

**Slowly, All at Once**  
A Cabin Christmas Romance

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## CHAPTER 1

“I’m selling the house. You need to be out by the end of the day,” my father said in the middle of Sunday brunch.

The chatter of the restaurant diners lowered to a dull hum. The fork I’d used to pierce a strawberry hung suspended over my plate, shining from the mid-morning sun coming through the floor-to-ceiling windows.

A waiter approached our table with a silver thermos in his hand. “More coffee?”

I nodded, giving him a forced smile.

As he poured, the aroma wafted up to me as the dark-brown liquid filled my cup. Steam rose from the top, promising clarity when it cleared.

Out the window, the ski slopes, which would be overflowing with skiers and snowboarders in the winter, were a lushly groomed green and filled with day hikers and mountain bike enthusiasts. Bikes hung on the side of the chairlifts as they slowly rolled up the cables to the top of the mountain, where the riders would disembark and ride the bikes down the terrain—only to do it all over again. All day long.

Summer in Jackson, Wyoming, was ending, and families were squeezing in last-minute vacations before their kids returned to school.

Across from me, my father was still talking, but I heard nothing after his first words.

My stepmom, Pamela, looked at me in my dazed state. “Camille?” She reached a beautifully manicured hand across the table and lowered mine to the table. I rested my fork on the side of my plate.

“Camille, honey, did you hear your father?” she repeated.

I looked to my left to see if cameras were hidden by the bar or behind the curtains. Nothing visible in the deer antler chandelier. Nothing visible in the wooden beams or the steel angles that held them together. I observed the restaurant guests and there didn't seem to be anything out of the ordinary.

A reality TV show about my father's life, his baseball team, and his utterly gorgeous, much younger wife, would be just the thing my older brother would sign up for.

I shook my head. “I heard him, but I'm not sure I understood what he said. I think I just heard him say he was selling the house. What does that mean?”

Jazzy, my younger half-sister, didn't even look up as she said, “Dad doesn't want the house anymore. He's buying a vineyard in Napa.”

I glanced at her, sitting to my right, and marveled how any teenager could cope in the real world. Her nose had grown into her phone's screen. She didn't comprehend how significant this was to me.

I looked back at my dad and Pam. “In Napa? Surely, we can afford to keep both. Where am I supposed to live?”

The irony of my previous thoughts regarding Jazzy's connection to the real world didn't escape me. My father's voice interrupted my wayward thoughts. “My dear, you've been living here rent free for six years. It's time you were on your own.”

“On my own?” My eyes flitted from my dad to Pam. Jazzy never even looked up.

“I'm cutting off your trust until you get a job.” He shoveled a forkful of eggs benedict into his mouth.

“Now? How am I supposed to live?” A few people at nearby tables glanced my way, and I lowered my voice. “Can I have a few weeks?”

After a swig of his mimosa, my dad answered, “I’m sure you have what’s left of your last allowance. You’ll be fine.”

I turned pleading eyes to my stepmom. “Pam, what is happening?”

“Sweetie, you’ve been living here since you missed placing on the podium at the 2016 Olympics. You can’t stay here forever and not do *anything*.”

“I get that, but could I have a little more notice? I volunteer for things. I just finished the plan for the *Sexy Men of Sports* calendar, and the proceeds are for charity.”

My dad snorted. “Sexy men of sports. You spend my money. You want to contribute? Get a real job.”

Pam put a gentle hand on my father’s forearm to calm him down and said to me, “Camille, you’re a smart woman. You’ll figure something out.”

My eyes burned; I’d never thought my dad was disappointed in me.

“I don’t mean to whine, but I could have used a little more notice. Time to find a job. Time to find a place to live. What do I do? What about Betty Blue?”

“A horse that won’t get you \$10 for one of her offspring?” my dad asked.

“She’s the best jumping horse I’ve ever ridden.” I crossed my arms, defending my 15-year-old Hanoverian.

“So, it’s your fault you didn’t place in the top six.” He accused.

I inhaled sharply, the tears threatening to fall. I spoke through tight lips. “Yes, Dad, my mistake cost me. But I still need a place for my horse.”

“Doesn’t your friend have a ranch where you can board it?”

My head spun with the decisions I needed to make. And quickly, apparently. “I guess so.”

Pam continued, “You can come work with me in the event planning office if you want to come back to San Diego. You always have such great ideas when it comes to promoting and planning.”

My eyes softened. “Thank you, Pam, but my home is here. My friends are here.” I turned my attention back to my dad. “Dad, is there a room here at the resort I can stay in until I figure this out?”

My dad finished his mimosa. “You’re strong, Camille. There’s a place for you in San Diego if you want to work for the franchise. Either that or you can talk to your brother about working at the resort.”

Anger bubbled up and out of me. I lowered my voice, trying to contain it. “Mach can do no wrong. Is that what this is about?” I took my napkin from my lap and threw it on the table. “The resort’s grown ever since Mach took over, but since I focused on riding, I’m being punished for not having a career. Being punished for following your dreams for me. And now that it hasn’t worked out, I’m no longer good enough.”

I pushed my chair back and stood. “Mach is the golden boy. The Stanford grad. The CEO. But not Camille. Camille choked, and now her prize horse won’t bring in any money.” The dining room had gone quiet. The wait staff stayed near the edges of the room. “I get it. I’ll be out. Maybe one day you’ll love me for me.”

I strode through the restaurant, into the resort hotel, and out through the lobby, holding my head high. I stopped in an alcove near the check-in

desk and pressed my fingers against the sides of my forehead, willing myself not to cry. I'm a grown woman, and I'd just behaved exactly how my dad had expected me to: a spoiled child. I waited a few minutes for the adrenaline to leave my system so I could focus on what I should do next—besides getting my things out of my dad's house.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. When my emotions were under control, I stepped back into the lobby and walked toward the front doors.

The front desk clerk smiled as I walked past. "Have a nice day, Ms. Bradley."

"Thank you, Emma." I smiled and nodded as I continued walking.

I was glad my brother was away at a hospitality convention because I would have punched his smug face when he told me, "Sorry, sis, resort is full."

In front of the entrance doors, the concierge asked, "Do you need a ride home, Ms. Bradley?"

"Not yet. Can someone take me to Brooks Outfitters instead?"

The concierge nodded and directed one of the valets to bring the Suburban around. He held the back door open as I climbed in, and then we drove the short distance to Brooks Outfitters, owned by my best friend, Mia Brooks and her brother, Jacob.

Jackson Square was overflowing with tourists. Parents dragged their hot, tired kids around to get pictures under the famous antler arches. College kids lounged in the coffee shops and bookstores on their day off as rafting guides or camp counselors. Everyone came for the perfect weather and left because of the biting cold winters. Each winter, a different crop of tourists. Die-hard extreme skiers and



wealthy Hollywood types who wanted to prove they were more cowboy than their Aspen- or Vail- bound colleagues.

The driver stopped the SUV just outside the shop, and I stepped out onto a wooden planked sidewalk.

“Will you need a ride back, Miss?” he asked as he helped me.

“No, thank you. I’ll get a ride.” I’d ridden with my dad from the house to the resort restaurant; I’d find my own way back.

He nodded and left me standing under the Old West-style wood framed awning.

The cowbell above the door jangled as I entered. Cody, Mia and Jacob’s all-around, do-everything guy, was dressing a mannequin in cargo pants and a fleece jacket.

“What did you do wrong?” I asked him teasingly as I moved farther into the store.

He grunted.

A large gas firepit sat in the center of the store. I walked past it and sat on one of the three couches; it was my favorite place to sit as I read while Mia and Jacob worked during the winter. The thought shamed me. Maybe my dad was right.

“Hey, wookie, where’s your sister?” I asked Jacob who was working a few feet away from me at the sales counter.

He glared down at me as I innocently looked up at him from the couch. I didn’t shrink away, but his six-foot-four frame did cast a large shadow.

A man and his tween daughters were buying life vests and kayak paddles.

“Cody,” Jacob called. He came to the counter and Jacob motioned to me. “Can you do something with her while I finish ringing up our customers?”

Cody sat across from me. He didn't say a word, only took a rubber band from his pocket and put his shoulder-length hair in a man bun.

He stared at me. His face was a pretty contradiction to the chastising, grownup expression he gave me.

"What? He is a wookiee." I held my hands out to the side of my head. "All that hair?"

Cody shook his head and went back to dressing the mannequin. I said to his back, "You deserve that job."

I picked up a POWDER magazine and flipped through it while Jacob finished with his customers. He walked them to their car, carrying some of their packages, all with a million-dollar smile. That smile that could charm women, aged 7 to 70, into brainless flirts.

When he returned, he scowled. "Mia isn't here, Camille. What do you want?"

"Can't I just come see my friends?"

"No. You always need something. A favor. A partner in crime. A glass of wine. And I don't have the patience or time for you today." He sat across from me and leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees, clasping his hands together.

"I always did find it unusual that you keep wine here." I sighed dramatically.

"I don't have time for your flightiness today, Camille. I have a trip to plan. What do you want?" he repeated.

"Where's Mia?" I asked nonchalantly, pretending. My heart was racing.

He leaned back against the leather back of the chair. "You mean you don't know where your bestie is?"

“Don’t mock.”

He laughed. “She and John closed on their house last week. They’re meeting the movers to get their things moved in.”

“Oh, good for them. Did they decide on the one at the golf course, or up in the mountains?”

“Neither. They bought out near the airport. A couple of acres with a one story. Lots of glass. Great views of the Teton crest.”

To hide my anxiety, I kept up with the trivial conversation. “Oh, they’ll be happy out there. Lots of room for Mia to ride her snowmobiles.”

Jacob tapped his foot.

I’d wanted to ask Mia if she knew of anyone I could stay with, but after Jacob told me she had moved out, I had a different idea.

I planted the seed slowly, unsure if Jacob would warm to the idea as much as I had. “So, she’s moved out of the upstairs apartment?”

He furrowed his brow at me. “I thought the two of you talked, like, every day, a couple of times a day.”

I shrugged, going for nonchalance. “I’ve been busy. We haven’t had time to catch up lately.”

He stood and went to the checkout counter. “Here’s their address, if you want to go out there.” He wrote the information on a Post-it Note, and handed it to me.

I folded it in half and slid it into the outside pocket of my purse. “So, you’re living upstairs all alone now?”

“Alone, but not lonely.” He winked.

“You’re sad. And that’s a dumb line.”

He chuckled. “Yeah, I’m alone. For now. I think I might start looking for a house. A cabin or cottage. Something away from the business.”

I was a little jealous, picturing Jacob in a small cottage with another woman. Him, all burly, manly, and rugged, sitting by a fire with a golden retriever at his feet. Cliché? I know. But so fitting. I sighed.

“Are you okay, Camille?” He sat down again.

I pushed my romantic ideas to the back of my head and decided to go all in with my request. “I was wondering if I could move in for a little bit? Maybe a few weeks or so.”

He almost choked. “Um, no.”

I scrambled to explain, telling him about brunch with my dad. “It will only be for a few weeks until I can find a job, and someplace else to live.”

“Ah, the frivolous Camille Bradley has fallen. Let me just sit here for a bit and soak it all in.”

“It’s really not funny, Jacob. And there are a lot of things I can do.”

He stroked his chin thoughtfully. “Actually, there is something you can do. You can move in, but I need some help.”

I scooted to the edge of the couch. “Anything. I can work in the store. I can do that.” I added, “I mean, I have been watching you work for years. How hard can it be?”

This was perfect. I could work in the store and get my trust fund back.

He leaned forward in his chair. His face was a mere foot from mine. “No, not the store. I need help on a trip.”

The fact that he seemed amused and was drawing this out did not bode well for me. Slowly, I asked. “What kind of trip?”

“A whitewater camping trip.”

I jumped from my seat. “No.”

He leaned back and grinned. “It’s my offer, Camille.”

He had me. I knew he had me. I’d have to help him. I nearly growled.

“Fine. But after that, I’m not helping out. We’ll just live together.”

His eyes sparkled with a sexy knowing glint. “An arrangement I know all too well.”

I grabbed my purse. “I’ll be back this afternoon with my things. I assume Mia left her bed.”

His ‘yes’ was mixed with laughter as I marched toward the front door. “Cody, I need a ride to my house.”

“You work for me, Cody.” Jacob said, but he was smiling.

I stared at Cody silently. I raised my eyebrows and tilted my head, clearly indicating he needed to give me a ride.

“She needs a ride, boss.” Cody looked torn but was already heading out the door.

My last thought as the door shut behind me was that I needed to finish my calendar. And quick. I needed a place of my own.

## CHAPTER 2

Cody drove me to my dad's house. His arm rested casually over the steering wheel. He hadn't been around long enough to know my relationship to Jacob. To him, I was just Mia's best friend. And if he did know, he kept his thoughts, and feelings about it, to himself.

I was grateful for his quiet nature because I didn't need to elaborate on my circumstances.

I watched the landscape pass by, trying to ignore the constricting pain in my chest.

After arriving at my house—my dad's house— and making sure I could handle the packing on my own, Cody returned to the shop, not even remotely worried about being in trouble with Jacob.

Tears threatened to fall. I inhaled, then exhaled, trying to stay focused on packing. I would need my clothes, of course, and the hand-blown glass candleholders I'd been collecting over the years. None of the furniture or kitchenware was mine. I was slightly embarrassed I hadn't had any greater goals than to socialize and spend money. My only goal in life had been to make it to the Olympics, and after that... well, things hadn't exactly turned out the way I thought they would have.

It hurt to leave. For as long as I could remember, I'd spent every winter and summer in this house. And for the past six years, I lived here on my own. I'd hosted parties, dinners, and never felt lonely. But standing here, now, highlighted all of the loneliness I'd been masking.

The house was large but not overly grandiose. It was solid and strong, nestled in the cottonwood trees a few hundred feet above the valley.

Stone pillars rose to a log-framed awning that proudly jutted out over the circular drive. Smooth river rock steps led up to the double wooden doors.

When I entered, the house was quiet. Not even the refrigerator hummed. Still, silent, somber. The house felt sad. Like it knew I was leaving.

Sunlight spilled into the entryway, reflecting off the main fireplace sitting near the bottom of the stairs. It was made of the same smooth river rock as the entryway and rose to the ceiling and exposed wood beams.

I climbed the stairs wearily. It didn't make sense that I had to move out. What more could I have done to not be a huge disappointment to everyone around me? Jacob didn't have time for me. Mia had moved on. My own brother was never around, and he lived less than ten miles away.

Perilously close to tears, I climbed stairs, sadness slowing my steps as I ran my hand along the railing.

When I reached the second floor, I stepped around the fireplace, and into the rustic, yet elegant western-style living room. The furnishings were heavy and masculine. Native American patterned heavy knit wool blankets in vibrant reds, oranges, and blues were folded neatly on an ottoman in front of the fireplace.

Expansive windows looked out toward the mountains—the majestic, rugged terrain of the Teton Range—and provided me the same view Mia would have from her new house a few miles north of town.

To the right, a long hall led to two guest bedrooms and the master's suite at the end. A small back staircase led down to an exercise room, a theatre room, and a four-car garage, where I parked my car. The 2008 Land

Rover Discovery was actually mine. It had been a gift for my 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, and I counted myself lucky my dad hadn't taken that back too.

I ran my hand over the back of the couch before walking down the hall.

Years ago, I'd taken the large suite, and no one but my older brother ever complained. It didn't matter that he lived in the resort my father owned; he never seemed to want anything good for me.

I sat at the foot of my unmade bed, staring at the sweeping mountain views. Only a few seconds later, I dropped my shoulders. How could he sell this house? I couldn't even afford to buy it *with* my trust.

'Take what you need. The movers will get the rest,' my father had said at breakfast.

What I needed was the whole damn house.

Instead, I opened my armoire, pulled out all of my designer clothes, and tossed them on the bed. My moves were automatic, my mind anywhere but here.

Next, the closet. Back and forth I went. The more steps I took, the angrier I got.

I stomped into the bathroom, where my hair products and makeup were strewn across the counter. The jasmine and clove scent of my perfume still lingered in the room, and my dresses were scattered on the floor and vanity chair. I'm messy. My shortcomings blatantly obvious now that I was in survival mode.

I ran down the back staircase and pulled my suitcases out of the garage, holding back my tears as I carried them into the house.



I packed as much as I could in the short time I had, and left the rest to the movers. I couldn't remember what time my dad was leaving today, but I didn't want to see him again unless I had to.

When my Land Rover was packed full of suitcases and dress bags, I did one last walkthrough of the house, ending at the living room. There, I screamed. Balled my fists up and just screamed. When all the air left my lungs, and my screams had no sound left, I cried. I lay down on the couch until the tears subsided and I could finish the task of leaving.

My phone pinged. Pam's text read *I'm sorry, sweetie. I'll call you with the times the realtor will start showing the house this week*

I gagged and groaned, then texted her *All my stuff is out*. To be a brat, I added *I'm not making my bed*.

She sent a heart and a laugh emoji.

I locked the front door on my way out and headed to the garage.

As I drove away, a faint feeling of freedom crept in around the edges of my shock. It surprised me. It was a feeling I hadn't imagined I would feel, but it was there nonetheless. The air smelled a little cleaner. The blue sky a little bluer. Everything I owned was contained inside my vehicle, and the thought that I could keep driving and be OK popped in my head. My stomach growled reminding me I wouldn't get far.

I put the window down and rolled my hand in the wind, a small smile on my face as I drove back through the village and parked in front of Brooks Outfitters.

The mannequin in the window was fully dressed now. A backpack sat at her feet, made to look full, and a green Coleman thermos stuck out of a side pocket.

When I entered the store, Cody and Jacob were sitting at the indoor unlit gas fire pit. The center of it was covered with a round steel disc and the ceramic tile surrounding the pit was littered with papers and maps.

“Hey, I have all my things,” I announced as I stood in front of them.

Jacob jerked his head toward the counter. “Spare key is on the antler by the cash register. Use the back door; don’t bring all your stuff through here.”

Weariness hit me hard, as the events of the day finally caught up with me. I wilted, and then inhaled deeply so I wouldn’t snap at him. Living with Jacob was not going to be easy if he kept dismissing me. In my haste and shock this afternoon, living upstairs felt like a great idea. Now? Not so much. “OK. Thanks.”

I grabbed the key from the antlers and left the store, then drove my car around back to unpack my belongings. The back staircase was steep, and it took me a few trips to get all of my things into the apartment.

As I climbed, the boxes bumped against the railing. “Freaking narrow staircase.” To no one, I added, “Jacob, do you think you can invest in a wider, more stable set of steps?”

The apartment above the store had served as Mia’s and Jacob’s home for years now. They’d invested everything they had, or so they said, into this store. Because they didn’t want the added expense of a house while they were just starting out, they’d built a two-bedroom apartment above it. Each of them had their own bedroom and bath, and they shared a kitchen, small eating area, and a comfortably sized living

area. The buttercream yellow walls boasted a large-screen TV prominently displayed in the room— ideal for watching football on Sundays. On either side of the TV hung black and white photos of Mia on her Polaris snowmobile, plowing over hills and kicking up snow.

I set a box down, rolling the pain from my shoulders near the glass hutch closest to the door that opened to stairs that led down to the interior of their store. Football trophies and MVP plaques were strategically placed inside the hutch so that all were visible. All of this ‘I-love-me’ shit made me angry. Jacob’s life had turned out so perfect, and I was irrelevant to him. Just like I was to my dad.

This was a mistake, but I was stuck for now.

I opened the cabinet and pulled out a framed picture of Jacob in his college uniform. I touched it lightly, running my fingers over the photo of his face. “So perfect.” I put it back in the cabinet and closed the door. “Oh, Jacob.”

I went to Mia’s room and lay down, exhausted. I loved that she was a kickass world-class snowmobile racer and yet utterly feminine. Her room was romantic and cozy. Soft gray carpet complemented the lavender walls, and a crystal chandelier hung from the ceiling, its light reflecting off the enormous mirror on the wall.

I pulled her white duvet up and over myself, snuggling into the oversized pillows that were stacked against the dark gray tufted headboard. As I drifted off to sleep, I promised myself I would only nap for a few minutes.

I woke up, momentarily disoriented, to a room bathed in early evening light. I’d slept for hours. From the window, gray shadows crept across the floor, coming in through the open blinds that showed the stores across the street.

A noise came from beside me. Snoring. Who was snoring? I rolled onto my side. Jacob lay next to me, his hands clasped across his belly, ankles crossed. His eyes were closed; his lips slightly parted. He hated me so much. And I had loved him *so much*. Why was he in here?

I reached out to touch his cheek, and he stirred. I pulled my hand back and tucked my hands under my cheek.

He turned to face me without moving the rest of his body. “Hey,” he said, groggily.

“What are you doing in here?”

He blinked a couple of times as if trying to remember. “I brought lo mein from the restaurant on the corner and came to see if you were hungry.” He rose and swung his legs to the floor. With his back to me, he whispered, “You looked so peaceful; I just laid down next to you.” He rubbed his face and stood. When he turned and looked down at me, his eyes were tender. “I guess I fell asleep.”

We stared at each other, each processing the intimacy of the moment.

Abruptly, he whirled around and left the room, leaving me staring at his retreating back. For a split second, I’d thought we’d have the honest conversation we needed to have so many years ago.

“It’s in the kitchen if you’re hungry,” he called out. I made my way into the kitchen; he’d put out plates and plastic forks. The cartons of food were open. I served myself a small helping and joined him at the kitchen table.

“Thank you for thinking of me.”

“Mm-hmm,” he said through a mouthful of noodles. After swallowing, he took a sip of the beer in front of him. “Don’t expect it every night. I usually eat out.”

Tension crackled between us. The underlying message? ‘We aren’t a couple anymore.’

“Got it.”

We ate in silence for a few minutes.

After finishing his food, he leaned back in his chair, resting an arm over the side. “Tomorrow, I want to go over the rafting agenda and get you outfitted for clothes. You’ll need water shoes and, I’m certain, some shorts and T-shirts.”

I looked at him with wide eyes. “I have my Prada sandals, can I wear those?”

His expression was horrified, and I held in my laughter. A second later, he tensed his jaw, rose, and took his plate to the sink. As he rinsed it, he sighed heavily. “I don’t want you here, Camille. I know you need a place to live, and you’re Mia’s best friend, but I don’t have the patience for your lifestyle.”

His words hurt. I crossed my arms. “I’m not the one that came in your room and fell asleep.”

“A mistake I won’t make again.”

When we got back from the trip, I would rectify this living situation as soon as possible.

In the meantime, I needed to be grateful. “I was just kidding earlier about the sandals.” He glared at me. “Seriously, I’ll come into the store and let you dress me.” The implication that he had once *undressed* me was not lost between the two of us.

I rose and took my plate to the sink, rinsing it off and placing it in the dishwasher next to him. After shutting the door, I leaned next to him.

He pushed himself off the counter and put the food away. I began helping him, but stopped when he said, "I got it."

He didn't even look at me. "Okay. Thanks again for dinner."

"Uh-huh."

I went back to my room to finish unpacking. A short time later, Jacob knocked lightly on the doorframe and said, "I'm going to head out for a bit."

He was dressed in jeans and a gray T-shirt. The bottom of his jeans was scrunched over a pair of nubuck leather hiking boots, and a baseball cap sat on his head, unable to contain the blond curls popping out its sides.

"Before you go, I need one more favor from you," I said as I unpacked one of my many suitcases and hung my clothes in the closet. Jacob stood in the doorway, watching me.

"Isn't it enough that I gave you a place to live?" he grumbled. He leaned against the frame, crossing his arms in front of his chest.

"Kind of. I need help finishing the calendar I was working on." I went back and forth from the bed to the closet. "My plan was to donate the profits to the Community Foundation, but now that I need a job, I'm hoping they hire me to do fundraising full time."

"What does that have to do with me?" He sauntered in and sat on what used to be Mia's bed, his arms braced behind him.

I paused, standing in front of him. When he looked up, I said, "I need help getting the rest of the athletes."

He moved to stand. “No.”

I stood closer, preventing him from getting up. “Please, Jacob. John and Ford both said they would do it. And with John’s brother, Brett, and a few of Ford’s extreme sports friends, I only need six more.”

“I count seven.”

I batted my eyes.

He stood, pushing me aside. “You are too much, Camille.”

“Please, Jacob.” I begged. “I could reach out to past boyfriends, but most of them don’t talk to me.”

“Cease and desist orders?”

“Funny. Seriously, if I can finish the calendar, I’ll be out of here faster than the blonde that skulked out of here last night.”

“She didn’t skulk,” he said, smiling.

I moved past him with another armful of clothes to put in the dresser. “You’re such an ass.”

He chuckled. “You’re the one that said it, not me. And why do you suddenly care what I do with my genitals?”

I stopped. “Are you serious?” He laughed, and I continued, “Never mind. Are you going to help me or not?”

“When do you need to have the photoshoot?”

“I’m going to the Community Foundation tomorrow to work out the details, but I’m thinking we need to have it in the next few weeks to launch for Christmas. They have a photographer who said he would shoot pro bono, and since there isn’t any snow, we’ll have to get a machine to manufacture it. The autumn lighting won’t be quite what I need for winter scenes, but we can make it work.”

He stared at my mouth as I talked. I was rambling.

Reluctantly, he said, "Yes, I'll help you."

"Thank you."

He walked to the door. "I might be late. I'll see you in the morning."

"Wait, one more thing." He stopped. "I need you to help me haul Betty Blue to 'Whitehorse Ranch' tomorrow. Lane said I can board her there until I figure out what to do long term."

"Lane Archer?" He scoffed.

"Jealous?"

"Hardly."

"So, you'll help me?"

He shook his head in disbelief, walking toward the front door.

"Goodnight, Camille."



## CHAPTER 3

Jacob knocked on my bedroom door the next morning. The sun wasn't even up when he declared "Up, princess, we have lots to do today."

I grabbed an apple on my way out so I could use it to cajole Betty Blue out of the stables.

We made it to my dad's house as the sun rose, casting golden light on the tops of the Tetons. I was shocked to see a FOR SALE sign at the base of the gravel driveway. "That was fast."

Jacob didn't speak, only gave me a sympathetic look.

When the truck stopped, I stepped out and crossed the grassy field to the barn.

"Betty Blue!" I called as I approached the barn door. Earthy scents of hay and manure wafted out as I slid the barn door open. "Want a treat, pretty girl?"

In the third stall on the left, Betty Blue bobbed her head up and down when she saw me. She greeted me with an enthusiastic whinny and a snort.

I held the apple under her mouth. "Hey there, girl, do you need to get out and run?"

Her soft lips pulled the apple into her mouth, and she crunched on it loudly. In a few slobbering bites, it was gone.

I petted her neck. "I know. It's no fun to be cooped up in here. But I have a small problem, and I need to move you today. You'll have lots of friends to run and play with. I promise." She danced and bobbed her head, pushing my hand away, then circled in her stall and came back to the gate to nuzzle me.

Jacob stood behind me, waiting to put her lead line on her.

I looked over my shoulder, tears in my eyes, and then continued my conversation with Betty Blue.

“I know what my dad is doing. He thinks I need to earn my place in the world. I get it, I do, but I wish he’d given me a little more notice.” She nudged my hand. “I know. You’re right, I’ve had plenty of time to take myself seriously. Don’t worry, I’ll figure it out. But, right now, I need to get my life in order.”

She calmed, and I continued to pet her gently until she wandered over to her food trough—bored with me.

Jacob stepped in the stall, going to her and easily slipping the tack over her head.

After loading Betty Blue in my trailer and hooking it up to Jacob’s truck, he reached for my fingers and held them softly. “I’m sorry.”

I shrugged. “It’s not my house.”

I stepped back into his truck, dismissing any more sensitive conversation between the two of us.

Lane was waiting for us at his barn when we arrived.

“Thank you for letting me keep Betty Blue here, Lane,” I said as I jumped out of Jacob’s truck.

“Anything for you, darlin’.” He side-hugged me as Jacob stepped out onto the truck’s running boards and then the ground.

Jacob jerked his chin up as he unlocked the back of the trailer. “Hey.”

“Hey, Jacob,” Lane said with a smile.

I stepped away from him. “I promise I’ll find a permanent home for her as soon as I can.” I smiled up at him. Jacob snorted as he stepped into the trailer to get Betty Blue.

“Keep her here as long as you need. The others will enjoy her company.” He removed his arm and held the trailer door open so Jacob could walk Betty Blue out.

“Easy girl. You can play soon enough. And I bet your mama has another apple or two in her pocket for you.” Jacob stroked the side of her head as he talked.

When Jacob cleared the trailer, and Betty Blue was on the ground, he turned her toward the fourteen-horse barn, guiding her with the lead rope and said, “Walk.”

The memory of a college-aged Jacob not knowing anything about horses had me staring at him forlornly. He’d showed up unexpectedly at the barn in California, and I thought something was wrong with Mia. I’d asked him if everything was OK.

“Yeah, I had some time between practices and thought I would see if you were riding today.” He’d leaned against the stall doors as I was putting the saddle on Betty Blue.

“Oh. Well, that was nice of you.” My hands had shook from nerves at the hope that he might want to be near me as much as I’d wanted to be near him.

He stepped forward. “Here, let me help you.”

I’d been saddling horses since I was six years old. I didn’t need his help. Still, the close proximity of him, had me letting him.

When his shoulder had brushed mine, I knew I would do anything to stay this close to him forever.

I'd secured the saddle and clipped on the lead line. I'd handed him the rope. "Do you want to walk her out?"

He'd taken the rope and given me the smile that continued to melt my heart.

"This stall okay?" Jacob asked, breaking me from my daze. I blinked rapidly and shook the memories from my head.

Lane rubbed the nose of one of his quarter horses. "That'll work."

I went to the back of the barn and grabbed a Sharpie marker sitting next to a whiteboard. "Lane, I'm going to write her name and stall number on the board. I have a.m. and p.m. instructions, as well as notes for a vet appointment coming up later in the week."

"Sounds good. I'll show Jacob where to leave the trailer."

Lane and Jacob left the barn.

When I was finished writing, I held another apple and a mint under my horse's nose. "It's you and me, girl. You and me."

Leaving the barn, I saw that Jacob had moved the trailer, parking it next to the 'Whitehorse Ranch' trailers and was waiting for me, truck running.

He jumped out of the truck to get the door for me.

Lane hugged me, and when he released me, I said, "I'll be gone when the vet comes. Can you make sure he takes good care of her?"

"Where you headed?"

I rolled my eyes toward Jacob, holding the passenger door open. "I told Jacob I would help him with a whitewater camping trip."

Lane laughed so hard, I thought he would choke. "How did that happen?"

Jacob responded, "Blackmail."

Lane snickered again. "I'll take good care of her."

I said another good-bye and stepped toward Jacob. I reached for the inside handle as Jacob pushed on my bottom to help me into the oversized work truck. Gently, he shut the door after me.

After he climbed in, started the truck, and buckled his seat belt, I waved good-bye to Lane, and then glared at Jacob when we were out of sight. "That was unnecessary."

"What was?" he said, his brow furrowed as we drove through the gate and back out onto the road.

"Honestly? All of it."

He actually looked a little shocked. "What are you talking about?"

I mimicked him. "Blackmail."

He shrugged. "It was."

"And being rude to Lane."

He rested his forearm on the top of the steering wheel as he drove, and frowned at me. "Everything is just so fucking easy for you, isn't it? 'Jacob, I need a place to live.' 'Lane, I need a place for my horse.'" he mimicked me.

"That's harsh." I scowled.

"I wasn't being rude to Lane. I was tolerating you."

I felt tears prick my eyes. "Am I really such a horrible person?"

His jaw clenched. "You know why I can't be around you, Camille."

I grunted. "And yet, you pushed on my bottom."

Smugly, he nodded. "Hmm. So that's it. This could get very complicated, Camille. You, living with me, harboring these secret desires."

"Please. Been there. You are simply a means to an end."

His laugh shook. "Well then, I will put you to good use. We should get back to the shop so we can go over the trip plans. We leave Wednesday."

I sighed and groaned. “That’s in two days.”

“You have a lot to get organized, don’t you?”

“Fine. But I’m not wearing khaki.”

He shook his head and scoffed at me again. The drive back wasn’t as long as the drive out since we no longer had the trailer and no stops to make.

Inside the shop, Cody was helping a customer with a pair of hiking boots.

“When you’re finished, Cody, let’s go over the plan for the trip this weekend,” he said as he walked past him toward the office. His limp caused him to falter, and he bumped into a clothing rack. He cursed. Angrily, he said, “Camille, grab a pad of paper and a pen.”

I stared in shock at his retreating back. To Cody, I said... nothing. My mouth opened and closed.

A man of few words, Cody shrugged. He handed me the pen and paper, and I went to the office to join Jacob.

Inside the spacious office that looked out toward the back maintenance shed, I put the pen and paper down on the round conference table.

More pictures of Jacob from his years in the NFL hung from the faux plywood painted walls. I crossed the steel blue carpeted floor to gaze up at one of them.

“You were so good, Jacob.” I said softly. I looked at him over my shoulder, smiling sweetly. He was sitting behind his heavy oak desk. He sucked his lips in between his teeth, and nodded.

I looked back at the picture of him in his Seahawks jersey. This photo was taken of him on the sidelines, helmet in hand, yelling at someone on the field. His hair had been buzzed short.

Almost in wonder, I continued, "I loved to watch you play. You were so focused, so fierce. No one could get past you. You were so good..." My throat closed. I swallowed back a tear. That face. That body. "You made everyone believe you, and you alone, could hold back the world." Even me, I thought to myself. Until he left me.

Seconds ticked by before he responded quietly, "It was a long time ago."

I inhaled and exhaled deeply. "Yep. A long time ago."

Not wanting to wallow in self-pity, I took a seat at the table and gripped the pen, "Okay, Boss, tell me what I need to do so I can get this over with."

He stood, grabbing a few sheets of paper, and slid them over to me. "Here's a list of clothes you'll need. Have Mia or Cody help you get everything together." He tapped a finger on another piece of paper. "This is the agenda. I'll need help cooking in the evenings and in the morning. Lunch and snacks are usually sandwiches and trail mix."

"Is Cody going too?" I asked.

"Yes, and he'll help with setting up tents and securing the rafts."

I leaned back in my chair, crossed my arms and squinted my eyes at him. "How many people usually lead these trips?"

"Depends on the size." He grinned, knowing he was evading my question.

"And how large is this one?"

"Enough that we need three people to help."

I tapped my lip. "Before we continue, you will be in my calendar, right?"

He rolled his eyes, put his head back, and groaned, “Ugh! Yes.”

“And you’ll help me get the rest of the athletes?”

“Yes,” he said as if it pained him.

“Who?” I was not going to let him slide from this.

He sighed, “Um, I can ask Alec DeVry.”

“The NASCAR racer?”

“Yes. We did a few celebrity golf tournaments together. He comes out a few times a year to ski.”

“And?” I rolled my hand.

“Can we get back to talking about the trip?”

“No, I need a few more. What about that skier that lives in town? The one in all those Ralph Lauren ads?”

“Tucker Hood?”

“Yeah, you’re friends with him, aren’t you? You can ask him.”

He raised his eyebrows at my statement. “I can?”

“Yes. And do you know anyone else? Anyone from your team?”

“I have a college buddy, Case Kennedy, I can ask him.”

“Is he an athlete?”

“No, but he’s rich.”

I dropped the pen on the table. “It’s supposed to be a ‘sexy men of sports’ calendar, Jacob.”

“Would it help if I told you he owns a Minor League Baseball team?”

“Oh, *the* Case Kennedy. Yum. Absolutely!”

He ignored my sigh. “Can we *please* get back to the trip? I have a business to run.”



He talked through the itinerary, the meal plan, and who would be in which boats.

“You remember how to paddle, right?”

“Of course, I do. Just because I choose not to raft, doesn’t mean I don’t know how. You don’t need to worry about me, Jacob. You taught me well.”

He ignored my reference to our past and continued.

“And pack your things in a backpack, not your Louis Vuitton suitcase. If you do, you’ll need to sign a liability waiver that Brooks Outfitters isn’t responsible for damages.”

I tilted my head, “Har-har.”

He chuckled.

I asked again, “How many are on this trip?”

He jerked his chin toward another piece of paper. “The man that was in here yesterday when you so frantically disturbed me. He has his two daughters for the summer.”

“Oh, that’s nice.”

He continued, “Two college girls on an end-of-summer vacation.”

Sarcastically I said, “How nice for you.”

Ignoring me, he added, “And a single older woman. Her husband died and she’s traveling the U.S.”

“Oh, that’s not nice.” I frowned.

He shrugged, “I don’t know. Seems like she’s trying to live her life to the fullest.”

“I need to get to the Community Foundation before they close today. Anything else I need to know?”

“I would say to be here Wednesday at noon, but I imagine you might just want me to kick you out of bed.” His pen stilled.

We both paused, motionless.

I don't think he meant to imply we would be in bed together, but the vision of a younger us, happy, in love, and in bed, was now firmly planted in my head.

His cheeks turned a shade of pink.

I held my breath.

He rushed on, "I mean, I could just knock on your door."

"Right." I stood, gathering the papers from the table. I turned toward the door. "Um, no, that's okay. I...I will be on time."

We both nodded at each other awkwardly.

To my back he said, "See ya later."

I went out the back door of the store, making an effort not to look in the office window.

The Community Foundation building was only a short walk from their store. I tried to clear my head and focus on my project, but everything I needed to do was jumbling around in my head.

I stopped on the sidewalk to check my bank balance. Ouch. My dad had conveniently cut off my trust before another deposit could be made. I had six weeks, max.

Maybe the Foundation would have a paying job for me. The possibility was bleak since I didn't have a degree, and socialite was not a skill most non-profits were looking for. I'd need to think about how to market my incredibly fine-tuned schmoozing skills. Maybe I could help with fundraising. People had historically always willingly emptied their pockets for whatever charitable event I pulled together.

The low rumble of a very expensive, very sleek McLaren Coupe approached me from behind. I didn't need to turn to know it was my brother, returned from the convention.

"Hey Cam, why are you walking?" He'd rolled down his window and stopped. "I know you still have a car."

"You do know there are starving children in the world, don't you?"

His comment was surprisingly friendly. "You picked this."

I snorted. Had frugality won me over in the span of a day? "You should appreciate my assistance, sell it, and give me the money."

"I don't think so. This car suits me."

I sniffed the air. "Something stinks." I looked pointedly at him. "Do you smell that?"

"Do you need a ride somewhere?"

I moved closer to the car. "Why won't you let me stay at the resort?"

"Revenue, sweet sister, revenue."

"Seriously, Mach? One freaking room! A small one. I'm your sister."

"Should have gotten a degree." He shrugged and revved the engine.

I stood back. "I went to the Olympics, dumb-ass. There wasn't a whole lot of time for college."

"It won't be forever, Cam, just prove yourself." he said just before hitting the gas and speeding away.

Now I was mad all over again. A game. A silly stupid freaking game, and I was the joke.

Between my discussion with Jacob, and the run-in with my brother, I was completely frazzled. I felt like I was racing to get my life together.

The heel of my boot lodged itself in a crack in the sidewalk causing me to fall sideways. I landed on my right hand and pain shot up my arm. I

wincing and rubbing it. Tears pooled in my eyes. I waited until the pain subsided before slowly standing and testing my weight on my ankle.

Wearily, I continued walking to the Foundation's office, rubbing out the pain in my hand.

By the time I reached the two-story yellow farmhouse that had been converted into offices, I was ready to lay down on the sidewalk and just take a nap.

The bell rang over the door when I entered. An enthusiastic receptionist stood to greet me. "Camille Bradley? I am so excited to meet you. I recognize your face from social media. Can I just say? Your calendar idea has been the buzz of the team." She fanned her face. "I cannot wait until all those gorgeous men are here for the photo shoot."

She leaned toward me and said in a conspiratorial tone, "Can you tell me who you have? I won't say a word." She leaned back and made a zipper across her mouth.

"Well..." I paused.

"Prisha."

"Prisha. It's nice to meet you. And I would love to tell you, but I need to tell Jenna first." I winked at her like we would have a secret.

Prisha ran back to the receptionist desk. She picked up the receiver and pushed a button on a desk phone. Her eyes twinkled at me. "Ms. Colter, Ms. Bradley is here to talk about the calendar." She paused. "Okay, I'll let her know."

"She said she'll meet you out back."

## CHAPTER 4

The back yard of the Foundation's building was expertly landscaped with smaller seating areas for more intimate conversations. Flagstone walkways connected each of the small seating areas around the perimeter. A larger gazebo area was placed toward the back creating a centerpiece for larger gatherings.

I had been here many times for large fundraising events, both as the coordinator, and as a guest.

"Camille."

I turned from my place in the grass. "Hi, Jenna."

She hugged me. "I'm so happy to see you, and so excited for your calendar idea." She hooked her arm through mine. "Come. Let's sit on the back deck and you can tell me what you have so far, and what else you need."

Leading me to a wrought iron table and chairs, I sat across from her. A silver tray with a pitcher of iced water sat in the middle. She poured two glasses over ice with lemon and handed one to me. "Prisha is just dying to know who you've lined up for the calendar," she said as she poured.

Leaning forward and smiling conspiratorially, she said, "I'll admit I am a little bit intrigued as well."

Stalling, I took a sip of the citrus-flavored water and cleared my throat. She didn't know I didn't have any money. She didn't know I'd been kicked out of my house. She didn't know anything I didn't tell her. I jumped right into the conversation as if nothing had changed since I pitched my idea to her. "Well, Ford, of course, and he offered to sell the calendars in his online store. And John, Mia's fiancé. They have a few friends who are willing to be in it as well."

“Oh, I just love John. He and Mia are such a cute couple,” she said, smiling.

I placed my hands in my lap and relaxed against the back of the chair. “I have a NASCAR driver, a college friend of Jacob’s, and a few others. I’ll e-mail you the names so you can start promoting it.”

We both took a sip of water. She asked, “So, what do you envision for a photo shoot?”

“I thought we could do it here. We’ll need to shoot over two or three days since a few of the shots will need to be winter scenes.”

“Will you need a snowmaker?”

“Yes, that would be great.”

She wrote it down on a pad of paper.

I continued, “And I’ll get with Mia to bring in a snowmobile or two. We’ll need a few backdrops of mountain scenes and summer flowers. I like the idea of a Jenny Lake background for June, July, or August.”

“I have a local photographer who takes great pictures. And, I think I told you he would do it pro-bono?”

“Yes.” I said a silent prayer of thanks.

She continued scribbling on the notepad and asked, “What about catering for food? Will they need to eat? How long will it take?”

“Yes, to food. Something light and healthy, but definitely bread. These guys can eat. And we’ll need good natural lighting, so let’s do breakfast, lunch, and snacks.”

She scribbled more.

I rattled off a list of what we'd need while Jenna continued to write. "Do you have a printing company that you use? We'll need someone to put it all together and get them printed."

"I do. I will reach out to them today and check their availability. What's your timeline?" She bit the end of her pen.

I had to think this through. Jacob still needed to confirm his friends would do it. And I needed to make sure we could launch it by Christmas.

"I'd like to host the photoshoot in the next three weeks, at least by the end of September. That will give us time in October to start promotions, and get the layout put together. I want to be able to put it out for pre-order on Black Friday."

She nodded as I spoke. "I think that is manageable. It's the only project we have after Old Bill's Run. We'll have lots of staff to support you."

"Thank you so much, Jenna. I really love this idea and, I mean, who doesn't like a sexy athlete?" I smiled flirtatiously.

She returned the smile. "Indeed."

I stood to leave. "I guess I should get back..." My voice trailed off when I realized I didn't know where I was going back to.

Jenna stood, gathering her notebooks. "Are you okay, Camille?"

"Uh-huh. Why?" I tilted my head inquisitively.

"You don't seem as excited about the project as you did a few months ago. That's all."

"Oh. No, I am. I just can't believe it's happening." I put my hand to my chest.

We walked together toward the back gate that led to the driveway. "You have raised so much money for the Foundation with your charity galas

and BBQ cook-offs. We love having your help.” Her tone was gracious as she unlatched the waist high, wrought iron gate for me.

I walked through, and said, “You are very welcome. I have so much. It’s nice to give back.”

She put her hand on my arm as I started to walk away. “Camille, if you don’t mind me asking...” She leaned toward me, her braid falling over her shoulder. “Do you know if Jacob is single?”

My feelings about Jacob were complicated. And while I thought her intentions toward him might be sincere, I wasn’t sure I could stomach actually *seeing* him with a girlfriend. I shrugged. “I think so.”

She grinned. “Okay, good.” She stepped back and the gate closed between us.

With a closed-mouth smile, I waved good-bye. “I’ll call you soon with final dates.”

“Perfect, thank you.” She put her hands together in a prayerful thank-you gesture.

I’d made it halfway down the drive to the sidewalk when she called after me, “Where’s your car?”

“I walked.”

“Do you need a ride somewhere?”

“No, I’m good. I’m just headed to Mia’s shop. It’s not far.”

“Okay. And I’ll send the total cost to your email later this afternoon.”

I tripped on the crack between the driveway and the grass. My sweater was suddenly too hot. I tried not to stumble over my words.

“Right. Sounds good.”



When I was out of sight, I groaned and dropped my head in my hands. I needed to find money to pay for this project.

As I made my way back through town, I briefly wondered how much I could get for my Land Rover. Sadly, not very much.

The sun was setting on my way to the shop. It was empty and quiet when I got there. Cody was just closing the cash register.

I sat down on one of the couches and watched him work. He stopped counting, looked at me, and rose his eyebrows.

I crossed my legs, and rested my head back on the cushion. “Where’s Jacob?”

“Cleaning kayaks out back.” He went back to counting cash.

“Long day?” I asked him.

He snorted. “Yes.”

I looked around the store. The racks were tidy and organized. Sweaters and T-shirts were neatly folded on the tables. Cody had done a nice job straightening the store after the onslaught of customers throughout the day. It was peaceful.

“You busy tomorrow?”

He looked at me without lifting his head. “Do you need help, Camille?”

I groaned and flopped forward, putting my head in my hands and resting on my knees. I mumbled, “Actually, yes.” I lifted my head. “I need clothes and shoes for the trip this week. Can you help me?”

He put the cash in a bag and shut the register, turning the lock and putting the key in his pocket. “Sure, but can we do it before the store opens in the morning? I have a one-day river trip tomorrow. I won’t be back until late.”

I stood up. “What time?”

As he walked to the front door, locked it, and turned the red and white hanging sign to 'closed' he asked, "Seven?"

"Seve...?!" I groaned again. He simply stared at me. I stood. "Sure. That works."

He headed toward the office. Before he went in, he said, "He really does need your help. He's not intentionally being difficult."

I put my hand to my chest in mock shock. "I think I just went into cardiac arrest. It always surprises me when you string full sentences together, but to say something so astute has rendered me dumbfounded."

He chuckled.

"And I'm a little disappointed you seem to be taking sides. I think he is being difficult. He's never very nice to me anymore."

"I like you, Camille. I like Jacob, too."

I frowned at him and he shrugged as he went into the back office. "See you tomorrow, Camille."

I went upstairs to the apartment.

I set up my computer and sent emails to everyone I knew that had money. Dear 'fill in the blank', send money. No, that's not what I wrote. I was a little more eloquent in my request. But the sentiment was the same—I needed funds for my calendar project. I could no longer fund it from my own accounts.

A little after 9 p.m., I heard Jacob and a female voice rustling around in the kitchen. Then a giggle. "Oh, jeez," I thought as I rolled my eyes. I stayed in my room. More noise, and then I heard them leave through the front door. Quiet.

The next morning, I reluctantly dragged myself downstairs to get outfitted by Cody. Water shoes, bandanas, shorts, UV-protected T-shirts, a straw hat, and a waterproof bag. The list of things I needed grew and grew.

I stepped out of the dressing room wearing a skort and sports bra to find Jacob sitting on the counter, drinking coffee from a matte black thermos.

“I’m not paying for any of this.” I informed him.

“Last I heard you were broke.”

Innocently, I looked at Cody, and turned my back to him. “Cody, is the knife in my back deep? Can you help me get it out?”

Cody laughed.

I went back into the dressing room, heavy with sadness that Jacob was still so closed off from me.

I spent the rest of the day responding to emails, running to the grocery store to get food for the trip, and reviewing the agenda, once again, with Jacob.

In the office, I sat on the couch under the window, my hands resting on the pillow in my lap.

The nagging feeling I’d missed something about us had been slowly surfacing ever since Mia became involved with John. Over the years, Jacob and I managed to steer clear of one another, acting as if we hadn’t meant something to each other. It had been easy enough since he and Mia were focused only on building their business and I could simply be Mia’s flighty friend. Now that Mia had John, she and I saw less and less of each other. And I don’t blame her. Before, she had been my wing girl at social events, and I was the party ‘yin’ to her tomboy ‘yang’. Now, she was the soon-to-be Mrs. John Barringer. The protective barrier between Jacob and me was now gone,

and my feelings for him were creeping back in around the edges of my reality. I missed him.

Jacob scribbled something in the margin of the meal plan, grumbling about needing to pick up more bagels for the trip. His brow furrowed.

Testing the boundaries with him, I said, “Hey, do you remember that Christmas when you first moved here?”

“The one when I was recovering from my injury? That was almost six years ago.”

“Yeah, that one.” I dropped my feet to the floor. “Did you ever imagine that you would never leave? That you and Mia would stay and make this your home?”

He leaned back in his chair, linking his hands over his stomach. “It was kind of hard to say no to Mia. She had big visions of running her snowmobile camps.”

“It’s fun having both of you here. I’m happy you stayed.”

His eyes narrowed. “You’re not getting out of this trip, Camille.”

I grinned. “I wasn’t trying to. I just think it’s great that you could be a part of it too. That it became something for both of you.”

We were quiet a moment. He asked, “Why did you stay? I thought you liked San Diego.”

I shrugged. “Betty Blue was too old to compete again, and Dad was busy with Pam and Jazzy. Here, I could be on my own, and still be near my friends.”

“And your brother,” he added.

I rolled my eyes. “I can’t really say that’s a bonus.”

He relaxed. This was the Jacob I had known and loved, a carefree California boy, with a million-dollar smile and the keys to the city. I stuttered, “I heard John is thinking about starting a youth football camp next summer. Have you thought about helping out?”

And just like that, it was gone. He hunched back over his papers. “Nope.”

He stood to leave, his limp more pronounced after sitting for so long. “I was able to get all the players you wanted for your calendar. Tell me the dates and make the arrangements, I’ll make sure they show up.”

I stood where I was, watching him. “Jacob?” I said, softly.

He stopped, his back to me.

I stepped forward. “Jacob, why didn’t you call me?”

He dropped his head and put his hands on his hips. I went to him and stood a few feet behind him. Quietly, I said, “You never called. We never officially ended us. It was like we never happened.”

He lifted his head, went to the door and opened it.

I caught up to him at the door. “Jacob, what did I do wrong?”

He looked at my hand on his arm, and clenched his jaw. When his eyes met mine, they were sad. “You know.”

“Jacob.” My chest hurt.

He stepped around me and left the office, saying over his shoulder. “I’m going to get more bagels.”

And just like that, we were back to being acquaintances.

END SAMPLE

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## About the Author

Rie Anders grew up in the Pacific Northwest and has led a very colorful life. After successful careers in the country's aerospace program and corporate America, she picked up a pen and left the nine-to-five life. She wove her knowledge of aviation, Pacific Northwest culture, commercial fishing in Alaska, and the West's rugged landscapes, into beautifully crafted, happy ever after, contemporary romantic fiction novels.

Rie lives in Texas with her husband and competitive figure skating daughter. She is sure there is a story there as well. On the daily drives to and from the ice rink, Rie enlists her daughter's input on many things. Character development, possible actors to play her feisty heroines on the big screen, and new songs to inspire perfect scenes are just a few.

If you want to know more about Rie, when she will release her next book, and where you can find her, please visit her website at [www.rieanders.com](http://www.rieanders.com) and follow her at <https://www.bookbub.com/profile/rie-anders> <https://twitter.com/RieAnders>.

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Please also enjoy an excerpt from Mia's story,  
[DEAR SANTA, DEFINE GOOD](#)

*World champion snowmobile racer Mia Brooks sacrificed love in exchange for her dreams. Alongside her brother, Jacob, she now co-owns and manages the most successful outdoor adventure outfitter in Jackson, WY.*

*Jacob schedules an excursion for a bachelor party the week before Christmas. But when he falls ill the night before, Mia must take over the adventure, and she is less than thrilled. Things only get worse when Mia finds that the groom-to-be is none other than the man who made her choose all those years ago.*

*Struggling to hold onto her heart, and her dignity, Mia must find a way to cope with the unfinished business of a first love; an only love. She thought she had moved on, but being in his presence proves more difficult than she could have imagined. The cold, snowy days in the woods lead Mia to make the ultimate choice – salvage the past, or move on to an entirely new future.*

## CHAPTER 1

“Jacob! Wake up!” I pounded on my brother’s bedroom door as I ran down the hall, frantically tying the belt on my bathrobe on my way to the kitchen.

Mumbling to myself about how late we were, I put on a pot of coffee and pulled two microwavable egg sandwiches from the freezer.

My brother and I owned Brooks Adventure Outfitters in Jackson, Wyoming. While we don’t open the shop until 10 a.m., we had gone out the night before to celebrate our birthdays, and today...we were running late.

While the coffee was brewing and the sandwiches were cooking, I went back down the hall to get him. Pounding on his door, more firmly than before, I shouted, “Jacob? Jacob, wake up!”

Not hearing an answer, I opened the door and jerked my head back, eyes widening, cringing at the stench that hit me. My eyes watered, and when I looked to the bed...no Jacob. “Jacob?”

A loud moan came from his attached bathroom. “In here.”

I crossed his room and saw him lying on the floor, his back against the tub, arm resting on the toilet seat. “What the heck, Jacob? For goodness sake. Did you really drink that much last night?”

“I’m so sorry, Mia. I didn’t think I did, but then I woke up this morning feeling awful.”

He really did look absolutely miserable. Skin splotchy, eyes red, T-shirt...well, disgusting.

I flushed the toilet, wet a rag with cold water, and wiped his face, watching as his eyes started to close and his head lolled back.

“C’mon, take off your shirt, and let’s get you back in bed.”



He slouched forward and I pulled his shirt off and over his head, throwing it in the bathtub behind him to retrieve it later.

Jacob and I were twins. Yesterday had been our thirty-first birthday and, by the looks of him, he'd drank way too much. The birthday was nothing monumental, and it had been on a Monday. Even so, the Million Dollar Cowboy Bar had been filled with friends willing to celebrate any occasion.

My curly blonde hair fell into my face as I leaned down to help him up. The smell of smoke from the bar last night had permeated the long strands, and I almost felt sick from the combination of awful scents. I needed a shower.

"C'mon big guy, you gotta help me." My hands were under his arms, and I tried to lift him from the ground. He was well over six feet tall, a former linebacker for the Seattle Seahawks, as gorgeous as Chris Hemsworth, and solid as a bull. Or, since we live in Jackson, Wyoming ... a buffalo.

Jacob and I grew up in Laguna Beach, California. Our dad was a football coach for the San Diego Chargers. I loved the beach, but I was drawn to the mountains. My parents took me skiing at Snow King Mountain, in Jackson Hole, when I was six years old. I spent my entire young life trying to get back.

During that first visit, my dad had taken me on an overnight snowmobiling trip through Yellowstone Park. The guide took us through the snow-covered trees, along a path cut specifically for what he called sleds and wound through the hills into an open pasture. This was the first time I experienced true exhilaration.

Settling in front of my big, burly dad, I recall him leaning around me so he could face me. We were on a so-called sled for two, and I was nestled in front of him so I wouldn't fall off. He asked me if I was ready. I smiled

gleefully, nodding my answer. He gently bonked his helmet to mine so I would know he understood me, and then he revved the throttle.

We shot out across the pasture like a rocket, and I screamed with delight. Laughing into the wind, I held on for dear life as my dad turned sharp, heading in a new direction. That moment solidified that wherever life took me, it was going to be on a snowmobile. I had found my passion.

Doing my best to get my brother from the bathroom to his bed, I heard him mumble against his chest, “I didn’t drink very much last night, Mia.”

My average height was causing me to struggle to keep him upright. I managed to get him to the bed, and he fell like a lumberjack onto it. Curling himself into a ball he started to shake. I stared down at him and put my hands on my hips. “What’s wrong with you, then?”

Watery eyes stared back at me. “I think I’m sick.”

A flash of panic struck me. “Oh, no, no, no, no, no! You have that bachelor party coming in this afternoon.”

“You have to take them.” He started to heave, and I ran into the bathroom to grab the garbage can.

“Jacob!” I whined at him. “C’mon, you can take them. You’ll be better in a few hours, or days, and everything will be fine. Please don’t make me take a bunch of frat boys up to Racers Roost. I’ll kill one of them, I’m sure of it.”

Racers Roost was a six-bedroom log cabin my brother and I built together almost five years ago. Between my race winnings and Polaris royalties, and his NFL earnings, we sunk everything we had into Brooks Adventure Outfitters. The house was nestled deep in the forest,

and it was where we took our customers when they joined one of our wilderness excursions.

His response was a robust hurl into the garbage can.

Closing my eyes, I lowered my chin to my chest and shook my head side to side. With resignation and a heavy sigh, I told him, "I'll call Morgan, she might be able to work the shop while I'm gone."

A grunt and a moan were all I heard from him as I left his room. I went back to the kitchen to call Morgan Archer, a friend of one of our employees.

As the phone rang, I poured myself a cup of coffee and then took the sandwiches out of the microwave. They had hardened, so I tossed them in the trash and sat down at the kitchen bar, waiting for Morgan to answer her phone.

She answered after a few rings and I proceeded to tell her my predicament.

"Oh, goodness, what exactly do you need from me?" She whispered. Her voice was muffled. I imagined her huddled between the bookshelves of the library, where she worked her usual job, mumbling with her hand over her mouth.

"Jacob is sick and I need to pick up a party at the airport this afternoon. I was hoping you could come work in the shop until Cody and I get back."

Cody was our employee. A twenty something year-old skier, snowmobiler, river-rafter, and mechanic-in-training. He showed up one day over a year ago and just made himself useful. He was rangy and wore a man-bun. These days, he was indispensable to us.

"Oh sure, I can do that."

She was going to hate me for my next words, so I said them in a rush. “And then I was wondering if you could work the store and check in on Jacob for the next three days.” I squinted my eyes shut and prayed she’d say yes.

“What?”

“I know, I know. But, now that Jacob is sick, I need to take this damn excursion since he won’t be able to work. I need Cody and Mac with me and everyone else has left for the holidays. There’s no one else.” I begged. “Please?... Please, please, please, please, please.”

“I can work the next two days, but I work on Friday, so Jacob needs to be better by then.” She tried to sound adamant, but I could hear the teasing lilt in her voice. I thought she might have a crush on Jacob, but I had more pressing problems than thinking about the two of them.

She told me she’d be at the shop at two-thirty and we hung up.

I finished my coffee, rinsed my mug in the sink, and reached for the aspirin in the cupboard above the microwave. Taking two for Jacob, I shook the bottle and took two for myself. A dull ache was already beginning behind my eyes and I needed to ward it off.

Jacob was lying flat on his bed, one arm thrown across his stomach, the other across his eyes. He was breathing heavily. I sat down on the edge of his bed, put my palm to his forehead, then gently nudged him awake.

Now that I knew he most likely had the flu; I spoke more softly to him. “Jacob. Jacob. You need to take some aspirin. Jacob, wake up.”

He groaned and slightly rolled himself to his side. Lifting himself up on one elbow he took the aspirin, put them in his mouth, and washed them down with the glass of water I handed him.

The pillows cushioned his fall back down to the bed, and I laughed at his misery. “You look pathetic.”

“Yeah, I’m sure.”

He waited a moment and then, without opening his eyes, asked if I got in touch with Morgan.

“Yes. She’ll be here this afternoon while I go get the party.”

“Good. That’s good.” His voice trailed off.

“You so seriously owe me for this.”

He was nodding off again. “Uh-huh.”

I covered him with the comforter and then went down the hall to my room to get ready.

When Jacob and I built the store, we added a second floor with a two-bedroom apartment. At one end of the hall was a door that acted as our front door and went down to a parking area in the back of the store. At the other end of the hall was the door that opened to a staircase that led into the store.

The apartment had a full-sized kitchen, a large living area, and we each had our own suites, with a bedroom, bath, and small office.

I showered quickly, washing my hair twice and applying a leave-in conditioner. I left it down so it could dry on its own.

Dressing for the day in my thermal long underwear, black stretch pants, and white turtleneck sweater, I pulled my fur-lined boots out from my closet and pulled them on over knee-high socks.

The sun was shining today, but I had lived in Jackson long enough to know that the temperature was most likely in the teens. It would be biting cold outside.

Peeking in on Jacob before I left, I saw he was fast asleep. I pulled the blanket up over him and left the door open just a bit.

Hanging on the rack by the door was my fur-lined jacket, which I grabbed on my way out the door into the store. Before I stepped out, I glanced at the clock above the microwave ...10:02. Late, but not too bad.

I walked out onto the balcony that looked down into the store and locked our apartment door behind me.

Not only had I managed to live my dream, but my brother and I had built our business into something bigger than either of us had first imagined.

After college, Jacob had been drafted by the Seattle Seahawks. Four years into his career, he broke his leg. Both bones down near the ankle.

I'd left California right after high school to travel and compete in snowmobiling races. Polaris found me cute and inspiring - their words - and they started sponsoring me. Eventually, I became a face of the brand and traveled all over promoting them. I moved to Jackson, Wyoming, permanently. When my brother was injured, he came to live with me while he recovered.

The sports doctor here in town told him that the way the bone had healed, he could never play again. He still walked with a bit of a crooked gait, but he pulled the cowboy thing and made it look like a

swagger. It certainly did not ward off swooning girls, and I was constantly signing them up for rafting trips...the ones he led.

Jacob decided to stay in Jackson, and I was starting to tire of the traveling, so we settled on snowmobiling tours. Then we added white-water rafting. Followed by fly-fishing. Later, overnight excursions, which is when we built Racers Roost.

Now, we had four guides and a mechanic, and I was perfectly content. I had already won the World Championship Snowmobile Derby, basically the Indy 500 of snowmobile racing. I loved being able to stay here, in Jackson. It was my home.

Standing on the ledge, looking down into the store, I was proud of the business we had built. We had a section for fishing, a section for kayaks, a section for skiing, and of course, an apparel line.

Cody was unlocking the front door and I saw Mac enter through the back. He caught my eye and raised his green industrial coffee thermos to me. "Ready for the day, Princess?"

Descending down into the store I smiled at him. "Absolutely!"

I reached the bottom of the steps as Cody started the cash register. Mac came to a stop in front of me and I gave him my standard morning greeting. "Today looks like promise Mac, today looks like promise."

## CHAPTER 2

Even though we were open for business, it would be unusual to get any walk-in customers this early on a Tuesday.

Our shop was located one street back off the town square, and it was usually tourists and Christmas visitors that would stop in. We shared a wood-plank walkway with a clothing store, a bank, a small café, and an art gallery.

I jumped up on the counter, watching as Cody counted out the cash in the till. Mac stood on the other side, one hip leaning casually against the counter, and waited for my morning talk.

“Jacob is sick. I think he has the flu, so I called Morgan to come help out.” I watched as Cody’s ears turned red and tried not to giggle at him. “Cody, I need you to fill up the trucks and then work the store while Mac and I get the gear ready for the expedition this weekend.”

Mac stood up straight and removed the ever present toothpick from his mouth. With a craggy voice he asked, “You takin’ the trip instead of your brother?”

I sighed heavily. “Unfortunately, yes. But the two of you will be with me, so I’ll be fine. Morgan will be here at two thirty so Cody and I can head to the airport to pick up the bachelor party.”

Mac chuckled under his breath and put his hands in his front pockets. “Oo-wee! I feel sorry for them boys. The great Mia Brooks is gonna knock them senseless if they get outta hand.”

“I appreciate the vote of confidence, but babysitting a bunch of drunks on a bachelor party was not how I wanted to spend my weekend.”



He laughed heartily and reached across the counter for the expedition packet. “Let’s see what size men we got here, and I’ll start pulling out the gear.”

Mac was one of our very first employees. We called him Mac because he was our mechanic. His real name was something entirely too basic for him, so we continued to call him Mac.

I’d met him on the racing circuit and when I retired, he just followed me home. He probably wasn’t more than fifty or so, and I don’t know if he was ever married, or if he had a girlfriend. He came to work, he fixed the sleds, he accompanied us on tours, he helped cook the meals, and then he went home. On occasion, he’d accompany us to any number of the bars, but those instances were few and far between. If I had to call him something, I would call him our right-hand man.

Turning my attention to Cody, I asked, “Do you want to take the trucks into town now and fill them with gas? I’ll help Mac put everything out when you get back, and then load it all in the trailer. We’ll hook up the flatbed and load the sleds.”

Cody nodded in agreement, grabbed the keys from under the counter, and headed out the front door. He didn’t speak often, usually only when asked a question, or when asking a question, that needed words instead of action.

I turned to Mac. “How many sleds do we have at Racers Roost?”

He rubbed his chin and nodded thoughtfully, “I think we left four last weekend. We’ll need to load yours, and Cody’s, and mine.” He paused, thinking it through. “With a group this large, we’ll need three more doubles. The men can pair up from the bottom of the trail through the woods.”

I was nodding at him as he spoke. “So, there’s six of them?”

Glancing back down at the reservation sheet, he said, “Looks like.”

I drawled, “Great.” And rolled my eyes. “You and Cody can pull their luggage on the utility sled and I’ll take the fresh food and miscellaneous items behind me.”

“Sounds like a plan, Princess.”

“Yeah, well, you know what they say about best laid plans.” I added sardonically.

He laughed good-humoredly at me and headed out to the back storage area to start pulling gear for the men.

I was just reaching for the expedition packet when I heard the bell ring above the front door. My best friend, Camille, bounded towards me, eyes gleaming with mirth. Her brown hair flew crazily behind her. She was wearing very expensive snow boots and a fur-lined suede jacket with a hood. She will tell you it is fake fur.

With great enthusiasm she jumped up on the counter and started talking.

“I heard you’re picking up a bachelor party this afternoon. Mind if I tag along?”

Lifting my eyes to her, I shook my head and asked her how she knew.

“I ran into Lane Archer at the feed store.”

“What were you doing at the feed store? Never mind, go on.”

“He asked about you and I told him he missed a great birthday party last night.” She poked me in the arm and continued, “I think he’s keen on you.”

Sarcastically, I said, “Oh, please!”

She missed my tone and continued rambling. “Well, anyway, he’d heard from Morgan that your brother was sick, and that she was going to be helping out at the store because you had to take a bachelor party that Jacob was supposed to run.” Gleefully she added, “And so I ran right over to see how I could be of service.” She squeezed her breasts together and waggled her eyebrows.

Exasperated, I said, “Freaking Jackson. This town is so small. And no, you cannot come along.”

She jumped off the counter and started whining, “Oh come on Mia, you know I can help out! Please! Please let me come with you.”

“No. But you can help out here until Cody gets back so I can go help Mac.”

She pouted. “That doesn’t sound exciting at all. I’m going to walk next door and get a coffee. Do you want one?”

“Yes please. Vanilla latte.” I shouted after her, “NO FOAM!”

She waved at me over her head, and I took my phone out of the side pocket of my leggings to text Mac. I’ll be out when Cody gets back.

He texted a thumbs up.

Opening the packet...again...I read through the itinerary Jacob had planned for them. Their flight would arrive at three thirty this afternoon at the Corporate Aircraft terminal and tonight they would be staying at the Lodge at Jackson Hole. We had dinner reservations at Gun Barrell for eight people at 7 p.m. and then I would pick them up at the hotel tomorrow morning to start the excursion. They had booked four nights and then they would spend their last night in Jackson dining at... the Cowboy Bar.

I looked up from the packet and groaned out loud. “Ugh! Not the Cowboy Bar.”

At that moment, Camille came back through the front door, with Cody right behind her.

“One vanilla latte for the traitor.”

I lowered my brow at her and held out my hand for the coffee. “I’m not taking you because I don’t have room for you. Now give...”

She handed me my coffee and I turned my attention to Cody. “Trucks full?”

He tossed the keys back in the drawer and then tucked some of his hair back behind his ears. “Yep.”

“Great. Thank you.”

Camille had made herself comfortable on the trio of couches that surrounded a gas fireplace in the middle of the room. She was sipping her coffee and had picked up a fly-fishing magazine. “Camille, I’m going out back to help Mac. Do you want to come with me?”

“I’m good here. I’ll just hang out for a while.”

Camille’s dad owned the San Diego Padres, so we were both from sports families. Not only did her dad own the baseball team, he was also part owner at Snow King Resort. Camille and I had become friends as children, and closer friends when I moved here full-time.

Camille also did not have a job. She spent her days shopping, sleeping ...bugging me. Every now and then she would do something philanthropic, like host parties for local charities, but only when inspired to do so buy some popular single athlete.

I left the itinerary on the counter and headed out back to help Mac.

Our shop was on an empty lot behind the store, surrounded by a chain-link fence. Two of our three Ford-F350 dually trucks were parked

inside the gate, along with both a large and a small trailer to haul the sleds. Cody had left my truck parked on the street.

Grabbing my down jacket off the hook by the back door, I stepped out into the harsh cold, tucking my chin into my turtleneck and lowering my head as I walked to the shop.

It was sunny today, and I was praying it would hold. Bad weather would make for a long weekend stuck in the lodge.

I heard the engines running from inside as I opened the chain-link gate and walked across the cement slab. Pulling open the heavy steel door, I saw Mac checking each sled, one by one to make sure they were ready to go. I flipped the light switch two times fast so he'd know I was there, and I waved when he looked up and saw me.

He turned the engines off.

Pulling the hood off my head, I unzipped my jacket and walked towards him.

Wiping his hands on a rag, he approached me and stood to my side so we were both looking at the sleds.

"Everything looks good. Shouldn't have any problems." He was nodding confidently and I turned sideways to smile at him.

When my brother and I started the business, I wanted nothing but the best sleds, the prettiest, the fastest. I wanted them all to be red, and I wanted them to all be Polaris 800 switchbacks. Over time, after many accidents, and mishaps, and dare-devils, I had come to accept the fact that most people wouldn't know the difference. Now, I just wanted them to stay in one piece.

My sled was a Ski-doo Freeride and she was beautiful. Now that I was no longer beholden to Polaris, I bought myself the sled I'd always wanted. She was capable of handling deep powder, as well as being powerful enough

to pull someone out if I needed to. She was kept covered and Mac knew to baby her.

“Great! Thanks Mac.” I slowly wandered through the shop doing my own assessment, and then sat down on one of the doubles. “Cody’s back with my truck so we should be ready to go soon. I’ll check on Jacob one more time and then we’ll leave for the airport.”

Mac stared at me pensively, quietly. And I just sat in the now silent shop.

“What’s on your mind, Princess?”

I took a deep breath, puffed out my cheeks and exhaled dramatically. Weighing my words, I waited a minute to gather them.

“Do you think I made a mistake, Mac?”

“What kind of mistake?”

“I don’t know. It just felt weird last night celebrating thirty-one and without having someone to celebrate it with.”

He opened his mouth to speak, but I cut him off. “And don’t say I have you.”

He laughed and said, “You know I’m not one for these deep talks, Mia.”

“I know.” I hung my head and stared at the dials on the sled.

We sat in silence for a few moments, lost in our own thoughts.

Mac wandered over to me and stood on the other side of the windshield. “But I reckon you did what you felt you needed to do, to make yourself whole as a person. And you shouldn’t worry about not having anyone to share it with right now. There’ll come a time when an opportunity presents itself, and you’ll know he’s the right one.”

I felt my eyes glass over. I swallowed audibly to keep back the cry.

“Now stop your crying and let’s get these beauties ready to load.”

With a laugh, I wiped the tears from the corners of my eyes. “Who said you weren’t good with these talks?”

He stepped around and gave me a hug. “Next time call your mama.”

“Oh God! Yeah, right!”

We both laughed as I walked to the shop garage door, pushed the green button that raised the electric door, and waited until it stopped to walk out to the lot.

Mac and I worked seamlessly together, hitching up the trailers, backing them in towards the garage and then loading the sleds one by one.

As soon as we were satisfied that we were ready for the morning, I left Mac to close up the garage and I headed back to the shop. Morgan, Cody and Camille were all sitting in front of the gas fireplace.

Morgan was such a pretty girl. She was young and studious, with the beautiful auburn colored hair that most of the Archers had. Her eyes were the color of sherry, and her skin was like cream. She was going to be stunning in a few years.

Approaching them, I realized my clothes were dirty, and that I needed to change before we went to the airport. I plucked at some of the dirt on my turtleneck as I came to a stop behind one of the couches.

“Hi Morgan, thanks for helping out. I really appreciate it.”

“It’s okay Mia, I don’t mind helping when I can.” She smiled at me from across the seating area.

I looked at my watch. Two forty-five. Looking at Cody next, I said, “I’m going to run upstairs and change really quick, and then we can go.”

His response was a quick, “sure.”

Taking the steps back up to my apartment, I let myself in and went directly to the kitchen to get Jacob some more aspirin and a glass of water.

His door was still ajar. When I pushed it open a bit farther, I saw he was fast asleep and breathing deeply.

I sat down on the edge of his bed, gently nudging him awake.

“Jacob. Jacob, wake up. Jacob, it’s Mia, I brought you some aspirin. Wake up.”

His eyes opened slowly and they were glassy with fever.

“Sit up as best you can and take these. Morgan’s here, and we should be back in a short while.”

He sat up, took the aspirin and water quickly, and then flopped back down on his bed. Throwing his arm back over his eyes, he mumbled, “Mia, I’m sorry about Cole.”

Adrenaline shot through my body, and I inhaled sharply. “What?”

“Cole. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you about Cole.”

I had no idea what he was talking about. Cole Blackwood was my high school sweetheart, and kind of college boyfriend. More importantly, he was my first love. And if I was honest with myself, my only love.

“Jacob, what didn’t you tell me?”

Jacob had nodded off to sleep again, and I pushed at him. A little louder, I said, “Jacob! What didn’t you tell me?”

But he was out and I wouldn’t get an answer.



## CHAPTER 3

Cole and I had met at camp the summer before our junior year in high school. It was a camp in Lake Tahoe, the kind where they fool the kids into thinking it will be kayaking, and hiking, and sleeping in. But it wasn't. It was a science camp.

I wasn't the most enthusiastic student, and my mom thought I might learn something. I definitely learned something; I learned to kiss. And by kiss, I mean, long, slow, sweet, summer night kisses that went on forever and marked my soul. Kisses that made me forget I wasn't supposed to let a boy put his hands down my pants, plunge his fingers inside me, and touch me until my legs quivered and my toes curled. Kisses that promised forever. Kisses I shared with Cole Blackwood.

We were an unlikely couple. I was cute and bubbly. Cole was tall and gangly, with a mop of black hair that never seemed to stay in place. He was studious; I was obsessed with being outside. He was calm; I was chomping at the bit to get out of Laguna Beach. He wanted to be a doctor; I wanted to race around the world.

But I loved him. He centered me and made me believe in fairytales.

By the time we graduated, Cole had been accepted to the University of San Francisco, and I had earned enough points in the winter racing to compete internationally. We stayed together for two years, until I got picked up by Polaris as a sponsor and an ambassador. My schedule got so crazy, our visits became further and further apart. By Christmas of his junior year, we were finished.

As I sat staring at my reflection in the bathroom mirror, that Christmas came sharply into focus.

My parents always hosted a Christmas Eve party, with people coming and going throughout the afternoon and into the evening.

Our house sat up in the hills and looked out over the vastness of the Pacific Ocean.

The interior, tastefully decorated in red and gold, sparkled with Christmas cheer. I kept watch on the door, waiting for Cole to arrive.

Dressed in a red, short-sleeve, mock turtleneck dress with a black belt, I was the epitome of one of Santa's helpers. My over-the-knee black boots reached just to the hem of my dress; enough to be sexy without being improper.

I hadn't been with Cole since September because of my racing schedule, and I was anxious to see him.

A little before 8 p.m., the doorbell rang and I jumped up off the couch to answer it. "I'll get it."

When I opened the heavy wooden door, Cole was standing on the other side, holding a small poinsettia and looking exceptionally gorgeous. He had trimmed his unruly dark hair and he looked...like an adult.

I reached out my hand to him and pulled him into the house. Shutting the front door, we turned to each other and I leaned up to kiss him greedily.

He held me with one arm around my waist, the plant in the other, and I pressed my mouth to his, wanting to get as close to him as I could.

He muttered against my lips, "Mia. Mia. Not in the hallway."

Nipping him a few more times, I said between kisses.

"But...I...have...missed you."

“I’ve missed you too, but let me at least say hello to your parents.”

Running his hand down my arm, he linked our hands together, and we walked to the living room together.

When my mom saw us, she excused herself from the couple she was talking to and headed our way. “Cole! I’m so glad you made it.”

He leaned down to kiss her cheek. “Merry Christmas, Mrs. Brooks.”

“Merry Christmas. Is this for us?” She reached for the plant and he handed it to her.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Oh, I just love the poinsettia plant. It always adds just the right amount of warmth and class at the same time.”

He agreed, and my mom asked me to get him a glass of wine.

I leaned up to kiss him again before wandering to the kitchen. “I’ll be right back.”

Watching him from the open kitchen, I took a few minutes to memorize his face. My heart hurt, and I pressed my fist to my chest, trying to rub out the pain. His mannerisms were controlled, tense; his smile didn’t reach his eyes.

Now that I was an observer, I could see something wasn’t right with him, and I wanted to put the blinders back on. Pouring us two glasses of wine, I joined him and mingled with the rest of my parents’ guests.

Shortly after nine o’clock, I grabbed Cole away from a couple of my fathers’ friends and dragged him downstairs to my room.

“Oh my God! I thought I would never get you alone.” I started unbuttoning his shirt as I slowly walked him backwards towards my bed.

He reached up to cradle my face, and I leaned into his kiss. He devoured me, and I pulled his shirt out from the waist of his pants. I ran my

palms up his chest, under his shirt and continued to kiss him until he fell onto my bed.

Scooting himself back, he pulled me up and onto him. I leaned down to kiss him, our tongues intertwining, our heads tilting to get closer to each other. He gripped my hips, and I pushed down onto him, feeling his hardness, and knew I was already ready for him.

“Cole. I’ve missed you so much. Please make love to me.” I was reaching for his belt buckle when he gripped both my wrists.

“Mia, wait.”

“Wait? For what? Oh, you don’t have a condom?” I jumped up off him and headed towards the bathroom, grinning seductively over my shoulder at him, as I sauntered away. “I think there are some in here.”

“Mia, no, that’s not it.”

His tone was sad, and resigned, and I stopped in my tracks. Turning to him, I crossed my arms in front of me. A chill passed over me and I frowned. “Then what is it?”

He was sitting on the edge of my bed, looking ruffled. He pulled one knee up and rested it on the mattress and patted the spot next to him. “Come here.”

“I’ll stand.”

Letting out a heavy sigh, he said, “I want you to move to San Francisco.”

Uncrossing my arms, I went to him. “Christ! That’s it? You had me worried.” I reached up to palm his cheek. “But I can’t right now, I’m getting ready to go to Northern Europe. I have a race circuit coming up and some promotions I’m committed to.”

He pulled my hand off his face and held it. “That’s just the thing Mia, you are always running off somewhere. I miss you.” He looked me in the eyes and said more emphatically, “I love you!”

My eyes started to water. “Then why does this feel like goodbye?”

“Mia, I love you! I have loved you since the first day of camp when you used the paint as toenail polish. I want to be with you, but I’m tired of being without you.”

“But I can come back more often....”

He cut me off. “We’ve been doing this for two years now. You always say that.”

I stopped my crying and felt my heart freeze. “Then what are you saying?”

He held both my hands in his and pleaded with me. “Come to San Francisco. Move in with me. Let’s plan a wedding.”

In what felt like slow motion, I pulled my hands from his and rested them in my lap. “And stop racing.” It wasn’t a question but his silence gave me my answer.

I lowered my head. “Please don’t make me choose, Cole. Please don’t do that to me.”

Raising my eyes to him, I saw he was on the verge of tears. I choked on a cry and tried to speak past the lump that was forming. “I can’t...I can’t do that.”

Rising from my bed, he started buttoning his shirt and tucked it back in his pants.

His silence was angering me. “That’s it?”

“I’ve said all I can say, Mia. You won’t stop, and I need to move on.”

“And you’re just going to walk away?”

He stood quietly, peacefully, and said in a controlled voice. “I love you! I will always love you. But I can’t do this anymore. I can’t be second. I’ll say goodbye to your parents and let myself out. I’ll tell them you were tired.”

I picked up a pillow, threw it across the room at him, and shouted, “You’re a coward! I hate you! I hate you! I hate you!”

He picked the pillow up off the floor and placed it cautiously back on the end of my bed. “I’m so sorry, Mia.”

I heard him choke and I started to cry. I threw myself on my bed and shouted into the pillow. “Get out!”

I tried to call him the next day to apologize, but he didn’t answer. I continued to call him well into the spring. He never answered. After a while, I figured it was time for me to gain some dignity and stop calling.

A knock on my apartment door shook me from my memories. It was Morgan. “Mia, Cody’s waiting for you.”

I wiped the tears from my cheeks and yelled, “I’ll be right out.”

Putting on another white turtleneck, I touched up my makeup and fluffed out my curls.

I left my apartment and went back downstairs, a big smile on my face. Cody was waiting for me, truck keys in hand. He smiled at me, understanding that this expedition was the last thing on earth I wanted to do right then.

“Ready to go get our boys?” I asked sarcastically.

He laughed and nodded, handing me my truck keys before heading to the back door. I went out the front door and climbed up into

the cab. Reaching above the visor, I found my oversized polarized sunglasses and put them on.

I waited until Cody pulled out from around back before pulling out to follow him to the airport. To myself I muttered, “God, please help me.”

END EXCERPT

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