



The Love Hoax

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Category: Romance

Description: How did I end up playing the fake fiancé to a woman I just met? Well, it all started with a trip. A guilt trip.

My family is wacky. And way too involved in my love life. So, when my sister demands I bring my fiancée to her wedding, there's only one problem . . . she doesn't exist.

Who better to play the role of my future bride than the woman who nearly kicked my bucket?

Of course, it doesn't hurt that Evie is gorgeous, accomplished, and funny.

The plan? We'll learn everything we can about each other, then 'break things off' a few weeks after the wedding.

Except . . .

The line between reality and make-believe is getting blurrier.

I can't stop thinking about Evie. Actually, I can think of little else.

Her laughter is contagious. Our fake kisses feel real.

Maybe if we keep practicing—a lot—we'll pull this whole love thing off.

For real.

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Chapter One

Evie

Isit crossed-legged in bed, my laptop propped up in front of me. Another night of binge-watching nineties sitcoms. I wait for my guilty conscience to perk up, relieved when it doesn't. I'm allowed a few innocent pleasures.

Glancing at the time displayed on my computer, I note it's already past midnight. With a sigh, I push the laptop aside to the empty side of the bed. That space, unoccupied for years, has become a dumping ground for when I'm too lazy to put things away properly.

I reach for my daily planner, dig a pen from my hair bun and draw a large 'x' over yesterday's date. Only three more days until the big 5-0.

I get out of bed and plod slowly to the kitchen, the porcelain tile cold against my bare feet. I find a clean wine glass, filling it from the half-empty bottle and swallow a large gulp of the cheap Merlot, the liquid sliding like silk down my throat.

"What have I got to show for half a century on this planet?" I mutter to myself, quickly following it up with a mental head slap.

Daniel and Jeffrey are my two gems. Everyone tells me I've done a terrific job with the boys, and I have to agree. Eleven months apart, they're Irish twins and thick as thieves when they're together. Whether their closeness resulted from their parents' divorce or preceded it doesn't matter. Chicken or egg. Their relationship had helped

them through the toughest time of their lives.

Now they're grown. A few months ago, Daniel graduated college. Set with a decent position at a Manhattan accounting firm, he's seeing someone, enjoying the freedom that comes with making money and having no major expenses. Jeffrey has two semesters left and is spending them studying abroad. It's still too early in Rome to call him.

Their dad has been a less than stable figure in their lives, jumping from one job to the next, frequently a year or two of no steady income in the interim. I've lost count of the times he's moved, and I assume it's due to evictions.

I down the rest of the wine, unable to shake the feeling of unease. Like a galaxy filled with stars and I'm fixated on the singular black hole. I hope the plan to celebrate my milestone birthday with Caroline is the right decision. I'm excited and nervous for the trip out west with my BFF. The two of us have been hitting the gym for months, chatting on the Stairmaster, revving up for the hikes in Yosemite.

I've known Caroline and my three other gal pals, Barbie, Sam, and Monique for years, some for decades. We've been there for each other through weddings, babies, divorces and death.

Barbie started the Fabulous Fifty club the day she hit the half-century mark last June and the rest of us were inducted early. Granted, I recruited Caroline who until then barely knew the others. She finally joined, kicking and screaming, swearing us all to secrecy. No one can know how old she is, except for the four of us and her life coach. She wanted to rename the club, DesperateHousewives of the Upper East Side, but all of us are single. We meet every month, more or less, depending on our schedules.

I rinse out the glass and go back to my room, studying myself in the full-length mirror, trying my best to see myself objectively. My wavy brown hair reaches my

shoulders. Golden highlights cover up the encroaching grays. My arms and legs still have muscle. After months of Pilates, my stomach looks firm and as flat as it will ever be. Other body parts have begun to turn south, but for a woman knee-deep in middle age, I don't look too bad. As a matter of fact, I've been confused with being Daniel's wife on more than one occasion. Whether that's due to my son's thick beard and mature manner or my youthful one is debatable, but the misconception does stroke my ego.

I slip into my short-sleeved nightie for what may be the last time this season. October in New York can be nippy, or warm and comfortable like today. But it's the weather in Yosemite that's on my mind, where it will be perfect for long days of hiking.

I put on my reading glasses and grab the National Parks travel guide I picked up at the bookstore on my way home from work, thumbing through breathtaking photos of where I'll soon be visiting.

Ten minutes later, I'm nodding off, the book slipping from my fingers, images of mountain peaks floating through my mind.

Chapter Two

Evie

“O

ne week only, right?” Bill the Bull asks.

It's the moniker everyone in the office uses for Stilton and Everett's newly minted managing partner. With his tough demeanor and slicked-back hair, if Bill had not become the head of a thriving mid-size New York law firm, he would be an enforcer for the Mob.

“Right,” I say, feeling my agitation build. I force it down. I haven’t taken a vacation in two years, and my boss is giving me a hard time. “It’s my birthday.”

Bill doesn’t seem to hear me. He’s staring at his screen. “I don’t understand why now. It’s crunch time with the two new accounts.”

It’s always crunch time. “Like I said, my birthday. I’m turning fifty. It’s not like I can change the date.”

Bill harrumphs. “Fine,” he says like a petulant child. “I’ll pass the Anderson account to Julie who will not be pleased. The other one will have to wait. Julie doesn’t have the brains to handle that one.”

Ugh.

“You can just stay longer hours when you get back.”

I know the conversation is over when he taps his earbud, twirls his office chair away from me, and begins speaking to someone on the other end.

I walk out quietly and go to my office, half the size of Bill’s despite being at the law firm three years longer.

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It has nothing to do with gender inequality and everything to do with Bill being married to the granddaughter of the firm's founder. He's skyrocketed to the top while knowing dangerously little about the intricacies of negligence law. I've saved his slimy behind on more than one occasion.

Nepotism lives on.

With rumors of his father-in-law's impending retirement, Bill is also a notorious kiss-up, frequently cutting ethical corners, something I have never been able to do.

Doing the right thing even when it bucks the system has held me back in more ways than I care to ponder. Maybe even contributed to the demise of my marriage.

Holy matrimony, my derrière. There was nothing holy about how Marco treated our marriage.

Marco grew up in Italy, in a traditional family where the man ruled the household. When he migrated to the States, he had trouble shedding the long-held misogyny. He didn't take well to sharing the throne. When the fiery attraction between us eventually fizzled—or more like, exploded—so did our marriage. By then, I'd birthed two babies.

I force thoughts of Marco away, take a seat behind my cherry wood desk and text both of my sons, reminding them of my upcoming trip to California. Daniel, my eldest, responds immediately with a thumbs up. I know I'll be lucky to hear back from Jeffrey. He has inherited my independent—and impulsive—streak. I hope the last-minute plans he made with his father come to fruition. My ex isn't known for

reliability. When Daniel started high school, Marco moved back to Rome. The worst possible time.

I'm about to dig into my work when a text comes in from Roger.

Yikes.

I've gone out twice with the restaurateur, and he's called me seventeen times since. We met when Caroline and I discovered Le Marais, the best restaurant in New York City, opened a few blocks from my office. Turns out Roger owns the place.

A bit on the short side, with an amiable disposition, Roger has magical abilities in the kitchen. But fair or not, I know what a passionate relationship is like, and while Roger is nice, he's vanilla. I need jalapeño.

Not to mention that I'm lousy at the dating thing. I've been out of the pool too long. My fingers and toes have shriveled.

My 'thanks, but I'm busy' responses have had the opposite effect from what I intended, turning Roger into a borderline stalker. Problem is I don't want to alienate him and get blacklisted from his heavenly restaurant.

I shoot out another polite text, hoping he'll finally get the message. I put the phone away and get to work.

Chapter Three

Evie

I hook my purse onto the back of the chair and peruse the menu. I would have loved to meet the ladies at Le Marais, but Roger did not get the message, leaving me no choice

but to break up with him. If that's even the term when you've met someone only twice. Still, my actions come at a steep price. I have essentially banned myself from the best restaurant in New York City.

Barbie, Sam, and Monique were already here when I arrived, each pausing the furious phone tapping to give me a hug and birthday wishes. Last to arrive, Caroline walks inside looking fit and exhausted. I stand, giving my friend a kiss on each cheek.

The habit started out as a joke fifteen odd years ago and since then has become a natural greeting. Of the five of us, Caroline and I are the closest.

The other three women offer a friendly wave. They are still adjusting to Caroline, the newest member of the club. It may take a while longer.

Caroline removes her dark sunglasses and settles into the chair across from me, taking in the bistro's hip décor as if she's landed on a new planet. She runs a manicured hand over her perfect blonde coif. Her plastic surgeon did an outstanding job with her eye lift.

"Hmm, interesting," Caroline says, her gaze settling on the bun-and-beard-wearing guy dressed in a silk vest tending the well-stocked bar. "What are we getting, other than wine, of course?"

"How about strawberry mojitos?" Barbie suggests.

We all cheerfully murmur our agreement.

Barbie is gorgeous and looks exactly like her namesake, only the Japanese version. Glossy, stick-straight ebony hair and the body of a woman half her age, she built her company from scratch, claiming to never have the time to meet someone.

When a server comes over, Barbie orders the cocktails and Caroline adds, “I’ll have the chicken salad and my friend will have the salmon tartar.”

I take this in stride. Caroline is the only person on the planet allowed to order for me. She is the biggest and best foodie this side of the Mississippi.

“Did you confirm the hotel reservation?” I ask.

“Yep. All set. So is the car.”

Originally, all five of us were planning to go to Yosemite together but then the ladies began dropping like flies. Prior commitments, work, kids’ schedules. Which is honestly fine. I love all these ladies but they’re not exactly the hiking types.

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The last woman standing is Caroline who refuses to allow me to be involved in the planning—or the paying—for the birthday trip. We could be staying in a yurt or glamping for all I know.

Who am I kidding?

Knowing Caroline, she booked a luxury suite in the middle of Yosemite. If such a thing exists. Which it does not.

If you look up ‘high maintenance’ online, you’ll find Caroline’s duck face, her plumped lips pouting into the camera. To be fair, I let her talk me into using the latest eyelash serum and I’m thrilled with the results.

Maybe she booked a tricked-out RV or a five-cabin yacht.

I laugh to myself. If anyone could reserve a yacht in a national park, it’s Caroline.

“What’s so funny?” Caroline asks, her eyes still frozen on the bartender.

“Nothing. Just amusing myself.”

Caroline’s attention turns to me. She studies me like I’m a specimen squirming around in a Petri dish. “So that’s what old people do.”

“What?”

“Laugh at jokes only they can hear.”

Monique and Sam chuckle at that, Sam covering her mouth daintily, instantly apologizing. How the sweet woman ended up living in New York, surviving the dog-eat-dog environment, is a miracle. A soft-spoken Midwesterner who moved to the Big Apple to support her husband's dreams, she's the quintessential plain Jane.

Only Sam is not plain. She's a very pretty woman who chooses to hide behind frumpy clothes and unstyled hair. The only time I saw her with makeup was at her ex-mother-in-law's funeral. She wanted to dress up for the occasion. She had hated the woman who in Sam's words, "Drove my husband away."

"You're five months younger than I am," I protest to Caroline.

"That's like one hundred and fifty days. Makes all the difference."

I roll my eyes but am entertained as usual. Caroline is the absolute best. All these ladies are.

"I rented a Porsche convertible," Caroline says, casually.

"Oh?" Monique says, wistfully.

Mo is the most elegant one in the club. Tall, sexy, discreet, and second generation French, she dresses to kill. Right now she was wearing a gorgeous Versace ensemble. If I heard she was a spy for the French Foreign Legion, I'd believe it.

"It's her fiftieth. Evie needs to harken in the new decade in style."

"I couldn't agree more," Mo says. I'm glad they're on the same page. There's a not-so-subtle competition between these two women I haven't had the energy to analyze.

The server comes by with our food and five fruit-adorned cocktails.

I take a long pull from the striped straw. Delish. “We’re going hiking, not to Rodeo Drive. Maybe a Jeep would be a better choice.”

Mo looks like she sucked on a lemon and Caroline scrunches her nose at the notion. “I’ll see if I can switch it to a Range Rover or Porsche SUV.”

As great as Caroline is with food, she is awful with money. Her much older, now dead husband left her with a bundle. More money than she could ever spend in two lifetimes.

When the club suggested I pick the place I’d want most to go for my birthday, she did her best to cover up her disappointment when I chose Yosemite National Park for a hiking trip. Caroline is more the Bergdorf’s and Van Cleef’s high-heeled type. The polar opposite to my outdoorsy personality. A pair of broken-in Timberlands would make me far happier than a new pair of seven-thousand-dollar snake-skin Manolo pumps. Like Caroline’s.

Yes, seven thousand.

“What about skiing in the Andes or a beach trip to St. Barts?” Caroline had pressed when I waxed poetic about Half Dome and El Capitan, two of Yosemite’s most challenging hikes.

“Nah, I’d rather show the universe I’m still active.”

Hiking the national parks has always been my favorite activity. Even if I have the rare occasion to do so. At least not since having kids, or a demanding job.

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“Fine. It will be fun!” Caroline said with a bit too much optimism.

I appreciated the attempt at excitement. Truth is, if I had another close friend who loved hiking, I’d still go with Caroline. She is my sister from another mister.

My phone buzzes, scooching across the tabletop. Caroline glances at the screen. “Roger is still calling? I thought you dumped him.”

“I didn’tdumphim. Dumping only fits if you’ve gone out on more than three dates and we have not.”

Sam says, “Debatable.”

Barbie purses her lips. “Evie’s right. Two is not enough to call it dumping.”

We all turn to Mo for the tie breaker. She shrugs. “I’m the last one to give dating input.”

She’s not wrong. Actually, the five of us are the walking wounded when it comes to men.

Clearly though, Roger and I left the last communication with vastly different take-aways.

“He gets points for perseverance, though,” Mo adds.

“That, he does.”

“So, will you give him another chance?”

I shake my head. “He’s nice but nice isn’t enough at this stage in my life.”

“You mean old age?” Caroline interjects.

“Yes. And besides, I have no time to date him or anyone else. We’re going out of town and then I’ll be overloaded at work.”

Caroline frowns. “Have you given any thought to leaving that firm with the jerk of a boss? You could start your own practice.”

The wild ideas of a woman with no money worries. “It’s too late in my career for that. I make a good living where I am and get to see you regularly after work.”

“That was when we were still allowed inside Le Marais.”

“This place is nearly as close to my office. We can move our club meet-ups to here.”

Sam says, “This place is actually better for me.” She doesn’t say why but we all know. Le Marais is pricey and while we’d be happy to help her, the risk of offending prevents us from doing so.

Caroline eyes the bartender, seeming to consider my suggestion. “I see your point. But still, life shouldn’t revolve around work.”

“Says the trophy wife set for life.”

“I work hard. I just clocked three miles walking from Park Avenue.”

We all laugh, Caroline joining in.

We eat and chat until I need to head home to pack. I pull out my credit card, happy to pay for my share of the bill. The others insist this is their contribution to my birthday celebration. After a bit of back and forth, I give in. “Thanks, ladies. This is going to be the best birthday ever.”

Everyone hugs, wishing me and Caroline a great time. Once Mo, Barbie and Sam leave, Caroline says, “I’ll have my driver pick you up at eight and we’ll head to LaGuardia.”

I feel a prickle of excitement. My epic birthday trip is about to begin!

Chapter Four

Adam

I unhook the carabiner from my harness and wind up the rope. The rappel down the rocky mountainside was exhilarating and somewhat easier than expected after the long climb up. But I’ve been on an adrenaline rush since sunrise and it’s only a matter of time until I’ll need to crash. The sun is beginning its descent. If I leave now, I’ll be back home by nightfall.

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I feel nearly ready to try Half Dome. I've been training for weeks for one of Yosemite National Park's toughest challenges and I can't wait. At thirty-seven, I feel stronger than I have in years.

Sweaty and bleeding on my left knee, I'm halfway to my car when my phone buzzes with a text from my sister.

Bring Ronna or don't come.

Steph doesn't know the meaning of subtle. Her wedding is five days away and she has morphed into the quintessential Bridezilla.

Good luck, Brad, I muse.

My soon-to-be brother-in-law has proven his saint-like patience with Steph countless times. He deserves a medal as far as I'm concerned.

I give only a thumbs up to Steph's text, knowing it will annoy her to no end.

I toss my gear in the back seat of my Honda SUV and reach for the first aid kit. I'm sitting behind the wheel when the phone rings. If I could stay off the grid for the next five days, I'd be just fine with it.

"Hey, Mom."

"Hi, honey. Just checking up on you. How's the hiking?"

Mom is not great at hiding her agendas.

“Amazing.”

“You being careful?”

“Always,” I say, dabbing a tissue to my bloody knee.

I wait for my mother to tell me the true reason for her call. When she doesn’t, I say, “Out with it, Mom.”

“Steph’s getting nervous.”

“Steph’s always nervous.”

“She said she can’t get married without first meeting your fiancée.”

Now I wait for the clincher.

Mom doesn’t disappoint. “Quite frankly, I think she’s right. I mean, we are beyond thrilled that you found The One, but it is strange we haven’t met her yet.”

I think back to the perfect storm a few weeks ago. During a somewhat inebriated Vegas moment I am not especially proud of, I answered a call from my mother and sister. It turned out to be the phone version of an intervention.

Both women were on the phone, strongly suggesting I sign up to yet another dating site. Steph had met Brad on CupidsBow.com, and now it was my turn to settle down. Actually, they have been riding me for years about getting married and making grandkids. “You’re not going to want to run after a toddler when your pension kicks in,” my mother had helpfully pointed out.

Without thinking, I said I met someone. Ronna. The name I saw on the poker dealer's name tag. "Someone special," I said, oblivious to the inevitable consequences.

At the moment, it seemed the only way to get them to back off. When they asked how serious I was about her, I blurted it out. "I popped the question."

Those four words sparked a firestorm of questions and unfettered joy. Where is she from? How did we meet? When is the wedding? Why had I not said anything?

I told them we still had to figure it all out and that she lives on the East Coast and much of our courting had been virtual. That I'd kept it close to the vest in case things didn't go the distance. Something they fully bought into. At least back then.

Mom is not letting up. A gushy bloody knee would be better than this.

"I know you said she travels a lot but we never even had a chance to speak to Ronna on the phone. Steph thinks she's imaginary. Like when you were little. Remember Archie?"

Great. She's bringing my imaginary buddy into the mix.

Archie, my best friend. And alligator. Who no one else could see.

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“Dad and I told her she’s being ridiculous.”

I stare out the window at the mountains. My happy place. “I didn’t make it up, Mom. She’s just crazy busy.”

“Okay, just make sure you bring her to the wedding. If you don’t, Steph won’t get over it.”

Nor will you, I think.

“Okay, Mom. I’ll make it happen,” I say. “I promise.”

When will I learn to keep the words inside my head?

“Great! See you in a couple of weeks!”

I hang up, fully aware I have just stepped off a very dangerous cliff.

Chapter Five

Evie

I stand under the safety of the awning outside my building on Sixty-Fifth and Amsterdam, scanning the Manhattan traffic as heavy raindrops bounce off the pavement. I rub my hands together for warmth, my wheeled Samsonite perched beside me. A yellow cab speeds past, splashing puddles onto the sidewalk, missing me by inches. Fall has arrived with gusto.

Where is she?

Caroline is not known for her punctuality, but tardiness is out of character for Paul, her punctilious driver.

Caroline relies on him for every detail. Since her husband Bernard's passing, Paul has taken on a variety of roles. Driver, personal shopper, travel agent, and everything in between.

I try calling Caroline once more. Still no answer.

If we don't leave in the next few minutes, we will miss our flight and have to rebook. Which would be a shame. I planned a full first day. We'll hit the ground running. Get the car, head for the park, and take our first hike, an easy three-miler around Mirror Lake.

I feel an excitement I haven't experienced in years. The great outdoors has always called to me. Now it's shouting. Kayaking on crystalline lakes, biking the mountain passes. But hiking out West is my favorite of all.

I open the Uber app. I will hurry to Caroline's place, see what the hold-up is. The Dakota is only a few blocks north. The famed building has housed some of the most prestigious and famous New Yorkers. John Lennon, Judy Garland, Leonard Bernstein. Now Caroline Page.

I'm about to click Request when the call comes. Thank heavens!

"Where are you?" I say, unable to keep the frustration at bay.

I hear some voices in the background. "Is there some issue with Paul? If so, we could just take a cab like normal people."

“No, he’s here.”

I glance at my watch, irritated at my friend’s carelessness. Maybe Caroline’s subconscious is sabotaging our trip. She doesn’t want to spend a week with a backpack weighing her down while she eats protein bars and pees in the woods. “There’s a chance we can still make it.”

“I can’t come.”

“What? Why not?”

“I’m in the emergency room,” Caroline sobs.

Caroline never sobs.

Fear forces away my irritation. “Oh my gosh, what happened?”

“I got up early to hit the gym one last time. Paul came to get me and as I was rushing to the car, I wiped out on the sidewalk.”

“Oh no!”

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“The doctor thinks I broke my leg. I’m so sorry!”

“Sorry? Don’t be sorry. I’ll be right there. Which hospital?”

“No!” Caroline’s sob-to-shout speed is admirable.

“What are you talking about?” I try not to shout back. “I’ll order an Uber right now.”

Caroline’s voice turns firm. “You are getting on that plane, Evie.”

“No chance.”

“I’m not kidding. This is the most adventurous thing you’ve done in years. You are not going to delay it because of me. It’s all paid for and I can’t cancel any of it. And even if I could, I wouldn’t.”

“I can’t just leave you here in the hospital while I’m traipsing through Yosemite. And what makes you think I want to go there alone?” I argue.

“I know you, and you will love it whether I’m with you or not. Paul is here with me so you don’t have to worry.”

Of course, I’ll worry. Caroline has no family. Unless you count Bernard’s children who detest their stepmother, certain she only married their father for his money.

“We’ll go another time once you’ve recuperated. Which hospital?” I ask again.

“If you show up here I will never forgive you. And even if I do forgive you, I won’t talk to you for the next six months. That means no girly workouts, tables at the best restaurants . . . or mojitos.”

I swallow hard. “No mojitos?”

“That’s right . . . Please.” Caroline’s voice breaks. “Please get on the plane.”

I badly want to argue further. But I know it’s no use. Somberly, I ask, “How can I enjoy my trip knowing my best friend is laid up?”

“Because you will know that I’ll be thrilled that you are having the time of your life. Send me lots of photos.”

There seems to be nothing left for me to say.

“All the reservation info is in the email I sent you last night,” Caroline offers.

A tear streaks down my cheek. “Thank you, sweetie. Feel better. I’m going to call you every day, and you better pick up.”

“You got it. Go break a leg,” Caroline quips.

I laugh, sadly, and click off.

Chapter Six

Evie

Iboard the plane with seconds to spare, the gate attendant smiling nervously as I catch my breath. “You made it just in time.”

I show my boarding pass to the flight attendant who leads me past the curtain into first class and lifts my bag into the overhead compartment.

I let out a lungful of air and plop down onto the wide leather seat with tons of legroom, silently blessing Caroline. A little—or a lot—of pampering is more than welcome. My morning has been a disaster.

Across the aisle sits a teenager who doesn't acknowledge my presence.

Kids today.

I can hear hard rock booming from his earbuds, finding myself more concerned that the child will be deaf by age thirty than annoyed at having to sit on a five-hour flight with Metallica as background noise.

That's what motherhood does.

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Seeing the flight attendant's back to me, I venture a quick text to Caroline, sending heart and kiss emojis. The guilt is nearly paralyzing. I am sitting next to Caroline's empty seat.

I pull my e-reader from my bag and try to get absorbed in the latest thriller I downloaded. I can't concentrate. I wave over a flight attendant and ask for a double vodka and orange juice, earning a fleeting brow lift in return. After all, it is only 9:30 in the morning.

Minutes later, I drain half my drink and close my eyes.

The next thing I know, we are landing in Reno.

I pull my carryon behind me. The vibe in the airport is nothing like that of LaGuardia. It is much more relaxed. If you don't account for the slot machines in the terminal.

Who needs to gamble on their way to baggage claim?

I look out the vast windows at the surrounding mountains, the tallest of which are already snowcapped. I am excited for the days ahead despite being alone. Since the boys have flown the coop, I've adjusted to more solo time. At first, it was hard coming home to a quiet apartment but in time I learned to value my space and freedom.

Still, good company always makes trips like these better. Maybe I'll make friends out on the trails.

I extract my bag from the baggage carousel and make my way outside to the rental car shuttle.

Twenty minutes later, I am seated behind the wheel of a shiny black Porsche Cayenne with all the bells and whistles that looks like it just rolled off the showroom floor. Chrome grills, heated seats and steering wheel, fancy nav system. The vehicle could probably drive to the top of El Capitan, I muse.

It's afternoon in New York but I decide against calling Caroline in case she's resting. Instead, I text Paul. I had forgotten I had his contact information until moments ago.

He responds immediately.

Caroline is resting comfortably. She will need surgery to repair a broken bone in her right leg. The doctor expects her to be off her feet for the next several weeks while she has physical therapy. She asked me to tell you not to worry. She has a lot of drugs in her system and she's high as a kite.

I frown in concern, second-guessing my decision to leave New York.

Too late now.

I fire up the ignition, the engine roaring to life. This car is a beast.

I pull out onto the road, taking in the desert, the mountains, the electricity in the air. I have a couple of hours ahead of me until arriving in Yosemite Village. On the highway, I spot the speed limit. 80 mph.

I hit the accelerator and head south.

Chapter Seven

Adam

I wash up and wipe the condensation off the mirror, catching my reflection and noting several scrapes on my taut muscles. I dab on antibiotic cream and cover them with bandages. My chest and shoulders are broader, my arms thicker after back-to-back climbs. I do a chest wiggle. The ladies wouldn't be able to contain themselves.

Yeah, right.

The only available women I have seen at Yosemite Sam's are the seventy-year-old twins who volunteer for the park service. The pickings are slim out here in the wild.

But hope springs eternal and I have an unexpected second wind. Skipping the actual shaving part, I pat on my father's aftershave, glad I swiped it during my last visit home.

I ruffle through my closet, making a mental note to call the cleaning service as I find a clean pair of jeans and a black t-shirt, donning them carefully as to not to jostle the bandages. My body aches but it's a good ache. From a day spent on the mountain, pushing myself to the limit. Now I need to decompress.

I've spent the last five years ignoring the judgmental comments of people asking how I can be outside all day climbing mountains rather than making a proper living.

Never mind that I spent a decade developing a tracking app that was acquired by a multi-billion-dollar company and used by every driver on the European continent. I am set for life. Financially, anyway.

I recall the jaw-dropping moment when the purchase fee came through. I decided right then and there that I wouldn't change. I look around at what I refer to as my 'cabin,' and laugh to myself.

Okay, at least I haven't changed, mentally.

The sprawling home set amid a copse of California black oak is nestled within one of Yosemite National Park's three private communities. It boasts soaring wood-beamed ceilings, state-of-the-art appliances, and a luxurious décor. Floor-to-ceiling windows offer a panoramic view of the surrounding mountains.

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I know I am blessed.

The one possession I've kept the same is my car. I still drive my ten-year-old Honda and will until it dies on me. It's a reminder of how quickly life can change. It keeps me humble.

I am still a kid from Denver, still an inner geek and adventure seeker. The two character traits are rarely found in the same man but I've never been typical.

As far as my mother and sister are concerned the only thing left for me to conquer is a meaningful relationship.

Where once their comments were veiled as innocent inquiries, in recent years they have become more blatant.

You're too picky. Will anyone ever be good enough? You've become too big for your britches.

What the heck are britches, anyway?

They have me pegged all wrong. I want a partner, someone to travel with, to hike the world with, to grow old with. I just haven't found her yet. In all fairness, I spent many years either holed up in a room with a computer surrounded by tech-obsessed nerds or alone on a rocky mountain. It doesn't make for meeting compatible women.

I should feel guilty for lying to my family about being engaged but it's the first reprieve I've had in years. Sadly, my goose is now cooked, the chickens about to

come home to roost.

The fowl metaphors remind me that I am famished.

I grab my brown leather jacket and head out. Zane will be waiting for me at the billiards table in the back of Yosemite Sam's. I pat my jeans pocket, glad I have some cash. If history is any indication, I will be paying my buddy a bundle by night's end.

Chapter Eight

Evie

I take a deep breath of Yosemite's mountain air, allowing the bliss to fill me. The weather is a perfect sixty-seven degrees with bright blue skies dotted with puffy white clouds. My watch app tells me I've clocked three miles with minimal elevation. The low-impact hike around the lake is breathtaking, optimal for getting my week of solo treks off to a spectacular start.

I make my way to the parking lot, hop into the Porsche and check my messages.

Paul has sent me a photo of Caroline grinning, a black and red takeout box beside her. It's from Le Marais. Who knew they delivered to hospitals? The photo brings a smile to my face.

She'll be okay.

My stomach grumbles loudly. I'd intended to stop for something to eat on the way to the park but didn't want to miss the daylight. Now I am starving. I search on my phone for a place to grab a bite between the park and the hotel and find one option dab smack between the two. I will be there in twenty-five minutes.

The place sounds benign enough.

I hitStarton the navigation and head straight for Yosemite Sam's.

Chapter Nine

Adam

Zane is sitting in the back of Yosemite Sam's, drumming his fingers toHighway to Heaven, playing over the ceiling speakers, when I find him.

"Hey, buddy. Glad to see you're still in one piece," he says as I fist-bump him.

"You too, man."

The bar-and-grill is half-filled, mostly with regulars. The tourists typically seek out the familiar chains closer to downtown Merced.

Zane, a dark-skinned He-Man with pulled-back dreadlocks, is arguably the best climber in Yosemite. He has conquered Half Dome and El Capitan several times as well as many of the most challenging climbs in the West.

A matronly waitress with an infectious smile comes over with two bottles of local lager. "Your usual, gentlemen. I'll have the burgers out in a jiffy."

"Thanks, Dorothy," I say. "Please opena tab for me."

"Sure thing."

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Zane waits for Dorothy to leave. “Ready for the big day?” he asks me.

Zane is the one person who knows about my whopper of a lie.

“Not even close,” I reply, taking a long draw from my beer.

Zane selects a cue from the wall, chalking it. “What are you going to do? If you show up to Steph’s wedding solo, you’re going to look a lot worse than that time you wiped out on the Angels Landing.”

I’ve worked hard to forget that hike. Zane and I had gone down to Zion National Park, set on breaking the record for reaching the top of the iconic rock formation. We would have made it, had it not been for a slippery trail. Thanks to Zane’s quick reflexes, I left with no more than a fractured wrist and a bruised ego. It could have been far worse.

“Pray for me,” I say, grabbing a cue, noting the table Zane selected has six pockets. Pool. “Thought we were playing billiards.”

“About time we mixed it up. You good with that?”

I shrug.

Zane says, “Twenty bucks says I beat you by three balls.”

“No chance.”

Zane sticks out his hand.

I take it and shake. I know how fiercely competitive Zane can be. Even if he has been practicing on the sly, I don't care. I'm happy to have a good buddy to hang with. Not to say I'm not competitive. Just not in Zane's cutthroat way.

I rack up the balls. "I'll break." I position my cue and take the shot. The red eleven ball falls into the far corner pocket. "Odds."

The two of us stop all chatter as we play, Zane winning by a landslide. I pull out my cash but Zane holds up a hand. "Let's eat, then double or nothing."

I know I can't beat Zane and it doesn't matter. The guy is so excited with each victory. And he needs the money.

"You're on!"

We take our seats and dig into the burgers and fries that Dorothy brought over to the table mid-game. Five minutes later, the food is devoured.

"Another beer?" I ask, licking a bit of ketchup off my bottom lip.

"Not until I cream you," Zane says.

I laugh. Zane looks past my shoulder. "Whoa. Cougar alert," he says in a loud whisper.

I see Zane's gaze shift up and down. Apparently, there's an older attractive woman right behind me. I grin. "You're salivating," I whisper back.

"Anyone playing?"

The female voice behind me is tinged with an East Coast bravado.

I turn around in my seat.

My eyes settle on a woman, her dark hair held up in a ponytail. She has cat green eyes under the longest lashes I've ever seen. She's exquisite.

Dressed in zippered hiking pants and a ribbed navy tank top that fits in all the right places, she's older than I am but by how much is hard to tell. Top-of-the-line, high-cut, scuffed Keens are on her feet. Her arms are toned but pale. Her enchanting eyes are smiling at me.

Okay, maybe not only at me. But the effect is the same. The cat's got my tongue.

Her brows are raised in question.

Before I can reply, Zane asks the woman, "Are those real?"

I nearly fall out of my chair. "Bro!"

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“Her lashes, you freak. They look like butterflies about to take flight.”

The woman laughs, lightly. I follow suit. She’s a good sport.

“Yes, they are real and they’re amazing.”

Zane looks confused but I pick up on the Seinfeld reference. “Good one.”

“Thanks.” She moves toward the table, looking around. “So, anyone here play?”

I say, “Yep, we just finished a game. Do you play?”

“A bit.”

Zane looks like a mountain lion ready to pounce. “Care for a friendly wager?”

The woman says, “Nah, I’ll lose my shirt.”

Zane is opening his mouth in response then shuts it at my fierce glare. “Then we’ll keep things simple. Thirty dollars on the table?”

She pulls out a fifty. “I don’t have change.”

Zane and I exchange a glance. He says, “I don’t either but the bar could help.”

The woman seems to consider something. “You know what? I’m on vacation. I’ll bet the whole fifty. Who’s my opponent?”

I feel bad for her. “I-”

Zane cuts in. “That would be me.” He stands up, pats me on the shoulder. “Grab us another round, buddy?”

“Right-o,” I say, and ask the woman, “Would you like a drink? It’s on me.”

“Sure, whatever the two of you are having. Thanks.”

I’m turning away, cringing at the massacre about to take place at Zane’s hands. Then I turn back. “That’s Zane. I’m Adam. What’s your name?”

She steps closer. She’s only a few inches shorter than my six feet. Her striking eyes meet mine. There’s a depth in them that holds my gaze.

She extends her hand. “I’m Evie Lawson. Nice to meet you.”

Chapter Ten

Evie

I take a sip of the lager. I’m not much of a beer drinker, but I want to meet new people and these two guys seem harmless enough.

Well, maybe not both of them.

The muscle man with the dreads speaks his mind, and then some. But the other guy, Adam, is a good fifteen years my junior. He’s a few inches taller than I am and sexy as all hell. He’s wearing a leather jacket over a black shirt, his hair just long enough to reach the collar. When I introduce myself, the musky scent of his aftershave makes me momentarily woozy. This one’s dangerous.

Zane stands on the opposite side of the pool table, cue in hand, seemingly chomping at the bit for me to take a shot. I position myself, leaning over, lining up my shot. I take it. And dunk three balls.

A loud hoot comes from the table. I turn to see Adam laughingdeliriously, several patrons turning to look our way, a few glancing at Zane whose face is beet red. I grin broadly.

“Way to go, Evie!” Adam shouts.

“Lucky shot,” I say, shrugging, secretly loving his cheerleading.

Zane grumbles. “You tricked me.”

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I shake my head, maneuvering around him to ready my next shot. “You made assumptions.”

“Touché,” Adam says.

Earlier, when I saw the two men sitting near the pool table, something pushed me to suggest a wager. That something was Zane. I know it wasn’t fair to lure him but I have a problem with the sexist moniker so why not let him think I’m just a clueless ‘cougar?’ It’s why I took the comment in stride, pretending not to hear it. Now he’ll pay.

Also, I’m turning fifty, divorced, and in dire need of a confidence boost.

When I scratch, Adam says, “Come on Zane, give it your best shot.”

Which he does. I’m impressed with his skill. Clearly, he takes the game seriously. But I’m better. I grew up with a pool table in my parents’ home in Connecticut. I still play regularly when I go to visit.

The game is over quickly.

“Double or nothing?” I ask.

Zane plops in the chair and hands me the money. “Nah.”

I pocket the cash. “If it’s any consolation, you’re the best opponent I’ve had in ages. Adam, you up?”

He holds up his hands. “Too rich for my blood.”

Zane rolls his eyes.

Adam gestures to an empty chair. “Wanna join us, Evie?”

I sit down, taking another sip of my beer. “I’m starving.”

Adam waves over the waitress who takes my order and smiles at me. “It’s not every day we see Zane beaten like that,” she says before moving onto the next table.

Zane bristles and heads to the men’s room.

Adam grins at me. “Don’t mind him. He’ll be back to himself by tomorrow. Are you visiting the area?”

I say, “I came out here for my birthday week. I planned to spend it in the mountains with a friend. Last-minute change.”

Dorothy turns. “Did I hear it’s your birthday?”

“Yep.”

Sixty seconds later, Dorothy places a slice of gooey chocolate cake in front of me. “On the house. Happy birthday.”

Zane is back at the table. “How old are you, anyway?”

Adam appears mortified with his friend’s abysmal social graces.

“Turning fifty,” I say, looking at my watch. “In three and a half hours.”

Adam says, “Fifty? You look amazing.”

I wonder what fifty is supposed to look like these days. I’ve seen photos of my grandmother at this age and she looked ancient. Thank heavens for Pilates and hair dye.

Zane says, “You’re only a few years younger than my mom.”

Seriously sore loser.

I smile and eat my cake, then stand. “Thanks for a fun time. I better head to the hotel. I have a big hike ahead of me in the morning.”

Adam asks, “Which one?”

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“Tomorrow I’ll tackle Cloud’s Rest.”

Adam brightens. “Wild. That’s where I’m heading.”

Zane cuts his eyes to Adam. “You are?”

“Yes, I am.”

I don’t miss the glare at Zane. I hold back a smile.

Zane stands, too. “I need to be up at six. Thanks for the grub, bro. Too bad I had to pass my winnings over to Evie or I’d pick up the tab.” He walks away.

“Better luck next time,” I call over my shoulder. To Adam, I say, “I better get going also.”

Adam stands, walking me to the exit, swinging the leather jacket over his shoulder. The shirt sticks to his abs, and his arm muscles look like their close to bursting. Are all the men in this town related to the Hulk?

He says, “You know, since we’re both heading to the park tomorrow, would you care for a ride?”

I feel an unexpected sensation. It sneaks up on me like a pouncing tiger.

Desire.

What is wrong with me? He's too young!

I clear my throat. "I'm leaving at daybreak. And I'm staying in the opposite direction from the park. And I don't actually know you."

Adam smiles. His teeth are perfect. "That's a lot of fands."

I open the door and return the smile. "Thanks, but I'll pass. I have my own wheels."

"No prob," he says. "Maybe I'll see you tomorrow in the park."

"Sure."

Seriously, how likely would that be in a park roughly the size of Rhode Island?

I watch him amble away, telling myself I made the right decision to decline his offer.

I know I shouldn't be surprised by the hotel. Caroline has expensive taste and the money to indulge it. But when I pull up to the reception and a white-gloved valet comes to take my bags, I find myself marveling.

The hotel, located in Merced, is the most luxurious I've ever stayed in. Unexpected, in a town close to a national park. Granted, I had to drive another twenty-five minutes from the bar, in the wrong direction. But it's worth it to have the claw foot tub with spectacular views, designer bath products, and a shower with spray that hits you from every angle.

I put on my flannel nightshirt, flick off the lights, and get under the covers, moaning at the feel of cool luxurious linens on my body.

Excited for the next day, I wait the few minutes until midnight. "Here's to another

half century on the planet!”

A half hour before dawn, I wake to the Beatles’ Good Day Sunshine blaring from my phone. Out the window, the mountains are still dark, their ridges visible beneath the moonlight.

Despite the temptation to remain under the cozy comforter, I sit up, itching to get out on the trail. First things first. It’s eight-thirty in New York. I ring up Caroline.

“Can’t talk. My doctor is here,” Caroline says, in a low voice and I pause a moment, picturing her in a dreary hospital room all alone. Caroline is not one to sit still. She likes to be out, at the gym, shopping, coffee clutches. But something in the tone of those few words takes me by surprise. If I’m not mistaken, Caroline is swooning. The doctor must be a looker.

I tell her I’ll call back and get out of bed, do fifty crunches, twenty push-ups and then ten minutes of an online yoga class before hitting the shower.

Thoughts of last night come to mind. I hope Zane is done licking his wounded ego.

As I lather up, the heavenly scent of argan oil fills the shower stall. A mental image of Adam pops into my head.

Adam is hot stuff. His thick mop of hair, curling at the edges. The way his shirt clung to his abs. Younger or not, the attraction is fierce. For me, anyway.

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Who am I kidding? No way Adam would be interested in a much older woman.

Maybe I should have agreed to ride with him to the park. What are the odds a man who cheered me on at the pool table, against his buddy, is a secret murderer?

Doesn't matter. It's too late. I have no way to reach him. And anyway, I'm not in the market for a man. Been there, done that.

I spray on tons of sunscreen and toss a bag of trail mix and two granola bars into my backpack. After filling up my water bottles, I grab my phone, sunglasses, and Columbia University ball cap and head out to the Porsche, pumped up for a day in Yosemite.

Chapter Eleven

Evie

The early morning clouds part the moment I park near the trailhead. I stopped for a short break on the drive from the hotel to fill up and buy two roast beef sandwiches at a Subway I found off the exit. Lunch and dinner.

I grab my backpack and all geared up, tap open my TrailsTrack app. It will keep me on the trail even when the Wi-Fi kicks off or the trail markers are hard to find. My smartwatch will log my steps, heart rate, and elevation.

Several other bleary-eyed hikers are starting out as well, some with dogs on a leash.

A young couple with a Shepherd mix greets me. The man is wearing a Cincinnati Bengals t-shirt.

“Hi there,” he says. “I’m Troy. This is my girlfriend, Sarah. Looks like we’re not the only early risers.”

“I’m Evie. Nice to meet you.”

“You also staying on the campgrounds?”

“Nope, I just drove an hour from my hotel.” I know I sound like a spoiled city girl. Can’t be helped. That’s exactly what I am. But with my heart in the mountains.

The dog sniffs the ground, fascinated by whatever scent he’s picking up.

“Far from home?” Troy asks me.

“Is it that obvious?”

He points to my head.

“Oh. Well, I went to Columbia Law a lifetime ago.” Probably his lifetime. “But I do still live in New York.”

“Never been,” Sarah says. She’s in her early twenties and soft around the middle. “We hope to get there someday. Actually, this is our first time out of Ohio.”

I find it remarkable when other Americans rarely leave their home states. The country is so diverse and beautiful. I know it’s a big city—possibly, entitled—mindset, but it’s how I think. “New York is great but this is prettier,” I say, gesturing to the breathtaking scenery, aware of the understatement. To our right is a wide lake

surrounded by a carpet of yellow wildflowers. Ahead of us, a mountain of evergreens, its trail to the top yet to be conquered.

“You got that right.”

Sarah, Troy, and I turn to see who’s joining the conversation.

He’s head-to-toe in pricey Gore-Tex, dark wraparound sunglasses are perched atop his shaggy hair.

I feel a flutter in my belly. “Hi, Adam.”

“Good morning, y’all,” Adam says, brightly, as if he’d slept for a solid eight hours which I know he has not.

The young couple smiles as Adam lets the pup sniff his hand, gaining canine approval. Adam gives the dog a thorough scratch behind the ears. “Who’s a good doggie?” he coos, checking the collar tag. “Percy, aren’t you a sweetie?”

Percy licks Adam’s hand, then sprawls, legs splayed, asking for a belly rub. Adam obliges.

“I’m surprised to see you,” I say, interrupting the love fest.

“Why? I said I was taking this trail today.”

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I'm flummoxed. Was that his real plan or did Adam come to find me?

Irrelevant. I'm not in his dating pool and he's not in mine. Truth is I have no pool, precisely how I like it.

Sarah says, "Maybe we'll see you two later. Have fun." The dog seems to understand and pulls her toward the trail, Troy waving goodbye.

I watch as Adam begins stretching, arms above his head, then bending at the waist, finally lifting and pulling each leg behind him until they touch his tight, adorable butt. "Ready?" he asks.

I look away, feeling the flush in my cheeks. "What do you mean?"

One corner of Adam's mouth lifts in amusement. "The hike. Are you ready to start?"

"Are you suggesting we do this together?"

"Am I being too presumptuous?"

I can't help but laugh. "If we keep asking each other questions rather than offering answers, we will never leave the parking lot."

Adam laughs along. "You have a point. Let me clarify. I'd prefer to experience this trail with another person. It will take most of the day and doing it with someone else will be a lot more fun than alone. Given that we're both set on conquering this trail, why not do it together?"

He sounds perfectly logical. And it doesn't sound like a come-on. I can't think of a good enough reason to refuse. Actually, the thought of spending the day with Adam is growing on me.

"I'm game if you are," I say, hoping I won't regret it.

Adam grins broadly. "Awesome! Come on. Let's see which one of us is tougher when there's no pool table involved."

"No question on that one," I say, and bound right past him.

Chapter Twelve

Adam

Two hours and two liters of water later, I'm down to shorts and an Under Armour t-shirt. I'm impressed with my hiking partner. She may be a big city woman but she's built for the mountain. Tight muscles glistening with a light sheen of sweat, she's keeping up with me.

Rising before dawn was a good move, even if it required a blaring alarm and a Red Bull. My heart is racing fast, and it isn't from exertion or the energy drink. Evie is doing it for me.

When I first saw her at Yosemite Sam's, my reaction was immediate. She's stunning. Those alluring eyes pulled me in so fast, I nearly forgot my own name. Watching her kick Zane's ass with confidence was the icing on the cake.

We've spoken little since starting the hike, which I appreciate and it seems she does as well. Twice I've witnessed her closing her eyes, knowing she was listening to the breeze rustling the leaves, the insects buzzing, the scampering of woodland creatures

in the brush. Just like I do.

We come upon a narrow clearing with breathtaking views of the surrounding mountains, several of their peaks draped in snow. I drop my pack beside a felled tree log.

“Hungry?” I ask. “I’m going to take a potty break and then grab a bite.”

“Sounds good,” Evie says. “I’ll do the same.”

When we’re back at the log, Evie pulls out two sandwiches, offering one to me.

I look at it, then at her. “No salad or kale chips?”

Evie takes a bite of the sandwich and swallows. “I’m the daughter of a deli owner. I was reared on pastrami and aged salami.”

“Oh, what I wouldn’t do for an overstuffed pastrami on rye right now.”

“Next time you’re in. Hartford, Connecticut, I’ll hook you up.”

“Connecticut girl.”

“I was. I moved to the Big Apple for college and have been there ever since.”

“Like it?”

“It’s fine. And by fine, I mean expensive and crowded.”

I chew, listening.

Evie goes on. “I’m not going anywhere for the foreseeable future. Both of my kids live in Manhattan, most of the time. And my job is there. I’m a lawyer in a mid-size firm. Lots of pressure.”

“You have kids?”

“Surprised? I’m turning fifty. Not that unusual.”

“I just didn’t think of you as a mom,” I say, unsure exactly how I thought of her.

“Thanks, I guess.”

“So you came out here alone?”

Evie nods. “Circumstances changed at the last minute.” She pulls out her phone. “No reception.”

When I give her a questioning look, she says, “My best friend, Caroline, broke her leg hours before the flight. She insisted I come alone.”

“You feel guilty leaving her behind?”

The answer is written all over her face.

“Yes, I do. But from the sounds of things, she’s managing just fine. If I had to guess, her doctor is holding her interest.”

I smile, watching a group of five hikers go past. I hear them speak in Italian.

“What about you?” Evie asks.

I feel a moment of unease. It’s a reaction I experience whenever meeting someone who doesn’t know my story. “What about me?”

“What’s your story?”

“No story. My life is pretty boring.”

She makes a face. “Boring? You live near Yosemite, hike every day. Sounds anything but boring.”

I shrug.

“How is it you’re able to spend your days like this out here?”

“How do you know I’m not on vacation also?”

She looks at me. “The waitstaff at Yosemite Sam’s knew you well. You haven’t shaven in days and you have tan lines that appear months old. So you don’t work in an office. And from what I can tell, you’re not one of the Park Rangers, so . . .”

“Maybe you should have been a detective rather than a lawyer,” I say, and take a bite of my sandwich, looking away.

Evie's eyes turn empathetic. "There's no shame in losing your job or being unemployed."

Initially confused, I realize she must have taken my behavior as deflection. It is, but not in the way she thinks.

"I have lots of connections through my law firm," she says. "What are you trained in?"

I work hard to hold back a guffaw. "You're going to help me find a job? You don't even know me." It's sweet, actually.

"You have a good point," she says. "But let's hear it anyway."

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“I studied computer science at Stanford. Dabbled in software development for a while.”

Evie places her wrapper in her bag. “I would think there’s quite a market for that out here. We’re not that far from Silicon Valley.”

“True.”

She seems to pick up on the cues and pivots. “How about you? Do you have kids?”

“Me? No. Maybe someday. But my sister’s getting married in a couple of weeks. That’s gonna be fun.”

“By your tone, I assume you don’t mean it. Why wouldn’t your sister’s wedding be fun?”

I pause. Only Zane knows my deal. But Evie is a stranger. She doesn’t know any of the players. What harm could it cause to tell her?

“Because they’re expecting me to bring my fiancée.”

I catch Evie’s fleeting frown.

“Oh, congratulations,” she says.

I’m not sure she means it. I get a strange, tingly feeling inside.

“I didn’t realize you were getting married. When’s the big day?”

I let out a lungful of air. “Well, that’s just the thing. I’m not technically engaged.”

“Oh, I see. But it’s serious.”

“Well . . .”

Evie gestures for me to go on.

“Actually, there is no fiancée . . . or girlfriend. I just said that to get my family off my back.”

Her gorgeous eyes widen. “You’re serious.”

I suck in my lips and nod.

“Wow. What are you going to do?”

“Haven’t figured that out yet.”

Evie laughs, a wonderfully musical sound. “Good luck with that one.”

“Thanks,” I say, standing. I grab my pack and she does hers. “I’m going to need it.”

Chapter Thirteen

Evie

“M

ake sure you're staying hydrated," I say, hoping I don't sound too motherly.

Since Adam confided about his unemployed status, seemingly skittish, I do what I can to change the subject. There's more to him than meets the eye. The fiancée debacle, for one. As much as I despise lying, I can understand the pressure a family can wield.

We continue on, the trail becoming more arduous. Two middle-aged female hikers with artsy hiking sticks pass us, heading down the mountain. They look sweaty and blissful.

"How was it?" Adam asks them.

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“Best hike of our lives,” one of them espouses.

The words give me a boost of energy.

Ten minutes later, I’m working harder to keep up. There’s no one else around. It’s just the two of us.

Adam says, “We should reach the top within the hour and then we’ll need to turn around quickly so we’re back before sundown. We don’t want to be out here when it gets dark.”

He has barely broken a sweat. Since stopping for lunch, we’ve only spoken to point out nature. Wildflowers, a snake in the path, and the howl of a hopefully faraway creature. I appreciate the deference to the environment. Too much talking interferes with the pristine, almost spiritual surroundings.

I grunt my agreement, and we go on, the incline growing steeper as we go.

“We’re almost there,” Adam says.

Thank heavens.

My thighs are burning with each step. I glance at my app. “The peak is just around the bend,” I point.

A wave of heightened anticipation washes over me. As well as an unexpected need to commune with nature, alone. “Mind if I go ahead of you? I’d like to have a minute at

the top.”

Adam nods, sagely. “Sure. I know what you mean.”

I go on until I reach the top, awestruck by the view. Careful to stay a safe distance from the edge, I do a three-sixty, taking in my surroundings. Mountains and cerulean blue skies as far as the eye can see. Alone at the summit, I whisper a thanks for the fortitude to complete the challenging hike on my fiftieth birthday.

I close my eyes and think about what I’ve accomplished in half a century. My kids, career, long-standing friendships. Divorce.

Did I make the right choices?

Not always.

I’ve had regrets. But as Frank Sinatra wisely sang, too few to mention.

My issue is more about the future, the unknown.

I’ve gone through the expected empty nest syndrome, spending the week after Jeffrey’s high school graduation, moping around the house, wondering what I would do with no one to care for. Wondering what else I was good for. For so long, my identity has been mother above all else. The adjustment has been grueling.

But I’m trying. Following Sam’s lead, I signed up for a Spanish language class at the library and yoga at the community center on 92nd Street. Yet deep down, I know something is missing, like an itch I can’t scratch.

I inhale a lungful of clean mountain air. Up here on the precipice, I’m hit with an epiphany. I want something more than filling my newfound downtime. I want a start-

over. A reboot.

I feel a deep sense of peace with the realization even as I understand it's a vague one. But now I have direction. Which will surely come with potentially complex decisions.

For later.

For now, I'm grateful for all I have. For being alive on a mountaintop in Yosemite National Park.

I think of my yoga class back in Manhattan. The teacher often starts off with a mountain pose that flows to a bend at the waist and a pose of gratitude. A year ago I would have laughed at the granola mentality. But my doctor suggested yoga as a healthy way to alleviate my stress, and I quickly grew to love the practice.

No one else is around. I don't need to worry how I look.

Eyes closed, I raise my arms above my head, then circle them wide and rapidly like a windmill, bending at the waist.

“Oomph!”

The grunt stuns me as I hit something hard. Nearly losing my balance, I pop open my eyes.

There's Adam, lying on the ground, atop his backpack, one leg dangling off the edge of the cliff, the wind knocked out of him. If he moves even a foot, he will roll off.

“Oh my God! Get back!”

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Adam blinks rapidly, disoriented.

I reach out for him, grab onto his hands, and pull with all my might, until he's out of harm's way.

He sits up slowly, shaking his head back and forth. I bend down beside him, adrenaline still racing through my veins.

"Are you okay?" I ask, taking his face in my hands, his stubble scratching my palm. His pupils are slightly dilated, his blue-gray irises are studying me, curiously.

"Adam?"

He looks around, as if only now realizing where he is.

Slowly, a smile grows on his full lips.

Relief washes over me along with a crazy urge to kiss him. I force it away and let go of his face.

"What were you doing?" Adam asks, seemingly oblivious to my erratic state of mind.

I let out a sigh that sounds more like a sob. "I was meditating," I say, meekly. "I nearly killed you."

Adam looks at the cliff's edge. "Wow. Close call."

The terror of what almost happened fills me. A tear escapes my eye. Adam reaches over and uses the pad of his thumb to gently wipe it away. "I'm fine now."

"I thought you were giving me a few minutes alone," I say, my cheek tingling from his touch.

Adam remains on the ground. "I remembered that today was your birthday and I wanted to suggest we do something fun after the hike to celebrate. Since your friend is not here."

"Oh." My heartbeat is finally slowing.

Adam comes to a stand, stumbling slightly. "You've got a really mighty vinyasa."

I get up beside him. "Are you going to be okay?"

"Yep," he says, a bit too casually. "Seems I lost my glasses."

"They might have gone over the side."

We both turn to face the cliff's edge and I shudder.

Adam lifts his pack off the ground. He's recovering far quicker than I am. "We need to get down the mountain."

It takes us three hours, arriving back at the parking lot as the sun is setting. The trek down was more than enough time for me to think about how I almost killed a man. A man I oddly feel close to.

"I'm so sorry, Adam. I don't know what else to say."

He shrugs. Actually shrugs!

“The way I see it, you saved my life, pulling me back from the edge.”

How can he be so cavalier about nearly losing his life?

I click open the Porsche, wondering how I’m going to drive in such a state. “I’d like to make it up to you.”

Adam appears ready to dismiss my suggestion. Then something crosses his face. “Come to think of it, there is something you can do, but?—”

Relieved, I say, “What is it?”

He shakes his head. “Forget it. It was a stupid idea.”

“Please tell me. I’ll do anything.”

A playful smirk crosses Adam’s lips. “Anything?”

I nod, vigorously.

Adam takes a deep breath and tells me.

Chapter Fourteen

Adam

“I

’m really fine, Evie.” I take a sip of my cinnamon-laced coffee.

“Are you sure you don’t want something stronger?” Evie asks. “It’s on me.”

We’re seated in a mom-and-pop café in El Portal, just outside the park. The place is decorated to appeal to tourists with park memorabilia everywhere the eye looks. Old road signs, photos from the 1800s, carved walking sticks.

“Maybe we should have those scrapes looked at.”

“Still in mom mode?” I tease her.

She blushes a bit and looks down at her mug. It makes my heart beat faster.

“Okay, I’ll stop now.”

Truth is, if things had been different, I would have gone straight home, fixed myself a double whiskey on the rocks, taken a shower, and slept it off.

I do my best to make it seem like I’m fine, but that near miss at the top of Cloud’s Rest shook me up, badly. Other than the near disaster with Zane on Angel’s Landing, this was the closest I’ve ever come to biting the big one, and that says something given my years in the mountains.

But seeing how upset Evie was, I played it down, suggesting we grab coffee and talk about my proposition.

Fine, maybe “proposition” sounds sketchy, but when she said she would do anything to make it up to me, things quickly took shape in my otherwise foggy mind.

“Come with me to the wedding,” was all I told her when we reached the trailhead parking lot after the eventful hike.

Now seated across from her, Evie’s face morphs from concern to curiosity. “Fine, tell me about your sister’s wedding.”

“You’ll come as my fiancée, Ronna.”

The soft wrinkles around Evie’s eyes lift upward, her fabulous lashes fanning wider with amusement. It occurs to me I’ve never met a woman with such expressive eyes.

She pauses for a beat, tilts her head. “Are you serious?”

“As much as a guy who cheated death a few hours ago.”

Thankfully, she doesn't react to the crass comment. Instead, a storm brews across her fine features, and then she nods. "Okay, I'm in."

My heart flutters in my chest once again. This woman is different. She's not only beautiful but confident, decisive, and caring. I want to get to know her better.

Which is why I'm sitting in The Rocky Roastery nursing a bitter Americano when I should be at home recuperating with a bottle of Jim Beam.

Evie finally drinks from her mug. "Tell me more about this scam."

Rather than defend myself, I leave the word "scam" on the table. It's accurate enough. "My sister, Steph, is getting married in five days. My parents believe that I will be attending with my fiancée, Ronna, whom, of course, they've never met."

Evie leans in as if we're hatching a bank heist.

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I say, “All we have to do is act believable so they think I’m in a committed relationship.”

“What will you do when they realize that is not the case?”

“I’ll give it a couple of weeks after the wedding and then tell them it didn’t work out and that I’m devastated. It will buy me several more months of peace.”

Evie whispers. “I have a few questions.”

“Go ahead.”

“This ruse where we play googly-eyed lovers is for just one night, right?”

I look away. “So here’s the thing...”

Evie seems to brace herself. “Spit it out, Adam,” she says, though there’s a measure of amusement in her tone.

“It’s a weekend affair. Starts on Thursday night and goes through Sunday evening. People are coming from all over to participate. I’ll completely understand if it’s asking too much of you.”

“I guess she’s marrying well.”

I do not share that I am essentially funding the wedding. Instead, I say, “Brad’s a good guy.”

“Where is the wedding? Is it a long drive from here?”

When I don’t immediately reply, Evie says, “This caper is getting curiouser and curiouser.”

“Well, that’s the other thing?—”

A small chuckle escapes her lips. “Where is this fabulous weekend wedding?” she repeats.

“In Breckenridge.”

“Colorado.”

“Yep.”

“I may not be great at geography of the American West, but I’m pretty sure that’s really far from here.”

I nod.

“So, your family lives in Breckenridge?”

“Nope. They’re in Denver, about an hour-and-a-half away.”

She is quiet for a moment. Then, “If the affair is over an entire weekend, I don’t think we can get away with just a few cutesy interactions. We will need to learn a lot about each other.”

Maybe it’s me but I’d swear Evie is enjoying this.

“With my family, think of it like prepping for an interrogation,” I say, meaning every word. My sister just completed her FBI training. For now, I leave out that nugget of information.

Evie laughs. It’s like music to my ears.

She asks, “Have you ever heard of The Newlywed Game?”

“No. What is that?”

“It was a TV program back in the ‘60s. They would bring in newlyweds and ask them questions to see if they really knew the person they had just married. It was very funny, but often contestants got irritated when their partner didn’t know some of the basics. We can’t let that happen.”

“My sister is already suspicious. We need to learn every detail about each other.”

“Everydetail?”

“Okay,” I say. “We can keep some things closer to the vest, but you get the idea. My sister is an FBI investigator.” So much for holding back.

“Literally?”

“Unfortunately, yes. She passed her exams a week ago.”

“Amazing.”

“Gets better. Steph inherited the ‘I can smell a rat a mile away’ powers from my mom, so if we’re not consistent, we’re going to be caught.”

Maybe I should ask the waiter to spike my coffee.

Evie says, “For arguments sake, what happens if you are caught?”

“Embarrassment, arguing, being called a liar. And worst of all,being subjected once again to a never-ending list of potential but completely incompatible women who?—”

She holds up a hand. “Wow. Sounds intense.” She yawns. Loudly. “Sorry. Long day.”

“Are you going to be all right driving all the way back to Merced?”

“I should be fine,” she says, yawning again.

I have an idea. “Listen, I know we just met, but close calls like the one on Cloud’s Nest tend to change things.” I know I’m coming off as sketchy. “Stay at my place,” I blurt out.

I must have hit my head on that cliff.

Evie chews the inside of her cheek. “Just for the night, right?”

“For as long as you want,” I say, incredulous that she’s even entertaining the offer.

“I don’t know if that’s such a wise idea.” She yawns again. Heartily.

“The roads are dark. It’s at least forty minutes to your hotel.” For good measure, I add, “You’ll have your own space. I swear.”

She pauses, unsure.

“It will give us a chance to get the details down.”

“Okay, but if I stay longer I’ll need to get my things from the hotel.”

I try to hold in my excitement. “Sounds like a plan.”

We leave her car parked in The Rocky Roastery’s lot. Five minutes later, Evie is sound asleep in my car.

Chapter Fifteen

Adam

I drive the dark, tree-lined roads carefully, even though I know them like the back of my hand. Night has settled over the mountain, a waning moon making little impact against the inky sky. The only illumination comes from the car's headlights. I know once I turn them off, the sky will become a sea of stars. Maybe I'll point it out to Evie when we arrive at the house.

Or maybe that would be interpreted as a come-on. Hey Evie, come this way. Let me show you the stars.

I glance at her. She's sound asleep, her head leaning against the window. It gives me the chance to study her beautiful face. Her small nose, high cheekbones, long thick lashes. A lock of hair has come loose of her ponytail and hangs haphazardly down past her ear. Soft puffs of breath emerge from her full ruby lips.

I feel an odd tingle deep in my belly. It's been many years since I've had such a powerful reaction to a woman. A fierce, all-encompassing attraction.

But it's more than that. She looks so vulnerable. A feeling of protectiveness courses through me. A primal instinct.

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As I take the last turn before my property, it occurs to me this is the first time I've brought a woman back to my place in the mountains. For a variety of reasons. I like my privacy. I don't want prying eyes or curious people judging me for what is obviously a pricey piece of land in the heart of the park.

Since selling the app, I've learned that people view me—and treat me—differently when they know about my money.

Still, that's only part of the story. Truth is, I haven't yet met a woman I wanted to bring back to my place. Not that this is that sort of situation. We just met.

Sure, I've experienced the occasional one-night stand back in college. Even a geek like me could find temporary companionship. But those days are behind me. As much as my sister believes I'm a frat boy in disguise, nothing could be farther from the truth. I've never been that guy, and now in my thirties, I want to find a true connection with someone, not a passing fling.

Yet, I didn't have a second thought inviting Evie to stay with me to save the late-night drive to Merced following the exhausting ordeal. The offer came out instinctively. All that went through my mind was hoping that she would accept. When she did, it felt like when my team won the Superbowl.

There's no way to dismiss it. If we spend any more time together, as it appears we're about to, I'll soon be a goner.

I approach the black iron gates and slow the car, clicking the remote attached to the dashboard. The gates slide open, silently. I drive up the long driveway, the gravel

causing the car to shudder.

Evie stirs as the car comes to a stop. Blinking her eyes open, she seems momentarily disoriented. Then she looks outside. The house is lit from within, the sensors at the gate having triggered them. I never liked arriving home to a dark house.

The house is modern, made of stone, wood, and lots of glass. During the day, the expansive windows allow in a great deal of light and offer breathtaking views of the mountains. It looks enchanting.

A look of confusion crosses Evie's face. "Where are we?"

"At my place."

Evie blinks once again and looks around. "This is your place?"

"Yep." I want to apologize but realize there's nothing to feel sorry for.

Evie seems to be reading my expression, assessing if I'm playing a practical joke on her. Something in my face must convince her I'm serious. The corners of her lips lift in a show-stopping smile.

I feel a flutter in my gut. "Come on in. I'll show you around."

Chapter Sixteen

Evie

I'm sure Adam is conning me. I mean, that is his M.O., after all. But the look on his face says otherwise. I do my best to keep my jaw from dropping. The house is something out of Architectural Digest. Even Caroline would stay here, happily. Not to

mention the rest of the Fab Fifty club. Sam would move in and never leave.

No way a man of Adam's age, vocation, and chilled-out temperament can afford the house I'm gawking at. It's massive. A combination of glass and earth-toned stone, the ranch-style home blends seamlessly with the surroundings. At least what I can discern from the ambient light coming from inside the house. I can't wait to see it in the morning.

Wordlessly, I follow Adam inside, unsure where to look first. A spectacular two-sided glass-encased fireplace serves as a divider between the living and dining rooms, a fire roaring in the hearth. Maybe someone else is here.

Adam made it clear he has no significant other. That's why he needs me to be his fake fiancée. Maybe it's someone not significant? The thought makes me uncomfortable. But obviously, someone has kindled the fire.

Reading my mind, Adam says, "The sensors at the front gate get the house ready for me."

I'm inexplicably relieved. "They do, do they?"

Each wall, not made of glass, is adorned with a brilliant display of art. Modern pieces with bold colors hang beside western-themed oils and black-and-white photographs, depicting spectacular mountain ranges. It appears to be Adam's private gallery.

"Is that an Ansel Adams?" I ask, approaching the photograph, in awe.

"Good eye," Adam says, coming up beside me, looking on like a proud parent, clearly pleased with my reaction. "I moved out here a year ago. Fixed up the house the way I like it."

Aretha Franklin begins crooning, the sound so clear I could swear the Queen Of Soul still lives and is singing in the next room over.

“Sensors?” I ask.

He nods.

“If I didn’t know better, I’d say you are trying to seduce me.”

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Adam's eyes nearly pop out of his head. "Oh, oh, sorry."

I laugh at his reaction. "I mean, seriously. A fire, the music . . ."

Adam seems frozen to the spot. A deer in the headlights. "I didn't mean?—"

Maybe he really is a geek in a hot bod.

I wander into the kitchen. It's smaller than expected but magnificent. I step back out again into the living room. "You designed all this?" I gesture to the brown leather sofas and modern lighting fixtures.

"My vision, but with a designer's touch. I'm more a computer guy than an interior designer."

I stop to admire a set of small horse sculptures on a dark wood table beside one of the sofas. They're expertly carved, each equine muscle defined perfectly. "Very tastefully done. Do you ride?" I ask.

"When I have the time."

"It looks like you have all the time in the world. Don't you spend your days climbing mountains?"

I regret the words the moment they leave my mouth. Seeing Adam's frown, I say, "I'm sorry, I really don't know you at all, do I?"

I sit on the sofa. Or more like melt into it. It's as buttery soft as it looks. "Which makes my being here somewhat . . ." Questionable? Inappropriate? "Impulsive."

Adam sits across from me. "You know more about me than most, at this point."

A curious statement.

Once again, his telepathy kicks in. "Maybe I'm to blame for not telling people that I'm loaded but I've learned it's better this way."

I can imagine that's true. Money turns people into strange beings. "Can I ask how you came into all this?" I gesture around. "Was it an inheritance?"

"God, no. My parents do fine but this was thanks to a combination of computer programming know-how and a whole lot of luck. I created an app that tracks traffic patterns. A European company bought it. Right time, right place, let's just say."

"I'm impressed," I say because I am.

Adam shrugs.

"So that's how you're able to spend your days exploring Yosemite."

Adam stands, as if he's been hit with a second wind. "That's not all I do. I'm a man of many faces." He makes a silly face, making me laugh.

"Are you now?"

On the table beside me is a framed picture I hadn't noticed before. An olive-skinned couple in their sixties, a striking red-head, and Adam. All are mid-jump on a beach. "I take it this is your family." I point to the red-haired beauty. "Stephanie?"

“That’s right. Last summer in Crete. Steph looks harmless in the picture, but don’t be fooled.”

“Greece. Nice.”

“My mom was born in Athens and my dad is a second-gen Greek-American. I spent much of my childhood trying to convince Steph she was adopted. Red-hair is a genetic anomaly.”

Having two kids of my own, the taunting doesn’t surprise me. “Can I assume she gave back as much as she got?”

“Still does.”

Adam approaches the wet bar tucked away in the corner of the room. “At the risk of being perceived as a come-on, I’m going to have a drink. Kentucky’s best bourbon. Join me?”

I watch him fill a tumbler with golden liquid. He’s a rare combination of Clark Kent and Cary Grant. Bookish and debonair.

“No thanks. But I am a bit hungry.”

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“Right, we didn’t actually eat anything, did we?”

I shake my head, realizing that despite the relaxed environment, the heavy fatigue I felt earlier is lifting. It’s him.

Immediately I push away the ridiculous notion. Adam is way too young for me to consider in any romantic sort of way.

Not that I am considering it. I am not on the market. I’m only here to rest and work out how to help him . . . fool his family.

Aware how strange that is, I follow Adam into the kitchen, wondering if the evening will turn any more bizarre.

Chapter Seventeen

Evie

Adam pulls a few items from the fridge. A block of blue cheese, a carton of free-range eggs, portobello mushrooms, and string onions. “How does an omelet sound?” he asks, looking perfectly at ease in the kitchen.

I take a seat on the barstool next to the marble island. “Heavenly.”

“I’ve got a loaf of French bread in the basket behind you. Mind cutting a few slices?”

French bread? The guy is curiouser and curiouser. It takes some effort to gel this

Adam with the rugged five-o'clock-shadow, Honda-driving version I hung out with on the trail and in the bar. The one smirking while his friend lost at pool. Apparently, he's more than just that guy. He's also a mega-loaded, sexy, unattached computer whiz who buys French bread and stinky cheese. If ever there was a time when looks were deceiving, it's now.

I reach for the long loaf. It smells divine. "Where do you find fresh artisanal bread out here in the middle of nowhere?"

"I have them delivered."

I suspect it's a very bougie service that delivers fresh bread to his door. In the middle of Yosemite National Park.

I find a bread knife in the sleek cutlery drawer and begin slicing.

Actually, the entire kitchen is exactly that. Sleek. Surfaces and cabinetry are all clean lines with not a handle to be seen. You simply push on the surface and it glides opens. I catch a glimpse of my reflection in the glass cabinet.

Yikes.

I redo my ponytail. As if that will make a difference. I look like a woman who has hiked all day and experienced a near-traumatic event.

"Um, I really could use a hot shower."

Adam stops chopping the vegetables and looks up at me, concern in his eyes. "Oh, right."

I look at the bruises on his arms. Since the fall on the mountaintop, they have turned

new shades of purple.

We're both shellshocked. Neither of us considered washing up. Hunger has taken precedence.

"I'm really sorry," Adam says, his forehead furrowed as if silently chastising himself for the oversight. "Come on. The eggs can wait. I'll show you to the guest room."

I nod, grabbing a slice of bread on the way out the door, gobbling it up in two bites.

Adam stops at the end of the wide corridor and pauses, seemingly sizing me up.

I feel a flutter in my belly. When three seconds pass without a word, I ask, "Earth to Adam . . . can I help you?"

He shifts his eyes up to meet mine. "I was just trying to see if you'd fit into my pjs."

I swallow hard, picturing myself in his pajama top while he wears the matching bottoms.

Jeez, I need to snap out of it.

"Maybe your baker can also deliver a new wardrobe," I goad while trying to erase the sexy image from my mind. But he does have a valid point. I have none of my clothes with me. They are all back at the hotel. A very long drive away.

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“Cute. How about this? We’ll toss the clothes you’re wearing into the wash and you’ll wear my Broncos jersey as a nightshirt.”

I’m not about to ask for his underwear. “Got any clean exercise shorts to go with the jersey?” I feel my cheeks heat up.

Adam grins. “I’ll even throw in a helmet. Okay?”

I can’t help but laugh. The entire situation is crazy.

Adam points out the laundry room, then opens the door to the guest room. “Make yourself at home.”

I walk past him into a spacious, modern room, decorated in soothing earth tones. It’s three times the size of my bedroom at home in New York. The far wall is actually an enormous pane of glass. “Wow.”

“Like it?”

“Love it.”

He stands there a moment, as if wanting to say more, and then steps out, closing the door softly behind him.

Twenty minutes later, I wipe the condensation off the mirror. Adam’s jersey clings to my curves, reaching the tops of my thighs. It’s far from an extra-large. Maybe it shrunk in the dryer. Hmm. Good thing I asked for his shorts.

Other than a tube of tinted lip balm, all my makeup is back at the hotel. I wish I cared. But I'm starving.

Okay, maybe I care a little bit. The more time I spend with Adam, the more fluttery my butterflies become.

I run my fingers through my hair, hoping the waves will dry nicely and do some ridiculous face exercises. As if trying to lick my nose with my tongue will tighten my skin before dinner is served.

Unfortunately, there's little more I can do right now about my appearance. I swipe on the lip balm, leave the room, and toss my soiled clothes into the washer.

Back in the hallway, I turn right and am struck by an enormous oil painting of a bear in a stream, a salmon clenched in its mouth. The scene is so realistic that I stand there for a few moments studying the brushstrokes. Breathtaking.

Across from the painting is a door left slightly ajar. I catch a glimpse of an enormous bed, the linens distinctly masculine.

Adam's room.

Realizing I've turned the wrong way out of my room, I make a U-turn and sniff the air. Smells like the eggs are ready.

Barefoot, I make my way into the kitchen, pausing in the doorway.

There's Adam at the stove, his back to me. Only this time, all he's wearing is a pair of gym shorts. The muscles on his back and shoulders remind me of the horse sculpture I admired earlier. All I want to do is touch them, feel his strength.

Instead, I say, “I could eat a horse.”

Adam turns to face me, taking in my appearance. His gaze is intense, fiery. If thoughts could physically manifest, the jersey clinging to my body would be scorched and tattered.

We stare at each other, neither one saying a word. An unseen force is pulling at me. Hard. It takes every last ounce of restraint to keep from running to him, falling into his powerful arms.

When he speaks, his voice is thick. “Come here, then. Let’s eat.”

It sounds more like a cunning dare from the wolf in Little Red Riding Hood than an offer to try the slowly burning eggs.

I walk into the kitchen, fully unsure if I should accept the challenge.

Chapter Eighteen

Adam

I turn back to the stove, trying hard to calm my intense reaction to Evie. Seeing her standing in the kitchen doorway wearing my shirt, her hair wet, her face glowing, stirs something deep inside me. Desire.

She’s a stranger, the voice in my head reminds me.

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I silence it. It feels like I've known Evie for years.

She comes up beside me, eyeing the burnt eggs. She's so close that I get a whiff of the shampoo lingering in her hair. The proximity is intoxicating, a pure test of my willpower.

"What happened here?" she asks, oblivious to my reaction to her.

"I guess I wasn't paying enough attention," I reply, my voice thick as molasses. I cough it away. "I can start again."

"How about I take over?" Evie suggests, washing her hands in the sink and drying them on the dishtowel situated on the counter between us.

I can't seem to make my feet move away. "Are you sure?"

Evie reaches for the spatula in my hand. My pulse races as our skin makes contact. For a second, our fingers linger.

I know if she raises her face to mine, I will be a goner. I will kiss her with every ounce of pent-up passion. I'll scoop her into my arms and carry her to my room...

She doesn't look up.

"Can you grab more cheese?" she asks, her own voice husky.

I back away as if any false moves will spark a spontaneous combustion. I open the

fridge and stick my head inside, hoping it will help me cool off. I pull out a package of mozzarella and hand it to her.

Within minutes, two perfectly cooked omelets are set on my glass dishes, sprigs of parsley, julienned cucumbers, and cherry tomatoes beside them.

I bring the plates to the table, along with forks and two glasses of orange juice. “Feels like we’re having breakfast in an alternate universe,” I laugh. “I know this day has been upside down. I’d say I’m glad it’s over, but it’s really nice having someone here to wind down with.”

Evie’s eyes flit away, and I wonder if I said the wrong thing.

“I really appreciate you putting me up for the night,” she says, her face a light shade of pink.

“It’s my pleasure. I know how exhausting it can be to drive the mountain roads late at night after a long hike. When you’re tired, the drive becomes hypnotic.”

“And that was some hike,” Evie says, taking a bite from her omelet.

We eat in companionable silence.

Till she begins yawning again. She holds a hand to her mouth. “Sorry.”

“Wait!” I blurt out, the word sounding absurd.

“Huh?”

Since sitting down to eat, I have been consumed with finding a way to keep the night going. All I want is to spend more time with her. “I have an idea.”

“An idea?” Evie arches a brow.

She thinks I’m coming on to her again.

“Grab your glass and come with me.”

To my surprise, Evie doesn’t hesitate. I find a couple of sweatshirts in the front closet and hand one to her. “Put this on. You’re going to need it.”

I show her out to the backyard, bypassing the hot tub, soft lights emanating from below the bubbling water. Floodlights are placed strategically among the landscaped flower beds that surround an expansive brick patio. The air is cool and will turn chillier with each passing hour. There is only a sliver of moon.

“It’s so peaceful back here,” Evie says, taking in the surroundings.

“I did a lot of this work with my dad,” I reply, gesturing to the patio.

“Amazing.”

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I lead her to the wooden swing I made with my father the last time my folks came to town.

Evie sits beside me, and despite the narrow space between us, she feels too far. I want desperately to hold her hand, have her lean against my chest. I'm not sure I can trust myself and I scoot farther away.

"Your backyard is lovely, but I think it's bedtime for Bonzo."

"One more second, please." I flick something on my phone, and everything goes dark.

Stunned, Evie grabs my hand. "Oh. My. God."

Chapter Nineteen

Evie

The sky is filled with stars, a twinkling sea spreading from horizon to horizon. The swirly haze of the Milky Way hovers above us. When I'm finally able to speak, I do so with reverence. "I've never seen anything like this."

"Never in all your hiking adventures?" Adam asks, delighted by my reaction.

I shake my head. "Nothing like this."

Keeping a respectable distance on the swing, Adam points skyward. "Know what that

is?”

“Sure, it’s the Big Dipper.”

“How about that one?”

“Is this a test?”

Adam chuckles. “Sort of. You game?”

“Why not? Okay, that’s Orion’s Belt.”

“I’m impressed.”

“Now it’s my turn,” I say, playfully. I point to a star at the end of a kite-like tail, then move my finger eastward.

“The Little Dipper, and Polaris at the bottom, of course.”

“I mean, that star just to the right of Polaris.”

Adam squints, looking and concentrating. “I think you have me stumped.”

“That’s the DanJeff star.”

Adam frowns. “I don’t think I’ve ever heard of that.”

“Makes sense. My ex and I bought it for our sons after the younger one was born. You know, on one of those star registry sites. At first I thought it was a major racket, selling stars,” I say, recalling that time so long ago. “But now I know better. No matter where I am in the world, every time I look at it, I think of them. And I hope

the reverse is true for the boys.”

Adam is completely focused. On me.

“What are your sons like?” he asks.

A broad grin spreads across my face. “Daniel is a guy’s guy. Sports are his life. Jeffrey is more into academics. I’d say they each have a bit of me and their dad in them but also are very different.”

“Are they close?”

“Very. That’s not to say they didn’t fight like cats and dogs when they were little. But they are best buddies.”

“They sound like great guys.”

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“They are. How about you?” I ask, softly.

“I’ve been lucky. Great family. If you don’t count the constant pressure.”

“You mean to get married?”

Adam nods. “Or at least to find a committed relationship. Rather than dwindling, they’ve turned up the heat. It makes getting together as a family very challenging.”

I’m facing him, listening intently. He looks pained. I try to imagine the kind of external pressure he’s describing. Mine has always come from within.

Adam goes on. “I hate to admit it, but I’ve avoided going home the last few holidays, claiming conflicts just to avoid it all. Of course, that’s not an option with Steph’s wedding.”

“You mean you haven’t been home for Thanksgiving?”

“Not for the last two years.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah I know, I’m a coward.”

“Not at all. I speak as a parent when I tell you, we can be a bit much sometimes but it always stems from love.”

“Sure, I know that. To clarify, I did see my parents when they came out here to visit.”
He pats the swing. “I built this with my dad the last time.”

“You’re a man of many talents.”

“That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you.”

I smack his arm, playfully. And giggle.

The last time I giggled, I was fifteen, huddling on the freezing bleachers enamored by the high school quarterback waving at me from the field.

“Are your parents hikers also?” I ask.

“My dad enjoys the outdoors more than my mom but I can’t picture either of them dangling from a cliff.”

“Then who did you get your adventurous streak from?”

“I’d have to say my Granny Bess.”

I laugh.

Then I shiver.

“You’re cold.”

“A little.”

He takes off his sweatshirt and puts it around my shoulders. I don’t put up a fight.
“So, how about we discuss the big scam we are about to undertake?” I ask.

Adam leans back, the swing rocking us as he does so. “I’ve given it some thought and realize you may feel indebted to me for nearly pushing me off the cliff.”

Isigh.

“Okay, low blow but in all seriousness, those worries are baseless. I’m fine, barely a scratch on me.”

I can see there’s more coming.

He says, “I will totally understand if you choose not to go along with all this.”

“But?”

He grins. A mischievous, delicious grin. “It would be great if you played the role of Ronna, my loving fiancée.”

I desperately want to say yes. Honestly, if he asked me to skydive off Half Dome, I’d say yes.

And yet. I can’t ignore the low buzz in the back of my mind. “No qualms about lying to your family?”

Adam chews his bottom lip. I wonder how it would feel if it was my ear lobe.

I tell myself to get a grip.

He says, “At the end of the day, you’re right. It is a scam. But it’s one of those white lies where no one gets hurt. If anything, they’ll all be happy. No harm, no foul.”

Adam seems sure of himself. While the lying part makes me uncomfortable—significantly so—I understand his predicament. Like he said, no one will get hurt. And I owe him.

I meet his eyes. “I gave you my word. To me, that’s sacrosanct.”

“Not only beautiful but loyal.”

I’m grateful for the dark. He can’t see the blush rising to my cheeks.

All I can think of is, he thinks I'm beautiful! I try hard to silence my inner teenager, again.

"You do see the irony, right?" he asks.

"You mean keeping my word about tricking other people."

He shrugs.

"Yep, it does seem funny but there you go."

The corners of his lips lift and he wiggles his brows. "Does that mean you're in?"

"I'm in," I say laughing. Seriously, I've laughed more in the last twenty-four hours than in ages. Even with the FF club. "Just to be clear, I'm not quite the saint you're conjuring up. Who doesn't love a good con?"

This time it's Adam who lets out a hearty guffaw. He sticks out a hand which I shake. "Welcome aboard."

Chapter Twenty

Adam

The cold gets too much even for me but this outdoor venture is working like a charm. Evie is fully on board, no longer yawning. When she patted my arm, I couldn't tell if she was flirting. Though I've improved some in recent years, I'm still lacking at reading women. But one thing was clear, my skin reacted to her touch like it was a bolt of electricity.

Evie's wearing a hodgepodge of my clothes and I can think of nothing sexier.

Except for maybe a lacy, black teddy. It takes all my self-control to push the image away.

I need to get a grip!

Evie would never see me as a viable lover. She's nothing like the directionless, insecure women I've met in recent years. The ones looking for an "experience" out West. Evie is an accomplished, metropolitan, confident woman with grown kids. Surely, she wants a responsible city man, with a stable job who owns a closetful of dark business suits and is on the board of several charities.

We're both shivering now and we head back inside to the sofa, where Evie and I review our fictional backstory. Where we met, how we fell for each other.

Her cover, as we begin to call it, is Ronna Rosen, a divorcée from New York City. It works well given it's where I told my family my fiancée resided. The fact that Evie actually lives there saves a lot of trouble.

"Okay, now for the grueling particulars," I say, holding back a yawn. I'm beyond tired now and have no idea how I'm keeping my eyes open. Other than having a beautiful woman seated near me.

"When is your birthday?" I ask, pulling out my phone.

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Evie says, “If we don’t commit the details to memory, it’s worth nothing. Looking at our phones to answer basic questions will be the kiss of death. They’ll figure it out in the first ten minutes of meeting me. Didn’t you say your sister works for the FBI?”

I nod. “You’re right. Don’t know what I was thinking.” I put my phone away.

“Looks like I’m better suited as a con artist than you are.”

The prettiest con artist ever. “There’s tons to memorize about each other.”

“Then we better get moving.”

“I’ll start. Ready for the rapid fire round?”

“Bring it on.”

I lean in, energized. “Birthday?”

“October fifth.”

“Leo, then?”

“Yep. You?” Evie asks.

“December thirtieth. Capricorn.” I say. “Siblings?”

“Sister in Toronto. Five years younger. Podiatrist. Married, two teenagers.”

“Hmm. Okay, hobbies... other than hiking or knocking off your hikingpartner?”

“Tennis, crosswords . . . pool.” She grins then asks, “Breakfast?”

“Froot Loops.”

“Seriously?”

I nod, getting a kick out of her amused reaction. “Pizza or sushi?”

“Always sushi.”

“Serious boyfriends?” I ask, tentatively.

Evie gives me a look. “They’ll ask me that?”

I redden a bit. “No, that’s mine.”

She’s holding back a smile. “Just two, the second being my ex.”

“Can you elaborate?”

“Only if you’ll reciprocate.”

Evie takes my pause as agreement.

“Okay, well, My first boyfriend was Ronaldo. We met in college. He was an exchange student from Rome.”

“Sounds exotic.”

“I have to admit, it was the most passionate, exciting relationship of my life. We dated through our Junior year.”

I’m not sure why Evie’s description of her college boyfriend bothers me, but it does. I try my best to hide it. “Then what happened?”

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Evie leans back, reminiscing. “He went home,” is all she says.

“And you never saw him again?” I ask, hoping I don’t sound too hopeful.

She shakes her head. “We wrote to each other for a while. But the distance was too much to overcome at that stage in our lives.”

“You never wanted to go over there?”

Evie seems to consider the question. Her mind is back there now. Not what I was going for.

“Sure I did. I was a young woman in love.” She blinks back to the present. “My life at the time was in New York. Neither of us could afford to hop an international flight. And then I met my husband, Marco. But Ronaldo will always be my first love.”

She eyes me. “Are you all right?”

“Yup, just tired, I guess.” And jealous. “Sounds like you prefer Italian men.”

She laughs. “I suppose it looks that way, doesn’t it? My husband was on the same exchange program as Ronaldo was. By the time I met my Marco I’d become a full-on Italophile.”

“So, Marco was happy to stay in the States?”

“At least at the time. He was the opposite of Ronaldo.”

Unsure what that means, I offer a brilliant, “Oh.”

“Your turn,” she says, her head leaning back against the sofa pillow.

“Looks like you’re ready to call it a night.” I glance at the clock on the side table beside me. 1:43 a.m. “We can pick it up again in the morning.”

Evie pats her cheeks. “You’re not getting off the hook that easily. I’m wide awake.”

“Fine, a deal’s a deal,” I say, gearing myself for the impending third degree. “What do you want to know?”

Her eyes close and her breath is coming softly.

“Evie?”

No response.

Gently, I adjust the velvet sofa throw over her and brush the hair from her face. “Good night, Evie.”

The urge to kiss her is overpowering but I force myself to leave.

I’m turning away when I hear her whisper, “Sweetheart?”

I freeze, the single word striking me like Cupid’s bow. I swing back, ready to pull her into my arms, kiss her with every ounce of my being.

“Remember the piano,” she says, softly.

I come to an abrupt stop. Evie is curled into a ball, her eyes still closed.

She's dreaming.

I swallow hard, aware I nearly did something crazy. I take a deep breath.

"Of course," I say.

The wind now taken from my sails, I go to bed, alone.

Chapter Twenty-One

Evie

I open my eyes, confused. Where am I?

The open-concept living space is filling with morning light, highlighting the luxurious finishes and carefully curated decor.

Adam's place.

The night had been the most fun I've had in . . . forever.

Adam and I stayed up, exchanging tidbits from our lives from where we grew up to what we ate for breakfast.

Given my current location, it seems I fell asleep, never making it to the guest room. I must have fallen asleep before he could tell me about his past love life. Bummer.

I stretch, yawn, and get off the sofa, smiling at my odd attire. Adam's clothes.

I walk to the glass doors, sliding them open. In the growing daylight, what I couldn't see clearly last night is perfectly visible now.

The house is perched high on a ridge. Rays of sun filter through the glistening dew-laden trees, casting a warm glow over the valley below. Barefoot, I step outside, the concrete cold on my toes. The pool is surrounded by expertly designed landscaping of tall grasses and colorful columbine.

The air is crisp and clean, with a hint of pine and wildflowers carried on a gentle breeze. A stunning panorama of rugged peaks and rolling hills stretches out as far as the eye can see. It's the perfect morning and I feel blessed to be alive to witness it. Blessed to have made it to the half-century mark.

"Good morning," a gruff sounding voice comes from behind me.

I turn to see Adam, his hair adorably standing on end. My heart skips a beat and a smile creeps onto my lips. I can't deny the attraction I feel towards him, but I remind myself this is nothing more than a fun way to pay a debt to a man I nearly killed.

A hot-as-hell man.

I offer a friendly wave. "It's so beautiful here," I say.

He comes closer. "It's my favorite place on the planet."

I get it. In an alternate universe, I'd live here and never leave.

We stand side-by-side in silence, deeply present in a world coming alive.

"Coffee?" Adam asks, breaking the quietude.

"Definitely, but I should probably get cleaned up first."

"You look beautiful."

His eyes are shining at me and my face heats up.

Adam is a conundrum. He's bold but not in the way I'm used to. Not in the Big City dog-eat-dog way. More like he oozes a chilled-out confidence, laced with a touch of

vulnerability. There's something about Adam that's undeniably charming.

All of which I find incredibly alluring. His mere presence beside me is an intoxicating elixir.

I clear my throat, trying to break the spell I seem to be under. "Sorry about sleeping the whole night on your sofa."

"No problem. You were exhausted. I didn't want to wake you."

A dog barks in the distance, giving me a chance to regroup.

Adam says, "You'll find all the toiletries you need in the hallway bathroom."

I excuse myself and head to the guestroom where I wash up, donning my freshly laundered clothes. I find Adam in the kitchen. The house smells of fresh ground coffee. "Hey," I say.

"Hey, back."

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He hands me a steaming mug, gesturing to milk, sugar, and cinnamon sticks. “Help yourself.”

I pop a cinnamon stick into my mug and sit across from Adam at the kitchen island.

Something occurs to me. “If we have to pretend to be in love for the entire weekend, we can’t break character for even a second.”

Adam nods. “That’s the gist of it. My sister will be all over us if she suspects anything is amiss.”

“So, how do we make this work? Do we have to hold hands and gaze into each other’s eyes all weekend?”

Adam chuckles. “Nah. We just need to act like we’re comfortable around each other. And maybe throw in a few touches and kisses here and there.”

I look at him skeptically. “Kisses?”

Adam grins. “Oh, come on, Evie. It’ll be fun.”

I roll my eyes, trying to make light of the whole crazy scenario, but deep down, I can’t deny the flutter of excitement in my stomach.

“Okay, I’ll try,”

“Thanks, I’ll do my best to not make it torture for you.”

If he's offended, he's hiding it well.

"What's our backstory?" I ask, straightening up in my seat. "How did we meet?"

Adam takes a sip of his coffee before answering. "We met on a dating app, and we hit it off right away. We've been dating for a few months now, and we just got engaged three weeks ago."

"Seems crazy fast."

"Not when you're madly in love."

His face is so sincere that I start to wonder if he was a drama major. I nod along, trying to keep up with the lie. "Right. And what do we like about each other?"

Adam leans in conspiratorially. "Well, I like that you're smart and funny, and you don't take any crap from anyone. And that you're independent and beautiful."

I feel my cheeks flush. "Thanks. And I like that you're . . . tall. And you have a nice house."

Adam laughs. "Well, I'll take what I can get. But seriously, Evie. I'm lucky to have you as my fake fiancée."

I smile at him, feeling a sudden warmth in my chest. Maybe this isn't such a bad idea after all.

Adam purses his lips. "What about the ring?"

My eyes widen. "The ring? We need a ring?"

Adam nods. “We’re getting married, right? We need a ring.”

I shake my head. “I don’t have a ring.”

Adam gets up from his chair and walks out of the kitchen, returning with a small box. He opens it to reveal a beautiful oval-shaped diamond ring with intricate filigree detailing. The stone is dancing in the sunlight that streams through the windows.

My jaw drops. “Where did you get that?”

“It was my grandmother’s,” Adam says. “May I?”

Before I can say a word, Adam is slipping the ring onto my finger. Like magic, it fits. Not too big, not too small. Just right.

“It’s lovely,” I say, aware this fiasco is turning stranger by the minute. We’ve only known each other for one day. A moment of awkwardness settles between us.

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“So, what else do we need to plan?” I ask, trying to change the subject, the ring like a boulder on my finger.

Adam takes a deep breath. “Well, we should probably decide how we got engaged.”

“Okay.”

Adam thinks for a moment. “We could say it was a surprise proposal. Like, I took you on a hike and then got down on one knee at the top of the mountain.”

My eyes widen. “That’s actually kind of romantic.”

Adam grins. “Yeah, I thought so too.”

My stomach growls. “Oops, sorry.”

“You’re hungry.”

“Maybe a little.”

“How about some oatmeal?”

“No Froot Loops?”

He laughs. “Nah, let’s go crazy today.”

I stand, looking for a pot.

“You sit, I got this.”

I do as I’m told, glancing down at the rock on my finger, certain the day is only going to get a whole lot weirder.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Evie

Adam and I spend the rest of the morning strategizing and practicing our engagement story. We have to get this right. From what Adam shares, his mother and sister, Steph, are notoriously nosy and love to ask probing questions.

As we’re finishing up, Adam’s phone rings. He looks down at the caller ID and blanches.

“It’s my mom,” he says, answering the call. “Hey, Mom . . . yeah, we’re just finishing up some stuff . . . what? No, we didn’t break up . . . what do you mean? . . . Oh, crap.”

I look at Adam, a sinking feeling settling in my stomach.

He hangs up the phone and lets out a deep sigh.

“What’s wrong?” I ask.

“My mom is making a collage of the family as a surprise gift for Steph and Brad. They want a picture of me and Ronna.”

“Okay, how hard can that be?”

“They want a kissing photo.”

“Oh.” I break eye contact. “Seems odd she didn’t mention this to you before.”

“Um, she did. I was avoiding it and then sort of forgot.”

Uh huh. “Or maybe you suppressed it?”

Adam shrugs. “Yeah, probably.”

“When do they need it by?”

He chews the inside of his cheek. “She’s at her computer, ready to rush order the collage or it won’t arrive on time for the wedding. She needs photos from all the family couples. My folks, grandparents . . . us. Apparently, she’s waiting only for ours. Clearly, Mom’s putting on the pressure. But honestly, I think this collage is a creative ruse to prove I’m really telling the truth about the engagement. I mean, they never did meet Ronna. Obviously.”

I find his rambling adorable.

“Soooo,” he goes on. “To answer your question, zero minutes.”

I laugh. How hard could it be to kiss Adam? “Okay, fine. In for a pound, right?” I ask, trying to keep it light.

The look on Adam’s face is priceless. Like a teenager about to score. “Really?”

Quickly, he steps closer, as if fearful I’ll change my mind.

I feel a strange mix of anticipation and qualms. How did I get into this situation? I’m in a stranger’s kitchen, about to kiss him, to satisfy his mother!

Correction. A very handsomestranger.

Goosebumps line my arms. “Ready?” he asks.

I can't speak, only nod. He takes my hand and pulls me close. He smells of musky cologne. I look up at him, his blue-gray eyes catching mine. I'm speechless.

He lifts my chin and leans in.

"Adam?" I whisper.

He pauses a millimeter from my lips. "Hmm?"

"The photo?"

The phone is sitting on the counter.

"Right," he says.

If I'm not mistaken there's a mischievous glint in his eye.

He raises the device, taps open the camera app, aiming it at us and turns back to me.
"Take two."

And then he kisses me.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Adam

Sparks fly the moment my lips make contact with Evie's. I place my free hand on her waist, pulling her closer, my heart racing with such intensity I think I may never recover. Evie's full lips are soft as silk, her breath cinnamon fresh as if she'd prepared for the impromptu kiss.

For a split second, I sense her hesitation. Then she relents.

It's as if a dam breaks, the torrent sweeping us away. I kiss her deeply, and she meets my passion full force. Every nerve springs alive with the thrill of her response and I lose myself in the moment. The kitchen, the house, the entire world fade into insignificance as I savor the taste of her lips

When we finally come up for air, I feel like I've been pulled back to reality, kicking and screaming.

Wow, wow, wow.

"Wow," Evie says, breathless as I lower the phone. My mother, sister, and anyone else will never question our relationship.

Evie leans against the kitchen counter, as if finding her legs. "You should get the Oscar this year."

"The Oscar?" My brain is on half-power.

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“You have to be the best actor in history. That kiss felt more real than any . . . real one. I mean, I also tried to act it out well, but you are the clear master.”

I feel my stomach drop. She was acting! The single best kiss of my life was only an act.

Stupid me. Of course it was an act. That’s what she signed up for.

I force an awkward laugh. “Thanks. When all this is over, you can send me the gold statue in the mail.”

Evie chuckles. “You got it.”

But she’s not looking at me. Something monumental just happened that neither one of us can explain.

She eyes my phone. “Think that was a bit much to send to your mom?”

“We could do it again.”

Evie blushes, remaining silent.

I can take a hint. “This will do fine.” I send it off to my mother, hoping we’ll have another chance to practice kissing like lovers. Very, very soon.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Evie

I lace up my running shoes, my heart pounding with excess stamina. It's a beautiful afternoon, the late-day chill perfect for a run as I step out onto the quiet street.

Adam suggested I stay at his place until the wedding. It would give us a chance to learn each other's habits and prepare for the onslaught of questions sure to come our way. He'll make arrangements to retrieve my bags from the hotel in Merced.

For a moment, I thought he was looking for excuses to spend more time together. Then he reminded me that the bride is a federal officer.

"We need to keep our stories straight in case we're cornered separately," he'd said.

He made it sound like a police interrogation.

"Are we crime suspects?" I quipped, giving myself a mental slap. No one my age would ever jump to my ridiculous conclusion. I'm many years older than Adam. He could be with a woman twenty years my junior.

And yet, with age comes honed intuition.

Unless I'm going crazy—which given my recent choices is a distinct possibility—there's a genuine and intense attraction, from both sides.

Things with Adam are becoming confusing. I need to recalibrate which is why I decided to go for a run.

At first, the rhythmic slapping of my feet against the pavement helps clear my mind. But as I find my stride, my thoughts drift back to the electrifying kiss.

The memory plays on a loop, each detail vividly etched in my brain. The way his lips brushed against mine, the warmth of his touch, and the overwhelming surge of emotions that coursed through my veins. It was a moment that took me by surprise, leaving me breathless and craving more.

I spend the hour-long run consumed by swirling thoughts and unanswered questions. So much for clearing my mind.

Exhausted and sweaty, I return to the house, my body screaming with both fatigue and exhilaration. I notice the empty driveway. Adam's car is gone and the Porsche is still at The Rocky Roastery.

I knock. When no one answers, I let myself in with the code Adam gave me. I pass through the foyer and down the hall, neither seeing nor hearing Adam. He must be out on an errand. Good thing, as I need a shower desperately.

In my room, I reach for my phone, intending to check for any missed calls or messages. But as I press the power button, the screen remains dark and lifeless.

Plugging it into the charger, I wait anxiously for it to come back to life. After several minutes, it's still dead. A bolt of panic fills me.

I'm alone in the wilderness with no cell signal. The likelihood of a house phone is slim. No one Adam's age bothers with landlines. I never thought to ask him how to log in to his Wi-Fi so I can't access email either.

Any lingering benefits from the run vanish as I realize if something were to happen to me, no one would ever know.

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“Get a grip,” I tell myself,

I fight to stop my downward spiral. Surely, Adam will be back soon. This is nothing like that other time. With Marco.

I mean, the only connection is a dead phone. So, why am I thinking about that awful incident now?

Because I met someone I truly care about.

With determination, I undress and get into the shower. Adam is not Marco, I tell myself emphatically. Far from it. By the time I get out, I feel more relaxed, the scent of the sandalwood body wash filling the bathroom. I wipe off the mirror’s condensation, studying myself, annoyed with my earlier panic attack. Even if Adam is now on his way to Hawaii, I would manage if something went wrong. I’d find a neighbor, use their phone, get to my car and drive back to the hotel. I am not helpless. Not anymore.

“Evie?”

My body fills with relief hearing Adam’s voice. He’s here. He hasn’t left me.

“I’ll be right out!” I shout, my entire mood shifting in an instant.

“I picked up some wine and cheese. It’s movie night!” Then, “Your bag is outside the door.”

Sure enough, my suitcase is there. Either Adam drove all the way to Merced to pick it up or he hired a magical delivery service.

I know my insecurities need attention, but now is not the time. I extract my makeup kit and dab on some tinted moisturizer, two coats of mascara, lip gloss and at the last minute, a spritz of perfume, aware I am acting like a schoolgirl with a burning crush. It's date night and I am going to be ready.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Evie

I dig through my suitcase. The sole item that isn't hiking clothes or flannel is a short-sleeve swimsuit cover-up. I bought the purple blousy frock on a trip with Caroline to Hawaii. Eight years ago. Not exactly high fashion. At the last minute, I tossed it into the bag along with my bikini, expecting that Caroline and I would take a soak in the resort's hot tub.

I throw it over my head. It's better than nothing.

Literally. Better than if I wore nothing. I'm not sure Adam would agree.

"Get your mind out of the gutter," I whisper to myself.

After another glance in the mirror, I grab my phone, hoping Adam has a suggestion for where to repair it. I'm halfway out the door when the screen flickers on.

Thank heavens. Disaster averted.

I kick myself for how I reacted to a dead phone. After years of working on being a truly independent woman, one hiccup has thrown off my mojo.

Ding. Ding. Ding.

My heart skips a beat when I see a string of missed calls and urgent messages. Jeffrey, Caroline, and my boss, Bill the Bull.

My son Jeffrey has left several voicemails, his voice tinged with worry. “Mom, this is my third try. It’s Sunday for heaven’s sake.”

Sunday has come and gone in Rome, our usual day for weekly calls, and I had missed it entirely. By the fourth message, he went so far as to call the local Yosemite hospital searching for me.

Overwhelmed with guilt, I quickly dial Jeffrey’s number. He answers on the second ring.

“Mom, where have you been?” he asks, his words rushing out. He sounds wide awake. It’s two in the morning over there. I feel terrible.

“I’m so sorry, honey,” I choke with emotion, much of it left over from my earlier panic. If the situation were reversed, I’d be beside myself. “My phone died, and I didn’t realize it.”

Jeffrey sighs, the tension in his voice melting into understanding. “It’s okay, Mom. Just promise me you’ll stay in touch. You scared me half to death.”

I never thought I’d hear my youngest speak this way.

“I promise, sweetheart,” I reassure him, my eyes welling up with tears. “I’ll make sure it doesn’t happen again. Are you all right?”

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He hesitates, then says, “Yeah. All good now.”

I suspect something is going on between him and his father but I hold my tongue. Jeffrey is an adult now and unless he chooses to share, I won’t get involved.

“The popcorn is turning cold,” Adam calls out, cheerfully.

“Mom? Who’s that?”

I pause, unsure of how to broach the topic. “Well, I met someone recently. His name is Adam, and we’ve been spending some time together.” I omit the strange deal we’ve struck.

Jeffrey remains silent for a moment, as if processing the news. Then he yawns, loudly.

Adam is now standing in the doorway, eyeing me with concern.

I say into the phone, “Honey, why don’t you go back to sleep. We’ll speak again next Sunday or whenever you like. I want to hear all about your studies, when you’re awake. Sorry again for worrying you. Love you.”

I’m about to end the call when I hear my son add, “I’m glad you found someone, Mom.”

Clearly, I’ve sent the wrong message. He seems to think Adam and I are dating, for real. “Actually, I?—”

“You sound happy. Just make sure he treats you right. Because if he doesn’t I’m coming for him.”

My baby is turning into a protective young man. If only I could slide through the phone and give him a big sloppy kiss. My eyes meet Adam’s. “You have nothing to worry about,” I say into the phone. “I’m in very good hands.”

Five minutes after ending the call with my son, I’m seated on the delicious sofa, a giant bowl of popcorn the dividing line between me and Adam. I shoot out a quick text to Caroline saying I’ll call her in the morning.

There’s no point in calling Bill the Bull. The office is closed. Why he’s calling on my time off, on a weekend, is beyond me. And a bit alarming. But there’s nothing to do about it now. I’ll deal with whatever it is in the morning. I drum my fingers on the edge of the bowl.

“Want to talk about it?” Adam asks, fiddling with the remote control. Clearly, he’s picked up on my disquiet.

I consider his offer. We’re supposed to learn everything about each other before Steph and Brad’s wedding. But telling Adam about my earlier panic or about my boys’ lives is too much, too soon. “I’m good. Thanks anyway.”

Before I know it, Adam and I are watching Monty Python and the Holy Grail, laughing our heads off, all my earlier angst fading away.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Evie

I wake up on the sofa. Again. Blinking against the sun shining through the blinds, I

decide the sofa is my new boyfriend. Warm and embracing, I love it. I stare blankly at the modern, curved light fixtures on the ceiling, wondering if Adam would consider parting with the buttery soft couch.

Clearly, I'm losing my mind. The last day and a half have been somewhat mind-altering. Not only the confusing emotions but keeping track of all the facts I will need to pass the smell test at Steph and Brad's wedding. Still, if this is Groundhog Day, where each day is a copy of the one before it, I'll be just fine. It's been a great time.

The weekend celebration is starting in three days, and other than a handful of memorized stats and the occasional background milestones, Adam remains a stranger. Of course, the reverse is true as well. I have seventy-two hours to catch up on thirty-seven years. Or in his case, fifty.

Fifty.

When on Earth did that happen? Just yesterday, I was picking up my toddlers from preschool, listening to their rapid-fire revelations—everything from time machines to Star Wars—from the backseat of our minivan, heading home to make supper for them and my husband.

Now, I'm a divorced empty nester.

If I dwell on it too long, it will take me down a melancholic road I have no intention of revisiting. After Marco left me—in the abominable way he did—I thought my life was over. But my pity party was short-lived. I had two exceptional sons in my care. Drowning myself in self-pity was a luxury I couldn't afford. Thankfully, it was my salary that had been supporting the family, not Marco's. With the help of friends and family, I landed on my feet. I'd be lying if I said there are no lingering scars. There are, for sure, but I take pride in how I came out the other side mostly intact.

I shake off the reverie and pick up my phone. 7:23. It's early. But not too early in New York. Rather than text, I dial Caroline's phone.

"Where the hell have you been?" Caroline shouts, omitting any form of greeting.

"Hello to you, too." I'm fully awake now. "Okay, sorry. My phone died, and then it was too late to call you."

Caroline sighs. "I tried reaching you like eighty-seven times. I thought maybe you fell off a cliff or something."

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The irony in her words isn't lost on me. "Funny you should mention falling."

"Oh no! Are you hurt? I'll send Paul to get you. The medical care will be far better here in New York?—"

I cut her off. "Not me. Actually, not anyone. I'm fine. I'll explain in a second. First, tell me how you're feeling. When are you getting discharged?"

"Calvin says it will probably be Monday. Then I'll need physicaltherapy twice a week. He recommended his colleague on Park Avenue."

"Calvin? I'll take a stab in the dark here. He's your doctor."

"He's an outstanding physician. Very dedicated."

I hear the smile in Caroline's words. "Is he, now? What else is he?"

"Hold on. He's my doctor. That's all. And we're not talking about me. What's been happening there? You're all alone traipsing through the mountains. I don't know what I was thinking pushing you to go without me." Then, "How's the resort?"

"It was great."

"Was?"

"Um, I'm staying at a . . . friend's house."

“You don’t have any friends near Yosemite.”

I could argue, but Caroline knows everyone in my life. “Fine. I met someone.”

I hear shuffling, as if Caroline is sitting up. “You’re having a fling? I’m speechless.”

“What? No! Adam is?—”

“Adam. Nice name. Wait, Adam and Eve. That’s priceless! Okay, spill it and don’t leave out even one single detail.”

I lean back against the sofa cushion, wrapping the throw around my shoulders, and proceed to tell my best friend all that transpired. I lower my voice, hoping I didn’t wake Adam.

“That’s some insane story. I can’t believe you’re going to that wedding as his fake fiancée. This is so out of character for you.”

I know it’s not a judgmental comment. If anything, Caroline approves.

“It’s crazy. But honestly, who’s going to be hurt by this? It will help Adam, and I’ll make up for almost killing him.”

“I see what you mean, Evie, but how can I put this?” She pauses. “Lying is an art. And you are a novice. No offense.”

“Nonetaken.”

“So, his sister . . .”

“Steph.”

“Right. She works for the FBI.” Caroline says it with a touch of disbelief.

I force my toes between the velvet cushions. “That’s what I’m told.”

“If you’re caught, she probably won’t take it too well.”

Caroline has a point. “She won’t find out.”

“How exactly are you going to explain your quick departure from Adam’s life the moment the wedding weekend is over?”

“Well . . . we haven’t worked out that detail yet.”

“Mhmm.”

“What?”

“You’re screwed.”

I make a mental note to address the post-wedding explanation. Maybe Adam will say we realized we weren’t meant for each other. Nah, too vague. Or we took things too fast. Or the age gap was too much to overcome? Hmm, maybe. We need to figure this one out.

I shove the throw aside and drag myself off the couch, walking barefoot to the back windows. The pool shimmers in the daylight, steam rising from its surface. I have a strong pull to jump in.

“Caroline?”

“Hmm?”

“It’s not a big deal or anything, but Adam’s younger than I am.”

“That’s okay. It’s in vogue now.”

“Thirteen years younger.”

“Whoa.” Caroline’s voice drops an octave.

Over the phone, I hear noise in the background. “Someone there, Caroline?”

“The nurse. Please go on.”

I open the back door and step out into the cool air. “I’ll have to call you tomorrow.”

“You sure you’re okay?”

“Yep. There’s something I need to do.”

I say goodbye to Caroline and strip down to my underwear. Bracing myself, I count to three and jump into the deep end of the pool.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Evie

Breaking through the water’s surface, I feel the cool air enveloping my wet skin, sending goosebumps dancing across my body. Water droplets glisten on my bare shoulders and cling to my damp hair, cascading down in tiny rivulets. I can’t remember the last time I did something so impulsive and exhilarating.

Pathetic, I think. A spontaneous, early morning jump into a heated pool is the most adventurous act I can recall in recent history. But as I survey my surroundings, an enlightening thought occurs to me, and a smile tugs at the corners of my lips.

I’m in Yosemite, miles away from my usual routine and responsibilities. Despite the last-minute upheaval with Caroline’s accident, I took the trip alone. And here I am, swimming in the pool of a captivatingly handsome man named Adam. It’s a reminder that I took a leap of faith, embraced the unknown, and allowed myself to be daring, for a change.

Floating on my back, I look up at the sky, mesmerized by the fluffy clouds drifting lazily above me. The weight of the world lifts from my shoulders, and a sense of peace comes over me. The worries and stresses that have been consuming me in recent months are replaced by a welcome serenity. My boys are okay, thriving as young adults, making their way in the world. My best friend is on the mend. My fear of getting close to someone again . . .well, the jury is still out on that one.

“Be in the moment,” I whisper.

I imagine the pool water washing away my burdens. I stretch out my limbs, allowing myself to fully focus on the senses. The smell of pine, the rustling leaves, the cool, lapping water cradling me. But lying here, in my meditative state, suspended in this calm oasis, a surge of reality breaks through. I glance towards the house, aware that Adam could wake up at any minute.

I close my eyes, determined to milk the last moments of tranquility. My mind floods with the memory of the epic kiss. No matter what I tell myself, the passion in that kiss was real. As real as the warming sun on my bare torso.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Adam

I stir from my slumber, my mind still tangled in the remnants of a vivid dream. Images of Evie dance through my subconscious, leaving an indelible mark that clings to my waking thoughts. I rub my eyes and the faint sound of splashing water jolts me from my sleepy haze.

Confused, I glance at my phone. 7:47 blinks back at me. Someone is in my pool.

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Maybe it's the neighbor's dog again, that collie who always finds his way into my yard.

Careful not to wake Evie, I tread softly down the hallway, pausing outside the closed guestroom door. The urge to see her is overwhelming.

Since setting eyes on Evie at Yosemite Sam's, I can't shake thoughts of her. She's distinctly feminine, with a kind soul. Add to that, athletic, funny, and uniquely alluring—the kind of woman I've always envisioned being with.

Getting to know her over the last couple of days has been a delight, but I'm no fool. She has a life in New York, grown sons, and a career.

Silence from her room tells me she's still fast asleep.

I step outside onto the patio and come to a full stop. Evie is floating blissfully in the swimming pool, her eyes closed. Illuminated by the soft morning light, she looks like an angel. In pink lacy underwear.

I'm momentarily speechless, unable to tear my gaze away from her. My heart quickens. I've been dreaming of her, and now, here she is, leaving me in awe of her carefree spirit.

Approaching the poolside, I take in her toned arms and long legs. I could walk away, and she'd never know I was here.

But where's the fun in that?

"Good morning," I say softly, so as not to startle her.

Evie's eyes pop open, her cheeks flushed as she crosses her arms across her chest. In doing so, her legs descend, and she begins treading water.

"Sorry, I couldn't resist," she says, quickly recovering, her voice carrying a hint of playful innocence and perhaps a dare.

Is she flirting with me?

I too can't resist and in one swift motion, I strip off my t-shirt and dive into the pool, creating a splash that mingles with her surprised laughter.

I resurface, water cascading down my chest and close the distance between us.

Our eyes lock, the connection crackling in the air, sparking a fire deep in my gut. At this proximity, all I can focus on are her full, wet lips.

My self-control evaporates and I reach for her. Her eyes widen, her mouth forming a delightful, inviting smile.

And then something hits my forehead.

In an instant, large droplets pelt the water's surface, followed by a crack of thunder. Startled, Evie breaks away, swimming to the edge of the pool. The spell is shattered.

I follow her, shivering more from excitement than cold. The absurdity of the timing hits me, and I can't help but laugh. Together, we scramble back to the house, the two of us dripping wet, leaving puddles on the wood planks.

As Evie runs to the guestroom, her laughter trailing behind, it dawns on me that

something powerful and exhilarating has shifted between us.

I have every intention of exploring it.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Evie

I clutch my mug of steaming coffee, finding it hard to make eye contact with Adam, sitting across from me at the kitchen table. I'm wearing the lush terry robe he gave me to wear after the deluge. The initials AD are sown on the breast pocket, the belt cinched around my waist. Adam's scent is all over me. I may never get dressed again.

When he materialized by the poolside and stripped off his shirt, revealing sculpted muscles beneath, I couldn't hide my astonishment. Then, when he gracefully dove into the pool, surprise quickly turned to excitement.

Watching him swim toward me, his strong strokes bringing him closer, I knew he was planning to kiss me. And then, when his lips were right there?—

“Evie, are you okay?”

I blink away the sultry memory and take a sip of my coffee, finding my voice. “That storm was crazy. It came out of nowhere. The sky was blue with only a few clouds. Then, bam!”

Despite making an attempt to sound light and airy, I'm babbling on. I'm wound up tight.

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Adam chuckles, and I meet his eye. He looks different. Maybe embarrassed?

Did I imagine the entire thing? Maybe he was just being playful. Sheesh, I almost kissed him.

I chide myself for once again second-guessing my instincts, letting insecurity and doubt fill my mind.

Adam goes to the large bay window, looking out. He keeps his back to me. “It can get like that out here. In June, I was hiking in the park and was hit with ten minutes of pounding hail. The climate out here is constantly changing. Very different from the coasts.” He pauses and turns around, his face serious. “About earlier... in the pool?—”

I feel the heat rise to my face. And then my phone rings. Bill the Bull.

I’m dying to know what Adam wants to tell me. At least I think I do. But something is up at the office. “It’s my boss,” I say. “I should take this.”

“Of course,” Adam says, grabbing an apple from the table and taking a bite. He seems nervous.

I excuse myself and go into the living room. Heavy raindrops bounce off the surface of the pool and onto the cement, leaving puddles all around. “Hi, Bill. Sorry I missed your call yesterday. My phone died.”

“I see.”

His tone is curt. I picture him sitting behind his desk, his slicked-back hair stuck in place with heavy-handed pomade.

“What’s going on? You never call on weekends.”

“How’s your vacation?”

Alarm bells are going off in my head. Bill the Bull never asks how things are on my end. The wind picks up, the rain pounding on the glass door, droplets streaming down the glass like thick tears. “What’s going on, Bill?” I repeat.

“I got a call from Jerry late on Friday. I didn’t want to ruin your vacation.”

Jerry is the firm’s CEO and Bill’s father-in-law. I can’t imagine what this is about.

“Please come out with it. You’re scaring me.”

“Remember when attorneys from Becker and Stone came by a couple of months ago?”

I wrack my muddled brain, pulling up the memory. The rival firm had previously attempted a hostile takeover of Stilton and Everett then switched tactics, offering a merger. Jerry had been wary, and I suspected the deal never got past the first meeting. Especially since I hadn’t heard a word about it since. “Yes, what of it? Did they hammer out a deal?”

“Yes, yes, we did.”

Something in the way he’s speaking gives me pause. Is Bill taking over the reins from Jerry? God, I hope not. Without Jerry’s oversight, he’ll run the place into the ground.

“The deal was being kept quiet. I wanted to give you more of a heads up, but?—”

A pang of dread runs through me.

“What happened!” I hear myself shouting and quickly bring it under control. “Bill, tell me everything . . . please.”

I end the call and walk to the patio door. The sun is peeking out from behind the scattering clouds. Pulling the robe tighter around my waist, I step outside and dissolve into a puddle of tears.

I hear the patio door open behind me. I don't turn around.

Adam keeps a respectful distance. “I'm sorry, Evie. I couldn't help but overhear some of your conversation.”

I must have been terribly loud if he could hear me from the kitchen over the pounding storm. A wave of embarrassment rushes over me as I recall Bill's final patronizing words. “You'll find something else.”

I'm fifty years old. Finding a job will be near impossible at this stage in my career.

I swipe at my face, speaking softly. “I just got canned.”

“Oh.” Then, “Was it unexpected?”

“Very much so. I'm blindsided.”

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As I say those words, something pulls at me. Bill had to have known this was coming down the pike yet he never said a word. Actually, the scumbag tried guilt-tripping me for going on vacation. My blood is boiling now, the anger a living, breathing thing.

I turn around, suddenly seized by a sense of determination. Adam stands in front of me, chewing on his bottom lip.

Speaking more to myself than to him, I say, “I made it too easy on my boss. I won’t go down without a fight.”

It’s as if a switch is flicked. I feel remarkably energized. “I need to go back to New York. As soon as possible. I’m so sorry. I know I committed to helping you at your sister’s wedding, but this phone call changes everything.”

Adam frowns but doesn’t argue. “Can you tell me about it?”

“No time,” I say, rushing past him. “I need to pack. But I’ll call you as soon as I deal with this and catch you up.”

“But—”

I stop cold. What am I doing?

I turn around, feeling awful. Adam looks shell-shocked. I go over to him and take his hand. Filled with conflict, I speak softly. “Thank you for your hospitality. These last few days have been incredible. I will find another way to make it up to you. I promise.”

I turn away and this time, hurry inside.

Chapter Thirty

Adam

I can't believe what's happening. Everything was going great and now, in a matter of minutes, things have turned upside down.

Evie is leaving.

In the blur, I try to come up with something to say to slow her down, to stop her. But she has that look. One I know well because I get that same impassioned look when I'm on a mission. At those times, no one can stand in my way.

Still, how can I just stand here and let her go? There's something undeniable growing between us, something I've never felt before.

When she held my hand, saying she'll find a way to make it right, it took every ounce of self-control not to pull her into my arms, to kiss her with a passion like no other. To tell her to stay. Beg her to stay. But I didn't.

She's made up her mind.

I stand helpless, watching her race through the living room toward the guest room.

And then the doorbell rings.

Chapter Thirty-One

Evie

The hurt on Adam's face nearly changes my mind. But I'm in hyper-mode. If I don't leave now, I'll be out of a job for sure. This way, at least I have a glimmer of hope at saving my career and livelihood.

Passing through the living room, Adam still frozen at the patio door, I hear the doorbell ring. Pulling the robe's lapels tighter, I hurry to the door, swinging it open.

There stands a colorfully dressed woman in her early sixties, her jet black, chin-length hair, teased and sprayed into submission. She has several rings on her brightly-polished manicured hands. At the sight of me, her gaze flicks to my ring finger, then widens into something akin to disbelief. Like pools of ink, her eyes turn dark and watery. To her credit, she recovers quickly, a glimmer of a smile touching her red lips.

"Ah, finally," the woman says, "You must be the infamous Ronna. I can't tell you how happy I am to meet you."

I stand back in confusion as the woman steps past me and walks inside the house. A whiff of Jean Naté touches my nose, a scent I haven't breathed in since my grandma was around. And then it dawns on me.

Who knows about Ronna? Except for . . .

There is no other explanation.

I feel Adam's presence behind me.

This woman has to be Adam's?—

“Mom.”

Chapter Thirty-Two

Evie

To my great relief, Adam quickly materialized by my side, though his frozen smile and strained voice do little to mask his shock. I, myself, am speechless, my mind awirl. The moment of truth has come a lot sooner than expected.

Adam places a supportive hand on my waist. Or maybe it's just for show.

Let the games begin.

The woman has been fixated on me since I opened the door. Now, a smile spreads across her face. She opens her arms wide, startling me when she brings me in for a tight squeeze before stepping back to study me once more.

“Anna Demetrius,” she says, as if introducing herself is an afterthought. I note a slight accent in her voice.

Adam speaks up. “Mom, what are you doing here?”

Anna pats her son's face. “You don't need to look so panicked, kardia mou. I was in the area?—”

Adam gives his mother a look of incredulity, ignoring what I gather is a term of endearment. “Really? That’s what you’re opening with?”

Anna squeezes past and makes a beeline to the kitchen. Apparently, she knows her way around her son’s house. She opens the wine fridge, takes out a bottle, and in fifteen seconds has it open.

“Okay, fine. You know how they say trust but verify? This is me verifying.” She grins at Adam who appears to be restraining himself.

Anna pours herself a copious amount of Cabernet. “I’m so happy to meet you, Ronna. I had hoped it would be sooner, well before Steph and Brad’s wedding, but I understand you have a very demanding job.”

I am still recovering from the woman’s tornado-like entrance but couldn’t have asked for a better segue. “Actually, I was just leaving.”

Anna frowns. “Oh?”

“There was an emergency at work. I’m terribly sorry but it appears I’ll be missing the wedding.” I begin to step away, Adam’s hand falling from my waist.

“Wait,” Anna says.

I turn back.

“I know an excuse when I hear one.”

“Sorry?”

Anna sets her glass down on the countertop and takes my hand, one of her large silver

rings digging into my palm. “I also know I can come off a bit strong sometimes.” Her gaze flits to Adam and back again to me. “Please don’t leave. I’m sure whatever came up at work can be managed after the wedding.”

I glance at Adam. He’s nodding! Clearly, he isn’t going to be of any help whatsoever.

Everything is happening so fast. Meeting Anna, being called Ronna, Adam’s look of desperation . . . my vanishing career.

“I’m really sorry,” I repeat. “But this is a time-sensitive emergency.”

Anna’s face falls. Before she can speak further, Adam says, “Mom, can Ronna and I speak privately for a moment?”

I glance at the time lit up on the oven door. If I don’t get back to New York immediately to fight for my job, I can kiss my career goodbye. “I need to pack.”

“Please, Ronna. I deserve that much, don’t I? You know, for nearly shoving me off the mountain.”

Anna’s eyes widen. Noting her shock, I say, “He means that figuratively, of course. Don’t you . . . darling?”

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“Of course.” Adam’s eyes are locked on mine. If I’m not mistaken, there’s pleading in them.

I sigh. “Yes, of course you do.”

“Go ahead, you lovebirds. I’ll be here waiting.” Anna sits on a barstool by the kitchen counter and takes a long sip from her glass.

Adam grasps my hand and leads me to the hallway. And then to his bedroom. It’s the one room I have not yet seen. And it has Adam written all over it. Whimsical art on the walls, lots of high-gloss wood, and earth-toned linens on a perfectly made king-size bed. Does Adam know how to make hospital corners or have housekeeping elves come by undetected?

I could swear his scent is emanating from the ensuite. Maybe it’s his shower gel.

Stay focused!

I need to get back to New York. With my hands tucked into the pockets of my robe, I watch Adam shut the door behind us.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Adam

I can’t believe my luck. The last few minutes couldn’t have played out any better, even if I had orchestrated them myself. My mother’s surprise visit feels like a

blessing in disguise. With her persuasive skills combined with mine, we might just convince Evie to stay.

Glancing at Evie's expression, I note her determination and perhaps, a hint of skepticism. I need to tread lightly.

"Adam, why is your mom here?" Evie asks, her voice tinged with uncertainty.

I run a hand through my hair, trying to appear composed. "Who knows with my mother, but my assumption is it's exactly what she said. They want to make sure you're real. Or that Ronna is real. I suspect Steph put her up to it. You did great, by the way."

"Thanks," Evie replies, then shakes her head. "That's probably because I didn't say much." Her tone softens. "As much as I'd like to keep my word, I have to go home and save my job. Tell your mother whatever you need, and I'll back you up, okay?"

She turns toward the door, her hand hovering over the knob.

"What if I sweeten the deal?" I blurt out.

Evie's hand freezes. She looks back at me, folding her arms in front of her with a sigh. Frustration is written all over her face.

I know I have one shot at this, and I'm not going to miss it.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Evie

A whirlwind of conflicting emotions runs through my mind as I face Adam. But the

prevalent one is fear. I'm jobless. Unless I do something about it. Now.

It doesn't help that Adam appears not to be taking my situation seriously enough.

Exasperated, I ask, "Why does it feel like this is all a game to you?"

I hadn't intended to let out my frustration on Adam, but he obviously has no clue how the other half lives. "Not everyone is a self-made gazillionaire. This is my livelihood you're joking about."

Adam exhales audibly, then sits down on the edge of his perfectly made bed. "I'm dead serious, Evie. Please hear me out."

If I'm being honest, I've been hoping for something—anything—to keep me right where I am. In Yosemite with Adam. The few days we've spent together, getting to know each other, were some of the best I can remember. But Bill's call, unceremoniously laying me off, is a reality I can't afford to ignore.

I need to pack up and get to the airport before I miss the last flight out. The hold-up, thanks to Anna's unexpected visit, is not helping.

But Adam is asking me to hear him out. I owe him at least that much. I gesture for him to continue.

He must see the near-panic on my face and frowns, then pats the space next to him.

I sit.

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And swallow hard, trying to keep the tears from falling. The weight of being fired is hitting home.

Adam puts his arm around me. “It’s going to be okay, Evie. I promise.”

Something in the way he speaks gives me a sense of comfort. I rest my head on his shoulder, our breath the only sounds in the room. My heart flutters in my chest.

Adam whispers my name. I lift my head, meet his eyes.

He’s going to kiss me. My breath comes faster with anticipation.

With all that’s happening, I want nothing more than to be consoled by this man.

He leans his head down.

“Adam!”

I nearly fall off the bed.

Adam jumps up. “Don’t move a muscle.” He opens the bedroom door and calls out.

“Yeah, Mom?”

“Where are the martini olives?”

“In the fridge.”

We hear some movement, things banging in the kitchen. “Found them!”

Adam shuts the door. This time he remains standing.

"You were saying?" I ask, trying hard to recalibrate.

“Right.” He too picks up on the mood shift. “After my appsold, I founded several startups. I’ve been planning to hire in-house counsel to handle all the legal aspects of the business.”

“Okay. . .”

“How would you like the job?”

It’s the last thing I expect him to say. I simply stare at him, waiting for the punch line. But Adam’s face is serious.

“You can start after the wedding. It will require a great deal of negotiation with potential investors and?—”

“That’s not my area of expertise. I’m a negligence lawyer.”

“I’m sure you can learn most of it on the job.”

It’s ludicrous. “I live in New York.”

“We have an office in Manhattan. You’ll work on our New York subsidiaries.”

“You havesubsidiaries?”

He shrugs. “You’ll be doing me a huge favor,” he says. “I can’t show up to my

sister's wedding without Ronna. I will never live it down."

Having met Adam's mother for only three minutes, it occurs to me he may not be exaggerating. It feels like being dropped into a scene from *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*. "That bad?"

"It's what I've been trying to tell you all along. They are wonderful people but . . . overly involved. Now that my mother has met you in person, Ronna has to be you." He purses his lips, tilting his head. "Unless of course you have a twin sister."

I can't help but laugh. I shake my head. "No such luck."

"That's what I thought."

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I note the twinkle in his eyes. “You’re incorrigible.”

“And irresistible.” He grins.

“And desperate.”

“Yes, definitely desperate.” He feigns puppy dog eyes. “So, is that a yes?”

“I don’t know . . .”

Adam asks, “Did you like your job?”

“Sometimes.”

“Your boss?”

“Definitely not.”

“Well, I’m offering you an alternative. And I’ll up whatever you were making by ten percent.”

I’m flabbergasted. “Why are you doing this, Adam? It can’t simply be to save face with your family.”

I don't add what I'm really thinking. While Anna is a woman with a big personality, she seems kind and fun and most of all, she’s Adam’s mother. Why is he so set on lying to her?

As if reading my mind, he says, “I know how this makes me look but you saw how happy it made my mother to meet you. The whole family is ecstatic that I’m finally settling down. It’s what they’ve been wishing for since I graduated college.” He looks at me pleadingly. “Please, Evie.”

I’m certain there’s more to the story. I have so many questions. But I decide to let it go for now. I can hear the ruckus coming from the kitchen. “What if I don’t like working for you?” I say, jokingly but Adam appears to take the question seriously.

“If you’re not happy, you can leave at any time. I’ll even help you find another position in New York. How does that sound?”

There’s no way I’ll make it to the airport in time. And anyhow, I know the odds of getting my job back from Bill the Bull are slim. Adam is throwing me a lifeline. I’d be a fool to reject his offer. It’s manna from heaven.

“We have a deal.”

In an instant, Adam’s face brightens. “That’s great!” He pulls me in for a hug. Clearly, this is a family of huggers. I could get used to that.

“Adam!”

Seriously?

I step back, calmer than I’ve felt since receiving the call from Bill. “What now?”

“Now we put all those hours of practice to good use with my mother . . . before she finds the vodka.”

“I guess that means I’m Ronna, your adoring fiancée.”

Adam nods, unsuccessfully hiding a devilish smirk. “Ready?”

I open the bedroom door. “Let’s do this. It’s showtime!”

Chapter Thirty-Five

Adam

“S

he’s stunning,” Mom says, before draining her martini and biting the green olive off the toothpick, swallowing it blissfully.

“She is, isn’t she,” I grin.

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Remarkably, Evie and I have kept all the facts straight. The days of practice have paid off. My mother is sold on our engagement. After what amounted to the third degree, Evie—or Ronna as she's reliably responding to—went to rest. From being laid off to meeting my whirlwind of a mother, it's clear she's drained.

When I thought Evie was ready to leave and go back to New York to save her job, I knew I had to think fast. Those moments when I had no idea what was going on in that beautiful head of hers were grueling. And telling.

My reaction was visceral. I needed to stop her from leaving. Not in a creepy, hanger-on sort of way. But in a 'things won't ever be the same if she leaves' sort of way.

I'm falling. Hard.

But now she's tucked away in the guest room, probably asleep. She's going to the wedding. And I'm overjoyed.

I've never felt anything remotely similar. I need to make sense of my fierce feelings for Evie.

Maybe it's infatuation.

The thought doesn't give me peace.

With my mother's piercing gaze locked on me, now is not the time for analysis paralysis.

I place my mother's glass in the dishwasher. "I'm happy you like her, Mom."

Mom seems to be considering whether to speak up. Then she says, "It's obvious why you were keeping her from us but it wasn't necessary."

Seeing the confusion on my face, she adds, "We would have come around in time."

"Mom, subtlety isn't your strong suit. What are you talking about?"

"Ronna is beautiful and intelligent. Clearly an accomplished woman."

"But?"

Mom turns away, opening the fridge, pulling out a bag of carrot sticks, eyeing it like it's a toxic substance. "No but. Just?—"

"Mom."

"You never once mentioned the age discrepancy."

I sigh. "I'm not discussing this now, Mom."

"Okay, okay."

Mom looks like she's going to implode. She drums her pointy nails on the countertop.

"What is she, like ten years older than you?"

My irritation flares but I keep my tone in check. "Why does that matter? Wasn't Grandma older than Grandpa?"

Mom seems to consider my words. "Yes . . . by four years, not ten."

No point in telling her it is actually thirteen. Or that Evie has grown children.

“It’s obvious you’re head over heels.” She takes my hand in hers. “Which is what every mother wants to see.”

I feel a wave of relief and warmth for my wild and crazy mom. Even as the thought creeps into my head, Does Evie think I’m too young for her?

Mom pulls her phone from her jacket. “Let’s get Stephanie on the line. She’s going to be overjoyed.”

Before I can decline, my sister’s face is filling the screen, furrows of wrinkles lining her forehead. Who says all brides are happy?

Steph blows out a breath of frustration, then smiles, unconvincingly. “Hey, Adam. How’s your phantom fiancée?”

It doesn’t seem to matter that we’re in our thirties. Or that my sister is about to be a married woman. Some things, like sibling rivalry, remain the same.

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Before I can come back with a zinger of my own, our mother intervenes. “Actually, Ronna is real.”

Stephanie’s face registers genuine surprise. “As in a flesh-and-blood woman with a heartbeat?”

I roll my eyes.

Mom says, “Ronna is lovely. She was planning to put out some work fires back in New York but we convinced her to still come to the wedding. Or I should say, Adam did.”

“I’m surprised. You never wanted us to meet the women in your life. I thought you’d come up with some dopey excuse at the eleventh hour.” She frowns. “You’re not going to do that, right, Adam?”

I shake my head. “I’m making an exception for your wedding.”

Finally, a genuine smile. “Thanks, bro.”

Somewhere off in the distance, we hear someone call Stephanie’s name.

“It’s my makeup artist. We’re doing a trial.” Her face turns grouchy. “If my bridesmaids don’t show up in the next five minutes, I’m going to fire each one of them. That will mean Ronna is going to get the job . . . now that I know she’s not a figment of your imagination. Tell her to be ready to step up.”

I can't tell if she's kidding. Her moods are all over the place. If ever there was such a thing as a Bridezilla, it's Stephanie. "I don't see how?—"

Stephanie shouts something to an unseen party. To me, she says, "See you in a few days. Don't be late." And she ends the call.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Evie

I lie awake in the queen-size bed, thinking. The last few hours have been crazy. The moment I agreed to go public with the ruse, I switched gears, feeling an immediate sense of relief to not have to leave for a flight back to New York.

Now I'm Ronna.

Anna has clearly fallen for it.

Fallen for it.

I cringe. It makes me sound like a scheming con artist.

The situation which started out as a funny favor has now become real. But there's little I can do. Having met Anna and agreeing to attend Steph and Brad's wedding, I'm in too deep.

I yawn, the fatigue of the morning's stress suggesting I need sleep.

When several thought-flooded minutes elapse without slumber, I glance at my phone on the nightstand and do the math. It's afternoon in Rome. Jeffrey will be in the middle of his schoolday. I picture him, a hint of his earlier boyishness in his stubbly

cheeks.

Daniel, on the other hand, will be at his Manhattan desk, bleary-eyed, after a night of either binge-watching YouTube or out with friends.

Oh, how I miss my boys.

I spoke with Jeffrey after my phone died. But no word at all from Daniel.

I yawn once more and dial my eldest.

“Mom?” He sounds fully awake and mildly distracted.

“Yes, honey.”

“All okay?” Daniel asks.

“Just saying hi. It’s been a while. What are you up to?”

“Watching Breaking Bad.”

“It’s nearly noon.”

“And?”

I'm about to say, “Don’t you have a job?” then stop myself. I'm mothering him.

So what? I am his mother.

Still, I hold my tongue.

“Nothing. So, tell me how’s Donna?” I ask, in an attempt to change the subject to the more neutral topic of his girlfriend.

“Fine.”

One word and I know. Something is off. “What happened?”

Daniel sighs. “We hit a rough patch.”

“Did you break up?”

“It’s a trial separation.”

The words hit me like a locomotive. There’s no way he could know they were the exact words Marco said the day after he left me.

Leftus. Me and the boys.

I never considered Marco's insulting suggestion. By then it was beyond too little, too late. It was a slap in the face. But this is not about me. It's about Daniel.

"Oh, honey. I'm so sorry. Are you okay?"

"Getting there. It happened a few days ago. I'm taking a personal day."

I feel awful. Here I am wondering why he hasn't reached out to me and he needs me.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"You finally took a vacation, I didn't want to ruin it."

"Sweetheart, you can always ruin my vacation."

The absurdity of the words makes us both break out in laughter. "What I mean is, you can always call me, day or night. You know that, right?"

"Yeah, Mom. Thanks."

I can hear his breathing change, like he's holding back a sob. My heart breaks a little with him.

"How is your trip going?" Daniel asks, changing the subject once more.

"It's been great. Seems like it's going to be an unexpectedly extended one."

"Why is that?"

"Well, here's the thing. I just got fired."

After explaining what happened with Bill, and that I already lined up something new, Daniel says, “Sounds like it's working out.” Then, “Heard you met someone.”

Apparently my boys are in touch with each other, which makes me happy.

“You’d like Adam. But someone and the one are not necessarily the same.”

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A light chuckle. “Got it, Mom.”

I share with Daniel how my short-lived unemployment could lead to an exciting new role on the horizon. I tell him how I love the mountains, the clean air, and the slower pace of life. I share how I'm going to a wedding in Breckenridge, Colorado. He listens intently, asking questions.

We speak for twenty minutes. It's the best call we've had in along time. The conversation feels almost like speaking to a contemporary.

It's weird when kids become adults. And wonderful at the same time.

But he's still my child. Which is why I never mention that I now go by Ronna, the adoring fiancée of a man he has never met.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Evie

I stifle a yawn as I step into the kitchen, actually looking forward to more time with Anna. The woman is a hoot. After my call with Daniel I fell asleep, waking up rejuvenated. I'm in a great mood, like I slept off all my earlier stress. Nothing like a power nap. And gainful employment.

My hair is pulled up into a high ponytail, and my face is refreshingly makeup-free. I'm close to singing *A Natural Woman*. If only Aretha was here, we could pull off a duet.

Anna sits at the breakfast table, sipping a concoction of what appears to be ibuprofen and tomato juice—a fabled hangover cure. I hope it works; she looks like any sound, even a whisper, might cause her pain.

Adam stands at the kitchen counter, waiting for the bread to pop out of the toaster. He looks absolutely scrumptious.

Seeing me enter, he seems relieved. “Ronna!” he chirps, though his demeanor betrays more weariness than cheerfulness.

I can feel Anna’s eyes on us as Adam walks over and lightly kisses me on the lips. My heart does a somersault. Appearances certainly do rock.

Adam smells of argan oil, a scent I recognize from the resort I abandoned. It reminds me of how my birthday trip with Caroline has gone completely off the rails.

I wonder what the ladies in our Fab Fifty Club would think if they could see me now.

“Anna, how are you feeling?”

“Like I was hit by a steamroller,” she groans. Then, she adds, “For the record, your future mother-in-law is not an alcoholic. It’s just been a very intense few months.” She looks at Adam. “You know Steph.”

“Yep. She’s like a whirling dervish. You better get out of her way when she’s wound up. And?—”

In unison, mother and son said, “She’s always wound up.”

Adam adds, “You have to hand it to Brad, taking all that on.”

It's amusing seeing how mother and son describe his sister.

"She can't be that bad," I say.

Anna says, "Stephanie is not bad. Just intense. Very intense."

Adam explains further. "Good thing Brad is such a chilled out guy. She really lucked out."

For a fleeting moment, I'm not sure I want to meet this larger-than-life bride or run the other way, back to New York as fast as the airlines can take me.

Adam seems to realize how he and Anna are portraying things because his tone softens. "Steph will be thrilled to meet you. It's going to be the wedding of the year."

I meet his gaze. Sharing a secret with this man feels intimate and exciting. "I'm still going . . . honey. Don't worry."

Adam brightens and I can't tell if it's in response to my confirmation or the term of endearment. Either way, I'm stoked to have the power to make him smile. He's relying on me, his partner in crime.

After a snack of bread and jam, Anna stands, looking better by the minute. "Okay, time to hit the road."

"You're leaving already?" I ask.

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“Aww, sounds like you’ll miss me. How sweet. Yes, I need to get back to Colorado to help with last minute things. “You,” she points at me, “were one of those last minute things on my very lengthy list. I was directed to set my own eyes on you. Now I can cross that one off.”

Adam says, “I sent you the kissing photo you asked for. Why wasn’t that enough?”

“It was for me,” Anna says, offering an apologetic look. “Steph, however, was of the ridiculous belief that you paid a stranger to be in the photo with you.”

I see Adam fighting to keep his face in check. He’s going for offended and I admit he’s doing a fine job.

But sheesh. Steph sounds like a drill sergeant.

Adam steps away, returning with his mother's purse. “Okay, Mom,” he says, kissing her on the cheek. “Thanks for the surprise drop-in. I guess we’ll see you in a couple of days.”

Anna winks at me. “Subtle, isn’t he?”

I hug Anna who seems touched by the gesture. She’s an unusual woman, to say the least. If she’s the family matriarch, the rest of the crew will be an interesting bunch.

Adam closes the door behind his mother, turning to me. “We should leave soon as well.”

Surprised, I ask, “Why?”

I won’t admit it, but I’m excited for another day with him in this magnificent and secluded setting, alone.

I remind my slow-to-wake brain that he's no more than a friend.

At best, an acquaintance.

No, he is a friend.

Not my fiancé.

I blink away the thoughts. If I'm not vigilant, our carefully-crafted pretense will start feeling all too real.

Or maybe that ship has already left the dock.

I ask, “Does Steph need your help as well?”

Adam shakes his head. “No. And anyway, I wouldn’t risk my life showing up early and stepping into the line of fire. But we should leave fairly soon because we’re driving.”

“We are?”

If my geography is correct, we would need to drive clear across Nevada, Utah, and half of Colorado, all huge states. “Isn’t Breckenridge really far from here? Wouldn’t flying make more sense?”

Adam breaks eye contact. “I prefer driving. It’ll be fun.”

“How long are we talking?”

“It should take about seventeen hours if we don’t stop.”

“Seventeen hours?”

“Driving saves on emissions.”

I hadn’t picked up on Adam’s conservation vibes but Californians lead the way with that. “I don’t see how we can drive that far and not stop.”

Or be in the same car for so long together. Platonically.

“You’re right. We’ll find a place to stay overnight and break up the drive over two days. We should arrive with hours to spare before the rehearsal dinner. No problem.”

Adam turns away and walks into the living room.

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I follow. “I’m not sure about?—”

“I can’t fly.”

“Sorry?”

Adam plops down on the sofa. The blissful one I’ve fallen asleep on twice. “I hate airplanes. Have for as long as I can recall.”

“Oh, I see.” I mutter, feeling like an idiot. He tried to keep his phobia to himself. Why did I have to push so hard?

I sit beside him. Close enough to touch. An awkward silence ensues. Adam chews on his bottom lip. I recognize it as his nervous tell. He runs a hand through his thick mane, the cowlick falling into his eyes. I want desperately to fixit.

Adam sighs. “When I was fifteen, my best friend’s parents were flying to New York when the pilot made an emergency landing. Miraculously, everyone survived but Kevin’s mother was left with a distinct limp.

Needless to say, he passed his fear along to me.”

“You never fly?”

“There are times I have no choice. Business that can’t be done virtually, where driving is not an option or when a deal is time-sensitive. Then, I take a sleeping pill. Knocks me out until we land.”

I suspect that stating stats of how more accidents happen on the roads than in the skies is one he's heard countless times before. "Okay, we'll drive."

His shoulders loosen. "Thanks, Evie."

"I suppose I should go pack."

"Not yet."

He has a look in his eye, one I'm beginning to understand. Playful mischief.

"What exactly do you have in mind?" I ask, the butterflies in my stomach taking flight.

Adam stands, offering me a hand. "I want a rematch."

I grin, letting him help me up. "A game of pool?"

"What do you say?"

I'm already heading for the door. Over my shoulder, I call out, "I say, hold on to your wallet, Mr. Demetrius. You're about to get fleeced."

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Evie

Most of the tables in Yosemite Sam's are available when Adam and I arrive. The smell of grilling meat is mouthwatering. A young guy in a fedora takes a seat by a keyboard I didn't notice the last time I was here. A small space beside him has been cleared for dancing. Odd as it's barely lunch time.

Dorothy saunters over, gesturing to the musician. “Pete’s new. He’s rehearsing for the dinner crowd.” She gives us a closer look, then smiles. “I see the two of you remained friends.”

I’m ready to set the record straight when Adam nudges me under the table. I don’t understand why, given that the only people we need to fool are his family, who live far away. But I play along. “Yes, we’re getting to know each other,” I say.

“Really well,” Adam adds.

After taking our order of burgers, fries, and beers, Dorothy walks away. Adam answers my unasked question. “It’s important we play the part,” he says.

“Here?” I whisper.

Adam nods. “If we don’t break character, we have a good shot at pulling this off.”

The keyboard strikes up, the singer belting out, “It’s nine o’clock on a Saturday. . .”

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He sounds so much like Billy Joel, I crane my neck just to make sure.

I'm about to ask Adam what he means when he places his hand atop mine. It sends a spark of electricity through me. "How about a dance?" he asks.

"Dance?"

Adam grins. "Yeah, you know, we move our feet on the floor, hopefully in time with the music."

"I'm not sure that's such a good?—"

"Look, we are about to be at my sister's wedding, and there will be a lot of dancing. There's a certain synchrony between two people who have danced together before. We need to find it."

Adam has a point. It will look strange if we're awkward together.

I allow him to lead me to the dance floor. Before I know it, I'm in his arms, swaying to the singer's silky voice.

Sing us a song tonight.

I place my arms around Adam's neck, our eyes locking. Something sizzles in the air between us and it's not the grilling meat.

Another couple joins us on the dance floor. The scene feels so . . . normal. There was

nothing to worry about. No awkwardness. Just the opposite, in fact.

When the song ends, I'm breathless. My heart beats wildly in my chest. Adam's hands are still on my hips, pulling me closer.

"Adam!"

I'm so startled, for a moment I think Anna is back. Only with a falsetto voice.

We turn to see Zane making a beeline to our table, then coming to a full halt, his dreadlocks flopping with the unexpected loss of momentum. "Whoa, Nellie!" he shouts, gesturing to our now-intertwined hands. "What is happening here?"

I quickly remove my hand, feeling my face redden. Adam and I sit.

Zane asks Adam, "Something you forgot to tell me, bro?"

Adam shares a look with me. "He's safe."

Zane's face registers confusion, then he points between us. "Okay, what are you two up to?"

"Have a seat," Adam says.

Zane complies.

"Remember my dilemma?" Adam asks.

Zane furrows his brow. "You mean about Steph's wedding and your made-up fiancée . . . ohhhh . . . wow."

While Zane is processing, Adam explains to me, “Zane is the only person besides you who knows about my . . . situation.”

“I see.”

Zane says to me, “That makes you Ronna, I suppose.”

I nod.

“I can’t believe you’re going through with this whole thing, Adam. You know Steph’s gonna catch you.”

“She won’t. We have our story down pat. As a matter of fact, you can help by asking us questions and seeing if we’re consistent.”

“Sounds fun, but I’d rather play some pool, win my money back,” he says, eyeing me.

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“Come on, just a few questions.”

Zane gives it some thought. “Okay, Ev—I mean, Ronna, where did Adam lose his first tooth?”

I scrunch up my face. “How would you even know that if you two became friends as adults?”

Zane shrugs. “Because it’s a big story. But I’m sensing some deflection here.”

Adam frowns. “I never toldher that one.”

Zane shakes his head. “Come on, guys. That was my first question. You two are screwed.”

“Looks like we have more work to do,” I say.

“Good thing we have seventeen hours together in the car to fill in the gaps.”

“Right,” I reply, feeling far from optimistic.

By the time I finish my meal and claim the hefty winner’s pot, having crushed the two men at pool, I’m fairly sure Steph will put the pieces together on our scam. Zane had tossed out several questions about Adam, none of which I could answer.

On our way to the car, I begin to wonder if lying to a federal officer about my fake relationship could land me in hot water. Or worse.

One thing is certain. Very soon, I'm going to find out.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Evie

“R

eady?” Adam asks, placing my suitcase into the trunk of his silver Honda SUV before opening the passenger door for me.

“As I'll ever be.” My response lacks the cheer I intended. I latch the seat belt, taking in the worn fabric seats and plastic dashboard.

“That's the spirit!” Adam says, his tone dripping with good-natured sarcasm.

As Adam takes the wheel, I ask, “No judgment here, but why are you driving this thing?”

Adam pats the dashboard. “It reminds me of how it all began. Keeps me humble, you know?” His expression turns thoughtful. “But I do have a backup Range Rover in the garage if you prefer.”

Not a phrase one hears every day. A backup Range Rover. “Nope, the Honda's fine.”

Adam smiles and pulls the car onto the road, his magnificent mountain home receding in my sideview mirror.

“You do realize this entire venture is insane,” I say.

“Not sure I'd go with insane.”

“Well, let’s review. You are bringing me, a woman you only met a few days ago, to your sister’s wedding, after tricking both her and your parents into believing we are getting married.”

I lift my ring finger, wiggling it.

“Touché. Don’t forget your new employment.”

I open a bag of trail mix and shake some out into my mouth. Adam extends his hand, and I sprinkle some into his palm. “How could I? I went from years at my law firm to your in-house counsel within a matter of minutes. And my only job requirement was my skill as an impostor.”

Adam glances my way. “Having regrets?”

“No, not really. Or better said, not yet. Zane is convinced your sister is going to figure this all out. He may be right.”

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“I respectfully disagree. We have this down, Evie. Even with Steph’s exceptional sniffing skills, she won’t figure it out.”

“What about your mother?”

“My mom will be too busy with all the last-minute wedding things. Any spare moment will be focused on Steph. Or should I say, Bridezilla.”

I’m not convinced, but Adam knows the involved parties. He has far more on the line than I do. If he thinks we can pull it off, I’ll trust him. Even if what I’ve heard about Adam’s little sister borders on the scary.

“If you’re going to depict our plan so critically, then at least include how you are essentially doing a good deed,” Adam says, taking in the skeptical look on my face. “You met my mom.”

“She was fun.” And perhaps a bit of an alcoholic.

Adam’s demeanor turns serious. “All kidding aside, I can’t show my face there—actually Steph made it clear I shouldn’t even come—without my fiancée. I don’t have a lot of family. Evie, this would have turned into a messy situation. If not for you.”

I hear the sadness in his voice. “Point taken. Maybe this is the time to start calling me Ronna.”

Adam gives me a look then smiles, his handsome features lightening up. I feel

warmth course through me. Outside, the mountains are changing, like someone flicked a switch that gradually sheds rays higher up the craggy rockface.

“Are you going to tell me the lost tooth story?” I ask.

Adam chuckles. “Sure. It all started when I was helping my mom bake my sister’s birthday cake...”

Adam goes on to tell the tale of a crying five-year-old Stephanie, biting into her birthday cake and chewing on her brother’s tooth. His voice is melodic and filled with nostalgia.

I think of my little boys, sleeping soundly on the sofa, cartoons flickering silently on the television screen. I feel their sweet breath on my neck as I carry them to bed. They smell of baby shampoo and freshly laundered pajamas.

As the car rocks gently, my eyes begin to close.

Chapter Forty

Adam

The glorious, shimmering lake fills my windshield as I drive the Honda along U.S. 50, Lake Tahoe’s scenic peripheral road. The last couple of hours have been spent in my head.

When Evie dozed off to my story, I made sure to stay quiet, not turning on the radio. She looks so peaceful, her breath coming softly, her head leaning against the window. She’s gorgeous. And kind. And fun.

The truth is having Evie beside me, even sound asleep, feels comforting. Like I’m not

alone anymore. Being alone has never bothered me. In fact, it's been my preference for longer than I can recall. But something changed with Evie's unexpected arrival in my life. I realize being with someone I really like is exceedingly enjoyable. Evie has quickly become someone to share both my quiet moments and crazy escapades.

Ronna, not Evie, I chastise myself.

Images from the week fill my mind. Evie singlehandedly beating Zane at pool. Her panic when I nearly roll off the cliff. Fretting when she lost her job. Floating in my pool, eyes closed, in nothing more than her . . .

As if sensing my thoughts, Evie shifts in her seat, then settles down once more.

The week has been incredible. And enlightening.

I still can't believe Evie agreed to drive all the way to Breckenridge with me. If she'd asked, I would have purchased a plane ticket for her and met her in Colorado. But it was never broached and I'm glad for it. I want to spend more time with her, and not only to get our backstories straight.

The truth is I can't seem to get enough of her. There's so much I want to know. Regardless of our ruse.

I think about my mother's words, calling attention to the age gap between me and Evie. Thirteen years to be exact. Evie has two grown sons and an ex-husband. Some would call that baggage. I don't care a whit.

There isn't a soul on the planet without baggage.

As if an angel whispered in her ear, Evie blinks open her eyes and stretches, drawing her arms up and back, behind the headrest, like a lithe cat.

Staring out the window, her jaw drops open, marveling. The lake shimmers under an afternoon sky, boats floating along the sun-drenched waters.

“Where are we?”

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“Just pulled into Tahoe. Nice, right?”

Evie yawns. “It’s incredible.”

“Glad you’re awake to see it.”

She glances at the clock on the dash. “Wow, is that the time?”

“Yep.”

“You were out cold. Didn’t want to wake you.”

Evie breaks from taking in the magnificent view to face me. “Thanks for letting me rest. I haven’t slept this much in years.” She turns back to look out the window. “Do we have time to explore the area?”

“I figured you might want to check it out. I allotted a few buffer hours for the trip. Meals, time to stretch our legs, and such.” I point to a dock in the distance. “If you want, we can grab a bite over there. Best views in town. And they have amazing burgers.”

Evie sits up. “Okay, let’s do it.”

I park near the pier, a minute walk to the burger stand and take hold of Evie’s hand. “Ready, Ronna?”

She smiles. “You bet.”

Chapter Forty-One

Evie

We're sitting side-by-side on the wood-planked dock, our legs dangling off the edge. I sense a change in Adam. He's quieter, lost in his thoughts. When I woke, the threads of my dreams fading, the glorious view in the distance, I wondered why I live where I do when places like this exist.

Maybe it's the serene surroundings but I can practically feel my blood pressure reach a new low. The lake is a mesmerizing shade between blue and green, reflecting the swaths of surrounding pine trees. A sloop sails by, its mainsail taut in the wind.

A takeout bag and two cups of iced tea are positioned between us. I bite into my burger, juices squishing out the sides, missing my jeans by a hair. "Oh wow, that's good," I manage. I'm not only sleeping more but my appetite has gone crazy. I can't stop eating.

"Told ya."

"I'm never going to fit into my dress."

I pause, realization hitting me. "Oh no, I don't have a dress." And if I'm a soon-to-be member of the family, I'll need the right color dress. We're arriving shortly before the festivities. No time for shopping.

"Taken care of."

Though relieved, I'm unsure what that means. I hope whoever took care of it has tacked on an inch or two to my waistline measurements. Adam meets my gaze. "You're going to look stunning."

I flush. “Thanks . . . sweetheart.”

Adam freezes mid-bite. Then, “You’re role playing.”

I grin. “Yep. How’d I do?”

“Convincing.” He looks away.

It hits me that maybe this whole charade is confusing for him too. I wipe my mouth with napkins I find in the takeaway bag. “How do you know Tahoe so well?”

“I used to come here in college. I worked at the resorts as a waiter.”

“You’ve come a long way since then.”

Adam nibbles on a packet of ketchup and squeezes it out over his cardboard pouch of fries. “No question. But it wasn’t always easy. Fry?”

“Don’t mind if I do,” I say, savoring the saltiness.

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“I was obsessed with my app,” Adam says, finishing his meal. “It took over my life for most of my college years. Even when I was here, working my butt off, every spare moment was devoted to improving the software.”

“You sound like a young Bill Gates.”

“You wouldn’t be the first to say so. Honestly, it was never my intention to create a multi-million-dollar empire. I was just fascinated by the challenge of it all.”

I see a childlike wonder in his eyes. “If you love programming so much, why aren’t you still doing it?”

“I hire people to do that now. I need to be the big picture guy. Probably for the best though.”

“Why is that?”

“Like I said, it became an addiction. It’s why I barely dated. I was both a hermit and a computer geek. Didn’t make for a stellar social life.”

Sitting beside a sexy, insightful, and sensitive man, I find it hard to imagine Adam as a tech nerd. “You didn’t date at all?”

“I was in one relationship. It didn’t work out.”

Sensing it isn’t a comfortable topic, I move on. “A hermit, huh? Then not much has changed. You’re still living in the woods all alone.”

Adam smiles. “True, but I also met you, didn’t I?”

“I’m not sure getting shoved off a cliff is the best way to dip your toe into the social scene.”

A gleaming motorboat pulls up to the opposite side of the dock. The engine cuts off, and a grandfatherly man, donning a skipper hat atop his snow-haired head, steps off the vessel, mooring it.

Adam says, “Beautiful boat.”

The man removes his sunglasses, revealing bright blue eyes against his leathery tanned skin. “Thank you. Her name is Divine Denise. After my late wife.”

“I’m sorry,” Adam says.

The man nods his appreciation. “This lake was Denise’s favorite place in the world. Visiting the area?”

“Just for today.” Adam pauses a moment. “I’m Adam, this is my fiancée, Ronna.”

I notice he doesn’t hesitate on the lie. Our rehearsals are working.

The man extends a hand. “Saul. Folks around here call me Captain.” The two men shake.

I watch a lightbulb go off in Adam’s head just before he says to the man. “Say, how would you feel about letting us take Divine Denise out for a spin?”

Captain Saul frowns. “She’s not a rental.”

“I’ll pay you five hundred dollars in cash up front to let me and my fiancée borrow her for a half hour.”

The man’s eyes nearly pop out of his head. “Five hundred?”

I interject. “Adam?”

He turns his attention to me. “Wouldn’t you enjoy being out on the water, Ronna?”

I glance at my phone screen. The plan was to arrive at our overnight stop by nine p.m. “Do we have the time?”

“We’ll be a bit behind schedule but if you’re all right with that—sweetheart—this could be fun.”

Sweetheart. The word sounds so natural.

It’s been years since I’ve been on a motorboat. It does look beautiful. Adam must sense my excitement and pulls a wad of bills from his pocket, handing them to Saul. “We’ll have her back in thirty minutes.”

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The man stares at the cash, then at the boat, looking unsure. “You know how to handle her?”

“Sure do.”

“Well, okay then. Here’s my number. I’ll meet you back here in thirty minutes.”

Adam adds another twenty. “Grab a beer and a burger on me.”

The man hands over the keys. “Increase the throttle extra slow or she’ll stall on you.”

“Got it.”

Adam boards the boat, extending a hand to help me. Seems we’re about to embark on yet another adventure.

Chapter Forty-Two

Adam

I cut the engine in the middle of the lake. Calm waves undulate beneath Divine Denise, rocking the boat soothingly. A smattering of watercraft dots the waters around us.

Evie’s hair is blowing in the wind, her eyes closed as if she’s concentrating on each of her senses. The chill in the air, the smell of the water, the sound of the screeching eagle soaring above. Turns out the long drive was a good move for several reasons,

not the least of which is giving Evie a chance to regroup. She looks more relaxed than I've seen her since she was laid off by her boss.

I take the opportunity to enjoy the view. Not the lake or the surrounding mountains, but Evie. She's a natural beauty. I don't know much about the ways of women, but I can tell she wears little if any makeup.

If this is what fifty looks like, I'll take it.

I try to picture her as a mom, doting on her sons. It's hard to envision.

She must feel my eyes on her because she meets my gaze.

The loud motor prevented us from speaking until now.

"Do you have photos of your kids?"

Evie seems surprised at the question. "Of course. Why?"

"It would help me picture another part of your life."

Evie's smile warms my heart. She scrolls through her photos and sidles up closer. She presents her phone, showing a photo of her in a deep-red gown, the dress clinging to her curves. Two handsome young men in tuxes are on either side of her, grinning.

Evie points. "That's Jeffrey on the right and Daniel on the left. They're pinching each other behind my back," she says, a certain glee in her voice.

"Where was this taken?"

"At my friend Caroline's annual charity benefit. Her husband left behind a legacy

when he died. A well-endowed foundation to help children with special needs.”

“Commendable. Is Caroline the friend who was supposed to come to Yosemite with you?”

“That’s right.”

I lean over and open the large white cooler beside me, hoping to find what I expect is inside.

Evie asks, “Looking for life preservers? Don’t worry I won’t shove you overboard.”

I picture the two of us holding hands, leaping into the lake, screaming at the tops of our lungs.

I pull out a bottle of Pinot noir, two glasses, and a wine opener. “Jackpot. I’ll give Captain Saul a sizeable tip.”

“Money is no object to you, is it?”

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The question is rhetorical and I uncork the bottle, pouring for each of us. We clink glasses.

“To new adventures,” she says, taking a sip.

“How is Caroline’s leg?”

“She’ll be fine. Guessing her doctor will be her nextvictim.”

“Pardon?”

“When Caroline sets her eye on someone, it’s only a matter of time before he succumbs to her wiles. That is, if she ever decides to get back in the saddle.”

“Sounds like an interesting woman.”

“She’s larger than life.”

“I’d love to meet her someday.”

Evie smiles.

I gesture for her to come forward. “Take the controls.”

“Me?”

Evie stands beside me. “I don’t know how to drive a boat.”

“I’ll help you.”

We set aside the glasses and I position myself directly behind her, placing my hand atop hers as we push the throttle forward. “Nice and easy,” I whisper in her ear.

The wind picks up and I feel Evie shiver. I squeeze closer, offering my body heat for warmth. As God as my witness, she melts into me. I smell the faint scent of her hair, my lips a breath away from her neck. I’m weak in the knees. But I remain steady, not moving a muscle, wishing we could remain this way until sunrise.

Chapter Forty-Three

Adam

Our only stops are to fill up on gas and use the facilities. It would be a boring evening drive if not for my all-consuming thoughts.

Evie falling back into my embrace as we navigated the boat back to the pier. Her shuddering beneath my touch. It makes my entire body tingle, even now.

The Captain was waiting for us when we disembarked. I told him about the wine, giving him a generous tip.

“Have a happy life, you two,” he said.

If only.

I’m already dreading when Evie will go back home.

The hours in Tahoe have been wonderful. But duty calls.

I pull up to the hotel's grand driveway and turn off the smooth jazz, playing on the radio. "Welcome to Salt Lake City, Ronna," I say, aiming for upbeat.

"Shower and bed," Evie mumbles.

I know better than to engage with her. We're both exhausted. And I can tell her back is aching from the long drive. As we took the exit, she downed a couple of pills, turning quiet. After a good night's rest, we'll both be energized, ready to finish the drive to Colorado.

The valet takes the car keys, practically grimacing at the Honda like it's an eyesore sullyng the luxury building's façade. I suspect the vehicle will be parked far from public view.

Evie and I follow a bellhop, pulling a cart with our bags to the reception counter. Evie looks like she's sleepwalking, her eyes at half-mast.

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Gleaming marble floors and an abundance of shiny wood adorn the lobby. I give my name to the clerk.

“Nice place,” Evie whispers, one eye closed.

I put an arm around her shoulders, mostly an attempt at keeping her vertical. “Only the best for my fiancée.”

The clerk hands me a key card. “You are in room eight-oh-four. Enjoy your stay.”

I look at the solo key. “Is the other room nearby?”

The clerk frowns. “What other room?”

“I booked two rooms.”

The man’s gaze passes from me to Evie, then taps furiously on his keyboard. “I’m so sorry, sir. There must have been some misunderstanding. We have only one room booked for you.”

“No problem, I’ll sign for another one now.”

“You don’t understand, sir. We are fully booked.”

Evie yawns so big I can see her tonsils.

“I need sleep,” she mumbles. Clearly, she isn’t tuned into what’s happening.

There's no point in finding another hotel with two rooms. Evie is ready to collapse. To the clerk, I say, "We'll manage."

We take the elevator to the eighth floor. The bellhop unlocks the room door, handing the key to me. I hand him a tip in return, then watch as the door closes shut behind him.

The room is luxurious and minimalist. One closet, one nightstand. One bed.

"Call me in the morning," Evie says, flopping onto the bed, her eyes closed.

"But—"

Before I can explain, Evie is sound asleep.

I stand at the foot of the bed, panic setting in as I try to figure out a plan of action.

Looking around the sparse room, it's clear there are no viable options. I make a decision I hope I won't regret.

Chapter Forty-Four

Caroline

My hand fumbles for my buzzing phone on the nightstand, my eyes squinting at the time. It's after one a.m. A surge of panic rises within me as I answer the call.

"Hi, Caroline. It's Jeffrey. Sorry to call so late."

Jeffrey, Evie's younger son who lives in Rome. This can't be good. "Is everything okay?"

“Sort of. I’m heading back to the States. I’ve been trying to reach my mom, again, with no luck. Thought maybe you knew a better way to reach her.”

I take a moment to regroup. The last time I was woken in the middle of the night, my husband had suffered a heart attack.

I find my pain meds next to the phone and dry swallow a tablet. My doctor explained the importance of keeping the drug in my system for the next week. He’s stopping by later to check on me. Who knew house calls are still a thing.

“What’s going on?” I ask.

A pause. “I had a blow-up with my dad. I’m going to finish the semester back home.”

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Whatever Evie has shared about Marco was not flattering. He's a ne'er-do-well with a roving eye. Actually, his eye wasn't the problem body part.

Jeffrey asks, "How's your leg? Sorry, I should have asked earlier. I'm a bit distracted."

Evie always described Jeffrey as the worrier child. "I'm okay. Are you?"

"Honestly, I'm concerned about my mom. She's been acting weird. She never misses our calls and now it's becoming a habit. It's not like her."

Having no children of my own, it's hard for me to fully grasp parent-child dynamics. "Maybe . . ."

"Maybe what?"

"Maybe she's having a good time."

Silence tells me he's considering the thought. "Well, she did say she met someone."

I'm glad I didn't have to share that with him. Apparently, Evie told them. "Then, there you go. All is well. She's just busy with fun things."

Jeffrey's tone turns grim. "You probably know my mom's been through the wringer. She's vulnerable. Easy prey. Could be something is up with the guy she met."

I shift my position, careful to avoid moving my leg too much. "Why do you say

that?”

“Call it a feeling. No one knows who he is. I mean, he’s a literal stranger.”

I can’t argue with the logic. I have no idea who Evie is with or his intentions. And Jeffrey is right. Evie is vulnerable.

Guilt for pushing my friend to go to Yosemite alone is ramping up. “Let me see if I can reach her and I’ll have her call you.”

“Thanks, Caroline. I appreciate it.”

“You’re a good son.”

“Not sure about that. But my mom . . . she’s the best.”

I’m not one to emote and I suspect the same is true of a twenty-something young man. He’s managed to worry me. I say goodbye, hang up, and try Evie’s phone, not surprised to get the voicemail. Yosemite isn’t known for good reception.

As I’m leaving a message, I recall something. I make another call.

“Paul, I’m sorry to wake you.”

“Yes, ma’am. Is everything all right?” His voice sounds groggy.

“Can you stop by? I need help with my phone,” I say, aware it sounds like an oddly frivolous request in the middle of the night.

“Yes, of course. I’ll be at your door in twenty minutes.”

“Thank you, Paul. I don’t know how I would ever manage without you.”

“Thanks for coming over so quickly,Paul,” I say, waiting for him to step inside.

My trusted chauffeur and part-time bodyguard stands in my doorway, dressed as always in a black suit and black tie around a crisp white shirt collar. He has a concerned look on his face. “Are you feeling all right? Should I call the doctor?”

“I’m okay. It’s about Evie.”

I hobble back to the living room and lean the crutches against the sofa. Once Paul takes a seat beside me, I explain about the call from Jeffrey.

“That does seem out of character for your friend, but what is it you need at this hour?”

I hand over my phone. “When I was planning on going to Yosemite with Evie, we agreed to share each other’s locations. We downloaded the app to each of our phones.”

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“That was smart. A way to keep tabs on each other.”

“Exactly, in case we got separated on one of our hikes or for . . . any other reason.”

Like if I hooked up with someone. I may have no interest in a relationship but companionship, that’s another story.

It never occurred to me that it would be Evie who would be willingly whisked away by a dashing local man. She is by far the more cautious of the two of us. It’s one of several reasons to worry.

“Jeffrey got me thinking I could locate her wherever she is. I spent a while trying to figure it out but can’t.”

Paul takes the phone from me and fiddles with it, tapping and swiping. The man is two decades my senior and more capable with tech than I am.

Paul hands the phone back to me. “Is this what you need?”

He has opened the app to a section I don’t recognize and I squint at it in surprise. Staring at the screen, I speak barely above a whisper. “Evie, my dear, what on earth are you up to now?”

Chapter Forty-Five

Evie

My eyes closed, I stir. Something pleasant is holding me down on the very comfortable bed. I snuggle closer, feeling movement behind me. A warm body.

My eyes shoot open, shifting to assess the situation. I'm in a spooning position, the inside of it, to be precise. Soft breath warms my cheek. I note the muscular arm draped across my waist. No mistaking it belongs to Adam.

Oh boy.

At least there's a sheet covering me. But how much of me is unclear. I'm too scared to venture a peek beneath the sheet. Careful not to disturb the status quo, I slip my fingers under, relieved to feel the edges of my camisole and boy shorts. Better than nothing.

I wrack my brain to recall what happened,

Tahoe, burgers, boat ride, a very long drive.

Then it hits me.

The pills.

I meant to take two Ibuprofen tablets. After many hours in the car, my back had been acting up and I dug into my bag for the pills. Given my current condition, I have to assume it's Caroline's sleeping pills I ingested.

Caroline offered them to me a week before our flight. The idea was to sleep well on the plane and hit the ground running when we arrived in Yosemite. I must have grabbed the wrong bottle. One pill could knock me out. Two would be the equivalent of a Roofie.

Adam stirs and I freeze.

What did we do last night?

Maybe I can creep out from beneath him, tiptoe to the bathroom and get dressed, then act like everything is normal.

Um, no. Surely, Adam knows everything that happened. Last I recall he was perfectly sober.

A narrow strip of sunlight filters between the curtains.

I blink rapidly, looking around. Everything is white. The walls, the carpet, the sheets.

Why are we even in the same room?

I need answers. And only one person has them. Slowly, I turn to face Adam, shocked to see his eyes are wide open.

He smiles. “Hey.”

His hair is disheveled. He’s in dire need of a shave. He smells intensely masculine and . . . all that separates us is an inch of air. He’s staring at my bottom lip.

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My questions catch in my throat.

That's when Adam lowers his tousled head.

And kisses me.

Chapter Forty-Six

Evie

Fireworks fill my vision and every last thought vanishes from my mind.

Am I dreaming?

I moan, uncurling my toes. I've been kissing Adam for what feels like all day but is probably five mind-altering minutes. I open my eyes. Only wisps of a lingering, druggy fog remain.

Adam's blue-gray eyes are smiling at me. "Good morning, beautiful . . . Ronna."

Hearing another woman's name from a man in my bed shakes me back to reality. I pull away, holding tight to the top sheet, and sit up, my back against the headboard.

Adam picks up on the instant change in the air. "Are you okay?"

"What are you doing in my bed?" I ask, my voice husky with the morning. I might sound a bit accusatory.

Adam's face scrunches up in confusion. "I know you were very tired last night but don't you remember?"

I suck in my lips, unsure how to answer. If we did something intimate together, wouldn't I remember? Would telling him I have no recollection be hurtful?

"You don't remember." He says it this time as a statement.

I shake my head.

"Wow."

"I accidentally took the wrong pills last night. Two strong sleeping pills."

It's like a light bulb goes off. Adam laughs. "Well, that sure explains a lot. I could barely keep you vertical."

I'm not sure what to make of his light-heartedness. At least he doesn't seem offended. "Um, did we?—"

Once again, Adam seems to pick up on my vibe. He turns serious. "No, Evie. As much as I would have loved to. But one thing you can be sure of, when we do, you won't forget it."

When we do. He said, when!

I'm ecstatic even as I'm suddenly self-conscious. When was the last time I colored my hair? Are my wrinkles more obvious this close up?

I feel a flush creep up my face which I know is odd given I'm already in bed with little on and just kissed the man. For five whole blissful minutes.

“What happened, then?”

Adam brushes a cowlick from his forehead and leans on a bent elbow. “There was some mistake with the booking. They only had one room for us. You were barely coherent. I made the executive decision to stay rather than find another hotel. You collapsed the moment we got to the room.”

He gestures around the sparse space. “As you can see, there isn’t much in the way of furniture, let alone a second bed. It was the floor, the tub, or the bed forme.”

It’s bizarre to not remember anything at all. “I see. You made the right decision. But?—”

He pushes up and sits beside me. “What is it?”

“Where are my clothes?”

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Adam appears to be holding back a grin. “As I recall, at some point in the middle of the night you mumbled something about needing the bathroom. When you came back you were wearing . . . less. Then you snuggled up to me.”

I’m mortified. I make a mental note to toss out the remaining pills.

Adam says, “In fairness, I guess I scooted myself during the night. Sorry.”

He looks anything but sorry.

“And the kiss?”

“What can I say? There is a beautiful woman in bed with me, suddenly awake, her lips a millimeter from mine. I am human, after all. Again, sorry.”

This time, I hold back a smile. “Okay, the interrogation is over. Thanks for, you know, not?—”

Adam frowns. “I would never?—”

“I know,” I whisper.

We stare at each other for a beat. The pull to go back to our previous lip-locked position is intense. That half-awake kiss was one for the books. If I don’t get out of the bed, we’re likely to stay here all day.

“Can you turn around please?” I ask. A silly request given he’s seen me in my

underwear twice, the first time, floating in his pool. But he does as I ask.

I locate my bag, find what I seek and scramble to the bathroom for a much-needed shower and toothbrushing. I wish I'd done those things in my delirium in the middle of the night.

When I emerge, Adam takes his turn washing up. After leaving the room, we grab breakfast in the hotel dining room, an elegantspace with gloved waiters. Omelets are served on fine china, fresh-squeezed juice in crystal stemware.

Adam is quite the conundrum. A mountain man with champagne tastes.

It's not yet eight a.m. when we hit the road once more, two to-go cups of steaming hot coffee in the holders between us.

Adam fires up the Honda's engine. "Next state, Colorado."

Chapter Forty-Seven

Adam

Traffic flows smoothly along the countless miles of highway. The last car I saw was at least five minutes ago, speeding in the opposite direction. We're making good time and will arrive in Breckenridge before sundown. But I don't care if the highway never ends. I have Evie by my side.

I feel ready for the big hoax and believe Evie is as well. If we're lucky, my parents and Steph will be otherwise occupied when we arrive at the hotel.

Evie is looking out her window, lost in her own thoughts. I hum along with Journey's Don't Stop Believin' set low on the radio.

It's a miracle I can keep my eyes open. Thanks heavens for the extra-strength energy drink I downed at our first pit stop. How they fit all that caffeine into such a tiny bottle is beyond me. My heart is palpitating from the eye-popping boost, my mind on overdrive.

From the moment I decided to get into the bed with Evie, I have barely slept. Particularly after she exited the bathroom in her lacy tank top. At first, I thought I was dreaming or maybe hallucinating. Spectacularly feminine with those toned arms and legs, and wild, loose waves, reaching just past her shoulders, Evie was a vision.

Her eyes had been at half-mast. Like a sleepwalker, she silently got into the bed beside me, snuggling close. I was nearly out of my mind with desire. But something was glaringly off.

It was as though Evie was under the influence of something. Had she downed a bottle of vodka when I wasn't looking? Once again, Evie was unconscious in seconds. Yet, each time I managed to slide to the edge of the bed, she scuttled closer as if her body had taken over while she slept. When I nearly fell out, I stayed put, even when Evie rested her head on my chest, accepting my fate of a night of no sleep.

The remaining wee hours were split between staring at the ceiling, trying to distract my mind with work problems and the occasional doze-off. When Evie finally stirred awake and turned to face me, the surprised expression on her face told me I'd acted wisely by not following my impulses.

She met my gaze with those incredible, dreamy eyes of hers, her words coherent. Even if they were used to question me about how we ended up in bed together. Her newfound lucidity served to cut away my self-imposed restraints.

Which is when it happened.

The kiss.

The moment our lips met, a veil was lifted, everything became vividly clear. Different than our first mind-blowing kiss in my kitchen. That one, as spectacular as it was, was a performance. This time, it was genuine. What began as a ruse to fool my family turned real.

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I wanted to shout my revelation right there and then. Tell her how much I want to be with her, to talk to her, hold her, kiss her.

Love her.

Whoa,love? Where did that come from?

Love, love, love.

The word rings true. With the mantra still swirling in my head, the exhilaration chases away the exhaustion.

I couldn't care less if she's older. Not a whit. She's caring, smart, beautiful, and outdoorsy. She brings out the best in me. She brings out the passion in me.

I glance at Evie, still pensive. Could she be thinking the same thing?

No chance. It's crazy even to consider such a thing about someone I met days ago, let alone say it aloud.

But I need to tell her how I feel. At the right time. When it won't scare her away. Which would naturally exclude here in my old Honda on a deserted highway.

I'll find the right time over the weekend. A romantic moment. To tell her I'm falling hard for her. Falling in love.

The thought buoys me, bringing a broad smile to my face.

Bob Marley begins crooning over the radio. Softly, I sing along.

Everything is going to be all right.

Chapter Forty-Eight

Evie

I stay quiet for most of the drive. We stopped twice to refuel, grabbing a bite at a farmstand in Grand Junction. Pulling into Breckenridge as the sun dips behind the magnificent mountain range, I find solace in the painted sky of purples and pinks. Not a bad distraction. And I need one desperately.

My milestone birthday has flipped a crazy switch. Realization hits me upside the head. So much so that I groan.

“All good?” Adam asks, a tinge of concern in his voice.

I mutter an affirmative reply. I need to think.

To the left, a narrow river flows over a rocky bed. A storybook pedestrian bridge, lined with hanging baskets of colorful flowers, spans the water. “Runoff from the snowy peaks,” Adam says. I nod without turning to face him.

If Adam realizes I’m acting differently, he doesn’t let on. It takes the first hundred miles to overcome my mortification at coming onto him in my pill-induced stupor at the hotel. In the bed. What sort of woman does he think I am? What sort of woman am I?

I’m a fifty-year-old mom. A respected attorney. How can I behave in such an irresponsible manner?

And yet from the moment I landed in Yosemite, it was as if I shed all of those long-held identities. Sure, it was freeing—that sense of being unencumbered by life’s normal routines and expectations. But I took risk after risk. On the mountain trails and with Adam.

Maybe I’m old-fashioned, an anachronism. But I have never been the type to behave as I have over recent days. If only I had stayed back in New York, refusing to allow Caroline to talk me into going alone. Maybe I’d still have my job, and my sanity.

The car makes it up a steep incline until we reach a large sign. Grand Colorado.

It serves as a wakeup call. We’ve arrived.

Adam pulls the Honda up to the sprawling resort at the foot of the ski mountain. My sole focus needs to be on convincing the Demetrius family that I’m Ronna, Adam’s adoring fiancée.

But my mind is made up, there’s no need for further ruminations. Once the wedding weekend ends, I’m going back home to New York to find another job, one that’s Adam-free. I’m going back to my normal, responsible life. Once and for all.

The moment Adam and I enter the lobby, a red-haired beauty in a flimsy blue organza sundress comes barreling toward me with the exuberance of a Golden Retriever puppy. “Oh my gosh, oh my gosh!”

My midlife, existential crisis will have to wait. I drop my purse to the ground, bracing for impact. Before I can escape her path, the hyper-fit woman, embraces me tightly, cutting off my oxygen.

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“I can’t believe you’re real, Ronna!”

Adam pulls his sister off me. “Whoa, Steph, she’s turning blue.”

Stephanie steps back, assessing me. Her eyes flicker to Adam with a split-second of surprise then return to me. “You’re gorgeous.” She takes my hand, ogling the engagement ring. “Granny Bess would love that you’re wearing her ring.”

I’m speechless. Not that there’s a chance to speak. All the words and breathable air are being consumed by Adam’s little sister. I remind myself that the rambunctious woman is also a federal officer.

“Hi, Stephanie, so nice to properly meet you.”

An amused smile crosses Steph’s lips. “Sorry about the surprise attack. I’m just so excited. I always wanted a sister.”

Anna emerges from a nearby hallway dressed in a bright orange pantsuit, the hue not far off from her daughter’s striking hair color. Her pointy heels click-clack on the parquet flooring. Heavy earrings pull on her earlobes. I can’t explain why but I find the look endearing.

“It’s true. Steph used to beg me for a baby sister,” she says, greeting us with kisses on our cheeks. “Nice to see you again, Ronna.”

I feel warmth toward Anna. She’s fun, bold, and stylish in her own out-of-the-box way. She’s also closer to my age than Adam is. Under other circumstances, maybe

we would be good friends, contemporaries. Remarkably, Anna and now Steph seem to be going with the flow despite the apparent age gap between Adam and yours truly, the woman they believe he's going to marry. I wonder if I would be as gracious if the situation applied to one of my boys.

Adam asks Stephanie, "Where's Dad and Brad? I want to say hi and introduce them to Ronna."

"They're getting dressed," she says, glancing at her chain-link watch. "Yikes! Dinner starts in a half hour." She points to Adam's nose. "Don't be late."

Adam looks exasperated. "We just arrived and need to get ready. We are going to be late."

Steph pouts. I imagine it's the same expression she gives her older brother when they're little. If I'm reading the room correctly, Steph is the spoiled little princess who has everyone wrapped around her little finger.

Before Steph can make a comeback, Anna guides her away. "Come on, let's see if the caterer did what you asked." And with that, Adam and I go to find our room.

Chapter Forty-Nine

Evie

The room at the Grand Colorado has lush carpeting and lots of wood. A completely different aesthetic than the hotel in Salt Lake City. We set our bags down beside the singular bed. Another bed.

My thoughts revert back to last night. The feel of Adam beside me, his breath on my neck. His lips devouring mine. The attraction between us is nothing less than a force

of nature. I shake my head clear of the memory and stare out the window at the panoramic view of the mountains.

“Look at me, please,” Adam says.

I haven’t made eye contact with him since the last pit stop, three hundred miles ago. I hesitate, then try for light chat. “Steph seems fun.”

“Please?”

I turn and see the look of concern and something else in his eyes. Something unidentifiable.

“What is going on in that beautiful head of yours?”

I swallow hard. Last night’s bizarre situation doesn’t seem to bother Adam at all. “There’s something I need to tell you.”

He tilts his head and smiles. “Funny, same here.”

I study him. Something is different in Adam’s demeanor. He’s calmer, lighter. He looks happy.

And hot as all hell. His hair has fallen just short of his eyes. His jaw is covered in a sexy five o’clock shadow. Despite myself, I can’t help but smile back.

A knock on the door is followed by a cheerful shout. “Hurry up in there!”

Adam grins, rushes to the door and flings it open. “Hey, Dad!”

A man, dressed in a sharp pin-striped suit and open collar, stands in the doorway. His

once-black sideburns are now tinged with silver. He reminds me of a later-in-life Cary Grant. Other than the choice of attire, he's Adam thirty years down the line. He brings his son in for a bear hug. "How have you been?"

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“Good, good,” Adam says, contentment painting his face.

Adam’s father turns to me. “Who is this lovely creature?”

Adam puts his arm around his father’s shoulders. “Ronna, this is my father, Ari. Dad, this is Ronna, the woman I love.”

I freeze. The words sound so genuine. Not the woman I’m going to marry but the woman I love.

Ari takes my hand and in a classic Cary Grant fashion, kisses it. It’s old-world elegant.

“Welcome to the family, Ronna. I’m so happy to finally meet you. And if I may, I apologize both for my wife’s unannounced visit to Yosemite, as well as for what is likely to come from the Demetrius women this weekend.” To his credit, he says this with a healthy dose of regret. “I learned a long time ago that when my girls get their minds set on something, my voice of reason is like spitting in the wind.”

I laugh. “That’s all right. I’m sure all will go smoothly. Steph and Anna seem on top of all the details.”

“No question about that! Okay, you two. See you downstairs.”

When Ari leaves, I ask Adam, “What was it you wanted to tell me?” It beats telling him I’m heading back to New York the moment this weekend is over.

Adam purses his lips. “It can wait. Steph will kill me with her bare lizard hands if we aren’t down there before the foie gras is served.” He points to the large wooden armoire. “You might want to have a look.”

I open the cabinet. “Oh my god!”

Inside is what amounts to a couture wardrobe. “How?—”

“Let’s just say Steph is detail-oriented. After meeting you, Mom estimated your size and Steph had these clothes delivered.”

“I didn’t realize she could afford Dolce and Gabbana . . . and Tom Ford.” Every single item is just my style. There is even a pair of diamond earrings that look suspiciously real.

“She can’t. I can.”

I try to hide my surprise. “You paid for all this?”

He nods. “By the look on your face, I did good.”

“You did,” I say, impressed. There’s more to his relationship with Stephanie than meets the eye. More than sibling rivalry.

I eye the armoire’s contents, feeling a growing sense of worry about the price tag. “I’ll pay you back.”

“No need. Think of it as work expenses.”

More like Christmas morning. These clothes are perfection.

I smile, holding back my excitement. If Adam wasn't standing right there, I'd be literally jumping for joy. "I'll go get dressed. I can be ready in twenty."

"Perfect. If you let me have the shower first, I'll meet you downstairs."

I watch Adam head to the bathroom then caress one of the stunning dresses, my fingers rejoicing at the silky satin fabric.

Maybe I need to rethink things once more.

Chapter Fifty

Adam

I snap the cuffs of my shirt and tug on the edges of my jacket, aware that I'm fidgeting. I'm not used to wearing a monkey suit anymore. If not for my sister and the beleaguered groom-to-be, Brad, I wouldn't be wearing one now.

Even at our board meetings, I wear a crisp button down and skinny, designer jeans. I'm a mountain man, through and through. I save the suits and ties for the most special of occasions.

I've never been the overprotective big brother. Neither Steph's personality nor my own ever fit the stereotype. But as insufferable as Steph can be she's also generous, smart, and funny. At least when she wants to be.

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The private dining room is both simple and elegant with wainscoting and high ceilings. Several finely-coiffed young women in matching dresses who I peg as bridesmaids, mill about, sneaking glances at the men horsing around on the opposite side of the room. It reminds me of those movies set in Victorian times where debutantes carried dance cards, happy to be courted by the most eligible men in the county.

“Hey, honey,” Mom says, straightening my tie. “Don’t you look debonair . . . and happy.”

“Thanks. I am. Happy, that is.”

In reality, I've been spending most of my brain power tossing around ideas of how and when to share my feelings with Evie. My eyes cut to the door, realizing I'm searching for her, like a homing pigeon.

Home.

It's the first time I ever thought of a woman in those terms. But that's exactly how it feels when I'm with Evie. Like home.

I've got it bad, I think, smiling to myself.

My mother glances at the door as well. “It’s wonderful to see you in love, sweetheart. I’m glad you found the one. Even if Ronna is?—”

I feel my hackles rise. Like a crossing guard, I put up a hand. “Mom, like I told you

before, I don't care about the age difference. Please don't bring it up again."

Mom purses her lips. "I was going to say, even if she is an East Coast dweller."

Duly chastised, I'm about to apologize when Mom adds, "I mean, sure, I would have been thrilled for you to provide me and Dad with a few grandbabies."

I bristle once more, annoyed that I thought things would be different this time.

Mom lowers her voice. "Don't tell me you never wanted kids of your own."

Having kids someday has always been in the back of my mind. But Steph is set on having a brood. Being Uncle Adam could be good enough.

I mentally slap myself. I'm seriously off the rails. None of this is real.

I try keeping my tone in check but the agitation seeps through. "Can we please shelve this topic for the time being?"

Mom waves away my comment, appearing to have a retort ready on her lips.

And this is why I don't share my love life with the family.

Judgment. With a capital J.

As if on cue, I watch as Steph and Brad peel away from two young men, their boxy black suits, regulation haircuts, and watchful demeanors, screamingFeds!

Must be Steph's new co-workers.

Brad has a light hand on Steph's back as they walk toward me and Mom. Thin as a

reed, Brad was never the guy anyone would have expected my loud, tough-veneered sister to end up with. With thick-rimmed Mad Men-style glasses, Brad is the most even-keeled man I've ever met. Still, in a wrestling match, Steph would take him down in a New York minute.

I bring Brad in for a bro hug.

“Congrats, buddy,” I say. “Thanks for giving the males in the family a fighting chance with a majority.”

“Happy to help,” Brad says.

Steph tugs Brad’s hand. “Let’s get this party started!”

Mom points to the door. “Look.”

My gaze lands on the door and my jaw drops.

“She looks like Cinderella at the ball,” Mom says.

It's exactly what I'm thinking.

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Evie stands at the entrance, scanning the room. I know she's searching for me but I want to use the few seconds before she spots me to take in the view. She's a vision in a sleeveless cream dress that fits her like a glove, the fabric shimmering as she moves beneath the chandelier.

Her hair is swept up with a few tendrils loose at the hairline. She wears diamond studs in her ears and strappy sandals on her feet. She glows like a goddess.

And then she sees me, a glorious smile growing like a budding flower on her lips. It makes my heart sing.

I love this woman.

The need to tell her is overpowering.

As if in slow motion, Evie glides toward me. She's poised, exuding an easy confidence. She's comfortable in her own skin. And what skin it is. Tanned, toned. Kissable.

Whatever momentary hiccup my mother's words infected me with, it vanishes in a heartbeat when Evie reaches me. I kiss her softly on the lips, my heart leaping as she kisses me back. It feels so real.

When she pulls away, Evie gives me an inquisitive look as if sensing the kiss wasn't only for show.

"You look magnificent," I whisper in her ear.

“Thank you. You’re quite handsome yourself.”

“You make a lovely pair,” Mom says, directing her words to me. I pick up a tone of apology in her words.

Brad’s grinning but Steph seems to be . . . appraising. No problema. I’m certain all my sister sees is her brother and his loving fiancée.

Mom says, “Let’s take our seats. You ready, Adam?”

Evie gives me a curious look.

I keep an arm around her shoulders, enjoying the feeling of her body close to mine. “I was asked to speak at the rehearsal dinner.”

We’d missed the actual rehearsal but this is my penance.

Steph echoes her mother’s words. “Yeah, are you ready, Adam?”

“Ready is my middle name,” I reply.

As I guide Evie to our seats near the front, family and friends all around, my speech is not what’s on my mind. All I can think of is how to find a quiet moment alone with my beautiful partner in crime.

Chapter Fifty-One

Evie

I watch as Adam takes hold of the microphone, the noise in the room dying down as he welcomes us to Steph and Brad’s rehearsal dinner.

Until now, I've only seen Adam in isolation. In his car, in his house, on the trails. Twice at the bar in Yosemite.

I'm not surprised to see how comfortable he is in front of a crowd. Of course, he probably knows the vast majority of attendees. But it's not only that. He has an infectious charisma that draws people in. People like me.

Dressed in perfectly-cut suit, Adam looks incredibly handsome. My heart skips a beat recalling how he introduced me to his father.

The woman I love.

If only.

Even if we were living in an alternate universe where all this was real, I already have a plan to go home. Where I built my life. Where my boys call home.

There's just one tiny problem.

I'm falling for my fake fiancé. Hard.

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“It’s an honor to be giving this speech,” Adam says. “Mostly because it means I get to hand off my annoying little sister to Brad.”

Everyone laughs, even Steph. She’s one tough cookie.

“But seriously, she is funny, smart, freakishly strong and kind . . .”

Steph’s expression is wary.

“ . . . even if she is that thing that rhymes with kitch or stitch.”

“Or rich!” Steph shouts, wiggling her sparkling ring finger.

Another round of laughter. Their parents look on with amusement.

It’s bizarre to be sitting at the family table, next to Anna and Ari. They’re a fun, larger-than-life couple. Adam and Steph are lucky to have them.

Once more, I marvel at their sibling relationship. Though seemingly more contentious than that of my boys, it’s obviously rooted in love.

Adam lowers his voice, conspiratorially. “Let me share one juicy anecdote with all of you. Brad, pay close attention.”

The entire room seems to lean in.

“When Steph was seven years old, she had important criteria for the man she would

marry.” Adam lifts a finger. “One, he had to have a gigantic pair of?—”

“Get out of my way! I don’t need an invitation!”

Instantly, the room’s attention turns toward the interruption. A white-haired man dressed in a well-cut suit is standing in the doorway, his face beet red.

I hear Adam say, “glasses!” but no one is paying him any mind.

One of Steph’s two Fed friends has his hand on the old man’s arm, blocking his entry. The agents have been on guard from the start, as if this were a top-secret summit of high-profile politicians rather than a wedding event.

Brad jumps to his feet, running to the doorway.

“Get off him!” Brad shouts, shoving the Fed’s hand away. The second agent grabs hold of Brad, pulling his hands behind his back. The only thing missing is the handcuffs.

Now Steph is rushing to them, shouting. I can’t make out everything being said, but the two men back down and walk away.

Brad ushers the older man to a chair and speaks with what seems like a forced calm. “Grandpa, are you all right?”

Yikes. Steph’s friends were accosting the groom’s grandfather!

I watch Steph approach her fiancé, her face ashen.

Brad stands. “I told you not to invite them and you did anyway.” Anger drips from his voice.

“I-I’m sorry. It was for security.”

“Look around. This is a family party. Our wedding weekend. We don’t need the FBI, goddammit!”

Steph takes a step back as if slapped.

They stare at each other for a moment.

And then the bride runs away.

Chapter Fifty-Two

Evie

I hear crying through the door.

I tap lightly. "Steph?"

When there's no answer, I crack open the door. "Can I come in?"

Steph sits there, staring at her reflection. Her wedding veil sits askew atop her head. Her cheeks are damp. Her tough veneer is gone.

"Oh, honey," I say, coming up behind her. "Don't cry."

Steph speaks into the mirror. "I've dreamed of wearing this veil since I was a kid. It was my grandmother's. Same one whose ring you are wearing."

I adjust the veil, spreading out the organza. "You'll be wearing this tomorrow at your wedding."

Steph shakes her head. "I'm so embarrassed. Everyone saw us fighting."

"Couples do that sometimes."

"At their wedding weekend?"

"Sure. Weddings are wonderful but also high-stress events."

Her squinting eyes tell me she's skeptical.

“Brad is madly in love with you.”

“You wouldn’t know it after that fight.”

I tilt my head. “Do you really doubt he loves you?”

Steph shakes her head. “No but I screwed up, big time. He asked me not to bring my FBI classmates but I didn’t listen. I guess they got overzealous. Now Brad’s entire family hates me.”

“When I left, Brad’s grandfather was laughing at something Adam said.”

Steph looks at me, hopeful. “He was?”

I nod. “It’s all going to be just fine. Your wedding will be amazing. Let’s go back to the party. I really want to hear what the other thing was that you wanted your husband to have.”

Steph smiles. “Adam is not going to tell that story.”

“Oh yes, he is.”

We laugh together.

Steph dabs at her eyes. “Now I have to redo my makeup.”

“You only need a touch-up. Let me help.” I swivel Steph’s chair around to face me and get to work.

When we’re done, Steph is calmer. “Thank you, Ronna. This might be hard to imagine but I don’t have a lot of girlfriends. My bridesmaids are more acquaintances

who agreed to step up than close friends.”

“That’s because you’re a strong, outspoken woman.”

“Intimidating.”

I smile. “Sure, that too. Not everyone can appreciate you. But that’s exactly what makes you so special.”

Steph smiles, genuinely. “You know something? You would make a great mom.”

I flush. “Thanks.”

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“I realize this is crazy but can I make a request of you?”

“Sure.”

“Will you be my maid of honor? I don’t have a sister or a best friend, no one I wanted to ask to take on the responsibility. At this late date it would only be a title but still.”

I swallow hard with emotion. And guilt.

She has no idea who I really am.

But Steph’s freshly lined eyes are beseeching me. In for a penny...

I carefully remove the veil from Steph's head and set it down. “Of course I will. I’d be honored.”

Chapter Fifty-Three

Evie

When Steph and I return to the party, things have settled down, though the mood has changed from lighthearted and near-rowdy to guests speaking in hushed undertones. There’s no sign of the Feds.

Brad sits at the head table, looking lost, his eyes darting to the door as though he’s been doing so every few seconds. When he spots Steph entering, he rushes to her.

All eyes are glued to the bride and groom as they stare at each other in silence. For a beat, neither one moves. And then, as if bursting from within, they speak in unison. “I’m sorry.”

In a heartbeat, Steph and Brad are in each other’s arms, whispering sweet nothings while the guests applaud. I swear I hear a collective sigh of relief.

Given the near-empty cocktail glass in Brad’s grandfather’s hand, he appears fully recovered.

Now, with glistening eyes, Steph is laughing, her fiancé’s arm around her waist.

I’m honored to have observed Steph’s vulnerable side. I suppose that’s what love does to you.

I take my seat between Adam and his parents just as the salmon teriyaki is being cleared, aware that I’ve never felt so comfortable in a room full of strangers.

A DJ has set up in the corner and begins playing soft romantic music I don’t recognize. Steph and Brad take to the dance floor, Ari and Anna following suit. Adam and I have the table to ourselves.

Adam leans in and whispers in my ear. The sensation sparks goosebumps down my arms. “What sort of magic did you wield with Steph?”

“I only reminded her of what’s most important.”

Adam’s hand finds a place on my bare shoulder. I shiver beneath his touch, my body reacting like a tuning fork to his strong masculine presence.

“And what would that be?” Adam asks, his voice hoarse. He trails a finger from the

nape of my neck to the edge of my dress collar. It's the most sensual of feelings.

I swallow hard. The man does things to me. Intoxicating things.

"Love."

Adam reacts to the word by pulling me closer. "Love?"

I can barely breathe. I force my heart to slow its rapid-fire pace. The line between fantasy and reality is a blurry mess. Somehow, I find my voice. "I, um, reminded her how much Brad loves her."

"Mmhmm. Anything else?"

The smell of his cologne is killing me. Musky with a hint of lime. His lips are so close.

"And how much she loves him."

"I see."

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Adam removes his finger from my neck. I yearn for its return.

I say, “Sometimes we need to be reminded of the obvious.”

A magnetic pull draws my gaze to meet his.

Adam says, “You mean of what’s right in front of your own two eyes?”

I’m about to answer in the affirmative when a new song begins to play. Eric Clapton’s Wonderful Tonight. It’s one of my favorites.

Adam stands, extending a hand. “May I have this dance, mademoiselle?”

I place my hand gently in his palm and follow him to the dance floor. Adam brings me into his arms.

I say, “Did I mention I’m now the maid of honor?”

Adam smiles with pride. “I knew you’d win Steph over. I just didn’t realize how quickly.”

With his firm palm on my back, I lean my head against his chest, listening to the steady beat of his heart.

Adam sings along softly. “Oh my darling, you were wonderful tonight.”

If only I could bottle this perfect moment forever. It feels like nothing in the world

could go wrong, ever again.

Chapter Fifty-Four

Adam

Evie is in my arms, snuggled to my chest. I'm singing softly along with the music. I wish this dance never ends.

Somehow, in a matter of days, Evie has managed to bring light and joy into my life. I've never felt so at peace with a woman. Including Daphne, the one who turned me off from the whole commitment thing for far longer than anyone liked. Including myself.

When I met Daphne in Vegas on the first afternoon of a three-day convention she had been standoffish. By the next morning, something had changed. She was like white on rice, showing up at each of the workshops I attended and sitting at my table for lunch. I wasn't stupid. Clearly, she had gotten wind of my net worth. Still, on the last day of the conference, when she slipped me her number, I was flattered. She was beautiful and accomplished.

At first, the relationship was exciting, attending work and charity events, going out to dinner and the occasional weekend trip. My mother and sister were anything but subtle, dropping hints about proposals, weddings, and even babies every time they spoke.

In time though, I realized how little Daphne and I had in common, from life goals to interests. Things had turned . . . convenient. And still, I stuck around. A combination of inertia, pressure, and no desire to hurt Daphne kept me involved.

That all changed inside a dim sum restaurant in Los Angeles, on the last day of a long

weekend intended for celebrating our first dating anniversary. I was exiting the men's room when I overheard Daphne speaking on the phone through the paper-thin ladies' room walls. She was calling someone "babe" in a tone I thought was reserved only for me.

"I just spent the afternoon using his credit card on a wild shopping spree on Rodeo Drive. I bought something you're going to loooove." She went on to describe the lacy lingerie in detail. "Seriously babe, Adam is such a clueless chump."

The moment she exited the bathroom, I broke things off. But Daphne didn't go quietly into the night. She did everything possible to badmouth me to my friends and even my work colleagues.

I was taken in by a pretty face.

I've since done all I can to avoid making the same mistake. The entire episode turned me off of commitment.

Until Evie.

Nearly falling off a cliff's edge was kismet, the universe sending me a jarring reminder that life is short. I choose to view the near-fatal incident as an esoteric peace offering in the delightful form of a beautiful New York attorney who loves the great outdoors.

Evie begins to hum to the music, pulling me from my reverie. I breathe in her shampoo, lingering in the sensation of having her in my arms. I still can't believe she agreed to this whole charade and drove with me all the way to Colorado. The wedding is tomorrow and thanks to Evie, it's still on. She figured out how to connect with Steph, a feat of Herculean proportions.

The song is winding down. This is it.

The perfect moment to share my true feelings. Tell her I'm no longer faking.

“Evie?”

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She raises her eyes to mine, a flash of fear as she looks if anyone heard me. “Ronna.”

I redden then laugh, nervously. “Ronna.”

Her face glows with calm and happiness, matching my own. My heart is full, ready to burst.

“These last few days have been amazing with you. It’s been hands down the best time of my life.”

She stops moving. I have her undivided attention. “Really?”

I nod, more nervous than I’ve ever been. “I was thinking, maybe, if you’re willing, you and I can?—”

Before I can finish the sentence, the music abruptly changes, and I’m swept away, Evie pulled from my arms.

“Opa!” my father shouts, as I get caught up in the rowdy dance. The sudden change is jarring.

But nothing can be done about it. The kalamatianós, the traditional Greek wedding dance, has begun.

The rest of the evening is filled with dancing, laughing, and imbibing ouzo. As disappointed as I am with the poorly timed interruption, Evie is going with the flow, trying to match Mom’s steps.

Apparently, Steph wanted to start the heritage repertoire before the wedding. Leave it to my sister, the woman who has been harassing me to commit, to be the one to throw a wrench into my plan.

Kicking up my feet, I realize there's a far more romantic time and place to tell Evie I'm in love with her.

Tomorrow. At the wedding.

Chapter Fifty-Five

Evie

I haven't had this much fun in years. The traditional Greek dancing and plate throwing are a blast. Dizzy, I stumble, and Brad helps to steady me, making me giggle, thanks in large part to the licorice-smelling spirits I've been given to try. Several times.

Guests are gradually peeling away, claiming they need a good night's sleep before the wedding. Wimps. It's an especially weak excuse given that the bride and groom are still partying. By one a.m., only the immediate family remains. Which for all intents and purposes includes me.

They're a loud, loving family. I can picture my boys fitting right in, horsing around.

Adam is dancing on the far side of the circle, laughing hard at something Anna is shouting in his ear. Red-faced and gleeful, he's achingly handsome. How he's remained single is a miracle.

I sigh, recalling the warmth of his embrace as we danced. As crazy as that sounds, it's quickly climbing the charts as one of the happiest moments of my life.

I'm not used to feelings of irrationality. I'm a straight-thinking woman and a dependable mom. But since I met Adam, I've become a spontaneous risk-taker. And I like it.

Before the music changed he was gearing up to tell me something important. Something about us.

Us. There should be nous.

There are lots of things to figure out. But not at this moment. I'll analyze the hell out of the situation after the wedding. I'm in no condition to do so now. Because now I'm tipsy, aware my inhibitions are fading.

When the band announces the last round, I take a seat, openly eyeing Adam as he makes a final circle around the dance floor, his hair flying, his forehead damp with sweat.

His shirt is unbuttoned and he's wearing it like a jacket. Maybe taking it off completely would be crossing some decorum line for him. Too bad. But I still have an amazing view of his strong, glistening chest. I wipe my chin just in case I'm drooling.

"Eyes up here, missy," Adam calls out with amusement, pointing two fingers at his eyes.

He's caught me staring. Like a parched woman spotting a tall glass of water.

I blush like a tomato.

"Having fun?" he asks, wiping his brow as he approaches.

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“Best. Time. Ever.”

The smile he gives me sizzles my insides.

Anna and Steph come by. “You two have a good night. See you on the big day.”

She gives me a peck on the cheek and Steph squeezes my hand. “Thanks again. You know, for the pep talk.”

When the others have left, Adam and I take the elevator to our room. I say, “About the bed?—”

“I’ll take the sofa.”

That was fast.

His quick offer sparks an irrational pang of hurt. “Thanks,” I mumble.

My feelings are a tangled mess. I want nothing more than to be close to Adam. The near-kiss in the pool, the realer-than-real Facetime kiss in his kitchen, the smoldering lip lock in the Salt Lake City hotel. And the dance tonight.

Was it all method acting? Adam immersing himself in the role of loving fiancé? My gut tells me otherwise. He’s either an Oscar-worthy performer or . . .

He feels it too.

There's something intense happening between us, a chemical reaction. No, it's deeper than that. It's genuine. And yet.

I don't want to get hurt again.

For no reason I can explain, memories of that day, years ago, come flooding back. Returning home early from work. My phone's dead battery. Entering the house, a bag of Chinese takeout in one hand, my briefcase in the other. Another woman coming out of my bedroom, her hair mussed, her lipstick smeared. My husband frozen in place, his mouth producing a pathetic, "Oh."

Stepping off the elevator, Adam looks at me with concern. "Are you okay?"

"Mmhhh," I manage, doing my best to recover quickly.

We're at the door when I ask, "What did you want to tell me earlier on the dance floor?" A flicker of hope courses through me.

Adam purses his lips. "It can wait until tomorrow." Then he smiles that glorious, sexy smile.

Seems tomorrow is going to be a Big Day in more ways than one.

Chapter Fifty-Six

Evie

I look out the window at the rows of white chairs draped in satin, neatly lined up on the expansive lawn. With a cloudless, cerulean sky above and a forest of evergreens that begins at the edge of the property, it's a spectacular day for a wedding.

The Nordic Center's lodge is both elegant and rustic and while Steph and Brad are taking photos, soft-spoken guests with champagne flutes in hand mingle inside. A harpist plays gently in the corner of the room. I accept a canapé from the tuxedoed waiter balancing a tray of hors d'oeuvres.

I found a stylist in town who twisted my hair up into a loose chignon. When I returned to the hotel, I slipped into the magnificent emerald green, hip-hugging gown waiting for me in the armoire. With a light shimmer the dress hits just above the tips of my new strappy heels. I am Cinderella at the ball.

I've barely seen Adam all day. He was already off the couch and out the door by the time I woke up, feeling groggy. Despite the ouzo and late-night dancing, it took a long time to fall asleep. I spent the wee hours pondering what Adam was planning to tell me today. It didn't help a whit knowing he was sleeping mere feet away. Memories of his sultry kisses ran through my mind on a sleep-depriving loop. The desire to tiptoe to him, quietly cuddle in his arms lingered until at last, I fell asleep.

I've spotted him twice, a blur of black and white, going in and out of the caterer's kitchen. Clearly, he's busy helping carry out all of Steph's wishes. Or demands.

The bride is certainly one of a kind. I wonder how she and Brad met. Steph certainly found the yang to her yin in Brad, reminding me of the adage, There's a lid for every pot. I make a mental note to ask Adam about the couple's backstory when the opportunity arises.

"Hello, Ronna, koukla mou."

Somehow I hadn't noticed Anna's arrival. The Greek phrase she used is, well, Greek to me but given the tone, I suspect it's a term of endearment.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Anna asks, gesturing around the room. Her jet black hair is now

stick straight, her dress, though the same shade of green as mine, is far more revealing with a plummeting neckline. With large dangling earrings, rings on each finger, and heavy eye makeup she resembles Cher of the seventies.

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I say, “There must be a better word than beautiful.”

Anna smiles at me. “Then we could apply that word to you.”

“Thank you,” I reply, touched by the kind words.

“It’s not only the delightful dress. It’s the love in your eyes whenever you look at Adam. You glow. It matches how my son looks at you, Ronna.”

I can’t suppress the blush to my cheeks.

Could Anna be right about Adam’s feelings? A mother always knows.

The thought makes my heart flutter.

“Are you ready?” Anna asks, taking hold of my elbow.

“Ready?”

“Family photos and then we’ll get lined up for the procession.”

“Um, I didn’t realize I’d be in the pictures.”

Anna laughs. “Well of course you are, honey. You’re a member of this family.”

She leads the way toward the exit and out onto the lawn. All the Demetriuses are there, including Adam.

I cross my arms against the late October chill.

“You’ll warm up in a jiffy,” Anna says. “The Colorado sun is strong.”

I feel Adam’s eyes on me and sure enough, I’m warmer.

This devilishly handsome man in a perfectly cut tuxedo is smiling at me.

A photographer with two assistants hovering close by directs the group where to stand and how to pose. Steph and Brad are in the middle, Brad’s family on one side, the Demetriuses on the other. I find myself snug between Anna and Adam, whose hand is set firmly on my waist.

The thought of me being front and center in the wedding album makes me cringe inside. Somehow it feels more egregious than taking on the maid of honor role. What I’m doing is wrong. But I’m in too deep at this point. No going back now. Hopefully, someday Steph and Brad will forgive me.

Adam leans in, whispering in my ear, his breath tickling my cheek. “You’re gorgeous.”

I feel heat building inside me once more. It isn’t the strong Colorado sun.

“I found a quiet spot behind the lodge,” Adam says barely above a whisper, his voice smooth as silk. “Meet me there after the ceremony. We need to talk.”

Goosebumps line my arms. “I’ll be there.”

When the photo shoot ends, those walking down the aisle take their places inside. Guests begin filling the chairs.

Brad and his parents wait anxiously ahead of Brad's two brothers and twin little girls toting baskets of rose petals. Then Adam and Anna, me, and finally Steph and Ari.

Once everyone settles, the musical quartet strikes up and Brad and his parents make their way slowly down the aisle. Brad takes his place beneath the flowered pergola. Then the girls march down, tossing pink petals from their baskets onto the white aisle runner.

From behind, I see Anna squeeze Adam's hand. The simple, loving gesture makes me wish I was truly a member of this wonderful family.

As I watch mother and son take a step forward, I sense a flurry of activity behind me. Probably late-arriving guests.

But something is off. I know those voices.

With a pit in my stomach, I turn around, my jaw dropping.

“Surprise, Mom!”

Anna glances back, her confused gaze settling on me. “Did they say Mom?”

Striding toward me with faces full of glee are my two strapping sons.

Chapter Fifty-Seven

Evie

“J

effrey? Daniel?” I croak.

Anna’s eyes cut from the boys to me. “Ronna, what is going on?”

“Um—”

Adam interjects, his face pale as a ghost. He squeezes his mother’s hand once more.

“It’s our turn to walk down the aisle. I’m sure we can resolve this later.”

He takes another step forward but his mother comes to a determined halt, her focus fixated on me.

From behind, I hear rushed footsteps. Steph emerges from the depths of the room, her father scurrying to keep up. She looks like a princess. A very angry princess. Her cheeks are nearly as red as her flaming hair. She glances at Jeffrey and Daniel, then

addresses Adam and Anna. “What is the hold up? It’s your turn.”

Ari takes hold of his daughter’s hand and pats it. “It’s all right, sweetheart. I’m sure everyone’s a bit nervous.”

Steph points a finger at her brother. “See? I told you the rehearsal was important and you had to miss it.”

Another round of Here Comes the Bride.

The guests’ faces turn expectantly to the door.

Ari says calmly, “Anna, Adam, Ronna, let’s move along.”

Steph’s eyes cut to Jeffrey and Daniel. “Who are these people?”

The music stops. Apparently, there are only so many times they can play the tune before it gets weird.

Now Brad is hurrying back down the aisle toward us, his face cloaked in confusion and worry. Guests begin murmuring.

Jeffrey says to Daniel, “I think Mom’s in a state of shock.”

Daniel laughs, taking in my expression. “Looks like we did surprise her.” He fist-bumps his brother.

Steph, Anna, and Ari are looking on with nervous interest.

I say, “Boys, maybe it’s better if you wait for me outside.”

Brad joins the assembled group, taking in the scene. “What is the delay?”

Steph steps next to Brad as if teams are being chosen and she is opting away from the others. She stares at me. “From what I can tell, these men are Ronna’s kids.”

Brad purses his lips. “Okaaay. So Ronna has kids we didn’t know about. Is that a reason to stop our wedding?”

Jeffrey furrows his brow. “Mom, why do they keep calling you Ronna?”

It’s like an inhale without the subsequent exhale. Everyone holds their breath. A lengthy pause and then a lightbulb goes off over Steph’s head. “I knew it!”

If I am a deer in the headlights, Adam is a moose. A silent, unhelpful, bug-eyed Bullwinkle.

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Daniel and Jeffrey finally get the message that something serious is going on and walk off. Daniel calls over his shoulder, “We’ll be at the front door.”

Some of the guests are now on their feet. A group congregates nearby, soaking up all the juicy bits they can hear.

Steph is in Adam’s face. “I can’t believe you could sink this low,” she seethes. “It’s my wedding day.”

Anna, Ari, Steph, and Brad encircle me. Or at least it feels that way. Like I’m at a Wiccan ritual and I’m the offered sacrifice.

I’m stunned to see Adam off to the side, staring at his polished shoes, a deep frown plastered on his face.

I swallow hard, my cheeks heating up with a deep sense of shame.

“I’m sorry,” Adam finally says. He’s looking at me, not at Steph or Brad.

“Sorry?” Steph shrieks. “I have a stranger as my maid of honor!” Her eyes water. She points accusingly at me. “Whatever her real name is.”

Adam sucks in his lips. “Will you let me explain?”

Anna holds up a hand. “Enough, you two. We will discuss this later.” She lowers her voice and addresses her daughter calmly. “Sweetheart, everyone is waiting for you to walk down the aisle at your wedding. Especially your groom.”

Brad nods, numbly.

A tear escapes Steph's eye, making me feel like the worst person on the planet.

"Right," she says. "This is my wedding."

She takes a deep breath, closes her eyes, composing herself. In a heartbeat, Steph's boiling anger has morphed into sadness. She forces a smile to her face, breaking my heart.

The harpist approaches. "Is everything all right?"

Anna speaks softly to the woman who hurries away.

Brad grabs hold of Steph's hand. "Are you ready to get hitched now? Please?"

Steph nods.

The music starts up. Guests settle back in their seats.

Brad takes his place back at the pergola. This time when Anna grasps Adam's arm, her posture is as stiff as a board. Adam hasn't looked at me or even said a word in my defense. Truth is, I'm defenseless.

I watch them walk slowly down the aisle.

If there was any question of whether I should march down behind them it is forced away when Ari and Steph glide past me, neither one meeting my gaze.

I am invisible. *Persona non grata*.

From my vantage point, I can no longer see Steph's saddened expression, only her lace train rustling behind her in the breeze. Brad is grinning from ear to ear as his bride approaches. I wait until Steph kisses her father and joins Brad beneath the pergola, their hands intertwining, the justice of the peace looking on with what appears to be unfettered relief.

I set down my bouquet and quickly hand the ring I'm wearing to a nearby attendant with specific instructions. I exit the hall, my two boys flanking me like bodyguards as I scurry away in shame.

Chapter Fifty-Eight

Adam

From my seat in the first row, I scan the gathering of guests, trying desperately to locate Evie. My mind is everywhere but here.

Mom nudges my arm.

"I, Brad, take you, Stephanie, as my lawfully wedded wife to love and cherish . . ."

I tune out once more.

Evie was right behind me and Mom but she didn't walk down the aisle. I don't know if it was on Steph's request or Evie's own volition, but either way, it must have been terribly embarrassing for her being outed in front of my entire family.

I was as shocked as everyone else when Evie's sons showed up. Then the wedding procession came to a screeching halt, the music stopping, Brad hurrying down the aisle in the wrong direction. I wanted to explain to everyone that the whole charade was my fault, the product of my unending stupidity. But everything happened so quickly. There was no time to manage the situation.

I thought I accounted for every scenario. Except for the one where Evie's sons crash the wedding.

My mother has given me the evil eye twice since taking our seats, my dad offering a fleeting frown of disappointment before realigning his features to their usual good-natured form. I've never felt this level of tension from my family.

I shift my body, trying to see behind me. No Evie.

How did things go south so quickly? Wasn't it yesterday we were all dancing together, gleefully?

I can't spot Evie's sons either, though they shouldn't be hard to miss. As much as I understand they are no longer children, seeing two jock-like guys, both taller and broader than myself, it hits home that Evie is the mother of grown men.

Now Steph and Brad are kissing, everyone cheering on the newlyweds. Somehow, I missed Steph's vows. I was preoccupied. At least Steph is mostly back to herself. Her low-simmer-stress, deeply-in-love-with-Brad self.

Mom pulls me to my feet, and along with the others, I clap as the happy couple makes their way back down the aisle and into the lodge.

"Excuse me, Mom."

Anna sets her hands on her hips. "Where are you going?"

"There's something I need to do."

"If that something is going to create more havoc at this wedding, then don't do it."

I swallow back my retort. She's right. "Message received."

I wait for the others to go inside where the tables are set for an elaborate luncheon. Then, I take the trail behind the building.

Please be there.

Zane would say I'm being delusional. He would be right.

Because Evie is not waiting for me.

I desperately want to declare my love to her, to beg her forgiveness for dragging her into my reckless scheme. To beseech her to stay with me. To let me shower her with love.

I slump against the back wall of the lodge and put my face in my hands.

Evie is gone.

Chapter Fifty-Nine

Evie

I sit shell-shocked in the front passenger seat of the car rental. Daniel is behind the wheel, Jeffrey in the back. We're parked on the side of Route 9 while Daniel searches on his phone for directions to the Denver airport.

We haven't spoken a word since leaving the Nordic Center when my boys wrapped me in a group hug and led me away. The fact that their arrival triggered something awful isn't lost on them.

The guests I passed on the short sprint to the car offered downward gazes and awkward glances. There was no point in waiting to say goodbye to Adam. His family is fractured by lies. Thanks to me.

I maneuver to eyeball both of my sons. "Boys, I'm so glad to see you. No matter what just happened back there."

"Are you okay?" Jeffrey asks, his face full of concern.

Rather than answer, I ask, "What are you two doing here?" I face Jeffrey who should be in Rome. "Is your dad okay?"

“Yeah.”

I freeze. “Caroline?”

“Everyone’s okay, Mom,” Jeffrey says, “We came to surprise you for your birthday.”

Daniel turns to face me and with deadpanned precision asks, “Were you surprised?”

A silent pause fills the car. And then I start laughing, the tears I’d been holding inside emerging like rivers down my cheeks. “Yes, sweetheart, I certainly was.”

Daniel says, “We didn’t think Caroline could keep a secret.”

“Caroline knew about this?”

“Sure,” Jeffrey says, “it was her idea.”

Figures. Caroline was always one to make a big splash. Being laid up with her broken leg, she recruited my sons as proxies. She probably thought it would make for the most memorable fiftieth birthday in history. She wasn’t wrong.

Jeffrey asks, “Was that the guy you like? The buff dude?”

“It doesn’t matter anymore.”

My sons appear stricken.

After a few silent beats, Daniel abandons the GPS and speaks up. “We really dropped the ball. You had a milestone birthday and we never even acknowledged it.” He looks down at his lap. “We’re really sorry, Mom.”

Jeffrey nods. “When you didn’t answer our calls, I kind of freaked out a little.”

“Me too,” Daniel admits. “I called Caroline. When she couldn’t reach you either and saw you left California for Colorado, she offered to pay for us to come out here and make sure you’re really okay.”

The looks on their faces make my stomach drop. I’ve been the catalyst for so much worry and heartache. Steph and Brad, Anna and Ari, my boys.

Myself.

I’m an emotional wrecking ball.

Thoughts of Adam in his tux, stunned into silence at being outed, fill my mind. He was blindsided just like I was. But no matter how you cut it, he let me take the heat.

It’s time to move on.

I extend a hand to each of my boys. “You two are my pride and joy. Come here.”

The three of us squeeze over the console for an awkward embrace.

“You are the best sons any mother could ever ask for,” I say, my voice muffled and raw.

When we pull back, Jeffrey says, “Not after what we just did at that wedding.”

“You didn’t do anything. That was a mess that I made. You understand?”

Jeffrey says, “Not really.”

I have no idea how to explain all this. But I try.

“Here’s the thing. I owed Adam a favor, a big one. The payback was, let’s just say, ill-advised. At first, it was fun. No one would get hurt. I’d only be helping a new friend.”

I have my boys’ undivided attention.

“But untruths have a way of floating to the surface. Sometimes at the absolute worst possible time.”

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Like seconds before a bride walks down the aisle.

“Teachable moment?” Daniel says without an ounce of sarcasm.

It’s surreal hearing my son use the same phrase I espouse when they mess something up. I laugh through my tears. “Yep, very big teachable moment.”

I take the phone from Daniel, tapStarton the directions, and hand it back to him. “Come on, boys, let’s go home.”

Chapter Sixty

Evie

Isit on my bed, my laptop propped up in front of me, a Haagen-Dazs wrapper beside it. An empty bag of Doritos lies on the floor, a few wayward chips caught in the sheets.

I try to focus on the CSI episode. I already need to rewind twice, only realizing I’ve missed something vital when another body shows up. Gone are the sitcoms. I’ve moved onto shows that match my mood.

Robust snowflakes swirl past the streetlamp outside my window before falling to the ground and covering New York in a blanket of white. It’s beautiful and peaceful. At least until the pristine snow is spewed upon by car exhaust and turns black and grimy.

I’m a true romantic.

I wonder if it's snowing in Yosemite.

Stop thinking about him.

Ten days have passed since I returned home, dejected and embarrassed. When I'm not stuffing my cheeks with candy, I'm sending my revamped resume to law firms around the city. I've only scored one interview and it isn't a great fit. Seems age discrimination is a thing.

Maybe I'll go on welfare, gain fifty pounds, and move into a trailer park. Do they even have trailer parks in Manhattan?

I hear the door to the apartment open and close.

"I'm home!" Jeffrey calls out.

"How'd it go?" I shout, relieved he's finally home from his date. I can now fall asleep without worrying.

Jeffrey stands in my doorway, looking tired and a bit frustrated. "Pretty awful. She spent the entire date talking about the mating habits of the praying mantis."

I recall the woman in question is studying to be a zoologist. Still, I'm curious. "Praying mantis?"

"Believe me, Mom, you don't want to know the details."

Apparently, boring outweighs beautiful and smart. "Sorry, honey. I'm sure you'll meet someone special soon enough."

He runs a hand through his thick brown hair. He's a handsome young man, a 'lady

killer,' as my friends call him. Just like his father had been at that age.

He's also in desperate need of a haircut but I don't say so. After our trip back from Colorado, Jeffrey asked if he could stay with me while he looked for a part-time job. He has one semester left and will finish it locally. I'm loving every minute of having my baby back home.

I reach for my phone and set the alarm clock to wake me up early. I want to prepare Jeffrey's favorite breakfast before his first class. Banana chocolate chip pancakes.

Jeffrey hasn't budged.

"You okay?" I ask, sensing his discomfiture. Though my boys are grown, I'm still finely tuned into their moods.

"Yup, just wondering if you heard anything from him."

Him means Adam. Jeffrey has brought him up before.

I shake my head.

He frowns. It's almost like he wants me and Adam to get together. But that ship has sailed.

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What I haven't shared with my boys is that Adam has called me several times and I've ignored each one, erasing the messages before I listen to them.

What's the point? Hearing Adam's voice would only create more havoc in my world. My life is in New York. The job is a technicality. I'll land on my feet like I always do.

"Okay. Good night, Mom."

"Sleep tight."

As Jeffrey closes my door, my phone buzzes, my heart skipping a beat.

But it's Caroline.

"Hey," I mutter.

"Well, aren't we chipper." Caroline sounds wide awake.

"Sorry. just tired."

"Right. I'm coming over."

"What? No." Realizing I'm being abrupt, I add, "You're in a cast and I'm going to bed. Actually, I'm in bed."

"I have a chauffeur and crutches. Put something on. Or don't. I'll be there in twenty

minutes. Shut your laptop and grab a bottle of wine. We need to talk.”

“How do you know I’m on my laptop?”

Caroline does no more than harrumph.

Before I can argue further, Caroline ends the call.

I look down at my chocolate-stained nightshirt. Now I have to get up and change.

“Great, just great.”

Caroline and I forgo the kiss on each cheek, which would be awkward with her crutches in the way. She carefully sets her casted leg atop the coffee table, accepting the glass of wine she requested. The cast is covered in a sheer black mesh with glittery gold stars. It matches her sweater. She has somehow managed to make her broken leg fashionable.

I yawn loudly hoping to get a point across. Say your piece and leave me in peace.

Caroline takes a long sip, then stares at the crimson liquid. “Not bad,” she declares.

“Okay, let’s get down to business.”

Paul had dropped her off at my door, got her settled on the opposite end of the sofa, propping her crutches against the wall before leaving, wordlessly. He’s waiting in the car downstairs.

“Caroline, I love you but why are you here at this hour?” It’s ten p.m.

“Because I can’t watch you throw your life away.”

I roll my eyes. “A bit dramatic, don’t you think?”

“Not in the slightest.” Caroline peers at me.

“Sooo, how’s Doctor Gorgeous?”

“Don’t change the subject.”

I meet Caroline’s gaze and hold it. It’s turning into a silent showdown.

Caroline sighs, looking away. Point to Evie.

“I hear you’ve been moping around. No contact from Adam?”

Jeffery materializes behind the sofa. Now four eyes are pinning me.

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“Mom’s been eating ice cream bars and bingeing CSI.”

I can’t believe my son is squealing on me. I give him my fiercest, don’t you dare say another word.

He shrugs in response.

I get to my feet, crossing my arms. “What is this, an intervention?”

When no one replies, I drop my hands, exhale, and begin pacing. “I’m fine.”

Caroline watches the parading with her head on a swivel. “You are not fine and please sit down. I’m getting whiplash.”

A growing sense of irritation creeps up my spine. I come to a halt. “Jeffrey, will you please excuse us? I need to speak privately to Caroline.”

Jeffrey looks wary but mumbles another “good night” and leaves.

I wait to hear his bedroom door close and turn back to Caroline. “Is that why you’re here? To give me a speech about Adam, tell me not to throw my life away? I’m not the one who blew it. We both did.” I plop onto the opposite side of the sofa.

“I only know the little you shared with me. But I’ve diagnosed the situation.”

“You have, have you?”

Caroline's face turns serious and she downs the rest of her wine. "Marco cheated on you two decades ago, Evie. It's time to give a new man a real chance."

My jaw drops. "What in heaven's name are you talking about? This has nothing to do with Marco."

"Doesn't it? A man you trusted and believed in. Your phone died and when you showed up at home earlier than expected, he was with another woman."

My stomach flops. I don't need reminders of that day. It's still as clear as if I'd walked into my bedroom last week, finding Marco getting dressed, a woman I'd never met giggling in my bed, at least until she saw me standing there.

"Are you trying to be cruel or is it coming naturally?"

Caroline scoots over closer to me and takes my hand. "No, sweetheart. I'm trying to force some sense into you. Adam may have acted foolishly with the whole fake engagement thing?"

"And the throwing-me-under-the-bus thing."

"It was his sister's wedding procession."

I pull my hand away. "Whose side are you on?"

"Do you really need to ask me that?"

The fire has been lit. "If you hadn't forced me to go on that trip alone, none of this would have happened."

I hit the mark. Caroline's face drops.

“I thought it would be good for you to live a little. You hadn’t taken a proper vacation in forever.”

“Well, this is what happens when I live a little, my friend. Thanks a lot!”

The hurt on Caroline’s face nearly breaks me. “Listen, I’m tired. I appreciate the gesture and your . . . caring but it’s not what I need.”

Caroline swallows hard then sucks in her lips.

Why isn’t she fighting back?

Because I pushed too far. She sent me on an all-expenses-paid vacation for my birthday and I’m yelling at her.

My emotions are all over the place. But after the reminder of Marco’s infidelity, I can’t bring myself to apologize.

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Caroline clicks something on her phone and in the ensuing minutes, neither of us speaks until Paul is back in my living room, handing her the crutches.

Caroline hobbles to the door and across the threshold, speaking softer than I thought she was capable of. “Once you calm down, ask yourself two questions. Is Adam the faithful sort?”

I don’t want to push for more but can’t help it. “What’s the second question?”

Caroline turns toward the elevator. “How will you feel if you never see him again?”

Once Paul closes the door behind him, I throw the deadbolt. A sob escapes my lips. The next thing I know, I’m completely falling apart.

Chapter Sixty-One

Adam

Islam the empty shot glass onto the oak bar harder than I intended. “Another JD, straight up. Make it a double . . . please.”

Yosemite Sam’s bartender gives me a sympathetic look and then turns to Zane, who shakes his head.

“Sorry, mate. Your tab is closed.”

I blink away the fuzziness, unable to conjure up any anger for being cut off. I know I

hit my limit several drinks ago.

To the bartender, Zane says, “Before you close the tab, can I get a double espresso to go?”

When he is served, Zane takes hold of my elbow. “Time to go, buddy. I’ll give you a ride home.”

Zane helps me into the passenger seat of his car then hands over the takeaway cup. “Drink it up, bro. Better than hair of the dog.”

Back at my place, Zane forces me into the shower, fully clothed, and blasts on the cold water.

I shriek. “Why are you doing this to me!”

“Because you would do the same for me. Correction, you have done the same for me. Best cure for the love lorn.”

Fifteen minutes later, I am on the sofa shivering in an old pair of sweatpants and a Broncos t-shirt. My hair is still wet.

Zane hands me a second cup of steaming coffee. “It’s been two weeks, bro. Time to move on.”

I shake my head and take a careful sip of the beverage. “Not gonna happen. She’s the one, Zane. But she’s gone,” I say, noting I sound like a Garth Brooks’ song. “I called, texted. She wants nothing to do with me. I don’t know what else to do.”

I look out the window. A few flurries are beginning their descent. I think back to the morning after the wedding. I was saying goodbye to my parents even as Mom

avoided eye contact with me. Thankfully, the newlyweds were sleeping in. The last thing I wanted was another run-in with Steph. That's when a wedding attendant returned the ring I gave to Evie. It was a karate kick to my gut.

After kissing my mother's cheek and offering my third apology, my dad walked me to the Honda and put an arm around my shoulder.

"You blew it, big time, son. But give her time. She'll forgive you."

I wasn't sure if Dad meant Steph or Mom. Six of one. "Right. Okay," I'd said.

My father caught my eye. "It doesn't matter how old she is."

At first confused, it dawned on me that he was talking about Evie.

"Nor does it matter that she has grown kids. And despite what you both did, she is something special. What does matter is that you love her."

"Is it that obvious?"

"As the nose on your lovesick face."

"Thanks, Dad. But she left."

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Dad gave me a concerned look. “Where’s that fightingspirit? Where’s the guy who bought and sold several companies, making a success out of each one?”

My shoulders slumped as I walked around the car and got behind the wheel.

My father leaned on the open driver’s door. “I’ve never seen you like this with anyone. Do what you have to do to fix it.”

I’ve tried. Every day for two weeks.

Zane coughs, pulling me from my thoughts. “How about we conquer Half Dome tomorrow?”

I eye my friend. It’s exactly what I need. A challenging hike until my toes bleed and every muscle in my body aches. Anything to forget the wedding. To forget what a first-class jerk I’ve been, standing by, not speaking up in Evie’s defense. To forget how devastated I was when I looked for her behind the Nordic Center ready to apologize and profess my love, only to discover she was already gone.

“Earth to Adam.”

I blink away the intrusive thoughts once more. “I’m not ready for Half Dome. I still need to train more for it.”

“Then we’ll train. I’ll pick you up at six thirty. Better get to bed. Looks like you need your beauty sleep. Badly.”

I grunt and watch Zane head to the door. “Thanks, you know for?—”

Zane gives me a thumbs up and with a smile in his eyes, lets himself out.

Chapter Sixty-Two

Adam

It’s still dark when Zane arrives to pick me up. Bleary-eyed and hungover, I grab my pack of water and protein bars and leave the house in a haze.

If Evie were here, she’d have an overstuffed deli sandwich for me.

Once in the car, I close my eyes, hoping for a good half hour of extra sleep. The first few minutes of the drive are blissfully silent and I begin to doze off. Until Zane speaks up.

“Can I talk to you now or does my voice sound like a blow horn?” Zane asks, keeping his voice low.

I have to admit, my friend is stepping up. As much as I hated last night’s freezing cold shower, I successfully rolled out of bed with little more than a dull headache.

Okay, very dull. I crack open an eyelid. “Go ahead.”

“Maybe I should wait until the grumpiness has passed.”

“Good idea.” I close my singular eye.

“I think you should go see her.”

Unease settles deep in my gut. “Who?”

“Seriously, who? There is no way you’re that hungover, bro.”

I say, “I don’t fly.”

“Make an exception. You need to deliver a grand gesture.”

“And risking my life is the way to do that?”

Zane shrugs. “Humans have been taking advantage of air travel for over a century. It’s far safer than driving.”

I’ve heard that unhelpful stat countless times. Truth is, I’ve been thinking of doing exactly what Zane’s suggesting but?—

“I need to respect Evie’s wishes. She is deliberately choosing not to speak with me. Showing up on her doorstep could go very wrong.”

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“What have you got to lose at this point?”

“You sound like my dad.”

“Then it’s two against one.”

Only Zane could turn a chat about my love life into a competition.

“Just do it,” he says, like an athlete endorsing designer footwear.

The parking lot is nearly empty and Zane pulls into the spot closest to the trailhead. Cloud’s Rest.

The same place where I met Evie.

The early rays of morning are breaking, lightening up the sky.

“Okay.”

Zane turns to me. “Okay?”

I nod. Zane smiles then fist-bumps me.

I reach into the backseat for my pack. “First flight out tomorrow morning.”

The two of us zip up our jackets, don wool hats, and stretch. As we start our trek, despite the weight of the pack on my back, I realize my heavy load has finally been

lifted.

Chapter Sixty-Three

Evie

Buzz. Buzz.

Someone is sitting on the doorbell. I know Jeffrey is out with friends and he has a key. That leaves only one person who would show up in Manhattan at ten p.m. unannounced. I want to ignore the bell but clearly Caroline isn't going anywhere. I'll need to have a chat with Paul and have him talk some sense into his employer.

Yeah, right. Like that would ever happen. Paul is as loyal to Caroline as a royal subject to his queen.

Caroline has to know I'm still livid. Even if what she said about Marco rang true.

"Would you leave me alone already!" I shout, stomping to the foyer and yanking open the door. I come to an abrupt halt.

Stephanie is standing in the doorway, her face as red as her hair. Brad appears to be hiding in the corner of the hallway, staying out of the line of fire.

"Stephanie?"

"I can't imagine who you would be expecting with that welcome."

"Sorry, I thought you were my friend . . . forget it. What are you doing here?"

Steph bites the inside of her cheek. "Brad and I are on our way to Madrid for our

honeymoon. We have an overnight layover here in New York. Thought we'd use it to, well, stop by."

"You're spending your honeymoon looking for me?"

She must interpret my tone as more irritated than surprised as she begins to turn away. "Maybe it wasn't the most thought-out idea."

Brad sneaks up closer, placing his hands on Steph's muscular shoulders and gently turns her body back to face me. "Steph really wants to talk to you," he says to me.

I can't fathom what this is about. "Please come in."

I show them inside and they take off their coats, Steph assessing the surroundings. "Nice place."

“Thanks.”

“Wasn’t expecting snow.”

I’m not one for small talk and make my way to the liquor cabinet. “Can I get you something to drink?”

“What’s the strongest thing you have?”

Seems Steph and I are on the same page.

“A bottle of Kentucky bourbon. It’s what I’m having.”

Brad says, “Make it three, please.”

I bring over three glasses and the bottle. I keep the whiskey in the house ‘just in case.’ If ever there was a time to open it, this is it.

I take a seat on the opposite loveseat, realizing that Caroline was the last person to sit in the same exact spot Stephanie now occupies. As much as that conversation had been a disaster, this one will surely be far worse.

I pour out three shots and down one. Steph follows suit, then says, “I hear your name is Evie Lawson.”

“Guilty as charged,” I say, immediately regretting the choice of words I am using with a federal officer.

I refill my glass but don't drink it. I need my wits about me. "Before you say your piece, I need to apologize."

Steph sighs.

"I'm terribly sorry," I say, taking a deep breath. "I'm so embarrassed for lying . . . to all of you."

Brad nods. "Thanks, that helps."

We sit in silence for a full minute, me unsure what else to say. "Well, then, if that's all?—"

"I ran a thorough background check on you," Steph blurts out.

"Excuse me?" I say, not sure I'm hearing her correctly.

"My friends, the ones you met at the wedding?—"

"The Feds," Brad says, like he's eaten something unsavory.

My defenses are building a Wall of China. I do my best to keep my voice even. "I remember them."

Steph sucks on her teeth, Brad shifts in his seat.

Steph says, "I asked them to look into your history. Everything."

What?

I gulp audibly. "Define 'everything.'"

“Your education, job history, finances, kids, reason for your divorce.”

Hearing her mention my boys, my mama bear is ready to poke out its head and growl. Loudly.

I want to protest the vile breach of my privacy. Before I can ask if what she’s done is even legal, Steph says, “I needed to know what else you were lying about.”

“Nothing,” I say, seething.

“I know that now but I didn’t then.”

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Brad seems to fade into the sofa's fabric. "For the record, I was not on board with this."

My focus is solely on Steph. "Why would you do that? What was the point? Were you planning to have me arrested?"

At this, both Steph and Brad laugh, stopping abruptly with my angry mien. "If only that were an option," she says.

I get to my feet. It is time for them to leave. What I did was stupid but not malicious, like Steph's investigation was. "Adam and I blew it big time but what you did?—"

Steph holds up a hand. "I checked your background so I would feel better."

My hands are firmly on my hips. "About what?"

"Telling you to go back to Yosemite, make up with Adam."

Of all the things I could have imagined Steph to say, that one wasn't on the list.

"Come again?"

"Adam and I have a strange bond. We fight like cats and dogs and are competitive with one another but at the end of the day, we love each other very much. He always wants me to be happy and I want the same for him."

I swallow hard. "What exactly are you saying?"

“I—” she takes hold of Brad’s hand. “We, think you and Adam are perfect together. Even if you are partners in crime. And despite my brother’s poor decisions, teaming up with you wasn’t one of them.”

I feel my eyes water.

Brad says, “From what I understand, if it weren’t for your calming influence, Steph and I might not be here right now.”

I chuckle softly. “It was nothing.”

Brad says, “It was everything.”

Steph nods.

I feel a wave of emotion. “I really appreciate you coming here and clearing the air but it’s no use. Adam and I are too different. For one, I’m older.” I frown. “By far.”

“I know,” Steph says.

Of course she does.

“Why should that matter?” Steph asks.

“We’re at different points in our lives. I’ve already had my children. He may want some of his own.”

Brad says, “Maybe that’s something you should discuss with him directly.”

I shake my head. “My life is here with my boys. Adam would never want to move to New York.” He probably wouldn’t even want to visit.

Steph looks away. It is clear I hit on something insurmountable. “Listen, I won’t pretend that Adam would ever want to live in a big city far from all the nature he loves. But you two need to talk. No matter what the outcome.”

I choose to leave out how hurt I was that Adam didn’t come to my aid at the wedding. There’s no point.

Steph must have sensed the end of the line. To Brad she says, “We tried.”

Brad offers a thin smile. “Good luck, Evie.”

To my surprise, Steph puts an arm around me and gives me a hug. I pat her back. “Be happy, you two.”

We say a final goodbye for what seems like the last time ever.

Chapter Sixty-Four

Evie

I pop up in bed. It's no use. I haven't gotten a wink of sleep. The clock reads 12:10 a.m. The last hour consisted of me lying in the dark, staring at the shadows on the ceiling, ruminating over my conversations with both Caroline and Steph. Apparently, my subconscious has grabbed hold of some message beneath the surface and isn't going to let me rest until I deal with it.

"Fine," I mumble into the empty room. I'm still livid at Caroline. But without admitting it to anyone else, I know my best friend is right. The trauma with Marco has dictated so much of my experience with the eligible men in my life since.

At some point along the way, I decided that no man is worth the heartache. I made a subconscious but concerted effort to seek out easy relationships, the kind that would keep my heart safe from pain and betrayal. Which is why none of those relationships got anywhere. They were easy, safe. Boring.

The revelation hits me hard.

I've been looking for the exact opposite of what I need to be happy. What I need to make someone else happy.

And then came Adam.

Despite all my protestations of late, Adam is the only man I can envision a future

with.

So why am I not fighting for him? Why did I blow off Caroline and Steph?

Despite the dark room, the answer is as clear as day.

I'm scared. Terrified, actually. Of putting my heart on a platter. Of being vulnerable.

I can no longer ignore that thing under the surface, waving its hands at me since I left Colorado. No more than I can ignore my own existence.

I love Adam. So much that I can't bear to lose him.

He's worth the risk.

The epiphany is like jumping clear of a cliff's edge without a parachute, praying there will be a miraculous soft landing.

Maybe Caroline understood something I could not. Which is why she wanted me to have an adventure even when she couldn't join me.

I'm a terrible person.

Suddenly, I can't wait. There are too many things I need to fix.

I reach for my phone resting on the nightstand.

"I'm so sorry," I cry when Caroline picks up the phone on the second ring.

"So am I," she says, as if she's been waiting for my call round-the-clock.

Neither one of us notes the late hour. We are both wide awake.

Which, come to think of it, is odd. Caroline is no night owl.

Then I hear some background noise over the phone. “Is someone there with you?”

“It’s only my doctor.”

“Huh?”

“My doctor, Calvin. He stopped by to make another house call. He’s very dedicated to his patients.”

I’m about to make a snarky comment when I hear her say, “Doc, will you excuse me for a minute?”

I’m stunned. She’s serious.

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Caroline waits a beat before saying to me, “I forgive you. If you’re awake it means you’ve come to your senses. Now go make up with Adam.”

I laugh. The fight is over. And Caroline is okay. The way it sounds, more than okay. Thank heavens.

“Dr. Handsome,” I say.

“Excuse me?”

I’ve never met him, but I assume Calvin checks Caroline’s boxes.

She gets it and laughs. “Dr. Handsome is my doctor. That’s all.”

Can it be she’s more delusional than I am?

I go back to the issue at hand. “Adam lives in California.”

“So? You have somewhere better to be?”

I open my mouth to explain that Jeffrey is home, that I am looking for a new job. That it’s snowing.

But I stop myself.

None of it matters.

My son is an adult, my job search can wait, and the snow is . . . well, I'll have to see how the conditions are at the airport. Which is where I will be heading once I pack up my bag.

"No, I have nowhere better to be in this whole entire world. Thank you, Caroline. Love you."

"Love you too."

I hear a door open and Caroline giggle. "Keep me posted, Evie. Gotta run."

"Will do. Say hi to Dr. Handsome for me."

"He's only my doctor," she adds before hanging up.

With a sudden burst of energy, I shove aside the comforter and pop out of bed. I am going to get my man.

Nothing can stop me now.

Chapter Sixty-Five

Evie

The snow stops me.

I stand in the departures terminal, staring out the window at the rows of parked 747s coated in a fresh layer of snow. One by one, flights are being canceled, grounded due to inclement weather, the electronic display board turning red, line by line. For now, my flight to Reno is delayed.

Don't cancel, I pray.

From the moment I entered the yellow cab, the snow began coming down in earnest.

"Hope your flight takes off on time," the cabbie said, not sounding concerned in the least.

Now I'll be happy if it takes off at all.

Since deciding to go for it with Adam, everything is getting in my way. No Ubers or Lyfts were available, leaving me shivering on the street, hailing a cab early in the morning. Then a winter warning popped up on my phone.

The gate area is crowded with bleary-eyed, coffee-sipping passengers. Several teenagers wearing matching basketball sweatshirts sit on the floor taking turns charging their phones.

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I take my seat next to a woman with blood red lipstick, thanking her for watching my bag while I stretched my legs. She reminds me of Anna.

Will Anna and Ari ever accept me after our deception? Adam is their child, so they have to forgive him. But the same may not apply to the fictitious Ronna.

I remind myself that none of it will matter if Adam doesn't want me.

Which is a real and terrifying possibility. After all, the entire time I was with Adam, we were engaged in a fake relationship.

Was it all an act?

Memories of Adam's heart-flopping late-night kisses in the Salt Lake City hotel room bring a blush to my neck.

Kisses don't lie.

My subconscious slaps me upside the head. Of course they do,

The internal battle has been plaguing me since my middle-of-the-night call with Caroline.

Am I doing the right thing?

I picture myself showing up on Adam's doorstep only to have him send me away. The thought makes my stomach hurt.

My phone dings with a text from Caroline.

You are powerful. You are vibrant. You got this.

Caroline is a mind reader.

I reply with a barbell emoji.

I am not going to let the fear of rejection get in my way anymore.

Better to have loved and lost and all that.

I will be all right. Even if he doesn't love me, even if it was all a sham.

The gate agent turns on the mic. "Ladies and gentlemen, we were just informed that the flight will be delayed another hour. We apologize for the inconvenience."

This is followed by a round of loud groans.

I send a message to Caroline.

I'm going to Colorado even if I have to fly the plane myself.

Chapter Sixty-Six

Adam

"P

lease fasten your seatbelts. We expect a bumpy ride until we're on the ground."

The announcement from the flight deck is unwelcome. I clutch the armrests, my knuckles turning white.

“Are you okay?” asks the old lady sitting beside me.

“I don’t like flying.”

“Then you picked the wrong day for a plane ride,” she chuckles. Seeing my horrified expression, she pats my hand. “Don’t worry, we’ll be fine. It’s only a storm passing through.”

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Only?

I smile grimly, with one pressing thought running through my head.

If I don't make it, Evie will never know how I feel.

Twenty-five minutes later, we touch down. I've never been happier to be on terra firma.

"See? Everything is right as rain . . . or snow, as the case may be," the old lady says, looking out the window before unbuckling her seatbelt.

Not if Evie refuses to see me.

Then nothing will ever be right again.

Chapter Sixty-Seven

Adam

I breathe a deep sigh of relief as I exit the jet bridge. If I never got on a plane again it will be too soon.

The terminal is abuzz with bedraggled people, several asleep in their seats. A group of teenagers dressed in green team sweatshirts are sitting on the floor playing what looks like Texas Hold 'Em.

“Excuse me, pardon me,” I say, weaving through the crowd, looking for the men’s room. I desperately need to splash cold water on my face and calm down my heart rate. I don’t want to show up at Evie’s place looking like a mess.

If I even get that far.

Why would she see me after I kept my mouth shut when she needed me most?

I take my phone off airplane mode. A text from Zane pops onto the screen.

Good luck, bro.

I give the message a thumbs up emoji, then go to pull myself together.

Ten minutes later, I’m stepping outside into the freezing cold. Recently plowed snow piles line the sidewalk. I zip up my coat and follow signs to the taxi line, when the phone buzzes once more with a number I don’t recognize.

I let the call go to voicemail and take my place in line, the yellow cabs inching forward, accepting passengers.

A new text comes through.

It’s Jeffrey, Evie’s son. Pls answer.

When the phone rings again, I quickly tap the screen. “Hey, Jeffrey. Is everything all right?”

“Hope it’s okay that I called. Found your number online.”

“Yeah sure. What’s up?”

“I just woke up. Mom left a note on the kitchen table. Who even does that anymore? That’s what texts are for, right?”

“Uh, right.”

“My mom is on her way to see you.”

“What?”

“Listen, I don’t know what the deal is with you two but fix it, okay?”

My heart is pounding wildly, trying to focus on what Jeffrey just said. “Back up a sec. Your mom is going to Yosemite?” I ask, incredulous.

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“She left me her flight info.” Jeffrey reads it aloud.

“JFK? That’s where I am.”

“Whoa. Rad, bro.”

A taxi pulls up and the driver gets out. “Where to?”

“Sorry, take the next guy.”

The man gives me a ‘you gotta be kidding’ look.

I tell Jeffrey I’ll keep him posted then turn around and run back into the terminal. The line is long up to the ticket counter. Two familiar bodies stand at the counter.

It can’t be.

I push to the front and hurry to the counter, earning several angry stares.

“Steph?”

“Adam?” She looks as surprised as I am.

Brad says, “This is too weird.”

I feel bad for the guy. He can’t escape the Demetrius clan.

“Aren’t you supposed to be on your honeymoon?” I ask.

“Yes, and we are,” she replies. I note the lack of fury. Something’s changed since I saw her last.

She says, “Hear anything from Ronna . . . I mean, Evie?”

“Huh?”

What is happening?

Steph is waiting for a reply.

“Her son just called me. She’s here at the airport on her way to see me.”

“Then it worked!” Steph beams.

“What worked?”

“Brad and I stopped at her place. It’s adorable by the way.”

My head is spinning. “Steph, focus!”

“We tried to convince her to clear the air with you.”

“You did?”

“What? I still have your back,” she says, matter-of-factly. Then, “Wait a hot second! You got on a plane to come here!” She grins. “Wow, now I know it’s true love.”

Ignoring the drama in front of her, the ticketing agent hands Brad two boarding

passes. “Enjoy your flight.”

I say, “I need to find Evie before she gets on that plane.”

All three of us turn to face the woman behind the counter.

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“I have to go back to the gate. Someone can escort me. The woman I love is about to leave.”

“I’m sorry, sir. That’s not possible.”

“Okay, then I need a ticket on the next flight to Reno.”

The woman taps on her keyboard and shakes her head. “We have no tickets left. Everyone’s been rebooked due to the storm that just came through.” She looks up. “Anyhow, it’s currently boarding.”

“I need to get back on that plane.”

The agent looks at me like I’m missing half of my brain cells.

Steph smiles sweetly. “If you can get my brother on that flight, I’ll name my first child after you.” She squints at the woman’s name tag. “Say-oh-eers. Sow-ears?”

“It’s pronounced SEER-sha.”

I frown. “

“Sir, you’re holding up the line.”

I think a moment. “Okay, give me a ticket to wherever the gate next to hers is going to.”

Saoirse looks at me funny then begins tapping on her keyboard once more.
“Cincinnati. One seat left.”

“I’ll take it!”

As I grab my boarding pass, Brad looks at me with fiery determination. “Come on!” he shouts.

And the three of us run together to the gate.

Chapter Sixty-Eight

Evie

“N

ow boarding flight five-three-two to Reno.”

Finally.

I rub a hand over my face and yawn, glad to see an airplane waiting at the gate. The snow has let up and only a few straggly flakes swirl in the wind. A group of passengers are already lining up to board. Exhausted from too little sleep, I must have dozed through the deplaning process.

I review my plan, such as it is. I’ll show up at Adam’s house and hope he still wants to see me. After a week of ignoring his calls and messages, he has given up. Hopefully not forever.

I grab my purse and pull out my boarding pass, getting in line behind a young Spanish-speaking couple. And hear a ruckus behind me.

The gate agent and couple lift their gaze, focusing their attention over my shoulder.

“Evie!”

A shiver goes through me and I turn around.

To my utter amazement, three people are running toward me.

Steph, Brad, and —

I must be hallucinating.

“Adam?”

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Steph and Brad hold back while Adam, gasping for breath, approaches, keeping a respectful distance.

“What are you doing here?” I ask, stunned.

“I needed to see you.”

I shake my head in disbelief. How is Adam here?

I find my voice. It’s weak. “Why?” I whisper.

Adam runs a nervous hand through his hair. “Well, for two reasons.”

Everyone in our immediate area is watching us, the boarding line has slowed with passengers caught up in the soap opera.

“First,” Adam says, “I need to apologize. I should have intervened when my family blamed you for the hoax we pulled on them. I’m so sorry for letting you down.”

He looks achingly vulnerable. Just like me. Tears sting my eyes. “I forgive you. We were faking.”

Adam shakes his head. “I stopped faking a long time ago.”

The words are a direct shot to my heart. I pause, unsure if all of this is a dream. If it is, I would stay asleep forever.

I take a tentative step forward, testing reality. “What’s the second reason you’re here?”

In a millisecond, Adam closes the gap between us, his expression intense. “I am madly in love with you, Evie Lawson. For real. I only hope you feel the same way.”

I can’t believe what I’m hearing. I swallow hard, “You do?”

Adam’s face is inches away from mine. He smells of minty toothpaste. He’s staring at my mouth.

“When did you fall for me?” I ask. “When I nearly pushed you off the mountaintop?”

Adam’s lips lift upward into that devilishly sexy grin. “Maybe a little after that.”

A rush of warmth fills my insides. Something occurs to me. “I thought you don’t fly.”

His face is dead serious. “I don’t.”

“You flew across the country for me?”

Adam nods and lowers his voice. “In a snowstorm. I probably broke the hand of the old lady sitting next to me.”

The gate agent speaks up. “Ma’am? We’re about to close the boarding door.”

I look up. Without realizing it all the passengers are gone.

I don’t move a muscle. Adam’s eyes are pinning me to the spot. “Why are you going to Reno?” he asks.

“Because . . . you.”

“Me?” he says,

“I have a speech.”

He raises an amused brow. Breathlessly, he says, “Please, let’s hear it.”

I sense the gate agent leaning in closer.

I gaze deep into his soulful eyes. “When I met you, I had just turned fifty. Up there on Cloud’s Rest I was taking stock of what I accomplished in my life. Two remarkable sons, a successful career, a cute apartment, wonderful friends. But despite my good fortune, I knew deep inside that something was missing. Something visceral.

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“I missed having a partner to share my good fortune. Not any partner. Someone who inspires me, believes in me, understands me. Someone to pull me from my comfort zone with new adventures, passion . . . and love.”

“I do all that for you?” he asks, brushing a stray tear from my cheek.

I nod, amazed I just said all that aloud. “It sounded much better in my head.”

In the background, I hear a heavy door being closed.

Adam and I stare at each other, the sense of anticipation nearing a crescendo.

“It was perfect,” he says, “but there’s one thing I need to do before anything else.”

I feel butterflies in my stomach, every nerve ending on fire.

Instinctively, I place my hands behind his neck and draw him closer. “I love you, too, Adam. With all my heart.”

Adam’s gaze turns fierce as he wraps his arms around my waist, causing goosebumps up and down my arms as he lowers his head.

And then the dam breaks open. Adam’s mouth is on mine, his hungry lips insatiable.

I kiss him with every ounce of my being, my heart taking flight. Passion flames within me, my fears engulfed as if they never existed.

When we pull apart, the gate agent is staring at us, her jaw on the floor.

Steph and Brad are grinning broadly. They wave enthusiastically and walk away, heading for their gate to Madrid.

I am still in Adam's arms when I say, "Looks like my flight is leaving without me. So, what now?"

Adam takes my hand and brings it to his lips. "Any chance I can talk you into another road trip?"

Laughter mixes with tears as Adam guides me away from the gate.

"Sounds like another adventure. Lead the way."

Chapter Sixty-Nine

Evie

FIVE MONTHS LATER

Barbie, Mo, Caroline Sam, and I clink glasses. Today we celebrate Caroline's fiftieth birthday. It goes without saying that we are all sworn to secrecy that she's hit the milestone. Most importantly, she looks happy and healthy, basking in the attention, her leg fully healed.

"How shall we celebrate?" I ask, thrilled to be back with my friends in Le Marais.

Several weeks ago, Roger sent me a text, saying he was sorry he wasn't in closer touch but met someone else. He hoped I wasn't "too hurt" and invited me and my "gal pals" to come back to his restaurant.

Eyeing what remains of the masterpiece that was my appetizer, I'm still pinching myself how it all worked out.

I've missed this place and my sweet friends. I feel bad to have skipped two of the last five club meetings. I've been busy.

Barbie flips her jet-black tresses behind her shoulder. "How about trekking up Kilimanjaro?"

Caroline and Monique groan in unison and the rest of us laugh.

Sam says, "Not unless one of you rich ladies first pays off my mortgage."

I smile at her outspoken jest, even as she's looking from Caroline . . . to me. Over recent months Sam has slowly come out of her shell. I note she's wearing a touch of lipstick. Maybe New York City is working its magic on her.

"Why look at me? I ask.

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The ladies exchange glances.

“What?”

When no one answers me, I say to Sam, “Caroline’s got you covered. Don’t you, Caroline?”

“Sure, Sam, send me the paperwork.”

We all chuckle, and take long sips of our mojitos, each of us relaxed and in terrific moods.

“How long are you in town for this time?” Mo asks me. I’ve been going back and forth to Yosemite to spend time with Adam and start my new job. I’m deeply in love with both the man and the work. My sons have come out twice to visit, the four of us hiking and playing pool. The guys get along better than I could have ever wished for.

“I’m not sure. Adam has some business to tend to in California. Jeffrey is graduating next month and I want to host the party.”

Jeffrey received a job offer in Los Angeles. He’s moving after graduation. It will be a combination graduation and bon voyage party.

If Daniel ever relocates out there, I’d have all my peeps on the West Coast.

All, except for these magnificent ladies. I make a mental note to attend these get-togethers even if it means traveling to be here.

Barbie asks Caroline, “How’s Dr. Handsome? He still making house calls?” She makes air quotes over the last two words.

“As a matter of fact, Calvin has asked to come by once or twice. I’m starting to wonder if he thinks there’s more between us than a doctor-patient relationship. Crazy, right?”

While she lifts her hand to get the waiter’s attention, the rest of us shake our heads in disbelief. Caroline is clueless. Or in denial. She’s been through an awful time losing her husband. I’m not sure she’s finished grieving.

I sense someone coming up behind me and wait for Caroline to order another round of mojitos.

Instead, Barbie, Mo, and Sam who are sitting across from me have their mouths ajar. People at the next table have paused their conversations. Everyone is looking past me and Caroline.

Caroline turns around and says, “Oh.”

Now it’s my turn. I shift my body and peer behind me.

There is Adam.

He’s wearing a suit and tie, holding a bouquet of red roses. I’m frozen to my seat.

Until all four women offer a loud whisper. “Get up, Evie,” they say in unison.

Some force helps me move to a stand. “Adam, honey. I thought you were in California, working.”

His stance tells me to stay back, like he has something he needs to get off his chest.

“I was, but something suddenly came up here in New York.”

“Oh? Is everything okay?”

He takes a deep breath, beads of sweat lining his forehead. “No, not really. Not until I say what I came here for.”

A fleeting bout of nerves runs through me. I force it away. No man shows up with roses and bad news.

“Evie.” He clears his throat. “You’re a strong, brilliant, resilient, fun, independent, and sexy woman. And an amazing mom to two incredible sons. You captured my heart.”

I’m beyond touched at this grand gesture. He’s managed to surprise me by showing up in New York, not once but twice.

I wait for him to hand me the flowers. Instead, he drops to one knee, setting the bouquet aside. Someone gasps.

That someone would be me.

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“We live on opposite ends of the country. But I’ve given it a great deal of thought and if you’re on board with it, we’ll keep both homes, here and in Yosemite. I’ve already begun treatment for my fear of flying. And ta-da, it’s working.” There’s pride all over his face. “I flew here without meds or breaking anyone’s hand.”

My eyes brim with tears, the words of love caught in my throat, fighting to come out. But Adam’s not done.

“I know our timeline is . . . unusual,” he says, looking up at me. “But I can’t wait another minute.”

He pulls a small velvet box from his pocket. I’m speechless, breathless.

“Make me the happiest man in the world and be my hiking partner for life.”

Adam opens the box, revealing a ring that catches the overhead light, glistening like a beacon.

“Evie Lawson, will you marry me?”

The room is at a standstill, holding its breath.

I nod, vigorously until the words emerge. “Yes, yes, of course I will.”

The room erupts, diners clapping excitedly. Someone whistles loudly. Roger is in the kitchen doorway, giving me a thumbs up.

I hear Caroline say, “Dr. Handsome, huh?” as if trying the concept on for size.

And then Adam is slipping the ring on my finger. It’s a beautiful, oval-shaped diamond ring with intricate filigree detailing. His grandmother’s.

My cheeks are suddenly damp, my heart bursting with love for this amazing man.

I help him stand, my fingers trembling slightly as I take hold of his tie, pulling him closer until our lips meet in a tender, electrifying kiss.

His mouth is soft against mine, his touch gentle. It's a kiss that speaks volumes, conveying love, respect, and shared dreams.

Surrounded by my friends’ cheers and applause, I know I’m the luckiest woman alive. I found my soulmate in Adam.

As we hold each other close, the room fades away, leaving only the warmth of our embrace and the certainty that this moment is the beginning of a lifetime of happy adventures. Together.

Adam and Evie found their happily ever after. Want an invitation to their wedding?