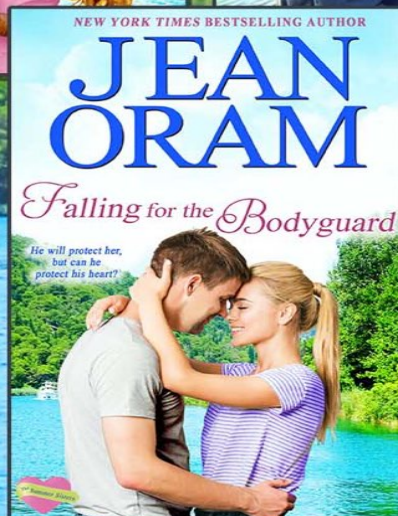
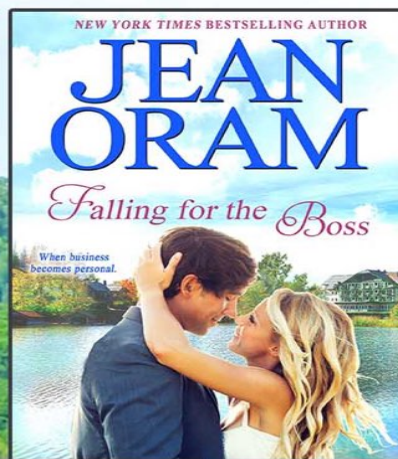


NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

JEAN ORAM

The Summer Sisters The Complete Series Box Set Books 1-5



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THE COMPLETE SUMMER SISTERS SERIES BOX SET

BOOKS 1 - 5

JEAN ORAM



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THE COMPLETE SUMMER SISTERS SERIES BOX SET

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The Complete Summer Sisters Series Box Set: Books 1 - 5

The Summer Sisters

By Jean Oram

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Second Edition

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Box Set Contains:

Falling for the Movie Star

Book 1 in the Summer Sisters Series

By Jean Oram

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Individual book ISBN: 978-0-9918602-9-6

Third Edition

Falling for the Boss

Book 2 in the Summer Sisters Series

By Jean Oram

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Third Edition

Falling for the Single Boss

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By Jean Oram

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Third Edition

Falling for the Bodyguard

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By Jean Oram

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Falling for the Firefighter

Book 5 in the Summer Sisters Series

By Jean Oram

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Second Edition

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All characters and events appearing in this book are fictitious unless otherwise noted in the acknowledgements. Any resemblance to real people, alive or dead, as well as any resemblance to events is coincidental and, truly, a little bit cool.

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A NOTE ON MUSKOKA

Muskoka is a real place in Ontario, Canada, however, I have taken artistic license with the area. While the issues presented in this book (such as water shed, endangered animals, heritage preservation, shoreline erosion, taxation, etc.) as well as the towns are real, to my knowledge, there is no Baby Horseshoe Island nor is there a Nymph Island, or a company called Rubicore Developments. The businesses and people are fictional, with the exception of The Kee to Bala, Duke's Marina, Windermere House, the Segwun and Wenonah, as well as the character Jenni Walker--you can read about how she ended up visiting Muskoka with her family in the acknowledgements.

Muskoka is a wonderful area, full of small towns, pristine woods and lakes, where movie stars and other celebrities do vacation amongst us regular folks. Yet, having spent many summers in the area during my youth and adulthood, I have yet to see a single celebrity--though a man my family presumed to be Kurt Browning's (a famous Canadian figure skating Olympian) father did offer to help me when the outboard fritzed out on me once. Darn outboard.

You can discover more about Muskoka online at
www.discovermuskoka.ca/

To my grandmothers. For helping me rediscover Muskoka each summer.

FALLING FOR THE MOVIE STAR

BOOK 1

From the back cover:

One picture. One tabloid. Two lives changed forever.

Finian Alexander is one scandalous tabloid photo away from catapulting his acting career onto the A-list. All his bad boy persona needs is an agreeable member of the paparazzi to give him a friendly boost. But vacationing out in the middle of nowhere, the only photographer he knows is way too scrupulous for her own good.

Or is she?

Hailey Summer is desperate for cash—so desperate that she's willing to do just about anything with her photography skills to save her family's

cottage and keep her secrets hidden from her sisters. So when sexy and arrogant movie star Finian makes her an offer, Hailey can't resist. But does his proposition take things too far? And when their plans begin to unravel, will Finian and Hailey find the limelight too blinding?

This is the first book in the complete Summer Sisters series, written by *New York Times* bestselling romance author Jean Oram.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A very special thank you goes out to Jenni Walker and Clare Cox. Clare Cox of CLIC Sargent organized an amazing fundraiser called Get in Character which raised money for families with children who have cancer in the United Kingdom. The organization provides tremendous support for these families during difficult times. Through an online auction, Jenni Walker won the opportunity to become a character in this book. Thank you Jenni for supporting CLIC Sargent and families with cancer. Any errors in representing this wonderful woman are mine alone.

I would also like to thank my critique partners who do an amazing job of keeping me on track, as well as the rockstar group of authors I nerd out with on Facebook. These five women are amazing authors with mega brains. I love that I can get my business geek on with them and they are there for each and every step of the conversation. As well, on the book end of things, I need to thank my editor, Margaret, who beefed up my sentences when I kept using the same words over and over. You rock, girl! Oops! I mean something less colloquial--You rock, woman! As well, thank you to Emily Kirkpatrick for her eagle eyes proofreading. Any oopsies that remain are due to my stumbling fingers.

And finally, a big thank you to my family. For my husband for believing in me and telling me to go for it with this new series. My kids who put up with me disappearing into my computer. And to my parents and grandmothers who introduced me to Muskoka and its quiet beauty and helped me go there almost every summer as a kid. To my brother--thank for throwing me in the Indian River, repeatedly, and to Sarah and Lindsey for walking to The Store in port with me time and again. I think it's time for ice cream, don't you? And finally, to all of those working to preserve Muskoka, its heritage and beauty, kudos and thank you.

Attribution: Finian Alexander quotes William Shakespeare in Chapter 9. The line, "The lady doth protest too much, methinks." is from William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Act III, Scene II and is spoken by Queen Gertrude.

“Finian Alexander, do something bad,” Hailey Summer whispered. The alley was quiet as she kept herself squeezed against a white catering van, waiting for the actor to make a move outside the town’s black tie gala.

She pressed her eye against the camera’s viewfinder as a streak of sun broke through the clouds, making her LCD impossible to read. The light was incredible and she was the only one there to see Hollywood’s bad boy break the rules and mess up once again, but she needed him to move faster. Much faster. The light was going to fail when the clouds opened up, or someone was going to interrupt him and send her home with nothing. Again.

Come on, Finian. Do this for me.

As a sunbeam shone down on his shoulders, he looked more like an angel in the shadowed alley than someone about to go joyriding in a stolen sports car and make her rich in the process. Well, at least tug her out of her life-swallowing hole of debt.

Patiently, she waited, lining up shots. Brick and clapboard. Parked cars. Faded jeans resting low on his hips. She couldn’t have asked for a better setting. Better light. She just needed Finian to *do* something. To flub up in that distinctive way of his so she could cover her past

mistakes. Then her three younger sisters would never have to know how close she'd cut things and how their legacy, their birthright, was teetering on the brink of being lost.

"Come on, hunky-hunk, open it. That's right." She smiled as the movie star carefully tried another car door, casting his eyes sideways to see if he was being watched. Door locked. On to the next. One of them had to be unlocked. This was Bala, Ontario, a small town known for cranberries, quaint cottages, tourism and bridges, not crime. He'd find an unlocked vehicle and go for a joyride; she'd capture the image of him breaking the law, sell it for big bucks, and kaboom. Her problems would be solved, without impacting his life other than adding another celebrity-life-gone-wrong story to his bulging portfolio.

She fidgeted, her anticipation building.

"Come on, come on "

She glanced over her shoulder, half expecting Austin Smith, a local photographer who did occasional paparazzi work in L.A., to appear and ruthlessly scoop her. Hailey had wrestled long and hard with her conscience to get to this point, and now that she was here, ready and waiting, Finian was taking his sweet time, giving the angel on her shoulder plenty of time to make arguments on why she should back out.

Hailey wriggled and refocused her camera. Finian hunched over as specks of rain started to fall as he tried another door. His hair was disheveled. He looked tired. Rough. As if he'd been up all night--like her.

Apparently, it was hard work being a party-man celebrity raking in millions.

The Mercedes he tried was locked, and he moved on to an Audi, his strong hands lifting handles with a care she hadn't expected. Maybe he was worried about setting off alarms. She could see that being a problem. A problem for both of them. She shifted slightly. Was there a law against watching someone break and enter?

She could report him later. Right now she needed images. She snapped a few photos of the light bouncing off Finian, then sighed as she lowered her camera. Officer Cranks would seize her photos as evidence. Her late father's poker buddy would give her that unblinking stare that undid her every time. Teary-eyed, she'd be handing over these shots before he felt the urge to blink. Years after getting busted egging houses with Austin, she still felt guilty buying eggs near Halloween. That night had been the beginning of the end for her and Austin, both as friends and as boyfriend-girlfriend. She'd gone back to being safe and reliable as he'd dived into his newfound persona, a hellion who'd laughed at her for crying in the cops' office. Not long after that her father had passed away and Hailey had begun to wear safe and reliable as if it was her own personal shield against the pain.

She cursed Austin under her breath for giving her a taste of fun and freedom before the burden had come. He was still waltzing around, living the life, raking in the dough, and she was barely surviving.

She propped herself against the old building, leaning her supporting arm on the van so she could line up her shots as Finian moved farther down the alley. She'd hand over the evidence after she got paid by the tabloids. But first, she would take care of her family's needs.

Come on, Finian. Do this for both of us. I'll help you if you help me.

"You really think he's going to get into one of those cars?" scoffed a male voice. Hailey jumped, nearly dropping her camera. "You should have set it up ahead of time and led him into it. You're wasting your time." Austin leaned over her shoulder, his cheap aftershave familiar in a way that made her distrust him.

She turned, pinned against the wall, his large build crowding her.

"Make your trap irresistible to a man like Finian." Austin's eyes roved over her and she wondered why on earth she'd pined for the annoying button-pusher after he'd broken up with her. He got under her skin

faster than anyone she'd ever met. Although maybe she'd just pined for freedom and a life she could no longer have.

"I knew it wouldn't be long before the worm crawled out from under his rock," Hailey retorted, turning to face Finian again. "Did your mother run out of canned lasagna?"

"This is my arena and this guy hates the paparazzi," Austin said, his mouth turning down. "Go back to your pretty art shots and leave this for the real photographers."

Hailey gritted her teeth so she didn't make an enemy out of Austin and took a few haphazard shots as though Finian was doing something intriguing. This was just like with the high school paper, when she'd wanted to take different pictures than he, the photo editor, had demanded. He'd wanted the publication to be a tabloid. She'd wanted it to be a liberal arts paper that covered anything and everything. An outlet and extension of her own artistic needs.

"I said--" he began.

She ducked as Finian looked their way. "Shut up! You're scaring the subject." She whacked Austin on the chest, just above where it softened into a small beer gut.

"He won't stop because we're here. Movie stars need the paparazzi. Free publicity--and he hasn't had any in almost a week." Austin glanced around the corner of the van. "They're all locked."

"I know," Hailey said darkly.

"He's not the joyriding type, you know."

"Says who?"

Austin hitched his camera bag higher on his shoulder. "I'm going for a beer. Call me when he gets desperate enough to do something interesting."

"Dream on."

"Only if you're in them and naked." He gave her a wink.

Hailey bit back a snort of laughter. "You're the nightmare and he's the dream, honey."

"Mmm. I love it when you call me honey." Austin lightly pecked her cheek, then backed away, his arm outstretched, pointing at her. "I know you still have my number."

"Only because you live with your mother."

He clutched his chest as if shot, and with another wink, disappeared around the corner.

Austin actually made a pretty decent enemy seeing as he helped motivate Hailey to work harder and follow the path she truly wanted. Well, except when he was a complete you-know-what and she wanted to shove him into the turbulent water near the falls in hopes that he'd drown.

Shaking her head, she turned to Finian once again. She'd had such a crush on him ever since his first movie--*Desperate Cowboy*, a low-budget film nobody remembered. But she did. Especially the way his tight little butt had featured in one of the scenes. Mmm. That scene had replayed in many of her fantasies. Add in his black cowboy hat, the swagger and the way his bright blue eyes had blazed out of his dark, tanned skin, and she'd been a goner for life.

She vaguely re-aimed her camera, trying to calm her body's reactions and thoughts about Finian. For several days she'd been casually tracking him, but all she'd seen was a regular man hanging out on vacation. Which was so wrong. He was supposed to mess up, with only her around to capture it in digital, not be a man she could envision living happily ever after with.

She was only supposed to catch him screwing up once, then sell it. That was the deal she'd made with herself to justify violating his privacy. Because even though he was a movie star, he was also a human. And in Muskoka there was an unspoken code--a code Austin

regularly broke--stating that celebrities in the area were to be left alone if they weren't obviously seeking attention.

She almost turned away when something caught her eye. Finian had finally opened the door to a 1950s Jaguar Mark I. She barely dared to breathe. What had she missed while fuming to herself?

Finian rolled up the car's window. Closed the door. Gave the roof a little pat, then walked away as the clouds submitted to the weight of their load.

What had she missed?

She popped her head above her camera for a 'real world' look. Why hadn't he hot-wired the car? Had he found something to take instead?

Whatever had happened, she knew one thing for sure: she'd missed her chance to save herself as well as her sisters.



HAILEY STOOD UNDER A SHOP AWNING, keeping an eye on Finian, the Big Letdown, as he ambled up the other side of the street, seemingly unaffected by the pouring rain. Which bar had Austin gone to for his beer? She needed to talk to him about a little thing called ruining another photographer's shot. Preferably while keeping Finian in her sights, but not within Austin's.

Hailey tried to sidestep the person who popped up to block her view.

"Hailey? Hailey?"

She glanced down to see her youngest sister, Daphne, clutching her arm, peering at her with concern.

"You okay? You look kinda pale."

"Yeah, fine." She peered around her sister, who was trying to rein in her bouncing five-year-old daughter, Tigger, who resembled Tigger from Winnie-the-Pooh more than her seldom-used given name, Kimberly.

Hailey relaxed as Finian paused under an awning across the street. She looked toward a nearby bar. "I was just thinking about how I'd like to rip Austin Smith a new asshole."

"Hailey!" gasped Daphne.

Tigger looked up with a sparkle in her eyes. "Auntie Hailey said a bad word."

Hailey sighed and gave herself a shake. "Sorry, kiddo." She placed her hands over Tigger's ears and gently rocked the girl's head back and forth. The little girl's long plastic raincoat rustled as she moved, one of her ever-present second-hand party dresses peeking out from under the hem.

"There." Hailey held up her fisted hand. "It fell out." She pretended to throw something on the ground and stomp on it. "It's like you never heard that word."

"Asshole," replied Tigger.

"Tigger!" Daphne clutched her daughter's shoulders. "We don't use words like that."

"Auntie Hailey used it."

Hailey winced. "Sorry," she said again.

Daphne gave Tigger a stern look and turned to Hailey. "So, what's up with you and Austin? You've barely talked since high school."

"Professional complications."

Daphne's nose scrunched and her eyes followed Hailey's to where Finian, protected from the rain, was leaning against a building as though he had all the time in the world and not a care to burden him.

He wouldn't last a second in the real world.

Daphne laughed. "You still have a crush on Finian Alexander."

Hailey snorted and rolled her eyes as though the idea of her harboring a flaming, scorching torch for the movie star was the most ridiculous thing she'd ever heard.

Her sister giggled and stared across the street. "I can see why. He's *delicious*."

"Very delicious," Tigger agreed.

"*And* I heard he just broke up with Jessica Cartmill," Daphne added. "Hello!"

Hailey squinted at her niece. "Do you know what we're talking about?"

"The ice cream store."

Hailey found her attention drawn to Finian again. Yep, he was standing near the sign advertising twelve different flavors.

"I wouldn't mind licking that," Daphne said in a low voice. Hailey placed an arm across her sister's chest, pretending to hold her back. Daphne let out a sigh of longing. "It's been over five years. I'm dying here."

"Do they have bubble gum ice cream?" Tigger asked.

"No sugar, Tigger," her mother answered. Then she clutched Hailey's arm again. "Tell me you're not following Austin's lead on photography. What he does goes against your principles."

"I know."

"You said the paparazzi are the ambulance chasers of the photography world."

"They are."

"Use your powers of photography for good, not evil."

Hailey laughed and adjusted the heavy bag digging into her shoulder. If only her sister knew how out of options she was. It was either become an ambulance chaser or lose the one place that had always brought the four sisters together. The place where not only their great-grandmother had fallen in love, but their grandmother and mother, as well. It was the very place where little Tigger had been conceived. And as much as the grown sisters teased Tigger for thinking the small family-

owned island was enchanted, Hailey knew they all secretly agreed. There was something about Nymph Island and their cottage, Trixie Hollow, that grounded people. The place had kept the family together when they could have easily ended up spread across the country, barely speaking to each other.

"You're up to something," Daphne said.

"Nope."

"You won't meet my eyes."

Hailey stared into her sister's blue eyes, willing her to realize that her own slim tax contributions toward the cottage hadn't been enough. That none of what the four of them--especially Hailey, who held the cottage in trust--had done over the years had been enough, and that by the end of August the whole kit and caboodle would be sold off to cover years of back taxes. And it would be Hailey's fault. For failing their ailing mother, her sisters and niece, and most of all, herself.

The jokingly used nickname Hailey-Failey would finally fit. Big time.

Familiar anxiety swirled within her and she tightened her hold on her camera bag's strap. She needed something lucrative, and fast, or she'd be forced to ask her sisters for help. And she couldn't. Just couldn't.

Not yet.

She glanced across the street to where Finian was still standing. Maybe it was true, what her mother always said--that if the cottage was meant to stay in the family, a solution would present itself. Maybe Finian wasn't in Muskoka by coincidence. It was fate. Destiny. Karma giving Hailey a hand up for her years of taking care of the family.

Tigger whispered to her, "Mom always finds out if someone is up to something."

"Not always," Hailey whispered back.

Especially since she was going to solve this problem. Right now. Before anyone knew the gambles and risks she'd taken, and how she'd messed it all up.

She straightened her spine. If anyone in the family were to be voted most likely to succeed in solving this dilemma, she was. She'd pulled them through their father's death when they were teens and kept the family afloat with after-school jobs. Then five years ago, after their mother's debilitating stroke, Hailey had moved in with her and taken over responsibility for the cottage. When it came to the point where their mother needed more care than Hailey could provide, she'd found the perfect nursing home offering the right balance of support and independence.

Not only that, but Hailey had been there for Daphne when her sister's summer boyfriend went home, never to be heard from again, leaving her heartbroken and pregnant. And she'd been there to help however she could when their two middle sisters, Maya and Melanie, went off to university.

Their mother had placed the cottage in her trust for a reason. Hailey solved problems and made things happen. And yeah, things looked bad right now. Really bad for the 110-year-old cottage. But she'd solve this problem just as she had all the others, and her sisters would never have to learn how close she'd come to losing the place they all loved.

Besides, telling them would just stress them all out, and they'd start running around in a panic, distracting her from getting the job done.

She could do this.

Her solution was waiting for her across the street.

Easy as drooling over apple pie.

"What's wrong?" Daphne repeated. "What did Austin do?"

Hailey waved a hand. "He pissed me off, that's all."

"Auntie Hailey said 'pissed'!"

"You didn't hear that," she replied quickly. "I meant ticked."

"How did he rub you the wrong way?" Daphne asked, head tilted.

"It doesn't matter."

"I heard he moved home to chill out for a while after that last fight with George Clooney." She leaned closer. "Did Austin ask you out? I don't think he ever got over you, you know."

Hailey scoffed and pushed her away. "Don't you have a protest to organize?"

"Oh, that reminds me. Can you join us for the picnic and protest for the dam?"

"Picnic?"

"It brings out more families."

"Um, I think I have a " Hailey scrambled for an excuse.

"It's tomorrow and we desperately need a good photographer."

"Please?" Tigger asked, jumping up and down as she yanked on Hailey's hand.

"I think I have to take Grandma to an appointment, hon. Sorry."

"I already asked Maya to take her," Daphne said. "It's just a few shots for a brochure and the website. Please?"

Hailey felt like a poser when she went to rallies. Yes, she usually believed in whatever her sister was protesting, but felt awkward yelling and shouting and making a scene about it. Although maybe if she helped her, Daphne would speak up for Hailey if she lost it all. The cottage. Her business. Her home. She gulped for air and squeezed her hips like a runner after a sprint, knocking her swinging camera bag out of the way. This wasn't good. Not good at all. She was going to default on all the promises she'd made their mother. All her cover-ups were going to be revealed. She was going to fail.

"Relax. Maya will take good care of Mom." Daphne rested a hand on Hailey's shoulder. "She only forgot her that time by accident. She won't

forget again. And besides, she didn't even get all the way out of the parking lot." Her sister squeezed her shoulder. "It's okay, Hailey, we can all take turns helping. It doesn't always have to be you."

Hailey sucked in a deep breath, her mind tangled in the complications of allowing Maya to help. "It's faster and easier--"

"On your own. We know. But she's our mother, too, and we've all grown up. The doctor has all her medical info, you don't have to be there to tell him everything. Let us show our love for you, Hailey. Let us help."

Hailey cringed, knowing her sister was about to launch into her sappy, let-love-cure-the-world philosophy which in her current mood would make her say something that would hurt Daphne's feelings.

Across the street, Finian was stretching, looking as though he was preparing to vanish on her. Hailey tried to breathe past the tightness in her chest as the pressure built within her. She squeezed her eyes shut until the burning passed. "I have to go. Now."

Finian was walking away, as the rain let up to a light drizzle. She was going to lose him.

"Hailey, I love you."

She turned to her sister and niece. "I've got to run. I have work to do."

"Oh, I almost forgot," Daphne said. "We're rescheduling the Canada Day picnic on Nymph Island because of the rain, and because Maya got called into work."

"Okay." Hailey stepped away.

"We're thinking of having it in a day or two."

"Okay."

"When do you need this year's tax money for the cottage?"

She paused and cleared her throat. "Um, before the end of the month." Guilt rose within her as she thought about how Daphne's

portion of the annual tax bill and back taxes would not only clear out her savings for taking Tigger to Florida, but would make going to the cottage the only vacation she could afford from now until her daughter grew up and went off to college.

"I heard taxes went up. How bad are they?" Daphne drew Tigger close.

"Not too bad," Hailey lied. "Maybe you can call in some honorariums with your environmental work or something?" Her niece's bright eyes flicked between the two, and Hailey stepped closer to lightly tap Tigger's nose. "Don't worry, we'll get you to Florida little monkey."

Tigger grinned and began bouncing on the sidewalk, singing about airplanes, Disney World and her mom.

Hailey glanced down the street, her shoulders sagging. Finian was strolling along, hands in his pockets, kicking an empty Tim Horton's coffee cup. He caught her eye over his shoulder, beckoning her to go save her family.



WHAT KIND of cut-rate paparazzo was this girl with the crazy hair, anyway? Finn had seen her following him off and on all week, her massive camera bag always over her shoulder. A few minutes ago, he'd ducked into an alley, hoping she'd follow, and mindlessly tried door handles on fancy cars as though seeking a joyride. Thankfully, none of them had opened. Until the Jag. But by then he'd given up on her helping him into the tabloids and had, instead, walked away.

What did he have to do to get her to take shots of him?

Right now, when she could easily be stalking him, she was across the street chatting with someone, her hair growing frizzy from the rain.

He began to stroll away, noting her panic and how she tried to extricate herself from her conversation with the woman and child.

Gotcha.

Maybe she had potential after all. He paused for a little fake window-shopping, allowing her to catch up. In the reflection he watched as she stopped at a food truck to purchase a cup of coffee, chatting with the vendor as though they were friends.

How was she going to aim that big camera at him if she was drinking coffee? What kind of paparazzi did they have in Canada, anyway? He ought to stomp over there and give her a few tips.

He hadn't been mentioned in a single tabloid--other than the odd post-breakup speculative whisper--since coming to Bala. Even after three days of this lady tailing him.

And yeah, sure, he'd selected Canada because he needed downtime to sort out who he was and where he was going with his life. But he hadn't been expecting to slip out of the spotlight in doing so. He'd just broken up with Jessica Cartmill and finished a movie. It shouldn't be easy to lie low.

Either that, or him breaking up with Jessica, a beloved star since the day of her debut, back when she was three years old, wasn't earth-shattering news as he'd assumed. Their breakup had come as a shock to the public, but instead of milking it he'd fled to what turned out to be backwoods Canada, where the paparazzi preferred to drink coffee rather than snap shots of him.

Maybe Jessica had been right. Maybe he *was* nothing without her.

His phone rang and he whipped it out, frowning as the rain started up again. His agent, Derek Penn, probably wondering why Finn hadn't delivered anything fresh for the celebrity news.

As if he needed that kick in the nuts right now.

"Yo! Finnegan!"

"Finian. Finn," he reminded him kindly. Finn cooled his temper, telling himself that he worked with Derek because the man was great at building stars. Derek knew who Finn needed to align himself with. What to do--and when--in order to keep his name out there, build his image, and which rung he should climb to take him up the ladder to A-list notoriety. Then on to the Hot List. No more B or C, or heck, D list for him. He was so close he could smell it. And it smelled like irresistible women hungry for him. Redemption. And cash. Lots of much needed cash.

"You haven't been in the rags in almost a week, man. What's up? I know you're chilling out and mending your broken heart and all that B.S., but you can't leave the planet. People will forget you exist."

Finn's heart thundered at the thought. If fans started wondering what had happened to that guy who was in all those action movies, everything would crumble. Not just his finances, but his promises. He'd be a broken man sent right back to the horrible place he'd struggled to escape.

He spun in a slow circle on the sidewalk. Not a camera in sight.

He kicked over a trash can and stalked on down the street. When he turned, a family was clustered around the barrel, righting it and placing the refuse inside. Canadians. They were making him feel guilty when he was supposed to be a man with no regrets and certainly no remorse.

Finn paused, spotting his little shadow with her face buried behind her phone as she sipped her coffee. She glanced at him, frowned at her cell, and continued on past him.

Maybe she wasn't a paparazzo. Maybe she was just a fan. A stalker. Though, she seemed much too indifferent for that. Those women did a lot more giggling and bumping into him. He'd be eating a meal, lost in his own world, and suddenly look up to see an excited face shining with the thrill of having locked eyes with him.

That was surreal in a way that made him shudder every time. It was as though they were looking into a pool where their own wishes and dreams were being reflected back at them. They weren't seeing him, they were seeing a man he could never truly be, and they expected so much from him. Things he couldn't give.

"And dude, what's up with your tweets? They're like friggin' cotton candy, they're so sweet," Derek said.

"What do you mean?"

"A puppy? *Really?*"

"What? It was cute."

"Yeah, but a golden retriever? Are you trying to kill me?"

Finn smiled. "I'll have you know that got over seven hundred retweets."

"Finn, man, listen to me. Bad boys don't tweet cute puppy photos. They tweet beer bongs and cleavage, and their hundred-and-forty characters are loaded with swears. Got it?"

"Yeah." Finn stared at the cracked sidewalk. He knew what men from the wrong side of the tracks did. He just couldn't seem to stay in that role. That was probably why he had fallen off the planet. He sucked as an actor.

He let out a jagged sigh and stared up at the rain clouds. Cool drizzle landed on his face, weaving its way through his stubble.

Maybe that was the problem. If he pretended to be a bad boy long enough, he might succeed and become the people back home. The people he'd promised not to become. And tweeting out crap felt like going back on the promises he'd made himself. It was though he'd be taking a step back to the place he'd struggled to leave behind.

"Find someone with a camera and get back in the rags, man," Derek continued. "You can't afford a vacation, not for the next five years. You've got to get high in the rankings or your next paycheck will see a

decrease. You gotta keep dry-humping the ladder until you own the Hot List. You want it, right?"

"Of course."

"Then get your butt in gear. Do you need me to leak part five of the plan? Because if you can't handle this and I leak it now--"

"Yeah, yeah, I know, Derek. The fall will come too soon. I won't stick to the top, career is over, et cetera, et cetera."

Finn didn't like Derek's elaborate plan for falling from grace, but it had worked for a ton of his stars when their careers were starting to flag. Stars who never quite made the A-list, but nevertheless enjoyed one last hip-hip-hooray joyride on the fame train before drifting off into oblivion where they belonged. Washed-up nobodies living in obscurity. People like him who just missed becoming a household name.

But Finn wasn't ready for that. He wanted to climb to the top and hang in there for as long as he could. He had too many changes he'd vowed to make in the neighborhood where he grew up. Once he fulfilled those promises, then he could fall from grace. Then he could let Derek give him that little bonus bump before vanishing into obscurity, his bank account bursting. His promises and family taken care of.

Finn studied his little shadow with the wild curly hair. She *had* to be more than a nature photographer which was what he'd first suspected since tourists didn't walk around with that kind of equipment slung over their shoulder. And she wasn't taking pictures of the stunning woods and water scenery that surrounded them. No, this girl was a serious photographer. The problem was, he'd yet to see her take a single shot of anything.

He shook his head, phone still clutched to his ear. It didn't matter who she was. It mattered who she would become.

He stepped out from under a green and white striped awning, wishing for some crazy drunken revelry he could crash. It was their

Canada Day long weekend, which should mean party time, but he hadn't come across a single party to dig into. They were having cake.

Politicians, who nobody had heard of, were cutting cake and taking complaints about garbage pickup. Kids eating cotton candy, with red maple leaves fake tattooed on their cheeks. No floozies in short skirts. No drugs. No booze. Just beautiful nature and a sleepy town sandwiched between rocks, trees, and water. A bunch of kind, warm-hearted people doing lovely, family-oriented things.

No wonder Derek wanted to hold his hand through all of this. Finn had come to familyland for his vacation, not bad-boy nirvana. His cottage might be crazy expensive, but he was having a tough time finding temptation.

He "uh-huhed" into his phone as his agent rambled on about his image. Running a hand through his hair, Finian shook off the light drops of rain. Only a cloud or two remained in the sky. Nothing to spoil the face painting.

"I'll get a flight out of here soon if I can't scare up some stories, but I think I might be onto something," he promised just before he pocketed his cell, the devil on his shoulder drumming up a plan to get him into the tabloids.

If he couldn't get this gal following him to take shots on her own and sell them, then maybe they could collaborate. Stars did it with paparazzi all the time. He could have his quiet vacation and still get in the tabloids.

He changed course suddenly, heading to the first bar he saw. The woman with the windswept hair noted his movements and followed.

Gotcha again.

He reached the steps to the bar, planning to go inside, have five rye and Cokes in quick succession, and see what Canada had in store for a drunken celebrity early in the afternoon. A throng of people suddenly

surrounded him, cameras raised. He flinched, adrenaline surging through his veins.

Where had they come from and how had they trapped him so quickly? They'd slipped out of the bush like moose or mice or something.

He shook off the fear and gave the crowd a crooked grin, knowing his two-day stubble was making his blue eyes sparkle in contrast.

Finn waited. Nobody snapped a photo. What on earth? Had he stunned them all with his craggy good looks?

"Uh " He held open the screen door, making an ushering motion so the crowd could enter the bar. "Going in?"

"Are you Finian Alexander?" asked a teenager.

"Yup."

"Can we take your photo?" asked a breathless granny, a camera clutched to her ample chest.

"Yeah." He nodded slowly. What the heck was up with these people? They appeared out nowhere, pressed in on him, all eerie and silent, and then asked if they could take photos? Didn't they realize his fame had put him in the public domain, and they could take a shot of him taking a crap in the woods and he wouldn't have a case for them invading his privacy?

They lined up like obedient kindergarteners, making room for each other, polite and quiet. His nature-nut shadow wove through the group, her hair still in knots, her face buried behind her phone. She glanced at him with dazzling eyes that took his breath away, then frowned at her phone again as she came up the steps to where he was holding the door. She apologized to someone nearby, although he couldn't figure out why.

Finn gave her a little bow and smile as she met him on the landing, and shot her a wink. She blushed and looked away. So very cute.

He began envisioning ways he could woo her. Have a little affair, wrap her around his finger so he could break up the boredom of this peacefulness. They could collaborate, or if that didn't work, he'd get her to betray him by releasing a story of how he was a trouble-making bad-boy. Somehow he'd find a way to get her to spin a story of his making, which would hit the rags and thrust him into the limelight. Just in time for his upcoming summer blockbuster release.

He shot her a massive grin as she moved through the doorway, and gave her a playful tap on the butt. Her eyes grew wide and she took a quick, unsteady sidestep before making it into the dimly lit bar.

Easy bait.

Plus she looked like she needed a drink. Even easier.

Finn shook his head and followed her inside. She looked so serious he wanted to pry her open, expose her to fun and make her smile.

Preferably while naked.

Yep. This vacation was about to get a whole lot more promising.



FINN FOLLOWED the woman through the bar, ignoring the rough floorboards under his sandals as he watched her narrow hips sway. There was something about her beanpole body that did strange things to his mind. He wanted to bend her around him. Feel those long limbs. Skin to skin.

He gave himself a shake. Booty call later. Right now he had to friend her, draw out her photography skills, plant the idea that she could, and should, sell photos of him and get rich. Everyone wanted money.

He paused. This region, Muskoka, was a summer playground for the rich. Did that mean she was wealthy? Was that why she wasn't snapping photos of him? She was an heiress to a multibillion-dollar

company, and didn't need to sell photos of the rich and famous because she was one of them?

If so, then he'd take the fame angle. Who wouldn't want the prestige of selling an exclusive photo for thousands of dollars? He took another look at her swaying hips. Her jean shorts were faded white in the butt. They were a tad past "fashionable" and heading toward worn-out. Her sandals looked as though they should have been replaced a few seasons ago.

Hmm. Maybe not an heiress, then. Which meant he could likely sell her on fame *and* money. He grinned. This was too easy.

She turned suddenly, and Finn almost ran into her. "Whoa there." He grabbed her elbows, his eyes meeting hers as he moved into her space, barely avoiding knocking her down. Mmm. She smelled nice. Outdoorsy. Fresh. Like rain and apple pie.

He glanced at her hands, looking for the coffee she'd had earlier, and found his eyes stuck on the cleavage exposed by her low-cut tank top.

Her knees buckled slightly as he leaned toward her heat, and her face paled.

What could he say? He had that effect on women. Although the pale face was odd. Usually they flushed. He glanced past her and realized he'd followed her--entranced by her sweet, worn-out butt--straight into a corner. There was no excuse for having followed her this closely. For cornering her. For holding her so close. For ogling her chest.

He gave her a dazzling smile. "Sorry, thought you were my sister."

"You don't have a sister," she breathed. She blinked, eyes wide, catching herself.

Well, hello pretty lady. She knew who he was. After days of being practically anonymous, he found it refreshing. A relief. Scratch that; it was sexy. Very sexy.

"How do you know?" he asked with a grin.

"You're a horrible liar." She pushed him away, but he held on tight.

"What do you mean? I'm a fantastic liar. I get paid big money to lie every day."

"To lie?" She crossed her arms in the sliver of space between them, eyebrow raised, her camera bag's strap digging a swath into her shoulder's skin.

She was challenging him. How interesting. He propped a hand on the wall beside her head, leaning close. Her eyes narrowed as he trapped her. Oh, this was fun. He'd forgotten how much fun a challenge was. He'd gotten used to women dropping their panties as soon as he shot them the right flavor of grin.

Time to pour it on.

He dropped his voice so it was low, gravelly. "Wouldn't you like that?"

"What?"

He ran a finger down the side of her jaw and watched, mesmerized, as her eyes fluttered shut and her breathing stuttered. "To pretend to be someone else. Pretend to be mine for the night. Hot for me to touch you in ways that will make you pant."

He ran a fingertip over her bottom lip, closing in. Any second now she'd suck on his finger, pull him into the bathroom .

He didn't expect the slap.

And he certainly didn't expect someone as slight as her to be strong enough to leave him seeing white spots. Wow.

She hadn't even hinted that she was going to move.

Her mouth dropped open in horror, before she clamped her hands over it. He watched as she wrestled with herself, her back pushed against the wall. If he played his cards right he'd bet his new BMW she'd get him ice for his cheek.

But there was something else behind her eyes. Something real. Something he'd forgotten.

Oh right.

He was one of those big cocky jerks women hated.

His stomach churned and he reached out for her, to let her know he didn't mean it. To show her he was actually a nice guy. A guy whose mother would beat him about the ears if she'd heard what he'd just said to a nice Canadian girl in a nice Canadian town on a nice Canadian holiday.

Instead, he watched as his wild-haired chick slipped past him, fire blazing in her eyes. Filled with longing and regret, Finn placed his palms on the wall and hung his head. He liked her already.

Hailey handed the tax reassessment form to her sister Melanie, her hands still shaking from slapping Finian Alexander less than an hour ago. Why had she done that? She didn't slap people. But he'd just been so sure of himself. Intense. Sexual. Confident. Cornering her and expecting her to fall against his crotch. Women like her didn't want men like him, and she'd hated the way her body had responded, singing and vibrating at his touch. Wanting him. Badly. Wanting--no *craving*--to know what his skin would feel like, bared and warm, against hers.

"Do you think we can get them to reassess it before this year's bill is due?" Hailey asked.

Melanie's eyebrows shot up. "Doubtful. Bureaucracy and all that, right? Did taxes go up?" She sifted through the forms laid out on her small round kitchen table, her long legs tucked underneath her. "How much is it?"

Hailey clutched the slender teacup, hoping to hide her shaking hands. "Don't worry about it, I think we're just being taxed too high. No point in paying out, only to have it handed back, right? Plus, I'm not sure they reassess retroactively."

"Do you need money?"

"I'm just trying to save us on taxes. We need to fix the chimney and some other stuff." She pulled the papers back toward her. Melanie had just graduated with her law degree and wasn't making much money in her first job and had a ton of student loans. In a few years she would be in a position to help carry the burden, but not yet. Letting her know how bad things were would just stress her out, and she'd worry herself into another ulcer. Plus, she'd feel the need to help out and there was no way she could. Not this year.

Other than help find some loopholes that apparently weren't there.

"I can look into it," Melanie said, pouring another cup of tea out of the fine bone china teapot that had been their grandmother's. The one who had somehow got their cottage and island as a gift from an obviously wealthy secret admirer. "But you know, Maya's business degree might be more helpful in terms of ducking through the ins and outs of taxation, red tape, and bureaucracy."

Hailey bit her bottom lip. Maya's nickname, Snap, had been well earned. She made snap decisions which she tended to stick to stubbornly. Plus, she always wanted to wrestle control from Hailey. "I thought your law degree would be able to help us."

"Seriously, you two need to stop competing and learn to work together."

"We work together fine."

Melanie rolled her eyes as if to say, *Yeah, right*. She handed back the forms and straightened the oversize shirt she insisted on hiding her strong build in ever since a summer crush had called her Sasquatch in the eleventh grade. "You can figure this all out. Just follow the red tape. I don't see a way we can one-up the system."

She smoothed down her curly hair and, reflexively, Hailey did the same, finding it knotted and wild from her early morning boat ride from

a photo shoot she'd done of a family of loons near the cottage, followed by stalking Finian through the rainy alley.

The bar. She almost groaned. He'd seen her with demented hair. The one time she got to face her crush and she looked like a patient who had escaped from North Bay's psychiatric wing.

"I'll print off a few photos to send with the application to prove it isn't a fancy place with enhancements." Hailey stood, gathering the papers and wishing her sister would read between the lines, guess the troubles they were in, and help her figure out what to do. Hailey was tired of the secrets, the promises, the feeling of obligation and duty. Yet she was the one who had promised their mother she'd take care of the back taxes, not add to them. Nobody had asked her to remortgage her house to finance a photographic show that featured her artistic side, but had never panned out monetarily despite all the awards and accolades. In fact, nobody knew she'd remortgaged everything to keep the cottage afloat. Why? Because it had been a stupid risk intended to buy them another year or two, when things would inevitably be better. But things hadn't gotten better and taxes had taken an insane jump. People were losing cottages or selling them, and the Summer family would soon be joining their ranks.

She pondered telling Melanie what she'd done, but knew her sister would be aghast. Hailey solved problems, she didn't dig herself deeper and deeper into holes. She didn't take risks and fail as she had.

Hailey shook her head. She couldn't do it. She had to keep it a secret. She had to solve this on her own. She couldn't break their trust. And they still trusted her. Trusted her to keep everything safe.

And anyway, she had Finian. The man she'd slapped. Oops.

She closed her eyes for a moment. She should have slept with him and then blackmailed him. She almost laughed. How could you

blackmail someone like Finian for sleeping with you when his reputation thrived on exploits?

Her crazy hair was onto something. She belonged in the loony bin.

Melanie was tapping her chin thoughtfully. "Photos might help prove the place isn't worth millions, like those new year-round McMansions Maya is always drooling over. Make sure you show that the cottage and the boathouse haven't been upgraded or improved much in the past hundred years. Show that the plumbing and electrical hasn't been changed since it was added a few decades ago. No A/C or jacuzzi tub. The old generator for powering the place, et cetera. And remind them that they don't provide any services like power, water, sewer, or garbage pickup on the island--we're off their grid."

"I'll do that." Hailey grabbed a pen, scribbled on a sticky note and stuck it to the forms.

Melanie shoved her glasses up her nose. "Who is he?"

"Who is who?"

"The guy who has you all shaky."

"It's nobody," Hailey replied too quickly.

Melanie raised her brows.

"It's nothing. I just slapped this guy because he was coming on to me and got in my space and I'm shaken up from it. That's all."

"And?"

Hailey sighed and fell into a chair. Slapping Finian had been stupid. Now she wouldn't be able to stalk him, waiting for her money shot, because he'd remember her and run the other way. She was going to have to face him and apologize seeing as there was no miraculous cottage-saving loophole for her to dive through and she still needed him.

"I was hoping he'd become a client," Hailey muttered. "How about an appeal? Could that save the cottage?"

"Save the cottage?"

"From overtaxation."

"That's something we should have started years ago, if they're overtaxing us," Melanie said.

"What if we sold it?"

"Good luck with getting that by everyone. Besides, Mom will never let you sell."

"We haven't been using it as much over the past several years."

"Yeah, because Maya and I were in school and you were taking care of Mom and starting your photography business. But now we're all here and on our feet." Melanie smiled. "Besides, where would the fairies go?"

"Sorry?"

"The Nymph Island fairies."

Hailey groaned. Tigger's fairies. Their niece believed the island was inhabited by them and had built little fairy houses all over the island, taking up the torch the sisters had dropped when they'd grown up and become too old for such things.

"You should talk to Mom," Melanie said.

"Yeah," Hailey agreed, wondering how much her sister suspected.

Clutching the forms, she headed for her car. She had time to zip over to the nursing home where their mother lived, and see how much wiggle room she had in her promises. If they could sell the cottage quickly, Hailey could at least save her house, her livelihood.

As she started her car, a familiar anxiety grew until it was gnawing at her stomach. It had been several days since she'd last visited their mother, and, sometimes, when she hadn't seen her in a few days, the worry and anxiety got so bad she'd become edgy and distracted, until she had to drop what she was doing and go to make sure her mom was okay.

Hailey let herself into the nursing home, finding the familiar soap smell strangely comforting. When she spotted her mother, Catherine, in

the sunny atrium, she let out a long breath, her shoulders relaxing. She plunked herself down beside her and enjoyed the July sunshine streaming through the windows.

"The rain stopped," Catherine said.

"I brought you a Twix." Hailey placed the chocolate bar on the table beside her wheelchair.

"I think this will be a fine spot to watch the fireworks, don't you think?"

"That won't be for another " Hailey paused to check her watch " seven hours, Mom."

"I'm reserving my spot."

"What about supper?"

"Supper sucks here," muttered Agnes Krowski as she hitched by with her walker. "Eat the chocolate bar and call yourself done." She gave them a wise look and continued on.

"I guess that settles it then?" Hailey asked.

"Life is uncertain, eat your dessert first," Catherine replied with a small smile. She resumed staring out the rounded windows that stretched above them. "I noticed you lost your hairbrush again."

"I was out in the boat. And rain." Hailey smoothed her hair with her fingers. "I could take you to see the fireworks if you want." Finian would probably be out being a celebrity-gone-wild somewhere, and she'd miss it, but the idea of her mother sitting in front of this window for seven hours so she could watch ten minutes of fireworks broke Hailey's heart.

"No, that's fine. I'm comfortable here."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

They sat in silence, watching a blue jay work peanuts out of a feeder.

“What’s bothering you, Hailey?”

Puffing out a big breath, she thought about how much time she and her sisters spent opening the cottage every May long weekend. Cleaning, turning things like the water pump back on, restocking the kitchen, opening shutters, putting on screens, making the beds, removing three seasons’ worth of dust and dead bugs and mice, cleaning off the path and dock. Getting the boat back in the water. Paint, fix, repair. Try to keep up with nature, which was unrelenting in its quest to reclaim the 110-year-old structure. And then in October, doing it all in reverse.

The first few years had been fun. It had felt as though they were all finally playing grown-up, and getting to do all the jobs on the list tacked to the back door that their mother and father had always done. But now the thrill of being an adult was wearing off, and the place was starting to feel like a heavy burden. Even though the sisters made cottage maintenance into a party, enjoying margaritas or hot toddies when the day’s work was done, it was a lot of responsibility, and the jobs and expenses were never-ending and slightly overwhelming.

“I’m fine,” Hailey said finally, patting Catherine’s hand. The cottage meant everything to her mother. It was where she’d fallen in love with their dad. Where she’d spent summers teaching the girls to swim. So many memories.

“You’re doing an awful lot of sighing.”

“Sorry.”

“So?”

“So what?”

Her mother arched a gray eyebrow and adjusted her bright orange button-up shirt.

Hailey sighed again. “You know how I promised not to sell the cottage?”

Her mom straightened, her blue eyes flashing.

"I didn't sell it," Hailey assured her quickly. "But it's heading for a tax sale August 30 if I can't find a way to cover the back taxes."

"How much?"

"Trust me, Mom. None of us have that much."

Her mother sagged, her non-stroke affected hand dropping down to worry her chair's brake lever. "I put you in a poor position, didn't I? Passing it on with taxes owed."

"No, no, Mom. It was me. Taxes went up. There were warnings I ignored, thinking destiny would take care of us and the cottage. There were urgent repairs needed. Maya and Melanie were in school. My photography business hasn't taken off as fast as I thought it would." She gave a shrug, hoping her mother wouldn't take on guilt that shouldn't be hers. It was Hailey's fault the tax bill had grown, not shrunk.

"If it's time for the cottage to move to a new family, then so be it. It owes us nothing and has given us so much. Let the municipality take it." She gave her a wistful smile. "I was hoping you girls would get a chance to follow the tradition and fall in love on the island."

"I think we were, too." Hailey paused. "I know I promised not to sell Nymph Island, but--"

"Hailey, *please*. Let destiny take her course. If it's not meant to be, let it go. It's not ours to profit off of. It's a gift. Always has been."

"But I need to sell it, Mom." Her voice was tight with panic and held-back tears. "I'm going to lose everything if it's seized. If we sell it, I can come away with something."

"What do you mean?" Her mother's voice was barely above a whisper. "Hailey?"

She bowed her head, feeling nothing but shame and failure. "I took some personal financial risks."

Her mom took a moment to recover her composure. Then, with her back straight and voice firm, she said, "Sell it, Hailey Rose. Sell it as fast

as you can."

Hailey let out a tremendous sigh that made her ribs ache, and scrunched her eyes shut. If this was what she needed to do, and now had permission, why did it hurt so deeply?

"Look at me," Catherine said gently. Hailey tried to focus on the right side of her face which lacked the permanently sad expression due to the stroke. Today, both sides were sad. "Do what you need to do, Hailey, and know that I will always love you."

Tears in her eyes, the older woman pulled her close. Hailey inhaled her familiar scent, one she linked to home and safety. Her mother trembled in her embrace, needing the hug as much as she did. Hailey vowed she wouldn't let her down. Nymph Island had to stay in the family, no matter what.



HAILEY SET up her phone's hands-free system so she could make calls as she drove from her mom's to where she'd last seen Finian. And slapped him. How on earth was she going to recover from that?

She needed a plan. A big plan. And, heck, a big fabulous miracle, while she was at it.

"Simone?" she said adjusting the gadget hanging off her ear. "Any chance you'd be open to me holding a small show in your boutique this month?"

"A show?" her friend asked.

"Yeah. Small photos of Muskoka and nature and things. The stuff that sells, you know? Like the Muskoka chair on a dock with mist all around. The wood boats from the antique show. We can split the proceeds."

"How much do you need?"

Hailey did a quick calculation. Simone's boutique was a two-story house in Port Carling that had been converted into a store. It was still divided into several small rooms, giving her plenty of wall space. Simone had good foot traffic through the summer months, and if Hailey could sell even half of what was hung, she'd be on her way to something. Not a full miracle, but it would at least be a step in the right direction. If she had ten such plans, maybe she could save the cottage. "Space for about fifty?"

"No, I mean how much money do you need?"

"Um, why?"

"Because it sounds a lot like you're selling out. Something you promised you'd never do, and told me I should push you in front of the *Segwun* if you did."

Yeah, that old steamship would definitely take a chunk out of her.

"I'm not selling out, I'm getting my name out there. They'll still be artistic shots. They'll just be ones with more commercial appeal."

"Commercial appeal?" She heard papers shuffling on the other end of the line and she held her breath. "Just checking to see when the next time the *Segwun* will be coming through the locks. The *Wenonah* may have to do, though, as this sounds dire."

"Ha, ha."

"Nymph Island again?"

"Uh-huh."

"You know you could ask your sisters to help, right? Just because you're the oldest doesn't mean you have to take care of everything. They need to start chipping in more."

"They can't."

"Can't or won't?"

"Simone, it's complicated." Hailey rubbed her forehead as she drove along the quiet, tree-lined road, sunlight dappling the hood of her faded

red car.

"Did you ask them?"

"Nymph Island's going up in a tax sale if I don't save it by the end of summer." Panic crawled over her and she just about had to pull over. She swallowed hard, bile coating her mouth. "I could lose everything."

"That's heavy. And what do you mean, everything?"

"I mortgaged the house before the Toronto show."

"The dud?"

"Yeah, the dud show that went nowhere. My sisters don't know."

"You've got to tell them."

"Why? So they can laugh and call me Failey all the time, and for good reason? Besides, they'll just freak out and make it into a big deal."

"It is a big deal."

"Only if I fail."

"Right, and you don't fail. Except on your driver's test."

"That's because I was rear-ended! It wasn't my fault."

"Hailey, I know they're going to be over the top, but they're your sisters. They're not in school anymore. Stop making excuses on why you have to protect them."

"Mom put the cottage in trust in my name."

"That doesn't mean you have to solve every little problem. What does Catherine say about all this? Did you tell her?"

"She said to sell it."

"So, then?"

"I can't. I can't be the one who loses it. Not after it's been in the family for over a century."

"There's no question of that, but maybe it's time. Maybe fate or destiny or the man in the moon or whoever your mom talks about wants it back. Lease is up, babe. Let it go. Easy solution."

"I know." Hailey remained silent for a moment. "I just I want to try. I don't want to give up. And there's nothing my sisters can do other than stress out about it all."

"Hey, I thought I was a Summer sister."

Hailey laughed at her friend's tone. Simone had spent almost as much time at the cottage as the four Summer sisters and had been dubbed an honorary sister with her height marked off in the cottage's kitchen doorway along with the others. But Simone was different. Simone knew everything and wouldn't butt in unless Hailey asked her to.

"You're just getting where you've always wanted to be," Simone said. "And while I hate to say it, the sacrifices you've made for that place are holding you back. If this was a costly time-share in Florida, you'd have sold it by now. The cottage is a sentimental money pit. You haven't even gone to Europe to photograph the Sham-Wow because of it."

Hailey blinked back the tears. "I know," she choked out. "And it's an Apennine chamois. Mountain goat."

Simone's voice transferred into her "let's get our business done" tone, and the tension in Hailey's shoulders vanished. Simone was ready to help. She didn't have to do it completely alone. "So?" she said. "How soon can you have your photos over here?"

"Thursday or Friday."

"Did you want to have an opening?"

"Yes."

"I'll mock up an invite and poster to hang around town and send it over. In the meantime, firm up the date. We don't have a lot of time to save our childhood playground, my friend."

Hailey sighed into her earpiece. "I know." She sped past a grove of trembling aspen, scaring a white-tailed deer back into the brush as she did so. "Hey, if you happened to learn the whereabouts of Finian

Alexander, send me a text, would you? And mislead Austin Smith, too, if you can."

Simone whistled under her breath. "This is way worse than you're letting on, isn't it?"

"Can you spread the word? This guy's mine."

"Hails "

"I know. But it's money, and it's still photography."

It was almost not selling one's soul. Almost.



FINN WAS STARTING to feel the rye and Cokes. All five of them. He was feeling them along with the pull to do something reckless.

The bartender passed him another drink and Finn thought about the woman who'd slapped him. Man, he'd had that one coming. How had he fallen out of touch with the real world and women so quickly? Or was it just a Canada thing that had made her reach out and whack him?

No, he was pretty sure it was him being a jerk. He'd promised himself he'd never let fame go to his head. Looked as if he'd let himself down on that one, too.

He downed half the drink.

He was flunking out left, right, and center.

"From the guy on the end," the bartender said, and Finn's shoulders slumped. A small part of him had hoped it was his nature nut coming by to apologize. Canadians did that a lot. Every time he'd bumped into someone this week, or even came close to bumping into someone, he'd been met with apologies. It had become a game, seeing how many apologies he could collect while wandering down the street. His record was thirteen in one block. One lady had apologized four times for one

incident, and he wasn't sure if he could count that as four, but he did. Besides, he was a jerk and it was his game, so his rules.

Finn gave a quick toast to the man who'd sent the drink, hoping he wouldn't come over and start hitting on him with hockey talk. Who followed hockey?

He froze as recognition set in. Son of a
Austin Smith.

Interpreting Finn's locked gaze as an invite, Austin slid over with his own drink.

"Hiya, Finian. Austin Smith." He offered his hand for a shake and Finn ignored it.

Austin remained beside him, unfazed.

"I know who you are," Finn muttered, keeping his attention on the local concert posters pinned to the walls.

"Anything you need from the paparazzi while you're here in town, you let me know. I cover everything in these parts."

"I'm taking a flight out tomorrow."

"That's not what the airlines say."

"Private jet."

Austin laughed and Finn's temperature rose along with his temper. He hated it when the paparazzi knew more about his comings and goings than he did--and it happened. And if anyone would have the 411 on what he was up to it would be this butt-wipe.

"I get people in the tabloids faster than a Kardashian gets knocked up, Finian. And you know it."

Finn glowered at him. "You give paparazzi a bad name."

"Thank you."

Finn shook his head and downed his drink. Austin was the kind of man who crossed lines, grabbed celebrities, riled them up with angry words--anything in order to get a better photo. Finn still wanted to

punch him for the way he'd violated his ex-girlfriend's privacy by flying over her backyard in a helicopter to get pictures of Jessica and her friends nude sunbathing. Finn had never been possessive or overprotective of his ex, but that had driven him wild.

"You know," he said conversationally, "I think there should still be a restraining order in effect."

"That's only for your ex-girlfriend."

Finn inhaled. Nope, he was pretty sure he'd sprung for the couple's package on that one. Double-bagged the bastard to keep him from popping up from behind potted palms and making his blood pressure shoot through the roof. The little prick had helped Finn's bad-boy image with all those angry shots he'd sold to the papers, but it hadn't been healthy fun, like the rest of his image building had been. So far.

"Yours expired," Austin said with a grin. "Yesterday." He took a sip of his beer, his eyes glittering with some other tidbit he was holding back.

Finn clenched his hands and waited.

"Oh, and Canada is out of California's jurisdiction."

Of course it was.

Austin dropped a simple business card onto the bar as he stood. He leaned closer. "You haven't been fresh news for almost a week. If you want to change that, I have a few ideas." He tapped the card. "Call me."

Finn stared straight ahead, ignoring the offer. Austin was not the kind of paparazzo he would collaborate with. For one, you had to trust the photographer not to sell you out when you were creating a story together. He'd rather take the time to create a paparazzo out of Nature Nut than shake hands with this guy.

"I have many happy celebrity clients. I can provide references if need be."

"Then why aren't you working for them right now?" Finn said, turning to stare down the large man.

"This guy bothering you, Mr. Alexander?" the bartender asked, his beefy arms folded across his puffed out chest.

"Just leaving."

Finn slipped a twenty into the tip jar after Austin hurried out, letting the bar's screen door slap in his wake. Finn held his breath, staring at the closed door, wondering what to do. What step to take next. It was a scriptless choose-your-own-adventure, and he was at a crossroads, unable to read ahead and figure out which path he ultimately wanted.

He should return to Hollywood.

Instead, he made himself comfortable and ordered another rye and Coke.

"No scotch on the rocks?" the bartender joked, referring to Finn's famous character in the action series *Man versus War*.

Finn gave him a polite smile and a silent *no*. He guessed Daniel Craig, Pierce Brosnan, and Sean Connery had to put up with a lot of martinis--shaken, not stirred--so he could put up with a few scotches on the rocks.

Scanning the bar, he searched for a rowdy group of young men who could swoop him into their festivities, building things up until he'd caused enough trouble to get sold to the celebrity magazines and websites. The bar was filling up, happy hour starting, red maple leaves stamped on faces. But no rowdy men full of testosterone.

He yawned and fought the temptation to go back to his kitschy cottage. He supposed the one good thing about being a bad boy was that trouble usually came knocking. Fame, fortune, and good looks equaled anything he wanted. All he had to do was wait. Wait for it to come through the bar's screen door.

And right now some narrow hips were swaying toward him, and his body perked up. Strange. He usually preferred a fuller figure. Why was this beanpole grabbing his attention?

Beanpole.

His eyes crept up the familiar outfit.

The photographer.

She was back.

He spun back to the bar, sucking his lower lip into his mouth as he rubbed his cheek absently. Hours later, he swore he could still feel the imprint of her slender palm. He lifted his cold glass to the handprint and turned farther from the door. The condensation seeped through his five o'clock shadow, the coolness a comfort.

Why hadn't his stubble been irresistible to her? He knew his blue eyes shone straight out from his face when he was unshaved. He was primal. Real. As irresistible as a plate of fresh chocolate chip cookies outside a pothouse.

Sexy. And yet she'd rejected him as if he was a high school loser and she was the prom queen.

He was supposed to be the prom king, making her weak at the knees. *She* was supposed to be just some girl who was happy he'd looked her way. But instead, she'd balked when he'd acted like a pushy alpha who was hungry for one thing and expected to get it.

But there'd been something about the way Nature Nut had reacted that stirred his blood in a way Finn's ex-girlfriend never had. Was it the challenge? The fire within her? The lack of vapidness? This photographer was nothing like Jessica. At first Jess's plastic perfect appearance had thrilled him. *She* wanted *him*. But as time wore on, her fake breasts and piles of makeup had started to repulse him. Yet everyone else found her beautiful.

Maybe that's why he was so turned on by his nature nut. It was her realness. She was the opposite of Hollywood, and every emotion played across her face like a Hot List actor earning her Oscar.

Wait

His nature nut?

He rubbed his jaw. Canada was getting to him.

Oh, man. She settled beside him, making him sympathize with the way Miss Muffet felt when the spider sat down beside her.

"I'm not going to slap you," she announced, after ordering a draft beer.

"Okay." His voice squeaked, and he cleared his throat. He needed to regain control. Though he wanted rub against her long, bare legs like a homeless kitten, he knew he had to play a role. Be cool. Intriguing. Debonair.

But she hadn't liked Mr. Hotshot earlier, and chances were she'd hate any role he put on--anything that was less than real.

Finn gripped the bar and rubbed his jaw again. He was screwed.

"I came to apologize," she said, her voice flat.

He spun on his stool to face her. She looked lost, defeated, rejected. Not at all like the fiery woman who had escaped him earlier. He wanted to pull her into a hug to feel her small body against his and make her smile. Make those worries not quite hidden in her eyes flit away like a cloud of butterflies.

"I should be the one apologizing," he said, trying to keep the slur out of his words. Why had he had so many drinks?

He placed a hand on the bar and leaned toward her. "I'm not the man you've seen in the tabloids. I'm not the man you met hours ago." He turned away. He was already blowing this chance. He was slurring. Obviously there was something wrong with him. Seriously wrong.

"Don't play me," she said, staring at him with serious blue eyes. "I know you don't have a twin brother."

He scratched his head warily, buying for time as he worked to hide the emotions associated with him having a twin brother. The public didn't know about his twin, Julian, and they certainly didn't know about that fateful night when, just a block from home, Finn had lost the man he'd shared a womb with for nine months and a bedroom for sixteen and a half years. "Sorry?"

"Don't lie to me and don't play the role of caring gentleman. I can see it coming and I don't like it. I'd prefer you be straight-up honest. Be who you really are."

"Oh." He pushed his sweaty glass away, contemplating her words. That should be easy. Except he didn't know who he was. He knew who he used to be and who he was becoming, thanks to Derek's hard work. But who he was at this exact point in time that was difficult to pin down.

"So, I'm sorry." She pushed away from the bar, her beer in hand. A pang of loneliness hit Finn harder than a Jean-Claude Van Damme punch to the gut.

"No." He grabbed her arm a little too tightly. "I'm sorry. Please. Stay." He gestured to the stool she'd slipped off. "Finish your beer. I promise I won't manhandle you."

She cautiously slid back onto it.

He grinned and leaned toward her as though sharing a secret. "Unless you ask me to."

The way she turned, looking shocked and prim, made him laugh. He liked this woman. All uptight and responsible and *real*. He wanted the beauty of her. He wanted real life with her, right here, right now.

Wow. He really needed a vacation if that's the way he was thinking.

Finn shook his head at himself and leaned on the bar. "So, what do you want in life?" May as well start with the core of who this woman was, and work his way out. He wanted to know everything.

Not because he was interested, but because he needed to discover her point of weakness. That's all. A character study, so he'd know how to get her to work with him. A means to an end. A business proposition. Nothing tangled and complicated, or real and deep, such as love or infatuation.

She looked taken aback and kept sneaking glances at him. Judging. Assessing.

Finally, when he thought she'd never reply, she spun on her stool, facing him full on. "I want life and everyone in it to back off so I can make my art. Full-time. That's what I want."

Finn smiled as her body language continued to challenge him. His smile faded when the impact of her words scraped at him like barbed wire. What she wanted felt a little close to home.

He'd wished for the same thing when he'd left film school. After hours of looking up his own butt in acting class, he'd wanted to let loose, make art and be someone. In the end, about to starve, and facing the prospect of returning home a big loser, he'd gone with what paid--action flicks. He liked action flicks, don't get him wrong. But he wasn't creating anything more than light entertainment that would be forgotten a few hours later. He wasn't changing lives or making a statement other than watch out, gas explodes when you're on the big screen and bad guys pop out of nowhere.

But what was causing those worry lines around Nature Nut's eyes? Who needed to back off? When she turned away, her face a mask of agony, he realized he'd waited too long to acknowledge her confession.

"Never mind. It doesn't matter. I'm just in a mood," she said.

"I'm staying at the White Pine Cottages and Estates. Nice place. The Sunflower Cottage. Little sunflower cutouts on it."

"Are you hinting--again--that you'd like to show me your bed?"

Finn choked on his drink. What was it about this girl that kept turning him around?

"I was just thinking, with you a photographer and all " He paused to clear his throat, and to choose his next words wisely.

She froze as if a polar ice cap had been dumped on her, encasing her. She didn't move, even to breathe, as she waited for him to finish his sentence.

He gently poked her in the arm and lowered his voice. "I thought you could, you know, take some private photos of me."

"I don't do *that* kind of work." Her voice was cold, her eyes unblinking.

"It's good money."

"Who said I needed money or was a photographer?"

"You okay?" He waved a hand in front of her face. Her cheeks were red, her eyes flashing, but behind it all he saw panic. "I've seen you around, snapping photos, and I thought maybe you could, you know, help a guy out." He was talking too fast, sounded nervous.

"I don't want to photograph you in the nude, okay?" She stood, cheeks flushed.

People turned, gasping and laughing. He was certain at least half of them were wishing they'd caught that outburst on film.

Finn snagged Hailey by the arm as she drew it back as though contemplating throwing her beer in his face. "I wasn't implying that. Geez. Get your mind out of the gutter. I meant publicity stuff." He released her, turning back to the bar, eyes averted. "Do you photograph nature? There's cool wildlife around here."

She was still standing there, ready to attack, although her beer arm was beginning to slacken.

"Like those haunting birds and that turtle with the yellow spots?" He watched her out of the corner of his eyes. Waiting. She was recalculating. "They're probably less difficult than working with a movie star."

"Black shell?"

"Yeah." He dared meet her eyes. The ticked-off look had been replaced with curiosity. "Kind of funky undercarriage. Orangey. With black."

She leaned forward, one hand on the bar, her eyes bright and focused. "Where did you see it?"

Seriously? This woman got off on reptiles. He'd have to remember that.

"In the marsh back there." He waved a hand vaguely.

"They're endangered. I've been trying to spot one for years. My sister needs to prove they're in the area." The photographer gave him a peeved look. "They've just finished nesting so don't go stomping around wherever. You'll squash their eggs."

He held up his hands. "I stay on the rocks when I'm in the marsh and on shore I follow the paths."

"Good." She narrowed her eyes at him and he felt the need to prove he wasn't some city-slicker movie star who would stomp on endangered eggs.

"Strange birds you've got, though." Finn gave a shiver. "What are those ones that look like an anorexic black-and-white duck?"

She choked on a laugh as she took her stool again. "That would probably be the loon." She made a quivering, high-pitched call. "Like that?"

Okay, that sound really shouldn't turn him on, but it did.

"Yeah, like a scared, high-pitched owl crossed with something insane."

Smiling at his description, she pulled out a one-dollar coin and held it up. "The loonie. Named for the loon shown on the front." She turned to the bartender and called, "Jamie? You got an elastic?"

He shot one to her and she snatched it out of the air, and began wrangling her curls into some sort of bun as she gave him a look. "Honestly, Jamie, you'd think you were my brother the way you treat me. Trying to hit me with an elastic."

The bartender propped himself on the bar. "And that's a problem how?" He had one of those knowing smiles that made Finn think the man might be competition if he hadn't just received a "brother" comment.

Jamie moved to the other end of the bar after getting a playful slap from Nature Nut and Finn studied the coin in his hand, pretending not to watch as she exposed a sweeping, pale neck. She was gorgeous. He turned the coin over and handed it back. "That's the bird. What's the story on the toonie? Aren't there polar bears on it?"

"Well, it's the two-dollar coin," she said, as if that explained things.

He scratched his head, thinking. Yeah. "That makes no sense."

"Who said it has to make sense?" She shot him a grin.

He let out a half laugh. Behind him, he could sense a few locals, waiting for him to turn their way so they could smile and say hi, get in on the jokes. Not now. Didn't they see he was picking up a lady? The two of them were finally having a conversation that didn't involve violence on her part. He was getting somewhere.

"Show me some of your photos," he suggested.

She pulled out her phone, then, with cheeks flaming, tucked it into her bag and, instead, slid a glossy postcard his way.

"What kind of photos do you do?" he asked carefully, not looking at the card, trying to figure out why she wouldn't show him her phone. Nude selfies for a boyfriend? He didn't like that idea. Not one bit.

"That kind." She nudged the card.

"Any portraits?" He kept his eyes on hers, but she refused to look at him.

She shrugged. "Only when I'm hard up for cash."

He scratched his cheek, studying her card. "This is an unusual shot." The contrast of light and dark, the way she'd used the deer's fur as texture. It could easily be just another photo of a deer, but she'd somehow made the buck feel real, alive, and as though he might turn his head, step out of the card and give Finn a shove with his antlers. That, he knew, took talent. Patience. Knowing your equipment. The light. The timing.

All the more reason she should work with him. And why shouldn't she? He'd be a great addition to her portfolio.

She faced him more fully, her lips moist and entirely kissable. If she had been even halfway willing

But he had her attention. About time.

Now he could take it home. Make the connection. Get her on his side.

"I bet you hear a lot of 'how much is a nice relaxing shot that would fit over my new couch? Preferably something that goes with my beige décor and is already framed?' "

She let out a snort, which told him she'd heard versions of that line plenty of times. The hitch in her shoulders relaxed a notch and he took the opportunity to slip Jamie money for her drink.

"You going to the concert tonight?" he asked.

"At The Kee?"

"Yeah. That big old-fashioned dance hall place? I still can't believe the bands they bring out here in the woods. It's unheard of."

"They've been doing it since Duke Ellington's time."

"So, you going? Do you like Vapid Magpie?"

"I do, but they're sold out. I didn't have " She shook her head.

"Have what?"

"The opportunity to get tickets when they went on sale," she said quickly, taking a gulp of her beer.

"I could get you tickets."

She laughed. "They sold out ages ago."

Finn leaned back, surprised at the edge in her voice. She was daring him, challenging him to surprise her with tickets. He could feel it. She really liked this band. Or she really liked him.

His bet was on the band, even though he wanted to bet on himself.

"Will you go with me if I get tickets?"

She echoed his movements, head tilted.

Man, she was intriguing.

"Why?" she asked.

He slipped closer, his lips grazing her ear as he whispered, "Why not?"

There was a lot of promise in his voice, and he noted the way her pupils darkened. She was tempted.

But nope, he'd gone too far again. She was closing up like a flower at dusk. He couldn't be this patient. He had days, not a lifetime. She had too tight of a rein on herself, and it would take too long to get her to loosen up.

But he had a little time. Time enough to see how far he could get tonight. He knew where her line was now and he could patiently play to it each and every time, breaking her down slowly and surely. Reel

her in. Push her out, pull her in. Temptation, temptation. Sweet, sweet sexy temptation.

A girl could hold out for only so long.

Before she could leave, he pulled two tickets out of his back pocket, raising his eyebrows in question. It was time for do or die. He wasn't famous for nothing. Strings were something he could pull. And everyone had strings.

"Meet me outside The Kee at nine." He slipped off his stool, leaving her hand outstretched as she reached for the tickets.

Nailed it.

When her face became a mask of something a lot like righteous anger, he went in for the kill. He rested a warm hand on her knee, watched her sharp intake of breath as her eyes fluttered shut for a split second. He tried not to grin. Anger and passion were so closely related that it made the game dangerous. And thrilling.

There would be no boredom in Muskoka as long as she was in his sights.

Meeting her blue-eyed gaze, nothing held back, he said, "Enjoy your life, sugar toes. If you don't let go and enjoy it every once in a while, you're living for nothing." He brushed her ear with his lips, the sensation of falling off a cliff rushing through him as he left her, barely daring to breathe.

Hailey couldn't believe the gall of Finian Alexander. Where did he get off? She'd slapped his face, come back to apologize, and he'd turned around and invited her to a sold-out concert of her favorite band after she'd misread his intentions.

Going to a concert was almost like a date. But it wasn't a date. He was a rich movie star; she was a nobody. She wasn't falling for this vacation game again. Not after Jake, who acted as though he was totally into her up until the moment he went back to the city at the end of the summer, dropping her and all his promises as if she was just some gal who couldn't take a hint. Why would Finian Alexander be any different?

He was lonely, looking for a fling, and she was the first woman to catch his eye.

Talk about overconfident, if he thought taking her to a concert would convince her to fall into his bed or allow him to exploit her abilities as a photographer. She'd seen him eyeing her photo card, and the rich and famous were always the stingiest. They seemed to believe she should be honored to photograph them pro bono, as if having them in her portfolio was a privilege. Yeah, well, little did they know that she'd won plenty of photography contests and awards without their ugly mugs. Contests that helped pay the bills.

Flopping down in front of her laptop, Hailey clicked the upload button to send new photos to her agent, Cedric Zimmerman. He often sent her a biweekly laundry list of requested nature photos from magazines, knowing she had no interest in capturing celebrity dirt when it came her way. But now she had dirt. Well, maybe not dirt, but dust at the very least. And she wanted to sell it. Fast.

She clicked to add the photos she'd taken with her phone that afternoon, then shook her head. At one point she'd thought she'd seen a glimmer of humanity in Finian's eyes. But that was ridiculous. He was the kind of man who charmed and played the game until he got what he wanted. But he wasn't going to get it from her. He could whisper in her ear in a way that made her nerve endings perk up, but there was no way Hailey was going to fall for his games. Love her? Leave her? No way.

Not now. Not ever.

The way he exuded confidence and sexuality made him just like all the other rich boys she'd met growing up. The summer men. So full of themselves it made her want to slap them in order to bring them down a notch and prove she was more than some plaything to make their pretty lives even easier as they vacationed in their fancy cottages, then left when the summer ended with never a glance back.

It was her time to come out ahead.

Hailey finished the upload and sat back, popping a mint Mentos in her mouth. She checked the time. She could show up at The Kee to Bala. See what he'd do. She let out a chuckle. It might be funny, watching him try to recall who she was, and if he had really invited her. Because by the time the concert rolled around he'd probably have tried to get into three more skirts with the lure of the tickets.

And if Hailey did manage to get inside, she'd ply him with drinks and wait for him to be the man she knew he really was. Then she'd

whip out her camera phone, take some unflattering images and sell them. Ta-da! Cottage saved. Happily ever after, while he blissfully resumed his car-crash life.

A message from Cedric popped up on her monitor. *Calling you.*

Yes!

She snagged her ringing phone.

"Tell me the good news," she said. She held her breath and swiveled her chair back and forth, trying to burn off her excitement.

"What are these shots?" her agent asked.

"What do you mean?" She drifted into a nearby armchair she'd picked up from the antique barn on Highway 118.

"You're a nature photographer. A good one making decent money for your stage of the game. For someone making art."

"And?"

"Don't go blowing your reputation with some half-done celebrity shots."

Ouch.

"These are as good as what I've seen online."

"What are you doing, Hailey? We've spent years getting you into good galleries. I know I hounded you on this whole art thing, but why are you going this route now that you're making a name for yourself and winning awards? Do you need money for some drug habit I don't know about?"

"You sell shots like this all the time, right?"

Cedric hesitated. "I do, but I don't understand."

"Can you sell these?"

He sighed, and she could picture him tugging his ear as he thought how to reply. "You need to shoot a story, Hailey. There isn't a story in these. There's a learning curve to being a celebrity chaser, believe it or

not. So, if you are in need of cash, maybe we can set up another show, or find a magazine. Want me to call *National Geographic*?"

"Yes, but there is a story." She needed more than some small show, months down the road, or a few photos for *National Geographic*. She glanced through the pictures she'd selected. They were all beautifully lined up. The light had held out for most of them and the one of Finian rolling up the vintage Jag's window was only a bit grainy because of the clouds, rain, and distance. The one of him holding the door to the bar was slightly blurry because he'd slapped her butt. But the tabloids never seemed to care about quality.

"A man rolling up a car window. Holding a door open for someone. These aren't stories."

"But it's a total contradiction," Hailey protested. "Surely that's exciting?"

"Would you buy a magazine with these on the cover?"

"No," she said with a sigh. "But I'd be intrigued."

"So, be intrigued. Even celebrities who lack manners can hold a door open for someone, Hailey. You need to capture shots of him doing unbelievable things."

Funny, she thought she had.

She narrowed her eyes, staring at the images of Finian. He was a mystery. One she needed to uncover and reveal to the world, one photo at a time. There was a layer he was hiding, and she'd expose it while giving him a nice big dose of reality. Oh, and making herself rich in the process.

"I'm on it, Cedric. In fact," she said with a chuckle, "he's expecting me." And how much more perfect could that be?



FINN SAT at the small desk in his rented cottage and stared at the blank page framed in sunflowers in front of him. Sighing, he pushed away his nonexistent plan for pulling Sugar Toes into his devious scheme to get into the tabloids with a new adventure. Instead, he picked up the old guitar he'd had delivered to his room. It looked as though it belonged to one of the employees. Well-worn. Stickered. And completely out of tune. Just the way he liked it.

He adjusted the sound to match his mood, his skills. He glanced at the card Sugar Toes had given him. Hailey Summer. Pretty name. He couldn't believe he'd gotten in this deep without knowing it. Hailey. He liked the way her name rolled off his tongue.

Focusing on the out-of-tune instrument, he ignored how he was slowing down the song as though smothering it. He played "Drooping Flags" by Vapid Magpie, knowing they'd sing it tonight. He played the simple riff again, and again. It was easy enough. If he stuck with the bass, he could almost make it sound untortured.

Almost.

Would Hailey show up tonight? Or would she chicken out? Would he be the man waiting outside the hall to see if he had been rejected? But the bigger question was, why had he so willingly put himself in this position? People waited for *him*, not the other way around. She hadn't even tried to turn the tables on him. It was as though he'd taken all his power and control, put it in a nice little shopping bag and handed it to her.

He put the guitar away, no closer to having a plan. How could he convince someone like Hailey to use her photography skills against him?

He walked to the window and stared out at the dark blue lake, rocky shoreline and wind-worn trees. If he'd been smart, he would have stirred her up, leaving her ticked off and longing for him. Then her anger could do the rest.

He punched the air, then shoved his hands through his short hair. He needed her to go paparazzo on him. Asking her out had been stupid, stupid, stupid. Derek was right; Finn shouldn't be here alone. Left to his own devices, he'd never get into the tabloids.

Finn paced the room, head down, thinking. He was sure he'd seen a desperate need within Hailey. He'd thought it was for money, but when he'd asked if she did portraits, she'd said only when she was hard up for cash. And she hadn't leaped at the chance to work with him. Hadn't gone all breathy and said *Yes!* Instead, she'd thought he wanted nude photos. He let out a laugh.

Talk about assuming opposite things.

So was she a bad businesswoman? Or was having a movie star in one's portfolio not as big of a deal as he'd thought?

Maybe she was famous in her own right. Maybe she was an incredible, sought-after photographer and he'd insulted her. He touched her card, letting his fingers linger over her name. How many run-ins had they had today? And he'd been so tuned out that he hadn't even asked her her name--not once. How had he gotten used to knowing people before he met them, all of them famous? Or else having people immediately introduce themselves, eager to get on his radar? How had that become normal?

He was losing little things from real life, like introductions. How to carry on a conversation. How not to be a self-absorbed jerk.

Reality was a sweet reminder of how far he'd climbed. But his new life left him living in a land where nothing was real.

He snatched up his phone as it rang, hoping, for some strange reason, that it was Hailey.

"Finian?" asked the female voice.

His mother.

"Mom, how's it going?"

"I prayed for you at church today."

"Why?" he asked, cringing. There were so many things for her to pray about. She read the tabloids, and while she was usually able to write another story for what was pictured, sometimes she couldn't.

"For your broken heart. Why don't you come home? I'll bake cookies. We'll walk Rex. We'll talk. You must be exhausted."

"Mom, my heart isn't broken."

"You were with her for over a year. Of course it is."

"Mom, did it look like I was actually in love with Jessica?"

"What do you mean?"

"Hey, here's an idea. Why don't you and Dad join me here?"

"What would we do with Rex? I read the papers and they said--"

"I was in the papers?"

"Last week. This week it's just one-liners here and there saying you're hiding out from the pain. Come home. We'll take care of you."

Finn pinched the bridge of his nose. "Mom " He tried to be patient. "I'm okay, really. And don't believe what you see in the papers or hear on the news. Any of that. I'm still me. I'm still your boy." Well, mostly.

"My boy who lost his manners. Your hands were all over that girl."

Uh-oh. He knew that tone of voice. He stared at the ceiling, trying to figure out which woman his mother might be referring to. It could have been anyone during the blitz he'd gone on after his breakup. Derek had been elated and said it was the best news he'd heard all week, and that Finn's royalty check would show a nice blip as a result of that bender.

The next day Finn had booked his trip to Canada.

"You know the things you see in the tabloids are usually staged, right, Mom?"

"I had one tough time explaining that to my church group."

Finn swallowed. The wrath was coming down.

"You know that photo was taken out of context?" he said, buying time, cringing, wishing he could hide.

"I doubt she needed first aid applied to her nether regions, Finian."

He let out a short laugh. Yeah, he knew which photo his mother was referring to. He felt his cheeks heat. Not his finest moment. Well, unless you were Derek; then you had that one framed and hung as a fabulous publicity stunt.

"Mom, I'm sorry. I'm sorry." Finn rubbed his hand down his face. This was seriously the absolute worst part of being famous.

"I think you need a new agent. One who doesn't encourage this kind of behavior. I was talking to Adrian and he said you would do very well with therapy."

Finn's brother, Adrian, had been there the night Julian died in his arms. He knew what Finn had been through and knew what he was trying to accomplish with his publicity and fame. And yet, Adrian--who Finn had put through rehab, and then college--always sided with their mother in the quest to straighten him out. If they wanted him to keep bailing them out for their medical bills and student loans, someone had to pay the price. They couldn't have perfect, famous Finian Alexander *and* have their financial worries cared for at the same time.

"I'm sorry you feel that way, Mom." Finn made his voice firm. "But you need to realize that this is the nature of being a movie star. I'm okay with it, so you shouldn't let the stories bother you, either."

"They are untrue, Finian. They're slandering you. Creating an image of you that is false! This man in the papers is not the boy I raised. You are better than this."

"Without the tabloids I'd be a nobody, Mom. I'd become that guy who everyone forgets or wonders what happened to."

"Quit complaining about what you don't have, and enjoy what you *do* have. You hear me?"

He sighed. He never won these battles. Ever.

"So, then " He could feel his mother switching gears, and braced himself a little too late. "Have you met anyone nice in Canada? I hear they wear skirts that cover their goodies."

"Yeah, you'd like her. She slapped me across the face."

His mother clucked. "Already?"

Finn laughed, letting his tension fall away. His mother had forgiven him, and saw the humor in how he was caught between two worlds.

"Yeah. She's got me on the run."

"Sounds like you need to come home and get a refresher on manners and how to treat a woman."

"I have a date with her tonight. If I'm lucky, she might even show up for it."

Hailey parked her car and, biting her lip, grabbed her purse before she could talk herself into hurrying back home. She had to squelch the intrigue she felt about Finian, and the only way to do that was to hang out with him. Analyze him. Oh, and take photos to sell him out and save the cottage.

Right. No problem.

She nudged her car door closed with her hip, swishing her gray-blue skirt out of the way. With nervous hands she adjusted her necklace and ran a palm over her straightened hair. She joined the crowd that was tumbling out of a bus in front of The Kee. If Finian wasn't already in line they'd never find a place to sit. Although if they did manage to snag a table, they'd spend all night trying to keep it instead of hitting the dance floor, which was her preference. Hailey had to admit it would be pretty cool to dance with a movie star. Assuming he even showed. And danced.

Finian stepped out of a massive cluster of people, waving to her. Hailey's heart hiccupped and she gave him a small wave back. There were a *lot* of women around Finian. Like, half of the population of Bala. And they had all turned to see who he'd waved at.

Hailey wasn't sure she was going to enjoy hanging out with him all night if these women were going to be sizing her up every second.

Finian stepped out of the throng and grabbed her hand, yanking her into the warmth of the group. What the heck. Might as well make the most of stalking him. She smiled and let her hand linger in his.

"You look hot." His dreamy eyes sparkled, and she had to force herself not to reach out and touch his cheek.

"Thanks."

Hot. Not pretty.

She was in the limelight. With a movie star. At a concert. People were talking about them, heads bent together, trying to figure out who she was. Taking surreptitious photos with their phones.

What had she been thinking?

As if sensing her desire to run back to her car, Finian gripped her around the waist, pulling her into the big building as the doors opened.

Her head felt light. He was touching her. He'd called her hot.

Wow, that was really messing with her head. Big time.

He headed to the bar, setting her up with a drink. She sipped it carefully, promising herself she wouldn't go along for the ride and be his date. This was business. She had to keep her wits about her.

But, oh, he was amazing, and even better in real life than he was on film. He still hadn't shaved, and the way his eyes were set off by the dark stubble on his chin made her want to stare into them for hours.

She looked away, then found herself drawn back to his eyes. There was something consuming in his intense gaze. Primal. As if he had plans for her. Plans that involved getting her into compromising positions.

Hailey studied her leather sandals, tapping the toes together. Normally, she'd run if she got anywhere near a man like this. He was too distracting, making it too easy to get consumed and forget about your own life. Your own needs. Your own wants. He was someone who

would love her and leave her, like all those boys who had tempted her and her sisters all through their high school summers.

She was already in too deep with him. She already wanted whatever he was willing to offer.

"What?" Finian asked, his eyes flicking over her face. "What's wrong?"

She smiled and waved off his concerns.

What did it matter, anyway? He'd never she'd never

And anyway, all those easy women fawning over him would surely be the ones he'd take home. Not her. Hailey was safe.

She almost laughed at herself. How had she believed even for one second that he'd choose her instead of the bosom babe trying to get his attention?

Oh, right. Because he'd asked her to come with him.

Maybe he thought she was an easy target. Or wanted free head shots.

It was probably that.

She could say no to free head shots.

"Do you like to dance? The band'll be starting in a minute." He lightly touched her elbow, eyebrows raised in question. Nervously, she strode to the spot he'd pointed to, near the stage. Turning, she waited for him to catch up. He was slowly making his way through the crowd as people paused to say hi, offer compliments, and generally distract and waylay him. Hailey rolled her eyes and turned to watch the band's roadies set up, ignoring the way Finian's broad shoulders cut a path, his moves relaxed and confident. There was something about the way he dressed casually in worn clothes that made him seem so real, so "boy next door."

She wanted to know what he looked like under that faded T-shirt, and how he moved those denim-clad hips when they were free of

cotton. She closed her eyes and told herself to stop thinking about him that way. Finian Alexander wasn't going to take her to bed. And anyway, she'd say no before she played the fool. It would be all right. All she had to do was enjoy the night and live a little while she waited for him to be the screwup he was.

She felt a zing as a warm hand touched her lower back and Finian wrapped himself around her protectively, possessively. She went to step away from his embrace, but realized he wasn't actually touching her, other than that gentle, resting palm. She turned back to the stage, where the band was starting into their first song, and tried to block out the subtle aftershave that made her want to move closer and inhale deeply.

Finian was a good dancer, Hailey discovered. The way he moved with ease, not just shuffling from foot to foot as he swayed to the music. She liked how he'd reach out to lightly touch her, drawing her closer when the crowds started to pull them apart. It felt like a real date. As though she was someone he wanted to be with. He had boundaries out in the real world and she was within them.

His dance was a seduction and she moved closer, intrigued. Every time he prolonged their eye contact beyond a casual, comfortable glance she felt herself flush with heat. And every time he used his body to gently block someone from honing in on them, she fell a little deeper for this version of Finian. She felt safe, protected. Wanted.

Hailey saw a flicker of discomfort in his eyes when wandering female hands brushed his body. He flashed the offender a smile as he spun to slap her on the butt cheek, hard enough to send her back into the throng of other dancers, giggling and with eyes that were filled with excitement and a hint of lust.

These women would rip him to pieces if given the chance. How could he stand it? Hailey's temper was getting the best of her on his behalf, and she didn't even really like the guy.

The band broke between sets, and feeling tired from the tension of watching everyone fall all over Finian, while fighting her own desire, Hailey went to the bar to get another drink. The band was good, but she really needed Finian to do something asinine. And soon. Before she began to think he was human, or began reassessing her no-sex-with-summer-men rule.

With a hand on her lower back, Finian drew her up some stairs that led to an outdoor balcony. He nodded to a bouncer, who drew back a folding screen, revealing a wrought-iron patio table for two.

Yep, she was screwed.

She smiled as Finian offered her a chair in the private, sheltered corner.

"Wow. The bad-boy has some manners, after all. Thank you." Although maybe his manners came out only when he had an agenda, such as getting up her skirt.

"Funny, my mother gave me a lecture on my manners only a few hours ago." He took the seat across from her, and before she could ask about his mom, he said, "So? What's your dream shot? For photography?"

A head popped around the screen. "Hey, guys. Did I hear you want some shots?" Austin held up his camera. "Hailey, you could straddle Finn. Finn, you could put your mouth over her--"

Finian was up in a flash, fists raised.

"Austin, go jump in the falls!" Hailey snapped.

Finian turned to face her, eyes assessing. "You know him?"

"Yeah. Unfortunately."

"Ex-girlfriend, actually," Austin said with a grin.

Finian gave her a disbelieving look that was also full of reassessment. She didn't like it. At all. As her mother used to say, *Who you associate with reflects on you*. And Hailey was associating with trouble, times two.

"It was in high school," she said. "Science proves the teenaged brain isn't fully developed until kids are in their twenties."

Austin clutched his chest as though holding a dagger, and grinned when Hailey shoved him back to the bouncer's side of the curtain.

"If you kiss her, Finn, just remember I kissed her first!"

Finian's right hand was still curled into a fist, his jaw tight as he yanked the brown curtain across, just about knocking down the temporary structure. He scowled at the bouncer. "I said *nobody*."

"Sorry, he said he was with you."

Austin shouted through the curtain, "Way to move in on the target and get the good shots, Hailey. I hope it's worth selling your soul."

"I'm not like you, Austin. I photograph turtles, not the egocentric!"

"I'd screw him for a money shot, but would you?" he called back.

Hailey moved to the curtain, ready to hit Austin with all she was worth. Finian guided her gently back to the table. "Don't let him get you all riled up or he'll have you in the tabloids faster than he came on prom night."

Hailey choked on her laughter. "Good one."

She allowed Finian to seat her again, before realizing what she'd said. "I'm sorry. I don't think you're an egocentric jerk."

"That's fine. You do, and I am."

Hailey studied her hands.

"That's my image, right?" Finian tipped her chin up and gave her a weak smile.

She sent him a grateful one. "I'm sorry about Austin. He's never brought out the best in me, especially since we grew up."

"Me, neither. In California I had a restraining order against him."

"Seriously?" Hailey leaned forward. She'd always thought Austin's stories of ruthlessness were blown out of proportion.

"Yeah. But apparently it doesn't work up here in Canada. Oh, and it expired." Finian cringed. "Think the Mounties would restrain him?"

"Austin can take a good shot from over a hundred yards away. He's like a seagull, and knows exactly where his crap is gonna land. So even if the Mounties did restrain him, your shoulders are still going to get messy."

Finian laughed, rich and deep. Hailey smiled, feeling a bond with him. Someone who finally understood just how much of an annoying burr Austin really was.

"What's your favorite song?" Finian asked. "Of the band's?"

"'Drooping Flags'," she said, feeling embarrassed. It was a silly song, but the depth of the lyrics got her every time. "And you?"

He paused. "Yeah. Me, too." He leaned on the table, arms stretched toward her. All she'd have to do was place her hands near his and he'd grasp them. Long fingers, wide palms, ready to touch her. Caress her. Lead her into sweet temptation.

She leaned back in her chair. "Same favorite song? You can't do better than that in your quest to get me to like you?"

"You don't like me?"

She swallowed hard. "I mean, we don't really know each other. And the odds of us preferring the same obscure song are pretty out there."

His eyes held a mischievous glint and she had no clue whether she could trust him. Hailey leaned forward and tipped up her jaw in challenge. "Prove it. Sing 'Drooping Flags'."

"I'll do one better." He got up and went to talk to the bouncer on the other side of the curtain. Finian returned a moment later, grinning.

"What did you just do?" she asked.

"You'll see." He gave her a wink over his rye and Coke, lifting it toward her. "Cheers, Hailey Summer."



FINN LEFT Hailey in the crowd by the stage. He both loved and hated her discomfort and the way she was wrestling with her attraction. She'd just about swoon, then catch herself and cross her arms, giving him a stern look. And now he was about to take it over the top. He'd either crash and burn and never see her again, or he'd have her naked body panting under him in a matter of hours.

From his spot in the wings he could see Austin at the back of the crowd, his camera at chest level, ready to take aim. Yep, this could get good. Finn could smash the guitar at the end of the show. Jump off the stage into the crowd and bodysurf his way to the bar, where he could drink right out of the keg. That would be tabloid worthy.

He cut a glance to Hailey. *Hailey.*

The way her soft dress was hugging her like a long-lost lover. The way her hair, straightened and glossy, curved over her bare shoulders. She was a vision of simplicity and understated beauty. Someone you could easily miss because of a lack of flash, but when you looked closer, you got drawn in, became lost. There was something undefinably sexy about Hailey Summer, and he wasn't the only one who'd noticed. But it wasn't the cocky ones, it was the nice guys. Men he hoped wouldn't put the moves on her, because in a contest against a nice guy there was no way Finn would ever win.

And she was his.

Well, no, she wasn't. But he wanted her to be--at least until he figured himself out, and where she fit into his life. Which was stupid. He did flings and relationships that lacked meaning. Hailey wasn't that kind of woman. She might even have a steady man in her life, and Finn was leaving in a week--even earlier if he couldn't get new dirt out

into the gossip rags. He needed to push Hailey into action somehow. Which meant he needed to stop thinking and feeling.

His shoulders slumped as he stared out at her. Somehow this had become a real date, with him trying to impress her enough she'd decide to stick around rather than get her to expose his dark side to the world. The woman didn't even have a real camera on her. Finn had lost his focus. Again.

He gave himself a shake and ground his teeth. He could do this. He could get back in the game. She had a camera phone, right? And there were others with cameras in the audience, including Austin, who was better than nothing--which was what Finn currently had.

He could muck this up, like skydiving without a parachute, and it would still turn out fine. That was the best part of having a persona that was out of control: he had the freedom to do whatever he wanted to woo the object of his affections.

Object of his affections? Woo? What was happening to him?

He dragged his hands through his hair, then down his face.

"You okay, man?" asked the lead vocalist.

"Yeah, of course. No problem."

"You sure?"

He gave a short nod.

The band shifted from foot to foot, eager to get back on stage. "Ready?"

"Yeah. Just, uh, take it slow if you can. I'm a beginner."

What was he doing? These concert-goers had paid money to see the band they loved, not to watch him flounder and ruin a song.

The lead vocalist grinned as he caught Finn's uncertain gaze going to the front row. "What's her name?"

"Hailey," he replied without thinking. He winced. How did he not know by now to keep his trap shut?

"We're on. Oh, and don't go smashing the guitar at the end of the song. It's Josh's favorite. Just in case you had any ideas." The singer gave Finn a look that made him feel like a kid who'd been scolded for aiming his slingshot at the butt of a rival classmate. Finn pulled the borrowed guitar closer. No smashing of other people's toys. Just like in kindergarten.

Well, they weren't in kindergarten any longer, were they? And there certainly wasn't a principal to keep him in from recess for not playing nicely.

The floodlights brightened as the group hit the stage, leaving Finn behind.

They stirred up the crowd, introducing him at the last possible second. He saw Hailey's eyes fly open as if someone had goosed her good. His hands shook and he wasn't sure he'd remember a chord, let alone how to rip one up with his uncertain digits. He downed the last of his triple rye and Coke, the burn making his throat ache, and then with a smile hit the stage, hand raised above his head. The band was already playing, and he had to concentrate to pick up the rhythm of "Drooping Flags." Every once in a while he'd fall behind, but the band would slow, add a few extra riffs and let him slide back in as if it had all been intentional.

By the end of the song the adrenaline and energy from the crowd had him keeping up, his fingers moving faster than they ever had back in the cottage. Cell phone flashes blitzed the stage and Finn grinned. They let him take the lead vocals and he gave the lyrics a throaty, rough rendition that brought tears to the eyes of a special gal up front. Hailey looked awed, almost stunned, but her arms remained hanging limply at her sides. She didn't take a single photo.

Come on! What was it going to take?

He wanted her to make money off this act, not Austin. She'd do him justice, whereas Austin would turn him into some fame-hungry monster-and rightly so.

Finn flicked Hailey a quick wink, hoping she'd snap to. Her face turned crimson and she slid her arms around herself protectively, toying with a lock of her long hair. The women around her, thinking the wink was for them, almost fell over themselves. This must have been what the Beatles felt like. Awesome. Indestructible. In control.

The band members crowded around him at the mike, belting out the chorus as if they owned it. Finn grinned. He was singing on stage in a concert. With a sweet group. Was being famous awesome, or what?

The song ended and Finn didn't want to give up the mike. Pumped from the high, he bounced off the stage, forgetting to crowd surf as he headed for the next best thing: Hailey.

He grabbed her in a bear hug and spun her around, knocking into several people.

"That was for you, Hails."

"Hails?" she said, pushing him away.

"Hail Mary, full of grace, you make me do crazy stuff."

"You can't blame me for that." She shrank against his chest as the crowd squeezed closer, people shouting over the music, congratulating him, praising him, snapping photos. Finn protected Hailey with one arm and smiled, then, snagging her hand, drew her to the back of the crowd. People were still snapping photos, slapping him on the back, making room for them to move. Royalty.

He stopped when he knew he was in line with Austin and his camera. Finn swept Hailey into his arms and planted a massive kiss on her lips.

New rumors would be starting tonight. And if she wasn't going to play his way, he would push her until she realized there was no choice.

This was his game and it was time he took control of it.



HAILEY, warm in his arms, felt soft and right. In the midst of his fake movie-scene kiss, something twinged within Finn, and he drew closer. Brought her right in. Nothing fake. Nothing held back. He caught her sweet mouth under his and deepened the kiss, putting all the emotions and excitement of the moment into what he was doing. Hailey trembled and drew back, sucking in air. In her blue eyes he could see her world spinning. It was all up to the universe. They were on a path that wasn't their own.

And one that would likely get him slapped if he listened to his libido. Instead of cringing and waiting for it, he blocked her by leaning in, setting off sparks in her eyes as he dipped in for another kiss. And another. Meanwhile, he ran his hands over the hot, smooth skin of her arms and shoulders, across the silkiness of her dress to the sides of her chest, feeling her, getting to know her, letting her know it was all right to release her passion. That he would reciprocate.

Finally, she slipped her arms up his torso and around his neck, giving in. He spun the two of them so she was pressed against a wall, maximizing contact as he breathed her into him while they kissed. He was falling into a rabbit hole. One he hoped Hailey would enter, as well.

When would he find a knee in his groin?

He closed in, blocking her just in case. He could barely believe she was tuning out the blaring band, the crowds, the catcalls, everything, and letting herself go free. With him.

His body responded to all the potential a strong woman like Hailey could bring and he ground himself against her. She let out a moan as she pressed against him, asking for more.

Oh, this was getting hot. They were going to have to move somewhere private. Soon.

He ran a hand down her chest, and suddenly she was out of his arms, leaving him propped against the wall, forehead pressed to the paint. She was a female Houdini.

Turning, he pulled her back to him by her hips, cupping her butt cheeks with both hands. She shoved him away, and as he moved forward to catch her again, he walked straight into the slap he'd predicted five minutes earlier.

"Back off," she said.

The women gathered around them gasped.

His hand went to the stinging flesh and he barked, "Hails, what the-?"

Her hands were bunched into fists and she looked like a bull about to charge. At him. For going too far, too soon. Too publicly. For making her feel passionate and sexual. For being too much.

He didn't know whether to run for cover or wave a red cape at her.

Standing tall, he cornered her again. "You deserve to feel sexy and wanted."

She let out a twisted laugh. "Just because I'm not famous and fake doesn't mean I suffer from poor self-esteem. I have boundaries, you know. And one of them includes not being groped and pawed in public."

He swallowed his shame.

He'd known that following his libido would get her walls up and maybe push her into revenge via some juicy tabloid photos, but seeing her look so hurt and disappointed in him was horrible.

She pointed a finger at him. "I mean nothing to a man like you, so don't play games with me, Finian Alexander, because I know when Hollywood calls you back I'll just be a pleasant romp in your memory

for about the five seconds it takes to forget me. Meanwhile, I'll be here feeling humiliated for letting you treat me like a piece of meat in front of my whole hometown."

He held out a hand, aware that the audience was hanging on to their every word.

"Hails, come on."

"Don't." She whipped her arm away from him with a glare and stalked down the plank flooring, faster and faster, until she was outside.

Gone.

"Want a shovel? That's a pretty big hole you're digging with Hailey." Austin stood beside him with a large smirk that Finn wanted to wipe off his face, knuckles up.

Finian Alexander was a jackass. How could she have forgotten that? How could she have let him touch her, all hot and full of longing, and with a passion that made her muscles weaken? Right there in public, with Austin snapping photos. Hailey was going to be just like all those other nameless women with his paws all over her on the front page of *Celeb Dirt!* How had he managed to sweep her up and make her feel special and wanted, when he was so obviously just using her? She was embarrassed. He'd turned her into a ravenous vixen who wanted to fling him down on the first available horizontal surface and use her teeth to pull the clothes from his body.

Was it the panic of losing everything? Or was he really that irresistible? No, it was his job to be irresistible and sexy, not live in reality where things like emotions mattered. She needed to remember who he was.

But Heaven help her, the way he'd sung her favorite song with that catch in his throat it had made it that much more meaningful. As though he had grabbed everything from deep within her and pulled it up and used it to make her feel things she'd never felt before. Like he understood. She fought off shivers and chided herself. That was a silly

idea. There was no way she had anything in common with a bad-boy movie star.

That was why he was a rising star. He could make women swoon. Even her.

Sighing, she turned her car into the marina parking lot just down from her house and untied the 1970s Boston Whaler that had been in the family for years. The boat wasn't much, but its basic barge-like structure with no cabin was perfect for hauling things out to Nymph Island. She headed out, swiping at the tears streaming down her face. She told herself they were just from the wind hitting her and that she wasn't upset about Finian. Or the fact that Austin had been shooting pictures of them getting hot and heavy, and totally out of control. That one slip-up would be smeared all over the planet by noon tomorrow.

She was a fool. The one thing she'd told herself she wouldn't be with Finian.

Oh, how Cedric would be laughing at her. *Can't get the story? Try creating it.*

Finian Alexander Gets It On with Local Girl.

She wiped the damp crease by her nose and sniffled as she slowed down near the shallows on the leeward side of the island, reveling in how calm the air was.

How had Finian managed to untie a piece of her she always kept under lock and key? How had he slipped under her skin so simply and easily?

But his mouth had felt so right against hers. She'd wanted to push his head down, down, down, and let him spread its heat elsewhere on her body. She choked back a sob. She never acted like this, felt like this. Ever.

No man had ever made her hands shake, just from thinking about the way he'd looked at her with burning desire. Made her knees feel as

though they'd lost their strength. And he was a movie star--a man who could, and would, have just about any woman he wanted. He was famous because he could make an average woman feel like a queen. Passionate. Wanted. Needed. Lusted after.

It wasn't real. Could never be real. He was playing his sex appeal games and she'd be a fool to think anything of it. Hailey needed to photograph his troubled side, not feed it. She needed to dig into his layers and

She needed to stay away. Far away.

She moored her boat at the cottage and sat on the dock, feet in the cool water. It was quiet except for the gentle slap of water at the underside of the dock, and she closed her eyes and tried to center herself.

She wanted Finian. She wanted money. She didn't want to give up the cottage despite her mother's permission to do so.

But there was no way Hailey could have what she wanted. She was going to lose. Big time.

An owl shrieked, sending shivers up her spine. She eased out a long breath. Across the water, Baby Horseshoe Island sat in the dark, despite it being a long weekend and having a camp for teens on the far side. But because of the high property taxes, she knew many couldn't afford to take the long summer vacations they used to in Muskoka's heyday and that the nonprofit camp had been struggling for years. It was increasingly rare for a family to spend the whole summer out here. Even those who could telecommute.

She sighed and turned to gaze up at the green cottage looming in the dark behind her. How long would it take for Nymph Island to sell? Who would it go to? Would they love it and appreciate its rustic charm? Or would they do like the new owners of JoHoBo across the strait, and renovate the cottage to the point that its heritage and history were

completely eliminated? Even the name--a combination of the original cottagers' children, Joanne, Hoskin, and Bobby--had been changed, to Missy's Getaway.

Still in her bare feet, Hailey walked up the long, winding dirt path to the cottage. She unlocked the door using a hidden key, and tugged a note off the clip she'd nailed into the old wood door so visitors could leave messages.

She flicked on a battery-powered light and read the note from a family wondering if the place was available for rent. Hmm. There was an idea. What would a place like this go for per week? She did some quick calculations and realized that even if she rented it out for a crazy amount, it wouldn't be enough to save the island. But it might help. She looked around the kitchen with a critical eye. It had been added on to the back of the cottage in 1960, the old outdoor kitchen having collapsed after a particularly heavy snow year. The whole place would need a bit of cleaning before being rented out.

Carrying a lantern, Hailey walked through the cottage's four bedrooms. The sisters would have to remove their personal effects, which wouldn't take long. The furniture was ancient, but could almost be considered antique. Add that the bathroom still had its original claw-foot tub, and she could sell the place's rustic charm without a problem. A quiet getaway where you could unplug in order to reconnect.

Upstairs was a massive attic that served as a big playroom for Tigger, and held four more queen-size beds. The alcove and small deck, which held a small table and two chairs, wasn't typical in many of the older cottages, and lent a nice openness to the upstairs. The place might not have a large-screen TV or air conditioning, but it had charm in spades.

She returned to the motorboat, inspired by her new plan. Once she was out from around the island and within reliable cell phone range

again, she used her phone's screen for light as she dialed the number off the note, hoping she wouldn't be getting the Walkers out of bed.

She introduced herself to the man on the other end of the line. "I apologize for calling so late--"

"No problem," he said in a delicious British accent. "The neighbors at this resort are so loud we won't be sleeping for at least another two hours. My wife, three kids, and I really want to get away from town and chill out on an island if at all possible."

"How many days?"

"Three days, two nights. We'd like to stay tomorrow night and the next."

"We could swing that." She'd have to do a lot of cleaning between now and then as well as confer with her sisters--although did it really matter if they knew? They'd want to come out for their annual Canada Day picnic since they'd been rained out today, but she could tell them the place was being fumigated and that they had to stay away. Then she wouldn't have to explain or argue or defend the idea. She could just go forward and get this problem solved and move them closer to keeping the cottage. "It's fairly rustic."

"That's fine."

"No air-conditioning. No television. A generator, solar panels and a battery for power."

"Sounds perfect. We would have the whole island to ourselves?"

"Yes." She told him the price and closed her eyes, fingers crossed, barely daring to breathe.

"Does that include a boat?"

She scrunched her eyes even tighter. "Yes. You can use mine. But no meals."

"Great. We'll meet you at the marina tomorrow at two."

Grinning, she docked the boat and got into her car, feeling lighter. She had a decent backup plan. The rental money wouldn't go far, but added to the proceeds she'd hopefully get from Simone's show and she'd be getting somewhere. Plus she'd resume her plan of getting Finian in the tabloids--without her attached to his lips.

Her phone rang and she quickly set up her hands free to take the call. Maybe someone had spotted Finian doing something dumb and she could spin over there and make a mint.

"Hi!"

"You sound happy," her mother said.

"Mom. Is everything all right?"

"Of course it is. I was just calling to tell you the fireworks were great. Best seat in the place."

"Oh, good." Hailey glanced at the sky and pulled out of the parking lot. She'd totally missed the fireworks.

"As well, I was thinking."

"Oh?" She held her breath.

"I think it's time to ask your sisters for help."

"What?" Hailey nearly drove off the road.

Her mother had been so clear and insistent over the past five years that the cottage shouldn't hold her sisters back from what they really wanted in life, knowing it was a burden and that caring for it might mean them not following their own paths. At the time Hailey had been honored that she was chosen to be Nymph Island's main caretaker, but over time she'd become slightly resentful of the burden, yet also strangely protective of it. But now, to let them in on how bad things were because she'd muffed up hardly seemed fair.

"I know I asked you to take care of the place and keep them in the dark on a few things in order to keep the situation simple and easy. But I never dreamed how much the taxes would increase. Or the inflation on

maintenance. I'm sorry for placing it all on your shoulders, Hailey. I can see now that it wasn't fair. However, you've still done a good job with what you have and I'm proud of you."

Hailey pulled over to wipe the tears from her eyes.

"But it's time to involve your sisters."

"What good will it do? They don't even have enough money to help cover this year's tax bill."

"Have you asked?"

"I've hinted that the cost has gone up, and everyone kind of goes pale and freaks out a little. Besides, Maya and Melanie just got out of school. Their jobs are crappy, and Daphne is trying to save up to take Tigger to Disney World. I can't just ask them to give me every penny they have when we might lose it all."

"So, then. Tell them it's going up for sale."

"I think the cottage was meant to stay in our hands, Mom." Why else would Finian have noticed her? Invited her out? Strutted about The Kee like a peacock? It was a sign. A sign that Hailey could do this on her own. *Then* she could bring her sisters in. She was the eldest, and the only thing in need of saving was the cottage, not her. "I'll save Nymph Island by August 30."

"It's time to accept help, Hailey. Don't be so stubborn and proud."

"I can do it faster on my own."

"Will the sacrifice be worth it? To you? To your relationship with your sisters?"

"Don't worry, Mom. I have everything under control."



HAILEY SCANNED THE ONLINE TABLOIDS. Nothing. As she'd told her mother last night, everything was under control. Apparently even more than

she'd realized. She grinned at her luck and leaned back, taking a sip of her black coffee. Austin hadn't sold the story of her and Finian getting it on at The Kee. Thank goodness.

But then, if this was a good thing, why did she feel deflated?

She shook off the sensation. She had work to do. She wasn't some teenager needing validation; she was an adult in need of serious cash. Like, over half her annual income.

Early that morning she'd taken the boat back across the still waters, removing or tucking away personal effects in the cottage, as well as scrubbing her way through the old building. In a few hours she would be escorting the Walker family out to Nymph Island, but in the meantime she had some serious Finian stalking to do. That, and selecting the photos she wanted to show in Simone's boutique.

After checking her watch, Hailey ran a brush through her hair. She didn't know where Finian would go today or what kind of transportation she would need to follow him, but she guessed he'd stick close to land. Grabbing her camera bag, she glanced in the mirror and adjusted her sundress, then reached for her car keys. It was time to exploit the soul-kissing faker.

She parked her car near Finian's resort and took the boardwalk along the lake, contemplating the marsh at the end, where he'd said he'd seen a spotted turtle. The animal was rare. Like him.

"I want to apologize for being too forward last night."

Hailey whirled, tripping over her loose flip-flop. Finian. It felt as though he found her as often as she found him. And she was the one who was supposed to be doing the stalking.

He caught her easily, helping her regain her balance. His hand remained on her arm and she tried not to lean closer, to get a whiff of him, to feel his body heat.

"Can I make it up to you?" he asked.

The man still hadn't shaved. Or maybe he had last night before going to bed, and had permanent stubble. She hated how it made his eyes smolder in a way that was entirely too sexy and irresistible. How it weakened her resolve to be cool and reserved, someone who was ruthless when it came to profit. Pair that with how his soft cotton shirt was clinging to his muscles, and she wanted to do a lot more than just capture him in digital.

Hailey plunked her camera bag on a nearby bench and placed her hands on her hips. "You're ridiculous. You know that?"

"I try your patience?"

He was pleading with her. It made her want to comply, to run a hand down his rough cheek and draw his fine mouth to her own, as well as test the strength of those corded arms.

"Everyone tries my patience." She turned away, needing to get a grip on herself.

"Wait. I'll walk with you."

Hailey stopped short, a laugh on her lips. Mr. Movie Star sounded so *nervous*. Not smooth or confident. Now, if that didn't make her want her to peel off the layers to see what was at his core, she didn't know what would.

No. She needed to keep a professional distance. He was an actor. He could apologize and act sincere and still be a jerk. She needed to stay reserved and analytical, so when he shed off those layers she was ready and waiting with her camera. Her camera. She'd left it on the bench. She shuffled back to retrieve it, wondering where he was planning to walk her to. She was supposed to be *following* him. She'd been playing the paparazzo role for a whole minute this morning and she'd already messed it up.

She needed to get back to photographing nature. It, at least, didn't turn around and follow her, and if it ever did, it always resulted in

great shots.

He caught up with her in a few long-legged strides. "I was wondering your nature photos?"

"What about them?" She tried not to let interest and hope creep into her voice. What if he wanted one for his home in Beverly Hills? What if he wanted to pose nude in--whoa stop right there. Not professional. And not nature the way she usually captured it.

"Do you need a picture of that turtle? That rare one?" He seemed hesitant. Much different from last night, when he'd been cocky and sure of himself as he'd pushed past her limits. "I know where it is."

"You didn't catch it, did you?" She crossed her arms and glared at him. Visions of the endangered turtle swimming in the bathtub at his cottage, looking for a place to climb out and rest, made her breath hitch.

"Do you really think you are the only person on the planet with a brain?" His cheeks had gone pink, and she shifted her weight, staring at him.

"So? What is it you want, Finian? Shouldn't you be doing something asinine for the tabloids instead of trying to tempt me out into a marsh?"

The kindness in Finian's eyes changed, as if he was putting up walls, becoming someone else. "Do you want to see the turtle or not?"

Of course she did. She was a nature photographer, and endangered animals were her prize subjects.

She swallowed and met Finian's eyes. "That's not a euphemism, is it?"

He let out a laugh, so deep and rich it sent tremors up her spine.

Forgiven.

"Why do I have a feeling you're cooking up something shady?" she asked, stepping closer.

"Because you believe what the tabloids tell you." He gave her a bright smile, slightly cocky and bold as he lifted his eyebrows in

challenge.

"And why wouldn't I?" She crossed her arms. "Last night you pretty much proved you'd do anything for attention."

The look he gave her was primal and intense. "Are you referring to the attention of my adoring masses, or just yours?"

She wanted to shake him off, feeling claustrophobic as though he'd moved in on her. In reality, he was still a polite distance away and there was no reason for her breathing to be all choked up.

"I'm not interested in gracing the Internet after a night out with you, sporting nothing more than my bra and panties, and strewn across your brawny half-clad body in a public place. Not my cup of tea."

Oh, my. Why did that sound so hot and tempting?

"But it's so much fun." He leaned in, his proximity teaching her body a thing or two about physical attraction and how rich it could be. How strong. Demanding. Natural. And a little something that should be answered to. Right now.

She rested a hand on his chest, blinking to clear the haze of need that flowed through her.

Again, it was no wonder why he was famous.

Hailey straightened, distancing herself as a crowd of women approached and began cooing and fawning over Finian. With grace, he autographed their shopping bags, and then one woman's stomach, his gaze flicking to Hailey as though making sure she didn't sneak off on him.

She turned away, breathing deeply. She needed to focus. She was here to expose his raw underbelly. A celeb gone wild and out of control. Not the real man she saw glimpses of and wanted to get to know.

"Come with me." Finian grasped her elbow, pulling her away from the women, his body tight to hers.

"Where?"

"Trust me?"

"Not a chance."

"Come with me anyway." He flashed her a grin that brought a twinkle to his eyes, and she allowed him to lead her away.



"THEY'VE BEEN SUNNING themselves out here all week," Finn said over his shoulder. He felt like a kid sharing a cool secret with a new friend, hoping she'd be suitably impressed.

The sun felt wonderful on his skin as they skipped from rock to rock through the marsh, just off the small thoroughfare that ran through town.

"It's later than I usually come out, but we might be in luck," he added.

Come on, turtles. Don't make a fool of me.

He jumped to the next rock, turning to hold out a hand to Hailey, who had her unwieldy camera bag slung over her shoulder. She made the leap, grabbing his hand for the landing, her flip-flops looped through the fingers of her other hand, her sundress bunched up to keep it out of the way of her long, slender legs. He couldn't help wondering how strong they were and how they'd feel wrapped around his waist as he

Wow, this sun was getting to him. His mind was so far in the gutter it would be a miracle if she didn't slap him due to the vibes he must be giving off.

As she moved to the next rock ahead of him, her bag threw her off and she waved her arms frantically to regain her balance.

"You need a backpack," he called, landing beside her and resting a palm lightly on her waist. He liked this game. So many reasons to touch

her, get a feel for her body, breathe her in and thrust his fantasies into high gear.

"The one I want is overpriced."

"By how much?" She needed a backpack. The way her bag was swinging and throwing her off balance it was a miracle she hadn't landed in the murky water.

"How'd you discover the turtles?" She turned to check how far they'd come.

"Training. How much are the bags?"

"Training?" She glanced at him with a puzzled frown.

He shrugged and held out his arms. "I have to stay in shape for my roles. It's nice to find something to do outside."

Tipping his head back, hands on his hips, he relished the feel of the sun. This was the life. He smiled at Hailey, his vision bleached from the sun. "Come on. Leaping from rock to rock is good exercise."

Finn took off again, letting out a whoop when he almost fell in, overestimating the distance between two rocks. He heard a laugh behind him and turned to see Hailey shaking her head as she carefully followed his route.

"I can take your bag if you want to try."

"I'm fine." She clung to her shoulder strap, eyes lowered as she eased past him, cheeks flushing as their bodies brushed against each other.

He wanted to run a hand up her arm, kiss her again. But glad that she was still talking to him despite last night's wandering hands, he decided he wouldn't push it. Instead, he'd suffer through the brush of her sweet curves against his groin as they moved past each other on the rocks.

"So what do you do for entertainment?" he asked.

"Watch your movies," she said with a sly wink.

He stood on a rock, assessing her. Was she kidding? Mocking him? Or revealing a secret obsession? "Very funny."

"You have no sense of humor," Hailey retorted. She let out another laugh and gave him a playful shove, before catching him so he didn't fall in the water.

She held him near, their eyes locking. He swallowed hard. He knew how she saw him--as irresponsible, full of bad judgment and lacking in impulse control. A man looking for trouble. He'd bet anything she wanted to take him down a notch.

He smiled at her, again resisting the urge to kiss her. Finn could handle her trying to take him down a notch. Anything she did would be just fine by him.

They broke eye contact and resumed moving through the reeds, his mornings sprints over the rocks paying off in nimbleness. Moments later, Finn stilled and held out a hand to prevent Hailey from passing. He crouched and pointed. There on a rock was a spotted turtle, looking ancient and wise, its beady eyes staring straight at them.

Hailey edged closer, her hair wild from the breeze, her gaze focused and intent. She grabbed his arm as she caught sight of the distinctive reptile sunning itself at the water's edge. It looked as though it was communing with a higher order.

"I can't believe it. You know how long I've been looking for one of these?" she whispered. "And there it is, sunning itself with the wisdom of the universe right on the edge of town." She turned to him, eyes full of wonder.

Finn shifted and cleared his throat. It was one thing for him to think the turtle was wise and connected with the universe, but to hear someone else say it out loud well, it made him uneasy. "You'd better take a picture before it takes off."

Without a word, she let go of his arm and began digging through her bag, matching up camera and lenses, her cheeks pink with excitement.

For a turtle. Finn sighed and scrubbed a hand through his hair. Eager to remain close to her, he resisted placing a hand on her shoulder in case he began caressing the soft, sun-warmed skin. Instead, he brought his head close to hers, as though trying to capture the view she was lining up. He let her curly, out-of-control hair tickle his face as he inhaled the sweet scent of her fruity shampoo.

He wondered what she'd do if he slipped the strap of her dress down to get a better glimpse of the way her chest rounded out. She was so petite, his hands could explore a lot of territory in one small move.

She shot him a frown over her shoulder.

Right. She was creating. Needed head space, physical space. Not some horny dude breathing in her feminine scent and fantasizing about her body. *Got it.*

He forced himself to step back onto the rock behind her, watching as she dropped into a squat, lining up her shot. Finn almost laughed at the thought of himself sitting on a rock in a mucky marsh in Canada, excited about sharing a rare turtle with a chick who needed to be introduced to a hairbrush. Some bad boy he was turning out to be.

"My sister Daphne is going to go nuts over these."

"Why?"

Still hidden behind her camera, Hailey whispered, "She's a bit of an environmentalist, and has been trying to prove these creatures live in the area. She's been working on stopping a development across the lake. The spotted turtle is sensitive to water pollution. Big developments bring disturbance, an increase in traffic, and of course, more boats, which means more water quality degradation. All of which is bad for these guys."

"Huh."

So Hailey got off on real-life issues. Who knew? Finn had plenty of those. Such as promises made to charities that he might not be able to keep. A brother who had died in his arms in a gang war. Another brother who'd flipped a switch with only Finn to bail him out.

He stood and tried to catch his breath as memories flooded over him. After twelve years the pain had barely dulled. He tried to focus on the conversation, his voice thick and tight, defensive. "Don't get me wrong, turtles are cool and all, but honestly, would anyone even notice if they went missing from the amphibian lineup?"

She turned to him, eyes round, mouth open.

"Kidding."

Grumbling something he couldn't quite hear, she changed the lens on her camera and took several more shots.

He stared at the sunning turtle. It was like him. Supposedly rare, but would anyone really notice if he went missing from the movie star lineup? Not likely.

"Sorry if I sounded like my sister," Hailey said. "But when you see something as beautiful as this and know it is endangered because its home has become our playground " She let out a sigh loaded with what sounded like guilt.

"Why does that bother you?" Finn asked, half listening, half caring.

She held up the LCD display on her camera so he could see her last shot. He looked out to the real turtle, then back to the camera. How did she make *that* look like *this*? *That* was boring. *This* was introspective. Her photo had somehow managed to capture exactly how he felt staring at the turtle when he was here alone, lost in his thoughts. Finn took a step back and just about into the muck. He knew from experience that the marsh water looked clean, almost pristine, but there was a lot of

deep mud at the bottom. He'd already lost one shoe in here and didn't want to lose another--especially in front of Hailey.

"Nice. Ready to go?" He needed to get out of here. Go be a bad boy. Create a new, fictionalized drama. Keep moving forward. And definitely squelch the urge to kiss the serious look off Hailey's face.

He rubbed his stubble in irritation. What was *wrong* with him? How did she keep getting under his skin, jabbing at the places he'd tried to kill off when he entered show business?

He needed palm trees, plastic smiles, and false everything. Not this. This was too real. Too *feeling*.

He plunged both hands through his hair and trudged back over the rocks, trying to shake off the emotions that assailed him. He needed some decompression time, naked with some bimbo, that's all.

It wasn't Hailey. It was him. It had been months and he was in a weird head space. It didn't help that she was teasing him in a push-pull game, and he was a man in transition. That was why he'd come here. He needed to sit and chill and not think. He needed peace so he could glide into the next stage of his career. Otherwise he'd get redirected from his goals.

"I'm going to be a while," she called, her soft voice distant.

He paused. What? She'd had her shot. She was like the director for *Desperate Cowboy* who'd kept demanding retakes when he almost always used the first take in the end. Why did Hailey want to hang out in the heat and take more photos? Was she punishing Finn? Trying to gain the upper hand?

This whole "creating" thing she was doing made him uncomfortable. He needed to go to a bar. Art wasn't his deal. Not anymore.

It was going to throw him off.

"I'm leaving," he said, his voice gruffer than he intended.

"Jealous of a turtle and all the attention it's getting, huh?" She straightened, her eyes shaded by her free hand. She came a few rocks closer, moving carefully. She lifted her lens, fired off a few shots of him standing peeved on a rock. In Canada. Great. Good luck selling that to the tabloids. It was time to find a real paparazzo.

"I'm not wearing sunscreen," he snapped.

Without looking, she reached into the bag resting against her hip and flung a bottle at him. SPF 60.

Ever Miss Practical.

"I'm going to move over that way and see if I can get some head-on shots. Maybe catch it swimming. Thanks for bringing me out here."

"There are no rocks that way."

She shrugged.

"What about the eggs?"

"They're not in the open water, Finian." Hailey rolled her eyes.

"And leave you out here in the sucking mud? What if you drown?"

He could barely believe she was dismissing him. Didn't she know who he was? He was Finian Alexander. A movie star. You didn't dismiss him after he showed you the thing you'd been seeking for years. And you sure didn't casually snap off a few shots as if it was a joke. You would pay at least as much attention and care to him as you did to the turtle. "You can't stay out here alone."

"You sound like my mother," she said, her tone odd.

"You ever heard of a hairbrush?"

"Really like my mother," Hailey muttered, her tone flat. She self-consciously drew her curls into a bunch, twisting them into a knot, her cheeks pink again. She stepped off the rock and waded through the marsh to face the turtle. What was wrong with this girl? She was dealing with mud between her toes and indeterminable squishy depths for a turtle. A freaking turtle.

Dammit. She was making Finn feel like a girl. Out in a marsh waiting for someone, being ignored. Insulted. He didn't like it. Not one bit.

"Your mother's a very smart woman," he called.

"Watch what you say." Hailey sloshed through the marsh, and in the process scared the turtle into the water. She lowered her camera, her face hard, the hem of her dress wet.

Good. She'd missed her shot and was mad at herself. And him.

Hands on his hips, he smiled, waiting for her to turn to him.

"You're a big jerk, you know that?"

"Yeah, I do. It's been amply noted by the general public."

She splashed toward him, her head cocked to the side. "And yet you are so proud."

"It pays the bills." He shook his head, sighing as he held out a hand to help her out of the muck. What was it about Hailey Summer that always pulled him between two worlds, and made him ruin her mood? Not meeting her eye, he wrung out the hem of her dress so the moisture wouldn't spread. "Your feet stink."

"You need to shave."

"You need to kiss me." He grabbed her and, in the middle of the marsh, showed her just how under his skin she'd gotten.

*B*y the time Finn pulled Hailey out of the marsh he was ready to take her back to his cottage and run his hands over her body and through her hair--hair that was surprisingly soft and fine, causing all that fly-away business he so often saw. He wanted to finish exploring all that potential he'd felt under her dress last night at The Kee.

He was practically dragging her as she laughed, stumbling along as they hit the dock, his eyes on his small cottage still yards and yards away. She'd let him kiss her again, her mood turning, her playful side coming out like a ray of sunshine.

A car peeled up beside them as they cut across a small parking lot, and Finn tugged Hailey behind him, afraid the paparazzi would distract her and dampen the mood they were building. He hustled her along as a woman, half hanging out the silver minivan's window, hollered, "Did you get it?"

"Get what?" he asked suspiciously, keeping Hailey hidden behind him.

Hailey shoved him aside, yanking her camera out of its bag. "Sure did."

Seriously? "Um, we have plans," Finn said pointedly. Specifically, consenting adult plans, and this soccer mom with the hippie vibe was

totally going to dampen the mood.

The woman, who had the same petite frame as Hailey but seemingly without the height, waved a hand burdened by massive rings. "Show me."

Hailey moved to the van, holding out her camera's LCD.

"How do you know about the turtle already?" Finn demanded.

"Hailey texted me," the woman stated.

"Oh, Finian, meet my youngest sister, Daphne," Hailey said, without glancing his way.

She could barely give him the time of day because of that turtle. What had he been thinking taking her out there?

"Nice to meet you," Daphne said, her eyes on the camera's screen.

"Yeah, pleasure is all mine," he muttered. Sulking, he took a few steps away to see if Hailey would notice. Nope. Not even a glimmer that he was missing.

He was definitely feeling like a means to an end right now. He turned to face the breeze coming off the lake, eyeing Daphne out of the corner of his eye. She was a modern-day hippie, wearing lots of beads and an embroidered smock. Add in the fact that her silver Dodge Caravan had a bright red flower painted on the hood and plastic flowers wrapped around the antenna, and it was pretty obvious she took nature as seriously as her big sister did--more so, seeing as Hailey was looking for turtles for her.

Derek would be laughing himself right off his chair right now if he knew who Finn had chosen to be his paparazzo. Yet the way the two sisters appeared to be opposites gave Finn hope. Maybe Hailey would find him--an opposite--just as intriguing and worthy of helping as she did her sister. And if not, it wasn't exactly horrible hanging out with her.

"You found this?" Daphne asked him, looking up at last.

"The turtle?" He ran a hand through his hair and tried to act casual. "Yeah. Why?"

The van door was flung open and he found himself being hugged by what resembled a python. Every time he tried to exhale Hailey's sister squeezed tighter, until he couldn't breathe at all. A smaller creature that he could only imagine was her offspring hugged his legs with all her might. Just when he thought he might actually pass out from a lack of oxygen, they released him, as if by unspoken agreement.

Finn inhaled and steadied himself. That mother-daughter team could take out unsuspecting spies with their killer grips.

The offspring began bouncing around on the asphalt, her fluffy party dress flouncing as she sang, "Mommy found the spotted turtle. Mommy's going to save them." She paused to give Hailey a hug for good measure, then climbed back into the van. Clicking the seat belt across herself, she announced, "All ready, Mom."

Panic slipped under Finn's skin as Hailey slid the little girl's door shut and climbed into the passenger seat beside Daphne. She couldn't just leave. They had unfinished business. They were about to go to his cottage and get it on. He was going to convince her to work with him.

But the women weren't even talking, they were moving as though this was all part of some prearranged plan.

Hailey had found what she wanted and was ditching him. The idea left him with a surprisingly hollow feeling that echoed throughout his being.

"Well?" the hippie asked him.

He stood on the asphalt, feeling like a third wheel.

"Are you coming, or what?"

"Where?" He glanced at Hailey, and knew it didn't matter what the answer was, he was going where she did. He climbed in next to the child bouncing in her booster seat.

"You'll see." Daphne pulled out of the parking lot in a move that would make most soccer dads salivate, and had Finn falling out of his seat.

"You might want to buckle up, mister," the young girl said. "Mom's like a race car driver. And they wear helmets."



STANDING in the public parking lot near Bala Falls, Hailey nervously ran her hands through her hair, accepting an elastic from her sister. Thank goodness Daphne and Tigger had come along. Hailey had become so swept up in Finian's kisses in the marsh that she'd forgotten herself. And that would have been a complete failure seeing as she wasn't supposed to be exposing him to the tabloids in a kiss-and-tell sort of way.

She wrestled her hair into a ponytail, the humidity of the warm day making it go nuts. The only thing worse was January and February, where she wanted to shave her head rather than deal with the static electricity that made her hair stick to her face.

"Don't break it!" Daphne squealed, just before the taut elastic snapped in Hailey's grip. "Why do you always pull it so tight? That was my last one."

"Sorry." Hailey grabbed a silk scarf from the front seat of the van and tied it like a headband to keep her hair at bay. Why hadn't she used product like she had for her date at The Kee? Oh, right, because she didn't want to be noticed by Finian. That had worked well.

Out on the rocks he had cupped the back of her neck while kissing her, his hands delving into her hair in a move that had made her fall against him, eager for the contact.

Some self-restraint she had.

She snorted, and turned to find Finian standing in the parking lot, listening to Tigger with rapt attention. Her niece took advantage of his focus, talking faster and faster, as though she expected him to suddenly look at his watch and declare she'd used up her allotted talking time for the next two days.

Instead, he let the girl take his hand and lead him into the throng of Daphne's people who were enjoying a picnic before they launched their protest.

"They keep saying a parking lot isn't a heritage site," someone said as Hailey passed them.

"Those rocks " added another.

"What are we doing here?" Finian asked through closed lips as she drew nearer.

"This? This is the picnic and protest I was trying to duck out of." She checked her watch. She had a little more than two hours until she had to meet up with the Walker family at the marina. It was going to be tight. "I'm supposed to take photos for Daphne, but I have to be somewhere soon. Help me out and tell me if you see something that would look good in a pamphlet."

"Like that human pyramid?" he asked, pointing to five protesters who were wobbling and laughing as they tried to stack themselves into a vertical triangle.

"Sure." Hailey swung her camera up and took a few shots. "What else, wingman?"

He pointed to the protest signs leaning against a picnic table. He picked a wild daisy from the tall grass near the edge of the park and laid it across the top of the table.

"Nice eye," she said. This was going to be easier than she thought. With Finian's help she might make her appointment with the Walker family with time to spare.

"You guys!" Daphne squealed to a nearby group, and Hailey moved closer, raising her camera to capture the excitement in her sister's dancing eyes. Daphne paused, holding everyone's attention as she hauled Hailey and Finian over. "You'll never guess!"

The group pushed forward, eager to hear her news, whispering to each other.

"Is Finian Alexander our new spokesperson?" one woman squealed.

Finian flashed Hailey a panicked look.

"No, Liberty, he's not. But this man " Daphne pulled Finian as close as possible. "Found " She let the anticipation build. " the *spotted turtle*"

The crowd gasped, their round eyes focusing on Finian.

"Here! In Muskoka!"

People squeezed in on him, a thousand questions flowing in rapid-fire succession.

"And Hailey got photos of it!" Daphne called above the noise.

The crowd surged toward Hailey, who held her camera bag against herself for protection, looking for a way to escape.

"The spotted turtle lives in Muskoka!"

The group began moving toward the parked cars, excitedly making plans. Hailey exhaled in relief. There was nothing like being squished in a mob to make a woman feel claustrophobic.

"Wait!" They all stopped moving and fell silent as Daphne held up her hands. "We can worry about that tomorrow. Today we have this." She flung a hand with flourish to the *Stop the Hydro Electricity Plant!* sign hanging above the protest picnic. "Tomorrow the turtle."

The protesters refocused, heading back to the tables.

"Wow. If I ever need crowd control, I'm calling your sister," Finian whispered in Hailey's ear. She smiled and nodded. Her sister was definitely using her powers for good.

Her smile faded. She'd just hauled Finian to a rally. She was supposed to be introducing him to drug dealers and tempting him with street racing, not *this*. She was also supposed to be stalking him from afar.

She sucked at being a paparazzo.

Daphne gave Finian a tight squeeze that made his cheeks flush. "Thank you, Finian Alexander. Now, let's set you up with a veggie dog. You must be hungry."

"*Veggie dog?*" he mouthed over Daphne's head, making Hailey laugh.

Her smile froze when she spotted Austin at the sidelines, carefully lining up a shot that had Finian in front of the protest signs.

She quickly tugged Finian in the opposite direction and pressed her body against his, distracting him so he wouldn't turn around, giving Austin the shot.

Being a good paparazzo was much harder than she'd realized.



OKAY, this was getting ridiculous. Everyone was all over Finian, and Austin was everywhere. He was going to scoop her, leaving her with nothing. Hailey didn't think Finian had seen Austin yet, as he was still smiling as if he was the king of the world. Although who could blame him? He was a friggin' hero for finding the turtle. Plus, he was sexy and irresistible, and definitely worthy of being the center of everyone's attention. But what was she, the one with the photographic evidence they needed to stop the development--chopped liver?

She inhaled, trying to settle her frustration.

Okay, all right it was jealousy ripping at her, pure and primal.

And it wasn't because Finian was the only one getting the credit. It was about the women fawning over him. Which was a silly waste of

energy. There was no reason for Hailey to feel jealous or possessive. He was a sexy movie star, so of course women fawned over him. She was just some girl with a camera.

She held her heavy camera against her shoulder and looked around it at the way Finian was grinning that big perfect smile, as if he and the fawners were the only ones at the picnic. She inhaled a shaky breath, watching how he gave each woman a light touch as he turned to chat with her. Nothing too intimate or encouraging, but enough to show that he wasn't passing her off. That he was listening. Caring.

Hailey ducked behind her camera again and fired off a few shots, struggling to keep her cool. It should be *her* receiving his smiles and touches. *Her*. Not random women who were supposed to be marching around shouting "Heck no, we won't go."

She swung her lens a few feet to the right, to zoom in on Austin who was looking frustrated as some large hydro power trucks lumbered between his hiding spot and Finian. She smiled and turned her attention back to Finian who was now giving out cheek kisses to the group. Why wasn't he kissing her? He wasn't even looking her way.

With deliberate moves, Hailey set up her tripod, barely refraining from breaking its legs. What was her problem? It was as though she liked him or something. She glanced up at Finian again. He was looking her way. She gave him a weak smile, grabbed an organic drink from the picnic feast to her right and jammed the straw down inside the juice box. He started to come over and she fumbled with her setup, aiming the camera in random directions, snapping shots that would likely be out of focus, as she tried to act natural.

Her heart tore into action, pumping harder the closer Finian came.

Be cool. It's okay. He came here with you. Of course he's going to stop by and say hi. He doesn't want to be abandoned here without a ride back, that's all.

"Hi," she said, as he grabbed her around the waist, his gaze focused determinedly in the distance. He pivoted her and pulled her along with him and she barely managed to snag her camera, still attached to its tripod, as he hurried them to the edge of the group. He didn't stop moving until they were hidden under the branches of a weeping willow. Then he released her, ran a hand through his disheveled hair and let out a "whew." There were bags under his eyes she hadn't noticed earlier. For all the fun he'd seemed to be having, being mobbed, it appeared, had drained him instead of filling him with energy like playing at The Kee had.

Last night he'd been jazzed, with waves of alpha excitement and energy coming off him, and Hailey had been a sliver too close to taking him to bed because of it. The only thing that had stopped her were thoughts of her sister Daphne, and more specifically, Tigger. Of how her little niece had come to be during a one-night stand with a summer boy after a Kim Mitchell concert at The Kee.

Add in the fact that Hailey had had her heart broken by a summer boy--a man she'd thought was different from the rest--and she was a little too sensitive about summer romances and the way Finian kept drawing her into his sights.

On the flip side, he was hot, intriguing, and his attention was totally flattering. Plus she needed him to want her near so she could photograph him when he finally showed his wild side.

Finian stretched out in the grass and yawned.

She stood above him, watching him tip his head back, eyes closed, content. He was so different from her in almost every way. His life was on autopilot. No cares. No worries. It was a miracle they even spoke the same language.

"What?" He opened his eyes, and she dropped to the ground beside him, feeling unsure. Finian reached over to run a hand down her bare

arm, giving her the shivers. "You look bothered."

She flashed him a bright smile. "Nah, I'm fine." She scanned the area. "Where's Tigger?"

"With her mom," Finian said, without glancing around. Sure enough, Tigger was bouncing along beside Daphne, her fancy dress swaying in time with her movements. In fact, the girl was bouncing more than usual--vibrating, really.

"Ah, crap."

"What?" Finian mumbled, his eyes drifting closed.

"Someone gave her sugar."

"Is she diabetic?" He sat up abruptly, his eyes wide as he sought out Tigger in the crowd.

"No, she just gets hyper. She'll be fine. Once we scrape her out of the clouds."

"She said it would be okay."

Hailey laughed and shook her head. She reached over and tapped Finian's nose. "You were scammed by a five-year-old."

"I'm losing my edge."

"Her mother restricts sugar like it's cocaine, so she's developed ways to get treats from unsuspecting people in order to get her fix."

"Interesting analogy." Finn shot Hailey an enigmatic look.

"Yeah, well."

They both stretched out on their stomachs.

"Are you an addict?" she asked quietly.

"No, but I know people who are. Or were." Finian swallowed hard, his eyes filled with pain.

"I'm sorry." She laid a hand over his and he met her gaze.

"For what?"

"For causing that expression on your face."

The sounds of the crowd grew in the background. It was getting close to protest time.

"Does your sister do these sorts of things often?"

Hailey nodded. "She views protecting Muskoka's environment as her duty."

"I can see why the two of you get along."

"I recycle, choose products based on their impact on the environment, and drive a car with a small carbon footprint, but I'm not Daphne. I mean, I go to more protests than the average Joe, but it's not my thing in the way that it's hers. It's not a major part of my identity." Her attention was drawn to her sister, commanding the growing rally with vim. "But I'd do anything for my sisters."

"I meant that you both step in to take care of others."

"My houseplants are all dead."

"Funny."

"Not really. I feel guilty every time I look at them."

"But it seems like you feel responsible for a lot." His face scrunched in a frown. "Never mind. I'm probably projecting."

Still on her stomach, she locked eyes with him. There was a lot going on in behind those amazing blue eyes of his, and she didn't have a clue what it was. There was a layer in there she hadn't managed to unearth yet. She saw glimpses of it right now, but it kept vanishing. Was it an act to up his appeal and intrigue, or was it something real he was trying to hide?

"You need to have more fun," he said at last.

"And what would you suggest?" she said with a laugh, adding a hint of flirtatiousness to her voice, hoping to see his hidden layer again.

He hunched forward on his elbows, the shade of the tree dappling his torso. "Come here." His voice was low and full of meaning.

Rolling her eyes, she leaned forward so their faces were closer.

She was playing along only so she could snap pictures of him and his version of "fun." Nothing else. She wasn't curious. She wasn't into him.

Right.

He watched her until she began to feel self-conscious. Was the dappling sun making strange shapes on her face? She shifted to pull away, but Finian pressed his warm lips to hers, gently grabbing a lock of her hair to keep her close.

He was doing it again. Pulling her in, drowning her in feelings she'd only read about in romance novels.

"Hey, lovebirds."

Hailey snapped away from Finian, feeling guilty for being the stupidest woman on the planet by falling for his moves. Again.

But he was a fine kisser and it felt so real.

She snatched the protest sign from Daphne and, without looking back, hurried off to meet up with the rest of the group.

"And you, hero boy," she heard Daphne say to Finian, "if you're good and wave this sign for the next half hour, I'll let you come to our cottage picnic tomorrow."

Oh, crap.

Hailey turned to see Finian nodding and smiling. Not tomorrow. And there was no way this man was ever going to see their cottage.

"Been in the family for four generations," Daphne was saying, as Hailey made her way back to them under the tree. "It's almost in its original state which is very rare for a cottage of its age," Daphne added.

"I'd love to see it."

Hailey thrust the sign back at Daphne. "I forgot I have to be somewhere. And the picnic is off. Trixie Hollow is being fumigated this week." She turned to glare at Finian. "I think it's time you stopped following me around."

It was time he learned who was stalking whom.

Finn held his phone away from his ear and winced. Derek was pretty much ready to sell him out to the first women's hygiene company to hint at an offer that he do a commercial.

"You're not Angelina Jolie, you understand that? You can't pull off this 'save the world' crap."

Finn inhaled, knowing if he shut up and let Derek blow off steam his agent would get over yesterday's protest a heck of a lot sooner. Although shutting up certainly hadn't worked with Hailey at the protest. She'd suddenly gone from all kissy under the tree to running away, and Finn couldn't figure out why. He'd totally kept his hands off the goods this time.

In the end, he'd watched her hoof it across the park, her sister hot on her trail. He'd seen them have words before Hailey had taken off to someplace where girls went to have a hissy fit on their own, and Daphne had reappeared to give him a long and silent ride back to his lonely little cottage. Once there, he'd sat on the deck overlooking the lake, and drunk enough beers to give himself a headache come morning. All night he'd wondered where Hailey was and if she'd seek him out again.

Which was what pathetic losers did.

And apparently, he was as pathetic as they came, because her words about him not following her had hit hard. All night he'd wondered how many of their "bump ins" had been his fault. Did she really think he was following her around? Because his feeling was that it was *her* following *him*.

He half listened as Derek strived to rant and rave Finn down to the size of a gnat.

"You can't go around waving Save the Whales placards."

"I think it was for a heritage site and a hydro electric thing," Finn corrected, rearranging little sunflower candle holders on the mantel of his cottage fireplace.

"You just undid months worth of work with this stupid stunt. I thought you knew better than this, Finn. A lot better. I thought we shared the same goals."

"We do."

"I have three kids to feed and an ex-wife to support."

"I know." Finn let out an anguished sigh. This was supposed to be the easy life, not him in the middle of a web where if he bounced hard enough everyone else fell off.

"You have charities depending on you."

"I'm aware of that." He shut off his mind as he moved to the table to tap through the links and images Derek had sent him. Finn knew how spectacularly he was failing; he didn't need help feeling just how badly.

The photos that had made it online last night were ones of him looking cozy in idyllic Muskoka. Enjoying himself. Content. Kissing Hailey.

His heart squeezed tight and his protective instincts hit the red line. His hands squeezed into fists and he cursed whoever had broken into her private life like that.

"How'd they get that shot of Hailey?" he demanded.

"The girl? Come on, Finn. You know nothing is private."

But this was a private moment between the two of them, and she wasn't a superstar kissing him for attention. She was trusting him every time she let him get close, and he'd broken her trust by letting his life invade their world. And he knew better. A whole lot better.

This was no longer about stirring her up so she'd go paparazzo on him, but something else. Something he couldn't figure out. Maybe the beginning the beginning of what?

"And for Christ's sake, Finn," his agent said, voice tired. "If you're going to roll in the hay with a local, tell her to brush her hair--she's going to be in the papers."

"It's the humidity, Derek. It gets frizzy."

"Don't you dare go falling in love with some nobody, you hear me?"

"I'm not in love." He stared at the photo, unable to peel his eyes away. It was a beautiful picture and definitely one to keep.

He sighed. Hailey didn't need the world on her because her hair wasn't perfect, because *she* was perfect. The world wouldn't understand. The world wanted fake perfect. You could be anyone as long as you were glossy on the outside.

Finn needed to find Austin. He needed to tell him to back off, because Hailey wasn't equipped for Finn's world and he wanted to spend more time with her--out of the limelight.

He flicked to the next shot. It was one of him holding hands with Hailey's niece. Tigger's face was so bright and open and trusting. Not knowing he was a man ripping down the tracks of self-destruction and that he'd just ripped away her anonymity, thrusting her into the mean old eyes of the public gossip circles.

What had he done to Hailey and Tigger?

Finn continued to stare at the photo of him with Tigger. He looked like any guy his age out in the world, finding his place, as well as happiness, family, and friends.

Not the image he'd been working toward, but somehow it still felt right. This tightness in his chest left him when he was with Hailey and her family. The tightness he hadn't even known he'd been carrying.

"Last time we talked, you said you had things under control, Finn."

"I do."

"This is not under control."

"Give me more time."

He banged through the rest of the photos. What about images of him in the alley looking for a joyride? Him on stage at The Kee? Outshining the band everyone had paid to see? Why weren't they here?

"How much more time?"

"I've got a plan. I just need a little time with the Canadian paparazzi."

Derek laughed. "There is no Canadian paparazzi. I'll send someone in."

"I've got this, Derek." An edge was slipping into his voice. "These pictures are barely anywhere, and this is just a ripple of intrigue. I know the world isn't ready for this kind of turnaround in my personality and way of living, but this is this is a setup, okay? Trust me. The world will be waiting for me to mess this up."

"And you will."

Finn nodded, head bent low enough that his chin grazed his chest. He would.

But this time it was going to hurt.



FINN WIPED the sweat from his brow, leaping from rock to rock, the reeds slapping at him as he went down his now-familiar path through the marsh. He was already faster than he'd been earlier in the week. More nimble, too. A few more days of this and he'd get the starring role for *Ninja Fighter*. Then he'd make it. Just one more movie. That's all he needed to set him up where he wanted to be. Then everything would be easy. Everything would fall into place.

Taking a wild leap, he soared through the air, landing on both feet. Forced to bend low to keep his balance, he hovered over the rocks, pumping his arms. He could sense the power in his muscles and knew the exercise would make him feel great for the rest of the day. Well, until he caught up with Hailey and tried to convince her to be his. His personal paparazzo. Not *his*, his.

Because her as his paparazzo--even though she seemed peeved at him--was the only way to go without either pairing up with Austin or leaving Canada. And Finn wanted more downtime.

But what would she do when he showed up again? Accuse him of stalking her? Slap him? Kiss him?

He stumbled and recovered, moving on through the cattails from rock to rock, disturbing birds whose sudden flight no longer fazed him. Great training for his reflexes. He was ready, ready, ready.

Nothing could faze him. Nothing could throw him off. He could have ten ninjas jump out of the reeds and he'd stay strong, not wavering in his straight line to the docks and boardwalk, which were approaching in less than twenty strides.

Fifteen.

Ten.

Finn skipped a rock, moving fast, arms pumping. He glanced up to judge the distance he still had to cover.

And there she was. Hailey.

He missed the third last rock and splashed into the marsh, his momentum throwing him into the water, where he sank to his elbows in the muck.

"Finian?" Hailey's voice drifted over to him, curious.

Embarrassed, he pulled his hands out of the muddy ooze, surprised they didn't make a sucking sound.

"Hey," he said lightly, rolling onto his back in the shallow water, letting its coolness wash away his heat.

"You weren't disturbing the turtles, were you?" She stood on the edge of the wooden boardwalk that connected to the docks, hands on her hips.

"Just taking a nice morning swim."

"In your running gear?"

"I was hot."

Hailey rolled her eyes and turned away. She was a vision today. It was as though she'd received a memo from his agent about her hair. This morning it was smooth, silky--even better than it had been at The Kee. All that fine hair hanging low on her back, a slight wave to it that shimmered in the sun. Her legs looked longer and sexier from his water-level vantage point, too. He was going to have to stay in here for a while to hide his growing erection if he didn't distract himself.

He scrambled onto the dock, focusing on her hair. As amazing as it looked cascading down her back, he kind of missed the wildness of her berserk curls. He scraped muck off his watch face, hoping it was not only water resistant, but also marsh bottom resistant.

Beyond Hailey, a man who had to be a reporter was talking to Daphne and Tigger. Finn's heart lifted, as did the corner of his mouth. Perfect. He liked reporters. And male reporters were almost always ruthless about revealing dark secrets and bad behavior. Female reporters only sometimes--but he usually had to have a one-night stand with them

first. Finn's attention drifted back to Hailey. She'd made it pretty clear she wasn't interested in that type of thing. Which meant if he did take it that far well, then maybe she'd blast him in the tabloids. But probably not. And anyway, he had other things in mind first.

He studied the local reporter, all crisp in his ironed shirt and neat haircut. Eager for something bigger than this small town.

Finn jiggled up and down to shake some of the water off himself. He still had lots of mud stuck to him--hardly a great look--but maybe he could pick a lover's spat with Hailey and get the reporter to catch her slapping him or something. Finn could line it up so she'd have her back to the camera and could stay anonymous, but he'd be in the news and she'd have her privacy.

He sidled up to Hailey, assessing the situation. She didn't move away.

Would she forgive him for picking a fight?

Man, he was losing his edge. That was the last thing he should be worried about. Or even care about. They were both playing a game for money and fame. Surely she knew the stakes. She wasn't just some girl who appeared around him all the time with a camera. She couldn't be. She had to be waiting for her moment. In other words, she was stalking him as much as he was now stalking her.

He turned to her, wanting to touch her hair.

"Over your snit?" he asked.

She frowned and moved two steps away.

"What were you mad about, anyway?"

"Just " She let out a sigh and looked the other way. "You wouldn't understand."

Suddenly, he was hit in the midsection and squeezed so tight he had trouble breathing right. "Whoa there, Tigger!" he gasped.

The girl pulled away, her face wrinkled in disgust. "You smell, Finian. And you're all wet."

"True and true. Did you know my friends call me Finn?"

"Fin? As in what fish use to swim?" She gave him a doubting look as if to say *Why on earth would you let people call you that?* "People call me Tigger, but my real name is Kim."

"And why do they call you Tigger?"

"You gave me sugar, you figure it out."

She flashed him a sly smile, and he laughed and gave her that one.

He pointed toward Daphne, who was still talking to the reporter, but was starting to come their way. "What's your mom doing?"

"She's talking to Rick. Did you and Auntie Hailey have a fight?"

He glanced up at Hailey from his crouch. She was ignoring him, her arms crossed as she stood outside the circle Daphne and Rick the reporter had created near the water's edge. "That's a good question."

"I ask good questions. Why'd she leave the picnic yesterday?"

"I think she was ready to go home."

Tigger shook her head. "She always says goodbye to me."

"Oh. Sorry, kiddo."

They both turned to study Hailey, who looked pretty, but had smudges under her eyes.

"She looks like she needs a friend, Finian Alexander." The five-year-old wrapped her arms around his neck, apparently no longer caring that he was wet.

"She does." He sighed to himself. There went his plan to get her mad at him for the reporter. It seemed that was the last thing she needed.

"What's the interview about?"

"About the turtle you and Auntie Hailey saw."

"Are they going to try and save it or something?"

"Public awareness is the first step," Tigger said seriously.

Finn gave her a light hug. She felt good. Warm. Full of life. And it made him want to have a whole houseful of kids. And of course, a wife who loved him. Really loved him.

"You're a smart cookie, you know that?" he asked.

The reporter moved closer, his pace increasing as he recognized Finn.

Finn lightly pulled Tigger's arms from around his neck and stood, preparing himself.

"Finian Alexander! Rick Steinfeld." The reporter pumped his hand enthusiastically, then snapped a few shots of Finn at close range. "I heard you were in our neck of the woods. Let's get some of you together." He pushed Hailey into the shot. She was frowning at Rick as if he'd just placed her in someone else's family Christmas photo.

Finn slung an arm around her, drawing her close to his wet body. This girl really needed to lighten up. She'd probably never gone photobombing--incredibly cool when you were as famous as sin.

Oh wait, they were the ones who'd discovered the turtle. No photobombing required here.

He grinned at the camera and noted Hailey was shooting him a peeved look while trying to lean away.

"So, you told him about us, huh?" he said through a smile he kept aimed at Rick.

Hailey tried to shrug out of his hold. "There is no us, Finian."

"Us finding the turtle together. But if you want another kind of us, I can probably oblige you. I think you'd enjoy being the girlfriend of a famous man once you got a taste of it."

Her cheeks flushed and he pulled her closer.

"You're so full of yourself."

"You could be full of me, too, if you play your cards right." He shot her an over-the-top seductive wink and waited for her to get physical.

To his surprise she broke out laughing. So much for the reporter catching her shoving him into the water or slapping him.

She bit her bottom lip, her mouth stretched into a large grin. "Does anyone ever stay mad at you?"

"You were mad at me?"

"You're all wet." She pushed away, looking at her now-damp outfit.

"I'm worth getting wet for." He shot her a lewd smile.

She laughed and gave him a massive shove that caught him off guard. Some ninja-ready actor he was.

"Where do you store all that confidence?"

He put on his best Austin Powers voice, thrusting his hips towards her. "Do I make you randy, baby? Do movie stars make you horny?"

Her smile faltered and she sighed, stepping away.

"Oh, come on. Where's playful Hailey? Why so serious? Life is fun and easy."

Her eyes flashed as she crossed her arms over her chest.

Now they were getting somewhere. That spark in her eyes. Kill him, but it made him want to push all her buttons.

Naked. In bed.

He cozied up to her, ready to take their beef to the next level. The one where they fell on each other and caused fireworks with their heat and passion. Oh, yeah, mark his words, she'd be a wild thing in bed.

"I heard you found the turtles?" interrupted Rick.

"What?" Finn struggled to pull his focus from Hailey. He gave her a last look as if to say, *We're not done here, sexy woman. Oh, yes. You will be mine.*

"Daphne said you found the spotted turtle."

"Yeah." Finn sized up the man. He looked about the same age as Hailey, and he hoped Rick wasn't another ex-boyfriend. Finn didn't need another man around that he wanted to kill on principle.

"You found it with your girlfriend, Hailey?" Rick looked from one to the other, pen on his notepad, lips ready to smile. He flicked a lock of hair out of his eyes and flashed a thumbs-up at Hailey, who seemed about ready to slap him. Oh, man. Maybe not an ex if he didn't know to clear out when that look came down the pipe.

"Yeah, my girlfriend." Finn put an arm around her shoulders.

"We're *not* dating." Hailey's eyes flashed as she flicked his arm off her.

"You don't want to be associated with me now?" he joked, his voice low and sultry.

"You're not my type and I'm looking for more than a fling."

"You think I'm not capable of something other than a fling? I just came out of a year-long relationship, I'll have you know."

"On the rebound. Even more not my type."

Finn faced Hailey. "What is your problem with me?"

Hailey brushed him off and addressed Rick, "I have photos of the turtle and Finian simply--"

"We'll pay you the usual rate for those, Hailey," the reporter said. "Make sure they're suitable for the paper. None of that artistic crap." Rick waved her away and Finn could see the man had stepped on her pride. He was so getting slapped. If not by Hailey, then by Finn.

"So, what's the scoop between the two of you?" Rick looked from Finn to Hailey again.

Finn opened his mouth, but Daphne pushed her way between them. "We're having a rally for the turtles on Saturday. We want to stop the Oakview Estates planning meeting. We can't let them go ahead."

"Right." The reporter made notes. "So, Hailey, what was that photo in the tabloids about?"

"What photo?" She stared at him with a blank expression.

"The one of you and Finian kissing?"

Finn met her eyes. Uh-oh. His get-Hailey-ticked-off-so-she-reveals-you-in-the-tabloids plan might take off earlier than expected.



HAILEY STRODE AWAY from Rick and Finian, resisting the need to break into a run. Daphne blocked her on the boardwalk, hands on her hips.

"I'm sorry," Hailey blurted, realizing she'd inadvertently stolen the limelight from Daphne's cause--the whole reason they were here in the first place. She'd called Rick this morning to interview Daphne as a favor, and as a peace offering to her sister for the way she'd taken off from the picnic--even raising her voice when Daph wouldn't let her flee to go let the Walkers into Trixie Hollow.

"What's up with you? Your moods are all over the place."

"Sorry. Just stress."

"And him?" Her sister pointed to Finian, palm raised. "One second you're looking like you want to drag him to bed, and the next punch him."

Yeah, that about summed it up.

"He gets under my skin, that's all." *And gets me in the tabloids, evidently.*

"I'll say."

Hailey turned away from Daphne and dug her fingers into her waist, hunching forward. Why was everything so difficult? This was supposed to be easy. How was she going to blow up Hollywood and take that cocky life-serves-me expression off Finian's face if Austin was going to pop up and scoop her every time? How was she going to catch Finian doing wild and crazy bad-boy things if she was always hanging off his lips?

She wasn't cut out for this. She hadn't even snagged a photo of him on stage at The Kee.

She strode over to the men, determined to set Finian straight and get things back on level ground.

"Rick, you came here to talk to Daphne about the turtles, so, Finian, you should kindly go finish your jog or swim or whatever you were doing."

The reporter opened his mouth and Hailey shot him a look.

"And Finian, I'm not your girlfriend."

"Okay."

"You can't call me your girlfriend to reporters." When she turned to Rick, shooting him another look, he smiled and tipped his head, then headed off to catch up with Daphne.

"Can I still kiss you?" Finian asked. He took a step closer, and panic pierced Hailey's muscles, making her want to flee. Was he going to kiss her right here? Right now?

He was near enough that she could smell the muck on him. Damp and earthy.

"You're wet and you stink."

"You did something new with your hair." The way his voice was soft and kind, it was easy to forgive him way too quickly. In fact, she couldn't quite figure out why she'd been so peeved a few seconds ago.

Hailey smoothed a hand over her hair, bothered and flattered that he'd noticed the extra effort she'd put into it. Oh, who was she kidding? She'd driven all the way to Bracebridge to get new hair product last night, when she should've been prepping her photo show.

"You're just too likable, you know that?"

"I try."

"That's so bad boy."

"Yeah." He swallowed and looked away.

She rubbed the bags under her eyes and sighed. She needed an injection of caffeine. Or an injection of life, at the very least.

"Known him a long time?" Finian asked.

"Who? Rick? Yeah. Since high school."

"Another ex-boyfriend?"

"No. I worked with him on the school paper. Austin, too. After graduation Austin fled to Hollywood to make it big, Rick went to McGill, and I I stayed around."

Hailey hugged herself, wishing she could have gone somewhere exciting and wonderful instead of sticking close to home and backfilling the holes in her photography knowledge with online courses, books from the library, and tips from other photographers kind enough to help her out while she struggled to get her family through their days.

She let out a long sigh. She needed a miracle to get her life back on track.

Finian sidled closer, his breath warm on her shoulder. She had to fight the urge to lean into him, to pull comfort from his presence.

"I should hate you, you know that?" she murmured.

"Why?" He looked hurt.

She shrugged. "I don't know. I've been trying to figure that out."

"You're a complicated duck, Hailey."

She stared at him. There was just something about him that not only messed her up inside, but also calmed her. Maybe she needed to stop fighting it. Whatever it was.

"Come work for me," he said.

"What?"

"What?"

"I'm sorry?" She shook her head. It sounded an awful lot like Mr. Movie Star had just offered her some sort of job.

He gave her chin a gentle chuck. "You Canadians apologize a lot."

"I'm sorry, but we do not." She placed her hands on her hips and squared off. Realizing she'd apologized, she let out a soft laugh, her anger gone like a drop of water falling on a hot skillet. Her laughter turned into guffaws. "Are you the only handsome and charming one in your family or are there others?"

The angles and shapes of his face were arranged as though someone had the camera in mind when they'd created him. If the whole family looked anything like him, a group portrait would be stunning. A photographer's wet dream. Not that he was asking her to be his personal photographer. He probably had something menial in mind, such as answering fan mail or styling his hair.

"Are you asking if I have a brother? Because you never answered my question," Finian said, his eyes serious.

"Work for you?" Her laughter bumped up a notch.

"Yeah." He crossed his arms, his broad shoulders widening as though the indignation of her laughing at him was puffing him up. "I saw the pictures you took of the turtle. If you can do that for an ancient-looking reptile, I can only imagine what you could do for a guy like me."

He gave her a cocky grin, but his eyes were flat. There was something there that looked an awful lot like longing playing peekaboo behind his amusement and teasing. But it couldn't be. Guys like him didn't long for women like her. What kind of trick was he trying to pull?

He was confusing. One minute lighthearted. Then it was as if she'd done something wrong joking about a brother. And now there was longing. And hurt. Fear of rejection.

Hailey didn't have time for mind games and men jerking her heart around.

She cast her eyes downward, giving his crotch a shrewd assessment. "I'm sorry, but if you want to get back together with your ex-girlfriend,

you're going to have to take selfies. As I've said, I'm not that kind of photographer."



HAILEY PRETENDED she didn't notice Finian come up to her car, laughing at the way she'd stalked off. Instead, she kept her head bent, reading text messages from her network stating they'd seen Finian near the lake here in Bala. Her system was working even if she seemed to be invisible to everyone, considering she was out here *with* him.

And why did that make her feel so frustrated, angry, and put out?

And why did she just act like a raving mad woman and intentionally misinterpret his sincere job offer? What was wrong with her?

Finian's shadow crossed her lap and she flicked off her phone's screen. She gripped the steering wheel as he crouched beside the car, arms crossed on the door frame. He smelled good. Even under the marshy scent.

She blinked back tears. Why did he have it so easy? Why couldn't it be her?

Ignoring his presence, she started the car, its power steering belt squealing. Add another item to her list of things she couldn't afford.

"Can I tell you what I desire?" he asked her.

"There are 1-900 numbers for that."

She bit her lip and blinked long and hard. Resisting his appeal was turning her into someone she didn't want to be. She needed to stop slapping him, stop saying things that weren't like her, and cease running away from him every time they got close.

She turned to face him. He looked amused, if anything.

"Why don't you think I'm you know? A female dog."

"Who said I don't?"

"You continue to talk to me, and yet every time we meet I say something awful and run away or else slap you."

He shrugged, his arms still crossed on her door. "I'm from Hollywood. Standard behavior."

"You're kidding, right?"

"Hailey, it's me, okay?" He looked away, his eyes dark. "Don't go twisting yourself into knots over a big jerk."

"See?"

"What?"

"Useless jerks don't say nice things or care about other people's feelings."

"They don't?"

"Nope."

"All the more reason I need your help, don't you think?"

He smiled, his eyes lighting with humor. No matter what she said to him or how many times she'd slapped him, he responded with forgiveness or a smile. It made her want to crawl out of her car and hug him just for being him.

Heaving a sigh as if she was doing him a massive favor, she said, "Okay, fine. What's the deal? What do you *desire*?"

She held on to her steering wheel for support and turned to face him when he didn't speak right away. The proximity of his bright eyes was too much. The way they shone and delved into her soul, whispering to her secrets, coaxing her into feeling okay it was unnerving.

She didn't want to see that unless she was behind her camera, protected.

"What? What do you want from me?"

"I have a feeling you can give me something the rest can't, Hailey."

Freshly showered and wearing clean, dry clothes that he couldn't help wishing was an Armani suit to wow Hailey, Finn climbed into her old car, after securing a bag of wardrobe changes in her trunk. He still couldn't believe she'd agreed to take a few head shots. It wasn't his full-on paparazzi proposal, but that could come soon enough. He needed to play this through, slow and sure.

He smiled to himself. There must be some dazzle left in his crooked grin, after all.

Plus two birds, one stone. New pics for Derek to hand out to his peeps, and Finn got to keep Hailey close enough that maybe he could finally figure out which button to push to get her to play paparazzi.

He frowned as he buckled his seat belt. Of course Hailey hadn't played paparazzi yet. Around her he'd been like a puppy asking for a belly rub. And when he'd stirred her up enough to make her slap him, he was simply being a jerk and not a celebrity worth noting.

"Are you paparazzi?" he asked.

She choked in surprise. "Am I what?"

"You know." He made camera clicking motions. "Paparazzi."

"Do I look like I am?"

"No, not really." He slouched in his seat and took in her slight frame. Her lower lip protruded in a pout as a pickup truck pulled out in front, almost cutting her off. The determination in her eyes as she floored the rattling car in order to pass the guy surprised Finn and he let out a chuckle. She fixed her attention on the rearview mirror and kept the car pushing up a hill.

"Good." She finally answered when they reached the top.

"You don't want to make a lot of money?"

"Everyone wants to make a lot of money," she said quietly.

Finn ran a hand over the dusty, faded dashboard. "You need a better ride. I can practically see the ground whizzing by through the floorboards. And the way this thing is rattling, you'd think it was a space shuttle breaking through the atmosphere."

"Some of us have to actually break a sweat in order to earn something like a car."

"What's with that chip on your shoulder? Do you think I was just born with a silver spoon in my mouth? Because I wasn't."

She flicked her attention to him for a moment before returning it to her new favorite, the rearview mirror.

"Well, you sure act like you were."

"That's because I'm somebody special." He winced and inhaled the car's dusty smell. He couldn't stop being that spoiled celebrity, could he? Outside, tall trees and waving grass fell away suddenly as they blasted through an impossibly pink granite rock cut. "I'm sorry I sound like an entitled prick."

Hailey's attention flicked to her mirrors again. "Sorry."

"For what?"

"For what I almost said."

"Do you always look this antsy and serious when you drive?"

"Only when I'm trying to ditch Austin Smith."

Finn turned to glance behind them. "Good luck. You'll never lose him."

"You've obviously been hanging out with the wrong kinds of drivers." She raised an eyebrow, a naughty smirk dancing across her lips, and his blood raced, ready for action.

She floored the old car, rocketing around a corner as she poured on the gas down a sudden open stretch. Farmland in the middle of what he'd believed was all bush and water and massive rocks.

She flew through an intersection and Finn braced himself as other drivers honked at them.

"You know it's okay if he takes pictures of me, right? It's kind of what makes a movie star's world go round."

"Don't worry. I know what I'm doing."

"I'm sure that's what Princess Di's driver said, too." Finn sent a cautious glance through the rear window. Austin had had to slow down at the intersection, his balls evidently not as large and steely as Hailey's.

She spun them onto another paved road. Unprepared, Finn failed to brace himself in time for the momentum and force of the turn, and fell against her. He swallowed bile and wished his headache would go away.

She shot him a look.

"Sorry," he said.

The road dived down a steep decline, where the ditches were thick with trees again. Hailey lurched into a hidden driveway, throwing gravel as she took the sharp turn. She performed a perfect brake turn at the bottom, spinning the vehicle so it was aimed back up the drive, but out of sight of the road. She threw the car in Park and rolled down her window.

"Wow." Finn's heart was racing so hard he'd fail a stress test. He forced himself to pry his left hand off the dash and his right hand off

the handle near his head--a grip usually reserved for old ladies struggling to exit the passenger side.

None of the stunts he'd ever done in his career had scared him like this. Those scenes had been strictly choreographed by professionals. Not real or completely spontaneous.

A car sped by on the road above--Austin--and Hailey's lips moved as she silently counted to seven. Then she poured on the gas, roared up the driveway and cut back the way they'd come, leaving the other photographer behind.

As they hit the main highway, Hailey kept pushing the speed limit. "He'll guess where we're going, so I need to get the car hidden and us tucked away before he shows up. Otherwise he'll pester us all day. He can be quite unrelenting."

A spark of protectiveness Finn usually reserved for family members ignited a blaze of jealousy. "What? What did he do?" Had Austin pestered Hailey into something she didn't want? She'd said they'd dated, and the prick had said he'd kissed her first. Finn had managed to block that image out of his mind, but now it was all he could see. Austin kissing Hailey. Austin being pushy with her. Being an unrelenting jerk until she gave in.

"Oh, he's just like a dog with a juicy bone. Won't give it up for anything." She waved a hand dismissively.

"I've never seen anyone drive like that before. Have you had to, uh, lose Austin before?"

"Are you okay?"

"Have you?"

"No, but it was fun." A smile flickered.

Finn relaxed into the seat. Austin was trying to get under his skin, and had succeeded, and Hailey was tired of men like her ex-boyfriend

getting in her way of making her own dreams come true. Finn needed to get a grip.

"So? You normally drive like that?" His voice came off high-pitched.

"Yeah. Of course. I often have paparazzi following me." Hailey shot him a grin, her body at ease. As relaxed as after he'd kissed her under the tree last night. Only last night

"You need to kiss me more," he said, letting his hand trail a line over her shoulder.

Hailey cranked the wheel, then straightened it just as suddenly, gasping as she avoided hitting a steep rock cut where the road zipped between high walls of pink-striped Canadian shield.

"Sorry," he gulped. "I'll preface something like that next time, so your surprise doesn't kill us." The sad thing was that he probably wouldn't mind her killing him as long as she was with him in his final moments.

She cleared her throat. "Squirrel. I was avoiding a squirrel." She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear and he saw her swallow. "I, um, didn't want to squish it."

He bit back a grin. Oh, this was going to be a fun day of him stripping in front of her for his wardrobe changes. He would play to her every line, and watch her blush and squirm, and loving every moment of it. Before the day was through she'd either be in his bed or selling his images to the gossip sites.



FINN WATCHED Hailey move around her one-car garage with the confidence of someone who knew where everything belonged. It was a pale yellow, clapboard building with an old, swing-up door. He'd expected her to pull the car inside, but instead, she'd driven right up onto the grass and into the backyard where she'd left the overheated

vehicle out of sight. Then she'd led him through the old two-story house, his bag of clothes in tow. As she went, she'd grabbed drinks from the fridge, a package of trail mix and some fruit, popping them in a reusable shopping bag. Other items that he guessed must be props were added to the collection. She moved fast, her actions sure and confident. Finn had wanted to check out her digs and all the photographs hanging on the warm-colored walls, but he could barely take his eyes off this version of Hailey.

She'd then gone flying out the front door, across a wide porch and down onto the lawn, just about leaving him behind. Her place had reminded him of his grandmother's house, where he used to spend his summers, playing dress-up and dazzling her with a new play every evening after supper. Warm, welcoming, and somewhere you felt safe being yourself. Because he sure couldn't be that "pansy acting boy" in the rough place where he'd grown up.

Her small garage studio was like the house, warm and welcoming. Area rugs covered the concrete floor in layers, track lights ran above, extra handheld lights and tripods hung in organized rows on racks and hooks below. The space had been drywalled and painted white. Finn moved toward a large worktable set in the corner, a rack of matting sheets and picture frames stacked vertically to the side. She seemed to be in the middle of a large project, judging by the reams of computer labels, piles of photos, and inventory lists. A large computer sat under a white sheet that she whipped off, showing a snazzy Mac Pro. Next, she moved on to unlock a cabinet beside her computer. It was filled with cameras, lenses, and other gear. She was definitely the real thing if her equipment was anything to go by.

But for a woman who didn't do many portraits, she had exactly what was required. The backdrop, the lights, the tripods.

"You have equipment for portraits?"

"As I said, I do them when I'm hard up for cash. So, yes, I do."

"I'll make sure my assistant pays you promptly."

She stuck out her tongue, thinking he was joking, as she unloaded her ever-present camera bag, tossing battery packs onto their chargers.

This girl was serious, a hard-core pro with a system and a plan. Organized and effective. Exactly what he needed. She would understand what he required. And when the moment was right, he'd present his own plan for what he wanted leaked to the press.

He eased himself into a worn armchair that looked as though it had been built in the 1930s and had seen a lot of sitting. The cushion was saggy enough to pull him in deep, which felt comforting after their crazy ride across the countryside. His headache had been coming and going all morning, but now it was forcing a major comeback. A quick rest here in this chair, head tipped back and eyes closed, would do the trick. That and a glass of water.

Something stirred the air beside him and he opened his eyes, realizing he'd drifted off for a few minutes. Hailey stood over him, camera poised.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to wake you."

He rubbed his hands over his face. Hailey was still perched over him, focused intently on something she saw. Saw on him? Within him?

He wiped his face again in case he'd drooled during his nap.

She crept back, placing her camera on the nearby worktable. She'd set up a backdrop in the middle of the room, the corners of the sheet tied to hooks set in the ceiling. She was ready, and he was the superstar keeping her waiting.

He jumped out of the chair, catching a can of Coke she chucked at him.

"You look like you need a pick-me-up." She leaned against the table, cracking a can for herself.

Not diet Coke. Interesting woman.

"Thanks." He pointed to the Mentos she was eating. "Haven't seen those YouTube videos where they mix Coke and Mentos to make rockets?"

"I think that was diet Coke."

"Still. Aren't you afraid your head is going to explode?"

"Yeah, like, every day. It's called living on the edge." She tossed him the pack of Mentos and rearranged a few pieces of equipment.

He threw the mints back to her without taking one, and moseyed over to her worktable, waiting for her command. He glanced at her for permission before flipping through the stacks of enlarged images she'd sorted into piles. The first seemed to be "please anyone" shots he'd seen around town in stores, posters, and hotels. Typical stuff the tourists wanted for a memento, such as a windswept tree, close-up of a chipmunk, an old wood boat gleaming in its berth, or a canoe tied to a weathered dock with mist floating around it. All pretty shots, but not particularly original for these parts. In his peripheral vision he saw Hailey lift her camera and focus it on him.

The next pile was still distinctly Muskoka, but the images were slightly more unusual. Another shot of the steamship *Segwun*, but taken from a low vantage point, with some sort of filter to make the great ship appear dominating and brooding. Massive.

He compared it with the bright and innocent shot from the first pile, hardly believing it was the same boat, taken by the same photographer, likely on the same day.

He flipped through more shots, laughing at a photo of a cow. Instead of focusing on its face, nuzzled up close to the camera, Hailey had shot focused in from behind, catching the cow's head turned inquisitively, as if to say, what are you doing back there? A vet would think this was hilarious.

Finn's nature nut had a sense of humor.

She moved the armchair he'd napped in so it was in front of the background. "Ready?" she asked.

"As ever."

She adjusted a few lights as he made himself comfortable in the chair again.

"Are those photos for a show?" He pointed to her worktable.

She nodded, silent.

"I like that your studio is unpretentious."

Hailey blinked at him.

"It doesn't scream *I'm an artist!* It reminds me of a buddy from film school, Bruce."

"Are you still in touch with him?"

"Not really. Not since I chose the more commercial route."

"Do you miss him?"

"Sure. We always miss those we leave behind, don't we?" Like his two brothers. One alive, one dead. Finn shook his head, thinking how much different his life would be if he hadn't chosen to follow the fickle stream of money, and how he'd simply traded one kind of deficit for another.

She stood in front of him and reached up to adjust a light, her knee brushing his. "I'm glad you didn't shave."

He rubbed his chin self-consciously, inhaling her scent. "Actually, do you have a razor?"

"Later. I need some shots of you awake in this thing. Then we'll get into more traditional head shots, etc." She adjusted his arms on the chair, moving him into a take-charge, I'm-in-command position. He felt powerful and manly just sitting this way. He grinned up at Hailey and moved his arm from where she'd placed it.

She readjusted it on the armrest again. "That desperate for a woman's touch?" she asked, and gave him a playful pinch.

Finn flinched, laughing. "It's like in those improv games where someone else directs your body." He'd always hated them, but for some reason, the way Hailey moved his body didn't bother him. She was respectful and had that cute, thoughtful expression when she posed him.

"I'm sorry." Hailey stood back. "I could try and direct you verbally, but I don't know what I want yet. Do you mind?"

"Not at all." He flashed her a killer smile and she hesitated, cheeks flushed, before she adjusted his position ever so slightly, her cool hands sure, her touch tentative yet firm.

She vanished behind a large camera, tweaking, making adjustments. She took shot after shot, her physical directing changing into verbal commands as they fell into a rhythm. Her body relaxed and her moves became more fluid.

"That's good, take a break." She finally arched her back and twisted a lens off the camera she'd been using.

"We're done?"

"Nope. But I need to think of what I want next. Do you have a list of specific shots you need?"

He knew the laundry list Derek would want, but couldn't bring himself to interrupt her flow to get stagnant pictures everyone else had. They would be like the pile of commercial shots she had on her table, and he wanted to be in the other pile. Finn wanted to see what she could do. He wanted to be someone who stood out and wouldn't be overlooked. Plus he wanted to know how Hailey saw him.

"Give me something different, Hailey."

"Can do." She finished her Coke, and her head tipped back, exposing her long throat.

"I haven't met anyone who consumes sugar in a long time," he commented and she shifted her weight in a way that caused him to apologize.

"Canada's getting to you. That's twice in the past two hours that you've said you're sorry. A new record, I presume."

He laughed and fell back in the chair, his legs splayed. He liked this woman. Liked her wit and willingness to poke at him. None of that skittering about to appease him as some women did.

"So, um, how bad were those shots in the tabloids?" she asked.

"Of us?"

He left the chair, moving closer, trying to figure her out. Was this his chance to ask her to collaborate with him and sell stories to the tabloids? Because right now, those rags felt miles away from this moment. From Hailey. And they were the last thing he wanted to think about.

"I'm tired of trying to stay one step ahead of my reputation," he said. "And I'm tired of having to strategize my relationships with people and commoditize our time into something that can be leveraged in my career." He shook his head and stepped to her worktable. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to say that. I meant " He drove a hand through his hair. "Don't pay any mind to what gets printed in the tabloids. The people who truly love you will understand."

"Understand what?"

"All of it."

"What are you saying?"

"What are you asking?"

They stared at each other for a few moments.

"Okay, fine." He crossed his arms. "The lighting in the shot was kind of crappy. And it was grainy, but those kinds of shots are the ones that

the audience really goes wild for. They tend to think they're seeing something that's--"

"No," she said impatiently. "I meant, like, was it *bad*?"

He stared at her, his heart catching. She was afraid to be seen kissing him and didn't want her private life smeared across the planet. She also probably didn't want to be associated with the likes of him. Honestly, he couldn't blame her even though the knowledge hurt worse than being smacked by a microphone boom.

He rested a hand on her elbow and watched her struggle with her emotions. They were flipping across her face, one by one. Fear. Frustration. Curiosity. Maybe a touch of anger and pride, as well.

"I'm sorry, Hailey. I didn't mean for you to be a casualty."

She straightened. "I'm not a casualty. I'm not a victim. But I don't like being part of some stupid publicity stunt."

His jaw clenched. "I know that. The photo wasn't my idea."

"And you're not too good for me, Finian Alexander. Your fame doesn't define you. You're just as human as everyone else."

He grabbed her by the elbows and brought her close enough to kiss, not sure what move he should make, only knowing that she'd successfully crawled under his skin once again.

Her eyes flashed as she pushed him away. "Show me the photos. I need to see what everyone in my world is going to be talking about--because trust me, they will be."



HAILEY OPENED a browser on her computer and Finian reached over to take the keyboard, sending shivers up her arm.

"There." He propped himself against the desk, his jaw set, eyes on her.

Slowly, she turned her attention to the webpage.

"Oh, wow." There she was stretched out in the grass, kissing Finian. Her heart raced and excess heat leaked up her throat and across her cheeks.

There it was for the world to see. Her. Kissing a movie star. Like in some romantic comedy where the famous guy falls in love with some girl wishing for a real life. Hailey nearly sighed.

It was a beautiful photo. Yes, a tad grainy, but gorgeous nevertheless.

Finian's eyes roved over her, assessing. "Think how much that photographer got paid."

"For exposing our personal lives." She shoved her chair back, and stood.

He gave her a smile, a glint in his eyes.

"*My* personal life," she corrected.

"If you're with me, Hailey, it comes with the turf."

"I'm not *with* you." She stared at her computer. This was fiction. Not real life. Real life was gritty and full of obligations and duties and burdens. It wasn't being swept away and falling in love. Or, in her case, lusting over a guy who would leave her once his vacation was up, and then never think of her again. "If this was my personal life, it would imply that you and I are something."

"We're not?"

"What's my last name?"

"Summer."

"Okay, that probably was an easy one. Middle name?"

"Something classic, strong, feminine."

"Rose."

"Told you so."

"What's my favorite color?"

"Something soft, like a cream or light yellow."

"How did you know?"

"The color is everywhere."

"My point is that you don't know me. You don't know what I like. So, pretending that this photo actually means something--"

"I know you like this." He cupped the back of her neck, pulled her body against his and gave her a long, lingering kiss.

Yeah, okay. He was right. She liked that. A lot.

She pushed him away. The kiss--*kisses*--had been errors. Signs of her temporarily leaving reality and getting swept into the distraction that was his life. He starred in movies that distracted people across the world from things like the bills they had to pay and the turtles that needed saving. And that was his life, too, one big, easy distraction, where he always won against the bad guys.

Not her world. Not at all.

"Leaving reality is your thing, isn't it?" she asked. "Acting as if there are no responsibilities in the world?"

"That's my job. Not who I am."

She yanked her hand away when he tried to take it. "Don't you get it? I'm a real person, Finian. Living a real life." Her phone's screen lit up with another Finian-spotting text, and she flipped it onto its face. "You can't just sweep in here and decide that I'm somehow yours. I'm not. And I never will be, because I live in the real world."

He grabbed her hand again, this time more firmly. "I like hanging out with you, Hailey."

"I never said I didn't like hanging out with you, Finian. But that's not the point."

"Then hang out with me." His jaw was tight with an emotion that she couldn't identify. There was a sincerity in his eyes that couldn't be faked. Or could it? He hadn't won any Oscars yet, but how could she be sure what was real when dealing with an actor?

He waved an arm to encompass her studio. "This is nice. No, not nice. Refreshing. Real. Genuine. Like you. I didn't realize how much I needed downtime, Hailey. Time out of the spotlight." He flinched, as if struck by his own words. "I need grounding, Hailey." He fell into the armchair, his palms rubbing his face. "I need to touch base and figure out where I'm heading."

She sighed and crossed her arms. She wasn't here to ground him or be his base to touch. As much as she wanted to hang out with him and see if something real happened between them, she knew they were from two different realities and needed different things in their lives.

He needed fame and downtime. She needed money.

She turned away as his cell phone rang in his bag. "I have to empty my memory stick. Please change into something more celebrity-gone-wild-and-bad." She glanced at his jeans and T-shirt. "Maybe add some black leather. Oh, and don't shave. Not yet."

She needed a reminder of who he really was. Not this mixed-up man with sincere eyes who liked to hang out with her. He was too tempting. Too *real*.

She focused on her computer, her hands shaking as she began transferring photos to the hard drive. Behind her, Finian answered his phone.

"I know," he said. His voice had a certain reserve she hadn't heard before. Kind of like a husband preparing for a dressing down. She almost turned to look, to make sure his ring finger was still bare.

She slipped to the tabloid page as the photos transferred, hoping Finian wouldn't notice. She took a screen shot of the article and read the headline. Finian Alexander Mending Broken Heart with Local Gal. The one line below simply said, "After last week's breakup with movie star Jessica Cartmill, Finian Alexander takes up with an unknown woman in Canada to distract him from his broken heart."

This was what Cedric had been talking about. Making a story from nothing, because in reality Finian didn't seem to be even a speck brokenhearted. And if he was, Hailey certainly wasn't helping him through it.

She sighed and rested her head on her hands. Austin had probably gone home with a nice little finder's fee for putting her in the tabloids.

She pivoted, watching Finian. He'd removed his shirt, his new outfit draped carelessly over the old armchair. He was amazing without a shirt on, having the right amount of muscles, and a nice trail of belly hair that led her eyes down to his crotch. His free hand was clenched into a fist and his shoulders were tense, making the muscles flicker under his skin as they flexed. She quietly grabbed a camera, lining up black-and-white shots. The harsh shadows from the lights by his side left striations along his corded arms, the muscles bulging as he fought for control of the conversation, his emotions, or whatever other demons he was wrestling.

The dark side. It was real.

She set her camera on her desk and turned away as he began moving around the room, touching objects, before stopping in front of the stack of photos for her show. She was dying to know what kept drawing him back there. This was the third time she'd noticed him drift to them.

He rested a hand on the table, leaning over the photos, eyes focused almost as though he was falling into the top image. Or pulling strength from it.

She shook her head. She was reading too much into it. He just needed something to focus on while he listened to his caller.

"I don't care if he can't offer me my usual rate," Finian said. "He's an old friend."

Hailey didn't mean to eavesdrop, but she found herself leaning closer, trying to hear the other side of the conversation.

"I don't think doing something like that would affect where I am on the pay scale. And it doesn't set a precedent. It would be a completely different kind of project. Plus, I happen to think I'm at a point where I can branch out." He paused, then his voice tightened. "I know you are the expert and I pay you to advise me, but last I checked I got to choose my projects."

He gave another sigh, shoulders dropping in defeat, the fight gone. "I know. No, I appreciate you weighing the two sides of an offer. I know. I don't have to say yes, but he's good." Another pause. "Yeah, but I was a nobody once, too, and he's going somewhere. I'd like to help him." Finian was looking at the ceiling now, and Hailey glanced up, as well. Nothing thrilling up there. Not since she'd insulated and transformed this place into her studio, at least.

Finian turned off his phone, gently setting it down. The room was too quiet, but Hailey was afraid to say anything. Finally, he turned to her with a sigh. "You wanted bad boy?" His voice was laced with fatigue and resignation. He held up a leather jacket. "With or without a shirt?"

*H*ailey led Finian into her house. She wanted to tug the leather jacket off Finian and run her mouth down his bare chest, pry his faded jeans open and

Whoa! She fanned herself and let him into her en suite to shave for the upcoming shots she had planned.

There was something about photographing a sexy man and having him shoot her smoldering looks that did funny things to her brain. It didn't help that he had a wicked sense of humor and had her laughing half the afternoon, making it almost impossible to take a nonblurry shot without the aid of a tripod.

"Okay, sexy beast, here's some shaving gear."

"Mmm. I like it when you call me that." He slid a hand around her waist and she bit back a smile, trying to hold on to her slipping professional persona. Hailey wanted to turn in his arms, have him lift her onto the vanity, and then grind against him while consuming him with her mouth.

She handed him a pink towel, a pink razor, and shaving cream. She giggled as he held them out.

"You expect the bad boy of Hollywood to use these?"

She grinned. "Real men can handle pink."

"Yeah?" He shrugged off his leather jacket, his eyes on hers. She broke contact to let her eyes feast on his bare arms, chest, and back. Heavenly.

He filled the sink with hot water, his moves sure and confident, falling into a routine. He filled his left hand with lavender shaving cream, letting out a sigh that made his shoulders hunch forward ever so slightly. "Purple? Really? Are you trying to kill me?"

"I think lavender will look great with your complexion."

He smoothed the cream between his hands, his eyes twinkling with mischief. Her own smile faded and she eased toward the door. *Uh-oh*.

"I happen to think " He took two steps toward her, traveling into her bedroom to pursue her. "That *you* would look good " Two more large steps. " in *lavender*."

She squealed and turned, fleeing into the upstairs hallway to get away from him.

He cornered her there, but she dropped to the floor, crawling between his legs to escape into the nearby sitting room. He turned, just missing her as she scrambled, laughing, into the room, ending up trapped in another corner.

Knowing he had her, he licked his lips, moving slowly. Agonizingly slowly.

Her chest heaved as she waited, giggling, half cowering. With two quick moves, he trapped her hands in one of his and lifted them over her head, against the wall.

Gently, he drew a line of shaving cream down her cheek with his free hand, then leaned back, assessing her. "It does suits your complexion, sugar toes."

"Yeah?"

She bucked halfheartedly against him and he pressed in closer, licking her mouth in a slow, languid move that had heat pouring down

through her belly and into the space between her legs. She dropped her head back, and his mouth moved to her neck, kissing, nipping, and holding so much promise she moaned, wishing he'd take her to her bed.

His mouth returned to hers and she poured her passion into him, their hips grinding together as they slid down the wall and onto the floor. They rolled, leaving her on top, and as his shaving-cream-covered hands began tugging at the hem of her shirt, she whipped it off. His eyes were dark pools of lust and longing, and Hailey froze, doubting herself.

What was she doing? She was supposed to be his photographer. He was paying her as a professional. Not for a good time where she could give in to her longings. Especially since this could never be anything more than a fling.

She lowered herself to him, trying to listen to her body and its needs, instead of her mind and its wants.

His hands moved up her skin with purpose and she lost herself in the moment.

The doorbell rang and Hailey sucked in a breath, determined to ignore it. She ran her hands down Finian's chest, showing him she had no plans to stop.

The front door's hinges creaked as it opened.

Hailey scrambled for her shirt.

Finian, smiling, wiped her face with what was now a bare hand, removing a trail of drying shaving cream. With a wink that looked a lot like a promise, he headed to the bathroom as she checked her shirt for tell-tale handprints.

"Hailey?" called Simone. "Are you home?"

"Simone?" Hailey quickly adjusted her shirt and smoothed her hair. "I'm upstairs."

"I'm just dropping off invites for tomorrow's opening." Her friend appeared at the top of the stairs. She cast a glance around the sitting room, her dark brown eyes on the lookout. "Why do you have shaving cream on your forehead and shirt?"

"I was, um, shaving my legs."

"Am I interrupting something?"

"No, nothing," Hailey said quickly.

Simone gave her a sly grin. "Okay, well, here are your invitations. I'll see you tomorrow to hang the pics?"

"Yup."

Simone handed Hailey the stack of postcards and headed down the stairs, saying, "Don't do anything with him that I wouldn't!"

Hailey closed her eyes. She was going to end up in the tabloids again if she didn't get control of her lust and longing for the man she really shouldn't have.



FINIAN WAS by far the best subject she'd ever had model for her, and it wasn't just because he was the sexiest man she'd ever seen, or that every time she thought of his kisses her hands shook. She'd taken over a thousand shots of him during the afternoon. An insane amount, but she'd loved every second of it. And if she was honest, she loved having him to herself.

"If all people were as easy and fun to photograph as you are, I would *so* be in the portrait business for life."

Finian smiled and let out a huge yawn from his spot on the studio floor, where she'd been snapping a few candids of him, freshly shaved.

Okay, so she'd kind of gotten off track with the standard head shot thing. Way off track. She blamed the way he'd revved her engine during

his shaving session for that.

"I'm sorry." She leaned forward, pressing a hand to his forearm. "I've exhausted you. You should have told me to stop."

"I never tell a beautiful woman who's having fun with my body to stop." He sent her a wicked grin and she slapped him with her camera's shutter release cable.

"Ooh. Whips? I would have never guessed."

Hailey gave him a playful shoulder shove and laughed as he rolled over on the fake bearskin rug, exposing his bare abs. She stood and went to her desk so she wouldn't be tempted to straddle him, and put her equipment away. When she was done, she grabbed the items she needed to show him the afternoon's photos.

"Do you want to see the pictures? Say yes," she prompted. She'd found parts of that layer she'd been looking for. Deep within him. The real Finian. And she'd captured it. "You're going to be pumped. Blown away."

"Yes. But no to whips and chains. Not my thing."

"Ever tried it?" She wagged her eyebrows and laughed when he blushed. "Your reputation is completely inaccurate. My, my. Wait until I tell the world."

"Image isn't everything. Or is everything. I can't remember anymore." He rolled back onto his stomach, propping himself up on his elbows and yawned again. He played with a tuft of the fake fur under him. "This rug feels good."

She tore her eyes away from his near-nakedness, where she'd had him pose like a nude baby on the rug, with a worn pair of jeans gracing his legs and hips. She'd wanted to ask him to take off his pants, to really play up the parody but hadn't had the courage.

She locked the cabinet that held her camera equipment. "I had fun today."

They were completely different people, living in different worlds, but they'd connected and bonded for a few hours. And somehow that had chased away her demons so she could enjoy life--her life--if only for a little while.

"Thank you," she said, nudging his shoulder as he joined her at the computer.

"It was fun, wasn't it? But you don't need to thank me. Anytime you want to have fun, I'm your man."

"I'll bet."

"Hailey." He gripped her face between his hands. "Look at me. There are two Finians. I know you've seen both, but you keep assuming the one in the tabloids is the real man. He's not. This man, here, is real." He placed her palm on his bare chest, her fingers trembling. "I'm real."

She bit her lips and worked to keep her emotions at bay. She knew this was the real Finian. It was just hard, the way she was developing feelings for him, because she knew the other--show business--Finian was the one who ruled both lives. And where did that leave her?

Leaning back, she broke contact and turned to her desk. "I kind of got sidetracked with the shoot, but there are some good pictures in here that you can probably use for other purposes. Promo or your website or something."

Sidetracked was an understatement. She'd slipped further and further off track as the afternoon progressed. The more Finian got into it, roaring with laughter, shooting her playful looks, scowls, and more, the further she'd slipped.

"Does it sound weird to say that I feel I know you better now?" She always did after photographing someone, but this was different. He'd let her into himself. Trusted her like nobody else had.

"Maybe it was the way you grilled me about my family and my life as you took photos," he joked.

"I was getting you to open up." She'd caught various emotions, whether in his expression or in his body language, which often revealed more than words. His family was close and meant the world to him. That had translated into a softening of his pose, and made the creases in his face vanish. Talking about his agent and career had created instant tension, as well as lines at the corners of his mouth. Jessica Cartmill? That had been interesting. His face had remained practically blank when Hailey had asked how his ex was doing, how they'd met. No flash of love, devotion, happiness, or even pain. It was odd. Really odd. Spooky, almost.

"I feel as though I know you better, too," he said.

"Shall we?" She collected the supplies she needed and opened the garage door.

"I thought we were going to look at the photos?" He slung his bag over his bare shoulder.

"Do you work out a lot?"

"Are you usually this ADHD?"

She laughed. "Let's get a snack. I'm famished. Plus, we can watch these on my TV in the house. Bigger screen."

She led him back to the house, tugging his hand to draw him over the threshold faster, in case Austin was lurking outside somewhere. She set Finian in front of the large monitor she used as a television in the living room, and plunked her bag on an armchair.

In the kitchen she made popcorn over the stove, added butter and salt, grabbed two beers and headed to the living room, where Finian was stretched out on her cream-colored sofa, eyes closed.

She grabbed her phone and, unable to resist, snapped a couple shots. He was peaceful, handsome, and more youthful looking now that he'd shaved. Quietly, she set up the monitor so they could flick through some images together, then waved the popcorn under his nose to waken him.

His eyes cracked open and he focused on her blearily. "That smells like it needs to be in my stomach."

"Real butter." She plunked the bowl on his chest and shoved his feet off her end of the couch. She sat, using a mouse to advance the images, her hand brushing his as they shared the bowl of popcorn.

"This is weird."

"What do you mean?" She pulled her hand back, wondering if he'd noticed that she always went for popcorn at the same time as him. She was definitely out of practice at flirting.

"All these photos. Sitting here watching and eating popcorn. Feels surreal."

"Don't you watch your own movies?"

"If I can help it, no."

"You're kidding!"

"I don't like watching myself on screen. It feels " He gave a shrug and sank down lower in the cushions, his long legs stretched out in front of him.

"My mother recorded my outgoing voicemail message for me. I don't like the sound of my voice when it's recorded."

"Nobody does."

"Not everyone's heard my voice, you big meanie."

Finian smiled and tossed a few pieces of popcorn her way. "Someone once told me it's not all about me. Maybe it's not all about you, either."

Hailey snatched up the popcorn bits and tossed them back at Finian, who caught them in his mouth, leaning toward her, his shoulder pressing into hers as he lost his balance.

"I thought you loved the limelight and seeing yourself on the big screen?"

"I like the consequences."

"Having the paparazzi jump into your love life?" She felt her cheeks flush as he glanced over at her, his eyes a bright, inquisitive blue. "Not with me. I'm not in your love life. I mean we're not--I'm not you know."

"The lady doth protest too much, methinks."

Hailey rolled her eyes and began advancing photos, jumping to some of her favorites near the end--the shots where she'd caught the other side of him.

Finian swallowed, head tipped back. "These are " He ran a hand through his hair, his eyes stuck to the screen where he was revealed, uncovered. Raw and laid out for the viewer. Real. So very real.

He swallowed again.

Hailey bit her bottom lip and refrained from saying anything. Could he see who he could be? The side of him that she'd begun to adore? The world would eat this up and it would pull him to a higher level of fame. Something he must surely want.

His hands clenched into fists, his eyes flickering darkly. "But they're art."

"Of course they're art," she snapped, rising off the couch. "What did you expect? Department store family portraits in front of a fake cloud background?"

Finian laughed, raw and brutal.

"Don't be rude." She flicked her shirt so that it hung straight. "I thought this was what you wanted. Something different. And now you're laughing at me. How perfect. Thanks for the reminder of who you really are."

"Head shots," he choked out.

"Yeah, head shots." She marched out onto the porch, slamming the door behind her.

How had she let herself believe for a few short hours that she was someone interesting? Someone special? Someone he liked hanging out

with, as though they were on the same page? She'd thought he understood what she was doing, posing him in unconventional positions.

What a waste of a day. Anger and frustration welled up inside her.

The worst was that it was an amateur move for not asking for a specific list of the shots he needed. He'd said he wanted something different, and she'd stupidly assumed he'd expected something other than the plain, boring standard fare which lacked interest or uniqueness.

Why had she tried to make art with him? She was supposed to be saving her cottage. Finian was Hollywood, and despite what she wished him to be, he was still an actor who wanted the easy way out. He didn't want gritty. He didn't want real.

And he didn't want art. He wanted plastic. But she had given him his real emotions, served up in digital.

She opened the door to her house, shaking her head at the still form still staring at her television. She leaned in, and said, "I've got work to do in my studio. Let me know if you see a boring pic you want me to send to your agent and let yourself out when you're done."



FINN FLEXED his hands and reached for the garage's doorknob before changing his mind. What could he say to Hailey? How could he make up for laughing at her, then sitting there like a stunned dork instead of running after her?

Sucking in a breath, he yanked open the door and rested his shoulder against the frame. "There's a fund-raiser ball at the Windermere House tonight. Want to crash it with me?"

She was at her worktable, the obvious agitation in her moves leaving him uncertain.

"I don't crash parties. Especially ones like those."

She didn't even deign to look his way. Not good. But was it because she was feeling unsure, or was she still mad?

"Besides," she continued, "I'm not the kind of woman who has things she can wear to something like that. If I were to take you up on your gallant offer, which I am not."

She looked up at him, her eyes filled with pain.

"I'm sorry I laughed. I didn't mean to."

She nodded, head bent again. She was more unsure than super ticked. He raised his eyes upward in thanks. He could coax unsure into sure. The problem was, that she was back to being tough Hailey. Real-life, hard-nosed Hailey. Not the woman he'd chased with shaving cream, making her laugh and squeal until he'd been so turned on he'd had to concentrate way harder on his shaving than he should have in order not to cut himself.

That Hailey had glowed. All her burdens had lifted and she'd bloomed. But now she was closing her petals as if expecting a storm to break her stem.

"Please," he said, his voice low. He wanted this woman at his side. To keep him from being the big jerk he was so used to becoming. To be the man she saw through the lens of her camera. Bigger in soul than he felt.

He wanted to be someone who made eyes twinkle for, all the right reasons, when people saw him coming. The reasons that made Hailey's eyes light up before she caught herself and acted indifferent to his arrival. Not the reason Hollywood twinkled. Not the way people expected the worst when they saw him and wondered what buffet table he'd break when he fell over drunk, or which lucky woman would get laid upon it so he could feast on her mouth for all to see. Arrogant prick. That was who he'd become.

But with Hailey he was himself. His old self. And it felt okay to be that person. Really okay. Safe in ways it had never felt with anyone else--even his family.

In fact, he felt so okay that he'd even argued with Derek over the artsy role his film buddy, Bruce Proust, had offered. Last week it would have been a flat-out "No, thanks," as the offered role was something he used to do before Hollywood. Something Derek told him would do no wonders for his career. It was as though Finn had killed that part of himself--the artistic, creative side--in order to succeed in Hollywood. But this afternoon Hailey had dug it up, breathed life back into it and shown him that it had been merely hiding out, waiting for a safe place to play. She'd quite simply captured the art side of him and presented it as if it was obvious.

Everything he was wrestling--who the world thought he was, who he thought he should be, who he was, and who he wanted to be--she'd ensnared for him to ponder. At first he'd been so stunned it was as though someone had dropped a grand piano on him. All those emotions. The light and angles. The way he looked. The way he held himself... It was art. Art that he had believed could no longer apply to him in his fake world of Hollywood and false images.

Finn hadn't known what to say. How to react. Sitting there, he hadn't been able to rev his engine out of the rut of stunned-ocity he was feeling. But now, maybe he could make up for his lack of response. He could take her out, bring to light that blossoming Hailey he'd been so smitten with earlier. Return the favor by bringing a part of her back to life.

Plus he felt a strong urge to keep her close until he figured himself out. On the other side of the sealed door was his real life, and Hailey was the key to the lock he didn't even know he'd been trying to pick.

She cut him a glance, her posture stiff. Professional Hailey.

He adopted a formal business tone. "I'd like photos of myself in a tuxedo."

She gave a small harrumph. "Fine. Put it on and we'll snap off a few uninspired poses that will lack originality right here, right now. No need to take me out in public in order to do so. I'll only want to artify you."

Finn swallowed and shut his eyes. Regret speared through him and he moved to where she was standing, turned her around and laid his palms on her shoulders, making her face him.

"I'm sorry if you thought I was laughing at your photos. They're amazing. I wasn't expecting it, and it hit me, Hailey." He took a hand off her shoulder, placed it over his heart. "It hit me here." He moved his hand to his head. "And here. I don't expect you to understand, since you don't know me. You only know who you've let yourself believe I am."

"I know who you are."

"No, you don't."

She turned away, picking up her camera. "Come on, let's get the shots over with so you can go crash your fancy party."

"The tux isn't with me."

She heaved an impatient sigh, hand on hip.

"And I'd like shots of me " His mind ran through various ideas. He needed her with him tonight. At any cost. "In crowds. And in the night, outside. And a dark lawn. The whole man-of-mystery thing." He frowned at her shaking shoulders. "What?"

A laugh burst out. "Finian Alexander, bad boy of Hollywood, the world's hottest bachelor, are you afraid to go alone?"

He straightened his back. "No, of course not."

She gave him a look of challenge, arms crossed.

He came near, crowding her, almost hating himself for the way he planned to push her buttons. "What about you? Are you afraid of

coming with me?" He eased closer until their shirts brushed. "Afraid of walking into the limelight?" His voice dropped an octave. "Afraid of being seen with me?"

Hailey gave a shaky laugh and leaned back against her table, hands braced against it, her chest pushed out in an effort to get away from his looming presence.

Oh, he had her. He had her bad.

His groin tightened and he refrained from touching her, having her. Consuming her.

"Are you?" He let his breath roam over the exposed skin at her neck.

She crossed her arms, bumping against him, chin raised. "Fine."

"You'll come with me?"

"If only to keep you from making me claustrophobic." She pushed him back. "When does this monkey business start?"

"Half an hour."

"Half an hour!"

"You're with me. We can be fashionably late." He sent her a wink. "Don't forget your camera."

"Photo shoots outside the studio cost double."

"That's fine." He leaned over her again, all smiles, knowing he was too close and loving every second of it. "My last movie was a blockbuster hit."

"And I can tell that fact did not go straight to your head."

He grinned at her. She was fun. "Let's get ourselves outfitted like the sexy beasts we are."



Wow. Hailey was she was *everything*.

The one English class he'd taken in college had told him not to use more than one adjective when describing something, but adjectives were all he could think of while staring at Hailey move across her sister's living room to the entry where he was waiting.

Breathtaking.

Stunning.

Out of this world.

Gorgeous.

Curvy.

Unbelievable.

Delicious.

A fifteen on a scale of ten.

Bedable.

Hot and sexy.

He'd dropped her off at Maya's house--another of her multitude of sisters--so she could get decked out while he borrowed her wheels to go get himself a monkey suit. Obviously his invitation had gone to her head as she'd been like a giddy teenager when he'd dropped her off to raid her sister's closet. But a crazy transformation worthy of a sci-fi show had happened in the thirty minutes he'd been out. She was mellow, graceful and demure. She'd shined up, big time. Soft makeup and lipstick that made her shapely mouth luscious in all the ways that turned a man on and made him think of things south of the border. Hair in soft curls. A red dress--quiet, serious Hailey in a knockout dress. It hugged her curves, its swooping neck bunched with lots of extra material, creating soft folds across her chest. Her shoulders looked strong and entirely kissable. That hint of cleavage he knew would keep him close all night, wondering, waiting. Hoping.

He wanted to take her home. To his parents. To his bed. He wanted to kiss her, and have that kiss last for the next fifty years.

Instead, he lifted her hand and lightly brushed his lips across the back. "You look utterly amazing," he told her.

She let go of his hand and he was unsure where to put his own. He needed to touch her, hold her. He quickly leaned forward, brushing her cheek with another light kiss, unable to move away.

Her cheeks flushed, the color spreading across her chest. She took him in with careful, quick glances. "You look nice, too."

"He looks hot, Hailey," said her sister. "Come on, admit it. You want to bump uglies big time."

Finn shot Maya a grin and she gave him a double thumbs-up. He was going to have to tell his friends about Canadian women, because he could only imagine what these hotties were like in the sack. His groin tightened as extra blood hurried to the area, in case he should decide to listen to the devil on his shoulder and take Hailey behind the bushes lining her sister's yard.

At the car he offered Hailey her keys. She paused, then accepted them. It was almost as though she expected him to drive. Interesting. She liked to be pampered and taken care of. He could do that.

Easily.

"She's wanted to go to one of these things since she was a kid," Maya called after them. "Make sure she gets the full experience!"

Hailey grumbled something about sisters that he didn't quite catch and carefully slipped behind the wheel.

"Maya's nice," Finn said, settling into the passenger seat.

"Yeah, she's all right." Hailey's eyes darkened as if she was holding back a secret, but before he could figure it out, she turned to check her blind spot, then pulled out onto the tree-lined street.

As she drove them to Windermere he eyed the silky material of her dress and the way it moved with her, creating shadows and curves and lines any man would admire.

And she was Finn's. For the night.

Sort of.

He was going to have a tough time reminding himself she wasn't his, because his body had kicked down into full-on primal mode, where he was hers and she was his and he'd do whatever he had to do in order to protect that.

He rubbed his cheek in anticipation of the slap he knew he'd get before the night was through. Oddly enough, he was kind of looking forward to it.

Oh, she was nervous. Hailey had tried to park away from the dazzling Windermere House, seeing as her car's rusty old body was an obvious indicator that she did not belong and never would at this fancy event--unless she was working it. However, Finian, always so full of confidence, had directed her to the valet with an assurance that had been thrilling and comforting. That was, until she had to hand over her keys to the surprised attendant. And of course, it had been a guy she'd gone to school with, who'd done a double take.

Finian, cupping her elbow, led her into the old hotel, ignoring the valet.

"This place looks great for its age." He gave a short nod to a person manning the door, and quickly breezed past before the man could ask to see their invitation.

"It was one of the few original hotels from the late 1800s, but when *The Long Kiss Goodnight* was filmed here in the 1990s, the place accidentally burned down. It was rebuilt and restored to look the same, but there are subtle differences."

"Hmm."

Finian swept her into a large room where the ball was being held, acting as though he owned the place.

"You have crashing down to a science."

"How do you think I met the producers and directors I wanted to schmooze with?" He shot her a wink and pulled her onto the portable dance floor.

Hailey pulled out "calm, cool, and collected" and tried to take in the place without gaping. She'd been through the entire hotel once before, as a kid, and had been wowed by it then, but tonight it was in full splendor, from the gowns to the intricate appetizers to the delicate decorations. She could imagine the years of old money moving about this room. Lady Eaton and her friends. And now newer money. People like Martin Short, Bill Murray, Kurt Russell and Goldie Hawn could magically appear to rub elbows.

She let out a sigh as Finian, her own movie star, kept his hand on her lower back, guiding her across the crowded dance floor. She liked having his hand there. His body heat pressed into her and she allowed herself to stay close, to not push away. And his tuxedo? She'd thought he'd looked good this afternoon without a shirt on, stretched out on the floor of her studio, but that was nothing in comparison to the way he looked decked out in black. She'd have to stop staring at him or the dampness in her panties was going to get out of control. Sex appeal? Oh, yeah. He was the sexiest man in the room.

"I forgot my camera in the car," she whispered.

"Later. Right now we live large."

Hailey tipped her head back, and Finian took advantage of her position and dropped her into a gentle dip, spinning her slowly in a half arc before pulling her up into his arms.

"You're a good dancer," she told him.

"You know what they say ."

She raised an eyebrow in question.

"Good dancers make excellent lovers."

Hailey laughed and resisted the temptation to glide her hand up the nape of his neck and pull his face closer to hers.

"Shall we take a break?" He led her to the bar with a hand still on her lower back, announcing that she was with him. She smiled as women noticed him. Noticed her with him. The crowd parted as though they were royalty. A girl could get used to this.

"Why are we here, exactly?" she asked, as he handed her a flute of champagne.

"Publicity. I can't hide out from my broken heart forever." He gave her a wink, and they moved to the side to enjoy their champagne.

A voice loaded with surprise broke into their conversation, "*Hailey?*"

Hailey kept her back to the woman, furiously trying to think of something entirely engrossing to say to Finian so he would lean in close, blocking out Polly, her ex-best friend and almost-rival. But the woman stepped around, facing them.

"I *thought* it was you, but then all those years you said you'd never go digging for gold. I just *had* to come see for myself." Polly placed a highly manicured hand against her silicone-enhanced chest and gave a tinkling laugh. She waved a finger at Hailey. "You naughty girl, I *knew* you'd succumb."

Before she could retort, Polly slipped her highly toned body between Hailey and Finian, gripped his arm and pressed her chest against him. "Honey, you just *have* to watch Hailey. She'll tell you one thing, then do the other." She gave a coy wink.

Hailey pulled her away. "Finian is my client. I'm photographing him. This is an *assignment*."

"Then where's your camera?" She sidled up again with a smirk and assessed an amused Finian. "He's *not* a bad catch. Made several mill on his last movie."

"Finian, meet Polly Pocket."

"Pollard," Polly corrected. "Thank you."

"Polly's been digging for gold since sixth grade and no longer understands the social complexities of friendship. Only financial commodities--she won a lot of awards as an investment advisor before she got married. We used to be close friends." She turned to Polly, who hardly looked real other than for the stress lines beginning to show around her eyes. "Polly, meet Finian. He's pretty much full of himself in ways you'd enjoy. However, he also has a tender side I've come to appreciate."

"I was going to say you're complete crap at introductions," Finian murmured. "But that's probably the nicest thing you've said about me." He gave her a light peck on the cheek that made Polly turn an unnatural pink. Possibly due to the shade of envious green mixing in with it.

"I didn't see your name on the guest list, Hailey. I'm sure I would have remembered seeing it. Yours, *too*, Finian." She tipped her head, eyes hard, jaw clenched. "I'd hate to think you were *crashing* a *charity* event."

"I never go by my real name at events like this." Finian leaned close to Polly, grasping her elbow and sidling close enough that her perfect posture softened. "You know how it gets."

Polly tipped her chin up. "Of *course*."

Finian stood beside Hailey, allowing the other woman to politely excuse herself. He rested his shoulder against Hailey's, his warmth easing into her as they looked out at the crowd of beautifully dressed people, while sipping their expensive champagne.

"Sorry about Polly."

"Never apologize for someone else's problems."

Hailey froze as a cluster of sparkling-eyed women rushed toward them. Finian, spotting them, spun around and placed a hand on the

wall behind Hailey, blocking her in. Her body heat rocketed and her pulse throbbed as the room shrank down to just the two of them.

"Don't look at them or they'll interrupt," he said, his mouth close to her jawbone.

She darted a glance to the crowd of women hanging behind Finian, waiting. Lurking.

"You are such a contradiction," she whispered. He wanted to be seen out in public, but didn't want the attention? Could she dare think he wanted to spend time with her?

No, of course not. Those were hungry dames who would suck his evening away. It wasn't about her. It was about staying sane.

"I think you are the contradiction." His breath came as warm puffs against her cheek.

Her longing ratcheted up a notch. Why did it seem as though one moment she was angry with him and the next moment she was ready to wrap her pulsing, naked body around his?

She raised her face, taking in his beautiful lines. The angular jaw, the lips the lips that were closing in on hers.

Oh, here it came.

Hailey almost forgot the flute of champagne she was holding as he kissed her slowly and sweetly. Her body pressed against him, and his arm wrapped around her waist, reeling her in so she could feel every inch of his body against hers. What had he done with his glass? And why did she care? They were propped against the wall, locked together, sharing heat, his mouth on hers. And he'd chosen her.

Hailey.

Chosen her for a summer fling.

No.

She wasn't that girl. She couldn't do flings and she didn't need a broken heart. Not again. She'd learned those hard lessons, and one of

them was to stop things before they went too far. She gave a gentle push against Finian's chest and he started to move away.

But it was fun breaking her own rules. Thrilling. And she was sure her old broken-hearted self would understand that if a man like Finian came along, you went along for the ride. Even if you knew the consequences.

You broke the rules for men like Finian Alexander.

So she kissed him again, harder, letting her passion and need enter into it. He immediately returned her passion, making her very aware of how close he was and how much his body wanted exactly what she was dreaming of.

She broke the kiss, gasping. "I crave you, but not here."

He stepped back slightly, but still too close for her to be able to breathe or think straight. The man was all-consuming.

And he was going to break her heart as if he'd dropped it from the top of the CN tower. But the funny thing was she couldn't summon the energy to care. It would be worth it. Entirely.

Hailey leaned her head against the wall, dared to look into his eyes. Saw exactly what she was feeling reflected back at her, full score.

Oh, she was in trouble.

Big, big trouble.



HAILEY LET Finian sweep her back onto the dance floor instead of upstairs to a room with what would surely be an exquisite bed. The champagne, her need, and his consuming presence were making her head spin. She laughed, the skirt of her sister's borrowed dress flaring out in a way that made her feel sexy and free as Finian twirled her-- and straight into the arms of Austin.

"May I cut in?"

"No." There was a possessiveness in Finian's voice that made Hailey pulse with longing. Finian tried to tug her back, but Austin held strong.

"Austin, I don't want to dance with you."

"Just for a few notes," he said.

Finian released her and crossed his arms. Hailey almost laughed. She'd bet anything he was going to stand right there and count the measures before reclaiming her. Her only regret was that he hadn't fought longer or harder for her.

"Interesting approach," Austin said, his body an uncoordinated wreck as he tried to lead her around the floor.

"What's interesting? Your approach to dancing?"

Austin gave her a smile as crooked as his bow tie. "Getting in close to Finian so you can expose him. Sell him out. Be there to capture the images of him at his worst. I never knew you had it in you."

"Shut up, Austin." Hailey pushed him away. "And you'd better not take any photos of us."

She ran her eyes down him, on the lookout for a camera. Someone like Austin who knew where he might be hiding one? For all she knew, he had a camera in his shoe and had already taken a photo up her dress.

"I'm on a date." He raised his hands in professed innocence. "I'm not working."

"You're always working."

"Watch out, Hailey." Austin lowered his voice, gazing in Finian's direction. "He'll use you faster than you can use him."

"He's not like that."

Austin turned her in that direction. Finian was surrounded by a mob of women who were gushing, taking photos and generally petting him as if he was their long-lost puppy. "Maybe you'd better go rescue him

before he begins to like it too much and you get busted for crashing this thing."

"Austin, no photos, okay?"

"Tonight only, but if something juicy happens I will break my promise."

"Deal. Now scoot."

He bowed, releasing her to go save Finian and try her hand at being Cinderella for one night.



THANK GOODNESS FOR HAILEY. Finn made a dash for her, breaking through the mob of women. He'd never had so many tush grabs or offers of "servicing" in a five-minute span in his life--even in Hollywood. There was something scary about these done up, perfect broads. It was as though their husbands ignored them and they hadn't been let out of their cages in months. But he got why rich men went after younger women--they were still halfway real.

Real like Hailey. Not like Jessica.

"I'm getting hungry. Are you?" Hailey asked as he fell into step beside her, his body curled around hers in a way he hoped would ward off any further advances.

"Are we leaving?"

She'd been a radiant beauty only moments before when they'd been dancing, and now she was closing up again. He glanced over his shoulder to see if he could spot Austin and get a hint for the trouble he'd stirred up.

"You can do what you want, but I need to eat," she replied.

"There are a few munchies here. Do you like shrimp?"

Her pace increased as she spied the exit.

Finn picked up his own pace in order to steer her in the opposite direction.

"I know just the place," he said.

"This way is closer to my car."

"Trust me."

"I think we've already established--"

He spun her into a hard kiss to stifle her objections.

"Do you want this night to be memorable, Hailey? Or do you want to traipse back to that life of yours that gives you frown lines?"

She paused as if deciding whether to be offended or not, so he pulled her into a French kiss, his hand on her left butt cheek. He consumed her in the crowd, then, snatching her hand, tugged her, breathless and unresisting, out of the hotel and down the sweeping, lit up lawn to the lake's edge. Where docks lined the shore he found the man he was looking for, waiting in a boat.

"You forgot to take pictures of me," Finn murmured in Hailey's ear, and her steps faltered.

He shot her a grin as a uniformed man came up, holding her camera bag. Right on time.

"What on earth?" She whirled around.

"The valet. He's allowed to have the keys to your car." Finn slipped a bill in the man's hand and took Hailey's bag.

"I said I was hungry," she snapped, snatching it from him. "I've been working for you all afternoon and need to eat."

"You weren't working a few minutes ago." Finn moved closer and her cheeks flushed. She began walking toward the hotel again, clutching her hips in a way that reminded him of a runner with cramps.

"There's nothing to eat in town at this hour unless we go back to the hotel," she said.

Not what he had in mind, nor what he had planned.

"Hailey, do you trust me?"

She turned. "No."

"Good. Come on." Finn held out his hand and she hesitated before walking carefully toward him.

He led her to the large speedboat with the waiting driver. When Finn stepped onto its deck and offered his hand to her, she hesitated, her hand trembling ever so slightly.

"To Port Carling, please," he said to the driver, when he had Hailey settled on board. The man gave Finn a nod, and within seconds they had cast off and were heading across the calm lake.

Hailey's eyes sparkled in the moonlight and her lips curved into a small smile as the boat's breeze flipped her hair. Just as he'd thought. She could be swayed and dazzled by a little special treatment. He leaned closer and laid a kiss on her lips.

He was getting further away from his original plan to tick her off so she'd expose him, but it felt right being with her. He couldn't intentionally hurt her, but maybe if he got close enough she'd understand what he needed to do, and would help him. They could be a team.

He kissed her again, wanting to stay in this moment with her. She was everything he no longer deserved, and everything he thought he'd left behind.

She leaned against him, the cool air whipping around them as the large craft picked up speed.

"You're cold." Finn whipped off his tuxedo coat and draped it over her shoulders, drawing her closer in the process. She was a beauty. Pure. And someone he could only lose or hurt.

He gave the top of her head a kiss, wrapping his hand in her soft curls.

What if he took over his life again? What if he risked it all and took a long shot? A long shot that could maybe, one day, make him a happy *and* successful man. Would he be able to rebuild his old community like he'd promised? Or would he lose everything, including Hailey?

"You look sad," she said.

"Then I guess I'm not doing it right."



FINN MANAGED to shake his melancholy by the time they hit the docks in Port Carling. It was time to show Hailey how fun it was to let loose for a night. To be free and have a good time. Hand in hand, they walked the short distance up the hill, meeting up with the sidewalk that took them to the restaurant overlooking the locks. Gently, he ushered her inside.

"Hi, cutie." The server sidled up to Finn and he almost laughed at how obvious she was.

"Table for two, please." He slipped his tuxedo jacket off her shoulders and caressed her exposed shoulder.

The waitress, eyes on him, led them to a table by a large window.

"I'll bet you'd like your usual drink? A scotch on the rocks?" She batted her lashes.

Finn blinked. The usual? He'd never been here before.

And he hated scotch. It tasted like spider pee.

Oh, right. Famous. And it looked good in a glass. Fit the image, blah, blah, blah.

He gave a short nod, not bothering to fill her in on his true tastes.

"What would you like?" he asked Hailey, annoyed by how the server's back was angled to shut her out in order to gain more attention from him--the person she presumed would be tipping her.

"Just water for now," Hailey said, her head buried in the menu.

"We have a nice sparkling water," the waitress said. "I could add a refreshing slice of lemon."

"Tap water," Hailey clarified, looking up, hands splayed across the table's linen cloth.

"We have a--"

"Tap. Please."

Finn hid his smile as the waitress hurried off. He closed his heavy menu, watching Hailey frown at her own. Her eyes skimmed the right column, then the items. Next page. Skim the prices, then the items.

He reached over and closed her menu, ignoring her downturned mouth.

The server appeared. "A scotch on the rocks for you, sir." She did a little curtsy as she lowered his drink. She set down Hailey's water and turned back to Finn. "Now, what can I get you for an appetizer? I think you'd enjoy the roasted tomato and whipped goat cheese spread on our fresh sourdough. It's fresh and delicious. Shall I bring that out along with a side of hot smoked salmon on our homemade crackers?"

Finn gave her a wave in agreement. He didn't care what they ate as long as Hailey was happy and stopped frowning at the prices--which really weren't too bad, compared to the places Jessica usually tried to take him. In fact, this converted house was casual, yet sophisticated in a way he'd come to equate with Muskoka.

"No, thank you," Hailey piped up. "Unless you wanted that, Finian?"

"I'm cool either way."

"Great, I'll go put that in."

Hailey vanished behind her menu again and Finn resisted the urge to tip it down.

"That color looks nice on you," he said when she finally closed it. "The red brings out a certain life in you." The lights above them were

dimmed and the soft glow highlighted the natural strands of gold in her curls. She looked healthy. Alive.

But she could look happier. Less uncomfortable.

"What's your favorite color?" she asked.

"Beige."

She placed her fists on the table, eyes twinkling. He took a sip of his drink, waiting for her to call him on it.

"I can't believe your pants have yet to burst into flames," she said.

"My pants?"

"Liar, liar, pants on fire," she sang. "Hanging on a--"

"I am familiar with the reference. I did have a childhood."

"Since when?"

"Since ever. I wasn't born famous and fully grown. I grew up in a crappy rented town house, with loud neighbors who did drugs and had fights on the communal lawn. I learned to ride a bike without training wheels, teased and fought with my brothers. Got my heart broken at the prom. The usual. I am real, you know."

"So, then " She placed her hands under her chin, the picture of innocence. "Which parent are you closest to? Your mom or your dad?"

"Why does this feel like a test?"

"Because it is."

"Really?"

"No. Quit stalling. I won't tell the parent who loses that they didn't make the cut."

"Everyone has a parent they feel closest to."

"And the winner is?"

"My mom. And you?"

"I've never met your mom, so how would I know she would be my pick?" Hailey winked over the rim of her water glass.

"What's in that water? It's turning you into a tease."

"So?" he asked. "Are you dodging my question? You're like honey, all sweet and innocent, pulling me in."

"Better to catch Hollywood flies that way."

He leaned forward. "Have you been following me?"

"So, my dad's dead--accident when we were teens--and my Mom had a debilitating stroke a few years back. The parents I grew up with are no more, and the roles have been reversed. So your question of which I'm closest to doesn't really apply."

"I'll take that as a yes. I'm flattered."

Her mouth tightened into a thin line. "This is real life, Finian. This is what it looks like. What it feels like."

"Why do you always call me Finian?"

"Last I heard, it was your name. Or is that another thing that's been faked about you?"

"What's fake about me?" He grabbed her hand, keeping her at the table. She was preparing to put distance between them again.

He wasn't sure why he cared what she thought or why he felt so insulted by her comment, but it was as though her answer could sweep away everything he'd worked toward like the swoosh of the final curtain.

"For one? Your bad-boy image."

Finn placed his palms on the table, stared at her. He glanced away, then back at her, letting out a massive sigh. "Come on, more details. Please." He must have given her a pathetic look because the tension in her gorgeous shoulders eased and her chest expanded, thrusting up a hint of cleavage. But all he could think about, other than how sexy she was, was that he depended on her answer as though it were his last meal. "Is it obvious that it is mostly faked?"

"To me it is."

"Gimme more."

"Manners?" She sent him a saucy look.

"Mother, may I, please?"

Hailey snorted, but the corners of her lips curved into a smile. "The hints add up, the more I get to know you. And honestly, when was the last time you've done something bad? It's not in your nature. It's merely a role you're playing."

He stood, hooking his fingers under the table as though he was about to flip it over.

"Don't!" She held out a hand, eyes wide with panic.

"Just kidding, Hails." He sat again, arms resting on the table. "Could you help me?"

"With what?"

"Building up my image again. We could work as a team." He held his breath, forcing himself to remain quiet. He had just one shot at this.

She laughed, rich and deep, as if the laughter was bubbling up from the depths of her soul. She placed a hand on her chest, her eyes merry. "Me? Hardly."

"You're a photographer, aren't you?"

The merriment vanished.

"Help me with my image, as a photographer, Hailey. Please."

"See? Bad boys don't say please."

"You're helping me already."

"Finian, I'm not the kind of girl who creates images for movie stars." She played with the edge of the tablecloth. "That's not my thing."

"That's not what I'm asking. I'm asking you to take photos. Sell them. Make money." He leaned closer, lowered his voice to a whisper. "A *ton* of money. A win-win partnership."

She averted her eyes, something warring within her. "Let's talk about it later, okay?"

"Promise?"

"Promise."

The server arrived with plates racked up her arms. "Here we are." She began sliding appetizers onto the table.

"Wow." He gazed at all the food. "This is a lot."

"I'll get you more serviettes. Would you like fresh pepper? A glass of wine, perhaps? We have a lovely Bordeaux that would go nicely with the dip."

"I'm fine, thank you."

"Would you like another finger of scotch?"

He shook his head.

"I've put in an order for our surf and turf, as well."

"Oh, I think this will be plenty for me," Hailey said, her eyes round.

"Yeah, we're good. Thanks."

"Oh. Okay." The server's shoulders slumped in defeat.

"This is lovely, though. Thank you."

"You don't want to miss our desserts. Save room for that. In fact, I'll bring you a dessert menu, as well as the wine list, so you can see what you need to save room for."

"Thank you."

Hailey's eyes flicked over the appetizers as though tallying the cost. The skin between her brows pinched and she reached for the small purse she'd set beside her plate.

"My treat. After all, I broke some labor laws today by not allowing you the time to get fed properly. This is my appeasement."

She opened her purse, fingering through its contents.

"No, really," he insisted. She paused, her blue eyes assessing him. "Haven't you been on a date before?" he asked.

"It's been a while. And I thought we were working?"

“We’re going to what?” Hailey took a step away from Finian, her stomach pleasantly full, as a light breeze picked up off the lake back at Windermere. It was a perfect night. Full moon. No wind.

But it sounded as though Finian had just said they were going to go--

“Parasailing.” A few helpers came down the hill to the docks, and before she knew what was happening, they had pulled the string of buoys out of the swimming area and she was standing barefoot in the small beach’s cold sand.

“I’ve never done this before.”

“Me, neither,” he said with a grin. “Well, okay. I have. But not here. And not tandem.”

“Tandem?”

“You and me, sweetheart.”

“Sweetheart?” She gave him a playful shove. “Isn’t that sexual harassment?”

“What?”

“We’re working right now. Although I have no idea how I’m going to photograph you if you’re strapped to my back, sugar buns.”

He let out a laugh, allowing the attendants to strap him in, his arms wrapped around her waist.

"I'll show you sexual harassment," he growled in her ear.

"Is that a promise or a threat?" Her voice came out breathy with desire, and she didn't know whether to squelch it or run with it.

The helpers began doing up the harnesses.

"Wait! I'm wearing a dress." She squealed and tried to turn away from Finian.

"Don't worry, it's dark out. Nobody will see your underwear. Live free, Hailey."

She closed her eyes. If only her whole life was like tonight. Then she might believe in living free. But she'd already done a hundred things she'd never dreamed of. Well, not quite a hundred, but the night was far from over and there was so much potential in the tentative connection between her and Finian.

"On three," said the parasail assistant, "I need the two of you to run across the sand for liftoff."

This was going to be interesting. Running with Finian strapped to her back?

"One, two, three "

Hailey took a step forward and they were launched into the air as the sail behind them lifted.

"Wow!"

It was as though she weighed nothing, like an angel, or one of Tigger's fairies. Finian held her close, his warmth protecting her from the cool, soft air swirling around them as they quietly floated above the lake. The moon glanced off the water's surface, racing them as they soared along.

"Look, our shadow," Finian said in her ear. Her dress's soft fabric danced across her smooth legs, as sensual as his husky voice.

"I wish I had my camera." Even though she knew the camera couldn't pick up what she saw--the small glimmers, the reflections, the way she felt--Hailey would have something tangible to hold on to. Something to remind her that this night was more than just a dream. A dream she'd want to repeat every night for the rest of her life.

Finian's arms tightened around her and she allowed herself to believe that he felt the same way she did. That he'd never done this or felt this with another woman. That she was special. That she was his.

He kissed her ear and she pointed in the direction of Nymph Island, telling him stories of her life as they glided along, letting him into her world one island at a time.



THE BOATMEN LET them down in the damp sand, the assistant easily catching them. Hailey felt graceful, beautiful, alive. And maybe a little bit in lust with Finian.

The helper unstrapped them and the cool air hit her back as Finian stepped away from her. She turned to face him. "You were nice and warm." He wrapped himself around her again as the boat pattered off, the moon's reflection dancing across its wake. She let out a small sigh of contentment, safe in Finian's warm embrace. She never wanted this evening to end. Ever.

"Let's walk," he said, taking her hand.

She let him lead her to their shoes, her camera bag resting in the sand beside them, Finian's tux jacket draped over it.

They wandered up a quiet, narrow road, away from the water.

Finian let out a laugh and stepped into a yard. "Check this out." Under a window was a flower bed filled with petunias, whirligigs, and gnomes.

"Finian! That's private property!" she hissed. She ducked behind a large tree just off the sidewalk, wishing the streetlight above her would burn out.

What was he doing? Trying to prove he really was a bad boy?

And if so, why did she want to run away more than snap a photo of him?

"This guy looks like Santa!" He waved the gnome at her, a clump of dirt falling from its joined feet. "Doesn't it?"

"Someone's going to see you!"

She was pretty sure that even in Hollywood people didn't go picking up lawn ornaments, willy-nilly. Although that could explain why the big homes were gated.

"Come on, Finian!"

The window directly behind him opened and Finian, unfazed, chirped a hello.

A gray-haired woman poked her head out. "What are you doing with Alfred?"

"Alfred?"

"The gnome in your right hand, buster." She leaned out farther and Hailey hid behind the tree again. Naturally, Mr. Everyone's a Fan of Mine So I Can Do Anything I Want had to choose Mrs. Star's house. This was going to get back to Hailey's mother faster than the time she and Austin went egging houses.

"Put him right back beside Georgie, please. They're brothers and don't like to be parted."

"Did you ever notice he looks like Santa?" Finian held the gnome up in the light cast from her house.

"Of course I did. Why do you think I bought him? Say, has anyone ever told you that you look like that Finian Alexander fellow you see in the movies?"

"Of course they have. Mostly because I am Finian Alexander." He beamed his bright smile up at the window and the woman wobbled before catching herself on the frame.

"Well! I'll say." She turned to look into her house. Turned back. "I'm going to need to take a photo or else my sister Elsie over in Blueberry Springs won't believe me. Don't move a muscle."

Finian flashed Hailey a smile and she shook her head, wishing she could move back onto the sidewalk where the dew wouldn't chill her exposed toes.

"I hope you don't mind that I came onto your lawn," Finian said when Mrs. Star returned, camera in hand.

"Of course not," she purred, aiming the device. A bright flash went off and Hailey winced. Mrs. Star's photo was going to be awful. Finian was going to have major red-eye and be completely bleached out.

He posed with the gnome again.

My word, the woman was blinding him with that flash. Hailey took a step forward, her heavy camera bag slung over her shoulder.

"Who's there?" Mrs. Star called out.

"Just me, Mrs. Star." Hailey stepped closer. "Hailey Summer."

"Hailey? Are you hanging out with Finian Alexander?"

"I'm afraid I am."

"What on earth are you doing with the likes of this young man?" She reached out to pat Finian on the shoulder. "No offense, but you don't have the best reputation, and Hailey Summer, she's a good girl. I've known her mother most of my life."

"None taken."

Mrs. Star patted Finian's cheek. "How you got such a bad reputation, I'll never know. Although you did waltz right into my yard like you owned it. You stick close to Hailey. She'll set you up all nice again."

"I'll do my best, ma'am."

Mrs. Star turned back to Hailey. "I bet Elsie five bucks it wasn't you on that celebrity show. I told her you'd know better than to kiss a man like Finian Alexander--not that you couldn't get him. You are a lovely young thing, and look at you, all dolled up. But I thought you had more sense in that head of yours than to get tangled up in this Hollywood disaster."

"Mrs. Star, would you like me to take a photo of you with Finian?"

"Oh, yes, please!" The woman patted her hair and leaned out.

Hailey took out her camera and snapped a few shots, laughing when Mrs. Star pretended to kiss a shocked-looking Finian, who was hamming it up, making the woman glow.

"You are just too special," Mrs. Star finally said, giving Finian a big kiss on the cheek. "Isn't he special, Hailey?"

She nodded, not daring to speak over the sentimental lump that had formed in her throat. If only if only he would stay, so she could explore just how special he was.

"Now, if Hailey doesn't mind," said Mrs. Star to Finian, "let's get one of you without your shirt."



HAILEY TURNED off her car and leaned back in her seat. Tonight had been amazing. Even though she was parked outside Finian's cottage so they could part ways, she still didn't want the night to be over. Not yet.

Without breaking the silence, Finian drew an arm around her shoulder, pulling her to him, his lips finding hers in the darkness. Her hand stroked his cheek as his tongue delved into her mouth. She moaned in contentment and wished she could press her body against his warmth.

"You're cold," he said, tipping his head so his forehead rested against hers.

She was trembling, but it was from something other than the cool night air seeping into her car. Something much stronger.

He broke their embrace and was out of the car, opening her door within seconds. "Come."

She hesitated.

"Trust me, Hails."

She placed her hand in his, meeting his eye. "I trust you."

"Good." He led her into his cottage, where he started a blaze in the fireplace with an ease that surprised her.

"Where'd you learn that?"

"In *Desperate Cowboy*."

"Oh, right." For some reason she'd never thought of him actually having to possess the skills he displayed in his movies.

Finian disappeared, then returned with an afghan in yellows and browns, sporting sunflowers like pretty much everything else in the cottage. He wrapped it around her shoulders with care, tugging her close enough to kiss. Then he was gone again.

Hailey watched the fire crackle, wondering what she was in for. Well, she knew what she was hoping she was in for. She was in his cottage at two in the morning after a night of well, she didn't even know what to call their night. Perfect. It had been perfect. And she was here now because she wanted more. A lot more. She wanted everything he was willing to give.

The overhead lights flicked off and Finian slipped onto the couch beside her, supporting her as he offered a glass of wine.

She toasted him in the firelight. "Thank you."

"You are welcome."

They held each other's gaze over the rim of their glasses and Hailey leaned into his strength.

"Did you have a nice night?" he asked.

"I did." A smile crept onto her face and she snuggled closer, wishing she could run her hands all over him, explore him, get to know him intimately. She wanted to know absolutely everything about him.

She placed her glass on the side table and then took his, placing it beside hers.

"You don't like it?" he asked.

Wordlessly, she held the blanket around her shoulders, standing so she could shift onto his lap, straddling him. Instead of being embarrassed by how much she wanted him, she slid farther onto his lap. His eyes darkened as he grabbed her hips, pausing as if double-checking to see if she was making the moves he thought she was. She pressed her chest against his, their eyes not breaking contact. With a quick pivot he had her on her back, his body pinned above hers. She wrapped her legs around him, drawing him tight against her and she grabbed his shirt, tugging his chest down to meet hers.

"What do you need, Hailey?"

"I need you." She lifted herself so she could reach his lips, diving into him, showing him how much she yearned to feel every bit of him from his body to his passion and desire. "All of you."



FINN SAT on the edge of his bed in the Sunflower Cottage and glanced at the sleeping form behind him. He quickly looked back at the wall so he wouldn't crawl back into bed.

What had he done? This kind of partnership wasn't going to do a thing for either of them, especially with him destined to head back home

in less than a week.

Hailey would never expose his dark underside now. Not unless he did something evil like betray her trust. And he couldn't do that. Not to his Hails.

She was too good. Too real. Too honest. Too everything he didn't need in a paparazzo. But everything he needed in a girlfriend. Sighing, he slipped back under the covers, tucking his arms around her, drawing her close. She felt good. Warm. Friendly.

He needed a girlfriend like her. Always had.

He whispered a thank-you into the air in case the God his mother believed in was real, and with care and attention, began kissing his way up Hailey's exposed arm, liking the way he could make her lips curve into a gentle smile.

She was no longer trying to run away. She was his. Here in bed. With him.

Forever.

There was a loud bang on the front door as Hailey rolled over, pulling him down into a full-mouthed kiss that had him primed and ready to yell, "Action!"

She ignored the door, pressing her body against him. He did likewise, spreading himself over top of her as he kissed her with leisure.

"Finian!" called a woman's voice.

His head popped up as Hailey froze under him.

"It's my mother." He rolled off Hailey and rubbed a hand down his face. "I think I was supposed to pick her up from the airport."

"Finian?" called his father.

"They're both here." He popped out of bed, yanking on a pair of jeans.

His mother banged on the door again and Hailey scrambled into action, falling off her side of the bed, her bare butt exposed. Finn

reached across the bed to give it a light slap, and she squealed and ducked out of reach, tucking the fallen sheet around her torso.

"You're so bad," she giggled, her hair tumbling across her forehead.

He shot her a wolfish grin, brushing the curls off her face. "That's what I keep telling you."



FINN SETTLED his parents at the small table on the deck that overlooked the calm lake, where the eerie loons were calling to one another. He placed a mug of coffee from the small one-cupper in front of his mother, and set up the machine to make one for himself.

"Sure you don't want a coffee, Dad?"

"I'm fine, thanks. There was free coffee on the plane. I had my fill for the day, plus some."

Finn glanced at the French doors that led into the cottage. Where was Hailey? Had she slipped out the back? Or would she hide out until his parents left? Maybe come in here with bed head, and dressed in her killer sexy dress as if everything was normal? Or would she slam through the front door as though she'd just arrived? Maybe he should have taken his parents for a walk so she could escape.

"What in heaven's name are those?" His mother leaned over the railing, gawking at the lake. "They are strangely gorgeous."

Finn lined up his sight with hers. "Loons."

"They sound atrocious, but I like it. Chilling and haunting." She hugged her arms around herself for effect and sat at the table again.

"Hailey said they're the bird you see on the one-dollar coin."

"Such colorful money," his mother replied, tucking her blond bob behind her ears.

"Monopoly money," added his father.

"It makes a lovely rainbow. And who's Hailey? Is she the girl you were telling me about on the phone?"

"Yeah."

"Can we meet her?"

"Um, maybe." He glanced toward the doorway.

"I'm so glad you invited us. We set Rex up with the neighbor and were off. You were so right. We needed a vacation. With your father's health--"

"I'm fine, dear, quit worrying," his dad said, leaning back to tuck in his plaid shirt. "Finian, I tried negotiating a better deal for you with the cottage manager."

"Thanks. But it's okay, Dad. I can afford it."

"With all those charity events you have planned in the fall? And your donations? That's a lot of money you've promised, son. People are counting on you."

"I know." Finn tried to ignore the way his chest tightened, and instead focused his attention on the doorway.

Last night he'd seen Hailey's phone light up in the night, and had checked the screen in case it was something worth waking her over. Turned out it was a series of texts from various people, all stating they'd spotted him. Him. Finian Alexander. She *had* been tracking him and following him. In order to get him into bed? He didn't think so. But was she paparazzo? If so, she sucked at it, plain and simple. Which left stalker fan. But that didn't fit, either.

So who was she? What did she want?

He was missing a piece. And it wasn't just the piece of his heart she seemed to have stolen in the night.

"I tried getting them to switch the booking to my name so I could get you a senior's rate," his father continued.

"You're not old enough."

His father flipped an ID card in his direction.

Finn spit out his coffee and laughed. "You're kidding me, right?"

His mother sighed and threw up her hands. "I told him he'd gone too far, but he couldn't resist. He likes the way people give him a second glance and ask to see his driver's license."

"What? It's a nice feeling. It's like being carded at the bar."

His mother blew on her cup of coffee, and as her eyes lifted, Finn felt the earth shift ever so slightly. *Hailey.*

"Hello. I'm Hailey Summer."

Hailey slipped past him, reaching out to shake his mother's hand. She was a vision in her red dress and wild hair--which looked as though she'd brushed it, then dampened it, causing major havoc. He grinned up at her and lightly touched her waist, loving the way the fabric felt over her curves.

His mother looked slightly in awe and stood up in front of Hailey, one hand over her chest.

"I know she's pretty, Mom, but you're staring." Finn pulled Hailey close and kissed the side of her head, inhaling her scent.

His mother blinked and gave herself a little shake. "I'm so sorry, it's just that I'm such a fan of your work."

"Uh, what?" Finn asked, his grip loosening.

"A fan?" Hailey echoed.

"Yes! The way you make wildlife come alive is simply incredible." Finn's mother tugged on his arm. "Have you *seen* her work?"

"Um, yes." He pushed a hand through his hair and met Hailey's eyes. "She took some photos of me yesterday. She, uh, revealed a side of me nobody else has."

Hailey was changing his life just by being in it. He pulled her close again, not wanting her to be farther than a breath away.

"Consider yourself very lucky, Finian." His mother gave him a look mixed with awe and wonder. "You don't realize what you have."

Finn rested a hand on Hailey's lower back, guiding her to a chair. "I think I do."

"No, this woman has won some impressive awards and doesn't do portraits any longer. How you managed to snag her " His mom blinked, taking in Hailey's wardrobe. Her attention flicked to Finn and back. She gave a small smile.

"Hailey, this is my mother, Daisy Alexander. Apparently one of your biggest fans. Don't give her your phone number or she'll call you with career advice every day."

His mother gave him a playful smack. "Oh, Finn."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Alexander."

His father gave Hailey an eager handshake. "I'm Bob, by the way. So, I'm guessing you're the girl who's been slapping some sense into our son."

Finn cringed as Hailey shot him a look, her face matching the hue of her dress. "Dad "

"I can tell by that grin of Finn's that he'd do just about anything for you." Bob lowered his voice as though Finn wouldn't be able to hear. "Maybe we could borrow your influence to work through a laundry list of grievances his mother has. Namely, his image."

"Dad "

Hailey was angling in her chair as though she was going to bolt. His parents were worse than the paparazzi that would undoubtedly start hounding them once word got out that he had a new crush.

All he wanted was a moment with her to solidify what they were before his real life interfered.

"Hailey and I have a few things to do today--"

"So? Will you work with him?" his mother asked Hailey.

"I've asked her to work on my image already, Mom, Dad."

"I don't think I'm the right woman for that job," Hailey said quickly.

"Good money in that, I suspect," his father countered.

Finn sighed. Ever since he'd started making enough to pull his family out of debt and out of that gang-infested community he'd grown up in, plus get his dad some proper health care, all his father had been focused on was money, money, money.

For Finn it had been money and fame. And with his focus on that, all the seven deadly sins had begun to line up, one behind the other. But that was it, wasn't it? Own a sin or two or be a nobody who never did anything or went anywhere. Be voted most like to sit around with a thumb up his butt. Or in his case, voted most likely to become a starving artist.

Anyone could change their destiny. The process just might not look pretty.

"Can we see the photos you took yesterday?" Daisy asked.

"I don't have them with me," Hailey said.

"I have the ones you shared through online storage." Finn ran to grab his tablet from the bedroom, flicking it on. He hurried back to the deck, worried he'd offered his parents a chance to give Hailey the third degree. Instead, she was sipping his coffee, sitting beside his mother, getting the scoop on his childhood temperament. If it had been anyone else, he would have felt exposed.

"Finian's always liked turtles," his mother said, reaching for the tablet. "But I didn't predict this environmentalist side."

"What environmentalist side?" he asked.

His father shot Hailey an appreciative smile. "You're a good influence, my dear. You really should work with him."

"Oh, Bob. They don't want to mix business with pleasure," his mother said with a sly smile.

"So? The turtles?" Finn asked.

"The tabloids are all over the whole turtle thing, Finian," Daisy said. "That article with you down by the water has gone viral."

"The article?"

"It was all about you saving the turtles. It started in the local paper here."

"My sister is going to love you," Hailey said, reaching over to give him a slight hug.

He slipped from her grip. Derek was going to be livid. Two environmentally slanted news items in less than a week. Finn pinched the bridge of his nose and inhaled slowly. This was how his career tanked. And Hailey was smiling as though it was the best thing in the world.

"Oh, Finian." His mom leaned over the tablet. "Look at how handsome you are. Hailey, you are incredible. Look at how you've portrayed my boy. You really see him."

That, it seemed, was exactly the problem. She saw him, but not his career.

He stormed into the cottage, at a loss on what he should do.

"What's wrong?" Hailey asked, joining him.

He pointed to the tablet she was carrying. "I need you to fix my image."

She grinned. "You're on."

Well, helping Finian fix his image was proving to be a particularly bad idea. Photos she'd taken in her studio as well as out in public were spread over her worktable. And every single one of them he'd rejected. She had to check in on the Walkers, and get her show to Simone, and having him spend the past hour rejecting everything she'd suggested was starting to get to her.

"I hired you to fix my image," Finian said, arms crossed. He looked so serious and business-sexy. If the world could see what he looked like right now he'd never have trouble finding work again. Too bad he was impossibly difficult.

"I don't get it, Finian. You want me to bury the turtle stuff in an avalanche of bad-boy disasters? That's not fixing your image, that's building on what you already have." She blinked back her disappointment and hurt.

"Who's going to pay money for this version of me?" His cheeks flushed as he waved a gorgeous photo of himself hunched on the rocks, looking concerned over the rare turtle in the background. The perspective was dead-on perfect. "This isn't going to rebuild the damage you've caused to my image, Hailey. Don't you get it?"

Tipping her head back, she fought the tears.

"I'm sorry that being seen with me did damage to your precious image. What fury must rain down upon you over being seen with a woman wearing clothes."

"Hailey, don't be a drama queen. You know what I mean. Two environmental articles in a span of two days. That's not what the public imagines when they think of Finian Alexander. It's incongruent."

She shook her head, her disappointment a heavy weight in her chest. She'd thought he'd seen the beauty and art in what she did, and had falsely believed that he wanted it for himself. For his image. To build and grow out of this phase. Instead he was asking her to bury the real things that had happened while he was with her. He was rejecting her and the things she stood for.

She'd seen him maneuver last night. He'd held her up like a princess, while other people ran around, making his life effortless. He'd had locals take them parasailing, and wait in their boat while the two of them ate supper. He'd been polite and charming, but it was obvious who was being catered to, and there was no equal footing. And now she had put herself in a position where she was the assistant, hired to make his easy life perfect again. Not his girlfriend or equal.

Hailey puffed up her cheeks, then blew out slowly. But she was a professional. She could handle this. This wasn't personal. This was his image. His career. His car-crash disaster. It was his choice. Not hers.

"Finian, we can't work together. We have two very different visions, and I don't want to fight with you."

She couldn't believe she was giving up a good paycheck by saying no to working with him, but Simone was right. Hailey had let the cottage and its needs lead to enough career sacrifices. And now it was leading to friction between her and the man she liked. She closed her eyes, knowing that once her family saw the For Sale sign on Nymph

Island, she might regret this moment. But it was still the right move to make.

"Hailey, I hired you because you can do anything with that camera. You can *capture* my vision."

"I don't care how much money you have, Finian, I have a reputation to protect, as well. I live in the real world where it took years to build up to who I am today."

"So have I."

"Everything depends on my reputation."

"Same here."

They stared at each other as a breeze wafted through the open garage door, stirring papers.

"Then you understand why I can't work with you."

He let out a growl and pushed away from the worktable.

"Who do you want to be, Finian?"

He shook his head at her, his eyes filled with something she couldn't identify.

"I know you see the other man you could be. You didn't hire me, an award-winning nature photographer, to create some stupid fake drama. So why are you chickening out?"

Finian moved closer, loosely wrapping his arms around her shoulders. He kissed her lips with a gentleness that scared her. He rested his forehead against hers and sighed. "Oh, Hailey."

"What?" She pushed away. That was a break-up voice. A you-don't-understand-me voice that would soon say, "It's not you, it's me."

"Don't you want to be more than some car crash that people stare at, grateful it isn't them?" She could barely believe she was pleading with him. When had she begun to care so much about how others viewed him? Was it when she'd slept with him?

No, it was before then. When she'd seen his exposed, vulnerable side, asleep in her chair. It was then that she'd felt the need to protect him. Not only from the world, but from himself. She had to convince him to see it her way. That the bad-boy persona was killing him. That he could be himself and get further.

Finian placed a hand on the back of his neck and stared at the ceiling, his T-shirt pulling across his muscular chest.

"Don't you see who you could be?" she asked. "You could make a difference in this world. Use your power for good instead of evil."

"Dammit, Hailey."

"I'm serious."

"You don't know me."

"Funny, but I think I do."

"Well, you *don't*."

"Are you afraid the world won't accept the real you--the man I've grown to care for?"

His eyes flicked to hers and his breathing halted.

She continued, "Are you afraid they'll chew you up and spit you out?"

"Yeah, pretty much."

"But don't you want to be more? Don't you want to prove to the world that you're more than what they see? That there is a real man under this artificial shell? What's holding you back? Why won't you be that deep and meaningful man I see, and who can change the world?"

"This is exactly why I need this bad image, Hailey. Don't you understand? It's my chance to make a difference."

Hailey scoffed and crossed her arms. "How?"

"The place where I grew up, Hailey. I made promises. Big promises. The only way I can reach those goals and meet my obligations is to be this man. This car crash you look down on. It pays the bills."

He cupped her chin, met her eyes. "If anyone knows how hard it is to pay the bills with meaningful art, it's you, Hailey."

She tugged her chin away. "Yeah, and I'm doing fine." Fine enough. Well, she would be if she didn't have the heavy responsibility of the cottage.

"But art isn't easy, is it?" He pointed to the stacks of framed photos she was taking to Simone's. "Are those your most arty photos you're taking for your show, or are you hiding the real you?"

She crossed her arms again. "You don't know *me*, Finian. So don't try and psychoanalyze me."

"I can't just suddenly go all artsy, Hailey. Don't you understand that? I *can't*."

"So you're going to reject your past? What about *Desperate Cowboy*?"

Finian threw his hands in the air and fell into her old armchair, sending dust motes dancing as he gave a dramatic sigh. "That was a lifetime ago."

"It won awards, Finian. It was your start. Your roots."

"Don't you think I know that?" He turned his face away from her, his jaw set in a way that made shivers run up her spine.

After a moment's silence he said quietly, "That movie is incongruent with the image I'm currently cultivating. The world wants to know if I can hold an Uzi in a convincing way, not whether I can keep up a five-minute monologue without boring the audience. I'm in a world where I need to work out, not convey fifty different facial expressions without looking hokey. I can't turn around and go back to my past without losing everything. You have to understand that. I made my choice ages ago and I have to stick with it."

He turned and made eye contact. His eyes were sad, heavy.

"I'm not prepared to live on the fringe again. I have obligations, too, Hailey. I have responsibilities. I'm not a do-nothing star who has lived

an easy life and goes along for the ride. There's a lot of work involved. So if you want to help me, you have to do it on my terms."

"I can't believe you're not willing to consider that there might be a different option."

"You want to know me?"

She nodded.

"Then let me paint a picture. My parents had medical bills they'd been carrying for years. Dad's not able to afford health insurance that will cover him, and every once in a while things they go down the drain. I've paid for all of it. I bought them a house in a decent neighborhood where they don't have to worry about someone shooting up their front yard. Then I bought it back from the bank after one of Dad's medical mishaps. I sent my brother to rehab. Then college. Started an anonymous college scholarship in the community where I grew up so other kids could get out. And I made all sorts of community development promises I'm about to renege on." He began ticking things off on his fingers. "I have an agent who depends on me. A publicist. An assistant. They all rely on me making a living, so they can pay their mortgages, feed their kids. There are producers who could lose everything if I don't bring it all to the table. I don't just sit on screen and look pretty. There's a lot of work involved. And I pay a lot in taxes, too. I have commitments. And being the celebrity car-crash everyone wants to read about in the tabloids is my way of meeting them."

Hailey swallowed. "I'm sorry, I never realized."

She wanted to tell him being a bad-boy wasn't the only option and that she understood obligations, but he continued on, a storm rocking his voice.

"That's exactly it, Hailey. You have no clue about me, my life. You've only met the version of me that you want to see. The guy on vacation."

She lurched as if she'd been slapped.

"You have all these assumptions about me, but you've barely even bothered to try and learn more about me." He stood and moved closer to her. "Did it ever occur to you that this image you look down upon is something I've carefully cultivated? That it's actually part of a large, overarching, multiyear career plan? That this image is actually something planned out? That I know what I'm doing?"

She blinked. Why would he slander who he was? Finian Alexander was perfect.

"You sold yourself out?"

He nodded, his eyes sad but fierce.

"Why would anyone choose to be a disaster when they could be living their real life?" She blinked back tears, not understanding why being such a loser in the public eye seemed like the best option.

"Have you not been listening?"

Hailey hugged herself, turning away. "I just don't understand."

She'd had to take jobs that didn't fit with who she wanted to be, but she'd always kept her goals in mind and was always working toward them. But Finian seemed to be rejecting that path entirely. Everything real. And if he was rejecting everything real in his life, where did she fit in? Nowhere.

She lowered her head with a sigh.

Finian gripped her arms, ducking his head so he could see her face.

"My agent has a full-fledged plan. A plan he'll put into action if I don't pull my head out of my you-know-what and get some publicity. He's ready to leak my made-up stories that will shorten my career. Yes, it will launch me temporarily, but not for long. This is a fickle business, show biz, and I need sustainability, Hailey. I depend on the work that comes in due to my image. Others do, too. So I have to ensure everything I put out there lines up with that image in order to shut up my agent, and get the roles I want. Being a bad boy is easy to maintain,

because people do half of it for me. They're always looking for the bad side and that's something that is hard to screw up." He pushed a hand through his hair. "Or at least it was before I met you." He flashed her a crooked smile. "Being this good guy you want, it's difficult, Hailey. That's going to bring criticism I can't handle. I'm not perfect, and the image you want to present to the world is one I can't maintain. I'm not that guy. I'm human."

She sagged, knowing she couldn't convince him to see her side any more than he could convince her to see his. "Finian, can you go wait in the house? I need to think."

Unable to breathe properly, she placed a hand on his chest, and despite the pain inside, she pushed him out of her studio, locking the door behind him.



RIGHT. She'd just locked the object of her affections out of her studio.

She sagged against the door, needing its support. She'd found the layers she'd been looking for and that had scared her. She'd had no idea he had all those obligations and commitments and was helping so many people. It made her own problems look insignificant. So what if she lost a piece of land? He was saving *people*.

But why couldn't he see his false image wasn't doing him any favors? That it would cripple him further down the career line and that it would eat away his soul? She'd tried the whole commercial thing and it had hurt her like she'd been swimming through shards of steel.

How could anyone live like that?

How could Finian?

But more importantly, why would he *choose* to live like that when there were other options? It didn't matter what you did with your life,

there was never enough money. So why not do what you loved? If he let the world see who he really was he'd go so much further. So, so much further.

Hailey didn't even know why she cared what he did. It wasn't as though they were in love and were planning to spend the rest of their lives together in Hollywood. That would be a recipe for heartache. She may as well tie her heart to a major highway and wait for a transport truck to smush it. If he wanted money and a bad reputation, then what was it to her? It wasn't her job to show the world that he was a great guy, or convince him that he could make more money by following his heart.

There was silence on the other side of the garage door. Had he given up on their argument that easily?

She blinked back tears and sat at her computer, staring at the folder of images she'd taken of him being the man she and her sisters had always dreamed of. Someone kind and caring. Sexy. She clicked through sweet images of him with Tigger, the turtles, with fans. With him dappled in sunshine. A handsome, intelligent man with more depth than he cared to show. The world needed to see this side of Finian. The world would *love* this man. She couldn't keep him to herself--and not when she knew it could help him achieve his dreams.

Determined, she selected ten photos and uploaded them to her agent, along with intriguing captions, creating a story of the Finian she knew. It wasn't enough to ruin his current persona, but it was enough to show Finian what she had in mind for an image makeover. He might never forgive her, but he also might be thanking her for the next sixty years.

Her hands shook as she moved to her worktable. She looked at the stack of framed photos for her show. Finian was right; she was a hypocrite. She was hiding behind the commercial photos, instead of selecting the more arty ones. The ones where she'd followed her heart.

She glanced at the closed door, then carefully tucked away the original stack of photos before framing the others, one by one.

If Finian only knew the risk she was taking by choosing artistic photos.

But it was her reputation. It mattered more than money, didn't it?

And if she was right about following one's heart, then everything would turn out okay.

She shook her head and smiled. She and Finian were so much alike and yet so different.

There was a knock on her door and her heart sped up. *Finian*. She glanced at her computer and draped the dust cover over it as though it would profess her guilt if he saw it exposed.

Slowly she unlocked the door and peered out into the midday sun.

Finian pressed her palm against his lips, kissing it. "I'm sorry you can't rebuild me the way you want to. It's not you, it's Hollywood."

"I know ."

"I don't want you to be mad at me."

She cocked her head. "But wouldn't that be good for the image and all that?"

"You know me better than that."

She drew a line down his chest with her finger. He moved closer, siphoning the air from between them as he tipped up her chin. "What do you see?"

She stared into his eyes, absorbing their intensity. "I see someone who wants to be larger than life and who will be quoted in fifty years. Someone who makes a difference. I also see a wonderful man denying his true side. You know the world would love the real Finian as much as I do."

"You love me?" He shot her one of his sexiest grins.

"You know what I mean." She slipped out of his grip, retreating as she gave him a sassy glance over her shoulder. "Women like me don't go for men like you. We like men with five-year plans."

"I have a five-year plan. It involves being bad to the bone." He grabbed her elbow, pulling her to him so he could shimmy his hips against hers. "Besides, you keep telling me I'm not bad."

"I was wrong. You're a bad, bad boy." She pushed him away, unable to stay mad at him. He was like a big balloon full of life and joy.

So entirely likable.

Finian released her, his face suddenly serious as he fell into her old armchair. He heaved a sigh laced with exhaustion and frustration. "I don't know what to do, Hailey, but I can't be that Renaissance man you want. Not yet." He cleared his throat, jaw tight. "Are we still working together? Because if we are, I need to set some boundaries and I need to have the final say on my image."

She shifted her gaze away. She'd already broken that rule.

"There are some things I am willing to do with my image--a lot, in fact--but there are some things that would destroy me within a week."

She knelt in front of the chair, clutching his face. "I want to leave a mark on your life, Finian. A marker you can go back to and say, That was where my life changed, and it was all because of Hailey Summer'."

"Trust me, there will be a mark, Hails." He pulled her into his lap, kissing her temple.

"If I'm going to work with you there needs to be a certain artistic element. If not, then you have to pay me more, and I have to remain anonymous."

"Okay."

"I want to work with you, Finian. You energize me in ways I can't figure out. But I can't be selling this whole bad-boy side and shooting

tabloid photos unless there is a spin to it that allows me to use my artistic, creative side."

"Fine. We'll figure that out shot by shot."

She pressed a hand against his chest. "Do you trust me?"

He gave a light laugh. "Not especially. You tend to slap me a lot."

She shook her head and smiled. "I know your audience, Finian. They are people like me and they are ready for real. They crave it."

"*Do* you crave it, Hailey?" He pushed her off his lap so he could stand. "Because it seems to me that you get enough real life. You need the lighter side. The joy and frivolity."

"I'm I'm getting better at it."

"Because that's what Finian Alexander provides--a break from the mundane for two hours or less. Nothing more. It's all I am. And it's what people need." He clutched her chin, his voice softening. "Even you."

"You also provide hope, Finian. Hope for a better world, a better future. Letting out your real side can only add to that. When you are real is when I like you the most, and let go of all my burdens."

His eyes softened with affection and pride.

"But, Hails, is that what you're doing with your show? Creating hope? Leaving your indelible mark on the world? Letting your artistic side out to play?"

"As a matter of fact, yes. Thanks to you, I'm scrapping the commercial images and I'm going to hang the more artistic ones. The ones I *feel*. I'm choosing art even if it means breaking my sisters' hearts and taking a big financial risk. You taught me that."

"I'm pretty sure I didn't."

"I have to be true to myself and I can't keep hiding behind what works. You might not be there yet, but I am." She pulled him into her arms, kissed his lips. "As much as that surprises me, we aren't that

different. We're just making different choices and taking different paths. You'll see what I mean." She tugged him toward the door. "Come on. I want to share something with you."



FINN MOVED WITH AN INTENSE FOCUS, his actions purposeful. Hailey's photos were amazing. She'd taken every one of the most stellar shots from the pile of incredible pictures in her studio and framed them. There wasn't a single commercial shot like he'd expected. He still didn't understand what she'd meant about breaking her sisters' hearts, but he understood having to make decisions that sometimes went against what family members thought was for the better good.

Here in Simone's two-story boutique, he had ended up pushing Hailey aside, a map popping into his mind of where each photo should be hung. Getting to work with her images was a privilege, and it stirred up his creative side as he imagined himself as an artistic director as he moved around the old converted house.

This was his role, and he was getting deeper into the zone and hanging pictures faster than Hailey could prep them.

He could see the whole story laid out in her images. The conflict here in the entry hitting people as soon as they came in, the resolution finalized on the top floor. He was breathing shallowly, finding the excitement of creating with her work invigorating.

Hailey had left to find more hooks, and he could hear hurried chatter and giggling in one of the side rooms. He smiled and switched two photos. Hailey's friend Simone, the store's owner, had been staying out of the way, plying them with coffee from a small pot in her office, and running ideas by Hailey.

The energy was contagious and consuming. Fun.

Finn slipped into the entry to grab an armload of images for one of the smaller rooms, and heard Simone shush Hailey. "I can't believe you slept with him," she said in a whisper that carried through the empty building.

"More than once, I might add," Finn called. He glanced around the corner to where Hailey was flushed clear from her sandaled toes to her forehead. She smiled shyly, in a way that warmed him. He wanted more. More of everything he probably could never have.

He ducked back into the hall and leaned against the first available wall. What was this woman doing to him? He couldn't do this with her. Not now.

He lifted the framed photo in his hands. It was of him.

His breathing hitched as if he had taken a fatal blow, and he sagged to the floor. He couldn't be the man she wanted. Needed. Deserved. He wasn't this guy she'd captured in black-and-white.

Still on his butt, he leaned around the door frame, intending to call out to Hailey, but changed his mind. The two women had their backs to him, studying a photo he'd hung only moments ago.

He held the picture of himself in his hands and swallowed. This framed man was the guy he wanted to be. How had she captured him? Revealed him? Seen him? And why was his image here with her nature photos?

He hugged the picture, then, kneeling, flipped through the others waiting to be hung. The rest were all nature related, and ones he had seen earlier. Where had this shot of him come from?

Turning, he moved quietly into the room where the women were tacking tags beside each photo, with the title, artist, and price.

"When does he go home?" Simone asked quietly.

Hailey shrugged. "It doesn't matter."

"I don't believe you."

"It's just a fling. It doesn't mean anything."

Simone made a derisive sound and Hailey turned with a handful of tags and sticky tack, her face pale. Finn ducked behind a rack of dresses before she could see him, listening to her move around the room, hating the fact that she thought of him as a fling.

But that's all it could ever be, right? They lived in two different worlds and he would soon return to Hollywood, leaving her behind. He had to. Besides, it wasn't as though she was going to move away from her family for some movie star who wasn't even close to her type. And it didn't matter that she saw him for who he really was, she kept thinking of him as the celebrity with the shoddy image she needed to change. And when he returned to Hollywood all she'd see was the side of him that he could safely reveal to the world.

"You seem pretty sweet on him," Simone said.

"He's a great guy. Too bad he's a movie star."

The women laughed.

"I could swear I was listening to Snap," Simone said. "Hey, speaking of Maya and your sisters, how's the cottage thing going?"

"I rented it out."

"They went for it?"

"Anything for the cottage, right? And--"

"Hey," Finn said, pretending he'd just entered the room. He placed a light kiss on Hailey's cheek and gave her shoulders a squeeze. "The show looks great."

"Thanks to you." Hailey moved to study at a row of photos to the left of the dresses he'd been hiding behind, the old floorboards creaking as she walked. "I love how you paired images. Some seem to work together based on their texture, or filter. Some even fight with their neighbor. You know, elbowing each other out of the way so they can gain more attention. But there's something else I can't quite figure out."

She gave him a look that resembled admiration. *That* was what he was missing from her. *That* was what he wanted. Every day from now until the end of time. He pulled her into his arms as Simone left to answer the phone ringing in her office.

"It's a story, Hailey."

She quirked her head, her lips twisted into a puzzled shape that made him want to kiss them back into a smile.

"A love story."

She glanced at the images from the corner of her eye. "But the subject matter "

"You'll see it. Start in the shoe room. It begins with a quiet spring, then builds to a climax before the resolution on the top floor. It's perfect."

She went to move out of his arms.

"Look later." He bent to kiss her on the lips, pulling her closer and closer until her breathing turned heavy with need. Need for him. He broke the kiss and smiled. "Thank you, Hailey. Thank you for letting me be a part of your life."

"So, there *is* more to you than fistfights and explosions?" she teased.

"Only on Fridays."

"Friday? What time is it?"

"Two."

She slipped her arms around his neck, drawing him closer. "Excellent. Lots of time." Her lips were tantalizingly close and he could smell her raspberry lip gloss, wanting to taste it. "Because I think you deserve a reward for helping me find my way with my art, as well as helping destiny."

"I think I have time for that." He slipped out of her grip after pasting a big kiss on her lips. "Let's get out of here."



FINN HUSTLED out of Hailey's car, laughing at how she'd nicknamed him Arty. He had no idea why that made him laugh. It wasn't a great nickname and it likely meant they were going to have another fight about him following his real side, but he loved how Hailey was smiling, and how that made him smile in return.

Hanging out with her felt so right. He'd gotten to the point where he couldn't stop touching her--and didn't want to. It was becoming difficult to imagine his life back in Hollywood, especially without Hailey.

He pulled her toward his little cottage with the wooden sunflower cutouts, and she laughed, dragging her feet, all smiles. "What's the big hurry, Arty?"

He growled like a primal beast and slung her over his shoulder as she laughed and pretended she wanted to get away. "I've been promised a reward for hanging your show with artistic flair, before showing up at the opening tonight as the artist's arm candy. It's time to pay up, sugar toes." He gave her a light slap on the butt and leaped up the steps to his cottage. "I'm going to make you enjoy living."

"You always do," she giggled.

Invigorated by letting his artistic side loose over at Simone's, he banged open the cottage door, unable to believe it had only been three days since she'd slapped him for coming on to her like a big pompous you-know-what. And only two days since they'd been hunkered over a rare turtle like a couple of school kids.

A couple.

He laughed to himself. Like that would ever work. She was getting under his skin in ways he'd never thought possible.

He dropped Hailey on her feet and slipped his hands under her shirt, his lips making their way down her bare throat. She let out a purr of contentment, her hands reaching for his belt.

Oh, things were about to get good.

He began shuffling her backward toward the bedroom when a familiar perfume, heady, overdone, and expensive--he should know, he'd bought it--froze him in place.

"Well, isn't this just too cute for words," cooed a female voice.

Hailey pulled away so fast she struck his chin with her head, making him clutch it in pain.

"Finian?" His mother joined his ex-girlfriend.

Jessica crossed her arms over her bust, which was spilling out of her tight tank top as she watched Hailey adjust her T-shirt. "We have things to discuss."

"Oh!" Finn's father just about ran over Jessica as he came hurrying in to see what the commotion was about. "Well, this is awkward."

Jessica tugged Finn's arm, her rings digging into his flesh. "I need to speak with you."

Finn's mother pulled Hailey into the kitchen, chatting softly. Finn extracted himself from Jessica and followed them.

"We need to talk about our relationship," Jessica called, dogging his steps.

"We have no relationship. I'm seeing Hailey."

Hailey grew taller, a smile lighting her face, and he stepped to her side to wrap an arm around her shoulder, planting a kiss on her forehead.

"Yeah, that's kind of a problem." Jessica slapped a tabloid on the table. "Because according to the papers you're two-timing me."

"Well, that does fit with his reputation," Hailey replied, and Finn let out a laugh, giving her a squeeze.

"That's an old photo." He glanced at the caption Kissed and Made Up.

"This is what the public wants." Jessica slapped another tabloid down. Back Together? And another old photo. She dropped another

tabloid onto the growing stack. Exclusive Insider on the Girl Who Broke Up Hollywood's Favorite Couple.

He glanced at Hailey, who was reading the paper with red cheeks.

"Hailey." He reached for her, but she stepped away. She wouldn't meet his eyes. "Did you talk to someone?" He looked back to the tabloid, flipping it open.

"No."

"Of course you didn't, because there is no you and him." Jessica gave Hailey a condescending look. "Daisy, can you take this girl out for coffee or something? Finn and I need to have an emergency meeting in regards to his image, as well as this latest *development*." She bored her eyes into Hailey on the last word, gazing straight down her surgically upturned nose.

"I think I'll go for coffee, too," Finn said.

"We need to address this, Finn. Now."

Something inside him grew taut to the point of breaking. "No." He stepped closer to Jessica. "I'm tired of these games. We were never real."

She let out a throaty laugh. "What does any of that matter? This is business, Finn, not *love*."

"How did I ever think you were some sort of a reward or prize?"

"Maybe we should let them talk business," his mother whispered to Hailey.

Hailey stepped toward the door, the crease between her eyebrows deepening. "Actually, I need to meet someone, so I should get going. Thank you, anyway."

Finn caught her on the porch, ignoring the paparazzo angling for a better shot on the path between the small cottages. "I'm sorry. I didn't know she was coming. I don't want her back. I didn't ask her to come."

"Finn, it doesn't matter."

He caught Hailey's hand in his, feeling as though he was losing the one thing he'd always wished for. "It does to me."

Hailey stood on the dock and waited for the Walkers, her cottage renters, to return from their stay on Nymph Island. They were supposed to meet her forty minutes ago, and without her boat she couldn't run out to the cottage to check on them. Where were they? Had she got the time wrong? Had they decided to stay an extra day and she didn't get the message?

She checked her phone for messages again and tried their cell number.

Nothing. No answer.

Today didn't seem to want to go her way, and she no longer knew if she was coming or going. And why had Jessica come to Muskoka so suddenly? It was as though the woman knew Hailey was trying to change Finian, and she'd come to his rescue.

Her phone rang and she answered without checking it.

"Hailey, Cedric here. Sold your photos."

She rubbed her forehead. "What photos?"

"The ones of Finian as a good boy up in the woods. You'll have a nice slider on which site was it " She could hear clicking in the background.

If this was what Hailey thought was going to work for Finian, then why did she feel as though she'd just stuck a knife in his back?

"Hmm. I just lost the email. But they're sold and it was decent money. Not great, I mean, it wasn't Finian showcasing his bad-boy side or anything particularly spectacular. But I managed to convince an editor that you had something there, and another side of the Finian Alexander we all know. We'll get some speculation going about him and build it up, and you'll be there on top, right?"

"Right. Of course."

"You okay? You sound kind of funny."

She closed her eyes to stop the world from swaying. She'd betrayed Finian. Gone against her word. Sold out both of them. And for what? To prove to him that she thought she knew best? She was no better than all the righteous people telling her to take the commercial route and skip making art.

She looked up at the sky, but the moving clouds made her dizzy and she had to close her eyes again. Finian would be back in Hollywood in a flash now that Jessica had come to claim him. He couldn't ignore his career nor his image. Those things always came first.

Pushing past the tightness in her chest, she told Cedric she was fine, and ended the call.

She stood there, struggling to shut off her mind, and the image of Finian drowning in Jessica's presence, as the boat, with the Walkers in it, finally came into view--being towed by one of the Duke's Marina guys. She held the towboat off the dock, biting her lip so she wouldn't show how upset she was as the driver filled her in. "Prop fell off. Want me to bring it in and send you an estimate?"

"Fell off?"

"Yup. Looks that way. Not sure what happened, but they said they lost momentum and a quick glance tells me the propeller's gone."

Hailey sighed. "Okay, take it in."

"They've already offered to pay for the damage."

"It's an old boat, I doubt it was their fault."

In the grand scheme of things a prop wasn't so bad, and it could be fixed and paid for before her sisters even noticed. She scooped up the line and shoved the towboat away from the dock. Then she hauled on the wet rope, bringing the broken Boston Whaler closer so she could help the Walkers unload.

Once she had them on shore, she pushed her boat off from the dock, letting it be towed away.

"I am so sorry, Hailey." Jenni came forward, looking immaculate in a well-fitted dress. "We'll pay to get it fixed."

Her son held up a purple shell, white on the inside. "Look what we found."

Hailey nodded to the boy, and said to Jenni, "No, I'm sorry. The boat's old and I doubt it was anything you did. I'm sorry you had to deal with it."

The women watched each other for a moment, then Jenni said, "You have a real gem there. So much space. I want to run home and write a story about this. And I love how your antique wicker matched. What a find."

"It's original."

Her husband began herding his wife toward the rental car where he'd already stowed the luggage he'd hauled from the dock to the car. "Time to go, Jenni."

"Oh, let's stop for coffee on the way," she said, hurrying to catch up. She turned back to wave at Hailey as she gathered her daughters and son. "Thanks again!"

"Hope you had fun!" Hailey waved back, turning as someone behind her called, "Hailey! You're here!"

She froze as her sisters and niece came down the slope to the docks, picnic baskets in hand. Her eyes cut to the retreating family.

"We figured since the fumigation was done we could have our much-delayed Canada Day picnic on Nymph Island." Daphne waved a basket.

"Fumigation?" Jenni gasped as she hurried by with a forgotten bag.

Hailey turned. "No, it's okay. My sister is talking about somewhere else."

"What?" Daphne stopped a few feet away, her cotton dress flapping in the breeze, as she stared at the family climbing into the packed car.

"Never mind. I'll explain later," Hailey said.

"Where's the boat?" Melanie looked from the family to Hailey and back again.

"Can you give me a minute?" Hailey sucked a breath through her nose, dug her fingers into her hips, wishing she could run away.

Mr. Walker hurried up and handed her a check. "I can't believe I forgot to pay you! Our mailing address is on the check--please send us the bill for the boat if we broke it." He patted Hailey's hand before she could brush away the offer. "Although, since my wife doesn't fly, we'll be taking a cruise back to the U.K. If you don't hear from us immediately, it's because we're lost at sea."

"Okay. Thank you." Hailey folded the check and tucked it into the pocket of her shorts. She turned back to her sisters, who were standing agape.

Wordlessly, Hailey pointed to a nearby maple and her sisters and niece joined her under its spreading branches. Their attention flicked between the packing family and Hailey.

"I rented out the cottage. That family was there for the past few days."

Hailey's three sisters all focused on her, their blue eyes wide.

"Is that why we couldn't go out there?" Daphne asked, waving Tigger to come back from the water.

"You rented it without asking us? I thought we were in this together," Maya said, crossing her arms.

"It's in trust in my name," Hailey replied.

"For all of us, Hailey. I think renting it out is a group decision," Daphne said.

"Do we still get to have our picnic?" Tigger asked, swishing the skirt of her yellow dress.

"Yes!" Daphne replied.

"No," Hailey said.

"Did you rent it out again?" Maya asked. "I hope you're charging enough. You know " She tapped her chin in thought. "This might be a good plan. We could fix up a few things with the income."

"No, I haven't rented it out," Hailey said, before Maya got too far off into her business world. "And the boat crapped out on them. Duke's guy just took it away to replace the prop--sounds like it fell off. So we're not going out to the island."

"What?" Daphne stared at the empty boat slip as though it would tell her the full story.

"Did you get additional insurance before renting?" Melanie asked. "I don't think our regular home owners' policy covers this."

"The insurance was canceled years ago," Hailey replied quietly, "and I'm pretty sure the prop fell off because the boat is old, not because of anything they did."

"Why was the insurance canceled?" Melanie asked.

"It wouldn't cover the cottage's old wiring without a major increase in our premiums."

"Did you shop around? You know there are some places--"

"Maya, not now, okay? I made the decision years ago. We couldn't afford it, trust me."

"Why didn't you talk to us, though?"

"You were in school. And it was outrageously expensive, Maya. It was the same year our taxes went up by almost 30 percent."

"What?" They all stared at Hailey.

"But you haven't charged us that much more for our portion of the taxes," Melanie said slowly.

"Why did you rent the cottage out?" Daphne asked, her attention focused, again, on the empty slip.

"We need the money."

"I thought everything was fine," Maya said. "Why didn't you say something?"

"Well, it isn't fine, and it hasn't been for a really long time," Hailey snapped. The last thing she needed was her sisters telling her how she should have done things.

"Whoa!" Daphne stepped between Hailey and Maya. "You love each other. Peace and harmony."

"Shut up, Daphne," Maya said, sharing a look with Hailey.

"So, why do we need the money?" Melanie asked.

"Because if we don't pay years of back taxes the island will be seized for a tax sale on August 30."

The sisters gasped, sharing looks of disbelief.

"I'm sorry." Hailey let out a sigh, her shoulders drooping. "Mom didn't want you to know that we were behind on our taxes when she passed the deed over to me, and I thought I could cover it, but I--I couldn't. She wanted you to be able to live your lives without the burden of this money pit changing the course of your destiny. She wanted you to follow your dreams and not be held back by the cottage. She didn't want it to own you."

"Why didn't you tell us?" Maya asked. Hailey lowered her gaze and her sister threw her hands in the air. "Did you ever consider asking if we could help?"

"I'm sorry." Hailey looked up. She thought of the paychecks that would be coming in because of Finian. But even they wouldn't be enough. She couldn't pull it together in time. The cottage was going to have to go up for sale. "I'm sorry I let you down."

Daphne, tears in her eyes, pulled her into a hug. "I'm sure you did your best."

When the two finally parted, Maya was sitting by the shore, hugging her knees to her chest.

"What did you do with our money?" Daphne asked.

"I paid the taxes, but we started out behind, and just kept falling further and further back no matter what I tried."

Tears streaked down Daphne's face and Melanie gave her a hug. Daphne said, her voice wobbling, "I guess we'd better find a way to say goodbye to Trixie Hollow."



HAILEY SNIFFED BACK the tears and drove around her house twice before giving up on the paparazzi milling about in front of her house, and driving right up onto the lawn and into her backyard, as she had with Finian. Her car left pale tracks across the grass, she noted, as she dragged her tired body to her house.

All she wanted to do was sleep, but she had the opening for her show tonight. She stared at herself in the mirror of her en suite bathroom. She didn't know who she'd become. She'd kept secrets from her family, had lied to her sisters for years, then betrayed the man she'd taken to bed, and broken her promises.

Who had she become in her quest to be an artist?

Sighing, she checked her phone as she poured herself a glass of white wine. No text from Finian. Did that mean his ex was back in his bed? That the website had already posted her photos that betrayed Finian's wishes, and he was done with her? Or was he blindly getting ready to come to her opening, happy at how she'd taken his new image into her hands?

She slipped into a black wrap dress that barely grazed her knees, and pulled on her nicest sling backs. Pretty good for a local artist. She smoothed her hair into a French twist, spritzing it with hair spray, trying not to think about Finian. She swallowed against the lump of need in her throat, and braced herself against the vanity. Why hadn't she listened to him? Why had she sold those photos?

The need to be wanted, desired, kept and protected ate at her. She'd thrown any chance she'd had away. To be understood. To be loved, however fleetingly.

Hailey smoothed the last strands of hair and mentally moved through her show, thinking of the things she would say to potential buyers. Her mind stilled, picking up the threads of the story Finian had created. It almost felt as though he'd recreated *Beauty and the Beast*. How could that be? A young woman in love. Forced to make a choice. But how had he done that with her nature photos?

Was she projecting her desires?

It's a story, Hailey. A love story.

Her mind raced through the images. Deer. Beautiful and ugly. Destroyed forests. Blooming flowers. Ladybugs after the long winter. And in the end, on the top floor, the beast turned into a beautiful prince.

Finian.

The man she hardly dared believe existed was real.

She stared at herself in the mirror. How could she make Finian and her sisters understand that everything she'd done was for them? It was for them. Her art was her chance to change the world. Their world.



FINN NUDGED a photographer away from Jessica and ushered her into the restaurant he'd been in less than twenty-four hours ago with Hailey. It felt like a week. His phone buzzed with a text and he ignored it. He'd had so many unsolicited calls and texts in the past four hours he was going to have to change his number again.

How had Jessica unleashed the hounds so fast? Did the paparazzi all have private jets, so they could be here in an instant? Sea planes that could land outside his little cottage? Actually, if they were anything like that schmuck Austin, then yeah, they probably did. Finn also guessed that Jessica was likely in cahoots with at least half of them, which would explain why their "back together again" stories had spread so fast and why his little corner of Muskoka was crawling with paparazzi.

This had to be some big cook-up between Jessica and their shared agent. Finn could smell it wafting over him, cloying like the smell of garlic and butter in this place. How had he ever let them gain control of his life? His reputation? His world?

Oh yes, because he needed the money and fame.

Last night's waitress greeted them with a smile. "Finian Alexander, you bad boy. Someone new and beautiful every night." She cast an assessing look at Jessica who gave her a smile that would befit a corpse, it was so cold and lifeless.

The waitress sashayed to the same table he'd shared with Hailey.

"I've been saving it for you," she said, leaning close so Finn could ogle her cleavage while he seated himself. He made a point of looking

away, of letting her know he wasn't interested. The large window to his right overlooked the sun setting on water. Beautiful.

Unfortunately, the view was instantly blocked by a flock of buzzing paparazzi. Finn lurched back in his seat, afraid the way they were banging against the glass as they jockeyed for the best position would break the window, showering him in shards.

"Scotch on the rocks, like last night?" the waitress purred. She flicked her eyes at Jessica.

"Both of us," she answered.

The waitress turned her attention to Finn, her head cocked as if to say, *You okay with her speaking for you?*

"Yeah, sure. Whatever." Why bother wasting energy fighting over a stupid drink? They didn't care who he really was or what he really wanted.

The waitress sashayed back to the bar.

"You seem upset," Jessica said, smoothing a linen napkin over her lap. She held her back straight, the epitome of elegance with her sleek build and well-threaded outfit. Yes, she was what everyone wanted to look at across the table.

Except for Finn.

He laughed as he remembered how only a few days ago he'd thought not being attracted to Jessica had meant there was something wrong with him.

He flicked his napkin out with a snap and laid it across his lap, ignoring her. He briefly closed his eyes, willing his face to be void of any emotion. The past few days with Hailey had been like another life. A life he'd enjoyed immensely.

And he'd probably ruined any chance of keeping it by choosing a career that would make him money, but could never resemble anything

close to reality. How did you mesh the fake life with a real one? A real woman?

The timing was all wrong.

"My, my. You got used to not having this." Jessica tipped an eyebrow toward the crowded window.

"Why are you here?"

"In case you haven't noticed, you're floundering. You've hit the 'just about made it' wall that holds so many back from becoming A-list. I'm here to help you through to the other side. To drive it home." She flicked a smile at the window and rested a hand over his, where it rested by his cutlery. "And to mend your poor broken heart." She flashed him a smile that had, once upon a time, turned him on.

Fighting the urge to whip his hand out from under hers, he leaned forward, smiled as if he cared, and said, "Dream on, Jessica."

He pulled his hand back as he grabbed his phone. He pretended to show her a few photos, as if bringing her up-to-date on his little vacation, buying for time as the flashes went off on the other side of the window. No more of this touchy-feely crap. They'd come here to talk business, not give the media a story. He'd been so out of it after Hailey had left that he hadn't even thought about paparazzi as Jessica hauled him away from his parents.

All he was thinking was that the sooner he heard Jessica out, the sooner she'd leave him alone. The problem was, his ex had a point. With Hailey he'd come much too close to giving in to the urge to be some amazing male version of Angelina Jolie--that woman had a good PR person.

Jessica knew what he needed. Hailey knew what he wanted. And those were two very different things.

Jessica's eyes assessed him like the businesswoman she was. Monetizing him. And while he thought this should bring him relief, in

fact, right now it made him want to punch the air and fight her ideas to the death. When Hailey had looked at him, even when she was behind her camera, he'd felt safe, understood, *seen*.

But this wasn't about who he was. It was about money. Fame.

Nothing real.

Nothing like Hailey.

The waitress placed their drinks on the table. "Tonight we have a really lovely--"

"That's fine, thank you." Jessica waved her away.

Finn fought the urge to apologize to the server, who looked hurt. Canada was getting to him.

"Do you have it in you to make the A-list push?"

Finn gave a slight nod, leaning back to sip his awful drink. "Not just a visit, Jessica, but a long-term stay."

"You've had a taste of the good and bad now, and maybe you want to change your mind?"

"You know what I want."

The waitress, who was walking by with a tray of drinks, met his eye, and he gave her a wink. She just about dumped its contents on him as she wobbled. "I'm sorry," she mumbled, blushing like crazy as she carried on.

His game was still on, but all he could think of was the hurt look in Hailey's eyes when she'd left him at his cottage hours ago. He checked his phone for a text from her and got tired of wading through the incessant stream of texts from people he'd never get around to blocking. Definitely time to ditch the number.

"Do you have a burn phone?" he asked Jessica. He waved his hand. "Never mind. You're probably the one who gave out this number, anyway."

"You were ignoring my calls."

Carefully, he unclenched his hand from around the glass of scotch.

"So?" Jessica asked. "What do you want? Other than to have that waitress come by and rape you with her eyes again."

"Jessica..."

"She was undressing you. Why do you think she came undone? You're such a *bad boy*." Jessica's voice had turned to a low, promiscuous growl full of promise that would make most men run to the washroom in search of condoms. "*So*, what do you want?" She waggled her eyebrows suggestively.

Finn angled a shoulder to block the sight of the cameras to his right. "I want to be like Julia Roberts."

Jessica tossed her head back, her perfect hair bouncing as she let out a loud trill of laughter, her fingers lightly touching her throat. She leaned forward, the smile still on her face. "Hon," she said, her voice serious, "I hate to break it to you, but you're no Julia Roberts. That girl put in her time. She stayed focused on her goal and worked her fingers off while protecting her girl-next-door image. That woman knew who she was at all times--cute and fun with a giant laugh. Easy to love. Whereas you are a bad boy. One who is suddenly a Boy Scout with a degree in art who saves turtles that are uglier than Christopher Walken."

"It's not a degree." Finn forced himself to lay his hands flat on the table. "It's a minor in film studies."

"You're not big enough, Finn. Not solid enough to be *yourself*. Or for that matter, to shun big stars from being in your life. There's no room for a real life."

"Julia married the grip, had a family, lives a quiet life. Her life is real *and* she's A-list. That's what I'm talking about."

"You are not marrying the grip." Jessica grabbed his hand, her nails digging into his skin. "You haven't put in the time. Your audience isn't going to follow this sudden move. This is a departure from who you've

been, and they're going to be confused. It would be like Coca-Cola suddenly going on an antisugar campaign."

"It's hardly the same."

"You can't marry the paparazzo. She's a nothing. A nobody."

"Why not? You sleep with them."

Jessica sucked in a breath, her eyes flashing. "Being in bed with someone from a business perspective is a lot different than setting up house."

"Since when does the world get to decide how I live my life?"

"Since the moment you stepped into the limelight and other people's income depend upon what you do there."

Finn closed his eyes and let the scotch burn a path down his throat, before waving for a second drink.

The waitress brought him another, shooting a worried glance at Jessica. Yeah, she had a right to be worried. Jessica chewed up the world and regurgitated it for lunch.

A new round of flashes snapped off beside him as he started his second drink. The paparazzi. He was ready to throw a table through the window to make them go just away for once.

"Live your real life in the background," Jessica said. She stroked the top of his free hand, which clenched under her grip. "Once you are solidly A-list."

"And when will that be?"

"Right around the time you ask me back," she said with a sly smile.

"That would be rather awkward. You and me and Hailey all living together in my little house. You following us around, trying to interfere and make room for yourself."

Jessica laughed. "You really think she's following you back to Hollywood?"

"You and I don't belong together, Jessica."

"Oh, I think we do."

"Give me one solid reason."

"Demi Moore and Ashton Kutcher."

"That's not a reason."

"Why do you think they brought Tom Selleck in to date Monica on *Friends*? The same reason Derek set us up together. We're infusing classic star and new man on the block. It boosts us both. You know, place the known with the lesser known. Cross-pollinate audiences." She cooed and patted his hand. "Sorry, baby. Am I hurting your pride?"

"No," he said, his voice hard. "Please continue."

"I breathe legitimacy into your stardom by being with you. And you breathe new energy into mine." She stood, ditching her napkin as she swiftly grabbed his face and planted a long, soulful kiss on his lips.

Hailey was going to be really, really mad when she saw this in the papers.

"And you and that girl?" Jessica said, his face in her grip. "It'll never last. You don't live in the same world, let alone the same country."



FINN SHOVED Jessica through the throng of paparazzi and into a waiting limo, and was struck again by how different his world was when she was in it.

The way she arranged limos and paparazzi. Jessica was always working. Always building the image. Whereas he'd come here to hide out and try to be human. Because really, when it came right down to it, that was the big difference between them, and why he couldn't live a true Hollywood life.

"I'm never going to be A-list, am I?"

The flashes from the paparazzi died off as the car pulled away from the restaurant, and he blinked away the white spots in his vision.

Jessica continued looking out the window, adjusting her neckline. "Lot of rocks here, aren't there? And not a palm tree in sight."

Finn pushed into the seat cushions. "Maybe I need to make it public that I'm the benefactor behind my community charities."

"Why would you do that?"

"Why not?"

"This is because of that girl, isn't it?"

"Who? Hailey?"

"She's going to destroy you and all you've worked for."

Finn thought of all the things Hailey had changed within him over the past few days. He'd come here hoping to fix himself, and she'd taken one look at him, slapped him, and in the process somehow started to turn him around. Got his head put on straight, and pointed him in the right direction. Must have been a good slap to be able to do that.

"Maybe I need to tear down this bad-boy image so I can rise again. Stronger. Better. Brighter. New."

"You sound like a sentimental, lovesick fool purring like a friggin' pussycat."

"I'm serious, Jessica. Why can't I change my image? Why can't I somehow leverage my good deeds? Why does it have to remain a secret?"

"Because it will destroy the image that Derek and I have built."

"Exactly."

"What are you getting at, Finn? You signed up for this. You know this has always been a good deal for all of us."

"You've never cared about the real me, Jessica. You don't know me, love me."

"And does *she* love you?"

"It's all about fame and the bottom line with you. I want more."

She squared off. "Are you really doing this sentimental crap? Why can't you be happy with what you have in Hollywood? Why do you think you deserve love on top of it all?"

"I'm getting real, Jessica. Real with myself. My life. With what I want." He called to the driver, "You can let me off here."

"We're in the middle of the woods!" Jessica exclaimed.

"I'd rather ride with the paparazzi. I can be anyone with them."

"They'll have forgotten you by tomorrow if you change tactics!"

"Have a nice life, Jessica."

"Don't ruin your career! I read that you're saving turtles and that is not acceptable! Get back in this car this instant!"

"Jessica, let's face it. You don't really care, and there are about a thousand young men out there who are ready to take my place. Go find one of them to be your new puppy. I'm done." He checked his watch. "In fact, I'm very late for a date with a woman who accepts me for who I am."

The early morning sun shone brightly as Hailey dropped the tabloid onto Simone's coffee table as though it had burned her. She couldn't breathe. She couldn't think.

That that *bastard*.

And the worst part was that she deserved it for betraying him. But this wasn't even a tit-for-tat move. It couldn't be. There hadn't been enough time for him to have seen her photos in *Celeb Dirt!* and retaliated by kissing Jessica at *their* restaurant in Port Carling.

"Where did this come from?" Hailey pointed to the front page photo of Jessica and Finian.

"Austin dropped it off. He said the paparazzi are still all over your lawn, too."

Hailey sagged onto the couch and Simone joined her.

"You can hide out here as long as you'd like."

She nodded, her stupidity burning through her. Hadn't she known he'd do this to her? Hadn't she known she was only a sideline distraction as his summer fling? A way to pass the time until Hollywood wanted him back?

It had felt real because he was an actor. No other reason.

At least she'd also managed to pull a punch with her own photos.

"Is this why he didn't show last night?" Simone asked.

Hailey shrugged, blinking back tears. "I guess so."

"You okay?"

"No."

"What are you going to do?"

Hailey rubbed her eyes and shook her head. "I don't know. List the cottage with a Realtor?"

"No, I mean with Finian."

"Roll over and play dead?" She gave her friend a pitiful look and moaned. "I feel like a complete loser, Simone. I promised myself I'd never fall for a summer man and his games again."

"I know. But he was a movie star." Simone shot her a wicked grin. "You slept with Finian Alexander."

Hailey let out a laugh and shook her head, her eyes tearing up.

"Oh, girlie." Simone gave her a half hug. They sat in silence for a moment. "I don't think you should list the cottage."

"What?" Hailey turned to face her.

"I know. You owe money and could lose everything, but don't you think don't you feel?" Simone raised her hands in question.

"Feel what?"

"That something's going to happen?"

"Could you be a little more specific?"

Simone shrugged, her cheeks flushing. "I don't know. It just seems like with you Summer sisters some miracle appears in the final hour, that's all. Or maybe I'm sentimental and don't want to see the cottage go." She brushed off her jeans as she stood, yawning. "I'm probably just being a romantic. I'm going to go make coffee. Want one?"

Hailey nodded.

A few moments later someone knocked at the front door and Hailey glanced toward the kitchen before getting off the couch to answer it,

hoping the paparazzi hadn't found her.

"I'll get it," she called, as the banging became more insistent. "Wow, don't break down the door!" Hailey wrenched it open to see a wall of paparazzi lurch forward from their spot on the sidewalk, a flurry of shutter clicks blocking out the sound of the tree frogs singing in the adjacent woods. She shielded her face and slammed the door.

The knocking started up again and Hailey peeked through the eyehole, her heart beating furiously. "Um, Simone?" she said, raising her voice to be heard across the main floor.

"Yeah?"

"Are you expecting Jessica Cartmill?"

"I'm guessing she would be here for you."

"Great," Hailey muttered. She opened the door, shielding her face in advance. Reaching out, she pulled Jessica in, who was wearing a typical celebrity-hiding-out getup--large sunglasses and a floppy hat. "What did you bring to my friend's door?"

"A hail storm. That's what they've dubbed it." Jessica lowered her glasses, taking Hailey in from her bare feet, up past her borrowed nightie, to her messy French twist left over from last night.

"Why are you here? How did you find me?" And why wasn't it Finian at the door? "And thanks, by the way, for bringing the paparazzi." She opened the door and yelled, "Get off the begonias!"

Jessica moved into the living room as if she owned it. "We need to talk about Finn."

"No, we don't."

"He thinks he loves you, and he's about to self-destruct because of that small little fact." Jessica sounded begrudging.

Hailey opened her mouth, but so many things came to mind she couldn't figure out which one to choose, so she shut it again.

"Why do you think he loves me?" she asked finally.

"He's trying to sacrifice years of hard work."

Hailey sat on the couch, trying to sort things out. Did that mean Finian saw her point of view in regards to his image? And if so, then had everything she'd felt with him actually been real? She raised a hand to her mouth. Had she just messed it all up by releasing nice-guy photos of him without permission?

No. He'd kissed Jessica last night and hadn't come to her opening as promised.

He was still a schmuck.

"You've seen the side of Finian that his agent and I have been trying to hide for years. And that's a problem."

"It's *his* career," Hailey said, still trying to puzzle things out. "*His* life."

Jessica gave a hard laugh. "Yeah, but it isn't. Okay? Things are getting out of control with the pictures you released to *Celeb Dirt!*--oh, yes, I know it was you. It's pretty obvious, Hailey Summer. And you're destroying him with this. You understand?"

"What do you mean?" She needed to sit down. No, she already was sitting. She needed to lie down.

"It's going viral," Jessica continued. "Everyone is already yammering on about this supposed soft side to Finn."

Hailey wrapped her arms around herself. She'd sold out the one thing that had been great about her summer. And for what? An old building on an island that she was going to lose, anyway.

She closed her eyes. She needed to talk to her sisters, sit on the dock on Nymph Island, figure everything out, and get grounded again.

Standing, she led Jessica to the door, warring with her emotions.

"What do you think is going to happen to Finn's career as an action hero now that everyone thinks he's out here playing house in Canada?" Jessica asked, her voice resentful.

Hailey's cheeks burned and her hands shook. "If it truly mattered to Finian, he'd be here. Not you."

"You don't get it, do you? You don't *get* what it's like to be a celebrity."

"And you don't get what it's like to be real." Hailey turned the doorknob.

Jessica laid a hand on Hailey's and she fought to keep herself from flinging it off.

"You hurt him, Hailey. He needs someone like me to protect him. He's a lost man trying to become a big star, and he's going to be eaten alive. And you know why? Because of you. If he falls, it will be because of you. Because you used him and you broke his trust."

"Don't play me." Hailey yanked her hand out from under Jessica's.

"You don't even know what game we're playing."

"Actually, I do. But it's a game for two and you're the third wheel." She opened the door, the crowd of photographers moving closer like a wall. "Have a nice life, Jessica."



"YOU WHAT?" Finn held his aching head. His ride with the paparazzi the night before had evolved into a long bender. They'd gone searching for Hailey at the opening, but finding everyone had left, they'd moved on to her house, where the lights were out. Then they'd started checking out the local bars, hoping to spot her. Eager to help local businesses, they'd purchased drinks in each establishment and before long, the night had involved him and a few others waterskiing in the dark as they, unsuccessfully, tried to find Nymph Island. It had been a fun way to blow off steam about Jessica, and would probably result in getting his

mug back in the tabloids as a temporary measure while he tried to figure out his life.

However, now Jessica was standing beside his bed, insisting he come and deal with some sort of crisis that sounded a lot like her having chewed out Hailey to no effect.

She thrust a tablet full of “good boy” images at him.

“Aspirin,” he said, trying to focus.

“Taken by your *girlfriend*. She posted them on *Celeb Dirt!* along with some chirpy ‘family man’ captions. Happy?”

He glanced at the images. Definitely taken by Hailey. He groaned and rolled over, tugging the blanket over his head.

What had he missed while passed out?

“What time is it?” he groaned. It felt as if he’d just dragged his carcass to bed.

“Two. In the afternoon.”

He *had* just gotten to bed. An hour and a half ago. He needed sleep. Caffeine. Hailey.

“Go away unless you’re Hails,” he said.

“She’s done with you, Finian. Don’t you understand?” Jessica’s voice was close, as though she was hissing at him through the covers. “She got what she wanted and she’s done. Washed her hands of you and your crap.”

“Am I in the tabloids? For bad-boy stuff?” He hated the way his voice rose in hope, betraying his emotions. His vulnerability.

“Yeah, online. A hazy shot that does you no justice.” Jessica whipped the blankets off him and he groaned as the bright light stabbed his eyes. She thrust the tablet at him again.

He took another glance at the photos. Definitely Hailey. He read the captions and suppressed the urge to hurl.

“I thought this was what you wanted,” Jessica said.

He glanced at the tablet again. The unexpected betrayal hit him again like a punch to the gut. The one person he'd thought he could trust, and she'd taken the version she wanted of him--the one he'd told her to keep quiet--and sold it to the public. She was no different from everyone else.

What a fool he'd been. And he'd even been warned by her old friend Polly at the party in Windermere. *Honey, you just have to watch Hailey. She'll tell you one thing, then do the other.*

"Doesn't anyone want me for me?" he moaned.

"Oh, stop feeling sorry for yourself, and get up so we can fix this."

"There's nothing to fix, and didn't I already break up with you today?"

"That was yesterday, and it's gone viral, Finn."

He pulled a pillow over his face, the soft cotton comforting. Of course it had gone viral.

Wasn't there anyone in the world he could trust, and who would want the best for him and not themselves?

He tugged the tablet over and took a closer assessment of the damage. His stomach churned as he flipped through the images. He looked beautiful. Happy. Real. Content. Successful and confident. Like someone he'd like to be. Someone to be envious of.

But that was his private side--a side he'd shared only because he'd trusted her.

He stood and threw his shoes against the wall, making Jessica jump.

"Why did I even leave the 'hood?"

"Do you want to see a bender photo from last night?"

He glanced at an image Jessica brought up on the tablet. He paused for a better look, his anger still pumping through his veins. "Is that me pretending to eat a spotted turtle?" He swore and swung at the air

before collapsing on the bed, diving his head under a pillow that smelled of Hailey.

Hailey had been right to sell him out. He was a big, fat pompous, self-absorbed, spoiled celebrity who couldn't manage a proper life for longer than approximately five seconds without making it implode.

"The good news is that with all this controversy around you, you should be able to help those charities of yours. The bad news is that this could be the burst of light before your stardom implodes."

"I don't want to think about it."

"I told that woman to back off."

Finn lifted his head, wishing Jessica was a cup of coffee and not his needling ex. "You what?"

"She needed to be warned. She's just some small-town chick who doesn't understand the consequences of messing with your image "

Finn couldn't hear the rest of what Jessica said over the rage of blood roaring through his ears.

He leaped out of bed. "Quit interfering."

"Um helping?" She gave him a valley girl look.

"You're making things worse. Stay away from her and quit meddling in my life. Didn't I already tell you to leave me alone?"

"You're confused, Finian."

"I know, and you're only making it worse. I need to see Hailey."

"You aren't going to have a life if you let her near you. Did you hear they are stopping the development of a very lovely resort and spa because of those old things--and because of you." Jessica folded her arms, eyes narrowed. "Just remember Finian, if you go down, so do I."

"Go home."

Jessica turned on her heel, and with a glare, left the room.

Finn sagged, trying not to think. Trying not to feel.

Being a celebrity sucked.

He tugged the tablet closer and, unable to resist, flicked through the photos again. Ten images of him happy and relaxed. Looking like a family man, with Tigger in one of her fluffy party dresses resting on his hip. One of him smiling at Hailey over a cup of coffee, his hair bed-head messy. One of Hailey smiling over her shoulder at him while he was strapped to her back for parasailing. The amazing shot of him with the turtle in the reeds. One she'd taken in her studio, where she'd caught him just before a laugh. His eyes were lit up with what looked an awful lot like love.

Was he really this man? Could he be this person *and* fulfill his obligations? Could he make a difference with something as innocent as an endangered species? What would happen if he said "amen" to these photos and began a life worth living? A life full of meaning?

He ran his hands through his hair, wishing he had a crystal ball so he could look down the paths presented to him, so he could see where they would take him. And which path would lead him to Hailey. The one where they ended up happily together.

Finn reached for his vibrating phone. *Derek*. He flipped it on its face, wishing he'd lost it in the lake last night.

A few moments later the cottage phone rang, then his mother entered his room.

"Derek is on the phone for you."

"Tell him I'm sleeping."

"He said he needs to talk to you even if you're, uh, indisposed."

"Thanks." Finn took the phone and turned it off.

His mother raised a brow, the *Toronto Sun* dangling from her hand. A familiar face was smiling out from the pages.

"What's that?" he asked, pulling the visual arts section from her grip.

"Hailey." His mother gave him a questioning look. "You missed her opening last night."

"Yeah, I suck, Mom."

"Language, please, Finian."

"Sorry."

One last look from Daisy and she closed the door, leaving him alone with the article.

Finn read the story about Hailey. New York galleries were already abuzz about her show at Simone's. And critics loved how she'd hung a story and not just photographs. It was an unexpected surprise, they said. But the worst was that she'd given him due credit for hanging the show. Him. Finian Alexander. Linked to her artistic statement.

He lowered the paper and pushed the heels of his palms into his eyes. His cell began vibrating again and he knocked it off the bedside table, smashing it underfoot until it cracked and its screen went black.

Swallowing, he tugged on a pair of jeans. He was a fake bad boy who was hiding his artistic side, and she was winning awards and getting big paychecks for revealing that fact to the public.

Never trust a noncelebrity especially when she had a camera. Rule number three. And he'd broken it along with all the rest.

And for what? A girl who didn't love him back.



FINN PAID the man in the cherry-red boat handsomely not only for figuring out where Hailey's Nymph Island was, but also for transporting him there. It had taken him a while to figure out where to find her, but luckily, Muskoka was a helpful place. He cast a glance behind them as they sped across the water, watching the trail of paparazzi following them.

The loud boat tore across the lake, throwing waves as it spun around a sharp, rocky point on a horseshoe-shaped island in order to

slip between the two islands. The driver chose the smaller island, protected by the horseshoe, and cut the engine as he cranked the wheel, swamping an old dock that supported a leaning boathouse.

Hailey. She was basking in the late afternoon sun, drink in hand, along with her three sisters, Tigger, and Simone. They all had their mouths bent in various expressions of distaste due to his arrival. But it was Daphne who flew to her feet, fist raised, as she shouted to the driver. "You harbinger of death! Where did you get your boating license? Canadian Tire?"

"He probably did," the woman beside her quipped. Finn guessed she had to be the sister he hadn't met yet, Melanie. "That's where we took the test."

"There's a law about speed limits, and you are well within thirty meters of shore--sensitive shoreline, in fact!"

"Maybe he needs a measuring tape. Men do tend to have a poor sense of length." Melanie rocked back on her heels, arms crossed.

"Loons nest on this shore, as well as mergansers." Daphne stormed toward them and Finn paused, one foot on the wet dock, one foot still in the boat. "How many nests did you just swamp? How many babies did you just drown in your reckless display of testosterone? How many family lines just came to an end because of your need to show off?" Her eyes filled with tears, and Hailey drew her back into the fold of women.

The driver asked Finn, "You sure you want off here? That one's crazy. I'd say she'd eat you for supper, but I'm pretty sure she's vegan."

"Nah, she's cool." Finn climbed onto the dock and pushed the boat off, hoping he'd be able to get a water taxi to take him back--and quickly, if things didn't go well. He was losing the indignant Hailey-you-used-me speech he'd created in his mind, and was starting to feel as though maybe the women would go after him instead of the other way around.

The boat roared away, swamping the dock with water again. Finn cringed as the women threw the driver icy glares before turning back to him.

Maybe next time he should ask an older gentleman in one of those long, 1920s wooden boats to take him for a ride. That way maybe he'd arrive without his foot rammed down his throat.

"Finian!" Tigger came bounding toward him, leaping into his arms.

He held her up, squinting as if unable to recognize her. "Is that Tigger?" He looked at the lifejacket clipped over her bathing suit, then up at her. "Where's your big dress?"

She giggled and said, "I have a ruffle on my suit. See?"

He placed her back on the dock. "It's a very nice ruffle. Very Tiggeresque." Finn ran a hand through his hair and gave the women a sheepish half smile. "Uh, sorry for my poor arrival."

He looked at the cluster of them, iced drinks in hand. He was crashing a celebration without a ride back. A few boats holding paparazzi drifted past the dock and he felt more uncertain than ever. When he was on shore it had seemed like the thing to do--come out here to shake Hailey's hand and congratulate her on one-upping him. Basically, get a leg up with a passive-aggressive dig designed to make her feel guilty for outing him to the world as someone who had been faking being a celebrity gone bad. And for intentionally ruining him and going against their deal.

"How are you going to get home?" Maya asked, stepping forward.

"Um " He glanced at the sisters. There was something that was off as if he was the one in the wrong, and not only for the way he'd arrived.

He took a step back, almost falling into the water. He caught himself and quickly threw on a role. Confident man in charge, who was supposed to be here.

And action!

"Could I talk to you, Hailey?" He reached through the group of women, pulling her out by the elbow.

Hailey's chest heaved, and her sisters and friend dropped back, eyes narrowed at Finn. He drew Hailey around to the other side of the boathouse and into the cool shade. The dock was worn, soggy in parts, and the walkway was narrow compared to the sunny side. Hailey leaned a shoulder into the green-stained siding and crossed her arms, probably trying to block out the boat filled with paparazzi drifting in the water behind her.

"So?" she asked, her voice low so her words wouldn't carry over the water.

"I think you're officially fired." He had a brief image of him adding, *Fired because I love you*. Then sweeping her into his arms. He shook off the daydream. "I'll have my assistant send you payment. I keep all the photos and retain their copyright."

Hailey bristled. "No."

"They're photos of me."

"I'm the photographer. You didn't ask for copyright. I didn't sign it away."

"I want them."

"You can't have them."

"Wow." He shook his head and let out a huff of air. "You know, I came here to offer you congratulations."

"For what? Surviving being stood up at my show opening? Or for being stupid enough to not foresee you getting back together with your ex as soon as she arrived?"

"Wait. What?"

"I saw the pictures in the tabloids of you kissing, Finian. Everyone did."

He ran a hand down the stubble on his chin. He'd forgotten about Jessica and her unwanted kiss.

"I can explain."

Hailey slapped him hard across the mouth, making his lips sting.

"Son of--! Hailey!"

"You and your two-timing ways aren't wanted here. I don't appreciate being jerked around. Got it?" She crossed her arms again, glaring at him with contempt. "I thought you were real. I thought you were *different*."

She whirled, glaring at the paparazzi shooting images as if they'd never seen something so juicy. "You guys get all that?" She pointed at Finn. "Because I was mistaken. You can ignore all that good-boy, family man, environmentalist stuff I leaked, because it's not true. He's a liar and a snake."

She turned, hands thrust out to push him into the lake. He snatched her by the wrists, and spun, lessening the momentum of her attack.

"Hailey." He pulled her close, making eye contact. "We were good together."

Hailey's head tipped down, her lower lip trembling as she yanked her wrists out of his grip, pushing past him.

He jogged to catch up, snagging her hand, forcing her to turn around. "I'm sorry, Hailey."

"Well, I'm not. I'm glad I know who you are now. Before I fell in love." Her voice choked on the word *love* and his heart tore.

She fled up the dirt path that led to the looming structure on the hill above.

"We're celebrating the cottage!" Tigger said, bouncing in front of him. She tugged his hand, trying to gain his attention. "We had a picnic. Mom says I waited long enough to go swimming again. You can't swim

right after you eat or you die. Did you bring your bathing suit? We have a beach!"

"A beach is nice," he said, his attention on Hailey's retreating form. He placed a hand on Tigger's shoulder, anxious to follow the girl's aunt. "I've gotta catch up with Hails, okay? Hopefully we can talk more later. I bet you're an awesome swimmer."

Tigger gave a reluctant nod and he took that as permission to tear after Hailey. The cottage path rose between towering white pines and stunted maples, arriving at a large green cottage with a white wraparound veranda. He climbed the steps to the veranda, careful where he placed his feet on the sagging boards. This place was ancient and he could almost imagine late-Victorian ladies traipsing along the gray-stained floorboards, parasols over their shoulders, as they vacationed in their summer house, away from the pressing heat of the city.

Hailey, swinging in a hammock in a corner, stopped moving when she noticed him.

"I thought it was real, Hailey. That we were real. How out of touch am I?" He let out a huff that bordered on a bitter laugh. "You played me. Used me for your own reward."

"I did not *play* you." She stood, indignant. She raised the hand that had slapped him, and he touched his still-stinging, swollen lips in response.

"No, you did. When I met you, I thought it would be great if you posted photos of me online--bad-boy stuff." He took a step closer, lowering his voice. "But I trusted you and let you see the real me. I felt as though I could change my life when I was with you, and I couldn't be anyone but my real self. I let down my guard and all the while you were one step ahead." He clapped briefly. "Well played, Hailey, well played."

She stared at her feet, shoulders slumped. "I'm sorry, Finian."

"I hope you enjoy your career, because you just ended mine."

Hailey watched the boat take Finian away as it disappeared around the island as she sank into her Muskoka chair.

She was supposed to be happy today. Her sisters had forgiven her. Her show was doing amazingly well, with almost a third of the inventory already sold. The weight was supposed to be easing off, but instead she felt as though it was getting worse.

A tear trailed into her margarita. She'd been wrong to sell the photos of Finian. How had she ever thought she was in the right and that it would turn out okay? Why had she tried to change him? Didn't she like him for all his flaws and the way he was a contradiction?

The celebration on the dock had turned quiet, and Tigger, fed up with the lack of party atmosphere, had gone to check on her fairy houses.

"So? What was that all about?" Daphne asked.

Hailey shook her head, unable to speak over the lump in her throat.

"Oh, poop." Daphne leaned over and gave her a half hug. "You went and fell in love."

She blinked hard, wishing the tears would stop falling. "No, I didn't."

"That's going to sting for a while," Maya said, topping up Hailey's margarita.

They sat in silence as squirrels scolded each other in the trees overhanging the dock.

"So, let me get this straight." Maya held out her hands as she did when she was trying to sort through things. "You went paparazzi? On your *boyfriend*?"

Daphne made a shushing sound and Simone patted Hailey's hand.

"He was just just a "

"You thought he was going to summer fling you," Daphne said, her mouth in a serious line.

Hailey nodded.

"But he was more than that?" Maya asked. She leaned back in her chair, downing half her frozen drink. She gasped and clutched her head as brain freeze set in. "Was this for the cottage?"

She nodded again.

"Hailey!" Maya sat upright, her chin dropped in horror.

"It wasn't just the cottage, though. I thought I thought "

"She thought," Simone said, "if he saw how he could be a nice guy in the tabloids instead of being the messed up celeb, she could help him rebuild his image and further his career. You know, help him be real."

"But he's totally an obnoxious celebrity?" Daphne asked.

Hailey tipped her head back, watching the stringy clouds drift by overhead. "He's not, though. He's really nice." She let out a sigh. "And I messed up."

"Oh. My. Word." Maya scooted to the edge of her chair, angling toward Hailey. "That viral stuff about him being a good guy and an artist was you?"

She nodded.

Her sister fell back into her chair. "Wow. Remind me to never mess with you."

Mallards drifted by, heads tilted sideways, probably wondering if the women would be good for tossing out a snack.

"Someone must be feeding them. I hope it's not bread. It'll muck up their gizzards," Daphne stated.

"No wonder he's upset," Maya said. "You just redirected his image. Hugely." She shook her head, beaming with pride. "My big sister."

"Except " Hailey let out another massive sigh, longing for Finian and the fun times they'd had together.

"Oh, honey." Maya slipped out of her chair so she could lean over her big sister and give her a hug.

Daphne's attention focused across the water to the next island. "What are they doing over there?"

Melanie leaned forward. "They're knocking down Salty Dog!"

"But it's over a hundred years old," Daphne protested, her face falling as a bulldozer went at the west end of the old cottage across the strait. The women watched in silence as the building caved in with a loud crash and a cloud of dust.

"Good. That place was about to fall over," Maya said, returning to her seat.

"Maya!"

"It's true. The one side was buckling."

"But the heritage," Daphne moaned. "It's gone. They could have fixed it."

"I heard there've been a lot of private sales over there this summer," Melanie said. "Thank goodness the camp for teens is still there, though."

Hailey counted the cottages along the shoreline. As far as she knew, only one was still in the founding family's possession.

Daphne stood. "We have to save it."

"I think it's a little late for that," Maya said, finishing her margarita. "I've got to get back to the mainland soon. Late shift at the Bar 'n Grill and the dealership in the AM." She let out a sigh.

Daphne turned to look up the path to their cottage. "We need to claim this as a heritage site."

"Daph." Maya ran a thumb and index finger over her eyes. "There is nothing culturally significant about our cottage."

"Actually," Melanie said, her eyes lighting up, "if we could prove it held cultural value or interest we could ensure the property stayed as is and reap some tax benefits."

"Does that mean you're keeping it?" Simone squealed in delight.

Maya stood up and clapped her hands. "What do you think the odds are that we can save this place in time?"

Hailey shook her head, sagging into her seat. "Not great."

She'd just sold herself--and her boyfriend--out while trying. She was done.

The only thing she could do was try and appease her guilt by finding Finian and apologizing until he forgave her.



HAILEY PUSHED the borrowed boat faster across the lake, ignoring Melanie's continuing questions about what the rush was. Where would Finian have boated to? Bala? That would be a long ride. Had he rented a car to take him to Port Carling or Windermere before hiring the boat to bring him to the island? Windermere was on the wrong side of the water, making Port Carling the obvious choice. But where would he go once he hit shore? Where would she catch up with him and beg him to forgive her?

She should have listened to him. She should have tried to understand. It was his life, his career, his image. Just because he'd slept with her, it didn't give her the right to interfere. She liked him for who he was, and that should have been enough.

Right now his life dictated that he needed to be a Hollywood star, with all the attitude and ego that entailed. It was like when she used to do portraits and "pretty" photos to pay the bills--before she could shift to full-time art. That's where he was, and she hadn't respected it. She'd been that annoying know-it-all who'd stormed in with her own plan. Her own vision. And ruined everything for him.

After docking the boat, she said goodbye to the others and headed to her car, driving straight to the Sunflower Cottage. Laughing to herself, she pulled over partway there and picked up her phone, dialing Finian's number. How had she forgotten about phones?

Voicemail. She left a quick message, then for good measure, sent him a text that said *I'm sorry. Can we talk?*

She could see a lamp on inside the cottage when she arrived, casting a warm light. The door opened when she knocked, and someone she didn't know frowned out at her. Was she too late? Had Finian checked out already? She turned to scope out the two paparazzi who'd stopped spitting sunflower seeds to focus on her when she'd driven up. They took a few more leisurely photos of her from their spots and she smoothed her unruly hair with a sigh. She needed to start wearing a hat.

At least the good news was that Finian still had to be around.

"Are you Hailey?" asked the man.

"Do you know where Finian is?" Hailey countered, trying not to inhale his spicy aftershave.

"Come inside."

The television flickered in the corner, some celebrity show dishing out gossip, with Finian on screen. Her photos. She stopped and stared. Those were her pictures on screen. The overexcited show host began spouting information she'd given *Celeb Dirt!* about his vacation. And then there were photos of her that must have been taken by Austin. Her and Finian kissing at The Kee. Holding hands out by the marsh. Looking so in love she had to sit on the first available chair.

The clip ended and the man standing beside her asked, "Happy?"

She looked up to see him glaring at her, arms crossed.

"You've destroyed three years of hard work. My hard work. In three days."

Hailey stood. "I'm sorry, you are?"

"I'm his agent, Derek Penn. You've thrown a carefully detailed plan out the window. His career is over. He just lost a role, thanks to you. Now there's a nice little hole in the action world that he used to fill."

Guilt rolled over Hailey in waves. No, wait a second

"You know what? You've obviously done a very poor job." She watched in amusement as his face turn purple. "Because if a girl like me can waltz in with a couple of photos and ruin the image you built up, then I guess well, I guess he needs someone a little better suited to making a brand or image."

"You don't understand the damage you've done."

"Neither do you." She resisted the urge to shove him, angry at the way he'd used Finian. *Her* Finian. "You've been stuck up Hollywood's a-hole so long you don't even understand the public! Didn't you just watch that?" She pointed to the television. "People *love* the contradiction I've shown them. They love that Finian is showing maturity and has another side. A side that is *real*. And that he has depth. That he's more than some car crash for them to laugh at. He's a good man and you're destroying him for your own benefit. This is about more than money."

This is his life! Look at actors like Harrison Ford and Leonardo DiCaprio. They're no train wreck. They have depth, are well loved *and* they are well-paid stars. If you truly cared about Finian, you'd want to give him a real life, too."

Finian's father appeared in the doorway. "I'm going to have to agree with the little lady on this one. Goodbye, Derek." He turned to Hailey. "I think we need to go find my boy, don't you?"



FINN ACCEPTED another drink from Austin and knocked it back. The man was staying at the far end of the bar, but seemed to sense Finn needed something. Something like firewater, and space. Lots of space.

He called down the bar to Austin, "I'm not a family man."

"I know."

"I'm not back together with Jessica, either."

"I know. But that's not what she or your agent are saying."

Finn shut his eyes. How had his life gotten so far out of his control that he'd let other people--people who saw him as nothing more than a commodity--take over? And how had he read Hailey so wrong? Was this mess because she thought he and Jessica were back together? That he'd been using her?

If so, it meant she cared. A lot. Deeply, even.

He wiped a hand down his face, caressing the stubble on his chin.

What did it matter? He'd lost the role he'd been angling for. He'd lost roles before, but he had felt like a shoe-in before this mess with Hailey. Derek had been right. The world was not ready for the real Finian Alexander.

"Are you in love with Hailey?" the photographer asked.

Finn pursed his lips and held in his breath. Without meaning to, he nodded. Son of a

"She's a great gal."

He gave a half nod.

"Heart of gold."

Finn let out an anguished snort.

"Anything she does, she has a good reason to do it. You had this coming, you realize that, right? She expected you at the opening. She was waiting."

"She ruined my reputation. In less than a week." Finn ordered another drink. He could prove tonight that his bad boy side was real. So real. He would let his demons out and propel his image back to where it was supposed to be. He'd make that producer regret not hiring him.

"Don't you ever hurt her."

Finn frowned, turning to face Austin. "Honor among paparazzi? Well, that's refreshing."

"Something pushed her to do this."

"Money? Fame? A need to pull the first punch?" So many reasons. But none of them felt like the Hailey he knew.

Austin paused. "The cottage. It's been in the family for generations. I heard it was up for tax sale."

"Thanks to my arty, environmentalist side it probably isn't any longer," Finn said bitterly. "I bet she got well paid for those images."

Austin laughed. "It's about time you gave back to the community." He sent Finn a challenging glance. "What? You think your reputation can't handle having a hidden side? Give me a break."

"I lost a role because of this."

"Are you sure that's why?" Austin shot him a look that got in under Finn's confidence and gave it a ding.

Before he could retaliate, a hand landed hard on his shoulder. "There you are." For a moment he was expecting it to be Hailey.

It was Derek looking like the cat that ate the canary. Anger flashed through Finn, lighting up every dark corner within him.

"Excellent, you've been talking to Austin. I've rented a small cottage a few miles down the road and hired a decoy for later. But right now, you and Jessica are going to go to the cottage and get down and dirty. Austin, I'll hire you to take a few photos, and kaboom. Back in the press as a--"

Finn landed a punch on the man's jaw, his knuckles cracking.

"Don't you get it?" Finn shouted. "You're messing with real people. Real lives. I don't love Jessica. I never have. She's as fake as a Louis Vuitton handbag in a Chinese market. I can't believe I thought it was normal to pretend to be in love with her." He glanced up from where Derek was stretched out on the floor, and saw Jessica backing out of the room, tears in her eyes.

Austin had disappeared. Finn had finally done something bad and it wasn't even going to be news.



FINN WAS DRUNK.

He was going to hurt in the morning, but it would be worth it. Judging by the peeved looks the polite Canadians were giving him, he was becoming loud and obnoxious. Right on schedule. If he was in the U.S. he'd be in a brawl by now. He'd be proving he was tough. But Canada was a hard act. He eyed a mean-looking guy in the back. Maybe he could hit on his girl and

Finn sighed and hung his head. Hailey was right.

Even Austin was right about him losing the role. It wasn't because of her. It was because people were getting tired of his schtick. He needed to get real, and Hailey's betrayal was the very thing he needed to push him into the life he'd come here to contemplate turning to in the first place.

Shaking his head, and doubting his next move, he asked Jamie if could borrow the bar's phone, then made a collect call to his agent's cell.

"Derek! Buddy ol' pal."

"Finn, you changed your mind. I was worried."

Finn laughed at the relief in Derek's voice.

"Man, I only forgot to tell you to go outside and play a nice little game of hide and go bleep yourself." He went to lower the phone in its cradle, ignoring Jamie's raised eyebrows, then lifted it back to his ear. "Oh, yeah. And I'll be taking care of my image from now on. Any plans you have in the works? Put 'em on hold. Better yet, shred 'em. We don't work together anymore."

He hung up the phone and dialed his old film buddy, hoping he still used the same phone number he had back in his college days.

Turned out he did.

"Bruce?" Finn tried to keep the slur out of his words.

"Yeah."

"Finian Alexander. I heard you have a role for me?"

"Finn! Man, good to hear from you. You know your agent already turned me down?"

"Well, lucky for you I just fired him. You fill the role yet?"

"I haven't."

"Great, because I say yes to your film deal. Arty is my new nickname, you know."

"Finn, are you drunk?"

"Yup."

"Maybe we should talk in the morning."

"Nope. Count me in. I want to do this." He paused and let his head loll to the side. "This is what I want. For myself." Despair washed over him. He was ending his career, which would lead to broken promises. But he just couldn't hold his head up any longer. He kept thinking the next movie would help him reach his goals, but it never did. He just dug in deeper. And deeper. And further from who he really was.

"Oh, man. This is so great. I'm going to rewrite the script for you. Your new life has gone viral, man. You're brilliant. You just shot your star into orbit."

"Yeah, something like that."

"You're all everyone is talking about."

"Really?"

"For real. I'm stoked. I can't believe you're going to do this. We'll reshape parts of the film and help build you up as a Renaissance man. Like a stepping stone into a new world. A new you. Dynamic. Revitalized. Refreshing."

Finn clutched his head. "Okay, you're going to talk me out of it if you keep spewing all that crap."

His friend laughed as they hung up.

Finn supposed if his life was going to go south he might as well create a masterpiece to be proud of before the final flush.

He pushed his hand into his face, supporting himself on the bar. He didn't want to live a fake life anymore, and his head hurt. His heart hurt. Everything hurt from years of holding it all back. Letting out a laugh, he finished his drink. Oh, how sweet, innocent Hailey had played him. She'd worked him right into something that might turn out to be the best move of his life.

Everyone loved the real Finn? Was that true? He turned to ask someone, but found the stools beside him were empty.

He got another beer from the bar, took a long pull as he exited onto the street, then smashed the bottle on the pavement. No more drinking tonight. He needed to think about how he would manage the pressure of sustaining his new, soon-to-be image.

"Is this who you want to be?" a woman called from the shadows as he swept a foot through the beer and broken glass, dispersing it.

He leaned over and braced himself as he spotted a figure that reminded him of Hailey.

His mind had to be playing tricks on him.

"Hailey." He staggered toward her as flashbulbs blinded him.

"Is it?" she asked again.

"Hailey!" Paparazzi surrounded him and he suppressed the urge to flee. They crowded forward, breaking into his space. He was drunk and they were too close. It was all too raw.

They were shouting questions at him. At her.

He had to protect her. But where was she?

Someone jostled Finn, elbowing him in the gut.

"Hailey!"

"Are you two in love?" called a reporter.

"Is she carrying your love child?"

"Why is your agent here?"

"I saw your parents. Did you have a secret wedding?"

The paparazzi were mobbing Hailey and she cowered, arms raised protectively. They were going to tear her apart. Finn lunged through the swarm and reached for her. He yanked her toward him and he heard her slap someone nearby.

"Let go of me!" she hollered.

"Hailey, it's me!"

She dived through the bodies between them, landing against his chest. She gripped him hard, pressing so close to him he could feel her

heart beating against his chest.

The crowd continued to shout questions, egging them on.

"Are you two in love?"

"Where's Jessica?"

Finn shoved people out of the way, not caring if he was breaking cameras. He held Hailey tight in his arms, trying to protect her. "Back off!" he yelled.

He couldn't move without stepping on someone. There was no car in sight. Nowhere to run to. Nowhere to hide.

He wrapped himself tighter around Hailey and began forcing people away by backing into them. He needed Security. Fast.

"Why'd you kill your brother?"

Hailey stiffened in his arms as he jerked in surprise.

"What gang did you belong to?" another photographer called, setting off a new chain of questions.

"Do you still wear its colors?"

"How much money do you owe?"

"Is your father dying?"

"Is your charity going bankrupt?"

"Will the medical aid run out?"

Finn held Hailey so tight he was afraid he was going to suffocate her. He needed out of here. Now.

He was failing.

Breaking promises, and he'd been living his real life for only five minutes.

He couldn't even keep Hailey safe.

A large man with a square face and a limp pushed between them and the crowd as though he were a hot knife gliding through butter.

"Got your back, Mr. Alexander. Follow my lead."

Finn tailed the man as he created a path to the street, where an idling car waited. Finn carefully kept Hailey's shaking body between himself and the brick wall of muscle leading them. At the car, the guy opened a door, shoved a paparazzo away and urged them to climb in.

Finn froze. How much did he trust this stranger?

Austin turned from the driver's seat with a grin. "Thought you two might need a ride."

Having him at the wheel made Finn even more nervous than riding with a stranger.

"What?" Austin asked. "Didn't you hear what I said, Finn? Hailey and I go way back. I owe her one for breaking her heart." He shot Hailey a wink and she dived into the car, Finn hot on her heels.

"Evander de la Fosse," said the brick wall as he wedged himself between Finn and the door. He offered his hand. "Private security. Ex-marine."

Finn shook it. "Finian Alexander. And this is Hailey Summer. Thanks for your help. Both of you."

"Hi," Hailey said to Evander, her body still pressed against Finn. He loosened his grip on her and kissed the top of her head.

"You okay?" he asked.

She nodded.

He wondered what she thought of the questions. Particularly the ones about his brother. Finn rubbed the familiar ache in his chest and wished he'd told her everything earlier.

"That was intense out there, man." Austin grinned back at them as he drove away from the mob. "Welcome to the big time."

"Yeah, maybe."

"No, that was insane. You hit something good."

Finn peered out the back window at the fading flashes, the headlights tailing them. Was all this because of Hailey? He kissed her

head again, keeping her close.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

"For what?"

"For selling you out."

"Was all of that you? The questions?"

"No." She shifted away. "What was that about, anyway?"

He smoothed her wild hair, unable to refrain from kissing the top of her head yet again. "I'll tell you later."

They made eye contact and he wondered if this was it. If once she knew the real man--the one final layer he hadn't shown anyone--she would never want anything to do with him again. She'd see what a failure he'd been and continued to be. How he'd made grand promises he couldn't possibly keep, and how thin he'd stretched himself in order to hold his demons at bay.

Austin pulled up at some docks and everyone bailed from the car. The photographer stopped near a small boat.

"This yours, Hailey?" Austin asked. "It looks different."

"It's borrowed. We can take it."

"Okay, in." Austin shuffled them into the boat and cast off under the flash of frustrated paparazzi who were without the means to follow them out onto the lake. They scattered, phones to their ears, swarming a nearby teen who had an outboard.

"Don't do it!" Hailey called out to the youth, hands cupped around her mouth.

He looked at her, uncertain.

Austin tore across the lake, cutting the engine as Evander reached out for the edge of the listing dock on Nymph Island.

"Still have that wood boat out here--Big Bertha?" Austin asked.

Hailey shook her head. "Sold it years ago."

"Well, we'll take this boat back to the marina. Let us know if you need anything. Distraction. Security. A ride back tomorrow. In the meantime, Evander will escort you to the cottage and I'll stand guard down here."

"Thanks, Austin."

Evander passed Finn his business card and they made their way up the dark path. "I'm in the area and it's easy for me to get to you fast. My direct line is on there."

"Can I get you on a retainer?"

The big man nodded. "Consider it done."

A boat roared between the small islands and Evander immediately dropped behind Finn, protecting him as Finn pulled Hailey closer.

"Want me to stay outside your door tonight?" the bodyguard asked.

"I think we'll be okay, thanks." Having some guy standing outside the cottage all night, being eaten by mosquitoes, didn't seem fair even if he was being paid. "But I could use your services tomorrow, I'm sure."

They made their way up the steps, the boards protesting under Evander's weight.

"What headline do you think they'll tack onto this?" Hailey asked Finn as she unlocked the cottage.

"I'm sure something about you and Jessica." He regretted the comment even before she turned away, her brows pressed in a tight line under the solar lantern by the door. "Don't let it bother you, our relationship was just a front--a publicity stunt."

"Ours or Jessica's?"

"Jessica's. And it's over. Was before I even stepped foot in Canada."

"Want me to check the place out for you?" Evander asked Hailey.

She let out a laugh. "I'm sure it's fine, but thanks just the same."

Finn thanked the man, who promised to be by in the morning, and Hailey shut the old wood door behind them. For a second Finn

wondered what he'd walked into. Stuck on an island with a woman who held his heart, but had sold him out.

"Do cell phones work out here?" He laughed as he patted his pockets, searching for his absent phone. "Or do you have a land line? This is starting to feel pretty remote."

Hailey was a breath away, staring at him.

"When do you go back to Hollywood?"

"I haven't decided yet." He ran a hand through his hair and took a step back.

"Why not?"

Her hope was like a cutaway from a dark scene to a bright one.

"Because," he said, as he stepped closer, his feet making the kitchen floor creak. "I think you were right."

Her eyebrows shot up.

"I wasn't being myself. And while this could all come crashing down around me, at least it will be more likely to happen on my own terms. Not like being a bad boy. Those days were numbered."

"It won't come crashing down."

"I promised charities things I might not be able to deliver."

She moved into the large living room, turning on a small lantern set on the table. She cocked her head. "What *was* all that back there, Finian?"

"The truth."

She waited, face pale in the dim light.

"Schools. Medical care for families in need." His chest tightened and he had to force himself to keep breathing regularly. "I have a charity where I try to keep families from falling into the world I did. The public persona you may have come to know is an easy role for me to play because that's who I used to be. I used to steal as a kid. I had to. Bread on the table and all that."

She angled her body away, her bottom lip drawn between her teeth.

"We look like a great family now, but the truth is my two brothers and I used to run with a rough crowd. Julian was shot in a gang war."

Hailey grabbed Finn's arm as though he needed steadying.

"I didn't kill him," he whispered. "Not like they said out there." His voice shook as his throat contracted. "I was there, but I didn't kill him. I couldn't stop the blood."

He bent over, his head too light to keep him standing, the image of his red hands haunting him.

She was reaching for him, and before he knew it Finn was in her arms, tears streaming down his face. She stroked his hair, and without realizing what he was doing, he had her shirt off, her body pressed against the throw rug on the floor. He ran his hands through her hair, his fingers and eyes racing over her skin as if blindness was coming and he had to memorize every physical feature or he'd perish.

Promises he'd made were about to be broken. She'd opened wounds and uncovered secrets, and yet he couldn't step away from her. He needed Hailey and her forgiveness. He needed her to make it all better. Drag him through hell so he could find heaven. Not only in her arms, but in the world. His life.

Starved for her to save him, he ravished her with kisses. He craved her like a balm for all his open wounds.

"Heal me, Hailey."

"I can't." Her voice was breathy with need as he skimmed his lips over her warm body.

"Please."

"You have to do it yourself."

"Help me."

She pulled his face to hers, kissing him soulfully. "Always," she breathed. "Always."

"Forgive me."

"Nothing to forgive." Her lips were moist on his bare shoulder. "*I'm* sorry. I crossed a line."

"Cross another one with me now." His mouth moved down her chest. "I trust you, Hailey."

He tugged off the rest of her clothing, and she pulled him into a room with a patchwork-quilt-covered bed.

"I wanted you to reveal me, Hailey." Finn watched her face as he lay wrapped in her arms, softly stroking her cheek. "I just didn't realize you'd *see* me. I was like an invisible soul no one had noticed for years. And then there you were. Seeing me. And it all became love and rumors. Somewhere along the line I started to believe I could be me. With you. With the world."

She let out a shaky breath and he knew she'd heard him, just like she saw him when nobody else did.

"I love you," he said.

"That's the rumor," she laughed. "But is it the truth?"

"No, really, Hailey. I love you with all my heart."

She pulled his body to hers. "I love you, too, Finian Alexander."

Finn smiled at Hailey and held her loosely in his arms. "Sure this will work?" he whispered, eyeing the reporters gathered for his outdoor press conference.

"Of course. It's my plan, and as you are aware, my plans always work when we're talking about your career and image. Look what I've done for you so far."

He laughed and kissed her hair. She'd definitely turned him from a bad-boy disaster with a sagging B-List career into a multilayered man in the week and a half he'd known her. He couldn't wait to see what the future had in store. He might just be lucky and get it all.

He hugged her closer, pressing himself against her warm body. "Let's see. Since I've known you, you chased off my ex-girlfriend, led me to fire my agent of five years, convinced the world I'm an endangered-turtle-eating environmentalist--"

"Hey, that wasn't me. You did that one on your own, but thanks by the way. The government is suddenly very interested in all the things she's been telling them for years and she's well underway in terms of saving their habitat."

"That's wonderful." He gave her a light squeeze. "But I need to clarify that you drove me to that bender, Miss Hailey Summer, by not

waiting around for me to finally show up after your opening.”

She gave him a pouty frown and he continued, “Let’s see where was I? Oh, yes. A family man, a bad boy with a gangster past, a charity creator oh, and how could I forget? Totally in love with an award-winning photographer who is now on New York’s hot list.”

Hailey spun out of his arms, laughing, sunshine dancing on her face.

He tugged her back, never wanting to let her go. Not until he knew absolutely everything about her and more. He loved Hailey, from the way her hair smelled to the way she curled her toes in her sandals every time he gave her a kiss.

Hailey’s reporter friend, Rick, waved Finn over to the microphone. Evander, brick wall that he was, was stationed behind and to the right, arms crossed, shades on, and looking every bit the professional bodyguard.

“As you may have heard,” Finn said to the crowd, “I’ve turned over a new leaf.”

A group of women in the front row screamed their approval, and he flashed a grin at Hailey, who was waiting off to the side. She gave him a thumbs-up as he turned his attention back to the gathered fans and reporters.

“It does not mean I’ve become a vegetarian. It doesn’t mean I am going to rehab. It simply means that I have been living two lives, and thanks to Hailey Summer, my hot new photographer girlfriend, I’ve discovered that it isn’t authentic, genuine, nor fair to you.

“So I have decided that the two lives I’ve been living are going to merge. I’m still going to enjoy myself at parties.” A group in the back let out a whoop. “However, that does not mean I’m going to indulge in wild shenanigans that get me into trouble, as well as the limelight.” The group let out a low groan. “Yeah, sorry, guys.”

Finn ran a hand through his hair, doubting where he was going with this, and whether he could sustain his new identity. Could he be Mr. Artistic Movie Guy? He trusted Hailey, but this was a wild leap into the unknown. He glanced over his shoulder and made eye contact with her. She gave him a small smile, her arms wrapped around herself. He took a deep breath and turned back to the microphone.

"There are many actors I deeply respect. Actors who have made a difference in this world. I have been working, secretly, on becoming one of those men. Someone who can make a difference in this world instead of creating a little diversion from real life and real life problems."

"What's wrong with that?" someone called, and the crowd chuckled appreciatively.

"For the past few years I have been donating everything I can afford to the charities and scholarships I set up in my old neighborhood. Meaning some months I almost had to go to the food bank myself--"

"Finian!" someone hollered. "Tell us about your brother."

Finn swallowed and tried to ignore the rush of adrenaline that pumped through him as the reporters surged forward, sensing this tidbit would be bonus-worthy come payday.

"I wasn't always famous, living in a nice house. There wasn't always food on the table. It's a familiar story for kids growing up in poverty and in inner cities. Gangs were common. Deaths just as much so. I didn't break that stereotype. I come by my image somewhat honestly."

He paused and took a sip of water, hating the way his hands were shaking, his heart pounding. Slowly, he unraveled his past to the crowd, explaining how his brother Julian was shot in front of him and his other brother, Adrian. At that moment he had vowed to transform his neighborhood into a safe place to live.

The sun was hot on his face when he finished his tale of how he'd promised his inner city neighborhood the moon--everything from ridding

shop owners of gang-related problems, to after-school programs, to scholarships, and free health clinics. He'd promised everything his family hadn't had. And every dime he hadn't required for clothing and food in Hollywood had gone straight back to his old neighborhood. Yet he wasn't sure he'd made a difference.

The crowd was so quiet he could hear the highway running beyond a grove of trees. He looked out into the sea of faces, wondering how much this Canadian crowd would understand about poverty, gangs, and medical bills ruining lives. Probably not a whole lot.

"I thought I could change my community, and I believed I could do it on my own. I've been trying to live up to my promises, scrambling from movie to movie in hopes that somehow, if I could just get famous enough, get paid enough, I could solve the problem."

A murmur went through the crowd.

"But I can't. Not all at once and not on my own."

Rick held up a tin can. "I'm taking donations to Finian's charities! Pass it around."

"Thanks, Rick." Finn gripped the microphone and pushed away the emotions he was feeling. He cleared his throat. "As for my career I'm off to film *Man versus War II* as scheduled. I was not fired from that film, despite the rumors." He smiled. "*Hangman's Destiny* is coming out in I've lost track of the days. Somebody help me out."

The crowd laughed and someone shouted out a date that felt entirely too soon.

"Thank you. There will be plenty more movie surprises in the coming months, as well. Stay tuned."

He turned, facing Hailey, the love of his life. The woman who had not only given him a chance, but had given him the chance to really live. A chance to start over. To be humble and honest. And real.

Most of all, to be real.

"Thank you for being by my side and seeing the real me."

He stepped to her, letting Rick wrap things up. Finn slipped his arms around Hailey, breathing her in. "Thank you for fixing my brokenness, Hailey."

She tipped her head back to gaze into his eyes. "Anytime, sugar buns." She lifted herself onto her toes and placed a kiss on his lips that made the crowd go wild. Breaking it off, she flushed, her eyes full of love.

He could get used to this.

"Will you come to my movie premiere with me?" he asked, nuzzling her ear.

"I thought you'd never ask."

"I want to be everywhere you are, Hailey." His lips made their way across her cheek to her waiting lips. "All the time."

"All the time?"

"Every single second."

"How are we going to manage this?" she asked.

"One project at a time."

"I can work just about anywhere there is nature. And I've always wanted to go to Europe. Any movies planned out there, Finian Alexander?"

"I'll see what strings I can pull for you. Oh, and I meant to tell you that Julia Roberts was asking who took my new head shots. Maybe you could make it in Hollywood, too."

Hailey gave Finn a playful shove. "Yeah, right."

"It's true."

Her eyes sparkled in the sunlight and he fell a little more in love with her.

"Don't you have reporters waiting for a one-on-one with you?" she asked.

"I hope they're not the only ones." He gave her butt a pinch and turned to the line of waiting journalists, knowing his life would never be the same, now that Hailey was in it.



HAILEY TRIED NOT to smile as her sisters and mother looked from her to Finian and back again, puzzling everything out.

"You guys forgave each other?" Maya smiled. "Nice!"

"Days ago. We wanted the same things, just differently." Hailey gave Finian's hand a squeeze and he wrapped his arm around her shoulders, pulling her close in the wicker love seat on the cottage veranda.

Melanie poured a margarita from the pitcher and handed it to Maya, who took a grateful slurp.

"Love conquers all," Daphne said in a wistful tone.

"So, what are we going to do about the cottage?" Maya asked. "Are we selling it?"

Hailey blew out a deep breath and leaned forward. "I almost have enough money, but " She shook her head, looking to her sisters.

"It's up to Hailey," their mother said. "She's carried the burden long enough, so she makes this decision."

"What if destiny makes it for me?" Hailey teased.

"That would be fine, too." Her mother smiled, and Daphne clapped her hands together.

Tigger, who was just off the veranda, trying to tame chipmunks by bribing them with sunflower seeds, said, "I got one! Ohhh, he ran away."

"Don't move, Tigger," Daphne called over the railing. "You're scaring them. Be very still. And quiet."

"Oh. Right."

"Maybe we *should* sell the place," Maya said. Her eyes roved over the veranda as though checking the structure and estimating its real estate value. "We could take the proceeds and rent something each year. Maybe in Florida one winter?"

Daphne gave her a wistful smile, but Hailey could already see the look of loss in everyone's eyes. She'd continued the Nymph Island tradition and fallen in love with Finian here--or at least it was where she first really realized she was in love with him and said "I love you." She wanted to give her sisters the opportunity to follow that tradition, as well. Even if it was going to be difficult.

Finian, as if sensing her thoughts, gave her a gentle squeeze.

How was she going to do that while she and Finian trotted around the globe, covering her photography shows and his movie filming and premieres?

She shook her head, knowing that if it was meant to be, it would happen.

Her mother tugged at the blanket draped over her lap as the leaves on the maples and oaks whispered to each other on a breeze.

"Are you cold, Mom?" Daphne came over and tucked the blanket around her.

"Okay, how's this for an idea?" Maya took a sip of her drink. "I'll sell a few business articles to get us closer to our tax goal, and we'll rent this place out as an executive retreat for a week or two. Hailey got, like, eight hundred dollars for a couple of days, so if I--"

Hailey sat forward, eager to jump in with suggestions.

"Hailey," Maya warned. "This is my idea, my plan, my way of trying to help, and it's going to be different from your ideas, so let me continue."

Finian's hand slipped to Hailey's knee and she eased back in her seat. "Sorry, go ahead."

"Anyway, we can get more if we offer it as a rustic retreat for businesses and corporations. I can work as an assistant, which will be great for me--I really need more experience on my résumé for when I move to Toronto in the fall. I can do up an ad and put it on Kijiji later today."

"What about your jobs, though?" Daphne asked.

"They both suck. I need to rub elbows with real mucky-mucks."

"But we can't use the cottage if you rent it out." Daphne frowned, hugging herself.

"Use it and lose it. Besides, it'll only be for a week or two. We'll survive." Maya took a gulp of her drink and winced. "Why are we always having cold drinks? They give me a brain freeze."

"Because we love you, and are trying to prevent you from getting drunk faster than the rest of us." Daphne smiled at Maya, who gave her a playful shove. "I'll ask for honorariums where I volunteer. Maybe they can help, or I can have some sort of sale. I have all those paintings I've made. Maybe I can sell some at the farmers' market or Simone's."

The sisters nodded.

"Did you send in the tax appeal?" Melanie asked Hailey.

"I did. I haven't heard back, but Betsy said she'd try and expedite it for us."

"I think it's time we were all responsible for our fair share of the tax bill," Melanie said. "Full cost."

"And upkeep and maintenance," Maya added.

"And I think we owe Hailey a lot for how much she's covered over the years." Melanie flipped a page in the notebook where she'd been tallying and writing all afternoon.

"No, it's fine."

"It's not fine," Maya said. "We need to help you, Hailey."

"Help is fine, but there's no need to try and cover me retroactively." Hailey turned to Daphne, who was the poorest of the sisters. "Don't worry, Daph. We can arrange something."

"You can work off your portion of the bill," Maya suggested.

Melanie tapped her notebook. "Where have you been getting all this money, anyway, Hailey?"

"I do have a job, you know."

Melanie gazed at her, eyes serious, quiet, probing. "Did you remortgage your house? Or leverage it or something? Win a lottery, perhaps?"

Hailey tucked herself closer to Finian, who tipped her chin upward to read the truth in her eyes. They were tag-teaming her.

"Hailey!" the women cried together.

"You could lose your house?" Melanie said. "Hailey!"

Hailey looked at her feet.

"Somebody, pour me another margarita," Maya said, waving her glass. "We have to sell this place."

Daphne poured a new round for everyone.

"Can we give destiny a little more time?" Hailey asked.

The sisters shared a look.

"Destiny? Why?" Finian asked.

"Because we all love this place and it's a part of us," Maya said. "Hailey's our big sister who loves us, as well as a big idiot who thinks she has to take care of us." She got up to give her big sister a hug.

Melanie cracked up, joining in the hug. "Sometimes, Maya, no filter between your mental gas pedal and your mouth is an okay thing."

Hailey released her sisters and snuggled closer to Finian. She gave Maya a knowing look. "This is a year of destinies. Destinies and dreams. Let's hang in there a little longer and see what the universe brings us, shall we?"

Hailey rolled her eyes at Maya and gave Finian a quick peck on the cheek. He'd been in Canada for two weeks and was starting to talk about leaving some clothes at her place when he had to go back to Hollywood in a few days. She liked it. She liked it a lot. Especially since she was going to his movie premiere as his official girlfriend.

Cinderella, shove over, Hailey was in the house.

"Move that table there," Maya commanded, as Hailey grabbed one end of the large table in the cottage's large attic. "Connor MacKenzie is going to be here in less than two hours and I want to be early to meet him at the airport. It's essential we get off on the right foot."

"You'd think he was the king or something," Hailey laughed, giving Finian a bump with her butt as he walked by with some power cords for the WiFi hub Maya was trying to set up. Hailey only hoped the cottage's ancient solar panels could keep the old battery charged well enough to power everything Maya needed. If she had to run the generator to charge the battery it would cost her a fortune in gas.

"Hailey, you don't understand. Connor is one of Toronto's biggest businessmen. He *is* royalty in the business world. Everything he touches turns to--"

"Gold?" Hailey interjected, dusting off the table with the sleeve of her sweater.

"Sold?" Finian added.

"Spending two weeks with him could alter my entire future."

"No pressure." Hailey lined the table up in the alcove and breathed in the attic's warm, old-wood smell. Would Maya's spending two weeks on Nymph Island with a man continue the island's legacy of matchmaking? If Hailey didn't have to go to New York to accept an award, or down to L.A. to set up a last-minute show she'd snagged, or to Finian's premiere, she'd stay parked here, watching and waiting. "I still can't imagine you taking orders from some business dude."

"I'm his assistant, not his maid."

"Aren't those essentially the same thing, when he's not bringing any of his own staff and you offered maid service with the rental, Miss Assistant?" Hailey shot her sister a mischievous grin.

"I know what happens on this island," Finian said with an eyebrow waggle.

Hailey blew him a kiss and smiled. "Good things."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever. This could be my big break." Maya let out a breath and rolled her shoulder before giving a clap. "We need to straighten the cords from the surge protector. And do you have the WiFi thing set up Finian?"

He shrugged. "I think so."

"Well, I need you to know so." With shaking hands, she connected her phone to the WiFi network to test it. "Everything has to be perfect. My whole career depends upon this. He could shoot me up the corporate ladder. Plus, he's renting this place for enough that we might be able to fix the chimney."

"Actually, girls " Finian gathered the two sisters together with a hand on their shoulders. "I took the liberty of hiring someone to fix the

chimney." He drew them onto the small deck and had them look up to where the chimney stood, repaired and restored. "I figured half the charm of the living room was a working fireplace, and that your renter would like a fire now and then."

"Finian!" Hailey paused, staring at the perfect chimney. No more missing bricks or crumbling mortar. "This money should have gone to one of your charities!" His neighborhood needed his support more than the Summers needed a working chimney.

"Your mother gave me her blessing."

Hailey gazed at him. There was a mischievous twinkle in his eyes. Almost as if almost as if he was trying to help Nymph Island along in matchmaking Maya and Connor.

He pulled Hailey into an embrace. "And I do happen to find fireplaces romantic."

She blushed, thinking of the first time she and Finian had made love, and how the firelight in the Sunflower Cottage had added to the moment.

"Wow. Thank you." Maya turned to them, then hesitantly gave them both a big squeeze.

"Finian, you know you didn't need to--" Hailey began.

He raised a brow.

"Fine. Thank you." She gave him a squeeze in turn. Sometimes it was okay to let others help carry the load.

Hailey and Finian followed Maya down to the boathouse. They were all going to ride into town, in the newly fixed boat, so she could go pick up their new tenant. As they walked, Maya kept letting out loud, gusty sighs.

"Nervous?" Hailey asked, hitching her new camera backpack over her shoulder. Finian had been right; it was dang handy. And really not that expensive, if someone else was buying it as a gift.

"I'm so nervous I feel like I have to pee every five minutes."

"It'll work out." Hailey bit her lips together so she wouldn't offer advice, and Maya could own this task without an interfering big sister.

"Fire in the hole!" crackled a voice from across the narrow channel.

Hailey ducked as a loud boom rocketed toward them, shuddering through her ear canals.

Finian threw himself over her, tugging Maya down onto the dock as small rocks rained around them.

Maya popped her head up from under her arms. "They're blasting on Baby Horseshoe."

Finian leaped up and cupped his hands around his mouth. "Hey!"

Maya stood beside him and added, "Ever hear of a blast mat?" She turned to Hailey. "They can't be blasting right now. This is supposed to be a quiet business retreat, not a construction zone."

A man in a suit stood on the dock across the narrow strait, waving.

"I'd like to give him the one-finger salute," Hailey grumbled, dusting herself off.

"He's coming over," Maya said.

They watched the man row across the water, looking awkward and out of place in his suit.

"Bring a broom?" Maya asked, kicking rocks off their dock. "Maybe a first aid kit?"

The man stepped out of his rowboat, looking uncertain as he stood on their turf. "My apologies. The name is Aaron Bloomfield."

"Harold, pleasure to meet you," Maya said.

Hailey shot her a "be nice" look.

"It's Aaron," he corrected.

"So sorry." Maya looked anything but. "We're in a bit of a rush to meet someone. I expect you will have cleaned off our dock--and not onto our sand beach, please--by the time we return. And that you won't have

damaged our property any further." She strode into the boathouse and climbed aboard their boat.

Finian, arms crossed, glowered at Aaron who stood watching, before following the sisters into the boat.

"I'm representing Rubicore Developments and the work we're doing over on Baby Horseshoe Island," Aaron said, standing beside the boat and pointing through the open door to where the sharp, rocky point on the island had been leveled by the blast.

The sisters shared a look. He was ruining it. Ruining the island, their view. Everything. This wasn't what you did when you found a beautiful place.

"We're planning to spiff up the cottages over there, and were wondering if your island was for sale."

"No," Hailey said, just as Maya replied, "Make us an offer and we'll see."

"Are one of you the owners?" The sisters nodded and Aaron presented them with a sealed envelope. "At your leisure. Offer expires in August."

"You come prepared. I like that." Maya started the engine, tucking the envelope in the pocket behind the driver's seat. "Finian, cast us off, please."

He obliged, then sat beside Hailey who gripped his hand, knowing the summer's adventures were only just beginning, and that there would be something in store for all her sisters before destiny was done with them.

~ The End ~

Turn the page to find out what happens to Trixie Hollow and the Summers in Maya's book *Falling for the Boss*—does she manage to save her career life with aid from Connor MacKenzie?

FALLING FOR THE BOSS

BOOK 2

From the back cover:

One sexy, burned out billionaire. One spitfire graduate. One small island.

Tycoon Connor MacKenzie has it all from the penthouse to the world-dominating corporation. At least that's what everyone believes. Underneath it all, his life is disintegrating faster than a stock market crash.

When Connor's doctor forces him to take it easy and go deep into cottage country for some much needed R&R he lands on an old cottage veranda in Muskoka which lacks the luxuries he's accustomed to. Maya Summer, a recent business grad, has been waiting for opportunity to come a knockin' and not only has it arrived on her doorstep, but it's presented itself in a very sexy package. However, despite Maya's best

advances and proposals, Connor's strict new "no-work diet" has them both starving for much more than than just business.

Can Maya convince Connor to let her be his new right-hand business gal while gaining enough income to save her family's cottage? And will Connor, the workaholic, be able to resist her charms, both in and out of the boardroom?

This is the second book in the Summer Sisters series.

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I would also like to thank my critique partners who, as always, do their best to keep me in line. As well, thank you to Emily and Erin for cruising the book for errors that slipped past me after making the corrections suggested by my wonderfully patient editor, Margaret.

Maya Summer shifted from foot to foot in the tall grass and squinted up at the sky. Where was that plane? She was more than ready for her future to land, and now it was delayed. She checked her watch and hurried into the private airstrip's terminal, a small shack, to use their washroom again.

"I shouldn't have had that extra cup of coffee," she muttered. She was wired, jittery, and so nervous she wasn't sure whether to throw up or break into delirious laughter.

"Meeting someone important, dear?" asked a woman as Maya hurried into the washroom's one stall.

"Connor MacKenzie. I'm picking up Connor MacKenzie." She grinned as she flushed the toilet, and refrained from giving a little happy dance there in the cramped enclosure. Connor MacKenzie was coming to see *her*. Live with *her*.

"*The* Connor MacKenzie?" the woman asked, surprise evident in her voice, as she made room for Maya at the sink.

Maya nodded and adjusted her suit jacket in the mirror. It was kind of boxy, not as fitted as she'd been looking for, but it was all she'd been able to find at the local Salvation Army, and it went with her flared dress pants. She was going to spend the summer with Connor. Okay,

okay, two weeks—only two weeks. *Oh, man. Breathe.* She had two weeks to convince Mr. MacKenzie that she was worth taking back to his Toronto office, where she'd be employed as his right-hand woman. His personal assistant, Stella Bijania, had on-the-spot hired her less than twenty-four hours ago to take care of her boss during his impromptu retreat and do whatever was needed to ensure he got the downtime he was paying for. It was also her job to prevent him from falling too behind while in Muskoka.

She could do it. And she would do it well. In less than a month she'd be in the city, settling into a penthouse off Yonge Street, wearing Prada, because the devil wore Prada, and she was going to be the devil of the business world. Plus, she was about to learn the best strategies straight from the man who'd invented most of them as he went from MBA student to the new king of Bay Street as well as the city in less than a decade. He was barely older than she was, and he was already worth billions. The next two weeks were going to rock.

"He's going to change my life," Maya declared as she touched up her lipstick. He'd quickly see that she wasn't just another university grad with no experience. It was as her hero, the entrepreneurial Arlene Dickinson, said, "You have to surround yourself with people who are more talented than you are." And Maya was ready to surround herself with all things Connor MacKenzie. The man was a walking business bible she was eager to speed-read.

"Connor MacKenzie?" the woman repeated. "He's coming to Bracebridge?"

"The one and only. And no, he's coming to stay at my cottage. On an island." She barely held in a sigh of longing. He was smart, rich, and business-minded. Don't forget hot. Man, what she wouldn't give to wrap his expensive silk tie around her fist and pull his sweet lips against hers

when she got the chance. That guy had a checkmark beside all the things a woman wanted in a man. Plus some.

"Are you his?"

"Business associate." Maya followed the woman out of the washroom. Okay, she was going to be his assistant and, well, maid, while he took a business retreat at her family cottage for the next two weeks, but still. She was working *with* him. One on one. Discussing business things, creating presentations, drafting emails to all the bigwigs he associated with. She was going to be the sexy, smart, witty woman in high heels and power suits nodding beside him, pointing out things he hadn't thought of, while he enjoyed his retreat from the city's stifling summer heat. He'd turn to her with respect brimming in his eyes, and ask how he'd ever got along without her. His lips would be just a whisper away from hers when he'd say

"Is that him?" The woman pointed out the dusty window.

Maya staggered on her heels before catching herself. "He's waiting. I've left Connor MacKenzie waiting!" She scrambled out the door, before catching herself and adopting her best no-nonsense stride. Several feet away, she extended a hand for a shake. Too early. She hurried her pace, hoping he wouldn't notice.

"Mr. MacKenzie!"

He turned to her, all sexy five o'clock shadow and Gucci shades, ball cap parked low on his forehead.

"Mr. MacKenzie!" Maya reached to shake his hand, and he thrust a heavy duffel at her. The bag dropped, wrenching her shoulder. "Oomph!"

The man packed like a girl, with everything in one ginormous bag that was nearly impossible to lift without seeing a chiropractor afterward.

"Do you have other bags?" she asked, looking around for a laptop. He had to have a briefcase. Maybe two. "On the plane, perhaps?"

"That's all."

Where were his computer and business papers? Surely not in the duffel, getting crushed. Crushed like the disks in her spine, one by one, the longer she stood clinging to the bag's handles. She readjusted her grip and leaned back so she wouldn't be tempted to allow gravity to take over and cause her to kiss the tarmac.

"Good flight?"

She could barely believe how *human* he seemed in person. Not at all the bouncing, vibrant machine whose mouth could barely keep up with his ideas during his TED talk two years ago. Watched: 73 times. University essays written about or referencing that talk: 13.

But this man here in front of her? He wasn't exactly exuding power and energy. No overflowing enthusiasm. He was mellow. Really mellow.

It kind of bummed her out, actually. But at the same time, there was something irresistibly intriguing about his quietness.

Connor stared at her and, with a quick inhalation, she launched into her rehearsed introduction. "My name is Maya Summer. I'll be your everything for the next two weeks."

An eyebrow appeared over the frame of Connor's sunglasses, beneath his sun-faded hat. "Everything?" he asked, his voice thick and rough, its tenor low.

Sweat pricked Maya's back, and she knew it wasn't caused by the heat of the July sunshine radiating off the cracked tarmac. It was the way his tone hinted at something less businesslike.

"Just about." She shot him a playful smile.

Some women might think her ambitious to a fault, but she'd sleep her way out of a starting position in the mailroom if she had to. And with this man, it would not be a hardship. Give her half an excuse and she'd run her hands over those broad shoulders, down his chest and

lower. Her eyes drifted where her imagination was going, before she caught herself.

Right. He was her boss. No need to make him feel similar to a piece of man meat. Not yet, anyway.

"You'll be staying at my cottage for the next two weeks," she said. "A quiet, rustic business retreat. And I will be available as your personal assistant—um, business executive. Are you sure you don't have another bag?"

He gave a small shake of his head.

"Okay, great. So, I will be your liaison with with, uh, everyone you require while you enjoy your retreat. Whatever you need, I can take care of it. And, uh " Where had all her lines gone? She'd imagined a much brighter meeting. For example, one where he talked and shook her hand. One where he asked about her, or at least her qualifications, so she could tell him she'd graduated with distinction, made the dean's list, won a scholarship from TD Mutual, and all that other stuff that made businessmen get excited when discussing the pillageable assets they could get for pennies on the dollar in their overeager assistants.

And okay, so things weren't unrolling the way she'd expected, but she was already learning things from him. For instance, when it came right down to choosing the proper power outfit, a short skirt was always the way to go.



MAYA UNLOCKED the trunk of her car and perched her sunglasses on her head as she hoisted Connor's bag into the trunk of her old Honda, her high heels sinking into the grass parking lot. Peering around the side of the car, she hoped Connor wouldn't notice the car's rust spots and its general lack of va-va-voom. She paused when he climbed into the

backseat. Did she look as though she ran a car service? Why wouldn't he ride up front with her?

She clutched the wheel and promised herself that it was only jet lag making him seem different than she'd expected. Soon he'd perk up, fill her brain with valuable business tips, and the formal, boss-assistant line would become blurred.

The only problem with her jet lag theory was the flight from Toronto was super short. Maybe he'd been in France. Or up all night hashing out a deal. Maybe he trusted her, and that was why he was so quiet. Maybe this was the real Connor MacKenzie.

Yes, that was likely it. He could tell she was someone he could be himself around and that she wouldn't judge him. He'd be spilling his secrets and insecurities in a matter of hours, wondering how he'd ever managed to get by not sharing his burdens with someone like her.

"I thought you were my assistant?" he said as she started the engine.

"I *am* your assistant."

"How are you going to do that if you're driving taxi? This job has a very demanding schedule."

"Oh! The door? It's from the wreckers. Mrs. Star accidentally backed into it and the only door I could find was off one of Alvin's old taxis—it hit a moose. Anyway, Mrs. Star is on a pension and it didn't feel right for her to shell out for a proper door that matched. Especially since I'll be buying a new car in the fall. Why have either of us spend money painting over *Alvin's Taxi* on this old clunker, right? Plus it's kind of fun. Sometimes I pick up fares to help pay for gas. Alvin doesn't mind as long as I charge reasonable rates and buy him a coffee every once in a while."

Silence.

Okay. Making the best out of a crappy old car didn't amuse him. Good to know.

Maya drove through the rocky terrain of the Canadian shield's countryside, forcing herself to not give excuses for her car's lack of newness, and parked at the docks where the family's old boat waited for them. She tried to surreptitiously fan herself with her suit jacket, hating the fact that Connor was comfortable in a faded T-shirt, shorts and a ball cap, while she was dying from the heat. But it was worth making a favorable impression, right?

"What are we doing?" Connor asked as she got out of the car.

"Taking a boat."

"A boat?"

Oh, thank the heavens for the breeze off the lake. She could stand here for hours.

Connor's voice sounded thick, slow. It was as if he was struggling his way through molasses. Was he on drugs? Was he on this retreat to try and get clean in private? Because she was *so* not the merry maid type and was not going to nurse him back to health. Play-acting nursemaid for a man as sexy as him? Oh, yeah. But cleaning up other people's vomit in a century-old cottage sounded like her idea of Hell with a capital H. Because, seriously, that stuff was not going to come out of the plain oak floorboards, and she'd rather go back to her crappy old service jobs if that was the way this was going to go down. Her family might need Connor's money in order to save their cottage, but a girl had to draw the line somewhere. Even for him.

"You're staying on an island," she informed him. "With me." A secret little jump of glee partied in her belly.

"An island?" He sat back in the seat as though stunned by the revelation, even though his tone remained flat and lifeless.

"Yes. It said as much in the ad."

"Oh." He waved, as though she should proceed to drive the car onto a ferry. "Very well then. Carry on. And please tune the radio to Met

Opera Radio. Channel seventy-four.”

Maya stared at him for a moment. “Um, first of all, does this car seem like Never mind, you have to get out of the car to take the boat.”

He paused, then slowly reached for the handle, fumbling with it before heaving the door open as though it was made of lead.

This was not good. Seriously not good. She popped the trunk and hauled his bag to the simple motorboat. The forty-year-old Boston Whaler was great for hauling stuff out to the island, but was definitely not a yacht, nor the kind of boat where someone could hide from the wind or any splashing she might intentionally cause in order to wake up her passenger.

“This is it. We’ll head across Lake Rosseau to my private island, where you will be staying.” Wow, did that sound good. “It has one building—the cottage, Trixie Hollow.” No need to mention the leaning boathouse along the rocky shore. “It’s rustic. Private. Quiet.” Well, it was when Rubicore Developments wasn’t blasting into the Canadian shield to demolish the point on nearby Baby Horseshoe Island. The company’s representative, Aaron Bloomwood, better have swept the debris off her dock like she’d asked him to when she’d left a few hours ago. Come to think of it, she still had his purchase offer in the boat’s seat pocket. Once she got Connor settled she’d have to pull it out and read it over to see if his company was offering a solution to all her problems. She almost laughed at the thought. Money couldn’t solve everything, but it sure could help when you were pushed against the wall like she was.

Maya boated across the lake, resisting the urge to make small talk with Connor. She had to rethink everything if he was going to be out of it the whole time.

She moored the Boston Whaler on Nymph Island and moments later Connor stood on the dock, stretching his back.

“It’s really quiet here,” he said.

Maya nodded and chucked his bag in the ancient lift she'd tinkered into working again. It ran from the dock up the hill to the cottage, since there was no road to drive up heavy items. She swung its rusted door shut, latching it before sending the bag up with motorized grunts and groans.

"We don't get to take that?" Connor was eyeing the lift as though it was a glass of water in a desert.

"We take the path." She pointed to the dirt trail edged with large rocks. Trees overhung it, creating shade at all times of the day. It got a tad steep at the top, where it curved around a massive rock to meet up with the steps that led to the cottage's veranda, but it wasn't anything someone their age couldn't easily manage.

"I'd prefer the lift."

"My hundred-pound mother is the only one who takes it, and even then it's pretty rough going." Maya studied Connor's frame. He'd lost weight since the last time she'd seen him speak—a conference she'd snuck into last fall. He was still hot, and still a broad man, just a little leaner than she preferred. She'd have to see what she could do about that. But even with him slimmer than usual, he wasn't going up in the lift.

Maya led him up the path to the cottage, trying not to be obvious about how she was slowing her pace to match his. A man his age—only about seven years older than her—shouldn't be working this hard. She racked her mind for any recent news stories that mentioned anything about his health. Nothing. They were all about his golden touch, fabulous mergers and net worth. Or sometimes about his still-single status.

She guided Connor up the steps to the veranda, dreading how run-down the place looked despite the hours of hard work she and her sisters had put into it. Even this morning Hailey and her new movie star

boyfriend, Finian Alexander, had been out helping put last minute touches on the place. And yet it still appeared neglected.

Maya flashed Connor a bright smile, hoping he wouldn't step on the rotten board third from the top. The last thing she'd need was him to fall through the steps, injure himself and sue them.

"We have a lovely new chimney thanks to Finian Alexander's generosity. Do you know his movies? He just left this morning." No need to tell Connor the man had been part of a frantic working bee, and not here as a guest. "So, anytime you want a fire in the fireplace—you'll notice it's gorgeous flagstone from the Parry Sound quarry—we can set you up."

Connor's glazed eyes took in the veranda as it came into view as though he was seeking a place to collapse. "It's hot."

"You'll find we get a lovely breeze here on the veranda. It's often seven degrees cooler here than in port." Maya tried to keep smiling as she stepped off the stairs. There wasn't enough breeze to whisper the feathers on a hummingbird.

"Is there air conditioning? My assistant said " He frowned as though trying to recall a conversation, his mouth curving into a perfect, kissable arc.

Maya clasped her hands to pull her mind back to business before it filled with fantasies involving Connor laid out in the nude. "Um, no air conditioning. This is pretty rustic, as the ad mentioned. Back to basics, you know?" She swallowed hard. She knew the kinds of places Connor MacKenzie normally stayed. Five star hotels with valet, personal concierge and a penthouse suite. Not this. Hadn't his assistant filled him in?

Maya could so totally replace someone like that in a heartbeat.

"Quaint." He tumbled into a wicker chair, reminding her of a long distance runner whose legs had turned to jelly. "I'll have to remember to

thank Stella.”

“Yes, quaint,” Maya said in a rush. She pointed to a clearing just off the veranda. “This over here used to be the ice shed, and there was an outdoor kitchen, as well. The cottage was built one hundred and ten years ago and has been in the family for—”

He patted his pockets as though seeking a phone. “Does WiFi come with a rustic retreat?”

“Yes, of course. We’re not *that* rustic. The password is *Trixie Hollow*. Zeros for Os. That’s the name of the cottage. If you don’t see the network, let me know and I’ll switch on the generator—sometimes the battery doesn’t hold its charge.” She was talking too much about things he didn’t care about. She’d turned into one of those annoying, nervous, buzzing women she despised.

“I have internet.” He frowned when he failed to find his phone.

“We don’t get cell signal in the cottage. Sorry.” She tugged down her suit jacket. “This way,” she called, opening the wood-framed screen door. “I’ll show you around.”

“No cell signal?”

He was going to ask for her to take him back to shore. She could feel it. Why had she thought this was a good idea? Why had she allowed herself to get excited?

Or maybe someone needed to bring back the real Connor MacKenzie, because this couldn’t possibly be him. She didn’t know who this guy was, but he was *not* the man she’d planned the next two weeks of her life around. Truth be told, it didn’t really matter if he didn’t talk to her for the next fourteen days, as working for him would be better than being the fill-in gopher girl at the local dealership, where there was absolutely no chance of advancement. And missing a few shifts at the Bar ‘n’ Grill wouldn’t exactly kill her, either.

But still, this version of Connor was Well, she couldn't quite put her finger on what it was. It was more a case of who he *wasn't*.

"You can get a decent signal on the dock, or if you take a nice little hike to the top of the hill out back."

"Landline?"

She shook her head and he let out a disgruntled sound.

"We can Skype or VoIP, though. Unlimited data. You wanted rustic and no interruptions, and that's what we offer." She turned to face him, standing close enough to be perceived as challenging. "That's what you booked, that's what you get."

The screen door slammed behind Connor as he moved a few inches closer. For a moment she feared being alone with him on an island. So far away from everyone, and with a version of her hero that she hadn't anticipated. And he was tall. Taller than she'd realized. He filled the wide door frame and created a shadow over her.

"My room?"

Maya let out a soft breath of relief.

"Right. You'll be staying in Daphne's—the Daphne Room. Very nice. View of the water." She hurried across the open plan living room and pushed on the door to her youngest sister's room. The white-painted, antique bedroom set looked cozy and inviting. "Upstairs is a conference room slash large office. Can I do anything for you as your executive assistant?" She stood in the doorway to his room, uncertain.

He said nothing as he walked past her and fell onto the bed, splayed out, facedown.

From her position on the threshold, she leaned closer. Should she be checking for a pulse? Taking off his shoes so they didn't mark Daphne's white bedspread?

"Um, Mr. MacKenzie?"

She didn't expect being his personal assistant would be so *personal*. She'd expected him to remain formal and for her to be hurrying around after him, scrawling ideas in a notebook.

"Maybe we should discuss my tasks later. Right now all you need to know is that the bathroom is down the hall. Kitchen, the opposite end. I'll be around the whole time, so if you need anything let me know."

A sound came from the bed and she took a tentative step closer. The sound came again. It was a snore.

Feeling strangely rejected, Maya left the room and closed the door. She'd go take a shower and change into something more casual, then reread the notes from Stella, his Toronto assistant. Just because he was sleeping didn't mean she had time to twiddle her thumbs.



CONNOR STOOD outside the bathroom and smiled as he listened to the shower run. Stella had done well, bringing this temporary assistant up to speed so quickly. Thank the stars and lucky paperweights that his new woman—even though she was a babbling, nervous wreck—was the type to stay on top of details. Otherwise there would be no way he could get through the next two and a half days of being disconnected.

He rested a hand on the doorknob, turning it to go in. This woman knew what he wanted after an afternoon of travel and a nap. She might even be better than Stella, if she caught on to his needs this quickly. And that's what he needed, if he was going to use the next few days to prove to his doctor that he wasn't on the brink of a stress-related heart attack, or a life-changing collapse due to exhaustion. A man such as Connor MacKenzie didn't need two weeks off of work—a few days would suffice.

He stepped into the misty, warm bathroom. It was exactly the way he liked it. Good old Stella. He needed to give her a raise, even though it was her fault he was stuck here for the weekend. Leave it to her to threaten to quit if he didn't listen to the doctor and take a few days to see if he could decompress. And as much as he liked to think that his secretary, Em, could fill Stella's shoes until he found a new assistant, he knew Stella was simply irreplaceable.

Shaking his head, he tossed his sunglasses on the sink counter and inspected his black eye. Yep, it still looked awful—just like the rest of him. Glancing away from his pale reflection, he peeled off his shirt, doffed his shorts and underwear. He picked up the shorts and inspected them. He hadn't realized he still owned any that weren't a form of businesswear. He didn't even wear shorts on the golf course. Where had these come from?

Smiling at the towel laid out for him beside the folded casual clothes, he shook his head in wonder. How had Stella managed to find time to go shopping for him? She was amazing. Knowing her, the new clothes probably fit perfectly, even though his waistline had decreased over the past few months.

He pulled back the curtain on the old-fashioned claw-foot tub, eager to let the water wash over him.

"Oh."

His temp assistant scrambled to cover herself, but then, with a change of mind that surprised him, turned to face him. Full on. Nude. Water cascading over her curves as though she was a nymph, ultra feminine and seductively wet.

"This shower is obviously in use," she snapped.

"So it seems." She was sexier without her clothes on. Definitely. She had round hips and a narrow, high waist that had been hidden under the suit jacket she'd been wearing earlier. It had hinted at her shape,

but this was so much better, he decided, eyeing her belly button. He liked that she worked out and took care of herself, but still had curves and an irresistible softness that would make any man with testosterone in his veins stand up and say hallelujah. And heavens above, those shoulders especially with water tumbling over them like floods off a mountain.

She was a mermaid. No, a siren. A siren for sure.

"Enjoy what you see?" She placed her hands on her hips. Her new position changed the way the water poured, making it head for the gully down the center of her chest.

Mmm. She was gorgeous. And sassy. He liked sassy.

He didn't need to glance down to know his exhausted body wasn't reacting to her *Playboy*-worthy physique in a way she rightly deserved. He wasn't sure if it was betraying him or saving him in this situation, but his pride was leaning toward betrayal. Although the silver lining of not saluting her form with his manhood was that maybe she'd be less likely to beat him out of the room with a back scrubber.

"What does your name mean?" Shifting his hands to cover himself, he met her eyes. They sparked with daring, and something within him tugged, drawing him closer, even though he hadn't moved a muscle. "You're interesting."

Most women would have rammed him in the nuts and had him strung up on sexual harassment charges by now. He'd stared for too long at something an honorable man would have looked away from. He should have apologized, left the room. Not gawked, analyzed and then started an asinine conversation about her name.

The city had wrecked him and destroyed the man he'd once been.

How had he not noticed?

"A mermaid? Siren? Greek goddess?" he probed.

The woman was assessing him as much as he was her. Her dark blue eyes were flecked with yellow. Pretty. Unfortunately, she didn't seem to think much of what she saw. Maybe it was his lack of physical response. That had to be insulting. A relief for sure, but also insulting.

Her earlier admiration had dried up. There was no cloud of excitement swirling around her, only brewing storms.

"A nymph," she replied finally.

"That's it. Right." He turned away.

"You know..."

He turned back, head quirked in question.

"You know..." Her voice shook as she repeated the phrase. Her cheeks had pink splotches. Uh-oh. "If we're going to be living together we need to set some ground rules. Namely, if the shower is running—which you can hear from outside the bathroom—don't come in."

"And you could learn to lock the door."

"It's broken." Her voice was hard.

Everything around here was broken, including himself. Connor didn't know whether to make himself comfortable or to run away. He pushed his fingers through his hair, then, remembering he'd tossed aside his sunglasses, grabbed them and put them on.

Maya's voice rose. "And if you happen to barge into the bathroom while I am showering, leave. Don't open the curtain and stare at me like a pervert. I'm not an object you purchased with your rental."

Oh, boy.

"Hon, everything was laid out."

"Don't call me hon."

"Towel." He pointed to the fluffy object folded on the small bench. "Shampoo. Toothbrush. Clothes."

"I am not your personal butler. This is not the Hilton."

"I know. The Hilton doesn't make it a habit of leaving mouse turds on my pillowcase. They prefer chocolate mints."

"I'll take care of that." Her chin lifted in a way that he could have sworn made her chest perkier. Was that possible? He wanted to see it again. "In the meantime, eyes up here." She pointed to her own eyes, and despite everything, he wanted to kiss her. Kiss her for being strong while being exposed.

Man, he liked her already.

But most of all, he wanted to kiss her for reminding him that there were still people left in his world who would stand up to him. That right there was worth every penny in his bank account.

"I should explain that my assistant does these things for me in the city. I like a shower after flying and I prefer the bathroom steamy." He swept a hand toward the laid-out toiletries.

Oh. Was that lavender shirt there before? The white lace bra folded on top? Pink razor? Wow. He wasn't just losing it, he was *gone*. He placed a thumb and index finger over his eyelids and then pinched the bridge of his nose. "I'm a bit exhausted and not myself. I apologize. If it isn't within your job description to make my life easy, then fine. You can take care of faxes."

He left the bathroom and slammed the door, laughing to himself. Fax machine. Nobody sent faxes anymore. And this place didn't even have a landline.

Connor had been hoping to find a wet bar after leaving his assistant to finish washing the conditioner out of her shoulder-length hair, but the only liquor he could find was a bottle of vodka stashed in the fridge freezer. He sat on one of the veranda's wicker chairs and sipped the cold drink from a short glass.

Much better.

He stared at the swaying trees, then closed his eyes. There was the breeze his spitfire nymph had promised. It was nice. Strong enough to brush away any mosquitoes, but not so much he needed a sweater. His vision blurred and spun slightly as he looked out at the maples and oaks again, but it wasn't the vodka. It was his new friend, fatigue. For weeks he'd found himself struggling to focus on conversations, unable to recall basic facts such as his phone number, and once, even his company's name, which were his own initials—CM Enterprises, Ltd. But two days ago—or was it only yesterday morning?—he'd woken up, his vision blotchy, his head unable to retain a thought for longer than five seconds. He'd had to concentrate incredibly hard just to pretend to be alive. When he'd walked into his office door frame after arriving over three hours late, and couldn't figure out if he was hurt or not, Stella had rushed him straight to the ER, fearing he'd had an aneurysm.

Turned out he was only burned out. Really, really burned out. And according Dr. Tiang, about to collapse and have all sorts of permanent system shutdowns if he didn't get some serious rest.

Apparently his body hadn't received the urgent memo that he was Connor MacKenzie and that he needed to remain an indestructible human. Instead, it was going rogue and humiliating him into submission.

He had the weekend before he returned for his follow-up. A weekend to cure himself enough to prove that the man with the medical degree was over exaggerating. Sure, Stella had booked this place for two weeks, based on the doc's initial recommendation, but she had to be nuts if she thought Connor—who could complete a merger from start to finish in less than thirty-six hours—was going to need longer than an extended weekend to get over a little fatigue.

Connor sipped his drink, willing his mind to wind down enough that it would shut off the never-ending list of things to do, so he could relax. He absently patted his shorts pocket for his smartphone. Right. Stella had done something with it so he'd be forced to unplug on this executive retreat—she even got Em in on it, if he'd hazard a guess. Some retreat this place was. It was more like real life detox for the plugged-in businessman. He tapped a finger on the sweaty vodka glass. The worst and scariest part was that he couldn't summon the energy to care that he'd dropped everything to go hang out on a remote island. He just couldn't get there.

And *that* freaked him out.

He had mergers, acquisitions and glad-handing events he needed to take care of, and he'd gone totally off grid.

He raised his sunglasses and rubbed his eyes, being careful around the bruising on his right. He ran a hand over his face, wondering who he'd become. To his right, the old wood screen door that led to the

living room banged shut with a *tap-tap-tap*, a loose bit of screen flapping in the breeze. Everything in this place was falling apart. He really needed to talk to Stella about what he expected in a retreat.

"Are you ready for supper?"

Connor turned, half expecting his mother. He flipped his shades down a moment too late. Oh well, he couldn't keep the bruise hidden forever, and she'd obviously seen it when he'd stared at her in the bathroom.

Smooth move.

"Mr. MacKenzie, are you hungry?"

She came closer, her brown curls leaving distracting wet circles on her T-shirt well below her collarbone. For a moment he wondered if he wasn't allowed the vodka. Was it her own personal stash that helped her get over the quiet desperation that had to be her life if she lived in shoddy suits and this run-down place? He could sense her need for something more. It was all there in her eyes, waiting to be let out, along with a hungry fire and intelligence. It was the kind of hunger that would lead to her overworking herself to death for his benefit.

Just what he needed. An opportunity to get a ton of work done when he was supposed to be kicking back.

"All right, I'll check again later."

Impatient lady.

Although, maybe it was him. Everyone seemed to expect answers from him before they had even stopped talking these days. Which was perplexing. He was Mr. Snap Decision and had instincts that killed in the business world. He owned Toronto.

He was feeling slightly queasy.

She'd said something about eating

That might be a good plan. He wasn't sure he'd eaten today.

"Yeah, food."

"Yeah, food?"

He sighed at the contempt she was trying to hide in her voice. Oh, right. Manners.

"Sorry. Food. Please."

"Much better."

"And could you hustle it up?" He loved the way her expression turned from satisfaction over his apology to mild outrage, her high cheekbones flushing. "I'm hungry and beat."

"You really aren't the king any longer, are you?" Her sad tone held a touch of pity.

He snorted to himself. As if he was someone pitiful. Didn't she know who he was? Anger flashed through him, and before he could tamp it down, fatigue was causing him to say things he was already wishing he could pull back. "And you think you can top my position with your shoddy suit, and acting as my babysitter in a falling-down cottage? What do you think *you* have that will get you to the top, sweetheart?"

Man, maybe he *was* burned out. Usually he could hold on to his anger and not treat others that way, especially an assistant. They put up with more than enough crap without him giving them attitude.

"Good grades haven't done it yet," she said, pulling her shoulders back in defiance. "So yeah, why not babysit some washed up has-been?" She sat in the chair beside him, grabbed his drink and knocked it back.

He blinked at her, trying to prod his brain into processing this new side to his assistant. Was she being insolent? Insulting? Or simply delivering his own secret fears in a blatantly direct way that felt similar to a hard-hitting turn-on?

He liked her. A lot.

"Has-been, huh?" He forced his hand to unclench.

She leaned on the arm of her chair. "Where did you go?"

He stared at the dancing trees, buying time in order to delve meaning from her words. He hadn't gone anywhere but here, and he had a feeling her question had to do with the pitiful look she'd given him earlier. He blinked long and hard, and took a sip of vodka, but his glass was missing. Brain definitely not engaging. All cogs plugged with something gooey.

Connor blinked again and the glass was back in his grasp, the woman at the screen door. He blinked again and she was gone. He peered into his empty glass. Was it the vodka clogging his mind? He didn't think so, seeing as his assistant with the swaying hips seemed to have downed over half of it, and he was a man who could hold a drink. He'd had plenty of training in business meetings and was known for being able to knock them back for hours on end and still retain his sharp business edge.

Which meant he was fried, if a few fingers of vodka had him gummed up.

Or

Nope, probably just fried.

Sleep. He needed two full days of sleep, then he'd be better again and could go back to Toronto to finish the merger for some young company that had grown too big too soon, and was ripe for this T. rex to devour. Oh, life. So beautifully predictable.

His assistant reappeared, coming at him in fragmented chunks of information. First at the door, then closer. Then in the seat next to him. A fresh drink appeared in his hand. One in hers. She was tipping her glass to clink against his, and hers cracked from the impact.

His world was tipping.

He shoved his sunglasses back up his nose and tried harder to focus, to control his movements.

The woman let out a bitter, jaded laugh, rubbed her eyes, then chucked her glass over the veranda railing, leaving an arc of clear liquid streaming through the air.

She lifted the bottle to her painted lips instead of getting a fresh glass.

Ah yes, he preferred this version of his assistant so much better. They could get into such fun.

She was staring at him.

"What?" he asked.

"Where did you go?"

He closed his eyes. She was confusing.

"You. Where did you go?" She was drawing out her words as if he was new to the language.

"To business school?"

"Are you on drugs?"

He laughed. She was funny, too.

"Are you?" she asked.

"No. Maybe I should try some."

She let out a sigh so heavy it could rival any teenaged girl having a conversation with her parents. "What's your deal?"

He shrugged.

"No, really. I came to see you last October at the Metro Toronto Conference Center, where you were the keynote speaker and were talking about the confluence of—"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah." He couldn't concentrate when she used long sentences. He was still trying to figure out "October" and "Metro Toronto Conference Center" and what that should mean to him. He pointed to himself. "Five-words-or-less lane."

"See?" She turned to him, her knee pressing into his leg. Her skin was smooth. She shaved a long way up her thigh, and he wondered

where she stopped.

He studied his own leg. He was wearing shorts that seemed familiar. He fingered the material. They were nice, but he didn't recall owning shorts that fit. Did his assistant buy them?

Wait. He'd already had this conversation with himself, and the hem was slightly frayed and they were loose in the waist. Part of his brain wanted to recall these shorts.

His assistant sat back, slouched in the wicker chair, the bottle back at her lips. "Where'd he go?" she asked. "Who's the grouch who showed up today?"

Connor let out a laugh. This woman played hardball. "I really like you, too."

"My name is Maya. Since you have obviously forgotten it already."

"Says who?"

"I can tell." Her voice became slightly breathless, her face alight. "Can I call you Connor?"

He had been right earlier. She was some new grad who thought he'd spout a million-dollar tip if she hung around him long enough. There had been a time when he'd got off on feeling as though he was someone magical, but now it was just another thing dragging on him. He was too busy to mollicoddle newbies and explain every little thing. Besides, most of what he did was instinct based on knowledge and experience, as well as being able to read people. And oh, tarnation, why did his head hurt so bad?

"Can I?" she repeated.

"I don't care what you call me."

"Thank you." She sat up, her chin set in a chippy way that sent off warning systems in his brain. "Connor, I think you should know that I recently graduated with distinction from the University of Toronto "

Oh boy, here it came. The sales pitch. I'll work for you for free if you just give me a leg up. Let me stalk you. Be your shadow. You'll never know I'm there.

He closed his eyes, and when he opened them again she'd moved on to talking about something else.

"and so if you need anything at all while you are here on vacation, let me know."

He'd fallen asleep. Thank goodness he was wearing his shades, so she likely hadn't noticed.

"I know I'm not intimately familiar with all of your systems, but I'll do my best to help you enjoy your time here at Trixie Hollow while—"

"Trixie Hollow? What is this? Disneyland?"

"It's the cottage's name."

"Sounds like Disneyland."

She appeared taken aback and he fought off an apology. Old money and their cottage names. How had he forgotten? He was putting his foot in it, left, right, and center, as though he was trying to do the hokey pokey with a bunch of toddlers.

"You should build a real cottage." He knocked back his drink and winced, surprised to see her smile. He had kind of been hoping to ward her off so she'd go find some food. He needed to eat, then sleep. Maybe take turns doing each one until his doctor-mandated penance was up.

She stood and shook his hand. "I was going to offer you a refund and put you on the next boat out of here, but I think we're going to get along just fine, Mr. Mac—Connor. I'll go fetch supper. Stay here and enjoy the view."

With a hop in her step, Maya vanished into the cottage, and Connor shook his head, wondering when he'd get off the island and back into his life, where everything made sense.



MAYA SET out plates and cutlery on the old painted table on the veranda. While she worked, she played a podcast about developing effective calls to action, stopping every so often to make notes. It was a typical gorgeous Muskoka evening, and they would be able to see the water, the trees and the busy bird feeder as they dined. The bugs wouldn't be too bad if she lit a mosquito coil or two upwind from where they sat.

Smoothing her shirt over her ribs, she closed her eyes, shaking her head in disappointment. So far this day had been a humiliating, gut-punching disaster—everything from Connor handing off his bag as if she were a bellboy, to him busting in on her in the shower. Thankfully, she hadn't been having one of her Connor MacKenzie fantasies. She straightened a fork and stepped back. On the bright side, she supposed the chances were fairly high that she wouldn't be having any more of those fantasies to worry about.

What had he been thinking, walking into the bathroom and throwing back the curtain? Other than him believing everything in the world was for him, and the only reason other people existed was to make his life easier.

She snorted and let the kitchen door slap shut behind her as she went to check on their supper. She still couldn't believe the way Connor had just stared at her as the water poured over her skin. His eyes had been so blank, so assessing, with no hint of lust or longing. She had a nice figure, so what was his problem? Why hadn't he reacted? He'd just stood there and gazed at her as if as if she was an asset he was considering merging with.

Well, if he was going to be like that, then she would be herself and not hold back, as her sisters had recommended. True, being her tell-it-like-it-is self might not be the best way to get the job she wanted in

Toronto, but the temptation to throw his boring, washed-up self in his face was simply too strong. Besides, it almost seemed as though he enjoyed her tough and sassy attitude. Plus, if there were sparks flying they'd get a lot more work done than if they were perpetually pussyfooting around each other.

And when he'd suggested building a real cottage? She'd never fallen in lust faster in her life. Her hormones must be in overdrive, because this version of Connor MacKenzie didn't exactly line up with her checklist of what she sought in a man. Yet suddenly she was cooking him supper. Well, that was part of the package deal, but still... She *wanted* to make supper for him, to show him that she appreciated his point of view. That she, too, valued new and modern. Yeah, this place was great and all, but if given the choice between this old cottage and something that kept the mice and bugs out, as well as cleaned up properly, she was in. Maybe if it also had better solar panels, or a brand-new, energy efficient generator. Having her long, steamy shower earlier had probably cost her five bucks, as running the ancient generator to power the aging water heater wasn't exactly economical.

She paused in the small kitchen, wondering if one day they could renovate this place as the neighbors across the strait had with JoHoBo. They'd taken an aged behemoth similar to Trixie Hollow and totally redone it. Nothing was the same, and it looked great. Fabulous, even.

The egg timer dinged. Time to check on the deli pizza toasting in the oven. Done. She tossed a layer of fresh tomatoes overtop, before slicing it on an old cutting board that would double as a serving platter. She had added more cheese and a layer of olives and bacon bits before putting it in the oven, in hopes that Connor might believe she was a real cook and not just dressing up premade meals.

She wiped her hands and carried the pizza out to the table. Maybe he ate out so often he didn't know what a home-cooked meal tasted like.

"Ready!" she called.

She heard a surprised snort from around the corner of the veranda and smiled. Probably woke him up. Good. She could pick his sleep-addled brain for business tips while dining.

She set the pizza on the table and realized the meal wasn't going to be enough. There weren't even appetizers, and only cookies from the bakery section for dessert. What had she been thinking? This wasn't going to do for a man used to Michelin-star meals.

Connor stumbled around the corner, one hand on the wall as though he was about to fall. "Big eater, huh?" He made his way toward her and crashed into the nearest chair, at the head of the table as though he owned the place. His shades were drawn down over his black eye and he moved as though he'd had an incredibly long day. She half wondered if she should take him to see a doctor. He seemed way too tired.

"Um " Maya stared at him as he started filling his plate. "You all right?"

"Yeah."

Maya sagged into the chair kitty-corner from Connor. She was half tempted to sit on the other end of the table, but it would seem ridiculous whenever they had to pass anything. Tomorrow she'd take a few leaves out of the table, then she could sit opposite him and create an equal balance of power. At breakfast, the showdown would be on. For now, she'd simply be grateful that he was more talkative than when she'd picked him up at the airstrip. Even though he still wasn't the man she'd idolized for years and dreamed of being mentored by. This man to her right was only a husk.

"So, what are you working on these days?" she asked, taking a piece of pizza.

Connor shrugged, consuming half his thin slice in one massive bite.

Maya eyed the pizza. She'd better not take another portion until he slowed down, for there might not be enough. She hadn't counted on him eating way more than her.

"I heard you closed a merger with Stillwater Financial a few months ago?"

He gave a barely-there nod.

She stared at him, her slice of pizza drooping. Seriously? The poster boy for the business world couldn't even be businessy? And when was he going to start assigning her tasks?

"Bad name," he said finally.

"Bad name?"

"Still water. Stagnant. Not refreshing or revitalizing. Not moving or keeping up. Bad feng shui."

Maya dropped her pizza. Had Connor MacKenzie, business king of Toronto's financial district, just spewed feng shui at her? Over a company name?

Silence took over the table, to the point where it felt as though the birds at the feeder were screaming.

Maya couldn't understand it. Last night she'd had one of her best flying dreams, which were always a sign that something good was about to happen. Being suspended above the ground, propelled forward without having to walk, had been exhilarating. She'd never quite gotten it right until last night, when everything had finally felt easy. She'd been happy knowing she was in the right place at last.

Which only made Connor's lack of enthusiasm that much more confusing and crushing.

"I'm moving to Toronto in the fall," she said, hoping the subject of a job would come up. Namely, that she could come work for his company, CM Enterprises.

"You prefer smog and traffic jams?" Connor shoved another slice in his mouth and pushed himself away from the table.

Maya wiped her fingers on a paper napkin. "My word." He couldn't possibly eat like that at business meetings, could he? People would run away in horror. "Have you ever tried tasting your food, or do you always enjoy resembling a vacuum cleaner?"

Connor blinked. Then his shoulders straightened and a blip of fear pulsed through Maya's system. Uh-oh. This was the Mr. MacKenzie she'd seen in Toronto. The one she'd been expecting. And now he'd arrived, after she'd verbally slapped him across the face.

Good to know what woke him up, but why? Her sister Melanie was right. Maya needed a filter between her mental gas pedal and her mouth.

"I was hungry," he replied.

"I can tell."

"Did you say you have a degree in business?" His voice was calm. It had been all afternoon, but this was scary calm. A look-out-for-that-incoming-pink-slip kind of calm.

"Yes." She gripped the table, not daring to say more.

He patted his mouth with the cheap napkin she'd set out, and threw it on his plate. "That's nice."

"Graduated with distinction."

"Good at writing resignation letters?"

Oh, ants on a stick. She'd just poked her head into a fire ants' nest, hadn't she?

"Just kidding," he said.

She was starting to dislike those sunglasses. It was difficult to get a gauge on him when she couldn't see his eyes.

"What are your plans while you're here?" she asked, struggling to keep her voice even. "I can help with keeping on top of any projects

you're in the middle of. Stella said to take a load off of you so you can enjoy your retreat."

"I'm fine." Connor stood, shoving his chair across the veranda with a scraping sound. "I'll be heading back to Toronto on Monday."

"What? For a meeting? I can come."

"I'm sleeping for the next two days, then I'll be heading home." He fingered the neck of his shirt as though looking for a necktie to straighten. He suddenly seemed very Mr. MacKenzie, the King of Toronto. "I doubt I'll be coming back so don't plan anything special on my account."

"But you booked two weeks!" Maya stood, panic setting in. She'd told her sisters he was renting the place for half a month, and she'd quit her crappy job for this. It was Maya's turn to cough up a painful amount in order to save the cottage from the tax man, and the only way she could do that was if Connor stayed. If he didn't, she knew she'd feel compelled to offer him a refund even though there wasn't time to find a new renter on such short notice. She needed him. With shaking hands she smoothed her shirt and rolled her shoulders. Then she gave him a big smile. "I know we didn't get off to a brilliant start, but you can't just leave."

Shoot. She sounded desperate.

If Connor left, she'd have to face failure and her always-the-hero big sister, Hailey, who'd been secretly bailing out this place for the past five years, to the point of remortgaging her own home and business. Summer was already a quarter over. They were running out of time.

"I can and will leave," Connor stated. "Keep the balance unless you re-rent the place."

"You signed a a—"

"It doesn't say I have to physically be here."

"Okay, true." Maya spread her palms on the table. *All right, girl, stay calm. There's an opportunity here. Failure is the best way to learn.* And she was failing, so what could she learn, other than that Connor MacKenzie was a big letdown who made her want to cry so long and hard everyone for miles around would need to build arks?

She inhaled slowly. Opportunity. Opportunity. "Before you go, let me ask you something. What would you do to change this retreat?"

"Other than bring in a phone, air conditioner, exterminator, carpenter, maid, interior decorator and—no offense—a cook? Other than that?"

Maya leaned forward. "Yeah, all that." *Tell me something I don't know, sweet cheeks.*

"I'd sell it. The land—premium. And a private island? Gold."

"I've received an offer from a developer."

Connor leaned forward, intrigued.

"Want to check it out? It's in the boat. I haven't had a chance to read it yet."

"Do I have to walk down that path?"



MAYA RAN UP THE PATH, clutching the offer from Rubicore Developments as she shoved her curls off her forehead. Should she scan the papers before presenting them to Connor, so she'd have her own view on them? She didn't want to be in the dark if he read it first and then began referring to clauses she knew nothing about. Maya slowed, fingering the sealed envelope. What if the conditions were so awful that Connor would think she was a dolt for sharing them with him?

But if it was a good offer, she and her sisters could sell the island before it was taken from them. They would be able to live happily ever

after with a nice, big, fat check and no more worries about repairs, renovations, and killer taxes.

Only she was pretty sure her sisters didn't see it that way. In fact, Maya wasn't completely sure she saw it that way, either. Even though, like Connor, she'd love to have something a little less run-down.

She started back down the path to the dock, noticing how dusk was falling and darkening her way. She slipped into a Muskoka chair and peeled open the envelope. Darting a glance across the strait to where men from Rubicore were working feverishly under the protection of the trees, she wondered what they were up to and why they wanted Nymph Island, as well. If they were planning to destroy Baby Horseshoe Island by demolishing things such as the rocky point, then it might be a good idea to sell while the getting was good. Who knew what Trixie Hollow would be worth if it was only a few hundred yards away from whatever they were doing over there?

Holding her breath, she scanned the papers for the numbers. Where were the numbers? She flipped through the pages.

Finally... She leaned back in the chair and refrained from giving Baby Horseshoe the finger, in case Aaron Bloomwood, the representative who had dropped off the offer, was watching.

The offer was disappointing—even if it was better than what any of the sisters had in the bank. It would cover the tax bill, setting them free of the financial burdens the cottage had caused them. But dividing the number by four—five, if their mother wanted a share—wouldn't do anything other than make the big problem go away and give them all a bit of breathing room. It wasn't enough to warrant giving up something that meant a lot to the family. Especially when Maya's cut wouldn't even pay off her student loans.

Leaning forward, she rubbed her forehead. She needed an amazing job, or at least a few editors to start saying yes to the business article

series she'd been sending out. But without a really great job she'd stay stuck. She had to go to Toronto, but needed money to set herself up there. Otherwise, where was she going to live until she got a few good paychecks?

The offer wasn't enough to make a difference in her life. Plus, living in Toronto and saying you had a cottage in Muskoka held a certain prestige that made Maya glow inside. She might not be rich. She might not be old money, but she had what most Torontonians coveted.

And she had three sisters to share it with.

Standing, she gazed out at Baby Horseshoe Island. As much as she loved progress, something felt off with what Rubicore was doing over there.

She rubbed her arms, hugging herself. Somehow this offer had changed things for her. She couldn't explain how or why, but she felt more connected, more protective over the cottage, now that someone else wanted it. Maybe it was the idea of giving it up to a developer like Rubicore.

Shaking her head, she started up the path again. She was turning into a softy like her sisters. If Connor still wanted to discuss the offer, maybe she'd ask him about counteroffer tips—just in case her family decided to explore the deal. Maya tapped the envelope against her free hand. It was always good to have a backup plan, especially when Hailey was at risk of losing her home and business.

Maya stepped onto the veranda and checked around the corner to see if her guest was still at the dining table. No Connor. Opening the screen door, she entered the dim living room and spotted him in an armchair in front of the cold fireplace. His shoulders were so broad she longed to trail her fingers over them, and if he'd been anything like the man she'd envisioned, lean down to lay a kiss on his lips.

Not professional in the least, and somewhat unexpected, but somehow so very tempting all the same.

Briskly, she joined him, trying to quell her nerves. It was business time. The way she handled herself with this offer would show him who she was and what she was made of.

She took the chair next to him and pulled the papers out of the envelope, hoping he'd stop gazing at the fireplace. Well, she assumed that was what he was zoning out over. He was wearing shades again. Which was silly, seeing as she'd already noticed his black eye, plus it wasn't the least bit bright in here. Obviously, there was a juicy story behind that bruise, and the fact that he wanted to hide it made her want to discover that story all the more.

She cleared her throat and waved a hand in front of Connor's face. A light snore made his lips vibrate, and she leaned back in her chair. The King of Toronto just kept disappointing her.

Connor's body ached as though he'd been tortured. The room smelled like warm, old wood. The bedding was soft with age. He propped himself on an elbow and squinted at the morning light streaming in through the bedroom window. He was wearing what he'd worn yesterday and he was on that island with the over-eager assistant who confused him. What was her name again? She had an amazing figure.

He went to adjust his manhood before realizing that it, too, was broken. No morning salute from the soldier down below, not even a hint.

He sighed.

Things were worse than he'd been letting on.

Groaning, he sat up. Why was he so sore? It was as if every muscle had been strung tight in the night. He stretched tentatively, the aches slowly subsiding.

If this was an effect of the fatigue, he might need longer than two days to get his feet under him again.

He shook his head and blinked away the uncomfortable sensation in his head. No, he had a plan. A deadline. He always met his deadlines. Being tired wasn't going to affect that. He'd just buckle down and relax while he was here. Get it done. Then on Monday he'd get back at it.

Simple.

He stepped into the quiet living room, wondering if his assistant had set up coffee. He stood for a moment, getting his bearings. Coffee to the right. No, left. Yes, right.

Where was she? Wasn't she staying here, too?

He moved into the kitchen, which had been added on at some point and didn't quite match the rest of the cottage, other than for its slightly neglected feel.

He lifted the coffeepot and gave it a shake. Empty. He found coffee in the cupboard, water, hit the brew button and waited. This was a really quiet coffeemaker, considering how old it looked.

He turned to a small radio on the counter and tuned it to FM 96.3, smiling as the kitchen filled with the sounds of his favorite opera. Humming to the music, he allowed the counter to support him as he watched the coffeepot. What was wrong with the thing? There was no coffee dripping into it.

The screen door banged, followed by the light padding of feet across the living room before another door shut. He hurried toward the sound. He needed coffee. What kind of game was his assistant playing? And where was his breakfast?

He pushed open the closed door and was met with a squeal.

Maya, her hair streaming water, tugged the top of her bathing suit over her exposed flesh. "Didn't we go over this already?" she snapped.

"This isn't the bathroom."

"Do I really have to explain what closed doors mean?"

"What are you doing?"

She grabbed the edge of the door and slammed it shut, Connor barely getting out of the way in time. The lock clicked into place.

"Your coffeemaker doesn't work."

"We're on an island, Connor." There was a bitterness in her voice as well as a "duh."

"And? Hawaii is an island and they have working coffeemakers. Same with Tahiti, Jamaica "

"We don't have power out here."

He nearly tried opening the door again. No power? But he'd just been listening to the radio. Batteries. Right. Then why have appliances if there wasn't power? That was really screwed up. Wait, hadn't she mentioned something about a generator?

This place required so much work.

He dropped his hand from the doorknob. She was probably fully undressed by now, covering those perfect curves in delicate lingerie. He pushed a fist against his forehead. What was his problem? He was fantasizing about seeing his assistant naked and he couldn't even get his soldier to salute.

And she was his assistant.

Sighing, he tipped his head forward until his fist was pinned between his skull and the door.

His eyelids drifted shut. He should go back to bed.

The door opened and he fell into the room, crashing past Maya to the floor. His face mashed into an area rug and his shoulders screamed from the effort of trying to slow the impact with his arms.

"Were you peeking through the keyhole?"

He groaned and pushed himself onto his back. "No, I was falling asleep."

"Are you narcoleptic?"

He cracked a smile. "No, but my caffeine levels are dangerously depleted." He licked his lips. His top one was already starting to swell.

"Do you want me to start the generator for coffee?" She leaned closer, taking on a sympathetic caring vibe that made him cover his face before

struggling to sit up.

Everything was such an effort.

"I'm going back to bed."

"Do you want coffee?"

He shook his head. The idea of getting to his feet and struggling back to his room was too much to contemplate. Maybe he could just sleep here. It felt good not having to hold up his body.

He stared at her bare ankles. Her long legs disappearing into cute shorts. That fine waist of hers. T-shirt; no crappy business attire. What did that mean? Wasn't she supposed to be an executive assistant?

"You look good from this angle," he said.

She whacked him with her wet bathing suit.

He let out a chuckle. He liked her spark.

"I swim around the island every morning when I'm here. So don't come barging into my room, because I never miss my morning swim."

"Never?"

"Never."

Determined little thing. "I used to swim."

"Used to? What, did you forget how to ride a bike, too?"

"You're snarky."

She shifted her weight as though determining whether to apologize.

He reached for her. "Help me up."

"How'd you get so old?" she asked, struggling to help him. He kind of wished she'd do all the work, but apparently they'd need a crane for that.

"I'm one of those working stiffs they warn you about," he grunted. Oh, the irony of that statement. He definitely did not have something stiff.

"I hardly think running your own company makes you a working stiff. And you know you can swim while you're here. I'm sure you

haven't forgotten how."

Connor, finally on his feet, felt out of breath. He gave a fake perky hop to dispel the worry in Maya's eyes. His entire body was way too heavy to be able to function properly and there was no way he could fake a spring in his step for longer than his little hop. Not like Maya. She was all spring and bounce and perkiness. A spitfire. A sexy, sexy spitfire.

"Maybe later I'll swim around the island."

Maya shook her head briskly. "No, you need to start by going across the strait to the left of the boathouse. It's shallowest there and you might be able to stand if you need to."

"Are you calling me an out-of-shape wimp?"

"Well, you don't exactly look as though you are doing great, now do you?" She crossed her arms over her perfect chest and raised an eyebrow.

"You're such a mean woman."

She leaned closer, giving him a proud smirk that made him want to kiss her. "I heard businessmen enjoy someone who can keep up."

This girl was going to be trouble. The fun kind of trouble.



CONNOR SAT on the veranda and sipped his coffee, loving the way the midday sun was scorching everything but him. He still couldn't quite figure out why he wasn't wiggling out and stressed about all the things he had to do at work. Normally, sleeping away a Saturday morning as he just had would have anxiety building within him like pressure in a shaken bottle of champagne. Instead, his anxiety merely hovered in the background, a low hum, until he decided to fret about it. Then his heart rate would skyrocket, his chest would grow tight and his hands clench until they ached.

Just thinking about being anxious made his muscles start to contract. No wonder he'd woken up sore. He'd probably slept this way, his subconscious fretting that he was forgetting something important, something lurking behind a corner that would alter his entire business world.

He closed his eyes, trying to focus on the quiet island sounds rather than an engine that was puttering and shuddering as though it was running rich. He cracked his eyelids as Maya thumped by, likely on a mission to do something involving the wrench she was carrying.

He shut his eyes again, promising himself that if he just chilled out and did nothing, thought about nothing, he'd knock the doctor's socks off with a new and improved version of himself. A version that could go back to work and figure out why his latest merger felt as if he was pushing a boulder uphill through slick mud. And maybe figure out why the acquisitions his advisor James Culver had been adding to Connor's portfolio seemed so out of character for the man. Normally, his two advisors were that in name only. They basically sat around, waiting for Connor to hint whether something looked good or not, and even what they should pursue. Then they would help make it happen. Bill Hatfield was great at moving things along, and James had been a solid third in the trio, sorting out details. But suddenly James had started adding projects on his own—with Connor's approval, of course. It was a refreshing change, but somehow it still left Connor more tired than it should.

The engine sound in the background stabilized, running smoothly for a moment before cutting off.

Maya reappeared, her fingertips coated with grease.

"What are you doing? Rebuilding a plane from the war?"

"Generator."

He silently reassessed her. She was sassy and unpredictable, and didn't mind getting her hands dirty—quite literally—if need be. She was also, apparently, smart enough to go to the U of T as well as graduate high in her class.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, shifting his weight, and making the old wicker chair creak.

She gave him a dirty look and continued walking past.

"I meant on this island. Making crappy waffles."

"Hey, those are the best you can buy in a box."

"I was promised meals."

"You've been given meals."

He let out a derisive snort, wanting to see how far he could push her. It was probably her mouth—that mouth with those perfect teeth and lush lips. Her wit. A combo that had probably kept her out of the jobs she wanted or gotten her fired. Or the fact that if her bosses had been like him—only not as broken—they hadn't been able to keep their hands to themselves around her. Or keep up to her. And in the business world there was nothing more threatening to most men than not being able to keep up with a gorgeous young woman such as Maya.

"Nobody said the meals would be fancy," she replied.

"I'm trying to get my health back and you're feeding me processed food."

"What's wrong with your health?"

"Nothing. Just trying to eat healthy." He took a slug of his coffee and went to adjust his shades. *His shades*. He'd forgotten to put them on this morning. Oh well. It wasn't as if she hadn't noticed.

"How'd you get the black eye?"

"Who fired you?" he retorted.

She stepped back as though recovering her balance after a kick to the gut. "When are you going to give me some jobs as your executive

assistant?"

"Interesting reaction."

"Listen, Connor "

"Make sure your sentences are short. My attention span isn't at its greatest."

"Yeah, none of you is."

"Excuse me?" He stood, only to find the world spinning.

"I'm sorry, but you are *not* the man I've idolized for all these years, and the disappointment is a little bit tough to bear when " Her eyes squeezed shut for a moment and it seemed as though she was fighting something supersized.

"Well, I'm sorry my life isn't living up to your dreams, Maya. But I think it's important to keep in mind that, at the moment, I'm your boss as well as your paying guest."

She stepped closer, looking tired. "Connor, I *am* here to help as your assistant, and I apologize for my attitude. Is there something you need from me? Because I need to make a run into port."

He contemplated kissing her, wondering what she'd do if he did. He gave his head a small shake and sat. They were odd together. She put him off guard, made him act like a jerk, but the thing was, he deserved it. All of it. He was a disappointment. Even to himself.

"So? Are you really going back to Toronto?" She jutted a hip, making her legs looking even longer. She was impossible in so many ways, from the length of her legs to her attitude. And the fact that instead of getting miffed at her and her digs, he wanted to pull her into the love seat a few chairs down and find a way to make her his.

"Hello?" She waved a hand in front of his face, her red nails flashing.

"Monday."

"Will you be back?"

"I hope not."

"Then I won't bother buying you the nice waffles." The screen door banged shut behind her, making a new sound as the screws came loose in the lower hinge.

He switched to the chair with a better view of the hummingbird feeder, spilling his coffee in the process. He needed to go home. If he stayed here all week he'd undoubtedly push the two of them into a situation where his manhood couldn't back him up.



MAYA SPOTTED her sister Melanie waiting for her in the marina on her motorcycle. Maya plunked herself on the seat behind her, accepting the offered helmet.

"Seriously? The death trap?"

"It's cheap on gas."

"Next time can we take the car?"

"Sold it."

Maya sighed and secured the strap under her chin. They were all making sacrifices for a rotting old building. What was wrong with them? Was this normal behavior? In one of her sociology classes they'd read a case study where the wealthy, in hard times, would drive their BMWs to a food bank far from home, park a few blocks away, then walk in. They'd keep up the pretense that everything was fine as they held on to their symbols of prestige and money, even when they were losing it all.

Was the Summer family—who had never been well-off—doing the same thing? Were they sacrificing everything to keep their symbol of prestige? The one thing that set them apart from the rest of the locals—as if having a rickety old cottage out here somehow made them "more"?

Or was it something else, such as sentimental value?

Melanie gunned the motorcycle's engine, causing Maya to clutch her so she didn't get left hanging in the air behind the crotch rocket like an unsuspecting cartoon character.

"Warn me!"

Melanie let out a wild laugh.

"Whoa. Who are you and what did you do with Smelly Mellie?"

She laughed again. If she hadn't been wearing one of her ever-present XXL T-shirts, which served to cover her figure, Maya would think something was seriously wrong with her younger sister.

Melanie did an extra lap around the nursing home where their mother resided. Maya figured her sister was either enjoying the cool air as much as Maya was or else was also dreading going inside the most depressing of all places.

As they got off the motorcycle, tucking their helmets under arm, Maya studied Melanie. "You know what would look fabulous on you?"

"If you say black leather "

"I'm actually thinking of a 1950s dress with the big skirt and tight bodice. You'd be totally hot. Simone's started making them for her boutique."

Melanie scowled at the idea of a dress and headed to the automatic doors. "Well, she'll have better luck continuing to sell Hailey's photos than me a dress. Is Simone coming today?"

"The honorary Summer sister will be here as always. And don't you wear skirts for work?"

"That's different. They're less dressy."

"Trade in the XXL shirts for me. Please?" Maya clasped her hands under her chin and batted her eyelashes.

Melanie shoved her through the doorway. "So is he as wonderful as you hoped?"

Maya shivered as the building's air conditioning hit her like a sudden cold front. "It smells like instant potatoes and desperation in here."

"Are you avoiding the subject of Connor MacKenzie?"

"He's an arrogant bum cake." The man was not the career savior Maya had envisioned, and she was confused by her reaction to him. She wanted to mother him and heal whatever was going on with him, but also to fight with him until he yelled and threw things. Then she wanted to take him to her bed and make love to him all night long. The man she'd admired in the TED talks, conferences and newspaper articles had to be in there somewhere.

"Bum cake?" Her sister laughed. "So, you like him, then?"

"Of course. He's infuriating as all get out. I can't decide if I want to hump his brains out or shove him off a boat with a rock tied to his ankles." She let out a frustrated breath. How could she still be attracted to him when he was so disappointing and so so sexy?

"Is he smart?"

"Freaking brilliant. And handsome." She groaned and rolled her head.

"And rich." Melanie was giving her a grin that meant her sister was totally on to her.

"It's more than that." Such as the power he wielded. Total turn on. "Anyway, I'll be rich soon enough, too."

"Starting when, exactly?"

"When he lets me do some work as his assistant and I get some experience to take to Toronto." Maya clapped her hands together and let out a breath. "Then my life will start."

"Why are you so focused on Toronto? I just got a job in a law office in Bracebridge, with way less of a commute, a lower cost of living, and a decent wage. Honestly, I'm not sure why people move to the city."

"Because there are *options* in the city. More room for growth. That's where my kind of jobs are, and the men that go with them. Plus one has the added bonus of not having eighty million neighbors coming in expecting special favors, and they don't spend forty minutes of your appointment chatting you up about your family, health, relationships or lack thereof. And there's operas and stuff."

"And you go to operas?"

Maya laughed. "No. But I *could*."

"For your information, meetings with neighbors only last five minutes."

"Forty-five."

"After the warm-up, five."

The warm-up was forty. Forty wasted minutes. Every single time you met with someone.

"Think about it," Melanie continued. "In the city, when you wanted student loans, the loan officer spent twenty minutes verifying your identity and asking about your program. Around here, they already know all that stuff, so they spent the meeting time chatting. You are a person, Maya. It's an easy appointment and they get the information right. Way better service—and it makes you want to go back again."

Maya stuck out her tongue.

"You know I'm right."

"I'm sorry, I thought you were Melanie, not Hailey."

"Maya " She gave a little sigh.

"Yeah, yeah. Rivalry-shmivalry. We're working together to save the cottage, aren't we? Isn't she letting me have it for the next two weeks, to make a miracle happen by calling the crumbling place an executive retreat?"

"What's going on with you?"

Maya ran her hands down her thighs. "Nothing. I'm just frustrated. I thought going to university was supposed to open my world." They paused to let an elderly man wheel by in his chair. "How's your new job?"

"Fine."

"Fine? Really? A brilliant job in a lovely town with lovely people who speak of lovely things? You're not maximizing your degree, either, are you?"

"Nobody does when they first start out. Especially in law."

"Reality is a wonderful place to be, isn't it?"

Melanie gave a small laugh. "You know what?"

"What?"

"Sometimes you're not bad for a sister. Unfortunately, today's not your day."

"Shut up," Maya said with a grin.

Melanie began walking faster, biting back a smile. Maya matched her stride until they were running down the hall in an attempt to be the first to enter their mother's room.

They rounded the last corner, giggling that none of the nurses had caught them, and ran into Hailey, who frowned and placed a finger over her lips, balancing a homemade triple layer cake on her other hand.

Rivalry? Yeah, it wasn't dead. Look at Hailey. She was already here, had the cake and was therefore going to enter the room first and get the majority of the credit. Of course there was rivalry. It would never die. Rivalry was what sisters did. It meant they loved each other. To death. However that happened to occur.

Mrs. Kowski, one of the residents, edged by with her walker. "That looks wonderful, Hailey." Her eyebrows rose hopefully as she stared at the cake, then at Maya's big sister.

"Come by in ten minutes and you can have a slice, Mrs. Kowski."

"Will do!" The woman increased her pace, heading to the nearby common room. "Supper around here sucks," she called over her shoulder. "I always have room for homemade cake!"

Hailey pointed to Daphne, who was struggling out of the common room down the hall with a mittful of helium balloons. Her five-year-old daughter, Tigger, was leaping alongside, trying to make the balloons bounce off her mother's head, and causing a great deal of static electricity.

Maya laughed. "Who gave Tigger sugar?"

"Maya, light the candles." Hailey was tense, her mouth drawn into a line.

"Where's movie boy?" Maya twisted to check the hall. No sign of Finian Alexander. Had he already taken off on her sister? Because if he hurt Hailey, Maya was going to kick his butt all the way from California to Canada. Hailey wasn't one to take risks, and she'd taken a big one with the bad boy of Hollywood.

"Just light them," her big sister grumbled. "Matches are in my back pocket."

"Chill. I've got it." Maya snatched them from Hailey's pocket and lit the candles. "Tigger's going to think it's for her. Five candles."

Hailey frowned, the line between her eyebrows deepening.

"Relax," Maya said. "She'll know."

Simone, her long black hair waving in time with her brisk stride, hurried up, a small wrapped gift in hand. "Sorry I'm late. Does Catherine know we're here?" She peeked at the closed door they were gathered around before giving everyone a hug. The others talked over each other as they assured her that she was right on time, and that everything was still a surprise, all while getting themselves organized.

"Who has the gift?" Maya asked.

"I had it delivered," Melanie said.

"I brought her a handmade silk scarf from my boutique," Simone added. "Orange, red, and yellow."

"She'll love it," Hailey said.

Maya looked around. Hailey with lit cake. Daphne with balloons. Melanie in charge of the already-delivered gift. Simone with a one-of-a-kind scarf. Maya was the odd one out. "You guys should have told me to do something."

"You were busy." Melanie pushed open their mother's door, nudging Maya so she entered after Hailey, Daphne bringing up the rear with Tigger. "Now sing."

They all burst into the room, singing loudly as though trying to outdo each other. Catherine's eyes shone as she grinned from ear to ear.

"Look at all my girls!" Mrs. Summer pulled her granddaughter to her wheelchair and hugged her close, stroking the child's wild hair. "And look at your pretty party dress."

"Mr. Finian bought it for me." Tigger beamed at Hailey.

"Mom," Maya said, "we all chipped in and bought you a gift. Mellie arranged to have it delivered. Did it arrive?"

"There's a big box in the corner. What's in it?"

"A television stand," Melanie said as Maya leaned over their mother's chair for a hug. She was waved away as Hailey brought the flaming candles and cake closer.

"Make a wish!" Daphne called.

"For sea monkeys!" Tigger added, gripping the wheelchair's armrest as she bounced up and down.

Maya drew the girl away, afraid her staticky hair would catch fire. "Why sea monkeys?" she asked, as all but one candle was blown out.

"They're cool!" Tigger replied. "Look! Grandma has a boyfriend!"

The women laughed, and Catherine blew out the last flame.

"Either that or my lungs don't work like they used to." She smiled at the girl. "Did you know I used to never miss a candle? Even the year I turned thirty-seven and your grandfather put thirty-seven candles on my poor little red velvet cake. Not a single one left burning."

"But there are only five on this cake," Tigger said. "Five, like me."

"I know, dear."

Hailey began passing out slices of cake and Maya tried to make herself useful, but her sister kept elbowing her out of the way. "How's your hero. What is he? The king of Toronto or something like that?" she asked, finally handing Maya a corner piece—her favorite.

Maya shoved a forkful in her mouth and mumbled something.

"What?" Hailey asked.

"Where's your movie star boyfriend?" Maya asked through a mouthful of cake.

"Screen test. So? How *is* the fabled Connor MacKenzie? Is he as great as they say?"

"Yeah. Great." Maya fixed a smile on her face. If Connor went back early there was no way she was telling Hailey. She'd hide out at Nymph Island alone if she had to. As he had said, he didn't have to be present for the full two weeks. And unless he fired her or she re-rented the place, there was no reason for him to ask for a refund.

"Good. Do you think we could line up more of these retreats?"

"That's such a great idea," Simone exclaimed as Hailey passed her a slice of cake.

Maya gave a half shrug. "Maybe. We'll see. Hailey, can I borrow Mom's old recipe book from you?"

Hailey just about dropped the cake-cutting knife in surprise. "Are you planning to cook?"

"Just a couple of things, such as waffles."

"But you like food that comes in a box. No fuss, no muss."

"Yeah, but it's not exactly executive fare."

"Good point. I could help if you want?"

"It's okay. You're busy, too." Maya scooted in next to her mother as her sisters, Simone and Tigger began trying to put together the gift. Finding they needed an Allen key, the bickering sisters headed off to see if they could convince the maintenance man to come help. Having decided it would increase their chances of success if they all went, they filed out, leaving Maya behind to keep the birthday girl company.

Catherine placed a cool hand over hers. "How are you, Maya?"

Maya angled her head so it was resting on her mom's shoulder. "Okay."

"Just okay?"

"I don't think Connor MacKenzie is going to be my ticket into the business world."

"Of course he isn't." Catherine gazed down at her, and if Maya closed her right eye, she blocked out the side that had been affected by the stroke and could see only the side that still looked like her mom, not a frail old woman who was close to completing her circle of life. Maya's heart constricted, and her mother squeezed her hand.

"Only you can be your own ticket."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean do this on your own. Go and make connections."

"But I am. I have the grades, and the guts and the instinct and the drive."

"But are you connecting with people?"

"Mom, it's the twenty-first century. The internet is popular for a reason—so we don't have to connect. We can just go out and get the job done."

"And are they getting the job done with strangers? Or are connections and networks still vital, my dear?"

Maya pushed away from her mother. Catherine was usually uncannily perceptive, but to tell her to go network and connect? That seemed a tad old-fashioned for what she had in mind.

"Go take someone out for a round of golf?" she kidded.

"I'm serious, Maya." Catherine smiled, the damaged side of her mouth going along for the ride. She tipped her chin. "Try it. And report back."

While there weren't many people Maya listened to, she listened to her mother. "Do I have to?" she whined.

Her mom reached over and gave her ear a playful tug. "Yes."

"I suppose golf would be more fun than sitting around in a boring old cottage with sketchy internet." And it sure beat trying to write business articles for money.

"My Maya." Her mother shook her head and looked to the ceiling.

"Fine. Fine. I'll try it." Maybe.



MAYA PACED outside the bedroom where Connor was sleeping. He'd been asleep when she'd got back from her mom's party, his door closed. And it was still shut.

She'd read an entire business book last night while waiting for him to wake up from what she thought was an early evening nap. She wanted to pick his brain about counteroffers, as well as the ideas she'd been reading about. Enough down time, it was work time.

Was he still here? Maybe he'd figured out how to get a water taxi, and had left.

Or, oh no, what if he'd tried swimming around the island? He was obviously in no condition to do so. She should have followed her instinct to take him to see a doctor. Now his death by drowning would be all

her fault. There weren't any riptides or scary currents, but in places the rocky shore dipped straight down into deep water, leaving no easy exit from the unrelenting waves unless you somehow made it around to the quieter side, where there was a sandy, shallow area near the boathouse.

Maya hadn't gone for her own swim yet and debated doing so now, to see if she could find Connor. But then a shuffling sound on the other side of the door made her step back. Connor opened it and stood in the doorway staring blankly at her, his hair an adorable mess, his eyes bleary.

He was hot when he was sleepy.

"What?" he asked.

She gave a shrug, her movements too quick to pass off innocence.

Remembering herself, she pushed a cup of lukewarm coffee into his hand. "Glad to see you didn't drown."

"What?"

"Nothing. Good morning. Would you like to play golf?"

Connor closed his bedroom door.

"Rude much?" she muttered.

"I heard that."

"Yeah, the soundproofing is bar none."

"You snore."

"It's the mice. I'm going for a swim."

The door opened again, and he was without a shirt. His skin was soft, pale. He needed to get outside for some vitamin D. He had broad shoulders like someone who used to work out or be active, but time behind a desk had done something. He needed her to feed him and build him up again.

"You're too skinny," she said. "You need a big breakfast."

"How's the water?"

"Cold." She wanted to bond with the guy, not swim with him. Swimming was for her. Alone. She didn't need to worry about him drowning.

"Cold just like you."

"Yes, but the water warms up in the sun." She spun on her heel, then, unable to resist, turned and stuck out her tongue.

"You plan to use that tongue?" he asked, stepping forward with a swagger.

Her jaw dropped. But pushing her shock aside, she strutted back to him, exaggerating her hip sway in a way she knew he noticed.

That's right. Eat up what you can't have, honey.

She leaned close and he licked his lips, his chest expanding. She whispered, "I do, but I promise you won't be so lucky to find it used on you."

He laughed, a rich, deep sound that reverberated through her, making her want to hear it again and again.

"Don't make promises you might not be able to keep," he said, lightly touching her shoulder.

She ignored the shivers and the way her body tightened at his touch. "Then I'll assume you're going to find a way to up your charm." She flicked a look over her shoulder as she waltzed away. "Considerably."

Again, that laugh.

"I'll do my best, Maya." He leaned against the doorjamb, sipping his coffee.

She paused, half turning. "Do you like your coffee black?" She hadn't ever asked him, just brought it out the way she took hers.

He gave a shrug. "I'm easy."

"I'll remember that." She shot him a wink and went to her room to rifle through her bathing suits. Discarding the bikinis as trying too hard,

she went for the less obvious, a knock-out red suit cut high on her hips and showed ample cleavage. She might have to stop swimming a few times to slip the straps up her shoulders again, but that would be worth it, seeing as today was her last shot at convincing Connor to stay, before he went back to Toronto and quite possibly didn't return.

Towel draped over her shoulder, she grabbed the coffeepot from the kitchen, topping up Connor's cup as she walked past him on her way out of the cottage. She paused as she poured, ensuring she inhaled mightily, letting her chest expand and rise, her suit dipping down as she matched the inhalation with a slight back-arching stretch.

Connor's attention strayed to her cleavage.

"There's sun on the end of the dock. It's a quiet place to chill out if you get bored up here."

If she could get him to chill out, stay awake and relax, she could pump him for business advice while sunbathing after her swim. Maybe even find a way to use him as a job reference—even though he'd yet to give her any work to do.

Not waiting for him to reply, she added a wiggle to her hips and made her way down to the water, knowing that if he decided to navigate the path, she was going to get what she'd come for.



THAT WOMAN WAS TROUBLE.

Connor loved a challenge more than anything, but he was too tired. Too old. That hot little red bathing suit had stirred something inside, but still he was too broken, and way too tired.

He sat on the edge of his bed and sipped the coffee. Black coffee wasn't bad. It was something he'd moved to about six months ago, when

the fatigue had started sneaking in. Cut out sugar. Get that caffeine straight into the system.

It hadn't helped. And he missed the warm, sweet creaminess of a double-double.

He set the cup aside. He needed to do something. He couldn't go on this way—barely living. Even if Dr. Tiang said he could go back to work tomorrow, how long would he last before he was running into door frames again?

The push of gravity was strong, and Connor lay back on the bed, staring at the ceiling, his mind blank. He rolled over, reaching for his bag beside the bed. He rummaged through his things, wondering what he should do. No laptop. No BlackBerry.

He was free. But free to do what, exactly?

Finding an envelope addressed to him, he tugged it out and hauled himself into the living room, where he collapsed on a chair near a crammed bookcase. He ripped open the envelope and felt a heavy sadness as he fingered the thick vellum. Rubbing his nose, Connor sighed and read the invitation. He'd already told his kid brother, Curtis, that he'd come to his wedding in Tahiti, but how had he not opened the invitation, when the wedding was only two weeks away? No wonder his brother had called and emailed a few times, to make sure he was still coming to act as his best man.

But how was Connor going to find time to go—assuming Stella or Em had organized tickets for him? Two extended weekends so close together was an insane idea, and familiar anxiety took root and flourished within him. He placed the invitation on the side table and reminded himself that at least it wasn't another ex-girlfriend inviting him to a christening. He sagged further into the armchair.

Real life was moving along without him. He had no wife. No kids. No pets. Nothing to go home to. No one to miss him. Nothing to give

him balance, as the doctor had suggested.

Balance. Connor was the CEO of his company. You didn't get there by balancing your world like a Zen master.

He didn't even know what balance looked like. Was it a week off once a year? Someone to cuddle with? Skipping the high-fat salad dressing?

He snatched up his brother's wedding invitation and stared at the empty box waiting for a checkmark beside the words *with guest*. His eyes burned. It felt like a dig.

Connor knew how his evening would go. He'd sit alone, feeling tired and wishing he was at work. He'd probably resent the time away from solving problems that kept popping up and that only he could solve.

His heart rate increased and he pushed out of the chair, grabbing the first book that came to hand. *The Fall: Tales from the Apocalypse*. Perfect. Something dark and brooding that wouldn't remind him about his failure to get a real life. A life with meaning, people, love and commitment. A life where someone would have his back even through the tough times. Someone who didn't want anything other than his love and company.

Yeah, that's probably what a real life and balance looked like. Pretty much everything he didn't have.

He stood on the veranda for a moment, clutching the book. If he went down to the dock, he'd have to come back up. He berated his old-fogey thinking and made his way down to the water. No sign of his spitfire Maya, just the old boathouse that was trying to yoga-move its way back down into nature. He tugged one of the Muskoka chairs farther into the sun and sat back, letting the rays dig into his skin. It felt good. Warm. Bright. How long had it been since he'd let the sun bake him, make him feel whole and real again? Happy.

Wait... Happy?

When had he stopped being happy?

Too much thinking. He was supposed to be filling his head with healthy thoughts so he could merge back into the rat race as though this pit stop had never happened.

He inhaled slowly, and thought back to the staff retreat they'd had a few years ago. What had that guru dude chanted? Empty thoughts? Clear mind? Something like that.

Think nothing. Think nothing. Think nothing.

But he was thinking something. He was thinking about not thinking. This was dumb.

He drew in a deep breath and held it for thirty seconds, then let it explode out his mouth. Maybe he should swim. That walk down the path hadn't been so bad; this retreat was already making him feel better. But he'd have to walk back up the hill to get his trunks, then down again, then back up after his swim. Too much work, and the sun felt too good.

Two ducks eyed him as they swam around the corner of the dock, vanishing under the boathouse door. Within a few moments they leisurely paddled out again, tilting their heads at him before heading across to the seemingly vacant cottages across the strait.

Tomorrow he'd have to bring bread down. Tomorrow? What was he thinking? Tomorrow he was getting back on that boat and heading to Toronto, his R&R complete, not feeding ducks.

A bulldozer started up across the water, the sound carrying to him as though it was right next door. Great. He came all the way down here to chill out—okay, and to see Maya wet and dripping in her *Baywatch* suit—and they had to ruin the ambience with a 'dozer?

He turned away, hoping to have a catnap, not wanting to allow himself to get intrigued by whatever project was happening across the water. He was on vacation. Relaxing.

Breathing.

Not thinking about what new project was under way.

Breathing.

Listening to purposeful splashing come closer with each stroke.

Maya.

He pried an eye open and watched her come nearer, until her hand tapped the dock like an Olympic racer. He half expected her to do a flip and push off, to go around the island again in the opposite direction. Instead, she hauled herself up out of the lake, ignoring the ladder.

He should have worn his shades, so he could drink her in. She was hot. Maybe even hotter because he knew what she looked like under that red Lycra. Knew exactly where the streaming rivulets of water were heading as they glided down her chin, raced over her collarbone and vanished into the valley at her center.

Thank goodness he was so exhausted, or it would become blatantly obvious how appealing he found her and she'd end up slapping him hard across the face for appearing like a testosterone-crazed member of the male species.

"Wow, look at you, all awake." Maya scrubbed at her hair with the towel, pausing to tip her head to let water drain out of her ears.

"Restorative powers of Muskoka." He glanced to his crotch. Only not quite restorative enough.

"I haven't heard anyone talk about them since the 1800s," she said with a laugh.

"You've aged well, then."

She smiled, with a welcoming friendliness that made him want to hold her, feel her heartbeat against his chest, her head nuzzled under his chin. That, and peel the suit off her wet skin.

He was lonely. That's what that feeling was. Huh. He'd never thought that would happen, but somehow it had pounced, lingering like

a sorry state of neglected affairs.

Maya wrapped the towel around herself and pulled up a chair beside his. "Plans for the day?" she asked. "A little work? Maybe some golf?"

"Not golf."

"Tennis?"

"Too much effort. It's going to be hot. The tree frogs are already singing."

She let out a small, defeated-sounding sigh. "Reading then?"

"Maybe." He flipped over the book, staring at the blurb on the back. Earlier in the week he hadn't been able to follow new project layouts. What were the chances he'd be able to focus on a collection of short stories? He set the book aside. What was he going to do when he went back to work, if his brain refused to engage?

"You okay?" Her cool fingers landed on his arm, and he flinched.

"You're cold."

"Cold and mean, I believe, if I string all your compliments together."

"My apologies. Put like that, I sound like a regular well, you can fill in the blank."

"Well, it's probably true. My mom told me to make connections with people. Network the old-fashioned way, because I'm you know a cold and determined mean woman intent on getting what I want. You understand how it is. Fine for a man, but not for a woman."

Her mouth turned down, and he felt for her, but her mother was right. Most new grads thought good grades made it a given that they would start at a six-figure salary, with three weeks paid holidays. And most of all, that they would be worth it. But they had no connections, were often a liability in their eagerness, and yes, women such as Maya were often dubbed a bitch. Yet she had the guts and strength to really go far if she didn't let the double standard get under her skin and make her resentful.

"Your mother is right," he said. "Make connections and network, get as much experience as possible and work your butt off. Literally. You'll make it."

Maya chewed on her bottom lip for a moment, looking uncomfortable.

"What's your favorite color?" she asked.

"Green."

"Mine, too."

How did he get stuck on an island with a woman like Maya? She probably had a more detailed five-year plan than he did, but was still lacking the basics that five minutes in the business world would teach her. "Are you trying to connect with me?" he asked. She had to be kidding.

"Am I that bad?"

"Try being less obvious. You know, authentic. Genuine."

"Right. Arlene Dickinson, the entrepreneur millionaire from *Dragons' Den*, said that in her book *Persuasion*."

Connor refrained from rolling his eyes. Maya was so green it almost hurt even to sit here and listen to her.

She nodded as though coming to a conclusion. "Why didn't you finish your business degree?"

"Cutting to the chase now, are you?"

"Why not? Time is money."

"Not at the moment, it isn't."

Her feet had begun twitching and he chuckled. Chitchat was killing her. "Do you know how to sit still?"

"No. Do you know how to talk about things that aren't business?"

"Of course."

"Then start a topic."

"I dropped out of business school because I made more during my third-year project than most graduates did in a year. Wouldn't you quit and follow the trail of money?"

"You fail."

"Excuse me?"

"That was a topic about business."

"I was answering your question."

"New topic."

"Like what?"

"I don't know. Show me how to connect."

"You are persistent. Unrelenting." He'd enjoy it if he was in Toronto and not trying to chill out. In fact, he'd likely have asked her out for a drink by now. But this was Muskoka and his vacation. "So, Maya, tell me why you think I can help you get ahead in the business world."

"Fail again. Business related."

"Maya. For real."

"If not you, then who?"

"You tire me, woman."

She sat back, looking sad and rejected. He couldn't do this. He couldn't lead someone with such passion and eagerness into a world that might give her so much it would consume her. It wasn't the same world he'd stepped into seven-and-a-half years ago, making millions as easily as sweeping up sawdust in a sawmill.

"I'm heading into Toronto at 9:00 a.m. tomorrow. Nothing personal, but I don't know that I'll be back."

Connor sat in the exam room, twisting his hands. The lab had drawn blood that morning and Dr. Tiang had checked his vitals, and was ready to chat about his conclusions. And despite the fact that it might mean more time off, Connor appreciated how thorough he was being. He'd been livid when the doctor had first pulled him off work, but his perspective had slowly begun to change while he'd been sitting on the dock with Maya yesterday. Seeing her so alive, healthy and vibrant, just lapping up life as though it was a big ol' bowl of milk, he'd realized how far he'd crumbled over the past six months.

And maybe Dr. Tiang could help him find a way to get a life. Get Maya.

Connor didn't want to be sent back to Muskoka, because it would mean he'd failed at being a real man and handling all that the city was throwing at him. But he wanted to go back if it meant he might begin to feel human again.

He tried not to remind himself of Stella's ultimatum—comply with the doctor's orders or she was quitting. He almost laughed at how over-the-top she'd sounded, claiming she didn't want to be the one to find him keeled over at his desk.

But his office couldn't run without him. Who would finesse the latest merger if he wasn't there? Surely not Bill and James.

Clenching his hands, Connor forced himself to breathe. Either the merger would happen or it wouldn't. Two weeks wouldn't settle his fate if he really was the king. And if the merger didn't go through, well, then it wasn't as though his stock was going to suffer due to one deal. Heck, he might even decide to pull out if they didn't get their ducks in a row and meet his requirements.

Dr. Tiang rolled over on a stool, stopping in front of him. Connor was in a suit, ready to go back to work, but he felt like a kid begging the coach to put him into the game again, yet afraid that if he did, he'd let the man down.

The doctor let out a large sigh, his focus not leaving whatever was scrawled on his clipboard.

"Mr. MacKenzie, do you have staff who can take over your business's essential duties for the next say two weeks?"

"I'm not running into doors. I'm fine to go back in."

"According to today's blood work, your elevated heart rate and memory test, you are not. You need rest. Two weeks is a bare minimum—just to see what you can accomplish."

"I can accomplish plenty."

"I'm guessing due to your present state that you need something more like months."

"Months?" Connor shoved his hands through his hair and swore under his breath. He needed a haircut. He'd ask Stella to book one when he got back into the office. Nuts. Stella. She was going to quit if he went against the doctor's orders. Was this an order? Although she wasn't here, which meant she didn't have to know what the doctor did or did not say.

"I'd like to do a stress test."

"Why?"

"To give you a better time frame for when everything is going to hit the fan if you go back to your previous lifestyle."

"Everything as in ?"

"Heart attack. Stroke."

Connor crossed his arms. He could convince this guy otherwise. That was his job. Sales pitch time. "I have good cholesterol and find my job rewarding. Positive stress is present in my position."

"Not enough of it, according to what your body is telling me. I'd like to say it is whispering, but it's more of an outright scream. I don't think it can yell any louder without having a major collapse. Shall we test your hearing as well?"

Connor glared at the man. "There's more to health than blood work, and my hearing is *fine*."

"Personal problems?"

"I have no personal problems." That was a nice side effect of not having a personal life. "I'm fine. This is how I work."

"Tell me something, Connor." The doctor paused. "Do you have trouble concentrating? Remembering things?"

"I'm a busy guy. I have an assistant and a secretary for a reason. Both good women."

"Have you been experiencing irregular heart rhythms? Increased heart rate? Loss of motor control?" He raised an eyebrow. The doctor knew the answer; that was part of why Stella had brought him in here last week.

"I'm fine now. You were right. A few days of rest did wonders." Connor stood, straightening his lapels.

"Have you lost interest in things that used to matter to you? Possibly your job or your social life? Hobbies?"

Who had time for that kind of stuff? Didn't Dr. Tiang read the financial news? You didn't get in there by hosting poker night for the

guys.

"Grown away from family or friends? Mood swings?"

"Take a hike," he said lightly.

"This isn't a joke, Mr. MacKenzie."

"My apologies. Really. I do appreciate your concern and know you're trying to do your job. Warning heard. Now, I need to get back to work, but I promise I'll cut down on my hours."

"Impatience?"

"Ha. Ha." Connor reached for the doorknob.

"Inability to perform in bed?"

His jaw tightened. "I don't see how that is any of your business."

Dr. Tiang stood, placing a light hand on his arm. "Connor, if you don't take a break and find balance, you will have a heart attack. That will mean more time off, either because it is fatal or because you will lose essential heart function—meaning for the rest of your life you will feel tired all the time. Or worse, you'll have a stroke. We're looking at the possibility of losing the use of one side of your body. Rehab. Do you have time for *that*?"

"I don't have time for *this*."

"You're only human, Mr. MacKenzie. You need to create a personal life that is separate from your business life. You, believe it or not, can afford to save your own life, Connor."



MAYA SHIFTED from foot to foot in front of the grimy glass doors to one of Toronto's small tax firms. It didn't seem as though Connor was coming back to Muskoka—not just because last night's flying dream had been a panicky one where she'd lost control and begun to spin backward, but because of the way he'd left with barely a goodbye, his

mind obviously already back in his skyscraper, making fistfuls of money. So she figured she may as well go to the job interview, even though the work wasn't exactly what she wanted. Plus Hailey had needed a ride to the airport.

Maya drew herself up, vowing to show Connor MacKenzie that she didn't need to wait around for him to notice her skills or kick-start her career. She could do it herself. She *needed* to do it herself. Adjusting her dress, she took one last breath and pushed through the doors, announcing herself at the large reception desk.

As the woman directed her to the elevators that would take her to the third floor, she added, "You might want to hold your breath."

Maya gripped the tall desk. "Why?"

"You'll see."

Maya slowly made her way to the elevators. *Hold her breath?*

Did that mean tons of other grads had already had an interview with this piddly little company, and she needed luck on her side?

The elevator doors opened and Maya was struck by a scent that was suspiciously similar to feral tomcat. She held her breath and dived into the tight space, repeatedly punching the button for the third floor, hoping the smell wouldn't stick to her clothes. Although chances were the interviewer would be immune to the smell. She shuddered at the thought of getting used to the rank odor, and inhaled without thinking. The doors opened and she fell out, coughing. She leaned against the wall, her interview nerves catching up to her.

She blinked back tears of desperation and drummed up the enthusiasm she'd been practicing in the car. She could do this. She needed this job only to help her get established in the city, then she could move on to something better.

Save the cottage. Save herself. Move on.

A woman in a disheveled suit hurried past her, asking, "Are you the three o'clock?"

"Interview? Yes." Maya stepped forward, hand outstretched. "Maya Summer."

The woman gave it a brief clench, directing her into a nearby, vacant room. "Okay, let's get to this. Why do you want to work for HL Financial and Tax Services?"

"I like numbers." Maya smoothed her dress, mentally chiding herself. She liked numbers? Could her reply be any more lame? "I am well organized and pay great attention to detail. I also have a good memory, and filling out forms, doing math and organizing taxes appeals to me."

"What's your experience with taxes?"

"I've filed my own for several years."

"Any courses? Job experience?" The woman flicked Maya's one-page résumé as she scanned it.

"I am a fast learner and—"

"I don't need a fast learner. I need someone with the necessary skills so they can jump in at a dead run. No coop placements? Internships? Summer jobs that have to do with financial management?"

A scruffy looking cat meandered through the room.

"I was in charge of cashing out each night at the—"

"Snowy Cone? I'm sorry, Maya, but that's just not what we're looking for. From your cover letter it sounded as though you had experience. Why didn't you do a coop while at the U of T?"

The cat began scratching a leather chair at the end of the table. Maya made a *psst* sound and tried to wave the cat away from the rapidly disintegrating chair. It turned to her, fangs and hissing noises.

"Don't pester Freud or he'll spray."

Maya took a moment. Was she seriously considering a job she wasn't interested in? A job that came with a mean, spraying tomcat who

destroyed office furniture and who knew what else? Yes. Yes, she was.

"Why didn't you do a coop?" the interviewer repeated.

"My mother isn't well." Maya pinched her hands between her knees and resisted the urge to plead with the woman. This was her seventeenth interview this summer, after almost a hundred applications. The only job she'd got was back home as a fill-in receptionist at the dealership, plus her old job at the Bar 'n' Grill—and even that was only one night a week, with the next two weeks off. "I've been going home each summer to help my sisters care for her. That's why I haven't been able to do practicums and gain experience during the summers."

"You haven't done any during the school year?"

"I didn't, no." No need to admit that she didn't know the right people to get those placements. It would only make her sound bitter and full of excuses, albeit legitimate ones.

"Well, I'm sorry to hear of your troubles, but sadly, there is nothing we can do for each other at this point." The woman stood. "Please call us when you have more experience."

Maya stood and tried to remain upbeat. "Thank you for your time."

The woman paused at the door. "If you can afford it, Maya, get some relevant experience, even if it's volunteer work. Offer to help out accountants in your hometown, anything related. It's better than nothing."

Accountant work? She wanted to buy and sell companies and get her hands dirty, not spend all day balancing numbers in a spreadsheet.

"Thank you."

Maya let herself out of the building, then sat in her car, sniffing her outfit for hints of lingering elevator smell. She seemed to be in the clear, luckily. Both in terms of smell and avoiding working in an environment rife with hissing cats. Well, at least one.

Maybe she could drive over to Connor's massive building and offer to work for him in Toronto. Anything. Even the mailroom was sounding good.

She rubbed her forehead and checked the clock on the dash. It would be after four by the time she found his office and got through traffic. Maybe even five. But he'd still be there. Men such as Connor didn't leave early. And after a weekend away, he'd be working extra hard, she knew.

She could beg, plead, whine. She'd do even the most menial jobs, and do them for free. Evenings and weekends she could work in a bar to pay her rent—or stay at Backpackers, the hostel on Dundas, and ride her bicycle. She'd have to do it for only a few months before the lack of sleep caught up with her, but by then she'd have proved herself, and Connor would start paying her what she was worth. Then she'd be right where she'd always dreamed of being.

She pulled out onto the main road, her car stalling in the backed up traffic. She restarted her engine, leaving a cloud of exhaust that made her cough. Silly old thing. Leaning across the seat, she rolled down the passenger window. Warm, muggy city air. Nothing ever felt better.

A man carrying a briefcase leaned in and said, "How much per mile?"

"Oh, um, about twelve kilometers per liter when I'm in traffic like this." She waited for the light to change, wishing she'd locked the doors. In the city you never knew what people were going to do—even if they were wearing a suit. She keyed up a business podcast, ignoring the man.

"I meant what's your rate? Your fare?" Maya frowned. "You're a taxi, aren't you?"

"Oh!" Maya put down her phone, contemplating the man. Picking him up would help cover her interview expenses. Sure, Hailey had given her a twenty for taking her to the airport earlier, but still, Muskoka to

Toronto wasn't a cheap drive in this beater. "Yeah, of course. Where do you want to go?"

"Eaton Center."

"That's a long drive." And just about exactly where she was heading.

"How much would it cost?"

"You know what? I'm already heading that way. How about forty bucks? Flat rate."

The man opened the back door, chucking in his briefcase. "Let's go!"

Maya laughed. She liked this guy. He could live by her nickname—Snap—that her sisters had given her, too. Snap decisions and all that—they might tease her about it but the fact was she got stuff done.

"I've never heard of your company—Alvin's Taxi—before," he said.

"We usually work in Muskoka." Maybe she shouldn't get a new car when she moved to the city. She could run her so-called taxi instead of biking and pick up a few fares as needed to help cover the cost of running a car. Well, until the police asked to see her taxi license or whatever it was she needed to operate in the city. Maybe she could drive for Uber or Lyft or something.

"Must be a lot cooler than in the city right now."

"It's a bit cooler," she admitted. She offered him her bag of trail mix. "Hungry?"

"No, thanks. Mind if I smoke?"

Maya shrugged.

He rolled down the back windows and lit up as her car crawled forward.

"The expressway might be faster this time of day."

"Construction."

The man sighed. "Always construction."

"Do you need to be there by a certain time?"

"Forty minutes."

"Hmm." Maya eased her car forward and onto the curb as she squeezed past a truck and into an alley. "Hang on. This might be rough." She cruised the alleys, zigzagging her way across side streets until they opened up on a bigger thoroughfare where she could get her overheating car moving at a good speed, cooling it down.

"Did I ever mention how much I like your cab company?" he said, a smile in his voice.

Maya laughed. "We aim to please." She glanced in the rearview mirror. "Where do you work?"

"Roundhouse Exports."

"Yeah? What's that like?"

"Pretty good. Two weeks off, paid. Health spending account."

"What's the work like? What do you do there?"

"I travel a lot. I used to be quality control. Now I'm distributor assessment. We could use a creative problem solver such as yourself. We're always on the lookout for people who can figure out how to maneuver around roadblocks."

"I'm for hire."

He laughed.

"Business degree from U of T. Graduated top of my class."

"And you're driving cab? The economy really is in the crapper."

"Nobody will hire me, because I have very limited experience," she said with a sigh.

"That's always a problem, isn't it?"

The way the silence stretched out between them like a rubber band, Maya knew he was regretting his "come work for us" comment. He was probably wondering if she was unstable or something, seeing as she hadn't been snapped up by some big corporation upon graduation.

The man in the backseat remained quiet, watching the city pass by outside the window. Maya finally pointed to a billboard. "Seen the Blue

Jays this season? I heard they're doing well."

"I don't really follow sports. I probably should, though, as I'd be more popular around the water cooler."

"Yeah." More silence. "So, uh, *is* your company hiring right now?"

"Just menial jobs. Nothing for someone with your skill set."

How did he know what her skill set was? Oh, right, she'd bragged about her marks. Maybe she should shut up about that and just take whatever job came her way. It seemed as though she was either under-experienced or overqualified.

"I'm not too good to start in a small job and work my way up."

"Anyone is lucky to get a job these days. Tell you what " He shifted, grabbing his wallet out of his back pocket. He flipped it open and passed his business card over her shoulder. "Watch our website—all jobs are posted on it—and if something comes up, apply, and use me as a personal reference. What's your name?"

"Maya Summer." Maya blinked, glad her sunglasses were covering her damp eyes. Finally, a lead. Finally a reference. She held up the card, willing her voice to be light. "Thank you."

He patted the seat and smiled. "Anytime, cab-driving Maya from Muskoka who graduated top of her class at the U of T. See? Remembering you and our connection. Rock solid." He tapped his sandy hair with a knuckled fist.

Maya laughed and read the name off his card. "Okay, Jonah who works at Roundhouse Exports and doesn't follow sports and has a health spending account. Thank you."

Maybe her mom was right. Connections might be the answer she was looking for, after all.



THE DOCTOR DIDN'T KNOW what he was talking about. Connor was not going to have a heart attack or stroke. He wasn't a senior citizen. He was young and alive. He just needed to figure out how to stop being such a pansy and get his work done.

"I'll be working late," he told his driver as they pulled up in front of his office building. "Don't wait around."

He stepped onto the sidewalk, the thick summer air pressing down on him. No cool breezes or chirping birds. Just traffic, exhaust, and heat. He tugged at his collar and hurried to the doors, eager for the relief of air-conditioning. A man stepped out, the door's glass reflecting the hot summer sun into Connor's eyes. It was so bright he was momentarily blinded, his balance failing as he stepped back. A bus honked and a truck ground its gears. Someone bumped his shoulder as he fought to see. A douche in a suit glared at him, barely lifting his head from his phone as he jostled past.

Connor entered the building and glanced toward the Starbucks nestled in its heart. He could really use a massive Americano right now, but the line was out the door. He patted his pockets, searching for his phone. Where had he left it? Was Stella in today? Or had she decided to take the two weeks off as she'd threatened to?

Maybe his secretary, Em, would want to get out of the office for a bit and fetch him a coffee.

He took the elevator to the top floor of the tallest skyscraper in Toronto, First Canadian Place. Landing that primo office space on the corner of Bay and King had shown him exactly who he'd become in Toronto. A king. A man who got what he wanted even if it wasn't on the table.

Eager to soothe his worries and doubts with a good opera, as well as a mindless task such as cleaning out his in-box, he stepped off the

elevator. A woman behind his secretary's desk popped up as he approached, her hands doing a strange jittery dance at her sides.

"Mr. MacKenzie?" Her face was a mask of confusion. "I thought you were on vacation."

He paused for a split second, not fully recognizing her. She seemed familiar, but at the same time foreign. "Just an extended weekend, didn't Stella tell you?"

"She said you'd be gone for two weeks." The woman placed a hand on her chest, her posture sagging. "It's unlike you to take time off, and so suddenly. I was worried."

"Did you change your hair?" He still couldn't quite place what was so different about his secretary.

Em patted her dark bob with the pink streak. "Three months ago," she said tentatively.

"It's nice. It makes you look younger."

She beamed. Yep, same woman. Man, he needed to start opening his eyes and seeing things. He stepped into his office, calling over his shoulder, "Can you get Stella on the phone, please?"

Em promptly sat, punching in numbers he should know by heart. He closed his office door and waited for her to buzz him.

What to tackle first? The in-box? Real or virtual? Check in with his merger project manager? His advisors and whatever they were working on?

He ran his palms over his large desk, surprised that they were trembling. He clenched them, willing them to still. He was excited to be back, that was all. That was why his heart was racing, too. It wasn't fatigue, or anxiety, or anything that would lead to him in a hospital bed.

"Mr. MacKenzie? Stella is on the line."

"Thank you, Em." He pushed the worn button. "Stella! We're back in business."

"The doctor let you go back to work?"

He tried not to be miffed at the way her voice rose in disbelief. "Why wouldn't he?"

"Because only a few days ago you couldn't remember my name, and ran into the doorjamb hard enough to blacken your eye, and stopped being able to form full sentences. Not to add you've been looking like death warmed over for about a week. And I mean that in the literal sense."

"Good to hear your voice, too," he said drily. "When can you be in here and bring me up to speed?"

He waited through a long pause, staring at the art on his office walls. He spun and studied the panel to his right. "When did I get new office art?" he asked.

"You've had that since you moved in."

"Have not."

"Have too."

Connor focused on the prints once again. The colors were so subtle, so bland. So boring. "Did I pick them out?"

"The interior decorator did. You said you didn't have time. You requested something powerful, intriguing and preferably not offensive."

Placing Stella on speaker, he walked to the wall and lifted the first print off. "Well, it's none of the above."

"I agree."

"Why didn't you tell me?" He could picture her shrugging on the other end of the phone.

"You know, paycheck, agree with the boss, et cetera. But I did bring you that new painting I found a few weekends ago."

"Where's that?" He scanned his room, and there it was, a gorgeous, bright sunflower that lacked the gloss of talent. Oddly enough, it made him feel good. It made him feel love. And not in a hokey way, either. "It's nice."

"I know. You should hang it on your wall."

He crouched to read at the name, and fireworks of recognition flared inside him.

"Connor? You still there?"

He pulled himself out of his spell. "Where did you say you got this?"

"Farmers' market a few hours north."

"Yes. Right. I remember now." He stood and returned to his desk. "Stella?"

"Yes?"

"Have you found that getting projects under way and making a decent profit seems more difficult lately?"

There was a thoughtful pause. "Yeah, maybe?" The way her voice lifted—a voice more familiar to him than his own—he knew she was considering the idea, hefting it in her mind while assessing its worth. "For the past few months things haven't flowed as quickly or smoothly as they once did."

Connor nodded. Thank goodness it wasn't just him imagining it, or creating a story in his head so he'd feel like less of a failure for the ways things had been moving lately. "It's harder."

"Well, the economy isn't what it was when we started."

He leaned back in his chair, assessing the print still hanging to his right. It had to go, too. Maybe after he caught his breath again.

"It is harder to make an easy buck with these stupid economic bounces," he admitted. Was that all it was?

"If it were steady. Even if in decline "

"Those were the good ol' days, weren't they?" He wanted to hash this out in person. She was his best sounding board and had been with him since he'd started this business. He checked his watch. It was already after five, and it wouldn't be fair to call her back in if she was already gone for the day.

"Why don't you retire?" Her voice was gentle, curious.

"Retire?" He let out a laugh. "Don't you know how young I am? I have a world before me." He spun around in his chair, his power position. There wasn't an office higher in the city and everyone knew it. He was on top in every way possible. "And give all of this up?"

"Yeah," she said softly. She was holding back. What was it?

"I'm missing something."

"A life, for starters."

He laughed. "I'm the king. Who needs a life? This is it! What everyone strives for."

"Everything is business with you and it's killing you."

"Not this again." He fought the temptation to hang up, his anger soaring higher than the CN Tower.

"Don't get snippy with me." There was an edge to her voice he hadn't heard before. "You need time off."

"I don't."

"Take time to reassess, Connor. I'm not saying quit, but you need time away to figure out your next life goal."

He paused, unsure. He had made it to the top, and didn't have any more goals other than to try and knock down any dirty rascals storming his castle.

"You have a stellar grad to help you out over the next two weeks," Stella said. "She and Em can take care of the little things and your advisors can take care of the big things. I hired Maya for two weeks. Everything is under control. Take a vacation, Connor."

"I don't think Maya can be you, Stella."

She laughed. "Of course not. But I gave her an info pack I spent half the night compiling. She's up to speed. She's eager but as quick as a whip. Trust her. She'll get it done and she has Em to lean on. I have good instincts in people. So trust the people you and I have hired and go. Rest. Restore. That merger is an old clunker, and two weeks away from it will enhance your point of view, not kill it. And everyone else has their own projects to keep them busy."

"Two weeks minus the days I've taken off already."

"Don't nitpick, Connor."

"You knew the doctor was going to tell me to take this time, didn't you?"

"I didn't, but I know how to be prepared for anything. You taught me that."

"You're not in Canada, are you?"

"No, Connor, I'm not," she snapped. "Ever think that maybe I need a vacation every once in a while, too? In fact, doctor's orders." Her voice was low, sad almost.

"Why?" His heart was racing again, but he knew that this time it was out of concern for his assistant, Stellar Stella, and not for whatever other reasons usually set it breaking the recommended speed limit.

"I'm pregnant. And I've been working too hard."

Talk about left field. Hadn't she married only a few months ago? It was right after the Westing merger, and she'd taken her honeymoon just before they'd jumped on the Everglades deal which closed last fall. It had already been well over a year, now. How did that happen?

"Congratulations."

"Thanks."

"Why do you sound glum?" he asked.

"Because I haven't even told my parents yet and I'm having to tell you. I'm still in the first trimester, so don't even think about telling anyone."

"Mum's the word." He chuckled at his pun.

"Connor, you're a nit."

"So? We're back at work in two weeks?"

"You taking the time off?"

"It's not the same without you here keeping me together, Stellar Stella."

"You're really taking it?"

"No, of course not. I'm going to die at my desk and you know it." Laughing, he ended the call, his humor dying as he broke the connection. He tugged forward a newspaper Em had left open on his desk, and glanced at the photo under a headline that had his name. Who was this old dude who looked as though he was a member of the walking dead?

Connor dropped the paper in realization. It was him. The knowledge hit him in the chest and he turned back to his view of the city, his breathing ragged with alarm. It wasn't a joke. He really was going to die here. He might already be no, don't think that way.

He moved to the wall, supporting himself for a moment before lifting the second print. A print? Why hadn't he bought real art? He could support someone doing something fresh and new, instead of buying a cookie-cutter image. He dropped the print and a corner of the frame splintered.

The print was him, his life. He was similar to the artist in that he'd made something cool the first time. Something original, new, and alive, not knowing how it would end up. He'd followed his gut and created. Then, boom, before he knew it, he was selling framed reproductions and hoping to ride the gravy train to something big, when in fact he'd sold

out and stopped creating long ago. This artist was rubber-stamping his own creativity, Connor his whole existence.

It was time for more risk, and to put something worthy in his obituary. He needed meaning.

He returned to the phone on his desk.

"Is James still here?" he said into the speaker.

"Yes," Em replied.

"Tell him to pop by, would you?"

"Sure thing."

A moment later James came breezing into Connor's office. "How's my favorite boss, Connor MacKenzie, the king of Toronto, doing?"

"You crazy bulldog, what's up?"

"Not a lot."

"How's the merger?"

"Bill says it's tough going."

"Why?" Connor took a drink of water from the mini fridge to his right. His throat felt dry and his eyes were burning. Must be the air in this place. Recycled. Maybe he should get some sort of renovation done to improve that. Stella, in her condition, would want fresh air, not this dry, already-breathed crap.

"The usual. Slow backers. Lawyers dragging their feet."

"Speed things up."

"Trying."

"And?"

"Things aren't like they used to be." James leaned back in his chair and propped his fingertips together.

"People are still eager to merge with me." Connor's anger was back. He wanted to snap, lash out at something. It had become like this in his office lately. He flashed from chilled out, relaxed and patient to ticked off and ready to punch something.

"I know, I know."

"Don't placate me."

"It's clause 15, subsection 7."

"Which is?" He should have this memorized, not James, who was only an advisor. James was a details man, yes, but he wasn't the boss.

Where were his files? Connor rustled through some papers on his desk and rubbed an eye.

"I'll work with him on it," James assured him. "We'll finesse things. Massage it along. Don't worry about it."

"Any new potential offers on the table I should know about?"

"Nope."

"Nothing?" It was that bounce in the economy. One little rise and everyone was sunshine and roses, thinking they were through the storm. They weren't. "I thought Bill was our ideas man."

"You weren't gone that long, my man," James said, tapping the corner of Connor's desk with a knuckle.

"How's your primary industry project going?"

"Okay. Moving along on schedule." James allowed a small smile and Connor relaxed. Maybe if this project went well for James things would finally get easier again.

"Look, I gotta go, Connor." James placed his hands on the chair's armrests and leaned forward. "Meeting with the lumberyard's people for dinner. Golf next weekend?"

Connor managed a tight, polite smile as he massaged the tightness in his left shoulder. He had come to hate golf, as it represented getting cornered by golf partners on the twelfth hole and propositioned for a new project, then having to play nice for another six holes before he could let them down nicely and walk away. Or in James's case, rejecting his play for Connor's company. His advisor wanted a large share of the

company's bottom line even though Connor had made it clear that it wasn't up for grabs. Connor owned CME, nobody else.

"We'll play it by ear, okay?"

"Sounds good." James tapped the door frame. "Oh, and hey, are you back again?"

"Can't stay away. You know me."

"I'll let the guys know." James licked his lips twice—a tell Connor had come to recognize as the man being nervous. Why didn't his right-hand man sound more enthused about the prospect of him being back in charge? Odd.

His office door opened and Em came in carrying a notepad, ready for an end-of-the-day debriefing. She smiled as James ducked out, and took a seat across from Connor, falling into Stella's usual routine.

Connor rolled his shoulder, trying to ease the shooting pain that was arching up his arm and into his neck. Probably a pinched nerve.

"You all right?" Em asked, her face pale with worry.

He rubbed his chest. "I think I need to leave. How about we debrief in the morning?" Every breath felt as though he was trying to wrestle a noodle through a vise.

Em stood alongside him as though she was expecting him to fall.

Connor didn't dare speak. He needed a hospital. Now.



MAYA WISHED she could stand in the entry of the skyscraper housing Connor's business forever. The air conditioner was blasting straight at the doors and the chill was a welcome relief from the heat of her car. She surreptitiously flapped the skirt of her dress to encourage more cool air to move against her skin before reluctantly moving through the stream of employees happily leaving the chilly building in order to breathe real

air. Feeling like a salmon swimming upstream, she weaved her way to the elevators, barely making it into the next empty one before the doors closed.

Hitting the button for the top floor, she savored the elevator's fresh scent. She ran her fingers through her hair, gazing in the mirrored wall and thinking of various opening lines. "Hey, how are you? Need someone in the mailroom?" Or "Can I work for you here, since you aren't coming back to Muskoka?" It didn't matter. Every line she came up with sounded desperate and stalkerish.

The doors opened and she stepped out of the elevator, needing to buy more time. They closed behind her and she whirled, almost slapping the down button before catching sight of a serious woman sitting at a desk, watching her.

"Can I help you?" she asked.

Of course he'd have staff that wouldn't let you just crawl back under a rock, but would call you out.

Maya waved and shook her head. "I was just going to say hi to someone, but just realized the time." She took a step backward and lifted her wrist as though checking her watch. No watch.

Wow. Moron move after moron move. Way to impress everyone in the big city. No wonder nobody would hire her.

"Well, since you're already up here, let me validate you."

"Is my downtrodden self-esteem showing?"

The woman laughed. "Your parking?"

"Oh, thanks." Maya stepped forward, digging into her straw purse.

"Who were you coming to see?" asked the woman.

"Connor MacKenzie."

"Something important?" she asked carefully.

"Well, um. Yes." To her, anyway. Not so much to Connor.

"You'd better go through and talk to Em. I think she's still here."

"Em, his secretary." She remembered her from the info pack Connor's personal assistant, Stella, had sent her. "Thanks."

Maya moved farther into the office, not liking the concern on the receptionist's face. She kept moving past doors and cubicles until she was toward the back, where there was an open area, tall plants and a vacant desk. A large corner office sat empty, its framed prints leaning against the walls.

Two men were chatting off to the side, their heads bent as though they were up to something. Their brows were furrowed, but the longer they talked, the more relaxed they became, until they were chuckling. Then one high-fived the other and let out a triumphant laugh.

A female voice broke her out of her people watching. "Can I help you?"

Maya admired the woman's short bob, complete with a pink streak. "Yes, I'm Maya Summer. I'm looking for Connor's secretary, Emily Duncan."

"You must be Mr. MacKenzie's assistant in Muskoka. I'm glad you're here."

"I am, thank you." Maya straightened her back and smiled. This woman knew who she was! Someone in this big impressive building knew who she was and, not only that, was happy to see her. Her life was beginning. Right here. Right now. "Are you Emily?"

"Em."

"Em." Maya turned slightly to point to the men, who had stopped chatting and were walking away in opposite directions. "Who are those guys?"

Em glanced over Maya's shoulder. "Mr. MacKenzie's advisors. Bill Hatfield and James Culver. Did Mr. MacKenzie call you already?"

"Today?"

"Of course he didn't." The woman frowned, dimpling her chin, as she began walking, assuming Maya would follow.

Maya liked her already. No need to stop talking just because you were on the move—there were things to be done.

"Stella is on vacation, so don't pester her unless absolutely necessary, and I will determine when that is. You go through me for everything. Understand?"

Maya nodded, trying to assess the situation. Something had happened, but Em was talking so fast she didn't have time to mull over what it might be.

"I'm glad you came in. I was going to courier files to you, but this is better. Nice to see who they're going to." She gave Maya a small smile. "You're going to be a busy gal. We need to get you situated."

"Why, exactly?"

The woman narrowed her eyes, and Maya felt as though her intelligence was being tested. "Mr. MacKenzie is taking two weeks off."

"Yes..." But did this mean he was heading back to Muskoka?

Oh, no. What if he was in Muskoka waiting for her to take him to the island, and she was in his office trying to pass herself off as someone important?

The woman shot her a wicked grin. "If you are asking why exactly you will be a busy lady as Connor's assistant, enjoy the quiet, because when we kick into high gear you'd better have your running shoes on, girlie."

"Check. Got them."

Em laughed. "I like you, Maya. I think Stella did good in hiring you. Not many could take on Mr. MacKenzie in the mood he's been in lately, but I think you might. You just might."

"Oh, he's fine." Maya let out a half laugh.

The woman waved her over to her desk.

"Is that his office?" Maya asked, pointing.

"It is. Stay out unless authorized. And you are not authorized."

Yikes. This secretary was scary under her pink streak and smile. But if this was what Connor wanted in his staff, Maya could so fit that bill. "It doesn't seem like him," she said.

"Then you don't know him."

"Yeah, I guess." She couldn't stop staring into the room. It was so barren. Not stark and modern, but barren. As if it was missing some key element—such as Connor. "He needs a plant. Or some life in there."

"Tried that. I had to water it, so gave up. I don't have time to make his office pretty." Em poured a stack of files into Maya's arms. "This'll do you for now. They're all copies, so I don't need them back right away. But when your position is terminated, all of these files and any notes, further files or anything you have created must be returned to me. To me. You understand?" She waited for Maya to nod before letting go of the stack. "You keep nothing."

That was heavy.

"This is all he's currently working on."

No wonder the man seemed so tired. It was an insane amount of work.

"He's familiar with everything in these files?" Maya couldn't help asking.

"Normally."

"He doesn't now, though?" She tried to get a better gauge of what Em was hinting at as the woman turned to grab a thinner stack.

"This is upcoming stuff. He might refer to it, but you probably won't need it. He will expect you to know it though."

Finally. She was going to be working for Connor in a real way.

"Do you have a box?"

Connor's secretary looked at her, eyebrows raised.

"What?" Maya asked.

"You're not taking public transportation with these confidential files, are you?"

"No, but it would make it easier to get to my car without the wind carrying away half the pile."

The woman grabbed a recycle bin from Connor's office and dumped the files into it. "I'll email you an encrypted file with Mr. MacKenzie's email addresses and other vital info, if Stella hasn't already."

"She did, but he hasn't requested I take care of anything yet."

"Oh, he will. Just give him time. In the meantime, you'd better get fully up to speed while you have a chance. Things will be crazy by Wednesday and you can't afford to get behind. If you're behind, we're all behind. Got it?"

Maya swallowed and nodded. Again, the mailroom was looking good. If only to avoid having the sensation that the entire corporation was resting on her shoulders.

"And if Mr. MacKenzie tries to do any work, you call me. He is absolutely and entirely on vacation. Got it?"

"I thought he was on a working retreat." She was sure that was what Stella had called it. He was taking a bit of a break while she took care of things at his side.

"It's a full-on vacation now, so you do your work and keep an eye on him for us."

"Why? What do you mean?"

"Because I'd like to still have a boss and a job next week."

Oh, that did not sound good. That *really* did not sound good.

Maya stepped out of the water taxi, cursing the spotty cell service on Nymph Island. At least now she knew that the boat, which hadn't been sitting at the marina where she'd left it earlier, hadn't been stolen since it was in the boathouse. The only question was which sister was out here at the island? And where had Connor gone? Em made it sound as though he'd resumed his Muskoka vacation, but Maya hadn't heard a thing from him.

She flicked her phone, the screen lighting up the night as she checked once again for voice mails or text messages. She paid the water taxi with one of the twenties from Jonah's cab ride and, hugging the blue box filled with files, walked up the dark path, wondering why the little solar lights she'd bought weren't working. Did not enough sunshine filter through the trees during the day to charge the batteries? Or had the box of lights she'd bought at the dollar store been broken or defective? She popped one out and inspected it. Finding a small plastic tab that kept the light from connecting to its battery while in its package, she pulled it out, making the light turn on, although dimly. She continued up the path, shaking her head. How could she not even slow down long enough to notice she wasn't installing them correctly?

A few lights were on in the cottage, and she hoped whoever was there wasn't abusing the aging power system by leaving them on for no reason. The solar panels were still okay, but the battery was a real problem—which meant they'd have to run the generator to boost it, so she'd have to haul more gas to the island. And gas was not cheap. By the time she reached the veranda, she was feeling impatient to tell off whoever was using more than one light. She opened the screen door, and Daphne called out, "There she is!"

Tigger came bouncing over. "I got a chipmunk to eat out of my hand!"

"No way!" Maya dumped the box of files and gave her niece a distracted high five, on the lookout for Connor, as well as any extra lights she could turn off.

Daphne stepped close to her, angling them so her words wouldn't filter past their bodies. "I gave Mr. MacKenzie a ride out here. Where were you?"

"How did he find you?"

"I'm listed on the info sheet you gave him."

"When did he get here?"

"About an hour and a half ago. In a limo."

"No plane?"

"He doesn't seem well."

"What do you mean?"

"I suggested a cleanse."

"Tell me you didn't." Maya reached over and turned off an overhead light, relief seeping under her jitters. "I really need Connor to see me as logical and analytical, Daphne. No offense, but a cleanse doesn't exactly say I'm Bay Street material and that I will get things done in a surefire way, or that everything I do is backed by research. That I don't feel, I act."

"Well," Daphne said uncertainly, "he asked me if it would help clear stress. So I set him up."

"You're kidding."

"I told him yoga was more likely to help, and showed him a few moves. I'll bring some of my videos over later. Do we still have the portable DVD player here?"

"I'm not running the generator for TV."

"It has a battery and it's for our guest! And he really needs yoga. He looks as though he's about to keel over."

"I fed the fairies!" Tigger said, slamming the door on her way into the cottage, having finished a loop of the veranda.

"Not now, Tigger," her mother said. "And *shhh*. Mr. MacKenzie is trying to sleep."

"It's not bedtime yet," the girl complained.

"As a matter of fact, it's past *your* bedtime." Daphne began herding her daughter out of the cottage. She paused, turning to Maya. "How did you get out here, anyway? I have the boat."

"Water taxi."

Daphne pulled her bottom lip between her teeth.

"I can give you a ride into town," Maya offered, "especially since they haven't been giving us a local's discount since Simone broke up with the owner's son, what's-his-face."

"That's unfair, she's not even related."

"She's a Summer sister by heart." Maya placed a hand on her sister's back and guided her out to the veranda.

Daphne paused, waiting for Tigger to catch up. "You should leave Mr. MacKenzie a note."

"Right." Maya turned, hurrying back inside. She turned the corner into the kitchen to grab the notepad, and slammed into Connor. "Oops!"

"I was looking for you, actually."

"Sorry, I was in Toronto."

"Doing what?"

"Job inter—getting files from your secretary. Good to see you here."

Connor crossed his arms. "You'll need to take over the details of the merger. Just the everyday stuff to ensure the wheels stay greased. Items that comes across my desk—push them along."

Maya's heart skipped and twirled. *Yes!* "Great. Let me know what to do, and it'll be done."

"All the info is in the files."

"But—"

"I'm on vacation, just get it done. Stella said you were capable."

Maya stared at him for a long moment. He was serious. Somber. His chin drawn tight with a determination she'd seen in him only during his talks.

"Yes, but "

"I'm on vacation. Talk to my advisors or Em. They'll tell you everything you need to know." He turned away, jaw clenched, as though fighting the temptation to talk.



CONNOR STILL COULDN'T QUITE BELIEVE he was back in Muskoka, but he'd been so relieved when Dr. Tiang had told him that his chest pains weren't a heart attack that he'd blindly nodded and agreed to take the prescribed two weeks off.

He'd never heard of anyone his age keeling over from stress, although he'd met plenty of people who'd bailed out of the rat race and looked healthier for it. The big question in Connor's mind was were they smart for listening to their bodies, or was this another test of his devotion and ambition? Another hurdle to leap? He was beginning to

think well, honestly, he was beginning to think that maybe he wasn't Superman and that the doctor might be right.

He stood on the end of the dock on Nymph Island and gazed into the water. The only place he knew where he could hide away and fix his life was here. Not Italy or some fancy spa, but here. With Maya. Only hours from the temptation of too much work.

He rubbed his eyes and watched small fish zip and zag below the water's surface, disappearing under the dock, then reappearing. Swimming really wasn't that difficult. Look at the fish, it was second nature, just like it was for him as a kid. He could still do it, no problem. All he had to do was get in the water. Just leap off the end of the dock. Nobody was around to see him stand up to take a break if he got tired. He just had to get in there, and build up from whatever he had until he was healthy again. Until he was buff, and ready for Maya.

The blue boathouse across the strait didn't seem that far. He could swim there and back to get his wind and rhythm, and then go around the island just like Maya did every day.

He stretched his right arm across his chest. Then the other arm. He hummed an aria from *La Traviata*. He carefully dipped a toe in the lake and jumped back from the chill.

Great. Now he was never going in.

He let his toes curve over the edge of the dock and closed his eyes, searching for motivation. Why was he doing this? *For work*. He needed to get back to work.

Meh. Work-schmerk. He wanted to go back to bed, even if it meant tossing and turning and barely sleeping.

What else was there? *Not dying*. That could be good motivation, except that it didn't feel like a particularly real threat.

Maya.

Hmm. The doctor had made it sound as though his manhood issues were due to stress and fatigue. In other words, if he took care of himself he might be able to pleasure a woman such as Maya. None of this too-soft business he was experiencing.

Smiling, he raised his arms to dive into the water. Motivation found.

The sound of bare feet pattered across the dock and he turned, losing his balance, tipping off the dock as a grinning Maya ran past him, diving out in a graceful arc while he landed with a splash. He came up gasping, grabbing at the slick wooden ladder, while Maya surfaced in a front crawl, taking her away. She rolled onto her back, laughing at his expression.

"It's cold!" he called.

"It's not that bad. Try it in May."

"May! I knew you were crazy."

"Earliest is May 5. It'll get warmer in a week or two, then start cooling down again. Enjoy it while it's good." She began backstroking away at a leisurely, strong pace possible only by those in fantastic shape. "There's a PFD in the boathouse that should fit you," she called, not breaking stride.

"I can swim."

"Stay where it's shallow. My first aid isn't up-to-date."

"Up yours, you braggy show-off," he muttered as she surged into a strong front crawl, disappearing from sight within seconds.

Of course she went around the island; it wasn't that big. It just sounded fancy, saying you swam around this big hunk of rock. Connor pushed off from the dock to follow her, but after the first three strokes, he failed to fall into a smooth rhythm, his breathing and movements all wrong.

He reminded himself to take it slow. He was on vacation and didn't have to make a full recovery today. Maya was handling the business

stuff, and she could do a fine enough job to get him through. Right now he needed to focus on himself and rebuilding his strength. Focus on this. One stroke at a time.

He swallowed a lungful of water. He grabbed for the dock, which was still only a few feet away, and coughed it out.

Great start. At least Miss *Baywatch* was on the other side of the island and hadn't seen him flounder.

He began dog-paddling until he was no longer fighting the water, then switched to a modified breast stroke, which was less exhausting. But why wasn't that blue boathouse across the way getting closer?

He turned to see how far he'd come, and frowned. Was there a strong current? He'd been swimming for what felt like ten minutes, and still wasn't even halfway. Sighing, he began moving forward again, struggling to go faster. Puffing great bursts of air, he finally grabbed the dock on the other side of the strait. Farther than he'd thought, and now he had to get back.

He was exhausted. He'd forgotten how much work swimming was. He tested the bottom of the lake. Mushy sand that sucked up between his toes. That was disgusting, but his body felt as though he'd used every muscle and needed a break. He clung to the dock, trying to catch his breath. At least Maya wasn't around to laugh at him.

"What are you doing at my dock?" a voice called down to him. "Need help?"

Connor flinched, almost pissing himself. "Just out for a swim, sir."

"You okay?"

"I'm fine."

"You're breathing pretty hard and are kind of purple-faced. Any arm pain spreading to your chest?"

Connor bit his tongue so he wouldn't tell the man to take a hike, and with a smile, pushed off the dock. "Too young for that," he replied.

"Fifty isn't too young, son."

Fifty? He wasn't even forty. He was barely in his thirties.

"Thanks." He rolled onto his front and began paddling hard, determined to show the man who he was in the water. He owned Toronto; he could definitely swim across a simple strait. He was just out of practice, that was all. He could muscle through this; he was young and strong. No problem.

But, man, he was so exhausted. It felt as though his bones were filled with concrete.

He raised his head out of the water to inhale a great breath, and just about rammed into an old rowboat skimming toward him.

"Connor, you okay?" Maya whispered.

"What the ?" He was barely even off Mr. Heart Attack's dock, and she'd been around the island already? Sure, the island wasn't big, but neither was the distance across the strait. Although swimming it made it seem so, that was for sure.

Maya raised her voice. "There's an important call waiting for you at the cottage, Mr. MacKenzie." She gave a little wave to the man on the dock behind Connor. "Oh, hello, Mr. Frederickson. Lovely morning."

Connor's heart rate increased to a level he was sure Dr. Tiang would call indicative of imminent failure. "What?"

"Shut up and get in," she muttered, hauling him up by the armpits.

He rolled over the gunnel and onto the boat's bottom, chest heaving with the effort. Maya oared them across the lake as though they weighed nothing. How did she have strength left in her arms to row like that? His felt like a puddle of overcooked noodles.

Back at Nymph Island, Connor crawled onto the dock and forced himself to stand, knowing the neighbor across the way was likely still watching.

"Who's on the line?" He blinked. His eyes were raw and stinging. He wasn't going to make it back up the hill to get the call. He fell into a chair, wondering what kind of disaster was waiting for him to solve. Merger cold feet? Laws in the way? Finances not able to be liquidated in time? Someone quit? And why wasn't someone else dealing with it for him?

Maya hauled the rowboat onto shore and tied it to a tree. "What?" she called to him.

"Who's waiting on the phone?"

She gave him a small frown and shook her head, then hollered up to the cottage, "Okay! We'll call back in an hour!" She made her way over to the dock and took the seat beside him.

"Who was on the line? I thought there was no phone. Who's up at the cottage?"

"Nobody, there isn't, and nobody," she whispered. "And watch what you say—everything carries across the water."

"Nobody?" Connor leaned back in his chair. "Wait a second did you just *save* me?" How entirely humiliating.

"No, sir." She looked away, cheeks flushed.

Just when he thought his pride couldn't fall any further

"Sorry," she murmured, her shoulders slumping forward.

"Nah, it's fine. I can swim again later."

He gave her a gentle nudge of thanks, his muscles screaming at the effort. She shot him a relieved smile, and some of the anxiety in his aching bones let go. He was going to be okay. He wasn't sure how, but with Maya looking out for him, good things finally felt possible.



CONNOR SAT across from Maya at the dining table on the veranda and clasped his hands together, squeezing them tight. He would not work.

He. Would. Not.

He would dump it all on his assistant and focus on those things Dr. Tiang had suggested to expedite his “recovery.” Heck, he might even try a cleanse and some yoga, which Daphne had suggested last night.

But as for the doctor’s suggestions? Connor was already doing well.

Daily physical activity? Check.

No caffeine? Working on it. But the thought of warm coffee with cream and sugar was so tempting, and the more he thought about it, the more he wanted it.

No sugar. So much for his coffee dreams.

Plenty of sleep? Always a struggle.

No stimulants. No problem. Other than the coffee issue.

No drugs, including over the counter. Never had been a thing for him.

No alcohol. Sucky, but possible.

No stress. Ha, ha. The doctor had a good sense of humor.

No work. Again, an issue. But that was why Maya sat across the table from him, unpacking a blue box from Em.

Connor tapped his fingers along the table’s edge. This was similar to being in a witness relocation program. He knew where his former life was, just wasn’t allow to reach out and contact it.

He mentally consulted the list from the doctor. There was more. What was it?

Meditation. Right. That should be interesting—trying to still his mind.

“I’m going to need fruit and fresh vegetables,” he said to Maya. “Nothing processed.”

“What?” She frowned at him as she finished piling a humongous stack of file folders on the table. Just seeing all those files full of all the

things he should be working on, finessing into a finished project, was making his chest ache and his heart act as though it was crossing cobblestones on stilettos.

"No white flour. Or at least in limited quantities. No more coffee or vodka, either."

"Uh, you know this isn't exactly " She bit her bottom lip, obviously worried about how best to proceed. Her demeanor changed suddenly, and she stretched her neck from side to side as though gearing up to tackle someone. "You know what? I'll do my best." She pulled up the chair across from him, sat and folded her hands on the table, imitating his pose.

"Thank you. I appreciate it."

"Em gave me copies of the things she feels I will need in the coming two weeks. Can I presume you will be staying for that time?"

He nodded. She was his motivation for getting better, so yeah. Not going anywhere but her bed—eventually.

"I went through approximately half of these files last night."

Connor felt his eyebrows dance up around his hairline. Wow. That was a lot of reading and digesting.

"I have a few questions, but I'll wait until I read the rest. Although I am curious where you want me to focus the majority of my attention."

"There should be a master timeline in there for all project completions. It includes checkpoints, deadlines, etc." He reached across the table to tug at a file, but pulled back before touching it. "Red folder at the bottom." He clasped his hands behind his neck, struggling with his urge to grab the folder. Maya pattered through the pile and his jaw clenched, perspiration pricking his forehead.

Unable to resist, and knowing it would be so much faster if he did it himself, he lunged forward, yanking the folder from the pile. He flipped it open and stared at the list of dates. Several had been crossed out,

their modification dates penciled in above. More should be checked off as complete.

"You got this yesterday?"

"Yes. Em said it was the most up-to-date version."

They were behind.

He scanned the list. Everything was behind, from a week to two months. He used to complete things ahead of time, eager for the other side to volley the project back to him. Now he had the mammoth company delaying projects, with a series of departments that all had to have their say before anything could be given the green light.

His breathing became shallow and his fists clenched.

He shut the file, wishing there was a way to slam it closed, lock it. He shoved the folder across to Maya, its contents sliding out as she caught it.

"Top page."

Connor pushed his chair away from the table. If he went any further he'd get sucked in, hours vanishing as though they'd never existed. Instead of taking a half step forward he would be taking two steps back in his quest to feel like himself again.

His chest started to tingle.

No way.

He stood, putting space between him and the massive pile of work. He needed to be alive. For for what? To be his brother's best man. Connor wanted to look good, not the pale, walking corpse he'd seen in the papers yesterday. He wanted to be someone who didn't disappoint women such as Maya.

That was his goal. Get this sexy nymph in his bed by the end of two weeks. Make her eyes light up at the sight of him, not show disappointment. Feel those curves, give her the best night of her life.

Doable. Totally doable.

"Start with this?" Maya waved the red folder.

"You'll figure out the priorities from that, yes."

"Aren't you going to be working?" She hesitated, and he wondered how much she knew.

"I'm on vacation. I'm totally hands off. Go through Em for anything you need. Stella is away. My advisors have been notified to give you any info you require."

"Wow. You guys are super serious about taking time off. I like it. Do you have a health spending account, as well?"

Connor tried to smile, but couldn't.

"So, if you don't want to talk business," she said, palms flat on the table as she leaned forward, her gaze digging deep into his secrets and soul, "why am I here with you?"

"I thought you got good marks in your classes or some such thing?"

"I did. But why wouldn't you have an assistant do this back in your office?"

"Just the way things worked out, I guess."

He stepped off the veranda and into the area where Maya had said the ice shed used to be ages ago, wondering if this was all a bad idea. He should have gone somewhere else for his vacation. Yet, he couldn't imagine being anywhere but here.

There was a narrow trail that led through the rocks and trees to what he guessed was the top of the island. He was curious to see the view was from there, but more than anything, he wanted to get away from Maya and how she was blowing holes in his resolve not to think about work.

Sure, Em may have blurted out why he was in Muskoka, but he doubted it. As far as he knew, Maya was in the dark and would remain there. It may be pride or vanity, but he wanted her to see him become someone strong again. For her to forget the shell he had become. He

wanted to no longer be the man losing everything because he'd never really had anything real to begin with.

He turned back to her, an idea striking him. "You're working here, so I can keep an eye on you, Maya. You're new. Eager. Likely to make errors. Think of it as a trial period. Normally it would be Stella handling this, but she's out of the country."

"But you won't look at the work, and you want me to go through everyone back in Toronto "

Shoot.

This woman was clever. And determined, like the man he'd been not that long ago. Where had he gone? Was he still there, or had he been swallowed by another one? A guy bent on keeping his head above the water while he treaded in quicksand?

Maya was searching his face for an answer.

"Just get it done."

He took a few steps up the hill and she called after him, "But this isn't the most effective use of—"

Just shut up, already.

"Consider it a job interview," he snapped, and her back straightened as if someone had inserted a rod. She gave a brisk nod, her nose diving into the files.

He looked up into the baby-blue sky. Why? Why him, stuck here with her? He couldn't make love to her and couldn't talk business with her. This was the worst version of hell. Ever.

Maya frowned and reread the brief on an acquisition Connor's advisor, James Culver, was spearheading. Grabbing her laptop, she did a few quick online searches. This acquisition made no sense. It was totally out of character for Connor's business. Was he suddenly branching out? Changing direction?

She shook her head. It didn't matter. What mattered was that she filled in any holes that had been created by those on vacation—namely, Connor and Stella. Maya sucked on the end of her pen, wondering what it would be like to work so closely with Connor. Had Stella fallen for him the way she had? All that power, control, and confidence. How could a woman not fall for that? And Stella probably knew everything about him, which meant she could quite possibly be competition. His assistant had almost a decade of experience as Connor's right-hand woman, and who was Maya? Nothing but some eager upstart wanting in, and with a massive crush on a man who didn't seem to exist any longer.

She looked up from where she had the files spread on the veranda table. Connor had gone stomping off into the bush almost two hours earlier, and was just returning. He was sweaty, sleepy-eyed as though he'd had a nap, and staring at her with an odd expression.

"What?" she asked.

He tipped his head in a way that made the warm July sunshine wink off the shine of his hair. He moved toward her, his eyes averted from the table, slipping into the kitchen as though he expected her to reach out and tackle him.

Weird.

She returned her attention to the files. She still wasn't sure what she was supposed to be doing.

"Connor?"

"Yeah?" He appeared at the screen door, the room behind him dark in contrast.

"Am I supposed to be checking your email?"

"Yeah."

"Okay." She gave a nod, encouraging him to say more. "Um, anything I should avoid?"

"Emails from my mom."

Maya froze. Were personal emails going to be mixed in with business ones?

"I'm kidding. She sends her jokes to my home account."

"Should I be checking any other accounts, as well?"

He shook his head. He looked weary, but at the same time, there was something new in him. Determination. Hope. Resolve.

Wowzers. That was a sexy look on him.

"If you want to meet with anyone while you're here, I can set things up," she offered.

"What do you mean?"

"Business meetings. Conference calls."

"I'm on vacation." His voice was sharp.

"Sorry. I wasn't sure—"

"I'll tell you if I need anything." Connor spun on his heel and vanished into the shadows.

Maya pressed her fingers to her temples and let out a long, slow breath. Wow. She grabbed her cell phone and checked its signal. Nope. She'd have to go up the hill Connor had just come down if she wanted to talk to Em.

Grabbing a few files, a notebook and pen, she headed up the narrow path.

It had been awhile since she'd been up here and she smiled at the fairy houses her niece, Tigger, had created since then. They were getting more elaborate the farther she went, ending with one made of birch bark, acorns and tiny pine boughs, featuring a sand path to its door. If there really were fairies on Nymph Island, they were living in some pretty nice digs.

Maya sat on a rock, enjoying the sun's warmth. Although the cottage didn't have air conditioning, the shade of the large pines and maples helped it stay cool, sometimes, too cool.

"Hello, Connor MacKenzie's office, Em speaking."

"Hi Em, it's Maya."

"What do you need?"

"I'm wondering about the sawmill acquisition."

"The lumberyard James is working on, yes?"

"What exactly am I supposed to be doing?"

"Have you worked on an acquisition before?"

"Um, no."

Em let out a sigh. "Okay, well, have you at least read the files?"

"Yes."

"And?"

"And it seems odd that he wants this behemoth, don't you think? It isn't at all like Connor's usual acquisitions."

"And you know his usual acquisitions?"

"I've followed his career in the papers, so yes, I believe I have a pretty good feel for what type of things he likes to acquire."

"Well, his advisors wanted him to branch out and diversify his portfolio, so just move things along as they come through."

"Right. Tough market at the moment."

"Yes. So? What is it you need, Maya?"

"What should I be doing?"

"Have you kept up on his email?"

"No, not yet."

"Then call back when you're done." Slight pause. "So I'll talk to you tomorrow."

"But it's only two-thirty."

"I'm guessing that account hasn't been checked in about four days. Have fun."

Maya clicked off her phone, noting a patch of trampled grass to her right where Connor must have hung out while he was up here. What had he done the whole time? Stared at the sun? Slept? She turned to face the lake. Maybe he'd just sucked in the view. It was a nice one.

Using the data on her cell phone, she logged into Connor's email system.

She swallowed hard. Five hundred thirty-three unread emails.

Maya began scrolling through them, reading names of individuals she'd only dreamed of contacting. There were invitations to cocktail events. Interoffice memos. Newsletters. Ongoing conversations. Where should she start?

A memo caught her eye in regards to Connor's vacation time. Obviously, whoever sent it had forgotten to take him off the list. She opened the email and scanned it. It was very to the point. He was taking time off and his contact person would be her, Maya Summer. An

email address was listed for her—a company one she hadn't accessed yet because she didn't know it existed. Crap.

She redialed Em.

"Am I supposed to have an office email?"

"Yes."

"Could you maybe share the password?"

"Texting it now."

Maya clicked off, shaking her head. She got the password and logged into her new CME email account, figuring nobody would have emailed her.

Fifty-four messages, and none of them looked like a "welcome to the team!" Blinking, Maya trudged down the path. Time to hook up to the cottage's WiFi and do some serious email culling.

As she walked, she skimmed the subject lines. One doofus wanted her to photocopy things for him. Was he for real? Didn't he realize she was Connor's personal assistant, and that she wasn't even in the Toronto office?

This was going to be a long two weeks.

Exciting. But long.



"I DON'T GET IT," she said into the phone to Em the next morning. "I was up half the night and I still can't see how CM Enterprises is going to profit from this acquisition."

The lumberyard CME was working on could do some real damage to Connor's bottom line. It wasn't like his other acquisitions or mergers, and while she didn't have access to every single file of his, she had enough common sense and financial knowledge to know that not only did this not fit a trend, but its purchase price seemed overinflated.

She had tried to broach the topic over breakfast, but Connor had pushed away from his half-eaten egg on toast with something that looked like fear hiding in his gaze. He hadn't come out of his room since.

And now she was getting brick walls from Em.

"Can I talk to one of his advisors?" Maya asked.

"I'll patch you through to James," the secretary said with a reluctant sigh. "But know that this isn't really your business."

"As Connor's assistant in charge of this stuff, I think it is. If there is a problem with the acquisition that nobody else has seen, then as an employee I have a duty to not only tell him, but to look into it more thoroughly." Especially with Connor being so out of it.

"Just don't go getting everyone riled up over nothing. These guys have a lot of experience and sway with Connor."

"Can you put me through, Em?"

She sighed and there was a click on the line.

"James speaking." The man's voice was tough, with an edge to it, and Maya had to remind herself that she wasn't some lowly backwoods gal, she was Connor's assistant. It was her job to get to the bottom of this, and to understand it so she could do right by her boss.

"This is Maya Summer. I'm Connor's assistant while Stella is on vacation."

"Who?"

"Maya Summer."

There was a long pause. Was he playing the I'm-too-important-to-remember-some-lowly-assistant game or was he waiting for her to proceed?

"I was talking to Em, and she said you could answer some of my questions."

No reply. Was he still there?

"I'm sorry, *who* are you?"

"I'm filling in for Stella. I have the necessary clearance, if that is your concern."

"Have you worked with Connor before?"

"I have not."

"What are your qualifications?"

"Connor hired me." She kept her voice low, dry, and unimpressed. She was not going to prove herself to this man. She needed information and he had to give it to her. "I'm his representative—"

"No, you are not, but carry on." His tone told her she was going to have to do some serious convincing to get him on her side. "What do you need from me that Connor doesn't already know?"

Wow. His mother must have trouble distinguishing him from a donkey.

"I have a few questions about the lumberyard acquisition."

"Do you now?"

"Yeah. Namely, how is Connor going to profit from this? I must be missing some pieces in my files."

"I'm sorry, I don't have time to explain this to someone who doesn't understand. This is my project and *my* assistants are taking care of the details. Connor can continue being oblivious as to how hard we're all working to keep him afloat."

Was this one of the situations where she should have tried connecting with him, such as her mother had suggested? He was totally shutting her out, which only served to make Maya more curious about what she was missing.

"What is the overall purpose of this acquisition?" she asked.

"I think this is above your pay level."

"And I think you are being difficult. Seventy percent of corporate mergers fail, you know."

"This isn't a merger, it's an acquisition, so what exactly is your point?"

"Why would a financial company take over a sawmill?"

"Lumberyard."

"Same difference. But this is like adding a chair to a cloud."

"Look, there are a lot of nuances in this business that secretaries aren't aware of."

"I am not a secretary. I have a degree in business and I understand that this one says fail all over it unless we do something."

"*We*? How long are you here for?"

"Two weeks."

"Right. So, not a royal we."

La-di-da.

"I still don't understand how this overvalued *lumberyard* fits in, and will make Connor money."

"Maya, is it?"

"Yes."

"Worry about your job. I'll worry about mine."

"All right, then shall I send this overvaluation to accounting and see what they think?"

"It's already been sent." What little patience had been in his voice was gone.

"It's not marked in the system."

"I'll let my assistant know."

"And what should I do when the shareholders ask why Connor's financial company is acquiring a sawmill?"

"Well, since you will not be invited to that meeting, I'll express that we are interested in growth and positive value. Merging and acquisitions is about expanding our reach. This helps build a new direction for the company."

What a load of bullpucky.

"We know what we're doing, Maya, so you worry about getting his highness coffee, doing photocopying, and staying out of the way. My assistants will continue to deal with this project." He hung up the phone and Maya smiled.

Oh yeah, there was something worth investigating there. She could feel it.



CONNOR TRIED to make his hands stop trembling. Could someone be addicted to work? Because his hands were shaking as though he was suffering from withdrawal as Maya passed her phone to him, an app open to the interoffice message she insisted he read.

He sucked in a deep breath, loving the dry, old-wood smell of the cottage. He'd been fine all morning and all afternoon by distracting himself with the new business of taking care of his body. Of avoiding Maya when she got that intense, hungry look. Which was pretty much all the time since she'd opened the box of files from Em.

But this. He should push the phone away. Right now.

"It's your advisors," Maya said. "Tag teaming me."

"Tag teaming?" Connor took the phone.

"They—well, just James really—doesn't trust me and is going to sandbox me."

"Why doesn't he trust you?" His heart clenched as he thought of the information she had access to. Stella had vetted her, but Stella had been pretty eager to get out of Dodge. What if Maya wasn't who Stella thought she was? What if ?

He skimmed the message and let out a relieved sigh. James was only freaking out over her eager questions. Typical spitfire Maya stuff. He

could get over that.

"How'd you get access to my account?"

Maya's shifting back and forth ceased, and she took a sharp breath. "Stella gave it to me. She said important things might come through this and to check it a few times a day."

Connor kept a firm grip on one end of Maya's phone, not releasing it when she gave it a tug. She seemed apologetic. Confused. But the thing that struck him the most was that she'd brought the message to him instead of deleting it. That had to count for something.

He released her phone. "How did you rile them up, anyway?"

"The sawmill lumberyard thing. It doesn't fit your profile."

"My profile?" He studied her.

"Yeah, why lumber?"

"What?" His mind refused to chug forward. He wasn't sure if it was the fire in her eyes or the soft, feminine scent wafting his way, but he couldn't seem to think.

"I don't see how it can bring in a profit for you."

"Look, my advisors are a bunch of butt-kissing pricks who usually wait for me to advise them. They aren't dumb, but this is the first time James has made a suggestion—a decent one at that—so I'm going to go with it. Both James and Bill are good businessmen. They made a plan and James made a compelling presentation. I trust them."

Maya nodded slowly, holding his gaze. Man, she was strong. It made him want to hold her in his arms and let her heal him one day at a time.

"I see," she said. "Well, maybe you shouldn't trust them explicitly. Maybe they're still too green."

"Green?"

"If they always come to you? Maybe they still need overseers."

"Are you offering?"

"Is that what you need?"

Connor ran his fingers through his hair and let out a chuckle. She'd go running the other way if he told her what he needed from her right now.

"No, but I'd like to know what you think." He moved closer, not sure what kind of game he was playing. By the way her eyes grew rounder and her chest expanded as she leaned nearer, he knew she felt whatever was surging through him, too.

"I " She appeared to be puzzling through something. "It's a gut thing."

"Well, unless it is vital, I'd suggest you let it go." He bent nearer as though he was going to kiss her, and her lips parted. "You're smart. Fix whatever needs fixing. I trust you."

He leaned away and she caught herself, straightening up as she shot him a slightly dirty look. He waved his arms as though making his way out of a spider's web, and headed to the screen door, wishing vodka was on the recover-faster list. Hanging out with Maya was confusing him. It made him want things he shouldn't. Such as sleeping with his assistant.

His hands were shaking again, and he rested against the railing, inhaling the island's pine scent. He needed to clear his mind and ignore the three hundred questions he had running through his brain. Maya might be trigger happy, but she wasn't dumb. Her reputation was at stake, and he knew she wanted a good reference. Hopefully, that would keep her in line until he could get back to work, in a week and a half. All he had to do was remember to breathe and take care of himself, and it would all work out.



THE WOMAN seriously wouldn't quit. She was all business all the time. Didn't Maya know how torturous it was hanging out in the same cottage as her? Connor rubbed his face and blinked twice, trying to summon patience, and enough of an attention span that he could focus on what she was saying. He'd been sitting so still a chipmunk, tail raised above its striped back, had scuttled within a few feet of him. Then Maya had come barging out of the cottage as though her hair was on fire, her eyes lit up with passion.

He used to seek out that sort of passion to spur his own. Now he dreaded it. He rubbed his chest and steadied his breathing.

"I was reading your emails and you got this." She passed him a piece of paper, her body practically vibrating with excitement.

"You're printing off my emails?" He willed himself not to care that she was printing what was probably confidential. It was her paper, her ink. But what else was she copying? And was she shredding stuff when she was done? "Did you clear the background check and sign the company's confidentiality and noncompete agreements?"

"Of course I did!" She tapped the paper. "This is a business proposition that I think has some serious potential. And no, I'm not printing out all your documents like I'm a federal agent collecting a case against you. I can see what you're thinking, Connor."

He passed the sheet back to her, but she refused to take it. "I thought I told you I was on vacation."

She held her breath for a few seconds, then sat in the chair across from him, elbows propped on her knees. "I know, but "

"I don't want to be bothered. If it isn't vital, let it go."

"Then why didn't you hire someone in the city?" She stood again, her body arched toward him in a way that was definitely intriguing.

If he were twenty years younger

He rubbed his eyelids with a thumb and index finger. They were almost the same age. He needed this vacation so he could get his life back. His *self* back. And while he was at it, he needed to find a way to release his pent-up sexual frustration.

"Delete those emails, Maya. They're junk. And then leave me alone to chill out. *Capisce?* I'm trying to take a vacation."

"But they're looking for a financial backer, and you would be perfect for this."

"Because I have money? I don't have time to babysit a project with a bunch of newbie entrepreneurs who have sunk their life savings, plus some, into some lame project and want me to magically make them millions."

Her lips curved in a smile. "You watch *Dragons' Den*?"

"I used to, but that has—"

"Kevin O'Leary has a cottage not far from here."

"Are you having him over for coffee to tell him about these people? I believe both shows hold auditions, Maya."

"You think you're hilarious, don't you?" She flashed an impish grin, not at all put off by Connor's attitude. It made him want to up their banter to see what it took to get to her.

"You ever heard one of those stories of people who've won the lottery, Maya?"

She nodded, her lips in a perfect pouty frown of disapproval. He wanted to kiss her until those lips were a bruised cherry red.

"People appear out of the woodwork, all with ideas on how they can spend your money," he continued. "They get it, spend it, and forget about you once you're broke again." He waited for her to see his point. "I'm that lottery winner, but I'm not gullible or that warm and generous. I protect my investments."

"This would *be* an investment, though. They have a product that—"

"Maya, it doesn't matter. They all have a great pitch. Well, okay, not everybody."

"They want forty thousand and are offering you fifty percent of their company."

"Maya " The more she talked, the more he wanted to know. It was his curiosity rearing up—a trait that had always served him well. But he was too tired. Too tired to start learning about a pile of new businesses. Especially when he could barely run his own company and seemed to be playing shadow tag with the grim reaper.

"Won't you consider them?"

He crumpled the paper and chucked it back to her. She caught it, looking determined, as though she was figuring out which angle would work with him to get what she wanted.

"Are they personal friends or something?"

She jerked her chin up, obviously insulted.

"Then what?" he asked.

"It sounds solid. I'd like to meet with them."

"You have forty K?"

She shook her head.

"I like you, Maya."

"But?"

"I'm on vacation! I said I don't want to be involved in anything unless it's an emergency. This is *not* an emergency. I need rest. I haven't had a vacation in years, and right now I am trying to keep a promise to myself. One where I kick back and don't think about work for two weeks. If you can't help me with that, I'm going to have to go elsewhere."

She swallowed quickly, her posture straightening. "You won't even know I'm here. I mean, that I'm working. That you have emails—"

"Get the vodka, Maya. You're strung way too tight."

She paused on the edge of her chair.

He closed his eyes. "Just get it. We both need it to survive each other right now."

She banged her way through the loose screen door, and he let out a quiet curse. Wasn't anyone going to fix that rotten thing?

Maya passed the half-empty liquor bottle back to Connor. They'd started off mixing vodka and Coke and using glasses, but that had been hours ago. Since then, she'd roasted veggies on the barbecue, as well as chicken breasts that, despite their blackened edges, had been pretty good, if she did say so herself. Or maybe it was just the vodka that made everything taste as though it was the best food she'd ever made.

They were almost to the bottom of the bottle now and had succumbed to passing it back and forth, swigging as they went. She was beyond drunk. And she was too warm. They were breaking heat records in Toronto and, despite it always being cooler out on the island, she was feeling the heat. The hot air pressed in on her, inescapable, and the way her shirt was sticking to her skin was driving her wild. If the lake wasn't so far away, she'd go for a dip.

"So what do you like most about being out here?" Connor asked, passing back the bottle.

She ignored it and peeled off her T-shirt, tossing it across the veranda, not caring that he could see her lace bra. He'd seen more in the shower and hadn't done anything to be worried about.

"Freedom."

"To whip off your shirt?"

"Yeah." She leaned her head against the back of the wicker chair.
"And you?"

He smiled. "Yeah, I like that you enjoy the freedom here, too."

She laughed. "Are you flirting with me, Connor MacKenzie?"

He leaned closer as he offered the bottle again, his lips near hers.
"Maybe. You said I had to increase my charm. However, you seem to enjoy it when I lack charm. It makes your eyes twinkle with mischief." He raised his chin. "You like the challenge, don't you? Trying to one-up me."

"Is this you trying to be charming?" He was so close, her own breath was being reflected back at her. All she had to do was ease a tad forward and she'd be kissing her boss.

He stood, offering his hand. "Would you care to go for a swim with me, Maya Summer?"

"I would." She rested her fingers against his palm, wondering what he would do if she took things a little further?

"Maya Summer, you are drunk."

She sighed. "That's why my sisters always make me drink margaritas. Otherwise I drink too fast." She allowed her chest to brush his as she stood. She shivered despite the heat and tipped her head back. Connor's eyes were dark pools of longing, and she wanted it unbridled. Here and now.

Before she could do something stupid, she hooked a finger through a belt loop in Connor's shorts, and pulled him to the steps that led down to the path.

"Don't we need towels?" he asked.

"There are some down there."

"Bathing suits?"

"My oh my, you need an introduction to the freedom that is Nymph Island."

"Fitting name."

Connor kept up as she headed for the water. Once her feet hit the dock, she shimmied out of her shorts, turning to watch Connor. The big question was whether to swim in her underwear or to skinny-dip. The sun was still shining and anyone who was over on Baby Horseshoe with half decent vision could see her.

Connor tossed off his shirt and tightened his abs, his attention focused on her bare stomach.

"You're too skinny," she said with a laugh. "Quit sucking in." She waved at his shorts, daring him to drop them.

His cheeks flushed as he slowly unbuttoned his shorts, allowing them to fall to the ground.

She reached behind to unclasp her bra, noting that Connor seemed to have stopped breathing. She decided against flicking the garment aside as well as shimmying out of her panties. Too early for skinny-dipping. Her family might stop by.

Instead, she gave Connor a wicked grin and asked, "Coming swimming?"

She took a shallow dive off the end of the dock before he could reply. The water felt amazing as it rushed past her clammy skin, and she came up grinning. "Refreshing."

Connor stood at the edge, studying the water's depth.

"Come on, Connor."

"Too chicken for skinny-dipping?" he teased.

"It's daylight."

"And?"

She laughed. "Want me to strip? You'll have to as well!"

He jumped into the water and popped up with a gasp. "It's cold!" He was treading water quickly.

"You're going to tire yourself out. Put your feet down."

He relaxed and straightened, his broad shoulders sticking out of the water. Maya came closer, keeping eye contact. He wasn't giving off signals. Not a one. None saying for her to back off. None saying to come closer.

She paddled near him, rolling onto her back, drawing his gaze. He was interested. Good. She could handle polite and shy.

Turning in the water, she glanced up at the cottage peeking through the leaning trees that hugged the shore. Almost laughing, she thought of her mother and sisters' beliefs that this place was a matchmaker, and that destiny had a hand in them falling in love if they spent time here with the right man.

Destiny better know Maya wasn't looking for love. She was after a good time and a hot career. And right now, judging by the desire coiling Connor's muscles tight, he might be able to fulfill one of the things she was after.

She splashed him playfully, and he seemed shocked for a second, before responding with a splash of his own. She rolled and dived, coming around to his bare ankles, giving them a tickle as she surfaced behind him, resisting the urge to nip at his lovely round tush. He laughed, looking younger than he had since his arrival. He reached for her ankle as she swam away, and she let him catch it, reel her in, curious to see what he'd do with her once he had her.

He pulled her closer, one hand over the next as he worked his way up her leg. She laughed and squirmed, playing along. He wrapped her legs around his hips, gripping her waist, his body scorching where their skin met. Without warning, his lips were on hers, taking her. Everything about him that she admired in the business world was at home in his kisses, too. Power. Control. Authority.

He deepened the kiss, consuming her breath and any willpower she might try to summon.

Oh, yeah. This was what she wanted.

She wrapped her legs tighter around his waist, the water buoying her. She caressed the nape of his neck, keeping her body tight to his. Connor walked them to the shallows, his hands moving over her back as they continued to kiss.

He sat them in the sand, then let out a stuttered breath and slipped out from under her. "Maybe not here," he whispered.

She led him into the small boathouse, dumping the stack of towels they kept in a cupboard onto the floor. Connor's body pressed tight to hers, not allowing her more than a butterfly's breath away, and they fell onto the towels together, their lips meeting again.

Slowly, he lowered his mouth to her shoulder, licking streams of water off her trembling form. He relaxed his grip which had been on her wrists, and she swept her hands free, pulling his chest tight to hers where she was stretched out on the lumpy towels.

"Don't be so impatient," he grumbled, trailing his fingers along the sensitive skin of her exposed side.

She shivered, wishing he'd move faster. He was being difficult, taking the control she wanted. But she loved it even though it frustrated her. There was something sexy about a man who could and would stand up to her anywhere, anytime. He would never let her bulldoze him, and the knowledge that his power extended to the more intimate reaches of her life pushed her desire deeper.

"You're killing me." She pulled on his shoulders, wishing he'd quit worrying about pleasing her, and make things happen.

He continued to move slowly, building the tension within her.

"You're sexy, Maya," he murmured. "You deserve time."

"Connor the King of Toronto and Bay Street and All Things Amazing," she breathed. The man had opened a floodgate. "Hurry up."

He laughed and lightly grazed her shoulder with a finger. "Let me take my time."

"I will explode," she murmured, listening to his heart tap out a steady beat. She was pinned by him, and all she could think was how good he felt being so close to her, and how much she loved everything the Y chromosome had bestowed upon him.

He closed his eyes as he feathered her face with kisses, their legs tangled and warm, the bags under Connor's eyes grooved and dark, his bruise still an ill shade of green. How could he be so worn-out? He was Connor MacKenzie, unstoppable. Maya's dream was to become the female version of him—someone who owned the business world with ease and grace—but this wasn't part of the dream.

She trailed a finger down his body, but he drew her hand away, kissing her wrist. He shifted so he was on top of her, his position low, his mouth moving south in slow circles over her stomach, his breath steady on her skin.

She thought he might go lower and she tensed, waiting for him. She threaded her fingers into his hair and his movements slowed until they stopped and a gentle breath tickled the skin on her stomach.

"Connor?" She propped herself up on her elbows. Another puff of breath followed what sounded like a gentle snore. "Are you *asleep*?"

If this was destiny playing a joke on her, destiny was an unkind so-and-so.



CONNOR BLINKED AWAKE. It was dark. Cold. And he was sleeping on something uncomfortable. Water was lapping under him, but he was dry. A dock. The boathouse.

Maya?

He patted the area around him. He was alone on the towels Maya had thrown out of the cupboard in their haste to continue their private party on land. She wasn't a nymph, after all, but a siren who had dashed him upon the rocks as he'd predicted. He stifled a groan, his mind filling in details he wished were attached to the brain cells the vodka had surely washed away. How stupid could he be? He'd come incredibly close to revealing his secrets to Maya. She was a lot like him in that she valued strength and virility, and he had neither. She'd almost seen how weak and broken he was, and that would have been a game changer. A killer. What was wrong with him? She was the sexiest, most stimulating woman he'd ever met, and he couldn't even react. She would take his lack of display to be representative of how he truly felt about her and be hurt.

She'd moved so boldly, calling him to her like the siren she was. Of course he'd followed her and her song. She'd been incredible, but he still hadn't been able to satisfy her in the way a man should. It was humiliating how he'd had to carefully fend her off, slow her down, protect his secret. And then and then he'd fallen asleep.

Asleep.

Connor sighed and draped an arm over his eyes, his head aching, his pride broken.

His longing for Maya created an ache inside him so severe it was as though something had been torn from him.

As soon as she noticed he was broken, she'd be gone. And for some reason that mattered to him. He'd been stupid to allow things to go so far—and not only because he was her boss.

Connor sat up, the digging sensation behind his eyes intensifying and making his head swim, his brain an overinflated balloon in a vise. The doctor had been right about abstaining from alcohol.

Sighing, he curled up on the towels under him, using one as a blanket over his shivering, half-naked form. Maybe later he'd go searching for his clothes, then make the awful trek back up to the cottage.

He'd actually been feeling better, so what did he do? Get drunk and maul his more-than-willing assistant. He was his own worst enemy, and yet all he could think about was finding some way to get his body back in business so he could show Maya just how much of a man he really was. How much he wanted to finish what they'd started.

He rolled over, trying to get comfortable, and his body thanked him with a stab, stab, stab in the temples. Pain in tandem with his heartbeat seared through him and he let out a groan.

Quiet footfalls sounded on the dock, then came into the boathouse. He glanced up as Maya crouched beside him, clothed again, flashlight shining on him. She didn't seem angry, only concerned. He was becoming an invalid.

He sat up, his head screaming at him to put a gun to it and end his misery.

"Hey," she said. "How are you feeling?"

Wow. Lots to dive into there. *Let's start with tattered human, followed up with crappy morals and no sense of honor.* Who took things that far with an assistant while both parties were drunk?

"Sorry about that." He wanted to stand, but couldn't figure out a way to do so without informing his head that a change in altitude had occurred.

"Sorry about what?" she asked, her voice edged with caution.

"Taking advantage."

She laughed, the sound hollowed by something similar to disappointment, he suspected. Or worse.

She sat on the boards with her knees drawn under her chin. "Just don't fall asleep on me next time."

He swallowed a bitter lump of humiliation. "I'm sorry. It wasn't you it's—"

"It doesn't matter," she said quickly.

"It does to me."

She didn't reply, simply handed him his clothes, then set the flashlight down beside her. She scratched her forehead as though feeling shy. He silently slipped into his shirt, hating the awkwardness that had settled over what had been a good night until he'd crashed, ruining it all—even though it had saved him from doing something he shouldn't have with her.

And while she'd said 'next time,' he guessed she was likely just trying to be nice. He glanced at her, but was unable to read her expression with the light creating shadows across her pretty face.

She stood, turning away to adjust the cupboard's contents, which had to be still in disarray from her yanking out the stack of towels like a madwoman. Connor quickly tugged on his shorts, almost falling over as his head was showered in shards of pain. His shirt felt odd like it might be backwards, but Maya passed him several bottles of water. She grabbed an air mattress from against the wall. "Can you bring the towels?" she asked.

He gathered them, careful how he moved his head, and followed her out to the dock, where she dropped the air mattress. She took the towels and began busily arranging them while he downed one of the drinks.

Connor hesitated beside her, not sure what she had in mind. He didn't want to fall asleep in the middle of something again, and he didn't exactly think his screaming head would let him do anything active, assuming he could even rise to the occasion. Things were already awkward enough without adding to their disappointing night.

"Have you seen the stars since you've been out here?" She turned to him, swinging the thin flashlight beam his way. He winced and held up a hand to shield his eyes.

"I haven't."

"Come." Using the flashlight's beam, she directed him onto the bed she'd made, complete with sleeping bags. Two.

Thank goodness. He could be smooth without taking things into no-man's land.

He sat carefully and slowly, then looked up as she turned off the beam of light. "Whoa!" Stars were crowding the sky as though there wasn't enough room for them all. The more he stared, the more he could see, filling in the inky background.

"I know. Amazing, right?" She sat on the opposite side of the mattress, and in the dim light filtering across from the opposite island, he watched her sit with her knees folded against her chest. All he could think of was how he wanted to make love to her. Not something hurried and impersonal, but to love her slowly and luxuriously. To feel every curve, luscious and deep. To learn her body as if it was an ancient, endangered language. To honor her temple, and let her know how precious and rare she was. Strong, feminine. He wanted a completely different kind of satiation than he had when he was younger. He wanted to take his time. Memorize everything about her and the moment.

Without questioning himself, Connor reached over and stroked her cheek with the back of a finger. She leaned into his caress.

He lay down on his back, hands tucked under his head to form a pillow, struggling to keep his eyes from drifting closed. "Do you know the constellations?" he asked. He wished she'd curve herself into the hollow of his shoulder and warm his side with her heavenly body.

"A few," she admitted from her side of the mattress. "It looks like we could reach up and touch them tonight."

"Yeah." His eyelids succumbed to the pull of gravity, but he promised himself he wouldn't fall asleep on her again. Not until she did.

"Another reason you love it here?" he asked, allowing a playful note into his voice.

"That and being able to, um, well, do private things outside." She laughed.

He laced his fingers with hers. The silence between them stretched with unspoken words.

He wanted to tell her that he loved how bold and brave she was. To let her know he supported her strength. He admired her, and found her nothing less than amazing in every regard that he'd discovered thus far.

"I'm really sorry I fell asleep."

"Connor, it's okay. Really." Her voice was tight, telling him it wasn't as okay as she was saying.

She joined him on her back, her pose echoing his, her chest rising with every breath. It was hard to enjoy the stars with her by his side. His eyes drifted shut and he opened them again, the world spinning slightly.

If he knew Maya, which he really didn't, she hadn't completely given up on him. And that meant that if he didn't blow it tonight, he might have yet another opportunity to explode whatever low expectations she had of him, as well as somehow, in the next nine days, find a way to retrieve his manhood from the dark hollows of his fatigue.



CONNOR AWOKE with Maya in his arms. He blinked and looked at her again, checking to make sure she was really there: a beautiful woman in

his arms. A caring and smart woman who had his back and was Okay, he had to stop thinking or he was going to turn into one of those sappy men he couldn't stand.

He barely dared breathe as he watched the mist rise off the water over Maya's shoulder. It had been years since he'd slept this well. And on an air mattress on a dock, with mosquitoes buzzing around him all night, no less. It had to be the magic of Maya.

A few hundred yards away a boat motored past slowly, voices drifting across the water, breaking the quiet spell of the sunrise.

The craft turned between the two islands, and Connor hoped the sound wouldn't wake Maya, so he could savor having her in his arms a little longer. Tipping his head to watch the boat, he inhaled Maya's scent, a subtle blend of pine, lake water and something else distinctively hers.

The boat pattered to a stop at the dock across the strait. Maya had said whoever owned the place had given her an offer for the cottage and that she'd show it to him, but she hadn't done so yet. What had happened?

Maya stirred as voices carried across the water once again.

"Good morning," Connor whispered as she propped herself on her arms, blinking at him, then at her surroundings.

"I drank a lot, didn't I?" she asked.

Regrets.

He hated mornings after. He was about to see self-loathing and embarrassment in those blue eyes of hers. Or, more likely, disappointment in him instead of the standard thrill that shone in the eyes of others at having bagged a CEO. Nope, today was going to be a hard hit to his ego. A morning after to top all morning afters.

And he and Maya still had to work together.

"We did, yes."

"Hmm." Her face became a scrunched up version of barely awake. Her eyes cut to his and he knew exactly what had just struck her mind. A flood of pink crossed her cheeks and he traced the color with the pad of his finger.

"You're blushing."

She dipped her head and giggled. "Did we really almost?" Her giggles turned to guffaws and he turned her over, needing to see her face in order to judge her reaction.

She was honestly amused by last night? How about that.

He laughed, letting her know she was safe with him. Always.

Connor wanted to kiss her. He didn't want to revert back to their professional shells. At the same time, he hadn't hired someone to be his girlfriend, and things could get awkward if she felt uncomfortable about their romp. And she *was* embarrassed.

Time for a distraction.

"So?" He tipped his chin toward the island across the water. "They gave you an offer?"

Maya's expression changed to one of interest and hope. And that fiery passion he'd come to look forward to seeing. "They did. Not a great one, though."

"Market value?"

"The island hasn't been appraised, but I'm guessing it's quite a bit below."

"Hmm."

"We may take it, though."

"Why's that?"

"We owe taxes." She stood, shaking out her sleeping bag before briskly rolling it into a tight wad, her jaw clenched. "Hungry?"

"Yeah." He rolled off the air mattress and onto his hands and knees. The bed had felt good. Connor gazed up the path. Would he make it?

His head wasn't sending out piercing signals as it had been last night, but he felt as though he'd slept in a desert with his mouth wide open despite downing a few bottles of water before sleep.

He licked his lips and tried to get some moisture to return. Good thing he hadn't given Maya a good-morning kiss, or she'd think she'd been kissed by the dying.

He watched her long, trim legs as she moved. She was something else from head to toe, inside and out.

Maybe, with Maya as his goal, he really could pull his health together. In the meantime, he had the monumental task of holding her off. He again glanced up the dirt path to the cottage. As with anything worthwhile, the first few steps were always the hardest—as would be the hundred crunches and push-ups he planned on doing that day in order to bulk up again.

Every time Maya looked at Connor, her body reacted. To say her crush had returned would be similar to calling McDonald's a small, family-owned burger stand. Now that she knew what his body could do to hers—with only his hands and mouth when he was dead tired—she was raring to go. All the time. She needed to find out what he was capable of when he wasn't hammered and about to pass out. But most of all, she needed to find out how he felt to make love to.

Moving across the kitchen as though he owned it, Connor laid a hand just below her waist and leaned across her, grabbing the saltshaker off the back of the stove. He looked at her, a hint of something in his expression, and her body and yelled, "Charge!"

She willed the reaction to fade so she could return to the business of making breakfast and being his not-quite-so-personal assistant—she needed a reference from him, not love.

Love? This stupid cottage was getting to her. Anything between them was a temporary sexual affair and nothing more. It definitely wasn't the whole "fall in love on Nymph Island" thing that had been happening in her family for generations, starting with their great-grandmother who had been gifted the cottage by a secret admirer. Neither she nor Connor had the time or desire to do anything as stupid as fall in love. They had

goals. Walking down the aisle was not on the horizon. Getting him to bend her backward in a passionate kiss? That could be.

No, a reference. That's what she wanted, not for things to get complicated, and sexual encounters always wound up that way.

Oh, my. He kept coming closer to get items. If he brushed against her one more time she was liable to push him down on the floor, pour pancake syrup over him and then lick every inch of him clean.

"How are you feeling this morning?" she asked, after clearing her throat.

"Thirsty as a camel in the desert."

"Is that a lot?"

"I imagine so."

She passed him the jug of orange juice from the fridge as they continued to work to the sound of the generator chugging away, making scrambled eggs and her mother's waffle recipe from scratch. Maya stirred the eggs and bit her bottom lip. Maybe if Connor was in a good mood she could convince him to dig deeper into the entrepreneur's proposal with her, because her gut was telling her it was something that could make Connor more money than a lumberyard, as well as change lives. And if she made him money, she might just get a tad of it, too—or at least a steady job.

"All ready?" He reached across her, taking the stack of waffles. She inhaled when his arm brushed her chest.

"All set," she squeaked, joining him outside. It was going to kill her going back to "just colleagues."

"Ever miss eating outside when you go home?" he asked, taking his seat.

"Maybe I eat outside at home." She winked at him and dished herself two waffles.

"Nah. You don't."

"How'd you know?"

"Too time-consuming. You're all about reaching your goals. Eating outside is a luxury that doesn't pay out dividends."

Maya laughed. "Am I that obvious?"

He nodded, scooping eggs into his mouth. "Only because I think a lot like you do."

"Yeah?" She leaned forward, eager to hear what he had to say.

"Yeah. But you need to learn to chill."

"Hey, wasn't I watching the stars last night?"

"Yes, and you were drunk." He shot her a grin, taking her in with his gaze, consuming her in a way that made her want to drag him in her bedroom. Nobody had ever quite looked at her like that and she found she enjoyed it.

"Your point being?"

"Want to hike around the island with me today?"

"I have work to do."

"Oh, work." He shook his head mockingly, as though she was making a big deal about trivial things, not keeping his butt out of hot water.

"It's *your* work."

"And I say cut out for a bit and take a hike."

"There's a lot to do, Connor. And I really don't think I should slack off or things will pile up."

"It'll still be there. It'll always be there. You never get to the end of the pile. Trust me. I'm on vacation, and as the island's guest, I demand you guide me so I don't get lost."

"It's a small island."

"Chicken?"

"Why would I be chicken?" She pushed back from the table, her chair legs scraping the veranda floor.

"I think I see a yellow belly."

Maya stood. "Connor, it's not funny. I have a dream and it's not to be someone's paid slave for the rest of my life. You said this is a job interview, and I'm taking it seriously. I want to be able to do things such as pay Nymph Island's taxes, own a penthouse in Toronto and get a real job that invigorates me."

"This work doesn't invigorate you?" He leaned back, crossing his arms, daring her.

"No." She braced her palms on the table. "Would checking emails all day invigorate you?"

"A penthouse isn't everything," he said quietly.

His tone suggested he'd lost something. Maya gave herself a shake. The man had everything and he was acting as though he was missing some stupid little thing such as picnics in the park.

"Invite some friends over if you're lonely in your big fancy penthouse."

"Who said I was lonely?" They stared at each other for a moment. "And friends I've met where, exactly?"

"Functions, work, the gym."

"Maya, to be the king means making sacrifices. Have you considered the fact that your life—this dream of yours—might land you in the same pile of poo I'm living in?"

"I know, balance and all that." She crossed her own arms and jerked her chin. "And can I just say, some pile of poo."

"Do you know balance, Maya? Do you really?" He placed his hands flat on the table. "Because I think you don't."

"More than you do."

"Then as your boss, I ask that you prove that by teaching it to me."

"What? Don't go pulling the boss card on me! We're—we're " She wanted to say "equals," but that wasn't entirely true. Not even on a

personal level. He hadn't allowed her to touch him last night. She thought he'd been more concerned about her pleasure, but now she wondered if it was more about control.

Why was she even thinking about last night? This was about work. And he was her boss.

It was all so infuriating.

Connor stood up in turn, so close she had to step back so she wouldn't kiss him and forget her anger. He said in a low voice, his breath tickling her neck, "Then come for a hike. One walk won't determine your whole destiny."

She had a feeling that he was very wrong, and that a hike could indeed determine her destiny. She just wasn't sure how.



MAYA PUT her hands on her hips and watched Connor finish slathering sunscreen across the bridge of his nose. Grinning, he reached out and dabbed a drop on hers.

"Don't get a burn," he chirped.

"It's not even 9:00 a.m."

"Smile, Maya. This is fun."

"What's with the sunny disposition?"

"What? Can't a guy be cheerful?"

"You're up to something."

His grin grew even wider. "Nope."

She rubbed in the sunscreen and hoped this stupid hike around the island would be worth the time away from work. Connor had an incredible amount of email come in every hour, and it was up to her to cull that pile, not go stomping around in the bush. She hadn't slept well on the dock, and wanted to do things with Connor that, in the light of

the day, weren't exactly appropriate, seeing how much power he held. And not just as her boss.

"Ready?" she asked.

Connor did a quick bend to touch his toes, then straightened. "Ready."

"You sure you can handle a hike? There are some steep slopes and loose rocks. The path is barely visible." She eyed him closely. A few days in Muskoka were making a difference, but she could tell the man was still not quite himself.

"Trust me. I grew up outdoors."

"Um-hmm." Sure he had. If the outdoors was shown on a television screen.

"I was in Boy Scouts." He leaned closer. "And Beavers, too, you know."

"Big deal. Wasn't everyone?" She mimicked his pose, loving the way his eyes twinkled in challenge. "I was a Brownie *and* a Girl Guide."

"I'm sure you were." His gaze roamed over her figure in a way that made her want to tug him down on top of the sun-warmed rocks and let him earn a badge or two.



HE WAS DYING. There was no other way to express what this hike was doing to Connor and his body. His lungs burned as though he'd inhaled acid. His legs had lost feeling and he was stumbling along, staring at Maya's perfect posterior, to keep him placing one foot in front of the other so he wouldn't lose the view.

How could one island be so big? Why hadn't he brought water? Or a hat? They had to have been hiking for at least an hour.

"Almost there!" Maya called back in a singsong voice.

Connor fumbled on the rocks, reaching out to catch himself on a nearby branch. The sapling bent under his weight and he went down in a sweaty heap behind Maya, who was skipping up the rocks like a mountain goat.

"View's great!" she said, shielding her eyes. "Over there behind that island is the inlet to the Indian River."

Yeah, his view from the blueberry bush that had broken his fall was great, too. He could eat berries and stare up at Maya's figure until he passed out.

Maya turned, a silhouette against the glaring sun. She scrambled down to him. "Are you okay?"

"Of course." He popped a berry toward his mouth and missed. "Just getting some antioxidants."

She tugged him out of the bush. "Wait until you see this view across the lake. You'll love it. Totally different from the top of the hill over there." She pointed behind them, and he studied the terrain. What in blue blazes? That had been *downhill*? This hike was starting to feel similar to his life: even downhill felt uphill.

He groaned, his quads leaden. He trudged the last few feet to where Maya stood waiting. The breeze brushed against his hot skin, and he thought about walking down to the water for a dip, clothes and all.

He fell onto his butt and loosely hugged his legs, trying not to wheeze as he stared out at the dark blue water.

"Another ten minutes that way, and there's a nice view of Windermere if you've got 20/20 vision."

"How long did we hike?"

Maya shrugged. "About ten to fifteen minutes."

"That all?"

"I know, it goes fast, doesn't it? Suddenly it's like—boom!—middle of nowhere."

He glanced at the broad expanses of rocks, trees, and water surrounding him. Middle of nowhere. Panic seeped into his soul and he fought the hit of adrenaline that urged him to run back to the cottage so he could check his email. Check his voice mail. Anything to prove he was still part of Toronto. That he existed and was still alive and needed. That he hadn't been completely forgotten. It was already Thursday. He hadn't been unplugged this long since before he started the company.

"You've been checking my email, right?"

Maya laughed. "Feels disconnected up here, eh?"

He gave a brief nod. He was tempted to take his sticking shirt off, but wanted to be more buff for Maya. Even if he felt dead after the hike, he decided he was going to do some exercises to help build his muscles again. He had all day to fit them in, and would do them one at a time. On the island there was nothing but time, and a body that wasn't doing his life justice. He should be a hot bachelor, not a defective, useless old man.

"And yes." She leaned closer and laid a hand on his forearm. "I've been checking your email."

"Good."

"Nothing pressing so far. Just a great opportunity to become a venture capitalist."

Some of the tension within him shook loose, knowing Maya was on top of things. He tried for a smile, which felt awkward. Add smiling to the self-improvement list. Connor tipped his head back, allowing more of his skin access to the sun's vitamin D.

Wait, did she say venture capitalist? That sounded *sexy*. Powerful.

No, don't bite the bait. She was fishing. He wasn't a dumb fish.

Right.

He peeked at Maya. Her fitted red shirt showcased her narrow waist, and she was gazing down at him with That look again.

"Don't stare at me like that."

"Like what?"

"All passionate and full of fire."

She was laughing, thinking he was joking.

"Anyway, I already told you. I don't do that kind of stuff."

"I was doing some research on funding entrepreneurs—"

"Dragons' Den?"

"Well, no but yes, kind of." She sat next to him, hugging her legs. "Their product could change the world, Connor. They could help children." She pivoted to him, her knee pushing into the side of his leg, and an ember flickered to life within him. He wanted to fan that ember into something that roared and consumed his soul.

He watched her expression, willing himself to hear her out, but not get involved. She needed this and he could handle it. It wasn't work, it was listening to someone else's dreams. He was being a mentor. That's all she wanted from him, and he could be that person. Truthfully, he'd mentor her any way he could just to keep her close.

"They have a product in a niche that has very little competition, and their device could become the standard in cleft palate surgery for children. Less pain. Faster healing times."

"If it is such a narrow niche, how do you assess the market? How do you know this invention will do all they promised? Has it been through clinical trials?"

"Investing in niches is always a risk." She pushed the tips of her fingers into his bare knee as she said "risk" and he felt the ember flare into something larger. Was it her, or was it work-related? And were the two inseparable? "But the payoff could be huge—and not just financially."

"And?" he asked, hating the way he was being sucked in, and yet he couldn't push the topic away to save himself.

"For forty thousand you could either win huge and change lives, or go home."

"Broke."

"Um, sort of. But only if we got scooped."

"Scooped?"

"There's no patent filed."

"No patent? What kind of hooligans are you dealing with?"

"This is why they need you."

"I'm not a babysitter. But seriously? No patent?" Something in his chest fizzed, and he closed his eyes to regain control of his reactions. You didn't sit on a great invention and start shopping it around without a patent. How amateur were they?

"They're working on it. They're doctors. This device is less clunky than what everyone's currently working with. They know what they need, but they require assistance getting there. And fast. You could help them. I know it."

"I don't have that kind of time."

"I do."

"For a cut?"

"Naturally."

"What if we lose? Do you lose, too?"

Maya's chin jerked upward in a move that he'd come to equate with defiance and determination.

"Yes. Then I lose, too."

"Even the investment money?"

"Well, no."

"But you still think it's worth the risk?"

"I'd like to meet with them."

Connor sighed. He was going to have to let her run with this or he'd never hear the end of it.

"Have you ever met Arlene Dickinson?" she asked.

He shook his head. He knew who the woman was, though. She'd taken over a communications and marketing firm out in Calgary, and had gone on to expand it into a major business with an office he'd recently worked with in Toronto. Plus, she'd written a few books and was the star of several business-type reality shows such as *Dragons' Den*. She did all that and wasn't an exhausted washout like he was. What was his problem, anyway?

"Well, what she says is capitalism isn't wrong. Capitalism without a heart and social conscience is. And this project has both. It's perfect."

"Why are you pursuing this?"

"Because I think it will make you more money than the lumberyard, which I still don't understand your involvement in."

"You don't have to understand it, you realize?" The familiar squeezing sensation returned to Connor's chest.

"As your advisor, I think you should take a look at the proposal and give it serious consideration."

"First of all, you are not my advisor. You are an assistant. A temporary one at that." Maya's face fell and he tried to soften the blow. He had to live with this woman, and she could go bad news on him if he wasn't careful how he treated her.

"Second, I really need a vacation, Maya. I love your passion. I understand it. Admire it. You'll go far." He held up a hand to stop her from butting in. "Here's the deal. You need to stop hounding me on this."

She inhaled to speak, then bit her lips and nodded. "But " He waited for her hope to return. "If you do your research, go meet with these people and still decide that you want to back them, then I will fund it. You and I will be equal partners, but I will be a silent backer. It'll be no

secret that I'm involved, but I don't want to get tied up in things or advise anyone. I can't right now. Understood? It's all you."

He waited as Maya sat silently, her face lit up like a little girl at Christmas.

Before he realized it, he was flat out on the rocks, being peppered with kisses. Then Maya leaped off him, her mouth moving a mile a minute about all the things she was going to do, and how he was going to be so proud of her, and that he'd never regret his decision, as well as something about how she loved him and everything in the world.

Connor exhaled, feeling strangely remorseful. What untamable beast had he just unleashed? And why did her offhand remark about love leave him feeling empty inside?

Maya glanced at Connor, who was as still as could be in the veranda's hammock. He'd lain down after their hike, hours ago, and hadn't moved since. He had muttered something about crunches, and promptly passed out.

She wanted to wake him with the news that the entrepreneurs had agreed to meet with her. First by phone and then, if that went well, in person. She didn't really need to talk to Connor, of course, but she wanted to. She wanted to hear his thoughts, get advice, but most of all, get him pumped up about the idea—and preferably decide to come along with her as team lead, because she knew she was going to want to meet the entrepreneurs after tonight's phone call.

In the distance, a garbage barge motored between the islands, and Maya squinted to see where it was heading. She leaned over the railing for a better look when she recognized Daphne and Tigger on the barge, coming her way.

Great. She did not need company distracting her right now.

Maya hurried down to the water, grabbing her niece, who by then was bouncing around on the end of the dock, trying to get the attention of anyone aboard the passing replica steamship *Wenonah II*.

"They can't see you, hon. Too far away."

"They might if I bounce higher."

Maya shuffled her niece out of the way and helped Daphne tie up the barge.

"Is this a good time?" her sister asked.

"For what, exactly?" Maya eyed Shawn, one of Daphne's protest buddies, the man running the boat. "We don't have any garbage. Well, not enough to warrant the barge, anyway."

"Oh, I'm not collecting trash today." Shawn grinned, standing tall beside Maya's kid sister.

"Shawn is taking his arborist's training and said he'd check some of our trees." Daphne smiled up at him, her soft sundress flowing around her in the breeze.

"Oh." Maya ran a hand down her thigh and calculated how much this was going to cost. The island's treetops were swaying even in this light wind. If one of the massive white pines fell on the cottage she'd be wishing she'd found a way to cough up the money to have it and any other dangerous trees taken down. Especially since Hailey had had to cut off the insurance a few years back, leaving the place unprotected.

"For free," Daphne said behind her hand so only Maya would hear. She flashed Shawn another beaming smile and skipped to help him unload some tools from the barge.

"Will it be noisy?" Maya asked.

"Depends on what I need to do," he replied.

"Any chance you could take down some of the trees leaning out over the water?"

The man shook his head. "Doubtful. I think there are a few government agencies that would get sticky about the shoreline—fish need places to lay eggs, and those trees, as well as fallen ones, create protection for them. Unless you have a permit to do work along the shore?"

"We don't." Her attention drifted to where their land was eroding in places, with waves undercutting tree roots and eating away the land near the boathouse. A few years ago they'd asked for an estimate on having it built up, but both the red tape and the cost were so overwhelming that the sisters had decided to allow nature to take its course. For now, anyway.

"I'll take Tigger up to the cottage." Maya turned to collect her niece, and found her already halfway up the path. "Tigger!"

"Oh. You still have your guy here," Daphne said, her hand flying to her mouth.

"He's asleep. Or was. Just do your tree thing, and I'll keep the kiddo out of everyone's hair. Oh, and Shawn?"

"Yup?"

"There's a big tree above the cottage that leans pretty badly that we're worried about. Can you check it out?"

"Sure thing."

Maya heard the screen door slam as she hurried up the hill. She hoped Connor wouldn't be bothered by having his space invaded.

Puffing slightly, she landed on the veranda moments after the screen door slammed a second time. Her niece was standing in front of Connor's hammock, twisting her hips back and forth to make her fluffy dress move.

"What happened to your eye?" Tigger asked. Her hands were cupped together, sunflower seeds for her chipmunks dropping onto the veranda.

Connor, slightly bleary-eyed, his face shadowed by stubble, blinked at her. "I ran into a door frame," he answered, his voice husky.

Maya let out a huff of amusement. Really? He couldn't have gotten a little more creative?

Connor smiled comfortably, not edgy as he had been when he first arrived. He seemed to decompress after every nap, and a little more of

the old Connor MacKenzie came out to play. "I know. I sound like an abused woman. At least it wasn't a doorknob."

"Tigger." Maya reached for her niece. "Come on. Let Mr. MacKenzie sleep. I need to put on lunch—"

"I already ate lunch," she replied.

"It's for me and Mr. MacKenzie."

"I thought you said he was going to sleep?"

"And I think you have some chipmunks to tame."

Tigger held her fingers a fraction apart, dropping seeds as she turned to Connor. "I came this close to petting one."

"Tigger has the classic Summer sister issue of impatience."

"I screamed," the five-year-old said wisely. "Not because I was scared, but because I was excited. I wanted my mom to see. I scared the chipmunk away."

Connor's gaze drifted up to Maya.

"I'm her aunt," she said quickly. "Daphne, my youngest sister, is her mother." Maya gave Tigger a little push. "Go find your chippies. I think they're hungry."

"I saw one up on the veranda earlier," Connor said, his voice having lost its huskiness. "I thought it was going to steal my sock."

The girl turned back to him, her mouth dropping open. "Really?"

"Really."

"Tigger, go play and let our guest rest."

The girl reluctantly went down the steps to find chipmunks.

"Sorry," Maya said to Connor.

"Why? She's cute. And she's got that persistent, quick-as-a-whip Maya thing going on. I've never seen someone wrap around you like that and beat you at your own game."

Maya wasn't sure if he was complimenting her or poking at her. "My sister and an arborist are looking at a few trees. I hope they don't

disturb you."

"Why so formal?"

"Formal?"

"You're acting as if I'm a guest."

"You are."

"Suddenly you're not calling me names, and you're acting as if you're a butler or something." He tapped her hand with the back of his.

"Treat me like a friend taking a vacation."

"Um. Yeah." A friend with some serious benefits. "All right. Want a drink?"

Connor stretched, slipping his hands behind his head, lost in the view of the boathouse and calm water below. "I shouldn't."

"I meant water or juice or something."

"Sure."

"I'm going to start a late lunch. Let me know if you need anything."

"What time is it?"

"Two."

"Seriously?"

"You napped for three hours."

"Nice."

"Yeah. Oh! And I talked to the entrepreneurs."

"Great. Take it away, Maya."

"I'm going to chat on the phone tonight."

"Great. When's lunch?" He stood, his focus elsewhere.

"Twenty minutes."

"Great. I'll be in my room. Let me know when it's ready."

Maya watched him leave, her heart going with him.



MAYA SET Connor's lunch on the shortened dining table and sliced a fresh peach for herself. She'd eaten earlier, but still wanted to sit with him. Pick his mind, flirt a little. And whatever else happened to come up. Preferably in his lap.

Connor pulled out her chair, and waited for her to sit before pushing it in. Then he took his spot across from her, frowning at her plate of sliced peaches.

"I ate earlier," she said.

"I could have made my own sandwich."

"Nah, it's part of the deal. I'll eat a snack with you, though—if you don't mind."

Connor shrugged and dug into his sandwich. Halfway through, he cocked his head, listening to a tapping sound coming from behind the cottage. "Is that a woodpecker?"

"I think it's Shawn checking trees." Maya listened, not hearing the normal sounds of her niece playing.

"For what?"

"Rot, I think. There are some big pines uphill of us and one big one that needs to be taken down."

Connor lowered his sandwich. "Should I be worried?"

"I don't think so " Maya wiped peach juice off her elbows with a paper napkin, thoughts of picking Connor's brain or flirting with him forgotten. "Have you seen Tigger lately?"

He shook his head.

"I'm going to go and investigate." Maya stepped off the veranda onto the flat area where the ice shed used to be, her senses on high alert. Big trees freaked her out. It wasn't windy, so they weren't swaying and creaking as they did in a storm, but nevertheless, she couldn't seem to chill out.

Stepping through wildflowers and ferns, Maya climbed up to where Daphne and Shawn were standing on a moss-covered rock, checking on a hemlock growing out of a crack.

"Did you see this?" Shawn called. "This tree is growing in barely anything."

"Yeah, cool. Have you seen Tigger?"

Daphne pointed to a spot a hundred yards to their right, just above the boathouse path. "She's collecting stuff for a new fairy house. Totally involved."

Maya sagged in relief as the girl flounced through the underbrush, a long blue cord trailing behind her as she squatted to pick up another treasure to add to her bunched up skirt, which was acting as a basket.

"How are the trees looking?" Maya asked Shawn.

"Overall, pretty good," he replied, stepping a few paces uphill to tap at another trunk.

"Any that need to be taken down?"

"I've got that leaning one you mentioned set up for taking down. The guide ropes are ready so it falls in the right place. There's another massive white pine up near the crest of the hill which gets the full brunt of the wind and could use a topping so it doesn't come down in a big storm. I don't think it would reach the cottage, but if it did " He waved dismissively and continued uphill, checking more trees, pushing against a few and performing other tree mumbo jumbo.

"He's cute," Daphne whispered.

"Don't fall under the spell of Nymph Island," Maya teased.

"He's literally a tree-hugger. What could be more perfect?"

Maya assessed Shawn, noting his lean build, Greenpeace T-shirt and scruffy, handsome looks. He probably would make a good fit with her hippie sister. "Hey, Shawn?"

"Yup!" he called.

"You seeing anyone?"

"In the trees?"

She rolled her eyes. "Romantically?"

"Why? You interested?"

"No, but my sister needs a date for a " She waved a hand at Daphne, gesturing for her to hurry up and find an excuse.

"I don't know!" Daphne whispered, her cheeks pink.

"For a movie. She wants to see Finian's new movie." Maya shrugged and Daphne nodded. "You heard Hailey's dating him?"

"I did."

"Yeah, well, he has a new movie coming out and we'll be going to the opening night in Bracebridge. Daphne needs a date. It's an action flick. Want to come? We can't promise anything special, because Finian and Hailey will be in Hollywood, but it would be cool if you came."

"Who are you taking?"

Maya stole a glance at her sister. "Um, me?"

"Yeah, if it's like a couple thing. I have a friend who might want to go, too."

Maya froze, glancing again at Daphne, whose attention was fixed on something behind her. This wasn't the time to be a good mother and watch her daughter; Maya needed help or she'd be sitting beside a tree-hugging guy with dreadlocks for two hours. Not that there was anything wrong with that—it was just so far off track compared to what she usually sought out that it would be like a penguin searching for a mate at the north pole.

"She's going with me," a male voice called out.

She turned, relieved to see Connor coming up the hill, ducking under Shawn's colorful tree guide ropes. The way Connor was moving, she could tell his quads ached, but he didn't let on. His face was a mask—the same business look she'd come to admire.

Daphne held out her hand as Connor met up with them, and he took it in a gentle shake. "Daphne Summer," she said. "You must be Connor MacKenzie?"

"I have one of your paintings," he replied, head tipped to the side.

"You do?" Her voice squeaked slightly.

"Yeah, my assistant picked it up on a whim. A big sunflower."

Daphne turned to Maya, a question in her eyes, and she held up her hands in surrender. "I didn't buy it, Daph. Totally unrelated."

Her sister whispered, "Destiny..."

"So? Can I come to the movie with you?" Connor asked. "It's been a while since I've seen a flick in a theater."

"It's this weekend," Daphne said. "Simone and our mother are going to join us, too." She turned to call up the hill to Shawn, "So? You coming to the movie with me or what?"

"Just tell me where and when," he yelled back. "And heads up! I'm taking down the leaning pine. It'll fall east of you so don't move that way. You should be fine where you are."

"Got it," Daphne called.

Maya swept her gaze over the group, making sure everyone was out of Shawn's way as he started his chainsaw. Everyone accounted for, including Tigger who was now picking flowers near the cottage.

Daphne glanced at Maya and Connor with a grin. "So? You two going together?"

Connor raised his eyebrows and Maya pretended to be put out, but inside she was doing a happy jig that would rival Riverdance. "Yeah, sure. Why not?" She ran a finger up Connor's chest and flicked his stubble-covered chin affectionately. "I hear this guy cleans up pretty good."

He grinned in a way that made her feel as though he was seconds away from pouncing on her and kissing her until she begged for mercy.

Which, for the record, would take a really long time.

Beyond them Shawn was yelling curses. "Oh! Look out! Fore! Timber! Treeeeee!"

Maya's attention turned upward as movement caught her attention. A giant tree was tipping toward them, gravity pulling it downward faster and faster. One of the blue rope guide was missing and the tree was angling toward them in a blur.

Her eyes flicked to where Tigger was playing, singing a song to herself. Directly in line.

Something blasted her shoulder, and she spun to catch her balance. Connor. He tore past her, heading for Tigger, while Maya grabbed her sister, who was rooted in place, her face a mask of horror. With strength born of desperation, Maya dragged her back, away from the falling tree. Jerking a glance over her shoulder, trying to see if Connor had reached her niece in time, she tripped on an exposed root and sprawled to the ground, hitting hard enough to wind her. Daphne landed beside her, her knee ramming into Maya's side.

"*Tigger!*" Daphne screamed, as the tree landed, shaking the ground, followed by a rain of boughs and broken branches. Other trees shuddered and dropped torn leaves and limbs as the giant thudded to the earth.

"*Tigger!*"

"She's okay!" called Connor, his voice strong.

Daphne scrambled toward the sound.

Maya pushed herself onto her back, her lungs shrieking for oxygen. She stared at the sky, unable to inhale. There was a new hole in the canopy up there, where the tree had come down. Maples reached for each other across the space, like outstretched human hands in a Michelangelo fresco.

Breathe, body, breathe.

Slowly, as her lungs recovered from the shock of impact, she drew in slivers of air, fighting the blackness that coated her vision. She carefully tested her limbs. She was entirely numb. Where Daphne had landed on her ribs there was an odd, vague sensation that she knew would soon become a shaft of pain, a trail of fire in its wake.

"You okay?" Shawn's face appeared above hers and she jolted, her lungs heaving into action. She nodded, unable to speak, gasping like a stranded fish.

"Take it easy." Connor knelt beside her, holding her shoulders. Tears pricked her eyes, and all she wanted was for him to hold her close so she could sob against his chest. "I think you knocked the wind out of yourself. Tigger is fine."

They stared at each other for a long moment. Then, finding her voice, Maya whispered, "Thank you."

Connor shrugged, struggling to shake off what she could see in his eyes. He sank to the earth, drawing a trembling hand over his mouth. Then he looked at Shawn and abruptly popped to his feet.

"You stupid idiot! You could have killed us! What were you doing up there? Do you know anything about trees? You could have *killed* that little girl!"

Maya pushed herself off the ground, pain finally catching up with her and stealing her breath. She wedged herself between the two men, pressing a hand on the chest of each as she tried to focus.

Shawn's body was shaking under her palm. He apologized in a fluid stream, barely pausing to breathe. "It was an accident. Man, I am so sorry. I'm so sorry. I don't know what happened. I had all the guide ropes in place and checked twice. No wind. I cut it right. I swear. One of the ropes—something happened."

"I guess no charge for taking that one down, huh?" Daphne said feebly, coming around the massive fallen tree, her daughter clinging to

her like a baby monkey, one of the guide ropes dangling from her waist like a belt.

Shawn paled and stepped away from Connor, whose fists were clenched, his neck muscles straining.

"Don't you double check your work? Who takes down a tree around kids?" Connor snapped.

Shawn bent over, hands on his knees. "It went over like a tipsy bridesmaid. Oh, have mercy on me. I swear I'll never..."

Tigger giggled at Shawn, the severity of the situation not registering, as she slipped out of her mother's arms. "That whole tree came down!" She snuck her hand into Connor's, her fingers vanishing in his grip. "Thank you for saving me, Mr. MacKenzie."

He gave a tight nod and blinked twice, his expression changing from one of rage to something else. He gave a large exhalation and, gently releasing Tigger's hand, pivoted to move briskly down the hill and into the cottage.

"That was exciting," Daphne said in a low voice. Her body was shaking and she looked as though she was fighting tears.

"I'm not allowed to touch ropes anymore," Tigger said sadly.

"Is the cottage okay?" Maya asked her sister. She squeezed her fingers into a fist, fingers that still pulsed from being pressed against Connor's muscled chest.

"Two broken windows." Daphne tipped her chin up as though she could keep from crying if she just got her head positioned right.

"I'll pay for them," Shawn said quickly.

Maya nodded, her mind already on other things. Namely, Connor, and what was going on in that heart and mind of his.



CONNOR SWIPED at his dry eyes as Tigger solemnly stared up at him. He stopped the hammock from moving so it wouldn't hit her. She looked too precious and fragile in her party dress, the lace along the edge tattered from climbing trees and chasing chipmunks. There were dirt smudges from where he'd tossed her into the underbrush as the tree came crashing down behind them, sending chunks of earth, grass and leaves flying through the air as though a bomb had gone off.

"Do you have any sugar?" the girl asked.

Connor tried to focus on the here and now, and the fact that everyone was safe. Tigger. Him. Even the freaked-out-looking Maya. He'd never witnessed fear so raw and stark in anyone before, and Maya had been the last person he had ever expected to see it in. He'd wanted to hold her, tell her it was okay, but he feared that kind of act would have enraged her—for making it seem as though she was weak and in need of consolation.

"Do you?" Tigger repeated.

"Uh, no."

The girl's lips curved into a frown, her chin dimpling with disappointment. *Oh, no. Don't do that to a man.* His hands were still shaking from his mad dash beneath the falling tree, saving her from what would have been certain death.

Him. Connor MacKenzie. A broken man had just saved a life. Lord have mercy on his soul, but all he wanted to do was burst into tears. There was too much aftermath clawing its way through him and he was failing at battling it back. He was too tired to be the stoic male, and too tired to deal with more female disappointment.

"Am I supposed to have sugar?" he asked.

"Old men always have candy."

Shock set him back. "I'm not an old man!"

"Yes, you are."

"Prove it."

"You move like an old man. You're old, and old men have candies."

Tigger's jaw was set in a way that reminded him of Maya.

Laughing, he shook his head, unsure how to make her see his point. "But I just saved you!" he said. "I just ran across and—" he gestured wildly "—and swooped you up! Old men can't do that."

"Tigger," scolded Daphne, coming up the veranda steps.

Birds were chirping in the background, again. It had been eerily silent after the tree had fallen. He peered around her for Shawn's form. She was alone, which was good. He didn't want to see Shawn until he stopped shaking and his heart rate returned to normal. Otherwise, he might find himself behind bars for manslaughter.

Sure, it had been an accident, but Connor couldn't help pouring all his adrenaline-fired blame on that man's shoulders for not seeing that the girl had removed one of his most important safeties. He'd almost killed Tigger. Almost. If Connor hadn't been there If he'd been a moment slower

He needed to stop thinking.

Connor tried to give Daphne a reassuring smile, but the truth of Tigger's words hurt. He bowed his head, sneaking a peek at the disappointed little girl in front of him. "Sorry, kiddo."

Tigger thrust out her lip in a pout that instead of making him want to give her a scolding, tore at his heart. Such an obvious tactic, and yet he couldn't believe how well it was working on him. No wonder old men carried candies; it wasn't for low blood sugar, it was to eliminate the chance of having their heart torn from their chests by cute kids. Especially once you had realized just how fleeting life really was.

Daphne angled toward Connor, blocking her daughter's view as she dropped a Werther's Original caramel in his hand. She gave him a smile,

pressing warmly as she closed his fingers around the candy. "Thank you."

He gave a small nod, not daring to speak. When Daphne disappeared into the cottage, he opened his palm, revealing the golden wrapper to the small girl.

Tigger's face lit up and she bounded over, her dress flouncing as she snagged the candy.

"Thank you!" She gave him a quick squeeze around his neck that about guaranteed he'd need to see his chiropractor when he went back to Toronto, and said, "Told you you were old!"

"Yeah, yeah, you got me." He swung his legs up into the hammock and set about rocking it, ready for a nap like the old man he was, as he watched Tigger shuck the wrapper and pop the candy into her cheek in a second flat, making her resemble the chipmunks she was trying to tame.

Maya came onto the veranda, her movements revealing her pain. Whatever had happened on her side of the tree hadn't been pretty. Her forehead wrinkled as she caught sight of the candy tucked in her niece's cheek.

"It's a good thing my competitors don't know her tactics," Connor said. "I'd be done for within a matter of minutes."

Wincing, Maya flopped into the chair near the hammock, setting the old wicker creaking like an arthritic in a storm. "Sugar winds her up." Maya bent her arms, gazing at her elbows, which were a dirty, bloody mess.

"Aw, Maya. Look at you." Connor sat up, taking her in. Her knees were a disaster, and her chin was scraped, as well. "Are you okay?"

Maya's bottom lip quivered slightly before she tucked it into her mouth, pinning it under her teeth. She gave a tight chin lift in acknowledgment.

"Have you checked the windows?" he asked.

"No. I came to see if you were okay."

"I'm fine." He held out his shaking hands and laughed. "Like a rock."

She smiled, her face pale. He reached across the space, just about falling out the hammock as he gave her shoulder a quick squeeze, letting his touch linger when she blinked back tears.

"It's okay, Maya."

"I know." She waved at the wetness in her eyes. "This is stupid."

He let out a low whistle as he caught sight of the torn skin on her palms. "Look at your hands! Come on, let's clean you up." Connor leveraged himself out of the hammock, then paused, noting his muscles were screaming in a new way—from hard use rather than fatigue. The sprint to Tigger must have built up an incredible amount of lactic acid. He paused again, then pushed himself all the way upright, ignoring the myriad of sharp muscle pains. So, he was officially on the road to recovery. How about that.

Maya hobbled to the screen door, trying to hide her pain. But her hips still swayed in that sweet way that made him want to pull them against his, and he smiled, remembering why he'd done all those crunches, the hike, the swim. Maybe he'd even add a few more push-ups before bed.



CONNOR STOOD at the doorway to the bathroom, watching Maya dig through a medicine cabinet.

"Come in," she said. "Close the door."

That was an offer he was willing to accept. He shut the door behind him, amazed at how well it closed, given the cottage's age. Connor

gently directed Maya to the bench under the window, cringing at the condition of her knees.

"Where shall I start?" He looked up and spotted the wound on the underside of her chin. He bent his head, assessing the extent of the damage. "You did a real number on yourself."

"Better than being hit by a tree."

"Any day of the week." He sorted through the first aid items. "I think we need to clean you up for starters. Do you have a facecloth?"

Maya pointed to a basket on a shelf to his left.

"Apparently, I am blind." He shot her a reassuring smile, not sure his doctoring skills would be up to par. But honestly, a chance to touch her bare legs? Only a fool would turn down the opportunity to play doctor on a woman such as Maya.

Connor filled the sink with warm water and swished the cloth around while glancing at himself in the mirror. He might be handsome again one day if he could ditch those bags under his eyes. And maybe get that greenish bruise to go away completely.

He turned back to Maya, kneeling in front of her. "Want an aspirin or something?"

"I'm fine."

He began dabbing at her knees, finding that the dirt stuck between every tiny crease in her skin. He rinsed out the cloth and tried again, using more water, letting it run down her leg and onto another cloth.

"Sorry," he said when she flinched. There were a few big tears in her skin, but luckily, nothing too deep. He slowly wiped her legs with the dry cloth, cleaning her down to her toes. Such lovely, gorgeous toes.

Maya presented her palms. "These are going to be fun."

"Is that a rock lodged under your skin?" He removed the tiny pebble, and lowered her hands into fresh water in the sink. "Let them soak." He

brushed the hair off her face, his moves slow and gentle. "They must be numb. You didn't even flinch."

He needed to add bicep dips to his repertoire tomorrow. And another swim. Maybe both. Because he swore as he brushed against Maya his body felt stronger, tighter. And he liked it. A lot. With her back against his chest, he reached around her, helping her clean her palms. It was something she could do on her own, but she didn't seem to mind the help. He inhaled her scent, watching as she matched his breaths, leaning back against him.

Mmm. This was good. Innocent, yet entirely erotic.

He slowly scooped water in his palms and ran them up her forearms, letting the warm liquid spill over her bare skin. She shivered and he moved closer, his body stretched over hers like a shadow. "You cold?" he whispered in her ear.

She shook her head and tipped it back against his shoulder. Allowing himself to cross the line, he placed a light kiss on her neck before returning his attention to her hands, hoping she felt as tempted as he did.

When her palms were fixed up, he gently spun her to face him, her back to the sink. He let his gaze linger on hers, then slowly lifted her arms to see her elbows. Her face pinched in pain and he stopped.

"What's wrong?"

"My ribs hurt."

"Ribs?" Keeping eye contact, he tenderly lifted the hem of her shirt, asking for permission.

"Oh, for crying out loud, Connor. You've seen me shirtless twice." She whipped off her top, her breath catching with the sudden movement.

That bra was as sexy as anything he'd ever seen in a Victoria's Secret commercial. Its satin dipped low over her curves, pushing them up in a

bounty that stirred his testosterone into a whirlwind. He blinked back the need that tore through him, fighting the temptation to play doctor in an entirely different way.

"My ribs are lower," she said, her tone teasing.

"Yeah, I know. I'm analyzing your assets." He bent close as if he was going to bite her neck, and she arched her spine, pressing into him. He reached behind her and pulled the plug from the sink, draining the murky water. Then he leaned back, eyebrow raised. Her cheeks flushed as she bowed her head to check her ribs.

He touched her skin, sending goose bumps across her midriff as he shifted her to get a better view. "Ouch," he said. "That's some welt. I'll get some ice."

He stepped out of the bathroom, and on the other side of the door he took a moment to compose himself. He was playing a dangerous game in there. One he wouldn't win. One that would end in his humiliation, because even as stirred up as he was, he knew he couldn't commit to the level their bodies surely desired.

Not yet.

He returned with ice wrapped in a damp tea towel, unsure whether he should apply it himself or excuse himself before he got in too deep. Maya glanced up at him, and there was something in her expression that made him drop to his knees and gently press the ice pack against her red skin. She inhaled, pushing her chest out as she curved away from the cold. He'd like to watch that move again and again. He reapplied the pack, and she placed her cool hand over his, folding herself against him as he fell back onto his heels, clutching her. Within seconds his fingers were knotting in her hair, tipping her head back to gain access to her mouth, kissing her with full force, pushing every emotion roaring through him into the kiss.

Her fingers slipped under his shirt, lifting it away from his body and over his head. He suppressed the urge to tense his muscles so he'd seem firmer under her touch. He swooped his hands around behind her head so he could tilt her back and kiss his way across her collarbone, her fingers trailing down his chest.

"Auntie Maya?" called a sweet voice.

Maya tipped her head up, looking dazed, her curls a riot around her perfect, flushed face. She pressed a finger to her wet lips.

The doorknob began to turn and Connor leaped into action, his abs screaming with the effort as he unceremoniously dumped Maya on the floor. He grabbed the knob, not allowing the door to open fully. Slipping out into the hall, he smiled at Tigger.

"Hey, kiddo. Need the facilities?"

"The what?"

"Bathroom? Your aunt is just finishing up." He pointed to the heels of his hands. "She's going to be sore for a few days."

"Does she need a Band-Aid? I have some princess ones in my mommy's purse."

"You know, she might like that."

Tigger quirked her head. "Where's your shirt?"

"Oh " He ran his fingers through his hair as Maya joined them.

"Hi, Auntie Maya." The girl danced into the bathroom, shutting the door behind her.

Connor stepped to Maya, pinning her against the wall, his lips on hers. They kissed as though it would be their last, until the sound of the toilet flushing broke their embrace. Maya dropped her feet to the floor and straightened her top. Without a word, she stepped into the living room, her hips swaying as though they held the secrets of the world.

He was a doomed man.

Where on earth had Connor gone?

Daphne, Shawn, and Tigger had left, and the two of them finally had the island to themselves. Maya's work was done for the day, and she wanted to dive right back into what they'd started in the bathroom. The way he'd caressed her skin when he'd dried her legs had made her want to jump in the shower so he'd have more of her to dry off.

Where had he gone?

Hearing footsteps on the veranda, she hurried around the corner to catch him, scaring a nuthatch off the railing. Connor looked wiped, his black swim shorts clinging to his wet legs. Not seeing her, he trudged forward, disappearing into the cottage.

Maya had come to know that look. It meant she was facing another evening tweeting distribution system jokes to Steve from Roundhouse Exports, or else watching *Dragons' Den* reruns she'd saved to her hard drive. Not so bad. Except the way Connor had revved her up meant she'd be spending special time with her vibrator, since he and his delicious mouth would be snoring only one bedroom away. She lifted her head to the sky and whispered, "Destiny, you are one mean woman."

It didn't help that the way Connor had rescued Tigger was a total turn-on. She'd never realized it, but apparently she had a thing for

heroes. Every time she thought of him dashing off to save her niece, an unrelenting heat spread through her.

Maya made her way into the cottage and sat down with *All In* by Arlene Dickinson. While she read, she kept Connor's closed bedroom door in her peripheral vision. She could swear he was snoring already.

She sighed and flipped a page, wishing she had the courage to wake him up by slipping under his covers wearing nothing but her loneliness and longing.

Her cell phone rang and she jumped up, crossing the room in a few strides. What the heck? She never got reception in the cottage.

"What's this?" a male voice replied when she answered.

"Um? Who is this?"

"James Culver. Connor's advisor. And I demand you tell me what this memo is about!"

"Oh! Right. Sorry." The phone got scratchy and she froze, not daring to move in case she lost the connection. "Connor is considering backing these entrepreneurs. It's all explained in the memo. I sent it to you, Bill, Em, and Stella so you'd be in the loop. A contract is in draft with Legal. I'm taking care of it all so you and your assistants don't have to worry about it."

"Worry about it? Are you kidding me? You're gambling away Connor's money on some dental device and you've been working here how many days? Some of us work really hard to make sure Connor makes money, not loses it. We get pestered like this all the time by people who would love to suck him dry. You need to drop this idea."

"Connor gave it the okay."

"Connor's on vacation and not making major decisions right now. I'm the one he left in charge of the office, and I say no. This agreement happened under my watch, and you not asking me first sets a precedent that I will be dealing with long after you're gone."

"Um, what kind of precedent?" She glanced at Connor's closed door.

"Word is going to get out that anyone with a half-baked idea can come to us for money and support. We'll never be able to do any real work—work that makes us a profit."

"And buying a lumberyard is going to do that?"

"And turning to venture capitalism is?"

"Uh, yeah. It is." She placed a hand on her hip. "I don't understand why you're getting in such a flap over me advising Connor on something out of character, when you seem to have done the same thing yourself. Except I'm only gambling 40K and you're gambling well over ten times that amount. My project could pay off big. And I fail to see how yours could."

"I have a lot of experience and know what I am doing." His voice trembled with anger.

"I sure hope so, because I like Mr. MacKenzie."

"Oh, so that's what this is about? You want to play house with the boss?"

Maya made sputtering sounds. "Wow. Just wow."

"Do your job and stay out of my way."

"Consider it my pleasure," she said, hanging up.

She set her phone down, letting out a slow, long breath.

"You've met James?" Connor said, leaning against the doorjamb to his room, arms crossed.

"I have had the unfortunate pleasure of landing on his bad side, yes."

And this was the moment when she lost her job for not getting along with his team. Crap. She was actually starting to enjoy the work.

"You handled yourself well."

"Thank you." Maya stiffened her spine, not daring to let her relief show.

"I'd even say you got the upper hand." Connor pushed off the doorjamb, wincing.

"You okay?"

"Yeah, just a sore shoulder." He flashed a brief smile, but gave her a wide berth as he hurried past her into the kitchen.

She followed, giving his butt a slap as he dug around in the fridge for a snack. He straightened, banging his head on the freezer above.

"Ow!"

"I am so sorry!" Maya laid a hand on his head where he'd bumped it, but he slipped away, avoiding her touch. She nudged her chest against him, offering herself, but he dodged her again, clutching his skull in a way that told her he was faking most of the pain.

Hurt seared her soul and she backed against the counter, letting him grab a peach before stalking out of the kitchen.

What was his problem? Whenever she got close, he ran away.

Maya bit her bottom lip. He didn't want something with her, fine. But she didn't want "something," either. She wanted one thing. Him. Okay, two things. Him and a job reference.



MAYA STOOD ON THE DOCK, the morning sunshine streaming down on her. There was something new and renewed about Connor today. Something she couldn't quite figure out. He would dance near, then close up and move away. But it wasn't just that. There was a purpose and drive flaring in his eyes that made her own heart beat a little faster in anticipation. It was as though he had his own secret project he was working on, and it made her curious. She wanted to help him and be a part of it, but she knew she had to be patient. Then maybe, just maybe, he'd let her in.

Connor hauled himself out of the lake, panting, as water streamed off his broad shoulders. Maya held out a towel and stopped herself from staring at the way his muscles bunched when he raised it to scrub at his dripping hair. His haircut was just past neat and tidy, and starting to look slightly shaggy. She adored how it made him appear less serious.

"Good swim?" she asked.

"Yup."

"Go across and back?"

"Yup."

"Still don't want to come with me to meet the entrepreneurs?"

"Nope."

"You are a man of many words this morning."

"Yup."

Sighing, Maya shifted her weight and toyed with the boat's key chain which was made of foam so it would float if accidentally dropped in the water. "I could use your help, you know."

"You said you had it covered."

"I do, but it would be nice to have you along."

"Dress to kill. It's sexist and horrible, but men like a sweet tush. It's a weakness of ours. And remember to listen."

"I'm a good listener."

"I wasn't done," he said, his tone slightly sharp.

"Sorry. You had more wardrobe tips for me? Maybe regarding how many buttons I leave undone?"

He shook the last of the water out of his hair with a grin, catching himself on a chair as he lost his balance. He towed off his torso and sat down.

"Well?" she asked.

"Patience, Maya."

"I have to leave soon if I'm going to make it on time."

He peeked out from behind the towel as he patted his brow. "Are you *driving*?"

"Um, yeah. That's what people who aren't *you* do."

He gazed off into middle distance. "Okay. Long story short?"

"Preferably."

"You already act as if you own the place, and I know you won't let them blow sunshine up your tush."

"Sweet tush, I believe you called it?"

"Fine, blow sunshine up your sweet tush." He reached over and gave her a light slap on the closest butt cheek. "You can file the sexual harassment suit later."

"You wish." She gave him a wink and he grinned again.

"Basically, go into any meeting assuming the other person is trying to get the better deal."

Maya sighed. Could he get any more basic?

"Be *patient*, Maya."

She licked her lips and tried to act as though she wasn't insulted by him wasting her time with trivialities.

"People will tell you anything. You have to check their facts. Don't take anything at face value. Ask questions most folks would be too uncomfortable asking. Repeat yourself if you have to."

"Got it."

"Listen. Pause. Reflect."

Maya nodded. "Listen, pause, reflect." She should probably add connect in there, too, seeing as it seemed to be a point of weakness with her usual tactics.

"Circle back if you have to. Take notes. Act like a lawyer ready to catch them lying. They wouldn't come to you if they could do this on their own. What can you offer that they haven't been able to accomplish? But most importantly, what can they bring you? It *has* to be

mutually beneficial.” He banged a fist on his open palm for emphasis. “What are your odds of success? And above all, they need to be a ton more invested than you ever will be if you’re backing them financially.”

“Right. Okay.” This was the stuff she’d been waiting for. Now why wouldn’t he come with her and help sort through it all, making certain she didn’t miss any cues or hints about problems that could bite her in the butt later? “Sure you don’t want to come and hash it all out afterward? Draw the agreement over the coals?” That would be so much fun.

He leaned closer, his expression full of haunting shadows. “Business isn’t just theory, instincts or snap gut decisions, or even research. It’s more than that, Maya.”

He stared at her for a moment, and shivers ran down her spine. The wrong kind of shivers.

“Can you do this?” he asked.

She nodded and took a gulp of air.

“Good.” He sat back, his face softening, the shadows gone.

“What do you love most about this business?” she asked quietly. “The chase? The catch?”

The shadows returned. “Ask them about their lives. Break the ice. See if they have kids.”

“Kids?” She didn’t want to talk sippy cups, she wanted to talk turkey.

“It’ll reveal their core to you. Who they are. As well as how distracted they are from their own work.”

“You prefer to deal with people without kids?”

“I didn’t say that. Just keep your eyes and ears open, as there are hints as to who they are in everything they do and say. Then wait at least two to three days before giving them a decision.”

"That sounds like a dating rule—don't call for three days after getting their number."

"Business is a form of dating, Maya."

She opened her mouth to ask what the two of them were doing, then closed it again. She had a meeting to attend. Connor would reveal himself in time. All she had to do was figure out how to be patient.



CONNOR ROLLED over to check the clock, his abs killing him. Only nine at night. He slung an arm across his eyes and wondered if it was a raccoon or Maya he'd just heard. He was guessing Maya. Either that or a really steamed thief.

He smiled, thinking of a robber coming in here. Other than the ancient furniture, which might actually be worth something on the antiques market if it hadn't been so well used, the place didn't have much of value other than Maya's laptop and printer. And even the printer was probably some thirty-dollar loss leader from the local computer shop.

He considered getting up to find out why she was in foul mood, but thought better of it. If her appointment with the entrepreneurs hadn't gone well he could deal with waiting until she'd cooled down, since the long drive obviously hadn't worked.

Thinking of Maya, he smiled and curled onto his side, lulled back into near sleep by the bed's warm comfort. The door banged open; the scent of coffee filled his nostrils.

"You work with a bunch of pompous, pig-headed, close-minded gorillas who wouldn't know their bellybutton from their brain," Maya announced, plunking a cup on his bedstand.

"Coffee? It's nine at night."

"Nine in the morning."

"Well, then. Good morning, sweet cheeks." He flipped himself over to flick up the shades, trying to hide his morning wood. He glanced down and sighed. Still nothing to hide. How much sleep did a man need?

"It's almost afternoon," Maya grumbled.

"Great." He squinted as light bleached the room. "I'm supposed to sleep."

"Says who?"

"I'm on vacation. That's what people do when they are on vacation."

"Right. Well, your advisor, James? He tried to fire me yesterday."

Connor winced as the coffee scorched his tongue. "Do I want to know why?"

"I went by to get more files on the sawmill and he told me to butt out."

"I thought you were meeting the entrepreneurs?"

"Oh, yeah." She sat on the bed beside him, the anger dissolving. "They were great. I think I'm going to go with them."

"Wait a few days," he warned. She was so impatient. She listened to her gut only long enough to get the first few chords of the song, then floored the engine, ignoring the rest of the tune. Every time. He needed to teach this girl to slow down before she floored it into a brick wall, as he had.

"I'll wait." She sounded reluctant.

"Good. I'm holding you to that."

He stood to leave his room, then turned back to Maya, who had her wavy hair pinned up in a way that made it look messy, elegant and sexy all at the same time. He was finding it difficult to keep fighting the urge to kiss her.

He pinched the bridge of his nose and focused on what had made her angry. "Why exactly does James have a problem with you?"

She shrugged. "I ask too many questions."

"What kind of questions?"

"My usual nosy ones." She gave him a smile. "You're not mad, are you?"

"For asking questions? No, not really." But the effect of those questions was intriguing. James, like anyone, became edgy when stressed, and Connor could see how Maya's inquisitiveness could get under the man's skin. He used to do the same to James eons ago, when they'd first started working together. But he'd thought James had mellowed. Was leaving the company in his hands too much for his advisor?

Connor gave Maya a reassuring tap on the elbow. "James is carrying a heavy load right now. More so with me gone, so don't take it personally. I turn into a supreme prick who wants things done five minutes ago, and for everything to be lined up so I can fire through them like a sergeant major general when I'm busy. It's normal." The familiar tightness associated with work expanded in his chest, which he rubbed with the heel of his hand. He gave a light laugh. "I should ask him if he wants to take over some of my projects."

Connor considered the idea, blocking out Maya's flabbergasted protests. James dealing with all the details he had to shovel through on a daily basis had unusual appeal. Could Connor walk away from the entire company, and not just his projects? He had enough to retire on, and James had enough to buy him out, as well as a deep desire to be king of the hill.

If Connor wanted to keep his foot in the game he could do some consulting here and there. Or just drift off into the sunset. Living in Muskoka, he wouldn't need a lot of money once he had a roof over his head, and the sale of his penthouse in Toronto would surely cover the cost of a nice year-rounder out here. He knew other businessmen who'd done it, such as Tristen Bell, formerly a die-hard real estate mogul.

They'd done a few deals together and come out laughing. Then Tristen had suddenly pulled up stakes and vanished. Rumor was he was in the area. If Tristen had enough to pull out, then so did Connor.

He interrupted Maya's continuing argument about his life, his business and how he couldn't ditch it. "Could I get a ride into Port Carling sometime? I want to look up someone."

"You can't retire. You can't give it up. You're at the top of your game."

"And why not? I've delayed my own gratification for too long." He let out a laugh, deepening it as Maya's expression turned from one of agitation to one of fear for his sanity. He placed a gentle kiss on her nose. "You need to lighten up, Maya."

Sipping his coffee, he headed outside to his favorite place on Nymph Island—the hammock. When he'd first started his business, during university, his satisfaction had come from making it into the big leagues. As the years went on, he kept telling himself that when he finished the next deal, made the next million, he'd take a break and join the jet set life he'd always dreamed of having. But he'd never given himself that gratification, and never allowed himself true vacations for fear of losing his position on the totem pole. He hadn't even gone to Italy to enjoy *Barber of Seville* in an old opera house.

So why not now? Why not cut out and enjoy what he'd earned? He was never going to do it if he stayed at CME. There would always be one more thing popping up as an emergency, changing his plans. This, out here in Muskoka, was real life. The life he'd been missing.

Connor shook Tristen Bell's hand and pulled him close enough to slap his back in a friendly man-hug, getting a warning growl from the massive Bernese mountain dog sitting at his friend's feet.

"Don't mind him. Maxwell Richards III is a friendly old coot," said Tristen.

"Quite the name." Connor gave the dog a scratch behind the ears and, seemingly satisfied, the big animal wandered off to collapse in the shade of a large maple.

"He came with it."

Connor sized up the former real estate tycoon. He was trim and fit, his hair a bit longer than the sharp-edged Bay Street image Connor was used to. In fact, Tristen had adopted somewhat of a casual, woodsy style.

"You look ten years younger than when I last saw you in Toronto. Are you doing some hot young thing?" Connor's attention moved to the large, renovated cottage sitting behind him. "They've got to be crawling all over you."

His friend laughed. "Are you kidding? After the way my ex-wife took me to the cleaners there's no way I'm getting on that horse anytime soon. Even for a one-nighter."

"How'd she get the better lawyer?"

Tristen laughed again and tipped his head as though asking Connor how much he wanted to hear. "I pretty much rolled over and played dead."

"Uh..." Connor shifted, unsure what to say to the toughest negotiator he knew.

"She showed me that nobody liked who I'd become." Tristen's face tightened, but before Connor could puzzle it out, the man's expression turned to one of light-heartedness. "So here I am. Like the place?"

They both looked at the two-story clapboard house, which featured a fair amount of stonework along its bottom.

"Love it."

"Thanks. Did it all myself."

"What?" Connor tried to hide his disbelief.

"Kidding. I tried, though. Turns out I'm not great at plumbing or wiring. But I designed what I wanted, and got in there when I could, and helped. Turns out stonework's my thing. You don't have to be able to measure things quite as precisely."

"Stonework?"

Tristen took a few steps to the side and pointed to the chimney that extended up the other side of the building.

"Wow."

"Did a patio out back, too. Want to see it?"

Connor shrugged, trying not to compare the man's pride with that of a new parent.

Tristen led him from the parking area and across a veranda that was similar to Maya's, but in better shape. Rounding a corner of the cottage-turned-year-round home, they found themselves on a stone patio overlooking the water.

"Laid them all myself. I have them in sections in hopes that the frost won't heave it too badly. So far, so good."

Connor nodded, his focus drifting to the cushy outdoor furniture sitting under an awning a few feet away. Man, that looked comfortable. And the way his quads were still aching from his dash to save Tigger two days ago, nothing had ever seemed more welcoming.

Tristen moved to a small outdoor kitchen and opened a fridge. "Beer?"

"Yeah." Connor peered over the small wet bar to check out the space. He withdrew his hand as his friend offered him a bottle. "Actually, you know what? I'm trying to cut back."

Tristen sized him up, then returned the beer, along with his own. He pulled out two bottles of water instead and passed Connor one. "Going to run a marathon or something?" he asked lightly, taking a seat in the outdoor living room.

"Something like that." Connor eased himself into a chair, hating the way his abs screamed at him. The good news was that it no longer took him all day to get in one hundred crunches. Too bad it still hurt, as though someone was spearing him repeatedly.

"So? How's the city? How's Connor MacKenzie Enterprises? Done any amazing real estate deals since I've been gone?" He downed half his water, then set it on the stone-topped table, which was actually more like a large ledge around a built-in fire pit.

Connor licked his lips. The last thing he wanted to do was talk business. He gave a small shake of his head and pointed to the renovated cottage with his bottle. "I love this place. So quiet." He could almost see Port Carling from their location on the small bay, but not quite. There was a low drone in the background from passing boats heading to town. "Does it get busy?"

"Yeah, weekends in July and August. You can tell when it's a weekend, like today, but it's still not too bad. I don't mind the sound of boats. Smells a whole lot better than Toronto's traffic." Tristen let out a laugh and crossed one leg over the other, slinging an arm over the back of his seat.

"Ever miss the city?"

"Never."

"Yeah. I'm not missing it as much as I thought I would."

"How long have you been out here?" Tristen asked.

"Less than a week."

"How long are you taking?"

"Two weeks, I guess. One left to go."

"Good on you."

Connor sat forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "It's weird, though. I'm not as stressed about being disconnected as I think I should be."

Tristen nodded, taking another gulp of his water. "Once you get over the withdrawal, it doesn't seem as vital any longer, does it? As though it loses its meaning."

Connor fidgeted with the label on his bottle of water.

"So?" his friend asked.

Connor looked up to find Tristen watching him in a way that told him the man knew exactly why he was there.

"I'm burned out." He rubbed his forehead, feeling haggard, washed up.

"Well, a vacation is a good start." His friend's brow furrowed and he focused on the water below. "I thought you'd be the type to work until you dropped."

"Apparently I'm at risk for a heart attack, stroke the works." Connor took another swallow of water, hoping to dispel the desperate lump that

had formed in his throat.

"You're pulling my leg!" Tristen sat forward, echoing Connor's pose, with elbows resting on the faded knees of his jeans.

"Wish I was." He took a few more gulps of water, struggling against the undertow of emotions.

"What are you going to do?"

Connor swallowed hard. He took in the quiet getaway Tristen had created for himself. "How " He cleared his throat. "How did you "

"Leave it all?" The large dog had found them, and he plopped his massive head in Tristen's lap, momentarily distracting him. He roughed up the dog's head affectionately, then tipped his own head back and forth a few times so Connor couldn't tell if he was imitating the dog or weighing his reply.

"Well," Tristen said finally, "how much do you know about my final year in Toronto?"

"Not much. I went to call you one day and you'd pulled up stakes."

"Yeah, I wasn't in a good space when I left."

"Understandable."

Tristen let out a long breath. "Basically, I was working too much. You know how it is. I never saw the wife or the kid. She wanted another, but I was never around, and so it never happened. You know how all that goes. You try and make them happy with the big house, the diamonds, and the Escalade in the driveway. Anyway, she got tired of it and left me. Got some fancy lawyer. Same story as half the guys on Bay Street. But I was tired and began to wonder why I'd done it all. Why did I make all those cutthroat deals and rise like the cream if she didn't care and it didn't make her happy? Work and deals lost their meaning when she left me. It may sound odd, but I discovered I didn't know her, my kid, my friends or even myself. So I gave her half the business, then sold my half and said good luck."

"You walked?"

"Yep." He leaned back, crossed his legs again. "I came up here, bought this fixer-upper in October three years ago. Been renovating it ever since."

"You're not working?"

"I have savings. She got only half, right? Don't need a lot other than for renovations. Oh, and taxes. The taxes around here are enough to give you a coronary. But I love it. It's quiet. The neighbors are hardly ever around. Deer walk through my yard. Nobody is yelling at you for letting squirrels live in your trees, or if you don't rake your leaves and they blow into someone's yard. It's peaceful in all the ways I need."

"Being retired, don't you miss working?"

"Of course. Anyway, I couldn't pull out entirely. I still sell a little real estate here and there, but nothing major. And I don't try to undercut people anymore. I got tired of being that hard, ruthless man everyone admired but dreaded, you know? Everyone deserves a fair deal."

Connor nodded, understanding where Tristen was coming from. People were in awe of Connor and his success, but also jealous and sometimes snarky about it. Especially if he came up well ahead of someone else in a deal.

"So, did it " Connor leaned back, enjoying the comfort of the cushions, unsure how to frame his next question. "Your identity "

Tristen gave him a crooked smile that had to be a hit with the ladies, and said, "My pride and vanity? Did it take a hit?"

"Yeah."

"Sure you don't want a beer?"

"Trying hard not to die here, man."

Tristen leaned forward. "It's that bad?"

Connor nodded, and his friend tucked his shaggy hair behind his ear, his broad shoulders stretching his shirt with the mild effort. "Well, you know what they say. Work hard until you retire, then die the next day. You're just such an overachiever that you're trying to have it all now."

"That's why we're friends, man. You always dish your manure fresh and straight up."

Tristen laughed, but suddenly turned serious. "Yeah, it hurt my pride a little. Still does when people from my past act as though I broke down or something. But the thing is the so-called 'hole in the world' that I left in Toronto got filled in almost immediately. Some other guy stepped up and took my place. People probably don't even remember me anymore. I wasn't as vital or as irreplaceable as I had believed. And yeah, my name is on a lot of papers for some major building projects and land deals in the city, but nobody is going to create a statue or name a park for me. My daughter doesn't even know what my favorite color is. How sad and pathetic is that? She still sends me a tie for my birthday. That's how little we know each other."

"She doesn't come out?"

"She's seventeen."

Connor didn't have a wife on the horizon, but he could see how any relationship he might start could very well end the way Tristen's had if he didn't make some major lifestyle changes.

"You gonna quit the rat race?" his friend asked. "I know of a nice little year-rounders not too far from here that you could get at a fair price. Needs a bit of winterizing, but it would allow you to modernize it at the same time."

Connor laughed. "You're still the same guy, angling for a commission, aren't you?"

Tristen's smile didn't reach his eyes. "If you quit the rat race, you can't go cold turkey, Connor. That kills men like us. You need a project even if it's joining the Lions Club or serving coffee at the local coffee shop three days a week. Don't just go pulling the plug, or it will get pulled on you. You know what I mean?"

Connor's heart lurched. Was his cold turkey vacation going to cause him to keel over?

"I can see what you're thinking," Tristen said. "Vacations are okay. You need them. What I'm talking about is for you to ease out—if you're considering pulling out. Or throw yourself into something new. Fill yourself with something fresh and rewarding."

"Like a job." Why did that sound so unappealing to his ears?

"Or a woman."

"Are you looking? I hear they have a thing for old money and you're last name rings a bell in that regard. Pun intended."

"Always looking." Tristen shot him a wink. "But never seeking, my friend."

Connor smiled and finished his bottle of water. The idea of coordinating a transfer out of the rat race was exhilarating but also exhausting.



MAYA STARED at the pages sent from Accounting. How on earth was this math supposed to add up to the lumberyard being worth that much? Yes, everything balanced out, but some of those numbers couldn't be correct. Knowing she'd get an earful, she hiked up the hill to perform due diligence, trying to talk herself out of making the call. There were more pros than cons to contacting the office. In fact, the only con would be that James would get bent out of shape again—but only if Em told

him that Maya had called. And she could handle that if it meant she could finally rest assured before Connor signed the deal.

She punched in the number for Em's home phone and paced a path through the underbrush on top of the hill.

"Em? It's Maya. Sorry," she added quickly. "It's the weekend and I know I'm a pain, but I can't get the math to work for the sawmill."

"Maya, we have—"

"Accountants, I know. But I can't figure out how Connor is going to come out ahead on this deal. I know I'm just an assistant, but I can't ignore this, as I simply can't see a sawmill being worth this much. And why would he want a lumberyard in the first place?"

"I have a call coming in," Em said. "I'll phone you back in a few minutes, okay?"

"Fine," Maya grumbled. She hung up the phone and rested its cool plastic against her chin. A boat puttered into the strait and Maya hurried down the hill, wondering if it was Connor returning from his trip ashore to visit his friend. When she got within sight of the dock, she relaxed. It was Connor. Smiling, she made her way to his side as the man in the boat pushed off. He was handsome. And familiar.

"Who was that?" she asked Connor.

"Tristen Bell."

"Oh, a Bell."

"Yeesh. Women and old money."

Maya laughed. "There are a few of them around these parts, you know." She gave him a haughty smile. "Plus, I'll have you know that some of us are looking for love. Not someone with a big fat bank account and a name that makes gold diggers woozy."

"That's what they all say until you buy them a Porsche." He slung an arm around her shoulders and she hoped he wasn't planning on having her support him all the way up the hill. Her ribs were still

tender where Daphne had landed on her, and he was pushing against the sore spot. "So, what did you do this afternoon?" he asked. "Enjoy having the cottage all to yourself?"

"Yeah, an afternoon off because your incoming work slows on weekends." She snorted and pushed his arm off her shoulder as they moseyed up the path. "I sunbathed nude on the dock and had an orgy in the woods."

"I missed all the fun."

"Yep." Her cell started ringing, and she hurried back to the dock for better reception. "I'll see you up there," she said to Connor.

"Boyfriend thanking you for the orgy?" He waggled his eyebrows.

She held up the phone. "It's Em."

She answered the phone, hoping he'd take the hint and leave so she could say whatever came to mind without worrying about him interrupting or getting offended with whatever cockamamie idea popped out.

"Hi, Maya here."

"Hello. Maya? I'm not sure how much I can help you with the lumberyard deal. Maybe I could put you in contact with someone on James's team."

"I'd rather get your vibe on this first." Maya stared out across the water, her attention drifting to where they were building a new cottage. Everything was changing. Everything was uncertain. But nothing was heading where she wanted it to go. Heck, she hadn't even heard the usual chaos emitting from the far side of Baby Horseshoe Island, where the teen camp was.

"Is something amiss in the state of Denmark?" Connor asked, startling her.

Maya held her thumb over the phone's speaker. "I can't vouch for Denmark, but I think Toronto might be a safe bet." She waved him

away, ignoring how he was rubbing his chest as he did whenever she got in deep with his business, and moved to the end of the dock.

"So, what do you need?" Em asked.

Maya lowered her voice, flicking her gaze over her shoulder to ensure that Connor was, indeed, heading up to the cottage. "The sawmill doesn't fit Connor's profile. I can't see how he's going to make money from owning it. And its valuation seems inflated."

"Connor has gone over everything already. In this economy it is good to diversify and have some primary industries in your portfolio."

"It feels like a bailout."

"James knows what he's doing."

"Did he bring this deal to Connor?"

"As far as I know."

"Em? Is this a bad time for Connor to take a vacation?"

"It's never a good time for the CEO to leave the office."

Maya pushed a hand through her curls, wanting to get Em to the point where they could discuss office conspiracies, as she had at least one in mind.

"You can trust me, Em. I need your help to figure out why I have a bad feeling about this deal. We need to save Connor." She glanced up the hill to where he was finally disappearing into the dusk and trees. "Is there a relationship between anyone working on the deal and the lumberyard owner, maybe? A connection? Anything?"

"I can look into it. You really think something is up?"

"Do you think it's possible someone other than CME might be benefiting from this deal?"

"It is a possibility," Em said carefully. "When you're dealing with millions of dollars and massive deals, people can get greedy. But they're signing in less than a week, Maya. The timing on all of this is very inconvenient."

"Then we'd better hurry. You search for connections and I'll dig deeper into the valuation. I'll call you tomorrow."

Maya hung up and wondered how someone such as Connor could let something like this slip past him. Was James really that good, or was she that far off the mark?



"MAYA, stuff like this happens all the time." Connor downed the last of his orange juice and pushed away from the table. He needed to escape before she had him several hours deep into her projects. It had been all he could do to walk away from her and her call with Em last night on the dock.

"This is important, Connor. Imagine you had a child with a cleft palate and cleft lip. Wouldn't you want little baby MacKenzie to feel less pain before and after reconstructive surgery? To have the best shot at proper healing? These guys have an invention that will ensure that. Medical devices are a growth industry—five percent per year. It'll be a home run, Connor. They just can't get the licensing in place in time to give this thing a real shot at making it."

She was making him feel, making that tug to jump in so unbelievably irresistible.

"So?" he said. "You've been to business school. Use your connections to nudge things along."

"My connections?"

He almost laughed at her confused tone. "Yeah, you know. The people you hung out with. Built connections with, and added to your network. Hobnobbing?"

She stared at her plate, face blank.

"You did network?" he asked.

"Yeah, of course!"

"So then, get on your phone. See who can help you out."

Maya smiled and pushed away from the table.

"Finish your breakfast first."

She promptly pulled her chair back in place. Laughing, Connor walked to his room to put on his trunks. Today he would try swimming around the island, and spend the afternoon thinking about early retirement and whether it was something he should implement.

He took his time going down the winding path to the water, breathing in the summer morning air. Closing his eyes, he tried a new method of being present in the moment, counting the number of bird species he heard calling to each other. The distinctive chick-a-dee-dee-dee of the chickadee, the knocking of a woodpecker. The scratching of a nuthatch walking upside down on a tree to his right. He'd opened his eyes. He sucked at being in the present.

Ditching his towel and sandals on a chair, he dived into the lake, coming up several feet from the dock. He slowly warmed up with a back crawl, determined to make it around the island by taking it easy.

The water felt good, and he wondered if he'd be able to keep swimming when he returned to the city. It would have to become part of his routine. He laughed and choked on a mouthful of water. There was no way swimming would stay in his routine once he returned. A few late night meetings and he'd sleep through his opportunity to swim. Add an early morning meeting, and soon he'd be completely out of the habit.

He needed to find a way to have it all. Being away from the office for a week without contact hadn't been nearly as bad as he'd feared. He was even beginning to enjoy not having anything pulling at his attention. He could stay with one line of thought without distraction.

On the far side of the island, the current turned against him, and the waves grew as the wind ripped across the open lake. Hugging the shore, Connor took his time, watching for places he could climb out if need be. The way the waves were eroding the bank here and there created small inlets that he could possibly use if he didn't mind getting dirty.

A few minutes later he found himself back between the two islands, sheltered from the waves and wind.

Almost there.

When he reached the dock again, he smiled and swam to shore so he could walk out of the water instead of trying to haul himself up onto the dock with his burning arms.

He heard a light, friendly voice, and spotted Maya on the dock. When she saw him emerging from the water like a sea monster, she turned away, holding her cell to her ear.

She was reminding someone who she was and where they had met.

Good, the girl was contacting her network.

He stood on the dock in a growing pool of lake water. He smiled and towed himself dry. He felt strong. Alive. Virile.

This morning he'd awoken to find a partial salute greeting him under the sheets, feeling better than he had in ages. The hope he'd felt—the relief—was overwhelming to the point of tears. He could fix himself. In one week he would be at his brother's wedding as best man, and he was going to look good.

He gazed at Maya's long legs from under his towel as he rubbed it through his hair. She shifted position, her frustrated mood revealing itself even though her voice hid it perfectly. She clicked off the phone and turned to him, the smile on her face tight.

"What?" he asked.

"You made it around the island?" Her voice still had that light, friendly tone she'd been using on the phone, but he could tell her calls hadn't gone well.

"I did. Did you go?" She shook her head. "Why not?"

"Lots of work to do."

"Don't sacrifice your health for my work."

"Don't flatter yourself."

"I'm not. I just know what should be a priority."

"Because you've been good at following them?"

"No, I haven't. That's why I know what they are." He tossed his towel on the chair beside him and squared off with Maya. "You find someone to help?"

"Not yet."

"Why not?"

"Because apparently my network doesn't remember who I am."

"Ah." He crossed his arms and leaned against the boathouse. He couldn't help but smile. He'd met so many ambitious people similar to Maya, who knew everything, except how to hang out and be human, not realizing that human connections were still ninety percent of business. "You handed out cards like they were candy at a parade, but didn't chat up the crowd?"

"There wasn't time. And anyway, people don't need me nattering on about stupid things, or acting like a desperate student or grad."

"Maybe they do." He watched her for a moment. "How many people remembered you?"

Maya turned to stalk up the path, and Connor called out, "Try Nolan McKinley. Tell him I sent you. Get his direct line from Em."

Maya turned slowly. "Thank you. I will."

"And take the time to be friendly and real. It's not all just business, you know. Remember? It's like dating."

"You sound like my sisters and mother."

"Smart women."

"Apparently," Maya said with a heavy sigh.



CONNOR STRAIGHTENED his tie and studied himself in the mirror above the bureau. Was he too dressed up for a movie? What was Maya wearing? Man, he hadn't been this nervous getting ready for a date since high school, and going to Finian's new film with Maya and her sister and that dumb tree guy wasn't even a real date.

He needed to stop thinking. The more he thought about Maya these days, the more he found that his own life wanted to blend with hers. It was as if the old Connor had been an immovable, impenetrable statue made of metal, which had somehow rusted while he'd been busy digging through never-ending paper. Now he felt that, if he reached out to touch it, that statue would crumble before him, becoming nothing more than a pile of oxidized dust.

Who was he? He had no clue.

Connor buttoned his shirt cuffs and studied his reflection again. Whoever he was, he looked pretty good. Almost like the old Connor who used to take on the world.

He dug through his bag for his wallet, and wondered what Toronto would be like without Maya. What if she moved to the city? Would he be able to feel her presence the way he did on the island? Would they meet up for drinks after work? And the bigger question, would he finally get his gearshift working, and be able to do the things a real man could?

He sighed and adjusted his fly. Not even forty, but he might as well be eighty.

Connor entered the living room and found Maya waiting for him. She took him in, not breathing, then turned away, busying herself with finding the boat key, which he'd noticed was always kept on the mantel.

"Do I look okay?" he asked. He immediately felt like a woman for the way he cared way too much about what her answer would be.

"It's just a small-town movie theater. You're fine." She lifted out the skirt of her dress. It was something soft that clung to her curves in a way that made him want to create a sculpture of her. She was a Greek goddess, demure and incredible, easily the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen. He reached for her, then pulled back his hand. He had to keep his focus. He needed her, but he wasn't ready. Not yet. He had to make sure he was worth the wait, because he knew she would be.

If she was still there.



MAYA COULDN'T LOOK at Connor. If she did she might be tempted to run a hand down his arm, and he'd been giving off weird vibes. Was being on a fake date with his assistant bothering him? If so, then why had he stepped in and offered to go with her?

Because he was a nice guy. He'd saved her from going on a blind date with one of Shawn's friends, then turned around and saved her niece. And right now, he was also helping Daphne by going out tonight. He probably didn't even want to be on a date with Maya.

Wait, did he like Daphne? Was that why he'd offered? He wanted to be closer to Daph?

Maya glanced at him as she parked down the street from the movie house. No, he couldn't. He didn't. Not the way he looked at her. Maya was the only one. Or at least the only one this week.

Maybe Connor didn't find her appealing.

Maybe he knew their night in the boathouse had almost been too much, almost gone too far. She'd been too forward. Too bold.

But he was an alpha, a powerful businessman. Why would he want demure? She'd seen the way he responded when she came on to him. He wanted her, and he loved it when she pushed him and tried to steal his control. It was a game they both enjoyed. So what did she need to do to get him to stop being so annoyingly gentlemanly?

She pressed the tips of her fingers into her forehead. Nothing about Connor made her want to act like a lady.

Men. They were more confusing than a messed up Rubik's Cube. All she wanted to do was peel off the stickers and put them back on the way they were supposed to be.

"You okay?" Connor asked.

"Yeah, great." If wearing one's sexiest dress and being barely looked at was the new definition of great.

Wow. She was officially driving herself crazy. Connor was her boss. He was here as her pretend date. End of story.

She yanked on the parking brake, knowing she should have stayed back at the cottage and worked. Sitting beside Connor for two hours would either make her sexual frustration worse or else get her thinking about work. And chances were it would be the latter, given all the emails she'd have to deal with when she got back to the cottage.

"I wish Hailey was here." Maya palmed her car keys, missing her eldest sister. Maybe it was knowing that Hailey was living a new life—a whirlwind one with a movie star that was already sweeping her away to new worlds where the rest of the sisters couldn't go, and couldn't relate to.

"She's in Hollywood?" Connor asked.

"Yeah, celebrating the movie's release with Finian. She's such a colossal pain in the butt, and acts as though she's solely responsible for our lives. However, she deserves the way hers is finally taking off." Now if only Maya's would, too. Maybe that was why she was so edgy tonight. It was as though she was on the verge of missing something important in life and she didn't know what it was, only that it was slipping away. "Do you have siblings?"

"Yeah, I have a brother." Connor's voice was quiet.

"So you know what it's like."

"Sure."

"You don't get along?"

"Nah, we do," he said quickly. He opened his car door, his moves tight, as though he was holding back emotion.

Very curious.

She allowed him to take her hand and lead her past the small park beside the theater, not letting go as they stood in line. She felt jittery trying to figure out what his hand-holding meant. Casually, she allowed her chest to rub his arm as she checked behind his tall build for her family. His Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed and the tune he'd been humming faltered. Okay, so she did have an effect on him. Major relief on not being alone on that one.

Daphne, laughing and smiling, met them in line.

"Where's Shawn?" Maya asked.

"He canceled. I think he's afraid of Connor." She grinned up at Connor, who let out a laugh before apologizing.

"Where's the little munchkin?" he asked.

"Babysitter. This is an action flick."

Connor smiled, his attention distant. "Right."

What was going on with him? Why all the distance? But at the same time, he was still holding Maya's hand. Which felt great—she didn't

want him to let go. Not ever.

Melanie joined them, her hair tucked in a ponytail, no contacts. "Were we supposed to bring a date?" She glanced down at her baggy shirt and paint-splattered capris.

"Um, Melanie, this is Connor MacKenzie my boss." Maya gave her a pleading look, hoping she would let his presence slide.

"Hello." Melanie shook her head, grinning in a way that made Maya want to rattle some sense into her. He was her *boss*. Quit grinning like that! Yes, Connor was a major, totally beddable hunk, but he also had a big say in where her future went from here.

"Um, Maya?" Daphne asked tentatively.

"Hmm?"

"Weren't you going to bring Mom?"

"Say wha—*no*!" Maya checked her watch, laid a hand on Connor's arm and said, "Wait here. I'll be back in a flash."

Melanie sighed and began walking off. "I'll go get her."

"No, I will. Besides, didn't you drive your moped?"

"It's a full motorbike."

"You're not taking Mom on that thing." Maya backed away from the group. "Really, I'll return soon! Save Mom and me seats."

Melanie, arms crossed, raised her eyebrows in amusement.

Connor strode toward Maya. "I'll come with you."

"It's okay. We might miss the beginning."

"I want to go where you go."

Maya's steps faltered. That may have been the most amazing thing she'd ever heard in her life.



MAYA SQUEALED her tires as she pulled into the parking lot of the nursing home. There in the entry was her mother, waiting in her wheelchair. Was Maya the worst daughter in the world or what? Never mind what Connor must think of her.

She hustled up the ramp and through the automatic doors, putting on a cheerful smile. "Hi, Mom! How are you?" Without waiting for an answer, she began wheeling her outside.

"I thought you were going to be here—oh!" Catherine stared up at Connor, who had come out of the car, handsome and welcoming.

"You must be Maya's mother, Mrs. Summer. I'm Connor MacKenzie, her boss over on Nymph Island, for the time being. You have a fine, smart daughter, Mrs. Summer."

Maya shot Connor a relieved smile as her mother grinned up at him, her mood lightening. "Call me Catherine, sugar."

Connor gave her a lopsided grin. "Sure thing, Catherine sugar."

Her mom laughed, and Maya wheeled her to the passenger side as Connor held the door open for them.

"And how are you enjoying Nymph Island?" Catherine asked him.

He moved to help her into the car, while Maya quickly unlocked the chair and flipped it flat so she could put it in the trunk. He replied, "It's wonderful. Very quiet and relaxing."

"Some might say magical," her mother teased.

Maya slammed the trunk closed. "Mom, don't start." She checked Connor's reaction, hoping he didn't think her mother was off her rocker.

"I saw fairy houses," he said. "What are those about?"

Maya replied quickly, "Just a tradition. It's it's nothing." Her mother gave her a look of understanding as Maya took the driver's seat, Connor making himself at home in the back.

There was nothing like taking your boss on a date with your mother, and talking about the mystical beings she secretly believed in.

Outside the theater, Connor gently elbowed Maya out of the way, taking care with Catherine in a way that lit her up from the inside with pleasure and adoration. Maya knew the feeling, as the man had a way about him. No wonder she'd forgotten to pick up her mom: Maya was living with the guy.

As Connor pushed the wheelchair up to the ticket window, she nudged his arm, mouthing *"Thank you."* He gave a nod, seeming almost bashful. He was so real, so present, she wanted to hug him and never let go.

Simone stepped out of the lobby before they could ask for tickets. "It's sold out. Come on, I have your tickets and Mellie saved seats."

"Thank you." Maya gave her a hug, funneling all the appreciation she felt for Connor toward her friend.

"Oof! You're welcome. I'll let you sit beside the hunk if you let go."

Laughing, Maya released her, and followed Connor, who was still pushing her mother's chair. He parked it in the dark cinema beside the row of familiar faces, and Maya let out a gasp as Finian took to the screen. He seemed so large. So real. So so like someone Hailey should be with. Forever.

"I can't believe your sister had sex with him," Simone announced. A few people nearby laughed, having heard about the whirlwind fire-and-ice romance the two had begun only weeks prior.

"I knew Hailey would be good for him!" called a knowing voice a few rows back.

"Wilma Star, is that you?" asked their mother, peering through the dark.

"To rights it is. How are you Catherine? I told my cousin back in Blueberry Springs—"

A chorus of shushing silenced the woman who then whispered loudly, "I'll catch up with you later so we don't get thrown out for

chatting.”

“Come for poker night at the home, Wilma. It’s Tuesdays at three.”

“I hate to break it to you, honey, but that’s not ‘night’.” Mrs. Star laughed and the shushing got more insistent.

“This is like knowing a movie star by proxy,” Connor whispered.

“You know him once removed,” Maya whispered back, as she got settled in the seat beside him.

The movie was great, but the best part was how halfway through it Connor placed his arm around her shoulder, drawing her against his side.

Oh, yes. Good things were going to happen between them. Again.



CONNOR HELD the door to the cottage for Maya, then closed it behind them. He loved her perfume. How gentle and flowery it was—a complete contradiction to the woman he’d come to know and admire.

“I can’t remember the last time I saw a movie in a real theater,” he said as she switched on a battery-operated lantern.

“Really?” Maya turned to him in the kitchen’s weak light, her body nudging up against his as they stumbled into each other. He placed his arms around her to steady them, burying his nose in her hair.

“You smell good.” He inhaled the scents that had clung to her, hiding beneath her perfume. “Sunshine, lake water, sunscreen and popcorn. You are a perfect summer scent.”

“You smell pretty awesome yourself, Connor.”

He grinned at the compliment. “It’s the aftershave.”

“What’s it called? Power, money, and seduction?”

He laughed and grasped her arms, holding her in front of him as his eyes adjusted to the light. “Money, power, and *seduction*?” This

woman was going to destroy him. How was he going to continue to resist her? How was he not going to reveal his cards? Because when she saw him unable to perform it would crush what was left of his ego, pride and sense of manhood.

He spun her around so her back was to him. Time for a distraction. Maybe give her some satisfaction, then disappear so she'd never have to know how broken he was, and how far he was from being the man she deserved.

He could have anything he wanted in the world except the one thing he craved.

Maya lowered her head to the side so he could place his lips on the spot where her neck and shoulder joined, and he skimmed her waist with his hands. She pressed into him and his touch crept higher, lightly gliding over her sides, then up to her neck. He trailed his fingertips down the delicate bare skin, continuing as though gravity was in control, lightening his touch as it traveled over her collarbone. She shivered and he allowed his hands to explore of their own accord. He spun her around to face him, lowering his mouth to hers.

Their kiss intensified and they fell against the fridge, needing its support as their bodies clicked into overdrive. Their kissing frantic, they bumped their way to the counter, Maya's hands running wild over Connor's back, his neck. Through his hair. Curving around his back. He shoved his hips against hers and swept an arm across the countertop, knocking things off in his frustration and an unreleasable sexual buildup.

She pushed him away, toward the bedrooms.

He couldn't. He reached in front of her and closed her bedroom door before she could enter, pinning her against its solid wood panel. There was no way he could leave her like this, but no way he could expose his secret, either.

He placed her hands against the door frame like an officer preparing to frisk her. He ran his heated gaze down her front, over her legs in a move so slow he knew it would try her patience. He exhaled slowly on her neck and she shivered, her head dropping back onto his shoulder.

"Connor, tonight."

"Patience, Maya. It will be worth it when the time comes."

She spun in his arms. "The time is now."

He danced his fingers over her shoulders, his fingers skating over her dress's neckline. He could feel her warmth through the material and he kissed her with the promise of things to come before he left her with a, "Trust me, Spitfire. Our dreams will collide when the time is right."

Maya was so sexually frustrated she could scream. Connor had got her all revved up last night, then backed off with some stupid line about her being patient, and the two of them waiting for their time. There was no “their,” so how could there be a “their time?” He was such a tease!

His hands and mouth were magic, but he kept leaving her craving the real thing. If they didn’t come together soon she was not going to be responsible for her actions.

She shook her head and contemplated diving into the lake, fully clothed, just to cool her steamy thoughts. Instead, she stepped away from the dock’s edge and nervously dialed the contact Connor had given her.

“Nolan McKinley please?” she said, clearing her throat as a man answered the phone.

“Speaking.”

She just about dropped her cell in the water. Connor had been serious about getting her a direct line to Nolan.

“Hello?”

“Yes, sorry.” Maya introduced herself and explained why she was calling.

“Connor’s branching out, is he?”

"Sort of. It's an experiment. I'm a summer assistant and well, it doesn't matter. Anyway, we're having trouble with some licensing for a project he's backing. Would you be able to help us speed up the process?"

Ah, crap. She'd forgotten to do that connection stuff everyone was talking about. Oh well, time was money and she was sure he had better things to do on a Monday morning than talk about the weather. And anyway, she could still do that listen, pause, reflect thing Connor had mentioned.

"Connor's already committed?" Nolan asked.

"He has."

"And he missed the timeline for this?" There was surprise in the man's voice.

"I overlooked it."

"And you're hoping I can fix that?"

"I am."

"And you are?"

"Maya Summer." She flipped through her mind's rolodex of memories. A bond. She needed a bond. "Mr. McKinley?"

"Yes?"

"Are you the same McKinley who was a guest seminar speaker at the U of T, let's see three years ago? It was on " *Come on, brain.* " patents, I believe."

"Good memory. How'd you enjoy the class?"

"Technically, I kind of crashed that one. Sometimes I'd sit in on seminars that sounded useful or interesting while I was waiting for my next class."

Nolan laughed. "So what did you think of my oh-so-memorable talk, Maya Summer?"

"I thought you were a very good speaker. Knew your topic and provided valuable insight, as well as—"

"Did you like my hair?"

"Your hair?" Maya shut her eyes. Thank goodness she'd checked him out online before calling. She could put a face to him as she thought back to the seminar. Mid-fifties. In fairly good shape. But he'd had a slightly scruffy look back then. "If I recall, you may have needed a cut."

Nolan laughed. "Consider me on the case. But no guarantees, Maya." His voice had a slight dry warning to it. She'd done okay, but not stellar.

"Thanks."

"And thanks for remembering an old man, kid."

"You're not that old," she protested.

"Probably not. Tell Connor I said hi, and that next time we play racquetball I'll clean the floor with him again."

Maya raced up the path to tell Connor the good news about Nolan helping out, but paused when she hit the veranda. Connor was standing stock-still, a chipmunk perched on his bare foot. In his damp swimming trunks, with the odd trail of water weaving down his legs, he looked hotter than ever. She refrained from moving forward, from touching his tanned skin, the surprising firmness of his stomach, the broadness of his shoulders. An amazing transformation had occurred behind her back and she wanted him more than ever.

He caught her eye and winked.

The chipmunk rose up on its back feet and stared at Maya before scurrying away.

"How cool was that?" Connor asked.

"Tigger's training is working."

"You catch Nolan?"

Maya nodded, coming closer as though she was a magnet unable to resist him. "He said he's going to beat you at racquetball next time he sees you."

Connor let out a rich laugh and patted his flat stomach. He gently placed a hand on her arm. "He doesn't know I've been working out."

Maya contemplated his lean, strong frame. Their eyes met and he lowered his face until their lips were almost touching. Maya slowly raised herself on her toes, leaning her still-tender palms against his chest so their mouths could meet. They broke the kiss and stared at each other, their bodies propped together for support.

Connor swiftly pulled her into a tight embrace, his lips locked against hers before just as suddenly breaking away.

"Connor," she breathed.

He pulled her hands together in front of him and kissed them. With a smile, he slipped away, saying, "Later, my Maya, later."

"Connor." She followed him a few steps, and he gave her a wink over his shoulder. The leaves on the trees rippled and showed their pale underbellies, foreshadowing a storm. "You need to learn patience."

"For heaven's sake, Connor, you can't just kiss a girl like that and then walk away!" She picked up a cushion off a wicker chair, prepared to throw it at him.

He returned to her, purpose in his moves. She hugged the cushion and he clutched her chin in his palm, giving her a light kiss that was at once tender and desperate. "I'm going to blow your socks off, but not until I say we're ready. Anticipation makes it all the better." His damp hair cooled her skin as he inhaled her neck, his lips grazing her as he spoke. "When you think I've forgotten you, I will appear. I promise you that, spitfire."

He turned, leaving her swaying on weak legs, a sense of anticipation lodged in her chest.



MAYA PACED the living room of the cottage, hating the way Connor was staring at her, eyes narrowed as he stood with his back to the fire. Only hours earlier she'd wanted him, but now he'd become the worthy target of her frustration.

He cocked his head, assessing her.

She repeated herself slowly, trying to quell the way her chest was starting to heave from holding it all in. "I think James is up to something that could lose your company a lot of money."

"Why would he do that?"

"I don't know, but he's blocking me. And he's blocking Em, too."

"Maybe because you are butting into his business? You know you are an assistant, and that he's put a lot of time and thought into this deal?"

Maya tried not to react to the dig about her position in the company, and that his comment could easily imply she didn't have a brain. He was playing power games today, and it made her want to rake her claws down him—and not in a good way.

"But you're paying too much for it, and you're not going to make that money back!"

"James is a savvy businessman."

"That's what I'm afraid of."

Connor came closer, his size alone making her want to shrink back.

"Ever think that maybe there is a reason we're purchasing this lumberyard? That maybe there are tax benefits?"

Maya crossed her arms, holding her ground. "They would have to be pretty substantial."

Connor rubbed his face and sighed. "Can you let this go, please? I trust James and his judgment. It's time to stop worrying this bone like a bulldog, Maya."

She waved the papers in front of him. "Did you even read these?"

"I think maybe you'd better read them less."

"But Connor—"

"Maya, James has been doing this for years. How long have you been out of school?"

"That is *not* relevant."

"I think it is. You are questioning and upsetting one of my most loyal advisors, which means you're also questioning me."

The wind rattled the shutters and Maya clenched her jaw, fighting for patience. "Connor, how do I make you see this?"

"Maya, I've hired good staff for a reason."

"What if he's turned on you, or is missing something?"

"Maya, stop."

"I can't work on something that is so obviously going to fail. I can't just waltz along, knowing this deal is going to cost you hundreds of thousands."

Connor crossed his own arms, brow furrowed. The shadows in his eyes were back. "Do you have evidence? Or is all of this your gut?"

"The lumberyard seems overvalued."

"And you are an expert on this?"

"I did some research."

"Maya. You know you can't value one company solely based on others, right?"

"I know." She sat in the chair by the fireplace. Maya had to win this one. She knew she was right. She just didn't know how to get Connor from point A to point B.

He tossed her papers on the coffee table and leaned over her chair, trapping her with a hand on each armrest. "You know arranged marriages?" He waited for her to nod. "Do you know the owner of that lumberyard? Not his name, but who he is?"

Maya shook her head.

"Exactly." Connor stepped back, crossing his arms again. "Arranged marriages still happen in the business world. Maybe James can see long-term value in this short-term loss."

"So you're going to lose half a million dollars just so you can get in this guy's pants? He must have something pretty special hiding in there."

"Maya, just do your job, and keep your nose out of James's way. I trust him."

"Do you trust me?"

"James and I have made many lucrative deals together. How long have you and I known each other?"

"Maybe he's making a deal on his own."

"Maya," Connor roared. "This has got to stop. If you continue to get in the way of my business partners I will have to terminate our connection. Do you understand?"

She stood, going toe to toe with him, looking for a crack to wiggle into so she could show him what she saw—that James was up to no good and would take down Connor, and his company, if left to his own devices. "You are a stubborn man, Connor MacKenzie. And it's not doing you any favors. I can't believe you won't investigate this enough to tell me I'm wrong. And if you can't see that this whole deal is faulty, then what will it take?"

"Who's being stubborn here? I've told you to stand down."

Maya raised her voice, anger tightening her muscles as she prepared for a fight to the finish. "Why is he giving Em a hard time? Because she agrees with me. And James knows I'm right. He's up to no good, and that's why he wants me out. Everyone is pushing this through because they know you're completely out of it!"

"Maybe it's because you're a pain in the neck who thinks she knows everything."

Maya closed her mouth, hot tears pricking her eyes. "If you want to fail, then fine." She turned away, throwing another log on the fire to ward off the chill that had seeped into the cottage. "Stick your head in the sand. Ignore the smoke signals, and while you're at it, shoot the messenger."

Connor spun her around, and for a second she thought he was going to make his alpha sexy moves on her, declaring it 'their time.'

"Maya, are you going to drop this?"

"No, I'm not."

He drew away from her, regret flashing across his face. "Then," he said, his voice low, "I have to let you go. I'm no longer in need of your services. You're getting in the way of James doing his job, and you refuse to listen to my warnings. That is not acceptable."

Maya ground her teeth and slammed out of the cottage, running up the hill out back, the cold wind slicing through her clothing. Leaves tore off the trees as she held her phone up to the darkening sky, searching for service.

Her phone dinged with a voice mail. A call from Nolan.

"It's not looking good, Maya. You might want to check other avenues."

Maya deleted the message and, sniffing back tears, listened to the next message.

"Maya. It's Em. No news. James is shutting me out and has hired a temp for all work on the lumberyard stuff." Her voice sounded tight. "I'll call again tomorrow. Don't send emails."

Maya stared at the peak of the cottage roof, visible through the swaying trees. Everything was coming down. Fired. She'd been fired. Was playing the business world's games really that important?

She was going to have to go back to her old job, begging. She sat heavily on a rock, letting the wind whip through her hair as she let out

a sob. Her phone dinged. Another voice mail. Great, who else was calling to inform her that the world sucked right now? Hoping for something good, she dialed back into the system and listened to her new message.

It was her sister Melanie. Maya looked to the sky, hoping her sister was calling to see if she'd be free to go out for a few drinks, because her week had certainly just opened up.

"Hey, Maya, Mom had a fall. She's okay, but they've moved her over to the hospital in Bracebridge. We're all going over there now. I'll call with more info as I get it. There's a storm coming, so you might want to sit tight until morning."

Maya nearly dropped her cell as she tried to shove it in her pocket. Rain began to sprinkle as she tore down the hill, her breath catching in her chest along with unreleased sobs. She raced into the cottage, ignoring Connor, her ex-boss, as she grabbed the key for the boat, planning to leave him stranded on the island. If he didn't want to listen to the truth, then he could sit here and rot. She wasn't making him breakfast one more time.



CONNOR GINGERLY CLOSED the cottage's glass doors, which covered the screen doors from the inside, battening down the hatches. Maya had stormed out, jumped into the boat and torn off across the lake, into what looked like some pretty nasty incoming weather.

He honestly hadn't thought she'd take getting fired that badly. He'd warned her that she was treading on dangerous ground, but she'd ignored him. He probably should have handled her more carefully, especially because of their past and the way he'd left her unsatiated and frustrated last night.

If he'd been thinking straight, he should have eased off after his warning and given her time to cool her heels. But she hadn't backed down and had promptly gotten under his skin, leading him to fear he wouldn't be able to shut her down. Nobody wanted a loose cannon at work, one they couldn't control.

Sighing, he gazed out the window, watching the tops of the trees fold in the wind. No wonder most HR departments had no-dating policies between employees.

But if James was upset, then it was obvious what the problem was. Connor just wished that Maya could have taken all that vim and vigor, redirected it and stood down for once. He was too tired for drama and theatrics. He knew who James was, but honestly, did he really know Maya that well?

Connor walked through the large cottage, checking the windows in each room, wondering if he should be worried about Maya. Although maybe he should be more worried about a tree falling on him or the wind ripping the plastic off the broken windows Shawn had yet to replace as promised.

Maya's laptop whirled on the table in the living room, and he tapped the touch pad, expecting the screen to be locked. Instead, he saw the digital version of the papers she'd been waving about earlier. Drawing up a chair, he read through her notes left in the open document. The familiar tightening in his chest began the more he read. This girl had a healthy dose of conspiracy theory in her. And while she had valid points, she had to be missing the full picture. James wouldn't do something this blatantly stupid and obvious unless he thought Connor had lost his marbles.

His mind flashed to the scene just before he'd left his office for the ER. James had seemed concerned, but relieved. What was that about? Was it a business partner wishing the best for a friend? Or was he

concerned Connor would take a break, come back and figure out what he'd done?

Connor glanced around the table for a phone before remembering he'd need a cell and have to go out in the storm if he wanted to contact James to double-check his gut reaction on firing Maya. Connor had noticed his BlackBerry at the bottom of his bag a few days ago, but the battery would definitely be dead by now. He searched Maya's computer for Skype, feeling out of line for snooping through her applications, and began punching in James's number. Then he paused. He should probably start the generator to ensure the battery used to power the place was charged so he didn't drop out midcall.

Rain was slanting sideways through the sky, and he'd need a raincoat to go out there or he'd be soaked in seconds. He lifted a stack of old Muskoka Lakes Association yearbooks off a steamer trunk by the door and peeked inside, hoping for an umbrella. Nothing but old letters and photographs, yellowed and damp smelling. He closed the trunk, rethinking his plan. This conversation was probably best held face-to-face in Toronto, because what if Maya was right? He'd want to see every tell in James's body language.

Rubbing the tight spot between his ribs, Connor ignored the strange feelings of betrayal, and slammed the laptop shut. James was reliable. Trustworthy. Maya was the one who had left him hanging. She'd found her way under his skin, and had begun to make her conspiracy theory against James feel valid, that was all.

Cupping his chin, he paced the living room. He didn't need this crap. He needed people who took care of things and let him get much-required rest. He had only a few more days of vacation and he still wasn't feeling completely human.

Connor drifted back to the table and poked through the papers beside Maya's computer, stopping to read through the entrepreneur deal.

He smiled, liking how detailed her notes were. She didn't let her own enthusiasm keep her from seeing potential barriers and stumbling blocks. The woman had good instincts when she wasn't barking up the wrong tree, and she would do okay without him and his job. She'd bounce back. How could a spitfire like her not bounce back even better after a tribulation like this?

Cracking his knuckles, Connor wrote a quick reference for Maya, focusing on her willingness to work hard and take initiative. He saved it on her desktop, so she'd see it, and closed the computer.

Then he went out in the storm, started the generator and typed a new phone number into Maya's computer.



MAYA CLUTCHED her mother's hand as Catherine dozed in her hospital bed. She appeared so frail and weak. How had she aged so suddenly? She was only in her fifties, but here in the ER, she seemed so close to—

Don't think about it.

"You okay?" Hailey tugged a blanket up around Maya's damp shoulders. It was pouring outside in what their mom would call a gully-washer, and while Maya had just managed to miss the deluge, she'd still gotten soaked through by driving the boat in the rain.

"Aren't you supposed to be in Hollywood?"

"I got in a few hours ago. I'm back for a few days before I go to New York. I can postpone, though."

"Is it that bad?" Maya's attention was drawn back to their mother.

"The doctor says she's okay. A concussion and a few bruises is all, but they want to keep her overnight for observation. Until the effects of the concussion have passed, she's at risk of another fall." Her sister's

voice cracked and Maya leaned her head on Hailey's hand, which still rested on her shoulder. "She's just so "

"I know," Maya said grimly. "It's hard."

Hailey nodded, unable to speak.

"You know we'll call you if anything happens. You should still go to New York."

"It's only work, Maya. This is this feels like "

"Let us take care of Mom. We've been holding you back for too long."

"You guys haven't been holding me back."

"Yeah? Then why didn't you go to that arts college for photography after you graduated from high school? I know you were accepted." Hailey's head turned so fast, Maya feared her sister would get whiplash. "You stayed to help us. And while we appreciate it, it's your time to follow your dreams. It's our turn to stay close and take care of each other. You know we'll keep you in the loop." She gave her sister's hand a squeeze. "It's okay, Hailey."

"I'd never forgive myself if " She swallowed hard.

"Don't think that way. She only fell down. It's not like she had another stroke. And anyway, by the time you have to go she'll be back to her old self."

Hailey nodded reluctantly. "I think Mellie Melon's waiting to come in. She didn't want to crowd you, since you were the last to arrive."

Maya nodded, trying to untangle her wet hair. Her curls were a crazy mess.

Hailey left and a few moments later Melanie entered, taking the chair across the bed.

"Thanks for calling," Maya said.

"I'm glad you checked your messages in time to beat the worst of the storm."

The sisters stared at their mother for a while, saying nothing.

"How's it going out there?" Melanie asked, pushing her glasses up her nose.

Maya blinked back unexpected tears.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing." She heaved a sigh. "I got fired."

"Fired? I thought you quit the restaurant."

"No, I mean "

"Connor MacKenzie fired you?" Melanie lowered her voice as their mother stirred. "What did you do?"

"Why do you think it was something I did?"

"You were *fired*."

"Fine. Connor's advisor is putting through a deal with a lumberyard that doesn't appear profitable for the company. Connor says it's for tax reasons and diversifying his portfolio, but I can't see how he's going to come out ahead. Things seem shady, but I have no evidence of intentional wrongdoing."

"You brought this up with him?"

"Yeah."

"Of course you did. You have no sense of self-preservation. Why did I even ask?" Melanie leaned back, her lips pursed. "Did it ever occur to you that maybe Connor *knows* it is shady, and that's why he fired you?"

"What?" Maya sat back. "No."

"Why not? You said he's on top of his game. Half of Bay Street's success is probably shady. Why should he be different?"

"He's not involved."

"How do you know?"

"He looked surprised. Slightly doubtful."

"Maybe he's a good actor. Or amazed that you figured it out."

"His advisor in charge of the project is shutting out anyone who questions it. I think he's It doesn't matter." She waved away her thoughts. "He trusts his advisor, not me." Maya stretched, releasing their mother's hand. "It's for the best, anyway. I couldn't work on a project I knew was going to bomb. I couldn't stand sitting there, letting it fail. If he's too stupid to see it, then he deserves it."

The problem was she didn't believe her own words. She felt as though it was up to her to save Connor, protect him. He was severely burned out, and she could see just how bad it had been, now that he was starting to come alive again. He was returning to the man she'd admired and wanted to emulate.

She didn't doubt there was something about the deal that would result in good things for James. Nobody in the business world was that loyal forever, especially when their boss was being called the king of Toronto and you were just his hardworking, behind-the-scenes peon whose ego was being continuously bashed in.

Maya rolled her shoulders, and remembering that she was sitting across from a lawyer, sat straighter. "Mel?"

"Yeah?"

"If I initiated a side project with Connor, am I still fired from that?"

"What do you mean?"

"Legally, do I still have a claim? I'm the lead and he's the backer. We are to split the profits." Maya batted at the air, dismissing her line of thought. "Never mind. That thing isn't going to fly, anyway." She let out a sigh. "Not unless you know someone who can get licensing for a medical device. Kind of in a time crunch."

"Have you tried expedited licensing?"

"How do I do that?"

"You can request it in certain situations. You might qualify."

"How do you know about this?"

"I took a business law course when I thought I wanted to be a corporate lawyer."

"I could seriously hug you right now."

Melanie smiled. "I'll send you the link."

"Do you think I should keep digging on the advisor thing?"

"You were fired, Maya."

"I know, but "

"You know Officer Cranks?"

It had been years since the man had played poker at their house with their late father, but he was hard to forget. Especially since he'd forgiven a few of Maya's speeding tickets.

"Wow, you play for keeps."

Melanie smirked. "I'm not talking about arresting anyone. His son, Jamie—you know, from the bar? He's dating someone who knows about licensing, if you need more help."

"How do you know all this stuff?"

"I talk to people," her sister said with a frown. "How do you *not* know all this stuff?"

Maya focused on their mother's pale face. Right. That whole connect-with-people thing she kept failing at.

She let out a sigh. She couldn't seem to do anything right these days.

Maya walked up the wet path, cool sprinkles of leftover rain dropping from the leaves above. She paused to take in the cottage, basking in an early morning sunbeam. Waking up with a crick in her neck from sleeping beside her mother's bedside, she'd realized she'd better at least come back to the cottage and haul Connor to the mainland.

She continued up the path, on the lookout for fallen trees. So far it seemed as though the island had weathered the storm well, other than the odd tree hanging farther out over the water. The waves were still at work, eroding the shore little by little. Too bad the tax department wasn't going to come out and remeasure their shoreline and thus adjust their applicable land taxes down a tad each time a storm shrunk their frontage.

"Hello?" called a voice.

Maya turned, to find a man on the dock—a man looking out of place in a suit. She frowned and hurried back down. She hadn't heard a boat pull up. As she got closer, she recognized the man, and alongside the dock, the rowboat from the other day. It was tied in a way that if a large swell came along it would damage the boat as well as the dock.

Inexperienced, stupid She had a long list of unflattering adjectives to describe the driver.

It was Aaron from Rubicore Developments.

"Hello." He hurried forward and shook her hand. "Aaron again from Rubicore Developments?"

"Yes, I remember."

"I dropped off an offer with you?"

"Yes."

"I was wondering if you had come to a conclusion?"

Maya wondered if he meant to sound as though he was playing that kids' game where you had to make every sentence a question or else you lost and had to suffer a knuckle rap from your siblings. She supposed he was feeling her out and attempting to be nonthreatening so he could get what he wanted. A typical man, in other words. "The offer is valid until mid-August, according to the papers."

"Yes, yes. It is. I was just checking to see if you had any questions or concerns." He passed her a business card, seemingly having broken out of his game.

"Why do you want our island?"

"We're developing across the water."

"What are you doing over there, anyway?"

"Spiffing up the place."

"That I can see." There were permit signs posted all over the place and every stitch of heritage was being striped away as if a pile of termites had been dumped on a woodpile.

"Do the Fredericksons still own the blue cottage? I thought I saw them on the dock the other day."

"The holdouts?" Aaron cleared his throat, pressing a fist over his mouth. "The Fredericksons, yes. Yes, still there."

"Hmm. What do they think of all the construction you're doing?"

"Did you have any questions about the offer?"

"Your offer is a bit of a lowball. I doubt my partners will go for it. This island has been in the family for over a century."

Aaron's jaw tightened and he stared up at the green building behind her. "I see."

"Maybe if you added a few tens of thousands, we might get a little more serious about discussing the offer."

"Your structure needs quite a lot of work."

"And how would you know that?"

"It's quite old. It looks original."

"How do you know we haven't kept it like new?"

He swallowed and stole a glance at the leaning boathouse. It was rather obvious they hadn't, but his assumptions were starting to annoy her. A man like Aaron wanted their cottage only to destroy it.

"I think it's a fair offer," he said.

"Well then, we'll be sure to let you know whether we agree by the deadline." Maya turned to walk up the path.

"You could make a counteroffer."

She gave a shrug as though considering it. "Maybe. We'll see."

The man straightened his suit jacket and stepped into his rowboat, windmilling his arms to regain his balance when the boat jerked and rocked on its tether.

Maya rolled her eyes and continued up the path, hoping he'd fall in.



CONNOR STROLLED down the old Milan cobblestone street, miles from the Teatro Alla Scala where he would enjoy *Don Chisciotte* that evening. Everything from the locals' laid-back manner to the fountains reminded him how much he missed Muskoka and his daily swim. The smiles of

the women made him think of Maya, particularly when their gazes strayed down his physique in blatant appreciation.

And yet he was in Italy. Alone.

If he was honest with himself, he'd admit he hadn't come here to finally see an opera, but to try and outrun the voices in his head that were arguing Maya's case. She'd brought up a lot of seemingly good points against James, and Connor was finding many reasons why she should still have a job despite everything.

He wandered past a caffè that smelled heavenly. Coffee? Pastries?

Connor glanced down at his gut. Maya had helped fill him out a bit. He felt good, stronger. He'd enjoyed being able to walk all afternoon despite the jet lag. But would adding a stimulant and sugar set him back, or was he being too hard on himself? How often did he get to enjoy a real espresso in a little Italian caffè? Coming here was one of the promises to himself that he'd never honored, and the aromas were seriously tempting his senses.

Should he do it?

He sat on a stone bench and watched children splashing in an ancient fountain while he waited for the urge to break his new habits to pass. Did any of his resolutions matter if he wasn't going to get the girl?

He'd changed while in Muskoka, though, and still hadn't quite figured out what it meant. All he knew was that the old Connor would have listened, checked into Maya's issue, resolved it and carried on even stronger than before.

Maybe he needed purpose. Something that would perk him up, like Maya's side project had done to her. It had boosted her drive in a way that was as sexy as all get-out. He remembered that feeling of having a new project that was so exciting and thrilling you couldn't help but smile. He'd had that years ago, but had lost it somewhere.

Maybe that was what he was missing. Not balance, but purpose. Back when he'd started his business, his goal had been to earn enough money to float a small country. He'd done it. He'd climbed to the top and shouted "*I'm the king of the castle.*"

In hindsight, he could see that that was when he'd begun to falter. There had been nowhere else to go from the top but down. Without another purpose, he'd blindly flailed on, struggling to maintain his position. The only thing that had been driving him forward was a fear of failure, and of a dirty rascal knocking him off his mountain.

Connor rubbed his arms, shivering. The day had grown cold and the old-fashioned streetlights were coming on, twinkling off the worn cobblestones. The children who'd been playing in the fountain were gone, leaving the square silent and empty. He turned up the street, stumbling on the stones as he made his way back to his quiet, lonely room.

Making a change in his life felt harder and riskier than it had when he'd had nothing. Now, he had everything to lose, but was slowly realizing that none of it had been worth a thing to begin with.



WHERE WAS CONNOR? Had he left the island? There was stuff strewn about his room, but it appeared as though his bag might be gone. Did he drown while swimming around the island? Had something happened to him in the storm? Or was he gone?

Maya climbed the slippery, lichen-covered rocks behind the cottage to call Em.

"Maya? What happened?"

"Do you know where Connor is?"

"He's off to Italy—or rather, there already. He said he fired you?"

"He went to Italy?" Relief and anger scorched Maya's gut. "Well, I guess that saves me from having the lake dredged."

"He didn't tell you he was leaving?"

"Why should he? He fired me." The bitterness in her own voice almost brought her to tears. She'd always been one to let bad stuff roll off her back, making her stronger for the next time. But this this was hitting her hard. "Did he say anything about a refund?"

"For what?"

"The rental and, uh, me. My assistant services."

"No. Did you tell him about the lumberyard?"

"Yeah."

"Oh." There was a brief pause. "Well, don't take it personally, Maya. He's in a weird place right now."

"I thought he was the kind of man who would at least hear me out."

Em made a sympathetic noise, then paused before lifting her voice in triumph. "You will never believe the info I discovered at a function last night."

Maya ran a finger over her thumbnail, her interest piqued even though she wouldn't mind a tad more sympathy from Em.

"James," she continued, "is a nephew of the financial officer who is in charge of the lumberyard's accounts. And it seems as though this guy is the true owner, too. I'm looking into it, but get this." She stopped sharply, and Maya wondered if underneath her excitement Em was actually ticked off. "The guy who did the evaluation on the lumberyard's worth is a *friend* of James from way back."

"You're kidding!" Maya sat down hard on a rock, her tailbone protesting the poor treatment. "These can't be coincidences. How did you discover this?" She stared at the sparkling flecks of mica in the rock under her, unable to wrap her mind around the new information. James

wouldn't be so ballsy or dumb as to think he could get away with something so obvious, could he? Yet these two connections were in the very places she'd been unable to make the math work.

"A little eavesdropping," Em said, "a copy of the guest list, a few files from the temp, and a bit of searching the net."

"Girl, you're a regular James Bond."

Em let out a pleased laugh. "So? What should we do now?"

"I got fired, Em. I'm out. Connor doesn't want to hear it."

"Pshaw! The Maya I know isn't giving up already."

"Connor didn't want to hear what I had to say about my suspicions. He trusts James, not me. How do we even know Connor isn't involved in the whole shebang?"

"He's not."

"How do you know?"

"I've worked for him since he started."

"So? People change."

"I know Connor."

"So?"

"He's burned out. He's always wanted someone to pick up the reins on a project—more than Bill and James have in the past—and so now that James is finally stepping up to bring in some profit, I think Connor's reluctant to focus on how he's doing it."

Listen. Pause. Reflect. Connor wasn't following his own advice.

"We need to get him to reflect on what I said about James," Maya mused. The stubborn man was refusing to deal with anything business-related these days. How was she supposed to get him to reflect?

Connect.

She needed to connect the dots for him.

"We need a tight, incriminating package that will help Connor connect the dots, Em."

"Well, then maybe I have something that will help with that. I did some research at the land titles office, too. I have an old roommate who works there." She paused, as though waiting for praise from Maya. "Not a lot of lumberyards have been sold over the past few decades, but accounting for its size and inflation, I'm guessing this business was overvalued by about four hundred thousand dollars—which was exactly your guesstimate, based on your own research. Maybe we could use this to help him see what we see?"

Maya rubbed her forehead. "This isn't good, Em."

"I thought this was the kind of thing we were looking for?"

"I mean it's not good for Connor."

"I've got more."

"Are you for real?" Maya bit her tongue to keep from swearing at the injustice of Em's timing with this info. A day sooner and it might have kept Maya from being canned.

"I know. I'm sorry. Yesterday was just a really good day."

"No, it's okay." Maya tried to strip the emotion from her voice. "Keep going."

"At that function last night I saw James and his wife, so I started chatting her up. Turns out they just bought a second home, in Florida."

"Florida?"

"Apparently he's been getting bonuses lately." She paused, her voice became low, sending an eerie vibe through Maya. "He hasn't, Maya. Not from CME. Nobody has. I asked Accounting."

"You're serious?"

"I know this feels like a ton of evidence, and to us it seems pretty incriminating. But I'm thinking if Connor blew you off, we're going to need the smoking gun *and* James's confession, because if you look at it from the other side, there are possible explanations for everything. People do business with relatives all the time, so maybe this uncle being the

financial officer, CEO guy isn't a big deal. As for the appraiser, a lot of people are on summer holidays. Maybe our usual appraiser is gone, so James called in a favor with his buddy. Maybe the overvaluation is accurate—maybe land is included, or something valuable that we don't know about. Maybe James has been doing consulting on the side, which explains the bonuses. It can all be explained away."

"He's got to be screwing over CME, though, Em. There are too many maybes, and this deal isn't Connor." Maya ducked when she flushed a flock of birds out the trees as she began walking the path at the top of the hill to burn off some of her energy.

"Let's eliminate the excuses, then."

"Do you have time for all of this?"

"If I lose my job I will be regretting not taking a few hours to snoop things out, now won't I?" Em replied in an all-business tone. "We need a solid plan and some good ammo before we talk to anyone—anyone, okay? Be patient."

Be patient. Be patient. That's all everyone ever seemed to tell her these days, and nothing good ever seemed to come from being patient.

"Once we have more info," Maya said, "promise me we can lynch James."

There was silence.

"Why do you care so much? Connor fired you," Em said finally.

"I guess well, because Connor trusted James, and Connor is a good guy. He deserves to have someone good on his team, someone trustworthy who he can count on when the chips are down and he isn't well."

Em sighed. "I keep hoping James isn't doing anything wrong, but the more I find out, the more it seems like " She let out another sigh.

"I know. Say, do you know anything about licensing?"

"What do you mean?"

"Patents and all that kind of new product stuff."

"No, but Connor's buddy Nolan McKinley would. I gave you his number, didn't I?"

"Already tried him."

"Did you play nice and ask him about his wife first?"

"What do you mean?"

"Maya, I know you want to make it in this world, but there's a game you have to play. You have to act as if you care about the personal and not just the business."

"I care."

Em laughed and Maya couldn't help but join her. "I know. I'm sorry. I'm trying. Really I am. I just want to get down to business."

"Umm-hmm."

"So?" Maya asked, trying to think of something conversational. "Do you have a cat?"

"Maya, shut up."

"I need practice?"

"A lot of practice."

"Do you have a dog then?"

"What is this? Go Fish? Get off the phone so I can do some more snooping around. And don't forget—play the game."

Maya sighed and clicked off her phone. Connections. Right. She could work on that. But being patient was going to do her in.



MAYA PLUNKED herself in the chair beside her mother's bed. Her mom gave her a thin smile.

"You look tired," Catherine said.

"I am."

"I love you, kiddo."

Maya, feeling teary, reached for her hand and gave it a squeeze, hoping her mother would know she felt the same even though she couldn't say the words for fear of bawling.

Her mom gave Maya's hand a light shake.

"How are you feeling?" Maya asked when the lump in her throat had been successfully swallowed.

"Not bad. Mild headache is all." She gave her a wink from her good side.

"I love you." Maya said it quickly, before the emotions could come flooding out.

"I know."

"Can I get you anything?" She needed to do something, needed to move. Standing, she straightened the flowers on the windowsill and checked them all for water. Obviously, Hailey had been by already, as everything was fine.

"I'm good. Hailey was here earlier. I have my Twix chocolate bar."

Maya kept her attention on the flowers. "I did something stupid, Mom." She turned to face her. "I got fired. My shot at trying to help the cottage didn't work out very well. Although Mr. MacKenzie hasn't asked for a refund for unused days."

"The cottage's destiny "

"I know. Destiny keeps it in our hands. Or not." Maya gave her a wry smile. "We got an offer from a developer across the lake. I don't know, though. It doesn't feel right. You know I don't really go for all that heritage stuff, but they're knocking everything down over there and changing it." She gave a laugh. "Who would have guessed? I don't like it."

Her mother had a peaceful glow about her, as though the world was unfolding as she felt it should.

"When will I learn to keep my mouth shut, Mom?"

"You need to work someplace where you can talk. A lot. That's all." Catherine smiled with fondness.

"Yeah. As an auctioneer, maybe?"

Her mother let out a light chuckle.

"I thought Connor's advisor was crooked. And I still think he is, but Connor Oh, I don't know. I'm confused." Her mother remained silent, allowing Maya to continue when she was ready. "There are arguments that the advisor might be on track, but my gut is telling me he isn't, that he's corrupt. But I don't have enough facts, and it's frustrating. Connor's supposed to be signing this deal in a matter of days, and I want to help, but he fired me. He didn't want to hear about James."

Maya bowed her head. "And to top it all, I think I'm about to lose forty thousand dollars of his—I mean, I might get it back, but I dropped the ball with licensing stuff because I didn't know enough. How could I graduate at the top of my class and still know nothing?"

Her mother was fighting off sleep, her eyelids drifting shut.

"I'm sorry. I'm nattering on like crazy, and you're tired." Maya tucked the blanket up around her mother's chin. "I'll come by again tomorrow. I'll know what to do by then."

"You always do, Snap." Catherine smiled, her eyes closing. "You always do."

Maya pressed her lips together. She wasn't Snap any longer. That confident gal was gone. There were no snap decisions to be made, and no way for her to snap out of her funky mood.

She sniffed back tears and, picking up the city's classifieds, dropped them in the recycling bin on her way out. Toronto seemed farther away than ever.



CONNOR STARED at his untouched cappuccino and straightened his bow tie. Women in fancy evening wear chattered as they wove past his spot at the opera's standing bar, their heavily adorned fingers weighted down with precious gems. He used to love events like this because he felt as though he had finally made it. But over time the people and their perceived problems had begun to bore him.

He'd always wanted to see an opera live in Italy, thinking that was the pinnacle for someone with his musical tastes. But the first half of the performance had bored him. He was alone and didn't speak the language. His bow tie felt too tight. The sound was amazing, the voices incredible. But something was missing.

Maya.

Which was silly. She wouldn't be able to sit through an opera. Why was he even thinking of her? She was meddling in his affairs, sticking her nose where it didn't belong. She didn't even trust his most loyal advisor, a man who had been working at his side for ages.

"Signore?"

"Yes?" The lobby bar had emptied, the opera ready to resume, and an usher dressed in a tux stood smiling, his hands clasped lightly behind his back.

"The opera is beginning."

"Thank you. I won't be going in."

"It is not to your tastes?"

"It is. Very nice. Jet lag."

"Ah, I see." The man bowed his head and stepped away. "Have an enjoyable evening."

Enjoyable. Connor didn't even know what brought him joy any longer, other than bantering with Maya and trying to get her to call him names.

He pulled out his phone and played with the On button. Sighing, he opened his email, not sure what he'd find or why he was even checking.

There were quite a few messages, but two recent ones from Maya caught his attention. The first was about the entrepreneur deal. Details, etc. The second one was more intriguing. He touched the screen to open it, and scanned the first paragraph, trying to remind himself to stay cool and objective. It was about James. Of course.

The email was an argument against James, and his supposed corruption was outlined by several points. Number one, he'd overvalued the lumberyard by approximately half a million dollars. Number two said James was claiming to be getting bonuses. Number three, he had bought a home in Florida. Connor's fist closed and he ground his teeth. He made himself read number four. He read it again. On the other side of the doors, a clear voice sang of love, deception, and betrayal.

Connor's finger paused over the phone's Off button. He could still go in and listen to the opera. He didn't have to read this. He didn't need to add it to his list of worries.

Number four James was related to the lumberyard's owner, who was also its financial manager, and James was a high school buddy of the appraiser he'd hired. Not exactly an impartial third party, as Connor had dictated.

Was that simply a coincidence? Or did all the pieces add up to something alarming? And if they did, how had Maya snooped it all out in a matter of days? How come Connor hadn't discovered any of this?

And what was he going to do? He was set to sign on the dotted line in less than seventy-two hours. Should he bail? Carry on? Confront James and fire him? No, sacking James would create a hole so big Connor would end up burned out almost immediately from trying to pick up the slack.

The bottom line was that Maya was right on one thing: the lumberyard didn't fit his portfolio, and what she'd found looked bad. Connor couldn't recall why James had wanted to buy the company. Was it merely for tax purposes? Was it to flesh out their portfolio and make them more stable as the economy continued to twist and turn, with dips and dives? There had to be more.

But the big question, if Maya was correct, was how much did he stand to lose? And why did she still care?

Who could he trust? Who could he turn to?

He needed more time.

Maya balled her hands into fists and stared down James outside his office. She knew the two of them were gathering a crowd in the open area, but she didn't care. Not one bit. Connor was due to sign the lumberyard purchase agreement in less than twenty-four hours, and he hadn't replied to her email about James. As far as Em knew, he was still in Italy. It was time to deal with things, and forget patience and all that bull crap. Maya had given her ex-boss time to reflect. Now it was time to act.

"I don't think you have Connor's best interests at heart," she announced, ensuring her voice could be heard by all the eavesdroppers who had suddenly found this area of the seventy-second floor incredibly interesting.

Em shot her a look of warning from her desk near Connor's office. She was half out of her chair, uncertain whether to intervene or not.

"What do you know about business? You're just some lowly assistant," James replied, his face tight with anger.

A faint gasp rose from the eavesdroppers—mostly female assistants. Maya caught flashes of righteous anger before she returned her attention to the well-dressed businessman.

"I know when someone is using nepotism for his personal advantage, and selling out his boss." She dropped her hands onto her hips and watched him consider running away. Nope. He had too much at stake to turn tail. Good.

James strode to the nearest desk, where a secretary cowered, her eyes round. She leaned away as he snatched her phone and punched in two numbers. "Security. Floor seventy-two. I need someone removed. Now."

Maya smiled. "Thank you for confirming my suspicions, Mr. Culver."

James paused, the phone halfway to its cradle. "What suspicions?"

"That you are corrupt."

James slammed down the phone and pointed at her. "You were fired by Mr. MacKenzie. Do you really believe you are the one to judge?"

Out of the corner of her eye, Maya spotted Connor's second advisor, Bill Hatfield, appear in his office doorway. He took in the scene, then gently closed his door again.

She turned to the cluster of employees. "It's true. I was fired." She turned back to James. "Because of you."

"I had nothing to do with it. You were causing a disturbance with your conspiracy theories." Red crept up James's neck. "It is time for you to leave."

"Sure, but before I go, I think the staff might find it interesting that you bought a house in Florida based on a bonus you got from Connor." She turned to address the workers, who were leaning forward awkwardly, straining to hear what was being said over the loud rain that had begun drumming on the large office windows. "Anyone else here get a bonus?" People shook their heads, their attention drifting to James. "Funny, because according to Accounting, neither did Mr. Culver."

Whispers riffled through the room and James shifted uncomfortably. "I don't know what you are trying to prove, Miss Summer, but you are not welcome here. You're bad for morale."

"And you're bad for CME's bottom line. Why else would you convince Connor to purchase a *sawmill*? There is no profitable reason for him to buy a primary industry—especially one that has lost money for almost a decade." She casually leaned against a nearby desk. "Well, unless, of course, you were trying to do a favor for someone in your family. Maybe an uncle who owned the failing lumberyard and was wanting to retire? Maybe promise him a secure future at Connor's expense, through a little something called a finder's fee? Smaller, of course, than your own kickback—sorry, *bonus*."

"Are you trying to accuse me of something?" James asked, his nostrils flaring.

"It must be difficult being you." The man's jaw clenched, and she could tell he was itching for her to explain why. "I know how hard you've been working lately. Connor has been leaving more details to you." She glanced around at the eavesdroppers. "To everyone, really. But being the man who never gets any credit from the public as to your role in the company's success... It must be hard to take."

"I don't need credit."

"That's good. Because I doubt you'd want to be the one named for losing Connor's company over four hundred thousand dollars."

"I never!" James swung his fist down as though searching for something to slam.

"The overvaluation, though? It's by over 400 K, James. I've done a lot of research, and it seems very odd that someone with so much experience in the business, such as your old high school pal, Peter Stoker, would make such a large error when determining the value of your uncle's lumberyard."

James licked his lips and swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing. His eyes were shifting from side to side and Maya knew she had him.

"Well, unless Peter was also doing someone a favor. Say, in exchange for a brand-new SUV for his wife? How's she liking it, by the way? Is it nice? I hear she got a lot of upgrades."

"That's a coincidence! You don't understand the complexities of purchasing another company, and you are jumping to unreasonable conclusions. There are tax benefits—"

"That come nowhere near covering the loss that Connor is going to take on this." Maya spread her arms out. "That everyone in this company is going to take."

She saw the fear in staffers' faces as they turned nervously to James.

"This is utterly ridiculous," he spat.

"No!" Maya shouted, her patience gone. "*You* are utterly ridiculous! The fact that you would do this to the man you work for. The man who taught you everything you know. To betray him so deeply..." Her voice shook with emotion. "Don't you get it? Don't you get who you have become? Don't you get what you are asking these innocent employees to be a part of?" The crowd behind her rustled nervously. "Who would hire a man who has a history of being fined for taking kickbacks when overvaluing companies? Do you know how bad this is going to look in the courts?"

A heavy hand landed on Maya's shoulder, and James's expression changed. She turned to face Connor, who was decked out in a suit and looking very sexy and in charge.

"Thank goodness you're here," she said quietly. Now he could finally see what she'd been saying all along, and make it right again.

"That'll be enough, Miss Summer," Connor said, his voice flat, the dark lines that had been under his eyes when they'd first met seemingly tracking across again as she watched.

She smiled in relief when he gave James a stern look. Her work here was done. That corrupt man was going to be packing so fast it wouldn't

even make it onto Facebook before he was long gone.

She glanced back at Connor, ready to reap her reward, but his shadowed jaw was set, his cheeks flushed, and he was staring at her in a way that made her hesitate. It was almost as though he didn't think James was in the wrong. That maybe she was.

"Please come with me," he said.

James gloated, crossing his arms and leaning back on his heels, as though he was a bouncer and she was about to be bounced.

How could Connor be so blind?

Maya pulled her shoulder out from under Connor's grasp as two security guards rounded the corner.

Em stepped to Connor's side, wringing her hands. "Mr. MacKenzie?" she squeaked.

"I've heard enough, Em," he told her.

She nodded and stepped back as he addressed the security guards. "I'll see that Miss Summer is seen out of the building." He placed a hand on Maya's lower back. Over his shoulder he said, "James, carry on taking care of things for me, please."

The man grinned smugly. "Like it was my own company, Connor."

"Excellent. That's exactly what I need to hear."

Maya shook off Connor's hand. "I will let myself out." As she headed toward the elevator, she addressed the room. "I know I'm not the only one who sees that James is about to lose this company hundreds of thousands of dollars. Why are you too chicken to say anything?"

Gazes flicked away as she tried to make eye contact with people as she passed.

"That'll be enough," Connor said quietly. He began moving them faster, his palm once again an insistent force on her back.

Outside the building moments later, he trailed her onto the wet sidewalk, where she wanted to run from the humiliation and never look

back. Her heart felt as though it had been stung by a thousand stingrays, and her eyes were burning with held back emotion.

As he reached for her arm, she dodged him, pulling her jacket tighter around her shaking body. If he couldn't come to the conclusion that James had to go, then it could only mean one thing. Connor was in on it.

"Maya."

"I held you on a pedestal you never deserved."

"Trust me, Maya."

"You know what? You can run your company however you want, but I thought you were someone else. Someone I wanted to emulate."

His body rocked as if he'd been hit. His eyes were dark and tired. "Trust me " He reached out and grasped her arm, staring at her as though he wanted to say something else. Finally, with drizzle hazing the air between them, he whispered, "Thank you."

"For what?" she spat.

"For seeing things."

"If you're talking about what just went on up there, you need glasses, because you don't know what you're even talking about."

He lowered his voice. "Maya, patience."

"You are such a tease! I don't know what kind of power trip you're on, but I hate you, okay? I officially hate you. Send that out in an office memo." She waved a hand across the sky. "This just in—Maya Summer hates Connor MacKenzie because he is a duplicitous, corrupt, hurtful man who likes to toy with people." Her chest burned with anger and betrayal. "You're about to sign a deal that will lose you a ton of money, and you think it's funny to tell me to have patience? You're beyond words, Connor MacKenzie. Beyond. Words." She blinked and turned away from a woman who had stopped to gawk at her outburst.

She turned back and whispered harshly, "I thought you had a sense of honor and I'm *embarrassed* to have worked for you. I will *never* use that worthlessly vague reference you saved on my computer. I'm not a pawn you can use in your games, Connor. I am a woman, and I hate the way you've treated me."

He reached out a hand, his brow arched in pain. "Maya, our time at the cottage wasn't like that."

"I'm talking about what went on in *there*!" She shoved a finger in the direction of the skyscraper. "It's like Arlene Dickinson said, it's not about being the best. It's about doing your best. And you failed, Connor. Big time."

"I'm not who you think I am."

"That's for sure."

He gripped her shoulders, drawing her closer. "Why do you care so much, Maya?" When she didn't answer, he gave her a light shake. "Why, Maya? Why?"

Her bottom lip trembling, she broke free of his hold. She felt shattered. This was worse than any heartbreak she'd ever experienced. And all for a man she'd never even had. A man who'd never been truly real with her.

"You wouldn't understand," she whispered as she walked away.



THE RAIN CONTINUED to drizzle outside the cottage, and Maya and her sisters sat around the fireplace, enjoying the blaze. "I can't believe he didn't *care*. That he was such a—a " Maya downed the rest of her hot toddy.

"Whoa, girl. You're going to end up hurling if you keep drinking that fast." Hailey gently pried the empty cup out of her hand.

"I like my drinks to go down fast and easy. And we're finally drinking something that doesn't give me brain freeze." Maya turned to Hailey, taking in her jeans and sweater. "Don't you have a flight to catch to New York or something?"

"I booked the red-eye. Tell us more about this thing with Connor. You really think his advisor is up to something, and that he might be in on it?"

Maya nodded, her head throbbing with held back emotion. "It's the only explanation."

"Are you sure?" Melanie asked, hesitation in her voice. "It doesn't quite fit right in my mind."

"Neither does him showing her out of the building and not James," snapped Daphne, with enough indignation it could have been her in Maya's shoes. Daphne was usually so "let it go" that Maya briefly wondered if something else was going on with her kid sister.

Maya pushed herself deeper into the cushions of her chair, the heels of her hands against her cheeks. "I don't know anymore. Nothing is a snap. He was so calm, but he had this haunted look." She reached for her cup to refill it. "Can we talk about something else?"

"Did you sort out that licensing thing?" Melanie asked.

"I meant something not me-related."

"No luck?"

"Jamie's girlfriend said she'd try. Everyone says they'll try, but nobody is on my side. Nobody cares."

"Yeah, go eat worms, would you?" Hailey snorted, tugging the filled cup away from Maya.

"I know, okay? I suck at making connections in the business world. I know, I know, I know. I'm too impatient. I want to get stuff done and people want to bond. You don't have to say it, the universe is already saying it loud and clear."

The sisters joined Hailey's song, singing about eating worms because of not being liked, and Maya broke into giggles at the silliness of it all. "You guys suck."

"Aw, Snappy, Snap, Snap," Daphne cooed, making kissy faces as she pulled Maya close.

Maya laughed and pushed her away. "I hate you guys. I'm being serious."

"So then?" Melanie asked. "What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to walk away."

"But " Hailey looked to her sisters for support.

"Maya, that's not what you do," Melanie said carefully.

"Yeah? And you guys have better ideas?"

Listen. Pause. Reflect. Connect. That was what she was supposed to be doing. Too bad that advice sucked.

"I have to get Tigger," Daphne said, fiddling with her knit pullover as she stood. "The party she's at ends soon."

"Yeah, we should all go. Are you coming, Maya?"

"I'm going to stay here a few days. I need to get over this, and send out some more рїsumїs. I may as well do it here without distractions. I might paint the screen frames, too."

"Are we keeping the place?" Daphne asked, her forehead furrowing.

Maya shrugged. "We have paint, I have time."

"Because, um, I have news."

The sisters turned to her. The last time Daphne had had news and used that hesitant, the-world-might-end tone of voice was over five years ago, when she'd announced she was unexpectedly expecting Tigger.

"I was at the planning office for the protest I'm doing in Bala against the big development there." She paused, inhaling in a way that made her chest heave.

Maya began planning out the rest of her evening in her mind, as Daphne, no doubt, was about to launch into the tale of another atrocity that needed desperately to be stopped. There was one every month, it seemed. Maybe after her sisters left Maya would check out head hunters to see if they could find her a job. And of course, finish off the last of the hot toddies. And maybe plot the demise of Connor, seeing as she couldn't seem to stop thinking about him.

Daphne mentioned Baby Horseshoe Island and Maya perked up. "Sorry, can you repeat that?"

Her sister's face pinched with worry as she said, "Rubicore Developments has bought out most of Baby Horseshoe Island and has plans to create a private resort complete with an airstrip, boating and wake boarding school, golf course, staff housing, mini marina, and hotel cabins."

"What?"

"I know." Daphne's voice shook.

"When?"

"The plans are still a proposal. We need to go to the next town meeting. The environmental implications alone are horrific."

"If we group together on this we can kick them right off that island," Melanie said, swinging her fist through the air. "I'll go to that meeting and show them exactly who they are messing with."

Daphne shot her a grateful smile.

"But if they've bought most of Baby Horseshoe they're not going to just roll over." Maya shook her head, adding up the pieces. "Aaron referred to the Fredericksons as the holdouts when he stopped by the other day. Are they the last owners?"

Daphne nodded.

"They've even bought out JoHoBo—I mean, Missy's Getaway?" No wonder the renovated cottage had been so empty all summer. It was a

miracle the place was still standing, seeing as at its core it was a hundred-ten-year-old cottage such as theirs.

Another nod from Daphne.

"And they offered to buy our island?" Hailey asked. "What does that mean?"

"It means they don't want the hassle of us over here complaining." Maya crossed her arms. "Daphne's right. We need to do something. And we need to not lose Trixie Hollow."

"We're going to need more people on our side." Melanie tapped her chin thoughtfully. "We need a developer on our side. Someone who knows how these guys are going to duck and dive, so we can block them before they try anything sneaky."

"Do you think they're going to bribe council?" Maya asked.

"They probably already have," Daphne said, blinking back what appeared to be several cubic meters of panic.

"We'll figure something out," Maya assured them all. "But in the meantime, we need to get our butts in gear and save our cottage, so it doesn't fall into their hands." She rolled her shoulders, trying to force herself to chill out. At least Connor hadn't asked for a refund. That was something helping them in the right direction. Too bad she didn't have much to live on, much less help pay the back taxes.

She walked her sisters down to the dock, their mood somber. Visibility was diminished due to the light rain and it was a nice break from the heat of last week. Plus, Maya thought ruefully, it matched everyone's frame of mind.

As Maya watched her sisters' boat disappear into the mist, another boat pulled up. She couldn't make out who was under the yellow rain hat. Was it Connor? Did he decide that she was right? Had he realized they were an amazing team, and that he missed her?

She loathed the part of herself that missed him, and the way her hope turned into a disappointment so deep it seared her lungs when she discovered it wasn't him in the other boat. She fought back the tidal wave of emotion. Maya Summer did not cry. Darn him.

The boat pulled up alongside the dock, the captain tossing her a line as he peeked out from under his yellow slicker.

"Jamie?"

"Girlfriend asked me to drop this off—I heard you were out here." He passed her an envelope sealed in a blue plastic bag.

"What is it?"

"Some licensing thing she said was important."

"Really?"

"Yep."

Maya clutched the envelope to her chest. "Did she get it to go through?"

He grinned. "It's all there in black-and-white."

As Jamie motored away, Maya stood under the protective eaves of the boathouse, reading the papers. Then she pumped the air with a fist and grinned. Maybe destiny wasn't such a mean lady, after all. Maybe Maya was just being tested.



CONNOR SAT at the head table of the wedding party, a warm tropical breeze ruffling his hair, which was in need of a cut. He smiled at his brother's delirious joy, having to admit the kid looked pretty good in a tuxedo.

"Having fun?" Curtis asked.

Connor nodded. Surprisingly, he was. He gazed out across the sandy Tahitian shores to the rolling ocean. What a view. If he ever got

married, something like this would do the trick. Would Maya want a destination wedding? She seemed like a no-fuss, no-muss kind of woman. Despite her desire for everything big and important, she'd probably love a low-key event in a similar setting to this.

He stretched his hands, which had closed into fists. Why was he even thinking of her? She hated him. He'd lost out. He pushed his fingers through his hair, glad for the breeze slapping the large canopy above him. He'd ruined it completely, but he couldn't let her in. He wasn't ready, wasn't there yet. And this was too big. Nobody could know. Not yet.

"I expected you to be on your phone all night." His brother's voice lowered with emotion as he clapped Connor on the shoulder. "Thanks, man."

"For not being on my phone?"

"For being here. Really being here."

Connor nodded, unable to speak. He'd become that guy who was never around. If he had a wife, she'd be doing everyone on the side in a quest for love and attention.

"Connor, you look fantastic," Roberta said, leaning around her new husband. Her cheeks were flushed and her hair was done up in curls that kept falling in her face in a way that reminded him of Maya. It seemed he couldn't get away from thoughts of that woman. "We're so glad you came."

Connor nodded, his heart sinking. They had truly believed he wouldn't take time to come to the wedding. He thought back to who he'd been two and a half weeks ago. Chances were he would have missed the flight, cramming one more thing into his day. Then he would have come on a red-eye and barely made it to everything on time, his mind still stuck behind his desk in Toronto.

"Have you been working out?" Roberta asked.

He nodded. "A bit. I took some time off."

"Well, it's good for you. You look less like death warmed up and served on dry toast. I was starting to worry about you." She gave him an affectionate tap on the arm and turned her attention to one of her bridesmaids, who was whispering something in Roberta's ear, assessing Connor. They were talking about him.

He fidgeted with the flute of champagne in front of him. Roberta wasn't the only one who'd been worried about him. He'd met with his doctor yesterday before catching his flight, and while he had permission to go back part-time, Connor knew he wasn't out of the woods. If he returned to CME he'd get sucked back into it all, and in a matter of weeks he'd be back in that ER. But without CM Enterprises, who was he? What would he do with his days? What could he do so he didn't keel over?

Curtis swept his new wife onto the dance floor and Connor watched as they smiled and kissed, wrapped up in each other's world. That's what was missing from his life. That was what he needed. Someone like Maya to be his other half and lighten his life. She gave him heck all the time and was pushy, but he liked it. She knew what she wanted, and wasn't going to turn into some vapid trophy wife just because of who he was. She'd do things that mattered and keep him on his toes, forcing him continually to be a better man.

The bridesmaid moved to sit beside him, her eyelids doing some strange batting thing that he figured was supposed to turn him on. He gave her a tight smile and focused on the dancers.

She walked her fingers up his arm. "Wanna dance?" She gave him an expectant look and he knew he'd be rude not to accept. But if he did it would lead to her being all over him for the rest of the night, and he really wasn't in the right headspace for that kind of company. Unless it was Maya.

How had she gotten to him so easily?

"I'm sorry, I don't think my girlfriend would appreciate that."

The woman glanced over Connor's shoulder. "She's not here, though, is she?"

"She is not."

The bridesmaid pulled on his hand. "Then what she doesn't know won't hurt her."

"No, but it might hurt me." He offered her his untouched glass of champagne, and she accepted it with disappointment. Connor scanned the room and finally pointed to a man near the back who was watching them. "I think there's someone over there hoping you will notice him."

"Who?" She turned, her eyes round with curiosity.

"He's been eyeing you."

She spun abruptly, putting her back to the man. "Really? Do you know his name?"

"Drink up and go find out for yourself."

She did as he suggested, her dress flouncing in a way that reminded Connor of Maya's niece. Saving her from the falling tree felt like forever ago. His mind drifted to the cottage bathroom, where he'd helped Maya doctor herself. He'd been such a broken husk. But was he any different now? Had he changed enough that he could finally be the man she deserved?

Sighing, he realized she probably wouldn't see it that way, and that woman saw everything.

He laughed as his brother swept Roberta into a deep dip, pretending to drop her. Connor missed this—being able to be present at an event without feeling as though he was about to lose his company if he didn't go check his email or texts. He missed *people*. Not everything needed to be about work all the time. But he still needed something the business world could give him. Something only James could deliver.



CONNOR SAT at the large conference table and clasped his hands together. As long as James played his right cards, Connor was going to walk away a free and happy man.

Em, her moves edgy, offered the two men coffee. Connor waved her away, but James, bags under his eyes, accepted.

"Do you want me to stay and take notes?" Em asked Connor.

"No, that's fine. I just wanted to chat with James and get up to speed."

James and Em frowned. The conference room was considered neutral turf, and the only time Connor met with an employee for a "chat" in here, it led to either a pink slip or a severe reprimand. The fact that Connor's second advisor, Bill, was not present made it more clear something was about to go down.

"How's " Connor snapped his fingers as though he was still burned out, and unable to pull up his other assistant's name. "Stella?"

"Fine," Em replied. "She can come back to work on Wednesday."

"I had Accounting send her a bonus this morning. Can you be sure she gets it?"

"Yes, sir."

"You'll get one, too. I appreciate all you do around here."

Em blushed as she nodded, whispering a "thanks" as she exited the room.

Connor, making sure his shoulders seemed weighted by fatigue, returned his attention to James, who was sitting at the other end of the table looking unsure, but also expectant.

"I want to thank you for taking care of the place while I was gone, James. I know it couldn't have been easy, with me pulling the plug on myself in the middle of a deal."

James cleared his throat and shook his head with vigor. "It was no problem, really."

"Well, I want you to know that I appreciate it. And this latest deal with the lumberyard, which you managed to close yesterday, was a good idea. I was looking at the papers and how much it increased the valuation of CM Enterprises."

James smiled, pleased.

"You've done a lot for me over the past year, in particular." When his advisor nodded, his chest expanding, Connor added, "And so I would like to make you an offer."

James leaned forward, hungry for details.

"I know you've been interested in having a larger stake in the company for some time."

"Yes, yes I have. I think I would do an amazing job with more control."

"How much would you like?"

James's greed practically turned him green. "As much as you are comfortable giving."

"I was thinking fifty percent."

He grinned and leaned back like a fat cat. "That would be fantastic."

"Or maybe you'd prefer to have majority control here?"

"What do you mean?" James's voice was breathless.

"Buy the company." Connor leaned back, hands folded behind his head.

"*Buy* the company?"

"Outright. You've done an amazing job, and your projections show that within five years you'll be rolling in it. It's a good time to buy."

"Why are you selling?" James licked his lips twice, a tell that he was nervous.

Connor laughed. "Have you seen me this past month? I can't even remember my own name. I'm not the king any longer and it's burning me out trying to be. I'm done, man. I'm *tired*. You do a much better job of balancing things. That's why I thought of you first. You are truly the new, uncrowned, king."

James swallowed hard, sitting a little straighter with the compliment and the hint that Connor might sell to someone else if he didn't grab the opportunity. "And what is the offer, exactly?"

"Purchase outright at your recent valuation."

"My recent " James cleared his throat. He blinked, licked his lips.

"Yes. I trust your valuation. If the past is any indicator, it's probably conservative. Since it is your valuation, you know exactly what you are getting and, man " Connor smiled and shook his head. "I can't believe I am even thinking of selling this place. It's been my everything for so long." He spread his palms flat on the table, rounding his shoulders as though in resignation. "But I can see how I'm in your way. You are the new king and it's time for me to step aside and let you shine."

James grew in his chair, shoulders straightening. "Yeah. Yeah, maybe."

"You in full control? Look out, world. Corner office. *Fortune* magazine calling you. Man, I must be crazy." Connor shook his head as though he couldn't believe it. He gave James a moment to imagine it all, then leaned forward. "So? What do you say? Are you in?"

James nodded hesitantly, his eyes drifting to the large windows along the wall. "I'm not sure about the value "

"Why? Is something wrong?" Connor made himself tamp his anger under a large weight, knowing one false move and he'd be stuck, not James, the man who needed to pay for his betrayal out of his own wallet.

Connor had checked the paperwork when he got back from Curtis's wedding, and James had come out ahead on the past three deals, whereas CM Enterprises had not. James was the real reason Connor was so burned out. He'd been paddling a ship his advisor had been poking holes into. Now it was time for James to buy the damaged ship.

Connor grinned internally. Either way, James was caught. He couldn't turn down the offer without showing how he'd become corrupt, and if he bought it, he was stuck with his own bad deals. Thank goodness for Maya and her threat to take James to court. No matter which way he moved he was screwed. Connor just hoped the man's pride made him move in Connor's favor for once.

"No, nothing's wrong." His advisor stared at the shiny tabletop.

"Is it a fair price?" Connor asked. "Should we investigate it further? Maybe there's something that has been overlooked?" He reached for the telephone sitting in the middle of the table.

Anger radiated off James. But he stood and clenched Connor's hand, shaking it as he practically growled, "We have a deal, Connor."

"Legal has the contract ready for you to sign. Shall we go over there now?"

Connor made James be the one to break eye contact and pull his hand away first, as well as exit the room.

Oh, yes. Connor was still king.



MAYA BASKED on a rock on the top of the island, the morning sun warming her bones. It had been a cool night in the cottage and now the sun was out to show her it was still summer.

Her phone rang and she answered it. The entrepreneurs.

"Maya, we've run into a glitch."

"Are you freaking kidding me?" How many fires did she have to put out with this stupid project?

"The licensing is fine. It's all set, thank you. But the distributor we wanted to use experienced a major flood, and now it's looking like everything is going to be delayed by months. They said they'd let us out of our contract, but time is so short and—"

"I get the picture. I can tell you're feeling a bit anxious and stressed, but we'll figure this out, okay?" Connect, connect, connect.

Son of a

How were they going to sort this out? She was going to have to call in favors from people she didn't even know. Again. And lately, it felt as though every time she turned around she was asking someone to cover her butt and make it happen, because she'd messed up somewhere. How did she ever think she could get this device out into the real world?

"You know what?" she said. "I might know somebody. It's a long shot. Really long, but I can ask."

"Maya. You are a godsend."

"I'll call you back, okay?"

She hung up and rang Steve from Roundhouse Distributions, hoping he'd recall who she was.

"Hi, Steve? It's Maya Summer, the girl with the taxi in Toronto."

"Wow. How'd you know I needed a ride downtown?"

Maya laughed. "Sorry, I'm unable to take a fare right now, but I actually had a distribution question for you. Do you have a moment?"

"Sure."

Maya explained what she needed. "So, I'm not certain if you can help, or point me in the right direction? We've ended up in a bit of a time crunch."

"I'm actually heading to a meeting right now with a distributor who might be able to help you out. I can ask."

Maya stared at her phone. If this was what everyone was talking about with the whole connections thing, then it was simply the coolest thing ever.

"That would be amazing. Thank you."

"No problem. Loving the Twitter jokes, by the way."

"I'm glad." Maya grinned at the sky. The Twitter jokes. She'd forgotten about the odd joke she'd been tweeting to him here and there. She had been connecting and maintaining their link without even realizing it. "Thanks, Steve. So much, really. I appreciate it."

He let out a laugh. "I only said I'd ask. I can't promise what they'll say."

"I know, but thank you just the same."

She happily lowered her phone, feeling more hope than she had in ages. Listen, pause, reflect and connect. She and Connor could write a business book, because Snap was officially back in business. Too bad Connor was more interested in being corrupt, because she had a feeling they could make a lot of money as a team.

Connor rolled over, bed sheets tangling around his legs as he scratched himself. Hmm. Something interesting was happening there. He looked under the covers and grinned. He was back. Connor the King MacKenzie was back.

Jumping out of bed, he dressed quickly and shot out the door of his penthouse to finalize the papers with James. Two more hours and he'd be free.

He sent a quick text to Tristen in Muskoka, giving him the go-ahead on a project they'd been working on. Today was the first day of the rest of Connor's life. A real life.

He strolled into his building—his for only another few hours, as he'd ensured James would take immediate possession. If James was going to have a bit of financial suffering, then the least Connor could do was expedite it.

Dappled light filtered in through the lobby's dusty side windows, and he couldn't wait to get out of the city.

A few hours later, he hurried back through the lobby, the few things he wanted to take with him tucked under one arm, Daphne's sunflower painting in the other.

The security guard glanced up and, recognizing him, shouted a hello. "Hey! Is it true that you're selling the place?"

"Already did it. I'm a free man." If he didn't have full arms, Connor would have spread them out to do a spin in the middle of the lobby. Within hours the money would be in his account and he'd be rich. Dirty, filthy stinkin' rich. Well, until he completed the projects he had lined up with Tristen. That was going to skim a little off the top of his nest egg, but it would be well worth it.

Climbing into his Lexus, he headed toward Muskoka. He wondered how Maya's entrepreneur project was going. Had she given up when Nolan hadn't been able to deliver? Had she carried on by finding another way? Seeing as his name was on the contract, Connor should probably check in with her. Plus it was a very good excuse to see the woman who had been haunting his dreams.

Tapping the steering wheel, he sang along to the radio, knowing he could finally love Maya in all the ways he'd wanted to since the night in the boathouse. Only two steps away from happiness, and the man he was meant to be.



CONNOR STOOD on Nymph Island's dock and stared up at the large green cottage. He turned to the water taxi. "If I don't come down in ten minutes, assume you are free to go."

The man nodded, folding the bills Connor had given him.

The cottage was quiet, but that didn't mean Maya wasn't there. He climbed the path, marveling at how he had energy and even a bit of pep, and was only slightly winded by the time he stood on the veranda. Not bad. Not bad at all. This place had been good for him. Magical, even.

The cottage was open and he went inside, calling Maya's name.

No answer. He began checking rooms, including his old one. He still had stuff in there. Maya hadn't packed it up and chucked it. What did that mean?

Noticing the battery was running low for the cottage's power system, he rolled up his shirtsleeves and checked the wires from the solar panels. Something was funky with this system, judging how Maya kept fiddling with it. The wires all appeared to be in order, so he checked the battery's water levels. All good. Probably just old.

Feeling as though he should do something to ensure Maya had what she needed out here, he bent over the generator. It required that adjustment she'd been tinkering with the other week. He headed back into the cottage and grabbed the toolbox from under the sink, then returned to the generator and began fiddling with it until he had the machine running smoothly. He straightened his back and stared straight into the blue eyes that had been haunting him since the night he'd left for Italy. *Maya*.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Giving your generator a quick tune-up. It'll use less gas. I think you probably need a new battery, though."

She let out a "humph!" and continued past him, into the building, the door slapping behind her. He carried the tool kit over to where the hinge was coming out of the old wood frame and fixed that, too.

Maya appeared on the other side of the screen, hands on her hips. "What are you doing?"

"Fixing the door. Don't open it for a few hours. The glue needs to dry."

"When'd you become a handyman?"

"I grew up in an old house."

"Why are you here?"

"I was wondering how the entrepreneur project was coming along. I thought I should check in, but I got distracted by a few things that had been bugging me during my stay."

Maya's shoulders relaxed and she laid a hand on the screen door.

"Other exit!" He placed his own palm on his side of the door, keeping it closed, their flesh separated by nothing more than a thin slice of wood.

She stared at him for a moment, then slowly lowered her hand and turned away as though she'd been rejected. After a moment, he heard the screen door off the kitchen slam shut. There was so much to tell her that he didn't know where to start. It didn't help that she was using her poker face with him.

She came around to the wicker seating area and gestured for him to sit. He took a moment to take in her luscious curves, showcased by her tank top and shorts, before joining her.

"It looks as though we are all set to go," she said. "We should have the product ready in six weeks."

"Really? The dental device?"

"You seem surprised."

He *was* surprised. "How'd you pull it together so quickly?"

"There were a few glitches. We overcame them."

"Think we'll make money?" He loved the way she jumped straight into things. No "Hi, how are you? Are we still mad at each other? Why were you such a jerk to me?" She could be professional even when she was angry with him.

Another good reason to choose her.

"Yes. And I think if we could get in to talk to someone at Health Canada we'd make waves faster."

"I read the paperwork you emailed. The proposal and projections seem conservative, if anything."

She nodded, and he could tell he'd reminded her of the other email she'd sent the same day as the proposal. The email about James. *In time, Maya. Have patience.*

Although the way she wasn't asking about it right off the bat told him he wasn't the only one who had changed.

"I know someone," he said.

"Of course you do." There was a bitterness in her voice.

"I think we could be a good team, Maya."

"Maybe if you listened to me and were an honest, up front and not a—a..."

He'd never seen her at a loss for words before and knowing he was the reason for all that emotion blocking her ability to express herself, he felt horrible.

"I do listen," he said gently, "and I did. In fact, I took action based on what you told me. I'm sorry that I fired you. I should have handled things better."

Maya shifted farther away from him, her arms crossing over her chest.

"I sold CM Enterprises, Maya."

"What?"

"It'll be in the news later today."

She leaned forward, her eyes locked on his. "You're kidding."

"I'm not. What better way to ensure James got what he deserved than to leave him holding the bag?" Connor grinned. This was still too good to be true. The only downside was the way he'd had to treat Maya and still not knowing who held Bill's allegiance—him or James—and whether he'd burned a good man.

"How did you manage to convince him to buy the company he was ruining?"

"He's a proud man and would have had a lot of explaining to do if he refused to purchase the firm he's always wanted. In fact, it probably would have sounded a lot like a confession. Thanks for throwing in that legal threat during your tirade back at the office, by the way. It really helped me out."

Maya frowned, then her face slowly began to soften. He watched her expressions change, unsure whether she disapproved or not. It made him want to kiss her just to make her smile.

"It's not so bad that he can't turn it around," Connor said. "And now that he owns the place, I'm sure he will. I wish him nothing but good things."

Maya finally smiled, the tension drifting out of her pose.

Connor's phone chirped and he held it up in bafflement. "You get cell service now?"

"They put in a cell booster across the water. It seems to help us a bit. It's spotty, though."

He lifted the phone to his ear. "Connor here."

"The money went through," said his lawyer. "You are out, Mr. MacKenzie."

Connor thanked him and smiled at Maya. He set down his phone and dusted his hands together. "Transaction completed. I am officially no longer the owner of CM Enterprises, Ltd."

"Remind me to never mess with you," she said, with an admiration that stirred him up inside. He wanted to show her all he could do if given the chance, especially now that he was back on his game.

"Shall we?" he asked.

"Shall we what?"

"I'm pretty sure I can get a meeting with the man you need to see at Health Canada. Monday is a holiday, so I'd suggest we get moving. Can your people get to Ottawa on short notice?"

"You're kidding!" Maya smoothed her hair in a move that was uncertain—not typical for her. "Today?"

He pulled her to her feet, keeping her hands in his. "There are two things I never kid about, Maya Summer. Love and business."



MAYA LISTENED to Connor splashing in the cottage bathroom as he shaved and got suited up to meet with his man over at Health Canada. She tried to make herself believe that she could trust Connor to stay in the business game long enough to set this thing on fire, and that he was as excited as she was. Because, really? Who sold their multimillion-dollar company that was doing well, even given James's added speed bumps? Sure, it was pretty cool the way Connor had stuck it to his corrupt advisor and all the man could do was open up and swallow it or face prosecution for misrepresentation of financial statements, bribery, having a negative impact on Connor's product development, corruption, as well as a misappropriation of funds. But the way Connor had been a shadow through the whole entrepreneur deal, and now wanted to swoop in when Maya had it in the bag, didn't quite sit right.

Then again, there was something about him today that reminded her of the old Mr. MacKenzie. A determination and focus that made her body weak with longing.

She rocked forward in her chair, hands tucked between her skirted knees, palm to palm. Then she stood and called through the bathroom door, "Why didn't you trust me? Why didn't you tell me about the deal you were making with James?"

There was silence. Finally Connor said, his voice low and tinged with regret, "I couldn't risk it, Maya. I didn't even tell Bill."

She stood, hand on the bathroom knob. She wanted to see his face.

The door opened and Connor faced her, shirtless and buff, his chin covered in shaving cream. "I'm sorry I had to let you lose face in front of everyone in the office, but I couldn't let on that I wasn't on James's side. Not until he'd bought the company." Connor turned to the sink to resume shaving.

"Why are you interested in this deal all of a sudden?"

"Do you not want me to go?"

"No, it's fine."

"Good, because I want to meet these people."

While Maya waited for Connor to finish up, she went over her notes one more time, trying to quell her nerves. She toyed with her necklace and wondered what was taking him so long. Shouldn't women take longer than men to get ready?

A few minutes later he appeared fully suited. She slowly took him in, her breath collapsing out of her lungs in a whoosh. He was hot. So smoking hot she was amazed the smoke detector wasn't having a hissy fit. He was sexy. Powerful. Everything she'd seen in the conference he'd spoken at all those years ago, but more. There was a determination within him that stoked her internal fire. She wanted him. Badly.

He'd shaved, and his chin was a thing of male beauty. She wanted to close the distance and pull him against her and see what their bodies suggested.

He tugged his suit jacket, buttoning it. He'd toned up, and it didn't fit quite as perfectly as the man it had been tailored for, but this was even better than she'd imagined. The world wouldn't know what had hit it. He'd be leaving a wake of swooning women everywhere he went today.

And he'd be on her arm as her business partner.

She picked up her purse and the boat key. "Shall we?"

Connor strode to her side, giving her a peck on the cheek. She nearly fainted. The scent of his cologne. So corporate. Powerful. Expensive.

Yes, this was the life she had been dreaming about.

Connor adjusted his suit. "This feels good. Like putting on a comfortable old skin."

She *knew* it. He may have sold his business, but he was still in the game. She led them down to the dock and gestured for him to get into the old Boston Whaler.

He held out an arm to stop her. "I have other plans."

She frowned. Was he kidding? If they didn't leave now they'd be late.

A seaplane roared in low, drowning out the rest of what he was saying. Oh, how she hated Rubicore. Daphne was right to stop developments over there. It was disruptive, having richie-rich neighbors next door.

Connor pointed to the plane, which had landed and was motoring toward them. "Our ride awaits."

"A plane is going to take as long as boating to the car." Silly men. Always looking to show off.

"It's taking us to Ottawa. We can land a block from the meeting."

"What?" They were going to arrive by plane? She tore across the dock, eager to get on the aircraft.

Connor laughed. "I thought you might like that."

Maya climbed into the seaplane and grinned at Connor. Without thinking, she grasped his face and drew his mouth to hers. Connor braced himself against the small plane's frame and leaned into her kiss, offering more than he ever had before. His free hand went to her waist as he deepened the kiss.

"I've missed you, Spitfire."

"My family calls me Snap," she whispered, her lips barely away from his.

"Why's that?" He gave her another warm, moist kiss.

"Snap decisions."

"Not because you snap at people?"

"Only when they deserve it." She flashed him a wicked grin and his eyelids lowered, his face nudging closer to hers. She inhaled his minty fresh breath and waited for him to kiss her again.

"You've learned patience, I see?"

"Shut up and kiss me. There's a time and place for everything."

"Ottawa?" the pilot asked.

"You know the place," Connor replied. He turned his attention back to Maya. "Buckle up. We have some people to woo."



HE'D DONE IT. Maya could barely believe it. Connor had come in all smiles and information, and drawn everyone in the meeting into one big happy, collaborative family. It was incredible. If there had ever been any doubt in her mind why he was the king, this meeting had definitively squashed it.

Connor helped Maya out of the bobbing aircraft back at Nymph Island.

"So?" he asked. "Did you like traveling in style?"

"Don't ask stupid questions, Connor. You're smarter than that."

"You want to keep on with this lifestyle?"

Maya turned, her long skirt swishing against her legs. "What do you mean?"

Connor's hand drifted to hers, and he linked their fingers lightly. "I mean, do you want to become business partners? On more than just this

project.”

She couldn’t have heard that correctly, because her brain was definitely incapable of computing the idea of the two of them as business partners, and it could compute plenty.

Connor slipped closer, his expression serious. “You have amazing instincts. I ignored requests for backing for years, and never once considered venture capitalism. But maybe you and I, together, could help people achieve their dreams.”

Maya bit her bottom lip. She knew *he* could help people, but what if she couldn’t? What if the dental device flopped? It had barely even happened in the first place, because she knew diddly-squat about the real world and timelines, who to talk to, where to go for help and even how long things took. The idea of screwing up all these details again nearly made her hyperventilate.

Connor, with a featherlight touch, tipped up her chin. “You’re freaking out in there, aren’t you?”

“There’s a lot to these deals, you know.”

“Um-hmm.”

“And a lot of stress.”

“Um-hmm.”

“And I don’t have money.”

“There is a place for everyone. You won’t have to do everything like you did on this deal. Em has agreed to leave CME—man, James is going to want to rename that place—and so has Stella. I gave them bonuses just before I sold.” Connor sent Maya a sly grin.

“You’re kidding!”

“Not at all. They are most favorably on my side.” He angled his head in thought. “Although I’m pretty sure they were even before the bonuses.”

"Oh, they totally were. Are," Maya said quickly. "Em was amazing with all of this."

"So, they can take care of the details. You can vet the masses. I can be the backer."

"Not silent, though? You'll also be the expertise?"

Connor linked his hands through hers again, his suit jacket brushing her chest. "I happen to think that is where you and I will shine together, Maya."

She squeezed their linked fingers, Connor's hips brushing hers. "Why aren't you running away?"

Her man slid their entwined hands behind her back, releasing her fingers so he could embrace her properly. "I think you're pretty special, you know that?" He shuffled closer, bringing his body flush to hers. "I always have."

"But you " All those times he'd pushed her away. "You fell asleep on me when I thought we were going to get busy!"

"I promise I won't ever again."

She took a step back, breaking his hold as she raised an eyebrow. "Maybe that will be an easy promise to keep, seeing as I don't mix business and pleasure."

Connor gave her a mischievous smile, his eyes darkening with desire as he drew her tight again, making her lean back in order to see his face. "Then I guess, sweet Maya, you will have to make a choice or change your mind, because I happen to know you find business pleasurable, and I want to make your pleasure my business."

His breath created light breezes on her exposed neck, making her skin tingle, and she knew she was going to cave if she didn't get away from him. But she wasn't certain she wanted to.

"Shall I show you?" he asked. "Give you a taste of what you are choosing between?"

Oh, yes. Most definitely.



MAYA'S LIPS were sweeter than he remembered. Her curves. Her spirit. He was a very lucky man. A lucky man about to make good use of what nature had given him. Something he would never take for granted again.

As he brought her to his room, he shook his head and stared down at her. She impatiently ripped her blouse over her head, not bothering with the buttons and sending her necklace skittering across the floor. He laughed and watched her scramble toward him, ditching her long skirt when it got in the way, her desperation to have him unleashed.

She would never learn patience in some regards, but it was a quality he admired in her.

Grabbing his belt, she hauled him closer.

It was finally time, and he couldn't decide whether to take it slow or simply give in to her pace. She moaned as they kissed, then pushed him away, her face scrunched in thought. "Are we going to set up business in Toronto?"

She blinked hopefully as he tried to focus on her words instead of his intimate plans.

"You're talking as though this is going to happen." He began caressing her soft skin, reminding her why they had moved to the bedroom. "I thought you hadn't chosen yet."

Her eyes fluttered shut and her breathing hiccupped as he continued to caress her, persistently ignoring the areas she wanted him to touch the most.

"Connor, don't tease me."

He laughed. "You like it when I do." He ran a hand down her hair, kissing her neck with an agonizing slowness. He loved pushing her buttons and her body responded with a shudder.

"Don't tell me to be patient, Connor," she said, her voice rough. "I need you to pick up the pace."

"Not yet. We're talking, remember."

Maya smoothed her hands up his chest with a desperation that made him want to forget savoring despite their long wait. "I want to live in Toronto," she said.

"Then live in Toronto. I already bought myself a place here. I'll fly into the city for any meetings."

"What?"

"You heard me." He nibbled on her earlobe, and she drew closer. "I just bought a place outside Port Carling, near Tristen's. I thought it would be good for me to get away from the rat race." She quaked with the effort of holding herself back, trying to mask her need for him. He could tell she was torn between ditching the conversation and pursuing it.

"But " She drew away slightly, no doubt so she could think. "I want Toronto."

"So move."

"Toronto feels like such an uphill battle," she moaned.

"Can't you have what you want here?"

She sighed and tipped her head back. Her shoulders dropped slightly. "I've always wanted out of here. But I think that was because I wanted to be a part of something big. Bigger. You know?"

"I do."

"Do you?" Her eyes were on his and he sucked in a shaky breath as her fingers found the bare flesh under the hem of his shirt.

"Spitfire, no more talking."

"Has my patience finally paid off?" she asked with an arched brow.

He answered with a kiss that would leave no doubt as to his answer, her mouth sweet under his lips. Grinning, she wrapped his tie around her hand and led him toward the bed.



MAYA OPENED AN EYE, her arm slung around a warm, strong male body. She propped herself up, drawing circles on Connor's chest. The best wake-up in the history of her universe. Connor MacKenzie in her bed. *The* Connor MacKenzie. And he was the king. The king of her world, her destiny, her future.

"Hey," she said as he awoke. "Good morning."

"It is," he confirmed. He smiled and gripped her bare thigh. "Always sleep in the nude, Miss Summer?"

"Only when there is a man to wrap myself around."

"And that happens frequently?"

"Not as often as I'd like, but I'm interviewing new partners and think I've found someone with potential. He's got the asset mix I've been looking for. A real go-getter, with experience."

"Are you calling me a man-whore?"

"Does that shoe fit, Cinderella?"

"You calling me a princess? Because I'll have you know a princess can't do what I did last night."

His steady gaze held something that made her insides go gooey. As though she mattered. As though he cared about her. And a bit as though she was responsible for the way he'd turned his world around. The way his smiles now lit up his face made her want to make him smile every day for the rest of their lives.

Yes, *their* lives. She'd made up her mind. Partners. All the way, and in every sense of the word.

"For future reference, that shoe does not fit. I'm a one-gal kind of guy."

"Good to know."

"So, Maya Summer. Have you decided what you'd like to do with your future?"

"You know " She sat up. "I think I want to try mixing business and pleasure. If that offer is still on the table."

He smiled as though she'd given him the best news of his life, and she fell a little bit further in love.

"It sure is," he said.

"Good, because I might even like you."

"Good, because I love my spitfire. And not just because of her grit and resiliency and bulldog attitude in the business world. You get me, and I get you, Maya. You make me laugh and want to be a better man. You fix my wounds and help me find purpose in my life."

Maya's heart skipped and stuttered. Did he just say

"I said it too soon, didn't I?"

She nodded hesitantly.

"You feel right, Maya Summer. And while my own patience isn't particularly great, when my instincts tell me something is a good deal, I tend to move fast."

"Snap decisions."

"Is that going to be a problem?"

"Have you forgotten who I am?" She dropped a kiss onto his lips. "Besides, gut instincts never lie."

"Listen to me, Spitfire, and we'll go places."

"I think we already are," she replied. "We have the right asset mix to make it long-term."

"Even through an economic bounce."

"Downturns in the economy."

"A bull market."

"I love you when you talk dirty."

"Do you, Maya?" He was serious.

"Love you?" she asked, playing for time. Could she tell him how she felt, just as he'd told her? Would it make things awkward or difficult if she let herself do so? Shut her eyes, let go of the rope and fall into whatever he had in mind?

Could she trust him? She was already changing her life for him. They were starting a business together here in Muskoka.

What about her plans? Her dreams? But things with him they were the real dream, weren't they? The thing she'd never dared allow herself to believe she could have—all of it. Business and pleasure and success and love. And all with one man.

The real dream: Connor MacKenzie.

"Yes. I love you. And not just because you're willing to give me everything I've ever wanted and more, but because of the way you understand me, and know how I'm going to trip myself up even before I do. You're there with the net to catch me before I hit the ground. And despite all my flaws, you are still here, willing to help me grow into the woman I really want to be. You trust me in ways I don't trust myself." Maya, her voice thick with emotion, whispered, "You make me a better person, Connor."

"Aw, Maya." He peppered her face with kisses and rolled her under him. "You are the lifeline I never knew I needed. Like a lighthouse on safe shores, beckoning to me through the storm. The one place I always wanted to be."

She danced her fingers up his chest. "You'd better distract me soon, because we're getting pretty mushy, and I hate to cry in front of men."

"Oh, don't worry, I have a lot of time before the next meeting." He tenderly drew a line down her cheek with the tip of his finger. "Plenty of time to distract you from the fact that you've fallen for that mushy stuff called love." He kissed her slow. "When is our next meeting again?"

"In about a week."

"Then you're going to be either one tired woman, or need to find a new project to keep me busy."

"I think that might just be my destiny, Connor MacKenzie."



FIND out what happens next on Nymph Island as Melanie stirs things up in *Falling for the Single Dad*, book 3! Turn the page to keep reading.

FALLING FOR THE SINGLE DAD

BOOK 3

From the back cover:

One developer. One lawyer. One unexpected chance at love.

Years ago, cut-throat developer Tristen Bell had everything that ever mattered to him ripped away. Now divorced and living in Muskoka, he's shunning all that reminds him of his past and the unstoppable man he used to be.

Melanie Summer thought her law degree would help her find a place in this world. But when a big city developer threatens to destroy all that she loves—including her family—she finally sees her path. The only hiccup is that the man she needs—the sexy and stubborn Tristen Bell—refuses to do anything other than give her tender, knee-weakening kisses every time he sees her.

When Tristen's teenage daughter ends up in the ER due to the negligence of his former rival, everything changes. Tristen knows he can shut down the developer but it means resorting to his old, ruthless ways and showing sweet Melanie a side that may send her running.

With time running out to stop the developer, and their attraction for one another increasing, will Tristen and Melanie learn to love and trust one another in order to reach their happily ever?

This is the third book in the Summer Sisters series.

Melanie slammed the door to the Super Duty Ford pickup and swore under her breath as the machine sent gravel flying across the Steel Barrel's parking lot. She waved away the dust, the sun's heat prickling her bare arms. Not only was she stuck outside a biker bar in the middle of nowhere, but she was wearing a 1950s-style halter dress that placed her cleavage on display, and she'd left her purse on the passenger seat of her date's truck.

Easy pickings.

She turned to the retreating truck, giving her now former date, Stedman, the finger.

This was the last time she would allow her sister Maya to badger her into getting out of her comfy oversized T-shirts and into the dating world. Not that she'd put up much of a fight, seeing as the two eldest Summer sisters had fallen in love last month, and everyone had agreed that it was now Melanie's turn to do the same.

She trudged across the gravel lot in her kitten mules. Were they kittens *and* mules? How did that work? Oh, who cared? She was never wearing the shoes again, seeing as the experiment of reinventing herself had failed miserably. Stedman had made assumptions based on her appearance. Namely, that she wouldn't argue with him—even though he

knew she was a lawyer. Fat chance on that one, buddy. That, and have sex with him behind the abandoned roadside motel next door. As soon as she got home she was tossing off this getup and climbing straight into her old wardrobe of jeans and big, comfy T-shirts.

Her sisters could call it hiding, but it didn't attract the kind of man who left her outside a biker bar with no way home. If she wanted passion she could find in an adults only shop, along with a package of AA batteries.

The Steel Barrel, like many places along Ontario's backwoods highways, was a fading, falling down establishment, although this one was rumored to be a gathering spot for the local chapter of the Hells Angels. A closed gas station stood on the far side of the bar, growing weeds, with scrap metal piled high behind it.

No phone booth. No purse or cell phone, because Stedman had spun off so fast Melanie hadn't fully realized what was happening.

She was a lawyer. Supposed to be intelligent and savvy. But apparently she wasn't that street smart when it came to men. If she'd had more than five dates in the past oh goodness, she didn't want to try and count how many years it might be she probably would have seen this coming.

It was the last time she'd try online dating.

Why was she spending time chasing men, anyway? She should be at the office, trying to catch up on the mounds of paperwork avalanching off her desk. Besides, if destiny actually existed and did have her, the third Summer sister, in its sights to take the next fall, then destiny could get off its butt and come find her. Preferably, with a man in tow.

Melanie glanced at the bar one last time, then scooted by an ancient, sun-bleached Ford with a flat tire. Only two hogs in the parking lot. That should make it less scary inside, right? She carefully crept up the rotting wood steps and braced herself to peek into the suspiciously quiet

tavern. Shouldn't there be music blaring and people being tossed through the grimy windows? She checked the sun, which was still fairly high in the sky. Maybe it was too early?

Hoping for air-conditioning, she daintily pushed through the saloon-style door. Nope, not a chance. The only coolish breeze to touch her skin was from the door swinging back to slap her on the rear.

To the right was a pool table with green felt worn down to its backing. Small tables crowded the rest of the room. Melanie tried to walk naturally, even though all eyes had turned to her, watching her every move. One bartender, two scary bikers, and a guy in a ball cap who appeared to be none of the above.

Keeping her eyes straight ahead, she took a seat equidistant between the bikers and Ball Cap. Her bare elbows stuck to the bar's surface and she peeled them off, giving the man to her right a weak smile. He not only seemed to be the best bet out of this place—although he was likely the guy with the flat tire—he also looked vaguely familiar. He was about a decade older than she was and definitely cute. Judging from the way the sleeves of his button-up shirt were rolled to reveal his strong forearms, she'd bet her last dollar, which was riding in Stedman's truck, that he'd been a businessman at one point.

The bartender stepped closer, the chains hooked on his stained jeans clanging ominously. He stroked his long beard in a leisurely fashion as he took her in, his demeanor meant to be intimidating. And totally working. He knew she didn't belong here—she didn't belong anywhere. Not even in her tight-knit family of four sisters.

The bartender was across from her now, fist nestled in his open palm. Fearing that she was about to get kicked out for not buying anything, Melanie spun on her stool to face the quiet man beside her. "Excuse me, do you have a phone?"

He nudged up the brim of his cap, then, as if realizing he was wearing it indoors, took it off and placed it over his right knee, perhaps so it wouldn't get sticky on the bar. His gentle gaze took her in. All the way from her silly shoes to the mess of curls hanging limply over her shoulders. "Yeah," he said slowly.

"Could I borrow it to make a call, please?"

The man patted his jeans pockets. "How do I know you aren't going to run off with it?"

"How fast can a woman run in heels?" she replied, as sweetly as her panic would allow. The bartender was pushing his fisted knuckles into his other palm now, biceps flexing. Really big biceps. Biceps that probably could lift her up and chuck her out the door from where he stood.

The quiet man gave her a crooked smile that caused her heart to stagger as he handed over his phone. "I'm sure I could outrun you."

"Thanks." Melanie tapped in Hailey's number with shaking hands. No answer. She tried her other two sisters, as well as their family friend, Simone, leaving messages with all of them. Sighing, Melanie handed the phone back, her eyes darting to the bartender, who had moved back to chat with the bikers, even though he kept one eye on her.

"Car break down?" the man asked, pocketing the device.

"Something like that."

He took a slow sip of his drink and watched her.

"Okay, fine. My date dumped me here when I wouldn't have sex with him behind the motel next door. I didn't get a chance to grab my purse and phone out of his truck."

The man's eyebrows rose ever so slightly and he quietly set down his drink, blinking once. "Well. That wasn't very gentlemanly."

"Last time I try online dating. 'Down-to-earth, back-to-the-basics' apparently means 'entitled you-know-what who demands intimacy on the first date.'"

The corner of the man's lips twitched and his fingers grew tight around his pint of beer. He cast a glance around the room, sitting taller as though on the lookout for trouble. "I apologize on behalf of mankind," he said finally, resting his gaze back on her.

"No need. That was officially my last date. I'm turning in my dance card. Tomorrow I will be going to the SPCA to pick up my ten cats. They come free when you take the vow of spinsterhood. For each year you keep the vow you get an extra cat. It's a pretty good deal when you think about it."

The man let out a surprised bark of laughter.

She turned to him, putting on a prim act. "What? I will make a fine cat lady."

His lips twitched again and his eyes glimmered with humor.

Melanie relaxed, propping an elbow on the sticky bar. "You look familiar."

He focused on his beer, the quiet, closed look returning. She tapped the bar with a fingernail as she ran through the list of possibilities of where she might have seen his cute chin and slightly shaggy haircut. "It was a photo! Did Hailey—she's my sister—photograph you? No, newspaper. That's it. I've seen you in the newspaper. *Bracebridge Examiner*."

The man adjusted his position, angling his shoulders away from her. "I'd offer you a ride, but I'm waiting for a tow truck."

"Flat tire?"

He gave a short nod.

"You're sure that's the only thing wrong with that old beast? It looks like something Henry Ford may have personally christened."

Her companion gave her a half smile of acknowledgment, his shoulders slowly relaxing.

"I like it," she said. "The truck."

He shifted back her way. Progress. She'd win a ride from him yet. She was good with people, and as like everything else in her life at the moment, she just needed a little more time.

"I like things that have a bit of character as well as a story," she said, edging closer. Not into his space, but enough to let him know she was comfortable around him. "Older stuff that's not all perfect and glossed up. You can tell it's had a life. Adventure. Character. Embraced, not hidden." She leaned her head toward his, as though confiding a secret, pleased when he echoed her posture. "And that truck has character in spades." Melanie straightened and slapped the bar with her right hand. "Tristen Bell! That's who you are."

"Bingo. You won the toaster." Tristen hunched over his beer, something she couldn't identify masking his earlier interest. He was cute, if slightly distant. He had a certain something that intrigued her, and a way of looking at her that made her feel *seen*. It was silly, but if he kept playing his cards right and he wasn't careful, she just might develop a little bit of a crush on him.

"You retired or something," she continued. "Although you look pretty young for that." He couldn't be an hour over forty. Although the well-washed shirt, casually rumpled hair and strong cords of muscles lining his forearms could make the former real estate mogul appear younger than he was. But still, nowhere near retirement age. Even his truck had to have a few decades on him.

Yep. Definitely crush-worthy.

According to Maya's fiancé, Connor, his friend Tristen Bell had made billions with his land development company and was one of Muskoka's most eligible bachelors, even though he had practically turned anti-social after his divorce. No arm candy. No long string of babes trailing in his wake.

Melanie held in a sigh. Yep. She could feel a crush coming on like a big ol' head cold—despite her vow to stay away from men and the world of dating.

"Not truly retired. I still sell a bit of real estate," Tristen said, his shoulders hunched defensively.

"My sisters and I are wondering how to stop a major development."

Tristen stood before she could say more. "I think I'd better wait outside for the tow truck."

The bartender, who had been chatting with the bikers, shot a glance Melanie's way, head tipped back in scrutiny. Was he checking to see if she was okay, or was he making sure she wasn't stealing his ratty cardboard coasters? She spun off her stool and followed Tristen outside.

Earlier, it had been difficult to imagine him sitting at home, alone, with those sexy forearms and broad shoulders. But the way he played hot and cold could definitely explain why he was single. Then again, that kind of behavior in men wasn't exactly atypical. Guys drooled over her sister Maya, but Melanie? Not so much. They usually got that distant, slightly constipated look and pulled back if she tried turning on the charm.

Nothing new, so why take it personally?

The sun struck her with its heat as she stumbled onto the wooden porch.

A hand steadied her with reassuring strength.

Swoon. Earlier, she'd had to resist the urge to touch the bare skin that stretched over the muscles flexing below Tristen's rolled-up cuffs. She'd always been a sucker for strong arms. Something about a man being able to lift her without grunting and straining had always been a turn-on. And now him steadying her? Goodness, she was crushing. Big time. And totally struggling to keep from stroking his arms.

"Thanks."

He gave her a small nod of acknowledgment.

She pointed to the old truck. "Shall we fix it?" Anything to get out of here and avoid walking home along the highway in her heels.

"The lug nuts are rusted up. Can't turn them."

Melanie stared at the old truck's wheels, then at Tristen's strong, yummy build. "I have an idea."

He glanced at her dress and winced. "I'm not sure I like ideas."

What was that supposed to mean?

"You'll like this one. Trust me." She climbed up the bar's steps again, Guns and Roses now blasting. The bartender was absent and Melanie glanced around before making her way back to her vacated seat, where she leaned over the bar and swept up a handful of lemon wedges. She could be debarred for stealing. Did this count as theft? She certainly hadn't paid for them. Turning to go with her pilfered fruit, she paused for a half second. The biker with the massive beard was staring at her as though he knew her. She gave him a weak smile and hurried back outside.

"You're going to turn lemons into lemonade?" Tristen asked.

"Something like that. First, here's the deal."

He crossed his arms and leaned against the truck's back fender. "I'm not interested in marriage."

She choked on her laughter.

"What?" His brow furrowed in displeasure.

"Do I look like I'm trolling for a husband?" She fluffed out her skirt. "Okay, yeah, maybe a bit, but I don't usually dress like this. I'm more of a T-shirt and jeans kind of gal."

"That's too bad. The look suits you. You have nice legs."

Melanie struggled to accept the compliment, but found she couldn't, given the lump in her throat. She was a Sasquatch. Always had been, since the puberty fairy had sprinkled her with that evil, magical dust.

Tristen didn't seem to be walking with the aid of a white cane, so why the false compliments?

"I already turned down one offer this afternoon, I'll turn down another." She widened her stance. "Forcibly if need be."

A hint of color tinged Tristen's cheeks. "That was a compliment. Ever get any of those, or does your quick offense usually cut them off?"

She narrowed her eyes.

"You are beautiful, you know. And just for the record, women are supposed to lap up compliments."

"I'm not a kitten at the milk bowl." Melanie turned away. "All I want is a ride after I fix your truck."

"Deal."

She stole another quick glance at him. He was still in that sexy pose, arms crossed, one ankle hooked over the other, and watching her as though trying to figure her out.

Desperate to put them on friendly terms again, she took the hand that wasn't cupping the lemons and ran it over the truck's curved hood. It was a classic 1960s Ford, with an almost vertical windshield. Not something she'd expect a man with supposed billions in his bank account to be driving. "How did you end up with a vehicle like this?"

"I needed a truck during renovations and my neighbor had one for sale."

"I thought you had someone else do those for you?" That's what the article had said.

His shoulders tightened as he straightened up again, and his voice became formal, businesslike. "I'm at a disadvantage." He met her eyes, slow and sure as he shook her hand. "I have the honor of meeting?"

"Melanie Summer." She straightened her spine, tugging her hand from his grip. The way he'd held it, focusing all his attention on her after complimenting her, was doing strange things to her mind and

body. If she didn't know better, she'd think she'd sped straight from a developing crush to full on, unabridged lust.

She obviously needed to get out more.

"No relation to Daphne Summer, by chance?"

Melanie held in her smile. Oh, boy. He was a real estate developer. Of course he knew her youngest sister. He'd probably met her head-on, seeing as she was responsible for almost every protest against local land developments over the past few years. And there had been plenty.

Melanie tipped up her chin. "She's my kid sister."

"I have one of her paintings in my living room."

Melanie forced her gaping jaw shut. "Her paintings?" Lately, Daphne had started selling her artwork at local farmers markets to help foot her portion of the family's overdue tax bill on their century-old cottage. First Maya's fianc  had ended up with one of Daphne's paintings, and now Tristen, too? This was getting weird. Although the two men *were* friends. Maybe it was a guy thing to shop for artwork together.

"What?" Tristen gave her a puzzled smile, his eyebrows wrinkling in an endearing way that made Melanie want to run a finger over them to see if they'd smooth out. "It caught my eye. A man can buy things without it becoming a big deal, you know."

Wow. Defensive. The ex-wife had obviously helped provide him with a little touch-and-go baggage before they split up.

He apologized under his breath.

"Well, how about that?" Melanie teased. "You have taste."

"Mentioning your beauty earlier doesn't prove that?" A hint of mischief flickered in his gaze and she crossed her arms over her chest, then remembered the lemons still in her left hand. All right, no more flirty games. She needed to get them out of here.

"Okay. The deal is, if I fix your tire you'll give me a ride to Port Carling. Will you do that?"

"How terribly convenient." Tristen resumed his casual stance, sizing her up in a way that she figured she wasn't supposed to notice. "I'm heading that way myself."

"Don't you live there?" she asked, tired of the games.

"Stalking me, Ms. Summer?"

"Newspapers." She bit back a dig about keeping track of the snippy billionaires who might be in her neighborhood.

"Don't believe everything they tell you."

"So then you're not divorced and hiding out in a cottage that you made into a year-rounder?" So much for keeping her digs to herself.

Tristen's face lost its playful expression. "Are you going to fix my truck or do I need to send you back into that bar, where the bikers can continue to undress you with their eyes? Because as much as you get under my skin, Melanie Summer, I'd like to think I'm gentleman enough to help a woman in distress. However, you are making that rather difficult."

Melanie sucked on one of the lemon wedges. "You don't believe I can do this."

Tristen waved a hand at the flat tire. "Be my guest, lemon gal."

"Watch and learn." She held the lemons over the lug nuts and squeezed, letting the juice run between them and the rim, hoping the acidic liquid would break the rust's bond. Moments later she licked her fingers and placed the lemon rinds in Tristen's hand. With a smile, she turned and walked over to the pile of scrap metal in the weedy yard next door, hoping she'd find what she needed and wouldn't end up looking like a fool.

She could feel Tristen watching as she poked through the scrap until she came across what she was looking for. She hefted the two-and-a-half-foot-long pipe and walked back to the truck.

"You're not going to whack me with that, are you?" he asked, pretending to cower. "I swear I'll never compliment you again."

She rolled her eyes. "Hand me the wrench, please."

After whacking the lug nuts with the pipe to loosen anything she could, she fitted the X-shaped wrench over the first nut, then slipped the pipe over the wrench's handle to give her more leverage. Praying the lemon juice had loosened the rust, she carefully applied her weight to the wrench and pipe extension, shifting her feet to add more pressure. Son of a gun. That really was stuck fast.

"Troubles?" Tristen asked, his lips curving into a perfect grin, exposing a fine line of white teeth.

Without a word, Melanie smiled back and turned to sit on the pipe, holding tight while she bounced up and down, hoping to budge the nut. There was one thing a gal learned growing up in a household of women, and that was how to get creative in solving problems when there wasn't a lot of cash around. Not that she was stellar at it, but still. She could hold her own. Usually.

Sweat gathered on her brow when the bikers came out onto the sloped porch to have a cigarette while leaning over the railing to enjoy the show she was putting on. Another unsuccessful bounce. Tristen glanced toward the road as if hoping for the tow truck.

Melanie bounced harder, giving the pipe and wrench a sudden jolt. The rust cracked and the nut turned, dumping her in a heap on the gravel.

Tristen was at her side in a flash, cupping her elbow as he helped her up. "You okay?"

"Fine." She brushed off her skirt and smiled brightly. "One down. Four more to go."

The bikers chuckled, taking leisurely drags on their cigarettes. Melanie refrained from mentioning that they needed to maintain a nine

meter radius from the building's entrance to be compliant with the Smoke Free Ontario Act, and set about fitting the wrench over the next nut. Tristen handed her the pipe, which had slid off during her spill, but he refused to let go. She pressed her body close to his to show she wasn't intimidated. "What?"

"Need help?"

"I'll finish the job, thanks."

She repeated her earlier actions—without being dumped on the ground—and the bikers cheered with each freed nut. Melanie curtsied for her audience when the new tire was finally in place, and thanked her lucky stars that her idea had worked. She was hot and dusty, but pleased.

"A round of whiskey for the pretty lady," one biker hollered.

"I think you're one of them now," Tristen whispered. Melanie watched as he put the wrench and jack away. "You want to go in," he noted in surprise.

She shrugged. She kind of did, and not just because she was thirsty.

"I can wait to drive you home, if you want." His voice was gentle, caring. Almost big-brotherly. But it wasn't fully platonic; there was a certain possessiveness in the way he held himself. Closer than a brother would stand. He watched her for a moment, maintaining eye contact long enough that she thought he might actually be interested. And not just in her safety.

"Better cancel that tow truck." Melanie slipped past him, hoping the free drinks would cure her hands of their Tristen-induced palsy.



Wow. The biker had been serious about providing a whiskey for her troubles. She finished the drink quickly, happy to see it was curing her

trembling hands. But just as she pried her elbows off the sticky bar to excuse herself, the second biker, the man with the long, tangled beard, stepped up with another. He took the free spot beside her, which had been vacated by his buddy, Kane.

Seated on her other side, Tristen bristled. So far he had remained silent, avoiding the revelry, but now he laid a gentle hand on her arm. "Are you ready to go?"

Of course she wasn't. She had male attention, and the bikers were buying her drinks. She was the only game in town and she'd judged these men wrongly. She had to make it up to them by absorbing their surprisingly kind, almost fatherly tributes. It was a sensation she hadn't felt in over a decade, and it was good. Really good.

"To think. With a few wedges of lemon she could do what that man with the big arms couldn't," laughed Kane, nodding at Tristen, who inhaled slowly, his grip tightening around his truck keys.

The bartender leaned over the bar, palm outstretched to Melanie. "I think you owe me some lemon wedges, miss."

All eyes turned to her. She had relayed her story of her date abandoning her, drawing a subtly aghast response from her audience. Everyone knew she had no money on her.

Tristen shifted, leaning to one side to get the wallet out of his back pocket.

"He's kidding," she said lightly, hoping she was correct. Tristen smoothed a five dollar bill on the bar as the others broke into guffaws.

"Just trying to help," he muttered. "Can we go now?"

Melanie bumped her shoulder against his, the two shots warming her gut. "Aw, it's okay. They're just giving me a hard time. Thanks, though. I appreciate it." She met his eyes and smiled, reaching over to give his chin a gentle squeeze.

The bikers began discussing engine repairs, and Melanie hoped they wouldn't ask her to fix something. While she'd been driving a motorcycle for the past few months as a way to save money, it would be a stretch to say she knew much about them.

"Sure can hold a drink," Ezra, the bearded biker, remarked as he purchased another round. His silver skull rings shone in the light as he slid a glass her way.

"Don't ask me to walk a line!" Melanie said, raising her third whiskey in the air. The men lifted theirs in turn, with crooked grins. "I hope nobody is driving." She let out a giggle. They were in the middle of nowhere on an old Ontario backwoods highway. Of course they were driving.

"Order of rings, Scar," Ezra said, and the bartender disappeared into the back room.

"Why do you call him Scar?" She hadn't noticed any marks on the man's smooth olive skin.

"*The Lion King* is his favorite movie. He likes to think he's tough, so we call him Scar, after Simba's evil uncle."

"No scars?"

"Only of the emotional variety," snorted Kane, his eyes slitted in a glare that didn't match his tone. Bikers were a strange lot. All kittens on the inside.

Melanie placed her empty glass on the bar.

"Ready?" asked Tristen.

She wanted to tell him to take a chill pill. But seeing as he was the only one in the bar not drunk, since he'd declined every offered shot, and the only one who had offered her a ride—not that she didn't think she could snag a weaving, incredibly fast and blurry lift back to town on the back of a Harley—he was her safest bet at the moment.

And safety was her middle name. Melanie Safety Summer. Had a certain ring to it, didn't it?

"This was a wonderful way to top off my afternoon, boys," Melanie said, wondering if it was wise to call bikers "boys." If she wasn't careful she might hit a hot button and break the little bubble of harmony that made her feel she was one of them, and end up with an angry duo on her tail. And she really didn't think Tristen's old truck could outrace or outlast these bikers and their hogs. "I enjoyed talking to you."

"What do you do for a living, Melanie?" asked Ezra, turning to face her. His eyebrows were as out of control as his beard, practically hiding his eyes as he lowered them to peer at her.

Ezra wasn't fierce—he was shy! That was so incredibly sweet.

"I'm a lawyer," she said, trying to own the fact, but knowing that it likely wasn't a favored occupation here in the Steel Barrel. Or anywhere on planet earth.

"I knew you were a smart one!" called Kane, slapping his buddy on the back so hard that Ezra turned to glare at him, fist raised. "Didn't I say she was smart?"

"Anyone who uses lemons to save a man like Mr. City here is smart, you dimwit," Ezra growled.

There was a muscle flickering in Tristen's jaw.

"Aw, come on, guys," Melanie said with a laugh. "He's lived out here for a few years. He barely even looks like a city slicker now."

They all stared at Tristen, who sat up taller, straighter. Okay, so maybe the neatly rolled up sleeves of his shirt kind of said "city." That and his current posture.

"Okay then? So? Anyone have a good story to share?" Melanie asked, breaking the silence. They couldn't leave on that note.

Ezra turned his crystalline eyes to her, his bushy brows low again, his voice quiet. "You a divorce lawyer?"

"Aw." She gave him a light nudge with her elbow. "Hung out with me for less than an hour and already looking to ditch the old lady?" The whiskey was loosening her tongue.

Tristen's fingers tightened around her elbow. Time to go, yeah. Not a bad idea. Melanie glanced at Ezra, but instead of murdering her and tossing her body in the bush out back, he let out a good-natured laugh, then gave her chin a none-too-gentle chuck with his fist.

Okay, he needed to stop wearing so many funky rings if he planned to do that to townies.

Tristen edged closer.

"Ezra here's an accountant," Kane said. Melanie tried to mask her surprise. "But he can't figure a way to leave the marriage with his nuts intact."

Tristen muttered, "Good luck, pal."

"What was that?" Ezra leaned across Melanie, his odor surprisingly fresh and clean, which was nice after all that whiskey and the heat. She wasn't sure she'd be able to handle the smell of greasy hair and BO. He dropped his cocktail napkin, which he'd neatly folded into a square.

"The woman always wins, so why waste your time and energy fighting her?" Tristen muttered. "Just roll over and play dead."

"Not my style." Ezra gave him a hard look, but Tristen surprised Melanie by holding his ground and making the biker break eye contact first. Tristen's fingers closed into a fist and she feared he must be battling something big inside, and for her sake, holding on to a very short and slippery rein.

She turned back to Ezra, blocking his view of Mr. About to Blow His Top. "Come by the office and we'll get you sorted out. Main Street, Bracebridge." Melanie slid off her stool, the floor seeming incredibly far away from her feet. They hit after at least a foot or two of free fall she hadn't expected, and she stumbled slightly, Ezra and Tristen steadying

her at the same moment. A possessive charge crackled between the two and Melanie finally got why women went to the bother of getting dressed up.

She might just become a dress gal, after all.

"Thank you. It was fun meeting you," she said to the bikers. "Say goodbye to Scar for me."

"Come back again, Lemonade." Kane winked.

"You ride?" Ezra called to her as she headed out.

"I have a bike, but it's not I'm not "

"What kind?"

"A Suzuki."

"What model?"

"Inazuma 250." It wasn't the fanciest bike on the market, but it was affordable and economical.

Ezra nodded, his fingers tangling in his long beard as he assessed her—mostly her legs, she noted. "A gal like you wouldn't have issues with the seat height, and it's nice and light. Good fit."

"I like it."

"Come ride with us sometime."

"Right. That would be nice."

She swallowed her apprehension as Tristen gripped her elbow and steered her out of the bar.

"They are so sweet!" she said as they trundled down the steps. The heat of the day was oppressing as ever, but the intensity of the sun had dropped a notch. They must have been in there longer than she'd thought. "Unexpected fun. My favorite."

"You're drunk. That was not fun," he grumbled, strong-arming her forward.

"Think he'll stop by for divorce help?" she asked as she missed the last step, doing a funny leg bend that would have deposited her on her

butt if Tristen hadn't been there to catch her. Sweet, sweet-smelling Tristen.

"You smell good. So did Ezra, actually. I didn't expect that. What kind of shampoo do you use? Does it have ylang-ylang in it? I like saying that. It's a fun word. At first I thought it was a joke, you know? But it's real. A tree with pretty flowers."

Tristen gazed at her steadily, still holding her shoulders as though he wasn't sure she'd remain standing if he let go. "I can't believe you drank that much whiskey. Straight."

"I made it through law school, didn't I?" She let out a giggle. "Can we sit down now? My legs feel funny. And I'm hungry. We should have waited for the onion wings—rings. Wings would be something. Flying onions. Isn't that the name of a restaurant?"

Tristen gave her a look she couldn't decipher, and shook his head, helping her into his truck like a perfect, sweet-smelling, gentlemanly hero.

He was already her favorite.

Tristen had never met a woman quite like the one sitting in the passenger seat of his beater, and he'd met plenty of interesting and unpredictable people in his thirty-seven years of life. However, it seemed as though he still had plenty to learn about the fairer sex. And Melanie Summer, in her eye-catching dress, who had figured out how to defeat an ancient, rusted-up lug nut with nothing more than lemons and a decent knowledge of physics, was sure to be another puzzle he'd never sort out.

Add in the way she'd won over the bikers? Unprecedented. If they'd both broken out into song and asked her to give them a makeover, he swore he wouldn't have blinked in surprise.

There was something magical about Melanie. At first he'd felt the need to protect her—she was an abandoned woman in a rough area and he'd been raised right. But the more he got to know her, the more his need to protect had morphed into something more innate and primal. For the life of him, he couldn't figure out what had changed, or why he feared if he let her out of his sight something would happen to her. Or that he would miss one of her unexpected quirks that would make him smile.

The woman in question shifted in her seat as they rolled into the village of Port Carling. "Can I buy you a drink to thank you for your rescue services?" She asked the question so casually it was as though she was already expecting the rejection he had begun to plot.

"I think you rescued me," he replied, trying to figure out her sudden lack of bravado.

Melanie's voice quivered slightly, her hands a tangle in her lap. "I was so sure Scar was going to throw me to the hordes, and my family would never see me again." She gave a laugh that was too tight to hide the fact she wasn't joking. When she'd waltzed into the bar as though she owned it, he'd been dazzled by her confidence. She'd struck him as a woman who knew what she wanted. And yet here she was, acting scared.

Her hands relaxed as her dark, worried expression gave way to a sunny laugh. "Who knew they were such a nice bunch of guys? I feel so silly."

Tristen didn't think they were nice. The way the bearded one had kept eyeing her pale neck, well, he could have sworn the guy had been measuring it to see if his hands would fit around it. "Maybe stay away from them, just in case."

She laughed again, brushing him off. "You're so funny."

No, he wasn't. Not at all. "He was eyeing your neck, Melanie."

Tristen's hands shook on the steering wheel. Didn't she understand the way the world worked? The way bikers operated?

"He makes necklaces, Tristen. While you were canceling the tow truck he told me I inspired him. If I go to the farmers market in Bala next week he'll have a hematite and chain maille choker for me."

Choker. Man, she did not *get* it, did she? "Make sure you don't go off with those men alone."

"Yeah, sure. Of course." She waved a hand, dismissing his concerns as she mowed her way through his offered bag of beef jerky. The woman could eat, he'd give her that. But she was acting as though these men were just regular white-collar workers dressing up tough on weekends, not members of the Hells Angels. Not that he knew if they were gang members or not, but they probably were. Accountants did not look gnarly, and Ezra looked incredibly gnarly.

Tristen rubbed his forehead and focused on keeping his truck between the narrow painted lines as they wound through the hilly town. The tires hit a bump and the fieldstones he'd picked up earlier clattered and banged in the truck's box.

What was it about this woman that made him want to hide her away? Part of him said it was to keep her safe. The other part said he was afraid others would see just how delicate and wonderful she was, and take her away.

Hadn't he learned anything from his ex? He needed to stay as far from women as possible. At least until he figured out his crap.

"Where am I dropping you off?" he asked, his voice gruff.

There was a familiar look of disappointment in Melanie's eyes and he tried not to feel guilty for being relieved. Disappointed women didn't expect anything from him long-term, and didn't go looking to change his bachelor status and mend his heart, or whatever else seemed to crank their engines. Not that Melanie was the type to do that, especially since he hadn't exactly strutted his manly side so far today. She probably thought he was a joke.

In fact, he was a joke. She had been right about him hiding out in Muskoka for the past two years. Since his wife filed for divorce, to be precise. He'd run from Toronto like a dog with its tail between its legs, confused and wondering what planet he'd ended up on.

But he knew that an innocent thank-you supper with Melanie would turn into something bigger. She'd wowed and wooed the hardened hearts of bikers, so what chance did a man like him have? She was fatally tempting. Sexy. Demure.

"At the boutique up the hill past the locks," Melanie said. "I left my motorcycle there."

Tristen glanced at her bare legs. Motorcycle in a dress? Who in tarnation was this woman?

Who cared? He needed to ditch her. And fast. Being intrigued meant trouble. And where women were concerned, he'd had enough trouble to last him at least another decade.

"Yeah, I know," she said, catching his look. "Practicality is my latest middle name. It used to be Safety. I really can't decide between the two. I guess I should have introduced myself properly. I'm Melanie Practicality Summer." She put out her hand to shake his.

He gave her a look, keeping his hands on the wheel. She heaved a heavy sigh and fingered the hem of her skirt with slim, delicate fingers, inadvertently revealing more thigh. Then she leaned forward, her palm resting on the door handle, ready to exit even though he was still a ways from her stop. She was taking his lack of enthusiasm over a drink as a personal rejection.

Women. Damned if you do. Definitely damned if you shut them down.

He stopped outside a house that had been converted into a two-story clothing shop. "Thanks again," he said. "Appreciate it." He stared at the motorcycle. "Are you okay to drive?"

Who was he kidding? Of course she wasn't.

"The beef jerky helped. Thanks."

"You sure?"

"Yeah, it's not far."

"The greatest percentage of accidents occur less than five miles from home."

"A misleading statistic. Most of your driving happens there."

"I'll give you that one, but I still think I should give you a ride the rest of the way home."

Melanie swung the squeaking door open and paused, half in the truck, half out, the skirt of her dress bunching up behind her butt. "A friend thought maybe you could help me and my sisters with some development stuff in relation to our family cottage. Could I call you sometime?"

Aha. A rich chick with a cottage. That's what the bit of intrigue had been about, the missing piece of Melanie's puzzle: she was a rich chick trying to be someone without a trust fund for the afternoon.

Funny, but he'd pegged her as a local. Granted, there were a few locals with cottages, but really, it didn't matter, did it? He didn't need to get wrapped up in a high maintenance and dressed-to-kill babe like her. And it was a sure bet she was all of the above. In other words, danger with a capital *D*.

And developments? An emphatic, resounding no. Toronto would get the winter Olympics before he ever dug back into that mess and allowed it to take over his life, turning him into the monster he'd once been. Anything to win the deal. The side of himself he'd carefully and purposefully locked away. The beast would remain shackled until he was certain it had been slaughtered and couldn't achieve reincarnation. That meant Melanie Summer was not allowed anywhere near his life.

"So?" She gave him an expectant look. "Could you? Please? I could make you supper or walk your dog in return."

First Alice Estaire hadn't got the hint that he didn't need a woman in his life, and now this one. It had taken eight months of peeling Alice off his arm to discourage her. Sadly, she knew where he lived and had

“popped in” at strange times, hence him getting his early warning system installed. AKA Max.

But now Tristen had Melanie offering to walk his dog? Did it ever stop? What was with Muskoka women?

“The seat is covered in dog hair,” she said. “It was a joke. Quit freaking out.”

“I’m not freaking out.”

“I’m trying to say that I don’t expect you to give your time freely. I know you’re a busy man.” Her gaze ran down his worn shirt and jeans.

Ouch. That was a dig.

“What do you need, Melanie?” He winced. That sounded like a yes, didn’t it? His cell phone vibrated on the seat next to him and he flipped it over to check who was calling. His ex-wife, Cindy, a woman who had been purposefully and successfully avoiding him for five months.

“I need help with figuring out how to stop a development,” Melanie said.

“Not my thing.” He picked up the phone, waiting for her to be polite and excuse herself so he could take the call.

“I only have a few quick questions,” she blurted, sensing he was in the process of shutting her down. “Surely you know—”

“Sorry, I really have to take this. If I think of anyone who can help you, I’ll get in touch.” He reached across the seat and closed her door, leaving Melanie standing on the sidewalk, looking crushed.

Get over it, woman. I’m not your type. I’m old, jaded, and dealing with an ex-wife. You are young, smart, beautiful, and completely out of my league. Move along and, for the sake of mankind, don’t sway those gorgeously round hips of yours as you go.

He answered his phone, the corners of his lips turning up in a smile as Melanie unceremoniously shoved a helmet over her curly hair. All dolled up and ruining the look with headgear.

What was the expression? Brains before beauty? Seemed like a good idea when riding a crotch rocket. And though she was walking straight, he still didn't think she should be driving. He rolled down the window to call out to her while his ex-wife ranted in his ear. Holding his thumb over the phone's speaker, he leaned out the truck window. "Shouldn't you be wearing leathers with that dress? A dragonfly smacking into your arm would give you a bruise the size of a grapefruit."

"Are you listening to me?" asked his ex.

"Yeah, yeah, of course," he said into the phone.

Melanie whirled, sticking out her tongue before flipping down the helmet's visor. He laughed, feeling more alive than he had in ages.

Not good.

He popped his door, prepared to make her accept a ride the rest of the way home. Melanie pushed her bike onto the road, but began walking alongside it, the engine off.

"Let me give you a ride," he called from his seat. "Or push your bike. It looks heavy."

"I'm fine," she snapped back.

He found himself laughing again. Had he managed to get under her skin the way she'd gotten under his? And why did that feel so satisfying? So full of promise?

Meanwhile, his ex continued on about how she needed to get Dot, their seventeen-year-old daughter, out of the house for the next two weeks. Both he and Cindy had been pretty determined at that age, and had defied their parents by eloping on their shared birthday—the day they'd turned eighteen. While that hadn't worked out so well in the long run, with the exception of having their daughter, they'd had fun and lived life the way they'd wanted to. It didn't surprise Tristen that Dot seemed to have a similar streak burning through her veins.

"And you expect what is it, Cindy?" He paused as though thinking, before delivering the dig he knew would drive her around the ex-wife bend. "An absent, emotionally constipated man who is incapable of expressing love to somehow straighten out the daughter who knows me so little she bought me a tie for Father's Day?"

"At least she thought of you."

"I remembered her birthday this year, thank you very much."

Melanie gave him one last glance over her shoulder, through the visor, then tucked her skirt under her backside and plunked herself on her bike—a move he interpreted as the equivalent to "kiss my butt."

His heart caught in his throat, but she merely coasted down a driveway. Home.

He relaxed, smiling at the image of a gal in an old-fashioned dress on a bike giving him 'tude. How could she have possibly felt intimidated in the biker bar, especially when they'd all crowded around her like birds to a feeder? And why did Tristen want to get to know her better? His raving ex had taken him to the cleaners and he'd all but rolled over and told her to give it to him with steel-toed boots. And here he was

Stupid.

He'd promised he'd straighten himself out before dating again. Ruining one woman's life was one thing, but to knowingly do so to another was not something he could do and keep his head held high.

"Cindy, enough," he said, stopping his ex-wife mid-rant. He knew girls needed their fathers or at least a male role model, but he didn't figure his ex actually believed he could take Dot for that reason. Something else was up, and honestly, he didn't care what it was. "Send Dot. I'll straighten her out."

He'd figured out how to fix and build stone fireplaces and patios. Surely he could fix his little girl's world. And if he did manage to straighten out a teen he barely knew, then maybe he could start down

that lonely, dark path of finally becoming a decent man who didn't ruin the lives of others.



TRISTEN PULLED into his driveway just outside town, staring unseeing at the cottage he'd converted into a year-round home. He wrung the steering wheel of his old truck and sighed. Sunshine fell through the maples overhead, leaving dappled shadows on the faded hood. He'd set something in motion, answering his ex's call. Something he wasn't sure he was prepared for. But he'd been hiding out for two years and he supposed it was time to face snapshots of the man he used to be, and the consequences that had ensued. Including a daughter who failed to have a father figure in her life.

Tristen watched the shadows dance across the windshield, and sighing, slipped out of the truck, then made his way across the gravel driveway. He had a guest room to prepare and a stone wall project to put the finishing touches on over in Gravenhurst before Dot came in the morning. Neither tasks were huge, but he didn't have time to dawdle if he planned to download a book on how to parent a teen. Why did Cindy, who had been perfectly content to allow him visitation rights for only a handful of hours a year, suddenly want him to take Dot for two full weeks? Was she trying to get even for the times he'd left her to take care of their daughter while he worked twenty-hour days on an unexpected project?

He turned back to his truck, remembering to check on his spare. He smiled and shook his head. Melanie. What a gal. The tire was still holding air, which meant one less urgent thing to worry about. Bounding up the two steps, he opened the door and headed straight to his tablet.

As he searched for a book by that Dr. Spock guy he'd heard about, he let his massive Bernese mountain dog, Maxwell Richard III, out the back door. Discovering Dr. Spock seemed to think childhood ended years before Dot's current age, Tristen began browsing online stores for Max-sized dog doors that would let the dog come and go from the house as he wished.

No. No distractions. He had to face this. No resisting. This was important. Scary, but important. Sixteen hours, minus eating, sleeping and working, didn't give him a whole lot of time to bring himself up to speed on teen rearing. He checked for a "What to Expect" for parents of teens.

Nope. Apparently the first two years of parenting were *The Years*. If you didn't have the skills by the time your kid was two, you were, essentially, hooped.

He placed the tablet on the coffee table and rested his head in his hands, his fingers finding plenty of hair to dig through. He needed a haircut. Sliding the tablet closer, he opened a browser and typed "How to Raise a Teen."

Now he was getting somewhere. Plenty of results.

How to Cope When Your Teenager Suddenly Becomes the Scariest Person You've Ever Met: Puberty and the Teenaged Girl.

Yep. Screwed. How was he, a man who had left parenting to Cindy, going to father a hormonal, strong-willed young woman he didn't even begin to understand? He knew nothing about her. Nothing.

He moved to the kitchen and cracked open a beer, pouring it into a chilled glass.

In his mind, Dot was still the tiny baby who fit in his arms and had been named after his grandmother Dorothy. But Dot wasn't an infant any longer. She was a young woman struggling to discover her

sexuality. He hoped Cindy had all that stuff under control, because there was no way he was equipped to deal with it.

If not, maybe seventeen wasn't too old for summer camp.

Or a job. Perhaps he could find her a job. Possibly two or three, so he didn't have to worry about mood swings, boyfriends, curfews, or figuring out how ask her not to flush tampons into the septic system.

Tristen dropped his head into his hands again. How was he going to deal with this? How was he going to contain and care for a young woman who was on the brink of adulthood and independence? He hadn't even been able to keep Cindy happy, and she'd been a fairly stable adult. He'd messed up so badly the woman had thought he'd been avoiding her, while he'd spent years striving to build up their business—which was now all hers—so he could set them up for a fantastic early retirement. He'd worked long and hard to provide all the things he'd thought she wanted. And what did she do? Freak out and tell him he wasn't there for her, and that he was an awful human being.

His front door swung open, and relieved for any kind of distraction, Tristen waved his friend Connor MacKenzie in.

"Still engaged?" he asked.

"Still looking, but not seeking beautiful ladies?" his pal retorted, grinning like a fool as he sat down.

"Always looking. Gave a pretty one a ride home today."

"Did you now? I thought you looked more exhausted than usual." Connor peered about as if searching for a hidden woman.

Tristen frowned and idly flicked a fly away from his beer. Something about Connor and today was trying to connect in his mind.

"You look like you're trying to push out a porcupine. What's up?" his friend asked.

Tristen scowled and took a sip of his brew, then paused. "Sorry, did you want one?"

"Nope, still trying not to die. And now that I have a reason to live and a wedding coming at Christmas, I need to stay trim and in good shape." He patted his stomach. "Plus, I'm kind of enjoying this not-burned-out feeling."

"Told you you should try leaving the city," Tristen said with a wink. His friend had been out of the city for only two weeks and he already looked like a brand-new man. Tristen walked to the fridge and tossed Connor a bottle of water, the plastic misting with condensation almost immediately.

"Thanks. And if I remember correctly you did not tell me to leave the city."

Tristen leaned against the granite kitchen island. "So?" He waited for Connor to cut to the chase. His friend wanted something, but whether it was how to build a stone fireplace—a skill Tristen had acquired since moving here two years ago—or to borrow a million dollars, he didn't know.

Max nudged the patio door open and threw himself on the floor by the door where the breeze was the best, ignoring Connor. The next time Tristen got a dog, he was doing his research and getting a real guard dog. Something with fangs, or that barked when people popped by.

"I told you about how Maya and her sisters might lose their cottage?"

"Really?" Tristen straightened. "Why?"

"Back taxes."

"You're joking!" He'd met his buddy's fiancée only a couple times, but she didn't strike him as the kind of gal who would let something like paying her taxes slip for a few years.

"Nope. Some sort of thing about her older sister being in charge of the trust and not being able to take care of everything." Connor pushed a hand through his hair, then patted it flat. "I want to bail them out,

but they're pretty intent on doing it themselves. You know how women can be. But the tax sale is at the end of the month."

Tristen nodded, keeping his attention on his beer glass. "Going to buy it back for them?"

"Maya would kill me."

"Why not do it secretly?"

"Nothing ever stays a secret."

"True. Early wedding gift?" Things were clicking in Tristen's mind. "Maya has a couple of sisters, right?"

"Three. Hailey, Melanie, and Daphne."

"Son of a " Tristen's Friend-About-to-Ask-a-Big-Favor radar began blinking a warning. "You're here to try and drag me into that mess, aren't you?" He set down his drink. "You know I don't do development stuff any longer."

"Maya's already asked you?"

"Melanie." Tristen locked his jaw so he wouldn't say something that would make Connor an enemy.

"I didn't think you'd met," his friend said, leaning forward.

"We did. She asked me. I said no," he replied, trying not to snap.

"Oh." Connor took a long pull on the bottle of water, his eyes on Tristen. "Why?"

"I'm not asking you why you're not drinking the beer in my fridge, now am I?"

"That's different. I'm choosing a healthier lifestyle and am pretty up front about it." Connor stood. "You're hiding out."

Tristen dumped the rest of his beer, plunked the empty glass in the dishwasher, slamming it shut. It was one thing for him to know he was hiding out, quite another if others could see it. "It was nice visiting, but my daughter is coming tomorrow. I'm not interested in babysitting some women who don't pay their taxes."

"Whoa! Whoa!" Connor put out his hands out as though calming a spooked horse. "The taxes have nothing to do with this. They just need to pick someone's brain on how to stop a development that's infringing on the rights of others, that's all."

"All developments do that, and I don't have the time," Tristen said a little too tightly.

"It would mean a lot to me if you could point them in the right direction." Connor's voice was low, and Tristen could see the anger fizzling below his friend's calm surface. "This area is important to them, and with you living on the river you should care, too. The developers are going to be using this waterway to get to their fancy island resort. From construction through to the end of time. There's going to be an increase in river traffic. Right outside your door. You'd be wise to express interest in what they're trying to accomplish."

Tristen rolled his shoulders and pushed the heel of his hand against his chin, adjusting his neck. Connor was pushing his buttons, and he was certain his friend meant to. They'd done business back in Toronto and he knew Connor's game face. All Tristen had to do was allow Connor's arguments to spill off him and it would all go away. Shut up and stay out.

"The developer is going to destroy Muskoka's Heritage Row and quite possibly, the surrounding environment."

Heritage Row, a strip of four old cottages, was picturesque, quintessential cottage country. In other words, this battle was likely to get messy. Definitely be wise to stay far away from it.

"Sorry, man, my daughter needs me." Tristen's eyes caught the large sunflower painting across the room. Daphne Summer. Melanie's sister. He was going to have to move the painting to somewhere he rarely saw it, judging from the amount of emotions whirling through him right now.

Melanie was in trouble. She needed his help.

"You sure your kid needs you 24-7? Isn't she out chasing boys by now?"

Tristen guided his friend to the door. "Don't poke at me, Connor. This is my chance to make things right with Dot." He lightened his tone, struggling not to let his emotions get the better of him. "Maybe she'll get me a rock identification guide for Christmas instead of cuff links. I don't want to wreck my chances of that."

"I'll buy you the guide. They need you. The developer is Rubicore."

Tristen clenched his fist. Aaron Bloomwood was part owner and their front man. The two of them had gone head to head in many fights back in the day. Each time, Tristen had won—by the skin of his teeth—and only because he'd had a reputation, and a large corporation backing him. Now? He had nothing. He was a nobody. He didn't even have the determined beast that used to run the show, because that side of him was not coming out to play. Ever. Again.

"Aaron Bloomwood still trying to make a name for himself?" he asked despite himself.

Connor nodded.

Tristen slowly shook his head. Definitely no way he could help out. Aaron brought out the beast in no time flat. With a fight like the one the Summers were gearing up for, you had to be all in. And the one thing Tristen had promised himself when he'd fled Toronto was that he would never do that again. Not for anything.

"You're out, aren't you?" Connor asked.

Tristen thought of the beautiful woman on a motorcycle and how she was in over her head. She needed his help. She wasn't a trust fund baby as he'd thought. She was just some gal trying to keep something in the family. Trying to keep it together—something he understood all too well.

"I'll think about it, but my answer, for the record, is still no."

Melanie bunched the handmade dress into a ball and whipped it into the corner of her basement bedroom, thankful Daphne and her daughter weren't home to witness her mini freak-out. Sucking in a deep breath, she smoothed the worn XXL T-shirt over her ribs, wishing, not for the first time, that she had a willowy frame like her older sister Hailey. But no, puberty had decided to give her melon-sized breasts and a massive growth spurt that had earned her the nickname Sasquatch from her first boyfriend, Lix Levenson.

For what it was worth, she'd tried putting herself out there in hopes of discovering what was missing in her life, but she'd failed. There had been no sudden finding her place in the world, no sudden sprouting of confidence, no sudden sensation of feeling comfortable in her body. She kicked the dress farther into the corner for good measure and yanked her hair into a sloppy bun. What a goof she'd been to believe it was possible. And to think, after leaving the Steel Barrel, she'd been ready to ask Simone, the dress's designer, to make her a closetful of them. But now, no way.

Melanie hadn't been seeking humiliation but that's what had been served up cold. Today she had been nothing more than a dressed-up version of the self she was trying to avoid. Evidence for the jury:

Stedman had left her by the road; Tristen wouldn't accept a drink or meal or let her pick his brain, and had practically run away from her. She'd always prided herself on her connection skills when it came to people, but when it came to men

Sure, the bikers seemed to have been smitten by her and her dress, and as kind as they were, they weren't the type of men looking to do marriage and kids with a lawyer.

Her life was in free fall. Not only had her landlord kicked her out of the rental she'd shared with her friend Nora so he could sell it, but Melanie was now depending on her baby sister to keep a roof over her head. At least she and Daphne could split the rent, and maybe somehow save up enough money for their portion of the cottage's overdue tax bill—even if it meant living in the unfinished basement and keeping her antique teacups in a cardboard box. Eventually, Melanie would have her student loans paid off and would be making more than the pittance that trickled into her bank account. As a first-year lawyer she was optimistic about having her financial life pull together, but that day had yet to dawn. Kind of like the one where her love life began to emulate something other than a horror flick.

She stomped up the stairs to the main floor of the tiny Cape Cod style home and just about bowled Daphne over.

"You're home!" she said to her sister.

"How was your date?"

"Where's Tigger?"

"Wow." Daphne waved a hand in front of her nose. "What were you drinking?"

"Whiskey."

Melanie ducked so she didn't have to catch Daphne's chiding look, and grabbed her five-year-old niece, who had bounded over, her ever-present party dress flouncing against her scab-covered knees.

"How's riding a two-wheeler?" Melanie asked, setting her down after a ginormous hug.

Tigger scrunched her nose. "It's hard." She tugged on her mother's hand, dragging her shoulder down. "Can I have ice cream? *Please?*"

"No sugar until after supper. If you're hungry, have an apple."

"I don't want an apple."

"Then you're not that hungry. Go play."

"It's hot out."

"Then play inside." Daphne turned to Melanie. "How was the date?"

Someone banged on the front door and Melanie took the opportunity to escape her sister's questions. She glowered out the peephole and swung the door open. "Go away!" she snapped at Stedman.

"I wanted to apologize." He offered her red clutch as though it was a bouquet of flowers.

Melanie snatched the bag. "Apologize for leaving me on the side of the road outside a biker bar? Or for lacking the ability to comprehend that no means no?"

She could hear Daphne shuffling in the room behind her, likely unable to avoid eavesdropping due to the house's small size. And while Melanie enjoyed being able to hear her sister read Tigger bedtime stories each evening, from her spot in the basement, this wasn't a conversation she particularly wanted to broadcast—especially since she might say something Tigger would end up repeating at an inopportune time.

Stedman tossed his head, sandy curls sweeping off his forehead. "Yeah, that."

"Which thing are you apologizing for, exactly?"

"Um, both?"

"Thank you for bringing back my purse." She began closing the door on him. "Wait. How did you know where I live?" She'd intentionally met him outside Simone's boutique instead of having him pick her up. Online

dating and all that. Although getting into his truck likely hadn't earned a high score on the "how to be careful on your first date" rating scale.

Stedman shot her an impish smile and she slammed the door, flicking the dead bolt into place. Men.

Where was that ice cream Tigger was asking for? Would Melanie be a bad aunt if she sat down at the kitchen table and ate it all? Out of sight, out of temptation?

Her purse began ringing and she dug through it for her phone.

It was her sister Maya.

"Hey," Melanie said. "What's up?"

"Connor just talked to Tristen Bell."

Had Connor been able to sweet-talk Tristen? It wouldn't be a hardship to spend more time around that man and his beefy biceps despite his hot-and-cold persona. Plus, the sisters could definitely use his expertise.

"He's out."

Melanie sighed, feeling let down all over again. "I figured as much."

"I thought he'd say yes to Connor. Being old pals and all."

That was the problem with billionaires. They always stuck to themselves and never felt the need to help the little guy. He might even own shares in Rubicore for all she knew.

"We'll find someone," Maya said. "You're good at talking to people and connecting and all that. Connor says to watch Rubicore carefully in case they take shortcuts."

Melanie made a noncommittal sound.

"Dang." Her sister laughed. "From what Connor's said about Tristen I figured the two of you would make a great pair."

In bed.

Whoa, where did that thought come from?

"Mel? Still there?"

"Yeah. Right, um, I'll think on it, okay?"

"Do you have your cottage money yet?"

"Almost." Almost being pretty darn far from pulling her share out of the sky. One month until the century-old cottage was whisked away from their possession if things didn't change. "Have you got yours?"

"I'm trying to convince Connor to give me a finder's fee for that dental device we're investing in, but he's being difficult."

"Tell him it's for the cottage and I'm sure he'll agree to give it to you."

"I want him to give it to me because he feels I deserve it, you know?"

"Then set up a finder's fee for the next investment. You have a month. Not a lot of time, but how long did the last one take you? A few weeks at best."

"Hmm. I wonder."

Melanie could practically hear Maya pondering an idea, weighing it for potential.

"All right. I'm on it. Thanks, Smelly Mellie."

"Pushy broad."

Maya laughed and hung up on her. Shaking her head, Melanie dug through the kitchen freezer. She jumped when Daphne appeared at her side, all petite and pretty in her flowing cotton dress. A mere woodland nymph compared to her. It made Melanie want to sit down so she didn't feel like Gigantor.

"Was that your date? Stedman?"

"Maya." Melanie closed the freezer, deciding against the ice cream. No need to add to the massive boobage. Maybe Maya would be up for meeting for drinks somewhere instead. That always seemed to go to her waist, which was easier to disguise due to said boobage. Comfort food of

the liquid variety. Plus, hanging out with Maya, the lucky duck, might allow some of her fabulous dating and career luck to rub off on Melanie.

In her dreams.

"I mean at the door," Daphne clarified.

"Yeah. Forgot my purse in his truck."

"The date was that good?" The hope in Daphne's eyes was disgusting. Disgusting because Melanie had wanted it, too.

"No. It sucked. How was your day?"

"Great." Her sister's face lost its usual sunniness. "Well, except I got another notice about the tax sale. Registered letter." She grabbed an envelope from a large bowl and handed it over.

Melanie scanned it, then said, "Nothing we didn't already know. Just another warning. It's procedural. Covering their butts and all that."

Daphne sat, her elbow anchored on the kitchen table in order to hold up her head of crazy, light brown curls. "Maybe we should stay out at Nymph Island to allow destiny to give us a real shot."

Tempting. The family lore said the island was enchanted. Or at least it was good at hooking up female members of the Summer family. Their great-grandmother, grandmother, mother, and now Hailey and Maya had fallen in love while spending time out at the ancient cottage. Plus, the two eldest sisters had had their careers take off in the last month. Even for a logical-minded lawyer, those facts were hard to discount.

But if the two youngest Summers—Melanie and Daphne—couldn't cover their portions of the cottage's back taxes, their family was going to lose the place.

"So? Nymph Island?" Daphne asked, pulling Melanie from her thoughts.

"Yay! Let's go to the cottage!" Tigger crawled out from the cupboard under the sink, where, evidently, she had been playing hide-and-seek

alone. "Wait!" She held out her hands, feet planted far apart. "I have to get my fairy box."

"I don't think we're going right now," Melanie said slowly.

"Well, I think we should," Daphne said decisively. "Use it while we have it. Do you have any dinner plans?"

Melanie shook her head.

"Then let's go. We can pick up a lumberjack sandwich on our way out. Instant picnic for six dollars. What do you say?"

Six dollars wasn't going to make or break them.

Tigger clasped her fingers together under her chin and batted her eyes at her aunt. Melanie laughed and threw up her hands. She could never resist her niece, who was a bright ray in her days. Every emotion that ran through that child was pure and real. She was the one true thing in Melanie's life. "Fine," she declared.

The girl was out of the room, nothing more than a flash of party dress, eager to collect her box of small treasures intended for the fairy houses she built on Nymph Island.

Melanie picked up her purse. "I met Tristen Bell today." Her body had a mini battle with itself over Tristen's confusing appeal and sudden, sharp rejection.

Daphne's face brightened expectantly as she waited at the door for Tigger to catch up with them.

"Maya says he won't help with Rubicore—and he said the same to me."

"Oh, well." Daphne didn't seem particularly perturbed. She jingled her van keys as Tigger raced by, fairy box cradled against her chest.

Melanie paused to watch Daphne climb into the unlocked Dodge Caravan. She couldn't quite put her finger on her sister's cavalier mood. Usually she was all over developers.

"Don't you lock your van?" she asked as she got in beside her, noting that all the windows were down.

"Nah. It gives me a sense of adventure, never knowing if there is an ax murderer hiding in the backseat." Daphne let out a burst of laughter, shaking the vehicle with the sound.

"I'm not an ax murderer," Tigger stated darkly, and her mom laughed again.

"Right you are!" Backing into the street, she said to Melanie, "Did you hear? A few local environmental agencies are swinging their weight to protect the spotted turtle habitat Finian found near Bala and not only is there a private firm acting like they want to hire me, but Environment Canada is, too."

"That would be amazing." Maybe that was why Daphne was in such a strange mood. Her sister had always shunned the idea of a something as rigid as a nine-to-five desk job—and especially for the government—but as a single mom, the prospect of decent pay, benefits, a pension as well as paid holidays might just be too darn tempting. Something like that would be a far cry from the odd jobs she took now to pay the bills so she could volunteer as an environmental spokesperson.

"Yeah, maybe." Daphne shot a wistful glance into the backseat, where her daughter was kicking out her legs, eager to go.

"Oh! I can't believe I forgot." Melanie bounced in her seat. "Guess who has a Daphne Summer original?"

"Connor MacKenzie. He already told me."

"Nope. Someone else. Tristen Bell."

Daphne cast her a sidelong look and Melanie quickly glanced away, certain she was blushing.

"Cool. I appeal to the early retired business tycoon. I wonder where you advertise to reach them?"

Melanie snorted a laugh. "Oh, and I found something in a flea market for Tigger," she added, digging through her small purse for the trinket she'd picked up before her date. Swiveling, she handed a tissue-paper-wrapped object to her niece.

"For me?" she squealed. "It's not even my birthday, Auntie Mellie-Melon."

Melanie laughed at the nickname, pleased to see her sister smiling, too. "Careful. It's an antique."

Daphne shot her a worried look.

"It was only \$1.75," she whispered.

"A fairy! Thank you." The girl clutched the small figurine, its wings peeking out from between her fingers.

"Remember: you can sell them when you want to go to school or buy a house or—"

"I want a Barbie house. Will this buy a Barbie house?"

"Um..."

"Honey," Daphne interrupted, as she steered the van into the grocery store parking lot, "your aunt means when you're a grown-up. A house for you to live in."

"Oh. Okay." Tigger turned the figurine over, assessing it. "When I'm married?"

"Or before then," Melanie said, having visions of her niece in her own position—with no money, no man prospects, no home, just a bunch of antiques she felt she couldn't sell because she'd become attached to them and the stories they held from the past.

"Well, if you can't make a go of online dating," Daphne said, changing the conversation, "there's no way I'm diving in. I'll take my chances with Nymph Island."

"You don't really think destiny's going to match us up with our mates if we hang out on the island?"

Daphne lifted a shoulder and looked away.

"Oh, my word. You do!" Melanie shouldn't be surprised. Her sister was the most likely of the four of them to fall for gooshy stuff.

"It happened to Hailey and Maya already this summer. And our mother, grandma and great-grandma in years past."

"Too bad that's not something I could put on the application for heritage status. I keep thinking there's something I'm missing. Some clue that will help us save Trixie Hollow. All those years. All that history. All those stories. And then Rubicore coming in to ruin everything "

Daphne said with a sigh, "We need a miracle, Mel."

Rubicore didn't care about anything the sisters did. Peace, quiet, history, heritage, the environment Rubicore's resort would be like having a buzzing shopping mall plunked in the middle of an idyllic farm. Not only that, there would be rich people laughing and playing next door in fancy digs, while they themselves wondered if they'd be able to keep their own dilapidated cottage standing.

Her sister's cheeks flushed and she gripped her keys hard enough that Melanie worried she'd hurt herself. Just as she reached across to touch her hand, hoping to get her to relax a bit, Daphne sighed and muttered, "Nuts."

"Josh is allergic to peanuts. So is Kyra," piped up Tigger. "They get chipmunk cheeks and a rash."

Daphne turned sunny again. "Okay. Inside to collect our picnic."

A few minutes later they were all back in the van and on their way to the marina where they kept the family's boat.

As they pulled up, Melanie leaned forward, staring out the window. Someone was checking out their Boston Whaler, tied to a dock. And not in an "interesting old boat; miracle it still floats" sort of way.

"Who is that man standing beside our boat?" she asked.

Daphne sat straighter in her seat. "Is he getting in?"

He definitely was. And just because he was wearing a suit didn't mean he wasn't capable of stealing it.

Melanie cast a glance in the backseat, where Tigger was gathering up her fairy box to climb out of the van. "Stay here with your mom, okay, Tigger? I need to talk to someone before we go to the island."

"Who?"

Daphne opened her door. "I'm coming with you. No, wait. On second thought, I'm calling the police." She lifted her phone to her ear, holding Melanie back with a gentle hand.

Melanie slipped free of her grip and got out as the man left their boat. Hurrying along the pier, she caught up with him before he turned down a side dock, away from her.

"Hi," she chirped and he gave her a quick nod and continued. "I see you were in my boat just now. Is there anything I can help you with?"

He paused. "I'm sorry?"

"My boat. What were you doing in it?" Melanie drew herself taller, folding her arms across her chest.

"I was leaving a message in Maya Summer's boat."

Oh, that was rich. Maya was calling it her boat now? The Whaler belonged to all of them. Sure, Hailey made certain it was always taken care of, but still. It belonged to the whole family. Just like the cottage.

"I'll be sure she gets it," Melanie said, striding toward the aluminum vessel.

His steps quick, the man followed her, as though playing shadow tag. It was creepy. Plus, who wore a suit in Muskoka?

Melanie whirled. "Do you have a problem?"

He nearly rammed into her. "I want to be sure the message gets to Maya."

"She has a boyfriend. A very large boyfriend."

A cool expression masked whatever the man might be thinking. "I will gladly retrieve it and deliver it myself." His voice was polite and businesslike in a way that raised Melanie's hackles. He gave her a small, false smile, as though that would warm her. "I was under the impression that was her boat."

"I'm her sister and we share the boat. I can give it to her."

Melanie could almost hear him thinking. He must have already met the well-put-together Maya and maybe pretty, willowy Hailey. Just wait until he saw Daphne, cute as a button, lively and vibrant. Able to wrap whole crowds around her pinky like some sort of snake charmer. Melanie could feel it coming, the up-and-down look, followed by the stale joke, "No wonder you're a tomboy. You probably didn't get much time in the washroom to get ready in the mornings, with three other sisters. Five women in the house! Ha, ha, ha."

Mirror time was not the specific reason for her lack of va-va-voom in the girly dress-up department.

"Yeah. Four of us sisters," Melanie said. He went to open his mouth. "And yeah, it was difficult getting mirror space in the mornings, but you know, you learn to adapt, and Mom put up extra mirrors in the hall, with small shelves underneath for those who were waiting."

The man gave her a blank look.

Melanie climbed into the open-decked boat, ignoring the way it rocked as she scrambled to find the note before the man could join her and snag it. Her fingers closed over an envelope tucked on the dashboard and she slid it into her pocket, keeping her back to the man.

He was still on the dock. "I haven't introduced myself."

"Right. You have not."

He held out his hand with a jerk.

Slowly, Melanie moved to the side of the boat, then climbed onto the pier, reaching out to shake his hand once she had a firm footing.

“Melanie Summer.”

“Aaron Bloomwood.”

Aaron from Rubicore Developments. Well, well, well. What was he up to? And what was Maya keeping from the rest of the family?

It wasn't that Melanie didn't trust her sister, *per se*. Okay, she didn't. Melanie didn't kid herself that Maya might try and wrangle them a better deal, then tell them at the last minute, hijacking things to go the direction she wanted—which probably wouldn't be a bad thing. But Melanie didn't like surprises, and this reeked of one.

Staring into Aaron's stony eyes, she felt like a fool. He knew more than she did, didn't he?

“And Maya will know who you are?” she asked, hoping her cheeks didn't flush as she pretended ignorance.

“Yes. I'm with Rubicore Developments. We made an offer to purchase your family's island that your sister found deficient.”

That sounded about right.

“This note is additional to the offer. A proposal of sorts. Can you please ensure she gets it? It's time sensitive.”

Now *that* was intriguing. The envelope was definitely going to get steamed open as soon as Melanie got a chance.



MELANIE AND DAPHNE sat on the veranda of the old cottage, Tigger having devoured her portion of the picnic so she could hurry off with her latest treasures—a nickel, an acorn, a leaf shaped like a heart, and a small pink pebble—to add to a new fairy house.

Melanie shifted so she could pull the envelope from Aaron Bloomwood out of her back pocket.

"Do you think he really was only leaving that for Maya?" Daphne asked.

"He said this is an additional proposal."

"Of the marriage persuasion?" Daphne joked in a British accent, her chin dipped down in false seriousness.

"But of course," Melanie retorted, sounding more like a count with a funky loose tooth than anyone British. "Our bossy sister is awash in suitors."

"Are we going to open it?" Daphne whispered, leaning forward.

Melanie grinned, remembering the time as kids when they'd read Maya's diary and giggled over their sister's first kiss—which in Maya's words had been sloppy and unimpressive, leaving Melanie wondering what all the fuss was about. She had a feeling Maya and her fiancé, Connor, were solving that little mystery several times an hour lately.

"Shall we steam it open, read it, then reseal it?" Melanie asked. "Or do we own up to our snoopish ways and tear it open?"

"He said it was in regards to the offer, right?"

She nodded. Her lawyerly training could get behind the logic of where Daphne was going with this line of thought. "Technically, any offer is for the owners. And we have 50 percent of the voters present—if we don't include Mom in our count."

"He mentioned something about it being time sensitive?" Daphne leaned forward, eyes glued to the envelope.

Melanie ripped open the end and pulled a sheet of paper. In the process, a square of card stock fell out. Her sister came to sit beside her, picking it up.

"It's an invitation to the unveiling of their development plans! Are they nuts?" The scorn and disbelief in Daphne's voice echoed the disappointment Melanie felt as she read the short note. She'd been hoping for something intriguing, like a Nancy Drew mystery that she

and Daphne could unravel. But this? This was just baffling and possibly insulting.

"Why was he so worried about whether she'd get this? And where's the proposal?" Melanie tossed the sheet of paper on the coffee table.

Daphne reached for the letter, then paraphrased the contents. "They're asking us to join them for supper, then enjoy a private tour of the island before the party where the plans will be revealed. They do say we can discuss any additional proposals at supper. There's nothing specific." She dropped the letter where she'd found it and swiveled her head to look out across the water that separated their place from Baby Horseshoe Island. "They want to woo us."

"I'm not up for wooing," Melanie grumbled, rubbing her eyes. The heat of the day, the three whiskeys, the hurt of Tristen's rejection and now this latest letdown were hitting her hard. She wanted a nap. She wanted her mother. "Do we have time to visit Mom on the way home?"

"Hmm?" Her sister blinked. "What?"

"Want to visit Mom on the way home?" The nursing home's official visiting hours would be over, but none of the staff seemed to mind the sisters coming by to see their night owl mother at unconventional times.

"I think we should go," Daphne said.

"Great. Maybe Simone can meet us. I want to tell her in person that if Maya has asked her to make more of those dresses for me, it isn't necessary. I don't want to hurt her feelings, but I'm done with Maya's attempts at revamping my appearance. You know?"

Daphne was staring at the island across the way, lost in her own world.

"Mom?" Tigger came bouncing onto the veranda. "Can we buy a Bedazzler? I don't have any more coins for my fairy houses and I need something. Fiona has one."

"Then ask to borrow hers, please." Eyes brimming with something that got Melanie's espionage radar blinking, Daphne turned and held up the note. "I meant this. We should go. Reconnaissance."

"Really?"

"They think they can woo us, but I say we go and gather ammo so we can shoot these pie-eyed, fat-headed, greedy rich cats out of the sky."

Tigger gave Melanie a wide-eyed look as if to say, *What did you do to my mother?*

Melanie grinned and high-fived her sister. For Daphne, that speech was as close to swearing as she ever got.

"I'm in! I say we learn what we can, then use it to halt Rubicore in their tracks. In the meantime, I'll talk to Mr. Valos over at the municipality. I bet he'd love to hear a presentation about Rubicore's plans from our side of the fence," Melanie said.

Oh, yeah. Things were about to get good.

A small sports car purred down Tristen's driveway. He watched as it crunched to a halt by his front step, the early morning light flashing on its shiny red door as his ex-wife got out. "Really, Tristen? Gravel? You couldn't pave it or lay out all those fancy stones you drone on about?" She winked as she slammed her door, but he knew she was half-serious.

"They don't make a good driveway. Not with our winters. Where's the Escalade?" He'd special ordered her a fully-loaded Cadillac SUV, and she wasn't even driving it?

She gave him a look. "You really thought that thing was me?"

"It's what all the stay-at-home moms were driving."

"Yeah, well, that was before you sold me your half of the company. And just before an economic downturn. Thanks for that." The fire and ice in her voice would be enough to make most men's testicles crawl inside his body for protection, but for Tristen it was the anger flashing in her sapphire eyes that made his Adam's apple lodge in place, not allowing him to talk or breathe. The old Tristen had been into screwing people over in business, but never family. Surely she had to know the timing wasn't his doing?

He moved around the tiny car, which was definitely a bad choice for Ontario's busy, often rock-lined highways. What luck would she have

against a tractor trailer, and how on earth were those sporty, low-profile treads going to keep her on the road in the middle of any kind of storm? Did she not comprehend how little rubber was connecting her to the highway? And traveling with their daughter—what was the safety rating on this thing? Did it even have side air bags?

His gaze drifted to his only mode of transportation, the truck. Definitely no air bags. He was going to have to buy a new vehicle if he planned to be driving Dot around. Possibly a Volvo. Or a Hummer. Those seemed pretty sturdy.

Working hard to calm himself, he tried for a welcoming smile. He pulled his daughter to his chest, noting that he'd committed a fatal error even before her body froze against his. He tucked her head under his chin nevertheless, surprised at how tall she was. Then he held her for an extra second, letting her know that he was that dad—a father who was not afraid to express physical affection, because he was *not* emotionally stunted, as his ex-wife had stated so bluntly while delivering her petition for divorce.

Tristen released his daughter, noting that her upper-lip snarl was quivering, as though she'd needed that hug for months.

He really had to prove to them all that he could do this, didn't he?

"How's it going, Dot?" he asked. She'd added a green and an orange streak in her bangs—if you could call them that. It was more like a sheepdog shag covering the front of her head, swept forward to cover the left third of her face, ending in a point near her small, sharp chin, which she raised defiantly as he took her in. Half pixie, half sheepdog. He was going to have to be careful what he unconsciously nicknamed her.

"I like your hair."

The snarl was back, and her arms crossed over her thin chest.

"You look hungry," he added.

He caught the look from his ex-wife, who was equally thin, and sighed. Women. They weren't all like Melanie Summer and willing to work it. That woman had curves like a modern day Marilyn Monroe, without the "I know I'm sexy" turn-him-off attitude. Ms. Summer probably ate without worrying about whether it was going to give her some padding a man might actually enjoy.

Why was he even thinking about her? She was the devil, tempting him back to the dark side of land developments. And no, that dark side did not have milk and cookies. It had beasts and quicksand. Snake pits and so much worse.

He grabbed Dot's luggage from the minuscule trunk and half listened while Cindy ranted on about what she thought their daughter needed. Just when he was about to shoo her away—forcibly if necessary—his ex-wife leaped in her car and tore out of the driveway without even a goodbye hug for the daughter she hadn't been separated from for more than a weekend in probably at least a decade.

"No lost love, huh?" he said to Dot, turning to find her gone. He found her on the stone patio overlooking the water, feet up on the outdoor furniture, head tucked low as she typed on her phone. "Want me to show you your room?"

"I'm not staying here."

"Well, I doubt your mother got you a room at the local inn, so let's go." He half turned, waiting for her to follow.

"I'm staying at a friend's house."

"Nope."

"The only thing that makes you my father is the fact that you knocked up Mom."

All right then.

Here was the first example of the hormone-induced lash outs the internet had warned him about. He supposed he no longer needed to

wonder why his ex had peeled out of here. She was probably ready to hit every bar on the way back to Toronto, crying, "Freedom! Freedom!"

"Right. We do share biology. However, I also bought that phone you are using and took you to Disney World when you were seven."

She glared at him. "Mom bought me this phone."

"Where do you think the money came from, Missy Pants?"

His daughter popped up off the couch, livid. "Don't call me that."

"You liked it when you were three."

"No, I didn't. You only used it when you were scolding me."

That actually sounded fairly familiar.

"Mom works, you know. She spends hours on that stupid business you abandoned, just like you abandoned us." His daughter's chest expanded and contracted with emotion, and her eyes were damp as she fell back into the cushions, her face so close to her phone that he worried about her vision.

"All right." Tristen took the seat across from her. "Looks like we need to set a few things straight. Number one, I am your father and always will be." He swallowed hard, drew a deep breath and tried to forge ahead, but found himself unable to say the three simple words he knew she needed to hear. Cindy's words ran circles in his head. *Why can't you say I love you? Don't you think I need to hear it?* The words froze in his throat, unable to come out. They were too important. "I uh " Nope. Wouldn't come out. "It's that four-letter word found in a three-word phrase, Dot." He cleared his throat. "I always have and always will feel that way about you."

Her shoulders hitched higher and her lips curled.

"Two, I'm glad your mom is getting out there and working. It's good for her. Three, that business is something I built from the ground up. It's called TriBell for a reason. When your mother and I parted ways she got

half of it as my spouse, and I sold her the rest. I didn't abandon it, but I admit that, yes, I ran from the city."

He had Dot's attention now. He could tell by the slight face tilt so she could catch glimpses of him, even though her attention was still aimed at her phone. How little she'd changed since she was a toddler. "I didn't intend to make you feel abandoned, but I understand how you might feel that way. And for that, I am sorry, Dot."

"Nobody calls me Dot."

"What do they call you?"

"It doesn't matter."

"You want me to call you Dot?"

She gave a tiny shrug.

When had she become a woman, with the mood-powered Tilt-a-Whirl personality that came with it? He bet Melanie wasn't like this.

Max roamed over, having noticed there was someone new present and Tristen wasn't simply talking to himself.

"This is my dog, Maxwell Richards III."

Dot's head lifted in surprise, a smile starting before she caught herself, tamping it down.

"Quite the name, right?" He scratched the dog's ears as the furry beast checked in with him before heading over to see what Dot had to offer. She ignored him, so he plunked his massive head in her lap. "He's a Bernese mountain dog. Friendly. Lazy. Eats a ton. Craps like an elephant."

Dot blinked, holding something back. Finally, she peeled one hand away from her phone and gently patted Max's head. The dog nuzzled closer and lifted his brown eyebrows in such a pathetic request for love that Tristen could visibly see his daughter's heart melt. She scratched under Max's chin, then, realizing what she was doing, pulled her hand back, crossing her arms.

"He sheds," she announced.

"Year-round. So? Ground rules or show you your room?"

Dot heaved a sigh so severely exaggerated he had to bite back a smile.

He headed into the building, knowing she was sure to follow this time. Grabbing her luggage from the entry, where he'd left it, he led Dot down the hall to the guest room. He nudged the door to the ground-floor bedroom open, pointing out the nearby bathroom, which was their one and only, sandwiched between his bedroom and hers.

He placed her suitcases by the bed. "Need anything?"

"An escape plan," she muttered, falling onto the mattress, which bounced her back onto her feet. "This bed sucks."

"So then, a few ground rules. We eat meals. Three of them. Every day. At the table. Together."

"Don't you have a job?"

"I do. And I have to head out in an hour and you'll come with me. I'm not going to have any of those 'I'm not hungry' or 'I just ate' games in this house. It might work with your mother, but not with me." He gave Dot the I-mean-business eye and noted she appeared slightly shocked. He might not have been around much in the past seventeen years, but he noticed things. And now it was his turn to play parent, without worrying about his wife undoing it all while he was at work. "No sneaking out. Phone is left on its charger in the kitchen at bedtime. In other words, no calls or texting at night." Her mouth dropped open. "You need sleep—uninterrupted—and you're a teen. Sleep is mandatory."

"What is this? *Jail*?"

"Mean Daddy Boot Camp," he said with a smile. "You can get a job while you're here, if you're interested. You have your driver's license?"

She shook her head.

"Want it?"

There was a glimmer in her eyes, which had finally lifted enough he could see their familiar star pattern. She didn't answer.

"You can also borrow my bike. We aren't far from town. There's a nice library there. I can get you a library card if you want. I don't have cable or satellite." Her eyes grew round again. "I have internet. I'll get you the password. No porn. Surf safe and all that."

"I have data on my phone."

"Which will remain on its charger at night."

"People can watch porn during the day, you know."

"Good point. I'll be sure to look over your shoulder every so often." He touched the cool surface of an amphibolite rock he'd placed on her windowsill as an attempt at *dýcor*. The dark-and-light gray striations were swirled, making it resemble marbled fudge.

He turned back to his daughter, who was tapping through messages on her phone. "Do you have a boyfriend?"

Dot froze. "No."

"Well, no boys. I guess you could go on a date if I meet him first and say it's okay. But assume you can't have boys over or go to their place unless I know them and have given approval." Tristen glanced again at his daughter. How could she not have a boyfriend in the middle of her seventeenth summer? "Sure you don't have a boyfriend? No crushes or anything that I need to worry about? Maybe this friend you wanted to stay with? Your mother and I eloped when we were only a little older than you, you know. I know what teenagers do." He sat beside her on the bed. "So? Boyfriend?"

"I'm gay, Dad."

He didn't know whether to be relieved that there'd be no boys, or to allow the joy of hearing her call him "Dad" sweep him away.

"Gay, happy? Or gay, lesbian?"

"I prefer the company of females." Her arms were crossed, eyes daring.

"Fine. Amend the no-boys rule to cover girls of the girlfriend persuasion. And at least I don't have to worry about you getting pregnant."

"Ha, ha."

"What? It's true. A father's worst nightmare—your teenaged daughter becoming a mom while still in high school." Other scenarios filled his mind and he amended his statement. "Well, one of the worst. Although really, that wouldn't be too bad. It would just be hard on you, giving up your freedom. And teen pregnancies are fraught with risk, healthwise. What I mean is that it could be worse. I would like to be a grandfather some day. Just maybe not right now. You're not pregnant, are you?" Tristen placed a fist over his mouth and cleared his throat. Time to shut his word hole.

"Are *you* allowed to have girlfriends over?" Dot's dark eyes narrowed in challenge.

His mind flipped to the image of Melanie sitting on her motorcycle, and the way she'd given him attitude.

"Don't have one," he said simply.

"That's lovely. You didn't even stay with the woman you left us for?"

Tristen choked on his shock. "Excuse me?"

Dot glared at him, all her teenage hatred and hurt directed at him. It felt as though an evil cloud of black pain had been shoved in his direction.

"Your mother and I broke up because she was tired of me not being around. Did she really tell you I was with someone else?" His voice was low, almost too quiet. He pushed back the anger, knowing where it would take him if he let it grab hold.

"I just kind of figured."

"Never assume." He directed them out of the room, his moves sharp, laced with pent-up anger. "Your mother and I came to the end of our ride together, that's all. Make sure you learn that lesson from us and communicate with your partner." He pulled Dot into a tight, partial hug before letting her go. He noted she took a large step away, but then slowly eased closer as they moved down the hall.

When they reached the end of the corridor, he stopped, blocking her way. "I know you probably don't want to know this, but there's never been anyone other than your mother. Well, in high school I saw someone else for a while. But when I met your mom, that was it for me. Nobody since."

"That's pathetic."

He wasn't sure if she meant settling down so young or the self-induced solitude. Either way, spending the last two years mostly alone had been good for him.

"Can I work for you?" his daughter said out of the blue, head cocked to one side.

The expression "damned if you do, damned if you don't" popped into Tristen's mind.

"I'm not working a lot at the moment. Some real estate on the side when others want a vacation. A bit of rock work. Nothing exciting."

"Fine." His daughter crossed her arms and reduced her eyes to slits, jutting out her chin. "If I fail it will be because of you."

Oh, look, the Tilt-a-Whirl was at work again. "Can you please explain?" he said, forcing himself to be polite.

"I flunked gym class."

"But you're an athlete." She had been part of the starting lineup in soccer since age five. It didn't matter if she had just entered the next age level and was the youngest on the team, she was always a starter. How could someone like that flunk?

"Whatever. I'll just drop out."

"No. Explain what you need."

She told him in one long breath, "I'm short the number of credits I need to graduate on time. I have to do summer school or work experience or I won't graduate. I missed registering for summer school."

"So, what do you need for that?"

"A job."

"Any job? How many hours?"

"I want to be a lawyer and the schools prefer law office experience, but anything would work."

Little spider feet crept up his spine. Law. *Melanie*.

Tristen took a deep breath and turned to head to the kitchen. "Let's have breakfast." He pivoted to face his daughter again, knowing, like a fifth sense, that an excuse was about to trip off her tongue.

"Nope," he said. "I'm a good cook, and I know you didn't eat on the way up. You're eating. Rule one."

It was time to get this parenting party started.



EARLY MONDAY MORNING, Melanie stood outside the municipality office of Mr. Valos, an old family friend. His secretary, Nora, who was her former roommate, had snagged her an early appointment—first of the day—and Melanie planned to share her fantastic arguments on why Rubicore couldn't continue their plans to destroy Muskoka. Mr. Valos would be convinced that he needed to put a lockdown on Rubicore's plans, and she'd skip off into the future, somehow finding her share for the cottage's taxes, and live happily ever after. The end.

Right. She really needed to figure out a solid plan for coming up with several thousand dollars over the next four weeks or she'd be the

one responsible for losing the cottage. And that was not how she wanted to finally stand out in the Summer family. Being the only sister sent to Camp Adaker to be straightened out after their father's sudden death as kids had been bad enough.

Melanie pushed open the tall door to Mr. Valos's office. Who did they think was going to work here—giants? Yeesh. She padded across the carpet to the desk, giving the man a light hug of hello as he stood to greet her.

"Good morning, Mr. Valos."

Had he gotten shorter? Because that was a really awkward place for his head—below her shoulder and a bit too close to her boobs. He was holding her as though he expected comfort, his arms hugging her too tightly. It was the kind of awkward that made a person want to toss their cookies a little bit. He finally released her and she struggled to keep her smile from wavering. She needed Mr. Valos on her side.

"Melanie Summer!" He held her hands in his, stepping back to take her in. "You look well. I heard you'd moved back after school. How are you?"

"Fine, thank you." She smoothed the dress she'd worn yesterday. She figured if it worked on bikers, it might work on politicians, too. "How are you and Mrs. Valos?"

"Great. Just great. Golfing a ton. Got my par down by three points from last year."

"And your daughter, Jess?"

"Married!" He clapped his hands in glee and sat down, leaning back in his chair.

"Jess is married?" Well, that took the cake. If she could do it, then why wasn't Melanie getting any action? "That's wonderful."

"So, what can I do for you? Just stopping by to see my new office?" He held out his arms, showcasing the grand room.

"Actually, I was wanting to talk to you about a development slotted for Baby Horseshoe Island."

"Oh?" He turned to push the intercom button that linked him with his secretary. "Let's get Nora to set up an appointment."

"Actually, I'm your first appointment of the day." Melanie unbuckled her briefcase. "I'd like to discuss Rubicore and their proposed resort."

"Yes, great for jobs and tourism."

"Wonderful economic reasons to love a development," she said cheerfully. His hand left the phone. "Although possibly not so wonderful for the environment."

He laughed. "You been talking to that sister of yours? What's her name? Belle?"

"Daphne."

"Causes quite the ruckus, doesn't she? I suppose that's what happens when you lose your father so young. Such a shame." He shook his head. "A crying shame. He was so good at poker."

"I don't believe our father's death had anything to do with Daphne's passion for animals and the environment. At Halloween, if you'll remember when she was four—" Melanie laughed lightly, attempting to ease the edge from her voice "—she used to ask for donations for the no-kill shelter in lieu of candy."

"Oh? She's diabetic?"

"No." Melanie sat up straight and placed a stapled document on Mr. Valos's desk. "Anyway, about this development."

"Should have sent Belle to that camp for emotional kids, too. It did wonders for you. You're a lawyer now."

"Camp Adaker," Melanie supplied weakly.

"Yeah, yeah. That place. We'll see what happens with that, then, eh?"

The room felt as if it was spinning. She was missing something. Something important.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, it's on that island."

She'd been fund-raising for the camp almost every year since she'd gone there as a camper, and then as a counsellor. To say she believed in the camp and that it meant a lot to her was a complete understatement.

"What's going to happen?" she asked.

The man stood. "I'm so glad you came in to visit, Melanie. Great to see you." He placed a hand on her lower back as she rose to her feet, about to argue that she still had a few more minutes in her appointment time. He gave her a gentle nudge forward and she resisted, holding her ground, knowing that once he got her out of the room, it was over.

She needed reinforcements, someone who could sway Mr. Valos's opinion, since he obviously still thought of her as a grieving child.

"I'd like to talk to the town council at their next meeting, as well. There are some serious environmental concerns, as well as ones regarding heritage loss, bylaw infringements, parking, traffic, noise, lighting, and even the footprint, which, from what I've seen, will be quite significant. I—"

"Very nice. Very nice. Create a presentation and we'll see."

"I have one." Melanie held up her briefcase. She'd stayed up until four in the morning creating this presentation, then begged Nora to find a way to slide her into Mr. Valos's schedule. And for what? Him to kiss her out the door? Not a chance.

She dodged him and headed to his desk, where she placed her laptop on the reflective surface.

Mr. Valos stood at the open door, seeming confused.

Melanie smiled, not making eye contact, so he'd be less likely to try and stop her. "I have all the information right here."

Hearing Mr. Valos greet someone, she turned, full of smiles, hoping to woo another member of the council into hearing her presentation,

especially since the next meeting wasn't scheduled for a while. Time was of the essence.

Her smile dropped, then picked up along with her heartbeat as she spotted a tall man standing in the door. Tristen. She didn't know whether to effusively rope him in, or be miffed that he'd refused to help. Either way, judging from the surprised look on his face, he wasn't here to play hero.

"Ms. Summer," he said with a tight nod. "I'm sorry, Vincent, I must have the wrong time. I'll check back with Nora."

Mr. Valos hauled him into the room by his shirtsleeve, seemingly with the opposite emotion he'd expressed while trying to drag Melanie out. "Stay, stay," he crooned, straightening the sleeve of Tristen's crisp dress shirt.

"I'm actually about to do a presentation about my concerns in regards to Rubicore's proposed resort development on Baby Horseshoe Island." Melanie turned back to her computer, waking it from sleep mode.

"This would be more appropriate at the next council meeting, Melanie. Ask Nora to be a dear and put you on the list, if we have time," Mr. Valos said in an authoritative, patronizing tone.

"And will there be any planning meetings between the municipality and the developers before then?"

"Oh, can't be sure," he replied, hooking his thumbs on his belt loops.

"Shall we ask Nora? I'm sure she must know." Melanie reached for his phone, lifting the receiver. "I'd hate for something to be approved that could endanger what everyone loves about Heritage Row. Muskoka is such a unique area of the world."

"I think I'll come back later," Tristen said, turning toward the door.

"Yes," Melanie chirped. "I believe we're going to need some time here, and since I know you're afraid of developments and developers, this

might make you uncomfortable.” She punched a button she figured would get her through to Nora.

Tristen gave her a parting glare, jaw clenched hard. He slammed the door behind him, making the framed pictures rattle.

“Ms. Summer,” Mr. Valos said, his voice low with anger.

Oh, it was *Ms. Summer* now. Nice.

He gently took the phone from her and placed in its cradle. “Mr. Bell has been waiting to see me about a very important matter and I don’t recall seeing your name on my schedule. I think it would be best if we did this at another time.” He opened the door. “Mr. Bell. Please. Ms. Summer and I are done. Your time is valuable, and I apologize for the mix-up and to have kept you waiting.”

Butt kisser.

Tristen reappeared in the doorway, his expression livid. Melanie had to admit it was a terribly sexy look on him. It tightened his jaw in a way that made her long to run her hand down it. Slowly. And maybe follow up with her tongue and some love bites. Oh, boy. She was going to need a cold shower if she kept staring at his jaw.

Focusing on the space just beyond Tristen, she said, “Mr. Valos, I feel Mr. Bell could provide valuable input on this issue. Should he deign to weigh in.”

Silence stretched in the spacious room.

“Mr. Bell?” Melanie asked, hoping her voice didn’t betray her desperate need to have him not shut her down. To help her out.

The man in question looked away and Mr. Valos gave an embarrassed cough.

Fine. She’d show the wimps that she could do this without them.

She snatched her briefcase from the desk and said, “I’ll set something up with Nora—*again*—on my way out. Thank you for your time, Mr. Valos. Oh, and tell your wife that I would be happy to help her sort out

the fender-bender she had last week if her insurance company is still giving her troubles."

Head held high, Melanie stomped from the room.

"Nora?" She snagged her friend on the way out. "I'm going to need another appointment. One where Mr. Bell can't shoo me out."

"I'm so sorry. He was early. You should have had another ten minutes." Nora's cheeks flushed as her long nails clicked across the keyboard. "Let's see what we can find."

"And can I get a slot at the next council meeting to do a presentation, too?"

"You bet. Just give me a minute."

Melanie hefted her briefcase, which was too light. Her computer. She'd left it in Mr. Valos's office. "Excuse me." She pushed open the door, not caring if she was interrupting some oh-so-important meeting between the two men.

"The land out by the highway. Did the rezoning go through? A client was wondering " Tristen trailed off, looking away as Melanie strode back into the room.

She shot him a dirty look as she made her way to Mr. Valos's desk.

So much for Tristen leaving his developer side behind. The liar.

"Sorry, boys!" she chirped. "Forgot my computer."

"Dear, this isn't the best use of your time," Mr. Valos said gently, pushing her computer closer to the edge of his desk so she could grab it.

"Let me worry about how I spend my time." She gave him a bright smile and tried not to kick Tristen as she passed him again.

He kept his eyes averted, jaw set, but she could feel his attention follow her as she crossed the room. She wished she was wearing something more adorable than the same dress she'd worn when they'd met yesterday. Why couldn't she ever be that amazing woman in front of others? In command and in control?

And that better not be pity she saw in his eyes as he glanced up.

She glared at him and shut the door behind her, barely refraining from sticking out her tongue.

She needed to show that I'm-so-great-and-too-good-to-help-you man that she could do this. *Would* do this. Without him.

Tristen walked the docks, eyeing the antique boats that had been entered in Port Carling's annual boat show while trying to clear his mind of Melanie Summer and the nasty look she'd given him as she'd stormed out of Vincent Valo's office. The guy had been condescending, and it had been nearly impossible for Tristen to sit there, acting as though he wasn't insulted on her behalf. The problem was that the real estate office he moonlighted for needed Vincent as he was the man who could get things rezoned faster than anyone else on the council. Today it had been Tristen's job to schmooze, and he'd walked right into that wave of anger coming from the woman whose image had kept him tossing and turning late into the night.

But now he was done work for the day, had let Dot loose on the boat show for a half hour, and had time to ponder an idea he wanted to try. Working with stones always cleared his mind and today he was counting on it.

He continued walking along the docks that wrapped along the one side of the small island park that had been cut off from the mainland by the larger steamship locks behind him. He remained on the lookout for the boat that had inspired his latest idea. It was a long shot, but he thought he might be able to use the boat's hewing, notching, and

joining technique with stone. A way to naturally fit several rocks together without the use of anything but skill.

And there it was. The *Winged Goddess*. An exceedingly rare wooden boat from the 1930s. Tristen waited for a group in tennis whites to move past, stealing the opportunity to check out the boat while a woman wearing a baggy shirt and shorts had the owner distracted.

Wood was different than stone, but it was also surprisingly similar. You could alter it. Carve it into almost anything if you were patient and knew how to finesse it. But you couldn't just jump in and do whatever you wanted to any kind of stone. And sometimes, if you tried to do too much without paying attention to the individual rock's internal cracks and striations, it broke. Kind of like a marriage.

"Sunk her this spring," the owner was saying.

The woman gave a shocked squeak, and Tristen let out a huff of a laugh at her indignation and horror.

"Yep," the man continued. "Mouse hole I didn't notice when I put her in. I gunned it to shore when I realized I was taking on water. Sunk her less than ten feet from land. Boy, that water was cold!"

"You and the boat are obviously okay, though?" she asked, her voice kind and soft. Caring. Familiar.

Later. Tristen needed to focus on the boat. The voice could very well belong to a woman he was avoiding—and there were several.

Their conversation grew more distant as they moved to the other end of the boat to check out the supposed damage, and Tristen crouched by the bow, inspecting the woodworking techniques.

"Well, hello!" cooed a voice dangerously close to his ear.

That was *not* the same familiar voice he'd heard a few moments ago.

He cut a glance to the side. Crap. Alice Estaire. Stalker extraordinaire. Okay, not stalker. Just overly friendly and clueless. Sort of like a puppy. She ran a finger across his shoulders. Not surprisingly, she found a knot

and began kneading it. He stood abruptly, smoothly displacing her hands. Nice enough lady, but not the one for him.

"Hi, Alice."

She batted her eyelashes and squeezed her arms together in a way that pushed her cleavage higher, much of it spilling above the low neckline of her pink tank top. "I see you're back at the real estate office."

He gave her a tight smile, turning on his heel to hurry away. "Lovely to see you. Must meet up with someone. Sorry." He nervously toyed with a polished stone in the pocket of his shorts and scanned the crowd for his daughter. Now would be the perfect time for Dot to show up. Striding down the dock, he made obvious phone-checking gestures. He felt bad for the way he'd brushed off Alice, but what was a man to do? They'd already had the it's-not-you-it's-me talk. She didn't take his hints, and if he was any more obvious he'd hurt her feelings. If he did that she might cry. And that would be uncomfortable for everyone.

At the end of the dock, still not spotting Dot, he paused beside an old schooner, taking in the way it had been put together. He still wanted a few more moments with the *Winged Goddess*, but didn't dare backtrack.

After asking permission, he took a few photos of the joints at the schooner's stern. Pretty standard and nothing exciting, but he felt the need to do something as he waited out Alice. A woman was bending to chat with a man sitting in the boat docked in front of the schooner, her laughter washing over him. That laugh. Melanie.

Beautiful, beautiful Melanie.

Tristen resisted the urge to run.

Away.

Fast.

"Beautiful lines," she was saying, her hands out as though fighting the temptation to run them over the boat's curves. A surge of jealousy

swirled within Tristen and he tamped it down, crossing his arms, wanting to turn away but unable to. He couldn't possibly be jealous of a boat. How ridiculous was that? He faked further interest in the schooner as he watched her chat, animated and happy. In her element.

She was wearing scruffy, loose clothes, so unlike the dress he'd seen her in just forty minutes ago. Her face was open, relaxed. Was one of the Summer sisters Melanie's identical twin?

And yet he knew this was his Melanie. The same woman who'd had bikers eating out of her hand only yesterday.

"So Tristen Bell is into old boats?" she asked, coming over. Was she swaggering? He could swear that was a swagger. Why was she acting as though she had something on him?

She hated him. He'd seen it in her eyes, so why wasn't she avoiding him?

He glanced behind him, aware he was backing away.

"Funny," she said. "I hadn't guessed that—despite your truck. Although that thing is just *old*. Nothing like this boat." She did a little move as though she was a model showcasing the antique craft. He'd never seen a woman act sexier, even in that horrible old T-shirt that was much too large for her luscious form.

Which meant there was something wrong with Tristen's brain. Seriously wrong.

This woman had the potential to push him into something that could destroy him, and all he could do was stand there and smile.

Managing to snap out of the hold she seemed to have on him, he said, "Was that a dig, Melanie Summer?" He sounded almost breathless, and cursed himself. Where was the suave dude he used to be? Had he inadvertently locked him away with his playmate—the monster side that had destroyed his life?

He couldn't be sure, but Melanie seemed half pleased to see him and half hopeful that she could find a way to shove him between the dock and boat, hold his head below the lake's surface and see how long it took him to drown.

The fact that her expression suggested his life was in imminent danger really shouldn't be a turn-on. But it was.

"A dig?" She placed a finger to her chin and stared upward, coy and cute. "Hmm. Possibly."

Oh, she was going to kill him. Definitely. Something scary had switched on within her and there was a flicker of the devil in her gaze. She wanted to get even for something. It was a look he'd received a lot back in Toronto for crossing people or signing contracts with new companies before his competitors even had a chance to say hello.

"They don't make them like they used to," he said, clearing his throat. He pointed to the boat in front of them. Then, hesitantly, and with enough time to second-guess himself, he jerkily leaned in to give her a light kiss on the cheek. "Good to see you."

She smelled good. Like cookies.

Her danger face melted and she blushed, unable to meet his eye. "You know it makes you sound like an old man when you say 'they don't make them like they used to.'"

He grinned. He knew he was supposed to stay away from her, but couldn't quite remember why.

Oh, right.

Land developments, possible relationship expectations, et cetera. She was so fun to toy with though. All he had to do was compliment her or show her a minor courtesy and she melted like sugar. The old Tristen would have used that against her in some way.

"I *am* an old man," he said. "Haven't you noticed?"

"Did you know that I happen to like older men? They are more stable and kind." She gave him a shrewd glance. "Usually."

"I thought you liked bikers."

"They'll do in a pinch, but I prefer men who are little more refined. And I must say, your manners are impeccable. Generally speaking."

There was a hazardous element to her words, but that flirty smile she could punch him in the nuts, but if she gave him that smile he'd ask for a repeat.

Stupid, stupid man that he was.

His voice dropped. "Are you flirting with me, Melanie Summer?"

She turned away, addressing him over her shoulder. "Maybe."

Hello, flight control? Yeah, we have trouble on the runway. Despite being grounded it seems Tristen is gearing up for takeoff.

He took in her tatty outfit, carefully noting every worn detail. "You like old things?"

"I like things that are *experienced*." She turned back to him, not touching, but acting as though she would play with his necktie if he'd been wearing one. The idea did funny things to his mind.

"You are a beautiful and dangerous woman, Melanie. You would never need a man like me." He wanted to touch her, move close, tell the world that she was his and that this was their little corner of the planet, and to go away.

She laughed, a high flush dancing across her cheeks. "I'm just playing, Tristen. Besides, I'm sure you and your actions won't ever show up on anything but my hit list." She gave him a smile brimming with moxie, but something had changed her eyes. They looked less playful and devilish. More hurt somehow.

He pretended to pull a dagger out of his chest, while keeping a watchful eye on her. Maybe she didn't hate him, just the way he behaved.

Story of his life.

Had that aspect not changed despite the two years of beating himself up over it?

"So, tell me, what do you like about antique boats?" She crossed her arms, suddenly serious as they stood shoulder to shoulder, facing the moored vessels.

"I'm sorry about Mr. Valos."

She gave a frown that brought her lips into a pout before she shook off his apology.

"So what do you like about them?" she insisted.

Tristen took a moment to change his focus from her and their games to the vessel in front of them. "They're like people."

"How so?" The crowd swelled and ebbed around them, bits of conversations floating past in waves. This was where he excused himself, found Dot, went home and didn't come out again until it was safe.

Likely around 2050.

Melanie's arms were still crossed protectively.

"Sometimes they shine in their age," he blurted. "They become better."

He winced. He hadn't meant to say something that sounded deep, but there was something about Melanie Summer that hit him hard enough to be uncomfortable. He wanted to learn more about her, but at the same time wanted to push her far away so he could breathe properly.

She nodded thoughtfully and went to sit on a nearby bench.

"Shouldn't you be at work?" Tristen sat beside her, arm draped across the backrest. So much for being able to breathe right. His arm wasn't around her, but he was close enough to feel the heat from her back seeping through the fabric of his shirt.

"I took the morning off."

"And what do *you* like about these old crafts?"

"Their stories," she said immediately. "Their history. They made it through when others didn't."

Why did it feel as though she was no longer talking about boats?

"Anyone ever tell you they can't talk?" he joked.

She swallowed hard, her neck lengthening as she jutted out her chin. "Shut up, Mr. Bell. You know what I'm saying."

"Sorry." The truth was that he did know. It just sounded hokey and he hadn't talked about anything real or deep in a very long time.

They sat in silence, the bench comfortable, just like the quiet between them. He wasn't quite sure what to make of it, seeing as she'd been angry with him only an hour ago.

"I thought you were done with developing?" Melanie stared at him, and he was fairly certain she was waiting for him to form a nervous tick, or generally reveal that he was, indeed, a lying schmo who wouldn't stand up for her.

Oh, wait. He'd already done that in Vincent's office.

"I am done," he said.

"Really?"

"Really."

"Then what about the land you were talking about with Mr. Valos?"

Tristen stretched his legs out in front of him, enjoying the shade from the large trees that grew on the grassy hill behind them. "Eavesdropping, Ms. Summer?"

"It was difficult not to when you were taking my appointment time." He could feel the anger from Vincent's earlier dismissal building within her again, and it was as though he was sitting on a volcano about to erupt. Time to bail.

No. He wasn't a chicken. He could use the old Tristen in a way that wasn't monstrous and stand up for himself.

"You took my appointment time and then didn't leave."

"I most certainly did not take your time." She drew herself up, eyes flashing. "And next time, grow some balls and be honest. If you don't want to help, then fine. But don't *lie* to me."

Oh, this chick was going down.

"For your information I am a *Realtor*, Melanie, and sometimes I inquire about zoning bylaws."

"And yet you can't give me advice about that sort of thing." She opened her small purse, pulling out her checkbook, voice cool as she said, "I see how this works."

"What are you doing?"

"You have to be paid to be helpful, obviously."

He took in their surroundings on the island, wondering how many of the people on the nearby sidewalks and docks were overhearing their conversation.

He stood, but didn't walk away. "I don't do that sort of stuff any longer." He squeezed his eyes shut when he saw the rejection in hers. "I'm sorry, Melanie. It's not about you. It's about me, okay?"

Dot loped out of the crowd, her sharp gaze taking in the two of them. Tristen slung an arm over his daughter's shoulders, pulling her into a half hug. She seemed both conflicted and happy by the embrace.

"Nice talking to you, Melanie," he said over his shoulder as he steered Dot away. They could take the path around the quieter side of the island where the small boat locks were located, then maybe take a shortcut up the hill past where the small museum was nestled, over the footbridge and then back to his truck and his much-needed solitude.

Dot planted her feet like Max did during hot-weather walks. "You didn't introduce me to your girlfriend."

Melanie quirked her head, then bent over, laughing.

Nice. Now he felt insulted. Why did this woman have to live on the same planet? Couldn't she move back to Mars or Venus, or wherever

women were from?

"What's so funny?" he snarled. He tried to stare her down, but an elderly woman caught his attention as she moved toward him with her walker. Hitch the walker forward, drag the bum leg. Hitch, drag, hitch, drag. It was distracting. Especially given how she kept staring at him, unblinking. He stepped out of her path, but she deliberately turned toward him once again.

Not good.

Melanie, now standing, extended a hand to Dot. "I'm Melanie Summer. Pleased to meet you."

The old woman, now a foot away from them, cleared her throat.

"Oh, Mrs. Kowski!" Melanie bent over the walker, giving her a hug. "So lovely to see you."

"Did I hear you have a boyfriend?" the woman asked.

"No, ma'am, you most definitely did not," Melanie replied.

Tristen smiled. How many people called older women "ma'am" these days? Melanie had been raised right.

Mrs. Kowski glared at him and made a disgruntled sound. He reached out and shook her hand. "I'm Tristen Bell. Pleased to meet you."

"I'm sure the pleasure is all yours."

Ouch. A relation of Melanie's, perhaps? She had the same sharp tongue.

Mrs. Kowski started in on him. "What's wrong with you that you won't take Melanie out for a lovely supper? A woman needs to enjoy as many good suppers as she can before they put her in a home and she's stuck eating strained peas and other foods that are affront to the term *meal*." She edged closer, almost nailing him with her walker. "You hear me, sonny?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Mrs. Kowski," Melanie said. "The man will barely talk to me, let alone take me out for supper." She winked at Tristen. "He's always acting as though he's got a great big bug up his—"

"I talk to her," Tristen interrupted, clutching Mrs. Kowski's cool fingers. "Although I don't know why. And I do not have a bug up my —no. Never mind."

He was fighting for this crusty old woman's favor and wanting to win. Melanie Summer was trouble, all right.

"This is my daughter, Dot." He looked to Dot, hoping she would smile and charm the lady.

"You poor dear," Mrs. Kowski said to the silent teen. "*Daughter Dot*. Your father isn't one to think things through, is he?"

Dot smirked in collusion. Before Tristen could defend the name, Melanie was choosing sides, as well. "You poor thing."

"I resent that tone," he interjected.

"He made me have breakfast, and thinks that everyone should eat as much as he does."

Tristen bristled. Food habits were not good conversation territory for them right now. Getting her to finish her breakfast had just about done him in.

"I'd rather not talk about meals, thank you." Mrs. Kowski sniffed and headed for someone new to grouch at.

"I could tell you how to apply for legal emancipation," Melanie muttered to Dot out of the side of her mouth. "That way you can eat what you want, when you want."

"I heard that," Tristen said, trying to draw his daughter away.

"Really?" Dot's eyes grew rounder and she held her ground once again. "You know how to do that?"

"Please don't encourage her." What would Cindy do if Dot managed to pull that one off? He'd have to move farther away than Muskoka.

Melanie winked at him over Dot's head as the teen turned to glare at him.

"You know what legal emancipation is?" Melanie asked his baby girl, tempting her toward rebellion.

"I took a pre-law class in high school last year. I want to become a lawyer."

Melanie gave her a high five. "I'm a lawyer!"

"Get out!"

Yep. This was where things got bad.

Melanie grinned. "Which schools are you looking at?"

"I can't decide between McGill or Queen's."

"McGill? That's seven hours away." Tristen protested. Toronto was far enough. He needed Melanie to convince Dot that Queen's was the place to go, as it was only a little over four hours away.

Although, if every meal was like breakfast, he might just pack his daughter's bags and send her to school at the other end of the country.

"That's hardly far, Dad," Dot said with a smirk. "But I need more experience before I apply, as my marks aren't stellar. Something about being abandoned by my father a few years ago set me back." She whisked her shaggy mane out of her face to make sure both eyes could reach him with their death-ray glare.

"Yeah, not at the joking stage for that little misunderstanding yet," he muttered.

Melanie, as if sensing his desperate need to change the subject faster than a rocket could launch, asked, "Are you looking for a job or internship?"

"Either would be great."

"There might be an opening in my office." She pulled her phone from her shorts pocket and addressed Tristen. "Can I ask?"

Dot gave a little bounce that was completely at odds with her rocker chick style. She whirled toward him, hands clasped. "Please?"

He couldn't be the one to dash all that hope. And honestly, he hadn't seen his daughter this overjoyed since the trip to Disney World when she was seven.

But more time with Melanie? That wouldn't end well for him.

Nevertheless, he gave a minuscule tip of his head, and Dot was in his arms, bouncing and squealing and generally making a scene, as well as bursting his eardrums.

"Thank you! Thank you!"

"Yeah, sure." He gave a sharp nod. "I'm going for ice cream. You coming?"

"Dad, teenage girls don't eat that kind of thing unless they're fat or something."

Melanie's cheeks flushed and she ducked her head so fast Tristen wanted to rewind the moment and erase it. A small voice in his head warned him not to acknowledge the comment, and to disappear. It was the same one that had told him to work harder when Cindy expressed that she needed more from him. It wasn't a very smart voice.

"Dot, just so you are aware, men don't like bitchy women. They like real women who don't mind putting food in their mouths."

Ah, man.

That didn't work.

His little parenting party had officially come to a grinding halt, and he was pretty sure he'd inadvertently offended Melanie while he was at it. He couldn't win, could he?

"I don't care about men," Dot snarled. "Don't you even *listen*?" Her voice reached a crazy pitch and he cringed. Tilt-a-Whirl time. "Not that you care, I have a girlfriend now."

"So, I'll just text my boss and see what's available, shall I?" Melanie said, her voice tight.

"What? When?" he asked Dot. "I left you alone for twenty minutes."

"Just now." Her arms were crossed, her chin jutted. "Her name's Samantha."

"Um?" Melanie was still waiting.

"Sorry. Yes, Melanie," he said. "I appreciate it, and I'm sure my ungrateful daughter does, as well." He tugged Dot's arm, urging her away from what was quickly turning into a complete disaster.

"I do appreciate it, *Dad*." She dug in, refusing to budge. "I need to give Melanie my phone number. It's rude to just take off without even a goodbye."

"I didn't take off," he said, his voice tight with held back anger. "And I said goodbye."

"It's okay, I know your dad's number," Melanie said without looking up, her shoulders frozen in a way that told him she was trying to hide, so she wouldn't be dragged into their fight.

"You do?" The hope and curiosity in Dot's voice made him want to gag her.

"Yeah. A mutual friend gave it to me." She looked at him this time. Her eyes were different. Sad. Lonely. Rejected.

Again.

Who was he kidding? Melanie Summer sad, lonely, and rejected? Get real. She was nothing like him. She wasn't hiding away from the world. She was out there shaking things up.

Dot was staring at him, putting together random, unrelated pieces and undoubtedly believing that he was lying to her once again.

"I didn't just take off on you, Dot, so just leave it alone, okay?" He stomped off, hoping she'd follow, so he wouldn't have to call Cindy and tell her he'd already lost their daughter.



TRISTEN TOOK a seat at his kitchen island as Dot grinned at him, momentarily forgetting the ice cream cone in her hand, and giving Max the opportunity to claim the melting treat with a well-timed flick of his jumbo-sized tongue.

Yes, Melanie had come through for his daughter, saving the girl's future with one text to her boss—a text that had just secured Dot a position as an intern.

And now Tristen owed Melanie.

In deeper by the moment.

Dot threw her arms around him, pulling him into a monster hug, before returning to her room to text her friends about the turn in fate.

He looked at Max, who was eyeing Tristen's empty hands. "Sorry, pal. I ate my cone back in town."

The dog's brown eyebrows lowered and he dropped his hundred-pound frame to the floor with a thump that vibrated through the laminate flooring.

"How do you not break something when you do that?" Tristen muttered. Grabbing a handful of blueberries, he opened the patio door, trying to ignore the garbage barge speeding by. It was too small to be Shawn McNeil's. Plus Shawn always followed the speed limit, whereas this barge was trucking along as if rules didn't apply. Tristen went back inside for his phone, then dialed the number for the police.

"There's a large barge with demolition debris speeding through the bay outside Port Carling," he told the dispatcher. "The scrap is just about spilling into the water. Maybe it already has." Because of the way the barge was weighted down with the remains of an old cottage, its speed was that much more dangerous. Traffic near town was bad this time of day, especially with the boat show.

"We'll send out the marine patrol," the woman said before hanging up.

Tristen leaned against the deck railing. This was the second or third barge he'd noticed in the past day or so. He supposed the recession wasn't hurting people as badly as he'd thought, which would mean vacation properties might pick up again. Not a bad thing when a Realtor earned a decent commission, and most cottages in the area went for over a million hot ones.

He smiled and returned to the kitchen to sort out supper. He needed something good, celebratory, healthy, yet filling for a growing teenager. Something his daughter would eat without protest.

"What's her name again?" Dot asked, joining him in the kitchen, phone in hand.

"Melanie."

"Cool." She texted something, tucked the device away, then smirked. "Her name was right on your lips, wasn't it?"

"There's nothing between me and Melanie." He reached far into the fridge, maneuvering jars of pickles and jam out of the way.

"Why not?"

"Why should there be?"

"She didn't go running and screaming from you."

He pulled his head out of the fridge to stare at his daughter.

"Not much fashion sense, though."

"She has plenty." His tone was too curt, his defense too quick. He put his head back in the fridge, half wishing it was a gas oven.

"You totally owe her one. You should take her out for supper."

"Not going to happen."

"Why not?"

"She wants something from me."

"Ew! I didn't want to know that." The disgust on Dot's face made him smile. He was tempted to leave the misunderstanding in place for his own amusement, but knowing she would be spending a lot of time with Melanie, he didn't want inopportune comments popping out that might give the woman the wrong idea about him and his intentions.

Not that there were intentions. Other than to avoid her.

"She wants me to help stop a development. Advice and such, and I don't do that any longer. I'm happy with stonework."

Dot crossed her arms and twisted her lips doubtfully.

"I left the business. I'm here and have time now. Okay? I'm happy." He turned away and clanged some pots together. He would continue on as he had, cutting his old world from his life—with the exception of Dot—and everything would be just fine.

"You're a jerk."

"Hey!" He pointed a noodle scooper in her direction. "Watch your language."

"It's true. She totally just bailed you out and you can't sit down and tell her how to take down corporate Canada before they destroy the world? Nice, Dad. Real nice."

"I don't like your tone, young lady."

Dot stormed out and Tristen fought with the urge to go after her and yell until his voice grew hoarse. Instead, he sat at the table and clutched his head, because she was right. He was a jerk. However, where Melanie was concerned, he had absolutely no plans to remedy that fact.

Melanie hunched over her computer and propped her head in her hand. Staying up late on Sunday night to create the presentation for Mr. Valos was finally catching up with her. Evidence: what had she been thinking, flirting with Tristen yesterday? He was the enemy. A big fat hot-and-cold, keep-to-himself, flustering, sweet hunk of man.

Oh, my. She was so doomed.

As she'd tried to sleep, his words about how antiques were like people and that they sometimes got better with age had repeated over and over again. If he hadn't said that, she was pretty sure she could have stayed mad at him. Instead, she'd jumped at the first chance to be helpful, and arranged an internship for his daughter, effective pretty much immediately. Something about cheap labor made her boss perk up. And of course, being lowest on the office totem pole, Melanie would be the one training Dot. Which actually worked out okay, seeing as the girl caught on quickly, giving Melanie hope that the two of them would find her desk's surface again. Under all the angst and dyed hair, Dot was actually kind of sweet.

"There's someone here to see you," the teen said, edging into Melanie's tiny office, her eyes round.

"Sorry, one day they will let the newbie have a bigger office." Melanie, still seated, reached out with a leg to nudge a chair out of Dot's way.

Mrs. Star wanted to update her will in order to give her thrice-removed nephew, Benji Reiter over in Blueberry Springs, a share of the lawn ornaments she kept in front of her home. Melanie restacked the overstuffed file folders into a tower to her left, trying to carve out a space where she could take notes.

"You can send her in."

"It's, uh, not a her. It's a him," Dot whispered.

Aaron from Rubicore appeared in her doorway, a crisp black suit making him somehow look bigger. He was practically blocking out the feeble sunshine that made its way to her back office. Melanie wasn't sure why, but she got the impression that if this were a movie, he'd have blown her away with a bazooka by now.

"Hello." She walked around her desk and shook his hand. He squeezed hers too hard. Annoying. She needed to use those fingers to type. "Aaron Bloomwood, is that correct?"

"Yes." He turned and waved another man forward. A very large man. On a dog-to-human ratio he'd be a massive Newfoundland. "Your assistant said you are available."

Melanie checked her watch. "I have five minutes before my last client of the day."

"This is Mario LaToya, my personal assistant." Aaron gestured to the Newfoundland at his side. "Melanie Summer."

Mario nodded, his eyes so dark it was hard to know whether he was friend or foe.

She had a feeling he was more vicious junkyard dog than cuddly pound puppy.

Aaron took a seat while Mario remained by the door in a military “at ease” position. Melanie slipped behind her desk, feeling unexpectedly nervous.

“What can I help you with today?” She folded her hands, spine straight. “Oh, and I passed the invitation on to my sisters. Did Maya tell you we’d be pleased to attend? RSVP the four of us, please. Although she’s not sure what the proposal is that you spoke of.”

Aaron scowled. Not a big scary one, but big enough to show he was not pleased with her for some reason. Melanie would have thought he would be thrilled to hear the people he was trying to schmooze were willing to join the fun. You know, evil laughter, followed by fingertips being tapped together as the plan slipped into place.

“We were hoping to further discuss any concerns you have at the dinner prior to the party, but I hear you have immediate concerns.” The scowl was gone, his face suddenly placid and friendly. Almost.

Melanie gave a noncommittal “Oh,” and smiled encouragingly, hoping he’d show his cards. Or at least how many he was holding.

Impatience flickered across the man’s face. “We would appreciate it if you talked to us if you have concerns. Allow us to alleviate them.”

Melanie tilted her head as though confused.

Mr. Valos had ratted her out? But why?

Or was it Tristen? Maybe that was the reason he wouldn’t help her—because he was already on the other team.

Dot hovered near the door and Melanie tipped her head, indicating she could close it. Instead, the teen continued to stand there, at a loss.

“We’d rather you and I discuss any issues you have,” Aaron said, crossing his legs. “I’m confident that reasonable people such as ourselves can come to an understanding without involving the municipality.”

Mr. Valos. The sneak.

"I'll keep that in mind. Thank you for coming to see me." Melanie spun her chair to the side so her legs were out from under her desk. She placed her palm on a pile of folders and leaned forward, ready to stand, essentially dismissing him.

"I don't expect you to understand how cities, towns, townships, or other municipalities work, Ms. Summer. The paperwork and bureaucracy can become quite involved in a project of this magnitude. Our financiers could become upset if we encountered delays over something so small I could have resolved it with a simple conversation." Aaron stood, adjusting his suit jacket with a half laugh intended to suggest they were on the same side. "And you know how the government can be."

Mario puffed out his chest, arms crossed, legs wide apart. Those scary dark eyes still watching her every move.

"Oh, I didn't realize you had approval, Mr. Bloomwood. Congratulations."

Aaron smiled, not giving away whether he did or not. *Nuts.*

"As a smart woman, you surely understand where I am coming from?" The developer leaned a bit closer. Not so much that he could be considered threatening, but with Mario behind him, that was definitely his goal.

Melanie laughed lightly. "Of course. I'm sure my sisters would love to have a chance to chat with you about the resort, and dinner is such a good idea." She held a hand against her chest, ignoring the fact that both men had moved closer. There really wasn't enough air in here. "And personally, I do wonder what will become of Heritage Row. It's so pretty, and I notice that one of the cottages is already gone. Only three left. Such a shame."

"It had termites."

"Oh, I didn't realize they came this far north. We'd better get our place checked. Thank you for the heads-up."

Aaron placed a hand on her desk, obviously seeing through her charade. He met her eyes with a forceful glare. "Don't go to the municipality, Ms. Summer. Come to us."

Melanie swallowed hard, trying not to allow her smile to vanish the way the saliva in her mouth had.

"Ms. Summer? There's someone here to see you," Dot said, her voice wavering. Melanie sighed in relief at the interruption. Talk about timing.

She caught a flash of black leather in the doorway. Had Mrs. Star gone for a makeover or was this yet another unexpected visitor?

"Send her in," Melanie called to Dot. "These men were just leaving."

Instead of Mrs. Star, Ezra the biker from the Steel Barrel pressed his way into the small room, blocking Aaron's and Mario's exit. "Everything okay, Melanie?" His low voice rumbled with a warning that sent a wave of both fear and relief spiraling through her bloodstream.

"These men are leaving. Thank you, Ezra."

The biker narrowed his eyes, legs planted hip-width apart.

"Move," Aaron snapped. He took a step forward, but the biker didn't budge.

"I do hope you weren't harassing this young woman." Though Ezra was shorter than Aaron and Mario, Melanie had no doubt he could take them out in a truly gory fashion.

Rubicore's front man glared, pushing past Ezra, who still didn't move, causing Aaron to bounce off him and hit the door on his way out. Melanie bit her bottom lip to hide her amusement. Mario, following his boss, flashed her a curious, reassessing glance.

When the two men were gone, Ezra shut the door with a bang, and it bounced back open again. He took a seat across from Melanie, who had collapsed into her chair.

"You let me know if they're a problem and I'll take care of them."

"Thank you." She wasn't going to question how, just take solace in the fact that someone would keep her safe if need be. Not that she thought she might need to take him up on the offer, of course. Aaron was just being pushy. Which told her exactly what she needed to know. There was a way to stop them, or at least seriously impede their progress.

She could take them down, but unlike yesterday morning, when she'd wanted to show Tristen that she could do it on her own, she knew she was going to need help. Plenty of it.

"What can I do for you, Ezra?"

"I need a divorce."

"I don't specialize in divorce law, but I could recommend someone for you." She flipped through her drawer for the business card of a local divorce lawyer.

"I want you."

Melanie glanced up in surprise. His voice was unexpectedly soft.

Standing behind him was Tristen, arms slack at his sides. He blinked, closed his mouth and stepped into the room.

Well, it looked as though everyone was coming to visit her today. Lucky duck. She knew she should have worn something more fun than her boring gray pantsuit. Not that she had anything more fun. She might have to break down and ask Simone for another dress, despite herself.

Melanie moved around her desk to usher Tristen out. "I'm sorry, Mr. Bell. I'm with a client at the moment. If you're here to pick up Dot, she can leave early."

Tristen's gaze flicked between her and the biker, who was sitting back, hands folded over his small paunch.

"Is this man bothering you, Melanie?" Tristen asked.

Was he kidding? Today was turning into pissing match after pissing match. There had to be something in the water, or else a bright, flashing sign outside saying Come On In and Mess Up Melanie's Day. "No, he is not." She enunciated the words carefully, not wanting to offend Tristen by pointing out how utterly ridiculous he was being.

"Dad," Dot said, joining her father in the doorway. "This guy just totally scared away some guys who were giving Ms. Summer a hard time."

Tristen's face flushed red and he came closer to Melanie, making her step back. "Is this true?"

"What is this? Protect Melanie Day?" She gave a nervous laugh and moved behind her desk again.

"Some developer trying to silence the girl, I'd say," the biker drawled. "That the truth, Miss Melanie?"

She sighed and nodded. That about summed it up, although it sounded much more sinister coming from him. It kind of made her hands shake a tiny bit, something that her knees seemed to want to get in on as well.

Tristen was staring at her, his fists clenched at his sides, a vein in his forehead throbbing.

"She held her own," the biker said.

"Ezra helped," Melanie added.

Tristen was around her desk in a flash, his fingers gripping into her shoulders, his brow wrinkled with what could only be worry. "Did they threaten you?"

Ezra was up and cramming himself into the small space behind her desk as Tristen gave her a small shake to get an answer out of her. "Did they?"

"Back off," the biker warned.

Melanie wrenched her arms from Tristen's grasp, pushing her chair backward as anger rushed through her veins, setting her on fire. "You don't want anything to do with Rubicore, so bugger off and mind your own business. I can take care of myself."

"You're in over your head."

"At least I'm trying to make things better, and not running off scared."

"You need help."

"I don't need help, thank you very much." She crossed her arms. "I can do this without you."

"No, I don't think you can."

"Really? And what exactly are you going to do for me, Tristen Bell?"

He rushed from the room, his face a fireworks display of conflicting emotions, leaving Melanie to scratch her head.

"Wow, okay," she said with a laugh.

"You're a real prize, you know that?" Dot called after her father, before following him.

So Tristen was going to run away again. Why should Melanie expect anything different from the man?

She addressed Ezra. "Sorry about all that."

"So, can you help me?" the biker asked.

"Technically, yes. But I think someone who specializes in divorce would be better, if it isn't an amicable split." She dug out a few forms. "Whoever you decide to go to, filling these out ahead of time will help keep the costs down, since lawyers bill by the hour."

Mrs. Star appeared in the doorway, smiling and cradling a garden gnome. Grand Central Station had nothing on Melanie's office this afternoon.

"Oh, dear. I'm sorry. You're with Ezra. How are you, sweetie?" Mrs. Star reached into the room to rest a hand on his leather-covered

shoulder. "Is your mother's ankle okay? I heard she had a spill."

"She's fine, thank you." He stood and offered Mrs. Star his seat.

"I'm sorry I'm late, Melanie."

"Am I interrupting your appointment?" Ezra asked.

"Of course you are, my dear. I'm not some Hells Angel waltzing in and expecting to be served, due to my intimidating behaviour."

Ezra gave a good-natured laugh and bowed gallantly. "My apologies, Mrs. Star."

"Are you here to get rid of that wife of yours? I heard the two of you were separating."

"I'm afraid so."

"Elsie owes me five dollars," the older woman announced triumphantly. "That's my sister," she added for Melanie's benefit. "She's over in Blueberry Springs, and says it's the best place on earth." Mrs. Star gave a snort. "That place has nothing on Muskoka. Wouldn't you say?"

Melanie slipped the divorce lawyer's business card into Ezra's hand, in case he changed his mind about hiring someone who knew what he or she was doing. At the same time, she studiously avoided Mrs. Star's attempt to get her involved in the ongoing battle between the woman and her absent sister.

The biker shut the door on his way out and Melanie relaxed. Back on schedule and back to normal.

"What was the kerfuffle out there about someone harassing you?" Mrs. Star asked with a severe look, almost daring Melanie to hide the truth.

"The developer out on Baby Horseshoe Island wanted to discuss things, that's all. He'd rather I chat with him before talking to Mr. Valos."

Mrs. Star snorted. "Mr. Valos couldn't help you save his own life. Now, what about that fellow yelling in the parking lot? What's he about?"

"What fellow?"

"He was yelling at two men, saying they needed to leave you alone." Mrs. Star was practically aquiver. "Does he like you? Is he your man? A fine fellow, defending you like that. Mrs. Kowski said there was a guy eyeing you at the boat show." Melanie's client pressed a palm against her bosom, eyes twinkling.

"There wasn't a guy eyeing me. Was the man outside with a teenage girl?" she asked, barely daring to let herself hope that much.

"Yes." Mrs. Star leaned forward, eager for her to confide all.

Melanie sagged into her chair with a sigh. Why was Tristen protecting her? Or was he only protecting Dot?

"He said they needed to leave you be because you were a lone woman and wouldn't cause them any problems."

"He did, did he?" She leaned forward again. Well, she might just have to show Tristen Bell that he shouldn't underestimate her. Just because he wasn't going to help her didn't mean she was going to roll over and not make a difference in this world.



TRISTEN SAT on the dock and closed his eyes, nudging Max's heavy body off his warm feet. What was Melanie getting herself into with Rubicore? And having a member of the Hells Angels defending her? The woman was in over her head and didn't even realize it. Normally, Tristen would walk away, but with his daughter working so closely with Melanie and rubbing elbows with her dangerous acquaintances, she could become a target, or worse.

He squelched the urge to take action, to destroy the enemy by any means, and in the process ground his jaw so hard a tension headache formed.

Dot paddled over on her pink inner tube, sporting the anklet he'd bought her for her thirteenth birthday. He'd almost forgotten about it. He'd spent hours looking for just the right item. A chain that was delicate, yet wouldn't break if she acted like a kid; a heart charm that was classy, but still spunky. Something she could wear anywhere, anytime, any age.

But maybe not swimming. He debated asking her to take it off, but was worried that, if she did, it might slip between the boards of the dock and be lost forever.

"You don't have to watch me, you know," she called. "Mom lets me swim alone."

"I happen to like hanging out on my dock, thank you very much."

"Grouchy much? What worm crawled up your—"

"Don't use that tone," he warned.

"So, you enjoy sitting here, scowling at the trash barges going by?"

"I'm not scowling." He relaxed the muscles that were pinching his mouth.

"Yes, you are. You glare at them while they pass."

"Have you looked in the bay?" It was only a few hundred feet across, really just a cottage-lined bulge in the river before it wove its way through the Port Carling locks and into Lake Muskoka. "They're dropping debris, which is going to wash up on my shore. How am I supposed to get a thirty-foot fir beam out of the water?"

Dot shrugged, her attitude back. "Who cares?"

"I do."

"Then help Melanie stop the development. And I mean more than just yelling at those bullies in suits."

Tristen tried to pry his hands out of the fists they'd formed, but found he couldn't. The tension had spread all the way down to his thighs.

"Chicken?" she taunted.

He stood up, hoping to walk off the anger ripping through his muscles, making them burn. "You work for her, but I don't appreciate you getting involved with her development battle. You need to stay out of it, as it does not concern you."

"They're dropping stuff in the water I'm swimming in." His daughter's head tilted in a haughty challenge.

"Don't you dare get involved in this!" Realizing he'd moved to the edge of the dock and was glaring down at her, giving her the reaction she'd feed upon, he stepped back and forced himself to cool it.

Dot's fingers tightened on the edge of the dock as she bobbed in the wake from one of the barges. "Why are you being so selfish? You could squash Rubicore in, like, five seconds."

"What I do or don't do is none of your business, young lady."

The teen gave an angry snarl, rolled off her tube and swam away.

"Stay close to shore."

He judged the distance between her and the barges. Given the location of the cottage on the outside curve of the bay, she had plenty of room before she ended up where the boat traffic naturally turned on its way in and out of town. But still, it was hard to see a swimmer, especially one far from shore.

Tristen checked his cell phone for reception, took off his watch and shoes, removed the small, polished black stone he carried in his pocket to remind himself that power, prestige, and wealth didn't equal a life worth living, and kept an eye on Dot in case she needed help. Having a teenager was going to make him prematurely gray.

That and the way Melanie kept popping into his life, taunting him to step into the world he'd left behind. He was a stoneworker now. One on the brink of being able to ditch selling houses, and start doing it full-time without digging into his billion-dollar nest egg. Call him crazy, but he felt the need to start this new life without his old money tainting it. An all new Tristen was being formed and he didn't need anyone or anything distracting him from the goals he'd set out for himself.

Dot continued to swim, rolling into a fluid back crawl, making her way toward shore, where the water was dark, shaded by tall trees. The exertion would hopefully work off the excess surliness and she'd return to the land of the normal. Then, he'd suggest she find a different law office to work in.

When Dot was close enough for him to holler at, he called, "How does someone with a stroke like that fail gym class?"

She pulled her head out of the water, not even out of breath as she replied, "What?" The snarky note in her voice was still there.

"Keep swimming, kid."

A few shingles nailed to a board drifted by, and he stooped to scoop it out. Max came over to inspect the object and Tristen found himself hoping Melanie would manage to put some stops and checks on the developer, if nothing else. Rubicore didn't care about the surrounding area, only their bottom line. And in a quaint, historic area such as Muskoka, it was a shame they should be allowed to act that way.

Dot's regular splashing faltered and she let out an anguished cry, which had her choking on water. Tristen went on alert, perching himself on the dock's edge, ready to dive in, arms out for balance as he watched for further signs of distress. As Max barked at his side, he mentally calculated Dot's location, in case she went under.

"Are you okay?" he hollered.

"No! I'm stuck to something!" Her voice was high with panic, her eyes huge. Tristen's legs burned with adrenaline as he shoved off the dock in a dive, arching far across the water in hopes of getting to her faster.

Then he was splashing across the lake, the inner tube under his arm, the weight of his clothes slowing him down as his cargo shorts' pockets filled with water. The tube interfered with his movements so he clipped its seam between his teeth and backstroked to where his daughter was treading water, struggling to keep her head above the waves.

"There's something under the water," she gasped as he came closer. Her eyes were black with panic. "It's caught my anklet."

"It's okay. I have you now." He pushed the tube toward her but she flailed, knocking it away as she went under. He grabbed her around the waist, trying to hold her up as he stretched for the tube, which was dancing away in the breeze. They went under together. Tristen kicked hard, his legs screaming. They were going down, along with whatever she was caught on.

He let go of her to try and dive, but she scrambled against him, hugging him so hard he lost the breath he'd been holding.

The water was deep, the bottom coming closer by the second. His foot hit a dark object under Dot. The fir beam he'd been griping about had decided it was time to sink to the rocky depths with his daughter attached.

Tristen twisted away from her, letting her use her energy against him as he bent to grab her leg. He yanked.

Nothing.

He was out of air. Dot's struggles were weakening. He shoved her arms out of his way and grabbed her ankle, bracing his feet on the old beam. It was too dark to find the clasp to her anklet. He yanked again.

Then harder. Why had he bought such a strong chain? He was going to hurt her if he wasn't careful.

He fumbled through the darkness, unable to find what the anklet was caught on.

Dot was barely moving. He couldn't lose her. Not like this. Not ever.

He braced himself against the beam, knowing this would hurt Dot, but that it might be their only chance. Wrapping his hands around her ankle in hopes of minimizing the damage, he gave one last vicious tug, using his legs as leverage. The anklet broke beneath his grip.

She was free!

Kicking hard, Tristen pushed past his daughter, snagging her as he burst to the surface, her limp body clutched against him.

Tristen gasped and sputtered. His lungs fought to take in the sudden oxygen; his muscles speared by pain. Shore. He needed to get to shore.

His body weak, he kicked furiously, heaving great gulps of air as he dragged Dot to land. After carrying her over the rocks set along the shoreline, he collapsed onto a bed of pine needles lowering her to the ground.

Her eyes were closed, her lips not nearly as pink as they should be. His fingers fumbled to find a pulse. He lowered his ear to her chest and checked for breathing.

"Come on, Dot. Breathe. Don't die." *Please don't die.*

Movement. Her chest expanded.

He rolled her onto her side, unable to take his eyes off the pulse at her neck, her nostrils' slight flutter.

Wake up.

After an excruciatingly long series of seconds that had him praying to every god he'd ever heard of, she stirred slightly. Then nothing. Max came thundering over, crashing into Dot. He barked twice, then licked

her face. She coughed and sputtered, her eyes opening. Then she let out a wail, and Tristen crushed her against his chest as she sobbed in terror.

"I have you, Dot. I have you. It's okay."

Max nosed his head between them, licking Dot's face.

Tristen checked her over as he held her. The leg that had been caught was bleeding from a long gash, and there was an oozing, angry welt where he'd tugged off her anklet.

His baby girl.

He hefted her, Max barking at his side, and spun to head up the hill to his truck. "I'm taking you to the hospital."

A large wail escaped her.

"Are you hurt anywhere other than your leg?"

She clung to his wet shirt, her hands in fists. The water she wrung out of the fabric trickled down his chest. He wanted to shake her, get a full sentence, so he could slow his storming heartbeat and know she was safe.

"Are you hurt?"

She let out a sob, her body shaking in residual fear.

Tristen tightened his grip and hurried his pace. Someone was going to pay for this.



TRISTEN HELPED Dot into the law office. She had needed twenty-four stitches to her foot and ankle due to the developer's negligence, and it had taken every scrap of willpower Tristen possessed not to go marching over to Melanie's and ask her to start a lawsuit against Rubicore, even though it was almost midnight by the time the doctor had set them free.

Melanie wanted action? Well, now that Dot had been hurt, there was going to be plenty of action. And not just from Tristen. His daughter

was fired up and ready to take on the world, as well.

Look out, Rubicore.

"Oh, my." Melanie rushed to help Dot as the girl hobbled into the office's entry. "What happened to you?"

"I got caught," she replied in a shaky voice. "On some trash that fell off Rubicore's barge."

"Rubicore?" Melanie met Tristen's gaze.

"We're pretty sure," he said.

"It was under the water," Dot continued. Her vulnerability tore him up, and he had to suppress the urge to punch something in hopes of making the helpless feeling go away. "We need to go get them, Melanie. We need to make them pay. My dad is right—they have to clean up their mess."

Melanie cut him another glance. She was in one of those 1950s dresses again, blue this time, with white accents, and it was as sexy as all get out. His eyes kept being drawn to her cleavage, which was tasteful exposed, but ultimately a sexy curve that made him want to get her naked.

He had to be hard up for some time with a woman. It was the only reasonable answer. Two years of abstinence was finally doing him in, because he was seriously considering a woman that a smart man would not take to bed. Melanie was not a one-night-stand sort of gal. She was the other kind. The kind he was definitely not seeking and therefore should not be eyeing.

They were waiting for him to speak, their expectation tangible.

"What?" he asked.

"Are you going to help?" Dot plunked her hands on her lips, that scary teenage persona flickering to the surface.

"Sure, let's get you over to your desk." He helped her along, purposefully misunderstanding her meaning, doubts niggling his mind. If

he got into this Rubicore mess with Melanie at his side he would ruin everything. And he wasn't referring to Rubicore. He'd crush the developer, of course, but he couldn't be that dashing hero for Melanie and still be the man he wanted to be. The man he was now. The man who wanted Melanie, a sexy, smart woman, to desire him as badly as he feared he desired her.

Doomed. That was the word for it.

"No." Dot stopped moving. "Help with the development." She gave him an assessing glance, then reached for the killer ammo. Like an illegal arms dealer, she pulled the pin on his soft side's grenade. The hurt child card. Helpless, he watched it roll in. "They hurt me, Daddy."

Daddy.

Crap.

He was officially a ruined man.

"I know, Dot. But we I—"

"What's the excuse, buster?" Melanie had moved up on him, arms crossed, fury pumping below her unflawed skin.

Double crap. He used to play hockey, but he hadn't seen his opposition closing in on him, ready to take him down. "Look, I don't have the puck, okay? So go after someone else."

Melanie narrowed her eyes. "You can't put the rookie with no experience on the ice and expect her not to get creamed. The team needs an experienced coach."

Triple crap. She was using sports analogies now? Add sprinkles and a cherry on his I'm-completely-and-utterly-screwed sundae.

He looked to Dot. She, too, needed him to be the man he'd become, not the monster he used to be. The man who could make her laugh and not scowl all the time. The father who was there. Not the man who strived to win at any cost.

Maybe he could sue Rubicore from afar.

"We need you, Daddy." Dot pulled on his arm, her eyes big. "We need you to be the scary guy who takes them down. We can't do it without you."

Both women might be harmless in appearance, but he knew they had a hard underside of manipulation and strength. While they were softening him, they were no match for an experienced manipulator like Rubicore, whose administrators had money, power, and prestige on their side and could buy out anyone—and likely already had.

Melanie and Dot couldn't do it on their own, could they?

"Imagine who else is going to get hurt if we don't stop them. I can't even go swimming anymore. What if something happens to Max? Or Melanie's kids?"

"I don't have kids."

"Who is going to stop them, Dad?"

Okay, first of all, it didn't have to be him. Anyone could raise a ruckus.

"We need you. You know what to do."

Unfortunately, that was true.

"We only have one chance. Time is limited," Melanie added quietly.

They were dog-piling him.

"I'm sure the municipality will do something," he replied.

"I called them this morning and I got a brush-off." Dot's chin jutted out and trembled. "You said you'd help. You said you wanted to crush their skulls like they were canned salmon bones." Her eyes brimmed with tears.

Oh, no. Not the tears.

He edged toward the door.

"You know people in the municipality, right, Tristen?" Melanie asked softly. She was following him. Stalking him with her pretty, sweet, and innocent persona. Nonthreatening but completely dangerous.

He was being selfish and unfair by saying no, especially since he'd probably learned how to manage the monster he kept bound in the attic. It wouldn't come out to play if he only helped out in the background, right?

"We need you, Daddy."

His daughter needed him. How could he ever convince himself there was a choice in the matter? If she needed him, he had to be in. End of story.

This was bad.

Tristen had changed his tune and was eager to help, which was good, but he'd turned into an impossible bossy pants who wanted to take over and be in control.

"We need to get someone who can make sure they perform due diligence. Like a watchdog committee," he said, leaning against the couch back, making himself comfortable here in Trixie Hollow. They'd left Dot at the movie theater with her new girlfriend Samantha and had done a motorboat drive-by of Baby Horseshoe, seeing frustratingly little despite hearing loud machines working in the island's woods. They'd decided on a Nymph Island stopover to try and come up with a game plan.

"How do you find a person like that?" Melanie took off her glasses and rubbed them on the skirt of her dress.

Tristen stared at the fireplace's stonework, seemingly lost for a moment.

"Out here, in the middle of nowhere?" he said finally, coming back around. "Not sure, exactly."

Melanie sighed, wishing the frustrating man didn't smell awesome. She'd been ecstatic when he'd agreed to help, but now he was

withdrawing, becoming distant and professional. She wanted the man who had charmed her at the boat show, the man with the passionate glimmer in his eye when an injured Dot had convinced him to help.

Part of Melanie wondered if he was having second thoughts about working with her.

She walked to the screen door that led out to the veranda and listened for a moment. "How can they possibly have a permit to be doing whatever they're doing over there? I haven't seen a thing in the municipal news."

"I'll write a letter to the council that you can use as your own," Tristen said, moving back to the garbage issue he seemed so stuck on.

"Why can't it have your name on it?"

"I thought you wanted to be the head of this project?"

"Why don't you want Rubicore to know you're involved?"

Tristen wouldn't meet her eyes as he began typing on his laptop. "I think you should also set up a few meetings to find out what is really going on."

"Mr. Valos still thinks I'm a useless teenager. We need someone with more sway." She gave him a pointed look, which was lost on him.

"I'm going to talk to the bylaw officer about the trash issue. I'll take the concerned-father approach."

"What can we do about the heritage they are surely destroying over there?"

"The garbage issue is long-term, Melanie."

"So is heritage."

"They're still going to be hauling trash once the resort is open. It's not something we want to see or have falling into our water."

"And the other environmental issues? Such as destroying habitat, creating noise and light pollution? This is a dark-skies area. Has that been considered in their plans? Will I be able to look at the stars with

Tigger or will they have too many security lights running so we can't see the heavens? They'll totally denude the place of shady trees, I'm sure, and then have to run noisy air conditioners. Sound carries across the water. And a golf course—they're hard on the environment, especially along the shore. How did anyone approve that? Just the fertilizer and pesticides running off into the nesting areas are enough to make me want to scream and lie down in front of a bulldozer." She sat down in a huff beside him, arms crossed. "I could go on, you know."

Tristen took a long, slow breath. "You're not going to stop this development, Melanie. The best you can do is ensure they stay accountable and follow the rules."

"Look at what they're doing! And nobody has the teeth or the backbone to stop them." She stood again, her anger exploding. "Why are you even here? For the stupid garbage issue? Because that's like asking someone to repaint a car that's going to crash into everyone's lives. You're going to pull out as soon as they clean up the bay, aren't you?"

Tristen's jaw tightened and he flexed his hands, finally settling them into fists on his knees.

"Oh, my word. You are." She wanted so badly to shake him her arms hurt from the effort of holding herself back. "I thought you were a real man, Tristen Bell. I can't believe you were going to use me like that."

He glanced up, eyes wide with surprise. "No. Melanie, I wasn't."

"You're not even one bit committed to stopping Rubicore. You've given up and rolled over." She leaned closer, his amazing scent wafting over her. "Are you committed to helping me, or not?"

"Melanie, I can't give you what you need. I can't be here all the time. I have a job."

"I asked you to *help* me. To do more than tell me things I already know, and write some lame letter."

He stood slowly, like a spring whose tension was gradually being released. "You asked for advice. I'm giving you advice. You can't attack all of those things without engaging in a massive all-out battle that will overtake my life."

"You're life?"

"Yours, too. Dot's. Everyone's. You don't have time to take that on. Taking this on is a full-time job for at least ten people with an incredible amount of knowledge and connections."

"You're telling me to give up."

"I'm telling you how you can achieve small wins."

"You've underestimated me, Tristen Bell. I am in this for more than a cleanup day at Rubicore's expense. I'm in this to play hardball."

"Rubicore plays dirty. They're big, smart, and have done this so many times they know every loophole there is. Take my advice and look for ways you can win something against them."

"I'm not doing this to validate myself. I'm shutting them down, do you understand?"

"Melanie, you can't."

"Yeah, well, if you don't believe leave. I'm tired of people thinking I'm a nobody." She pointed to the door, her muscles trembling with adrenaline.

"You asked for advice and I'm giving it."

"You heard me. Commit to my plan to oust Rubicore or get out of my cottage."

"Listen to me." He held her arms as though he feared she was going to run away. "A company like Rubicore has so much money and power behind them—"

"I still believe in the power of grassroots movements, democracy, the legal system, and the power of right and wrong over money. I'm sorry you don't. Now, I'll ask you again. Please leave."

"You gave me a ride here."

She chucked her cell phone at him. "Call a water taxi."

"Melanie "

"I don't want to hear it unless you are going to commit to showing these guys some teeth."

He lowered his brows, looking torn and broken. He stared at her phone for a few seconds, then with a sad shake of his head, carefully tapped in the number for the water taxi.



MELANIE WIPED the tears from her cheeks. She was silly, getting upset over Tristen, but as usual she'd expected too much, got her hopes up, and boom. There it was: a man who wasn't that interested and wasn't able to support her in the way she needed.

Oh, but how his cheeks had created those dreamy lines on either side of his mouth when he'd frowned at her.

Melanie smoothed her new dress over her knees—Simone had insisted she take it as a gift—and wondered what she should do next. Save the cottage? Figure out how to take Rubicore down?

At least she and Tristen had discovered early on that they couldn't work together. It would have been awful if she'd gone to lean on him and found he wasn't there.

Sitting on the floor, she opened the old steamer trunk they left behind the couch facing the fireplace, and inhaled its aged smell. History. So much history. She stroked its dinged metal edges, then reached in to pull out her favorite item. Old letters scented with dust and adventure. It had been years since she'd last looked through the trunk, and she placed the bundle of old letters addressed to her great-

grandmother in her lap, ready to enjoy the guilty pleasure of reading someone else's business and being swept away to another time.

The sloping handwriting of her great-grandmother's male pen pal had become familiar over the years and Melanie's eyes quickly adjusted to its swirls and the faded ink, making it easy to decipher.

She used to read the letters simply because they were a tie to her great-grandmother, Ada, and not because they made a lot of sense—not without her grandmother's side of the story. Skimming the first letter on top of the stack, Melanie sighed. This was a man who was committed. He was discussing a project they shared and how they were going to break ground in the spring. The letter writer was likely from northern Ontario, as he kept calling what must have been a cottage a "camp." Melanie flipped the envelope over, squinting at the postmark. Illegible. She read the signature again. That was tricky, because it looked as though it said Stewart Baker. But that was ridiculous. The only Stewart Baker she knew of had been an old Canadian movie star in black-and-white films—a man she'd heard about only recently. There would be no reason for a man like him to write to her great-gran about how they were building a cottage. Melanie laughed at the way her heart was racing. Ever the romantic.

Despite feeling silly, she skimmed another letter for clues that the pen pal was *the* Stewart. Nothing. A slight reading on the Swoonalicious Scale, but that was about it. The next letter mentioned Muskoka and a weekend spent at Windermere House. Another needle bump on the scale, but no real clues. Was this man the father of her illegitimate grandmother?

Melanie carefully set everything back in the trunk and stood, barely daring to breathe so she wouldn't break the pieces that were trying to float together in her mind. Standing, she grabbed her purse and the boat key. There was one easy way to find out if Stewart Baker, the movie

star, had spent time in the area. And if he had, then maybe, somehow, she could pin historical significance on the cottage and save them a few tax dollars.

Relieved to see Tristen wasn't still waiting on the dock for the water taxi, Melanie climbed into the family's Boston Whaler and set out across the water. She docked at the island where the museum stood, and climbed the small hill to see what she could discover.

"Stewart Baker, huh?" asked the curator, her longtime friend Christophe.

"Yeah. Do you have anything on him? Did he vacation here?" She held her breath, knowing her hopes would be unrealistically dashed if the letter-writing Stewart was merely a random man. And she had only half an hour to find out before Christophe locked up for the day.

"He did."

"For real? The movie star?"

Christophe nodded, his floppy hair dropping into his hazel eyes.

Melanie paused, thinking. She still needed proof whether the letters to her great-grandmother were actually from the movie star, especially since none of them mentioned movies, fame, or a career.

"Do you have any letters with his signature, by chance?" she asked.

"I don't think so. I'll check the archives. I have a few photos of him in there that I can dig out, for sure. In the meantime, why don't you start over there?" He pointed to a display a few feet away. "With last year's short documentary on old-time movie stars, I put up a few of the better photos of him and some other celebrities."

"What documentary?"

"It was on the CBC. It may be still viewable from their website." Christophe adjusted his glasses on his long nose. "Say, are you putting anything in the antique show this weekend? Daphne told me your collection is rotting in cardboard boxes."

"It's not rotting."

"I could sell a few things at my table if you'd like." He gave her a wink, tucking his shirttails into his droopy trousers. He'd been trying to curb her "hoarding habit" for years, telling her that antiques were valuable only if you sold them.

"Ha, ha." She gave a weak smile, trying to work through the tightness that had developed in her chest. If she sold her antiques collection she might be able to foot her portion of the tax bill for Nymph Island, but it wouldn't be easy parting with the old friends. And yet she knew she would do it without barely a second thought. Poor Hailey had carried the burden of their cottage for too long. It was time to step up and help out in any way she could. If Melanie had to declutter in order to do so, then so be it. It would be worth it. Her sisters and the memories held on Nymph island were worth more than any antiques. There would always be more to collect. There wouldn't always be a cottage that brought them all together.

"Yeah, I might," she said, finally.

Christophe's eyes widened and he hurried off to the archives, taking a second glance over his shoulder as though she was something to fear. It almost made her laugh.

"Yeah, I know," she called. Desperate times called for desperate measures.

The curator disappeared through a door and Melanie turned to find Tristen standing close, his phone held up for her to see.

She took a step back, hand on her chest.

He waved his phone, saying nothing.

She peered at the encyclopedia page displayed there, trying to stay as far away from the man as possible.

Stewart Baker. Tristen had looked up the man she was investigating? Was that creepy or charmingly helpful? And why hadn't she thought to

pop the movie star's name into a search engine? Unsure, she glanced at Tristen, but found his expression unreadable. Grabbing the phone so she could scroll, she read about Stewart's life, death, and career.

"It was at the right spot," Tristen said. "Before you scrolled." His hazel eyes were flecked with a gold she only ever saw on the rims of her antique teacup collection. He gave her a tiny smile, as though they were having a secret conversation. Then he gave a small nod, at her questioning glance, and she knew. Tristen understood. What, exactly, she wasn't quite sure, only that he understood.

She handed him the phone, not finishing the article. "Why are you here, eavesdropping on my conversations?"

"I wasn't ready to go home."

"So, you followed me?"

"Actually, I was here first. I thought maybe *you* were following *me*. Came to apologize, perhaps?"

She let out a snort, her cheeks burning with sudden anger. "A little full of yourself, perhaps?"

His lips thinned. "Look. I know what I'm doing with this. You want me to help, then do it my way. Don't waste my time because your pride sits in the way."

"My pride?" She threw her head back and laughed. "You're such a big chicken it isn't even—"

He grabbed her cheeks in his roughened hands and pressed his lips to hers, hard. Her eyes flew open, heart racing. He was kissing her. Tristen Bell was kissing her, and my word. It felt good. Really, really good. She reminded herself to shut her eyes, and once she did, she was lost. Her body fell against his, her palms mirroring the way he was holding her face, latching him against her until she was ready for him to stop. Which would probably be never. The kiss deepened and her hands drifted down from his face to his chest. Her fingers stopped when

they hit his belt. He was a trim, lean, solid piece of chiseled rock from the neck down. As hard as the rocks Dot said he worked with.

Tristen stepped back, breaking their kiss. Her eyelids fluttered, unable to fully open after having her circuits blown.

"I'm willing to help you, Melanie, but it has to be on my terms. I can be a valuable member of your team."

Team. She didn't even have a team. Well, she had Dot who was eager, but inexperienced. Daphne, who seemed less and less interested in charging off after Rubicore in regards to the environmental impact, and Maya spouting off about economics, and Hailey lost behind her camera, thinking photos would save the day. Melanie sucked as a leader, if that was her team. They didn't even have a game plan and she was not taking Tristen's, which was to play helpless and get steamrolled.

"Do you want me to be part of your team, Melanie? Yes or no?"

There was an edge to his voice that made her turn her back to him. She threw up her hands, wondering if kisses would be part of his terms. "Whatever. Okay, whatever. I don't care, just don't ask me to roll over and play dead."

"Stewart Baker built one of the cottages on Baby Horseshoe Island."

"Heritage Row?"

"It didn't say, but maybe the curator knows."

Melanie studied Tristen. "Would you have told me this if I'd said no?"

"It sounds as though the man spent a lot of time in the area."

"Why are you being so helpful?"

"I'll be helpful with Rubicore, Melanie."

"I didn't mention Rubicore."

"You didn't have to."

Christophe joined them, handing Melanie an envelope full of black-and-white images. "I've got special gloves over at my desk that you can

wear when you look at these.”

“Thanks.”

“Do you happen to know which cottage Stewart Baker owned?” Tristen asked.

“JoHoBo.” The curator winced. “Sorry, Missy’s Getaway, now.”

“Stewart owned JoHoBo?” Melanie perked up.

“Back then it was the Rusty Pelican. His family had it built in 1900, if memory serves. Stewart would have been about ten at the time, but he had quite the fortune already. He was *the* baby or small child in the first silent films. The cottage doesn’t look anything near the same since renovations. Can’t believe the council allowed that.” Christophe tsked quietly. “By the time I heard they’d applied for a permit to gut the place, it had already been approved. Anyway, Stewart’s production company really came into its own during the First World War. When he passed away in the fifties he was an icon. And rich as sin.” The curator winked and, with a nod, backed away to his desk.

Melanie paused. There was something wrong with the timeline. Maybe Stewart wasn’t the clue she was looking for.

“What?” Tristen lightly touched her elbow. “Is something wrong?”

“I felt as though I was close to something.”

“Maybe saying it out loud will jog your mind into making the connections.”

Melanie pushed her glasses up her nose, wondering why he was being so helpful. She’d kicked him out of her cottage less than an hour ago. And men thought women were confusing.

“Ages ago, my great-grandmother was given Nymph Island, which included the cottage, Trixie Hollow. But we don’t know by whom, or why. I was thinking it was Stewart and that maybe they’d had a relationship, but there’s a twenty-year age difference. It’s just I can’t

imagine my great-grandmother being a mistress or having a sugar daddy."

"That was her photo on the mantel at your cottage?"

Melanie nodded.

"She was pretty. Like you. I could see it."

There was a fondness in his eyes that made Melanie's heart swell, even if she didn't quite believe the compliment. Why was he buttering her up? She ran a hand through her curls in frustration and bent to read the caption under a black-and-white photo. Something about a governor at a grand opening.

"Who is that?" Tristen pointed to the picture.

"Some governor."

"No, beside him. In front of the steamship."

Melanie shot straight up, then bent to stare at the grainy image. It was hard to pick details, so she leaned back, squinting at it.

"Isn't that your great-grandmother? And Stewart Baker?"

Melanie placed her fingers over her mouth. It couldn't be. She snapped a photo of it and the caption to text to her sisters, careful not to use the flash. "You know how many times I've been in here and never noticed that?"

Her great-grandmother had known the movie star. The letters were the real deal. But what was the story? The tale she could use to claim heritage status? Everything had lost its story, like the teacups she'd found stashed in a dusty old box in the back of a Parry Sound antiques shop. Those cups had to have a provenance. They were black-and-white nymphs, fashioned in a style that was tacky yet fascinating. Commissioned. Rare. Priceless.

Why was she thinking about her cups?

Because she didn't know their story, either, and she'd always felt they should be connected to their island somehow.

"Why would someone give her a cottage? Was she keeping secrets for someone important? The governor? Stewart?"

Tristen listened, leaning against the display, arms bulging under his shirtsleeves, pulling at the material.

Who was her great-grandfather? Melanie had always imagined him as a World War II hero who went off to war and didn't come back to his pregnant girlfriend, as story that was common enough. But what if it was one of these men? What if her grandmother had been a secret, illegitimate baby?

"What mystery are we trying to solve?" Tristen asked.

Everything.

"If Trixie Hollow has heritage significance we can get a tax break, and we won't have to sell it to Rubicore."

"Wait. Sell it to Rubicore?" The air crackled around Tristen.

"They made an offer, but we're not going to take it."

"Were you going to tell me this?"

"We're not taking the offer, so it doesn't matter. I'm going to save the cottage." Somehow. *Teacups*.

Why did they keep popping up whenever she thought about the cottage? Was it the nymph connection? So many mysteries. So few solid clues.

"But they want something from you," Tristen said. He was standing close, his eyes digging into hers. "That changes everything. You fighting them will be a personal affront. This is dangerous."

"It's not *dangerous*. You're being dramatic." She pulled him farther along the display, glancing at photos. "Come on, help me. If we can find something we can pin on Heritage Row, too, then Rubicore can't destroy it. See? Everything is connected."

"That's what I'm worried about."

Melanie gave him a disgusted look.

"You've got to hit them in the pocketbook," he said. She could tell he was trying to be gentle. He was also trying to tell her how to fight Rubicore again, and hinting she couldn't win. "Stories about long-gone lovers isn't enough to stop these guys. It has to be something that drives fear into the masses, like public safety."

"And is it fear that finally made you want to help me and my sisters?"

"Yes."

Their eyes met, neither of them blinking.

"And?"

He remained silent for a moment, then sighed. "Look, Dot got hurt. She almost drowned." Tristen sagged, his strong frame suddenly seeming smaller, his expression exhausted. He let out another sigh, eyebrows furrowed. "Do I need another reason?"

"Yes."

He looked up. "Yes?"

"Selfish reasons aren't enough. It has to be noble."

"How very romantic of you."

"Catch me if I swoon." There was no humor in her voice. "I need your help, Tristen, and I know you want it your way. I get that. But we've agreed to work together. *Again*. And you can't shut me down every time I want to take another route on *top* of yours. We'll do it your way, but we're going to do some of my things, too."

"Don't let it sidetrack you or detract from the main strike. The hit we know is going to make a dent." He pursed his lips tight in thought. "You're going to need stories—something people can tie into."

"You just said that won't work."

He gave an exasperated sigh. "I mean in real life."

"Long-gone lovers is real life."

“We need to stick with this century so folks can relate to it. Something that will stir people up but still hit Rubicore in the pocketbook.”

Maya was right. If something wasn't connected to the here and now, nobody cared. Melanie suppressed the urge to cry at the futility of it all. She was wasting her time. And for what? To delay the inevitable? As Tristen had said, Rubicore would get their way. She'd be better off if she sold everything she owned to save Trixie Hollow.

Melanie was in his space. Specifically, she was in his bedroom, but she wasn't dressed in lingerie. At least if she was, it was covered by her 1950s sex appeal dress. He should have told her to stay in the living room while he came to retrieve his laptop.

After hearing from Dot that Melanie planned to go to a party held by Rubicore, he'd asked her to meet him at his place after work to sort out a strategy. But something was off with Melanie. When he'd left her at the museum last night she'd looked dejected, but he'd thought she was still on board. But now it was as though she'd given up, and he was finding himself more invested in the fight against Rubicore than she was.

He moved them to the outdoor patio overlooking the water, and offered her a bottle of water and a seat. He waited until she was comfortable, then settled on the other side of the small coffee table.

"First off, why do you want to go to the party?" he asked.

She shrugged. "Free food."

"And free booze?"

She rewarded him with a small smile.

"You okay?" he asked.

She gave a half shrug.

"Well, tomorrow night, just keep quiet. It'll be difficult, but go with the intention of listening. Watch for the unsaid things between the men. They're going to try and play you and your sisters. Possibly divide and conquer. Distract you, woo you, perhaps try to switch your attention to something that isn't related to them. Give you another target to fight against."

"Right. Reconnaissance." Melanie shifted, her legs long and tempting. The passion to fight Rubicore was gone and she seemed smaller and lost somehow.

"You need someone to go with you," he said.

"To the party? My sisters are going with me."

Tristen ran the heels of his palms down his quads, working out tension left over from his early morning run around the museum's island. The way she was acting, he was afraid Rubicore would get her and her sisters to sign a noninterference agreement or something that would bind her, leaving her unable to fight when she got her spirit back. While he couldn't go with her, as Aaron would immediately know what they were up to, maybe he could convince someone else to go along to keep them safe. But who?

"Someone who knows Rubicore's games," he said.

"You."

He watched as conflicting emotions moved across her face.

"Not me. Aaron knows me."

"You're enemies?"

"I wouldn't say enemies, exactly."

"Your hesitation says there's a story."

Her smile was welcoming, beckoning him to talk. Nuh-uh. She would have to find a less tough nut to crack.

"Nothing but boring backstory."

"You know what I love most about the *Winged Goddess* at the boat show?"

Bait. It was bait.

"I love that the owner left the boat's subtle signs of age," she said.

"Poor restoration and lack of proper storage, care, and maintenance," Tristen interjected, knowing he was being difficult. But he also knew it was likely his only defense against the attack she was lining up. She was going to give him a heart-softening story and set him up for the kill. Just like Dot had. There was no way to stay clammed up without coming off as selfish and self-absorbed. He admired her for it, even though it sucked being on the receiving end.

"You must be a good lawyer."

She ignored him, carrying on, her voice a soothing balm. Putting him in a trance before the attack, and he didn't even mind. "I can stare at that boat for hours, always seeing something new. Unlike most of the other boats that show up there, it still has a few dings, respecting the fact that they mark the passage of time, its history and stories. They show what it's been through. It's wholly unique. They haven't covered up what most would try to hide."

"And?"

She moved to sit beside him. Her body pressed against his shoulder, not in a take-me-now-big-boy sort of way, but rather a let-me-in way. "I like backstory, Tristen Bell, and if we are going to work as a team you need to quit hiding from me."

"I'm not hiding."

Dot stomped onto the patio, grabbing a diet something from the fridge. He needed to stop buying that crap. There was no way it was good for her.

"Have you cleaned your room?" he asked, grateful for the interruption.

"I just got home. I was *working* all day." She plopped into the nearest chair, her legs splayed over its arms, her back contorted in a way that made his nerves scream in terror.

"Sit properly. You're going to give yourself spinal problems."

Her mouth moved with what he was sure were silent insults as she swung her legs to the floor.

"Studies show diet stuff isn't good for you. Plus, a teenager doesn't need to be worrying about dieting."

"I'm almost an adult," Dot said. "I could apply for emancipation."

"Don't start."

"I'm going to town to get signatures."

"I told you to leave it."

"It's for a petition, *Dad*."

"For what?"

"I *told* you already."

"Watch your tone."

She held in an eye roll. Things had been getting better between him and Dot since she'd begun working with Melanie, but there were still times when he wanted to ship her back to Toronto.

"Is that the trash petition?" Melanie asked.

"Yeah."

"I dropped a letter off at the municipality and sent one in to the paper, too," Tristen said.

"I'm going to town," Dot said.

"If you're taking my bike, don't forget a helmet."

Once Dot was out of earshot, Melanie said, "You shouldn't harp on her about diet stuff. She's probably really sensitive about her body right now. Seventeen is still an impressionable age."

"She seems pretty tough to me."

"The way you talk about what she puts in her body will have a lasting impact."

Melanie's cheeks were flushed. Were they were dipping into her backstory instead of his? If so, very nice.

"Did your dad say things when you were a teen?"

"No." She tipped her head down.

"Then why do you feel I have such an impact? She needs to eat better."

"Show her how. Talk about it. Don't order her."

Tristen clenched his hands, trying to quell his anger. He appreciated Melanie caring, but this was his life, his daughter, his job to raise her.

Melanie said in a rush, "I know she's with you only for a month, but you're important to her. Her experiences now—including those with her body and food—are shaping the woman she'll become. If you're not careful, you could have a serious impact on her self-image." Melanie began gracefully ticking things off on her long fingers. "On her self-esteem, confidence, self-worth. She needs to know you love her however she looks. That you support her and that you're there for her."

He cleared his throat, unsure what to say. This was getting kind of touchy-feely.

"Show her she has the power to take on the world."

There was that passion he'd been looking for. Irresistible.

He leaned over and kissed Melanie.

When she didn't pull back, he deepened the kiss. Her lips were perfect against his, soft cushions, her mouth wet and warm. He cradled her head, making love to her mouth in a way that took him back to his teenage, lust-fueled years. A woman hadn't turned him on like this in forever. Not even Cindy.

And to think that only moments ago he'd been peeved at Melanie.

She pulled back, her cheeks flushed.

He held her forehead to his. "That was really sexy, what you said."

Her whole body flushed with the compliment.

"You're blushing worse than a lobster."

She straightened the hem of her dress, pulling out of his grip, unable to meet his eye. "It's not often that men kiss me to shut me up." Her gaze met his and he was struck by the power behind it. If he wasn't careful, he'd be a goner. But right now, that seemed like a tantalizing promise rather than a threat.

He reached for her, his thumb resting in front of her ear as he drew her head close again. Her earring tickled his palm. He waited a beat, and her chin tipped up. She wanted another kiss. He could oblige her. No harm, no foul.

"Ew!" Dot's voice was laced with disgust.

Melanie leaped back and Tristen sighed, resting a hand on her bare knee, a knee he didn't want escaping just yet.

"What do you need, Dot?"

"I didn't need to see that." The disgust was still there.

"What do you need?" he repeated, more insistently.

"I have to go to the far end of town to see if Samantha will help, and there's no air in the back tire."

"I said no girlfriends unless I was present."

"No, you didn't. You said I couldn't go to their house unless you said it was okay. I'm just picking her up."

"The pump is in the shed."

Dot disappeared, but the mood on the couch was broken. Tristen leaned back, his arm draped over the back of the sofa so if Melanie relaxed, she'd be in his embrace.

She stood. "I told Daphne I'd take care of Tigger—my niece—tonight. Did you have any more advice for the party?"

"Yeah, don't go." He hooked her index finger with his.

"My sisters and I—"

"I meant right now."

Her perfect mouth popped open, then shut. She looked away, her brow furrowed, her finger dropping his. "Don't play games, Tristen."

"No game. Stay."

"I'm leaving." She was backing away, spooked. "Tomorrow night, I'll keep my mouth shut and ears open." Her hands were shaking, but she hesitated, seemingly at war with herself.

He forced himself to stay seated, to not chase after her. "It was just a kiss."

She bent over, so close he thought she was going to pick up where they had left off. He smiled, waiting for her to land.

"It is never. Just. A. Kiss," she whispered.



TRISTEN HAD THOUGHT about Melanie all night long and woken with a raging erection that was difficult to ignore. What was he supposed to do with her? He couldn't send her out to the wolves on her own for this dang party. But if he went, it would ruin the entire element of surprise, which was the only way they'd win against a company like Rubicore.

Around four in the morning he'd come up with a plan. Not a perfect plan, as it meant putting his pride and dignity on the shelf, as well as asking his daughter for a major favor that had likely made her throw up in her mouth when she'd finally stopped laughing at him.

He knocked on the door to Melanie's rather small house, feeling hopeful.

She opened the door, her bathrobe tucked tightly around her curves. Her hair was in an updo and she smelled like nail polish. She was going to the party. Good. And she was smiling in surprise, but was it because

there was someone odd at her door, or because she recognized him, even though he was dressed in women's clothing?

Speaking to her might be a problem, he realized, as she waited for him to do so. He held a hand to his throat and used a light, raspy voice. "I'm so sorry, I'm losing my voice. Do you happen to know where number 85 is?"

Melanie paused, thinking, then leaned out the door, one eye on Tristen. She pointed vaguely up the street.

He laid a hand lightly on her elbow and thanked her.

She jolted, head tilted back like a horse about to rear. "*Tristen?*" The pulse at her neck was throbbing madly.

"Hello."

Melanie sniffed the air. "Is that Katy Perry's new perfume?"

He gave a dejected sigh. "Yeah."

She stared at him, her fingers resting against her neck, her other arm wrapped tight around her middle.

"You didn't recognize me, right? I mean, at first?"

"No. You look very " Melanie's eyes trailed down his tight red dress, to the second-hand heels, then up to the short blond wig he'd borrowed from Dot. He felt like a drag queen with foundation and powder layered on so thick over his close-shaven cheeks, but Dot had assured him that nobody would recognize him and that he didn't look half bad. "Um different," Melanie said. "Pretty good, actually." Her eyes drifted over him again.

He was going to have to be crazy vigilant about keeping his knees together, not adjusting himself, keeping things tucked in place, and generally acting as though he was the real thing, but it looked as if he might have found a way to make sure Melanie stayed safe at the party.

"We're good then. I'll go with you."

Her shoulders shook and she put a hand to her mouth as though trying to hold in a bubble of laughter. Finally, it bubbled up and burst forth. The seal broken, laughter flowed like lava until she was bent over, gasping for breath.

"Nice." Tristen turned away, hands on his hips. He flicked out the skirt of his dress, not used to the way it tickled his newly shaved legs. Apparently that move fueled the fire, as she only laughed harder. He whirled, fed up. He hadn't denuded his arms and legs of hair for nothing. He only had a few hours until his five o'clock shadow would be begin to peek through the makeup—there wasn't time for this. "You can't go to this thing alone, Melanie. You need a man to go with you and keep you safe. You need me."

She sobered up as though someone had thrown her in an icy lake.

"You are not going alone."

"The more I stare at you, the more you look like a really big man squeezed into a form-fitting dress that might pop off you at any moment like an overstretched rubber band."

"You didn't recognize me." He wasn't sure if it was the conversation or the dress, but he was definitely feeling like the girl in this situation.

"No, you can't come." Her voice was firm as she subtly backed into the house.

He placed a hand on the door so she wouldn't be able to shut it on him. "I am going with you, Melanie Summer, and that is that."

A woman appeared behind Melanie and flinched so abruptly she almost fell over. "A drag queen? Wow, you don't see those very often."

"Maya, not now," Melanie said, her voice filled with impatience.

"No, really. And wow, that tight dress is both scary and sexy." Maya analyzed him, scratching her head. "The square neckline makes your shoulders look too broad, though. You'd look drool-icious in a suit." Her eyes ran down him and he could have sworn she licked her lips.

"Tristen Bell," he said tightly, extending a hand to her.

Melanie's sister gave him a wicked grin. "I knew you looked familiar! Wait until Connor hears about this."

"Please don't," Tristen said with a grimace, as the woman took a picture of him with her phone before he could stop her.

"He wants to come to the party," Melanie said. "He doesn't seem to think I can handle myself." Her arms were crossed, her mouth set.

"Good plan." Maya didn't glance up from her phone, and she was surely sending the photo to Connor. Tristen took the device, deleting the photo and text before she could send it off into the universe.

"Wow. You have massive hands," she said as he handed back the phone. "Keep those tucked away or everyone will know you're a man." She turned to Melanie. "I need to help Daphne finish getting ready. You're next, Mellie Melon. Don't take too long."

As the sister vanished into the house, a small child came bounding out. She launched herself at Tristen, squeezing him around his stomach so tight he thought he might involuntarily lose his lunch. Which was pretty impressive, seeing as that should be well digested and along its merry way by now.

The girl released him and bounded up a step, then looked him in the face before giving a shriek of terror.

Melanie swept the child into her arms and whispered something into her unruly curls. The girl's terror-mortis eased.

"I thought you were Lady Gaga." The girl eyed him again. "I wrote her a letter asking if she'd come visit for my mom's birthday. It's in a couple of weeks."

"I'm not Lady Gaga."

"I *know*."

He cleared his throat. "My name is Tristen Bell."

"My auntie doesn't like you. You won't help her."

"Tigger " Melanie said in a warning tone, her cheeks pink. "This is my niece, Tigger. No secret is safe with her."

"Will you help her?" The girl's eyes were so big and round Tristen felt his heart ping.

"I am trying, but your auntie is making it very difficult."

The child thought about that for a moment while the auntie in question stiffened beside her. He could feel her becoming defensive.

"Do you have candy?" the girl asked. "Auntie Maya's boyfriend, Mr. MacKenzie, always has some. And Auntie Hailey's boyfriend, Mr. Alexander, he bought me this dress." She twirled, making the skirt flare out. Maybe Tristen should have worn something more like that. It would hide his narrow hips and maybe not show off his physique as much. Although he might look like a scary version of Little Miss Muffet. And that was not a cool look. On anyone. Well, unless you were under the age of about seven.

"Do you?" the girl prodded.

"Tigger, let him be." Melanie tried to shoo her into the house.

"It's okay. I think I have something." Tristen hurried to his truck and dug through the glove box, desperate to win the girl over, in hopes it would help Melanie change her mind about him coming to the party. He sorted through the random rocks he'd collected, choosing a cold, pink stone before rejoining the gals on the step. He held out his closed fists. "Pick a hand."

The girl lightly tapped his right hand. He opened it to reveal the heart-shaped pink quartz.

She squealed, her eyes bright as she snatched the stone, then held it to her chest. "For *me*?"

"If you'd like it, yes. It's pink quartz and I found it while working in the Parry Sound—"

"My fairies are going to *love* it!" She whirled, bouncing into the house. "Mom! Look what the man gave me!"

"That made you popular." Melanie crossed her arms and leaned against the metal railing.

"I do what I can."

Had he scored a point with her? It was difficult to tell.

"Is she going tonight?" He didn't expect danger, but he knew how distracting a child could be when professional bamboozlers were playing their game. In fact, he wouldn't be surprised if Aaron used the little girl's presence against them, sweet-talking them into signing a noninterference agreement, twisting everyone's words and intentions, knowing the women wouldn't create a fuss in front of Tigger. Tie their hands, duct tape their mouths by using their own family against them. He'd seen that happen more often than he'd like to admit. Find a soft spot, then utilize it to one's own advantage.

Loud laughter came from the house, practically shaking the windows.

"Her mom hired a babysitter."

"Good." One less Summer to worry about.

"Tigger is certifiably awesome."

"Just like the other females in her family."

"But I don't think that a party is appropriate."

They stared at each other for a moment.

"Don't play me," Melanie said.

"I'm not. You *are* something else, Melanie. And I'd like to come and help you. I won't cause a scene, but in order to help, I need to know what kind of games they're playing. Which punches they might pull. It's in everyone's best interests."

"Tristen," she said in a gentle voice, likely meant to let him down easy.

"You can't go alone, Melanie. There are no ifs, ands or buts. End of story."

"It'll be fine."

"No, it won't. They will try and bulldoze you."

"I'm stronger than you assume." Her hands were on her hips, her cheeks flushed.

"I know that, but I also know how these men work. Plus I have a pretty good idea that you would do whatever it took to protect your sisters. You're a loyal sister, missy." He chuckled her gently on her chin. "Let me come along and be your wingman. I can be the heavy, if you need one."

"They'll figure out who you are."

"I'll be quiet and hide in the back, unless you give me a sign."

"You still sound like you."

"What about this?" He lowered his voice so it was husky and had a come-hither quality.

"Okay, that just messes with my brain."

"You like that, baby?" He gave a little sway and nudged his fake chest up against her. She laughed and looked away.

"You are too much, Tristen Bell."

"I won't make a scene, I promise." He put up a hand, knowing he was getting close to a yes. "Scout's honor."

"And are you a Scout, Mr. Bell?"

"Okay, so I never was. But I am a man of my word. Take me along. I can redirect conversations or create a screen or distraction. Whatever you need."

"Nobody ever notices me, so a screen isn't really necessary." She pointed at him. "Don't argue with me. I know my life. I am invisible and nobody would notice if I got in a boat and never came back."

"I would notice. Let me come along and keep you safe."

Melanie sucked her cheeks in. "If you are worried about my safety, then you shouldn't come and put yourself at risk. You have a daughter. I have nobody." Her voice went low and his heart ached for her. How could she feel as though she had nobody? She had the whole world eating out of her hand. Everyone from bikers to little old ladies were ready to defend her. She lived in a house that was currently shaking with laughter.

He gently cupped her cheek, worried she'd pull away. He looked deep into her blue eyes. "You really can't see yourself, can you?"

"Tristen " She pulled away.

"No." He tightened his grip so she couldn't escape. "You're like those antiques you talk about. Unique. Special. You've made it through life, and instead of breaking and getting worn from the challenges that have been thrown at you, it's made you better. Given you a shine and a sparkle that makes you valuable and sought after by those who know what to look for."

She leaned into his touch, her weight gently resting against him. "And are you looking, Tristen?"

His familiar line escaped. "Always looking, but never seeking."

Her posture stiffened as she caught his meaning. She turned away, and he knew he'd lost her again. He was a man used to being in control, but with Melanie, being in control was darn near impossible.

Melanie stood on the dock, uncertainty causing her to hesitate. Patio lanterns hung on a wire strung above, and an antique water taxi waited for them. Tristen was at her side, doing heavens only knew what with that skirt of his. In the end, she hadn't much of a choice about him coming to the party, after Daphne exited the house, all smiles and welcoming, having heard he'd given Tigger a stone. For the first time in days, Daphne was acting like her old self, and Melanie had quickly relented, allowing Tristen to come play superhero.

"This is really twisted," she whispered to him now. He had stopped adjusting his clothes and was smoothing his wig repeatedly.

"Why?" His daughter's perfume wafted over her instead of his usual cologne as he leaned close to hear her.

"Just very twisted." She wondered what he'd done to prevent a male-like bulge from appearing in the front of his dress. Being attracted to a man who was currently wearing women's clothes was messing with her mind every time she started to check him out—which apparently was a new, unbreakable habit of hers.

"Right," he agreed, his voice rough.

"Shhh. You're talking like a man."

"How do you stand these heels?"

"How did you even find those? Your feet are enormous."

"Used clothing store. I like your dress."

"Okay, we are not doing this."

"Doing what?"

"The whole girl thing where we compliment each other on things, to see where the other one shops, while secretly thinking we could do better in some small way."

"Women do that?"

"Yeah, and good luck getting your hands on this dress, buster. Simone designed it for me specially. One of a kind."

"I can tell. It looks as though it was made for you. It hugs your curves in a way that shouts to the world that you are all woman."

"I can't decide if I should shove you in the water or thank you."

"A kiss would be fine."

She glared at him and he laughed, low and rich.

Remind her again why she thought this silly man was sexy?

"Ooh. Nice outfit, Tristen," Hailey called, joining them on the dock.

Melanie shushed her sister with enough vim and vigor to catch Aaron Bloomwood's attention as he arrived. "*Trista*," she reminded her sister.

"We're so glad you could be our guests tonight." Aaron appeared at Melanie's elbow, his white suit looking very *Miami Vice*. The sky behind him was streaked with pinks as dusk settled in, a storm on the horizon. Perfect weather to go hang out on an island with the enemy. A cool breeze ruffled Melanie's dress and she shivered, bringing her arms around herself. Tristen had his own wrap—provided by Maya, to help mask how broad his shoulders were—around her in seconds, and she turned to give him a round-eyed what-are-you-doing look. He was going to blow his cover before he even got to the dinner.

Melanie slipped the wrap off her shoulders, handing it back to Tristen as Maya, laughing, with fingers pressed just above her cleavage, complimented Aaron on his attire, thereby drawing his attention away from the garment exchange.

Aaron reached past Melanie—invisible, thank you very much—and clutched Hailey, giving her cheek a kiss. Another for Maya. Daphne. And even Tristen.

“See?” Melanie whispered to him, as their host waved Mario over.

“See what?” he whispered back.

“Never mind,” she grumbled. Of course he wouldn’t notice that she was invisible. He’d gotten a cheek kiss of approval from their host. If anyone was to guess who was the man in drag, it would likely be her getting the votes. It didn’t help that Maya had given Tristen some body language lessons, including how to do the sexy, swaying hip walk. If Melanie were a man, she’d be all over Tristen. She hadn’t asked what he’d slipped down the front of his dress, but he definitely fell in the well-endowed bombshell category.

“And who do we have here?” Aaron’s attention was stuck on Tristen. Not good. He wasn’t supposed to notice Tristen. If Aaron figured out that the woman he was ogling was actually his old cutthroat competitor from Toronto no, Melanie most definitely did not want to think about that, nor the possible consequences.

Mario was leaning in, drawn to Tristen, as well. Aaron’s guard dog was wearing an impeccable black suit that disproved the theory that black was minimizing. In fact, the man’s bulk might actually be enhanced. His scowl definitely had been. Well, until he’d seen Tristen. Now he was all smiles.

“You are so very tall,” Mario said, his voice deep and accented.

Tristen placed a hand on his chest and gave a bashful eyelash bat that made Melanie want to barf, especially when she saw how well it

worked on Mario.

"This is our cousin Trista," Hailey said. "I hope you don't mind her coming along tonight?"

Maya gave their host a lovely smile and Hailey moved to clutch his arm, adding her own lovely smile.

The man didn't stand a chance.

"Perfect," he said. "The more the merrier, if she doesn't mind us talking business?"

Tristen gave a demure shoulder shrug, which seemed to satisfy Aaron. The way he was studying Tristen's shoulders made Melanie uneasy, however. "I like strong women. Do you work out, Trista?"

Tristen swallowed hard and Melanie hoped Aaron failed to notice his large Adam's apple.

"How much can a gal like you bench press?" Aaron looked as though he was going to give Tristen's arm a squeeze, but Melanie stepped in, deflecting him.

"Oh, is this the boat we are taking? It's simply exquisite. I do love antiques. Was this in the boat show?"

Aaron frowned. "Oh, uh, yes, I think so."

"Shall we set out?" she asked brightly.

"I suppose we should, since everyone is here."

Mario began ushering them into the boat as Aaron began a sales pitch on how wonderful their evening was going to be. Tristen waited for Melanie, hand extended to allow her onto the boat first. She gave him a pointed glare and a shove, forcing him to go ahead. It was endearing how gentlemanly he was, but he was going to blow it. Big time.

Tristen sat beside her on one of the boat's bench seats, giving her leg a quick squeeze. "You okay?"

She gave a barely there nod.

"We can leave early."

Melanie pulled her shoulders to her ears and scooted over. "You're breathing on my neck and sitting too close. It's like we're lovers, not cousins." This was not the time to enjoy how near he was.

"I thought women acted all cozy." He drifted farther away and she immediately missed his body heat. Tristen glanced around the boat's cabin, then grabbed his bra under his fake breasts and heaved it back and forth, like a cow with a major itch trying to relieve the agony on barbed wire.

"Would you stop that?" Melanie smacked his arm, loudly enough to make Hailey turn and stare.

"You two okay?" she asked, a crease forming between her brows. She'd straightened her hair and it fell over her shoulders in a glossy wave that made Melanie envious. Self-consciously, she ran a palm over her own curls, hoping they weren't frizzy, but knowing there was a fair chance they had sucked a good portion of the evening's humidity from the air, adding to its volume. She was definitely going to look like a drag queen by the end of the night.

"We're fine," she said.

Tristen clasped his hands in his lap and Melanie sighed, waiting for the inevitable disaster to hit.



THE WATER TAXI dropped them off in a small inlet where a screened-in room sat nestled along the shore. The lights inside, reflecting on the dark water's moving reflection, beckoned in welcome. It was a private restaurant that Melanie hadn't even known existed. A whole other world.

"Oh, Nate's," chirped Tristen. "Love this place." He gazed at the building as though taking in a long lost friend. "Incredible garlic bread." He took Melanie's hand and helped her out of the boat. She shook her head and let him. They might be able to teach him how to walk in heels, but apparently some habits were too ingrained. And if she was honest, she was secretly glad of that. He turned and helped the rest of the sisters, going so far as to playfully scold Mario for not being a gentleman and forcing "Trista" to step in.

The man had the grace to look sheepish, and hurried ahead to hold the door to the restaurant for the group, as the wind picked up.

Melanie sat through the meal, watching as Aaron and Mario sucked up to her sisters and Tristen. She was pretty sure they weren't succeeding. Daphne had a glazed smile. Hailey was playing with the light and shadows caused by her dessert fork under the chandelier's glow. Tristen was spending more time trying to avoid Mario's admiring looks than offering quiet commentary. Only Maya seemed half-interested. She was nodding politely, fist under her chin, adding the odd, "Is that so?" But even she didn't seem to be into it.

"When will you be breaking ground?" Melanie asked.

"As soon as everything is in order," Aaron replied, barely sparing her a glance.

"Will that be long? Summer is almost over."

"We're doing all we can to expedite the process."

"I hear the permit process can be very time intensive. Your investors must be frustrated."

Aaron gave her a glance, falling back into a rehearsed speech full of glitz and innuendos. Basically, he was using "look at this and ignore that" misdirection—the very thing Tristen had warned her about and was common in the courtroom. Add in a few reassurances meant to placate them and that about summed up Aaron.

"It must be so exhausting dealing with all that bureaucracy," Maya said. "I hope you know someone in the municipal office who can help you expedite things." She was toying with her fork, watching the men from under her lashes in a way that made Melanie wish she could do that without looking mentally deficient.

Aaron smiled, but didn't give more than with a noncommittal shrug and another canned reply.

Tristen hissed in her ear, "Can you believe this?"

"Yes."

"How stupid do they think you are?" He adjusted the linen napkin laid over his lap. "On principle, you should storm out of here. They won't say anything unless it is part of their prepared speech. I know I promised to remain silent, but I really think I should intervene."

"Don't you dare."

Maya topped up the men's wine, filling her own glass as well, which was swiftly swapped with Daphne's when they weren't paying attention. So far, by Melanie's count, the men had had about four or five drinks each and Maya about two. Daphne, however, was starting to look a tad tipsy from helping her out. Melanie wiggled her fingers at Daphne for the full glass, which made its way down to her. She set it in front of Tristen. This would be his third or fourth, as she'd placed a few glasses in front of him when the men insisted the sisters drink up. "This is how you help out."

He sighed and took a delicate sip so as not to smear his lipstick.

Maya tried a few more ways to get the men talking, leaning forward as she laughed at an inane joke.

"He's staring down Maya's dress!" Tristen hissed under his breath. He shoved his chair back and slammed the wineglass onto the table. Melanie quickly placed a hand on his arm.

"Are you okay, Trista?"

The sisters shot them panicked looks.

Tristen cleared his throat and Melanie quickly asked, "Do you need to powder your nose?"

"Yes. Excuse me."

Tristen's eyes widened and he half sat as he realized where he'd have to go in order to keep up the pretense.

Melanie took him by the arm. "Let's go, sweetie." She led him away from the table, adding merrily over her shoulder, "Poor gal can't hold her wine! But she'll be a blast later!"

The men laughed and waved them away, their attention already back on Maya.

Hoping Tristen might have some strategy ideas, she accompanied him to the ladies' room. She watched as he pushed open each stall door, an irrational bubble of laughter squeezing its way up her chest. "Did you *shave* your legs?"

"Yes." He tugged the red fabric of his skirt out of her grasp as she sought a better look. "I think it would be rather obvious that I am a man if they were to see—" The bathroom door swung inward and a woman stumbled in, her cheeks flushed. Polly Pollard. Hailey's old bestie from school—well, before Polly had decided to go the find-a-rich-husband-and-become-a-trophy-wife route and Hailey the struggling artist route.

Tristen, quick as a whip, supported Polly to keep her from falling. The woman giggled and reached up to place a hand against his cheek. "Oh, now aren't you just the homeliest but sweetest thing."

Tristen gave her a watery smile.

Polly, noticing Melanie, lurched into her arms. "Mellie !" she crooned. "I've missed you. How *are* you?"

"Great."

"I have to tinkle, okay? Nice catching up with you."

Tristen helped Polly into a stall, shooting Melanie an amused look.

"So?" Melanie asked. "Are you going to keep it together out there or should I put you in a taxi?"

Tristen pulled her away from the occupied stall. "They're totally blowing sunshine, and aren't falling for bait." He pushed his hands through his hair, knocking his wig askew. "You're in over your head."

She lifted the edge of his wig, trying to pin it back in place, hoping the task would keep her from unloading her frustration with Rubicore onto his shoulders. A man like Tristen just might make her frustration his own problem, and try to take down the men who were causing it.

Tristen grasped her hands, stopping her ministrations. "You need to be careful. Aaron's made life difficult for his enemies. He's playing hardball out there. This is a big project, no matter what he says. Someone has put a lot of money on the line. If you have any secrets in your past, then it would be best to let this thing go."

Melanie, still toying with Tristen's slicked back hair, said softly, "I can handle this. I have no secrets."

"What about your sisters, your mother, your niece and her father? *Your* father?"

"He's dead. Has been for years."

"But what about everyone else?"

Did her family have more secrets? Hailey and their mother hadn't told anyone about the cottage's tax situation until last month—and now it was almost too late to make the payment. Their great-grandmother had been gifted an expensive cottage and had had a child out of wedlock. Was the cottage a bribe to stay quiet? How many secrets *were* in the Summers' past?

Melanie shoved the last hairpin in place and Tristen let out a gruff, "Ow!" as it jabbed him.

"Sorry."

"Oh, honey." Polly slipped out of her stall, her dress snagging on the latch as she weaved her way over to Tristen. "Get the hormones." She waved at his fake hair and makeup. "This is too high maintenance. My half-brother's dad got it done." She put a hand to her crotch as though lifting her nonexistent junk. "Whole kit and caboodle. It's no wonder Josh got in trouble as a teen. Talk about confusing. Dad becomes Mom."

"I think that's a terribly good idea, Trista," Melanie exclaimed.

Tristen shot her a look and shook hands with Polly, giving her a bright smile, and Melanie felt a surge of unwanted jealousy. "Trista. Pleasure to meet you."

"Well, Trista honey, you get this all taken care of and live your life as you were meant to live it, okay?" She leaned close, looking sad and aged. "That's so important."

The woman sashayed out of the room, sending a flirty glance over her shoulder at Tristen, who seemed to have his eyes glued to her pert nether regions. Something was up with Polly and her marriage, that much was evident. But there was no way she was getting Tristen.

Melanie grabbed his face, dragging his coral lips to hers. She pulled him forward, excitement mounting as he deepened the kiss, his body pressed tight against hers. His fingers tangled in her curls as he tipped her head back, exposing her neck. He kissed down the length of sensitive skin as voices grew louder in the hall.

"It's never just a kiss," Tristen whispered, his lips against her throat, his warm hands releasing her slowly. His voice was a delicious form of sex appeal that she wished she could rub all over her body.

She straightened her dress and stepped to the door, passing a woman who gave her an odd, questioning look as she entered.

Melanie took her spot at the table, Tristen beside her. She felt riled up and frustrated. What was happening between them? She glanced at him, then away. She'd kissed a man wearing drag. She was half-drunk.

What kind of espionage person drank on the job and took a make-out break?

Noting her arrival, Hailey did a double take, and Daphne started dabbing at her mouth like crazy.

Tristen turned, and Melanie saw that his lipstick was smeared.

"Oh, sh—" She quickly dropped her head and rummaged for a tissue, swiping at her lips to remove all lipstick, hers or Tristen's. Knowing her cheeks were burning, she took a deep, calming breath before daring to look up. Hailey was distracting the men by pointing to the small restaurant's beams and talking about light, shadows, gray space and who cared what else; she was keeping them from getting any odd ideas about Tristen and Melanie.

They still had to get through a party after this. A long, agonizing party.

As surreptitiously as possible she indicated where Tristen needed to fix his lipstick, and he took care of it as though they were playing some sort of mirror game.

"You look beautiful tonight," he whispered.

"Shh."

He was enjoying this.

She focused her attention on the chandelier above, struggling to keep her temper in check. What was it about him? He was so so *tempting*. And she was not the type to be tempted. Not by someone like Mr. Hot and Cold.

"You're not that sexy, you know," she murmured.

"I totally am."

The room was warm. He was too close. She wanted to grab him and kiss him. Beg him to take her away somewhere private. At the same time, he was dressed as a sexy woman—she needed to push him far, far away.

The wine was messing with her mind.

"So our proposal," Aaron said, interrupting her thoughts, "is that you stay out of our way and we'll do our best not to cause interference with your island. Be good neighbors. And as thanks for putting up with us, we'd like to offer you free lifetime golf memberships at our resort."

Under the table, Tristen gripped Melanie's leg—so hard she let out a squeak. Did he think she was dumb? There was no way she and her sisters would fall for that.

"After you kill all the wildlife in order to make it, and pollute the water with the chemicals off your perfect greens? No, thank you," Daphne mumbled, arms crossed.

"Golf is boring," Maya stated.

"There's more," Aaron said, his smile cranked tightly in place. "Discounts to our boutique."

"How about a job?" Tristen asked lightly. "I could use a job."

Aaron paused a moment too long. In the silence, they could hear the restaurant's old windows rattling as the storm picked up.

"Hiring from the outside?" Tristen asked sweetly.

"Well, we " Aaron floundered. "It's a very delicate procedure, starting a new resort, and we have a team in place who is experienced in getting something of this magnitude off the ground."

And there it was. Tristen flashed Melanie a wink. It was a big project, after all. As well as fairly typical in terms of them bringing their own experts and staff. Eventually, they might hire locals, but that would be a ways down the road. And even then the hiring pool would stretch far and wide, with no preferential treatment going to townsfolk. If anything, they would get the menial jobs and that was all.

"That's why you want our island. Staff housing," Maya said, her eyes meeting Melanie's.

"Will you be sourcing supplies locally? What is your footprint in terms of shipping pollution?" Daphne asked.

"We have our distribution chains in place," Aaron replied.

"So, that is a no," Tristen clarified. The lights above them flickered as an errant breeze filtered through the room.

"Please, have more wine. I'm sure we can come to a settlement and find a way to work together."

Settlement. Were they offering cash? Melanie immediately thought of their overdue taxes. Her family could use cash, but not from Rubicore. The only thing they should be doing with this company—which planned to take what was great about Muskoka and ruin it—was stop them.

"Shall we get out of here?" Tristen asked.

Melanie was breathing hard and she knew she had to be glaring at the men. But there was no way she was leaving. There was a lot more to find out.



TRISTEN FOUND himself staring at the model of Rubicore's resort plans, his mind shifting into an old gear that wasn't nearly as rusty as he'd assumed it would be. As the party buzzed around him, he stepped gingerly around the three-dimensional mockup of Baby Horseshoe Island, his feet sending spikes of agony searing through him as he analyzed the plan for potential issues.

So far, so good. It was evident Rubicore had put some time and thought into it. He wondered who they'd found for an architect. The proposed buildings had a classy, yet rustic look to them. Although Heritage Row was nowhere to be seen. Were they going to demolish the cottages, or relocate them? How would Melanie react when she noticed?

Beside him, she was pointing out problems, stating concerns about the watershed and so forth. The problem was, she seemed to be focusing on things the public honestly wouldn't care enough about to get behind, and Rubicore could simply slap Band-Aids on. They needed something big. Bigger than hiring local. Much bigger.

"What are they going to do about parking?" Hailey asked.

"I hope the dark sky legislation extends to the island," Maya said wistfully, her cheeks slightly flushed. "I like being able to see the stars when I'm on the dock."

"What about water quality and degradation issues?" Hailey asked. She nudged Daphne, who so far hadn't said a word.

"Sewage, noise pollution, an increase in traffic " Melanie was still listing things off to her sisters.

Tristen sighed. Directing these women into following one solid plan—assuming he ever found something good for them to attack—was going to be like herding sheep with an air horn. It didn't help that he was exhausted and slightly tipsy. Being a woman and remembering all the rules was tiring. His panty hose was digging into his waist and the wig was itching like crazy. How did Melanie and her sisters appear so comfortable, milling about, chatting with other partygoers?

"We're going to go freshen our drinks," Hailey said, then departed with the other sisters, leaving Melanie and Tristen alone.

"Can we go sit?" he begged. The first hour of the party he'd followed Melanie like a lost pup as she had made the rounds, chatting and catching up with what felt like half the room, and introducing herself to the other half.

"Thank goodness these plans haven't been approved yet," Melanie said, hands on her hips.

"Actually, they were approved this afternoon," said Mr. Valos, joining them. He grinned down at the model as though he was a puppet master

and this was his show.

Yep. It was time to step out of this mess. Dot could drink a big ol' case of Get Over It. Things were not good here. And the more involved Tristen became, the more likely it would be that he'd let the monster out of the attic.

Yet he couldn't make himself move away from Melanie's side. And he was pretty sure it wasn't because she smelled like coconut.

Mr. Valos clasped his hands behind his back, looking pleased. "It will be such a lovely resort. Such a wonderful thing for Muskoka. I can't wait for them to break ground at the end of August and see this dream come to fruition."

"Break ground?" Melanie's voice rose in disbelief. "There hasn't been a public meeting to hear objections. There's a process. This is Canada!" She was starting to yell, and Tristen gently tapped her arm, but she yanked it out of his reach.

"Now, Melanie," Mr. Valos said uncomfortably. "Let's not create a scene."

"You and the council are just going to have to sit on your rubber stamp of approval until the public has had a chance to weigh in on this."

"Now, Melanie " Vincent repeated. His patronizing tone made Tristen want to shove his fist into the man's face. Angled just right for maximum destruction, of course. "The meeting was changed to accommodate the vacation times of some of the council members. They work hard, you know."

"Whoa." Melanie held up her hands, a dangerous look on her face. "Tell me you haven't already had the meeting."

Mr. Valos tugged at his tie, cheeks flushing with guilt.

"There was nothing in the paper stating the meeting time and date had been changed." Melanie was moving closer, as though she was

going to attack the man.

"Mel " Tristen warned.

"I sent a notice to the paper." Mr. Valos was drawing himself up.

"Then why did I not see it?"

"Too late to print, perhaps?" Tristen asked, barely remembering in time to use his female voice.

Mr. Valos blinked rapidly. Guilty. He'd probably sent it in, washed his hands and carried on.

That meant they'd just lost a big one to Rubicore and the municipality. Now the developer could proceed, as well as claim innocence on its part in terms of due diligence not having been performed. The municipality could issue an apology. Rubicore could hand out some free memberships. Over. Done.

Rubicore was probably bribing councillors, and the old Tristen probably would have done the same with such a costly project. But he had to admit, standing helplessly on the other side of that fence made him pretty angry.

"I don't see Camp Adaker in these plans," Melanie said. Her chest expanded as she caught on to what had happened: the camp was gone. Quietly swept off the table when nobody was paying attention.

"Well, Rubicore does own it. I suppose it is their prerogative. Now, if you'll excuse me. I must go chat with the premier."

"They bought the camp?" Melanie caught Vincent's arm. Her voice was weak, and for a second Tristen wondered if she was about to faint.

Mr. Valos replied, "Years ago."

"But " Melanie's face scrunched in a way that Tristen figured was a pretty good indication she was holding back tears. "I've been fund-raising for Adaker since I stopped working there as a counselor. It's a charity. Nonprofit. How could they buy it?"

Oh, boy. This was where it got personal for her.

Mr. Valos paused. "It's closed now. Didn't you hear?"

"How could they close it?"

"They didn't want the campers near all the construction, and felt it would be best to shut it down."

"Forever?"

Valos shrugged.

"I think it's time for us to leave, Melanie." Tristen glanced toward the exit and a woman in a pastel suit smiled, making eye contact.

"Have you seen the full plans?" she asked as she approached, allowing Mr. Valos to slip away. The woman wore a Rubicore name tag and began spouting off wonderful facts about the resort. She pointed out the parking plans, and Melanie, who seemed stunned by the news about the camp, allowed Tristen to pull her away. He just about had her out of range when she dug in her heels again.

"I'm sorry," Melanie said to the woman. "What did you say?"

"By creating more parking in port, we will not only solve our own parking issues but also create more public parking in the downtown core of Port Carling." She beamed expectantly.

"You *what?*"

Oh, he knew that tone. Someone was about to have their nuts handed to them in a gift bag.

"Parking," the woman chirped, oblivious. Probably because she didn't have nuts.

"I'm sorry, but this looks like the island where the museum is. You must mean the snippet of land that is across the road from the locks?"

The woman glanced over her shoulder, seeking help.

Tristen sidled up behind Melanie, not caring if he was standing protectively close. He wasn't going to risk missing a thing. That was his jogging island they were messing with.

"But how are you going to get cars onto the island?" he asked in his best Trista voice. "It's foot traffic only, and you'd be ruining the island's charm, changing that. It would involve major construction to get cars out there."

"A ramp. Now if you look at the—"

"I'm sorry. A ramp?"

There it was. The much-loved, small island park was going to be levelled and covered in asphalt, with sections of it carved out to moor an increasing number of boats. Currently, with the walking path around its circumference, the old log cabin museum, mature trees, as well as being a stopping point for the *Segwun*, it was picturesque, quiet, and so entirely Muskoka.

And about to be demolished in the name of progress.

His temperature rose, and he could tell the news was having the same effect on Melanie. Adding a vehicle bridge to the island would also create a traffic mess on the hill that joined one half of town to the other. In their fight against Rubicore, they'd quite literally found their hill to die upon and he didn't know how he was going to manage the fight without becoming a monster. And the more he got to know Melanie, the more he worried that his monster side would scare her away.

"Sweetie, let's take a picture of these beautiful plans," Tristen cooed, hoping Melanie would take a massive chill pill and follow his lead. He could feel Aaron's eyes drilling into them from the group he was chatting with, several feet away. "The parking is going to be so *helpful* for the town."

Melanie slowly changed her tune, shoulders relaxing. "Here, let me hold your purse for you, Trista."

Tristen listened to the man on the other end of the line explain who he was. "Sorry, with which paper?"

"Toronto Star."

"And what did you need?" He prepared himself for questions regarding why he'd left Toronto. Had someone seen him in drag last night? He swore one of the men in the cluster chatting about golf had recognized him. Were things about to get nasty?

"You are Tristen Bell of TriBell Developments?"

"No, not any longer."

"You were before you sold your shares to your ex-wife, Cindy, is that correct?"

"Yes, but what is this about? Is she okay?" Scenarios of things going wrong with the company flooded his mind. Media storms were difficult for any business owner and he hated the thought of his ex, who had held the reins for only two years, being in the middle of something that could severely rock her boat as well as her bottom line.

"Your daughter is Dorothy?"

"Yes."

"And you are dating Melanie Summer?"

"What is this about?"

"You have concerns about a development led by Rubicore in Muskoka?"

"What business is this of yours?"

"That will be all. Thank you."

"Wait!" Tristen braced himself with a hand against his stainless steel fridge. "What is this about?"

"Just fact checking, sir. Have a nice day."

Fact checking.

Tristen pulled the phone away from his ear and stared at it, the dial tone humming.

This meant one thing. War. And the first shot fired by Rubicore was going to be a big one.



MELANIE STOOD in the heat of the midmorning sunlight bouncing off the window beside her, loving the way it warmed her after the too cool air-conditioning in her Bracebridge office.

"You need to back off," Tristen said. He'd pulled her away from her desk, where she and Dot had been trying retroactively to get last week back on track—a lovely way to spend a Saturday morning. If he hadn't seemed so stormy, Melanie would have been a tad excited at his take-charge attitude.

"It's not safe," he said.

"Had a side of drama with your morning coffee, I see?"

Tristen snatched her by the arms. "Listen to me, Melanie. I'm dead serious. I got a call from a reporter this morning and they are fact checking personal stuff. This is the beginning of it all. They are already twisting my life into something that is going to look really bad."

She whipped her arms out of his grasp. "Maybe this is a positive article—ever think of that?"

"There are a thousand ways to interpret the truth, and none of the ones that will hit the papers will be the way I see my life. That I can guarantee." The lines around his eyes softened before crinkling again with worry.

"How do you know?" she asked. "Maybe they will see you the way I see you."

"Because. I've lived it. Nice stuff doesn't sell papers, Mel."

Mel. She liked the way that sounded.

"You'd better not have secrets," he continued, "because if you do, they will be everywhere."

"Not this again."

"They will aim to destroy you and everything that matters to you. They want to hurt you so bad you won't be able to get out of bed and face the world, the day, yourself. Do you understand? This isn't a game, it's war. Psychological, emotional, everything. Nobody gets between them and their buck. Nobody."

Melanie tipped her chin up, hating that the world had left him so jaded. "I have no secrets, Tristen Bell."

"Everyone has secrets."

"Well, I don't."

"Any embarrassing situations?"

Of course. She was human. And a woman, as well. Who hadn't had their period start at an inopportune time? But she didn't expect *that* to make the news.

"They will pick you apart like crows over roadkill."

"I can handle it and the exposure will be good. In fact, a war of words could be a positive thing. It will get us some publicity and I can bring up the parking issue. People won't side with the nasty big

corporation that owns all but one of the cottages in Heritage Row, and has no plans to save them or turn them into a museum. And yes, I asked."

He grabbed his hair in frustration and muttered something under his breath.

"I'm a big girl, Tristen. I can take whatever they throw at me, and besides, I won't be alone."

Tristen took a large breath as though preparing to say something else. She headed him off. "An old friend of mine works with the local paper and he'll be receptive to spinning some David versus Goliath stuff. Quit worrying." She gave Tristen's shoulder a squeeze. Man, he was a big guy. One day, she'd like to feel those big strong arms around her.

She turned to walk back to her office, but Tristen snagged her hand, stopping her, desperation edging his voice. "People are going to get hurt."

His eyes were fraught with storms again. She stepped forward, tapping his chest with a finger. "You know who is going to get hurt? Rubicore."

"What about your niece?"

"Totally unrelated to this."

"Nothing is unrelated. They were asking about Dot, and I can't have them tearing her up. You know I can't. They can rip into me, but not her."

"I understand that and I can see how much you care for her." Melanie smiled, hoping he wasn't heading in the direction she feared he was.

He lowered his head and when he looked up again, his eyes were dark with regret. "I have to bow out. I'm sorry."

"No." After he'd gone to all the trouble of dressing up in drag, which she'd figured showed great dedication to the cause, all it took

was the possibility of a stupid newspaper article to scare him off? It had to be something bigger that was scaring him away. It had to be something about her. In some way, she wasn't amazing enough to keep him by her side. "You can't roll over and play dead. Dot wants to be involved in this. It's important to her. We need you." Crap, Melanie's voice was quavering. She couldn't lose him. When he was around it all felt possible and she felt safe and strong.

"I'm sorry, Melanie. I want to do this for you, but I can't reconcile the two sides right now. I have to protect my family."

"Is this about Toronto and your ex-wife?"

"This is about being a good father." His jaw was set, the muscle below his ear bulging.

"But their garbage hurt Dot."

"They're cleaning up the bay. I talked to council this morning."

"She's dedicated to this. She can handle some lying newspaper articles."

"It's my job as her father to protect her. I haven't always, but this time I can."

"Have you thought about asking her what she wants?"

"She's a kid. I'm her dad." His voice was getting louder, his cheeks flushed. "I've been through this before and I'm not doing it again."

"I thought you were a man who cared about more than yourself." Melanie chin wobbled as she fought back tears. She was so worn-out from keeping her chin up, shoulders back. Pretending to be the confident woman she had never been on the inside. And for whatever reason, Tristen just made her want to curl up in his arms and let it all out, which was so completely infuriating. She'd been doing just fine until she'd met him, but now that he was around, her life felt empty when he wasn't there.

Which was stupid. How could he undo her in such a big way, and yet so easily, too?

"I thought you were a man who was strong enough to stand beside me when the going got tough. Apparently I was wrong."



BACK IN HER OFFICE, Melanie pushed her trembling fingers through her hair. How had she let Tristen become so important in her battle? It felt as though he had pulled the rug out from under her by quitting, even though he'd barely done anything other than nag at her about hitting Rubicore in the wallet, and pointing out the obvious parking thing. But it had felt nice knowing he was on her side. And now she was alone again, to battle a company so much bigger than she was.

Sitting, she tapped a pen on the stack of waiting case folders. She needed help from someone who could get word out about what Rubicore was planning.

"Was that my dad?" Dot asked from the doorway.

Melanie adopted a smile that fell flat. "Yeah."

"Why was he wearing his you're-in-trouble face?"

"He's out."

"Of what?" Dot caught on a second later. "What? He's giving up? He's going to let Rubicore win?" The teen fell into the chair across from Melanie, her face lined with anger, followed by disappointment. "But why? I thought the parking thing was a killer."

"He's spooked."

"Are you sure? My dad eats companies like Rubicore for breakfast."

"The papers called him this morning to fact check some stuff, and I guess he's just worried that things are going to get messy. He's trying to protect you."

Dot let out an exasperated sigh. "I don't need protecting and why does he always leave when things get tough?"

Melanie had already heard the story of Tristen leaving his family, his company, his city. It had seemed so odd before. A strong man like him taking off? But now, after seeing the haunted look in his eye, she understood that there was something in Tristen's past that was big enough to scare him into making a run for it even now.

She sighed. "He's trying to protect you." Melanie wished he was interested in protecting her, too. But she knew if their positions were reversed she'd do the same thing and pull out in order to protect Dot. "But messy doesn't bother me. I'm going to figure out a way through this. They aren't going to destroy a beautiful island on my watch. Are you still in?"

"Yeah."

"Good, because I could use the help." Melanie stood. "What do you say to an extended lunch and then working a bit later to make up for it? Think your dad would be okay with that?"

Dot's eyes shone with excitement as she followed Melanie to the door. "Are we going to go kick some butt, Ms. Summer?"

"We sure are. With or without your father. And the first place we are going to start is with someone who can give us a voice. If Rubicore's getting the papers involved, then we need to fight fire with fire, right?"

They walked through Bracebridge, turning into the office where Rick Steinfeld, a reporter friend of Hailey's, worked.

Melanie strode across the room, stopping to place her hands on Rick's desk, leaning forward. "How would you like to be in the middle of a media storm?"

He dropped his pen and tipped his chair back, all ears. "You know I would."

"Is Austin Smith still in town?"

"Whoa. Mellie, are you sure?"

"Why? Who's Austin?" Dot asked, practically bouncing at her side.

"Paparazzi. Major snoop," Melanie said.

"Awesome."

"And who is this?" Rick asked, sizing up the teen.

"Dot Bell."

Rick's head quirked. "Daughter of Tristen Bell?"

"Yeah." She crossed her arms as if to say *I'm not him*.

"Someone was asking about you."

"Who?" Melanie demanded, feeling fingers of dread working up her spine.

"Not sure. I overheard another reporter talking to someone." He scanned the open office. "He's off today. So, what are you two up to?"

"Rubicore is going around telling everyone that their big resort is going to create jobs in the area, but I happen to know for a fact that they don't plan to hire local, nor shop local. And preserving Heritage Row is not in their plans for their resort on Baby Horseshoe Island. They own Camp Adaker—which is also not in their development plans. They want to turn Port Carling's island park into a parking lot, and have the go-ahead, since the municipality didn't perform due diligence before approving Rubicore's proposals. They're ruining the environment. Noise, light, air, water, garbage—"

Rick, who had been taking notes, paused, hand held up. "Whoa. Back up a tad. These are a lot of serious accusations."

"They are ruining everything that makes this Muskoka."

Rick fiddled with his pen. Finally, he rubbed his eyes and let out a sigh. "Look, I don't mind helping you guys with your battles. I really don't. I've helped Daphne bring a lot of things to light, but my boss is getting tired of me always taking the environmental slant."

"Then focus on the other stuff. The parking lot issue is something that everyone can get behind."

"What did Rubicore do to you, Melanie?" he asked quietly.

"This isn't a vendetta. They're just ruining things."

"Look, I know it must be difficult watching them change everything on the island across from you, when you guys are having a tough time. But making these sorts of accusations publicly could get you in a lot of trouble."

"It's not that." Her throat was filling with tears. First Tristen and now Rick? He was supposed to love crazy stories like this.

Someone in the office behind Rick called his name and he held up a finger, excusing himself. He entered the office and closed the door. A moment later he reappeared, unable to meet Melanie's eye.

"I'm sorry, I can't help with this."

"What? Why?" she protested.

Rick glanced toward the office behind him, then scrawled something on a scrap of paper. He spun it around so she and Dot could read it.

Major advertiser.

"No," Melanie whispered. "You have got to be kidding."

Rick slowly shook his head.

Tears of frustration welled up, blocking Melanie's ability to speak. Grabbing Dot by the arm, she led her onto the street.

"I don't get it. What does that mean?" the teen asked.

"The developer is advertising with the paper, so they can't say anything untoward, as it might sever their financial ties."

"That's so stupid!" Dot exclaimed.

"I know." Melanie paused, thinking. "But it might also explain why the public meeting's date change never made it into the paper."

Dot's shoulders had slouched forward. "Now what?"

"We have a case, but no help. I think it's time to get creative."



TRISTEN'S TABLET clattered onto the countertop and he thrust a hand out to steady it. He froze for a second, then let out a breath.

This was not good.

He'd warned Melanie that her secrets would be exposed. He'd warned her and she hadn't listened. She'd ignored him and now everything was starting to crumble.

And it wasn't just her family secrets, it was his, too. His was the name people knew. He made the story juicy. Rubicore had taken a preemptive shot across their bow. They'd slammed her. Slammed him. Slammed everyone they could get their hands on who might be connected to the Summers.

He clutched the counter and lowered his head. His cell rang and, seeing it was Cindy, he figured he might as well get it all over with now.

"Dot is *gay*?" his ex-wife yelled, before Tristen had a chance to say a word.

"Yeah, she is." He pinched the bridge of his nose. He didn't even consider that Cindy might not know that little tidbit.

"And I have to read it in the Sunday news? My mother called me this morning. I was enjoying a nice relaxing moment and now this. What did you do to her?"

"I didn't do anything to her."

"I'm coming to get her. You're a lousy father and you're destroying her."

"Some studies suggest that three percent of the population is considered homosexual or bisexual."

"*What?*"

"Three percent of—"

"Don't you see, Tristen? You're going to *destroy* her. This is just like when I kicked you out. Everything was in the news. I couldn't trust anyone."

"I know."

"How do you think she feels, being publicly outted? She's just a kid." Tristen's jaw popped as he ground his teeth together.

"How is she? Does she know?" Cindy asked, her voice wobbling.

"I haven't talked to her yet." Tristen's ribs hurt from holding in the rage, the urge to slaughter whoever had revealed his daughter's sexual preferences to the media.

"And who is Melanie? Is she the other woman?"

"She is not the other woman." He could handle allegations that he and Melanie were together and about to take down Rubicore. That wasn't a problem. The other stuff, however, went deep and would only get worse.

"She's the lawyer Dot has been working with, isn't she?"

"Yes."

"Is she gay? Did she turn Dot?"

"I don't really think it works that way, Cindy." Tristen sagged against the counter, absently rubbing Max's ears as he nudged his snout against Tristen's thigh. "Take a deep breath."

"Don't tell me to take a deep breath. This is my daughter. You need to stop this, Tristen. You need to pull the plug. That woman is unstable."

"Melanie is one of the most stable people I know."

"That woman had to go to a troubled teens camp."

"She worked there, Cindy."

"She was a *camper*, Tristen."

He paused, thinking, but failed to see Melanie as a troublemaking youth. "I think the camp helps kids who have been through a trauma,

too, Cindy.” Melanie had mentioned that her father had died. Maybe there’d been a bad accident.

“Don’t make excuses for her, because I don’t care. I don’t want Dot around her.”

“Have you considered that the papers might be wrong about some things? Were they right when they said I left you because you were more concerned about getting manicures than helping out with the business?”

Silence.

“Tristen, I don’t like Dot being in the media. She’s our *child*. We need to protect her.”

The room felt too quiet. His world too narrow. Tristen braced himself against the fridge, pressing his forehead to the cool stainless steel. She was right. He’d failed Dot once again.

“You do whatever you need to do to get her out of the spotlight. You hear me? I’m running a reputation-based business and your name is still associated with it even though you obviously don’t give a crap. We’re still connected, Tristen, and I don’t want my name in the news unless it’s about me storming the business world.”

He clicked off the phone and turned to see Dot standing in the doorway.

“So I’m gay, huh?”

“That’s what the papers say.”

She shrugged and opened the fridge, pulling out a wedge of brie. Stress eating, or had his chats about not worrying about every single calorie finally taken hold?

“Are you okay?”

“I guess.” She spun his tablet to face her. He watched as she read, her expression changing from interest to anger. “What a load of bull. I hope Melanie slams them back.”

"The best thing to do is not retaliate."

"She won't take this lying down. Not Melanie. She's tough."

But was she tough enough? That was the question.

And what kind of man was Tristen for sitting back, waiting to see if she was?

Dot's expression grew darker. She looked at the tablet again. "Dad?"

"Yeah."

"Rubicore is owned by Aaron Bloomwood, Jim Hanna, and Mistral Johnson?"

"Apparently."

She gave him a quick, fierce hug. "Thanks for backing out of the fight, Dad. Thank you."

"What are you talking about?" She was upset with him earlier for telling Melanie he could no longer help. And now she was thanking him? He didn't really have the energy for her mood swings right now.

Her face paled. "We have to stop Melanie."

"I already tried, she won't budge." He glanced at the tablet for answers on why his daughter was suddenly so upset. "What's wrong?"

"What's wrong?" Her voice was pitched so high he was sure dogs would come running. "If Melanie ruins Rubicore it'll destroy my girlfriend's family! The Hannas will be put in the poorhouse and then Samantha will break up with me!"

"Back up a step." His heart clenched. His daughter had been sleeping with the enemy? Well, hopefully not *sleeping*. But still. All those rules and promises he'd made to watch over her, and he didn't even know Dot's girlfriend's last name? He was a crappy dad.

"Jim Hanna is her *father* and you've told Melanie how to annihilate the company. You're always messing up everything." Tristen braced himself as Dot's unbridled anger came rolling in. "That's why Mom's business is failing. Because she's too nice, not like you."

“TriBell is failing?” Tristen’s world tilted. His family was in trouble?
“How bad is it?”

Dot crossed her arms, shutting him out. “It doesn’t matter. Mom will solve it, like always. Not you.”

“I can’t stop Melanie, but I’ll do whatever I can to help you and your mom.”

There was no way he could help Melanie now—even from afar—but maybe there was a way he could show her he still cared and that it wasn’t personal.

Tristen wandered through the indoor antiques show, lightly touching tables, his mind elsewhere, his mood edgy. He needed to find a way to show Melanie that him backing out of the Rubicore fight wasn't about her. After the way the papers had slammed her, he figured she had to be hurting something fierce. And while he'd warned her that this was going to happen, he still felt as though it was partly his fault for not protecting her somehow. Fights like this forged strength in some, while breaking others, and he wasn't sure which way Melanie would go.

Scanning displays bearing antique place settings, tablecloths, and trinkets, he kept an eye out for something unique. Something that obviously had a story. An underdog antique that nobody except Melanie could love. The right gift would tell her that she wasn't alone, that he saw her and believed in her even if he couldn't be at her side slinging arrows into any foe that dared come near.

He stopped in front of a table, doubting himself. He was falling into old habits. Gifts when the woman needed his time and presence. Wanted the impossible.

"See anything you like?" asked the lady watching the table's shellacked items. Nothing had the right energy. They were glossy, done up, their history hidden under fresh varnish.

"Not yet. I think I'll know what I'm looking for when I see it."

"Just like with love," she said, shooting him a wink.

The next table had toys and teacups.

"Over a hundred years old," the man said, passing him an old jack-in-the-box. The vendor looked familiar. Christophe. The museum curator. "And these teacups were found in an old ice shed here in Muskoka. Perfectly preserved." He lifted a cup and held it out for inspection.

Tristen turned it over, then set it down again. Too flowery. He had a feeling Melanie didn't like antiques that were too pretty.

"I can make a deal on anything from this half of the table. However, this side I'm selling for a friend, so unfortunately no deals." Christophe waved his hand toward an odd assortment of china that had seen better days, but had a certain something that caught Tristen's eye.

"You hear about the museum's island?" Tristen asked, bending down to study the strange collection of teacups that were lined up along the edge of the table.

"The bastards. They think they can just move that old log cabin as many times as they want, and it will still be okay."

"Sorry?"

"The log cabin? The part of the museum that was moved in from Glen Orchard in the eighties? This was supposed to be its final home because of its age."

"You aren't going to fight it?"

The man looked dejected. "What can I do? Nobody cares about that stuff."

"You should talk to Melanie Summer. She cares."

Christophe gave a rueful smile. "She's a good kid, but I'm not sure she can pull this one off."

Tristen ignored the remark, trying to keep it from getting under his skin, where he knew it would fester. The monster wanted out, wanted

to roar at everyone in her way. It wanted to clear the path and present Melanie with a nice little castle, every problem swept away. Solved. By him. Using force, if necessary.

Tristen turned over an ugly cup that had faint cracks in its finish, and read the markings on the bottom. They weren't familiar, but he certainly recognized the tremble that had crept into his hand. He carefully set the cup down, knowing how rare it must be with its simple black drawings of nymphs. The price for this one cup could be well over a hundred bucks. He glanced down the row. Over a thousand dollars perched along the edge of the table. He gently nudged the cups back, hoping to keep the collection safe from children roaming the indoor market.

"How much is this cup with the nymphs? I know someone who might like it."

"That one's quite rare and unusual. We think it was commissioned, and have been trying to trace its origins for some time." Christophe studied the bottom of the cup, after shoving his glasses farther up his nose. He checked the price list beside him. "Two hundred and fifty. This one's price is nonnegotiable."

"Two-fifty? For one cup?" Tristen stared at him. The man had to be kidding, right? The thing was hideous. Christophe set it down again, and Tristen reached for it. "I'll take it."

Melanie would probably smash it at his feet. One cup. Two hundred and fifty dollars. He'd lost his mind.

A young child skipped up to the table and reached out to snag a cup. Tristen batted her hand away, causing one to teeter. He righted it, then quickly piled the teacups up in front of Christophe. "I'll take them all."

They needed someone who would keep them safe.

"That is " Christophe paused to calculate the purchase price, eyebrows raised. Catching himself, he added quickly, "I'll wrap those right up. Cash, check, debit, or credit card, sir?"

Tristen handed over his credit card, keeping an eye on the crowds milling about. One jostle and this history would be gone. Destroyed. He felt like a new dad trying to protect his offspring from a herd of stampeding gazelles.

He rubbed his brow. They were only cups. He didn't even like frail and delicate things. He smashed rocks, for crying out loud. He probably couldn't even drink out of these dainty little teacups without crushing them in with his big hands.

And yet he was willingly going to dip into his untouched Toronto account to cover this ridiculous expense.

At home, he unloaded a ton of granite he'd picked up before hitting the show. He heaved the heavy stones as far as he could into the bush, struggling to exhaust the energy fueling the emotions roaring through him. He wanted to protect Melanie, though he barely knew her. He wanted to put on his old suit and kill Rubicore. Not just give them a limp or send them away. *Kill them.*

Panting, with sweat soaking his T-shirt, he stared into the underbrush. The rocks were unloaded, but had been tossed so far and wide it would take hours to ferret them out from under the fresh mulch of crushed ferns and saplings.

His arms ached from the effort, but he felt good. He'd make it through another day. And right now, that was all that mattered.

After a shower, he unpacked the teacups on the granite kitchen island, doubting himself and his intentions.

Dot, milking lake water out of her shaggy bangs and onto the floor, laughed at the cups. "This could be the definition of hideous. Wow." She carelessly held one up to the light.

"Didn't I tell you not to go swimming without me?" He snatched the cup and carefully set it down beside the box.

"It's fine. I was in the shallow area."

"There is no shallow area. The bottom drops off right away."

She shrugged. "I didn't know you liked antiques."

"Quit changing the subject. No more swimming without me. And I'm more into boats. And rocks. Not china."

"Rocks aren't antiques."

"Prove it."

She rolled her eyes, a small smile playing at her lips. "Fine."

"Good." He stared at the cups, unsure what to do. Was it too much to give them all at once to someone you hardly knew? Should he wrap them individually? Chuck them back in the box and then shove it at her as though it was old junk he couldn't be bothered with?

Dot fingered the receipt. "Three thousand dollars?" She stared at him, eyes wide. "You know I'd like a car, right?"

"You can earn one."

"Right. So you can buy ugly cups." She gazed around the simple home. "Mom said you have billions. Why " She curled her upper lip, eyeing the hole in his old sock where his big toe peeked out.

"Why don't I spend it?"

"Yeah."

"So I can buy ugly cups." He grinned and shoved the box of cups into the middle of the island where they'd be safe.

Silence stretched between them and he could feel that Dot wanted to talk.

"Why are you bailing on us?" she asked.

"I'm not bailing on you. I'm just It's complicated."

"You know I don't care what the press says."

"Your mom does."

"And since when do you listen to Mom?"

"I'm trying to do better. I don't want you getting hurt, Dot."

"Kind of too late for that." Her eyes darkened and the way she turned her shoulders, he knew she was about to flee. He pulled her into his arms, hugging her, unable to speak. Unable to explain.

"I'm sorry, Dot."

"For what?"

He held her by her shoulders, watching her expressions change like the seasons.

He was sorry for a lot of things. For not being around more. Not understanding that Dot's mother didn't need gifts and gestures to know that he'd loved her. For having to bail on Dot and Melanie in order to try and keep them safe. For not being man enough to deal with everything. For having a monster in the attic that he couldn't seem to control unless he hid out and smashed rocks all day, cementing them together as if it was his life he was piecing back together.

"I guess we can do it without you. I mean, that whole island parking lot thing is going to get everyone riled up, right?" She appeared so young, lost and in need of reassurance.

"You bet, Dot, you bet." He pulled her into one last quick hug, then released her, knowing what she didn't—that Christophe had already given up.

Tristen opened the fridge, staring at its contents. Max came to his side and sat, looking expectantly into the fridge with his sad eyes. "So?" Tristen asked. "Eat out tonight?"

"I totally want fries and a big greasy hamburger," his daughter exclaimed.

"You read my mind," he said with a smile.

"Can we go to McDonald's in Bracebridge?"

"I was thinking of a real restaurant."

"McDonald's is real."

"I'll think about it."

"Is that a yes?" She clapped her hands, eyes sparkling. Just like when she was a little girl. He'd missed so much over the years. But he wasn't missing it now, was he?

"Get in the truck."

"Are you sure that will get us there?" she teased, hurrying to the door before he changed his mind. "I heard about Melanie having to save you. Maybe you should only drive it if you have her or a mechanic with you."

Tristen laughed and pushed Dot out the door. If nothing else, things were finally coming along between the two of them.



MELANIE STRUGGLED to pry a reporter away from Daphne as they bullied their way into the restaurant to get Tigger a sundae. The girl had waited patiently as the two sisters had tried to talk sense into Mr. Valos, going so far as to interrupt his Sunday tee time in order to do so. Talk about wasted breath. The man had to be receiving something under the table. Either that or he really just didn't care about doing what the taxpayers paid him to do.

And then, as the three of them had walked across the McDonald's parking lot, a swarm of reporters had descended. Cameras were shoved in their faces along with microphones. Questions were shouted. The Summers couldn't get back to the van and had made a break for the restaurant's doors, but reporters had blocked them, closing in. Melanie had never been claustrophobic, but this nearly did her in.

Daphne turned to face the cameras, tucking Tigger behind her. Melanie struggled to get to her side, but the reporters, sensing her sister

was about to give them a sound bite, jostled her back.

"Rubicore needs to have a public meeting outlining the results of their environmental impact study, which should include waterway traffic patterns and their impact. This is a basic right belonging to the citizens of Port Carling, and Rubicore has failed to honor that right." A gust blew Daphne's light cotton dress against her small frame. She seemed so vulnerable trapped against the closed door. Melanie shoved a man out of the way as a new round of questions were flung at her sister. Daphne was used to talking to the press, but Melanie could see the fear lingering in her eyes, and Tigger was trembling, clutching her mother's skirt to her face.

Melanie stomped on the reporters' feet, dug in her elbows and used her tall build to plow her way to her sister's side. "Please, we have no further comments." She felt as though she was a lawyer protecting her client as she ushered Daphne through the restaurant door, backing them up slowly.

"Daphne!" shouted a reporter from the rear of the cluster. "What do you have to say about your daughter's birth father applying for custody?"

Instantly, her sister's small form pushed against her back. "Keep going," Melanie warned.

"My dad?" Tigger asked, her voice small and curious.

"No. Say nothing." Melanie shoved her sister inside the restaurant and straight into the arms of Tristen. He whisked Daphne and Tigger away, calling to the manager to take care of the reporters. Melanie let the door swing closed, then blocked the entrance, arms crossed. Her body shook as she stared down the reporter on the other side of the glass.

"Mistral Johnson has filed for full custody," he shouted through the partition. "He wants his daughter back."



CAREFULLY, Melanie joined Daphne and Dot in the booth, her butt sliding across the hard plastic seat. Her sister was trembling, staring blankly out the window. Melanie placed a hand on hers, hoping to help settle her.

"We'll sort this out, Daphne."

Tristen took Tigger to the counter to order her the promised sundae. Melanie gave him a reassuring smile when he didn't look away from them. There was something in his eyes that made it difficult for her to breathe right.

"He's going to take her? Why now?" Daphne's eyes were full of pain, her face a mask of confusion.

"He won't. He can't. You've been a good mom. He can't just sweep in and take a daughter he's ignored for years." However, Melanie also knew the man had rights that he could ask the courts to honor. And with him being well off, when Daphne was a struggling single mom, the courts would likely give him whatever he asked for.

Daphne blinked back tears and Melanie whispered, "I'm so sorry. This is all my fault."

Tristen had been right. But she'd had no concept of how bad it could get.

"I'll call everything off, okay? I'll apologize to Rubicore in the papers. Tigger is more important than a development."

"Um, not to interrupt your guilt fest," Dot said, speaking up, "but hasn't Daphne been in the news a ton for environmental stuff? It might not be because of Rubicore, right?"

"Tigger's father is part of Rubicore," Daphne said quietly.

"What?" Melanie had to force herself to lower her voice. "When did you learn this?"

"Since forever. He inherited his share from his father when he turned twenty-one."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"No wonder he's upset," Dot commented with a surprised laugh.

"You can't quit, Melanie," Daphne said. "This would have happened between me and Mistral anyway. And Rubicore doesn't exactly have a great environmental record. You can't keep quiet just because of me."

"I can't let them take Tigger."

"*They* aren't going to. Mistral and I will talk. We'll figure things out. It's unrelated, as far as I'm concerned." The determination in her sister was welcomingly familiar.

"Is this why you were weird about fighting Rubicore?" Melanie asked.

Daphne paused, as if trying to decide how much to divulge. "They only care about money."

"That's true." Tristen interjected. He stood by their table, waiting for Tigger to finish chatting with a nearby family about ice cream and sugar.

"I'll be your lawyer, Daph. I'll make this right. We won't lose her. Not even for an hour a month."

Mistral was going to lawyer up with some hefty legal guns from the city. Melanie would have to find some smart tricks and loopholes. Quickly, if she planned to keep her niece in Muskoka.

"I don't get why he wants her all of a sudden," Dot said, her upper lip curled in confusion.

"This isn't about Tigger," Tristen replied. "It's about making the Summers pay for going up against Rubicore. He likely doesn't actually want the kid."

Daphne's mouth turned down, tears in her eyes.

Melanie squeezed her sister's hand. "We'll stall the custody proceedings until we've killed the development. Then he'll drift off and forget about it." Presuming he wasn't the type to do the whole vendetta thing when he lost, of course. "Okay? Chin up."

Her sister tipped her face upward with a sniff. "I can do this. Positivity. Being a mope brings no flowers or sunshine."

"That's right," Tristen said, a stitch developing between his brows.

"Mom?"

Daphne wiped away a tear and replied, "Yeah?"

"Why is there a man taking pictures of our van?"



TRISTEN CROSSED HIS ARMS, trying to figure out how he was going to keep the two Summer sisters safe. Dot took Tigger onto the stone patio to play with Max, who was going ballistic trying to keep everyone away from Dot, as he'd been doing ever since the near-drowning incident. He was a guard dog, but only where she was concerned.

Tristen pulled up a stool at his kitchen island and addressed Melanie and Daphne. "You're going to need a security guard. Both of you."

It was stupid to have brought them here with the reporters snooping after them, but what else was he supposed to do? When the private eye had been not-so-privately snapping shots of Daphne and her vehicle to, no doubt, build a case against her as a mother, Tristen had realized they had to find a quiet place to come up with a pretty serious game plan. When Connor happened by—and incidentally prevented Tristen from breaking the PI's camera in front of the women—he'd poured the Summers into Connor's car and said to meet him at the first place to come to mind—home.

But now they were in his house, with a major media storm brewing, and he'd pretty much placed himself in the middle of it. Funny how it didn't bother him as much as he figured it should.

"I'll see if Evander de la Fosse is available." Connor began scrolling through the contacts in his phone. "Hailey and Finian used him and said he was good."

"Whoa wait." Daphne raised her small hands. "Security? No. This is getting out of hand."

"I agree," Tristen said.

"This can be resolved with peace, love, and understanding," she continued. "We need to sit down and discuss things, not escalate them. Running scared attracts the wrong kind of energy. We need to rise above this slander and arms race."

"Arms race?" Connor looked up from his phone. "You want him armed?"

"No!" Daphne let out an exasperated sigh. She began explaining the impact of violent energy to Connor and Tristen blocked her out, his attention on Melanie. She'd noticed the box of haphazardly repacked antique cups on the counter. Gently, she picked up the nymph cup, staring at it as though it were a friend she thought she'd never see again.

"Ugly, huh?" Dot grabbed three oranges out of the nearby fruit bowl, while Max gave Connor a preemptive growl and slid his large body between Dot and the group of adults. "Dad's got exquisitely poor taste. Come on, Tigger. I'll show you how to juggle."

"Not in the house," Tristen called after them, not taking his eyes off Melanie. Her cheeks had flushed and she swallowed hard before slowly raising her gaze to meet his.

"They made me think of you." He pushed the box in her direction. "I saw them at the antiques show."

Melanie was clutching the nymph cup against her chest. "But these " Her eyes lowered to the box, her free hand flipping back the wrappings as she took inventory. "These are really rare, Tristen. Exceedingly rare."

He wanted to say, *Like you*.

He could feel the others staring at them, the earlier discussion over war and peace having faded away.

"You get a security guard in place?" he asked Connor.

"I'm not sure Daphne is ready for that," his friend said carefully.

Daphne, eyes narrowed, feet planted firmly apart, had her small hands clenched into fists. Every fiber in Tristen's being told him to step away if he wanted to live. He only hoped the men who ran Rubicore felt the same way.



TRISTEN STOOD at the patio door, sipping a cup of decaf and watching Melanie. She had been standing on his back deck gazing at the bay below for almost an hour. Arms crossed, clutching the teacup. Every once in a while she'd sigh, her shoulders drooping. Then, over the next few minutes, they'd rise up again.

He figured it had to be something big. Bigger than yesterday's headline that had claimed the two of them were dating. The paper had run a less than flattering photo of Melanie alongside one of him looking, quite frankly, dashing. It was meant to hurt him and his reputation, but he couldn't help but think it must have hurt her, too.

Connor had driven Daphne and Tigger home, Melanie not answering when they'd called to her. Daphne had told Tristen to give her some space, as she was likely working through something big, and she'd asked him to drive her sister home when she returned to planet Earth.

He'd never seen anything as interesting. Never seen a woman just think. Men, yes. But women not so much.

Finally, after an hour of letting her stew things over, he joined her in the growing dusk to see if she needed anything. Privately, he'd been wondering if she was having some sort of standing seizure. But she turned, eyes shadowed, fully conscious.

"How's Daphne?"

"She left."

"Without saying goodbye?" Melanie took a hesitant step toward the house.

"We called to you, but you were thinking. I can give you a ride home if you're ready."

"I need to go there."

Had she taken a hit to the head? "Yeah, I'll take you. Ready?"

"No, Baby Horseshoe."

"That's private property, Melanie."

"I know. It's okay. I won't do anything stupid." She took his hand, still clutching the cup as she led him down to the boathouse.

He followed her directions out to Baby Horseshoe Island, an argument constantly on the tip of his tongue, but unable to be released. There were so many reasons not to go there. She pointed them between the island and a smaller one, and finally to a boathouse that looked as though it was trying to get up the courage to finally bend all the way over and dive into its watery grave. Her island. Tristen let out a relieved breath and docked his boat before she could ask him to trespass on the neighboring shore.

Melanie moored the boat with ease, then disappeared into the dark. He called to her, uneasy about raising his voice so close to the enemy.

"Coming?" she asked, hidden in darkness.

He found the footpath and followed her up the hill. Small solar lights cast just enough of a glow to reveal tree roots poking out of the earth a second before he could trip on them.

Lights flicked on in the cottage and he paused, admiring its rustic charm, before heading up the wooden steps and onto the wraparound veranda.

Melanie shouldered her way out a screen door. She held up one of the cups he'd given her, the one she'd been holding while doing her thinking earlier. "Where it belongs. Nymph Island."

"How about that?"

"It's a sign."

"Of what? Apocalypse due to mythical creatures?" He was losing patience.

She passed him a can of beer, cracking one for herself. She poured part of hers into the cup and toasted him before lighting a lantern above them.

"The whole 'sign' thing is a long story," she said finally. "But basically, I was selling all those cups in order to save this place from a tax sale." She took a seat in a wicker armchair. "But you bought them as a gift. For me. These things were not meant to leave my hands, it seems."

"Wait. Back up a second. Did you just say I bought stuff you were trying to get rid of, and then gave it all back to you?"

"Technically, I didn't want to part with them, but I'm getting kind of desperate. I didn't think anyone would actually buy them, the price was so ridiculous." Melanie moved to the railing, gripping it as she leaned out, gazing toward Rubicore's island. "I owe you three grand."

Tristen rubbed the back of his neck. "No, I think this is the way it's supposed to be." They sat without speaking for a long moment. In the distance, there was a dull roar and whine of a motorboat. Birds had

turned in for the night, leaving it quieter than she'd have thought possible. Quieter even than his place. "So? Was it enough?"

"The money?" She shook her head. "Getting closer, though. The cottage " She turned quickly, watching him in the light of the lantern hanging above. "Do you believe in destiny?"

He shrugged. This was where she showed her crazy side and he ran for the hills, relieved they'd only shared a kiss, right?

"That things happen for a purpose or a reason?" she asked hesitantly. "That maybe there is some sort of energy pulling us along so we are where we're supposed to be at the right time?" There was something in her tone that suggested she might not believe in destiny.

She was a lawyer, after all.

"Daphne is always talking about it, and my analytical, logical mind just rolls its eyes and groans. But now " Melanie inhaled shakily. "I kind of "

"You feel it?" he prompted. He dropped his eyes. Crap. He was buying it, too, wasn't he? But the fact was, in that huge sale of literally thousands of items, he'd not only found the teacups she was selling, but bought them for her. "Did I buy all the cups you'd put out?"

"Every single one."

He pulled a hand down his face. Maybe they just had similar tastes. Tastes in ugly nymph cups. Or more likely, Melanie was so unique that everything about her stood out in a crowd.

"I've never felt as though I belong," she was saying.

He finished his beer, setting the empty can on the coffee table. Confessions? He could not do this.

Yes, he could. He was trying to change. He could prove to her that he was a good guy who listened, instead of shutting her down by telling her that everyone felt that way. Easy.

"Never?" he asked.

"Everyone walks around as if they have this great purpose and meaning, and know what they want and where they want to be. They're all so blissful and *happy*." He almost laughed at the vehemence behind her words. "With this thing with Rubicore, I feel like I can make a difference. That I am the person who needs to put a stop to it all." She sighed, hands on the railing as she cast her gaze out into the darkness again. Head bowed, she let out another heavy sigh. "But I can't. I just can't do it. I can't be the one."

Tristen relaxed in relief. Thank goodness. She was backing out. Now she'd be safe again and Dot could stay working at the office she so dearly loved.

Melanie turned to him in the soft light of the lantern and he surprised himself by walking to her side, running a hand into her thick hair and pulling her into a kiss.

He needed her. Not for any reason other than to simply have her. To find out what it was that made him toss and turn in the night, dreaming of her and that special hold she seemed to have on him.

Her fingers tangled in his hair, her hands wandering down to his chest, then his waist. She let out a moan of contentment as he sucked on her lower lip. She tugged on his belt, ruining any resolve he might have about being a gentleman, his mind set on finding a place to devour her fully. He lifted her in his arms, carrying her inside the cottage, hoping he could be everything she needed to feel right again.

Melanie pushed her mother's wheelchair toward the flower-painted minivan she'd borrowed from Daphne. Her knees still felt shaky from last night's intensely passionate rendezvous with Tristen. She hadn't meant to, but after the teacups followed by how he'd listened to her woes and it had been as though a breaker had been flipped when he'd kissed her. In that moment she'd wanted nothing more than to have an utterly, mind-blowingly amazing night with the man. He'd met her at every breath, every kiss, digging them in deeper and deeper.

And now she had to deal with the consequences of getting involved with a man who had been very clear from the start about not seeking a relationship.

But their night together. It had been simply out of this world and her body got trembly and hot just thinking about it.

She was in too deep with Tristen after only one night. Just like that.

"You all right, Melanie?" her mother asked as she helped her into the passenger seat. "You're sighing a lot."

"It's all good," she said brightly, checking the time. She had forty minutes before she had to be at work, and hoped the doctor was on time for his first appointment of the week. Pushing the empty wheelchair

around the van, she loaded it in the back, then gave a little shriek as a man popped up beside her, camera angled at her face.

"Back off!" she yelled. Her cry caught the attention of the nursing home's caretaker, who ambled over, rake in hand. "You okay, Melanie?" he called.

"This man is harassing me."

The photographer backed away, hands raised. "Not infringing on anyone's rights."

The caretaker glowered at him, giving his rake a shake when the reporter went to move closer to Melanie. She ducked into the van, squealing on the treadless tires as she left the lot, taking several hard turns, hoping to squelch any ideas of him following her.

"What was that about?" Catherine asked, clenching the armrest. With her left side affected by a previous stroke, she was having trouble staying upright.

Melanie slowed the van, her breathing shaky. "Sorry. A photographer was getting in my face." She checked the rearview mirror. How long would it take for the reporters to figure out that she was giving up the fight? That the risks to her family were too high, and she'd backed off? Like she'd told Tristen last night, she couldn't be the one.

"What is that thumping sound?" her mother asked.

Melanie checked the dash. An amber light showed a flat tire. She slammed the heel of her hand against the steering wheel. She pulled over in a quiet neighborhood and got out to check the damage. All her heavy driving had created a leak in the driver's side rear tire. She took a long, slow breath, trying not to let it get to her.

It was a fairly quiet road, and so far nobody had discovered the flower-painted silver Caravan. If she was quick about it, she might be able to have the tire changed before anyone caught up with them.

She glanced up the road, half expecting Tristen to come to her rescue, as she had with him only a week ago. Only a week and he'd crept into her world so solidly.

"Are you okay, Mellie-Melon?" her mother called, as Melanie opened the hatch to look for the jack and spare.

Her lower lip trembled and she pulled in a deep breath to steady herself. "I'm going to change the tire."

Everything she touched was falling apart. Rubicore was going to ruin Muskoka. Daphne's life was being turned upside down. Tristen and Dot had been smeared in the papers. And now this.

She dropped the spare on the ground, groaning as it refused to bounce.

Flat.

Melanie stared at the tire, deciding what to do. She could call a tow truck, if she used some of the antiques money to pay for it. The problem was it felt completely wrong taking the cash, even though Tristen was a billionaire. The teacups were probably to appease his guilt for bailing on her and now he was going to think the sex had been a thank you. And it hadn't been. It had been something so much more.

Always looking but never seeking.

That's what he'd told her on his doorstep when he was dressed in drag. How much more clear could he have been? He didn't want what she wanted. He wasn't looking for forever.

Melanie heaved the spare back into the van and slammed the hatch closed. Looked like they were driving on the flat. Consequences be damned.

"That was fast," her mom said.

"The spare is flat."

Stupid Tristen. The way he'd swept in and rescued her, Daphne, and Tigger when the press had closed in yesterday way too out-of-this-world

dreamy. And she kept wishing he'd kiss her again. Once, twice, forever.

She hated him.

He was the right guy in all the wrong ways. Or was it the wrong guy in all the right ways?

Either way, she was great at falling for the wrong man.

"Are you okay?" Catherine asked.

Lowering her head onto the steering wheel, Melanie sighed. "Do you believe in signs?"

"Yes. Don't you?"

"I didn't."

"You do now?"

"I let something go and it came back to me." Not that it mattered. It was just a coincidence.

She and Tristen may have had an intimate night on the island, but it didn't mean they were about to fall in love. Especially since neither of them believed in destiny or any of that hokey stuff. She was letting her mind get away from her.

And honestly, if she was him, she would be running away. It had to have hurt his pride a few days ago to see the sensational headlines that he, Tristen Bell, all debonair in a tuxedo, was dating her, all disheveled in a holey Camp Adaker T-shirt. She was a Sasquatch. He was in the McDreamy league.

Why was she even thinking about that? About him?

It didn't matter. He was done and the papers would soon grow tired of it all.

"I sold the Nymph Island teacup along with some others," she said, picking up the conversation again, "for an utterly ridiculous price, and someone bought them and gave them to me as a gift."

"Destiny," her mother replied with a certainty that should have comforted Melanie. "Who is the man?"

"Nobody."

"Nobody?"

"He has a daughter and he's divorced and he's just not not into me. But he's special." Great. Now she was going to cry.

"Oh, honey." Her mother laid her hand over Melanie's.

What did she have in her life? A crappy old falling-down cottage that had forced her to sell her beloved antique teacup collection, which had been returned to her for all the wrong reasons, meaning she needed to return the money. She had a developer ruining the cottage's view, as well as its peace and quiet. Taking down every stitch of heritage, story, the very things that made her island feel like Muskoka. Life was simpler there. It was as though she was visiting an older time, when women like her were sexy with their curves. And Rubicore was ruining it.

Plus, they were giving up on Adaker, the one place that hadn't given up on Melanie. A place that had made her feel better about the world during a time when she'd no longer believed it was possible. They were taking that away from other children, and that wasn't right. And for what? So the rich could romp and play and pretend there were no problems in the world, while they destroyed the habitats of rare animals that lived on that peaceful, treed island.

Rubicore had betrayed her. They hadn't told her who she was fundraising for.

And now that she had publicly pointed out all the ways Rubicore was a sneaky corporation whose owners didn't give a lick about anything other than money, they were attacking everyone she loved. They were razzing Finian, a man who had come out about his gangster past and the promises he'd broken to fix his old neighborhood. They were all over Hailey and her previously failing business—saying it was taking off only because she was dating Finian and not because of her talent. They were calling Maya a money-grubbing siren who had hooked

Connor and convinced him to sell his corporation, in a move that had stunned Bay Street. It had even brought Mistral out of the woodwork and into a custody battle for a daughter he didn't want. He was trying to uproot the best thing in everyone's lives—Tigger.

Tristen had warned her and Melanie had gone ahead, anyway. What kind of person was she for doing that?

"Talk to me," her mother said lightly.

"Everyone I " *Fight through it. Don't cry.*

"Is this about the newspapers?"

Melanie nodded, not daring to speak.

"They have been brutal, haven't they?"

Great, even her mom read the stories. What did she think of her daughter ruining lives, while not making a difference in the world? It was all for nothing.

Nothing.

"Don't you see?" Catherine asked. "You've scared them."

"They're being cruel to the people I love."

"That's because you got close to something good and juicy. Why else would they care about people like us? What did you find that they don't want the world to know about, Melanie? There is something wrong happening here, and they know you are onto it."

"You think so?"

Her mom's blue eyes shone with pride. "Go get 'em, Melanie."

"I can't. What about Daphne?"

"You fight this battle. She'll fight her own."

"I can't, Mom. I can't do this to everyone."

"We are tough enough to withstand this, Melanie."

"I might not make a difference."

"You won't know until you try."

Melanie sighed impatiently, thinking maybe her mother didn't get it. "But there's going to be pain."

Catherine laughed merrily. "Where there is something worth doing, there will always be pain. Don't let that stop you."

"But " She swallowed.

"We all want you to do this. Do you understand? This is *important*." Her mom added quietly, "Not just anyone can do this, but you can."

"But what about Tristen? What if I ruin his life? All these secrets are being thrown out there."

"Secrets, when revealed to the world, have a funny way of losing their scary edges. Think of it as airing out his closet and setting his skeletons free."

"Mom, I'm practically dancing across the world's stage with everyone's skeletons right now. I don't have the right to do that."

"Those teacups came back to you for a reason. Don't waste your time feeling sorry for yourself and worrying about everyone else. It's time for us to deal with our own problems. That's not your burden to bear, and you don't have much time to set things right with this developer. We're counting on you to be our voice, Melanie. Don't let us down."



MELANIE MANAGED to get Catherine to her appointment in time, then the tire patched during her lunch break. She'd then called Daphne after work to see if she would be up for an impromptu protest outside the municipal offices over Rubicore closing Camp Adaker and her sister had agreed.

The crowd of people had grown steadily, with Hailey's old friend Polly even coming out to support them. It had turned out the camp meant a lot to Polly as well, her half brother, Josh, having spent time

there as a teen. She was eager to hold a gala and put her fund-raising prowess to work, if need be. And if anyone could raise awareness—especially among those with money to spare—it was Polly.

While they might not be able to convince Rubicore to keep the camp running on Baby Horseshoe after their resort opened, the public attention would hopefully force the corporation to reopen the camp elsewhere in order to save face. And as long as the camp continued its excellent work, then Melanie would at least feel she had accomplished something in all this big mess.

But she wasn't done with Rubicore. Not by a long shot. Her mother was right. This was her battle. And yes, Tristen was right about making the developers feel it in their wallets, but Melanie also knew she could make them bleed with a thousand paper cuts. She could be that bee that drove them crazy, wasting their energy swatting when she buzzed here, there and everywhere.

She grinned, feeling so evil and yet so alive. Taking down a nasty corporation one small step at a time was a nice dollop of awesome sauce on top of the in-your-face sundae she was serving up for Aaron Bloomwood and his crew.

Checking her watch, she figured she could likely catch the Fredericksons over on Baby Horseshoe Island before they turned in for the night. She'd love to see Tristen to get a gauge for how he was feeling about her, but she knew if she could convince the owners of Salty Dog, the last privately owned cottage in Heritage Row, to make a heritage claim, it could possibly help protect the rest of the cottages, even though Rubicore owned them. Time was of the essence.

Mr. Frederickson, his bald head glinting in the evening light, met Melanie on the short path leading from the dock to the rustic cottage.

"Melanie, I thought you'd mistook our place for yours. To what do I owe the pleasure? Did that man your sister Maya was seeing finally

drown, trying to swim around the island? I haven't seen him in days."

Melanie laughed. "No, Connor is fine, Mr. Frederickson. He and Maya have been working out of his new place lately. They've started a business together. Even got engaged."

"Give them our congratulations."

"I will, thank you." She inhaled the pine scent of the island and said, "It's quiet tonight."

"I complained to the municipality that those knuckleheads were working too late into the night and disturbing others."

Melanie held back a smile. A thousand paper cuts. She barely resisted the urge to hug the man.

"Mr. Frederickson? Have you and your wife put any consideration into claiming your cottage as a heritage site?"

He let out a snort. "And have the government breathe down my neck every time I want to fix my leaky plumbing? No, thank you. Plus, we have enough tourists coming by and gawking at the place as it is."

"I understand," Melanie said with a nod. She needed to chat him up, then slowly bring him around. But it would take time. Time she didn't have. "Taxes sure have gone up around here lately."

His head tipped back, taking in the tall pines lining the path. "I'll say. Up almost a third that one year." He shook his head. "Can't believe how many people lost their cottages. Good thing I have a decent pension. How are you gals doing?"

"Barely holding in there. I've actually been looking into the heritage angle for Trixie Hollow."

"And why would you want the government telling you what you do with your own property?" His tone said it all—*I thought you were smart, but now? Not so much.*

"Between you and me, Mr. Frederickson, we are this close—" Melanie placed her index finger and thumb a fraction apart "—to losing Nymph

Island in a tax sale. If we declared it a heritage site, then not only would we get a tax break, but we could get the likes of them—" she angled her thumb at the large Rubicore Developments sign that was pounded into the recently leveled bedrock, where they planned to build a helipad "—to leave our place alone."

"Are they bothering you?" Mr. Frederickson's brow was furrowed, his arms crossed.

"They want our island to house staff. I'm pretty sure they'd pull down Trixie Hollow and build something big. Take out all the trees. Increase traffic between the two islands. She's one of the last original cottages in Muskoka that has been mostly untouched, you know."

"There aren't many of those left." He glanced back at his own place on Heritage Row.

"I don't know how they got a permit to take that fine old cottage down," she said, referring to the missing one. "I thought that sort of thing had to go through the permit process, where the public had a chance to speak up about it."

"Full of termites, they said."

"Oh?"

"Came to our door saying they might spread if they didn't destroy the place. I said by all means take it down."

"Hmm." Melanie nodded as though she sympathized, but inside she was screaming. Why didn't they fumigate the place? Surely Mr. Frederickson wasn't that far out of touch? "You've heard they've closed Adaker this year and have no plans to reopen it?"

"I'm sorry, kid." He dropped a hand onto her shoulder, making her feel small. "I know that camp was good for you, but it was old. A lawsuit waiting to happen. A pile of timber waiting to ignite at the first hint of lightning."

Melanie drew herself up. "Why don't they build a new one? I'm sure a big corporation could use the tax break. And it was a nonprofit charity."

He nodded. "Never a problem housing that camp on the island."

"Have they made an offer on your place yet?"

"Yep."

"Us, too. It was insulting."

She really was going to have to sell every last one of her teacups—again. Because at the end of the day, the cottage mattered more than her collection. If she could sell them once, she could sell them twice.

"I wish I had something to prove our cottage has cultural value." If she could finally find the kingpin piece and get a tax break, her sisters might consider the cut to their annual taxes as her contribution to the debt.

Melanie inhaled, trying not to panic. Less than three weeks to pay up or the cottage would be seized. Three. Weeks.

"Its age isn't enough?" Mr. Frederickson asked.

"Sadly, no. Although if you and the rest of Heritage Row go, we'll be that much closer to being the last of the original cottages in all of Muskoka." She winked at him, trying to keep her desperation at bay. "Will you consider making yours a heritage site?"

He shook his head. "Too late now."

"It's never too late."

The lines around his mouth deepened in a way that made her sense something bad was in the works. Had he and his wife accepted Rubicore's offer?

Mr. Frederickson held up a finger. "I have something Yeah." He nodded thoughtfully. "Let me see if I can find it. It's been in the cottage since we bought it twenty years ago. I think it may have come from JoHoBo, back when it was called the Rusty Pelican. Sorry, it's Missy's

Getaway now. I can never keep up with all these name changes. Hang on."

Rusty Pelican? Stewart Baker's cottage? Melanie resisted the urge to follow Mr. Frederickson into his abode and ransack it for clues. The man returned moments later with a package wrapped in an old, thick plastic bag.

"I think this has something to do with Nymph Island. Maybe you can use it for your heritage claim."



A HARLEY RUMBLED past Tristen toward Melanie's law office, its engine's reverberations rattling through him. It stopped in front of a waiting man wearing black leather and chains—the bearded guy from the Steel Barrel. Great. Tristen had simply wanted to drop off Dot's forgotten cell phone, maybe say a quick hello to Melanie to see how she was doing since quitting the Rubicore battle and then head out to Rosseau to give a quote on mending one of the village's rock walls.

Who was he kidding? He wanted to ravage Melanie at her desk. He hadn't seen her since their skin-on-skin escapade two days ago and he'd thought of little else since.

He should march in there and let her know that he respected her. That it had been fun and that he was willing to have more life-altering, mind-blowing, sweaty sex with her anytime, anywhere.

No. He should walk away. Melanie wasn't the one-night-stand type and going in there would give her the impression that he wanted something more, something deeper.

He stared at the motorcycle, fighting with himself, as it rocked "Gangsta's Paradise" out of its speakers. The song took him back twenty years and for the first time in his life, Tristen felt old. And white. Really

white. But mostly old. Too old to be standing outside a woman's place of work trying to summon the courage and a good enough excuse to go in and say hi.

The rider, wearing something bright and colourful, released the handlebars, shifting back on the bike as slim hands unhooked the helmet's chin strap.

An old-style dress. Intricate chain maille choker. No leathers.

The music died as Melanie turned off the bike, her laugh ringing through the street's early morning silence, hitting him in the chest. Why was she riding a chopper? She should be safely behind her desk reading legal clauses. Not riding a bike with handlebars up near a giraffe's ears.

She was going to ruin him.

No leathers. No. Leathers.

He unclenched his fists, hoping he hadn't cracked the screen of Dot's phone, then resumed walking. Trying not to look up, he caught sight of Melanie shaking out her hair, the helmet gripped between her hands, her moves slow and deliberate.

His steps faltered. There was something different about Melanie Summer this morning. The weight that had been resting on her shoulders seemed to have lifted. Was it merely the effect of a good motorcycle ride? No, it was her hair. The curls were gone. Her brown locks were straight and glossy, flipped up at the ends like a Stepford Wife.

She caught his eye and flashed him a smile. He swore a woman never looked sexier.

Remind him again why he was holding back?

Right. A strong woman with moxie to spare didn't need a man like Tristen. Well, that idea bothered him. A lot. Bothered him as much as the way her prim and proper appearance was bad, bad, bad for his

mind. He wanted to take her home, even if he had to carry her the whole way.

He needed to stop pulling back. Stop being a chicken where she was concerned. Two years of licking his wounds was long enough. They were both out of the Rubicore fight. Tristen no longer had to worry about the monster coming out and scaring her. He could be himself. His new self.

He rubbed a hand over his brow and walked closer. He didn't want to talk to the biker, but wanted Melanie all to himself. Wanted to ask her out. Touch her skin. Make love to her mouth.

"Hey," he said, managing to sound casual.

"Hey, Tristen. You remember Ezra?"

"Yeah, hey." He gave a chin lift in the man's direction. "What's up?"

"Melanie just took Marley for a ride. Marley the Harley."

"Is that why you weren't wearing any leathers?" Tristen asked Melanie.

She laughed and rolled her eyes in amusement, as though she couldn't believe he was being such a prude.

He was tempted to withdraw his remark, but had promised himself he was going to stop pulling back. This was him. Right here. Protective. She could take it or leave it.

"He has a point," Ezra said, eyeing Melanie's attire in a way that made Tristen want to block the biker's view. "One truck taking a corner too close, or someone not checking their mirrors " He slapped his palms together. "Happens too fast and too frequently."

"You should buy a car," Tristen blurted out. "With air bags."

"Wow. You guys know that I already have a mother filling the role of worrywart, right?"

Ezra laughed, his gnarled beard bobbing against his chest. "What about a father? Seems to me you could use one of those, Lemonade."

Tristen crossed his arms and glared at the man. If anyone was going to use cute nicknames and protect Melanie, it was him, not Biker Dude.

"Okay, well. This is getting awkward." Melanie handed the helmet to Ezra. "Thank you for letting me try Marley. She was awesome. But you might not want to let me do that again."

"Why's that?" he asked.

Tristen leaned closer.

"Because I'll want one," Melanie said, giving the biker a conspiratorial elbow nudge.

"That's my gal." Ezra slung an arm around her shoulders with in a jingle-jangle of chains.

"Melanie Summer! Was that you squealing those tires?" A small woman with a plume of graying hair strode up to the group, her finger waving.

"Mrs. Star. How's your sister in Blueberry Springs?"

The woman brushed off Melanie, who was closing in for a hug. "Don't you sweet-talk me, you young thing. Those two-wheeled contraptions are death traps."

"Yes, ma'am," Melanie said.

"Well?"

"She was doing me a favor, ma'am," Ezra interjected.

Mrs. Star cocked her head at the man in leathers, and Tristen found himself holding his breath. The pleats of her skirt flicked back and forth as she stormed over to poke the biker in the chest.

"Don't you go pulling a lovely, innocent young woman like Melanie Summer into your Hells Angels business, you hear?" She smacked Ezra in the gut with her handbag. "I'll tell your mother what you've been up to."

"Yes, ma'am." The biker gave a small, submissive bow.

"Now come with me. I need your help."

Ezra gave Melanie a chaste cheek kiss, then escorted Mrs. Star into a store nearby.

Wow. Maybe the biker wasn't so scary, after all.

"I hope I'm like Mrs. Star when I'm retired," Melanie said.

Please tell him she didn't really want that.

"So full of energy. She's awesome."

"And about to castrate a member of the Hells Angels."

Melanie laughed and steered him into the law office, her body bumping up against his as they went, no seeming awkwardness due to their night together. "I have something I want to show you."

He tried to remind himself that she likely wouldn't be showing him what his gutter mind had imagined, but given the polka-dot dress she was wearing, he'd probably allow her to drag him to hell and back, all the while with a smile on his face.

Melanie was vibrating with excitement and he couldn't help but think that maybe it was leftover adrenaline from her motorcycle ride with no leathers. The woman was nuts. Crazy. Insane. Energetic. Inspired. Smart. Creative. Sweet. Determined. Lovely.

He loved her.

Whoa. Stop that train of thought. He did *not* love her. He was simply intrigued. She was interesting and caught him off guard, and kissed and made love like a devilish whirlwind, that was all. Nothing more. Absolutely nothing more.

"Check this out." She unwrapped an old plastic bag and set a stack of papers and photos on her desk. He came around, perching on a corner of the desk, staring at her. She was gorgeous. Eyes sparkling and wonderful.

She waved a photo in front of him.

Right. She wasn't an image he could get lost in for hours. She was real. He pried his attention away from the pearly skin of her long pale

neck and glanced at the black-and-white photograph.

"It's Stewart Baker," she said.

So it was.

Tristen placed Dot's phone on the desk and angled the faded picture to get a better look at the background. "Is that your cottage?" The trees were short and the structure fairly new, but it was obvious he was looking at Trixie Hollow, with the rocky outcropping visible behind it.

He shuffled through the rest of the photos. There were ones with Melanie's great-grandmother and the movie star in couple-type poses, arms around each other, gazing into each other's eyes. In the background of some was Heritage Row, looking rather spiffy and fresh. New.

"What is this?" Tristen flipped over a photo of a baby, checking the back for a name.

"It looks like my grandmother, but then all babies seem the same to me. I haven't had a chance to check it against the photo my mom has."

Tristen squinted at the faded ink on the back, the swirly writing making it difficult to discern.

"I keep thinking that maybe Stewart Baker was the father. My great-grandfather. But I don't have proof." Melanie handed him a stack of papers. "There are receipts, too. Stuff being commissioned."

Puzzling his way through the stack, Tristen couldn't figure out if he was missing clues, or if he was still rattled from seeing Melanie ride a bike belonging to a member of the Hells Angels. Or maybe it was more due to the fact that he was waiting for her to mention their night together.

"I can prove now that those letters are from the movie star," Melanie said, "and that he and Ada had a romance of some sort. That has *got* to lend some significance to Trixie Hollow, right?"

"I don't know if your great-grandmother dating a famous person makes your property significant, Melanie. How does that provide cultural value?"

She sighed heavily.

The receipt he was holding felt thick compared to the other papers. Using his thumbnail, he carefully pried two thin pieces of paper apart. The hidden sheet held a drawing that made him close his eyes to refocus before looking at it again. Finally, he held it up to Melanie.

"Isn't this your teacup?"

Melanie paled, her fingers shaking as she took the sketch. She swallowed before reverently placing it on the desk in front of her. "An assessor said it was one-of-a-kind and had likely been commissioned approximately a century ago."

"By Stewart, apparently. A nymph cup for Nymph Island, possibly? A place where his lover stayed?"

"I found this in the archives over at the land title office." She handed him a photocopied deed to Nymph Island with Ada's name on it. "Do you think Stewart gave her the island?"

Melanie's eyes glittered with excitement and Tristen focused on the papers again, trying not to think about the last time he'd seen her eyes glitter like that—while moving over top of him gloriously naked.

With these new clues, you could connect the random dots, make a few assumptions and possibly end up with an argument for cultural significance. But there were some pretty big leaps on the path to making this all into a claim, and he believed the heritage board would want a solid, indisputable trail.

"You know that pursuing these leads might uncover secrets from the past?"

"I know! It's so exciting." She pulled an envelope from her desk drawer. "I almost forgot. This is for you."

He accepted the envelope, opening it in front of her. It was a check. The full cost of the teacups. "What is this?"

"It's not right for you to buy them in order to give them back to me." She wouldn't meet his eye and he knew it was about something more.

"I wanted to buy them. I did. I wanted to give them to you. I did." He handed the check back to her, but she wouldn't accept it. "What's the real issue here, Melanie? Is it about me and the Rubicore fight?"

"No."

"Then take it. I know you need it. I won't miss it." Yep, that was the wrong thing to say. "I didn't mean it like that. I just mean can I help you out?"

"Money only complicates things."

"Things?" He had a feeling she was hinting at their night together, but he couldn't be sure.

"I'm not keeping the money."

"Yeah?" He ripped up the check. "Try and force me to take it."

Her shoulders dropped a hitch. Then she sat in her chair, got out her checkbook and wrote him a new check. She handed it to him, one eyebrow raised in challenge.

He could rip it up like he did the last one, or he could find a new and more creative way to help her out. If he put his mind to it, he bet he could find a way to get that three grand for the teacups back in her pocket—one way or another.

He took the check and pocketed it with a grin. "At least you aren't fighting Rubicore anymore." He paused as something clicked in his mind. "Wait. You aren't going to try and block Rubicore with this heritage claim, are you?"

Her eyes shone with the truth.

"You said you were out, Melanie. Done." His voice was too loud, too harsh.

What was with this woman?

She wouldn't meet his eye, cheeks flushed. "I changed my mind."

He pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed. The old squeezing sensation in his chest was back.

"I'm going to claim heritage significance for Trixie Hollow and put in lots of info about Heritage Row. It's called that, so why on earth wouldn't they protect it as a heritage site?" She waited for him to look at her. "But no, I won't actually make a direct claim involving the other cottages."

Melanie smiled, and he had the distinct feeling she'd done something. Something he didn't know about.

"So how did the cup end up in a shop?" She was changing the subject on him. "What happened? If it was for the cottage, why didn't it stay there? The family has owned the cottage for the duration of this cup's existence. And what about this other stuff Stewart had commissioned? The receipt lists an entire tea set and all I found is one cup. Is the rest still out there? Did he actually give it to Ada, or did something happen?"

Tristen sighed, letting her redirect his attention away from her and whatever she had up her sleeve. He sorted through the photos again, trying to pull out a thread from a fuzzy memory. "I watched a documentary on him. It said he used to do charity work up here. Left his family back in Montreal."

"Charity?" Melanie perked up even further. She had one of those dreamy looks women got when they saw a happily ever after unfolding. Which only meant any hiccups along that road would toss her all the more and make her blind to anything in the way. Such as the truth. Whatever that was.

"He was married, Melanie. Had kids."

She wasn't listening.

"Then maybe the Bakers can answer the last of my questions," she said.

Tristen placed a hand on her arm. "Mel, hold up a sec. What if they don't know? This could not only change the way you see your family's past, but it could also alter the way Stewart's family sees their own. And even the way Canada, as a country, views the old star."

She chewed on her bottom lip, thinking it through. Finally, she sighed. "People have a right to live a happy, blissfully unaware existence, don't they? I can't make this claim without revealing secrets, can I?"

She had that defeated look again, and Tristen tried to ignore the taunting voice in his head pinning the blame squarely on himself.

"Melanie?" A man stood in the doorway, his face grim. "Can I have a moment?"

"Sure."

Melanie excused herself and Tristen took Dot her phone, weaving through the office's few cubicles to find her. The reporters, who on Sunday had been as thick as a swarm of mosquitos in Algonquin Park, had faded away, and he felt okay again with Dot working here. Although, with Melanie back in the fight, he might have to broach the topic of his daughter finding a new place to complete her work experience, since things could easily heat up once more. Not a fun prospect. At all.

A few minutes later, he spotted Melanie heading back to her office, her face pale. He caught up to her as she stuffed items in her shoulder bag. He grasped her hands, holding her still so he could figure out what was wrong. Her fingers felt small and fragile in his and the overwhelming urge to protect her took over. "What's happened?"

She pulled away and began stuffing the few personal effects she kept on her desk into her bag. "I'm being investigated for slander and my license has been temporarily suspended. Effective immediately."

It looked like it was time to let the monster out and take charge of things once and for all.



TRISTEN PACED outside his daughter's room and thought about what he was going to say. He needed to kick Dot's girlfriend's father's butt. And doing that would likely undo the tentative bond he and his daughter had built over the past week. It was going to be a long haul 'til the end of August after this little chat. Really long.

Doubting himself, he turned to leave just as the bedroom door swung open. Dot, hand on hip, gave him an unimpressed look. "What?" she asked.

"What? Nothing." He quickly moved back.

"You've been pacing outside my room. Do you need love advice or are you grounding me?"

"What? Why?"

"What? Why?" she mocked.

"Don't do that."

"Do what?" she asked innocently.

Man, she was good. "Dot, I have to do something and you're not going to like it."

"You're marrying Melanie? Because that wouldn't be so bad. Unless you keep buying her horrible cups."

The thought of marrying Melanie with Dot's approval had, surprisingly, sent his mind off into a happy little meadow where it began frolicking and singing.

"Dot. I have to fight Rubicore."

His daughter gave a halfhearted shrug and pushed past him. "Are there any of those blueberries left?"

That was it? No Tilt-A-Whirl open for business today to give him the most terrifying ride of his life?

In the kitchen, Dot dumped the last of the blueberries into her hand and, tipping her head back, dropped them into her mouth. Trying to understand women and their moods was like trying to tag a ghost.

"You're not upset?"

"Why should I be?"

"You eat like a kid. Wipe your mouth."

"I'm a kid for another five months and six days. I've got to live it up. With the responsibilities of voting and the ability to get wed without parental permission, as well as drink alcohol in some of our provinces, I should live it up while I can. My days of being a carefree dependent are numbered."

"It might get nasty between us and Rubicore," he warned.

"Sink your teeth into them, Dad." She had her head in the fridge now and was rooting around. "Kill them for what they're doing to Melanie."

"The fudge is in the crisper."

"The crisper?" She turned, her lip curled up in the same way it used to when she was a baby and someone talked goo-goo-ga-ga at her.

Tristen patted his midriff. "Out of sight, out of mind."

She unwrapped a square of chocolate, popped it in her mouth, then another. That would be one way to put it out of mind—just let her devour it.

"What happened to you and Samantha?" he asked.

"She was *experimenting*." Dot's scowl deepened as she rolled her eyes, clearly disgusted.

"Oh."

"I know, right?" She turned, livid all of a sudden. "Who *pretends* to be a lesbian?" Her eyes grew damp. "I mean, it's hard enough. It would be like me going slumming just to see what it was like, then turning around when I had slum friends and saying, 'Nah, just kidding. I don't like your way of life, after all. Enjoy! I'm heading back to the easy path, where everyone loves me and nobody looks down at me'." She was crying full force and Tristen froze, stunned by her revelation. He closed the space between them and squeezed her tightly, wanting to take her pain and fill the hollow spot within her with love.

He stroked her hair, surprised at how soft the shorn bit at the back was under his palm. Despite the makeup and perfume she still smelled like his daughter.

Dot pushed away. "It's *so* hard finding someone." Her bottom lip folded in pain and she crashed back against his chest.

"It is."

"You met Mom in high school—what do you know?"

"Yeah, okay." He'd give her that one. What did he know, truly?

"The odds were in your favor, too." Dot broke contact again, glowering at him, and he tried not to smile. She looked like a lost tyke with her cheeks wet and her lips pouty from the injustice of her lot in life.

"We all lead lives of quiet desperation." He buffed his knuckles on his chest and let out a loud sigh as though hard done by. "It's my lot in life to carry the burden of being so devastatingly handsome."

"The odds are in your favor because you're not *gay*."

He tipped her chin up with a finger. She'd stopped crying, but frustration still had her in its grip. "I'm always here."

"Right here in the kitchen?" She gave him a cocky scowl.

That was his girl.

"Yep." He grinned. "Right here. Just waiting for you to need your old man. I might not always be able to say the words you need to hear, but that doesn't make them any less true."

She swallowed hard. "I know."

"Good."

"Now go crush Samantha's dad so bad he has to use a catheter to take a leak."

Tristen ran a hand through his hair uncomfortably.

"Metaphorically, Dad. Yeesh." Dot rolled her eyes, scooped up the last of the fudge and disappeared back into her room.

He let out a long breath.

Things were probably going to be okay between him and Dot. But Melanie? That was a whole different story.

Tristen pulled out a stool at the granite island and poured Melanie a glass of lemonade, smiling as he recalled the nickname the bikers had given her only a week and a half ago, when she'd rescued him. He set the tall glass in front of her, wondering if she needed something stronger after the way Rubicore had proceeded to run her career and credibility off the tracks in a mere handful of days. He could probably use something stronger himself, considering he was about to reveal his hidden side to Melanie.

He was surprised how nervous he was. But he'd been plotting and organizing things behind Melanie's back for days and it was time to let her in on what he'd done.

He'd already hurt everyone he cared about once. Why not again, when this time he'd be on the right side? He needed to protect them from Rubicore, whose leaders were gearing up for a grand slam.

But the Rubicore team didn't realize that Tristen was planning to add their blood to the battle this time. And a battle it would be, because helping Melanie he finally understood that his failed marriage hadn't been entirely his fault. While he still didn't know if he could control the monster, he knew his wife could have told him sooner that she didn't want gifts. Melanie had returned the antiques money; why couldn't his

wife have done the same, if it wasn't what she needed or wanted? Cindy could have asked him to take a different job, or asked for help, as Melanie had. The truth was Tristen and his ex could have done a lot of things differently. Separately and together. But he hadn't ruined her life all on his own. She'd been half of that marriage, too.

But now he had another chance. Melanie saw him, understood him and was strong enough to push back if she needed to.

Tristen Bell wasn't as broken as he'd thought.

"It's time to blow everything out of the water," he said, taking in the bags under Melanie's eyes. He held her hands in his, hoping she'd pull from him the strength she needed, and that he would be able to provide whatever it was she required in order to carry on.

He knew he'd been misguided, thinking money, power, and prestige were everything. But no, with Melanie, he could be on the right side and, for once, do some good things in this world. She was his chance to make things right.

No more hiding out. He was ready.

"I've suited up, Melanie. I'm all in. If this fight matters to you, it matters to me. I should never have chickened out and left you to do this on your own."

She laughed, sounding slightly teary, and leaned hard against his chest. Holding her, he felt as though the things he could do for this strong woman would never be enough.

But he'd do his best because she was what mattered.

"We're going to tackle Rubicore from a united front. I have your back." He placed a light kiss in her curls and she tipped her head up, bleary eyes searching for an answer he hoped she found.

"Really?"

"I'm not backing out this time. I've already called some folks in Toronto to do some investigating. It's going to get ugly, I won't deny

that. But we'll be careful so they can't pin things on you. I don't want this situation with the bogus slander claim to get worse. I need you to go apply for heritage status, so you can save Trixie Hollow from the mice and the taxman. Rile up Rubicore by mentioning their place in Heritage Row, too."

She gave him a doubtful glance.

"Do it. They can't touch your license for that. Next, we'll file formal complaints against Rubicore and the municipality. The way they are pushing this resort through is not right. We'll get an unbiased, secondary party to do impact studies—I've already got the process started on that and have paid to have it expedited. As well, we need to get people stirred up about the parking lot and the camp. I've got a few people working on that as well."

"There's no time," Melanie sighed. "Everything's already so far along."

"I've asked a friend to look into the slander claim. He says there is a good chance he can have you back in the office by next week."

"You're joking?"

"You may have a case for loss of income, as well as them tarnishing your reputation."

She gave a small laugh. "Sometimes we live in a ridiculous world, don't we?"

"We'll get Rubicore, Melanie. We will."

She sagged back onto her stool, taking a sip of her drink. "There's not enough time or money to fight them the way we need to, Tristen."

"I have so much money to pour into this it's disgusting. So much that Rubicore won't know what hit them."

"Tristen you can't."

"I can and I will. This is important."

She gave him a look and he said, "It's my money." He topped up her glass, even though she'd barely taken more than a few sips. "And once

we get these proceedings shoved through, the municipality can't approve more permits until it's resolved. We'll stall Rubicore and hit them where it hurts the most—"

"Their bottom line. How are you going to get proceedings through in time to stop anything?"

He smiled knowingly.

"They're going to be so ticked off," Melanie said.

"Are you ready for me to rock your world?"

"You already have." She blushed, then stood on the lower spindles of the stool, hands on his shoulders as she gave him a light kiss, before sitting again.

Tristen blinked, his mind leaving the task at hand. He forced himself to take a seat on the other side of the island, away from Melanie and her tempting lips. He really wanted to take that kiss somewhere else right now, but he still had more to tell her, and if she kissed him again he'd have her in his bed in less than a second flat, their battle plans forgotten.

He focused once more, but found himself unable to sit. "On a more personal note, I sweet-talked a lady named Betsy into bumping up your claim for tax reassessment. Not only did she do that, she also gave consideration to making your reassessment retroactive."

Melanie launched herself around the granite island and into his arms. He held her tightly, inhaling her coconut scent. After a second, she went to pull away, but he tightened his grip, not wanting to let her go, fearing that since he'd started to allow his had-to-win-at-all-costs side out, he might not have the chance to hold her again. Cindy hadn't like that side of him; what were the chances a gentle, sweet woman like Melanie would?

She laughed and placed her hands between them. "Okay, you can let go now."

He rested his head in the crook of her neck, inhaled once more and slowly complied with her request.

A blush tinged her cheeks as she seated herself again and he could see that she was having a tough time focusing, too. "How did you manage to get Betsy to consider that? I've talked to her *three times*."

"I need a shower after all that schmoozing." He used to put on the charm almost daily to smooth the wheels of progress, and hadn't thought twice about it. But now it made him feel dirty, manipulative, and exhausted. And yet he'd done it. And he'd do it again for a woman like Melanie. He'd seen her tax bill for that old cottage and it was horrendous. "I should probably mention," he said, moving to the open living room, "she didn't just give you consideration. She had your taxes reduced and gave you one year retroactive at the new rate."

He fell backward onto the couch as Melanie leaped at him, peppering him with kisses. Max, waking up from his spot on the cool stone apron surrounding the fireplace, jumped up, barking.

"Shush, Max," Tristen said with a laugh, trying to shove the dog's snout out from between him and Melanie.

"Thank you, thank you," she said between kisses. "You don't know how much this means to me!"

He held her tight, kissing her with everything he had so she'd know just how much she mattered to him.

"What's Max so—" Dot began, entering the living room. "Oh," she said with mild disgust. "Never mind."

Melanie jumped off Tristen, leaving him feeling strangely bereft, and ran over to lift Dot in a massive hug. "Your dad is so awesome!" She dropped the teen back on her feet and raced to the front door, flinging it open wide so she could holler to the chickadees and squirrels, "So totally awesome!"

She returned to the room, grinning, her excitement pulling a smile from Dot.

"I can't wait to tell my sisters. They'll be so pumped."

"Is this about Rubicore?" Dot asked.

"He's saving me money on taxes."

"Wait, there's more," Tristen said.

"Not more ugly teacups," Dot grumbled as she slouched back to her room, likely to commiserate with her teenage friends about the instability of adults.

"I talked to the camp director and he says he'll stay on board even if we have to start fresh somewhere else," Tristen said.

"He shouldn't have to move."

"I know."

"But I guess an open camp can still help kids, no matter where it's located, right?" Melanie's smile was weak, her eyes lost in the past.

"What is it about you and this camp, anyway?" He pulled her close and tucked a curl behind her ear. He felt strongly about a few of the charities he'd supported over the years, but it was nothing personal like the camp was for Melanie. She acted as though it was a part of her.

"I went there. As a camper and as a counselor. I fund-raise for them." There was a steely glint in her eyes.

"I can't see you as a troubled kid."

"I'd experienced trauma." She sat on the couch, eyes blank. "My dad died in an accident. I took it the hardest out of all us girls. Mom sent me to Adaker because I wouldn't stop crying." Melanie gave Tristen a sheepish smile that faltered. "Puberty, you know how it is. But that camp showed me that I still had a lot, and that there were kids much worse off than I was. They help so many children. I can't bear the idea of it not being able to do that any longer."

"We can still help kids."

"If the camp closes, that's it."

"There is funding for the camp no matter where it ends up."

"But Rubicore won't pay to build a new camp somewhere else."

"I hope you don't mind, but I've taken care of that, too."

Her jaw dropped open.

"I've agreed to be a private donor."

She landed on him again, but this time he was ready. He grabbed her as her legs wrapped around his waist, and pivoted so her body was pinned between him and the wall. When her lips met his, he leaned into her, deepening the kiss until her body slowly melted.

As he kissed her, he wished he could find a way to tell her that he didn't want her to run away when this was all over.

"You're amazing," she whispered, and in that moment he felt like the hero he'd always dreamed of being by taking control of things for others. It didn't mean Melanie was any less strong, only that he could be there to remove barriers that stood in her way.

With one hand against her soft cheek, he pulled back so he could look her in the eye. "You're the most beautiful, strongest thing I've ever seen. You know that?"

There was a light in her eyes that sparked and she melted in his arms before catching herself, a wall he hadn't seen coming, going up and shutting him out. Her legs loosened around his hips and her feet slid to the floor. She started to push him away, but he blocked her.

"What? You don't want me to help?" He'd been so sure he'd gotten it right this time.

"It's not that. Let's just let's not complicate things, okay?"

"There's nothing complicated here." He kissed her again, pulling her close. She softened into his embrace, and he lost himself in the feel of her skin, her mouth, the moist warmth of her tongue.

She angled her mouth away, panting slightly. "Tristen?"

"Yeah?"

"I can't do one-nighters. I just " She looked at him, her eyes full of pain and a deep affection that surprised him so fully he dropped his arms, stepping away.

He watched her walk back to the island, take a sip of her lemonade with a trembling hand, then say, "Let's just get back to killing Rubicore, okay?"

Not knowing what to think, he joined her, his mind on everything but Rubicore.



"WHAT KIND of tricks are you're trying to pull?" Aaron Bloomwood backed Melanie down a side street, away from the commotion of the protest she and Daphne were leading with Tristen in front of the municipal office, over the parking lot issue. One last protest and then it was nothing but hard-core business. Tristen had been up half the night, setting things in place for the upcoming battle. He'd called in favors, talking to people she'd only heard about in the news. Their net was ready and about to fall down on Rubicore.

Spittle flew from Aaron's mouth as he jabbed the air around her, making her wonder if he'd caught wind of their plans. "First that whiney-nosed camp for losers, and now this stupid museum and island that nobody cares about!"

She kept backing up, staying out of range.

"Aaron, so lovely to see you," Tristen said casually, appearing beside her and she stepped into his shadow, relieved to not be alone. "The horns never did recede, did they?" He reached out and patted Aaron's head, studying the man with a curiosity that would have made Melanie laugh if she hadn't been so worried about the reaction he was about to

earn. Not only was Tristen taunting the raging bull, he was ballsy enough to touch it.

The man focused on Tristen. "Are you behind this?" Aaron pitched forward, hands squeezed into white-knuckled fists.

Tristen smiled an innocent, infuriating grin. "Oh, Aaron."

The patronizing tone hit its mark, sparking the executive's temper as though Tristen was a torero, prepping the bull for the matador with another well-timed spear. Was Melanie supposed to be the matador? She hoped not. She wanted to run far away, not escalate this battle.

"Do you have any idea what this two-bit lawyer is doing? The mess she is causing?"

"Oh, has she caused a problem?" Tristen asked casually. There was a steely glint in his eyes that Melanie hadn't seen before.

"She just got our renovations for Heritage Row shut down."

"I did?" Melanie grinned at Tristen, who gave her a small head tilt as if to say, *Keep a lid on it, woman.*

"You are never going to practice law again." Aaron was on her once more, but Tristen wedged his shoulder between them.

"No." He shoved a finger so hard into the man's chest, Melanie was surprised it didn't draw blood. "Now you listen to me." His voice was low, a primal warning that sent chills up her spine. "This woman is off-limits. You say nothing to her. You don't touch her. Threaten her. Sabotage her or her reputation in any way. You understand? If anything bigger than a sliver happens in her life, I am holding you personally responsible. Do you understand what that means?"

Tristen was forcing Aaron to back away. The developer had a look in his eyes Melanie hadn't thought possible: fear.

"You're a nobody now," he retorted. "You carry no clout. The whole world has forgotten about you and the way you ran scared from Toronto."

"Well, then I suppose it is a good thing that a tip from a nobody can still set up an investigation for corruption, wouldn't you say?"

The way Tristen rocked back on his heels, so cool and relaxed, made Melanie's heart pulse madly. He had their quarry right where he wanted him, and was playing it all so easily and with such confidence it made her want to jump on Tristen and kiss him so hard he forgot his name.

"You don't scare me." Aaron's voice trembled with rage.

"I know where you live, I know where all your partners live, Aaron James Bloomwood. I know how you play your games. Shall I set up a watchdog committee? Oh, wait. I already did that. Have fun answering to them."

Chills raced down Melanie's spine again. Tristen was so this other side to him. It was hot.

"You lie," Aaron spit.

"So sorry to spoil the surprise for you. Oh, and the municipality? We're pretty sure you have someone you're paying under the table to push things through. I've got people looking into that, as well."

"You'll pay for this, Bell. You'll pay!" Aaron backed away, his finger raised in warning.

"Don't worry. I already have. Several times over."

Aaron stormed around the corner and Melanie worried he was going to come back with Mario and others carrying weapons. She shivered and tugged Tristen in the opposite direction.

He stopped her, his hands bracing her shoulders. "I'm sorry. Are you okay?" He looked worried.

"Yeah, fine." Her voice was as shaky as her legs.

"Liar." He drew her around the building and back into the crowd, where the protest against Rubicore continued.

She sagged against him in the safety of the gathering.

"I'm sorry you had to see that." Tristen kept his attention on everything but her, as though he was afraid to face her.

"I'm not."

He gave a sad sigh, shoulders drooping. "This stuff doesn't bring out the best in me, Melanie. I get lost in it. I want blood when I fight someone like Rubicore."

"Well, I've never seen a man act sexier. Thank you." She pushed her hands up his firm, wide chest and smiled, leaning into him, hoping he'd kiss her. "My hero."

He seemed stunned and took half a step back, then struggled to recover his balance. "I'm sorry, did you just say that monstrous scene was sexy?"

"Very." She drew a finger down his jaw, incredibly turned on. "I like how you stuck to your guns and stood up to him. He's a big bully. And in case you didn't notice, I'm a lawyer. We're always out for blood." Melanie pushed her chest into Tristen's, trying to get closer, hoping he'd see how much he'd aroused her. "I happen to think a man coming to my rescue is unbearably sexy and I feel safe around you, Tristen Bell."

His arms finally wrapped around her, so tight her breath left her lungs. His kiss was so deep and full of need her knees buckled, forcing his broad shoulders and strong arms to get to work and hold her up. Yet another reason to love the man.

Tristen cared about her. It wasn't just his gestures that said it, such as when he hurried ahead to get the door for her, but the bounce in his step that couldn't be faked when he came up to her. He was a man of gestures, and he'd just shown her that she was his. His. His. His.

They broke apart and Melanie simply stared into his eyes, wanting him to know that she liked him, too. That she wanted him. Just him.

No pressure for "I love you" or a big commitment. She just wanted to be with him and receive whatever he could give.

Dot materialized out of the crowd beside them, Tigger in tow. "That was so awesome, Daphne!" the teen exclaimed, when Melanie's sister appeared as well. "Did you see those Environment Canada guys totally scouting you out?"

Daphne gave her a half smile. "Yeah."

"Can I interview you for an essay I have to write for work experience?"

"Yeah, sure." Daphne still seemed distracted and Melanie tried to pull her mind off Tristen long enough to figure out what was up. He hooked her pinkie with his index finger, keeping her close as she drifted out of his arms.

"You okay?" she asked Daphne. Her sister wasn't herself at the moment and Melanie wondered if Aaron had talked to her, too.

"Yeah, fine." She gave a small smile. "Just thinking."

Tristen, standing behind Melanie, lightly touched her elbow, letting her know he was still there. Tingles ran up her arm from the contact, giving her shivers despite the early evening sun. Melanie turned to face him, hooking both hands in his, becoming lost in his gaze.

She heard Daphne say, "Okay, I have Dot, if that's okay with you, Tristen?"

He gave a chin lift that sufficed for a nod.

"Okay, then. See you later. Much later," Daphne said, giving them space.

"I have the best sister in the world."

"I agree. Unless you are plotting my murder and she's dealing with potential witnesses, in which case I may retract my agreement." There was a hint of a smile in his eyes.

Why were they still standing here? She was desperate to have him. Something carnal to prove to herself once again that his gestures, kisses, and smoldering looks were the beginning of something.

Melanie slipped her arm through his, holding her breath as she asked, "Want to do something?"

He didn't say a word for a moment, then murmured, "Yeah, let's do something." His eyes were caught on her lower lip and she ran her tongue over it. His attention was making her nervous. He drifted closer, his side pushing into hers.

"Kiss me," she said.

"Better idea." He pulled her toward the parking lot. "You drive here?"

"No, Daphne gave me a ride."

"Good."

Tristen opened the passenger door to his truck with a creak, and hurriedly helped her in. He was in a rush and that was fine by her. She needed to find out if what she felt and saw between them was as real as she believed.

Tristen, in a move that surprised her, leaped into the passenger's side, clutching the door frame with his left hand as he swung his lips to hers. His warm fingers clutched the back of her neck and her arms flowed around him, pulling him closer. He kissed her long and deep, his tongue probing.

Hurry, they needed to hurry.

His eyes were hooded with passion and longing when he leaned back, his broad shoulders blocking her view of the outside world. "Can I take you home, Melanie Summer?"

"Please do. And ignore the speed limit."



MELANIE COULDN'T STOP SMILING. She snuggled closer to Tristen's warm, naked body, her cheek resting on his firm pectorals. He was even more ripped than she'd remembered. All that working with rock had done

amazing things to his body. And in turn, his amazing body had done mind-blowing things to hers.

She never wanted to leave his bed. If he trapped her here forever, not letting her go, she'd be more than okay with it.

His fingers lazily drifted up and down her bare back, pausing to lift a handful of curls off of her neck. She felt as though she could melt into him.

"I love it here," she whispered.

"My house?"

"In your arms."

He pulled her tighter, kissing the top of her head. "Yeah."

It was difficult not to say the words that wanted to trip off her tongue. That she loved him. That things felt right when he was around. That, finally, she felt as though someone understood her and shared the same wavelength. That someone was there. Yet it wasn't about loneliness. She'd come to terms with that long ago. This was about being *alone*. When he was around she didn't feel as though she had to do it all by herself. There was someone else there to lean on. To be her rock. A teammate.

She was falling hard. And she didn't know if he was, but it felt as though he might be. She didn't believe she was someone who needed to hear the words, but she still wanted to. To ensure that the gestures meant what she thought they did. He was a gentleman, but he took extra care with her. She could see that. The way he was always there, watching, ready to catch her.

Would he say those words she needed to hear?

Did it matter if she was happier now than she could ever remember?

She wanted to tell herself it didn't, but she knew that it would be lying.



IT WAS CINDY. Great. He'd just made early morning love to Melanie, making that slight worried, questioning look in her eyes disappear almost completely, and now his ex had to show up, ready to ruin everything.

A large ring that hadn't been purchased by him flashed on Cindy's finger. Its significance both bothered and relieved him. Bothered him because she hadn't told him she'd found someone new. Relieved him because she *had*.

"Hey," he said, walking to her car, cup of coffee in hand. He was still in his pajama pants and an old T-shirt, and it made him wonder just how early his ex had gotten up to drive all the way here for her latest mission.

He blocked her from moving forward. He didn't want her in his home. Didn't want her acting as though she owned the place.

A man he presumed to be Cindy's new husband got out of the passenger side and Tristen shook the short man's hand, offering them both congratulations.

"Does Dot know?"

Cindy shared a guilty glance with her new man. She gave a small nod. "Yeah. She didn't want to go with us for the elopement."

"So you dumped her on me?"

That sounded wrong. His daughter could never be dumped on him because she was always welcome.

"Yeah. I figured it was your turn to deal with all of that." Cindy gave him a smirk.

"Thanks."

Another smirk. She obviously thought he was being sarcastic.

He took a sip of his coffee, wondering how he hadn't been able to see how jaded and snippy Cindy had become. She used to be well, she'd

always sort of had that side to her, but it seemed as though his presence amplified it these days. "For what do I owe the pleasure of your visit?"

"Dot texted me a few days ago. She said she wanted to come home," Cindy replied.

"And so you're just coming now? Unannounced, I might add." Tristen widened his stance, knowing his attitude would intimidate the new husband, who was likely here for one reason only—to intimidate Tristen into doing whatever Cindy wanted.

Get a real job, buddy.

This was his turf, his kid. Dot may have wanted to go home, but he was certain she'd prefer to stay now that the Rubicore thing was heating up. She'd want to see it through as far as she could.

"She still has fifteen hours of work experience to complete," he said, arms crossed. "I think she'll want to stay."

"I'd like to hear it from her."

"By all means."

His ex began moving to the front door.

"I'll have her come out." His voice was firm, a warning, and Cindy halted and muttered something under her breath. He turned. "What?" he demanded.

"I know that look, Tristen." Cindy's voice had an angry tremble. "Like you own the whole world. Well, you don't, okay? You don't. I liked the new Tristen better."

The new Tristen was a scared pansy hiding out from the world. The old Tristen had been powered by greed and a need to prove himself to Cindy, so she'd finally show him some love. How wrong he'd been. The two of them had never truly understood each other.

There had never been anything wrong with him. He'd simply been with the wrong woman. But now he wasn't, and life was about to get good.

"This is who I am," he said, spreading out his arms. "Take it or leave it."

"I think I already did."

He smiled. It was time to set the record straight on how things were going to be from here on out.

"If you need help with your business, let me know. Dot said it's struggling."

"It's fine," Cindy said, her voice tight.

"What do you need?"

"From you? Nothing." Her eyes snapped and flashed. "You sold it, remember? Ran away from it all."

"As a wise woman once told me, we're all still connected. I'd like to help if I can. Not a lot, but somehow."

"Get over yourself. I'm here for Dot."

"She's come into her own, you know. And I'd like to see her more. Maybe every summer. Holidays. Every other weekend. I'll make the drive."

"Oh?" His wife gave him a saucy look. "In the less than two weeks you've had her you've turned her around and you think you're going to make daddy of the year? Bring her out."

"*You've* done a good job with her." His voice was just above a whisper, and Cindy froze, caught, hanging on his every word. "She's an amazing young woman."

His ex blinked back tears, chin raised. "Yeah, on my own."

"I'm sorry I didn't realize what you needed. It didn't occur to me that what I was giving you and Dot meant nothing to you."

Cindy was blinking rapidly now. Her new husband moved closer to try and save the day. *Too late for that, man.* His old life with Cindy had crashed and burned. It was time to listen to the relationship's black box and bury the dead.

"She values spending time together more than gifts," he said to the man.

"Yeah, I *know*."

Tristen smiled. He'd had her first and it was killing the other man. Good. These two might actually make it together.

"I'll get Dot for you."

Their daughter was already at the door, listening, her eyes puffy from sleep. And he hoped nothing else. She crossed her arms, Max growling at her side. "I'm not going back to Toronto."

Cindy's plucked brows lifted.

"I have a work experience job here. And I need to help with Rubicore."

"Rubicore?" Cindy's eyes widened and she turned to Tristen. "Rubicore?" she repeated. "Do you not listen to me, ever?"

"Pretty much nope." He slung an easy arm around his daughter, as Max kept an eye on the strangers. "We're showing them a thing or two about how to treat the environment. Aren't we, kid?"

Dot smiled. "Damn straight, Dad."

"Language," both parents warned at the same time.

Cindy drew herself up, uncertain.

"Can I keep her until the end of summer?" Tristen asked. "We have some lost time to make up for."



TRISTEN STOOD IN HIS KITCHEN, his ex gone, his daughter tossing a stick for Max out on the small grassy slope beside the house. Being with Melanie, he felt as though he could slip into infinity. His world was already losing its edges, bleeding into hers.

He understood it now. The puppy dog men who seemed content to lead the life of the completely whipped. The husbands who followed their wives through the mall, carrying their shopping, holding their purses, waiting outside stores and doing the “man stand” outside change rooms. It wasn’t about being whipped, it was about contentment. About being close to the woman you loved, and receiving comfort by being in her presence.

It was about being with her. When you were apart, you no longer felt whole. Now he understood why Cindy had felt neglected. It wasn’t just about him not saying “I love you” enough.

He poured a fresh cup of coffee, mixed in cream and sugar, and brought it to his bedroom, where Melanie was dead to the world, stretched out under the sheets like a Renaissance painting. His.

Or he’d like her to be.

They needed to talk, and putting his feelings into words would be hard. He’d failed Cindy, but he wouldn’t make the same mistakes with Melanie. He could show her his love, but he needed to find a way to say the words.

He waved the coffee under her nose, careful not to spill it on the robin’s-egg-blue sheets. She smiled and stirred.

“I had a dream your ex was here to take Dot away from you,” she mumbled, her voice endearingly thick with sleep.

He leaned down to kiss her lips. “It wasn’t a dream, my fair maiden. But I vanquished and triumphed.”

She rolled onto her back, careful to keep the sheet covering her chest. Her pale skin was so plush and beautiful he wanted to pull her against him and make love to her again and again.

“Vanquished?” she asked.

“Cindy was here. But Dot is staying.”

Melanie propped herself up, exposing more pearly skin as she sipped the warm drink. Her eyes closed and she inhaled happily. "This is perfect. Thank you, Tristen."

He smiled and massaged her foot. He loved the fact that she'd thanked him and relished this quiet moment between them, in no hurry to run off anywhere. It was a privilege being the first person she saw when she woke in the morning, and he hoped it was one he would have again and again.

"I really like having you here, Melanie."

She flashed a hint of a smile.

He felt bashful, like a ten-year-old boy revealing his crush to the object of his affections. "I like *you*."

"Good." She gave a small nod and got out of bed, the sheet trailing behind.

That was all? No *Where is the I love you?*

"We're okay?" he asked tentatively.

"Is there a reason we shouldn't be?" Her expression turned wary, her shoulders tight.

"Not at all. But what about you?"

"Me?"

"Do you like me, too?"

"Well, I *do* hop into bed with just about anyone." She shot him a sassy wink. "So I can see how you might get confused." Smiling, she came close and stroked the stubble on his jaw.

"Okay, so we like each other. Do you trust me?"

"Yeah," she said thoughtfully. "I do."

"Even though I am not always so great with words?"

She laughed, her chest bouncing. "You're kidding me, right?"

"Er, no."

"Tristen Bell, you are the complete package. You know that?" She slipped her fingers over his shoulders, plucking at the fabric of his old T-shirt. "You show me you care in so many ways. All the little things you do for me, making sure I'm okay. Those mean more to me than silly words." She turned shy, her cheeks pink. "It's how I know."

Feeling lighter than he had in years, he cornered her by the dresser, pulling her tight against him. He gave her a kiss that should resolve any lingering doubts as to his intentions. "You look like a goddess with your hair all disheveled, the sheet draped in front of you like that. Very Renaissance."

"Okay, now you're just trying to get me back into bed with you."

"Is it working?"

She laughed and pushed him away. Then tipped her head in the direction of Dot's room, eyebrows raised.

Tristen eased closer, placing his hips against hers. "She's outside playing with the dog." He kissed Melanie again, the sheet dropping from her body as they wrapped their arms around each other and fell onto the bed.

An incredible way to start the day.

Before Melanie could figure out what had gone wrong at the picnic, Tristen was flying around her, his fist connecting with another man's face.

"Not on my watch!" Tristen shouted as bones crunched.

Tigger, who had been talking to the knuckle-sandwich eater, raced to her mother's side, eyes wide with fright. Melanie, still not comprehending what was happening, pulled Tristen away from the man.

Mistral.

Oh, of all the rotten luck. Daphne's ex-boyfriend had blood pouring everywhere. He'd press charges for certain.

Melanie tried to hand Tigger's father a wad of napkins from the picnic basket, but Tristen blocked her, grabbing them and tossing them at the man, who tried to snag the fluttering objects, one hand on his gushing nose.

They'd been having a picnic with Daphne and Tigger by the docks in Port Carling as they planned their next move against Rubicore.

"What's going on?" Melanie asked in a calm, even voice.

"He was taking Tigger," Tristen said, his left hand clutched around his right fist.

"Whoa." Dot, who had gone to grab ice cream, came to a sudden halt as she took in the scene, the cones in their cardboard holder tipping precariously.

"He was taking Tigger," Tristen repeated, jaw clenched.

"I was introducing myself!" the man shouted, his own hands clamped over his nose, which made his voice sound nasal. "I'm her father!"

"What?" Tristen's eyes were fire and ice. "Why were you trying to lure her away? Answer that!"

"We were going to play Frisbee."

Daphne was strangely quiet, but her hands trembled as she held her daughter close.

"You don't lure a girl away from her mother." Tristen's face was red, the vein in his forehead bulging. Judging from how fast it was pulsing, he was in danger of a heart attack.

Melanie placed a hand on his shoulder, hoping to settle him before he could attack the man again.

"A father has rights." Mistral's nose was still flowing, the napkins so red it made her head spin.

"From what I've heard, you don't," Tristen snapped. "You're lucky I didn't knee you where it hurts, you deadbeat."

"I, um, I said he could come," Daphne said meekly, idly swiping Tigger's tears away with a thumb. "I'm sorry." She moved around Tristen, who staggered in surprise, while Melanie gaped at her sister.

"You *what?*" Melanie asked.

"He was supposed to be here before everyone else, so I could introduce him."

"But he's he's the *enemy*," Melanie sputtered. What was her sister thinking, inviting Mistral Johnson, who was not only one of the owning

partners of Rubicore, but was trying to steal her daughter away? She'd definitely lost her marbles.

"He's not the enemy," Daphne said hotly. "You're taking things too far, saying that, Melanie."

"Too far?" Okay, she was booking her sister into the psychiatric ward to have her brain checked. "He was trying to kidnap your daughter."

"I was not," the man retorted.

"Just leave it alone, Melanie," Daphne said. "You don't know everything."

Melanie stepped back, shaking her head. That was it, wasn't it? She didn't have a clue who her sister was any longer.



BACK AT THE HOUSE, Melanie waited as Dot took Tigger to the backyard to play, probably sensing things were about to get crazy.

"Why would you let him come around you?" Melanie asked Daphne, setting the picnic basket on the front steps.

"He's receptive to working together and he wants Tigger to be part of his life."

"Think about the timing on that," Tristen snapped. His jaw was so tight Melanie thought his teeth were going to crack. "He is using you, Daphne. Never speak to him until this is over, you understand? Don't let him be around Tigger alone. And if you do have to talk to him, make sure I'm present. And a lawyer. You got that?"

Daphne glared at Tristen with an expression so vehement Melanie had to look away. How did a fine picnic turn so ugly so quickly?

"I don't appreciate the way the two of you are ganging up on me," Daphne said. "I'm an adult and this is my life."

"Tristen is right, Daphne. Mistral is playing both sides. He's taking advantage of your loving, forgiving and trusting nature."

"He wants to be a part of Tigger's life. It's not my right to deny that."

"His timing is rather convenient, as well as suspicious," Tristen said gently. "I think a bodyguard would be a good idea."

Daphne unlocked the front door, calling Tigger to come around the house, effectively dismissing them.

"I agree with Tristen," Melanie said softly. "That was scary."

"You two can take off now," Daphne said. "I don't need this toxicity around me at the moment."

"I live here," Melanie said.

"I need some space to think, or I'm going to say something I'll regret."

Melanie watched as her sister hurried her daughter into the house, the sound of the dead bolt snapping into place behind them.

Kicked out? By Daphne? What alternative reality had Melanie landed in?

"You can stay with us," Tristen said, giving Melanie's shoulder a squeeze. "She just needs time. She's confused."

The three of them began walking the way they'd come, backtracking to get Tristen's truck.

"Do you think she'd mind if I had her tailed?" he asked eventually, taking Melanie's hand. "That Evander fellow Connor's mentioned could keep an eye on her."

"If she found out she'd be livid."

"I can handle her."

"I kind of want my family to like you, Tristen."

He cupped her chin, his expression serious. "And I kind of want your family to stay safe."

Warm and cozy. That's how Melanie felt when she looked into his eyes. "Yeah. Me, too."

"Ew. I'm walking ahead if you guys are going to be all yucky." Dot positioned herself up front so she didn't have to see them smooch.

Melanie smiled and kissed Tristen lightly, careful not to lose herself in the process, which was so easy to do with him. Breaking away, she threaded her arm through his and began the process of catching up with his daughter.

The tension that had gripped Tristen only moments ago wafted away.

"How's your hand?" Melanie asked, holding it up to take a look.

"Sore. But worth it. That man " Tristen's face clouded over and his neck reddened, the tension returning.

"I know." Melanie swallowed hard. "There's something happening that I don't understand, and it freaks me out." She sighed. So much to say, so few words to encompass it all.

Tristen wrapped his arm around her shoulders, giving her a squeeze. "The worst part is he's playing to her heart. She wants this. She wants a happy family."

"I just hope she doesn't do something she regrets. She's stopped listening, and I don't trust Mistral one tiny little bit."

It was as if Daphne wanted Mistral back, when all he'd ever done was cause her pain. How many times had Melanie's sister claimed that she didn't need a man to help her raise Tigger, and that it was a blessing Mistral wasn't involved? Had they just been words to cover up her true desire?

Chills raced up Melanie's spine and she snuggled closer to Tristen. When it came right down to it, she didn't feel as though she knew her sister very well.

"Can you give me a ride to my boat?" Melanie asked, as Tristen moved a few steps ahead to unlock the truck for Dot. "I want to go to Nymph Island."

"Alone?" Tristen was back at her side in an instant.

"Unless you two wanted to come keep me company?"

"You're not going anywhere without us. Dot! We're going to Melanie's island."

While Melanie's world might be turning upside down, at least she had Tristen by her side.



"THIS IS GETTING SCARY." Melanie stood beside Tristen on Nymph Island's dock, staring at the charred hole in the trees where another cottage of Muskoka's Heritage Row was missing. "What do you want to bet they burned it down themselves?"

Tristen didn't say a word, just clenched his jaw and kept an arm around her, squeezing a tad too tight.

Rubicore wasn't playing fair. Two of the four heritage cottages gone. Just like that.

"Looks like it's time to fight fire with fire." Dot laughed, plunking herself on the edge of the dock, feet in the water. "Can you believe the gall? Of course we're going to investigate that." She looked over her shoulder at her father. "Right, Dad?"

"Definitely. I'll call in some favors and get investigators in here before any evidence is gone."

Tristen began dialing someone and Melanie sat in a Muskoka chair, fingers against her lips, thinking. She inhaled the scents of warm wood, lake, pines, and a hint of wrongdoing that smelled a lot like the evil side of progress and the slaughter of what was real and meaningful.

She pulled out her cell phone, checked for a signal, then called her big sister Hailey. "Hails? You back in town? You're going to need to come photograph something for me." She dialed another number. "Mrs. Star? Can you get on the phone—call everyone you know? Another cottage on Heritage Row was just destroyed. Fire this time. Owned by Rubicore, too."

Tristen, who was done with his call, gave her a warning look. Slander, yeah, yeah, yeah. She wasn't saying anything, just providing information that could be put together however Mrs. Star felt inclined.

Melanie made another call. "Austin? Yeah, Melanie here. I need you to stir up whatever you can about Mistral Johnson, Aaron Bloomwood, his partner Mario, and any other Rubicore bigwigs you can find."

"Jim Hanna!" Dot interjected.

"Jim Hanna. Yes. Anything. Photos would be good."

Another call. "Connor? Does that Evander guy do any bugging? Think he could bug Mr. Valos's office? Perfect. Thanks."

Melanie punched in another call. "Rick? I don't care who Rubicore is to the paper, I need you to find a way to get something into the press in Toronto—use a pseudonym if you need to—and reveal how the company owns Adaker as their own personal charity, but have been lying to their board members about the camp's solvency. If you get in trouble, I'll be your lawyer. By the way town council tomorrow—I think things might get interesting. You might want to be there."

She glanced at Tristen, who was still watching, arms crossed, eyebrows raised. "One more call," she told him. She dialed the last number. "Christophe? I have a mystery for you. Can you find out what charity my great-grandmother Ada and Stewart Baker started together and why? I have a feeling it is local." She hung up the phone, staring across the water at Baby Horseshoe Island.

"What was that last call about?" Tristen asked.

Melanie turned to him, her mind still elsewhere. "Adaker. Sound like any names we know, fitted together?"

A slow grin lit like fire and he pulled her close. "You are brilliant, Melanie. Absolutely brilliant."

She could see it all clearly now. The path she was supposed to—no, was *destined* to—take. She was finally where she was supposed to be. She'd never felt that connection to the world and her place in it before, but now she finally could.

And it felt good. Powerful.

Everything was unfolding as it should, even if Rubicore was still winning. It wouldn't be long, though, until she had them where she wanted them.

She just hoped she had enough time to make it happen before it all came crumbling down around her and her sisters. It was like the parachute game they used to play at Adaker, and she'd just lifted the round chute into the air, dived under and tucked it all around her. It would stay inflated before collapsing and protecting her inside. But would there be enough time before it sank, trapping her?

Tristen weaved his fingers through hers as Dot wandered up to the cottage to see if there were any good snacks there. His chest expanded as he drew in a deep breath, and Melanie placed her free hand against it.

"I love you, Melanie." He looked so solemn and so much like a small boy afraid of being rejected that she gently took his chin in her grasp, wanting to see every emotion running through his eyes.

"Thank you for telling me. I know it isn't your style to express yourself in words."

"I'm sorry I'm not very good at this. And while I know you like me, too, I hope you feel the same. The same depth. Maybe not today, but someday."

Melanie laughed, tipping her forehead to touch his. "Tristen Bell, you silly man."

"What?"

"I love you, too, and have for some time." Tears filled her eyes suddenly and trailed down her cheeks. With his thumbs he brushed them dry.

"I am very glad to hear that." His shoulders relaxed and he let out a long, slow breath.

"I feel less alone when you are around," Melanie sniffed. "It sounds corny, because of course I am less alone, but I mean in my heart."

It was as though Tristen saw that broken part inside that she'd been trying to heal for years. That dark corner she wanted to finally squash so she could fill it with light. But Tristen was already there, doing it for her.

"I feel connected when you are around," she said. "Like there is someone with me and that it will all be okay. It's not like that when I'm with others. I still feel lost and like the odd one out. With you, I feel love. Trust. Beautiful, even. Everything good."

She leaned against him, loving the way he enveloped her in his arms, pressing his lips firmly to her temple. He was protecting her from the world, telling her in his own way that it would all be okay.

Melanie was red in the face, pounding her fist on the table in the council meeting, and Tristen couldn't help but feel turned on.

Last night they'd spent the night on Nymph Island, Dot tucked away in the cottage's loft, as he and Melanie had wrapped each other in love.

It made it difficult to pay attention to anything but her now. The way Melanie was revved up, her butt wiggling in her dress pants as she laid into the council for not following protocol and posting permit applications in a public place. For failing to have an official open house regarding the proposed resort, and other such business. This was on top of her presentation against Rubicore—which was very thorough and convincing. The council was getting a dressing down from his gal, Mel. Nothing could be sexier to witness, and Tristen had the best seat in the house.

She glanced at him over her shoulder with a wink, then beckoned a man wearing a snazzy suit to hand out sheets of paper to the row of men seated before her.

"Consider yourselves subpoenaed for breach of regulations," the man said coolly.

Tristen sat up. Whoa. That was *not* part of the plan. Is this what she had been doing at the crack of dawn when he'd gone looking for her after finding her side of the bed vacant?

The subpoenas were being delivered to the council, as well as several Rubicore administrators who were seated in the audience.

Hadn't Melanie agreed they were going to let agencies take care of Rubicore and the municipality? As a first-year lawyer one didn't take on the big guns, who had a herd of lawyers bred for going in for the kill.

The men at the table stared, faces aghast and open with fear. Members of the press, who had been lounging against the wall, stood straight, alert, cameras clicking.

She had them.

Was this all a ploy? A tactic to get them to comply? But no, then she would have only threatened. Did she not understand what she was up against? She'd just sent a very large boulder in motion and down a very steep hill. He only hoped she wouldn't be the one to get crushed.

Tristen moved to the back of the room so he could secretly use his cell phone, which wasn't technically allowed in chambers. He needed Connor to get that Evander guy on both women. Now. No more thinking about it. It was go time. Especially since Daphne still wasn't talking to Melanie, who had just pitched a flaming barrel of oil over Rubicore's fence.

If Evander was half as good as a bodyguard as Connor said, then the man could at least tail Daphne while keeping her safe. And if the man had a brother, Tristen would hire him to sit on Melanie's tail. She wouldn't like it, but there was no way she was arguing with him on this one. Nothing was going to happen to his gal, and her risk factor had just multiplied like fruit flies near overripe bananas.

Tristen blinked, focusing on the men lining the back of the room. He took in their black leathers. Their headbands and gnarly beards. Arms

crossed over their barrel chests. Scars and tattoos.

What were the Hells Angels doing here? Were they on Melanie's side? He watched as they gave brief, approving smiles when she sass-talked a Rubicore man. Maybe she wasn't as vulnerable as Tristen had thought. Maybe she really did have this all tied up. But why hadn't she told him she was going to drop-kick Rubicore's baby?

Because he would have tied her up at home until she saw sense. That's why. Smart woman. She'd warned him she'd do it his way, and if she had time, also do it her way. Looked as though he needed to keep her busier.

He sat beside Gnarly Beard, hoping he hadn't come off as too big of a stuck-up guy during their prior meetings, and that the biker would agree to do a favor in Melanie's honor. Tristen needed as many people as he could round up to cover her sweetly shaped butt.

"Can you keep her safe?" he asked Ezra.

The biker narrowed his eyes as if trying to read him.

"Can you?" Tristen repeated. He knew he looked scared, but he didn't care. "She can't do this alone. I'm helping her, and I'll do whatever I have to do. But I only know the business side. I need to have someone keep her physically safe. Can you help?"

Without a word, the man gave a tiny nod, then turned back to listen to Melanie give the corporate scum dogs what had been coming their way for a very long time.



"I THINK you definitely found your place, Melanie." Tristen shook his head and pressed a kiss against her temple, leaning against his old truck. "This has certainly cranked the heat under Rubicore."

They were so screwed, but he'd promised to back her and he would. This time he wasn't going anywhere. He would use every last resource at his disposal to help keep her safe—to ensure she was the one who came out on top in this battle.

He'd beaten Rubicore before and together they'd do it again.

Several men in black leather loitered nearby, chatting as they leaned against the parking lot's brick wall. Watching. Waiting. Listening. They had his woman's back.

Melanie was vibrating from taking on chambers, and he ran his hands up and down her arms. There was no way he was letting her get back on her motorbike in the state she was in. She'd drive right off the road and into the towering pine trees surrounding this part of town before she got more than a block or two away.

"You know what Valos means in Finnish?" she asked.

"You know Finnish?"

"It means cast. He's empty. That man could be filled with anything and right now he's filled with deceit and lies and everything that is wrong with this world."

She was punctuating her sentences with pokes to Tristen's chest. He wrapped a hand around hers, stilling the jabbing finger.

"It's going to be okay. You'll get him. You just turned it all upside down and gave it a shake. I'd be surprised if any of those goofs are still in politics six months from today, or that Rubicore is still in business. You're making a name for yourself and standing up for what you feel is right, despite the odds. I admire that. Not everyone can do it."

She let out a shaky laugh and he gave her a hug, feeling incredibly proud.

"It's called being insecure," she said. "You think about others and what they are thinking and needing so you don't have to think about yourself."

"I don't believe that's the reason. Besides, you seem pretty confident and secure to me."

"It's an act." Her voice was shaky, her cheeks flushed.

"Well, there's no reason to act that way, Little Miss Dynamo. Not that you need taking care of, but I'll spend the rest of my days doing so, if you'll let me. And I'll show you in every way I can that you are important to me. Do you understand that? No matter what happens with Rubicore, the council, and the press. Okay?"

She snuggled her head against his chest. "I know you care. I care about you, too."

"I know your mind is still in chambers, but I need you to hear this, Mel. Sometimes I have trouble expressing myself, and I need you to talk to me, even when things get hairy and I go a little berserk after attackers."

She glanced up, her eyes worried. "What do you mean?"

"I need you " He had to pause to collect himself, since his heart was racing. " to not run away or kick me out. If you don't feel loved, then tell me, okay? And I'll try to do better."

"I don't think you would ever fail at showing me your love, Tristen." She took a step back, clenching his hands so tightly it made the one that had punched Mistral Johnson ache. Had that been only yesterday?

"Trust me, I could fail. I have before."

"You won't. I trust you, Tristen. You have already shown me in so many ways."

He swept her curls from her shoulders. He'd pulled her back into bed that morning and she hadn't had the time to do it up. "Do you really trust me?"

"With my life."

"Then trust me when I tell you you're beautiful."

Her eyes glimmered with tears and her throat bobbed as she swallowed hard.

"Trust the fact—even if I never say it again—that you are the most beautiful thing I've ever seen and that you always will be."

She let out a self-conscious laugh and bit her bottom lip. He ran his thumb over the pinched flesh, tugging it out from her teeth's grip. "Trust me?"

She finally nodded, a blush spreading across her pale cheeks.

"I love you, Mel."

This time he would do it right.



MELANIE FELT as though her heart was going to explode into flowers and rainbows from all the love she felt inside. She'd just totally busted some balls in chambers and Tristen was all over her like she was the sexiest thing in the world.

His world.

And his world was a world she wanted to live in for the rest of her life.

Nothing could feel better. He'd called her beautiful and meant it. But most importantly, she believed it. He didn't think she was a Sasquatch and he was man enough to handle her splendor and size.

When he told her she had a place, was important, beautiful, and loved, she felt it. Believed it. Trusted it.

He was one-of-a-kind. And hers. All hers.

She felt a rush of adrenaline as a crazy idea flipped through her mind. She could propose. Right here in the parking lot where people were walking to their cars, murmuring to each other about her little showdown. It felt as though she'd just kicked a hornets' nest and her

life was finally going to go on that big ride she'd always wanted to take. So why not have her love life take off on that ride, too? She didn't want anyone else by her side as she took on Rubicore and the municipality. At night. In the morning.

Him. Only him.

Tristen was the man who could be by her side through it all, helping her. Not taking over, but trusting her to make her own moves, and clearing obstacles when she needed help. Because of him she knew what path she needed to take in order to save Muskoka. Plus with the tax break he had assisted in wrangling, her sisters had decided that would count toward Melanie's portion of the debt.

She'd done it. She'd finally contributed to the cottage. And it was all due to the wonderful man in her arms.

"I love you, Tristen." She squinted against the gorgeous August sun. She loved the way the light picked up the highlights in his short hair. He was handsome. Strong. Supportive. Everything she never believed she could ever have.

He bent his head to meet hers, kissing her in a way that had her arms wrapping around him and her legs wishing they could do the same.

"You don't know who you are messing with!" shouted an angry voice.

A breeze picked up and Melanie kept kissing Tristen, not wanting to break the moment, not wanting to be distracted or to find a way to chicken out on asking him to be hers forever.

The shouter repeated himself, closer this time. The clinking of chains and the sound of heeled boots crunched on the gravel. Tristen had her out of his arms and pinned behind him in an instant.

From there, she couldn't see the man yelling at them. Ezra and Kane eased up beside her, their friends flanking them. She scooted to Tristen's

side, frustrated by how he kept trying to hold her back.

If they were calling her out, it was her battle, and she wanted to see who she was dealing with.

"You don't know who you've messed with, Melanie Summer."

It was Mistral Johnson, his face black-and-blue from Tristen's punch. His cronies were lined up in their spiffy suits and pointed, polished shoes, ready to do his dirty work.

"And vice versa!" she cried. Tristen hushed her with a low voice, as though trying to calm a spooked animal, but she added, "You can't just walk over people and the planet because you have more money."

"You're on the wrong side and your sister is going to pay."

Melanie's heart seized painfully. "Which one?" she called, her voice stronger than she felt. Inside, she wanted to hide her face in Tristen's shirt and let him take care of it all.

"Daphne is going to pay."

"Hey, now," Tristen called, stepping forward, away from the row of cars behind them. "This is nothing personal, boys. Just business."

The bikers took Tristen's cue, stepping into a line, with Melanie blocked behind them, a united front against Toronto's business sector.

"I think it *is* personal," Mistral replied. "You've embarrassed us and shamed us with that stupid charity case of a camp. Slamming us in the papers. This is my chance to shine and prove that the company's worth something and you're over here insinuating that we burned down that crappy old cottage on Heritage Row. You've got all of Muskoka upset with us for trying to bring prosperity and tourists to the area. And now this crap-case legal thing? We're going to bury you." He took a step nearer, body angled so he could escape Tristen's wrath if he got too close. "You won't think you're so great when you go down in flames."

"This has nothing to do with you and everything to do with fairness and proper proceedings. Laws. Bylaws." She squeezed between Tristen

and Ezra, feeling safe.

“Daphne knew I was part of Rubicore. She encouraged this, and now she’s going to pay.”

Melanie watched them take off, her breathing coming hard, as though she’d sprinted to get here. “Daphne. We have to get to Daphne before they do.”

Tristen, expression grim, shared a silent look with the surrounding bikers, and Melanie wondered what she’d gotten her family into. And whether they were going to survive it.

- *THE END* -

Turn the page to find out what happens in the next book,
Falling for the Bodyguard, with Daphne and Evander!

FALLING FOR THE BODYGUARD

BOOK 4

From the back cover:

One shattered war hero. One hippie. Two very unlikely sweethearts.

Evander de la Fosse believes he's only good for one thing: stopping bullets meant for others. But as war-torn hero Evander shadows single mother Daphne Summer he finds himself wishing for the one thing war took from him—a life worth living. Daphne, with her bright and upbeat disposition, possesses a pull on him he can't deny.

A believer in the power of love and destiny, Daphne figures fate must have a major wicked streak for sending her polar opposite—Evander, a well-armed bodyguard—into her life. She doesn't need him, nor does she want him or his military ways seeping into her world. She has a life to live, a daughter to raise, and a family cottage to save in less than two

weeks. The last thing she needs is to get involved with another Mr. Wrong. But the steely-eyed, former military hunk refuses to leave her side, especially after a confrontation with the enemy, who has been stirred up by her sisters, ends in threats. Daphne, determined not to add fuel to the fight, tries to convince Evander to back down. But Evander knows Daphne needs him—needs him for more than just protection.

Will the two find a way to see eye-to-eye as well as heart-to-heart before the enemy can take them down? Find out in the fourth Summer Sisters book!

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks goes to my readers the Jeansters for inspiring Evander. They requested a security, army hero who was wounded. I hope I did your request justice. (Don't tell the other heroes of the Summer Sisters series but Evander ended up being my all-time favorite hero—I may have developed a bit of a crush on him.)

Special thanks also goes to Evelyn Adams, Margaret Carney, Angelique Luzader, Erin Dixon, and Emily Kirkpatrick.

Daphne Summer pulled her minivan down an unmarked, dead-end residential street in Port Carling, Ontario. She performed a quick U-turn and waited for the vehicle that had been following her while she did errands to come around the corner. Sure enough, the truck turned down the tree-lined road a minute later, slowing ever so slightly as its driver realized his error. As the Chevy rumbled past Daphne's van, she made eye contact with the man behind the wheel.

She knew that face. Evander de la Fosse.

Turning the steering wheel, she blocked the road's exit with her van. She got out, arms crossed, and waited for him to reach the end of the cul-de-sac and turn around. Grateful her five-year-old daughter was at a playdate with a friend, and not with her, Daphne prepared to give the man a piece of her mind.

The truck stopped and Evander cut its engine. He rolled down his window and licked his lower lip, resting one of his strong arms on the door as he leaned out to watch her.

Not a word.

The strong silent type, eh? Well, she had plenty of words to fill the silence. A bird whistled to her from an evergreen and the August breeze

ruffled her cotton dress as she stomped up to the truck, feeling incredibly short as she gazed up to where the man was sitting.

She put her hands on her hips, well aware she was anything but threatening to the former marine looking down at her with mild interest.

"Evander de la Fosse, I presume?"

She caught the minuscule flicker of surprise in his usually stoic features. "At your service," he said with a brisk nod.

"Funny, I don't remember hiring you to tail me, and seeing as money's rather tight at the moment, I'm confident I'd recall ordering a shadow as I run about to grab the mail and a few groceries." Especially a man who represented everything she stood against.

He said nothing.

"So? At my service, huh?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Don't call me ma'am."

"Yes, Miss Summer."

"My name is Daphne."

He was starting to look uncomfortable, which she figured was good.

"So, being at my service would imply you are here to help?" She looked at him with big doe eyes.

"Yes."

"Good." Her voice turned firm. "Kindly take a hike."

"A bit warm for that today," he said, his eyes lifting to meet hers. He was so serious. Not even a hint of a smile, and his dark eyes held a hint of pain she figured must always be there.

"Don't get smart with me." Five years as a single mother had reduced her patience for sass to somewhere near nonexistent.

Evander's lips twisted slightly as though he was fighting the urge to smile.

"I know my meddling sisters and their billionaire hero boyfriends think I can't take care of myself. Poor little Daphne. The clueless wonder who feels instead of thinks. But I *can* take care of myself. I don't need you tailing me and freaking out my daughter."

He studied her, his plump lower lip disappearing under a row of perfect white teeth. Nope, not perfect. The front tooth had a triangle-shaped chip and scarring ran down from his right ear to his chin, partially hidden by five o'clock shadow. He was not a man best described by light and love. He was large, capable and everything manly stuffed into one muscular package of testosterone-driven sexiness.

No, not sexiness. How could he be sexy? He was nowhere near her type. Then again, Daphne was used to men who claimed their lack of personal hygiene was a statement about their environmental beliefs rather than laziness. But this man right here knew his way around a washing machine and iron. His button-down shirt was as crisp as well-cooked bacon, and looked just as yummy fitted over his build.

What was she thinking?

She needed to get a grip. She was a mom. She didn't have time for drooling over a man who would be nothing more than a thorn in her side. And Evander was definitely a thorn. A thorn who was returning her heat and interest in his own gaze. It was as though his eyes were refracting the scorching summer sun onto her skin.

"What? What are you staring at?" she asked, shifting uncomfortably, wishing she could hide.

Again he said nothing.

"I know your type," she said, trying to be angry with him and failing. "I will not feel 'less than' just because you think we're in a staring contest."

"Okay."

She took a deep, cleansing breath and tried to channel joy and understanding for this man, who had obviously been broken during a battle somewhere.

"Take the day off," she said gently. "I don't need a former marine as my stalker."

"I wasn't a marine. I'm Canadian."

She frowned, thinking through past conversations, her internal mother-detects-a-fib early warning system blinking. "You tell everyone you were a marine—or so my sister Hailey told me."

"It's easier."

"Than?"

"Canadians don't know what JTF 2 is."

"Right." That was a good point, seeing as Daphne had no clue herself.

"Joint Task Force 2?"

She gave a shrug and he sent her a frustrated look, as though she should know this.

"It's like Britain's SAS," he prompted, and she shrugged again. "Special Ops. Always get the incredibly evil bad guys?" She gave another indifferent lift of her shoulder, enjoying how connected the movement seemed to be to his frustration level. "Coolest weapons? Top secret missions?"

"So you're a soldier?" she said simply.

"Formerly."

"Great. Well, you can go. I don't need a soldier following me."

"You've received threats," he growled from his position in the truck, evidently at the end of his rope.

"Not this again," she grumbled. "My sisters totally overreacted."

Ever since Mistral Johnson, her daughter's father, had popped out of the woodwork everything had gotten a bit crazy. Sure, he'd said unkind

things to her sister Melanie yesterday, but her sister had just served the man with legal action and had put several massive blockades between him and his company's planned resort. Of course he was going to blow his top. Who wouldn't?

But that didn't mean Mistral was a monster. Daphne wouldn't have spent an entire summer with him six years ago if he was. He was simply caught in a materialistic world, with unreal expectations placed on him by his father, and it was ripping him apart. She could help him, but acting afraid and having this brick wall of manhood standing between her and her life wasn't going to help anything or anyone.

"They did not overreact," he said, his brows pinching down over his eyes.

"Do you know Mistral?" When Evander didn't answer, Daphne demanded, "Do you?"

"No, ma'am," he said, his tone brisk, as though he was addressing a commander. "Not personally."

"Well, I do. And it's not ma'am. It's Daphne."

"Yes, Daphne."

Speaking to this man was like trying to train a cat. Or herd a five-year-old who was scattered and lively and utterly exhausting. Daphne needed him to go away and stop following her. It had to be bad energy, having him shadow her because he thought something bad was going to happen. She shivered, hugging herself through her thin summer dress.

"Mistral's my ex, and believe it or not, he is a kind and gentle man. He'd never do anything to hurt me."

"Isn't he trying to take your daughter away?"

Daphne gave the ex-soldier a look. "My, you are a real snoop, aren't you?"

"It's in the papers."

Right. She felt the familiar tightening in her chest. Her world was, quite simply, being upended like an unzipped purse, and given a shake to see what would fall out. She just needed to hang tight, think positively and let things unfold as they were destined to. The universe had a plan. She'd be okay.

"Mistral is under pressure. I'll talk to him soon."

"Soon?" Evander's body tensed and she could feel the air around them turn electric. Wow. That man had some serious energy going on.

She wanted to poke at him to get him to lighten up, but didn't kid herself. The truck's metal door between them was not protection; he could have that thing open and be out at her side, pulling her body against that tight, broad muscular build of his, in no time flat. Not that she wanted that. She might be hard up for a man, but she'd never be *that* desperate.

"We're going to discuss visitation."

"For Kim?" Evander's voice was so low and gravelly it sent tremors down Daphne's spine and between her legs in a way no other man's ever had.

"Yes. But everyone calls her Tigger."

"You should get a restraining order."

"Funny. Look at me laugh."

Daphne shook her head at herself. Sarcasm was not positive and it wasn't who she wanted to be.

"Is she safe?" he asked.

"Who? My daughter?" Realizing she was flapping her hands, Daphne stilled them. "I can take care of Tigger," she said quietly. "And her dad would never hurt her."

"Tristen said Mistral Johnson tried to take her during a picnic."

Not this misunderstanding again. Daphne sighed, her heart hitching, throat closing as she spotted the worry in Evander's eyes. She didn't

know if her reaction was due to him, a stranger, looking so concerned over her daughter's welfare, or because she was letting the panic and fear of the situation slip into her mind.

"She's fine." Daphne struggled to keep her voice level.

"Abductions are more common than you think."

"I never pegged you as a man who would play the fear card to get what he wanted."

"It's my job. I look for what bad things could occur, then ensure they don't."

No wonder he had that crazy energy about him. Who wouldn't be affected by a job like that? It was impacting Daphne and she was only talking to him.

Running her hands up and down her sides, she breathed deeply, focused on aligning her chi. It wasn't working. There was something about Evander's dark blue eyes that was causing interference and static with her energy field. His presence was making her heart hitch and her legs want to step closer to his truck. Her throat had turned dry, as though she was sucking desert air, and she tried again to steady herself.

"You have some strong energy, Evander de la Fosse. You need yoga. And Reiki."

His lips twisted in confusion. Right. She was being a hippie flake. She tried hard not to be like that around people who didn't "get it."

She closed her eyes, struggling to focus on the last things he'd said. *Tigger. Abductions.*

How dare he try to strike fear into her like that? Daphne didn't need him, and he was *not* going to scare her into changing her mind.

"Evander, sweetie " she pushed patience into her voice " children are more likely to be killed in a car crash than be abducted. We simply think abductions are more common than they are because we hear about every single one in the news. Reporters try to make it sound as though

it was the kid next door, when it actually happened on a whole different continent. Tigger is safe. Thank you for trying to scare me, but it's not working."

"A man like Mistral—"

"Watch what you say." Daphne pointed a finger at Evander. "He's my daughter's father and you didn't see the caring side I did all those summers ago. I know him. He's scared, but he's gentle and kind. He's lost, but I can help him. I *will* help him."

Mistral's father was incredibly hard on him, and Daphne had a pretty good idea how much pressure he must have applied on Mistral, to make him give up not only Daphne and Tigger, but his own dreams of creating resorts that mattered, in order to follow in his father's footsteps businesswise.

Evander closed his mouth, his jaw tight. Although his arm was still draped on the truck's door frame, the stiffness in his shoulders belied the casual pose.

"Daphne?" Their eyes met, sending more chills down her spine. "Scared people act in unpredictable ways, and you have these men pretty darn scared of what you and your sisters are going to do to their bottom line. They're taking note of your actions, and I think in your case, you can never be too safe. In other words, I'm not going anywhere until this is over."



DAPHNE CONTINUED HER ERRANDS, keeping an eye out for Evander's black truck. Maybe he wasn't a cat, after all, and was trainable. Either that or she'd lost him. About twenty minutes ago she'd decided it was time to try and ditch him. She'd pulled into a parking lot and hung out long

enough for him to get bored and allow his attention to wander—then she'd quickly sped off. *Special Ops that, Soldier.*

Once home, she'd parked the minivan and walked the few blocks to the island park in the middle of Port Carling. She waited on a bench for Mistral, keeping her eyes peeled for Evander to pop out of nowhere despite there being limited foot access to the island.

Six years ago, she and Mistral had had a summer to remember. And not just because she'd come away expecting Tigger. Mistral had been a ray of sunshine in the long tourist season of scooping ice cream at a local shop. While he'd looked like one of the rich "summer boys" her sisters always warned her about, he'd been different. One of the elite who vacationed in Ontario's cottage country, he could have easily acted as though he had the world in the palm of his hand, confident that everything would open up for him because of who he was, who his parents were, and how much money they had.

But as she'd handed him his mint chocolate chip ice-cream cone the day they'd met, he'd paused to look her in the eye—and had actually see *her*. And in that moment, she'd known. Mistral was just like her—struggling with life. Whereas she was wondering how she was going to afford entering the University of Guelph's environmental science program, he'd been struggling with having a large silver spoon force-feeding him his future. Mistral was in line to take over a very large share of his dad's business when he turned twenty-two that winter, but he'd been lost and confused.

On late-night walks they'd wander the town hand-in-hand, him encouraging her to change the world, adding layers and details to her dreams as though he was a part of their fabric and always would be. By the end of the summer they had decided they were going to create a sustainable, natural habitat with his money and her forthcoming environmental knowledge. Their little plot of land was going to teach

people how to treat the earth, without major consumption and the destruction of the environment. Daphne had shown Mistral there was more to life than what his parents believed, and he'd shown her that some people with money could selflessly help change the world.

When the summer ended he'd gone home to Toronto and she'd stayed in Muskoka. They'd kept in touch for the first few months, emailing back and forth. Phoning. Texting. Planning their future.

And then she'd found out she was pregnant. Mistral slowly became more and more busy with his life in Toronto, shutting her out so thoroughly that he was gone by the time Tigger was born, leaving a gash so deep and wide Daphne wasn't sure how she'd survive.

The next summer, she'd seen him once, looking tired and drawn while crossing a parking lot. She'd had Tigger in her arms, and was still feeling fat from her recent pregnancy. Mistral had caught her eye for a split second, his gaze softening as he'd paused. Then he'd hurried on, forcing a laugh as he caught up with his friends when they noticed he'd fallen behind.

The first time he'd met Tigger was a few days ago, and Melanie's boyfriend, Tristen, had punched him.

Daphne rubbed her forehead, trying to remove the image of Mistral's bloody nose from her mind. Today she had to show him that they didn't need a lengthy, costly custody battle. They were adults and could resolve sharing Tigger like civilized grown-ups, because their daughter needed a father.

While Daphne had always kept the door open for Mistral to be part of their life, he'd changed so severely she barely recognized him as the man she'd once fallen for. The spark in his eyes was gone and he was acting uncharacteristically erratic. The old Mistral would have been the voice of reason, and remained levelheaded through something such as Melanie's fight against his resort. He wouldn't have issued threats, but

would have sat down and thought of ways to work around the barriers, just as he had when they were planning their little nature reserve.

Daphne looked up in time to see Mistral come over the footbridge and onto the island—a park his company planned to turn into a parking lot. His stride was confident and spoke to who he'd become: a man used to getting his way, used to having crowds part for him. While she was pleased to see he'd found the self-assurance he'd been seeking, she knew he couldn't be happy or satisfied living under his father's thumb.

A chipmunk scurried past, one eye on her for snacks, and carried on, making her think of Tigger, who loved trying to tame the little creatures.

"Daphne," Mistral said with a curt nod. "May I join you?" He gestured to the bench where she was sitting, his pale yellow golf shirt making his dark skin almost glow. He'd always been handsome, but now his features were somehow more mature, more compelling. Her eyes swept over him, stopping at his bare ring finger.

She patted the vacant spot beside her and he sat.

"You never married?" she asked, feeling silly for how she phrased it. The man wasn't even thirty.

Mistral gave her a glance, but ignored the question. "My lawyer advised me not to talk to you without him present until things are settled. I'm curious about your message, though. And I like that you're willing to compromise."

Daphne knew lawyers would muddy the waters. And as much as her sister Melanie, her own lawyer for the custody battle, wanted to help, she'd want to do it an aggressive way that would alienate Mistral, instead of helping him find a way into their family, as Daphne wished.

"I think you and Tigger should spend time together before you decide how much time you want to ask for. Children are a lot of work."

If he asked for—and won—full custody, Daphne would be done for. There'd be no point to her days. No joy and happiness in her life. She'd be completely lost.

Mistral was a busy man working long hours. There was no reason for him to ask for full custody unless it was a vindictive move to take Tigger away from Daphne. And even though the man had been acting erratically lately, she couldn't see him pulling a stunt like that—despite what the papers said.

"What are you saying? That she won't want to spend time with me?" Mistral glanced at a man who had appeared nearby. He was watching them closely and obviously waiting for Mistral.

"I'm not saying that at all. Just that kids take a lot of time and energy. Who is *he*?" Daphne asked, pointing to the man.

"He's my assistant."

"Well, he's staring at me as if I'm going to stab you." She crossed her arms across her chest, not liking that this was the second time in the past hour and a half that she was surrounded by negative energy. The way the man was watching them almost made her want Evander de la Fosse here, on her side. Almost.

A rustling behind her made her jump and turn, moving off the bench.

Evander.

Was the man a psychic with teleporting powers? Because Daphne was pretty sure she couldn't summon someone with her mind, and the fact that he'd suddenly appeared when she was thinking about him was kind of creeping her out.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

"Who's this?" Mistral had left the bench, too, and was backing away, a hand laid protectively over his bruised nose, from when Tristen had slugged him only days before.

"You okay, Daphne?" The concern in Evander's eyes made her already galloping heart increase to a painful pace. When was the last time a man had looked out for her? Worried about her? She was always so busy being a mom, she rarely had anyone ask how *she* was doing. Even her sisters didn't think to do so, as they were always more concerned about the small human she was raising.

What was she thinking? Evander was a hired gun. A man who could escalate this situation in no time flat by bringing in the wrong kind of energy. He didn't care about the battles going on in her heart; he was worried about the possibility of violence happening.

"Evander, please go. This isn't about you."

Mistral smirked and Daphne resisted the urge to tell him off.

Evander crossed his arms, his massive shoulders bunching with the movement. "I'm staying."

"Are you trying to threaten me by bringing a bodyguard with you?" Mistral asked. "I expected this of your sisters, but not from you."

"This man is not here because of me."

"Yes, I am," Evander said.

"I didn't hire you."

"You knew I was involved with Rubicore," Mistral said to Daphne, "and yet you stepped in anyway. You know how much pressure I'm under. You know how important this is to me. You know what the stakes are."

"I stayed out of that whole thing as much as I could, in case you didn't notice," she snapped. As she did so, Evander moved closer. Mistral's assistant followed suit, and Daphne began to wonder if the man's occupation might be more similar to Evander's rather than as "assistant" to Mistral.

She held out her arms to stop them. "Boys, enough. We're trying to have an adult conversation here about a little girl who needs her father

in her life. Back off.”

Evander halted, eyes wary.

“You need to park your nose in someone else’s business,” Mistral said to Evander. Or maybe it was to her. Daphne wasn’t sure.

“Watch it, buster,” her shadow warned, his body rippling with pent-up anger.

Daphne blinked, unsure about how to deal with the new sides the men were showing. She’d grown up in a household of women and had no idea how to put an end to this kind of posturing.

“It’s fine, Evander,” she said quietly.

“No. It’s not.” He stepped in front of her, blocking Mistral’s access. “He’s threatening you.”

“He doesn’t mean it. My family’s making things difficult for him. He’s trying to prove himself, and he’s just scared he’s going to fail.”

“You can think again if you believe I scare that easily!” Mistral shouted, his voice betraying him with a waver.

Daphne peeked around Evander to apologize. Mistral’s moves were edgy as he shifted from foot to foot as though trying to decide whether to flee or fight.

“I knew meeting up with you was a bad idea,” he said. “I’m glad I didn’t tell my dad I was thinking twice about his advice.”

“Mistral, hang on, okay? We really need to talk. Evander, go. You’re making things worse.” Daphne tried to push the man away, but his strength was impressive. There was absolutely no give when she pressed her weight against his chest, just 100 percent ripped muscle under his light jacket. She gave him another shove, her hand hitting something hard under his elbow. She gasped. “Are you *armed*?”

Oh, this just made things worse.

She went to pull at the gun, to try and hide it or throw it away, but Evander’s hands were on hers, deflecting her. A second later, he’d

shoved her behind him again in a move that left her stumbling. First she was in front of him, then—boom—back here wondering what had happened.

She peered around him again, then ducked, holding in a scream. Mistral's bodyguard had a gun aimed at Evander, who already had his own drawn and leveled.

Daphne dived under the bench, arms over her head. Mistral was cowering behind it, knuckles white as he gripped the slatted back.

Peace and light. Everything was going to be okay. They didn't need her freaking out and adding chaotic energy to the situation.

Although she couldn't help but blame her sisters. They were being so pushy and aggressive with Rubicore. Sure, Daphne kicked hornets' nests all the time with her environmental protests, but this was different. This was trying to take down the whole company and kill their livelihood. It wasn't only about keeping them accountable in regards to the environment. This had become a fight to the death.

"Tell him to stand down," she whispered to Mistral. "Tell him."

"You tell your guy first."

"He's not my guy."

"What do you want, Daphne? Child support? Is that what this is about?"

"You know it isn't."

"Why did you bring an armed man to a chat about custody and visitation?"

She wanted to ask him the same question.

"Why do you want Tigger?" Her voice was quiet, and she hated asking, as it suggested that his intentions might be less than noble. But her sisters and Tristen had planted the idea that, due to the timing of his custody claim, Mistral might be using their child as leverage, and the idea wouldn't go away. Daphne's heart told her that him owning Baby

Horseshoe Island—just across from her family's island—wasn't a coincidence, and that he wanted to be a part of their lives. But logic said his actions might only be those of a ruthless businessman.

"Why are you messing with Rubicore?" he countered.

"This is about family, not business."

But were they really that different now?

Sure, she thought Rubicore should clean up their act or receive a good smack upside the head for all they were doing. But the thing was one of Rubicore's owners was Mistral. The father of her daughter. The truest, most precious thing in Daphne's life. She wasn't going to mess with that.

"Why are you ruining the island across from my family's?" A thought hit her and she gasped. "Are you trying to get *even*?"

"For what? You not knowing your way around birth control?"

"Hey! You were an equal participant, and here I am stuck holding the bag." She sucked in a breath. "I did not mean that. Tigger is everything to me."

"Ricardo? Is it safe?" Mistral called to his bodyguard.

Clearly it was not. The men were still having their testosterone-driven showdown.

"Do you want to be part of her upbringing, Mistral? Really and truly? Because she's a great kid. I'd hate to think " *No, no negative thoughts or assumptions. Positive intentions only.* Daphne still believed if she could help Mistral get what he needed in his life, that little something so he could break free of his father, the man could really live the life he was meant to.

He snorted. "You don't live in the real world, do you?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Daphne, come." It was Evander, gesturing for her to get up. He was still pointing a gun at Mistral's man.

"No! You're *armed*. Don't you see that there is something wrong with that fact?"

Mistral scrambled out from behind the bench, giving Evander a wide berth as he scuttled toward Ricardo. Evander took out a second weapon, keeping one trained on each man.

She was definitely going to need a chakra cleanse after this.

Mistral ran behind his guard and the two men backed away.

When they were finally gone, hightailing it over the footbridge, Evander shifted his second gun into its leg holster and held out a hand to help her up.

Refusing his offer, she dragged herself out from under the bench, finding her cotton dress filthy with dirt.

Evander's eyes darted around the island. He waved a hand at her, hustling her along. "Come on. We're not safe here."

"Evander, stop. We're in *Canada*. They're just two scared men. They're not going to shoot me. Mistral's just It's complicated." She brushed at her dress with brisk, agitated moves.

At least the press seemed to have decided to take the day off from their hounding about the legal action Melanie was taking against Rubicore. And, of course, the small fact that Mistral wanted custody of his and Daphne's daughter. The media showing up for this blowout would definitely not have worked in her favor. As an environmental advocate, she was generally a fan of the press—good or bad—seeing as it helped raise awareness. But this? This would have ruined her chances of keeping Tigger.

Evander's jaw tightened and Daphne vaguely wondered what sort of dental problems he might have as a result of the tensing he did all the time.

"I'd rather be cautious than find out what they are truly capable of," he said. "As I said before, scared men are unpredictable."

"Well, so am I!"

"No, you're not. You're along for the ride." With a firm hand between her shoulder blades, he pushed her out of the park.

"I resent that," Daphne muttered, allowing him to lead her to what he felt was safety. He kept his hand resting on the holster under his jacket, his body ever alert. While she fought the sensation of being taken care of, she silently reveled in the fact that someone else was in charge, if only for a moment or two, so she could collect herself.

Evander felt alive as he escorted Daphne Summer home from the park in Port Carling, where Mistral Johnson had blown his top and revealed more than he'd surely realized. When Evander had taken on protecting the single mom and her young daughter, it was for the distraction of having a steady job to do—not for the money, seeing as he had more than he could spend in this lifetime. He no longer seemed to fit into civilian life, having lost some important synapse that connected him to humanity. To real life.

And anyway, field-testing new equipment in a low-risk, real-life environment was one of his favorite things to do, which made watching the Summers a perfect job. Perfectly boring. After less than twenty-four hours on the assignment he'd been wishing another G8 Summit would come to Gravenhurst and cause a fuss. That a prince would need Evander's former Special Forces training and protection services.

The job of watching Daphne, despite the verbal threat from her ex, had been so uneventful that an hour ago Evander had done the one thing a good soldier never did: he got cocky. He'd relaxed his guard while waiting for Daphne in that quiet parking lot. Sitting in his warm truck, he'd let his mind wander, until a flashback from his earlier life as a high-risk, elite protection agent had gripped him, and he hadn't

fought it very hard. The flashback had washed over him, dragging him down like a determined undertow. It had been mercifully short—only about five minutes—but it had been long enough to allow Daphne a chance to slip away.

When he'd finally caught up with her again it was by sheer luck, or possibly good training. He'd spotted her flowered yellow dress in the park while he'd been driving over the drawbridge that separated the two parts of town. He'd barely got to her in time.

People didn't pay him ridiculous amounts to add a little extra safety to their lives. People came to him because they were serious. When Tristen Bell had asked him to watch Daphne instead of Bell's own girlfriend, Evander should have realized the stakes. And yet he'd made the mistake only a new recruit would make. Just because it was calm in the war zone, that didn't mean the war was over.

A single mother of one He didn't want to consider what might have happened if he hadn't come along when he had.

He needed to pull himself together and focus.

But war had changed him and all he wanted to do was show Mistral and Daphne what a wonderful, healthy, vibrant little girl they had. Wanting to share a child wasn't something to get violent over.

Yet every day Evander saw individuals getting worked up over what he considered small things. If they looked beyond their sheltered and protected lives, they'd realize that good people were dying over things they regularly took for granted.

People—children, mothers, fathers, families, civilians and soldiers—were laying their lives down in the streets for the things they believed in. Big things. But back home folks were getting worked up because their expensive recording device didn't capture their favorite television show, or their neighbor shoveled snow onto their property. They were allowing small things to ruin their days, their lives.

Evander wanted to grab them and shake them, make them open their eyes. To let them know just how good they had it. Food. Democracy. Clean drinking water. Health care. Religious freedom. Public education. Safety. Nobody was going to get blown up on the school run here in Canada.

Realizing that his hands were in fists as he marched Daphne along, faster than she was likely comfortable going, he backed off, just as she wrenched her shoulder away. She wasn't out of breath from their brisk hike up the hill, which was good. In a foot race they'd probably do okay.

Always keep the weakest link in mind. Always know your viable exits.

"I can walk myself home," Daphne said. Her dress was no longer clean, after her dive under the park bench. She'd shown good instincts getting out of the way of the gun, which was something he could work with. Some people froze when faced with an armed attacker, making them an ideal target. That was tough, because it put Evander's own life at risk. And despite the number of times he'd thrown himself in front of things that should have killed him, he was quite fond of living.

He stopped when Daphne halted. He eyed their surroundings. He'd rather they kept moving.

She turned to him, hands on her slender hips. "I *said* I can walk myself home."

"Nope. Coming with you." He trailed behind her, giving her six inches of space, one hand on his gun in case her ex and his trigger-itchy buddy came by with a bright new idea.

Man, that civilian doofus needed to think again if he thought he could throw off a former member of Canada's JTF 2 simply by pulling a gun. There was something about having tanks, missiles, grenades, fire

bombs, and land mines blowing up around you that made dealing with one gun look as basic as preschool.

Daphne tried to walk faster, to slip out from under the protective hand he kept lightly over her shoulder blade. *Keep her close. Know where she is at all times. Focus on possible threats and change in location.*

"What were you thinking, meeting him in the park?" Evander scolded. The slope had leveled out and the tangled shrubbery to their right had slowly morphed into trimmed yards, where hiding was more difficult. "Haven't you heard of coffee shops? Police stations or lawyer's offices? And why did you try to shake me off?"

"I told you to stop following me. It's not my fault you can't listen."

Her attitude reminded him of his old commander. The man had been a take-no-guff, tell-it-like-it-is, get-to-the-point type. "Keep it straight and honest and within the laws" had been one of his favorite sayings.

"You don't call the shots," Evander said, echoing part of the commander's welcome to JTF 2 speech.

Daphne whirled on him, her dress flaring out around her shapely legs. "It's my life."

"And I've been paid to protect that life. Those orders precede yours."

"I'll pay you to stop protecting me."

"You can't afford me."

"Yes, I can." A flicker of doubt crossed her face.

"You can't." He gave a small smile of satisfaction when her face flushed.

"How do you know? I might have tens of thousands of dollars stashed away."

"That's about what you'd need." She shot him a look of disbelief, and he said, "I'm elite, and don't come cheap. Besides, I'm loyal to the one who hired me. He makes the calls."

"Loyalty among gunmen, great."

"It's what keeps us alive. Speaking of which, you really need to stop ditching me."

"I don't need protecting," she said quietly. He knew she didn't quite believe the statement.

"Did you notice your ex's bodyguard just drew a gun on you during conversation?"

"Yeah, because he thought you were drawing yours!"

"Because you touched my gun." Evander enunciated the words slowly, waiting for it to sink in that weapons being drawn had been due to her actions, not his.

"You didn't tell me you were armed."

"You never touch someone's weapon unless you plan to use it."

"Or throw it away so things don't get crazy."

Evander sighed. What was he going to do with her?

"It's your fault things went wonky back there," she insisted.

He sighed again. "Remind me why I took this job," he muttered. He paused a moment to settle his frustration, taking in the picturesque view of the north side of town, which was laid out behind Daphne. The Indian River cut through the small valley, creating a scenic backdrop for the woman, whose wild curls framed her delicate features, while the breeze pressed her thin dress against her curves

"My eyes are up here, Evander."

"Your dress is dirty," he replied.

"Again your fault." She brushed the garment with a long swoop of her arm and began walking again. He fell into step, positioned so that he could throw her down and shield her with his body at a moment's notice.

She halted suddenly and he slammed into her, wrapping an arm around her, holding her tight so they didn't trip. Her body was warm

and soft, and it had been too long since he'd had a woman against him. He allowed himself to inhale, to savor the unexpected treat.

"What are you doing?" she asked, wiggling out of his grasp.

He released her, hoping his expression remained blank. This was starting to look as though it was going to be a very long week in his life. Or however long it took to resolve this case.

"You're following me again," she stated, stomping away.

"My job."

"How do I ditch you?"

If she only knew the number of men trained in espionage that he'd managed to stay behind through gnarly Middle Eastern city streets, she wouldn't be asking that question. Then again, the single mom had managed to ditch him once. And there was the dead-end she'd trapped him in, too. He needed to get his head back on straight and start acting as though this was a critical matter—which he now believed it was.

"You promised you'd stop trying to ditch me."

"I did *not* make such a promise. Oh, and I was talking to Tristen earlier and we decided your services are no longer required. You are dismissed."

"You suck at lying."

Her jaw clenched and for a second Evander wondered if she was going to try and hit him. It wouldn't be the first time a peace-loving hippie had socked him.

"You're insufferable," she said finally, chin raised.

"That's what my mother tells me."

Daphne looked him up and down, then eyed the width of his shoulders. "You're a mama's boy?"

"Being on speaking terms with my mother does not make me a mama's boy."

Something niggled at the back of Evander's mind. His mom something was up with her. He knew that she would tell him in time, but the feeling that something big was on her horizon kept bumping into his thoughts, distracting him.

"How do I get you and Tristen off my back?" Daphne asked.

A large truck rumbled by on the narrow road, close to the sidewalk. Evander placed his body between the vehicle and Daphne, shuffling her back a few steps.

"For starters, get a restraining order against Mistral and his bodyguard," he advised.

"I am not getting a restraining order against my daughter's father."

"Then you'll definitely be stuck with me for quite a while."

"Some of us believe that love changes people, weapons don't." She crossed her arms, scowling up at him.

"You love that man?" He struggled to say "man" instead of something derogatory. Mistral was not the one for Daphne, and Evander knew it without a doubt. Daphne's love, attention, and hopes were wasted on her ex.

"Whether I love him or not is none of your business."

"If you don't love him, then why are you defending him? Why don't you walk away and slam the door?"

"Do you have kids?" she asked.

Female version of a land mine. He needed to watch where he placed his size twelve feet. "No."

"Then don't pretend to understand." She turned and began walking once again. A few steps later, she stopped. It was going to take forever to get her back into the safety of her home at this rate. "How do I get you to stop following me? Besides a restraining order, what do I have to change in my life?"

"Tristen mentioned something about allowing your sister to move in with you again. So you wouldn't be alone. The safety-in-numbers theory. That would be a smart place to start."

"Are you kidding me? This is about Melanie? Because I'll have you know she doesn't have the right to tell me how to deal with my daughter's father, as though she knows what it's like to be a single mom. And neither do you, I might point out."

Evander began herding her along, wishing they were less exposed. Going for a walk after having a gun drawn on you was not a bright idea. And as for the bit about her sister? If the two of them had been men they'd be well over it by now and enjoying a few beers, the water under the bridge having long ago reached the ocean.

"Add in handgun and training, as well as better security for your house. Those are the places I'd start."

Daphne let out a sigh so gusty he wondered how her lungs managed to hold that much air.

"You're making everything worse. More difficult," she said, not looking his way.

"The same could be said for you," he grumbled when she stopped again. "Keep walking, woman." He gave her a light poke in the back, but she didn't comply.

"You're armed."

"Yes, and that fact put luck on your side only a few minutes ago, might I remind you. Now get moving."

She gave a light laugh and the sound hit him in the sternum like an unexpected punch from a heavyweight. This woman was simply overflowing with life, which, instead of making him feel more empty, made him feel well, he wasn't sure yet, but he liked it.

Daphne was everything he didn't have in his life, and never would again. Except for the danger part. He had that in spades.

"You have a nice laugh," he said, surprising himself.

"You carry a gun." Her breathing seemed a bit off as she added, "Two. Maybe more."

He stepped closer, infringing upon her space. "Does that make you uncomfortable?"

"Yes! You can't just walk around with weapons strapped to you. This is Canada."

He watched her closely so he wouldn't miss any emotions or internal truths she'd likely try to hide from him.

"How would you have felt if I hadn't been there and he'd pulled that gun?"

"It wouldn't have happened if you were off somewhere else, buster. You scared him." Daphne poked Evander in the chest, hard. He rubbed the spot with the heel of his hand, watching her, taken aback by her strength.

"The fact remains that you were meeting with a man who brought along an armed accomplice."

"Accomplice? How sinister." Her tone was flippant and sarcastic, but she wrapped her arms around herself and started walking again, brow furrowed, head down in thought.

"Do you see it yet?" he called.

"See what?"

"What you're up against?" This woman was so independent she'd stay clinging to a crumbling bridge, seconds from death, but determined to fix the structure herself even if there was a crane on shore ready to help.

She had stopped again, her eyes sliding away from his whenever she tried to meet them. "Rubicore is my sister's battle. All I want is a father for my daughter." Daphne finally met his gaze, her beautiful blue eyes

flecked with green and hazel. "Can you understand that? I don't want a big mess, and with you here, a war is sure to break out."

"My dear Daphne, it already has."



EVANDER LET himself into his mother's house in Bracebridge and scooped up the orange tabby that was trying to make an escape. He called out, "It's just me," as he disarmed the home's security system. He scratched the cat behind the ears, careful of the right one, which would likely get him clawed, seeing as old Rudolph was working on getting over an ear infection.

"No going outside until you're all cleared up again," he murmured to the cat, depositing him on the floor, then picking up the potted geranium he'd bought on the way home.

The cat meowed at the door and Evander gently shooed him away with a foot. "I know, I know. You're ready to go on a mission and hate sitting on your paws until you receive the go-ahead. I get it, buddy. But there's no way I'm letting you out until you're through the twice-a-day meds. You're too unreliable." His life had boiled down to providing risk reduction to a feline since returning home late last winter. What a use of his skills.

Rudolph swore at him with a haughty flick of the tail and Evander scooped him up again, tucking him under his arm. He made his way to the back of the old Victorian, which had been rambling even before the previous owners had added to it, and found his mom sitting in a wing-back chair. Florence was watching the evening light change over the sloping yard, the sun's fading rays highlighting certain flowers in the garden just beyond the window. She was lost in thought, and looked up

when he entered the room, but was not fully present, her usual buoyant self lost in untold secrets.

He plunked the cat on her lap and pulled up a tiny padded footstool, cramming his massive build onto it. He handed her the potted red flowers. "In case we get an early frost and the sunflowers don't make it to blooming. And you may have to take over Rudolph's ear drops."

The cat scrambled off his mother's lap and hightailed it out of the room.

Florence frowned after him. "He understands English, you know." She gave Evander a smile, her dark hair streaked with gray whisked back into a casual bun at the nape of her neck. She was tall and stately, but seemed wan. "You're lucky you weren't holding him or you would have got scratched. Again." She gave his hands a pointed look.

"The woman I'm watching needs more security."

"The single mom?"

"Someone pulled a gun on her today."

Florence's eyes widened and she sat straighter. "What are you doing here? You need to be guarding them."

"I was relieved by Chuck."

"Chuck?" She gave a scornful snort.

Evander chewed on his lower lip, then stood. Chuck wasn't the most attentive or well-trained bodyguard Evander's old buddy Tyrone Bellingham had working for his security company, and Evander had bitterly complained about that fact to his mother on more than one occasion. The only thing reliable about Chuck was that he was the weak link on any job. Which meant Chuck shouldn't be the one on night watch after what had gone on today. "Excuse me a moment."

His mom gave a nod and Evander pulled out his cell phone, moving into the next room, sending Rudolph scuttling from his hiding spot,

belly low to the floor. Evander braced a hand on the oversize door frame and called his boss, Tyrone.

"Hey, it's Evander. We need better security on the Daphne Summer case."

Tyrone cursed under his breath. "What happened?"

"Nothing further." Thank goodness Tristen had had the presence of mind to switch Evander from Melanie to Daphne that morning. "Have you checked in with Tristen?"

"Of course. As soon as you told me about what happened in the park. He says nothing happened over there today, but he's adding a couple of extra patrols around his house as a precaution. And word on the street is that the Hells Angels are watching out for Melanie." Tyrone gave a small chuckle.

"Good."

"I emailed the extra background checks you wanted about half an hour ago."

"Thanks. Is there security on their mother or the other two sisters?"

"None has been requested through my firm, so I can't say for certain. But last I heard, Finian and Hailey have their own private detail that's moving with them. No word on Maya or the mother, Catherine."

Last month, Daphne's eldest sister, Hailey, had needed Evander to help ward off the frothing paparazzi when she'd hooked up with the movie star Finian Alexander. Since then, the photographer had been on the road, with short stopovers to her home in Muskoka, and the star had been off filming and opening movies, meaning they had stepped beyond the local services Tyrone generally offered.

"Daphne needs twenty-four/seven security and you need to up her to a level four," Evander said. "You need someone better than Chuck."

"Four?" Tyrone protested. "Tristen's only paying for level one, man. Basic tailing and intervening as needed. We don't make those calls. We

just deliver what they order.”

“I know.”

“She’s not a dignitary.”

“She’s a mom, and she’s in danger.”

Evander had done a full dossier on the family last month when he’d covered Finian, needing to know what he was getting into. At that time he’d found pretty much nothing on the Summers, but since then things had definitely changed. In the past six weeks three of the sisters had hooked up with rich men. They co-owned a cottage that was about to go up for tax sale, and none of the Summers had much in the way of money. He was trained to look for connections, and these sudden hook-ups felt as though they went beyond simple coincidence. Something was at play here. Whether it might impact the case, he didn’t know, but it was worth keeping in the forefront of his mind.

“We need to do some pretty serious paperwork,” Tyrone said. “Permits, consent, release forms and more if we want to intervene at level four.”

“She needs more than Chuck across the street at night.”

Tyrone sighed.

“I’ll pay the extra,” Evander muttered.

“You’re going to end up paying to work this job.”

As an unannounced member of the billionaire boys’ club, Evander didn’t have a problem paying the bill in order to keep Daphne safe. She was a mom. In his mind, keeping her safe no matter the cost was a no-brainer.

“Fine. Whatever. I need the sanity the distraction will bring.”

“The world’s richest security guard pays to work for me so he doesn’t have to think about the fact that princes don’t pay him to get blown up any longer, and he’s just a measly civilian like the rest of us. I should make that my company motto or something.”

"Shut up. Talk to Tristen about my recommendations, and in the meantime, I'll cover any additional expenses." It wasn't as if Evander had anything better to do. He wasn't fit for the army or high-risk elite security any longer. His leg had healed well enough from the blast that had earned him the big payout from the Middle Eastern prince he'd saved, but not enough for the work he used to do.

"Has your impartiality been compromised?" Tyrone asked.

"I don't have a crush on her, if that's what you're asking."

Him with Daphne? It was obvious that the two of them would never see eye to eye, nor get along. It didn't help that Evander was no longer made for real life, and everything about Daphne was innocence and genuine vitality—life itself. Plus, she had a lovechild with that good-for-nothing, piece of work Mistral Johnson, who had a silver spoon welded into his mouth. That guy knew nothing about the struggles of the real world.

Assuming there still was one.

"Ever thought that maybe the police should be watching her?" Tyrone asked, and Evander knew his friend was going to approve upping the security on Daphne no matter what it took, but was checking him for emotional baggage attached to the case.

"Ever think maybe they don't have the manpower to do it right?"

"I hate it when you get like this. You know that?"

"You've hated me since boot camp, when I threw your heavy butt over that wall when you couldn't make it on your own." Evander gave a smug smile, waiting for the retaliation he knew was coming from his longtime friend.

"You had to throw everyone over that wall."

"That's all I get for a comeback?"

"Kids are in the room," Tyrone muttered. When the man had finished his first tour, he'd come home to be with his wife and kids,

opening a security business. But frankly, it didn't get a lot of action in the danger department and he was getting soft. The man was using his hard-earned skills to spy on unfaithful spouses more often than actually protecting anyone's life. Although some of those wives sure got dangerous when they saw photographic evidence that they were no longer honored and cherished by their husbands as the one and only.

"Don't let it get personal, man," Tyrone said. "Don't let her get under your skin and skew your judgment."

"I haven't gotten soft like you, Tyrone," Evander said, ending the call.

He thought about Chuck watching Daphne. The man was being paid to sit in a car across from the house, and was likely sleeping on the job. Any enemy worth his salt would take full advantage of that, and after what had gone on today, Evander knew he had underestimated the crazy side of Daphne's ex by at least a full point.

He rejoined his mother in the sitting room.

"Have you eaten yet?" he asked, knowing she hadn't. In fact, there was no hint of supper, despite it being after six.

"I was waiting for you."

She still hadn't moved from her chair, and Evander knew without a doubt that something was up.

"You okay?" he asked lightly.

Florence waved him away. "Just thinking."

He picked up a plate that was littered with the corner crusts from her morning toast. It was unlike her to leave them lying around. Pausing in the doorway, he watched his mother, feeling torn.

"I can hear you thinking all the way over here," she said, without turning around.

He took his spot on the stool again, placing the plate on the floor so he could grasp his mother's cool hands. They always felt so small in his

and he stared at them in wonder. How could a woman who'd won boxing matches in her youth have such delicate fingers?

"What's wrong?" she asked.

He drew in a long breath. "Are you going to be okay on your own?"

"I have been for years."

He knew the comment wasn't intended to make him feel guilty, as his mother had always encouraged him to go out and see the world, even going as far as to join the navy. Still, the guilt he felt was uncharacteristically strong. She needed help, but obviously didn't feel she could ask for it, for fear of interfering with whatever he had going on. Which meant it was big. Frustration welled up inside him, threatening to burst out as anger.

"Go. She needs you," his mom said. "I'll hold supper."

"I shouldn't be longer than an hour or two, to get things sorted out. I'll bring pizza home if you haven't eaten by then." He stood and gave his mother a light kiss on the forehead, unable to dismiss the feeling that she needed him.

"Can you give Rudolph his treats before you go?"

The cat came into the room, meowing perkily, and Evander scooped him up, heading to the kitchen to doctor his ear.

With the cat fixed up and only one new scratch on Evander's hand, he unlocked the carriage house out back where he kept his gear, knowing that every moment he took to get ready was a moment Daphne was poorly protected.

It was time to move, move, move. The clock was ticking, and his nervous system tingled in anticipation, but he needed to get himself prepared. Take it slow and methodically. Think things through. Taking a minute now could save ten later.

He placed a GPS tracking button in his front pants pocket and double-checked the ammo clips for his holstered handgun, as well as the

one strapped to his leg. Knife, present and sharp. He moved on, riffling through his meager gear with purpose. A lot hadn't come home with him from the Middle East, and he had been slowly restocking again.

He debated taking his entire duffel of supplies, but instead chose carefully. He didn't have permission to do any of the things he planned to do to the woman's house. He needed to be discreet. He didn't know Daphne well, but he knew she wouldn't appreciate having her house monitored, even if it was for her own safety. He held a bug in his fist, contemplating. He lowered his hand, dropping the bug back into its case, leaving it in the duffel. Later. Priority items first.

The monitoring gear he needed fitted in a large zip-top bag, and he placed it in his truck, wishing it had a backseat, before going to check on his mom once again. His leg was bothering him today and he kneaded the spot above his knee as he entered the house.

"Just me again!" he called, wincing as the security alarm went off. Digging through the pockets of his cargo pants, he pulled out his phone, silencing the alarm. If that app ever stopped working he'd be doomed.

He was getting rusty, fast. Just like Tyrone. He needed more discipline, as well as a schedule.

"You'd think this place was Fort Knox," his mom said from the other room. "But then again, you always liked your toys." She gave a light laugh, followed by a cough as he entered the sitting room.

"You sure you're okay?" The cold that had been wearing her down seem to be going on for much too long. "I can take you to the walk-in clinic tomorrow night after my shift."

"A woman is allowed to cough without dying, you know."

A feeling of dread settled deep within him. "Who said anything about dying?"

"It's just an expression, Evander."

Knowing he was less than square emotionally, he set out to put at least one aspect of his life back in order—Daphne.

Daphne allowed her sister Hailey to hoist Tigger out of the family's Boston Whaler and onto the dock at Nymph Island for the impromptu late-supper picnic. The four sisters—with no boyfriends in tow—had even managed to round up their honorary sister, Simone, to join them, making it just like old times. Single Daphne wouldn't be the third wheel at their jointly owned cottage tonight. She could sit back and enjoy the peace and her family. She'd be able to breathe and act as though her life was normal.

Evander, when he'd gone home for the night, had told her to stay locked in the house, and that a man named Chuck would be watching her from a car on the street if she needed anything. When Hailey—just home from Europe where her boyfriend was filming *Man versus War II*—had phoned, suggesting they all go to the cottage for a picnic, Daphne hadn't thought twice about leaving the house. Evander had told her there was safety in numbers, and traveling in a group was another form of following his orders. He couldn't get upset about that, could he? Just thinking about her afternoon made her hands shake, and she slowed her breathing, determined not to allow it to get to her.

Daphne unpacked bags of food from the boat, lost in her thoughts. The whole place, from the aging dock to the tip of the cottage's roof,

needed so much work. Work her family couldn't afford to have done. In fact, if Daphne didn't somehow pull a miracle out of thin air, she'd be the one who lost their beloved island to the taxman in two short weeks. She'd asked her sisters if they'd consider asking their boyfriends for loans to make up the difference in what they had and what they owed. But all of them feared they might never be able to pay the men off again. This summer was the test. If they couldn't handle the taxes by themselves, then it was time to let go, because what would happen next year or the year after, if they borrowed money to get through now? They were in this situation because they hadn't been able to keep up with the payments for several years.

"I can't believe they're ruining Heritage Row," Melanie said, from her position on the end of the dock. "Termites. How stupid do they think we are?" She pointed to the charred remains of the cottage that had burned down only a few days ago. "And I know we're going to find evidence of arson with that one. Then we'll have Rubicore right by the—"

Daphne tossed a backpack at Melanie, distracting her from her rant.

"Mark my words, Maya," Melanie said, lowering the bag onto the weather-worn planking. "I'm going to save those remaining cottages."

"Didn't Rubicore buy the Fredericksons' place?" Maya asked.

"Where did you hear that?" Melanie's voice was breathless with outrage, and Hailey patted her on the back and gently guided her toward the cottage path.

"It seems like something they would do," Maya said to Simone, who nodded in agreement as she readjusted her shiny black locks into a fresh ponytail.

Daphne pretended to look for something in the boat as the other women trickled up the hill, still discussing the endless battle about heritage and Mistral's company. Her sisters knew little of real life. About real struggles and heartbreak. And the last thing Daphne needed after

her day with Evander was the group of them ganging up on her and telling her how to run her life in regards to Mistral. Typically, if they talked about Rubicore long enough, her ex-boyfriend—one of the company's partners—would come up, as well as a lecture about how Daphne should deal with things.

She climbed out of the boat once everyone was well ahead of her. Her daughter was already halfway up the path, grinning from ear to ear, pleased to have her aunts together here, at her favorite place in the whole world. With a flounce of her party dress and a flash of bare feet, Tigger vanished up the last turn, Hailey hot on her heels.

On the cottage veranda minutes later, Daphne began unpacking the picnic, with Simone quietly helping. Soon a feast was laid out on the outdoor dining table, and they all sat down to eat.

Tigger, bouncing in her spot as she ate the last bite of her potato salad, asked, "Can I go work on my fairy houses?"

At Daphne's count, her daughter had built about fifteen elaborate fairy houses around the island. They were made of driftwood, leaves, pinecones, small pebbles and other natural treasures, plus coins her daughter had collected with the make-believe fairies in mind.

Daphne nodded permission, and Melanie pushed away from the table, saying, "I'll go with you, Tigger. I want to see the latest additions."

"Can I come, too?" Simone asked.

Tigger snatched her hand, pulling her from the table.

"Maybe the fairies need new dresses?" the woman asked, waving over her shoulder to the sisters left behind. She owned her own boutique in Port Carling and had begun to branch out, designing her own fashions, in particular 1950s-inspired sundresses that looked amazing on Melanie's curvy figure.

Daphne had been half hoping Melanie would stay at the table so they could resolve their recent differences over including Tigger's father in their lives. Instead, her sister had taken the first excuse to run off. While Daphne wasn't quite ready to allow Melanie back into her house, she needed Evander and all his intensity out of her space.

Tigger ripped up the hill, chattering a mile a minute, her excited voice fading as the three moved out of earshot.

Hailey and Maya exchanged a look and Daphne tensed.

This whole excursion had been a setup and she'd walked right into. Maybe she did need Evander in her life, if only to protect her from her sisters and their traps.

Maya cleared her throat. "There's no easy or gentle way to say this. But the upshot of it all is that we think Mistral is dangerous and you should avoid him. Get a restraining order."

Hailey added quickly, "He pulled a gun on you today."

"How do you know about that?" Daphne stood, palms flat on the table's cool surface. There was a chill in the air and it seeped into her bones. "Have you been talking to Evander?"

"This is getting out of hand," Hailey said, brows pinched together.

"No. Everyone's interference is getting out of hand. A simple, peaceable situation went south because Tristen's hired gunman, Evander de la Fosse, was there."

"Thank goodness he was," Maya said, arms crossed. "I can't believe Mistral pulled a gun on you."

"He didn't pull a gun on me." Shivers ran down Daphne's spine. "It was his *bodyguard*, and he only did it because Evander was there, minding my business and acting as though we were in the middle of a war, not peace talks. It would have been fine without him around."

"Why does Mistral have an armed bodyguard?" Hailey asked, eyeing her sideways.

"Because I have a big thug following me around scaring everyone. That's why." She sat, pushing her fingertips against her eyelids. "If Evander hadn't been there, then Mistral's guy wouldn't have gone off his rocker. Mistral and I could have sorted things out like two civil adults. It's a silly, exhausting, negative, expensive waste of time to tie up the courts with this."

"Civil adults don't draw guns when discussing the custody of their child," Maya stated.

"Is that why you were talking to him?" Hailey asked. "Didn't Melanie tell you to only talk to him through lawyers in court?"

"Melanie has very different views about how to go about this. It's my child, my life."

"We know you and Mistral had an amazing summer," Hailey said uncertainly, "and we all thought it would lead to you two marrying, but things " She trailed off, eyes cast down.

"I was hoping to have a real conversation with him," Daphne said. "One where nobody else could meddle and push their own agenda. But thanks to Tristen, and probably Melanie, too, their nosiness just cost me and Mistral some major trust today."

Daphne felt the energy drain out of her, and realized that as forgiving as she was, it was going to be difficult letting this one go. She was mad at Mistral for allowing the situation to get out of hand. Mad at Tristen and Melanie for interfering and not consulting with her first. Mad at Evander for not telling her he was armed.

"Why couldn't you have had that conversation in a safe place with lawyers present?" asked Maya. "Mistral doesn't want Tigger as a daughter, he wants her as a pawn in this fight." She waved her hand in the direction of Baby Horseshoe Island, where his company was buying up land and planning a massive resort.

"Mistral reached out to me a few weeks ago about being in Tigger's life. I owe it to him to have a conversation without assuming he has less than honorable intentions."

"He reached out because we're attacking his company," Maya stated simply.

"Everyone assumes that they know Mistral better than I do. I know the real man. You don't."

If given the chance, Daphne knew that under all the trappings of money and success, she'd still find the man she'd fallen for all those summers ago—not for herself, but for her daughter. "Tigger needs a father."

"Finian adores Tigger," Hailey said of her boyfriend.

"And Connor, too." Maya nodded, eyes bright.

"A real father. A man who will be there always."

"They'll be there," Hailey said.

"Right. Where is Finian now?" Daphne asked.

"Well, he has his movie " Hailey trailed off, looking to Maya for help.

While the sisters' new boyfriends had been amazing with Tigger, acting as surrogate father figures, the fact was they were influenced by new love, and it wouldn't last. They'd forget about her daughter and move on when they had kids of their own.

"Tigger needs a father of her own, someone who will be a stable, constant presence in her life. Of all people, we should understand that, having lost our dad. And right now her biological father is reaching out. That isn't something I can ignore just because the timing isn't convenient. I'm going to assume the best until there is a reason not to."

Her sisters opened their mouths to argue but she held up her palm, her body shaking with pent-up hurt and anger. Wordlessly, she fled to her bedroom in the cottage.

They didn't get it and never would. Mistral may not have proven himself in the past five years, but she at least owed him the chance to try.

It was easy for her family to think Mistral would use Tigger as a pawn in his company's fight against them, but Daphne knew him. She knew he was still the same man inside, wishing he could be more than a shrewd businessman, following the path that had been laid out for him by his parents. She believed in the old Mistral that she'd fallen for even if he hadn't shown that side to anyone else.

And the fact was, he had reached out first. Then the papers had caught wind of the news and twisted it into something negative and judgmental, trapping Mistral behind a wall of publicity he couldn't break through while still saving face. But if Daphne could find a way to be there if she could get some positive press, then maybe he could find his way across to her. To them.

Her ex-boyfriend wanted and deserved to have the opportunity to be in Tigger's life in all the ways his own father hadn't been. Mistral could change the future. Their future.

But her sisters how was she going to be patient with them until they saw what she could do?



DAPHNE PARKED IN HER DRIVEWAY. She rubbed her eyes and stared at her small clapboard home until the minivan's headlights turned off to save battery power, plunging the yard into near darkness. While Melanie had lived with them for only a few days before their disagreement over Mistral, the house felt emptier without her, and Daphne wondered if they would ever manage to get back to the place they'd once been—close and tight. At the picnic last week, Mistral had been trying to befriend

Tigger, but then Tristen had misunderstood the situation and ended up nearly breaking Mistral's nose. That had led to a difficult conversation with Tigger, where Daphne had tried to explain that the "bad man" was actually her father.

Contemplating spending the night in the van so she wouldn't have to disturb her sleeping daughter and go through the whole I-want-Auntie-Mellie-Melon-to-come-over-and-tuck-me-in fight that always broke her heart, Daphne continued to gaze at her house. How could she get her five-year-old into the house without waking her? When the child was smaller, no problem. But now? She was just too big. Daphne was going to have to wake her, then go through the whole crazy process of dealing with a kid who'd just had a power nap and was ready to take on the planet for another two hours.

Daphne wanted her own bed. She wanted peace. She wanted quiet. She wanted to not think about how muddled and messed up her life had become over the summer. Which meant that she'd likely stay up most of the night painting sunflowers to keep her thoughts at bay.

This summer she'd been selling quite a few of her paintings at the local farmers' markets and had earned over a third of what she needed for the cottage's tax bill in order to prevent it from being seized. She could pull an all-nighter at her easel, then if inspiration was thick, skip the protest on watershed issues she planned to lead, maybe even the Bala market, and paint through the day until it was time for work in the afternoon.

A dark figure rustled past a bush along the side of her house. The person was moving with confidence that didn't scream bad intentions, and Daphne quietly opened her van door. She slipped out, then locked it behind her. For a second she wished she had Evander at her side. He was powerful and intimidating. Amazingly muscular and yet nimble.

Her mind drifted to the rippled skin that ran down the side of Evander's cheek. The scarring continued under the collar of his shirt and made her wonder if it was the reason he was no longer in the army. Undoubtedly it was responsible for that sharp, haunted look he carried in his hazel eyes.

Why was she thinking about him? He'd just escalate whatever this was into something awful. It was probably her neighbor wondering if Tigger had kidnapped his cat again to dress it up and have tea parties.

A squirrel raced across Daphne's path and she held in a startled squeak, snatching Tigger's Cabbage Patch doll from the lawn before sneaking around the corner of the house. The figure was gone and she let out an inaudible sigh of relief. She paused, listening. Nothing. She slipped off her flip-flops, the grass almost painfully cool under her feet.

Daphne held the doll by its legs, placing Maple's hard plastic head on her shoulder. Maple would make an excellent weapon if need be. Daphne had experienced that firsthand when she was still figuring out that sugar made her daughter go absolutely bonkers. She'd been in the wrong place at the wrong time when Tigger and Maple had been having a dance party on the living room couch. Daphne's cheek smarted just thinking about the way Maple had made contact with a bruise-causing crunch.

At the back corner of the house, Daphne took a quick peek, hidden by her John Cabot rosebush. Its soft fragrance filled the air as she watched an impossibly large man on the back step reach above the doorjamb, sticking something to the wooden clapboard. He stuck something else on the door itself. Leaning away from her, he arched his broad shoulders over the stair's metal railing and repeated the process with the kitchen's sliding window. Satisfied with his work, he turned, facing her from his elevated position.

"Hi, Daphne."

Darn.

"Um, hi, Evander."

"What are you up to tonight?" he asked.

"I'd like to ask you the same." She marched out of her hiding spot, still clutching the doll, although she allowed it to drop from her shoulder. She joined him on the cement step and reached above him to yank the thick sticker she wouldn't have noticed if she hadn't seen him apply it. She handed it back to him before turning to dismantle the rest. Evander caught her wrists in his hands. Not too tight, but enough to let her know she couldn't get away.

"What are you doing to my house?" she demanded. "Other than trespassing."

"Setting up a monitoring system to help keep you and your daughter safe."

Daphne's shoulders dropped, her righteous anger suddenly washed away. She was tempted to relax into his grip to see if she could borrow his strength for a minute. One of the hardest things about being a single mom was having to be strong all the time. And right now, the thought of being unsafe in her own home made every bit of bravado and strength she'd built up over the years slip away.

"I don't want to be spied on," she said softly.

He was still holding her wrists, his grip warm and reassuring. His hands were massive and engulfed her so fully he could have held her just as securely with one hand instead of two.

"It's not spying. It's a warning system that will tell me if someone disturbs your windows or doors."

"Spying," she said, unable to help chuckling when he gave her an exasperated look. A rich, deep bubble of laughter moved up through her body.

"What?" Evander asked cautiously, as her laugh ripped free.

"You know how many times a day I open and close windows and doors?"

"Well." He gave the house an uncertain glance. "I'm more concerned with disturbances at night, as I'll be with you during the day and see when you are disturbing the security points."

She pulled her wrists from his grasp, unable to argue with him no matter how uncomfortable the idea of being monitored made her feel.

"Why not get me an ankle thingy they put on people under house arrest?"

"I didn't think you'd go for that, but I have one in my truck. I can go grab it."

She couldn't tell if he was joking or not, but she had a pretty good feeling he was. She turned, feeling off balance. "I have a daughter who needs carrying to the house. You keep playing with your rescue hero toys. I have real life to attend to."

She left him on the porch, but was surprised to find him falling in beside her within seconds, a slight limp to his strides. Passing the front of the house, she propped Maple on the front step so she wouldn't forget to bring her in, and Evander caught the doll as it began a slow topple to the ground. He righted it, then followed her to the van.

"Why did you leave the house?" he asked.

The way he was watching the street with a frown was annoying. Why didn't he ever look at her? It wasn't as though danger was lurking on the quiet, small-town street, just waiting to catch them unaware. She'd like to be looked at every now and then.

She sighed. "Don't worry, safety in numbers."

"I believe I told you to stay put for the night."

"Yeah, and you also told me to hang out with large groups of people, which I did. So, fight your way out of that one." She hushed her voice, placing a finger on her lips as she pulled on the van door,

wincing as the old metal panel slid open. Before she had a chance to unbuckle Tigger, Evander had the girl in his arms, her small head of curls tucked against his shoulder, her eyelids not even fluttering with the movement.

He was good.

Daphne unlocked the front door, expecting him to try and maneuver the girl into her arms. Instead, he crossed the threshold, barely making it through the doorway without brushing the top with his short, sandy hair. In the entry, he paused, angling Tigger's feet in Daphne's direction as if they'd done this a thousand times before. She slipped the girl's sandals off her grubby toes, completely in love with the perfect, clean imprint on her foot's sole where the sandals rubbed them clean with each foot strike. Trying not to appear too sappy, Daphne refrained from kissing the toes, and guided Evander to Tigger's room. He gently laid the girl on her bed, pulling up the blanket and tucking her in. He smoothed an unruly lock of hair off Tigger's face before stepping back.

Daphne, eyes blurry with tears of fatigue and gratitude, played with the collar of her dress, hoping Evander didn't see the emotions ruling her at the moment.

"Thank you," she said through a thick throat.

"All part of the service."

"You're a horrible liar," she said, and he smiled.

"It was my pleasure." He gave a little nod and let himself out. Turning on the front step, he passed her Maple, but didn't release the doll until she met his eyes.

Feeling grateful for the gift of time alone to paint, she said softly, "Go ahead and rig the place up, Evander. Do your thing."

"Lock your doors and don't go anywhere until I'm back in the morning. Call me if you need to leave. You have my cell number as well

as Tyrone's. I'm going to wait here until I see Chuck on the street again."

Daphne sighed. Give the man an inch and he turned into Mr. Bossy Army Pants who figured he had the right to rule her life as though he was the one in charge.

But she'd changed stubborn people's minds about the environment, and she could change his, too. She just needed to apply steady pressure and keep on smiling.

Evander waited at the stop sign behind Daphne's flower-painted van. The woman was something, that was for sure. She'd just led an early morning awareness rally about protecting watersheds as sleepy-eyed hydroelectric workers trickled past her and into their building, avoiding her and her gang of protesters. He'd never seen anyone come alive the way Daphne had, shouting and whipping up the crowd, spouting off facts that had even him looking sideways at the power company. That woman needed to find a bigger platform, because if she could get a man like him to care about fresh water, she could change the entire world.

Which made her all the more dangerous for a group like Rubicore and, therefore, meant she was that much more in need of protection.

He followed Daphne into Bala, mindlessly steering his truck along the town's curving streets. She hadn't tried to shake him off yet today and he took it as a good sign. Maybe having a few hours to think over what had happened yesterday had given her a much needed introduction to reality. Although, possibly, she was simply using him as a buffer between her and the reporter who'd been quietly taking photos of her all morning.

Evander visually swept the quiet streets for signs of danger. Did he have enough security on Daphne and the girl? Carrying Tigger into the

house last night had felt so very real. In that brief moment he'd allowed himself to wonder if he could ever have something like that—the privilege of carrying his offspring into the home he and the love of his life had created.

Then again, who was he kidding? Having offspring would ensure he'd be in a perpetual state of alertness, everything becoming a danger. The kid would either have no life due to his restrictiveness or Evander would die of stress.

War had ruined him. He no longer had the little piece of humanity that would allow him to be a husband or father who reacted the proper way.

Shuddering, he blasted the AC, hoping to prevent a horrid flashback from his first tour of duty, where he'd seen children no, don't let the memory in. Bury it. He was here. He was safe. That was in the past and he'd done all he could to improve the lives of others.

His head hurt as though rocked by an explosion and he lost the flashback battle, falling into a whirling pool of acidic horrors ranging across years of duty. He pushed his way out of it, his jaw clenched so tight his teeth were grinding together like broken rocks.

Evander unfolded his fingers from the steering wheel, regulating his breathing. The flashbacks were getting better. He hadn't lost sight of Daphne. Hadn't crashed his truck. He had to have faith that this wasn't just a quick reprieve before the flashback roller coaster dunked him under again, causing him to fight with everything he had in order to see the light, to breathe and stay alive.

Daphne pulled up at the Bala farmers' market, which hadn't yet started. He was no good to her in this state. He needed to get it together.

She put her van in reverse, preparing to back into a parking spot, and he sighed in relief. Good. Ready for a fast getaway. At least one of

them was with it.

However, she continued backing up until she was in line with a row of tables. Evander, unsure what she was doing, stopped his truck next to her. He would have preferred if she'd placed her van closer to the main entrance, but they could discuss good parking habits once she was a bit more receptive. This was a fair enough start.

Evander leaped out of his truck and opened her van's side door, noting that his hands were still trembling from the flashback jaunt through Memory Lane's house of horrors. As soon as the door slid wide enough, Tigger bounced out. The girl was like a trick can. Open it and she sprang out.

"Thanks, mister," she said as she bounded over to stand by her mother.

Daphne opened the back of the van, unloading paintings that smelled of fresh paint. She was a vendor. Which meant he was losing his edge. This should have come up in his background search, shouldn't it?

He was stuck between worlds. No longer a JTF 2 with an edge sharpened to precision, ready to be used at a split second's notice, and no longer a civilian able to chill out and blend in.

He leaned two tall canvases against the side of his truck. "Are you selling these?"

Daphne nodded.

"You painted them?"

She nodded once more.

Again, shouldn't a hobby of this magnitude have come up?

"How do you find the time?" he asked.

She gave a wan smile and he gave her a closer look. He knew being a single mom was tough going, but today her weariness was similar to a heavy cloak pulling her down. It wasn't bags under the eyes or paleness

like most people, it was a waning of the larger-than-life vitality he'd come to know as purely Daphne.

"I haven't been able to sleep much lately."

He felt conflicted. If she wasn't sleeping it could mean she was actually concerned about her welfare and might cooperate. However, he also knew sleep deprivation was an effective form of torture that he wouldn't wish on anyone, and could result in poor judgment.

"Mom, can I get some cotton candy?" Tigger asked, tugging at her mother's dress.

"No sugar this early in the morning. There are apples in the van."

"Do you have any candy?" Tigger asked Evander, a hopeful look in her eyes.

"Do I look like the kind of man who carries candy? That stuff will rot your teeth."

"No, it won't. I brush two times a day." She held up two fingers as though that would buy her a yes.

"Have the apple. It will make you feel better."

"I'm not sick. Who are you?"

"Evander de la Fosse." He held out his hand and she gave it a solemn shake. "You're Kimberly, right?"

She made a face. "Everyone calls me Tigger."

"Right then. Tigger. Nice to meet you."

Daphne was unloading paintings, not paying attention. He wasn't really sure what, if anything, she had told her daughter about him shadowing them, and was afraid he'd end up saying something wrong.

"Why are you here?" Tigger asked.

"I'm helping your mom." He turned to Daphne, arms outstretched. "Hand them here. I'll carry them."

Tigger, obviously knowing the drill, toted aluminum easels to a grassy area in front of the open van, not at all dejected from her sugar

shutdown. "You were at our house," she said.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I'm helping your mom."

"Why?"

"Because she needs help." Man. This kid was determined—just like her mother.

Evander faced Daphne. "Do you sell many?" He propped the paintings on easels, one eye on the reporter who was snapping the occasional photo. He'd talked to Austin Smith earlier and the reporter-photographer had been corporative, agreeing to keep Evander in the loop if he saw anything odd going on. The man had shown the appropriate amount of concern for Daphne and Tigger, making Evander believe he might actually be on their side.

"Sometimes I sell a few. I only just started trying to sell them," Daphne admitted, her lower lip tucked under her top teeth as she stared at one of her paintings.

Okay, so he wasn't that rusty at background checks. This was a new thing. He could work with that.

He followed Daphne's gaze to the painting of a bright sunflower on an intense blue background. Stormy yet beautiful. She'd captured the ethereal light before a storm where everything is dangerous, the potential for life or death crackling in the sky.

He needed to have this painting. He opened his wallet and realized he didn't have enough on hand for something this incredible. Putting it away again, he lifted the painting off its easel, tucking it back in the minivan.

"What are you doing?" Daphne asked, drawing herself up. "Tigger and I are perfectly safe here in the crowd." She glanced at her daughter and lowered her voice. "You said so yourself."

"That one's mine."

"Oh." She came up short, surprise blanking her expression. "But you haven't paid for it."

"I'll pay for it tomorrow. It's mine."

"You don't even know how much it costs." She narrowed her eyes, arms crossed. "Are you taking pity on me?"

"No. And that one's mine. Have a problem with that?" He crossed his own arms and stared her down.

He'd never been an art guy, but that painting hit him in a place he couldn't explain. He needed to have it. It was that simple. His eye caught another sunflower, a smaller one. It had a red background, and streaks of pink in the yellow petals. "This one, too." He packed it away, knowing his mother would like it.

"You don't have to do this," Daphne said, unpacking the painting again.

"I'm not doing anything." He pushed it back into the van. "Is this how you treat all your customers?"

"You're not a customer, because you haven't paid for them."

He crossed his arms once more and sat on the bumper of the van's open hatch, not budging, blocking her access to the paintings he'd claimed.

"Fine." Daphne threw up her hands, not looking nearly as delighted as he figured an artist who'd just sold two paintings should look.

He thought he heard her mutter something about impossible men before turning back to her other paintings.

"Yeah? Well, they go well with impossible women," he retorted.

"I am not going well with you."

"You could say that again."

"Excuse me?"

"Hey, I'm just a friendly guy." Who was armed and lethally dangerous.

Always armed.

She snorted, heading to talk to an early customer, ending their fun banter.

The market crowd slowly began to ebb and flow around them and there was one man in a tan jacket who kept staring at the paintings, his mind obviously elsewhere. Evander watched him, his gut telling him the man was eavesdropping on Daphne. Evander moved through the paintings, circling around to stand behind the man. She was talking about things she thought a developer was doing wrong. Typical Daphne stuff, from what he'd learned.

He sidled up beside the man and cleared his throat, making him jump. Out of the corner of his eye, he noted that Austin had snapped a shot of the eavesdropper. Very nice. If Evander needed a photo to help identify the man later, he was set. Maybe there was a way to get the reporter on Tyrone's payroll. They could always use an extra set of eyes and this guy seemed to always be around.

"That one your favorite?" Evander asked the lurker.

Daphne, oblivious, chirped away with some scruffy, skinny hippie type. Another thing to talk to Daphne about—what she said where and to whom. The list was going to be endless by the time Evander got her back into the protection of her house at the end of the day.

The eavesdropper nervously glanced at the sunflower with the wilted petals. "Yeah. Yeah, I like it."

"Just bought two today myself. She's great. Shall I wrap this one up for you? I can ask the artist for a deal if you want to add in one of her framed sketches over there. They're a great gift for the woman in your life." Evander raised his eyebrows, waiting for an answer. He stood a little closer, well aware that he was intimidating the smaller man.

"They are very affordable," Evander continued. "I can tell you have exquisite style sense. Shall I package up both, or just this one?"

The man gave a wobbly smile. "Just this one."

Evander made the sale, winking at Daphne, who'd quirked her head at him. He would not be introducing this man to the artist. Making sure he kept chatting him up, Evander guided him away from Daphne's booth, handing off the painting at the last moment.

"Did you just sell the worst painting in the batch?" she whispered, coming up alongside him.

"Apparently."

Eyes twinkling, she gave him a tight hug that just about cracked a rib. "Thank you!"

He rubbed his side, reassessing the slight woman. Where on earth did she hide all that strength?

"Your hugs should be a weapon."

She gave a rich laugh that tickled him, almost making him want to smile.

He glanced around, tension seeping into his veins. "Where's Tigger?"

"I sent her to get pepperoni."

"What?" He clenched Daphne's shoulder, making her squeak. He quickly scanned the area, unable to spot the girl's pink party dress. "You need to keep her in sight at *all times*."

When would this woman get it through her head that she and her daughter were in danger?

"Evander." There was a warning in her voice, suggesting he was overreacting. He was *not* overreacting.

The eavesdropper would not have bought that painting had he not been trying to cover the fact that he'd been busted by Evander. Add in the gun incident yesterday, the custody battle, as well as how the sisters

were attacking Rubicore's livelihood, and his blood boiled with danger in a way it hadn't in a very long time.

They were separated. Everyone was vulnerable. He grabbed Daphne's arms. "This is serious. *Never* let her out of your sight. Ever."

"That's no way to live."

"It's the only way to live right now. The only way to ensure there's a tomorrow to live *in*." He gave her a brief shake, then released her so he could sprint through the crowds, hoping he wasn't too late.



EVANDER TOOK the narrow residential road to the beach's boat launch and park, uncomfortable with the sloping dead end that would have them pinned against the Indian River with no escape. There was one exit. One. And anyone could easily block it.

He'd found Tigger at the farmers' market pepperoni stand and had whisked her away, ignoring the unimpressed look from both Summers when he'd sat them side by side and told them to never leave his sight without permission. Ever. Again.

His growing sense of unease was not helped by the fact that he was certain Daphne had tried to shake him en route from Bala to Port Carling. She had some good moves, but there weren't a lot of places to shake him between the two small towns which had made it futile. That and the fact that he had hours of training, whereas she had none. Something was up, but he didn't know if it was her feeling ticked for him telling her off or if she was planning to do something he'd dislike.

His gut told him it was the latter.

The effects of his earlier flashback were catching up with him and he yawned, wishing for a nap. Just before the boat launch he spun his truck around, parking it along the edge of the grass to ensure it was

aimed up the road. He got out and made a twirling motion with his finger, telling Daphne to turn around as he had. She rolled her eyes, but laughed as she complied, her good mood from selling three paintings at the market keeping her buoyed. He was not that easily fooled, though. She'd tried to ditch him, and her body language didn't have its usual lightness. It was as though each movement was carefully thought out ahead of time so as not to reveal what she was hiding. It was a basic interrogation skill—watch body language for tightness. He'd just never thought he'd be using it in a domestic matter.

C'est la vie. Real life.

With a practiced eye, he scoped out the playground, park, boat launch, river, and treed residential area for places someone could hide—friend or foe—as well as possible escape routes. He held out a hand to help Daphne out of her van, then unleashed Tigger, who had been struggling with the door. The girl burst forth, sprinting for the play equipment shaped like a fortress. He would have loved playing here with his brother when he was a kid, but instead he'd grown up in the city, where things were busy, sterile and a whole lot less fun.

"You don't have to stay," Daphne was saying. "I'm sure you have lots of things to do today. We're just going to hang out and play for a while."

He stretched and ran a hand through his hair. "A man can always use more vitamin D."

She was definitely up to something.

Daphne leaned into her van and looked at the dash clock. She stared at it as though contemplating something, her lower lip pinned between her teeth.

There was no way he was going anywhere but where she was. And if she thought she could outwait him, good luck. He'd spent twelve days

in scorching desert heat waiting outside an enemy bunker for just the right moment. This would be nothing.

"Hungry?" Daphne asked, tossing him an apple.

He caught the red delicious and took a large bite before saying, "Thank you."

She took a bite of her own, watching him as his gaze flicked from her to their surroundings, then back again.

"Are you always thinking of ways to escape?" she asked. "Always on the lookout for enemies that might need a weapon waved at them?"

"It's my job." He gave her a cold, steely glance and with satisfaction saw it hit home, making her shiver. "Have you noticed you're being followed by a reporter?"

Daphne glanced around, her eyebrows puckered over her bright blue eyes. Her face relaxed when she spotted Austin. "That's Austin Smith. He's paparazzi."

Now Evander was ticked off. The man hadn't been fully honest. Reporters and paparazzi were two entirely different things. Plus, Daphne knew more than he did. That small fact was becoming increasingly familiar. And not a good kind of familiar.

"He's an old family friend," Daphne said brightly, and Evander was certain she knew just how much this was bothering him. "Rick Steinfeld might come around soon, too. They're trying to help."

"In what way?"

"Melanie convinced them to help with the publicity angle. To help Mistral see that I'm not a threat." She waved her hand dismissively, not expanding on what was going on.

"More info, please."

"Oh, you know. Just some positive press to combat all the stuff in the papers. They haven't exactly been kind or honest. It's making things worse for Mistral instead of easier."

The crease between Daphne's eyebrows had reappeared and he figured it was best to change the subject for now. He had enough to mull over.

"Is she always like that?" He gestured to Tigger, who had already made a few friends and was in the middle of a battle with a group of boys over who got to be on the top of the play structure.

"Gregarious? Yes. Full of energy? Yes."

"They should bottle that."

"She's actually part of my grand scheme on how to take over the world."

Evander gave an amused chuckle. "She's a good secret weapon."

He turned his back to the river, figuring a flank attack was less likely than one from the road. He kept his eyes peeled, waiting for whatever Daphne didn't want him to be there for.

But every once in a while, he found himself becoming involved in the antics of the children. They were boisterous and so full of life and innocence. Everything he had gone to war in order to protect, right there. That was the reason. And it made every bit of loss and destruction worth it so they could have a real childhood.

He seemed to have caught the attention of a few boys, who edged closer. Finally, they summoned their courage and came right up.

"Are you a bodyguard?" asked a kid with dirt smudged on his nose.

Evander loosened his posture, realizing that with his sunglasses and firm at-ease pose he must look like a member of the Secret Service.

"What happened to your face?" asked his buddy.

Evander debated ignoring them, but figured that wouldn't help his case with Daphne, seeing as she was listening in.

"Yes, I am a bodyguard. And I got blown up protecting a prince." He sighed to himself. That information was way too interesting for young

boys. He should have said no, that he had been born with the scars that ran down the side of his face and torso.

"Did it hurt?" asked the first boy.

"Like a son of—" He caught himself in the nick of time and glanced at Daphne for her reaction.

She looked just as interested as the kids.

"Do you have a gun?" asked the second child.

Beside him Daphne flinched. "You should show them some soldier moves in the woods. He was in the army," Daphne told them, her eyebrows raised, obviously trying to convince the kids to gang up on him.

That was unfair. Offside.

Clever, too.

"I'm pretty sure your parents wouldn't like an armed stranger teaching you how to be a soldier in the dark and scary woods." Evander could teach these kids stuff that would turn their heads inside out. Without even touching on the amphibious assaults he could coordinate along the water's edge. They'd never see water the same way.

"Our parents won't mind," one kid said quickly. That was followed by a chorus of head nodding.

"The woods aren't scary," Daphne added.

"I need a push!" called Tigger from the swings.

"I got this," Evander said, eager to get away. At the rate they were going they would have national secrets exposed within seconds.

Daphne was following him across the sandy play area. "You don't have to push her, I can."

"What? You don't trust me?" he challenged.

She looked momentarily taken aback and he used her hesitation to reach Tigger before she did.

"Maybe you could go get us ice cream," Daphne suggested.

Setup. One hundred percent. He'd been tailing the two long enough to know that Daphne almost always said no to anything with sugar, and there was no way she would introduce sugar-induced chaos into her world midday. Especially after a late night of painting that had obviously led to her energy levels taking a hit.

"Ice cream!" Tigger squealed.

"Only if Evander gets it," Daphne said. "I need to stay here with you."

"We can all go!" Tigger said.

"Great idea," Evander said. "When can we go?" Daphne scowled at him, but he kept a straight face. "What? We're not going?"

"Aw," Tigger complained.

He gave her a light push on the swing. "Hey, I met your Cabbage Patch doll last night. What's her name?" His brother, Kyle, had wanted one of those as a kid—until a neighbor kid had laughed and called him a sissy. Evander had given the neighbor a black eye for that, then saved up his allowance to get Kyle the doll. But by then the damage had been done and his brother had decided the safe place for him and his sexual preferences was the closet.

One day his brother would open that door, and until then Evander would be there, letting him know he was still loved, no matter what.

"You met Maple? Push higher!" Tigger demanded.

"Nice name. Very Canadian." He gave her another push, this time a little harder, worried he would knock her right off the swing if he wasn't careful.

"It's my favorite ice cream."

"Oh."

"Higher!"

"Have you ever killed anyone?" asked one of the boys. They'd crept closer while Daphne fumed at him for foiling her plans.

"Where are your mothers?" Evander asked.

"We're old enough to come here on our own," the kid said.

"Well, I think I hear someone's mom calling," Evander stated, avoiding meeting their gazes.

"Higher!"

"Do you want an under-duck?" he asked.

"What's that?"

"A monster push where I dive under you while letting go at the last minute."

He glanced at Daphne questioningly, wondering if the running push would be too much for the girl. Daphne gave a small nod, her arms wrapped around herself as though warding off a chill. A moment ago she'd seemed ticked, but now she looked defeated. He watched her for an extra second, trying to figure out what had changed, and nearly got knocked by Tigger as she swung back toward him.

He moved so he was in front of the swing, wondering if the running push would send the little girl flying. "Are you sure about this? You're wearing a dress."

She carefully let go of one of the chains and he felt his heart stop for a second, worried she'd fall. She lifted the hem of her dress, revealing a pair of shorts. "It's okay, I'm prepared for play."

"A girl who is prepared for play. I like that. Too many kids spend all their time inside these days. Do you have a tree fort? Secret club?"

Tigger gave him a frown. "Nobody will make a fort with me."

"You have a good tree?" He realized that by going down this conversational road he was, in a little girl's world, practically offering to build a fort for her.

He was getting in too deep. He was going to lose objectivity.

"There's a big tree at the cottage. But it's too hard to get tree fort stuff there because it's on an island. And the generator isn't good

enough anymore to run power tools. That's what Mom says."

"That's a pity." Tigger needed a man in her life who could step in and resolve these petty issues.

"Under-duck?" she asked.

"You bet. You ready for this? Hold on tight."

Without looking at Daphne, he grabbed hold of the swing and gave it a massive push. As he let go at the last second to duck underneath, Tigger's face flashed a look of fear.

Too high, too fast.

What kind of bodyguard was he?

Again, *not* equipped for real life.

The girl squealed and he spun, preparing to dive and catch her before she plummeted to the sand-covered earth.

Tigger was holding on for dear life, her grin wider than the Grand Canyon. He glanced at Daphne, worried she was going to yell at him for pushing her little girl so high.

Instead, the mother threw up her hands with a resigned smile. "Well, I guess that gets me off the hook from now until eternity. There's no way I can top that."

He smiled internally, proud of himself. This was feeling pretty close to real life, and it felt incredible.

That was, until he spotted a man who stopped him cold.



DAPHNE RECOGNIZED the two figures that had caused Evander to tense and act as though he was mentally prepping for a takedown. Every fiber of his awareness was directed at the pair, even though he continued to push Tigger on the swing as if on autopilot. What had felt like a quiet family moment seconds ago was shattered.

This was where things got tricky and Daphne got to practice her juggling skills. She needed to change everyone's points of view, but she couldn't do it when they were in the same space, breathing fire at each other.

Then again, what did it matter? Neither she nor Mistral had kept their word today, putting them off to what was surely to be a bad start.

"Daphne," Evander said carefully, his tone quiet and dangerous.

"Oh, Mistral is here," she said lightly, stepping away from the swings. "Great."

"Did you arrange this?"

"Yes. I have to set things right between us." Evander wasn't supposed to be here and neither was Mistral's man. She chewed her bottom lip, which was feeling tender from all the attention it had been receiving from her teeth today. She needed to chill out with a few candles and some good old-fashioned meditation.

Energy fizzed off of the bodyguard. Tigger continued swinging, blissfully unaware.

"What is it going to take, woman?" Evander snapped, moving away from the swing.

"This is my life, my family. *Please* follow my lead and try not to do anything stupid today."

"Such as saving your life?" He stood toe to toe with her, his minty breath hot on her face.

For a moment she had trouble reminding herself that he was the one increasing the complications in her life and upsetting things that had nothing to do with him—such as her discussions with Mistral. Daphne was going to be a full year older in a week's time and was no closer to having the life she wanted, and she couldn't figure out why. She tried, she really did. And yet it just never happened.

She turned as Evander held out a hand as though stopping traffic. Mistral and his bodyguard had advanced on them quickly, but stopped when Evander directed them to. Already taking charge.

"I asked you to follow my lead and not get into a competition with Mistral's assistant over who's the real alpha, and what are you doing? Taking charge."

Evander's eyes narrowed. "I create the boundaries to keep you safe. You can be as stupid as you want within those bounds, but only after I say you can."

"You don't trust me."

"You have yet to give me a reason to." He brushed her aside, placing himself between her and the men.

She fumed silently. He was such a big, fat, pushy blankety-blank. She needed to do like the heroine in the movie *Tangled* and hit the man upside the head with a cast-iron skillet to show him not to turn his back on her or to take her for granted. She could take care of herself just fine, thank you very much.

Evander lumbered toward the men, his body moving as though he was a beast at the top of the food chain and on the prowl. Shivers ran up her spine, but it wasn't from fear. There was something so primal and intense about him that made her skillet idea fall away. He left her off-kilter and battling a strange mix of longing and resentment.

She needed to get him out of her life.

"Are you armed, Ricardo?" Evander asked the bodyguard, and she blew a sigh into her curls. Direct route to getting off on the wrong foot. Lovely. Had the man heard of social etiquette?

The bodyguard flashed his piece and Daphne closed her eyes. Great. Now she'd never hear the end of this. Another armed meeting.

Evander's massive hands closed into fists, the muscles and veins in his forearms bunching. Strength, power, and not afraid to use it. This

man was everything she stood against.

"I thought you said you were going to leave him behind," Daphne said to Mistral, pushing past Evander, who didn't budge, causing her to bounce off him. "No weapons. No trigger-happy bodyguards."

"I think it's a good thing he came." Mistral gave Evander a pointed look.

"I tried to ditch him," Daphne said quietly, hoping the other two wouldn't hear.

"Got a permit for that?" Evander asked Ricardo.

"Evander, enough," Daphne said. The other bodyguard smirked and she glared at him as she drew Evander aside.

Tigger had slowed on the swing, her feet dragging in the sand, her eyes wide and wary.

"Can you support me on this, please?" Daphne asked Evander. "Without violence."

His large hands were cupped together; his legs were apart. He might be "at ease" but his eyes belied his body's stance.

"I need this, Evander." She rested a hand tentatively on his forearm and he flinched, his gaze dropping down to hers in surprise. Hadn't anybody ever touched this man? Then again, most people likely took note of the keep-away-or-I'll-break-body-parts-you-didn't-even-know-you-had vibe and stayed far, far away.

Lucky people who had the choice.

She touched him again, this time with no apparent impact. "Please?"

"Why?"

Answering the simple question would open a can of worms she preferred to keep stashed away. It wasn't as if he'd understand, anyway. Just like her sisters. They thought no father was better than Mistral. But she had to give him a chance, didn't she? It wasn't her right to prejudge his parenting skills and discount him accordingly.

"Trust me?" she asked.

"You should be applying for a restraining order, not meeting with him. These men are not as safe as you think."

"And they're not as scary and evil as you think they are." She called to Mistral, "What do you say we have our bodyguards sit at a picnic table so they don't interfere with our conversation this time?"

"Sure." He gestured for Ricardo to go to a nearby table and, like an obedient dog, the man complied. She wondered if Evander would do the same.

With reluctance, Evander joined Ricardo at the picnic table, but didn't sit down, apparently finding it more comfortable to cross his arms and scowl at her.

Daphne called to her daughter. Tigger somberly slipped off the stopped swing. She meandered over, her bounce gone, her gaze flicking to Evander several times as though seeking support. When she approached, Daphne knelt beside her, her nerves getting the best of her. Evander was acting as though he was a puffed up guard dog and Mistral was avoiding looking at their daughter.

"Tigger, honey," Daphne said gently. "I'd like to officially introduce you to your father, Mistral Johnson."

Tigger folded herself against Daphne's back, nearly knocking her over onto the grass. "He's the bad guy," she whispered.

Daphne's cheeks flushed, and she hoped Mistral hadn't overheard. "No, no," she replied. "That was just a misunderstanding. He's your he's your dad."

This was supposed to be the moment where her daughter jumped for joy and skipped off into the sunset, hand-in-hand with her father.

Why was everyone looking so uncomfortable?

Daphne darted a glance at Evander, who seemed pained. Okay, so she could have prepped Tigger a bit more, but that would have meant a

morning of endless questions and Evander becoming more interfering—just like her sisters—as he grew more and more suspicious that Daphne was leading her own life without his input.

Mistral held out a hand to shake Tigger's and the girl tried to disappear into the folds of Daphne's dress. Gently, she tried to coax her daughter to stand up. Wasn't this the moment she'd been waiting for? Tigger had been dreaming about her father for years and making plans around meeting him and spending time together.

Maybe Daphne just needed to give Mistral more space so he could step up as a parent. So Tigger could stand on her own and they could develop a relationship without waiting for her to determine it all. Rising, Daphne stepped back, pushing Tigger forward.

Father and daughter had their heads cocked the same, watching each other. Awkward silence stretched between them and Daphne bit her lower lip, wishing she could create a dam against her emotions. Their first meeting was supposed to be amazing not this.

"Hi," Mistral said.

"Hi," Tigger echoed back.

More awkward silence.

"Why don't we take this over to the swings?" Evander said, coming to crouch beside Tigger. "Do you want another under-duck?"

Daphne didn't know whether to be angry with him for butting in and for Mistral allowing him to take the lead, or to be relieved at how Evander was ensuring her daughter had someone to help her break the ice.

Evander began striding away and Tigger hurried ahead to whisper something to him.

"Sorry? What was that?" he asked, with an uncharacteristic gentleness that rocked Daphne, who had been trailing behind them.

He got down on one knee like a quarterback about to start a play. Tigger cupped her hands around his ear and whispered loudly enough for Daphne to hear, "I don't have a father."

It was as though someone had stabbed her in the heart. Daphne reeled, trying to remember to breathe, trying to stop the pain and horror as it struck her full force.

Mistral's expression didn't change, but she noticed that Evander had to brace himself so he didn't fall over. Clearing his throat, he stood, taking the girl's hand. He led her to the swing, his strides so long and fast that Tigger had to skip and jump to keep up.

Evander plunked her on the swing and, with his head bent close to hers, said something that made her smile. Daphne's heart hitched and she raised a trembling hand to her lips. For all his guns and gadgets, Evander was an incredibly decent man—even if he likely had some definite darkness to his aura.

The next time he glanced her way, his brows pinched and furrowed, she mouthed, "*Thank you.*" He gave her a curt nod, the tension in his expression easing.

"What's your favorite color?" he asked Tigger, giving her a push.

"Pink, purple, yellow, green. But not puke green. That's gross."

Evander, still pushing Tigger, asked Mistral the same question.

He thought for a moment and Daphne worried he might not play along with the ice breaker. "I don't think I have one."

"It's black," Tigger said shyly.

Nobody said anything as they watched Mistral battle an internal argument over the supposed favorite color.

"Why do you say that?" Evander asked Tigger.

"He's always wearing it."

Mistral's bodyguard laughed, holding a hand over his mouth as though nobody would notice the mirth bubbling forth. "She has a point,"

he said, when everyone continued to stare at him.

They all looked to Mistral, who was decked out in a tailored black suit despite the heat of the August afternoon.

"Where would you like to travel to?" Evander asked, picking up the game again, and Daphne sighed. He was making the questions too complex. Her daughter was only five.

"Disney World," her daughter replied without a pause.

"Good pick." Evander addressed Mistral, "And you?"

"Been there."

"Well, la-di-da-da." Evander flopped his hands and bobbed his head in a haughty dance that made Tigger giggle.

All right, this was a whole new aspect to the special ops ex-navy man, and Daphne wasn't quite sure how to take him. She knew children often brought out the real side in adults, but that was often the cranky, generous or impatient side. Not a huge-hearted, gentle, silly persona from a man with muscles on his muscles and a glare that cut holes through steel.

If she wasn't careful, she was going to hold this man as the new ideal for a father for her little girl. And that was Mistral's job.

"Mom and my nanny took me," her ex said.

Evander raised his eyebrows at Tigger, who giggled.

"Do you know how to build a tree house?" Daphne blurted to Mistral.

He gave her a puzzled look. "Um. No. Do you?"

She shook her head.

"Me, neither," Tigger said with a heavy sigh. She slid off the swing and came over to take Daphne's hand. "Can we go home now?"

Usually she had to bribe her daughter with everything under the sun to leave the playground. Daphne glanced at Mistral and Ricardo.

Her ex was checking his phone and easing toward his black, unmarked car.

Her heart sank. He was done already?

Her sisters could not be right about this. He wanted to be a father. That's what he'd said over the phone. Their daughter was amazing. Quick-witted, fun, and vibrant. Couldn't he see that? Didn't he want to be a part of her life?

Daphne freed herself from the girl, hurrying to fall into step beside the retreating father. "You're leaving? Already?"

She hated the desperate whine in her voice, but couldn't help it. She'd hoped for so much. She'd expected him to want to make up for the way his own father had been painfully absent in his upbringing. All those years ago he'd spoken as though he wanted to change the past. And here was his opportunity.

"You can change it all," she said breathlessly. "You can stop the cycle right here and be a present father who is loving and caring and spends time with your daughter. There's no reason another child should grow up without the love of their father."

Mistral looked at her with surprise, then glanced back at Tigger, who was getting a ride on Evander's shoulders.

That was supposed to be him, didn't he see that? That man could be him.

"What are you talking about?" he asked. His phone was vibrating in his hand.

Baby steps, she reminded herself. Don't overwhelm him with changing the world before he sees how he can make small changes in his own life.

"I thought you wanted to get to know Tigger before arranging visitation, and before we settled on custody."

"Why do you call her Tigger?"

"She's bouncy."

He gave the mellow child a doubtful look. "I think we did well today," he said with an easy shrug. He held up his cell. "I have to take this."

Daphne grabbed the phone, surprising him when she didn't allow him to raise it to his ear. "Don't you want more?"

He paused, staring at her for a moment. "I'm not sure I can have it all. Your dreams are too big." He gave a helpless shrug.

"I meant more time with Tigger. To get to know her."

His phone began buzzing again in their shared grip. "I'm sorry. Today's gone sideways on me. I wish I had more time, but I have a business to run and my dad needs a proposal from me ASAP."

There was hurt in his eyes as he walked away, phone at his ear, shoulders hunched forward in defeat.

Moments later, Mistral paused, then turned back. "Daph, the kid and I'll spend time together. I'm here for the rest of the summer, off and on." He came closer, voice dropping. There was a hint of the young man she'd once loved hiding in his wistfulness. "We'll get to know each other. Okay? Plenty of time."

Summer ended in less than two weeks.

"You'll see her again?" Daphne asked.

Mistral paused, watching Evander and Tigger goof around. "Call me."



DAPHNE HAD to remind herself that just because she was ready to move faster, it didn't mean Mistral was. She had a habit of looking far into the future and wishing for too much, and this time she needed to allow it all to happen as it was meant to.

He would see their daughter again. That should be enough for now.

She turned to find Evander behind her, teeth clenched so tight he was going to need cranial sacral massage to align his body systems again.

Reaching up, she gently placed a hand along his tense jaw. "You're going to pull yourself out of alignment."

He blinked at her as though not quite sure who she was or what she was saying.

"It's time to get home," he said.

"Fine." She'd lost brownie points with Evander today, while he'd earned a stack to last him a lifetime—or, in his case, until tomorrow at least. The idea of losing points with him bothered her even though he was a bossy grump. For some dumb reason she wanted the big lug to think highly of her.

It was almost as though she'd developed a crush on him today. The idea tickled her mind and she began laughing. How ridiculous! Evander? Not on your life.

"What?" he snapped.

His frown made her mirth all the more contagious and it spread through her body until she was bent over double, helpless.

"You've finally cracked. Well, can't say I didn't see it coming." He put his hands on his hips, looking so stern and serious that her laughter took out her knees, dropping her to the ground, where she let it take full control.

"She gets like this," Tigger said, giggling.

Daphne sat up, holding her gut, trying to stop the laughter. "I'm sorry, I really am. This is all just so ridiculous all I can do is laugh."

Tigger bounded away, chuckling to herself.

Evander yanked Daphne to her feet, his glare as deadly as a sharpened blade. "Just because nobody pulled a gun today does *not* mean we can laugh and have a merry time."

Daphne did her best to try and quell the riot of giggles expanding in her chest.

Under his breath, Evander muttered, "What went so wrong in your life that you want your daughter spending time with a man who has an armed bodyguard with an itchy trigger finger lurking behind him at all times?"

Her amusement ceased as though someone had pulled the emergency brake.

"I don't judge your life, you don't judge mine." She went to gather Tigger, who was sitting under a picnic table, picking dandelions and singing softly to herself. Daphne glanced back at Evander, who was waiting, arms crossed.

How was she going to deal with him following her around for what would likely be days or weeks?

And yet if it hadn't been for him today, things probably would have belly flopped hard enough to leave her stunned and breathless. She had expected him to make things worse by escalating the men's worst sides, but instead he'd helped her daughter. He'd stepped up as the father figure Daphne had been seeking for her little girl. The fact that he was the one who had put Tigger at ease and looked out for her, instead of it being Mistral, was like a pebble in Daphne's shoe.

The universe obviously had a cruel sense of humor. Evander was not going to be the girl's father figure. End of story. Mistral was.

The universe was simply teaching Daphne patience.

She just wished the universe would pick up the pace a bit.

She crouched by the picnic table. "Come on, Tigger, time to go."

"Home?" the girl asked. "With you?"

Daphne bit her bottom lip to hold in the pain. Just like that, her daughter's world had changed enough that she no longer trusted that she would always be with her mother.

"Yes, with me."

"Evander, too?"

"Yes, I expect that he will follow us as usual."

"Can I ride with him?"

The question set Daphne back. The man had definitely left an impression today. On both of them.

"I think you should probably ride with me."

The girl crawled out from under the table, grass stains rubbed into the hem of her dress. Without a word of argument, she climbed into the minivan.

Evander was talking on his phone, and Daphne felt so exhausted that even though she knew this was her chance to shake him, she couldn't bring herself to do it. Instead, she waited outside her van, intrigued by the way his forehead was scrunched and lined. Phone still to his ear, he raised a hand, placing a thumb on one temple, his index finger on the other. Yup, definitely pulling things out of alignment with all that stress he kept bunched up under his skin. The man could use some serious yoga, too.

"Mom, are you sure you can wait that long?" he said into his phone. Mama's boy.

"No, I'll be there in twenty. Time me."

Daphne tried not to show her surprise. Just like that he was ditching her? What had happened to all the safety stuff he was so keen on? Had the meeting with Mistral convinced him that the danger was gone? The idea both elated and disappointed her in one mixed-up swirl of confusing emotions.

Evander looked up at Daphne, and she felt the power of his gaze hit her hard in the chest. Something was wrong in his world. Something big. Realizing that he, indeed, was human shouldn't be so shocking to her, but the idea was foreign and new.

"That's for me to figure out, Mom. Just sit still. I'll be there soon."

Evander turned off his phone, eerily silent for a moment. His shoulders were hunched forward, his eyes screwed shut. She watched as his hands flexed tighter and tighter around his cell. Afraid he was going to break it, she gently tried to loosen it from his grip, hoping not to disturb him. His fingers tightened instinctively and she lightly rested both palms around his fist. She wasn't afraid, but she felt the need to move slowly and carefully.

"You're going to break it," she whispered, tugging on the phone. His fingers released immediately and she took the warm case from him. "Are you okay?"

He remained silent, not moving.

She pushed him toward her van, her mind made up. Time to earn back some brownie points, or at least repay a favor or two. "Where are we going?" she asked. She had him in the van's passenger seat before he realized what was going on, and began blinking and shaking his head. She shut the door on him, not knowing whether he would stay put or not.

She climbed into the driver's seat and pulled out. "Where to?"

"Bracebridge," he said finally.

"Buckle up, then."

They were on the main road out of town before he began protesting. "I can drive."

"We're already on the road."

"I should drive."

"You're in no condition to do so."

"You don't have enough gas."

"Sure I do."

"The gas light is on," he said, his voice hollow.

"I can get to town and back on that."

"You should always keep in the top quarter."

"I'd always be at the gas station."

"Stop taking risks." He turned to her with haunted eyes. "What if you had to evade someone and ran out of gas?"

"Evander "

"Promise me you'll be more careful."

"Shut up and let me drive," she said, already regretting the good deed.

E vander was out of the van before Daphne had pulled to a complete stop in front of the house. He didn't even remember getting into her van. He bounced against the front door and it shook and creaked in protest. Right. Unlock it first. His fingers fumbled over the security code and the dead bolt finally released, letting him in.

His mother was waiting in the entry, sitting on a stool, face pale, fingers trembling as she tied the laces of her running shoes.

"There you are," she said, as though everything was normal.

But nothing would be normal ever again. Florence had been hiding a massive secret from him. They had been living in the same house, and even though he'd been trained to spot irregularities, he'd missed the fact that his mother had cancer.

She patted his arm and said, "Now, now, you're blaming yourself for something, aren't you?"

"Why didn't you tell me?"

She sighed. "Let's talk about that later."

The home's security alarm began screaming and he wished there was something he could smash to make it shut up. Couldn't it see they were in the middle of a crisis?

"Where's your phone?" Florence asked.

Evander patted his large pockets, finding the gadget. He turned off the security alarm, and with his pulse still racing, swept his mother into his arms and out the door.

"Oh, for heaven's sake, put me down." She gave his shoulder a swat. "I can still walk, you know."

Daphne's eyes were as round as saucers as he strode up to the van. She scooted around the van to open the passenger side door, and Evander placed his mother inside, buckling her in. She gave him an exasperated look.

"I haven't turned into an invalid, you know," she said sternly. "And don't forget to lock the house."

He shut the van without a word and returned to the house to do so. He needed to get an app for that, too.

When he got back to the vehicle, his mother and Daphne were commiserating. He could tell by the way they shut up when he entered the van.

He turned to Tigger, who was silently regarding his mom. "They were talking about me, weren't they?" he asked.

The girl sat up straighter, as though trying to keep the secret inside.

"No, it's okay. You can side with your mother," Evander said. "I know they were complaining. It's what women do about men."

Daphne giggled and pulled out, taking them to the medical office as per his mother's directions. Evander's right foot kept pressing into the floorboards, wanting them to go faster. Didn't she know his mother wasn't well? They needed to get there ASAP.

"Let me drive," Daphne said calmly.

"I didn't say anything."

"You didn't have to."

Florence chuckled in the backseat. "You didn't tell me Daphne was so lovely."

Daphne laughed. "I think it's beyond his capacity to see that."

The amusement in his mother's voice allowed some of the tightness in his chest to ease off. If she still had a sense of humor. No, that didn't work. Soldiers had joked in his arms as they drew their last breath. He needed to pull himself together. He would be no good to his mom if he allowed the fear to take over. Gripping the door handle, he got ready to leap out as soon as they stopped.

A few minutes later, Evander was sitting beside his mother in the doctor's waiting room, tapping his foot.

"Are you okay? How are you feeling?" he asked again.

Florence sighed, a hint of exasperation darkening her expression.

Daphne and Tigger sat on his opposite side. This was not how he'd envisioned his day going down. He was supposed to keep work and life separated. Not this. The fact that Daphne was doing more of the take-charge and take-care role than he was didn't help. She'd been the one who'd thoughtfully fetched his mother a cup of cold water from the waiting room's cooler. She'd been the one who had lowered the room's blinds so they no longer let the early afternoon's sun stream into her eyes.

He rubbed his mouth, hating the way his stubble felt against his hand. He needed a shave. He needed to get control. And the more he was around Daphne, the less he seemed to have.

"You look tired," his mother said.

"So do you."

"Yes, but I have cancer. It's a good excuse." She gave him a beatific smile that nearly stopped his heart.

"Tigger, stop it." Daphne grasped her daughter's arm, keeping her from restlessly tapping the table with the flat of her hands.

"How old are you?" his mother asked the girl.

"Five. How old are you?"

Daphne reprimanded her. "You don't ask adults their age."

"She asked me first."

"That's fine." Florence smiled. "I'm sixty-three."

"That's pretty old," replied Tigger.

"It is. Come over here and I'll show you something I'm working on."

Tigger was at her side in a second flat, taking the free chair to her left. His mom slowly pulled her knitting out of the shoulder bag she'd brought along. Her movements were slow, another hint that she felt worse than she was letting on. Evander reached over and helped settle the ball of yarn on her lap.

With a calm and even voice, Florence began telling Tigger the story about how she'd learned to knit, and what she was making.

"Can you make blankets for fairies?" Tigger asked.

His mom paused thoughtfully. "I don't see why not. Although I think you would need special yarn. This is too thick and wouldn't cozy around a fairy in the right way. They are much too delicate. But I have a yarn yes, a very thin, fine yarn that just might be right for fairies."

"Really?" Tigger's eyes were glowing, and she seemed enthralled with his mother. Something pricked at the backs of Evander's eyes and he breathed a silent prayer that whatever deity or power ruled the planets would spare his mother. Not just so she could be this amazing person for Tigger, but for his own children one day. Now there was a thought that hadn't struck him since leaving the army. Where had that hope come from?

"About how tall is your fairy friend?" Florence asked.

Tigger placed her palms a few inches apart. "I think they're about this tall. It's hard to tell because they're so fast and secret and magical." She clasped her hands together, squeezing her shoulders toward her ears as though trying to hold in her exuberance. Cute. That's what Tigger was. A real-life rocket launcher in human form.

"They live on Nymph Island. I made them houses."

"Did you know your mother is a woodland nymph?" Florence asked.

Tigger's eyes grew round and Evander held in a groan. His mom was going to get carried away and the girl was going to be sorely disappointed when the truth hit her.

"It's true," Daphne said. "I was named after a woods and plant nymph. All of my sisters were. Hailey is named after the water nymph. Maya is a celestial nymph—stars and such. Melanie is, well, Melanie."

"She's not a nymph?" Tigger asked.

"She's an earth goddess."

"I miss Auntie Mellie Melon."

Daphne studied her hands and Evander wondered just how long the two sisters were going to fight.

"Is the doctor ready yet?" he asked, shifting forward. Maybe he should remind the receptionist that they were waiting.

His mother pushed him back in his chair, barely pausing in her knitting. A headline from a newspaper on the table caught his eye. He picked it up. The story was about Rubicore, the municipality and the legal action Melanie had started against them. Which got Evander thinking.

"Where did Austin go?" he asked Daphne.

She gave a shrug.

"I asked him to help keep an eye on you today."

Another shrug.

Civilians. So reliable in their unreliability. It looked as if it was all on him when it came to watching Daphne and Tigger.

His mother's name was called, and while she refused his assistance down the long hall to the exam room, she let him guide her past the reception area. Then she paused, hand on his forearm, eyes meeting his.

"You need to keep that family safe, Evander."

He nodded in reply.

"You need to bring them home, to our house."

"I'm not bringing them home."

"How are you going to keep them safe if you aren't with them? You need to keep them together and you need to be under the same roof. Our roof."

"I understand that, but I'm not bringing them home."

"You have the place so rigged up I'm half afraid to move and half afraid not to for fear some sensor will tell you I've expired." She gave a wan smile.

He'd never been a fan of gallows humor and especially not now.

"Maybe that's a good thing," he growled, wishing he was like any regular man right now. At home. In front of a game, rum and Coke in hand. "And they are *not* moving in with us. That's final."

His mom patted his cheek and smiled as though she knew something he didn't. He hated it when she did that.



EVANDER WIPED his eyelids with the tips of his fingers and sighed. His mom's appointment had revealed that she was dehydrated—something that scheduled home care could have prevented if his mother hadn't been trying to hide her cancer from him.

They'd given her fluids intravenously in the doctor's office, then Daphne had helped take her home. Once Florence was settled, Daphne gave him a ride back to his truck in Port Carling, making him feel about as useful as air-conditioning in the Arctic.

"Why would she try and hide that from me?" His fists were clenched over his knees and he willed himself to open his hands flat.

"Well " Daphne said, casting him a glance. "Maybe she worried you might try and take over?" There was doubt and hesitancy in her voice.

"But wouldn't that make her feel better? Knowing someone else was taking care of the details so she could focus on getting better?" The fact that he hadn't noticed how ill she was made him feel like the world's worst son. She'd already started radiation and had gone to numerous appointments without him knowing. The fact that she didn't trust him to know of her illness was the worst part.

She didn't trust him.

"I thought old age was setting in rather rapidly." Man, that sounded lame. "She told me it was a cold. I should have known. She normally bounces back from something like that within days."

"You can't blame yourself. She's an adult and makes her own choices for whatever reason." Daphne's voice had an edge and he knew she was thinking about her own life.

"When was she going to tell me?"

Before he'd left, he'd called the neighbor to look in on her, even though he'd be gone less than an hour. His mother had protested about bothering their neighbor, but all Evander could think as they drove farther away from her was that he should be there with her.

Daphne pulled up alongside his truck and he faltered. He couldn't leave her and Tigger unprotected. Coverage wasn't coming to sit outside their house for another hour. But he needed to get back so he could arrange for home care to do regular check-ins on his mother, as well as live-in help until she got the all-clear. He pinched the bridge of his nose as emotions overwhelmed him. She'd better get the all-clear.

His mom had assured him that radiation would be done in another week and this blip was likely the worst of it all. Then she'd have a scan to see if the treatment had worked. Meaning she would likely try to railroad his attempts to help, since she figured the end was in sight. But

she hadn't reached it yet, which meant she needed help and support. Help and support he wasn't there to give.

He followed Daphne back to her house, needing to see her tucked in until someone came to relieve him. Thank goodness she'd gone with the flow this afternoon. He'd been so taken aback by his mother that he hadn't even thought to call Tyrone to get someone over to fill in for him so Daphne could go home.

He phoned Tyrone now, and slapped a GPS locator on the back of Daphne's van as he ushered the two Summers to the front door. With his mind in two places he was going to need as many gadgets on the job as possible.

"I'm going to double-check the sensors," he told Daphne, shutting the door behind them. He checked the house, and when he'd decided all was still okay, went to the front door.

Daphne opened it on the first light knuckle rap, not checking the peephole. He knew, because he had his thumb over it, testing her.

"Use your peephole," he said.

"I knew it was you."

"No, you didn't." He handed her a wad of cash he'd pulled out of his wall safe back in Bracebridge. "For the paintings."

Not counting it, she shoved it in the pocket of her cardigan, and he found himself wondering if she had a wall safe of her own or would like him to install one.

"I was watching you from the window," she said, "so I could answer before you rang the bell and woke Tigger—she totally crashed on the couch. What did you put on my van when we were coming inside?"

"A locator. That okay?"

"Other than it being utterly ridiculous?"

"Yes."

She chewed on her lip for a moment. "I don't like it."

"I know."

"It represents everything that's wrong with this situation."

"Tyrone, my boss, will be on watch tonight, other than for a few hours—that will be Chuck, okay?" Evander didn't like the fact that Chuck was still on the job, but Tyrone was short staffed tonight, to the point of needing to fill in himself to reduce the amount of time they had to lean on someone like Chuck.

"You're going home?" Daphne hugged her sweater around her, even though it was a warm August evening, and he stepped closer, worried that she was having a tougher time than she was letting on.

He waved his cell phone, wanting to thank her for all she had done that day, but unable to find the right words without showing her his cracks. "I'll call if I sense any disturbances. You can also call me if you need anything. Do you still have my number?"

She shook her head and, with a sigh, he pushed past her, inhaling her fresh scent. He'd given her his contact info after the Mistral incident, and he'd had a feeling she'd crumpled it up. But things must be changing if she was receptive to having it now. Or at least letting him barge in to give it to her again.

Either way, he'd take it. It would be easier to keep her safe if he had her participation.

In her kitchen, he scrawled his name and numbers on a notepad. "Put this in your phone. Leave it in your van, your house, work. Everywhere. I'm never farther than a breath away, but I want you to feel safe. Know I have your back, Daphne. Even if I'm not on your doorstep."

She held the small piece of paper, staring at it blankly in the early evening light. Finally she looked up, brushing a mess of curls off her forehead. "Do you live with your mom in Bracebridge?"

"Yes."

She swallowed hard and he knew she was thinking that being twenty minutes away wasn't exactly next door if she was having an emergency. Normally, he'd find a place closer, but with his mom

"Chuck and Tyrone will keep you safe."

Her lips parted and Evander resisted the urge to kiss her.

Strange. He wasn't one to get involved with his job. And that's what she was, a job. Plus, she wasn't his type. She'd take him to task on every thing in his life, and he didn't have the energy to battle that on a daily basis. Nor a desire to. The woman of his dreams would take him for who he was.

"I'm out," he said, striding through the small house, which was warm and friendly—just like Daphne and her daughter. "Call if you need anything. Any time of day. If I call, pick up." He held on to the door frame. It was now or never. He swallowed hard. "Thanks."

"For what? Not busting your balls?" She gave him a light shove, her hands warm on his chest, and he once again had to rein in the urge to kiss her.

"Yeah. And for today. Appreciate it."

She nodded and he closed the door, calling through it, "I want to hear those locks click into place."

He could hear her sigh from the other side of the door, but the sound of metal on metal made him smile.

"See you in the morning," he said. With one last check on her place using his app, he waved to Chuck, who had finally arrived, yawning and holding up a Big Gulp. Evander headed home to take care of his mom and present her with a painting he figured she'd enjoy staring at as much as her garden.

Daphne sat up in bed and checked her bedside clock. Who was calling her cell at two in the morning? She fumbled for her lit-up phone, trying to clear the sleep from her voice before answering. Pulling an all-nighter yesterday had not done wonders to her ability to wake up in a flash.

"Hello?"

"Daphne." It was Evander, his voice low and urgent.

She was out of bed before she processed a thing, hurrying to Tigger's room, heart pounding.

"Where's Chuck?" Evander asked.

"Chuck?" Who was Chuck?

"Can you see him on the street? No, don't go to your window."

Daphne froze, unsure what he needed her to do.

Evander swore under his breath and she could hear clanking in the background, a door slamming, an alarm going. Another curse and a "Hang on a sec." A truck started up. "Stay on the line." Another phone chimed as it powered up.

Heart pounding, Daphne climbed into bed with Tigger, careful not to wake the girl. She placed her back to the wall, eyes on the doorway.

"What's wrong?" she whispered into the phone, listening for any sounds in the small house. She found herself wishing Melanie still lived with her. Technically, she'd kicked her out only for one night, but her sister had stayed away longer. Right now, Daphne wished she had someone bigger and bolder to lead a charge against whatever was going on that had Evander flipping his lid.

She eyed the bedroom window, wanting to escape, believing the wide-open yard would offer better fleeing options. At the same time, she was too freaked out to move. Was Evander overreacting to a tripped sensor?

"There's been a disturbance to one of your windows," he said, and she could hear his truck picking up speed in the background.

"Sometimes they rattle during thunderstorms," she replied, eager to dismiss the fear coursing through her nervous system.

"It's been opened."

Daphne held in a terrified gasp.

"Have you heard anything?" he asked.

Her old house creaked, but she couldn't tell if it was a late night breeze or someone inside.

"No, I don't think so."

"Hang on, okay? I'm right here if you need me."

She overheard Evander giving Chuck a good chewing out over voice mail, on what must have been the other phone she'd heard start up moments ago. After that she could hear him talking to the police.

"Do you have a grip on the wheel?" she asked, envisioning him with a phone in each hand as he stormed the curvy road between the two towns. He didn't answer, although she could still hear the hum of tires on asphalt. So he was still moving, still right side up, still on the road. All good.

Daphne wrapped Tigger in her blanket and carefully lowered the sleeping girl to the floor, then slid her under the bed, joining her a second later. In the movies, they always hid under the bed or in the closet. And they were always found.

"Daphne?"

"Yes," she whispered, afraid to be overheard.

"Do you have a weapon?"

"No." Her voice quavered.

"Stay where you are. I'm on my way and so are the police. Stay stay hidden."

He'd save her.

But he was still at least ten minutes away. Anything could happen in ten minutes.

"Hurry," she whispered, and curled tighter under the bed.



THE HOUSE ROCKED as the front door banged open, and Daphne held in a squeak, squeezing Tigger close, her own back to the room as she wiggled closer to the wall, trying to flip the edge of the blanket Tigger was wrapped in over herself for more cover. The little girl moaned in her sleep and stretched her arms, knocking the underside of the wooden bed frame.

"Shh," Daphne begged.

There were shouts, the thumping of heavy feet, the slamming of bodies and more shouts. Daphne could barely breathe, and tears trickled out the corners of her eyes.

Please, Evander, please.

The house grew quiet around her. Then the bedroom light flicked on.

"Daphne?" It was Evander.

She pulled her head out from under Tigger's blanket, body still curved protectively around her daughter, then craned her neck to look behind her, counting feet.

Two very large black army boots were in the middle of the room. Just Evander. She sighed in relief and Evander's face popped into view, his shoulders bulging as he watched from a plank position. Slowly, he lowered his chest to the floor, his biceps rippling under his T-shirt in a way that would have left her in awe if she hadn't been busy losing her mind with fear.

He cautiously extended his hand, as though to a feral kitten. "Are you two okay?"

She gripped his fingers, snatching them to her as she rolled to face him, placing her back to her still-sleeping daughter.

"Is Tigger in there?"

"Asleep," Daphne whispered.

"You okay?" He pulled on her arm, gently tugging her out from under the bed as though reeling in a fish. Once she was clear, she threw herself at him, collapsing onto his chest and knocking him onto his butt. His arms wrapped around her as he squeezed her close, his breath ruffling the curls that had fallen over her forehead.

"Everyone accounted for, Evander?" asked an officer from the doorway.

"Yes, sir. Everyone is fine." He tipped her chin up. "Right?"

She gave a tiny nod, her mouth trembling. He pressed her to his hard chest so she wouldn't wake Tigger as sobs broke free.

"We'll give you a minute," the officer said. "Meet us outside when you're ready."

"Roger that," Evander said.

Daphne burrowed deeper into his arms, protected by his strength.

"We caught the man who broke in," Evander murmured. "He was riffling through papers in your living room. Came in through the kitchen window."

Daphne shuddered. A man had broken in, unbeknownst to her, while they were sleeping. What would have happened without Evander and his gadgets?

He stroked her hair and her hiccupy breathing slowly worked its way back to regularity, with only the odd hitch here and there.

"How'd you get here so fast?" she asked.

He ignored the question. "He wasn't armed and the police have him in custody. I'm sorry." Evander sounded so grim.

"Why?" She looked up, amazed at how angular his face was from this viewpoint. All sharp lines, but soft, too. Caring. Warm. Safe.

Ridiculous. He was an army man who had served several tours of duty. And his scars? You didn't get those by sitting behind a desk. This man wasn't here to comfort her, he was here to take care of problems. She pushed herself out of his arms, feeling small and alone.

"I should have been here," he said.

"Chuck was on," she replied, wiping her cheeks dry.

As if feeling her need for space, Evander stood, moving to the doorway. "He was at the local convenience store. He's been dismissed." Evander ran a hand briskly down the scarred side of his face. He spied the cardigan she'd left on Tigger's dresser during story time. "You need a wall safe."

Daphne stared at the sweater, which she'd been wearing when he'd paid her for the paintings. There was a lot of money in its pocket at the moment. "Do you normally have that much cash on hand?" she asked him. She knew he hadn't been to the bank between buying the paintings and paying her.

"I was trained to be prepared for anything."

He was watching her in a way that made her feel nervous. No, not nervous, just inspected. He was trying to figure something out about her and she wasn't sure if he was drawing positive conclusions or not.

"The army had a pretty big impact on you, didn't it?"

"Yes," he said awkwardly. "But this is this is real life. It's good to have money on hand in real life, too."

He moved to sit on the edge of the bed, making it creak with his size. Daphne had a momentary vision of it collapsing and her daughter being squished. Evander clasped his hands together, elbows on knees.

"What did he want?" Daphne asked, sitting on the opposite end of the bed. "The person who broke in?"

"He was eavesdropping on you in the market today while you were talking to that hippie guy about your plans for the development. You need to start watching what you say and where. Tyrone and I have ideas about this guy and we're confident someone from Rubicore sent him."

"Rubicore?" A cold dread settled deep in Daphne's gut. "It wasn't Mistral."

"What are you not telling me?"

"Nothing. I just know Mistral, and that you and everybody are going to assume it was him. He's not like that. He wouldn't do this."

"Well, we'll put a tail on this guy once he's released from custody, and find out for sure."

"They're going to let him out?"

"Probably."

"But he just broke into my house in the dead of the night and you saw him spying on me."

"Yup." Evander's hands were clenched together, his knuckles turning white, and she got the feeling he was fighting back something dark and sinister.

"I let you bug my house because I felt and now it just " She bit her knuckle, her breath hiccupping again.

Evander, with fluid, easy moves that came from using his body in unpredictable, real life settings rather than in a regimented gym, had an arm around her in seconds. She pushed him away. If she let herself collapse into his strength she'd never be able to stay strong on her own, and would turn into a blabbering puddle of desperate tears and wails, dependent and needy.

"You can't be a passive participant in your life any longer, Daphne. You have to take action."

She nodded, not following his logic.

"I mean it. You need to take action like you do with your environmental protests."

The intense look in his eyes made her throat catch.

"Nobody can stop you when you take charge. But with this whole thing going on, you've been allowing yourself to be the passive recipient. It's real. It's very real. Take charge. Take the reins. Take control. This is your life. *Yours.*"

Her lower lip started to tremble, but he didn't come to her this time. She breathed through the upset, imagining being wrapped in peaceful, loving light, and positive energy.

"I am taking charge," she said finally. She'd arranged to meet with Mistral several times and could have simply run away after the gun incident. But she didn't.

The break-in wasn't about her and Mistral. It was related to the battle her sisters were having with Rubicore.

"You need to step it up. Your ex " Evander paused and glanced toward the underside of the bed, as though on the lookout for a girl eavesdropping on them " is working with men who just had someone break in to find out what you have planned against them."

"Custody and Rubicore are unrelated."

"You need to take this seriously. You owe it to her—" he tipped his head "—to act as though this threat is real, and to keep yourself and your daughter safe."

Daphne swallowed. "I can't be like you."

He lowered himself onto his knees, joints popping with the controlled effort, and took her hands in his. His eyes were dark, but in this light she could see flecks of copper running through the dark blues, their star-shaped pattern feeling familiar.

She withdrew her hands from his. "I'm about peace. Harmony. Mistral and I can talk through all of this. Weapons and fights aren't the way, Evander."

"I know."

She looked at him in shock.

"But sometimes you're working against someone who is operating on a different plane, and you need to protect yourself accordingly."

"I can't arm myself."

"I'm not asking you to."

"Then what are you saying?"

"You need to move somewhere more secure. You need to let me watch over you and your family. For real. Twenty-four/seven."

"I can't be around that kind of energy. Not for all hours of the day." She wrapped her arms around herself, imagining him putting her and Tigger into a bunker.

"Was today really that bad?" he asked, the corners of his lips turning downward.

She had to admit that today had been okay, and he'd been helpful at both the market and the park. She'd seen a different side to Evander even before the issue with his mother.

But she couldn't reconcile the man who'd escalated a conversation to drawing weapons in a public park, with the one who had been so tender and caring toward her daughter, then nearly out of his mind over his mother's illness. Add in the fact that he'd come here at high speed to rescue her, and then held her tight. There were many sides to Evander de la Fosse, several that she quite liked and admired, but she couldn't forget that he was trained to do things she couldn't even imagine one human doing to another.

"Put better locks on the windows, Evander, or whatever you need to do, but I am not leaving my home. I have my own life and I am going to live it. Alone."

Evander hadn't slept after Daphne's break-in. With reluctance, he'd driven away last night, only after ensuring that several patrol cars would remain watching the home. He'd had to build a sufficient case to the chief of police that Daphne could still be in danger, and that had not helped him sleep. Not that he'd even tried.

He'd gone straight home to order several new security items for Daphne and her house. Then he'd gone to the garage where he kept his gear and dug through his duffel, mentally counting gadgets and forming plans.

The second problem he needed to solve was his mother. A day nurse wouldn't be able to come in for another twenty-four hours, and the idea of his mom being home alone was not an option he was comfortable with.

He needed to get Florence and her care squared away so he could focus on his job. Having his mind in two places when things were escalating was not safe.

Evander set down a tracking device and punched in a familiar phone number. "Kyle? We need you back home."

"Evander?" His brother's voice was groggy. "It's five in the morning and you're not calling me Brick."

It didn't seem the time for nicknames. And besides, the name had never suited his brother. If anyone was a brick in the family, it was Evander, and everyone knew it—hence the ironic nickname for Kyle. It had bothered him at first when the kids had started using it, but his brother had liked it, so Evander had gone with it until it stuck.

"Time for you to get up and book a flight. Mom's got cancer and is undergoing radiation. I need help. How fast can you get here?"

"What?" There was panic and pain in his brother's voice. "Mom's sick?"

Shoot. He hadn't handled that one well, had he?

"Yeah. Sorry, man. It's been a long night. She's doing okay, but I can't get a nurse to come by until tomorrow, and I'm on a sticky job. I need someone I trust here to watch her and make sure she's okay."

"She's not okay?"

"Well, she has cancer."

"I'll be there as soon as I can." His voice tight with held-in grief, his brother said goodbye and hung up.

Evander kicked himself for being insensitive. This was that take-charge side that bothered Daphne, too. He sighed and turned his phone over in his hand, contemplating calling his brother back, but deciding against it. Evander needed to get more things solved, and his brother could talk the ear off a brass monkey. Best to keep moving forward.

Giving the duffel's zipper a sharp tug, he decided to take everything he had with him, and went to load up his truck in the early morning chill. He locked the vehicle and garage, then headed to the house. The sun's early rays were just reaching the white clapboard as he let himself into the silent house, turned off the security alarm and checked the time. He had to take over Daphne's security in one hour.

Enough time to make his mother breakfast and get her set up for the day. The neighbor would look in on her again, and hopefully his

brother would be able to get an early morning flight from Nova Scotia and be here by lunch. No, too far a drive from the airport. He'd be lucky to get here by supper.

Evander picked up his phone and redialed his brother.

"Oh, Evander. This is just so—" Kyle's voice broke off.

"Did you get the time off work? Can you leave today?"

"Yes."

"Good. I'll send a private plane. Get on it and you'll be here by noon. I'll make sure a car is waiting for you at the airstrip."

"I just can't believe it. I need more time to process it all, and Mom how's Mom?"

"You'll see for yourself at noon." Evander paused for a split second. "Thanks, Brick."

He hung up, breathing deep and slow. He hated cutting off his brother, but he had too much to do and not enough time.

He booked his brother a plane while wondering what would taste best for breakfast to a woman who wasn't feeling well. He tested a honeydew melon for ripeness and carved balls out of the tender fruit, placing them in a bowl along with banana slices. If she ended up having chemo she would need more potassium, so he may as well start ensuring she was getting some in her diet already.

Chemo.

He braced his hands on the counter.

Radiation.

He let out a jagged breath.

Cancer.

Righting himself, he swung at the air, hitting nothing and feeling no better for the physical outburst.

She had to beat this.

End of story.

With a focus of purpose he hadn't experienced since his army days, he slapped pieces of buttered toast beside the bowl of melon and carried the tray upstairs. He rapped lightly on the door. He'd forgotten water. She needed water, lots of it.

Maybe a sports drink with electrolytes added to it.

He swung the door open.

"Good morning," he said. His mother was sitting up, looking thoughtful. "I brought you breakfast."

"And it's not even Mother's Day," she said, her voice its usual chipper tone.

He stared at her for a moment. She had cancer. And yet she looked normal. He half expected to see it gnawing through her body.

"How are you feeling?" He set the tray on her lap and gently pinched the ends of her fingers to check for dehydration. The skin puffed back out, her fingers pads rounded again. Good.

"I'm fine. A good night's rest was all I needed."

"And intravenous fluids," he scolded. "Stick out your tongue."

"Evander, I will not."

"I'm not leaving until you do."

She darted her tongue out quickly, like a child hoping not to get caught by an adult. The color had returned. It looked as though the intravenous fluids had worked. One less thing to worry about. For now.

"Evander, really. I am fine." Her tone had a sharp edge to it, which he ignored.

"I couldn't get home care to come in today, but the neighbor will stop by to check in on you."

"And how will she get in?"

"Are you not able to get to the door?" He hadn't taken that into account. Could he trust the neighbor with the code to their home? He needed someone nearby who could get in. He should have done a

background check on the people next door. He didn't have time this morning, but maybe Tyrone could get one done on the double.

"I was joking about the security alarm. Never mind. It wasn't that funny."

Rudolph leaped onto the bed with a "hello" meow and strode straight toward Florence, tail up, a cat with a purpose. She tucked the feline against her as he stretched to sniff at the tray.

Evander took the cat from his mother and got a claw dug into his knuckle for the effort. "Do you remember how to turn it off? I printed out the instructions. Do you still have them?"

"Evander, relax. I was kidding."

"Not funny."

His mother sighed. "Did I hear you go out last night?"

"Sorry, I didn't mean to wake you."

"Girlfriend?" She raised her eyebrows in jest.

"Daphne's house was broken into."

"Oh, no. Is everyone all right? I told you they needed to move in here."

"Good luck convincing Daphne of that. She asked for more security on her home, at least. And yes, they're fine."

"Who's watching them right now?"

"The local police."

His mother relaxed, her body sinking into the pillows she'd propped up behind her.

"Don't worry, Mom. I have everything under control."

"I have no doubt about that." She began poking at her breakfast, nibbling at the toast.

"Make sure you eat the fruit, too." He wanted to stand over her, to make sure she ate more than just her toast, but he needed to get moving. "I'll bring you water. Do you think you'll get out of bed today?"

"Don't be ridiculous. Of course I will."

He stood in the doorway, the cat held too tight against his chest. He let go of the furry beast and it skittered out of the room. "Mom, why didn't you tell me?"

"Well, at first they didn't think it was anything." She toyed with a melon ball, idly chasing it with her spoon. "I figured there was no reason to alarm you. You were just getting settled back into civilian life. Then " She gave a small shrug. "It became hard to tell you. You don't have a lot of friends or a support network, and I didn't want to lay something on you that you might not be able to carry on your own."

His mother didn't have faith in him. That hurt. He turned and left.

Florence called after him, "I'm sorry, Evander."

He came back to the doorway. "I told Kyle. He'll be here by noon."

"I'm not on my deathbed." There was a sharp brightness in her eyes.

"No, but you need help."

"I'm not an invalid."

"If you'd have told me sooner, I could have scheduled my work around helping you." He'd done his research last night and knew that in a few weeks the radiation was going to catch up with her and lay her low. She might not need help today, but she was going to need it soon.

"I don't need you altering your life just because I'm having a health bump."

"Then what is family for?" He resisted slamming the door, his muscles trembling with the effort of holding in his anger.

A health bump?

Health bumps didn't get much worse than cancer. And she'd just proved yesterday that she couldn't do this on her own. She needed help. She needed support.

And he would find a way to be there without letting Daphne down.



WHEN EVANDER PULLED up to Daphne's house, Tyrone was waiting for him.

"Hey, man," Evander said, shaking his hand while slapping him on the back. "Police are gone already?" You couldn't trust anyone to do a good job these days.

"I told them they could take off."

"Oh. All right. What brings you back here so early?"

"I figured you'd want to beef up security on the house." He gestured to his unmarked van sitting in the driveway.

"What did you bring me?" Evander opened the side door, eager to rifle through the man's gadgets.

"Pretty much everything I have."

Evander picked up a toy walkie-talkie. "I didn't realize these were the up-and-coming model. What's the range on one of these things?"

His boss snatched the toy, tossing it on the passenger seat. "Sorry, man. Nothing is sacred when you have kids. They're going through a spy phase."

"You let them in your van?" he asked with surprise. Tyrone used to be incredibly finicky about his space, always going on about boundaries when he was in the navy. Although, come to think of it, it wasn't easy sharing every inch of space with a roomful of alphas ready to pee on anything and everything. You had your own bunk and a foot locker and that was it. Messing with someone else's stuff was grounds for a fight that would send you to the infirmary for a few stitches, if nothing else.

"I have kids," Tyrone said simply, running a hand through his short, tight curls. "Now, what do you want? I have to get Vanessa to gym camp in forty minutes."

"The sensors I placed on the windows worked well. Maybe something else, though. Security cameras? Better locks on the doors and windows for sure. Panic buttons." He glanced toward the house. Daphne was watching from the front window, but allowed the curtain to drop back into place when he gave her a nod.

Today was going to be interesting.

Tyrone held up a lawn ornament. "One of these?"

"Tyrone. Focus, man."

"No, really. It's like a nanny cam for your yard." He turned the gnome so Evander could see the camera hidden in the small man's eye.

"Does it send a signal?"

"Of course it does." Tyrone gave him a look of disgust.

"Great. How many do you have?"

"Two. Put one in the front yard and one in the back."

"Did they come with instructions?"

"Instructions? Are you kidding me?"

Evander grinned. "Just messing with ya. Plug and play, right?"

He tucked the gnomes under an arm, snatched a few other fun items from Tyrone's treasure chest and set to work. "Thanks, Tyrone."

He waved as his friend drove off, wondering how he'd managed to find his way back into real life with such apparent ease. Was it because Tyrone had a wife and family waiting for him back home? Was it because he had never gone into private service and gotten himself blown up? If Evander had left the life sooner, would he have been okay?

When would asking himself a million what-ifs change his past?

Never.

He needed to look forward, move past it and settle in where he was now.

After installing the last gnome, Evander picked up his insulated coffee cup and took a long swig. Then, feeling properly braced to face

Daphne and her quips about his gadgets, he knocked on her front door. She'd been peeking out the windows here and there, but hadn't stopped him, nor asked questions.

The woman was a puzzle. She'd freaked out over him being armed, and yet was trying to arrange for her daughter to spend more time with a man being protected by a trigger-itchy, rap-sheet-carrying baboon. Yes, Evander had found the skeletons in Ricardo's closet pretty darn quick after their first run-in. So why wasn't the peace-loving hippie scurrying the other way? She'd been a single mom for five years already. Why bring in a father now?

Daphne opened the door. "Good morning."

Evander tipped his insulated coffee mug toward the cup she had clutched in her hand. "Good morning. Sleep well?"

"Ha. Ha." She gave him a nasty look, which tempted the corners of his mouth to lift into a smirk.

"Humorless in the mornings, eh?"

"You are way too happy today, putting all your gizmos around my yard and on my home. You live for this, don't you?" She crossed her arms, holding the half-empty cup against her chest.

"Us gun-toting, fear-mongering heroes like a little action every once in a while."

She began to close the door and he placed his boot between it and the frame.

"I'm going to install better locks, so you may as well leave it open."

The way she bit her bottom lip, her brows arching in worry, made him feel bad for approximately one second. That's how long it took to remind himself that at least now she'd take things seriously and he could finally help without her blocking him.

"How's the kid?" he asked. She'd had a big day yesterday. And while it seemed as though she'd slept through the entire ordeal last

night, he was certain she'd be intuitive enough to pick up on her mother's vibes. "Does she know about last night?"

"No. Please don't tell her." Daphne headed back into the house, and Evander set about improving her front door's security.

As he finished with the windows an hour later, Daphne walked by in a red sundress, looking as lovely as ever. She had a picnic basket slung over one arm, and if she'd been wearing a red hood he would've called her Little Red Riding Hood.

Tigger, following her mother, spotted Evander and asked, "Are you coming to the park for a breakfast picnic with us?"

Evander raised an eyebrow at Daphne. They still needed to talk about scheduling her days and giving him heads-ups, obviously, as this whole being-out-of-the-loop thing was starting to really tick him off.

"I resent that look," she said.

"I would love to go on a picnic," he said to Tigger. "Thank you for inviting me."

He handed Daphne written instructions on how to set the alarm he'd installed.

"You installed a security system? My landlord isn't going to appreciate this."

"I'm sure your landlord will love the upgrades, especially since he doesn't have to pay for them."

"Do I have to pay for them?"

"No. It will go on Tristen's bill." The man had been more than willing to pay for more protection on Daphne, especially when Evander had called him from the road this morning, bringing him up to speed.

"I can't believe you did all of this without asking."

Oh, here they went again.

"You said last night you wanted this. So I did it." He kept his tone light, but left no room for argument. "Now, let's go have a lovely picnic

out on some exposed rock, shall we?"

Daphne glared at him and he had a sneaking suspicion she blamed him for every problem in her life at the moment.

He helped them into the minivan, then gestured for Daphne to roll down the window. "I'll follow you in my truck. Where are you going?"

"Just down the road to the park. The same one as yesterday."

Something was up. Why would she drive to a place so close? Fear? Plans to ditch him?

"Why are we driving?"

"I have to work later. I'm driving so we can leave directly from the park."

"We need to talk about your schedule."

"Fine." She bit out the word, then threw the vehicle in reverse and backed up so quickly she nearly ran over his toes.

Evander hurried to his truck, catching up with Daphne a short way down the road, disliking the fact that she was so in love with a park that had so few escape routes.

It was still early enough that mist was hanging low over the cool, damp grass in the park and wisps of it drifted and disappeared on the river as the sun came over the trees.

Evander stretched, on the lookout for changes in the park since yesterday. After walking the circumference of the playground, he sat on a bench, not caring that the dew was seeping through his clothes. It was going to be a long day and any chance to sit and take a breather was a smart idea.

He watched, a twinge of envy weaving through him, as Daphne pushed her daughter on the swing, smiling and chatting. Only yesterday he'd been in her place and feeling more real and alive than he had in ages.

The two Summers were happy, free, and innocent. And it should stay that way at all costs. Crossing his arms tightly across his chest, Evander glanced around the park again, hating the way the tall wooden forts and play structures made it hard to spot anyone sneaking up on the oblivious duo. They were too exposed. He resisted the urge to pace the perimeter like a caged panther.

Earlier, the break-in had given him greater focus, but now his protective instincts had reared up, and the way they were raging against what Daphne wanted for her life made it difficult to sit there and respect her wishes to engage in normal daily activities.

Evander dragged a hand over his mouth. In his haste, he'd forgotten to shave this morning and the stubble bothered him.

He checked his phone for the time. His brother should be in the air by now. Tyrone should be working on finding a suitable replacement for Chuck. The neighbor should be checking on Florence.

Things were taken care of, but Evander still felt ill at ease.

The park was filling up with the occasional mother and child, the kids buoyant, the moms clutching their coffee cups with a need that rivaled addicts.

Daphne was laughing with her daughter, living a life where everything was seen through rose-tinted glass. There was always a bright side. The glass was half-full, even if it contained poison.

He admired that about Daphne, even though it suggested she had her head stuck in the sand.

A child in one of the forts screamed and Daphne jolted, her face paling.

Good.

She was on edge. That probably meant she wouldn't try to slip away from him today.

He stood, checking the perimeter of the park once again. A cloud passed in front of the sun, giving the air an extra chill.

Someone tugged on his pant leg and he frowned down at the little person. "What?"

It was one of the kids from the other day.

"Are you in the army?"

He'd grown out his buzz cut to a length he could finger comb. He wasn't wearing fatigues.

"No. But I was," he admitted. "The navy. And JTF 2."

The boy gave him an impressive salute.

"At ease, soldier," Evander said, shaking his head. Where was this kid's mom? He was a distraction.

"What's J-something-something-2?"

"Special soldiers who do secret stuff so you and your parents can sleep safe at night."

Unlike Daphne. He needed to get her out of that house. She was too far away. Too unsecured. Too unpredictable.

"Did you kill Osama Bin Laden?"

"Go play."

"Are you Tigger's dad?"

Evander's gaze flicked to the little girl who was smiling on the swing. His mind went blank for a moment, refusing to kick into motion.

He didn't believe he was cut out for real life, but he was starting to wonder how many people actually were. In fact, he kind of wondered if he might do a better job of providing a stable father figure in Tigger's life than Mistral. Namely because Evander would actually try his best.

"No. Go play."

"Do you have a gun?"

"Yes. Now go play before I shoot you."

"Awesome." The kid vanished into the fort, and about twenty seconds later Evander was surrounded by a crowd of boys all about nine years old.

Weren't kids supposed to sleep in and play video games during the summer holidays?

"Can we see your gun?" asked the first boy.

"No. Go play." He kept his hands behind his back, eyes sweeping the periphery.

"Please?" One kid clasped his hands under his chin and batted his eyelashes.

"That only works on mothers. Go." Evander tried to shoo the boys away, but they squealed and moved like marbles on ice. This way, that way, too slippery to catch.

Realizing they were distracting him, egging him on to play, he shook his head, trying not to smile. "You kids are little punks, you know that?"

They laughed and scattered, heading back to their fort, knowing the gig was up.

"The surprise of the week—you're good with kids," Daphne said, coming up beside him.

He hadn't even seen her leave the swings with Tigger. He took a deep breath to keep from imagining all the things that could have happened in his moment of distraction.

"We need to discuss a schedule, as well as what's safe and what's not." He glanced around at the playground. "Let's go." He almost added, "It's not safe here." But he knew that was likely a lie. He just wanted to get her somewhere that offered better protection.

"Piggyback?" Tigger asked him hopefully as she joined them. She smiled up expectantly, and the longer he paused, the sadder her face got. Jeez, the kid was a killer. She could teach those boys a thing or two. Grumbling, he lowered himself into a squat. "Fine. Climb on." He

caught sight of her fluffy party dress ruffling in the breeze and stood, causing her hands to slip off his shoulders.

"I wasn't on yet!"

"You can't get piggyback rides wearing a dress."

She glowered at him in a way that made him chuckle. So serious. This girl would laugh at the concept of a glass ceiling, then go ahead and smash it.

He glanced at Daphne for help, but all she did was give him an infuriatingly serene look. He was on his own. He jerked the cardigan that was slipping off Tigger's shoulders into place, zipping it up. "You're going to catch cold."

Humanity. Right there. He'd just proved he had some, hadn't he? And here Daphne had the gall to think he didn't have any just because he'd served their country, protecting her and others from all sorts of evils she couldn't even begin to comprehend.

"I'm wearing shorts underneath again," Tigger said, revealing a flash of pink as she pulled up the hem of her dress. She didn't thank him for zipping up her sweater.

He sighed and squatted once more, pressing his fingers into the sandy ground for balance. The girl climbed on, clinging so hard he figured he could scale the Himalayas and not lose her.

"Ready?"

"Yep!"

"Then let's go." He began walking up the slight hill to where Daphne had parked her van.

"You're helping my mom save the whales. Can you help me, too?" Tigger whispered in his ear, and he frowned.

"The whales?"

Daphne shrugged, giving him a small smile.

"Right. The whales," he said. If the girl knew how hard the navy could be on whales in the middle of a war, despite precautions, she'd hate him forever.

"Can you teach me kung fu?" she whispered.

"Why are you whispering?" he asked softly.

"Mom thinks I should solve everything with light and love and forgiveness and understanding," she said loudly.

Oh, boy. Where to start on that one?

Daphne called back, "Violence is not the answer." She gave Evander a preemptive dark look and he refrained from letting out a weary sigh.

"Can you?" Tigger urged.

"Dunno. We'll see." He took a few steps, thinking. "Is someone picking on you?" He pointed at a woodpecker sporting a crown of red feathers to distract Daphne. She slowed to watch the bird, chatting to herself about how free and pretty it was.

"A boy at the babysitter's pushes me down when the adults aren't looking. I asked him to stop and he won't. He just pushes me harder."

"Right. I can help with that." Evander caught himself. "Maybe." It wasn't his place to teach someone else's child self-defense, but the idea of someone bothering the girl made him want to send heads rolling. He could probably come up with a compromise. He could teach Tigger some moves that would protect her and help her stand her ground, while being relatively nonviolent. With Daphne still hot and cold about allowing him into her space, even despite the threats, he didn't want to push things too far.

"Horsey sounds," Tigger said, bucking against his back.

"No."

"Please?"

"No."

Daphne smiled and he figured she knew something he didn't.

His phone began ringing in his back pocket and he had it out in a flash. "Hello?"

"Evander, it's Mom."

"Are you okay?"

"I can't find Rudolph for his eardrops." She sounded worried. More worried than she should about the cat.

"I gave him his drops before I left."

"Who is Rudolph?" Tigger whispered in his other ear.

"Quit eavesdropping," he grumbled.

"Rudolph from Santa's Village? Can we go? Please, Mom, please?"

Evander lowered Tigger to the ground, having to give her a shake so she'd let go. He gave Daphne a grateful nod as she pulled the girl farther away.

"What's wrong?" he asked his mother. It had to be more than just the cat.

"Nothing. I just thought that you'd forgotten to give him his drops."

He watched Daphne and Tigger hop from foot to foot as they made their way to the van. Daphne had let her guard down, her shoulders relaxing into their usual fluid, graceful moves.

In fact, she was more at ease with him than he'd seen yet. She was letting him in, one small step at a time.

That was promising.

But would she let him in far enough, fast enough to match the speed with which Mistral and his men were escalating things?

"Are you sure you're okay?" he asked his mother. "Kyle should be there in three hours. Maybe less. Has the neighbor checked in?"

"Yes, she has, and I'm fine. I was just worried about Rudolph."

As he hung up he wondered if the cancer suddenly felt more real to his mother now that her kids knew. It had likely released all the worries and fears she'd been keeping hidden from herself.

"Is Florence okay?" Daphne asked as she closed Tigger's van door.

"She probably wouldn't tell me if she wasn't."

"My mom's like that, too."

"Did you tell her about the break-in?"

"Why? So she can worry about something she can't help with?"

So his instincts about Daphne had been correct. Strongly independent, often to her own detriment. She kept things close to her chest when life went wrong instead of reaching out and causing drama like so many women did.

"You can lean on me," he said, not quite understanding why he felt the need to tell her that.

She watched him quietly for a moment, her slender hand resting on the driver's side door handle. "Yeah. Okay," she said softly.

"Promise?"

"Promise."

Baby steps. They would just need a lot of them in rapid procession for him to keep her safe.

The whole Evander business was getting ridiculous. She'd been letting the man into her life little by little and it wasn't healthy. It shouldn't feel normal to have a bodyguard at one's side. But there was something about him that made him feel more like a friend today. Which was silly. He was still worried about safety all the time and definitely still bossy.

Daphne crossed her arms and glared at Evander, who was trying to convince her that him coming to her workplace with Tigger was a good idea.

"Tigger and I will hang out in the back room while you're at work. We'll stay out of the way. It'll save you on babysitting costs and I'll be right there if you need me. We'll play."

His idea of play was probably teaching her how to clean a gun and throw knives. No, thank you.

Daphne shook her head. That wasn't fair. He'd proved he was awesome with Tigger and could be a silly, fun playmate. He was also gentle and caring with her, but a mother had to draw a line somewhere, and he wasn't going to become the girl's babysitter.

Evander finished filling her van's gas tank and pushed the button for a receipt.

All she wanted was to go to work as though everything was normal, and all he wanted was to act as though she was going to be kidnapped if he wasn't within arm's reach to prevent it.

They'd just been to the police station to fill out some paperwork, and the officers had assured her that the man had broken in only to look at her plans against Rubicore, and would remain in custody until his hearing in four days. She was safe.

Life went on.

Tigger, who had been drawing happy faces into the dust on her van doors with a wet squeegee, came up to Evander.

"Done?" he asked, before tossing the girl into the van as though she weighed nothing. Tigger giggled and tried to crawl out so he'd have to do it again.

He gave a shake of his head and closed the door.

"You need to go home and take care of your mother," Daphne said. "That's what you need to do. I have this covered. Everyday life is back in progress. The police said that the man will remain in custody, and that Mistral's assistant, Aaron Bloomwood hired him. Not Mistral."

"Aaron works for Mistral."

"Mistral doesn't give him every little order, you know. Aaron is trying to become a partner in the business and he's his own man. The sooner we act as though everything is normal, the sooner it will be. Go to your mom."

"My mother is fine." Evander's jaw clenched, causing a muscle to flicker below his ear.

"She needs you." Daphne stared him straight in the eye, but his gaze kept sliding away. She was right and he knew it. She pressed her palm against his forearm. "She needs you more than we do."

"You're forgetting that your home was broken into last night."

"I wasn't hurt. They wanted plans. They saw them. They're in jail. End of story. This isn't a big deal, but the bigger deal we make of it, the bigger deal *they* will make of it. Do you like it when things escalate in war? Because that's what you are doing in my life right now."

She wrenched open her door, but Evander gripped it, not allowing her to climb inside and make her escape.

"You're being a fool," he growled.

"And you're being a warmonger. I don't know what reality your head is stuck in, but this is real life. In real life " She paused, looking him over, wanting him to hear what she had to say, but knowing there were scars below the surface that would deflect her words to protect his internal beliefs. " we don't act this way."

His grip on the door loosened and she took advantage of it, slipping into the seat. Evander wouldn't let her close the door, however, and the next driver in line for the pump honked his horn.

Evander glanced back, but didn't move.

"I'm going to tell Mistral's partners I'll cooperate. We can work together. Compromise."

"You're selling out?"

When he said it like that, his brows pinching over his dark eyes, it felt as if she was doing more than just reprioritizing her life.

"It's just one more development. I don't have to fight them all. It's over." She ignored the tightening in her chest over all the environmental wrongs that Rubicore would be getting away with.

"It's not over."

"Evander, don't make a federal case out of this. You're being hired to protect me. You should be happy I'm not stirring the pot like Melanie is. You should be happy you no longer have to sacrifice anything in order to protect me, because once I talk to Mistral you can quit."

He gently shut the door. "Come on, you'll be late for work."

Daphne hit the power locks and spun away, leaving him behind on the large square of asphalt, looking stunned. Okay, so she was heading for work and he knew where that was, but it didn't mean she couldn't have five minutes to herself without him breathing down her neck.

As she turned the corner to head to the highway, she saw him hightailing it to his parked truck. Instead of taking the main highway, she spun onto a side road, hoping to extend her Evander-free time a tad longer.

Talking to Mistral and his partners would not be selling out. She was settling the disagreement, taking things down a notch. She could take her own voice out of the battle without undermining her sisters, and everyone could get what they wanted if they listened to her plan.

"Mom," asked Tigger from the backseat, "what about Evander?"

"He's taking his truck, honey."

Pulling onto the country road outside of town where the babysitter lived, she dropped off Tigger, surprised not to find Evander on her tail. Had something happened to him?

Before climbing back into her van, she circled it, wondering where he'd placed the locator. She'd seen him put it along the back somewhere, but still hadn't discovered where the snoopy device was hiding. Checking the road for his truck, she wondered if he'd decided to shadow her from afar.

Back on the highway, she headed for work, happy to have her life feeling closer to normal. Cranking up some old Van Halen, she sang along, unwinding.

Today was going to be a good day.

As she drove through the striated rock cut that towered over her van, she began planning out how she was going to present her plan of cooperation to Mistral. She hadn't dared call him that morning for fear

of Evander, who had been working outside her home, interrupting and giving her a hard time. Now he knew her plans and could get over it.

In fact, now would be a good time to try Mistral at his office. They'd discuss ways to work together and create a compromise, then she'd present the plan to her sisters, informing them that she was the new go-between. Melanie would probably be upset, but then again, she likely didn't realize just how much she was messing with Daphne and Tigger's life by taking Rubicore on the way she was.

Daphne's cell rang, and hoping her Bluetooth was working properly, she hit the connect button.

"Daphne Summer," she said. She always felt a bit silly talking alone in the van, as people passing by might think she was talking to herself, and therefore a little off her rocker.

"Daphne! It's Nate Rockerfield from Environment Canada. How are you?"

"Oh, Nate. How are things with the oil sands?"

He groaned. "Don't ask."

The man had wanted to leave a legacy, but energy resources were always a tough battle. Again, finding balance between two parties and their disparate needs.

Daphne checked her rearview mirror for signs of Evander. It wasn't as fun evading him if he didn't put an honest effort into catching up again. She took a side road, leading to another highway. Ten minutes until her shift: she had time to extend the game. In fact, Evander could already be outside her place of work, arms crossed, scowl in place, foot tapping at her delay.

"We were wondering if you would be interested in coming in for an interview?" Nate asked.

"Job interview? As in nine-to-five for the government?"

He laughed. "What you do for the environment on your own is unprecedented."

"Aw. Thank you."

"We offer pensions, health plans, child care, family days, the works."

But she'd be stuck behind a desk for very regimented hours.

"Signing bonus?" she asked. The idea of a regular, decent paycheck was tempting.

"We're not a big department. Taxpayers pay our wages."

"Is that a no?" she teased, turning onto another secondary highway. Almost there. A Hummer had been following her and she slowed to let it pass. She hated it when vehicles blew past on a solid line. It seemed as though everyone was in a hurry these days and didn't pause to think of the safety of others, just themselves getting ahead.

"I can ask," Nate said. "Remember, we hold a different form of clout than private firms. We can extend our influence internationally. I think you could make a real difference working with us rather than a private firm."

"When do you want me to come by?"

"Next week?" The hope in his voice made her feel pretty darn good. Environment Canada wanted her. Her!

"Sounds good, Nate."

He gave her the date and time. Her birthday, the appointment time within an hour of her birth. It had to be a sign. Her life was about to pull into focus and order. Maybe a real job would be okay, after all.

Feeling jazzed, she hung up and pulled over, allowing the Hummer to pass as she stopped to dial Mistral. Ensuring her Bluetooth was still working, she pulled out again.

"Mistral Johnson, please," she said when his secretary answered.

"One moment, please."

There was a series of clicks and then Mistral was on the phone.

"Hello." His voice was crisp and professional.

"It's Daphne."

"I know, my secretary has caller ID."

Well, that was probably a good thing. The secretary knew to let her through. Things were progressing in the right direction there, at least.

"I'm sorry about last night," he said, sounding rather grim. "I heard the news."

"About the break-in?" she clarified.

"Yes. I've talked to Aaron. I think the man is feeling rather desperate after what your sister threw at us. Any chance to figure out what your next move might be."

See? It wasn't Mistral. It was Aaron. It was her sisters. She was on the right track. Meaning Evander was wrong. She stuck her tongue out at her rearview mirror, even though it was only the Hummer behind her and not Evander.

Wait. The Hummer was back?

"Actually, I'm calling about the development," she said, feeling distracted. "You don't know anyone with a gold Hummer, do you?"

"No, I don't think so. Why?"

"No reason. Anyway, I was thinking we could figure out a way to work together with that development."

Mistral sighed. "I think we have very different ideas on what should be done on the island."

"True. But I also believe we can work together. And let's be honest, if it isn't us giving you pressure about the environment, then it's going to be someone bigger, such as Environment Canada. So who would you rather have? Us or them?"

"Are you threatening me?" His voice had a steely edge.

"No, I am being realistic."

"Really? Because it sounds as though you're saying if I won't work with you, you'll go tattling to Environment Canada."

She almost laughed. She was going to *be* Environment Canada. Possibly.

"I want you to succeed, and I know how important this development is to you." She refrained from saying how this whole project was an obvious cry for approval from his father. "I think you could create a nature preserve like you used to dream about."

"Daphne, I grew up. I know now that a nature preserve would be a money pit."

"So, money is everything?" She knew it was an unfair jab, but he had it coming. He'd been adamant when he'd told her only a few years ago that he never wanted to become that man where money was everything. And now he was. It made her angry. The man had no backbone of his own.

"Daphne, you don't understand."

"And what is it that you've learned in the past five years that I am unable to comprehend?"

"Don't pull the past into this."

"You can have it all. You *can* have it both ways."

Something slammed on his end of the phone and she imagined him smacking his desk in frustration. "No, I can't have it both ways. I tried and I failed. And now I have to live with that. Out here in the real world we have to make money, and so that's what I'm doing."

She fought to stay calm. "I believe you can have your development, stay within environmental protocols, as well as preserve the environment. Your development could be a nature preserve. A nature retreat. A green vacation spot. Eco-tourism. It's the wave of the future. Don't you want to be the one to start the trend here in Ontario?"

"There's no money in it."

"Then maybe you need to start talking to me."

He gave a derisive laugh. "And you suddenly know about money?"

"I guess that's for me to know and you to find out. Are we on to meet up with Tigger again in a few days?"

"I'm pretty busy."

Daphne bit back her disappointment. "You said you wanted this."

"I do, but I'm tied up."

"You know where to find me."

She fumbled for the button to end the call, but Mistral said, "Do you really think you could get your sisters off my back?"

"Everything except the legal stuff Melanie started against the municipality for failing to follow protocol, but everything else, yeah. I think so. We could create a solid compromise that's fair to both sides."

"Fair for both sides?"

"Yup." She could almost hear him thinking how unlikely that was.

"Let me think on it, but this sounds incredibly unrealistic." He let out an uncertain laugh. "Daphne, as crazy as it is, I still trust you. I know everyone's telling me not to, but you're still the same woman you always were. You haven't changed despite everything. I'd like for some big pipe dream to work out, but I can't help but feel it's highly unlikely."

Daphne sighed. Same old Mistral. All talk and dreams, but no balls to take action.

"If anyone can bring a pipe dream to life, it's probably you."

They said goodbye, and while Daphne knew that changing Mistral's mind was still a long shot, she felt better about where the two of them stood than she had in a long time. Smiling, she turned up the music and concentrated on the Hummer, which was finally pulling out to pass once more. Panic reared up like a wild horse as she realized the vehicle was passing on a solid line, with a ten-foot-high rock cut coming up fast on either side.

She tapped her brakes to let the Hummer get by safely, but it dropped back alongside her. When she waved at the driver, the vehicle just crept closer to her van, and she laid on the horn.

Daphne finally slammed on the brakes, and the Hummer zipped on ahead. She drew a deep, calming breath. That had not been someone simply forgetting to shoulder check after passing.

On the other side of the rock cut, the Hummer was waiting, and Daphne had to swerve to avoid a collision. Panicked, she sped on past, pulling visuals on her location. She was only a minute from town. One long minute. Then she could find Evander and have him help her figure out what was going on.

When she checked her rearview mirror again the Hummer was back on her tail, following too close. She sped up, freaked out.

"Call Evander," she said, slapping off the radio and hitting the Bluetooth button.

"Look up colander, is that correct?" her phone asked through the speakers.

"No." She kept an eye on the vehicle behind her, keeping her speed constant. They wouldn't hit her. They were just trying to scare her. It would be okay.

"Call Evander," she repeated to her phone.

The Hummer slammed into the back of her van and she screamed, fighting to control the vehicle as it swayed and swerved.

She heard a dial tone, then ringing through her speakers.

She glanced behind her, expecting another hit. The Hummer was gone, replaced by Evander's truck.

Blinking, she looked back again, not believing her eyes. The man must have superpowers.

Slamming on the brakes, she went to pull over, never so relieved to see the muscle monkey in all her life. Evander came up fast, waving at

her to keep going. She could see him mouthing, "Go, go, go." Or maybe that was him through her phone, which had finally connected.

"Don't pull over," he commanded. "Go straight to the police station."

"I have to go to work."

"Don't start with me, woman. That was not a friendly bumper tap. Get your ass to the station or I swear I'll run you off the road myself."



DAPHNE MADE it all the way to the police station before breaking down. But as she turned off her Caravan, Evander's black truck stopping beside her, she lowered her head to the steering wheel and let it all out. Great big van-shaking sobs.

What if Tigger had been with her? What if the Hummer had succeeded in knocking her off the road? As the what-ifs flooded her, she gave over to the terror.

Her door opened and Evander was there, talking to her in a calm, low voice as though she was a spooked animal.

"It'll be okay, Daphne," he said.

She lashed out, trying to hit him with her left hand and failing. "This is not my world. Not my world! Mistral's a nice guy. He has to be. I let him in. I let him be the father of my baby girl."

Evander shushed her sobs as he eased her out of the van. A police car sailed past, sirens and lights going, and her legs grew weak with the severity of the situation.

"You okay?"

"No." She let out a small sniff, laughing at herself and the truth. She was not all right. She turned into Evander's warm strength, hugging him.

"I'm sorry I ditched you," she muttered.

"I'm glad you did. If you hadn't, how would I have been in position to knock that guy off your tail?" With an arm around her shoulders, he guided her into the station. The officer seemed to know Evander and they began discussing the incident as though she wasn't there.

She had no control over her life any longer.

She stood. "I need to go get Tigger. No, I need to get to work. I need to " She swallowed hard, feeling dizzy.

Evander caught her, lowering her into the chair across from the detective, pushing her head between her knees. Moments later, the officer handed her a cup of ice water.

"Shock," he said.

"This is not my life!" She tried to stand again, but strong hands held her head down. "I need to get Kim—my daughter—Tigger." The hysteria in her voice was unnerving, even to her own ears. They were going to give her a shot of something to knock her out if she wasn't careful, then make decisions that weren't theirs to make. This was *her* life, and as Evander had said, she needed to be the one in control of it.

She pushed the ice water away and shrugged off Evander's hand, which was resting at the nape of her neck, way too powerful to feel as comforting as it did. "I need to get my daughter."

"A patrol car has already been dispatched," the detective said. "In case."

"I need to tell my boss I'll be late."

"I've already called," Evander said.

There was nothing left for her to do. To take care of. And that's what she did. She took care of things in her life. And they'd taken it all away from her.

All of it.

Even her freedom. A sob escaped her chest, pulling the muscles tight as she fought it with all she had.

Everything had gone chaotic. And not in a, “it will all work out if I give it space” sort of way like usual. It was a destructive energy. Negative, toxic, and contagious.

Everything happened for a reason. So why was this happening? Why had someone tried to push her off the road?

She looked at Evander, who was calmly sorting things out on her behalf.

Everything happens for a reason.

Hailey burst into the large room, her boyfriend, Finian, two steps behind, and was pulling her out of the chair for a hug in a matter of seconds. Daphne felt like a teenager whose parents were about to fuss over her, then scold her.

“Thank goodness you’re all right.” Hailey smoothed Daphne’s hair, looking around. “Where’s Tigger?”

“They’ve gone to get her.”

Her sister sagged. “Thank goodness she wasn’t with you.”

Next, Maya and Melanie came blasting in. More hugs, a few more tears.

“I’m sorry for everything. I really am. I’m so sorry,” Melanie said.

“Why? Did you plan this?” Daphne joked.

Melanie paled. “For starting everything. I should have kept my mouth shut. I’d rather have Rubicore’s nasty development across from the cottage than lose you.” She gave Daphne another squeeze, then let out an “oomph” when she squeezed back. “Forgive me?”

Daphne nodded.

“Does Mom know?” Maya interrupted.

“She’s going to panic!” Hailey said, clapping a hand to her mouth.

“I don’t even know how *you* know,” Daphne said, wiping at her eyes. Connor and Tristen, who’d come in behind Maya and Melanie,

were looking as though they were ready to rip someone apart on Daphne's behalf. She'd never felt so loved as she did in that moment.

"Evander called," Maya said.

Daphne turned to him. "Thanks."

"You're going to be stuck with these sisters nagging you now, too, I hope you know." There was no way she was getting her family off her case now that they knew just how bad things seemed to be getting.

The detective took down Daphne's side of the story, shuttling everyone else into a private waiting room down a short hallway. When she finished, an officer came in with Tigger, who had a huge, dripping ice cream cone grasped in her sticky hands. She was grinning and looking immensely pleased with herself.

"Mom!" She came running over. "I got to ride in a police car. I asked for an ice cream and he said yes!"

Daphne laughed, hugging her daughter tight.

"Oof! That was a big hug, Mom."

"Does she know?" Daphne asked the new officer, as he led them to the room where her sisters and the men were waiting, Tigger bouncing along ahead of them.

He shook his head. "I told her it was a surprise field trip. I hope that's okay?" He opened the door, where everyone but Evander was present, all leaning forward in case there was news.

"Was the man in the Hummer?" Daphne began.

"Still working on that. Hey, Tigger. Want to see the holding cells?"

"What's that?"

"The jail."

"Cool!"

"Don't worry," the officer said to Daphne, "they're currently empty." Before he closed the door behind him and Tigger, he leaned in to say, "Take as much time as you need."

A moment later, Evander joined them in the room, saying, "They arrested him."

"They just took Tigger to go see the jail!" Daphne stood.

"It's okay, he still has to be processed and interviewed first. It'll be a while before he makes it as far as a cell," Evander assured her. "The man driving the Hummer works for Aaron Bloomwood. Apparently no connection to Mistral."

Daphne shut her eyes. "I was just talking to Mistral before the incident. He swore he had nothing to do with the break-in, and he said he talked to Aaron. I don't get it." Tears threatened to fall. She still wanted to believe that Mistral had nothing to do with this attack, but how could he be that clueless about what his project partners were up to? Was everything he said to Daphne just a lie? Or was his life so out of control that he thought he was telling the truth?

"The break-in?" Her sisters stood as though connected by a string, their heads turning to her.

"When?" Maya asked.

"Are you okay?" Hailey asked. "What happened?"

They crowded around and Daphne sighed at letting that tidbit slip.

"Her house was broken into by a man sent by Aaron Bloomwood," Evander said. "He was looking for any plans you might have against the Baby Horseshoe Island development."

As the women gasped at the news, their boyfriends stepped back, heads down.

"You told the men, didn't you?" Daphne asked Evander, staring at Finian, then Connor, and finally Tristen. They knew and had obviously kept it a secret from her sisters.

Protection. Keep the women in the dark. Alpha male crap.

Daphne stood. "I'm so tired of this." She slammed her foot into the side of the metal table, making a loud enough clang that an officer

poked his head inside the room to make sure everything was okay.

"We are *not* a bunch of stupid females." She swiped her arms through the air. "Enough secrets. Enough."

"You knew?" Hailey asked Finian.

Evander pinched the bridge of his nose, his shoulders rounded.

Finian nodded, saying, "Evander told us. We, the three of us, agreed not to tell you, as you'd worry. We've all upped security, though."

"You men need to stop making decisions that affect my life without talking to me—and my sisters first. Do you understand? All this covering it up isn't making anything better. It's making it worse."

The men looked sheepish as she collapsed into a chair, feeling drained. She turned to Evander, the one person she felt she could trust to keep it all together for her. Which was silly, seeing as he'd helped the guys keep secrets from her sisters, and tried to run her life. But then again, she doubted that he'd ordered the men to keep things from Hailey, Maya, and Melanie. Evander was all for everyone knowing what they were up against. Even when she didn't want to listen to what he had to say.

Daphne looked around the room. Each of her sisters had someone who was helping her through this, so she didn't have to face it alone.

Funny how none of them believed in the magical power of Nymph Island, and yet look at what the island had done for them this summer.

Daphne believed in the island's magic, and where was her man? It definitely wasn't Mistral, given his inability to follow his dreams and be himself. And it was certainly wasn't Evander.

But for the moment, he'd have to fill the role. "Take me home," she whispered to him, knowing she was too shaken up to drive herself safely. Too afraid of what might be out there waiting for her and her daughter if he wasn't on hand as her shield. Because as much as she wanted to blame him for everything, that was incredibly unfair and

she'd done it for too long. She had to start taking responsibility that she was, in fact, a big part of why this target was painted on her back.

Holding her elbow, Evander led her to the door.

"Wait," Hailey said. "We need to sort things out." She left Finian's side, touching Daphne on the wrist. "Don't leave."

"Why were you talking to Mistral before the 'accident'?" Melanie asked.

"I have an idea regarding the island." Daphne added carefully, "I don't think we should give up what we're trying to accomplish, but I think there's room for collaboration with Rubicore in order to meet in the middle."

The room grew quiet.

Evander gave her a nod, as though to say this was her moment to step up and take charge.

"I know Mistral. I know his dreams. And I think I know a way that we can meld his need to prove himself to his father and our need for a good neighbor who honors the environment."

Daphne turned to Evander, expecting him to recommend a restraining order again, instead of more talks.

"I think that's a good idea," he said, placing a hand on hers.

"Thank you."

"He's going to railroad you," Maya warned.

"Mistral threatened you," Melanie said. "When I filed suit against Rubicore and the municipality, he made verbal threats. He said you're going to pay. That you knew he was Rubicore."

Daphne sighed. Everyone kept getting hung up on that outburst, didn't they? And while she understood where they were coming from, the man didn't seem to be frothing at the mouth to have her killed. His business partner, however, seemed to be a different story.

"It's okay, Melanie," Daphne said quietly. "We've all made mistakes when the heat is on."

"What do you think?" Connor asked Evander, drawing Maya closer to his side.

Evander paused, and for a second Daphne thought he was going to side with the majority. Instead, he looked her in the eye and said, "I made a promise to protect Daphne. She's made it clear that doing it my way cramps her style, and I think she's right. Things are escalating instead of improving." The muscles in his jaw flexed, his collared shirt stretching and pinching over his crossed arms. He drew his lip under his chipped tooth for a moment, watching her. "I think she has good instincts. Even in war there are peace talks among countries. She needs to give this a try. If anyone can take the threat out of this man, I think it's Daphne, if she's willing to step up."

"I am." She reached over and squeezed his hand in gratitude. Go figure, that the army guy would be the one to understand what she was trying to accomplish.

"Can you keep her safe?" Tristen asked.

"I will do my best." Evander turned to her. "As long as Daphne tells me her entire plan and allows me to help."

She couldn't meet his eyes, due to the shameful way she'd made it so hard for him to do his job for the past three days. But she'd finally learned her lesson. She wasn't going anywhere without Evander until this whole thing was over and done with.

"Thanks," she said to Tristen, her hand on the doorknob.

"For what?" he asked.

"For Evander."

Tristen smiled. "Sometimes I get things right."

"Wait." It was Melanie stopping Daphne this time. "Where are you staying?"

"Toronto's only a day trip if I have to go down to his offices to chat. But he's been here a lot this month so maybe we could meet up somewhere nearby."

"No, I mean you can't stay alone in your house."

"I've been staying with Connor lately," Maya said, "and I'm giving up my rental at the end of the month, but for the next week you and Tigger could crash there if you want." She frowned. "Although that's still living alone."

"She's staying with me," Evander stated.

"No, I'm not." Daphne gave a laugh of disbelief. Her? With him? "I have no desire to live in your bunker, thank you very much, army man."

"It's not a bunker."

"Nope." She crossed her arms. "Not happening." She might see that it wasn't wise to leave his side, but she wasn't upsetting Tigger's world by moving them in with a man they barely knew.

Evander gripped Daphne's arms, lowering himself so he could give her what she figured was his best listen-to-me glare. "You've seen how poor my relief staff is. What if Chuck had been on today when you'd decided to ditch the bodyguard?"

Daphne sucked in a breath, visions of the morgue floating through her imagination.

"And you were right. My mom needs me. But so do you. So does Tigger. It's the only way to solve this problem."

Sometimes being a mom trumped everything else, didn't it?

"I don't want to hide out." She really didn't. She wanted Mistral to stop all this and protect his daughter. Because when it came right down to it, he was on Rubicore's side and that side was against her and her family. He was choosing money over what should be his family.

Mistral's father had raised him to be just like him despite Mistral's contrary wishes. And the sad thing was it looked as though his dad was succeeding. Mistral had wanted to live a life that truly mattered, with people who knew how to share and spread their love, without limitations or conditions. Yet he was still living under his father's thumb. She'd thought he'd been reaching out for help, but now she wondered if that had just been her own hopes clouding her judgment.

"If you'd be more comfortable with someone else protecting you we can make that arrangement," Evander said. "Just say the word."

The idea of someone else armed and watching her didn't sit well. Evander was real. She trusted him and he was incredible with Tigger. If anyone was going to have their back she wanted it to be him, even if the idea of him being armed at the breakfast table didn't particularly line up with her family values.

"I can keep you safe." His tone was gentle now. Giving. "Do you trust me?"

She nodded, wishing he'd hug her or something. Crush her against that big chest of his and allow her to borrow his strength and determination for a moment. Today had proved that she couldn't do it on her own, that she needed Evander.

"Can I continue to help you?"

She nodded again. "Please."

"Settled," he said, stepping back. He addressed the room. "You all have my contact info if needed, and I recommend tightening your security where you can. Be vigilant until you hear otherwise from me. In the meantime, you can find Daphne and Tigger with me."

Evander parked the truck in his mother's driveway and turned to look at Daphne and Tigger. How was this all going to work out? In the police station it had seemed like the no-brainer answer to a multitiered equation. But now he looked at the quiet old house and thought of all the complications that could arise. Daphne still had a job to go to, his mom still had radiation treatments, his brother was visiting and Tigger was one big ball of energy. There were going to be times where he'd be needed in more than one place. Never mind that sometimes he liked a little space and solitude to think. It was going to be similar to living in a submarine, but he'd been there, done that. He could do this.

"Right." He opened his truck door, watching them exit the other side, thinking his mother would have his head for not going around and opening the door for them if she happened to peek out the window. He pulled the bags they'd packed back at their house out of the truck's box and herded the Summers into the house.

He paused in the doorway, watching them take off their shoes.

He'd never had to protect a woman before, let alone a single mother, and his instincts to destroy anything in her way that could cause anything from a frown to an outright cry was alarmingly strong.

Still holding their bags, he wondered if he should teach them how to disarm the security system. Maybe show them where he kept his weapons. How many ground rules should he set? Should he tell them to stay out of his mom's sitting room, so she'd have more space and quiet in the house? When he'd called Florence, she'd been elated at the prospect of them coming to stay, even teasing him about bringing home strays, something he used to do frequently as a kid.

"Evander?" Daphne lightly touched his arm, giving him a shock. "Are you sure it's okay we stay here?"

"Of course. Plenty of room. Doors and windows are alarmed at all times. Kitchen is at the back. Your rooms are upstairs." He glanced at Tigger, then crouched beside her. "Are you okay staying here and helping my mom? She isn't feeling well and could really use your company."

"I'm a good helper."

Daphne stroked the child's curls and nodded. "Very good helper."

What on earth were they going to do, cooped up together for days on end? The kid was going to go bonkers from boredom and his mother was going to be worn-out in about five seconds flat.

"She's sick, though, so she might need quiet times."

"Okay," Tigger whispered.

"I told your boss you were staying home for a few days," he said to Daphne, leading them up the staircase while carrying their bags.

"Okay."

He turned, having expected a fight.

"What?" she asked.

He said nothing, but pointed to the end bedrooms at the top of the stairs. "These are your rooms. I'm in this one." He pointed to the room next to Daphne's. "That one on the other end is my mother's."

His brother was going to have to stay on the basement pull-out bed. Was he even here yet? The house felt awfully quiet.

"Is your mom here, Evander?" Tigger asked, rolling up onto the balls of her feet.

"She should be downstairs." He leaned over the small railing and hollered, "Mom? Are you home?"

"That's not quiet time!" Tigger exclaimed.

"Down here," Florence called. "Brick phoned. He'll be here shortly."

"Who's Brick?" Daphne and Tigger asked at the same time.

"My brother, Kyle."

"Is he like you?" Tigger asked.

"Not in the least."

"Well, I should like him tremendously then," said Daphne.

He glanced at her in surprise and she rewarded him with a mischievous grin.

"I want to see Granny Flo's fairy yarn!" Tigger said, disappearing down the staircase in a flash, her bare feet slapping the wooden stairs.

"Is that okay?" Daphne asked. "Does your mother need quiet?"

"She'll tell us if she does." Probably. But he was going to have to come up with diversions so the girl didn't overwhelm his mom. He paused, unsure whether he should take Daphne's bags all the way into her room. A good host would, but in his mind the bedroom was already her space.

He entered the room, placing the bags on the floor by the far wall where they would be accessible, but out of the way. "Do you need anything else?" he asked, feeling awkward as he waited by the bed, unable to leave without pushing past her in the small room.

She was chewing on her bottom lip.

"Do you still have alarms on my house?" she asked.

"Yes."

She nodded, thinking.

"A tracker on my van?"

"Yes."

She stepped closer. "So then? What took you so long to get to me today?"

"My GPS doesn't show all the roads. I had to take what turned out to be the long route."

"Oh."

She was so close her soft skin was brushing his, and he took her chin between his thumb and index finger, tipping it up so he could see her face. "Are you okay?"

She let out a shattered sigh and a tear broke free.

He pulled her to him and she collapsed against his chest, sucking strength from him.

This? It felt real. The most real thing since before his army days. Even his mother's cancer didn't feel like this. Scary, but not truly real. Holding Daphne felt genuine and he wasn't sure why.

He gently stroked her hair as she hiccupped into his chest, trying to hold whatever it was inside.

This woman, with the world wrapped around her finger, needed someone to keep her safe. She was a seedling standing her ground in a raging storm. She needed a hand cupped around her, protecting her so she could grow and change the world, make it pure and full of light again. This was a job only he could do. He was made for it, and he'd do the best job he could.

"I'll keep you safe, Daphne," he whispered.

Her body shuddered in reply and he held her close, feeling her arms tighten around him. They could barely reach around his chest, and she lowered them until they were wrapped around his waist. He kept stroking her curls, wondering what she was thinking, what she was

feeling, what she needed. Her arms pushed between them, moving up his chest as he let her go, his hands reluctant to leave her welcoming warmth. Her palms drifted up to his face, the dark circles under her eyes enhanced in the dim light of the room. She cupped his jaw, her fingers tracing the scars that extended down the side of his neck.

Her lips parted to ask, and he pulled her hands away. "I was blown up. It doesn't hurt."

"Was it the war?"

"Afterward. Protecting someone. A prince."

Her eyes darkened and she pulled away, horror flashing across her features.

"Daphne, I've been in many dangerous situations, and I've always known what I was getting myself into before taking a job. This situation is nothing like any of those, but I still know what I'm getting into."

"You would allow yourself to get hurt protecting someone else? Someone who isn't any more special than you are?"

He almost laughed at the idea of being more special than a prince, but stayed serious, drawing his spine straight as though about to salute an officer. "Yes."

Her slim hand rested tentatively on his chest. "For me?"

"Yes." He wasn't sure he liked where this was going.

She sprang on him, her feet leaving the ground as her legs wrapped around his waist, her arms hooked tight around his neck. Her lips landed hungrily on his and he caught her waist, holding her against him as she kissed him with tremendous need. He squeezed her to him as he instinctively turned to lower them onto the bed.

Her kisses lit a fire within him and he wondered why he'd never thought of the protecting-scared-women angle before. It was hot.

Invigorating.

As close to real as he could wrangle.

But Daphne. She was in a bad space and would regret this. This was a Molotov cocktail of emotions, adrenaline and fear. It was nothing more than those reactions spurring her forward, seeking a sexual outlet to ease the unfamiliar and overpowering emotions. He knew getting intimate would only be a temporary stopgap and that she'd feel uncomfortable around him if he let things go any further.

So why wasn't he stopping?

He stole one more starved kiss, then, ignoring his own need, gently pushed her off him, his lips unwilling to break the connection. She tasted sweet and delicious. Pure. He pushed her safely away again and stood, putting the bed between them.

There was a fire between them that was still burning as they stared at each other from across the bed. Then she lunged at him again and he caught her, rolling under her slim form. He caressed her back, trying to find the strength to push her away once more as they kissed, her legs straddling him as her tongue dipped into his mouth.

He flipped her over so she was pinned under him, her thigh caught between his legs. He stroked her curls off her face, knowing that with every kiss, he was getting in deeper.

The sound of small feet on the stairs gave him what he needed to break away.

He sent Daphne one last hungry look before rolling off the bed, taking a moment to catch his breath before going to douse his desire in a very cold shower.



EVANDER PUSHED Tigger on the rope-and-board swing he'd made for her in his mother's rambling backyard. She and Daphne had been living with them for less than twenty-four hours and he was already wrapped

around Tigger's finger. Although, he reminded himself, the swing had been his idea as a preemptive measure to keep the girl from wearing out Florence who, so far, seemed perkier from having her light up their home.

He eyed the ropes as the child swung back and forth. If he added a rubber strap he could give the swing a little bounce, which would appeal to Tigger's nature.

He added rubber straps to his ongoing mental shopping list, then visually swept the yard's perimeter for safety breaches. He needed a better detection system than he currently had. As well as more lights and possibly a pack of vicious dogs that snarled and frothed at the mouth.

Daphne joined them on the lawn, smiling, seeming not at all shy despite the way she'd attacked him with her lips last night. She moved with grace and simplicity, a compelling figure of femininity, and he wanted to hold her, inhale the scent of her hair while falling into her warmth.

Thinking that way was a direct route to mission failure. Women were almost always the biggest distraction for soldiers. He needed to stay focused. Stay impartial, objective, removed.

He turned his back to Daphne, giving Tigger another push.

"Look what Evander made me," the girl said to her mother.

"A whole swing just for you?" There was something wistful in Daphne's voice and he caught her hugging herself in his peripheral vision.

"Take over," Evander said, directing her to step in and push Tigger. He needed to go check the feed from Daphne's yard gnomes. Maybe he could ask Brick to help out. His brother had arrived, distracted by grief to the point of being more of a hindrance than a help last night. This morning he seemed better, but he needed purpose to help keep him from

dissolving into worst-case scenarios. Plus, once the press caught wind of what had happened on the road yesterday, and where Daphne was hiding out, Evander would surely need a bit of help with crowd control.

At the edge of the yard, he turned, checking on the mother-daughter duo. It wasn't smart spending this much time in the open backyard. There was a fence along the alley, plenty of large trees, lots of coverage, but it was still open if you knew where to peek in—and there were plenty of places to do so and not be noticed. The swing had been a bad idea. Tigger would want to spend too much time out here.

Evander knew he needed to focus, but he was so tired of it. He wanted nothing more than to sit back and laugh while watching the kid bounce around the yard. He wanted a life where he had nothing better to do than worry about her happiness.

But he had to be the man he was trained to be, because Aaron Bloomwood wasn't in custody even though the Hummer driver had pointed his finger at him, and Daphne's little chats with her ex weren't leading to progress.

It was up to Evander to be vigilant and keep them safe at all times.

His mother called from the back door, "Rudolph got out."

The cat pranced past him in the grass, legs extending as he upped his pace to stay out of range.

Tigger, out of nowhere, pounced on the feline, rolling him over to rub his belly.

"Oh, not a good idea," Evander warned. "He claws." He swooped the cat off the ground, and like sharpened steel on silk, those claws sliced through his skin.

"He liked that," Tigger protested.

"Cat's don't like having their bellies rubbed," Daphne said, backing him up as she directed Tigger to the swing again. She was being careful

not to allow her daughter to bother Florence too much, and Evander appreciated the effort.

He passed the cat to his mother.

"Lunch?" she asked.

"That time already?"

"I can make quiche," Kyle said, appearing behind her, his face covered in some sort of green goop that made Evander think of women in spa commercials.

"That would be lovely, dear," Florence said.

"Consider it done," Kyle said with a graceful bow.

Florence cuddled the cat to her chin, still standing in the doorway. "You looked like a family out there."

"Mom," Evander warned.

"I like having kids around." She gave the cat an extra squeeze. "And you seem different with them here."

"Yeah, super worried they're going to be hurt," he grumbled, familiar anxiety rising within him. He turned to face the yard. "Time to come in!"

"Aw," protested Tigger. Daphne began ushering her off the swing. At least the woman was listening to him now. Although he wasn't sure if she wasn't just going with the flow and taking the path of least resistance. Either way, today he'd take it.

"I meant you seem relaxed," his mom said. "More alert and worried, but relaxed somehow."

"That makes no sense," he said over his shoulder, hurrying to where Tigger had stopped to peer into the lush lawn, Daphne crouched over her, her back to Evander.

"Come on," he said, glancing at the ladybug that had delayed them.

Daphne jumped, hand going to her throat. "You scared me."

He placed a palm on her shoulder, guiding her to the house. "Didn't mean to sneak up. The old lady wants lunch, Tigger. Let's see what we can make her. My brother wants to make something that I'm sure will take five hours, and you probably won't like it, anyway. If we beat him to the kitchen we set the menu."

Tigger skipped to the house, then, seeming to catch herself, slowed her pace to a walk. "Florence isn't old," she said. "Old people have candy."

"Oh, she has candy. And I know where she keeps it."

"No sugar before lunch," Daphne said, frowning.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. That's what all the moms say." Evander shot Daphne a wink and she shook her head in warning.

"Mom says it makes me bouncy!" Tigger added an extra bounce to her step, landing on the back step.

"Even more than usual, huh? I'd pay to see that."

"Oh, you'll pay all right," Daphne muttered as he held the door for them.

He paused to reset the alarm and throw the dead bolt behind them, trying to be subtle about it.

"Tigger," Florence called from the front room. "I made something for you."

"Goody!" The girl bounced off, disappearing around the corner, her party dress swinging.

"Your mom's going to spoil her," Daphne said with a sad smile.

"I can talk to her." He moved to the kitchen, Daphne following.

"No, it's fine. Tigger loves her. She's going to miss her, that's all."

"She's not dying." He cleared his throat, hoping it wasn't a lie. He braced himself against the open fridge door, pushing back the insistent hollow ache that threatened to turn the bright day gray. He slapped a

brick of cheddar on the counter, then added a pound of butter and a carton of milk beside it.

"I'm sorry," Daphne said carefully. "I didn't mean to imply that she was."

"It's not terminal," he said, swallowing over a lump in his throat. "And I'm sure she'd love it if you and Tigger stayed in touch. After. She used to be a kindergarten teacher and she misses kids." He pulled a package of whole wheat elbow noodles from the cupboard, then handed Daphne a large pot. "Can you fill this with water?"

Without a word she filled it, then set it on the stove, lighting the burner beneath it. "How long before you think it'll be safe for us to return home?"

"I don't know."

"We're in your way, Evander."

"No, not really."

"Cramping your style at least?"

He let out a sigh and gave her a dry look. "I have no style to cramp."

She glanced at his ironed shirt and raised an eyebrow.

"Army habits." Yeah, so a T-shirt might not need heat to flatten, but the action was soothing. A hot blade running across wrinkles, making everything smooth and perfect in one stroke. It was easy to get lost in the meditative rhythm of ironing.

"If we're making it difficult for you to parent your daughter," he said, "tell us."

"It's fine. Really."

He gave her a stern look and she laughed, tossing up her hands in what may have been delight.

"This is the best thing to happen to her all summer." Daphne's smile fell and she wouldn't meet his gaze as she busied herself grating cheese

with too much vigor.

They worked in steady silence, but finally he had to ask, "How come?"

"Family is good for her."

Family? Was that what she thought this was? He tried to argue, but found his mind stuck on the word, his throat seized as though in the solid grip of an enemy commander.

"Hey," Kyle said, entering the kitchen, his face washed from the earlier green mask, "I said I'd make lunch."

Evander pushed the jug of milk into his hands. "Take over. Mac 'n' cheese."

"But I was going to make quiche."

"Plans change."

Daphne clamped her mouth shut so she wouldn't argue with Evander. Tigger was happily learning to knit in the other room, completely enraptured by Florence and her ability to create gorgeous fairy blankets. Kyle, who'd barely left his mother's side since his arrival, was helping by untangling the balls of yarn. He was so unlike Evander, with his slender build and feminine gentleness, that Daphne could barely believe they had the same parents.

Outside the large kitchen window chickadees were eating at a bird feeder, their black caps bobbing as they pecked at the seed. Another movement caught her eye, a streak of faded orange fur. Rudolph. She stood to try and warn off the birds, but they were already gone, and Rudolph moodily stalking away at the missed opportunity.

"Are you listening?" Evander asked.

"I don't know. Are you still lecturing?"

He gave a disgruntled snort at her flippant dig.

She'd been carefully following his directions and advice in hopes that he'd take his tension down a notch. If he said it was time to come in from the yard, she came in. No questions asked. But he'd been on a tear since she'd announced wanting to go back to work. She'd had to remind him that even though she was living here she still had expenses.

She took a seat at the kitchen table, cupping a mug of coffee in her hands. While she'd seen a new side of Evander by sharing his home for the past day and a half, his being on edge was getting to her. Yesterday he'd all but stormed out of the kitchen while they were making lunch, leaving her and Kyle to finish the macaroni and cheese.

"Have you heard any more about the guy in the Hummer?" she asked him now.

"There's no new information," he said. "Have you talked to Mistral?"

"Do you think I should?" She found it strange that Mistral hadn't called her cell. He had to have heard what had happened.

"I think you should be an active participant."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

His voice took on an edge that she didn't like. "You have a habit of sitting back and allowing your life to steer itself, or letting others make decisions for you."

"Fine. I can move out. I thought this was the safest option, but if you'd rather I stand up and make a big choice about it all I'll go pack my bags."

"Hear me out before you go twisting your panties in a knot."

She stood up. "You really don't know how to be civil, do you?"

"You can't let everything flow by you. Being one with the world is not a life plan." Evander punctuated his sentences by slapping the back of one hand into the opposite palm, like a politician making an important point.

She'd never liked politicians that much. Too many seemed to be on the take or didn't have the balls to make the big changes the planet needed, for fear of ticking off their constituents.

"You need to be an active participant in keeping yourself safe. Don't wait for everyone to make your decisions without you."

"And what do you know about my life?"

"A lot more than you seem to." His eyes were flashing as she dropped her hands onto her hips to glare up at him.

"I doubt anyone like you could *ever* understand someone like me."

"For all your acceptance," he said, stepping close enough that his body heat scorched her skin, "you sure can't seem to accept me and where I'm coming from. I'm putting my life on the line to save your skin. In fact, how many times have I bailed you out in the past five days and you can't even find it in your big, generous heart to grant me a sliver of understanding?"

Daphne felt as though he'd not just turned the tables on her, but that he'd pushed one against her, pinning her in a corner.

Her voice wobbled as she said, "You know what? You showing up with your testosterone hanging out, and waving that gun of yours around like a big ol'—"

"Oh, no you don't." He was so close now that she could barely think, only feel desperation and anger and something else she most definitely didn't want to feel anywhere near this man. "You don't get to blame the gun thing on me. Do you even know who Mistral's bodyguard is?" Evander pressed closer. "Do you?"

She slowly shook her head, her curls tangling as they brushed over her shoulders.

"The man you want your daughter hanging around employs a man with a rap sheet longer than my tibia. Ricardo's been arrested for assault several times. Is that in line with your family values?"

She really wanted to slap him. At the same time everything Evander was saying was slamming kernels of truth into a tender place she'd tried to keep buried inside.

She closed her eyes, willing herself to be strong enough to take what he was saying. He was pointing out all these things because he believed

it was best for her and her daughter. She knew that, but it didn't make it hurt any less.

"Okay," Daphne said, giving in, hoping he'd just stop talking.

He gently took her arms, his large hands covering so much of her skin that she leaned into his touch, wanting more. She wanted to have a long nap in the shelter of his protection, then wake up and find her life fixed again. Instead, she had to be strong. As strong as this man who was telling her she had to be even stronger. She had to be a mother. She had to do what was best for everyone, even if it wasn't the best thing for her.

"Okay what?" Evander asked.

"You want me to accept you?" Her voice shook, so many emotions battling within her she was surprised she didn't burst at the seams. "Then let me in."

She needed him to break down the wall that always seemed to come up whenever she saw glimpses of the real man. The more she got to know him, the more she saw snippets of realness, but she needed *something* to show her that he was feeling the same attraction she was. She wasn't even sure what it was exactly, but she needed to know if he felt it, too.

"You want to know why I went to war?" Evander said finally. "Because of love."

She twisted out of his grip, laughing as she ran a hand through her hair, fingers catching in the fine knots. "To get in some woman's pants? I didn't expect that."

Evander ignored the joke. "I know that what you do comes from here." He touched his chest above his heart. "Everything in your life is guided by love. But what if someone or something was threatening that?"

Daphne blinked hard. Someone *was* threatening it.

"Sometimes in order to protect love so it can grow and spread throughout the world, you have to crush those who are trying to destroy it. Those who are so ruined they can no longer see the beauty in this world and only want to break it. You can't talk to people who have gone that far into the pain. They only understand fighting and weapons."

She didn't want to believe him, didn't want to grasp his rationale, but his argument made perfect sense.

She didn't want there to be people who understood only fighting and weapons, and not love. She didn't know how the world had become so broken, but war never fixed things. Nothing seemed to. Not even love.

Evander swallowed hard, fighting some emotion she wasn't familiar with. He'd seen things she never could and he was closing up before her.

"I went to war," he said, glancing up, his eyes dark and chilling. No, he wasn't closing up, he was letting her in. He was showing her what she was seeking, baring himself so that she could understand. "To protect love. To make sure it had a place to grow—even in the unlikeliest of places."

She shivered despite the warmth of the morning sun. His gaze softened and he extended a hand to her. She hesitated for a second before reaching out and placing her palm in his large one.

"Let me protect you," he said. "Let me give your love the shelter it needs so it can grow and change this world."

She folded herself into his arms, nodding, mute with the shock of having someone so different finally understand and accept where she was coming from. Evander was quickly becoming the man who was everything that had been missing in her world.



DAPHNE SHOOK the tension out of her hands and released a gusty sigh. The way Evander had revealed himself in the kitchen had been unexpected. The fact that he went to war for the same reasons she lived her life was unsettling. How could they both be driven by love? It was incongruent having a gun-toting, knife-throwing hunk of muscle going to war to preserve love in the world. What had set them on such separate paths if they had similar core values?

War and peace. Which would help save the world?

And yet, if they were so similar, why couldn't Evander see that she was an active participant in her life? She wasn't sitting around letting it go by, as he seemed to believe.

She vowed not to think about him any longer and finished folding the basket of laundry in her room. Pushing back the curtain, she glanced at the street below. There was a car parked along the curb, the window rolled down. An elbow rested on the sill and she wondered when the reporter would give up. He'd banged on the door, requesting an interview, but Evander had chased him away with threats that had sent chills down her spine. She allowed the curtain to fall back into place.

She needed a way to show Evander she was taking action. Just because she wasn't controlling every little thing and left space for spontaneity didn't mean she was letting her life run her.

Picking up her phone, Daphne dialed Mistral's office. She was going to arrange that meeting she'd told her sisters about. No more pussyfooting. No more waiting for Mistral. Summer was almost over and she needed a decision from him.

"Mistral, please," she said, when the secretary picked up.

"I'm sorry, he's not taking calls right now."

"Now or ever?" Daphne asked with suspicion.

"I do believe his lawyer has advised him not to speak with you." The secretary's voice had a chill that could rival a kiss from a snowman.

"Right. And that's your business how, exactly?" Daphne asked sweetly.

"I will not put your call through."

Peace, light, and goodwill. No murder via ballpoint pen.

"You will let him know I called, because that is your job." Daphne hit the red button to end the call, wishing she'd been able to slam the phone down. Maybe next time she could slam it against something and then tell the woman to—no, peace, light, happiness. *Inhale, one, two, three. Exhale, one, two, three.*

Oh, forget it.

Daphne picked up the phone and dialed Mistral's cell.

"Yeah?" His voice was curt and dismissive.

For a moment Daphne forgot why she was calling. *Take charge of her life, be active and not a passive participant. Prove to Evander he was wrong. Make him proud of her.*

"Have you had a chance to think about my proposal?" she asked.

"My lawyers advised me not speak with you any longer due to what happened on the road the other day."

"You heard about that, huh? Thanks for your concern."

"Yeah," he said drily, "it was a little embarrassing, being hauled down to the police station for questioning."

"Did you send him after me?"

"Give me some credit."

"Did you?"

"Who do you think I am? Some monster? What if Kim had been with you?"

"I'm fine. Thanks for asking."

"Sorry. I'm sorry. Things are crazy around here right now and it's getting to me."

Daphne bit her tongue so she wouldn't say something snarky. "Does Aaron still work for Rubicore?"

She spied Evander in the hall outside her bedroom. He paused as he went by, his head stuck in his phone as usual. She was starting to dislike his phone. And it felt as though he was using it as a barrier between them, when all she wanted was to find out more about him. To sit. To talk.

And maybe get another one of those kisses like when she'd been hopped up on nerves and adrenaline after he'd brought them into the safety of his home. He'd met her with a passion and need that had cranked her up even further. But then he'd pulled away. Several times. She wasn't sure what would have happened if Tigger hadn't come up the stairs.

She wanted more of Evander, but she knew it was the kind of more that would lead to trouble. They might seem to have some core beliefs in common, but they were still so incredibly different. But the way he handled Tigger and made her eyes dance caused Daphne's heart to warm and swell as though she had a circulatory problem. The worst part was that she desperately wanted Evander to care for her, as well.

"He's a bit of a mess," Mistral said carefully into her ear, and for a moment she thought he was talking about Evander and not Aaron. "He's not dealing well with the roadblocks and I've suggested counseling. I've let him go, but my father has decided to keep him on as his own assistant. It doesn't matter what I do, Dad always undermines me." He let out a sigh as though the weight of the world was pressing on him. "I fired Ricardo, too. I have a new assistant."

"Is he armed?"

"Probably. I'm sorry. I know how you feel about guns."

"Why do you need a bodyguard?"

"I was advised to make sure I had an assistant who was armed, for crossing picket lines up in Muskoka."

"What picket lines?"

"The ones everyone assumes you'll erect against me." He gave a sheepish laugh. "I've had time to think. I let my dad blow you up as this big evil force who hated me, but seeing you " His voice was soft and almost wistful, and Daphne wondered if he was remembering those hot summer nights they'd spent together hiding out at Trixie Hollow, when nobody else was around. "I understand where you're coming from."

She could practically visualize Mistral running a hand through his hair as he let out a jagged breath.

"Thank you. Thank you for saying that." She sagged onto her bed. Mistral was still the good man she'd known him to be. They could still get control of this situation. But they had to work together, and he was going to have to learn how to be a whole lot stronger.

Daphne glanced into the empty hallway, wishing Evander could have heard Mistral, but he'd wandered into his own room on the other side of the wall. She half pictured him pressing his ear against it to hear her side of the conversation. Although it was more likely he had her room or phone bugged.

"This project is my baby," Mistral continued. "It was also Aaron's first real chance to prove himself and get a massive promotion. He didn't take the threat well."

"That's why I'm calling. I want to remove the threat by working together."

"You think we can work together without killing each other?" He added quickly, "That's just an expression, by the way."

"I think in a lot of ways we're coming from the same place." She thought of her recent conversation with Evander. The two of them, even though vastly different, had similar core values driving them to take action in differing ways. Mistral hadn't changed so much that they were no longer coming from the same place. They just had different reasons for doing what they were doing.

"You always saw the world differently," he said, "and with a hope that none of us others could ever wish for."

Daphne gave an uneasy laugh. "I'm not sure if that is a compliment or not."

"It is."

Silence stretched out between them.

"So?" she asked. "What do you say? Shall I drive down so we can discuss this plan?"

"You are the most persistent woman I've ever met. And I've met plenty." She could hear papers rustling in the background, then a sigh. "Fine. You win. How can I say no to someone who's always been open and friendly, even when I've been a complete you-know-what and my colleagues have broken into her home and tried to run her off the road? Man, I really need to start listening to my lawyers, don't I?" He gave an uneasy chuckle.

Lesson number one: It was always harder to say no to someone who was smiling, friendly, and expected the best from you.

Evander might not understand her go-with-the-flow, happy attitude, but it was kicking his let's-fight-it-out plan right now.

"How's tomorrow?" she asked. "Any openings?"

"I'm in Toronto."

"Well, in case you haven't heard, the highway does run both ways. How about eleven o'clock?"

"Fine," he said with resignation.

She hung up the phone and began planning.

“*W*hat do you mean, you want to go to Toronto and talk to Mistral?” Evander wanted to give Daphne a good, hard shake, but was struggling to squeeze drops into the cat’s folded-back ears. Yesterday, he’d been certain she’d understood what he was saying about being an active participant in her life. He knew he’d agreed to help her with peace talks, but this? Several members of the press were waiting out on the street for their chance to go in for the kill, and she was busy whipping up a meeting that would be in the papers all around the planet—without consulting him first, he might add.

“Email your proposal,” he said.

How was he supposed to protect her? How was he supposed to keep her safe when she kept shutting him out? He’d thought they understood each other at long last. He’d opened up and yet she was still the same old Daphne, charging on. Nothing had changed.

Rudolph clawed his way loose when Evander unconsciously tightened his grip on the feline. Evander held in a hiss of pain, not wanting to be distracted from the bomb Daphne was imploding at his feet.

“I don’t *want* to go, I *am* going,” she said, tipping up her chin with determination. “There’s a difference.”

Brick wandered into the room in a magenta bathrobe. "Oh? Toronto? Are we all going? I could use better slippers than the ones I packed. I was in such a state." He smiled expectantly at the fighting couple, and Evander scowled, pointing to the door.

"I'll take that as a no." Kyle backed out of the kitchen, hands raised in surrender.

"Did it ever occur to you to run this meeting by me first?" Evander boomed. "That there might be things I need to put in place to ensure your safety? I thought we were a team. A team trying to keep you safe. Meeting with Mistral. Is. Not. Safe."

He should have bugged her cell phone. He should have captured their conversation so he could hear Mistral's side of it. She was too trusting.

"Evander, you're being really " Daphne wouldn't meet his eyes as she backed away.

"Threatening?"

"Yeah."

He took one massive step, eating the space between them. She bumped against the table, sending Tigger's half-empty glass of milk sloshing. He rested his hands over Daphne's ears and pushed his lips against hers, determined to show he wasn't a threat, and that he only wanted what was best for her. He gave her a hard kiss, then stepped back.

"When I said be active in your life," he said softly, "I didn't mean go running into the open mouth of the roaring lion."

Her cheeks were bright red as she said, "I resent the way you paint me with the stupidity stick."

She placed her tiny hands on her hips and glared at him, her attention focused solely on his lips. He almost laughed, she looked so indignant. But there was a fire in her eyes that he didn't dare mess

with. If he didn't handle this right, she would take off without him. And that would be a disaster for sure.

"And," she added, "you need to learn to kiss better." She turned on her heel, trying to beat a hasty escape into the sitting room, where Florence and Tigger were knitting once again.

Evander hooked her around the waist, spinning her into his arms. With one hand on the back of her head, the other wrapped around her slender form, he pulled her warmth against him. With a deliberate slowness, he gently brushed her lips with his. The caress was sweet and he licked her lower lip before giving her a long, slow kiss. Heat sizzled between them and it was all he could do to pull back, to be a gentleman, to not lift her T-shirt dress and lay her flat out on the breakfast table.

He let her go and put his hands on his hips as she had only moments ago, enjoying the way she looked dazed, her chest expanding, but not quite fully able to inhale properly.

"For the record, I *can* kiss. And I understand that you are used to making your own decisions without having to consult with anyone. But in order to do my job and keep you safe—no matter what sweet things that ex of yours whispers in your ear—I need you to consult with me. I can't do my job if you're making plans without talking to me."

"Okay."

Okay? That was it?

Had his kiss blown her difficult side out of commission? If so, he'd have to remember that trick.

"What time do you have to be there?" he asked grudgingly.

Today was going to be endless. After that kiss and her softly giving in, he was going to be thinking with the wrong head all day long.

Daphne checked the slender watch on her wrist. "About three and a half hours."

"And you're just telling me now?" The anger was back. "It's almost a three-hour drive."

"I know. But I thought—"

"You did this so " No, he wasn't going to argue with her. He was also not going to lock her in a room for her own safety. As appealing as that was.

Tigger came bounding into the kitchen, all lace and flounces in her party dress.

"Is she coming with us?" he snapped, tipping his head toward the small girl. Daphne was never going to think about safety first, was she?

"I'm right here," Tigger said. She gave him a dark look.

"Sorry, kiddo."

"Well, if I can't go, then she can't go," Kyle said, joining them in the kitchen. He pointed to Tigger. "So, I say we stay here and have a TV party with Florence, while the pooppy adults fight their way to the city and back. What do you say, Tigger? Does your mother approve of nail polish? I think Granny needs her nails freshened and I bet she's got some colors that would look splendid on those tapered fingers of yours."

"Is it okay if she stays here?" Daphne asked, looking from Brick to Evander. "I was going to take her to hang out with Melanie, since she's still off work, but I'd feel better leaving her here with all the security stuff."

Evander ran a hand down his face, taking in his brother's magenta robe. Would the kid be safe here? It wouldn't be as safe if he was gone, but she sure wasn't coming with them.

"You had time to line up a babysitter, but still didn't think to tell me you were going to Toronto?" he asked, an edge to his voice.

"You were eavesdropping! How did you *not* know?"

"I was not!"

"I think this is our cue to go raid Granny's nail polish," Kyle whispered to Tigger, and they hustled out of the room.

"You're always around, looking over my shoulder," Daphne said. "You're like, like " Her hands were fluttering and her cheeks were flushed. They needed to go to bed. Together. That would settle this.

No.

No, he couldn't think that way. He needed to remain focused. Not think about what she'd feel like with her legs wrapped around his hips.

"I only heard you ask if Aaron still works for Mistral," Evander admitted, his jaw clenched.

"He doesn't. And neither does Ricardo."

Evander suddenly felt lighter, with tension draining away as though someone had pulled the plug. "That's promising."

"I thought so."

He checked the time and gave a hefty sigh as he poured coffee into his travel mug. "We'll take my truck even though there's no backseat for Tigger." Why hadn't he bought a bigger truck last winter? Had he really believed he was that alone in the world that he'd never need to give several people a ride—or small people for that matter? "She'll be okay riding up front again. The airbag turns off. Plus, the tires on your van suck and the bumper's still smashed."

Instead of arguing like he expected, Daphne gave him a sunny smile.

Darn women.



EVANDER HAD A VERY FAST, very cold shower while trying to get his frustration with Daphne out of his mind. That and how wonderfully right her body had felt pressed against his as he'd kissed her in the kitchen. Again.

He really needed to stop doing that.

It was becoming harder to get the way she felt out of his mind, as well as those sneaky fantasies that were starting to take over. Fantasies of what they could do together. Alone.

Focus. Keep her safe.

No matter the cost.

He groaned and buttoned his cotton dress shirt. He jerked the cuffs, inspecting his ironing job. Perfect. At least one area of his life was staying controlled and in line with what he needed. Even if it was only his ironing.

Tigger bounded by his bedroom door. She stopped and doubled back. Grinning, she said, "I'm not going to Aunt Mellie Melon's anymore because we're having a nail polish party instead!"

"You call your aunt that to her face?" He slipped his phone in his back pocket and his wallet in the other. He needed to get Daphne's van worked on. There was a shop a few blocks from here that might be able to get it fixed today while they were out.

The girl giggled. "She likes it."

"You're joking?"

Tigger shook her head. "I like Max. He's Tristen's dog. He has a really big tongue."

"I didn't know that about Tristen. Interesting." Evander grabbed his truck keys and slipped by the girl. They headed down the wood staircase, where sunshine streamed through the window, hitting the landing and blinding him for a half second.

"Max has a big tongue, not Tristen." The girl giggled, her bare feet tapping out a chirpy beat as she trundled down the steps behind him.

"Oh." He pretended to be chagrined. "It's a good thing I didn't say anything to Tristen about his big tongue. That would have been embarrassing."

"You're silly."

"I don't think I've ever been called that before."

They found Daphne in the sitting room talking quietly with his mother. The women paused, looking up as he entered the room.

"Saying good things about me, I hope," Evander said with a grin.

"Always," Florence replied. She got up from her armchair, looking better than she had in days. Having a houseful of distraction was good for at least one of them. "Look at Daphne, Evander. Isn't she a delight? How could a man ever say no to her?"

"You'd be surprised," Daphne replied out of the side of her mouth.

"Could you say no to this lovely face, Evander?" Florence waved a hand over Daphne as though showcasing the woman.

Evander placed a kiss on top of his mother's head, hoping she didn't know the full truth of that. The longer he spent with Daphne, the more difficult it was for him to be a solid, stubborn wall of "no."

Daphne lightly touched his arm and goose bumps rose along his skin like flames spreading through dry grass.

"Ready?" She pressed her fingers to the base of her throat. A sure sign she was worrying.

"You okay? We don't have to go. Your van is heading into the shop, but we could use picking it up as an excuse to stay."

"That's a horrible excuse," Daphne said, with a laugh that didn't have her usual house-shaking Richter scale level of energy.

"Tigger will be okay here," he said. "Brick is tougher than he looks and there's no way he'll let anyone near her. He's just as protective as I am, even though he likes to wear odd colors." Evander gave her a wink. "I taught him how to defend himself. He's good. And the house is well secured."

His mother nodded. "I haven't nicknamed the place Fort Knox for nothing."

"Would you feel more secure knowing where Tigger was, and being able to check up on her location?" he asked. Not waiting for more than a flicker of agreement from Daphne, he turned his head and called, "Tigger! Come show your mom your new trinket."

The girl bounded out from between the couch and curtains. Little eavesdropper. She danced over to her mother, showing off the lacy ponytail clip he'd given her as soon as he'd heard she'd be separated from him for the day.

"Evander gave it to me. Isn't it pretty?"

Daphne sent him a surprised look.

"Mom and I made it. It connects." He waved his phone, trying to keep the girl in the dark that her hair clip had a tracking chip in it that connected to his phone so he could keep track of her. Loose lips had sunk more ships than torpedoes, and he didn't want the girl giving away the one thing that might keep her safe if things went south.

Daphne frowned thoughtfully as she studied her daughter and Evander rushed through goodbyes, hoping Daphne wouldn't ask about radio signals and brain tumors.

Wishing he had an attached garage or a secret escape tunnel from the house, he locked the front door behind them and headed to the truck. He gave a reporter who looked as though he was about to step onto the property the finger, and opened the door for Daphne, helping her into the truck.

With one last glance at the house, he pulled away down the tree-lined, sun-dappled street. In his rearview mirror, he saw three cars fall in behind him.

Reporters.

If he'd had any time to prepare, he'd have had Tyrone come over to create a diversion. Instead, Evander began going through a few basic maneuvers, such as timing traffic lights in order to run them and lose

his followers, and using traffic to create buffers between him and those trying to follow him.

"You're going the wrong way," Daphne said.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't realize you wanted to tip off the reporters that we're going to Toronto? And here I thought it would be smarter to have them think we were heading in the direction of Port Carling."

"Sorry," Daphne muttered. "Do your thing."

By the time they were near the next highway exit, he'd lost the reporters. He circled around Bracebridge, heading out to the highway he really wanted, and crossing his fingers that none of the reporters picked up their trail again.

"I hope this is worth it, Daphne."

"Me, too."



DAPHNE NEEDED A DISTRACTION. Lots of them, and the familiar divided highway wasn't providing any. Having Evander ticked off at her for not telling him about Toronto was draining. His unhappy energy was filling the truck and she discovered she didn't like him being upset with her. Not at all.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you about Toronto," she said. "I thought you were listening, and sometimes it feels as though you know what's going on more than I do and I just " The excuses sounded lame. She'd messed up. Plain and simple.

"You need to tell me things."

"I promise I will from now on. I'm sorry."

He gave a sharp nod and she could tell he was already moving past it, but didn't want her to think that it was that easy to be forgiven for something of this magnitude.

"And I don't think of your house as a bunker, either."

His lips flickered, almost as though he was amused.

The truth was, she felt safer and more at home with Evander than she would have expected. Living with the de la Fosses was good and the idea of returning to their quiet little house in Port Carling held surprisingly little appeal. But how much longer could Florence take the rambunctious Tigger? How much longer until having her daughter following Evander everywhere wore on him?

There were still a lot of kilometers to go and too much time to think. Daphne had a general idea of what she wanted to say to Mistral, but she needed a distraction so she didn't turn into a nervous mess who wondered how on earth she'd ever fallen for a man like her ex.

"Have you traveled a lot?" she asked Evander, hoping he was feeling chatty.

"Yes."

"What was your favorite place?"

"In what way?"

"Um, people?"

"Canada."

"Does that count?"

He smiled at her, his eyes teasing. "Of course it does."

"How so?"

"Look at how much land we have, how diverse we are. I was stationed out in a small farming town in Alberta for a while. The people were very down-to-earth. You could tell they'd been through tough times and they depended on each other. Nobody was an outsider or a stranger. They still pulled over to help if someone had an accident or their car broke down. They looked you in the eye and called you on your crap. I liked it."

Daphne smiled at the idea of Evander in the middle of a bunch of tell-it-like-it-is farmers. "It sounds nice." Real. Honest. Very different from the online world she'd come to avoid. It seemed as though her friends and acquaintances presented only their edited, polished, super-mom side, leaving her feeling poorly about her own life and failures. She knew their lives had ups and downs, just like hers, but it still got to her, seeing only the shiny moments.

It was either that or drama created around small things that they'd blown out of proportion. And if there was one thing that bugged Daphne, it was when people competed to see who was having the worst life or the crappiest day.

"Think a town like that would have room for a hippie like me?" she joked.

"It's like Northern Ontario in some ways," Evander continued, ignoring her question. "Although there's maybe more laughing and booze up north."

"There always is. Got to stay warm, right?" This conversation wasn't distracting her. Not nearly enough. Especially the way he was smiling now. It looked good on him, and all she could think about was how those lips had felt against hers this morning in the kitchen. "Why did you keep pushing me away? Upstairs. When I first arrived."

Well, that wasn't supposed to come out.

Evander's eyebrows lifted and his chest expanded as though holding in a breath. Finally, giving her a quick glance, he said, "I've been hired to protect you. If I get involved it will compromise my ability to stay focused and retain a clear mind. I have to be square, not distracted. And you are definitely a distraction."

She liked the idea of being able to distract a man like Evander. He was impenetrable in so many ways, but being able to dig into that armor

and get underneath was more than flattering. It was empowering in a way she hadn't expected.

"And I know, too, with this stuff going on, emotions can get out of whack." His voice was lower now, his head tipped to check his blind spot as he changed lanes. "I'd hate to let things get to a point where you'd regret it later."

"Right. Because I obviously don't know my way around birth control." She'd been down this road before with the one man she'd seen since Mistral, back when Tigger was two. Just because Daphne had a child out of wedlock did not mean she didn't understand what sex led to if one wasn't careful.

"Sorry?" Evander looked uncomfortable, maybe even as if he was contemplating jumping out of the moving vehicle.

"Baby out of wedlock."

"Oh."

It seemed as though he didn't believe she was a man trap. That was good. However, that begged the question of what he did believe she was.

"I don't recommend condoms," she added. "They aren't particularly reliable."

He smiled at her tone.

"So your sisters all fell in love recently?" he probed, his curiosity palpable.

"Yeah." She gave a wistful sigh. "All three in the past six weeks."

How had destiny brought all three of them boyfriends in such a short period of time? Especially when they didn't believe in the legend? And what about her? Was destiny going to pass her over? She had only a week before the tax deadline. What if they lost the island? Would she remain single forever? Had Mistral been her one Nymph Island love match?

"Are you hoping Mistral will ask you back?" Evander's question popped out as though he'd been reading her mind, and she could tell he wanted to take it back.

"I would like him to take an interest in Tigger, that's all," she said honestly.

"He's only met her this summer?"

Everyone assumed she'd walked away, head held high, and never looked back. But in reality she'd tried seeing him in Toronto once when Tigger was six months old. She'd been tired, broke, and desperate for child support. His father had turned her away, not recognizing her or Tigger as anything more than a bother on their front step.

"I send him photos of her. Letters. Drawings."

"Did he reply?"

"Not until this summer."

She turned to Evander, whose expression had turned dark. "Do you think it's a game? His sudden interest? My sisters think Do you think he really wants to be her father? Truly?" Her heart squeezed, waiting for his reply.

She felt as though she knew Mistral and the position he was trapped in, unable to lead his own life. But at the same time, she wasn't sure if her own hopes and wishes were clouding her vision of what was really happening. She wanted to be positive and expect the best, but she knew she had to be realistic, too.

She thought of Mistral trying to play with Tigger at the picnic before Tristen had punched him. Had that all been an act? Because Evander was taking more of an interest in Tigger than Mistral was. Sure, the bodyguard was stuck with her, but he was still being the man she wished Mistral would be, and that wasn't part of the job description.

"It could be a ploy," Evander admitted. "He's a shrewd businessman."

It just seemed so out of character for the young man she had fallen for all those years ago. She wasn't sure who he was now, but it still didn't fit. People didn't change that much in such a short period of time, did they?

"He's successful, isn't he?" Evander added.

"You know, just because he has money doesn't make him special."

"You can say that again." There was a glimmer of a smile playing at Evander's lips.

"He used to be a decent man. He had potential to change the world. Still does."

"I'm sure."

"You have a secret," she said lightly. There was something in the turn of the conversation that was tickling his funny bone. He was keeping something under his hat. Something beyond him thinking Mistral wasn't special because of his money and success. If she didn't know any better she'd think Evander had money or some sort of hidden success.

"We all have secrets."

"Are you carrying a gun today?"

He gave her a look of disbelief. "That's not a secret."

She let out a sigh. "Well, don't bring them into the meeting. In fact, you can stay outside."

"I don't think—"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah." She held up a hand. "I meant outside the room with his latest trigger-happy buddy. You guys can see who has the fastest draw in central Canada while we get down to brass tacks."

He gave her a grudging nod and took a sip of the massive coffee he'd picked up in Barrie when they'd stopped for gas. If she drank that much she'd be peeing all day. That and be as hyper as Tigger on sugar.

She supposed on the coffee-cup-to-body-size equivalent scale his extra large was like her drinking her small. Big coffee for a big guy.

"Mistral is following in his father's footsteps because he doesn't know any better," she said, wanting to talk it out with someone who might understand, or at least be an impartial, analytical party. "He doesn't know how to free himself. He thinks being like his father will win him love and pride. But it never will. His dad will never be able to provide what Mistral needs. Everyone deserves love, especially from their parents. It can be so heartbreaking to not have it, and its absence changes a person." She pressed her palm against Evander's warm forearm, thinking about her daughter and the lack of a father figure. It had to be affecting her, just as it had affected Daphne not having a father during her teen years. "Don't you think so?"

He met her gaze, his eyes warm and safe. "I do."

"Mistral needs a lot of love."

"Is that why you're giving him the benefit of the doubt? Why you're trying to talk sense into him?"

"If you don't believe in the good of every person, what's there to believe in?"

"You haven't been to war." His grip tightened on the wheel and Daphne wondered what all he'd seen with those dark eyes of his. The way they shuttered over emotions, keeping his true self hidden away.

As an experiment, she lightly kissed her fingertips, knowing he saw it in his peripheral vision, then gently placed them against his temple, stretching to do so.

He flinched, jerked the wheel, then straightened the truck again. When he glanced at her, surprise was the dominant emotion on his face. Ha! He couldn't shutter everything away.

"Why'd you do that?" he asked softly. The vehicle had slowed, he'd been so taken off guard, and he picked up speed again.

She smiled. She could get to him. Love fixed everything. Maybe even Evander.



EVANDER WAITED outside the skyscraper's meeting room. He didn't like the idea of Daphne in there alone with Mistral, even though he was just outside the door. Mistral was a man caught between two worlds, and based on what Evander had seen in his life, that made a man unpredictable. It didn't help that Daphne thought she could fix the guy.

Opening his tracking app, Evander checked on Tigger. Still at home. While he trusted his brother to watch out for the girl, he knew that if Mistral and others knew Daphne was here, they could try to do something behind their backs. Not likely, but knowing Tigger was exposed, despite security measures, left Evander anxious to head back to Bracebridge.

He texted his brother. *Anything unusual?*

His brother texted back, *Yeah, this kid's energy levels.*

Did you give her sugar? Daphne says it makes the kid wacky.

Oh. Oops.

Evander shook his head and pocketed his phone, then erred on the side of caution and pulled it out to text, *Don't go outside. Stay in the house. Keep the alarm on.*

Feeling better, he studied Mistral's new bodyguard. He seemed familiar and Evander placed him as an acquaintance from his army days. Again, if Daphne had given him more time he could have found out who the new guy was and done a background check.

Smiling, the new man extended his hand for a shake. "Evander, right?"

"Yeah. Sorry, I can place you in the army or navy—no, army—but not your name."

"Leif McClain." They shook hands. The man looked him in the eye, his grip not too firm, but authoritative enough that Evander took a liking to him. "Good to be forgotten, since I never made it out of boot camp. You had to throw me over that stupid wall every single time."

"Ah. Sorry. I threw a lot of people over if it makes you feel better."

"I wasn't cut out for the army, as I still hadn't hit my growth spurt." He patted his biceps. "How'd you do?"

"Navy. JTF 2."

The man's eyebrows rose in appreciation. "Medals?"

"A few."

Mistral was trying to surround himself with honest, levelheaded men, judging by the personable bodyguard. However, Leif really needed to shut up so Evander could keep an ear out for trouble beyond the closed door.

He had a vision of Mistral trying to badger Daphne, and he turned to the door to check in on her. If he'd had more time to prepare, he could have bugged Daphne so he could listen to their conversation via an earpiece. The quiet mumble of voices on the other side grew louder, but as his hand touched the doorknob, Mistral's man lightly tapped his arm and shook his head.

Evander ignored him and opened the door. It was his job to keep Daphne safe, not listen to the lackey hired by the man voted most likely to hurt her.

Quickly taking in the situation, Evander caught Daphne's gaze. She seemed distraught and he was to her side in a moment. "Everything okay?" He kept his eyes on her, knowing Mistral would try to smooth things over.

"No." Daphne glared across the desk at her ex. "But I suppose that is nothing new." She rose with grace and Evander couldn't help but be pleased to think that the trip to the city was coming to completion. There were too many unknown variables when they were treading on enemy ground.

"I have agreed to cooperate. I've proved I'm trustworthy." The way she spit out the word *trustworthy* he figured the man had questioned her loyalty. "You can't blame me because your corporation didn't follow laws. I purposefully stayed out of the Rubicore fight, something you can't seem to comprehend." Her voice was hard, stubborn.

"You led a protest against us closing our own summer camp."

"It wasn't yours to close. It's a charitable organization on land you bought out from under it with the promise that you'd take care of it on Baby Horseshoe Island. Closing it so you can build your resort isn't taking care of it. That camp is important for teenagers, and both you and I know it."

"I'm not the only one who makes decisions around here." Mistral's face was flushed and Evander wondered how many decisions the man actually got to make in his own company.

She leaned forward, her voice softening. "Be the hero I know you are and open Camp Adaker somewhere new. Tristen Bell has agreed to cover the cost. You'd look like a saint for looking out for those troubled kids. Think of the publicity and goodwill it would generate around your business."

She paused and Evander felt himself holding his breath so he wouldn't miss Mistral's reply. He noted that the new bodyguard was doing the same.

"I'm on your side," Daphne cooed.

Oh, this man was going down. Who could resist her when she got like that? Not a man who was swinging for Team Heterosexual, that was

for sure.

"There's a way to follow the rules with this development and come out on top. Be the good guy, be the hero. As well as make a tidy profit and prove yourself to the corporate world. Everyone could be emulating *you*."

Man, she knew this man's weaknesses and was playing to them like a major league pitcher. Evander should have told her to be active in her life sooner. Then again, he wouldn't have had the chance to hang out with that firefly kiddo of hers. The girl seriously brightened his days in ways he hadn't expected. Daphne, too, if he was honest with himself.

She collected her purse, saying casually, "Think about it. You know me. I wouldn't do anything to hurt you. I have your best interests at heart and I know if we cooperate everyone could get what they want. Everyone."

Daphne turned to the door, and Evander fell into step behind her, shaking himself out of the moment in order to keep one eye on the men. In the doorway, Daphne paused, turning back, and he stepped out of the way so she could see Mistral. "You know it doesn't have to be this way," she said to him. "We could be on the same side again."

"Were we ever really on the same side?"

Evander could see there was no love lost between them, yet the hope in Daphne's eyes nearly crushed him. Her desire to have Tigger's father in their lives was almost unbearable to witness, and the worst part was that Evander knew Mistral didn't have the strength of character to be good for either of the Summers.

Daphne was a smart, competent, and confident person, yet she was falling for the same mistakes women made over and over again. She was believing in the wrong man instead of cutting loose, knowing she deserved someone better.

"There was a time when you wanted to make a difference on this earth," she said. "Money wasn't everything and you wanted to be different from your father, but look at you. You couldn't be more like him if you tried." Daphne had moved back to the desk, facing off against her ex-boyfriend, her fingertips resting lightly on the smooth varnish. "Has he accepted you yet? Is he proud? Have you finally received his love?"

Evander watched, intrigued. The man who had been so removed, emotionless and determined shrank in his fine leather chair. She had him by the ball sack and all she had to do was twist and he'd be a crumpled heap on the floor, wailing for his mama.

Evander had definitely underestimated Daphne.

She turned, pausing again in the doorway. "You're a crappy father, Mistral, just like your dad was. I thought you'd want to be different from him in that regard, but I suppose I was wrong."

With that parting shot, she brushed by Evander, the contact making the hairs on his arm stand up. He grinned at the stunned-looking Mistral, then followed Daphne back down on the elevator and out into the street. She may have just picked a fight or she may have put the man in his place. But either way, Daphne's stock had definitely gone up.

"I think I fell in love back there," he said, helping her into his truck.

"Oh, Evander. You did not." She gave him a dry look.

"No, really. Sexiest thing I've ever seen." He held up his hand as though taking a vow.

She blushed. "That wasn't my best side playing him like that."

Maybe not, but it was still dead sexy and revealed just how powerful she could be when she got out of her own way.

“Can we go to the island?” Tigger asked, tugging on her mother’s arm. They’d barely made it in the door and the kid was all over her as if they’d been separated for weeks rather than hours.

“What island?” Evander asked. The idea of going somewhere again was exhausting. He wasn’t a wimp, but he could use a low-key evening after strutting about in the lion’s den with Daphne poking at the snarling beast. He’d had way too much time on the way back to imagine all the ways Mistral could react to her little showdown today. Everything from the good to the bad to the very ugly.

“The cottage,” Daphne clarified, brushing a mess of curls out of her face. She looked worn-out, and her usual hurried, brisk movements were methodical as she pulled off her sandals. He steadied her with a hand on her elbow, knowing she needed more than he was offering.

“So? Can we go?” Tigger bounced alongside her mother, and Kyle raised his eyebrows hopefully to Evander. Daphne looked at him as well, deferring the decision. She was going to defer to him on going to the family cottage, but not on going to see the man who could possibly be in charge of having someone attack her with a Hummer? Because while everyone kept pointing to Aaron Bloomwood, the fact of the matter was the man had been working for Mistral, whether he’d ordered the attacks

or not. And although Evander hadn't pegged the wishy-washy, weak Mistral as a mastermind, he knew better than to underestimate someone who was scared and easily influenced by others.

"How's Mom?" Evander asked his brother, putting off answering the girl.

"Fine. So? Can we go?" Brick asked. "I've heard all about this magnificent island."

"Why don't you and Tigger go see what you can rustle up for supper, and Daphne and I'll talk about it."

Evander felt fatherly, shocked at how comfortable it was. Then again, Tigger seemed to have a knack for weaving her way into people's hearts, making them feel as though she was theirs.

"That kid is something, isn't she?" He took Daphne's light sweater and hung it on a hook at the door. "So? What's the island about?"

"It's where our cottage is. We go for supper picnics there fairly often."

"You like picnics, don't you?"

"Who doesn't?"

He could think of a few people. Namely those who felt exposed dining out in the middle of nowhere when they had lives to protect.

"You want to go to the island?" he asked, unsure whether Daphne wanted him to be the bad guy and say no to Tigger, or if she was leaving the final call to him due to safety concerns.

She shrugged, a spark of something in her eyes.

She wanted to go.

Of course.

Evander thought back to the short visit he'd had to Nymph Island when he'd been helping Daphne's sister Hailey and her movie star boyfriend, Finian, escape the paparazzi last month. The island had been dark and remote, with crappy cell service. The building had been run-

down and nowhere near secure. And if memory served, it was right across the water from Rubicore's island.

"I don't think your cottage is a safe place to go right now," he said, aware he was crossing his arms.

Daphne placed her hands on her hips, and he could tell by the set of her jaw and the way she was chewing her bottom lip that she was fighting the urge to argue with him. Her life had changed a lot since he'd come into it, and he was beginning to resent the way she held it against him, as if it was his own doing.

"It's a place where I can think," she said.

"They tried to run you off the road, and you practically launched grenades at Mistral today." Evander's temper started to rise. People like Daphne were their own worst enemies. They took control, but over the wrong things. "Do you trust me or not?"

"Trust has nothing to do with this."

"You're not trusting my advice nor my authority."

"Authority?" Her head took a dangerous tilt, and if he had been a smarter man he would have shut up and run. But there was a reason why he was a hired gun and not working in a skyscraper like Mistral. He never shut up. He never ran. It made him good at what he did.

He took a step closer, knowing he was encroaching in her personal space and that she found his size threatening. He would never hurt her, but his number one job was to keep her safe, not become her best friend or give her warm fuzzies.

"Authority?" she repeated.

"Yeah, you have a problem with that?"

"Oh, you are just too much."

Knowing it was a mistake, he bent his head down so his lips were flush with hers. She tasted like raspberry lip gloss and something comforting. Her eyes drifted shut and when he moved away, breaking

the kiss, he had a moment to revel in her unguarded, sweet and innocently beautiful self.

She was the epitome of everything the war had taken from him, and he stepped back, feeling as though he had been hit hard in the chest by a shock wave. She was life and he was falling for her.

“Are you okay?” Her voice was soft, her touch on his arm more firm.

He was a man. He could get through this. It was just a kiss.

But he needed distance. A distraction. Something to keep him preoccupied.

He opened his mouth and said, “Let’s go to the island.”



DAPHNE STOOD in the front entry of Florence’s home and blinked furiously, scrambling to get her bearings. That was some kiss. Again.

He kept doing that.

But this time it was him who looked completely off-kilter afterward.

Head tucked down, Evander strode down the hall with his slight, distinctive limp, disappearing into the kitchen, where Brick and Tigger were hooting with laughter as they worked up dinner plans.

He’d kissed her. Then said they were going to the island.

Which was odd, seeing as she knew he didn’t want to take her there for fear that without his million doodads he couldn’t keep them safe.

While in Toronto she’s seen a lighter side of Evander. One that smiled, and it looked good on him. Unfortunately, he’d seen and liked a side of herself that was awful.

Again, she’d failed in trying to take action. She’d been pushy and mean to Mistral in an attempt to coerce him into working with her and her sisters. She’d said unkind, hurtful things. She’d been the type of woman she hated. And Evander had loved it.

She needed to go to Nymph Island and think. But Evander had made it clear he was willing to die in order to keep her and Tigger safe. That wasn't something she could take lightly, and she feared going to the island would put him in a dangerous position.

In the sitting room she ran the island plan by Florence, half hoping she'd say no. The woman caught Daphne's hands in her own, giving her a steady gaze that reminded her so much of Evander. "Are you okay, dear?"

"Fine. Where did Tigger take off to?"

"She's in the kitchen with Kyle. There's so much life and happiness in that child. You're doing a wonderful job."

Daphne jolted, not expecting the compliment. It felt as though she spent her days trying to keep up with her daughter more than actually guiding and shaping her into someone or something specific. There was very little to take credit for other than a bit of passed-down genetics.

She sat heavily beside Florence, thinking. What kind of parents did Tigger have in her life? A father who destroyed the environment for money and essentially wanted nothing to do with her, and a mother who was cruel to him in hopes of getting him to do things her way.

Maybe letting go of Nymph Island would be for the best. Rubicore and their developments were the future, not old cottages that were lucky to be still standing. Daphne was exhausting herself, trying to make people care about preserving Canada's heritage and environment.

Tigger bounded into the room and Daphne held in a sigh. She didn't have the energy to deal with the girl. Just listening to her natter away at Florence made her want to cry from exhaustion. Being a single mother was all she'd ever known, but the past several days of having support had been eye-opening in regards to how tiring it really was. Especially while trying to keep from getting killed.

She'd always envied how her friends were able to slip off to book club or dance lessons or simply go for a walk on their own. She knew she was lucky that her sisters would step in and take her daughter here and there, so Daphne could get a small reprieve for a few hours. Sometimes all she needed was thirty minutes to herself. Thirty minutes of uninterrupted thoughts, even though the small break often left her feeling guilty. She knew needing that time didn't make her less of a good mother, but it still made her feel that way.

Evander stood over her and she looked up, feeling impossibly small.

"Let's go."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"Really?" Hope bubbled up within her.

"Really."

"We should pack a supper," she said, too exhausted to move.

"Already done. Coming, Mom?"

"I'd love to."

Evander packed everyone into Daphne's repaired van and took the keys. "Mind if I drive? You look beat."

Tears threatened to brim in Daphne's eyes and she nodded, climbing into the back. She didn't know where he'd had her van fixed, how much it cost or even how he'd arranged to get it back to the house. Right now she was just happy not have to do anything but go along for the ride.

Evander nudged her awake in the marina parking lot. Everyone else was already heading down to the dock, and they needed her and the boat key.

"You okay?"

"You were wrong," Daphne said. "I take action in my life. I do things. I organize protests and influence people about the environment."

Man, that was an exhausting endeavor. What would it be like when she worked for Environment Canada? More of the same, only every day and not on her terms? It sounded like a sure path to burnout. "I don't let others do everything for me. I let you fix my van, and I listen when you boss me around about safety stuff now, but that's different. I'm always trying to do what's best for my daughter, as well as ensure we have enough. It's not an easy balance. Today, when I tried to be the person you wanted, I wasn't someone I liked."

He sat in the captain's chair in the van's middle row, angled back so he could look at her.

"Okay."

"Okay?" she asked.

He seemed thoughtful for a moment. "Maybe I was wrong. I got a charge out of seeing you kick Mistral in the proverbial nads today, but you're right. It's not you." He rubbed the side of his face where the scars were, and she wondered what he was thinking. "That wasn't the peace talk you had in mind."

"So now what?" She shivered, worried she'd made things worse with her trip today instead of better.

"We re-strategize."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah." He held out his hand to help her out of her seat, but didn't pull her up yet. "I need to learn how to get out of the way and trust you and your slow-and-steady instincts. You need to do this your way and I need to stop interfering and simply be there to help keep you safe." He swallowed hard, showing her it had been difficult for him to tell her he'd been wrong. She leaned forward, awkwardly hugging him in the cramped space.

"Thank you. You're a real man, you know that?"

His eyes clouded briefly, then without a word, he nodded, drawing her out of the van and down to where everyone was waiting for them.

At the cottage, Tristen's boat was tied up at the dock, and Daphne sighed, knowing that on top of everything, she didn't have the energy to deal with Melanie tonight.

Her sister and Tristen came down the shaded path hand in hand, and Daphne worried they might be interrupting something.

"I'm surprised you let them out of Fort Knox," Tristen said to Evander, shaking his hand. Although he said it with a grin to show he was kidding, Daphne could see tension return to her big bodyguard. It had slowly begun to creep up on him the closer they got to the island, and now it was back in full force.

"We have a picnic," Kyle said, holding up the basket. "We brought way too much food and I'm sure there's enough for everyone."

"Sixth sense," said Florence, tapping her temple with a finger. "I knew there'd be more people."

"We won't be staying long," Melanie said, and Daphne knew it was a lie even before Tristen shot her sister a look. They'd always been good about sharing the cottage, and any of the sisters were welcome at any time, even if the others were using the place. But now that they were all hooking up, Daphne wondered if she would be the odd woman out in a place that had always felt like home.

"Oh, do stay. I'd love to get to know Daphne's family better," Florence said, as introductions were made.

"Love your dress," Kyle said, eyeing Melanie's 1950s-style frock. "I can see the Summer women have a thing for femininity."

Daphne looked down at her T-shirt dress, then over at her daughter, who was in her usual flounces.

"I'm special," Tigger said.

"You sure are," Florence said, giving her a pat.

Daphne frowned at Tigger. She'd been saying the odd, uncharacteristic thing lately. About not causing a fuss, about being special, and something about cycles or circles.

"I suppose we should go up?" Daphne asked, waving the picnic basket toward the path.

They all made their way up to the cottage, Florence taking the ancient lift so she wouldn't have to deal with the steep hill. On the veranda, Daphne began unloading the picnic on the outdoor dining table as Tristen and Melanie brought more chairs. Evander helped his mother out of the lift and joined Daphne.

"Where's Tigger?" he asked.

"Probably making a fairy house."

"Where?"

"Out there somewhere," she said, waving vaguely toward the underbrush behind the cottage.

Evander tensed, the large muscles in his shoulders bunching up. He squeezed the bridge of his nose and said, "You know you're killing me here."

She gently touched his shoulder, wishing she could massage the tension out of him. "Expect the best."

"How am I supposed to do that when I've seen nothing but the worst?"

"Evander, what a thing to say," his mother scolded.

Daphne kept her attention on setting the table, carefully lining up the utensils beside the plates so she wouldn't cry. How could a man see the horrors she was certain Evander had and still keep on living? How had he not been crushed by the knowledge that the world was a dark and nasty place?

"It's okay," she said softly to Florence. "I'm sure he has. I'll call Tigger back in a minute."

"Did you hear I got heritage status for Nymph Island and Trixie Hollow?" said Melanie, her voice a bit too chipper. "They processed it so fast!"

"That's amazing," Daphne said.

"Going forward we should get more tax breaks due to it being a heritage site. As well, any fix ups we do here may be eligible for grants."

"That would be great."

"Tristen said he knows a guy who can redo our roof in the spring." Melanie whispered, checking to make sure the rest of the group was still around the veranda corner, inspecting the rotting steps. "He said he'd pay for it."

Daphne continued setting the table, feeling even more out of place on the island. All her sister's rich boyfriends were going to spruce up the place, squeezing her, the single mother, out even further. Finian had already fixed the chimney, and now Tristen had plans, as well.

That was assuming the cottage would still be theirs next year.

She sighed and listened to Melanie continue talking about the cottage. "I still haven't figured out how Ada, our great-grandmother, came to own the cottage, though. Christophe—the curator at the Port Carling museum—you met him last year at the antiques show? Anyway, he's trying to find a connection with the cottage's name. You know, combine the names Ada and Stewart Baker to get Adaker?"

Daphne nodded, having heard something about this from Hailey the other day.

"So, I think if I could find out more about that and their relationship, then I could really get the public interested in some sort of heritage claim for Heritage Row. I still feel I'm still missing something major. Like it's right there and I just can't see it."

Daphne made a noncommittal sound as her sister paused to look out over the trees and water to the island across the way, where a few old

cottages from the past era still remained.

Silence stretched between them. There was only one more thing for the two of them to discuss. Daphne met her sister's eye and they both looked away.

"How did it go with Mistral?" Melanie asked quietly.

She shrugged. "Time will tell."

"We don't have a lot of that."

Daphne rearranged a few last things on the table. "I think we're about ready to eat. I'll go call Tigger."

Everyone sat, with the exception of Evander, who waited for Daphne to come back with Tigger. When he saw them step onto the veranda, his shoulders relaxed. He helped them into their chairs, then took a seat beside Daphne.

"Have you ever considered yoga?" she asked, as he kept his gaze moving. Always checking for security breaches.

His mother unsuccessfully held back a chortle.

"JTF 2 men do not do downward dog." Evander gave Daphne a look that could have melted steel. She began laughing. It started low in her belly and worked its way up until it was exploding out of her in a way that shook the table. Tigger started in beside her, and soon everyone except Evander was laughing.

The look on his face was priceless, and before long she was wheezing from the effort of laughing so hard. She wiped the tears from her eyes, and said, "Oh, honey. You know we love you."

Evander's expression twisted.

She leaned over and pulled his large shoulders toward her in a half hug. "Has nobody ever told you they love you?" She knew she was probably playing with fire—well, more like a flamethrower filled with jet fuel—but she couldn't resist poking at his serious side.

"No," he said, his voice not wavering one iota.

"Aw." She gave him an extra squeeze before releasing him.

"Now that's simply not true," said his mother. She folded her napkin carefully beside her plate and gave her son The Eye.

Daphne felt someone move behind her, and turned to see her daughter bouncing up beside Evander. Stretching, the girl reached up and wrapped her arms around his thick neck. She gave him a light kiss on the cheek and said, "I love you, Evander."

Melanie gave a happy sigh and Daphne watched the man's reaction. He was struggling with something, but she couldn't identify what it was. All she knew was that he needed more hugs and kisses as well as love in his life.

As soon as the last fork rested on an empty plate to signal the meal was finished, Evander stood to clear the table. Daphne worried she'd pushed things too far with her joking. He wasn't a regular guy, and he'd been through things she couldn't possibly imagine, and had the scars as proof.

She caught up with him in the kitchen, where he was shoving paper napkins into the small garbage can under the sink. His shoulders were bunched, his movements quick and jerky.

Carefully, Daphne came up behind him and slid her hands around his waist, joining them at his belly button. He jumped, his body rigid. She rested her head against his back, listening to his heart race under the skin, through his rib cage and a pile of muscle.

"I'm sorry if I teased you too much. I hope you didn't think I was making light of what you've done."

Evander didn't move, resembling an animal caught in the sights of a hunter. Not moving, not willing to be seen.

Finally, he said, "It's okay. Most people are afraid to tease me."

"Aw. But you're not scary."

"Yes, I am."

She laughed against his broad back, feeling as though she was hugging a bear, and his body gradually softened under her. He braced himself against the counter with his hands, not slipping from her embrace.

"Daphne, if you knew the things I've done."

"I have a child out of wedlock. I get not being perfect."

"It's not that." He turned, breaking her tight grasp as though it was nothing more than a thin thread binding him. "This is different."

"I don't care. I know who you are now. Here. In this moment."

She wasn't sure what she was saying, but it felt as though she was fighting for him. For them. For a chance that he would let himself live again.

That was the problem. He wasn't allowing himself to live and that's all she wanted—him. Alive. With her. Living and laughing their way through life. Together.



IT WAS a good thing she'd got Evander off Nymph Island when she did. Four generations in the Summer family line had fallen in love there, and she was *not* falling for Evander. But things had gotten sketchy a few hours ago.

Tossing herself onto her side, Daphne pulled the thin blanket up under her chin and stared at the sliver of moonlight peeking through the gap between the wall and the curtain of Florence's guest room. How long until this was all resolved and she could go home?

Today hadn't been as productive as she'd hoped, with Mistral becoming defensive rather than open as he'd been over the phone. She'd gone in strong, thinking he was in line with her suggestions, but he'd pulled back.

Maybe she needed to be more like Maya and show up with a whole plan. A business plan.

Kicking her legs off the bed, Daphne sat up and grabbed her phone off the tall, antique nightstand.

"Hey, hope I'm not calling too late," she said to Maya.

"It's okay, Connor and I were just Never mind."

Didn't destiny get it? Daphne was the one who needed someone, not her strong sisters. If anyone needed a man to lean on sometimes, it was her.

No, positive thinking only. She would find someone. Eventually.

Evander.

She laughed at herself. There was no way. She was tired and stressed and he was a steady, comforting presence, that was all. They were too dissimilar. She wanted someone in her life right now only because she was feeling vulnerable and lonely. It was just getting to her. The hopes. The stress.

The amazing way Evander was with Tigger. Another reason she shouldn't feel lonely: she had her daughter. But Daphne wanted a relationship with a man. She wanted family. Love. More kids. Stability. A father for Tigger.

Someone to take over when she was too exhausted to see straight.

"Hey, you okay?" Maya asked, breaking into her thoughts.

"I'm just " She trailed off with a sigh, unsure what to say.

"Yeah."

Her sister got it. Maybe not all of it, but she got it enough that Daphne felt a bit less lonely.

"Can I come over?" Maya asked. "I feel like I haven't seen you in forever."

It was late, but she didn't think that Florence or Evander would mind her having company.

"Sure." Daphne made certain her sister had the address, then clicked off the phone.

Pausing outside Evander's door, she considered knocking, but his light was off. The man needed his rest. He'd be okay with her sister coming over if Daphne was careful about the alarm. Besides, if she saw him sleeping in nothing but his boxers, she wasn't sure she'd be able to hold back. There was a side to him she wanted to learn more about. An intimate side. She had a feeling being Evander's woman would be a very sacred, safe place, and the temptation to try and see if she could fit into that role was all too strong.

A half hour later, her sister and their old friend Polly Pollard were at the front door, and Daphne hoped she remembered the right sequence for turning off the security system so it wouldn't go off and wake the sleeping household.

"I bumped into Polly at the gas station," Maya said as she stepped into the house. "Will Evander have a fit if she comes in, too?"

"Nah, but fair warning he might try to microchip you, Polly." She winked at the woman to show she was kidding.

Their old friend looked sad and tired, but gave a small smile. She'd married for money rather than love, and it looked as though it was starting to take a toll. Daphne remembered her as a vibrant woman, but lately whenever she saw her she seemed worn down by the world.

"Things are pretty rough?" Polly asked Daphne.

"Kind of, but I'm in good hands here. How are your fund-raisers going? Oh, and thanks for getting our mom to go for a mammogram during your breast cancer awareness campaign." If Daphne could rouse people for environmental reasons, Polly could rouse people for a cause. And they were both looking exhausted. Go figure.

"They're going well, thank you for asking." Polly held her hands loosely intertwined in front of her. She was polite and slightly distant.

Not at all the girl they'd grown up with.

"Are you okay?" Daphne asked.

"Hey, can we make some margaritas or something?" Maya asked.

Daphne ignored her sister and watched Polly. The woman's eyes brimmed with tears and Daphne pulled her into her arms, squeezing her tight.

"I filed for divorce." Polly sniffed.

"I'm so sorry to hear that."

"I'm not," she said, straightening up. She adjusted the hem of her trim white shorts, pulling herself together. "It was time. No love lost and all that."

"What happened?" Maya asked bluntly.

Daphne flashed her a look. Sometimes her sister got so wrapped up in what she wanted and where she was going in life that she forgot other people might be feeling tender about things.

"I married for money, and not for love," Polly said. "I got tired of it. That about sums it up."

"Oh," Maya said, apparently satisfied with the answer. "Speaking of money, I think I may have managed to convince Connor that I should get some sort of finder's fee for the dental device, as well as an advance on the project we're working on—better than asking him for a loan for the cottage taxes, right? So, it looks like I may be able to foot my portion of the bill. How are you doing?"

"Less than a week left to pay it off," Daphne said gloomily. She led the women into the sitting room where Florence knitted during the day. Daphne was going to be the one who lost the cottage for them all. And not just for them, but for future generations. For Tigger.

The women took seats and Daphne wondered if it would be okay to raid the de la Fosses' liquor cabinet. She'd contributed with groceries, but just barely, due to Evander persistence that they were guests—something

his mother agreed with. Getting up, Daphne went into the adjoining kitchen and began digging around. She found a bottle of spiced rum and a few cans of cola in the back of the fridge. Carrying them back into the sitting room, she set the girls up with drinks, figuring that tomorrow she could replace what they consumed.

"Do you think we should take the offer?" Maya asked. She turned to Polly and explained, "The cottage is going to be sold in a tax sale in less than a week if we don't come up with several years' worth of back taxes. We've all decided we'll pay our own equal share, which is a lot. But we've had an offer to purchase."

"Trixie Hollow?" Polly said, a note of loss lowering her voice. "What a shame. Is there anything I can do?"

Polly, when she and Hailey had been close, had spent tons of time at the cottage and likely had good memories of the place, as well. It seemed as though everyone who went there did.

"I don't think so, but thanks," Daphne said, topping up the woman's glass.

"You're that far away from making the payment?" Maya asked.

"Depends if I sell more paintings. It's been doing okay, but I'm still short."

"This sucks."

"Tell me about it."

"What about Simone?" Polly asked. She adjusted her string of pearls and watched the sisters as though unsure whether she was overstepping her bounds.

"You think she'd like to buy a painting?" The honorary Summer sister and boutique owner was expanding into making her own dresses to sell, and it was unlikely that she had money laying around to buy a painting. Not that Daphne charged a lot, but still. She knew money was tight for their friend, too.

"I meant have a show in her boutique, like she did for Hailey last month. That was a success, right?" Polly said.

"Hot diggety," Daphne said. "Why didn't I think of that?"

"That's what I do. Solve problems." Polly tipped back her glass, emptying it.

"How's Melanie doing? Does she have her portion?" Daphne asked, hoping she wouldn't be the only sister who couldn't come up with the money on her own.

"She's been selling her antiques—again," Maya said. "Did you hear what Tristen did?"

Both women nodded. The fact that Tristen had gone out and accidentally bought all the antiques Melanie had put up for sale, and then given them to her as a gift, had become a bit of a legend.

"Add in that tax break she got through the reassessment and I think she's pretty much covered."

"I'm going to be the one who loses it, aren't I?" Daphne moaned.

"Well, as Mom says, it's up to destiny," Maya said with a cackle as she finished her drink.

"I need a sugar daddy," Daphne decided with a laugh.

"Somehow, I can't see you with one of those," Maya said.

"You're currently living with the billionaire," Polly stated.

"Obviously the grapevine has things incredibly inaccurate, as usual," Daphne said, taking a sip of the spiced rum.

"This is Evander de la Fosse's house, right?" Polly said, her glass languidly hanging in her hand as she gazed around the old home, taking in the high ceilings and crown molding.

"It's his mother's. I doubt he's a billionaire in disguise."

"Quite the contrary." Polly leaned forward, elbows on knees, voice dropping to secret-revealing tones. "He used to protect princes. He'd take

high-risk jobs protecting royalty over in the Middle East when everything went haywire. He even got himself blown up."

If anyone knew about billionaires, it was Polly, but she was reaching a bit with this one.

"Getting yourself blown up for being a macho man doesn't make you a billionaire," Daphne said.

"If you do it enough times, it does."

"What do you mean?" Daphne's heart thundered at the thought of Evander allowing himself to get blown up over and over again as a way to accumulate wealth.

"You get paid fairly well to protect a prince whose life is in danger. If you get blown up, you not only get a bonus added to that danger pay, but some sort of insurance gives you extra money, as well. It's ridiculous, really. But only the elite can get a job like that. Shake out his couch and see if you can find an extra grand or two. Or, you know. Use your feminine wiles."

"I am not going to sleep with Evander in order to save the cottage."

Polly and Maya focused on something behind Daphne.

"He's in the doorway, isn't he?"

They both nodded silently, eyes round.

"You're drinking my rum and have uninvited guests that you didn't run past me," Evander said, his voice low and unimpressed.

"Sorry, I'll buy you a new bottle. And you know Maya." Daphne stood, turning to Polly, wishing Evander wasn't looking so unwelcoming. "This is Polly Pollard. She's an old friend. I didn't want to wake you and I reset the alarm."

"Nice to meet you," Evander said, stepping into the room to shake her hand before returning to his spot in the doorway.

"You as well," Polly said. "I apologize for drinking your rum." She lifted her glass, looking demure, harmless, and a little bit on the prowl.

Evander said nothing, just stared at Daphne. She felt as though she didn't know this man all of a sudden. "Are you really a billionaire?" she asked, cringing as the words came out of her mouth. It didn't make a difference if he was, and now he'd think it did.

He turned on his heel. "Make sure you reset the alarm when you go to bed."

Daphne eased back onto the sofa and faced the two women. Polly appeared thoughtful, while Maya looked as though she was trying to hold in the giggles.

"Good on you," Maya said. "Just like the rest of us. Shackled up with billionaires, but not asking for a dime. What on earth is wrong with us?" She let out a snort of laughter. "We should be like Great-Grandma Ada and milk it." She laughed again. "There's some awesome irony in here somewhere, isn't there?"

"I guess we're too independent for our own good," Daphne said with a sigh.

"Are you talking about the Ada who started Camp Adaker?" Polly asked.

"The one and only."

"She really did know how to work an angle." Polly lifted her glass in a toast. "Cheers to that."

Maya and Daphne frowned at her.

"Well, I mean she got that cottage given to her when she was pregnant with your grandmother."

"What?" Maya perched on the edge of her armchair. "What? Say that again?"

"It was a baby-keep-quiet gift. He was married. Stewart Baker—the father."

"How do you know that?" Maya leaned forward.

"I work on the camp board."

“And?”

Polly was dishing out fresh info and acting as though it was common knowledge. How did she know more about their family than they did, when Melanie had been digging for weeks?

“Ada and Stewart started the camp.”

“Okay. Melanie’s suspected that. The camp name part,” Maya said.

“It’s an epic love story.” Polly cooed into her spot, looking dreamy. “Ada and Stewart used to camp out on Nymph Island when they were working on the summer camp. The island became their lover’s nook.”

“Destiny causes people to fall in love when they’re on the island,” Maya said, eyes focused on something in the distance.

“Yeah, but how do you know the cottage was a keep-quiet gift?” Daphne asked.

Polly shrugged. “There are old letters at the camp. It’s all written between the lines.”

“Letters?” Daphne pressed.

“You have to tell Melanie.” Maya smacked the table with the flat of her hands. “That’s so crazy that they’re still around and we had no clue.”

Daphne pinched her lower lip between her fingers, thinking. She turned to Maya. “Could you help me create a business plan for an ecotourism retreat?”

“A business plan?”

“Ecotourism is a fun idea,” Polly said. “My brother, Josh, the firefighter?” She waited for them to nod in recognition. “He just went on one of those trips. It was expensive, but he said it was incredible.”

“I think Mistral could turn Baby Horseshoe Island into a nature retreat instead of the resort he has planned,” Daphne said. “He could obey environmental laws and guidelines, as well as have his development. He would have to scale back some of the things he’s

planning to do, but it could be an ecofriendly retreat. A blending of tourism, development, and environmental awareness. But I need to be able to show him the bottom line."

"It's kind of late to make changes to his plans, isn't it?" Maya asked.

A feeling of defeat washed over Daphne. For some reason she wanted to show Evander that she could do this, more than she wanted Mistral to make changes to his plans—as beneficial as that would be.

She emptied her glass. "I have to try."

Evander barely recognized Daphne as she sat in the meeting room wearing Maya's borrowed pantsuit. Her hair was swept up into what Tigger had informed him was a French twist. Even though the outfit was a bit big, she looked professional and businesslike. Not at all like the woman he had come to know and feel comfortable with. When people began acting unlike themselves, it was time to worry. That was when the unexpected happened.

He figured after their chat in the van the night before last that she would go back to Miss Take-It-As-It-Comes, instead of trying to be hard-edged. But here he was, on his toes again. At least before calling this morning's meeting she'd given him enough of a heads-up that he'd been able to phone Austin Smith, the paparazzi, to create a diversion so they could leave the house in peace. The man, true to his word, had created a buzz that had all the lurking reporters sprinting away from the house, cameras waving so he, Daphne, and Tigger could sneak off to Port Carling to meet with Mistral.

Again.

Evander took up his post at the door of the library's basement meeting room as Daphne greeted Mistral by handing him a stapled bundle of papers.

Maya sat beside Daphne, her lips white from the effort of keeping them pinned shut and not sharing all her business know-how. Outside the room, Tyrone was caring for Tigger, as Kyle had stayed behind to take their mother to her radiation appointment.

Mistral's new hired gun, Leif, leaned back in his chair.

Daphne began outlining the business plan she'd been working on with Maya since the night of the cottage picnic. A plan for an eco-retreat on Baby Horseshoe Island, rather than the monstrosity Mistral had planned.

Evander figured it was a case of being at least a year too late, but admired Daphne's determination, as most people would have given up, then always wondered if they could have made a difference.

Mistral shifted, looking uncomfortable. "I appreciate you going through the bother to put something together, but we're so far into the development that changing plans now could really set us back. Plus, the cost alone "

Evander had to give it to him, the man at least looked apologetic.

"I understand that," Daphne said softly as she pushed a sheet of paper across the table toward him. "That is why Maya and I came up with this."

Mistral held a finger over the graph, his attention on Daphne. "What is this?"

"Money." She slid a bullet-point list toward him. "And this is how to change direction without losing any. Basically, you're simplifying what you already have planned. So it will actually cut your construction costs. You can make these changes, do it under budget and still open on the scheduled date a year and a half from now. You'll be offering fewer services to your clients, which will lessen your overhead. As well, you'll be offering things you don't have to build or maintain, such as birds

and other wildlife, and the peace and quiet of nature. In essence, build less, charge the same.”

Mistral leaned back, leaving the graphs on the table.

“Ecotourism isn’t a cheap vacation,” Maya blurted out. Hands clasped, she glanced at Daphne, then added, “We know you already have plans for the island, but the problem is that at the rate you’re running into compliance issues, you’re never going to get it built.”

Mistral opened his mouth to argue, his face red. Evander took a step closer to the table, arms loose at his side, ready to act.

Maya continued, “I know you’ve got several agencies hot on your tail, so let’s be honest. Things haven’t been going easy for you. You’re losing money waiting for permits and plans to get pushed through, and the issue with the municipality not following permit protocols is not cool. Nobody’s going to back down on that fight.” She leveled the man with a steely look and Daphne shifted uncomfortably. Evander didn’t blame her. Maya was pretty darn direct. Painfully so.

“You can either carry on with your original plan and hope you don’t go belly-up before you get through the delays, or you can give Daphne’s idea a serious look. It has incredible merits and I believe she is ahead of the game in terms of trends in tourism.”

Maya leaned back. “I honestly don’t see how you could fail with this. In fact, Connor MacKenzie took a look at the plans last night, and if you don’t do this, he will. You’re lucky Daphne’s given you first right of refusal.”

Mistral’s head tilted to the side. They had him.

The Summers had been underestimated again.

Maya stood, and a panicked look flashed across Daphne’s face. Evander awaited his cue from her.

“I still don’t see how changing my plan is going to allow me to come out financially ahead,” Mistral stated. He tried to emulate Maya’s earlier

posture by leaning back in his chair, as though he was the one in control. It was obvious the man wanted to learn more.

"Here on page six," Daphne said, pushing papers toward him.

"Read at your leisure," Maya said. "Daphne and I have another meeting to get to." She checked her watch. "If you want to work with us you'd better let us know soon, because we're pulling this off the table in four days."

"Four days?" Mistral began flipping pages and Leif scooted closer to the table to help him find whatever he might be looking for. "I'll have to ask my dad."

Pansy. The man didn't even run his own company? No wonder things were so messed up.

"Don't forget that we own the rights to this resort plan," Maya said. "Don't try opening it elsewhere."

"I also made a list of the endangered species in the area," Daphne said. "It's something that could—"

Both Maya and Evander reached for her. They had Mistral where they wanted him. It was time to shut up.

"Everything you need to know is in the package," Maya said, pushing Daphne out the door. They left Mistral and Leif hunched over the papers.

Maya shut the door, and said, "I think that went well." She gave them a bright smile that reminded Evander of Daphne.

"Do you think he's interested?" Daphne asked, her hands twisted into a tangle.

"We'll hear from him soon enough," Maya said.

Daphne turned back to the door and Evander cringed, catching her hand. She didn't know when to let well enough alone, did she?

"What did you forget?" he asked.

"I just wanted to ask if he wants to see Tigger, since he's out here today."

Evander shook his head. "One thing at a time. Don't distract him." With a gentle hand on her shoulder, he moved her away from the door, wishing they had the kind of relationship where he could give her a hug.

Maya was watching, her lips pulled into a frown.

Maya would make a good soldier, with her determined, straightforward approach, but Daphne had too much hope and too much heart. She'd make a lousy soldier, and for that reason it made Evander like her all the more.

Against his better judgment, he pulled her close, wrapping his arms loosely around her. She leaned in, resting her head against his chest. She trembled, making him think of a sapling in need of protection from the storm.

"I'll go round up Tigger." Maya hustled off, and Evander wished she'd come back. He was doing a sister's job right now. He should be rounding up the kid and she should be doing the mumbo-jumbo, loosey-goosey, huggy thing her sister needed. Not him.

He smoothed Daphne's hair, reveling in its straightness when bullied into a twist.

No, definitely not him.

He allowed himself to snuggle her closer.

Mistral and Leif left the room, Mistral not even looking their way, and Evander had to struggle not to go after the man. The way he'd dismissed Daphne during the meeting had bothered him. Daphne was right here, wanting Mistral in her incredible life, and the man couldn't even give a crap. He was taking everything for granted. His freedom. His life. Other people. Even ideas. What was the point of Evander getting

blown up and going to war if goofs like Mistral could sit around in offices and ignore great ideas?

This was a democracy. There was freedom to try new things. To live a real and full life. But what was the point of it all if you were going to live by tight rules and never try stepping out of the box? If you were never going to even bother to try and stretch a little?

Evander hadn't gone to war so men like Mistral could ignore their awesome kids. The man didn't have an inkling of what he was missing. If Mistral could see what Evander saw, he'd be a changed man. But Evander didn't have the power to open the man's eyes. Mistral had to make the choice to open them and to see everything he had.

Sometimes, Evander had discovered, you had to go across the world and get shot at in order to understand just how precious one small child growing up in Canada could be.

He shook his head. Mistral didn't even know what section of the dictionary to find the word *lucky* let alone where to see it in his own life.

"Mistral doesn't realize what he is missing," Evander said, hugging Daphne tighter as Tigger came bounding over, her face lit up like sunshine. "He has absolutely no idea."



DAPHNE HAD BEEN MOPING around his mother's house all day and Evander had finally figured out a decent way to distract her. Yesterday's meeting with Mistral had torn a piece out of her, and he could only imagine how she must feel—rejected at every turn.

He peeked into the sitting room, where his mother was patiently teaching Tigger to knit, her usually smooth ball of yarn a mess of tangles at their feet. Kyle was trying to sort it out without getting

attacked by Rudolph, laughing whenever the cat pounced. Radiation had gone okay, but Evander could see how tired Florence was.

He climbed the stairs to the bedrooms and found Daphne sitting cross-legged on her bed, her head in her hands, elbows on knees. She was wearing uncharacteristic jeans and a T-shirt, her feet bare.

Gripping the door frame above his head, Evander leaned his torso into the room. "Bored?"

He definitely was.

There hadn't been a hint of danger in almost a week. And the past few days of checking his monitors and security measures for breaches had become a tedious, mindless habit that was making him wonder if he was missing things because there was never anything to see.

Were the Summers finally safe? Oddly enough, Daphne hadn't asked to go back to her house other than to pick up a few things.

She turned to him, her eyes sad. "Just feeling sorry for myself."

"Isn't there a yoga meditation thing for that where you shove your butt in the air while sticking out your tongue?"

"Probably."

It occurred to Evander that he didn't know how to proceed from here. An eight-mile run usually helped him out of any funks, but he didn't think sending Daphne out was a wise idea. Not yet. Who knew if Aaron Bloomwood was still on the warpath, especially if he was indeed working for Mistral's father, who obviously ran Mistral. And if Mistral actually brought Daphne's new development idea to his father's attention, Evander could pretty much guarantee Aaron would do something stupid in order to preserve all he'd been trying to accomplish in making a name for himself within Rubicore and the planned development.

"So?" Evander said, not quite self-centered enough to walk away from the woman and her blues.

"So?" she replied.

"What's got you down?"

She let out a long sigh. "What doesn't?"

He let go of the door casing and sat down beside her on the bed, making the mattress dip so low she had to shift away from him in order to not fall against him. She smelled like sunshine.

"List the blues. It'll be like skeet shooting. You fire, I'll blast them."

He got a flicker of a smile. "For one, I'm stuck living in G.I. Joe's headquarters."

"Ouch." Of all the crappy things she had to choose from, and she picked that first? He'd actually believed they were doing pretty good at the cohabitation thing.

"I'm sorry. That came out wrong. I mean, the food is much better here than in the army, from what I've heard." She gave him a half smile that made him want to kiss her lips.

He shifted farther away.

She began listing more blues-causing grievances. "My ex wants nothing to do with our daughter. My sisters are in a battle with him. His partner tried to run me off the road and break into my home. His bodyguard would have shot me or something if you hadn't intervened." She shuddered and Evander eased closer in case she needed him. "My life has become an action movie. I don't even have the money to help with the cottage. My sisters are all going to be able to raise enough to not only save the place, but their billionaire boyfriends are going to fix it up. Meanwhile, I'm over here, about to lose the island for our family after a hundred years of ownership. All because poor Daphne the single mom is an irresponsible hippie with her head in the clouds, and doesn't understand money. What I understand about money is that there is never enough. No matter how much I budget or skimp or save or buy used."

"Are you looking for an ear? Or do you want me to argue those points and shoot them down?" Evander angled himself so he was facing her more fully. "First of all, I think you're doing a bang-up job of keeping those ducks in a row. Especially that bouncing one you've got going on. But Daphne, you can't control what others do and how they run their own lives. You can only change your own. But by doing so, sometimes we can change someone else's."

"I guess." She paused, running her hands through her hair. "I just wanted to prove that I could take control over my life and that I could make changes. And I can't." She met his eyes. "You were right."

Hearing her say that wasn't as rewarding as he'd thought it would be.

"You're in a tough spot right now and there aren't a lot of directions for you to maneuver. Don't judge yourself based on the ability to take charge over the past week and a half. You've tried a lot harder than most people would in your situation."

"Are you blowing sunshine?"

"You should know me better than that by now."

"Are you really a billionaire?"

The shock must've shown on his face, judging by her reaction. "Yeah," he said simply. "Pretty much."

Only a few dollars short and a lifetime too late to really enjoy it.

"I would never have figured. You carry it well."

"Was that a compliment?"

"You get so few that you don't recognize them?" She gave him a goofy smile and he could see that she was well on her way to a cheerful mood again. Back to the Daphne he had come to love.

"And," she said, holding up a finger in warning, "complaining about money is not me asking you to save me. I know you heard me, Maya, and Polly talking."

"You'd make a horrible gold digger."

She sighed, shoulders drooping. "I know."

"Come." He stood and held out his hand. "I want to show you something hard."

She rolled her eyes with a groan. "I have no interest in touching your gun."

"Don't make this dirty."

She blushed in a way that made him grin inside as he led her out of the house.



DAPHNE SHOULD HAVE KNOWN.

Evander wanted to teach her kung fu. Or karate. Or jiu-jitsu. Some sort of martial art that was not created for aligning one's chi, but rather for killing someone with one's bare hands. The man was never going to understand her, was he?

Digging her bare toes into the soft grass of the sloping backyard, she put her hands on her hips and cocked her head to the side.

"Don't give me that look," Evander said.

"Which one?" She tipped her head to the other side. "The one where I am staring at you as though you are a crazy fool who knows nothing about me even after living elbow to elbow for six days? That one? Or maybe the one where you try to make me into a killer so I can be like you, the big army hero."

He took her down.

She didn't even see it coming. One moment she was giving him sass and the next moment she was flat on her back in the grass, the heavy weight of his body pushing into hers. She kind of liked it.

Even though the move was taught to him for reasons she was opposed to.

"I never said I was a hero." His breath was warm on her forehead. She could stay here awhile. He hadn't even hurt her, laying her out flat.

"Do that again. That was really cool."

"No."

She stuck out her tongue and he pulled her to standing. He maneuvered her hands so they were in front of her face, elbows pointed down. "We'll start with a few blocks."

"I want to take more action in my life, but not in a kung fu action movie way, Evander."

Then again, if she got a chance to hit Evander she probably wouldn't refuse. Yeah, yeah, she was a peace-loving person who believed in words before violence, but she figured she owed him one for the way he'd cramped her style and messed with her chi's alignment. And she hated to admit it, but this was kind of perking her up for some weird reason.

"Take out your frustrations on me," he said, beckoning her with his raised hands. He had them positioned as if he was going to chop through something.

She snorted. "I'm not going to hit you." He'd just block every hit she tried to make, which would lead to immense amounts of frustration.

She contemplated his face, the strength of his bones. She'd probably break her hand if she managed to land a hit. "Can you teach me how to wipe that grin off your face?" she asked.

"Which one?" he teased. "This one where I look at you as though you don't know me after living elbow to elbow for six days?" He gave her a wicked grin that stirred something fizzy deep in her belly. "You liked that one?"

She lunged at him and he caught her, spinning her around, pushing her up against the trunk of a nearby birch. His breath was tantalizing on her bare neck and she leaned her head to the side, needing to feel his lips graze the tender skin.

Instead he stepped back, releasing her.

"I was having a very nice feel-sorry-for-myself session up there, you know."

"Beating something will fix you up."

Daphne rolled her eyes. Typical man.

Evander made dodging moves as though they were in a boxing ring, and she tried to hold her interest. The sunflowers along the back window were starting to open. Fall was coming. She was going to have to put Tigger into school soon. Would she have enough money to cover the requested back-to-school supplies? She hadn't registered Tigger in the local elementary, unsure why she'd dragged her feet. It was only kindergarten. She hadn't sent her daughter to optional junior kindergarten, figuring too much school would be hard on a bouncy girl like Tigger, even though it would have been cheaper than day care.

Evander's open hand whizzed by Daphne's ear as he faked a jab. Without thinking, she blocked him.

"Good, good!" he said encouragingly.

He threw another jab and she blocked that as well. She had that job interview with Environment Canada tomorrow morning. She'd never thought a nine-to-five position would hold appeal, but with her daughter starting school maybe it was a good answer. Financial stability. Benefits. Retirement package. She'd hadn't saved a nickel for retirement yet. She blocked another jab and yawned. She'd also need flexibility in her schedule. Would they be able to offer that?

But could she make a difference working for the government? She needed that sense of fulfillment in a job if she was going to be there

full-time.

"Let's mix things up a bit," Evander said, backing off. Good. He was getting annoying.

Would Environment Canada allow her to take a grassroots approach? She supposed she could always quit if it didn't work out.

Evander did some sort of crazy move, dropping low on the lawn, one leg whipping out to knock her feet out from under her. She landed hard on her butt.

He paled and was over her in an instant. "Are you okay?"

She blinked up at him. This close, she saw the flecks of gold in his eyes that she'd forgotten about. He had nice eyes.

"Daphne?"

His concern was so genuine, her throat closed up. She rolled onto her left hip and stood, giving herself distance. Dusting herself off, she said, "I'm fine. I just wasn't expecting it."

"I'm sorry. You were just blocking everything and I "

"I was what?"

"You were blocking me like you'd done this before. I figured it was time to step things up. What kind of training do you have?"

"Training?"

"Martial arts. Karate or something?"

"Tai chi. Yoga."

"Huh." He leaned back on his heels. "Maybe I should try yoga, after all. You're good."

The compliment was unexpected and Daphne felt herself blush.

"You went to this sort of Zen place," Evander was saying.

"I was thinking. Are we done? I'm going to get a sunburn. I didn't put on lotion."

Evander repositioned himself, taking on his typical shoulders-back, all-business body language. "I need to teach you self-defense."

"Why?"

"It's something I can do for you."

"Aren't you already doing enough?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Fine." She threw up her hands. "Teach me how to kill someone. Put a dark hue on my aura."

"There's a positive energy associated with using your body to defend yourself. This is going to give you strength and power."

"Okay. Show me." She tipped up her chin, fighting to be positive. She always worked so hard to show the world a happy side, and it seemed as though Evander simply walked up and it all just drifted away as though it had never been there, revealing all her hurt and anger. The hurt and rejection she kept hidden inside. He always released it, and she hated feeling that way. It was out of control and it wasn't happiness. Those emotions were so dark and strong they could take over her life, destroy her. Her feet ate the ground between herself and Evander as she threw all her hurt and anger into her hands, thrusting them against his broad chest. He stumbled backward, his eyes wide.

To her surprise, he shoved back. She caught herself before she fell, and whirled on him, fists clenched and swinging. If he'd been a second slower, she would have hit him a good one right on the cheekbone. Instead, he blocked her and dropped into a ready position, legs bent in a crouch, arms out and ready to block her jab. She imitated his position, glad she was in jeans for once.

He wiggled his fingers at her as though to say, "Give it to me. Give me your best shot."

She knew she couldn't take him. She had nothing in her arsenal that could get through to a man as trained and as ready and aware as he was in this moment. The lawn stretched out behind him, birds chirped

in the sky, a light breeze kissed her skin, and in front of her was a man as large as a grizzly bear, ready to take her down as soon as she moved.

She dropped her arms in defeat. This was her life right now. She couldn't move without being taken down. She could throw goodwill and ideas out there and they'd be swatted right back out of the sky again, as though someone was standing over her, swinging a giant flyswatter.

Tumbling into the grass, she held in a choking sob. Evander was wrapped around her in an instant, pulling her onto his lap. He held her so tight it was both confining and comforting. Soothing and painful.

It was perfect.

The sobs spilled out of her and his lips burned trails across her forehead, laying kiss after kiss as though paving a highway of sympathy across her skin.

She tipped her head up so the kisses would land lower on her face. The heat of his skin touching hers left tingles along her cheekbone, over the bridge of her nose, before curving around to her lips.

Their kisses turned greedy and hard, bruising skin as they tried to give away the pain in their souls. Her palms ran up his sides, untucking his perfectly ironed shirt. His skin was hot under her fingers, and she tracked over small ridges of scars as though they were a sandy lake bottom under her touch.

His hand ran up over her T-shirt, and she sighed. It had been so long since anyone had touched her. Consumed her. Loved her.

Their kisses turned frantic as she straddled him, plucking at the buttons down his front. All thought left her mind for long glorious seconds. Her body tingled with anticipation and everywhere it touched Evander's she felt as though she was caving in to him. She wanted to be his, to be seen, to be felt.

Evander whispered something, his voice raw. She smiled against his mouth, pushing his shirt off his shoulders. It was caught on something.

Her fingers stumbled across something hard. His gun.

She scrambled out of his lap, suddenly aware of what she was doing and with whom. He was her bodyguard. He was being paid to protect her. He was a wonderful man, but he'd made it clear that being together would cloud his judgment. She needed him clear-minded for her, for Tigger.

Chest heaving, she fell to the grass, staring at the handsome man who locked his eyes on hers, his gaze echoing what she wanted. What she needed. Echoing the lust. He felt it, too. The connection. It fizzed and sparked between them like wet Pop Rocks candy. Evander was like nothing she'd ever experienced. Not even Mistral.

He was the man she wanted, despite everything. Daphne Summer wanted Evander de la Fosse with everything she had.

Daphne walked slowly and carefully down the old wood steps the led into the basement. She'd peeled herself off of Evander's smoking hot body on the lawn six hours ago and had spent the last six agonizing hours wanting him. Avoiding him. Six hours of trying to be good. And now she'd had enough.

She hadn't been in the basement before. It wasn't exactly off-limits, but hadn't been part of the welcome tour of the house.

She paused, doubting herself. Would getting involved with Evander put everyone at risk? Would it affect him? Maybe he'd changed his mind about getting involved with a client since nothing dangerous or scary had happened for almost an entire week.

Music and light flooded her way as she continued to creep down the old staircase, a hand trailing along the wall on either side. From her vantage point, the basement looked as though it had been finished. She paused at the bottom, then crossed the laminate floor, stopping in the doorway where the music was pumping from. The room was brightly lit, with mirrors along one wall. Foam exercise mats interlocked across the floor. The stereo played "Demons" by Imagine Dragons loudly enough that Evander, who was in a corner, didn't hear her clear her throat.

He was shirtless, with mounds of muscles rippling. Sweat slicked his skin, making it shine under the lights. He was tanned, strong, healthy, and utterly irresistible.

The room was filled with exercise equipment, weight machines, and barbells so massive it seemed impossible that anyone should be able to lift them, let alone one man. Evander was pumping iron, doing biceps curls with weights that looked large enough to weigh down a member of the Mafia sent to go swim with the fishes. Watching Evander, Daphne wondered how he managed to not rip through shirts. He was compact and powerful.

His intense focus on his movements made her breath catch. She stood in the doorway, uncertain whether to proceed. The song changed to something dark with a lot of electric guitars, and Evander switched exercises without apparent thought. Setting down the barbells, he stepped to a machine and began doing weighted squats. The machine's round weights were larger than the tires on her minivan, and she wondered if Evander ever worried about being crushed.

When she figured his legs must be burning, he reached for a rope and began skipping. His arms crisscrossed in front of him over and over, picking up speed. She'd thought that Tigger was a good skipper, but Evander was light on his feet in a way that belied his size. The man was dangerous.

She stepped back, preparing to sneak away, feeling as though her intrusion had led to her seeing a side of Evander she wasn't quite prepared for. Her movement caught his eye and his intense focus was gone in a flash. He dropped the rope and came to her, a hint of primal aggression just below the surface despite his concerned look. She stepped back, a hand at her shirt collar.

"What's wrong?" he demanded.

"Nothing. Supper's ready."

He stared at her for a moment, and she knew he'd seen through the lie. All week, his mother and brother had planned meals around his routine, and today was no different. He always said to go along without him if he wasn't ready in time. Daphne had intruded upon his space, crossed the line.

Evander watched her with those dark, brooding, probing eyes of his and she felt exposed. Around him, nothing ever stayed hidden.

"You're a crappy liar," he said, though his expression was kind, amused.

She moved her mouth, but no words could come out. He was so *masculine*. Large. His shoulders so broad, his waist so tapered, hips so narrow. He was so *man*. It made her hungry. And not for supper.

Slowly, as though it was just dawning on Evander that his body was holding her under its spell, he gave a hint of a knowing smile.

So few emotions ever made it to Evander's surface that Daphne felt similar to a blind woman seeking hints under her fingertips to find out what was going on with the man.

She wished it was her body making *him* speechless, throwing him off, making him be the one wanting more than he could have.

Without thinking, she reached out, placing her hands on either side of his sweaty face, bringing his lips down to hers. For all his strength, there wasn't a hint of resistance, and he made the move as easily and fluidly as though it was his idea.

Daphne slid her tongue inside his mouth, the warm sweetness overpowering her. There was something about Evander that felt right. Safe. Hers.

She pushed her body against his and his arms slowly came around her, cupping her in a way that felt as though a piece of what had always been missing was coming home at last. It felt as though this was the only place she was ever supposed to be.

Sighing against his mouth, she broke the kiss. Keeping her eyes closed, she savored the moment, tucking it away for later, when he would surely slip out of her life. The thundering of the music's bass echoed in her chest cavity, jumbling her irregular heartbeat in a way that felt like discord. Welcoming discord.

"What do you want, Daphne?"

"You."

"You know I can't do real life," he whispered, his voice anguished. "Relationships. Family. I can't be the man you need. The man you deserve."

"Try going with the flow to see what happens. You might surprise yourself." She teased a finger down his chest, loving the way it slid in one long glide, making her think of other things. More carnal things.

"You are the kind of woman men wait for," he said, removing her finger from where it had paused between his hot skin and the elastic of his workout shorts.

She sighed. That sounded really good, but it wasn't what she was looking for. She sagged against his body, wondering why he wouldn't just do what they obviously both wanted.

"Don't you want me?" she asked, hating the vulnerability in her voice.

"Want has nothing to do with this."

"Is it because I'm a mom?"

"Not in the way that you think."

"Why do men have a problem with understanding that mothers still have wants and needs?"

She could tell her bluntness had caught him off guard. He ran his fingers through his hair, then gently rested a heavy hand on top of her head.

"Because mothers are special. Sacred. You treat them with the honor and respect that they deserve. You only take them to your bed if you feel you can do their lives justice."

Great. Now she was going to bawl.

"Fine." She made her voice harsh, turning on her heel before stomping up every single step to the main level. She hoped he realized that respect and honor were not what she was looking for with him. She needed someone to hold her tight and tell her it would be okay. She needed someone strong enough to make her forget her problems and responsibilities for a few moments. Not one more man rejecting her.

Being together for a moment in time didn't have to be complicated. Because when it came to love, it was the simplest thing in the world, and she wasn't even asking for that.



EVANDER PARKED his truck outside the government office for Daphne's job interview. He came around and let her out, holding his umbrella over her head. He should have brought two, but his mind was elsewhere. Pushing Daphne away when she was offering herself, no strings attached, last night had been one of the hardest things he'd ever had to do. Ever since, she'd been giving him the cold shoulder, which told him that, somehow, whether Daphne realized it or not, there would have been strings attached to a night of lovemaking. And those strings most likely would have been feelings. Deep, honest, true feelings.

"Happy birthday!" Tigger squealed to her mother before Evander closed the door.

"Good luck," he said to Daphne as she hustled into the building, ignoring the rain and leaving him standing under the umbrella.

Not for the first time, he wished he had something more to offer her. A woman such as Daphne deserved more than a one-night stand. Deserved a whole lot more than he could ever give her.

"We have to go bake her a cake while she's at her interview," Tigger announced when he climbed into the truck.

"We don't have time. Sorry, kiddo," Evander replied, watching through the large windows as Daphne was checked in by the building's security. It was refreshing to see someone intent on his job. "Hang on two secs. Stay here, doors locked."

He splashed across the sidewalk to the building, noting that the weather was similar to his mood. Bleak. His mother had scolded him when he'd pulled the dishes out of the dishwasher and slammed them the cupboards that morning. *Too loud. Take it easy. Don't forget to smile.*

Canadian summers were short and once again he'd been lulled into taking their beauty for granted. He dashed through the drizzle to the security guard, slipping him fifty bucks. "Keep an eye on that woman. She doesn't leave the building with anyone but me."

"And who are you? Her stalker?" the man asked, eyes narrowing with suspicion.

"Her bodyguard," he said simply. He handed him his business card. "Check with the police if you don't believe me."

He returned to the truck, Tigger picking up the cake thread of conversation as he settled back into the cab's dry warmth. "We could buy a cake. The bakery will put swirly writing on it."

"Yeah, okay." Evander glanced at the building, hesitant to drive away. He should be inside, waiting outside the interview room. His mother was at home, having a good day, Brick holding a meeting on the phone with some guys back at the office. The press hadn't followed Evander's truck today. Were things safe? Could he risk leaving to buy a cake?

Would he ever actually feel Daphne was safe?

Yeah, when she was permanently ensconced at his side.

So probably never.

"We need to have a party, too." Tigger was bouncing in place beside him as he pulled away from the building. "A *surprise* party. Mom's always wanted one."

"We don't have time to plan something like that."

"Hand me your phone." Tigger held out her palm. "I can call everyone and tell them to meet us at the house after Mom's interview."

The kid actually made it sound as though it was that simple. Buy a cake, invite people over. It was a party.

"What about decorations?" he asked.

The girl thought for approximately one nanosecond before saying, "There's a dollar store near the bakery."

"You have a solution for everything, don't you?"

"Yep."

If only his life was as easy as this kid made hers out to be. But maybe that was the beauty of childhood—things were simplified, black-and-white. No mazes full of shades of gray to get lost in.

"Tell you what, if you can convince my mother to hold a party at our house after the interview, then we will have a party."

Celebrating Daphne's birthday would be an easy way to show her that there were no hard feelings and that he still liked her. In fact, he liked her quite a lot. Too much.

But Daphne was a woman who could use someone caring for her, showing her she was loved. And while he couldn't show her in the way she wanted, he could show her in other ways, and his family could help.

"Can I have your phone?" Tigger asked.

"Even better," Evander said, as he hit the button on his steering wheel to connect his phone to the car's Bluetooth and speaker system. He said to the truck, "Call home."

Tigger, hands clasped in her lap, leaned forward. The sound of dialing and a phone ringing worked its way through the truck speakers.

His mother answered the phone and Evander said, "Hi, Mom, I have someone here who would like to ask you something." He raised his eyebrows at Tigger as he turned down the street to the bakery

"Granny Flo, can we have a birthday party at your house for my mom after her interview? Evander said we could buy her a cake and there is a dollar store where we can get decorations like balloons and streamers. She really wants a surprise party, so is it okay if we invite people over?" The girl paused to take a breath and Evander let out a chuckle.

"Today? In an hour?" asked his mother in surprise. He really hoped his mom was up for a party.

"Yes, please."

"You have such lovely manners, Tigger. Yes, of course you may have a party for your mother. That is a splendid idea. What do I need to do to help you out?"

Tigger looked at Evander thoughtfully, then froze, hands out as though someone was whispering something important in her ear. "No. We have to have the party at the cottage."

"It's raining, dear," Florence said.

"I know. But Mom and my aunts are about to lose it. Shh. They don't want me to know, so pretend you don't know the secret. Trixie Hollow is a special place. The party has to be there."

"Well, I suppose that's settled, then," his mother said, much to his surprise. "We're all waterproof, right, Evander?"

"We are," he admitted reluctantly. "Are you sure you'll be okay, Mom?" Having a few people over for cake was one thing, but trekking through the rain to an island was something else.

"Would you like me to make some punch?" Florence asked.

"Yes, please."

"You know what? I bet I have some balloons and streamers in the basement. I'll send Brick down to look. We'll try and decorate the cottage before you get there."

"Thank you," Tigger said crisply, ever the in-charge kiddo. Evander reached over and ruffled her hair. So little and yet so sure of herself. She had a good mom.

"How much time do we have?" Florence asked.

Tigger and Evander looked at each other.

"About an hour?" he said. "Plus travel time to get to the cottage. We'll send Hailey or someone over to pick you up."

"Thanks, Evander."

"Thank *you*, Mom." He ended the call and parked the truck in front of the bakery. "We're going to have to be very efficient, Tigger."

"That means getting things done really fast, right?"

"Yup."

They bought a cake, and while they waited for the baker to add swirly writing that said Happy Birthday, Daphne, the girl used his phone to call Daphne's sisters and mother, as well as a few family friends. By the time the cake was ready, Evander figured Tigger had invited approximately a dozen people. This girl got the idea of efficiency, that was for sure. When it was safe for Daphne and Tigger to move back into their own home he was certainly going to miss them and the ray of sunshine they brought to every challenge in their lives.

It felt right having them around, and he only wished he could offer them something to make them stay.



EVANDER RELAXED as Daphne climbed into his truck, smiling. The warmth that had been there a few days ago had returned, and he hadn't realized how much it had bothered him having her upset and feeling rejected.

"How did it go?" he asked, pulling out onto the rainy street.

"The job sounds really interesting." She paused, biting her lower lip, her long lashes emphasizing the sparkle in her eyes. "Really good, actually."

Tigger was staring straight out the windshield, barely moving, barely blinking. The cake and snacks were hidden in what was likely becoming a soggy cardboard box in the truck's box, and he would have to drive carefully to ensure it didn't slide around. He nudged the girl who was sitting between him and Daphne and rolled his shoulders, trying to hint that she should loosen up so she didn't give away the surprise.

"When will you hear back?" he asked Daphne.

"I have it, if I want it." She stopped worrying her lip with her teeth and gave him a grin so huge he felt as though a shock wave from an explosion had hit him in the chest. He was left momentarily breathless and focused on keeping the truck in its lane. Across the heated cab he could catch waves of Daphne's gentle scent, could practically feel her touch, wild and electric, despite the space between them.

He needed to get his head on straight. Having her this close for this many days was starting to get to him.

"Are you going to take the job?" he asked.

"I think so. I told them I needed to think about it for a day. They offered me a signing bonus, though." The grin was back.

"Environment Canada? Wow, they must really love you."

"Yeah." He thought he saw a flash of sadness, but if he had it was long gone already. She looked like an entirely different person than she had only yesterday afternoon, when she'd collapsed in a fit of self-pity. The woman had some serious resiliency and was bouncing back already.

She probably wouldn't need him in her life much longer.

An ache started within him, spreading slowly like an acid burn. Deep and vicious.

"So?" Daphne asked Tigger. "What did you do while you were waiting for me?"

The girl's eyes grew round.

"We went to the grocery store and grabbed a few snacks. Tigger wanted to have a birthday picnic on the island. Is that okay? It's kind of rainy, though."

He glanced at Tigger, who was acting as though he'd just revealed the entire surprise.

"You actually left your post to get snacks?" Daphne laughed, bracing her hands on her thighs, the truck rocking with the familiar happy sound. "What on earth could ever pull you away from—" She stopped short, and he covered for her so Tigger wouldn't know the full reason they were staying with him.

"We needed snacks," he said simply. "Plus, I talked to the security guard." He felt the familiar worry creep up inside him. He *had* left her unprotected. A rookie mistake. This lull could very well be the quiet before the storm, and not the quiet before everything went back to normal and she no longer needed his services.

Unable to help himself, he asked, "Nothing suspicious happened while we were away?"

"Whew," she said. "I was wondering what had happened to the real Evander. And whatever you said to that security guard must have

worked. He really didn't want me to leave, until I pointed out that you were waiting for me."

"It's my job," Evander said grumpily.

"I thought your job was saving the whales?" Tigger gave him a confused pout.

"I was teasing your mom. When you find a man who cares about you, he's going to want to make sure you stay safe all the time. It's what men do." Evander focused on the road that led down to the marina where the Summers kept their boat, cursing himself for making it sound as though he cared about Daphne. Which he did.

He wasn't supposed to get involved, and caring about her in the way he did was definitely involved. He was going to have to pull himself off the case, but who would take his place? Even with his objectivity compromised he still did a better job than most.

As he parked his truck he began to worry that something in the marina would give away the surprise. Familiar vehicles parked along the road. Stragglers trying to get to the island ahead of them. It was a workday, so how many people would be available to drop what they were doing and go to an impromptu party?

What if nobody came?

He glanced around for any reporters. Not even Austin today. Maybe they didn't like the rain.

He parked in the empty spot reserved for the Summers. "Hang on, I have an umbrella. Let me come around." He grabbed the damp umbrella out of the door's cubbyhole and, shaking it out, hurried around the truck. The marina was suspiciously quiet and Evander decided that surprise parties were not a good idea for a retired JTF 2 man. Everything in place seemed suspicious. He should see hints, shouldn't he? Extra vehicles? Boats scooting out of the harbor before being noticed by the birthday girl?

Holding the umbrella above the passenger side door, he helped Daphne and Tigger slide out of the truck.

Handing Daphne the umbrella, he grabbed the wet box from the back of the truck, letting the rain drip off him as he followed them to the old aluminum boat. Instead of stomping through puddles, Tigger walked somberly beside her mother.

"You're awfully quiet. Are you feeling all right?" Daphne paused on the dock to press a palm to her daughter's forehead, nearly catching Evander in the eye with the umbrella's points as he climbed into the boat. "You feel fine."

"Tigger," Evander asked, "can you help us launch the boat, please?"

The girl sprang to life, and before long they were all standing in the vessel's small overhang enclosure, trying to stay dry despite the wind and rain.

As they pulled between Daphne's island and Baby Horseshoe all was quiet. Other than a few extra boats parked across the way at the neighbor's, Nymph Island looked and sounded vacant, causing Evander a moment of doubt. From down here everything looked normal. No balloons. No streamers. No security guards trying to hide. His heart began picking up its pace and he worried that something had gone wrong, and most of all, that nobody had come for Daphne.



DAPHNE WALKED up to the cottage, the damp path silent under her feet. Fat raindrops fell off the leaves above, striking Evander's umbrella as she held it over her and Tigger. Her daughter was acting strange, which was unusual, as hanging out with Evander usually made her extra sparkly.

Daphne glanced back at Evander. His head was bowed, drops of rain sparkling in his hair as he cradled the soggy cardboard box of snacks. She felt a tug of fondness for the man, as well as something she couldn't quite identify. It was almost a possessive feeling. One of wanting to make him happy, to lift his sorrows and love him until he smiled.

She was going to miss him when they moved back to their own house. Who in her life would let her take the umbrella and carry the snacks through the rain to a dilapidated old cottage? Who else would take care of all the little things so she could worry about being a mother?

Daphne swiped at her damp eyes. She really needed to stop thinking about Evander or it was going to be even harder leaving him when this was all over. As it was, it would be difficult enough.

She thought back to her job interview. She was definitely going to accept Environment Canada's offer if it got her closer to a life like this, with fewer worries. It was ironic that the stability she'd mocked for years was what she now craved via a steady job. It was her own version of Evander. A constant, steady, reliable something to lean on that would take care of the details—which in her case would be the money side of things.

Taking this job would be a milestone in her life. One where she grew up and planned a bit more, so she didn't end up in a corner where she couldn't even pay the taxes on the cottage. It was time to join the rat race.

All she had left to figure out was Mistral.

No. It was her birthday. No thinking about a man who hadn't done a thing she'd wanted in the past six years. He was a waste of dreams and energy. It was time to let that hope go and move forward so she

could find something better. Someone more deserving. Tigger was worth it and so was she.

Evander gripped her elbow, steering her around the broken step, third from the top.

She stopped halfway onto the veranda. The main room's glass door was open, leaving the cottage unsecured by the flimsy screen door that was closed over it. She turned to Evander, nearly knocking him with the umbrella. "The door's open."

Behind her, she heard the screen open and she turned to face the threat. She stepped back in surprise, arms flying out, crashing into the box in Evander's arms.

People flooded out of the cottage, shouting, "Surprise!"

Behind her, she could feel Evander fumbling with the box against her back. Something tumbled past her on its way to the floor. Cool, moist splatters hit the backs of her bare legs and she turned to see Evander looking as crushed as the birthday cake lying on the veranda floor.

Without thinking, she reached up and cupped his stubbly cheek. He leaned into her touch as though about to collapse from disappointment.

"It's okay," she said softly, "I'm sure we can salvage some of it." She glanced down at the ruined cake and began laughing. "We won't even have to cut it, we can just scoop it out onto plates." Her laughter took hold and she had to clutch her sides to support herself. Leave it to her to smash her own cake.

Hailey bent to fuss over the mess, and Maya, with an arm around Daphne, began laughing as well. Tigger dipped her finger into the creamy icing, licking it clean before aiming her finger at a broken sugar rose covered in splatters of pink icing. Melanie stopped her with a gentle hand. "No double dipping."

The sisters saved as much of the cake as they could while Daphne greeted a veranda crowded with people she loved. Her environmental protest buddies. Her sisters' boyfriends. Her mother and her friends. Even new friends such as Evander, Kyle, and Florence.

She turned to Evander. "Did you plan this?"

"The kid did." He tipped his head toward Tigger, who was licking the icing off a bag of chips that had been in with the cake.

"Oh, boy. When the sugar hits—look out."

"Don't worry about Tigger. I'll take care of her. You enjoy your party."

Daphne watched Evander for a moment, surprised at the affection in his body language. Had it always been there? Had she just been so determined to make him into her enemy that she hadn't noticed this sweet man inside the warrior? Or was it something new?

"Thank you, Evander."

He gave a small shrug as if to say it was nothing.

"For everything." She held his gaze for a long moment, to ensure he knew she meant more than just the party. More than just the offer to take care of a sugar-buzzed child.

He gave a bashful half smile before turning away.

Her love was changing the man. Or maybe he was changing her.

"Happy birthday, Daphne," said someone to her left.

"Mrs. Star!" Daphne gave the woman a cheek kiss and a hug. She hadn't seen her mother's old friend in ages. "How have you been?"

"Like a snowflake in a sudden storm. Great!" She leaned closer to confide, "I've been winning several bets against my sister Elsie in Blueberry Springs lately. She owes me twenty bucks now. Although I may have to go to that little mountain town and collect it from her. You know how she is."

"I heard about your bet over Hailey and Finian."

Agnes Kowski, another friend of her mother's, joined them, pushing her walker up close to Daphne's toes. "I can't believe you ruined the cake."

While her mother never complained about the food at the nursing home, Mrs. Kowski, her neighbor, certainly made up for it by complaining double.

"Now, now," Catherine said, from her position in a nearby wicker chair. "At least it isn't red icing, and the girls managed to save most of it. I'll make sure you get a slice."

"The cake they serve at the home is a disgrace," declared Agnes.

Daphne took a seat beside her mother as Hailey handed her a piece of smashed cake, ensuring that Mrs. Kowski got a slice, as well.

"We opted not to sing Happy Birthday. Is that okay?" Hailey asked Daphne.

"I tried to convince her you wouldn't mind blowing out candles on a broken cake," Finian said.

Daphne assured them it was fine. Having a room full of people she loved meant so much more than a perfect cake.

"I told you so," Hailey said to her boyfriend as they went to serve more cake.

Shawn McNeil, an environmentalist friend, handed Daphne a small wrapped gift.

"Oh, Shawn. You didn't have to get me anything."

He looked bashful. "I've had it for a while. I heard your birthday was coming."

Evander stood off to the side, watching, not eating.

"Do you want cake?" Daphne offered her piece to him, but he shook his head and smiled, his eyes doing their typical flick around the area for potential dangers. The veranda's perimeter was dotted with men she

figured were the security agents the boyfriends had shadowing her sisters.

What a complete mess she'd made of things. Hopefully, next year would be better. Hopefully, she'd grow up with her new job and quit messing things up for others.

Daphne set the cake down and carefully unwrapped the gift. She held up three six-inch-wide slabs of wood, slices from a tree showing the growth rings. She glanced up at Shawn. "These are wonderful, thank you."

The man ran a hand through his longish hair. "They're heat pads. Like big coasters." He took them from her grasp and laid them out on the coffee table in front of her. With gangly, awkward moves he snatched plates of cake from bystanders, setting them on top of the short stumps. He stood back. "See? But you put hot stuff on them."

Daphne smiled. The gifts were so Shawn, who was training as an arborist. "They're wonderful, thank you."

He gave a smile and his body relaxed. "Yeah? You like them?"

She nodded.

Connor, who had been standing nearby, eating cake, said to Shawn, "Knock any trees down lately?" His voice with was without humor, and Daphne could tell that he still wasn't over last month's incident that had endangered Tigger. Shawn had been taking down some trees, as well as testing some of the bigger ones for rot, and despite his precautions, one of them had fallen too close to Tigger. If it hadn't been for Connor, there would have been a funeral. Daphne's gut clenched at the thought of what could have happened, and her fingers gripped her plate. Forcing herself to relax, she looked up to see Evander watching her.

"What happened?" he asked, coming to her side.

"No, nothing."

"What did he do?" Evander's neck was strung tight, veins popping as he fought for control. Fists bunched, he whirled to face Shawn. "What did you do?"

Shawn backed up so quickly he tripped over the coffee table and went sprawling, sending cake and tea crashing to the floor.

"Oh, dear," Florence said, surveying the mess. "Evander, honey, please go get a dustpan."

Daphne jumped up, not liking the way he was pulling Shawn to his feet. "What did you do to Daphne and Tigger?" Evander demanded.

Connor stepped in. "No harm, no foul. Tigger interfered with some safe ties."

"Connor saved her from a falling tree," Maya said, giving her fiancé's arm a squeeze, her engagement ring sparkling in the late afternoon sun streaming through the rain clouds.

"Mom! A rainbow!" Tigger came bouncing over, her eyes lit up, pink icing smeared around her mouth like clown makeup. "Come see! Come see! Come see!" She hauled on Daphne's hand until she had no choice but to follow.

She glanced over her shoulder to where Evander was still burning holes into Shawn with his eyes. Then, with a short nod, Evander glanced around the gathered group to ensure all was okay, before heading to the kitchen.

Dutifully, Daphne admired the rainbow until Tigger was satisfied. As she chatted with friends, she watched Evander host. He ensured his mother had all she needed, while he moved in and out of the kitchen with fresh pots of tea, juice boxes, and dirty dishes. All he needed was a frilly apron. Daphne smiled, loving to see the domestic side of the big burly man. He was constantly surprising her in ways that made her smile.

"Someone has a crush," Simone said, sidling up beside Daphne as the group drifted away to talk to Melanie.

"On who?" Daphne asked her old friend.

"Your bodyguard. It's very Whitney Houston of you."

Daphne let out a bark of laughter, and Evander glanced her way, his shoulders loosening when he realized all was okay.

"You're blushing," Simone teased. "Please tell me you've brought that hunk of man to the island several times in the past week and a half."

"Not on your life. I am not letting destiny get her hands on that one."

"Why not?"

"Because we're total opposites." *Liar*. At first, she'd believed it, but the more she got to know him, the more she discovered that they were more alike than different.

Simone gave her a smile that suggested she didn't believe her for one second. "I'm going to go find me a hunk and get you to bring us here to see if the island's magic works on honorary Summer sisters."

Daphne laughed.

"There's nothing to lose. Oh, speaking of nothing to lose, when did you want to have a show of your paintings in my boutique?" She rubbed her hands eagerly. "I can't wait to premiere Daphne Summer."

"Can you hold a show tomorrow so I can make a few grand by Friday?"

"Tax deadline?"

"Yeah."

"Unfortunately I'm just finishing up a show, but in September I could."

Daphne sighed. Once she started her new job she probably wouldn't have time for painting. Not while balancing being a mother, too.

Why did it seem as though any time one good thing came into her life, she had to let go of something else?

Tigger bounded over, trailing a string of balloons, and dropped to the floor, grabbing Simone tight around the ankles before shoving her shoulder behind the woman's knees, toppling her.

Daphne reached out for Simone, who caught herself against the veranda railing.

"Tigger! What on earth was that?" Daphne scolded. "Enough sweets. You know what sugar does to you."

"Evander taught me that!" Tigger chirped loudly.

A few feet away, Evander smiled with pride.

"What's he going to do next? Teach you how to fire a gun?" Daphne muttered.

"He says I'm too young and you have to say yes first. Can I? I'm not that small anymore. I get to go to kindergarten next month."

Across the veranda, Evander bent over to allow Mrs. Kowski to whisper in his ear while she pointed at Tristen.

"No guns. Are you okay, Simone?" Daphne asked.

"Oh, yeah. Fine. Good one, kiddo."

"Don't do that again," Daphne told her daughter.

"But now Rigby doesn't pick on me at the babysitter's anymore," Tigger said, looking pleased with herself.

"I imagine if you used that move on him he found out pretty darn quick who he was dealing with," Simone said. "But a nonviolent takedown? Love it. That'll serve you well in life, little ninja."

"Rigby didn't even see it coming," Tigger said, bouncing in place.

Evander was laughing with Mrs. Kowski now, and Daphne frowned. She didn't realize the woman knew how to laugh. He was turning everything in Daphne's life upside down, and right now, she wasn't sure how that made her feel.

"You keep telling me to solve everything with love, light, and forgiveness," Tigger said. "And sometimes understanding. But Evander taught me how to get even." She smacked her small fist into her waiting palm and narrowed her eyes before cruising the room for more goodies.

Daphne shut her eyes, unsure whether to be mad at Evander or relieved that he'd helped her daughter in what had hopefully been a not-too-violent takedown. Drawing a deep breath, Daphne reeled herself in. It wasn't as though he'd taught her how to give the boy a knock-out punch. It could have been worse, and if she was honest with herself, there'd been times where she'd lain awake at night, worried that her sweet daughter would be taken advantage of or forced to do something she didn't want to. She didn't believe in violence, but she did believe in self-defense.

Therefore, upside down was good. Evander was good.

"Tristen Bell," Melanie said in a strong, loud voice.

The party grew quiet and Tristen, licking his lips uncertainly, pushed his way out of the cluster of people he was talking to, his teenaged daughter, Dot, looking concerned.

"Yes, Melanie?"

Melanie, eyes teary, dropped on one knee. Daphne's heart constricted as the women around her let out happy sighs.

"Will you marry me, Tristen?"

The man was across the veranda in a heartbeat, pulling Daphne's sister to her feet in order to kiss her thoroughly.

"That must be a yes," Simone whispered to Daphne, smoothing her form-fitting dress. "I tell ya, you've got to get me in on this cottage action."

Daphne snorted, feeling oddly alone despite the crowd gathered in her honor. Forcing a smile, she joined the cluster congratulating the couple.

With the hubbub still going on, she went to stand in a corner with a cup of tea from Evander, and watched Tigger's antics. First her daughter hit up her grandmother for more sugar—but Catherine knew better. Then she moved on to her next mark, like a druggie in need of a fix. Daphne caught Evander eyeing the girl from the edge of the crowd. He had a slice of cake and was eating while he watched, not missing a thing. His wistful smile grew as Tigger worked the crowd, and Daphne found herself wondering what Evander was wishing for.

Then his back straightened and the window she'd been peeking through shuttered closed, blocking off the real man behind the bodyguard persona. His attention flickered over his checkpoints with practiced precision and she wondered if he ever truly relaxed. If he'd ever marry. If he'd ever know love like her sisters Melanie and Maya did with their fiancés, and Hailey with her boyfriend.

It was sad to think that a man who had begun to mean so much to her couldn't enjoy the small things most took for granted.

Daphne, exhausted and happy, ushered guests into the rowboats Connor and Tristen were using to shuttle guests across the strait to the Fredericksons' dock, where most of them had moored their boats to avoid ruining the surprise. The word was that Evander and Tigger had pulled together this surprise party with less than an hour's notice.

When the majority of the partyers had been seen off, she went up to the cottage, where Evander was trying to get Tigger to eat a slice of cheese in hopes that it would absorb some of the sugar running like cocaine through her veins. He looked exhausted and Daphne couldn't help but feel pleased that he was the one dealing with the sugar rush that he'd all but pooh-poohed the other day.

Out on the veranda, Maya prepped the lift to take Florence down to the dock where Kyle was already waiting for her, then it would take their mother.

"It was such a pleasure meeting you," Florence said, taking Catherine's hand in her own to give it a squeeze as they said goodbye. "Your daughter is such a fine artist. I hope she continues painting."

"Thank you," Catherine said.

Maya helped Florence into the lift, before heading down the path to help Kyle in case the lift's old latching mechanism needed the special

Summer touch—a tap with a hammer or large stone—in order to open.

“He sure is good with Tigger,” Catherine said to Daphne, as the little girl’s laughter rolled out of the kitchen.

Daphne tucked her sweater tighter around herself. “He is.”

“He’s become like a father figure for her. Will you stay in touch with him?”

“I hope so.” The truth was, with Evander around everything was easier in her life. She should be melting down, but instead she was growing and changing. And laughing.

“Are you still hoping Mistral will step up as a dad?” her mother asked.

At her ex’s name, a flash of anger rocketed through Daphne. Mistral wasn’t strong enough to be the father figure Tigger needed. He didn’t have the strength of morals or the ability to do what was right in the face of differing opinions. She’d kidded herself for years, but now with Evander in her life she could see just how wrong a fit Mistral was.

She’d expected too much from him and had thought his words would make up for his lack of action.

How was it that this broken billionaire in disguise, an ex-military bodyguard, could be the man that she wanted and needed?

Wanted and needed? Had she lost her mind? It was this island, wreaking havoc on her heart. She didn’t love Evander. She couldn’t.

She gave her head a shake and asked her mother, “How did you manage to raise all four of us after dad died?”

“Like you, I rolled with the punches, one day at a time.” Her mom gave her a secret smile. “And sometimes I secretly fantasized about the day when the house would be empty and nobody would have any pressing demands on me. But don’t tell your sisters. They wouldn’t understand.”

Daphne smiled. She'd had a few of those days herself. At the same time, she would pull those wishes back so fast. She didn't want to wish away her days with her daughter, who was already growing so fast, but it was still hard. There was always more she could do to be a better mother, a better person. She could be a better cook. Keep a cleaner house. Be more focused and diligent at work. Listen more attentively when her daughter told her stories about her day. The list could go on and on.

Catherine rubbed Daphne's arm. "You're doing a fine job."

"Thanks." The sound of Evander's laughter boomed across the veranda and Daphne paused. Laughter. Evander. That may have been the first time she'd ever heard him laugh. A real, true laugh. And she'd missed it.

"He's really good with her, isn't he?" Catherine said, smiling.

"Surprisingly, yes."

"Why surprising?"

"Because he carries a gun and he's all manly."

Her mother laughed. "That is the most ridiculous reason I've ever heard for a man not being good with kids."

"I know. He just surprises me, is all."

"You know, you used to laugh all the time and today you were laughing more again. If living with this man helps you with that, go with it."

The laughing had felt good. Really good. And she knew a big part of finding that joy again had to do with Evander.

"Are you suggesting I should shack up with him?" Daphne asked.

"It's obvious the two of you care for each other."

"As friends, Mom."

She was turning into such a liar when it came to Evander. She cared for him as more than a friend, but that didn't make it easier to accept or any less scary.

What if she got involved with him and he got hurt? What would that do to her? To Tigger?

"Make sure you take those blinders off before it's too late."

"I know, but it's scary. It's not just me in a relationship. Tigger is, too."

Catherine laid a warm hand over hers. "I completely understand."

"Did you ever date after Dad?" Daphne asked, not remembering her ever going out on dates as a widow.

"No. Sometimes the one you get on the first try is The One and nobody else can compare. But in your case, I think destiny brought you even better seconds, if you know what I mean." Her mom gave her a wink as Maya came up the steps to help her into the lift.

"Your taxi awaits," Maya said, bowing as she gestured to the now vacant device. "Good thing I didn't let Connor talk me into letting him ride this thing during his stay last month or he'd have broken it and where would we be today?"

"Probably riding a new lift, knowing him," their mother laughed. "He so likes to help out, doesn't he? Oh, and remind me to thank him for fixing the screen door. I keep forgetting to mention it."

"Okay," Maya replied.

Evander joined them on the veranda.

"It was lovely meeting you, Evander," said Catherine. "And thank you so much for all you're doing for my girls." She reached out and gave him a weak hug, her stroke-affected side hanging limp. He gave her a gentle, tender hug in return, and Daphne's eyes filled with tears.

"It's truly my pleasure, Mrs. Summer," he said, his voice a quiet rumble.

The affectionate note in his voice made Daphne itch. Her mother had to be wrong. She herself had to be wrong. She and Evander couldn't care for each other in that way. It was too scary. Too big. Too real. It

was all just adrenaline and the way he was so kind that made her think she wanted him sometimes. He was a sexy man, that was all. Not her type. He didn't want to be with her. They would never make it.

"You okay?" Evander asked, lightly touching her elbow. Electricity shot up her arm and she flinched.

"Fine." She pushed past him, helping settle her mother in the lift, even though Maya was already there. She needed to get away from Evander, from everything running through her mind like wildfire.

She wanted Evander so bad it scared the daylights out of her.

"Mistral is not the man you need in your life," Catherine whispered, her expression serious. "Open your eyes to what you've got before you let it go."

Daphne squeezed them shut.

"I agree," Maya murmured.

Daphne closed the lift's gate, allowing Maya to take over. She needed to climb to the top of the island, sit on a rock and think. But when she turned back to the veranda she saw that Evander had Tigger riding high on his shoulders. Her daughter was laughing down at him, patting the top of his head as he beamed up at her. They looked just like the family she'd always dreamed of having.

But they were the family she could never have, because Evander had made it clear he was not cut out for real life. And having kids and a family was as real life as you got.

He rolled Tigger off his shoulders and the girl came bounding over to her. She wasn't going to get that thinking space, was she?

"Mom, brains and beauty won't buy you everything. You should marry for money."

"What?" Daphne looked at Evander, who shrugged.

"I am a sweet and quiet girl and I promise to not cause a stir."

"A stir about what?" Who had her daughter been talking to today?

"Mistral—Dad—said if I want to stop the circle I have to step out of it."

"What circle?" Angry heat spread through Daphne.

"He said I can be someone special."

Evander's face was red, his fists clenched, jaw tight. He looked as though he was holding back a deluge of anger, just as she was.

Daphne dropped to her knees. "Mistral's not your father."

Tigger's face scrunched in confusion.

"I mean, he is. But he—a dad shouldn't " She looked to Evander for help.

He scooped up the girl. "I happen to think you're already somebody special." He leaned over to give Daphne a peck on her cheek. "And I think your mom has the power to change the world. Do you understand how amazing that is? Because secretly, I hope you cause a really big stir every day for the rest of your entire life." He gave the girl a kiss on the cheek, then lowered her carefully to the ground.

And in that small action, Daphne lost her grip and fell in love with the man she had sincerely hoped to resist.



DAPHNE WAS STORMING down the rickety old stairs of the veranda and Evander worried she would fall through the third step from the top, which was rotting through. He quickly scooped Tigger up onto his shoulders and followed Daphne down to the dock. A bee had definitely zipped into her bonnet with Tigger's talk of being special, and he worried she was going to leave the island without them.

Maya, Florence, Kyle, and Catherine were on the dock and looked startled at the trio's abrupt arrival.

"Is everything okay?" Catherine asked.

Voices drifted across the water and Daphne stormed to the end of the dock. Untying the rowboat that was bobbing there, she climbed in. If she was rowing, she wasn't planning to go far. Which meant she was going across to the other island. To enemy territory.

Evander passed Tigger to Maya and, ignoring Catherine's questions, climbed into the wobbly boat at the last second, nearly falling into the water as Daphne started pulling the boat with surprising speed and strength across the calm strait. The rain had let up, but the air was cool and damp, and moving through it felt like moving through a rain cloud.

"Dare I ask where we're going?" Evander said.

Daphne didn't reply, but climbed out on the opposite shore, yanking the bow upon land even before he jump out of the boat. She was out of breath from the brisk row, and was panting as he followed her through the trees.

"Daphne, are you okay?"

"I'm going to settle this once and for all."

He had a feeling things were about to get crazy. He patted his side, ensuring his concealed handgun was still with him, then flexed his calf to check on his knife.

She was moving fast and he had to jog lightly to keep up.

She bounded up to an old cottage, where he could hear deep voices discussing something. Daphne flung open the door, heading inside. Evander followed, quickly taking in the room. It was an open concept cottage like Trixie Hollow, with a main room that had several doors leading off it. A fireplace covered half the opposite wall; screened doors and windows were at their backs. Were the doors ahead dead-end bedrooms? How many viable exits were there?

The men in the room were recovering from the shock of having uninvited guests barge in. Evander quickly identified Mistral, a gray-

haired man who was Mistral's father, Aaron Bloomwood, and the third, less active Rubicore owner, Jim Hanna. The new bodyguard, Leif, had drawn his weapon, as did Evander.

As the screen door slammed shut behind him, a man who rivaled Evander's size came out of one of the side rooms. He looked dark and mean. Mario La Toya, Aaron's right-hand man according to Tyrone's background checks. Interesting that he was finally showing up. Yet, no trigger-happy Ricardo. That alone was good, but that still didn't make this a friendly place to be—and especially with Daphne all fired up.

The room had a few tables he could turn up as protection. A few glasses half full of liquid. Flinging them would make a man flinch, buying Evander what could possibly be a lifesaving split second or two.

Daphne strode straight to Mistral, stopping a few feet from him. "It's done. You had your chance, and you blew it. Do not ever talk to our daughter again. Do not talk to me. And the offer to work together on the development has been withdrawn."

Mistral paled and his father smirked. Mistral's father. That would make him Tigger's grandfather. Evander hated him already.

"What did I do?" Mistral asked softly. He angled himself as though trying to shut out his father.

"Telling Tigger she could be special if she stepped out of the circle I'm in. You're already trying to divide us. I know you don't approve of how I live my life, but putting our daughter between us is a game ender. You will not get custody. Ever. You will drop your claim right now and never speak to either of us ever again."

Mistral glanced at his father, then whispered to Daphne, trying to draw her away from the men. Evander heard him say, "I told her she should step out of *my* circle. I want her to be able to break the cycle my family is in, where money and prestige are more important than love." He turned to his father, raising his voice. "The way the Johnson family

lives is not healthy, and I want my daughter to have more than I did as a child. That's part of why I haven't stepped up. She deserves more."

"You got that right," Evander said. He shut his mouth and stepped back, wishing he'd kept quiet. This wasn't his fight, but with Tigger involved, it felt as if it should be. The girl was like an RPG missile, her sole purpose to break through men's armored shields, as she'd done with him.

Mistral's father rolled his eyes. "Not this again. You had everything you could possibly want as a child."

"I never had the one thing I truly wanted. I wanted and needed a father to be there for me."

"I was out earning a living."

"You never approved of me."

"And how have you shown me that you're worth approval?"

Evander wasn't a sappy, touchy-feely, let's-hug-it-out sort of guy, but the sudden urge to punch Mistral's father made his knuckles itch. He figured it was a good time to put his gun away, so he didn't shoot the man in the foot accidentally-on-purpose.

"And hiding a grandchild from me?" Mistral's father continued. "I had to learn about Kimberly from the press rather than my own son. You're lucky I didn't disown you."

Evander wasn't sure whether he should punch Mistral's father now or comfort Daphne, who looked as though someone had yanked a rug out from under her.

"I can't believe you lied to your own son," she whispered. She gave the man a look that could kill. Almost automatically, Evander covered his nuts. Daphne turned to address her ex. "Mistral, I guess your father never told you that he shooed me and Tigger off when we came to see you once. He knew exactly who we were."

Mistral paled, and Evander wasn't sure if the man figured he was busted in some old lies or whether he hadn't realized just how deeply his dad had been meddling with his life.

"Your father was afraid I'd convince you to give up the life he'd laid out for you," Daphne said.

Mistral ran his hands through his hair, shoulders hunched. Evander shook his head, wishing he could give the man enough strength to break free. If only for Daphne and Tigger's sake.

"She's a slutty liar!" Mistral's father shouted, pointing a finger at Daphne.

Evander broke the man's nose.

He hadn't even felt himself move. He was suddenly in front of him, his fist stinging, with the man bent over, blood gushing. Leif pulled Evander's arms back in a weak lock that he could break by sneezing.

"You son of a—" Mistral's father shouted as his men bustled around, trying to take control again.

"You don't talk to the mother of my child that way," Mistral said, stepping between his father and Daphne.

"Mistral," she said softly.

"No," he replied. "It's time I stood up to him. It's time I broke free and lived the life I want." He moved closer to Daphne and Evander broke Leif's grip, getting between the two, one hand resting lightly on his holstered gun in warning. He didn't like the way Mistral was changing his tune. Sure, it was probably good that he was standing up to his father after years of submission, but it wasn't enough.

"And what life do you want to live?" Daphne asked.

Evander got the feeling they were touching on a discussion they'd had years before.

"Anyone want to buy an island?" Mistral called, letting out a pained laugh.

"Don't you dare," commanded his father. "I bought you this island so you could finally break free of this woman and show her she no longer has a hold on you. You go through with this development plan. Show her who's boss. Show her who and what really runs this world."

"I don't know what runs this world, Dad, but I know it isn't you." Mistral positioned himself at Daphne's side. "I can't believe I've let you be in charge of my life for so long. I can't believe I didn't walk away when you hired Aaron after I fired him. I don't even know why he isn't in jail. And you want to know the truth, Dad? Your development plans are unoriginal crap. Who needs another exclusive resort that ruins the environment? Nobody. And certainly not me. This is my island and I'm asking you and everyone associated with you to leave. Effective immediately."

Mistral's father, a handkerchief held to his bleeding nose, gaped at him. Then his face turned as red as the blood still flowing from his nose as he realized he'd finally lost his son.

"So?" asked Evander. "Is that offer to buy the island still up for grabs?"



DAPHNE WAS ALREADY SHOVING the rowboat into the water by the time Evander caught up with her.

"You don't have to buy this island," she said, clambering into the boat. "I don't need another rich man trying to alter my life or trying to save me."

"You don't need anyone to save you, period."

She looked at him in surprise.

"I've never met anyone as strong as you are," he said.

She gave a snort, then stiffened. Evander turned to see what was bothering her. It was Mistral, looking half scared and half triumphant. He came to a stop on the shore, several feet away.

"I understand that you don't want me to have anything to do with Tigger, but I really like the way you're raising her," Mistral said. "She's an amazing person and is going to be a lot like you."

"Yeah, well, that's too bad for her, because it means you will never love her," Daphne said, standing tall in the wobbling boat. Evander steadied its bow, partly so she wouldn't have an embarrassing incident where the boat tipped her into the lake, and partly so she wouldn't leave without him.

"I did love you," Mistral said. "I still do—"

Evander thought he heard someone growl, but it didn't seem to be Daphne.

"I hope to find a way to be the father figure that Tigger so greatly needs," Mistral said.

"If she needs a father figure, I'll be that man," Evander said. "That's a right you have to earn by putting in the time and love, and you have a long way to go. Just because she shares half your genetic code does not make you a father."

"He's right," Daphne agreed. "Being a father is a right that has to be earned."

"You start at square one," Evander continued. "You have to start by earning Daphne's trust. Then Tigger's. You pay attention to that girl when Daphne goes out of her way to set up a meeting." He let go of the boat, stepping forward to poke the man's chest, furious at how he had overlooked his own child.

"You're right," Mistral said, and Evander tried to grant him the love and understanding Daphne was so good at, rather than hit him for being such a pushover. He knew that sometimes people got wounded

bad enough it caused them to give up. For Mistral it had likely been one drawn-out emotional blow as a child as he'd sought love and approval. The man had taken a crippling hit and Evander recognized the hollowed-out result. The bravado might still be there, but there was little left but shell.

Mistral might get his spirit back one day, but it would be a long, difficult journey, and he was kidding himself if he thought he could get there with a few smooth words to his ex-girlfriend.

"Get some balls and grow up," Evander said. He turned to the boat, pushing it off with Daphne still inside. "We're done here."



DAPHNE STUMBLED out of the rowboat, her legs weak from the waning adrenaline rush of the confrontation. She was shaky and less than exuberant.

What box of Pandora's had she opened in the middle of the Johnson family?

Evander steadied her with a hand at her elbow. He'd been a constant strength behind her for the past few days. The man she'd been seeking for years, but had always been looking in the wrong direction. And she couldn't have him.

Maya, standing on the edge of the dock, already had the mothers, Kyle, and Tigger loaded into Connor's boat, along with their bodyguard. Maya shared a look with Connor. "We have Tigger for the night," she said. "Connor has lots of security."

"I think everything is over," Daphne said, considering the possible effects of her trip to Baby Horseshoe.

Her sister tipped her head. "What do you mean?"

"Mistral told his father and his development plans to get off his island. I told Mistral he wasn't welcome in our life." She glanced at Tigger, her heart breaking as the girl frowned, obviously trying to connect the pieces and figure out the implications. "I know Mistral's words are often different than his actions, but I think this time "

A warm hand caressed her shoulder and she leaned into it, knowing it was Evander looking out for her.

"Is it okay if Tigger goes?" she asked him. Daphne needed time to think. Time to sort everything out.

"Who've you got?" Evander asked Connor.

"Tyrone's on. The other guy's sick and Tyrone said something about you having his head if he sent in a newbie."

"Good. You'll all be fine, but don't let your guard down. Just in case." Evander nodded and the boat pulled out, leaving them alone at the cottage.

Daphne waved them out of sight, then collapsed into one of the Muskoka chairs. She picked at its flaking white paint. When she looked up, there was something in Evander's eyes that made her gut tug tight. A low hum of need and desire was sparking in his eyes, a feeling that was echoed in her veins.

She stood, her dress and sweater feeling like a barrier between them. She gently hooked her fingers in his, resting her head against his chest. "Thank you."

"You keep thanking me, but for what?"

"Everything. I couldn't have done any of this without you and your strength, and knowing that you were here I always thought I was independent and could do things on my own, but you helped me do more. To stand up for myself and to have the courage to say to myself and to Mistral that he wasn't the right fit for us, no matter how much I wanted it for Tigger."

With his free hand, Evander thumbed away the wetness on her cheeks.

His voice was low and unsteady when he said, "I need to thank you, too."

Daphne smiled with uncertainty, quirking her head. What could he possibly need to thank her for? An ulcer caused by her inability to listen to him?

He scooped both of her hands into his, and in the cool damp air, his body heat felt welcoming and familiar. Like something she never wanted to leave.

"You showed me that real life is still possible."

"Of course it is," she said softly.

"You gave me hope that I may still be capable of participating in it. That maybe I could be more than an ex-warrior."

Her heart broke as she pulled her hands from his grip, cupping his face while trying to see inside him. How could a man like him ever make it through the things he'd been through? He had such a kind and caring soul that going to war should have torn him apart. She stroked the scars along the side of his face, ran a thumb along his eyebrow and another faint scar.

He rested his forehead against hers and she smiled. This was who they were, leaning against each other in ways the other didn't understand or even realize. While she had thought that he was saving her, she had possibly been saving him. Fixing his broken spirit.

"So? Ready for the real test to see if you're fixed?" she asked with a playful smile.

"I don't know," he said, with such seriousness she had to laugh.

"Is the glass half empty or half full?"

"You tell me." He angled his lips over hers, drawing her in for a sweet kiss. He broke the kiss, watching her with heavy eyes, waiting for

her to reply.

"It's always been half-full in my books." She slid her arms up over his shoulders, toying with the short hairs on the nape of his neck. He was so tall and broad it made her feel sexy and small and feminine. Wonderful.

"I'm starting to see it that way, too."

"I knew I'd get to you."

"Who says it was you?"

"Because love conquers all."

"Yeah? And do you love me?" His voice was even, low.

"Yes," she said playfully, realizing it was true, and that it felt good to have it out in the open. To admit to it. To claim it.

He kissed her hard, nothing held back. His large hands, which had been covering her shoulders, slipped to her back, drawing her so close she could feel his anticipation through his cargo pants. Letting out a soft moan, Daphne went up on her tiptoes so their mouths would stop breaking apart because of their height difference. Evander cupped her buttocks, pulling her up his body in a move so slow and sensual that by the time her legs were wrapped around his waist she was ready to shed clothes and get down to business.

"Let's go somewhere more private," he said, and she'd never heard a man suggest anything better in all her life.

Daphne and Evander lay entwined in her cottage bedroom. Sighing against his bare chest, she smiled.

Destiny had come through for her just under the wire, with a man she'd never have expected but who couldn't have been more perfect. And on her birthday, no less. He'd sneaked in like the trained man he was.

Resting her chin on a fist, she stared into his dark eyes. He tried to hold back a smile as he pushed a heavy hand through her curly hair, giving her tangles the most delicious tugs.

Being with Evander was like nothing she'd ever experienced. He was sweet and tender, yet insistent in all the ways a lover should be. He'd been almost bashful while undressing her in the small bedroom, yet reverent and sensual. He was the same man in the bedroom as outside of it. In control, caring and protective.

"You're beautiful," he said, his voice almost breaking. He pulled her head against his chest, breathing her in.

He was struggling with something.

"Let go," she said, tipping her head up to meet him eye to eye. "I'll catch you."

"You already have."

"Then let it out."

He took a deep breath, then whispered, eyes shut tight, arms wrapped around her as though afraid she'd disappear with the words he spoke. "I love you, Daphne Summer. I love you so much it scares me more than being shot at."

She laughed, her body rocking against his. "Don't worry, I won't leave any holes."

"You'd better not." He pulled her closer so he could kiss her, the bedsheets tangled around them. "I said I would protect you so you can change the world, Daphne. That's a promise I intend to keep. In fact, I plan to talk to Finian, Connor, and Tristen to see if they'd like to go partners in a new venture I have planned."

"What's that?" She couldn't see the other men wanting to be bodyguards, but then Evander had given Mistral that focused look of his when he had an idea and was about to make it happen.

"This woman I know—" Evander said.

"Hey, no mentioning other women in the bedroom!"

He caught her hands as she pretended to fight him. "It's you! It's you!" He laughed, and she'd never heard anything better in all her life.

He settled her and continued, "If the four of us can get the island, then maybe you would be interested in creating a place that is relaxing, teaches people about the environment, preserves our heritage, and maybe creates a new legacy within your family for a little girl who has snuck her way into my life and heart."

"Are you talking about Baby Horseshoe Island?" Daphne sat up, not caring that her chest was exposed. Around him, it didn't matter what she wore, he would always see through it to the real Daphne. The one she hadn't felt strong enough to reveal to the world. To herself, even.

"It's going to take a lot of time." She had to take the job with Environment Canada, and needed to arrange for a signing bonus ASAP.

It was Tuesday, and by Friday she had to have enough to pay the taxes on this place or it would be gone forever. Legacy ended.

"It will," he admitted.

"We both have jobs."

"True."

"I never really wanted to work behind a desk, though." She let out a sigh. She really wanted this. Badly. As soon as she had started telling Mistral the small dream all those years ago it had begun to feel real. And the hope was still there. The desire to make it happen.

The timing was off, though. She couldn't have the cottage *and* build this island retreat.

The men didn't even own the land yet.

But it felt so right. She couldn't imagine saying no.

If the cottage is meant to stay with us, destiny will find a way. Wasn't that what her mother always said?

Evander took her left hand, his large and warm around hers. "Will you be my partner?"

Although he was talking about the island, Daphne couldn't help but feel as though he was asking for more than that.

And for the second time that day, she followed her heart.

"Yes, Evander. I will be your partner in anything that comes our way, and especially this. That is a promise."

He smiled and swept her up into his arms. "How did I ever become so lucky to have you walk into my life?"

"You were special-ordered by destiny, sweetheart."

Now all she had to do was hope destiny could save the cottage, too.



EVANDER WAS AFRAID. Things were so good with Daphne. Unexpected and entirely frightening. In war he'd had moments of fear, but was never afraid. He knew what his odds were. The other men were there of their own accord, had made their own peace with the fact that they might not come out alive.

But this was different. Daphne had the power to destroy what war had never been able to touch.

And he could break something here more precious than anything he'd ever been responsible for.

But he loved her. With all his might, and the hope and brightness he saw on his horizon was something so exciting it nearly split him apart with the possibilities of what his future could be with Daphne at his side.

The past ten days had changed them both and that crushing weight that had been following him, pressing down hard on his chest, had lifted as though it had never been there.

He looked in the old cottage bathroom mirror and caught himself smiling. No, not smiling, grinning like a mad fool.

He was that man. That man in love who whistled everywhere he went, with a bounce in his step. He let out a chuckle at his turn in fate.

The Summer women said this place was enchanted, and for the first time, he believed. The force of love was something that could never be underestimated and he'd do everything in his power to nurture and protect it.

He lifted his face to the ceiling and whispered, "Thank you. Thank you for Daphne and a chance at living a real life."

Melanie burst onto the veranda, her fianc , Tristen, in tow, the last couple to arrive as they said goodbye to the cottage before heading down to the tax office. Snacks and a pitcher of margaritas were set out, but nobody was diving into them.

“Mr. Valos from the municipality got arrested.”

The sisters and their men all whirled to gape at Melanie.

“He was taking money under the table.”

“No!” exclaimed Maya in disbelief.

“Of course he was,” Tristen said, slipping an arm around Melanie’s waist.

“Thank goodness. One less thing to worry about in your life,” Evander said, cozying up behind Daphne to give her a kiss on the ear.

“You were worried about him?” she asked.

“Of course. He was part of the Aaron-Mistral mishap.”

“And Aaron Bloomwood is up on charges, too,” Melanie said.

“Mistral?” Daphne asked, and Evander’s grip tightened around her waist.

“Nope.” Melanie gave her a smile. “Although I heard through the grapevine that he’s officially no longer part of Rubicore.”

Connor raised his eyebrows at Evander, who slipped away from Daphne to stand with the other men.

"We have something to tell you all," Evander said.

"We bought Baby Horseshoe Island," Finian announced.

"What about your charity?" Hailey asked, her mouth hanging open. Finian had been supporting piles of charities back in his old neighborhood. How could he afford an island, when he barely fed himself half the time in order to make sure others in need got enough?

"I'm going to fly kids out to the camp to spend time in nature. What better way to make a difference in their lives? Daphne was telling me that time spent in nature reduces blood pressure, anxiety, depression, ADHD, and all sorts of other stuff."

"The camp?" Melanie interrupted, hands clasped in front of her.

"I was talking to Polly Pollard, who's on the camp board," Tristen said, taking Melanie's hands in his, "and she says they would be more than happy to reopen Camp Adaker on the island again."

"I always liked Polly," Maya said, pouring herself a margarita. She took a big sip and, wincing, gripped her forehead. "Ugh. Brain freeze."

The sisters laughed, turning to see who was coming up the steps to join them.

"Simone!" They all got up to hug their friend, who had turned in her usual fashionista look for old cutoff jeans and a dinosaur T-shirt.

"What's with the new look?"

"I was painting a few walls in my boutique." She waved her checkbook in the air and the mood turned somber. "I brought money to save Trixie Hollow."

Daphne checked her watch. "We have three hours until the tax office closes."

She knew that she, for one, was short on the amount she needed to save the cottage from the tax sale. Turning down Environment Canada

had felt like a relief, but it also meant she didn't have a signing bonus to bring her to the amount she needed to cover the tax bill.

"Your money is no good here," Hailey said crisply. "We made a deal among us."

Melanie and Daphne shared a look. "Do you have enough?" Melanie whispered.

Daphne gave a minute shake of her head and Evander, at her side again, gave her shoulder a reassuring squeeze. He already knew she was short and wouldn't accept a loan. How could she? She was a single mother starting a new eco-retreat venture with four billionaires. It wouldn't be easy to pay him back.

But it had felt right, choosing Baby Horseshoe Island, even though it meant she might have to say goodbye to the cottage if destiny felt it was time to let the island go.

Trading one for the other.

Because the one thing she'd learned in her life was that you couldn't have it all, and sometimes you had to make sacrifices to keep what was truly important.

Tears streaked down Daphne's cheeks, and with one arm, Evander effortlessly pivoted her into his hold, cradling her.

"Please? Will you let me help?" he asked.

She shook her head. She wanted to nod, but he'd already done so much. Besides, she and her sisters had been clear when they made their pact last month. They had to do this on their own, because if they couldn't do it now, how would they ever be able to keep doing it through all the years ahead? The cottage definitely wasn't getting any younger, and its maintenance costs would go nowhere but up.

"How is my money no good?" Simone was saying. "You've let me use the place like I own it for years, but you won't let me contribute to it? I

say we take a vote.” Simone slapped her checkbook on the table and took a large gulp of Maya’s drink.

“I vote yes,” Melanie said, her back straight, her hand in the air. “All in favor?”

“We can’t change our minds. We made a deal,” Hailey said.

“Is that heritage claim stuff going to get us a tax break, Melanie?” Maya asked.

“We won’t hear back for a bit yet. But even if they say yes it won’t be an immediate tax break.”

Maya took a careful sip of her drink. “So getting a heritage-related tax break this year is out of the question.”

“Oh!” Melanie turned to the men. “You own Heritage Row now!” She wildly pointed across the water to where the old cottages stood.

Tristen nodded. “Yes. All of it.”

Melanie froze. “Are you going to—”

“Save Heritage Row? Don’t be ridiculous. Of course we are. My fiancée would have my head if I didn’t.” He grinned as she launched herself into his arms.

“Wait back up a second,” Daphne said. “Rubicore really bought the Fredericksons’ cottage?”

“I told you they did,” Maya said, arms crossed.

“I thought you were speculating.”

Maya smiled modestly and shrugged. “I was.”

Connor explained, “Rubicore had just taken possession of their cottage, and seeing as we bought every stitch of land from them, it’s now ours. We own Heritage Row and Baby Horseshoe Island in its entirety. Even Camp Adaker. The island and everything on it has officially been saved.”

The sisters cheered, then slowly grew quiet.

"We're going to lose Nymph Island if we don't accept help from others," Daphne said quietly, turning away from Evander's broad chest and the aftershave she'd come to equate with love and security. "I vote yes to help. Simone is one of us. She's a sister and we said sisters." She whispered, "Sorry, Evander."

He gave her a squeeze in reply.

Hailey blinked twice at Daphne's response, then waited for Maya to vote.

"I don't care one way or the other," Maya stated.

Tigger came bouncing through. "I saw a chippie!" She crooked her finger at Evander, who dutifully lowered his head questioningly. The girl placed a noisy kiss on his cheek and then scuttled down the veranda steps. Evander, looking bashful and pleased, called out a warning about the rotten step.

"I know, Evander-dander!" Tigger called back.

"Help would be nice." Maya elbowed Connor in the ribs. "My boss here just spent all of his money on an island and won't give me the size of advance I surely deserve for finding him wonderful new venture capital clients, so I'm in. I'd like to be able to eat between now and my next paycheck."

"I bought that island for *you*. And it wasn't all my money," Connor said darkly. "Plus, if you'd let me help with the taxes this could all be resolved in five seconds."

"No," Maya said. "Haven't you been listening? We don't want to get behind again. It's do or die. Not beg and borrow."

"So it's settled?" Simone asked Hailey.

Hailey froze for a moment, before stepping forward and embracing their friend in a massive hug. "It's settled," she said. "Pay up."

Laughing and wiping tears from her eyes, Hailey said, her voice shaking, "Okay, let's see if we have enough to save this place."

The men looked solemn as the women counted what they had between them.

"Are you sure we can't help?" Tristen asked quietly.

Melanie held her breath for a long moment, then slowly shook her head.

"We're four dollars short." Maya laughed, sitting back in an old wicker chair, hands on her knees.

The men shared a look and dug into their pockets.

"No," the sisters said at once.

"I'm sure I have change in the ashtray in my car," Maya said.

"In the couch," Daphne said.

"I have four dollars," said a small voice. Daphne turned to see Tigger watching them quietly.

"Do you?"

"Yeah. The fairies won't mind if I take their decorations. It's to save their island!" She dashed off and the sisters looked at each other.

Destiny.

You just never knew what she was going to pull out of her hat next.



DAPHNE STOOD BESIDE HER SISTERS, Simone, and Tigger in front of the municipal tax office.

"Shall we?" Maya asked.

Daphne turned back to where Evander was waiting, leaning against his truck. He smiled and nodded. He was at ease, an entirely different man than he'd been only days ago.

Love conquered the world. Saved the day and changed men.

Everything was going to be okay. Everything was working out.

For the first time, Daphne was really and truly happy. While her earlier happiness had never been an act, her old self felt like a sepia photo compared to where she was now. She was blessed to be a part of something bigger—a true, loving relationship with Evander. They were good for each other. Not just today, but tomorrow, and in the coming months and years. He was a keeper. Evander made her want to try harder. To be a better person and to make a bigger difference and she knew she could with him by her side.

Nate from Environment Canada had texted her on the drive over, asking her if she'd work as a consultant here and there. She'd said yes. She could still help change the world, but still have the freedom to be where she needed to be. For Tigger. For Evander. For herself.

She blew her boyfriend a kiss, waited for him to catch it with a shy smile, then turned to go inside with her sisters, who were holding the door for her.

They had the money. They'd done it with their talents and skills and a lot of good luck. Daphne looked up at the ceiling, silently thanking destiny for not only the island that kept the sisters together, but for the men who had come into their lives that summer.

Love.

Lots of love.

She caught up with Tigger, who hadn't stopped smiling since Daphne had asked if she'd like to move in with Evander and Florence permanently. Tigger would be starting kindergarten after the long weekend, with a whole lot of love in her life thanks to Evander and his mother. Tigger would finally have that father figure in her life, as well as someone to build a tree house for her in the backyard. A man who loved her, doted on her and taught her all the things Daphne was afraid to, such as how to defend herself physically.

And as for Mistral, she agreed with Evander. He had to man up. A lot. She'd give him a chance when he was ready, but she wasn't going to pin her hopes on him as she had for the past six years. She had someone else in mind when it came to dreaming about her and Tigger's future.

The sisters stepped up to the counter along with Simone and Tigger. The five adults put checks in front of the clerk as Tigger carefully laid out her coins, one by one, counting softly under her breath.

"This is for Nymph Island," Daphne said, speaking for all of them.

It was time she stopped acting like the baby in the family, because in many ways she was the most grown-up, the only mother in the group. Well, as far as she knew. Her sisters had each spent a lot of time on the island over the summer and, as Daphne knew, destiny had a way of spreading her love by adding new members to the Summer family.

~ The End ~

Catch up with the Summers four months later! Turn the page to read about Simone's chance at love when she gets snowed in on the island in *Falling for the Firefighter*.

FALLING FOR THE FIREFIGHTER

BOOK 5

From the back cover:

One blizzard. Two opposites. And some time under the mistletoe.

Josh Carson has a secret. As a firefighter he's comfortable being sent in to save forests and wildlife, but in his spare time he creates delicate hair ribbons that are anything but masculine. When he finds Simone snowed in on Nymph Island--and she'd rather freeze than be saved by Mr. Tough Guy--he realizes that the only way to win her over and get her to safety is to take a risk and reveal his true self.

Simone Pascal loves being independent and self-reliant--she's never needed a man to save her, and yet she keeps falling into Josh's arms at every turn, wanting him to rescue her. The worst part? She likes it. A lot. Which is a big problem since she's rearranged her entire life to take

on a new project—a baby via a sperm donor. Her life plans most definitely do not include anything as unpredictable as falling in love with Mr. Macho Firefighter, but that seems to be exactly what she's doing.

Will the two come to terms with their true selves in time to snag their happily ever after? Or will they be spending Christmas cold and alone?

BONUS: Includes a letter to Santa from the beloved character Tigger!

This is the fifth and final book in the Summer Sisters series.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Thank you also goes to the women who helped keep me and this story on track: Evelyn, Cali, Margaret, Emily, Erin, and Michelle. Thank you.

And one more big thank you goes to my readers. I couldn't do this journey without you. I hope you have a wonderful, warm holiday season full of all the greatest things in life.

Simone Pascal fidgeted with her purse, her agitation growing as the meeting went on. She sat back, not joining in as the women built off each other's ideas, ping-ponging them through the group, morphing each one from a kernel into something new and groundbreaking that would give them a competitive edge that always led their businesses to the top.

The Meeting of the Minds women came together every three months to discuss their world domination plans, and had a track record that just about guaranteed someone in their group snagged a million-dollar deal in the fashion industry each quarter.

Simone, despite being at least a decade or two younger than the majority of the members, had already landed at the top of her game, thanks to the group, and she knew who to turn to if she ever needed anything in her designing business or boutique. But what she needed now was something they couldn't provide, and there was only one uncharted frontier left if she was going to have it all. She required help, but not from the MOMs.

She checked the antique watch she'd received from her good friend Melanie Summer.

Five minutes. She couldn't wait any longer.

The watch reminded her of all that was important. Her friends, the Summers, had found exactly what she wanted for herself: Love. Family. Support. Someone to hold her during the long Canadian winter nights, especially when her world got shaky. She'd incorrectly assumed all those good things would just happen for her, even though her past kept showing her she wasn't good girlfriend material. She was missing whatever it was that made men stay, whatever it was that showed them that what she was doing *was* love.

Simone packed up her ever-present design sketchbook and meeting notes, taking a moment to watch the women who had helped her so much over the years. While she'd never once believed she'd ever hold anything back from this group, she knew they wouldn't understand where she was at and what she needed to do to achieve her next goal. Nobody would—from her father to her friends. But these women surrounding the boardroom table were dynamos that balanced and juggled everything with ease. They just *did* it, and Simone wasn't as lucky. She needed help.

She stood, excusing herself.

"Where are you going?" asked Wanda, a bridal boutique owner from the small town of Blueberry Springs. Her eyes were wide with surprise, and she kept one hand on Simone's chair as though she planned on keeping her in the room no matter what.

"I have a flight."

"You've missed flights before because we've run long," she said, suspicion lacing her words.

Simone felt the prickle of sweat tear up her spine. "I have to do something."

Around the table, eyebrows lifted, waiting for the reveal.

"What could be more important than this?" one of the women asked. Everyone made this group's meetings a priority—that's why it worked.

That and the way they checked their egos at the door, held nothing back and ensured things didn't become personal. Even here, on Christmas Eve, the women were hashing it out in person on the West Coast at 8:00 a.m., not a single member absent.

Simone's mind stuttered to a stop.

It was 8:00 a.m. Pacific time. That meant it was 11:00 a.m. eastern.

She shoved her chair back, clutching her belongings to her chest. "I'm sorry." Simone knew she was jumpy, sweat clinging to her brow. She was acting like the poster girl for I Have Something to Hide, but she had to go, couldn't explain.

The women watched, mouths hanging open, as Simone exited the room. She rifled through her purse until her hand closed around salvation. Just a few more moments.

She rushed into the bathroom down the hall, her fingers trembling as she latched the stall's lock. She flipped down the toilet seat and plunked herself on top of it, her sketchpad and notes tumbling to the floor in her haste. She adjusted the syringe's plunger over the flesh near her hip, her heart racing with anticipation. She closed her eyes and bit her lip. This was always the worst part.

She sucked in a slow breath. *Don't think. Just do it.*

The needle hovered above her skin and the tiny walls swam, pressing closer.

Do it, Simone.

After inhaling a quick, sharp breath, she jabbed the needle into her flesh, letting out a cry as she shoved the plunger down, then ripped the syringe out as quickly as possible. Relief flowed through her and she let out a shuddery breath. She was good for another twenty-four hours.

She hung her head, collecting herself, before realizing she'd dropped the syringe in her haste. It had rolled under the door and was nestled, spent, between a pair of cherry-red Louboutins.

"Simone?" It was Wanda, her voice demanding, unyielding.

Simone scrambled to collect the syringe, banging her head on the closed stall door, her neck contorting as she fell short of her goal, forced to watch, powerless, as a hand with heavily lacquered nails closed around her secret.

"Open up!" Wanda demanded from the other side of the door. "We need to talk. Now."

Simone eased back onto the toilet seat, not ready for a confrontation with a woman she respected so greatly.

Wanda banged on the stall door with enough force that it sprang open, clanging against the wall. "Explain the meaning of this." The syringe lay on her open palm, the woman towering over her.

More members of MOM poured into the washroom, surrounding Wanda, trapping Simone. They gasped when they saw the needle, one woman having the foresight to ask, "Are you diabetic?"

Simone shook her head and the looks of disappointment ran so deep that she had to turn her gaze away.

"You don't understand," she began, her voice wobbling. "You make it all look so easy and I just want " Her voice grew thick and she had to swipe at her eyes, not caring if she sent streaks of mascara across her cheeks.

"I do understand, but *this*?" Wanda shook the empty syringe at her.

"I can't I "

"We know the pressure can be tough, but it's not worth it. Take a break. You're at the top of your game. Delegate. I'll send you my best virtual assistants. Anything is better than this."

"I know of a good rehab," another woman offered.

"Rehab?" Simone felt the room spin. They thought she was on drugs. That she was shooting up to maintain the energy she needed to get

ahead. But she was already at the top of her game—there was nowhere left to go. No more mountains to climb.

All but one and it had nothing to do with fashion or design.

The women closed in. “Simone, don’t make excuses,” someone murmured.

“Don’t deny this,” Wanda prompted gently. “We can help.”

Tears sprang into Simone’s eyes. The MOMs meant the world to her, but this was the one thing they couldn’t help her with. Nobody could, and she was running out of time.

“This explains why you were so fidgety in the meeting. You needed a fix!” a fellow member accused.

“No!” Simone scrunched her eyes closed, the room feeling too small, her voice too quiet, too weak. “It’s not that.”

They all began talking at once, so Simone stood, raising her voice to be heard as she let her secret out of the bag. “They’re fertility drugs. I’m trying to have a baby.”

All eyes shot to her left hand, checking for a ring.

“Alone.”



SIMONE HIGHTAILED it out of the Toronto International Airport and into the blustery December weather badgering the lakeside city. The MOM confrontation hours ago, back on the rainy West Coast, had not been her idea of fun. They, at least, had implicitly understood how difficult it was to find a man who was not only confident enough in his manhood to be with someone who earned oodles more than he did, but also didn’t take her level of business commitment personally. That had been enough for them to get behind her having a baby on her own, without having

to discuss cysts, ovaries, and operations that would soon leave her barren.

Either way, she was definitely off her game. Not just for revealing her secret, but for messing up the time zones and, as a result, falling three hours behind on her hormone injection schedule. When she'd accidentally forgotten an injection last month it had meant no baby. How was she supposed to be a good mother if she couldn't even keep to a simple once-a-day, make-a-baby commitment? What if she forgot to feed her baby or left it somewhere? She negotiated million-dollar deals with ease and had designs in Milan, London, and New York, and yet couldn't seem to stay on the stupid schedule.

She needed to pull herself together. She couldn't keep messing up and she couldn't wait for Mr. Right, either. She had to do this and she had to do it now, in case the cysts decided to take more than just her ovaries. The doctors had said she could freeze her eggs and use a surrogate, but there was no way a control freak like herself could get behind the idea of entrusting someone else with such an important job as carrying her baby.

"Simone!"

She startled, not expecting to bump into anyone she knew. And that voice brought back a torrent of unwelcome childhood memories that, in her current mood, left her wondering if she could ignore the call and run.

She turned, facing her father, Thomas Pascal.

"Dad, Merry Christmas. I'm sorry, I'm catching a flight to Muskoka and don't have a lot of time."

Behind her dad, her "stepmother," Tricia—who was nearly the same age as Simone—shifted from foot to foot, a tentative smile playing on her lips.

Her father ushered Simone toward his black sedan, parked at the curb. "We'll give you a lift."

"It's okay, I've booked a shuttle."

He opened the rear passenger door and she bristled. If she wanted to get in, she could open the door herself, but him doing so became an unwanted pressure. Simone felt as though he'd already made the decision for her, completely dismissing her thoughts on the matter.

"We'll give you a lift," he repeated.

"What's wrong?" Simone asked. She pressed one hand against the cold metal of the car's roof. Not only was it unusual for her dad to know where she was, but the fact that they had *both* taken the forty-five minute trip to the airport to shuttle her to a charter flight meant something was not right on planet earth. Thomas was not that kind of father. Never had been and never would be.

"We have a little Christmas gift," he said with a grin, nudging her into the sedan, closing the door behind her.

A gift?

The car's heat enveloped her, a welcome change from the bitter weather outdoors, and Simone wondered what the gift could be. She gave a reluctant sigh, then pulled the seat belt across her hips, wincing as it pressed against her sore injection site. She needed to either get over her queasiness with needles so she stopped bruising, or conceive. Preferably the latter. And the sooner, the better.

Her father helped Tricia into the front passenger seat with uncharacteristic care. Was she unwell? What was going on? Simone leaned forward, hoping to catch a hint of what was coming.

Although when she thought about it, her father had always treated his second wife like gold. And even though Tricia and Simone were only a few years apart in age, there had always been an annoying double standard in terms of his treatment and expectations. The woman was

quiet, unassuming, and as far as Simone had noted, possessed no desire to succeed or get ahead in the world, making her wonder what her father saw in Tricia. She was Simone's opposite in almost every way when it came to personality, but still managed to bring out Simone's competitive edge every time.

"What's wrong?" she repeated. "How did you know I was here?"

"I was talking to your mother," Thomas said.

Oh, boy. Things were definitely amiss. As far as Simone knew, her parents hadn't spoken in ages. As it was, Simone and her father connected only about three times a year, and almost always she phoned him, on his birthday, Father's Day, or Christmas Day. But never Christmas Eve. And he was here in person.

Not good.

"She has the flu," her father added, checking his blind spot for traffic as he pulled away from the terminal. "She asked that I pass on the word that you shouldn't come over tonight."

Simone felt an uncharacteristic pang of abandonment as well as an irrational flash of anger toward her father. Why was he suddenly involved in their lives? Why hadn't her mother called to tell her? Why did she tell Thomas, of all people? Now, instead of it being two old maids spending the holidays together, Simone was simply alone.

"She said she will likely be feeling better tomorrow afternoon and that you could come over then."

Things were definitely getting weirder, and Simone pulled out her phone to send a text to her mom, hoping her father was mistaken. It wouldn't be the first time.

"You were working today?" he asked.

"A meeting." One she wasn't sure she would have the honor of participating in again.

"Good for you. So many people think they can take the day off just because it has Christmas in its title. People like that will never get ahead." He caught her eye in the rearview mirror. "Mark my words."

"I know," she breathed, predicting the next line of argument, about how she needed to work harder and smarter than everyone else to get to the top. Been there, done that, got the T-shirt and found its style didn't suit her as much as she'd thought it would.

"Are you working tomorrow? There's no reason not to, since you don't attend church." Her father's voice was louder, telling her he'd noticed that she'd tuned him out and that this was his second time asking about her plans.

She sighed, feeling a sudden plunge of exhaustion. "Yes, Dad."

"Good. You can reach further than you have been. Be smart with your time, delegate. What are you working on next?"

Simone hedged. "I'm just wrapping up details from my latest deals." Would it kill him to say, "Good job. I'm proud of you"? She knew she shouldn't care what he thought and that she should have stopped trying to impress him ages ago, but she still heard his voice in her mind, driving her forward as she worked toward her goals, spurring her to get up and tackle the next mountain, to dust herself off when she got knocked down, and to zip back in, head down, ready to charge.

It was exhausting.

"So?" he prompted. "What's next?"

"Nothing I can talk about yet." *And nothing you would approve of.*

"You need a plan. You need to be able to see your next five steps."

"I have it under control, Dad."

"Thomas, let her be," Tricia scolded gently, and Simone was surprised she'd spoken up on her behalf. "Simone is doing really well."

"Thanks," she said quickly. Things were getting weirder and weirder and she was relieved to see her father finally pulling over to drop her

off for her next flight. She climbed out, hauling her laptop and overnight bag along behind her. "Thanks for the ride. Have a nice Christmas."

"Simone " Her father came around the car, hurrying to meet up with her on the sidewalk.

Tricia climbed out, too, smiling, mittened hands clasped in front of her.

"Are you guys okay?" Simone asked, feeling worried. She rarely saw the couple and had no clue what was going on in their lives, only that this was unprecedented and definitely unnerving.

Tricia grinned, her shoulders up around her ears, hands out as though expecting a hug, as Thomas said, "We're expecting a baby."

Josh Carson stopped midstep in shoveling his neighbor's driveway, contemplating the friend he hadn't seen in well over a month.

"What have you been up to these days?" Dustin repeated.

Josh had begun to hate the question and the awkward dance of elusiveness he inevitably ended up doing to avoid giving himself away. And worse, this time it would be with a fellow smoke jumper. Trust was of the utmost importance between jumpers, as they often held each other's lives in their hands, and now he was going to lie by omitting the one part of his life that finally felt right.

But he knew a man such as Dustin wouldn't understand, and that there would be too much ribbing, too much that Josh wouldn't be able to take without lashing out as he'd done so many times before. But this time, instead of protecting someone else, he'd be protecting himself.

"Staying out of trouble," he replied, leaning against the shovel for a moment as though contemplating whether he had dutifully summed up the past several months of his life. He gave Dustin a cocky grin before continuing on with his job. "Got anyone knocked up yet?"

"None that I know of." His friend chuckled, slapping him on the back with a gloved hand, his laughter punctuated by clouds of warm air that burst from his lungs.

Josh gave the man a friendly yet unencouraging smile. It was Christmas Eve and he had plans that didn't involve bailing a pal out of trouble.

"What about you? Finally find someone to keep you warm?" Dustin asked.

"Nope."

Women were inherently problematic. They liked to stick the thin edge of their crowbar into his life, hoping to crack him open and spill out the contents as if he were a picata. No, thank you.

"Nobody?" Dustin asked in disbelief.

Josh, unlike his friend, had become weary of the trouble that usually came with a no-strings-attached good time.

"Did you go gay?"

"No," Josh snapped, struggling to block out memories of men crowding around his father, asking the same pointed question. The disgust in their voices. The taunting. Shoving. Attempts to punish the man for having the courage to show he was different.

There had been more than one occasion where Josh had seen his father's nose bloody, his gut hit so hard he couldn't straighten up to stand tall against the attacks. Josh had learned to fight fast and dirty in order to protect his dad, who had, years later, decided to undergo the transformation from Patrick to the person he had always meant to be—Patricia.

His father's sex change wasn't a secret, but it also wasn't something Josh brought up, particularly in testosterone-fueled gangs such as the smoke-jumping crew. If you were different, you got beat up in life. It was that simple.

"Then why aren't you out chasing tail? We're in our prime, man." Dustin flexed his biceps to illustrate how much firefighting had done for

their bodies, the impact lost under layers of winter outerwear. "I need a wingman and the chicks dig you."

"Not interested."

"You all right?" Dustin asked.

"Fine." Josh had returned to clearing the driveway, jerking the shovel harder than he had to in order to send snow flying onto the piles lining the asphalt driveway.

"Oh, right. You're touchy about that whole homosexual thing." Dustin deadpanned with an expressionless face. "Because you're gay."

Josh continued working as though he hadn't heard the ribbing, aware he was probably going to break the shovel's handle if he pushed any harder.

Awkward silence settled over them until, feeling as though he was being judged, Josh said, "Live and let live, man. No need to be like that about something that doesn't impact you."

"Is your third leg as soft as your heart?"

Josh raised an eyebrow in challenge, unblinking, as the odd snowflake drifted down, the sky continuing to darken, bringing with it a blanket of colder air. The smoke jumpers had dubbed him The Finisher for the way he ended any fight, always coming out on top.

"I'm soft?"

Dustin lost the staring contest by looking away first. "Well, except for that mean left hook of yours."

He continued to glare.

Dustin sighed. "And that swing kick thing you do to knock people down."

Josh tossed a handful of snow at him, showing him that all was forgotten and forgiven.

His friend smirked, ducking. "Easy to see why you're single. Softy."

Josh snorted, thinking how his buddy wasn't that far off base. His latest projects were definitely far from masculine.

He wordlessly pushed his shovel against Dustin's chest, then picked up a wider one from the snowbank by the garage. Together they finished clearing Mrs. Star's driveway before she could come out and fuss like nobody's business.

"Hey, I wanted to ask " Dustin began as they dumped the borrowed shovels beside Mrs. Star's garage. Immediately, Josh knew his friend had a woman on the line and something was standing in the way of him discovering the color and texture of her lingerie.

"It's Christmas Eve. I have a commitment," Josh replied.

He planned to warm up his half-frozen hands, then drive over to Bracebridge to have a hot chocolate and Bailey's with his half sister Polly as per their ongoing tradition. It had begun around the time the two of them had moved out of their blended-family home and needed to steel themselves before returning there on Christmas Eve. To her father and his mother—biological, not the medically and hormonally enhanced version he used to call Dad—and all the family politics and pressure that went on with the little not-so-fun reunion.

Seeing as Polly's divorce was now under way, he figured she was going to need an extra shot of something warm and fortifying before facing the firing squad of advice from their meddling parents.

"Aw. Come on, man," Dustin begged. "Please?"

That level of whining? Had to be a Scandinavian. "Blonde?"

His friend grinned.

"Blue eyes?"

The grin got wider.

Josh merely shook his head, watching a courier van stop in front of his place. A young woman about their age popped out, her dyed golden locks woven into a high bun similar to a ballerina's. Josh watched his

friend out of the corner of his eye. The woman strode toward them with a grace that hinted at flexibility and fitness.

"Hi. I'm looking for a Josh Carson?" She waved a box.

Dustin intercepted Josh. "Working Christmas Eve?"

"I know, right?" She brushed a wisp of hair off her forehead, beaming up at Dustin.

"What could be so special that needs delivering today? Shouldn't a nice woman like you be home with someone doting on you, instead of schlepping through the snow for doofuses like my friend here who can't figure out when to order their gifts so they arrive early?"

She blushed, due to the intensity of Dustin's steady gaze, and Josh elbowed him out of the way to scrawl his signature across the delivery confirmation screen.

"When do you get off?" Dustin was leaning in, pouring on the charm. "I have a lot of time at the moment. I'm a smoke jumper."

Josh could have sworn her knees softened, ready to buckle as she gazed up at his friend. Josh made a swipe for the box, but Dustin tucked it out of reach, not wanting to interrupt the spell he was weaving like a web.

"Isn't Miss Scandinavia waiting for you?" Josh asked loudly.

Dustin gave him a sour look as the spell broke, the courier babe slipping away with a quick "Merry Christmas!"

"That was uncalled for woman interference," Dustin said, smacking him in the chest with the box as the van spun away. "I owe you one."

Josh shrugged, grinning. He clutched the package with both hands, but his pal refused to release it.

"What is this, anyway? A gift for me?" Dustin twisted the box so he could see the Customs declaration form. His face darkened with disappointment as he read the contents.

Time to put up the walls.

Dustin glanced at him in disbelief. "A BeDazzler?"

"It's not for me." Josh wrenched the box free, losing his battle to be cool. "It's Christmas."

"What are you up to? You're up to something." His friend was tracking closer, eyes on the prize—Josh's secrets.

"Beer?" Josh tucked his BeDazzler under his arm and opened the front door to his one-story. The welcoming warmth of the entry reminded him how cold it had become outside and how unforgiving Canada's winter could be. They were in for some weather tonight.

"Nah. Maybe next time. I've gotta run." Nevertheless, Dustin stepped inside, throwing an arm around Josh's shoulder in a brotherly way. "Just came by to wish my bachelor friend a merry Christmas." He gave him a big, cheesy grin.

"That's why text messages were invented." Josh gave Dustin's arm a pointed look and his friend awkwardly dropped the embrace.

"Right. So. I was hoping you could do me a small favor."

"I'm committed."

"I'm supposed to get something to Evander de la Fosse—I'm helping out Tyrone Bellingham tonight. You know the guys? Big. Former military. Working on security systems over at the Baby Horseshoe Island development? Ringing any bells?"

Josh nodded. Evander had hooked up with one of Polly's friends, Daphne Summer.

"Tyrone's sister is smoking hot, by the way," Dustin interjected. "Anyway, I told Tyrone I'd get the item to Evander. Tonight."

"And?" Josh asked, ready to push his buddy out the door and close it. Lock it. Move on with his evening. He wasn't in the mood for a wild-geese chase. And anything involving Dustin always ended in some sort of scavenger hunt.

"I kind of double booked myself. There's this hot woman " He shaped an hourglass in the air with his hands. "Fireplace, red wine You know how it is."

"I have plans."

"Hey, didn't your sister get divorced?"

"She's off-limits."

"I'll let you jump out of the plane first next season if you let me comfort her."

Josh had spent two years fighting house fires, then moved on to the ego's equivalent of leveling up—smoke jumping. While he didn't mind the way women looked at him when he told them what he did for a living, the job was starting to mess with his head, and a part of him doubted he'd be there to jump next spring. Lately, he'd been overreacting to anything fire related and had installed extra smoke detectors in his home—above and beyond code. He'd even found himself testing the devices in his friends' homes, as well as checking fire escapes on taller buildings. It was becoming a problem. An embarrassing one he suspected would go away if he found something else to do for a living.

With the box still balanced under his arm, he shoved Dustin out the door. "Good night. Merry Christmas. Good luck."

His friend, a desperate gleam in his eyes, shoved his foot in the doorjamb. "She's Swedish."

Josh laughed.

"She leaves the country the day after tomorrow."

Josh laughed harder. Dustin's problems were so minor.

"Five hundred bucks."

Josh stopped laughing. "You're serious about this one?"

"A grand. Please?"

Wow. Dustin was actually begging. And Josh could use the money. Another reason he hadn't left smoke jumping yet. A guy like him didn't

have a ton of options in this economy. Plus it didn't help that he was well-suited for smoke jumping. Even as a kid, he'd always had escape plans at the ready. How to get away if things got bad. Always made sure he had at least two exits, as well as a backup plan. Which made him great at his job, sticking another gold star on his ego.

"A grand?" he confirmed. His friend had to be joking. But a thousand bucks would buy a lot of supplies and could be worth any wild-goose chase.

No. He couldn't do that to Polly. Not tonight. He'd made a promise and she was way more important than Dustin's flavor of the week.

"She needs my help, Josh."

"What do you mean?" He was aware his voice had taken on a hard edge. "Is she in trouble?"

"I need to show her that not all men are bad."

"Meaning what?" He moved closer, his senses sharpening.

"Her last boyfriend was a little abusive."

"A little?" The cardboard box with the BeDazzler bent under Josh's arm.

"Emotionally."

"Emotionally?"

"He called her fat."

"Forget it." Josh tossed the dented box onto a pile of shoes by the door. He should have known better than to listen to Dustin unless they were in the midst of a forest fire—then the man was always dead-on.

"Please?" he begged again.

"No."

"Come on. She was really upset. I promise I won't track Polly—ever."

Josh gave him a sharp look.

"Please? Super-easy job." Dustin placed his hands under his chin, looking pathetic as he attempted puppy-dog eyes. "It won't take long."

The delivery is even in your direction—Bracebridge.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

Josh sighed, softening. “Fine. Whatever.” He could drop it off on the way to Polly’s and collect an easy grand, if that was all it took. “But you owe me. Big. As in *really* big.” He shook his head and put out his hand, expecting a package or instructions. “What do I have to do?”

Dustin passed him a padded envelope from inside his down jacket. “Give Evander de la Fosse, the bodyguard, this. Tonight.” He laid a hand over the envelope, giving each word special emphasis. “Has to be tonight. Life or death.”



JOSH HAD SPENT the past forty-five minutes trying to track down Evander and was starting to think the delivery was less about life-or-death and more of a wild-goose chase intended to free up Polly so Dustin could comfort her.

Although if Dustin was telling the truth and it wasn’t about Polly, how much was *he* getting for the delivery if he was planning to reward Josh with a cool grand? Either way, the package had to be pretty important. Josh gently pressed his fingers into the padded envelope, thinking. Some sort of spy device, or evidence needed to crack a case? It didn’t seem likely, and while the package was light enough to be considered empty, it had a small pebble-like bump, proving it wasn’t. He shook the thing. Nothing. He held it to his nose and inhaled. Smelled like a plastic-padded envelope.

Josh dialed his sister, wanting to remove the sneaking suspicion that he was holding a packaged piece of trash so his buddy would be free to bed Polly while her protective stepbrother was busy. And while the idea

might seem extreme, he knew Dustin had a thing for women who were on the rebound, and his sister definitely qualified as she waited for her ex to adhere to their prenup. Polly deserved more than a meaningless one-night stand, which was all Dustin ever offered.

"Polls?" he said when she answered.

"Are you coming over or what?"

"I'm on my way. I just have to do one thing. Is Dustin there?"

"No, why should he be? Is he running from his latest woman's old man and his shotgun?" She sounded amused. Which meant she'd had two drinks at least. Two more and she'd be looking for a place to nap. He'd better plan on being the driver once he unloaded the package. "How long will you be, anyway? I've already had five texts from your mom."

"Only five? We've got a few hours before she blows her lid, then." Josh paused for a second, tapping the envelope against his thigh. Polly knew Hailey. Hailey was Daphne Summer's sister. Daphne was living with Evander.

Josh may have just found the lead he needed to complete his task.

Phone to his ear, he began hurrying to his truck, the snowflakes drifting down around him growing more grainy than they had been half an hour ago. "Polls? Where's Evander de la Fosse tonight?"

"Evander? With Daphne. Why?"

"Because he's not at home and I need to see him."

"So?"

Josh summoned patience. He could tell from Polly's tone that she was holding back, playing the straight card. In other words, messing with him.

"Where's Daphne?" he asked sweetly.

"With her sisters," she replied just as sweetly.

Despite his focus on getting the package off his hands ASAP, he found himself chuckling. He needed a woman in his life who could dish things back at him like Polly, yet was understanding at the same time. Without the icky, annoying sister part, of course.

Why was he dreaming, anyway? He had a life to get in order, and after that only a certain type of woman would be interested in him. And he was certain she'd be nearly impossible to find.

He sighed and pushed a hand through his hair, dislodging snowflakes. "And where are Daphne's sisters?" he asked, starting his vehicle.

"At their cottage."

"And where is—"

"You have to go to Nymph Island?" Polly complained. "That'll take *forever*. No, wait. The lake probably isn't even all the way frozen yet. Ha, ha. You have to stay on land and drink with me."

"Then how did they get there?"

"Helicopters."

Billionaires.

"I'm putting on the kettle for a hot chocolate and Bailey's right now."

He let out a laugh at her assumed victory. "I made a promise, Polls. I've got to see this through." He heard grumbling on the other end of the line. "Just an hour. Promise."

"You and your promises. How are you even going to get there?"

That was going to be the trick, wasn't it? He ended the call, pulling out onto the street.

Forty-five minutes later he found himself crossing a frozen Lake Rousseau on his snowmobile, the local fishermen having assured him that it was indeed his lucky day, as the lake had frozen over early this year, making it safe to sled on.

Josh was going to have to make sure he got Polly a little something extra for her stocking tomorrow morning, because at this rate he wasn't making it back to her place within the hour he'd promised. And while it was only ten kilometers across the lake to Nymph Island and ten back, he had to take it slow in case there were unexpected areas of thin ice or open water.

After slowing to check his GPS, Josh glanced up at the nothingness above him. Earlier in the day the clouds had been gray and low, the temperature dropping, and now with the night fully upon him the chill had intensified, the world had turned eerie and dark.

Back on track, Josh hugged the shore of an island, where he knew the ice would be thicker, enjoying the way fresh drifts puffed up around him like icy confetti. There were worse ways to spend Christmas Eve than riding across the lake. Maybe he'd even go in for a warm drink if those cute Summer sisters were feeling welcoming.

He rounded a small horseshoe-shaped island and spotted his goal, marked by a flicker of light high in the trees. He parked his machine beside the Nymph Island dock, not wanting to drive up the path in case his sled hit something under the snow or he tore up the landscaping. The silence felt almost deafening, but he left his helmet on, knowing that his body heat would escape quickly if he removed it. He flipped up his visor, finding the scent of fresh snow crisp, clean and invigoratingly nippy. On second thought, he might have to skip staying for a drink, as a cold front was definitely coming in. If the weather kept up there'd be whiteout conditions within an hour or two and then it wouldn't matter how good he was, because if he couldn't see squat, including his GPS, he could consider himself royally pooched.

Bundled in his helmet and snowmobile suit, Josh followed a trail of footprints up the hill. The only sound breaking the silence of the night

was a generator that powered the island, giving the rustic old cottage a homey glow as light poured from its windows.

He trudged up the incline, snow crunching underfoot. He made his way onto the steps that led up to the old cottage's wraparound veranda. Someone had recently cleared the way, although the odd icy bit had been left behind. As he climbed the stairs he could see through the large porch windows. Four couples cozily enjoying themselves came into view, leaning against each other as they laughed. They were warmed by the flames roaring in the fireplace, a beautifully sad lone woman sitting on the outskirts of the group.

He felt like an intruder. An outsider. Someone who didn't belong here.

He almost turned away, afraid to break up the scene. His foot fell through the third step from the top, and he caught himself with a muffled thump that drew all eyes to him. A large man placed himself in front of a petite woman and a little girl in a party dress. With surprising speed for a guy his size, he ate up the space between himself and the French doors. Josh whipped off his helmet so Evander would recognize him, then doubted the move. The headgear might offer protection, since the bodyguard obviously hadn't figured out who he was, and came roaring through the door.

Josh fumbled for the envelope in his snowsuit's inside breast pocket as the man leaped across the veranda, taking him down before he had a chance to speak. As Josh fell backward, he watched the envelope spin through the air above them. Then the impact of their tumble down the stairs jolting through him and he lost his wind, the big, bulky man squeezing his lungs dry like a sponge until darkness shut him out.

Simone had jumped at the invitation to join the Summers and their men out at their cottage on Nymph Island for an impromptu winter picnic, instead of spending Christmas Eve alone, brooding about the fact that her father and stepmother were going to have a baby. Now she pushed the gawking sisters aside and skittered down the icy steps toward the unconscious form lying under a sheepish, protective bear of a man.

“Evander, get off him,” she said, pushing at his large shoulder.

Evander slowly complied, keeping his body as a barrier between her and the limp intruder. Sweet.

But also very annoying. It made her want to rail against his protective actions and prove that she could handle herself, thank you very much.

“Careful, he’s armed,” Evander said as she went to move around him.

Simone froze in her tracks. The unconscious man, blond hair askew over his forehead, didn’t seem like the type to carry a weapon or do evil deeds. He seemed harmless. And completely unprotected. On top of being unconscious.

Evander cautiously patted down the man, checking for weapons. “He was reaching inside his snowsuit.”

Daphne handed him an envelope with a wry frown. "He was armed with a message." She tucked a chunk of unruly curls behind an ear and Simone noted that her face looked rounder, more tired than usual. She'd bet Daphne's hunky man had been keeping her up too late, expressing his love and wearing her out.

Simone had tried dating a former military type like Evander once and it most definitely had not worked out, the man finding her inability to accept his help insulting. What she really needed was a guy with enough confidence to be the yin to her yang as needed—to be soft, caring, and understanding. Unfortunately, she had yet to find that in a straight man.

"Don't shoot the messenger," quipped Maya, the second eldest Summer sister, from her perch at the top of the staircase.

Simone watched Evander slowly bring himself down a notch. His training in the military had served him well as a bodyguard for Daphne and her daughter, Tigger, earlier that year, but at the moment his over-the-top reaction left Simone feeling unnerved.

She understood why Evander was still acting protective—he obviously loved Daphne and thought of Tigger as his own, and with the silence that had settled after the whole blowup last summer, he was likely waiting for some sort of surprise counterattack. But this wasn't the navy or secret intelligence. It was Daphne dealing with the father of her five-year-old. While her ex was a big, spoiled, confused man, Simone didn't think there was going to be any more trouble. And as opposite as Daphne and Evander seemed to be, they connected on a level Simone hadn't quite figured out yet. But whatever it was, it was good and she didn't want to see it end by him overreacting and trying Daphne's patience.

"Come on, let's get him inside," Simone said, nudging Evander, who immediately stooped to lift the man slowly being covered by gently

falling snow.

"Maybe we shouldn't move him," Daphne said, worry lining her brow.

The man in question groaned, his eyes not opening, as he gave a feeble attempt to shift position.

"No spinal damage. He can move. Get him inside," Simone commanded. "Come on, chop, chop. Maya, hold the door. Connor, help out Evander." She stepped aside, hugging herself as Maya's husband came forward. There was moisture in the air that hadn't been there earlier and it was cutting through her fitted sweater like miniature blades of ice.

"It's Josh Carson," Hailey, the eldest Summer sister, said in surprise as the inert man was carried past her.

"JC? Polly's half brother?" Simone hurried up the step to take a better look at their friend's sibling. They'd all gone to the same high school—the Summers, Simone, Polly, and JC—and Simone remembered JC as a fighter she'd wisely steered clear of. Some sort of issues at home, if she recalled. While handsome and a bit of a player, he'd had a quickness that had shifted from sunshine and roses to a fierce fighting stance at the drop of a hat. She'd never figured him out, and luckily, their paths hadn't crossed very often.

"Hasn't he been away fighting forest fires?" Maya asked.

"Smoke jumping," Hailey stated.

Simone shivered, walking alongside, taking in JC's good looks. He was still as cute as all get-out. She'd give him that. Handsome.

Dangerously so.

"Didn't he go to jail or something?" she asked. There had to be a reason this man was bad for her.

"That was Lix Levenson. Failure to appear," Melanie said, straightening as she closed the door behind the group. "They used to

run in the same crowd."

"Didn't you date Lix?"

"Unfortunately, yes." Melanie's mouth formed a tight line. Her fiancé, Tristen Bell, gave her a one-armed hug in support, his teenaged daughter, Dot, rolling her eyes at the display of affection.

Lix's story was slowly coming back to Simone. He'd been the one who had started the whole insecurity thing Melanie had going on with her Marilyn Monroe-esque body. A few comments at the wrong time and her friend was still reeling all these years later. However, thanks to an inadvertent combo move of Simone plying Melanie with homemade 1950s style dresses and her fiancé noticing how sexy they looked on her, she had definitely come into her own. Add in the fact that Tristen had helped her open her own legal aid office and the woman was on top of the world.

The men laid JC on the old orange couch near the fire, then stood back and stared at him. Five-year-old Tigger, who had been silent through it all, brought JC's snowmobile helmet and laid it on his chest, her expression remorseful.

"Evander killed the bad man." She looked up at her mother with large, round eyes, her bottom lip trembling.

"No!" Daphne collapsed onto her knees, hugging her daughter tightly. "He's not dead. Evander just knocked him over, but he's a friend, honey. Evander was just being careful." She gave her boyfriend a look, but he stood as still as a mountain, hands loose at his sides.

"I'm sorry," he mumbled.

"He's not like Grandma Summer?" Tigger asked, placing her hands on either side of Daphne's face and staring at her.

The room grew hushed at the mention of the recently departed Catherine.

"No, honey," Simone said, reaching down to squeeze Daphne's shoulder as the sisters all fought against tears, their grief still raw and whole. Maya busied herself straightening magazines on the nearby card table, forcibly clearing her throat. "JC's going to be okay," Simone added. "He's just resting after bonking his head."

The figure on the couch moaned again as if to prove his vitality and Tigger squealed and hid behind Evander. He reached behind him to scoop the little girl into his arms, then carried her away from the group, mumbling soothing words. Simone saw tears brim in Daphne's eyes again, but this time out of love instead of grief.

Simone wanted that. Big time.

But she was too self-reliant, too strident. She may as well live with brick walls around herself for all the luck she'd had in the dating world. Thank goodness for modern medicine. She could have a baby with donor 8753 and live happily ever after—without some man harping at her about her inability to show him some love. She could love just fine, thank you. Men just couldn't recognize it because she didn't swoon.

She sighed, then, realizing she was wallowing in self-pity, cleared her throat. "Well?"

"Should we call 911?" Melanie asked.

"Why?" Daphne, still hazy with grief, looked up.

"He's unconscious," Melanie replied drily.

Hailey's husband, Finian Alexander, an A-list movie star, wrapped his arms tighter around his pregnant wife.

They all stared at JC for a long moment, then Simone headed to the kitchen. It was cooler in that part of the cottage, as the kitchen had been added on decades ago and barely benefited from the warmth flowing from the fireplace, the cottage's only heat source. With the pump turned off until spring so the pipes didn't freeze, Simone dug through

one of the coolers they'd brought for a bottle of water. She uncapped it, taking a swig to ensure it was nice and brisk.

Perfectly refreshing.

She rejoined the crowd gathered around Josh and, without pausing to take in the way his five o'clock shadow looked devastating against his pale skin, dumped the contents of the bottle on the man's face.

He jolted and sputtered, his hand swiping over his strong jaw in response. His helmet rolled off his chest, hitting the area rug with a thud. He started to sit up, but grew pale and eased back, wincing.

"Simone!" Hailey whispered harshly, giving her a glare before stalking to the kitchen, her maternity jeans slipping lower in her haste. She gave them an impatient tug, quickly returning with a tea towel.

Simone shrugged. He was conscious now. Problem solved, right?

"What happened?" JC asked. His voice was groggy, as though he'd been sleeping for days, and the roughness in it sent ribbons of pleasure down Simone's spine. She quickly banished them. It was just the hormones talking. Which meant they were working. Which meant she'd be pregnant soon and holding a baby by next Christmas. But not with JC. Nope. No way.

Why would she even think of that? Of course she wouldn't be here with him. She was having a baby with donor 7658. Or was it 8753? 7857?

Maybe if she could look away from the drops of water clinging to JC's stubble she'd be able to remember. While his hair was light, his facial hair was darker, like an untold secret not everyone knew. The darkness brought out the paleness of his blue eyes, giving his handsomeness an unexpected edge that revved Simone's engine.

"Evander thought you were armed," Daphne said gently, taking the towel from Hailey and dabbing at the water on JC's chin. Simone found herself moving closer, resisting the urge to elbow her friend out of the

way so she could take over the gentle ministrations. But instead of allowing Daphne to help, JC took the towel, swiping it along the back of his neck where the water was trailing into his snowsuit.

"You should get out of that," Simone said, her voice cracking. She coughed to clear her throat. "Let it dry." She shrugged when his eyes met hers, and glanced toward the windows, to see the snow still coming down, sticking to the glass. Going out with a wet base layer wasn't smart. Even she knew that. She crossed her arms so she wouldn't be tempted to help him strip.

Daphne passed JC the envelope that had been knocked from his grip during Evander's tackle. "This is yours. I'm Daphne. Daphne Summer. I think you know my sisters." She made a quick round of introductions, starting with her sisters, their men, and then Tigger and Dot before completing the circle with Simone.

Her and JC's eyes locked and she had to glance away, not trusting herself not to stare, not to reveal her longing. She'd dated men like him before and it had always ended with the guy dumping her, leaving her with a broken heart, because under all the macho bravado he didn't have what it took to be with a woman who was strong and independent.

JC waved the envelope, leaning forward to brace himself with an elbow on his knee. "It's for Evander." He tentatively probed the back of his head.

Simone had a perfect view of JC's broad shoulders and the way his torso tapered down to his waist, evident even under the bulky snowsuit. Her need to memorize his every detail made her feel as though she'd never seen a man before, and she forced herself to look away once again.

"What is it?" Daphne asked, turning the envelope over in her hands before handing it to Evander, who snatched it, quickly tucking it in the

back of his jeans.

"What do I owe you for delivery?"

"Say thank you!" Daphne scolded, arms crossed.

"Thank you," the bodyguard muttered.

"It's already covered," JC said, sending more shivers trickling down Simone's spine. He needed coffee so he'd wake up and lose that bedroom quality to his voice. What were the chances there was still some left here from the summer?

"What is it?" Daphne asked again.

Tigger's eyes lit up. "Is it a super bright fairy light to help me sleep at night? You promised you'd get me one and it's almost Christmas. Can I open it? Can I?" She began bouncing, snagging Evander's arm. "Mom, you said I could open one present tonight and I choose that!"

"It's not big enough to be a super bright fairy light," JC mumbled. "The wings would break off."

"Maybe it unfolds and pops up when you take it out of the package," Tigger replied.

"You know what a super bright fairy light is?" Simone asked Josh, suspicion edging into her mind. If she had no clue what it was, how did a big tough guy like him know? Did he have kids?

Of course he had kids. Practically everyone their age did.

Except her. But she was getting there, wasn't she?

"Let's have supper before we worry about any gifts, okay?" Daphne cast Evander a curious look before heading to the kitchen with Hailey and Maya to set out the picnic supper.

The bodyguard pulled on a down jacket and excused himself to go to the outhouse, where Simone suspected he'd check out the contents of the mystery envelope in privacy.

"What's in it?" she asked JC as soon as he'd gone.

The man merely shrugged. He attempted to stand, saying his sister was waiting, but his legs gave up on the task, sending him reeling into Simone, who caught him and plunked him back on the couch. Holding him, even through his thick, padded outerwear, felt too close, too intimate, too tempting and therefore dangerous.

"I dunno," she said skeptically as she blocked him from trying to stand again. "You don't really seem up to it and I think Polly would rather have you wait a few minutes before going out across the lake. Alone."

"Totally," Tristen's daughter agreed. Her streak of green hair fell into her eyes and she flicked it out of the way. She'd been quietly sitting at the edge of the room, watching, and Simone had almost forgotten about her.

"Do you have a bump?" Simone asked, holding herself back from checking his skull.

"Yeah," JC said, his fingers diving into his hair to check.

"We need to ice it," Melanie murmured. She zipped into the kitchen for a plastic bag, then filled it with snow off the veranda.

"You shouldn't drive," Dot said.

Simone nodded. "We can give you a ride back later."

"I need to get my sled home. I promised my mom a ride tomorrow."

"Then we'll get it tomorrow," Simone said, taking the cold pack from Melanie and awkwardly offering it to JC. She almost caved in to the desire to apply it herself, to sit close and nurse him back to health, maybe even allow herself to brush up against his muscled arm.

Which, once again, told her the hormones were working.

"I'll have the helicopter come get you," Connor MacKenzie said, pulling out his cell phone. The man had once been nicknamed the King of Toronto and was now starting a whole new business venture with his bride, Maya. Lately it seemed as though the two of them were closing

million-dollar deals each month. They were impatient types, having eloped only weeks after they met. However, it was definitely working for them so far. They were already ahead of the game by decades. "You should have a doctor take a look at that bump."

"Is it bleeding?" Dot asked, her voice filled with both awe and disgust.

JC shook his head.

"Do you remember what happened?" Simone asked, sitting beside him. His pupils appeared to be the same size, but that didn't rule out a concussion. You didn't lose consciousness for nothing.

JC thought for a moment, then said, "I remember walking up the path and seeing everyone in the cottage, and then waking up inside it."

Simone shared a look with Finian, who drew in a long breath. He turned to Connor. "Got any cell coverage?"

The other man shook his head, adjusting the neck on his tan, cable-knit sweater. Finian checked his own phone before pocketing it again.

"I thought there was a cell signal booster here?" Simone said, a sliver of panic shifting to the forefront of her mind. While she found it relaxing being on the island, as she never seemed to feel the need to compulsively check her email, she didn't like the idea of being entirely cut off from the outside world. She had a lot of skills, but winter survival in the middle of nowhere wasn't one of them.

"That was over on Baby Horseshoe," Finian replied.

Right. And when Finian, Connor, Tristen, and Evander had banded together to buy the island from Daphne's ex and the developer Rubicore, the previous owners had taken everything that wasn't tied down before they turned over the keys.

"I bought one for here," Connor said, "but I lent it to a friend for his hunting cabin and haven't got it back yet." He gave an apologetic frown.

The group grew silent, the only sounds the crackling of burning logs and Hailey, Daphne, and Maya laughing in the kitchen as they prepared supper.

"I'll head up the hill and see if I can get enough signal to call a helicopter in for you," Connor said to JC.

The injured man stood. "I'm fine. A helicopter isn't necessary."

"You bothered by helicopters?" Connor asked, sizing him up.

Simone watched the two position themselves. Cockfights. She hated them. Alphas seemed to get their noses out of joint for the silliest reasons.

"I'm fine with them even when I'm jumping out of one and into a forest fire," JC replied. "I just don't want to put you and your pilot out in a storm on Christmas Eve for a small bump on the head." As if to illustrate how minor it was, JC tossed the bag of ice on the nearby coffee table and tugged the zipper of his suit up to his chin. "Thanks, but I'm heading out. Merry Christmas."

Finian headed him off. "Let's eat first. Give you a minute to clear your head. That was quite a fall."

Connor grabbed his parka off a coat rack and headed for the door as Evander came in, brushing large drifts of snow off his shoulders, his cheeks rosy.

"Bad weather coming in," JC said, eyeing Evander as he moved closer to the door. "Thank you for the invitation, but I'd better make a move while I still can."

"I doubt anyone is going anywhere soon," Evander said, his voice low and commanding. "I just about got lost returning from the outhouse. There's not much in the way of visibility."

"What? It was fine five minutes ago!" Simone protested, moving to the window. The idea of not being able to make a run to the outhouse

caused the several cups of coffee she'd drunk on her flight home to slosh inside her. Talk about timing.

"Go in pairs if you're heading up the hill in the dark," Melanie said, entering the room with her sisters. "Supper's ready."

"Nobody's going anywhere," Evander declared.

Josh winced as he put on his helmet. "I have a GPS. I'll be fine if I move fast."

"Could you see the cottage lights from the outhouse?" Connor asked the bodyguard, one eye on JC, who was buckling his chin strap.

"Once I was close, but there's no way you could see them from up the hill. Or from down by the boathouse, for that matter. Not through what's almost a total whiteout." He gave JC a pointed look, knowing the man had left his snowmobile down there.

"We could use rope to guide us up the hill so we don't get lost," Finian said. "In my film *Man versus War*—"

Hailey gave him a playful squeeze. "Okay, Mr. Movie Star. No need for cinema references."

"Yeah? And who had my poster above her bed as a teen?" he teased.

Hailey blushed, pinching him. "Watch it or I'll photograph you in a compromising position."

"I like the sound of that." He carefully scooped the pregnant woman into his arms. "At least we don't have to worry about paparazzi if we're snowed in."

Simone noticed how JC caught the cuddles out of the corner of his eye as he surveyed the weather from the French doors. An expression crossed his face that she couldn't quite understand. Was it envy or discomfort?

"Will the helicopter be able to fly in this?" she asked. It didn't sound safe for JC to go zipping off across the lake in this weather, nor for him to ride in a helicopter—an aircraft they couldn't even call in.

He opened the door and a gust of wind blanketed him in snow. He closed it again and looked back at the group.

"Come on, let's make ourselves useful and look for rope," Finian said to Connor, Evander, and Tristen.

"The bin in here has extra boat lines, it might have rope," Melanie said, leading them into a bedroom off the living room.

JC, his hand still on the door, watched the snow come down for a moment before reaching over to tap the single-paned window. "We should close the shutters. We're losing a lot of heat." He headed outside and quickly started latching the wooden panels over the windows.

"Are we stuck?" Simone asked when he returned, stomping the snow off his boots.

"Overnight would be my guess." He tugged the curtains over the French doors.

"Overnight," she echoed, wrapping her arms around herself. Snowed in on Christmas Eve without her morning dose of hormones?

Not on her life.

There had to be a way out of here before then.

"I'm sure it's just a cloud giving us little dose of powder for a perfect white Christmas. That's all." She stood straighter. Mother Nature wasn't going to mess with her plans. She couldn't. They were women. Women had to stick together. It was a rule of sisterhood.

JC turned, tripping on a small area rug with his large winter boots. He swayed like a leaf in an autumn wind as he fought for balance. Simone wrapped her arms around his waist, supporting him. He smelled of snow and snowmobile exhaust. And something else she couldn't put her finger on, but wanted to continue inhaling. Forever.

JC tried to sit on a nearby chair, taking Simone with him. He apologized as she scrambled off him, his hands brushing her sides as he tried to help steady her.

Electricity and need zinged through her and she stood, cheeks heated. This man This man was way too tempting, especially in the state she was in. She wanted to sit in his lap and kiss those wonderful lips of his, feel the scrub of his five o'clock shadow on her cheeks. Wanted to hear his body sing along with hers.

She fanned her face. "It's warm."

His steady gaze watched her. "Right." He slowly unzipped his snowsuit and Simone had to look away, certain he was teasing her, that he knew the impact his body was having on hers.

She cleared her throat and glanced around the room. It was empty. Everyone had left to go fill their plates or find rope, leaving her with JC as though he was her personal gift from Santa.

She glanced back at the man, who gave her a lopsided, amused grin. Honestly, she'd rather have a lump of coal.



SIMONE WATCHED everyone break into couples to enjoy their picnic supper in the spacious, open living room, Dot and Tigger laying out a blanket for their own meal. The men hadn't found enough rope to try and make their way up the hill to see if they could wrangle service out of their phones, but Simone was fairly certain the storm would blow over soon. It had to.

In the meantime, the living room had plenty of seating. The only person sitting alone was JC, and after looking around at all the lovebirds, Simone reluctantly settled in the armchair beside him, facing the large fireplace. Even though JC was the kind of man she avoided, sometimes, when you were unlucky in love, sitting with lovebirds hurt.

"How's the head?" she asked. He hadn't thrown up and didn't seem confused, which she took to be good signs. He'd removed his snowsuit

and she had to work to train her attention away from the span of his broad shoulders. Whenever she wasn't focused on something such as the wooden snowshoes above the mantel she found herself taking in his pure manliness like a woman who'd been deprived of— Nope, she was not heading off in that forbidden direction again. This was JC. He was a big macho jock type who liked thought-free bimbos. He was the exact opposite of what she was looking for and vice versa. Not that either of them were looking for something that sizzled between the sheets, anyway.

Brain?

Yes.

Shut up now.

"Bit of a headache," JC replied.

"Stick your head in the snow. That should help," Maya suggested from her spot across the room, where she was tapping away on her laptop.

That's what Simone was going to need if she kept thinking—a snow bath to cool her jets.

"Helpful and oh so kind," Hailey quipped.

Simone nodded in automatic agreement, even though she believed JC had no right to look so tempting, and should be punished for it—preferably by something cold and unpleasant.

"She's not the most nurturing of the group," Hailey added, giving her sister a glare.

"What?" Maya said. "It was a good suggestion. Cold will reduce the swelling, which will help decrease the pain."

"I've got something for that," Simone said. She pulled her purse out from under the couch near the armchair she was occupying. She'd almost brought tomorrow's hormone dose with her, just in case, but had been worried one of the sisters would see it in her purse and ask

questions she wasn't ready to answer. But now she was more worried about the possibility of missing the shot entirely and wasting another month by falling off the schedule again.

She couldn't explain why, but she was afraid to tell the Summer sisters she was going it alone on the baby front. Maybe it was because she'd waited too long to broach the topic and was now in so deep they'd feel hurt by being excluded from something so big. She'd wanted to confide in them when she'd found out about her ovaries in early October, but it had felt so minor compared to the loss of their mother. So she'd waited. But then there had been Hailey's pregnancy announcement, Maya's elopement and Melanie's wedding plans. It had all felt as though Simone's petty sorrows and stubbornness in wanting to carry her own child would simply be seen as her being selfish, wanting her own way and trying to get attention or pity instead of sharing in the joys of their lives.

And honestly, it wasn't a big deal to be trying this avenue. Couples did it all the time without announcing it to the world. Besides, she wasn't even sure it would work—it hadn't last month, so why make a big fuss of what might possibly turn out a dead end?

But if it did work

Two months. There would be only two months age difference between her half sibling and her child. They would share the same milestones, and anyone who could perform elementary math would realize that Simone had gotten herself knocked up right around the time her father made his big announcement. It would look as though Simone was in a desperate bid against her stepmother for her dad's attention, even though she'd just spent three months adjusting her life priorities, consulting, researching, and going to doctors and fertility clinics. She'd undergone a multitude of invasive tests, filtered through donors, and was weeks into preparing herself, as well as dealing with side effects,

but what would it matter in the end? They were going to have a baby first.

Simone handed JC the bottle of acetaminophen, thinking she might have to pop one, too, if the pressure in her head continued to intensify.

"Thanks." He shook out two and handed back the bottle, then flinched when the logs in the fireplace shifted, sending off sparks and causing him to drop the pills onto the area rug. He muttered something about needing to get out of the business, and retrieved the tablets from the floor.

Simone, not wanting to know the meaning of his mumblings, began tucking into her plate of pasta salad and fried chicken, stretching her feet toward the fire. "You have kids?" she asked him, still curious about the fairy light conversation.

"Nope."

She shouldn't feel gleeful hearing that, should she?

"Married?"

"Nope."

More glee.

"You proposing?" he asked with a wicked grin.

She let out a snort, giving him attitude, her body tightening at the casual way he glanced at her. She didn't even know what it was, but it annoyed her how quickly he could get her mind and body off track. She wanted to lick his biceps, which was utterly ridiculous, seeing as he was wearing a long-sleeved, thin sweater. She'd get lint all over her tongue. Plus freak him out and make things awkward.

"It's called making conversation, you Neanderthal. Not all women who see you want to hook you."

His expression turned to one of surprise. She gave him a smug smile, happy to have knocked the panty-dropping grin off his face for the time being. She leaned back in her chair. Even though it was possible she

could end up stuck overnight in a place with no running water and heat that barely spread beyond the living room, it could be kind of fun if she got to push JC off his little "I'm so hot" pedestal. Her new life was all about slowing down and having fun again, so why not start now? She was ready to stop worrying about other businesses getting ahead of hers and ready to dropkick pressure out of her life. Ready to find her joy.

She moved her feet as Daphne glided by, placing a juice box on the mantel while she reprimanded her daughter for drinking two in a row.

"Sorry," Dot said. "I thought that was still her first one."

"Tigger, you know all that juice will make you bouncy." Daphne added, "It's okay, Dot. She's a little trickster." She gave her daughter a pointed look, which was returned with a giggle before the five-year-old skipped over to JC, clinging to the arm of his chair as she jumped in place.

"Did you know Nymph Island has fairies?"

JC, who had been about to take a bite of his chicken, paused thoughtfully. "You don't say?"

"I do say!" Tigger placed her elbows on the armrest, leaning close to the man, eyes wide. "They're real!"

"Real?"

Simone watched the exchange, curious as to why JC was taking Tigger so seriously. Was he afraid Evander would knock him out again if he didn't entertain his little girl? If JC wasn't careful he might become one of her new favorites, and she already had four doting men to choose from. Uncle Finian had won her over with a new party dress and tales from Hollywood; Uncle Connor had saved her from a falling tree. Evander had captured her heart with his love, while quiet Uncle Tristen had done so with his gentle ways, big shaggy dog and teenaged daughter.

"Hey, where's your dog, Tristen?" Simone asked.

"At home. Probably crossing his legs," he answered, his face tightening with worry at the thought of his Bernese mountain dog being locked inside for the night.

"I made them fairies houses and they ate the blueberries I left for them," Tigger whispered loudly, still hanging off JC's chair.

"Really?" He leaned closer, as though their conversation was the most interesting thing in the room. Which it kind of was. It had Simone intrigued, mostly due to the way JC seemed so genuine and unexpectedly gentle with Tigger.

"They like shiny things," the girl continued.

"Like sequins?"

"Sequins?" Simone exclaimed. Okay, stop the bus. How did a man like JC know what they were? Shouldn't he be suggesting manly objects such as ball bearings?

He set her back with a look that said, *"We weren't talking to you, lady."*

Well, she knew where she wasn't welcome. She'd known his nice side was just a front for a nasty under layer. She took her plate and went to join Hailey at the card table near the stairs that led up to the loft.

"Ugh, I can't stand the smell of chicken," Hailey complained.

"What's wrong with it?" Simone asked, waving her drumstick under her nose. It smelled divine.

"It's just a pregnancy thing." Her friend leaned away, trying not to inhale.

"Oh. Sorry." Simone slouched in the hard-backed chair, then picked up her plate and moved to sit with Daphne, who was watching her daughter, likely worried that she was abusing JC's kindness.

"And other stuff like nickels," Tigger was saying.

"Those would make perfect stepping stones for their garden," JC replied.

Tigger's eyes lit up as she crawled up onto the arm of the chair. JC didn't seem to mind the intrusion into his personal space and Simone hoped he wouldn't notice her watching them, trying to figure him out.

"Do you have a fairy garden?" Tigger asked.

JC shook his head, finishing off his own drumstick. "Do you?"

Tigger nodded and held up five fingers.

"Did you know that if you mix Jell-O powder and glitter together after it rains it can help them fly?"

Tigger slowly shook her head, focused wholly on the man. There was something about him that was mesmerizing to all females—any age—wasn't there? Too bad he was a big, burly, heart-smashing alpha under it all.

"Because, see " JC shifted to face Tigger more fully. "If they get caught in the rain then their wings' special flying powder gets washed away."

Tigger gave him a somber look. "That's bad."

He nodded. "But usually what they do is they find a trail left by slugs—you know how they glitter and shine, but disappear after about a day? It's because the fairies collected the glitter. They use it to replenish their flying powder. But you can mix up your own if there aren't any slugs around to help."

"Really?"

He nodded again. "It's fairy magic."

"Tigger, that's enough," Daphne said, trying to save JC, and making Simone snap to. She'd become totally involved in their conversation again. "Why don't you come play Go Fish with me and Dot?"

JC waved her away. "It's okay."

Tigger was staring at the room's dark windows, which were rattling in the wind, their closed shutters clanging every so often. "Fairies hibernate."

"They do?" Simone asked from her spot across the spacious room.

"With the squirrels. They cuddle to stay warm," she added in a serious voice filled with regret, her focus back on JC. "But the squirrels like to eat their hair ribbons. And make their coats into nests. They aren't very good at sharing sometimes. I don't think they went to kindergarten."

JC chuckled and caught Simone's eye. She was struck by how he seemed to be an entirely different person while talking to Tigger. Gentle, kind and very real. There were no walls. Not even a hint of the expected jock mentality or that superior grin he'd flashed at Simone moments ago.

But this was good. She'd seen both sides early and wouldn't fall for him. There was no room in her plans to become confused over an attractive man such as JC. But he really needed to stop smiling and being so sweet to Tigger. It wasn't fair. He couldn't be so nice to the girl, lure her into liking him, then go back to being a big macho guy who wouldn't even say hello if he passed her on the street. The connection was going to mean too much to Tigger.

"Have you read the *Rainbow Magic* books?" he asked, head bent low to match Tigger's. "It's about little girls who are friends with fairies and get help from them. I think you'd really enjoy the stories if you haven't read them already."

Fairy books? Did his sweetness never end? This was so wrong. He needed to stop acting like the man Simone had dreamed about. Carefully, she crossed her arms, pinching the tender flesh on the inside of her arm. Nope. Not having a hormone-induced fantasy.

"She hasn't learned to read yet," Evander said gruffly, his own arms crossed, his brow furrowed. Simone smiled in relief. JC's act wasn't getting under just her skin, but Evander's, too. The men would suss him out, help her stay safe—or sane, or whatever it was she needed. Maybe an ice-cold shower.

"I know a few words, like *bat* and *cat*," Tigger said eagerly. "I could read them!"

"Maybe your mom could read them to you? Or, uh, Evander?" JC glanced at the big man somewhat doubtfully.

He gave a sharp nod.

"Right." Simone stood with her empty plate. Enough of the Mr. Nice Guy act. Time to get to the bottom of who he really was. "So? Beat anyone up lately, or have you been too busy learning about fairies?"

JC gave her a hurt look, the walls folding around him again. She could practically hear them clang and lock back into place, shutting her out so fully she almost had to take a step back.

"Simone " Hailey said, giving her a funny look.

"You used to get into some real knockdowns, didn't you?" Simone continued, determined to figure out what game JC was playing, to expose him for who he really was.

"Yeah, I did," he said, standing to face her. "Usually when close-minded individuals tried to place me and my family into a little box."

Simone gasped. "Are you implying I'm close-minded?"

He simply raised an eyebrow and turned back to Tigger. "Come on, kid. I'll show you some ribbon designs so you can help your fairies redecorate their hair come spring."

Simone glanced around the room, looking to see if anyone else was as outraged by the way he'd dismissed her. But everyone's gaze darted away. Okay, so she'd been a bit harsh, but she'd only been trying to protect Tigger.

"I am not close-minded," Simone said, her voice small.

JC gave her a "sure, sure" nod and went to retrieve his cell phone out of a snowsuit pocket, then handed it to Tigger.

Simone took her plate to the kitchen and returned to the living room a moment later to find Tigger utterly engrossed by the contents of JC's phone. Trying to ignore the fact that he'd won over the small girl in such a short period of time, Simone focused on building up the fire again.

JC came up behind her, his presence building a heat within her that wasn't related to the blaze she was stoking with the poker.

"Push the wood in farther or it could roll out," he said, as she added another log.

She faced him with a glare. "I know how to stack a fire."

"And create a fire hazard."

She growled at him and went back to rearranging the logs. Men like JC were know-it-alls. They played games and weren't real. Men like him, she reminded herself, told her that she was incapable of love and that all she thought about was her business. Men like JC didn't see that she wanted the same things as everyone else. All of it. Family. Love. All the trappings of domesticity.

As she gave the log an extra jab she promised herself that even if it was the last thing she did, she was going to prove to JC that she was capable of love. She was going to love him and he was going to love her right back, without getting all insecure about how strong she was.

No, wait.

That was completely wrong.

She was having a baby. Her way. On her own. No JC and all his macho baggage. She didn't need a man. All she needed was to get home in time for her morning hormone shot.

No problem.

Except for that raging blizzard.

Josh had Simone pegged. She was an unhappy, pretty little control freak who liked having things her way as well as lined up “just so.” She probably dated men like Dustin and expected to change him.

When she’d got all in Josh’s face about knowing stuff about fairies, he’d considered hiding out in a corner until the storm blew over, but had realized that, quite frankly, he didn’t care if she got her panties twisted in a knot. Her problem. Not his. She was probably used to having them wedged up her perfect little butt, anyway. If she had to reduce him to nothing more than a fighting lug so she could overlook him, then she was the one who had issues.

“Should we be rationing food?” Simone asked, as a few of the guys went back for seconds.

Control freak.

Josh adjusted the burning logs in the fireplace, carefully placing the screen across the opening when he was done.

“Who knows how long we’ll be snowed in?” she added. “And while I know this is probably the last time all of us will be together for Christmas—”

“Why?” he interrupted, feeling irritated that she was being so bossy. There was plenty of food in the kitchen and they were all adults capable

of solving a few food shortage problems without her dictating their lives. "Because we're going to suddenly starve to death?"

Environment Canada had said tomorrow was supposed to be nice after tonight's flurries and wind. Getting home wasn't going to be a problem.

"No, because everyone is moving on," she snapped.

Without her, obviously. Hence the knotted undergarments.

And while Josh admitted that rationing was likely a smart plan—just in case—at the moment he didn't feel like conceding any points to her controlling side. He wanted to win and he wanted to put her in her place, wherever that was.

"Afraid of a little storm?" he asked.

"You're still such a pain in the butt."

He let out a triumphant bark of laughter for getting under her skin so easily.

"Butt! Simone said butt!" Tigger squealed, bouncing in her seat at the card table.

"Tigger!" scolded Daphne.

"Sorry," Josh said.

"That's enough, Tigger." Evander placed his hand over the girl's. She quieted, her eyes gleaming as she looked up at the big man. That kid was life at its best.

Simone was glaring at Josh, hands on her curvaceous hips. She was sizing him up, likely trying to prevent him from getting under her skin any further. He watched her reassess her line of attack, bolster her defenses, and he admired her all the more even though he didn't want to.

"When will we get out of here?" Hailey asked. She smoothed her sweater over a small midriff bump, which he noted Simone watched out of the corner of her eye with was that longing?

Why would someone like her want a kid? He couldn't even begin to imagine her doting over a gaggle of offspring. Not unless she was a power mom. CEO of the color-coded family calendar.

He smiled at the thought. *That* he could see, actually.

But if she wanted kids, then why didn't she have them? She seemed like the type to make things happen, ripping through roadblocks as though they were made of crepe paper.

He shook away the thoughts. He didn't have time to get curious about a woman like her. He needed to keep her on the defensive so she didn't unearth his secrets, slaughter him wholesale in front of everyone.

"We'll catch our flight," Finian said to his wife, nuzzling her neck as she blushed and curled into him.

Josh had to look away, not quite sure where was safe. Everywhere he turned there were lovey-dovey couples getting friendly, and it made him feel like an intruder. No wonder Simone kept coming and sitting beside him. She needed escape and it was either with him, the surly teenager with strange-colored hair or bouncing Tigger. Personally, he'd choose Tigger, but then again, Simone didn't seem to appreciate fairies. They were probably too feminine. He let out a chuckle, quickly biting it back when she gave him a look.

"What?" she asked from a few feet away, adjusting photos that were hanging crooked on the wall.

"Nothing."

"No, what?" she insisted, abandoning her task.

"I was trying to imagine you doing something feminine."

She appeared taken aback. "I do feminine things all the time." She ran her hands down her sides, smoothing her outfit, and he immediately imagined her in very feminine, lacy, see-through attire.

"Sure," he said, not at all trying to hide the way his voice dipped low and gravelly with desire.

She flushed as though she'd been out in the sun too long, and glanced around the room, her desperate gaze finally landing on Melanie Summer, who was wearing a dress with woolly leggings. "I made that dress. By hand. That's feminine."

"You made that?" He darted a peek at the garment, which he'd noticed earlier. Melanie wore it as though it had been made specifically for her, from the print and color right down to the style and stitching. If Simone had made that, the woman not only had an eye for design, but some pretty serious talent and skills. Something he'd love to have.

She tipped up her chin. "I did."

"Really?"

"Yes, really." She gave an exasperated huff.

"She makes my woman look incredibly sexy," Tristen interjected, running a hand down his fiancée's back. "New dresses arrive all the time and we—"

"Shh!" Melanie scolded, head tipping down in pleased embarrassment.

"You need to start charging her for these. I'd pay thousands," Tristen said, nibbling Melanie's ear. He murmured, "I would have noticed you even without your stunning dress, you know."

Josh did his best to shut them out as their words became sweet enough to send a diabetic into shock.

He cleared his throat, wishing the fireplace needed more attending. "So you made that dress? By hand? That's a nice hobby." He tried to focus on Simone and not the annoying kissy noises that were coming from behind him.

"It's not a hobby, and I can do other things besides sew, you know," Simone said, her back straightening. "Being feminine doesn't get you ahead in this world."

"Okay." Josh let out a slow breath, realizing that while he'd been poking at her for fun, her hang-ups seemed to run deep. "Look, I'm sure

you do a great job of getting ahead in the world.” He gave her a disarming smile, hoping she’d let it go.

She cocked her head to the side, and he found it difficult not to admire how sexy she looked when she was mad.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” she asked.

All right. Time to pull the pin and let her explode so they could avoid each other for the rest of their sentence on Nymph Island. Finian moved behind Simone, pretending he needed the poker for the fireplace. He gave Josh a finger-across-the-throat signal.

“It means don’t pin your issues on me,” Josh said, his voice displaying fatigue with their pointless fight.

Finian’s eyes grew large and he playacted dying a horribly violent death. It was a wonder the man hadn’t won an Oscar, and Josh tried not to appear amused by the comedy unrolling behind an unsuspecting Simone.

She stalked over to him. “Could you be any more condescending?”

“Probably, but I like how your throat gets all splotchy and red when you’re annoyed. I think you’d lose the splotchiness if you got more upset.”

He was right. That smooth skin was already being flooded by more red. This woman was a ball crusher and he happened to like his bits and pieces in an unpurified form. That meant if he planned on coming out alive he needed to end it. End it now.

He loomed closer, certain he knew which final button to push. He’d get too near, make her uncomfortable enough with a few suave moves, and she’d avoid him until the end of time, righting his world once again.

She crossed her arms over her chest, holding her ground. “I don’t like you.” When he didn’t respond, she jabbed him in the chest with a long fingernail, glossy with layers of perfect polish.

"You're not the first," he said, catching her finger, "and you won't be the last."

"You imply that because I'm a woman I'm weak and I can't possibly have achieved anything worthwhile." She wrenched her finger out of his grip, her arm flying backward as he released it.

"Simone," one of the sisters warned.

"No," she said, focusing on Josh, "I know your type. You act all smooth and fun, but you can't take it when push comes to shove. You can't handle the tough stuff and you're not man enough to do what feels right in your heart."

He felt shaky, her digs striking chords of truth, and he was getting the feeling she'd go on all night—or at least until she had him strung up by his nuts, which wouldn't take long at this rate.

"You probably say you love someone, but when the chips are down, you can't handle a strong woman. You think you're a real man, but you're not."

Josh rubbed his forehead. "That's your issue, not mine."

"No it isn't, and I can see it all over you, plain as day. You're just like the others, so quit playing games with me. I know that look. I know what it says."

He decided to up his approach, since there didn't seem anything to lose, and she was starting to strike too close to home. He eased even closer, feeling like a primal cat tracking down its prey. Josh dragged his gaze up her body, allowing his eyes to fill with desire and sensuality. "And what is my look implying now?"

She gave a series of flustered blinks, her cheeks flushed.

The whole room had gone silent, and he was starting to wonder if he'd find himself seeking shelter in a snowdrift until the blizzard was over and he could escape.

"Are you afraid of our chemistry?" Josh ran a hand down her arm. She shivered but didn't quite push away. Risking it, he tipped up her chin, aligning his lips with hers. He paused there, hovering over her, curious whether she would meet him halfway or whether the group surrounding them would break it up.

"You're a tease." She crossed her arms, not pulling away, that adorable flush spreading all the way to her ears.

"Yeah?"

"And I don't like you."

"You've already said that."

Knowing he should break contact, he tried to move away, but found he couldn't seem to release her. He must have taken a bigger bump to the head than he'd thought, because right now he wanted her to like him. A lot.

He knew better, though. Women like Simone were too much work to handle, making him fall back on his basic, dominant side when he knew he could be so much more. But right now, as the heat from the fireplace warmed them, all he could do was wonder what her lips tasted like. Salty? Like lip gloss? A perfect blend of something uniquely Simone?

"Just like in high school," she said quietly. "Try to make the girls swoon, then walk away laughing."

He kissed her lightly, his lips tingling with the electric pulse that came off her in waves. She tasted like snowstorms and cherries.

He broke the kiss, delighted she'd allowed it. He murmured, "I'm not laughing."

Her dark eyes were black with consternation. "Neither am I."

Still holding her chin, he kissed her once more, quickly, wanting to see if that ticklish jolt would happen again when their lips met.

It did.

He made himself back away before he could wrap his arms around her and claim her in a stupid move he'd likely regret for the rest of his miserable life.

"Well, uh, that was fun," Maya said, rolling her shoulders before giving everyone a big smile, attempting to draw attention away from the now dissolved fight. "Did you know Simone made my wedding gown? Gave me the sister rate—free."

"Enough about the dress, Maya," Daphne said with a grumpy frown, arms wrapped tight around her slight frame. "We've heard about it eight hundred times."

Josh blinked at the women, trying to get his head around the fact that he'd just tenderly hate-kissed Simone in front of everyone in an attempt to get her to eff off. What on earth had just happened?

He should never have come out here tonight. He wanted to hold Simone's hand and snuggle on the couch. Which was not his style. At. All.

He rubbed the bump on the back of his head and went to the kitchen for a beer, before changing his mind and snagging a bottle of iced tea instead. If the storm cleared up he'd have to leave—no matter the time of day—and would need his wits about him in order to do so safely.

The kitchen was freezing, but he took a moment alone to think. He *never* let a woman get that far under his skin. And so quickly. Simone had found buttons to push that he hadn't even known he had. How had she turned everything around on him?

"Right, well, did I tell you all I have plans for tomorrow?" Maya was saying in the other room. "And those plans do not include me being stuck on this island. All of us in this tiny living room all night trying to stay warm? Give me a real place to sleep." From the doorway Josh saw

her playfully whack her husband on the shoulder. "Get us out of here, would you?"

Figuring it was safe to rejoin everyone, Josh drifted back to the spot in front of the fireplace, warming his hands, turning to face the group. He could feel Simone's presence beside him as surely as a touch. He glanced at her, but she looked away, down and to the left as though the flooring was suddenly of utmost interest. For a second he felt guilty. There was an air of vulnerability to her now, as though their fight had been about proving something important to herself and losing had set her back. He just about reached out to comfort her, to let her know it wasn't personal, when she straightened her shoulders and put on the visage of entitled, powerful woman again.

"Good idea on getting out of here," Simone said. "What do you have on tap for us, Mr. Connor MacKenzie?"

"Put in an order with Mother Nature, ladies," Connor replied drily. "It doesn't matter how many bucks I have, they won't do us any good in this weather."

"Oh, come on," Maya said with a pout.

"Spitfire " Connor warned. But she grinned at him and he grabbed the back of her neck, pulling her in for a long, deep kiss that had everyone turning away to give them privacy.

Josh glanced around the large room. There were worse places the dozen of them could be stuck; and he knew, because he'd been stuck there. And given the chance, he'd always choose cold over too much heat. Forest fires did that to a guy.

"It's not so bad here," he said. The place was rustic, over a century old, but it had been built well and was standing the test of time like a trooper.

"It would be even better if it had a working flush toilet," Simone said.

"Fully winterized," Maya chimed in with a sigh. "Central heat, running water." She was ticking things off on her fingers and Josh got the impression she wasn't the cottage's biggest fan.

Simone added, "At least the generator hasn't crapped out yet, so we have electricity."

"The guys got us a new one last fall," Daphne said.

"That's why it's so quiet!" Simone exclaimed. "Nice work, men."

Josh bit his bottom lip, feeling like a puppy for wanting some praise from her, too. She had definitely worked her way under his skin.

"We could use heated bedrooms so Hailey could rest her back in a real bed tonight," Simone added.

Finian, Connor, Tristen, and Evander shared a look, and Josh realized they were up to something. He eased himself into a chair so that the sudden change in altitude wouldn't send the lump on his head throbbing, and waited for their surprise to unfold.

"What?" Maya demanded. "What was that look about? What did you do?"

"We," Connor began, glancing at the other men, who nodded their consent for him to continue, "got you a little something for Christmas."

"Is that what's in Evander's package?" Melanie asked. Pink rose up the big bodyguard's neck and he avoided eye contact with anyone in the group.

"I thought the generator was our gift," Daphne interrupted, watching Evander carefully, her body language suggesting that things might not be wonderful in their little paradise.

"It was, but there's more." Evander placed a hand on her hip, drawing her close.

The women were circling the men, eyes alight in anticipation of the upcoming surprise.

"What is it? What is it?" Tigger chanted, dancing around the room. Even Dot was looking curious, her head popping out of the manga book she'd been reading.

Simone leaned closer to Josh. "You drove a snowmobile here, right?"

He nodded, giving her a look. She knew full well he'd come on his sled. Did he have to worry about her taking off with it?

She glanced over at the occupied sisters. "I'll pay you to get me home by eight-thirty tomorrow morning if these monkeys can't get their helicopters and billion-dollar plans working by then."

"Yeah?" Josh lifted his eyebrows, assessing her. She smoothed her sweater over her chest, enhancing the smallness of her waist, the fullness of her figure. He inhaled, trying to quell the stir her body was creating within him.

What was so important that she'd flip on a dime, turning him from enemy number one to an elite member of her inner circle? Were his kisses that amazing?

While he'd like to think so, he couldn't help but wonder what she was up to.

"Why?" he asked.

Her large eyes lifted to meet his and he felt himself soften at their quiet desperation.

Oh, that woman.

"Name your price," she countered. She flicked her hand impatiently when he didn't reply. "How much?"

Behind Simone the sisters gasped at what was surely some exorbitant gift.

"You can't afford me." As tempting as it was to enter her inner circle, Josh would have to be nuts to succumb. She was trouble and he'd do well to remember that.

"Try me," she challenged, her voice low.

Fine. Time to see how serious she was. If she was going to push, he was going to make it worth his while being stuck with her. "A thousand."

"Dollars?" she confirmed, giving him a little bit of sass. Implying that his amount was a pittance and well below her expectations.

"If you give me attitude, two thousand." He crossed his arms over his chest.

Simone echoed his pose. "Three."

Josh turned his palms upward in question. What on earth kind of bargaining was that? He hoped she didn't do her own negotiations for those dresses she made. Then again, the Summer sisters had said she'd given them away.

The room emptied around them, leaving Josh and Simone alone. There was only one reason a woman would pay three thousand dollars for a twenty-minute snowmobile ride.

"Are you in trouble?"

She seemed taken aback before going on the defensive. "I need to be home by eighty-thirty. Can you make it happen or not?"

"If the helicopter can't come get us by then, I doubt it will be safe for us to make our way across the lake on a snowmobile."

"So you're not man enough?" she said, tossing her head in challenge.

A fight flared up inside him, but he reminded himself that a trip across the ice in sketchy weather wasn't worth anything if you didn't make it out alive.

"Well?" she prompted.

Simone Pascal was a piece of work. A beautiful piece of work.

But she was calling him a wuss. Not verbatim, but essentially that was the message. Josh felt the muscles in his jaw flex as he fought the mighty urge to show Simone just how much of a man he was.

But years of firefighting training had taught him to push those emotions aside. The ego. The history and scars from the past that made men do stupid things, putting themselves at risk—whether with forest fires or with women.

He stared down at Simone, wanting to run his fingers through her rich dark hair. She had pushed out her chest while making her pitch and he found his gaze drawn to their perfect curves. Irresistible. If she wasn't the exact opposite of what he needed, he'd probably try and get her into bed.

"Why are you willing to risk both our lives to get home by a certain time?" he asked.

"It's none of your business."

"Oh, I think it is."

"Can you or can you not?"

Why would a smart woman take such a risk? Both in high school and over the past hour she hadn't struck him as a great risk taker. It was true she was the kind of woman who came along and crushed barriers that stood in people's way, but not without knowing all the angles first. She had single-handedly convinced the teachers of their high school to allow dances to be held again after a couple of Josh's buddies had become drunk and caused a scene. She'd been a hero.

But right now? The desperation radiating off her told him she might not have considered all the angles this time.

"Why?" he insisted.

"Can you do it or not?"

"It's risky."

"Do I need to look elsewhere?"

A loud voice in the back of his head shouted, "*No!*" And he was pretty sure it wasn't just because she was the type to take the snowshoes above the mantel and set off on her own to try and meet her goal—

despite the dangers. Her mind was set and all he could do was cushion any possible blows that would come her way. He had to keep her safe.

"So?" she asked, pressing him for an answer. "Will you?"

"I'm your best bet."

She blinked and stared as though she had been shocked, her gaze falling from his pectorals to the floor. Just as quickly, she looked up, meeting his eyes, judging his sincerity. "Is that a yes?"

"If whatever you need to do is worth risking your life for, then, yes, I will do my best to get you there while keeping you safe."

She nodded briskly, smoothing her hands over her locks, her long, graceful fingers capturing his attention. He imagined her getting onto the back of his snowmobile in the morning, wrapping her arms around his waist, locked together as they raced across the lake. She would feel good, and he knew his brain would keep him up all night imagining the feel of her curves molded against him. That and procuring scenarios where she'd have to straddle him, face-to-face, instead of sitting behind him.

He needed to get her and her sexy figure off this island before she crowbarred her way into his life.

She licked her lips, her mouth dropping open as she prepared to speak, and his attention involuntarily zoned in on her.

"No," he breathed, trying to look away from her moist lips. "We don't go tonight. I make the calls."

Her brow furrowed.

"It's dark. There's a whiteout, which means we could get lost just trying to find the snowmobile. You still have twelve hours before you have to be home. We'll find our window out of here."

"Promise?" she asked softly, a rare vulnerability peeking through.

"Yeah. Promise."

The pinched expression that had increased during their conversation washed away and she stood on tiptoe, one hand against his chest. He froze, her scent locked into his mind as she gently brushed her lips against his cheek. She smiled, an electric hum hitting his core.

"Thanks."

There were no two ways about it. That woman was trouble.



THE MEN, it turned out, had purchased electric heat for each of the bedrooms, so the Summers could start spending nights on Nymph Island during the shoulder season—which, quite frankly, was handy timing. Everyone in the cottage except Josh seemed to be rolling in cash, and now even Simone was offering him stupid amounts of it for a short snowmobile ride.

His head felt tight and he wasn't sure if it was the cumulative impact of the constant background throbbing of his goose egg or simply the fact that everyone around him seemed to be successfully pursuing the things they wanted to do with their lives and he wasn't.

Tigger had sneaked another juice box and Simone placed it on the mantel beside two others and flopped into the armchair opposite him. Why did she keep sitting beside him? He wasn't up for another fight with her. He got that it was difficult sitting with the lovebirds, who had taken over the whole place from the couch behind their armchairs to the card table and sitting nook, but he needed a break.

"I like this one!" Tigger called, waving his phone in the air. She was tucked into the window seat by the rattling shutters, studying photos of his accessories.

"Me, too," he replied, unable to focus on the moving device. "What do you do for a living? You make dresses?" he asked Simone, tending to

the fire so no one else would mess with it. Everyone seemed to toss logs in willy-nilly, sending sparks onto the extended hearth, then sweeping them up with a bristle broom. Talk about fire hazard. He'd had to stomp out more than one spark on the knotted rug at his feet. The worst of it was this place was essentially a pile of kindling waiting for a lit match to fall.

"Yes. And I have a boutique." Simone turned in her seat, addressing Connor. "Hasn't it cleared off yet? What kind of weather can helicopters fly in?"

"Afraid to pay up?" Josh joked quietly. He could still feel the burn of her kiss, where her lips had lingered when she'd thanked him only minutes ago. He had a suspicion he'd be enjoying the phantom sensation of her touch for hours, days, weeks.

"Not this," Connor replied.

"What do you sell in your boutique?" Josh asked, attempting to distract Simone into relaxing.

"I own it, run it, stock it," she replied simply, not answering his question. Her hands were pressed tight between her thighs, her shoulders hunched forward.

"And it does okay?" Josh was definitely getting the vibe that something was wrong in Simone's life right now. Was her business in trouble? Was that where the tension was coming from? He knew it couldn't be easy running a store, given the ebb and flow of tourists that ran through the local area. "I have some stuff I sell on Etsy and eBay."

He cringed internally. Why did he say that? Was he nuts? She didn't need to know about his creations. She was the last person who would understand him, and the first to make assumptions. She was the type who would mock his work and fail to understand who he was just because he made delicate hair accessories.

"It does fine," she said.

"She does art shows, too," Hailey added as she passed by, looking for something.

"Anything to get foot traffic." He understood that.

"It's on the main route through Port Carling. Traffic isn't an issue in the summer."

"Do you have much space for inventory?"

"It's a converted house, so yes."

Something familiar was trickling through his mind, setting off alarm bells, a tightness forming in his chest.

Wait a second "Didn't a boutique in Port Carling just get a deal to expand and distribute their handmade dresses internationally?"

It had to be her. He'd almost reached out to that boutique owner, asking if they could form a partnership of sorts, but he'd chickened out at the last moment. Now he was glad he had. The last thing he needed was someone like Simone laughing at him, feeling sorry for him while being trapped in the same old cottage overnight.

"That was a few months ago," she said, her tone offhand, her glance flicking to the Summers and their men.

Son of a Her boutique was obviously doing better than fine.

Josh felt his shoulders fall. Simone was the woman he needed to talk to if he wanted to bump things up to the next level with his hobby, turning it into a legit business. But she was the last woman he wanted to talk to. She was a superwoman, and everything was too fresh, too tender for him to deal with someone who could be so blunt, callous, and to-the-point with her criticism and advice.

"Her business is doing really well," Melanie said. "Her dresses are always perfect."

"Delectable," Tristen agreed, giving Melanie a kiss on the forehead.

"She was in the *Financial Times* a few weeks ago," Connor offered, quick to get in on singing her praises.

Instead of looking pleased and proud, Simone seemed almost bothered by the attention and ready to change the subject.

"Congratulations," Josh said.

She gave him a brief smile. "Thanks."

"What?" he asked. "You don't like the success?"

"It's fine."

She wouldn't meet his eyes. She was hiding something.

"You want more?" he prompted.

She let out a weary sigh.

"Too much attention then?" What made this woman tick? He almost hoped she found the spotlight too much, as he could identify with that. When he brought his fairy art and hair accessories into the Children's Burn Unit the kids always made such a fuss. It was a pleasure, a real reward, to see them enjoy his creations, but sometimes it was overwhelming. They were just ribbons, sequins, lace, and other fun bits glued or stitched together. Painstakingly. But they weren't going to change the world, and the assessing sidelong looks, along with the unwanted questions in the nurses' eyes, almost didn't make it worth it sometimes.

"The attention is fine."

"Yeah?" He reached over, tapping Simone's arm with his knuckles. "Then chill. Enjoy the ride." She was at the top of her game. What was there to worry about? It wasn't as if anyone would be looking at her as though she'd lost her mind for creating dresses.

"Chill?" She blinked at him twice and repeated, "Chill?"

"Yeah." Why did it feel as though he was fighting a long-term girlfriend and not an acquaintance? "Be happy."

She gave him a nasty scowl. "Who says I'm not happy?"

"Your face."

"Excuse me?"

Women. Everything was an insult when they were mad.

"You're obviously not." He glanced behind him, expecting some backup. But everyone remained silent, suddenly too involved in their card games, books, and other conversations to lend a hand.

Apparently Simone wasn't one to be messed with. Which meant he was going in, guns blazing, alone.

Goodbye, nuts. Nice knowing you.

"If you were happy and doing what you're supposed to be doing with your life you'd be overjoyed, and it would show on your face."

"And you're the poster boy for happiness and fulfillment?" She crossed her arms, giving him a look as if to say, *"I win."*

"Not in the least." He leaned back in his chair, taking a sip of his iced tea. "But at least I'm willing to admit it."

"Maybe I'm already doing what I want to do," she added, a hint of imp twinkling in her eyes.

Secrets. That woman had secrets.

"Then smile." He leaned forward, knowing he was pressing into her personal space again despite them being in opposite chairs.

She flashed him a lot of teeth.

"Not a snarl, a smile."

"You don't deserve a smile." She turned away in her seat. Point for Josh.

Hailey, swilling a hot toddy, tossed another log on the fire, laughing at Finian, who was making faces at Tristen's daughter, Dot. The two were in a battle, seeing who could make Tigger laugh the hardest. Someone had to be winning, as the kid was giggling like a demented hyena and about two seconds away from accidentally smashing his phone. Sparks flew onto the hearth and area rug before Hailey closed the screen.

"Good plan. Mix alcohol and fire," Josh snapped at her, getting up to take care of the live embers. They'd be royally screwed if this place went up in flames tonight.

Hailey stepped back, holding her drink closer to her chest. "It's not a *real* hot toddy. I'm pregnant." She gave him a look and stomped away.

Great. Way to go. Insult the hostess. He'd just bumped up the expiration date on his welcome.

"Sorry, sorry," he muttered sheepishly.

He readjusted the screen, ensuring sparks couldn't fly past.

"I've got this." Simone pushed it aside, hip-checking him out of the way to poke at the logs, adjusting them in what he grudgingly admitted was the way he would have if he hadn't been so worried about the place burning down.

"My hot toddy isn't real, either," Melanie said to the group with a shy smile. "I made mine with herbal tea."

"Why?" Simone asked hesitantly, as though afraid to hear the answer. Standing beside her, Josh could feel the tension radiating off her like heat waves.

"We're trying to have a baby."

Simone's forehead wrinkled and Josh wondered why she didn't seem more excited for her friend.

Tristen put an arm around his fiancée's shoulder. "We know we aren't married yet, but we don't care. We will be soon enough." He gave Melanie a look filled with so much love that Josh found himself wishing he could find someone who would accept him exactly the way he was: confused. And not following his dreams because he was a big chicken. Right. That would definitely be quite the woman. A great way to start a strong relationship, too, he'd bet.

He rubbed his face, dismissing his thoughts. A relationship ran the risk of pushing him off track right now, and for once he was finally

allowing himself to create without censorship. Getting involved with someone would undoubtedly relocate that new ability to the back burner.

"Good luck. I hope it goes well for you," he said to the couple, trying to put the screen back in front of the now roaring fire. But Simone stood stock-still, her shoulders rounded down, blocking his way.

"Thank you." Melanie beamed at him and then began chatting with Hailey and Daphne about babies, while Maya rolled her eyes.

"Simone, can you move, please?" Josh murmured.

"I know, okay?" she whispered back, still blocking his path.

"Know what?" he asked. She was making his head hurt more than the bump was.

"I'm okay with being a control freak." The strain in her expression was new and his instinct to take care of her kicked in, overriding his innate need for self-preservation. "I know it's not easy for men like you to deal with, but it's the way I am. It's who I am."

"I don't care if you're a control freak, but sometimes you're a danger to yourself. Do you get that?"

"Excuse me?"

"You're so determined to get out of here, you think you can take on this whiteout. It would eat up anyone—even me." He gestured to the windows, which now had snow packed between them and the shutters. Outside the wind howled, sending drafts through the large living room. "You need someone to take care of you or you'll end up making use of those in the dead of the night." He pointed to the old-fashioned snowshoes hanging above the fireplace.

She blinked furiously, her face a scary shade of red. "I do *not* need taking care of. And definitely not by the likes of you."

Her voice had a dangerous edge to it, and Maya quietly slipped from the room, taking Connor with her.

The red, blinking light in his mind warned Josh to back off.

"Move." He needed to put the screen back in place so more flying sparks didn't ignite the place.

Simone's delicate hands had wrapped into tight fists, ready to lash out. Fighting stance. Ready to protect herself. He echoed her posture, loving the way she narrowed her eyes in challenge.

He did enjoy a tough woman. Too bad they just about killed him every time.

"You know," he said quietly, "I haven't had so many fights with one person in such a short period of time since I was sixteen." A flash of anger seared him as he recalled battling it out with Austin Smith over Josh's father's metamorphosis into womanhood.

"Well, welcome to talking to a real person, buster. One who won't allow you and your wishes to rein her in."

"Who said anything about that?" More like try to rein in the crazy insecurities.

Simone pushed up her sleeves and leaned forward, ignoring her friend. "I doubt you've even paused to consider what we're up against here. You think it'll all just get taken care of by magic, but so you know, we're stuck in a drafty cottage with not enough food, probably not enough gas in the generator to keep the electricity on all night for the bedroom heat, nor do we have enough wood stockpiled on the back porch. We have no cell or Internet connection and nobody gives a crap because they're under the haze of new love! These are problems." She smacked her right hand into her left palm. "Problems I can solve. So don't get in my face about thinking you're somehow stronger than me and that you have to take care of me. I can do just fine on my own."

The logs in the fireplace shifted and crashed, sending up sparks. Simone flinched and let out a squeak of pain. Without thinking, Josh yanked the straw out of two of Tigger's juice boxes lining the mantel and squeezed, sending dual streams of apple juice onto the live spark

burning through Simone's tight jeans. Simone patted the burn and he wrenched her hand away, then tossed a nearby blanket over the spot, smothering it in case the liquid had missed its mark.

The logs snapped and crackled behind him, throwing off another shower of glowing sparks.

"Someone put the screen in place!" He flung it in the general direction of the fireplace as Simone squealed again, dancing away from the hearth. Before he had a chance to process what he was doing, Josh had the woman bundled tightly in his arms and was standing on the veranda in the midst of the stinging blizzard, applying snow to the burn holes in her pants.

She struggled to escape his grip, but he held fast, pressing large handfuls of snow against her thigh.

"It's cold!" One of her feet had found purchase on the veranda, but he held the other leg against him, still applying snow. She curled into him for balance, arms around his neck, a warm spot against the frigid wind swirling around them.

"The sooner we get cold on your burns, the better."

He really needed to get back into structural firefighting and away from wildland fires. Rabbits, deer, and squirrels didn't regard him the way Simone was right now. Such dark, trusting eyes, it made a part of him grow.

Something about holding Simone in his arms felt right. Despite himself, he took her mouth in a kiss.

Okay, this was nice.

JC had completely overreacted to the sparks that had burned through her clothing. Being the he-man he was, he'd jumped into action, carrying her away to save her from disaster.

And now he was kissing her with lips that were surprisingly soft and gentle, not pushy or demanding. All Simone's insecurities and fears washed away. It was a real kiss—not like earlier. This was a kiss between lovers; he was giving and taking, and her body thrummed with a need for more.

She liked it in all the wrong ways, and she reminded herself that she didn't need someone to take care of her. She didn't need a big burly alpha to rescue her from a little spark singeing her skin. She hated it when men swooped in, overreacted and assumed she couldn't handle things.

Didn't she? Didn't she hate that? Yes, she was pretty sure she did. She wasn't supposed to like anything JC did.

Not even one teensy tiny bit.

Right.

Except he was a *really* good kisser. Olympic athlete kisser. And he was warm, strong. Solid. Holding her safely against him, her leg propped

at his waist as he pressed a handful of snow to her thigh. He was shelter in the raging blizzard that swirled around them, lifting her hair and chilling her with its frigid breath.

This kiss was even better than the stupid fight-kisses he'd given her in front of everyone, trying to get her to stand down. Little did he know that she was totally onto him.

He nibbled her bottom lip and she barely held back a moan of contentment. It had been so long since she'd kissed someone so slowly and deeply, and even though her fingers were starting to hurt from the cold she didn't want JC to stop. Ever.

Which meant he was a very dangerous man.

She liked danger, didn't she?

She was pretty sure she did. She must, because only a fool wouldn't enjoy this.

"I'm sorry," JC said, finally breaking away.

"For what?" she whispered, trying to prevent herself from rubbing her cheek against his strong chest. She was certain it would feel divine. Maybe she could sink against him for a while and allow someone else to stand guard in her life so she could rest. Just for a little bit.

"For, uh, saving you. Not that you need to be saved," he added quickly.

She practically purred against him. He was a fast learner, avoiding her personal land mines with a deftness that could be fun. In bed.

Her leg was still in his grip, wrapped around him as though they had stopped dancing midtango.

"Sometimes a woman needs to be saved," she murmured, giving up her internal battle and allowing her cheek to rest against his warmth.

Definitely time to get out of his arms. The hormones were turning her into a swooning fool.

Simone did not do swooning. She did not do fool.

She did strong, reliable, and independent.

Their exhaled breath barely had time to form moist clouds before the vicious wind whipped it away. Yet they stared at each other for a moment, their earlier bickering forgotten. There was a kindness, a gentleness in JC's eyes, and a protective vibe that came off him, leaving her feeling safe as well as quiet inside. Relaxed.

Different.

He wasn't really a big macho man, was he? That was just an outer coating, like a garment he donned to face the world. In fact, he was

Simone frowned in thought. What *was* he?

Well, whatever he was, he was striking a lot of chords that had so far not been strummed by any of the men she'd dated.

Which meant he wasn't who she'd thought he was. And yet he was still rescuing her.

What did that mean?

"Are you okay?" His voice had taken on its earlier huskiness, and her body suddenly took notice of the ways he was male, the freezing wind forgotten.

"I'm fine," she answered. "Is your head okay?"

"I'll survive." He removed the handful of snow he'd been pressing to her leg. Her body heat had melted some and the area felt icy, exposed to the wind, sending shivers ripping through her body.

"You're always fine, aren't you?" he murmured, setting her gently on her feet.

"Always."

He kept an arm around her ribs as though needing to keep her close. Her arms remained around his neck, preventing him from breaking the half embrace. She liked this side of JC and wanted to discover more of it, fearing that if she let go she'd lose this exclusive glimpse.

She shivered again as the bitter wind whipped between their bodies, stealing the heat they had built up together. She snuggled into him instead of heading back inside as a rational woman would.

"You're cold." He reached to open the door like a gentleman, and in a flash she understood why women loved the gesture. Usually it drove her nuts, but in this moment she knew he was simply looking out for her and that the move came from a caring place, not from superiority or chauvinism.

"And you're " She stopped him from moving, trailing a finger down his chest as she tried to place what it was about him that differed from her expectations. His body trembled and he caught her finger, causing her to snap to. She was being a flirt and happily slipping into the role of woman in distress.

"You're unexpected," she said, hustling inside when he opened the door. She yanked him in with her so she could slam it behind them. "It's really cold out there."

She tried to shake off the chill and slowly discovered that everyone in the living room was staring at the two of them, jaws slightly unhinged.

Josh gave Simone a quick, uncertain glance, combing a hand through his short blond locks. "Sorry, I overreacted. I'm a firefighter. Sparks. Burning through clothing. Everything's all right now."

He leaned over, reaching for Simone's leg to check the damage, and she let out a squeak as his touch sent lightning crackling through her nervous system.

"Are you all right?" He took a step closer as she backed away.

"Fine. Just cold. Your hands are cold." She gave him a smile that felt forced and raced to the fireplace, before changing her mind and tearing into the bathroom, where she locked herself in. There was no running water and no heat in the small room. A stupid place to run to. But it

was the only private place in the old structure and she needed time to collect herself.

"Are you okay?" Hailey called through the door.

"Yeah. Um " Simone quickly whipped down her pants. "Just checking the damage." She was fine. Her legs were cold, pink, and the small burns wouldn't even think of blistering, thanks to Josh's speedy application of snow.

Hailey tried the knob. "We might have something we can put on it."

"Uh, no! I'm fine. Really. Just overreacted." She yanked her pants up again, terrified that Hailey would pop the old door's lock and see the bruise on her hip from the day's earlier hurried injection.

"Are you okay? For real? You seem—"

Simone pulled open the door. "Fine! See? Ta-da!"

JC was at the fireplace, sweeping up ashes, one eye on Simone as though he knew all that she was hiding. He set the screen carefully in front of the fire and said to all, "We need to keep the screen in place at all times."

This guy telling everyone what to do? Not the man she'd been kissing only moments ago.

It was all an act, wasn't it? Despite his possible soft side, his nose would still get bent out of shape if he saw her bank account. She didn't have time for dented egos, didn't have time for men like him.

"Come join us for a round," Finian called to JC, holding up a deck of cards.

Simone crossed her arms, waiting for her own invitation. Was this a guys-only game? She happened to be a fantastic, utterly ruthless poker player.

Minutes later Maya pulled a grumbling Simone aside, her finger darting between her and Josh, her voice none too quiet. "What's going on?"

JC, who was organizing his freshly dealt hand, stilled.

Simone raised an eyebrow at her friend. "As in the fact that they didn't ask us if we wanted to play?"

"Want us to deal you in, Simone?" Tristen asked, head bent over his cards, not looking up. The man was a divorcee and careful when women got ticked off. However, right now it only added to Simone's frustration. She wanted him to ask *before* they dealt, not after she made a fuss. She knew she was being an irrational female, but men had made her this way. It was their fault for making assumptions about her based on gender.

Daphne came closer. "You two have this " She waved her hands in the air as though trying to get a sense of Simone's aura. " this energy."

"No, we most definitely do not."

"It's because you both rescue people." Hailey piped up from her spot on the long window seat, where she was playing Go Fish with Tigger.

One kiss and the sisters thought the two of them were going to be heading down the aisle. Just because Simone could still feel the heat and pressure from his lips and wanted more didn't mean the kiss had actually meant something.

Kisses with players such as JC never meant anything.

"Rescue people?" Maya said, waking up her laptop. She was becoming just as bad as Simone—working all the time, although at least Maya was better at not blocking out the entire world around her once she got down to business. Simone had once missed her neighbor's house burning down because she'd been so involved in a proposal she'd been writing.

"He's a firefighter—obvious—and Simone is always solving everyone's problems. They're both fixers."

JC was giving Simone a thoughtful look.

"We're not compatible," she said, crossing her arms. "I don't go for the rescuing type. Too macho and pushy."

"That's okay," JC replied. "I prefer my women to be more open and accepting. Less prickly."

Simone let out a bark of laughter, ignoring Daphne's murmured advice about accepting their connection. "You prefer your women to be pliable and big breasted, that's what you prefer. The dumber, the better. Boss them around and then rescue them at every turn. It would kill you to add some yin to your yang."

"Sometimes a woman needs to be saved," he said, his voice flat as he mocked her earlier words.

Simone gasped, stepping forward, ready to fight. How dare he throw that moment back in her face!

"You seem to prefer the kind of man you can walk over," JC stated. "A man without cajones of his own. A man you can boss around and who will stand down at every raised word. You don't want a man, you want a lapdog." He slammed his cards on the table.

"Love, light, and forgiveness." Daphne gave them worried glances as though she was watching a pencil-pushing office worker try to diffuse something nuclear. "Evander, help."

The big man was up in a flash, following JC, who had stormed over to Simone. Evander kept his distance, but seemed ready to tackle him if need be.

She loved her friends.

"Simone!" Tigger called excitedly. "Use the trick I showed you at my mom's birthday party!" She made a hugging motion with her arms, then hunched her shoulder, suggesting Simone should bind JC's legs together, then knock him down.

Simone sauntered toward him. "You feel threatened whenever it looks as though a woman might be tougher than you."

JC was close, his breath warm on her face. "You think you know me?"

"I know your type."

"And what is my type, exactly?" His arms were crossed yet again, giving her a look that made her doubt herself. He'd revealed an unexpected side when they were outside, and while it had taken her off guard, she knew it couldn't be real. It had to be an act to get her into bed. She'd fallen for it in the past with other men and had learned her lesson. There was no reason to relearn it.

Simone jabbed his chest with a finger, secretly loving and yet hating the way it felt: all muscle. "Alpha. Dominant. Protector. Macho. Male."

"Aren't you paying Mr. Alpha Dominant Protector Macho Male three grand to get you home by eight-thirty tomorrow morning?"

Simone clenched her jaw, angry that he'd mentioned their deal in front of the others.

"Well!" Connor said with a delighted laugh. "Simone's finally spending her signing bonus. Three grand for a Ski-Doo ride! You're right, Daphne, there must be a connection there."

"It's not like that," Simone snapped.

"Macho man is fine when you're stuck," JC continued, "but otherwise I'm not good enough for you? I'm just a thorn in your independent side. Why are you so afraid of accepting help from me?"

"I'm not afraid."

He leaned closer, his manly scent tantalizing. "I think you're afraid you'll lose control."

"Signing bonus?" Maya asked.

"Lose control?" Simone laughed. "You think your kisses are *that* amazing?"

"Signing bonus?" Maya repeated. "For what?"

"It's nothing," Simone said, realizing everyone was staring at her.

"Nothing? Don't be modest, this is huge," Connor said, not picking up on her reluctance to share the news. "She sold her patterns and

entire brand to a major designer. Three-million-dollar contract." He snapped his fingers. "Just. Like. That."

The room filled with gasps and cheering, and Simone closed her eyes. *Nice going, Connor.*

"Sorry, was that a secret?" He looked so worried that she had to smile and let it go, pretend everything was fine even though this was going to open up the floodgates to every secret she had.

"Your whole brand?" Maya squealed, her jaw dropping open. "But what will you do?"

She gave a feeble shrug, knowing Maya understood the implications of what she'd done—sold her entire livelihood. Simone could no longer produce designs in her own name as she'd sold the rights. Anything new she created couldn't be sold unless under a different name. She would be starting over.

She was changing her life and the Summers wouldn't understand. She hadn't had time to prep them for this. And look at their lives—there was no way they could understand. They had everything and she had nothing now. Nothing but hope and a possibility that kept slipping out of reach whenever she grabbed at it.

"Simone?" Connor asked, looking worried.

"No, it's good." Her voice was too high-pitched. Too strained. "Just waiting for the right time to announce it, that's all. So many fun announcements lately." She gestured to Hailey's growing belly, and Maya and Connor, who had eloped.

"Is Kmart still a secret, too?" Connor asked.

Could the man *not* give her a break? Simone pressed her hands flat against her legs so she wouldn't bunch them into telltale fists.

"What happened with Kmart?" Daphne asked.

"She sold the subsidiary line of dresses she designed for Melanie," Connor said proudly.

"Why didn't you didn't tell us?" Hailey demanded, her eyes wide with excitement.

"Oh, you know just business stuff. Nothing as exciting as babies or marriage."

A round of hugs and toasts were made and Simone caught JC's eye as she turned to clink her teacup against Tigger's juice box. He gave her a look that was surprisingly understanding. She glanced back at him, wanting to see it again, confirm that it had been real, but the look was gone.

She couldn't figure it out, but she wasn't even mad at him any longer, despite having wanted to rip his throat out only a moment ago. Was it just the hormones, or something else? Whatever it was, she needed to get away, because being around him made her feel as though she was lost in a carnival. Enjoying a sweet and smooth carousel ride one second, pulling punches in the haunted house the next.

"Well, I can't wait to see what you do with your boutique in the spring seeing as you've sold the rights to everything you used to sell in there," Melanie said, smoothing out her handmade dress.

"What will be your new direction?" Maya asked. "Art gallery? Kids' clothes?"

Simone fidgeted with her cup of herbal tea, hoping someone would change the topic before she was forced to reply.

"Simone?" Melanie gently touched her shoulder.

"I sold it."

Gasps of surprise filled the room and JC started laughing. At first it was a light chuckle, but soon it became an uproar, so loud and unnerving that Simone wanted to walk over and sock him in the jaw just to shut him up.

"It's not funny," she snapped.

"What?" Maya sputtered. "But what are you going to do?"

"Just something new," Simone said.

"What is it?"

"A a lifelong project."

"And?"

"Let's just say it's a matter of now or never."

The sisters were silent; the men drifted back to their game of poker.

"Whose turn is it?" Tristen asked.

"Why do you have to be home by a certain time on Christmas morning?" Melanie murmured. Of course the lawyer had noted that little tidbit and had to bring it up again.

"I want to be with my mom."

"Badly enough to spend three thousand dollars?"

"Yeah, why the time crunch?" JC asked, and she shot him a glare. Not. Helpful.

"A flight somewhere?" Hailey wondered.

"You're getting married!" Daphne squealed, hands clasped hopefully beneath her chin.

"Are you kidding me?" Simone cried. Her inner tough side was ready to pop up and start taking names and numbers. Stupid hormonal roller coaster. But she'd rather come off as too tough and prickly than cry. And she'd been close to that a moment ago. No crying. No pitiful looks. She could apologize later for being snarky, but you couldn't take back pity when you spilled tears.

"What's wrong with marriage?" Maya asked.

The woman was a glowing new bride. She wouldn't understand. In fact, none of the females in the room would.

"You're such a catch," Daphne said. "And pretty. Smart. Determined and independent. Why won't you accept love and marriage?"

"Daphne, it's not about accepting it." Simone avoided looking at JC. "Who am I going to find to marry me?" She hated the way her voice

sounded so choked up. She needed to shut up, but she was on the downward thrust of the hormonal roller coaster and gravity was pulling the words from her, leaving her powerless to stop them. "How much time have I spent on this island that's supposed to have magical superpowers, and yet I'm still single? You say I'm an honorary Summer sister, but obviously the magic prefers bloodlines." She threw up her hands, then rubbed her eyes, defeat closing in on her. "It doesn't matter. I don't know why I even care. Men and I are like oil and water. Nobody is going to love me. Nobody that I don't make myself. So what's the point?" She drew a shaky breath. "I give up. I don't need a man for anything, so why am I even talking about this?"

She dropped into a chair, feeling such turmoil that she wanted to stomp out into the blizzard and scream and scream until her throat was as raw as her heart.

The room was silent for a long moment, then Hailey said, "Oh. My. Word. Your lifelong project is a baby."

"You're adopting at 8:30 a.m.? On Christmas Day?" Daphne asked.

"Courts aren't open," Melanie replied.

"Who's the dad?" Evander inquired.

"I'm going to be an auntie?" Tigger asked, bouncing around, trying to catch up with the scrambling adults.

"You sold *everything*?" Maya was sputtering. "For a baby? Oh, geez. I think I'm going to throw up." She pushed her husband aside. "No, really. Barf coming through."

"Don't use the bathroom!" Hailey called, as her sister headed toward the nonfunctioning toilet.

"A sperm donor?" Melanie asked.

Simone gave a brave nod. "Yeah."

"You're getting the baby batter tomorrow?" Finian asked with a frown.

"No, it's Christmas," Hailey said, waving him away, her focus solely on her friend.

"A hormone injection," Daphne suggested, glancing at Simone for confirmation. "You have to stay on schedule."

Melanie gave her a look so filled with sympathy that Simone had to blink away tears.

"Designer baby?" Maya said, joining them again with a plastic trash can in hand. "I can see you doing that, actually."

"Oh, quit being dramatic." Hailey pushed the tub away from her sister's face.

"But what about love?" Daphne asked, sitting on the arm of a nearby chair as though the very thought had sapped her ability to stand.

"Can I name the baby?" Tigger said. "I have a book of fairy names. Priscilla is pretty." She turned to JC. "You can choose the middle name."

"Thanks for thinking of me, princess," he replied, ruffling her curls. "But I think Simone will want to name her little one."

"What's the dad look like?" Tristen asked. "Is he smart? Nice? And why is he giving away his sperm? Or selling it?"

"You're going to raise this kid? Alone?" Finian crossed his arms as though he was prepared to yank the decision from her hands if he felt it should be done. Ever since he'd revamped his bad-boy movie star image with Hailey's help he'd grown incredibly protective of anyone close to her. Which was sweet. Unless he tried standing in her way. In which case Hailey better not count on his ability to have more kids.

"She has money, apparently. So why not?" Maya said drily.

"I'm doing this," Simone stated. "Okay? I've thought about it long and hard. So either tell me it's a fabulous plan or shut up and move aside."

The sisters leaned back as if one connected unit.

Simone bit back tears, the medical facts explaining her decision stuck in her throat. She really *was* doing it alone. They didn't understand. Not everyone found love as they had. Not everyone had their lives fall into place. Some people had to work their tails off and they still didn't get everything.

JC moved to her side, his touch like a spark; it flared, burning like a lit fuse, streaking through her, looking for a place to explode.

"I'll get you home on time. You can count on me."

She nodded, knowing he was the one person she shouldn't lean on, but the one person who would get her through.



SIMONE SIGHED, stuffing the soiled paper plates in a trash bag to take back with them whenever the storm decided to let up. She didn't know what to think of JC stepping in to help. She supposed her acting like a damsel in distress spoke to his alpha rescuer side. It didn't really matter—her pride could take the hit if he got her home in time.

The wind rattled the shutters and whistled through the odd crack in the cottage's walls. At least the new generator seemed to be holding up despite the raging storm. She glanced around the kitchen, aware that if she could turn off a few more lights the machine might be able to power the electric heat for the entire night without running out of gas.

Someone short hugged her from behind. Daphne. "I think it's great you want to add a child to this world. You'll be a good mother."

"I hope so."

Daphne had always made motherhood look simple, even though Simone knew being a single mother hadn't always been easy for her.

"You'll do fine. And the fact that you won't have to worry about money or working will make it that much better."

"As long as my brain doesn't turn to mush." Simone laughed, fighting panic at the thought of sitting around with a baby, no career, and ignoring dress design ideas that came to mind. Plus going from superwoman to stay-at-home mom was such a sudden shift in speed she hoped it didn't break her internal drive's transmission.

Maya came bustling into the room. "Okay, so what's this really about? Can we talk about left field? You're on top of your game and have worked so hard to get there. You're landing incredible deals I'd commit murder for. You can't just drop it all for a *baby*."

"Too late." Simone tied the trash bag closed.

"You're already pregnant?" Maya frowned, looking to Daphne for an explanation.

"No."

"You didn't add alcohol to your drink tonight," Melanie said from the doorway.

"I'm trying to stay as healthy as possible, because last month's insemination didn't work."

"Oh, honey." Daphne gave her a hug. "Why didn't you tell us you were going through all of this?"

"You've all been busy and this was sort of last minute for me."

"How on earth could this be last minute?" Maya asked.

"Everything's sold now," Simone said, steering the conversation away from the medical aspect, "and I transfer the last of my business and shop next month."

"But you're not even pregnant. What if you can't get in the family way?"

"Maya!" Daphne scolded.

Simone paused, trying to fight off the doubt that had niggled at her on more than one occasion. What *would* she do with herself if she couldn't get pregnant? She had planned the next nine months thinking

her first insemination appointment would work, and it hadn't. Now she was ready for an adventure that might not come to fruition.

No, don't think about it. Stay positive.

She shrugged as though it didn't matter. "Everything just lined up for me to sell. I couldn't wait."

"Meant to be," Daphne said with a contented sigh. She gave Simone an extra squeeze.

Hailey, who had come up behind Melanie, asked, "Why now? Maya's right—your career is skyrocketing and you're not even thirty yet."

"What if you meet the right man?" Melanie interjected.

"If he is the right man," Simone said, pointedly looking at Daphne, "then he will love me even if I do have a child."

Daphne gave a nod.

"You really want a family?" Melanie asked. "No career?"

Simone swallowed hard. "I didn't sell everything off on a whim."

She knew that once you added too much to your paper plate at the banquet of life, your plate began to sag and you ended up with sweet-and-sour sauce on your new suede pumps. With big projects you had to do them one at a time. You could have it all, just not all at once.

"Well, I'm sure you'll get a baby one way or another," Maya said.

"Why is this last-minute? Is it because you got a good offer?" Melanie asked.

Simone took a deep breath, willing herself not to break down as she spilled the truth. "I have cysts that are choking off my ovaries. They are being removed in a few months and it might damage my womb."

Daphne's hand flew to her mouth and the other sisters gave her such sympathetic, horrified looks that Simone went back to dealing with the garbage.

"Why don't you get your eggs frozen?" Maya suggested a long moment later.

"It's not my style. I mean, I have in case, but I don't plan on using them. I'm doing this now, my way."

"Well, good luck, sister." Maya reached over and gave her a massive hug.

Within seconds, all the Summers were hugging her and whispering supportive phrases, and Simone felt bad for not giving them enough credit.

"I really couldn't have guessed any of this," Hailey told Simone. "But I'm excited for you. I haven't quite got my head wrapped around it, but I think it'll be good." She gave a not-quite-convincing smile.

"If you need anything, anything at all," Daphne said, "let me know. I don't have any of my baby stuff anymore, but I know about colic, morning sickness and all that stuff."

Hailey suddenly let out a squeal and gave a little bounce. "Our children might be in the same class! What if they're best friends? I'm so excited." She gave Simone another hug, blinking away tears.

Simone bit her bottom lip, trying to remain stoic, not quite having realized just how much she'd needed to know the Summers would be there for her, supporting her.

"It's all going to be okay, isn't it?" she asked, looking from sister to sister. They gave her reassuring smiles, just before the generator, with no forewarning, died, plunging them into darkness.

Josh, glad a sharpshooter such as Simone hadn't joined the poker game, was about to win the entire stack of toothpicks set in the middle of the card table when the lights went out.

"Oh, man," Connor said from Josh's right, his features faint in the light from the fireplace. "The generator. Doesn't anything work the way it's supposed to these days?"

"Out of gas?" Finian asked.

"I'll go check." Evander's chair scraped back. "Tigger? You okay?"

A glow in the corner of the room highlighted the girl's soft features as she continued to play with Josh's phone. She waved the lit-up device under her chin, making ghostly noises. "Am I scary?"

"Very," Evander confirmed. "Everyone okay?"

The women had been chatting in the kitchen when the lights went out, and the sound of hands trailing along the rustic wood paneling filled the room as they returned to the living room. "Yeah, fine." It was Simone.

Josh was surprised at the relief he felt upon hearing her voice. She was probably the last female on earth he needed to worry about, and for some reason that made him worry about her all the more.

Connor flicked on a battery-operated lantern just as the women turned on several flashlights.

Evander pulled a black woolen cap low over his forehead, giving his scarred face a lean, serious look in the firelight's shadows. Josh usually felt as though he could take any man in a given room, but the bodyguard had a vibe that even Josh knew not to mess with. Plus he still didn't know what had been in the "life or death" package and whether it had any bearing on tonight.

Evander shrugged into his parka and Josh said, "I'll go with you." When the big man gave him a look, he added, "I can hold the flashlight."

Simone handed him a massive flashlight. "Don't freeze your little chestnuts off."

"Thanks. But for the record, they *are* bigger than yours. More like coconuts."

"I wouldn't place any bets just yet," Maya muttered, handing him a toolbox.

"You should probably get that checked out," Simone said. "Only egos should be swollen, not nuts." She gave his crotch a discerning look and he refrained from shielding himself with the toolbox.

Connor came outside with the two men, cursing as the unrelenting wind hit them full force. "It's colder than the north pole out here." He shuddered and hunched further into his parka. The gusts whipped against them, then up over the side of the cottage, creating a lip of snow that hung off the edge of the roof, threatening to dislodge itself on them and the silent generator.

Josh shone the light over it, assessing the wisdom of standing under the frozen overhang. Deciding it was likely safe, he followed Evander and Connor, who had cut through a massive drift that had sculpted itself around the generator like a frozen wave.

"I don't think it's been tampered with," Evander said, gazing around the generator, on the lookout for tracks in the snow.

Connor shot Josh a sharp look when he opened his mouth to ask why anyone would come mess with their source of power.

"I think we're okay here," Connor said. "We're safe."

Evander gave a curt nod and stared at the inert chunk of yellow metal, likely as relieved as Josh that snow hadn't encased the machine, but rather had curved around it. Hopefully, the drifts were doing the same thing down on the lake, so he wouldn't have to dig out his snowmobile come morning. Josh trailed his flashlight over the generator, which was shiny and new and seemed to have no good reason to stop if the gas gauge was correct. He reached out a gloved finger and tapped it.

"It should run for eight to twelve hours on a tank," Connor said.

Josh handed the flashlight to him and, trailing a hand against the side of the cottage so he wouldn't get lost in the darkness, grabbed a shovel off the back porch. He returned, digging out a larger space in the blowing snow for Evander to work. Josh knew quite a bit about machines, but was reluctant to jump in before he was invited or was certain he could actually help. If Evander wanted to fix it and be the hero, that was fine by him. Josh didn't have a woman inside who he had to prove himself to. Especially not Simone, with those large, dark eyes of hers.

Tristen and Finian had come out to help and Josh suddenly found himself surrounded by four men in the small, shoveled circle.

"You need to be careful with Simone," Connor said.

"What do you mean?" Josh replied, on guard.

"She's going through a lot of big life changes right now."

"I get that."

"I'll be the one who safely delivers her home in the morning," Connor added, the wind stealing the force of his words as it swirled around them, already filling in the cleared space, a few fistfuls of snow at a time. In an hour it would be as though they had never shoveled it out.

"Okay." Josh widened his stance. "But if the weather isn't completely safe for your helicopter, there's no way I'm letting her get into it. Nothing is worth her getting hurt."

He knew they were fighting words and that he might find himself headfirst in a drift as a result, but he needed these men to know that he had Simone's best interests at heart—even though she was the most difficult and annoyingly beautiful woman he'd ever laid eyes upon.

"None of us will," Evander said.

"She's one of the family," Finian added.

"And this family sticks together," Tristen stated.

Josh took in the determined set of their jaws and the way they all knew their lines within the little play that was unfolding. He pitied the man Tigger brought home as her first boyfriend. And yet, at the same time, he completely and utterly understood it. He felt the same way about Dustin sniffing around his sister, and she was a grown woman.

"We take care of our own," Tristen added.

But their interests were split and they weren't able to give Simone the unbiased attention and care she deserved. A powerful sense of possessiveness washed over Josh, settling deep into his bones. It was stronger than anything he'd felt in all his years, and he knew without a doubt that he needed to be the one to take care of her. That he was the only one with nothing to lose by pushing her back when she needed it the most.

"I would never do anything to hurt Simone, but if she chooses to ride on my sled, she's my responsibility. You have your own families to

take care of.”

He continued, “She’s going to do something stupid with that iron will of hers. You know that, I know that. I have a lot of experience saving people, and she’s the type who’ll put herself in even greater danger rather than allow someone else to help her. So while I know you have her best interests at heart, understand that I will cross you if I feel she needs me.”

Evander reached forward and Josh forced himself not to dodge the incoming blow. But instead of punching him, the man grabbed Josh’s hand and pumped it up and down. “Understood.”

Tristen slapped Josh’s shoulder. “Love is a tricky thing, isn’t it?”

Josh cleared his throat and crossed his arms. “It’s not love.”

Tristen laughed and returned to the cottage with Finian, who gave Josh a knowing smile over his shoulder before disappearing into the darkness. Connor, hot on their heels, bellowed with laughter, Josh not quite catching the joke.

“What?” he asked Evander, who was grinning at him.

“Good luck. You’re going to need it,” Tristen called from the darkened doorway. “Evander, you have this machine under control, right?”

For a split second Josh considered that the breakdown may have been scheduled in order for the men to chat with him, but seeing the serious look on Evander’s face as he contemplated the silent machine, he crossed the idea from his mind. This was real.

“I’ll call if I can’t figure it out,” the bodyguard said, squatting as he got down to business.

“I didn’t hear it chug,” Josh offered. “I think there must be a broken connection.” The generator was barely ticking with heat, which meant it was quickly cooling down and the metal would soon be killer on their bare hands if they had to do any serious work.

Evander said nothing, but began checking wires and hoses.

"What was in the envelope?" Josh asked, curious about the oh-so-important delivery that had got him stranded here.

"Sorry about that. I overreacted."

Josh's free hand instinctively went to the lump on the back of his head. He pulled up his snowsuit's hood, burrowing into its heat. "No problem."

"Daphne and Tigger were in danger this past summer, and while everything is good now, I guess I'm still not quite over it."

"Understandable." Josh waited, wondering if Evander would reveal what was in the package. They continued inspecting the machine.

"Any chance it overheated? That drift had it fairly closed in," suggested Josh.

At the same moment, Evander said, "It's a ring."

"Yeah?" Josh asked encouragingly.

"Not sure she will say yes, though."

"Why's that?"

More silence. Josh wiggled a loose wire, then tried restarting the machine. No luck.

"Daphne and Tigger have lived with me and my mother since August. I'm listed as one of Tigger's emergency contacts at her school."

"You're family."

"Yeah, family." The man's voice was filled with warmth and a sense of wonder. "I think it's been good for all of us. My mom's been battling cancer and having Tigger in our life is a great distraction. The doctor say she's doing amazingly well and even gave her permission to travel to my brother's for the holidays."

"That's good."

"Yeah. It's just "

Josh waited quietly for the man to continue.

"Daphne's been independent for so long I'm not sure she wants to be tied to someone. The Summers—that includes Simone—are all very independent women."

"I've noticed." Josh had also noticed they seemed okay with being cozied up to the men in their lives.

"I'd planned to ask her tonight and had it all figured out, but " Evander's shoulders stiffened.

"But what?" Josh asked softly, knocking the snow off a connection so he could check it.

The man shook his head. "It's nothing."

"Well, you won't know unless you ask," Josh said, looking for something else that might be causing issues with the generator.

"Daphne's seemed different lately. Lost in her own world. I got caught up in the idea that maybe I was good for them. Sorry, it's not your problem."

Josh was starting to feel as though he was in over his head—with both the conversation and the generator. "I'm sure you're good for them."

Evander tried starting the machine and cursed when it remained stubbornly silent.

"What do you have on your phone that's so interesting, anyway?" Evander was gruff, brisk and, Josh could see, hurt. Slowly, it dawned on him. He had been monopolizing the man's daughter, stealing an important connection.

Josh thought over his options. He had to say something, but the only thing he could think of meant revealing his secret side, which Evander surely wouldn't appreciate or admire. But that wasn't why Josh was here, was it? He had come to deliver a ring so the man could ask the woman of his life to be with him forever, not to earn the man's approval. And anyway, Tigger would rat him out soon enough with her joy over his creations.

"It's stuff I make for the Children's Burn Unit in Toronto," Josh said quickly. "Hair accessories, fairy art. It " He tried to find words to express what he did without sounding too effeminate to the former marine.

Evander cleared his throat. "Fairies?"

"Yeah. Fairies," Josh admitted reluctantly.

"Oh, thank goodness." Evander stood, clapping him on the shoulder. "You don't know what a relief it is to hear that."

Josh blinked in surprise. That really wasn't the reaction he'd been expecting, but now he wondered which avenue Evander's assumptions were traveling down.

"It's very girly stuff, but I'm not, uh "

"That's perfect. Great." Evander tossed up his hands. "You don't know how happy this makes me."

"I'm not gay."

Evander was suddenly on guard. "What does that mean?"

"Just because I enjoy making pink, lacy, sequined hair accessories and fairy art doesn't mean I'm gay." There. He'd said it. Out loud.

He'd admitted he was different, despite the possible consequences. Simone had gone forth in the fashion world and prospered; so could he.

Josh squared his shoulders, ready to take the first fist. It was going to hurt, but maybe his snowsuit would help cushion the blow if Evander hit him in the gut.

"What's wrong with being gay?" the big man asked, eyes narrowed.

"Nothing." Josh should loosen the muscles in his jaw so it wouldn't snap. He reminded himself not to tense, to allow himself to get tossed aside, go with the impact, not resist it.

"What are you saying?"

"Nothing." *Jaw loose.* "I'm not gay. I like women." He shook the tension out of his hands.

"Daphne is mine and you'd better stay away from Tigger!" the man roared.

Josh blocked his face in anticipation, but Evander didn't strike.

"Are you homophobic?" The bodyguard was close, his breathing harsh and loud through his clenched teeth. He was studying him with a glint in his eye that Josh sure didn't like. It was protective and fierce, which meant he'd fight like a mad fool, out to destroy anything he perceived as a threat. "Because my brother is gay and I've seen the stuff he's had to deal with, so you'd better watch your mouth or I'll—"

"My dad is transgender," Josh blurted out, wincing as the words hit their mark, his hands still held protectively in front of his face. He was really going all-out tonight, wasn't he?

Evander's fist dropped, but the defensive challenge still laced his voice. "So?"

"So I know all about the stuff your brother faces and the fights he gets into because of his sexuality. He wouldn't choose that kind of social rejection if he had a choice. Nobody would." *Except me, now that I'm coming out with my creations.* Man, he was nuts. "And he's incredibly brave to follow the beat of his own internal drum. It's more than most people can do."

"Then why are you making a big deal out of homosexuality?"

"Have you ever seen a man who wasn't gay create pink frilly things for little girls and find it incredibly rewarding? How do you think that goes over? Usually 'different' means getting a fist in your gut."

Evander laughed and slapped Josh on the back, his face lit up with amusement. "If I hadn't seen that hungry look in your eye whenever you spy Simone I'd think you were gay based solely on that."

"What hungry look?"

Evander simply gave him a smile and Josh let out an aggravated sigh, then flicked the generator switch. To his surprise, the engine roared

to life. It looked as though the machine had merely overheated.

Evander stomped the snow off his boots outside the cottage door, then opened it, hollering, "Guess who fixed the generator? Someone had better show Josh some love under the mistletoe."

He winked at him, then disappeared inside.

Josh hesitated, wondering why his heart had lifted at the thought of the beautiful and difficult Simone rewarding him under the mistletoe.



JOSH LET himself warm up in front of the fire before peeling off his snowsuit. The temperature had dropped outside over the past hour and a half and the wind was definitely too much for a helicopter, even though the flakes were no longer piling up in the same way.

"The storm isn't letting up," Connor said to the group.

"Are we here for the night?" Simone asked. Her arms were crossed under her chest, lifting and pushing in a way that pulled Josh's attention. It made him realize that the men had been right—he'd developed a hunger for her. However, that didn't mean it was going to go any further than that. She was prickly and didn't want to let anyone close even though she kissed like an angel. A steamy, sexy angel who moved her mouth in heavenly ways.

Distraction, distraction well, he could just ponder how judgmental she was. That would surely help him take his mind off of things. She was so determined. She hadn't even asked for her friends' support with her whole baby thing. Talk about a powerhouse holding her cards close. She didn't just have walls, she had a moat, fire-breathing dragons, molten lava, and burning oil ready to take down anyone who dared think of lending her sympathy or support.

What kind of past had made her like that?

"We're spending the night?" Hailey said with a yawn.

"Looks that way," Finian replied, massaging her shoulders.

"It'll probably clear up by morning," Tristen offered.

"I hope so," Simone grumbled.

"Better find someone warm and cozy up," Connor said, aiming a sly grin at Josh.

Cozy up. His eyes drifted to Simone, who met his gaze with a glare. He tried to fight a smile, but it broke through anyway, defying his wishes.

"Come on, baby." He held his arms out to her. "You know you want it," he teased. "You know you want a real man to hold you at night."

She made a disgusted sound in the back of her throat and turned on her heel. "Come on, Tigger. Let's set you up with a bed."

"I'm writing a letter to Santa with Evander. We're not done yet." She waved the half-written page as evidence.

Tristen's daughter, Dot, who had been dozing in the window seat, said, "Is it warm upstairs yet?"

"Let's check," her father replied.

"Sleepover with Dot!" Tigger said, bouncing up, her letter forgotten.

Tristen and Evander moved up the stairs that led to a loft, to ensure the heater they'd set up was doing its job.

"Come on, Tigger," Evander said. "Let's get you settled. You'll have to sleep in your clothes tonight."

"Will Santa still come if we stay here?" Tigger called up the steps, not following.

Evander's head appeared. "I don't think Santa knows you're staying here tonight."

Tigger gave him a worried look and Josh stepped in, hoping Evander would be okay with his interference. "When I was a kid, Santa always

left gifts for me at home even when we got snowed in at my grandma's once. He won't forget you."

Noticing that she still had his phone, he held out his hand for it. The girl reluctantly placed it in his palm. "I organized it by colors." She pointed at the folders she had created. Sure enough, all the blue apps were in one folder, all the orange ones in another. He wondered what else she had done while he hadn't been paying attention.

"That's great, thanks."

"First ride out," Connor said softly to Evander, who had come back down the stairs for Tigger. The men shared a look, everyone silently agreeing that they'd work as a team to get either Evander or Daphne home before the little girl, so Santa could prepare for her arrival.

People shuffled up and down the stairs, arranging beds, gathering extra bedding from upstairs and preparing the group for the night. Josh stayed out of the way, assuming he'd tough it out in front of the fire. Keep it going. Listen for the generator. Keep an eye out for the miraculous return of cell service or a rescue party. It wouldn't be the first time he'd stayed up all night with nothing but flames for company. His attention still snapped to it whenever a log popped, but so far he'd resisted the urge to check the smoke detectors. He had a pretty good feeling they were outdated or had dead batteries, and that there were nowhere near enough in this old building to meet code. In fact, the one outside the kitchen door was hanging from its wiring.

He tried to make himself not care, but finally gave in and grabbed a chair, stepping up on it so he could test the dangling smoke detector.

It bleated shrilly in his ear. It worked and he was now deaf. He tucked the device back into its mounting bracket.

"Oh, don't do that," Melanie said. "We can't pull the battery out when we burn toast otherwise."

Pull the battery out. She'd just said that. A lawyer. A woman with more degrees than he could shake a stick at pulled the batteries out of smoke detectors. The very device that could save her life on a night like this.

"I'm a firefighter," he said, summoning patience. "I can't stay in a building where the smoke detector isn't functioning in the way it was designed to. And it was designed to be in its brace. Once I'm gone, go ahead and do what you want, but I really need this in place tonight."

Melanie shrugged. "Okay. That's fine. I get where you're coming from."

If only Simone was as accommodating as her friend.

"And how's that fire extinguisher?" He pointed to the red metal canister peeking out from under a pile of old rags near the kitchen door. "Has it expired?"

"They expire?"

Grant him serenity.

"Their neck seal weakens and they lose pressure. Especially if they've been discharged at all."

"Oh."

Great. He was going to be pulling people from a burning building in the middle of the night, wasn't he?

"Thanks for fixing that," Melanie said as he returned the chair to the card table, having righted the fire extinguisher and giving it a tap on its bottom in hopes of loosening its contents. "You went to Camp Adaker, didn't you?" she added, joining him near what was becoming his favorite chair in front of the fire.

Josh felt himself bristle. Not where he expected the conversation to go. "This place is old and dry. You need to be careful with fire here."

"You don't want to talk about it?" she asked gently.

Adaker had been a summer camp for troubled teens. Some kids went for a week. Some, like him, came for several summers before they figured out the light of day wasn't out to get them.

He sighed. "It's okay. The camp was good."

"I liked it."

"You went there?" he asked, not masking his surprise.

She nodded. "Shortly after my dad died. I thought I was the only person who'd had anything bad happened to them. The camp helped."

Yeah, seeing kids who were truly up crap creek would have helped. Perspective and all that. He'd finally realized in year two that his problems really weren't that bad. Nobody was beating him unconscious at the dinner table for not passing the salt fast enough, like some of those kids.

"Polly said they closed the camp?"

"They did, but these guys—" she jerked a thumb over her shoulder "—went and bought the whole darn island. Including the camp." She gave a soft smile. "I'm going to open it again next summer. My grandma was one of the camp's founders."

"Keeping it in the family."

She smiled, her eyes so warm and open that Josh felt himself relax. "Good luck. It provides a good service."

"Thank you. I was wondering though did the camp help you? Truly?"

"Yeah." He glanced around, feeling self-conscious. He didn't really want to talk about the camp with Simone around. He was a different person than he'd been back then, young and confused, controlled by a pulsing need to beat the snot out of anyone who stood in the way of his father's happiness. If Simone heard he'd been at Adaker she'd go on about the macho thing again, either that or think he was a wimp who couldn't handle his feelings and was in need of saving. Neither shoe fit.

Melanie lowered her voice. "Could I ask you about it someday? Nothing too personal. Just what helped and what didn't? When I reopen the camp I want to take things up a notch. Not that it wasn't great, but I want to have a good sense of what worked and what didn't. You know? So I don't cut the good stuff."

"Yeah. Sure." He pushed his hands into his thighs, stretching out his back. "That would be fine." He glanced around the room. "Just just make sure you keep the hands-on social workers. They're amazing."

Melanie pressed a palm to his knee as he cleared his throat twice, trying to dislodge the lump that had formed.

He stood, poking at the fire even though it didn't need it. He glanced up and said quickly, "Thanks for keeping Adaker open."

She leaned back in the chair, clearly happy. "My grandma and her lover started the camp decades ago. Can't let it go now, right?"

"Could I have everyone's attention, please?" It was Evander. His tone was take-charge and everyone turned to face him. He coughed, fist to his mouth, then reached for Daphne, pulling her close. "Some amazing things happened last summer. To all of us." He gave an apologetic look to Simone, and Josh wondered what was going on. "I've met royalty and worked in some amazing parts of the world, but the most incredible thing to ever happen has been Daphne allowing me to be a part of her life."

"Me, too?" asked Tigger hopefully.

"You, too." He ruffled her curls and she beamed up at him with so much love that Josh wished he could escape the private moment that was unfurling around him.

Evander cleared his throat. "With one look, Daphne breathed new hope and light into my heart. I had believed I was broken beyond repair, but I wasn't. I just needed the love of this amazing woman, and

I'm grateful for her every single day. I am blessed she gave me a chance."

He glanced at Tigger and added, "And you, too, Miss Bounce."

The girl beamed from her seat beside him, bouncing on her hands, which were tucked under her dress.

"I'm not always good with words, but I think it suffices to say that Daphne was right when she told me love changes the world. It starts with one person and spreads from there. And so I will do whatever I can to help her spread love. I will do whatever I need to ensure Daphne and her daughter are always happy, always safe and always loved. I know that Mr. Summer passed away a long time ago and Catherine not so long ago." He cleared his throat again. "So, as I stand before you all, I summon your blessings as Daphne's family as I ask for her hand in marriage."

He lowered himself to one knee, drawing a small engagement ring from his back pocket. He held it out for Daphne, who bit her lip, trying to contain the joy that was already making her small frame vibrate. "Daphne, will you complete my life, my happiness, my heart, and marry me?"

"Say yes!" Tigger squealed, so loudly Josh laughed and rubbed his ears.

Daphne was silent for a long moment, looking so somber Josh feared she was going to refuse. Then she whispered, "I'm pregnant."

The room was deathly quiet, then Evander stood slowly, looking enormous.

"We're having a baby, Evander."

"A baby!" Tigger nearly fell over. She pretended to fan herself, then jumped up and down, her little-girl persona breaking through her attempt at ladylike drama. "Make it a *sister*!"

Evander swept up Daphne, holding her close, not speaking. Muffled choking sounds came from the man, then he whooped loudly and swung her in circles, bouncing as he went, nearly knocking over nearby chairs, the floor creaking with his weight as he laughed with joy. He set his girlfriend down again, his eyes red-rimmed, his expression suddenly so somber, his mouth shaking with emotion. Then he crushed her against him once more, breathing her in.

"Uh, did we get an answer?" Dot asked.

Evander pushed Daphne away, clinging tight to her arms. He was pale, serious, ring still clutched between his large fingers.

She simply smiled up at him before blinking back tears and nodding, mouthing the word *yes*. She nodded again, more vigorously. "Yes!" She fell into his arms and he wrapped himself around her so completely that everyone clapped and cheered. A happy ending for a man who had only moments ago been completely insecure about the worth of his love.

"Yay!" Tigger piled onto the couple. "Evander's my forever daddy and I'm going to be a sister!"

Josh glanced around the room. The other Summers were all smiling, embracing their own men, happy for their youngest sibling as Evander slipped a ring on her finger.

And yet Simone was ghostly white, rocking back and forth as though preparing to start a race. She glanced up at the snowshoes above the fireplace and Josh knew he was going to have to keep an eye on her. Something was going on inside her head and it wasn't good.

As Daphne and Evander kissed each other as fiancée and fiancé, Simone found herself glancing over at JC to ensure their deal was still on. He gave a small nod, looking as serious and determined as she felt.

She no longer belonged here. Everyone was happy. Everyone was hooking up, having babies and moving on with their lives. She was moving on, too, in terms of her livelihood and identity, but it was all so incredibly fast. Everything was changing. Simone was no longer like her friends. Daphne had a family and was now making it official. Hailey was starting one, and the way Maya kept joking about puking, she was likely along the way, too. Even the proper do-it-by-the-book Melanie was trying to get pregnant before her wedding.

Simone didn't even want to think about what was happening in her father's life.

Everyone was getting what they wanted. Everyone was expanding their love, happiness radiating outward in waves, new people popping up on the planet as a result, and it made her desperate to have someone who would love her back.

Simone pulled out her sketchpad to clear her mind, despite having promised herself to ignore fresh ideas so they wouldn't take over her new life. She leaned her shoulder against the mantel and, after taking a

cleansing breath, used Maya as inspiration for her design. Around the room, adults still fussed over bedding and sleeping arrangements, as well as Daphne's news.

With quick strokes of her pencil, Simone found herself digging into her own past instead of creating something for her friend.

Wanda's words from the latest MOM meeting echoed in her mind. *There's nothing I can stock in my boutique that works for the twelve to seventeen-year-old crowd. It's either too provocative, too little girlish or too mature. That age group is like the black hole of formal wear. Don't even get me started on larger-sized gowns.*

And didn't Simone know it.

Memories of junior prom gowns flashed through her mind. Lots and lots of prom gowns, but only a handful that fit. Feelings of inadequacy, of being fat, uncomfortable, unattractive and different in all the wrong ways washed over her as though she was still in the moment, trying on dresses with Hailey. While her friend had been complaining that she'd have to take in the waists on many of the trendy garments, Simone had been wondering how she could make the adult-sized dresses into something hip and less revealing.

Every garment she tried on had been a shock to her system, sending her into a month-long depression that had been just as bad as when her parents had split a few months prior. The trauma caused her to pile on even more weight, adding to her prom dress problem. Her feelings of inadequacy had underscored everything as though drawn with a heavy hand in charcoal, and it wasn't until she began designing gowns like the one coming to life on her sketchpad that she'd come back around again.

Simone held out her pad and studied it critically. She'd come full circle, hadn't she? Starting with plus-sized gowns and ending with them.

Or maybe it wasn't full circle, maybe it was just a new start. The right start. The path she was actually supposed to follow. It was possible she'd sold her old brand, kit and caboodle, for a reason and now she could follow this new path without the restrictions or hesitation that came with an established brand name.

JC moved closer, reaching out to touch her shoulder. She shifted away, afraid the sweet gesture might make her insecurities rear up, ready for attack. But instead of making contact, he braced himself against the mantel, so smoothly she doubted he'd actually intended to touch her.

"Nice. Very goddess-like." He was more curious and appraising than judgmental as he looked over her shoulder.

She pulled the screen away from the fireplace and tossed the sketchpad inside.

No new beginnings. They took too much time and would take her away from her dreams of a family. She was shifting back to her comfort zone and that needed to stop.

"Why'd you do that?" he asked, scrambling for the poker so he could fish out the smoking pad. "It was good!"

"Leave it." Flames licked the edges of the pages. "I'm not starting any new projects."

"You're hard-core, woman." He kneaded her shoulder and she let out a breathy laugh, not quite believing she'd tossed half a year's worth of designs in the fire.

"Oh! Get it out!" She pulled the poker out of JC's grip as the papers ignited, sending out a flash of heat. "Those were good ideas."

"They'll be even better the second time you sketch them. More refined."

"How do you know?" She turned to watch him, curious.

JC gave a nonchalant shrug. "Still snowing out there?"

His walls had been raised and Simone decided not to pursue it.

"Not exactly how you anticipated spending your Christmas Eve, huh?" She refused to move away, even though he had placed himself squarely in her space as though she needed support. "Stuck here. Will Polly and your family be worried?"

"Probably." He looked at her with a steady gaze. Why wasn't he freaking out about his family worrying? Oh, right. Because he was one of those men who expected the world to revolve around him, and any problems were always someone else's. Machismo. She kept forgetting that. Especially when she met his kind eyes, which often flashed with secrets and pain.

"Is anyone else expecting you?" She hated herself for holding her breath as she waited for his reply, but a part of her needed to know. She knew he wasn't married, but he was a handsome man who fought fires for a living. He probably had twenty women waiting for him to call tonight.

That idea shouldn't bother her nearly as much as it did.

Except he'd kissed her. Repeatedly. And it had been better and better each time.

"A girlfriend?" JC asked, eyebrow lifted as though he thought he might be winning some sort of game. "Need someone to cozy up to, and you're worried about infringing on someone else's property?"

"No, just wondering who I need to apologize to once you find my charms irresistible."

JC choked on a chuckle and Simone turned away, pleased by her quick retort.

"Connor?" She waited for him to stop nuzzling Maya's ear and pay attention. "Don't you have sled dogs at your disposal? Emergency helicopters that are used to flying in Antarctica where there are blizzards all the time? This guy's got people panicking that he's vanished off the

face of the earth, and while he obviously doesn't care about it, I think we should make an effort to get him off the island."

"You're voting me off?" JC said, his voice quiet behind her, sending chills up her spine. She could take a half step back and be in his arms, her body pressed against his rock-hard form.

"There is no vote." She prompted Connor, "So? Don't you?"

Everyone was staring at her. "What?" she asked.

"If my people felt they could get here safely, they would be here," Connor replied. "We're okay where we are for the next while, so let's focus on the joy of being disconnected from the world. Let's celebrate being together with family and friends."

"Well, I guess I'll take one of the extra beds upstairs?" she said. The fact that nobody had mentioned where she'd be sleeping was starting to feel a bit suspicious, and she was beginning to suspect that she was going to end up toughing it out with JC in front of the fire.

Maya gave Connor a swift glance.

"What?" Simone asked.

"We, um, kind of took them out when we were perking up the dñcor this summer. There are two cots up there. Maybe Tigger could sleep on the couch instead of with Dot?"

Since the marriage proposal the girl had received a second wind, and had been tucked away in the corner, furiously dictating the rest of her letter to Santa via Evander.

"I'm sleeping with Dot!" Tigger announced, bottom lip thrust out. "Upstairs!"

Simone threw up her hands, knowing better than to fight with the little girl when she stuck out her bottom lip. "Fine," Simone said. "I can sleep on the couch."

Which meant JC was going to sleep where? In a chair?

"Unless you want the couch," she offered grudgingly. He gave her a dark, unimpressed look.

"Okay, it's mine then. Thank you." She primly turned away, trying hard not to think about how close she would be sleeping to him.

"Well, I'm calling it a night," Hailey said, stretching her arms above her head. "Growing a baby makes me tired." She shot Simone an apologetic look.

"Of course. You need to take care of yourself," Simone said. She wrapped her arms around herself. "Do we have enough firewood to get us through the night?"

"I carried some in earlier," Finian said.

"And I cleared the roof," Evander added. "The snow load should be okay through this storm."

Great. Another thing to worry about: the roof falling in on them due to the weight of the snow Mother Nature was using to bury them alive.

JC was pulling on his snowsuit, zipping it up, the bulky outerwear covering his well-defined chest. "Where's the woodpile?"

Finian went out with him and Simone relaxed, fidgeting with the burn holes in her jeans. As much as she hated to admit it, she trusted JC to take care of things. As Hailey had said earlier, he was a fixer, too. Or rescuer. Whatever. Same difference. But it was starting to feel as though she was relying on him too much for basic survival. She wanted to wade through the snow to get more wood, too, if only to prove that she didn't need him.

"Are you okay?" Hailey asked, head cocked to the side.

"Fine. Great. Just, you know, problem solving." She caught Tigger as the girl bounced past, her letter finished. "Let's get you into that bed, kiddo. I'll tell you a story, how's that sound?"

"Are you sleeping with Uncle Josh tonight?" Tigger asked, her eyes so full of innocence and hope.

Simone needed someone who would think she was enough, no matter what she did or didn't do with her life, and the men like JC she'd dated always wanted her to change, always wanted more. They always wanted that "something" she didn't seem to possess.

She took a deep breath before replying. "He isn't my type, sweetie."

"You should make him your type."

Yeah, that's what her body kept telling her, too.



SIMONE HAD JUST FINISHED TELLING a story to Tigger—and Dot, who had pretended not to listen on the neighboring cot, but hadn't turned a single page in her book the entire time—when she heard JC's voice downstairs. She let out a sigh of relief, knowing they likely now had enough wood to get them through the night, plus some. The man would make a good provider and protector for someone who liked that sort of thing.

"Josh!" Tigger hollered from beside Simone, startling her.

Heavy feet pounded up the wood steps to the attic and Josh called, "Yeah?"

"Come up here."

Simone stayed where she was on the cot, curious about what Tigger was up to.

"We're friends, right?" the little girl asked, when his head poked over the railing.

"Yup," he said simply. He moved to the top step, hand gripping the banister. His cheeks were bright red from darting out into the cold night, his shoulders as broad as ever. He looked handsome and strong, intent on making sure Tigger knew she was important and heard. Not all adults took the time to do that, and while that quality had always

softened Simone, she hadn't expected it in a man such as JC, and for some reason it made her angry. The man was supposed to stay in his arrogant little box, not mess with her mind by being caring and great with kids.

He was being a heart slayer, which was completely unfair.

"Friends get friends Christmas presents, right?" Tigger questioned. Simone chuckled, scolding her gently for being so forward.

"Of course they do," Josh replied.

The girl beckoned him over, sitting up. Only a moment ago Simone had her close to falling asleep, but now she was as wide awake as Dot.

"Phone." Tigger held out her hand expectantly.

Josh passed it to her and she punched in his access code.

"Wait. You know his code?" Simone asked.

"I changed it to my birthday," the girl said, zipping through the contents, her mind on one thing.

Josh laughed. "Were you planning to tell me that or leave me locked out of my phone forever?"

"Forever."

Simone bit her bottom lip, trying not to laugh, and Josh shook his head, eyes crinkling with amusement.

"Never give a kid your phone," Dot said from her cot. "First rule of ownership."

"Too bad this bright adult male didn't think of that," Simone teased.

JC sat beside her on Tigger's small bed, too close for comfort, but Simone forced herself to stay, to stand her ground even though the heat coming off him felt too familiar, too consuming. It reminded her of how irresistible he was when she let her guard down. But he wasn't her type. The two of them were opposites, or too much alike, too something. Something that would make them fight all the time and weaken the very defenses she needed in order to survive.

She sighed, knowing a man such as JC could throw her off track, and she had too much at stake. And yet and yet he tempted her much more than she cared to admit.

"This." Tigger held up JC's phone. "I want this."

"In pink?" JC replied. "Or purple?"

"Purple so it matches the dress Simone is making for me. She makes me lots of dresses. Can you tuck me in?"

Simone snatched the phone, holding it still so she could get a better look at the photo of an adorable frilly doodad. "You have Internet connection? When did you get a link? We need to call the helicopters."

"They're pictures," Tigger said, suddenly sleepy again.

"From the Internet, which means he has signal."

"Maybe he could have a show in your boutique like Mom and Hailey did. Mom sold lots of paintings."

Simone ignored the girl while she searched for the phone app. "Why do you have all of your mobile apps arranged by color?" The man was proving to be more and more nutters. Definitely not good dad material.

She dialed 911. Nothing but silence as she held the phone to her ear. She checked the cell signal. No bars of service. What on earth?

"Slow down," JC said, laying a hand over hers, then taking his phone back. His palm was large, warm, and oddly comforting. And made her mind flash to other things besides getting off this island. "They're photos of things I make for kids."

She tried to look at his phone again, but he had turned it off, slipping it into his faded jeans pocket. And now she was staring at his crotch's bulge.

Man, these hormones were getting out of control.

"He makes really pretty hair ribbons and barrettes."

JC was calm, his voice low and soothing. "I make them for kids in the burn unit."

Simone felt as though she was lost in a funhouse. Only it wasn't fun. The hair ribbons she'd seen had been delicate, beautiful, well-crafted, and unique. She'd barely had a glance at them, but knew they were special and that the creator had talent.

How could JC create something like that?

It was impossible. The man jumped out of airplanes so he could face off against raging forest fires. He got into fistfights and was built like a steamy, sexy hunk of manhood. Creating delicate girly things by hand was not manly. It was not JC.

It made no sense. It didn't add up.

"I've been thinking about expanding my own business a little. I was hoping you and I could talk about distribution if you have time."

Simone sat up, jostling Tigger in the process. "Get the creator to call me and we'll set something up, but I'm not dealing with a middleman." Her heart was pounding like mad as she felt her world slipping. "I deal with the heart of the business—the creator. And tell her that candy-apple red is too overstated. Even for a child."

Dot, who had been watching the exchange, quietly slipped away, scurrying like a cat in a roomful of guard dogs.

Josh paused for a second, then gave a slight, thoughtful nod.

"He is the heart," Tigger said, her voice laced with confusion.

"Him?" Simone shook her head. "Tigger, no. Not possible."

"He makes fairy art, too."

"No, he doesn't."

"I'll show you!" The girl hopped up and trundled down the stairs. "Wait here."

Fairy art? The man was so manly he was stirring up parts of Simone that had been on life support for years. He couldn't be gay. It wouldn't be fair to womankind.

No, it didn't matter. She knew who he was and she didn't want him. Let him be gay. That would be a relief, actually. It would make him a lot less dangerous and make a lot more sense.

"So you're a gay man masquerading as some big macho alpha dude?" Simone laughed, relief washing over her like a downpour after years of drought. She clapped her hands as she stood. "That's *so* perfect."

He scowled up at her and she placed her palms on either side of his cheeks in joy. Who cared if he was angry that she'd figured out his secret? She'd known there was no way the old JC could make something so delicately beautiful. She'd *known* something was up with him. Known he wasn't real—because he was a fake.

She placed her lips on his, kissing him with happiness and relief. He was gay! She was safe!

His fingers knotted in her hair, drawing her close. Her eyes flew open as his kiss turned angry and possessive. And hot. *Really* hot. It was as though he was trying to prove something to her and wow. It was as though a bell was being rung again and again as his mouth worked hers in angry, hungry passes.

He pulled her into his lap, their surroundings forgotten. She became lost in what was simply the best kiss she'd ever had. It was passionate and barely contained. Her control was slipping and she didn't care.

His hand was caressing her gently, and she eased closer, jumping back when she moved against something firm. She fell out of his arms, landing on the floor.

Gay men didn't get excited kissing women.

Oh, no, JC wasn't gay. Gay men didn't consume women in passionate kisses.

He was as straight as a prairie highway.

What had she been doing? Where was her mind?

"What was that?" she barked.

He stood up, his mouth set in that angry way of his that made her want to take him down a notch for being so so JC.

"You are *such* a liar!"

"What are you talking about?" He scowled.

"Are you gay or not gay?"

"What does that matter? You're not open-minded enough to see that I'm the best thing that could ever happen to you."

"Best thing?" She snorted and focused on his chest, which was rising and falling as quickly as hers. "You're a big hoax. A liar. A facade. A bunch of false advertising in a big sexy body. You're a—a " Words failed her as she looked up into his eyes. His anger was gone and had been replaced with resignation and disappointment. In her.

No. Nobody was *ever* disappointed in her. She *exceeded* expectations. That's what she did. That was her *thing*.

He pulled her up off the floor, gently rubbing his thumb over her knuckles before letting her go.

"I hope you find what you're looking for."

He gave her one last glance before heading down the stairs, pausing to murmur something to a returning Tigger as Simone sank onto the vacated cot, feeling as though she might cry, her heart slashed by a sense of devastating loss.



SIMONE WAS GETTING under Josh's skin. She'd been so hot and cold. Strong and vulnerable. Push and pull. Tease and withdraw. And then the gay comment? It was as if a rocket had gone off in his brain. When she'd bent down to give him that patronizing "you're gay so I'm saved from being attracted to you" kiss, it had been all he could do to keep from proving just how hetero he was.

The worst part was that she had been right. The candy-apple red was overstated. It wasn't a big deal, but her offhand comment showed him just how out of his depth he'd swum. She had an instinctual color sense he lacked. He'd been working on trying to develop it and had barely branched out from pink, knowing it was beyond his current skills. And she'd taken one glimpse and known.

Over. His. Head.

He couldn't do this, could he? He was going to fail and look dumb. There was a reason men didn't do this kind of stuff.

They did other things. Manly things that didn't get them called gay.

And he knew he wasn't a homosexual, so why did that term still get a rise out of him? Wasn't he beyond that by now?

But Simone. Man. JC pushed his fingers through his hair and stood on the back porch of the cottage, hoping to freeze away the heat that lingered from their hot kiss. He could still feel the lushness of her body pressed to his, the potent response of his body and how it had demanded to prove his virility.

Thinking about her was not helping, but it did distract him from the self-loathing that was flaring up like a beast.

Despite the fact that it was cold enough out to prevent most gas-powered vehicles from starting, he was still feeling heated. And from what? One kiss with a woman who hated him. But the way she'd come alive, the way all her prickly barriers had come crashing down as she'd gotten into their kiss... There was none of that "must protect myself from Josh at all costs" thing she normally had going on. She'd gotten into it. Gotten hot. Really hot.

He'd liked it.

A lot.

He wanted to kiss her again.

And then some more.

A lot more.

The door behind him creaked open.

"How's the weather?"

It was Connor, shoulders hunched under his thick sweater.

"Better than it was." It wasn't howling as it had been an hour ago, but still beyond anything a helicopter could get through, or a safety-conscious snowmobiler would try to tackle.

"And how are things inside?"

Josh shrugged, pretending he didn't understand where Connor was heading.

"Making any progress?"

"How so?"

"It's none of my business, but I figured there were only three reasons a man would come stand out in a blizzard without a jacket, and seeing as you aren't a smoker, that leaves us with either you want off this island bad enough to risk your own life so you can get away from her, or she's got you so fired up you need to cool your jets."

Josh chuckled. The man had him pegged, all right.

Connor gave him a light punch in the arm. "She might be standoffish and difficult, but she's worth it if she's already got you feeling like this after a few hours of being stuck with her." He leaned closer, as though someone might overhear. "And when you do get together, all that spitfire attitude" He grinned and shook his head. "You'd better watch out. It'll be like no other woman you've ever experienced. Trust me." He held the door open behind him. Considering how chilled he'd become, Josh followed the man inside.

The warm scent of old wood paneling met them as Connor walked ahead, passing through the chilly kitchen and into the living room, arms stretched high as he yawned loudly. "Well, I'm calling it a night. Let's

hope the heat keeps working or we'll all be cuddling with Josh and Simone tonight."

Connor gave his wife a look that said all sorts of naughty things, and the couple, giggling, vanished from the room.

Simone was staring into the fire, fingers pressed to her lips, shutting out the world. Josh liked to think that maybe he'd gotten under her skin, as well.

Daphne, who had finally managed to get Tigger settled, headed off for the night with Evander, while Melanie and Tristen lingered to see if Simone and Josh had all they needed. Judging by the stack of blankets and pillows, as well as the pile of firewood, Josh deemed them set.

"So?" he said to Simone as he shook out a blanket, folding it around himself as he took the chair opposite her. He crushed a pillow behind his head and leaned back, kicking out his feet. He was still mad about how she'd discounted his hair accessories, denying the possibility that he'd be capable of creating something delicate.

She ignored him.

He shut his eyes, making himself comfortable. Tomorrow she'd be out of his hair. Tomorrow, tomorrow. Then he could go find someone in a bar for a one-night stand, and shake Simone out of his system.

He shifted in the chair, unable to get comfortable, the pillow pressing against the tender bump on his head.

Straight men could create pretty things. They could bring joy into the world in ways other than saving cats from burning barns.

But Simone had said she wanted to talk to the creator. That had to mean she liked them, and saw potential, right?

That he was rocking it.

He opened one eye. "Still think I'm gay?"

She whirled, glaring at him. "I don't appreciate you playing games with me." Her voice was low, so as not to bother the others through the

thin cottage walls.

"No games. This is me."

"You don't add up."

"Because you have an outdated calculator that's as narrow-minded as you are," he snapped, whipping the blanket off his legs.

"I am not narrow-minded."

"Prove it."

She blinked, chin tipped down.

"Stop assuming I'm either a pushy, overbearing man who wants to run your life or that I'm gay and living a lie."

"You are a liar."

If you denied your true self long enough, did that make you a liar?

"See? You're not denying it." She smirked as though she'd won a point. But instead of being bothered, he found himself wanting to break down her barriers more than ever. All that attitude, all that fire. They could have a lot of fun if she let him in.

He moved to her swiftly, pulling her out of her chair and into an embrace. "And you're a liar by denying how much chemistry we have going on between us, and the fact that it scares you."

She pushed lightly on his chest, a feeble halfhearted move that told him she wanted to stay exactly where she was, wrapped in his arms. "You don't scare me."

"Right."

"Why would I be afraid of you?"

She was looking up at him with dark, curious eyes.

"You tell me." He lowered his lips to hers, and was rewarded with that surge of desire sparking to life inside him—same as always. This time it was less out of control, but just as hot and needy. He swept his thumb over her hollowed cheek as she deepened the kiss. Cupping her below the waist, he pulled her body to his.

She broke away, eyelids at half-mast. "We're not good for each other."

"I think we are."

"No."

He dropped his arms, already wanting to hold her again. "Do you always deny everything that's right in your life?"

Her body turned rigid as anger flared. "And are you so cocky to think you could actually offer me what I need?"

"And what is it that you need?" He fought a growing resentment for her brick walls and tried to soften his attitude so he wouldn't act like the man she thought he was.

"I need a man who's not you." Her voice was wobbly, her eyes blinking furiously.

He had a hold on her, but somewhere in her life she'd become so shaken that he wondered what it would take for her to cross the barrier that kept her at bay. Whatever it was, he found himself that much more determined to have her, to win her over.

Simone Pascal was going to be his by the time they said goodbye.

Josh had been sleeping lightly, waking every hour or so to place more logs on the fire so Simone wouldn't have to. Each time, he'd taken a moment to watch her sleep, wondering what had her so spooked and how he could circumvent it. She'd become an irresistible challenge, a mystery to crack. But so far he'd gathered no hints other than what he already knew about her. She was strong. Clever. Independent and allusive. Keeping secrets from her friends just as he did.

Had she been burned one too many times? Or was she just fiercely independent to a fault?

The fire was still going strong, and before drifting off again, he glanced over to check on Simone, who was sleeping on the couch just behind him. Her blankets were crumpled, her supple form no longer denting the cushions. He sat up straighter, listening for her. All was quiet other than the fire and gentle background hum of the generator and bedroom heaters.

He checked his phone. It was 4:00 a.m. He'd last been up at two. How had he managed to sleep through Simone stoking the fire?

He rubbed his eyes and got up to check the common areas, tenderly exploring the bump on his head, which had shrunk considerably. Simone

wasn't in the kitchen, nor the nonfunctioning bathroom. There was still plenty of firewood. Had she gone to the outhouse?

He checked the time again. How long had she been outside? Was she properly dressed? Was she even out there? Maybe she was comforting Tigger, who'd had a bad dream or something.

No. The snowshoes that hung above the fireplace were gone and, when he checked, the mat at the door was short one pair of women's boots.

She was outdoors. On snowshoes.

Heading home? He didn't think so. That seemed too fraught with risk for even the determined and obsessively independent Simone.

You couldn't have a baby if you were frozen in a snowdrift. So where did she go? And why?

Had to be the outhouse.

Josh hurried to put on his suit and boots, hoping to bump into her as she came in from the cold, but still he prepared for the worst. Gathering lights and a blanket, he opened the back door off the kitchen, disappointed and alarmed when he didn't find her standing there.

"Simone?" he called, not caring if he woke anyone. There was no reply but the haunting sound of grainy snow scurrying over hard, crusted drifts.

"Oh, that independent woman. She's going to be the death of me," he muttered under his breath as he clipped the spare flashlight onto the back clothesline. She should know better than to go out alone. She should have woken him up, told him where she was heading.

He kicked himself for sleeping through her departure, and scanned for telltale tracks in the snow. His earlier path to the woodpile had drifted over, obliterated by shifting snow. But a large set of indentations led toward the outhouse. Snowshoes.

He swung his light out into the darkness, calling Simone once again before setting off.

Finally, near the outhouse, he heard a reply to his frequent calls. "Here! I'm here! JC?"

JC? Nobody had called him that since he was a teenager. Which meant she likely assumed he was the same troublemaking goof from back then. He still was in some ways, but he liked to think he'd changed at least a little bit and had allowed his finer traits to develop as he matured.

"Simone?" He cast the light over the snow, wondering if the wind was playing tricks with his ears.

Out of the corner of his eye he caught sight of a feeble band of light shining up into an evergreen. Josh hurried through the dark night, the flying flakes dizzying as he swung the light, searching for her.

"Simone?"

"JC!"

She was scrambling like a wounded bird, stuck under the branches of a spruce. The wind had created a deep bowl around the tree, drifts of snow curving up to the lower limbs, blocking her in. He had no clue how she'd ended up in there, but she was good and trapped, unable even to stand. He tested the edges of the drifts, checking for give. They gave all right. If he came any closer he'd find himself on top of her. And not in a fun way.

"Are you hurt?"

"My snowshoe's caught under me. I can't get up. I can't get out." The more she tried to claw her way out of the bowl, the more snow caved in on her, soft and impossible to maneuver through. She was swimming in snow up to her shoulders, branches whacking her in the head whenever she got some momentum going from her sitting position.

"Are you warm enough? Can you feel your toes?" She appeared to be decked out in jeans and a short, trendy ski jacket, although it was difficult to tell by the way her clothing was packed with snow. She looked more like a human snowman than a smart Canadian prepared for all weather.

Women. Her need to be fashionable probably had her legs close to frostbite, if Jack Frost hadn't already been nipping at them.

"Get me out of here!" There was panic stitching her voice, and when Josh failed to move, she scrambled, making her situation worse.

He balled up the knitted afghan and tossed it under the branches that protected her from the worst of the wind, afraid to come closer. "Wrap yourself in that."

"JC! Get. Me. Out."

She struggled again, but the snow was like quicksand, grainy and loose, ready to pull her down each time she stirred. He was going to need more supplies. A rope. Shovel.

"Hang tight. Don't try to get out." He didn't wait for her reply, but ran back through the snow, his feet falling through at various depths, sending him off-kilter like a newborn fawn learning to walk on ice. He needed to stay calm, slow down, make a methodical plan to get her out of the shifting snow. A twisted knee wouldn't do either of them any good.

Before long the light he'd hung on the clothesline came into view. He moved it to a nail in one of the porch posts and untied the line. He grabbed the shovel he'd used earlier while fixing the generator, and figured if he couldn't get Simone out of her bind with this he'd come back for reinforcements—waking the entire cottage if necessary.

Back at Simone's tree he carefully tested the edges of the drift again, backing off as soon as it began to crumble. Then he lay down on the snow, wondering if the clothesline would be long enough to haul her to

safety. If he had to dig her out, how long would it take in conditions such as this?

"Simone?"

"You left me here!"

"Don't get your frozen lace panties in a huff. I had to get supplies."

"How do you know they're lace?" His voice was indignant and he chuckled, trying to shake the vision of her lovely shaped buttocks encased in delectable, fine fabric designed to make a man crave all it hid from view.

He tossed one end of the clothesline to her, reminding himself to cool his jets. It wasn't a good time to be visualizing her wearing close to nothing.

"Hold on to the line and I'll pull you out."

As soon as she tugged, the rope cut through the drifts. "It's not working," she complained.

"I know." Making sure he was on a solid crust of snow, he stood and grabbed the shovel. "I'm going to have to dig you out." He batted what looked like purple yarn out of his way, but it kept blowing back at him. "What is this?" It was wrapped around one of the branches, threaded out into the dark night, hooked on something else.

"It's my string."

"For what? Knitting?" A few feet from the edge of her drifts he began digging through the hard crust, hoping to make steps of some sort. But as soon as he broke through the surface he faced the same grainy pebbles of snow encasing Simone. One false move and he'd find himself in a similar predicament.

"It's my lifeline." What was she talking about? "To follow back to the cottage from the outhouse."

"You should have woken me."

"You were sleeping." Her voice was stubborn, petulant despite its tremor of fear.

"Quit moving. You're making it worse."

"I almost got out that time."

"No, you didn't. You're working against me and it's going to take longer if you keep that up."

"Then hurry. I can't get out—my leg is stuck under me. I can't undo the buckle."

"I'm trying." He scooped crystallized snow out of the hole he'd dug. It was no use. It was all deep and grainy under the thick crust. He needed to get creative. Fast.

"Hurry."

"Have you already been to the outhouse?"

"No," she moaned. "And I can barely feel my thighs."

He began shoveling faster, hoping to uncover a miracle in the snow's depth while he tried to form other rescue plans in his mind. She began trying to help again, only drawing more snow into her shelter. She needed to listen to him, trust him. Josh stopped digging, battling his frustration.

"Why are you stopping?" she asked, her voice low with worry. "Don't leave me, please, JC. I'll promise you whatever you want. Just don't leave me to freeze. I'll—I'll set up your friend with distributors or other designers. Get her a discount on ribbons. Anything."

She still didn't believe he'd made the accessories. That cut.

He sighed, still resting against the shovel despite the way the wind nipped at his exposed cheeks. "Do you want me to help you or not?"

"Get me out." Her chin was starting to vibrate despite her obvious fight to keep her teeth from chattering.

"Yeah?"

"Please!"

"Then do as I say and stop trying to climb out!"

"I'm not a weak damsel in distress. I can help."

He couldn't see her in the darkness under the branches, but in his mind's eye he pictured her with her hands on her hips, ready to do battle.

"Would it kill you to accept help? To admit that you can't do this on your own?"

He shone the flashlight in her direction, seeing her silhouette under the spruce as she began scooping snow, trying to break the crust that worked as a barrier between her bowl and where he'd started to dig. More snow piled in on her and she shuddered as it seeped around her waist.

She didn't learn, did she?

"And is that better?" he snapped. "Doing it yourself is working out fine for you? Shall I head inside and wait for you in front of the nice cozy fire?"

"I'm not going to just *sit* here." She was getting close to hysteria. Panic. On the verge of losing rational thought, which meant she was in an even worse state than she'd let on.

Josh quickly moved south several feet and dropped the shovel at his feet. He stretched himself out over the crusty snow, wondering if he was taking a stupid risk that would cost them both. As he slithered forward, testing the drift's edge, he talked to her in a calm, soothing voice, using her name to help her anchor her thoughts. "It doesn't make you any less of a powerful woman to accept help when you need it. It's a sign of strength."

He held his breath for a count of three, ensuring he was speaking without judgment so she'd relax and not allow panic to drag them both under.

She began trying to kick her frozen legs, pushing herself closer to him, snow shifting and pouring down her side and likely into her coat. She struggled harder, scrambling to reach him.

That did it. No more Mr. Nice Guy. "You know why people like you die in house fires?"

She didn't answer.

"Do you?" His voice was harsh, commanding.

"No, I don't. I'm not in the mood for a pop quiz right now. I'm freezing."

Below the anger he could hear the tears in her voice. He pulled the shovel up to his side, turning it so the scoop was extended to her, his grip firm on the handle. If she sat on the blade he might be able to drag her up over the loose stuff and onto the crust.

"They die in house fires," he said calmly, snapping the shovel out of her reach so she'd focus on him, "because they're too self-reliant to accept help when they need it."

She lost control of her shuddering.

"Grab hold. Sit on it, lay on it, whatever you can do, just get your weight on the scoop and hug the shaft—you'll be steadier that way."

She hesitated, likely put off by his tone, until he said, "Do it."

Her eyes met his in the thin sliver of light from the flashlight at his side and she tentatively placed her mittened hands around the shovel, stretching to do so, the blanket still wrapped around her higgledy-piggledy.

"Hold on as tight as you can and don't move a muscle."

She wrapped her arms tighter.

He gave her a nod to check that she was ready, then tugged her toward him. Her legs slowly straightened like a pulled-out accordion and the shelf beneath Josh began to buckle. Carefully, he wriggled backward, inching Simone out, drawing her like a sled over the soft snow.

She tried to help by kicking her legs, the large snowshoes flopping and catching on the drifts, tilting her sideways so she almost fell off the shovel's blade. He halted her movements with a harsh, "If this had been a house fire, you would have just died, as well as put my life in danger by trying to do it your way. Don't. Help."

She allowed him to haul her the rest of the way out as though she were a dead fish, then help her stand on her snowshoes. She looked weak, half-frozen, and he worried that she hadn't actually finally acquiesced to him being in charge, but that, rather, she might be two seconds away from becoming a human ice cube.

"I thought you were going to leave me," she said, her teeth chattering uncontrollably.

"You are pretty stubborn." He watched her for a second. She was in no shape to trying wrangling the snowshoes over the uneven drifts. Picking her up, he carried her in the direction of the outhouse before deciding that was a death mission. He turned, heading back to the cottage.

"You'll relieve yourself in a bucket back inside where it's warm."

She didn't fight him and he picked up his pace, worried about her lack of pep.

They landed on the back porch sooner than he thought possible, and not pausing to take off their boots or outerwear other than her snowshoes, Josh placed Simone right in front of the fireplace. He knocked the biggest chunks of snow off her, then carefully placed two logs on the dwindling blaze and yanked her chair as close as he dared. The blanket he'd tossed to her under the tree was caked with snow and he discarded it before pressing his bare hands against her skin, assessing the level of chill.

Her cheeks were icy and her fingers so cold they wouldn't be able to undo her snap or fly. He hurried to the kitchen and plugged in the

electric kettle they'd used for hot toddies, before returning to her side. "Should I wake the girls?"

She shook her head, stopping him when he leaned back to holler for help. He eyed her for a split second before agreeing with her decision. She might be too embarrassed to call the others, but he knew what needed to be done—and waiting for anyone right now could cost Simone dearly.

He took her bare hands and slipped them under his sweater, instinctively jumping back at the frigid touch. She tried to pull away, but he held her gaze with a shake of his head.

"We need to take off your jeans. The snow packed into them is going to give you frostbite, if it hasn't already. Plus when it melts it's going to keep the cold against your skin."

"I'm okay," she said, fighting the chatter of her teeth and momentarily winning, before they began rattling again.

"No, you're not. I make the executive decisions. If I say you need something, then that's what you're going to get, do you hear me? This isn't a game where you win independence points. This is life or death."

He freed one hand from hers, tipping her chin so she'd be forced to meet his gaze. "Do you trust me?"

She didn't answer, seeming so small pressed against him, so vulnerable, lost and in need of direction. Not just with her clothing, but with her life.

"Do you trust me to make that call for you?" he asked.

With tears in her eyes, she nodded.

"Then we need to take off your pants."



JOSH'S HANDS were like fire against her numbed skin. Every sensation was as intense as though she was being singed by live wires. She wasn't sure if it was the cold that had taken over her flesh or Josh's gentle, careful touch.

He released the button of her jeans, his fingers tugging down her zipper before gripping the waistband and shucking off the denim in one swift movement that left her quaking in the fire's heat. He pushed her onto a chair, then pulled the inside-out pants over her ankles. Thank goodness she'd shaved her legs that morning. She knew this wasn't the time to think about those sorts of vain things, but she was a single woman hopped up on hormones and he was a hot specimen of manhood stripping her with single-minded determination. Not thinking about the state of her legs would be like the prime minister not thinking about politics.

"Your feet stayed relatively warm." He ran his hands over her feet, ankles, calves, up to her knees and thighs, assessing for frostbite, and she wanted to slip off the chair and into his arms. She felt exhausted and colder than she could ever have imagined, and wanted to suck in his strength and warmth like a hungry vampire.

Vulnerable. That's how she felt. But she felt safe with JC and trusted him to take care of her without fuss or drama. It surprised her, but it was Josh she wanted stripping her in front of the fire, encouraging her to take a sip of warm tea, wrapping a blanket around her as he moved with swift confidence, setting her up for survival.

As much as she hated to admit it, there were some things men like JC were great for and right now he was doing it. He was rescuing her and she needed it. He neared recklessness in his haste to stoke the fire, and she set her pride aside and listened, obeying him with a submissive compliance she didn't know she was capable of. She hadn't treated him in a way she was proud of, and yet, no questions asked, he was taking

care of her with an efficiency that didn't leave her feeling helpless. In fact, she almost enjoyed it. He wasn't leaching her power or strength, he was simply caring for her, carrying the torch when she couldn't.

He held a hand in front of her to test the heat radiating from the roaring fire.

"Can you feel the warmth?" he asked. "At all?"

She thought about it, then shook her head. "Not much."

He grabbed her chair and yanked her back an extra foot. "Don't move closer. Not yet."

She wasn't sure whether she was still clutching the blanket over her bra or not, her hands had gone so numb. She still had to pee, but knew she wouldn't be able to go without JC's help. She could hold it a bit longer.

"I thought you were going to leave me out there." Her voice sounded small, broken, and a tear slipped out.

JC squatted in front of her, his expression serious and definitely worried, which made her tears that much harder to hold back. "Do you really think that poorly of me?"

Yes.

No.

But when he'd disappeared after she'd been such an independent cow, she really wouldn't have blamed him if he'd left her there. She'd truly believed that if she'd just gotten the angle right she could have crawled out. However, she knew now that she would have frozen by then.

"I'm sorry."

"You were cold and stuck."

"And difficult," she whispered.

He smiled, but didn't agree, and she loved him for it.

"If that had been a house fire I would have cost us our lives," she said, taking all her strength to acknowledge how wrong she'd been.

She resisted the urge to reach out and touch him, to let him know without words that she trusted him, appreciated him. Saw that he was special. He was a decent man and probably one of the best.

Just not the man she needed. Not a man she could get along with for the rest of her life. But maybe they could stop fighting and be friends.

"You okay?" JC brushed his thumb across her cheek. She barely felt his touch, her jaw struggling to hold in the chatter that kept shaking her body. "Does anything hurt?"

She shook her head. *Only my pride. And sense of self. I used to believe I was a nice person.*

But the way she'd treated JC the night before, she knew she had some growing up to do before she had her baby. It wasn't right to lash out at someone just because he made her experience things she didn't feel strong enough to handle.

He tucked a hot water bottle from the kitchen behind her back and took the chair beside her. The heat of the bottle felt amazing. He leaned over to brush her cheek again, wiping away tears.

"I'm not really crying."

He lifted the cup of warm tea, but pulled it back when she reached for it. "No." He tucked the blanket tighter around her body, then held the mug to her lips, refusing to allow her to help. "Sip."

The warm liquid felt good and she sipped more, watching JC. Eventually, he shifted closer and lifted her feet from under the blankets, tucking them under his sweater as he had with her hands. He sucked in a sharp breath when her soles hit his abs, but kept her feet against him, wrapping his palms around the tops. "Do you feel this?"

She nodded. "My feet are okay."

"They're pretty cold, too. We've got to start slow—you might have hypothermia. And if you do, you'll soon feel something, although I doubt it will be pleasant. Tingling, pain. It's all normal."

Something fun to look forward to.

They sat in silence, his heat seeping into her, slowly reducing her shivers. JC was careful to warm her without infringing on her space, and she half wondered if he was afraid to use skin-to-skin contact. Not that she blamed him. She hadn't been all that nice to him, going as far as to imply that he was gay. She didn't know what it was about the designs and why she couldn't acknowledge that he may have made them. She supposed it would mean that she'd have to reassess her old perception of him—a thought that scared her even more than the attraction that simmered between them.

In due time he pushed her chair aside, as well as his own, and pulled the couch a few feet from the fire. He helped her move to the cushions, the new spot chilly in comparison to the old one even though it was just as close to the flames.

"Do you still need to use the washroom?"

"Can I warm up more first?" The thought of having to move away from the fire was less than appealing.

"You sure?"

She nodded. She could hold it a little while longer.

JC yanked his sweater and T-shirt over his head in one fluid move, leaving him bare chested. Her breath caught in her throat at the sight of all those toned muscles rippling as he created a nest of blankets around them on the couch. What was he going to do? Press his advantage and go for skin-on-skin? She didn't know whether to feel shy, be ticked off or enthusiastically remove her lingerie in anticipation.

Instead, he simply tucked her into a ball, pulling her shins against his chest, slowly providing more heat as she huddled in the nest of

blankets.

"Did you really make those things that Tigger was looking at on your phone?"

"Even the candy-apple red ones. Are they any good?"

Simone paused, unsure. If she complimented him would it go to his head? Would he become arrogant and ignore her opinion because he felt as though he was already at the top of his game and just needed to be discovered?

"Be honest," he said, displaying a genuine need to know.

"I'm fairly certain you already know they're exquisite." She pulled the blanket up under her chin, edging her butt closer to him so she could steal more of his heat. This going-slow thing sucked. She wanted to press the length of her spine against his chest and have him wrap himself around her.

"Do I have talent?"

When she seemed reluctant to answer, he added quickly, "Be a straight shooter. I need to know."

"And what if what I say goes to your head?"

"Everything goes to my head—don't you know my type?" While his tone had a sharpness as though he'd been insulted, she knew he was joking, trying to break down the barriers they'd erected over the past day. Despite herself she laughed. The man was a piece of work. So persistent and determined. Traits she definitely admired and valued. Traits that had gotten her into hot water a time or two herself, when she'd let hers shine.

"You have some serious talent. You could go far with this. But " She paused, making sure he was still listening. "It's going to take a lot of hard work and you're going to need to fine-tune your color sense and possibly a few other things. Competition is fierce and there's no room for 'good enough'."

He nodded, his expression serious.

"What?" she asked softly.

"How do you know if you're ready?"

"You jump in."

"No testing the waters?" He gave her a quick look of assessment, his forehead tight.

She shrugged.

"Nothing about you is quiet or understated, is it?" he asked, his voice low, almost admiring. "Bold and beautiful."

She felt heat flood to her face. He'd just called her beautiful. And meant it. And not in a "you're beautiful and I want to bed you" kind of way, but in a cherishing one. That was new. She liked it.

"Thank you," she said, unable to meet his steady gaze. "But I believe you mean strident and overly confident. Maybe even pushy and annoyingly outspoken, as well."

He laughed quietly so as not to wake the others. "Yeah, that, too." But instead of raising her hackles, she found herself laughing along with him. What was it about this man that allowed him to slip under her barbed wire, anyway? It was as though they understood each other on some level she hadn't even known was possible. Made a connection.

"So?" he asked, when the rich sound of his laughter died away. "You really think I could do something with this?"

"Yeah, but it doesn't quite fit your image."

"Tell me about it," he said with a groan.

She leaned forward, pressing into him more fully when a cold breeze seeped under the blankets, making her shiver. "I think your image might be inaccurate."

They shared a look, and with a tremor of anticipation she realized she was about to ask him to warm her, skin to skin.

Simone woke up clinging to a bare chest. She pulled her cheek off the warm skin to a magnificent view of a sleeping man. Ho, ho, ho. Merry Christmas to her.

She closed her eyes again, at war with herself. She loved how JC felt, protecting her with his body's heat. But she hated the way she wanted to run her hands down his tautly muscled skin. Her fingers wrapped themselves in the tuft of chest hair between his pectorals. It was a slightly darker color than his head of hair, more similar to his jaw's stubble. She shuddered, still slightly chilled from her stupid outhouse adventure. She'd ended up relieving herself in an old plastic tub, JC disposing of it over the veranda's edge for her so she wouldn't have to go out in the cold. Humiliating and disempowering didn't even begin to touch what a blow that had been to her identity as an independent, self-reliant island unto herself.

But the worst blow was that she didn't even care that she wasn't this big, tough, do-it-herself dynamo at the moment. She wanted to just cuddle up and let him deal with everything.

Which meant she must have frozen her brain under that tree. How stupid was she, not testing the drift's edge while tying her yarn to the branch? One minute she'd been standing there, the next moment she

was slipping under the spruce, snowshoe folded under her, dug into the snow, trapped.

What would've happened if JC hadn't woken up and come looking for her? Still, she couldn't imagine a world where she'd willingly wake up JC in the middle of the night so he could accompany her to the little girls' room.

A large hand covered hers, holding it still.

"That hair is attached, you know."

"Sorry." Her fingers flew open, releasing their grip.

"Are you warm enough?" JC's voice was rich, deep, and gravelly in all the right ways, sending tingles down her spine. She leaned away before realizing that her lacy bra was rather see-through. She pulled the blankets around her, leaving JC's rock-hard chest exposed.

Her flesh felt chilled without his body pressed against hers.

JC sat up, tucking the blanket more fully around her shoulders, allowing her to take it with her as she climbed off the couch and practically into the fireplace. He must have melted, sleeping that close to the flames.

She reached for her phone, touching a button to wake it. She had to take her morning shot in an hour and ten minutes. Not much time. Plus she'd slept in. Everyone had. The cottage was eerily silent without the howling wind rattling the place.

"Merry Christmas," JC said. He was stretched out on the couch, his hands tucked behind his head, watching her, his chest tempting and bare.

Was he really a good guy? He'd been so kind last night. A thoughtful, caring gentleman who had allowed her a semblance of dignity while taking charge in a way that didn't leave her bristling. He hadn't made her feel weak or powerless—at least not intentionally.

Anything that made her feel less strong was because she had been fighting imaginary battles with a very decent man.

His words echoed in her head: *It doesn't make you any less of a powerful woman to accept help when you need it. It's a sign of strength.*

Maybe it wasn't so much about it being a sign of strength as accepting help from the right person. A person whose hand up would give her strength, not diminish it.

"Merry Christmas," she said softly.

"What time is it?"

"Time to go." She pulled on her dried jeans, keeping the blanket hunched over her shoulders for privacy. Next, she grabbed her sweater from where it was laid out on a chair. She dropped the blanket, back turned, not caring what he saw, since he'd already seen enough. She pulled her hair out of the sweater and let it hang down her back, adding another layer of warmth.

Fully dressed, Simone brushed aside the curtains on the French doors and peeked out. It was calm and still. A beautiful white Christmas, and it wouldn't be long until the helicopters came.

She felt the warmth of JC standing behind her. She resisted the urge to cave against him, to suck in his strength and heat. Turning, she found him much too close. She had to get home and create a baby. She had plans, plans that didn't involve him. He was wonderful, but he wasn't The One.

She raised her hands to create a barrier, her heart skipping and racing unsteadily as her fingertips grazed the smooth skin of his pectorals. He had a six-pack and a teasing line of muscle that slipped under the waist of his low-slung jeans. His body represented heady doses of power and sexy masculinity, and she needed to tell her hormones to stand down.

JC ran a thumb over the edge of her jaw, sending shivers straight to her core. "How are you feeling this morning?"

"Good. Fine."

She pulled away, feeling as though she'd bared too much to him last night. Too much skin, too much longing. Too much vulnerability. Too much everything. She needed space to think. He was going to ask her to feel things about him, before turning around and deciding, too late, that she really wasn't his type, after all.

"I guess you're off the hook," she said, feeling a foreign pang of disappointment. She went to duck past him, but he reached out and lightly grabbed her by the waist, holding her, making her desperate for his touch.

"I'll be down on the ice digging out my machine. But I won't leave Nymph Island until I know you're safely on your way and this damsel in distress is no longer in need of my rescue services."

Simone straightened as if someone had goosed her. *Damsel in distress.*

She'd allowed his help and now he was throwing it in her face. She had known it was coming; why had she let her guard down? She braced herself, waiting for the next blow. Waiting for him to prove without a doubt that her first gut reaction in regards to who he really was had been correct.

"You're still having that baby?" he asked.

"Does it matter?"

"You should wait."

"Why?" she asked, chin raised. If he was suggesting she wait and have a baby with him, he'd lost his mind. They'd spent most of the past twelve hours butting heads.

"Because. You might regret it."

"You think I don't know my own mind?" Her head cocked dangerously to the side.

"I think you do," he said carefully.

"You don't like single moms? You have a problem with them?"

"I think we've proved I'm a lot more open-minded and accepting than you are, Simone Pascal." His voice was soft, his face close to hers, fencing her in, not allowing her to lash out and escape.

"Yeah? Then how come you can't let me be? Why are you always in my thoughts? Why are you always making me doubt my path? Why are you always there to see me fail? I'm strong."

"I know," he said softly.

"I'm strong! I'm independent. I don't die in house fires. I can take care of myself, but I can accept help, too. I'm not who you think I am. I'm more than that."

JC yanked her close, kissing her so deeply that she had to cling to him to keep from falling to the floor. Their anger was like fireworks, electrifying and exploding around them. She curled into him, shaping herself to his build, wrapping her arms around his neck, hating the way she absolutely loved kissing him, hating the way she wanted all of him. Every bit, from his attention and admiration to his heart.

No. Not JC. She couldn't fall for a man like him.

"I am not a damsel in distress," she said, breaking away.

"Don't have a baby."

"Don't tell me what to do." If they got together, this would be how it went—him in the driver's seat. JC determining the who-what-where-when-why-and-how of her future, even when it pertained to her own body.

"It's a mistake. You don't know what you're doing."

"Oh, I think I do!"

"He's a stranger."

"That's the point. A stranger can't—" She cut herself short, not adding *hurt me, be disappointed in me, expect things I can't deliver*.

"What if he wants the rights to his child?"

"He's signed a consent."

"Laws change. He's a stranger and could carry—"

"He's been screened. Psychologically. Diseases. The works. That's a lot more than I get dating some guy I pick up in a musty old cottage." She dared herself to look down her nose at him, dismissing him even though it hurt every cell in her body to do so.

Men like JC couldn't give her what she needed. She knew that. She'd learned that lesson already and wasn't going to test the theory once again by breaking her own rules. Not for him. Not for anyone. She couldn't trust him and she couldn't trust herself around him. If she wanted to carry her own baby she needed to get JC out of her life—pronto.

"What if your child has a hundred siblings from this guy? Do you know what kind of mess you're inviting into your life? There are other ways. You're an amazing woman, and I know how much your independence means to you, but sometimes you have to consider the things you may have overlooked. You have to contemplate the people you never thought of."

He could *not* be asking her to consider him. He just couldn't.

Don't even go there, she warned herself silently. Stay angry. Don't let him see you cry. Don't let him open the cracks. Don't even think about how serious he might appear at the moment—he's just bothered that the chase is over and he didn't win.

"Yeah, well, nobody has stepped up." She flung herself away from him as other occupants of the cottage awakened due to their loud exchange. "And quit bossing me around. Just because you got to play hero " She shook her head, not trusting her voice.

"Simone—"

"No." She turned away, then whirled back to face him. "I don't want you and I don't need you. So just step out of my life."

"Simone—"

"I thought you were different. I was obviously kidding myself because you kiss like you mean it. Like you're someone I could get close to. A man I could trust."

"I am someone you can trust. Have I ever hurt you?"

"I need someone who will support me without telling me what to do with my life."

"I'm not looking to run your life, just stride along beside you. Be your copilot."

"I don't *need* a copilot! Just because you make me want you—I mean want you to warm me up with your hot body—" She let out a frustrated sound. "You *know* what I mean." She pressed her fingers to her temples. What was it about this man? "I don't choose you." Her voice was wobbly, tears threatening to fall. She needed to run. And there was nowhere to go. No escape.

She pulled herself together, reassembling her protective walls, chin raised once again.

"You might as well leave now, as I won't be requiring your services," she said coolly, stopping herself from adding *ever*. "Have a nice Christmas."

She turned her back and began straightening the living room, ignoring the Summers who were peeking out of their bedrooms with concern. Simone, for the sake of the future she had planned for herself, hoped she never saw JC again.



THAT WOMAN WAS colder than last night's blizzard. How had he allowed himself to believe she wasn't going to turn against him, and that her softening last night had been her letting him into her ice palace to help melt the walls that surrounded her heart?

He was stupider than a sack of hammers.

Josh stomped over the crusted drifts of snow between the cottage and his snowmobile down at the lake. She couldn't even take a joke, she was wound so tight. He'd been teasing, trying to compliment her and let her know that he believed she was strong—stronger than he'd thought—for allowing him to take charge last night. He'd known how difficult it must have been for her to set her pride aside, and he'd been stupid to think it had something to do with him.

He'd been a fool to believe that the moments they'd shared under the blanket had changed things. He'd felt something when he'd held her tight against his bare chest. A connection. And she'd felt it, too, but what did she do with it? Turned around and shoved it in his face.

He'd actually begun to think they might have something real, something he could take with him into his new life adventures. Someone who would have his back and actually understand him and all his messed up and confused ways. Someone who could see through all that and love him just the same.

What a fool. The worst of it was he'd known better, but had still plowed ahead, wanting to be wrong about his assumptions.

She was still the same old Simone his wiser, younger self had avoided in the high school hallways. She didn't do vulnerable and didn't like men who had a soft side or exposed her own. She was cool, calculating, and always on top.

She wouldn't change—not even for him.

He reached the lake and cursed. There were a multitude of drifts by the boathouse, but no snowmobile in sight. Which meant one of the

mounds was his machine. He broke a branch off a nearby tree and used it as a probe, poking snowdrifts until he came across something unyielding. He began digging, his anger fueling him to make short work of the job.

As he brushed snow away from the controls, sounds of the Summer family came closer. He glanced up to see a group of them chatting and laughing, Simone trailing behind, her mittened hands shoved deep into her coat. She looked cold and miserable.

Good.

He turned back to his machine. All he had to do was start it, let it warm up, and he would be out of her life forever.

Not quite soon enough, but it would have to do.

He sat on the frozen seat and turned the key. The machine groaned and shuddered, indicating something was definitely wrong. He flipped open the hood to find that the wind had completely packed the engine with snow, likely part of its starting issue. He sighed.

Canada.

He sighed again.

Winter.

Why didn't he move south?

He began clearing snow from the engine compartment. The last thing he wanted was to be rescued and have to share a seat on a helicopter with Simone.

The men started clearing a spot on the ice for the helicopter to land, their cheery laughter snaking its way to Josh like a slap across the face. They hadn't been stupid enough to fall for an ice queen—and that's what he'd done last night fallen.

He knew better than to do that.

"Won't start?" It was Evander, standing over the machine, looking impossibly large. Josh nodded, feeling defeated. Evander tried a few

things, but the engine still didn't catch. "Too cold, maybe?"

"Yeah. I think so." His mother would be disappointed he wouldn't be able to take her for their annual Christmas Day snowmobile ride, but she'd survive. The frigid overnight temperatures likely had left the oil as thick as fudge, which meant his snowmobile wasn't going to start without a significant heat-infused intervention. One he couldn't provide out here.

"There's an extra seat in the helicopter. We'll come get this later." Evander placed a hand on Josh's shoulder, directing him farther onto the ice. The sound of helicopters grew in the distance as they made their way to the gathered group. Josh hoped the choppers landed quickly, as he was in no mood to chat.

Maya came hurrying through the thigh-deep snow from the woods as though afraid she'd be left behind. "I just threw up!" she announced.

"I told you we should have packed the pasta salads in more snow. Now she's got food poisoning," Melanie said, turning to Hailey. She located Tigger. "How are you feeling, little monkey? Are you okay?"

Hailey was tapping the back of her hand against Melanie's arm, studying her in a way that made Josh turn to study her as well. She didn't look pale. In fact, she was glowing, beaming at her sisters.

Uh-oh.

Josh quickly checked Simone, who, judging by her expression, had yet to clue in as to why Maya had been ill.

Hailey squealed, arms extended as she trundled through the snow to hug her sister. "This is so exciting! We're going to have cousins the same age!" She hugged her sister even tighter. "They'll be in the same class at school. Same with Daphne's baby!"

"Wait, what?" Melanie asked, as Daphne got in on the hug, as well. "You're pregnant?"

Connor paled and Josh reached out to steady him. "Congratulations, man."

Connor gave a jerky nod and blinked twice before a ghost of a smile stretched across his face.

Simone quietly joined the celebrating sisters. She offered congratulations, but Josh could tell she was struggling with the news. He wanted to provide comfort, to let her know that it was okay to feel everything that had to be storming through her—even though it would mean she'd reject him again. A woman like Simone not only deserved a good man in her life, she deserved support, love, and acceptance.

Which was probably why she was choosing to have a baby on her own. Unconditional, uncomplicated, reliable love.

He shook his head, the realization seeming so obvious. But before he could figure out what to say to Simone, Evander called to the men, "Are we all clear?"

They'd knocked down the few drifts on a patch of ice the wind had blown fairly clear, to make a semi-decent landing pad.

The guys who had gathered around to offer the newlyweds their congratulations nodded.

"We should be good," Finian said.

Evander waved in the first helicopter, like the former navy commander he was. Then he turned away from the incoming machine, arms out, shepherding the women closer to the boathouse, encouraging them to face away from the soon-to-be-driving snow as the rotors kicked up the grains and whipped them their way. "Get low."

One of the choppers landed, while the other hovered nearby, waiting its turn on the impromptu landing pad.

Josh reached down to shelter Tigger, then picked her up, bundling her across the snow to the waiting rescue party, protecting her the best

he could from the kicked-up snow. He placed her inside as Evander helped usher the women in.

Josh caught Simone's eye. She looked sad, tired, and rejected, which was odd. He was the one who'd been rejected. Soundly.

He shook his head, knowing he had to stop thinking about her, stop wasting his time on a done deal. She would never allow him to help in the ways she needed the most.

Evander closed the doors and gave them a pat, providing the pilot a thumbs-up through the glass. Josh caught one last glimpse of Simone fidgeting with her mitts, her dark eyes cast down. He reached for the door, but Evander pulled him away, the machine already lifting off.

It was time to move on. Without her.

Simone had been bustling around her mother's kitchen all afternoon and their Christmas dinner was finally ready. Her mom hadn't tossed her cookies since the night before, but she was still pale, clearly worn-out from her battle with the bug, and dozed on the couch with a blanket tucked under her chin.

Simone cupped the dish of mashed potatoes, loving the way the heat seared her palms and radiated up her wrists. Since being stuck under the spruce tree over twelve hours ago she had been craving heat. Lots of it. She was wearing layers of sweaters and had spent extra time checking the turkey just so she could allow the oven's heat to wash over her. She still couldn't get warm, but she knew it wasn't a physical affliction as much as missing JC's steady presence. Not just his body's warmth, but the fire in his eyes when he battled with her and the way he didn't allow her to walk over him. Quite plainly, and as annoying as it was, she missed the way she heated up in his presence.

But she didn't need him and he'd only mess with her plans, while breaking her heart.

She poked the steamed carrots with a fork, testing if they were done, her mind drifting to the firmness of JC's chest. The way his hand had

enveloped hers when she'd been tugging on his chest hair, his body snuggled up just right beneath her. She flung the fork onto the counter.

Josh had managed to get under her skin—and good. She'd walked in the door right on time to take her hormone shot, but instead of injecting it, she had gently laid the needle back in its case, unused.

She still didn't know why, only that it felt like a betrayal to carry a baby that belonged to another man.

Which was messed up.

No, it was beyond messed up.

It was crazy. Plain and simple. A baby was her plan. Possibly her last chance. She had the father chosen. The appointment for insemination was booked. She'd rearranged her *entire life* around this appointment and now she couldn't go through with it because of a stupid kiss in a stupid enchanted cottage.

She'd wanted to be swept away by someone on Nymph Island for so long that she was tricking herself into believing that what she'd felt with JC had been real.

She knew better than that. Just because he seemed to know when she needed someone to give a little push back, or turn her toward the truth so she couldn't avoid it, didn't mean he was the answer.

But right now, no matter what the pros and cons list kept telling her, a baby didn't feel like an answer, either. A child wasn't going to make her feel any less alone.

Thinking about JC was a colossal waste of time. He wasn't going to give her a second chance. He wasn't going to come running to sweep her off her feet and have a family with her. She was too high maintenance. Too hot and cold. It hadn't been fair how she'd turned his gentle ribbing into a barb, then lashed out at him and stormed off without even a goodbye.

She removed her apron and tossed it aside, bracing herself against the counter, head hung low. She should have taken the hormone. She could still take it—it would just be much later than usual.

Grabbing a blank notepad out of her mother's junk drawer, she started marking the paper with vicious lines, trying to draw through her frustration, seeking that quiet place within her where she usually found answers.

Realizing she was refining the designs she'd thrown in the fire—the very designs she'd promised herself she'd abandon in order to focus on her new life—she flung the pages across the counter.

No more. No more ideas. She needed to focus on what was coming up on her horizon. Her plan. No more split focus, no more chickening out. She'd take the next hormone shot in the morning and hope it worked this month.

She opened the email app on her phone, looking for items to delete without reading. Coupons, spam, jokes. Gone, gone, gone. She didn't want to think right now.

Why had it felt so good to be rescued by Josh? Why had she loved being warmed by his body? She'd known he'd only been joking that morning about her being a damsel in distress, but nevertheless he'd struck upon that hidden cave inside her where she kept all her fears locked away.

Her phone rang in her hand and she nearly dropped it. It was her father. Were they supposed to talk again today? Twice in twenty-four hours seemed like a lot.

"Merry Christmas," she said crisply.

"Merry Christmas," he replied.

Silence stretched over the phone. Apparently that was all he had to say.

She bet this would be just like any relationship she had with JC, because he was just like her father. The pressure to do better, to change, to impress him, to do a song and dance every time she wanted his affection. She needed to be self-sufficient and never need him. Ever. When she'd needed her first business loan she'd gone to the bank, not her dad. And yet and yet last night she'd kept turning to JC. She'd had other options and she hadn't chosen them. Why?

Because JC wasn't her father, was he? She didn't have to be featured in the *Financial Times* to get a get a crumb of approval. JC thought she was strong just the way she was.

"Do you have hobbies?" she asked her father.

"You know I like to play golf."

"I mean, ones I don't know about. Maybe crafts, puzzles, model building? Some men build stuff."

"Are you okay?"

"Do you?" She was holding her breath, waiting.

"It's a waste of time and money. Real men build real things. Useful things." There was a slight pause before he asked, "You didn't get me any of that crap, did you?"

"No. I sent you a gift card."

"Right. I saw that. How's your business?"

No thank-you? JC would have thanked her. She was certain of it.

"I sold it."

"You what?" Thomas sounded incredulous and she secretly enjoyed the feeling of having pushed him off center.

"Don't worry, I got a good deal," she said drily.

"The whole thing?"

"Everything." A feeling of panic welled up inside her. She'd sold her livelihood and wasn't having a baby.

Wait. She wasn't having a baby? Since when? And what was she doing if she wasn't having a baby?

"Do you have something new on the line?" her father asked.

"No." Her voice sounded small in her own ears.

She could do something with the plus-sized teen designs. She could help JC—be his consultant. She wasn't completely gone, was she? She still had a chance to reclaim her old identity. She wanted that, right?

"You're pregnant, aren't you?" her father accused. "What's his name?"

"I'm not pregnant."

"Then who has you acting like a fool?"

She *was* a fool, but only because she'd let JC get away. She'd hurt him, then pushed him away, rejected him before he could reject her.

"I'm tired of working so hard for nothing."

"Those who work hard get ahead. Welcome to life."

"And then what? I'm ahead. I'm not happy. I don't have a family. A boyfriend. I have everything but I have nothing."

"And a boyfriend is supposed to fix that? You're being irrational."

"Maybe my whole life is irrational. I made money thinking I'd finally get your approval, and guess what? I didn't get it. All I got was more pressure to keep working and earn more, get more accolades. And I did. And so what? I'm still the same person. I still have the same problems. Only now I'm tired, I'm alone and I'm not happy." Her voice was wobbling and she despised the way she was breaking down.

JC had seen her unhappiness. Why couldn't her father?

She really needed to stop comparing the two.

"Maybe you weren't meant for this."

"Are you suggesting I'm not strong enough? Because I am. Nobody else I know has gotten as far as I have in such a short period of time."

JC had told her she was strong. That asking for help was a sign of strength. She'd let him help her and the world hadn't caved in on her.

She swiped at the tears streaming down her face.

"Simone, listen carefully."

"Why?" She sounded bitter, resentful. "I listened to you my entire life and here I am."

"Yes. Here you are. With enough money to change your life. With the knowledge that you went out and took the business world head-on and won."

She drew in a deep, unsteady breath. Stupid logic. Stupid issues making his words sound like praise and approval.

She forced herself to continue listening and not hang up the phone. He was going to get her all wound up and rushing off in the wrong direction again, wasn't he?

"You're the strongest person I have ever met. I pushed you so hard because I believe you can change the world."

Her designs. Those stupid designs. They just wouldn't leave her alone.

Because they were game changers, that's why.

Wait. Her mind rewind his words. He thought she was the strongest person he'd ever met? How did that happen?

"You can get anywhere you want," he continued. "You can have all those things nobody else can achieve."

She pulled her earlier sketch closer, assessing it for potential, allowing herself the freedom to feel the fizz of excitement as more ideas came to her. She paused, then flipped to a new sheet, allowing her pencil to fly, uninhibited by her internal business mind, which demanded that the designs reach a wide audience, be simple and cheap to make, and be on trend.

She had something with this line of designs—her originals. She really did. Something bigger than she'd had yet.

But did she still have the energy to make them happen?

Did she even want to? What if they took over her life? What if this was the wrong path for her? She didn't want to spend the next decade chasing her own tail right back to where she was in this moment.

"You can't give up now."

"Yes, I can."

"You're destined for great things."

Here comes the pressure, in three, two, one

"But maybe I pushed you too hard."

Simone's mouth opened and closed, she was so shocked by his admission.

"And you're right. You have achieved great things. I haven't shown it well, but I *am* very proud of you. You solve problems and you don't cause them. But I still don't understand why you're giving it all away."

She considered making a joke about money talking, but settled on the truth. "I'm tired. It's fun and I love making designs, but the pressure to make something super huge out of every idea is onerous. It's taken away the joy." She lowered her voice. "I want to take some time off, but I feel guilty and like I can't because of the way you treat me." She pulled in a deep breath, afraid to say everything she felt, but knowing this might be her only chance. "I need you to not pressure me. It's not healthy and I push myself hard enough as it is."

"Okay," he said simply. No pause. No anger. Just acceptance.

"Okay?"

That was it? After decades of him pushing her to work harder, longer, smarter than everyone else, he was letting her off the hook? It was like gearing up for a hurricane, battening down the hatches, struggling against the gale force winds, only to have the storm come all the way up your walk to drop dead in your doorway.

"As much as I want success for you..." Her father paused, and Simone had the feeling he might be struggling with emotion, something

she had never witnessed before. “I want your happiness more. Do what will make you happy. Just tell me what does and I promise I will do my best not to interfere or push you in the wrong direction.”

“But I don’t *know* what makes me happy,” she said, her voice wobbling once again.

“Then go find it. Push down every door and look behind it. When you find it, seize it. You have time, health, youth, and now wealth on your side. Get out there. Find it. Own it.”

Brushing the tears from her cheeks, Simone thanked her father in a whisper.

“I’ll always be proud. There is nothing you can do that will ever take that away. Now get off the phone and go figure out your life.” There was a hesitation as though he’d almost hung up, then figured he should add, “Merry Christmas.”

When he hung up for real, Simone laughed, sniffing back tears.

Her father might actually be a pretty good guy, and he might even make a decent father for her upcoming sibling.

Which meant Simone probably had to rethink everything.

She looked around the kitchen at the cooling dishes of food, and peeked into the living room, where her mother was gently snoring. Simone folded the dress design, tucking it into her purse. Maybe she didn’t need to reject her designer side entirely. Maybe she could sketch for fun, see where it took her—if anywhere. She had time to take a break, connections if she didn’t want to produce and sell the designs herself.

A baby could wait, couldn’t it? Maybe her uterus would come out unscathed when they removed the cysts and ovaries, and she’d still be able to carry her own baby. Maybe a surrogate would be okay, too.

Out of habit, she opened her email again.

How was she going to find happiness, though? How was she going to break the habit of working only on ideas that would lead directly to prestige and success? How was she going to let herself be a loose ribbon in the wind? An artist. A designer. Nothing on the go but a license to explore her own creativity, her own life.

Her breath caught in her throat, the possibilities overwhelming.

Read more email. She needed more distractions.

An incoming message caught her attention. One of the MOM members was looking for someone to collaborate on hair accessories for their toddler line.

The project had JC's name all over it.



SIMONE WAS CRYING OVER AN EMAIL. Outright bawling. Ugly crying at its finest.

She ran to the upstairs bathroom and locked herself inside, smothering her face in a towel in hopes that her mother wouldn't overhear her self-pity fest of sorrows and confusion.

Her sobs racked her body, her ribs aching with the force of her release.

Her tears turned to hiccupy laughs as she fell on her butt, stunned by the realization that she had been lashing out at JC's creations because she was jealous. He had the freedom to create whatever he wanted without thought to market, cost, or trends. Anytime he wanted to he could sit down with his supplies and let his heart lead him. He was living his life and taking the risk, and making something that he obviously loved to create.

The ridiculousness of a multimillionaire, well-known designer being jealous of a man with a boxful of ribbons and a glue gun was so inane

she had to hold her sides against the giggles that overtook her. Her lashing out at him hadn't entirely been about her feelings or insecurities, it had been about *work*.

And her getting off track with her life and dreams hadn't entirely been her father's fault. It had been hers. It was her life, her call to make.

Simone stood suddenly, dropping the tear-soaked towel in the tub.

Her new life plan came to her in a flash. It was so simple. So elementary. She was going to follow her heart. She was going to play and discover what truly made her happy.

She'd pull a JC and follow her heart and talents. That man was as genuine and real as the pope, but all she'd allowed herself to see was the alpha side she so despised because it reminded her of her father.

She'd blamed that aspect of Thomas's personality for pushing her with unrelenting persistence, driving her to do better, climb higher—and further away from her own dreams. But in the end, it wasn't just him at fault, because she possessed that trait, too. And it had caused her to push away JC, caused her to do damage.

She opened the bathroom door, mind made up. It was time to find JC. Time to repair things.



"YOU HAD US SO SCARED," Josh's mother said as she cleared the table from their Christmas dinner. Their palpable relief when he'd shown up via helicopter that morning had left him feeling humbled as well as loved.

Not like with Simone. He doubted she would have shed a tear if he'd fallen through the ice or if his chopper had gone down.

They hadn't spoken or even made eye contact when their flights had landed near town, depositing them by the group's vehicles parked in a frozen marina. They'd simply gone their own ways, Evander and Tigger

giving him a ride the rest of the way home in Evander's truck so the sisters could drop Daphne off first to ensure Santa arrived before the little girl.

"I know, Mom. I'm sorry," Josh told her.

"We're glad you're all right, son," his stepfather said, giving his shoulder a squeeze.

"Me, too. I'm sorry I worried you," he said again.

He began washing dishes with Polly in the kitchen while their parents moved to the living room to curl up in front of the fire, pausing to kiss under the mistletoe along the way.

"How will you get your snowmobile back?" Polly asked.

"I'll probably drive out with my truck in a day or two. If I let this cold snap pass it might start on its own."

He dried the gravy boat, thinking about the island. About Simone. She'd admitted he had talent. Potential.

He leaned against the counter, facing his sister. "What would you say if I told you I make frilly hair accessories for little girls?"

Polly began laughing. She hunched over the sink, her hands limp in the sudsy dishwater. She caught sight of his expression and straightened suddenly. "You're serious?"

"Sadly."

"Is this why you've been acting strange lately?"

"Probably."

"Okay. But I don't get it. This is a secret?" She handed him a large casserole dish to dry.

"There's still stuffing on it," he complained, handing it back.

She stuck out her tongue and plunged the dish into the warm water again, swishing it about before handing it back. "You know, a good drier would have taken care of that."

He licked the spot where the stuffing had been stuck. "Like that?" He rubbed the tea towel over the spot, drying his saliva.

Polly's nose scrunched up and she flicked water at him from her fingers. "Get a new towel and give me that dish." She made grumbling noises as she rewashed it yet again. "You're such a brother."

He smirked.

"Did you get a new tea towel?"

He balled up the used one, chucking it at Polly, who ducked, her perfect hair missing the chance to get mussed up. He grabbed a new towel from a nearby drawer.

"And don't you think I didn't notice you changing the subject with your shenanigans." She gave a stern look. "Why is your hobby a secret?"

A hobby. That's all it was, but he wanted it to be so much more. He wanted it to become his identity. Something he could be proud of. As gutsy and scary as that was.

He let out a slow breath, his shoulders lowering in increments. If he wanted to take his "hobby" up a notch, he needed to talk to Simone. Which was, oh, let's see the last thing on his list of things he wanted to do. Ever.

"You know who you need to talk to?" Polly asked, shaking a soapy finger at him.

He cringed. *Don't say it.*

"Simone."

She'd said it.

"She doesn't believe I'm capable of creating the accessories. Or if she does, she thinks I'm gay."

Polly sputtered, choking with laughter. "And what would ever give her that impression?"

"The items are rather feminine."

"Show me." She held out her hand as though he could somehow procure one.

"My phone died, but I think the burn unit may have photos on their website."

"The burn unit? In Toronto, where you volunteer?"

"Yep."

"Interesting." Polly assessed him as she dried her hands on her woolen slacks, an uncharacteristic gesture. She reached into her nearby purse, pulling out her phone.

"How are things with you and the ex?" Josh asked, as she brought up the web page.

She lifted one shoulder noncommittally. "I want money. He doesn't want to part with it. Hate is an ever-expanding emotion. That about sums it up."

Her long fingernails slid across her phone screen, tapping intermittently. Her head tipped to the right and her expression softened, a smile tugging at her lips.

"These?" She held out her phone for him to see. He nodded. "They're beautiful. And obviously much loved." The expression on her face reassured him. She saw the beauty in the creations as well as how they brightened the days of small children. A win-win. But he wanted to do more. He wanted to reach further, touch more lives.

Polly put down the phone, hands on her hips. "You need to talk to Simone. For real. These are amazing."

"Thank you."

"Do it," she insisted.

"Right now?" he joked.

"Just tell her I sent you and she'll help you until the world ends."

He was pretty sure he'd discovered the loophole on that claim.

"She's connected," Polly continued, turning back to the dishes. "She'll know everyone you need to meet in order to make this a go. Seriously. Talk to her."

"Right now?" he repeated, still joking.

"Well, she's probably having supper with her mother."

"Her parents are split up?" he asked, trying to disguise his interest by polishing the blade of his mother's old carving knife. It had been a wedding gift from her first marriage, to Patrick/Patricia, and it always made Josh think about those confusing times when his mom had tried to support her partner the best way she could, but finally had had to go separate ways when Josh's father went through his metamorphosis into womanhood.

"They split up when she was a teenager. A real piece of work. Always pushing her to do more and work harder. I remember her winning an award for top marks and he asked her why she hadn't got 100 percent. The look on her face " Polly paused, her mouth pinched with anger on Simone's behalf. "I'll never forget it. She was crushed. But the next year, what did she do? Got 100 in math."

"Does she see him much these days?" Josh felt as though he was close to something.

"I think they talk on the phone."

He waited for her to continue unloading her peeves about Simone's father. Josh's patience was rewarded when his sister turned, still ticked off. "Nothing was ever good enough and he made her work harder and longer than everyone else. It's no surprise she's as successful as she is, but I don't think it came without a price. She keeps telling me she wants an understanding, touchy-feely guy, because she can't keep a man longer than about five seconds." Polly laughed. "But a woman like her? She needs someone who's determined and can stand up to her, or she'll walk all over him without even realizing it."

Josh nodded in agreement.

"She just needs someone awesome, you know? A guy who will support her and encourage her without pushing so hard or taking over with his own ideas. There has to be a point where enough is enough, and good enough is good enough. Everyone wants to feel as though they've made their parents proud. I don't know if she's ever felt that."

So good ol' Simone was fighting ghosts, not him. Josh had sensed that, but had still allowed himself and his own ego to get in the way.

She was strong, but afraid of failing. She feared not being enough for those who cared about her, hence her practice of always giving the Summer sisters dresses, which must take inordinate amounts of time. She had a father who pushed her to do well in her field and what had she done? Sold it all.

That woman was about as lost as a blind man reading a paper map.

It was time someone told Simone Pascal that she was special, amazing and most of all, enough. Enough for him.

As long as she thought he was enough for her.

Polly wiped down the counter, then faced him. "So? Are you going to talk to her and get some advice?"

"Yeah." Josh reached for his coat. "And I think I'll do that right now."

Josh never did find Simone on Christmas Day. Nobody had come to the door at her mother's house or her own. By then, out of leads, he'd lost the steam behind his mission to convince Simone he was her man, and had ended up going home.

That had been three days ago, and he was feeling more and more miserable with each hour that went by and he hadn't figured out an amazing "we're meant to be together" speech that would knock down her walls so she could fall into his arms once and for all.

Josh pulled into the grocery store parking lot, having spent the entire afternoon bouncing through Lake Rosseau's drifts. He'd reclaimed his snowmobile from Nymph Island, winching the dead machine up onto his truck. He was hungry and ready to indulge in a hot barbecue chicken, potato salad, and a couple beers in front of tonight's hockey game with his favorite teams, the Boston Bruins and Toronto Maple Leafs.

He would not spend the night thinking about his projects.

And definitely not thinking about Simone.

Not tonight.

Parking toward the back of the lot, he trudged through the couple inches of wet, heavy snow that had fallen during the day. Shoppers were struggling, the snow-covered asphalt causing their carts to become

unwieldy machines. After watching a woman in a red parka unsuccessfully shove hers through the mess, the front wheels digging in and tipping the cart forward every time she got momentum, he finally gave in and went to help. By the time he reached her, she had come around to the front of the cart, puffing as she tugged it forward.

He hesitated for a second, then picked up the cart and carried it.

He felt entirely unprepared to face Simone despite the baker's dozen speeches he'd rehearsed in his head over the past few days. All he had to do was open his mouth and start talking, but the only thing he could think about was how cute her thighs looked peeking out from under her bulky coat and how pale she seemed, with dark circles smudged under her eyes.

"Where's your car?" he asked.

She pointed across the lot to a black SUV that looked as well kept as the woman who drove it.

"Have a good Christmas? Get home in time?"

"I caught my mom's flu. It's left me wiped out."

He set the groceries inside her vehicle, pausing as he tried to think what to say.

"Thanks," Simone said. "And I wanted to " She glanced up, a battle happening behind her eyes. He took a step closer, not wanting to miss a single word that came out of her plush lips.

"I knew it!" A male voice came from behind them, causing Josh to tense. "I always *knew* it."

Polly's ex-husband, Chuck. Not what he needed right now.

Simone's shoulders drooped and she turned to face the man, but Josh ushered her into her vehicle.

"Go. You don't look like you're in the mood to deal with a severe case of dick-itis today."

A small smile curved her lips and she shot him a grateful look. He pulled her seat belt out of its retractor, handing it to her. She didn't even balk at the help, which buoyed his hopes.

"I always knew it," Chuck said, drawing alongside Josh.

"Have a safe drive home, Simone. If you need anything, I'm always running to the store."

"Okay."

Josh looked back at her in surprise, having expected an argument.

"When Polly told me about your latest venture—your gay little hair accessories—everything finally clicked," Chuck said.

Josh sighed and screwed his eyes shut, summoning the strength to hold back what would surely be an immediate desire to sock the man in the jaw. For some reason, the urge to prove his manhood didn't surface. There was no flare of anger, no flash of need so intense he found himself pummeling Chuck's ugly nose. He opened his eyes to find Simone staring at him.

How about that? He might actually be okay.

Maybe being different didn't always mean pain or anger. And yet he'd seen so many people get hurt for letting their freak flags fly.

Was it because Josh finally didn't care what others thought? That he realized those who attacked were often those who were unfulfilled and weren't following their own true path? Was it because he knew that his new business was truly him and that if he followed it he could make a difference in the lives of others? Did being secure in his sense of self negate everything else?

Maybe this was why Patrick/Patricia never fought back or engaged in self-defense.

"You're just like your dad," Chuck said. Josh winced, feeling the cut of the blow on his father's behalf. "Or whatever he is now that he's had his manhood chopped off."

Josh felt the familiar urge to strike, the desire to protect Patricia flaring inside him. But he kept his back turned, absorbing the support he was silently receiving from Simone of all people. He gave her a tentative, what-can-you-do smile, not sure what was going on in her head.

Her quiet curiosity had turned to the brightness of dawning comprehension.

Great. Just what he needed—her pointing out the fact that he seemed to be having his own gender issues with his new career of choice.

She slid out of the vehicle and into his arms, surprising him. Her lips landed on his, hot with want, kissing him in a way that would turn Sir Elton John straight.

She released Josh, ignoring Chuck. “You’re a good man, Josh Carson.” She tapped his chest almost playfully. “Don’t forget to remind me to discuss that deal with you for your accessories. I think it’s going to become *huge*.” She placed a gloved finger over his lips when he gave her a confused frown, then slipped back into her vehicle, shutting the door and starting the engine.

What deal?

Oh. She was covering for him, building him up, making Chuck squirm with the hint of possible success raining down on Josh.

Simone Pascal had his back.

He grinned. The kiss had been pretty good, too. Although kissing her always felt like the most natural, real thing he’d ever done. And would like to do again. And again.

There was something about that woman.

There really was.

He was going to fall even deeper in love with those bossy pants of hers if he wasn’t careful.

Wait.

Love?

Aw, he was doomed, wasn't he?

And couldn't be happier, because she'd kissed him. By choice. Even if it was simply to shut up Chuck.

Things were definitely looking up for a certain Josh Carson of Maple Avenue. Yes, indeed.

Josh turned to the silent man beside him as Simone drove away. "Sorry. What were you saying?"

"Wasn't that Simone Pascal? She doesn't date just anyone, you know." Chuck sized him up. "Last I heard she was dating one of the Toronto Maple Leafs. Is she trying to get you to go straight?"

All right. Josh had had about enough. He stood a little closer, allowing his size to intimidate as he moved into the man's space. "I've been meaning to talk to you. Polly says you're having issues getting the divorce papers signed on time."

"Oh. Well, I I need to discuss things with my lawyers."

"What's the holdup?" Josh clenched his hands into fists, squaring off.

"I'm sure it will get all straightened away in the new year. Holidays, lawyers, you know how it is."

"I'd hate for my sister to be held back in any way. If by February she isn't free of you, you'll start answering to me." He smiled, thinking that maybe his old identity of being a troublemaker wasn't so bad to have on hand.

"I—of course."

"Good. Happy New Year."

Josh left the man standing in the middle of the lot. As he headed into the grocery store, doubt started to seep in about the intent behind Simone's kiss. She didn't seem like the kind of woman who took favors without repaying them. Was she trying to level the score for the way Josh had saved her back on Nymph Island? If so, he was going to have to find many more favors to do for Simone. Many, many more.



SIMONE FINISHED CURLING HER EYELASHES, then layered on the mascara. She leaned back and studied the effect. Her eyes were smoky and sultry, her dress hugging her in all the right ways, tucking in below her ribs before flaring out over her hips. She slipped on heels that emphasized the length of her legs and, using her curling iron, placed a loose curl in a wayward strand.

Good enough. She checked her watch. Fashionably late.

She would definitely catch the eye of JC at Polly's New Year's Eve party. Simone wasn't proud of the way she'd left him on Nymph Island on Christmas morning, but their grocery store encounter had been pretty decent. Her only regret was how she'd had to make such a hasty exit after that steamy kiss, in order to play out her ploy to make Chuck jealous of JC's new venture.

Gay?

She knew JC wasn't. And now she felt doubly bad for tagging him with the term when he'd obviously dealt with that sort of thing enough, given his father's own gender issues. But the poor guy was going to have a tough time proving he was still a macho man after he went public with his accessory business. A smoke jumper making delicate, pretty hair ribbons for little girls. It was sweet and she loved him all the more for going for it.

She wasn't sure where she stood in JC's world, and hoped he'd come to the party tonight so she could talk with him. If that didn't work, she'd force herself on him with business plans and lists of connections.

She drove to Polly's house, knowing the Summer sisters were due to arrive around the same time. She half hoped they'd already be there, half hoped they weren't, so she could talk to JC without them interfering.

Polly took her coat at the door and ushered her into the ginormous house she used to share with her husband. Music was playing in the living room and her tasteful Christmas decorations were still up. The scent of cinnamon wafted from a nearby row of candles and Simone wondered where everyone else was.

"Am I early?"

"Perfect timing," Polly replied.

Simone hated being the first to arrive at parties, although in this case it might give her a chance to catch up with her friend.

"How are things going?" She'd noticed that the more masculine décor items seemed to be missing from the house, which meant Chuck had likely experienced the full boot since the last time Simone had been over, a few months ago.

"Pretty good." Polly smiled as though she had a secret.

"Who is he?"

"What do you mean?" Her friend frowned, tucking her white cardigan tighter around her thin frame.

"The man who has you smiling?"

Polly let out a bubble of excited laughter. "Oh, he's nobody. Nobody yet, anyway." She raised her eyebrows, grinning. She led Simone into the dining area, where an appetizer feast had been beautifully laid out. "Make yourself at home. Nothing is off-limits."

"Other than the man who has you smiling? Name, please?"

"Maybe he's not for *me*."

"Oh, no. Don't you dare set me up with someone." *Especially if he's not your half brother.* Simone stepped toward her friend as though she could stop her from causing havoc in her life.

The doorbell rang and Polly gave her a teasing grin before hurrying to the entry, where the door was already opening. "Josh! Happy New Year."

Simone felt a rush of nervous energy rush through her, sending her thoughts into a tizzy. She wanted to run out the back door so she wouldn't have to face JC, but at the same time she wanted to run up and kiss him like there was no tomorrow. She quickly poured herself a glass of wine, knocking it back. She refilled the glass, then, muttering to herself about acting cool and calm and most of all collected, she joined the others in the entry.

JC, who had just hung up his ski jacket, allowed his gaze to slowly linger over her. Unapologetic, hungry, but reserved. Totally JC. His attention paused on her glass. He met her eyes, knowing exactly what the drink meant.

"Are you here alone?" he asked.

She gave a coy shrug of her shoulders. "The night's still young."

"Allow me to top up your glass," he said, placing a warm hand at the base of her back, sending rivulets of desire coursing through her bloodstream. He curved his body protectively around hers, guiding her to the kitchen when the doorbell rang again, as though worried someone might steal her away.

She loved where this night was going already.

"I'll just get the door," Polly said, clearing her throat.

"I think I forgot to thank you for your help at the grocery store the other day. With my groceries and with Chuck," Simone said to Josh as they entered the kitchen.

"I should thank *you* for rescuing me from him."

She turned to him, placing a hand lightly against his chest, then backing off, the heat from their touch too distracting.

"I mean it." She regarded him through her lashes. "Thank you. For *everything*." She knew she was being vague. Nevertheless, his head tipped, acknowledging her intent.

She let out a sigh of relief. No digs. No machismo.

Instead, JC gave her a wicked grin, full of mischief as a hint of scorching desire flared through his blue eyes, making them darken. "Have I mentioned I have a soft spot for damsels in distress?"

No. Just no.

She told herself to cool it—that he was simply testing her. She knew she had some pretty explosive trigger points, but that still didn't mean he should push them.

"You know I'm teasing, right?" He sounded worried and his hand drifted up to her shoulder, giving it a light squeeze. The move was reassuring and her head drifted toward him as though pulled by a magnet. He massaged her shoulder, his free hand adjusting a loose strand of her hair so it stopped tickling her chin. He moved closer, his aftershave sweet and spicy. She trusted him, knew he would never intentionally hurt her and that she needed to let go of her issues—for him. For them.

"Do people never tease you?" he asked.

"Not if they want to live."

"You need to know that I tease because I care." He was nuzzling her curls now, and she was having issues with breathing and rational thought as well as keeping her wineglass upright. "If I didn't like you, I wouldn't tease you." She tipped her head, offering her neck with a moan as the heat of his breath traced a line up her flesh to her earlobe.

"So your enemies get off easy?" She leaned into him. "Nice."

He laughed, his breath tickling her ear.

Simone stepped from his embrace to refill her already full glass and JC slipped in behind her, his hands gliding around her waist. She found herself leaning against him yet again. What kind of game were they playing? They had unsettled business to discuss before they moved down the path they were on.

She spun in his grip and he stepped back, probably thinking she wanted him to let go. If only he knew how much she craved his touch, his steady presence.

She held her glass between them as though in protection and he took it, wrapping his hand around hers, trapping her fingers momentarily as zings of her body's approval sang through her. The hormones—even a week later—must still be in her system. Or else it was simply the impact of having a steamy hunk of male standing in front of her with a whole lot of carnal desire flickering in his gaze. She'd love to run her fingers over his abs again, only this time without numb fingers so she could feel every ridge of muscle twisting under his skin as her touch led to reactions within him.

"Simone?"

She dragged her attention away from his crisp dress shirt, waiting for him to continue, but his sister entered the room, her body language apologetic as she fetched beverages for more arrivals.

JC, gaze locked on hers, set her glass aside.

"Josh, can you do me a favor and show Simone the new bedspread in the guest room?" Polly turned to Simone. "The color combination is exquisite. I could totally see you creating something with those tones. If you need the quilt for inspiration, feel free to take it home with you."

The woman moved away, picking up a previous conversational thread with her guests before Simone could protest the setup. Oh, Polly was good.

"Not at all awkward," JC mumbled in amusement as he led the way.

"Well," Simone said, pushing away her nervousness, "I did want to talk to you in private." They turned down a hall, the sound of music growing fainter. "Why does your sister call you Josh and not JC?"

"Nobody other than you has called me JC since high school. Hard to believe, but I did grow up and move away from my troublemaking

days.”

Another dig, well deserved, but a dig intended to keep her and her assumptions about him in check. On Nymph Island she’d been so intent on holding him at bay that she hadn’t even noticed everyone called him Josh, leaving her the only one stuck in the past. She hadn’t given him an equal chance—well, any chance at all, if she was going to be honest about it. She had judged him based on her own insecurities and issues, as well as his past. Hardly fair. And time and again he had proved to be more than that.

“Do you prefer to be called Josh?”

He nodded.

As they passed a small table laden with various ceramic Santas, Simone quickly turned, sliding her palms up Josh’s chest to prevent him from continuing forward. It was time to apologize. It was what she had come for.

He bumped into her, snatching her waist to steady them. Awareness shot through her as their bodies pressed against each other. She took a deep breath, suddenly feeling nervous about her plan of putting herself out there. She wanted Josh, didn’t want this feeling to end, but was afraid that he’d reject her if she allowed herself to be vulnerable.

“Is this private enough?” he asked, his voice low and rough with something that made Simone’s pulse pound in anticipation of something delicious.

She nodded, glancing over his shoulder at the vacant hallway. He deftly snagged her by the wrists, pulling her against him as he pivoted to pin her against the wall.

“You look like you want to bolt,” he said gently. The length of his hard body was pressed into hers and she finally felt as though she could breathe, think straight.

“I’m not having a baby.”

Okay, that wasn't how she had planned on starting the conversation, but it was a definite icebreaker.

His grip loosened ever so slightly. "Why?" His expression lightened, his eyebrows suddenly raised in understanding. "Oh, the flu?"

The flu wouldn't have interfered with her appointment, but she loved that he was thoughtful enough to consider that.

"No."

He tilted his head just so, his blue eyes full of curiosity.

"You were right."

"I was?" Another lifted eyebrow, and words spoken slowly, as though he was wanting to avoid a trap. No gloating. Just concern. If he kept that up she was going to cry. Nobody had worried about her since she was a kid.

"There are—were—a lot of unknowns," she said carefully.

"Such as?" His thigh was pressed to hers, holding her in place, causing her body to keep fumbling for the mind-shutdown switch so it could play.

"It doesn't matter," she whispered.

"It doesn't?"

"Only that I decided it might be wise to give a real man a shot before I pulled the trigger."

She'd had a good long chat with herself and had decided to put insemination on hold so she could pursue things with Josh. She'd thought she wanted a baby, but really, deep down inside, what she wanted was love. While things were new and uncertain with Josh, she felt they had potential worth exploring. The ovarian cysts would still need to be removed, but she had a little bit of time to think, breathe, and live. In a few months she could reevaluate her baby plan as well as the idea of surrogacy for her frozen eggs, but right now it was time to explore love.

Josh said nothing, merely watched her for a moment, his Adam's apple bobbing with every swallow.

She laughed nervously. "That makes me sound as though I'm a certifiable man trap. I just meant that—"

He silenced her with a kiss. Her wrists were still encased by his hands, their arms trapped between their bodies as they angled their mouths, digging against each other for better access.

He broke the kiss. "Are you asking me to be your boyfriend?"

"Yes." She wanted to add about fifty clauses, but figured they could get to that later.

He studied her for a moment. "I know you're strong enough, but are you open-minded enough to date a man who makes frilly accessories?"

She gave him a wicked grin. "Make me your girlfriend and I'll show you things that will make you wonder why you ever questioned my open-mindedness."



SIMONE ADJUSTED her dress and dabbed at her mouth, hoping to eradicate any traces of smeared lipstick. Because she was certain it was smeared. Everywhere. She bit her bottom lip so she wouldn't grin. Polly's bedspread had definitely been inspiring.

She giggled as Josh joined her in the hallway, tucking in his shirt. He slung an arm across her shoulders. "I'd say that opened my mind." He leaned into her, giving her temple a kiss. "So? Now what?"

She hooked her fingers in his, not wanting to join the celebration going on in Polly's living room. She wanted to ring in the New Year, but not with anyone other than Josh.

He leaned against the wall, legs splayed. He pulled her into the V, his hands loose around her waist.

"Believe it or not, I don't have a plan," she said.

"That must be new for you. Any heart palpitations? Sweaty palms?" he teased.

She leaned her hips against his, giving him a saucy look.

"Know what's funny about you not having a plan?" He gently brushed a strand of hair off her forehead. "For the first time in my life, I actually have one."

"And what's that?"

"To take you to bed as often as I can."

She laughed, trying to escape his arms, but he tightened them, trapping her. She lessened her struggles, peppering his chin with kisses that gradually slowed as their bodies melded together.

"Seriously?" he said between kisses. "I'm going to go for it." He hooked a finger in the neckline of her dress, teasing her with a gentle touch.

She traced patterns down his chest, loving the hardness of his flesh. Next time she planned to spend a lot more time focusing on it with her lips and tongue. Maybe even a minute or two here and there to see what he liked best.

"I think you already did go for it."

Smiling, he bumped his forehead against hers, tracing her nose with his before planting a heavy kiss on her lips. "I may have to try again before the year is through."

"You have a few minutes and about a 90 percent chance."

"Not 100?"

"We are in the middle of a large party."

"That hasn't stopped us yet."

She felt herself blush as she placed a finger over his lips, loving the fact that they could tease playfully now without her getting bent out of shape. She trusted him. With everything. Including her heart.

He took her finger into his mouth, giving it a light nibble. Oh, yes. They were going to have a *lot* of fun together.

"So?" She shifted impatiently against him. "What's your plan?"

"I'm giving up firefighting. It was a big part of my identity, but it's time to see if I can make a go with my hair accessories."

He looked uncertain, as though this was the scariest thing in the world. A second later his features relaxed, and she could tell he had been waiting to take this chance for some time.

"Good."

"You don't mind dating a man who is " His gaze shifted away and she knew he was struggling with how people would perceive him.

"Gay?" she teased.

His eyes flashed and he pushed her away. She wagged her finger at him. "Uh-uh! If you get to tease me, then I get to tease you."

"It's not funny."

"And neither is the whole damsel in distress thing. Your identity might be a macho male issue, but mine is being self-reliant and independent. If you knew how much it galled me every single time you had to bail me out—"

He shut her up with a kiss again, his hand drifting through her long tresses, cupping the back of her head. She had to admit she loved the way he took control. And he'd been right. She needed a man with big cajones. She needed *him*.

"I'll help you," she said when they broke apart. She placed another light kiss on his lips, wanting to stay connected with him, to keep savoring the way he felt against her—strength and protection but with a gentleness she craved.

Despite the way he was comfortable taking charge, she knew Josh would never infringe on her ability to remain autonomous. If she was down, he was up, and vice versa. He would be there, ensuring she met

her goals, whatever they might happen to be. An equally strong and powerful partner who knew the rules of give and take.

Thanks to Nymph Island, at long last the man she'd always dreamed of was quickly becoming hers.

She gave him a grin. "Let's start by making a deal with Melissa's Cuties."

"Melissa's Cuties? For real?"

"You've heard of them? Good. Well, she's looking for toddler hair accessories and I think you'd be a good fit. We can talk about distributors, discounts, connections, and all that after we hammer out a contract with her."

"Are you taking charge of my life?"

"Yes. Do you have a problem with that?"

"No, but right now, more than anything, I just want you to be my girlfriend. Not my business partner."

"Are you really going to turn away this gift horse?"

"Until next year."

"Such a long wait," she teased, knowing they were only minutes away from midnight and changing their calendars.

"This year I want to be nothing more than your lover." She had to admit she liked the sound of that. "Next year we can worry about business, world domination, and hitting the cover of design magazines."

"Those things don't really change much, other than your bottom line, just increase the pressure to do it all again."

"And maybe after that, if we still like each other, we can venture into the undiscovered arena of domesticity and family."

"Are you proposing?" she asked, head tipped to the side.

"Do you think I should?"

"Well, I think it would be wise to show you all the ways I'm open-minded first."

"And I still have to show you all the ways I love you, Simone Pascal."

She froze against him. "You love me?"

He ran a thumb down the length of her jaw, sending tremors of desire through her. "What's not to love?"

"Overcontrolling, overconfident, strident " She began listing the faults that had got her into trouble in the past.

"I happen to think those are qualities in the women I like to date. Plus I've noticed that you've been slowly letting me see your softer side. I like that, too. It all balances out quite nicely."

"How did I ever get to be so lucky?" She ran her palms down his chest. "I seem to have found a man who's real. Tough and yet—"

"Don't say it."

"I wasn't going to. And I love you, too," she blurted out, then closed her eyes in fear. It was too soon. Yes, he'd said it first, but it was still too early for either of them.

But she liked the way she lit up and felt alive when she was around him. She liked the way he took her to task and called her on her crap. They had things in common and were strong enough and pushy enough for each other, and she loved that about him. About them.

Plus he was great with Tigger. Great with her friends. And he stepped in and rescued her when she truly needed it. Simone really, really liked it when he had her back. She didn't want to, but she knew she could trust him, love him, and not get hurt.

It was plain old out-of-control love. The one thing she couldn't plan for and the one thing she'd crossed off her list, thinking it would never happen.

Josh smiled, hugging her close. "Let's get out of here, shall we?" he whispered in her ear. She grinned up at him. She'd never heard anything better in all her life.

He tucked her against his side as they headed to the entry. From the other room came loud cheering and a chorus of, "Happy New Year!"

"Does that mean we have to talk business? Or can I still enjoy the early glow of being your girlfriend?" Simone asked Josh, disappointed that they'd missed their chance to ring in the new year in their birthday suits, bodies moving in blissful, wanton harmony.

"You can always enjoy the glow of being mine. Always." He twirled her around, catching her in the doorway, then pulled her into his arms for a long kiss. He pointed to a sprig of green above them. Mistletoe.

Love and mistletoe. Definite seasonal must-haves.

BONUS LETTER TO SANTA FROM TIGGER



Christmas Eve
Nymph Island

Dear Santa,

Thank you so, so, so, so much for bringing me a daddy—he is writing this letter for me and I keep checking to see if he is writing all the words right. He says he is but I’m not sure because I can only read the beginner books because I’m just five and we aren’t learning how to read very fast at school. It took you a really long time to get Evander for me (that made Evander laugh and smile. I had to tell him to write that part down) but he is very nice and he can lift me up in the air like I’m the whipped cream on top of a sugary sundae. It’s like I can fly just like a fairy. But I’m not allowed very much sugar.

And Evander’s going to be my forever daddy! Forever and ever and ever. And ever. He gave Mom a ring and now I get to hug him every day. Even when he’s cranky about Mom not being careful about locking

doors and checking her car mirrors. But there are no more bad guys because Evander scared them away. So it's okay to come to our house at Christmas tomorrow morning. Nobody will take my super bright fairy light that I asked for. Oh! I didn't ask for it yet. I asked for a pony in my last letter, but Evander says ponies in town aren't a realistic gift and that they don't fit on your sleigh, either. I secretly think Evander bought me one because he has lots of money and always finds a way to get things for me that I really like. So it's okay if you didn't get me a pony named Sparkles. Now I am writing you to say I would like a super bright fairy light for Christmas, please. (Mom says I must remember to say please.) *(Note from Evander: I already bought her the light, so no worries there, big guy. No pony, though. Maybe next year.)*

My fairies say they'd like new winter coats because the squirrels made them into nests again. Mom says that's what squirrels do in the winter and that they couldn't have known that they belonged to the fairies. Can you please make sure your elves put the fairies' names in the coats this time so the squirrels know that they belong to someone? The fairies names are still the same but Evander said I should write them down for you in case you don't remember. He doesn't know that you remember everything. He's an adult and he doesn't believe anymore. The fairies are Trixie (like the cottage's name), Ellspa, Vixey (like your reindeer Vixen), Tinkerbell (of course), Silverbell, Silvermist, Gillian, Fawn, Chippie (like the chipmunks I'm taming), and Periwinkle. I hope your elves have time but Evander says you are probably already in the air delivering presents right now. I told you he doesn't believe anymore. He can't remember your magic. Thanks, Santa! I know you'll bring good coats for my poor shivery fairies.

We live in a new house now. It's in Bracebridge with Evander and Granny Flo—that's Evander's mom who is a little bit sick. She's feeling okay though. MAJOR BIG NEWS! I'm going to be a sister! I didn't even believe it! It's going to take forever to be a sister. Months and months. I promise to be good and help out because I can't wait. I can dress the baby and do its hair and love it and squeeze it and give it a ride in my doll carriage. I won't feed it sugar and next Christmas I can help the baby write to you because I'll be big and will be able to write letters. More than just boring words like *cat* and *dog* and *mat*.

Evander is reminding me to tell you about the house because I got distracted. He's smiling a lot. I think he likes writing to you, too. (*Note from Evander: I do, actually.*) The house has lots of Christmas lights around the door and lots of trees and a big backyard. It's Evander's old house but he says you haven't been there in a really long time because he's all grown up now. I think it's silly that you don't come to his house now that he's big. Everyone needs Santa and gifts. Maybe then they would still believe and be nicer to each other. But Evander is nice even though he doesn't believe anymore.

In case you don't remember the house it's white and it's close to the park. It's not very close to my school though so my mom has to give me a ride on her way to go work on the island by our cottage. They are making a place for people to take a holiday that's not bad for the environment. It means that Mom and Evander have to talk about it a lot and it's very boring. Uncle Connor and Uncle Tristen like to talk about it a lot, too. Uncle Finian is okay though. He doesn't talk about it all the time. Only sometimes. He likes to talk about movies and movie stars. They are very pretty. He knows Ashley Judd—she was in *Tooth Fairy*. It's really funny. Evander says it wasn't that good and he'd only give it

two stars but I would give it a thousand! I think Mrs. Claus would like it. You should get it for her for Christmas! And maybe some warm slippers so she can wear them when she watches the movie. That's what I do. She'll laugh a lot so don't give her anything to drink or it might come out her nose.

I don't have to go to the babysitter's very much anymore which is too bad. Evander showed me how to protect myself like I mean business. So I showed the boy who pushed me down and he stopped pushing me because he could see that I knew business now. We're friends sometimes except I don't see him. We go to different schools and not the babysitter's this year. My teacher's name rhymes with Walrus. It's funny because she's really skinny and doesn't look like one. She's very pretty like a Barbie doll. She thinks Evander is good-looking and a nice man. She says any woman would be lucky to have him. I told her he was taken and to back off because I knew business and I wasn't afraid to use it. I had to tell Evander five times to write that down! He doesn't write everything I tell him to like my mom does. He keeps asking questions and telling me I shouldn't tell you some things because they aren't what you put in a letter to Santa. Duh. He doesn't know we write letters to each other all the time and that I tell you *everything*. If you're friends with somebody you don't hold things back. That's what Mom says.

Love forever and ever. Write back soon and give Rudolph a snuggle from me. And rub his nose, too. He likes that lots.

XO

Tigger (Kim)

P.S. From Evander de la Fosse—Tigger's new daddy. Thank you for bringing light into my life again. I will always believe—despite what Tigger says—as well as believe in the power of love. Merry Christmas, big guy.

P.P.S. Don't eat the gingerbread cookies Tigger made for you. Her mother is trying to cut back on how much sugar they put in their cookies and it's not necessarily the best thing for ginger cookies unless you enjoy a lot of spice. I'll try to swap them out for chocolate chip ones before you come.



Thank you for reading FALLING FOR THE FIREFIGHTER and the complete Summer Sisters series. I hope you loved Simone and Josh's story as well as the entire Summer family. Want to read the real scoop on their friend/enemy Polly Pollard? She's revamping her entire life—including risking a second chance at love! Find out how Polly fairs in [SWEET TROUBLEMAKER](#).

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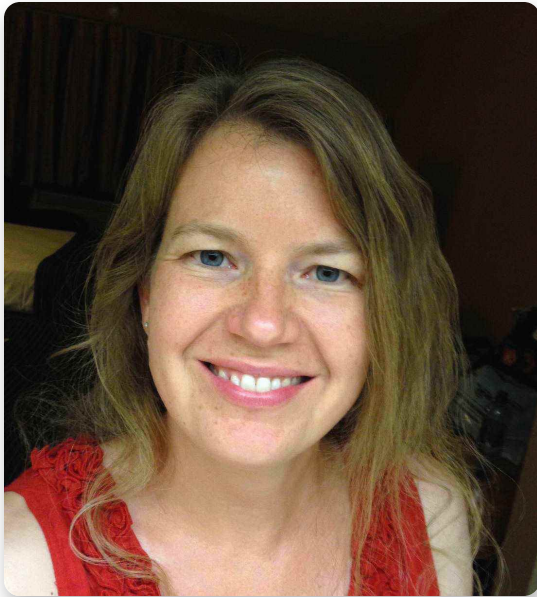
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Jean Oram is a *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestselling romance author. Inspiration for her small town series came from her own upbringing on the Canadian prairies. Although, so far, none of her characters have grown up in an old schoolhouse or worked on a bee farm. Jean still lives on the prairie with her husband, two kids, and big shaggy dog where she can be found out playing in the snow or hiking.

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Thanks for reading.

XO

Jean