



Stuck With Mr. Frosty

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Category: Romance, New Adult

Description: She came to the mountains hoping for peace and a fresh start.

Instead, she found a grumpy search and rescue expert, and his charming dog...

If only her heart would listen to logic instead of wagging right along with that tail...

HER

I came to Aspen seeking healing, and all I found was six feet of sheer frustration.

Aiden's one redeeming feature is his adorable dog, Honey,

But even she isn't enough to take the edge off.

We need to find a way to break this tension between us, stat,

Otherwise, there's no telling what I'll do...

HIM

The moment she arrived, I knew it was going to be the longest few weeks of my life.

Mia Kirk could have been designed to annoy me,

And now we're forced to share a cabin for the season.

A switch flips when I realize she's not just a vapid party girl, but the most intriguing person I've met in years.

And then the chemistry between us ignites with an intensity I've never experienced before...

We both know it's no-strings. I've spent my whole life on the road, and I'm not about to settle down now,

Even if, for reasons I don't understand, she has me thinking about it,

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CHAPTER 1

MIA

I'm finally home, Mom.

All right, maybe the ski resort wasn't home, but when I think of Mom, this is the only place I can picture her.

And right now, more than ever, I need to be able to connect with her. To be in the place where her spirit lingers. To talk to her about the way my life feels like it's spinning out of control.

I take a deep breath and grab the hot-pink duffel bag and the matching case with my ski gear. I can do this.

The other volunteers are gathered outside the resort, laughing as snow falls down around them, their breath coming out in white puffs of air. They all gather their supplies, looking like they don't have a care in the world.

And then a dog comes bounding through the snow, its tongue lolling out of the side of its mouth.

The Bernese Mountain Dog comes to a skidding halt in front of me, rooting through the drifts of snow, its black tail wagging back and forth. I smile and watch the dog, longing to run my fingers through its silky black fur.

It looks up at me, the two tan patches above its eyes looking like eyebrows. The long black fur and the white patches remind me of a paint-by-number kit of a similar dog I did as a child. The dog cocks its head to the side, letting out a low whine.

“Honey!” a man says, his tone sharp as he claps his hand to his thigh. “Come here.”

She turns without a second thought and races through the snow, leaping at the last moment and throwing herself into the man’s arms. Even with his puffy black jacket and what has to be ninety pounds of dog flying at him, he catches her with ease.

I stare at the two for a moment, considering going over and saying hello. It would be good to make friends here before the season starts. I’m sure most of my time will be spent on the slopes, teaching people how to ski for the first time or trying to make sure it goes smoothly for them.

Mom’s favorite part of the job was teaching people to ski.

The sun glints off the massive log resort coated in a powdery dusting. The windows still have the same shine, revealing the giant Christmas tree that has been decorated in golden hues. The lights twinkle.

For a moment, it feels like coming home.

I’m here, Mom. I came back to see you.

“You must be new,” a woman says as she picks up a bag near me. “We best get going inside to the orientation.”

“I’m Mia.” I follow behind her toward the long steps that lead up to a massive front porch with fire pits and wooden chairs. “And not entirely new. I used to come here with my mom. She was one of the instructors.”

“I’m Rosie.” Her brown eyes lit up with glee. “Is your mom here now?”

“Um. No.” I force a smile even as a sharp pain sits in the center of my chest. “She died a little less than a year ago.”

Rosie pauses, tucking her chocolate-colored hair behind one ear. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Thanks. Anyway, what’s this about the orientation?”

“We have it every year.” Rosie hauled her bag higher up on her shoulder, studying me for a moment. “You’re Heather’s daughter, aren’t you?”

My cheeks feel like they’re on fire as I nod.

Rosie smiles, her eyes turning glassy. “You have the same eyes; like the color of the valley in the spring. Same smile, too. I used to work with her when I first started working here. Didn’t get to spend too much time with her, but she always seemed nice. Not like some of the other instructors who are going to see you as a threat to their jobs.”

“Perfect. Just what I need.”

Laughing, Rosie nods to the group in the center of the lodge, a man standing on the front counter. “Looks like Jerry’s ready to start the meeting.”

More people filter into the room, forming a half-circle around Jerry. I set my bags down at my feet, rolling my shoulder to ease some of the pain from the duffel bag’s thin strap cutting into it.

“It’s good to see you all back for another year,” Jerry says, projecting his voice

through the room. “We’re going to take the next couple hours to get to know each other and to get settled into the cabins.”

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I glance at Rosie. “Cabins?”

She nods, glancing around the room like she’s taking it all in for the first time, her eyes wide and her hands on her curvy hips. “Oh, yeah. You share a cabin with three other people. They’re hidden back in the woods so the rich people at the resort don’t see them.”

“Or so they can’t find us to bother us on our days off,” a man says from my other side, giving me a wink. “Ryder.”

“Mia.”

Rosie rolls her eyes. “Don’t let him charm you, Mia. He’s slept with half the women here, and I’m sure his goal this year is to sleep with the other half.”

“Always have to ruin a good time, don’t you, Rosie Posey?” Ryder crosses his arms over his chest. “You should stick with me, kid. I know this place like the back of my hand. Know all the good spots to hide from ol’ Jerry too.”

Jerry, as if summoned by Ryder talking about him, looks straight at us. “Your cabin assignments are on the wall. And even though most of you are still young, I expect you to behave in a way that would be considered respectable.”

Ryder groans, his head falling back. People around us laugh, indicating that there’s no chance any of them are going to behave. Not that I’m surprised. I’m sure most of them are accustomed to running wild at night.

At least, they are if half of the stories Mom used to tell were true.

Jerry gestures to the desk he's standing on. "If any of you have a problem, come and speak with me directly. I will be near this desk most of the time. If I'm not, have whoever is standing here call for me, regardless of the time of day."

Murmurs go through the crowd before Jerry claps his hands together. He hops down from the counter. "Now, the seasonal manager, Steph, is going to take it from here."

Rosie snickers and leans over to me. "I'm going to my cabin. I'll see you later, okay?"

"You don't want to stay here through this?"

"It's the same every year. You should stay, though. Some information might be useful."

Rosie turns and takes off, following behind a few other people filtering out of the room. I shift and look around at those who stayed, seeing the man with the dog in the corner.

Maybe I should go over and introduce myself.

It couldn't hurt to have at least one person to get through the orientation with. I sidle around the edges of the room as Steph, a blond woman with big blue eyes, climbs on top of the desk, ready to give the rest of the speech.

I step beside the man, smiling when his cerulean eyes lock on mine. My gaze roams his face for a moment, taking in the black lip ring at the corner of his mouth, accentuated by his scowl.

“I’m Mia.” I hold my hand out as Honey starts to sniff at me. “Beautiful dog. I’ve always wanted one, but living with my mom and traveling a lot made it hard to get one. Never seemed to be enough time in the day.”

He grunts, shifting away from me.

“How old is she?” I run my fingers through her silky fur, smiling when her fluffy body collides with my legs.

“Three.” His jaw tightens. “Is that all?”

My mouth goes dry. “Excuse me?”

He gives a sharp nod, not saying anything else as he pats his thigh and strides out of the room, the dog trotting behind him.

I sink down against the wall, staring at the bags in front of me, wishing I could go back in time. It’s only been an hour, and I already feel like I don’t belong. Rosie was nice, but I don’t know if she’s going to be around much.

And if anyone else here is like the dog’s owner, then I doubt I’m going to have a good time.

There’s no way that everyone is like him, though. Maybe he isn’t like that normally either. I might have just caught him in a bad moment. I can’t imagine that anybody is at their best after traveling to get to Aspen.

I traveled for hours. I don’t feel my best right now. Though I may not be up for snubbing people, I’m still not in a great mood. I’ll try speaking to him again later, maybe apologize for bothering him.

Steph claps her hands together. “This is going to be a long winter, people. We’re booked out through the next couple of months, and there will be high-class guests here who expect only the best from our staff. There are going to be mandatory training sessions for staff tomorrow and the day after.”

With a sigh, I keep staring at the bags in front of me, wishing that I could go find my cabin and settle in for the night.

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Though, the downside to that is having to be alone with the thoughts that have plagued me for the last year.

Mom, I don't think this was the right thing to do.

Maybe I should just go home. Try to find another way to connect with her. To find those pieces of myself that have seemed like they're missing since she died.

She wouldn't want that, though. She would want me to keep pushing. To make the best out of what seems like a bad situation.

The only reason I'm staying is for her.

CHAPTER 2

AIDEN

I stop on the other side of the room, glancing at the woman with the hot-pink bags and the auburn hair. Who the hell does she think she is?

Without so much as a second thought, Mia came over to introduce herself. That wide smile and her desire to look like a flamingo were almost more than I could handle. And now she's sitting down and staring at her bags like she's lost.

Not my problem.

You can't fix broken people.

And I know broken people.

I glance down at Honey, and she gives me those big puppy-dog eyes. The corner of my mouth twitches as I turn and head out of the main lodge, scooping up my bags where they were left by the front door.

Fat snowflakes fall lazily from the sky, dusting more of the pine trees towering tall around the lodge. I step onto the path that leads to the worker's cabins, boots stomping against the stones.

Honey darts ahead, dashing through the snow that is already high enough to come halfway up her legs, forming little snowballs in her coat that I will have to brush out once we find our cabin.

"There you are!" Carter grins, appearing on the path ahead of me with a cigarette hanging from his lips. "I've been waiting for you. Thought you were going to be here earlier."

"Those things are going to kill you one day," I say, hoisting the bag higher on my shoulder.

Honey sees Carter and flies through the snow, her tail wagging a mile a minute as she jumps up onto him with all the faith in the world that he'll catch her. Thankfully, he does, though he stumbles back a step.

"You know, one of these days she's going to do that to the wrong person, and they're both going to end up in the snow and unhappy." Carter spits the cigarette to the ground before Honey has the chance to snag it in her kissing attack.

She licks him until he's laughing and struggling to hold onto her before setting her down. As she takes off after a squirrel, he picks up the cigarette, butting it out and

tossing the end into one of the trash cans.

“What cabin are you in?”

He takes the bag with Honey’s supplies from me, slinging it over his back. “Four. I’m rooming with June and two newbies.”

“Which means I get to room with people I don’t like for the entire season, perfect.” I scrub a hand over the stubble on my jaw. “Think Steph arranged it that way on purpose?”

“Probably. You know she wasn’t happy last season when you barely bothered spending time with anyone else.”

“They’re all too peppy.” I whistle for Honey, and she rounds back to me before jogging ahead down the path.

The first little log cabin appears to my right, hidden behind the trees, another path leading up to the front porch. More cabins appear, obscured from view by the trees.

“You’re in seven,” Carter says as we arrive at the center of the worker village.

Thankfully.

The circular area is centered around a massive fire pit, perfect for bonfires at the end of a long week. Benches made of pine line the area, and at the far end there’s a noticeboard. People gather around it, stumbling into each other, bags and gear for the slopes going in every direction.

“Any idea who I’m going to be with?”

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“Ryder and Rosie.”

I bite back a groan. “Think we could convince your newbies to move out and give me and Honey the room?”

“Unlikely.” Carter leads the way down the path to my cabin. “And Steph would kill you. You know how much time she spends poring over the living arrangements for everyone.”

“I know.” I stare at the cabin, the lights already on in the windows. “And Rosie and Ryder aren’t the worst. They’re just a lot.”

“Both of them have too much energy for me.” Carter stomps up the stairs, Honey trotting along beside him. He opens the door and waits as I carry the rest of the supplies through before he enters. “And we’re going to have the first search-and-rescue team meeting after mandatory training tomorrow.”

“Got it.”

Carter drops the bags on the ground with a nod to Rosie and Ryder as they rush between the rooms, arguing about which one is better.

Ryder looks at her in triumph the moment he sees me. “We get the bigger room. Need the extra space for Honey.”

Honey goes bounding over to him at the mention of her name, her tail wagging, ready to take out anything breakable at knee height.

Rosie sighs and tips her head back, looking at the ceiling before pointing to both of us. “If you’re going to be getting the bigger room, then I don’t want to hear anything about my stuff being everywhere, got it?”

“Won’t hear a complaint from me.” I drop my ski supplies to the right of the door in the front closet, careful not to crush Rosie’s belongings.

“I’m going to complain,” Ryder says, smirking at her as he shoves his bags into the bedroom on the right at the back of the cabin. “There’s no escaping that.”

Rosie rolls her eyes and looks at me. “Good to see you again. Didn’t know if the two of you were going to come back after all that happened last season.”

“You mean that chick that wouldn’t give up on trying to hook up with him?” Ryder pops his head out of the room, his dark hair flopping into his eyes.

“What was her name?” Rosie hums as she lugs her duffel onto the couch and starts pulling out snacks to stock the little kitchenette. “Emily? Laura? Abby?”

“Becca.” Ryder leans in the doorway, his arms crossing over his chest. “She was obsessed with you. I think she applied again this year, but Steph wasn’t willing to take her on after all the drama she caused last year.”

I head for the room I’m going to be sharing with Ryder, waiting until he moves out of the way before stepping inside. “Just like every other year I’ve been here, you all are welcome to sleep around as much as you like, but I’m here to do a job.”

Ryder’s gaze turns mischievous as he claims the bunk on the far side of the room. “Rosie is going to be falling for me in no time. She’s going to be begging to spend the night in our room.”

“Gross.” I toss my bag onto the bed beneath the window. “Don’t shit where you eat.”

“I plan on making her fall for me before the season is out. I hope you know that.”

“I’m not spending the night on the couch.” I dig out my clothing, sorting it into the dresser at the foot of the bed.

Ryder flops down on his bed and stares up at the ceiling. “You’re cramping my style. How do you expect me to have a good time if you’re not willing to spend a night on the couch?”

“Not my problem.”

“Come on, Aiden. You don’t have to be a complete buzzkill again this year.”

“You’re what, twenty-five now? Isn’t it time to get it together?”

Ryder’s nose wrinkles. “Man, you’re not fun. Thirty really sucks the joy out of you, doesn’t it?”

“I’m only twenty-seven.” I lay out a couple books on top of the dresser, setting the case with my headphones beside them. “And I have my shit together.”

“Debatable. I’ve heard you spend the rest of the year traveling from one mountain range to the next. That’s living like a hermit, man. You would think that some human connection would be something you’re interested in while you’re here. Especially when you know that you aren’t going to see most of these people again.”

“I’m fine.”

Honey walks into the room, her nails clicking on the oak floors. She sniffs around for

a moment, taking in the lay of the room before hopping onto the bed and settling down into a ball.

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“There’s going to be a party tonight,” Ryder says, hauling himself up from the bed as boots stomp against the porch outside. “Looks like our last cabinmate is here.”

“Great.”

He scuttles out of the room and I follow behind, figuring that the way to survive this season is to try and be on good terms with all my cabinmates.

However, when I step out of the room and see the hot-pink bags sitting at Mia’s feet, I know it’s going to be the longest season of my life.

Dying on the side of a mountain in the cold might be better than spending weeks with her as my cabinmate.

CHAPTER 3

MIA

It might not be too late to switch cabins. I could go to Steph and ask her if it’s possible not to be roomed with the hot guy and his dog.

No amount of chiseled jaw is worth putting up with the disgusted look he gives me, his upper lip curling. He leans in the doorway to the one room, Honey shoving past him, her tail going a mile a minute.

I grin and crouch down. She barrels into me, nearly knocking me to the ground, her tongue dragging across every inch of visible skin she can find.

She yips and wriggles backward, circling around and going to sniff my bags. I get up and brush past the man as he comes to get the dog, keeping my gaze straight ahead instead of spending time admiring the way his dark, long-sleeved shirt clings to his muscles.

Rosie appears in the doorway to one of the rooms at the back of the cabin. “I was hoping it was you!”

For someone who just met me, the welcome is warm, and it helps ease some of the worries in the back of my mind. I follow her into the bedroom, glancing at the two beds and the two dressers, a single desk in the corner.

“This is such a cute room.” I run my hands over the dusty rose duvet. “I didn’t think that the staff cabins were going to be this nice.”

“Aspen Adventures likes to make the staff as comfortable as possible.”

“I might have missed that part of Steph’s speech.” I inspect the window above one of the beds, looking out at the snowy forest that surrounds us. “I can’t believe I’m here.”

“I can’t believe how much you look like your mom.” Rosie gives me a sheepish smile. “Sorry, it’s just the more I look at you, the more you look like Heather.”

Tears spring to the corners of my eyes. “Thanks.”

The man walks into my room, dropping my bags on the ground. “Don’t leave your things in the common area.”

I fight the urge to snap at him. “Sorry, I?—”

“Doesn’t matter. Just don’t. It’s a small cabin. Not a lot of room to spare.” He spins

and leaves, though Honey trots in and makes herself comfortable at my feet, her tail thumping against the floor.

Rosie sighs and starts unpacking the bag on her bed. “Don’t mind Aiden. He’s always been cranky, and it seems to get worse every year. And there was drama last year that I’m sure he’s trying to avoid this year, so he’s going to be a bit of a dick.”

“A bit?” I unzip my bag, taking out the picture of me and Mom in Italy the week after we found out she was sick.

She had been insistent on taking one last trip together since the chemotherapy wouldn’t start for another week.

Tears well in my eyes as I run my fingers over the white frame, tracing the intricate carvings. My chest tightens as I set the picture down on the dresser, setting my makeup bag, a mirror, and some perfume beside it.

Rosie hums and sets out a small speaker. “Any particular music you want on while we unpack?”

“Doesn’t matter to me.”

She puts on something upbeat, cranking the volume. As she unpacks, she dances around the room.

And before long, I’m dancing with her, both of us prancing around the room with cans of dry shampoo for microphones.

“Would you turn it down?” Aiden glares, looking at Honey, who has moved from her position on the floor onto my bed. “Some of us need to work.”

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Rosie turns down the music a little. “What could you possibly have to work on right now?”

“Reviewing the maps of the slopes.” He doesn’t so much as glance my way while he speaks.

I set the can of dry shampoo down and sit on the bed beside Honey. “You should lighten up and have a little fun. It’s only the first night. There will be plenty of time to study the maps in the morning.”

“I have other things to do in the morning.”

“Like what?”

He finally looks at me. “Work.”

“Got it. Workaholic.” I smile and cross one leg over the other. “Well, if you change your mind and want to have a bit of fun, you know where to find me.”

The color drains from his face, his mouth setting into a thin line. “Not likely.”

He spins and storms out of the room, whistling for Honey. She yawns and rolls over, stretching out on the bed and not bothering to follow him. I doubt that’s going to put him in a better mood, but that’s not my problem.

Even if he doesn’t want to have some fun, that’s his issue.

Rosie shuts the door behind him. “I don’t think he’s ever had a day of fun in his life.”

I flop back and look at the wooden slats on the ceiling. “So, what are you doing in Aspen?”

“Seemed like a good break. I’m twenty-two, and I have no clue what I’m supposed to be doing with my life.” She lets out a small laugh. “Dodge college in favor of making massive tips in the hospitality industry, though I’ve been coming here for a few winters to teach skiing.”

“Where do you work otherwise?”

“Sailing yachts in the Med. Spend a lot of time going out on overnight trips with some very rich people. They’re jerks, but when I make more in two days than I do in a month, it’s hard to complain. What about you?”

“I’m twenty-five. Just graduated college. I’m going to be a kindergarten teacher next fall, but until then I’m just trying to figure out what to do with myself.”

The words are hard, and a lump sits high in the back of my throat. I used to know what to do with myself.

“You’re just graduating?”

“This past May, actually, but I know it’s late. Mom first got sick right after high school, so I took a year off. She got better, so I went to school, and she was back teaching skiing. Had a year left of college when she got sick again, so it put things on the back burner.”

“I’m sure she was happy to have you there with her.”

The corner of my mouth twitches as I sit up, catching a glimpse of the picture. “Sometimes. Before she died, I was back in school because she wanted me to go back.”

There’s a knock at the door, thankfully cutting off the conversation about my mom.

Ryder pokes his head in. “Hey, there’s a party down at the staff mess tonight. Either of you planning on going?”

Rosie nods and hauls a knit dress out of her closet. “I’ve been waiting for the staff welcome party all year.”

Ryder snorts and shakes his head, his gaze wandering over to me. “Good luck keeping up with this one.”

Rosie mimics him, going to the door and giving it a light nudge to push him out of the room. She shuts it behind him before turning to me, mischief in her eyes.

I swallow hard. “We’re going to a party?”

“Yes. Did you bring anything to wear?”

“Ripped jeans and a black corset top good enough?”

Rosie fans herself, slumping against the wall. “You’re going to knock ’em dead. I would kill to have boobs like yours, and in a corset top, man. The men are going to be following you around like lost puppies.”

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I roll my eyes and get up, rummaging through my clothing until I find what I want to wear. A smokey eye and some loose curls later, we start heading to the mess hall for the party.

My breath comes out in white little puffs in front of me, the wind whistling through the trees and snow falling around me. Rosie loops her arm through mine as we trek down the snow-covered path to a long, low log building. Heavy bass pounds into the otherwise quiet night, and bright pink and blue lights swirl in the windows.

“Seems like the staff really know how to party.” I lean close to Rosie, nearly shouting in her ear to be heard above the music as the door swings open.

Her grin stretches wide as she nods. “Work hard, play hard.”

We step into the mess hall, and all the wooden tables have been pushed to the edges of the room. Groups of people are scattered at them, some playing board games and drinking from red Solo cups, others leaning close together and chatting.

In the middle of the room are people dancing along with the music that’s pumping out of the speakers, only leaving long enough to get a drink at the bar before going back to dance.

And in the corner is Aiden, though Honey is nowhere to be seen. Probably didn’t want to hurt her hearing with the loud music.

Just when I think he’s going to spend the rest of his night alone and miserable, people approach him, and he starts talking and laughing with them. The smile he gives one

of the women is enough to have my heart melting.

Rosie tugs me over to the bar. “Tequila!”

I wince but accept the shot she shoves in my hand, throwing one back and then a second. Though I probably should’ve taken some time to load up on carbs, it looks like a couple of people are in the kitchen and cooking, the scent of burgers mingling with the mix of cologne and perfume.

“Come dance.” Rosie takes me by the hand, spinning me around as we get to the middle of the dance floor.

I laugh as we dance to the music. I can’t remember the last time I went out with any of my friends and just let my hair down. It’s been a long and hard few years.

But being here now, it starts to feel like I’m living my own life again. I don’t feel like I’m coming apart at the seams.

Aiden glances over at me, his gaze connecting with mine as I dance next to Rosie, rolling my hips to the music as she makes her own unique moves. I spin away from her and rake my hair back from my face with one hand.

His eyes are burning a hole through my back. I know they are. I can feel the heat, my heart beating faster. I take a deep breath in, my focus on his attention broken as Rosie pulls me in and dips me low when the song ends.

When I stand up straight, we dissolve into laughter. She smiles and motions to the kitchen. I nod, and she’s gone, wandering through the crowd and disappearing through the doors at the back of the room.

I run my hand through my hair, the strands a little sweaty as they cling to my fingers.

I wince and slide the hair tie off my wrist, tossing my hair into a messy bun at the nape of my neck.

Aiden is still looking at me, even as I make my way over to the bar. He glances away the moment I decide to stare back at him.

Maybe now is a better time to introduce myself.

CHAPTER 4

AIDEN

Mia strides through the crowd like a woman on a mission, those damn ripped jeans hugging her body tight, making every curve visible. The front of my pants gets tighter as I stare at her for a moment while she leans over the bar.

Ryder shuffles to my side and elbows me. “So, what do you think of the newest roommate? Pretty, isn’t she?”

“Sure.” I shrug and sip from my bottle of nonalcoholic beer, the condensation wet on my fingers. “Don’t know what that matters though. If you’re planning on sleeping with her, don’t.”

“Why?” June asks, her tone teasing as she smirks up at me. “You thinking of sleeping with her? She doesn’t seem like your type. Looks like she enjoys having fun too much.”

“I don’t know why all of you think that I don’t like having fun, but I do.” I tuck one hand in my pocket, trying to subtly ease some of the tension in the front of my jeans as I glance at Mia again.

This is going to be a long season.

June laughs and shakes her head, tossing back the amber shot in her hand. “Listen, Aiden, nobody thinks you like to have fun because you rarely do. How often have we been begging you to come out with us, and now you’re finally doing it?”

“I don’t like partying on work nights. I’m here to do a job, and so are the rest of you. And I’m taking over for Carter in a couple hours.”

Ryder claps a hand on my shoulder. “And there’s the party pooper we all know and love.”

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June puts her empty shot glass down. “We don’t get drunk every night, but we do try to go out and have a good time and, ya know, get to know the people we’re going to be working and living with over the next couple of months.”

I shrug and take another pull of the nonalcoholic beer. “I don’t need to spend time getting to know everyone else beyond their shifts and when they’re out with a group.”

“And yet you keep staring at Mia.” Ryder tucks his hands into his pockets. “Seems to me like you’re at least a little bit interested in her. Maybe you should spend some time with her or something. Get to know her.”

“Uh-huh.” I nod, stepping away from them. “I’m going to do just that.”

And then I walk away, heading in the opposite direction of Mia the second she starts drawing closer to me. She’s like the other people here, wanting to have a good time and a vacation she gets paid to be on instead of actually caring about the guests.

I head outside, standing on the porch as fat flakes of snow drift down around me. The music is quieter out here, the closed doormuffling the bass. At least until it opens, and music and the scent of cherry-vanilla perfume pour out.

“Sooner or later, you and I are going to have to talk to each other.” Mia leans on the railing beside me, crossing her arms around her torso like she’s trying to keep warm.

Kind of hard to do when you decide that a corset is the appropriate shirt for the middle of winter.

There's no denying that her breasts look great, especially when the cold starts to flush her skin.

I say nothing, staring out at the way the exterior lights make the snow shine.

She sighs. "I feel like we got off on the wrong foot, and you seem to have a horrible idea about who I am. And I feel like that is really going to hold us back, considering we have to work together and share a cabin."

I press my lips into a thin line before glancing at her. "Stay outta my way, and I'll stay outta yours."

"Really defeating the whole purpose of trying to make friends."

"Wasn't trying to make friends." I push off the railing and jog down the steps. "Have a good night."

She makes a frustrated noise before the music gets louder and softer again. Looks like she'd rather be inside having a good time than getting ready for the first day of work.

Whatever trouble she gets into isn't my problem.

The morning comes only a couple hours later, and I don't feel like I've slept nearly enough. I stretch as I get out of bed, Honey hopping down from the end, her tail wagging. It only takes a few moments to shower and get dressed before I get Honey ready for the snow, putting on her rescue harness, her boots, and her goggles. Her tail beats against the wall as she waits by the door to our room, ready to go.

I open it up and she runs to the front door, her tongue lolling out of the side of her mouth. She sits and waits while I stop in the little kitchenette and grab a couple protein bars, stuffing them into the pockets of my jacket.

A soft snore comes from the couch. I look over the back and there's Mia, sprawled out on the cushions, drool rolling down her cheek. She's curled up, lying on her side and clutching a pillow beneath her head. There's a little crease between her eyebrows, like whatever is going on in her head is deeply troubling.

I glance at the schedule on the wall. She has another hour before she has to be at her shift.

Doubt she's going to make it when she's passed out this hard.

It's not my problem though. At least, that's what I keep telling myself as I leave the cabin and head outside.

Honey leads the trek through the snow to the little gondolas that run up the side of the mountain. We get in one, and I settle into the hard wooden seat while she sprawls out on the floor.

This ride has always been my favorite part of working at Aspen.

I hate the loud tourists and the workers who treat this as a vacation, but getting to sit down each shift and just look at the mountains, the trees, and all the snow is breathtaking. It's only when I'm up here that everything else seems so small.

The gondola comes to a stop at the top of the mountain. A few eager snowboarders and skiers are already going down the hill, with a couple instructors and some of the medic team watching over them.

I pass them by for the path that leads through the trees, breaking through to the other side where there's a clear view down the mountain and to the east as well. Carter stands outside with a mug of coffee in his hand.

“How was the party last night?” He looks at me over the rim of the travel mug as he takes a sip.

I groan and lean back against one of the stilts the watch building is on. “The usual shit. People got too drunk, and most of them are going to be hungover for their first shift of the season.”

“You could do with a little letting loose every now and then.”

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I bend down to scoop up some snow, packing it into a ball and throwing it for Honey to chase. She takes off with a bark, bounding through the snow. “Don’t know why everyone seems to think that I need to learn how to let loose.”

“Because you walk around with a stick up your ass, and everyone can see it.” Carter smirks and tucks his free hand into his pocket. “I like you, Aiden, but you’re too serious. You need to learn to live a little.”

“I have work to do.”

“And nobody can ever have a bit of fun while they’re working, can they?” The corner of Carter’s mouth tips up. “You spend most of your life moving around from one place to another and never settling down long enough to think if you’re really doing what’s right for you.”

“Settling down is for people who want to do the wife-and-kids thing.”

“And that isn’t you?”

“Not at this point in my life.” I ball up more snow, throwing it far and grinning as Honey sprints after it. “I’m happy with where I’m at.”

“You’re still what, twenty-seven? You might not think that settling down is going to be for you yet — and sure, that looks different for everyone — but sooner or later, you’re going to get tired of traveling from one mountain range to another.”

If I was being honest, I would tell him that I’m already getting tired of it, to some

degree. I like the travel, though, and I don't think that there's ever going to be a world where I don't spend time going from country to country.

Carter yawns and checks the time on his watch. "Well, you think about having some fun while you're here this season. I'm going to go call my wife and the girls, and then I think I'm going to be passing out for the rest of the day."

"Tell Cassie I say hi. And tell the girls that I better see them on the slopes later this season."

He nods, already pulling out his phone, pausing long enough to hand me the radio and the keys to the sled.

Since it's warm out, I set up camp in one of the chairs outside, turning up the radio and listening to the chatter while playing fetch with Honey.

This is the second-best part of my day. Being alone.

But one day it might be nice to have someone to be alone with.

It's a shame people only love you when they want something from you.

CHAPTER 5

MIA

"We're late!" Rosie rushes into the living room, hopping around and pulling her ski pants up. "If you don't get your butt in gear right now, we're going to be super late!"

I jolt upright from the couch, reaching up and wiping some of the drool from the corner of my mouth. "You're kidding."

“No!” Rosie grabs my hand and hauls me up from the couch. “Come on. Skip the shower, you’re just going to get sweaty. Brush your teeth and then let’s roll!”

Scowling, I hurry into the bathroom and strip down, finding a couple minutes for a quick body shower, though my hair is going to have to go untouched until I have time to deal with it later.

I hurry into my room and pull on some fleece-lined leggings and a black quarter-zip before hauling on my ski pants and coat.

“You two are in a hurry.” Ryder leans against the counter, eating a bowl of cereal while Rosie and I stuff our pockets with a couple protein bars.

Rosie glowers at him. “Why didn’t you wake us?”

“Aiden told me not to. Ran into him while he was on his way to the watchtower. Said you two were sleeping and needed your rest.”

I’m going to kill him.

Right now, though, I don’t have time for that. I need to get myself up the mountain and to the first class. When I do find Aiden later, there’s going to be hell to pay. I know it’s not his job to wake us up, but he would’ve seen me on the couch.

He would’ve seen my drool.

Horror fills me as I rip open one of the protein bars and take a large bite. Rosie scowls at Ryder before joining me, hauling on her snow boots and letting out a loud sigh.

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After shoving my feet into my boots, I follow Rosie out the door and we run down the trail. She takes the steps two at a time, landing in the fresh snow and stepping to the side as one of the landscapers shovels the path.

I follow her, my heart hammering in my chest. The last thing I want to do on my first day of work is to make a bad impression. The people here knew my mom. They're going to expect me to live up to her memory.

And I don't know how I'm ever going to be able to do that.

My breath comes out in white little puffs as we hurry to the gondolas and cram inside. Rosie slumps back against the seat while I sit across from her, looking out over the mountain.

Snow coats the tops of the hills and the trees. The pines are a striking green beneath their dusting, and there are people flying down the hill. I take a deep breath and blow it out, wondering how many times Mom looked out at this same view.

Rosie reaches over and takes my hand. "She'd be happy you're here."

I wipe some tears from my eyes and smile. "I wish I could have come with her the last couple years, but I was never able to take the time off school. There was just so much going on. I didn't realize how much I would miss it while sitting here now."

"I'm sure she was happy that you were off and living your life instead of following her around mountains." Rosie gets off the gondola first, waiting for me. "She used to talk about you all the time. Sometimes, I felt like I knew you even though we'd never

met. She was so proud of everything you did.”

“You’re going to make me sob, and we have to be at our first class in like two minutes,” I say, voice breaking. I force a smile and look up to the sky, pulling my sunglasses from my pocket and slipping them on to hide what I know have to be red eyes.

Rosie laughs and puts her own sunglasses on, leading the way over to a post marked Lesson A. She stands beside the post and takes a deep breath. “Let’s do this.”

I nod, butterflies erupting in my stomach. We’re on a tiny bunny hill at the top of the mountain, one that flattens out for several yards at the bottom of a small slope. The gondolas open again, and several children pour out with skis and snowboards clasped tightly, a couple parents trailing behind them.

“Good morning!” I force a level of cheer into my voice that I definitely don’t feel, clapping my hands together and smiling at the people gathering around. “I’m Mia, and this is Rosie. We’re going to be your instructors for the day. Now, anyone with skis, come with me.”

I step to the side, and the horde of children carrying fluorescent skis follows me. I show them how to step into the skis and make sure their boots are locked in and the buckles tight.

“Okay.” I look around at the little group in a semi-circle in front of me. “Who knows what a pizza is?”

We’re in the middle of discussing how to move and stop when there’s a bark and several excited shouts about the puppy.

Honey comes bounding through the snow, her blue goggles shining and her

fluorescent vest bright against the snow. Her fluffy tail whips back and forth as she drops down in front of the children, begging for belly rubs.

I laugh, reaching out to catch one of the toddlers on skis as she goes slipping to the side while trying to get at the dog. After I set the toddler back on her skis, she takes off sliding and drops to her knees beside Honey.

Aiden storms over, his hands curled into fists, the reflective sunglasses he has on hiding what I know has to be furrowed brows.

“Do you even know what you’re doing?” he hisses under his breath as he stops in front of me, keeping his body turned to watch the children while also lecturing me.

“Wow. Okay, so you’re really set on being rude today, aren’t you?” I put my hands on my hips, glaring up at him. “I don’t know what your problem is right now, but I have other things I should be doing.”

“Well, the sole thing that you should be doing is watching the children.” Aiden motions to them, but he keeps his voice low.

I could shove him down the side of the mountain and be perfectly fine with that right now.

I don’t think anyone else would be happy about it, but it would make me feel better. Maybe I’d get lucky and he’d turn into one of those characters from a TV show, rolling into a giant ball with only his eyes and his feet sticking out.

“I am watching the children,” I say. “I don’t know what you think you’re doing, but I’ve got this, and you don’t need to worry about it.”

“That one,” he says as he points to the toddler in skis, “nearly took a header down the

mountain because you were too busy looking at Honey to care about the kids.”

With a scoff, I drop my hands. “Have you ever seen a toddler on skis? They barely know which way they’re going. They’re marshmallows. She has a safety strap on so I can grab her, and I did. As soon as she started to slip away. So don’t think that you can come over here and tell me that I don’t know what I’m doing.”

Aiden makes a rough noise in the back of his throat and turns to the children. “Hey, everybody. Time to talk about mountain safety!”

That’s it. First chance I get, he’s getting shoved down the mountain.

“He took over my lesson!” I jab my fork in Rosie’s direction before stabbing a piece of chicken on my plate. “I was supposed to be teaching them how to ski, and instead he taught a bunch of kids under five how to tie knots!”

Rosie’s lips press together as she struggles to smother a smile. “I don’t know, but I thought the two of you looked pretty good working together. It was like you were waiting for your chance to strangle him.”

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“They don’t even know how to tie their shoes.” I brandish the fork like a wand, wishing I could poof away everything that’s stressing me out. “They don’t know how to do bunny ears, and he was teaching them how to secure a temporary shelter in case they get lost in the woods.”

Rosie laughs and shakes her head. “You know, if I didn’t know better, I’d say that you and Aiden are going to end up sleeping together before the end of the season.”

“I’ll put money on that.” Ryder drops down onto the bench beside Rosie and slaps down his tray.

My cheeks feel like they’re on fire. Scratch that; my entire body feels like it’s on fire. I’m going to burn into a little crisp, and there’s nothing I can do about it.

“Nothing is going to happen between us because I can’t stand him. He’s horrible. He’s controlling and arrogant, and he’s sticking his nose in where it doesn’t belong.”

“Look, maybe he just wants to get to know you, and that’s why he’s being such a pain.” Rosie grabs her apple and takes a large bite. “I mean, you’re one of the new staff members?—”

“And he never bothers with them.” Ryder gives me a pointed look that makes me wish I was an ostrich so I could bury my head in the sand and pretend this isn’t happening right now.

“Okay, great, so he’s decided that I’m enemy number one.” I stab into more of my chicken, popping it in my mouth. “I have other things to do. Things that don’t involve

me sitting and arguing with him all the time.”

Rosie takes another bite of the apple, licking her lips. “He’s got an intense schedule with all the rescue work. I doubt that you’re going to end up spending that much time with him. Definitely less than you think you will.”

“I hope so. I don’t know how I’m going to survive the season if I have to put up with that every time I turn around.”

Sighing, I lean back in my chair and glance around the mess hall, taking it all in. Mom used to sit here, near the window on the left side of the room in one of the worn leather chairs. She would spend her nights hanging out with the staff and reading by the fire.

I remember when I used to come with her when I was really young. There were endless nights spent sitting at her feet and playing with my toys or coloring. We would spend long days on the slopes together.

My chest aches as I finish my lunch, thinking about all the memories of her that Aspen holds.

Aiden can try to scare me off, but I’m not going to leave.

At least, I’m going to do everything I can to stay.

CHAPTER 6

AIDEN

The first week of being back in Aspen always feels like putting myself through the most excruciating training known to man.

It's different than the other mountains I work on, taking up more of my energy and focus. Especially with Mia and Rosie constantly running around the cabin as if they own the place. I don't know how many eyeliner pencils I've found on the coffee table. Or the tube of lipstick that somehow ended up in a kitchen cupboard.

Or there's the fact that I don't think I've ever seen so many bras in my life.

They're everywhere. It's an invasion of the bras. You can't just toss them in the dryer to clean them. And you need different ones for different tops. I never wanted to be this involved in discussions about bras, and yet every time I leave the bedroom, there they are.

I sigh and look at Honey. "I don't know how we're going to last the season. Maybe we should go live at one of the watchtowers. It would be a little cold, but it would be quiet."

Honey pushes to her feet and goes to the door, standing on her hind legs and hitting the knob down. The door cracks, and she claws at it until it opens.

Even the dog is leaving me to spend time with Mia.

There's nothing I can do about that, though, so I grab a book and crack it open, burying my nose in the pages. This is one of two days a week I get to myself, and I plan on spending it in bed and finally finishing the novel I started on the plane ride over here.

However, all it takes is the pounding bass in the other room an hour later to send my head spinning.

I shift around on the bed, trying to ignore the music and turning to the next page. Unfortunately, all I can seem to do is read one paragraph several times. At this point,

I think I could write it from memory.

And that's when I can't hold on any longer.

Rosie and Mia are getting on my last nerve. I don't know how Ryder puts up with it, but the loud-as-hell music is where it comes to an end.

I can't keep living like this and still do my job. If I'm going to be going out sitting in a watchtower every day and watching for skiers and snowboarders getting lost on the side of a mountain, or even the hikers straying too far from the trail claiming that they think they know what they're doing, then I can't be sitting here while they pound music all through the night.

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Before I shove the door open, I take a deep breath. As I fling it to the side, countless bodies pour into the small living room. The door opens, and even more people are outside dancing, beers in their hands, laughing and talking like they're having a good time.

There, in the middle of it all, are Mia and Honey.

Honey is soaking up the attention like she's never had belly rubs before in her life. Her tongue lolls out the side of her mouth, and her tail beats against the floor, the steady thump, thump, thump nearly rivaling the bass of the music.

To be honest, I don't know what Mia is doing here. I don't think she's taking the work seriously most of the time. There are some moments when the smile falls and she concentrates on everything going on around her, but those moments are few and far between. She seems like a party girl with no sense of what she's doing or where she's going in life. Maybe it's not fair to judge her, but right now I'm pissed. I don't have time to stand around and get to know her when my blood is boiling and my pulse is pounding in my ears.

I storm over to Mia, fingernails digging into my palms. "What the hell is going on here?"

Mia spins with a bottle of beer in her hand and holds it out to me. "Here, it's been a long week, and you look like you need this. Why don't you crack it open, enjoy some music, and try and loosen up a little bit?"

"I was enjoying my night until you started blasting music like you own the damn

place.” I glare at the offending bottle in her hand, but she shoves it at me.

“Just take the beer, have a good time, and we can argue in the morning.”

I take the beer from her, but that’s only because I plan on heading back to my room, cracking it open, and enjoying the rest of my book once she turns off the music and kicks all these people out.

“You know what else?” she says, an impish smile curving the corner of her mouth, those big eyes shining bright with mischief.

“No, but I’m sure you’re going to tell me.”

“I spent a lot of my time researching a good doctor to pull the stick out of your ass. You’d be surprised how hard it is to find somebody well versed in a stick-ectomy.”

“You think you’re funny.”

She smirks and crosses her arms under her chest, pushing her breasts up higher in that tight bustier she’s wearing. “I know I’m funny. I don’t let the little things in life get to me. If I did, who knows where I’d be right now. Now, try to make yourself as comfortable as possible with the stick, open the beer, have a drink, and try to have a good time.”

She spins around, walking away, but I follow her. I’m not done with this argument yet. Not even close.

“I don’t know what you think you’re doing.” I step in front of her, setting the bottle on the counter while she reaches up into the cupboard. The tight jeans she’s wearing hug the curve of her hips, and for a moment, all I can think about is running my hands over them, hauling her back into me.

It'd be easier to argue with her if she wasn't so attractive. If that temper of hers didn't draw me in at the same time as the anger pushes me away.

“Come on, Aiden. Have a little fun.”

And it's the sound of my name on her lips that does it for me. I crack open the beer — because at least I can enjoy that — and go to sit on the couch in the corner while Honey lays at my feet, still soaking up the attention from all the people pouring in and out of the cabin.

Mia's like your typical social butterfly. She's all smiles and laughs, hands on arms, leaning forward and teasing people, and moving from one person to the next like everybody in the room is her best friend. And based on the smiles on their faces after she's done with them, it looks like they believe it too.

That's one of the things I don't understand about her. How can she be so effortless when talking to people? How can she make them feel so comfortable that it's like she's known them their entire lives?

If that's the way she makes other people feel, then why does she get under my skin the way she does?

Maybe I should spend time sorting through my thoughts, but I don't want to. Not tonight. The beer in my hand is already half gone, and the alcohol slowly entering my veins is making me think that maybe it would be a good idea to loosen up a little. At least for the sake of seeing her smile at me the way she smiles at everybody else.

I'm halfway through my second beer when Mia comes back. She drops down on the couch beside me, one long leg crossing over the other. That infectious smile drops, but her lips still curve to the corner of her mouth.

“So,” she says, her tone light and flirty, her fingers gracing my shoulder, “are you finally starting to have fun?”

“I was having fun in my room reading my book until you turned this place into party central.”

Mia rolls her eyes and leans closer to me. Her lips are near my ear, her voice soft and low despite the music raging around us. “Come on, Aiden. Don’t you want to live a little?”

“If you came over here to start trying to pick the same fight with me again, I suggest you go. I don’t have time to do this with you right now.”

I turn my head to the side just to look at her, but then my mouth is too close to hers. Her lips nearly brush against mine as she laughs. Her gaze searches mine, and there’s something behind her eyes that I can’t quite work out.

“Hasn’t there ever been a time when you wanted to let your hair down just a little bit?” she asks, still too close to me.

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My heart pounds in my chest, and all of a sudden, the front of my jeans feels a little too tight. All I can think about is the way her fingers feel on my body. If only there was a little less clothing between us and fewer people here.

“I let loose too much, and people could die.” I finish up my second beer and put it down on the table, with a slight buzz in my head, but everything is crystal clear. Two beers is the limit, always has been.

“You’re off tomorrow.” Mia nods to the calendar on the wall. “I checked before I invited everybody over. I didn’t want to interfere with your job.”

If she doesn’t want to interfere with my job, she shouldn’t be sitting next to me, looking like heaven and hell wrapped into one. She shouldn’t be making me question who I thought I was when it came to the relationships I keep with people at work.

Mia smiles, and it’s one that sends my heart crashing through my chest. “When I first met you,” she says, “I was pretty sure you were icy because you didn’t like me.”

“And now what do you think?”

She studies me for a moment. The look in her eyes makes me want to whisk her away so we can talk for a few moments alone. Which is a mistake. Getting close to people and allowing them to know you — to have expectations of you — is always going to be a mistake.

“If you keep looking at me like that, I’m going to want to know what’s going on in your head,” she says, her tone light and teasing as she reaches up to smooth a finger

over the corner of my mouth. “You’re going to get frown lines if you keep looking this serious all the time.”

I’m in over my head. I can see it as plain as day, and yet there’s a part of me that wants to kiss the tip of that finger, maybe suck it into my mouth until she’s begging for me to kiss other parts of her body.

Time to pump the brakes.

“Probably better if you don’t know what’s going on up there.” The corner of my mouth twitches. “I don’t think you’d like it so much.”

What happened to pumping the brakes?

Warmth floods her eyes as she stares at me, her tongue darting out to wet her full bottom lip. She clearly caught the double meaning of the words, not that I was trying to hide it at all.

“I think it’s time I go back to my room.” I don’t move, though, part of me hoping that she’s about to give me a reason to stay.

“Now you’re running away.” Her fingers move over my shoulder, tracing down my arm before climbing back up. “I thought I was the one accused of doing that.”

I lean in. “This is a bad idea.”

Mia rolls her eyes. “You need to stop overthinking everything. If you keep doing that, then you’re going to spend the rest of your life stressed and trying to figure it all out.”

“You need to worry a little more.” I pick at the strand to make the tension unravel between the two of us, wanting it to fall apart just so it doesn’t later.

“I didn’t think we were going to start arguing again tonight.”

“And yet here we are.” I motion between us, my fingertips grazing her collarbone. Electricity crackles between us. She leans closer. I don’t think there’s much more distance to close between the two of us, and yet it feels like a chasm has opened.

She’s insisting on building the bridge across it. I can see the determination in her eyes.

It scares me. That determination makes me want to run for the hills. I don’t think being friends is a good idea, because I know that once we’re friends, I’m going to want so much more with her.

I’m going to risk too much for her, and when it comes time to leave at the end of the season, she’s going to want me to stay with her. And I’m going to want to continue to the next adventure.

It’s better to end this before things ever have a chance to kick off.

“I know you think we should be friends, but it’s not going to happen,” I say, pulling back to put more distance between us.

Mia’s fingers trace patterns on my shoulder before she pulls back entirely. “You know, I thought we were starting to make some progress.”

“What progress could we possibly be making right now?” I motion to everything around us before standing and patting my thigh. Honey gets to her feet, but she looks miserable doing it.

“I don’t know what’s going on right now.” Mia’s eyebrows pull together. “I thought we were having a good time, and now here you are about to start insulting me again.

And don't even say that you're not because I can see it on your face. So, actually, you know what, go ahead and say it. Get out everything you need to say because this is the last chance you're going to have to say it."

As much as I want to fight the urge to say everything that's on my mind right now, there's a part of me that craves the self-sabotage. The part that wants to send her running so if something does happen between the two of us, I don't have to be the one to make the hard choice at the end of the season.

I can make it right now and save everyone the pain.

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“Oh, the last chance, is it? Why? You about to go running back to the city with your tail between your legs like the vapid little party girl you are?”

It’s a low blow. One that capitalizes on the horrible thoughts going through my head, the ones I know aren’t true after watching her work over the last week.

“Excuse me?” She shoots to her feet, getting closer to me. Except this time, it doesn’t feel like she’s about to kiss me. No, this time, it feels like I’ve stepped into a steaming pile of crap that I don’t know how to walk out of.

I always did know how to put my foot in my mouth.

“You heard what I said.” My chest nearly brushes against hers as I loom over her. Looks like it’s time to double down, even though this is only going to hurt more. “You’re so busy trying to fill the void that’s inside of you by convincing people to like you that you’re treating all of this like a joke. You think that I’m the one with the problem, but unlike you, I’m here to do a job.”

Her eyes shine like she’s fighting back tears, her cheeks red and splotchy. “I don’t know where this new attitude just came from, but I thought we were having fun.”

“We weren’t.”

“Well, then, I hope you have a good rest of your night.” She stares up at me, one tear slipping down her cheek. She angrily brushes it away. “Maybe before you judge me, you should actually get to know me. You might think that I’m a shallow party girl who just knows how to laugh and have a good time, but you don’t know the first

thing about me if that's what you believe."

She weaves through the bodies, gyrating to the music, heading to a room. The door shuts with a heavy thud and I'm left standing in the middle of a party I didn't want, wondering where the hell I went wrong.

Actually, that's a lie. I know exactly where I went wrong. I thought it was possible for us to get along.

But as I head back to my room, there is no shaking the feeling that maybe she's right. Maybe I don't know how to have fun. Maybe somewhere along the way, that got lost, and now who I am isn't who I've ever wanted to be.

With a sigh I turn, heading to Mia's room instead of my own and knocking on the door. Not a sound comes from inside, and she doesn't get up to open it either. I don't push her, not tonight.

I'll try to fix this in the morning.

CHAPTER 7

MIA

I get up in the morning feeling like it's the end of the world. There's a tightness to my chest that I can't seem to shake, and each time I draw in a breath, it only gets tighter.

Sitting up in bed, I glance out the window. The sun is just starting to creep over the horizon.

It's the same feeling that's been following me around for the last few months. The one that says I'm never going to know what to do with my life. I don't know what to

do now that I've actually graduated from college with my degree.

Mom, I wish you were here right now. I could really use someone to talk to about all of this.

Her picture sits on the dresser at the foot of the bed, facing me. Most mornings when I wake up and the sense of dread hits me, seeing her smiling face in the picture is enough to help.

Not today, though.

It's probably because today is the first day in a week that I have time to think. There's nowhere I need to be this morning. No classes to teach. No plans with Rosie or June. Ryder is going to spend most of the day working in the kitchen while I sit here and lose myself in my thoughts.

I have to get out of here.

The thought plays on repeat as I toss back the covers and get out of bed, my feet hitting the cold wood floor. The heater in the corner of the room rattles to life.

Rosie isn't in her bed. It's still perfectly made, the sheets pulled tight. I don't know who she went home with last night, but at least one of us had a good time.

Shuffling around the room, I pull out a pair of fleece-lined leggings, hoping that it's going to be warm enough as I check the weather app. There's supposed to be some snow later in the day, but for the most part, it should be warm enough for a hike.

After wiggling into the leggings, I pull on a thermal shirt and haul on a hoodie over it. I slip my jacket on before stuffing a small backpack with bottles of water, my first aid kit, and the few supplies I might need if I get lost in the woods.

Not that it's likely to happen. I used to go on hikes with Mom all the time on her days off.

But I still grab the map and stuff it into the backpack, along with a compass, just in case my phone dies.

A hike is all I need to clear my mind.

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Sorting out the rest of my problems is going to take a lot more work than a simple hike through the woods, but it's at least a start. Something to make me feel like I'm doing something other than nothing.

I step into the kitchen and grab a protein shake and something quick to eat before lacing my boots and heading out the door.

The air is crisp and warm, though there's a chill to the breeze that moves through the trees. I pull my gloves out of my pockets and yank them on before tugging my hat lower over my ears.

I'm sure it's only going to be a matter of time before the layers start coming off.

I only start to relax after I've left the resort grounds. The trees around me are towering, and the sun is shining brightly. Some of the snow is melting, but the thick layer on the ground still crunches beneath my boots.

As I slip out of my coat, some gray clouds drift across the sky. The sun is only shaded out for a moment or two before it's shining again. I tilt my head back to the sun, pushing up my sunglasses for a moment and closing my eyes.

"Mom, I don't know what happens to us when we die, but if you're up there and watching over me, then you should know that I miss you like crazy."

I sigh and slip my sunglasses back down, swinging my backpack around to the front of my body. As I stuff the coat inside, the birds are singing. I inhale deeply, and the scent of pine lingers, reminding me of all the years I used to spend out here with her.

Tears burn the corners of my eyes. I wish she was here right now. She could spend time with me, walking around the forest and taking in the beautiful scenery. In the off-season she used to paint all the mountains and the rocky outcroppings. She'd paint the valleys that ran for miles and the slopes that seemed ethereal in the snow.

Everything looks exactly the same as the way she captured it.

I swallow hard, trying to fight the lump in my throat, taking another turn away from the resort, heading for a trail that Mom used to talk about all the time.

"I'm going to do this for you." I reach for the locket around my neck, holding it tight.

The trail is supposedly one of the hardest, especially in the snow. It isn't shoveled out, and there are some harsh inclines that are only made worse with ice in the winter. I have some spikes for my boots in my backpack, so that should make it easier.

You shouldn't go on a new trail alone, Aiden's voice says in the back of my mind. You should always be prepared for the worst to happen, and someone should have a map of your hike before you set out so the rangers know where to look for you.

I shut out the voice and reach the base of the trail, stopping for long enough to eat a protein bar and drink some water.

If this doesn't make me feel closer to Mom, I don't know if there's anything that will.

Snow falls in fat flakes, and the wind whistles through the trees. I trip over something that catches on my boot, falling to the ground hard, my sunglasses falling off. As I reach for them, more snow sweeps up from the ground with the wind.

I grab the glasses before they can get too far and shove them back on before pushing

to my feet.

The bad weather came out of nowhere.

I suck in a sharp breath, trying to ignore the pain in my side. It's only a little further up the side of the mountain where there should be a cabin I can take refuge in for the rest of the day. At least, I think there is.

If I'm being entirely honest, I'm not quite sure where I am at this point. The map is soaked through, and my phone died a few minutes after I considered turning back to the resort.

Maybe this was all a mistake.

Nope, it wasn't. I just have to keep telling myself that I have a reason for doing this, even if it seems like a pretty dumb reason right now. I don't know why I thought I would feel close to Mom here.

I don't think I'm ever going to feel close to her again.

Slow down, Aiden's bossy voice says. Think about where you are. Search for any landmarks and leave a sign that you were there.

I'm not lost, I argue with the voice, even though I do think I'm lost.

And it's getting darker.

I'm going to have to spend the night out here. I only brought a couple thermal blankets and a sleeping bag that zips up over my head. I don't think I could even get a fire going with the way the snow is falling.

The wind starts howling as the sky turns midnight blue. I think the stars would be starting to show if the clouds weren't in the sky. I swallow hard, fighting past the sense of terror that traps itself in my throat.

There's an icy hand squeezing my lungs, making it hard to breathe. My feet keep slipping out from behind me, and as I climb up the slope, there are rocks lining one side of the path. They look jagged and sharp even in the low light.

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I bite the inside of my cheek, trying to hold it together. This isn't the worst thing to happen to me. That was losing Mom. If I could get through that, then I can get through this.

But as the wind howls louder and snow whips around, blinding me, wolves start to howl in the distance.

A shiver runs down my spine, and though I want to move faster, Aiden's voice in the back of my mind keeps telling me that it's important to keep my pace. That I need to conserve my energy.

I take a deep breath and try to still the racing of my heart, but it's impossible. I didn't think I would ever be in a position like this, but now that I am, I don't know how I'm going to get out of it.

Just a little while longer. I just have to keep going for a little while longer.

But I don't know where I am or what I'm trying to get to anymore.

My boot catches on something again, and I go crashing backward, landing hard on my butt, my head cracking against the ground. Stars dance across my vision and pain ricochets through my body, settling in my ankle.

I groan and sit up even though everything in my body is telling me to stay down with my smushed backpack. I could just spend the rest of the evening on the ground.

If it weren't for the howling wind.

Or the wolves in the distance.

And then there's the problem of the snow still coming down in a blinding white sheet, making it hard to see anything around me.

"Please, please, please," I whisper, trying to ease my ankle out of the rocks it's caught between. "This can't be happening right now."

But it is.

The wind gets colder as I tug at my boot, pulling the laces and trying to get my foot out, but even that doesn't work. And I don't want to get my foot wet. The last thing I need is frostbite on my toes.

I stick my foot back in the boot and lace it up tight.

All right, just take a moment to think this through. The worst thing I can do right now is panic.

I take a deep breath and blow it out, trying to slow my racing heart. Everything is going to be fine. I just have to take a moment to breathe.

But even after a couple moments of breathing, I still can't get my foot out.

And the wolves are getting louder.

CHAPTER 8

AIDEN

Rosie trudges along beside me. "Do you think we're going to find her soon?"

Ryder pulls up on my other side, hoisting his bag higher on his back. “The storm is getting bad. If we don’t find her in the next few minutes, we’re going to have to turn back and try again in the morning.”

I glare at Rosie. “If you’d told me that she went out hiking when the storm started, we wouldn’t be out here right now.”

Tears spring to her eyes. “I know. I didn’t think anything of it when I came home and found the note. If I knew the weather was going to get this bad, I would’ve come to find you.”

I sigh and stop, huddling in on myself to keep warmer against the wind that’s whipping around me. “Why don’t both of you head back to the cabin together?”

“No.” Ryder shakes his head. “We’re not going to leave you out here alone to search for her. It’s too dangerous.”

I sigh and look around, watching the red light I have attached to Honey bouncing through the thick snow falling. She circles back, the light growing bigger as she comes closer to me.

“Aiden, what are we going to do?” Rosie’s voice wobbles and then breaks. “I know you don’t like her much, but we can’t leave her out here.”

“Do you know where she might’ve gone?” I motion Honey to my side, holding onto her collar to make sure that she stays with me while we’re not moving.

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Rosie bites her bottom lip before pulling up the scarf over her mouth. “I don’t know. There was a trail her mom used to go to when she wanted to be alone. It’s possible that Mia went to hike it, but it’s a hard one.”

“What trail?” I don’t know if she’s out there, but after everything I said to her last night, it’s more than likely that she wanted to be alone.

I never should’ve said those things to her.

If I had been nicer, Mia might be back at the cabin right now instead of spending an entire day out in the cold and the storm. This is all my fault, and I’m not going to forgive myself if anything happens to her.

Rosie rocks back and forth on her heels. “Devil’s Pass.”

“Of course.” I let out a deep breath again before looking between her and Ryder. “The two of you are going to go back to the cabin, and you’re going to wait for her there just in case she was able to turn back.”

Ryder scoffs. “No, we’re not. You’re going to need help if anything’s happened to Mia, and you shouldn’t be going out that way on your own in weather like this.”

“I know what I’m doing. I’ll be able to move faster without the two of you slowing me down.” I gesture to the sled I’ve got trailing behind me, the harness tight on my chest. “And I can pull her back if I need to, but there’s a cabin on that trail we should be able to get to if she did go that way.”

Rosie sniffs and reaches up to wipe her eyes. “Fine, but you better bring her home. If you don’t, then, well, I don’t know what I’m going to do, but it’s probably going to be miserable for everyone involved.”

I nod and turn, not feeding into her dramatics as Honey and I set off on our own. I’ll make better time without the other two holding me back and without Rosie driving me insane. I don’t think she’s stopped talking since I stormed into her room earlier and asked where Mia was.

The look on Rosie’s face made my blood freeze in my veins.

And now I’m out here searching in the middle of a storm. I know the outlook isn’t good. When people get lost in storms like this, they’re often found with severe frostbite, or they’re not found at all.

I don’t want Mia to become another statistic.

“Find her,” I say as soon as Honey comes bounding back to me. Honey sniffs at Mia’s hairbrush in my hand before she takes off again.

I stuff the brush back into the pocket of my backpack, my chest tightening.

The night only gets darker as I check the map, the headlamp shining bright against the lamination. I check the compass I have before heading out in the direction of Devil’s Pass.

It’s a hard hike. I don’t know how experienced Mia is, but if she isn’t hiking all the time, I would’ve told her to change her hiking plan. Even I’m struggling, and I spend most of my days out in the snow.

Honey barks and charges through the snow, the red light bouncing. I move a little

faster, hoping that she's found Mia. It's still going to be a long hike, and when a wolf howls in the distance, I move even faster.

Just hold on a little longer wherever you are, Mia.

Honey's bark fills me with equal parts hope and dread. She's found something, but I don't know what she's found. It could be Mia, or it could be a glove she dropped.

I take a deep breath and trudge through the growing mounds of snow, following Honey's red light until I reach her.

"Mia!" I drop to the ground beside the body, pulling back the top of the sleeping bag, hands shaking. "Mia, are you okay?"

She blinks up at me, her lips tinged blue and the tip of her nose a bright red. Blood is still flowing. "What are you doing here?" she asks.

"I was worried when you weren't home. What the hell are you doing out here on your own?"

Mia stares at me for a moment before a small smile tugs at the corner of her lips. "That's what you want to say to me right now?"

I nod. "You're out here in the cold, and you're in a sleeping bag?—"

"And thermal blankets. I have two thermal blankets on too." She shuffles, sitting up a little, the sleeping bag and the blankets falling away. "But my ankle is caught."

The last words come out as barely a whisper. They're so soft that I don't think I hear them at first, but once they process, I shuffle down to her ankle and push everything to the side.

Her boot is wedged deep between two rocks. She shakes it a little, hissing between her teeth as she shows off how wedged it really is.

I pull my goggles down to get a better look. “Stop moving it if it hurts that much.”

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“Has anyone ever told you that you’re incredibly bossy?”

“Mia, you’re not being helpful right now. I’m going to get your foot out, and then we’re going to take a look at it.” I slip my hand down between the rocks and the bottom of her boot, gripping the heel.

She whimpers as I ease the boot partway out between the rocks, tears in her eyes. “Stop. It hurts.”

I pause, glancing up at her. “You can do this, okay? I’m going to get it the rest of the way out, and everything is going to be fine.”

Her head shakes, and her bottom lip quivers. “I don’t think I can.”

Honey circles Mia before laying down on her chest, forcing her back. Mia starts to run her fingers through Honey’s fur, taking deep breaths. I don’t know how much help it is, but I know that when I’m starting to panic, there’s nothing more comforting than having Honey settle on me.

“Okay,” Mia says, her voice wavering. “Please get my foot out of there.”

“It’s going to be fine. Just take a deep breath and let it out.” I wait until she inhales, and then I pull her foot out the rest of the way.

She lets out another shaky breath, but Honey stays in place, keeping Mia as calm as possible right now.

The second Mia's booted foot is out of the rocks, I kneel and pull her foot into my lap, taking off her boot and starting to feel along her ankle. Nothing feels out of place, and though the muscles are obviously stiff and bruised, she's able to move it.

Her cheeks are a deep red as I slip her boot back on and tie it up. "I'm sorry you had to come all the way out here in this," she says. "I thought I knew where I was going, and then my map got soaked through and I tried to turn back, but then I started getting turned around and?—"

I get to my feet and hold out a hand to help her as Honey gets up. "You don't need to keep rambling. It's my job to find you."

"Oh." She puts her hand in mine and allows me to help her up. She tests out putting weight on her ankle and nearly falls over. "I don't know if I'm going to be able to get anywhere right now. Maybe it would be better to leave me and go back for a snowmobile."

"Not going to be able to get one up the mountain in this storm. Too risky." I help her over to a tree and take her backpack, packing up the blankets and the sleeping bag. "I'm going to help you, unless you want to ride on the sled."

She shakes her head. "No, I should be good to limp along. It's just going to take some time."

"We have all the time in the world." I put her supplies onto the sled along with my own backpack, securing them so it will be easier to pull along and help her. "Rather get there alive than risk you getting more hurt by trying to keep up with me."

I loop my arm around her waist, and she hooks hers around my shoulders, resting some of her weight on me as we walk along.

However, with the first step, she nearly goes down.

“Shit,” she says under her breath. She looks at me with tears in her eyes, looking like she’s seconds away from falling apart.

I turn around and disassemble the sled before motioning to it. “Sit down. I’m going to put this stuff in your lap, and then we’re going to get moving.”

“Aiden, it’s going to hurt you. I’m not light, and with everything else?—”

“Mia, shut up and get on the sled. We can argue once we get to the cabin, but I’ll be damned if you think I’m going to leave you out here because I can’t deal with your weight and two backpacks.”

Her cheeks turn a darker shade of crimson, and she slowly lowers herself to the sled, settling in and grabbing the backpacks. She pulls them into her lap, looking down at them, her dark eyelashes dusting the tops of her cheekbones.

I adjust the harness and check the map before I start walking. Mia is silent throughout the walk, but every now and then, I think I hear a sniffle.

Guilt eats at me as I peek at her over my shoulder. I should’ve been here earlier. Maybe if I had been nicer to her last night, she never would’ve taken off this morning.

The cabin rises up on the horizon, nothing more than a black blob against the dark night, but the closer we get, the more shape it takes.

I stop outside the door and push it open before unhooking the sled from my harness. I take the bags from Mia and toss them into the cabin before crouching down and picking her up before she has a chance to try and move on her own.

“Aiden, this is unnecessary.” She claps her hands on her bright red cheeks.

“It’s going to be a long walk back, and you’ll need to be able to put weight on your foot, so yes, it is necessary.” I set her on the couch, and Honey follows us inside. I go around the room, turning on the lanterns hanging throughout the cabin. “Do you need help getting out of your ski suit?”

Her cheeks turn a darker shade of red. It would be lying to say that I didn’t like seeing how flustered she gets at times. It’s never this bad when we’re around people, but right now, when it’s the two of us, she’s a little off guard.

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Mia shakes her head and reaches for the zipper of her jacket. "I'm fine."

I nod and head back outside, shutting the door behind me and taking the sled to gather firewood from the shed around the back. I stack it high, not wanting to have to go back out if the storm gets worse.

When I come back inside, Mia is out of her boots and coat, wearing nothing but a tight long-sleeve and some leggings. Her hair hangs loose around her face, and she runs her fingers absentmindedly through Honey's fur.

Honey wags her tail when she sees me, her gear already off and stacked on the coffee table.

I work on bringing the firewood inside, lighting it up in the fireplace before rummaging through the small kitchen and finding a pot to warm up some canned ravioli on top of the wood stove.

When I finally turn to Mia, she's watching me like she's not sure what to think of me. I sigh and take off my coat and boots, leaving them by the door. I slide out of the ski pants before running a hand through my hair.

Mia looks away. "Thank you for coming to get me," she says. "I didn't know what was going to happen when I was out there, and I was worried about maybe not coming home."

My eyebrows arch as I cross over to her and sit on the little coffee table in front of her, the glow from the lanterns around the room lighting us up. "Nobody was going

to let you die out here. As soon as I found out that you hadn't come home, I went out and looked for you."

She runs a hand through her hair, staring past me at the flickering wood stove. "I didn't think you cared that much since I'm a vapid party girl."

I wince, my gaze finding hers. "I said some things I didn't mean. I'm sorry. I'm not good at getting to know people."

Mia scoffs. "That's putting it lightly. There's not a chance in hell that any of your elementary school report cards had plays well with others written on them."

The corner of my mouth twitches as I get up to check on dinner. "Not even a little bit."

Her laughter fills the room. "I'm sorry too. I know I get under your skin, and I exploit that at times. I mean, you do make it easy, but I shouldn't be taking advantage of that."

I dish out the food and bring a bowl over to her. "Well, maybe we can work on being friends."

Even though I'm sure it's a terrible idea. I don't know how to be just friends with someone. Not when I spend most of my life moving around the world. People tend to like someone they can count on to be there when they need them.

I can't promise to be that person for her.

But perhaps, for the rest of the season, at least, I can stop worrying about whether she wants to be friends or not. We could just be.

We finish our dinner in silence, the crackle of the fire and the scent of burning wood wrapping around us. I make sure to sit in the solo chair beside the couch — not that I could sit on the couch even if I wanted to. Honey seems to have taken up her place beside Mia, and there's no separating the two based on the side-eye the dog keeps giving me.

And then before I know it, Mia is yawning and looking like she's seconds away from falling asleep on the couch. I get up and take the bowls into the little kitchenette to wash in the morning.

When I turn around, her head is dropping toward the pillow, her injured foot up on the arm of the couch and Honey sleeping beside her.

I sigh and pick up Mia, carrying her to one of the two doors on the right side of the cabin. She looks up at me, and for a moment I consider leaning in and kissing her. It would be easy to do, but I don't know if I would want to stop.

Mia shifts in my arms, tilting her head back more like she's giving me the perfect angle to claim her.

I stare at her for so long that my heart feels like it's going to beat right out of my chest, and then I push open the door, ready to go to bed before I do something that's going to change the rest of the season.

But, instead of the two twin beds that were here the last time I came by, there's only one queen-sized bed.

CHAPTER 9

MIA

I roll over, wincing when my ankle tightens. It feels worse than it did yesterday. As I groan, Honey shifts beside me, yawning and shuffling closer, her tail wagging.

With a grin I run my fingers through her fur. I could get used to waking up with a dog in the bed. I always wanted one when I was younger, but Mom said it would be too much work. She never wanted to deal with a dog when she was the only one trying to provide for our small little family.

“Hey, girl,” I murmur, laughing when she stretches and crawls closer. Her tongue drags over the side of my face. “Yeah, good morning to you too. Why don’t we go see what there is for food for you?”

Honey’s ears perk up and she bounds out of bed, pawing at the closed door. I stare at it for a moment, not sure I want to go out there and face Aiden. Yesterday was humiliating beyond all reason.

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I shouldn't have been out there in that storm. As soon as it started snowing, I should've turned around and gone back to the cabins. Instead, I kept going, thinking that I could make it, turning myself around.

And now I'm in a tiny cabin with a man I barely know. I want to get to know him, though.

Maybe the long walk back to the resort is going to make him see that I'm not the person he thinks I am.

As I swing my legs to the side and try to stand, my ankle gives out. I fall back to the bed and grit my teeth. The pain is horrible, but it doesn't feel like anything more than a severe twist.

I let out a breath and get to my feet again, this time able to hold myself up. It's a slow limp to the door, but I manage, pulling it open and giving Honey enough room to dart out before I follow her.

"You're up." Aiden glances my way before crossing the room and looping his arm around my waist. "Come on. Let's get you settled. It's not like we're going to be going anywhere anyway."

"We're not?" I try to ignore the butterflies in my stomach.

His fingers drift along my ribs through the thin material of my shirt. Tingles run through my body. If I didn't know any better, I would think that the way his fingertips brushed along the underside of my breast was intentional. I'd think that it's

a subtle touch designed to drive me crazy, not the touch of a man who's just helping me to the couch.

I ease down onto the couch. "Thank you. Now, why aren't we going anywhere?"

Aiden goes to the window and yanks open the curtains, showing off the wall of white outside. "Storm got worse. I used the emergency radio to tell Carter that we're fine so he doesn't try to send out a search party."

I nod and grab the throw pillows, stuffing them under my foot to keep it propped up. "How long do you think we're going to be here?"

Though I want to get to know him, I want the ability to put distance between us. I don't want to spend the rest of the day too close to him. Getting carried into that bedroom and finding out that we'd have to share was horrible. And then he put me into bed, let Honey get in with me, and turned around to walk out.

Somehow, that was worse than if he had climbed in bed with me.

I don't think I would've been too interested in keeping my hands to myself, but it might've made for an interesting time.

"Shouldn't be more than a day. Maybe two. Give the snow some time to settle." Aiden comes over and sits on the coffee table, pulling my foot into his lap. "How is it this morning?"

"Still hurts."

He laughs, his big hands massaging my foot and ankle, the callouses on his hands rough against my skin. A shiver rolls down my spine. He keeps prodding at my ankle, moving it this way and that. "Yeah, I didn't think it was going to feel great. You

really had it wedged in there. You're going to have to tell me how you managed to do that."

"One wrong step, I guess." My cheeks feel like they're on fire. "It's not like I went out with the intention to get caught between the rocks and then bust up my ankle. Sometimes these things just happen."

"Oh, they do." He gently puts my foot back down on the pillows. "I meant what I said last night. I'm sorry for how horrible I was at the party. There's no excuse."

I press my lips together into a thin line, studying him. "Why'd you change up like that? I thought we were getting along? You were having a good time, and then all of a sudden, you were accusing me of being vapid."

"Yeah, well, I'm an idiot."

"Huh." I glare at his back as he stands and walks over to the kitchenette, rummaging through some of the food in the cabinets before going to his bag. "Does telling people that you think you're an idiot usually get you out of explaining yourself?"

He stiffens, his tense muscles visible under the tight-fitting thermal shirt he wears. "Yeah. Usually."

"Cool, well, just so you know, that's not going to work with me. So, I guess you should tell me why that happened."

Aiden clears his throat, pulling out a few breakfast MREs from his bag. "Didn't think much about it. I have a hard time dealing with people. Got in my own head about some other stuff. You just happened to be the unlucky person in my path."

"I was the only person in your path."

He prepares the French toast MREs, setting them to the side to finish heating up. When he turns and faces me, leaning back against the counter, his muscled arms crossing over his chest, I clench my thighs together. I try to ignore the feeling building low in my body, but it's hard to ignore.

Aiden looks at me, his gaze seeming to burn straight through me. "Well, yeah, there's that. Look, I don't know what's going on with either of us, and I'm not good at this friendship thing, but you seem like it's something you want, and I've been told that it could be good for me to have some more friends, so..."

The corner of my mouth twitches. "That might be the most you've ever said to me."

He rolls his eyes and gets up, but he can't quite hide the smile on his face fast enough. "Honey, you want some kibble?"

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“I just want you to know that I’m going to tell everyone that you want to be my friend. They’re not going to believe it. All of them are going to be thinking that I’m making it up, but don’t you worry, I’ll make sure they know.”

Aiden pulls a bag of kibble and a bowl from his bag, filling it up before tucking the bag away. He grabs the bowl of water he set out for her last night, cleans it and fills it with fresh water.

He glances at me as he sets the bowl down. “You could tell them whatever you want, but I doubt any of them are going to believe you.”

“Maybe not, but somebody has to.” I smirk and shift on the couch, nodding to the fireplace. “Want to show me how to light that since we’re going to be here for a while?”

He goes back to the food and turns it out onto plates before bringing the food and a set of forks over. “You don’t know how to light a fire?”

“Please. I just spent endless years of my life in the hospital and in college. I have no clue how to do any of the wilderness stuff my mom did. She used to teach me when I was younger, but when I got to be a teenager, I stopped wanting to spend time with her on the slopes. I spent way too much time hanging out with kids my age.”

“I didn’t know your mother.” Aiden sits down on the other end of the couch. It’s still not close to me, but it’s better than it was last night. “But I did know of her. Never met anyone with anything bad to say about her.”

Unless my eyes are deceiving me, he keeps glancing at me with interest shining bright in his eyes. There's a tension that lingers in the room, making my heart beat faster.

"Thank you." I take a bite of the French toast.

"Is she why you did that trail?" Aiden moves closer to me, his feet on the table, brushing against my good one.

Another shiver runs through my body, my blood freezing in my veins before it all goes rushing at once.

"Yeah." I force the word out, trying not to focus on how warm the room seems to be getting despite the fact that the only heat in the cabin is coming from the wood stove.

"Why?" He puts his empty plate on the table, shooting Honey a warning look when she starts to lick the syrup from the plate. She doesn't pay him any mind, continuing on her mission.

I smile and finish my own food, shrugging. "Don't know."

"Now who's the one copping out?" He gets off the couch and kneels beside the fireplace, motioning to the ground beside him. "Come on. I'll teach you how to light a fire, and you're going to tell me all about what the hell possessed you to send yourself up a trail called Devil's Pass."

I swallow hard and ease off the couch, kneeling down beside him, careful not to jostle my ankle too much. "I didn't know it was called that. I just remembered where the entry point was and what it looked like from all the paintings Mom did."

Aiden grabbed some old newspapers and paper towel tubes and ripped them into

small pieces. “This is the tinder. It’s stuff that’s easy to burn, and it’s what you’re going to put down first.”

I nod, taking some from him and placing it into the center of the hearth. “Okay.”

He grabs some tiny sticks and stacks them in a cone shape on top of the tinder. “So, if you only saw Devil’s Pass in paintings, what made you think that you’d be able to climb it?”

“I’m in pretty good shape. I like to stay active, even though I don’t have time for a whole lot these days.”

“Kindling.” He nods to the little sticks. “You want to make sure that they’re burning good before adding a log, so you start increasing the size of the sticks until you can get up to the logs.” Aiden pulls a lighter from his pocket. “This is a whole lot easier to do if you have this.”

I laugh and take the lighter from him, flicking it and igniting the tinder, watching it catch the bottom of the kindling cone on fire. “Yeah, I’d say that’s pretty easy.”

He adds thicker sticks to the cone. “Still doesn’t make sense why you stayed out there once the storm started up.”

“Well, I thought that I was good. I know how to read a map and use a compass. Didn’t think that it would get as bad as it did. And then it seemed like turning back was a bad idea. I had no clue where I was.”

“So you lodged your foot in the rocks to stay put until someone could come and find you.”

“Listen,” I say with a teasing smile, leaning a little closer to him as I stack thicker

pieces of kindling in the cone. “The best part about all those lectures you were giving me was the part where you explicitly told me to jam my foot between two rocks. It’s the best idea you’ve ever had.”

“Oh, well, then you should hear my lecture on cursing like a sailor when you stub your toe while hiking.”

Laughing, I help him add small logs to the fire. “I think it would be a good idea not to give that lecture to the children.”

“You’re probably right.” He gets to his feet, immediately bending back down to help me up. I keep weight off my ankle, leaning into him, and I can’t help but like the way it feels.

His body is warm against mine, and the scent of his cologne wraps around me. I could get lost in that scene, pretending that nothing bad in the world is ever going to happen while I’m here in his arms.

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And that's dangerous.

Aiden lowers me back down onto the couch. "I think there's some board games around here somewhere. Want to play a couple?"

"Hold on. First, you save me, and now you want to play games with me?" I hold a hand to my chest, falling back into the teasing territory because it's far easier than telling him what I really want from him.

Which involves one night of probably bad decisions and the bed in the other room. Or the couch. I'm willing to work with what I need to.

Aiden rolls his eyes, but a dimple pops in his cheek as he smiles and shakes his head. "All right. Well, I'm going to go find some games. You sit here and think about more witty things to say."

"They're hardly witty if you have to think about them."

He snorts and disappears into the bedroom, coming back out a few moments later with a board game.

As he sets the box on the table, he sits close to me, his thigh brushing against mine. Fire rushes through my veins, and for a moment, I consider telling him I want him.

But I don't have to.

Aiden turns to me, and it's only then that he seems to realize how close we really are.

Instead of backing away, he leans closer, a few inches between us. His breath ghosts over my lips.

And then he leans back.

It's going to be a long day.

“Won again.” I toss my cards down onto the table and raise my hands high above my head. “We’ve spent like nine hours playing games, you know. I’m all for sitting in front of the fire on some thick blankets and talking.”

Aiden grunts but gets up and goes into the bedroom, coming back out with thick stacks of blankets and some pillows. “Don’t know what you’re going to want to talk about.”

“Well, I thought I could get to see more of your charming personality in action.”

He spreads the blankets out on the ground and sets up the pillows facing the fire. “Sure. I know that’s really why you want to spend time with me. It has nothing to do with my body.”

The corner of my mouth curls upward, heat flooding from my core. “It might have a little to do with your body.”

Aiden’s eyebrows climb, like he wasn’t expecting me to flirt back with him. “Well, at least you’re honest.”

I get up and shuffle over to the blankets with him, sitting down and leaning back against the pillows. “Yeah, you learn that quick when your mom is dying. I didn’t have a lot of time left with her, so I didn’t see the point in beating around the bush about anything.”

Aiden sprawls out beside me, lying on his side with an arm tucked beneath his head. “What happened to your mom?”

“Cancer. Twice, actually.” I swallow hard, fighting past the lump in my throat. “The first time was when I was young. I remember spending a lot of time in the hospital with her, but all it took was a round of chemo and a surgery, and she was good to go home.”

“And the second time?”

“She was sick for years, and then she died.” I force a wavering smile, my voice cracking. “I thought that I could find her by coming here. Feel whatever small piece of her might be left in the world.”

Before I know what’s happening, I’m pulled into his embrace. He holds me tight as the sobs break loose, shaking my body.

It’s the first time I’ve really let myself cry since being here.

And once the tears start coming, they don’t stop. They trail down my cheeks, and it’s hard to pull in a deep breath.

“It’s okay,” Aiden says in a hushed tone. His hands rub up and down my back. “Let it all out.”

I press my face into his chest, too upset to be embarrassed. My body keeps shaking until I have no tears left to cry. It’s only once I pull back and wipe my eyes that my cheeks are on fire.

Sniffling, I pull back more. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to lose it like that. I just haven’t thought about her or spoken about her this much since she died.”

“Cry if you need to.” His fingers skim up and down my spine. “I’m fine with crying. I deal with a lot of it during search and rescue missions.”

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“I didn’t think you would be.”

Aiden laughs, his hand still. “Well, there’re a lot of things you don’t know about me.”

I smile, feeling better. “I’d like to get to know more. If we’re going to be living in the same cabin for the next couple of months, it might be nice. I mean, you don’t know that much about me.”

That dimple pops out again, making my heart melt and my inner walls clench.

He reaches out, and when his thumb drifts over my bottom lip, my heart stops. “I know that you chew on your bottom lip before you go speak to parents after lessons. You’re terrified of them.”

I laugh, his thumb slipping past my lip, my bottom teeth grazing the tip.

Aiden’s gaze locks on mine, his eyes hooded as he leans in. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“I don’t know,” I say as his thumb slips down my chin and he cups my jaw. “What are you doing?”

“Nothing that’s going to end well for either of us, I’m afraid.”

“Then why do it?” My voice is barely more than a whisper as I shuffle as close to him as I can, every inch of my body pressing against his.

“Because I’m damn tired of fighting it.”

And then his mouth is on mine and his hands are slipping beneath the back of my shirt. His calluses are rough against my skin, creating a delicious friction that has heat pooling between my thighs. I press them closer together until one of his hands trails down over my hip.

Aiden pulls back and looks at me, lust in his eyes. “We should stop.”

“I don’t want to.”

“Your ankle?—”

“Is fine.” I run my fingers through the soft strands of his hair, pulling him back to me.

“Just be careful.”

He groans low in the back of his throat as my lips press over his.

CHAPTER 10

AIDEN

I groan as Mia’s tongue tangles with mine. I grab her thigh and haul it over my hip before rolling her onto her back. I grind into her, my pants growing tighter over my cock as I roll into her.

Mia moans, her body arching. She tugs on my hair, one leg hooking around my body and pulling me into her. Electricity sparks between us as I tear my mouth from hers and kiss my way down her neck.

My tongue flicks over her hammering pulse. Her hands roam down my back and over

my shoulders, tracing her way down my arms. When her nails rake into my skin, I rock forward, driving against her core.

She rolls her hips. “More.”

I chuckle and drag her earlobe between my teeth. “Greedy. Who said I was going to be giving you anything tonight?”

Mia takes my jaw in her hand, pushing me back enough to look me in the eyes. “Oh, so you want to play games?”

“Only the kind that end with you naked in my arms.”

A dark pink flush coats her cheeks, but there’s want burning in her eyes and her thighs press tighter on either side of my body. I grind into her, heat radiating between us. I hover above her, reaching for the hem of her shirt and pulling it above her head.

Her breasts nearly spill out of the bra that’s holding them in place. The stiff peaks of her nipples poke through the thin material.

I moan and kiss my way back down her neck, sucking on her skin, teasing it with light nips until she’s writhing under me. Her breathy little gasps have me aching as my tongue traces between the valley of her breasts and down to her belly button.

“Stop teasing,” she whispers, fingers roaming my back. She grabs a fistful of the shirt and pulls it up and over my head.

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I twirl my lip ring for a moment as I sit back and study her. She's a work of art I don't think I'm ever going to get tired of looking at.

And tonight, she's mine.

I grab her leggings and underwear, hauling them down her legs, careful not to jostle her ankle too much. Her core is glistening with her arousal.

"I'm going to apologize in advance." My fingers trail down her body, dipping between her legs and gliding against her slick folds.

"What for?" she gasps as I push one finger into her, my thumb brushing her clit.

"Once I get the chance to have you on my cock, I doubt that I'm going to be able to hold on for very long."

Mia laughs, the laugh changing to a moan as I slide another finger into her. Her pussy clenches tight around my fingers, her legs shaking. I kiss my way along her torso, from one hip to the other.

"If you're thinking about marking me up, you better think again." She arches off the floor as I drag her leg over my shoulder, burying my face between her legs.

I twirl my tongue around her clit, teasing the little bud until she's rocking against me, her hands in my hair. As I suck on her sensitive bundle of nerves, her moans grow louder. I thrust my fingers faster, moving in time with my tongue.

Her body shakes harder, her back arching off the floor. Mia comes hard, rolling her hips. I keep teasing her, crooking my fingers against the inner walls squeezing around me.

I'm aching, wanting to bury myself in her, but I want her to keep riding out the waves of pleasure too. Her body goes limp for a moment before she's tugging me back up to kiss her.

Our tongues tangle as she reaches between us, shoving the rest of my clothing off my hips. Her hand wraps around my cock, sliding up and down the length, her thumb brushing over the tip.

She guides me to her, her hand falling away as I inch into her. Her nails dig into my shoulders and rake down my back as her legs lock around my hips. Mia's gaze locks on mine, and she arches up to kiss me.

"Have I ever told you how much I like that lip ring?" Her head falls back against the pillows as I roll my hips, driving deeper into her.

I throb as I bury myself deeper into her, everything in my body drawing tight. Mia rocks with me, her legs tightening around my hips, her inner walls milking me as I come. She rides the high of another orgasm, her nails scratching at me, making the pleasure build. I give her long and slow strokes, enjoying the feeling of her wrapped around me until I can't take anymore.

"Shit," I mutter as I pull out of her.

"I have an IUD. We're fine." She shifts on the pillows, her chest rising and falling as she catches her breath.

I lay beside her, staring up at the ceiling. And then Honey comes trotting over like

she isn't the size of a horse, dropping down at the end of the blanket in front of a fire and curling up into a ball.

Mia shuffles closer to me, putting her head on my chest without a word. I loop my arm around her, holding her close and kissing her temple.

"Do you ever think about what comes after this life? I mean, I spend a lot of time thinking about it, and I've never come to anything that's a good enough answer."

"I don't know." My fingers drift up and down her arm. "I used to think about it when I was young. My mom died when I was a child, and my father was... a hard man."

"Oh?" She props herself up on her arm, looking down at me. "You don't have to tell me if you don't want to."

"Nah, it's fine." I brush a strand of her hair back from her face, those light green eyes searching mine like she's digging around for my soul. "It's not that interesting."

Except, when Mia looks at me like she is right now, I think I might be the most interesting person on the planet to her. She studies me like she actually wants to know me. It's something I've never had before and something I don't think I'll ever have again.

And I want to bask in it.

Even though I've only known her for a week, I can't stand the thought of disappointing her. Of not telling her about my life just because she asked, even though it's far from a happy story.

Mia runs her fingers over my chest. "I used to think about death a lot when Mom first got sick. Probably too much. I was a kid at the time. Didn't know what I'd do without

her. My dad has never been in the picture. Mom said he didn't want kids, and finding out that he was going to have one didn't change that."

"Did that bother you?"

She shrugs and lays back down, her head still on my chest. "Maybe it did back then. Doesn't now. I learned a long time ago that there's no point in begging people to love you, and that even if you want to, you're never going to be able to change their minds."

"So, if you believe there's no point in chasing after people, why did you keep chasing after me over the last week?"

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“Lonely knows lonely.” She glances at me again. “I thought maybe you might like to be lonely with someone.”

I pause, considering that. “My mom died shortly after I was born. My father tried to raise me, but it felt like he blamed me for her death. He was angry all the time, and those few moments when he wasn’t, he was just sad. And then he died when I was ten.”

“How?”

I clear my throat. “He was out in the mountains. He used to like going camping in the winter. That winter we rented a cabin because I kept complaining about sleeping in tents. He went out because he wanted at least one night in a tent.”

“Seems odd to leave your kid alone like that.” Mia traces her fingers over my stomach again. “Why’d he do it?”

“He and Mom used to go camping by the lake. I guess he was missing her, and he thought that it would be the way to be close to her, but a storm rolled in. Snow came down like it hadn’t before. He didn’t come back in the morning, and I was snowed in. I found an emergency radio and called to the ranger station like he taught me to do.”

“I’m sorry.” She looks at me with tears shining in her eyes.

It’s the first time someone has said those words to me that I actually believe them. She looks at me like she’s feeling my pain. Like she would do anything she could to take it from me.

My fingers are still touching Mia. “They couldn’t get to him in time. Their rescue K9 was retired the week before, and they hadn’t been able to find any other dog yet. By the time they found Dad, he was gone.”

Mia slings her arm over my torso, holding me tight, kissing my collarbone. I hold onto her like she’s the only thing holding me together right now because I think she might be. I don’t know what else to do.

And the longer I lay there with her, the more wrong I think I might’ve been.

She’s not the airheaded party girl who just came to the mountains for a good time.

She’s the only person I’ve been able to open up to in a long time. The one person in years who has made me feel like maybe being alone isn’t what’s meant for me.

The thought scares the hell out of me.

I wake up the next morning to Mia tracing her fingers over my collarbone, her lips tracing my pulse. I hold her a little tighter, wanting to bask in front of the fireplace with her for a few minutes longer, but the fire has long since gone out and the cabin is frosty.

“It stopped snowing,” Mia says as she gets up, testing the weight of her ankle while I get to my feet. “What do you think about going back to the resort where there are hot showers and warm cabins waiting?”

Without thinking about it, I pull her into me, my mouth capturing hers, savoring the taste of her on my lips. “Are you going to be okay walking?”

Honey’s tail thumps against my leg as she wriggles her way between us and leans into Mia. With a smile, Mia smooths her hand over Honey’s ears and shrugs. “I’m

tired of cold showers, so I think I should be able to make it just fine.”

I laugh and reach for my clothing, pulling it on and heading off to get breakfast ready while she limps out of the room to go pack her things. I’m nervous about whether or not she’s actually going to be able to make it down the mountain, but we won’t know unless we try.

Mia shakes her head as I carry her up the stairs to the cabin we share with our roommates several hours later. “You really didn’t have to carry me the last two miles.”

Smiling, I set her down on her feet and place a kiss on the corner of her mouth. It feels strange to be so warm and intimate with someone else, but there’s something about hiking seven hours through the woods together and having nothing else to do that lets people get to know each other.

I take a deep breath. “You know they’re going to be in there waiting for us. Carter warned me about them over the radio before we set out.”

Mia pulls out her phone and shows me nearly a hundred missed messages from the group chat with Rosie and Ryder. “Believe me, I know.”

Honey barks at the door, looking between the two of us like she wants us to stop talking and open the door so she can go to bed. I take a deep breath, trying to get ready to face whatever’s to come, but I don’t know if I ever fully will be.

As I push open the door, we’re met with wolf whistles from Rosie and Ryder that send Mia scurrying into the cabin, shaking her head and laughing, trying to change the subject.

I follow her, not sure of anything that’s going on, and more than anything wanting to

curl up in my own bed and sleep. It's been a rough couple of nights sleeping on the couch and then the floor, but at least on the floor, I got to have Mia in my arms.

"What do we do now?" I whisper as I stand behind her, trying to tune out the millions of rapid-fire questions coming from Rosie and Ryder.

Mia looks over her shoulder at me, that warm smile easing some of the tight feeling in my stomach. "We go with the flow."

CHAPTER 11

MIA

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I clap my hands together, looking at the children gathered around me, their warm breath coming out in little bursts, their brightly colored helmets making them look top-heavy. “All right, everybody, that’s today’s lesson. I’ll see you all back here tomorrow. We’ll be going down the bunny hill!”

The kids all cheer, sliding over to their parents and chattering away to them without a care in the world. I smile and shake my head, grabbing my skis, swapping my boots, and waiting until the last child is picked up before heading out to the search and rescue tower.

It’s only been a day since we’ve been back, and I’ve been itching to spend more time with Aiden.

I don’t know what changed between us in the cabin, but there was a big shift. Something felt like an avalanche. One thing gave way, and it was enough to change everything for me.

And I think for him.

The fresh air steals my breath away, but the sun is warm and bright. I turn my face to it, letting the wind blow my hair around. After taking a deep breath, I keep heading up the path to the gondolas.

I step off the gondola a short time later, following the footsteps that lead in the direction of the search and rescue tower.

Eventually, the tower comes into view, and Aiden is sitting at the base of it, throwing

a bright orange ball for Honey. He tosses it again before his gaze locks on mine, and instead of the dozen or so feet between us, it feels like there's no distance at all.

My palms are sweaty and my heart pounds against my ribs. This doesn't feel like anything else I've ever experienced, and something about that excites me more than I want to admit.

"What are you doing here?" he asks, a slow smile spreading across his face as Honey yips and runs over to me, her entire body wiggling. "I'm beginning to think my dog doesn't love me anymore."

"Well, maybe she just has good taste." I put my skis in the snow and crouch down to love on Honey like she deserves. "I wanted to come and see when you were going to be done with your shift. Thought you might want to go skiing with me."

"One day back and you're already missing me?" He smirks, the lip ring catching the glint of the sun.

"Funny. I thought you could use a friend, but if you want to be alone, I could leave. Maybe take Honey with me since she doesn't seem like she's having such a great time with you."

He laughs and stands with his hands in his pockets. "She'd probably go with you too. The dog is a traitor."

Honey looks up at him, grinning her little doggy smile.

I stand up and look at him, not sure whether to kiss him or not. There's part of me that wants to, but the other part tells me to stand back. To not push him too hard, too fast.

Aiden has already proven that he likes to pull away the second people get close to him. If this new friendship — and maybe something more — is going to work, then I'm going to have to match his pace.

He steps closer to me, looking like he's as torn as I am over what to do next. "What do you think about going for a hike where we don't get lost?"

"Were you ever lost?" I tuck my hands in my pockets, my cheeks warming.

"Not when I was looking for you. Or ever. But I think one day I might be able to." He gives me a crooked little smile and checks the time on his watch. "I'm off in twenty minutes, but it'll probably be closer to ten. Carter is the one taking me off shift today, and he makes a point of being early."

I nod and hustle across the packed snow to drop down in one of the chairs. "I hope that this hike isn't going to be too long. My ankle is okay, but after teaching the last class, it's a little sore."

He smirks and takes a set of keys out of his pocket, tossing them to me. "Ever drive a snowmobile?"

"You're going to let me?" I grin and hold the keys like they're my new prized possession.

"Well, there're four in storage, and if I take a spare radio, Carter is going to be fine with me taking it. But you can't tell the others. They'd be pissed if they knew about the appropriation of resort equipment they're not allowed to borrow."

"Oh no, Aiden, are you about to tell me that you like breaking the rules?" I ask, tone teasing as I stretch out my legs and lean back in the chair. "Because I didn't think you were the type."

He twists the lip ring with his tongue. “Where do you think this came from?”

“Now you’re going to have to tell me the story.” I unzip my ski jacket partway, the sun baking me in my suit. “And we both know how much you love sharing.”

Aiden drops down into the seat beside me and picks up the ball when Honey brings it back again. He lobs it through the snow and glances at me. “I told you about growing up in foster homes. Well, I had this one foster mother. Real piece of work. She tried to control every aspect of my life when I was fourteen, and being a teenager, you can imagine how well I took to that.”

“You? Liking being told what to do?” I scoff and turn to face him, tucking one leg up on the seat. “I couldn’t imagine you hating that at all.”

He toys with the lip ring again, the look in his eyes distant. “We got in a fight about something — I don’t even remember what anymore — and I decided that I was going to do something I knew was going to piss her off, so I got my lip pierced.”

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“How did that go for you?”

“She lost her mind. Nearly kicked me out of the house then and there. She told me that I was going to ruin the image she had among her friends. And then she had me sent away.”

I reach out and take his hand, and for a moment he doesn't react. Then, his hand turns over and he laces his gloved fingers with mine, holding it tight like he needs me right now.

I can't remember the last time I was needed. Probably before Mom died. Back when it was just the two of us taking on the world together. That was the last time I felt like I knew what I was doing with my life too.

Aiden's thumb runs over the back of my hand. And though I can't feel the warm touch through the layers that separate us, there's a tingling that runs through me.

Carter shows up a few minutes later, looking between the two of us, a lazy grin spreading across his face. “I heard the rumors around the resort, but I didn't think they were true.”

“Dunno what you heard,” Aiden says as he gets to his feet, tugging me up with him. “Carter, Mia. Mia, this is Carter. He's been working here for an eternity.”

Carter rolls his eyes and offers me a smile. “He makes it sound like I'm ancient, but I'm really not.”

“Mind if we take one of the snowmobiles and a radio?” Aiden hands him one radio and heads up the stairs to the tower.

“Go for it.”

Aiden disappears into the watchtower before coming back out with another radio. He nods to me and leads the way to a shed around back. “Ready to drive?”

“Yeah, but is it okay to leave my skis here?” I glance at them and my helmet. “I don’t want Carter hating me because I left things in his way.”

He shakes his head. “They’re fine where they are. You don’t have to worry about that at all.”

Aiden turns on the lights and grabs a helmet off the wall, handing it to me. I flip up the visor and pull it on, buckling it beneath my chin and tightening the strap. He grabs one of his own, pulling it on and sitting down on the back of the seat, patting the space in front of him.

I climb on in front of him, and he goes through the motions, showing me how to turn it on and get it moving, doing a quick lesson on braking.

We set out with Honey running along behind us. I keep the pace slow enough for her to tag along, enjoying the time beneath the sun with the fat flakes of snow starting to drift down around us. A couple of white clouds pass through the sky, and the trees get thinner as we climb higher up the mountain.

Then, the trees fade altogether and a little cabin sits there, waiting for us.

“Now,” Aiden says as we get off the snowmobile and take off our helmets. “This one only has a wood stove and a bed. Using the toilet involves digging a hole in the

woods, so unless you want to freeze your ass?—”

I burst out laughing and hold up a hand. “Wait. Did you just tell me that I was going to freeze my ass?”

He gives me a wicked smile, the look in his eyes teasing. “Why?”

I grab a big ball of snow and pack it tight, throwing it at him. Honey races after the ball, jumping against Aiden and knocking him into the powdery snow. He laughs and tries to keep her from smothering him in kisses.

When he finally gets to his feet, there’s a dangerous look in his eyes. I turn and run, ignoring the complaint in my ankle as I race away from him. He catches me around the waist only a couple moments later, hauling me back against him.

Laughing, I wriggle around, trying to get free. Aiden’s laughing as he wrestles me to the ground and climbs on top of me, holding a fistful of snow high above my head. He arches an eyebrow and looks down at me.

I hold up my hands, blocking my face. “Okay, so maybe I regret starting a snow war.”

Honey comes flying in, knocking Aiden off of me and smothering him with another round of kisses. I laugh and get to my feet, brushing off the snow and straightening up, the ache back in my foot.

Aiden stops in front of me, staring down like he’s trying to figure something out. “You’re hurting.”

“Well, I did try to become one with the rocks, but it’s fine. A couple more days and everything is going to be fine, and then you can stop looking at me like I’m going to

break.”

He presses his lips together in a thin line. “I’ve heard that snacks fix everything. What do you think about having snacks?”

My stomach growls in response, and he laughs, disappearing into the little cabin and then coming back out with a bag of chips and a pack of cookies. He’s got two folding chairs slung over his shoulders, and he sets them up before dropping down into one.

I take the other and snag the bag of cookies from him. “So, do you come up here a lot? Is it one of those places you like to go to hide from the rest of the world?”

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“Sometimes. I used to come up here more during other seasons. I wasn’t so good at getting along with the others when I first added Aspen to my rotation. Carter saw that. Said I needed a space to be alone and recharge without someone in my face all the time, so he showed me this place.”

I open the bag of chips, the scent of sour cream and onion rising up. “And now you’re showing it to me?”

“Actually, yeah, but there’s a reason for it.” He turns and nods to the wall right behind us. “Look just beneath the windowsill.”

I twist and look, searching for whatever it is he wants to show me, and then I see it. Mom’s name is carved into the side of the building. The letters are small, but right beneath her name is mine.

“I don’t remember coming up to this cabin.”

“From what I heard around the resort, the last time she was at this cabin was when she was pregnant with you.”

A lump rises in my throat, threatening to choke me. I get up, my vision blurring, and head over to the wall, tracing my name over the letters. It feels like there’s a giant hand around my lungs, squeezing the air from me, making it impossible to breathe.

I run my fingers over the carving, tracing our names together. A hot tear tracks down my cheeks as a smile tugs at the corners of my mouth.

Aiden crouches down in the snow beside me, reaching to wipe the tears away. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah. I just didn’t know about this place, but she was here with me.” I suck in a sharp breath and lean closer to him, putting my head on his shoulder. It feels foreign and natural at the same time.

And right... like this is where I should be right now.

Aiden presses his lips to my temple. “If I knew that showing you this was going to make you sad, I would’ve told you before I brought you here.”

“No.” I pull back to look at him. “This was good. Thank you. I think I needed this. Everywhere else I’ve gone since I got here feels like I’m walking through someone else’s memories of her. Everybody talks about her, and it seems like they know her better than I did, that they had these parts of Mom that I can never see. This right here, though, this feels like her.”

For a while, we just stay there. I don’t think I could pull myself away if I tried.

When I finally stand up, we head for the chairs and sit down, going to town on the snacks. Aiden splits his cookies in half, eating the bare top half, licking the icing from the bottom, and then finishing that plain cookie.

I stare at him for a moment before taking a cookie of my own and popping the entire thing into my mouth. “What do you do when you’re done here for the season?”

“Go to another mountain range, work a season there.” Aiden sets the cookies to the side, looking down at Honey as she plops down at my feet. “What are you going to do?”

I swallow hard, fighting past the lump that still seems to be lodged tight. “I don’t know.”

“That’s not a bad thing,” he says, his tone even as if he really believes it. That’s not what other people tell me. I keep thinking that I need to have the rest of my life figured out, especially after going to school and getting my degree. But then I sit down and look around at my life, and I don’t know if it’s going to be worth it in the end.”

“Why do you think it won’t be?” He separates another cookie and licks the icing from it.

“I thought that all I wanted to be in life was a kindergarten teacher. I love working with children. It really feels like what I’m supposed to be doing, but then the thought of looking for a position scares the hell out of me, and I start second-guessing everything.”

Aiden hums. “I thought that I was going to be an accountant when I was younger. I was in the foster system, and I wanted something good and stable that was going to set me up for the rest of my life, so I thought about doing that.”

I tilt my head to the side, studying him, the stubble on his cheeks, the lip ring, the thoughtful look in his eyes. “I could see it. You’re intelligent and level-headed, which is infuriating when I’m trying to argue with you. Even when you were being a dick to me, it was so calm and measured, like you’ve never lost control in your life.”

The corner of his mouth twitches, his gaze locking with mine. “Well, maybe that’s because not a moment of my life has felt like I controlled it. My father was a hard man, and all my foster parents were worse. Some kids have great experiences, but I didn’t. And I did a lot of thinking about the kind of man I wanted to be.”

“And do you feel like that man?”

He shrugs. “I like to think that I’m better than that man some days and worse than him others. Nobody is perfect, and life is quite frankly a bitch.”

I laugh and take two cookies, twisting off the tops and eating them before smashing both together to make one big cookie. “You’ve got that right. So, I guess I don’t know what I’m doing when the season ends.”

“Well, there’s time to figure it out.” He grabs a few chips from the bag in my lap, crunching on them as he stares out at the snow-covered trees. “I don’t think that anyone ever has to have their life figured out entirely either. How are you supposed to know the person you’re going to be years from now?”

“I guess so.” I run a hand through my hair, letting the waves fall where they want. “What if you never figure it out?”

“Who says you have to figure it out?” Aiden tilts his head to the side, the dark strands falling across his forehead. “What was it you told me yesterday — go with the flow?”

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“I might’ve said that at one point or another.”

“So, why don’t you apply it to your own life?” He pops open another cookie, and all I can think about while he’s licking the icing is what else his tongue could be doing right now.

“Because... I just can’t.”

“Yeah, sure. You say that, but why?”

I roll my bottom lip into my mouth before blowing out a deep breath. “I guess it’s because I always had to know what was going on. When Mom got sick the second time, I was in my teens. I had to balance school and her appointments because she couldn’t keep track of it all.”

“And now you feel like you have to know exactly what’s going on.” He looks at me, understanding shining in his eyes. “Mia, are you a closet control freak?”

I laugh and shake my head. “You know that’s not me.”

“I know. It drives me insane at times. You seem so at peace with everything around you, and most of the time I just want to explode.”

“You seem so calm.”

“A façade that I put on for the benefit of those around me.” He holds out a cookie to me, and I take it. “I think you just need to ride out the rest of the season, and then you

can find out what's going to happen with your life after that."

"Maybe." I take a bite into the cookie. "Actually, you know what? You're right. I'm going to make the most of the season, and then I'll figure out everything after."

He chuckles. "I can see in your eyes that you don't mean that."

"Nope. I'm probably going to spend the rest of the season worrying about what to do when my life stops being on hold, and then after that, who knows."

I sure as hell don't.

But maybe Aiden is right, and I don't have to figure it out right now. Maybe there is time to sit back and just enjoy life for a while.

If I'm with him, I think it'll be easy.

CHAPTER 12

AIDEN

Rosie kicks in the door to my room way too early in the morning, Ryder trailing behind her.

I groan and roll over, pulling my pillow over my head and trying to muffle it all out. "Go away. It's too early for whatever the hell the two of you are going to do."

Rosie sighs. "We need to have a roomie meeting, which means that you need to get your butt out of bed and into the living room right now."

"Or... I could stay right here since it's one of my two days off." I pull the blanket up

over my head, holding it tight when a light tugging starts.

“No can do,” Ryder says. “I’ve been told that I’m welcome to do whatever it takes to get you out of this bed, and I’m going to do just that.”

Rosie claps her hands together. “Come on, let’s go. Get up and out of bed and get your butt on the couch because I cannot keep listening to you and Mia banging it out every night. Not when the only place either of you wants to get romantic when the rest of us are sleeping is the couch.”

I smirk beneath the covers, my cheeks burning hot at the same time. “We put a blanket down.”

“Oh, God!” Ryder stops tugging on the blanket. “Not this blanket. Tell me that this wasn’t the blanket on the couch last night.”

“If I tell you that it wasn’t, will you get the hell out of here so I can at least put pants on?” I push back the blankets enough to look at them.

Ryder gags and looks at Rosie. “I say we give him half an hour to get everything together, and then we can have the meeting.”

Rosie sighs, and the quiet tap of her foot against the floor tells me that she’s less than impressed, but finally it stops. “That’s fine, but you better be out there, Aiden. I’m not going to go to put all the effort into putting forward my best lecture ever without you being out there to listen to it.”

I nod and link my hands together behind my head, staring up at the ceiling as they disappear from the room. The longer I lay there and stare, the less I want to get out of bed and go hear what they have to say. When I signed on for the season, I thought I was going to have roommates who left me alone for the most part. I thought it was

going to be a couple months of silence and going about my job.

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Everything is upside down now.

After another couple minutes of doing nothing, I get out of bed and head to the washroom, taking a quick shower and getting dressed. When I finally make it into the living room, Ryder and Rosie are perched on the coffee table and Mia is sitting on the couch, looking smug with Honey's massive head in her lap.

"Good." Rosie gets to her feet, her hands hitting her thighs. "Now that everyone is here, we can get started."

Ryder nods, trying his best to look serious, but I don't think he's capable of that. "We need to talk about the past week of sex-nanigans."

"Do you need a tissue?" Mia asks, reaching for the box and holding it out to him. "If you have a cold, you're going to need to stay away from me."

Ryder groans and gives her a flat glare. "You've got to be kidding me, Mia. Jokes? At a time like this?"

She shrugs and puts the tissues to the side. "Well, you two are the ones acting weird right now."

"Listen." Rosie paces back and forth, her hands clasped. "We can appreciate that the two of you feel the need to go at it like rabbits since you got together, but I think we need to put a couple limits on some things. Like bedrooms. I walked in on you two naked in bed together the other day, and that just can't keep going on. I can't be subjected to that again."

When I sneak a glance at Mia, she's smothering her laughter behind her hand, her shoulders shaking a little.

I scrub a hand down my face, though my cheeks feel like they're on fire. "Well, it's not like you were supposed to be home. We checked the calendar, and you were going to be gone all day."

"You could have locked the door!" Rosie's hands fly up in the air before she takes a deep breath and seems to center herself again. "Effective immediately, doors are to be locked if the two of you are alone. And there's to be no action of any kind in communal spaces."

Ryder nods, his arms crossing over his chest. "And effective immediately, the two of you are going to be in the same room so we don't risk another naked incident."

Now Mia is laughing out loud, doubling over, tears streaming down her cheeks. She looks up at me and shakes her head. "I'm sorry, but you really should've locked the door."

"Well, I think I've learned that for next time." I bite the inside of my cheek and look anywhere in the room but at Rosie.

"Great, so let's get the two of you into one room so we don't have to risk our eyesight again." Ryder gets up and immediately goes into our room, packing his things.

Mia smirks and winks at me before getting up and heading to her room, leaving Rosie and me alone. Rosie looks at me and then shudders, leaving the cabin without so much as another word.

I have a feeling it's going to take some time to recover from that one, but maybe one of these days, she's going to be able to look at me without thinking about my naked

backside.

Within the hour, Mia is settled in my room, sprawled out on her bed with Honey alongside her, leaving no room for me. Mia hums to herself, reading her book with one hand and playing with Honey's fur with the other.

"All right, so this isn't going to work." I look down at her, noting the panic in her eyes. "I mean the sleeping arrangement. Your bed is going to have to get closer if all three of us are going to be able to sleep together."

Honey gives me a side-eye, setting her big head on Mia's stomach.

Mia laughs. "Well, we're going to need something to go on top. Otherwise, I'm going to slip through the middle the second you and Honey start trying to cuddle with me."

I sit down on the floor beside her bed, leaning back against the nightstand and looking up at her. "I figured as much, which is why I contacted one of my friends in housekeeping, and they're going to be bringing us a foam topper and some sheets to fit it."

"We could get in trouble for that." She shuts the book, an amused smile still on her face. "You keep breaking these rules, Aiden, and I'm going to think that I was wrong about you this entire time."

I snort and shake my head. "I think we were both very wrong about each other in the beginning."

Mischief sparks in her eyes as Ryder comes bustling through the door with the foam topper and a large stack of sheets. He says nothing and slams the door on his way out.

Mia laughs and gets up from the bed, crossing the room and locking the door. "I think

there's still plenty of time for us to get to know each other better, don't you think?"

"There might be, depending on what you mean by getting to know each other better." I grab her by the waist and pull her into me, lips ghosting over hers. "If you mean we should push the beds together and get a little naked, then I think you're right."

"Only a little?" she asks, tone teasing as she drapes her arms over my shoulders. "Like take off my right sock and that's enough, or are we looking for more than that?"

"I was thinking a little more like strip you down, bend you over, make you beg for me."

Her answering smirk has my cock stiffening as she leaves my embrace and grabs one of the nightstands, moving it out of the way while I grab the other. We push the beds together, stripping down the linens and throwing the mattress topper on. As Mia leans over the edge of the bed to pull down the fitted sheet, I come up behind her, my hands on her hips.

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She straightens up and leans back into me. I kiss down the side of her neck, tracing her pulse with my tongue. Her breath comes out in a little burst as I nip her shoulder. As I soothe away the sting with my tongue, my hands slip beneath her shirt.

My hands climb higher, fingers tracing along her ribs and the lacy material of her bra. “What do you want?”

“Are we really going to play that game right now?” she asks, her voice breathy as she tilts her head to the side to look at me. “You could have me any way you want me, and you’re really going to stand there and play games?”

“We’re going to have to be fast, and you’re going to need to be quiet. Otherwise, Rosie is going to come knocking on the door. Think you can do that?”

Mia grinds back into me, the curve of her ass pressing hard against my jeans. “I don’t know. Think you can manage?”

I pull her nipples between my fingers through the thin material of her bra, pinching them tight. “Maybe.”

She leans back into me, her nails raking along my arms before I let go of her nipples. Mia turns, and then her mouth is against mine, eager. Her tongue prods at my bottom lip before slipping past it.

I groan low and reach for her leggings, sliding them down her body. She rips her shirt over her head, tossing it to the side.

After reaching behind her back for the clasp on her bra, Mia stands in front of me, completely naked.

She pulls my shirt over my head, her fingers tracing down my chest. She follows the path of her fingers with her tongue, making my entire body tense. My hands sink into her hair, pulling her head back as she sinks down to her knees in front of me, reaching for the button on my jeans.

Mia's tongue darts out to wet her bottom lip. The rest of my clothing hits the floor, my cock springing free. She grips the base, sliding her hand up and down, her thumb brushing over the head.

And then her tongue is tracing the underside, flicking over the tip before she takes me into her mouth.

“You look so good on your knees for me.”

Mia moans around me. The vibrations have tingles shooting through my body. I thrust deeper into her mouth. She hollows her cheeks and takes more of me.

I rock my hips, pumping harder. Mia grips my thighs, her fingers sinking into my skin.

When it feels like I can't hold on any longer, I pull her to her feet and kiss her hard. One hand stays in her hair, the other slipping down between her legs. My fingers circle her clit and slide through the slick folds of her pussy, her arousal addictive.

Her moans get louder as I push two fingers into her. I grin and lean in, kissing her until we're both out of breath and she's squeezing down hard around my pumping fingers.

“I want you to come all over my cock,” I say, voice husky as I spin her around and give her a gentle nudge forward.

She gets on all fours on the bed, her round butt in the air, her dripping core on display. I stroke my length before pushing into her, moaning as she wraps tight around me.

Mia gasps as I wrap her hair around my fist, arching her back while I thrust deeper into her. I throb as I keep thrusting. She rocks with me, her hips driving backward as her inner walls start to pulse.

My fingers sink into her hip, and I pull her back against me harder and faster. She grips the sheets, pressing her face into the bed to keep quiet.

When she comes, it sends me over the edge. The feeling of her clamping down around me is too much. I give her a couple more slow strokes, drawing out both of our orgasms.

We fall to the bed together, and she curls into my side, her head on my shoulder. Her breathing comes in short little bursts, and she says nothing for a long moment.

Mia props herself up on her elbow after a few minutes, looking down at me with a smile. “What do you think about going to a party tonight?”

I sigh and stare up at the ceiling. “Do we have to go? We could stay here. Maybe spend the rest of the night naked and breaking in the new mattress.”

“Come on.” She pats my shoulder and pushes herself off the bed. “I think it would be fun to go dancing and spend some time drinking and relaxing with the other staff. It’s been a long week. With all the demanding guests that have been here this week, I could use a little time to relax.”

“I don’t know. Bed is pretty relaxing.”

She keeps the smile in place as she grabs a silky black robe and pulls it on. “Okay, well, I hope you have a good night. I still think I’m going to go to the party and unwind, but I don’t think I’ll be out too late. We could go hiking tomorrow?”

Guilt gnaws at me as I nod. She’s willing to go out and do things, but the thought of going to a party is too much for me. I don’t want to spend a night drinking with people I don’t talk to much, pretending to care about the hardships of their day when the truth is that I don’t.

But going with Mia would mean something to her.

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I sigh and get out of bed, pulling some clothing out of my dresser and tossing it onto the bed.

Mia comes back from her shower a few minutes later, her hair wavy and her skin flushed. She eyes the clothing on the bed. “That doesn’t look like you’re getting ready to spend the rest of the night in bed.”

“Thought about it and decided that going to a party with you does sound like a better time than sitting here and reading.”

She laughs and pulls an oatmeal-colored knit dress out of the closet. “You’re going to have fun, and if you’re not, we could always come back here and have some fun of our own.”

“Gonna take a shower before we head out, then.”

Mia hums to herself, moving around the room, already hauling out her makeup while I pull on some shorts and head to the shower.

“I told you the party was going to be a good time.” Mia smiles up at me like she’s having the time of her life, though maybe it’s more so the two cans of beer she’s had in the last hour.

“Sure you did.” I reach down long enough to pet Honey as she comes wandering over for some attention before taking off the other way.

“I did. It’s good for you to get out and have people to talk to. I mean, I know you talk

to them and sometimes you've been at the parties, but this is different. This is just relaxing and going out and probably having a little too much to drink."

"You've definitely had too much to drink." The corner of my mouth twitches as I band my arms tighter around her waist, holding on while she leans harder into me. "You want to go back to the cabin yet?"

She shakes her head and pulls away as the song comes to an end, a faster one playing. "No. I want to keep having fun with you, and I love this song, which means that you need to dance with me."

"Oh, do I?" I smirk and lean in, teeth grazing her earlobe.

She shivers and looks at me with wide eyes. "That's if you know how to dance. I don't know if you know how or not."

"I can dance."

"I don't think you do." Her lips purse, her gaze roaming up and down my body, suggesting that there's something other than just dancing on her mind. "I think you only know how to stand there and drink."

"Even though I was just dancing with you?"

She shrugs, starting to move her hips to the beat of the music. "I don't see you do anything more than swaying."

"That's all dancing to music is anyway."

Mia turns and presses her back against my chest, grinding into me as she moves with the beat of the music before pushing away with a laugh. She continues to dance,

looking effortlessly happy.

And it's when she looks that happy that I remember she's here searching for the ghost of her mother. That this isn't just some job for her; it's a chance to feel whole again.

Maybe, just maybe, we might be able to fit our broken pieces together.

So I follow her, giving into her desire to spend the rest of the night dancing, losing the parts of myself that I don't like in the parts of her that make me feel like a better man. Like I might be capable of finding someone to spend the rest of my life with.

I feel like that person one day could be her.

CHAPTER 13

MIA

"I don't know if I should talk to him about what we are or not." I glance at Rosie as we finish stacking up the pylons and take them to the supply shed.

Rosie takes the stack from me and sets it inside on a shelf. "I don't know what it could hurt. I know it's been, what, a month? He's gotta have some ideas about what's going to come of this by now."

As I shut the door and lock it, I bite my bottom lip. "Yeah, but on the other hand, I don't know if I want to get that deep with him yet. It's a lot of pressure to put on someone. Besides, I don't know what school I'm going to end up teaching at next year, and then there's the whole he likes-to-be-alone thing."

"I don't think he likes to be alone anymore." Rosie grabs her skis. "I don't think you like being alone much either, so maybe it's good that the two of you think about

what's happening between you.”

I sigh and take off my ski boots, swapping them for hiking boots lined with faux fur.

“And then there's the risk that we want different things.”

“Might be one you have to take.”

I pull my goggles off the top of my head, stuffing them in the bag with the helmet already in there. “Normally, I like risks. I don’t think you grow as a person unless you’re willing to take them, but everything feels right. It feels like if I go to him and open up this conversation, then we’re going to change things. And it’s a risk that I don’t know I should take right now because everything feels so perfect.”

“It’s not perfect if you’re having these feelings.”

Groaning, I zip up my bag and sling it over my shoulder. “You’re right.”

Rosie laughs and bumps her shoulder into mine. “If it makes you feel better, I don’t want to be.”

“Unfortunately, you are. And I know this is part of being an adult.”

“Still feels like there’s another ‘but’ coming.”

“But...” I say, drawing out the word. “Things are good how they are. There are no strings attached. And when the season comes to an end, we both know we’re going different ways.”

“And you’re going to take the easy way out, so you don’t have to face it right now.” Rosie stops outside the gondola building, leaning against the side of the wall. “Sooner or later, you’re going to have to deal with the fact that you either have an expiration date or you don’t.”

“Tonight, I think we’re not going to deal with that.”

Rosie’s lips twitch. “You’re right about that, actually. He told me and Ryder to get lost tonight. I can’t tell you what the surprise is going to be, but there is one.”

My heart leaps into my throat, the butterflies in my stomach going wild. “He has a surprise for me?”

“That’s all I’m going to tell you.” Rosie kicks some snow at me. “Now, go back to the cabin and have some fun with your man, and please disinfect whatever the two of you get onto.”

Laughing, I kick some snow back at her. “Sex isn’t all we do when we’re together. It’s just one of the benefits of having a winter fling.”

Rosie rolls her eyes. “I don’t think fling is the right word for it, but if you want to keep insisting that it’s all it is, then you go right ahead with that. I won’t keep fighting you on it.”

“Maybe one day you’ll get to look back and tell me that you told me so.”

“I know I will.” She nods to the next gondola pulling up to take her away. “Have a good night.”

“You too.”

It’s getting dark out as I climb the stairs to the cabin, clouds of steam rising from the heating system. I stomp up the stairs, shaking the snow from my boots. Clouds roll overhead, blocking out the stars that try to shine through the trees.

The air is only getting colder as I push the door open. Honey launches herself off the

couch and over to me, her tail wagging hard.

I laugh and crouch down, rubbing behind her ears while she tries to cover every inch of my face with her kisses.

The scent of melting cheese and greasy pepperoni fills the cabin. The couch is pushed back to give enough room for the mattresses on the floor. Lights hang across the ceiling, a twinkling warm white.

Aiden stands in the middle of it all, looking unsure of himself, but there's a small smile curving his lips. "I hope this isn't too much, but I thought with the late shifts tomorrow, we could have a movie night tonight."

"Do you have popcorn? And chocolate chips?"

"Yeah, popcorn is freshly popped. Didn't want to add the chocolate chips until it cooled down a little since you said you still like the chocolate kind of intact." He rubs the back of his neck. "Pizza's here too."

"Thank you." I stride across the room and stand on my toes, pressing a quick kiss to his lips. "I'm going to go get cleaned up, and then I'll be right out so we can enjoy this."

I hurry to get showered and changed into a pair of joggers and a camisole, scurrying out to the mattress bed in the middle of the room and crashing down against the pillows. Aiden comes over with a bowl of popcorn and a plate of pizza, dropping down beside me.

Honey curls up at our feet, snoring within a couple minutes.

I grab the remote, scrolling through the movies before settling on one. "I don't know

what you want to watch, but I'm in the mood for something bloody and gory.”

“Oh yes, what everyone wants to watch when they're trying to be romantic.” He grins and shoves some popcorn into his mouth. “Blood and gore away.”

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“It’s very romantic, but there’s nothing quite like someone’s head being cut off.”

He laughs and gets comfortable, eating some pizza while I find the movie that looks like it’s going to have the most heads flying. All thoughts of talking about the future disappear for the moment.

But they come rushing back when the first movie ends and Aiden shuffles beside me, pulling me into his side and pressing his lips to my temple.

“Have you thought more about where you want to apply to teach once the season’s over?” he asks as I scroll through the movies, looking for another one to watch.

I swallow hard, chest tightening. “I don’t know. There are some schools in my area, but I don’t know if I want to stay in my area or if I want to move around.”

“Why wouldn’t you want to stay where you are?”

“Lots of ghosts.” I force a smile, but the words are hard to say, like I’ve been avoiding talking about why I would want to leave.

“Ghosts?”

“Of Mom.” I pull away from him so I can look him in the eyes, sitting up and pulling my knees to my chest. “I know that seems ridiculous to say given the fact that I came here to feel close to her, but there’s something about this that feels different than staying in the city.”

“Why?” He sits up and crosses his legs, laughing when Honey plops down in front of him with her big head in his lap.

“Mom was always larger than life to me.” I pick at a loose thread on my pants. “And now that she’s gone, everything else about my life seems so small. I keep going to places in the city where all I see are the spots she and I used to be together, and then it hits me like a ton of bricks.”

“You’d rather run away?”

I glare at him out of the corner of my eyes before sighing. “I guess you could see it that way.”

“How would you see it?” His fingers comb through Honey’s fur, letting the long strands run gently between his fingers before falling away.

I pause, not sure what to think about his line of questioning. It doesn’t feel like he’s interrogating me; more like he’s trying to understand what’s going on in my head. And for a moment, it feels like we might be something more than just two people having fun. Like we might be headed for something after the season and he’s trying to figure out where I stand on the entire matter.

Sighing, I reach for a slice of cold pizza. “I think I want to get out and live my life for her. She wouldn’t want me to sit around and keep thinking about all the places we used to go and all the things we used to do.”

“That still sounds like you’re going to be living your life for another person.”

I bite the inside of my cheek and turn to face him. “What would you do if you were me?”

The corner of his mouth twitches. “I’m a horrible example to follow. I spend most of my days traveling around the world and avoiding having to figure out what to do with the rest of my life. I’m probably the last person you should be taking advice from.”

“And yet, I’m asking you for it. So, what would you do?”

His hands are still in Honey’s fur. “I think I would spend the rest of the season figuring out who I am and what I want from my life. You can’t spend it living another person’s dream.”

“Kind of seems like a cop-out answer.”

He chuckles and shrugs. “You have me there, but I don’t want to be one more person influencing you to do something you don’t want to do. This should be your choice, and you should make it with your own best intentions in mind.”

“Is that what you do when you travel?”

He presses his lips into a thin line for a moment before looking away from me.

For a long while, he says nothing. This is it. I’ve finally pushed him away from me, just when I thought things were starting to go well. He’s going to keep pulling back and all the progress we’ve made over the last few weeks is going to disappear as if nothing happened at all.

Finally, he leans back and looks up at the ceiling. “I travel to run away from the thought of having to figure out where to settle down.”

“Do you think that’s ever going to change?”

I know I’m asking more for myself than anything else. I want to know what he thinks

about us having a future, and I'm asking about it in every way I know how without having to say the actual words.

And if he knows that, he doesn't let on.

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“It might. I’m not the kind of person to deal in absolutes.”

I laugh and lean back into him, trying to pretend like I wasn’t hoping for a different answer. Like I wasn’t thinking that this could be one of those movies.

Like I didn’t think that the only time I’ve felt like myself in a long time is when I’m with him.

CHAPTER 14

AIDEN

Carter sighs and drops into the chair beside me. “That kid’s going to go tumbling down the side of the mountain if he keeps directing his skis that way.”

I glance at the child he’s talking about, Mia close behind the kid. “Mia’s got him. It should be fine. She seems like she knows what she’s doing, and it’s clear she likes working with kids.”

“Warm words from the guy who shares a room with her.” Carter smirks at me over the rug of his travel mug. “You didn’t tell me that the two of you were an official thing.”

“Because I don’t know what we are, and even if I did, I wouldn’t be parading around and telling everyone about it. Can’t see why everyone would need to know my business.”

“I don’t think it’s that everyone wants to know your business, but I’ve known you a long time, and for as long as I’ve known you, there’s been maybe two girlfriends. I don’t think either of them lasted longer than a month or two either. So, the fact that it’s been close to six weeks with Mia and you’re still with her is interesting.”

I groan and kick up a wave of snow for Honey to chase. She nips at it, barking before nestling down in the snow, half-burying herself beneath it. I kick another wave over her, and she snorts before going to sleep, happy as she can be that there’s snow on the ground and coating her fur.

Carter takes another sip of his coffee. “You know, it’s not a bad thing to have someone you like to spend time with. Some might even say that it’s what they’re looking for and that they don’t want to spend the rest of their lives alone. And, for what it’s worth, I think she’s good for you.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because I know you. I think it’s good for you to have someone who likes to have fun and doesn’t take things too seriously.”

“Look, this is just supposed to be a bit of fun for the time being. There are no labels on anything. And there’s no talk of what happens after the season, so there’s no need to start thinking that she’s good for me.”

“Damn, you really do run away like a scared child when someone gets close to figuring out how you feel about people.” Carter smirks and arches an eyebrow, my own reflection shining back at me in his sunglasses.

“I’m not running away from anything. I’m just trying to enjoy my season, and when it ends, I can figure out what comes next.”

“Don’t you get tired of that?”

“At times.” I shrug and reach for my coffee, watching as a group of hikers trek along the trail and into the woods. “I like my freedom though.”

Although these days that sense of freedom doesn’t quite feel like it used to. Instead of thinking about all the new adventures still waiting for me, all I can think about is what will happen to Mia and me. Where we’re going to be.

If she wants to make this work.

I’m not that man though. I don’t spend a lot of time thinking about the future beyond which location I’m going to end up in next. I don’t think about settling down and doing the whole wife-and-kids thing.

But lately, I’ve been thinking about it.

Carter slaps a hand on my shoulder. “You look like you’re going to throw up.”

“I do not.”

He snorts and shakes his head. “Look, for what it’s worth, I used to be like you. I thought that life couldn’t get any better because I was on my own, and that felt good. I thought it was going to be fine. And then I met Cassie, and everything changed for me.”

“Mia isn’t my Cassie.”

“Nobody is going to be your Cassie. Can’t compare relationships and think that two are ever going to be the same. However, I think you need to allow yourself to open up to the idea that Mia could be the one to change everything for you.”

I roll my eyes and reach for my own travel mug of coffee, opening it up and taking a long sip, letting the scalding hot liquid coat my throat.

Right now, there's no telling if Mia could be the person to change everything for me, and I don't want to put that pressure on useither. I want to have a good time and see where this leads, but I'm going to be fine if that is nowhere.

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At least, that's what I keep telling myself.

Carter scoffs. "You need to pull your head out of your ass and see that there's a good woman standing in front of you. Sure, she might not be who you imagined you would want something long-term with, but from what I've seen, she's the kind of woman who doesn't give up on you either."

"She probably should've." I don't think I'm worth half the effort she's put into getting to know me, but she seems to think I am. I still haven't been able to figure out the reason why.

"Don't sell yourself short. You're a good man, and you always have been. You might like to wander the world, but there's nothing wrong with that if that's what you enjoy."

"I'd rather just not talk about all of this and let things happen how they're going to happen. With you so focused on what's going on, it feels like I have to figure out exactly what's going to happen and when, which is impossible."

"Didn't mean to make you feel like you had to figure it all out right now."

I take another sip of my coffee, my breath coming out in a small white cloud when I exhale. "No, I know. It's just that sooner or later, I know Mia is going to start asking the same questions, and then what am I supposed to do?"

"I'm going to suggest that you figure it out together. She's probably feeling the same way you do."

“Maybe.” I bite the inside of my cheek before letting out another sigh. “I just don’t know what to think about it all.”

“You’ll figure it out in time.”

“You’re right.” I dig the toes of my boots into the snow. “Now’s not going to be the time though.”

“What we do have to figure out now is the schedule for next week. I need the week after off since Cassie is bringing the girls up here. So if you take next week off, then you and I can offset each other and we’ll weave the other guys in between.”

“Should work for me.”

I might even be able to arrange something special for Mia.

When I get home late that night, pink and blue lights are flashing in the window. Music pounds, and Honey rushes up the stairs like the best part of her day is coming home. I’ve never seen my dog more excited to go back to the cabin, but then again, she’s attached at the hip to Mia.

I push open the door and come face-to-face with Rosie on the coffee table with a hairbrush held tight in her hand, her hips swaying in the most awkward movement I’ve ever seen.

Mia slides down the hall, playing the air guitar and dropping to her knees in front of me. She flips her hair as she continues playing, her tongue sticking out like she thinks she’s a rock star.

I smirk and kick off my boots onto the mat. “Quite the performance you’re putting out.”

“Thank you, Colorado!” Rosie shouts, pointing her finger at the imaginary crowd as the song changes.

Mia laughs and gets to her feet, pushing up onto her toes and kissing the corner of my mouth. “Are you here to have fun with us, or are you here to judge the way our band works?”

“Oh, I would never judge your band at all.” I shed my jacket and snow pants, hanging them both up, gloves nearly falling out of the pocket of my jacket.

Mia snags my hat and tosses it onto the shelf before taking me by the hand and pulling me deeper into the cabin. She lifts my hand high and spins beneath it. Rosie jumps down from the table, tossing her hairbrush to the side.

Rosie grabs Mia and spins her around, dipping her low before pulling her back in. The pair of them tango around the room before Mia spins her way back to me.

Smiling, I take her by the hand, spinning her out before pulling her back in. We move with the beat of the music, her body pressed close to mine. I press my lips to her temple, laughing when she tilts her head back onto my shoulder.

“You might not be half bad at dancing.” She looks at me with nothing but warmth in her eyes, sending my heart hammering in my chest.

And because I can’t bear the sight of that look anymore, I spin her out, letting go of her and whipping out the sprinkler, my hips rocking in an awkward rhythm to the beat. She bursts out laughing, shaking her head and joining in on the fun.

My cheeks start to hurt from smiling so wide, but I wouldn’t change a thing. Even if I look like a fool while dancing with her.

After a few more songs, she slumps onto the couch and Rosie turns the music off, heading to her own room.

Mia looks up at me. “What should we do now?”

“Gotta take Honey for her walk, but I’ve got nothing going on after that.” I haul on my boots. “You’re welcome to come with me if you want.”

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She springs to her feet like she isn't tired at all, and Honey comes with her. As Mia gets ready to head out, I get Honey into her harness before shrugging on my own coat.

The stars are shining over the trees as we step outside. Mia stuffs her hands in her pockets and looks up at me. "So, I have a few extra days off next week."

"Well, I have the week off. So, if you want to leave the resort and head into town or something, I can see about borrowing a car from one of the other staffers."

"I wasn't thinking about going into town, but I definitely want to spend some time with you. It feels like I've barely seen you in the last week or so since our work schedules have been so all over the place."

"Well, then, leave it to me and I'll come up with something for us to do." I already have a plan in place, but I needed to gauge what she was thinking of doing first.

Mia takes my hand in hers, lacing our fingers together as we walk. "The kids were wild today."

"Yeah, we saw that kid nearly take a header down the hill."

She laughs and shrugs. "I'm starting to think that sooner or later, I'm going to have to let him. Not enough to hurt himself, of course, but maybe enough that he might listen to me when I tell him how to point his skis."

"Some people have to learn the hard way." I squeeze her hand a little tighter.

“Although, if you do let him go down, be prepared for some annoyed parents. They don’t like to hear that their child will only learn one way.”

“I know.” Mia gives me a flat look. “One of the girls in the class wanted to switch to snowboarding, so I put her in one the other day. You should’ve seen the fit her mother threw.”

“How bad was it?”

“I think she was going to try and get me fired, but it didn’t go very far. Don’t know what else is going to happen, but I hardly think it’s my business to discourage a child from trying something new as long as it’s safe.”

“I’m sure nothing more is going to come of it. It’s not the first time that a fit’s been thrown by the parents here, and I know it’s not going to be the last.”

She grins and leans into me as we stop in an open field. “I doubt it too.”

I drop her hand and let Honey off her leash, pulling out a ball and throwing it far. Honey takes off bounding through the snow, her tail whipping back and forth.

And for a moment, everything feels right in the world.

We’re not talking about the future.

We’re enjoying what’s happening here and now. The rest can come later.

Though, I still don’t know what the rest is going to entail.

CHAPTER 15

MIA

“Where are we going?” I ask as I button up my jeans and reach for the quarter-zip on the bed.

Aiden shrugs. “Secret.”

“Yeah, okay, but I think I should know if we’re going to be gone somewhere for a while, don’t you?” I nod to the overnight bag on the bed. “I mean, you didn’t tell me what that was for. You just started rummaging through my underwear drawer and throwing stuff in.”

He smirks like he’s proud of himself for that one. “If I told you what we were doing or what to pack, then you would know what we’re doing, and it wouldn’t be a surprise. That doesn’t sound like nearly as much fun as actually surprising you.”

“It doesn’t, but?—”

“Nope.” He grabs the bag and slings it over his shoulder before picking up another bag of Honey’s supplies. “We’re not going to sit here and bicker about whether I’m going to tell you what the surprise is or not.”

“Then what are we going to do?” I ask, the corner of my mouth twitching as I pull on my hat and sherpa jacket, following him out of the room.

He leads the way to the door, and we put on our boots. “We’re going to go get in the car I borrowed, and we’re going to go somewhere.”

“Overnight?”

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He shrugs and puts Honey's harness on.

He opens the door and jogs down the steps, Honey darting in front of him to go wait by the truck. I follow them and open the door for her. Aiden tosses the bag in the back first before picking Honey up and putting her in the back seat as if she barely weighs anything at all.

He shuts her door and opens mine. "After you?"

"Maybe I want to drive." I give him a teasing smile and hop into the truck, getting settled in my seat.

He snorts and shakes his head. "If I was going to let you drive, then you'd know where we're going. You get to remain in the dark until we get to the surprise."

"I don't think that's very fair."

"You can choose the music."

Beaming, I wait until he's in the truck, the engine running, before connecting my phone to the sound system. If it's going to be a bit of a drive to the surprise, I may as well enjoy myself on the way there.

We pull up outside a cabin made of more glass than wood, overlooking a frozen lake. I glance at Aiden, my eyebrows rising and my heart stopping in my chest. I don't think I've ever been in a place like this. It's so stunning.

“Where are we?” I ask as we get out.

“Still the resort,” he says as he lifts Honey out of the truck and sets her on the ground.

“It’s a private cabin. It’s the one I like to stay at when I come to Aspen to ski.”

“You didn’t have to get us a private spot.” I hug him before ghosting my lips over his. “But I’m glad you did. I think a little alone time is going to be just what the doctor ordered.”

“I’m sure it will be.” Aiden grabs the bags and slings them over his shoulder. “I was thinking that we first eat the dinner that should be delivered soon, and then I don’t know about you, but I’m looking forward to a night in the hot tub.”

“How long are we here for?”

“Couple days.” Aiden pulls the key out of his pocket and hands it to me. “Why don’t you go explore inside? I’ll bring these in and then wait for the food.”

I nod and take the stairs up to the cabin two at a time, unlocking the door and pushing it open. I’m met with all the comforts of a luxury cabin in the woods. There’s a small kitchen and flannels in shades of warm beige and chocolate brown. Pops of a deep burgundy stand out, making this look like the perfect place to cuddle down for the night and have a good time.

As I move into the only bedroom, the tension in my shoulders immediately fades when I look out at the back deck. “This place is beautiful!”

Aiden laughs from the other room. I continue through the bedroom to the bathroom. There’s a massive tub in front of a window that overlooks the forest and the sunset. It’s starting to look a little haunting out there, but it’s still beautiful.

I could spend forever in a place like this.

The front door opens and shuts, the scent of steak and garlicky potatoes filling the cabin. My stomach grumbles, and I make my way into the kitchen as Aiden doles out the food onto plates.

“Help yourself.” He pushes one of the plates toward me.

I load it up with another scoop of potatoes before going to sit at the wooden dining table by the sliding glass door that leads out to the deck and the hot tub. Aiden lights a fire in the hearth before joining me, sitting across from me with a serene smile.

This is the most relaxed I’ve ever seen him.

Out here there’s nobody to worry about except the two of us and Honey. There’s not a chance that our roommates are going to come walking in — or that somebody is going to want something from one of us. We get to be entirely alone.

Butterflies erupt in my stomach at the thought.

We eat our food without saying much, the sipping of wine and the clink of forks against plates filling the air. I slip Honey a couple pieces of my steak beneath the table, her tail thumping against the floor.

“She’s going to be the best friend you’ve ever had for that.” Aiden leans back in his seat and sips the last of his wine.

I reach for my own glass and shrug, crossing one leg over the other. “She abandoned you for me the day we met. I don’t see what difference anything I do now is going to make.”

He laughs. “Yeah, I know. She’s your dog now. I’m just that guy who takes her around the world and feeds her every morning.”

Grinning, I take my plate and his into the kitchen, putting them in the sink to be washed later. When I turn, Aiden is behind me, his hands falling to my hips and heat burning in his eyes. The way he looks at me is like nothing I’ve ever experienced before, and it brings something to life in me. Something I didn’t know I had.

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“Why don’t you go get changed into that bikini I packed for you, and we can head out to the hot tub?” Aiden’s fingers skim beneath the hem of my shirt, brushing against my skin.

Heat rushes straight to my core at the simple touch. I press my legs tighter together and nod. “Good idea.”

The corner of his mouth tips up and he leans in, his lips soft against mine. He pulls my bottom lip between his teeth, nipping it lightly before letting go.

When he goes to pull back, I follow him, deepening the kiss. Our tongues tangle, and he lets out a low moan that has me thinking of forgoing the hot tub entirely. I could spend the rest of the night out here with him and be perfectly happy.

But he ends the kiss when we’re both gasping for air and gives me a slight turn toward the bedroom.

“I have big plans for us tonight,” he murmurs in my ear before giving me a light swat on my ass.

Now, if that isn’t the hottest thing I’ve ever heard, I don’t know what is.

And, like the horny woman I am right now, I hurry to the bedroom and pull on the plum-colored string bikini and fix my gold nose ring before fluffing up my hair. I want to walk out there and have his jaw drop. If he doesn’t think that I’m the hottest woman he’s seen when I meet him at the hot tub, then my plans for this night are ending sooner than I thought.

I shake out the butterflies of anticipation. This isn't the first time we've spent a night together, but somehow, this feels different.

Aiden put effort into this night. He sat down and thought about what I would like, and then he made it happen. He's treating me like I matter to him — like this is going to be more than just a season fling to him.

And I don't know if that's true, but I want it to be.

As I walk out of the bedroom and over to the sliding door, I see his toned back as he pulls the cover off the hot tub and checks the water. The dips and lines of his muscles are highlighted by the string lighting hanging above him, making the stars in the night sky shine even brighter.

I take a deep breath, my heart hammering in my chest as I push open the door.

Aiden turns in the middle of pulling the last of the corner of the cover off, stopping like he doesn't know what he's doing. His gaze rakes up and down my body. Another wave of lust courses through my veins as the front of his swim shorts tent just a little.

It takes him all of five seconds to close the distance between us, sweeping me into his arms and hauling me tight against his body.

He tastes like white wine as he kisses me, moaning low in the back of his throat.

"You're so damn beautiful," he says, his voice raspy as he steps back, his hands skimming up and down my waist, brushing against the undersides of my breasts.

"You don't look so bad yourself." I hook my finger into his waistband, and his erection grows bigger as I brush my fingertips over the front of his shorts.

Aiden goes to reach for me, and I squirm away from him and get into the hot tub, sinking down beneath the water and settling into the corner, stretching my legs out. Aiden pours two glasses of wine, handing me one before getting into the hot tub across from me.

His legs brush against mine, and I'm grateful I went for a wax at the spa yesterday morning. Nothing says getting ready to spend a couple days having endless amounts of sex like getting your leg hair ripped out.

"I can't believe you put all of this together. Nobody has ever done something like this for me before." I sip the wine before tilting my head back to look up at the snow falling around us.

"Seems like you've been going out with the wrong sort of men."

"I've been going out with very few of them," I say. "When Mom was sick, dating wasn't really worth it. The two guys I saw didn't understand that I was always going to be there for her when she needed me."

"Their loss." He takes a long drink of the wine, looking at me over the rim. "For what it's worth, I think it's a good thing that you were there for your mom. People regret it when they aren't, and then they spend the rest of their life wondering what would've happened if they had just been there."

"I agree. I thought a lot about whether I was doing the right thing or not while I was going through it."

He studies me, something in his eyes that's close to understanding. "And clearly, you decided to be by her side. I can't imagine that was an easy choice to make either. It's hard to see loved ones struggling."

“It was. I thought a lot about what I was doing while I was going through it. Mom kept telling me to go out and live my life, but I didn’t know how to live my life without her in it, and I guess that’s where I’ve gotten to now.”

Aiden puts his wine to the side and drapes his arms over the edge of the hot tub. “I don’t know about you, but I happen to like where we are right now. Far better than the foster homes I used to spend time in.”

I grin, moving to straddle his lap, my arms draping over his shoulders. “Oh, are we going to play a game of whose backstory is more tragic?”

His hands drop to my waist. “I was thinking we could. I already told you about how my father couldn’t bear to be around me. Should I tell you about how I kept trying to get his approval?”

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“I held my mother’s hand while she died. At least, I thought she was, and then she took this horrible gasping breath and looked me in the eyes and told me she loved me.”

“Okay.” Aiden toys with the strings on my hips. “You win. You have the most tragic backstory, and I won’t try to compete with you for it again. I’m pretty sure I’m only going to lose.”

I laugh and run my fingers through his hair, pushing the damp strands back from his face as the snow keeps falling down around us. “If it makes you feel better, the next time we start to compete with tragic stories, I’ll let you win.”

He smirks, his gaze locked on mine. He tugs on the strings, the fabric dropping away from my body. He pulls it free and slings it onto the deck.

My nails trace patterns on his chest as I grind against his hardening cock. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“I think both of us need to recover from our tragic backstories, and from what I hear, sex can be very healing. Especially when there’s someone as stunning as you riding my cock and begging to come.”

I arch a brow, fingers drifting over the pounding pulse in his neck. “Oh, you think I’m going to be begging for it, do you?”

“I know you’re going to be.” He lifts his hips and grinds into me. “We both know when it comes to riding me, you’re nothing but needy.”

Leaning in, I kiss him, our tongues tangling as he reaches for the strings behind my neck. Once the fabric is out of the way, he cups my breasts, pulling my nipples between his fingers until I'm writhing against him.

Heat floods between my thighs as I grind down on the bulge in his pants. He groans into the kiss, one hand sinking into my hair and pulling me closer.

When his teeth sink into my bottom lip, I moan a little louder. He pulls my nipple into a stiff peak, pulling on my hair at the same time to angle my head back. Both of us are gasping for breath.

His lips find my neck and he bites down on my pulse, flicking his tongue over the sting until it's gone.

"What do you want?" He drags my earlobe between his teeth.

"You." I hold on to his broad shoulders, rocking with him as he lifts his hips and drives up into me, his swim shorts still in the way.

Aiden smirks against my skin, kissing his way lower down my chest, flicking his tongue over my nipple. He teases it until I'm aching and desperate for him.

And then he switches to the other side, repeating the process. My inner walls clench tight, and if I don't get to ride him soon, I think I'm going to go insane. I need to feel him buried deep inside me. I need his fingers on my clit, teasing me until I come.

"Sounds like you're going to have to beg," he says, his voice husky.

I bite down on another moan, his fingers dipping between my legs. He rolls my clit between his fingers before flattening them against it and sending waves of lust through my body.

“Please,” I say, breathless, as he lifts his hips and pulls off his shorts. “Please. I need you.”

He smirks and picks me up, turning around and setting me on the edge of the hot tub. The cold air is a harsh shock, but I don’t have long to think about it. Not when he gets on his knees in front of me, his mouth closing over my core.

His tongue flicks against the little bundle of nerves as I grip onto the side of the hot tub, trying to keep myself upright. His fingers press into my pussy, crooking against my inner walls and moving in time with his tongue.

He sucks hard on my clit, and I see stars as I come. His fingers keep thrusting, drawing out the pleasure until my legs stop shaking on either side of his shoulders.

And just when I think it’s over, his tongue keeps going, swirling around me like I’m the best dessert he’s ever had. I arch into him, and he hauls one of my legs over his shoulder, changing the angle so his fingers and tongue can work deeper into me.

Aiden nips my inner thigh before pulling back. “I want you on my cock now, but I don’t know if that’s what you want.”

His fingers drive deep into me, stretching my inner walls and making my entire body shake.

“Please. I need you right now. Please, just make me come.”

He chuckles and pulls me back to him, sinking down onto one of the seats while I straddle him. My legs brace either side of his thighs, and I sink down onto his cock.

Aiden’s fingers dig into my hips, and he sets the pace, guiding me up and down, sinking deeper into me each time. I pulse around him, nails raking against his skin

while my back arches.

I come again when he leans forward and captures my mouth in a searing kiss. His cock throbs, and I clamp down hard around it. Aiden comes, his slow strokes eventually stopping, his arms banding around me tight.

Though I don't know how the next couple of days will be, it's hard to imagine that they'll be any better than being in his arms and looking up at the snow and the stars.

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When we get back to the staff cabin two days later, all I want to do is turn around and run back to our private little haven.

Rosie glances at me over the back of the couch as I lug in the bags. “Where’s Aiden?”

“He had to run to see Carter. Something about some hikers getting injured near the search and rescue station and needing to bring them back down to the resort.” I set the bags inside the door.

She nods to my room. “There’s a letter in there for you. Arrived yesterday.”

“Thanks.” I kick off my things and drag the bags into the room before turning and seeing the letter on the desk.

My heart stops in my chest at the return address. My hands are shaking as I slip a finger beneath the seal and open it up, pulling out the sheet of paper.

Dear Miss Kirk,

We are thrilled to offer you the position of kindergarten teacher at Southwood Elementary School. Please find enclosed the paperwork we need you to fill out and submit to us by the end of the month.

We are overjoyed to have you join us at Southwood Elementary. We know that you’ll be a great addition to the team. If you have any questions, please don’t hesitate to reach out.

Ava Ness

Southwood Elementary Principal

I read the short letter a couple more times, flipping through the stack of papers in the back. My contract isn't long, but the salary listed is enough to make my jaw drop. I hadn't hoped for something so good when becoming a teacher just out of college, but there's the number — a high enough salary to sustain me for the rest of the year if I choose to go back home.

My phone starts ringing, and my heart drops to my stomach. Please don't let it be Aiden.

June's name flashes on the screen as I pull my phone out of my pocket. I slide my thumb across the screen, wondering what I possibly forgot for her to be calling me on my first day back.

"Where are you?" June asks, her voice shrill. "You and Rosie were supposed to be at work ten minutes ago. When I granted you time off, I didn't think that it was going to come to this."

I tossed the letter back on the desk. "Shit, I'll be there in a few minutes. I'll grab Rosie too. I'm so sorry."

June sighs. "Hurry up."

We hang up, and I rush to the living room, hauling my boots back on and grabbing my ski coat and pants from beside the door. "Rosie, we're late."

"Shit!" Rosie tosses her popcorn bag to the side and springs up from the couch, flying to the door, pulling on her ski pants and stomping into her boots. She hauls on her

jacket, and we hurry out the door.

Figuring out what to do about my teaching job is going to have to wait until later.

CHAPTER 16

AIDEN

I sigh and shed my gloves and coat, hanging them by the door. It's been a long day of convincing several different resort guests why they can't ski a black diamond trail when they've barely been skiing for a month. All I want to do is crawl into bed with Mia and maybe watch a movie or two.

Or maybe I could take her out. I don't know what we'd do if we went out, though. The wind is howling today, and the snow is falling in thick sheets. When we wake up tomorrow morning, it's probably going to look even more like a winter wonderland than it has the rest of the season.

And then there's the thought that maybe I should take her out to dinner. I know the restaurant in the resort is putting on a fancy steak dinner with lobster bisque as an appetizer. She's mentioned before how much she loves steak and lobster.

Maybe I could take her out to dinner, and it would be time to tell her how I feel about her, even though I don't really know what that is. I do know that I don't want to leave this season without her, though.

If that means that I have to move to her hometown, find a little place for Honey and me, and figure out where to go from there, then that's what I'm going to do.

Ryder stands in the middle of the kitchen, stuffing a handful of cheese puffs in his face. "Looks like it's getting bad out there."

“Yeah,” I say as I open the fridge and grab a bottle of water, cracking it open and taking a long sip. “They closed the slopes early. Everybody’s been sent back to their rooms, or if they’re staying out, it has to be on the resort grounds near the building.”

He makes a noise in the back of his throat. “Guess that means it’s going to be an earlier morning for me, with more people at the restaurant for breakfast.”

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“Probably.” I glance around looking for any sign of Mia. She should be back by now.
“Where are Mia and Rosie?”

“They ran into town. Said that if the storm is going to get worse, then they want to have some snacks and drinks to be able to enjoy their night since they both have tomorrow off.”

Maybe that’s better than trying to trudge to the restaurant with her through the snow. I won’t have time to overthink about what to say to her or how I feel.

I won’t have to walk beside her, not knowing if she feels the same way. If she’s thinking about what comes next for us after the season. She could be thinking about it. She might be thinking about it as much as I am. I don’t know.

Ryder puts the bag of cheese puffs to the side. “Are you feeling all right?” he asks.
“You’re looking a little green.”

“Yeah, fine.” I open the cupboard and grab Honey’s bag of food, leaving my water bottle on the counter while I get her dinner ready.

“Things okay with Mia?”

“Yeah, they’re great. Better than I thought they’d be, honestly.”

Ryder crosses his arms. “Look, I know we’re not friends. I know that you don’t really like having friends, but for what it’s worth, if you want to talk about it, I’ve been told that I’m a good listener.”

“Nothing much to talk about,” I say. I put Honey’s bowl on the floor. “I’m gonna go get changed. Don’t let them pick out a movie we’ve seen a million times. You know that if they have their choice, we’ll be watching something starring some guy with dark hair and a sad face again.”

Ryder laughs and nods, saluting me before going to drop down in front of the television to sort through the movies. “I’ll leave the action movies out and hide everything else.”

“Sounds good to me.”

I leave him in the living room and head into the bedroom, shutting the door behind me and taking a deep breath. If this is going to be the night that I tell Mia how I feel, then I need to figure out what to say to her. I don’t know what to say to anybody in this situation, though. I’ve never been on the end where I have to figure out what comes next and if the person I’m with likes me as much as I like them. I’ve never had to think about what happens if I tell somebody how much I care for them, how I’m falling for them, and they don’t feel the same way.

It’s always been easier to be the one who runs when things get too serious.

With Mia, I don’t feel like running, and it makes my stomach toss and turn in a way I’m not used to.

Sighing, I walk across the room, my hip slamming into the corner of her dresser. A paper on top flutters to the floor, and I pick it up, freezing when I see the words “Southwood Elementary School” written on it.

And even though I know I shouldn’t, I read the letter. With each line I read, the sinking feeling in my stomach only gets worse. I don’t know what to do. I was going to tell her how much I care about her — how I’m starting to fall in love with her.

I was thinking about moving with her, but she didn't even tell me about this letter. She didn't tell me that she had made her decision about what happens when the season ends. Every single time I've asked about teaching and her job after this, she's told me that she doesn't know what she's going to do. She has never mentioned the fact that she's already applied for a teaching position at a school, let alone the fact that she has been accepted.

With shaking hands, I set the letter back on the dresser. I'm going to have to talk to her about this, but I have no clue what to say. She's been thinking about leaving me the entire time we've been together. She knew that she'd be going.

Although, I can't blame her for having a job lined up — because that's what any responsible adult should have. Hell, I have one lined up at the end of the season. But I think that maybe it would have been better if she had just told me.

Maybe she's thinking about telling me at the end of the season. Breaking up with me and then parting ways. Though, can it be really breaking up if we've never talked about what we are to each other?

I sigh and grab my towel and toiletry bag, heading for the shower. I can figure this out later. One thing is for certain, though. When I talk to her tonight, I'm not going to talk about how I feel or where we're going. I need time to process.

It's clear that she's made her decision. I don't want to be the man to hold her back from her new life, and maybe it's too early to be considering moving to a different part of the country for a woman I only met two months ago.

The old Aiden never would have once considered leaving behind the life he loves for somebody he barely knows.

Even that feels like a discredit to what we are. I know her. She knows me. But maybe

I care about this more than she ever has.

After my shower I head into the mess hall, braving the snow outside just to get away from the cabin. I don't think I can be in there right now with Mia while she's smiling, laughing, bouncing around the room like nothing's wrong. I'm not gonna push her to talk to me about it before she wants to, and right now I'm not in the headspace to bring it up with her either.

Carter looks up from the bowl of soup in front of him. "I didn't think I was going to see you in here. I thought the plan was to stay in the cabin tonight."

I sit down across the table from him. "Yeah, well, circumstances have changed."

He tips back his bowl, slurping at the last of his soup before setting it down. "Oh yeah? How so?"

"Things have just changed. I have a job lined up at the end of the season, and I've been allowing distractions to pull me from that. There are commitments I need to attend to."

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Understanding dawns on his face. “Oh, so this is about Mia.”

“How are Cassie and the girls?” I drum my fingers on the table, glancing around the mess hall looking for them. They’re here for a couple more days, aren’t they?”

“Yeah, they are, but don’t think I don’t know what you’re trying to do by changing the subject.”

“Look. I don’t think it’s worth talking about right now. Mia and I have been fun. It’s been a good time, and I really do care about her.” I pause, my mouth going dry after saying those words for the first time. “But when the season comes to an end, we both have other plans. I’m not gonna be sticking around for anyone or anything. Not when there is my life waiting for me.”

It’s a lie. It tastes bitter on the tip of my tongue. I know what I want, and I know that it’s her, but it doesn’t seem like she’s factored me into her plans.

I’m spiraling. I still have to talk to her first. See what she’s actually planning on doing.

However, in the moment, it’s hard to see past the abandonment issues I’ve never quite been able to shake.

“I think the two of you could figure out a way to make it work.” Carter glances around, stretching up in his seat a little bit. “I don’t know where Cassie and the girls went. I think Cassie said she was going to take them out to make snow angels.”

“Well, you should be spending time with them outside instead of sitting here talking to me.”

“Not like you gave me much choice about talking to you.” His tone is teasing as he reaches for the roll on the side of his plate. “I was just sitting here, enjoying my lunch, when you came over and decided that we needed to have a talk about your love life. Which I think tells you that I’m the wrong person to be talking about your love life with at this point. You should be talking to Mia about whatever it is that’s bothering you.”

“There’s nothing bothering me.”

“Yeah, sure.” He scoffs as he breaks off a piece of his roll and pops it into his mouth, chewing and staring at me. “Who are you trying to convince, me or yourself?”

“Look, I just want one night where I don’t have to think about what comes next for the future. Because that seems to be all I’ve been doing for the last couple weeks.”

“Like I told you, things are going to change. She came into your life, and she’s changed everything you thought you knew — that you thought was going to happen. It’s understandable that you’re having cold feet right now. Chances are that she’s feeling the same way too, especially with the season end drawing closer.”

“I’m going to talk to her. We’re not kids in high school who can’t talk to each other about this kind of thing. I just need a couple more days.”

Carter makes a noise in the back of his throat like he doesn’t quite believe me. Not that I care. It’s the truth. I need a couple days to figure this out, and then everything will be fine. Mia and I can enjoy the rest of the time we have together, and at the end, we can go our separate ways.

Just like we were supposed to this entire time.

It was my fault that I thought this could be anything else. I know that hookups like ours rarely make it past the season. And even when they do, it's only for a couple weeks, and then the people discover that it's never going to work.

Maybe I should be thankful that Mia is forcing distance between us.

At least it will save us both heartbreak down the road.

CHAPTER 17

MIA

Aiden has done a spectacular job of avoiding me over the past twenty-four hours. He didn't come to dinner last night, and when I got up this morning, he was already gone for work. And now that it's nearing midnight and everyone else is finally in bed, he comes home.

I look over the back of the couch at him, trying to figure out what to say. Nothing comes to me. What do you say to somebody who's avoiding you? I thought things were good between us. Sure, there's the small matter of the letter, but that's tucked away deep in my underwear drawer.

Aiden eyes me for a moment before going into the kitchen and opening the cupboard, pulling down a pudding cup. "I didn't know you were gonna be up."

"Well, I've been trying to figure out a time when we could talk, but you never seem to be around."

"There's a lot going on at the search and rescue station. With Carter on vacation, I've

had to pick up a lot of the slack.”

“Sure, I understand that. What I don’t understand is why you’ve been avoiding me. We’ve been home for twenty-four hours, and you can’t even bother to answer a good morning message that I sent you this morning.”

“Didn’t know I had to respond to every message.”

I could scream. It’s not the point, and the guilty look in his eyes tells me that he knows that. He’s trying to be difficult and get under my skin, and it’s working.

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“You don’t have to, but you haven’t talked to me since yesterday morning when I lugged the bags back home and you were gone. I don’t understand what’s going on.”

“I don’t have time to talk right now. I just came home. I have just enough time to have a snack and then I have to go back to the search and rescue station.”

“Why? So you can keep avoiding me so we don’t have to talk about what’s going on between us?”

“I don’t know why you think I’m avoiding you. I’ve got no reason to avoid you.”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought. So I don’t understand what’s going on.” I rub a hand down the side of my face, trying to make sense of all of this.

He sighs and peels off the top of this pudding cup, licking it before putting the garbage in the trash. “I really don’t have time for this. I have to go back before the other guy leaves.”

“I don’t think you do. You’ve already been working a double shift, and now you’re trying to tell me it’s turning into a triple? I think you’re trying to hurry out of here so you can avoid talking about whatever’s been bothering you since yesterday, and rightnow it feels like we’re going around and around in circles. I keep saying the same thing. You keep telling me you have to leave, and then you don’t walk out the door.”

I get up from the couch, my temper flaring. I take a deep breath, but it does nothing to ease some of the irritation flowing through me.

Aiden shrugs. "This is the only point of the day I get to come home for a while. I'd like to enjoy it before I head back out. I'm not in the mood for an argument right now."

He's not in the mood for an argument? I take a moment to try and rein in my temper. I don't have much of one most of the time, but there's something about him that's drawing it out of me.

I snap. "We can't keep dancing around each other like we have no clue what's going on."

He grabs a spoon and jabs at the pudding cup. "I've got a real job to do, Mia."

"And you think I don't?"

I don't know where this is coming from at all. I want to go over to him, take his face in my hands and ask if everything's all right. I want to look in his eyes and know that we're going to be fine.

But I don't think we're going to be. There's this sinking feeling in the bottom of my stomach that tells me this is the beginning of the end.

Aiden puts a massive spoonful of pudding into his mouth and shrugs.

"Seriously, Aiden. We're going to do this now because if we don't, I don't think we ever will."

"Fine," he says. "I think my first impression of you was right. You're just here for a good time. That's all this has ever been for you. At the end of the season, you're going to go back to your life and pretend that you don't know what you want. When the truth is that you know what you want, you're just too scared to go after it."

“Where the hell is this coming from?”

“This isn’t just some game of pretend for me, Mia. This is my job, and this is my life. This is what I do all year round. I travel. I do search and rescue. I don’t have time for settling down or whatever else you might have assumed we were doing here.”

I guess that’s my answer.

Tears prick at the corners of my eyes, but I hold them back.

“What I assume we’re doing.”

“Yeah. I’ve known what this is from the start. It’s fun. We had sex, we went out, we danced.” He doesn’t look at me, just says the words, his tone hollow. He finishes his pudding and tosses the cup into the trash. “I think it’s time we stop pretending that this was anything more than what it was.”

Confusion surges through me as he walks out, the door slamming behind him.

I have no clue what just happened or why. Things were going good between us. Sure, there were moments when it seemed like maybe this wasn’t going to be something that we continued forward with. But that’s why I wanted to talk to him. Ever since those couple of days in the cabin, all I can think about is where we go from here.

But now it seems like he’s backing out. He’s done.

Maybe I should be done too. It might be easier that way. I could pretend that he’s never meant anything to me. It would feel like ripping my own heart out of my chest. But I could do it.

I’ve pretended I’m fine before.

Pretending isn't good enough, though. I cross the room, my heart hammering in my chest, blood rushing in my ears. As I yank open the door, my mouth goes dry. I don't know what to say to him. I don't know how to fix this.

But I have to try.

He might be the best thing that's ever happened to me.

"Where do you think you're going?" I say, my voice getting louder as I storm down the steps and into the snow. The cold seeps through my slippers, soaking them quickly.

When he turns around, there's a pained expression on his face. "I told you. I need to go back to work."

"No. What you're doing is running away. Why don't you tell me what caused this change between us? Tell me what I did. Let me know what I can do to fix this."

He recoils like I hit him. "There's nothing to fix. We need to just let it go, Mia. Maybe we were wrong."

"I think this moment right here is the only one I've been wrong about." My voice breaks, the pain in my chest growing tighter. "Enjoy work."

I go back inside, slamming the door behind me, blocking it and slumping against it. I bury my face in my hands, trying to take deep breaths. There doesn't seem to be enough oxygen in the world.

Rosie pads out into the living room, rubbing the sleep from her eyes as I look up. "Do you want to tell me what's bothering you, or do you wanna just sit and cry?"

“I’d tell you, but I don’t know if I just broke up with him or if he broke up with me, or if we’re still together and this is just a bump in the road.” I laugh, tears leaking out of the corners of my eyes rolling down my cheeks. “Honestly, I don’t even know if you could call it a breakup. How does something end when it never even really began?”

“Okay. How about you take a deep breath, sit down, and tell me what happened?”

“I don’t want to sit and talk right now.” I wipe the tears from my eyes, tipping my head back and looking at the ceiling until the feeling of needing to cry slowly fades. It’s a trick I got good at while Mom was sick. “I just want to try and forget this entire night happened.”

“I heard him say that he thinks you’re here just for a good time.” Rosie sits down on the couch and pats the cushion beside her. “We all know that’s not true, so why don’t you come over here and tell me what prompted the argument?”

I shake my head. “I don’t know. He’s been avoiding me since yesterday. I tried to talk about it with him today, but you just saw how that went. Apparently, he’s back to thinking of me the same way he was at the start of the season. I don’t know how he got there. I thought things were good between us. I mean, yeah, I got an offer to teach at school, but I was thinking of rejecting it. I haven’t even told him about it yet because I don’t know what I’m going to do. There’s part of me that thinks that I should be traveling the world and seeing it. Then there’s this other part that’s thinking about settling down. Even considering wanting to do that with him.”

“Does Aiden know that?”

“He was going to. I haven’t had the chance to tell him yet. Every time I’ve tried to talk to him over the last day, whether it’s through text or the few times I’ve seen him in person at the resort, he always shuts me down or ignores my message. Sometimes

he walks away.”

“Well, the end of the season is a few weeks,” Rosie says softly. “Maybe he’s just preparing himself.”

“I don’t think I’m ready to prepare myself.”

“Well, then maybe you need to make him see that as well.”

I slump on the couch beside her, my head pressed back against the cushions as I stare up at the ceiling. This time I can’t will the tears away like I’ve willed them away every other time.

“Sometimes we don’t get choices about these things.”

“I know, but I’m not ready for this to end.”

“In that case, I think you need to go get out of this cabin and chase down your man.”

CHAPTER 18

AIDEN

Honey is sleeping in the search and rescue station while I sit on a cot looking out the window. Snow is falling and the stars are shining brightly over the trees. Well, at least the ones visible through the thick cloud cover.

Maybe I should have stayed and talked to Mia more. Maybe I should have told her that I saw the letter. We could have figured this out. But I’m not sure that there is anything to figure out at this point. She made up her mind about what she’s doing, I think. She and Rosie have been lurking around the cabin and whispering to each

other. At least they were this morning when I stopped by.

Sure, it could've been about nothing, but it sounded like Rosie was talking about her plans after the season is over.

I should have known that this was never going to work out. I should have known that she would leave me because everybody else does. The kind of life I live is the kind where people just sit to the side and think that I'm wasting my time. That there has to be something wrong with me to make me want to move around all the time.

And the more I think about it, the more I know I won't be happy following her and settling down. I would feel like I'm holding her back or forcing her to take me with her.

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Groaning, I tip my head back against the cold window, closing my eyes. This is why I don't do relationships. I should have told her how I felt before this all blew up in my face.

At least then there was something good between us. Something that might make it harder for her to let go.

I sit up straighter again, shifting on the cot and leaning back against the other wall. The cold seeps through the wood, but the space heater in the corner is working overtime. It's not the best setup in the world, but it's the one that works for tonight. It's better than being back home in the cabin and having to look at Mia, knowing I disappointed her.

I glance out the window and see a shadowy figure stomping through the snow.

The form is small and slightly hidden in shadow. It's only once the figure steps into the light shining outside the station that I can see Mia. There's a determination on her face and a look in her eyes that I don't dare mess with. It looks like she's gonna set the world on fire if she doesn't get what she wants.

It's probably wrong to be turned on by that, but even if we are at odds right now, I'm still insanely attracted to her.

Maybe if I pretend that I don't know she's here, she'll go away.

It's childish. Ridiculous, really. I should go down there and talk to her. I should tell her that I saw the letter, tell her that I don't want to hold her back. I could tell her that

I'm afraid of her leaving. Or that I'm afraid of being alone. Hell, I could even tell her that the thing that terrifies me most in this moment is leaving this resort knowing what I had with her and worrying that I'll never find it with anybody else again.

And I know I wouldn't. It would be impossible. Someone like her comes around once in a lifetime.

But just because someone like her only comes around during that one moment in your life when you need them the most — just for a fleeting passage of time — doesn't mean that they're there to stay. Maybe Mia was never meant to stay with me.

Her boots pound against the steps as she climbs up to the station. There isn't even a knock at the door before it flies open, and she steps inside. Honey springs up from her nap and dashes across the small space, burying her big head against Mia's thighs. Mia smiles and runs her fingers through Honey's fur.

"Hi, girl," Mia says, crouching down and scratching Honey behind the ears, laughing as Honey slobbers all over her. "I've missed you too."

Guilt hits me like a punch to the gut. I'm wondering how I deprived them of each other for the day. Or what will happen when we've gone our separate ways and they don't see each other again. Even though she's always been a friendly dog, I don't think I've seen Honey take to anyone the way she's taken to Mia.

I run a hand through my hair. "What are you doing here?"

"Well, I thought about what you said back at the cabin." Mia stands up and looks at me, hurt in her eyes, but there's a hard set to her jaw. "Thought about it, and I decided that it's bullshit."

My shoulders slump. "I don't know if I have the energy to continue with this

argument.” To continue pretending that I don’t love her. That I haven’t fallen for her or that we can make it to the end of the season and beyond.

Mia arches an eyebrow, her arms crossing under her chest. She stands taller, her chin tilting up. “That’s it? You’ve got nothing to say about any of this?”

“I don’t know what you want me to say about it.”

“I want you to tell me what the hell is going on in your head, Aiden.” Her voice wavers, a slight quiver to her bottom lip. “I want to know why you keep pushing me away.”

“What’s going on in my head right now is that there are two weeks left of the season, and then I move on with my life and you move on with yours.” My tongue darts out to wet my bottom lip as I try to force the appropriate tone in my voice.

All I want to do is crawl back onto that cot and shut down for the night. I could pretend that this isn’t happening right now — that I can hide away from my life. It’s what I used to do when I was in foster care. It doesn’t work as an adult, but the idea is appealing nonetheless. She’s looking at me like she doesn’t know who I am, what she wants, or what I should be doing right now.

“Why don’t you just leave?” I ask her, forcing words out through gritted teeth. It feels like I’m ripping out a piece of myself when I say that to her.

Mia looks at me like I just told her I hate her. Her lips press into a thin line, and she gives a single nod before spinning on her heel. She pauses and turns around long enough to say goodbye to Honey before stepping out the door and shutting it behind her.

I go to the window and watch her leave, my heart hammering in my chest, crushing

against my ribs. There is a deep pit in the bottom of my stomach.

What the hell did I just do?

Ryder hums to himself as he carries two omelets to our table, setting one down in front of me. “Made this just for you. Made sure to put an extra bad attitude in it.”

“How do you put an attitude in eggs?” I grab the bottle of hot sauce in the middle of the table, pouring out a healthy amount. “Thanks for this, though.”

“Well, I think about the way that you and Mia have been storming around and avoiding each other for the last week. Putting it into the omelet involves violently breaking eggs against the counter. You might find some shell in yours.”

The corner of my mouth twitches as I stab my eggs, scooping up a forkful. “I heard a little crunch is probably a good thing.”

Ryder smirks and cuts off a bite of his own omelet, sticking it in his mouth. The silence stretches between us for a moment before he swallows hard and reaches for his coffee, mixing in some cream and sugar. “I’m going to tell you all that I know about women. It’s not a whole lot, but I think that you would like to know something — well, at least if you want to fix this with Mia. And based on the fact that you’re still here and aren’t running for the hills to your next rescue gig, I’m thinking that you do want to fix it with her.”

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“Not sure there’s anything to fix. I’ve done a pretty fine job of messing things up.”

“I don’t think there’s anything you messed up so bad that can’t be fixed. Mia seems like a very forgiving person. She likes you. If she didn’t, she wouldn’t have tried as hard as she did to get to know you.”

“I know that things are complicated.” I stab another bite of my breakfast, inspecting it for little bits of shell. All that’s there is ham and cheese. And something green that smells a little like onion. It’s safe.

“Things can’t be that complicated. I think you two are both making this more complicated than it needs to be. It’s been a week, and the two of you barely said more than three words to each other. She’s been sleeping in the bedroom while you’ve been out on the couch. Honey is moving around like she doesn’t know where she’s supposed to be.”

Before I can say anything else, Mia comes over and sits down beside me, dropping her tray on the table.

She gives Ryder her bright smile before turning to me. “You know what? I’m tired of avoiding this conversation or whatever the hell is going on between the two of us. So, I guess it’s up to me again to try and fix this. Although, I’ll be honest right now. I don’t know why I’m bothering quite so hard for us when you clearly don’t care.”

Ryder gets to his feet, leaving his breakfast behind. “I think that’s my cue to go get some more coffee.”

Mia twists in her seat to face me, crossing one leg over the other. “What happened?”

“Doesn’t matter what happened. All that matters is that in a week, we’re both done here.”

“Sure, you could pretend that it doesn’t matter, but if you feel for me even half of what I feel for you, then you have to think it matters. Or you could tell me that we’re done without even trying to figure out what the hell happened. Though it seems to me like something happened, but you’re not enough of a man to actually communicate with me about it.”

“Sure, you could think that if you want.” I take another bite of the eggs. “I don’t know what else there is to tell you. You’ve got your plans after this season ends. I’ve got my plans. And it’s pretty clear that the two of them are never gonna line up.”

Mia scoffs. “You’ve got to be kidding me. That’s all this is about? My plans? I don’t have any plans — like I’ve been telling you the entire season. So maybe you don’t believe me.”

“Oh, okay. I don’t believe you. I wonder why you would spend this entire season telling me that you don’t have plans when we both know that you’ve got a life to turn back to after this.”

“What life?” She throws her hands up in the air, her cheeks turning a bright red, her eyes flashing with anger. “I’m alone. I have nobody I’m going home to.”

“I think it’s best that you leave.” The words feel like they’re made of shattered glass. They grate on my throat, tearing me from the inside out.

I don’t want to keep fighting with her. Maybe I should tell her that it’s going to be okay. That we can do whatever she wants. It’s what used to work in the foster homes

to keep the fighting to a minimum.

But how can I give up on my life and my dreams?

Although I think those dreams have changed since I met her.

Pretending I'm distant is better. I lean back in my chair and shrug, continuing to eat my breakfast. I'm being cold, and it's cruel, but it's the only way I think I can convince her to give up on me.

Mia's eyes shine with tears as she nods. "You know what, fine. You win. No matter what comes between us right now, I hope you're happy with your life."

She gets up, the legs of her chair screeching against the tile floor. Multiple people in the room turn to look at us, but I ignore them all, instead watching my plate and listening for the steady beat of her footsteps to fade. I don't know if I could have made more of a mess of this than I already have.

I immediately feel bad, regretting what I did. As I stand up to chase after her, Ryder steps in my path. He puts his hand on my chest and holds me in place. "I think it's better that you don't follow her right now."

"I made a mistake."

He shakes his head. "No, at this point all you've made is a series of choices. You picked the path that you've now gone down. You don't want to talk to anybody about what happened. You won't even talk to her. And even if you would, I think that she's heard everything she needs to hear."

"She's better off without me." My lips press together as I struggle to keep my breathing even and my eyes from burning. "I've gotta go to work."

“Of course, yeah.” Ryder shakes his head and sits back down in front of this food. “One day you’re going to wake up and see what you did here, and you’re gonna want to fix it. That regret is gonna eat you alive, and you’re going to think, well, what would have happened if I just told her the truth. Or if I had never started whatever the hell this is in the first place. And then you will spend the rest of your life living with that regret because that right there is probably the best woman I’ve ever met. Sure, she’s got her issues. We all do. But she fought for you from the beginning. And now look at how you’re treating her.”

“I know.” I turn and head for the door.

I know he’s right. There’s nothing else I can do. I screwed up. I’m an idiot. I know I should go after Mia and tell her everything at this point, but I can’t.

It’s stupid to think that I won’t be alone. I’m not going to be anything but a terrible partner.

I step outside, the fresh air nearly soothing some of the spiraling thoughts in my head as I take deep breaths. I made my bed.

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Honey takes off bounding through the snow, her nose to the ground following Mia's tracks, catching up to her just before she goes around the corner.

Even my own dog doesn't want to stay with me.

I'm not about to beg people to love me, though. I'm certainly not about to beg Mia to change her plans for me.

It's time to let her go.

CHAPTER 19

MIA

Rosie sits down on the bed, bouncing and looking at me. For every item I fold and put into my bag, she pulls it out and tosses it aside. I grab another stack of clothing from the dresser and stuff it in. She tries to take it back out.

She gives me a sheepish smile.

"I don't know what you think you're doing, but I have to pack."

"There's a staff party tomorrow night, and then we're done for the season. And that's it," she says.

"I can't keep going on like this. I have to get ready to go because if I don't, I don't know that I'm ever gonna leave."

Rosie reaches over and takes me by the hand, holding it tight. “I know this is hard for you right now, and to be honest, I can’t believe that Aiden is acting like this. In all the years I’ve known him, he’s never been cruel. A little cold and aloof, sure. But making you feel like you don’t matter to him? I don’t know what that’s about. Anybody can tell that when he looks at you, he sees his entire world.”

“Thanks, Rosie.” I pull my hand away and turn my back to her to grab more clothing from the dresser. “But I can’t listen to that right now. If he really cared about me the way that you all seem to think he does, this wouldn’t have happened.”

“You still don’t know what happened?”

“Not a clue. All the times I asked him, he didn’t have anything to say about it. When I tried to talk to him the other day at breakfast, he had nothing to say. So does he care about me? I can’t keep forcing him to talk to me.” My voice breaks and more tears gather in my eyes. I don’t know how much more I can cry this week before I finally get to go home. I grab the papers inside a drawer.

I still haven’t filled out the paperwork for Southwood Elementary. I don’t think I can. Each time I pull up the contract and start reading through it, even looking at that number on the front page for my salary, it doesn’t feel right.

At this point I’m not sure what would feel right, but I know that’s not it. Maybe I should take some time for myself. Travel overseas and teach English to kids in China or Vietnam or somewhere where nobody knows my name and nobody knows all the shit I’ve been through the last couple of years.

I take the papers and hold them tight, trying to figure out what to do.

Rosie nods at the papers in my hand. “What’s that?”

“My teaching contract. Ever since I arrived here, it hasn’t felt right.”

“Does this have anything to do with him?”

“No. It started the moment I got off the bus and felt like I was supposed to be here. Like this is where I should have been all along.”

Rosie looks at the papers before looking back at me. “So, you’re not going to take the job, then?”

“I don’t think I can.” I stuff the papers in the bag and grab more of the clothing she threw to the side, stuffing that in as well. “I thought it was what I wanted, but now the things I want are so different than they were when I first got here.”

“And now you don’t know how to make those two things line up.”

“I realized it wasn’t probably a good idea since I didn’t know what I wanted to do or where I wanted to be. I was thinking that I could just come for this season and not leave an entirely changed person. And all I see is my mom, but in a good way. It’s not like I’m sitting around here and thinking about all the things that we could have done together if she’d only had two more years. I came to this resort to find her, and I think to find myself.”

“I can tell you that in the time you’ve been here, things changed. You’re not the same person you were when we stepped off the bus.” Rosie’s eyes gather with tears and her lips purse before she lets out a wavering breath. “I don’t know how to say goodbye to you.”

“It’s not like we never get to see each other again.” I zip up my bag, leaving out only what I need for that night. “My friendship with you has been one of the best things that’s developed since I’ve been here. You’d be crazy to think that I’m not going to

call you every week so we can talk and catch up on everything.”

Rosie laughs and wipes the tears from her eyes. “You better.”

I set the bag on the floor and drop down beside her on the bed, leaning back against the mattress and looking at the ceiling. Have you thought about what you’re gonna do once the season’s over?”

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“I got an offer to work here through the spring and summer.”

My head whips to the side, my grin wide. “Congratulations! I know you love it here. So what position did they give you?”

“Well, June is leaving after the season, so an activities coordinator position opened. She put my name forward, and I guess the big bosses liked my work enough to offer me a job when she’s gone.”

“You’re gonna be so good at the job that they’re not gonna know what hit them.”

“I know.” Rosie playfully tosses her hair over her shoulder, her smile growing. “And if you ever want to come back here, I’ll make sure to put in a good word for you too.”

“I don’t know if I could come back here after everything that’s happened.”

“I’m sure you could. You’re stronger than the bullshit.”

“I’ve always been told that resilience is one of my best qualities, but these days it feels like I’m just playing a game of catch-up.”

Rosie shakes her head. “When you leave here, you’re going to be just fine. I know you, Mia. You may not be teaching, but you’re gonna find out what makes you happy, whatever that might be.”

I sigh, staring at the ceiling. “I don’t know. All that’s been on my mind is how I’m just about to leave him. I don’t know what he’s doing right now. I haven’t seen him

in the last couple of days. He comes and goes without so much as a goodbye or hello. Somehow, in a span of just a couple weeks, we've become strangers."

Rosie pats my thigh. "You know, we should go to the staff party tomorrow night. It's gonna be the last chance we have time to party together before you leave me here alone."

"You're not gonna be alone."

"You know what I mean. I'm gonna miss you. And if this is the last chance we have to go to drink too much tequila and dance to songs we don't know the words to, then we're going to do it. I don't care if you don't feel like going out. I will drag you kicking and screaming."

"And I suppose it's for my own good."

"It is for your own good." Rosie grins and rolls onto her side to face me. She grabs the corners of my mouth and turns them upward. "There's your smile. I've been missing it."

Laughing, I swat her hands away from me. "I've been smiling just fine."

"Sure, sure." Rosie pushes up to her feet as Honey comes trotting into the room. "Promise me that you're not gonna leave tonight while we're all sleeping and that you'll stay for one more day and go to the party with me."

"I promise," I say, patting the bed beside me as Honey jumps up.

"Good. Aiden is gonna be there."

I scowl at her, a pit forming in the bottom of my stomach. "Well, if that's the case,

maybe I'll sit this one out. I can hang around until you get back. Then we can talk all about the party and who you think you're going to hook up with out of the people who stay."

"Come on! You have to go to the party and talk to him one last time. I don't think the two of you should end on this note."

"With everything that's going on between us, I don't see another note to end on. This is the way he wanted things, and this is the way they're going to be."

Rosie gives me a flat look. "Is this really how you want things to end, though? You were half of the relationship, so you get a say in it too. You don't have to just roll over or pretend to be fine just because he's being difficult."

I shake my head sadly. "This isn't some romance movie where the quarterback comes running in at the end of the third quarter. He's not going to rush up into the stands telling me that he loves me as I'm on my way out the door. Something shifted for him. It changed. And that happens to people. He's entitled to his feelings the same way I'm entitled to mine."

"Sure, it is." Rosie heads for the door, pausing in the doorway. "But is this one of those things you want to regret later on in life?"

She leaves, shutting the door behind her, her words echoing in my head. I don't know if this is the kind of regret I want to live with. I've done my best so far not to live with any. And maybe that's led to Aiden thinking that I'm nothing but somebody who's there for a good time and a short time.

But at this point, I thought he knew me better than to think that I was a flake. I thought he knew that I wanted something more than just the superficial with him. I thought that one of these days, we were finally going to get around to talking about it.

Maybe Rosie's right.

I was half of this relationship, and maybe I get something to say about it too.

CHAPTER 20

AIDEN

“You’re not going to sit here for the rest of the night moping.” Carter stands in the doorway of the search and rescue station, glaring at me with his arms crossed over his chest. “It’s the last party of the season. You should be out there partying and having a good time. Maybe you should even think about getting Mia back.”

“I told you I’d rather be working. You’ve always enjoyed those parties more than I have.” I lean back in the chair behind the desk, linking my hands together behind my head and staring at the hiking plans posted on the wall. There are only two groups of hikers out, and once they come back for the night, I can relax and start reading.

Carter nods at the window. “It looks like there’s one of the groups there, so it’s just the second one you’re waiting for.”

I glance and see them trudging through the snow, six people headed back toward the resort. “Well, that makes my job half as hard as it was gonna be tonight.”

“Come on. You should go to the party.” Carter steps back into the station, Honey weaving between his legs the best that a Bernese Mountain Dog can. “One of these days I’m gonna trip over her and fall flat on my face.”

“More likely she’s gonna run into the back of your knees and send you flying down a staircase.” I pat my thigh, calling Honey over. Instead of coming to me, she sits down and glares at me.

I know, girl. I miss her too.

Carter's eyes roll, and he shakes his head. "This is ridiculous. Both of you should be at that party and talking to your girlfriend."

"She's not my girlfriend."

"Yeah, and whose fault is that?" Carter fixes me with a disappointed look. "I can't believe that, for the first time in all these years, you finally met somebody who interests you. Somebody you could — I'm assuming — spend the rest of your life with. And instead of trying to fix whatever the hell is going on in your head, you're sitting here and hiding from her."

"Are you gonna stay here all night and bother me, or are you going to enjoy the last night you have with the staff?"

"I'm gonna go." Carter tucks his hands in the pockets of his jacket. "But if you change your mind about the party, just radio down to the mess hall and I'll come switch out with you."

"Thanks, but I don't think I'm going to change my mind." I kick my heels up on the desk and lean back a little more, watching as the sun starts to sink toward the horizon. It's only going to be a matter of time before I'm alone and can turn back to my book.

Carter leaves the station, shutting the door behind him, his footsteps echoing on the steps and then crunching against the fresh snow.

After a moment I glance at Honey. "Looks like it's just going to be two of us. It's the way it's been for a long time. I don't think that's worth changing right about now, do you?"

Honey turns her back on me and lays her head on her paws with a dramatic sigh.

Traitor.

Time seems to drag by the closer the sun gets to the horizon. I keep glancing around, checking for the hikers, but they haven't come back yet. The clock slowly ticks toward the twelve, and I start counting down the minutes until I start sending out messages for them. They could be back at the resort by now. If they took a different way, I might not have seen them go by.

A few more minutes tick by. I message down to the resort. A crackling message comes back. They're not down there.

My breath catches in my throat. This is the part of the job I hate the most. It's the one that takes me back to all those years ago when my father died.

I grab my bag of rescue equipment, snatching the keys for the snowmobiles off the wall. Honey jogs along behind me as I fly down the stairs and over to the shed, unlocking the door. I head for the snowmobile with a little sidecar and sled behind it. Honey hops into the sidecar like she's been doing her whole life, sitting down while I get on. The snowmobile revs to life and we head out into the evening.

I take another look at the group's hiking plan and turn down a path that has old boot marks on it. I don't know if they're going to be down here, but it's the best place to start. It looks like they were gathered for a little while, the remnants of a fire burned down and doused with snow.

I hop off the snowmobile, cupping my hands over my mouth. "Becky! Luke! Tyler!"

I shout their names over and over again, following the footsteps that lead around their little camp until I find a set of all three tracking away from the fire pit. Honey darts ahead of me, her tail wagging.

I follow along behind her, pulling the emergency sled with the first aid kit slung over my back. The trees grow thicker, the trunks closer and closer together, branches scratching and tearing my jacket as I delve deeper into the woods. It's getting darker out, harder to see. I pull the headlamp from my backpack and set it on my head, turning it on. Bright white light shines in front of me, highlighting Honey as she darts between the trees with her reflective coat on.

I don't know how long we trudge through the woods, but the cold is starting to seep through my jacket and my pants. My toes are starting to turn to ice, and with the fur-lined boots I wear when I'm out here, it should be nearly impossible. Honey finally stops running, but it looks like it's at the edge of a cliff. My heart sinks in my chest as I approach the edge slowly, careful not to disturb too much of the snow.

I tilt my head, shining my light down over the side. It's not a steep cliff, but there are rocks at the bottom and among them are three bodies. "Becky! Luke! Tyler!" I shout down.

There's a groan from down below before two of the three people stand.

"We're down here," Becky calls. She sounds exhausted. "I didn't think anybody was coming for us. I know that we left the hiking plan with the search and rescue station, but we weren't back in time."

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“That’s why we ask you to leave us the plan,” I say, trying to keep calm as I unhook the sled from my body and drop the rescue bag to the ground.

My fingers are numb as I pull out the climbing harness and the rope, attaching it to one of the trees. I tie the tightest knot I can while Honey sits at the edge of the cliff, wagging her tail. As I hook myself into the harness and then onto the line, my hands shake. The third body isn’t moving.

“Who’s on the ground not moving?” I ask as I inch my way toward the edge of the cliff.

“Luke.” Her voice breaks as she looks down at him.

The other man, Tyler, nods. “He hit his head on the way down. We didn’t know what to do. We didn’t have a first aid kit with us.”

Becky glares. “I told you we should’ve brought a first aid kit.”

I lower myself over the edge of the cliff. It’s not a far drop, but it’s one I want to be hooked in for. However, the line starts to move, and all of a sudden, the rope springs free.

My body plummets. Pain shoots through my back as I hit the ground, but I can get to my feet. Even though I’m a little wobbly, it’s better than nothing. I pat my pockets. I don’t have my radio. And I didn’t radio this call in. A pit opens in the bottom of my stomach. Calling in an emergency is the first step of a rescue. If I had done that when I was supposed to, backup would be on their way. They would be able to get

me and the other three out of here even with my rope snapped. Instead, I'm going to have to climb up the face of the cliff.

I try to focus on one thing, crawling over to Luke and checking him over. Though there's blood on his head, I don't think there's an immediate emergency. His pulse is strong.

"Becky?" I try to keep my tone as calm as possible. "Are you good at climbing?"

Becky nods, her hands shaky. "I think so. I used to do some rock climbing when I was in college. It's been a few years, though."

I squeeze my eyes shut for a moment, taking a deep breath. I'm going to be like the people who couldn't get to my father in time. Luke needs help getting up. He's unconscious, his chest rising and falling though the breaths are shallow. There's no way of knowing what trauma was done to his head. He could die out here just like my father died, except this time it would be my fault. My job is to save him, but I don't know if I can do that right now.

I've been too distracted with everything else going on in my life. Even on the ride over here, I was thinking about Mia and maybe skipping out of work to go down to the party and talk to her. Carter said he'd cover for me.

Guilt eats at me as I open my eyes and look at Becky with a broad smile, giving her encouragement as I guide her toward the edge of the cliff.

"Okay, Becky, you and I are going to climb this together. You're going to go first, and if anything happens, I'll be right here to help you."

She clenches her jaw shut and gives me a determined look, but fear shines in her eyes and a tear slips down her cheek. She reaches out and wipes the tear away like it was

never there to begin with.

“You can do this,” Tyler says.

Becky walks over and gives him a tight hug. “Make sure Luke’s okay.”

Becky goes to the cliff, and she fits her fingers into a handhold and her feet into little footholds. She starts climbing slowly, and I wait until she’s several feet off the ground before beginning my climb after her. It’s been a long time since I went climbing, and though I try to stay in shape in case situations like these arise, the rocks are slippery with the ice that came down last night.

Becky tilts back, and my hand shoots out, pressing against the small of her back and shoving her into the rocks. She lets out a shaky breath and nods, taking a moment before continuing her climb.

It seems like an eternity passes, but we haul ourselves over the edge of the cliff and onto flat ground.

“Okay, Becky,” I say as I get up, shaking out my hands and stretching my fingers. “I’m going to tie a rope to the tree, and I’m going to hook my harness up. And I’m going to do a better job at that this time.”

She laughs, but there’s still a nervous look in her eyes. “Are you sure you’re going to be able to get them up? I don’t want anything to happen to them.”

I grab the radio from my bag and call in the code to Carter. “Backup is on its way. I’m going to go down there, and Tyler is going to come up. Tyler will stay with you until help arrives, and I’m going to stay down there with Luke.”

Becky nods, tears shining in her eyes. I leave her and tie the rope to the tree, hooking

it in tight and connecting my harness to it. After giving it a hard tug, I make sure that it's not going anywhere and lower myself down the cliff.

“All right, Tyler.” I step out of my harness and show him how to put it on. “You’re going to climb up. I’ll hold the rope down here, so all you need to focus on is getting up the side.”

Tyler takes a deep breath and nods.

After Tyler gets to the top, I drop to my knees beside Luke and check him over again. He’s still stable.

In the distance I can hear the hum of other snowmobiles as they draw closer. They get louder and louder as I stay beside Luke and wait for them to arrive. The longer I stay with him, the more I get to thinking that life is too short to waste not going after what I want.

Mia is what I want.

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Carter repels down the side of the cliff, landing in the snow beside me with the rescue basket. “James and Morgan are at the top. We’re going to load Luke into it, then James and Morgan are going to take him down the hill and get him to the paramedics who are waiting on standby at the search and rescue station.”

We tend to Luke, careful not to jostle his head too much as we fit the neck brace around him before lifting him into the basket.

We stand below, holding onto the basket, helping make sure that Luke is pulled up lightly without banging the side of the cliff. Once he’s brought over the edge, snowmobiles rev up. Carter and I hook ourselves into the ropes and climb up the side.

We ride down the mountain, Tyler and Becky on the backs of our snowmobiles, Honey sitting in her sidecar.

After dropping them off at the waiting paramedics, Carter turns to me. “You look like you’ve done some thinking during the time we’ve been apart.”

“Sorry to ruin your night.” I pat him on the shoulder. “But I have something I need to do.”

CHAPTER 21

MIA

Usually, a shot of tequila and some good music is enough to fix my mood, but not tonight.

I dance with Rosie, my hips moving to the beat, my hands high above my head. But even as I try to throw myself into the thought of having a good time and enjoying myself, at least for my last night here, I can't. Each time I look around the room, I keep hoping to see Aiden. I keep thinking that maybe he's going to be in a corner waiting for me to talk to him. Maybe he's going to come over and tell me that he can't live without me. Although that sounds a bit melodramatic.

Maybe I'm just hoping that he's going to come over and tell me it was all a mistake.

Rosie looks at me, her eyebrows pulling together and her mouth dipping into a frown. "You don't look like you're having a good time."

"That's because I'm not." I take a sip from my beer and stop dancing, heading over to the side of the room while she trails behind me. "I thought you were going to be right. That this would be a good way to get my mind off everything, but the longer I spend here, the more I wish I was on the road back home."

Rosie pulls me in for a tight hug. "Look. I know this isn't how you wanted to spend your last night here, but I appreciate the fact that you can do it for me. If you want to go, I'll walk you back to the cabin and we can call you a car."

June hustles over, her eyebrows pulling together. "What do you mean, call her a car? You're not going to stay for the rest of the night?"

"No." I give her an apologetic smile and shrug, doing my best to try and seem like I'm not being torn apart on the inside. "I loved being here this season, and I think I might try and come back next year over Christmas break. I don't know if I'll be able to work here, but I'd like to at least come visit all of you."

June scoffs, pulling me into another hug. "If you don't come and visit me, I'm gonna be mad. Your mother would be proud of you and all that you've done here this year."

Tears gather in my eyes, a couple of them spilling over. “Thank you. I didn’t know how much I needed to hear that from somebody who knew her.”

“I know it’s hard, but if you ever need to talk, you have my number. And I’ll be more than happy to offer you a position again. I mean, I am leaving, but I think I can pull some strings for you.”

I laugh and hug her tighter before stepping away. “Thank you. I’ll let you know when I know.”

June stares at me for a moment longer, like she’s trying to figure out what’s going on in my head. Then she steps away with a little wave and a smile, but it feels like it’s the last time we’re going to speak to each other. I’ve made a lot of good friends here, but I don’t know if I can talk to somebody who was close to my mother. Not after everything I’ve learned while here. As much as it would be nice to hold on to those memories, I think I just need a clean break from Aspen.

Rosie’s smile drops as she looks past my shoulder at something. “Oh,” she says. “I don’t know if you want to talk to Aiden tonight, but it looks like he’s here to talk to you.”

I turn around, and sure enough, there’s Aiden storming across the mess hall toward me, his hands curled into tight fists at his sides, a look of determination in his eyes.

“Not even a little bit,” I say, exhausted with this entire situation. “I don’t think there’s anything left for us to say.”

“No,” he says, “there’s plenty for us to say. Mainly me.” He sighs, his hands uncurling. He runs a hand through his hair, knocking off his hat in the process. “A lot that I should tell you.”

“You think now is the time to tell me when I’m about to be leaving?”

“Well, I had to do a little bit of thinking first.”

I scoff. “Oh yeah, what thinking?”

“The kind of thinking that leads me to the conclusion that I’m an idiot.”

“You could have figured that out sooner and spared us both a lot of trouble.” I hear the bitterness in my voice, but I don’t care. This is what weeks of hurting has done to us. There’s a tightness in my chest that I haven’t been able to shake since the day he started acting cold.

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It only seems to get worse the longer I stand there with him.

“Come on, Mia, talk to me for a minute.” His hand hovers close to mine like he’s thinking about reaching out and touching me, but he doesn’t. That’s probably a good thing. If he did, I don’t know if I’d be able to withstand the urge to melt back into his arms and pretend that everything was fine. To put off talking about all the things that went wrong between us.

At least if I leave now, I don’t have to talk about any of those things.

“Mia, please. Just talk to me.”

I cross my arms in an attempt to hold myself together. “How many times did I ask you to talk to me? How many times did I try to get you to tell me what was bothering you? And you just threw it back in my face. You dismissed me like I was nothing. Like the weeks we were together meant nothing to you. I think we’re done talking.”

“That’s it?” he asks, his voice breaking. “You’re just going to run away? Don’t you ever get tired of running? You do mean something to me, and I don’t want us to end like this.”

I bark out a bitter laugh and brush by him. “You could have figured that out earlier. I don’t have time for this right now. I need to go finish packing my things, and then I need to get the hell outta here.”

He doesn’t try to stop me, not that I want him to. I’m done. I can’t keep holding on and hoping that things are going to change or that I’m going to find out why he even

distanced himself from me in the first place.

It hurts too much to keep holding out hope for us when I know I shouldn't.

I should've known from the beginning that I was only going to break my own heart. That he was never going to get attached to me the way I grew attached to him. I knew it from the beginning, but I still hoped that, in time, there would be something more to us.

Maybe he was right about me when we met. Maybe I do spend too much time with my head in the clouds.

But somehow, as I leave the mess hall, I can't bring myself to regret falling in love with him.

CHAPTER 22

AIDEN

I give the door about three seconds to close behind her before I chase after her. "No, Mia. We're not doing this. You don't get to walk out on me. Not this time. I'm not gonna let you. I'm not gonna keep being the idiot that watches you walk out the door and doesn't chase you down."

She stiffens and spins around. "You're not going to let me? Why do you think it's a matter of letting me? After everything you've done to us, after the way you destroyed us, why do you think it's a matter of letting me?"

I approach her like she's a wounded animal in the woods, taking my time, careful not to spook her as I get closer. "I love you."

“You don’t get to use ‘I love you’ as a bandage when you screw up.” Mia’s voice breaks, tears gathering in her eyes. She reaches up to wipe them away, but she’s not quick enough. One of the tears rolls down her cheek, dripping off her jaw.

I draw closer to her, still keeping a bit of distance between us. “I’m not using it as a bandage. I know that it’s going to take a lot more than telling you I love you to fix the damage I’ve done. But I wanted you to know even if this is about to end between us. Even if you’re about to tell me to go get lost after I tell you what I have to say. I still want you to know that I love you.”

She swallows hard, her lips pressing into a thin line. She doesn’t run away, but she doesn’t say anything either. I’m not going to pressure her to say anything. Not right now. Not when there’s so much I have to apologize for.

Instead, I put my hands in my pockets to keep myself from reaching for her. “I’m an idiot. I’m an idiot with abandonment issues that run deep. And one day, when I was in our room, I saw the letter from Southwood Elementary. They accepted you as a kindergarten teacher. Congratulations, by the way. That’s what I should have said when I found out about it.”

Her eyebrows pull together. “Is that why you’ve been acting like this? Because you saw the letter? A letter that you didn’t even know if I was going to accept. A job offer that I didn’t tell you about because I didn’t know what I wanted. And I didn’t know if I was what you wanted.”

I take another step closer to her, the distance between us less than a foot now. “You’ve been what I wanted since you walked into my life. We couldn’t be more opposite. But I think that’s for the best. You bring out a part of me that I didn’t know I was missing. It’s a part that I probably should have tried looking for a long time ago, but nothing in my life made sense until you came along. I was happy just moving from mountain to mountain and working on search and rescue crews.”

“You had no business going through my things, you know that?” Even though she looks angry, there’s a softening in her eyes. I can work with that.

“I know. I had no right looking at any of that. I should have told you the moment I found it.”

“So then ask me what you want to ask me.”

“I don’t need to ask. I would follow you to the ends of the earth if that’s what it took. If you took that job, then I’m right there with you. I’ll get an apartment in the city wherever Southwood Elementary is, and we can make a real go at this relationship. And if that’s not where you want, then I’ll keep following you. You decide where you want to go, and Honey and I will be there.”

“I didn’t take the job.” The corner of my mouth twitches. “I called the school this morning and told him that I was taking some time to travel the world. I thanked them for the offer, but at this point, it doesn’t make sense to accept it.”

“And why not?”

“Because while I was here, I learned that I should follow my heart. Mom wouldn’t want me doing a job I don’t love in a place that makes me sad. And I don’t want that for me either. I like teaching skiing to children. I want to get into snowboarding. I want to spend endless hours going on snowmobile trips. And one day, I do want to teach kindergarten, but that can wait.”

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I hold my breath, hoping there's more.

"A place where the three of us can be happy. Because I love you too, and I want to be with you." A slow smile spreads across her face. "I want a place where you and I can do all those things and so much more. Along with couples therapy because apparently, we could do some work on learning how to communicate with each other."

"I like the sound of that."

I pull her into a tight hug, swinging her around before setting her down and kissing her. Her soft lips find mine, and fireworks shoot off in the background. Or maybe that's just the sound of my soul finally coming home and finding its other half in Mia Kirk.

EPILOGUE

ONE YEAR LATER: MIA

"Do you remember the first time you brought me to this cabin?" I lean back in the hot tub, my hair cascading over the edge, the cool winter air prickling against my exposed skin.

Aiden smirks, toying with the bikini top that's hanging over the edge of the hot tub. "I think we already reenacted that part of the trip."

My cheeks warm as I stare at him, still unable to believe that he gives me the same

butterflies he used to a year ago. There's something about the way he looks at me that sets my soul on fire.

"I'm glad the renovations are going to be finished on the house soon." I slide my fingers through the water, sinking lower as bubbles rise. "I thought we'd be settled in there by Christmas, but it doesn't look like that's going to be the case."

"It doesn't matter. I thought you were planning on spending Christmas here with Rosie and Ryder?"

I tilt my hair back, getting some of it wet and warm. "Yeah, yeah, I want to spend Christmas here. Rosie keeps sending pictures of the tree that they have in the lobby. It's gorgeous, and the presents waiting under it look too beautiful to unwrap."

The corner of his mouth tips up into that boyish smirk I love. "I have something you can unwrap."

I laugh and shake my head, sending a wave of water toward him. "You're going to have to give me a break. You haven't kept your hands off me since we got here this morning."

Aiden crosses the hot tub, coming to sit beside me with a little grin on his face. "Can you blame me?"

"I very much can blame you. We would be further along with the house by now if you hadn't insisted on making use of every room before they started working."

"Listen, the rules are that you gotta break in a new house. I didn't come up with them. Those are just the rules."

Honey pops up on the edge of the hot tub, her big paws hanging over the edge, her

toes getting wet. She gives out a bark, her tail thumping against the post beside her.

Aiden gives me a cocky look and arches an eyebrow. “See? The dog agrees with me.”

“The dog barely likes you.” As if to prove my point, Honey’s tongue drags over the side of my face.

“I’m still convinced you rub yourself in bacon to get her to like you that much. It’s really the only explanation that makes sense.”

Laughing, I get out of the hot tub and grab a towel, wrapping it around my naked body and padding into the cabin. Aiden follows behind me, catching me around the waist and pulling me into his embrace. He kisses my temple, and I melt back into him.

“I love you,” he says, his tone husky. “And I’m so happy we decided to stay in Colorado.”

“So am I. Something about it feels like home.”

He nods and motions to the bedroom. “Go get dried and dressed, and then we’re going out on our hike. I have a surprise for you.”

Our hike takes us along the path my mom used to hike, though this time it’s easier going. There’s no storm coming out of nowhere, and I don’t have to huddle in a sleeping bag to stay warm.

After reaching the summit of that hike, Aiden leads the way down another trail that descends partway down the mountain before curving back up.

The stars are shining brightly overhead as we finish making our way up to the little

shack where we had snacks that one day a year ago. My mother's name is still carved into the side, my name beside it, and Aiden adds his beneath.

My breath comes out in short little bursts, white puffy clouds appearing in front of me. I turn to face him, tears gathering in my eyes. "I think she'd be proud of us."

"I think she would be too." His hand slips into his pocket, and he pulls out a little box before he gets down on one knee in front of me.

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My hand flies to my mouth, covering it as he flicks open the box and shows off a gorgeous oval ring with a gold band. “Aiden, what are you doing?”

“Mia Kirk, it was a year ago today that I knew you were going to change my life forever. You saw me in a way that nobody else did, and I like to think that I got to see you that day too. I may have been an idiot, but I’ve only gotten smarter with time.” He stumbles over his words a little, laughing as Honey throws herself down into the snow and starts rolling around.

I point to Honey, happy tears shining in my eyes. “Is that part of the proposal?”

“Wasn’t supposed to be, but I guess it is now.” He gives me a broad smile and shakes his head. “I love you, Mia. The love I have for you only continues to grow, and I want to keep it growing for the rest of our lives. Will you marry me?”

“Yes!”

I grin and pull off my glove, holding out my shaking hand. He slips the ring onto my finger before standing and kissing me. When he looks at me, my heart pounds in my chest, but it’s a steady sort of pounding. The one that tells me I’m right where I need to be.

As I push onto my toes and kiss him again, I get lost in the moment. His tongue tangles with mine, and we kiss each other until we can’t breathe.

“I love you too.” I trace my fingers along his jaw as we separate. “It’s hard to believe that this is where we ended up after the way we started.”

Aiden keeps his arms looped around my waist, kissing my temple. “I just needed to get out of my own way first.”

“And look at us now that you have.” I glance at the glittering ring on my finger. “A house and a wedding.”

“And a bunch of friends to celebrate with.”

I nod, already thinking about asking Rosie and June to be my bridesmaids. We’ve kept in close contact over the last year, and I couldn’t think of getting married without them there.

Aiden kisses me again, holding me tighter. “What do you think about going down to the resort for dinner and sharing the good news with everyone?”

“Rosie invited us to dinner at the mess hall with the others tonight.” I take him by the hand, already leading the way back down the mountain. “So, how does the start of forever feel?”

He smirks and looks down at me as Honey goes racing by us. “It feels like everything I’ve ever wanted.”

And as we hike back down together, I think he’s right.

I came to Aspen looking to find myself and a sense of family. I was chasing ghosts, and instead, I found a new life. A better life.

Aiden is everything I didn’t know I wanted or needed, and he came along at a time in my life when I was entirely lost.

We’re going to get to spend the rest of our lives finding each other, and there’s something so exciting about that.

He's the reason I believe in soulmates.

The End