



# ON *the* EDGE

JULIA CONNORS

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A SECOND CHANCE SPORTS ROMANCE



JULIA CONNORS

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*To all the girls who keep pursuing their dreams, no matter what life throws  
at them.*

OCTOBER



# CHAPTER 1



## JACKSON

*Park City, Utah*

The door to the training center hasn't even closed behind me when TJ calls out, "Please tell me you're not engaged to that man-whore so I don't have to fire you?" He's already walking toward me with his arms wide open and sweeps me up in a quick hug.

I take a deep breath, inhaling the gym scent that's so familiar to me in the off-season—rubber and metal and sweat. The tangy smell never ceases to bring me back to my own days as a ski racer. These days I'm relegated to training the men's team instead.

He steps back and puts his hands on my shoulders. "Please."

I hold my bare left hand out and raise my eyebrows in mock disapproval. "Nope. And just so you know, you could get in big trouble with HR for threatening to fire me for getting engaged."

"If half naked pictures of you and Marco keep making the front page of every newspaper in Italy, we're going to have a PR nightmare on our hands."

"We were on a boat, in the middle of *Lago di Garda*. How was I supposed to know the paparazzi were camped out on the shores, and why



the hell does it matter if I'm photographed in a bathing suit while on vacation?" I know my frustration is evident in my voice, even while I try to play this off like it was no big deal.

"Uh, that was half a bathing suit, Jackson," he says. TJ's neck gets red when he's embarrassed, which doesn't happen often, but clearly this conversation is out of his comfort zone.

"No," I clarify, "that was a lucky angle for some photography hack who was able to make my one-piece with almost no back look like I was topless. Besides, you know I'm not looking to show off my scars to the world."

"Please, Jackson, just think about how your relationship with Marco looks," he says as he guides me down the row between some of our simulators and weight equipment. "You're a physical therapist for the Men's Alpine Team. You're responsible for *our men* being in peak shape"—he gestures around the Elite Training Center like I need to be reminded that I'm here to train our athletes—"and you're dating an Italian. He's the competition. And it doesn't help that he's the reigning world champion of pretty much every event in ski racing. Like I've been telling you all along, this could easily be seen as a conflict of interest. If this were an Olympic year, dating Marco would be career suicide."

"I can't help that he's the competition." I shrug. But even as I feign nonchalance, I know this is a dangerous game I'm playing, pitting this relationship against my career. I thought any objections to me dating Marco had settled down, but this damn photo seems to have riled things up again.

"Don't let yourself become a liability to this program." TJ slings an arm around my shoulder, pulling me close, and says, "I'm giving you this advice because you're at the beginning of what promises to be a great career, and our program can't afford to lose you. But there are some higher-ups making noise about your relationship."

"Duly noted," I say, elbowing him in the side. He doesn't budge, just hugs me tighter to his side in that protective way he has about him. I sigh and rest my head against his shoulder. "Thanks for looking out for me, I do appreciate it. Really."

"I love you like a little sister," he says, and pulls my hair just like I imagine a big brother would. "As your boss, I can't tell you not to date Marco. But as a friend, I hate seeing you take this kind of a risk with your career."

TJ has been supportive through many ups and downs—my terrible and very public breakup with my ex-boyfriend, my recovery from a catastrophic career-ending ski injury, successfully completing my doctorate in physical therapy—and then took a risk hiring me as a physical therapist right out of grad school two years ago. But despite all this, there are some things I can't make him understand, no matter how close we are.

“So, there have been some changes to the team,” he tells me when we reach my office, which is separated from the gym by a glass wall.

I quirk an eyebrow at him. “This close to the start of the season?” It's only October, but we're due to ramp up our training this week and we'll be on snow in a few weeks.

“Yeah, Josh decided to retire. He's making the announcement this afternoon.”

“What?” My voice squeaks several octaves higher than normal. “He's not going to race anymore and he didn't even have the decency to tell me in person?”

I mean, of all the people to keep this a secret from!

“He's having a hard time with it,” TJ says. “He knows it's time to go, that he's not helping the team anymore. He didn't want you to try to talk him into staying.”

“I poured my heart and soul into that man,” I grumble. As his physical therapist, I'd traveled with him to every World Cup race around the globe. I was the reason he came back from a torn hamstring that his previous physical therapist said was career-ending.

“And you got a couple extra years out of him when he was past his prime. But when was the last time he was in the top ten with any kind of consistency? He knows he's not at the level he once was. You have to know it too.” He looks at me like he expects some sort of confession. And while thirty-four-year-old Josh definitely wasn't finishing on the podium as often as he had in his twenties, he still had some good races left in him.

But, if I'm being really honest with myself, it was getting difficult to keep him in fighting shape. Sometimes it seemed like the harder I pushed, the more afraid I was that I'd eventually break him. Retirement, rather than a catastrophic injury, probably is his best option. It worries me a bit that he recognized that reality before I did. It's my job to make those assessments and recommendations, and maybe I was too close to see it—maybe I was

seeing his success as my success, believing that if he retired it meant I'd failed him.

"I wasn't ready to give up on him," I say, glancing away so I don't have to meet TJ's eyes.

"This is the most elite level of alpine skiing. Don't be the patron saint of lost causes."

I cross my arms over my chest in what I'm sure is a too-juvenile reaction for someone nearing thirty. "You really know how to welcome a girl back from vacation."

"I do have other news, though," TJ says, and I expect his trademark lopsided grin, but instead his face is an odd mix between an uncomfortable grimace and a conciliatory smile. "A fresh start. A new racer who's younger than Josh, but he's going to need you every bit as much. There are some medical issues you need to be aware of. You'll definitely be expected to travel with his support team like you did with Josh's. You up for that?"

Like there's another option. As a physical therapist, traveling to races with athletes is part of my job. "I'm up for anything," I say, while praying this new racer isn't too young or too immature. I have no time to stroke some teenager's overdeveloped and undeserved ego. "Who's the new guy?"

"Go read his medical file. I left it on your desk. Get settled in and review his records today because you'll need to meet with him tomorrow. And welcome back." He clasps his hand on my shoulder and gives it a quick squeeze before he turns to head into his office.



"You're back!" I hear the squeal as soon as TJ shuts the door to his office. I turn to find Sierra barreling toward me, her golden hair flowing behind her as she literally runs across the training room.

I brace myself for her hug and she still manages to knock me backward a step. "You're a little overexcited to see me," I say when she finally lets go.

"You were gone forever! Seriously, I need girl time, and I need it *now*."

"Too much testosterone in your apartment these days?" Until this past summer, Sierra rented the second bedroom in my condo. Then her boyfriend, Peter, proposed and she moved in with him.

“You have no idea. Please tell me you’re free tonight? I’m not joking about needing some girl time. If I come home to find that Peter’s left his post-workout dirty towel on the floor of the bathroom and started cooking dinner using every single bowl, pan, and utensil in our kitchen one more time, my head might explode.” Peter is in ridiculously good shape and is an amazing cook, but his messiness gets under Sierra’s skin.

“Sure. I mean, I’m pretty jet-lagged, but if you don’t mind me yawning every five minutes, we can probably grab dinner and drinks.”

“Perfect,” she says, following me into my office. “So, I’m not waiting until tonight to hear about your vacation—why is there no ring on that finger?”

“Were you and TJ concocting engagement scenarios in my absence or something?” I force a laugh, trying to dismiss her question.

“Guilty as charged.” She plops into one of my office chairs as I lean back and half sit on the corner of my large wooden desk.

I tuck a strand of my dark brown hair, which is long overdue for a haircut, behind my ear. “I *told* you that Marco and I aren’t on the marriage track. It hasn’t even been a year. I don’t know why you’d be thinking that an engagement was even a possibility.”

“You *said* you weren’t getting engaged, but all the pictures you and Marco were posting while you were in Italy . . . the candlelight dinner in Verona”—she scrolls through the photos on her phone with a dreamy smile—“the picnic after rock climbing in the Dolomites, the clubbing, the daily workouts together, the bike rides along Lake Garda. Oh, and the weekend in Venice. It looked like you were having the time of your life!”

I cross one ankle over the other as I stand there looking at her squirming in her chair with excitement, so happy for me. “It was a pretty amazing vacation,” I admit, a smile tugging on my lips.

“And this one,” Sierra says as she holds up her phone with a picture that Marco and I both posted on social media at the beginning of my month there. We’re side by side on our paddleboards on *Lago di Garda*, our backs to his best friend, Christian, who snapped the photo. We’re holding hands, and we’re framed by the mountains on either side of us in the distance. “I mean, if that doesn’t scream ‘looking off into the future, together,’ then I don’t know what does!”

We staged that photo, and it came out even better than planned.

“Sierra, you know better than to believe a post on social media is the whole picture,” I say. As the head of social media for the alpine ski teams, Sierra should damn well know that not everything is as glamorous in reality as it looks online. “It was a great vacation, but if I don’t post photos where my life looks awesome and people don’t keep liking my photos, the sponsorships will dry up.” Now that I’m no longer racing, I have to work much harder to remain a sports “influencer” and keep my sponsorships, since they pay my mortgage. Not that I’m not paid well as a physical therapist, but Park City is a ridiculously expensive place to live and I’m down one roommate who helped cover my condo expenses.

“I know.” She sighs. “But if you and Marco are even half as in love as all your pictures make it seem . . .”

“I love Marco dearly, Sierra. But that doesn’t mean we’re getting married anytime soon.”

“But someday?”

“Moving on . . .” I need to stop this conversation before it goes any further.

“Sorry,” she says, “I’m just so happy to finally see you in a relationship again. It’s been years since you were with he who shall not be named.”

“And remember how I vowed to never give anyone the power to hurt me like that again?”

“Marco would never hurt you like that,” Sierra swears. I love that she defends him because of how important he is to me, and I hate that she’s right but for the wrong reasons.

“I didn’t think Nate would hurt me like that either, Sierra. But sometimes loving someone makes you blind to their shortcomings.” How else could I have missed what an absolute asshole Nate would turn out to be? I’d given him my whole heart for almost a decade, then he shattered it and never looked back.

“I really worried that you’d never move on, but maybe it’s true that everything happens for a reason. But you and Marco are so good together, it’s like fate that your friendship developed into more. Plus you’d have the most beautiful Italian babies.”

“Can we just get through *your* wedding first, before you start planning mine too?”

She smiles that sly smile she gets when we talk about Peter, and I’m about to ask her if they have nailed down a date yet, when she glances

down at her phone, then bounds out of her seat. “Got to go set up for some new athlete photos I’m taking today. Let’s finish this conversation over dinner—and drinks. The drinks are critical. I’ll get in touch later so we can figure out when and where,” she says and rushes out the door without even waiting for my response.

I walk around my desk and glance out the window at the tall grass that grows for miles, right up to the jagged mountains that are forever capped in ice. It’s a beautiful view, but I can’t wait for it to be entirely covered in pure, white snow. It’s been two months since we were in New Zealand for summer ski training and I can’t wait to get back out there again.

I take a seat at my desk and glance at the manila folder filled with medical files that TJ left sitting there for me. It’s about ten times thicker than the medical file of any other athlete I’ve worked with. Whoever this new guy is, TJ wasn’t kidding about him having “some medical issues.” How the hell does a guy make the national team with a health record long enough to fill a folder over an inch thick?

I open the folder to scan the first page and my eyes land on the one name I never wanted to see again in my entire life.

“Oh. Hell. No.” Anyone but him.

## CHAPTER 2



NATE

*Park City, Utah*

I lean up against her doorframe and cross my arms loosely over my chest. I want to appear casual, but I need to be prepared for the very real possibility that she'll try to kill me.

I take the moment to observe her. She's sitting behind her desk and the sun streaming in the window behind her is lighting her up like an angel, a trick of the eye that could throw me off my game if I let it. She reaches to pick up the manila folder thick with my medical records. Her full pale lips, the color of cotton candy, pull down at the corners into a frown. A folder of medical records this big means a significant challenge for her, a challenge I imagine she'll welcome . . . until she finds out it's me.

She reaches behind her neck and sweeps her dark, wavy hair around to one side so it falls over her shoulder, hanging nearly to her elbow. It's longer than the last time I saw her, and I wonder how many other things about her have changed in the years since she was mine.

I watch her flip the file folder open, wondering if I used to find every movement of hers so fascinating or if it's because I haven't seen her in person in so long.

“Oh. Hell. No.” Her voice is a whisper and a groan, then a hiss of anger escapes her lips as she scans the first page of my records.

She flips to the back of the file, to start at the beginning. Everything contained in those early pages she already knows, intimately. But then she flips the pages until she gets to the part she’s less familiar with—the last five years. And suddenly, I can’t stand the wait for another second. I need to see her face, to know how she’ll react to me being in her life again.

I clear my throat and her head snaps up. “I see you found my file.”

She narrows her eyes at me, those thick black lashes descending to cover half of her bright green irises. She’s always had an expressive face, and right now her look is murderous.

“This is not happening.” Her voice is icy as she rises to stand behind her desk. “Go away and stay there.”

“Sorry, Jackson.” I shrug so she won’t see how the guilt is eating away in the pit of my stomach, sending a burning pain up into my chest. I don’t want to hurt her any more than I already have, but the pain of this reunion is inevitable. There is no reconciliation without it.

“What are you doing here?” Her hands are on her hips as she stands behind her desk, but it’s hard to feel threatened by her when she’s in florescent purple leggings and a navy workout tank that says *I do it for the tacos* in metallic purple script.

“I missed you too,” I say, taking a few steps into her office. Her cheeks flush in anger as my words hit her and I know my tone was all wrong, but I take another step toward her desk anyway. While anyone else would have the good sense to stay away from her when she’s this mad, her anger and I are old friends.

“Like hell you did,” she says, her eyes narrowing to let me know she doesn’t for a second believe me. If only she knew. “Get out of my office.”

I try to stay calm, act like this isn’t a reunion moment I’ve dreamed about for years. I was never delusional enough to believe that she’d make it easy on me, or that I deserved for her to. “Here’s the thing, I can’t really leave. Because now that you’re my physical therapist, we work together.”

“I will kill you, and this time neither your parents nor mine are here to stop me.”

The last time I surprised her like this was twelve years ago, before we started dating. We were seventeen—so young and innocent, unaware of all the ways we could hurt each other. I’d unintentionally turned her friends,



and really our whole high school, against her. At that moment, her father held her back when she wanted to claw my eyes out. I deserved it then. I deserve it far more now.

I focus on not reacting to her mention of my “parents,” since now I only have one. I see that realization—and the regret—cross her face, briefly, before she shuts that emotion down. She’s a fortress now, she wants to think she’s impenetrable. I will find my way in.

“You can’t kill me either, Jackson.” I keep my voice calm, like it’s no big deal that I’ve made the National Ski Team and she’s expected to be my physical therapist after all this time. “You have to get me ready to compete.”

“You *can’t* be on the men’s team. I go away for one month, and . . . how could this happen?” She walks around her desk, which feels big and formal for a physical therapist’s office in an athletic training center.

“The usual way: by being an exceptional skier.”

She doesn’t appear to appreciate my sarcasm. As she approaches me, her eyes are still narrowed. This look of determined concentration is the same way she looks right before she orgasms, which has my mind going in the completely wrong direction. Those memories are the reason I neither expect nor have time to block the right hook she delivers to my jaw.

“Ow,” we both groan at the same time, me clutching my face and her cradling her hand.

I breathe through the pain—it’s not even close to the worst I’ve felt—and right myself. “Jackson, c’mon,” I say through my clenched jaw. I already know my face is going to hurt like hell later on.

She’s still bent over, cradling her hand, and as I step toward her to help she looks up at me with the wild eyes of a cornered animal. “Get. Out.”

“Suit yourself,” I say with a bravado I don’t feel as I head out to the hallway. It takes everything I have not to look back over my shoulder.



Well, that didn’t go how I thought it’d go. Or maybe it did. I don’t know what I expected, really. I figured she’d *want* to kill me. But I guess I didn’t expect her to actually hit me. Not that I didn’t have it coming. After five years of radio silence, I deserve that and more from her.

The Center is busy this morning, but I'm still new here so I'm able to make my way to the locker room with nothing more than a head nod to the few people I pass. Once I'm there, I stand in front of a mirror and rub my jaw. It's still pretty clenched up and even as I try to stretch it out, the muscle resists. I need to get an ice pack on it or it's going to be swollen soon.

Jeff Beltzer, who's made quite a name for himself in his nine years on the team, enters the locker room a few feet from where I'm standing. "Hey," I say as he glances over at me, "I'm Nate. I'm new here."

"I know who you are, man," he says in a faint Boston accent. He reaches out to shake my hand and his eyes crinkle as he smiles. "Glad you're joining us."

I guess I've made a name for myself too, which is ironic since I've barely stepped up to the start gate on a race course since I was a nationally ranked skier in high school. "Thanks, I'm pretty happy to be here."

"Long time coming," he says, but his eyes narrow. "What happened to your face?"

"Uh, unpacking injury this morning," I say, running my knuckles along my jaw which, if the tenderness is any indication, is probably already bruising a bit. "Living out of boxes right now." At least half of what I've told him is true.

"Of course," he says with a nod. "You need an ice pack?"

"Probably a good idea," I say, grateful he suggested it and I didn't have to ask.

I let him lead me to one of the trainers who of course wants more details. I make up a story about unpacking and carelessly knocking a marble bookend off a shelf and right into the side of my face. It sounds believable enough since I just moved to Park City a few days ago. No one needs to know that I've been staying in a hotel suite and the movers are delivering my stuff to my new condo later this afternoon. If anyone knew how I really got hurt, Jackson might lose her job, or they'd keep her away from me, and neither of those options will do me any good.

Jeff takes it upon himself to be my tour guide, taking me to our first team meeting where Coach introduces me and explains that with Josh retiring they've moved Taylor Lang up from the B team to the A team, and given me his spot on the B team. Everyone knows that my selection to the team fell under a Coaches Discretion—that a small committee of coaches decided I deserved a spot on the team even though I hadn't technically

qualified for it. That they put me on the B team and not the C team is sure to ruffle some feathers among my teammates, but I'll deal with that as it comes.

For now, I'm here and so is Jackson, and that's all that matters.

Coach verbally reviews the training schedule for the week—details that were spelled out in an email we received before arriving here for the first official week of training. My mind wanders, as it often does, to Jackson. *Is her hand okay? Will it be a problem if anyone finds out she hit me?*

Everyone already knows about our history. Jackson's crash at Val d'Isère in the Super-G that should have clenched her first place spot for the season in that discipline five years ago was highly publicized. As was the fact that I didn't show up for that race, even though I was her speed coach. The guilt is a tight knot in my stomach because her career-ending crash and our breakup have overshadowed her other milestones that came before it—the surprise Olympic gold in Giant Slalom during her second season, where the media began comparing her to ski racing icon Mikaela Shiffrin, her seventeen podium finishes her third season on the World Cup alpine circuit, and how close she came to securing an overall World Cup victory her fourth and final season, just over five years ago.

“Dude.” Jeff elbows me, and I look around to see that everyone is getting up, milling around the room, and I've just been sitting here lost in my own thoughts. *Man, I need to get a grip.* Being this close to Jackson for the first time in years is throwing me.

“Sorry,” I respond with a forced smile. “What did I miss?”

“Coach wants you and the other new team members to go get your athlete photos taken on the balcony.”

“Thanks, man,” I say as I stand and make my way toward the door where the two other new guys are waiting for me. They are both young, I'd say early twenties, like Jackson and I were when she made racing her full-time career.

We fill the time with small talk as the three of us make our way through the Elite Training Center. I've studied so many pictures of this place that I feel like everything looks familiar even though this is really only my second time here. My first visit, for my interview with the coaching staff, took place after -hours so no one outside of the small group of coaches would know it was happening. I don't love the backdoor way I made this team, but I did what I had to do to make it happen. I deserve this spot even if I didn't

earn it in the traditional way, and the coaches know that I can compete at this level even if extenuating circumstances prevented me from competing sooner.

“Your videos are pretty dope, dude,” one of the guys says to me. He’s a snowboarder and I can’t remember his name—Zach, maybe? He has a baby face that makes him look even younger than he is. I’m pretty sure he’s on the development team, where I would have started were it not for an emergency surgery immediately following ski season my senior year of high school.

“Thanks, man,” I say. I’d hoped the focus here wouldn’t be on my social media, but I’m not surprised that someone’s already brought it up. My most-watched video where I heli-skied the Cathedral in Alaska last year has over ten million views, and the video of me doing a back flip into Corbet’s Couloir at Jackson Hole, my second most-watched video, has eight million views.

“What’s it like, being famous?” the other dude, also probably ten years younger than me, asks.

“I’m really not famous.” Sure, a lot of people follow me on social media to see me ski crazy lines in the backcountry, but it’s not like I’m a household name—not even among ski racing fans. “I’m just lucky to have sponsors willing to support me in doing what I love.”

“But you’re not going to be able to do that anymore, are you?” Maybe-Zach asks.

“Nah. But that was just a stand-in until I could get back to racing.”

“I can’t believe you even did all that after your surgery,” he says.

*Is there nothing about my personal life that’s actually personal?*

“Yeah well, I knew my body could handle it, and sometimes the only way to show the doctors what you can do is to go out and prove them wrong.” It was a risky move on my part, but it’s paying dividends now that I’m back in the same place as Jackson. In some ways I still can’t believe that I’ve finally overcome every hurdle to making this happen. In other ways I can’t believe it took me five long years.

We approach the glass doors leading out to the balcony that runs along one side of the Center, but the younger of the two guys I’m with puts his hand on my forearm as I reach for the door. He nods toward the balcony, where a very angry woman with long blond hair is pacing frantically and

yelling into her phone. She sees us standing at the door and holds her finger up asking for a minute.

“What the hell?” Maybe-Zach asks.

I shrug even though I know exactly what her problem is, she’s just now found out that I’m on the team. A minute later she hangs up the phone and shoves it in her pocket before taking a fortifying breath and waving us out to the balcony.

“Sorry about that, guys.” Her tone oozes professionalism, nothing like the freak-out we just witnessed, but the familiar voice sends goose bumps over my spine. As nervous as I was to see Jackson, and as much as I knew it wasn’t going to go well, I’m almost more nervous to see her best friend. Sierra and I have a history that’s been complicated by my idiocy and her protective nature.

Sierra’s got a tripod set up in front of her, facing a white backdrop that’s hung along the exterior wall. I let the youngins move toward her, and I hang behind them because I’ve already been punched once today.

She gives a welcoming smile to the other two guys and greets them by name, “Zach . . . Tim,” she says before shaking each of their hands. Then her eyes move to me and if looks could kill, I’d be slain. “Nate.” The word is hostile, my name dipped in poison. She makes no move to shake my hand.

“Sierra,” I say, my emotions carefully checked behind a mask of indifference.

She works efficiently, setting each of us up in front of a white backdrop. I can practically see the wheels turning in these guys’ minds, hoping that eventually they’ll replace this photo with a photo of themselves holding up an Olympic medal.

Once the photos have been taken, Sierra dismisses us, letting us know that we’re free to go for the day, and reminding us what time we need to report back tomorrow.

“Nate,” she says as I turn to leave, “a word?”

“Sure.” I turn back to her, letting the door shut behind Zach and Tim as they leave. I take a small step toward her, trying to appear open to this conversation while still staying out of her reach.

“What the fuck, Nate?” she says, her voice low and calm and she sweeps her hand behind her neck to pull her blond ponytail to the side.

“What do you want me to say, Sierra?”

“What do I want you to say?” she spits back at me. “How about, *I’m the world’s biggest asshole?*”

“Okay, I’m the world’s biggest asshole.” My flippant tone coats the words until there’s no joy for her in hearing them.

She rolls her eyes at me as she removes the camera from the tripod, placing it carefully in its bag. “Why are you here? *How* are you here?”

“You know why I’m here. And how? Coaches’ discretion. You probably know that too.”

“Why are you doing this to her?” she asks, but she doesn’t wait for my response before starting her rant. “How could you just show up like this? Five years of no contact. You deserted her. You didn’t even reach out after her accident to make sure she was okay. *You didn’t come back.* And now she’s finally happy, and in love, and you decide *this* is the time to show up?”

In love. Those words worm their way into my brain, triggering questions I don’t yet have answers for. *Does she really love Marco? Does it affect my plans if she does?*

I don’t try to justify my choices to Sierra. I don’t tell her about my path back into Jackson’s life. I need redemption, but not from Sierra. And Jackson deserves to hear about these missing years before I tell her best friend.

“You just can’t be on the team,” she says when I don’t respond. She sweeps the tripod up, aggressively releasing the levers and collapsing the legs.

“I already am.”

“You need to *go*,” she spits out. “Just pack your bags and jet off to some other ski resort where you can film yourself jumping out of a helicopter like an idiot. Go back to your millions of YouTube fans and your groupies. There’s no place for you here.”

“My place—” I catch myself just before I say *is with Jackson*. “My place is on this team, Sierra. I’m not going anywhere.” It’s not a challenge, it’s the truth. Now that I’ve found my way back to her, I’m never leaving again.

She zips up the tripod bag and slings it over her shoulder so violently it hits her in the back. She doesn’t wince at the impact, but her eyes water. “Does she know you’re here?” Her voice is fiercely protective, like she’d kill me right now if it meant she could save Jackson from having to see me.

“She does,” I say, and my hand involuntarily moves to my jaw. I can feel the swelling already starting, despite the earlier ice pack.

“This is going to go very, very badly,” she warns me.

“I’m counting on it.” It’s a truth I’ve accepted, it’s going to be bad before it gets better.

Sierra storms past me, then turns back around so the tripod bag comes barreling into my stomach; it feels like she’s punched me in the gut, but looks like it was an accident. She shoots a withering glance at me as she watches me double over, then turns and swings the door open, stomping inside.

And *that* went about as well as I expected too.

## CHAPTER 3



### JACKSON

*Park City, Utah*

I close the door to my condo behind me and toss my bag on the coffee table before struggling out of my jacket. My right hand is wrapped with an ice pack resting up against my bruised knuckles. I got through the rest of the day with lots of ice and some ibuprofen. I've certainly had much worse pain in my life, so even though bruised bones can hurt as badly as broken ones, I didn't let it get in the way of my first day back at work.

A text pings my phone.

**Annie:** *I got your voice mail this morning when I got into the office, and seriously, you could not have timed that better!*

Annie, the head of the racing program at Danforth, has been there since I raced for them in college. We've kept in touch here and there. I usually stop and see her at least once a year since I have to drive by Danforth to get to Blackstone Mountain, where my parents spend most of their time since Dad retired a few years ago.



I use voice-to-text to message her back, cursing my stupid injured hand.

**Jackson:** *Oh wow, does that mean you do know of a PT opening in the area?*

**Annie:** *I do! Something here at Danforth, actually. I can't put any more info in a text just yet. Can we chat when I have some more details?*

**Jackson:** *That would be perfect, just let me know when you want to talk.*

**Annie:** *I'll call you in a week or two when I have more info.*

**Jackson:** *Thank you!*

My entire body is humming with adrenaline. A few days ago, when I was enjoying my last day in Italy, Dad called to tell me that he and my mom had just gotten back from a trip to Dana-Farber Cancer Institute in Boston where Mom goes to have monthly tests that make sure her body is responding to the gene therapy treatment that's kept her cancer at bay for the last decade. And for the first time since starting the treatment, her tests were not normal. While they've been scheduling more tests to determine what the abnormal results mean, and what's next for my mom, I've been feeling extremely guilty that I'm not there to help. Thanks to racing, grad school, and my career, I've spent the last ten years either in Park City or Europe. This feels like a wake-up call that maybe it's time to go home.

*But you have a dream job for the National Ski Team*, a whiny voice in the back of my head reminds me. I know I'd be stupid to throw that away. But my parents have sacrificed everything to make racing possible for me, including my dad living in Europe with me in my late teens and early twenties while my mom stayed in Boston to raise my little brother. Being there to support them through whatever comes is the least I can do.

Annie was the first person I reached out to in the area to see about potential jobs, and I didn't expect her to know of anything right away. I figured I'd start putting feelers out now with the hopes of moving home maybe this summer, after the ski season is over. But that was back when I thought Josh might be skiing his last season. Now, moving back to New England feels like the perfect antidote to Nate's sudden arrival. I'm almost giddy with the possibility of putting a couple thousand miles distance between us.

I shoot off a text to my dad.

**Jackson:** *I just heard from Annie Dilmont. She thinks there's a PT position at Danforth opening up. I don't have many details yet, but I'm already seriously considering it.*

**Dad:** *Don't get ahead of yourself. This all may be nothing, and even if it's not, we don't expect you to leave a career you love to move home.*

Home. I honestly don't know where that is anymore. Probably Blackstone, where my parents live full time now and where I grew up spending every weekend skiing in the winter.

**Jackson:** *I'll keep you posted. And let me know as soon as you find out more info about Mom's tests. I'll be home all weekend.*

I find the remote and turn my gas fireplace on, then gather a few pillows up and put them against the arm of my sofa before settling back, pulling a blanket over my lap, and taking a moment. I exhale, relieved that despite the intensity of my work and this new complication with Nate, I have this sanctuary.

Of course, from my perch on the couch I can see a to-do list a mile long—scuffed trim that needs to be repainted, the gorgeous metal pot rack Sierra gifted me before she moved out three months ago that's still in the box propped up against the wall leading into my kitchen, the two baskets of clean laundry that I need to put away, the stack of mail I need to go through, the hiking boots I meant to return before my trip. All the things I meant to do before my trip. All things I don't feel like dealing with right now.

I reach over to my bag, and pull the medical files out. I was supposed to have reviewed them earlier today, but I was sidetracked by my visit to the team doctor about my hand. I hate bringing work home, but I needed to get out of there after endless planning meetings this afternoon.

Nate's file is so thick it's like opening an encyclopedia. I start at the back, with the details I'm intimately familiar with. *Donated kidney to mother, age 19.* Details about his recovery from the surgery fill the page, but I was there for every minute of that experience and know even the

details that the medical files leave out: how we all—especially his mom—tried to talk him out of it; how he delayed college for a semester because of the recovery; how hard it was on him emotionally to not be able to ski that first winter; how, even when he could ski again, it was like a part of him was missing because it was too dangerous for him to race; how he threw himself into my racing instead, even coaching me in my speed events once I left college and raced for the National Ski Team; how, in some ways, he was never the same after that surgery.

My phone vibrates, an angry buzzing that punctuates the silence. I grab it with my left hand and rest it on my knees so I can slide my finger across the screen to accept the call. *You just had to hit him with your right hand?* I chastise myself.

TJ's face and his stupid lopsided grin fills the screen. "Hey, Jackson Hole," he says, using the nickname he's had for me ever since finding out I was named after the ski resort where my parents found out they were expecting me and immediately eloped. "Why am I looking at your ceiling?"

"Sorry!" I fumble the phone as I grab it with my left hand and hold it so he can see my bandaged right hand, "It's hard to function with my right hand all wrapped up."

"Yeah, I heard about that." He winces. "You hit your knuckles on your desk? Hard enough to bruise them?"

I try not to react to the disbelief in his voice. That's my story and I'm sticking to it. "Yeah, kind of stupid." I roll my eyes. "Must be the jet lag."

"You sure this has nothing to do with that medical file I left in your office?"

I flip the camera and hold it above tonight's reading material, focused on the name at the top of the page. *Nate Davenport*. "You mean this one, you traitor?"

"Jackson," TJ says, his voice consoling and admonishing at once.

"Don't 'Jackson' me," I say, flipping the camera back to my face. "You could have warned me. You know, a text or something while I was away. Or you could have at least told me before I went into my office, instead of leaving that file on my desk like a coward." Hopefully the lighting is low enough that TJ can't really tell how upset I am—both about Nate's reappearance and what feels like TJ's betrayal.

"I only found out two days ago. I wanted to tell you, but I wasn't sure how you'd react. You know crying chicks aren't really my thing." TJ's lips

are set in a firm line, like he wants to shut this conversation down.

“I hate you so much right now,” I say. “And I wouldn’t have cried. Any tears I had for Nate dried up years ago.”

“I know, but I was worried about what you *would* do. Sometimes your unpredictability is your strength,” he tells me, and I have to hide the smile that springs to my lips over how surprised Nate seemed when I punched him. “But it also makes it hard to have difficult conversations with you.”

“Don’t blame this on me! You just didn’t want to have the hard conversation in the first place.” I’m thankful that my boss is also a close friend and that I can be brutally honest with him outside of work. One of TJ’s most infamous stories is about how he ended up in Park City. He moved halfway across the country because he was too chicken to tell his college girlfriend that he didn’t want to stay together after graduation. Put him toe-to-toe with a livid male athlete and he can more than hold his own, but TJ doesn’t do well in confrontations with the female half of the population.

“Hey . . .” he says, but two sharp knocks at my door draw my eyes away from the screen.

“Gotta go,” I tell him. “Josh is at the door.”

I hit the button to end our video call and slide the phone into the pocket of my hoodie as I make my way toward the door. Two sharp knocks is Josh’s signature arrival. In my head I run through all the things I want to say to him. *What kind of asshole just up and retires without telling their physical therapist? How could you just desert me like this without any notice? Did you know that Nate would be added to the team and I’d be training him?*

Of course, I won’t say any of that, both because I respect him and because his wife Lauren is one of my best friends.

As I unlock the door, I ponder why it didn’t occur to me to stop and see him and Lauren on my way home since they live just down the hall. *Oh wait. Shit! Double shit!* While I was gone, they moved into the house they were building up on one of the mountains overlooking the valley. I think I forgot to respond to the message Lauren sent with pictures while I was in Italy!

*I’m a terrible friend!* No wonder he didn’t bother telling me he was retiring, I didn’t even respond to his wife’s text.

I throw open the door, ready to start groveling.

My breath catches in my throat. Standing there in my doorway, with a plate of brownies in his hand, is the man I've spent most of my life alternately loving and hating.



At first I'm too stunned to speak, but I can't help my eyes roaming down Nate's body. He's wearing a short-sleeved T-shirt that molds to the hard planes and ridges of his upper body, and fitted sweat pants that show off his huge, muscular thighs. He's also wearing shearling slippers. *What the hell?*

"Peace offering?" One of his eyebrows is raised and a cocky half smile graces his lips as he holds the plate of brownies toward me. His hair, which used to be blond, has darkened to a shade closer to light brown. It's damp and a little on the wild side right now, as if he'd gotten out of the shower and forgotten to brush it.

I just stare at him, not even acknowledging the plate. "How are you in my building?" He's not wearing a jacket. He looks like he came from next door, not from wherever he's living now.

"I live here." He shrugs, a movement that is so classically Nate. The familiarity of it pulls something deep inside me, like an ache in my heart that's also connected to other regions which have a decidedly happier reaction to Nate's physical presence.

I'm having a hard time forming words. Usually the opposite is true, and it's only through practice that I've gotten good at controlling my reactions.

"Pick your jaw up off the floor," he says, but his voice is kind. "I'm subletting Josh's place."

"You're WHAT?" Given the volume of my voice, I'm surprised my neighbors aren't opening their doors to see what's going on.

"I'm pretty sure you heard me." He looks past me, his eyes glancing around my condo. "Are you going to invite me in?"

"Absolutely not!" I draw back a bit in shock that he would even suggest it. Having to see him at work is one thing, but this is my home—the place I come to escape everything else.

"Why?"

"Are you for real? Five years without a word from you. Not one text, not one call." I was in the ICU after my crash at Val d'Isère, France for a

week after he left, and he didn't even come back to see me. My brutal tone reflects my anger. One thing I've figured out very clearly since he's been gone is that it's easier to be angry with him for walking away from what we had than it is to focus on how completely he shattered my heart. "Now you show up here with no notice and I'm supposed to *work* with you? And come to find out, you're *living* down the hall from me. And you don't know why I'm not inviting you into my home?"

"Could you give me a chance to explain? I want to make things right."

If he'd come back four years ago with a good excuse, I may have listened—but I promised myself then that one year was enough time to obsess about where he was, if he was okay, and if he was coming back. Wasting any more than a year on him was pathetic, so I willed myself through it then and every day since.

"Making things right is literally impossible." I don't say what I'm really thinking—*there is nothing you can say to undo the damage you have done*. I don't need to give him the satisfaction of knowing how completely he destroyed me.

I pause and consider the amount of time we'd spend together if I were his physical therapist. "And there's no way the two of us could ever have the kind of partnership you'll need with your PT. Take that idea you have about us working together and put it out of your mind. I won't try to get you taken off the team, but I'll never work with you." I start to shut the door, but he puts a hand on it, just enough for me to stop and listen to his parting blow.

"Jackson, you're not going to throw away your whole career just because I'm here." He lifts one eyebrow like he's challenging me to disagree, and I just want to wipe that look right off his face. If he thinks his newly minted place on the team affords him more weight in this decision than my years on the team combined with my years working there, he's insane.

*It's not my career that's at stake here*, I think to myself as I slam the door in his face and slide the deadbolt into place.



I listen to his retreating steps down the hallway, left with nothing but questions. Hundreds of them that I've collected over the years, and a few new ones that have sprung up with his reappearance today. Questions Nate could have answered, but because I don't ever want him to know how badly he hurt me, I refused to let him explain.

I make my way back to my couch and close the folder with Nate's medical files, setting them on the ground. Even though I know they might have some of the answers I'm looking for, they aren't what I need. Only Nate can tell me *why* he walked away from a seven-year relationship over a seemingly minor argument we'd had many times before. What made that night, that fight, different? It wasn't relationship-ending stuff, it was typical figure-out-your-future-together stuff.

I glance at the oversized wooden clock on my wall and do the math. It's still only 4:30 a.m. in Italy. Marco won't be up, and yet I eye my phone wondering if I should just call him anyway. But that wouldn't be fair to him. He's started his daily training sessions on snow now and he'll need his sleep to recuperate. I can wait another hour or two.

I lose track of how long I lie there, memories of Nate and I running through my head. Part of what makes it so hard is that most of the memories are good. Really good. Finally, I pick up my phone that's been resting on my stomach and dial Marco.

His voice is groggy when he answers.

"Did I wake you? I'm so sorry," I say, my voice barely above a whisper. And despite how badly I need to talk to him, I mean it. I know how important it is for him to be well rested. I'd never want to put his training in jeopardy.

"S'fine," he slurs, like he's still trying to get his vocal cords to rise to the challenge of speaking.

"Something big happened, and I knew you'd want to know."

"What is it, *Bella*?"

I sink deeper into the pillows of my couch, wishing they could swallow me whole and transport me into Marco's arms. "Nate's here. In Park City. Somehow when I was in Italy he weaseled his way onto the team. Josh retired, and now I'm supposed to train Nate, and I'm *freaking out so bad* right now."

"You're saying all these words," he says, "but they don't make sense. How could Nate have made the team? He hasn't competed in . . . wait, has

he been competing?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think so. But somehow, he made the team. And he’s living in Josh’s condo *right down the hall* and now I’m supposed to be his physical therapist. I can’t do that. There’s no way.”

Marco pauses, the line silent except for the background noise of his sheets rustling. I picture him sitting up, throwing his legs over the side of the bed, and rubbing his thumb along his forehead where it meets his hair, like he does when he’s stressed. “Let us approach this logically. I mean, maybe this will be a good thing for you?” His voice, soft with his Italian accent, is so hopeful.

“A good thing.” My voice is dead, the emotion completely missing. I take a bolstering breath. “I punched him today, bruising my knuckles in the process, and my hand is all wrapped up in a splint with ice. That was within the first thirty seconds of seeing him. Can you even imagine what will happen if we have to work together?”

“Maybe you will finally learn the reasons for . . .” The lilt of his accent rattles in the back of his throat. “Everything?”

“You are supposed to be on my side, here!”

“I am always on your side, love. But I’m also not going to lie to you. Your hatred is eating you up inside. It’s preventing you from moving on . . .”

“I *have* moved on,” I insist.

“Are you sure about that? Because moving on also means letting go. Your hatred is like an obsession, and holding onto it gives him power over you.”

I roll my eyes even though he can’t see me. “I am not obsessed with him.” The words are barely loud enough to hear.

“I said you’re obsessed with hating him. And maybe if you find the answers you need, you’ll finally be able to let go.”

“I let go a long time ago, Marco.”

“Hmm,” he replies, and I can picture him shaking his head.

“What are you doing now?” I ask, suddenly desperate to change the topic.

“Getting up. I’ll need a double espresso to get going today.”

I picture him fumbling around his room, pulling his sweats on as he stands barefoot on the travertine floors of his bedroom while the dark beams of his ceiling hang over his head. He’s always groggy in the



morning, stumbling around, like his body needs to warm up before the adrenaline rush that fuels him floods his system.

“Sorry about waking you up,” I tell him. “But don’t have a double, or you’ll be impossible today.”

He chuckles. “Good thing you’re not here then, because I’m having a double.” He pauses for a beat. “I miss you. Can’t wait to see you in Finland next month.”

“Yeah, I hope so,” I tell him.

“What do you mean? Is that race in question?”

The first men’s World Cup Slalom and Giant Slalom races are in Levi, Finland in three and a half weeks. “Everything’s a question right now. I have no idea what events Nate will be racing in yet.” Just because Josh was going to Levi doesn’t mean Nate is. “And I’m still hoping I can get out of training him. I have to try to switch roles with someone else . . . maybe Nicolette,” I say as the plan starts to formulate in my head. Nicolette is the physical therapist assigned to work with the sports medicine division that helps injured athletes recuperate at the Center. But maybe she’d be game for traveling as Nate’s PT instead? “Which would keep me here in Park City for the winter instead of on the World Cup circuit.”

“I understand why you want this change, but you staying in Park City will make *our relationship* much more difficult. I can’t only see you once every couple of months.” His voice has that pleading quality he only gets when he’s asking for something he really wants.

“I know. We’ll figure it out, promise. Let me talk to TJ tomorrow and see what my options are.”

“I don’t like that you’re letting Nate influence your career like this,” Marco says.

“You aren’t suggesting I work with him, are you?” I ask Marco.

“I don’t know. I just want you to be happy.”

“I *am* happy, Marco,” I tell him, and am rewarded with his trademark sound of disagreement, that *Hmm* that rattles from the back of his throat.

*I could be happy, I want to say, if I wasn’t so worried about my mom and if my ex-boyfriend hadn’t just walked back into my life.*

## CHAPTER 4



### JACKSON

*Park City, Utah*

I arrive at the Center an hour early, and find TJ exactly where I know he'll be, in the free weight section of the gym getting his own workout in before the athletes arrive.

"You just going to stand there staring at me, or do you want to come make yourself useful?" he calls from his horizontal position on the bench. I don't know how he can even see me behind him.

"You know what I'm going to say about this workout, don't you?" I ask as I walk from the doorway toward the bench press.

"Save your lectures, Jackson Hole," he says as he lifts the bar from the rack above his head.

"If one of our athletes bench-pressed this much weight without a spotter, you'd rip them a new asshole. One wrong move and you could crush your ribcage, or worse, your neck."

"Yeah, well," he grunts out as he holds the bar high above his chest, "I didn't know you'd be happening along. Lucky me."

"Lucky you indeed." I throw his sarcasm back at him and slip my hands under the bar while he lifts it to its full height.

His face contorts into a grimace as he lowers it down toward his chest before pushing it back up. “What’s on your mind?” he grunts out before lowering the bar for his second rep.

“What makes you think I have something on my mind?” I ask, keeping my voice light and casual.

“You have your thinking face on,” he says once the bar is back up and he’s taken a deep breath. “Spit it out.”

“I can’t train Nate,” I tell TJ. “You know our history. There’s no way we can have a positive professional relationship. He needs someone who can support him unconditionally, who wants the best for him, and who will stop at nothing to help him win. I’m not the right person for that job.”

He opens his mouth to say something, but I barrel on. “I think Nicolette could be perfect for this position, though. She has so much experience training injured athletes, and for all intents and purposes Nate has been an injured athlete for years. He needs someone like her. I could stay behind and work with the recovering athletes. I know them all pretty well, and I have the skill set to oversee their recovery. It’s a perfect swap.”

When the weight bar reaches its full height again, TJ eases it back onto the rack and sits up with a huge groan. He only did four reps, so I know he’s not racking the weights because he’s done working out. The fact that he needs to sit up for what he’s about to say is not a good sign.

He turns and looks up at me. “Jackson, I have tremendous professional respect for you, so please believe me when I say this. *You* are the perfect person to train Nate. *You* are the best at what you do. *You* are the one who can get the most out of your athletes, pushing them to do more than they thought they could and keeping them healthy while they exceed their own limits. Not Nicolette or anyone else.” TJ points at me like he’s trying to drill this information into me as he repeats, “*You*. That’s why he was assigned to you.”

In any other circumstance, hearing these words from my boss would be immensely gratifying.

“TJ, I *can’t*.” My voice is practically a whisper as I force it out past the lump in my throat. I break eye contact and glance out the window at the bright sunshine.

“You don’t have a choice,” TJ says, his gruff voice rolling out softly. My head snaps back to him. “What do you mean?”

“Remember when I said there were some higher-ups making noise about your relationship with Marco? Well, this is their litmus test for you. If your loyalty is to the team, you’ll train Nate.”

“That’s not fair, TJ. Even if I weren’t dating Marco, Nate would be the one person I would never, ever want to work with. You know why I can’t train him. You have to understand.”

“I do, Jackson, and I fought for you. But this is out of my hands. Even Coach McCarthy wants you working with him. And you should take it as a compliment. You’re the best at what you do, and Nate needs that if he’s going to live up to all that potential.”

“This is a trap, and I’m the one who’s going to get hurt.”

“I’m sure you two can manage to keep things professional,” he says.

I roll my eyes. “Your faith in us is unfounded.”

“It’s been *years*, Jackson. That must be water under the bridge by now, no?” he asks as he wipes his palms on his workout shorts.

*I wish.* “Yeah, sure. Water under the bridge.”

“Listen, you need to get in the right state of mind for today. You have a training session with him this afternoon. Go do some yoga or whatever you need to do to get your head right. Clear your schedule for this morning if you need to, but be back for our team meeting after lunch. And be ready to face Nate after that. Okay?”

I look down the aisle of free weights toward the mirrors, and am surprised to see that I look calm. *I can fake my way through this. At least for today.*

“All right. I’ll see you after lunch then.” I turn and walk past the balance boards and the wall of TRX suspension belts and battle ropes, toward the door.

“Jackson,” TJ calls, and I turn to face him. “Tread carefully. Don’t let your emotions make your decisions for you here.”

I know this warning is coming from a place of love, that he’s giving me this advice because he wants what’s best for me. Still, all I want to do in this moment is to make Nate and the pain of the past five years go away. I nod at TJ, then head out the door. I know exactly where I need to go.



“Well, aren’t you a sight for sore eyes!” Nurse Patty says as I stop by the desk to check on Ms. Juarez before I show up in her room. “And you picked a good morning to stop by. She’s been up since the crack o’ dawn and she’s already complaining about the lack of entertainment today. No cards or bingo happening, so she’s agitated.”

“Well I brought her some books of crossword puzzles and word searches, so maybe that will help. She’s not too agitated for a visit, is she?” Agitated is the term we use for when Ms. Juarez becomes so mean you just can’t stand being around her. At ninety-four, it doesn’t take much to get her worked up, and she stopped holding her tongue years ago, long before I met her.

“Nah, it’s a fairly good day so far, all things considered. And good on you, trying to keep that mind of hers sharp!” Patty says, her southern accent coming through nice and thick.

“Thanks, Patty,” I say, sliding three different packages of Swiss chocolate and Italian candies off the pile of books in my arm. I set them on the counter in front of her. “This is for the nursing staff, so make sure you share.”

“Ooh, you got us some fancy-ass candy from Europe. You have the best time over there in Italy with that hottie boyfriend of yours?” She reaches across the counter and squeezes my forearm affectionately.

“Sure did.” I wink, then head off to visit Ms. Juarez in her private room at the end of the hall.

She’s sitting in the reclining chair—the kind you always find in hospitals, with very little padding and a wipeable vinyl fabric—looking out the window. She’s got pillows propped on both sides of her to hold her steady. Her hair is a bright white against her dark skin, the long, wavy locks are wrapped in a bun on top of her head, and she sits with her hands folded in her lap.

“Well, well. Look what the cat dragged in,” she says, after glancing sideways at me in the doorway. “It’s been so long I thought maybe I outlived you.”

At ninety-four, she’s outlived everyone she once knew. When I met her a few years ago doing clinical rotations in a rehabilitation facility during my doctoral program, she’d just had a hip replacement. She wasn’t able to live independently anymore, so she moved to a nursing home and has been here since.

“Now Ms. Juarez,” I say as I come and sit on the end of her hospital bed because it’s the nearest seat to her. “You knew I was going to Italy for a month.”

“Did I?” She looks back out the window with her chin jugged in the air, sounding disinterested rather than confused.

“I sent you three postcards just so you wouldn’t forget,” I say, scanning the room because I’m sure she has them somewhere. Sure enough, they’re taped along the bottom edge of the mirror that hangs over the dresser.

“Hmph. My dementia isn’t *that* bad.”

“I’ll start worrying about your dementia when you forget to tell me about it,” I say. She’s got a mind as sharp as someone half her age, though according to her own self-diagnosis her memory is failing. Granted, she was a legal scholar back in the day, a trailblazing career woman who was the first Latina judge in her county and retired after nearly two decades on an appellate court in Texas. So I’m sure her ninety-four-year-old memory is not as exceptional as it once was.

“So, was Italy with Prince Charming everything you hoped it would be?” she asks, her tone flat with an undercurrent of bitterness. She’s still looking out the window rather than at me, and her frail hand now clutches the blanket that’s draped around her shoulders with such force that her hand is shaking.

I never claimed Marco was Prince Charming or set any expectations about this trip, so I know that this isn’t about me. Her propensity to lash out when she’s hurt or scared makes her so human that I can almost feel her pain. It’s her one vulnerability, and I think it’s this commonality that’s kept me coming back and visiting her weekly for years now.

“Have you ever been to Italy?” I ask, rather than answer her question.

“I was supposed to go once, more than sixty years ago, but it didn’t work out.”

“You never wanted to visit since then?”

“I never wanted to be reminded of Jack.” She says his name the way you’d talk about a restaurant that gave you food poisoning.

“I don’t think you’ve mentioned Jack before,” I say, wondering why she doesn’t want to be reminded of him, and why going to Italy would make her think of him.

Her head snaps back as she glances over at me, and I can feel a Ms. Juarez-style story coming. She doesn’t tell stories so much as she spews

them, rarely pausing for breath.

“I’ve never told you about Jack? Jack Wilder was the last man I ever loved, and the only man I ever loved to hate.” She pauses, choosing her words. “We were working on a case together in the summer sometime in the early sixties. It was long hours in the sweltering city, but I didn’t mind it because I was in love and engaged. We were busy daydreaming about honeymooning in Italy the following summer just to escape another Houston summer. I assume you know what Houston is like in July? The air can feel like walking through a steam bath of piss.” She sighs.

“Anyway, I knew this was the case that was going to make my career, and Jack made the long hours of depositions and combing through evidence a bit more bearable. He was the first man who ever really appreciated me for my brain, not just my body—because back then, wooo, did I have a body,” she says, smacking her lips together. “I guess I was naïve, thinking we could all find our own Martin Ginsburg. The man who will love you even when you’re more successful than him, cook for you because you can’t be bothered with trivial shit like that; someone who was looking to celebrate my successes, who knew that my light would amplify his, rather than dim it. Maybe Ruth Bader got the only guy like that.”

It’s impossible for me not to think of Nate and how he was that person for me. How he was my biggest supporter, how my successes brought him as much happiness as if they were his own, how for years he lived for me and my racing career. And how I was secretly ready to walk away from racing forever so that he could finally get back into it if he wanted. I just wanted that one crystal globe first, just wanted to say that for one year I was the best in the world, and then I’d tell him I was retiring. As it turned out, I never got the chance.

“What’s wrong?” Ms. Juarez asks, carefully assessing my face with her narrowed eyes as I shake my head trying to sweep the memories out of my brain.

“Nothing,” I mumble.

“You look like you saw a ghost. You’re not thinking about that cad who left you years ago, are you?”

It’s funny how old memories can still feel so fresh, so painful. I wonder if that’s how she feels when she thinks about Jack Wilder after all this time?

“I’m fine,” I tell her. “So what happened with Jack? He wasn’t your Martin Ginsburg, I take it?”

“Lord, no. It was a Friday night in early August. I was sifting through boxes of paperwork and evidence looking for something, anything, that would confirm something our client had told us in a deposition a week before. And lo and behold, I found it. I was ecstatic, jumping around that conference room with a receipt from a gas station in my hand. And Jack was jumping right along with me before he kissed me, telling me how brilliant and beautiful I was. I knew that this was my shot for partner. I’d thrown everything I had into that job . . . I did not make it to thirty-two, still unmarried, to not make partner. Jack and I agreed that since it was late on a Friday night after everyone else was gone, we’d meet with the partners on Monday morning and tell them what I’d found. I spent all weekend planning what I was going to say. And you know what happened when I walked into that conference room again Monday morning?”

I shook my head, already prepared for the punch in the gut that I knew was coming for thirty-two-year-old Ms. Juarez.

“They’d made Jack partner. He’d gone behind my back over the weekend, shared *his* big break in the case, and they were so busy passing around cigars when I walked into the conference room that they didn’t even notice I was there.”

“Why would he do that?” My heart breaks for her, having her triumph stolen away from her like that.

“Because he could. Claiming success without merit—it’s the oldest story in the book. He told me he did it for us, because he couldn’t possibly marry me if I was both Latina *and* technically his boss.”

The hiss that escapes my lips is filled with the anger I feel on her behalf.

“You know what? He should have thought about that before he proposed. I went to a different firm and my career took off, eventually I became a judge, and you know the rest. I bested him in every possible aspect of our field, while he was forced to retire early because it turns out he was an even worse partner than he was a junior lawyer.”

“So in the end you got your revenge,” I say.

“Yes, but . . .” She pauses, giving me time to lean in. Ms. Juarez likes to know her audience is hanging on her every word. “It was a hollow victory. I would have been better off if I’d forgiven him.”

“What?” My whole body leans back involuntarily. “You’d have wanted to marry someone who could do something like that to you?”



“Marry him? No. But you can forgive someone without giving your heart back to them,” she says, and the truth of that statement hits me like a ton of bricks. Just as I suspect she wanted it to.

“But why would you forgive him? It doesn’t sound like he deserved it.”

“I held on to that bitterness and hatred for decades. I used it to push me forward in my career, but then every success was just a way to prove I was better than him. In the end, nothing I did was about me,” she says, her voice thick with emotion, “it was always about him. How much happier could I have been if I’d forgiven him and moved on? I could have appreciated and enjoyed my life so much more if I wasn’t holding on to all that negativity. Years ago, I went to his funeral and dropped a rose on his grave. I walked away wishing I could have back the forty years I spent hating him, so I could have spent that time loving someone else instead.”

“Your heart couldn’t handle both hating him and loving someone else?”

“You can’t grow weeds and grass in the same garden. Hatred and bitterness are like those weeds, and unless you spend your time fighting the weeds and nurturing the grass, the weeds just take over. In the end it hurt me more than it hurt him. Sit with that for a minute.”

I do as she says, wondering if that’s what I’ve been doing with Nate—spending so much of my energy hating him that I can’t nurture and grow in other areas of my life? Other relationships?

“You’re much too young to be this bitter.” She shakes her head and I know this is her way of telling me to let go of this hurt I’ve been carrying around for the past five years, but she knows better than anyone how impossible that is. “Anyway, do you want to play a game? Maybe Scrabble?”

“Sure, let’s play Scrabble,” I say, thankful for the opportunity to think about something other than my own baggage. I get the big board out, the one I gave her last Christmas because it has plastic ridges between the squares on the board so she can set the tiles in and they don’t move. It’s hard for her to line them up just right otherwise.

Halfway through the game, she looks up at me. “Thanks for coming, sweetie. I’m sorry for bringing up all that history earlier, but I just had the sense that you needed to hear it.”

I ignore the implication that I’m following in her footsteps, and instead tell her, “I’m always happy to hear about your life.” I hope she knows how much I mean that. Since she has no family, every story and every memory

will die with her, except for the ones I can keep alive. And maybe in the end, this is what keeps me coming back week after week. Because we all need someone to listen to us, to know us.



I return to work more conflicted than I left. I probably would have been better off if I'd just gone to yoga like TJ suggested. Then I'd be relaxed and ready to face Nate later today without losing my cool, and potentially losing my job. Instead, I'm left mulling over my conversation with Ms. Juarez and wondering if I'm determined to end up alone too, bitterness having hollowed me out like it did to her.

*No, you've moved on. You just need to keep moving forward and not looking back,* I remind myself. But that was so much easier to do before Nate showed up.

I slide into my seat at our team meeting right before the men's head coach, Matt McCarthy, walks in. Josh's old coach, Lyle, who is one of the team's assistant coaches is right behind him. The coaches don't normally join our PT team meetings, but I suspect they're here to make sure we can take good care of Nate.

"Jackson." He nods to me as he takes the seat next to mine. "How're you doing?"

"I'm fine, Coach, how are you?"

He looks at me without answering, just stares at me for fifteen seconds that feel like fifteen minutes, his dark brown eyes assessing me. I swallow and raise my eyebrows, refusing to be intimidated by him. I've studied human behavior enough to know how I *should* act, and when I should act that way. In this case, Coach McCarthy is clearly trying to get me to crack—though I'm not sure what he expects. "Are you really okay?" he finally asks.

"I'm fine, Coach. Why wouldn't I be?" I don't know who the "higher-ups" are that TJ claims are making noise about my relationship with Marco. But I do know that he said Coach McCarthy specifically wanted me training Nate. So unless I want to be out of a job, I'd better act like I'm damn pleased to do just that. And if I happen to find another job soon, I can walk

out of here with my head held high, having not lost my shit—or my job—just because Nate reappeared like a ghost from my past.

“Good,” he says, the word clipped and decisive.

TJ kicks us off with a status update on each of the returning athletes on the men’s team. There are no surprises there. Even Jeff Beltzer, who had broken his collarbone in a dirt bike accident at the beginning of the summer, is fully recovered. Heading into this season, we’re in an extremely good place in terms of our athletes’ health, probably better than any of the past three seasons I’ve been here.

And then we get to Nate.

“Okay, so what is this guy’s deal?” Lyle asks, and I’m taken aback because I’d assumed he’d been on the team of coaches who granted Nate’s “coaches’ discretion.” But he seems as surprised by this new addition to our team as I am. “How did he go from being social media famous to racing on the men’s alpine team? Because there are some damn qualified men on the C and D teams that were probably hoping for that spot.”

I’ve never seen anyone challenge Coach McCarthy, especially not one of his own coaching staff. I clasp my hands together in my lap because my protective instincts are kicking in even though they have no business doing so. But it’s hard to hold my tongue when what I really want to say is that he shouldn’t underestimate Nate, whose raw talent when it comes to skiing is second to none. He may not have been able to race for years for health reasons, but if he’s half as good as he used to be, he deserves this spot. What he doesn’t deserve is my blind faith in him, but somehow my brain can’t quite convince my heart of that.

Coach glances down at my hands, takes in my fingers seized around each other before meeting my eyes.

“Work with him a bit, Lyle,” Coach says, his flat baritone voice that’s usually devoid of emotion is heated as he swings his eyes across the table to his assistant coach. “You’ll see that he very much belongs on the team.”

“Can you tell us how this happened, at least?” Lyle asks. “I mean, he hasn’t raced on an FIS course in what, a decade? How did he end up on this team?”

“Davenport’s an exceptional skier. You may know he was invited to join the development team during his senior year of high school. I was in your shoes at the time”—he nods his chin to Lyle—“and I was the one who recruited him. He accepted, but then he decided to forgo his skiing career so

he could donate one of his kidneys to his mom, who was suffering from kidney failure. You probably also know that he then coached Jackson here,” he says as he nods to me and all heads at the table swivel in my direction, “for a few years when she was still racing.” Blessedly, he doesn’t mention that we were dating, though it’s impossible that there’s anyone sitting at this table who doesn’t already know. “Since then, he’s been out there making Warren Miller-style videos, but that’s a reckless waste of his talent if you ask me. We’ve kept in touch here and there, and when he contacted me about getting back into ski racing, I was open to the idea. Excited for the possibility, actually, because the kid’s still got it. I met with him twice in the last nine months, put him through every test I could think of, set the hardest courses I could imagine. And you know what he did? He skied them faster than anyone else on this team ever has. So yeah, he earned his place,” Coach says, planting his hands firmly on the table on either side of the notebook and tablet stacked in front of him as if to say *Conversation closed*.

My hands loosen in my lap, mirroring the relief I feel. I don’t want to train Nate. I don’t want him here in my life. But damned if I don’t think he finally deserves his chance to prove himself. If only he could have done this sooner, maybe things between us would have turned out differently.

*Nope, don’t go there, Jackson*, I tell myself. I recognize that ache in my chest and refuse to give in to this line of thought. I’ve been down this path of imagining different outcomes for me and Nate way too many times over the years.

Now that I’ve moved on, there’s no point in looking back.

Coach McCarthy turns to me. “He has his doctor’s clearance, but I need you to make sure there’s no reason he can’t compete. If you have any hesitation at all, I need to know, and I need to know right away.”

“I’m meeting with him later today,” I tell him, and I’m once again astounded at how normal my voice is given the pace at which the adrenaline is pumping through my system.

“Good. I expect a full report no later than tomorrow morning.” With that, Coach McCarthy stands, followed by Lyle, and they leave the room.

I glance over at TJ, who nods in my direction, clearly pleased with my performance. And that’s exactly what it is: a performance.

## CHAPTER 5



NATE

*Park City, Utah*

Jackson has me meet her in her office instead of out in the training room, and the way she's sitting behind that huge desk of hers when I enter lets me know that she needs a physical barrier to hide behind. *Good*. Because she's fearless in the face of anger, and never backs down from a challenge. She doesn't hide unless she's scared.

If she were only mad about me being here, she'd be up in arms challenging me every step of the way. The fact that she's scared has all my sensors turned on high alert, hoping she's fighting her own feelings for me.

"Have a seat," she says without even looking at me. She turns a page in my medical file, her thick pale pink lips pursed.

I sit, watching her flip through the file, intentionally mute. It's like her silence is begging me to speak, to say anything just so she can shut me down like she did at her front door last night. But if she thinks I'm going to be the first to crack, she's dead wrong. I'm playing the long game, and I could sit here looking at that beautiful face, her gorgeous dark hair in its side braid, that seductive crevice where her neck and collarbones meet . . .

yeah, I could stare at this view all day. And if she won't tell me what she's so scared about, I'll just have to figure it out on my own.

*Is she worried about her job?* There is no doubt I'm an asshole for putting her in this position, where she's being forced to work with me against her will. If there was *any* other way, I would have taken it. But it took me so much longer to get to this point than I had planned, and now this backdoor into the National Ski Team feels like the only way back into her life.

*Is she worried about her relationship with Marco?* I sure as hell hope she's worried that my reappearance will spark the flames of what we used to have, and dim whatever misplaced feelings she has for him. Because if there's anything I'm one hundred percent certain about, it's that her feelings for Marco *are* misplaced and I'm happy to be the one to prove that to her.

She clears her throat, but it's not an invitation into conversation as her eyes are still focused on my file.

"How are your parents?" I ask her as she drags a finger across a page. *Guess I'm the first to crack after all. Some things never change.*

She inhales sharply, pauses a beat too long. "They're fine," she says without looking up.

*Are they?* Her mom has been living with cancer since we were juniors in high school. In fact, the first time Jackson ever let her guard down with me was the night she found out her mom was fighting a recurrence from the breast cancer she'd beaten when Jackson was in elementary school. Since then, she's been a success story for a gene therapy that stopped her cancer's growth and allowed her to live a pretty normal life.

But that pause before Jackson's response could mean many things. A lot can happen in five years, and she'd feel no reason at this point to let me in on the private details of her life.

"Your brother?" I ask, trying to engage her in conversation.

She keeps her eyes focused on the pages in front of her when she says, "Last I heard he was in Switzerland."

"Still snowboarding?"

"And partying," she says, a tinge of bitterness in her voice.

Beau Shanahan, a professional snowboarder in his mid-twenties, doesn't seem to be growing out of the party scene. I ran into him last year at a ski resort in Canada, but I don't mention that to Jackson. For years Beau has been competing in the X Games and other similar snowboarding events and

using the prize money to fuel his lifestyle of women, booze, and snowboarding. Probably exactly what Jackson thinks I've been doing with skiing the past few years, but nothing could be further from the truth.

She's not inclined to give me any more information, so we sit in silence for a few minutes until she drags her finger over part of the page she's reading and asks, "What caused the kidney infection?"

"What?" I know what she's referring to, I just want to get her to look up at me.

She raises her eyes—a bright Kelly green around the edges of her irises and a lighter green near her pupils, surrounded by thick black lashes—and holds my gaze before squinting at me like she's trying to read my mind. "Last year, you had a kidney infection. What happened?"

"My kidney got infected."

She pulls her bottom lip between her teeth, biting it while she takes a deep breath. On an exhale she says, "Yes, how?"

"Bacteria got into my urinary tract and infected it." I cross my arms over my chest. Yes, I'm being purposefully obtuse, but she knows how kidney infections happen. Why is she asking?

"UTIs and kidney infections are incredibly rare in males."

"And yet I got lucky," I respond, my voice hard and flat because she's trying to make something out of nothing. I'm sure she wants some excuse to find me unfit to race. But the infection wasn't related to me giving away one of my kidneys, it was just shit luck that was made worse by the fact that I only have one kidney now, so it was that much harder on my body.

She sighs, because she knows I'm not going to give her any more information. *Two can play this game.*

"Your file says you became a vegan after the infection?"

"I did," I confirm. "My specialist and I agreed that there was enough evidence showing that a vegan diet can help with kidney issues to warrant giving it a try."

"How long did that last?" She barely contains her eye roll. The man she dated would never have been a vegan, but I'm not really him anymore.

"Well, I guess it's been about fifteen months or so."

Her head snaps back a bit, like she's been slapped.

"Wait? You're still a vegan?" Her eyes move from my face, slowly scrolling down my body. Her look is impossible to read. That's new. She

could never hide her emotions before, a reality that was sometimes difficult for her when it came to interviews with the press after a bad race.

This closed off, guarded look she has now is probably hard earned, and I can't help but wonder if I was the cause of this new skill set she's developed. That possibility twists my stomach with guilt again. I didn't do anything that wasn't necessary at the time, but it kills me that I've caused her pain and that I've missed these years with her.

"Yes, still a vegan. You seem surprised."

"I didn't think . . ." She pauses and her eyes sweep down across my arms and my chest. "You have more muscle mass than I would have expected given the lack of animal protein."

"I think you'll find I'm stronger than ever. Better endurance too," I assure her with a smirk.

"Hmph," she responds, looking back down at my medical file, her cheeks turning pink. It's good to know that a bit of sexual innuendo still has the same effect.

There's so much we need to talk about, but she's closed off and I'm going to have to slow roll this. She needs to trust me before she'll open up at all, before she'll allow this to be anything more than a strictly professional relationship. Plus, she has a boyfriend—for now. I relax into the chair, accepting that this is the beginning of a long uphill battle.

Her silence gives me the opportunity to scan her office, looking for clues to who she is now, and what the past few years have been like for her. Her undergrad degree from Danforth is hanging on the wall, and I was there for that graduation, but next to it is her doctorate from the University of Utah, where she eventually got her PhD in physical therapy. While we were still together, she'd already been taking grad classes online during the off-season, so she must have decided to pursue the doctorate after she recovered from her accident. I was out of the picture by then.

On the credenza behind her desk, under her single, large window facing the mountains, sits a row of picture frames. Most of them are blocked by her chair, but the one on the end catches my eye and I can't believe I didn't see it sooner. It's a picture of Jackson and my mom, about a month before she died. We were in St. Moritz for a race, and my parents flew over to Europe because it was a crucial race for Jax, and because they'd met at a race in St. Moritz back when my mom skied for Canada's National Ski Team.



Jackson had come in second that day, giving her enough race points to move her into first place overall for the season. We were wildly happy and given that both sets of our parents were there, I'd wanted to propose to her at dinner that night. I'd already been carrying the ring around with me for a year at that point. But she'd caught onto my plan before we left the hotel room to head out, and she reminded me that I promised I'd wait until she secured an overall World Cup title. It was the same fight we always had, me ready to put a ring on her finger after seven years of dating and her setting her own goals and expecting me to adhere to her timeline. Dinner was tense that night, but the photo of her and my mom, their heads tucked close in conversation and both of them with huge smiles on their faces, makes me realize that maybe that dinner holds different memories for her. She'd always had a special relationship with my mom, who loved Jackson from the start not only because they had so much in common, but because Jackson brought out the best in me. That weekend was the last time she saw my parents.

Jackson must have looked up at me while I was staring at that photo because when my eyes turn to her, she glances over her shoulder to see what I'm looking at. It takes her a moment to turn back to me, like she's trying to figure out whether this is a conversation she wants to have.

She closes the file folder on her desk and abruptly stands. "All right, let's get your first training session over." She sighs.

Okay, so we're not talking about why she has a photo of her with my mom framed in her office then.

"I thought you said you'd never work with me." My voice is teasing as I repeat her words from last night, but I'm actually trying to get a sense of how hard she fought to get taken off my case.

"Nothing's certain yet. But Coach McCarthy did ask me to make sure you're physically fit enough to undergo the training regimen we'll put you through."

*Nothing's certain my ass.* The *only* thing that's certain is that as long as I'm on this team, Jackson will be my physical therapist. Coach was practically salivating at the possibility of getting me back into racing after he saw my times on the courses he set when we met up at Whistler this past winter. My one condition was that I be allowed to work with Jackson. Negotiation isn't normally part of the invitation process, but I've known Matt McCarthy for a long time. Once he saw my race times, he was willing

to do whatever it took to get me here to Park City. And being near Jackson was what it took.

“Okay,” I say, standing, “let’s do this.”



After my training session with Jackson yesterday, in which I’d blown away any hope of hers that I might not be fit enough to race, my luck continues. I round the corner in the cafeteria at lunch and see Sierra sitting at a table in the corner scrolling through her phone. She’s absorbed in whatever she’s doing, so I’m able to sneak over with my tray and slide into the seat across from her. Her head snaps up, her face friendly, until she sees that it’s me.

“Nope,” she says. “You can’t sit there.”

“Why not? Is this seat taken?”

“Jackson’s my best friend, Nate. And I’m not having lunch with her ex.”

“You’re not eating, so technically we’re not having lunch together,” I say as I gesture at her empty plate.

She pushes her chair back to get up, but I reach across the table quickly and rest my hand on her arm. She stops, her eyes landing on my hand.

“Don’t touch me.”

“Please just hear me out,” I say as I pull my arm back and pick up my fork just to have something to do with that errant hand.

“Why would I do that?”

“Because I’m trying to make things right with Jackson. And if you care about her, you’ll want this for her too.”

“Don’t even think for a minute that you can waltz back in here after all this time and *make things right*.” She enunciates each of my words, her big brown eyes hard as she looks me up and down. She’s hovering on the edge of her seat like she’s going to get up and stalk away at any moment. “You don’t get to make things right for her, Nate, because she already did that for herself. Without you. *In spite of you*. Don’t for a second think that she’s just been sitting here pining away for you, and that your sudden reappearance is going to make everything okay. She’s better off without you.”

“If I believed that she was better off without me, if I even suspected that was the case, trust me, we wouldn’t be having this conversation. But she

and I are meant to be together, Sierra. It's taken me longer to make my way back to her than I wanted, but that isn't a reflection of my feelings for her."

"What do you mean 'make your way back to her'?" she asks, pulling her chair back toward the table as if she intends to stay for this conversation. "If you'd wanted to come back, all you had to do was show up. Preferably years ago."

"I know it probably looks that way, but it's not that simple. I think Jackson deserves to hear this story before you."

"So tell her already." Her eyebrows crinkle down so far a wrinkle forms between them, and I realize that the years I've been gone have been hard on Sierra, like they were on Jackson. That she's carried some of the pain I caused too, even if it was just through suffering with and supporting her best friend.

"I will, but she's not ready to hear it yet," I say. "You know how she is, how sometimes I just have to wait until she's ready."

Sierra nods, and I'm sure she's thinking back to the months I spent pursuing Jackson in high school before she was ready to accept her own feelings, and later, to the years I spent trying to convince her that her professional goals didn't need to be a precursor to our marriage.

"It's too bad you've never been good at listening to her when she says she needs more time," Sierra says, and now her eyebrows are raised in challenge.

"It's too bad she's so good at setting artificial boundaries and building unnecessary walls—"

"Not so unnecessary *now*." She folds her arms as she leans forward in her chair and rests her elbows on the table. "You being here makes everything harder for her, Nate. She's finally happy. After some of the unhappiest years of her life, she's happy. Don't you dare interfere with her relationship with Marco. If you really do love her, then let her be."

"What makes you think Marco makes her happy?"

"Are you serious right now? I mean, I know you haven't spent time with them as a couple, but you have to have seen pictures of them. Can't you just tell how in love they are?"

"I'm not going to argue that they don't love each other, Sierra." I take a drink of water while she waits, her expression manages to convey her skepticism and assure me that she'll claw my eyes out if I hurt her best

friend again. I choose my words carefully. “I’m just saying that I’m not sure how *in love* they are.”

“Nate, you’re reading something into this that isn’t there. They are very much in love, and I strongly suspect they’ll be engaged soon. I’m sure that’ll be hard on you since you spent so long trying to get her to marry you.” She says it like she’s trying to not only stick a dagger in my heart, but twist the blade too. “So back off and let her be happy.”

“I can’t do that, Sierra. If she hears me out about what happened and she shows me that there’s definitely nothing there anymore, then I’ll respect that. If she chooses Marco, I’ll respect that too.” I’ve never allowed myself to envision this outcome, but in the deepest recesses of my brain, I suspect it’s a possibility. I may have broken things so badly that they can’t be repaired. “But until that happens, until I’m one hundred percent sure, I’m not going anywhere.”

“I look forward to you finding out just how wrong you are,” Sierra says as she stands and grabs her tray.

I sit at the table for a few minutes after she leaves, finishing up my tofu and veggie stir-fry and my recovery smoothie. I’d had my first workout with my athletic trainer this morning, and I have a session with Jackson this afternoon. I know she’ll push me harder than she should, just to try to break me. Which is fine. It’s part of how I know she still has feelings. She may think those feelings are hate, but hate and love are so closely intertwined I’m not sure she knows the difference when it comes to us.

## CHAPTER 6



### JACKSON

*Park City, Utah*

I glance at the text for the fifth time in the last hour.

**Sierra:** *Make sure you wear those thigh-high suede boots tonight. Need you in them for a sponsored post on social.*

I'm sure that if I looked back at the carefully crafted and color coded spreadsheet she sends me at the beginning of each month, I'd know what she was talking about. Thankfully she sends me these reminders too. I'm glad she takes care of my social media for me, especially the sponsorships—I have no desire to be in charge of that part of my life. That little blue icon next to my name can be such a blessing and such a curse at the same time.

Glancing back down at the floor around me, I take in the disaster that is now my closet floor with the previous six outfits I tried on strewn about. So far, the only part of my outfit I've successfully chosen are the thigh-high boots, and the high heels are already killing my feet.

I'm going for flirty and fun for girls' night out, but not trying too hard. I can't look too sexy or it'll send the gossip mill into motion as people speculate whether I'm looking for love outside my relationship with Marco. Given how much time we have to spend apart due to our careers, there is constant speculation.

I reach for the black wrap sweater dress I'd first put on. It is gorgeous, but shows a tad too much cleavage. I put the dress back on its velvet hanger and then flip through the neighboring dresses with a little more force than is necessary. *This is so not me.* I'm a no makeup, hair in a braid, wearing leggings to work every day kind of girl. I'd much rather have my girlfriends over to my condo, pour us all heaping glasses of wine, and relax in our pajamas on my couch watching rom-coms. Designer clothing and the Park City social scene are not really my thing.

*Be grateful it pays the bills,* I remind myself.

I stop flipping the hangers when I land on a hunter green sweater dress. I bought this one because of how it played up the green in my eyes, though I've never worn it because it is so short—one of the curses of being five feet, ten inches tall. But with these boots, it could work. I pull it on and am satisfied with how the long sleeves and crew neck cover everything except for the six inches between the tops of the boots and the hem of the dress. Perfect.

My phone pings on the shelf next to me and I grab it and a crossbody bag that I'll use tonight.

**Sierra:** *Be there in two minutes. Will wait for you in the lobby. Want to get some pictures of you in those boots in front of that stone wall before we go out.*

**Jackson:** *Okay, I'll head down.*

I throw my necessities into the bag, sling the leather strap over my shoulder, and head out to the hallway. The elevator chimes as it reaches the third floor, and I rush toward it, glad that I won't have to keep Sierra waiting. Oddly, no one seems to be getting out, so I step quickly forward to make sure the doors don't close before I get in.

The minute I cross the threshold into the elevator, I freeze, because there, staring down at his phone like he's trying to bore holes into it with his eyes, is Nate.

Nate glances up as the doors close behind me. “Holy shit,” he growls.

“What’s the problem?” I’m the one who should be annoyed with him, not the other way around. I’d maintained a very professional attitude all week, despite the number of times he’d tried to bait me with his teasing and despite the fact that he almost always took his shirt off at some point during his workout so I was forced to notice he had an eight-pack that ended with a perfectly cut V that headed down into his gym shorts. He is in the best shape of his life, and happy to flaunt it whenever he can.

“Nothing,” he says, but his eyes are squinting and his brows are drawn down like he’s wincing.

“Then why are you looking at me like that?” I ask as I reach over to the panel and push the button for the lobby.

“Like what?”

“Like you want to murder me.” I used to know Nate so well, I could tell what every single one of his facial expressions meant. By the timbre of his voice, I could tell what he was feeling. I knew what all the nuances of his body language meant. It doesn’t seem that I’ve retained any of that intimate knowledge, those things I once understood without having to even think about them are missing. Nate is a stranger now, as much as I’m sure I am to him.

“You just surprised me.” He shrugs, but he eyes me skeptically and I return his glare. “Going out?”

As if I’d be dressed up like this otherwise. “Yeah, girls’ night. I better not run into you while I’m out.” I don’t know what possesses me to say that. Nate’s dressed in the same sweatpants he was wearing earlier today at the Center, and he clearly hasn’t showered since he worked out. He doesn’t appear like he’s headed out for the night.

“Okay, but fair warning,” he says, “I’m headed out tonight too.”

He’s only lived here for a week, how could he have friends to go out with already? But I don’t ask. I don’t want to know if he has a date or if he’s going out with guys on the team; it doesn’t matter to me and I don’t want him to think I care more than I actually do.

The elevator slows as we approach the first floor and I step toward the door. Nate’s looking back down at his phone, ignoring me. “Hey, Nate,” I say as the doors open again.

“Yeah?” he asks, his eyes sweep up slowly from my toes, along my legs, and up my body, before they land on my face. I wish I could control

the way my body responds, so that I didn't get that slight chill in my spine that comes from nervous anticipation as his eyes moved over me.

"Why didn't you get off, earlier?"

"What?" he asks, his eyebrows shooting up his forehead.

I realize that may have come off sounding more sexual than I intended. "You were already in the elevator when it opened on our floor. So why did you come back down instead of getting off upstairs?"

"Oh." He pauses for a moment like he's trying to remember. "I forgot to get my mail."

He follows me out of the elevator and turns into the mail room. "Have fun tonight," he calls before the glass door shuts behind him.

I walk across the lobby, where Sierra is sitting on a couch with her mouth hanging open. "What just happened?" She stands as I approach and gives me a quick kiss on the cheek.

"I'm not sure. I just had the weirdest exchange with Nate in the elevator." I quietly tell her what happened.

"Hmm," she responds. "Well you look gorgeous, so he's probably just hiding in the mail room beating himself up for ever letting you get away."

"Don't put ideas like that in my head," I insist. "I don't even want to think about a scenario where Nate is regretting his choices."

"Why? Shouldn't you want him pining after you now that you're so much happier without him?"

"I just . . . I don't want to even think about what happened between us. It was all so long ago, I just want to forget there was ever anything there."

"But you haven't forgotten about it," Sierra reminds me. "I hesitate to say this, because I know you've moved on, but maybe you should just talk to him and find out what happened. You know, see if there's a justification for what he did. Aren't you curious?"

By the tone of her voice, I can tell *she's* curious. "If you want to know, why don't *you* just ask him?"

"I have. He will only talk about it with you. Or at least, he says you deserve to be the first to know . . ." She stalls and we both glance toward the mail room as Nate walks out, but instead of waiting for the elevator he heads to the stairwell without even glancing over his shoulder toward us.

"You asked him?" I try not to let the hurt creep into my voice.

"I mean, yeah, in between yelling at him for what he did and telling him to fuck off and get out of your now-happy-without-him life. Of course I



asked. How could I not want to know?”

“Sierra, there’s no way there’s an explanation that will warrant my forgiveness. Disappearing like he did, and not even coming back after my accident while I was in the hospital? The only way what he did could be justified is if someone was holding him captive or something, and we know that wasn’t the case because two years later he showed up on social media, living his best life, clearly not missing anything in regard to our relationship.”

“I know, and I’m with you one hundred percent—what he did is unforgivable. But I guess . . . I just can’t imagine that there’s not a good reason for it all. Maybe if you knew what happened, it’d allow you to get rid of some of this animosity toward him.” She shifts her weight from one foot to the other, back and forth as she talks.

“Animosity?” I roll my eyes because the word seems too benign to describe my feelings.

“Okay, how about hatred, then?” She throws her hands in the air. Sierra’s always been a physical talker, and understanding how she’s feeling is as much about watching her body language as it is about listening to her words. Right now, she’s uncomfortable and frustrated. “It’s almost an obsession, and I hate to see you give him that kind of power.”

Her words are way too close to Marco’s, and they dig at sores I didn’t even realize I still had, just under my skin.

“You think knowing why he left would make me hate him any less?”

“I think at least you’d finally have some answers.”

“I lost everything because of Nate—my racing career, my future, and my dignity. And none of that would have happened if I hadn’t trusted him in the first place. He was the worst kind of mistake and the best thing I can do right now is stay the hell away from him!”

Sierra’s eyes narrow, but she says nothing. Finally, after a moment of us staring at each other, she just blinks and shakes her head. “Okay.”

“What does ‘okay’ mean?”

“It doesn’t mean anything, Jackson. Just okay.”

I want to believe her, but she seems hurt as she reaches into her bag and takes out the small but fancy camera she uses to capture photos of me for social media. It’s substantially more discreet than the one she uses for her work with the team.

“Sierra, I just can’t go back there. I can’t forgive him because he hurt me too badly. And I absolutely cannot open myself up to the possibility that he could ever make me feel that way again.”

In fact, everything I’ve done since he left has been designed to protect myself from experiencing that kind of loss again.

“I just want you to have the closure you deserve,” she says, as she steps closer and takes my hand.

“I’ve had enough closure,” I tell her with a definitive nod of my head. “I have you and Lauren and Petra. I have Marco. I have a fantastic job, and an awesome life. And nothing about Nate being back here is going to change any of that,” I say with more certainty than I feel.

“All right.” She shrugs her shoulders in defeat or disappointment—I’m not sure.

Sierra is so honest and earnest and always determined to see the good in everyone. It’s one of the things I have loved about her since I met her when we were kids. But I don’t love it when she’s applying those same qualities to Nate. Especially because she’s been through all of this with me already—the pain of him leaving, the crushing realization he wasn’t coming back, the difficult rehabilitation of my body and my heart over the past five years. She shouldn’t have it in her to see the best in him anymore. I certainly don’t.

“Sierra, I’m sorry,” I tell her, reaching over to squeeze her shoulder. “I love you, and I know you only want what’s best for me. But when it comes to Nate, I just can’t forget or forgive.”

I wrap her in a hug, and she returns it with one arm while her arm with the camera hangs limp at her side.

After a moment she pulls away, smiles, and says, “Photo time.”

I close my eyes and take a deep breath. Right now, taking photos where I have to pretend that my ex hasn’t thrown my life into a tailspin is the absolute last thing I want. “Of course.” I plaster on a smile as I lean back toward the stone wall for the mini photo shoot.



Petra is chatting up the bouncer outside the bar when we arrive, her curly black hair hanging in big ringlets down the middle of her back. She has her

arms wrapped around herself like her cropped leather jacket isn't keeping her warm, but I'm not fooled for a second. That girl has an amazing rack and she's totally showing it off for the beefcake in front of her, even though he's younger than my baby brother. She's shameless and I love that about her.

When we sidle up next to her, she throws her arms around me. "It's been forever!" she says as she squeezes me in one of her trademark hugs, tight arms holding me to her.

"I missed you too, *Zaichik*." I use her childhood nickname, meaning Bunny in Russian, that she'd told me about when we raced together years ago. Despite competing against each other, her for Austria and me for the US, we'd become good friends. The World Cup circuit was like that—you spent so much time with the women you competed with. Battle lines were drawn for sure, but fast friendships were also formed. And one thing about Petra hasn't changed, she is stunning. Flawless porcelain skin, unbelievable hair, and a body perfectly proportioned for modeling. Which is, in fact, what had originally brought her to the US after she stopped racing years ago. But the modeling industry turned out to be a cesspool and she wanted nothing to do with that, so she got into event planning in New York City. After coming out to Park City for the Sundance Film Festival, she fell in love with the town, started her own event planning company, and stayed.

Petra pulls back from the hug, looks me in the eye, then glances over to Sierra. "You're right, she looks like she needs a girls' night."

I feel the heat creep into my cheeks as I glance over at Sierra, still not sure where we stand after that earlier tiff about Nate. "You've been talking about me?"

Petra rolls her eyes. "Not like that, sweetie. Sierra just mentioned that you were missing Marco and were also pretty stressed about work. I need all the details—your Italy trip, and Nate's return." She raises her eyebrows like she wants me to spill everything about the last five weeks right there on the sidewalk in front of the bouncer and a dozen strangers.

I glance back and forth between them. "That requires drinks," I say before I turn and walk through the doors, then edge my way through the crowd.

We find Lauren near the bar, where she's managed to hold down a small table with four stools. "About time," she says over the noise of the music and the crowd as she pushes three glasses toward us.

“What are we drinking?” Petra asks.

“Vodka tonic with lime,” Lauren says.

“Bleh.” Sierra fake gags. “Could you just give me something sweet with my alcohol, please?”

“You get the next round and you can choose the drinks, eh?” Petra says. “For now, learn to enjoy your vodka without covering up the taste.”

“Enjoy vodka?” Sierra looks toward the ceiling. “Spoken like a true Russian.”

“Only half Russian, but *fully* capable of drinking like one,” Petra boasts as she plays up her accent. It’s true though, she can drink any of us under the table, any night. “Okay,” she says, turning toward me after taking a big sip of her drink. “We want to hear all about Italy!”

“Was it as amazing as it looked?” Lauren asks. “Because those pictures . . .” She pretends to swoon off her chair.

I give them the highlights of the trip, and appreciate that Sierra doesn’t look bored given that she’s already heard most of these details. Then I pull out my phone to show them a few pictures I didn’t post on social media—photos of Marco’s gorgeous country house with the amazing stone pool that felt like it was built into the mountainside.

“Whoa.” Petra puts her hand on my wrist to stop me from sliding over the next photo. “Who is that?”

She peers closer.

“You mean Christian?” I ask.

In the photo, Marco is sitting back on a lounge chair, his very tan chest on display, and looking over at his best friend. Christian is sitting on the side of his lounge chair, facing Marco, the profile of his entire body is on display. With his sun-lightened hair and his bronze skin, he looks like he walked off a yacht in the Mediterranean, which he had done only about a week before this photo was taken.

“Who is Christian?” Petra asks, letting his name roll off her tongue in a sensual purr as she zooms in on the photo.

“Marco’s best friend. You’ve never met him?”

“Honey, where would I have met him?”

“I don’t know, he’s with Marco all the time. Comes to a ton of the races. I guess I thought you might have met him back when we were all racing.”

“I’d remember if I’d met a sex god like that,” she insists and we all laugh. Petra has no filter.

“You know,” Sierra says, leaning closer. “He actually kind of looks like Nate.”

We turn toward her with wide eyes and open mouths.

“Nope,” Petra says decisively. “We are not going there.”

“Going where?” Sierra asks, her face full of confusion, like she doesn’t understand what she just said.

“To the place where I say he looks like a sex god and you say he looks like Nate,” Petra replies, her voice slightly hostile.

“I’m sure that’s not what Sierra meant,” I say, slinging my arm around Petra and whispering “down girl” in her ear, which makes her lips quirk down at one end.

“No, that definitely isn’t what I meant,” Sierra confirms. “Just that he’s got the same hair color and cut as Nate, and look at that straight nose and his jawline. From this profile, he just looks a bit like Nate.”

Okay, so she wasn’t commenting on the fact that both Nate and Christian are in insanely good shape. Bodies of sex gods and all that.

Part of why I’d snapped that photo and then sent it to both of them was that it was an amazing photo of two men at the peak of physical fitness. The kind of photo that male models are always staging and posting on Instagram like “Just a lazy Sunday at the pool with the guys.” The fact that this was one hundred percent real is what makes it so amazing.

Petra takes the phone from my hands and she and Lauren both lean in for a closer look. “Yeah,” Petra agrees, “I can see it.”

“I’ve never met Nate, so I’m not sure,” Lauren says.

“Wait, you’ve never met him?” Sierra asks, then looks at me with confusion in her eyes.

“How would I have met him?” Lauren asks. “I’ve only known Jackson since she started working with Josh, what, two years ago? Nate wasn’t in the picture then.”

“You didn’t meet him before he moved into your condo?” I ask her. I take a sip of my drink, hoping the glass hides my face and she can’t see how torn I am trying not to be mad that one of my best friends rented her condo out to my ex-boyfriend.

“He *what?*” she roars.

I almost choke on my drink in response. “You didn’t know that Nate was living in your condo?”

“I didn’t even know that Nate was in town. He can’t be living in our old place. Josh said he sublet it to the guy who was replacing him on the team.”

The three of us just nod, and I watch Lauren’s face closely as the realization dawns.

“That asshole,” she says, and her long red hair sweeps down into her face as she reaches into her bag and pulls out her phone.

“Are you talking about Josh, or Nate?” Petra asks.

“Both!” Lauren responds. “But more my husband, and I’m about to rip him a new asshole. How did he not tell me this?”

“Maybe he didn’t realize?” Sierra offers. “Does he know that Jackson and Nate were together?”

Lauren levels her with a look. “Does *anybody* not know about that?”

“It doesn’t seem like Josh to purposely sublet a place three doors down from Jackson to her ex-boyfriend,” Sierra says, always the peacemaker. But she’s right, it doesn’t seem like something Josh would do, which is why I’ve found it impossible to reach out and bring it up with him or Lauren this week.

Lauren looks at me. “Did you ask Josh why he did this?”

I shake my head. “I’ve had kind of a crazy week. I figured we’d talk about it tonight.”

She pulls her long hair to one side and winds it around her hand before dropping it. Her lips purse into a line beneath her adorably upturned nose. “I’m going to call him right now and find out what the hell was going through his head.”

“It’s not that big of a deal,” I tell her, but I suspect my voice gives away how hard it is to lie about my feelings on this matter.

“Like hell it’s not,” she says, her voice fierce as she stands. “I’ll be back.”

I watch her retreat toward the rear hallway where the bathrooms are, and I am momentarily distracted by the back of someone standing near the stage with the live band. His hair is a familiar sandy color, a little longer on top but closely cut as it tapers to his neck. His wide shoulders tower over the head of the woman standing next to him, and he throws his head back and laughs, a gesture that’s so familiar even though I haven’t seen it in years.

*No. He can’t possibly be at the same bar tonight.*

And then he leans down to say something to his date, and I sigh with relief because it's not Nate.

Petra leans toward me. "What's it like working with Nate?"

"Super uncomfortable." In my mind I picture his proclivity for taking off his shirt so I'm forced to notice every hard-earned muscle in his upper body. I try to forget how frequently I've had to touch him, especially the ways I've had to use my own body to stretch his out to prevent injury after a workout. Suddenly, this sweater dress feels like a bad idea. I'm so hot I bring my hands, cold from my drink, to my cheeks. "I tried to get out of it," I admit. "I tried to switch places with someone else, but . . . I guess there are some questions about whether my loyalty lies with the team, or with Marco, and having me train Nate is a litmus test of some sort."

"That's such bullshit," Sierra mutters.

"Having to work with him adds insult to injury after what he did to you," Petra says as we see Lauren heading back to the table.

I nod, pissed off even though I understand that the point of our work is to build the best team possible, and Nate is one of the best. I'm even more pissed at myself for the way my traitorous body just reacted to the thoughts of Nate's body. He's been here for less than a week and is already waking up long buried memories.

"What'd Josh say?" Sierra asks Lauren, and though I'm interested in her response, I'm scanning the crowd because I have that prickly feeling along my shoulders and neck that I only get when I'm being watched, and in the back of my mind, all I can think about is that Nate might have shown up here.

"My husband is incredibly distracted right now, and is a complete and utter fool. Jackson, I'm so sorry," she says, reaching across the table and taking my hand. My eyes snap back to her. "He literally didn't put two and two together. Like he didn't realize that *this* Nate, the one replacing him on the team and the one he agreed to sublet our condo to, was *your* Nate."

"He's not *my* Nate," I insist, at the same time Petra asks, "Distracted about what?"

Lauren looks at Petra. "Oh, uh, just this whole process of building the house. It's been ridiculous, all the freaking decisions. And there were quite a few things not done how Josh wanted, so since we've moved in he's been focused on working with the contractors to get everything right." She looks back at me. "But that doesn't excuse this. I never should have put Josh in

charge of subletting the condo with everything he's already doing at the house. Do you want me to evict Nate?"

I smile, a little laugh escaping as I take in all five feet five of Lauren and picture her trying to kick Nate out of his new digs. "You know what, it doesn't even matter," I say, because I've finally accepted that I'm not going to get out of training him and still keep my job. "We work together all day. It's not like we're going to be hanging out at home too." But in my mind, all I can think of was the way Nate's eyes grazed over my body in the elevator earlier tonight. It was a look I recognized, even as I'd tried to so hard over the past years to forget it.

This has the potential to be so, so dangerous.



## CHAPTER 7



NATE

*Park City, Utah*

“Dude,” Jeff says as we undo the straps from our waist so we can roll the weights attached to them back to the start of the sprinting strip that runs through the gym. “I heard you were at Toast on Friday night with a ridiculously hot blonde.”

“Did you now?” I say, refusing to give him any more information.

“Yeah, Steve said he saw you having dinner with . . . how did he describe her . . . a Kate Upton lookalike?”

I had assumed it was a safe bet that I wouldn’t run into any of my teammates at restaurant known for its champagne bar.

“Hmm.” I consider Zach’s assessment. “Yeah, I can see the resemblance.”

“Soooo?” he says, drawing the word out as we walk, bent at the waist, each rolling our heavy disk weights back toward the start line. “You dating someone?”

I glance down at the end of the track and see Jackson there, arms folded in front of her as she glances down at a clipboard she’s holding. “Don’t be a

gossip,” I tell Jeff, hoping that stops this conversation before Jackson hears anything she shouldn’t.

“You had dinner with a Kate Upton lookalike and you think we’re not all wondering who she was?” he asks, his voice louder than I’d like as we inch closer to Jackson.

My realtor is newly and, as far as I can tell, happily married. She lives with her husband in Salt Lake City, and her real estate firm specializes in properties in Park City. But she’s also a curvy bombshell with gorgeous white-blond hair, so I’m not surprised that tongues have been wagging around the Center after I was apparently seen with her.

“She’s just my realtor,” I say, and Jackson’s eyebrows raise in a way that would be imperceptible were I not watching her so closely. In my peripheral vision I notice Jeff glance over at me before he follows my line of sight.

“Oh,” he huffs out under his breath. That word can mean so many things, but he doesn’t elaborate; instead, he peels off to rack his weights as I approach Jackson at the end of the track.

“Does this mean you’re moving out of my building?” she asks as I stack the weights at her feet.

“Ahhh,” I say, standing with my hand over my heart. “You already miss me, and I’m not even gone yet.”

“Just hoping this means I won’t have to run into you outside of work,” she says, and narrows her eyes. I can’t get the vision of her in the elevator on Friday night out of my mind. Those legs that went on for days clad in thigh-high boots, and that ridiculously short sweater dress that brought out her green eyes. I’d never seen anyone look so sexy showing so little skin.

When I don’t respond with more information, she pushes on. “So, were you looking for a new place to live?”

Clearly we’re at the fishing for more information stage, and while I’m not sure if she’s curious about my hot realtor or whether she’s actually hopeful I’m moving out of her building, I know it will drive her crazy if I don’t give her answers. So I reply, “Not exactly.”

“What kind of real estate were you looking at, then?”

“The kind I can invest in,” I say, then reach down and pull the hem of my T-shirt up to wipe off my face.

A small hiss of air escapes her lips. “Keep your clothes on, Davenport.”

I eye her over my shirt and don't miss the fact that she's totally focused on my abs, or the way she licks her bottom lip before pulling it between her teeth. "Eyes up here, Shanahan," I tease as I drop my shirt and jerk my chin up. She meets my gaze, her eyes giving away nothing. "You know, for someone in a serious relationship, you sure have a hard time keeping your eyes off me."

"I'm your physical therapist, Nate. It's literally my job to watch your body. But maybe you could make this less awkward for both of us and just keep your shirt on."

"Keep your eyes off my body and you won't have to feel awkward about it," I say and shrug, literally for no reason other than I know it'll piss her off.

Speaking every word carefully, she asks, "Have you, any time in the past week, removed your shirt with the intention of me looking at your body?"

I take a step closer to her, noting that her hair smells like the coconut shampoo she favors. "If I have?" I reply, dropping my mouth near her ear.

She looks up, fire in her eyes. She drops her voice to a low, husky growl. "Then don't you *dare* insinuate that I'm somehow the problem here!"

And now I have to shut my own thoughts down because I'm honestly never more attracted to her than when she's pissed off. I'm sure it stems from our high school days, when I used to do whatever I could to rile her up before every race because she skied better when she was mad. I was in love with her even then, and just waiting for her to catch up. I'm always waiting for her to catch up.

I step back, knowing I need to put physical distance between us or my body is going to respond like it always does when I'm around her. That's the problem with being a guy and choosing to abstain from sex—your body is *always* ready, even if your mind isn't. But until I make my way back into Jackson's heart, my mind will have to win out because there's no one I want but her.

"Go put your weights away," she says, as she turns and walks toward the sports medicine room. I carry my two disk weights to the rack, and in an attempt to focus on anything other than my reaction to Jackson's proximity, I force myself to think about business instead of pleasure.

My dad sent me another message this morning about the family business. He's been trying to get me to join him in buying and managing commercial properties in Boston for almost a decade. And while commercial property has never been that interesting to me, owning and managing rental properties has. The company I started four years ago owns property at various ski resorts around North America and offers custom ski vacations, complete with a private chef and valet transportation. And now I'm looking to expand into the Park City market, hence my meeting with Whitney. But that's just a small side project, not the one that has my full attention right now. Because in my spare time I'm working on my biggest property acquisition yet, one that I hope will help me win Jackson back.

Jackson is waiting for me at the door to the rehab room when I return from racking my weights, like she didn't want to be cornered in the room when I stepped through that door. Some things haven't changed, she cedes control slowly, if at all. "After you," she says, her voice tight as she gestures me through the door.

"Hey," I say softly after she enters the room behind me. I know this can't be easy for her, having to be my physical therapist.

Though it's a large room with plenty of space for multiple people to work on rehab and recovery, we're the only ones here at the moment. She glances up from the clipboard where the athletic trainer had recorded all the details of the training session we just completed. "Yeah?"

"I'm sorry."

"For what?" she asks, her voice both curious and accusatory.

I focus on her mouth, the way her normally full lips are pursed together. "I'm sorry if I've upset you. That isn't my intention. It's just—" I pause. "You won't even talk to me."

"We're talking right now," she says quietly, like someone might walk by the room and overhear us.

"You won't talk about anything that matters. You're all business, all the time. You won't let me explain what happened. You won't even admit that you're training me. You keep acting like this is all temporary."

"It is all temporary, Nate," she says, the words harsh and impassioned.

"Jackson, at least for this season, you're my PT. We can make this work, but you have to work with me and not against me."

"Are you kidding me right now?" she says, stepping closer to me but dropping her voice lower, so it's barely more than a whisper. "I'm doing

everything I can to make this work in the short-term, to prepare you for racing even though you don't deserve my help." Behind her eyes I can see the volume of truth she's keeping to herself. "But there is no way I can work with you all season. Not after how you left me—" She stops short as footsteps sound outside the doorway. Someone passes and keeps going, while both of us hold our breath. I want her to finish that sentence. It feels like the most honest thing she's said to me since I've been back. Finally, she exhales. "Let's go for a run."

I'm so taken aback by her sudden shift that I'm not sure how to respond. "I just had a two-hour workout. I'm way too stiff to run. Are you trying to make sure I get injured?" I'm not sure I'd put it past her right now.

"No, I'm trying to loosen up your muscles so we can stretch them out, and we can't have this conversation here," she says, gesturing toward the doorway and the variety of athletes and trainers working in the space beyond.

"Fair enough," I say.

She says nothing as I follow her out of the training room, along the corridor, and out the glass doors. Once outside, she kneels first on one leg, then the other as she tightens the laces on her sneakers. I twist at the waist while I wait, trying to loosen up my lower back which is a little stiff from the workout. It feels like the temperatures are falling, but we'll be warm when we start moving.

"Stretch out your quads too," she says as she returns to standing. "It looks like Alex really worked them out today and I don't want them seizing up while we run." She squats down like she's sitting in an invisible chair with one ankle crossed over the opposite knee, and leans into her stretch with a small groan that pulls at the memories of the times I caused that sound. She alternates legs and then waits for me to finish stretching. "Ready?" she asks and she takes off running and expects me to follow.

From my vantage point I can take in her body without her disapproval. It's amazing because she's probably lost at least twenty pounds of muscle since I last saw her, but she somehow looks smaller without being diminished. The muscles in her upper back and arms—revealed under the loose racerback yoga tops she seems to prefer—flex as she gently swings her arms back and forth. Her thighs, which used to be nearly as big and strong as mine, are thin cords of muscle now and I watch as her hamstrings flex and release with each step she takes.

“Are you checking out my ass?” she calls over her shoulder.

*I’m totally checking out your ass.* I raise my eyes to meet hers. “Nope, your hamstrings,” I tell her and her lips quirk up on one side as she resists a full-on smile.

“Stop looking at me,” she grumbles.

“You’re running in front of me. How would I not look at you?” My words come in short pants as she picks up the pace. I increase my stride so I’m running next to her on the deserted road. Around us, golden grass sways in the breeze and enormous white cumulus clouds float through the bright October sky. Its blueness belies the cold air sweeping in over the mountains and I notice the goose bumps prickle her arms.

We run in companionable silence for about a mile, and I never stop wondering what she’s thinking about. There is so much I want to know. So much I want to tell her. Waiting for her to be ready to hear it is killing me slowly.

I’m about to ask her how her girls’ night was on Friday when she slows dramatically, a small squeak escaping like it slipped up her throat without her permission.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, turning and running backward in front of her so I can see her face.

With each step, she winces. “Sciatica.”

“This is a thing that happens now?” I ask, slowing my pace, knowing she’ll slow down or risk running right into me.

“It happens *sometimes*,” she grits out, one hand pressing into her glutes near her tailbone.

“You need to breathe,” I remind her, slowing down even more.

“Hard to through the pain,” she grumbles.

“What causes this?”

“It started happening after my second surgery,” she says as she slows to a walk. If she’s surprised that I nod in reaction to her surgery, surprised that I know what each one entailed, she doesn’t let on. “There’s scar tissue that presses on my piriformis, so sometimes it spasms and pushes on the sciatic nerve.”

“Why don’t we stop so you can stretch it out?”

“All right,” she concedes, and when she stops she squats into the same position she was in before we ran.

“Breathe,” I remind her as I hold out my hands so she can take them for balance. She surprises me by sliding her palms against mine and gripping my wrists, then leaning back further into the stretch. I try to ignore the electric current that’s pulsing there between us, running along the warm slickness of our skin. I can’t help but wonder if she feels it too. She looks down at my feet as she dips into the stretch even further, her upper body coming to press against the flat space made by her right leg bent at an angle and resting on her left knee. I watch in amazement as her body bends further than seems possible.

“How are you this flexible?”

“Yoga,” she says without looking up. “I wish I could do Sleeping Pigeon right now, that helps more than anything.”

I have no freaking idea what Sleeping Pigeon is. “Why can’t you?”

She stands, releasing my hands, and looks down at the path we’re running on before using her shoe to sweep away the small pebbles of tar and the sand that litters the pavement. “I’d have to basically lay my whole body face down on the ground with my leg curved under me, and this is just,” she says with a shake of her head, “not an ideal place to do it.”

“You can lay my shirt down like a yoga mat,” I offer. “Would that help?”

“Always trying to get naked, huh?” she says, then quickly looks away as the pink creeps into her cheeks.

If she’d have laughed or winked after that comment, it feels like it could’ve been a moment where we might have broken through some of the walls she’s built around herself. Instead, I can already see the defenses going back up—the stiffening of her spine, the pursed lips, the way she’s turned her head away, the refusal to meet my eyes.

“How about we walk back to the Center and you teach me a little yoga? I’m sure it’ll help me stretch out from my workout and this run.”

“You want to learn yoga?” she asks, skepticism coloring each word.

“Why not?” I shrug.

“Josh used to always say that real men didn’t do yoga,” she tells me, and I realize he must have been an idiot, because how could he not want to see her bending into all kinds of crazy yoga poses. *Oh yeah, he’s married.*

“I hear it’s becoming pretty common for athletes. There are football teams bringing in instructors and doing sessions a couple times a week. I

suspect they're still real men, even when they finish doing yoga. Besides, how hard can it be?"



"I'm pretty sure I'm dead," I tell her as I lie in a puddle of my own sweat in the corner of the gym.

I look over at her sitting cross-legged on her yoga mat, and I watch her throat move up and down as she takes big gulps of water. A trickle of sweat makes its way down her neck and I want to run my tongue along the path it just traveled, right back up to her jaw.

"Pro tip, buddy. Never utter the words 'how hard can it be' to your physical therapist," she says, setting her water bottle down and bouncing up off the ground to a standing position with minimal effort. She's soaked through, too, her entire body glistening with sweat and her damp hair is piled into a bun on top of her head. But she doesn't seem like she's dying. In fact, she seems reenergized.

"I don't think my body was supposed to move like that," I tell her. Already there are muscles I didn't even know I had that are sore. But the bigger muscle groups I worked out earlier feel stretched, and strangely relaxed.

"Everything we just did will help prevent injury. Learning to stretch everything out like that will build strength and flexibility so that when something bends in a way it shouldn't, you'll bounce back much more quickly." She bends in half to spray her yoga mat, giving me a clear view of her cleavage. As much as I don't want to, I look down right as she glances over to hand me the spray bottle.

I roll over onto my stomach then lift up to my hands and knees before I reach over and swipe the bottle out of her outstretched hand. "I think it'd be better to just throw this away," I tell her as I eye the mat. I didn't know I could sweat that much.

"Just spray it down, wipe it off, and hang it up over there to dry," she says as she points to a space with pegs on the wall.

I do as she says, then notice that out the now-dark windows there are large flakes of snow falling through the light cast from the lampposts in the



parking lot. I guess we've been yoga-ing longer than I realized. "Hey, look," I say, calling her attention to the windows, "the first snowfall."

I can remember with absolute clarity how she's always reacted to the first snowfall of the season—no matter where in the world we experienced it. It was always a cause for celebration, running outside to catch snowflakes with our tongues or to make snow angels if it was really coming down. Then we'd come inside and make peppermint hot chocolate and watch the snow fall.

She glances out the windows. "Hmm," she murmurs. "Guess I better get home before it really starts coming down."

"You're not even going to watch the snow?" I ask, surprised at her lackluster reaction to this novelty.

"I'd much rather get home and take a nice long bath," she says as she reaches over and pulls her sweatshirt on. "The hot water will help the sciatica a ton."

*Don't think about her naked in the bath*, I tell myself, but it's too late. I turn back toward the windows so she can't see the reaction that's building in my boxer briefs. Damn gym shorts hide nothing. "Okay," I say. "Have a good night."

"You're staying?"

"Yeah, going to watch the snow for a few minutes, then take a shower before I go home."

"Okay." She shrugs as she bends down and scoops up her water bottle before heading out.



I know the minute that the elevator doors open to the third floor that something's not right. I can practically see my breath. It might be colder inside than it was in the unheated belowground parking garage. Even if the heat isn't working, I don't see how it could be this cold unless it's been off all day.

A quick phone call to the super, Arnie, confirms that the entire heating system is out. "They were here working on it all day, but they had to order a part and can't get it until tomorrow. I posted signs in the lobby," he says, but that does no good if you come straight up from the underground garage

where I have a parking spot. “If you’ve got somewhere else to stay tonight, I recommend going there.”

“All right, thanks,” I tell him as I hang up. Even though it’s inconvenient, I can just go back to the hotel. I didn’t know that subletting Josh’s apartment was going to fall into my lap like this, so I have my suite there paid for the whole month. I can start a fire in the fireplace. I plan out what I might order from room service as I throw basic necessities—chargers for my phone and laptop, and my shaving kit—in a bag along with some clothes. I’m ready to leave in less than five minutes, already looking forward to the warmth of the hotel.

In the hallway, I start toward the elevator, then look back over my shoulder. *Shit*. Jackson was coming home to take a warm bath. I imagine her still sweaty and shivering in her condo.

Without even making a conscious decision to do so, I’ve already turned and am at her door. I hold my breath as I raise my hand to knock, but the door swings open before I can even make contact. Jackson jumps back in surprise, and a small gym bag clatters to the floor. “You scared the crap out of me,” she gasps.

“You heading out?” I ask. She’s wearing fuzzy fleece pajama pants and a hooded Sherpa sweatshirt, and her jacket hangs open over those layers.

“Yeah, my heat and hot water aren’t working so I’m going back to the Center to shower. I’ll stop and tell Arnie about the heat on my way out.”

“I already called him. It’s not your condo, it’s the whole building, and it won’t be fixed until tomorrow.”

Jackson growls out her frustration, a primal sound from the back of her throat. “Guess I’ll be sleeping on the couch in front of my fireplace tonight, then.”

“I have a suite at the Marquis. I’m happy to give you the bedroom and take the couch.”

“Why would you do that?”

“As a thank you for the torturous workout today?”

She crosses her arms over her chest. “I don’t think the two of us sharing a hotel suite is a good idea.”

“I know you need a shower, or a bath—there’s a colossal bathtub by the way—and we can order room service. I hear they make amazing pulled pork mac and cheese.” It’s a low blow because she’s a mac and cheese connoisseur. I can see her resolve crumbling when she pulls half her bottom

lip between her teeth. “And peppermint hot chocolate with extra marshmallows.”

I can see the hesitation in her eyes, the way she’s trying to talk herself out of this. Then her stomach growls and she breaks into a small smile. “Okay fine, bribe me with food why don’t you.” She holds the door to her condo open for me and turns back inside. “I just need to grab a few things,” she says, sweeping her bag off the floor and heading across the living room into what I assume is her bedroom.

Her living room is taken up by a deep forest green velvet couch facing a fireplace that has old wooden skis hung above it. On either side of the marble-topped coffee table are two leather club chairs. The space doesn’t feel like her at all—it’s too Park City, not enough Blackstone.

Blackstone Mountain, where we raced together in high school, is one of the last independent mountains in the Northeast. It’s all pine-paneled walls, fieldstone fireplaces, and faded wooden tabletops. It’s the one place in the world that Jackson thinks of as home. And it’s nothing like this condo she’s living in.

It makes me wonder if this condo isn’t really *her*, or if I just don’t know who she is anymore. Or if maybe she doesn’t know who she is anymore.

Between the sleek fireplace and the kitchen is a gallery wall of black-and-white photos in matching gold frames. I make my way over there, hoping to have a minute to snoop at the pictures before Jackson is ready to go.

There’s a photo of Jackson’s parents that must be recent because I hardly recognize her mom, whose once dark hair is completely gray now and the lines at the corners of her eyes are deeper than I’ve ever seen them. There’s a photo of Jackson with an older woman who I don’t recognize at all, and I wonder who she could be.

Then my eyes land on a photo of Jackson that I’d recognize anywhere, even washed out in black and white like this. She’s standing on the podium at her first and only Olympic Games, the ones she headed into during her second year racing on the World Cup circuit when she was hardly known in the international ski world. And the gold medal she’s wearing and the US flag that she’s holding up with both arms pale in comparison to the size of her smile. But those memories—when everything seemed possible—are not what have taken my breath away. Instead, it’s the small triangle of wrapping paper, white with silver foil snowflakes, that’s tucked in the lower right

corner between the matting and the photo. It's the wrapping paper from the first gift I ever gave her, back when we were seventeen—a snow globe with two skiers coming down a mountain above an alpine village. A larger piece of that wrapping paper hung on her memo board in her bedroom in high school and popped up here and there over the years we were together—mostly pressed into a notebook she always traveled with.

The fact that she now has a small piece of it tucked into a frame hanging in her home solidifies in my mind that us ending up together was always the only possibility.

“Get it together,” I mumble to myself. I've felt more emotions in the last week than I've felt in the last five years. It's like being around her again has turned me into a sap.

“What's that?” Jackson asks from behind me.

*Holy crap, man. Get. Your. Shit. Together.*

“We need to get going. I'm starving, aren't you?” I ask as I turn toward her.

She's taken off her fleece pants and is clad in the leggings she was wearing earlier, but she's left her heavy Sherpa sweatshirt on. “Famished. I'm pretty sure I could eat my weight in mac and cheese right now, so prepare yourself.”

“For what?”

“The room service bill.” She gives me a little wink.

*That's the Jackson I know and love.*

## CHAPTER 8



### JACKSON

*Park City, Utah*

“This truck is . . . not what I expected,” I tell him as I open the passenger door to the cab of his pickup after setting my bag on the floor of the back seat. I’ve never known him to drive anything but luxury SUVs, and the enormous black truck I’m climbing into is so not him. Or, not the him I once knew.

“I needed something practical,” he says. “I’ve lived out of this thing the last couple of years.”

I consider all the driving he must have done, going from mountain to mountain to shoot the crazy videos he’s made, as I take in the interior. For an enormous pickup truck, it’s surprisingly high-end. Leather seats, LCD display, fully trimmed out. In that way, I suppose, it is very Nate-like. The irony of this truck and all the places it’s taken him, and me being in it now, is that I didn’t even know about Nate’s social media presence, didn’t even know about the videos, until Marco told me about a year ago.

*Oh shit—Marco!* I pull my phone from the pocket of my jacket. “I need to text Marco,” I tell him. “You know, let him know where I’m headed. And with whom.”

“Tell him I said ‘hi,’” Nate says, and his upper lip curves over those ridiculously perfect teeth in a smirk. I’ve seen that look a million times, and it usually meant he was one step ahead of me. It is the same look he’d had on a deserted street in snowy Montreal while we were in college when he pulled me into an alcove, kissed me senseless, and told me he was going to marry me someday. A hundred other memories of Nate and his stupid smirk flash through my mind in an instant. That’s the problem with having to spend time with him—just one quick look can bring back a whole host of unwelcome memories.

“Don’t be a dick,” I say, tilting my head toward him. “And he’s not going to mind that I’m staying with you tonight.”

“Why would he mind?” Nate shrugs, and I try not to read too much into that. I assume he means there’s nothing for Marco to worry about.

“Like I said, he won’t. Because he’s not a jealous fool.”

It seems like that reminder of his past actions shuts him up. But then, still looking at the road as he drives through the fast-falling snowflakes, he says, “I assume you’re implying that my jealousy of your and Marco’s friendship was ridiculous. And yet, you’re dating him now. Soooo . . .” He trails off, and my eyes focus on the way his throat moves, how the thick muscles there ripple when he swallows.

I sigh in frustration because I see exactly how this looks from his eyes—that something *was* going on with Marco and me back when I was dating Nate, and we just hid it until recently. Or that the feelings were there back then, even if nothing happened until now.

“It wasn’t like that, and you know it,” I insist.

“Wasn’t it?”

I ignore him, looking back down at my phone and focusing on the text I need to send.

**Jackson:** *Hey, you may already be asleep, but I wanted to let you know that the heat went out in our building and Nate got a suite at the Marquis (a hotel nearby) and offered me the bedroom.*

I reread the text, and I can only imagine the questions that will run through his mind when he reads that. *Why did you take him up on that offer?* And as I consider it now, not in the spur of the moment, it does seem risky that I am heading to a hotel with him. But Sierra and Peter don’t have

a spare bedroom, Petra is in Salt Lake City for an event tonight, and Josh and Lauren are in Maine visiting her family, so it wasn't like I had other options—except to freeze.

**Jackson:** *I took him up on it because I'm desperate for a bath after a crazy workout this afternoon, and I didn't really think about how it might look. I'm sorry!*

I stare at the phone for less than a minute before the dots appear letting me know he's responding.

**Marco:** *Please be careful.*

**Jackson:** *That's it? You're not mad.*

**Marco:** *Just concerned about you, Bella. Please be careful. And please don't let anyone see you two in the hotel together. You know the trouble that can cause! ;-)*

**Jackson:** *Promise . . . XOXO*



“Why don't you take a bath while we wait for room service? That way you can fully defrost.” Nate's so at ease as he gestures toward the bathroom, but I can't relax enough to imagine bathing in the same suite as him. Coming here was a mistake. The physical attraction I've been fighting at work is only amplified now that we're in a hotel suite together.

At least there's no chance anyone saw us arrive. He pulled into a private parking spot next to an elevator that brought us straight up to the penthouse. Because, of course he has a penthouse suite. He's always been so approachable and real, sometimes I forget what it means to be a Davenport.

“What about you?”

“I'm all set, I showered at the Center before heading home. I'll start a fire. We can eat in front of it when the food gets here. I'm pretty sure I saw some bubble bath in there.”

“Nate, you haven't even been in the bathroom,” I remind him. But then I realize that he already had the keycard that let us into the elevator and into the suite, so maybe he has been here before.

“This is where I was staying before I moved into Josh’s place. I’ll show you where everything is.” He walks past me, close enough that I can smell his scent—deeply masculine like the woods and also fresh like laundry detergent, because Nate is in every way a contradiction. He continues down the hall, and I trail behind determined not to focus on his wide shoulders that taper to a narrow waist, and how his pants hug his muscular ass.

The bathroom is almost as big as the bedroom in my condo, and every inch of it is covered in marble and glass and mirrors. A huge freestanding soaking tub takes the spotlight. Opposite it is the longest double vanity I’ve ever seen, topped with Calacatta gold marble so gorgeous that my mother’s interior designer heart would stop beating at the sight of it. A walk-in glass shower with two rainfall shower heads, a door to the separate toilet room, and a door to the bedroom complete the far wall. It’s amazingly luxurious.

Nate turns the water on and it pours out of a waterfall faucet. “Still like it scalding?” he asks, as if it’s the most natural thing in the world that he knows, and remembers, how I like my bath water.

“Always.”

A little smile tugs at his lips as he opens the vanity door under the sink and grabs a bottle of bubble bath, then turns and pours a healthy amount into the tub. My toes curl into the plush bath mat as I envision soaking in the tub, surrounded by those vanilla sugar-scented bubbles. I can’t wait to be warm, and apparently my body agrees because it shudders like someone’s dragging ice along my spine.

“Here,” he says after he steps into the shower and reaches into an alcove on the wall. He hands me full-size bottles of luxury shampoo and conditioner, the kind that’s so expensive normal people like me only buy it if they find it on clearance. “I’ll let you know when the food arrives,” he says, as he takes three quick strides right out the door, shutting it behind him with a decisive click.

When I realize the floor is heated, I almost lie down on it to wait for the bathtub to finish filling. Instead, I peel off my socks and let my bare toes enjoy the feel of warm stone. As my feet defrost, so does the rest of my body. My sweatshirt lands on the countertop, followed by my yoga tank and my leggings. While I wait for the tub to finish filling, I take a minute to evaluate myself in the vanity mirror. My scars are still there, along the back of my hip and the front of my abdomen, but they’ve faded and are far less puckered now that I’ve spent years rebuilding my core muscles. I take off



my underwear and my sports bra and toss them on top of my pile of clothes before stepping into the tub.

The warm, scented water transports me to Tahiti, where Nate and I spent two glorious weeks the summer before my accident. Back when it felt like we had the world at our fingertips, before everything went so wrong. The entire trip was magical, but what I'm remembering now is that there was an enormous wooden soaking tub, about the same size as this one, on the deck of our overwater hut. Every night Nate would draw us a bath out there, and fill it with vanilla scented oil and the orchids that they left on our pillows each night. It was like being in a tropical spa, outside looking at the billions of stars. The sex we had in that tub, on that deck, and in that hut still haunts me because sex with Nate was like nothing I've experienced since.

And now that's all I can think of. I recognize that familiar pull, the tightening between my legs, and the heaviness in my breasts. I want Nate's mouth on them—his tongue was capable of pure magic. Still, my hands move up my body, grazing over my stomach, and cupping my breasts, my thumbs sweeping over the hard peaks of my nipples. I swallow the moan that's rolling up the back of my throat and reach one hand down between my legs. My fingers find the sticky slickness that I knew would be there, and I dip two fingers into the warm depths until they're coated and then bring them back along my folds to roll over the sensitive bundle of nerves that are aching for touch.

With one hand I alternate between stroking and pinching my nipples, and with the other I increase the pressure on my clit. In my mind, the scene from our last night in Tahiti plays out, when Nate picked me up out of the bathtub and carried me to the chaise lounge on the edge of the deck. The way he knelt down and laid me back on the thick cushions, before returning to his knees. The look of absolute possession in his eyes as he gazed down at me. The warm breeze on my wet skin sent goose bumps across my flesh, but Nate held me pinned there with the weight of his stare. My eyes traveled down his body, slick and wet, every muscle defined in the light of the moon, and I couldn't help but reach out, capturing him in my hand. My thumb swept over his tip as my fist closed around him and I began the torturously slow pace that I knew drove him crazy.

As I dip two fingers back inside myself and stroke upward, I'm not sure if the moan I hear is Nate in my memory or me in the present. But I seal my lips and return to picturing him bending down to capture my nipple in his

mouth, the pull I felt as he sucked just hard enough to bring pleasure at the edge of pain. I envision the way he pulled my legs up around his waist, sinking himself into me as I welcomed him, ready with a hot slickness he could bring about in half a second of touching me.

Nate had leaned forward and rubbed his nose along mine before pulling back enough to be fully in focus. "I want forever. I want it with you."

"I know." I reached up and stroked his jaw with the palm of my hand before threading my fingers into his hair. "And we'll have that. Just give me time."

"I've been giving you time," Nate said, beginning to move inside me slowly. "For years. I need you to commit."

"I am committed Nate," I told him, bringing my hips up to meet him thrust for thrust. "I'm one hundred percent in."

"Then marry me."

"I will. I promise." The word escaped on a sigh. "Just let me win my championship first, then we'll focus on that future."

"I'm not asking you to choose between the two," he all but growled, moving in me with more intensity. This was an old argument already. One World Championship, that's all I needed. Then I planned to walk away from racing—not that he knew that yet, but in my mind I had already decided. He'd followed me around the globe for years as I competed, he deserved time to pursue his dreams too, whether that meant getting back to racing or something else entirely.

"I love you," I told him, and as I stroke my fingers inside myself now it's impossible to forget how I felt then.

Nate leaned closer, his lips brushing against my ear. "Let me see you touch your breasts."

I skimmed my hands along his body on their way to my own, then rolled each nipple between my thumbs and forefingers. The tightening of my muscles around him was instantaneous, and the pulsing grew so intense I swore I saw stars. Then the waves of heat and pleasure rolled through me, and it was impossible to separate my physical bliss from how in love I was with him.

"Nate," I moaned as I exploded around him.

Tonight's orgasm rolls through me just as intensely as if Nate is really here making me feel this way, and I purse my lips shut and sink under the water as the pleasure ripples through me. Wave after wave of sensation

course through me as I continue stroking myself, and then suddenly I'm being jerked out of the water.

## CHAPTER 9



NATE

*Park City, Utah*

She's soaking wet and sputtering obscenities, but I don't think she'd want me to set her down so her nakedness would be on full display. Instead I just hold her cradled against my chest. In the mirror, I watch the curve of her body between my arms, noting the scars that skim across her skin. I've seen them already in the *Sports Illustrated* shoot she did after she'd healed from her accident, but seeing those scars in person is somehow different. More real. More my fault than ever.

The guilt is still there, tugging at me, but my traitorous cock only notices her bare skin, her ragged breathing, the way I can see her breast pressed against my chest in the mirror. The guilt and the lust war with each other as I hold her, surprised that she hasn't leaped out of my arms yet.

Finally she opens her eyes, looks right at me, and asks, "What the fuck, Nate?"

"What just happened?"

"I was taking a relaxing bath and you yanked me out of it, and now I'm freezing . . . and naked." She manages to sound both pissed off and breathless at the same time.

I make sure I don't glance down at her body, just keep my eyes focused on her face. It's only about a foot from my own, and her eyes are focused on my lips, like she's trying to make sense of what I'll say before I even say it. "You called my name," I remind her. She sounded like she was in pain. "Then when I knocked to check on you, you didn't answer and I was afraid something was wrong. When I opened the door, you were thrashing around under the water. I thought you were drowning."

The flush starts in her chest and creeps swiftly up her neck to her cheeks. I've never understood how anyone with such an olive complexion could turn pink so quickly.

"Drowning. In a bathtub. Really?" She lowers her eyebrows along with her voice, like the idea is ridiculous. "I didn't call your name, and I wasn't thrashing around. I was just washing myself off."

I raise my eyebrow because she's a terrible liar. Always has been. "You're not going to convince me that I barged in and interrupted your bath unprovoked."

She doesn't say anything, just stares at my lips a beat too long before raising her eyes to mine with that defiant look she's been practicing a whole lot since I've been in Park City. This is going nowhere, quick—there's no way she's going to tell me why she called me in there, and no way I'm going to believe I imagined it—so I decide to drop it rather than have this result in a fight. "I'll grab you a towel."

"I wasn't done bathing. I haven't even washed my hair yet."

For a split second, I imagine stripping my clothes off and walking into that shower with her. But I know she's not ready for that, even though I'm equally confident that she's burying a whole lot of longing. I can feel her desire, like a vine that's growing between and around us, pulling us closer together. But she's not ready to acknowledge its presence yet, so I grab a towel off the wall and shake it open before stepping up to the vanity. I wrap it around her shoulders and set her down, facing me. "You sure you're okay?" I ask as I wrap the towel around her, pleased that she doesn't screech and move to cover herself when I'm facing her.

She's flushed and wet, the towel covers her breasts where her hand clasps both sides together. Her legs are spread apart and I'm standing between them. It's nothing I haven't seen before, but shit it's been so long. I'm trying to remain unaffected by seeing her like this, but it isn't working—which will be exceedingly obvious to her if she glances down. It's like

I'm a teenage boy again, lusting after her, knowing we belong together but trying to take it slow until she's ready. Funny how history repeats itself. And just like back then, I'm sure that tonight I'll be getting myself off to visions of her naked and moving beneath me, or on top of me, or . . .

"I'm fine." Her words are crisp, but there's no heat in her eyes. She's not mad. The distance I see in her gaze makes me wonder if she's remembering us together too.

"Maybe you can wash your hair in the shower? Not sure I trust you in the tub again."

"I'll be fine. This time, I'm locking the door though."

"Suit yourself," I say, but I can't stop my lips from turning up at the corner because, of course, a locked door wouldn't stop me if I need to get inside.

She opens her mouth to reply, but a knock on the door to the suite cuts her off.

I turn around and pull the plug in the tub. "I'll get dinner ready. Be quick in the shower or you'll have cold mac and cheese." I keep my back to her as I rush out the door so she won't notice the tent in the front of my sweats.



It's ten minutes before the shower goes off, and another ten before she opens that bathroom door. She's trying to piss me off, but she's playing the wrong game; I've been waiting on her since I was seventeen, twenty minutes is nothing.

Walking toward me in flannel pajama pants and a waffle knit T-shirt, with her hair in a French braid and nothing on her face but her trademark watermelon lip balm, she looks so young and fresh-faced—nothing like the woman I ran into on the elevator Friday night. But my reaction is just as primal. This version of her is *my* Jackson. Casual, comfortable, like a favorite blanket or a worn-in sweatshirt, and all I want is to tangle myself up in her hair, her limbs, her lips.

I clear my throat when she comes to a stop on the other side of the island, trying not to spend too much energy figuring out if she's wearing a bra. I'm pretty sure she isn't.

“I think you promised me dinner?” She sounds tentative, like she’s not sure what to say after the bathtub incident. But she doesn’t sound mad, which is a relief. Or is it? At least when she’s mad she’s showing some emotion rather than locking everything inside so I have to guess at how she’s feeling.

“Just keeping everything warm.” I turn to the counter behind me and grab the two dishes, still covered in the metal lids they arrived with when room service delivered them.

Jackson slides onto the barstool as I set the plate in front of her, and I have to bite my tongue not to mention how easily we’re falling into our old routine of me taking care of her. She picks at her mac and cheese, taking small bites and trying to pretend I’m not here while I devour my double veggie burger. After that workout followed by the yoga session, I was about to eat my own arm if she didn’t come out soon.

When my veggie burger is consumed and the silence has stretched on longer than is comfortable, I ask, “You want to talk about what just happened in there?” and nod toward the bathroom across the living area.

She meets my gaze for a millisecond, but that’s all it takes for me to see the heat flash in those emerald eyes, the desire not well enough masked. She looks back down at her food. “Not particularly.”

And that’s when *I know*. What I heard wasn’t the strangled sound of her calling my name in distress. It was the sound of her moaning my name. Which means that whatever she was doing in that tub, she was thinking of me . . . of us. My body reacts to this realization before my mind even finishes wrapping itself around the idea. “Why not?” I ask, leaning a little closer to her.

“Why do I not want to talk about how you just invaded my privacy? How you picked me up, naked, out of my bath? Gee, Nate, why would I *not* want to talk about it? Maybe because it goes so far beyond the boundaries of our purely professional relationship? Maybe because it violates my boyfriend’s trust? Maybe because *I* feel violated?”

And this is not going where I’d hoped it would go. She can’t even be honest with herself.

“I’m sorry. I really did think you called my name because something was wrong.”

“Well, I didn’t,” she says, her eyes flaring in defiance.

“Just so you know, I don’t believe you. But I’ll change the subject since you’re so obviously uncomfortable.” I drop my eyes to her chest as she heaves a sigh of relief. The top two buttons of her waffle knit T-shirt are open, revealing the smooth, olive skin below her neck. She has the softest skin I’ve ever felt, and my mouth is salivating at the need to remember the way she tastes. But that too will have to wait. “My dad wanted me to tell you he says ‘hello.’”

She levels her gaze at me, her face unreadable once again. I hate that she has the ability to do that now. That mask is not who she is, and wearing it is not something she was capable of back when we were dating. *How did you learn to hide your emotions like that?* I want to ask her. Necessity, most likely. I hate to think that I’m the cause, but it’s probably true.

“How is he doing?” It sounds like it pains her to ask. She looks away, spearing a few more pieces of pasta and taking another bite.

“He’s good. I mean, not great, but he’s doing okay. Throwing himself into work all the time.”

“Still in commercial real estate?”

“Yep,” I confirm. “He’s been after me to come work with him for years.”

“And you don’t want to?” She sounds genuinely curious.

“That’s not really the business I see myself in,” I say, unwilling to give her too many details about my own real estate investing business. There are too many variables up in the air right now. I want to wait until I’ve locked down my latest acquisition. I sure as hell hope she’s thrilled when she finds out, because the alternative is that she’ll never speak to me again. If I’m being honest, it worries me that I don’t know whether she’ll love it or hate it.

“I’m sure he just wants you closer,” she says. “Is he lonely?”

“You know my dad.” I shrug. “It’s not like we talk about his emotions.” That was always my mom’s role, and Jackson knows it.

“I’m so sorry, Nate. I can’t even imagine how much he must miss your mom.” She takes a quick drink of her water. “I mean, if how much I miss her is any indication . . . I wish I could have been there to say goodbye.” Her voice is so filled with guilt and sadness.

“Don’t.” I stop her. “You have no reason to feel guilty. You had no control over what happened.”



“I don’t feel *guilty*, Nate.” The words are caustic, her eyes so cold it’s like she’s throwing frozen crystal daggers right at my heart. “I’m sad and I’m angry because you kept it from me how bad off she was. You left France to come back to Boston without even telling me, and then the next thing I know,” she says, then pauses to take a deep breath, “I wake up from a freaking coma, a week has gone by, and your mom has already been buried!” A tear escapes down one cheek and I turn fully toward her on my barstool, reaching out and using my thumb to wipe it away, but she swats my hand from her face. “You didn’t just leave me, Nate. You made it so I didn’t get to tell your mom how much I loved her. To thank her for being so amazing, for caring so much about me, for always being so supportive . . .” She clearly has more she wants to say, but she stops, choking on the last words as she’s overcome with tears.

I reach over and rest my hand on the back of her barstool as she pushes her plate away from her, making room to fold her arms on the counter before dropping her head down on them.

“I didn’t know,” I say softly as I lean in toward her. I reach out and tentatively brush my hand over her head, smoothing her hair back from her face. “When I got on that plane, I didn’t know it was the last time I’d see her. I didn’t know there wouldn’t be an opportunity for you to say goodbye.”

“I would’ve come too,” she mumbles into her arms. “If you’d told me, I would have been on that plane with you.”

“I didn’t think she was at that point yet. I mean, all I knew was that they’d put her in the ICU, but it wasn’t the first time and there was no indication that she wouldn’t make it out again. And I didn’t want you to miss that race. You needed Val d’Isère to secure your first place standing for the season. Your dream—that overall World Cup trophy—was within reach. No way I was going to take that away from you.”

“Just so you know,” she says, turning her head and looking up at me. Her tearstained face is so close it’s a struggle not to cup her cheek in my hand, kiss away those tears. She sighs. “I would have come back to Boston with you. I would have skipped the race. And I wouldn’t have regretted it.”

“It’s easy to say that in hindsight, especially knowing now how that race ended.”

She jerks up to a full sitting position. “It’s easy to say that *in hindsight* because it was true then too. Instead, you decided for me. You left, I raced,

and we all know how that turned out.”

She doesn't flat out say what we both know—that my not being there caused her crash. That I knew she'd be worried when I just disappeared, and that she never skied well when she was distracted. It wasn't my intention, but it *was* my fault.

“I . . .” I start but the loud and distinctive ring of my cell phone interrupts me. That ringtone is the only one I never ignore. I glance at my phone, sitting next to me on the countertop. “I'm so sorry, but I have to take this call.”

She shrugs, a small lift of her shoulders with her eyebrows slightly raised. I know that look. She thinks our conversation isn't important enough to me to continue, which couldn't be further from the truth. But I don't have time to explain that to her right now.

“I'll be right back,” I tell her.



“Talk to me, Jed,” I say as I bring the phone to my ear and shut the bedroom door behind me. Given that everyone involved in this acquisition has had to sign an NDA, this isn't a conversation I can have in front of Jackson, and the bedroom is the only semiprivate place in this cavernous suite.

“The board of directors met tonight and they agreed to the sale,” my lawyer says, and I let out a relieved breath. “But they have conditions.”

“Of course they do.” The last two decades have seen huge ski conglomerates buying up many of the resorts across the country. Blackstone Mountain, being one of the last independently run ski resorts in New England, are staunchly opposed to “selling out” like so many of the mountains around them. At the same time, climate change is making operating a ski resort more expensive every year and they've been struggling financially as long as I can remember.

“As you predicted, Rory Shanahan was the most vocal opponent.”

I don't respond. I expected Jackson's dad to oppose this plan, both because he loves the small, independent nature of Blackstone and because it's me. And his position as president of the board means he has great influence.

“So,” Jed says, “you have until tomorrow at the close of business to either accept or counter their conditions.”

Which means we have to talk about this now or there won't be time for Jed to get all the paperwork in order tomorrow. I sit down at the desk as Jed walks me through the parameters of this sale, which would have me investing in and owning a majority share of the mountain. As I suspected, developing the backside of the mountain with an additional twelve runs is something they view favorably. But the ski village I want to put at the base, complete with a hotel, condos, indoor water park, and shops, is a sticking point.

When we finish up, I feel good about where we've landed, and more confident than ever that we can make this work. I'll give on some points, but they'll have to give on others. I hit my phone screen to disconnect the call and sit back, satisfied. Until I see the clock. How can it have been almost two hours? It's approaching 10:00 p.m., and I'd told Jackson I'd be right back to finish our conversation. *Shit.*

I rush to the door, but when I open it, the suite is deadly silent. *Did she leave?*

I take a few tentative steps into the living area and the side of Jackson's hip comes into view. She's curled up on the sofa, phone in hand, asleep. A few more steps and I'm towering over her, watching her back rise and fall rhythmically. There's no way I'm letting her sleep on the couch after I promised her the bedroom, so I bend on one knee and slide my arms under her, lifting and cradling her to me as I stand. She's dead asleep, doesn't even move or open her eyes as I carry her to the bedroom and lay her down. But as I lift her weight from the bed to pull the covers out from under her, she reaches out, laying her hand on my arm, her finger tightening around my wrist.

My eyes slide up her body to meet hers and I'm yet again astounded at the desire I see flash across her face. “Thanks,” she whispers, still gripping my wrist.

## CHAPTER 10



### JACKSON

*Park City, Utah*

My eyes open slowly and I glance around the dark room. It takes me a second to figure out where I am, and another second to remember how I got into this bed.

Heat flashes through my body, as I remember Nate carrying me in here last night. The way he cradled me gently in his arms, the way I grabbed his hand as he turned to leave. My entire body and soul ached for him; I wanted so badly for him to stay, but thankfully I didn't let my guard down and tell him that. And then, the dream.

It's been a while since I was plagued by dreams of Nate. I suppose I shouldn't be surprised by their reemergence now that he's back, but I wish last night's had been less graphic. I can't remember the whole thing, but flashes of passion are burning their way through my memory—the hot breath on my nipple as his mouth closed around it, the smooth sliding of his fingers over the tender flesh above my entrance, the slick friction of him sliding into me, the trail of wet kisses up my chest and across my collarbone. The feeling of being well loved in the most primal way.

Even now, my core is clenching involuntarily as I remember the feel of his skin against mine. The pulsing is there, just like it was in my dream. I woke up a minute too soon. If I'd stayed asleep, I'm confident I would have orgasmed. That's never happened to me in my sleep before, but I'm *that* close.

I try to breathe through the aching emptiness, but that throbbing in my center, the need for release, is so great I suspect I'll come if I even touch myself. As if responding to the thought, my core clenches again and waves of longing roll through me, curling my hips up in need. The vision of Nate over me, pushing into me, has me plunging two fingers into myself at once. It doesn't feel half as amazing as I know Nate does, but it only takes a few strokes for me to feel my muscles tightening. I roll on my stomach, my face buried in the pillow as I drive my hips down on my fingers and ride wave after wave of the pleasure brought on by imagining that my fingers are Nate.

I freeze, afraid for a moment that there'll be a repeat of the tub incident. I rolled face-first onto that pillow so I didn't call out his name. But did I moan it in my sleep? I couldn't possibly explain that away a second time.

*You idiot*, I chastise myself as I lie there. This attraction I feel for Nate is bad; absolutely no good can come of that and it has the potential for so much harm. Marco. My job. My heart.

But this insane attraction is how I've always felt around him. He was my first, and for years, he was my only. I've had sex with that man on five continents, and unlike what I always hear happens, the sex never slowed down, the desire never dulled. Instantly my mind goes to the last time we had sex, in France right before my accident. I can picture clearly my legs wrapped around Nate's waist, my hands pinned above my head as he fucked me up against the wall of the cabin we rented in Val d'Isère. I can feel his chest rubbing against mine with each thrust, hear the sound of our bodies slapping together, smell the scent of our sex. And, just like that, my clit is aching, my core clenching again. I reach up under my shirt and rub my thumb across my nipple, then roll it between my thumb and forefinger, sending another shiver throughout my body, over and over again. With my other hand I reach between my legs, dipping my finger back into the dampness there and bringing that up to rub over my clit.

I feel both sensitive and desensitized from having multiple orgasms in the past few hours—the need is there, but my clit is too sensitive and the

orgasm doesn't come easily. I dip two fingers back into my folds, curling them to reach that spot deep inside that Nate's dick always managed to hit in just the right way. Grinding the heel of my hand over my clit, I picture Nate and I in the bedroom of that cabin in France, but this time I picture the way he bent me over the dresser, sliding into me from behind. We watched our lovemaking in the mirror, watched his hips meet mine in a steady rhythm while his hands played with my bouncing breasts before trailing down to stroke between my legs. Our eyes never left each other's. When he picked up the pace and we were both panting from chasing the edge of our orgasm, he wrapped one hand around my ponytail and gently pulled my head back so I was looking up at him in the mirror.

"Tell me you're mine," he grunted between clenched teeth.

My heart ached for him in that moment, my strong, always in control boyfriend who let down his guard long enough to show that he needed my reassurance. "Always yours," I told him, right as the orgasm slammed through me.

This time there are tears rolling down my face as the waves of pleasure roll through me. What Nate and I shared—not just the extraordinary physical connection, but the way we felt about each other—I just don't think I'll ever feel that way about anyone again.

*Don't be ridiculous*, a voice inside my head says as I pull my shirt back down and find the underwear I don't remember removing. *You're only feeling this way because you're around him all the time*. And that may be true. I mean, I wasn't fantasizing about Nate and getting myself off to visions of us having sex before he showed back up in my life. Of course, I can't remember the last time I had an orgasm like any of the three I've had in the last twelve hours.

But how can I possibly be so attracted to him after everything he put me through?

On the other side of the bathroom door I hear the shower go on, and I glance at the clock. It's 5:30 a.m. Nate's still an early riser.

I'm overcome by the desperate need to get out of here, away from him—to put as much distance between us as possible. I climb out of bed and quietly pull on the leggings and sweatshirt I wore here, throw my pajama pants and phone into the bag I brought, and open the door to the suite. As I expected, the living room is empty as I sneak across it and slide on the

snow boots I left at the entry. I shut the door behind me as quietly as possible.



The cab ride back to my condo proves to be a productive mental exercise. I arrive home having concluded that my dream was brought on by last night's apology, which I desperately needed to hear. While he didn't apologize for everything or even explain why he just left like that and never came back, obviously knowing that he was sorry and regretted at least some of his choices softened my attitude toward him enough to let my subconscious take over. Which, if I want to protect myself from getting hurt like he hurt me before, can't happen again.

Since I can't get out of training him and still keep my job, I need to enact an exit plan, stat. The text I receive from my dad after turning on my gas fireplace reaffirms my decision.

**Dad:** *The doctor just called with the results of the PET scan. It's not good. Small cancerous tumors on gallbladder and liver. Starting chemo next week. Then they'll reassess and maybe remove part of the liver.*

I sit down on my kitchen floor, trying to process what this means. Mom's cancer has spread. Despite over a decade of gene therapy to repress the cancer, it's started to grow and is creeping into other organs. And the fact that it's in both the gallbladder and liver is catastrophic. The liver has always been the worst case scenario because the survival rates are extremely low.

**Jackson:** *I'm so sorry, Dad. Do you want me to come home? I can take medical leave and be there to help out.*

Of course I just used up all my vacation time going to Italy. Of. Freaking. Course. That's okay, I can sublet out my condo, do a seasonal rental or something, and go home for the next few months if they need me. I have savings I can fall back on if I need to.

**Dad:** *Honestly, there's nothing you can do if you're here. It's a lot of sitting around and waiting. Now that I'm retired, I have nothing but time on my hands.*

**Jackson:** *Okay, but if you change your mind and need me there, just ask. I will drop everything and come home. I want to be there.*

**Dad:** *I know you will, honey. But it's not necessary. Not now, at least. We'll see you at Thanksgiving, as planned.*

**Jackson:** *Have you told Beau this is going on?*

**Dad:** *I haven't really heard from him in months. Guess I'll need to call him with this news.*

Mentally, I curse my brother for being so absent. I know he and my dad have some issues, but he's always been so close to Mom.

**Jackson:** *Let me know how *\*that\** conversation goes. And if you need anything from me, call or text any time.*

**Dad:** *I will.*

**Jackson:** *Can I call and talk to Mom, or does she not want to talk about this yet?*

**Dad:** *Definitely give her a call, but maybe later tonight because she has an important meeting with a new client today.*

**Jackson:** *Okay, I'll call her after work. Love you!*

**Dad:** *Love you too. Have a good day.*

I pull my knees up to my chest and rest my forehead on them, letting the tears come. How has everything gone to shit so quickly? A month ago, things were perfect. I had an amazing job that I loved doing every single day, my relationship with Marco wasn't being threatened by the return of my ex-boyfriend, and my parents were living their dream retirement up at Blackstone, with my dad spending his time on the board of directors for the mountain and my mom taking on the occasional interior design project as a creative outlet.

Mom's diagnosis is the confirmation I need that this is the right time to leave my job, but cutting myself off from the National Ski Team feels like severing a limb. It's one thing to contemplate it as a future decision, like I



was just a few days ago, but entirely another to be ready to implement an immediate change.

But if I need to go home for any reason, I can do that more easily from here if I'm just taking on private PT clients. If I were in Europe or Asia on the World Cup circuit, it would be much harder to get home, and unfair to leave Nate in a situation without a PT.

I ignore the texts that start coming in from Nate, asking where I am and why I left, and snuggle under a blanket. With the fire blazing, it's not as cold as I thought it would be. I should have just slept here last night instead of going to that hotel with Nate. I don't know what I was thinking at the time; no mac and cheese is worth this shame and regret.

My phone keeps buzzing with text and phone alerts, so I dump it on my couch and get out my yoga mat and bands. In the few minutes it takes me to set that up, I've got six missed text messages, and a voice mail. I don't bother checking them because I don't want to talk to Nate. In fact, I don't want to see him, either. The only people I really want to see and talk to right now are my parents.

I shoot off a text message to TJ letting him know I'm not feeling well and am going to stay home sick today. Then I turn my phone off.



"You are my favorite friend right now," I tell Petra when I come out of her bathroom, freshly clean and in a much better mood than when I arrived at her condo.

My yoga session was a frustrating exercise in not being able to control my own mind, and I ended it frustrated at my mediocre workout and my series of questionable choices last night—only to realize that I still didn't have hot water, so I couldn't shower.

"Your request was perfectly timed." Her lips curve into a sly smile.

"Yeah, because it gave you an excuse to get rid of the random guy you brought home last night. I thought you were in Salt Lake City?"

"I was. There was a big corporate dinner I planned for a law firm, and this particular lawyer was pretty cute. We stayed at the bar talking after the dinner. One thing led to another and we ended up back here."

"He came all the way back to Park City with you?"

She just shrugs like it's no big deal that a guy came forty-five minutes out of his way like that.

"What's his name?" I ask, curious to see if she even retained that info.

"Hell if I know. He put his number in my phone and said he'd text me, so I guess I'll figure it out if he does."

I can only imagine how many names and numbers are in her phone that she's not really sure who they belong to. "Your life is awesome. You know that, right?" I tell her. Seriously, Petra gives zero fucks about what anyone thinks of her, and it's refreshing.

"I mean, I wouldn't say no to a relationship with someone amazing—something like you have with Marco—but until then, I'm happy to keep taking all these guys on test runs."

We're laughing together when my phone starts ringing and without thinking, I groan, "Ugh, it's probably just Nate calling again."

Petra raises one perfectly sculpted eyebrow as her head swings toward me and she's about to say something when I glance at my phone and gasp, unable to mask the surprise.

"What's wrong?"

"I have to take this *right now*. Can I go in your bedroom? I just need a little privacy."

She nods, clearly confused about what's happening here.

"Hey, Annie," I answer as soon as Petra's bedroom door closes behind me.

"Hi. I'm wondering if you have a few minutes to talk about this job? Or is it a bad time?"

"Now's great."

My mind spins just thinking about this opportunity to get out of training Nate. Maybe they have something opening soon, rather than at the end of ski season. That's not normally how this works, but maybe a PT at Danforth moved or got another job or something. I mean, it's Danforth. My alma mater. I'm a veteran of that ski team, it'd be great to be back there and still working with skiers. And it's roughly twenty minutes from where my parents live. Maybe this is the answer to my prayers.

"Good. Let me tell you what we have coming up and you can tell me if it sounds like something you'd want to pursue," Annie says, her words clipped and efficient. "Santana has announced that he's retiring."

“What? Are you for real?” I ask. Chris Santana is a legend among men—the head of the athletic trainers and also the trainer for my ski team for the two years I raced at Danforth before leaving to race full time for the National Ski Team. There was no athlete he couldn’t help through whatever ailed them. We all idolized him. The man always said he’d never retire, claimed he’d be training our kids when they were in college.

“He knew it was time. He’s still as amazing and talented as ever, but he has a bad knee that makes it hard for him to ski, and he’s got grandkids now. His wife wants him home more often.”

“Oh, wow. I can’t imagine him slowing down,” I say as I pace in Petra’s bedroom. Her queen bed is a tangle of sheets from her visit with the lawyer and I have to continually walk around her lace bra that’s in the middle of the floor where it was no doubt flung at some point last night.

“Santana slow down?” Annie’s laugh is almost a bark. “Yeah, sure. He’s going to finish out this last ski season, and then he says he’s staying home to raise some cows on their farm and play with his grandkids.”

“So you’re looking for someone to replace him starting when?” I clarify.

“We’d like to have his replacement in place in the spring, so there’s some overlapped transition time.”

I feel like I shouldn’t remind her that I only have a few years of experience as a physical therapist—including my year of clinicals at the end of my doctorate program—when she’s talking about a job that would mean supervising an entire team of athletic trainers. “Those are some big shoes you’re looking to fill,” I say instead.

“No doubt. And I personally think you’d be the perfect person to fill them.”

“Annie, I’m flattered, but I’m not sure I’m qualified.” The words are out of my mouth before my brain can stop them.

“Jackson, you’re an alum, a veteran of the race team, an Olympic gold medalist. And you just happen to also have a PhD in physical therapy and several years of experience working for the National Ski Team. Who could be more qualified?”

“Well, when you put it that way . . .” I say, chuckling at myself. “I guess since it’s Santana, I have a bit of impostor syndrome. So, is the job being advertised already?”

“Not yet. I think HR will post it at some point this week. We’d like to then have the candidates on campus for interviews between Thanksgiving and Christmas.”

I think about all the travel for World Cup races between Thanksgiving and Christmas, and I let out a sigh that I’m sure she doesn’t miss. Then I remember that I’m planning to leave my job anyway, so I’m not beholden to the World Cup travel schedule.

“That was a big sigh,” she says and I debate whether or not I should tell her I’m leaving my job. Since I don’t know how that will go, and since there’s still a chance I might stay, I opt for explaining the initial sigh.

“That timing may be tricky for me. The World Cup races really pick up right after Thanksgiving. I can check my schedule, I think there’s a couple days in between Lake Louise and Beaver Creek and maybe I could fly in for an interview then. After that I’ll be in Europe for most of the winter.” I pause realizing how much I am presuming right now, and I let out a nervous laugh. “Sorry, I’m getting a bit ahead of myself.” I stop and run my hand over one of Petra’s houseplants, something with big leaves that sits right in front of her large double window.

“You’re really not,” Annie assures me. “And listen, part of why I wanted to chat about this on the phone is because I wanted to tell you that I’ve shared with a *very* select few key people that you might possibly be interested in this position. And they are *very* excited about this possibility. We’ve all heard that you’re training Nate Davenport now, and could not be more impressed that you’re overcoming your history to work with him. This shows exactly the kind of dedication to ski racing and a commitment to athletic wellness that we’re looking for. The ability to set aside personal differences for the good of the team is an imperative quality for our coaching and training staff. And you’re training a racer with significant medical issues. This all gives you an edge. Make sure you play that up in your interview if you want the position.”

It’s like the words are lodged in my throat. I had initially envisioned this job being a way to escape working with Nate, but now it seems like it’s predicated on working with him.

“Okay,” I manage after a few awkward moments of silence. “Thanks so much for the tip.”

“Of course! Having you back here would be amazing. I’ll text you when they post the position so you can apply.”

I thank her and then hang up, staring at my reflection in the gigantic arched mirror that hangs on Petra's wall.

*What have I done to deserve this?*



“So, what was that all about?” Petra asks when I come out of her bedroom. “And before you even think about lying to me, just know that I could hear about half of that conversation.” Her arms are folded across her chest, her bright blue eyes boring holes into me.

“Why do you look so mad?” I lean against the doorframe of her bedroom.

“Because when I hear my best friend say ‘maybe I could fly in for an interview,’ it makes me think you might be planning to leave Park City for a job somewhere else. What the hell, Jackson? Are you moving?”

“Okay,” I say as I walk toward her couch. She meets me there and sits down next to me. “Can I tell you something that’s extremely secret and rely on you not to tell *anyone* else?”

“Of course,” she says as she takes her long black curls and winds them into a bun at the nape of her neck.

I consider what, if anything, to tell her about Nate. I opt to leave that part out.

“My dad let me know about two weeks ago that my mom’s cancer is back.”

Petra reaches out and grabs my hand, squeezing gently. “I’m so sorry, hon.”

“Given that this is her second recurrence, even while on a specialized gene therapy that targets the cancer to inhibit growth, this is really bad news.” I pause, swallowing down the sob that is rising in my throat. “Like, maybe terminal.”

“Is that what the doctors have said?”

“Not yet. They are starting chemo soon, and I hope there’ll be good news. But it’s made me realize how much I want to be back home, close to my parents so I can be there for my mom through whatever this looks like.”

“Why does this have to be top secret? You’re not even telling Sierra?”

“Sierra literally moved to Park City for me. She will be crushed if I leave.”

“Hey, *I* moved here for you too.”

“You moved here because of me, not for me.”

“What’s the difference?”

“She moved here so we could live in the same place, we even work together. You moved here because you came to visit and saw a business opportunity, a niche that you could fill. You will be fine if I move home.”

“So will Sierra,” Petra says with far more confidence than I feel.

It’s not that I think Sierra can’t survive without me. Not at all. She has her own life—a job and a fiancé and I’m sure she’ll be okay. But I do think she’d be really hurt if I left. “I just don’t want to say anything until it’s more definite.”

“You’re really thinking about giving up your job to move to New Hampshire?”

“Yeah. It’s still in the very early stages, but Danforth is recruiting me to be their head athletic trainer,” I shake my head, still in awe of the offer. “In a lot of ways, that’s a step up from where I am now.”

“Are you sure this isn’t just about Nate?”

“I mean, the idea of working with athletes that *aren’t* him definitely holds appeal.” I give her a little smile. “But honestly, I started looking into options at the end of my Italy trip, as soon as I found out about my mom, and before I even knew Nate was on the team. I figured I’d give Josh one last year, then jump ship and go home.”

“But then working with Josh morphed into working with Nate,” Petra says.

“Yeah, exactly. And Petra, I can’t even explain how bad it is.”

“Why? Is he being a horrid asshole?”

“No, which is the problem. It’d be much easier to keep hating him if he was. He’s being great, actually. Last night he even apologized for some of what happened between us. Not all of it, but it was really heartfelt.”

“Wait, last night? Why are you seeing him outside of work?”

I tell her the bare bones story of staying in his suite with him, but leave out anything that might indicate how attracted I am to him. Then I tell her how I left this morning determined to quit my job so I didn’t have to work with him anymore.

“Hold up,” Petra says. “This is not adding up. You stayed at his suite last night, he was nice—made sure you got dinner and a bath and even apologized. And you snuck out this morning determined to not work with him? Why? Wouldn’t that make it clear that working with him would be easier, better than you expected?”

I look down at my hands—a blanket that’s been lying on the couch next to me is all clenched up in my fists. I can’t meet her eyes, afraid that she’ll be able to see the war going on inside me playing out like a movie on my pupils. Even as hard as it is to admit to myself how attracted I am to him, I worry that she’ll see it plainly written across my face. Petra knew Nate and me when I was still racing. She saw the good, the bad, the ugly of those years, and she knows that no matter what ups and downs we had, the one thing that lasted until the end of our relationship was the attraction, the desire.

“Jackson,” she says in a voice that should be reserved for reprimanding children, assuming Petra ever settles down enough to have kids.

I glance up at her, the guilt and shame making it hard to breathe. I *cannot* be attracted to Nate. Not after the way he took my heart and shattered it. I’m never giving him, or anyone else, the power to do that to me again. There’s no way I could withstand a second heartbreak of that magnitude.

“What’s really going on?”

“Petra, I can’t talk about this,” I whisper, images of Marco flashing in my mind. I can’t betray him.

“Okay, I’ll talk about it then.” She shrugs. “Here’s what I’m seeing—you dreaded having to work with Nate. But he’s hot, and you have a history that’s even hotter, and you’re mentally fighting your physical attraction to him, and it’s hard. And you’re probably feeling really guilty because of Marco.”

I blink several times in reaction to her astute assessment.

“Yeah, pretty much. I hate him. And I love Marco. So why am I attracted to Nate?”

“Um, maybe because you guys have always had this explosive chemistry together?”

“I guess.”

“Jackson, I remember a time that man could look at you from across the room and we’d *all* blush from the fire in his eyes. Like we could all feel it.

It was consuming. Katarina and I were always so jealous,” she adds, referring to a German racer that we were close with back in the day.

“Yeah, well, sometimes it feels like he’s still looking at me like that.”

“So let him look.” She juts out her chin in defiance. “It’s probably driving him crazy to realize what he let go of, especially since you’re with Marco now. He deserves to feel that regret. And you deserve to feel desired. No harm in that.”

I pause, considering whether I should say anything more. But I need advice. I need someone else to know what I’m feeling. In a small voice, I tell her, “But I feel that attraction too, now that he’s back. And it’s tearing me apart because it’s so wrong.”

“There’s nothing wrong with being attracted to an attractive man. You’re probably missing Marco and starved for sex. It’s natural that you’d feel attracted to someone you’ve had amazing sex with . . . as long as you don’t *act* on it,” she reminds me, and I can feel the heat creeping up my neck and into my cheeks as the memories of last night and this morning run through my head. “Wait,” she says, “you haven’t done anything with him, have you?”

“No,” I respond, relieved that I can be honest about this at least. “Nothing has happened between us.”

“Then why do you look so guilty?” She leans toward me.

“Let’s just leave it with the attraction is so strong that I was considering leaving my job so I didn’t have to train him. I figured I’d pick up some PT work here in Park City until I found a job close to home so I could move back and help with my mom’s situation.”

“And then?”

“And then my old coach from Danforth, who just called me about the job there, told me that one of the reasons they think I’d be a good fit is because of my ability to set aside personal differences and train Nate. She basically said that the key to me getting that job is successfully working with Nate this season.”

“Crap.” She sighs, leaning back and flinging her elbow over the back of the couch.

“Yep. So if I want this other opportunity that would allow me to both progress in my career *and* be close to my parents, I have to work with him this season.” Somehow, admitting this out loud actually fortifies my belief in myself that I can do this. When I pit this opportunity at Danforth against



my attraction to Nate, I'm more confident that I can withstand him in order to get what I really want.

"Okay, you can do this. Just go out there and be the best damn physical therapist you can possibly be. Be the one that every single athlete wants to work with because you're so good. You don't do that for Nate, you do it for you. Because no matter who you are training, you are going to be the best at what you do. *That's* who you are."

Petra's unwavering faith in me is part of what makes her such an amazing friend. "Nate's going to wonder why I'm suddenly so on board with training him after telling him this was only temporary and there's no way I'd be his PT this season."

"Good, let him wonder. You don't owe it to him to tell him any of this. And once he starts racing, at least you'll be at some of the same races as Marco. Then, you just need to get thoroughly fucked." She nods, and I blush again at her lewd but accurate assessment. "And you'll forget all about whatever you're feeling toward Nate."

"You're probably right," I say, because there's no way I can tell her that seeing Marco again definitely won't quench the need to finally have really good sex again.

Sadly, since Nate deserted me five years ago, I haven't had *really good sex* even once. And I'm confident that this is half the problem.

NOVEMBER

## CHAPTER 11



NATE

*Copper Mountain, Colorado*

I come to a stop at the bottom of the Giant Slalom practice course, next to Lyle and Jackson.

“Man,” Lyle says. “You get better every day. That’s two tenths of a second faster than your fastest GS time yesterday.”

“Yeah,” I pant, “that felt like a really good run.” I’m still trying to catch my breath when Jackson looks away, her eyes sweeping across the bottom of the run. I follow the same path, wondering who she’s looking for. About twenty different pairs of eyes are focused on me. “Why are they all staring?” I ask, quietly enough that only she and Lyle can hear me.

She pauses, measuring her words in that way she has ever since she snuck out of that hotel suite two weeks ago—for reasons she refuses to talk about. “I’m going to be honest and you need to promise you won’t let it go to your head, okay?”

“Okay?” It comes out as a question because I have no idea what she’s getting at here.

“Everyone just stopped what they were doing to watch you ski. Like, they were all going about their business and then someone said your name

and I swear you could hear a pin drop.”

“What?” I bark out a nervous laugh that’s very unlike me. “Why?”

She just rolls her eyes at me in response, and a small flame lights in my chest because for the first time, this finally feels real. I’m racing again, and despite over a decade away from it, I really am better than I ever was.

”Because,” Lyle says, while Jackson seems unwilling to answer my question, “they know they’re seeing greatness.”

I swallow down a laugh. “I appreciate the vote of confidence, but that seems a bit of a stretch.” This isn’t false modesty. I know that was a good run, but “seeing greatness” is ridiculous.

In skiing, we save that kind of terminology for the legends—for Bode Miller’s badass racing style that made him a household name and earned him the second most Olympic medals in the history of the sport, for Ingemar Stenmark holding the most World Cup wins ever, for Ted Ligety reinventing the art of the turn, or for Marcel Hirscher holding the most overall World Cup titles and retiring at the pinnacle of his career.

Those are the Greats. I’ve never even skied in a World Cup race. I do not deserve the terminology that is being used to flatter me at this moment.

“You are at the top of your game right now,” Jackson says as she shoves her hands into the pockets of her jacket. “Keep this up, and you are going to burst onto the World Cup stage. And the press *will* take notice.”

“Between how you’re skiing right now, your past social media presence, and all this,” Lyle says, waving his hand in front of my face as he rolls his eyes, “you’d better be prepared to deal with the media shitstorm.”

“I can hold my own with the press,” I assure them. Jackson nods in agreement. I was always the buffer between her and the press, so I have a lot of practice.

She pulls out her phone. “I’m going to send this video to Sierra for her to post on social.” She hits play on the video, tilting the screen toward me. I lean my head in to watch, and I’m so close I inhale that scent of her shampoo, because Jackson isn’t high maintenance enough to wear perfume. “Here,” she says suddenly, handing me her phone and stepping away.

In addition to carefully measuring her words around me since leaving that hotel room, she’s also been keeping a physical distance whenever possible. And ignoring me whenever she sees me outside of training, which is often because we’ve been living in the same house here at Copper Mountain for the last week.

I watch the video, impressed with myself when I see my run on film. That really *was* a solid performance, and I'm relieved my support team isn't just blowing smoke up my ass.

When I hand the phone back to Jackson, she tells me, "Sierra will probably edit it together with some of the footage that was taken at different points on the mountain. It should go live in the next day or two."

"I think we're done for the day," Lyle says as he glances up toward the fading sun. The light is starting to get flat, and it's better to stop before the lack of contrast on the snow leads to error or injury. "See you back at the house."

Lyle turns to leave and Jackson follows him, striking up a conversation which I'm confident is intended to prevent me from talking to her.

I've been trying to give her space, but this is getting ridiculous. If I'm going to be successful here, I can't be spending my time worrying about why she's ignoring me or if I did something to upset her. It's been a month since I joined the team and I feel like any of the initial progress we'd made, especially the day we went on that run and then did yoga together, was somehow ruined by that night in the hotel suite. And I'm still trying to figure out exactly what happened. She seemed fine at dinner, she even let me apologize for some of what happened. When I carried her into the bedroom after she fell asleep, she wasn't mad at me, she was grateful. I tucked her in, and then she disappeared the next morning and has kept me at a distance ever since. At least she seems to finally be on board with training me—there have been no more mentions of her not being my PT for the season.

"Jackson," I bark at her retreating back.

"I'll catch up with you later," she says to Lyle before she stops and turns toward me. She doesn't speak though, just waits with her arms crossed over her chest. There's a hurricane of emotion swirling in those emerald eyes.

"My lower back is bothering me a bit." It's not a total lie. It's sore on one side, but it's nothing out of the ordinary. Racing is a tremendous strain on the body, over and over again. But today, my sore back is the excuse I need to force us into closer proximity.

"All right, let's have a look. Want to stop in the lodge? Or back at the house?"

"The lodge is good," I say. There's a room they've designated for our team that we've been using for physical therapy, and hopefully no one else

will be using it. The house is too close quarters with the other six people staying there. It's impossible to have a private conversation.

She turns and walks toward the lodge.

"Really?" I call out. She's not even going to wait for me to get my skis off?

"I'll meet you in there," she says without even turning to look at me over her shoulder.

It takes me a few minutes to get all my gear packed up in the mammoth ski bag that houses my protective equipment. I lug both pairs of skis I needed today—my Slalom and Giant Slalom skis—and trudge through the hard-packed snow to the lodge.

I find Jackson settled in the room we've been using for PT. She's already taken her snow pants and ski jacket off; she's just wearing her base layer leggings and a zip-up hoodie. Her brown waves are up in a bun on top of her head and her cheeks are flushed pink from the transition from the cold outside air to the warm, dry inside air. For a moment it feels like we just stepped back in time, it could be five years ago or a decade, in any one of a hundred ski lodges we've been in together. Our skiing lives are intertwined like tracks crossing on freshly fallen snow . . . eventually there are enough tracks that they become indistinguishable from each other.

"So?" she asks putting her hands on her hips.

She has the casual, effortless look that I can't stop being attracted to. She's never realized how beautiful she is. Even when we were teenagers, she was competitive, strong, and more concerned with substance than appearance.

Her eyes travel over the length of my body. "Where's it hurt?"

There are so many jokes I could make right now, but they'd just piss her off so I swallow them down. Instead, I walk toward her and she takes a step back. *What the hell is that?* "Did I do something, Jackson?" Confusion flickers in her eyes. "You're acting like you're afraid of me."

"I'm not *scared* of you, Nate. I just don't want to be near you any more than I absolutely have to."

I focus on keeping my hands loose at my side instead of balling them into fists. She can be so infuriating. "You know, words like that could wound a guy. Make him doubt himself. Totally kill his confidence."

"Yeah well, lucky for you, your arrogance is unshakable."

"Is it, though?" I ask, taking a small step closer.

“Nate,” she warns, her voice low and throaty. She swallows, a lump bobbing in the elegant cylindrical column beneath her jawline, and her cotton candy lips parting as she takes another breath.

“Jackson,” I reply in the same tone, but I don’t come any closer.

“I’ll step outside so you can get undressed,” she says, changing course quickly. “Take off everything but your base layer bottoms.” And with that, she slips right past me and races out the door.

When she returns, I’m sitting on the treatment table in the compression leggings I wear under my race suit.

“Okay, show me exactly where the pain is,” she says, her voice softer, kinder than it has been in weeks. Her deep, slow breathing reverberates across my shoulder blades and my skin rejoices in the sensation.

“Right here,” I say, putting my fingertips along the ridge of muscle that’s particularly tight.

Gently, she moves my hand back to the table and uses her fingers to probe in a circular pattern around the muscle while asking about different pain points. “Well,” she says finally, “it seems like you just have a knot in your back. Probably from the strain of the past week. There’s no real inflammation, except right at the knot, so I don’t think you’ve pulled anything.”

“So what can I do about it? Heat and stretching?”

“Yeah, that’ll help. Have you ever done dry needling?”

“Not even sure what that is,” I tell her.

“It’s kind of like acupuncture. I place needles directly into the knot to stimulate blood flow to the area. It usually results in a loosening of the knot and pretty instant pain relief. And it doesn’t hurt.”

My shoulders shake with a small laugh that comes out more like a snort. “I’m not really worried about the pain.” Pain is part of a professional athlete’s life, and a few tiny needles stuck into my back aren’t going to hurt nearly as badly as some of what I’ve already experienced.

“All right, why don’t you lie face down,” she says as she takes a few steps away. I look over my shoulder and she’s digging through a bag and pulling out a small hard plastic kit. I lie on my stomach with my arms bent so I can rest my head on my hands.

Her footsteps are soundless and I nearly jump when she places her hand on my back. “I’m going to work a little tension out of the area first,” she tells me. The heel of her hand digs into the knot in my back; it’s pain on the

edge of relief. She keeps talking, almost like nervous chatter. “You will want to put heat on this tonight. Take a really hot bath or I can give you a heat pack if you want. It’ll help loosen up this muscle some more, and can help with the tenderness from the dry needling.”

“Will it really be tender?” I ask. “Or is that like a disclaimer you have to give me before doing the procedure.”

“Little of both. Everyone reacts differently. I know you’ve had acupuncture before, but this is a bit different. These needles will be going directly into the trigger point, so your muscle may begin to twitch as it releases the tension,” she tells me as she runs her thumb over the knot. “You ready?”

“Sure.”

“No talking,” she insists. “Just relax.”

The thin needles go in so easily I barely feel them, but as she predicted, my muscle begins to twitch as the knot loosens and the blood starts flowing into it. The relief is almost instant. I lie there for probably twenty minutes, so relaxed that I start to feel drowsy.

“I’m going to take them out now,” she tells me, her voice soft and quiet. With the door closed, there’s barely any noise from the mostly empty lodge.

“Mmm,” I say to acknowledge her. I’m almost too relaxed to talk. But then she starts pulling the needles out of my back, a strange sensation that, while not painful, jolts me right out of my state of tranquility. Things start to come back into focus, like the fact that her hip is about six inches from my face, the vanilla-coconut scent wafting off her body, and the way her fingers move across my skin as she attaches a removable heating pad to my back.

This pull I feel toward her still—all the time—is driving me crazy. I need to explain why it took me five years to come back to her, get her to forgive me so we can move past it. I want to clear the air before we head to Europe this weekend to finish up our training for the first race of the season.

“Jackson,” I say, “why—” But a loud knock on the door interrupts me, and Jackson calls out “come in” so quickly I’m sure I can hear the relief in her voice.

“Oh, sorry,” Jeff says from the doorway.

“Nothing to be sorry about,” Jackson tells him. “We were just finishing up a treatment on his back.”



He nods to Jackson. “I’ve been looking all over for you,” Jeff tells me. “You rode over here with me, did you want a ride back to the house?”

Hoping that it’ll give us time to talk, I’m about to tell him I’ll catch a ride with Jackson. But she says, “Good plan, I’ll see you guys back there,” as she puts the sharps container back into her dry needling kit, sweeps up her jacket and her boot bag, and heads for the door.

I watch her slip out of the room, then swing my feet over the edge of the table and sit up slowly. I can’t help the sigh that escapes.

“Sorry, did I interrupt something?” Jeff asks.

“No.”

“Okay,” he says, but nothing about his tone says that he believes me.

“She was just finishing up a treatment on my back.”

“If you’re done letting her treat you like a pin cushion, let’s go. I’m starving!”

I pull the rest of my clothes on, and follow him out hoping that I’ll get a chance to finish that conversation with Jackson back at the house. Ideally without interruptions.



“Seriously, dude?” Jeff says, giving me the side-eye.

“What’d I do?” I ask, shifting on the wooden bench in the lodge as I stretch out the fingers in my right hand. Sharpies litter the table in front of me. There’s a holdup down the autograph line as one of the most famous female skiers in the world is chatting with what appears to be a whole ski team. There are like eight helmets on the table in front of her to sign. These team events where we get to interact with fans are fun, but what I really want to be doing right now is finding Jackson so we can finish that conversation we started two days ago.

Jeff leans close enough to me that no one else will hear him. “That MILF was practically fucking you with her eyes.”

“Nothing I can do about that,” I tell him. It wasn’t like I hadn’t noticed. Her husband was busy holding their baby while she had me taking photos with her five-year-old and signing some memorabilia for him. If I were him, I’d be pissed as hell.

“It’s that video that’s all over the team’s social channels.” He rolls his eyes.

Sierra didn’t *just* post a video of the training run Jackson filmed a couple days ago. She created a whole montage as part of a “meet the athletes” series so that fans can get to know us. And apparently the only thing they’ve gotten to know about me is that I don’t wear many clothes. Sierra took footage of my abs rippling as I did pull-ups, squatting 350 pounds in nothing but a pair of spandex training shorts, getting fitted for my team race suit, and drinking a recovery shake with teammates in just my sweatpants. The two minute video—which included less than twenty seconds of me actually skiing—was like a promo video for a sports model, not a professional athlete.

There are guys like Marco Antonio who eat up that kind of publicity. But it couldn’t be further from who I am, and Sierra would *know* how much I wouldn’t want to be objectified, which means she’s trying to piss me off.

“That video could not be less reflective of who I am,” I tell Jeff.

“Put some clothes on when the cameras are around then,” he mutters.

“Hey, I didn’t even know we were being filmed half those times.”

“Sierra is always filming. It’s necessary. Get used to it.”

“Why does this video have you so pissed off right now?”

He tips his chin toward a cluster of teenage girls with a stupid amount of makeup on, long hair hanging down their backs, giggling together in the line that wraps around the room. They’re looking over at us. “That doesn’t normally happen at these team autograph nights. It’s all parents with younger kids who look up to us because someday they want to ski in the Olympics. They just want us to sign their helmets and get a picture so that when they grow up and make the National Ski Team they can do the same for other little kids.”

“Dude, I’ve probably been to as many of these as you have.” I elbow him. I think of the years I was Jackson’s coach and she attended these team nights. “I know the clientele. There are always teenagers too.”

“Yeah well, they’re normally here in their ski team jackets and winter hats. Those girls look like they’re going to a club and they want to bring you along, get you drunk, and take advantage of you.”

He’s not wrong. They’re dressed up in a way you never see at ski mountains, like they’re going out and trying to impress guys. “No way in hell,” I mutter.

“Get used to this kind of attention. For whatever reason, you’re being portrayed as the hot new addition to our team.”

“Cuz I am the hot new addition to our team. People are tired of your sorry face.”

“If you say so, pretty boy. All that matters are the rankings. You going to be able to keep up?”

“Plan on it,” I say. This is my one shot and I plan on leaving as much of a mark as I can.

The line keeps moving and just when I think my hand is going to fall off from signing my name so many times, the group of teenage girls is upon us. Luckily the end of the line is also in sight.

They tell us which local mountain they ski for, and then I ask what I can sign for them.

The girl in the center of the pack, who has been batting her eyelashes and smiling at me for a few minutes as we chat, boldly asks, “Will you sign my stomach?” as she puts a hand along the bottom hem of her sweater like she’s going to pull it up while her friends either giggle or gasp.

“Sorry,” I say. “This is a family-friendly event. We’re not signing body parts tonight.”

“Shame,” she says, her eyes never leaving mine. “How about a photo together then?”

“Sure.” I just want them to move along. “Why don’t you all come around here and we’ll take a picture with you.” I gesture to Jeff. No way am I being in this photo with them alone. This is awkward enough already.

They set their race bibs on the table in front of us and scurry around behind us, all giggles and high-pitched screeching the way teenage girls often get when they’re excited. And that’s when I finally see Jackson, sitting with her head close to Sierra’s and looking at something on Sierra’s phone. Sierra helps run this event, so she flew in to start setting up and prepping us yesterday. They’re at a table only a few feet beyond where the girls had been standing in front of us, most likely blocked from my view because of the constant line of people in front of me.

“Lean in close,” one of the teenage girls says. “Selfie time.”

“You’ll never be able to get us all,” another one responds. “Your arm’s not that long.”

“Can you take it, Nate?” the first girl asks, holding her phone in front of me.

“Ugh, sure.” I hold my left arm out as far as I can, but I still can’t get us all in the shot. There are too many of them. Beyond the camera, Jackson’s eyes lock with mine. “Hey, Jackson,” I call out. “Can you come take a photo for us?”

For a second she doesn’t move or respond, just looks at me with fire burning in her eyes.

“Sure,” she says, all casual-like despite the fact that I can tell her reaction is anything but. She takes a few steps toward us and manages to take the phone from me without any skin-to-skin contact. She taps the phone screen a few times and then says, “Smile.”

She takes a few photos, turns the phone off, and hands it back to owner. *So she was watching closely enough to know whose phone we were using. Interesting.* “You’re holding up the line,” she tells the girls, then gives them the fakest smile I’ve ever seen.

“Sorry,” they chirp, an inconsistent chorus.

Jeff and I both sign their race team bibs that are on the table in front of us, and they move on.

“Crap!” I hear the blonde sigh when they slide down the line to Steve.

“What’s wrong?” another girl asks her.

“Every single photo is out of focus,” she growls.

My shoulders are most likely shaking with the repressed laughter that bubbles up in me, because I know damn well that you practically have to *try* to take an out of focus photo on a phone these days.

“Hey, Nate,” I hear the blonde girl call out to me. Pretending I didn’t hear her, I turn away to talk to the little girl who’s next in line. She has three things for me to sign, then her older brother starts talking to me about racing, and I’m able to forget the group of girls moving down the line.

The minute the last person in the line passes me, I’m up out of my seat searching for Jackson. She and Sierra aren’t sitting at that table anymore. I find Sierra across the room, taking pictures of families who are here for the event, but in glancing around, I don’t see Jackson anywhere. And then I catch sight of her green sweater with her dark hair like a curtain down her back as she slips through the door to the women’s restroom.

I cross the room as casually as I can, trying not to appear like I’m in a rush but also trying not to get caught up in conversations as I go. I somehow manage to get to the restrooms before she comes out, so I lean up against the wall and pull my phone out. I’m hoping that if anyone is

watching me they think I'm just checking my texts, not waiting for my ex-girlfriend like a creep.

Her gasp when the bathroom door opens lets me know she wasn't expecting to see me waiting for her. It's such a raw, sexual sound that reminds me how hard it is to work with someone you used to have sex with. And reminds me how desperately I need us to get back to having sex before I lose my freaking mind.

"You're avoiding me," I say as I look up and meet her eyes. My pose is casual, leaning back against the wall with one knee bent and my foot propped on the wood paneling, my arm loosely holding my phone in front of me. But my statement is decidedly *not* casual. We are having this conversation, because I'm tired of her finding ways around it.

"We work together," she replies. "I see you every day. How could I possibly avoid you?"

"See, that's exactly what I mean. You're physically present, but you are avoiding having any meaningful conversation with me. What's going on?"

"Nothing is going on, Nate. I told you the other day, I'll be your PT—for this season at least. But we're not going to be friends. Any chance of that died years ago."

"Why won't you at least let me explain what happened?" I ask, pushing off the wall and stepping closer to her. The hallway is narrow, so we are only a foot apart and she backs up, right into the wall.

"Because you made your choice, and I've dealt with it. I don't want your reasoning. Your *why* doesn't matter anymore."

"That makes no sense. It's like you're afraid you'll have to forgive me."

She swallows in that gulping way she does when she doesn't want to respond.

"You *are*, aren't you?"

"Are what?" Another gulp.

"Afraid that I might have good reasons for leaving you, and you might have to forgive me." I lean forward and place my left arm against the wall next to her head.

She looks up at me, meeting my eyes with her icy glare. "Nothing you say will make me forgive you, Nate. That's why you don't need to bother trying." And with that, she ducks under my arm and races around the corner back into the crowded lodge.



**Nate:** *Are you still awake?*

**Jackson:** *Yes, why?*

**Nate:** *My back is really stiff again. Can you take a look?*

I check my phone incessantly over the next few minutes, waiting for her response. When it doesn't come, I head out of my bedroom and down the stairs with one of the remaining stick-on warming pads from the stash she gave me two days ago. I can't position it myself on my back, so I'm hoping someone is still up and can help me with it.

The two-story living room is empty. Everyone headed to their rooms earlier than normal tonight, since we're leaving for Finland tomorrow. Packing takes forever; alpine skiers travel with an unbelievable amount of crap. Even though we're only going for one race with two events this time, I've got six bags including all my ski equipment. When we head back to Europe after Thanksgiving, I will have far more to bring with me for the month we're on the road. After Christmas, it'll be a three month stint in Europe.

The lights are on in the kitchen, and as I round the corner into the large space, I'm caught off guard by the sight in front of me. She's in leggings and an oversized sweater, standing on top of a barstool with her head in the cabinet above the refrigerator. Even though I can't see any identifying features, I know it's Jackson. I can tell it in the curve of her hip and the small grunts of frustration I'm hearing. I walk quietly across the kitchen, afraid that if I say something and scare her she'll either hit her head on the cabinet or fall off the barstool. That protective instinct I've always had when it comes to her kicks in, and I want to fix whatever is ailing her right now. But she hates other people trying to take over and solve her problems for her—aside from the ongoing argument about getting married, the only other thing we ever fought about when we were together was when I tried to fix things *for* her instead of *with* her.

She pops her head out of the cabinet, curse words falling from her lips as she does.

"What's wrong?" I ask quietly as I approach her side.

She gasps and loses her balance at the same time, pitching forward. I reach up, putting my hands on her hips to steady her, but in her attempt to push my hand away she fully starts falling toward me. I wrap an arm around her thighs as her upper body falls over my shoulder and hold her tight to my chest to break her fall. Using my core strength to break her fall doesn't do anything good for my lower back.

"Put me down," she grunts. My shoulder is digging into her stomach so she rights herself, bringing her upper body in line with her legs.

I loosen my grip so she starts to slide down my body toward the ground. "Is that how you say 'thank you' in your world?"

"Yeah, thanks for scaring the shit out of me so I fell off that stool," she says, her voice laden with sarcasm.

I tighten my grip before her feet hit the ground. Her head is still a few inches above mine, so I look up at her. "That didn't sound even remotely sincere." I can tell by the look in her eyes—all fire and anger—that she's not in the mood to be teased. It only spurs me on.

"Because it wasn't. Put me down," she repeats, her voice quiet like she doesn't want anyone else in the house to hear. She puts her hands on my shoulders and pushes back, but my arm holds her securely.

"I'll put you down if you tell me what you're so pissed off about."

"Fine," she grumbles, and I have to hold my smile in because she's adorable in her righteous indignation.

I loosen my hold on her and she slides down my body. I have to block the vision of this exact scenario with us naked that comes flashing through my mind, because I can't afford to let my lust distract me for even a second. We are having this conversation, and we're having it now.

Her feet land softly on the ground and I look down at the top of her head. My arm is still loosely around her back, and she hasn't attempted to step away from me. But she hasn't looked up at me either.

"So?"

"I stashed some salted caramels up here and they're gone."

"You know that's not what I'm asking about."

She looks up at me then, her arched brows dipping in confusion.

"What's had you so pissed off since you left my hotel suite that morning? It's been two weeks of the silent treatment from you."

"First of all, I talk to you every single day. I'm not giving you the silent treatment."

I try not to let it annoy me that she's refusing to admit what we both know is true. "During training, you only talk to me if you absolutely have to. Outside of the gym and off the mountain, you go out of your way to avoid me. The other night at dinner, I asked you a question and you turned away to talk to Jeff, pretending you didn't hear me."

"What part of this don't you get, Nate?" she says, the frustration simmering to the surface. "You and I are never going to be friends. I'm your physical therapist. That's it. When we're not working, I have no obligation to talk to you." Her words sting, like she intended them to, but things still don't add up.

"So you left my hotel room pissed off because you have to work with me? That doesn't make sense. We'd had a really good training session together. We'd had dinner, and I'd apologized about my mom. Things were improving between us, and then suddenly they weren't."

Her cheeks flush and I know I'm onto something. But she doesn't reply.

"What happened that made things worse?"

She looks down at the floor. I wait patiently while she decides what she wants to say.

"I got some bad news, that's all."

I reach out and tilt her chin up so she's looking at me. "What happened?" Her eyes are glassy with unshed tears, but she doesn't respond. And then suddenly, *I know*. "Your mom?"

She blinks and the tears run down her cheeks. Without even stopping to think about it, I wrap both arms around her and pull her to me. "I'm so sorry, Jackson," I murmur against the top of her head.

I feel her arms move against my stomach and then they're wrapped around my waist, squeezing tightly as her chest heaves. I hold her while she clings to me, her shoulders shaking as she cries. She tucks her head against my neck, and I rest my cheek against the bun at the top of her head. I should know exactly what's happening with her mom. I should have been there for her through this. I should have let her be there for me when my mom died.

My younger self was a damn fool, too full of pride to make good decisions and I'll spend forever making things right if that's what it takes.

After a few minutes she starts to pull away, but I put my hands on her hips. "Here, hop up," I say as I lift her onto the countertop of the large island.



She wipes her wet face with the sleeve of her sweater. “I should go,” she says, but makes no move to leave.

“I have something for you,” I tell her. “It may help a little.”

She raises one eyebrow, her curiosity obviously piqued.

“But first,” I say, “can you put this on my back?” I hold up the heat pack I’d set on the counter before she fell off the barstool. She takes it from me, tearing it open and peeling the backing off to reveal the sticky side. I slide my shirt up and she positions it along the lower left side of my back right where it’s still sore.

When she’s done, I turn back toward the enormous restaurant-style standing freezer. Sitting all by itself on a shelf inside is a small pint of ice cream with a note that reads “Vegan—Don’t Eat” rubber-banded around it. I turn toward her with the pint in my hand and I can see her lips turn up at the corners when she recognizes her favorite brand of ice cream.

“Wait, why do *you* have ice cream?” she asks, the accusation clear. She honestly can’t wrap her mind around me being vegan.

“Just keep an open mind until you’ve tried it.”

“Oh God, it’s not ice cream, is it? It’s going to be some nasty nondairy concoction that’s going to make me wish I’d never tried it.” It’s worth letting her give me shit to see the playfulness in her tearstained face.

“Don’t rush to judgment. You haven’t even tasted it yet.” I grab two spoons from the drawer near my hip and step up next to her. I set the carton and spoons on the counter next to her. “Let’s give it a few to soften up.”

She eyes the pint warily, but then her eyebrows raise. “Caramel almond brittle,” she says, and I can see that she’s hopeful. Caramel is her favorite food group.

“Do you want to talk about what’s going on with your mom?”

“Not really.” She looks away, over my head, instead of making eye contact. I can read her face easily if I can just see her eyes, and she knows it.

“Do you need to go home? Should you be there instead of going to Finland?”

“No.” She shakes her head lightly. “She just started chemo. They’re doing the treatments at Danforth-Hitchcock,” she says, referencing the hospital near Blackstone where my mom received periodic dialysis treatments during the winters while we were up there skiing in high school. “She just has to go back to Dana-Farber in Boston once a month for her

regular checkups. Besides, I'll be home in less than two weeks for Thanksgiving."

"So, the cancer is spreading again?" It's so hard to know how to word the question in a way that will keep her talking instead of shutting her down.

She nods.

"Fuck, Jackson, I'm so sorry." I put my hand on the back of her neck and she doesn't flinch at all. "What can I do?"

"There's nothing to do. We just wait."

"Promise me you'll tell me if you need anything? Or if you need to go home to spend time with your parents?"

"Sure." She shrugs. "Is that fake ice cream ready to try yet?"

"We'll see," I say, pulling my hand back from her neck and removing the lid from the container. The spoon slices through it and I dig out a bit with caramel and a big chunk of almond brittle for her.

She takes the spoon, eyes the ice cream suspiciously, and slides the spoon into her mouth, closing her lips around it. She slides the spoon back out, then swirls the ice cream around her mouth, her face thoughtful like she's judging a fine wine.

"That doesn't suck," she says. "At all."

"See?" I say, using the other spoon to scoop some out for myself. But she grabs it from my hand and shoves it in her mouth. She laughs when I lunge for the spoon and she leans back to keep it out of my reach.

She's lying back on the granite countertop, holding my spoon over her head and laughing with a mouth full of ice cream as I lean over her, my hands planted on either side of her head. My voice is a low growl when I tell her, "That was a mistake."

"That ice cream is *mine*. All of it," she insists through a mouth full of ice cream, unable to control the giggle that bubbles up out of her. There's ice cream on her lips and there's nothing I want more in this moment than to lick it off.

"Oh, yeah?" I challenge, leaning down close to her ear. I'm about to say something completely inappropriate, but warranted, when movement at the entrance to the kitchen catches my eye.

"Oh, shit," Jeff mumbles as he freezes in place, eyeing Jackson lying back on the countertop and me leaning over her, and clearly drawing

conclusions about what's happening here. Or what was about to happen here.

"This is not what it looks like," I tell him.

Jackson closes her eyes for a second while swallowing her mouthful of dessert.

"I stole his ice cream." She laughs, but it sounds forced, as she waves the spoon in the air. She sits up and looks over her shoulder. "And apparently he's very protective of it."

"Was it that vegan shit with the note on it in the freezer?" Jeff asks, taking a tentative step into the kitchen.

"It's disgusting," Jackson says, "don't ever try it." She looks over at me and gives me a little wink and it's ridiculous how good it feels to be her co-conspirator, even over something so trivial. She turns back to Jeff. "I think I'm going to go throw up now."

Good, now I'll never have to worry about Jeff stealing my ice cream—just Jackson.

She hops off the counter and walks out of the kitchen without saying anything to either one of us.

"Ice cream, huh?" Jeff says as he takes his water bottle to the refrigerator to fill it.

If he hadn't already thought he was interrupting something when he walked into the training room two days ago, he might have believed that I was leaning over her on that counter with my face inches from hers because I was trying to get my ice cream back. But two close encounters in a row . . . there's no way he doesn't think something's going on.

"Do you have any idea how hard it is to find decent vegan ice cream?"

"Mmm hmm. Sure, Romeo," he says as he stands there letting the filtered water flow into his bottle.

"Don't be a dick. She's my physical therapist."

"Dude, you used to bang that chick on the regular—"

I step toward him so quick he stumbles back and water goes everywhere.

"You will *not* talk about her like that."

Jeff gives me a half smile. "And now I know for sure you still have feelings for her. Congrats, you're exactly as predictable as I thought you were."

“I hate you right now,” I mumble as I reach for the spoon Jackson left sitting on the counter.

“Nah, you’re secretly hoping that, now that I know the truth, you’ve got a friend you can divulge your master plan to.”

“Master plan?”

“You do have a plan, right?” Jeff is barely masking a horrified reaction, like I’d told him I regularly eat my own vomit.

“What the hell is happening right now?” I ask as I scoop out a spoonful of ice cream and shove it into my mouth. It’s delicious in an overly sweet, send you into a sugar coma kind of way.

“Uh, I’m being the cool ‘you can talk to me, bro’ friend, and you’re being weird about it,” he tells me as he walks over to grab a dish towel off the counter and wipe up the mess of water down the front of the fridge. “It’s not like it isn’t obvious that you still have feelings for her. And it’s not like we don’t all hate her boyfriend. So, what’s the plan?”

I stop chewing and look at him. “You’re being serious right now?”

“Totally.”

I put the lid back on the ice cream. “This isn’t really something I’m prepared to talk about.”

“You sound like a fucking lawyer. Is your plan *classified*?” He sounds like a twelve-year-old giving his friend crap.

“Right now it is,” I tell him, swinging open the door to the freezer and dropping my ice cream on the shelf. “I’ll see you in the morning. We’ve got a long flight. I’m headed to bed.”

Jeff coughs out “pussy” under his breath as I walk past him out of the kitchen. I don’t bother responding. I’ve been surrounded by people who work for me—whether making my ski videos or building my real estate business—for the last few years. It’s refreshing to have this banter with someone who’s not on my payroll.

## CHAPTER 12



### JACKSON

*Levi, Finland*

“There is no reason you can’t place in the top five for this race,” I tell Nate. “The conditions on this mountain are perfect for you. You couldn’t be in better shape. Just attack this run like you did the last one and you’ll get major points for this race.” I keep my tone upbeat and confident. He needs to know I believe in him.

“I don’t know why you think I can waltz into the top five at my first World Cup race. I’ll be thrilled if I stay in the top fifteen,” Nate says, looking at the course with a small dose of fear in his eyes.

The thing with Nate is, he’s my opposite. I was a come-from-behind kind of skier. Tell me I couldn’t do it, and I’d set out to prove you wrong. Nate had that figured out about me when we were teenagers. He’d taunt me before every race, making me think he didn’t believe in me, just so I’d go out there and prove him wrong—a routine we maintained for too long. *Except for the one time he wasn’t there . . .* but I can’t think about that day right now.

Today, I need him to go out there and ski the best he’s ever skied. My future depends on it. And for Nate to do well, he needs to go into this race

confident. He needs to believe he has a shot at winning. And for some reason, the person he trusts to be honest with him right now is me.

“Look at me,” I say, putting both my hands on his shoulders as I turn him to face me. “You are sitting in fifteenth going into your second run. Do you know how amazing that is for your first World Cup race? You can do this. You are the best skier I’ve ever known.” Every word of that is true. Marco is an amazing skier—the best in the world—and our US team is full of talented and hardworking men. But Nate has the raw potential to be better than all of them.

He leans down, resting his forehead against the top of my head, our knit National Ski Team hats pressed together. I can feel his breath on my face, and suddenly my heartbeat is pounding in my chest, making it hard to breathe. *This is your career, I remind myself. It’s not personal.*

That night in the kitchen before we flew to Finland was a mistake. I let my guard down. I was feeling scared about my mom’s cancer, and anxious about the Danforth interview that’s now a little over a week away. I let the attraction overcome my logic and I let him console me when I should have been pushing him away and consoling myself. Letting him back in, in any capacity, is too dangerous. My heart can’t handle any more heartbreak. And that’s what Nate is—a heartbreak I barely survived the first time around.

“Keep talking,” he says, his voice low and gravelly. Goose bumps start at the base of my spine and crawl slowly up my back because I recognize the tenor in his tone. He’s using his turned-on voice—the one I could never resist. But I don’t think he even realizes it. He’s not trying to seduce me out here at the top of the course, in front of everyone. He just needs me to be here for him right now. He needs that connection, to know I believe in him.

*Stay focused.*

“You know every turn on this hill from your first run,” I remind him. Levi is always tricky because the four hours of daylight means that if you’re lucky enough to land in the top thirty during your first run, your second run is in the dark under the yellow glow of the lights. It can feel like an entirely different course when the light changes that much. “You have the speed and the agility. You are stronger than you’ve ever been. Don’t go too aggressive at the top of the course, save it for the middle where you’ll really need your strength on that steep terrain. Dig in as hard as you can on those turns and focus on your balance. Keep it tight. Your body is ready for this,” I assure

him. I squeeze his shoulders as I step away, vaguely aware of the clicking of multiple camera shutters. Of course this is all documented. Everything is.

“Thanks,” Nate mouths as he steps back, then reaches over and clasps my shoulder with one hand.

“Time to warm up,” I tell him.

“Five more racers,” Lyle barks at Nate, “then you.”

From the bottom of the hill the crowd erupts for the skier who just finished. I don’t try to calculate who it was, and I hope Nate isn’t thinking about that either. Comparison is a mind-fuck when you’re at the top of the mountain waiting to go. Lyle stands next to me, the two of us trying to block out the cameras.

Nate easily runs through the warm-up regimen I’ve prepared for him without even breaking a sweat, though his breath is coming out in little white puffs.

“Three more to go.” Lyle gives us the update on Nate’s position in line.

I have him do some high knees to get his heart rate up, make sure he’s good and warm going into his run. “All right, let’s stretch out your back. All the way over.” I guide his head down so his upper body is as close to his straight legs as possible. For someone with so much muscle, he’s surprisingly flexible. Consistent yoga is helping with that. “Bend your left leg and breathe into it,” I say, moving behind him and pushing against the muscles of his lower back and making sure he’s not stiff or tender there like he was in Colorado. “Alternate.”

When Nate is sufficiently stretched out and his muscles warm, I look over at Lyle. “He’s ready.”

“All right, gear on,” Lyle barks as he starts to turn away toward the start gate. “You’ve got about two minutes until you’re at the start gate.”

Nate steps into his skis and straps his helmet on, before turning toward me. He reaches out and takes both my gloved hands in his. “Thank you for being here.”

I resist the temptation to remind him that it’s my job—that I’m paid to be here. That would undo all the progress we’ve made getting him ready for this race. “You got this,” I say instead. “You can win this.”

He leans in as close as the chin guard on his helmet will allow. “I didn’t only come here to win this,” he says, his voice low and steady, but quiet enough that only I can hear him. “I came for you.”

Lyle shoves Nate's poles between us, clicking them into his gloves, and he's off toward the start gate. If I hadn't had so many years of recent practice perfecting my poker face, pretending like nothing—especially concerning Nate—bothered me, my mouth would be hanging open for the cameras. And that's the very last thing we need right now.



Heads turn as Marco and I follow the host to our table. A few people have their mobile phones out and are taking pictures or filming us. I hate this part of our relationship, but Marco adores the spotlight, loves being beloved, appreciates every minute of his celebrity. He's done nothing to earn the good looks that were gifted to him by his parents, but he's had an amazing career and deserves to be recognized for every win he's earned. People just can't get enough.

Once we're seated and our waiter has taken our drink order, people around us appear to go back to enjoying their meals. Marco has gotten us a round booth tucked into the corner. The nearest patrons are at least ten feet away, so at least we've got some privacy.

"How's Claus?" I ask him when we get seated.

"Shy." He laughs. As is tradition in Levi, the male and female winners each get to name a reindeer. Claus was Marco's prize for his first place slalom finish today, and it's a fitting name given that the Lapland region of Finland is known as Santa's Lair—home of Santa, including Santa's Village which is a surprisingly popular tourist attraction. And Santa always presides over Levi's "bib draw," the nighttime party that kicks off each World Cup race with the top fifteen ranked racers pulling bibs to find out what order they'll race in.

Marco has four reindeer now. They live in the same preserve as my one reindeer from years ago, who I named Beau after my brother. My reindeer was a girl, which continues to make me laugh to this day.

"You sure you don't want to come to Jeff's birthday party with me tonight?"

"It's not that I don't want to, *Bella*. But I have to be up at 4:00 a.m." He reminds me that he'll be on a flight to Paris before I even wake up tomorrow. I have a few team obligations in the morning, so I'll be flying



out later in the day. I'll still arrive in Paris in time for the two-day wedding celebration of one of his close family friends. "And you know I can't sleep on flights," he reminds me.

One of my most prized talents is my ability to sleep anywhere, at any time. Long-haul international flights, ski lodges between races, car rides—really anywhere. Marco, on the other hand, can't even sleep in first class unless it's on a flight where the seat fully reclines into a bed.

"Besides," he adds, "I doubt your team would appreciate me being there."

"Come on, you're friendly with all of them. You've raced with Jeff for years, it's not like it'd be weird if you showed up at his birthday party."

"I think it'd be weird for Nate," Marco warns.

"Pfft. Don't be like that."

"Let's not make things more awkward. You know the press would be all over any kind of a confrontation and we already managed to get through this week without one, so let's call that a win and not tempt fate, eh? There are still a lot more races for us to get through this season."

I roll my eyes in response. "Nate being here shouldn't mean that we don't get to do things together."

"I was never going to Jeff's birthday party anyway, *Bella*. I've got to get to bed early for my flight. I'm sorry not to see you dressed up in your flapper costume, though."

We've planned a 1920s party to celebrate Jeff's last day of being in his twenties. My dress is amazing, I'm so excited to wear it. But I wish Marco was going to be with me as a buffer from Nate. That night in the kitchen at Copper Mountain still has me rattled. It's like my defenses completely crumble in his presence, and I don't want to risk being alone with him again.

"I'm confident Sierra will overdo it on the photos and you'll see them plastered all over social media."

"Good. More people need to see and appreciate this beautiful face," he says as he reaches over and cups my cheek with his full hand. I give his wrist a gentle kiss.

"You're too good to me," I tell him. "You know that, right?"

"I know," he says. "And actually, I need to talk to you about an important decision I made a couple weeks ago. I wanted to wait and talk to you in person."

My heart is now beating in my throat, making it almost impossible to swallow. This sounds serious. But the waiter approaches and takes our orders before Marco can get another word out. Once he's gone, I take a gulp of my martini, and then I look at Marco. "You were saying?"

"I talked to my coaches and my agent already, and I'm sorry I didn't talk to you sooner, but I really wanted to have this conversation in person."

"You mentioned." I gesture that he should go on.

"This is my last season."

"What?" My gasp is so loud the people at the table next to us glance over. I lower my voice when I ask, "Why?"

Marco is at the absolute pinnacle of his career. He's got years of racing ahead of him. He's got career bests still to achieve, records to hold onto and defend. "I'm going to attempt a Marcel Hirscher . . . you know, go out while I'm on top. Hopefully this will be another crystal globe season for me," he says, referencing the large glass trophy the overall World Cup winner receives at the end of the season. So far he's got five from the last seven years, plus countless numbers of small globes for winning each discipline within alpine racing over many years.

"But why, Marco? Don't you still love racing?"

"I do, but I've been doing this for twelve years. It's getting old. The nonstop travel, living out of hotels, training year-round. And it's been hard for Christian."

"Oh." So this is about Christian. That makes more sense.

"I need to get out of the spotlight," he says, and I wonder how it's possible that he relishes the spotlight and wants to get out of it at the same time. Love is complicated like that. "It's time I started leading a more secluded life where the media isn't all over me. I need to put my energy where it really belongs. Which means, we need to start talking about an end game strategy here."

I suck in a breath. I knew this day would come, knew it from the moment I agreed to this. But never in my wildest dreams did I think it would happen this season, while I was working with Nate.

"Well, I have good news then." I give him a weak smile. "I have an interview next week at Danforth."

It's Marco's turn to look surprised. "You're trying to be closer to your parents? That would be such a good move for you—you could be there for

your mom's treatments and you'd get to be back at Danforth. Congratulations!" His happiness is so genuine.

"Well, I have to actually get the job first. But if you retire and I leave the National Ski Team, it makes sense that this could die a natural death. No drama, no big breakup. Just two people moving in different directions."

"We'll make it the most understated breakup in history," he assures me, reaching across the small table and clasping my fingers in his. "No drama. No news. No media. I promise." He squeezes my hand in his, and it's enough reassurance . . . for now.



*1 Year Ago*

*Hotel Bar, Sestrière, Italy*

The whiskey burns less going down than the last glass did. That's probably not a good sign, but at this point anything that dulls the pain is worth trying. I glance down into my Old Fashioned glass as I swirl the amber liquid around the ice cubes. I don't care what anyone says, whiskey is only tolerable when watered down.

The chair next to me, which has remained blessedly empty for the past hour, moves as someone shuffles into it. I hate everyone right now, so I certainly hope this poor soul doesn't try talking to me.

"You trying to set that drink on fire with your glare?"

My head whips to the right because, despite the cheesy line, that voice belongs to the one person who I don't hate at the moment. Could probably never hate.

"Marco," I smile. "Thank God it's you."

"That's what all the women say." He wraps an arm around me and I rest my head on his shoulder. It's half a hug, and exactly what I need at the moment.

"It's really good to see you."

"*Anche tu, Bella.*" He leans in for a kiss on each cheek. "Gorgeous as always."

I pull back and roll my eyes. Some things never change; Marco is a flirt through and through, and as long as I've known him he's taken to flirting with me in both English and Italian. It's harmless flirting though, he'd never act on it and ruin our friendship.

"Why change what God already made perfect?" He winks, but I'm pretty sure he's serious. When I don't respond, he asks, "Why do you look so angry?"

"You know who Alessandra Ricci is?"

Marco raises an eyebrow. "Am I a man?"

"Well," I say, picking up my phone. I open to the text message Sierra sent about an hour before, and turn it so Marco can see the picture of my ex-boyfriend with a supermodel draped around him as they leave a restaurant. "Apparently, she's dating Nate. And my life is pathetic in comparison." I look back down at my glass, embarrassed by my honesty. The alcohol must be affecting me more than I realized. I mean, I trust Marco. I met him when we trained together for a summer in Switzerland eight or nine years ago. Predictably, Nate hated our friendship. Maybe he'd even hate the fact that in leaving, he brought Marco and me closer together, allowed us to develop a rock-solid friendship.

"Want to make him jealous?" Marco asks, his accent taking on a sexy tone that would be activating the warning flags in my mind if it weren't for the alcohol.

"Hell, yes." I smile so hard it hurts. I take another sip of whiskey and finally enjoy the way the burn travels down my throat and warms my belly.

Marco signals the bartender. "I'll have what she's having."

The bartender slides the glass over to Marco, and he lifts it toward me with his left hand while grabbing his phone with his right. "Cheers, and smile, Jackson," he says as he clinks his glass to mine. He looks over at me, his smile huge. I give him an equally big smile back, then turn toward the camera, but he's already got his phone down in front of him.

"Aren't you going to take a picture?"

"I just did. Look, it's perfect." He holds his phone toward me and I take it, zooming in on our faces. In my drunken state I think it captures the closeness of our friendship perfectly.

Marco takes his phone back and quickly types out *Whiskey with my hottest best friend* before posting it online.

“Oh, I’m your hottest best friend now?” My words are slightly slurred, but it doesn’t stop me from taking another sip of whiskey.

“Well since my other best friend is Christian . . .”

“Yep, I see your point. Okay, I’m the hottest.” I laugh. I mean, Christian is gorgeous, but that’s not the kind of thing Marco would likely notice about someone he’s been friends with since they were teenagers at boarding school together.

Marco smiles at me and takes a sip of his whiskey. I don’t know how he manages it without his eyes scrunching up and his face puckering, like when I’m drinking mine.

I glance down at the photo on his phone again. “What makes you think Nate will see that?”

“Because I have millions of followers, and he’s one of them.”

“Nate follows you?”

“We follow each other.” He shrugs.

I sit back in my seat, stunned. The sudden movement has the room spinning as the whiskey threatens to ignite the fire that is consuming my stomach at the thought of them being connected like this. “I kind of feel betrayed. You said you’d punch him if you ever saw him again, yet you follow each other on social media like you’re friends?”

“That was years ago,” he reminds me. When I woke up from my coma in a hospital in France, Marco was there and Nate was not. And Marco’s been here for me ever since. “And now he does that crazy heli-skiing off piste, which is fun to watch. I saw the video of him skiing the Cathedral in Alaska a couple days ago. It was . . . what’s the word you Americans use? Legit?”

“He . . . what now?” The Cathedral is only accessible by helicopter and skiing down it is equivalent to slinging yourself down the face of a cliff. In the backcountry. With enough snow to cause an avalanche. So essentially, insanely stupid. And Nate is *not* insanely stupid. Or at least, he didn’t use to be.

“You didn’t see it?” Marco seems surprised.

“I blocked him on social media, and everywhere for that matter, when he left.”

“Then why do you have that picture of him and Alessandra?”

“Sierra texted it to me. She knows I’m in Italy and that Alessandra is half Italian, so she was worried I might see it on the newsstands here.”

“Well I’m fairly confident he’ll see *this*,” he says, showing me the photo that has already garnered over a thousand likes since he posted it roughly two minutes ago.

I look down at my drink, wishing it was doing a better job of dulling my feelings. Instead, I seem to be feeling things even more deeply tonight. “I doubt he’ll care.”

“A picture of us drinking together in a hotel in Italy, looking at each other like that?” He drops his voice lower as he says, “Nate will care. Trust me.” His dark eyes bore into mine, one eyebrow quirked as if challenging me to disagree.

“He would have cared, back then,” I correct him. Back when Nate and I were so crazy in love that his possessive jealousy made him stupid. “But it’s been years, Marco. He won’t care now.”

“We’ll see.” He shrugs.

*But will we? Even if he was jealous, how would I ever know?*



It sounds like someone is jackhammering right outside my hotel room door. *Bang, bang . . . bang, bang*. Then a pause, then *bang, bang . . . bang, bang* all over again. I glance at the clock, alarmed that it’s already nine thirty in the morning.

*What the hell time did I get back to my room?* I try to remember what time it was when Marco and I left the bar. It had to be close to two in the morning. The fragmented memories of Marco helping me back to my hotel room flash through my head. I think he may have held my hair back while I threw up, or maybe I was holding my own hair back with one arm while hugging the toilet with the other. Those memories are too fuzzy, and too embarrassing, to recall.

But I woke up alone in my bed. Like I always do.

*Bang, bang . . . bang, bang*.

I’m about to grab a pillow and put it over my head when I hear Marco’s voice. “Jackson, wake up.”

I spring out of bed, which is a mistake because the whole room tilts sideways and I have to put one hand down on the edge of the bed and one against the closest wall to steady myself. This is not good. I have to be

packed and downstairs for the van to the airport in an hour, and I can hardly stand up straight.

I stumble to the door and check the little view hole. Sure enough Marco is standing on the other side, his fist raised like he's going to start banging down my door again. I reach for the handle, swinging the door open and narrowly missing my big toe.

"Please . . ." I groan. "Stop pounding on my door."

He steps in, shutting it quickly behind him, then lets his gaze travel the length of my body. His eyes return to my face and he looks like he just saw a train wreck.

"That bad, huh?" I say.

"Did you just get up?"

"I think I'm dying," I croak.

"No whiskey next time," he says as he reaches out and slides his hand over my head before gently squeezing the back of my neck fondly, "eh?"

"Never again." My voice is so raspy I hardly recognize the sound.

"I see that you don't feel well," he says, hesitating just a second for me to anticipate a *but*, "but we need to talk. It's important."

The worried note in his voice gives me pause, but my bladder makes its immediate needs known. "Okay. I've just got to use the bathroom first."

"Take your time," he says. But I don't have time. I have a lot to do to pack up and get ready to fly, and I can't be late when the airport transport vans arrive.

When I come out of the bathroom, bladder empty, teeth brushed, and face washed, Marco is sitting on one of the two chairs next to the window.

"You could have told me I looked like a clown," I say. My reflection in the bathroom mirror had been nothing less than terrifying—mascara streaks down my cheeks, blotchy red skin, and my dark wavy hair tangled and ratty.

He ignores my clown comparison. "You need to see this," he says, holding out his phone.

"Is this about the picture you posted last night?" I ask as I walk across the hotel room. I really don't care how many likes the photo ended up getting. Unless Nate responded? And that's what I'm expecting to see as I take the last few steps to him.

"Swipe through them," Marco says as he hands me his phone. The screenshot shows the front page of an Italian paper, and under the headline

*Has Marco Antonio Finally Found Love?* is a short paragraph outlining certain “facts” about last night. As best I can read the Italian paper, it says: *Perpetual bachelor Marco Antonio, best known as the reigning world champion of men’s alpine racing, posted this photo of himself and former US gold medal skier Jackson Shanahan. Witnesses claim to have seen them leaving a hotel bar and heading upstairs together. Despite his playboy status, Antonio keeps his love life extremely private, until now.*

I scroll to the next screenshot. And the next. And the next. They all include the photo Marco posted last night, and a grainy photo of us walking across the lobby with his arm wrapped around my waist. They also all include varying alarmist headlines.

I zoom in on the photo, and I see what I should have seen last night, but likely missed because of the alcohol. With our heads less than a foot apart and our eyes locked in a gaze, it looks like we’re about to head to the bedroom.

“Shit,” I say, sitting on the chair across from him and handing him back his phone. “I should never have taken that stupid photo. My job could be at stake here, Marco. I work for the US National Ski Team and you’re the competition. If people think we’re secretly together . . . it’s bad.”

“Everyone knows you’re my best friend. Do they object to that?” he asks. *Why is he so freaking calm about this?*

“I mean, sometimes they give me crap, but it’s not a problem.”

“Then why would it be a problem if they think we’re dating?” Marco rubs his hand across the dark stubble on his jaw, the rough sound is like sandpaper across wood in the silence of my hotel room. His lips turn down at the corners as his eyes sweep over me. Sometimes looking at Marco, I can’t believe I’ve never felt more than friendship toward him. He’s devastatingly handsome—the kind of man that women throw themselves at—but he’s always been more like a brother to me.

“I don’t know.” I sigh. “Maybe it wouldn’t be. But if the people I work with think I’ve been dating you and *lying* to them about it . . .”

“The media clearly thinks something is happening between us, and I think people are likely to believe it,” he says.

“But we can just tell the truth. We’ve been friends for almost a decade.”

“You want to engage the media in speculation about what’s happening behind closed doors? Because I think you know how that goes.”



Damned if he's not right. I went through the media circus before, during my breakup with Nate. The more you try to convince people that something didn't happen, the more the media spins a story, vicious in their quest to get readers despite the personal cost to the subject of the story.

"I may need a favor?" he says more to the floor than to me. He sounds unsure—like either he's not sure if he needs a favor, or he's not sure he wants to ask.

"Go on," I suggest, and suddenly he's rambling away in Italian. I'm pretty much fluent, but not nearly able to keep up with the speed of his rant. Something about a secret relationship and needing to protect his best friend Christian, and needing my help.

"Can you just . . . rewind and say that again, either slower or in English?"

"I need you to pretend to be my girlfriend."

"To protect Christian?" *I am so confused.*

"Yes."

"I don't understand," I tell him, wishing I wasn't so groggy because obviously I'm missing something here. "How does me pretending to be your girlfriend protect Christian?"

He gives me wide eyes, like I should understand and he shouldn't have to explain it. "Christian's family is extremely conservative and also extremely Catholic. His uncle is a cardinal. His family knows the Pope. They are starting to be suspicious of all the time we spend together. But if I had a girlfriend, they wouldn't worry."

"Wait . . ." My stupid brain must not be working right because it sounds like Marco Antonio, who has been donned "God's gift to women" by the Italian media, is secretly dating his male best friend? My eyes widen at the realization.

Suddenly about eighteen different memories from over the years click into place, like the enigma machine breaking a code deep in the recesses of my mind. I definitely should have seen this before, and I'm pretty sure I'm a terrible best friend for not catching on sooner.

"But, why do you want to hide this about yourself? There's no shame in it."

"I'm not ashamed," he says, leveling me with a chastising look that has me regretting my word choice. "But if I come out, then people will put two

and two together and Christian will be outed as well. His family would disown him.”

“So, you’ll just live this lie indefinitely?”

“I need to keep it a secret while I’m still racing, because if the media gets ahold of this info it will be really bad for Christian. In the meantime, Christian is hoping his family comes to accept that this isn’t a huge sin, that it just is what it is. And this fake relationship,” he says, gesturing between us, “this works for you too, *Bella*. As long as you assure them there’s no conflict of interest, your team can’t be mad that you found *true love*.” He puts the two words in air quotes with a smirk that would have any other girl fanning herself. “And you can focus on your career without the pressures of dating or the speculation that you’re *still* not over Nate.”

I sink back in my chair, glad I was already sitting when he hit me with the low blow. Because, as crazy as this sounds, he’s right. The longer I go without seriously dating someone, the more the rumors spread that I still haven’t moved on from Nate. I mean, you’d think the rumor mill would be small because the number of people still interested in a has-been skier and her ex-boyfriend, over four years after their breakup, shouldn’t be large.

Yet it’s always there. In interviews about my career, the questions about Nate are inevitable. Every time one of my sponsors runs a new ad campaign featuring me, the comments are there on social media. Last year I dated a pro soccer player for a hot second, and the instant we broke up the sports media were posting ridiculous stories about how we broke up because I wasn’t over my ex-boyfriend. Really, the guy was just a terrible chauvinist and I was over it.

Me and Nate, we’re like a breakup story the sports world just can’t let go of until they get to the bottom of it, even years later. And I get it. They want to know what happened, why he left, and where he went. Hell, for a long time I wanted to know too. Now I just want to put it behind me. And this might be my opportunity for a clean break. No more speculation about me and Nate, just moving forward with Marco. He’s right, this would be mutually beneficial.

And besides, the thing he hasn’t said—because he would never say it—is that I owe him. After the accident that ended my career, Marco was the one who was there for me. He flew out to Boston and stayed with me at my parents’ house during the off-season, while I was in rehab learning to walk again after having my pelvis bolted together in three places. He stepped in

where Nate should have stepped up. Marco was there for me through every step of my recovery and in the years since. I've cried on his shoulder more times than I can count.

*I can do this for him.*

## CHAPTER 13



NATE

*Levi, Finland*

Huge parties where everyone is wasted are a lot less fun when you don't drink. The antics of my teammates, their families, and all our combined sports staff were amusing for the first hour or two. But now that it's getting on 11:00 p.m., it's already old. Or maybe I'm just old.

"Davenport!" Jeff slurs as he slides up to me. He wobbles his landing, bumping his shoulder against mine and spilling some of his drink onto the floor.

"Big celebration for you, old man," I say, slinging an arm around his shoulder to hold him steady. He's going to hurt tomorrow. But he's celebrating a top ten finish in addition to his thirtieth birthday.

"Old man, pfft." He tries to roll his eyes, but his whole head moves with them and I wonder if he's making himself dizzy. "How old are you?"

"Still twenty-nine for a while," I assure him.

"Okay, so before your thirtieth are you going to lock shit down with Jackson finally?" He's practically yelling, but luckily with the music blasting I don't think anyone else can hear him.

"We talked about this, Jeff." *In other words, shut the hell up.*

“Oh, yeah, your top secret classified plan.” Even in his inebriated state, his voice is mocking and his lack of discretion is pissing me off.

“It won’t be top secret if you don’t shut your mouth about it,” I growl. But he’s too drunk to care that I’m annoyed.

I glance around the room looking for Jackson. She’s been hard to miss in that sexy as hell flapper dress she’s wearing. As far as dresses go, it’s fairly conservative with its high scooped neck and cap sleeves, but it’s very sheer and it’s short if you don’t count the fringe that hangs to her knees. It hugs her body too perfectly for me to be capable of looking away.

Unfortunately, she’s stuck so close to Sierra all night that I haven’t had a chance to get her alone for even a second. But at least Marco’s not here with her. He came up to me after the event today, congratulating me on my finish and earning my first World Cup points. I wanted to strangle him, because the thought of him with Jackson does that to me, but there were cameras all around us. Instead I shook his hand.

“You’re looking for her right now, aren’t you?” Jeff asks.

Either he’s not as drunk as I thought, or he’s an astute drunk who won’t remember any of this tomorrow. Either way, I neither confirm nor deny his accusation.

“Just saw her heading up to the second floor . . .” he says, tilting his chin at the various balconies that overlook the dance floor of this very small nightclub attached to our hotel.

“Okay.” I shrug as if this information is useless to me.

“Alone.”

*Oh.* In my head I’m plotting how to get up there and find her, hopefully without Sierra seeing me and coming at me like a fucking bulldog. She’s way too overprotective of Jackson and always has been.

“Moving on,” Jeff says as he breaks out from under my arm. Dude’s definitely unsteady on his feet as he walks away, but he’s clearly sober enough to know what he’s doing by providing me this tip.

I take a moment to glance up at the second level and that’s when I see her leaning against the gilded wall of the balcony closest to the stage. She’s almost entirely out of view, and this couldn’t be a better place for us to finally have a private conversation. I turn and head toward the stairs quickly, hoping nobody notices me leaving.

I pull the heavy velvet balcony curtain back and am greeted by a gorgeous view of Jackson’s curves. The taupe flapper dress she’s wearing is

almost the color of her skin, covered in intricate rows of golden beads and sequins. She's leaning forward, her arms spread wide across the balcony railing and the hem of her dress barely covering her underwear, with the gold fringe hanging down her thighs, taunting me. She has one leg crossed behind the other and she's balanced on ridiculously high heels as she watches the mayhem below.

When I come up behind her, I'm afraid I'll scare her and she'll topple over the short wall in front of her. I put one hand on each hip to steady her as I lean toward her and ask, "You hiding up here?"

She looks over her shoulder, takes in the sight of me, and her lips curl into a wicked smile I instantly recognize—it's her 'get me out of here and to the bedroom' look. And it could not be more unexpected. Unless me telling her today that I came back for her has somehow changed her mind about me?

She shifts her weight back, grinding that perfect ass right into me and I am instantly hard. I want nothing more than to push myself into her right there, but I have the good sense to take a moment and assess the situation. Her right hand loosely encompasses a glass with nothing but ice left in it.

"How much have you been drinking?"

"More than you," she says, her eyes leaving my face and returning to the dance floor below. Given that I've chosen not to risk drinking with only one kidney, her answer tells me nothing.

"Dammit, how much?" I ask, then take a risk by pulling her hips back against mine so she can feel what she does to me. Her throaty groan is barely audible over the music pumping through the speakers, but I hear it just the same. *She's been drinking, I need to shut this down right now.* But my body has stopped taking orders from my brain for the moment.

"Just enough to take the edge off," she says as she glances back at me again.

"Take the edge off what?" I growl as she slowly rocks her hips against me. I'm fairly sure I'm hidden in the shadows so that from the dance floor no one looking up here would suspect that we're connected at the hip right now, but even if I'm not, it's a risk I'm willing to take.

"The loneliness," she mumbles, then presses her lips between her teeth like she's trying to keep any more words from coming out.

"So you're trying to make Marco jealous because he's not here to keep you company?" Even my annoyance doesn't stop me from dropping my

fingertips to the back of her thigh and trailing them up her leg and under the fringed hem of her dress.

“Believe me, he’s not jealous of you,” she says with an acerbic laugh, and I try not to let the truth of it sting. Because why would the top-ranked skier in the world be jealous of me, when he’s dating my ex-girlfriend and he clenched a first place finish today while I barely finished in the top fifteen?

“Would he be jealous if he knew where my hand was right now?” I ask, rubbing my thumb along the crease where her thigh meets her butt cheek.

“Don’t tease me, Nate,” she says, her glare turning hard and her back going rigid so that I panic and say the exact opposite of what I mean.

“It doesn’t have to just be teasing.” I regret the words the second they leave my mouth. This can’t go anywhere, not with her drunk and still dating Marco. But her proximity and the blatant desire I see in her face is fucking with my moral compass, has it going haywire and spinning in circles.

“Nate, please,” she begs as she slides her foot out from behind her, parting her legs in an obvious invitation.

I lean in, my back cradling hers, and drop my lips to her ear. “Tell me what you want.”

“Touch me.”

This is cruel torture, but I did it to myself.

“Not here,” I tell her, nodding my chin toward the dance floor below us. “Let’s go.”

I find the stairwell, deciding it’s best to avoid the elevator where we’re more likely to run into people we know. She takes the first flight quickly, but slows as she approaches the next floor. When she reaches the landing by the door that will let us into the hallway, she turns and I see the hesitation in her eyes.

*Good, maybe she knows this is a bad idea and I won’t have to let her down.*

She doesn’t say anything, just stands there as her eyes move up and down my body, appraising me.

I lean in, bracing my arm against the wall behind her and it takes everything I have not to lean in those extra few inches and taste her lips. “You don’t want to do this,” I say, testing whether she knows herself well enough to disagree.

“I can hate you and want your body at the same time.” It’s not what I was expecting her to say. I guess I thought she’d mention Marco, use him as an excuse to put a stop to this.

“You don’t hate me.” I look her in the eyes and see nothing but hurt and defiance shining back.

“Oh, trust me,” she says. “I do.”

I bring my mouth toward her ear to make sure she understands every word of what I’m about to tell her. “I’ve been waiting for this for years. I’m not throwing my chance away on a one-night stand.”

She pulls her head back and her eyes narrow, completely focused where before they were a bit glazed. Then she looks down, her voice quiet when she asks, “Are you turning me down?”

“Turning you down? No.” I take my free hand and press my fingertips to that sensitive space where her ear and jaw meet, then trail them down to her chin and tilt her face back up toward me. I trail the bridge of my nose up her cheek until my lips graze the hair hanging in front of her ear. Quietly I remind her that we’re worth more than this. “But we both deserve better than what’s on the table tonight.”

I push off the wall, my resolve settling in as I put my hand on her lower back and guide her toward the hallway door. She pushes my hand away. “I can get back to my room myself,” she says, then swings open the door and walks through it without looking back.

I stand in the doorway, watching to make sure she gets to her room okay, and praying that I didn’t make a huge mistake by not following her. But I don’t want to be someone she regrets. Or rather, I don’t want to give her another reason to regret being with me.

Instead, I’ll make her understand why I left, since it’s become increasingly clear that no one in her life has been honest with her about that.



In the few minutes it takes me to make it back up to my room, I’ve already pictured three different scenarios for how things with Jackson could have ended tonight, and all of them involve me buried in her while she cries out my name. Once I lock the door behind me, I shed my clothes as I walk toward the bathroom, not even caring where anything lands. As I turn on



the water in the shower I'm pulling down my boxers, anxious to not feel so confined.

I step into the hot shower and tilt my head forward, letting the spray hit the top of my head and run down my face. It's easy to picture Jackson here with me, in this shower, her legs spread like they were tonight, and her hands pressed above her shoulders on the sterile white wall tile. It's equally easy to imagine that the streams of water that trail down my chest and fall to my hardened cock are her fingers, reaching behind her to guide me. The image of her perfect ass pressed up toward my hips, with her dark hair thrown over one shoulder as the water runs down her back, has me fisting my cock into my hand and groaning as the sensitive nerves there finally make contact with something other than my zipper.

In my imagination, or perhaps my memory, I feel the slick heat of her pussy as it clenches around me while I push in to the hilt. She looks over her shoulder and moans for more. I bring my fingers up to her mouth, let her swirl her tongue around them a few times, and then I bring them back down in front of her and use them to circle her clit. Instantly I can feel her tightening around me, her moans growing louder as she tells me how fucking good it feels. A few more thrusts and in her breathy sex-voice she says, "Oh God, Nate. I'm coming!" She's squeezing me impossibly tight now, and I can feel the pull at the base of my spine, the tingling as it travels to my balls, and now I'm shooting my release all over the wall of the shower, both sated by the relief and disappointed that it was only a vision.

When I head back into the room, my phone is vibrating in my pants pocket on the floor.

My lawyer's name flashes across the screen where I really hoped to see Jackson's name, which is a bit of a mood killer.

"You still up?" Jed asks when I answer the phone.

"Yeah, just got back to my hotel room." I glance at the clock and do the math, realizing it's just about the end of the work day back on the East Coast.

"Okay, I wanted to let you know that the Blackstone folks want a meeting to hammer out the last details."

"What details do we need to hammer out?" I ask. "They already accepted our revised proposal."

Blackstone Mountain is the last brick in my path back to Jackson. It's a deal that's been over a year in the making, the crowning jewel on the real

estate empire I've been quietly building. That, combined with skiing, have given me the fulfillment I needed to be the man she needs.

"It sounds like they want some reassurances about a few of the terms. You just need to show up and remind them that Blackstone is your home mountain and you have their best interests at heart." He lets out a frustrated breath. "I mean, that's what this is about, right? You're investing in it for sentimental reasons?"

Jed thinks Blackstone is a bad investment. I've made riskier investments and had them pay off, but nothing of this magnitude. And I can't deny that there's a sentimental connection here—where Jackson and I fell in love, where I raced for my last two seasons before having to give it all up.

"Sure, but it's also a smart investment. There is so much potential there. Just wait, you're going to be bringing your family there instead of Stowe, and cutting your travel time in half."

Jed lets out a laugh that's a half snort. "I'll believe it when I see it."

"See if you can schedule the meeting Thanksgiving weekend. I'm spending the holiday there with my dad anyway," I tell him. "I'm sure you'll be with your family so maybe we can just video conference you in."

"Depending on the day, I may come up for it. Like you said, it's not that far from Boston."

"Okay, let me know the details of the meeting once you have them, and send me a summary of the items they want reassurances on."

"Will do," Jed says, and disconnects the call.

I stare at my phone, thinking about how this deal has the potential to be the best investment I ever made, or the worst—largely dependent on how Jackson reacts when she finds out.

## CHAPTER 14



### JACKSON

*Helsinki, Finland*

“AirFrance flight 5010 with service to Paris is now boarding passengers with seats in business class.” The announcement echoes throughout the mostly empty terminal. Aside from my flight, few of the gates around us have any passengers waiting at this time of the evening.

The line moves slowly as an older couple passes through the gate and onto the passenger boarding bridge, but I’m almost to the front when I hear my name yelled loudly from behind me.

I’d recognize that voice anywhere. So I do what I think will protect me, and will protect my heart—I ignore it and start to hand my ticket to the gate agent.

“Jackson, please,” Nate pants next to me, his breath coming in short spurts.

“I need to get on my flight,” I say, turning toward him and letting my hand with the ticket fall to my side.

“Please. Just step out of line for a minute so I can talk to you. Don’t leave like this.” His voice is right on the edge of begging.

“Don’t leave like this?” I bark out a laugh. “Oh, that’s rich, coming from you.”

Leaving is his specialty.

“Ma’am,” the gate agent says to me. “Would you mind stepping out of line so I can let these other passengers on the plane?”

I’m so flustered as I glance at the line that’s formed behind me, with all their eyes on me and Nate, that I mumble “of course” and step toward him, when what I really should have done was given her my ticket and walked down the jetway. I should have walked toward Marco, who is waiting on the other end of that flight, and not toward Nate, who doesn’t deserve me.

He takes my arm and gently leads me to the side where there’s a little space near a wall of glass overlooking the tarmac. The airport lights sparkle in the darkness, and I keep my eyes trained on the plane instead of looking at Nate.

“Hey,” he says, tucking his knuckles under my chin and tilting my head toward him. “Why did you disappear?”

“I had a plane to catch.” I shrug. In reality I’d made sure that the entire trip from Levi to Helsinki I was engaged in conversation with someone that wasn’t Nate, then slipped away from the rest of the team the minute we got through security. I’ve been hiding in the AirFrance priority lounge for the last hour and a half, hopeful I could get on the plane without having to have this conversation with Nate.

“Jackson,” he says, ripping me out of my thoughts. “You know that I wanted last night to happen as much as you did, right?”

My eyes narrow. “I didn’t want last night to happen,” I lie. “That was the alcohol speaking. So thank you for saving me from making a huge mistake.”

“I don’t believe that for a second,” he says, his eyebrows dipping low as he considers my words.

“That’s on you.” I shrug. “I’m being honest here and you’re refusing to take me at my word.”

“There’s no way I can take you at your word when every single thing about your body is screaming something different,” he says, looking down at me.

And that’s when I realize how close I’m leaning into him, and that he can see through my thin sweater that my nipples have hardened in response to his proximity. *Ugh*. My body is a traitor. I’ve spent all day furious at

myself for letting my attraction to him get the best of me. Again. And here he is next to me and my body is already reacting the way it always does, always has, when he is around. The further I am from him, the better for everyone. Especially Marco.

“I came back because of you,” he says again.

“Please don’t do that.”

“Don’t do what?”

“Make it seem like we could ever care about each other like that again.”

“Did we ever stop?” he asks, taking a step closer so that he’s only inches from me. I can feel his breath on my forehead, a warm caress, and my body aches to curl in and get wrapped up in him where I belong.

*No, I tell myself, that’s definitely not where you belong.*

“Nate,” I choke out through the lump that’s rapidly rising in my throat. My nose feels like someone just flushed it with saline, and it brings tears to my eyes. I punctuate each word as I tell him the truth, finally. “You. Broke. My. Fucking. Heart.”

And it’s still broken. I’m not sure it will ever be whole again.

“I know, Jax, and I came back to make it right.”

I pause for a second at the nickname, the one I haven’t heard in years. The one I hated, until I didn’t. It’s his pet name for me, and until now he hasn’t used it once since he’s been back. I want to ask him about it—why he doesn’t call me Jax anymore—but the second half of his declaration, that he came back to make things right, is the one that really needs addressing.

“You don’t get second chances with things like that,” I say, my voice firm and maybe a bit louder than I intended. “You can be the sledgehammer, or you can be the glue. You don’t get to be both.”

“So is Marco the glue, then?” he asks, his voice tinged with jealousy and a hint of sarcasm. “Did he put your heart back together?”

“*I’m the glue*, Nate. My heart was healed long before Marco and I got together.” That might be the least true thing I’ve ever said; but I wish it were true, and I need him to believe it is.

“If it’s so healed,” he says, dropping his voice so low I almost have to lean in to hear him, “then why are you still hurting so much?”

I look up, shocked when I shouldn’t be. He’s always been able to see everything I try to hide from him. He gets me at a level that’s intrinsic to who I am, and he always has. It’s part of why his leaving left me so devastated. He shattered my heart, but more than that, he shattered my

sense of self—because without him, I wasn't sure who I was anymore. And I can never, *I will never*, give anyone that kind of power over me again.

For a moment there are no words, just the conversation we seem to be having with our eyes.

*Come back to me*, his plead.

*Not in this lifetime*, mine insist.

“I have a wedding to get to,” I tell him as I grab the handle of my carry-on suitcase and turn back toward the gate agent who is now waiting for me as it seems that everyone else has boarded through the business class line already. As I walk through the door to the jetway, I chance a glance back over my shoulder. Nate is standing there with his shoulders hunched and his head down, pain radiating from his entire being.

*Good*, I tell myself. It's only right that he should be the one hurting now. If only his pain wasn't also my pain.



### *Paris, France*

I stand next to Marco's parents as we watch Christian's older brother finally kiss his bride at the end of the longest wedding service I have ever attended. My back is killing me from the wooden chair I've been sitting on for the past two hours, and the cold stone floor of the Gothic church has my feet almost numb despite the air being warm and stuffy. Finally standing again is a relief.

While lesser known than Notre Dame, Saint-Eustache has a storied history of its own having baptized, wed, and buried some of the most famous aristocrats and writers in French history. And its Gothic exterior and Renaissance interior are among the most beautiful of any church I've seen.

As Lorenzo and his bride clasp hands and turn toward the wedding guests, the priest pronounces them man and wife. Or at least, I think he does. The service has been in French and I speak barely a word of it. For a brief second I wish Nate was here to translate for me—his mom was French Canadian and he speaks French passably and understands it perfectly—but then instantly I'm chastising myself for the thought. I need to get Nate out

of my head. Tonight is all about being in love with Marco, or making his and Christian's families believe I am.

From the altar, Marco catches my eye and gives me the kind of smile that the press loves. It's not his sly, private smile that I know well, it's his camera-worthy smile. His mom doesn't miss a thing, so she turns toward me and squeezes my hand when she sees her son beaming at me. Which luckily means she misses the way Marco then glances over at Christian, who is standing between him and Lorenzo.

The bride and groom make their way down the aisle and Marco follows in the long line of bridesmaids and groomsmen.

I find Marco outside the church after we've given our best wishes to Lorenzo and Camille, his French bride who I've met a few times over the past year. I rush over to Marco where he stands on the stone plaza outside the church, next to Christian, and wrap my arms around his neck. He squeezes me tightly in his embrace and I whisper "Less glances at Christian, okay?" quickly before his parents come over.

He plants a kiss next to my ear as he whispers "I'm trying, but you see how he looks in a tux." There's laughter in his voice.

I pull back and look him in the eye, smiling at him. It's easy to play this role because I do love Marco. I just don't love him like his family assumes I do.

He kisses the bridge of my nose just as his parents catch up to me. "You are a beautiful couple," his mom says. "Let me take a photo of you."

While we pose for the photo on the plaza, with the cold blue sky, the church, and the leafless trees in the background, I try not to look at Christian. It must hurt for him to watch Marco flirt with me. I wish it didn't have to be this way for them, and I'm glad that it won't be this way for too much longer.

Marco's mom texts us both a copy of the photo, and I'm certain Marco will have it posted on his social media platforms before he even arrives at the reception.

*Good, I hope Nate sees it.* I hate myself a little bit for this pettiness.

"Camille said you should come with us to take pictures," Marco says, looking down at me while keeping his tuxedo-clad arm around my shoulder.

"I won't be in the way?"

"We just need to take the big group picture. We already did photos with her attendants and the groom's photos with us." He uses the arm that's not

around me to reach over and clasp Christian's shoulder. "Let's go."

We say our goodbyes to his parents, and he squeezes my hand as we walk toward the cars waiting to take us to the reception site. It's a victory squeeze, and I return it. We aren't often around his family, but every time we are and they remain convinced we're in love, it feels like a we've won the next battle in a long war.



I'm speed walking toward the bathroom in a desperate attempt to get there before my bladder explodes, when a hand reaches out and grabs my wrist, pulling me sideways. I spin to find Camille, encased in white lace, holding onto me. "Jackson! I want you to meet Andrea," she says as she lets go of me and swings her arm around one of her bridesmaids.

I try not to squirm in place as Andrea tells me she was Camille's roommate the year Camille studied abroad at NYU. There's a long story about Andrea's roommate deciding at the last minute to take a year off, and Andrea getting 'stuck' with a random, only to discover they were like long-lost sisters. But I'm only half listening because I've drunk too much water during dinner and now I think I fully understand the saying my Italian grandmother used all the time when I was little—*I have to pee so bad my back teeth are floating*.

"I was just telling Andrea how grateful Enzo's whole family is for you," Camille says, a coy smile on her plum-colored lips.

"Enzo's family?" I ask, unsure why Lorenzo and Christian's family would be grateful for me. I hardly know them.

The realization hits me a half second before she says, "Yes, for reassuring them that Christian and Marco aren't *more* than friends."

Even with her thick French accent, the doubt in her voice is clear. *Mayday*.

I roll my eyes and smile to give myself a second to prepare my response. "I know," I say, making my voice sickly sweet. "Isn't it so sad that two guys who have been lifelong best friends can't just be best friends without people speculating that it's more than friendship? I mean, that's never happened to my best friend Sierra and me. Has it happened to you two?"



Andrea and Camille share a look, and Camille is a little sheepish when she says, “No.”

“See,” I say, reaching out and giving her forearm a friendly squeeze. “There aren’t that many advantages to being a woman in this world. But aren’t we lucky that at least our friendships can just be friendships without being questioned?”

They both nod, looking like they would rather be anywhere than here talking to me about this. Good. I hope she’s sorry she had the nerve to bring that up to my face. Let his family speculate in private, no need to gossip outside the family.

“Well, I’d better go find Christian and tell him it’s almost time for us to toast the newlyweds,” Andrea says. “I’ll meet you back at the dance floor?” she asks Camille.

Camille nods, and they both say goodbye to me and head in different directions—Camille toward the main reception area in the lobby of the museum, and Andrea toward the bar area set up in one of the wings. I act as though I’m headed to the bathroom, and briefly wonder if I’m going to pee myself in public when I veer off toward a door to the courtyard in the center of the museum.

I weave through the topiaries and stone benches to the garden at the center. I know this is where I’ll find Marco and Christian because Marco told me this is where they were headed before I left for the bathroom.

In the dim light from the building, the shadows of the hedges seem ominous, which is a good match for my mood. If Andrea finds them before I do, there could be serious problems. I’ll never understand the risks Marco takes with Christian. Sometimes it seems like he wants to get caught. Maybe now that he’s planning his retirement he’s wanting to go public about their relationship, but this family wedding is certainly *not* the occasion to come out.

I round a hedge near the center of the garden and find Marco and Christian inches away from each other in the shadow of a rose bush. They jump apart in alarm, but I hold my finger to my mouth to indicate the need for silence, because I hear footsteps behind me and they are the telltale tap of high heels. I have a sinking suspicion Andrea followed me.

“Hide,” I whisper to Christian as I push him away, and he steps behind a manicured topiary as the clicking heels are nearly upon us.

Marco pulls me to him and I wrap my arms around his shoulders, sinking my face into his neck as he brings his lips to my ears and whispers, “*Gratzi, Bella.*”

The quick staccato of the clicking heels is almost upon us when I look up and meet his eyes and mouth *kiss me*. His lips sink to mine in the necessary display of affection, the one we’ve rehearsed in public many times. Like always, I feel . . . nothing. Not the rapid increase of my heartbeat or the tightening between my legs that I felt when Nate appeared behind me at the party a few nights ago. Not the excitement or anticipation I felt when we raced up the stairs toward my hotel room.

*Good, I tell myself, you won’t feel the disappointment you felt when he let you down, either.* Marco is safe. This “relationship” is the protection I need.

A throat clears behind us, and we pull away from each other. I plaster a guilty look on my face because I know that’s the expected response, and Marco just smiles that devilish smile of his.

“I’m sorry to interrupt,” Andrea says. “I was looking for Christian and someone said they saw him head out to the garden.”

“Last I saw him,” Marco says, “he was headed to the restroom.”

“Okay, well he’s needed on the dance floor because it’s time for us to give our toasts to the bride and groom,” Andrea says.

“I’ll go check and see if I can find him,” he tells her, then gives me a kiss on my temple and tells me he’ll meet me at our table inside.

“Weren’t you headed to the bathroom?” Andrea says as we turn and walk back along the stone path toward the doors. Once we’re out of the garden, light spills through the glass walls that surround the courtyard, and inside people are dancing and mingling. From this perspective, I feel like quite the outsider.

“I was,” I tell Andrea, “but I saw Marco walking out here and I couldn’t resist sneaking away with him for a few minutes. We’ve spent this whole weekend with his parents.” I sigh, hoping I sound like a sexually frustrated girlfriend who’s been cockblocked by her potential in-laws.

“Sorry I interrupted, then. I did hear that Christian was out there.” She sounds unnecessarily defensive, which makes me question her real motives.

“Hmm,” I say, hoping that he found a different entrance back into the museum. “I guess Marco and I must have just missed him then.”

I look down at her stilettos as we take the stairs up to the museum doors, immensely thankful for her footwear choice. If I hadn't heard her coming, that could have ended very differently, and it was too close of a call as it was.



I slide into window seat 4A, and sigh with immeasurable relief as the big leather seat wraps me in its embrace. Despite the ridiculous number of air miles I've racked up in my years on the World Cup circuit, I didn't think a first class upgrade would be a possibility on this flight. With Thanksgiving only days away, every flight from Paris to Boston is oversold so I was holding out for an emergency exit seat at best. But when I checked in, the kiosk had spit out a boarding pass for a first class seat.

"Can I get you a glass of champagne before takeoff?" the flight attendant asks as she stands over the empty seat next to me.

"That would be great." I can't hide the huge grin. This has to be good luck—a first class seat on my first trip back home in months, a few days to spend with my family, and best of all, no Nate trying to worm his way into my life.

I slip my buzzing phone out of the pocket of the knit dress I have on.

**Dad:** *Looks like your flight is on time. I'll meet you at baggage claim.*

**Jackson:** *Thank you! But you'll be sorry you offered to pick me up when you see how much crap I'm lugging with me.*

**Dad:** *I'll bring the Yukon, it'll all fit.*

I love that my dad understands what it's like to schlep through these World Cup races. The last few weeks have had me in three different countries and now I get a few days at home with my parents before heading to Lake Louise, Canada and then Beaver Creek, Colorado. By the time I get back to Park City, I'll have been gone for five weeks.

**Jackson:** *Thanks! Also, you're not going to believe this—I got upgraded to first class!*

**Dad:** *Awesome. Enjoy it. We can't wait to see you!*

**Jackson:** *Me too!*

The flight attendant hands me a glass of champagne and sets a small dish of Marcona almonds with rosemary and sea salt on the plastic tray between my seat and the still empty 4B.

I sip my champagne as I scroll through my social media feeds, relishing how amazing life is at this moment. There are plenty of times I hate the travel and the all-consuming, nonstop nature of my job. But at this moment, everything feels perfect. I snap a quick picture of my noise-canceling headphones sitting on the table next to the champagne and almonds. I do a little editing, then post it with the caption: *A first class upgrade—champagne, Marcona almonds, and my Waves noise-canceling headphones. The perfect trip home for Thanksgiving with my family. Watch for a Waves giveaway coming soon! #travel #familytime #Waves #allthemusic #noneofthenoise*

Even though Sierra runs most of my social media, occasionally I do take a look and even post things myself. She'll be thrilled I took the initiative with this, since Waves is one of my biggest sponsorships.

My seat mate slips into 4B and I keep scrolling on my phone. While I'm curious who I'm sitting next to, glancing over feels intrusive. But then he leans forward to put his book in the space beneath the TV on the seat-back in front of him, and I recognize that jawline, the short dark blond hair, and that insufferable smirk.

"How are you sitting next to me?" I seethe. "You were supposed to be on a plane headed home from Helsinki three days ago."

Nate just shrugs. "Change of plans."

"You arranged this?"

"We need to talk," he says, his voice low. The way he looks at me has flashbacks of Jeff's birthday party running through my head, and I'm certain my cheeks have gone pink in response. "You ignored me on our way from Levi to Helsinki and I got desperate. I figured an eight hour flight would give us time to figure out what's going on here." He leans back in his seat and stretches out his long legs in the cavernous space our little two-person pod provides. The private seating feels both intimate and inappropriate.

“This borders on stalking, Nate.” I reach up and punch the flight attendant call button, and she’s next to us in two seconds flat.

“Can I get you a drink?” she asks Nate, as if that must be why *I* called her over here.

“Just water with lemon, thanks,” he says, giving her his most charming smile. I want to slap it off his face.

“Excuse me,” I say as she turns to leave.

She turns back, eyebrows raised. “Oh, yes, what can I get for you?”

“Is there any chance whatsoever that I could get my seat changed? I’ll sit literally anywhere else on the entire plane, I don’t even care where. Give me the last row with seats that don’t recline, next to the bathroom,” I say and she eyes me like I’m rambling through a mental breakdown. She might not be totally wrong. Nate’s proximity has me so on edge I feel like I might melt. I lower my voice and slow down my words. “Honestly. Anywhere but here.”

She exchanges a look with Nate, like she’s apologizing that he’s seated next to me.

“Let me see if we have any open seats.”

Nate turns toward me after she leaves. “Come on Jackson, don’t you think you’re being just a little dramatic? We work together every single day.”

Work isn’t the problem. There, we’re always surrounded by other people. It’s when we are alone together, like we essentially are in this little first class pod. Sitting next to him on this flight is a risk I’m not willing to take. Instead of responding, I look out the window hoping my silence will be my answer.

The flight attendant comes back a few minutes later. “This flight is oversold. We can get you on a different flight, but the next one with availability is on Thursday.”

Three days from now. I’d arrive on Thanksgiving night and only have one more day with my family before flying to Lake Louise for the men’s speed event. And since Beau predictably isn’t coming home for Thanksgiving, if I’m not there, my parents would be all alone. I can’t do that to them. Especially not this year.

I haggle with the flight attendant about switching my seat with someone in economy, which she flatly refuses to do. Nate watches this entire

exchange with a look of amusement, like a spider who's spun a web and is enjoying watching the fly get stuck in it.

"We're doing our final preparations for departure," she tells me, as she holds out her hand to collect my empty champagne flute. "That door is about to be locked. If you want to rebook on another flight, I'm happy to escort you off the plane—though your luggage won't make it off—but it's just too late for me to find you another seat. What would you prefer to do?"

Dejected, I sink into my seat a bit. "I'll stay here. Thanks for looking into it for me."

"Listen, Jackson," he says, and instead of meeting his eyes I snatch my headphones off the tray table between us. Before I can put them over my head he rests his hand on my wrist. "Please just let's have a conversation about this so we can clear the air. You deserve to know what happened five years ago, and why I'm back now. You can continue hating me after I explain myself if that's what you want."

My heart is pounding in my chest faster and harder than it ever does. Because after years of wanting to know why he left and never came back, I'm terrified to hear what he has to say. What if he has a good reason and I have to forgive him? Without this hatred keeping us apart, what protection do I have?

My need to keep Marco's secret, to protect him, reigns supreme in my mind. That was a close call in Paris. And letting Nate get close to me again, even if it's just by forgiving him, will open us up to speculation we don't need.

I don't say anything. I just look straight at him while I slide the headphones back over my head, close my eyes, and will myself to fall asleep like I always do on flights.



Pretending to sleep is exhausting.

I've been lying here for what feels like hours, and the images I've worked hard to not think about over the last few days are now on a live reel looped in my brain. It's like being stuck in a dream watching snippets of various movies on repeat. Except instead of actors, my snippets are full of Nate and me. In the bathroom after he pulled me out of the tub the night our

heat went out. In the kitchen eating ice cream the night before we left Copper Mountain. At the top of the mountain before his first World Cup race where he looked me straight in the eye and told me he'd come back for me. On the balcony of the club at the hotel in Levi, with his hand trailing up the back of my leg and his breath next to my ear.

I'm a confused bundle of emotions and hormones, a bad combination for the conversation Nate wants to have. Or maybe a good combination for him, because my will to keep hating him seems to be weakening the more I watch the instant replay of the times we've had together since he returned. In some ways, we're the same together as we ever were. But in most ways, this feels different. Like we've grown and matured. Or at least, he has. I sometimes feel like I'm more irrational and emotional than I was as a teenager.

Back then, I knew who I was and what I wanted; I had my life planned out before I even met Nate. And my life went according to plan—I was invited to join the National Ski Team's development team my junior year of high school. I left Danforth halfway through college to ski full time. I won an Olympic gold medal, a few World Cup small globes, and almost achieved my ultimate dream of an overall World Cup crystal globe. And Nate was there for all of it, fit into the space I carved out for him in my life.

But he always wanted more. Looking back I can see how little I gave, how small and defined that space truly was. My focus and determination were enormous, just like my dreams. But they only left so much room for a relationship. I was afraid that if I gave him any more of me—if I married him like he wanted—that I'd lose some of my focus and maybe lose out on achieving my goals.

And then I crashed and lost everything anyway.

I open my eyes and turn my head toward Nate. He doesn't see me at first. He's wearing some tortoise shell glasses and reading a book, and the sight does something funny to my insides. I've never seen Nate with glasses, and I definitely don't have a thing for guys who wear glasses. Somehow they make Nate seem more grounded, like instead of the sex god who haunts my dreams or the sculpted athlete I work with daily, he's just a normal guy.

I can picture him in my bed, his back leaning against the headboard, reading before going to sleep. And it's startling to realize how much I crave

that reality. How I want to come to my bed and find Nate there, waiting for me like it's the most natural thing in the world.

I'm a mess.

He glances over at me then and I remove my noise-canceling headphones. "What's that look?" he asks. Because of course he sees something in my face that I don't want him to see. He always does.

"I've never seen you wear glasses," I say, because I can't say what I've really been thinking.

"They're just reading glasses. My eyes get strained when I read for a long time without them."

I'm about to tell him how insanely hot he looks in them, but I catch the words as they're almost out my mouth, swallow them back down where they belong, and bury them there.

"Did you sleep?" he asks, when I don't say anything. I shake my head no as I lie there, looking up at him. "What were you doing for"—he glances this watch—"the last three hours?"

"Thinking," I tell him as I bring my seat back up to a sitting position.

Nate raises an eyebrow.

"I'm sorry," I tell him quietly. I know it feels like we're in our own little pod, separate from the rest of the passengers in first class. But in the unlikely event anyone recognizes either of us, I don't want our conversation overheard. "I know I've been acting like a crazy person. I know I've been closed off and angry, then professional but distant, I know that sometimes I let my walls down and then build them back up quickly. This is just really, really hard for me."

"I'm sorry too," he tells me, "for causing all that. But what I really don't understand is why you don't want to know what happened? Why haven't you let me explain?"

I swallow down the lump in my throat. "Because you hurt me so badly, Nate. You leaving like that, and not coming back . . . I've never felt so helpless, so unloved. I swore to myself that I'd never forgive you *or* give anyone that kind of power over me again. So I turned that hurt into hate. It fueled my recovery and it's what's driven me forward when it would have been easier to just give up on life."

I probably sound ridiculously melodramatic to him, since he has no idea how his leaving impacted me. No one does. I hid it from everyone, insisted I was better off without him. Only Sierra and Marco know how much he



hurt me, and they both fed into that hatred at first, like it was the healthiest way to deal with the loss.

It feels good to be honest with Nate, finally. But I can tell from the stillness of his face, the way his eyes are squinting behind his glasses, that this isn't what he was expecting me to say. He takes the glasses off and sets them in the pocket of the seat in front of him, then rubs the bridge of his nose and slides his fingers across his eyelids before looking at me again.

"I did come back, Jackson."

It's like the plane has kept flying and left my body behind, and now I'm free-falling through the air, hurtling toward the ground at a hundred miles an hour.

"What?" I manage to squeak out even though there's no air left in my lungs.

"I did come back," he repeats. "And I don't know why you don't know that."

But he has to be lying. There's no way.

## CHAPTER 15



NATE

*Five Years Ago*  
*Bourg-Saint-Maurice, France*

When I finally arrive at the hospital, I'm a wreck of a human being. I haven't slept in almost two days. And in that time, I've held my mom's hand while she took her last breath; I've found out that my girlfriend of seven years is in the ICU; and I've left my father alone in Boston, wrapped up in his grief, because I needed to get back to France to be with Jackson.

I walk the halls of the hospital like a ghost. I encounter few people at this late hour, but when I do they don't even look at me, either wrapped up in their work or their own grief, depending on why they're at the hospital in the first place. It's like an out-of-body experience where I'm watching this happen to someone else. There's no way I gave up a kidney and my lifelong dreams to save my beautiful, loving mother and now she's lying in a morgue—but that's where she is. There's no way that my determined, headstrong girlfriend could possibly be in a hospital bed in the ICU—but that's where I'm headed, because that's where she is.

There's no way I can survive if I lose both of them. I honestly am not sure how I'm even holding it together at this point. It's like I'm on some sort of trauma-induced autopilot.

The walls of the rooms within the ICU are all glass, with curtains pulled to give the patients some privacy. At the nurses' station, someone checks a clipboard and informs me that I'm not on the list of visitors. After the way I left, without even telling anyone where I was going or when I'd be back, I shouldn't be surprised that I didn't make "the list." I'm surprised nonetheless.

She tells me she'll check and see if it's okay for me to visit, and walks toward one of the small glass rooms in the back. Before she gets there, Jackson's dad, Rory, steps through the glass door. He talks to the nurse, then glances up at me. He's not trying to hide his surprise at seeing me here. He closes the door behind him and firmly plants himself in front of it as he waits for me to come over.

So that's how this is going to be.

"Where have you been?" he asks me as I approach. His lilting Irish brogue has turned hard, and I deserve that. He has no idea what I've gone through, he only knows that I deserted his daughter when she needed me.

"I had to go home for a few days." He just stares at me, waiting for me to say more. But I'm struggling to find the words, to say them out loud. I still can't believe my mom is gone. And knowing how close she and Jackson were, how much this will devastate Jackson, makes it that much harder. I find myself unable to tell him she's died, both because I don't want to believe it and because I can't take his sympathy. "Is Jackson going to be okay?"

"Yes. She's in a medically induced coma to save her from the pain and let her heal a bit. But she has several surgeries and an incredibly long road of recovery ahead of her."

"Oh, thank God." My shoulders slump as the relief floods me.

"Maybe you shouldn't have come back," Rory says. His words are terse and he couldn't have possibly said anything in this moment that would have stunned me more.

"What? Why not?" I ask, hoping I've misunderstood his meaning.

"Some people were not meant to live in the shadow of others. You've been living in Jackson's shadow for years and hating every minute of it." He's wrong and not wrong at the same time.

“I don’t hate every minute of it,” I insist. But I do hate how unbalanced our relationship is.

“You’ve spent five winters following her around like a puppy,” he reminds me, “watching her do what you always wanted to do. Sometimes I feel like this is more your dream than hers, but she’s living it.”

I don’t know how to respond to that.

“And every year that she’s more successful, you get more resentful,” he claims.

“I don’t resent her!” I want to strangle him for even suggesting it.

“I know you don’t. But you resent the circumstances that have kept you away from racing. Every year you spend over here in Europe with her while she’s training and racing is a year you aren’t doing what you love and what you really want to do.”

“I don’t think we could survive long distance,” I say. Why does my voice sound so small? “We’re barely hanging on as is.”

“You’re unhappy because you’re not doing what you want to be doing, and she’s unhappy that you’re unhappy, and you’ve known each other so long you know exactly how to piss each other off. You can’t keep going down this path.”

I loosen my fist in my pocket, running my finger over the velvet box with the three carat emerald cut diamond engagement ring and the diamond encrusted wedding band inside. My mother’s rings. The ones she wanted Jackson to have.

“The doctors told me it would be too dangerous to race,” I remind him.

“That was years ago. And it would have been too dangerous then. But you’ve recovered. Have you gotten a second opinion? Or are you out here being a martyr, making up reasons to be pissed off at the world?”

My back stiffens at his words. I’ve been telling myself that I couldn’t get back to racing because I needed to be here to support Jax.

“Jackson needs someone as strong as she is. Stop being her doormat,” Rory says, his face softening as he runs his fingertips across his forehead like he’s squeezing away a headache. “You were meant to race. Go do that. And when you’ve figured out who you want to be, maybe she’ll take you back. I’m telling you this because I think of you like a son. You’ve forgotten how to make each other happy, and you can’t make someone else happy unless you know how to make yourself happy first.”

“I don’t even know how to BE without her in my life.”

He looks at me like he really wants to tell me to grow a pair. But Jackson and I have been together since we were seventeen and have traveled and lived together since we were twenty. She's a part of my family and I'm a part of hers. We are married in every sense but the legal one.

In my pocket, I rub my thumb across the velvet box again, wondering why I brought it with me. She's put off marriage so many times, why would she change her mind now? Do I really think waking up out of a coma will make her want to get married?

I glance through the glass door of Jackson's room. Because of where Rory's standing, I can't see Jackson's face, but I can see the tubes coming out of her body, the machines surrounding her. Then my eyes land on the figure sitting next to her, bent over her bed.

His lips are moving and he's holding her hand. I've been gone for two days and already Marco's there, ready to replace me. She insists they're just friends, but her dad has welcomed him into the room that he's keeping me out of.

*So this is why she hasn't wanted to marry me.* Suddenly it makes a lot more sense. Maybe I haven't been the man she's needed me to be, despite the fact that I've done everything I could possibly do to support her and her career. Maybe Rory's right and I need to grow up a bit before I deserve her.

"Don't think for a second that I won't be back," I say to Rory.

Then I do the hardest thing I've ever done.

I turn and walk away.



*Present Day*  
*Transatlantic Flight*

Jackson's got her bottom lip between her teeth and her green eyes are glassy. It's like she's frozen, her face transfixed in the same shocked expression it's been in the entire time I've been talking.

I wait, watching for her reaction. And then her lip is trembling as it slips from between her teeth, her eyebrows dip, and tears are streaming down her face.

“Hey,” I say, reaching over with both hands to cup her face and smooth away the tears with my thumbs. “Why are you crying?”

“Are you serious right now?” she whispers, a hoarse laugh escaping her lips.

I don’t answer, just keep her face cupped in my hands.

“Nate.” She sighs. “You just told me that everything I’ve believed about what happened between us was a lie,” she says, pulling back and using the sleeve of her dress to wipe her face.

“No, what was between us was *not* a lie,” I growl and I pull my hands back to the console that rests between us.

“No,” she says, “I mean about your leaving. We had a fight and you left Val d’Isère without telling me where you were going or that you weren’t coming back—”

“Because I *was* coming back,” I insist. “I got the call from my dad that my mom was being moved to the ICU right after our fight. I wasn’t thinking. My dad chartered a jet and I was on my way back to Boston within an hour of finding out. I should have told you. But I was stupid and upset and not making good decisions. I should have brought you with me. I know now that if I had, everything would have turned out differently.”

She knows what I mean—she wouldn’t have raced in Val d’Isère, which means she wouldn’t have crashed. She might still be racing today. She might be the best in the world. We might still be together.

“We can’t change what happened,” she says with more strength than I would have expected. “My crash was just bad luck.”

“Your crash happened because you weren’t focused. You were worried and upset, and that’s on me.” It’s the truth I’ve been living with for years. “I can never make that up to you.”

“You don’t have to.” She reaches out and squeezes my hand before quickly pulling her hand back. “I shouldn’t have skied with how upset I was. But I was so close. That overall World Cup title was within my grasp.”

“I know,” I tell her, “and you deserved that victory. I’m so sorry.”

“Nate, that part isn’t your fault. I skied when I shouldn’t have, I should’ve known better. Yes, I was upset *because* of you. But you didn’t force me to ski in that condition, I did that to myself.”

There’s a moment’s pause where the air feels heavy with the weight of these truths we’re sharing for the first time. “And now you’re telling me

that you *did* come back, but that my dad told you to leave? I don't understand why he'd say that. He knew how committed I was to you."

"He clearly saw something neither of us were able to see," I admit. "We were fighting constantly. It really was like we'd forgotten how to make each other happy. I think that, for me at least, no matter how much you love another person, when you live just for them you can end up hating yourself in the process. Your dad made me realize that I needed to find what was missing in my life, figure out how to be my own whole person."

Another tear slips down her cheek and she doesn't even bother to wipe it away. "Why didn't I know how unhappy you were back then? Why did you hide that from me?"

"I don't think I realized it myself. But I suspect that's why I put so much emphasis on getting married. I felt like every sacrifice would be worth it once we tied that proverbial knot."

"And every time I put off the marriage talks, asked you to wait . . ."

I nod in response.

"And then to show up to your hospital room and find Marco there, right next to you where I should have been—"

"You and your stupid fucking jealousy," she hisses before she grabs the bottle of water she has stowed in the seat pocket in front of her and takes a sip.

"Jackson, you swore up and down that there was nothing between the two of you back then, but he was the first person by your side in the hospital and you're together now. So how am I supposed to believe that *something* wasn't going on. Maybe you weren't cheating on me, but it was more than just friendship."

When I told her what happened in the hospital that night, I left out the part about having my mom's rings—it's too pathetic to tell her I showed up with them and found Marco holding her hand. I hope to one day tell her the story of how my mom gave them to me on her deathbed, insisted they were meant for Jackson and only Jackson. But she is not ready for that conversation right now.

"You are . . ." She trails off, the color rising in her cheeks and her eyes narrowing, ". . . so incredibly frustrating. I never once lied to you about me and Marco. You can believe me or not, but I have no reason to lie about it now. If I was cheating on you, or had feelings for Marco when you and I were still together, there'd be no reason for me not to admit it at this point."

She does have a point, albeit a weak one. That betrayal is one reason I stayed away so long—knowing she and Marco had feelings for each other and she wouldn't admit it to me. Even though it was a couple years before they went public with their relationship, that doesn't mean there wasn't something there before. *But she dated people in between*, a little voice in the back of my head reminds me. *There was that pro soccer player, among others.*

“Is that why you never reached out to me? Never made sure I was okay?”

“I knew you were okay. Your recovery was well documented on social media and in plenty of sports magazines, and Marco was with you in a lot of those photos. So why would I come back when I knew you were with him?”

“Oh my God, Nate,” she growls. “*I wasn't with Marco. Not back then. We haven't even been together for a year.*”

“Right,” I say, as I rub the bridge of my nose where it meets my eyebrows.

What I don't say is that I don't think Marco is actually in love with her. That he doesn't look at her the way I do, that I'm certain he loves her but that it seems almost platonic. She deserves to have someone who is truly, deeply in love with her. I want her to choose me, but even if she doesn't, I don't want her to choose Marco.

“Here you go,” the flight attendant says from behind me, and it's a struggle not to tell her to go away. Her timing sucks. “Salmon for you,” she says to Jackson as she reaches past me to hand her a plate, “and the house salad and rolls for you,” she says as she sets a small salad and a plate with two rolls in front of me. “You sure you don't want anything else?” she asks.

I don't bother explaining that there's nothing else on the menu that's vegan. I brought some snacks with me too. I won't starve. “I'm good, thanks.”

Jackson eyes me as the flight attendant walks away. “I ordered for you,” I tell her. “I couldn't tell if you were asleep or not. Your choices were salmon or a pasta and meatball dish, and I know how particular you are about meatballs.”

She chuckles. Her maternal grandparents immigrated from Italy, and her mother is an amazing cook. “The things you remember . . .”



“You’d be surprised how little I’ve forgotten.” It’s a distinctly suggestive comment, and by the expression on her face she’s noted that. There isn’t a single detail about her that I haven’t dwelled on over the past few years. They say absence makes the heart grow fonder, but sometimes it can make the heart grow obsessed.

She cuts up her food and takes a few bites before she says anything else. Finally, she sighs and tells me, “I don’t know how my reunion with my dad is going to go when we land. The fact that he’s been lying to me for years, and about something so important . . . it’s just . . . unfathomable.”

“He had our best interests at heart. He wanted you to be with someone who made you happy, and he wasn’t sure I could be that person if I couldn’t even make myself happy.” I don’t want to defend him, yet he was right. And Jackson’s relationship with her dad is a foundational part of who she is. Putting a wedge between them won’t help me win her back.

She scrunches her eyebrows together and I imagine that she’s mulling over her dad’s words. Her face shifts to confusion, then to a small smile, then her eyebrows are back together.

“You look like you are doing a lot of thinking right now,” I tell her.

“I’m just . . . it’s like my brain is connecting a lot of dots together. Things make a lot more sense.”

“What kind of things?” I ask in between bites of my salad.

“Why you left. And maybe . . .” She pauses again, like she’s afraid to go on.

“Maybe?” I prompt.

“And maybe why you’re back.”

“Jackson,” I say, pushing my tray table with my food away and turning toward her. “I’ve told you why I’m back, and I don’t intend to leave any room for misunderstanding. I came back for you.”

“But I’m with Marco,” she says, her voice barely a whisper.

“For now.” I shrug and a smile pulls at my lips.

“You are insanely arrogant,” she groans as she rolls her eyes toward the ceiling of the plane.

“I’m a realist. And the reality is, you and Marco are not meant to be together.”

“And you and I *are* . . .?”

“Your words, Jackson. Your words.”

## CHAPTER 16



### JACKSON

*Boston, MA*

“So your mom saw the race in Levi,” Dad says as we pull out of the airport and head toward the tunnel that will take us to the interstate. “And the part before the second race, when you and Nate had your foreheads pressed together. It didn’t look like a PT-athlete relationship to her.”

“How mad was she?”

“Oh, she’ll tell you all about it herself. I already took the worst of it, I think. That damn Italian temper of hers.”

He and I agreed it was better if she didn’t know I was training Nate because we didn’t think she needed the extra stress and worry right now. But now I wonder how we thought we’d make it through a whole season without her finding out. It seems stupid that we lied, even if our intentions were good.

“Hmm,” I say, thinking how my mom is like a hurricane—she blows in strong when she’s mad and leaves calm, despite the destruction in her wake. I used to be the same way, but having to hide so much of what I was feeling after Nate left, and having to face the press so often, has taught me how to tamp down my emotions.

“It’ll blow over. I just wanted you to know before you walk into the house because there’s no way she’s not bringing it up.”

“Thanks.”

“So, care to tell me how Nate ended up on your flight back from Paris?”

Dad had been pretty shocked when Nate and I descended the escalators to baggage claim together. They’d been cordial to each other, but there was a shitload of tension there.

I glance over at Dad. It’s dark in the tunnel, deep beneath the Charles River, and we’re both glowing orange from the lights that line the walls. His eyes are fixed forward—there’s no room for error down here, where the two lanes are narrow and each ends only a foot from the curved concrete walls.

“I’m not sure, but it’s not the first time I’ve ended up on a flight coincidentally seated by one of our athletes.” I choose my next words carefully. “But on the flight, Nate told me that he *did* come back to the hospital in France when I was in the ICU. And he told me what you said to him, and why he left.”

My dad’s breath hisses as it exits his lips. “Yeah, about that . . .” His hands grip the wheel and I can’t help but notice they’re more wrinkled than I remember. Glancing at his face I notice that it is, too. His auburn hair and beard are littered with gray which stand out in sharp contrast to the deep copper color I’m used to seeing. I’m sure the change has been gradual, but I only see my parents a few times a year and I notice the changes more and more with each visit.

“When were you going to tell me, Dad? We don’t keep secrets from each other, remember? And that is kind of a big one!” My voice cracks and there’s nothing I can do to stop it. Knowing that the one person I trust above all others has been lying to me for years has shattered my reality. In the back of my mind I know he would feel similarly if he knew about my relationship with Marco, but that’s a secret I have to keep to protect Marco and Christian. I can’t see that Dad had any such reasons for keeping this secret from me.

“I was going to tell you . . .” my dad starts.

“Yeah? When?” I ask when he doesn’t finish his sentence. “Because the time I needed to know this was years ago!” My voice is rising in anger as we exit the airport tunnel into the larger tunnel that runs beneath Boston and will take us to the bridge leading north, out of the city.

He glances over at me quickly, then puts his eyes back on the road. It's a minute before he says anything and the silence that passes while I wait is not a comfortable one.

"When they brought you out of your medically induced coma," he says slowly, "Nate was the first person you asked about. When I told you he wasn't there, do you remember what you said?"

"I had been drugged for days, how would I remember the first conversation I had after coming out of a coma?"

"You told me 'good.' That was your first reaction. With no time to think about it, no time to plan your response, your first thought was that you were glad he wasn't there."

Dad's got the Irish storytelling gene, so he's always embellishing everything. But I can tell, just from the directness of his words, that this is no exaggeration.

"And it never occurred to you that it might have been my pride speaking? Or the drugs?"

"You were so adamant, right then, and in the days and weeks following, that you were better off without Nate. It seemed irresponsible to tell you he'd actually shown up, like it might derail your recovery."

"And never once in the years since did you think to tell me?" I ask as I gaze out at the nearly empty highway in front of us. We have a long drive to Blackstone, and plenty of time to hash this out before we get home to face my mom.

"What good would it have done? You were doing so well. You finished your doctorate, got your dream job. You and Marco . . . why would I say something that might derail your career and your love life? All for what? If Nate wasn't coming back, why would I say something?"

"Were you afraid that if you said something you might give me false hope? Did you think I was secretly waiting for him to return?"

"Actually, no. You were so adamant about being better off without him, and things were going so well for you. I *did* think he'd come back to you, but as the years passed I figured I was wrong about that. And I couldn't imagine that you might want him back after everything. Was I wrong?"

My throat tightens as Dad asks the million dollar question. "I don't know, Dad. Maybe?"

"So you were hiding your true feelings and pretending like you were glad he was gone?"

“Yeah,” I say, my voice small. “I was so hurt that he left, and betrayed that he never came back. It was easier to hide that rather than to expose it and become the girl everyone pitied.”

“But . . .” my dad says.

“But he did come back,” I fill in. “Only I didn’t know that. I don’t know what would have happened if you’d told me about the conversation you two had. Maybe I would have waited around for him. More likely, I would have gone after him, figured out where he was and tried to work things out. Either way, *knowing* that he didn’t throw away our relationship without any clear reason would have made a world of difference.”

For a few miles Dad doesn’t say anything. I stare out the window as the city turns to suburbs.

“I’ve always tried to do what was best for you,” he says finally.

I think of all the sacrifices he’s made to make sure I could race, including the years where he spent half the year in Europe with me, away from my mom and brother. “I know you have, Dad.”

“I’m sorry if this was the wrong decision on my part. But also, you can’t hide your true feelings and then be mad that I acted based on what you were telling me. If I’d have known how you really felt, I probably would have made a different decision.”

“Fair point,” I tell him. And my conscience nags at me about Marco, and the fact that I’m still lying to him about that. But that’s not my secret to tell, and it’ll be over soon enough anyway. I just have to get that job at Danforth.

“I have an interview on Wednesday morning,” I tell my dad. I share the details that Annie has given me, and how hopeful I am that this might work out.

“Why in the world would you give up your current job to move to New Hampshire?” he asks when I’m done talking. From the tone of his voice and the way he glances over at me, I can tell this isn’t a rhetorical question. He really doesn’t get it.

I roll my eyes and his return to the road. “Dad, Danforth has a nationally ranked D1 ski racing program. It’s a well-known and well-respected school, and this job is technically a promotion.”

“So you’re not leaving your life behind just to be closer to home because of what’s happening with your mom?” The doubt in his voice comes through crystal clear.

“Part of this, of course, is because of Mom. I want to be there for her through whatever comes next. And part of it is that I’ve been on the World Cup circuit for so long that the travel is getting old. I’m ready to *not* be on the road two hundred-plus days a year. And being closer to Blackstone is a big plus too. I know the mountain has been struggling for a while. I want to do what I can to help.”

“You’re sure this isn’t because of Nate?” His question detonates like he intended.

“I’m not going to lie and say that the idea of not working with him wasn’t part of the initial appeal. But now, I don’t know. I feel like we’re in a better place now that we’ve been honest with each other about why he left and how it affected me.”

Dad pauses, and I can practically see him thinking, choosing his words carefully. “Just, please make this decision independently of Nate.”

“Okay?” I say, not really sure what he means.

“I just want to make sure that you make this choice based on what’s best for you, not because you’re running away from Nate.”

I cough out a laugh. “I’m not running away from Nate.”

*You totally are*, my conscience reminds me.

“Okay, because there’s a good chance you could still see him if you move back.”

“Because his dad still has the place they bought up at Blackstone? That’s fine.” I shrug.

My dad opens his mouth to say something in response, but then closes it.

“What is it?”

His mouth is firmly set in a frown. “Nothing.”

But it doesn’t feel like nothing.



*Blackstone, NH*

I sit in my car listening to the voice mail again.

*Hey Jackson, it's Annie. I'm so sorry, but we're going to need to reschedule your interview. Something came up at the last minute. Someone in HR will probably call you to reschedule down the road.*

Probably. Meaning it's not definite.

I didn't get the voice mail until I was in the car in my parents' driveway, leaving for my interview. Now I'm not sure what to do. I call Annie back, but she doesn't answer.

I head back into my parents' house to change out of the slacks I'm wearing with my V-neck sweater in Danforth Green, because as an alum of course I wanted to show my school spirit. As an added bonus, it makes my green eyes shine. I throw on a pair of leggings with the sweater and since Mom's still sleeping and I'm terrible at doing nothing, I decide to head over to the mountain. Dad's in some sort of emergency board meeting this morning, but he said it'd only take an hour or so. Maybe we can grab brunch together at the restaurant in the lodge when his meeting is over.

Annie's return call comes in over Bluetooth right as I'm pulling into the Blackstone Mountain parking lot.

"Hey, I'm so sorry about the interview," she says when I answer the call.

"Annie, what happened?" I'm sure she can hear how worried I sound.

"Something came up, I'm so sorry to have to cancel on you like this." She doesn't sound that sorry.

"Was it something on your end? Or something about me in particular as a candidate for the position?" I ask as I pull into a parking spot.

She knows what I'm asking. Have they already decided they don't want me for the position?

She sighs, a deep exhale that pauses our conversation. "It was kind of both, actually. People here want to see how your training Nate plays out before committing to an interview."

But they'd already committed to the interview, so that means something has changed.

"What do you mean, how it plays out?" I ask. Nate finished fifteenth in his first World Cup race. If that's not seeing how effective my work with an athlete can be, I don't know what is.

"I'll be honest with you, Jackson. There are some rumors circulating that you and Nate have more than a professional relationship, and it put up

some warning flags. We can't have our staff getting personally involved with the athletes they train."

"I'm absolutely *not* involved with Nate," I say, carefully monitoring my tone so I sound firm and professional, but not reactive. "And even if I were, this is entirely different. He's not some college kid ten years younger than me. You knew I'd been involved with him before and you said that my ability to set aside personal differences to train him was a strength going into this position. And that's what I've done. Absolutely nothing has happened that has crossed professional boundaries."

"I believe you," Annie tells me, "but I'm not the only one on the hiring committee. And some of the other members want to pause for a bit, see how this goes. You were the only one we were interviewing, so it's not like we'll hire someone else in the interim. You're still in contention for this."

"That's a relief," I say, even though going from being the only candidate for the job to having my interview cancelled doesn't feel like a relief at all. It feels like yet another thing Nate's taken from me.

"Just give it a little time. Will you be home again for Christmas? Maybe we can hold the interview then."

"I think so, and I'd like that."

"Great. We'll talk again soon. In the meantime, just keep your head down and stay out of the press. Understandably, we don't want to bring someone into this position who's going to create some sort of media circus here."

"Understood," I say before we say our goodbyes and hang up.

I press my head back into the headrest of my mom's SUV and take a few deep breaths, trying to convince myself that it's not a big deal that they've postponed my interview. Postponed is not cancelled, but even that reassurance doesn't feel all that encouraging.

*Stay out of the press.* I'm not sure what she even means, as I haven't been in the press lately and there hasn't been a "media circus" like she mentioned. What are they worried about? And more importantly, what did they see that raised people's alarm bells? Was it me and Nate, standing with our foreheads pressed together at the top of the mountain in Levi? The same shot that had my mom up in arms?

If Nate wasn't on the team, none of this would have fucking happened.

Then again, would I trade finally knowing the truth of what happened? Would I trade the weight that's been lifted knowing that he didn't leave



because he stopped loving me, even though it's been replaced by this new weight of possibly not getting the job I need?

No. I needed to know the truth, no matter the consequences. Because what I now know means I don't have to keep hating him, and I can finally see what Marco and Sierra were trying to tell me—that my all-consuming hatred was keeping me bound to him.

He said he came back for me. But maybe it's time I finally let him go.



“I'm really sorry it got cancelled,” Marco's sympathetic words carry through our call. “But this isn't your fault, you haven't done anything wrong.”

My heart swells at his supportive stance. This is a tricky lie we're living and it only works because we always have each other's back.

“I still can't believe the plane conversation we had. Did *you* know the truth?” I ask him. I'd still been trying to make sense of everything Nate told me when Marco and I talked a couple nights ago. It didn't even occur to me to ask him if he'd seen Nate at the hospital years before.

“Not until you told me.”

“So you didn't see him there, even though he saw you?”

“Pretty sure I was focused on you, *Bella*.”

I glance at the door to the conference room across from the couch I'm sitting on in the admin office. The door pulls open just as my stomach rumbles so loud I swear it echoes across the room.

A few people file out the door, putting their coats on as they go, and I nod to the ones I know and then tell Marco, “The meeting's over, I gotta go.”

“No way,” I hear a deep, familiar voice rumble as I slide my phone into my pocket.

I glance up. “Oh my God, Cole! What are you doing here?” I bound out of my seat so we're face-to-face.

“I'm on the board now,” my former ski coach tells me. Cole's only twelve years older than me, and last I heard he was out in Tahoe working for one of the big conglomerates. I didn't even know he was back on the East Coast, much less at Blackstone. “Rory didn't tell you?”

“Dad’s tight lipped about all board-related business. Like why you guys are meeting the day before Thanksgiving,” I prod, hoping he’ll give me a little intel.

But he doesn’t bite. “It’s good to see you, kid.” He wraps his arm around my shoulder in a quick side hug. “What are you doing here?”

“I had a change of plans this morning and so I popped by to see if Dad wanted to grab something to eat when this meeting was over.” A big part of me wants to tell Cole about Danforth. I still saw him all the time when I was in college. Since Blackstone is so close to Danforth, he came to my home races whenever he could. We grew apart once I left college for the World Cup circuit, but he was such an instrumental part of launching me into my career.

A look passes over Cole’s face that I can’t quite place. He was a grumpy old man even in his twenties, but this isn’t the “I’m tired of everyone’s shit” look I’m used to seeing from him. Instead, he looks almost guilty. Which I don’t understand, until I hear Dad’s voice at the conference room door.

“You better not screw this up,” he says. I glance over at him, but his back is to me and I can’t see who he’s talking to inside that room.

“That’s my cue to go. Good to see you, kid,” Cole says quietly and slips out the door of the admin offices so quickly I don’t even have the chance to say goodbye.

Dad is two steps out the door before he notices me waiting there, and his face rearranges itself as he goes through several emotions—guilt, regret, shock. It’s the look of a man who just walked into a restaurant with his mistress only to find his wife sitting at their table. In other words, not the reaction I was expecting.

He turns back to the door like he’s reaching out to close it, but he’s too late because Nate’s already stepped through it with some guy in a collared shirt and tie following right on his heels. This other guy’s got jet black hair that’s obviously been styled, and he’s way overdressed for a ski lodge.

Goose bumps erupt on my back like a snake slithering up my spine. Something is not right here. What the hell are my dad and my ex-boyfriend doing in a top secret board meeting together? Nate hasn’t even been back to Blackstone since we broke up. And he doesn’t belong here now. Especially not with some suit carrying a leather messenger bag and looking all official.

“What the hell is going on?” I ask as I stand.

Nate’s reaction is much like my dad’s—guilty.

“This one’s all yours to explain,” Dad says to Nate.

“I signed the NDA, too, remember?” he responds. He’s talking to my dad and it pisses me off that neither of them has even responded to me.

The guy standing behind Nate leans in close and says something to him so quietly I can’t quite make it out. Then Nate tells me, “I want to explain this, but it’s a violation of the nondisclosure agreement.”

An NDA means that there’s some sort of business deal going down here, and it’s obviously something they’ve been working on prior to today. Suddenly I understand that this is what Dad wasn’t telling me in the car when we were driving home from the airport.

I look back and forth between my dad and Nate, my eyes narrow as I try to determine their intentions.

“Fine. Get me the paperwork and a pen, then start talking.” There’s no room for argument in my words. I’m not asking. I’m insisting they tell me what’s going on.

But then the guy who I’m guessing must be Nate’s lawyer steps in front of Nate with his back to me, and lifts some paperwork to point something out. Again, his voice is so quiet when he speaks to Nate that I can’t make out his words even in the relative silence of the room. I glance over at Dad, hoping he sees how betrayed I feel right now.

Nate shakes his head, drawing my attention back to him. His nostrils flare and he closes his eyes, taking a fortifying breath. It’s clear he’s conflicted.

Then he opens his eyes, and looks straight at me. His face is begging my forgiveness before he even opens his mouth. “It’s a violation of the contract to add anyone else into this process, NDA or not. I’m so sorry, Jax.”

“Oh, hell, no,” I say, the words rolling off my tongue slowly. “You do *not* get to go behind my back like this and then turn around and call me Jax.” I’m livid and I’m not even sure what about. I don’t technically have a right to be involved in whatever is going on here. But the fact that my father and my ex-boyfriend are obviously engaged in some sort of deal regarding Blackstone—the only place in the world that really feels like home—and that they both hid it from me, is yet another betrayal. And I’m still not over the first one. Combine that with my interview being cancelled this morning, and I’m obviously looking for a fight. I know it and I still can’t stop myself.

“I’m not going behind your back,” Nate says, shifting his weight back and forth as he runs his palms down his thighs. “I have every intention of explaining this. I just can’t do it yet because of all the fucking legalities.”

I look back and forth between Nate and my dad. “Just once, I’d like you both to be honest with me. Every time you hide something from me, even if you think it’s for my benefit, it just makes things worse.”

I turn and leave so quickly I don’t know if they even respond. Outside, I take the elevated walkway across to the deck of the lodge then scurry down the outdoor stairs, weaving around the ski families in their snow gear. It feels like both yesterday and a lifetime ago that I was in their boots, back when all I wanted in the world was to race. Back then Blackstone was my sanctuary. And until today, I’d hoped it would be again. But now I’ve lost my interview at Danforth, and Nate has his fingers all over some business here at Blackstone. Even though I want to be here for my parents, moving home now feels not only less possible, but less appealing as well.

DECEMBER

## CHAPTER 17



NATE

*Big Sky, Montana*

I grab the last picture frame off the shelving next to the wide wooden mantle. This one is harder to wrap up and pack away than the rest. It's a photo Rory took of us the year Jackson started racing full time on the World Cup circuit, nearly ten years ago. He was always poised somewhere close by with his camera. She'd just earned her first first-place finish, and I'd lifted her up to the crowd, but instead of waving to her fans, she'd wrapped her legs around my waist and gazed down at me, a combination of love and victory etched across her face.

She'd had the photo framed and given it to me on New Year's Eve—the date we always celebrated our anniversary because New Year's Eve of our junior year of high school was the first time I'd kissed her. Actually, it was the second time I'd kissed her, but the first time that meant something to both of us, and we'd been together since then—through high school and college and her racing professionally. The note she'd stuck to the frame had said "Always and Forever." I wish I still had that, but it was lost somewhere over the years.

My phone rings on the table next to me and I glance over, hoping it's Jackson even though I know it won't be. I'm starting to wonder why I keep this hope alive at all. We'd made so much progress on our flight back from France. I wasn't naive enough to think that conversation had solved everything, but I'd exited that plane thinking maybe we could find our way back to each other now that she knew I came back for her—back then, and now.

But it's been more than two weeks since our run-in at Blackstone, and she's made it clear she has no interest in furthering the conversations about our relationship until I can be truly and completely honest with her. Which I can't be because of that fucking NDA. I even went to the board of directors with a proposed amendment to the contract that would allow Jackson to be added to the list of people involved in the acquisition, but the board had been opposed to it. No one was certain that she'd support the plan, and they were afraid I'd withdraw the offer if she didn't. Even her father agreed she shouldn't be informed. And I haven't been able to even tell her that I tried, because even that would have been a violation of the nondisclosure agreement.

"What's up?" I answer the call.

"You could have told us you were in town," my videographer Mark yells. I can tell he's in his truck with his phone on speaker, and by the sound of it there are other people with him.

"Who's us?"

"I'm with Dan and Luke, and we just heard from one of your neighbors that your truck is parked outside. What the hell?"

"I'm just here packing up some of my stuff. I'm heading to Europe next weekend, and I don't think I'll be back here this winter. Sarah is on my ass to rent it out," I tell them. This cabin has been my home base for the last few years. It's the only property I own that I don't rent out, but my property manager, Sarah, has been pushing me to add it to my portfolio of rental properties if I'm not going to use it this season."

"We'll be back to get you after we stop at the liquor store," Mark tells me. "You're coming out with us tonight."

"Fine," I say, because it doesn't matter whether I agree or not, I know they'll be back with their beer and expect me to be their designated driver. Keeping my friends safe has pretty much been my job for the past couple

years. “But I’m not staying out late tonight. I have to drive back to Park City tomorrow.”

“Whatever, grandpa!” I hear Luke yell over the noise of the road, and they all laugh.

I hang up and place the framed picture of Jackson and me on the pile of packing paper and wrap two pieces around it, but instead of adding it to the box of my personal items that I’m clearing out, I take it into my bedroom and put it on top of my bag so I can bring it back to Park City with me.



“So, asshole,” Mark says as he walks into my entryway with two six packs in his hands. “We hear you’ve been killing it in your first few races.”

“I’ve done fine. Nothing to brag about.”

The guys all kick off their dirty snow boots and Mark hands me the beer so he can take off his jacket.

“Bullshit,” Dan grumbles. I cock my eyebrow at him, not sure what he means. “You hit the top fifteen in your first race,” he clarifies. Of the three die-hard skiers in my entryway, he’s the only one who’s also raced.

“But I haven’t been back there since,” I admit.

Dan mimics me, repeating my words back in a squeaky voice. “You’re such a little crybaby. You know how many people spend *years* trying to break into the top twenty?”

He’s right. I’m being a moody bitch about my track record so far. After a top-fifteen finish in Levi, I finished nineteenth and twenty-first in Lake Louise and Beaver Creek, earning me enough World Cup points to snag a spot in the upcoming bib draw at our next race in Alta Badia, Italy. It’s also means I’m finishing higher than some of my counterparts on our A team. But my race results are slipping in the wrong direction.

“All right,” Luke says, taking the two six packs out of my hands and walking toward the two-story living room. “Let’s make our plans tonight before grandpa here bores us with his woes about the privilege of World Cup racing.”

“You guys are the worst,” I say.

After a couple rounds of beers sitting in front of my huge stone fireplace, the three of them have coordinated our night out. Another half



hour later and we're snagging a booth at a bar at the base of Big Sky. It's close to all the mountain condos and the big hotels, which means it's a prime location for picking up girls who are here for a ski weekend.

"You're so fucking uptight," Mark says after I order a soda from the waitress. "If you're not gonna drink, you at least need to get laid."

"It's obviously been too long," Luke adds.

*They have no idea.*

"You're such dicks," I say. "I've been traveling for a month. What makes you think I haven't fucked a different girl in each country?"

As it is, I haven't slept with anyone since Jackson and I split. And the only way I'm breaking the longest and only sex-free streak of my adult life is with Jackson.

"Because you're wound so tight there's no way you're gettin' some," Dan says. Mark and Luke nod along like puppets.

"My love life is *still* private." It's not something I've ever talked to these guys about, even though half the time I'm with them they're just bragging about their latest conquests.

"Hot chicks at nine o'clock," Luke says. "Definitely tourists."

From where I'm sitting, I can't look without turning and making it totally obvious.

"There's three of them, and four of us. Looks like you're out of luck, grandpa," Mark says. "I call that hottie with the long blond hair."

I chance a glance over my left shoulder, then do a double take. The woman Mark's referencing is raising her glass and clinking it with the other two, and my night is about to get much more interesting. Because the hottie with the blond hair is Sierra, sitting next to her is Jax's friend Petra, and across from them with her back to me is definitely Jackson. I'd know that long brown hair anywhere. Her sweater is some off the shoulder business and I have an overwhelming need to trace that bare skin—from her shoulder, up her neck, and along her jawline—with my mouth.

I spin my head back toward the guys so Sierra doesn't see me. *What the hell are they doing in Big Sky?* As we were heading back to Park City from Beaver Creek a couple days ago, I did overhear Jackson telling one of the coaches she was going away on a girls' trip when he asked what her weekend plans looked like. I remember thinking it was unlike Jackson, who is a total homebody, to travel on our only free weekend at home before we leave for Europe.

“What’s wrong?” Mark takes one look at my face and asks.

I school my expression into a smirk, something they’re more familiar with than the stunned look I’m sure I was just wearing. “You’re out of luck. She’s engaged.”

“How can you tell?” he asks, glancing over at her. “You can’t even see her left hand from here.”

“Because I know her. Actually, I know them all.”

“You’re totally hooking me up with the one that looks like a Greek goddess then, right?” Luke asks.

I take one look at his baby face and let out a sound that’s half laugh, half snort. Luke’s one of the best backcountry skiers I know. He can ski a line through trees in six foot deep snow and never have to dig himself out once. But he’s never quite outgrown the baby fat in his cheeks, and his boyish charm is so not her style. “She’s Russian, not Greek. And that woman will eat . . . you . . . alive,” I say slowly, emphasizing each word. Petra chews up guys like him and spits them out for fun.

“I’ll take my chances,” he says and I sincerely hope he’s bluffing. Watching her rip him apart and send him away in pieces won’t be fun for me, though I assume Mark and Dan will laugh their asses off. Maybe I deserve the grandpa moniker after all.

“Holy shit, that other chick has a body,” Dan says, stretching out his last word so it sounds like baaaaa-dee. “That other chick” can only be one person.

“Do not even fucking look at her,” I growl and whatever they hear in my voice has all three of them freezing. For a moment they just look at me, Luke with his eyebrows up to his hairline, Mark with his beer paused right before his lips, and Dan looking sheepish.

“Is that . . .” Mark finally says, the words trailing off. We don’t talk about Jackson, ever. More than just Bro Code, it was part of our agreement when they all started working with me years ago.

I nod, then look over my shoulder, my eyes tracking Jackson as she walks across the bar toward the bathroom. That sexy sweater clings to her breasts and skims her hips, and her black leggings cover the only part of her thighs visible between the sweater and those same fuck-me boots she had on in the elevator the night I ran into her before her girls’ night out. In the solitude of my room many nights since, I’ve pictured her in those boots and nothing else. The blood rushes to my dick so fast I’m almost light-headed.

“Like four different guys just watched her walk across the bar,” Luke says.

I swallow down the growl that rises up in my chest. “Good luck to them,” I scoff.

Dan looks around, then shrugs. “I don’t see her boyfriend here.”

The mention of Marco is like a cold splash of water to my face. I adjust myself and then stand, hoping the fact that there’s essentially a steel pipe behind my zipper isn’t obvious.

“Where’re you going?” Mark asks as their eyes all shift to look up at me.

“I suddenly have to take a piss.” I turn and stalk away from them, walking along the perimeter of the bar to avoid notice. Sierra’s like a fucking guard dog and if she sees me she’ll be on me in seconds, trying to keep me away from Jackson.

I wait for Jax near the bathroom door, with my shoulder leaning up against the wall and my back to her table of friends. The minute she opens the door I push off the wall and step in front of her.

She inhales sharply and looks at the ceiling before turning her eyes back to my face. “This is starting to feel a lot like stalking.”

“This time it’s purely coincidence. What are you doing here, anyway?”

“What are *you* doing here?” she says.

“I live here.” I take a step closer to her and she wobbles a tad as she steps back toward the wall.

“I thought you lived in Park City.” She sounds uncertain, like maybe she imagined me being her neighbor, and I have to wonder how many drinks she’s already had.

“Right now I do, but this is where I’ve lived for the past few years.”

“Ah”—her head bobs like she understands something that has previously alluded her—“your secret hideaway.”

“It was not a secret that I lived here. Anyone who was actually looking for me could have easily found me.”

“I guess no one was looking then.” She crosses her arms over her chest. It pulls at the top of her sweater, revealing her cleavage. I can’t help but notice her nipples are hard, and it’s not the least bit cold in here so I have to wonder if my proximity still does that to her. I feel like a teenager in how I can’t tear my eyes away. “Up here, Davenport,” she says as she raises a hand to point at her face.

I take my time sliding my eyes up to her face, just to piss her off. When our eyes meet, I'm surprised to see a look I know well—hugely dilated pupils and naked lust. She's never been good at hiding her attraction to me and she can't hide shit when she's drunk. "You didn't answer my question about why you're here."

"Girls' weekend," she says. "Since it's the last weekend I'm home for a while, my friends wanted to do something special. Did you know I was going to be here?"

"If I knew, I wouldn't be asking, would I?"

She rolls her eyes in response.

"I didn't know you'd be here," I assure her. "I came up this weekend to pack some personal items. I'm going to rent my place out this winter."

She just nods, then starts to walk past me, but I put my arm out against the wall to block her and I lean in. "You sure *you're* not stalking *me*?" I tease.

The fire in her is palpable—it's equal parts anger and attraction, and the heat radiates off her cheeks until I feel singed. "I've never been further from stalking you in my entire life. Even when you walked away from our relationship five years ago and didn't look back . . . I hated you less than I do now."

"Whoa," I lean away a little so I can get a better focus on her. She might be madder than I've ever seen her, which is saying something. I wish an angry Jackson wasn't such a turn-on, because I know I need to defuse this situation, but all I really want to do is push her up against this wall and kiss the shit out of the lips that just spoke a truth I don't understand. "What is this about? Is this all because I can't tell you why I was at Blackstone a few weeks ago?"

Her eyes get glassy. "Nate, you deserted me when I needed you most. You came back when I needed you to stay gone. The photos of us before your second race in Levi ruined things you can't even understand. And now you've got your fingers all over some aspect of Blackstone . . . the *one* place you know I love more than anywhere else. Why can't you just stay out of my life?"

I lean in again, so close my lips practically brush her ear. "If you really want me out of your life for good, Jax, you're going to have to stop looking at me like you want to fuck me."

She sucks in a surprised gasp and her hands are on my chest pushing me away. “Get the hell away from me,” she spits out, but her eyes haven’t lost that look. Her mouth is saying one thing, but her body is saying another.

On my other side, I hear a voice I was hoping not to hear this weekend. “This asshole bothering you, miss?” My eyes swing over to Johnny Todd—womanizer, ski pro, and all around asshole. One of the things I’ve missed least about Big Sky is running into him.

“So much,” Jackson says, her voice breathy. She’s looking at him like he just found her lost puppy. “Would you mind walking me back to my friends?”

“You don’t want to do this,” I tell Jackson.

“I’m so glad you’re always around to tell me what I want,” she says, her voice full of searing sarcasm.

She has no idea what she’s starting here. If there’s anything I know about Johnny, it’s that women aren’t safe in his presence. There have been a lot of accusations over the years, but none that have turned into charges. With one more shove, she pushes me away and I watch as Johnny walks her back to her table. Once there, he plops himself in the open seat next to her.

*Well, shit.*

“Unbelievable,” Dan laughs when I get back to our table and take a seat that allows me full view of Jackson’s table. “You found the one girl who is immune to your charms.”

“Not immune,” I clarify, “just resistant.”

The guys all laugh like I’d intended, but the churning in my gut is there anyway. Every time Jackson and I take a step forward, we follow it up with two steps back. Our relationship is heading in the wrong direction and I’m starting to question if it’s just my stubbornness that’s refusing to let go of something that’s already dead. But then images of the party in Finland and Jackson leading me to her hotel room flash through my mind, followed closely by memories of our flight from Paris when it seemed like we’d really made headway in overcoming our past. *This isn’t dead yet*, I assure myself.

I’d worried a little bit when I first got to Park City that maybe I was in love with some previous version of Jackson, and that she wouldn’t be the same person now. But this version of her—stronger, more self-assured, more independent—is as much of a turn-on as ever. Which is why it’s hard to watch her sitting there next to another man.

I shoot the shit with the guys for a while longer, my concern growing as I watch Jackson down two more drinks. She doesn't seem particularly into Johnny—she's not overly focused on him, hasn't put her hand on him or leaned into him—but he's still at their table and he seems particularly into her. I wonder if she's told him she has a boyfriend? Not that I think it'd make any difference to him.

When he stands and reaches out for her hand, then leads her to the dance floor, I know trouble is brewing. The problem with Johnny is that he doesn't know how to take no for an answer—in any aspect of his life, but especially with women. It's put us at odds before.

“Introduce me to the goddess,” Luke says to me, nodding toward Petra.

“An introduction from me is not going to hold much weight,” I tell him. “She's one of Jackson's best friends, so she probably hates my guts.”

I glance beyond where Sierra and Petra are sitting, heads close in conversation, and make sure I can still see Jackson. She's swaying on the dance floor, not in time with the music. Johnny's got his hands on her, one on her hip and one wrapped around her shoulder. I'm not sure if he's holding her up or dancing with her, but all the alarm bells are going off in my head.

I stand, but Luke takes it to mean I'm going to introduce him to Petra and he trails behind me. I glance over my shoulder to find Dan and Mark right behind him. *Shit.*

I veer off course to deposit my friends at Sierra and Petra's table.

“Ladies,” I say, giving them my most charming smile. The one that women generally find impossible to resist. Sierra's face hardens like stone, but Petra's is more friendly. She stands and gives me a kiss on each cheek.

“Who do we have here?” She nods toward my friends, her husky voice is the purr of a lioness toying with her next meal.

I introduce my friends and as they start chatting with Sierra and Petra, I glance up to check on Jackson. But she's not on the dance floor. I scan the crowd, checking the bar area and the other tables. She's not there either.

“Fuck,” I growl as I start to move toward the front of the bar. I hear my friends asking what's wrong behind me, but I don't turn back to answer. There isn't time. I need to find Jackson, I need to make sure she's okay.

I get to the front of the bar and still don't see her anywhere. I can feel the light coating of sweat that's broken out all over me in response to the panic that's flooding my body. *Shit, where is she?*

From behind me, an arm points toward the window. “She’s outside,” Mark says and we both break into a run, bursting through the door and past the bouncers.

Not thirty feet away Jackson’s struggling as Johnny is pulling her down the sidewalk. It’s becoming a scene and several people have stopped around them. “Sorry, my drunk girlfriend doesn’t want to leave,” he tells the onlookers.

“I’m not his girlfriend,” Jackson yells, but she’s slurring her words and I can see the doubt on the faces of those who stopped to help. They don’t know who’s telling the truth.

“Hey, asshole,” I yell as we run to catch up to them. Johnny’s head spins around toward me, and Jackson finally shakes him loose.

“Nate,” she cries as she runs toward me.

I grab her shoulders. “Don’t move,” I say, and she nods because my voice leaves no room for disagreement.

I spin and start chasing after Johnny, who’s running down the street like the fucking coward that he is. “Nate,” Mark says from right behind me before he clamps his hand on my shoulder, pulling me back. “Just stop.”

“I’m going to fucking kill you,” I yell at Johnny’s retreating back, but I slow my steps. I watch him jump over the mound of snow along the sidewalk and climb into the passenger side of his truck. “I’m going to bury that asshole,” I mutter to Mark.

“Okay, but maybe don’t announce your intentions at the top of your lungs on a crowded sidewalk,” Mark says as we turn back toward Jackson. “You know, just in case he turns up dead.”

I cough out a laugh before raising my eyes to find Jackson and make sure she’s okay. The small crowd of people around her is dispersing, but as I come toward her two women move between us like a wall. She’s shivering in her leggings and sweater because of course she doesn’t have her coat on.

I look straight at Jackson. “Let’s get you home.”

They turn toward her. “Is this your boyfriend?”

“Not anymore,” she says, swaying slightly. “But he’s okay, he’ll take care of me.”

The two women look less than reassured. “I just want to make sure she gets home safely,” I tell them. “I’ll text her friends and let them know where she is.”

“Let’s see you do it,” one of the women says, so I pull my phone out of my pocket and send a message to Sierra letting her and Petra know Jackson’s drunk and I’m taking her home. I show them the text.

“Are Sierra and Petra your friends that you’re here with?” she asks Jackson.

“Yep. Lauren was supposed to come, too, but she got the stomach flu. Sierra and Petra are still inside. Petra wants to get laid tonight, and Sierra is moping about her stupid fiancé being a prick,” Jackson giggles. The fact that she can laugh about this situation only proves how drunk she is. *Why did her friends let her out of their sight?*

“Okay, enough sharing your friends’ secrets,” I say and move toward her. The women part to let me through and I wrap my arms around her, holding her to me and trying to keep her warm. “Can you guys just Uber home?” I ask Mark as I stand there running my hands up and down Jackson’s back as she curls into my chest for warmth.

“Sure.” Mark nods.

“And tell Sierra and Petra what happened. And maybe that it wouldn’t have happened if they were looking out for their friend. Make sure they grab her jacket and purse, or anything else she had.”

“M’kay,” Mark says as he turns to head back to the bar.

“You sure you’re okay with him?” the other woman asks.

“I’m positive,” she says, and rests her forehead against my neck.

“Thank you.”

The women nod and turn to follow behind Mark. Jackson looks up at me, her big emerald eyes repentant. “I’m sorry,” she whispers.

“You didn’t do anything wrong,” I say, squeezing her a little tighter and hoping my heat will help her stop shaking.

“You know that’s not true.”

“Let’s get you warm,” I say, guiding her toward the bar and then down the alley to the back parking lot where I left my truck.

“Did you mean to leave with him?” I ask, turning toward her once we’re in my truck and I have the heat cranked.

“No, I just wasn’t thinking. I was feeling dizzy and he suggested we step outside and get some fresh air. My head is all kinds of messed up right now,” she says as she drops her forehead into her hands. “I was just trying to make you jealous.”



“Honey, you don’t need to leave a bar with a someone to make me jealous. Just talking to him was plenty.”

Jackson snorts, but what just happened was not funny in the least.

“You could have been hurt, Jax.” I have to bite the inside of my cheek to keep from yelling at her. “You don’t know that guy. Your friends didn’t even know you left the bar. You could have been raped, or killed. If I hadn’t been there, who knows what would have happened just now!” Her actions were so supremely stupid, but this still isn’t her fault. No matter how much she drank, she clearly didn’t want to leave with him.

“If you hadn’t been there,” she insists, “it *wouldn’t* have happened. I wouldn’t even have talked to him.”

“Jackson, you’re dating Marco. And I’ve told you how I feel about you. You don’t need to flirt with some asshole in a bar just to dig the knife a little deeper, you know?”

Her eyes shoot toward me and she opens her mouth to say something, but then squeezes her eyes shut tightly.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, reaching across the cab of my truck. Her head tilts to the side so I cup her cheek in my hand.

“Dizzy,” she whispers, taking deep breaths in and out through her nose.

“Are you going to throw up?”

“God, I hope not,” she says.

“Let’s get you home. Where are you staying?”

“Petra’s friend’s condo.”

“Okay, where’s that?”

“Dunno.” She shrugs her shoulders without even opening her eyes. “Somewhere in the village.”

Great. There are only about a dozen different condo complexes in the village. She doesn’t know where she’s staying, and clearly doesn’t have a key since her purse and jacket are back in the bar. Even if I called them to find out, it’s not like I’m leaving Jackson alone in this state. I’m sure her friends would come home to take care of her, but they almost don’t even deserve that opportunity after the way they let her get abducted in the first place.

Fuck it. “You’re coming home with me.”

That news earns me a small smile and a whispered, “Good.”

## CHAPTER 18



### JACKSON

*Big Sky, Montana*

I'm trying to be mad at myself for my stupidity, because I know tonight could have turned out very differently if Nate wasn't keeping such a close eye on me. But I'm warm and I'm drunk and being in Nate's truck with him just feels right. He watches the road, his face a chiseled mask of concentration. His body is the polar opposite, looking relaxed as he leans back against his seat, his right hand resting on the top of the wheel while he holds it steady with his thumb.

We glide along the road cut between trees as we gain elevation, traveling up the mountain away from the village. In the distance Lone Peak shines brightly in the moonlight, its stark white face casting a beautiful glow over the tree line below.

"God, I love it here." I sigh. Everything has this ethereal glow, and I don't know if it's just the natural beauty under the full moon or if the alcohol has changed my vision. Maybe this is like beer goggles, but for mother nature?

"I knew you would," Nate says, so quietly that I almost can't be sure he said it at all. I want to ask him what he means, but he turns off the main

road and I'm distracted as we're driving past houses that look like something out of a winter calendar—all log cabin style with steeply pitched metal roofs and gables with big windows and snow piled up around them. Every house has similar architectural details, but they're all different enough that it doesn't feel cookie-cutter. We're almost down the full length of the street, which ends at an opening to a ski run, when Nate turns into a driveway of the most perfect ski house I've ever seen. Its enormous walls of windows are slightly more modern than the other houses we've passed, but it still fits.

I'm so focused on the house that I must have missed Nate getting out of the truck, because suddenly he's opening my door, unbuckling my seatbelt, and sliding me down to the ground. Standing here pinned between his body and the seat of the truck, I realize how much my body still craves his. I look up at him, his blue eyes are focused on my face, searching.

"Stop giving me that look," he says, and turns his face away.

"Hey," I say, my hand landing on his sternum. "What look?" He looks pissed off suddenly.

"Let's get you inside," he says and pushes me forward to walk up the path in front of him. I'm acutely aware of how close his body is to mine, the heat radiating off him as he follows closely behind me, his hands on my hips to make sure I don't slip on the packed snow of his shoveled walkway.

Nate uses his thumbprint on the keypad to let us in and the voice-activated lights softly glow at about fifty percent strength, casting the two-story entryway in golden light. I take a look around while I sit on the tufted bench and remove my shoes. The floor plan is open and modern with clearly defined living spaces and oversize windows with what I'm sure are gorgeous views.

"Are all your properties like this one?" I've made it my policy not to ask personal questions like this, but the alcohol is lowering my guard.

"Most of them are a little more modest," Nate says as he deposits the contents of his pockets into a black marble bowl on a table opposite the bench I'm sitting on.

"How many houses do you own?"

"Enough."

My breath leaves my mouth in a distinctly annoyed *pfft*. "You know, one is enough for most people."

“Most people aren’t making a living off vacation rental properties.” He shrugs.

He’s got a distinct five o’clock shadow tonight, and it makes me wonder if he didn’t shave this morning. I like him best clean shaven, but this look is rugged and hot and I’m bothered by the fact that I just cannot stop being attracted to him, no matter how hard I try. *Stop trying*, a little voice in the back of my head suggests. But even the alcohol isn’t enough for me to forget that everything hinges on us not getting together—Marco’s secret, my current job, and my future job at Danforth.

He leads me into the kitchen and I run into a barstool at the island because I’m so busy taking in the gorgeousness of it all—the black lower cabinets with some kind of etched gray stone countertops, the geometric pattern of the marble backsplash, and the light wood upper cabinets. Nate pulls the seat out for me and deposits me in it, and I sink into the supple leather. He pulls a loaf of bread out of a cabinet and slices a piece off before buttering it and putting it in the toaster oven. He grabs some jam from the fridge and while his back is to me I admire the way his jeans cling to his ass. *Stop it*, I tell myself, but my stupid eyes don’t listen, they just continue ogling him.

I set my elbow on the countertop and rest my chin on my fist because my head feels heavy and what I really want to do is close my eyes and go to sleep.

“Nope,” Nate says, materializing next to me as he puts an enormous glass of water and some ibuprofen in front of me. “Don’t even think about going to sleep until you’ve drank this entire glass, had your ibuprofen, and eaten the toast I’m making you. You’re not waking up sick or hungover.”

“Why are you still taking care of me?” I ask, certain I haven’t done anything to deserve this treatment from him.

“Old habits die hard,” he says, then pulls his quarter-zip sweater over his head. His T-shirt clings to it and lifts almost up to his chest before he’s pulling it back down with one hand and pulling the sweater off with the other.

My mouth is full of sand. I can’t tear my eyes away from the peaks and valleys of those abdominal muscles, even after his shirt is covering them again. I gently slide my fingers along the countertop searching for that glass of water. When Nate leans toward me, I glance up and his pale blue eyes are

crinkled at the corners, tinged with laughter that's only expressed on his face.

As he hands me the glass of water I was searching for, I realize that I don't even care that he's caught me staring at his body. I take a sip, then another, until I've drunk half the glass. He hands me the ibuprofen and his fingertips grazing my palm send jolts of electricity up my arm, spreading a warm glow through the heart I've tried to keep frozen. I swallow the pills as he places the toast in front of me.

I wonder if anyone else has ever loved me more than he has, or maybe even—according to him—still does. Certainly no one has ever hurt me more than he has. Is that just part of being loved and loving someone? Knowing that they can hurt you, but trusting that they won't?

*But he did*, that little voice inside my head makes its presence known.

"I was going to retire," I blurt out. It's a total non sequitur, even though it's intrinsically related to the conversation I'm having in my own head. He's appropriately confused.

"Retire?"

*Shut up*, I tell myself. *This and Marco are your last defenses. Don't give him an in.* I open my mouth anyway. "Yeah. Five years ago. I just wanted that one crystal globe, I wanted to be able to say that at one point I was the best in the world. I just . . ." My words fade away under the intensity of his gaze.

"Why would you retire when you still had so much winning left to do? You were only a few years into your career. That doesn't even make sense."

His eyes have this look, like he's searching my face for clues. Or at least, I think they do—it's hard to know for sure because I'm starting to see double. *This is bad. Why did I drink so much?*

I pick up my toast and take a big bite, chewing and swallowing before I answer. "So we could focus on you, for a change," I tell him, and take another bite. He doesn't say anything, just watches me chew and swallow my toast. "I wanted you to be able to ski again, and I wanted to be there to support you."

There, I've said it. At least he knows the truth now. At least he knows why his leaving hurt extra bad—I was going to walk away from my career for him, and instead he walked away from me.

Nate is moving back around the island, coming toward me quickly and I don't understand why until he's wrapped me in his arms and my face is

pressed against his T-shirt. That's when I realize my face is wet with tears I didn't even realize I was shedding. And then, everything fades to black.



My mouth is filled with paste and my eyeballs burn as they scratch against my eyelids, but I'm warm and cozy curled up on my side under the weight of an incredibly heavy blanket. Without even opening my eyes I know it's early. Too early. I feel like I could go back to sleep for a thousand years. Except there's an annoying vibration along the base of my spine. It keeps buzzing a few times then stopping, then it inevitably starts again.

"What the hell is that?" His warm breath tickles the back of my neck and my eyes jolt open. I don't recognize this bedroom, but the voice is intimately familiar.

The vibrating stops and I exhale, taking deep measured breaths and hoping he'll believe I'm still asleep. I have no idea why I'm in bed with Nate. I lie there for a moment and by the sound of his even breathing I think he may have fallen back asleep, but then the buzzing starts again.

I hear Nate sigh and when he moves I realize that the heavy weight on me wasn't a blanket, it was his arm, which is now pulling the covers down.

"Are you groping my ass?" I mumble when I feel his hand move across the top of my butt cheeks.

"No, I'm trying to figure out why your ass is vibrating." I can hear the amusement in his voice, but I don't understand why he's so chipper and I feel half dead.

*Oh, the drinks. The many, many drinks.*

Nate lifts my sweater and I feel his fingers slide against the waistband of my leggings at the same time that the memories from last night come flooding back. The bar, that creepy guy who wouldn't leave me alone, my narrow escape right into Nate's arms. Nate bringing me here, feeding me toast, and me telling him that I was about to retire before my career ended. *Shit.*

That was an important conversation—the one that changes everything, because if he knows I was retiring to invest in his career, then he knows I was going to *finally* marry him. That conversation deserved to be more than a one-sided alcohol-fueled admission.

“Is your phone in your leggings?” he asks, and his husky voice has me wishing he’d slip his hand inside said leggings. I clench my core and mentally chastise myself for not trying harder to fight the attraction.

“Oh! Yeah, there’s a zipper pocket back there. I forgot I put my phone there before we got to the bar.”

How naive I was, thinking I was being “safe” by keeping my phone on me and not realizing that drunk me would forget I even had a phone. Not once during that entire encounter outside the bar did it occur to me to try to get to my phone or to voice activate a call to 9-1-1.

Nate’s finger drags along the skin of my lower back as he unzips the pocket, and his knuckles skim my spine as he pulls the phone out—the intimate but unintentional gesture has my thighs clenching together even harder. And I still haven’t even turned over and looked at him.

“Hmm,” he murmurs, and I can hear the teasing in his voice. “You sure have a lot of messages here.”

I flip over so quick he doesn’t even have time to move away before I’m grabbing for the phone. Of course, his arms are longer than mine so he easily stretches to hold the phone away and without thinking I lunge across his chest to reach for my device. I’m not able to reach it, but I am quite clearly able to feel the reaction his body has to mine pressed up against him.

I clear my throat and look over at him.

“You can’t rub your body up against mine first thing in the morning like this and expect my body not to respond.” There’s a playfulness in his voice that’s so familiar it makes me long for the past, when I could have acted on the attraction I’m feeling for him.

His eyes roam down to my lips. “Nate,” I say before this can go any further, “why am I in your bed? I assume you must have other bedrooms in this gigantic house.”

“As drunk as you were, I wasn’t leaving you alone in an unfamiliar house—especially in case you got sick.”

He makes it so hard to resist him. I know that I’ve been holding onto this hurt too long. I know I can and should forgive him. I know he wants me. And now it’s abundantly clear that I want him too.

Nate used to call alcohol my truth serum, because all my walls come down when I drink. And the fact that the last two times I drank—weeks ago in Finland and just last night—I’ve ended up in a compromising position with Nate speaks volumes. I’m sure he realizes it too.

“I didn’t get sick though, right?” I ask, just to make sure.

“Nope. How are you feeling now?” he asks, his voice soft and his eyes laser-focused on my face.

“Not awesome.”

He opens his mouth to reply, but the sudden buzzing of my phone in his hand draws both our attention away. “It’s Sierra,” he says, like I can’t see her picture flashing on the phone. “You’d probably better take this.”

When Nate hands me my phone, I roll over onto my back to answer the call and he heads out the bedroom door. I assume he’s trying to give me some privacy.

“Oh my God, Jackson!” Sierra shrieks when I answer the phone. “Why haven’t you been answering your phone? Petra and I have been calling you for over an hour.”

“What time is it?”

“It’s seven thirty. And our flight this afternoon has already been canceled.”

“What?” I gasp and sit straight up, which is a mistake. My head wasn’t ready for that and it’s pounding in protest. “Canceled why?”

“There’s a huge blizzard moving down from Canada.”

“That wasn’t in the forecast,” I insist, as if Sierra somehow has control over the weather. I can’t get stuck in Montana. We leave for Europe in three days and I need the next two days to pack, finish some stuff up at work, and visit Ms. Juarez. Winters are hard on her with my visits few and far between, and since I’ll be gone for the next month I at least want to get one more visit in before I go. “Okay, so what’s our plan then?”

“Petra and I wanted to head to the airport. There’s a flight that leaves at nine and we were hoping a few people might not show up on time and we could get their seats on standby, but you weren’t answering your phone and we certainly weren’t leaving without you.”

“I’m so sorry. My phone is set on Do Not Disturb until 7:30 on weekends, so it didn’t ring until just a minute ago.” My mind instantly flashes back to Nate and how impossibly hard he was against my stomach as I lunged for my phone before it started ringing in his hand.

*Focus, Jackson.*

Sierra sighs. “I’m not sure what to do now. Petra’s friend is coming back today and I’m sure he’ll want his place back.”



“Okay, let me go talk to Nate and see if we can figure something out. I mean, if worse comes to worst and we can’t get back to Park City, we can probably stay here. There’s plenty of room.”

“I can’t believe you freaking left the bar and went home with him last night,” Sierra says, her voice so full of disapproval I feel like I’m going to get grounded. “Were you even thinking about Marco?”

“First of all, I didn’t leave with him, it’s a little more complicated than that. I’ll explain when I see you. And second, there’s nothing to worry about. Nothing happened between me and Nate, he just made sure I was safe and took care of me so I didn’t get sick. Marco won’t be upset because there’s nothing to be upset about.”

Sierra sighs after a long, disapproving pause. “Okay. Call me back after you’ve talked to him.”



### *Park City, Utah*

“Thanks so much for driving us home,” I say to Nate as he sets my ski bag and boot bag in my entryway next to my two carry-on suitcases. Then I glance at my phone, which is buzzing in my hand. “It’s Petra.”

“Okay,” Nate says, all traces of the easy camaraderie gone as he turns and takes two steps toward the door before turning back toward me. His blue eyes are electric, like he’s looking for a fight. “Don’t think we’re not going to talk about last night.”

“There’s nothing to talk about,” I say with a lightness I don’t feel. I’m embarrassed I said anything about retiring, but Nate isn’t one to let something like that go. So my strategy has been to act like I don’t remember anything that happened or was said after he brought me home.

“Oh, we’ll talk about it.” He wears the expression of a man who always gets what he wants as he shoves his hands in his jacket pockets and heads to the door.

There’s a moment there, when his back is to me, where I don’t want him to leave. Being with Nate is comfortable, like pulling on your favorite pair of joggers after a long day at work. It feels like it would be so easy to fall

back into our old relationship and I'm realizing that despite my concern about not knowing what he's got going on with Blackstone, I really don't hate him.

My apartment is cold, and as I watch him walk through the door I'm already feeling lonely. But I let him go because I need time to think about this and I know it won't be possible if he's here. His presence overrides everything else. Always has.

He turns again like he's going to say something, then glances at my phone buzzing in my hand, gives me a quick nod, and walks down the hall.

"Hey," I say as I answer Petra's video call. I slide the lock into place, turn and lean against the door, and wonder again if I should have asked Nate to stay.

"Are you alone?" she asks. Her hair's up in a high bun and she's already got her makeup off and a hoody on. The only place Petra gets causal is at home, otherwise she pretty much struts around like she's on a runway.

"Yep." I nod. "Nate just dropped me and all my stuff off." I glance at my pile of luggage on the floor of my already tiny entryway as I navigate around the items and head to my living room.

"Good, spill the tea. I want all the details. Hold nothing back."

"Details about what, exactly?"

Sierra spent most of the six hour drive from Big Sky shooting daggers at Nate's head from her perch in the back seat of his pickup. Petra, on the other hand spent most of the drive quietly watching what was happening in the front seat, her eyes moving back and forth between Nate and me like she was analyzing a crime scene.

"First of all, the *looks* that man was giving you in the car when you weren't looking . . ." she says and fans her face as I walk to my living room and sink onto my velvet couch. "And you spent the night at his house, and who knows what's happened while you two have been in Colorado and Europe together? Something is clearly going on and you probably need someone to confide in, so start confiding."

I could rationalize everything, because nothing inappropriate has happened between us. *Yet*. But she sure as shit is right about me needing someone to talk to. I think of Marco. Would he be okay with me telling Petra that our relationship is fake? Petra can keep a secret, and as long as I don't give her too many details I don't think Marco would object to me telling her.

“I need you to know that nothing has happened,” I tell her and she nods before taking a sip of wine. “But also, it feels like we’re always on the edge of crossing that line.” I’ve already told my friends about the flight home from Paris when I learned the truth about Nate leaving me. Now I tell her about Levi and how Nate turned me down yards from my hotel room door.

“Did you take nothing away from our conversation last time we talked about this? You were supposed to let him *look* so he could feel all that regret about leaving. You weren’t supposed to offer yourself up to him!” She doesn’t sound mad or judgmental, just like she’s trying to understand where my head was in that moment. “And *he* was the one who stopped it from happening?”

“I am such a mess, Petra,” I say as I thread my fingers together and twist them around each other. “In that moment, I was just thinking that I needed to get him out of my system. Plus, it’s been a *really* long dry spell.”

“But Marco was in Levi. Did you . . .” Her mouth drops open as her eyes go wide. “Did you *not* sleep with him when you saw him there? Is *that* why you were so ready to get down with Nate?”

“So here’s the thing,” I say, and take a deep breath. I’ve never said this to another living soul. “Marco and I aren’t really dating. It’s like . . . we’re just . . . it’s just convenient to pretend that we are.” I tell her enough that she can understand my motivations for agreeing to this fake relationship, without giving her any details about Marco’s reasons.

“Is this like one of those fake relationship or marriage of convenience romance books that Sierra’s always reading?” She is forever teasing Sierra about her love of romance novels, which Petra insists are pure fantasy.

“Except I think in those books the fake relationship always turns real, and that’s the opposite of what’s happening here. Anyway, I just need you to know that I’m not cheating on Marco. He knows almost everything that’s happened with Nate since he’s been back. Sometimes . . .” I pause.

“Sometimes it even seems like he wants me to get back together with Nate.”

“What?” Petra squeals. “I thought they hated each other!”

“I mean, Nate hates Marco,” I say as I pull a blanket over me. “But not because he thinks Marco’s a bad person, he just has always been jealous of our friendship and now that he thinks we’re dating . . .” I trail off because I realize I don’t really know how Nate feels about Marco. “But Marco

doesn't hate Nate. He just likes to give Nate shit because it's so easy where I'm concerned."

"Because after all this time Nate's still in love with you," Petra clarifies and I can feel the heat creeping into my cheeks. "Oh my God, he is, isn't he? Has he said that?"

My cheeks are practically fuchsia at this point, so much so that I almost turn the video off on our call. Instead I reach over to my coffee table and grab the remote for the fireplace, turning it on and hoping it helps take the chill out of my space.

"Do you feel the same way?" she asks, her voice rising like a tea kettle.

"I don't think I could ever trust him enough to feel that way about him again." I tell her about Blackstone and the NDA.

"Can you really hold that against him, though? I mean, legally he can't tell you."

"I don't know. I just don't like that he's keeping this big secret from me. Secrets were what almost ruined our relationship when we were teenagers, and we promised each other complete and total honesty after that."

"So you're telling me you never kept secrets from him?"

I think about the secret I just revealed to him last night. At first it just felt like I'd be jinxing my chances of winning if I told him, and I wanted that crystal globe *so bad*. After that, it would have just been pathetic to tell anyone I had been planning to retire for my boyfriend who left me. Maybe things would have been different if I'd have told him up front?

"Hmm," Petra says, eyes crinkling as she analyzes my face, which seems to be giving her all the details that my silence is not. "Like I thought. You had your secrets too."

"The thing is," I say, working this momentous conclusion out for myself for the first time, "if I'd told him my secret, things might have turned out very differently."

Her eyebrows are so high they look like they're launching off her forehead. "Jackson, have you ever thought that maybe your dad was right?" Normally I love Petra's straight-shooting approach, but this question is like a shot to the stomach. "I mean, maybe you guys wouldn't have made it if he'd stayed back then. Maybe he really did need to leave in order to find himself. I mean, you did kind of . . . well, he sort of . . ." She bites her lower lip like she doesn't want to say what she's about to say.

"Just spit it out, Petra."

“I mean, it was obvious who wore the pants in your relationship, and I imagine it must have been hard for him to always be in your shadow.”

I know she’s not wrong, but it’s hard to hear it anyway. “Yeah,” I say sadly, “maybe. But now the reality is that he’s back, and he’s still the Nate I always loved, just a bit more mature and a lot more sexy. And he’s finding his footing on the National Ski Team right as I’m about to walk away from this life. Even if the Danforth thing doesn’t work out, I’m still hoping to move home after this season. And he’ll be traveling and competing.”

Petra sighs. “Maybe you should talk to him about this? If he’s told you he’s still in love with you, if he’s laid it all out like that, then doesn’t he at least deserve to know what you’re thinking? And to know that you’re leaving?”

“What if he tells someone and I get fired? I can’t take that risk. I haven’t even told Sierra for that reason! Being a physical therapist for this team is the best leverage I have for finding a new job.” If I get fired, it will ruin everything.

“I’m just saying, you can’t be mad that he won’t tell you about Blackstone after signing an NDA if you’re keeping things from him that you don’t legally need to keep a secret.”

Touché.

“Since he’s been back, I’ve never let myself envision a situation where Nate and I have a future together. I mean, getting naked with him, sure. But I haven’t considered anything long-term.”

“Even though you know that’s where his mind is at?” she asks and I nod. “I mean, the guy thinks you’re with someone else and he still tells you how he feels and still says he’s waiting for you. Do you have any idea how ballsy that is? Jackson, you need to be honest with him.”

“I can’t talk to Nate about any of this until I’ve talked to Marco. I’ll see him in a couple days when we get to Italy.”

“There’s this amazing newfangled way to talk to people even when they’re far away,” Petra says and rolls her eyes as she gets up off her couch and walks to her kitchen with her empty wineglass. “Why don’t you just call him?”

“This really feels like it should be an in-person conversation.” Like how he waited to tell me he was retiring until we were together in Levi. “Plus, I need time to think about what I want to say. I’m still not sure where I want this to go with Nate.”

“I’m just saying, you could call Marco right now and be fucking Nate tonight. You know that, right?”

“Wow, Petra, you’re such a romantic.”

“Honey, you clearly need sex and you clearly want it to happen with Nate. Why put up all these artificial boundaries and these walls?”

“There’s nothing artificial about how completely he destroyed my heart. Pardon me if I’m being cautious because I don’t want to ever feel like that again.” The pain of the past washes over me at inconvenient times, and sometimes I wonder if I’ll ever truly be over it. Even now that I know he didn’t leave me in the way I thought he did, it still hurts.

“I know he hurt you,” she says as she props her phone up on the countertop and pours herself another glass of wine. “But you also know that at the time, between what your dad said to him and thinking you had feelings for Marco, he had reasons that at least check out—if not make the whole thing understandable.” She raises her eyebrows, tilts her wineglass toward me in a mock salute, and takes a sip of her drink.

“Has anyone ever hurt you like that, Petra? Ever made you feel absolutely worthless and unlovable, and utterly alone?” She can’t understand how I’m feeling if she hasn’t experienced something like it—empathy only goes so far.

A look passes over her face that I can’t quite place. “As if.” She rolls her eyes and takes another sip of wine. “So maybe you can recognize that this is more about your fear than about what actually happened, no?”

“In theory, yes, I’m starting to see that. But the reality is that I’ve lived with this hurt and pain for five years, and that’s hard to let go of.”

“You can keep holding onto that,” she says, “but in the end it may hurt you more than him.”

Her words remind me of Ms. Juarez’s sage advice. She told me I was much too young to be this bitter. And I’m being given a second chance here, so maybe I would be a fool to give that up.

“Thanks for the therapy, Petra. Helpful as always.” I blow her a kiss.

“Anytime you need some tough love, you know I’m here for you.”

“Please don’t tell anyone what I told you about Marco, not even Sierra or Lauren. That has to stay secret for now.”

“Therapy is always confidential.”

## CHAPTER 19



NATE

*Alta Badia, Italy*

We slide down toward the next gate, our skis perpendicular to the fall line so that we leave smooth tracks on the course during inspection. Since no two race courses are set the same, we have this time before the race to inspect the course and plan out how we'll attack it. But we can't actually ski the course, instead we "slip" it, sliding down it to get a feel for the placement of the gates. Success in a ski race is based on a lot of different factors, and how well you remember the course from the inspection is an important part of being prepared.

"Right here," Lyle says, poking the snow with his pole where he's stopped, "this is where you need to pivot. Any sooner and you'll miss this gate, but if you wait any longer you won't be set up for the next one."

I look at where his pole is planted, then look at the red slalom pole downhill from us. I envision my arc, the angle I'll need to go around this gate and still be set up for the blue pole beyond it—the one that's so close it would be incredibly easy to miss. I close my eyes and picture it again, letting my body sway slightly in the direction of the turn as I imagine

myself making it around the pole. Then I nod to Lyle and we slide down to the next gate.

By the time we get to the bottom of the run, my lower back is doing that thing it's been doing for weeks, where it knots up just enough to be inconvenient but not enough to be dangerous.

"You need to see Jackson about that," Lyle says when I mention it. "She said she was going to grab lunch before the race. Go find her and make sure she's okay with you racing."

"I'm not skipping my slalom race because my back's got a knot in it," I tell him as I step out of my bindings.

"That's Jackson's decision, not yours," Lyle says, an edge to his voice. Somehow he seems to know exactly what to say to piss me off, a theme I've noticed since joining the team. I can't tell if it's his way of pushing me to do better, or if he actually doesn't like me. Maybe this is just part of us figuring each other out.

"Okay. I know Jackson's not going to tell me to skip a race because I have a knot in my muscle, but I'll check in with her about it anyway." I hand my skis to the ski technician and head for the lodge, laughing to myself at the idea that Jackson, who's skied with actual injuries, would say I shouldn't ski because of something this minor.

I find her at a tiny table on the patio, the remnants of her lunch sitting on the tray in front of her. She doesn't see me approach because she's got her eyes closed and her head tilted toward the sun like she's absorbing the warmth of the brilliant blue sky. Thanks to her noise-canceling headphones, she doesn't hear me either. She's got one boot on the chair opposite her, and her elbow rests on her bent knee.

It's a pose that's so familiar my chest aches a bit and I have to remind myself that she's not the same girl she was when she first got the Waves sponsorship. It was such a clutch deal for her, and that first ad was *everywhere*—Jackson, in a white race suit that hugged every single inch of her body, reclining in a gondola with one foot up on the seat across from her and her elbow resting on her bent knee. She was looking out at the snowcapped mountains with Waves headphones over her ears, and across the top of the ad it read *What are you wishing for this Christmas?* She oozed sex appeal, and so the answer was obvious for any male looking at that ad. I'd had it framed and was going to give it to her the following



Christmas. By then, though, I'd left, she'd crashed, and everything had gone to shit. The frame is still in a box back in Big Sky.

I don't even realize I've stopped walking until someone jostles into the back of me and apologizes, so I take the last step across the patio to reach her. When my shadow falls over her face she opens her eyes, but neither of us say anything. Her long hair falls down from under her knit National Ski Team hat, her cheeks are pink from the cold, and her eyes are bright and alive. She looks happy and I can't stop staring at her like a creep. I want to say something, but I honestly can't remember why I'm there.

"Are you ready to warm up?" she asks and it's enough to wake me up from this stupor.

"Lyle wants you to check my back out before I race."

She sits up, clearly concerned when she asks, "Why, what's going on?"

"It's just that same muscle that's been bothering me. It's knotted up again."

"Let's go take a look," she says. She stands and nods for me to lead the way to the heated tents set up behind the grandstands where the fans watch the race.

Once there, I slip my arms out of my race suit, pulling it down to my waist and sliding my base layer up so she can see my back muscles. She prods at the offending muscle with the tips of her fingers, and it's like she's shooting electrical currents into my back with each touch. I can't help the small grunts of pain that escape every time she pushes on the muscle—I didn't expect it to hurt like that. I also can't help the sigh I let slip when she runs her hands along both sides of it, her warm fingertips grazing my flesh gently.

"It's pretty inflamed," she tells me. "How long has it been bothering you?"

"Just since this morning. I probably pushed too hard in GS yesterday."

"Any regrets?"

"Worth every second," I tell her and she gives the back of my arm a supportive squeeze.

"You got yourself some nice race points with that eighth place finish yesterday," she says, her voice placating in a way that has me worried about what she's going to say next, "but your back is really inflamed. I think you should sit today out. It's better to miss this one race rather than potentially injure yourself and have to miss the next couple races."

“It’s just a knot in my back, Jackson, I’m not hurt.” I turn around to face her, crossing my arms in front of me as I do.

Her eyes are glued to my chest where my base layer strains across the muscles there. “Right,” she says, “but if it spasms while you’re racing—which it very well might given how much strain you’ll be putting on it—it could seize up and you could actually get hurt. It’s not worth the risk, Nate.” She drops her voice so low I almost miss her say, “Trust me.”

I reach out and tilt her chin up so she’s looking at me. “I do trust you,” I tell her. “But I need you to trust me too. I’m going to race, and I’m going to be fine.”

“You’re not going to race if I say you’re not in good enough condition.” Those thick pink lips of hers are pressed into a hard line and her eyes are sharp, like she’s looking for a fight.

I take a small step toward her. “Is this a pissing contest? Because your job is to make sure I’m in *good enough condition* to race,” I throw her words back at her, “not to stop me from racing when I’m fine.” Even despite our history and her initial unwillingness to train me, I never felt like she didn’t want me to race or win. Until now.

She crosses her arms over her chest, mimicking my stance. “In my *professional opinion*, you should sit this one out. It’s not worth the risk of getting injured.” She pauses, and when I don’t respond she says, “But if you insist, by all means, go ahead and race. But don’t come expecting me to fix you up when you hurt yourself.”

“Fine,” I say, spinning on my heel and heading out of the tent.



I stand at the start gate for my second run, and I hope that Jackson wasn’t right. I skied great during my first run, well enough to put me into sixth place headed into the second run. But as I’ve waited my turn, my back has been getting tighter and tighter. It doesn’t matter though, it’s not bad enough that I can’t ski.

I step up into position, situate my skis at the lip of course, plant my poles in front of the start wand, and crouch into my starting position. The beeper counts me down and I throw my body forward, down the initial steep incline of the course.

The first few gates are set closer together so it's quick turns that require less pressure on my back, but during the steep middle part of the course the posts widen and I'm going faster, requiring more edging so the pressure on my lower back picks up. I'm flying though, my run going as well as it could despite the low-grade pain radiating out of that one muscle. As I approach the bottom of the course and the cheering crowds, the gates are set closer together again and I pick up speed as I slalom between them. The last pole before the finish line comes more quickly than I remember, and I have to cut to the left quick and hard so I don't veer off course and lose those precious tenths of a second that can mean the difference between fifth place or fifteenth.

But when I cut in around the gate to head toward the big red finish line, the exact thing Jackson warned about happens—my back seizes up, forcing me to double over in pain. I'm able to stay on a straight course and cross the finish line, but I can't right myself enough to come to a complete stop easily, and instead I end up on my side, skidding across the snow toward the barriers before the crowd. Somehow I manage to dig the edge of my bottom ski in enough that I don't crash into the barriers, but I'm lying there in agony when Lyle, Matt, and a medic rush to my side.

"How'd I do?" I ask when they kneel next to me.

"You're in second with five more racers to go," Matt says, at the same time that Lyle, ignoring my question, asks, "Your back?"

I confirm, telling my coaches what just happened after the last gate. The medic asks if I think I can walk, or if I need a stretcher. No way am I giving Jackson the satisfaction of being *that* right about this injury.

"I'll walk," I grunt out between clenched teeth. They take my skis off and I roll over to my hands and knees. There's no way I can move my left leg under me, so I bring my right knee up instead and am able to put that foot down and push up so I'm almost standing, still crouched over, and I drag my left foot up under me as well. I can't quite come to a full stand, but Matt and Lyle each dip under one of my arms and help me start walking, slowly. The crowd erupts in wild cheers, and I'm frustrated and angry that I'm not able to go over and shake hands with the racer in first place, and I'm pissed that Jackson was right, and I'm annoyed that I'm injured so early in the season.

So when Jackson meets us in the tent, her lips pressed together and her eyebrows raised, her gaze judgmental, I spit out, "Just don't."

“Don’t what?” she asks, the aggravation as clear as can be.

“Don’t say I told you so.”

“I would never,” she says, and for some reason she sounds hurt.



An hour later, I’m lying on the table under a blanket, more pissed off at the world than I have any right to be. I should be pissed at myself for racing against the recommendation of my physical therapist, but it’s easier to blame Jackson. She’s sitting next to me, texting. She hasn’t said a single word to me since Matt and Lyle brought me into the tent. The doctor has come by and given me a muscle relaxant and I’m waiting for it to take effect before I can get up. Even then, he warned that I’d be drowsy and sluggish, but I’ll take that over the throbbing in my back that’s sending shooting pains up to my ribs and down my leg.

I close my eyes for a minute, and when I reopen them I’m flanked by the doctor and Lyle. My eyes swing around to find Jackson, and I have a hard time focusing on her down at the end of the table I’m lying on, standing there beyond my feet. Marco’s standing next to her, his arm around her waist. I almost tell him to get his hands off her, but realize that she’s his girlfriend, not mine, and stop myself just in time. Instead, a random jumble of slurred words leaves my lips. I hate this feeling of not being in control of myself.

I must have fallen asleep when the drugs kicked in. I have no idea how long it’s been, but Marco’s not in his race suit so I imagine the race has been over for a while.

“We’re supposed to be leaving in fifteen minutes,” Matt says to the doctor. *Whoa, where’d Matt come from?* It’s like people are appearing and disappearing out of thin air. “Can he travel?”

We weren’t set to leave for Val Gardena until hours after the race ended. I guess I’ve been asleep, or totally out of it, for that long?

“I don’t think that’s a good idea. He should stay here at least for the night and wait to travel until he’s in less pain. I imagine this intense pain will only last a day or so. But he should give it at least two weeks before he starts training again, or he could re-aggravate the injury and be out much

longer. I'll get you a prescription for him," the doctor tells Jackson. I hate that they're talking about me like I'm not lying right here.

Lyle looks up at the ceiling of the tent like he's praying for patience, and my own frustration—with myself and the situation—grows. "I'll start looking for accommodations," he says as the doctor turns to leave.

"He can just stay with us," Marco says, and all eyes swing to him, especially Jackson's, which are huge.

She gasps. "Marco, no."

"It's fine," he replies, rubbing her back. Then he turns to me. "My best friend, Christian, has a house nearby and we were going to stay with him for two nights before heading to Val Gardena. You're welcome to rest there while you figure out your next step."

The palpable look of relief on Lyle's face makes me feel like I have to say yes, but the look of horror on Jackson's face is equally strong so obviously I should say no.

"That's very thoughtful of you, Marco," Lyle says before I have a chance to respond.

Jackson sighs.

"Are you sure you don't mind?" I say. "I can probably just find a room at the resort here."

"There's plenty of room. Plus if you stay here, Jackson needs to stay too. You coming with us works out for everyone," Marco says as he kisses the top of Jackson's head. I want to punch him less than I thought I would, probably thanks to the drugs.

"I'll bring your luggage here," Lyle says and he's out of the room quickly.

"I'm going to go call Christian and let him know," Marco says to Jackson and gives her shoulder a squeeze. "I'll wait outside for you."

Once Marco's gone and it's just Jackson and I, she levels me with a glare.

"Are you more mad that I got myself injured when you told me I shouldn't ski? Or that I'm infringing on your weekend with your boyfriend?"

"Let's call them equal. This didn't have to happen, Nate," she says as she walks up to the head of the table. "You did this to yourself because you were too stubborn to listen to my medical advice."

"I thought I could do it."

“Well, you did end up in fifth overall. Your best finish yet. So I guess in some respects you were right. But at what cost?”

“I know.” I sigh. I’m going to miss at least the next two races, including my first Downhill event.

“Let’s see if we can get you sitting up. How’s the back feel?”

“Better than it did before the shot.” Jackson slides her forearms under my back, and her hair hangs right next to my face. I turn my head just enough to smell her hair, the scent of her is familiar and nostalgic at the same time. “All right, see if you can sit up with me helping you.”

She gets me to a sitting position, which hurts less than lying down because it’s stretching the muscle a bit. Then she takes my race suit off and when Lyle brings my bags in, she gets me my ski team sweats and sweatshirt to put on over my base layer. It takes forever to get me ready to go, but eventually I’m standing and ready to walk out of there, very slowly, on my own.

I reach out and put my hand on her arm as she walks next to me, and she stops and turns to face me. “Thank you,” I say quietly. It’s been so long since I’ve needed to rely on anyone else like this, and it’s difficult to be open to her help when I’ve always been the strong one helping her.

Well, not always. Not when it really mattered, I guess. That’s where Marco stepped in and maybe—it occurs to me for the first time—just maybe that means he deserves her more than I do.



### *Coravara, Italy*

It’s already dinner time when we pull up to a two-story house. Even in the dark I can tell from the way the house is situated at the top of the hill that it has an amazing view of the valley, facing the flat, jagged tips of the Dolomites in the distance with the rolling hills and the river playing out below.

The exterior of Christian’s house is white stucco with large windows or glass doors every few feet all the way around, and a balcony with wooden decorative railings that runs around the entire perimeter. There’s a steeply

pitched wood-shingled roof with small patches of snow on it here and there. The stone foundation has a garage built in, and Marco uses an automatic door opener clipped to the sun visor in his SUV before pulling into the space, so I assume he must be a regular here.

He unpacks the bags from the trunk of his SUV, setting them on the garage floor and saying to Jackson, “Why don’t you take Nate up and introduce him to Christian. I’ll get the bags into the house.”

She nods, but her face has the look of someone who has swallowed something rotten. “Can you do the stairs up to the first floor?” she asks me.

“We’ll see,” I say, because I know it’s going to hurt like a bitch, but I don’t plan on being a baby about it either. Neither Jackson nor Marco need to see that weakness from me.

Luckily I’m able to step up with my right foot on each stair, and then bring my left leg up to the step. It’s slow going, but I make it without complaining about the pain. Given how badly it still hurts, I doubt I’d be able to move if I hadn’t had that muscle relaxant.

We enter a long hallway with a heated slate floor and a steeply pitched wooden ceiling that meets an exposed wooden beam running along the peak of the roofline. Jackson bends over and unties her boots, leaving them in a metal tray by the door, then she turns to me and unties mine.

“I can do it,” I say.

“Sure,” she mutters and continues untying my laces. I glance down the hall to the left, where beautiful old wooden doorways lead to what I assume are bedrooms. To the right there’s an arched entryway to the kitchen on one side and another arched entryway to the living room on the other side. The hallway opening at the end leads to the dining room, where a substantial wooden table sits in front of enormous windows and below a large chandelier made of antlers. Even at first glance I know it’s exactly the kind of house I’d buy as an investment property.

Jackson leads me to the kitchen as Marco comes up the stairs behind us and heads the opposite direction with our bags. Christian is standing at the stove stirring a pot and opens his arms to Jackson when we enter, sweeping her up into a hug with kisses on both cheeks. He murmurs something in her ear in Italian and the only word I understand is *interessante*.

Jackson introduces us and we shake hands. His English is not as good as Marco’s and I wonder if they usually speak Italian when Marco and Jackson visit.

“You do not eat meat, yes?” he asks me.

“Yes, sorry. I know that makes it difficult.”

“No, I made a roast chicken, but also baked polenta and ratatouille which you can eat. And we have fresh bread. I can also make you a salad.”

“Please,” I say. “Don’t go to any trouble. Polenta and ratatouille are great.”

He says something else in Italian to Jackson, but I can’t understand any of it.

“Thank you for letting me stay with you,” I tell him. “I know you weren’t expecting an extra guest.”

“It is really no trouble,” he says as Jackson ushers me to a table at the end of the kitchen. There’s a bench seat with cushions built into an alcove under windows, and two chairs on the other side. She pulls out a chair for me, and once I’m sitting she rests her hand on my shoulder in a protective way, surprising the shit out of me.

“You sure you’re doing okay? The pain is manageable?”

“Yeah,” I say, swallowing down the emotion that’s rising in me. I need to get a grip quickly—these medications are making me feel drunk, like my inhibitions are nonexistent and I just want to act on my feelings for her. *Her boyfriend and his best friend are right fucking here, and you’re their guest*, I remind myself.

Marco comes into the kitchen then, takes in Jackson’s hand on my shoulder and glances at Christian. It’s awkward as shit, then Marco approaches Christian and claps him on the shoulder, leaning in and unleashing a torrent of Italian so fast that I can’t catch a single word, not that I know many Italian words in the first place. Christian just nods, then says, “Dinner is ready.”

Marco and Jackson spring into action, her opening cabinets and drawers to get out the plates and cutlery and glasses, and him taking the plates from her and heading over to the stove. She grabs some cloth napkins out of another drawer and brings them over to the table with the cutlery and glasses, and it takes me a moment to realize why this scene is odd. It’s so domestic, like the three of them have done this before. She knows where everything is.

“You’ve stayed here before?” I ask her quietly while she stands next to me folding napkins and setting them on the four placemats at the table.



“Yeah, we were here for a few days this fall when I visited.” She sets forks and knives on the napkins as she explains, “We went hiking up here once it got too cold to spend our days at Marco’s house on the lake.”

Oh, so she was here during her month-long vacation with Marco. She’s never mentioned it to me, but I saw the highlights on social media.

Christian and Marco bring platters to the table—a whole roasted chicken that looks amazing even if I can’t eat it, a large baking dish full of sliced polenta, and a round cast iron pan with meticulously sliced vegetables arranged like dominos in two circles and cooked in a tomato ragu.

“You like to cook?” I ask Christian as he and Marco take a seat on the bench across from me, and Jackson sinks into the chair next to me. She and Marco lock eyes and she raises her eyebrows, but I keep my focus on Christian, pretending like I don’t notice.

“I love cooking. I wanted to go to culinary school, but my parents were . . . not in favor of that.”

“What did you end up doing instead?” I ask.

“I work for the family business.”

“Work?” Marco coughs out a laugh. “Is that what you call it?” Marco turns toward me and says, “I don’t think Christian has ever worked a day in his life.”

“That is where my paycheck comes from,” Christian says, and I can tell this is an old argument. “And really, you are one to talk? With how many days you’ve gone to a real job?”

“I do have to *earn* my winnings though,” he teases and Christian’s cheeks pink. It’s been a long time since I’ve seen a grown-ass man blush, and it makes me wonder why he’s so embarrassed.

As we dish our food onto our plates, he tells me a bit about the machine parts manufacturing company his great-grandfather started and how it’s evolved over the years. He certainly knows a lot about the inner workings of the company he’s purportedly hardly involved in.

I eat my fair share of the polenta and ratatouille while the three of them chat about people and places I don’t know. It’s oddly comforting to see Jackson in this environment. Even though I hate to think of her spending one second more than necessary with Marco, I can’t help but feel relieved that she’s had people like him to support her after I left her like I did.

I should be jealous thinking of her relationship with Marco, like I've always been. But no matter how hard I try, I just don't see anything more than affection between them. There's no heat, no obvious attraction. Aside from the look they shared when she first sat down—the one that was more like *why am I sitting next to Nate?*—they haven't shared any more looks.

My knee bumps Jackson's under the table as Christian and Marco share a laugh at some sort of an inside joke that neither she nor I get even though they're speaking English. It's a soft enough tap that she could think it's an accident, but she knows it's not. In the soft light of the kitchen chandelier her skin is glowing and when she tilts her chin toward me she has a wrinkle between her eyebrows. "Your back doing okay?"

"Not really." My words are soft and low, because I'd prefer Marco not hear them.

"Are you in pain?" she asks, leaning closer.

"Would you think less of me if I said yes?"

"I'd think you're human." She rolls her eyes. "We should do some dry needling followed by ice, and see if that gives you some relief."

"Sure," I say as I take my napkin off my lap and set it on the table next to my plate.

Next to me, she stands and Marco and Christian's eyes snap up to her. "Nate needs some PT. I'm going to wash our dishes and then work with him for a bit."

"Don't worry about the dishes," Marco says as she stacks my plate on top of hers, "we'll get them."

"I'll leave them in the sink then."

"Stop fussing," Christian says to Jackson, sounding a lot like her old Italian grandmother. We'd visited her a few times in Brooklyn over the years, and she never really liked me. I bet she's over the moon about Jackson dating Marco, though. "We can clean the plates up. Just help Nate."

I follow Jackson to my bedroom. She leaves to grab her dry needling kit while I take my shirt off, but I can't even lie down on my own, so she finds me shirtless and standing next to my bed when she returns. She helps me move from a sitting to a lying position on my bed, then helps me roll over on my stomach.

I let out a guttural sigh, all the air hissing out of my lungs at once, when she pushes on the muscle. "It's still really inflamed," she says, as if my pain

didn't prove it. "And it's seized up again. I want you to take more pain medication"—she glances at her watch—"in half an hour."

"Okay," I say, but it comes out as a grunt because she's still pushing on that muscle. It's taking everything I've got not to clench the muscles in response.

"This is going to hurt more than the last few times we did this," she warns me, and I nod my acknowledgment. "But it should really help your pain level once the muscle starts releasing."

"Just do it," I grit out.



Outside the wind lashes the snow against the stone walls, and the tiny particles of ice keep a staccato beat as they clink against the windows. The gales howl, an alto melody to accompany the beat. The curtains are closed tight to keep the warmth in, but outside winter rages. It's the kind of storm that blankets everything in white, making it new again. A fresh start.

The sound of the voices is so faint I'm not sure if that's what woke me up, or if it was the storm raging outside. A door creaks open, and I hear footsteps in the hall heading the opposite direction of my room.

I push myself up carefully, relieved that my back already feels quite a bit better. I open the door to the bedroom quietly and peek my head out. The door to Jackson and Marco's room is cracked open, a thin sliver of light escaping in a narrow beam. At the end of the hall I watch as Marco slips through the door to Christian's bedroom and then latches it shut quietly.

*Oh.* I take a deep breath, wondering if this means what I think it might.

I head to the hall bathroom where I remove the ice pack Jackson had taped to my back after the dry needling. I remember her telling me to lie there and relax, though I don't remember falling asleep and I'm not sure how long it's been. Probably more than the half an hour she told me to wait before taking my next pain killer. I take one of the pills from the prescription bottle on the counter, then cup some water in my hand so I can swallow it down.

For a few minutes I stand in the doorway of the bathroom, waiting to make sure Marco isn't coming back. When he doesn't, I go to the door of his and Jackson's bedroom and tap bluntly with my finger tip. Nothing

happens, so I push the door open a crack and hear the same small whine of the hinges that I heard when Marco opened it earlier.

Across the room Jackson is standing at the French doors watching the storm, but she spins in surprise at the sound of the door opening. I shut it quietly behind me and fix my eyes on hers. My steps are practically silent as I cross the wide-planked floors and come to a stop before her.

I can see her pulse beating erratically in her neck, and I wonder what it means.

“Why did Marco just go into Christian’s bedroom?” I ask, fixing my gaze on those eyes, the color of the hills in her father’s native Ireland. “And why hasn’t he come back?”

She gulps, the force of it moving her entire jaw, but she doesn’t break eye contact. “I don’t know what you want me to say, Nate.”

I take a step closer. She’s less than a foot from me now. “How about the truth for a change?”

Her eyes stay fixed on mine, then slide down to my lips.

“I thought maybe the shared glances between Marco and Christian at dinner were just an expression of how awkward it was that your ex was here,” I tell her. “But now I’m thinking it was awkward because they had to hide something that they wouldn’t have hidden if I wasn’t here.”

Jackson closes her eyes and gives an almost imperceptible nod, so I step closer. Close enough to feel the soft knit of her pajamas. Close enough to feel her breath on my neck. Close enough to notice that her nipples harden under her lightweight pajama top as my proximity increases. “Tell me honestly,” I say, my words barely above a whisper, “are you in love with Marco?”

“I’ve never told you I was.”

“That’s not an answer, Jax,” I tell her, brushing her hair behind her shoulder and resting my hand on her neck. She rolls her head back, looking up at me and sighing.

“No, I’m not in love with Marco,” she says. “Never have been.”

I take that small step toward her so our bodies are flush with each other. I need to feel her pressed up against me and I need her to feel what she does to me. I take in her heavily lidded, hungry eyes, notice the way her mouth is parted open. “So is that why you’ve been looking at me like that?”

“Like what?”

“Like you want me naked.”

“Have I?” she asks as she shifts her weight so her breasts move along my chest. It’s all I can do not to maul her. It’s been so fucking long and I want her so bad.

“It’s the look you’re giving me right now,” I tell her as I stroke her neck with my thumb. “And in Levi and Big Sky, and a hundred moments in between.” I dip my face toward hers, dragging my nose along her jawline until my lips find her earlobe. “Unless I am misinterpreting this?” I whisper, my breath caressing her as she rubs her cheek along mine. I know I’m not misreading the situation, but I need to hear that she wants this too.

A shiver runs through her whole body at the same time she groans—a throaty, needy sigh of pleasure. “Not misinterpreting.” She sighs, rolling her hips into mine. “But I’m scared, Nate. I’m scared you’ll hurt me again.”

I straighten up, pulling back enough to cup her face in both my hands. I take a deep breath, appreciating that finally there are no walls between us. “I’m committed to spending every day of the rest of my life doing exactly the opposite.”

## CHAPTER 20



### JACKSON

*Coravara, Italy*

I didn't know how badly I needed to hear those words until they're out of his mouth. I stand there for a second, just staring at that beautiful face with the razor sharp cheekbones, his straight nose with a perfectly flat bridge, those full lips. He is perfection, and for some reason, he has never stopped wanting me.

I push up on the balls of my feet intending to claim his lips with mine, but he's one step ahead of me as his lips slant over mine. He pulls my lower lip into his mouth and I let out a sigh, opening enough for him to delve into my mouth, his tongue sliding against mine as he wraps his arms around my waist bringing me fully to him. Our bodies are pressed together so I can feel every ridge and valley of his athletic body.

I want him more than I ever have. I know it in the way every nerve ending in my taut nipples sing as they press against his chest, the way the pressure builds in my core and I have to clench those muscles together to quell the aching need to have him inside me. It's been an eternity since we've been together like this, and I never believed I'd ever find the kind of

physical connection I had with Nate. Maybe it's not so surprising then that my body has found his again.

His hands move slowly, his thumbs circling my hip bones, then sliding under my shirt and up my sides until finally they reach my breasts. He cups them in his hands, and groans into my mouth, then he's pulling my shirt up and over my head. I gladly take it and toss it on the bed as he gazes down at me, his lids heavy. "God you're beautiful," he says.

I reach out and take his shirt by the hem, pulling it up and over his head, tossing it over with my own on the bed. "That's better," I say as I take in his naked torso—a sight I've seen so frequently since he's been back, but have never been able to ogle with the appreciation his body deserves. I step back to him, our bodies only a few inches apart, the incredibly hard length of him pressed up against my stomach.

His hands come back to my breasts, circling my nipples, rolling them back and forth under the rough pads of his thumbs until I am moaning his name.

He rests his forehead against mine, a gesture that I always loved so much—the one that always preceded him kissing me like he owned me, which he did. Clearly he still does.

"I need you so badly," he whispers as he keeps up the assault on my nipples, which has me pressing my hips into him again, searching for that friction I need.

"I see that," I say and move to kiss him, but he holds me back with his hands on my breasts, rolling my nipples between his fingers until I'm pretty sure my underwear is soaked through with the need dripping out of me.

"Do you need me too?" he asks, and the vulnerability in his voice breaks through any last walls my heart might have been hiding behind.

"See for yourself," I say, guiding one of his hands down my stomach and into my underwear.

"Oh, God," he growls as he slides his finger along my slick folds. "You're fucking drenched." He slides his finger along my seam, then circles my clit—over and over, teasing me until I thrust my hips toward his fingers and beg him. Finally he slides two fingers up and into me, stroking in and out, his fingers curled in the perfect way to hit that spot deep inside that he knows drives me crazy. A few more strokes with the heel of his hand pressing against my clit while he slides his fingers along those muscles deep inside me and I'm saying his name in between pants and grunts and

sighs. He covers my mouth in his again, sliding his tongue along mine with the same rhythm, slowly speeding up as my muscles begin to clench around his fingers.

My hips meet every thrust of his hand in quick, desperate movements, my orgasm so close I long for it like an addict. I can feel my muscles clenching harder as the sensation I've been chasing starts rolling through me and Nate pulls his mouth away from mine to whisper, "Yes, come for me." The desire in his voice combined with the waves of my orgasm hitting me has me practically seeing stars. My hips are erratically thrusting against his fingers when I feel that tightening of my muscles as they pulse around his fingers and I come completely undone, over and over again.

"Oh, wow." I sigh as I rest my forehead against his shoulder trying to catch my breath.

"You are so sexy," Nate says, his lips close to my ear.

I look up at him as I reach my hands over to the waistband of his flannel pajama pants and hook my thumbs inside. I tease him by sliding them down his legs slowly until they pool at his feet. I do the same with his boxer briefs, sinking onto my knees as I pull them down his muscled legs. Kneeling in front of him, I slide my fist over the tip of him, then rub my thumb back across it as I slide my tightened fist down the length of him. I dip my head forward and slide my tongue over his tip as I begin sliding my hand along his shaft, my mouth taking more of him with every thrust of his hips.

Nate groans, a deep primal sigh in his throat, and I look up at him—every muscle in his abdomen is a defined specimen of athletic perfection, his broad chest is chiseled and tense, the muscles in his shoulders and neck strain under the delicate torture of my hand and mouth stroking him.

Then he opens his eyes, locking in on my own, and brings both of his hands to my jaw, tilting my head back so he slides out of my mouth. "Come here," he says, and I stand, letting him slide between my breasts and along my stomach so I can feel the hot, hard length of him against me. He rests his forehead against mine again, breathing hard like he's trying to regain some of the control he lost while he was in my mouth. Nate is always in control, always level and measured. Except when we're having sex. And I want more than anything to see him lose that restraint. "This first time is going to be quick," he says, his voice so quiet and deep. "It's been a really long time."



A laugh bubbles up in my throat. “Really? How long?” I think back to all the pictures I’ve seen of him over the years. The ones I’d never admitted to anyone that I actually looked for. Alessandra Ricci might be the most famous model he dated, but she wasn’t the only one. And there is no shortage of photos online with girls draped all over him at ski resorts across the globe.

For a few long seconds he doesn’t say anything, then “Five years.”

I pull back from him so I can focus on his face. “What? How is that possible?”

“I promised you a long time ago that even though you weren’t my first, you’d be my last.”

I just stare at him, aware that my mouth is hanging open. A million thoughts race through my head. How is it possible that through the second half of his twenties he never slept with anyone? Especially when that is so at odds with the public persona he’s given off? Finally, I ask him as much.

“I’m not saying I was a monk all those years, but I never had sex with anyone. Some things are sacred, and I meant what I said when I told you I wanted you to be the last woman I ever slept with. I still mean it,” he says, dipping his head to capture my mouth with his. My body responds appropriately, but my mind won’t shut down and enjoy this. He must sense that because he pulls back, giving me a small closed-mouth kiss. “Don’t let your mind go crazy right now,” he says, “come back to me, to this moment.”

“That’s just a huge piece of information to absorb.” I sigh.

He presses his hips forward into my stomach, the smooth, hard length of him rubbing against me. My own hips involuntarily move against his leg, which is somehow between my own, seeking the friction that I already need again. Once is never enough for me, and Nate’s always been up for as many rounds as I need to feel sated.

He dips his mouth to my throat, trailing hot, hungry kisses up to my earlobe. “I really need to be inside you,” he says as I grind myself along his leg.

“Yes, you do,” I whisper as he takes my earlobe in mouth, gently biting and sucking in a way that makes me acutely aware of the gaping space inside me and how much I need him to fill it.

“My back is going to make this tricky.” He sighs.

“Does it hurt right now?”

His jaw ticks. “Not as bad as earlier. But I wouldn’t care if it did.”

I understand what he’s saying—we’ve both waited too long for anything to get in the way of this happening.

“Sitting is comfortable for you, right?” I ask, eyeing the ladder back chairs in front of the glass doors.

“I like the way you think,” he says, taking my hand and leading me two small steps until we reach a chair. He carefully sits down, wincing a bit as he does. I straddle him, sliding up so that the base of him is positioned right along my seam. He takes both of my breasts in his hands, his hot tongue circling one of my nipples before he pulls it into his mouth, sucking on it in a way that makes my hips take on a life of their own as my swollen and wet clit slides along his shaft.

“Shit,” Nate groans, his mouth moving away from me.

“What’s wrong?”

“I don’t have condoms.”

“I’m still on the pill. I haven’t been with anyone in a long time and I’ve been tested several times since. I’m fine if you are,” I say, my eyes begging him not to stop.

“You are a fucking miracle.” He sighs as he puts his hands on my hips and lifts me up so the tip of his cock is pressing right there against my opening. The walls of my vagina are throbbing with the need to feel him inside me, to have him fill that gaping emptiness.

“I’ve got this,” I tell him as I slowly lower myself onto him. He’s bigger than I remember, filling and stretching me exactly as I hoped he would. His mouth dips down to my other breast, and when his tongue meets my nipple it’s like someone’s pulled a string activating all my vaginal muscles, and they dance as I slide up and down, riding Nate.

My thighs quiver as I raise and lower myself on him, every inch of him filling me until he bottoms out. A groan rattles his throat and reverberates against my nipple, and I speed up the pace, sliding him into me with a quick and consistent rhythm. The feeling of him filling me, and his hot, wet mouth on my breasts, is so amazing that I’m already chasing my second orgasm.

“I’m close,” he warns, then he slides his palm against my stomach. His thumb finds my clit and he softly glides it over that sensitive nub until I’m bucking wildly against him. I open my mouth to call out his name, but he wraps his free hand around my neck pulling my mouth to his so I’m

moaning into him. I feel my muscles beginning to spasm, clenching him erratically as I continue to slide along his cock, the heat spreading to my core. Over and over those muscles tighten until I'm not sure I can handle the exquisite pressure anymore, then like a burst of fire, I'm consumed by the orgasm that rolls through me and the way I feel Nate pulsing inside me as my orgasm milks his out of him.

I collapse on top of him, wrapping my arms around his shoulders and pressing my face to his neck once it's all over. I stay that way for a long time. I want to go back to that feeling immediately, want to keep having sex with him forever.

Nate cradles his arms up my back and cups my shoulders with his hands, gently pulling me away from him. "I'm sorry that was so quick," he says as he wraps my hair together into one of his hands.

"Yeah, it was obviously terrible," I say, which earns me one of his cocky smiles. That was the best sex I've had in five years, and he clearly knows it.

"I was afraid Marco and Christian would hear us," he says, nodding to the wall that separates Christian's master suite from this bedroom. "You were not quiet."

I don't want to be quiet—I want to have uninhibited orgasm after orgasm with Nate. Inside me, I feel him hardening already, and he pulls my hair back to expose my neck to his mouth. He trails hot kisses across my collarbone, then down the slope of my breast until he takes my nipple in his mouth and sucks hard enough that I'm not sure if it's painful or pleasurable, but my muscles clench around his cock and he groans in response. He moves to the other nipple and does the same, and my hips slide toward his, taking his once-again hard length deeper inside me. "You're already ready for round two?"

"Yes, and this time it's not going to be quick. I am going to worship your entire body, every single part of it."

"Tell me more," I say as I slide my hips to meet his slowly, languidly, like we have all the time in the world.

"Well first," he says as he slides his hands along my sides, from my hips to my armpits and back, "I'm going to clean you up. Then I'm going lay you down on that bed, drape your knees over my shoulders, and taste that pussy of yours that I've missed so much." My hips move faster at the

thought of his mouth on me. “Then I’m going to bend you over that bed and stand behind you so I can watch myself slide in and out of you.”

“Yes.” I sigh with pleasure.

“And I’m not going to stop until you’ve come at least two more times.” Nate captures my mouth in his, and I kiss him back almost frantically as I start to ride him again, my breasts bouncing up and down as they drag along his chest. The thing with Nate is that the second time he can go for as long as he wants, so the idea of him getting at least two more orgasms out of me isn’t even remotely a long shot.

I’m so turned-on at his proposal that I pull back from the kiss, level him with what I hope is my most sultry look, slide my eyes over to the bed, and say, “Let’s get started, then.”



It feels like my eyes have only been closed for a minute when the squeaking sound of a cranky old door hinge pulls me back to consciousness. I open my eyes as Marco is quietly closing the door behind him, and he’s two steps into the room before he looks up. Soft morning light is streaming in from the glass doors, a hazy beam illuminating the floor between us with just enough light for the rest of the room to be visible in the early morning hours. Marco stops short, literally freezing in place when he sees Nate in bed with me.

His eyes lock on mine in surprise. “Shit,” he mouths.

“I know!” I mouth back, and I can’t contain the smile. I’m lying on my side facing him, with Nate curled behind me and his arm wrapped around my waist over the covers. Nate hasn’t moved an inch so I assume he’s still asleep.

Marco fans his face in mock horror. “I’m leaving,” he mouths and points over his shoulder toward the door.

“No need. I’m awake now too,” Nate says from behind me. His voice is rough and ragged like it always is on too little sleep. I look at him over my shoulder, and with his head resting on his arm that’s curled under his head I understand how he could see past me to Marco.

“You two certainly have a lot of explaining to do,” Marco says, but his voice is teasing.

“No more than you, I guess,” Nate says and Marco stiffens in response. “Relax, you and Christian being together is the best news I’ve had in years.” Nate’s arm tightens around my waist, pulling me back against him.

“I’m going to go make espresso,” Marco says, and normally I’d tease him about how it must have been a sleepless night with Christian, but I refrain in front of Nate. “We should probably all talk about this.”

“*This*,” Nate says using his arm that was wrapped around my stomach to gesture to the two of us, “just happened. Maybe Jackson and I can have a little time to talk about it first?” There’s an edge to his voice that I know Marco doesn’t miss.

“You’re right,” Marco says. “I was making assumptions. You two should talk first.”

I roll over to face Nate after Marco leaves, and cup his jaw in my hand, loving that I can act on these impulses instead of having to act like he doesn’t affect me. “Well? You wanted to talk?”

“There are so many other things I’d rather do to you first,” Nate says, his gravelly voice rolling over me, and my body responds as if he was touching every inch of it. “But we probably *should* talk about this. You know where I stand. You know what I want—”

“Tell me,” I interrupt him, because Nate is a master at turning these conversations around on me, making me talk about my own feelings, before I truly understand his. This time, I want to hear it clearly from him first.

“I want everything,” he says. “I want what we had, but better. I want the evolution of the life we planned together. I want yours to be the last face I see at night and the one I wake up to in the morning. Last night I told you I want to spend the rest of my life making you happy, and I meant it. I’ll always mean it. Forever.”

I focus on his eyes, the color of a bright, cloudless winter sky as I let his words sink in, wrap them around me like a blanket that can protect me and keep me warm. “I want to give this a try, Nate. But there are so many obstacles.”

“We’ll face them together,” he says and nuzzles his face closer to mine on the pillow and brings his hand up to push my hair off my neck and shoulder. “But this can’t be a ‘we’ll give this a try’ situation. We passed that phase after high school. I’m committed—my heart has always been yours, even when you didn’t want it. If we’re going to do this, I think we need to

go into it expecting that we'll make it this time . . . not leaving a back door open just in case."

"That isn't what I meant." I shake my head. "I just meant that there are a lot of things standing in the way of us being in a relationship. Like my fake relationship with Marco, for starters."

"I can't wait to hear all about how that transpired," Nate says, the corner of his lips turning up. "Later. In the meantime, tell me you're in this with me." His voice is sure, but his worry is imprinted on his expression, the way the corners of his eyes pull back and then his pupils flare.

I know that this is my last chance at happily ever after with Nate. After the night we spent together, I either need to be all in, or I need to walk away for good. He's held on, waiting for years already, it would be cruel to ask him to wait any longer. And the truth is, I don't even know why I've fought this for so long. Habit, maybe. Pride. Fear of getting hurt again. All of the above.

"I'm in." I sigh. It feels good to utter those words. "I can't fight you or my attraction to you any longer." At my words, he grins the arrogant grin of a man who's been told he's a sex god. "Once I knew why you left, I mean, that just confirmed that what we'd had *was* real, and maybe that it could be again."

"I'm not the same person I was back then," Nate says, his voice firm. "I've grown up a lot in the last five years. I know I had some insecurities about you and our relationship . . ." He trails off for a few seconds. "I promise that I won't be that stupid, jealous fool again."

I know I should make some promises of my own right now. But somehow I can't make them come out my mouth. I need to tell him that I'm probably leaving the National Ski Team, that I want to move back to New England. But he captures my mouth with his, his lips toying with mine before his tongue lashes through my parted lips, and I'm overcome, swept away with no longer having to repress my need for him.

Finally, Nate pulls away. "We should probably go talk to Marco about how this is all going to go down. Because now that I have you, I'm not giving you up to pretend you're his girlfriend. I literally can't watch you kiss him one more time."

"Even though you know it means nothing?"

"Would you want to watch me kiss some other girl, even if it meant nothing?"

I consider how I've felt seeing him with his arm around a supermodel or snow bunnies draped all over him in social media posts, the way the female fans looked at him at the autograph night last month. I've never even seen him kiss someone else, and my hackles are up at the thought.

I'm sure my face must say it all because Nate says, "Ahh, you understand."

We get dressed quickly and Nate watches as I throw my hair up in a loose bun on top of my head. There's a look in his eyes, some combination of happiness and sadness and worry.

"What?" I ask as I finish wrapping the second elastic around the mess of hair I didn't even bother to brush before finger-combing it into place.

"I've just missed this."

"Yeah, because I'm so sexy in my pajamas with my morning breath and bed head." I roll my eyes.

"You have no idea," he says, the look on his face is absolutely predatory as he takes a few large steps across the room and curls his arm around my lower back. "You literally have no idea." The words are whispered, like a promise or a threat. And maybe it's both—the promise of what we can have together and the threat of the many ways he plans to use my body in the coming days, several of which I heard about in detail last night because as in control as Nate usually is, he can't quite control his mouth in the bedroom.

His lips graze mine, but I bring my palm to his chest as I pull back. "Nate, if you start this now we're not making it out there to talk to Christian and Marco. And the only thing more embarrassing than them knowing how we spent last night would be them waiting in the kitchen for us, knowing why it's taking us so long to get out there. Besides, these doors are hardly soundproof," I say, tilting my chin toward the 200-year-old wooden door.

"Fine." He sighs. "But tonight we're sleeping somewhere more private."

"As you wish." I wink, then take his hand and pull him toward the bedroom door, already thinking about being alone and naked with him as soon as possible.

I can hear Marco and Christian talking as we make our way down the hallway toward the kitchen, and their voices halt when the floorboard squeaks under my foot just outside the arched doorway near the stove. When we pass through it, they are sitting close together on the bench under

the picture window, steaming mugs of espresso on the table in front of them.

I'm used to seeing them like this, comfortably intimate, but I can feel Nate stiffen beside me. "Sorry," he mutters when Marco raises an eyebrow at him. "I'm still getting used to this information. For years you've flirted with Jax at every opportunity, so you can imagine this is . . . unexpected."

"I flirt with her because I adore her," Marco says, rubbing his hand along Christian's thigh. "Just not the same way you do, clearly."

Nate nods, and I pull him over to the espresso machine and take his order, then send him over to the table with Marco and Christian while I get to work on our drinks. I can see the grimace on his face as he sits, and it takes him a moment to get settled comfortably in the chair. His back is bothering him more than he's letting on.

"Your intentions are good this time?" Marco asks. "You're not going to hurt her again?"

"I'm standing right here," I call out, unnecessarily loud. "You don't need to talk about me like I'm invisible."

Nate pushes his chair sideways, the wooden spindles sliding along the terra-cotta tiles, so that he's got Marco and Christian on his right, and me on his left. "My intentions have always been good. Everything I've done, I've done to get us to this point."

"What point is that?" Marco asks.

"The point where we're mature enough to make good decisions about our relationship, and don't have the same challenges we had when Jackson was racing."

"What about the challenges of you racing?" Christian asks. "You and I both know it's not easy being the significant other of a racer. And now that's what you're asking of Jackson."

I glance over my shoulder in time to see Nate shrug. "Racing is secondary to me."

"What does that mean?" I ask him as I tamp the espresso grounds into the filter handle and hit the button to start brewing before swinging my eyes back to him.

"I told you that I came back for *you*." He pauses and runs a hand through his sleep ruffled hair, like he's a little embarrassed and doesn't want to have this conversation in front of Marco and Christian. "I'm happy to be



racing again, but it's not my livelihood and it doesn't have to be my career if it doesn't work for both of us."

"You'd stop racing for me?" I ask, my voice low and breathy from the shock. I don't ask because I want him to quit for me, I ask because it changes assumptions I had about our lives heading in different directions with me strategizing an exit plan and him still on the team.

"If I needed to," he says, his face serious. "I'm not interested in racing if you're not there with me."

I turn on the milk steamer and it screams into the oat milk until it's nice and frothed, giving me a minute to collect my thoughts. When I turn it off and pull the frothing wand from the stainless steel cup of milk, their heads are close together in quiet conversation.

"I know just the place," Nate says.

"The place for what?" I ask as I pour the steamed milk into each of our mugs and top it with the foam.

"Marco suggested maybe we should get away for a little while, somewhere quiet where I can rehab my back and we can have some time together out of the spotlight."

"Big Sky?" I ask hopefully and he nods, a smile playing at his lips. "I love it there." I sigh as I set his latte on the table in front of mine and pull up my chair close to him. "And you have plenty of space for the rehab you'll need to do. I'll need to clear it with the team, but it should be fine. Lots of athletes go home to do their rehab instead of back to Park City." Though once his back is better we will need to go to Park City to get him back in shape and get him cleared to race again. Still, we should get at least a week alone together before that.

"Is it possible for you to keep your location a secret?" Marco asks. "So that no one starts to speculate that you have more than a professional relationship?"

"About that," Nate says. "We don't need to publicize what's happening between us"—he pauses and looks at me for confirmation, which I give with a nod of my head—"but it doesn't make sense for you two to keep pretending like you're dating."

Marco and I glance at each other.

"We've already planned to end this," Marco says, "toward the end of the season." Blessedly, he doesn't mention his retirement or me applying for the job at Danforth. That's something I need to share with Nate in my own

time, and not until I'm one thousand percent sure he won't share the news with anyone at work. I can't risk losing my current job, as that would be a surefire way to *not* get the Danforth job. I already have one strike against me because of our proximity at the top of the run in Levi and dating him would be the nail in that coffin. All the reasons I was resisting him in the first place come rushing back to me in the light of day.

I need to talk to him about this, explain that we absolutely *have* to keep this a secret until I have that job offer and have signed on the dotted line. Probably even beyond that, until I've left the team and moved on to the Danforth job. No one can know this started while I was his physical therapist. That's a nonnegotiable.

"End of the season is way too far away," Nate says. "I'm not watching you and Jax pretend to be together for the next four months." He looks at me, asking for me to understand.

"He's right," I say, and Marco nods, a concession if not an outright agreement. "We can have an amicable split. Maybe if we spend the holidays separately, it'll be easy enough to say that we're still friends and on good terms but no longer romantically involved."

"That's fine, but you two need to be very careful in the meantime," Marco says, and Christian nods along. "If someone catches you two together in the next few weeks, it will ruin our plans and it will look like you're cheating on me."

Christian and I both burst out laughing over how ridiculous that is, since for the last year Marco's been the one "cheating" on me.

"We'll be careful," Nate assures him.

"I don't mean you," Marco rolls his eyes. "Everyone *knows* you're still in love with her. But Jackson's been pretty cold and indifferent to you since you joined the team." He turns his head toward me, "You have to keep that up even though it's not how you feel. Otherwise, people will start speculating, and if you remember, that's why we started this whole thing in the first place."

Nate's eyebrows raise in response to that.

"No, we started this because you needed cover for your relationship with Christian. I *agreed* because I was sick of people speculating that I still wasn't over Nate."

Nate almost chokes on his coffee and ends up coughing.

"What?" I ask him when his shoulders shake with laughter.

“Well obviously you weren’t.”

I want to wipe that stupid smirk off his face with my lips. Because, in the end, he’s right. I wasn’t over him, no matter how much I told myself I was. No matter how much I wanted to be. And now I can’t even imagine why I ever thought I could resist him.

“I need to start making some phone calls,” I tell them as I stand with my coffee mug.

“Me too,” Nate says, but makes no move to get up.

“Let me know when we’re leaving,” I say and kiss the top of his head before heading back to my bedroom. I’m not sure how my boss and Nate’s coaches are going to take this news, but somehow, we’ll make it work.

## CHAPTER 21



NATE

*Big Sky, Montana*

When the big black SUV with tinted windows pulls up to my garage, I breathe a sigh of relief. Jackson gets out and inputs the code on the keypad and I watch her standing there in her snow boots and down jacket as the driver rolls the car inside. She steps in, and the door rolls closed behind her.

*Thank fuck we're back.* It was a logistical nightmare getting us back here undetected—a short flight from Northern Italy to Munich, Germany, then another from Munich to Chicago, then a private jet to a small airport near Big Sky, and a car service directly to the inside of my garage. I don't want to risk someone seeing me getting out of the car outside my house. Even my local friends shouldn't know I'm here, or it could put our plan at risk. We need to stay hidden for a couple weeks, just until the holidays.

The driver takes our suitcases out for us before backing out of the garage. The second that door rolls closed, the garage light goes out and Jackson and I are rushing toward each other.

"It's been impossible to keep my hands off you since we left Italy," I tell her as I cup her face in my hands, loving how the soft glow of the

moonlight through the windows along the top of the garage door streams in and lights her up.

“If it were impossible you wouldn’t have been able to do it,” she rolls her eyes.

“Superhuman willpower,” I say as I bring my lips down to hers and invade her mouth. Our bodies wrap themselves around each other and our tongues clash as we each fight for control of this kiss. She pushes up onto her toes to give herself some leverage, but I’m a step ahead, already spinning us as I move toward the wall, backing her into it.

I slow her down, drawing out the kiss as I unzip her parka. She reaches up and pulls the zipper down on my jacket too, sliding it down my arms until I have no choice but to drop my hands and let it slide off. “We need these clothes gone, now,” she pants as she pulls her jacket off and drops it next to mine.

“In the garage, Jax?” I can’t help but smile. She deserves better than this.

“Right now,” she growls.

Her eyes narrow as she unzips the tunic length sweater she’s wearing and lets it drop to the ground too. Beneath it, she’s wearing a black lace bralette that barely holds her perfect tits. I’ve spent a lifetime worshipping this part of her anatomy—perfectly sized and hyper-responsive to my touch, I can get her off just by sucking on her nipples.

That memory has me so hard my boxer briefs can’t contain me. I reach my hand up and brush my thumb across her nipple and she responds by grabbing me by my waistband and pulling me closer, then unbuttoning and unzipping my pants. “We’ve crossed so many time zones I don’t even know what day it is,” she says, “but I’m confident it’s been over twenty-four hours since you’ve been inside me and I’m not waiting one more second.”

She reaches her hand into my boxers and grips me tightly, rubbing her thumb over the tip of me, sliding across the moisture that’s already pooling there and killing any objection I might have had about fucking her in the garage. Who am I to deny this woman my dick whenever and wherever she wants it?

I lean toward her, one arm bracing myself on the wall behind her and capture her lips with mine. She responds by squeezing me tighter as she works her hand up and down my shaft, circling my head with her fingers each time she reaches the tip. “You drive me fucking crazy,” I say pulling

back and cupping her breasts in my hands before leaning down and sucking one of her nipples into my mouth through the lace fabric. Her hips piston forward looking for mine, and I fucking love the way her body responds to me. I take her other nipple in my mouth as she continues to jerk me off, then I reach up and slide the lace to the side. I suck her fully into my mouth, taking long pulls on her nipple followed by the flat lapping of my tongue over that sensitive area.

“Nate,” she moans, then lets go of my dick and shoves my pants down to my calves where they rest at the top of my snow boots. Then her hand is back on me, stroking me faster and harder until I’m the one that’s moaning. She lets me go again, pulling away so she can pull her leggings down, then she guides my hand to the small triangle of lace held in place between her legs by thin black strings. I run my finger beneath the lace, along her seam, and I’m amazed at how wet she already is. I circle her clit, but each time she presses her hips into my hand I slide my finger back down to her slit, playing with her opening but not delving in like she wants me to.

“Nate,” she says again, a plea. “Stop torturing me. I need you.”

I take her by the hips and spin her around to face the wall, then guide her wrists above her head, planting her palms against the concrete. I pull my shirt and sweater over my head so I can feel her skin against mine, then I lean forward, my chest against her back, my dick resting between her ass cheeks. She pushes back into me, rocking her hips sensually, letting me know what she wants. Her long hair cascades down in waves, so I gather it together and wrap it around my fist before tugging her head backward lightly. I lean my head down so my lips are next to her ear and with a low, steady voice, I tell her, “Don’t move unless I tell you to.”

“What if I want to touch you?”

“Too fucking bad.”

She lets out a small groan of frustration, but stays with her legs spread apart as far as her leggings will allow, her hands above her head in front of her on the wall. She’s so fucking sexy, especially in this thong with three straps coming from the front to the back, held together by a ring.

“You want garage sex,” I tell her, “then we’re doing it my way.”

I reach around the front of her and pull the other side of her bralette cup down so both her breasts are exposed. Even in the cold air, her body is burning up with desire. Cupping her breasts in my hands, I sweep my thumbs across her nipples, and when she rocks her hips back into me, I

meet her, thrusting my dick along her ass and lower back. She sighs each time our hips meet. When I take her nipples, pinching each lightly between my thumb and forefinger, she goes to move her hand, saying “I need to touch myself if you’re not going to do it.”

Both my hands fly to her wrists. “Like hell you do,” I say as I press my body up against hers. I take her hands and slide them down the wall so she’s bent forward more, then go back to her nipples again. She’s rubbing her ass against me so forcefully, thrusting her hips each time I roll the sweet peaks of her breasts between my fingers, that I know she’s ready. I grab her hips, use my foot to spread her legs as far as the leggings around her calves will allow. Then I reach my hand between her legs to pull that scrap of fabric masquerading as underwear aside, and dip two fingers into her to double-check that she’s ready for me. She rides my fingers so hard I know I need to be inside her *now*.

With her legs barely spread, sliding into her is like sliding into the tightest, hottest space my dick has ever been. I can tell she feels the difference in this angle and position too, because she moans as I stroke in and out of her, then groans my name loudly when I take my fingers, still covered in her juices, and swirl them around her clit.

“Holy shit,” she says on an exhale before pushing her ass further back into me, arching her back so she can take me even deeper. And that’s what does me in. That’s where I lose control, grabbing her hips and slamming her back onto my dick over and over.

The pressure builds quickly at the base of my spine, and raw need claws at me. If Jackson’s soft grunts are any indication, she’s as close as I am, but I’m not risking finishing before her. I take one hand and run my finger along her lips, which she parts as she sucks my finger inside, swirling her tongue around the tip. Then I’m rubbing my finger over her swollen clit as she whispers “Oh, shit,” followed by “Yes” dragged out on an exhale.

I feel her tightening around me, the spasms gripping my dick as the waves of her orgasm roll through her. I can only hold on for another second before I’m spilling everything I have inside her. When I finish, I put one hand on the wall next to hers, and wrap my other arm around her waist, holding her to me. We’re both catching our breath, neither of us eager to move.

“Holy crap,” I say when I can finally use words again.

She turns her head to mine where it rests on her shoulder and kisses my cheek. “That was . . . mind blowing.”

My rib cage rattles with the victorious laughter that bubbles up, and I can feel her smile like it’s radiating out of her body.

I pull back, running my hands along her sides, then I pull out of her and reach down for my T-shirt. I clean myself off and then clean her off before I pull her leggings back up her legs.

“You know,” she says, turning toward me after she’s tucked her breasts back into her bralette, “yesterday was the first time I’ve had good sex since you left.”

“I don’t want to think about you fucking anyone else, much less talk about it,” I tell her as I reach down to grab my sweater and jacket.

“Hey,” she says, reaching down to cup my chin and bringing me back up to face her. “I thought you were gone for good.” The pain in her voice makes me regret ever leaving, even though I know it was the right thing at the time. “If I’d had any idea you were coming back, I’d have waited for you.”

I wrap my arm around her waist and pull her to me, burying my face in her wild hair. “Just remember that I didn’t know your dad didn’t tell you why I left. So every time I saw that you were dating someone new, like that douchebag soccer player—”

Jackson laughs. “He really was a douchebag.”

“It made me think you didn’t want me to return.”

She pulls away and looks up at me before running her tongue over her lower lip and looking away. “I only ever dated other people so everyone would think I was over you. Which I never was. Despite thinking that you’d abandoned me, I honestly never stopped loving you.”

I’ve waited five years to hear that, and still her words hit me harder than I expect. I cup her face in my hands, bringing my forehead to rest on hers. There’s so much I want to say, but all I can get out before a lump forms in my throat is, “I never stopped loving you either.”



“So you can for sure be there on New Year’s Eve?” Jed clarifies.

“Yes, but what about Jackson?”



“What about her?” Even over the phone I can hear the edge of concern in his voice.

“Well, she and I . . .” We said we weren’t going to tell anyone, but Jed’s my lawyer and he needs to know. Besides, as my lawyer he can’t tell anyone things I tell him in confidence. “We got back together. I want her there with me on New Year’s.”

“I don’t see why that’s a problem.”

“I don’t really want her to find out with everyone else. If we’re planning to make a big announcement at that New Year’s Eve gala the ski team does, she should know beforehand. I don’t want to spring it on her, and I don’t want her to hear it from someone else.”

“I can check with the board, see if they’re okay with you telling her after all the paperwork is signed but before the announcement is made. That would give you a window of a couple hours to talk to her about your plans before everyone else finds out.”

“Her finding out immediately beforehand isn’t ideal.” I sigh.

“But it’s better than her being surprised with the info at the gala, right?” Jed confirms. “You’re going to have to bend on this. For whatever reason, the board doesn’t want her or anyone else brought in on this.”

I think about how much she loves Blackstone. How she loves the small, independent vibe, the old-school lodge, the lack of shops and tourists, the personal feel of the mountain. My plans will change some of that. The new lodge and hotel on the backside of the mountain will be a big draw for tourists, but I’ve worked with the board to ensure that things are done on a small enough scale to still maintain the independent vibe. To cut down on weekend tourists, the hotel is mostly made up of condos with quarter-, half-, and full-ownership shares available so there won’t be that many rooms available for normal hotel reservations. And my company is already working on identifying small, local businesses to lease the shops and restaurant spaces that will make up the new “Main Street” in the village. I’m hoping for a small European ski village feel, which I think Jackson will love. But any changes to Blackstone may alarm her, and I just wish I could talk to her about it now—convince her that I’m actually saving the spirit of the mountain she loves, because it was either sell to me, sell to a big conglomerate that was going to make changes on a more massive scale, or go bankrupt.

“As long as I can tell her before the gala,” I say to Jed.

“We’ll see what the board says. They’re bound to have varying views on this.”

We agree that he’ll let me know once he’s talked to them and that, in the meantime, I’ll have my company coordinate a promotional video announcement that highlights the plans for the entire village. When we hang up, I’m reminded how hard it is to still run my real estate business while also competing. If I were in Europe racing right now, instead of in Big Sky recovering, I wouldn’t have time to be this hands-on.

I leave my home office to find Jackson. We are supposed to do another physical therapy session, so I’m in my workout shorts and nothing else. I’ll be covered in sweat by the time we’re done, there’s no reason to wear clothes. I can hear her talking on the phone as I walk down the hall to the living room, and I run my hand along the back of my neck as I try not to stress about how I’m going to get her to Blackstone for New Year’s Eve without telling her what’s going on.

“Whoa, honey!” The voice is alarmingly unfamiliar, with a bit of a Texas drawl. I look up and realize that Jackson is holding her phone up on her knee, angled at me. “No wonder you’re hiding away in the mountains somewhere. If I had a piece of eye candy like that, I’d hide him too!”

Jackson’s eyes are huge when she looks at me, then she taps her phone screen and says, “Hold on, Ms. Juarez.” She taps the screen again. “It’s muted,” she tells me, then gives me a quick explanation of who Ms. Juarez is. “I was showing her the house because she doesn’t understand why I can’t come visit her. I’m trying to explain to her that I’m not in Park City, without telling her where I am exactly. She knows what my condo looks like because sometimes we FaceTime and so I was showing her that I’m not at home. I didn’t know you’d be walking back in so soon.”

“So you’ve been visiting one of your former patients for years, because she has no family?”

“She’s family now,” Jackson shrugs, but her cheeks turn pink.

I let this information soak in for a second. Jackson’s always been so focused, so dedicated. Sometimes she can come off as cold, but it’s moments like these that I love her most. She loves deeply and quietly, it’s not a show for her. It’s steady and constant, being there when it matters. And knowing I wasn’t there for her when it mattered is what made me unsure she’d ever take me back.

“Can I meet her?”

“Right now? Or in person when we’re back in Park City?”

“Both?”

Jackson uses her chin to nod toward the space on the couch next to her, and I grab the sweatshirt lying over the back of the chair next to me and pull it over my head. Then I squeeze in close so we’re both in the frame, my arm slung over Jackson’s shoulders. Ms. Juarez’s eyes light up and Jackson unmutes just in time for us to catch her saying “This is that asshole who left you when you were in the ICU, isn’t it?”

Jackson laughs at my surprised response. “Pretty much. But he had a good explanation and an even better apology.” She lets me explain myself, and I can see Ms. Juarez’s hard face relax.

“So you’re finally going to do it, Jackson?” Ms. Juarez asks.

“Do what?” Jackson’s brow is furrowing in that way that makes her look adorably vulnerable.

“Let go of the anger and soften your heart enough to love again.”

“Ouch,” she says and Ms. Juarez just makes a puckered “oh honey, it had to be said” face in response. “I guess I am,” she says, glancing over at me.

“What about that Italian boy toy?” she asks. Man, this woman holds no punches.

“Marco’s a great friend,” Jackson tells her. “But we’re not in love.” She looks at me and I hear what she’s not saying—she never stopped loving me. I know she said those words a week ago when we arrived, but reminders like these are the reassurance I think we both need at this point.

“Good. Because you were clearly never over this one,” Ms. Juarez tells her, and I wonder if everyone else knew that, too, or if she was for some reason more open with this older woman than she was with her friends and family. “Go have your fun. Will you visit soon?”

“Yes, I think we’ll be in Park City in about a week. I’ll visit as soon as I’m back.”

“Will you come too, sonny?” I assume she’s talking to me, so I promise I’ll come visit her when Jackson does.

“I miss you,” Jackson says, “I’ll see you soon.”

“Miss you too,” Ms. Juarez says before Jackson ends the call.

She snuggles into my side. “Man, I love that old lady.”

“I can tell,” I say as I kiss the top of her head where it rests on my chest.

“She’s just . . . I mean, I want to be feisty like her when I’m that age. She doesn’t give two shits what anyone thinks of her. She’s had quite the life.”

“How does she have no family, though?”

“She was very dedicated to her career. She never married or had kids. She had a really bad breakup when she was our age. Her fiancé betrayed her and she never really got over it.”

I squeeze her tightly to me and gently kiss the top of her head, letting my lips linger against her hair. “You know that I never betrayed you, right?”

“I wasn’t making a comparison,” she says, then quiets and takes a deep breath before she continues. “She told me her story as a warning not to go down the same bitter path she did. Will you really come visit her with me?”

“Yeah, of course. She’s important to you.”

“So are you,” Jackson says, sitting up and swinging one leg over my lap so she’s straddling me and we’re face-to-face. I move to kiss her, but she follows with “Which is why we need to get your PT done for the day. Can’t have you broken forever.”

“If being broken means getting to spend all day, every day with you”—I shrug—“I’m okay with this.”

“Not on my watch. My athletes get better, and more quickly than anyone expects them to. They do not stay broken,” she says. I love how determined and passionate she is about her work. She pops off my lap and onto her feet like she’s some sort of ninja, then holds her hand out to me. “Come on, let’s get this over with so we can get naked.”

“No fair mentioning nudity when you expect me to work,” I say as I take her outstretched hand and stand, then strip off the sweatshirt I put on for the video call.

“You worked really hard this morning,” she says, running her hands along my pecs and up across my shoulders. The feel of her skin against mine will never get old. “So how about we make it more fun this afternoon?”

“I like fun.”

“You’ve only got to do three sets of this afternoon’s exercises. How about each time you complete a set perfectly—no shortcuts at all—I’ll remove an item of clothing.”

I take in her leggings and sweatshirt, there’s two items. I try to decipher if she’s wearing a bra, but the sweatshirt is cropped and loose, so I can’t tell.

She never goes commando, so if she's wearing a bra then I don't think losing three items of clothing will get her *quite* naked. I'm already looking forward to removing that last item of clothing myself.

"Deal," I say and reach out my hand so we can shake on it.

"You're going to regret this," she says as we shake.

"I've got to do the work, might as well get a reward, no?"

She turns and walks toward the wall of windows that look out at the snowcapped trees on the side of the mountain behind my house. The sun's close to setting and casting the last rays of golden light on the scene. It's pure beauty, enhanced by the fact that she's here with me.

When we first arrived, Jackson pushed the long wooden dining table over against the wall, and set up this space as my workout studio instead. I have a weight room in the basement, but she hasn't let me move to free weights yet. Instead, she's made me do a million resistance exercises meant to strengthen my core muscles. Sounds easy, but she manages to come up with new ways to torture me twice a day.

This afternoon, she shows me the sequence of moves I need to complete. A full set is ten reps of five different exercises. By the time I've done the first set, rivulets of sweat run down my chest and back.

"You're already so much stronger than you were a week ago," she says as she looks down at me. I'm on my knees, where I collapsed after I finished my first set. I can't take my eyes off her stomach, a strip of which is visible between the waistband of her leggings and her cropped sweatshirt. I hope that shirt is the first piece of clothing to go. As if reading my mind, she asks, "So what should I take off first?"

"Is *everything* an option?"

"Nope, but if you do a really good job with the last set, I'd consider taking my last two items of clothing off for the finale."

"Ditch the sweatshirt then." I shrug, trying to act like my entire body isn't burning up with desire right now. She grabs the hem with both hands, pulling it up and over her arms before dropping it on the ground. "Holy shit," I hiss, my breath being pushed out of my lungs by the sheer lust that's consumed me. "What is that bra?"

Jackson glances down at her chest. The burgundy lace and mesh cups plunge deeply and are held together with delicate satin straps so thin I'm not sure how they don't snap. A lace band runs beneath the cups and around her back.

“Sierra gifted me this set for my birthday. You should see the underwear.” She has the nerve to wink and I reach up quickly to grab her hand, but I miss and practically fall on my face. “But you won’t see them unless you do the next set.” She is clearly trying to torture me, which is fine, because I can give it right back once she’s naked.

“That’s going to be easier said than done.” I glance down at the raging hard-on that’s making itself known through my gym shorts.

“That sounds like a *you* problem.” Her smile is enormous and her eyes are filled with the laughter she’s holding in.

“Oh, you are so dead. Just wait until you want to come. I’ll draw that process out so long you’ll be begging me.”

“Nate, if this first set is any indication, you’ll barely be able to stand at the end of the third set. I’ll take my chances.”

“I love a good challenge,” I growl as I stand up, facing her.

“I know.” A new, smaller smile plays at her lips. She understands me so well. This workout was always going to be a killer, and she wanted to give me an incentive to work through it even when I’d want to quit. In this instance, I’m perfectly fine being as predictable as she expected.

## CHAPTER 22



### JACKSON

*Big Sky, Montana*

Nate nuzzles his face into the side of my neck. “How’s this going to work?”

“How’s what going to work?” I murmur, still too weak from my last orgasm to form any coherent thoughts.

“Us.”

“I think we’re working just fine,” I say, the innuendo heavy in my voice and the smile light on my lips. I’m on a yoga mat on the floor of Nate’s former dining room, lying in a pool of our sweat—his from the workout I just put him through, and me from the two orgasms he just made me work for. We are drenched and smell terrible, and we’re both the best kind of exhausted. I’m not sure I’ve ever been happier.

“I mean what’s it going to be like when we leave Big Sky. Do we have to hide this from our team? From our parents and friends?”

“I don’t want to hide this any more than you do,” I tell him, turning my head and kissing his forehead. I find his insecurity adorable because he’s so confident in every other aspect of his life. But I never again want to give him a reason to feel insecure about my feelings for him. There was too

much of that in our past, and if I've learned anything, it's that I was at least fifty percent responsible for how our relationship ended.

"Good."

"But," I start, and he's flipped himself up and on top of me before I can get the next word out, his mouth claiming mine again.

"No buts," he says when he pulls back.

"Nate, I don't want to hide this. *But* I don't know what my contract says about fraternization. I could be fired for getting involved with an athlete I'm training. It goes against everything I was taught in grad school and it's probably a violation of the oath I took when I became a physical therapist."

"We'll figure it out. Maybe the team can switch things up." I can practically hear the wheels turning in his head. "Maybe you can move over to working with Jeff, and his physical therapist can work with me."

"That would entail us telling the team what's going on. What if we tell them and they fire me? Nate, if I get fired because I'm involved with an athlete I'm training, I will literally *never* be able to find another physical therapy job. No one will hire me if they know I've crossed that line. I think we're better off waiting."

"Waiting for what, exactly?" he says. He's got his elbows propped on either side of my shoulders, but I'm able to reach my hand up and stroke his face.

"Maybe until the season ends?"

*Tell him about Danforth*, a little voice inside my head insists. But I swallow that information down. It's too soon.

"You think we can keep this a secret for months?" The way his face has rearranged itself into a mask of doubt leaves no room to wonder whether he thinks it's possible or not.

"I don't think we have a choice. My entire career is at stake here."

His face softens and he leans down, stroking the bridge of my nose with soft kisses. "What will change at the end of the season?"

"When the season is over, I can find a different job." There's no point in pretending like this could work out any other way.

"Then I'll leave too."

"Nate, no. You are finally back to racing. It took you so long to get here, and you're doing so well. Why would you walk away from that?"

"I told you in Italy that I'm not interested in racing if you're not there with me."



“I’d see you all the time in the off-season, and I could visit a lot while you’re racing.” Maybe Danforth isn’t the right fit for me anymore. If I get that job, I’ll be working with and traveling with the collegiate team during the season. I wouldn’t be able to get away to go visit Nate while he’s over in Europe.

*But Mom*, that voice nags, *you need to be closer to Mom*. Danforth offers that.

Nate must see the war that’s going on in my head as I try to figure out a way for us to be together without either of us having to give up our plans, because he asks, “What’s going on? You have your thinking face on.”

“I’m just trying to figure out how our relationship can work without you having to give up racing.”

“The simplest solution is usually the right one,” he says. “We just need to be honest. You can talk to TJ and I can talk to Matt, then we’ll work with HR to find a way for us to be together without you losing your job.”

I let that sink in. “Nate, I have to be honest about something. But you have to swear not to say a word of this to anyone.”

His eyes crinkle as his hand strokes the hair above my ear. “Go on.”

“I was already thinking about this being my last season with the team before you arrived.” *Tell him the whole truth*, that little voice is screaming at me inside my head. *Tell him you’re looking for jobs in New England. Tell him you’re leaving*. “But I don’t think that means you should give up your dreams. You’ve come so far already this season. This is just the beginning for you.”

He shakes his head. “Nope. This is just the beginning for *us*. I’m not making the same mistakes we made years ago, putting skiing before our relationship.” What he doesn’t say, but I hear anyway, is that it was *me* who put skiing before our relationship, not him. “Making this team has absolutely been a dream for me, but it’s not my only dream, and I’m willing to give it up to get other things I want even more, like a lifetime with you.”

His eyes are so vibrant, the color of the water in the Mediterranean on a sunny day. He’s so alive right now, so sure of what he wants. But I’m not sure I can be the reason he gives this particular dream up. “I don’t want you to walk away from skiing for me. And I’m afraid that if you do, it’ll always be a wedge between us.”

“How so?” he asks, and I can see the confusion in his eyes.

“I’m afraid that every time things are hard, you’ll wonder if it was worth giving racing up for me. I’m afraid that years down the road, you might come to resent me for this.”

He rolls off me so he’s lying on his back next to me, and he reaches for my hand, lacing our fingers together. “If you had finished your last season and won that crystal globe, then retired like you’d planned, would you have resented me for it?”

“That’s different, Nate,” I say, giving his hand a little squeeze as I stare up at the vaulted ceiling. “I would have been retiring after achieving everything I’d ever set out to accomplish. Sure, I would have still potentially had some good years of racing left in me, but I’d have walked away with my gold medal and my crystal globe.” Career goals—achieved. *If only it had gone that way.* “But you won’t be in the same position if you walk away at the end of this season.”

“Which is fine, Jax, because those were your dreams, not mine.” I glance over at him and he continues. “I’ve honestly never had any goal in my adult life that didn’t include you by my side. And I’m not willing to forsake our relationship to achieve my ski goals. In order of importance, those goals just don’t rank as high as us being together.”

“Nate.” I sigh, and he looks over at me. “I don’t know what to say.”

“Say that we’ll make this work, whatever the cost.”

“We will,” I assure him. “We’ll figure it out as we go. But I’m nowhere near ready to tell TJ and Matt what’s going on here. I need to look into my contract and figure some stuff out. And I need you to give me time to do that, okay?”

“No problem,” he says, but I can see it there in his eyes that it is a problem. He doesn’t want to wait, and after all the waiting he’s already done, I understand why.

I wish I could give him a different answer, but there’s no other choice right now.

“The sun is setting,” Nate says a few minutes later. We’re still lying on the floor with our fingers loosely intertwined. “Want to watch it from the hot tub?”

“Outside?”

“Yeah, the hot tub is under the deck. The sun sets on the other side of the mountain so it’s a pretty view of it from here.”

“You’ve watched a lot of sunsets from your hot tub, Romeo?” I elbow him and try to pretend like I’m not envisioning Nate in this hot tub with another woman. Or several other women, for all I know.

“Not a lot,” he says and sits up. “I’m going to go grab you a robe.” He slides his shorts back on.

I lie there on the floor while I wait for him to return, racking my mind for a solution. Two people with very different goals. How can we both get what we want without either of us having to sacrifice so much?

*He doesn’t even see it as a sacrifice. Stop projecting your feelings onto him,* that little voice inside my head insists.

“Here,” Nate says as he holds open a long plush robe by the shoulders. I stand and slide my arms in, and he pulls the sides around me, wrapping his arms across my front and pulling me back to his chest. “Stop it.”

“Stop what?”

“Stop looking for different solutions. I’m telling you that the simplest option is the best one. We need to tell TJ and Matt what’s going on and let them figure out how this can work within the confines of our careers. Or, we can do it your way and keep it a secret until the season’s over, and then both walk away from the team. But that seems much more risky because I think people will see what’s going on between us.”

“We have time to figure this out,” I tell him as I turn my head and kiss his neck.

He lowers his head and captures my mouth with his, and as he deepens the kiss, he lets the robe go so it drapes open. His hands run along my sides, from my hips to my breasts and back down, but he’s teasing me again and never touches me where I need him to, so I wrap the robe back around me as I pull away.

“I’ve never had hot tub sex,” I say as I tie the belt around my waist, take his hand, and lead him toward the stairs to the finished lower level.



We’re halfway through Nate’s workout two afternoons later when my phone rings. Normally I wouldn’t answer my phone while working with an athlete, but I know it’s TJ calling to talk about getting Nate back to Park City to clear him to go back to Europe.

“Carry on,” I tell Nate as I walk toward the couches in the living room and answer the call with “Hey, TJ, how’s it going?”

He clears his throat. “I just sent you an email, which you should check immediately. I need your ass back here in Park City *now*. If you’re lucky, I’ll be able to save your job. But I’m not making any promises.” His voice is level, but hard. TJ rarely gets truly angry, but when he does, the master of avoidance is more likely to give you the silent treatment than to show how pissed he is.

“What?” I sputter.

“Just check your email. I’ll see you first thing tomorrow morning.” The line goes dead.

I sink into the couch closest to me as Nate calls out “What’s going on?” from across the large, open space.

“I’m not sure,” I say as I pull up my email on my phone. At the top, there’s an email from TJ. It’s been forwarded from Matt McCarthy, but the original email was sent from some address that’s a random mixture of letters and numbers, obviously intended to be unrecognizable. The subject line is “Nate Davenport in Big Sky.”

I scroll further down, and then I’m paralyzed with fear and shame and anger. There in graphic detail, in picture after picture, is my training session with Nate two days ago. In each picture I’m wearing fewer and fewer clothes, and there are several of Nate and I having sex on the floor.

*People I work with saw these.*

At least the photographer blurred out anything that could get him or her charged with distributing pornography, but it’s still clear enough what was happening. And it’s clear it happened while we were working. Yes, we were in the privacy of Nate’s home—though obviously it wasn’t as private as I thought—but we were clearly doing a PT session.

*Oh shit.* I may have said that instead of thinking it, because suddenly Nate’s standing right behind me asking, “Hey, what’s wrong?”

I can’t speak. It’s all I can do to hand him my phone and let him look for himself while I sit there with my elbows on my knees, head in hands, taking deep breaths to keep from hyperventilating.

“Shit.” He walks to the floor to ceiling windows in the living room, and looks out at the full evergreen trees lining the edge of his property where the photographer must have hidden. He comes back and says, “TJ sent these to you?”

“Yeah, and if you look at the email you can see the message was forwarded from Matt.”

Nate’s growl is full of frustration, but he doesn’t seem to be feeling the overwhelming embarrassment that’s got me feeling like I’m in the midst of a hot flash. Then suddenly my stomach is turning over. I run for the half bath off the hallway and make it just in time to empty the contents of my lunch into the toilet bowl.

*This can’t be happening.* This is a hundred times worse than the picture of Marco and I leaving that bar together in that hotel in Italy. But at least these pictures aren’t in the news or on social media. Actually, for all I know, they might be.

This cannot be happening. But it is, and I’ve never felt more powerless in my life.

“You okay?” Nate asks from the doorway.

“Yeah, I’m just great.”

He sets my phone on the counter. “I forwarded that email to myself and I’m going to start looking into who sent it. Don’t worry, Jax, I’ll take care of this.”

“Take care of it?” I ask from my knees, looking up at him in the doorway. I’ve got my hair in one hand and am wiping snot from under my nose with my other. My voice sounds hysterical, even to my own ears. “Aside from the tremendous violation of privacy, Nate, and the fact that my boss and yours both saw them, those pictures are probably going to cost me my job. I’m being called back to Park City, and TJ said he’d try to save me from getting fired, but he couldn’t make any promises.” I stand and flush the toilet.

“Give me a little time to start looking into who sent the email initially so we can isolate that piece at least.”

I don’t even care who sent the pictures. They can’t be unsent. I’m going to lose my job, and will also have to kiss the Danforth job goodbye. And all Nate cares about is figuring out who sent the pictures? “Fine,” I say as I scoot past his frame in the doorway, and head upstairs to his bedroom.

When I hit the top of the stairs I look down over the half wall that separates the upstairs landing from the living space below. He’s already got his laptop out on the dining room table and is on the phone. He’s talking quietly so I can’t quite make out what he’s saying, but I don’t care. I head to the bedroom, pull the one suitcase I never unpacked out of the closet, and

throw the other empty one on the bed. I grab clothes and start stuffing them in as quickly as I can. In the bathroom, I dump all my toiletries into another bag, grab my makeup bag, and throw them both on top of the mess that is my suitcase.

Then I realize I left my phone downstairs in the bathroom, so I go back down to grab it, only to see that I have an email notification from Annie on my home screen. The subject line is: *Interview date and time.*

The timing could not be more ironic. I'm going to get fired, which means Danforth will cancel the interview *again*. Instead of opening the email, I text the car service we used when we arrived, asking for the quickest ride to the airport possible. The driver replies that he can be at the house in fifteen minutes, so I carry one suitcase down the stairs followed by the other. Nate's got his back to me and his AirPods in and is engrossed in whatever he's doing, which involves an awful lot of swearing. I grab the few things I have lying around the living room—the book I'm reading, my Waves wireless headphones, and the cropped sweatshirt that started this mess—and throw them all into my purse because I'm not sure I'd be able to zip my suitcase closed again if I opened it and added anything else.

With my bags, boots, and coat at the front door ready to go, I stand at the kitchen island watching Nate, waiting for him to seek me out, to make sure I'm okay. He still hasn't gotten off the phone or looked up from his computer. He clearly cares more about figuring out who took and sent the pictures than he does about the fact that I'm going to lose my job. I don't know why I thought this was going to work, or how we'd keep it a secret.

When the text from the driver comes, I'm so pissed off at him that I debate leaving without even telling him. But even as upset as I am, I won't do that to him. I know how it feels to have the person you love leave without saying goodbye.

He's so engrossed in what he's doing that he actually startles when I put my hand on his shoulder. He takes in my coat and boots, and his brows furrow.

"I need to get back to Park City," I say.

He takes his AirPods out, pushes his chair back, and stands to face me. "Wait, what? You're not leaving now?"

"I am. TJ wants me in his office first thing tomorrow morning."

He folds his arms across his chest. "Then we'll go together."

"My car is already here."

He looks pissed off before he even glances at the entryway where my suitcases sit. “You packed and called a car, and didn’t even bother to tell me you were leaving until it was time to go?” His brows are furrowed and his eyes are narrowed. He seems far more angry than he should be about this, and I can’t even fathom what else is going on inside his head.

“I’m sorry, Nate. But I need to go take care of this—see if there’s any way to save my career.”

“And you don’t want me there with you, to help explain what happened?”

“Nate, those pictures showed exactly what happened. And I’m one hundred percent confident that on-the-job fucking is grounds for firing me. What do you think you’re going to say that would change those facts?”

“How about the truth? That this isn’t some fling. We have a history and everyone knows it. We were in the privacy of my home, on a weekend.”

“That doesn’t make it off the clock, Nate. We work twenty-four seven during the season. It was clearly a PT session, so it was work.”

His phone starts buzzing on the table and we both look down to see Matt McCarthy’s name flashing there. “When your head coach is calling you, you’d better answer.”

“Don’t leave,” Nate says as he reaches for the phone. His thumb hovers over the screen.

I feel my phone buzz in my pocket, probably the driver asking if I’m coming out. “I have to, Nate. And you need to answer that call. I’ll let you know how it goes with TJ.”

I turn and walk away, trying to block out the sound of Nate’s voice as he answers the phone. I make it out the door rolling my two suitcases, and the driver loads them into the back of his SUV as I climb into the back seat. I rest my head against the headrest and don’t even bother to wipe away the tears that are finally falling.

How could things have possibly gone to shit so quickly?



It’s after midnight when I walk into my condo, but instead of finding it dark and cold, a few lights are on and so is the heat. There’s a fire burning in the fireplace. *What the hell?*

I leave my suitcases and coat in the entryway and walk into the living room just as Sierra sits up on the couch, rubbing her eyes.

“Sierra, what are you doing here?” I ask as I round the back of the couch.

“You didn’t think I was going to let you come home to an empty condo by yourself after what you’ve been through, did you?”

I sit down next to her outstretched legs and she opens her arms to me. I can’t do anything but collapse into them. I’m emotionally and physically exhausted, but also completely wired from the coffee I drank on my long drive. When I arrived at the airport I found that the only flight left that day back to Salt Lake City was fully booked, so instead I rented a car. I’d called Sierra at the beginning of my drive, but it was a quick conversation because she was still at work.

The six hour drive home took far longer because of heavy snow in Idaho, which I’d had to navigate with my crappy compact rental car. It was nothing like the comfortable drive back from Big Sky in Nate’s truck with him, Sierra, and Petra earlier this month. And just like that, the memory of that drive—that time with Nate and my friends, when my whole life wasn’t imploding—has me in tears again, sobbing onto Sierra’s shoulder.

“I’m sorry,” I tell her after I get out most of my tears. I pull back, reaching for the box of tissues on my coffee table and wiping off my face before blowing my nose. “I’m so glad you’re here, but also I feel bad taking you away from Peter. Wasn’t he getting home from a business trip today?”

“Eh.” She shrugs. “I wanted to be here for you. Plus, Peter and I had a fight right when he got back, so it was nice to be able to give him some space to cool down. I talked to him a couple hours ago, things are fine now.”

“I’m so sorry, Sierra. What happened?”

“It’s not a big deal. Work has just been extra stressful for him lately, and he’s been extra snippy as a result. It’s like he takes his stress out on me, but he’s always super apologetic about it afterward.”

That doesn’t sound like a healthy pattern, but I don’t say that to Sierra because I’m sure she’s well aware. Instead, I ask, “Is there anything I can do?”

“No, but thank you,” she says, brushing her blond hair behind her shoulder. “I just wanted to make sure you got home safely and that you are okay.”



“I’m so far from okay. How did things between Nate and I get this messed up, this quickly?”

“Well since I didn’t even know you guys got back together until today, I’m not really sure.” There’s a justified note of bitterness in her voice.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you. It’s only been, I don’t know, a little over a week? Just since Alta Badia. There are so many reasons that we needed to keep it a secret . . .”

“Like Marco,” she asks, her eyes bugging out because, duh, she thinks I’m cheating on my boyfriend. How did that not even occur to me?

“Oh my God, Sierra, no.” I give her my most earnest face as I beg her, “Please don’t be mad, but Marco and I are just friends.”

“Wait.” She pauses. “Like this is a recent development? Or like you’ve only ever been friends?” She works through this slowly, then narrows her big brown eyes at me. I bite my lip in response and she just shakes her head. It feels like forever before she says, “So you’ve been lying to me for a year?”

“I’m so sorry, Sierra. It was a favor to Marco that just took on a life of its own. I didn’t want to lie to you, but I had to so I could protect him.”

“Protect him from what?”

I take a deep breath. “Sierra, you are like a sister to me. You’ve been my best friend since we were little kids. And I’ve hated lying to you even if it was to protect my other best friend. And so I’m really sorry, but this isn’t my secret to share. I have to respect Marco’s privacy.”

She crosses her arms over her chest. “Marco knows about you and Nate?”

“Yeah. When Nate hurt his back at Alta Badia, we stayed with Marco at Christian’s house there. That was the first night we slept together.”

“And how did you possibly think you could keep this a secret from everyone else? I mean, even if those pictures hadn’t been taken, you believed that no one would realize you two were back together?”

“I don’t know.” I shake my head. “Optimistically, yeah, I thought we could just be very careful and even if people suspected, we could avoid confirmation. But now, I mean, now I’m probably going to get fired.”

Sierra doesn’t say anything in response to that, and she doesn’t meet my eyes either.

“I am, aren’t I?” I ask, reaching out and putting my hand on her knee so she’ll at least look at me.

She clasps her hand over mine and gives me a little squeeze. “I don’t know. I guess it’ll depend on whether there’s something in your contract that prohibits this type of relationship with the athletes you train. I mean, if you weren’t training Nate, it might be different. But you said the pictures were taken during a training session?”

“Yeah, they were. At the time, I didn’t even think about that—we were living at his place in Big Sky, just doing normal domestic things like cooking and reading and watching TV together . . .”

“And having sex during his PT time?”

“I mean, yeah, we were having sex *all* the time. We had a lot of years to make up for.”

“So why isn’t he here with you?”

For the hundredth time since I walked out that door, I wonder if I made the wrong choice. “He did offer . . .”

“And you told him not to come back with you? Are you crazy?”

“Maybe. It was just the most surreal experience. After I got those photos from TJ, Nate went into detective mode, like all that mattered was who took the pictures. He didn’t even care how I was doing, that I was humiliated, and that I might lose my job.”

“Did he say he didn’t care about all that?” Sierra sounds skeptical.

“No, he didn’t *say* it, but that’s how he acted.” I explain about packing all my stuff up, and how he was on the phone and on his computer, not even checking on me or acknowledging that maybe I wasn’t okay.

“What was he doing on his phone and his computer?”

“I assume trying to track down where the photos came from. But that’s pointless. It doesn’t matter where they came from because they’re already out there, and TJ’s probably going to fire me because of them.”

“Maybe he was trying to make sure they didn’t go any further than they already had?” Sierra says in that gentle and consoling way she has about her. “Like making sure that they don’t get posted on social media, or don’t get sold to the gossip rags or something?”

“Maybe,” I say, thinking about how cautious he is about his “image.” I’m sure his PR people are all over this trying to get control of those photos before they get auctioned off to the highest bidder. “But he hasn’t called or texted once since I left.”

She raises an eyebrow. “Have *you* called or texted *him*?”

“No. I told him I’d let him know how things go with TJ tomorrow, but I was hoping he’d care enough about how I was doing to get in touch in the meantime.”

“I’m sorry,” she says, and pulls me into a hug. “Maybe you should try to get some sleep. Everything feels more manageable when you’re well rested, don’t you think?”

“Sure,” I say, because I know that’s what she wants to hear. But I already know that I’m not going to sleep a wink tonight. Somewhere out in the world there are photos of me having sex, my career is about to go up in flames before I’ve even come close to paying off my student loans, and my boyfriend—who is supposedly so in love with me—hasn’t even called to see how I’m doing.

## CHAPTER 23



### JACKSON

*Park City, Utah*

I'm a hollow shell of myself when I pull open the door to the Center the following morning. My eyes are so puffy from last night's cry-fest that no amount of under eye concealer can make them look normal. My wet hair is braided because I couldn't be bothered to do anything with it after my shower. My limbs feel like they weigh fifty pounds each, and as I walk across the empty lobby with its huge two-story windows, I'm carrying the weight of everything that I'm losing.

I came in extra early, knowing TJ would be here and hoping no one else would be yet. I find him in the weight room, exactly where I expect him to be. And as if he knew I'd be here early to see him, he's organizing the dumbbells rather than getting his own workout in.

"Jackson Hole." The way he says my nickname—the same way you'd greet someone in the receiving line at a funeral—sounds more like *goodbye* than the word itself ever could.

"I'm so sorry, TJ."

"Don't apologize," he says, but the words seem to stick in his throat and come out raspy.

“You gave me this job fresh out of school, before I was probably ready for it—”

“You were ready.”

“And I fucked it up. But I *told* you this wouldn’t work out. Back when Nate first joined the team.”

“You were successful beyond belief. And I hate what this one mistake is going to cost you.” He shakes his head the same way my father used to when I’d disappointed him. Even from his position squatting next to the row of dumbbells, he has an air of authority.

“So it’s definite, then?” I ask, leaning against the doorframe for support.

“Nothing’s definite. But Jackson—” He lets a long sigh escape his lips as he stands. “I don’t know how we could keep you on staff with those photos out there. It is a very clear violation of your contract.”

“What about Nate?” I ask. I can’t stand the thought of him losing his spot on the team because of me. That whole strip tease during his workout was my idea, and I’m prepared to admit that if it will save his racing career. There is still so much he can accomplish, and I want him to have that opportunity. Even if he decides not to continue past this season, I want that to be his *choice*, not something forced on him because of my fuckup.

“Nate doesn’t have anything in his contract that would disqualify him from racing because of this,” TJ tells me, and I relax for the first time since walking into the Center. “Which is why, as I’m sure you know, we called him back to Austria so he could train with the team for this weekend’s races.”

Thankfully I’m already leaning against the doorframe, because I think that’s all that’s holding me up right now. *Nate is in Austria? No phone call. No text. Nothing. He flew to Europe and didn’t even tell me?*

I can hear the blood pounding in my head, but I refuse to lose my composure in front of TJ. I take a deep breath and draw on any strength I’ve got left to get me through the rest of this conversation.

I can’t force any words out, so I just nod, acting like of course I knew Nate was in Europe. Because yesterday we were making plans for the future, and less than twenty-four hours later, while my life is completely crashing down on me, he’s already left without telling me. *Again.*

“For now I’ve been instructed to put you on an unpaid leave,” he tells me.

“While what?”

“While they decide what to do about the situation.”

“Who has seen those pictures besides you and Matt?” I ask, wondering if there’ll be some kind of investigation. If me keeping my job hinges on anyone else seeing those photos, I’m out.

“No one that I know of. Matt sent them to me only. I haven’t shared them with anyone else. But I had to report the fact that they exist. I’m sorry, Jackson,” he says when he sees my face fall. “I had to. Which is when HR said to put you on administrative leave while they investigated the allegations that you’d breached your contract.”

I’d reviewed my contract last night after Sierra left. Sure enough, there was a clause in there about not being involved in a sexual relationship with any of the athletes on the team.

“We’ve both seen the photos, TJ. We know that I’m in violation of my contract. And if an ‘investigation’ means anyone else is going to have to see those photos in order to come to the same conclusion, then I’d rather resign.”

“I hate to say this. I really wish I didn’t have to. But that might be for the best,” he says. “There’s no reason to drag it out.”

Again I nod, not trusting my voice.

“I’m gonna miss you, kid,” TJ tells me, taking the steps between us quickly and wrapping his arms around me. He rests his cheek on top of my head. “I really hate to lose you like this.”

“I did this to myself,” I mumble into the space between his pec and bicep.

“It still feels wrong to let you go,” he says.

I know that my relationship with Nate hasn’t compromised my ability to do my job, and I think TJ knows it too. But I signed a contract, and there’s nothing either of us can do to change that after the fact.

“I need to clean out my office,” I tell him. “But I’d rather not do it with an audience. Can you work with HR to see if I can come back later tonight and get my personal belongings?”

I think of how much my office has been like a home to me while I’ve worked here. My degrees hanging on the wall, my photos, the plants Sierra has helped keep alive while I’ve traveled, the spectacular view of the mountains. I’ll need several boxes and more than a few tears falling to pack it all up.

“Sure, I’ll let you know what they say.”

I give him one last squeeze and step back. “Thanks, TJ, for everything. I’m sorry that I messed things up so badly.”

I take two more steps backward out the door, then speed walk out of that building as quickly as I can. I’m almost to my car when my phone rings, and I glance at the screen. The name of Ms. Juarez’s nursing home flashes there and my stomach drops. She never calls me, she only knows how to FaceTime me from her iPad. Which means it’s the staff calling, and I sincerely hope it’s not bad news. I can’t take any more of that right now.

“Hey, Jackson, it’s Patty,” my favorite nurse says with her thick southern drawl. It’s no wonder Ms. Juarez likes her the best, too—shared southern roots and all that.

“Hi. Is everything okay?” I glance at my watch. It’s just past 7:00 a.m., not a normal time for a phone call unless something’s wrong.

“No, it’s not. Jackson, I’m so sorry. She passed away overnight.” Her words hit me right as I’m opening my car door, and I manage to slide myself into the driver’s seat so I don’t collapse right on the pavement. “She went to sleep last night and just didn’t wake up this morning. She passed peacefully, which is a blessing.”

*There is no blessing in her life ending*, I want to scream. “I didn’t even get to say goodbye.” My voice cracks on the word. “I got back late last night and I was going to come visit her today.” Tears stream down my face and there’s no point in even trying to wipe them away.

“She knew you loved her very much,” Patty tells me.

But did she? Did I ever tell her? I can’t hold in the sob, it’s like my heart is breaking right in half and the sound just tears out of the gaping hole.

“She left some stuff for you,” Patty says.

“She . . . what now?”

“I think she knew her time was near,” Patty says, but how could that be? I’d just talked to her three days ago and she was as vibrant and ornery as ever. “Everything was in order. She even had an envelope sitting on her nightstand addressed to you.”

“I’m sorry,” I say when Patty quietly waits for me to respond. “I’m having a hard time processing this. I just talked to her the other day and she was fine.”

“I know she was, which is why it’s good that she was able to leave this life peacefully, without pain or prolonged suffering. Do you want to stop by and pick up her belongings?”

“Pick up her belongings?” I stutter. Nothing makes sense.

“Yes, she had you listed as her next of kin. And they haven’t taken her body away yet. I thought you might want to come down and say goodbye.”

Suddenly I’m on fire. I peel off my jacket, but my skin is burning up and I can’t breathe. My heart is beating erratically, and every beat is painful.

“Okay,” I squeak out. “I’ll be right over.”

I disconnect the call, throw my phone on the seat next to me, push my seat back as far as it will go, and tuck my head between my legs. I’m not sure that’ll really help, but I’m also not thinking clearly in this moment. I just know that I’ve lost my job and one of the most important people in my life—maybe even two now that Nate is gone again—in the last ten minutes. And it’s just too much.

I don’t know how long I stay there before the knock on my window has my head flying up in surprise. Sierra’s on the other side of the glass, her features arranged into a look of concern.

I roll down the window as I use the sleeve of my fleece to wipe off my face.

“They fired you?” she asks.

“No, I resigned. But that’s not what this is,” I say, gesturing to my tearstained face. “I just got a call from the nursing home. Ms. Juarez . . .” I can’t quite get the words out, and instead a sob escapes. It’s a guttural cry, the kind you have no control over.

“Oh, no,” Sierra whispers as she reaches through the window and squeezes my shoulder. “What can I do?”

“Nothing,” I tell her. “I have to go over there. She had me listed as her closest relative, so . . . I don’t even know what that means.”

“Okay, I’m going to put in for a personal day and I’ll go with you. Give me five minutes to get to my office and grab a few things. I’ll be right back.”

“Sierra, you don’t have to do this.”

“Like I’d let you drive anywhere right now.” She smiles as she squeezes my shoulder one more time before stepping away. “I’ll be right back.”





“I didn’t believe it was this bad,” Petra says as she and Lauren walk into my bedroom, where I’m rolling each individual piece of my winter clothing as tight as I can and putting them into the three suitcases spread across my bed.

“I told you so,” Sierra says.

“Jackson,” Lauren says, “you can’t really be leaving.”

“I am. I have to. I literally can’t do this anymore,” I tell them. “I no longer have a job. Nate won me over and promised me forever, only to disappear again. And my mom is going through chemo. It only makes sense to move home with my parents for a little while.”

“But it’s only been *two days* since you lost your job. You’ll find a new one,” Petra insists.

“And there has to be a reason Nate went back to Europe without telling you,” Sierra insists. She doesn’t say what she knows I’m thinking—he’s had days to call and explain himself. Send me a text. Anything. And yet, there’s been no attempt at contact. There’s no way to misunderstand his intentions.

“I will never find another PT job after resigning for a breach of contract,” I say, dropping another sweater into my suitcase. Then I look over at Sierra. “And if Nate truly cared about me, he wouldn’t have flown back to Europe without telling me. His absence is like history repeating itself all over again.”

Lauren bursts into tears, and when we all look at her in alarm she sits down on the velvet chair in the corner of my room, covering her face and bowing her head while letting her red hair hang forward like a curtain.

“What’s wrong?” Sierra asks, kneeling next to Lauren.

“Nothing. I’m so sorry. I’m being stupid and selfish and need to get my emotions in check,” she says, but her voice is breaking on every other word like she can’t get her sentence out through the tears. “Just ignore me.”

“Pfft, ignore you,” I say. “Why in the world would we do that?”

“Because I’m being ridiculous. I have no reason to cry right now, you’re the one going through hell.” She looks up, her face splotchy and apologetic.

“Lauren, what’s really going on?” I ask.

Lauren’s dark blue eyes sweep over the three of us. “It’s just, I always envisioned that when I had babies, all their aunties would live close by, and now I don’t know if you’re even coming back,” she says, her eyes focusing in on me.

“Are you . . . planning for the future, or are you already . . .” My mouth drops open as her pale skin is overtaken with a deep blush and she nods. “Lauren! You’re going to be a mom?”

I think all three of us must launch ourselves at her at the same time, because suddenly we’re a squealing, crying, cooing, laughing heap on the floor at her feet.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you sooner,” Lauren says through tears, but sounding happier than I’ve seen her in a while. “Things were a bit touch and go for a while. There were some complications and I didn’t know if this pregnancy was going to last. But now there are two baby girls in here.” She rubs her belly.

“There are so many things we need to know!” I say, as it occurs to me that this is why Josh wasn’t really paying attention when they sublet their condo to Nate, and why Lauren wasn’t involved in that process. And this is why she didn’t come on our girls’ weekend to Big Sky—she didn’t have the flu, she was sick because she was pregnant.

“It’s a really long story,” she says, but we insist she tell us and she relents, sharing details about the fertility treatments and almost losing this pregnancy.

“Why didn’t you tell us you were going through any of that?” Petra asks once we’re caught up on all the details. “We would have all wanted to be there for you. You shouldn’t have had to go through that alone.”

“I wasn’t alone,” Lauren says, a small smile on her lips. “I had Josh.”

“Yeah, but guys aren’t always awesome with the emotional ups and downs of stuff like that. You should have had your girls by your side too,” Petra says with her trademark ferocity.

“I’m sorry I didn’t say anything,” Lauren says. “I didn’t want to have to explain every up and down, over and over. The idea of keeping people updated on what was going on just seemed so emotionally overwhelming.”

“We get it,” Sierra assures her, giving Petra the side-eye. “It’s totally up to you when you want to share your personal secrets.”

“Speaking of,” Lauren says as she looks at me, “Nate?”

I sigh as I disentangle myself from my friends. They already know we got back together, and that he left me *again* when things got tough. I suppose it’s time I give them *all* the details though, maybe then they’ll understand why it’s better if I go back home for a while . . . or maybe forever.



I sit on the bottom bunk in the bedroom where I spent almost every weekend in my entire childhood. My parents' condo at Blackstone has been remodeled almost from top to bottom, except this bedroom. It looks just like it looked when I was a teenager, with the exception of some new bedding on the bunks Sierra and I used to share when she spent every weekend with us during ski season.

On my phone, I look over Marco's post one more time. He wants to be one thousand percent sure I'm happy with the wording before it goes live. A public declaration of our "breakup" with assurances that we parted ways amicably. A dissolution of our fake relationship. Given that everything real in my life has also dissolved recently, this feels more than a little ironic—like a fake final nail in a real coffin. My old life is gone, and I'm still trying to figure out what my new life will look like.

It won't involve Nate, obviously, since he's still MIA. Or not actually missing this time, just not missing *me* apparently. And given that Annie called yesterday to tell me she'd heard a little rumor that I was back at Blackstone and no longer working as a physical therapist for the National Ski Team, my future no longer includes the possibility of working at Danforth either. She'd clearly heard about Nate and I being involved, even though thankfully she didn't seem to know about the photos, because she said, "I hope this means that you and Nate are finally happy."

Sometimes the ski world is cruelly and claustrophobically small.

**Jackson:** *This looks fine.*

**Marco:** *Are you sure?*

**Jackson:** *I'm positive.*

**Marco:** *Are you sure YOU are okay?*

**Jackson:** *I will be, eventually.*

**Marco:** *If you want me to kill him next time I see him, I'm willing. I might even be able to make it look like an accident.*

I do smile at that. It might be the first smile I've had in the week and a half since I arrived back at my parents' place. Even on Christmas, I couldn't bring myself to celebrate—I was a miserable guest, but my parents gave me

a lot of leeway, knowing how heartbroken I was. How heartbroken I still am.

**Jackson:** *Don't do anything stupid. Just kick his ass on the slopes. That'll be enough.*

**Marco:** *Okay, Bella. If you need anything, let me know. Christian and I are always here for you.*

**Jackson:** *I know. And I love you for it.*

**Marco:** ❤️

I head out the door of my bedroom, planning to find my mom and see if she wants me to make her some tea or get her some food. She's been so weak since I've been back and it's been emotionally draining to watch her frail form hobbling around the condo. It's like reliving the worst memories of my childhood, when she was fighting breast cancer the first time and the chemo almost killed her. But she was twenty years younger then, and wasn't on her second recurrence of cancer. I feel selfish even thinking this way, but I just *cannot* lose her now. Not after Nate, and Ms. Juarez.

But as if she'd anticipated my plans, she's sitting on the couch wrapped in a faux fur blanket with a mug of tea in her hands. She nods toward the mug on the coffee table, which I assume is for me. It's still steaming.

"I was just about to call you out here," she says. "It's like you read my mind."

"How are you feeling?" I ask as I take a seat on the opposite end of the couch, facing her.

Her white-gray hair is up in a ponytail, but the craters beneath her eyes don't look as hollow as yesterday and she's got a little of her color back. "A little stronger today. It's always the worst a few days after the treatment. I'll be fine in a couple more days."

I let my eyes sweep across the living room, admiring how my mom has remodeled the place. It's been a slow process of small updates here and there since my dad retired, and this is the first time I've been here since my mom decided everything was finally finished. Her interior design eye is still strong even though she only dabbles with work lately. The place looks like something out of a magazine, and it's kind of a shame that they live here full time because I bet they could rent it out during the winter and make a killing.

I tell my mom as much, and she just shakes her head slowly. “But then we wouldn’t be here enjoying it, would we?”

“I guess not. So where’s Dad today?”

“At the mountain,” she says, reaching over and setting her mug on the marble coaster next to mine.

“Does he normally go to the mountain every single day?” This week between Christmas and New Year’s is one of the busiest of the year, so I’m not sure if this is his normal routine or he’s there more right now because it’s so busy. Or if he’s *there* because I’m *here*.

“He goes most days. But if what you’re really asking is if he’s there to avoid you, then the answer to that is also yes.”

“I know,” I admit, biting my bottom lip. Dad and I have always been so close. Our bond formed in our shared love of skiing and grew even deeper when I started racing on the World Cup circuit because he was the one who moved to Europe with me, while Mom stayed home with Beau because he was just starting high school. But this last week and a half has really put a wedge in our father-daughter relationship, and I don’t know how we’ll ever come back from it.

Mom hugs her knees to her chest, her petite size making her seem almost childlike. “He doesn’t understand how you’ve managed to lose everything you worked so hard for.” She leaves off the “*again*,” but I feel it hanging there at the end of her sentence just the same.

“Me either, Mom. I guess I never should have let Nate back into my life.” I was brutally honest with my parents about what had happened with Nate—if photos are going to surface at some point, I wanted them to prepare them that the possibility exists. They were understandably frustrated that I’d lied to them about my relationship with Marco, but surprisingly understanding about what had happened with Nate. Or at least, I thought they were at the time. But Dad’s been mostly avoiding me since. I’m not sure if it’s because I got back together with Nate in the first place, or because he’s disappointed in how I allowed myself to blur personal and professional lines. Probably both.

“Are you sure that letting him back in is where you went wrong with all this?”

I just stare at her, narrowing my eyes as I try to work out what she’s saying. Or not saying. At this point I’m not even sure what we’re talking about anymore.

“Are you suggesting that I went wrong *before* letting Nate back into my life, or *after*?” I ask as I pull a pillow over and hug it to my chest, like it’s armor that might protect me from whatever she’s going to say. My mom is known for being honest, and usually for being right. Somehow, she has always had the ability to help me see things I couldn’t see before.

“I’m not sure,” she says, pulling the blanket around her legs like a cocoon. “But when you told us the story of what happened, the only time you sounded like you were actually okay was when you were with Nate. Otherwise you sounded miserable, like you were faking your way through your own life. With Nate, things sounded *real*—real happiness and now real heartache.”

“I was happy,” I admit. “And crazy enough to think this time it could last. And then he left.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“Are you asking if he really left?” I watched the recap of his race yesterday in Bormio, so yeah, I know he really left and I’m not sure what my mom is getting at.

“What I mean is, are you sure he’s the one who left *this* time?”

I mean sure, I was the one who left him in Big Sky. I told him I’d talk to him after I’d met with TJ, but by that time he was already back in Europe, having left without telling me. *Or was he waiting to tell me when I called him? Was he just giving me the time I’d asked for to deal with this?*

Clearly able to see the wheels turning in my head, my mom grabs her mug off the table and takes a sip while she watches me think this through.

“I did leave him in Big Sky,” I tell her. “But I told him I’d let him know how my conversation with TJ went, and by then TJ had told me he was already on a plane back to Europe. Mom, he left me. Again.”

“Have you heard his side of the story?” she asks, her voice kind but probing.

“No, have you?”

“Of course not. But there are always two sides to every story—as you should well know by now—and maybe hearing his would clear a few things up. Or maybe it wouldn’t, and you’d be right where you are now. But at least you’d know for sure. *Not* talking to Nate when things like this happen has never solved anything.”

She’s right, I know. But my pride is so hurt that the thought of being the one to call him is a bitter pill to swallow. He should have called to tell me

he was going to Europe, like I told him I was going back to Park City before I left Big Sky.

“Maybe,” I tell her, then take another sip of my tea.

“Maybe you guys can talk when he’s here for New Year’s Eve?”

“Nate’s coming *here* for New Year’s Eve?” My voice is practically a scream.

“I’m not supposed to know about that,” she tells me with a wink. “But from what I understand he’s the guest of honor at the ski team’s gala fundraiser.”

The New Year’s Eve gala is new since Nate and I were on the Blackstone ski racing team in high school, and I’ve only ever attended one—the year after my accident when I was home with my parents for the holidays during my grad school Christmas vacation. That year, I was the guest of honor. It’s a cozy affair held in the lodge, which the ski team decorates with thousands of strands of twinkle lights. Tickets are stupid expensive for what the event actually is, but the adults all pay it and dress up and enjoy the night because the money supports the mountain’s race team, so it’s for a good cause.

“He’ll be here in three days?” I clarify.

“Maybe even sooner. I think they have a big meeting the day after tomorrow.”

Oh, so it’s about whatever deal he’s got going on with the board. The one he wouldn’t tell me about—or *couldn’t* tell me about. There is a difference, I realize, even though it didn’t feel like there was a difference when I first learned about the secret negotiations.

I consider again what that deal might entail. Probably some sort of real estate development that he’ll own and manage. It’s a smart plan, but I can’t help but wonder what Blackstone is getting out of the deal. Maybe financial relief? I know they’ve been struggling for years as they have to make more and more snow each year as the winter temperatures rise.

“Okay, I’ll think about that.”

“Please do,” my mom says. “You two need to talk, and it’ll be better if you do it in person.”

We finish our tea and Mom decides to take a nap, so she heads to her bedroom while I clean up our cups. I’m in the kitchen when my phone buzzes with a text.

**Sierra:** *You need to listen to this voice mail Nate left me.*

There's an audio file attached to the message. The pain is instant, my heart cracking open and the hurt pouring out. He left my best friend a voice mail, but he can't be bothered to call *me*—the woman he said he was willing to drop everything for because nothing he wanted to accomplish in life was worth it if I wasn't by his side? *What a load of crap*, I think to myself. He obviously never meant it.

**Jackson:** *He called you???*

**Sierra:** *I called him first. Left him a VM reaming him out for what he did, demanding to know why he hurt you again. You obviously haven't listened to his reply, so DO THAT NOW.*

I turn the volume down on my phone so I don't disturb my mom, then tap Play on the audio file. Nate's deep voice floods the small kitchen.

*Are you for fucking real, Sierra? Jackson left ME, not the other way around. She left me in Big Sky after telling me that she didn't want me to go back to Park City to be there with her when she talked to TJ about what had happened. And right before she left, I saw a notification on her phone from Annie Dilmont at Danforth setting up an interview. So not only did she leave me, she lied to me for weeks not telling me she was applying for a job at Danforth. And after she left, she never called or texted. Not to tell me she got home safely, or to tell me about her conversation with TJ—which she said she'd do—or to come clean about Danforth. I had to find out she resigned her position from Matt. It's been two weeks and she STILL hasn't called or texted. Not for Christmas, or to tell me what she's doing. She's made it abundantly clear that this whole relationship is as one-sided as it ever was and that she still doesn't know how to be honest with me. So yeah, I'm done. But not because that's what I wanted. Because that's what SHE wanted. And Jackson always gets her way.*



The line goes dead there, and my head is spinning so fast that I have to grip the edges of the soapstone countertops to hold myself steady.

What. The. Hell?

I think through everything that happened, trying to see it from his point of view. And I can see what he's saying about me leaving him in Big Sky. It's like my mom suggested. Though, in the voice mail he did omit the fact that he left and went to Europe. That's probably what that call from Matt was about, right as I was leaving Big Sky. Maybe Matt insisted he get his ass back to Europe or lose his spot on the team? Maybe he was going to tell me as soon as I called him, but then I never did? And dammit, that email notification. Why did he have to see it? Why didn't I tell him sooner . . . any of the times that I thought about telling him. If I had, it might have made a huge difference.

*Shit.*

*Double shit.*

I have screwed this up beyond belief, but hopefully not beyond repair.

I grab my phone off the counter and head back to my bedroom. There's one thing I have been putting off, and I think I need to do it before I can figure out what steps I need to take to fix the mess I've created.

In my bedroom, I pull the small box with Ms. Juarez's belongings out from under the desk that sits at the end of my bunk beds. I carefully open it, knowing the letter from her will be right on top, exactly where I left it before I packed up my car in Park City to head back here to my parents' home. I know that Ms. Juarez wouldn't have left this world without leaving me some parting advice. I wasn't ready to read it then, but I am now.

*Dear Jackson,*

*Your entire life, people will judge you. They'll be happy for your successes, or they'll be jealous about them. They'll be supportive when you fail, or they'll be critical of you. But no matter what, good or bad, there will be judgment.*

*Your job is to surround yourself with the people who will build you up, the people who will be there for you in the good times and the bad. And that will involve risking your heart, because loving people is a risk. It's a risk I never took after Jack hurt me, and that's my life's biggest regret—that I let getting hurt stop me from loving again.*

*Without love, there's little purpose to life. Trust me.*

*So I'm giving you one job, for the rest of your life—trust in love. Know that you'll get hurt along the way, because pain is an inevitable part of living and loving. But trust that the pain will be worth it, because love is worth it. Without it—no matter what else you accomplish—life is only a hollow shell of what it could be.*

M. J.

I read the letter through two more times, and each reading gives me more insight into what I've done. When I saw those photos, my immediate reaction was about the fear of people judging me. I knew I would probably lose my job, but even more than that, I was embarrassed and ashamed that those photos were out there, and afraid that they'd be posted online.

Nate knew that. He knew how I was feeling and he sprang into action doing the one thing that he thought he could do to help—tracking down who sent those photos. I'm not sure if knowing where they came from would have helped, but his first inclination was action, trying to protect me from further hurt. How did I not see that sooner?

*Your job is to surround yourself with the people who will build you up. The people who will be there for you in the good times and the bad.*

That's what I've done. I've surrounded myself with the family I've chosen—Sierra, Petra, Lauren, and Marco—people who will support me no matter what. But the one thing that was missing was love. Someone to love me through the good times and the bad. And that's what Nate has always done. It's what he was still doing in Big Sky. During the bad times, he was still trying to help support me in the one way he knew how—solving the problem. The fact that what I really needed was his arms around me, comforting me—that's on me for not just telling him that. For not asking him to stop what he was doing and support me in the way I needed him to.

And instead of staying with Nate, or bringing him back to Park City with me, letting us draw on each other's strength and love . . . I left him. I was so afraid of what others would think of our relationship that I didn't stop to consider that maybe it only matters what Nate and I think. I did what was easiest. I ran back to Park City.

How will he ever forgive me for this? From his voice mail to Sierra, I can't tell if he will. He said he was done. I'm so tempted to take that at face

value and retreat back into the fortress I built around myself after my accident. Building those walls back up would be easy, and might insulate me from further heartache. But then I glance at Ms. Juarez's letter again.

*Without love, there is little purpose to life.*

If I walk away now, will I spend the rest of my life wondering what would have happened if I'd stayed and fought for us, for what we could be? I think back to what Nate said to me in Italy, the morning after we'd had sex again for the first time. *I want what we had, but better. I want the evolution of the life we planned together.*

I know with absolute certainty—I want that too. But how can I make him believe that I'm in this for forever?

And then the answer is there, so obvious that I don't know why I didn't think of it sooner. There's one thing Nate has always wanted that I've never been willing to give him. Until now.

I dial Sierra's number. "I need your help," I say when she answers the phone. "What are the chances that if I bought you a plane ticket, you'd come out tomorrow?"

"I can do that," she says. "I've got the next few days off for New Year's and the weekend. Peter's traveling right now and he's not going to be back for New Year's Eve anyway." Her voice is sad, and I want to talk about that, but it'll have to wait until she's here.

"Good, because you and I have New Year's plans. I'll send you a plane ticket and a list of some things I need you to bring."

"Is this about Nate?"

"Is anything not? Everything I've done, or not done, for the last five years has been about him. And I need to finally make this right."

"Good," she says, and I'm not sure when she switched back to Team Nate, but I'm glad we're on the same side here. "Send me the details, and I'll be there tomorrow."

## CHAPTER 24



NATE

*Blackstone, New Hampshire*

Jed claps his hand on my shoulder. “This is it, kid,” he says. He’s only five years older than me, so I assume he’s used to talking to his own children this way. “This is going to change your life. You’re one hundred percent sure you want to do this?”

I nod. Even though this isn’t happening the way I wanted it to, I still know that buying the majority share of Blackstone is a smart investment. Originally I did this more for Jackson than anything else—to preserve the mountain she loved and help it grow in a way that would allow it to retain its independent, small-town feel. But it’s a smart investment even if she’s not involved. And this mountain, where I raced for two years in high school while falling in love with Jackson, has sentimental value for me as well.

“It’s not going to be too hard on you, being here all the time even if you’re not with her?”

“You’re my lawyer, Jed, not my therapist.”

He bristles a tad at my comment, evidenced only because his lip twitches and he tightens his grip on my shoulder. “It’s my job to make sure you make good decisions. And I want to know you’re not pissing away this

many millions of dollars on a project you'll lose interest in or that will take a toll on you emotionally."

There's no way this isn't going to take a toll on me emotionally, but it doesn't mean I don't want to do it. This is a smarter investment in my future than racing, so after this season I'll be back in Blackstone growing my business and leading this mountain toward a more sustainable future.

"It'll be fine," I tell him.

"Okay," he says, reaching for the door to the conference room. Behind it sits Blackstone's entire board of directors, including Jackson's dad and her race coach from high school. People I thought would be like family to me by now, but as usual Jackson's inability to fully give her heart away has prevented that.

"Let's do it," I say, nodding my chin toward the door. Jed swings it open, and we walk in.

Thirty minutes and a shit ton of signing paperwork later, I officially own fifty-one percent of Blackstone, and the rights to expand the backside of the mountain and build a small village with a world-class hotel there. Once the paperwork is signed, every member of the board comes over to shake my hand, welcoming me into their fold. Except for Rory Shanahan. He stands at the head of the table with his arms crossed, immobile until every other board member has left.

Rory looks at Jed, then back at me.

"Should I wait outside?" Jed asks.

"Sure, I'll meet you there in a minute," I tell him.

Rory's shoulders relax a tad when Jed leaves, but he still stands there with his arms crossed. "I don't have to tell you how epically you fucked up this time, do I?" he asks.

My spine stiffens. "*I* fucked up? With Jackson, you mean?" He nods in response. "Rory, *she* left me. And I had to find out she resigned from my coach."

"All I know is that my baby is sitting at home with a broken heart. And you are once again to blame."

I think my heart skips a beat when I hear the word *home*. "Jackson is here?"

He nods again. "And she's even more messed up than last time you left. Probably because this time she's not trying to hide her feelings from everyone, telling us she's okay when she's clearly not."

“I’d like to remind you that I left last time because *you* told me to,” I say. I’m not a teenager in need of fatherly advice, and he’s hardly one to give it, given the role he played in our split five years ago.

“That was the right decision at the time. You wouldn’t have made it back then, not the way you two were fighting and making up every few days. *This* was your chance. And you blew it. Whatever she needed from you when those photos were taken, you didn’t give it to her.”

*Oh, he knows about the photos.*

“How could I, when she left me? When she ran away back to Park City and then didn’t even get in touch? It’s been weeks and I haven’t heard from her once. I didn’t even know she was here.”

“Maybe because you ran back to Europe.” His voice is ice.

I focus on keeping my feet firmly planted on the floor, since my body seems to want to launch itself at him, my fists itching for a fight. Anything to release the pent-up anger at how Jackson left me.

“I was called back to Europe by my coach, and told that I’d lose my spot on the team if I delayed at all. I didn’t have a choice. It was Jackson’s *choice* not to call me like she said she would.”

“Did it ever occur to you,” he says as he drops his arms, shoving his hands into his pockets, “that maybe she didn’t call you because she had to find out from her former boss that you were back in Europe? Did you ever stop to think how that looked? Like you were leaving her, just like you did before?”

I pause, wondering why that actually hadn’t occurred to me. I’d been so focused on how *she* had left me, how *she* hadn’t called when she said she would. She knew my back was better and that I was due to go back to racing. Sure, I went back a little earlier than expected thanks to those photos being sent to my coach, but I didn’t leave her.

*Did I?*

Rory takes in my face, the way my shoulders have slumped. “You actually didn’t stop to think about that, did you?” he asks. I shake my head. “When did you guys get so bad at communicating? You were so good at it when you first started dating. Where did you go wrong?”

I think back to when Jackson and I were in high school, to the rumors and the misunderstandings we had to sort through, to our promise that we’d always be open and honest with each other. That there’d be no secrets. Then I think about the years when she was racing on the World Cup circuit, when

I was open and honest about wanting to marry her and about my jealousy over her friendship with Marco, but she kept from me the fact that she was planning on retiring. And then we when got back together a few weeks ago, I was open and honest with her about my intentions, but she was still keeping secrets. Then again, Blackstone is probably the biggest secret I've ever had and I couldn't tell her about it either.

"I think you'll have to ask her that question," I tell Rory, "since she was the one telling me that we'd make this work whatever the cost, but not telling me that she was planning to move back here and work at Danforth."

I can tell by the way Rory's eyes go wide that he expected she'd told me about that.

"Right, so if you want to talk about people not communicating, keeping secrets that affect the other person's life, maybe you need to talk to your daughter." I reach into my bag and pull out a sealed manilla envelope. "And while you're at it, give her this too."

Rory glances at the envelope, his eyebrows dipping as he looks at it.

"It's every shred of original evidence that those photos existed. The original SD card they were taken on, as well as the only printed copies." I think back to the process of getting them from Johnny Todd, my nemesis in Big Sky. I'd explained the entire situation to Jackson on a notecard tucked into that envelope. I'd assured her that she didn't have to worry about those photos ever being shared or published. As mad as I was at her for the way she left me, I still wanted to put her mind at ease. I was planning to overnight that envelope to her in Park City once this meeting was over. As it turns out, that would have been a waste.

"Okay," Rory says, eyeing the envelope in his hand like he's holding a bomb. "I'll give them to her. And I'll see you tomorrow at the gala. You're ready for that?"

"I am," I tell him. Or at least, I will be by then.



The party's in full swing when Rory steps up to the podium at the front of the room, next to the projection screen that's been showing photos of the ski team on a loop for the last hour.

“It’s your big moment,” my dad says, smiling into his beer as he lifts the bottle to his lips.

“I don’t know why I feel so nervous.”

“Because you’re taking a big risk. You’d be foolish if you didn’t know that not everyone is going to love these changes. And I didn’t raise you to be foolish.” Growing up, my dad wasn’t the most emotionally available parent. He worked too much and he left most of the loving up to my mom. But Dad never did anything halfway. I think back to what I learned from him—how to always go after what you want, how to take calculated risks, how to persevere when things get tough, and how to know when to cut your losses. And maybe most importantly, how to love someone with your whole heart. He set that example in the way he loved my mom, and in the way he still loves her, five years after she died.

“No, you sure didn’t,” I say and tip back my drink too.

“You did good,” he tells me, glancing over and giving me a half smile because apparently it’d kill him to give me his full approval.

“I know.” I’m confident in my own decision-making abilities and I didn’t do this for his approval. In fact, the only person whose approval I actually care about regarding this transaction is Jackson’s. And given that her dad gave her those photos yesterday and I *still* haven’t heard from her, it’s safe to say that I probably never will—whether she agrees with my purchase of Blackstone or not.

The background music that’s been playing dies down, and Rory’s voice rings out from the podium. “For those of you who might not know me,” he says, as if there’s anyone at Blackstone who doesn’t know him, “my name is Rory Shanahan. I’m on the board of directors here, and we want to thank you for coming out tonight for this amazing event put on by our ski team. Every bit of the profit tonight goes to support the boys and girls who race for our mountain, and I’d like to take a moment to thank them. Can you all come up please?”

About forty kids, ages eight to eighteen come up to the front, all of them in the black pants and white dress shirts they’ve worn as they’ve worked this event together. We give them a round of applause, and as they leave the front of the room Rory leans in to the microphone.

“Some of you know that I’ve owned property here and been coming to this mountain for well over thirty years. I taught both my kids to ski here. My son, Beau, learned to love snowboarding instead, but my daughter,



Jackson, raced for the Blackstone team until she moved on to Danforth and eventually the National Ski Team.” Everyone claps, even though this isn’t a new story. Jackson is skiing royalty at this mountain. “And Blackstone has changed quite a bit since I started skiing here. New trails, big additions to the lodge, and new lifts—thank God!” The audience chuckles. “And even though every change that’s happened here has been positive in the long run, sometimes change can be hard. The board has mentioned that there’d be a big announcement tonight, and so I want to prepare you for some changes that are going to be taking place starting next season.” A low-level murmur rises up from the gala attendees.

Rory explains how climate change is making it more difficult and expensive to run a ski resort, and about the multiple offers they’ve turned down to be purchased by major ski conglomerates. “To some extent, I think we all fear change. The board was afraid of losing the intimate and independent feel that we have here. But then, earlier this year we got a very different kind of offer. One that would allow us to grow on a reasonable scale by adding twelve runs and a small luxury hotel to the backside of the mountain. And the part that really sealed the deal was that the offer came from a veteran of the Blackstone Mountain Ski Team. You more likely know him from the waves he’s been making as a rookie this year on the National Ski Team. I’d like to invite Nate Davenport up here to tell you a little more about these plans.”

Heads spin toward me and the crowd parts as I head up toward Rory. This is a warmer welcome than I’d expected from him, all things considered. He shakes my hand, then gestures toward the podium.

I hate public speaking. I can power through it only because I’m too arrogant to make a fool of myself, but I always keep my remarks brief.

“Like Rory mentioned, I spent several of the happiest years of my life here at Blackstone. There’s nothing I want to change about the feel of this mountain. In fact, the main reason I wanted to invest in it is to preserve the independent spirit, while helping it to grow in a fiscally sustainable way that will ensure we can continue raising generations of ski lovers who feel the same way we do about Blackstone. And I know that any description I give won’t be able to do my vision justice, so I had some of the people I work with put together this video to show you what’s possible and the timeline for this growth.”

I tip my chin to the guy in the back who is running the AV and the lights dim even further as the video starts on the screen behind me. Through the many rounds of editing I've seen it at least fifty times, so I don't focus on it at all. Instead, I watch the audience—the men and women who love Blackstone and are raising families who feel the same way. And thankfully, almost all of them are smiling and nodding as they watch the video, “oohing” and “aahing” at the stunning architecture of the new hotel and the small village of local shops and restaurants around it.

When the video ends, most of the adults are clapping and the teenagers around the edge of the room—the ski racers who are experiencing Blackstone the same way I did at their age—are high-fiving each other. I step back up to the podium to say a few words, but the lights don't come back up. I make eye contact with the AV guy across the room, but he just shrugs and then taps a button on his computer.

I about give myself whiplash with how fast I turn toward the screen when I hear Jackson's voice. Her face fills the white space, her cheeks pink from the cold weather and her green eyes bright and alive. She's standing on the deck of the Blackstone lodge, I can tell because I can see the ski team cabin next to the lift behind her.

“Hi, everyone,” she says. I glance out at the audience and lock eyes with Rory, whose arm is around Jackson's mom. When he winks, I have the sickening feeling he's set me up somehow. “If we haven't met yet, I'm Jackson Shanahan. I grew up skiing at Blackstone, and it holds a very special place in my heart. Here I learned about perseverance and dedication. Those lessons helped me achieve *some* of my dreams.” She pauses for a moment while the picture of her receiving her Olympic gold medal flashes on the screen. “And for that I'll always be grateful.”

That picture is replaced by a picture of the two of us when we were teenagers, out on the same deck she was just standing on at the beginning of the video. There's a fleeting moment where I wonder how we were so young, just babies really, and I already knew then that I wanted her in my life forever. That thought sinks to the pit of my stomach like a lead weight.

“However, the other reason that Blackstone will always be home, is because it's where I learned how to love.” A slideshow of pictures of us continues as she says, “Nate came into my life when the only thing I cared about was skiing, and he taught me that achieving your goals and living out

your dream is so much sweeter when you have someone to share those ups and downs with.”

By now, we’re into pictures of us when she was racing on the World Cup in our early twenties. “Nate and I planned our lives together, but we were young and it turns out I was a little too determined and a little too focused on my goals. I let the best thing I ever had slip right out of my hands.” The picture of her crash at Val d’Isère makes me visibly flinch, like it always has, but it’s quickly replaced with photos of her in the hospital—giving a thumbs-up even though she’s so bruised and scabbed up she’s hardly recognizable, learning to walk again after her hip surgery, and one where she’s sleeping with a stuffed penguin.

“You might think I’m talking about the crash that ended my racing career, but I’m not. I’m talking about the five years after that, the ones I spent without Nate in my life.” The video cuts over to footage of her wearing a sexy black dress, and . . . my eyes scan from the projection screen to the room because in the video she’s definitely standing in this lodge and it’s already decorated for tonight’s event. Does this mean she was here earlier? Is she still here?

“The reality is, when you’ve been loved the way Nate loved me, there is no way to fill the void that’s left when it’s over.” She takes a fortifying breath and looks straight at the camera. Her chin is dipped and her green eyes are glassy. “Nate, I’m going to be more honest right now than I’ve ever been. You told me that you wanted what we had, but better . . . the evolution of the life we’d planned together. I need you to know that I want all those things too, and I want them with you. I’ll never stop wanting that, even if sometimes I am stubborn or get scared and pull away. Loving you has always been the driving force of my life,” she says, and I can feel the tingling in my nose as a lump takes up residence in my throat, and goddammit I will *not* get teary-eyed in front of this whole fucking room, no matter how long I’ve waited to hear her say this.

The next words out of her mouth absolutely floor me.

## CHAPTER 25



### JACKSON

*Blackstone, New Hampshire*

From my hiding spot in a darkened hallway at the back of the lodge, I'm torn between keeping my eyes on Sierra and watching Nate's reaction to this video. He hasn't stormed out of the room, which I was afraid might actually be a possibility. Instead, he's stood in the same spot since my face first appeared on the screen as if he's grown roots and can't move. I pray that's a good sign.

I swing my eyes back to Sierra and she gives me the signal I've been waiting for.

I slip out into the room at the back of the crowd, cringing a little as I watch myself on the screen in front. "I want to still be loving you when I'm eighty. I want to watch our kids and our grandkids learn to ski at this mountain we both love." I start walking forward, weaving my way through the crowd until there are whispers all around me and the crowd parts. I arrive at the front of the room right as, on video, I tell Nate, "I want to spend the rest of my life with you, Nate Davenport. If you'll still have me."

He turns back to the front of the room, freezing when he sees me standing there only a few feet from him. There's a moment when our eyes

lock but neither of us move, where I'm afraid that it's not enough. That I've waited too long to finally say yes to him. That despite the distance we've come and how intertwined our journeys have been, that we still won't have what it takes to cross the finish line together.

Then Nate steps forward, holding his hand out toward me. I want to jump into his arms, but I step forward until we're toe-to-toe, ignoring all the whispers behind me.

Nate drops his forehead to mine. "I'll only say yes on one condition."

"Anything," I say, and I mean it. There's nothing I wouldn't do for this man.

Nate clasps my hands in his and pulls his head back to look me in the eyes. His voice is strong when he says, "I've known I wanted to marry you for a decade. And I've almost proposed so many times I've lost count. So here's my condition—I will propose to you, and when I do, I need you to finally say yes."

My eyes are locked on his so I'm not sure if he notices my smile. "Pretty sure I just proposed to you."

"I heard no question there. I've been waiting for years, you're not taking this opportunity away from me."

I can't hold back any longer. I launch myself at him, throwing my arms around his neck and he lifts me off the ground. All around us, people are clapping and cheering, but as he slides me down his body until my feet hit the ground, I hardly even notice them. They're just background noise preventing him from hearing my response.

"Yes," I say, looking up at his face. I bring my hands around to his face, cup his jaw in both hands, and bring his mouth down to mine. My lips brush his softly before I whisper, "When you propose, my answer will be—a thousand times—yes."

# EPILOGUE

## JACKSON

*Four Months Later*  
*Blackstone, New Hampshire*

I pull into the parking lot, which is one big mud pit now that the snow has melted and the ground is thawing, when my phone buzzes with a text.

**Nate:** *I'm running a few minutes late. I'll meet you inside.*

Even though it'll probably only be a few minutes until he's here, I hate that anything is keeping him from me. He's been gone for the past three months, and I need to see him in the same way I need air to breathe.

After spending New Year's together, he headed back to Europe to finish the season. I flew over twice to visit him, and I would have liked to have been there for more of his races, but my life has mostly been consumed by this project at Blackstone.

We broke ground over a month ago, in early March, and since then the hotel has looked like a steel skeleton rising out of the mud pits of northern New Hampshire. Every time I traverse the dirt road that will eventually be paved and landscaped and serve as a fitting entrance to the hotel we're building, I hope to see more progress. And today, it happened. Our hotel now has exterior walls wrapped in breathable "house wrap" to protect it from the inevitable spring rains. In the last month alone, I've learned more

about building codes, structural engineering, roofing materials, and weatherproofing than I ever thought I'd know in a lifetime. And that's just for the exterior. I'm excited to move on to the interior once the windows go in, and the plank siding and stone accents go up. I can't wait to see our vision become a reality.

I head in through the side entrance where the cubbies are set up with everyone's labeled hard hats. I wish I was wearing something sexier for the first time I'm seeing Nate in too long, but the steel toe work boots are a requirement for the job site, and jeans with my long-sleeve fitted T-shirt and down vest help me not stand out like a sore thumb in this construction zone. I smile to myself at the entirely sheer lingerie I've got underneath it, because that'll be fun to show Nate once I have him to myself.

But first, we need to have the town inspector sign off on the solar panels that were installed on the roof last week, and on the electrical work in the control room where the enormous batteries are stored. We're planning on keeping the carbon footprint of this hotel as small as possible, and the solar panels will help. I can't wait for Nate to see the progress that's been made, and for him to be here for all the future rounds of executing our dream.

"Jackson," our contractor calls from above me where he's walking on a steel beam twenty feet in the air like it's the most normal thing in the world. "I'll meet you in the lobby. Wait till you see what we've accomplished in the last two days."

"The outside was surprise enough! You got more done in here too?"

"Come and see for yourself." He jerks his thumb over his shoulder in the direction of the lobby, then spins on his heels and starts walking toward the front entrance to the hotel.

I head down a hallway framed out with two-by-fours toward the cavernous two-story space that will one day be our beautiful lobby with a soaring stone fireplace. As I take the last few steps from the end of the hallway into the vast open area of the lobby, a hush falls over the room. The music and the rhythmic sound of construction tools—it just fades away as one by one the construction crew stops working and someone lowers the volume on the stereo they normally keep loud enough to hear over the tools.

I'm about to glance up at the second floor balcony that surrounds the lobby on three sides to ask Jim what's going on, when instead my breath catches in my throat. In the middle of the two-story space, with light streaming in behind him through what will soon be enormous windows,

stands my man. He's lit up in the sunlight, his face so smooth and chiseled it's like Michelangelo might have sculpted it out of stone, and when he sees me a smile practically breaks that exquisitely carved face in half.

My feet carry me across the plywood floors faster than I've ever run before, and without even thinking twice about it, I launch myself at him, wrapping my arms around his neck and my legs around his waist. "You're here," I breathe, my cheek resting against his as I cling to him.

"I've missed you too." He tilts his head to the side, sliding his lips along mine. I pour everything I have—my longing, my fears, my dreams—into that kiss. I don't tell him how happy I am to finally have him home. I show him.

And that's when the whistling starts—the kind of catcall whistles that usually precede some guy calling out "get a room." Remembering that we're in the middle of a construction zone, I drop my feet to the ground and give him a perfunctory kiss as I pull away.

Nate leans his head down, his voice a growl next to my ear. "How long until we get naked?"

"We just have a couple inspections, then we can head home."

"Not sure I'll make it that long," he says.

The work zone is still unusually quiet, so I glance around to see what's going on. But oddly, not a single person is facing us. They all look very busy intentionally avoiding us.

I turn back to Nate to ask if he's noticing this too, but he's not standing there anymore. My eyes swing lower to where he kneels on one knee, and my gasp is so sudden and so loud that it fills the entire space.

He reaches out and takes my hand in his. "I've known I loved you for twelve years, four months, and eleven days. I've known I was going to marry you for a decade. I've lost count of how many times I've wanted to ask you."

I assume he's talking about *Before*.

"But I waited because we both needed to be ready to build a life together. At the time, I told myself I was waiting because *you* weren't ready. But really, maybe I wasn't ready either. Maybe somehow I knew that we both deserved better than what we were able to give each other back then. I can't promise that everything is going to be perfect from here on out. We're both too headstrong for that. But I can promise you it's going to be worth it."



I want to say “yes” and launch myself into his arms, but he’s been waiting so long to ask the question that it’s only right I let him get that part out. So instead, I just nod and swallow back all the emotions that are about to come tumbling out of me.

“I want to spend every day of the rest of my life proving to you how much I love you, how worth the wait you’ve been. I want to watch our dreams grow together, to see our kids grow up in this place we both love so much. I want to grow old with you, but not too quickly”—he smiles—“because I want to make sure we spend time enjoying every moment along the way.”

There is an actual lump in my throat that I painfully swallow down as my eyes fill with tears and I wonder how in the world I ever tried to convince myself Nate wasn’t the one for me. I’ve known it all along, and can hardly remember why I ever fought these feelings.

He holds out a ring box, flipping the top open. “Jackson, will you marry me?”

I crumple to my knees. The question, I was expecting. What’s inside that box, it’s left me breathless. There, looking back at me is a three carat emerald cut diamond with smaller princess cut diamonds all the way around the band. I’d know that ring anywhere, because his mom wore it on her finger every day. “Is that . . .?” I trail off, the words unable to rise past that lump that’s back in my throat.

“It’s not an exaggeration to say that her last request was that I give you this ring,” he says, his voice thick with emotion.

I reach my hands out and cup his face in mine. “Yes.” I smile. “Yes, I will marry you. And I promise I’ll spend every day making sure that I love you better than I ever have. You are the best thing that’s ever happened to me, Nate, and I can’t wait to live our dreams together.”

I kiss him gently, our lips barely touching, ghosting over one another in a silent promise. Then Nate pulls away and takes my hand, sliding the ring on my finger.

Around us, the room explodes into cheers and we both look up. The entire balcony is filled with people and now they’re facing us. As my eyes track across them I recognize each and every face—my parents, Sierra, Petra, and Lauren, Mr. Davenport, Jeff, Marco and Christian, our best friends from high school, my friends from our high school ski team, people from the National Ski Team, people we’ve worked with and become friends

with here in Blackstone. The room isn't filled with construction workers, it's filled with everyone who's known us and loved us since we met.

My head snaps back to Nate. "How did you do this?" The level of coordination this must have taken astounds me.

He stands and pulls me up by my hand, kissing my cheek once I'm back on my feet. "I sent people plane tickets, obviously." His smirk is so quintessentially Nate that I can't help but laugh.

"No one else could pull something like this off." I shake my head in amazement while I soak in the cheering of our friends and family. I'm pretty sure people are shooting off confetti cannons because there is colored paper floating down around us, but I can't take my eyes off Nate.

"There are no lengths I wouldn't go to in order to make you happy, Jackson." He wraps me in his arms and brings his lips to mine, whispering, "This is just the beginning."

## **THE END**

Not ready to see Jackson and Nate's story end? [Click here](#) to get Jackson and Nate's bonus epilogue so you can see what they're up to in the future.

Keep reading for an excerpt from Sierra's book, **OUT OF BOUNDS**.

## OUT OF BOUNDS

**I'm a type-A planner. Arriving at my best friend's wedding newly single—not planned. Off-the-charts chemistry with her much younger brother—also unplanned. Agreeing to be his roommate for a few weeks—wait, was there a plan?**

Jilted by my cheating ex-fiancé and left homeless in the process, it's a no-brainer to take my best friend Jackson up on her offer to stay in her condo in Park City. The only catch? Jackson's already agreed to let her much younger brother Beau stay there for a few weeks.

Living with Beau short-term *shouldn't* be an issue, except when we meet again for the first time in a decade, our chemistry is off the charts. But Beau is everything I'm not looking for in a guy: he's unpredictable and self-centered, a known womanizer, and incapable of committing to anything besides traveling the globe snowboarding. Plus, no guy is worth losing my best friend over.

As barely tolerating each other turns to barely restrained attraction, our relationship is pushed far past the boundaries we've both erected. Can we keep it casual as our relationship heats up, or are we risking every plan we've ever made?

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*Read on for a short excerpt from Sierra and Beau's book.*

## Sierra

The bar's a little busy when I arrive, which is to say that the one bartender is having trouble keeping up with the twenty or so people who all want drinks at the same time. I give her a sympathetic smile as she deals with a group of older men who are shamelessly flirting with her.

The cocktail reception the night before Jackson and Nate's rehearsal is hopping, and it's weird that I know almost no one here. I guess that's what happens when your best friend moves across the country and starts a whole new life with her soon-to-be husband.

I grab one of the cocktail plates sitting on the bar and collect some hors d'oeuvres from the passing servers. After the late lunch with my mom that left my stomach turning sour, I wasn't in the mood for dinner. But I'm already feeling that one glass of wine I had in my hotel room and know that if I don't put food in me now, the alcohol will hit me hard. I don't need to add a hangover to the list of reasons this weekend already sucks for me. Nope, it's only up from here.

*Think about how far you've come, I remind myself. Think about the job you love and the life you've built for yourself. The wonderful life you'll continue to build without your cheating ex, because fuck him.* I spear an olive with my toothpick wishing it was Peter's heart.

I'm furious at myself for not seeing the signs. I'm embarrassed and ashamed that I let someone deceive me like Peter did. But, I'm not heartbroken. Maybe that part comes later, after the anger fades?

Another bartender comes through the swinging door behind the bar with a fresh rack of glasses. After setting them on the bar, he turns his attention to me.

"What can I get you?" he asks.

"Prosecco?" I could use something bubbly.

He pops the cork out of the already open bottle and gives me a heavy pour. "Have a great night," he says as he slides the glass over to me.

I thank him and shove the last of my hors d'oeuvres, a goat cheese stuffed fig, in my mouth so I don't have to carry my plate back to our table.

I realize—too late—that I really should have taken smaller bites. It's so large I can hardly chew it.

"Hey," I hear from beside me. The voice is smooth and rich, deep without being raspy. I glance up, and *holy shit*, he's even more gorgeous up close. The eyes that looked almost black from across the hotel lobby this afternoon are a dark brown with flecks of amber around the pupil. His skin is pale with olive undertones, and if the thick scruff on his face is any indication, it's been a few days since he's shaven. And he's so close—sitting on the barstool right next to me—though I have no idea how he got there. Was he there the whole time? Or was I so lost in my own thoughts that I didn't even notice when he sat down?

I give him a closed-mouth smile, then point to my mouth as I start chewing. This is humiliating. Why can't I just be normal and not have shoved a huge fig in my mouth before the hottest guy in the place started talking to me?

He takes a sip of his drink. "I hope it's good," he says as I chew.

I lift one eyebrow and nod. I can feel myself turning red from embarrassment. But after I swallow about half of my bite, I recover with, "Oh, *it's good.*"

His resulting smile is blinding. Seriously. And the seductive laugh that follows is an aphrodisiac. After I finally swallow the rest of my food, I take a sip of my Prosecco, set my elbow on the bar, and rest my chin on my palm as I lean toward him. "I highly recommend the stuffed figs."

"Interesting choice," he says, and his eyes track from my face down my body.

"Why is that?" I ask, analyzing his face closely. There's something so familiar about him, but I can't figure out how I know him.

"Well, figs have a long history of being linked to human sexuality."

"Do they, now?" Clearly I'm skeptical.

"In the Western world, fig leaves are often used in art to cover, or represent, men's and women's"—he glances down where my dress folds in my lap—"genitals. According to several ancient texts, Adam and Eve gained their knowledge of good and evil from a fig tree in the Garden of Eden—thus the fig is the 'forbidden fruit.' And in some Eastern religions, the fig represents feminine sexuality. They're often used to symbolize the *yoni*, which in Hinduism is a symbol of the divine procreative energy and is a representation of the goddess Shakti."

“You know an awful lot about”—without even meaning to, I lean toward him like he’s a magnet—“figs,” I say, trying not to laugh. He has got to be making this up.

“You don’t believe me,” he says, but his voice is teasing. He’s not offended in the least.

“Do you specialize in figs?” I tease as I pull a lock of my hair back behind my ear.

“Not exactly,” he says.

I tilt my head to the side like I’m analyzing him and his story. “Is knowing about figs part of your job?”

“Not really.” The hint of a smile plays at his lips.

“Do you grow figs?”

“Can’t say that I do.” His low voice is somehow familiar, an eerie yet comforting sound.

“So why would I believe you?”

“Care to place a little wager on this?” he asks as he moves his hand so it rests on the back of my barstool. I’ve never felt more comfortable being boxed in by a man.

I take another sip of my Prosecco and the glass is nearly empty. *When and how did that happen?* My brain reminds me that he wouldn’t want to wager on this unless he actually did know a thing or two about the topic. If he was blatantly making shit up, he wouldn’t offer up a bet. Unless he’s bluffing?

“What do you have in mind?” I ask, eyeing him over the rim of my glass.

“If I’m right, you have to *really* try to catch the bouquet at the wedding.”

I roll my eyes right in his face. “No, thanks.”

“Why not?” His head is only a foot from mine, and I don’t remember how we got quite so close.

“I don’t want to catch it.”

“Fair enough,” he says, sitting back in his seat. “But look into figs when you have a minute, just so you’ll know if I was making all that up.”

“Were you?”

“I guess you’ll find out.” He shrugs.

I take my last sip of the Prosecco and set my empty glass on the bar, hoping the bartender will notice I need a refill. “So, do you live around

here, or are you in town for the wedding?”

“Just in town for the wedding,” he says, but the way his lips curve up on one side makes it seem like there’s more to his words than I’m understanding.

“So, how do you know Jackson and Nate?”

A silent laugh makes his shoulders shake. A fact that barely registers because I can’t stop looking at his ridiculously gorgeous smile and those full lips surrounded by closely trimmed facial hair. They are stupidly kissable, and that’s all I can think about as I gaze at them. “I’ve known the Shanahans my whole life.”

“Then why haven’t we met before?”

“What makes you think we haven’t?”

*Is he fucking with me?* “I think I’d remember if we’d met.”

“And why’s that?” he asks, a mischievous sparkle in his eyes.

*Fishing for compliments, I see.* Obviously I’m not going to tell him he’s too hot to have forgotten about. “I have a good memory.”

He starts to lean toward me again, but then there’s a hand on his shoulder and one on mine, and I turn to find Jackson literally in my face.

“I’m so glad you two found each other,” she says. Which probably means that this hottie is one of Nate’s single college friends she mentioned earlier. She turns toward him and says, “I’ve been looking for you. Did Sierra already catch you up on the roommate situation?”

*Roommate situation?* My brain must be a little fuzzy from the Prosecco, because I thought her little brother was going to be my . . .

*Oh.*

*Holy.*

*Crap.*

They both look at me expectantly, but it’s like my tongue is paralyzed inside my mouth. My brain is too busy trying to convince my lungs not to hyperventilate, it can’t focus on forming words anyway.

“The roommate situation?” he says.

“Yeah,” Jackson says when I don’t respond. “Sierra needs a place to stay while she looks for a new apartment, so I told her she could have one of the bedrooms in my condo. I hope you’ll be a good roommate,” she says to him, but the way she says it she might as well have said *don’t be a dick to my best friend.*

“Probably time we set some roommate ground rules then,” Beau says and gives me a wicked grin. “Talk to you later, Jax.”

Jackson bristles, as she always does when anyone but Nate calls her by that nickname, but she doesn’t move. She looks at me like she’s trying to figure out if I want to stay and have this conversation or if I need her to help me escape.

“I’ll be over in a minute,” I tell her. She nods, and as she walks away I suddenly wish I’d just gotten up and gone with her. Why the hell did I stay here with Beau?

“So,” he says before his top teeth sink into that lower lip. “I guess you didn’t recognize me.”

“Obviously.” My mind is spinning, and a million questions are bouncing around in there. *Has he grown a foot and gained forty pounds of muscle since I last saw him? How could a shorter haircut and facial hair so completely change someone’s look? Does flirting with my best friend’s little brother make me the sleaziest maid of honor ever? I can’t take my eyes off him, how am I going to live with him?*

That last thought is the one that’s got my stomach turning over, because I can’t convince myself that this delicious man sitting in front of me—so confident and powerful and large—is the scrappy little brother I used to hang out with every weekend growing up. The boy I knew was just that—a boy—and he looked and sounded nothing like this man. Even the last time I saw him, when he was still in high school, he hadn’t lost the baby fat in his face, was barely taller than me, and probably outweighed me by all of twenty pounds.

*Still, how could I not have known?* I wonder. I guess because I expected Beau to look like a grown-up version of that boy, and he’s changed a lot. I try to remember the last time I saw a picture of him when he didn’t have ski goggles and a helmet on, and I can’t think of a time.

“I feel like you’re having a moment right now,” he says, his eyes sweeping over my face before he turns toward the bar and orders us both more drinks.

I watch him talk to the bartender, and I realize that I had actually bought into Petra’s plan for rebound sex, and I’d been hoping it would be with him. *No, no, no.*

Why does he have to be so easy to talk to? Why does he have to be so good looking? Why does he have to be so much younger than me, and share



DNA with my best friend?

“Here you go,” he says as he hands me the champagne flute filled with another glass of bubbly. I stare at the glass in my hand like I’ve forgotten what to do with it.

“I can’t be your roommate,” I blurt out.

I cringe at this new reality where I am officially the most awkward person in human history.

Beau raises an eyebrow at me, and says, “Take a breath, and a drink.”

“Don’t patronize me, Beau.”

“Why are you looking for a new place to live?”

“My old living arrangement fell through.” I take a drink just to break the eye contact, then glance at the mirror above the bar. He’s still staring at me, but he doesn’t press me for more details, which I appreciate.

“So why can’t we be roommates, exactly?”

“I . . .” I don’t know what to say. “I don’t really want to live with a guy.”

“But you knew what the roommate situation was and you agreed to it. Until you realized exactly who *I* was.” He puts a hand on his chest and I realize the trap he’s placed me in. I was okay living with Beau when I thought it was Jackson’s little brother who I had zero interest in. But this gorgeous man bantering with me, the one I’m stupidly attracted to but could never touch because of who he is—*him* I don’t think I can live with. “You afraid you won’t be able to keep your hands off me if we’re roommates, Sierra?”

The sound of my name on his tongue might be the sexiest thing I’ve ever heard, and it has me flushing. The heat travels up my chest and my neck as I mumble, “Don’t be ridiculous.”

“Then it’s settled, Roomie. On one condition.”

“I haven’t even agreed to live with you and you think you’re setting conditions?”

“Believe me, you’ll be okay with this one.” He pauses. “You have to take the master bedroom.”

“Why? The spare bedroom is still filled with my furniture from when I lived there.”

“Because honestly, I can’t stay in a room and sleep in a bed that I know Nate was fucking my sister in.”

For reasons I don't understand, I'm turned-on by the word *fucking* coming out of his mouth. It's the way his teeth press into his lip before the word rolls off his tongue and the slow way he enunciates it. It's actually a sensual word to watch someone say—not that I've noticed before now. But once again my eyes are glued to his lips, and when his tongue darts out to wet them, I feel the familiar pull of attraction right between my legs.

*I need to get out of here, away from him.*

“Fine,” I say as I push my barstool back and stand. I should have thought about the close proximity that'd put us in before I did it though, because suddenly his face and mine are only inches apart and I'm standing between his legs. “I'll take the master.”

I grab my drink off the bar and turn, pushing past his knee in my rush to get away. And as I walk back toward Jackson and Petra, I'm trying to figure out if the sound I hear is him laughing at me, or if it's all in my imagination.

*Author's Note: If you don't like adorably possessed shelter puppies, sexy roommates in gray sweatpants, family curses, unexpected trips to Las Vegas, and steamy off-limits secret flings, this book isn't for you. But if you like all that and a happy ending, [click here for Sierra and Beau's book](#).*

## AFTERWORD

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Julia Connors grew up on the warm and sunny West Coast, but her first decision as an adult was to trade her flip-flops for snow boots and move to Boston. She's been enjoying everything that New England has to offer for over two decades, and now that she's acclimated to the snowy winters and finally found all the places to get good sushi and tacos, she has zero regrets. You can usually find her in front of her computer, but when she stops writing she's most likely to be found outdoors, preferably with a pair of skis or snowshoes strapped to her feet in winter, or on a paddleboard in the summer.



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