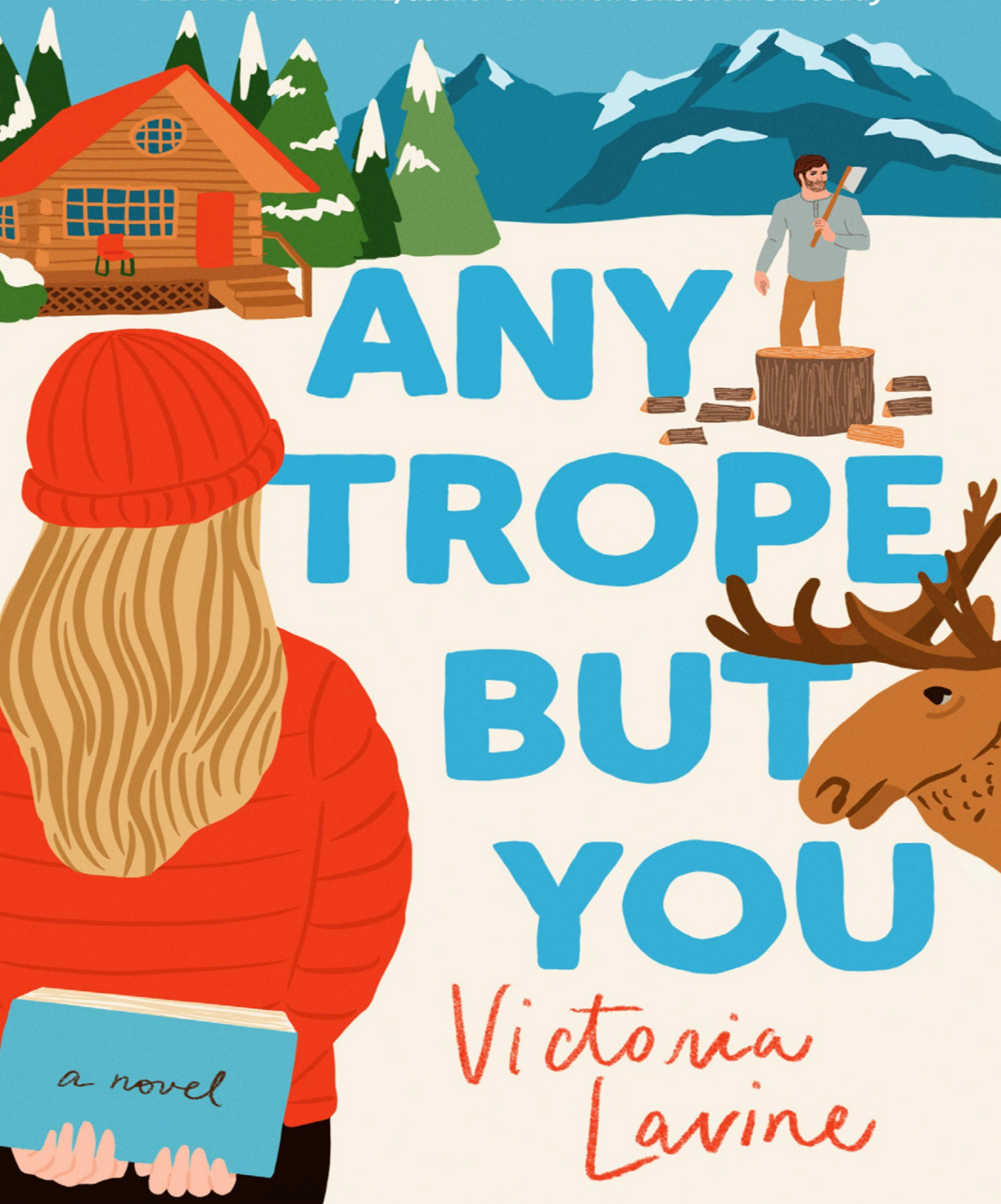


"Touching, heartfelt, and swoon-worthy with crackling banter."
—PEYTON CORINNE, author of TikTok sensation *Unsteady*



ANY TROPE BUT YOU

Victoria
Lavine

Advance Praise for *Any Trope but You*

“*Any Trope but You* is truly a breath of fresh air. Touching, heartfelt, and swoon-worthy with crackling banter and mastery of romantic and comedic timing, it tells a story of love, failure, longing, and family against a snowy, cozy landscape. Brilliant and effervescent, with imperfect characters who live and truly learn, Lavine poetically twists tropes in a way that will have you melting through to the very end.”

—Peyton Corinne, author of TikTok sensation *Unsteady*

“Incredibly clever, deeply relatable, and sparkling with the full spectrum of emotions, *Any Trope but You* is everything I love in a romance. Victoria Lavine is your next auto-buy author.”

—Tarah DeWitt, *USA Today* bestselling author of *Savor It* and *Funny Feelings*

“*Any Trope but You* is a love letter to the romance genre and to the concept of Happily Ever Afters. Victoria Lavine manages to incorporate so many beloved tropes while telling a story that feels totally fresh and original, and she writes characters with such depth that I might have momentarily forgotten I could not request Margot Bradley’s books from my local library. Plus, it may be set in frigid, snowy Alaska, but make no mistake—this book is *hot*! A truly charming debut that had me smiling, blushing, and wishing for my own pet moose.”

—Sarah Adler, *USA Today* bestselling author of *Mrs. Nash’s Ashes* and *Happy Medium*

“Heartfelt and warm, *Any Trope but You* is an absolute delight and a romance lover’s dream! I fell for these characters and their soft-hearted love and care for

one another. A beautiful love story and a reminder that we are all deserving of our own Happily Ever Afters!”

—Naina Kumar, *USA Today* bestselling author of *Say You'll Be Mine*

“If you loved Emily Henry’s *Beach Read* but wished it were snowier, *Any Trope but You* is your book! I came for the grumpy lumberjack and stayed for the cast of loveable characters! The only part of this book that isn’t hot is the Alaskan setting!”

—Kate Robb, author of *This Spells Love*

“*Any Trope but You* is my favorite brand of romance—Hallmark storyline with the passion turned up to the nth degree. I loved how thoughtful and relatable Margot was, and Forrest had me ready to book my own trip to Alaska to find a man like him. Readers are in for such a treat!”

—Etta Easton, author of *The Kiss Countdown*

“Snowy, sparkling, full of witty banter and cozy vibes, I absolutely loved this book. The characters leap off the page to meet you, the antics are delightful, and it is extremely big-hearted. I read it in one huge gulp and had a great time.”

—Laura Wood, author of *Under Your Spell*

“Victoria Lavine writes the kind of effervescent, whip-smart prose romance readers crave. Starring loveable leads whose chemistry is equal parts electric and tender, *Any Trope but You* is a perfectly cozy and big-hearted romance that I know I’ll return to again and again.”

—Ellie Palmer, author of *Four Weekends and a Funeral*

“Lush, cozy, sweet, and incredibly sexy, Lavine’s debut is like a mug of decadent hot chocolate that you’ve developed feelings for.”

—Laura Piper Lee, author of *Hannah Tate*, *Beyond Repair*, and *Zoe Brennan*, *First Crush*

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ANY TROPE BUT YOU

a novel

Victoria
Lavine

ATRIA PAPERBACK

New York Amsterdam/Antwerp London Toronto Sydney/Melbourne New Delhi

To James.

On the other side of the stories we share, you're my matching bookend.

To my fellow breast cancer survivors, previvors, and warriors.
It's a rare and beautiful thing to find out just how strong you really are.
This book's for you too.

MARGOT

Standing at the foot of my bed, I stare down at the two shirts I've laid out, wondering which one will make me look less like a liar. The flouncy pink one with roses is definitely giving Tenderhearted Romance Author (the exact image I'm aiming for), but is it trying too hard? The other option (crisp, white, sleeveless) has more of an edge, but is it *too* edgy? Will my readers take one look at the aggressively high neckline and know I'm hiding something?

I realize the same sort of wardrobe questions probably run through the mind of a serial killer preparing to take the stand. Except in my case, the jury will be hundreds of my most devoted readers, and instead of a court hearing, I'll be feigning innocence during a live stream promotional event for my latest book. Which starts in—I glance at my alarm clock—twelve minutes. *Shit.*

I cross my arms over my bra in a futile attempt to self-soothe. After six novels and their subsequent book tours, one would think I'd have this whole living-a-lie thing locked down by now. Or that I'd at least be able to pick out a shirt. But according to my underboob sweat, one would be wrong. Because despite occupying the body of #1 *New York Times* Bestselling Author Margot Bradley (the title my publicist insists every interviewer, podcaster, and unsuspecting Starbucks barista address me with), I live in perpetual fear that my fans will somehow learn the truth about me. That beneath all the romance tropes and triple-orgasm sex scenes I peddle like snake oil, I'm more jaded about love than a former *Bachelorette* star, mid-divorce.

I know it begs the question: *How can she write romance novels if she believes love is Satan's pyramid scheme?* To which I would answer: I haven't always been this wise and all-knowing. No, no. Once upon my twenties, I experienced the sort of swept-off-your-feet, can't-stop-staring-at-their-forearms, logic-melting chemistry that romance tropes are made of. I thought I'd found love in the heady rush of endorphins and desire, perilously tied to that most tenuous of human bonds—trust. I *know* the feeling of a two-point-three-carat engagement ring sliding onto my finger. Coincidentally, I also know how it feels when that ring slides off for good. How those helium-high feelings inevitably ignite on a spark of truth and explode, crashing to earth in a fiery inferno of pain and horror.

Too much? Maybe not. I've found that most people who reach their thirties have experienced at least one breakup that left them subsisting on dry Froot Loops because they were too busy inwardly collapsing to pour themselves milk. I also happen to know that the brokenhearted often seek comfort and escape through the billion-dollar romance novel industry. How? Because I've been one of them. I learned the hard way that in this bleak swipe-left world, romance novels give hope to the hopeless. They make you believe that a sensitive, multilingual, insanely jacked doctor named Hunter is just waiting in the wings of your life, ready to laugh with you about all the toads you dated while cuddling after your nightly synchronized orgasms.

Unless you're me, of course, and bitter experience has taught you that Dr. Hunter isn't coming—to you *or* in you. So instead, you use the faded remnants of your old hopes and dreams to write those romance novels that no longer provide *you* solace but still pay your bills and comfort others. And by others, of course, I mean my readers, whose unwavering loyalty deserves to be repaid in the currency they crave most. In golden-hour kisses. In snowed-in cabins with only one bed. And above all, in Happily Ever Afters.

More than anything, it's this particular story element that cuts the deepest to write and (when I'm willing to admit it) makes me yearn for the time when my faith in love was nearly as unshakable as my readers'. But those days are long gone, and if I had to hazard a guess, I'd say my old belief in love everlasting is probably chilling with my engagement ring at the bottom of the Pacific. It's why I've had to develop the perfect coping mechanism for every HEA I write but don't believe in:

my Happily Never After file. A top secret, password-protected document that contains alternate endings to every novel I've ever written. They're the endings my characters *would* have faced if they were real people with real issues that no number of straining Henleys or rippling abdominal muscles could solve. It's a brutal catalog of drawn-out divorces, monsters-in-law with spare house keys, parking-lot rendezvous with younger women, and unfortunate facial-hair choices. None of them are pretty, but they're all the truth and, for me, an essential reminder to never let my guard down again.

But on bad days, when even my Happily Never After file isn't enough to keep me writing weddings-and-babies epilogues, there's one reason—one person—above all who keeps my fingers pounding the keyboard. A single fan I can't bring myself to disappoint.

A knock makes me jump. I look over my shoulder, and just like magic, there she is. My sister.

"It's eight till, Margot," Savannah says, tilting her golden-blond head and glancing down at my underwear. "I didn't realize your publishing contract included a striptease clause."

"One live stream peep show for every new book launch," I confirm, looking back toward my shirt conundrum. "According to my marketing team, sex sells."

"And did marketing sign off on those granny panties?"

Placing my hands on my hips, I turn all the way around. "They're retro-cut, thank you very much. *Not* granny panties."

"They cover your belly button."

"And?"

"Do they come with a hood?"

I stick out my tongue. "Come here and help me pick out a shirt."

Savannah straightens and starts walking. Automatically, I scan her gait, visually assessing her pain level. She's at the tail end of a flare-up, and I worry she's pushing it by being out of bed so soon.

"Definitely the white," Savannah says.

"What's wrong with the pink one?"

"Nothing. If you're planning on rolling a joint and pulling some tarot cards."

"It's not *that* flowy."

Savannah picks up a sleeve that could conceal a family of raccoons in its billowy depths before letting it flutter to the bed. “Up to you. Just don’t get caught in any light breezes and sail away.”

I pull the white shirt on. “Good?”

Savannah smiles. “Beautiful. And are you planning on completing this ensemble with pants?”

I snap the very high, very beige waist of my underwear. “Over these beauties? No way. I’m working after eight on a Sunday night, and no one’s going to see me below the waist. Come on.”

I hold the door open for Savannah, who makes her way carefully toward me. On top of debilitating full-body pain, a flare-up of my sister’s cocktail of autoimmune disorders also leaves her with terrible balance. It’s disconcerting to see an otherwise healthy-looking woman in her midtwenties walk like a frail, elderly person, but I’ve grown accustomed to it the way anyone becomes used to something unbearable. By sheer necessity.

I track Savannah’s hand as it comes up to stabilize her on the doorframe. “Are you sure you don’t want me to get—”

“No, I’m fine,” she says, cutting off my offer to retrieve her cane. “Thanks, though.”

I bite back an argument. After four straight days of relying on me for even the simplest tasks, the last thing she wants is more coddling. It’s hard enough that she has to live with a caretaker (me). The least I can do is respect her independence when she’s capable of it.

“So who’s this interview with again?” Savannah asks.

“That romance podcast *Stop, Drop, and Swoon*. Ever hear of it?”

Savannah’s eyes light up as we make our way to my office. “Oh, I love that show! You better be on your guard, though; Sylvie doesn’t pull punches.”

“Good thing my book’s a literary masterpiece devoid of all flaws,” I say airily. I don’t bring up the crying jag of self-doubt and despair that happens on the eve of all my book releases.

I grab a throw blanket off the couch as we pass through the living room. Two years after moving in, I can still barely believe that writing romance novels has funded this midcentury dream of a house in Silver Lake. I might not believe in

Happily Ever Afters, but living here and being able to care for my sister full-time comes pretty damn close.

Savannah grins. “True. *Warmest Regards* is an instant classic. I expect a representative from the Pulitzer committee will be calling any day now.”

I snort-laugh. “The only award *Warmest Regards* would win is a world record for most uses of the word ‘clench’ in a published work.”

“Better ‘clench’ than ‘moist,’” Savannah points out graciously.

“There was definitely at least one ‘moist.’ Remember the hot-tub scene?”

“There was not!”

I shrug. “Better ‘moist’ than ‘member.’”

“There’s nothing worse than ‘moist,’ Margot.”

“Except ‘moist member.’”

Savannah makes a gagging face as we enter the dark office, and I veer left toward my desk. It’s strategically positioned in front of a wall of built-in bookshelves (the main reason I bought this house, if I’m honest), and as I turn on a lamp, all my color-coded books and framed photos are cast in a warm glow. Savannah beelines for the love seat across from my desk, and I toss her the blanket.

“Thanks,” she says, curling up like a cat. Within five seconds, an actual cat—or Savannah’s familiar, as I prefer to think of him—jumps onto her lap and makes himself at home with all the entitlement of his namesake, Mr. Darcy. “And for the record, I do think your writing deserves a Pulitzer. Your books bring joy and escape to all your readers, Margot.”

Her words echo my own daily justification for writing stories I suspect do more harm than good, but as I sit at my desk and open my laptop, my guilt is interrupted by a small burst of adrenaline when my Happily Never After document appears. I definitely didn’t open it today. Even more oddly, the page on the screen isn’t my latest alternate ending but one of my old venting journal entries I occasionally use the document for as well. Sad, bitter words leap out at me.

Signed over two hundred books at today’s event. Reader after reader told me how much my books mean to them while I did my best to pretend that they still mean something to me too. Honestly, it would be SO much easier to keep this deception up if my fans weren’t the sweetest people on earth. I know they want guaranteed happy

endings—and I'll give them anything because I owe them everything—but how can they be so fucking naive? Every time I hear another person tell me they're waiting for their own Margot Bradley HEA, I die just a little more inside. I hate this mask I have to wear.

I glance at Savannah, terrified she's found me out at last. It's the only explanation for why my HNA doc is open. But she's busy drawing little circles on Mr. Darcy's fuzzy gray forehead with her fingertip. I forcibly lower my shoulders. If Savannah had seen the document, we wouldn't be sitting here like nothing had happened. We'd be sitting here like we'd just felt the first ground-shaking tremors of the Big One. Except instead of an earthquake capable of swallowing Los Angeles whole, it would be this secret. The only one I keep from my sister.

"Hey."

I look up from my screen, now devoid of any incriminating documents.

"There's a reason you have the world's nicest fan cult and a regular spot on the Times Square Jumbotron," she says.

The permanent knot of guilt that resides in my stomach cinches a little tighter. "And that is?"

My sister gazes at me with hero worship I don't deserve, and I flinch from the blow before it comes. "Because you write from the heart."

It's a gut punch, but to my chest. A tit punch. Somehow I force a smile as said heart seems to plummet through my body, the floor, and the ground itself until it reaches the earth's core for incineration.

"Thanks for being here, Van," I say. "I know you could be out with Cooper."

Savannah smiles dreamily at the mention of her boyfriend, and I immediately regret bringing him up, even if it did distract her. My own feelings about love aside, I think my sister could do better. Not that Cooper isn't nice (and an admittedly great Scrabble player), but he's also a line cook/freelance photographer/surfer with two roommates in Los Feliz, without the time or resources to care for my sister in the way she deserves. I know it won't last, and just like every time, I'll be there for her during the fallout.

"You know I wouldn't miss this," Savannah says, reaching out and wiggling her fingers at me. "Not for all the moist members in the world."

I laugh, wiggling my fingers back at her before taking a steadying breath. "Okay. Showtime."



“So before we move on to reader questions, I have to ask—can you drop *any* hints about your next book, Margot?”

I smile at the grid of eager faces, zeroing in on the podcast host’s bright blue hair. “I really shouldn’t, Sylvie.”

“Okay, but what if I”—a click of a mouse—“unmute everyone and ask them to say ‘please’ in three, two, one...”

“PLEEEASE,” a chorus of voices rings out.

I raise my hands in surrender, laughing. It’s all a show; I’ve already gotten the green light from my editor to drop a small hint to fire up the rumor mills of Bookstagram. “Okay, okay. At the risk of being dropped by my publisher, the word is... ‘Alaska.’”

The screams are wild, and I quickly lower the volume as Mr. Darcy leaps from Savannah’s lap and takes cover beneath the couch.

“Okay, muting going back on!” Sylvie calls out. “Everyone just try to breathe. Sip some tea. Squeeze a stress ball. I know this is a lot to process. Is Alaska the location? A person? A state of mind? I’m sure we’ll all be desperately unpacking Margot’s clue until her next release date, but just for tonight, I’d like you to focus your questions on what we *do* have our lucky little mitts on, and that’s *Warmest Regards*.”

I can no longer hear them, but all across my screen, participants are clapping or waving their dog-eared copies of my book. Seeing such devotion to my writing should feel better than anything in the world. In the early days, it did. But that was before all my stories began to feel only marginally less harmful than lead poisoning. *There are no Happily Ever Afters, you sweet, hopeless romantics—*

“Let’s start with JennyLin_Librarian. What’s your question for Margot, Jenny?”

“Hi, Margot! Hi, Sylvie! Love the books, love the podcast!”

“Thanks so much, Jenny,” Sylvie and I reply together as a square enlarges to show a young woman clutching a glass of rosé in one hand and a waterlogged copy of *Warmest Regards* in the other. She’s a familiar face at all of my digital

book events, and a zing of guilt passes through my chest when I think of the loyalty and money she and so many others have given me to be here.

“Margot, I was wondering if any of your stories are inspired by real life?”

The irony of this question nearly causes an involuntary snort to escape my nose. But I master myself and take a sip of water. Smile warmly. “Great question, and thanks so much for being here, Jenny. Your support means the world.” I deliver my carefully worded answer, and the interview moves on. Question after question comes, and I glance at the clock. Savannah must sense I’m fading because she shoots a double thumbs-up at me and mouths the word “moist” to make me smile.

“Ooooh-kay,” Sylvie chimes. “It looks like our last question is coming from Truth_Seeker98. What truth are you seeking from Margot Bradley tonight?”

As usual, the participant’s square is enlarged, but because they don’t have their camera on, the screen seems to go black for a moment. And then a Word document appears. I blink against the sudden brightness of the screen, confused, until panic ricochets through me like a white-hot pinball. It’s my Happily Never After file. *No*. That’s impossible. But then the document starts slow-scrolling, and all my damning words appear.

“Oh, what’s this?” Sylvie asks, not understanding what she’s looking at. “Truth, is your mic turned on?”

My entire body begins to shake in a fine tremor as I rapidly scan words that were never meant to be seen by another human being. *Alimony*. *Slashed tires*. *Viagra*. This isn’t happening—surely this is some kind of stress hallucination. I try swallowing, but my throat is a rolled-up tube of sandpaper. And then a voice, creepily distorted, speaks into the silence. “My question for Margot is: How dare you?”

My spine goes rigid. “Who is this? How did you get this document?”

“Nothing is truly hidden on the Cloud,” the voice says ominously. “Imagine my surprise when I tried having a peek at your next manuscript and found this instead. The *real* endings to all your books. How you *really* feel about your fans.”

I close out the window in a knee-jerk attempt to rid it from everyone’s screens, but that doesn’t make the document disappear for anyone else. I’m left confronted with a grid of faces, all squinting and clearly reading. Sweet

JennyLin_Librarian's eyebrows make a pinched climb above her crooked glasses. A fresh surge of panic makes me want to slam my laptop shut and pretend it's not happening, but I have to put out this fire somehow—

"Margot, what's going on?" Savannah whispers, reminding me of her presence. "You okay?"

Sylvie's voice is next, slow with awe. "What in the actual hell?"

"Sylvie, please," I croak. "End the meeting."

"Margot, what is this? Is this real? It says here that Avery and Caleb... get a divorce? That Caleb..." A sharp gasp. "Gets a *beer belly*?"

In every square, hands clap over mouths in silent horror.

"Look, Sylvie, I can explain," I say.

"So fucking naive?" she reads, pink splotches appearing on her round cheeks as she finds my old journal entry. "Is that how you really feel about this community, Margot?"

"That's not—Sylvie, just *please* end the meeting," I beg.

Digitally distorted laughter interrupts my bargaining. "End the meeting? Do you really think I wouldn't post this somewhere else? *Everywhere* else? Links have already been sent to every participant here tonight."

I flash hot. Then cold. My vision swims as I fight down a wave of nausea. "How could you? Invasion of privacy. Totally illegal—"

"How could *I*? I think the real question here, Margot, is how you could lead millions of readers on like this. Raking in their hard-earned money while secretly laughing behind their backs. If this Happily Never After file proves one thing, it's that you're a fraud. And that's why I'm calling on everyone here tonight to cancel Margot Bradley. If you believe in love—in Happily Ever Afters—never buy one of her books again."

And with that, Truth_Seeker98 leaves the meeting. In the aftermath, there's only silence and screen after screen of hurt and hostile faces.

"Well, Margot?" comes Sylvie's somber voice. "Do you have anything to say for yourself?"

I open my mouth, but my brain is a skipping record, permanently stuck on the word *Fraud, fraud, fraud, frau*—

But then from behind my computer, Savannah stands up too quickly. She wobbles, and without thinking, I stand up too. There's another offended gasp from Sylvie, and when I look down, I realize that my webcam is pointed directly at my sky-high granny panties. *Perfect.*

"Well, I think that concludes tonight's episode of *Stop, Drop, and Swoon*," Sylvie says coldly. "Rest assured, dear listeners, as ground zero for this major hit to our community, I will be holding space for your reflections and feelings and reporting on them as the story unfolds. Please send your comments in at—"

I slam the laptop closed. "Savannah, wait!"

But she's already left the room, her blanket tossed to the floor.

I find her in her room, sitting on the bed in the dark. She's busy reading something on her phone. Between the blue glow from the screen and the moonlight streaming in through the window, she's rendered silver. If it weren't for the slow tears spilling down her cheeks, she could be a statue.

My voice cracks into the dark. "Van, listen. I can explain."

"Is it true? Did you write this?"

For a moment—only a moment—I consider lying. But I can't keep this secret from her anymore, and after what's just happened, there's no point in trying.

"Yes," I say, shame fogging out of me like from a smoke machine. "I wrote it."

Her voice hitches. "And this is your worldview? That love never works out in the end?"

I cross my arms as if I can shield her from the sharpened ice chip that occupies my chest instead of a heart, but I can't bring myself to answer her. She does it for me. "This is about Adam. Isn't it?"

Adam. Hearing my ex-fiancé's name spoken out loud after such a long time purposefully *not* saying it feels like brushing against an electric fence. I barely get the words out: "Can we not talk about that right now?"

"Oh, Margot," she says softly.

"I'm so sorry—" I begin, but Savannah surprises me by tossing her phone on the bed and standing up. Without another word, she walks to me and throws her arms around my neck.

For a long moment, I stand there in the dark, shakily inhaling the honeysuckle scent of her shampoo while relief nearly buckles my knees. *She doesn't hate me.* As

though she hears me think it, Savannah grips me tighter: *I could never hate you*. Hot tears spring from beneath my closed eyelids, and I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that *this* is the only kind of real love. Everything else is cubic zirconia.

When my breathing finally eases, we release each other at the same moment, and I stare at her through mascara-blurred eyes. “What the fuck am I going to do, Van?”

Savannah sighs and then, like a small miracle, one of her twin dimples appears with her half-smile. “I think I have an idea.”



The next few days suck. They suck like the whirlpool that pulled the *Titanic* down. On top of all the appointments and hassle involved with reporting the HNA leak to the authorities and increasing my computer’s security, I’ve helplessly watched as my reputation has gone up in higher and higher flames. My agent, my editor, and my publicist form a trio of triage, each desperately trying to stop the hemorrhaging. But despite their Herculean efforts to save my ass, it’s no use. My career has cracked open like an egg, directly into Satan’s skillet. I have no choice but to abandon all social media, where me and my oversize panties have become the flame-throwing target for every betrayed Bookstagrammer, Goodreads troll, and sycophant on the Internet. When I manage to sleep, I dream in hashtags: #HappilyNeverBuyingAgain #BeerBellyGate #Boycott MargotBradley #PantiesofLies.

The final blow comes five days after the HNA leak. My usually crisp and buttoned-up agent calls in tears to let me know that she tried everything, but my next publishing deal—which we were still in the process of negotiating—is dead in the water. There will be no Alaska book. There will be no more books, period. All is lost.

The next morning, I sit at the kitchen bar staring blankly into the perfect latte heart Van has crafted for me. I have savings. Enough to last us a good while after my royalty checks completely dry up. But what then? Savannah’s freelance illustration business does okay, but not well enough to keep us in Silver Lake, eating the organic, grass-fed, non-GMO, grain-free, pesticide-free, everything-free

diet my sister's body requires (or else). I become profoundly aware that, at thirty-one years old, I have no salable skills besides writing. It's the only thing I do well besides caring for my sister and finding deals on Net-a-Porter.

In short, I'm screwed. And yet a small, obstinate part of me is proud that I didn't deny the truth. If anything, this ordeal has simply proved yet again that Happily Ever After is a lie designed for the tenderhearted and gullible—something I refuse to ever be again.

"Your face is doing that loading-wheel-of-doom thing."

I look up from my coffee as Savannah comes back into the kitchen with her laptop. "Sorry," I say, sitting up straighter. "Just wondering if Amazon might consider rebranding their stock of my books as a toilet-paper alternative. Might keep us in the black."

"Not a terrible idea, actually. But I think you're going to like mine better." Savannah turns her laptop around on the kitchen island to face me. On the screen is a website featuring a beautiful aerial photo of a rustic lodge surrounded by a smattering of log cabins. All the buildings and pathways are nestled within a pristine wilderness that seems worthy of a David Attenborough voice-over. Overlaid on the photo are the words "North Star Lodge" and, below that, "Your Alaskan Adventure Awaits."

"What the hell is this?"

"It's where you're going, obviously!"

I look up at her with dead shark eyes. "Savannah, the Alaska book isn't happening. There's no need for a research trip."

"This wouldn't be a research trip per se. This would be a Reinvention Trip."

She says these last words with actual jazz hands. Before I can comment, she launches into what is very clearly a rehearsed motivational speech. "So you were knocked on your ass. So what? Do you think Taylor Swift gave up after her recording company screwed her over? No. She started rerecording her own albums and emerged as a new woman. A *better* woman. And when people *still* tried to dim her shine? Do you think she threw in the towel? *No*. She slapped the world back with her Eras Tour."

"Thank you for this enlightening history of your favorite pop star, but I'm not going to Alaska."

I push my stool back to get up, but she grabs my wrist, shackling me across the kitchen island. She stares at me with the surprising ferocity of a honey badger. “No, Margot. *You’re* my favorite pop star, and that’s exactly why you have to go.”

I meet my sister’s light brown eyes, a perfect mirror of my own.

“You can’t give up writing,” she declares, tightening her grip. “I won’t let you, because you’re too good at it and you love it too much. If you’re not allowed to write romance anymore, then you just need to try something else. You need to get away and find out what that is.”

Against my will, my mind conjures an alternate universe in which going to Alaska is a possibility, and what it would mean for me. *A fresh start. An opportunity to write something new. No meet-cutes. No perfect endings. An escape from L.A. and the Category 4 shitstorm that is your life. Alaska.* With every new thought, Savannah’s unhinged plan somehow makes more and more sense to me. Something like hope—or maybe it’s just desperation—blossoms in my chest. That is until the hard boot heel of reality comes down and crushes it like a cigarette butt.

“But I can’t leave you,” I say.

At this, Savannah only smiles and lets go of my wrist. She’s prepared for this. “Oh, yes, you can. You forget, dear sister, that I have a wonderfully devoted boyfriend. Cooper is going to stay here with me.”

The words “No. Absolutely not” jerk out of me.

“Why not?” Van says simply. “I’m twenty-eight, not sixteen. I pay rent—”

“Which I’ve never asked for—”

“Which entitles me to have guests over.”

“And what happens if you have another flare?” I demand.

“Then I have another flare! Cooper and Mom are more than willing to help me.”

I bite my lip. “And how long does this scheme of yours dictate that I’d be away? A week?”

Savannah lets out a laugh like I’m an adorable simpleton. “A *week*? No. You’ll be gone for six weeks.”

I choke on my coffee, which I’d sipped in an attempt to look poised. I’m just *winning* at life over here.

“Six weeks?” I manage eventually. “No, no. You’ve lost your sweet little mind.”

“Au contraire,” she says, wagging her pointer finger at me. “My mind has never produced such genius. Six weeks is exactly what you need to produce your next manuscript.”

Despite the lunacy of this plan, my mind is racing. After everything that’s just happened to me, there’s only one thing I want to write about: *murder*. A grisly departure from the saccharine stories I’ve been writing for years, and an outlet for my true-crime podcast addiction. Already, the beginnings of a story are swirling like mist in my mind. A murder set in a remote Alaskan landscape. A frozen body found years later by backwoods hikers. A down-on-her-luck detective sent on probation with something to prove.

I glance up to see Savannah with two fists against her mouth, holding in her excitement, and it’s the final nail in my coffin.

“Okay,” I say on a sigh, resigned to never being able to deny my sister anything. “I’ll consider it.”

Savannah squeals, and the biggest smile I’ve seen from her in months blasts across her face. “Oh, thank God! Because I already booked it!”

“You did *what*?”

“You’re leaving in five days! And don’t worry, I know Alaska’s cold in November, but I already ordered you all the gear you’ll need.”

I’m stunned into speechlessness. Savannah comes around the kitchen island and gently lays her hands on my shoulders. “I know this is a lot to take in. But you always take care of me, Margot. This time let me take care of you. Please.”

I stare into my sister’s eyes and see a capableness and determination I’ve rarely seen there. I swallow.

“Okay. Alaska it is.”

MARGOT

Coming to Alaska was a mistake.

I should've known it the moment my driver introduced himself very fittingly as Bear, or after any of the eight hundred times he's farted in the spray-painted Suburban I've been trapped in for the last two hours and twenty-six minutes. It comes as a total surprise when he growls, "Here we are," because the directions app on my phone stopped working over an hour ago, and because this particular swath of snowy evergreens looks identical to the last hundred miles of snowy evergreens we've driven past. But just like his four-pawed brethren, Bear needs no directions. He turns into an unmarked break in the trees and onto an unpaved suggestion of a road that makes my teeth rattle for a solid ten minutes.

When we finally come to a halt and my vision stops vibrating, I look out the window and see it. North Star Lodge. *I made it.* Bear pulls directly in front of a large timber-frame chalet that wouldn't be out of place at a Swedish ski resort. Beneath its peaked roof and multiple stone chimneys are giant windows and a wraparound porch covered in fluffy snowdrifts.

"I'll grab the bags," I'm told, and Bear heaves himself out of the car with a last squeak of flatulence. A blast of frigid air circulates through the warm, smelly fug of the SUV, and I gasp, pulling my parka's hood over my head. It dawns on me that until today, grabbing food out of my freezer is the only real cold exposure my tender skin has ever endured. I slide my hands into the pillow-like mittens I originally thought were overkill, simultaneously thanking and cursing Savannah.

If I survive this and ever see my sister again, I'm immediately booking her a one-way sightseeing trip to Antarctica.

Bear stomps back through the snow toward the Suburban, and I see he's left all my luggage on the porch. It takes me several tries to shoulder the vehicle door open, probably because an ice chrysalis formed on the drive here. Sure enough, there's a cracking sound, the door swings open, and I tumble out. Bear catches me by the elbow, and I thank him before removing a mitten to retrieve some of the cash Savannah insisted I bring. "Alaska isn't L.A., Margot," she'd said when I questioned whether paper money was still even a thing. "Not everyone will take Venmo." I glance at Bear, who looks like he'd sooner accept a sack of grain or cured meats as payment, and feel grudgingly grateful for my sister's forethought.

"Thanks, ma'am," I hear him rumble, though there's no detectable facial movement from beneath his bushy I-can-skin-a-deer beard. "Send Trapper my regards, eh?"

Alarmed both by being called "ma'am" and by the name Trapper, I barely manage a halfhearted wave as Bear climbs back into his den and drives off in a white cloud of frozen exhaust.

And then, just like that, I'm alone. Wind whistles eerily through the trees, and I realize that, at the very least, this trip will provide the perfect inspiration for my murder mystery. *Maybe too perfect.*

I hurry up to the porch as quickly as I dare. Whenever I watched Christmas movies as a kid, complaining to my mom that I wanted to live in a place with four discernible seasons, I never once imagined snow being this fucking slippery. Arms wide, I gingerly make my way up the stairs and am greeted by an enormous carved wooden door that makes the entrance to this place look like Thor's front porch.

I pull it open on well-oiled hinges, half-expecting to meet a party of Vikings and step into the glorious warmth. But I'm still alone. My face prickles as blood returns to it, and I look around. It's just as advertised on the website: Scandinavian furniture draped with various animal pelts, a giant stone hearth in the center of the room, and floor-to-ceiling back windows that look out onto a scene that I'm having trouble believing isn't a fake backdrop. I step closer, mesmerized. Evergreens march down a dramatic valley to where a powerful river cuts through the snow-clad earth like a dark serpent, resisting winter's command

to freeze. Beyond, in a distance so vast my brain struggles to grasp it, are mountains. Snowcapped and eternal, they make the dusty hills surrounding Los Angeles look like piles of pebbles.

Closing my mouth, I turn and look around for signs of life. The room feels more like a private residence than a hotel, and the only conceivable check-in area is a cozy book nook next to the fireplace, where an old desk stands sentinel. But no one's there. I look up to where the cathedral ceiling gives way to a balcony on the second floor, and then remember Savannah saying that guests stay in private cabins scattered around the property. *But where the hell is the staff?*

"Hello?" I call out, unnerved. I pull off a mitten and check my phone for service. Nada. I'll have to connect to the Wi-Fi once I find someone to tell me the password. Unless, of course, I've unwittingly been dropped off at a ghost hotel à la *The Shining*. I swallow, suddenly wishing Bear hadn't scampered off so fast.

"Hello?" I call again.

When nothing stirs, I let out an exasperated huff. Pulling my mitten back on, I march toward the front door. If there's no one inside, they must be out on the grounds. Maybe it wasn't as cold as I imagined.

I open the door and am instantly corrected. My eyeballs sting against the inrush of arctic air, but I march out like an intrepid explorer, ready to brave the hostile unknown. Looking around, I notice a path cleared in the snow along the side of the lodge. I follow it, and as I do, I hear a faint rhythmic sound on the wind. I continue until the path turns against the corner of the lodge, and I stop in my tracks.

There's somebody chopping wood in a snowy clearing surrounded by trees. A tall, broad somebody. A somebody with clearly defined back muscles that flex and bunch beneath his clinging thermal shirt with every fluid swing of his ax. A somebody whose labored breathing rises in white clouds around his dark curls. The wood before him stands no chance as his blade comes down with perfect accuracy. There's a juicy splitting sound. He grunts, and somehow I'm not cold anymore.

Like a total creep, I watch him move the way you watch a random Olympic sport you've never seen before but suddenly find yourself very deeply invested in. Is wood chopping an Olympic sport? If not, it should be. I've never felt more

patriotic in my life. I take a small step closer. Something about him is familiar. Even though I can only see his glorious backside, I somehow know that if he turned around, his face wouldn't be a surprise. But how? There's exactly a zero percent chance I know this future gold medalist of ax wielding.

A crunching sound from close behind startles me out of my trance. I turn around, and the scream I let out precedes all thought. When words finally flash across my mind, they burst like emergency flares: *Brown. Huge. Fur. Huge.* I stumble back from the beast, which blows out an angry steaming breath and rears its enormous head. I scream again. Or maybe I haven't *stopped* screaming. As scorching adrenaline sets all my internal organs on fire, I turn and run blindly forward, arms pinwheeling. The man drops his ax in the snow, staring at me in alarm. In my lizard brain, he's my only chance for survival, and when I close the distance between us, I don't think—I jump.

He catches me like he's used to random women leaping into his brawny arms, and frankly, I wouldn't be surprised if he is. But apart from registering that his face is indeed the rugged masterpiece I expected it to be, there's only one thing on my mind. "RUN!"

To my dismay, he only raises one of his thick eyebrows. *Just great.* Leave it to me to throw my life directly into the hands of a beautiful idiot. I barely resist the urge to dig my heels into his ass and spur him on like a horse. Instead, I whip my head around to see how closely my death is approaching. But to my utter astonishment and relief, my death is standing quietly in the snow where I left it, blinking placidly at us. I turn back to the man I've suctioned myself to.

"It's a moose," I inform him, still panting from my sprint of terror. "Not a bear."

The man nods politely, as though this is, in fact, news to him. "An important distinction."

"I thought I was going to die," I say defensively, gripping him a little tighter around his neck.

"You mean this isn't how you greet everyone?" he says in a baritone I feel right through my parka. *Holy smokes.* The blood rushing to my face makes my cheeks sting, and I realize my hood must have fallen back during my mad dash.

“There aren’t any wild animals where I’m from,” I say. “It just took me by surprise.”

“Then you must be Margot Bradley from L.A.”

“And you must be Trapper from... the forest?”

His full, slightly chapped lips widen into a smirk that creases the corners of his eyes. They’re dark green, thickly lashed, and make him look distantly related to the evergreens surrounding us. Like he grew here right next to them. Something about him is so familiar, and yet I can’t quite—

“No, Trapper’s my father. I’m Forrest.” A pause. “From the forest.”

At this, a breathless laugh escapes me, and I watch with a delicious flip of my stomach as he clocks my dimples. “A bit on the nose, don’t you think?”

He looks away to glance around at the heavily wooded terrain with a literal moose standing nearby. “Could be worse. Could’ve been named after my godfather.”

“Who is?”

“The guy who just dropped you off.”

I snort, which makes him smile. His perfect teeth are a brilliant contrast to his dense stubble-verging-on-beard. I become increasingly aware of my legs wrapped around his granite waist, and of the fact that I’ve just used the word “granite” to describe his body to myself, like he’s the real-life version of every romance hero ever written. I notice with growing alarm how warm he is from his exertions, and how long it’s been since I’ve been this physically close to anyone with a penis. Which is *exactly* the last word I want in my mind right now and therefore becomes the only word I can think.

Until, finally, I recognize him.

My smile slides off my face as a sense of unreality grips me. Because he’s not the embodiment of every romance hero ever written—just all of mine. For the record, I’ve written plenty of men into existence. Six, to be precise. To all of them, I graciously bestowed a single favorite feature, teasing out my own personal preferences across multiple characters because giving them all to one man seemed gratuitous. But now, as I stare at Forrest, I’m confronted with all of them at once. My eyes roam his features, recognizing Caleb’s coarse, chocolatey waves. Brandon’s green eyes. Levi’s sculpted bone structure. Anders’s superhero

physique. Harrison's height. And though I'll never know for certain, probably Dax's—

"Did you want to climb down," he asks uncertainly, "or are you still in fight-or-flight mode?"

I blink, realizing I've been staring at him like a psychopath for the better part of a minute. "Right. Yes. Down," I say eloquently.

Forrest helps me clamber off his 10/10 Would Recommend body, and I take a clumsy, snow-crunching step back from him. I begin to understand that I ran flailing from something completely harmless and straight into the arms of the actual threat.

I came to Alaska to escape everything I knew. To leave behind my identity as a romance author and write a grisly murder-mystery novel. Instead, I'm having a picture-perfect meet-cute with a man who seems ripped straight out of one of my own romance novels. A man I've known for less time than it'll take me to have a muchneeded cold shower, but who somehow registered as a beacon of safety in my moment of life-or-death panic.

But Forrest from the forest? *Really?* Even I'm not that corny.

I put a mitten to my forehead as a pulsing tension headache starts right above my left eyebrow. It's been the longest day in existence, I haven't eaten anything in hours, and I probably smell like Uncle Bear's irritable bowel syndrome. Forrest's eyebrows draw together, making him look like one of those hotly troubled men in a cologne ad. "You okay?"

At the genuine concern in his voice, anxiety ripples through me. And yet my gaze locks with his in a reflexive search for reassurance and comfort. It's a questionable instinct, considering he's a very large stranger who happens to be wielding an ax. But he's not looking at me like I'd be perfect for his human taxidermy hobby or even like I'm just another resort guest. His gaze, like his question, is soft and a little bit wary as it surveys my features—like I'm not the only person here who feels like I've met a piece of my own imagination come to life.

God, I need a nap. Or better yet, a ride straight back to the airport. I shake my head a little to clear it. He asked if I'm okay, and the truth is, I'm not. I haven't been this attracted to someone in a long time, and the last time I was, it cost me

my dignity, my faith in love, and several nonrefundable wedding security deposits. At the thought, panic skitters up my spine, and suddenly, I feel like a cactus in a time-lapse video, speed-growing its spikes. For better or for worse, making myself unlikable has always been my default defense mechanism.

"I'm freezing," I announce. "I'd like to be taken to my cabin, if you don't mind. And I need someone to collect my bags."

At my frosty tone, Forrest's expression and posture instantly become more guarded, and I regret my coldness. But I'm in full damage-control mode, and if I'm going to be stuck here with him for the next six weeks, establishing some distance is the only way I'll survive.

"Right," he says, all traces of warmth vanishing like he's hastily rebuilding his own toppled boundaries. "Follow me."

He picks up his ax and starts walking, but I hesitate to move. The bear-moose is standing next to the path, and even though it doesn't seem particularly interested in rampaging, it's still an enormous fucking wild animal. Forrest sees my hesitation and sighs. Apparently, his patience for outsiders has been exhausted. "Don't worry about Bullwinkle," he says. "He's just begging for carrots. Come on."

"*Bullwinkle?* As in ... is he your *pet?*"

"No, he's a five-hundred-dollar penalty waiting to happen. It's illegal to feed moose, but my dad started it, and now he's practically domesticated. Just ignore him."

I can imagine how Savannah would react to depriving any animal of a "wittle tweat," illegal or not, and I'm hit by my first real wave of homesickness. I make a silent vow to work up the nerve to sneak Bullwinkle a carrot before I leave, but as we pass by the towering mountain of brown fur, I can't help sidling closer to Forrest. He might be a little grumpy, but at least *he* doesn't have the giant horn things. Antlers. Whatever.

Instead of leading me back to the main lodge to collect my bags, Forrest takes me on a new path through the woods to find one of the surrounding cabins that I'll call home for the next six weeks. When I start to lose feeling in my stumbling feet, I discover that sneakers were the wrong footwear choice. I remember the subzero boots (and all the other gear) Savannah purchased and insisted I bring,

and I feel a burst of appreciation for my sister. I may not want to be here, but at least she made sure I wouldn't lose my toes.

"Not much farther now," Forrest calls out, moving ahead of me like he was born and bred to withstand arctic temperatures in form-fitting base layers.

Meanwhile, I barely repress a shriek when a wet clump of snow falls from an overhead branch and lands on my head. I'm just about to turn back and tell him I'm fine sleeping on an animal pelt back at the lodge when our destination finally comes into view. The cabin is tiny, snowcapped, and surrounded by trees. A cozy beacon of warmth and comfort. *A place with a toilet.* When we reach the door and he unlocks it, I push my way past him, desperate to be inside. Forrest comes in at the pace of someone who doesn't physically register temperature changes.

"Close the door!" I hiss. "You're letting all the warmth out!"

He obliges me, stomping his snowy boots on the welcome mat while I rip my mittens off and practically shove my fingers in my mouth to warm them up. As my face begins to thaw, so does my nose.

"Here," Forrest says, handing me a box of tissues from the entryway table.

I note with annoyance that his own nose is miraculously dry and adorably rosy. I blow mine with an embarrassing honk before removing my coat. My travel clothes are comfortable but not nearly comfortable enough. I need to be swaddled in the cashmere sweatsuit I recently splurged on—my consolation prize for agreeing to this trip.

I look up at Forrest and realize he's staring at me. Probably because, thanks to the pound of snow melting in my hair, I resemble a wet jet-lagged cat. On top of feeling unnerved by him in general, his gaze makes me feel uncharacteristically self-conscious, which is probably why I blurt out, "Were you going to give me a tour or something?"

He blinks at my rude tone, and even though I can taste the word "sorry" on the tip of my tongue, I hold it in. I realize I have no legitimate reason to be annoyed with him, but the slightly panicky self-preservation part of me is searching high and low for one.

"Yes. I mean no," he corrects himself. "I was just going to grab your bags from the lodge. Did you want me to build a fire first, though?"

I look around to see a stone fireplace in the cabin's living room, and one of those circular wrought iron racks loaded with wood. Pretty self-explanatory, and more than anything, I need to be out of this man's disturbing presence.

"That's okay, I've got it."

"You've got it," he repeats doubtfully.

"What, I don't look like I know how to light something on fire?" I say, ready to be offended on behalf of fire-lighting women everywhere.

"*Do* you regularly light things on fire?" The concerned eyebrows are back.

"I mean, I don't have a monogrammed blowtorch or anything, but I think I can handle a fireplace."

His face makes it clear he thinks otherwise, but wisely, he doesn't push it. "Just remember to open the flue."

"Right. Obviously," I say, making a mental note to look up why a fireplace would have a flu. Which in turn, makes me think of something critical. "Oh! I'm going to need the Wi-Fi password. I was having trouble connecting earlier."

He squints at me like I've just spoken in a foreign tongue. "Wi-Fi?"

"Uh, yes? Sometimes also called the Internet?"

At this, he laughs. A deep, rich sound that, paired with his smile, momentarily stuns the neurons firing across my brain. "There's no Wi-Fi here."

I shake my head to clear the pheromones clogging my ears. "Come again?"

He lifts his hands and looks around the rustic log cabin as though to point out the obvious. "There's no Wi-Fi here. Closest tower's near Talkeetna, and that's out of range."

"So wait," I say, struggling to comprehend. "You're telling me North Star Lodge has no Wi-Fi. *Period?*"

"Big part of why most folks come to stay here. They want to connect with nature—not their screens."

I register his judgment but can only gape like a fish, unable to form words. It hadn't occurred to me that a no-Internet situation was even a remote possibility.

"But I need the Internet," I tell him, barely checking the panic in my voice. "I need it for my job! To keep in touch with my sister, who has a very serious condition!"

“Well, I drive to Talkeetna once a week to pick up mail and supplies,” he says. “I guess you could tag along and use the Internet café in town.”

“*Internet café*? What is this, 2003?”

He shrugs his giant shoulders, gives me a smile that seems more like a taunt, and this time it takes zero effort to be irritated with him. On the contrary, the irritation floweth.

“Welcome to Alaska,” he says. With that, he leaves me standing in a log cabin in the middle of the Alaskan wilderness, wondering how the hell I’m going to survive the next six weeks of my life.

FORREST

How does one human being fill this much goddamn luggage?

As I adjust the slippery hard-shell bag on my lap that wouldn't fit with the rest in my snow machine's largest trailer, I have to wonder if anyone, ever, has been as epically lost as Margot Bradley. Amelia Earhart? Magellan? Tom Hanks and Wilson? Nothing about this situation makes any sense. Without deviation, all the guests who stay at North Star Lodge are experienced outdoors enthusiasts. They're the sort of people who know how to convert their own piss into drinking water and typically bring only what they can carry on their backs. Until today, of course. Something tells me our new guest's idea of the "great outdoors" is a stroll down Santa Monica Pier.

I stretch the tension from my neck as I drive toward her cabin, still feeling whiplash from her literal crash collision into my life. I can admit that, at first, I'd thought the last six months of near isolation in the Alaskan bush had finally gotten to me. That I was having a multisensory hallucination of the most attractive woman my prefrontal cortex could dream up. But as it became clear she was a real person with approximately the same degree of humble self-awareness as Malibu Barbie, my mind latched on to a single question: *Why the hell is she here?*

It's a puzzle, and unfortunately for me, I can never resist one of those.

I pull up to her cabin, cut the engine, and begin unloading her endless suitcases, all of which are a completely impractical and therefore irritating cream color. *Did she pack an outfit for every hour of her stay?* I shake my head in disbelief.

Maybe the high price tag of staying at North Star convinced her she was signing up for a glamping experience. She's in for a hell of a surprise when she meets the other guests, whose clothing looks (and smells) like it's been worn straight out of a sweaty stuff sack for days on end. Because it has been.

A small part of me that's been starved for amusement during the last extraordinarily difficult few months can't wait to see how she interacts with them. Or how she'll respond to the news that there are no spa services at North Star Lodge. But a wiser, more cautious part of me just wishes she hadn't come at all. From her long mane of wavy golden hair that looks like it's managed by a team of professionals, to the bright white tennis shoes she slipped through the snow in, everything about her screams Southern California. Which is exactly the place I'm trying my damndest to forget.

I finally finish unloading the trailer and straighten to my full height before knocking on her door. After almost a minute of silence, I knock again. Still nothing. I release the inside of my cheek when I realize I'm chewing it. Chances are, she face-planted and fell asleep after a long day of travel. Then again, it's only been a few minutes since I left her. Annoyed concern grows like a thorny weed in the pit of my stomach. Did she perish from lack of Wi-Fi? See a squirrel and faint? Start a fire and forget to open the goddamn flue like I told her to?

This last hypothesis sends a flare of very real worry up my spine. Guest safety is my responsibility now that my dad's been forced into early retirement. Moreover, while I'm not technically a practicing physician (at least in the traditional sense), I did go to med school. I have a license and recited the Hippocratic Oath, which *technically* requires me to help those in need. Even those who can't tell a moose from a bear. Maybe especially those.

I knock one last time, loudly, and after more silence, I open the door. "Hello?" I call out, scanning the room. I see with relief that there's no fire, but I'm still prepared to dress a head wound with one of the eight thousand articles of clothing she packed. And then I register the sound of running water.

"Hey! I'm in the shower!" she calls back. "Can you bring everything to the bedroom, please?"

I take a slow breath, willing my heart to climb down out of my throat. Ever since my dad's accident, it's been hard not to expect the worst. But she's fine. Just

showering.

After a moment of letting that sink in, I quickly find myself wishing I had the inability to form mental images. The simple fact that she's beautiful is just another alarm bell clanging between my ears, warning me to keep my distance. Reminding me that the last time I was lured in by a pretty face and a cold night, the aftermath nearly cost North Star Lodge a whole season's worth of business. Not that Margot is trying to do any luring. After the initial shock of our meeting, she's made it clear she couldn't be less interested, which suits me just fine. I have an ironclad rule about not getting too close with guests—even if this one already has my mind running laps.

I clear my throat. "No problem," I say over the water, grabbing the handles of the first two bags. I'm about to roll them into the bedroom but stop on the threshold. The in-suite bathroom door is cracked open, presumably so she'd hear me when I came in. But leading to it in a messy trail are the clothes I saw her in earlier. My eyes drag helplessly to her yoga pants, where a small piece of light blue lace peeks out of the black Lycra. Farther on past her sweater is a strappy bra in the same color. *Jesus H. Christ*. If it could, my dry spell would send a tumbleweed rolling through the room. *I need to get a grip*. She just wants help with her luggage, and here I am staring like I've never seen a woman's underwear before.

"Thanks," she calls offhandedly.

Averting my eyes, I roll the bags in before turning on my heel to grab the others. The many others. When I come back, her tuneless humming drifts from the open door on languorous curls of steam, and I'm hit by the distinct scent of gardenias. It stops me mid-step. Reflexively, I inhale deeply, and in an instant, I'm back on my old balcony. My eyes close, and I can practically feel the California sun warming my face and hear the bumblebees droning past me. I can taste my favorite coffee after my morning workout and feel the soil between my fingers as I check my plants for water.

But then Margot hits a particularly flat note, and my eyes snap open, bringing me rudely back to reality, where all of that's gone. My gardenias, the bees, my coffee, my home, and most painful of all, the career that made them possible. Instead of making strides in what I'd believed was my life's work, I'm right back in the place I thought I'd escaped for good. I run a hand through my hair and exhale

quietly, refusing to regret my choices. I need to get the hell out of here. Stop daydreaming in a stranger's cabin while she showers not ten paces away from me, and go check on my father—the only reason I'm here in the first place.

After all her bags are finally in the room and I'm done organizing them according to size because I can't help myself, I look toward the bathroom door. "Okay, that's everything," I call out over what I can only guess is the world's worst rendition of "Uptown Girl." Or "Smells Like Teen Spirit." Impossible to tell. "Dinner's at six in the lodge," I tack on, hoping I don't sound eager to see her again. Because I'm not.

"Great, thanks," Margot calls back. "I left something on the bureau for you."

I'm ashamed by how quickly my head snaps around. I'm not sure what I hoped for—a clue to explain her presence here? Another hastily discarded undergarment? But all I see is a giant Stanley thermos.

"I'd love some ice water, if you don't mind," she calls out, and humiliation dive-bombs through my entire body. So this is why she feels comfortable with me wandering around her bedroom while she showers. I'm the hired help. She probably expects me to pick up her towels and leave goddamn mints on her pillow too.

It shouldn't be a surprise after the way she spoke to me earlier, but like it was snagged on a hangnail, my mind catches on the memory of her jumping into my arms. How, for just a minute, she stared into my eyes like I was the only person in the world who existed for her. How, in the space of that suspended moment, explanations for her presence here didn't matter because I was holding all the warmth, light, and beauty of Los Angeles that I've been aching for. Guess we were both hallucinating.

I leave the bedroom but not before snatching the Stanley mug off the dresser at the last second. If she sees me as a bellhop, that just makes things easier. I've got a job to do, and it doesn't involve getting hung up on guests who are going to be gone in a blink anyway.



"Hand me one of those onions, would ya?"

An hour from dinner being served to the guests, I'm moving at a fast clip in the lodge's kitchen. At my dad's request, I toss an onion his way without thinking. The moment it leaves my hand, I realize my mistake. "*Shit.*"

The onion flies through the air in a slow, graceful arc, but my dad's newly impaired left hand isn't fast enough. The onion hits him square in the chest with a soft thud, rolls down to his lap, off his wheelchair, and beneath a table. Scout, the big black-and-white malamute who isn't a service dog but rarely leaves his side, lifts his wolfish head off the floor and gives me a disapproving stare. I swallow down another curse. For a millisecond, a lifetime of memories watching my dad deftly toss and catch whatever object happened to be in his grasp overrode the new reality we're both adjusting to.

"Sorry, I—"

Dad cuts me off with a forced laugh. "Who the hell do you think I am, Joe DiMaggio? Go on and grab it. It rolled under there."

Relieved to have a mission, I crouch down and hunt for the errant onion. As I search, pausing to give Scout's thick, soft ear a placating scratch, I hear the kitchen door swing open with a squeak that needs fixing.

"Hey there, boys. Did you start without me?"

I surface with the onion to see Jo walk in, carrying a large crate of vegetables from the greenhouse. Tall, strong, with striking black and silver hair that reaches her waist in a perpetual braid, she's the lodge's manager, chef, and full-time resident, and the closest thing to a mother I've had since I lost my own eight years ago.

"Woulda, but Forrest was hell-bent on playing catch with me," my dad says, smiling.

I walk over and place the onion on the low work surface I built for him during the long back-and-forth months of attending his physical and occupational therapy in Anchorage and retrofitting the lodge for accessibility. "Someday," I promise quietly, grabbing his shoulder with an encouraging squeeze.

Dad nods, pursing his lips beneath his thick Burt Reynolds mustache while I cram down my regularly scheduled sense of failure. I know, logically, that it isn't my fault his hemiparesis hasn't improved since the accident. I also know my dad doesn't expect me to perform a miracle during the daily PT exercises I insist on.

Despite having nearly two decade's worth of medical education and experience, there isn't much I can offer him beyond basic PT assistance, pain management, and emotional support. But it's so goddamn hard to reconcile the self-sufficient, adventure-obsessed father I was raised by with this shell of a man sitting before me. It's why I'm here. Why I can't go back to California for the foreseeable future. My dad isn't well, and the last time I left home when one of my parents wasn't well, I only had one to come back to.

"Well, it's time to stop horsing around," Jo says, rolling flannel shirtsleeves up her forearms with crisp efficiency. "I think we should make something special for our new guest tonight. Seems like a very nice young lady."

If my ears could prick up like Scout's, they would. "You met her?" I ask, despite my efforts to squash all curiosity about her. I know asking questions and thinking about her more than absolutely necessary will lead to the one thing I don't need: distraction from my father's care.

Jo nods, peeling the onion my dad cut the ends from. "Sure did," she says, setting it down between the stabilizing pegs of the one-handed cutting board I got him. "Dropped by to introduce myself."

"Glad someone's being friendly to her," Dad says with a chuckle, methodically chopping the onion with his functional hand while I finish washing my own. "Forrest seems to think she won't last a week here. What did you think of her, Josephine?"

"Well, she's stunning, for one," Jo says, tying on her apron. "I have a feeling those two young men staying with us are going to be drawing straws over who gets to sit next to her tonight." Her dark eyes catch mine with a mischievous gleam I don't like one bit. "That is, unless someone else gets to her first."

Dad's eyebrows rise nearly to his shock of silver hair. "That true, son? You holding out on your old man?"

The real question is why I even mentioned Margot to him in the first place. I focus on the garlic I start to slice like it can explain every mystery of the universe, including why the hell my dad and Jo feel the need to set me up with every unattached woman who passes under the roof of this lodge. After I nearly sank a multigenerational family business with one deeply regrettable fling with a guest and the soul-eviscerating Yelp review that followed, one would think they'd have

stopped pushing me to pursue visitors. But apparently, their biological urge to embarrass me is stronger than logic.

“Didn’t realize I was supposed to report guest attractiveness to management,” I grumble.

“So you admit she’s a looker,” Dad goads, grinning from ear to ear. “Lemme guess: *blond*.” He looks at Jo and says matter-of-factly, “He’s always had a thing for blondes.”

“She is!” Jo confirms, beaming. “And when I asked if she’d already met Forrest, I swear her cheeks went pink as a sunset.”

“Well, just look at the boy. Spitting image of his father,” my dad says, laughing.

“Are you done yet?” I ask calmly, unwilling to show irritation. It would be like spraying kerosene on open flames, and I’m already sweating.

“We haven’t discussed my grandkids yet. Trapper Junior has a nice ring to it.”

Jo hoots with laughter, and my molars could leave impressions on a piece of steel.

“Okay,” I say. “Have your fun. But don’t be surprised when she packs her bags even faster than I predicted if you two keep sticking your noses where they don’t belong. She made it very clear she isn’t interested, and neither am I.”

Like a prosecutor, my mind unveils a high-definition mental image of her abandoned bra as evidence to the contrary. It’s one small step from remembering the baby-blue lace on the floor to imagining it against her golden skin and—*Shit*. Generally, I pride myself on not being the type of man who has inappropriate thoughts about women I’ve only just met. But I’m also not the type of man to lie to myself. My isolation plus her dimples to the power of six lonely months is an equation with one conclusion for my poor biology. But just because looking at her feels like being punched in the trachea and robbed of all oxygen doesn’t mean the situation has to be complicated. In fact, it’s the least complicated situation in the world, because she made it abundantly clear she’s not interested. Moreover, she’s a *guest*, and—

“You know, Trap, I think tonight might be the perfect night for that Beaujolais we’ve been saving,” Jo muses, intoning the word “Beaujolais” so suggestively that I may never recover.

“The Beaujolais is a fine idea,” my dad says thoughtfully. “Maybe with some of that rabbit.”

“And candlelight.” Jo sighs. “She’s a romance author, after all.”

My eyes have reached the apex of their roll when they freeze, and I cut them toward Jo. “Romance author?”

Her smirk makes me instantly regret showing even passing interest. “Oh, sure. She’s very well known. Surprised you haven’t heard of her, what with all you read.”

No, I haven’t heard of her. Because *romance*? It makes me think of those old paperbacks with busty women desperately clutching shirtless men on windswept cliffs. Somehow it doesn’t strike me as the genre she’d write in. Then again, I’ve known her for less than twelve hours and romance isn’t really something I’m familiar with—in books or in my own life. The word alone implies the sort of commitment I used to watch my colleagues get distracted by time and time again, to the detriment of their careers. I was never convinced the rewards were worth the risks. After all, I’d seen what had happened to my parents.

“So that’s why she’s here?” my dad guesses. “Writing a new manuscript?”

“That’s right,” Jo says, pulling the rabbit out of the fridge. “When her sister booked the trip, she mentioned that the story is set in remote Alaska. Guess she thought Margot needed some real-life inspiration.”

At this, my shoulders drop at least two inches as I finally understand why she’s here. Obviously, her sister thought Margot could handle staying at North Star. Well, I’m headed to Talkeetna tomorrow to pick up parts for the sauna I’ve been repairing. I’ll just make sure to grab a brochure for the closest luxury resort while I’m in town and slip it under her cabin door when I get back. Margot Bradley will be out of my hair so fast, I’ll feel a breeze over my ears.

With something like a plan forming to find a place that suits her better (and, more selfishly, to rid myself of an all too intriguing distraction), the unsettled feeling in my chest eases slightly.

“You said her sister booked the trip?” I ask, methodically tearing off and stacking sage leaves to chiffonade. I’ll need to refund the sister for the stay once Margot is gone.

Jo nods, already at work breaking down the rabbit carcasses. “She did. Very particular about a package that’s coming in tomorrow. Wants us to take extra good care of it.”

Hub. I suppose once I deliver that package, it won’t be a problem for Margot to pack up and leave North Star. I’ll dust off my hands, and that’ll be that. She’ll be gone, and I’ll be able to return my focus to what matters—helping my dad.

For the first time all night, I look up and smile. “Don’t worry. I’m happy to take care of it.”

4



MARGOT

Walking through the Alaskan woods in the pitch dark with nothing but my phone flashlight is both the bravest and the dumbest thing I've ever done in my life. But after spending all day unpacking while subsisting on my dwindling snack stash, I've learned even *I* can only eat so many avocados. My choice had been simple but grim: get to the lodge for dinner or starve.

At first it seemed simple enough to follow the trail. Dark, ominous, and life-threatening, but still. Simple. Now, though, as I trip over another snow-covered log and my hair gets caught in brambles I definitely don't remember from my walk earlier, I have to wonder if I've taken a wrong turn. My heartbeat becomes the only thing I can hear. I backtrack in the direction I came from (*I think?*), and the trees quickly become denser. When I realize I can no longer see either the light from my cabin or the lodge, I know I'm lost.

A stick snaps to my left, and I suck in a terrified breath. Is it just Bullwinkle or something with sharper teeth? Am I supposed to stay still and silent or wave my arms around to make myself more intimidating? I'm on the cusp of doing the latter when I see a light.

"Thought I heard someone out here," a voice says as I turn. Relief blasts through me. It's a nice voice. A human voice. A mellow tenor with humor brightening its edges—completely different from Forrest's no-bullshit baritone.

The figure of a man approaches me, but I can't see him well. I hold up a hand against the glare of his headlamp, and he adjusts it upward with a quick "Sorry!"

When my pupils adjust, I find myself looking up at a tall, lanky man. He's younger than I am—probably midtwenties—and cute. Very cute, with messy reddish-brown hair beneath his beanie, freckles all over, and dark, mischievous brown eyes.

"Wow," he says with a lopsided smile. "I mean—Hi. Name's Ollie." He holds out a bare hand.

"Margot," I say, offering my mittened one.

He shakes it, then, bringing two fingers to his lips, he whistles loudly. "Found her!" he calls into the woods.

Another whistle responds like a thumbs-up, and he turns back to me.

"My buddy Topher was searching for you too. Guess I win," he says, grinning. I can't help smiling back. Suddenly, the woods feel a lot less threatening. "Headed to dinner?" he guesses.

"Trying to," I say, embarrassed. "It's my first night. I probably should have packed one of those." I point to his headlamp.

"That's okay. Just follow me."

With his guidance, it's no time before we get back on the path and reach the porch of the lodge, where I arrive slightly out of breath.

"Here," Ollie says, switching off his headlamp and holding it out to me before we go in. Under the overhead light of the porch, he looks even younger. Almost Peter Pan-ish, if Peter had gone through puberty and taken up mountaineering. "I've got an extra."

"Oh," I say, taken aback. "That's okay, I don't want to take your things—"

In response, he grabs my mitten and closes my hand over the light. "It's yours," he says with all the gallantry of offering me a tennis bracelet.

"Thanks," I say, my stomach giving a small swoop as he lets go of my hand with a squeeze. Ollie is way too young for me, but it's not the worst thing to be the subject of his attraction. After the weird energy with Forrest earlier, this feels simple. Manageable.

He opens the door for me. "Ladies first?"

We enter, and my mouth immediately waters from an incredible aroma coming from the back of the lodge. We follow it to a rough-hewn dining table where three people are already seated. As we approach, a young man with elbow-

length brown hair throws up a hand in greeting. As he does, his poncho flaps open, and I'm hit by a gust that's equal parts weed and BO.

"Hey, man! You found her!"

Ollie smiles, unzipping his coat and removing his hat to reveal a messy mop of hair, which only deepens the Peter Pan vibe. "Margot, this is Topher, your other knight in shining North Face."

"Thanks, Topher," I say, removing my outerwear. "I'd definitely still be out there if it weren't for you two."

"And this is Alice," Ollie goes on, gesturing across the table toward an athletic-looking woman in her fifties with a frizzy brown ponytail, "and her wife, Yoon," he finishes, introducing a woman with short gray hair who also looks like she could wake up on any given day and participate in a surprise triathlon.

"Nice to meet you all," I say, climbing over the bench to sit next to Ollie. The table is already set. Beeswax candles illuminate the length of the table, and their warm glow gives an intimate quality to the large open space.

"First time to North Star?" Yoon asks with excitement.

I nod. "Sure is," I confirm, hoping she doesn't see how hard it is for me to imagine coming a second time. "Is this not your first visit?"

Yoon and Alice laugh. "Oh, no," Alice says in a distinct midwestern accent. "We've been coming here since before the Internet. Usually we're summer tourists, but we had to visit after we heard about Trapper's—"

Alice seems to catch herself and stops awkwardly, glancing toward Yoon for help. But just then the door to the kitchen opens, and I lose track of the conversation. Forrest strides through carrying a giant earthenware platter and wearing an apron. The dark pin-striped cotton stretched across the center of his broad chest looks like a postage stamp being drawn and quartered. Of course, he's wearing a white Henley beneath it—the standard-issue uniform of all romance heroes—and in accordance with Romance Law, he has the sleeves rolled up to his elbows.

Thankfully, I'm distracted as Jo, the woman I met earlier, comes through the doors behind him. Like Forrest, she's loaded down with food but stops to hold the door open for a man in a motorized wheelchair and, right behind him, a dog that looks like an honest-to-goodness wolf. As they all approach the table, Jo

quickens her pace and claims a spot next to Alice. The man, who must be Trapper because he's basically Forrest in thirty years with a mustache, pulls up to the head of the table along with his furry sidekick, leaving Forrest with one obvious place to sit—next to me.

"Hi again, Margot," Jo says, interrupting the flip-flopping in my stomach. "Settling into your cabin okay?"

"It's very cozy, thank you," I say diplomatically. I'm not sure I'll ever be able to truly "settle" into a place where wild animals larger than refrigerators prowl right outside my door.

"Food's growing icicles, son—come on and sit down," Trapper calls out to Forrest, who's arranging dishes like it's his job to avoid sitting next to me. Honestly, I can't blame him. Within the first ten minutes of meeting him, I managed to both leap into his arms and go full Regina George on him. Now I'm armed with a steak knife. I'd probably avoid me too.

"Welcome to the lodge, Margot. I'm Trapper," Forrest's dad says, confirming my guess with a warm smile beneath his retro mustache. "And this handsome boy is Scout," he says, ruffling the fluffy head of the placid, blue-eyed giant sitting beside him. "I think you've met everyone else."

I smile back. "Great to meet you both." Scout is more focused on panting at the spread of food on the table than paying attention to the guests, and I can't blame him. "Dinner looks amazing," I say.

I'm ogling a platter of glistening roasted carrots covered in chopped pistachios and herbs when Forrest finally brings himself to sit down, sandwiching me between him and Ollie. His weight makes the wood creak, and as he settles with his forearms on the table, I have an almost vibrating awareness of the empty spaces between us.

"We're so glad to have you," Trapper says as everyone begins serving themselves. "Especially Forrest, I think. He's a real bookworm."

At this less than subtle overture, Forrest remains silent as a stone, serving himself salad.

"I love books!" Ollie chimes in brightly from my right side, and I get the strong impression that he'd profess his love for maggots if they happened to be my area of expertise. "Do you work in publishing or something?"

I take a swig from my water glass, wishing someone would hurry up with the wine. "I'm an author. But you probably haven't heard of me," I demur, hoping it'll kill the conversation. The last thing I want is a cozy fireside chat about the swift and brutal death of my career.

Ollie smiles. "Try me."

Internally, I sigh. "Um, have you ever heard of *First to Fall*?" It's my least popular book and therefore my best chance at stopping this conversation before it starts.

"Oh, he probably won't know that one, Margot," Jo chides playfully. "But I'll bet anything he's heard of *Between Two Worlds*."

When a barely audible curse slips from my mouth, I feel rather than see Forrest glance down at me. *Between Two Worlds* has become my best-known novel after it was adapted for the big screen a couple of years ago.

"*Between Two Worlds*? You mean the movie?" Ollie says, grabbing the bottle of wine and pouring my glass with the finesse of someone used to waiting tables.

"Thanks," I say, immediately gulping some down. "And yes, but it was a book first." I serve myself a beautiful piece of meat that vaguely resembles chicken beneath a velvety burgundy sauce.

"Wait. So you wrote a book that got turned into a *movie*?" Topher asks, leaning forward to stare at me. "That's dope."

Ollie, Alice, and Yoon all gape at me like I've announced that I once swam across the English Channel with my legs tied together. Heat rises to my cheeks as both pride and embarrassment surface within me, and I can't help stealing a glance at Forrest. After our run-in earlier today, I know he thinks I'm an incompetent airhead. But his laser focus on serving himself vegetables doesn't waver, and I remind myself it doesn't matter. It's not like I need to impress him or anything.

"I, for one, am a huge fan, and I just can't believe you're going to write your next book right here at North Star," Jo says, passing a basket of warm rolls around. "Is it another romance?"

I shake my head a little too vehemently and have to check myself. "No. I'm trying my hand at a murder mystery, actually."

“Oh, now, that’s my favorite genre,” says Trapper. “Ever since my accident, all I really do is read, and there’s nothing better than a good whodunit.” He holds up his glass. “Cheers, everyone.”

We all lift our glasses and drink the surprisingly excellent wine.

“I’m so sorry you had an accident,” I say, wondering if this was what Alice was about to mention as her and Yoon’s reason for visiting.

Trapper’s smile becomes a little forlorn as he nods. “I was leading a hike up on Talkeetna Glacier about six months ago and fell right into a crevasse hidden in the snow. Dropped about twenty feet and hit my head pretty good.”

My hand comes up to cover my mouth as Trapper goes on. “I’ve been hiking that glacier for over forty years now. Thought I knew all her secrets.” He shakes his head. “Foolish. Thankfully, I was the only one hurt. My hikers called in help, and I was transported to Anchorage right away. But I haven’t really used the left side of my body since.”

Sympathy makes my chest feel like it’s being crumpled. “And that’s why you’re...” I say quietly, glancing at his wheelchair.

“In this little dune buggy here?” he says, patting the arm of the chair with his working hand while Jo cuts his food into bite-size pieces. “You got it. But according to my brilliant son, I’m not going to be sitting down forever, am I?”

I turn my head to Forrest, who lifts serious eyes to his father. “Not forever.”

Yoon makes a closed-mouth sound like “Aw!” But while the sentiment is sweet, I find myself annoyed by such a hopeless promise. I personally would never say something like that to my sister, whose autoimmune disorders are never going to be cured by wishful thinking or false platitudes. It’s one thing for a doctor to deliver an optimistic prognosis and wholly another for a glorified groundskeeper to do so.

“Do you mean your doctors are hopeful?” I ask Trapper, taking a bite of meat. It’s absolutely delicious but definitely not chicken. I think of Bullwinkle and decide not to ask.

“I suppose so,” Trapper says with an amused glint in his eyes. “Seeing as Forrest’s my doctor.”

The bite of food I’m on the very cusp of swallowing goes down the wrong way, and I cough, my eyes watering. I drop my fork and knife with a clatter, and

there's immediately a warm hand rubbing my upper back. For a hot lighting-in-my-stomach second, I think it's Forrest—who is apparently *a doctor*?

On top of his romance hero good looks, his woodchopping habits, and the perfect meet-cute I accidentally had with him, the revelation that he's also a doctor is one trope too far. What the hell is going on? Was my plane sucked through some kind of Alaskan Bermuda Triangle? Am I not actually here, but passed out and drooling on my keyboard, lucid-dreaming a new romance novel plot? If I weren't busy hacking up a lung, I'd be laughing. Or crying. Probably crying. I came here to turn over a new leaf, but here I am, sitting next to a man who seems to embody the entire genre I'm trying to put behind me. Ollie leans into my field of vision with a worried expression, and I realize it's his hand on my back. "You okay?" he asks, passing my water.

I take a grateful sip and nod before looking at Forrest, who's calmly cutting his mystery meat, completely unconcerned by my choking. Without looking up, he says, "I'm not your doctor, Dad."

At this, it's Jo who laughs. "Don't listen to a word he says, Margot. Trap would still be in a medical facility in Anchorage if Forrest hadn't moved up from Los Angeles to take care of him."

Finally recovered from my coughing fit, I can only sit and stare, completely stunned. He's from *L.A.*? He gave up California to live *here*? I take in Forrest's profile, chastened by my assumptions. I know better than anyone what it's like to have the rug ripped out from under you when a loved one becomes unwell. How your priorities do a sudden Rubik's Cube rearrangement until your life no longer resembles the one you were living before. How *you* fade out, eclipsed by the endless details of another person—their water consumption, their medication schedule, their symptoms, and their gains.

"Is that true?" I ask him, almost hoping he'll deny it. I don't want to feel this empathy or admiration for a man whose gravitational pull requires active resistance.

He glances quickly at me, then away. "I'm not a practicing physician. But I do care for him."

"But you are a physician," argues Alice, mid-chew. It reminds me to eat my own food. "You went to school for about a hundred years, didn't you?"

At this, a corner of his full lips hitches reluctantly. I try not to notice how soft they look between the carved lines of his nose and jaw. “Now, that’s a fact,” he agrees, taking another bite. He swallows, and I watch the muscles of his throat work. “But you know I went into research, Alice. Not patient care.”

Alice gives a side to side head movement as if to say “potato, potahto.” “Last time I checked, your email footer said ‘Forrest Wakefield, MD, PhD.’ If that doesn’t make you a physician, I’m a monkey’s guncle.”

“Don’t be modest, Forrest,” agrees Yoon. “We’re all grateful you’re here with Trap. He couldn’t be in better hands.”

“Truer words never spoken,” Trapper agrees with a catch in his voice. He’s looking at his son with a level of love and pride I thought was reserved for Hallmark movies. Then again, maybe this is how lots of fathers look at their children, and I just happened to draw one of the short straws. Maybe the shortest straw of all. I take a sip of wine to wash away the sudden bitterness in my mouth.

Forrest clears his throat uncomfortably. “And speaking of hands,” he says in a tone that firmly signals a subject change, “you two have any luck climbing Widow’s Neck today?”

At this, I feel Ollie perk up beside me, but Topher answers first. “It was a killer climb. Perfect rec for today, man. The valley views were unreal at the top.”

“Where are we headed on Saturday? Any hints?” Ollie asks.

Forrest shrugs. “No need for mystery. Thought we could hike up to Eagle’s Point if that suits the group.” He looks toward Alice, Yoon, Ollie, and Topher for their input, completely skipping over me.

“Oh, absolutely,” Yoon says enthusiastically. “We haven’t hiked Eagle’s Point since, what, Ally, 2005?”

Nods of agreement and excited chatter flicker through the group, but Ollie notices my silence and nudges me with his elbow. “Up for a hike?”

I press my napkin to my mouth as I swallow some caramelized carrots, trying not to laugh. “Hike? Me? Oh, no. I’m an indoor cat. An indoor cat who has an entire manuscript to write.”

“What? No!” Ollie exclaims. “You’ve gotta come. Alaska’s meant to be experienced outside.”

“Poetic, dude,” Topher says, nodding slowly.

“It’s sweet of you to invite me,” I say, throwing a self-deprecating smile at Ollie, “but do you *not* remember how you found me tonight? I’d only slow you down.”

He laughs softly, his brown eyes warm in the candlelight. On my other side, Forrest makes a sound in the back of his throat like a boot grinding gravel.

“I don’t mind slowing down,” Ollie promises me.

Leaning forward to look down the table, Topher says, “Back us up, Forrest. She’s gotta come.”

Forrest shakes his head. “Can’t. She’s right about slowing us down. Eagle’s Point isn’t a hike for...” He catches my gaze for the first time all night, and my stomach is convinced I’ve jumped out of an airplane. “Amateurs,” he finishes, like it’s a replacement for “idiots.”

Anger and embarrassment quickly replace all swoopy feelings in my body, and if I didn’t have the very real fear of falling off a cliff into a bear’s nest, I would insist on going on this hike just to spite him.

“Well, we have a few days. I’m sure I can bring you around.” Ollie grins, nudging my knee with his beneath the table.

The rest of dinner is filled with stories from the last few Saturday wilderness excursions. These weekly adventures are apparently included with booking at North Star Lodge and have always been led by Trapper, until Forrest had to step in. I couldn’t be less interested. The only thing I’m looking forward to on Saturday is having Forrest and his big Heathcliff energy off the property.

“Did you bring any of your books with you?” Ollie asks, returning to the topic of my writing as we finish dessert—a wild-blueberry streusel with maple ice cream.

“I did,” I say, popping the last decadent crumb into my mouth with my fingers. “Sometimes I have to reference them. Don’t want to use the same jokes twice, you know?”

“I’d love to borrow *Between Two Worlds* if you can part with it,” he says. Then, “Maybe I can grab it when we walk back to your cabin?”

“Um, okay,” I say awkwardly, not sure how I feel about him reading the steamy scenes my readers are (correction: were) so fond of. It’s not like I’m usually

shy about my writing, but twentysomething rock climbers who are actively trying to get in my pants aren't my usual demographic.

"Actually, I can walk her back," Forrest informs us as he stands to collect plates. "She needs to sign our liability waivers after dinner."

"Liability waivers?" I ask, slightly alarmed. "For what? The local moose problem?"

"I'm happy to wait," Ollie offers.

"Might take a while, and you and Topher need an early start tomorrow if you plan on reaching Curry Ridge," Jo points out, her eyes sliding from me to Forrest.

I watch as Ollie bites his lips together. "Yeah, I guess that's true." He throws me an apologetic look. "But I'd love to catch up tomorrow night if you want. Maybe I can pick up the book then?"

"Of course," I say, slightly relieved.

The feeling doesn't last. After the group disbands and Jo assists Trapper into his chairlift, following him upstairs with Scout loping close behind, I'm left alone with Forrest and his candlelit cheekbones and surly attitude. Not that I didn't ask for it—I haven't been cold to him in hopes of bringing out his cuddly side. It's almost a relief to know his hackles are raised as high as mine. That I might just scare him too. In the silence of the dimly lit lodge, we approach the book nook like two wary animals, ready to bare our teeth at the slightest provocation.

"These are the standard liability waivers all our guests sign," he says when we reach the desk, sliding a folder and pen to me with a sharp *shh* sound. "In case you do decide to go on any of the weekly excursions."

I cross my arms over my slouchy sweater, accidentally pulling it off one shoulder. His eyes tick to my bra strap and immediately away. "I didn't realize I was allowed to," I say.

He slowly crosses his own arms, and I swear I hear a shoulder seam in his Henley pop from the strain. "You said you didn't want to go. I was doing you a favor."

"A favor is walking someone through dark, moose-infested woods. It's not calling someone an amateur in front of the entire 'I've Scaled Everest' contingent."

"I did walk you through the woods, and I'm about to do it again."

“I don’t need you to walk me through the woods,” I declare. “Ollie gave me a headlamp. And who knows? Maybe I’ll change my mind about that hike.”

I toss my hair over my shoulder and lean down, scanning the paperwork. Alarming phrases jump out at me. *Remote areas without medical access. Encounters with dangerous wildlife. Grievous bodily harm and/or death.*

I glance up at Forrest and the annoying smirk he’s wearing on his smug, handsome face. “Still want to come?” he asks.

Grinding my teeth, I sign all the paperwork in a flurry, not bothering to read any more of it. It’s not like I’m going on any of these excursions, but his judgment is intolerable.

“Maybe I do,” I say airily, standing up straight again. “Ollie said he’d be happy to slow his pace for me.”

Forrest snorts, smirk firmly in place. I want to yank it down. “Ollie can’t resist climbing any boulder he sees. He’d leave you behind in his chalk dust before the first mile.”

“I flatter myself that I can be more interesting than rocks.”

Forrest stacks the papers neatly into the folder while his glossy eyebrows communicate a one-word response: *Sure.*

I turn in a huff to get my coat. *I have a headlamp, I remind myself. I’ll be fine to make it back to my cabin. Probably.* But as I zip up and walk toward the front door, Forrest catches up with me.

“I said I can make it back on my own, thanks,” I say tartly.

“I’m going the same way,” he explains.

“Oh yeah? Is it poker night with Bullwinkle?” I say as we walk out into the frigid night.

“I’m going to bed. My cabin’s the one just past yours.”

So he doesn’t sleep in the lodge. I don’t know why I find this interesting. I shouldn’t find anything about him interesting, because I happen to know that Forrest is a human phishing scam. Men like him always seem familiar and trustworthy thanks to Hollywood and the romance novel industry, but they never actually live up to their fictional counterparts. Instead, they lure you in with their good looks and noble careers only to steal your heart and stomp on it before moving on to someone new. Maybe that’s a bold assumption to make about

someone I've just met. But my life is strung with the blown-out lights of disappointing would-be heroes, and this time I'm not taking any chances.

Along the wooded path, he points out helpful markers for the next time I'm forced to leave my cabin, but mostly, our mutual dislike keeps us silent except for the crunching snow beneath our boots. When we reach my front door, I fumble to find my key, nervous that he'll keep walking before I'm safely inside.

"It's in here somewhere," I say, patting all my pockets while secretly praying he won't abandon me to the wolves. I finally find it and let out a relieved breath that clouds around my face. I hasten to unlock the door, and when it's open, I turn, half expecting him to be gone already.

To my surprise, however, he's still there, solid and unmoving as the evergreens around us. "You good?" he asks. And I may not want to admit it, but knowing he'll be in the next cabin down makes me feel like I might actually sleep tonight.

"Yeah," I say quietly. "Thanks."

He nods once and then sets off toward his cabin. I'm about to turn into my own when I notice a white cardboard box beside my door that camouflages with the snow. Bending down, I open it and see that it's filled with small paper-wrapped bricks labeled as *fire starters*. A confusing twist of gratitude and surprise tightens my chest. There's no note or explanation, but that only seems to confirm that Forrest left it in here at some point during the day. I hoist the box into my arms, scanning the trail to call out either a thank-you or a retort. But he's too far away now, so I just stand there in the bitter cold, watching him disappear into the trees.



MARGOT

I'm not a pacer. When I sit down to write, my butt is basically glued to the chair until my Stretch Your Legs alarm goes off each hour, or until my toes go numb if I've forgotten to set it. But not today. Today is my first full day in Alaska, and I'm already a floorboard-scuffing, Internet-starved, hair-pulling writer who is approximately one thousand words short of her two-thousand-word goal.

I came here under the impression that it would be no problem to switch genres. After all, I've logged hundreds of hours falling asleep to grisly murder-mystery podcasts (perfectly normal and not at all concerning, thank you very much). But there are still a million gaps in my knowledge, and I didn't count on not having the world's collective information at my fingertips. As it is, half of the thousand words I've managed to write are bracketed notes like "insert detective lingo here."

I pull my hands down over my cheeks, blowing out an exhale. As the afternoon has worn on, the cabin has become noticeably colder. Looking for a way to procrastinate, I eye the empty fireplace and the box of fire starters. I bite my lip. Forrest grumped nonsensically at me about catching the flu if I wanted to start a fire, but instead of listening, I was far more focused on getting him out of my hair. A potentially regrettable choice in hindsight, but honestly, what's so hard about building a fire? Cavemen—no, *cavepeople*—did it, so why can't I?

I walk over to inspect the area and find a wooden box beside the rack of fire tools. I open it and discover a bunch of twigs and papery bark. Based on every

barely remembered *Man vs. Wild* episode I've ever zoned out to in various waiting rooms with Savannah, I get the feeling this isn't potpourri but an essential piece of the fire-starting process. I turn my attention to the grate in the fireplace. Obviously, the logs go there. Gingerly, I slide one of the rough quarters of wood from the stack. I start adding logs and twigs at random, stuffing the little fire-starter bricks between them until the haphazard stack fills out most of the fireplace. After searching around a bit more, I find a long lighter and crouch back down. I smile to myself, thinking about Forrest's face when he sees a cheerful plume of smoke unfurling from my chimney. That'll teach him to mansplain fire to me again.

I hold the lighter flame to the stack, waiting for it to catch in several places. The fire-starter bricks light up at once, and I let out a whoop of victory as, soon enough, the whole stack starts crackling with leaping blue and orange flames. Quickly, I take a selfie so I can show Savannah (once I return from exile), that I've become a fire goddess. Inordinately pleased with myself and convinced that the gentle crackling will soothe my writer's block, I strut back to my computer desk and sit down.

Closing my eyes, I take a breath and try to see the world I'm attempting to create through my main character's eyes. Mentally, I feel her hair whipping at her face as she power-walks across a frozen parking lot to the remote Alaskan precinct she's flown out to assist. After hours of writer's block, I'm typing in a blur, words finally flowing, when my eyes begin to sting. I cough. Next to me, the fire roars on merrily, but I notice the air in the cabin is hazy and getting darker with every passing second. That's when I see the smoke rolling in from the top of the fireplace.

I stand quickly as a thread of panic pulls taut within me. I might not know much about fireplaces, but I'm pretty sure that smoke is supposed to go *up* the chimney, not out of it. Quickly, I walk toward a window and open it, but as I do, the fire alarm goes off.

"*Shit*," I say, wheezing and running around the cabin and throwing open every window. But the smoke just keeps pouring in and the alarm is still blaring, I can't stop coughing, and I'm suddenly freezing my tits off as arctic winds whip through

the smoky air. I've run to the kitchen, desperately searching for a pitcher I can fill with water, when my front door bursts open.

Forrest stands backlit in the swirling smoke like an Avenger, searching the room until he locks eyes with me through the gloom. Without a word, he strides toward me with a face like thunder. He doesn't hesitate when he reaches me, only stoops and lifts me off the floor. I kick pointlessly. "I can walk!" I croak. "I have legs!"

He ignores me and leaves the cabin as quickly as he came in, unceremoniously setting me down in the snow. "Stay," he barks, before marching back in without sparing me a glance. I send an I Curse You look at his back and immediately run to a window to see what he's doing.

Through the smoke, I see Forrest walk purposefully into the kitchen and grab the fire extinguisher hanging prominently on the wall. I cringe so hard I nearly sprain something. How did I miss it? It's literally the brightest object in the room. I watch as he pulls the pin and aims it at the fire, which has gotten so large that flames are licking the outside of the mantel. He pulls the trigger, and fluffy clouds of foam shoot out, instantly dousing the flames. Apparently, he isn't done. He walks to the kitchen and grabs an oven mitt. Crouching low near the scorched fireplace, he sticks his arm up the chimney, and there's a metallic squeaking noise. Like magic, the smoke stops pouring from the fireplace and disappears.

Dread builds within me. He is *never* going to let me live this down. I think of the other guests—rugged, strong, and capable. I'm willing to bet my frostbitten buns that none of them has ever turned a cabin into a barbecue pit. If it hadn't been clear enough already that I never should have left L.A., this is my signal. My literal smoke signal. Savannah has obviously overestimated me by a stunning margin. I'm no Taylor Swift. I don't have what it takes to reinvent myself, especially not in a place like this.

The only problem is, I don't have much of a choice. What remains of my career is still floating back to earth like charred bits of fireworks. My sister and my agent are expecting me to return with a shiny new manuscript and a blueprint for the rest of my life. And while I can withstand many things, disappointing those two isn't among them. Which is why, when Forrest comes back through the open door, I tilt my chin up, ready to defend my right as a paying customer to stay in

this cabin until I'm smoked like a Christmas ham, even if it's the last thing I want to do.

"Here," he says, shoving his arm out toward me.

I look down to see my parka and grab it, teeth chattering. As I pull it on, fully expecting him to begin shouting at me, he does something far, far worse. He steps in close and gently lays both of his rough hands on the sides of my face. The defensive speech I've been preparing dies on my lips. His thumbs graze over my cold cheeks, gently pressing in different spots, his dark-green eyes sweeping back and forth across my face. Until, abruptly, he lets go. I blink.

"What the hell was that for?" I ask, telling myself my voice is weak from the smoke and only the smoke.

"Your cheeks are red," he clips out. "It's a sign of carbon monoxide poisoning. I had to check."

"And?"

"And..." He scrubs a hand down his beard, visibly trying to rein something in. It doesn't work. "And I told you to open the goddamn flue!" he bursts out. "But did you listen? *No*. Instead, you built a bonfire and almost torched the whole fucking cabin! You're a danger to yourself and everyone around you."

I take an involuntary step back, more hurt than I want to admit. "Well, obviously everything's fine. Congratulations on saving the day, Smokey Bear."

Forrest takes a step closer, his eyes boring into mine, and this is *not* the moment to notice how perfectly the sharp angles of his beard follow the cut of his cheekbones.

"It's Smokey *the* Bear and it's not *fine*," he snaps.

"*Pretty* sure it's Smokey Bear," I mumble, but my argument is met with a sound of exasperation as his eyes widen in disbelief.

"You could have passed out. You could have been burned. You could have died, Margot!"

At the sound of my name and the raw worry in his eyes, I hesitate for half a second. But then his cold dismissiveness during dinner and our walk to my cabin comes roaring back to me. He doesn't care about my well-being at all. This is a self-preservation thing.

“Well, I guess it’s good that I signed your little liability waiver last night. No skin off your nose if I—What was it again? Come to ‘grievous bodily harm and/or death’?”

“That waiver is meant to serve as a warning against all the dangers of this place. I didn’t realize I needed to include the goddamn *fireplace* on the list,” he says, jabbing a pointer finger toward the chimney.

“Okay, fine! You win!” I say, holding my hands up in surrender. “I suck at being in Alaska. I don’t know how to build a fire, I’m scared shitless of being eaten by a reindeer, I can barely find my cabin in the daylight, much less the dark, and I’d give anything to be back in L.A. with my sister. But did you ever stop to think that maybe there’s a *reason* I banished myself to Winterfell?”

While I’ve been ranting, Forrest’s expression has undergone minute changes. His dark eyebrows remain at full furrow, and his jaw looks tight enough to crack a bolt in half, but there’s something new in the depths of his green eyes. Is it *remorse*?

“It was to research your book. That’s why you came,” he says, like any conclusion he draws is the right one.

I open my mouth in a ditzy expression of surprise and put a finger to my dimple. “Oh! So that’s why I came. Thanks so much for explaining my own reasoning to me.”

His eye twitches. “Is that *not* your reasoning?”

“No, it’s not,” I say darkly, suddenly wondering if #Pantiesof Lies is still trending.

“Then why—”

“It’s none of your business! Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have to get back to writing. Thanks for putting out the fire.”

I’ve already turned when he says, “Wait.” When I don’t stop, he lets out a strained “Please.”

I toss a look over my shoulder. Forrest is standing in the snow with his hands in his back pockets, looking like what he’s about to say might kill him.

“There’s a letter for you.”

If I were covered in lightbulbs, every single one of them would be lit up and flashing. “Savannah,” I say, breathless. I’ve never gone this long without talking to

my sister, and at the prospect of having any contact with her after this epically shit day, I'm feeling desperate. "Where is it?" I demand, stepping closer. I'm not beyond frisking him.

"Back at the lodge."

I'm already marching past Forrest to the trail when he grabs my elbow. "Hold up. You're not walking anywhere in those."

Confused, I look down to see my sheepskin slippers. "Oh. Right." I run back into the cabin for my boots, while Forrest follows to close all the windows. It smells like the inside of a meat smoker, and the fireplace is a sticky, foamy disaster, but I'll deal with that later.

When we leave, I power-walk down the trail. Forrest's much longer legs keep up easily, and when we reach the lodge, I follow him in like a bloodhound. "Where is it?"

He calmly walks to the desk where I signed the waiver and pulls out a drawer. He hands me the letter, and I nearly weep with relief when I see Savannah's looping cursive on the envelope. I tear it open and pull out a sheet of paper.

Dear Margot,

I swear I can almost hear you cursing my name all the way from Alaska. I'm sorry I didn't tell you about the no-Internet thing. You've probably been wondering why I booked you this middle-of-nowhere cabin when there are plenty of luxury resorts that would have been much more comfortable for you. But the thing is, that's exactly what I was trying to avoid. I know how awful that sounds, and if you haven't already burned this letter and stomped on the ashes, let me explain.

Reinvention doesn't come for free, and it definitely doesn't come with room service. It's born out of pushing yourself to the limit after you've already endured the worst thing in your life. If you'd simply stayed home or booked yourself into a cushy resort after all your shit hit the fan, then sure, you might have been able to lick your wounds and recover. But would you have grown? Definitely not. Which is exactly why I sent you to North Star Lodge.

I'm sure by now you've heard about their weekly wilderness excursions. I also know you've probably laughed in the face of anyone who's suggested you

participate. But now I'm asking you to participate. I'm asking you to push yourself so that when you come back, you'll have the strength to pursue whatever the hell it is you want for your life, regardless of what your fans, publisher, and even I want. This is your opportunity to look your fears in the eye and stare them the hell down.

To help motivate you, I've sent ahead a letter for every week of your stay. The proprietor knows that they're ONLY to be given to you upon the completion of a wilderness excursion, so don't bother trying to get them early.

Lastly, I know you're doubting yourself. But just know that if there's one person in the world who I believe can pull off a Swiftian reinvention, it's my big sister. I believe in you, Margot. Go out there and climb a mountain for both of us.

*Stay safe, but not too safe,
Savannah*

The hand holding Savannah's letter falls limply to my side. I stare unseeingly at a knot in the wooden floor while the inside of my chest turns over like a rock tumbler. Homesickness—no, Savannah-sickness—pricks the corners of my eyes, even while I have the urge to do exactly as she suggested and destroy the letter. She's asking too much. She has way too much faith in my ability to cope with this place. I just nearly set myself on *fire*. There's no way I can go on wilderness excursions—a fact I've been reminded of repeatedly since my arrival, by one person in particular. My eyes jerk up to Forrest, who's staring at me warily. Savannah said the "proprietor" was keeping the other letters, and now I know my target.

"Where are my other letters?" I ask, slowly approaching the desk like a lioness on the hunt.

He shakes his head. "You know the deal. No excursions, no letters."

"Bullshit," I say, inching closer. "You and I both know that's not happening."

"Apparently, it is."

"Remind me: Who was it who said I'd only slow the group down? That I'm an amateur? A danger to myself and everyone around me?"

The natural downward slant of his eyebrows that gives him resting don't-fuck-with-me face shifts subtly from straight disapproval to disapproval with a hint of guilt.

"Your sister seems to believe in you," he says.

"My sister also believes in crystal healing," I snap.

"Not my problem."

"Give. Me. My. *Letters*," I say, my fingers landing on the edge of the desk across from him.

"No."

"Why the hell not?" I burst out. "Savannah's not here! She'll never know!"

"And you're perfectly fine lying to your sister?" he asks with a look of censure. "After she took all that time to plan this out for you?"

His words pack a bigger punch than he probably realizes. Squirming slightly, I think of how I hid my Happily Never After file from Savannah for years, letting her believe I was the same romantic, optimistic version of myself that she approves of most. Mr. Moral Compass is frowning at me like nothing about my response surprises him, and shame plucks at me with barbed fingers until I'm sure I'm covered in red splotches.

"I wasn't planning on lying!" I lie. "I'll tell her I couldn't follow through," I promise, edging around the corner of the desk. But as soon as I've said it, Savannah's voice seems to whisper through my mind. *I know you're doubting yourself. I believe in you, Margot.* I shake my head to clear it. "Give me my personal property," I repeat in a cold voice, coming to stand directly in front of him. "Stealing mail is a federal crime."

Without breaking eye contact, he crosses his arms over his lumbersexual flannel and puffer-vest combo. He shakes his head. "No excursions, no letters."

I barely resist throwing a paperweight at him. *Fine.* I didn't want to pull out the big guns, but all's fair in love and (in my case) desperation.

"Look. Forrest," I say, softening my voice around his name. I tilt my head innocently and take a step closer to him. He visibly swallows. "I'm a professional writer. If you let me have my letters, I will write fucking *sonnets* about North Star Lodge and its extremely accommodating staff on every review site there is. If you

decide not to give them to me..." I trail off and shrug, letting his imagination cook up the alternative.

Like clockwork, his whole body goes rigid, and his nostrils flare like I've inflicted a mortal injury. When he speaks, his voice sounds like it's being forced through a meat grinder. "Thanks for the offer, but reviews are the last thing we need right now."

Shit. I only meant to vaguely threaten him without actually acting on it, but I didn't think of Trapper's accident. I didn't think about how they probably don't want an influx of bookings while they're adjusting, *or* a setback from the normal flow of business. I bite my lip, stewing in my guilt until Forrest takes the box of letters out of the drawer.

I gasp and make a grab for them, but his big hand clamps around the package and lifts it skyward, many untold feet above my head.

"You give those back!" I jump pointlessly, and he has the nerve to *laugh*. I'm weighing the options of either climbing him like a tree or kicking him somewhere soft and vulnerable when he steps away from me, arm still raised. "Where the hell are you going?" I demand.

"To put these in my dad's underwear drawer."

I let out a growl of frustration, to which Forrest only responds, "Hike starts on Saturday at noon sharp. Pack appropriately."

And with that, I'm left to fume by myself, smelling like a smoked brisket and already strategizing how to push him into a ravine and make it look like an accident. Because one thing is certain—I'm going to get those letters or die trying.



FORREST

Why the hell didn't I just give her the damn letters? Margot would be safely holed up in her cabin right now instead of tagging along on a hike that's well beyond her capabilities. It might have also established some level of civility between us, which has been sorely lacking in the last few days. Up until now, I've mostly been able to avoid her, but unfortunately, she and Scout have formed an alliance. He scratches at her door every time I take him for our morning run, and she always opens up, greeting him with affection while completely icing me out. I've never felt a colder shoulder than the one she's been giving me, and I live in goddamn Alaska.

I glance back at the group I'm leading to the Eagle's Point trailhead, which lies only a short distance from my cabin. Alice and Yoon are right behind me, followed by Topher, while Ollie pulls up the rear with Margot. Her voice lifts in a flirtatious laugh that makes my shoulders stiffen beneath the heavy straps of my pack, and I turn back to face the trail.

Yes, leaving her would've been the responsible thing to do. But after I got my own letter from Margot's sister marked *Please read before delivering Margot Bradley's package*, that became a nonoption. My fists tighten around my hiking poles as the words I memorized from reading so many times come back to me.

To the Excursion Leader of North Star Lodge,

I'm writing because I have a huge, unusual favor to ask, and somehow, a letter seemed like the best way to ask it. Please bear with me—I'll do my best to

explain.

By now, I'm sure you've met my sister, Margot, and that you've already formed opinions about her. I'm going to hazard a guess that they probably run along the lines of "What the hell is a woman like her doing in a place like this?" Rest assured that Margot is definitely asking the same question. It's a classic fish-out-of-water trope to the extreme. Like, a fish in a desert... except with snow, and probably lots of flannel. But here's the thing. You'd never guess it from her polished surface, but my sister's the strongest, most selfless person you'll ever meet. It's also why you'd probably never guess that she's been hurting deeply for a very long time.

Maybe Margot will tell you all about it on her own terms (it's not my story to share), but trust me when I say that if anyone needs to find out exactly how resilient they are, it's my sister. It's why I'm asking you to tell her about these letters but withhold them unless she goes on wilderness excursions. I know it's a big ask from a total stranger, but North Star Lodge strikes me as the sort of place that would specialize in personal growth adventures.

Should you decide to do me this solid and earn a lifelong IOU, you'll see each letter is labeled for every week of her stay, as an incentive to get her out of her comfort zone. I warn you now, though—Margot is going to fight this tooth and nail. But more than anything, my sister needs to discover that she has what it takes to overcome what's happened to her. Please keep her safe and help her find that strength.

—Savannah

The strongest, most selfless person you'll ever meet... hurting deeply for a very long time. Why won't those words let me go? Is it because I'd written Margot off as someone incapable of feelings deeper than a petri dish, only to see how desperately she misses her sister, who clearly hero-worships her? Or is it because all my assumptions about why she's here have been shot down, leaving me scrambling for answers? I don't have a fucking clue, and that's exactly the problem. I like having a firm understanding of the world around me. Up until recently, my entire life was centered on finding answers to difficult questions. Margot Bradley

shouldn't be a mystery to me, but every time I try to file her into one of the neat little gray boxes of my mind, she bursts out in vivid color, making me question her all over again.

It's why (with the slow-as-shit secret satellite Internet I've been selfishly keeping to myself) I plugged my Kindle into the lodge's computer and downloaded her entire collected works last night. Initially, I told myself that reading her books was simply research. That Margot's corny romance novels would disprove her claim of being able to write a make-or-break review of North Star, and I could calm the fuck down. Shamefully, I might have also been looking for evidence against Savannah's description of Margot as strong and selfless. But by the time I started the second book at one in the morning, it had become much harder to pretend I wasn't completely engrossed by her writing, and by her astounding sensitivity to the challenges of others.

With every nuanced delve into her characters' complex internal landscapes, I was left wondering why the hell she was switching genres. While murder mysteries seem more appropriate for her prickly personality at first glance, writing tales of the heart is obviously her true calling. Then again, maybe she's only prickly to me. She seems pretty fucking cozy with that wet-behind-the-ears rock climber Ollie. Which brings me back to the questions of why she's giving up romance, what that might have to do with her staying here, and how the hell I'm going to keep her from ripping North Star a new one as soon as she has Internet access.

The gears in my mind grind to a halt as I nearly walk into the Eagle's Point trailhead sign. I've barely noticed the ground beneath my feet, and I'm amazed I didn't lead the group into a sinkhole or worse. I shake my head to clear the suspiciously blond cobwebs. Resettle my pack. *Focus*. I wasn't kidding when I told her this climb isn't for amateurs.

"Okay, everyone," I say, turning to face the group. "As you know, we're headed up to Eagle's Point. There's going to be a lot of scrambling over icy, snow-covered rocks, so make sure your spikes are on your boots and your poles are secure around your wrists if you're using them." I chance a glance at Margot, who's gone white as a sheet beneath her usual golden glow. Ollie puts a reassuring hand on her shoulder, and I look away. "If, for whatever reason, you're not feeling up for today's hike, this is your last chance to turn back."

I can't help meeting Margot's gaze, but she only lifts her chin and sends me a look that clearly and specifically says, *If I die today, it's your fault, and I will spend my afterlife tripping your cabin's fire alarm every time you reach deep REM.*

Fair enough. "Okay, then. Let's go."

Past the first thirty feet of dense trees, we're met with a tumble of boulders that'll require sure footing to climb safely. Behind me, Topher lets out an appreciative "*Sweet*" and rushes forward to monkey his way up the snow-dusted boulders outside of the designated path. I turn to look at the group before ascending, and just like I suspected, Ollie's eyes have gone cartoonishly round at the sight of the rocks. "Just take it slow, and use your poles," he's saying to Margot in a distracted voice. "You're gonna do great." And with that, he comes forward and leaps onto the first outcropping of rock before scrabbling to catch up to his friend.

Margot shoots me a look of panic, gripping her hiking poles like twin light sabers instead of holding them in any remotely useful position.

Alice pats my elbow as she passes by with the sort of gruff "Good luck" one wishes to a soldier headed to the front lines.

"See you at the top!" Yoon says, beaming.

As soon as they're out of sight, I walk back to where Margot is standing completely frozen, staring at where Ollie disappeared. "He left me," she says in shock. "For *rocks*."

"Like I said," I say with a curious lack of annoyance. Mostly, I'm relieved Ollie left so I can manage this situation myself. Not because I want to but because the responsibility of keeping everyone safe is on my shoulders. I'd usually make the group stick together on this climb. But this isn't the standard crowd of summer tourists. Alice and Yoon have been outhiking me on these mountains since I was a boy, and Topher and his family have been vacationing here since he was in a baby carrier. Even Ollie, I can grudgingly admit, is an excellent climber. They're safe on their own, but Margot's going to need all the help she can get, and it's my job to give it to her—no one else's.

"You don't need to rub it in," she says, walking forward to assess the boulders. And then to herself, "I guess it's now or never." She takes a breath and lowers her

shoulders. Then she attempts to climb the rocks five feet to the left of the path. My mouth twitches, but I refuse to be charmed.

“You’d have an easier time if you tried climbing the actual trail,” I say after watching her struggle for a solid minute.

She turns sharply, her long blond ponytail whipping around her fleece ear warmer, and blasts me with a smile so beautiful, it has to be dangerous. “Then maybe, instead of just standing there like a creepy Paul Bunyan, you could show me the way.”

Tearing my eyes away from the dimples on either side of her smile feels like trying to peel off industrial-strength Velcro. “The trail starts here,” I say, pointing to a slab of rock that was wedged into a wide crevice by my grandfather decades earlier. “Look for flat places like this, and always secure your poles before you step. You can lean on them for leverage.”

For a moment, her bravado slips, and she catches her full bottom lip between her teeth. “Shouldn’t you go first?”

“Only if you want the rocks to catch you if you fall.”

I watch her eyes travel up the steep incline of boulders, the long line of her throat moving in a tight swallow. “Good point,” she whispers.

“Ready?”

“Are *you* ready?” she counters, pinning me with a glare.

“For what?”

“Catching me if I fall. My life plan doesn’t actually include ‘Shit my pants and die in Alaska.’”

A surprised laugh escapes me. “That depends. Are you planning on shitting your pants before I catch you, or only if I miss?”

She holds up a hand, and even through her mitten, I can tell she’s flipping me the bird.

“Come on,” I say, unable to wipe the smile off my face. “I’ll catch you either way.”

And so we begin, step by step, to climb one of the steepest trails on North Star’s property. Margot is slow and unsure of every foothold despite the way her toned legs easily carry her over the boulders. Not that I’m focused on how toned her legs are in those thermal tights. Or her ass, for that matter, which has been

directly in front of my face for the past twenty minutes. To keep myself from staring and potentially falling to my death from distraction, I keep my eyes down as much as I can. Finding the next step, and the next, and the—

“I made it!” she shouts up ahead.

I climb over the last boulder on this stretch and find Margot holding her poles above her head. She’s jogging in place like Rocky Balboa doing a victory lap, and I almost don’t have the heart to tell her we’ve barely completed an eighth of the trail.

“Great job,” I say, surprised by how honestly I mean it. “Rest of the trail continues through those trees.” I point with one of my poles.

“You mean there’s more?” she asks with a look of utter devastation. Her poles drop limply by her sides.

“Just a little farther.”

“Why do I get the feeling you’re lying to me?”

“I’m definitely lying to you.”

She groans.

“Let’s go,” I say. “It’s less steep for a while.”

She trudges behind me, but as the trail widens to accommodate two hikers, I find myself slowing down to walk beside her, even though I know I shouldn’t. Reading her work last night has confirmed two disturbing facts. One, that she’s talented as hell and I’ve been a dick to underestimate her. And two, that she could absolutely write a Yelp review that could put North Star on either a destination map or on a BuzzFeed list of “Best Places for a Terrible Time.” Recovering from a scathing review is a storm I’d hoped North Star would never have to weather again, and just like last time, it’s all my fault for not leaving a guest well enough alone.

“So when are you going to admit that you’re only withholding my letters to torture and humiliate me?”

I try not to wince. Instead, I lift a branch that’s grown across the trail so she can go under it. A small gesture to symbolize my newfound intention of not being a complete asshole to her.

“I think you overestimate how invested I am in the situation,” I say neutrally, choosing not to examine exactly *how* invested I am after reading her sister’s letter.

“Is it just me who brings out your sadistic nature,” she says, ignoring me, “or have you always nurtured a secret hatred for blondes?”

Blood rushes to my cold face. What is it about me that says I have a hair-color fixation? It’s completely preposterous and why I say, “You guessed it. My area of research is focused primarily on the inferiority of blondes and how best to make them miserable.”

“Must be nice to be an expert in your field,” she mutters, stumbling over a rock.

“I was under the impression that’s exactly what you are,” I say, more than happy to point the spotlight away from myself. “Except your field is what? Happily Ever Afters?”

At this, Margot jolts. Miscalculates a step and slides on some ice. Automatically, I reach out to stabilize her, but she only bats my hand away. “I’m fine,” she says, though I’ve obviously struck a nerve. I stare at her profile, wishing I could decode the downward pinch of her eyebrows and the tight line of her shoulders beneath her pack.

“So, out of sheer boredom,” she says a few moments later, hijacking the spotlight and turning it back on me, “what is your field of research? When you’re not busy burning blond wigs, of course.”

“You’d be surprised by how time-consuming wig burning is,” I say, earning a snort. “But in my spare time, I research breast cancer. Triple-negative breast cancer, specifically.”

At this, she rolls her eyes and sighs like she can’t help herself.

“Wow,” I say. “Not usually the reaction I get.”

“Sorry—” she says, flushing when she realizes I’m staring at her. “I swear I’m not rolling my eyes at breast cancer.”

I lift another branch for her. “And here I thought I’d finally found someone depraved enough to be my wig-burning assistant.”

She laughs, and a sharp thrill of satisfaction rings through me like I’ve hit the bell at the top of one of those hammer-swing games at a carnival.

“No, it’s just—” But she stops, throwing me a furtive glance.

“What?”

“Well, I know you’ve probably never read a romance novel,” she says while I repress the urge to start whistling innocently. “But they employ a lot of well-worn tropes, and ‘doctor for a worthy cause’ is one of them.”

“So you’re reducing my entire career down to a romance-novel trope?” I ask, raising an eyebrow at her. The trail has steepened considerably, but she seems to be taking it in stride while preoccupied with our conversation.

“Is it your career still? I thought you’d given it up to be with your dad.”

The question hits like a cannonball to the gut and sets off about a hundred others I’ve been asking myself every day for the past six months. Have I really turned my back on all my research and education to be my father’s caretaker? And since, yes, I obviously have, will I ever have the opportunity to return to my old life? Especially when my father’s condition shows no quantifiable improvement, and he’s at constant risk of medical complications? The unfortunate answer is: not likely. Deep down, I know that even if I were deluded enough to think I could make a difference for him medically, it’s not the real reason I’m here. What ultimately made me turn my back on my entire life and what keeps me here today is guilt. During the last year of my mother’s life, I let her and my dad convince me she was okay. I stayed away until it was too late, and that’s simply not going to happen again. It’s why I’m about as stuck here as the stone slabs beneath my feet.

“I did give it up,” I say, hoping my curt answer will deter her line of questioning. But what she says next is the last thing I see coming.

“I get it.”

I look at her, tracing the classic line of her profile with my eyes while she concentrates on securing her hiking poles. “You do?”

She lifts a shoulder. “My sister, Savannah—the one who wrote the letters you’re holding hostage—she’s not well. Or at least she’s not well a lot of the time. She lives with me, and I take care of her.” She suddenly frowns like she doesn’t want to admit her next words, even to herself. “And if she lived in fucking *Alaska*, I guess I’d have to live here too.”

My mind loops back to the day Margot arrived and she learned (falsely) that there’s no Internet at North Star Lodge. How she whined that she needed to keep in touch with her sister, who has a serious condition. Guilt sends a rash of heat up my spine. I’d assumed she was lying her ass off to get what she wanted because, as

we've established, I'm a judgmental prick. I glance at her and vow to tell her about the Internet access—shitty as it is—as soon as we're back. Meanwhile, I'll deal with the revelation that this woman, who upon first impression seemed completely trite and unrelatable, is probably the one person in a thousand-mile radius who might understand what I'm going through.

"It doesn't feel like a choice," I reply.

She catches my eye for a moment and then shakes her head, a quiet exhale clouding her rosy face. "No. It doesn't."

"Do you mind telling me her condition?" I ask.

Margot's eyes sharpen. "I guess that depends. Are you one of those doctors who don't take autoimmune diseases seriously?"

My eyebrows jump. "Why wouldn't I take them seriously? They're extremely well documented."

She makes a sound of derision. "Go tell that to every asshole who told us Savannah's symptoms were 'psychosomatic' during appointments she barely had the strength to sit through."

I register surprise as anger on behalf of a person I've never met fills my stomach with battery acid. After a moment, I manage to speak. "I'm sorry she—and you—had to tolerate that. Skepticism of poorly understood conditions is an unfortunate defense mechanism in the medical community. It doesn't mean that what she's suffering from is any less real than a more easily quantified illness."

Margot is mid-nod when her pole slips on ice. My arm shoots out to steady her, and this time she grabs on to it. Even through the layers of her mittens and my coat, the pressure of her hand sends unwelcome ripples of awareness through me. "Thanks," she says as she lets go and starts walking again. "And thanks for not being another dismissive doctor."

"Of course," I say, clearing my throat. Then, "Why don't you go ahead? The trail's getting too narrow for both of us." She hikes ahead with a last fleeting look at me, boots crunching on the packed snow, and for the rest of the increasingly difficult trail, the only conversation between us is about where to place poles and feet. As we ascend, the temperature drops and the trees become sparse. Margot struggles with her footing, but with every new boulder, she seems to become more

determined to get to the top. Which, after two painstaking hours that leave even my thighs burning, we finally reach.

“Oh my God,” she half gasps, half cries as she crests the last boulder to the summit. She stumbles forward on legs that wobble like a newborn fawn’s as I climb up next. She looks around despondently as she walks through the trees to the huge jut of rock that serves as the hike’s summit. “What the hell was the point of climbing up here? It all looks exactly the same as—”

And then she makes it past the tree line and sees it. A vista of epic proportions, with unfathomable miles of wilderness stretching before us. Her jaw drops slowly as awe renders her speechless. And then, with timing that simply can’t be planned, an enormous bald eagle launches itself from the treetops below us, stretching its six-foot wingspan to fly down toward the snaking river. She gasps and takes a step back.

“This is—” she starts, shaking her head.

“Pretty incredible, huh?” I say softly. Even after growing up here, I find it impossible to take the grandeur of this place for granted.

A disbelieving smile pulls across her face. She shakes her head again. “I can’t believe I made it. I fucking did it.”

“You fucking did it, Margot,” I agree, unable to stop my own smile from spreading.

She turns to look at me with windburned cheeks, a halo of wispy golden hair that’s escaped her ponytail, and amber eyes that practically glow with pride. She’s so beautiful in this moment—sweaty and exhausted and victorious—that I almost forget all my rules. About my blanket ban on guests or, frankly, anyone I find this captivating. Her sister’s words come back to me—*she’s the strongest, most selfless person you’ll ever meet*—and somehow don’t feel as implausible as they did yesterday. But the possibility that they might be true makes keeping my distance from her even more crucial. *The reward isn’t worth the risk*, I repeat to myself like a talisman against her. *Not worth the risk*.

“So where’s the chairlift back down the mountain?” she says, clearing her throat and looking around like it’s hidden in the bushes.

I fight the smile stretched across my idiotic face. “Going down is easier. Come on. We need to get moving if we’re going to make it back before dark. We’re

running behind as it is.”

Her brow furrows at my grumpier tone, and she lowers her phone after taking several selfies I shamefully wish I could see. “Speaking of being behind, where’s the rest of the group? Shouldn’t we have seen them coming down?”

“They must have gone down the outer ridge,” I say, pointing my pole to another small break in the tree line. “It’s a longer trail but less steep.”

“Then I guess that’s our path,” she says, looking over her shoulder at me as she moves toward the break. And then, in a moment so fast I barely see how it happens, she’s on the ground, hiking poles splayed and a cry ripping from her.

Fuck. Fear grips me by the throat, and I run over to where she’s sitting up and clutching her ankle.

“It’s broken,” she says through gritted teeth. “I just knew it. I’m going to die up here! I’m going to be an eagle snack!”

“We don’t know it’s broken,” I say with forced calm while practically ripping my backpack apart to find the first-aid kit. “Can you move it?”

She turns her tear-streaked face to glare up at me. “Does it fucking look like I can move it, Forrest? I *told* you I shouldn’t have done this hike!”

“But you did do it,” I say, steadying her panicked gaze with mine. The words seem to sink in, tethering her back to the pride she felt earlier. “Just like Savannah knew you could.”

After a moment, she gives a shaky nod, and my own pride for her swells beneath my rib cage.

“Take these,” I say, holding out three ibuprofen tablets to her. She dry-swallows them and looks up at me as I stuff the kit back in my bag along with her much smaller pack.

“Shouldn’t I take my boot off?” she asks. “So you can see it?”

I shake my head. “Not till we’re back down the trail. It could swell up like a balloon, and it’s too cold for you not to have a boot on.”

“How the hell am I going to get back down?” she asks, but instead of sounding angry, she sounds terrified.

“First we’re going to stand you up,” I say, keeping eye contact with her. “Then we’re going to see if you can put any weight on it.”

She nods, biting her lip. “Okay.”

With her good leg braced on the rock, I grab her hands and hoist her up. Gingerly, she tests her ankle, and I see the blood drain from her face. “Oh God,” she whispers as pain squeezes fresh tears from the corners of her scrunched eyes. “Oh God, oh God, oh God.”

Damnit. I glance at the sun. We have two hours till dark, and it took us almost three to get up here. There’s only one way this is happening, and she’s not going to be happy about it.

“Margot,” I say, tightening my grip on her hands. She opens her eyes. “Listen to me. It’s getting late, and we have to start moving. I’m going to have to carry you.”

Her wide, glistening eyes go round. “What? *No*. No way.”

“Do you have a better suggestion?”

“Flying by eagle? They looked fucking big enough.”

I shake my head. “They only work weekdays,” I say. “Union thing.”

The reluctant flash of her dimples allows me to take my first full breath since she went down.

“Come on,” I say, shouldering my pack while keeping one hand gripping hers.

“But I can’t be in another trope with you,” she whines. “And we already did this one! Remember the fire?”

“Did you also hit your head?” I ask, like I definitely didn’t read a Carrying the Heroine trope in one of her books last night.

“My head’s perfectly fine, thank you,” she snaps.

“Good. Then you’ll understand why I’ve got to pick you up right now before we waste any more daylight.”

With that, I scoop her up and hold her to my chest, the scent of gardenias enveloping me like every reminder of home I’ve been craving.

“I better get two letters for this,” she grumbles, even as she settles herself more comfortably against me.

“In your dreams, California,” I say as I enter the tree line.

“Do *not* give me a cute nickname!” she warns, pointing a pillowy mitten in my face like it’s a deadly weapon.

I only chuckle and grip her tighter, thinking maybe romance tropes are underrated after all.

MARGOT

Inconvenient Fact Number One: It's impossible to stay mad at someone who's carrying you down a mountain.

From my vantage point against his left shoulder, my gaze catches in the side of Forrest's beard and follows it up to where a fine sheen of sweat illuminates his high cheekbone. He's been carrying me without a break for what has to be half an hour now. Is he going for some kind of world record? The Small Woman Long-Distance Carry? Gaze focused forward, he adjusts me in his arms, and the hand gripping my thigh tightens as he navigates some rocky terrain.

Inconvenient Fact Number Two: Being carried down a mountain by someone you're actively trying not to be attracted to has the exact opposite effect. Honestly, they're facts I *really* could have lived without. But my impartiality never stood a chance against the barrage of sensory stimulation that comes with being held by him. Somehow it even drowns out the throbbing pain in my ankle. I'm staring at his mouth in a trance, registering every rise and fall of his chest, and trying to discreetly snort his musky, tree-adjacent scent into my memory palace when he breaks the silence with "Ready for a breather?"

His question startles me from my ogling.

"*Me?*" I say doubtfully. "Pretty sure you're asking the wrong guy here."

He steps around a large boulder that bisects the path, his breathing labored. "Maybe I don't want to admit my arms are about to fall off."

“Uh-oh. Are you trying to impress me?” I tease, wincing as my ankle is lightly jostled by a steep step downward.

“Depends. Is it working?” he asks.

“Not anymore, spaghetti arms.”

He chuckles breathlessly but then says, “Maybe I just don’t want you to worry about getting dropped,” and it’s like I’ve swallowed an ice cube whole. Up until this moment, despite the quickly sinking sun and the treacherous terrain, I’ve felt safer than I usually do in my cabin. Forrest’s hold on me is so secure and his footing so confident that another accident hadn’t even occurred to me as a possibility.

“Now I’m definitely not worried,” I tell him.

“I appreciate the confidence,” he says, gaze trained on the ground in front of him.

“So there’s this thing people occasionally use? It’s called sarca—”

My word is cut short when he takes another step downward and I *feel* his foot slide on some ice. I can’t help my gasp or the way I grip his coat like a life raft. My whole body tenses, and pain lances up my leg from my ankle. But then we’re back on more level ground and I exhale. He stops next to a lichen-covered rock face that borders the trail. “You okay?” he asks.

I nod, surprised my fingernails haven’t sliced holes in his jacket.

“Here, I’m going to set you down,” he says. Forrest carefully lowers my legs but keeps a hold on me while I balance on my uninjured foot and lean back against the rocks. When I’m settled, he lets go of me but doesn’t back away. His breathing is still heavy as he unclips the small blue drinking tube attached to his shoulder strap and brings it to his mouth, sucking down water in deep gulps that put his close-range throat muscles to work. The throbbing in my ankle reaches new heights from standing upright, but somehow, it’s not the number one thing occupying my mind.

“Here.” He gestures when he’s done, holding the silicone tube out to me.

I eye the wet mouthpiece before my gaze jerks unwillingly toward his also wet lips. Frankly, I’ve never been so thirsty in my life. *It’s just the forced proximity getting to you*, I tell myself. If I can recognize the trope, it means I can be aware enough not to fall for it. Firmly ignoring the missed-step feeling in my stomach as

I take the valve from him, I put it into my mouth and bite down, swallowing the inrush of cool water. Forrest averts his eyes while I quickly finish up, wishing I didn't feel like we just made out by proxy.

"Hope I don't get your cooties," I say, trying to diffuse what is likely one-sided tension.

"Too late for that," he says, clipping the drinking tube back onto his shoulder strap. "They're a clinical certainty now."

"Well, if I've got yours, then you've got mine."

Forrest closes his eyes and rolls his shoulders, stretching his neck slowly to the right as his breathing slows. "You climbed a mountain today," he says. "There are worse cooties to be had."

"Even if the cooties fell on their ass and need to be carried down the mountain?" I say, mildly horrified when the question doesn't come out like a joke but more like a quiet plea for validation. The embarrassment I've been nursing since my butt hit the ice blooms up to my face, heating me unpleasantly.

Forrest opens his eyes to look down at me. "Better to fall on your ass climbing a mountain than to never climb it at all," he says with such matter-of-factness that I almost believe him. His gaze takes a tour of my face like there are suddenly new things to see within my features. "Your sister was right about you," he says at last.

The mention of Savannah is a surprise hit of serotonin followed quickly by the need for more information. "What do you mean she was right about me? Did you talk with her? What did she say?" I demand.

Forrest shakes his head. "I didn't talk to her. I got my own note explaining her plan for your letters."

"Ah," I say, easily able to imagine Savannah penning a masterpiece of persuasion to convince Forrest of her scheme. "And were you flattered, guilty, or threatened into doing what she wanted?"

The corner of his mouth hitches up. "Mostly guilty. But should I be worried about a horse head showing up in my bed if I screw this up?"

"More likely a moose. Savannah loves a theme."

Forrest lets out a disbelieving laugh, visibly shuddering. "Siblings. Always wished I had one, but now I'm not so sure."

"I think in general they're pretty hit or miss."

Another smile, but softer. "Sounds like you lucked out, though."

His words summon the lump that, ever since I left my sister, has been constantly waiting to form in my throat. My voice comes out a little choked. "You have no idea."

Forrest looks at me like he's reassessing a conclusion he thought was set in stone. For a week now, it's been nothing but bickering and avoidance with a heavy dose of side-eye between us, but a shift is happening that doesn't feel entirely under my control. It's scary, and my gut tells me I need to change the subject if I want any hope of maintaining my emotional distance from this man. I look around at the pristine wilderness surrounding us and ask the first question that I can think of.

"Was it hard moving away from all this? When you went to school, I mean?"

The question seems to surprise him, and he rubs the side of his beard with a coarse scratching sound. "In some ways. Bullwinkle definitely missed me."

I laugh, and he returns it with a smile that's almost sad. "But mostly I was excited. Mom and Dad were too." He pauses while I get hung up on the word "Mom," knowing he calls Jo by her first name. I wonder if Forrest's mother and Trapper separated and, if so, where she is now. Then he says, "Everything I wanted was in L.A."

"And what about now?" I ask before fully thinking it through.

He looks at me, eyes flickering to my mouth for a moment so brief, I probably imagined it. "There are a few things I miss," he admits.

I swallow. "Do you ever wish you could go back?"

I can see the answer in his guarded eyes. "No point wishing for the impossible."

"Right," I say, mouth dry. "No point." I adjust my one-legged stance against the rocks and wince.

"You okay?" he asks, concern drawing his dark brows together. "That ibuprofen should have kicked in by now."

"I'm fine," I lie, but he gives me a look that makes me feel like a squeaky-clean windowpane.

"Let's get going," he says, glancing at the low-hanging sun like a normal person would look at a watch. "Ready to board?"

“Would it be easier if I tried fitting in the backpack?”

He smiles without a trace of his earlier melancholy, and my heart does *not* do a backflip. Nope.

“Might work if we cut some leg holes,” he suggests.

I can’t stop from snorting at the visual he’s painted. “You didn’t happen to pack a *Baby on Board* sticker, did you?”

A deep, handsome laugh escapes him, and I’m transfixed, a small animal caught in his high-beam smile. But then he crouches low, scooping me right off my feet, and I suck in a breath as he pulls me close.

“You’re sure you had enough of a break?” I ask.

“Are you asking if I’m going to drop you?”

“You’re free to infer what you wish,” I say delicately.

He starts walking, his hold on me firm and secure. “I won’t let you fall, Margot.”

No, I think. *I’m not afraid you will*. Unfortunately, that’s not the kind of falling I’m really worried about.



My eyes are closed, and I’m almost drifting off from the rhythmic movement of Forrest’s endless walking when the word “Finally” escapes him.

Startled, I look ahead through the trees and see a cabin in the deep blue of falling dusk. It’s the same one we passed as we walked to the trailhead, and relief washes through me. After three more quick breaks to radio Jo and increasingly tense silence as it got darker and darker, *we made it off the mountain*. Forrest picks up his pace, clearly headed for the snow-covered cabin ahead of us, and a small jolt goes through me. I expected to be taken to the lodge, or my own little home away from home, but this place is neither. This cabin must be *his*. My suspicions are confirmed when we reach the door and he doesn’t hesitate to walk right in.

It’s dark inside, but even so, I wouldn’t mistake this place for anyone’s but Forrest’s. For one, it smells like someone lit a scented candle in here called Cedar and Muscles, and it’s painstakingly neat. The space is bigger than mine, with a full kitchen, but the log walls and Scandinavian hygge vibes are the same. The real

giveaway that this place is Forrest's (apart from the home gym set up in the far corner) is the bookshelf. It looks new and slightly mismatched amid the other furniture, and it's absolutely crammed with books and framed photos of his family. It reminds me of the shelves in my own home, and a pang goes through me at the realization that if I had to move, the prized possessions I'd bring with me would be the same as his.

"Here, keep your weight off that foot," he instructs breathlessly when we reach the living room, where he lowers me in front of an armchair.

Bracing awkwardly against him, I gasp a little when he grabs my parka's zipper and pulls it down. And maybe it's because of what we just went through, but the muffled zzz and his labored breathing in the dark, quiet room seem to open more than my coat between us. He parts the lapels, sliding the thick garment off my shoulders, and my eyes fly up to his. But his sole intent is freeing my arms as quickly as possible, and that's when I realize all the security and assurance I felt that we would make it down safely was completely one-sided. How didn't I notice the anxiety rolling off him until now?

"I can take my own coat off—" I argue weakly, but in the next moment, I'm sitting in the armchair, and he's kneeling beside me and his abandoned backpack, already untying my bootlaces.

"I can untie them," I offer, wanting to show him I'm okay. He only brushes my interfering hands away and continues to pull the laces out of the holes with quick, anxious snapping sounds. Something I'm afraid to name squeezes my heart. He was quiet for so long on the last part of our journey, I mistook his worry for concentration.

"Forrest, I'm okay," I say, despite my own growing anxiety about what we'll discover once my boot comes off.

He continues to work, almost like he didn't hear me. "This might hurt," he warns before finally working the loosened boot off my ankle.

I groan and fall back in the chair, biting my lips together as all compression disappears and my ankle becomes an angry, throbbing bowling ball. Forrest's warm hands begin to gently test my mobility, and almost immediately, a sharp stab of pain makes me sit up straight again with a gasp. He nods to himself and mutters something I barely catch. Letting go of me, he stands, turning on a lamp

and shucking his own coat and boots before going to the kitchen. There, he pulls out a large pot and begins filling it with water from the sink.

“What does ‘vertical aversion’ mean?” I ask while he grabs two ice cube trays from his freezer.

To my surprise, there’s a ghost of a smile on his lips when he says, “I guess that works, too, but I said ‘lateral inversion.’ It’s the type of sprain you most likely have.”

My palms go sweaty on the leather armrests. “That sounds serious. Is it serious? Will I need an X-ray? Surgery?” I say, my voice getting higher with each new alarming possibility.

He shakes his head, popping all the ice into the water and shutting the tap off. He walks back to me with the sloshing, clinking pot, looking far more relieved than I feel. “It’s the most common kind of sprain. You’ll be fine in a few days,” he says, kneeling down and placing the pot at my feet, “but you need to ice it to prevent more swelling.”

I lean forward to look into the pot and then back up at him. “That looks really fucking cold.”

“It’s really fucking cold,” he confirms, pulling off his hat. The coarse dark cowlicks around his face are damp with sweat, and he looks exhausted. Not regular exhausted but I-just-carried-a-person-down-a-mountain exhausted.

“Alright,” he says. “Sock off.”

Swallowing hard, I carefully begin peeling off my sock and try not to cry again. While I’d never admit this to him, I feel like the world’s biggest idiot. For a moment at the summit, I thought I’d proved myself wrong. That I *can* do these excursions that have somehow become, after Savannah’s letter, inextricably linked with my ability to pull off my career reinvention. But after injuring myself and being carried like a baby for hours, my self-confidence has never been lower.

When my toes are free, I wiggle them experimentally and see Forrest’s eyebrows pull up at the sight of my bright yellow gel pedicure. For the first time in hours, something like a smile pulls at my lips because it’s so like him to disapprove of anything whimsical. I cross my arms over my sweater. “Is there a problem with my nail polish that you’d like to share with the rest of the class?”

He's still kneeling and sticks a hand in the pot to swirl the ice around. "Having a problem would suggest having an opinion about nail polish." He pulls his hand out and rubs it over his neck, massaging overworked muscles. "Which I don't."

I blink away from his wet skin, suddenly parched. "Tell that to your left eyebrow, if it ever comes down from the stratosphere."

"That's my 'surprised but not enough to care' eyebrow," he says, lowering it.

"And it's surprised by what? That colors exist outside of the flannel spectrum?" I ask, looking around his painfully tidy cabin.

"Maybe it's surprised anyone would consciously choose to paint their nails the color of stomach bile."

"Or *maybe* your operating system is simply unable to process all things fun and adorable."

I wiggle my toes again to further illustrate my point, and he looks away from them, faint color rising above the line of his beard. If I were flirting, I'd tease him for it and definitely bring up foot fetishes. But I'm not flirting, and there will be no flirting. My flirt broke years ago, and I have no interest in repairing it—especially not with men who have a disturbing knack for making me feel cared for. I remind myself firmly that Forrest is the excursion leader: helping me up the mountain—and then carrying me down it—was just his job.

"I've got no problem with your toes," he says flatly, "but I do have a problem with stalling. Get them in the water."

"Fine," I say nonchalantly. Like stalling isn't exactly what I've been doing this whole time. Like I stick my feet in ice baths all the time to relax. Locking eyes with him, I plunge my foot into the icy water. A second passes, and then—

"*Shit!*" I yelp as the pain in my ankle rockets from ten to a thousand. I start pulling my foot out of the pot.

"Nope," Forrest says, leaning in close and putting a heavy hand on my leg to keep it in place. He squeezes my thigh, and my eyes jerk up to his. Apparently, even excruciating pain can't keep my body from lighting up at his touch. "You need to keep it submerged. You'll get used to it in a few minutes."

"A few minutes?" I cry. "How many, exactly?"

"Fifteen to twenty," he says, and I can't stop my whimper. His grip on my thigh tightens, and all my nerve endings do a stadium wave. "You can do this," he

promises.

There is *no* dimension in which this is true.

“No, I *can't*,” I force out, scrunching my eyes shut. “I won’t *have* a foot if I keep it in here for twenty minutes.”

“Margot, look at me.” Reluctantly, I open my watering eyes to meet his steady ones. “When we started our hike today, I fully expected to turn back early with you. I never thought we’d actually reach the summit.”

My chest constricts with hurt, despite how low my own expectations were. His lack of faith in me seems like confirmation that I don’t have what it takes to live up to my sister’s belief in me. I lower my pricking eyes, telling myself the tears are from the searing pain in my ankle. But then his thumb starts circling against my inner thigh, like he knows his touch is the only thing that could possibly get my attention through the radiating pain. My gaze stutters up to his, and his eyes are startlingly dark in the dim lamplight.

“I don’t like being proven wrong,” he admits in a low voice. “Can’t fucking stand it.” He takes a breath. “Except for today. You proved me wrong on that summit, and I—”

He looks like he wants to say more but stops himself and looks down at where his hand rests on my thigh. I blink at him, unsure how to respond, until I remember what he said on the walk down.

“What did you mean earlier, when you said my sister was right about me?” I ask, almost in a whisper.

He hesitates a moment, then lifts his eyes to mine again. “She said you’re the strongest person I’ll ever meet.”

My breath catches as I’m swept into a riptide of love and longing for my sister. It swirls and churns with fledgling pride for myself and gratitude for Forrest’s willingness to change his mind about me.

“Which is why,” he continues, “you’re going to keep your ankle in this bucket, so it doesn’t swell up and make a bad situation even worse. I feel fucking awful enough as it is.” His voice is tense with regret, and in his worried eyes, every slippery step he navigated and every minute of anxiety he masked for me is suddenly laid bare.

“It wasn’t your fault,” I say, surprised by how quickly the need to reassure him tumbles out of me. “What you did to get me back down... it was right out of a novel. I haven’t even said thank you.”

Forrest cuts off my gratitude with a shake of his head. He’s staring at me not like I’m an inconvenience but like we’ve gone through something together. The sort of calamity that bonds you to someone. And with the slightest upward slide of his warm hand, he silently tells me what he won’t say out loud. That he’d do it all again to keep me safe. That maybe he’d do it all again just to keep touching me. And all at once, I can’t help feeling like more than just another guest to him.

“Forrest—” I say, my voice low.

The dense fans of his lashes drop and flutter twice at the sound of his name cloaked in wanting instead of barbs. His hand stills as he opens his mouth to speak. But he’s interrupted as the walkie-talkie he’s been communicating with Jo on beeps loudly. His hand leaps off my thigh like it bit him, and he stands abruptly. As he backs away, I can practically see his brain stamp *CLASSIFIED* on whatever he was about to say and shred it for good measure. Jo’s voice is loud and staticky in the quiet cabin when she says, “Did you make it back yet?”

Forrest pulls a hand down his face, looking as flustered as I feel. “Don’t take your ankle out of that bucket, Margot,” he warns like he’s reading my mind. Before I can even pretend that wasn’t my next move (it absolutely was, damn him), he hits the talk button on his radio. “We made it back, and I’ve got her in my cabin. Her ankle isn’t broken, but she’s got a pretty good sprain.”

The troubled look that crosses his face as he says this guilts me into keeping my mostly numb foot in the bucket. A few seconds later, a light on the walkie flashes, and Jo’s voice comes crackling in. “That’s great news! Glad you made it back safely. Oh—hold on. Ollie wants to say something.”

There’s a sound of rustling static and then, “Margot, are you there? It’s Ollie.”

Looking like he’d rather throw the walkie out the window than give it to me, Forrest reluctantly holds it close enough for me and hits the speak button.

“Hey, Ollie, I’m here,” I say.

“Margot, I am *so* sorry I didn’t come back for you,” comes Ollie’s repentant voice. “I just kept getting distracted, and the boulders were so epic—”

Not as epic as that eye roll, I think, stealing the walkie out of Forrest's hand while his eyes are aimed at the ceiling beams.

"It's okay. Forrest got me down safely, and it's just a sprain," I say, looking up at him again.

"Well, I'm still sorry, and I promise I won't—"

"Okay, okay," Jo's voice interrupts. "Forrest, we're about to eat dinner here. Are you and Margot on your way?"

Forrest takes the walkie back from me and looks away. "No. She's still icing her ankle, and I've got food here. I'll make sure she eats."

"Okay, then," Jo says with far more chipperness than when she spoke to Ollie. "Have a good night together. Over."

Forrest puts the walkie down, and in the renewed silence, my stomach feels like a pancake that's been flipped but missed the pan on the way down. We're alone in a snowy cabin, and I can't help feeling like I stepped right out of one trope and into another.

My stomach grumbles, and the corner of Forrest's mouth lifts. "Fish sound okay?"

I sigh. Knowing him, he probably caught the fish in question with his bare hands while navigating raging rapids on his way to save an injured otter. If I had any sense of self-preservation, I'd demand to be taken to my cabin immediately.

But I'm starving, hurt, and half-frozen, so what comes out instead is "Fish sounds great."

He nods, and then—as though he's making doubly sure to obey Romance Law—he rolls up his sleeves before heading to the kitchen. As I drag my eyes away from him, I have the thought that if there is any mercy in this cold, cruel world, he'll be a terrible cook.



But obviously, the world could give two otter shits about mercy. Obviously, Forrest *hasn't* been on dish duty while Jo and Trapper churn out the five-star meals I've eaten every night in the lodge. Obviously, in addition to his advanced

medical degrees, Dr. Forrest Wakefield, Carrier of Women Down Mountains, has also found time to attend culinary school and earn several James Beard Awards.

Neither of us speaks during the meal—we're both too famished and awkward after our accidental glimpse beyond the blinders we keep up around each other. But the fire he started provides soothing background noise to our food shoveling, and when I come up for air, he's already done, studying me like I'm a snag in his research.

"That was amazing," I say to break the silence. "I have no idea what it was, but all other fish are dead to me now."

A corner of his mouth turns up, and he looks down at his empty plate. I breathe. "It was halibut, and that's just a five-hour hike talking. Chef Boyardee would've tasted just as good."

"I somehow doubt Mr. Boyardee would have poached his halibut in brown butter," I say, narrowing my eyes. It's not a compliment. It's an accusation. "Where the hell did you learn to cook like this?"

He shrugs. "Right here. My, uh..." He frowns at his fork and nudges it into perfect alignment. "My mom was a chef back in the day. Taught me and my dad everything she knew. We've been cooking for guests ever since."

In the quiet that follows, I have the sudden sensation that the heavy inner workings of a lock have turned open, but I can't quite see what he's set loose between us. He mentioned his mom on the walk down, but this time it feels different. He isn't looking at me, and I'm afraid to say anything that might make his intangible vulnerability more solid. I don't want things to get more personal between us. Things felt personal enough while I was pinned to his body on the mountain. While he was knocking down my fortress walls with every small stroke of his thumb before dinner.

"Anyway," he says, and the unspoken thing between us is chased away, "I'm guessing you want your letter."

"My letter!" I exclaim, all other thoughts banished. "Where is it? Do we need to go to the lodge?"

"No, I've got it here," he says, standing to collect our plates.

"You said you were putting them in your dad's underwear drawer!"

He shrugs. “Didn’t seem safe enough. You could’ve just asked for them nicely, and he probably would’ve given them to you.”

My mouth drops open in outrage. “So you let me sit there with my foot in a torture bucket without handing it over?”

“You didn’t ask.”

“I was starving and injured!” *And distracted*, I privately scold myself.

“Well, you’re getting it now,” he says, setting the plates in the sink. “Hold on.”

When Forrest returns from his bedroom, he puts the envelope in my outstretched palm. I tear it open, hands shaking all over again, while he tactfully walks off to clean up the kitchen.

Inside is the letter, along with an old Polaroid photo. I pull it out to see Savannah and me, ages eight and eleven, respectfully. I know our ages because we’re in Halloween costumes, and it was the year Savannah wanted to be the princess from her favorite Grimm’s fairy tale, *The Frog Prince*, and please-please-pleased me into being the frog. I stifle an emotional laugh as my eyes move over my own gangly limbs and Savannah’s missing-tooth smile. It was the best night of that whole terrible year. With difficulty, I rip my eyes from the photo and unfold my letter.

Dear Margot,

If you’re reading this, it means you’re a badass. It means that you pushed yourself way (and I mean ALL the way) out of your comfort zone. And maybe it didn’t go perfectly. If I had to guess, I bet you probably earned a few bumps and bruises (and no, I’m not psychic, I’m just one of the many people who saw you slip and fall in horseshit that time I begged you to hike with me up to the Hollywood sign, sorry not sorry). But even if you are hurting and covered in poop right now, I also know there’s got to be a small part of you that’s feeling proud too. I know I am. You just did something really hard, and really scary, but managed to push through it. Just like you did when I first got sick.

Do you remember how quickly everything fell apart that year? How one second, it seemed like we could have been the family in a Wonder Bread commercial, and the next, I was practically living in the children’s hospital? How Mom and Dad stopped being able to walk past each other without

fighting, and she took that second job to put a dent in my medical bills? Honestly, life before that year does feel like a Wonder Bread commercial to me. The memories are there, but they don't feel like mine. I used to think it was because I was just too young to hold on to them. Or that maybe getting sick made all the pre-illness times feel like a fantasy. And maybe both of those reasons are a little bit true, but what I really think now is that our family had stress fractures all along, and my getting sick simply cracked them wide fucking open.

But just because everything was coming apart at the seams didn't mean there weren't silver linings. For one, I was allowed to consume all the TV and Kool Pops I wanted. Basically kid heaven. Mostly, though, I remember it being the year my impossibly cool older sister who never gave me the time of day suddenly became my best friend. How she'd sneak me copies of her Betty and Veronica comics, even though Mom said I was too young for them. How she'd turn down sleepovers to stay home and make me burnt toast and alphabet soup dinners when Mom was working late and Dad was too caught up in a painting to remember. How she started writing me bedtime stories about the perilous adventures of Super Savannah, the crime-fighting girl wonder, that made me believe—even if only while reading—that I was strong enough to do anything.

I guess the whole point of this letter is to return the favor. To remind you that you were strong enough not only to survive that completely shit year but to make it magical for me. That you were also strong enough to get through whatever wilderness excursion you just survived, and you'll be strong enough to get through the next ones too. I know it's asking a lot. I know. But I also know that doing hard things fires up creativity like nothing else, and for that reason alone, this manuscript is going to be your best yet—I just feel it.

*Stay safe, but not too safe,
Savannah*

There's a soft *pat* sound as a drop of water lands on Savannah's letter. It soaks into the paper, and with surprise, I realize it's fallen from my face. Embarrassed, I

glance at Forrest, whom I find absent-mindedly drying his hands and staring at me like I've confirmed something he didn't necessarily want to know.

He puts the towel down. "Well?" he asks quietly. "Was it worth a sprained ankle?"

I look down at the letter and Polaroid and can only nod. It would have been worth a whole-body cast. Reading my sister's perspective on that awful year was like going back in time and receiving a hug as my eleven-year-old self. But even with her reassuring words, all the old pain and anger linger, surfacing like a bruise as my eyes repeatedly catch on the word "Dad."

"Want a drink?" Forrest asks. His tone is different. Softer, but careful too.

I look up at him from across the room. His posture is deceptive—I'd call it relaxed if it weren't for his utter stillness. He's holding himself like a man who's waiting to see if I'll come and join him over the line he's just crossed, or yank him back toward good judgment. My eyes cut to the front door. I'm emotional. Lonely. Both excellent reasons to ask him to take me back to my cabin this instant.

"Sure" is what comes out instead. "But only if you have one too."

He nods, opens a kitchen cabinet, and a few moments later, he's beside me, filling two short tumblers with Scotch, neat. He sits down next to me so we're sharing a corner of the table, and the light of the fire catches on all his outlines—his messy hair, the architecture of his nose, the blunt corner of his square jaw. He's looking at the Polaroid out of the corner of his eye, and after taking a burning sip that tastes like a campfire, I set my glass down and push the picture over to him. "Go ahead," I wheeze as the alcohol starts a cozy fire in my belly. "Laugh. My pride's somewhere back on Eagle's Point, anyway."

A closed-mouth chuckle. "So this is the evil mastermind behind the letters." He frowns. "Didn't think she'd be so tiny."

Despite myself, I smile. "They said the same thing about Napoleon."

"Which is why she's the princess and you got stuck as a warty amphibian?" he asks, taking a drink. His tongue brushes the whiskey from his lips as he lowers his glass, and my stomach drops like a yo-yo.

"I think you mean I'm a tragic literary figure, and I'll have you know my Frog Prince raked in a solid pound of Reese's Cups that year."

“Your personal favorite?” he asks, his eyes skimming over me. His body has loosened, taking up all the space it needs, and mine responds like a mirror.

“Hers,” I admit, picking up my glass. The second gulp goes down smoother and seems to bloom up and up, softening edges as it goes. Softening the part of me that should be building barricades, until all I can hear is the low roar of the fire.

“Why doesn’t that surprise me?” he murmurs.

His eyes are on my mouth when he says it, and this time, when I take a sip, the whiskey blooms lower. My legs press together, carefully avoiding his beneath the table.

“You ask a lot of questions for someone who isn’t ‘invested in the situation,’” I air-quote him from the beginning of our hike.

Slowly, almost casually, he rests his forearms on the table and draws in closer, caging his drink behind his large hands. He raises his eyes to mine right as his now-familiar scent wallops me in the face like a dictionary of romance hero smells. Cedar, whiskey, and bad decisions.

“I guess that was until I had to carry the ‘situation’ down a mountain,” he says, and his gaze feels like a towrope dragging me in.

My pulse is the whole percussion section of an orchestra. At some point, one of us is going to stop this. Stand up and walk away.

I lean forward in my seat, almost closing the distance between us. “So I’m a ‘situation’ now?”

In the leaping firelight, his eyes make me think of deep green pools of water reflecting a wildfire. Steady amid the chaos.

“Nothing I couldn’t handle,” he replies, his deep voice hitting all my most neglected parts like gongs.

It’s been so long since I wasn’t careful. In her letter, Savannah practically named the day I stopped expecting life to pull its punches. But today I climbed a mountain and stood on the windswept summit with fucking eagles and felt like a different person. A brave person. Now the feeling’s back, except I’m inches away from a man who makes all my boundaries feel like terrible ideas. It’s why my uninjured leg is sliding beneath the table, searching until—

“Margot.” He says my name like a warning, but I watch his pupils dilate and feel like I’m being swallowed. My leg rests against his like a trillion volts of

electricity aren't surging through our point of contact. I wait for him to pull back, but he's stock-still against me. The air between us might as well be flammable.

"I wouldn't mind seeing how you handle me," I say, the words striking the empty inches between us like a match.

And then his hand is on my jaw, tilting it up as his thumb strokes where my dimple would be if I smiled. A breath shudders out of him, and all the heat coiling in my body expands at once, sparking in every erogenous zone I possess. My mouth parts, soft and pliant for him, but just when I expect the first brush of his lips, he freezes.

He pulls back a critical inch, and his eyes do one panicked circuit over my features before he closes them hard. "Shit," he curses hoarsely, turning his head away from me and accidentally brushing my face with his curls. Abruptly, he's pushing his chair back and standing, leaving me hot, bewildered, embarrassed, and angry, all in quick succession.

"I can't do this," Forrest mutters, more to himself than to me. "I never should have—"

"*Seriously?*" I cry in disbelief, as every mayday signal I've been ignoring is cranked up to full blast. "You started it!"

My accusation, which was honed to perfection sometime around the second grade, stops his pacing. He stares at me, eyes wide. "*I* started it? You're the one playing footsie—"

"That wasn't footsie! It was an accident!" I lie, my cheeks getting hot. "You're the one who implied you wanted—"

"I never implied anything—"

"You grabbed my face!"

At this, he stops and runs his hand through his hair for the third time in under a minute. Exhales. "Look. I'm sorry. I'm not interested in getting involved with guests. I never should have—" he starts again, but I cut him off.

"You seemed pretty interested a second ago," I say sharply, looking pointedly at his crotch. Before he can respond with more than an embarrassed flush and a hasty adjustment of his pants, I push back and stand on my one good foot. Humiliation and defensiveness snake through me, raising my own temperature by

a thousand degrees. I don't need a coat. I'll melt all the snow in Alaska simply by limping outside.

"Don't try to walk yet," he snaps, running a hand through his hair again. It gives him an electrocuted look that shouldn't be attractive on anyone, but naturally, he pulls it off. "I've got a pair of crutches."

"Why do you have—" I begin asking, then shake my head. "Never mind, it doesn't matter. I'm going back to my cabin now."

I grab my letter and photo and begin hobbling pitifully toward his hiking pack to wrestle my smaller one out of it. Forrest curses again and quickly heads to the bedroom. I've managed to retrieve my pack and am limping toward the front door when he returns with the crutches.

"Here," he says, handing them to me after I get my coat on. I grudgingly accept them without a word because I have *never* been more upset with myself. I swore I wouldn't give in to Forrest, and here I am playing footsie with him, even if I'll claim plausible deniability for the rest of my days.

"I can walk you back," he says gruffly as I finish getting my boots on.

"Oh, that's okay." I smile. "I'd rather freeze to death."

"You don't know how to get back from here," he points out as I awkwardly maneuver my crutches and fish out Ollie's headlamp that I packed in case of an emergency (if this doesn't qualify, I don't know the meaning of the word).

"I know this cabin is just a little farther down from mine on the same trail," I say. "Just tell me if it's a left or a right out of here."

"It's a right, but Margot, listen—"

"No, Forrest, *you* listen. You gave me every indication that you were interested. I thought maybe we could have a little fun in this godforsaken place, but since that's obviously not something you're capable of, I'm happy to find it somewhere else." I open the front door with a swirl of cold air and pull on the headlamp. Outside, it's pitch black and terrifying, but getting away from Forrest to nurse my wounded pride is currently sitting above oxygen on my pyramid of needs.

"Thanks for carrying me down a mountain and making me dinner. I know you were just doing your job, but how about next time you don't almost kiss me and then claim you're not *interested*. I'll see you around."

With that, I limp out into the bitter cold, leaving him to stare after me in utter silence.

FORREST

G*oddamn sauna. Goddamn warped boards. Goddamn shipping costs. Goddamn hardware. Goddamn... everything.*

As I finish up my latest list of things to damn, I wedge the last replacement board into the sauna's wall. I drill a screw into the pilot hole with a satisfying squeak, and I line up the next one. *Nearly done.* This whole project has been a pain in my ass, but as usual, I try imagining the look on my dad's face when I tell him the sauna's fixed. This time, though, instead of Dad's crow's-feet and silver mustache, my mind's eye conjures a face that would probably be even more excited by the prospect of a sauna. A face that tilted toward mine last night, flushed with whiskey and heat. Full lips that parted invitingly and—

I accidentally hit the trigger on my drill, and the screw at the end of the bit goes flying.

“Goddammit.” I get down on my hands and knees and naturally find it hidden under the bench in the farthest, darkest corner. I groan as I stretch for it—Margot isn't a large person, but carrying her for miles tested my strength, and I'm feeling it now.

Serves me right. I *should* be paying a price, because as much as I want to blame everyone and everything around me, Margot was right when she said I started all the trouble last night. Despite my so-called ironclad rules, I took one look at her tears while she read her sister's letter and I asked her to stay for a drink. I sure as

hell didn't move my leg away when hers slid against it, or stop my hand from touching her face.

My eyes close at the memory of her smooth skin beneath my fingertips. Her voice when she said she wouldn't mind seeing how I'd handle her.

At the thought, desire instantly spikes in my bloodstream, like every other time I've replayed that moment. It's chased immediately by a jittery, almost panicked feeling when I think of how close I came to fucking up. How close I came to picking her up and taking one more short hike with her to my bedroom.

God knows it's been long enough. I scrub a hand down my face and line up the next screw, trying and failing to stem an upsurge of self-pity. The last time I had the company of someone other than my left hand was back in L.A., where a casual arrangement with one of my work-driven colleagues checked a weekly box. Nothing too distracting. In other words, the polar fucking opposite of what I feel with Margot.

I exhale and drill in the last screw. *Get a grip*, I command myself. *She'll be gone in less than six weeks.* I didn't give up my whole career and move my entire life only to jeopardize my family's business with another ill-fated fling. Margot already implied that she isn't beyond writing North Star Lodge a review that could seriously damage us, and after last night, I wouldn't be surprised if she's got one drafted. After all, that's what happened four years ago. Charlotte Bard—the lifestyle influencer and destroyer of worlds I made the mistake of sleeping with while she was here reviewing the lodge—aired her grievances about me to her entire following and the Internet at large the moment she regained Wi-Fi access.

I'm not sure if my dad and Jo could forgive me twice. And to judge from the way Jo talks about Margot, she probably has wider influence than Charlotte. Which is why it's even more essential to keep my distance. I came here to care for my father, period. Not to get tangled up with a woman who represents everything I left behind. A woman who could make my future a lot harder than it already is.

I sigh as I look around the sauna, taking a moment to admire the finished result. I'm considering giving the room a test drive when I hear voices coming up the path. A few seconds later, the door to the outer vestibule that serves as a changing area opens, and it's like I've swallowed an emergency flare.

It's Margot and Ollie. I can see her smile through the little window in the sauna door and hear her muffled laugh. She pulls her hat off and shakes out snow-dusted blond waves. One of the front strands catches on whatever the hell is making her lips shine like that, and my fingers itch to brush it away. Clearly, Ollie's fingers are itching too. I can't see him, but a calloused hand appears in the little window that frames Margot and gently pulls the strand away from her mouth. His thumb grazes one of her dimples, and the part of my brain that communicates exclusively in angry gorilla grunts takes over. Grabbing my drill, I march to the door and throw it open.

Margot and Ollie startle like they've been caught in flagrante, and as far as the poisonous green snake coiling in my belly is concerned, they might as well have been.

"Hey, man," Ollie says with a cocky smile as Margot steadies herself on her crutches. My eyes automatically drop to check if they still have the nonslip guards I put on them last night, and I'm relieved to see they're in place. But the last thing she needs right now is an unnecessary hike through the snow, and if Ollie had spent one second thinking about her safety, he wouldn't have brought her here. Oblivious to my disapproval, he says, "I was just showing Margot the sauna. It's open now, right?"

For fuck's sake. When Ollie and Topher first arrived, I promised them the sauna would be up and running soon. But I didn't mean it was open for the kind of recreational use Ollie sure as shit has in mind.

Not that I'm allowed to care, I remind myself. I turned Margot down, and she told me point-blank that she's on the hunt for someone to keep her warm at night. If she wants to bunk up with Ollie for the rest of their time together, that's her prerogative. Even if he's barely out of footie pajamas and sure as hell can't give her—

"Funny," Margot says coldly, shifting her weight on her crutches as she looks at me. "You never mentioned a sauna to *me*, Forrest."

"Because it's out of order," I say, pointing my drill and triggering it at the sign I conveniently haven't removed from the sauna door yet.

Ollie's and Margot's eyes snap to the words CLOSED FOR REPAIR, and I half expect to hear a sad trombone accompany the disappointed looks on their faces.

In return, I try not to smile like the Grinch.

Ollie rubs the back of his head, ruffling his coppery hair. “Well, damn. Sorry, Margot. Any idea when it’ll be up and running, Forrest?”

“I’ll keep you posted,” I say, daring to glance at Margot. Her eyes narrow.

“Let me guess,” she says. “It’ll be fixed exactly five weeks from now.”

At this, Ollie looks confused, but all I feel is guilt. That was pretty much exactly the plan. I’m reminded of my selfish impulse to keep the Internet from her, too, which I still haven’t rectified. But maybe telling her about it now could be the perfect olive branch to offer. We still have over a month together, and if I don’t want North Star facing another terrible review, I need to find a way to reach civil ground with her.

“It won’t take that long. Just need to finish up a couple of things,” I promise, even though technically, the only thing left to do is sweep up. “Like I said, I’ll keep you posted.” I wait until she gives me a reluctant nod. I take a breath and go on. “In the meantime, I wanted to let you know that there’s limited satellite Internet in the lodge. It’s slow and disconnects every time a cloud passes overhead, but it works some of the time.”

“*What?*” Margot yelps so loudly that Ollie and I startle. “There’s Internet available? *Right now?*”

I nod, careful not to say too much as a smile of pure elation and relief lights her up. Almost immediately, it fades. Her eyes become suspicious and search my face like I have hidden secrets in my beard. “But you said there was no Wi-Fi.”

“There isn’t,” I confirm. “It’s satellite, and it’s only on the computer in the lodge.”

“But it’s been connected the whole time I’ve been here?”

When I don’t respond at once, something worse than anger moves across her features. She’s hurt. “But you knew how badly I’ve been missing my—”

She stops and looks away from me, unwilling to show me any vulnerability. As guilt and regret short-circuit my ability to reply, I watch her firm up her chin. When she speaks again, her voice is stronger.

“Whatever,” she says flippantly. “I don’t know why I expected anything else. What’s the password?”

I stand rooted to the spot as my brain struggles with how to fix the situation. Back at Caltech, I specialized in solving complex puzzles on a cellular level, but apparently, not being an asshole to Margot Bradley is beyond me. I know I should apologize. Admit that it was a dick move and tell her I'll move the fucking satellite to her cabin right now if she'll just stop looking at me like that. I want to explain that I was planning to tell her, but I've been terrified that she'll make good on her threat to tell the entire world how unpleasant staying at North Star is. But I'm frozen, and Ollie's sizing me up like he's seeing me for the first time.

"There is no password," I finally manage. "Just open up the browser."

Margot mutters something that's either "For God's sake" or "Go drown in a lake." "I'm sorry, Ollie, but if there's Internet, I need to work. I haven't been able to fact-check a single thing I've written in the last week."

"Cool, cool," Ollie says, unable to completely mask his disappointment. "I can walk you to the lodge if you want."

"Sure," she says, looking directly at me as she says it. "Do you mind stopping by my cabin first, though? I need to grab my laptop."

"Yeah, totally," Ollie responds casually, while his face says he just found Willy Wonka's last golden fucking ticket. "See ya at dinner, man," he says to me, putting a hand on Margot's back as she turns on her crutches without saying goodbye. "And keep me posted about the sauna." He has the nerve to *wink* at me before turning away. The door opens and shuts behind them, and I'm left alone to contemplate the pros and cons of setting fire to the sauna I just spent weeks repairing.

My plans for arson are interrupted, however, when my radio chirps and Jo's voice comes through. "You there, Forrest?"

I mutter a few choice words and unclip the radio from my back belt loop. "Here."

"Just wanted to let you know Trap's nerve block wore off a while ago. He's mighty uncomfortable but denying it."

I glance at my watch. *Damnit*. I'm also late for his anticoagulant. I never lose track of time like this. What the hell is happening to me? My father is in pain, and all because I've been too distracted, thinking about Margot. I pinch my nose bridge hard enough to hurt and take a deep pull of much needed oxygen. After a

moment, I decide this is the wake-up call I needed. Bringing Margot to my cabin, trying to impress her in the kitchen, pulling the whiskey off the shelf... nearly kissing her: it was all a massive cascade of mistakes, but it's not too late to course-correct.

“Thanks, Jo. I’m on my way now.”

MARGOT

A lot can happen in one week. In my case, I've added ten thousand angst-fueled words to my manuscript, gone through a whole relationship life cycle with my crutches (we've parted as friends), spent six awkward dinners elbow to elbow with Forrest, and exchanged exactly five words with him ("Can you pass the wine?"). Now, as I climb the porch of the lodge with my laptop bag and morning coffee in tow, I glance around and approach the front door with the stealth of a panther. Or as stealthily as I can in an ankle-length parka that makes zippy swishing sounds with every faintest movement. For the last six mornings, this has been my routine, carefully timing my arrival at the lodge before the breakfast buffet is cleared but after Forrest has eaten. Because despite a week of telling myself it wasn't a big deal, his rejection is still echoing through my mind as if he shouted it into the Grand Canyon. "*I'm not interested... interested... interested!*"

Maybe if I'd been able to maintain my anger, I wouldn't be sneaking around like this, but in the week since that night, all my outrage has slowly deflated into humiliation with a steaming hot side of disappointment in myself. I can't even be mad at him about the Internet thing anymore. Having Internet access *period* is too much of a relief, even if all I've gotten from Savannah in response to my frantic emails is a two-sentence response: "This is an out-of-office reply from the department of Your Perfectly Fine Sister. Stop emailing me, Margot!"

Without anger to bolster me, avoiding Forrest as much as possible has become my new strategy. It's not that hard to spot him. He's approximately six-foot-

forever, so whenever I see his large frame coming toward me, I simply turn in the opposite direction and try to resist swan-diving into the nearest snowbank. Avoidance seems to be his new goal as well, if the new lack of morning Scout visits is anything to go by. Last week, I'd started looking forward to hearing the gentle giant scratch and whine at my door, and not at all because Scout was always with a sweaty midrun Forrest decked out in clinging thermal gear. But not seeing Forrest is definitely for the best, even if he can't be avoided completely.

I still eat dinner next to him every night because apparently, the seating assignments from our first night together were cast in stone. On top of that, the IV drip of Google I require to function forces me to work in the lodge, where Forrest is constantly coming and going. Which is why I'm currently hiding behind the front door and peeking through the edge of a flanking window to see if he's inside.

My eyes sweep the room, looking for any sign of movement, but all is still. Cautiously, I open the front door and step inside the warmth. A cozy fire crackles in the giant stone hearth, and as I pass by, I see with satisfaction that breakfast is still laid out on the dining table. After setting my things down at the desk, I decide to make myself a plate.

As usual, Jo, Trapper, and Forrest have outdone themselves on the food front. Perfect breakfast sandwiches on homemade sourdough sit in a warming tray next to wild-blueberry muffins. There's hot coffee, along with my favorite oat milk and honey, and big glass jars of maple yogurt with all the fixings. The spread has been a little different every morning, and I can't help thinking of Forrest carefully preparing it, the way he cooked for me in his cabin.

I try shooing the memory away, but it doesn't work. As though my thoughts have accidentally summoned him, I hear the distinctive sound of heavy boots, and my head jerks up. Forrest is coming out of the kitchen, carrying a large empty tray. When he sees me, his step hitches for a second, as if he's also considering a hasty retreat. But then he continues on, and I look down at my plate, loading it as quickly as I can.

"Good morning, Margot," he says cordially.

"Good morning, Forrest," I respond even *more* cordially. Because when you've been shut down by someone after suggesting they have their way with you,

competitive politeness becomes the only available communication style.

“Do you have everything you need?” he asks like the world’s hottest butler.

“In life?” I take a piece of bacon. “I guess that depends on if you’d consider a private jet back to L.A. a need or a want.”

“I’d consider it a gross misuse of fossil fuels, but I actually meant breakfast. Do you have everything you need?” he repeats, and my mind hops right on an escalator descending into the gutter.

“The breakfast is fine,” I say, clearing my throat.

“Just fine?”

“Yes, fine, unless you’re hiding a platter of lightly salted avocado slices behind your back. In which case, it would be perfect.”

He snorts, loading the tray with empty plates. “Avocados? Here? Are they being shipped on the private jet?”

I grab a piece of toast and glare up at him. “You’re telling me there isn’t something you desperately crave from California?”

His gaze lifts to mine, and as I replay my words, something like a crank turns slowly in my lower abdomen, tightening everything. I swallow, his eyes go dark, and I’m brought right back to his cabin, one warm inch away from knowing if his full, sulky mouth feels as soft as it looks. Therein lies the other reason for needing to avoid him at all costs. Ever since we nearly fell into the Just One Time trope, my body has been like a light switch. Perpetually and safely in the off position until the second he’s brushing my elbow at dinner or looking at me like this. And then I’m *on*. Lit up and hot enough to melt the filament in a light bulb.

A greenhouse strawberry rolls off the plate that has gone slack in my hand and lands with a small thud on the table. Hastily, I look down to pick it up. “Like food, I mean,” I clarify.

Forrest makes a dry sound in the back of his throat and continues stacking glasses on his tray. “Good coffee. That’s what I miss.”

“Right. That,” I say, like I’ve never heard of coffee before or, frankly, liquids in general. My libido is too busy doing a choreographed cheer complete with pom-poms and high kicks for my brain to process words. Instead, I try to remember everything I’ve been telling myself for the last week. That he lost his chance at a fling with me for *good*. That thick waves the precise shade of my favorite 72% dark

chocolate and eyes the color of sun-dappled evergreens aren't even *that* attractive. But then his lashes lift to look at me again, and my libido lands a perfect back handspring.

"Anyway, I've got to get writing," I say, ducking my head in case my libido also somehow manages to clap out the letters H-O-R-N-Y! across my face.

"Right," he rumbles like a semi, picking up the loaded tray. "Good luck today."

"Thanks," I say over my shoulder as I hightail it to the desk. If I'm actually lucky today, I won't have to see him again until dinner.



I sit down at the desk while cramming my mouth with a conciliatory bite of blueberry muffin, ready to brush off my run-in with Forrest and get to work. Finally being able to do book research has been like attaching jumper cables to my manuscript, and I'm already flying through chapter five. I take a sip of coffee as I wake up the old desktop PC. But instead of the usual desktop photo of Denali, a browser is open.

My coffee mug pauses on the way to my lips as I realize someone has left an email open. I don't mean to read it, but it's short, and by the time my eyes have skimmed the first line, curiosity makes it impossible to stop.

Dear Dr. Wakefield,

A more formal letter will be reaching you soon, but I wanted to be the first to inform you that the Bauer-Hinckley Grant has been awarded to you in the amount of \$2.5 million. You and your team have been selected to continue your visionary work on detecting changes in precancerous lesions in TNBC patients at the molecular level. On behalf of the Bauer-Hinckley Grant Selection Committee, I want to congratulate you and your entire team. I look forward to speaking with you soon.

Warmly,
Amy Kohanski, DrPH, MD

I stare at the email after reading it again to make sure I haven't misunderstood. I haven't. My coffee remains suspended in midmotion, and I finally take a sip before carefully placing the mug down. Forrest has just been awarded a \$2.5

million research grant. *Two and a half million dollars.* He knows this, and yet he's spending his morning clearing jam-smeared plates in the middle of the Alaskan wilderness, thousands of miles away from where he should be—popping champagne with his research team in California.

I sit back in the chair as a wave of dizziness spirals through me. I can only imagine how Forrest must be feeling, but nothing in his behavior this morning hinted at the life-altering decision he's facing. As always, he keeps everything locked beneath that sculpted surface, and I can't help but wonder—what the hell does lie beneath?

Will he consider going back to California? Could he leave if he wanted to? In the past week, I've witnessed his unwavering dedication to his father's health. Trapper lives in the rooms above where I currently sit, and Forrest is constantly going up and down the stairs, bringing meals, helping with his physical therapy exercises, and administering medication. As someone who takes care of a sometimes physically disabled family member, I know that Trapper wouldn't be able to live as comfortably without Forrest.

Unexpectedly, my heart aches for him. Despite our awkwardness, tension, and constant bickering, I understand how impossible the choice must feel for him. Whenever Savannah goes through one of her flare-ups, my world comes to a standstill. Work takes a back seat, and all my energy focuses on my sister. But Savannah also has stretches of good days, and the nature of my job allows me to work from home and drop everything if need be. Forrest doesn't have such luxuries.

The motorized sound of Trapper's chairlift interrupts my thoughts, and I quickly close Forrest's email. Not that I need to rush—Trapper often jokes that he used to climb mountains faster than his lift takes to traverse a single flight of stairs. Scout reaches the bottom of the steps first and beelines for me, his bushy tail wagging.

"Hey, boy," I say when he reaches me, ruffling his fluffy black and white fur before sneaking him a thick piece of bacon off my breakfast sandwich. He swallows it whole, then puts his heavy head in my lap like he'd be happy to melt there.

“Thought it might be Forrest who’d miss you the most when you leave, but now I’m not so sure.”

I look up to see a smiling Jo, who’s waiting for Trapper at the bottom of the stairs. I take another sip of coffee and try not to look like I’ve been reading someone else’s highly sensitive private messages. “Morning!”

“Good morning, Margot,” she says, chuckling a little. “How’s the book coming?”

Good question. Technically, I’ve been meeting my word-count goals, but unfortunately, I keep running into a different challenge. Despite all my efforts to keep it from happening, a romantic subplot is brewing between my main character and the grumpy local detective she’s been forced to team up with. I didn’t originally plan to make him such an eligible bachelor, but somehow he’s become a handsome single father with a heart of gold. My saving grace is that I’ve managed to maintain my protagonist’s tough-as-nails exterior. She’s the anti-romance heroine, and in a way, it’s been satisfying for me to write a character who makes target practice out of every trope that comes her way. Honestly, she could probably teach me a thing or two.

I realize Jo is waiting on my answer, and I shake off my self-doubt. “It’s going great!”

Trapper finally reaches the bottom, and Jo rolls the wheelchair downstairs into position before hitting the brake. With a familiarity that can come only from endless repetition, she grasps Trapper around his middle and helps him up before easing him into the new chair. He makes a muffled sound of discomfort but gives her hand a grateful squeeze as she releases him. Jo smiles down at him, and I wonder, not for the first time, if something other than friendship exists between them.

“Hey there, Margot,” Trapper calls as he powers his chair closer to my desk with Jo walking beside him. “Hope Scout’s not bothering you. He thinks he’s quite the lady’s man.”

I smile. “Seems more like a bacon man to me.” I look down at Scout, who has lain beside my chair, glacier-blue eyes pointed up at me. “But you’re not bothering me, are you?” I ask in the voice I use for all babies, furred or otherwise.

Trapper chuckles. “How’s everything? You ready for tomorrow’s excursion?”

My face must say everything, because he laughs.

“Don’t tease her, you old badger,” Jo says, swatting his shoulder.

I pop a bite of muffin into my mouth. “Any idea what we’re doing? Just in case I need to send my lawyer a last will and testament?”

Trapper waves away my words with his functional hand. “You don’t need to worry. Forrest won’t let anything happen to you.”

“Besides a sprained ankle?”

“Anything serious,” Trapper amends with a smile. “How is it, by the way?”

“All better,” I say, flexing it below the desk. “If there’s any hiking tomorrow, I should be fine.”

“There’s always hiking,” Jo deadpans before putting a hand on Trapper’s shoulder. “I’m headed to the greenhouse, but I’ll be back soon. Don’t keep her from her work, Trap.”

She walks off with a swish of her long braid, and I take another drink of coffee, studying Trapper over the rim. This isn’t our first one-on-one moment, but I’m still not fully at ease around him. Not because I don’t enjoy his company—on the contrary, he’s warm, interesting, and genuinely seems to care about my well-being. In fact, he’s exactly what I used to wish my own father was like. But it’s been a long time since all my wishing hardened into believing that good dads don’t exist. A cold comfort, maybe, but one that I’ve relied on, and one that Trapper challenges at every turn.

“I won’t keep you long,” he says. Clever brown eyes twinkle out from deep crow’s-feet I imagine were earned from years of squinting at snow-bright landscapes. They make me wonder if Forrest inherited his green eyes from his mother and where she might be now. “But I wanted to ask if you’ve ever read any Jude Devereaux.”

My eyes widen, surprise nearly knocking me sideways. “Jude Devereaux?” I repeat. “Of course I have. Historical romance isn’t my genre, but she’s a classic. Are you a fan?”

Trapper chuckles and nods. “Well, my wife was, before she passed, but I’d be lying if I said I hadn’t read one or a dozen. Only thought I’d mention it because I still have her whole collection upstairs if you’re ever looking for reading material.”

“Oh,” I say as his words stop my mind like a stick shoved through bike spokes. “I’m so sorry for your loss.”

He nods. “Thank you, dear. We’ve had time to adjust. It’s been, what... going on eight years now, I believe.”

I’m silent as some ill-defined emotion wells up inside me. I remember Forrest’s firelit face that night in his cabin as he told me about his mother teaching him to cook. How I’d sensed something as fragile as tissue paper stretching between us, barely concealing this piece of himself. I hadn’t wanted to see it, but now...

Trapper gives me a small, reassuring smile before answering the unasked question in my eyes. “Triple-negative breast cancer. Happened just like this,” he says, snapping his fingers. Old pain deepens the weathered lines of his face. “It’s the most aggressive type. Forrest can tell you all about it.”

“Forrest?” I repeat, slow on the uptake.

Trapper nods once. “It’s his area of expertise.”

And just like that, the pieces fall into place like bricks dropped on my chest. Forrest already told me on the hike that he was a breast cancer researcher. He told me and I... I rolled my eyes.

Nausea grips me. When did I become so jaded? No wonder he doesn’t want anything to do with me. I’ve been trying so hard to fit him into a neat little romance hero box, but this is his very real, very messy life. I think of the grant and everything he’s giving up to care for Trapper, and admiration and sympathy gather around my heart like soft cotton wool. It’s the last thing I need to be feeling for him, because this is *exactly* the sort of crisis that happens to all my romance heroines. I even have a name for it: the Melting Point.

My formerly independent leading lady finds out that the annoyingly attractive jerk she’s been forced into proximity with is a secret cinnamon roll: crusty on the outside with a warm, gooey interior. She discovers that he’s starting a nonprofit for blind animals, or has a weekly standing date to watch telenovelas with his grandmother, or (just another hypothetical example) is dedicating his life’s work to curing the disease he lost his mother to. I see all the caution tape. I understand how this plays out. But it doesn’t mean I can fully control what’s happening inside my chest. Because Forrest isn’t a romance hero with a simple character arc,

safely trapped and untouchable within his pages. He's complicated, roaming around freely, and highly touchable. Above all, he's off-limits.

"And he is *the* expert," Trapper goes on, as if he hasn't noticed the nuclear reactor meltdown happening inside me. "No one as highly regarded in the field. If you only knew how many institutions have been fighting over him since he was sixteen. The technology he and his team were developing before I—" Trapper stops himself with a frustrated sigh. It's not the first or, I'm sure, the last time I've heard him and Jo sing Forrest's praises, but this tidbit is new.

"Sixteen?" I repeat. "Seems pretty young. Did he win a science fair or something?"

Trapper chuckles, a mixture of pride and sorrow pulling at his features. "Not exactly. He got headhunted by Stanford after he wrote a letter to the editor of a well-known science journal and corrected one of their papers. He criticized them for 'lack of rigor,' I believe."

"Jesus," I say faintly. "Pretty sure I was just slinging french fries and kissing boys when I was sixteen."

Trapper smiles, but it dies quickly. "He was always too brilliant for this place. It's why I keep telling him he has to go back."

"You *want* him to go back?" I ask, bypassing polite interest and gunning straight for an insider scoop.

"Of course I do," Trapper says quietly, looking down at his hands. "I'd give anything for things to go back to the way they were. I tell him every damn day he needs to return to Caltech—that Jo and I'd be fine on our own—but he doesn't even respond."

"Did you just say Caltech?" I ask, making sure I haven't misheard him.

"That's the one. Does it mean something to you?"

I sit back in my chair and rub a hand across my forehead, more unnerved by this conversation with every passing second. "No, no. It's just... I live in Silver Lake. It's a fifteen-minute drive from Caltech."

Trapper's mustache broadens with his smile. "Another reason I'm so darn happy you're staying with us, Margot Bradley from Silver Lake. I've got a hunch that you remind Forrest something awful of home."

“I doubt I’m going to be the one to convince him, Trapper,” I warn him. “You might have noticed that we’re not exactly swapping friendship bracelets.”

Trapper chuckles. “What I’ve noticed is that my son, who managed to graduate high school two years ahead of schedule, is late for our morning walk for the third time this week. Any idea what might be making him so uncharacteristically scatterbrained these days, Margot?”

At his thinly veiled question, a hot flush creeps up my neck, and like a coward, I raise my coffee mug to hide behind. “Beats me,” I mumble before taking a long sip.

Trapper only chuckles again and begins maneuvering his chair away from the desk. “Good luck writing today, dear. Come on, Scout. Time for our walk. Let’s go find Forrest and get my skis on,” he says referring to the ingenious detachable wheelchair skis that help him get around in the snow. He whistles, and Scout immediately gets up, trotting after him.

“Say hi to Bullwinkle for me,” I say, waving goodbye.

“Will do. And if I don’t see you before you all leave tomorrow, happy camping!”

I gulp down the burning-hot coffee as all thoughts of Forrest, Caltech, the grant, and his decision vanish.

“Camping?”

MARGOT

As it turns out, Trapper wasn't joking. Apparently, camping in subzero temperatures is the plan. When I voiced the opinion at dinner last night that I'm surrounded by lunatics, all I got were self-effacing chuckles of agreement. It wasn't comforting. Afterward, Forrest gave me a mile-long packing list, and I spent the rest of my night aggressively stuffing my hiking pack with as much gear from the list as possible. "As possible" being the operative words.

At the time, it seemed like a petty act of defiance not to bring every item on his anal-retentive list. Like "crampons," for example, which sound like the bastard child of cramps and tampons. Now, however, as Forrest brings the SUV to a rumbling halt in the middle of actual fucking nowhere, I'm starting to wonder if I should have made more of an effort to pack everything.

"Hey, how about this!" I say as I take in the frozen expanse of tundra ahead of us. "You take everyone out *there*, and I'll just camp in *here*. When you all get back, I'll have her nice and warmed up for you." I nervously pat the dashboard.

Forrest removes the keys from the ignition and doesn't laugh along with the rest of the group in the back seats. In fact, he's been distracted all morning, which I suppose isn't too surprising, considering the grant offer yesterday. For the millionth time since reading his email, I wonder what his decision will be. Based on his eyebrow furrow alone, I don't think he's made it yet. But what if he *does* decide to go back to Caltech? Will I ever look up from my laptop and see him standing in my favorite coffee shop? Would we ever intentionally meet up?

“No way, Margot,” Ollie says from the row directly behind me, putting a hand on my shoulder. “You’ve got this. We’ll all be here to help you.”

I only barely resist pointing out that the last time Ollie promised to stay with me, I was instantly dumped for a boulder. But general sounds of assent ripple around the group as seats are unbuckled and everyone climbs out of the vehicle. Forrest turns toward me. To my surprise, he looks almost as anxious as I feel, which does absolute wonders for my nerves. “It’s just one overnight,” he says, and it sounds like he’s reassuring himself. “Let’s go.”

“You can’t make me,” I say in a panic, covering my seat belt’s clip.

He pulls on a thick beanie and, for the first time, looks almost reluctant to lay down his ace. “No camping, no letter.”

I swallow. Trapper said Forrest wouldn’t let anything serious happen to me, and all I can do is hope he’s right.



To no one’s surprise, the hike to the campsite is grueling. So grueling, in fact, that I make a vow to never use the word “grueling” in one of my books again unless I’m describing this and only this. Even Ollie has gone silent beside me, his small exhalations clouding around his face in tiny puffs. My exhalations, meanwhile, could fill the Goodyear blimp. When Forrest finally holds up a mitten to signal the group to stop, it takes everything I’ve got not to crumple in a heap.

Miserable as I may be, I can’t deny the beauty of the location. We’re set back on a cliff that overlooks an ocean of pristine snow, dwarfed only by the immensity of the sparkling blue sky. Everywhere I turn, the air glitters with what Ollie calls “diamond dust.”

“Great job, everyone,” Forrest says, barely nodding at me and setting loose a thousand butterflies in my stomach. I wish I could install a bug zapper. “We don’t have long until sunset, so we’ll need to work fast. Pick your tent site and start stomping it out. It’s going to be blustery tonight, so we’ll need to build wind walls.”

At this, Alice and Yoon look at each other like a couple of kids who just scored full-size candy bars on Halloween. Immediately, the group disperses to pick out

their camping spots like one area of snow is better than another, but I have no idea why I can't set up right where I'm standing. It would mean less walking.

Forrest snowshoes toward me like my laziness is emitting a radar signal. "The wind is going to come whipping right off the cliff toward us," he says. "You want to pick a spot with some coverage."

I glance around at the nearly featureless landscape. "Great idea, but unless you're going to stand in front of my tent all night, there's nothing else around," I point out.

"I'm setting up my tent between theirs and building a snow wall. You can set yours up behind mine. Come on."

Oh. Well, I suppose that's considerate. Then again, I suppose it's also his job to make sure I don't die out here. But before I can thank him, he's stomping off again, leaving me to follow in his snowshoe prints.



As it turns out, building a snow wall is kind of fun, if hard manual labor is your thing. It's not my thing, but at the very (very) least, it's keeping me warm. Unpleasantly sweaty, actually, despite Forrest's constant warnings not to overheat *or* get too cold. Unlike him, however, I've been unable to maintain perfect homeostasis and have simply embraced feeling like a ripe gym sock.

"Are you drinking water?" Forrest asks for the hundredth time as I pat more snow into place. After all our efforts, we've created a rectangular pit into which both our tents will fit.

"Yes," I reply, pausing to take a small sip of water from the silicone tube connected to my pack. I've honestly been avoiding drinking too much because peeing in arctic temperatures sounds about as fun as, well, peeing in arctic temperatures.

Forrest pulls up the sleeve of his coat to look at his watch. "We only have an hour till sunset. Let's get building, and make sure you're not sweating."

I laugh. "Do you need me to stop breathing too?"

"I'm serious, Margot. I told you to remove layers if you start overheating. Sweating is dangerous in these conditions."

“Then maybe you shouldn’t have made me snowshoe across the entire polar ice cap and build a snow fort,” I say defensively, holding my arms out from my waist. “This coat is basically a water balloon now.”

Forrest looks at me like I’ve announced my imminent death.

“Stop worrying. I’m fine,” I say with more confidence than I actually feel. “Let’s get building.”

We open our bags to find our tents. Naturally, Forrest’s is strategically packed at the top, while I have to dump literally everything out to find mine. I’m still rummaging by the time his small one-person tent is set up, and he comes over to crouch beside me.

“I think all the tent stuff is in bags like this,” I say, holding up a blue drawstring bag.

To my surprise, he’s fighting back a smile and keeps looking away from the haphazard diaspora of camping shit strewn about me. I whack him in the shoulder with a clatter of tent poles and try not to smile myself. “Don’t laugh at my packing skills.”

“‘Skills?’” he repeats.

I try whacking him again, but he catches it. “Why don’t you work on getting all your other gear back in your bag, and I’ll set up your tent.”

I stare at him. “Really? You’ll build it for me?”

“If I don’t, I’m not sure you’ll finish by sunrise.”

“Rude, but probably accurate,” I say, sighing. Then, suddenly suspicious, I say, “You’re not going to withhold my letters or make me, like, whittle a walking stick instead, are you?”

He smiles in earnest, and it’s the first time I’ve seen it since that night in his cabin. The harder I try to look away, the harder it becomes.

“Don’t give me ideas,” he warns. “Come on. We’re losing daylight.”

I’ve begun stuffing gear back into my bag when Ollie’s boots appear at the edge of our pit. “Hey there! Need a hand with anything?”

He’s watching me wrestle my sleeping bag into my pack like it’s an anaconda, but Forrest answers first.

“That’d be great, Ollie. Can you set up the camp kitchen? I left everything right over there,” he says, pointing his mitten to a lonely pile of gear a solid thirty

feet away from us.

“Uh, sure. No problem,” Ollie says, looking at me like I might save him.

“Great,” Forrest replies, unsheathing some tentpoles. “We need to get some water boiling as soon as possible.”

“On it,” Ollie says glumly before turning away.

“Margot, are there any other blue bags over there?” Forrest calls over to me.

“No, you’ve got everything,” I say, stuffing a lamp into my bag.

He’s silent for a moment. “Are you sure?”

“Positive,” I say, looking up at him. “Why?”

He stares at me and then looks back at the gear. Rubs the brim of his beanie with his mitten.

“What is it?” I ask.

Forrest’s eyes close like he’s struggling for patience. “There’s no tent here.”

“What are you talking about?” I say. The first hint of dread rolls through my stomach like the rumble that precedes an avalanche.

“The *tent*, Margot,” he says through his teeth. “It’s not here.”

“Of course it is! It’s right there!” I say, pointing my mitten at the bright blue fabric laid out in the snow.

Forrest picks it up. “This is the tent fly. Not the tent.”

“What the hell is a tent fly?”

“It doesn’t matter, because it’s not a *tent*,” he snaps. “So I need you to search your pack again for that missing bag, and tell me you didn’t forget the single most essential piece of your equipment.”

My face blanches as I reckon with the possibility that my tent is currently having a cozy hang with my crampons back in my cabin. The thing is, I packed all my tent gear before anything else. I *knew* it was important. But Forrest is looking at me like I’m the biggest airhead to ever airhead.

“I didn’t forget it,” I declare. “If it was in the box, I packed it.”

“Then it has to be in your bag.”

“I just dumped everything out! It’s not in there.”

“Then you forgot it,” he says, shoving tentpoles back into their bags with way more aggression than they deserve.

“I *didn’t* forget it,” I growl.

“Everything okay?”

Our heads snap up at the same time to see Ollie at the edge of our pit again.

“My tent manufacturer apparently neglected to include the tent portion of my tent,” I say.

“Oh my God,” Ollie responds. He glances at Forrest, whose jaw muscles look like they’re skipping rope, and then back to me. “Where are you going to sleep?”

Where am I going to *sleep*? Good fucking question. “I don’t know!” I say as panic begins to set in.

“It might be a squeeze, but you could totally share me and Topher’s tent,” Ollie offers.

I don’t want to even contemplate the smell of that scenario, much less actually experience it, but before I can come up with a polite way to refuse, Forrest interrupts. “She’ll stay with me. I’ll have more room in my tent than you and Topher, or Alice and Yoon.”

“How about we let Margot decide, man?” Ollie’s tone is deceptively light as a look colder than the windchill factor passes between them.

Eventually, they turn their attention to me, waiting for my decision. I glance at Forrest’s tent, then at Forrest. “More room,” my frostbitten ass. His tent looks hardly big enough for him, let alone another person. Not to mention I’ve already been through enough tropes with this man to fill my favorite Nora Roberts trilogy, and that was before *One Bed* got downgraded to *One Tent*. Internally, I groan. But it’s either camp with Forrest, get hotboxed in Ollie and Topher’s tent, or crash Alice and Yoon’s romantic getaway. I chew my bottom lip. “I’ll stay with Forrest. Thanks for offering, Ollie, but three’s a crowd.”

Forrest nods like I’ve chosen wisely, and I resist the urge to throw snow in his face.



After I’ve made my decision about where to sleep, it’s like the sun decides to fall out of the sky. It’s nearly pitch black by the time everyone has eaten, filled their extra Nalgene bottles with hot water, and retreated to their tents. Getting inside is an ordeal in and of itself. The ceiling is barely a foot above my head while I’m

sitting, and our sleeping bags overlap because the tent isn't wide enough to accommodate both.

"There isn't enough room," I hiss as Forrest crawls in, trying and failing not to brush against me about thirty times.

"There'd be plenty of room if you hadn't forgotten your tent," he hisses back, unzipping his coat. He shrugs it off his shoulders, and as he moves, I'm hit by the smell of him: warm, fresh-cut cedar and a pheromone-spiked muskiness that makes me think of leather work gloves and denim (but not *sweat*, of course). Honestly, what *is* it about men who smell like trees? At what point did biology decide wood was the go-to scent for making men smell attractive? It's intoxicating, but I will *not* let my eyelids flutter.

"I told you, I didn't forget it, and if we ever make it back alive, I can't *wait* to prove it to you," I grumble, taking off my own coat and shoving it down by my feet. *Damn, it's cold in here.* Unfazed, Forrest begins unbuttoning his ski pants. I try not to stare as he works them down over his hips, revealing a skintight merino base layer that leaves little to the imagination.

"Just like you didn't forget your extra Nalgene?" he says dryly, pulling my attention away from his crotch.

"It seemed redundant. I didn't know what it was for," I say, shoving my own ski pants down despite the aching cold. If he can handle it, so can I.

"So since you didn't know what it was for, you decided it must be pointless?" he asks, handing me his own extra water bottle, which, he explained earlier, will act like a heater in my sleeping bag. I set it aside while he pulls off the fleece he's wearing. It drags his base layer up with a static crackle, and something lurches low in my stomach as I catch a glimpse of olive skin and dark hair. He yanks off the fleece and pulls his shirt down, but not before he catches me staring.

I look away quickly as blood warms my cheeks and set about unclipping my sweaty sports bra beneath my shirt. All awkwardness aside, there's no way I'm sleeping in boob prison.

"You'll find that I think pretty much everything about camping is pointless," I say cheerfully, pulling my arms through my damp shirtsleeves and bra straps.

As we maneuver ourselves into our overlapping sleeping bags, I'm shocked by how cold the silky fabric is. I expected it to be warmer than the frigid air inside the

tent, but somehow it's even colder. I snake an arm out and grab the hot-water bottle, but despite curling around its radiating heat, I can't stop shivering. My damp base layers and even my socks seem to be freezing and stiffening all around me. Forrest reaches up and shuts off the lamp hanging from the top of our tent, plunging us into absolute darkness, and I will my body to warm up.

"Good night," Forrest says grumpily as he turns on his side and puts his Denali-sized back toward me.

"Night," I say, trying not to let him hear my teeth chatter. Outside, the wind howls, and despite the pit we're in, the walls of our tent shake.

Long, miserable minutes pass, but the hot-water bottle I'm relying on to warm me up is losing heat quickly. I begin moving around in the sleeping bag, trying to generate some kind of body heat, but a deep chill from the snow-packed ground rises through the floor of the tent directly into my sleeping bag. My teeth begin to chatter harder, and I can just make out my breath swirling in clouds above my face. Forrest turns over in his sleeping bag to look at me. In the dark, his faint outline looks as big as a polar bear's.

"Jesus, Margot, are your teeth making that racket?"

"I'm f-fine." My voice shudders.

"Goddammit," he says quietly. I hear the scratchy sound his beard always makes when he scrubs a hand over it. It stops, and suddenly, his warm hand is on the side of my face instead. I practically whimper when he slides it into my sweat-dampened hair and curses under his breath again. "You took your hat off," he scolds. To my dismay, he lets go of me and turns the overhead lamp on.

Whatever he sees in my face draws his eyebrows together with worry. He quickly grabs my hat and pulls it over my head before I can insist on doing it myself. Then, without warning, he presses two fingers to the pulse in my neck and closes his eyes, counting. When he opens them again, his expression is grim.

"Okay, here's what's going to happen," he says, removing his hand and meeting my gaze. "You've got all the early signs of hypothermia, so you're getting into my sleeping bag, and I'm going to warm you up."

I want to ask him if this line works on all the ladies he takes ice camping, but I'm shivering too hard to form any words. I manage a nod, and he unzips his bag. I try to unzip mine, but my numb fingers aren't working properly, so he does it for

me. Immediately, every wisp of warmth vanishes, and a deep shudder racks my body. Forrest quickly reaches up to turn the light off, and a second later, he's pulling me against him, his big arms wrapped tight around my body. My eyes drift shut, and I'm no longer in Alaska but stepping out of my overly air-conditioned house and onto my sun-drenched patio during the height of an L.A. summer. I half-moan into his chest, shivering uncontrollably, and his hands move over my back, trying to rub warmth into me.

"God, you're freezing," he says into my hair. "You should've told me you were so cold."

"Why? So you c-could point out another reason I don't belong here?" I stammer, snuggling deeper into his warmth. I can't seem to get close enough.

He exhales and holds me tighter, welding our bodies together. "Your base layers are damp. I *told* you not to sweat." He pauses, trying to regain his patience. "Margot, listen. I swear I'm not trying to make a move, but you're at risk of hypothermia. The best way to warm up is skin to skin."

"Like, *n-naked*?" I squeak. The part of my brain that's dedicated to raising red flags hoists about eleven in quick succession. I thought this trope train was stopping at One Tent, but apparently, it's headed all the way to Strip for Body Warmth. "No way," I say nervously.

"I know it's not ideal," he says in a strained voice. "But I can't see anything, and we'd only need to take our shirts off until you warm up."

"J-just our shirts?"

"Yes. We need to warm your core."

A small, hysterical laugh escapes me. *Warm my core*? He's clearly unfamiliar with romance vernacular, because I'm positive that's the *last* thing he wants to help me warm up. I'm about to tell him my "core" is already toasty enough, but then the biological need not to freeze to death joins forces with the hollow ache I've been fighting ever since I first laid eyes on him. It's a fight that's only gotten harder with every new piece of evidence that he isn't the imitation romance hero I've imagined him to be, but the genuine source material. He tucks my head closer to his chest, and my resistance finally crumbles.

"Okay," I whisper.

“Okay,” he repeats, and I can hear his heartbeat thump like a kick drum in his chest. “Lift your arms above your head,” he rasps, and as I obey, he slides my shirt up and over my head in one swift movement.

I inhale sharply as my clammy skin is exposed, and my nipples tighten painfully without even my bra to protect against the cold. He makes quick work of his own shirt, and a moment later, both of our layers are abandoned and his arm is sliding beneath my bare waist to pull me in close. He pulls up the sleeping bag’s zipper behind me, and every inch of space between us vanishes.

I’d thought lying against him with clothes on felt incredible, but it’s nothing—*nothing*—to this. His skin is so deliciously hot that I feel almost scalded by him. He’s preternaturally still as he holds me, but as my temperature rises, I can’t stop moving against him. My face burrows into the heavy curves of his pectorals, huffing his spicy evergreen scent, while my hands greedily search for every pocket of his warmth. Unknowable minutes pass, and when I finally, finally stop shivering, I realize what my hips are doing when his hand slides down to roughly grip them into stillness.

“Please,” he says, his voice a ragged whisper above my head.

Embarrassment engulfs me. How long have I been dry-humping him without realizing it? Just like after our hike, he’s offering me standard-issue medical care, but my body has drawn other conclusions. He told me plain and simple that he’s not interested, and if I knew what was good for me, I wouldn’t be either.

I open my mouth to apologize, but then his hips tilt ever so slightly—almost like he can’t help himself—and I register what’s between us. My breathing stops. The world stops, too, because... *he wants this*. He wanted this in his cabin, too, but we weren’t zipped skin to skin in a sleeping bag. Here, it’s easier than breathing to draw my thigh over his. To pretend we don’t hear each other’s muffled groans at the closer contact. His hand presses against my low back, and my mind flickers. His body is so warm. Enormous. Surrounding me, overwhelming me, but somehow still not close enough. Thick heat pools low in my belly like molten gold from a crucible, and I’m almost panting, fists tugging at his chest hair.

He arches into me again, on purpose this time, and the size and heat of him untether all my thoughts like helium balloons. What’s left behind is every feeling

I've been repressing and denying. How badly I've wanted this. How much I secretly like him. How safe I feel in his arms. My mouth opens against his skin as his hips roll against mine again, a small cry breaking from my throat when he hits me right where I need him through our thin base layers. I tell myself it's okay. That in the howling dark, it could just be the wind.

Then his hands slide lower, and there's no pretending about the way he grips my ass. I'm jerked upward, gasping between unsteady breaths as he brings my face on a level with his. In the dark, I can't read his expression, but his thoughts are crystal clear, because they're the same as my own. *We shouldn't be doing this.*

"I know. I'm sorry," I breathe, staving off the pain of another rejection from him with half-formed excuses. "I didn't mean to—I was just so col—"

I never finish my sentence. His mouth finds mine in the dark, and every feeble excuse for my bad behavior is incinerated. I expect him to be careful—he's so meticulous with everything else—but his kiss feels like a fever. His lips are hot, swollen, lusher than I'd even imagined, and I'm delirious. Lost in the slide of his beautiful mouth and the small, breathless gasps between every new way we fit together, until there's simply no room left in this sleeping bag for all the reasons why we shouldn't do this. Not when his hand is sliding up my naked back, and not when he grips my hair around his fist, angling my head back for easier access. On the contrary, my mouth is falling open for him like a fucking guest book, and I feel the responding growl he makes in my toes. I feel it rumble against my naked breasts, too, and at the first hot stroke of his tongue, every last trace of cold is burned from my body. When he sinks his teeth into my bottom lip, the moan I make is embarrassing, and I can only hope the other guests think it's the wind.

But then I'm on my back, and Forrest's heavy body is pinning mine to the cold ground, engulfing me, and I forget to be embarrassed. I forget all about my red flags and caution tape, too, because he's licking my neck, his beard rasping my sensitive skin between hungry sucks, and my hands are finally buried in his thick hair. His burning palm scrapes up from my waist, higher and higher, until he finds the curve of my breast. He squeezes roughly and I arch, gasping cold air against his mouth when he brushes a soothing thumb across my nipple.

"Margot," he groans, pressing his erection into me through our base layers, and suddenly, my body is a welder's arc beneath him, too bright to look at. I have the

frightening thought that no one has ever made me want like this. Need like this. No one has ever been this rough or desperate with me. Not even Adam.

And with the worst timing in the world's history of bad timing, my ex-fiancé's face appears in my mind. I try to banish it like a bad omen, but he lingers. Reminding me that while it was definitely never this intense, this is exactly how it started between us too. A classic Just One Time, heat-of-the-moment trope. One single night that led to a casual, then not so casual, relationship, which turned into "Let's move in together" and eventually "Will you marry me?"

At the memory, my heart decides to stop beating. Forrest must sense something's wrong because his head rises from the center of my chest, where his bee-stung lips have been lighting a fiery trail south. He meets my gaze in the dark, and the situation feels all too familiar. I'm making the same goddamn mistake I made five years ago, only worse. Because, unlike Adam, Forrest isn't a douchey journalist, one thousand percent convinced his next story will bag the Pulitzer. Forrest is humble and legitimately brilliant, if half of what Trapper and Jo have told me about his career is true. Even if they didn't brag about him constantly, I've seen with my own eyes that he's self-sacrificing to a fault and cares for his father the same way I care for Savannah. He's beautiful and, very alarmingly, the best kisser I've ever had the pleasure of locking lips with.

Point being, if falling for Adam felt like tripping and landing flat on my face, falling for Forrest would be like skydiving without a parachute. After hitting the pavement, I'm not sure I'd get back up again.

Forrest's own calculations of how badly we've fucked up seem to catch up with mine, and his eyes go wide in the dark.

"Shit," he huffs, and for once, we're in perfect agreement.

MARGOT

The next morning, there's a sharp sound, and I jerk into consciousness like a half-formed butterfly who's just had her cozy cocoon ripped open. Forrest has unzipped the sleeping bag, and from the faintest suggestion of light in the tent, I'm guessing the sun's been over the horizon for about fifteen seconds.

"Nooo," I whine as my front side is exposed to the brisk morning air. I turn toward his warm body, but he's already sitting up and ignoring my sleep-weakened attempts to get him back in my clutches. Too soon, he's gathered his clothing from the foot of our sleeping bag and is unzipping the entrance to our tent, letting in a rush of even colder air. Before I can do more than gawk at the dim eyeful I get of his naked torso, he climbs over me with a gruff "Sorry" and escapes into the predawn light.

"Good morning to you, too," I croak after him.

I yank the zipper of the sleeping bag back up and burrow in. I'm still half asleep and wondering what the hell I did to make him jump up and leave. Suddenly mortified, I dip my nose beneath the sleeping bag cover and sniff. But all I detect is him. Woodsy. Musky. Serious. My sleep-fogged brain vaguely wonders how anyone could possibly smell serious, while I inhale more deeply. I draw my legs up toward my stomach, wishing he were still spooning me, when—

Oh God.

My eyes fly open in the blue predawn light. Forrest was my big spoon. As in we fell asleep together. In the same sleeping bag. Shirtless. The last cobwebs clear as

everything else that happened last night rushes back to me. His hot mouth on my skin. His rough, capable hands. And how it all came to a screeching halt. My limbs curl protectively inward as I remember our half-panicked agreement to pretend it never happened, and suddenly, it's no mystery why he bolted. The mystery is how I managed to have an incredible night's sleep after the most awkward goodnight of my life.

Because you were swaddled in a cedar-scented muscle blanket, you idiot.

I sit up, no longer able to stay still. I'm shaking with cold (and anger at myself) as I manage to corral my boobs into a frozen-stiff sports bra. *Serves you right*, I think down at them. Giving in to this attraction and (fine) these *feelings* is exactly what I told myself I wouldn't do. But last night, I lost control. And in the ruthless morning light, I know it wasn't only because of how intoxicating it was to be touched by him. Just like the close call in his cabin, it was being cared for and held that was too much for me to resist. And whether I want to admit it or not, he's been caring for me since the moment I met him and jumped into his arms.

From quietly leaving fire starters to keep me warm, to gently touching my face to test me for carbon monoxide poisoning when I nearly burned down my cabin with them, each moment with Forrest has been another falling domino leading to last night. I've never really been on the receiving end of all this concern, and unfortunately for me, it's everything I never knew I wanted.

For a long time now, I've been the self-reliant caregiver. When I was growing up, work was always my mom's priority, even before Dad left us and the job of parenting fell squarely to me. I raised not only Savannah but myself, too, and usually, that's a source of pride. But now nothing is certain. The hidden fault line of my career has been cracked wide open, and escaping to this brutal, beautiful place has left me craving a different kind of security. The kind of security you can only get from another person and which, despite all my efforts not to, I feel with Forrest.

I press my fingers to my closed eyes, rubbing them for some much-needed clarity. I need to get out of the scene of the crime. I don't know what I'll say to Forrest when I see him, but reestablishing some sense of normalcy feels almost as urgent as my need to pee. At the very least, I tell myself, we're on the same page.

Maybe it was the way he ducked and rolled out of the tent like it was on fire, but I get the impression he has his own reasons for needing a reset.

After bundling myself, I leave the Tent of Ill Repute and venture into the literal tundra, stiff and aching from snowshoeing. Looking over the edge of our tent pit, I see Forrest's imposing figure at the camp kitchen. A confusing combination of relief and disappointment twists through me when I see he's not alone. Ollie spots me at once, grinning and waving like I'm Punxsutawney Phil emerging from his hole on Groundhog Day. Technically, I do need to crawl out of a pit, so: fitting. Forrest doesn't turn to watch my ensuing struggle, which is the first small mercy of the day.

"Morning, Margot!" Ollie shouts from thirty feet away as I make it to normal ground level, red in the face and panting.

Forrest turns to Ollie and sternly mouths something that looks like a rebuke. Then again, he'd probably manage to look stern saying "happy birthday" to a six-year-old. Stern is his baseline. He probably gave a stern look to the obstetrician who delivered him into the world. But my hunch is right, because Ollie seems to shrink and looks at Alice and Yoon's tent apologetically.

By the time I reach the makeshift kitchen, Ollie is back to beaming at me, and Forrest is very much un-beaming but handing me a thermos of hot coffee that more than makes up for his lack of social grace. "Thanks," I say, meeting his gaze.

It's a mistake. Huge. Because his too-handsome face is drawn, like he didn't sleep a wink, but all the nervous defensiveness I'm expecting to be mirrored back at me is missing. The look in his eyes is raw. Somber. Like he's resigned himself to not having the one thing he wants most. My heart kicks in my chest, and I'm possessed by the very alarming instinct to slide into his arms again. To smooth his brow and tell him everything's going to be okay.

"Wanna check out the sunrise with me, Margot?"

I startle and realize I've taken an involuntary step closer to Forrest. Ollie is looking at me expectantly. "It's going to look epic from over there," he says, pointing somewhere off to the right.

"Sure," I blurt, smiling at him like my heart isn't doing wheelies around my chest. What the hell is happening to me? *Think of Adam*, I command myself. *Remember how that worked out for you?*

“Need a hand before we go?” Ollie asks Forrest.

Forrest doesn’t look up at us as he refills the kettle, but something in his carefully neutral expression betrays his hurt feelings. “You two go ahead,” he says, and I find myself telepathically shouting, *Tell me to stay and I’ll stay!*

But Ollie’s hand is on my back, and before I know it, he’s saying, “Great!” and leading me away from the campsite.

After briefly excusing myself at the portable outhouse to pee at the speed of a NASCAR pit crew, Ollie and I trudge through the unbroken snow toward the neon half-dome of sun peeking up over the horizon. The lower half of the sky is already a painting of electric orange and pink swirls of cloud, fading upward to a fathomless blue where the last stars are still winking out.

“Wow, how was this not the first thing I noticed?” I ask as our crunching footsteps come to a halt at a bend in the cliff edge. He’s led us far enough away from the group for it to feel like we’re the only two people left on earth.

“Pre-coffee brain,” Ollie explains. “No excuses now, though.” He taps his mug to mine before taking a drink. He swallows it down and immediately pulls a face.

“That bad?” I ask, his easy charm coaxing a smile from me.

“Well, I doubt Forrest pissed in yours. You’re probably safe.”

“Stop,” I say, laughing. “He would never. He’s just...”

“Sending me a message?” Ollie interjects, taking another sip of his awful coffee with an exaggerated eye twitch.

I’m trying to get my smile under control, and it’s not working. “Stop being dramatic. There’s no message hidden in the grounds, Ollie.”

He turns to face me, and I’m struck again by how good-looking he is, with eyes almost the same auburn-brown as his hair and freckles of the impossible-to-count variety.

“You sure?” he asks, looking down his nose and sticking out his tongue, which has actual grounds clinging to it. “I can’t see them too well, but I’m pretty sure they spell *Back Off*.”

I’m laughing, but his words send an unwelcome tingle through my stomach. The same one I felt when Forrest sent Ollie away yesterday with his tail between his legs. Or when his control snapped and he kissed me like the world was burning

down. He's protective. A little territorial, and if I'm honest, there's a deeply unevolved part of me that minds it not one bit.

"Go ahead, then," Ollie challenges. "I dare you to take a sip of yours and tell me it isn't phenomenal."

Giving him a skeptical look, I take an experimental sip and—*oh*. Hot, sweet, creamy goodness fills my mouth like the answer to all my frostbitten prayers. I taste my favorite combination of oat milk and honey, and a different kind of warmth slides into my belly. Forrest knows how I take my coffee. He packed my fussy ingredients. Carried them on his back for miles, when every ounce of weight in a hiking pack matters. Is this another trope? If so, I'm okay with it. Huge fan. It feels like more than an olive branch. It feels like a gesture. A message. I take another slow drink and can't repress my small sound of pleasure.

"See!" Ollie half laughs, half cries in outrage. "I knew you'd get pour-over perfection."

"I don't know what you're implying," I say, sounding about as shifty as it's possible to be.

"Hey, come on," he says, putting a hand on my arm and dragging my attention away from the sunrise, which has only gotten more spectacular in the intervening minutes. I look up at him, and his smile fades into something serious for once. His hair is a copper fire in the sunlight, and when he speaks again, his voice is softer. "I think you do know."

I don't answer him. I'm too busy not breathing.

"I like you, Margot," he says, capturing my gaze. "And I get why you chose Forrest last night. He's... layered. Scary. The Bruce Wayne to my Peter Parker, if you will." He shifts closer when a reluctant laugh escapes me. "But we only have a few weeks left, and I just wanted to put this out there. That if you were looking for something easier..." He pauses, considering his next words. "I could be easy for you."

At this declaration, my stomach swoops, and he smiles down at me. "I'm not a doctor with a secret bat cave, but we could have fun together," he goes on. "I could tell you how ridiculously pretty I think you are, and when it's time to part ways, we could say goodbye as friends. It wouldn't need to be complicated."

I blink, my mind stuck in buffering mode as I process his offer. An easy, no-strings hookup buddy instead of... Forrest. Forrest, who trips all my alarm systems with one dark glance. Forrest, who, simply by existing, challenges the beliefs over which I lost my career and beloved readers. Forrest, who has his own probably excellent reasons for regretting our kiss, which I'm not at all curious about. Forrest, who terrifies me.

My eyes trace the contours of Ollie's face. If I were making choices, he would be the right one. I can easily imagine us tumbling into bed together, and I know how fun it would be because men like Ollie are my safe zone. Playful, hot, and commitment-phobic. *Easy*.

"I..." *Want to want you*, I think. I should say yes. Or nod. Wink, maybe? No. But something—

He leans down and kisses my cold cheek. His face is cold, too, but his breath is warm against my ear as he lingers and says, "Just think about it, 'kay?"

He leans away, and I hear myself say, "Yeah. Sounds good."

FORREST

After I get the group back to the lodge and we nearly eat the plates beneath our dinner, everyone's saying good night and slumping off to their beds when Margot turns to me and says, "Well?"

It's the first word she's spoken to me in hours, and I'm not sure what she's asking. Does she mean: *Well? Did you really think you'd be able to focus on anything else now that you've had your tongue in my mouth and your hands all over my perfect body?* Because after a completely sleepless night with her pressed against me, that's certainly the only question running laps in *my* mind. But then she follows up with: "My letter?" and I remember the entire point of forcing her to go extreme-weather camping in the first place.

"Right. Sorry," I apologize for the dozenth time today. "It's in my pack. I'll go grab it."

On my walk to the entryway, I glance at Ollie, who's only half-listening to Topher and just waiting for me to leave Margot unattended. He winks at me as I pass by, and it takes monumental effort to keep my face from revealing how badly I'd like to put him back on a plane to the lower forty-eight *tonight*. I don't know what he said to her this morning, but when they came back from their little sunrise chat, she wouldn't even make eye contact with me.

Which, fine. Margot and I agreed we'd try to forget about what happened in the tent. But the thing is, I'm competitive. Some of my colleagues (or all of them) might say it's a defining characteristic. They might say it's why I'm practically

jogging to retrieve her letter and get back before Ollie has a chance to invite himself over to her cabin.

After I've dug it out of my pack and returned to the dining area, it's no surprise to see him sidling up to Margot at the edge of the fireplace. Topher's standing directly in my path, presumably on wingman orders to keep me at bay. As I approach, he puts his hands on his hips, spreading his poncho like the world's crunchiest superhero.

"Hey, Forrest," he says, immediately confirming my suspicions. "You ever see a double rainbow out here? Once, at Burning Man—"

"Nope. 'Night, Topher," I say, bypassing him and locking my sights on Margot and Ollie.

As usual, he's making her smile, and a distant part of my mind tells me I should let them be. It knows I should hand her Savannah's letter and excuse myself. Let Ollie comfort her in the aftermath of whatever she's going to read, because the sooner she bunks up with him, the sooner she'll be unavailable, and the sooner I can go back to focusing on what really matters: my dad and the lodge. Unfortunately, that calm, rational part of my mind isn't steering this ship right now.

"Sorry for the wait," I say when I reach her and hold out the slightly crumpled letter.

"Thanks, Forrest." She takes it from me and, like a reflex, holds it to her heart. My own thuds in response, like it could care less about all the boundaries we agreed to, but she doesn't look at me. Instead, she looks at *him*, and I resign myself to being satisfied that, at the very least, I've been entrusted to give her something so precious. That I have the privilege of knowing how much it means to her.

"It's a letter from my sister," she explains to Ollie. "But I think I'll read it in my cabin. It's getting late."

"Do you want me to walk you there?" I ask.

"No," Margot says quickly, glancing up at me. To my alarm, there isn't just awkwardness in her eyes—there's fear too. She looks quickly at Ollie, and my stomach sinks. "You and Topher are headed my way, right?"

Shit. I try catching her eyes again, but she won't look at me.

“Totally. We’re happy to swing by your place,” he says, sliding a lanky arm around her shoulders. “Lead the way.”

Margot’s eyes flicker to mine again, and there’s that look once more. My own sense of panic flares. Why is she scared of me? Did I fucking scare her in the tent? She and Ollie begin walking away.

“Have a good night,” I say hoarsely, unable to remember ever feeling so helpless.

“Thanks, man,” Ollie says, giving me one last sly smile. “We will.”

I catch the faint smell of gardenias, and I can’t help turning and watching her go, pulled close to another man’s side. They collect Topher, who’s sitting cross-legged on the floor, probably still contemplating double rainbows, and leave with a quiet click of the front door. Sticking both hands in my hair, I let out a long, hopeless exhale. I am so fucked.

How the hell did I let this happen? Logic, discipline, and sacrifice are the three pillars I’ve built my entire life and career on, and all it took was one night with Margot Bradley to knock them down like dandelions, all my best intentions floating away like seeds on the wind. The truth is, I don’t want her to be with Ollie. I don’t want him to lay another fucking finger on her, and my gut says she doesn’t want him to either. But she’s letting him walk her to her cabin, and I can’t understa—

My body goes completely still as I realize the fear in her eyes tonight was the same I felt when all her muscles tensed beneath mine in the tent. *Why?* Half-formed, circular questions I’ve been asking since she got here begin swarming, but in a startling moment of clarity, my mind leaps over them like a stone skipping on water. It touches briefly on the perfect Happily Ever Afters she writes. Glides to her sudden pursuit of writing murder mysteries. Jumps to her decision to follow Ollie and, finally, lands and sinks into Savannah’s words about her *hurting deeply for a very long time*.

A glimmer of a theory forms. A fleeting chance to taste my drug of choice: understanding. It’s why my feet are carrying me toward the computer, even though I know I shouldn’t look. Up until now, I’ve resisted the urge to Google her or reactivate the social media accounts I abandoned after the Charlotte debacle. It’s bad enough that I’ve read Margot’s entire collected works. But now,

with every piece of information I've collected about her fitting together, nothing can stop me from finding out whether I'm right.

The old PC boots up with the speed of a glacier, and I drum my fingers next to the mouse. Finally, I pull up a browser and am on the cusp of typing her name when the most important question I always ask before beginning any research hits me: *Is the pursuit of this knowledge ethical?*

My fingers curl off the keyboard and into my palms. On the one hand, the information I'm seeking might well be within the public domain. On the other, Margot might not want me to know about it. She's never actually come out and told me the real reason she's staying at North Star Lodge. Then again, my intent isn't malicious. I simply want to know Margot better and avoid inadvertently scaring her again.

My fingers tentatively rest on the keyboard once more. Whatever I find out will die with me. I type her name, and after one last second of hesitation, I hit the return button.

When the page finally loads, my eyes widen. One flinch-inducing headline after another goes off like grenades in my mind as I take in the scope of coverage about Margot. *New York* magazine, *The Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*... she's in them all. Suddenly, Charlotte's bad review about North Star Lodge seems like a push on the playground compared to what Margot could potentially inflict. And yet I kissed her. Kissed her and forgot the existence of my one all-important rule: Don't get involved with guests. *Fuck*. I pull a hand over my face as adrenaline floods my exhausted body like I've been defibrillated. I don't want to believe Margot would intentionally hurt the lodge just to get back at me, but then again, I didn't think Charlotte would either.

I need to stop this. Get up from this desk and stop thinking about Margot, period. But then one headline catches my attention above the cacophony of all the others: *Margot Bradley Canceled After Shocking "Happily Never After" File Leaks*.

Without thinking, I click on it. At the top of the page, there's a Zoom-meeting screenshot of Margot's beautiful face crumpled with distress. My collar seems to shrink around my neck while something hot and ugly knots in the center of my chest. I flick down past the image to not so much read the article as absorb it.

Quotes from Margot's leaked file are interspersed between paragraphs in bold font. When I reach the bottom of the page, there's a link to the full document, and I don't think; I just click.

Names of characters I've come to know appear on the screen. I rapidly scan the document, taking in every brass-knuckled divorce settlement, affair with the nanny, and erectile dysfunction with stoic determination. This is it. The reason Margot fled Los Angeles to reinvent herself. I honestly expected to find evidence of some kind of public breakup, but in a way, this is so much worse. This brutally honest document is a blueprint of everything she's scared of. It reveals a lifetime of broken expectations and heartache, and instead of offering words of comfort, her fans disowned her.

My hand tightens around the mouse until the plastic makes a strained squeaking sound. It's so fucking unfair. After everything she's given her readers, she deserves a little loyalty and compassion. She deserves someone who can show her that not every man is a selfish prick destined to leave her high and dry, and it sure as hell isn't Ollie. After a steadying breath, I navigate back to the search results page and scroll farther down, because I'm not done putting people on my shit list.

Barker Books Rumored to Drop *New York Times* Bestselling Author Margot Bradley After Fan Outrage

I click the link with building anger. Barker has yet to respond for comment, which is essentially confirmation of the news. The entire publishing industry is now officially on my fucking list.

"Margot," I say almost inaudibly, shaking my head as my brows crunch together. Suddenly, every one of our interactions is cast in a new light. I judged her as being prickly and defensive, but who the hell wouldn't be after going through something like this? She's *still* going through it, and yet she came to remote Alaska, galaxies outside of her comfort zone, and is managing to crank out a new manuscript in a genre she's never written in before. I've seen firsthand how hard she works at it every day.

I dig a knuckle into my left eyebrow, rubbing the knot of tension that's forming. I can empathize because I'm the same way. When Mom was sick, my lab became my only place of solace.

My lab.

The news that my team and I have secured the Bauer-Hinckley Grant emotionally clotheslines me all over again. What with one thing (Margot) and another (Margot), I'd nearly forgotten the impossible decision I'm facing. Before we left for camping, I'd sworn to myself that I'd cede the grant to the runner-up as soon as I got back. But here I am, and I still can't bring myself to pull the trigger.

Exiting out of my Google search, I pull up the grant email and stare at it. I spent untold hours crafting my proposal and suffering through all the networking bullshit that academic prizes demand. Winning it after leaving my career behind feels like the universe spitting right in my face and cackling gleefully. The advances my team and I could make with this sort of support might spur entirely new early detection methods for TNBC. Methods my mother's doctors never had. But accepting this extraordinary opportunity would mean leaving my one remaining parent to suffer without offering the support I can give. I love my work, but the simple fact is, I love my father more. I rub a hand across my forehead, clamping my eyes shut. It didn't feel like a choice when I left everything behind, but now there's an unexpected factor tipping the scales.

Margot. Her strength in the face of a complete career collapse. Her loving devotion to her sister. The way she felt beneath me and how badly I want her there again. It's a giant red flag snapping in the wind, but I'm no match for the powerful chemical cocktail of testosterone and dopamine that my brain pumps out whenever I think of her.

Instead of measured expectations, I see us waking up together on the weekend in California, warm and slow and hungry for each other in the soft morning light. I see myself taking her to my favorite coffee shop and the Pasadena farmers market to hunt for perfect avocados. I imagine the way she looks in her natural element, free of parkas and snow boots, with the Santa Ana wind in her hair and the sun kissing her golden skin.

Christ Almighty. One kiss with this woman and I'm already planning our future together.

Trying to focus on the task at hand, I sigh and stare at the blinking cursor in the empty reply block below Dr. Kohanski's email. If I accept the grant and leave Alaska, I won't have to say goodbye to Margot in four weeks. But Jo could never manage running the lodge on her own while taking full-time care of my father, no matter what her opinion is on the matter. The off-season is one thing, but the rest of the year is too much work for any one person to bear. I exhale, trapped in an endless loop between what I so desperately crave and what family duty demands. I know what I have to do, and yet, as I begin typing my reply, the words that appear aren't at all what I had planned.

Dear Dr. Kohanski,

I am deeply honored by the committee's decision and sincerely thank you and the entire board for the faith placed in my team's research. Unfortunately, I'm currently in Alaska, caring for my unwell father. Due to these extenuating circumstances, I ask that you allow me a little time before I make the decision to either accept the grant or cede the award to one of my well-deserving colleagues.

Thank you again,
Forrest

It's not a solution, but at the very least, it might buy me a little more time. Holding my breath, I hit send.

MARGOT

I could help you unpack?" Ollie offers.

"No, that's okay. Thanks again for walking with me," I say with an apologetic smile. "Good night!"

As I close my cabin door on Ollie's disappointed face, it's hard not to feel like I've fended off an overfriendly dog. The horny kind that wants to hump everything. I drop my hiking pack on the floor and let out a huge sigh of relief that morphs into a groan. My back and thigh muscles feel like they've been minced, and I want nothing more than to curl up by a fire and read my letter without a single man hovering over me.

I pull my hat off with a crackle of staticky hair and miss the basket I try tossing it into. How did I get myself into this mess? If I were writing myself as a character, getting caught in a tug-of-war between two men would *not* be a plot point. I unwrap the mile-long scarf from around my throat. Things in my southern hemisphere have been downright arid for a while, but honestly, self-deprivation is just easier. Far easier than this disaster triangle I find myself in with Forrest and Ollie. *Not that Forrest is even an option*, I scold myself, mentally kicking him out of the triangle as I toss my scarf at the basket and miss again. If there's any kind of triangle situation, it's between me, Ollie, and my cashmere sweatsuit.

Because Forrest makes you feel things you're scared of, a small know-it-all voice inside of me pipes up. It sounds exactly like Savannah.

No shit, I snap back at the voice, toeing my snowy boots off while pelting my mittens at the basket. They flop down next to the hat and scarf, and the basket's still empty.

Just like your love life, Pretend Savannah chimes sweetly. I roll my eyes. Leave it to my sister to telepathically attack me. But maybe some baskets don't want to be filled with warm and cozy feelings. Maybe some baskets are destined to be decorative because they know hats can be pulled over eyes and scarves can choke. Case in point, the last time *this* basket willingly stored warm and fuzzy feelings, she nearly ended up married to a walking, talking asshole.

But Forrest isn't Adam, my inner Savannah argues as I hang my parka.

That's right, I shoot back. *He's even worse*. Because Adam never made me feel the way Forrest did in that tent. Adam wouldn't have tripped over himself to apologize the next day. He never would have gotten into a jealous huff over another man's attention. Adam never made me feel like I was worth aching over, but losing him was excruciating anyway. Losing someone who might actually care is unfathomable.

When I stumble to my bedroom to change, I pause on the threshold, confronted with the haphazard pile of camping gear I left behind. A small dart of shame flies through me, landing in the pit of my stomach. Was Forrest right? Am I about to find my forgotten tent and have to burn it in the middle of the night?

I make my way cautiously to the pile. But when I begin searching, the tent is nowhere to be found.

"I knew it," I whisper. A smug smile lifts the corners of my mouth as I imagine rubbing the truth in Forrest's face. But then everything that happened between us last night hits me again, and I realize I won't be rubbing this—or anything else, for that matter—in his face ever again.

I stand quickly, feeling flustered. All day, I've been trying not to think about our kiss, with varying degrees of failure. I've had to stop my fingertips from grazing my lips or my lightly chafed neck. Every time his outsize frame accidentally brushed against mine in the car or at dinner, it felt like the gentle caress of a stun gun. Goose bumps erupt across my skin, and I realize that my traitorous hands are gliding across my collarbones. I snatch them away with an exasperated breath.

Think of your letter, I command myself as I pull off my smelly camping clothes, intentionally avoiding every erogenous zone. When I'm finally showered and dressed in my sweatsuit, I pad to the living room area and deal with the fire next. After nearly cooking myself that first time, I pulled Jo aside and asked her to show me how to properly build a fire. She was more than happy to, and no one was more surprised than I was when I actually enjoyed doing it.

When the fire's going, I stand back to gaze at a blaze even the most die-hard Girl Scout would be proud of. And I *am* proud, I realize with a small jolt. Never in a million years would I have guessed that I'd be able to build a fire, hike mountains, or survive camping in single-digit temperatures. But I've done all these things and have the sore muscles and sweat-stained bras to prove it. I shake my head in disbelief. Maybe Savannah was on to something after all.

My letter.

I grab it before settling into the cozy armchair by the fire. This envelope is a lot thicker than the last two, and as I open it, I discover about a dozen clumsily stapled pages of notebook paper folded next to Savannah's letter. The faded pages are crammed with my own childhood handwriting, and I raise a hand to my mouth in surprised recognition.

Laying the stapled pages on my lap for later, I unfold Savannah's letter and begin to read.

Dear Margot,

How was your adventure?! JK, you can't tell me, because you're in the wilds of Alaska (mwah-ha-ha!). But you don't need to tell me, because I already know: it was EPIC. Whether it was epically great or epically bad, I'm not sure, but I'm not going to sweat the details. The point is, you made it back, because you're reading this, and I couldn't be prouder. When you finally get back to L.A., I bet I won't even recognize you. You'll be like one of those survivalist babes on the NatGeo channel who can, like, filter muddy water through a tampon or something.

And speaking of awesome things you're capable of, look no further than the Sacred Document enclosed within this envelope (did you just hear that chorus of singing angels?). Out of everything I'm sending along with these letters, this

is the one thing I'm most nervous to put in the hands of the U.S. Postal Service. I consider it your origin point. The wellspring from which all your other stories have sprung. It's the first love story you ever wrote!

Do you remember when I begged you to write it for me? It was the day Dad bailed on our first visitation weekend after the divorce. You were sitting in his empty painting studio, scraping paint splatters off the floor like you couldn't bear even the smallest reminder that he'd ever lived with us. It broke my heart, Margot. Over the months of their constant fighting, I watched your faith in our father—and men in general—completely crumble. I knew it was all over the day you took down your side-by-side conspiracy-theory posters of Prince Eric and John Stamos. You told me there was no such thing as love everlasting. I didn't want to believe you were right.

Maybe it was all the Disney movies I'd watched while being stuck in the hospital, but I refused to believe that true love was a myth. Just because our parents didn't find their HEAs with each other, it didn't mean HEAs didn't exist, period. I just needed to find a way to convince you, which was why I asked you to write me a love story. As a hopeless-romantic eleven-year-old, I hoped it would restore your faith in love. As a hopeless-romantic twenty-eight-year-old, I hope it will restore your faith in yourself.

I know so much has happened between then and now. Other letdowns, other heartaches. But I sent these precious pages to you as a reminder that even if everyone in the world lets you down (looking at you, PUBLISHING), you, Margot Bradley, have the extraordinary gift of turning heartbreak into something beautiful, hopeful, and, dare I suggest it, romantic. You know I always say the reason your books are so good is because you write from the heart, and it's completely true. So now that you're back from tracking animal scat or whatever they forced you to do, get back to writing your book, and don't hold back. Write your heart out, no matter what's hiding inside it.

*Stay safe, but not too safe,
Savannah*

I sniff once and swipe beneath my eyes. Is Savannah really going to make me cry every damn time? Apparently, yes. Carefully, I set down the letter and pick up the stapled pages. A watery laugh escapes me when I see the cover page.

Love at First Fight

*A Short Story by Margot A. Bradley
and written for Savannah H. Bradley*

Just as Savannah planned it, memory and affection wash over me at the sight of my first real attempt to write a story. But other details of that day sink in too. I remember when Mom broke the news that my sister and I wouldn't be staying in Dad's new apartment that weekend after all. The hurt, confusion, and grief that I was too young to fully understand or process. Most of all, I remember the anger. The way the all-too-cheerful cornflower blue paint lodged beneath my broken fingernails as I tried scraping him out of our lives for good.

I remember how Savannah begged me to stop and write her this story, and how I finally agreed. I told myself it would be a distraction. A way to cheer my sister up. I had no idea how engrossed I'd become, or how the story would blow the smallest breath of hope into the dying embers of my heart.

I open to the first page, handling it like a museum archivist. As I read through the opening lines, and then through every subsequent page, those same embers seem to burn hotter than the fire crackling next to me. I relive the first moments after I handed Savannah these pages, and the way I sat on the edge of my seat, dying for my sister's reaction to every clumsy sentence. For the first time in a very long time, I remember why I became a romance writer in the first place. It's not about my beliefs on love. It's about giving people hope when they need it most. Maybe especially after they've gone through one of the many endings cataloged in my Happily Never After file.

I think of my fans—the countless people who've turned up to my book signings and sent me grateful messages for getting them through difficult times. For weeks, I haven't let myself feel the loss of the romance community, but right

now the lack of their support feels like a black hole opening up in my chest. How could I have ever taken them for granted and let myself lose them?

I look up at my laptop across the room, desperate to fill a loss that feels too big to comprehend safely. For the past week, my main character has been forced to work ever more closely with the steadfast Alaskan detective as they begin interviewing suspects. So far, she's been impervious to his charms. Nothing, not even his dedication to justice or his adorably scrappy six-year-old daughter, tempts her away from her sole objective: solving the case.

But with physical proof in my hands that a love story can be the difference between bleak despair and a whisper of hope, I'm imagining a new path for my heartless character. Maybe she's simply been hurt too many times to see clearly what's in front of her. Maybe if she gives him a chance, he'll prove her completely wrong.

I'm barely aware that I've made the decision to leave my seat and grab my laptop. When I open it, I begin to type, words flowing out of me like they never have before. It's not what I had planned. But Savannah charged me to write from the heart, and this time, I'm listening.

MARGOT

Sitting in front of the clunky PC in the lodge, I take a sip of lukewarm coffee while rereading the email I've just written to my agent. In the week since the camping incident, I've been busy—if that's even the right word. Consumed is more like it. I owe it partly to feeling inspired but mostly to how convenient work makes it to avoid interacting with certain people. Namely Ollie (who nudges me about “hanging out” at every opportunity but especially in front of Forrest) and Forrest (who's been hovering like a storm cloud but especially when I'm with Ollie). Honestly, it might be funny if I didn't feel like a slab of red meat between two circling wolves. Despite knowing that giving Ollie a chance would diffuse the tension *and* get me laid, I can't bring myself to do it. Every night he asks, I tell him I need to work, and *no*, I'm not interested in examining why.

Suffice to say, I'm nearly halfway through my time in Alaska and have managed the not small feat of also reaching the halfway point of my manuscript. Which, in standing with tradition, means sending my agent initial pages for review. My teeth sink into the side of my cheek as I reread my email one last time and check that the satellite Internet I borrowed is still working on my laptop.

Hey Anjali,

It's been a minute! Thanks for checking in, and I'm sorry for not responding sooner. Reception in Alaska has been spotty, but the lack of distraction has been great for writing.

I pause reading as a guilty flush creeps up my neck. My time in Alaska hasn't been completely distraction-free, but there's no need to mention that to Anjali.

Below you'll find the first (very rough) half of my new manuscript, which I'm calling *Iced Over*. I'd love to know your first impressions and whether you think this could be our answer to HNA-Gate.

Thanks again for sticking with me on this tiny, slowly sinking life raft,
Margot

I hover my cursor over the send button, scrunch my eyes shut, and click it before I chicken out. I exhale along with the mail program's little whooshing sound, registering that I haven't been this nervous to send pages since the early days. Before I left for Alaska, Anjali approved my strategy to write in a totally new genre and has been busily building her contacts with murder-mystery editors. And while I still consider my new manuscript a murder mystery, in the almost week since I read Savannah's last letter, my stringent anti-romance stance has gone a little soft around the edges. My characters are toeing the line of something less than professional, and I can't help but feel that my manuscript is stronger for it.

"You look like you're plotting something."

I look up to see Trapper coming toward me in his chair, with Scout leading the way. He smiles, but it looks more like a wince. "See what I did there?"

I smile at his corny joke and pet Scout. "I'm always plotting something."

"And how's this one coming?" he says, rolling up to my desk.

"Well, I guess we'll see. I just sent the first half off to my agent."

"First *half*?" he repeats, raising his eyebrows. "You don't waste any time, do you?"

I shrug. "I've always been a fast drafter. Revising is what takes forever."

He shifts in his chair uncomfortably, and I notice that his usual slight lean to the left is more pronounced. I ask, "How about you? You didn't take Scout on his morning walk. Feeling okay?"

"Woke up, so I guess that's something," he grumbles. Scout makes a sound that I swear sounds worried.

It's the first time Trapper has shown any frustration about his condition to me, and when I don't respond right away, he glances up. "Sorry. I don't mean to be a cranky toad. It's just my damn shoulder," he says, grasping it with his good right hand. "Most of the time, the pain patch or nerve block Forrest gives me numbs it out, but some days..."

He sighs again and shifts to the left. I'm reminded of Savannah's own untouchable discomfort, and my mind immediately goes into pain-management mode. Countless hours spent researching every avenue of relief outside of opioids have given me an arsenal of techniques to use on my sister. At home, I have special oils, natural tinctures, and even a playlist of low-frequency sounds designed to help with chronic pain. But my most effective tools are my hands, and as I watch Trapper try to mask the pain he's in, an offer to help is out of my mouth before I can think twice.

"Would you mind if I tried something?" I ask. "My sister suffers from chronic pain, and I've learned a lot about acupressure over the years."

"Acupressure?" Trapper asks doubtfully. "You're not going to stick me with a bunch of needles, are you?"

I smile. "That's acupuncture. Acupressure is just done with touch."

He chuckles hoarsely. "I guess that beats being a pincushion. Where do you need me, dear?"

I direct him to where I have access to his left arm. Gently lifting it to lie on the desk, he winces as his shoulder moves. I begin with his hand, pressing and holding points that sometimes give Savannah relief.

"Can you feel this?" I ask after several minutes of working on different points.

Trapper's eyes drift shut. "It's funny," he says slowly. "I can't feel much of anything in this arm, but I... I almost *sense* something."

I nod. I don't consider myself a hippie, but after years of seeing Savannah's pain improve with energy work, I'm a believer. I move farther up his arm to a point on the bicep. I watch as muscles in the left side of his neck visibly relax and his shoulder lowers slightly. He lets out a small exhalation of relief, and I continue working up his arm. I'm so focused that I don't notice anyone approaching the desk until I hear Forrest clear his throat.

Startled, I let go, and Trapper opens his eyes to smile up at Forrest. "Sorry, son, but it looks like you're out of a job. Turns out you're not the only healer at North Star Lodge."

"Did it help?" I ask hopefully, trying to focus on Trapper instead of Forrest's looming presence.

"*Help?*" Trapper repeats, still smiling. "That was unbelievable. My pain was at an eight, and now it's a six. You've got healer's hands, Margot."

I sit back in my chair and avoid Forrest's gaze as pride glows in my chest. After feeling so useless on our wilderness excursions, having Forrest see that I'm good at *something* doesn't suck.

"I'm glad I could help a little," I say, glancing up to see Forrest still staring at me. I look away, my cheeks heating.

"Where did you study acupressure?" Forrest asks me, absent-mindedly rubbing Scout's ears when he gets head-butted in the leg for attention.

I shrug. "Countless acupuncture appointments with Savannah. Books, YouTube. I'm not an expert, though."

"Could've fooled me," he says, and there's no denying the hop-skip-jump my heart does at his words. "Thank you for taking care of him."

"Of course," I say, brushing a lock of hair away from my burning face before it catches fire. I glance at Trapper, who's smiling at our exchange like a cat with a canary in his mouth.

"Come on, Dad. It's time for your PT and meds. I'll get you settled upstairs."

I look at Scout, who can't seem to decide which of us to beg for a walk. He keeps swinging his head to look at us in turn, tail wagging hopefully.

"I could take Scout outside," I offer. "I need some fresh air, anyway."

"You don't have to," Forrest says. "I'll walk him after I finish with—"

"That would be great, Margot, thank you," Trapper cuts him off. "Why don't you come upstairs with us first, and I'll get you his lead. I want to show you what Forrest's done to my rooms."

I look up at him, startled. "Me?"

"Yes, you." Trapper chuckles. "You don't need to stick around for my torture session, don't worry. Just a minute, and you and Scout can be on your way."

"Dad, that's really not necessary. Scout doesn't even use a lead," Forrest says.

“Please, Margot?” Trapper interrupts us. “Will you humor me? It won’t take five minutes.”

Forrest shakes his head at me, signaling that I don’t have to come up. The last thing we need is more time in each other’s company. Then I look at Trapper, and there’s nothing for it.

“Of course,” I say, forcing a smile. “Lead the way.”



When we’re all upstairs, I’m led to a wide door that opens into a sitting area and kitchenette featuring large windows and a door that leads out onto a deck. The view is spectacular, and I wonder, not for the first time, if people who live here ever get used to the beauty of this place. As I walk in, I notice that wooden handrails, much like ballet bars, line the room. Light switches are low enough for Trapper to reach comfortably, along with cabinets and bookshelves that are all at wheelchair height.

Trapper sees me looking around and nods approvingly while Scout proudly trots to his cozy flannel bed in the corner and retrieves a worse-for-the-wear stuffed animal that might have been a duck at some point.

“You’d never know this place was just a bunch of extra guest rooms before.” Trapper beams with pride as Scout drops the tattered duck at my feet. “Forrest remodeled everything himself.”

I’m scratching Scout behind the ear when I’m hit by the memory of Forrest in the sauna, dusted in wood shavings and holding a drill in the world’s most blatant display of competency porn. I guess it stands to reason that he’d be able to retrofit an entire living space. He’d probably raised a barn single-handedly by the time he was twelve.

“Bear helped,” Forrest rumbles, his hand rising to the back of his neck.

I walk toward a corner of the sitting area where physical therapy devices and medical equipment are organized. I take in the neatly organized row of syringes I assume are for Trapper’s nerve blocks and a stack of black notebooks that just *feel* like Forrest, and something spreads through my chest that’s so tender, it aches. I may not have handled any power tools when I adapted my home for Savannah,

but I oversaw the contractors and did the research. I know how much time, effort, and love it requires to make a living space comfortable for someone with a disability.

“He did an amazing job, didn’t he?” Trapper says as he comes up next to me.

I look down at him and realize that my eyes, while not exactly teary, aren’t exactly dry either. Embarrassed, I try to blink the moisture away, but I’m not fooling anyone. As I stand there, surrounded by the evidence of Forrest’s love for Trapper, it’s impossible not to think of my own father, whom I haven’t spoken to in well over a decade.

Ever since I read Savannah’s letter, half-formed memories of his scattered, creative chaos, which I naively adored as a child, have fluttered through my mind like leaves on the wind. They drift away, just like he did when we needed him most, until all that remain are the ghosts of visitation rights never exercised and the unspoken message that we weren’t enough to anchor him. It’s unfathomable to imagine any sort of relationship with him now.

To see Forrest, so dedicated, so present for his father, is like looking into a world that could have been mine but never was. A lump forms in my throat.

“He really did,” I say softly.

My eyes rise to meet Forrest’s, and for once, I can’t look away from his dark-green gaze. I may not have a father like Trapper, but I have this kind of love with my sister, and Forrest sees it. An understanding I’ve never felt with anyone else expands between us. It reaches inside me, filling up the cracks left by so many people who didn’t understand the time and sacrifice it takes to truly care for Savannah. People like Adam. But my ex-fiancé’s name is like a gnat on my periphery right now. All I see is Forrest. I understood before why he left California, but standing in this lovingly constructed room, I also understand that if he hasn’t already turned down the grant offer, he will soon.

What I don’t understand is why the thought leaves me feeling so gutted.

“Thanks so much for showing me,” I say quietly, placing my hand on Trapper’s shoulder. “I should get Scout outside. Come on, boy.” I pat my leg to get the dog’s attention. Scout comes immediately, and without waiting for a reply, I turn and leave father and son alone together, just as I’ll do again in three short weeks.

FORREST

After risking another obliterating review for nearly giving Margot hypothermia and then groping her during last week's wilderness excursion, I played it safe this time by leading the group on one of Alaska's most boring but quintessential winter experiences: ice fishing. Shockingly, everyone caught something, and perhaps more shockingly, no one sprained an ankle or required me to get half-naked in a sleeping bag with them. In other words, it's the first excursion that went exactly according to plan, apart from my complete inability to keep my distance from Margot.

Ever since learning the truth about what made her flee to North Star, I've found it harder and harder to deny that my simple physical attraction to her has morphed dangerously into something more. It was never more painfully obvious than when I witnessed her helping my father with his nerve pain, her beautiful features schooled into complete focus as she worked with targeted acupressure points that I've since researched and practiced on him as well. All week, my interactions with Margot have been cordial, if awkward, and I can only hope she hasn't noticed how fucking difficult it's been for me to tear my eyes off her.

Back in the snug little fishing shack, I watched her eyes and nose scrunch every time she took a sip from the flask of whiskey that's almost as essential to ice fishing as rod and reel. Listened to her laugh as everyone's tales of misadventure got taller and taller, their hand gestures wilder and wilder. I didn't indulge, of course. I knew it would eventually be up to me to lead five tipsy guests back to the lodge on

snow machines without any mishaps, which is what I'm doing right now, with Margot riding pillion behind me.

The snow is a deep, soft blue in the falling twilight, and her arms tighten around my waist. I know it's not something I should be feeling so goddamn self-satisfied over, since it was either ride with me or walk, but the way she automatically climbed onto the back of my machine without a single look over at Ollie had me revving the engine like a balls-for-brains idiot. Ultimately though, an urge to extend this ride as long as possible won out over the Neanderthalic urge to race him, and I led everyone back at the speed of a drifting snowflake. Now, as glittering powder swirls in the beam of my headlight and the lodge looms up ahead, my hand lets off the throttle against all sense and reason. I slow to an idling stop, and Alice and Yoon drive up next to me on one side, Ollie and Topher on the other.

"Everything okay?" Alice shouts over the rumble of our engines.

My mittened hand lifts to form a thumbs-up before I signal with a chopping motion for the group to go on ahead without us. *What the hell do I think I'm doing?*

"We'll be back soon," I shout, like this was all part of a presanctioned plan and not a sudden and alarming loss of impulse control.

Alice and Yoon give a thumbs-up and accelerate ahead, while Ollie gives me a long stare before throttling reluctantly forward with Topher behind him. Something like joy leaps in my chest, and with a flick of my wrist, I whip the machine around, snow spraying in an arc behind us. Margot presses closer against my back as we face the darkening trails once more.

"What are you doing?" she yelps through her helmet, but I can hear her excitement too. Feel it in the way her arms and thighs tighten around me.

I turn my head. "Want to go for a real ride?"

Her mittens curl into my stomach. "Yeah," she says breathlessly. "Let's go."

I rev the powerful engine, and we shoot off like a rocket. Margot screams, then laughs, then screams again as her body welds itself around mine, and I decide that devising ways of making her this happy is now my number one priority. We practically fly over the snow, weaving in and out of trees and making hairpin turns on snowbanks that leave even me breathless. Margot is wrapped around me so

tightly that she'll need a crowbar to peel herself off, and that only spurs me to go faster. I grew up driving snow machines and know these hills and valleys like they're an extension of my own body. With every one of Margot's surprised shrieks and laughs, I feel more and more like a fifteen-year-old kid trying to impress the girl of my dreams, and I can't help but wonder if it's working.

By the time we've circled back to the lodge, we're both covered in snow and grinning like idiots. I can't remember the last time I've had this much actual, smiling-till-my-cheeks-ache, belly-laughing fun. Probably not since before my mother passed away, which, considering that happened almost a decade ago, makes my life seem pretty fucking grim. But there's something about the adorable way Margot is stumbling off the snow machine and leaning on my forearm that makes me want to forget about the past, the future, and anything else that isn't happening at this exact moment. I stare as her long golden hair seems to tumble out of her helmet in slow motion and she aims her megawatt smile up at me.

"Just so you know, I never signed off on being in the *Fast & Furious: Alaska* movie," she scolds.

I pull off my own helmet, grinning right back. "Should I have talked to your agent first?"

Margot's eyes lock on my post-helmet-disaster hair. "Only if you wanted a strongly worded email about the testosterone-fueled downfall of American cinema."

"In that case," I say, pointlessly trying to smooth down the unfortunate collective of cowlicks that is my hair, "I'm offended on behalf of the entire *Fast & Furious* franchise."

"I didn't realize you were such a Vin Diesel stan," she teases as we walk toward the lodge, her mittened hand on my forearm like it belongs there. "Ever try cosplay? I bet you'd look great in a leather vest."

"The vest only comes out when I'm writing my fan fiction," I say.

She beams up at me. "You've never seen a single *Fast & Furious* movie, have you?"

I pause. "No."

Margot throws her head back and laughs, tipsy on whiskey, adrenaline, and this thing ricocheting between us. In the quickly gathering twilight, I feel as

intoxicated as she is.

“Come on, California,” I say, holding the door open for her. “You need to eat something.”

Instead of protesting the pet name, she bites her lip against the smile she’s trying to tamp down and walks right in.



Inside the lodge, the rest of the group is hanging out at the large rustic dining table, the wine already flowing. Ollie sees us approach and looks glumly at Margot smiling beside me. Absurdly, it makes me feel like I’ve won some sort of antler-locking mating contest, and despite my agreement with Margot to keep things platonic, it costs me physical effort not to throw a possessive arm around her shoulders.

“Hey, everyone,” Margot says, accepting a glass of white wine as she walks up to the table. “Thanks, Yoon.”

“Would you like some, Forrest?” Yoon asks.

“Sure, why not,” I say a little too cheerfully. “I need to get cooking, though. Did Jo already grab the fish from you all?”

“She did,” Alice confirms, passing me a glass of red.

I nod and look to Margot, who hasn’t sat down in her usual spot yet. It’s an odd moment. Leaving to cook the group’s meal after spending all day shooting the shit with them feels like redrawing the line of staff and guest separation, which has become increasingly blurry. She raises her eyes to mine like she’s sensing the same thing, and after a moment, she says, “I love to cook. Can you show me the kitchen?”

Something untamed leaps in my stomach at her offer, but I clamp it down. “You’re a guest,” I say, despite the immediate protest my brain makes: *She’s not just a guest. She never has been.* I ignore the illogical feeling and say, “Relax. You don’t need to help.”

But I also know she doesn’t like being told to do anything, even if it’s to put her feet up, so I’m not really surprised when she smiles and says, “I insist.”



We find Jo and my dad already working in the kitchen, Scout lying in his corner bed, and they all greet Margot with enthusiasm when they spot her. I start telling them she's only having a look around, but Jo's already handed her an apron.

"How's the shoulder, Trap?" Margot asks, looping the neck of the apron over her head. "Any more luck with that pressure point?"

Dad answers in the affirmative, but my focus closes in on Margot's hand coming to rest affectionately on his shoulder. They say the way to a man's heart is through his stomach, but the way to mine is apparently caring for my disabled father.

"So what needs chopping?" Margot asks, breaking the spell and tying her apron strings as I fumble to put my own on. "I know my way around the kitchen."

I see Jo exchange a conspiratorial look with my dad.

"In that case," my father says slowly, "what would you say to letting two old coots kick back while you and Forrest take care of dinner? Everything's nearly prepped, anyway."

I repress a groan. Not as familiar with Jo and my dad's Machiavellian matchmaking schemes, Margot seems caught off guard. "Oh," she says with a nervous half-glance at me. "I mean, of course. You should absolutely rest if you need to."

"Great!" Jo beams before I can call bullshit. "Thanks, you two! Come on, Scout!"

They vanish from the kitchen faster than a couple of freshly baked biscuits, Scout trotting after them. The kitchen door is still swinging from their hasty exit when Margot and I look at each other, finding ourselves very much alone.

She laughs awkwardly. "So, that was subtle."

"You mean one of them *didn't* slip you a key to my cabin?" I deadpan.

She pats the front pocket of her jeans. "Nope, just a condom."

I half-snort, half-cough into my wineglass and feel my ears catch fire as I try to recover. "I wouldn't put it past them."

"Wow. Do they try setting you up with every available woman who stays here, or just grumpy romance writers from Los Angeles?"

I take a deep, fortifying drink of wine as the word “available” seems to hover and then bloom between us. After what happened on the camping trip, I obviously assumed she was unattached. But hearing her say it out loud feels like the smallest opening of a door that my baser instincts want to rip off the hinges.

“Playing matchmaker is their favorite sport,” I confirm, rolling up my sleeves. I pick up Jo’s abandoned knife and continue scaling the fish she left in the sink. “Extra points if the woman in question has zero interest in me.”

“And have they ever been successful?”

At her question, the memory of her gasping against my mouth is like a bright red flare streaking across a cold black sky. The fish slips out of my grip and lands with a wet flop at the bottom of the sink.

“With past guests, I mean,” she hurries to say, glancing at me and then back down at the thick wedges of lemons she’s cutting.

Her clarification summons a barrage of less pleasant memories of Charlotte, who, now that I’m thinking about it, my dad and Jo never tried setting me up with. They didn’t need to—she’d made her intentions clear from the moment she arrived. It was only at the end of her stay, when I stopped giving in to her demands, that things blew up in my face.

“Have *you* ever been successfully set up by your parents?” I counter, ignoring the prickles of warning skittering up my neck.

Margot goes silent as she begins picking parsley leaves. I begin to wonder if she’s just going to ignore my question when she says, “Parent. Singular.”

Oh.

“Sorry,” I say, clearing my throat. “I didn’t mean to assume.”

She lifts a delicate shoulder, her eyes on the herbs, while I work on gutting the fish. “It’s fine. My dad’s alive, if that’s what you’re thinking,” she says, cutting her eyes to mine briefly. “He’s just a cliché.”

It takes a moment for me to process what she’s said, but when I do, sadness blends with the anger I’ve been nursing ever since learning about her career crisis. I think of her Happily Never After file and wonder if all the fictional dipshits she’s written about are based not on a former lover but on someone much closer to home.

“He left?” I say quietly.

Margot's full lips press together as she picks up her knife and begins mincing parsley. She nods once. "When Savannah got sick. Mom wanted him to get a job to help cover the medical bills, but he was a *painter*," she says with mock loftiness. "His art always came first."

Before his own child. I think of the sweet Polaroid of Margot and Savannah in their cheap Halloween costumes and struggle to respond. I've personally only ever known the love of a kind and committed father and can barely fathom what that yawning absence must feel like.

"And your mom," I say finally, trying to pivot. "What's she like?"

At this, Margot's right dimple tucks halfway in as she smiles faintly. "My mom is amazing. We didn't have a lot of her growing up because she worked around the clock to keep us afloat, but when she was there, she was *there*, you know?" She pauses, her smile sliding into a smirk. "And to answer your question, no. She's never tried setting me up with anyone because, A, she's way too busy, and B, she's still hoping I'll finally find my gay side and write men off altogether."

"Fair enough." I chuckle, halfway through the last fish.

Spotting a basket of fingerling potatoes, Margot grabs a handful and begins slicing them into small, creamy halves.

"And what about you?" she says. "You obviously won the cosmic jackpot in the dad department. Was your mom just as sweet?"

A snort escapes me as I remember my mom bossing me around this very kitchen. She taught me to put care and intention into everything I do—to strive for excellence—even if I'm just chopping chives. I automatically adjust my knife grip in case she's looking down on me with one of her signature eyebrow raises.

"Sweet' isn't the word I'd use. She was pretty fierce. But fiercely loving too."

And yet all the love in the world didn't save her.

The ache that lies beneath all my reasoning for not getting too involved with anyone draws my abdominals in tight. It's quickly followed by the irrational belief that my mom would still be here if I'd just been present for her treatment. Logically, I know it's not true, but try telling that to the guilt that cracks a whip at me every time I even consider going back to California. It won't listen to reason, even though the rational part of me knows that whether it's cancer or, in the case of Margot's father, garden-variety selfishness, the people you open yourself up to

always leave you in the end. Margot herself will be leaving here in three weeks, and I would do damn well to remember it. But then her arm brushes mine as she reaches for the salt, and the dull ache of loss disappears as my nerve endings turn into sparklers.

“Trapper mentioned that you went into breast cancer research after she passed,” Margot says, and her voice sounds like she’s tiptoeing through broken glass. “Would you have chosen a different field if she hadn’t, or...”

At her gentle curiosity, my larynx rusts over like it’s been sitting under salt water for a century. I give her a tight nod. That excruciating year of my life isn’t a topic I’ve discussed with anyone, and I’m not sure I ever will.

She’s quiet, and I feel her gaze on my profile. I lift my eyes to meet her honey-brown ones.

“I’m sorry, Forrest.”

Something tight eases slightly in my chest. I nod, and after a beat, we both look back down at our workstations.

“So what were you studying before the left turn into breast cancer?” she asks, tossing the bowl of sliced potatoes with olive oil, herbs, salt, and pepper.

I slowly release my breath, grateful for the change in topic. “Originally?” I say. “I had my heart set on pediatric cardiothoracic surgery.”

She ignores the terrible joke and turns to face me, hands on her hips. “Wait, wait,” she says. “You’re telling me you were going to be a heart surgeon? For *babies*?”

“Well, technically pediatrics includes children up to eighteen, but yes, I suppose I would’ve worked with babies too.”

An incredulous laugh gusts out of her before she reaches for her wineglass.

I laugh, completely bemused. “What?”

“Nothing,” she says after a healthy gulp. “You just keep proving my theory over and over again.”

“Which is?”

“Never you mind,” she says primly, and I watch the tips of her ears go pink.

“You can’t tell someone you have a theory about them and not reveal it. It’s a crime against humanity.”

“Maybe I’m a sadist.”

“Or maybe,” I drawl, moving on to trimming asparagus, “you’re just a chicken.”

Margot slides the potatoes into the oven with surprising crispness for someone who’s been day-drinking in an ice-fishing shack. “I am *not* a chicken,” she says.

I tilt my head in mock concentration. “Did I just hear... clucking?”

“You know what?” she says, shutting the oven door with a bang. “Fine. You really want to know my theory?”

“I’m all ears.”

She makes an exasperated sound, picking up her wineglass again. “But that’s exactly it. Of course you are. You’re probably a *great* listener, because your type is bound by law to be good at listening.”

I’m surprised to see a fevered, almost miserable look in her eyes as they travel up and down the length of me. “I’m... not following,” I say.

“Oh, please. The PhD for a worthy cause? The muscles for days? The genetically inherited carpentry skills? The *rolled shirtsleeves*?” She points her wineglass toward my bare forearms as if they, above all else, prove her point. “Everything about... *this*,” she says, waving her hands and wineglass up and down to indicate my entire being, “is straight out of an overserved romance novel. And I would know!” she cries. “I write them!”

When I don’t respond, she closes her eyes and rubs her temple with the same hand that holds her wineglass, sloshing it slightly. “My point is, you don’t seem... real. Or if you are real, then you’re obviously hiding something. Like volcanic bacne. Or an elbow fetish.”

I can only stare until Margot makes the cutest hiccup I’ve ever heard, jump-starting my brain. Is she really saying what I think she’s saying? That I seem too good to be true? I might feel elation if it weren’t for the clear disgust she’s radiating.

“I’m not sure if I should feel insulted or flattered,” I say slowly, “but I can assure you I don’t suffer from any eruptive skin conditions or extremity fetishes.”

“Oh, don’t feel flattered,” she scoffs as she begins clearing up her station. “If it’s not an elbow fetish, it’s something else. You’ve probably been collecting your own fingernail clippings since you were eight, or you have a secret Edward Cullen tattoo.”

I snort. “Now, Margot. You of all people should know the only face I have tattooed on my body is Vin Diesel’s.”

Margot spits the sip of wine she’s taken back into her glass, laughing. When she recovers, she says, “I’m sorry. I’m just not buying it. I’ve been in too many tropes with you for this to be reality. I’ve either had a Pilates accident back in L.A. and all of this is a romance-novel-inspired coma dream... or you collect clown masks.”

I sigh, dropping the asparagus stalks into the steamer basket. “Maybe. Then again, maybe my fatal flaw is not keeping well enough away from grumpy romance writers from L.A.”

Our eyes catch, and something hot lurches in my lower abdomen.

“We might be dangerous, but I doubt we’re fatal,” she says with a smile.

My eyes drop to her mouth. Slide over her curving lips to each dimple in turn. “I guess we’ll see about that.”



MARGOT

Dear Margot,

You're halfway through! Release the confetti! Do a shimmy! I hope the latest excursion was incredible. I can only imagine the things you've seen! If you haven't been taking photos, this is a slap on the wrist to get snapping. Make sure you're taking pictures of whoever is with you too. I'll need to put faces to names, especially if any ruggedly handsome mountain men are involved (PLEASE say there are ruggedly handsome mountain men involved).

I think I just felt your eye roll from here. I realize you only barely tolerate my belief that every situation is a rom-com plot waiting to happen, but just imagine if, on top of writing your next bestselling novel, you found TRUE LOVE in Alaska. Bear with me for a second (get it?!). Maybe he's a hardcore survivalist who only speaks in grunts, but you somehow get snowed in together (because classic) and you charm him with your L.A. girl addiction to avocados and Pilates. The title possibilities for your future memoirs are endless. Snow One Like You. Love on Ice. Northern Nights. Polar Promises.

Okay, sorry, I'm done. Glacial Heat! Okay, now I'm done. Of course, I know you're reading this thinking I'm crazy for hoping you might find romance, especially after I read your Happily Never After file. But I guess old habits die hard, and I'm the kind of person whose day-to-day life sort of depends on ridiculous hope. Even when hope is the fastest route to

disappointment. I know I don't need to explain that to you—you've had more than anyone's fair share, Margot. And yet through it all, you've always managed to put aside your own pain to continue taking care of me. Case in point: Evan Ferris.

Do you remember that night you went to his seniors-only party in high school? I can't even tell you how jealous I was, watching you get ready. You were the prettiest girl in the whole world that night (still are, UGH), and I tried so hard to stay up so you could tell me EVERYTHING. Namely and specifically whether you'd finally caught Evan's attention. But because I have the energy reserves of an elderly koala, I fell asleep.

Later, I didn't hear you come in, but I felt you crawl into bed with me. Or maybe it was being punched in the nose by your cucumber-melon body spray that woke me up. Either way, I went completely frozen because, unbelievably, you were crying. You who never cried. You who always wiped my tears. You were trying to be so quiet, but you were shaking, and I didn't know what to do, Margot. I pretended to be asleep because I told myself that's what you wanted. Now I can admit it was because I was scared. I'm so sorry I made you be the big spoon that night. I'm sorry I made you comfort me when you were the one who needed to be held.

You only told me what had happened years later, but honestly, I knew that night. I knew you'd given Evan everything you had to give, because that's what you do, Margot. You give. Evan and his dickhead friends spread the rumors at school, but even if I hadn't heard a peep, I'd have known from the way you never said his name again. How you never said any boy's name again, if you could help it. I would have known from the way you started sacrificing even more of your time to take care of me.

More than anything, I regret taking advantage of your apparently limitless generosity. For not seeing how much you were compartmentalizing. I hope Evan fucking Ferris regrets it, too, and if I ever set eyes on him again, I hope you're ready to bail me out of prison.

But even if I can't go full "Vigilante Shit (Savannah's Version)" on all the men who've hurt you in the past, I have hope that one day you'll stop letting them control your view on love. You give so many readers a blueprint for the

kind of partner they deserve, and after all the bullshit you've put up with over the years, you deserve a Happily Ever After more than anyone. So yes, weeks from now, when you're reading this and I'm missing you like I've lost a limb, I will also be manifesting that you're cuddled up with a bearded giant who has a heart of gold and the equipment and stamina of a wild bull. You're welcome.

*Stay safe, but not too safe (except with contraception!),
Savannah*

I let out a groaning laugh and pick up the envelope this week's letter came in. Forrest gave it to me tonight after we'd cooked and eaten together, and he graciously didn't point out that I'd completely forgotten to ask for it. I don't want to admit, even now, how preoccupied my mind has been with him this week. How, ever since seeing what he did to adapt his father's rooms, I can't stop noticing the responsibility he takes for everyone at North Star. Somehow, even the romance heroes from my own books are starting to fall short of him. I have no idea if Savannah's got the "wild bull" part of her letter right, but "bearded giant with a heart of gold" feels scarily accurate. I exhale, forcing myself to stop thinking about him, and take out the picture Savannah included with her letter.

It's a supremely corny photo of us in our prom dresses, and my eyes immediately begin to water. We're posing under a blue and silver balloon arch in a classic couples pose. Being slightly taller, I hold my sister tenderly from behind, our corsages angled just right. We wear simpering smiles, and I can still remember how we practically vibrated from trying not to crack up. I almost skipped prom that year, but Savannah insisted and (as usual) got her way. Thanks to her, it was the best night of my entire high school experience.

But just because Savannah has an annoyingly good track record of being right about most things doesn't mean she's right about everything. Particularly about "true love." My eyes roll at the thought like a muscle reflex, and I put the letter and photo on the bedside table next to me. I remind myself that Evan Ferris was just the first in a long line of romantic disappointments, and nothing in the

intervening years has given me hope of finding a partner who isn't another dick in good-guy clothing.

Liar liar, Savannah's voice seems to whisper as images of Forrest flash unhelpfully through my mind. The straining muscles of his neck as he carried me down a literal mountain. His anxious hands as he bandaged my ankle. The moonlit expanse of his bare shoulders when he shared his body heat.

The memory sends the most confused, directionless butterflies in the history of winged creatures flying through my stomach. In an effort to rid myself of the disturbing images, I reach over to yank the chain on my bedside lamp. My bedroom is plunged into darkness, and I snuggle into my covers with relief. But after a moment, the mental PowerPoint presentation of Forrest's selfless deeds and strained Henleys glows all the brighter.

With a frustrated groan, I turn huffily under the covers as if I'm capable of putting my back toward thoughts of him. Like every night since the camping trip, I force myself to think of Ollie. Taking advantage of his offer would've been a no-brainer for me before coming here. Before meeting Forrest. But now I couldn't be less interested, and running down the clock seems like the best option. I exhale. In just three more weeks, I'll be gone. Forrest will still be here, and I'll be safely back in L.A. with my sister, who will be disappointed to learn that nothing remotely romantic happened to me during my stay. I sigh, willing myself to believe the lie.

I'm about to close my eyes when I register how unusually bright it is in my room. In the last three weeks, I've become so accustomed to being able to wave my hand directly in front of my nose at night and not see it that I already plan on buying blackout shades when I get home. But tonight my room looks more like it does in L.A. Wondering if I've left the overhead oven light on, I throw back the covers and get out of bed.

As I pad through the silent cabin, it becomes clear that the light is coming from outside. I walk toward the kitchen window, and I'm surprised to see a small building with a light on, not far from my cabin. I squint through the trees to get a better look.

It's the sauna. *What the hell?*

I chew my lip, feeling a bit uneasy. Forrest didn't mention that he finished fixing it. Could he have stopped by to work on it after dinner and left the light

on? Annoyed, I glance at the digital clock on the oven. It's almost midnight. There's no way anyone is in there. The whole group is exhausted after today's excursion, including me. I should just get into bed and deal with it.

But I don't make any move to get back to bed. I'm thinking of Savannah's weekly charge for me to "stay safe, but not too safe." I imagine myself venturing out in the dark like a total badass, casually shutting the light off, and then making it back to my cabin like walking through the woods in the middle of an Alaskan winter night is NBD. I imagine teasing Forrest tomorrow for his negligence and casually dropping that I've taken care of it because I'm *not* a chicken. *Stay safe, but not too safe.* The thrill of doing something a little scary wakes me up as if I've had back-to-back espresso shots. Am I really doing this?

Apparently, yes, because I'm already moving toward the front door and pulling my parka on over my pajamas. Before I can second-guess myself, I turn on my living room light so that I'll be able to see my cabin on the way back. I pull on my boots and Ollie's headlamp and march out into the night.



Getting to the sauna is more difficult than anticipated because I have to cut through the woods and deep snow. Even though it's not very far away, by the time I arrive, I'm shivering. Quickly stomping the snow off my boots, I don't hesitate to push the front door open. The outer changing area is dark, but the small window in the sauna door emits a warm yellow glow. I shake my head with self-satisfied smugness as I open the door, imagining the look on Forrest's—

Naked body.

Before I can fully register what I'm seeing, the world's most appropriate cloud of hot steam blasts me in the face. I gasp at the same moment Forrest yelps, "Shit!"

As the steam clears, I see that he isn't actually naked but is wearing a small white towel around his hips that only seems to accentuate what isn't covered. I stumble backward into the vestibule, my heart thumping wildly as the door swings closed again, hiding him from view.

"Oh my God," I say out loud, pressing the heels of my mittened palms over my eyes in an attempt to scrub the image of his sweat-slicked body from my mind.

Except, nope. It's there to stay. It will probably be the image I see every time I blink from now until I'm wearing adult diapers and hoarding Werther's Originals.

The sauna door opens again, and I can't help it. I drop my hands to look at him. No. To ogle him. His huge frame is backlit in the doorway, but the sweat sheening his muscles picks up the muted light, gilding every thick curve and tight line in gold. My mouth goes paper-dry, then promptly fills with saliva, while everything below my neck clenches in unison. *This* is what I was snuggled up against in the tent? No wonder I instinctively dry-humped him. He could be Darwin's poster boy for Survival of the Fittest, and while I might have the brain of a twenty-first-century woman, my body is clearly operating on the evolutionary urges of a horny monkey.

"Sorry—" I croak, trying to look everywhere and nowhere all at once. "I just saw the light on and came to turn it off. I didn't think anyone would be here."

"I couldn't sleep," Forrest explains, his big hand tightening on the too-small-yet-somehow-not-small-enough towel. "Sorry the light bothered you."

"It's fine," I say in a high voice, finding a safe spot in the upper corner of the room to stare at. "I didn't realize the sauna was fixed yet. I'll leave you to it and skedaddle."

Skedaddle? When did I turn into a middle-aged dad? Will I look down and see tube socks and Texas? I've turned to hide my burning cheeks when he says, "Hold on. I can walk you back. Just let me get some clothes on."

I turn back to him, my face radioactive. "No, no. That's okay. The heat feels incredible in here, and you're already—" My eyes drop to his towel. "Just stay."

"The sauna's for guests, and you were out on the ice all day." His eyes tick up to mine. "If anyone should be enjoying it, it's you."

I stare at him. Swallow. "Maybe it wouldn't hurt to warm up a little bit."

He nods. "I'll get out of your way, then. I just need to grab my—"

"You don't have to go," I hear my mouth say, like I'm a hand puppet being controlled by my vagina.

He pauses midturn and looks at me. Avoiding his eyes like that's my life's calling, my gaze lands and gets stuck on his very large, very at-my-eye-level pectorals. The soft chest hair I nuzzled in the tent is plastered to him in dark swirls that taper to a stripe down his hard stomach. He's built like a house. Like, a house

that allows extra biscuits on Thanksgiving, but only after a ten-mile Turkey Trot. My fingers curl in my mittens.

“You sure?” he says, and it feels like he’s asking something else.

“Of course,” I say lightly, like I’m absolutely in control of the bottle rocket of need blasting through me. “I wasn’t the only one out on the ice today.”

“Right,” he says uncertainly. “Well, I guess I’ll just...” He points a thumb at the sauna door behind him. “While you change, I mean.”

“Okay,” I say in a voice that rivals a dog whistle. Every warning bell I own is clanging together, but as he ducks into the sauna, my eyes slide down the two rounded columns of muscle bracketing his spine like they’re doing the luge right to his ass. My hand finds my zipper, and within a minute, my parka, mittens, and boots are in a heap on the floor. That’s when the full-body shakes start. *What the hell am I doing?* If there’s one single earthly activity that’s probably least conducive for keeping my distance from this man, it’s taking all my clothes off to sit in a hot, steamy room with him.

And yet the thought doesn’t stop me from yanking my pajama top off. All day, I’ve felt my resistance to him melting. I know that the wiser choice would be to pull my winter gear right back on and slip away to my cabin. Or better yet, to Ollie’s. But the whole theme of my trip could basically be “Fearless (Margot’s Version),” and if he can handle being nearly naked in this sauna together, then so can I. *We’re adults with boundaries*, I tell myself, sliding my pajama bottoms and panties off with a nervous swoop of my stomach. We want the same thing. Which is distance. *Definitely distance*. And if there’s a tiny voice inside me whispering that every romance heroine ever written has told herself this lie, I’m too distracted to listen anyway.

Finally, wearing nothing but goose bumps in the freezing vestibule, I spot a stack of fluffy white towels. I grab one and wrap it around myself, but even on my average-length torso, the bottom of the towel barely covers the tops of my thighs. *Great*. I reach up and undo my messy bun, letting my hair cascade around my shoulders to hide a little more skin. And then all that’s left to do is walk in.

With a deep, centering breath, I push the door open and am immediately engulfed by hot steam and bad choices.

MARGOT

Thighs.

I'd challenge anyone seated across from Forrest Wakefield in a sauna to think of anything else. I thought I'd been strategic in sitting as far from him as possible on the opposite bench, but only now, faced directly with the spread of his muscular legs and tiny towel, do I realize my miscalculation. Is it too late to move to the bench perpendicular to his? What would I say? *Sorry, I have to move before I accidentally beg you to crush me between those thighs like a grape!*

Forrest also seems to be questioning his decision to stay. His eyes keep landing on random parts of me before hastily jumping away like my body is a game of Floor Is Lava. Which, honestly, isn't too far off the mark. To put us both out of our misery, I finally hazard a "So..."

The only problem, of course, is that I have exactly zero follow-up thoughts to this brilliant segue except the word "thighs," or possibly "chest."

"So," he repeats, clinging to the word like I've tossed him a lifeline.

"Why couldn't you sleep?" I manage eventually. It seems my brain *is*, in fact, capable of words that aren't body parts if I keep my eyes on my own knees.

"I could ask the same of you," he deflects. My traitorous eyes look up in time to see him running a hand through his damp hair. "Did Savannah make you cry again?"

I let out a half-laugh. "What gave it away? My existential ennui or panda eyes?"

He lifts a burnished shoulder. "That letter with the Halloween Polaroid nearly made me cry, and I didn't even read it."

I roll my eyes fondly. "That's nothing. You should see her when she wants something and becomes the physical embodiment of that sad song they sing in ASPCA commercials."

"I think you're referring to 'Angel' by the great Sarah McLachlan."

I smirk and cross my legs. "Top song on your workout playlist?"

He leans his head back against the sauna wall, exposing his throat. "Nah, I only work out to Taylor Swift."

My surprised laugh turns into a cough.

"Here," he says, passing his water bottle.

"Thanks," I say, taking a long, grateful pull of icy water while trying not to get hot and bothered over sharing a straw.

"I didn't take you for a Swiftie," I say. "Savannah's going to adore you."

I catch what I've implied only after it leaves my mouth and spend the next few seconds trying to evaporate into the steam.

"She sounds like a fun roommate," he says mercifully. "Do you keep tissues in every room?"

I stick my tongue out at him as I pass the water back, but the homesickness I've been wading in ever since arriving in Alaska seems to rise up like the tide around me. When I say, "She's the *most* fun," it comes out less like a snappy retort and more like I'm wishing myself condolences.

Forrest stares at me through the humid air, his eyes soft on my face. "You miss her."

The way he says it, tender as a bruise, doesn't make it sound like an understatement. I cross my arms across my towel a little tighter. "I've never been away from her this long," I admit. "Ever."

"Is that why you couldn't sleep?" he asks. "Homesickness?"

I brush away the sweaty baby hairs curling around my face. "Not exactly. I needed to hit my word count, so I was working late. I saved reading her letter as a treat."

"No reward like a good crying jag," he says with a half-smile, reaching over to ladle water over the hot rocks and setting every one of his shining muscles into

motion. When the hiss of steam clears, he sits back, adjusting his towel over his flexing thighs. "Saving your letter for after work, though: your self-restraint's impressive."

Forrest-slash-forest-scented steam swirls around my face, and a punch-drunk laugh nearly skips out of me. *You have no idea, buddy.*

I clear my throat. "I'm trying to finish my manuscript before I leave," I explain, crossing my legs tighter.

"And how's the story coming?" he asks, picking up his gaze from where it accidentally dropped into my lap. "Writing another bestseller?"

The question catches me off guard. "Honestly?"

He nods.

"I'm not sure." I exhale, leaning my head back with a soft *thunk* against the cedar planks. "I sent the first half off to my agent, and I'm not usually nervous about feedback, but I'm writing in a new genre, and I guess..." I swallow, and sweat that's been collecting in the dip at my throat makes a ticklish escape down the center of my chest. "I guess I'm worried I sent her a trash fire and she's trying to figure out how to put me down gently."

Forrest makes a scoffing sound, and I look up from where my eyes have drifted to the planes of his stomach. "No way," he says, shaking his head.

"You seem awfully confident for someone who's never read my work," I say.

At this, Forrest takes a long drink of water. Shifts a quarter inch to the left, like it might remove his giant body from my line of sight.

"*Have* you read my work?" I ask, astonished.

His gaze lifts to mine, and for the first time since I met him, he looks nervous about something other than my lack of wilderness know-how. His already flushed cheekbones deepen in color, and he rubs the back of his hand across his sweaty brow.

"You *have* read my work." I gasp, clutching at my towel like I've been exposed. "Which book?" I demand. "*Between Two Worlds? Warmest Regards?*"

For a moment, he bites his lips together, studying me. "Honestly?" he asks, echoing my own uncertain question from earlier. I nod, feeling like I'm standing on the precipice of something I'm too scared to look down at.

He sighs, and his expression turns apologetic. It's my only warning before he takes that final step off the ledge and pulls me with him.

"All of them."

My stomach bottoms out, but the initial shock soon crystallizes into an unfamiliar anxiety. I'm not ashamed of my work. I carefully craft stories designed to provide escape, hope, and pleasure to a well-deserving audience I've been missing more with every passing day. But I never imagined Forrest, aka Dr. Serious McEyebrows who casually pulls in \$2.5 million research grants, would take the time to read all my smutty romance novels. It makes me feel like I've been caught with my pants down, except worse, because I'm not even wearing any.

It begs the panicky question: Has he read *all* of my work? As in my Happily Never Afters too? Does he know about my fall from grace?

"And by 'all of them,'" I say delicately, hoping he doesn't notice the pulse racing in my neck, "do you mean *all* of them?"

His eyes never leave mine. After a very loaded pause, he says, "Yes," and I can hear it in his somber voice. The regret for having pried into the tattered remnants of my career. For finally figuring out why I ran away to Alaska. But there's something else in his voice. A ringing edge to that "yes" that almost sounds angry.

"And?" I ask, my voice barely above a whisper.

That small opening is all he seems to need. His fists clench, and even through the steam, there's no mistaking the rising anger in his eyes. "It's bullshit," he declares. "It's no one's business what you write for yourself, and it's no one's business to punish you for what you've obviously been through. That list of Happily Never Afters was honest and raw, and your readers should have fucking applauded you for it. They don't deserve your words after what they've done, and if your new book is half as good as your other ones, you're giving them way too much."

In the silence following this—outburst? proclamation?—it takes me a few moments to pick my jaw up off my lap before I can even think of responding. Forrest has read my entire backlist. Forrest loves my words. But somehow this is nothing—*nothing*—to how it makes me feel that he loves those words too. The ugly, mean, and wounded ones that I tried hiding away from the world.

In the low, misty light, he's staring at me like a sweat-streaked warrior ready to do battle for my right to tell the truth about chronically limp dicks and late child support. I blink as the corners of my eyes begin to sting. Ever since I arrived in Alaska, I've done my best to shove the fallout of the HNA leak into a tiny box so I could focus on my new book. Until this moment, I hadn't realized how truly exiled I've felt from the world. But having another person in my corner—having *him* in my corner—makes me feel braver. Like I'll be able to leave this retreat from society with my head held high.

"Forrest, I—"

But I stop myself, because the last thing I want to do is accidentally reveal the dangerous rush of emotions that are making my insides feel like a wind turbine. Instead, I say faintly, "I can't believe you read romance novels. You seem more like a *Scientific American* kind of guy."

The tension breaks, and he laughs in surprise. "I am a *Scientific American* kind of guy," he confirms before his smile fades slightly. "But I guess I'm a Margot Bradley kind of guy now too."

I let out a breath of disbelief as my ribs tighten around the sudden unfurling, unspooling, and unfolding happening in the center of my chest. I pull my towel tighter, afraid it might come undone from the expansion happening inside me.

"You never answered my question," I say suddenly, latching on to anything that will take his focus off me.

"Your question?" he repeats, dragging his eyes away from where my hands grip the towel beneath my cleavage.

"Why you couldn't sleep."

His lashes lower. "It's nothing," he says. "Just leftover work stuff from back home."

My insides twist a little. He's been honest with me, hasn't he? On the mental scoreboard I'm keeping, there's a solid one in his column and an unacceptable nothing in mine.

"It's the grant," I say, leveling him with my gaze. "Isn't it?"

It's Forrest's turn to look like he's been hit in the gut with a rubber mallet. "How do you—"

“I saw the email. And before you accuse me of snooping, I’ll have you know it was just up on the computer for anyone to read. I didn’t go searching.”

Forrest wipes a hand down his face. Rubs it across his broad chest like he’s checking for a heartbeat. I do an involuntary Kegel.

“Well, shit,” he says flatly.

“Is that why you couldn’t sleep?”

“Yes,” he admits, exhaling. He brings his feet in closer toward the bench, spreading his thighs a little wider. My gaze drops to where the small towel is slung like a hammock between them. He seems unaware that the opening has parted into a slit up his inner thigh, barely hiding him from view. I know I should look away, and yet, I’ve never tried so hard to develop telekinesis.

After seeming to weigh his words, he goes on. “I asked for more time to make my decision, but there’s... pressure. The organization behind the grant is very eager to make an announcement.”

At the revelation that he didn’t immediately turn the grant down, the bright, unwieldy feeling inside my chest feels like it’s beating its wings against the dark box I’ve crammed it into. A small, selfish voice inside of me begins chanting, *Take the grant. Take the grant. Take the grant*, like I’m casting a spell.

“What will you do?” I ask, trying so hard to be impartial that I sound like a too-cool teenager asking if my crush is going to the mall this weekend.

Forrest’s throat works in a hard swallow. “I have to turn them down.”

“But your work,” I say, a hint of desperation bleeding into my voice. “It’s important, Forrest. I’m sure there’s a way to help Trapper and—”

“Would you leave Savannah?” he cuts in.

I feel the trapped thing in my chest crumple in on itself, cringing away from the question. “No,” I whisper.

He nods tightly, and I don’t fully understand why my disappointment is so crushing. I already knew this was the decision he’d make. More than that, I understand probably better than anyone why he has to make it. The heat is obviously getting to me. Even if he did move back to California, it’s not like we’d be anything more than we are now. I have Savannah and the burning trash flotilla of my career to take care of.

But for once in my life, even that doesn’t feel like enough.

“I guess it’s settled, then,” I say, wiping a rolling bead of sweat from my temple. “You should email them back tonight. No point torturing yourself.” I look at the door of the sauna, suddenly wanting to escape. “Anyway, I should probably head back. It’s late.”

I stand, leaving a wet, ass-shaped stamp on the hot planks of wood where I’ve been sitting. To my alarm, Forrest stands too. My head swims as I stare at him, watching rivulets of moisture snake down his torso with every breath he takes. His high cheekbones are flushed, his eyes dark.

“Work isn’t the only thing making it hard to say no,” he says in a low rush. Like it’s been yanked from him.

I’m lightheaded. It has to be the heat. Still, I make no move toward the door.

“What is it, then?” I say as my pulse begins pounding in my ears. I swear I can feel every individual bead of sweat on my body. The feeling in my chest is putting up a fight again, pushing against the walls I’ve constructed around it to protect myself.

Forrest shakes his head, jaw muscles jumping. “It doesn’t matter. I’ll have to settle for my own Happily Never After.”

My eyes lift away from the contrast of his olive skin and the bright white of the towel. How tightly he’s gripping it. I can barely hear myself think over the throb of my blood. I want him. I want him to touch me so I’ll forget about losing him. We have three weeks left together. Isn’t that better than nothing? I’m desperate. High on his ridiculous evergreen-scented sweat and his big romance hero body and his forest-green gaze and every other silly trope he puts to shame. It’s why my hands are sliding up the warm terry cloth of my towel, almost without my permission.

“There’s another option, you know,” I say, my heart beating against my chest like it’s trying to make a prison break.

“Tell me,” he says hoarsely, taking a step closer.

I hook a shaking finger into the spot where my towel is tucked above the swell of my breasts. The fabric is tight and damp from my sweat and the steam. All my red tape is waving like banners in the wind behind me, but all I can see is him. As the fabric gives a little, the thing in my chest flares hot enough to burn down every wall around it. Forrest’s eyes drop to my hand, his full lips parting like his entire

future depends on what I'm about to do. Heart in my throat, I give one firm tug, and the towel falls. "Happy for right now."

"Jesus Christ," he rasps, his eyes roaming over me wildly. He moves in close, and I'm struck anew by how much larger he is than me. "Happy for right now?" he repeats as one of his hands comes to cradle my upturned jaw.

I nod, my breath shortening to small, quick gulps as his thumb glides over my cheekbone. "Just till I leave," I negotiate. "We'll keep it simple."

"There's nothing simple about this," he argues, but his thumb has moved to the corner of my mouth. His long fingers are trailing down my neck, making my nipples pinch. "We said we wouldn't do this."

"I did try to walk out," I say, shifting closer to him. I watch a bead of sweat slide from his throat into his chest hair as his thumb begins stroking my bottom lip, and I know the scales have tipped for him too. That the pain of fighting this has become more unendurable than the fear of giving in. Still, I ask him, "Should I try again?"

"No," he says quickly, stepping in so close, my breasts brush beneath his chest. We both suck in a harsh breath, and as my lips part, a sudden nonnegotiable need to taste him coaxes my tongue out. I tentatively lick the salty pad of his lingering thumb, and the sound he makes is tortured.

Slowly, I close all remaining space between us, looping my arms around his toweled waist. Forrest curses as he looks up at the ceiling slats, but he doesn't pull away. Instead, the thumb I'm kissing eases slowly but purposefully into my mouth. Lightning cracks through my stomach, striking hard and hot between my legs. Looking up at him through my lashes, I rake my bottom teeth against his calloused skin before sucking slowly. He makes a deep, soft groan as his other hand slides to my lower back, pulling me tighter against him. I can feel whatever he's working with angled down against the towel between us, pressing hard into my belly and beyond my hip bone like a steel bar.

I gasp lightly around his thumb, and he drags it from my mouth down to my chin. He pinches it firmly and tilts my face up, his eyebrows drawing together as if they could summon thunder. When he speaks, his voice is deep and coarse. "You really think 'happy for right now' will be enough? Three weeks of this and then *nothing*?"

The wild, untamed feeling in my chest escaped the moment he touched my face. Now it's vibrating in every cell of my body, throbbing with two words: *never enough. Never enough.* My teeth skim my bottom lip, trying to scrape the last taste of him into my mouth. "It has to be enough."

His eyes search mine, moving back and forth between them like he's looking for another option. "Fucking hell," he says with a desperate catch in his voice. The hand on my back becomes a bracing forearm, and then he's jerking me up on my tiptoes, bending me backward as his mouth comes down against mine. My arms go up, circling his warm neck to pull myself even closer. The last week without his kiss has been a torment. The last *thousand* weeks without his kiss have been a torment. The hand that isn't gripping my waist slides into my hair, supporting my head and neck, and my knees turn to liquid. For all his strength, I feel him trembling too. Like a man deprived, he catches his lips against mine in quick, frustrated presses, unable to get what he needs fast enough. I open up for him in response, needing him deeper, and every stroke of his tongue and sharp nip of his teeth is like a warning: *You asked for it, so now you'll get it.*

Hot lips and scraping teeth move down my neck, and I throw my head back, letting him support me completely. When he reaches my collarbone, his tongue dips into every smooth hollow, and my hips jerk against him. The towel is a frustrating barrier between us, and I realize I'm not beyond trying to hump it off him. But then he's pulling me up straight again, and before I can protest, he kneels at my feet.

"Oh God," I breathe, sucking in my bottom lip as his beautiful face comes level with my breasts. I'm a shaking, sweaty mess in front of this man, who's looking at me like he knows exactly what I need and is honored to give it to me. Of course he is. I went on an unsuspecting pilgrimage to the Alaskan bush and somehow found the holy grail of hot, considerate men. For once, I don't feel like rolling my eyes. I'm delirious with wanting every mind-blowing, back-to-back, soul-freeing climax that romance books have taught me to expect from men like this, or my money back.

When his lush mouth brushes over one nipple and then the other, my whole body spasms. "Jesus, Margot," he grinds out. "Just look at you."

And I do. I can't stop watching the way he moves over me, my hips grinding helplessly against his thick chest when he finally sucks me into his mouth. My toes curl painfully against the hot slats as I arch and gasp.

"Fuck," he hisses when he releases me, licking his way to the other side like my salty skin is the most delicious thing he's ever tasted. "*Fuck*," he growls louder, his hands sliding to roughly grip my ass before he pulls my other nipple deep into his mouth.

"*Forrest*," I gasp, my hands struggling to slide into his coarse, tangled hair. "Please..."

He draws me out before letting go with a soft *pop* and looks up at me. He's breathless, every line of his body tense and hungry for me. "You need me lower, sweetheart? Just tell me."

Sweetheart. God, why do I love that so much? Maybe because no one's ever thought of me as sweet. But the way he's staring at me makes me feel like molten sugar, and I nod frantically, making a sound like *uhhn* that will have to pass for yes. His hands slide back to my hips, and to my faint surprise, he guides me gently away from him. I take two wobbly steps back before my ass hits the hot door, and I'm surprised it doesn't sizzle.

"Oh," I say faintly as the distance between us allows me to get a good look at him on his knees. His chest rises and falls quickly, his abdominals contracting with every breath. Below them, the Little Towel That Could seems to be clinging to his hips by sheer will alone, but has split open to partially reveal him. I'm not sure what sound I make. As I take in every thick inch that's worked its way free, I have only one thought: *Dax*. My most generously, beautifully endowed character. Staring at Forrest is like looking at my most improbable dreams come to life, and suddenly, my self-consciousness springs into action.

Just like the heroes in my books, he's too perfect. I've never been with someone so gratuitously attractive. It's why romance heroes need to stay safely within their pages, where they can't take innocent, horny women unawares in Alaskan saunas. My arms cross over my body as I squirm under his gaze, and the drunken, glazed look in his eyes vanishes.

"Margot, no," he pleads, coming slowly forward on his knees.

“Don’t you dare grovel! It’s too much,” I protest as he gently peels my hands away, pressing kisses to every area I’ve tried to hide. “You’re too much for me.”

“Christ, how do you think I feel?” He inhales and glides his nose against my belly. “So beautiful,” he murmurs so low I barely hear him. “Can’t fucking breathe when I look at you.”

My own breath hitches in my chest as his tongue catches a bead of condensation slowly rolling between my breasts. His hands tighten on my hips, his thumbs drawing slow circles on my slick skin.

“Please, Margot,” he whispers, looking up at me. “Please let me.”

I don’t need clarification. His hands are already tugging, drawing my hips off the sauna door. My shoulder blades press harder against the scorching wood as I tilt for him, nodding my permission. “Yes,” I say. “*Yes.*”

Forrest exhales his relief against my breasts before slowly sitting back on his heels. As he does, the towel finally gives up its valiant efforts and falls away. I can only gape at the sight of him, completely naked and kneeling before me. But then he plants open-mouthed kisses on my trembling thighs, on the creases of my groin, everywhere but where I need him, and all I can do is hold on to his shoulders for dear life.

“Please,” I beg in a hoarse whisper, my hands sliding up his neck into his hair, gripping.

He doesn’t seem to hear me. His slow, teasing licks and kisses continue, and I’m about to repeat my plea when one of his big hands wraps completely around my right ankle. It begins to slide up slowly, making a light, teasing trail up the back of my calf while his kisses draw ever closer to where I ache the most. I’m panting, arching my hips to no avail, when his hand finally reaches the back of my knee. When he smoothly picks up my leg and places my foot on the bench beside the door, I can’t help my gasp.

“Is this okay?” he asks, looking up at me from where he’s licking my newly opened inner thigh.

Is it *okay*? Is *oxygen* okay? It feels incredible, and he hasn’t even touched me yet. I’ve never felt so vulnerable, exposed, or powerful in all my life.

What comes out is a breathless “Uh-huh.”

He smiles like he's heard my thoughts, and then his hand is back. This time it's moving up my other leg, as slowly as before. It's just like him to approach foreplay with the same careful attention he gives everything else in his life, and if it didn't feel so maddeningly good, I'd probably slap him to go faster. When he finally places the softest kiss on top of where all my need radiates from, I'm so worked up I nearly buck into his face. "Oh my God," I say, eyelashes fluttering at the ceiling.

"Fuck," he says in a reverent voice. "You're so ready for me, aren't you? So fucking perfect."

He kisses me again, but this time he lingers. Gently rubs his full lips back and forth across me until I feel myself open for him. His slowly sliding hand is up to my mid thigh when I begin to tremble. I've never been teased like this before—until I'm almost feral with need. At the first hot stroke of his tongue, I have to bite back a scream. When he sucks my clit tight between his warm lips, I ascend to a higher plane. In my delirium, I swear I'll let us both die of heat exhaustion before I ever let him take his perfect mouth off me again.

Thankfully, he isn't a man built for half-measures. When I arch even farther off the door, grasping his hair, calling his name, the lid on his own hunger blows off. He buries his gorgeous face against me, breathing me in, lapping me up. With every rough grunt, he tells me he fucking loves this. That he would happily drown in this. I think, *This is it. This is when we both lose our everloving minds*, but then his hand betrays him. His fingers, which have been steadily moving in their upward journey, finally tease the outside of my opening with the barest featherlike stroke, and I realize he's in complete control.

My sharp cry severs the last threadbare wisp of restraint I've been holding on to. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I realize I don't need to hold it together anymore. All this time, I've been running constant risk assessments, worrying about what will or won't happen next between us. But tonight Forrest has taken all of it out of my nervous, desperate hands, and when I let go at last, my bent knee falls open even wider for him. It's like he planned the whole thing. He probably did. In one thick push, his fingers fill me, and every thought in my brain contracts to a sharp, silent white dot before my world detonates.

My entire body arcs with a hoarse, wild cry, but Forrest only works me harder, praising me for being *so good, so sweet, so tight*. His hand is a blur below me, his

mouth humming against me with his own low moans until the rhythmic pounding of my orgasm begins to wane and I'm jerking limply against him, small, hiccupping gasps escaping on every other breath. And still, he doesn't stop. He licks me clean like I'm his favorite flavor, and when I can't take it anymore, he pulls his fingers from me and cleans those too.

I can't speak. I can barely breathe. I'm drenched, my hair plastered across my face and body like I've survived a hurricane. I feel myself slowly collapsing into a heap. But because romance heroes always catch heroines, I'm gracefully scooped and pulled into his lap with one smooth movement. Cradled against his warm chest, I'm a woman transformed. Never again will anyone catch Margot Bradley scoffing at a trope. If I were wearing a bodice, I'd rip it myself.

As I slowly float back to earth, I realize Forrest is kissing me, pressing slow, adoring lips to my sweaty hairline, my temple, my still-panting mouth. In his arms, I'm a shoelace being untied with one long, slow pull. My heavy eyelids open, and I find his gaze. What I see there should scare me, but when his deep voice asks, "Have you had enough?" the only thought pulsing through me is the same one that thrummed through me before.

Never enough. Never enough. Never enough.

FORREST

F*orrest? Are you there? Please come in."*

The shrill blip of the walkie-talkie in the vestibule may as well be a signal from outer space. I ignore it. Continue trailing water from my fingers over Margot's lips, her graceful neck, and the rapid rise and fall of her chest as she recovers her breath.

"Forrest? Hello? Really need to talk. Come in, Forrest."

Margot's eyes flutter open. "Was that... Am I hearing things?"

I don't know. Processing extraneous sound isn't one of my abilities right now.

"FORREST, I CAN SEE THE LIGHT ON IN THE SAUNA, I KNOW YOU'RE IN THERE. COME IN."

At Jo's commanding voice, I jolt with the spine-buzzing alarm of a middle schooler caught making out with his girlfriend in the basement. I take in the mess of towels and the tangle of our limbs on the floor. Margot sits up, too, her eyes snapping to mine. "That definitely wasn't in my head," she says.

Biting back a curse, I gently separate myself from her. "Wait here," I say, pressing a quick kiss to her forehead. I stand and go to the door, leaving quickly so Margot won't be blasted by the chilly air in the vestibule. And by chilly, I mean cryogenic. I repress a yelp and cup myself as my balls try to migrate permanently into my stomach. *Shit, it's cold out here.* I do an awkward half-jog to the walkie, goose bumps contracting all across my body. *Goddammit.* There's no reason for

Jo to need me at—what time is it, even? Grumbling and shivering, I pick up the walkie and press the button. “I’m here, Jo.”

“Oh, thank goodness!” Jo’s voice crackles through. “What the hell are you doing in there? I was beginning to think you’d given yourself heatstroke!”

“Uh, no,” I say, rubbing the back of my neck. “Sorry. What’s up?”

“No time to explain. Just get over to your dad’s room, quick.”

At the urgency in her voice, a hundred worst-case scenarios fan out in my mind like the world’s most terrifying deck of cards. All irritation disappears as guilt swallows me whole. I moved to Alaska to be on call for my dad, but instead of being at the ready, I’m stark naked in a sauna, losing my goddamn mind over the very woman I swore not to get involved with. How long has Jo been trying to reach me? Has my dad been hurting and needing my help? And what can I even do if he is? Ever since moving back, I’ve been dreading this moment, knowing that despite all my medical experience, there may be little I can do in this remote location beyond basic care. Panic sluices through me, extinguishing all thoughts of further pleasure. I’ll have to explain the situation to Margot and hope she’s willing to wait in my cabin until I’ve sorted everything out. With some semblance of a plan forming, I let out a short exhale.

“I’m on my way.”



Naturally, Margot refuses to stay behind.

“But did Jo *say* anything was wrong?” she asks as we hastily climb the steps to the lodge, both sweaty beneath all our winter gear.

“She didn’t need to,” I say tersely, holding out the door for her.

“Because you’re telepathic?”

“Because she wouldn’t radio me at one in the morning if there wasn’t an emergency.”

“You don’t know that,” Margot argues, but I can tell from the anxious pitch of her voice that she’s as scared as I am. Despite the stress of the moment, her genuine concern for my family feels like a fist squeezing my heart. I try my best to

focus as we jog through the dark first floor of the lodge to the staircase, climbing the wide steps side by side until Margot stops abruptly.

I turn to look at her. "What is it?"

"I just—" She glances up at me. "They're going to know we were together, Forrest."

This has occurred to me as well, and while I'm fully aware that my dad might pull a sheaf of wedding brochures right out from under his orthopedic butt cushion when he sees us together at this hour, merciless matchmaking is the least of my concerns at the moment. As long as my dad's okay enough to tease me, I'll take it.

"They'll consider it an early Christmas gift. Come on," I say, reflexively holding my hand out to her.

At Margot's hesitation, I immediately worry I've crossed some invisible line that's been drawn at hand-holding. Which, after the things I did to her in the sauna, should feel ridiculous but somehow doesn't. It's an intimacy I'm intentionally unfamiliar with. But then her hand is in mine, and I exhale as she slots her slender fingers between my much larger ones. Her chest rises and falls, and I know we're feeling the same thing—that facing this won't be so bad if we're together. She looks up from our intertwined hands to give me a brave smile. "Let's go."

When I knock on my father's door, I half-expect her to let go of me, but her thumb strokes mine, and my heart does an embarrassing sort of pirouette. Before I can read too much into it, the door begins to open. I brace myself for whatever catastrophe awaits me, my mind running split-second dry runs of every lifesaving medical procedure I've ever learned. But Jo's face appears, and she's... *smiling*?

"Finally!" she booms, her eyes going round when she sees I'm not alone. "And Margot too! Oh, this is just *wonderful*! Come on in, you two, come on in." Jo backs into the room, her long flannel nightgown swinging merrily as she holds the door for us. I look around, still expecting to have a coronary embolism at the sight of my father lying in a crumpled heap on the floor. Instead, he's sitting up in bed, looking alert and comfortable.

"Jo radioed," I say uncertainly as Scout gets up and pads over from his bed to greet us. "Everything okay, Dad?"

He looks pointedly at Margot's and my interlocked hands. "Never better," he says, laughing. "Took you long enough, son."

Heat creeps into my face, but I don't loosen my hold on Margot's hand. "It's late. Is there a reason you called?" I ask, irritation quickly replacing fear now that it's clear he's okay.

At my tone, Jo comes to sit beside my dad, sliding her fingers into his unresponsive left hand. "Show them, Trap," she urges gently.

My eyes zero in on Dad's hand, and I grip Margot's tighter. I'm convinced I'm imagining it when his middle finger twitches, then shakily curls over the back of Jo's hand. His other fingers follow until he's holding her hand in a weak but determined clasp.

"Oh my God, Trapper!" Margot exclaims. She gives my hand a final squeeze before slipping hers out of my grasp and hurrying over to my dad and Jo. She drops down to cover both their hands with hers, radiating happiness for my family, and a band that's been around my chest snaps. In a single moment, all my fear over her intentionally hurting the lodge with a bad review vanishes. *How did I ever think she was remotely like Charlotte?* Beneath all her protective layers, she cares. She's all the warmth and light I've needed in this cold, dark place, though I can hardly bear to witness it. I'm rooted to the spot while a nameless disappointment stretches bitter branches through me.

The feeling doesn't obey logic. I know this is a major milestone for my father. One that we've worked countless grueling hours for in our daily PT sessions. I should be thrilled. Over the fucking moon. But knowing how I should feel doesn't stop the only thought pulsing through me: *it's not enough*. Not enough to give me hope that he'll ever walk again, and not enough to give me hope that I'll ever be able to leave his side. The guilt for even thinking of leaving while the one parent I still have is suffering is unbearable. But the truth is, since Margot showed up, I've been hoping for a miracle. A way out. But this victory—the smallness of it—feels like a chain binding me tighter to the future I've committed to. A future that doesn't include California, my lab, my research funding, and most importantly, Margot. I wouldn't have admitted it yesterday—or hell, a few hours ago—but after she let me hold all her trust in my hands tonight, there's no

denying the way I want her goes far beyond “happy for right now,” even if that’s all we’ll ever have.

“Think this calls for some wine,” Dad announces, interrupting my thoughts. “Jo? Will you grab a bottle?”

“I’ll get it,” Margot volunteers with a smile that lights up the whole room. My chest contracts so hard, I wonder if I should use my dad’s blood pressure cuff on myself. After the door closes behind her, the silence lasts approximately point-three seconds before my dad and Jo start talking, completely oblivious to what’s playing out inside me.

“What’d I tell you!” Dad snaps his good fingers and points at me. “He’s always had a thing for blondes.”

“Quick, before she comes back,” Jo says, flapping an impatient hand at me as Scout (clearly done with the late-night human drama) heads back to his bed. “Tell us how it happened! Is it serious? Of course it’s serious. But how will you make it work after she leaves? Would she ever consider staying for good?” Jo gasps and covers her mouth with her hands. “Oh, Lord, what if I scared her off? The way I was yapping at you while you were *intimate*,” she stage-whispers with air quotes, in case I somehow missed her meaning.

Christ. “You two really need a new hobby.”

“Of course she’s not staying here, Josephine,” my dad cuts in, ignoring me. “Margot’s got a whole life back in Los Angeles. What would Savannah do without her?”

At my father’s perfectly sensible words, the disappointment ballooning through me abruptly doubles in size. I know she’s going to leave. It’s not exactly news, but hearing it spoken so plainly after the night we’ve had together feels like a kick to the chest.

My misery must be written all over my face because my father says, “There’s no need to look so glum.” I lift my eyes from my boots to see him smiling softly. “The answer’s easy. It’s time for you to go back to California.”

The room is silent until a husk of a laugh escapes me. “Go back? You know that’s not happening, Dad.”

“And why not?” Jo interjects with a sudden brightness in her dark eyes. “Your father held my hand tonight, Forrest. All your hard work is obviously paying off.

He's had a breakthrough!"

I resist shaking my head, not wanting to minimize his accomplishment. "It's an incredible milestone to reach," I agree, silently dusting off my old bedside-manner training. "But we also know this is a two-steps-forward-one-step-back situation. It's very likely you'll experience some backsliding, Dad, and you still have a long road of PT ahead of you. We're also not out of the woods for a post-traumatic neurological event. We've been lucky so far, but if—"

My dad holds up a hand, shaking his head. "Don't even try it, Forrest. You and I both know if I had a stroke, there'd be nothing you could do for me here but make a fuss."

Hurt and indignation swell inside me right alongside the paralyzing uselessness I feel at his words. He's right, of course, but there's zero part of me that wants to admit it, even to myself. "Make a fuss?" I repeat, while Joe looks nervously between us. "That's what you think I'm doing here?"

My dad makes an impatient sound. "No. What I think you're doing here is letting a misplaced sense of guilt and responsibility dictate your life." He pauses and his gaze on me softens. "What happened back then wasn't your fault, or your responsibility, and neither is this."

At my dad's oblique reference to my mother, my heart seizes up. Up until now, he's gone along with me, letting me use my medical knowledge as a mask for the real reason I'm here. But it's gone now, and all I can say is the simple truth. "I need to be here." I look at him beseechingly. "I... I'm happy to be here."

My father purses his lips, staring at me. "But you can't stay here forever, Forrest. Your whole life's in California."

I shake my head, unable to bring myself to say what I think we've both known for some time: that with every passing day of almost nonexistent gains, the independence we'd hoped to reestablish for him has become less and less likely—right along with my willingness to return to my old life. I'm only thankful I never told him about the grant I was awarded. He doesn't need another reason to feel like he's holding me back.

Dad looks down at his hand, still awkwardly wrapped around Jo's, and I see a tear slip quickly into his mustache. It's the moment when I realize he's been holding out for a miracle too.

“Your mother never would’ve agreed to this,” he says, his voice thick. “Never.”

Regret nearly suffocates me, quickly followed by irrational anger. I want to tell him Mom doesn’t get a say because she’s dead. And instead of spending the last year of her life by her side like I should have, I was thousands of miles away while her cancer spread.

“Losing Mom is exactly why I’m here,” I say too sharply. “I’m not making the wrong choice again.”

Dad’s mustache bristles as his mouth hardens into a thin line.

“But what about Margot?” Jo says, interrupting whatever argument my dad was about to unleash.

I take a breath. “She’s going back to her sister in three weeks.” I make my voice as neutral as I can. “And I’m staying here. Margot understands why.” I pause. “She understands better than anyone.”

At this, all three of us go silent, sifting for any sliver of hope, when the door eases open behind me. I turn, and there she is, holding a bottle of champagne and smiling like the goddamn sun. Her eyes lock with mine, burning me from the inside out, but I can’t look away. Despite all logic, I look at her and feel the shape of my future, the same way I know the warm taste of her skin without touching her.

“Forrest?” she says hesitantly, her smile falling slightly.

Before I can think better of it, the words “Come here, sweetheart” escape me in a low voice.

Because the future is a slippery thing. And even when your plans are cast in stone, and every piece of data points to one bleak conclusion, reckless hope is the last ember to fade into darkness.

MARGOT

Sitting at the desk in the lodge, staring at my computer, I probably look like I'm working. I am not working. In fact, "work" has become a word that technically exists in my vocabulary but has about the same level of personal relevance as the word "bumfuzzled." Although scratch that. Bumfuzzled is pretty much exactly how I feel right now.

I exhale and drop the pen I realize I've been pressing between my eyes, probably leaving an attractive indentation that will be there for hours. Lovely. I check the little desk calendar, hoping I've somehow zoned out long enough for it to be Friday, but no. It's still Tuesday and still three days before Forrest and Trapper return. After his dad's hard-won mobility gain, Forrest took him to Anchorage for a week of testing and physical therapy.

At first I told myself that after we nearly burned down the sauna together, space was exactly what I needed to get control over these feelings that, frankly, make me suspect I've been body-snatched. In my hubris, I even had visions of knocking out the next quarter of my manuscript while he's away. But it's been three days of peace and quiet, and every sentence I've managed to eke out has felt like giving birth through a straw.

I roll out my nine millionth frustrated exhale of the day (it's eight a.m.), and my eyes drag toward the slow Internet-wielding PC that has made me her little bitch. On the screen is a respectable, work-related search results page. But behind this front are twenty-two tabs of shameful Internet stalking.

Before I know it, my hand is on the mouse, cursor hovering over the tabs. I click one at random and immediately recognize it as the article about targeting RCD (regulated cell death) in early stage TNBC (triple negative breast cancer) that Forrest wrote in 2019. Apparently, it was groundbreaking. Apparently, *he* is groundbreaking.

In the three days that I was supposed to write nine thousand words, I've instead spent my time fangirling over Google Scholar articles that I have no hope of comprehending. But my lack of understanding does nothing to dim the awe I feel as I read his articles anyway, silently mouthing words like "clinicopathologic" or "immunohistochemical." Or when I discover that his sudden departure is the sole topic of medical-nerd Reddit.

I sit back in the squeaky leather chair and let out my nine millionth and one exhale of the day, thinking of what he told me the other night: "There's... pressure. The organization behind the grant is very eager to make an announcement." Given everything I've read about the situation, my only response is *No shit*. They'd be heroes for bringing him back. And unfortunately for me, learning how valued he is makes me... feel things. Terrifying things like admiration. Yearning. The urge to sedate him and drag him back to California with me.

Except we both know that's not happening. After leaving Trapper's room, it couldn't have been more clear that Forrest's not leaving Alaska any time soon. But an expiration date is exactly what I *should* want. I don't *do* relationships. I don't *do* romance. In fact, I'm pretty confident a Google search of the words "frigid bitch" would yield my face as the first suggested image.

But that was before he'd admitted to reading all my books. Before he'd held me and called me sweetheart. Now I'm just screwed, and not in the fun way. Because despite my best efforts not to, I miss him already.

I'm not sure how long I've been staring at his article and low-key (okay, high-key) pining, but a soft ping from my email snaps me out of it. I feel a small zing of excitement and nerves at the sight of an email from my agent. I click it at once and find her response to my manuscript. As usual, she opens with what she loved, but as I get to the meat of the email, my eyes catch on the word "However."

However, I feel that the romantic through line of the story is currently stealing the show. And while I'm absolutely trash for your characters' chemistry, after everything that's happened since the HNA leak, I worry no publisher is going to take a risk on another Margot Bradley romance. I realize this would be a significant edit (and I am truly having to force myself to type this out), but I strongly suggest making their relationship completely platonic. Maybe your detective's handsome partner could be happily married?

I reread her words, but they don't get any better the second time. All at once, I feel like I've been dropped right back into the dunk tank of despair I was drowning in before escaping to Alaska. The magnitude of what I've lost hits me anew, coming in flashbacks of everything I used to take for granted. Namely, my fans. Ever since Forrest called them out for not supporting me, I've only felt guiltier for hurting them in the first place.

A swell of shame rolls through my stomach. I think of Jenny Lin_Librarian, who I recognized at my last fateful event because she attended all the others. I remember how I used to come home from every book tour with pockets full of friendship bracelets, cookies with my book covers iced onto them, and countless other thoughtful gifts. How once, there was a tornado warning at a book signing in Austin, Texas, but despite this, I signed books for three straight hours. Would murder-mystery fans brave a tornado for me? I have no idea, but the simple fact is, the romance community is the *best*, and I've lost their trust forever.

I cover my hands with my face. All the hurt and bitterness that fueled my Happily Never After file feels like a poison slowly leeching away, leaving me sick and hollow. There's no sense of self-righteousness to bolster me now, and in my heart, I know why. It's the same reason my cold, hard-ass heroine has been slowly falling for a steadfast Alaskan detective she has no business wanting. For the first time since I stopped believing in Happily Ever Afters, I'm secretly hoping my readers are right, and I've been wrong all along.

A tentative "Hey" in the silence jerks me out of my wallowing, and I look up to see Ollie coming toward me, his usual easy smile slightly tense. Guilt squirms through me. In the last week, I've become an expert in nonanswers and excuses, avoiding him at every turn.

"Hey," I say as he perches on the edge of the desk beside me. "Aren't you and Topher supposed to be climbing... something?"

“We’re heading out in a bit,” he confirms, grabbing a small stone paperweight painted like a salmon to fiddle with. “Wanted to catch you before we left, though.” He gestures at the computer with the salmon rock. “I know the inspiration’s been flowing, but I thought maybe tonight after dinner, you’d want to hang?”

I take a deep breath, gathering the courage to say what I should have said days ago. He’s been nothing but kind and patient with me and doesn’t deserve to be strung along.

“Ollie, look. I really like you, and your offer was flattering... but I can’t.” I force myself to maintain eye contact and watch as disappointment passes over his features. “It’s not because I don’t like you or—”

“It’s Forrest,” he interrupts, looking down at the paperweight. “You don’t have to explain.”

I stare at his profile, a jolt going through me at his frankness. I hesitate, then decide on honesty. “Partly, yes. But we’re only—” *Friends with questionable boundaries? Mutually consenting adults with a newly discovered sauna fetish?* I flush, struggling to complete my sentence because I honestly don’t know the answer. Eventually, I settle on a lame “It’s complicated.”

A faint snort leaves Ollie’s nose, and I’m fully aware that “complicated” is exactly what he offered to help me avoid.

“I guess I get it,” Ollie says, looking back over at me. “He’s got that whole ‘I know I look like an NFL quarterback, but I’m just a humble doctor genius’ thing going for him.” He uses air quotes and a mock baritone to imitate Forrest.

“It’s not that,” I say defensively. *Or not only that.* “He’s much closer to my age, and we...” I pause, thinking of how he dropped everything to go to Anchorage for his father. “We have a lot in common.”

“It’s fine,” Ollie says. “Am I bummed? Duh.” A corner of his mouth lifts ruefully. “But mostly, I just want you to be careful. I said I like you, and I meant it. Even if we can only be friends without benefits.”

“Careful?” I repeat, my eyebrows drawing together. “About Forrest?”

Ollie stops spinning the stone. He looks down at it but doesn’t say anything.

“Is there something you want to tell me?” I ask, as the fine hairs of my arms raise.

Ollie lifts a hesitant shoulder. "I'm not one for spreading gossip," he begins ominously. "But you should know you're not the first guest at North Star Lodge who's fallen for Forrest. I'd hate for you to get hurt, too, is all."

The composure I've maintained ripples like a rock has been chucked into it. "What are you talking about?"

He looks at me with genuine remorse, which only makes my spine go stiffer.

"I only know because of Topher," he says apologetically. "His family's tight with Forrest's, and I guess a few years ago, some travel influencer left a Yelp review after she stayed here. What she said about Forrest was *not* chill. She raked him over the coals for hooking up with guests and leading her on. It really impacted the lodge's bookings for a while."

Ollie's words roll over me, slowly flattening out whatever tenuous hope had begun to grow. Is it true? Did this unknown woman open her heart to Forrest only to realize she was one of many? She was clearly hurt so badly that she felt justified in eliciting revenge. Am I setting myself up for the same injury? My mind isn't so much jumping to conclusions as riding a heat-seeking missile toward them. And still I don't want to believe it. I was just beginning to trust Forrest, and it felt... monumental. Like I could finally lay my armor down because he'd proved me wrong: that good, accountable men really do exist outside of novels. That somehow I'd done the impossible and found someone even better than a romance hero.

But as it turns out, I think bitterly, impossible is exactly what this fantasy ever was.

"I'm really sorry, Margot," Ollie says, reaching out to put a hand on my shoulder. I feel so brittle, I'm surprised I don't shatter. "Maybe talk to him first? Give him the benefit of the doubt?"

"Right," I say through bloodless lips.

Ollie's face falls. "Shit. I didn't mean to upset you."

I force a small smile as frost spreads throughout my chest. "It's fine. I'm glad you told me."

He frowns doubtfully. "Well, I'm here for another week. If you want company as just, you know, friends, I'm around."

I nod as he releases my shoulder with a final squeeze. “Sure,” I say, my eyes flicking up to his. “Have a good hike.”

“Always do,” he says, smiling.

He slides off the desk, setting down the salmon stone with a gentle click against the wood.

“Hey, Ollie?” I say before I think better of it.

“Yeah?”

“You don’t happen to know the name of that influencer, do you?”

He looks at me, chewing his lip. After a moment, he nods. “Charlotte Bard.”

We say goodbye again, and I force myself to wait until the front door has closed behind him before waking up the old PC. My throat is tight, palms sweaty, as I type her name into Google. I’m almost hoping the Internet stops working, but naturally, the satellite signal is clear as a bell. The page loads, and I’m immediately assaulted with images of a stunning woman with platinum blond hair and dark roots, whose job is clearly to be as #aesthetic as possible.

I find her website and click. The homepage is trendy, with a banner reading *Charlotte Uncharted* and a huge photo of her licking gelato next to the Trevi Fountain in Rome. Ignoring the hot, prickly surge of jealousy this inspires, I find the search bar and type in “North Star Lodge.” It’s another second—why isn’t the Internet *always* this fast?—to pull up the review she wrote.

My gut takes another wallop as I see her in a photo at the top of the post, posing next to the big stone fireplace I currently sit ten feet away from. I glance up, half expecting her to be there, cackling at me between licks of gelato. I don’t want to read this woman’s words. I don’t want a new chapter of disillusionment in my life. But I have to know.

Hello Darlings!

I hope you’ve been warmer than me, and by that, I don’t just mean temps. For the last week, I’ve been in Middle of Nowhere, Alaska, trying to find out if the rising trend of remote adventure resorts is worth experiencing. So without further ado, here’s the Char Report for North Star Lodge:

0 out of 5 Chars

That's right, folks. My first ever zero out of five. Trust me when I say I did not make this decision lightly, but in the face of what I experienced, zero Chars was my only option. For those with sensitivities to blatant unprofessionalism, TMI about my sex life, and world-class assholery, turn back now. You've been warned.

Stomach clenching, I scroll beyond another gorgeous photo of Charlotte posing on the snowy porch to get to the next paragraph.

Okay, friends, grab your popcorn. One week ago, Dr. Forrest Wakefield picked me up from Anchorage to drive me to his family's lodge, and ladies and gentlemen, I'm not ashamed to admit that I was instantly smitten. For a girl who's been around the world and seen it all, Forrest checked all the boxes. In fact, once we'd established that my interest wasn't one-sided, he checked boxes I didn't even know I had, okay? Every moment I spent with this man made me think I was living in a snow-dusted made-for-TV movie. He made me think he felt the same way. But that was until yesterday, when it was time for me to leave, and instead of accepting my phone number (like a decent human being), Forrest informed me that he thought a clean break would be best.

Now, maybe he assumed I'm the kind of girl who has a fling in every place I travel to (I'm not). Maybe he assumed I wouldn't catch feelings for him or find out about the string of guests he's left brokenhearted (wrong). Maybe he assumed there wouldn't be repercussions for leading me on, or for his complete lack of professionalism (wrong again). And sure, maybe things between us started out casual. Maybe I could have been clearer about my growing feelings. But ultimately, I feel used. Heartbroken. One of who knows how many guests he's hooked up with and discarded.

To add insult to injury, my experience at North Star has been not only subzero, but subpar as well. Between having to hike to the main lodge for every barely edible meal, and the overly rustic Lincoln Log accommodations, this trip has felt less like a cozy retreat and more like an exile from society. And maybe that's what some people are looking for, but it certainly isn't me.

Lastly, since I'm an influencer with a predominantly female readership, I want this to be a warning to any woman still thinking of booking a trip here. The proprietor's son who seems too good to be true? He isn't.

xx, Char

Quickly, I exit the browser and sit back in the office chair, heart pounding. I realize that up until now, I've been waiting for the other shoe to drop. It's all I've ever known from the men in my life. But even with my record-low expectations, having proof that Forrest is no better than the rest of them doesn't hurt any less.

A small, desperate part of me is clinging to the inconsistent details she mentioned about the food and accommodations here at North Star, since my own experience has been so different. I want to believe she might have made everything else up too. But why on earth would she lie? What would she gain from being so malicious? And most painful of all, why didn't Forrest tell me about this? My stomach curls around a knot of hurt at the question. After reading all my Happily Never Afters, he knows how hard it is for me to trust anyone. He *should* have known I'd want to hear about this from him first. But he didn't tell me. And now, without his side of the story, I have to take Charlotte's word for it.

I drop my face into my hands but tell myself I'm glad. That I'm better off finding out before my heart got even more involved. By the time he gets back in a few days, maybe I'll believe it.

FORREST

It's incredible how quickly you can tell someone's pissed at you. Thanks to this evolutionary superpower, it takes me less than a second after returning from Anchorage to understand that the only welcome home I'm likely to receive from Margot is a detailed instructional pamphlet on how to fuck off.

It's problematic, because ever since the sauna, the attachment hormones I've been desperately trying to repress have decided they're moving in and putting up fucking wallpaper. Naively, I actually believed going to Anchorage would help me get some control over them. But this feeling in my chest has only gotten more settled in the last week. Margot has a home inside me now, even if it's just for the next two weeks, and the idea that she might not want it chafes so deep I can barely breathe.

Unfortunately, I haven't had a second to talk to her about it. From the moment I got back, I've been inundated with settling my dad back into his rooms, preparing for tonight's snowstorm, and making dinner for eight hungry people so that Jo can have a break, all while feeling like there's a freshly sharpened ax dangling above me. But thankfully, dinner's over, and I no longer have a table full of people watching as I try to break the icy wall of polite formality Margot has put between us.

"Hey," I say to her profile as she loads her plate on top of the others.

"Yes?" she says without looking at me. Her tone is curt—the same as when she asked me to pass the goddamn rolls, and nothing like the warmth she used while

planning her cozy fucking Scrabble rematch with Ollie.

“We need to talk,” I say more brusquely than I intended. “Please,” I add.

She takes a breath and lowers her shoulders like she’s been preparing for this moment. I’m bewildered, mind clawing for what I did, when she finally looks at me. “Let’s go to your place.”

I nod, wanting to feel relieved, but she turns from me without another word. She’s silent on the cold, dark walk from the lodge. Silent when we reach my place and take off our outerwear. Silent as she perches on my couch like she doesn’t plan to stay long. I hurry to light the fire, my anxiety building with every sharp pop and crackle of burning wood. Until finally, I turn to her.

“Well?” I blurt. “You want to tell me what I did? Why you won’t even look at me?”

It comes out like I’m the one who’s pissed, and I want to staple my tongue down. I’m not pissed. I’m scared and jealous as hell, but I can barely tell the difference right now. Her light-brown eyes narrow at me, and I know I should sit down next to her, but I’m too nervous. I cross my arms instead.

“I think the real question,” she counters, crossing her arms right back, “is whether you were ever going to tell me about Charlotte.”

My tapping fingers freeze against my ribs as her words deliver the relief of understanding what’s wrong, and horror because—*shit*. My shirt begins suffocating me as I mentally scan words I wish I didn’t have memorized, this time from Margot’s perspective.

“Charlotte,” I repeat hoarsely. “You read her review.” *And I bet I know who showed it to her.*

Margot’s eyes drop to her hands, which have twisted in her lap so tightly, her knuckles are white. “Yeah, Forrest. I read it.”

Goddamn it, Ollie. Half-panicked, I take a step forward, needing her to look at me. When she doesn’t, I automatically kneel down to be at her level, and her eyes widen in surprise.

“You’re right. I should have told you about Charlotte sooner, and I’m sorry I didn’t. But you need to know there’s more to this story than what was in that blog post,” I say, summoning all the loyal earnestness of a golden retriever. “I’ll tell you everything if you’ll let me.”

“I think her review said it all,” Margot shoots back, but her bottom lip is trembling. “Honestly, I don’t know why I’m upset. You’ve read my *Happily Never Afters*. You know I got canceled for not believing in fairy tales. You’d think —” She stops and closes her eyes for a moment. When she looks at me again, all the hurt she’s tried locking away is still there. “You would think I’d have learned this lesson too many times to be surprised by another asshole in good-guy clothing. But I guess you really had me fooled, Forrest. Bravo.”

Her voice hitches on my name, and everything in me wants to reach out and pull her close. Knowing I gained her fiercely guarded trust only to have it broken over *this* is intolerable, but I try to hold my focus.

“You’ve only heard her side of it,” I say firmly. My whole body is tense, practically vibrating with the need to explain myself.

Margot pulls back from me. “So you’re saying she was lying?”

“No. Not about everything, but she made some pretty big assumptions and omitted quite a fucking lot,” I say, unable to fully muscle down my bitterness. I run a hand through my hair and take a breath. Apparently, I’m not above begging on my knees for this woman. “Please, Margot.”

I wait, completely at her mercy until she gives me the smallest nod to go on. I exhale.

“I did have a very short-lived relationship with Charlotte Bard,” I confirm. “Like you read in her review, I made the inexcusable mistake of agreeing to sleep with her. But unlike what she wrote, I’d never crossed that line with a guest before, and haven’t since, until—” I stop, meeting her gaze, and I know we’re both remembering the sauna. My eyelashes do the equivalent of a stutter, and I take a breath. “It was completely unprofessional, she ended up hurt, and I take full responsibility for the consequences.”

“I’m not following,” Margot says, her arms tightening across her light pink sweater. “How is this you *not* using her and leaving her? Why would she say you did the same thing with other guests, too, Forrest? Who am I supposed to believe?”

It’s an indicator of how fucking bad I’ve got it for Margot that even in the depths of the doghouse, I can’t help admiring her fierce protectiveness for a woman she’s never met. Charlotte, no less—a woman who, for a time, made my

life feel like a porta-potty she'd used, knocked over sideways, and then kicked down a hill. Suddenly, I feel like I need to be sitting for this conversation.

"Do you mind if I—?" I ask, glancing at the seat next to Margot. After a moment, she nods again. "I know right now it seems like her word against mine. I don't blame you for taking her side, and I'm not denying the role I played." I carefully fold myself onto the love seat without touching her. "But I swear she's the only guest I've ever been with up until now, and I regretted getting involved with her almost immediately."

Margot rolls her eyes. "Is that the gentlemanly way to say she was a bad lay?"

"It wasn't about that," I say neutrally, refusing to skip into *that* particular minefield. "After that first night, she became... demanding. Petty. Unforgivably rude to my dad and Jo." I pause, interlacing my sweaty hands between my knees and corralling bitter memories. "Whatever initial attraction I'd felt disappeared, but when I tried pulling away, Charlotte made it clear that keeping her happy was the only way the lodge was going to get a good review."

"That's not what she said." Margot shakes her head and looks at me. "She said that *you* used *her*."

I pull in a breath and look down at my hands as my stomach crunches into a denser knot. "And I have no doubt she felt that way. After the night we—" I glance at Margot apologetically, and her lips compress. "She felt attached. I think she hoped I'd feel the same way, and when I didn't, she was hurt. Angry. Told me I owed her a chance, at the very least, and if I didn't give it to her, she'd have something to say about the lack of decency she was treated to."

Margot looks stiff enough to snap, but her eyes are reassessing me. "So you gave her a chance?"

I shrug uncomfortably. "I felt guilty and trapped. I thought maybe she was right, and I didn't want the lodge to get hurt, so I kept trying to rekindle our initial connection, hoping I'd misjudged her." I shake my head. "Obviously, it was a shit plan. I couldn't make myself feel something that wasn't there. So she wrote that blog post about me, falsely criticized North Star while she was at it, and copied it onto every major review site. It took a solid year of damage control for the lodge to regain its footing."

I'm silent after this, unsure what else I could say to help her understand what I went through—what I made Dad and Jo go through—when Margot finally says, “Forrest... that’s unbelievable.”

Her voice is shocked, and I’m so ashamed that I can’t bring myself to look at her. I want to say, *I know*. I’m the one it happened to, and four years later, I can still barely believe it.

“I have emails saved if you want proof,” I tell her. “After she posted that review everywhere, she sent me some pretty uncivil messages. I asked her why she lied about the lodge and all those other guests I supposedly slept with, and she admitted she’d just been angry. But she wasn’t apologetic, and nothing I said persuaded her to take the review down. Apparently, it was her ‘top-performing post.’”

I sigh, pulling a hand over my exhausted face. “I decided to tell my superiors at work what happened, and it was a whole goddamn mess. They interviewed all my coworkers, half of whom are women, to make sure they felt safe working with me. My character has never been more scrutinized, but none of them spoke against me. They were all incredibly supportive.”

Margot is quiet at this, and the cozy fire and thickly falling snow outside seem to exist only to contradict the wire-tight tension stretching between us.

“I don’t know what’s more ludicrous,” she says at last, “what Charlotte did, or the fact that you actually have an explanation for all of this.”

At her words, hope is a guttering flame in my chest. “You believe me?”

Her honey-colored eyes sweep reluctantly to mine. “I don’t want to,” she answers softly. “Ever since getting to Alaska, I’ve been looking high and low for a reason not to trust you, and this...” She shakes her head with a ghost of a laugh. “I thought this was it. In a way, it was almost a relief to have the rose-colored lenses ripped off. Now, though...”

Her eyes are glassy in the firelight, and my heart feels like it’s in a car compactor.

“Now what?” I ask.

She rubs her forehead. “Now I have to believe you. How could I not? You feeling morally obligated to make things work with an entitled manipulator, just because she slept with you, is the most *Forrest* thing I’ve ever heard. It’s the same

reason you didn't try sweeping it under the rug at work, and why everyone still trusted you. The same reason you gave up your whole life to take care of your dad." She shakes her head faintly. "You probably drove Charlotte back to the airport, didn't you? I bet you carried all her luggage too." When I don't contradict her, she takes an unsteady breath and looks down. "I can't believe you found a way to make me trust you even more."

After a moment, her hand slides tentatively onto my knee, and I force myself to focus on her words as all my awareness narrows to our point of contact.

"I don't *do* trust, Forrest," she admits. "It's never been a good fit for me. You understand that, right?"

I'm beginning to. From the little I've gleaned about her absent father and all the fearful, angry mistrust woven throughout her Happily Never After file, I'm beginning to understand why she might be hypervigilant around men. It only makes me feel worse that she had to worry about me too.

Slowly, I lift my hand to her face, and it's like a paint can of relief spills through me when, instead of pulling away, she leans her cheek into my palm. Suddenly, the made-for-Margot room inside my heart has throw blankets and fucking fairy lights.

"I'm never going to be someone you can't trust," I say, making sure she sees me when I say it.

"And by 'never,' do you mean just for now? Until I have to go back to the real world?" she asks, smiling sadly.

"I mean fucking never," I say, as every part of me rebels against the catastrophic idea of losing her, ever. Her eyes widen slightly, and I'm choked with regret for keeping anything from her. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you everything sooner. It's why I was such a dick about anything happening between us. I've always had a rule to keep my hands off guests, and Charlotte gave me a pretty solid reason to never cross that line again."

"Well, I hate to break this to you," she says softly, the corners of her lips lifting as I stroke the barest hint of her dimple, "but you suck at following your own rules."

My fingertips and thumb slip down either side of her neck, and I feel her pulse jump.

“You’re not a guest. You stopped being a guest the second you ran away from Bullwinkle and jumped into my arms,” I argue stupidly. Anything to keep playing this game of slow-motion touching.

Her hand slides almost imperceptibly from my knee to my thigh, and every moment of wishing I hadn’t left her this week throbs through me.

“Not a guest?” she asks, leaning into my touch until my hand is lightly wrapped around her beautiful throat. “Then what am I, Forrest?”

Mine. The word is white-hot in the darkness of my mind, and my hand tightens for one reflexive moment. Her mouth parts as her eyes turn hungry, and I struggle to form other thoughts. With effort, I force myself to let go and explain what I see in her so that she can see it too.

“You’re selfless,” I say, sliding my palm lower, fingers stroking into the dip behind her collarbone. “Fiercely protective, loyal, and kind. So fucking brave.” She shudders at my touch, and her breathing gets quicker. Shallower. “You try to hide it, but you’re so giving underneath it all. You care about my dad, Jo, and even Scout. You’d never do something to hurt them or this lodge.”

“So you’re saying I’m a family friend?” she asks breathlessly, pressing her knees to the side of my thigh. “Hot.”

“It is hot,” I agree. “How many people do you trust with Savannah?”

Her eyelids get heavy as she searches my face, her gaze catching on my mouth. “I’d trust you.”

There wasn’t much space on the couch between us to start, and now it’s practically gone.

“I’m sorry I left you. I’m sorry you had to go through that. For being one more man you thought you couldn’t trust,” I say, my hand drifting to the softest sweater I’ve ever touched. “How long has it been since you read that bullshit?”

“Three days,” she almost whimpers, like it’s been three centuries. Her hand finds mine, pressing it to her cashmere-covered heart like I’m the only one who might soothe it, and yeah, three centuries feels about accurate.

“Who told you?” I ask, like I don’t already know the Shit-stirrer in Chief.

“Ollie,” she confirms, and I feel like a bear yanked on a chain. I’m not thinking when I lift her onto my lap so that she’s facing me. I pull her hips close, and her

pretty mouth opens in a quiet gasp. “He was looking out for me,” she says, her fingers curling into my chest.

“Yeah, I know exactly what he was looking for,” I grumble. At the thought, a sudden, alarming possibility burns acid up my esophagus, and my fingers dig into her tight yoga pants. “You take him up on anything while you were pissed at me, sweetheart?” I ask, my rocky voice betraying me.

Her white teeth snag on her bottom lip, and she shakes her head quickly. “No.”

But her pulse is racing in her neck, and she won’t look anywhere above my chest, despite how close we are.

“And why not?” I ask, trying to maintain some semblance of rational thought as guilt and jealousy tornado through me. The only thing grounding me are her hips, which have started making rocking movements so tiny I doubt she even realizes what she’s doing.

“Because he’s not—” She stops talking, her flush only getting deeper, and Christ, this woman. She feels so fucking good spread wide across my lap, giving in to these feelings neither of us has any business having. Soon enough, I can’t stop my hands from helping her hips along, tugging and pushing until I know she can feel what she’s doing to me.

“He’s not what, sweetheart?”

Her eyes are dark and sweet as maple syrup when she looks up at me. “He’s not you.”

Three short syllables, and I’m flush with victory. Greedy with triumph. I want her to say it again, but she falls forward and presses her forehead to mine like she’s been defeated. Like she knows all about the secret room in my heart with the flowers on the table and the candles going, and she wants in. My eyelids drop like cinder blocks, and despite all good sense, I’m ready to roll out a goddamn welcome mat for her.

It’s slow, the way it starts. A slide of my hand up the back of her sweater, a needy tilt of her hips against me. There’s no ambiguity about what we’re doing now, and I’m on my way to breathless when I ask, “Missed me?”

The side of her nose glides against mine in an imitation of a nod. “Too much,” she whispers, like it’s okay to tell secrets if we’re this close together. And fuck, I

missed her too. Missed how soft she is beneath all her armor and the way I feel when she takes it off for me. But I only have two more weeks left with her. I missed six precious days of this, of *her*, and my urgency to make up for lost time feels spring-loaded.

She must feel it too because her hips start rolling harder against me, seeking friction, and I slide forward on the seat to give her better access. She huffs a breath as she centers herself on what feels like the business end of a baseball bat in my pants, and I can't stop the rusty sound she pulls from me when our lips catch for the first time. It's just a graze, but the tease of her mint ChapStick may as well be a narcotic.

My head falls back onto the couch, unable to support itself when she starts rubbing herself off on me in earnest, her little whimpers warm against my parted lips. My tongue slips into her mouth for one life-stopping moment, and I'm moaning. She's teasing me, her lips brushing mine, teeth nipping, and I want to be a gentleman, but my hand finds the nape of her neck and holds her in place so I can taste her properly.

We're panting, hands seeking and grasping, when she leans back, out of reach. I want to protest, but it dies on my lips when she grabs the hem of her sweater and pulls it off, her long hair cascading down one shoulder.

"Oh, Christ," I groan. It's fine. I'm fine. I'm only having a cardiac event as my eyes fall to her chest, propped up in the same baby blue bra I've been jerking off to ever since I saw it on the floor of her cabin almost a month ago. Yeah, she was never just a guest. She's every one of my dreams come to life. Her vulnerability, her trust, her beauty, her thoughtfulness, and yes, her tits, and if I thought I couldn't get any harder, I'm proven wrong when sitting in pants suddenly becomes impossible.

"Hold on to me," I order her, taking two generous handfuls of her ass as I stand up. She makes a cute little yelp, clinging to my shoulders as her legs wrap around my waist, and I pause because I've been here before. I think of the first time I met her. How she leaped before thinking and how I held her just like this. Stared, dumbstruck, at her just like this. We've come full circle, except this time I'm going to give her exactly what I now know we both secretly wanted that first time.

“Bedroom,” I say thickly, and start walking.

MARGOT

Being wrong? It's the greatest feeling in the world. All the misplaced anger and disappointment that turned my stomach into a cement mixer for three straight days? Worth it. Because there's kissing, and then there's kissing Forrest after a fight. It's like sinking into a hot bath after years of being frozen solid. Like the first meal after running three consecutive marathons. It feels like coming home, and with a stutter in my chest, I realize I've missed him like my own heartbeat.

I spent three days misery-scrolling through Charlotte's blog, beating myself up for ever trusting him, and listening as every fearful part of me formed a bitchy choir to sing "I told you so" at top volume. But somehow, he took that broken trust in his gentle, capable hands and made it even stronger.

He's a *good* man. A throwaway phrase I've never given much thought to because I've never had anyone to apply it to. But now the words sink into me, as soft and deep as his tongue, and I groan from the red-wine-and-clove taste of him. I'm drunk on him. Fucked up on him, and I can't believe we only have two weeks left of this when it feels like we're just beginning. The thought sends an electric shock of urgency down my spine, sparking and crackling until all shreds of my cool are burned to a crisp.

My nails dig into his shoulders as he carries me to the bedroom, and I'm surprised I don't smell burning cotton from where I'm grinding against his cast-iron abdominals. At the thought, I nearly laugh. I've used those exact words to describe romance hero abs before, but Forrest's are even better because they're

real—with hair, and heft, and constellations of dark pinprick freckles I’ve lost sleep thinking about. Every solid inch of his body reflects the habits of a fastidious man who runs and lifts every morning for health instead of vanity. Deep down, I know he cares for himself so that he can care for others, and the ache I’ve been nursing for him all week ratchets even higher.

I want to say that the way we end up on his bed is graceful, but I accidentally scratch him on the face when I yank his shirt off, and his shoulder clocks me under the chin when we tumble in a desperate heap onto the mattress.

“Shit, sorry—” he says, but we’re both laughing, his fingers tracing the underside of my jaw before trailing hungry kisses in their wake.

“Pants,” I breathe, sliding my fingers into his thick hair.

I guess I should have been more specific, because he starts pulling *my* pants down when I very clearly meant *his*. But I don’t protest, because his warm mouth is following their descent, lingering to kiss me over my pale blue underwear. I arch, gasping when the wet heat of his tongue meets me through the thin fabric, but then he’s gone, moving south over my trembling thighs.

He climbs off the bed to yank my yoga pants from me, and in his haste, he only pulls them off one side. They’re dangling from my right foot, but he’s too busy staring at me laid out on his bed to notice, and I can’t be bothered to tell him, because he’s shirtless in a pair of worn-out jeans. It’s a *good* look. In fact, it’s probably the best look anyone has ever had since the invention of fabric.

“God, you fill those out just right,” he says, breaking my trance. Forrest has seen me naked before, and yet the slow circuit his eyes are traveling between my bra and panties almost makes it feel like the first time.

“These old things?” I say with a nervous laugh, sitting up and pulling my foot from my pants. He’s staring down at my chest in its light-blue bra like it’s the hottest thing he’s ever seen.

“I saw this,” he admits in a low rush, stepping closer, “the day you arrived.”

“You saw... hmm?” I say distractedly, lightheaded from the proximity of his flexing stomach, the dark scatter of tiny freckles, and the tidal wave of longing they send through me. For the last week, finishing what we started in the sauna is all I’ve thought about, even while I was mad. Maybe especially while I was mad,

because how *dare* he ruin things before I had the chance to touch him. To taste him.

His calloused fingers slide under my bra straps, fingering the delicate blue lace. When he speaks again, his voice is rough, and my toes curl, knowing I'm not the only one needing to vent. "*This*. You just left it on the goddamn floor for me to see." He hooks his thumbs into the thin, lacy cups and drags them slowly beneath my breasts as my innermost muscles zip tight. "Were you trying to tease me?" His fingers splay over my skin before gathering to my nipples, tugging all too gently. "Torture me?"

I tip my head back and arch into his touch as his words spread a guilty flush across my face. I remember all too well the split-second decision to leave my clothes on the floor of my cabin, knowing he'd see them. In the moment, I'd told myself it was because I was too tired from traveling to bother being neat, and not because I was craving connection with a man I'd just met and was determined to dislike. But of course he saw right through me. Knew I wanted him to feel as overwhelmed by me as I was by him. If I've never been just a guest in his eyes, then he's never been just a proprietor, or a doctor, or a real-life romance hero in mine. He's my match—the other bookend to my story—and the truth is, I want his payback. I want to remind him of every moment I've pressed his buttons and goad him into taking all that pent-up frustration out on me. I've had glimpses of the rougher side he keeps so carefully in check, but tonight I want to make him *snap*.

"What if I did?" I ask, nearly panting as I slide my palms to the thick ridge behind his straining fly. It's the first time I've touched him here, and need whips through me at his size and heat, even through the denim. I lean in closer, unable to resist licking up the coarse length of his tight zipper before slowly easing it down.

A desperate, nearly silent "*Fuck*" escapes him, and my eyes follow his hand as it lifts to his mouth. I don't know what I'm expecting him to do, but when he spits on it, my blood promptly turns to magma, and every empty place inside me starts flashing *Vacancy* signs. It's so unexpected of him—so deliciously crude—that I whimper, eager for whatever's coming next. Fingers gleaming, Forrest finds my nipple again and pinches, rolling the tight bud until the sharp hiss through my teeth comes back out as a moan. He soothes the sting, rubbing me wetly, before moving to the other side.

“Then you have a fucking lot to answer for,” he rasps, right as my fumbling hands manage to yank down his jeans and boxer briefs.

I suck in a breath, my mouth watering as his erection bobs so heavily, so beautifully, that I’m hardly aware of getting off the bed to sink onto my knees. “Then I guess I better get started,” I murmur.

When I put my lips to him, his whole enormous body tenses as he releases a string of expletives that might just bring the ceiling beams down. I adjust my grip, pressing soft, sucking kisses up the broad velvet underside of him. He tastes as good as he looks, and I’m not sure which one of us groans first when I pull him into my mouth.

“Margot—*fuck*,” he hisses unevenly. Every muscle of his stomach contracts as he scrapes long fingers into my hair, and *oh, God*. Every helpless tug he gives sends a clenching ache to where I’m emptiest. When my hands fall away, silently asking him to take control, his groan is a broken thing.

“*Christ*,” he curses deeply, brushing a trembling thumb over the stretched-out corner of my mouth. “Look up at me, sweetheart. Show me it’s good for you.”

I hum my approval as heat floods me, loving the feel of his hand sliding to the back of my head, pressing me closer, until my eyes prick. We both gasp as he pulls back, and moan when he slides back in, electricity coursing through my veins as we find a careful rhythm. His eyes are locked on mine, constantly assessing me, making sure I’m enjoying this. Even as he picks up his pace. Even as he grips my hair tighter. He’s losing it, and my hand slides between my legs, desperate to dull the ache between them. But it’s like he knows, and at the first stroke of my fingers, he pulls away with a strangled curse, cutting my relief short.

“Stand up,” he orders breathlessly. “Stand up.”

I stumble to my feet with his help, delirious with need, and he kisses me, urgent and sweet. His hands are cradling my face, and I realize we’re both shaking. I soak up the comfort of his warm body, of breathing in his unsteady exhalations. “Can’t believe you let me—” he stammers between kisses, touching my swollen lips with trembling fingers. “*God*, this mouth. Fucking perfect.”

I let his praise wash over me like a delicious wave; it only makes me want to give him more. To take more. To trust more. His hands move to my back, unclipping the bra I forgot was still attached to me, and I sigh with relief as it falls away.

“Fucking perfect,” he says again, tracing the side of my breast. And maybe it’s because of how unflinchingly honest he was with me earlier tonight, but words I’ve never spoken aloud to any partner fall from my lips.

“They’re not real.”

It comes out apologetic, and I find myself searching his features for the disappointment I’m sure I’ll find. But the corners of his mouth lift, and he shakes his head, still breathless. “That’s a pretty bold claim to make.”

He walks me backward to the bed. When he guides me down onto my back, his hands are sensitive, exploring the curves my twenty-five-year-old self secretly hoped would tempt someone into staying for good. His warm mouth closes over my nipple with an appreciative hum, tongue flicking the hardened tip, and my spine arches off the mattress. He releases me with a teasing nip of his teeth and looks at my heaving chest like a scientist examining evidence.

“They look like a fucking fantasy. Feel like a fucking dream. But according to my data, they’re definitely real.”

I laugh breathlessly, but then he’s sliding my panties off. As he lies on his side next to me, he pins one of my legs open with his muscular thigh, spreading me. His cock nudges my hip, hot and blunt, and I bite back a moan, clenching around nothing.

“What else isn’t ‘real’ about you, Margot?” he asks, slowly stroking his hand down my trembling stomach.

I’m squirming. Biting my lips and half-crazed from his teasing. And maybe this was his plan all along, because I feel a sudden alarming urge to confess everything. To tell him that all my life, I’ve wrapped falsehoods around me like duct tape over broken glass, so no one gets hurt. But ever since my Happily Never After file leaked, that tape has been unraveling, and it spins away faster and faster every second I’m with him. Soon all that’ll be left for him are my jagged edges. My breath hitches around my answer. “Pretty much everything about me.”

He kisses me, and the moment is so soft I’m afraid I’ll break it. He pulls away enough to look into my eyes and say, “That felt real to me.”

He’s right, of course, but I don’t have the time or wits to deny it because his hand slides lower, two of his fingers parting me as I fist the sheets and gasp. They

slip easily to either side of my clit, pinching gently, and my hips spasm off the bed as nerve-zapping pleasure blots out all comprehension of our conversation.

“So do your Happily Ever Afters. Your Happily *Never* Afters,” he lists, closing his eyes and gliding his nose against my cheekbone like he isn’t actively trying to kill me. His fingers glide lower, and I moan, lifting my hips in a futile plea for more. Still he teases me, tapping my wet entrance before dragging upward again to press life-destroying circles into me. “How you care for your sister. How fiercely you protect yourself. How hard you fought against this.”

A sliver of self-defense squeaks out from under the concrete wall of lust that’s sitting on my brain. “You fought it, too,” I argue breathlessly.

His chuckle is low. “Of course I fought it. Look what you fucking do to me. So jealous all the time. Begging on my goddamn knees for your forgiveness.” My breath hitches as his eyes find mine. “You launched yourself at me the first time we met, and it was like the whole fucking sun fell right into my arms. So warm, so gorgeous, I thought I was hallucinating.” His breath shudders out, and his powerful hips flex against me. “And when I realized I wasn’t... Christ, I was so fucking scared. Scared of how you made me feel like I’d come home to California while I was standing ankle-deep in snow. Scared of how badly I wanted you.” He shakes his head slightly, looking at me with the same surprised wonder of that first moment. “Of course I resisted. You’ve had my heart in your teeth from day one, Margot.”

It’s too much knowing we’ve both been losing the same fight from the second we met. I capture his words like fireflies, bottling them up to feel their glow whenever I want. When I speak, my voice is raw. “I’m not fighting anymore. *Please, Forrest.*”

When his middle finger finally eases into me, my body welcomes it with a brass band and *Welcome Home* signs, but it’s not enough. My greedy hand goes to his cock at my hip, encircling and stroking, and he thrusts with a helpless groan.

“More,” I whisper, drowning in his dark-green eyes. He bites his lip like he can’t speak around his own need, and when a second finger joins his first, I feel just this side of too full. He sees me wince and stills. “Too much?”

I shake my head, my breathing ragged, and tighten my grip around him. By the time he’s tucked a third into me, I’m already close. When he pulls out, I moan his

name, but he's already turned to his bedside table. When I hear the foil rip, my heart goes into hummingbird mode. I've never wanted sex like this. It's always been a means to an end for me—an easy hit of dopamine when life feels too hard, or, with Adam, a way to keep him tethered to me.

With Forrest, there is no endgame. It's just an overwhelming need to be as physically and emotionally close as I can get, despite knowing we'll be torn apart in two short weeks. It's a terrible, reckless idea, until he rolls back and kisses me, and it tastes like reassurance. With his forehead resting against mine, he says in a threadbare voice, "I need you on top. Don't want to hurt you."

There is no galaxy in which this man would hurt me, but I let him pull me over his hips anyway, and in the warm glow of the lamplight, he's the most gorgeous thing I've ever seen: a staggering feast of olive skin, thick muscle, dark hair, parted lips, and hungry eyes. Straddling him, I draw him to my slick entrance, and he grunts, grabbing my hips hard.

"Just go slow, yeah?" he says hoarsely.

I suck in my bottom lip, nodding quickly. "Okay." Except, also, no. My body has a better idea, and it's *fast* and *now*, because I've never craved anything so badly in my life.

I'm shaking as I press down against him, taking the first couple of inches before a pinching burn stops me midgasp. Forrest makes a sound like a dying man, and my inner muscles flutter around him like they might faint. But I need this to work. I just need him. I just need all—

"Margot, look at me," he says sharply. His hands squeeze my hips, and I raise my dazed eyes to his.

"*Slow*," he growls, his chest muscles rising and falling like he's midsprint. I'm about to protest, but then arms the girth of birch trees are lifting me up an inch before pressing me back down. Up an inch and back down. Up and down. Up—

"O-oh my God," I stutter, dropping my palms to his flexing chest as he manually works me over him. And fine. Maybe slow isn't a terrible idea. Maybe slow is the best idea ever. Because soon enough, the too-big-to-fit trope I'm cursing goes from being unbearably tight to unbearably... *good*. So good that my hips begin moving on their own again—this time in small, needy pumps until I'm fucking him softly and he's groaning. Falling apart beneath me.

“*Forrest—*” I whimper, seeking reassurance in his gaze. I’ve never been so stretched in my life. So deliciously full, or wet, or pliant. His heartbeat is wild beneath my gripping hands, his eyes desperate.

“You can take it, sweetheart,” he breathes. “Almost there.”

Somehow, he’s right. My breathing is tattered as every thick inch of him slowly disappears, until all at once, I’m flush with him. We both groan at the contact, and as Forrest arches his hips, my vision swims.

“Fuck. *Fuck*. So beautiful.” His words are slurred, his pupils expanding, his gaze darkening. “So fucking beautiful.”

I moan, and the roll of my hips is fretful. His hands slide to my ass, gripping and tilting me forward, like he knows exactly what my body needs. I inhale sharply, my eyes locking with his as a place deep inside me wakes up, calling out for friction.

“Yeah? Right there?” he whispers, bringing a shaking hand up to brush a tangled lock of hair from my face.

“Mmm.” I nod frantically, hardly knowing what to do with all this pressure inside me. But that glorious spot he’s found starts demanding more, and soon my small, hungry movements turn desperate, until I’m lifting up on my knees and dropping back down, over and over and—

Without warning, he sits up, and the change of angle takes my breath away. I grip his shoulders, and it’s even better because he’s closer. Deeper. I’m drugged on the smell of his damp skin. On the flush of his high cheekbones and the grip of his hands as I ride him harder.

“God, just look at you,” he pants, his voice wrecked as we look down at where I’m split wide for him, taking him deep. “Tell me you love it, sweetheart. Tell me it’s good.”

“*Yes*,” I moan, head falling back as I begin to shake at the edge of something tectonic. “I love it,” I cry, working him harder as he drags his mouth up my arching throat. “I love it so much. I love the way you feel. I love...” *you*, I finish silently. The thought is a firework, illegally lit and startling. But then his hand reaches between us and he’s thumbing my clit, and all my thoughts scatter. “*Forrest—*”

“Fuck—” he growls in response, stroking me harder. “Give it to me, Margot. I’m not going to last.” And I can see it in every taut line of his body and the sweat sheening his throat and shoulders. I can feel him inside me, pulsing with the need to let go.

It takes three, maybe four, more strokes of his thumb, and the world ends. I cry out, spasming around him as his hand moves faster, strumming me past the bounds of any pleasure I’ve ever experienced. Until it’s just too much—too big to contain in one person’s body. But in a moment, he’s in it with me, eyes slamming shut as he roars into my sweat-slicked skin, and I’m no longer alone. We bear it together, lines blurring, hearts melding, blood racing, until his strength is mine and mine is his, and I feel like I could withstand anything at all.

Anything but losing him.

FORREST

I come back to earth in pieces. I feel her steady breathing on my chest, her hair tickling my shoulder, and her leg tucked between mine. Each point of contact seems to glow as I become aware of it. Her eyelashes blink against my chest, and I open my eyes.

“Forrest?” she says, and the drowsy confusion in her voice—the way my name’s the first word out of her beautiful mouth—is something I enjoy to a disturbing degree. To a one-way-ticket-to-Los-Angeles degree. To a what’s-your-thread-count-preference-so-you-never-want-to-leave-my-bed degree.

“Right here, sweetheart,” I say, sliding a hand down her back.

She lifts her head to look at me, her hair a mess, cheeks pink, lips swollen. She gives me a sleepy half-smile, showing off one of those dimples, and I’m a dead man. I feel weak as a baby bird knocked out of its nest, but somehow, I’m already getting hard again, just looking at her like this. Roughed up. Tender. As soon as the thought occurs, the question is out of my mouth. “You feel okay? I didn’t hurt you?”

She gives an experimental wiggle that has me counting to ten. “I’ll live. I just need to sit in a snowbank for an hour.”

She’s teasing, but it doesn’t stop the rush of guilt spearing through me. I knew I was too rough with her, and I wasn’t even on top. *Thank God*. She’s so much smaller than I am, but I just couldn’t—

“Forrest. Stop.” She grabs my chin and pulls my face to look straight at her. “I’m good. I’m better than good. That was—” Her lashes drop. Her thighs tighten around mine, and *Christ*. Will we ever see the outside of this cabin again?

“Terrible?” I finish for her as my hand continues traveling south. “Not worth the trip?”

Her eyes close as my thigh nudges hers farther apart, my fingers lightly following the curve of her ass downward. “Ahh—definitely zero Chars.”

My hand stops short of its goal as a deep rumble of laughter builds in my chest. “That’s just cruel.”

I can feel her smiling into my neck. “Fine. I’ll give you one.”

“Only one, huh?” I say, wrapping an arm around her back and flipping us. She gasps but doesn’t argue when I start working my way down her body with my mouth. “I bet I can earn another.”



A good while later, I’m propped up against the headboard, my rating up to a solid three, and her back is a limp noodle against my chest. I kiss her damp temple, breathing deeply and pulling her tighter against me.

“Don’t you even start again,” she says weakly, her head lolling against me. “My legs will fall off.”

I chuckle, releasing her enough to hold two fists in front of her. “Fine. Pick one.”

At this she rouses a little, tensing against me. “Oh, God, this isn’t about tomorrow, is it? You aren’t, like, making me choose between cliff rappelling or heli-skiing, are you?”

I smile into her hair, nuzzling the silky gold locks, and fine. I prefer blondes. This blonde. Sue me. “Tomorrow’s excursion is canceled,” I murmur. “This storm’s going all night.”

She turns, tipping her head back to look at me. “Wait. You’re telling me we’re literally getting snowed in right now?”

I kiss the tip of her nose. “Your favorite trope?”

She snuggles back into my chest with a contented hum. “It definitely is now.”

I lift my fists back up. "Pick."

"I need to know my choices."

"Not how this works."

She huffs a breath. "Fine. This one," she says, poking my left hand.

"Mmm. That's too bad." I tsk. "You got your letter, but you would've *loved* the other one."

She sits up and turns around, laughing and giving my chest a swat. "Stop. What was the other one?"

I kiss her outraged mouth. "It's in the kitchen. Go take a look, and I'll grab your letter."

Her eyes go wide and bright at the prospect of a surprise, and then she's out of the bed, walking out of my room with the same sway of her hips I've seen about a hundred times. Except this time she's stark naked, and when I hear her gasp at the crate of avocados I sold a kidney for in Anchorage, all my life plans shrink down to keeping Margot naked for as long as possible.

I get up to grab her letter, and when we climb back into bed, she slots back against me like I'm her favorite easy chair. She tears the envelope open, occasionally forking another creamy green slice into her mouth with muffled pleasure, and I lean my head against the headboard to let her read in privacy, wondering if life has ever been this good.



I'm not sure how long it's been since I drifted off, but when I wake, she's no longer against me. I spot the letter first, abandoned next to me. There's also a little enamel pin in the shape of an ax, but I don't spare it more than a glance. Margot's sitting on the edge of the bed, wearing a threadbare Stanford T-shirt that used to be mine but is now hers exclusively. Her usual upright posture is slouched, her shoulders caved forward. She's looking at her feet, still as a stone.

"Margot," I say, and she starts at my voice.

"Oh, hey," she says with false brightness, her spine straightening. She's still not looking at me. "You should go back to sleep. It's so dark out."

"It's been dark since three p.m."

She flaps a hand. "You know what I mean. It's late."

"Then you should come to bed too."

"I'm busy," she says, trying her best to conceal a wet-sounding snuffle.

"Busy crying?"

"Busy wishing you were still asleep," she says without any real bite.

I move over to her, planting my feet on the rug beside her dangling ones. After a moment I say, "I'll go start a fire, and then you can stop pretending you're not dying to tell me all about it."

She gives a watery laugh, and I kiss her damp cheekbone. I don't know how much she'll tell me, but I'll take any piece of her heart that she'll share.

In the end, with the fire crackling and snow silently building itself around us like a pillow fort outside, she lets me read the letter for myself.

Dear Margot,

Based on the brilliant chronological arc of my last letters, I'm sure you can probably guess what this one's going to be about. Maybe you've even been dreading it a little? I know I have, but only because writing it involves mentioning He Whose Name Starts with A and Should End with Hole but Unfortunately Doesn't.

First, though, I want to apologize. When we talked that night after the interview, pinning all of your new-to-me jadedness on Adam was a) giving him way too much credit, and b) such an oversimplification of what has clearly been the result of not one asshole but a whole... pride of assholes? A murder of assholes? A bloat of assholes? Okay, sorry, that last one was gross, but so are they, and I curse them all with chronic hemorrhoids for eternity. Moving on.

Despite my finally understanding what led to your heartbreaking disbelief in all things romantic, I'm sure you get why my knee-jerk response was to blame Adam. Because while the other guys I've mentioned have done undeniably shitty things to you, breaking up with you one week before your wedding was next-level douchery. It was douchery to the power of douche squared. It's math, and no, I will not be taking questions about my art school education at this time.

*Anyway, the day you were supposed to get married and I took you to that ax-throwing biker bar instead, I saw a side of you that left me (and the rest of the patrons) in awe. Frightened awe, but awe just the same. Afterward, I thought: This is it. She's never going to write another love story again. But to my utter astonishment, you walked back into your office the next day and sat down to finish writing *Last Call*—possibly the sweetest HEA you've ever written. You also exorcised all evidence of Adam from our house (including that incredible set of vintage Italian espresso cups he bought me—grr!), and suddenly, it was like your whole relationship had never happened. You didn't speak about him, and I was too scared to bring him up (you are really good with an ax, btw).*

*I couldn't understand it. Life went back to normal-sans-Adam so fast. The only real difference was that you had even more time for me. And if I'm honest, maybe that's the real reason I didn't question your supernatural powers of compartmentalization. *Perfectly Fine and Holding It Together* Margot was very, very convenient to have around. But now, looking back on all the ways you've shielded me from your pain, I can only imagine what it must have been like to go through that alone. Yes, I was living with you, but I wasn't there for you, was I? As usual, you were there for me. To this day, I don't know why he broke things off, and if you never tell me, that's okay too.*

I suppose the main purpose of these letters is to let you know that I'm sorry it took me so long to see what was right in front of me. But I see you now, Margot. I see you, and I guess I've been wrong—it is possible to love you even more than I did before.

*Stay safe, but not too safe,
Savannah*

Carefully, I refold the letter. The original creases aren't perfectly square to the edges of the paper, so I reopen it and correct the fold. Then I unfold it again, and my eyes lock onto the string of words that took me a solid two minutes to move past. *One week before your wedding.* And then the next set. *The day you were*

supposed to get married. The revelation sears through me again. Margot was engaged. She'd been a single *week* away from becoming another man's wife.

Once, I was driving on the I-5 back in L.A. when a white pickup truck veered aggressively into my lane, clipping the bumper of the car in front of me. The accident was terrible, but by some miracle, I escaped unscathed. For days, I couldn't get rid of the sick, swooping feeling of having barely dodged something cataclysmic. I have the same feeling now.

"Forrest?" Margot's voice reaches me from what seems like a great distance. "Did you finish?"

I turn to look at her, and the dam-breaking relief rushes through me, roaring in my ears. She's spending the night with *me*. Saying *my* name. I have to physically restrain myself from crawling on top of her. Greedily seeking comfort when, like Savannah said, Margot is the one who needs support.

"Are you okay?" I ask once I have a grip on myself.

She's sitting on the other end of the living room love seat, curled up in a flannel blanket, her golden skin and hair alive in the firelight. She's stopped crying, but her eyelids are a little puffy. She shrugs, and the blanket slips off, tugging at the large neck hole of my T-shirt to reveal a delicate shoulder.

"It wasn't exactly light reading," she says. After a moment she adds, "I don't like being reminded of that time in my life. I like the idea of Savannah blaming herself even less."

I'm quiet for a minute, tallying everything I just learned against everything I already know about Margot and Savannah. "Is that why you've never told her what happened with Adam?"

She looks at me sharply. "She had nothing to do with it." At my raised eyebrow, she shifts irritably. Exhales. "Fine, it wasn't about *her*, but about how I am with her."

I nod slowly as my theory is confirmed. A pillow hits my face.

"Stop being so all-knowing. No one made you the omniscient narrator here."

I shake my head with a small smile. "I don't know everything. But she said she was living with you. That you had 'even more' time for her. I can imagine that would put a strain on any relationship." She's curling herself into an ever tighter flannel ball, and I know I've got it right. "You said yourself the last thing you want

is Savannah blaming herself for anything. So you shielded her, like she said you always have.”

A dull red flush is creeping up her cheeks. On a selfish level, I don’t want her thinking about her ex for another goddamn second. But a bigger part of me knows that if she’s never told her sister what happened, then she hasn’t told anyone. And more than anything, I want to be the person she confides in.

“You can tell me,” I say softly. “I want to know, if you want me to.”

Her eyes are as wide and unblinking as a startled doe’s, staring at me like I’ve said something crazy. And maybe I have. But then she takes a shuddering breath and starts talking like she’s just been waiting for someone to ask.

“It was this big night for Adam,” she says in a small, resigned voice. “He’s a journalist, and he’d won a prize for one of his pieces. I was so excited for him, because things had always been tense between us professionally. I’d had a lot of early success, and he...” She glances at me, and the tiny crease between her eyebrows looks like a load-bearing structure for approximately one metric fuck-ton of toxic male insecurity. She takes a breath, and I copy her, hoping it’ll soothe my building anger. It doesn’t.

“Let’s just say it was hard on his ego,” she summarizes. “So a week before our wedding, we were supposed to go to the awards ceremony, but that morning, Van came down with a huge flare. She’d been pushing herself so hard as my maid of honor, and it flattened her.”

Margot looks at me and pulls her blanket like an iron shield around her. “I chose to stay with my sister at the hospital that night. It was the worst I’d seen her in years, and it was all my fault. *My* fault for letting her take on too many responsibilities.” She sighs. “But even if I’d had nothing to do with it, I would have been there. She’s my sister.”

She looks away at the fire, and when she speaks again, her voice is hushed. “Adam couldn’t forgive me. He said I would always put Savannah ahead of our relationship, and I told him he was right. So he ended it that night, and the thing is, as devastated as I was, I couldn’t really blame him. Because he’s not the villain in this story,” she says, her voice shaking. “It’s me. That night, I realized I’m not cut out to be in a fully committed relationship with anyone except my sister.”

When she looks back at me, she's not crying, but there's a bone-deep tiredness that has nothing to do with the amount of sleep she's gotten. "Anyway, like you saw in the letter, Adam was the last straw in a whole stack of rotten straws. I started writing my Happily Never After file to cope, and never wanted to try another relationship again, until—"

She stops herself and looks down at her feet, which have migrated to the side of my boxer briefs. Her toes scrunch like they're trying to hide.

"Until?" I repeat, mouth going dry.

She sneaks a hand out of the blanket to brush hair out of her face with a flash of impatience. "Until *this*. Whatever *this* is. Which I don't like, for the record."

And just like that, all the denial over what I want with Margot evaporates. For weeks now I've put off turning down the grant at Caltech, even though I know I have to. With this unbelievable admission that Margot might be willing to put her battered trust in me, the temptation to move back to California is more powerful than ever. And this time my research, the grant, even my gardenias have nothing to do with it. Reaching for her, I pull her into my lap, leaving most of her blanket behind.

"You don't like this," I repeat.

"Not at all," she says, tilting her face up to mine. Her breathing picks up. "You're very dangerous for my mental and emotional health. You're also very unattractive."

I cup her face in my hand, wishing I could erase every moment she's been punished for her incredible selflessness.

"You have to know I'd never ask you to choose me over your sister," I say softly, wanting to make every promise Adam never gave her. "I'd never punish you for loving her, Margot."

Her gaze stutters up to mine. "I... I know you wouldn't." She swallows. "You understand what it's like to give up everything for your family. You'd do anything for your father."

She's right, of course. It's why I know I'll be scraping whatever's left of my heart off the airport floor when I watch her plane fly away in two weeks. So I kiss her. There'll be plenty of time to worry about that. Right now the snow's only

getting deeper, the night's almost gone, and I still have a very long list of ways to get her to admit she likes whatever *this* is.

MARGOT

The thing is, when you have the best sex of your life, you have to tell your best friend about it. Details must be discussed and verified for posterity so that someday, when the two of you are drinking mai tais in your poolside nursing home and slathering SPF onto your suspiciously wrinkle-free faces, you can reminisce accurately. It's why I find myself feverishly typing words like "five times" and "vaginal orgasm" and "FIVE TIMES" in an email to my sister the next day, when I should be working.

I know I'm not supposed to contact you, but this seemed like a force majeure situation if there ever was one, I type out. Counting down the seconds until I see you again!

I look over my email, making sure I've left out just enough to tempt her into writing me back. I know it's a long shot, but I *really* want to talk to my sister. More than anything, I need her to tell me to stop panicking about sleeping with a man who makes me feel things I thought died, decomposed, and scattered to the four winds when I slid off my engagement ring.

A prickle breaks out under my arms, threatening nervous sweat, and I look up from my computer to gaze out the front windows. I can see Forrest in the distance, plowing the biblical amount of snow that dumped on us last night. This morning he had to build a snow ramp to get us out of the cabin with the snowmobile. Not that I really wanted to leave.

Spending the night with him redefined the Snowed In trope for me, even though I thought I'd written the book on it. Two, actually. I learned that in between the pages of sheet-grasping pleasure, the smaller details hit even harder. Like the way my feet fit perfectly on the tops of his. Or how the weight of his arm in the crook of my waist feels like a missing body part returned at last. I've learned the smell of his skin when he sleeps, and the scratch of his voice when he wakes me up with a rough and quiet "Need you." And I'm ruined for it all. Ruined for him and the thought of him following me back to L.A. so that we can do what we did last night, every night, in perpetuity, or else.

Oh my God, I need help.

Like the answer to my prayers, there's a ping in my inbox, and I lift my head out of my hands, where I've been trying to deep-breathe some rational boundaries into place. *It's Savannah.* I click and am almost bludgeoned by her use of all-caps.

MARGOT OH MY GOD OH MY GOD YES!!! FORCE MAJEURE ACKNOWLEDGED UNDER THE TERMS OF COITUS SURPRISUS!!!

I know I shouldn't give in to this very obvious trap (well played, sister), but can we talk?? I have the satellite number to North Star Lodge, so be waiting by the phone in five minutes, okay?

I get up so fast, the rolling office chair hits the bookshelf behind me. I begin searching around the lodge for a telephone like I'm Indiana Jones in the *Temple of Doom*. I've slung myself halfway across the room when there's a ringing sound, and I turn to see that, naturally, the phone is right next to the bookshelves I've been sitting in front of for weeks. I break into a run, grabbing the receiver off the hook with a breathless "Hello?"

"Margot!"

"Van!"

"Margot!"

"Van!"

We're shouting at each other, and tears are free-flowing down my face at the sound of my sister's voice—a sound I've missed more than I even realized.

“Stop crying, you *know* I can’t handle it when you cry!” Savannah says with a wet sniff.

“Oh my God, I’ve missed you, Van,” I say, pressing the plastic to my ear as tightly as I can.

“I’ve missed you too! You have *no* idea the kind of self-control I’ve had to have. Taylor dropped her newest rerelease, and Cooper has *no* appreciation for her early work. I’ve had to choose all my merch completely alone!”

“I can only imagine the hardships you’ve endured,” I say, but I’m grinning ear to ear. She sounds healthy, and a cold coil of worry is unwinding slowly in my stomach, releasing my shoulders down my back.

“That’s right! Unlike *you*, cozied up with your mountain daddy!”

“Oh my God, please never say those words again,” I beg. “And isn’t Cooper with you? Don’t even pretend like you two haven’t been taking full advantage of my absence. I’m buying a black light when I get home.”

“Ew, Margot, inappropriate.”

“And ‘mountain daddy’ is appropriate?” I’m laughing, practically radiating endorphins.

“It’s exactly accurate! Now spill. Did he or did he not tie you to the bed with a flannel shirt?”

I laugh again, thinking about everything we did last night, and my weird, embarrassed giggle somehow morphs into a sigh.

“Wait. Wait, wait. Did I just hear a wistful sigh of longing?” Savannah says, instantly alert.

Because I can’t help it, I do it again. “Maybe?”

“Oh my God, Margot. Do you actually like this guy?”

Like? It seems like such a tiny word for the equally terrifying and stupid tornado of feelings in my chest.

“I’m trying not to, Van. I’m really trying. And it shouldn’t be that hard. He’s so grumpy, and so sure he’s right about everything, and so annoyingly competent and caring, and he’s a *doctor*, for the love of God. You can’t even get a more basic trope, right?” I bite my lip, but I’m unable to hold in the next sentence. “But he got me *avocados*, and they’re, like, impossible to get here, Van.”

I take a breath, and I can pretty much hear Savannah's jaw swinging in the wind. "And worst of all," I continue, "he didn't say it, but I'm getting this feeling that he *might* be considering moving back to L.A. So it's not like I can just enjoy the best vacation sex of my life and then forget about him when I go home, like a normal person!"

Savannah is still quiet, and I begin to worry our call has disconnected. Then she says, "Margot, listen to me very carefully. I know you're supposed to be working on your manuscript, but as far as I'm concerned, not fucking this thing up with Dr. MD is your new number one priority."

"His name is Forrest," I cut in.

"His name is Dr. Mountain Daddy—MD for short—and I haven't heard you sigh over a man since, like, 2016, when that barista offered you a free refill on your matcha latte." I give a weak laugh, but she rolls right over it. "Margot, I've *never* heard you talk about someone like this before. Not even Adam. And he's moving to L.A.? *This* is your HEA. I just feel it!"

I switch the phone over to my nonsweaty ear, trying not to get caught up in Savannah's excitement. My sister "just feels" a lot of things. "Van, do you know the last thing I saw before getting off socials? It was a Bookstagrammer theorizing that I'm the hate child of Miranda Priestly and Voldemort. I was literally canceled for not believing in love."

As soon as the L-word is out of my mouth, I want to suck it back in like a piece of spaghetti. To cover up my slip, which I will *not* be examining later, I give her something else to latch on to. "But I do like him. Despite all my desperate, flailing efforts not to."

She makes a squealing sound that probably lifts the ears of every wild animal within a ten-mile radius. "This is literally the best news I've ever heard in my life," she gushes. "I knew I was brilliant for sending you to Alaska, but I didn't know I was a *genius*! I need to contact Mensa!"

I'm letting her ramble on about all the secret tests I need to give Forrest to confirm he's not a sociopath, still in awe that I'm talking to my sister, when I realize she never answered my question from before. "Van, you never said if Cooper is staying over," I interrupt. "He *is* staying with you, right? Or Mom is?"

There's the barest hint of a pause. A millisecond of hesitation before she says, "Of course I'm with Coop. Mom has been around too. They're quietly but viciously trying to outcook each other for my approval, it's hilarious. Thanksgiving is going to be a bloodbath next week."

Thanksgiving. I'd nearly forgotten that was happening. My homesickness nearly chokes me, but I won't be derailed again. I let my own pause draw out until she knows I'm suspicious. "Okay. And no hint of a flare-up?"

"No, I'm *good*. And even if I did have a flare, I'd be fine, Margot. I'm hashtag thriving."

There's an edge to her voice I don't like. It's not the usual frustration she has with me when I coddle her. It seems more nervous. I don't think she'd lie to me about a flare, but she *might* lie to me if things were on the rocks with Cooper. More than anything, she wants me to believe in love everlasting.

"That's so good to hear," I say, trying to sound relieved. After a moment, I add, "So what have you and Cooper been up to besides defiling our house?"

This time there's no mistaking her nervous laugh. "Me and Coop? Oh, you know. Going out to eat. Training for *American Ninja Warrior*. The usual. But listen, he's coming back in for lunch, and I'm not allowed to be talking to you! Force majeure adjourned!"

I try swallowing down the lump of worry that has wedged itself in the back of my throat. I know how much Savannah loves Cooper. A breakup would absolutely send her into a flare, and I wouldn't be there to help. The urgent sense that I've been away too long tightens in my chest.

"Right," I croak. "Well, you know you can email or call me for anything, right? I will get on a plane in a heartbeat and come back if you need me."

There's an exasperated huff. "I know you would. Which is exactly why I'm ending this phone call before I let slip that I have a paper cut and you show up in a helicopter."

"Van, I haven't even thanked you for your letters," I say, stalling our goodbyes. "You have no idea how they've gotten me through—"

"Stop! Stop that right now! NO talking about the letters until you're finished with all of them, Margot!"

I roll my eyes. How can one person be so bossy and endlessly giving at the same time? “Okay, fine. Sorry. I love you.”

“I love you more,” she says, and I close my eyes.

“Impossible.”

FORREST

Alright, alright,” Alice says, tapping her knife to the edge of her wineglass to get the attention of everyone oohing and aahing around the Thanksgiving table. “I’ll make this quick, so we can all stop drooling.”

Everyone quiets down with appreciative smiles, and I catch Margot’s eye. During the last sleep-deprived week, my almost primitive urge to care for her has become an empty well that’s impossible to fill, but this dinner is my latest attempt. I had to kick her out of the kitchen no fewer than six times over the course of the afternoon to keep my labors a secret, but it was completely worth it to see her jaw drop as every dish came out. She isn’t the only one impressed by the spread, either. In the warm glow of the candlelight, I’m struck by my mother’s old insistence that every meal for a guest should be given like a gift. It feels that way now, and a fondness for everyone who chose to spend their holiday here radiates out from me. It even extends to Ollie, but probably only because it’s his last night here. After tonight, he and the rest of the guests will be gone, all except for Margot.

“First,” Alice says, raising her glass, “to Trapper, Jo, and Forrest.”

“Don’t forget Scout,” Yoon whispers loudly, and I see Scout’s fluffy ears perk up from where he sits beside my dad.

“Scout, too, of course,” Alice amends. “I can only speak for myself and Yoon —”

“You can speak for us too!” Ollie cuts in, elbowing Topher and Margot, who nod their agreement.

Alice winks at them before looking back at me, my dad, and Jo in turn. “Then I guess I speak for all of us when I say that there’s nothing we could be more grateful for than North Star Lodge. You three have turned this place into an extension of what we call home. But tonight I really need to call out Forrest.”

Everyone’s eyes fall to me, and it takes concerted effort not to duck my head.

“That’s right, Forrest, I’m about to embarrass you, so don’t wait for the end of the toast. Drink up.”

I chuckle and salute her with my glass before taking a hearty gulp of cabernet.

“Back home, all our friends know about our honorary ‘nephew.’ The back-country boy who got into Stanford at sixteen. The one leading the charge against breast cancer in the name of his mother. The one who takes the time to send a couple of old ladies birthday cards every year, *on time*, and who got the best endocrinologist in the country to personally take on Yoon’s case.”

Beside Alice, Yoon mouths the words “thank you” at me, pressing a hand to her heart, and it almost makes sitting through Alice’s laundry list bearable.

“We didn’t think it was possible to be prouder, but that was before this trip.” Alice stops to nod at my dad, whose mustache is so bunched and bristled, I know he’s seconds away from shedding tears. “Forrest, we know how much you’ve given up to come and take care of this crotchety old bastard, along with the rest of us. Your home, decent weather, civilization in general, and God only knows what sort of work opportunities.”

At this, Margot slides her hand into mine and says proudly, “Oh, just a multimillion-dollar research grant or two.”

At her words, alarm buzzes through me like I’ve been electrocuted. My father’s eyes, which up until now have been soft and tearful, go sharp as they find mine. “Grant?” he says. “What grant?”

For a long moment, everyone is silent, with their wineglasses still raised in a tableau of shocked surprise. My internal temperature rises about four thousand degrees, but somehow, I don’t turn to ash on the spot. Picking up on the abrupt change in atmosphere, Scout lets out a short whine. Beside me, Margot seems to

realize she's unintentionally dropped a bomb right next to the turkey, and her hand freezes in mine.

"You haven't told him," she says in soft horror.

Reflexively, I look at my dad.

"The Bauer-Hinckley?" he asks me in a cracked voice.

Jo covers her mouth with the hand that isn't holding her wine, and memories flood back of video-chatting with them during the many arduous months of preparing my proposal. I nod once, and my dad's eyes widen beneath his shock of silver hair. He and Jo know as well as my research team how impactful this funding would have been. It's not just the opportunity of a lifetime—it's the opportunity of *my* lifetime. It's what I've been steadily working toward for the last decade, and under any normal circumstances, I'd be floored by winning it. As in literally passed out on the floor.

Instead, I've barely allowed myself to think about it. Being chosen for this only to let it slip out of my hands after investing so much hope and effort has simply been a loss too large to process, on top of everything with my dad. It's been far easier to lose myself in Margot, but now, with every eye on me, I get to open the lid on my grief with seven other people. *Wonderful*.

"You got it," Dad says, his mustache quivering uncertainly. "You got it, and you didn't tell us?"

Regret and guilt are two iron fists to my solar plexus. "It's not that simple," I say.

By now everyone's glasses are back on the table, and for once, Ollie isn't smiling or throwing me a dirty look. Even Topher manages to look sober. Unable to understand what's going on, Scout barks nervously, startling us all, until my dad pets him absently.

"I'm so sorry I said anything," Margot whispers, looking between me and my dad. "It wasn't my place—I didn't think. I just assumed—"

I squeeze her hand and look at her. "Not your fault. I should have told them already." I take a breath and look at Jo and my dad. "I'm sorry I didn't. I chose not to say anything because I'm not accepting the grant. There was no point in upsetting anyone."

My dad rounds on me. “No point, my bony ass. You hid this from me because you knew what I’d tell you. You’ve *got* to go back, Forrest. You told me back when you were applying that this was the funding you needed to make a real impact on TNBC. To help everyone who’s facing what your mother went through.” His thick eyebrows slant together in something that’s half plea, half reproach. “You’ve got to accept the grant and give up this pretense of being my goddamn nursemaid when we both know that’s not even why you’re really here.”

Shame cuts deeper than a carving knife. This is the first time he’s called me out on the guilt that binds me here since the night of his mobility gain. He had plenty of chances to discuss it with me while we were in Anchorage, and I’ll be damned if he thinks we’re going to have this conversation at the Thanksgiving table. “We’re not doing this right now. I’ve already made my decision.”

“Oh yeah? Already told the committee, have you?” His hawk’s eyes dart to Margot and back to me. “Or can you not bring yourself to do it while Margot’s here?”

My whole body seems to swell as I grip Margot’s hand a little too tightly, wishing I could hide her behind me. I’m not the only person in my family who likes solving puzzles. “Leave her out of this.”

Then I feel the stroke of her thumb on mine, and the fire I’m about to breathe dies down to burning coals. When she speaks, it’s like cool water running over my scalded heart.

“Alice is right. Forrest is the most selfless person I’ve ever met, and we should all be thanking him—not berating him for a decision I’m sure he’s considered from every possible angle. Would I love for him to come back to L.A. with me?” She doesn’t look at me as she poses the question, but I see her throat move in a tight swallow. My pulse is thrumming in my ears, nearly drowning out my ability to hear her quiet answer. “Of course I would.”

She looks up at me with such bare honesty and longing that biting my tongue is all I can do to stop myself from promising to follow her anywhere, despite what I’ve just said to my father. Her voice rises as she speaks again, looking directly at my dad. “But I trust him, Trapper. I trust that he’s making the right decision, and you should too.”

In my father's thoughtful silence, Jo glances around the group and lets out a nervous laugh. "Well, I guess it's a real Thanks-giving now."

The tension breaks, and even my dad cracks a sardonic smile. He raises his glass to Margot before locking eyes with me. "To Forrest. And to making the right decisions."

I drink along with everyone else, but despite all my insistence on having made my choice, I couldn't be less sure of what it actually is.

MARGOT

Unsurprisingly, nearly ruining Thanksgiving does *not* get me out of wilderness excursions. It's my second-to-last Saturday, and contrary to his assurances that he's not mad at me, Forrest has strapped me to a pair of cross-country skis. They look cute but feel like a medical bill waiting to happen.

Weirdly, I was almost looking forward to this outing. Apart from Thanksgiving, it was a busy week of failing to make the edits Anjali suggested and tripping into Forrest's bed at every opportunity. A little fresh air seemed appealing. But now, as I'm forced to duckwalk up another hill, I realize what I took for a newfound outdoorsiness was just the sex-fueled dopamine fog I've been living in for the past week.

"How much farther?" I call-slash-whine up to him. He's ahead of me on the trail, and I almost regret interrupting him. With every back-and-forth swish of his skis, his muscular ass has been the dangling carrot keeping me going.

"Just another mile," he says, smiling back at me like this is welcome news.

I consider going full dead bug in the snow and forcing him to drag me.

"You can do this," he says in his steady voice before continuing to ski. It's not the first time today that I've almost looked beside me, hoping for a sympathetic smile from Ollie or another group member, but after we exchanged contact information and tearful hugs goodbye yesterday, I'm the only guest left. It makes today's trek with Forrest feel less like a wilderness excursion and more like an

overly ambitious date. But ten million minutes later, the woods break into a clearing, and I'm looking at—

"A *resort*?" I scream, startling some birds from a tree. "You took me to a *resort*?"

"Surprise," he says, smiling down at me.

I look down the hill to where people—actual human beings other than Forrest, Trapper, Jo, and me—are milling about in stylish winter gear, sipping from steaming coffee mugs or pulling on ski gear. I suddenly feel like Mowgli stumbling from the jungle into civilization for the first time. Gratitude and excitement fill me up like a hot-air balloon, ready to send me into the stratosphere. I could just kiss him, so I do, leaning over the side of my skis and almost falling down in the process.

When I pull away, breathless for more reasons than one, he says, "Come on. I hear the spa offers very overpriced mud baths."

At this, I dig my ski poles into the snow and bomb down the slope like I'm Mikaela Shiffrin going for gold, leaving his laughing baritone behind me to catch up.



After being peeled, wrapped, and exfoliated within an inch of my life, I decide I still haven't had quite enough pampering to make up for the last month, which is how I find myself in our room's private outdoor hot tub. It's currently a balmy five degrees outside, but apparently, enjoying the contrast of hot water and soul-freezing temperatures is an Alaskan tradition.

"So how was the return to your natural habitat?" Forrest asks from across the tub. His head is tilted back, steam curling from his wet, sunset-lit shoulders, confirming he's the hottest man on the planet.

"*Such* a relief." I sigh, sinking a little lower as I put my feet in his lap. "I've been needing to molt for weeks now."

I feel his soft chuckle more than I hear it.

"Are you too blissed out to read your letter?"

“You brought it?” I ask, yanking my foot from his grip and sitting up. The buoyancy of the water carries me halfway to him, and he pulls me onto his lap.

“On second thought, no,” he rumbles, lifting me to lick quickly cooling water from my cleavage. “Must’ve forgotten it.”

Unfortunately for him, I get a good view of the table beside his shoulder and see a corner of an envelope sticking out from underneath our bathrobes. I feel the usual sharp thrill of desperation to read it, but to my surprise, it doesn’t linger.

“You okay?” he asks, picking up on my hesitation.

I tear my eyes from the envelope. “I’m good. I think I’ll read it later,” I say, leaning in to kiss him.

He stops me short and arches a brow. “Who are you, and where have you buried Margot Bradley?”

It’s impossible to escape his scrutiny, but I try anyway, and after a moment, he makes a hum of understanding. Without a word, he twists around and grabs my letter. He holds it between us, examining it. “I don’t think it’ll bite you.”

“Then maybe you could,” I suggest in a halfhearted attempt to distract him. He pinches my ass beneath the water.

“It won’t be worse than the last one,” he says, getting right to the heart of my avoidance. “Unless you’ve been through another life-altering trauma I’m unaware of.”

“No, you’re right,” I say. “I mean, there was that time my career did cartwheels into an active volcano, but that was just a blip.”

He scoops warm water with his free hand and pours it over my shoulders, warming me. “Do you want me to read it first?”

The opportunity to tease him for being nosy barely registers under the weighted blanket of relief I feel. “Would you?”

With damp but careful fingers, he opens the letter. There’s a sheaf of folded paper inside, but when he pulls out a trio of friendship bracelets, I feel like a house of cards facing down a hurricane. He slips two of them on my wrist, stretching one onto his own, and tosses the envelope back on the table. Gently, I spin the letters on each bracelet to face upright: *#1 MB FAN. HEA CLUB*. I do the same for Forrest’s, and my heart bucks like a wild horse when I read the words stretched over his thick wrist: *LOVE UMB*.

Trying not to read too much into his probably random bracelet choice, I focus on the gifts themselves. They're from my readers. A handful of the endless tokens of appreciation I used to receive. I look up at Forrest to see if he understands the magnitude of this small gift, but his eyes are scanning Savannah's letter. After a few more seconds, he smiles, a glow of affection softening his cut-from-granite features. "You need to read it."

"There's no way you already finished it."

He shrugs. "Fast reader."

I make a sound of disgust and take the letter from him, looping my arms around his neck and leaning against his chest so I can read over his shoulders. With his hands slowly scooping hot water down my spine, holding me to him, I feel about as ready as I ever will be.

Dear Margot,

The last one was a doozy, eh? I feel like I should apologize for getting your hopes up about all these letters only to keep bringing up some of the hardest moments of your life. But I promise I'm not a complete asshole. For this letter, instead of talking about the past, I want to take a little road trip into the future. I've packed your avocados, my favorite seaweed chips, sunglasses, and even one of those female urination cups that gives you a little plastic penis, in case we need to pee on the side of the road. Ready, Thelma?

In the future I'm imagining, your fans have forgiven you, and Barker has taken you back as their favorite pet author. I know you probably just read that and either winced, rolled your eyes, cried, or did all three at the same time. But listen. I know I don't need to tell you this, but romance readers are the best kinds of readers. For one, we buy ALL the books. The publishing industry would probably just lie down and die without us. Secondly, and most importantly, we believe in true love. And the thing is, you can't have true love without forgiveness, Margot. Try reading a romance novel sometime—you'll see.

My point is, I see a detour up ahead, and if (and ONLY if) you want to take it, I think it might help you win everyone back. I know your team released that official statement way back when everything went down, but you

and I both know it sounded like a committee of stuffy PR dude-bros wrote it. Since then, no one has heard a peep from you. And yes, I realize that may have something to do with someone bundling you onto a plane and sending you to the Alaskan bush (you're welcome), but I'm guessing your fans needed this time. That you did too.

I also realize you went to Alaska with murder in your heart (just the fictional kind, hopefully) and that you're trying your hand at a new genre. For the record, this is not me telling you to abandon it. Go ahead and finish your dead-body book and then write some Pokémon fan fiction if that's what you're called to do. But I happen to know, as your sister and an authority on all things Margot Bradley, that despite what your Happily Never After file may suggest, the real secret is that you love being a romance author. More than anything, you love your readers. And now that we've all had a minute to calm down, maybe it's time to reach back out? Because on behalf of all of Romancelandia, may I humbly say, we fucking miss you.

*Stay safe, but not too safe,
Savannah*

Sometimes—no, all the time—it's scary how well my sister knows me. I drop the letter back on the table, and it's hard to know if it's the wonder or the water making me float. This morning, with dawn filtering through the snow-powdered windows of our cabin, I left Forrest asleep in bed and snuck out to the living room with my laptop, intending to get a few more pages done. Instead I found myself writing something else entirely: an explanation to my readers.

"Well?" Forrest says, sliding a hand over my lower back in the water. "Are you going to make a statement, Thelma?"

Disbelief stretches my lips into a smile. If there's any reason I was finally able to pin down the feelings Savannah wants me to share with my readers, it's because of Forrest. Despite all our obstacles, I can see a future together spooling out ahead of us like the thread of hope woven through any great romance novel. Maybe it's been there all along.

"I wrote it this morning," I tell him, looping my arms around his neck.

He looks at me like he's not surprised but laughs all the same. "Your sister is something else."

"Just wait till you meet her."

The seemingly casual words feel like a promise and a plea. At Thanksgiving, I defended his decision to stay behind. But every new morning I've woken up in his arms, it's gotten harder not to beg him to come home with me. And right now he's looking at me like all I have to do is ask.

"I wrote a letter, too," he confesses, and my whole body goes still. He reaches back toward the table and grabs his phone. After unlocking his screen and tapping it a few times, he exhales and says, "Here."

He hands it to me, and I see an email draft. At the words *an honor and privilege to accept the Bauer-Hinckley Grant*, I nearly drop his phone in the hot tub. My eyes jerk up to his as my heart starts a sprint to nowhere. I'm about to either speak, or scream, or pass out when he takes his phone back, places it on the table, and kisses me.

We sink lower into the water, my hands slipping up his powerful neck into his hair as our mouths find a now familiar rhythm that's all our own. When he groans softly, the terrifying thought occurs that I want to do this forever. I could kiss this man for the rest of my life and never get tired of it. He breaks away, panting, and rests his forehead on mine with his eyes closed.

"Let's send them," he says, low and fervent.

"Right now?" I ask as fear/excitement/nausea bolts through me.

"We're never going to have a better Internet connection."

"I love it when you talk dirty," I say, earning a low husk of a laugh.

"I mean it," he says, opening his evergreen eyes to gaze at me. The sun is setting over pristine Alaskan hillsides, painting the snow every shade of warm pink and orange, but all I can see is him. I'm almost trembling with the temptation to say yes, but if there's anyone who knows what this means for him, it's me.

"It would mean leaving your dad," I state the obvious. "You can't do that, Forrest."

His hands tighten on me like I'm already slipping away from him. "You heard him at Thanksgiving," he argues, his eyes reckless and hungry over me. "He wants me to do this. I'll visit once a month to keep an eye on things, but he hasn't had

any backsliding. There's every reason to believe his health will only continue to improve." He says this like it's a line he's been repeating to himself for days.

"And what about helping with his physical therapy?" I force myself to ask. "His medication management and nerve blocks? Jo can't care for him like you do."

What I can't ask are the harder questions, like "what if?" What *if* something happens to Trapper? Would the grant legally bind Forrest to stay in California? Or might he leave again? The thought sends a chill through me that has nothing to do with the frost forming at the ends of my damp hair.

"He may need to spend more time in Anchorage during the busy season when Jo isn't as available to help. He also won't have nerve blocks at home any more, but I know Jo will take him to Anchorage if his pain meds aren't cutting it," Forrest concedes. "I'll buy him and Jo a place in the city that's close to the hospital."

"You can afford that?" I ask. Pulling in multimillion-dollar grants is one thing, but I have no idea what kind of salary a cancer researcher makes.

The look he gives me is a little embarrassed. "I don't really spend a lot of money, and they paid me well. I'm... comfortable."

I bite my lip. "I can't imagine your dad and Jo living anywhere but the lodge."

Forrest takes a sobering breath, making ripples in the water with his chest. "It wouldn't be the first time my dad's given up North Star to live there."

It takes me a second to understand what he's saying. Over the last week, I've gleaned more details about the woman who raised Forrest, but he guards his memories of her like a dragon over rubies. "For your mom?" I ask, sliding my hands up his chest.

After a moment, he nods. "Dad rented an apartment in Anchorage while she was undergoing treatment. I only learned about it when they let me visit her at the very end."

My stomach twists. "What do you mean, they *let* you?" When he doesn't answer, I ask, "What exactly happened that year, Forrest?"

Forrest exhales, and it's abundantly clear he'd rather talk about anything else. But I think he knows that this isn't me prying. This is about the walls I've torn down to trust him, and asking if he's willing to do the same for me.

“She was diagnosed during my second year of residency, and I decided to switch my focus after getting my license,” he says eventually. “But going from patient care to oncology research required making up a lot of lost ground. I was stretched... very thin that year.” He blinks quickly down at the gently rippling water. “So my parents shielded me from how bad her condition was, hoping she would rebound.”

At the drawn look on his face, my heart feels like it’s been tenderized by a hammer, each thump pulsing like a bruise.

“The whole time, Mom insisted that I stay in L.A.,” he says. “Always insisted she was beating it. But when she didn’t, I realized too late that I’d thrown away my last months with her. I could have been by her side but chose not to be.” He looks at me, and the anguish in his eyes is something I want to wrap up in a warm blanket and rock until it’s soothed.

“You did what she wanted,” I insist in an unsteady voice, but it feels like offering drugstore carnations when he deserves a whole acre of roses.

“I didn’t, though,” he says bitterly. “What my mom wanted more than anything was for me to live my own life. It’s why she kept me away from Alaska. But after Dad’s accident, I came right back.” He presses his lips together, and I stop breathing, afraid to say anything that might discourage him from sharing this piece of himself. “I’ve been so scared,” he admits. “Scared of losing Dad and making the same mistake I made with Mom. I’d made my peace with giving up work and staying here to care for him. But then you showed up. Jumped right into my arms, and now I’ve got something I’m even more afraid to lose.”

His gaze travels over me feverishly, his hands pulling me in tighter against him. When he speaks again, his voice is hoarse. “So fucking smart, and beautiful, and giving, and difficult. Every day you’ve been here, I’ve thought that Mom must have sent you. She knew you’d be the only person who’d get me back to California.”

My world tips over, the same old pieces I’ve always known rearranging themselves into a kaleidoscope of possibilities. I feel the spaciousness of being with him without a clock counting down until my departure flight. I imagine visiting his lab and discovering yet another side of him to admire and pine over. I imagine

introducing him to Savannah, and I'm filled to overflowing with a rightness I've never felt before.

The selfish words I've tried hiding tumble clumsily out of my mouth, tripping to get out. "I don't want to go home without you."

At this, Forrest grabs his phone from the table. He unlocks and taps it a few times, and he's so casual about it, he could be checking the weather. But then I hear the small *whoosh* of an email being sent off before he turns back to me. "Now you won't have to."

An incredulous laugh bursts out of me, high and panicky. "Did you just—"

He smiles and lets out a shaky breath. I want to kiss him, but there's something I need to do first. "Hand me my phone," I say.

"Margot, you don't have to," he says. "If you're not ready—"

"I do have to," I argue. "I came here to write a murder mystery, and I didn't, Forrest. After you dragged me through every trope under the sun, how could I write anything but a romance novel?" I take a breath, trying to steady myself. "I stopped believing in Happily Ever Afters a long time ago. But now... if there's any chance I could win my readers back by admitting I've been completely wrong, then I have to try."

He hands me my phone, but it's not as simple as shooting off an email. When I'm done turning my letter into slides for an Instagram post, I swipe over to my camera app. With my chest pressed against Forrest's so that only my face and the back of his head, neck, and mile-wide shoulders are showing, I snap a photo and add it to the end of my post.

Holding my breath and silently vowing to enact holy vengeance on Savannah if this letter backfires, I post it and immediately silence my phone. There are looming question marks about the future, but it's *our* future, and I want it to start right now.

FORREST

Home. Home. Home. The word pulses through me with every beat of her heart, and all I can do is follow it. We're going back to California together, and it's too new to feel real. Like we're a couple of kids pretending. And that feels reassuring because the idea of actually leaving my dad shoots an arrow of panic straight through me. Logically, I know he'll be thrilled. Logically, I know his health and mobility have made slow but steady strides. But logic isn't what made my thumb hit that send button.

Every single touch, every faint suggestion of her dimples, every needy gaze she sends my way has me by the throat, dragging me deeper into something I spent my whole adult life carefully avoiding. I've seen what losing someone precious can do to a man. Felt the cold shadow of it as a bystander when my mother passed away in my father's arms. I know better than anyone that all good things—even the greatest things of all—eventually come to an end. But when Margot confessed tonight that she didn't want to go home without me, it tipped the scales just enough. Just enough for me to make what was either the best or worst decision of my life.

And right now, with her body wrapped around mine as I carry her out of the hot tub, it feels like a no-fucking-brainer. Her wet skin is sunlight in my mouth, and every small gasp she makes is an X on a map I'm charting. Her lips find mine, and she's licking into me softly. Nipping my bottom lip and pulling away before I can taste her like I want to. She's a goddamn tease, and usually, I love it, but

tonight it's the last thing I want. I want reassurance that accepting the grant and watching her share her letter with the world mean what I need them to mean. That she's mine. For as long as I can have her, she's *mine*.

We're both shivering by the time we make it inside the suite, our robes hanging haphazardly off our wet bodies. I barely have time to close the heavy door behind us before she's up against me, dragging down my gift-shop swim shorts and standing on tiptoe to press open-mouth kisses to my collarbone.

"Why—are—you," she complains between frustrated kisses, "so—*tall*?"

"So I can do this," I answer, scooping her up and holding her to my chest. Her gasp is cut short as I kiss her, carrying her a few short paces to the fluffy white cloud of a bed. Her laugh as I drop her on the mattress is the sweetest sound I've ever heard.

"How dare you toss me around," she scolds with a smile, shrugging out of her bathrobe. She slides her top off as my fingers hook into her tiny, wet bikini bottoms and drag them down to her ankles. "And how dare you *undress* me. How dare—"

I don't find out what else I've dared, because her words dissolve into a breathless moan as I fling the bottoms over my shoulder and yank her naked hips to the edge of the bed. My eyes travel down every inch of her body, taking in every supple curve that seems divinely designed to drive me batshit. At the sight of her bare pussy—so slick and needy before I've even touched her—my knees drop to the goddamn floor. She's already given me so much tonight. But if I've learned anything about myself when it comes to Margot, it's that I'm fucking greedy. I steal one decadent lick of her, relishing her shuddering moan, before taking one knee in each hand and pulling them over my shoulders.

"Demanding, aren't you?" she says breathlessly.

But I can't answer her, because she's the most gorgeous thing I've ever seen, and my mouth is already on her, my muffled moan mingling with her sharp intake of breath. She's so fucking delicious, I'm drowning. Licking into her softly—then hungrily—until my tongue is pushing into her, and my hand has to put a choke hold on my jealous dick.

"*Forrest*," she whines. With every needy squirm of her hips, she tries moving me higher, but she's right—I am demanding. Only because she loves it. Only

because I'm trying to draw this out for as long as I can stand not being buried in her. "Please," she begs me, her pretty pink fingernails digging into her thighs. "*Please—*"

I give in to her reluctantly, moving upward with slow, teasing licks. When I meet her frantic gaze and finally suck her swollen clit between my lips, she lets out a sob. Her beautiful body arcs, wire-tight, and I know I have only seconds before she detonates. I'm desperate to feel her spasm around me, and when I fill her hard and fast with two fingers, I get my wish.

Her heels dig into my back, hands tearing at the sheets, and still I need more. I can't stop pumping my fingers. Can't stop lapping her up—not until she's limp and jolting through the aftershocks. Not until she's closing her trembling thighs and making little whimpers like she can't take one more kiss.

"Come here," she says, her voice hoarse and weak.

I obey, letting her hands draw me closer until I'm positioned over her, caging her perfect body between my arms. Her lashes lift slowly, her honey-colored eyes dazed and dreamy as she slides her hand down to notch me against her soaked entrance. My head drops with a curse as her palms slide to my hips, urging me forward. I only barely manage not to plow into her.

"Wait, sweetheart. I'll grab—"

She cuts me off with a shake of her head. "I have an IUD," she breathes, bringing a hand up to touch my cheekbone. My lips. "I need you closer," she says, and fuck—I know she doesn't mean just physically. This is about trust, and when she kisses me softly, it splits my heart wide-fucking-open. Then she goes in for the kill. "I want you on top," she whispers against my lips, and I groan. It's not the first time she's asked me. In fact, she's asked me every single morning and night this week, but I can barely maintain my self-control when she's riding me—I might hurt her if she isn't the one setting the pace.

"I can't," I rasp, but my dick is already nudging against her snug entrance like it didn't get the fucking memo.

Her thighs spread wider as she squirms against me. "Please, Forrest," she whimpers. "I trust you."

I trust you. Her words leave tracks in my bloodstream, marking me permanently. But her trust isn't the issue here. The problem is trusting myself.

Then her hands slide from my hips, and I feel her touching herself. When she slicks her own need over my aching cock, pulling away becomes a nonoption. She moans, rubbing the head over her clit before stroking it back down to her entrance, and my need to be inside her turns molten.

“Jesus Christ,” I bite out, and with a helpless groan, I drive halfway into her, more than I’ve ever given her to start. She cries out against my heaving chest, and for a moment, I freeze, terrified I’ve hurt her. But a second later, she’s lifting her legs to wrap around my waist, her hips pumping in hungry little movements that turn my insides to ash.

“More,” she begs, teeth sinking into her plump bottom lip, and I’m fucking done.

“*Margot*,” I grind out, almost angry with her for making me lose it like this. All my life, I’ve been able to keep it together under any situation. Any situation but her. From the second she crash-landed into my life, she’s had me wrapped around her manicured finger. I try holding back—try stretching her out nice and slow, like she deserves. But she moans, “*Harder*,” and the undomesticated part of me that she loves stroking to life chews through its fucking muzzle.

My growl is feral as I rear up onto my knees, lifting one of her ankles to my shoulder as I thrust into her the rest of the way. Spread wide and filled to the hilt, she arches her head back with a sharp gasp, her chest flushed and shaking.

“Is this what you wanted, sweetheart?” I pant as I begin rolling my hips in earnest. “You needed me to lose all fucking control?”

She nods, hiccupping a broken “*Yes*,” and I can’t help it. My hand comes down, splaying possessively across her chest and pinning her to the mattress like she’s mine. And she’s taking it. Loving it. Meeting my every thrust until I’m bottoming out in her tight little channel and seeing spots. Until my heart’s ready to explode with how much I fucking love her. The words are stretched across my wrist on a bracelet I’m never taking off, and they’re branded inside my chest. The truth is, I’ve been loving her this whole time but was too goddamn scared to admit it.

Because I love her, because I need her to feel a fraction of the pleasure I’m feeling, my hand slides down her sweat-sheened body to where we’re joined. My fingers press firm, tight circles right where she needs them, and the effect is

instantaneous. She clamps around me like a vise, her eyes slamming shut, and her cry is a wild, beautiful thing. My hips thrust harder through every wrecking spasm until I'm staring down my own completion like it's the barrel of a shotgun. When she opens her desperate eyes and says "*Forrest*" like I'm the only thing she needs, that gun goes off, as annihilating as I expect it to be.

She's the end of me but also the beginning. The liability I never wanted but always craved. And when she pulls my shaking body down to hers, kissing my face, she's all the comfort I never knew I needed. Accepting the grant might have been a mistake, but right now, with our hearts trying their hardest to break free of the walls that separate them, it's a mistake I'd make again, and again, and again.

MARGOT

Having unfettered access to Wi-Fi for twenty-two hours was like falling off an Internet-free wagon I never wanted to board in the first place and then being rudely shoved back on. I suppose technically, it's Forrest's truck and not a wagon, and *technically*, I'm extremely grateful he retrieved it this morning from the start of the ski trail while I had one more facial at the spa. But that doesn't mean I'm happy about it. For the seventieth time since we started the drive back to North Star, I compulsively open my email app. For the seventieth time, it tells me to check my Internet connection, and I swear I can hear the endless stretch of snowy pine trees laughing at me. My sigh is a growl in sheep's clothing.

"Phantom Wi-Fi syndrome," Forrest says somberly as he shifts into first gear at the world's most pointless stop sign. Which he obviously stopped at. "Pretty serious condition, I hear."

I smack his shoulder. "This is all your fault. I was basically used to living off the grid. I was like, one connection-error message away from churning butter and knitting my own underwear."

"Damn," he murmurs. "Really shot myself in the foot, I guess."

"Because your celebrity crush is Pioneer Woman?"

He draws a meditative hand over his beard. "Well, yes, but also because the underwear you'd have the patience to knit would be microscopic."

"I'm patient!" I cry, repressing my laugh.

For once, he spares a quick glance from the road to give a pointed look down at my crotch and back up. I flush. He's not wrong, though. I'm never patient with that.

"Patience is overrated," he says, picking up my water bottle and handing it to me like he's tracking my fluid intake. He probably is. His eyes flick over to me, catching my latest attempt to check my email. "I think you could probably come up with a better use for your phone."

"Like what?" I mutter darkly. "Projectile?"

He laughs, and there's a feeling in my stomach like wings beating hard to get liftoff. It hits me anew that he's coming back to L.A. with me. That we'll actually have time to see if things ever settle down between us, or if life with him is always going to feel like a film collaboration between the Hallmark Channel and Pornhub. But with my apology letter probably getting digitally crucified by Bookstagram and Trapper as yet unaware that his son will be leaving him, there's an almost Bonnie and Clyde energy between us. Like we'll be arrested at any minute for daring to make ourselves happy for once. Because as it turns out, I'm not the only one whose life skills include pushing people away.

Late last night, with our limbs tangled in the dark, I worked up the courage to ask if he'd had to break things off with someone in L.A. I was fully braced for him to admit that he'd broken the heart of his Nobel Prize-winning research partner who also happened to be Amal Clooney's twin sister. However, to my surprise—and selfishly, to my relief—he admitted he's been as closed off to committed relationships as I've been. We've both been avoiding romance for so long, it feels criminal to suddenly be this infatuated with each other. I have to keep reminding myself that the only laws we're breaking are our own.

I try to ignore the small voice that reminds me I was obsessed with Adam once too. How there was a phase when his hairy-pancake ass seemed charming. Sexy, even. I shudder. I remind the little voice right back that Forrest and I are the quintessential enemies-to-lovers trope. I've already spent quality time hating him, and the most annoying thing I could ever dig up on him is how dependable, brilliant, and sickeningly handsome he is. Which, to be fair, is still annoying.

But I'm very aware that we're both white-knuckling this thing, and any speed bump could potentially send us flying into a what-the-fuck-have-we-done ditch. I

press my lips together to keep from stress-sighing again. What I need is something I never thought I'd need: a Savannah monologue reassuring me that Happily Ever Afters, while unlikely, can and do happen. That this might not be too good to be true.

Naturally, I didn't hear from Savannah before we left the resort, like I was sure I would. Not that I expect her life to grind to a halt every time I post something on social media, but this wasn't exactly your run-of-the-mill hot-dog-legs vacation post. At the bare minimum, I expected her to re-create my photo out of artfully arranged exclamation marks. But there was nothing. Sprinkle in the fact that she dodged my questions about her and Cooper while we were on the phone, and my mind has basically been a film festival of worst-case scenarios all day. Did Cooper's unpredictable schedule finally drive a wedge between them? Was my being away the catalyst? Does she blame me? Did she get sick? Is she—

“She's fine, Margot.”

I blink up from the *No Connection* message in my email app, which I didn't realize I'd opened again. Forrest is looking at the road, his expression calm, and a hot, prickly sensation fizzles over my skin. There's nothing except reassurance in his deep voice, but the words are triggering anyway. “She's fine” was Adam's constant, dismissive, frustrated refrain every time he wanted to go out and I felt compelled to stay with Savannah. My stomach feels as slithery as a snake pit. Is this how it starts? How many “she's fines” will it take before Forrest is fed up with my priorities?

My fingers grip my phone harder. “You don't know that,” I say tightly. “There's no way you could know that.”

At my tone, Forrest is silent, which only makes me feel immature and defensive, ready to lash out. To my surprise, he puts on the hazard lights and slows down until we're stopped on the side of the deserted, snowy road. He angles himself in his seat so he can look at me. “I'm sorry. You're right.”

“I'm... right,” I repeat uncertainly.

Forrest holds his open palm over the center console like he's trying to get a nervous bird to hop into it. As my tentative hand slides into his wide, calloused palm, a breath shudders out of me. When I look up at him, his face is patient.

“Tell me the list,” he says.

“List?”

“Your ‘What Could Be Wrong with Savannah’ list,” he clarifies.

“How do you—”

“I have one for my dad,” he says matter-of-factly, looking down at our slowly intertwining fingers. “It’s very detailed. Lots of subsections and bullet points.”

A soft snort of disbelief leaves my nose as wonder unfolds in my chest. I shake my head. For the last month, I’ve been surrounded by thousands of miles of untamed wilderness and somehow managed to find the one person who sees and accepts my neuroses completely—and not just from a place of kindness but from a place of actual empathy and understanding.

“When I spoke on the phone with her the other day,” I begin, “she was really evasive every time I brought up her boyfriend, who’s supposed to be taking care of her while I’m away.” I pause, superstitious that I’ll bring my fear into being if I say it out loud. “I think they might be breaking up.”

Forrest nods, considering this. “And you’re afraid the emotional toll and stress might activate an autoimmune response.”

“Exactly!” I cry. “It’s happened before!”

He squeezes my hand. “Then it’s not unreasonable to assume it might happen again. But a flare-up of her condition was a possibility I’m sure you discussed with her before coming here. Was her boyfriend the only person aware that she might need care?”

I let out an exhale as a small lump forms in my throat. Not being called crazy or irrational about my sister is spreading a warm balm over wounds that have ached for so long. “No,” I answer him. “My mom is helping out, too, and I looped in the doctors and neighbors before I left.”

He bends his head to catch my gaze, willing my own words to sink into me. “Then you are caring for her,” he says. “Even if you’re not right there. You’d never leave her helpless, Margot.”

After a few seconds, I nod, letting his steadiness soak into me.

“Anything else on the list?” he asks.

I gnaw on my lip. “It’s just, if everything was fine, she definitely would’ve responded to my post yesterday.”

He shrugs. “Maybe. Then again, she might not have seen it yet. Or she has, and she’s been busy hiring a skywriter to spell out *OMG MARGOT* over the lodge.”

I let out a shaky laugh. “That is absolutely her brand.”

He gives my hand one last squeeze before letting go. “Then we better get back before we miss it, yeah?”

I swallow, hardly knowing how my chest is containing this much love without splitting open. “Yeah,” I whisper, and I think he knows. I think he sees every hidden part of me, and for the first time ever, being known doesn’t feel like a threat. It feels like coming home.

He shifts the gears and gets us back on the road, and with an inner peace matched only by the tranquil landscape around us, I start to believe that I won’t need my sister’s monologue after all.

It’s only after we get back to the lodge that I realize how wrong I am.

FORREST

If you're not careful, sometimes life can trick you into believing you're living in the best parts of a romance novel. I've read enough of them now to know how it goes. Every touch and sidelong glance become blazes on a trail leading to a summit so high, you feel unbound by gravity. Like you could step off the edge and simply float with the person you've found to love. And so you do. You take their hand and leap. And even as you fall, neither of you feels afraid, because for once in your life, you're not alone. Not until the cold hard ground of reality rushes up to flatten you.

Or at least that's how it feels when Margot and I return and find out my dad suffered a tonic-clonic seizure while we were on our way back to North Star.

We had just parked at the lodge and gotten within range of the satellite service when my phone picked up all of Jo's frantic voicemails describing Dad's seizure. Explaining that she was driving him and Scout to Talkeetna, where an ambulance was meeting them to take him to Anchorage. It only happened about an hour ago, while Margot and I were driving, and if I hurry, I won't be too far behind them. So I'm packing, even though I haven't taken off my coat from the road trip I just finished. My hands can't seem to grab my dad's clothes fast enough; I should have had an emergency bag of his things ready to go. If I'd only been here, I could have helped. I could have—

“What can I help pack?”

Margot's voice cuts through the storm of my thoughts like a ray of light, making me wince. She's standing in the doorway of my father's rooms, determined to help, but even looking at her is a reminder of how selfish I've been. Indulging in fucking fantasies at a ski resort while I should have been here when my dad needed me most. I can't stop imagining him, disoriented and asking for me while I was away with Margot, making plans to abandon him. It produces such a volatile mixture of panic, guilt, and fear in my gut that I fumble the pile of clothes in my arms. "Goddamnit," I mutter, dropping into a crouch to pick it all up.

In a moment, Margot is by my side, and the smell of gardenias nearly breaks me. "Let me help," she says, gathering socks and worn flannel like they're the tattered remnants of my composure. Her light brown eyes dart over me, and I hate that I'm making her nervous, but I can't seem to get a grip.

Usually, I can remain calm in an emergency. But that capability has gone offline. In fact, everything seems to be offline except the high-pitched ringing that isn't just in my ears but in every cell of my body. Because I'm not only dealing with a crisis—I'm dealing with it after waking up from a fever dream, the consequences of which include a \$2.5 million research grant I had no right to accept, and the soon-to-be-broken promises I made to a woman I'm head over fucking heels in love with.

"Forrest, please," she says after we pack the clothes in the suitcase. She places a tentative hand on my tense forearm. "Talk to me."

Her touch is even harder to bear than her home-at-last scent because I don't deserve it. After all my posturing, I'm about to break her goddamn heart, like every other bastard in her life. I flinch away, wincing at the hurt in her eyes. For a moment, neither of us breathes. She's staring at me like she just needs one word. One word to reassure her that we're okay. But I can't give it to her. So I turn away, packing the daily journals I keep about my father's health and progress. Journals that have been left empty the last two days.

"Okay," she says to my cowardly back. "I'll go check if we need anything from downstairs."

I glance up in time to see her turning away, and I blurt, "You don't need to come." It's the first full sentence I've said since we got the news, and my voice

comes out hoarse and abrasive.

“Of course I’m coming,” she retorts, but I can see the alarm building behind her brave eyes.

I stare at her for a beat too long, dragging out the last moment before I ruin everything. Before she knows I don’t have it in me to bring her to Anchorage with me. Not when she’s the source of all my joy and all my negligence.

“No,” I tell her. “You’re not.”

She takes a half-step back, and I watch her expression quickly flicker from surprise to hurt before she grips on to anger. “I think I’ll make that decision for myself, thanks. We’ll have plenty of time to argue about it in the car.”

She turns again, clearly not wanting to give me the chance to make this worse. I’d give anything not to. Anything to keep pretending my father’s seizure hasn’t changed everything.

“Margot.”

She looks back at me, her eyes terrified but defiant, and my breath lodges in my chest. “I’ve already texted Bear,” I choke out. “He’s coming, so you won’t be alone. He’ll—” I pause, my heart picking up reckless speed. “He’ll take you to the airport so you can go home.”

Her beautiful eyes are glossy with unshed tears as she shakes her head. “You don’t have to do this. You think you’re protecting me from having to care for one more sick person, but—”

“No, it’s not that,” I interrupt, running a heavy hand through my hair. “I just —”

“Just what, Forrest?”

Her voice is a trembling, naked thing I can barely hear over my galloping heartbeat, and panic robs me of all tact. Instead of letting her down easy, the words that bolt from my throat are blunt and graceless. “I just can’t afford any more distractions.”

She jerks like I’ve dealt her a blow. “I’m a *distraction*?” she repeats, audibly winded.

In a moment of horrible clarity, I understand the full impact of my words. To Adam, she was too committed to her sister. To her father, too much of a responsibility. To her readers, too heartless. And now, despite all my empty

promises, I've told her she's too much for me too. Self-loathing winds its way through me like a viper, sinking its teeth in.

"If I hadn't taken you to the resort, I would've been here to help," I try to explain. "If I hadn't let myself get so carried away, I could have seen this coming. I would have been prepared."

"So this is *my* fault," she snaps back, and I get whiplash from how quickly things are nosediving.

"I didn't *say* it was your fault," I say, my voice rising to match hers. "What I'm *saying* is that my dad needs me, and I can't have you around because there's no room for anything else when I'm near you, Margot!" My eyes go wide and desperate. "No room to think, no room to breathe, and right now I *need* to think. I *need* to breathe."

The edges of her blur, softening in my standing tears until I can almost pretend she isn't looking at me like the worst thing that's ever happened to her.

"And the grant? Was that just another distraction too?" she asks.

I walk toward her, unable to stop my feet. She goes rigid, and I half-expect her to turn away. But when I stop in front of her and slide my hand into the side of her hair, she chokes back a small sob.

"What would you do if it were Savannah?" I ask thickly, meeting her tear-filled eyes with my own.

She bites down on her trembling lip and gives the barest shake of her head.

"Say it," I press, blinking moisture from my eyes until it runs down, soaking into my beard.

This is it. The reason I love her and the reason I can't have her twined together like barbed wire and velvet around my chest. We're two sides of the same mirror, perfect reflections of each other, unable to breach the glass.

She takes a shuddering breath as my thumb brushes her lower lip. I know her answer before it leaves her in a broken whisper. "I would stay."

When I kiss her, salty and unbearably sweet, I tell her what's too painful to say out loud. That I'm going to rescind my grant acceptance. That our hope for a future together was a fool's dream. When I press my forehead to hers, her face cradled in my hands, I tell her that I'll be with my father until the end.

And I know that when I leave without a single look back, she understands this was always going to be another Happily Never After.

MARGOT

When Forrest is gone and everything is silent except for the muffled whimpers I'm forcing back down my throat, my body propels me out of the lodge toward his cabin. It must have snowed the night we were away because the trail is covered and deep. Bullwinkle is standing beside it, placidly munching on God knows what, and I rush past him, my calf muscles aching as I break snow. When I finally make it to Forrest's front door, I know he won't be inside, but he's not what I'm looking for.

I push my way in and make a beeline straight for the bedroom, not stopping until I'm pulling open his underwear drawer. I let out a small sob at the sight of my sister's last letter. More than anything, I need her voice in my head. I need to hear that somehow everything's going to be okay. I rip open the envelope, breathing hard.

Dear Margot,

Can you believe this is your last week? Can you believe that you're actually sad about it? And no, don't give me that bullshit—I know you are, you know you are. But I bet you're also missing L.A. and, dare I say it, your annoying little sister? Technically, as I write this, you haven't left yet (you're currently holding a Pilates posture on our patio that reveals exactly what your birthing face would be), but I'm already missing you SO much. Even more so because of my big news.

Over the course of these letters, I've tried to show you that I understand why you needed that Happily Never After file. I've cherry-picked examples of the worst men in your life and acknowledged my role in taking advantage of your kindness. No arguments, please.

But the thing about pretty words on paper is that you can read them and choose to ignore them. They can have a major impact, and even change your perspective, but there's always the option of not doing anything about them. And in this case, that's not okay. My worst fear is that you'll come back from this reinvention trip a changed woman, exactly as planned, and slowly slip back into old, comfortable routines. Which is why—deep breath here—when you get back to L.A., I'll have already moved out.

It wasn't a decision that I made lightly, Margot. Having you as a roommate and caretaker has been the greatest gift anyone in my position could ever hope for. More than they'd even have the right to hope for, because no one can give that much without completely sacrificing themselves. And that's exactly what you've done for me, over and over again. And while it's a beautiful, selfless thing, it's also allowed me to become a crutch for you. A ready-made excuse to shut out all possibilities of self-discovery, transformation, and yes, love.

I know this news is going to hurt. I know you're probably on the verge of a heart attack—please sit down, okay? You have to trust me when I say that this is exactly what's needed to happen for a long time now. And not just for you but for both of us. More than anyone I know, you deserve a Happily Ever After, and I hope, with this new space and room to grow, you'll be able to welcome it with open arms when it comes rushing into your life.

*Be safe, but not too safe,
Savannah*

For once, Savannah is wrong. Despite my trembling body, I'm not having a heart attack. Having a heart attack would require a heart, and all I've got left is a smoking crater in the center of my chest. I also don't need to be told to sit down. I'm already on the floor in a crumpled heap. It occurs to me to try pulling myself

together enough to get up and take action, but all I can do is stare at her familiar looping cursive. I'm searching for proof that an imposter wrote these words and not my sister. *Please be an imposter.* But her backward-looking F's are the same as they've been since second grade, and I know it's her.

The urgent need to take a sharp gulp of air alerts me to the fact that I've stopped breathing. I take another. And another. My brain is having difficulty parsing the sudden arrival of this news with the fact that she wrote it weeks ago. This wrecking ball has been in motion all along, right next to Forrest's neatly folded boxer briefs, and I can't decide whether I should laugh or scream. What comes out is a sound more like a death gurgle. I have the reflexive need to do something, anything, to stop her from moving out, but logically, I know she's already gone. Gone like our dad, gone like Adam, gone like my readers, and—I swallow painfully around the quickly expanding pressure in my throat—gone like Forrest.

I don't know how long I cry or how many pairs of his clean underwear I use as makeshift Kleenex. But when I manage to stumble into a standing position, I've come to two irrefutable conclusions: I can't stay here, and I need to see Savannah at once. I wipe my eyes. Refold my letter. I'm finally going home, but not really. Not at all.

MARGOT

After one smelly ride from Uncle Bear, two back-to-back red-eyes to L.A., one short stop at home to dump my bags in the foyer, and one bumper-to-bumper crawl to Los Feliz, I'm finally standing on the stoop of a quaint blue-and-white bungalow. My sister's new home. It's barely seven in the morning, and the scent of bougainvillea perfuming the balmy air is a sensory shock after living in an icebox for over a month. I should be nervous to be here, and I am, but frankly, I'm also too fucking exhausted to wait another second. I knock on the door.

As with the rest of this journey, I expect a long wait, but I jump when the door opens almost immediately. It's Cooper, long and lanky in a skintight wet suit. His tan skin, sky-blue eyes, and sun-bleached waves accessorize his SoCal surfer boy look more effectively than any longboard ever could.

"Margot!" he yelps, his eyes going round with fear. Maybe he can tell I haven't changed my clothes or brushed my teeth in over twenty-four hours. Maybe he can tell that I've been subsisting on shrink-wrapped airport salads, with one notable exception of an orgasmically delicious Starbucks cake pop that almost instantly gave me the shits. The point is, he should be afraid. *Very* afraid.

"Where," I say, stalking closer to him, "is my sister?"

The door squeaks open a little wider as Cooper backs up, either to escape my poisonous morning breath or to allow me into an admittedly charming front sunroom. I step in, and even out of my periphery, the hanging macramé plant

holders and bright yellow throw pillows on rattan chairs feel like an extension of Savannah.

“Babe!” Cooper calls, turning to look at the inner doorway leading to the main house. “You’ve got a visitor!” He turns back to me, and after a second, he blasts me with a bright, lopsided grin that makes me want to hiss like a vampire caught in sunlight. “She’s going to be so fucking happy to see you.”

Before I can protest, he’s wrapping me in a neoprene-and-fermented-ocean-scented hug that lifts my tired feet off the ground and gives my compressed spinal column two satisfying pops.

“Gotta run,” he says when he sets me back down. “Swell’s coming in. Are you staying over with us?” He smiles at my responding “Uhh” like I’ve said, *Sure am! I packed my jammies!* “Awesome, Van’ll be so happy. Can’t wait to kick your ass in Scrabble tonight.” He clicks his fingers and points at me in a way that’s somehow not douchey. With one last disarming smile, he’s sidling past me toward his surfboard-laden Jeep.

I’m still getting my bearings when I see her materialize, staring at me from the inner sunroom door like I’m a ghost. A ghost with a large balsamic vinaigrette stain on her shirt and an eye twitch.

“Margot,” she says, shock leeching all strength from her voice. She’s always been beautiful, but after being separated from her for so long, I pick up on subtle shifts in her appearance. Her skin is bronzed like she’s been spending most of her time outside. The faint purple smudges that have always lived beneath her eyes are still there, but she’s not leaning on the doorframe like she does during a flare. She looks... strong. It’s clear she’s having one of those blissful stretches of good days we both treasure so much, but my fear that she’ll wither without me almost wants to believe it’s a fluke.

“You’re back early,” she says, and there’s no mistaking the anxiety in her voice.

“Of course I came back,” I say. “Your letter—”

“You shouldn’t have read it early,” she blurts. “I’m going to have a word with Dr. MD. He promised he’d keep the letters locked up somewhere safe!”

Under any other circumstance, I’d probably laugh, but thinking of Forrest—even if it’s just his underwear drawer—feels like a fork twisting up my insides like spaghetti. I can’t bring myself to respond, so I say the only thing I’ve been

thinking since I read her letter. “What the fuck, Van?” I mean to say it angrily, but it comes out as a hurt whisper crammed with every *Bachelorette* binge, overnight hospital stay, delayed publication date, and eight-hour bone broth I’ve lovingly simmered for her over the years.

She shrinks in on herself and suddenly looks younger. “You read the letters,” she says. “You know why I did it.”

“But you *can’t* do this!” I shout, surprising us both. At the stunned look on her face, I take a deep breath and try to lower my voice; to try for reason. “You know Cooper can’t dedicate enough time to you. I know you love him, but you need to live with someone who can drop everything when you’re in a flare.”

Her sandy eyebrows pinch together. “So what are you saying, Margot? That I’m *never* supposed to move out? That I’m not allowed to build a life with someone I love if he doesn’t have a work-from-home job with limitless vacation time?”

“*We* built a life together, Van! A home together! Doesn’t that count for anything?”

“Of course it does! It counts for everything!”

“Then how could you abandon it all without even telling me?” I demand.

Her face scrunches as she squeezes her eyes shut. “Because I never would have had the strength to leave if you were here, and I *had* to get out of that house, Margot! You were living your whole life for me, and I was suffocating!”

Pain spreads through me, thick and black as an oil spill. For so many years, the story I’ve told myself has had only four words: *my sister needs me*. It’s only now that she’s run away from home that I realize I’ve had it all wrong. I’m the one who needs my sister. The proof is in her bright eyes and this beautiful new life she’s built for herself. One month of independence has transformed her in a way I hadn’t thought possible, and it cuts deeper than any words ever could.

My voice is shaking when I speak. “So all that about reinventing myself? Sending me to fucking *Alaska*? It was all an elaborate bullshit way to get me out from underfoot so you could secretly build your little love nest with Cooper? So you could just *leave* me, just like everyone you wrote about in your letters?”

Savannah angrily wipes a tear from her face. “You know that’s not true. You *know* that’s not true, Margot,” she repeats. “I sent you to Alaska and moved out so

you can finally have a life that isn't shackled to my ups and downs. I did it because I need to see if I can live without someone monitoring my every twitch. I did it because, as much as you might want me to be, I'm not your Happily Ever After!"

I recoil like I've been slapped. She pauses, gathering herself with a breath. "*Please*," she says, and she's asking the impossible. She's begging me to rise above my own wounded ego to see the bird's-eye view she so clearly painted for me in her letters.

But the part of me that feels deceived and abandoned doesn't want to rise above the trees. It wants to thrash around in the mud some more and maybe throw a little of it too. I don't want to acknowledge that the love and care she put into crafting each one of those letters guided me through every moment of transformation I experienced in Alaska. But even now, there's no denying that they did. Her words gave me strength and opened my heart enough to allow that brief but incalculably precious time with Forrest.

She's staring at me with barely concealed panic, and I realize that despite all her careful machinations, she's as terrified of losing me as I am of losing her. She knows she's never moving back in with me, that an era has come to a close, but she doesn't know if I'll ever forgive her for leaving. I swallow hard as the desperation to keep her all to myself begins to battle a new kind of urgency. It's the deep-seated need to always reassure her of my love. To comfort her and give her what she needs, no matter what it might cost me. In the end, my selfishness doesn't stand a chance.

My eyes spill over like a child's. "B-but how am I supposed to live without you?"

Her eyes widen with unexpected hope. After a moment, she half-laughs through her own tears and says, "Did you really just quote a Michael Bolton song and *not* sing it?"

I give her a tremulous smile, wiping my eyes. "Believe it or not, quoting Michael Bolton wasn't intentional."

All at once she's setting her coffee mug on the ground, only to immediately knock it over with her foot as she rushes toward me. I'm wrapped in her slender arms, and she's hugging me harder than she's ever hugged me before. I feel her strength and know that she's been okay without me. I close my eyes as relief and

gratitude pour through me, washing away petty jealousy and bitterness. I let my tears soak into her honeysuckle-scented hair, and for the first time since setting eyes on her, I let myself feel the sweetness of being home at last.

“I’m sorry I smothered you,” I say, my voice as nasal as a kazoo.

“I never said ‘smothered.’ Maybe just ‘loved to the point of mild asphyxiation.’”

“I fucking missed you,” I say, crying softly.

“I fucking missed you, too, and I need to hear everything.” She sniffs, pressing her forehead into my neck. Then she lifts it just as quickly, her eyes wide and shining. “But Margot, oh my God,” she says, breathless. “We need to talk about your *post*. It’s completely blown up.”

I try not to gulp. Ever since I put that letter into the world, I’ve been too afraid and too overwhelmed to look at the response. But I’m back home now, and out of excuses. “What are they saying?”



The answer is a LOT. Checking my email and socials for the first time in days feels like being dropped into a beehive. Except instead of being repeatedly stung, I’m apparently the new queen. Every romance reader who’s ever created an Instagram account in the last decade seems to have something to say about my letter, and the vast majority have welcomed me back with open arms. My DMs are filled with personal messages from fans who tell me how they too have lost their hope in love only to find it again at the least expected moment. There are apologies for mean comments, people professing that they couldn’t bring themselves to throw my books out, and perhaps most of all, demands for the Alaska manuscript.

“I... don’t know how to handle this,” I say to Savannah. I’m curled up on her floral-print IKEA couch, sporting wet hair and borrowed Care Bear pajamas after she forced me to “destink” in the shower. I’m flipping between the endless comments and my email inbox, where a very hopeful but “let’s temper our expectations” email sits from Anjali. As it stands, Barker Books has already begun their apology campaign to get me back, and there’s been interest from a

competing publisher who *didn't* drop me like a hot potato. One guess who I'll go with.

"Is that an 'I don't know how to handle this because it's so freaking awesome' or an 'I don't know how to handle this because I'm not sure I even want it anymore'?"

I drag my eyes away from my screen, tossing the phone on the cushion between us. "I think it's more of an 'I don't know how to handle this by myself,'" I say miserably.

"You're not by yourself," Savannah insists. "You've got Anjali, your pick of any publisher, and you've got *me*."

"No, I know," I say, biting my lip. "I guess that's not really what I mean."

Savannah looks at me sharply. "Do you mean Mr. Hot Tub? Because I'm going to be honest, I am *dying* to talk about this. Frankly, I'm disappointed he didn't come with you."

When loss nearly buckles me, the curiosity in Savannah's face morphs instantly to concern. "Margot, what happened?"

I lift a shoulder, twisting the ties of the lavender pajama bottoms into a single tight rope. After learning about Savannah's move, I shoved everything that happened with Forrest into a dark box with a rusty padlock for later examination and wallowing. But now it's seeping through the cracks, and there isn't really any point in holding it back.

"That post... it was only my half of a promise we made to each other," I whisper. "Forrest was going to move back to L.A. He'd accepted this huge research grant for work. We were going to try to—" I find that the rest of the words won't leave my throat. *Be together*.

"And he broke his *promise*?" Savannah asks quietly. Dangerously. I swear her hair begins to rise, like she's summoning some kind of vengeful power.

"He didn't have a choice," I say quickly.

She looks capable of shooting lightning bolts from her nostrils, though, so I explain what happened to Trapper and the whole reason Forrest was in Alaska to begin with. I explain that I couldn't rightfully expect him to make a choice I wouldn't have made myself.

Savannah's hand lightly covers her mouth as I keep going. "I think what feels so fucking heartbreaking about it all is that I'm right back at square one. My readers think I've found my HEA, but it's all over. I'm being welcomed back into this incredible community I've missed *so* much, and all I want to do is give them this book to say thank you. But every single sentence in it is about him." My voice hitches on the last word, and I steeple my head in my hands. A slow-rolling tear drips off the end of my nose. "I don't know how I'm going to stomach publishing it, Van. Going on tour, doing interviews, everyone asking me about Mr. Hot Tub. What are they going to say when they learn it didn't work out? That it's just another Margot Bradley Happily Never After?"

Savannah scoots close to me on the couch and pulls me into a hug. "You don't have to tell them anything," she says, kissing the side of my head. "Or you can tell them everything. But either way, they know who you are now, Margot. You let them *see* you, and that kind of vulnerability isn't taken lightly in this space. I think they'll wait for a different book if you can't publish this one. I think they'd read *anything* you decide to write. I know I would."

I sniff a little. "Even Pokémon fan fiction?"

"As long as you make it spicy enough."

I give a watery laugh and lean into my sister. There's a hollow ache in my chest that goes a little too deep to maybe ever fully heal. But the thing I've learned about hollowness—the kind that's carved from pain—is that the deeper it goes, the more room it leaves for love. And when love finally rushes in, it fills every dark and twisty crevice with a light almost too brilliant to bear.

In the dark moments, when all the lights go out, it's the love from a sister, or a community, or even a romance novel that keeps the empty chambers of your heart from caving in. And right now that's exactly what I need most.

FORREST

Two Months Later

February in Alaska is about as unpleasant as you'd think, but not for the reasons you might guess. It's not the marrow-penetrating cold that can freeze a spilled cup of hot coffee before it hits the ground, or the sun's reluctance to rise above the horizon for more than a few pale hours each day. It's not the mournful keening of the wind in the pines or the invisible black ice that turns every road into a game of Russian roulette. No, the worst thing about Alaska in February is the loneliness.

In the dead of winter, it's not just the bears who hibernate. People in the backcountry settle in too. Without new faces to see or stories to hear, conversations with familiar voices become circular, repeating the same worn paths, until eventually, everyone runs out of things to say. So we retreat into books and become isolated even from the people we live with. But in our solitude, the stories we read can miraculously transport us from the cold, deep quiet of the snow and into worlds of spring green, thrumming with life and new growth. Or in my case, right into the heart and mind of a person whose absence I feel every moment of the long days and even longer nights.

I know it isn't healthy. I know that reading and rereading Margot's books covers my mind in her fingerprints until I can't see anything but the lack of her. She's everywhere and nowhere in the cool, uncreased pillow on the left side of my

bed. She's missing from the lodge's stiff, neglected office chair tucked beneath the desk. Worst of all, she's gone in the dark windows of her cabin that watch me like judgmental eyes as I pass by every day.

"Need a little Beethoven with that scowl?"

I look up from the old copy of *Scientific American* I've been pretending to read while I drink my mediocre morning coffee and see my dad smiling at me. Or almost smiling. None of us has been doing much of that lately.

"I'm not scowling, I'm reading," I reply as he and Scout approach me at what I've come to think of as Margot's Desk.

He smirks. "Tell that to your magazine before it bursts into flame."

"We could use a little more warmth around here," I grumble.

My dad chuckles. "I know exactly the kind of warmth you're missing, and I'm sorry to say it won't come from setting things on fire with your glare, son," he says matter of factly.

He's not wrong, I think. With a sigh, I set the magazine down as Scout noses his head onto my lap for a scratch. "I'm going to help Jo in the greenhouse. I'll be back for our PT at eleven."

I've pushed back from the desk and started clearing my plate when he says, "Actually, you won't be."

I stop. He spoke softly enough that I might have misunderstood. "Excuse me?"

Dad pins me with a look that tells me to sit right back down. He might be folded up like a wounded bird in that chair, but he can still put me in my place with one lift of his craggy brow. I sit down.

"Actually," he repeats, more firmly this time, "you won't be."

"Of course I will," I say, just as firmly. Lately, he's been more and more resistant to our PT sessions, and I know why. The candle of hope he's carried ever since his accident has burned down to a barely glowing stub in the wake of his seizure. It's only made me more vigilant about keeping up with his exercises, but maybe I've been pushing him too hard. Maybe it wouldn't be a bad idea to—

"Son, you're fired."

My head jerks up. This time I have no doubt what he's said. "Fired?"

He nods. "Fired."

We stare at each other, and after a long moment, I can't help it—I laugh. It feels strange against my vocal cords, and I realize I can't remember the last time I found something funny. But the idea of my dad firing me is so completely ridiculous in our situation that he has to be joking.

“Sure, okay,” I say, still chuckling. “I’ll just go polish up my résumé, then.”

But there's no telltale twitch of his mustache or crease of crow's-feet. He's looking at me with a gravity that's almost apologetic. “I mean it, Forrest,” he says. “You're no longer my caretaker. I've hired someone else, and he'll be here at eleven.”

For what feels like a long time, all I can do is let my somatic nervous system take over to perform its many jobs. It absorbs my father's serious expression. It registers the stale aftertaste of subpar coffee while my mouth goes dry as a cotton ball. It processes what I've just heard. Except I'm having a little trouble with this last function. Usually, the way humans process and interpret meaning from sound is a miraculous phenomenon. I know, for instance, that my father's words have hit my ears as sound waves, which set off an intricate, almost infinitesimal dance of movement inside my inner ears, which my brain somehow perceived as recognizable neural signals. I can understand what he's told me, but allowing it to register as fact isn't something I seem capable of. That's probably why the only thing that comes out of my mouth is “Nope.”

I stand up, my body ready to vacate the premises as quickly as possible before it's hit with any more indigestible information. Scout wags his tail hopefully, and suddenly, a run in negative-twenty-degree weather seems like a great idea.

“Yes, Forrest,” my dad says patiently, like he knows I'm having trouble keeping up. “His name is Joshua, and he'll be here at eleven.”

“Joshua,” I repeat.

“You got it. He's a registered nurse and knows my whole case.”

The unreality of the situation has me scrambling for words like they're a bunch of marbles that got dumped on a floor.

“But... but we're *nowhere*,” I stammer stupidly. “You need someone to live here with you during the busy season at the very least. It's too much work for Jo.”

“He *is* going to live with me. Joshua, his wife, Ana, and their two little girls. They're all very fond of the great outdoors. Ana can't wait to lead wilderness

excursions. She's got her pilot's license, too, so we might even be able to start doing those flight tours we always talked about."

"How did you—"

"Jo and I have been making phone calls ever since we got back." He shrugs his good shoulder as Scout comes to lie down beside him. "Turns out a solid salary, free room and board, and a slower way of life appeals to a lot of young folks these days." He rubs his chin stubble thoughtfully. "Had to beat a lot of 'em off with a stick, honestly. But Joshua and his family are the perfect fit."

"Can the lodge even afford to hire two full-time employees?" I ask.

"Son, look around. The cost of living here is about as low as it gets. We can afford it."

"So—" I begin uncertainly. I press a fingertip to the rough-hewn desk between us. "So Joshua and his family are... coming here. At eleven. To *live* here. At North Star Lodge."

"Glad you're keeping up."

I shake my head as my heartbeat picks up, then picks up again, until I can feel it throbbing in my neck. "There's no need for this. This is *my* job. It's my job to take care of you," I say as strands of fear, protectiveness, rejection, elation, disbelief, skepticism, and general overwhelm snarl together like an unsalvageable knot of fishing line at the bottom of a tackle box.

"*Was* your job," he corrects me. "You're fired, remember?" At whatever my face is doing, his own softens. "But not for lack of skill or dedication. You're the most—" He pauses, mustache bristling up like a porcupine as he presses his lips together. When he speaks again, his voice is tight. "No one's ever gonna fill your boots, Forrest."

It's like someone's shoved an apple straight into my esophagus. "But why would you do this?" I manage around it. "There's no point now! You know they gave the grant to someone else. You know..." I swallow. "You know Margot hasn't returned my calls since she left."

At this, my dad rolls his eyes. "Don't be an idiot on purpose. You can still work without the grant. As for Margot, you read her letter to her readers. She might be hurt, but you know how she feels."

I bite my lips together, studying the deep wood grain of the table. Call me a coward, but no. I haven't been able to read the letter she wrote. Just thinking about it brings me right back to the hope-filled moment when we were delusional enough to think we could make a relationship work.

"Oh, good grief," Dad mutters. Taking his phone out, he taps it a few times and slides it over to me. "Read it. And you better be grateful I saved it for you in Anchorage. I had a feeling you were being obtuse."

Slowly, I sit back down and see that he's saved screenshots of an Instagram post to his photos app. I tap the first one, bracing myself for a fresh hammer swing to the heart, but it's impossible to stop myself from sinking into her words.

Dear readers,

At the risk of digging the hole I currently occupy a little deeper, I'd like to tell you about a woman who lost her faith in love. (It's me. I'm the woman.) Like every good villain, I have an origin story, and in the name of being as bravely vulnerable as you have always been with me, I'd like to share it with you.

Becoming this jaded didn't happen overnight or even over one too many Tinder dates gone wrong. Like so many others who find it difficult to entrust their heart to someone, I had my own heart broken when I was little. Far too little to understand or deserve the carelessness of someone I depended on (don't worry, Mom, it wasn't you). But like all children, I still craved the unconditional love I was missing. As I got older, I even began writing tales of true love that eventually inspired people to find their own Happily Ever Afters.

But time and time again, I gave my cautious heart to men who only ever broke it. Eventually, the pieces were so small and sharp, I had no choice but to sweep them up and lock them in a safe. But still, I had YOU. My incredible readers who loved me more than any would-be hero. You sought my stories for comfort and guidance, and I couldn't bear to let you down, even if it hurt to write the happy endings I no longer believed in. And so my Happily Never After diary was born.

It was never meant to be seen by the world. It was my private place to vent, worry, and virtually pillow-scream. But now that it has been exposed, I honestly couldn't be more grateful. I've learned that sometimes the worst things that happen to us end up being exactly what we needed in the first place. In my case, being canceled for not believing in love led me to remote Alaska, where I'd hoped to escape my life and all the romance tropes I never wanted to write again.

Instead, I met a man who embodies them all.

It was a classic enemies-to-lovers arc—I'm sure you know how it goes. Two people resisting each other because they have a unique ability to shine a glaring light on exactly what needs to be healed in one another. More important, they have a unique ability to give each other hope. Hope that, against all odds, Happily Ever After is possible.

There will never be words to adequately apologize for how I've hurt you, but I hope you might find it in your hearts to forgive me. Because while the fledgling spark of hope I carry for my own HEA shines bright, it would be incandescent if it included you.

x, MB

When I finish reading the last photo of her letter, there's a desperate part of me that doesn't want it to ever end. My shaking thumb swipes left, vainly hoping for a postscript, and what I see is a thousand times better. A thousand times worse. It's a photo of Margot. Her beautiful face is nestled over my wet shoulder in the hot tub, her luminous brown eyes staring directly at the camera. They're filled with such happiness—such hope—that I'm almost convinced I can still fix this. Almost. Until I remember those same eyes filled with the pain of promises that *I* broke.

"You shouldn't have shown me this." I hand the phone back to my dad, barely checking my self-disgust. "What was the fucking point?"

My dad has the nerve to chuckle. "I'm not done. There's something else."

I start pushing my chair back, not really in the mood to have my chewed-up heart spit back out. "Thanks, but I'll pass."

“Not on this you won’t,” he says with a goddamn twinkle in his eye. “I’ve got Margot’s new book.”

My ass, which was hovering slightly over the chair, lands like it’s been yanked back down.

“What? Where is it? How the hell did you get it?” I ask, looking around like I’ve missed it sitting in plain sight. I’ve spent more time than I’d like to admit tracking my Google Alerts about her next book, which won’t be published until next year.

My dad shrugs a shoulder. “I emailed Margot and asked her for it. Her editor sent me a bound copy of the latest draft, and if the dedication’s anything to go by, I don’t think I’m the only one who was meant to see it.”

“Dedication?” I repeat, mouth going dry.

My dad reaches down to his wheelchair side-satchel, pulls out a book, and slides it across the desk. “Go on, then,” he says when he sees my hesitation. “Don’t make me read it to you.”

I pick up the book, tracing my hands over the spine, and force myself to breathe slowly as I read the cover.

HEART OF THE WOODS

Margot Bradley

Folio Publishing

I flip to the nearly blank dedication page, focusing on the words centered there.

To Forrest.

Thank you for helping me believe in Happily Ever After again, even if we couldn’t have our own. Every moment with you was better than fiction.

Finally, I know how Margot must have felt with every letter she got from Savannah. The bittersweet elation of having communication from the one person you need most, even if their words cut you to the quick. I reread her dedication—words for *me* that she plans on baring to the whole world—and hardly know

whether to be grateful or miserable. It's the final farewell she never had the chance to give me.

"You're only half of yourself without her," my dad says gently, pulling my gaze up.

"You're right," I manage, because truer words were never uttered. "But this is her goodbye, Dad. It's closure."

"Read between the goddamn lines, son. This isn't goodbye unless you let it be. Haven't you ever read a romance novel? You need to go to her, and you need to go *now*." The way he says this last sentence is heavy with experience. He knows exactly what it feels like to be torn from the person who balances out the scales of your life.

"But I can't leave you," I argue shakily, and this time it's not coming from a place of rational thinking. "Not after Mom."

He tilts his head, and there's a ghost of a smile on his lips. "Come on, now. Do you think for one second that Sheila Marie Wakefield would've tolerated you moping around here like goddamn Eeyore when you could be chasing down your soulmate and continuing your life's work?"

Up until now, I've managed to keep my eyes dry. But hearing my mother's name is like hitting a release valve. I think of her standing tall and straight in the kitchen, her clean white apron tied around her like armor. I remember the flash of her knife, as sharp and beautiful as her smile. I remember her embrace, as firm and sure as the way she always said "I love you." She wouldn't have put up with any of my shit. She never did.

"No," I say, my voice like a rusty hinge swinging open. "She wouldn't have."

"Your mom left us when she had to, on her terms. There's nothing you could've done differently that she would have allowed," my dad says, his tone brooking no argument. "Every moment I had with her was one I'll always cherish, and no, it wasn't long enough. But do you think if I'd known we'd lose her, I would've let her *go*? Lost even one more second with her?"

I shake my head, pressing a hand to my eyes as my breath starts coming in stutters. "No," I whisper. "You wouldn't have."

"Then my question is—would *you*?"

I drop my hand to look at him. For the first time in two months, I see a spark of hope in his eyes that I thought had been snuffed out for good. I blamed its loss on the seizure and his physical setbacks, but as it rekindles now, I see that it hasn't been about his health at all. I realize I've done the one thing he never would have—I've willingly given up the love of my life for another, when all along, he knew I could have both.

"No," I finally answer him, bracing my hands against the desk. "I wouldn't."

He nods, and when he smiles, it looks broader than Alaska itself. "Then I guess you'd better start packing. The flight I booked you leaves this afternoon."

I stare at my father, who, despite his new challenges, has taken charge of the situation and reversed our roles. I realize I'm no longer taking care of him—he's taking care of me. And at long last, I'm going to see her. At long last, I'm going home.

If she'll have me.

MARGOT

Tell me those are NOT what I think they are.”

At the sound of my sister’s voice, I turn to see her standing in the doorway to my office, holding a bowl of popcorn and staring at my ass.

“Yep,” I say, pulling out the high waist of my underwear and letting it snap back. “Ye Olde Panties of Lies themselves.”

“Ye Olde’? Do they have a built-in chastity belt?”

“Discreet but effective cockblocking or your money back,” I murmur, staring at the email on my screen. It’s from Sylvie, the podcast host who witnessed the infamous Happily Never After leak and who will be hosting my much anticipated comeback interview tonight. I scan the details for the hundredth time, still cowed by the sheer number of people who RSVP’d to hear our live stream talk.

There’s a soft ceramic-against-wood sound as Savannah puts her bowl down on my desk and comes up behind me. I breathe in the delicious scent of buttery popcorn as she rests her chin on my shoulder, realizing I haven’t eaten anything in hours.

“How many times are you going to read that?” she asks, looking down at my screen with me.

I’ve shoved a handful of popcorn into my mouth. “As many times as it takes for these numbers to get smaller.”

Reaching out, she puts a denim-blue-painted fingernail over the end of tonight’s participant number, covering the last zero. “Better?”

“*So* much better,” I say gratefully.

She gives me a hug. “You’re going to do great. What’s the worst that could happen? It’s not like a disgruntled superfan is going to hack into your private files and share them with the entire—oh, wait. That already happened.”

I sigh. After getting back home, the law-enforcement authorities who investigated the HNA leak informed me that they’d identified the hacker and apprehended them. It’s been an enormous relief, but I must not look any less nervous about this interview, because Savannah snaps the waistband of my underwear and says, “Look. Your readers have seen these, and they *still* took you back. If that’s not unconditional love, I don’t know what is.”

I laugh, elbowing her away. What she’s said is true though. In the roughly two months since I posted that explanation letter and photo of myself with Forrest, my life has turned around in ways I couldn’t have begun to imagine when I originally boarded that plane to Alaska.

Not only have my fans forgiven me, but my brilliant agent was able to broker my biggest deal yet with a new publisher for my manuscript. If that weren’t enough, two of my older novels have climbed back onto the bestseller list, and demands for my Alaska book have been overwhelming. It’s a lot to process. Of course I’m thrilled to be a part of this community again. Of course I’m grateful. But according to my new therapist, that doesn’t mean I can’t also be sad as hell.

Because while many wonderful, astounding things have happened since I came back to L.A., they’ve all been like beams of sunlight filtered through a cracked and dirty window. A muddied lens diminishing every good thing that comes my way because I can’t share them with *him*.

As usual, just the thought of Forrest sends a pulse of pain through the yawning cavity in my chest. Missing him is less of an emotion and more of a full-body chronic condition I’ve barely learned how to manage. As I prepare for my first public-speaking engagement since the floor of my life dropped out from beneath me, I know the only question on everyone’s mind is whether or not I found my HEA with him after all. It’s a question I’m not sure how I’ll bring myself to answer despite the endless versions I’ve drafted.

“Thanks, Van,” I say after taking a deep breath.

“You betcha,” she says from the couch, and I’m surprised by her distracted tone of voice and how intently she’s staring at her phone.

I check the time on my screen and get a sharp zing of adrenaline. One minute to go. “I guess this is it,” I say, sitting in my chair and pulling up the social media platform the event is being held on.

She looks up in alarm. “You’re *sure* you don’t want to put pants on?” she says. “Just in case?”

I smile. “Just in case I have to stand up and have another mental breakdown?”

“Never say *never*, Margot,” she says. “What if there’s a fire? What if we’re burgled?”

“These are my lucky panties now,” I say, mildly amused by her concern. “I think I’ll take the risk.”

“Fine,” she grumbles. “I guess it’s not like there’s anyone left on Planet Earth who hasn’t already seen how great you look in enormous beige spandex.”

“Okay, well, thanks for the pep talk,” I say, switching on my ring light. “Here goes nothing.”

“Good luck!” she says, blowing me three kisses in quick succession.

I pretend to catch them in midair, smack them to my lace-clad hip, and then it’s go time. With one last prayer that I don’t stick my foot in my mouth, get burgled, or generally fuck this up, I join the live stream.



“Thanks for that answer, Margot,” Sylvie says. “I think what you said brings up a salient question about whether the romance genre creates unrealistic expectations in real-life relationships, or provides a set of bars that we should rightfully expect every potential partner to hurdle.”

I take a drink of my water. To her credit, Sylvie hasn’t come out and openly asked me about #MrHotTub, as he’s known on socials, but she’s been slowly circling around it, keeping me and our thousands of listeners on the edge of our seats.

I put down my water glass, nodding. “I’d say that people have always looked to stories as a way of navigating their own lives and relationships. Reading novels is

one of the most time-honored ways of understanding and processing the human experience, and an essential part of that human experience is, of course, love.”

“So you *do* believe that the genre provides useful standards for people to check against while navigating their own relationships,” she says, thoughtfully twirling one of her bright blue 1940s-style pin-curls. “That feels like a pretty different tune from the one you sang in your Happily Never After file.”

During this live stream event, I can’t see any faces besides Sylvie’s, but her statement immediately creates a surge in comments and reaction emojis that sends an icy-hot prickle up my spine. This is her first mention of my HNA file, and there’s a palpable sense of being in the middle of a lake I thought was frozen and hearing an ominous crack.

“Yes, I suppose it does probably sound different,” I say, trying to keep my composure even though I know she’s moving in for the kill.

She smiles, sweet as pie. “And does your change of tune have anything to do with a recent change of *heart*? Maybe because of a certain *someone* in a hot tub?”

I blink and I see Forrest’s eyes. Just a flashing memory of deepest green, warm with firelight. But as soon as the image arrives, it’s gone again, leaving behind a fresh bruise. I’m aware that Sylvie and thousands of unseen others are watching me carefully, and that maybe Savannah was right about wearing pants after all. If I were wearing them, simply standing up and running away might be an option. Because despite all my carefully crafted answers to this very question, none of them feels like the right one. I could be ambiguous and leave everyone unsatisfied. I could be dishonest and say I’ve never been happier. Or I could be truthful but disappointing and admit I’ve never been more miserable in my life.

In the end, I find a way to be all three at once. “I don’t think there’s ever been a single heart that hasn’t been changed from meeting someone remarkable, Sylvie. Even if the time spent together was brief.”

“And that remarkable someone,” she says, leaning in closer to her screen. “Do you mean to say he might *not* be part of the Happily Ever After you hoped for in your post?”

I swallow hard as loss briefly pinches the muscles of my face together. I open my mouth to speak, but my response won’t emerge. I stare down at my hands, which are *not* shaking only because I’ve gripped them together so tightly. Sensing

that Sylvie is on the verge of repeating her question, I reflexively look up at Savannah like she might have cue cards waiting for me.

To my surprise, she's not looking at me. She's nervously tapping her fingernails against the back of her phone and staring off to the right at my office door. Before I can finish thinking *What the hell*, the doorbell rings, and I nearly emergency-eject from my skin. Savannah jumps, too, but doesn't land back in her seat. Instead, she's up and jogging out of my office like she's been waiting for those chimes all night. Bewildered, I turn back to Sylvie, who's looking as confused by the loud interruption as I am.

"Sorry," I say, chuckling nervously. "Saved by the bell, I guess."

Sylvie waves off my apology with an easy laugh and a smile. "No worries. Life is full of plot twists."

"You're telling me," I deadpan, earning a laugh.

Sylvie's smile widens. "Which brings me right back to the question I know everyone listening wants to know the answer to, Margot." She pauses for effect. "Is it safe to assume that, after your trip to Alaska and incredibly hopeful letter, you believe in the possibility of Happily Ever After once again?"

Despite the feeling of my heart being torn open like an overripe peach, I smile. Despite the pulpy, dripping mess in my chest, the answer to her question is easy. My voice hitches. "Absolutely," I say.

Sylvie rests her chin in her hands and sighs. "And what changed your mind?"

Suddenly, it doesn't feel like an interview for untold thousands but like I'm sharing secrets at a sleepover. "I think," I begin hesitantly, "what I didn't understand about Happily Ever After is that there are some people who come into your life—even for just a moment—who have the power to fundamentally change you forever. They're the people who see right through all your masks, and all your bullshit, and love you anyway. And not just *despite* all your wounds but because of them too. You're safe in their hands for as long as you can hold on to each other, but even when it's time to part ways, you leave knowing you've been truly seen." I pause, carefully wiping beneath my eyes, and take a breath. "You leave knowing you'll spend the rest of your life looking back on the time you had together with sadness, yes, but joy and thankfulness too."

“And so for you, Happily Ever After is a state of gratitude for the love you’ve received—no matter if the relationship has long since faded,” Sylvie says far more succinctly than I did. Her voice is tender, and below her face is an endless stream of heart emojis floating upward in a rainbow of color.

I nod. “Yes, that’s what I believe.”

“But what if it didn’t have to end?”

At this, I look to my left, because it wasn’t Sylvie who asked the question. It was a far deeper voice. A voice I haven’t heard in months, though it’s flickered in and out of my thoughts and memories every hour since I left him.

“Forrest,” I whisper, hardly daring to believe he’s really here.

I feel the vibration of the floor as he begins striding toward me, Savannah following in his enormous wake, and I stand up to face him, my heart going wild. All thoughts of the interview disappear when he comes to stand in front of me. It’s been so long since I’ve seen him and felt his presence that I’m overwhelmed by the details of him. The high cut of his cheekbones and the dip of his throat. The breadth of his shoulders and the coarse cowlicks of his dark hair. He looks as tired as I was after coming back to L.A., but somehow all the more beautiful for it.

Without thinking, I step closer, tilting my face up like an offering, and his hand lifts to cradle my jaw. My eyes flutter shut at his calloused touch—so familiar, so missed—and my entire body calms at once.

“Aaand that’s about all for now, folks!”

Forrest and I turn our heads sharply in unison at my sister’s voice. Savannah is standing on the other side of my desk, holding up my computer and apparently live streaming *everything*. My face promptly turns into a surface hotter than the sun’s core as the realization hits me that I’m having the most profoundly personal moment of my life in front of thousands of people, in my *underwear*. And not just any underwear but *those* underwear.

Savannah mercifully turns my computer around to face herself, grinning ear to ear. “Apologies to cut things short, Sylvie, but my sister has an HEA to get to. Totally unavoidable, I’m sure you understand.”

“But is that—” sputters Sylvie. “Oh my God, is that *Mr. Hot Tub*?”

Savannah winks into the camera, clicks a button, and closes my computer on the desk. “Sorry, but I had to give them *something*,” she says, walking over to us.

“Forrest, we can officially meet later. And Margot, I was wrong—that was even better without your pants.” She gives us one more dazzling smile and practically skips out of my office, closing the door behind her.

And then we’re alone for the first time in months, the aching chasm between us narrowed to a single foot of empty space.

“I’m so sorry” is the first thing he says, his voice like broken granite. “I’m sorry I didn’t come sooner.”

“We both knew it wasn’t going to last,” I say, ready to make his excuses for him. “I understand.”

“No, Margot,” he tells me. “I thought we understood. I thought we were being selfless. But I was so fucking wrong.” He shakes his head. “I’ve got nothing to give anyone else if you’re not with me.”

He’s looking at me like every wet curve of my eyelashes and crease of my lips are small miracles. I know because I’m staring at him the same way.

“But your dad—” I start, even though I don’t want to say it. Even though I want to avoid any topic that might steal him away from me again.

“Fired me,” he says with an incredulous laugh. “Hired a live-in nurse and evicted my ass.” A stunned laugh gusts out of me. Forrest steps in closer until that foot of space becomes mere inches. “He never wanted me to sacrifice everything for him. The more dedicated I was, the worse he felt for keeping me from living my own life. For keeping me from you.”

I shake my head, wondering how it would be possible to relate harder to something. “Savannah gave me the same wake-up call,” I tell him. “After you left to take your dad to Anchorage, I read her last letter and learned she’d moved out of my house.”

Forrest’s eyes widen, and I know he understands how difficult that particular revelation must have been for me. “Christ, are you okay? I had no idea—”

I nod, taking a breath. “I’m okay. And so is she, despite all my paranoia. We’re still adjusting, but it’s getting a little easier not to send constant text reminders for her to take her supplements.” I pause, biting my lip and dropping my gaze from his. “It has been a little lonely, though,” I say in a choked voice, and I can’t stop the tears from welling up.

“Fuck, Margot. I’ve been so lonely, too, sweetheart.” One of his hands rises to gently tilt my chin up. “Every day since you left has felt like a goddamn tally on a prison wall. And then my dad showed me your book dedication, and it made me hope I could try and make things right.”

“Does that mean...” I say uncertainly, hardly daring to ask the question that’s been burning inside me since he appeared. “Do you mean you’re moving back to L.A.?”

“I am,” he says, making those two words sound like a vow.

“For good,” I confirm, raising my own hands to tentatively rest against his warm chest.

At my touch, he takes a racking inhale. “For as long as you’ll have me.”

This whole time, I’ve been on the brink of tears, but at this, they spill freely down my face. I’m half-laughing, half-crying when I speak. “And you promise there won’t be any more wilderness excursions?”

He pulls me in close, a corner of his beautiful mouth lifting. “There will *always* be wilderness excursions.”

I try to look disappointed but fail completely. All I can see is our future together, stretching out farther than any distant horizon line, and—

My thoughts are interrupted when his big hands wrap around my waist and he picks me up, my bare legs automatically wrapping around his hips. I look down from my favorite place in the world, my arms wrapping around his neck like they’ve come home at last.

“I gotta say, I like you in this position a lot better without pants,” he says, chuckling, and I can’t help my blush.

“It might have been a little cold for our meet-cute,” I point out. “Then again, you know a thing or two about warming me up.”

The look he gives me matches the squeeze of his hands, and my breath hitches.

“So about that HEA Savannah mentioned,” he says, his deep voice resonating through me. “I’ve heard you’re the expert on how they go.”

I smile down at him, and my world narrows to the deep green of his eyes and the smile tugging at his lips. We might as well be a thousand miles away, standing in front of a (perfectly ventilated) cabin fire together.

“They’re not really that complicated,” I tell him, sinking my hands into the back of his thick curls and watching his eyelashes flutter. “You already nailed the grand gesture. That’s a good start.”

He nods like he’s considering it carefully. “True. But I haven’t told you I love you yet. That seems pretty vital.”

At those words, my heart feels like a bird trying to take flight right out of my chest.

“You love me,” I whisper, and it’s half-question, half-declaration.

“Of course I love you,” he says, raising a hand to stroke my dimple with his thumb. “Why else would I be here begging you to spend the rest of your life with me?”

I laugh as joy, love, and a certainty I’ve never known before wells up inside me, spilling out until I’m sure it’s racing down every street of my neighborhood, banners flying in the wind. It’s begging to be written about, begging to be witnessed, and begging to give hope to every person who ever thought they were only cut out for Happily Never Afters.

“I love you, too,” I say, but he already knows.

He slides his hand to the back of my neck, pulling me close and kissing me like he’s spent his whole life searching for this love and plans to spend the rest of it holding on to me.

My arms wrap more tightly around his neck, and I kiss him back until I know he understands something vital. This may not be our first kiss, and it’s certainly not our last, but it *is* the first kiss of something I never imagined for myself. Happily Ever After.

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Victoria Lavine's love of romance novels started in high school with a crate of old bodice rippers and a wink from her local librarian. Now she writes her own Happily Ever Afters when she's not enjoying the great state of Maine with her husband and daughter, taking orders from her two cats, or coming up with excellent reasons to make her next latte.

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