



# The Beauty



RIE ANDERS



*The  
Beauty*

R I E A N D E R S

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## CONTENTS

[The Beauty](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Dear Santa, Define Good](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

## CHAPTER 1

**THE LARGE MAN** dropped to his knees in front of me. Clutching his hands to his chest, he collapsed to the floor.

I sprinted towards him and dropped to my own knees, my ski pants easing the impact against the resort's hard lobby floor. I hurriedly shrugged out of my ski patrol jacket to give me more flexibility.

"Sweet baby Jesus." The man muttered, staring up at me.

"Call 911." I shouted over my shoulder to one of the colleagues I'd been walking with. I shifted my gaze to the other and said, "Get me the AED."

They ran off in opposite directions, pushing through the crowd that was starting to gather.

The joyous Christmas carolers had stopped singing when I shouted, huddling up against the side of the lobby with the others to watch the emergency unfold.

I unzipped the fallen man's parka, preparing to start chest compressions. "Just hang on, we're getting you some help. Can you hear me?"

With one hand, he gripped my wrist and pulled me down to his broad chest. Caught off guard, I lost my balance and collapsed on top of him. The woodsy, outdoor scent of him wafted up. I inhaled and sighed, momentarily disoriented.

Before I had time to respond, he spun a lock of my long hair around the fingers on his other hand and marveled at it. "You are the most beautiful women I have ever seen in my life." He turned his gaze back to me. "Am I dead?"

“What?”

“Are you an angel?” His voice was gravelly.

I’d heard similar comments on my looks before. My skin had, for the most part, been blemish free and flawless. People had told me I looked like a porcelain doll, with big brown eyes and long lashes. In the context of the moment, though, I wasn’t prepared to process his words.

My colleague dropped down beside me with the AED. “I got it,” he wheezed. His eyes darted between the man and me. “Is he okay?”

A slow, sexy grin spread across the face of the fallen man. My eyes went to his. They looked like bottomless pools of melted gold.

He whispered, gently pulling my flaxen hair, “I think I love you.”

I fought for a breath, feeling suspended in time. That voice, again. Gravelly, but husky and deep. The voice of a healthy man, not one fighting for his last breath.

That realization snapped me back to the moment. I jerked my hand from his and forcibly slapped away the other. He released me and laughed.

I pushed at him and stood, clumsily. An attempt to make space between us. “What is wrong with you?” My voice cracked. “Do you have any idea how frightened I was? I thought you were having a heart attack.”

With an agility I wouldn’t have expected, he leapt to his feet. “I am so sorry. I couldn’t help myself. You are breathtaking.”

Two very attractive men I hadn’t noticed before stepped forward. The tall, curly-headed blond muttered to the man, “You are such an ass.”

The dark haired one shook his head at me. “Please forgive my brother - he really is an ass. But he didn’t mean any harm.”

The hotel guests moved along, realizing the excitement was over. I turned my gaze back to the golden eyes.



Now that the adrenaline had slowed, I noticed just how large he was. Almost a head taller than me, and twice as wide. His eyes were the only pretty thing about him. A scar ran through his eyebrow. Another through his top lip and cheek.

His cheeks had a few small pitted scars, just barely visible below the beginnings of a beard. His nose was crooked, I wondered what kind of story resulted in that.

The sexy grin was back when my eyes returned to his. I grabbed my jacket up off the floor. Shoving my arms angrily into the sleeves, I said, "Please be careful. I don't want to have to rescue you for real."

I turned to walk away. My colleagues were waiting for me at the exit doors.

He jogged up alongside me. "I really am sorry."

I kept walking. "Ok."

"Are you on the ski patrol?" His jacket was still unzipped.

"I am."

"Are you..." His voice trailed off.

I reached the other ski patrollers, turned and stopped. "Am I what?"

He put his hands in his front pockets. He gave a quick glance to my colleagues behind me, as if asking their permission to talk to me. "I don't know. I don't know what to say to you. I just want to... I don't know."

Telling the others to go ahead, I reached for his elbow and guided him to a quiet corner at the other side of the hallway. He came easily, like a little boy that knew he was being punished. "Listen..."

"Brett." He smiled, proud of himself.

"Brett," I repeated. He smelled really good. Like cinnamon and the outdoors. Warmth radiated from his body. I had to work to be able to concentrate. I wanted to reach out and snuggle into his wool sweater. That would be a dumb move, considering.

I continued, "I don't have time to date. I don't have time for nonsense. And I certainly don't have time for someone that plays childish games to get a girl. I appreciate the compliments, but I have to respectfully decline."

"Give me a chance. Just one drink. When you're off work. I'll be normal." He made a cross over his heart.

"I'm sorry, but no." I turned to leave.

He called after me. "What's your name?"

"Have a good night, Brett."

"I lied," he called again. "You aren't an angel. You're an elf. A beautiful, magical elf, and you're going to fall in love with me."

I waved at him over my shoulder without turning around.

The sliding doors opened as I approached them. The biting cold of winter in Alaska hit me, nipping at my warm skin. I pulled my neck warmer up to cover the bottom of my face.

I'd grown up skiing in the mountains of Colorado. While the snow and cold was nothing unusual, the never-ending darkness that blanketed Alaska in the dead of winter was something I just hadn't gotten used to. Couldn't seem to get used to.

This was my third winter. I was finally starting to come out of the fog that had brought me here. I wasn't sure I would return to Denver, but I did want more than my quiet, solitary life here.

Brett was attractive, in an embattled warrior kind of way. His bulky skiwear hadn't hidden anything of the muscular body underneath. I might have considered a date with him under different circumstances. But recklessness was not something I could overlook. I'd worked too hard to protect myself from that kind of childish behavior from a man.

I made it to the ski patrol office just outside the tram. A

jubilant bunch of day patrollers held the door for me on their way out for the night. Bells, attached to the door, jingled.

“Hey, Dr. Cain.” They said as a chorus.

“Hey, guys.” I said as I stepped into the warm building.

The main room bustled with the people ending or starting their shifts. Someone had put a Christmas tree up, decorated with colored lights and inexpensive ornaments, like beer cans and poop-emoji key chains.

“Hey, Liz, heard you saved a life today!” Thomas, another patroller, teased as he stepped into his boots.

I sat down on the bench and stepped into mine. “And I might take another.” I teased.

Laughter filled the room. “Aw, Thomas, she schooled you,” someone hooted.

Thomas locked the last buckle. He moaned, “Elizabeth. Elizabeth. Hear my soul speak: The very instant that I saw you, did my heart fly to your service.”

I couldn’t keep from smiling. “Okay, Shakespeare, enough. He was harmless. A bunch of guys on a weekend trip.”

“Your beauty...” I threw a glove at him. His eyes sparkled with good humor as he caught it against his chest. “Okay, I’ll stop. But...”

“No buts.” I stood. “We have work to do. You can buy me a drink when the lifts close.”

I gave him a teasing smile and he responded with a cheesy one. He raised his arms as if he scored a touchdown.

Artificial amber lighting illuminated the snow, allowing skiers to enjoy the runs for longer than the five hours of daylight we had this far north. I headed for the lift.

Laughter and excited chatter filled the sixty-person enclosed gondola. The door slid closed, signaling the start of our six-minute trip to the top of the mountain.

As it transitioned from the wheels to the cable, the lift

vibrated. A little girl next to me clutched her mom's leg, whimpering at the uneasy swaying of the car.

"It's okay, baby. We'll be skiing soon." Said the mother, soothingly.

The softness of the girl's mother contrasted sharply with the tense relationship I had with mine. I'd always imagined if I'd had a daughter, I would have comforted and soothed her just as this one was. Sadness crept into my heart at the thought that I might have missed the opportunity to feel that joy.

I patrolled with Thomas. We'd worked together a number of times over the past few winters and had become good friends. We knew each other's downhill patterns and were familiar with our expressions of concern.

I was only a part-time National Ski Patrol volunteer. This week, though, I was filling in for a young patroller who'd wanted to spend Christmas week with his family in Seattle. As a result, Thomas and I had spent more time together.

My shift ended up being uneventful. No injuries. No distress. No broken bones. No drama.

After the runs were cleared and closed, Thomas and I took one last trip up the tram. Our last job of the day was to make sure no one was left behind on the mountain, that no one was hurt, and that everyone was back at the resort safe and sound.

I pulled my gloves off, stuck them between my knees, and adjusted the strap of my helmet.

"The snow was good today," I said to him.

He leaned against the handrail, gripping the cold steel with his hands. "Yeah, it wasn't bad. Supposed to get dumped on in the next few days."

"That's good. People staying for Christmas will love that."

I put my gloves back on and gripped the overhead

handle as the gondola rolled over the supporting towers. I swayed back and forth with the force.

He asked, "Are you going to see your family over Christmas?"

"Nope."

He chuckled, "That was an abrupt answer."

"They are all staying in Colorado. I didn't want to travel."

The gondola rolled into the landing and the doors slid open, saving me from having to elaborate further.

"Ready to make a final run?" I asked.

He nodded in the direction of downhill. "I'll follow you."

The lack of skiers on the snow provided a quiet solitude that should have been cathartic and peaceful. But my thoughts snuck in, drowning out the rhythmic swish-swoosh of my skis on the snow.

When I left Denver, my mind had been so clouded with pain that I ran without thinking through my actions. I knew I had to get as far away as possible, but I hadn't considered proximity to the North Pole when making my decision. Hawaii and Alaska were the furthest from mid-America. Hawaii didn't have skiing, so that was out.

Looking back, normal daylight and drinks on the beach might have been a better option than bears roaming the streets like stray dogs and midnight sun in the summer.

A flash of red flew past me, coming to a hockey stop and forcing me to stop before slamming into him. "What? Are you okay?"

He scowled. "Yeah, are you?"

"What do you mean?"

"You're daydreaming, Liz. You were flying down the hill without even checking the trees or looking around. You were skiing recklessly."

I dropped my head, ashamed, and fighting sudden tears. "I am so sorry. My mind wandered. Were you able to look around? Is there anyone left on the mountain?"



He stood silent, assessing me. It was a moment before he asked. "Was it that guy? Did he upset you?"

I closed my eyes and raised my head to the sky. I took a deep breath, exhaled loudly, relaxed my shoulders. I looked back at him and answered, "No. Honestly, I'd forgotten about him. It's just... it's just the holidays. That's all."

"I get that you may not want to talk about your past. You've been buttoned up since you got here. But people care about you, Liz. You can consider us friends." He shifted his weight and leaned into his poles. "You can consider me a friend."

"Thank you, Thomas. I appreciate that." I know that wasn't what he wanted to hear, but I couldn't give him any more than that. "I really do."

He sighed. After a few more moments of contemplation, and assessing my state of mind, he jerked his head to the end of the slope. "C'mon. Let's finish this run and I'll buy you that beer."

I pushed forward on my skis to get around him. "Deal."

We finished our run of the hill, checked in with the gondola operator, and made our way back to the patrol room to change.

I changed out of my ski pants and sweater into a black turtleneck, black leggings, and black knee-high snow boots. After I traded my patrol jacket for a white, hooded puffer jacket, I followed Thomas in his truck to the local bar just a mile down the road from the resort.

Music drifted into the parking lot. Thomas waited for me at the door, holding it open when I reached him. "After you." He smiled.

Glittering Christmas ball ornaments dangled from the top of the bar, while heat lamps glowed on the outdoor patio.

We made our way through the bar to a group of patrollers. Judging by their glassy eyes, they'd been drinking since their shift ended hours ago.

“Elizabeth!” A junior female patroller slurred from the other side of the table. “When I grow up, I want to be just like you.”

Thomas pulled a chair out for me. He asked her, “A doctor?”

She leaned her head on her friend’s shoulder. “No. A goddess. I want men to drop at my feet and declare their love.” She sighed. “It’s like a dream.”

I looked at Thomas as I sat down. He took the chair next to me. “Does everyone know?”

“Apparently,” he chuckled.

“Margo, it was a silly prank, and there was nothing romantic about it.”

She continued going on about love and romance. I focused on the menu, starving for something other than a burger.

A whispering murmur rose around our table of ten. When I looked up, there he was. Across the room, shooting pool like he didn’t have a care in the world. Brett, the golden-eyed warrior.

## CHAPTER 2

**THE WALLS OF** the bar seemed to close in around me. There was nowhere for me to hide. Instead, I raised my glass of water in a cheer. His eyebrows rose and he smiled as he tipped his beer bottle to me.

Margo turned her head to look in the direction of my gaze. "Oh, my god, yum!" She turned back to me and said in a low voice, "Seriously, if you don't want one of those, I'll take 'em."

Inwardly, I cringed. Outwardly, I lowered my brow to her.

His friends followed the direction of his gaze. There was a girl with them this time. A curly headed blonde that could have been the twin to one of the men I'd seen earlier. She smiled at me and waved. That was unexpected.

My cheeks warmed. I looked down at my menu and asked Thomas what he was going to order. He leaned towards me, setting his arm on the back of my chair.

I lifted my eyes giving a quick glance back at Brett. He was leaning against a cocktail table, his hands resting on the pool cue between his legs. His eyes were on me. He looked amused.

Thomas asked me, "Do you want to leave?"

"No. I'm fine." I stared back at the menu without actually reading it.

When the waitress came to take our order, I settled for a burger and a beer, not having the capacity to actually read and order anything different.

Talk around the table turned to the winter solstice

party in two days, Christmas plans, and the fact that Margo was on avalanche patrol in the morning and would obviously not make it.

Moments later, Brett materialized beside our table. "Excuse me for interrupting."

Our conversation hushed. Everyone looked up at him with equal parts curiosity and wariness.

He shifted on his feet and put his hands in the front pockets of his worn jeans. "I'd like to apologize to all of you for my behavior earlier today."

They all nodded and murmured, "Yeah, yeah's," and "No worries."

"I didn't really think through how my action would be perceived and I'm sorry to..." he waited.

"Elizabeth," Margo offered with a goofy smile.

He grinned like he'd won a prize. "I'm sorry to Elizabeth for frightening her."

I smiled with my mouth closed. "All is forgiven."

Brett looked around the hushed table. I shifted uncomfortably, waiting for him to leave.

He turned his eyes to me. In a softer tone, he asked, "Can I talk to you for a minute?"

I looked around the table. Some of them were suppressing laughter. Margo, wide eyed, was nodding jerkily.

Pushing my chair back, I took my napkin from my lap, set the red cloth on the table, and stood. "One minute."

He tipped his head towards the bar and I walked in that direction. He placed his hand at the center of my back as he led me past the crush of tables to the bar. The intimacy of the touch sent shivers up my spine. Gesturing to a stool, he waited until I was situated before taking the seat next to me.

He faced me. "Elizabeth, that was a great question. Thank you for asking. I was going to go first, but I love that you're interested."

The bartender approached us. "Can I get you anything?"

Brett held up two fingers. "IPA"

"You got it."

Brett turned back to me. "Where were we?"

"You were talking nonsense."

He grinned and gave a thumbs up. "Right. Well, in answer to your question, I'm here with my brother, John, and his wife, Mia. The other guy is her brother, Jacob, which is a really complicated situation. But I'll leave that story for another time. Mia and Jacob..."

My anxiety rose. I put my hand up, cutting him off. "Stop. Please."

His shoulders relaxed, that amused look in his eyes again. The corners of his mouth turned slightly upward. His eyes crinkled at the corner. This time, he really looked at me. He seemed like a relatively intelligent guy, but this sort of cavalier behavior always wore me out.

"You don't have to act like this. I'm here. I'll talk to you."

He glanced at his family. The girl rose her eyebrows at whatever he was trying to convey. When he turned back to me, he looked calm, relaxed. He put out his hand for a shake. "Hi, I'm Brett Barringer. I'm here for the weekend with my family. Do you live here?"

I shook. The calloused palm tickled my hand. "Elizabeth Cain. I do."

The bartender set our beers on the bar. A waiter stood beside him, carrying my burger. "Do you want to eat here?"

I looked at Brett. He was quiet, waiting for my answer.

I nodded to the waiter. "Yes, thank you."

Brett asked the waiter to bring one more for him. "Double patty, no cheese."

The waiter nodded at him.

Brett nodded at my burger. "Please, eat."

I cut the burger in half, took a bite, and ate quietly



while he watched me.

“You know, you could have just said you have a boyfriend.” His tone was gentle.

I swallowed, wiped the corners of my mouth with the napkin, and took a drink of my beer. “I don’t.”

“The guy next to you seemed very protective. Close and comfortable.”

“Friends. Colleagues.”

He shifted so he was completely facing me. “Ski Patrol?”

I didn’t want to get too deep with him, so I simply nodded.

“How long have you been doing that?”

“Let’s go back to my first, fake question you were so willing to answer for me. Why are you here?” I ate a fry.

His smile showed straight, even, white teeth. Two in the front looked like implants. “My sister-in-law and her brother own an outdoor adventure company in Wyoming. They want to expand, so they’re looking at resort towns where they can do snowmobiling tours and backcountry camping.”

“Ah, I see. The glaciers are a great place to do that.”

“Yeah, they are. But I think the market is already saturated here. I got the feeling today that this isn’t a place they want to consider long-term.”

His burger arrived a short while later. He squirted catsup across his fries and dove into the burger like a starved man.

I spoke, giving him time to enjoy his food. “There’s plenty of nature here to be competitive, but the isolation in the winter takes some getting used to.”

He raised his eyebrows as he chewed, so I continued. “I’m from Denver. I grew up skiing Vail, Beaver Creek, Crested Butte, wherever. My older sister was a downhill competitive racer. I used to try and catch her. One day, I

thought I could beat her, so I skied out of the boundary of the run.”

He took a sip of his beer, his golden eyes twinkling. “Ah, so you do have a reckless streak.”

“I was young.” I emphasized. “And I really wanted to beat her.”

“Did you?” He plucked another fry from his plate. “Beat her, that is.”

“No. But that’s how I ended up on the patrol. The patrol guys on the mountain that day followed me. When we got to the bottom of the hill, they approached me and told me they could take my pass for the season over what I’d done.”

“But they didn’t.”

“But they didn’t. Instead, they offered me a job.”

“You must be a really good skier.”

“I’m okay. Not as good as my sister.” I looked away. “The funny thing is that I saw them chasing me and was only trying to get away. I wasn’t out to impress anyone.”

He laughed heartily. “I knew I liked you. A rebellious streak hides within.”

And that was my cue to leave. I pushed my plate away and signaled for the bartender.

“Can I get my check, please?”

Brett looked at him. “Add it to mine, I got it.”

I stood from the stool. “Well, thank you very much for dinner. And for the conversation. You seem like a nice guy and I appreciate the apology.”

He looked like he wanted to say something. Instead, he just smiled at me, and nodded.

“Well, again, thank you, and good luck to your sister-in-law. I hope...” I stumbled, pushing in the stool. “I hope her business is very successful.”

He just kept grinning.

“Good night, then.”

He rested his elbow on the bar and put his chin in his hand. “Good night.”

I said my good-byes to my friends and made my way out to the dimly lit gravel parking lot. The freshly fallen snow brightened the surrounding trees. When I reached my Toyota SUV, I dropped my chin to my chest, closed my eyes, and exhaled.

“Elizabeth?”

I jerked, startled. My hand flew to my chest. I turned to face him. “Oh, geez! You scared me.”

Brett approached me slowly, as if not to frighten me further. He spoke with a voice as soft as a lullaby. “Elizabeth. I know this is crazy. Please know that I don’t even know what’s happening, but you have captivated me. I know it sounds like a line, but it’s not.

I dropped my arms to my side.

“When you left the bar just now, I felt like a piece of me left. I know it’s crazy. You feel like something I need. I can’t explain it. If I had never seen you after my unapologetic behavior earlier today, I might have been ok.” He stopped a few feet in front of me. “But I will never be ok now after talking with you. Your voice. Your face. Your beautiful hair.”

He reached out and caught a wisp through his fingers, looking at it as if he’d never seen hair before. He curled the blonde strand around his fingers as he continued. “It’s like golden wheat, shining in the sun. It’s so soft.”

My mind raced. What was he saying? Was this real? Was he for real? No one talks like that.

And yet, a part of my heart responded. His words sounded genuine, and something in me wanted them to be. I was speechless. My lips parted, and he stepped a foot closer.

“I’m leaving tomorrow night and I know this is insane but I need to kiss you. To taste you. You may have ruined me forever, and I just can’t leave without knowing if this was real.”

My body moved without my permission. I leaned against him, resting my right cheek against his chest.

With his right hand, he removed my beanie and pulled me closer. He rested the palm of his other hand on my head, cradling me against him. He kissed my head and whispered. "What am I going to do?"

Against my better judgement, I lifted my head, stood on my tip-toes and kissed the side of his neck, just below his ear, whispering, "Kiss me."

He lifted me a few inches off the ground and walked me backwards. My jacket inched up and the cold glass of my car door window touched my back. The solid muscle of him held me firmly in place as he placed one knee between my legs. I rested, confident in his ability to hold me. Soft, warm, full lips touched mine. Like a padded pillow, he pressed his lips, waiting. My lips tingled. He nuzzled, pulling my lower lip between his, and then returning to kiss me fully.

White stars danced behind my closed eyes. I opened my mouth. His tongue danced with mine. I moaned. Fire leapt through me. I pulled him tighter to me. I couldn't breathe. I didn't want to breathe. A desire like I had never felt consumed me. Wrecking me. We became a tangled mess of arms and lips.

"Elizabeth. Sweet, beautiful Elizabeth, let me come home with you." He said against my lips, my cheek, my ear. He planted kisses on my nose, my forehead, my temple. "I need you."

My eyes stayed closed. I allowed the words to flow over me, warm and rich. I needed him, too. Then the fog cleared in my brain. His words clinked against the logical part of me. I put my hands to his chest and gently pushed. As if handling a fragile doll, he slowly settled me to the ground and stepped back.

I held my hands up, palms facing him. Fearful of my desire for him, I said, "Please step back."

His brows raised with worry. "Elizabeth?"

"I'm not... this isn't who I am. I'm sorry." I fumbled with

the door handle and jerked my car door open. He handed me my beanie, and held onto the window frame as I stepped in to leave, preventing me from shutting the door.

“Elizabeth, don’t leave like this,” he begged.

I stared through the windshield. “Please let me go.”

I could feel his stare in the silence.

“I lied earlier,” he said deeply.

I turned my head to look up at him.

He continued, “To myself. I lied. It’s me that’s going to fall in love with you. I’ll figure this out. Somehow. You’re it for me, Elizabeth. You take your time. I’ll wait.”

His words were shocking and crazy. And, oddly, they somehow felt possible.

He gently shut my car door. In a daze, I drove the mile back to my rented A-frame cottage, to my dog, Todd, and my self-imposed loneliness.



## CHAPTER 3

**I KNEW HE** didn't really love me. That wasn't possible. I'd been in love before and that crazy, wild, liberating, feeling wasn't it. Love was steady, not reckless. Love was conscious, not senseless. Kissing Brett had been a mistake.

The hard snow and gravel crunched under the wheels of my car when I turned down my driveway. Todd's fluffy head appeared in the living room window, his ears perked, as I parked the car and turned off the ignition. The curtains fell into place when he got off the couch and headed to the front door. I could hear his happy whine as I climbed the wooden steps.

When I opened the red door and stepped into the small living area, he circled me, panting, and then went to get his squeaky toy. A small lamp in the corner shone dimly, painting the room in a golden glow.

"Do you need attention, boy? Is that it? Get your toy. Go get your toy."

My small bedroom was to the left of the entryway. Just large enough for a queen-sized bed, a dresser, and a hanging rack. I'd removed the door because it kept hitting the side of the bed.

Coat hooks were mounted on the wall to my left. I hung my coat and bag. With one booted toe, I pushed off one boot, then pulled the other off with my hands. I peeled off my socks, put them in the boots and placed them under the coatrack.

The living area to my right was quaint and cozy. Two full-sized couches sat in an L-shape before a rustic, wood

burning fireplace. The exposed flue pipe ran up to the low ceiling and out the top of the A-line roof. A small television waited in the right corner. Dust had settled on the screen.

My phone chirped. I pulled it from my bag and stared as it rang. "MOM," read the screen.

Ignoring the call, I walked into the kitchen at the back of the house, put my phone on the counter to the right of the sink, and filled a small glass with water from the tap. I leaned with my back against the sink and drank it slowly.

The phone on the counter to my left taunted me, ominous in its ability to make me wait for news. I waited to hear if it would give me a message alert. *Ping*. There it was. A voicemail.

I rinsed my glass and put it in the drying rack. Todd lay at my feet, panting, his squeaky toy resting between his paws. I looked down at him. "Should I listen to the message?" He lifted his head. "I know. I'm just as tired of it as you are. Let's go see what we can find out about Mr. Barringer instead, shall we? You don't care, do you? Nope. I didn't think so. Well, at least come keep me company."

I motioned to the circular staircase that led to the loft I used as an office. "C'mon, let's go." He lifted himself up off the floor and jogged up the stairs in front of me.

Shag carpet absorbed my padded steps as I climbed the stairs. The A-frame peaked in this room, making me feel like I was in a cozy cocoon. A floor-to-peak, triangular window at the far end of the room looked out into the darkness. During the limited daylight hours of winter, I could stare at the snow-covered mountain peaks. In the winter they were accessible only by dog sled or snowmobile. In the summer, they were crisscrossed with hiking trails, leading miles into the back-country.

My desk was placed at the window. Orderly, simple, neat. I sat in the white cushioned office chair and turned on the computer. Todd lay under the desk, his chin on the tops of my bare feet.

I pulled up a browser and typed 'Brett Barringer' in the search engine bar and waited.

There were thousands of articles. If I were a less controlled person, I might have tossed the computer straight through the glass window.

*Sharks Center, Brett Barringer, traded to Seattle Kraken  
Barringer traded after missing eight years of clinching a  
playoff win*

*Seattle Kraken to pay Barringer largest one-year contract  
in league history*

*Brett Barringer benched after knee injury; will return after  
the New Year*

*Is this the beginning of the end, for Kraken's Center, Brett  
Barringer?*

Story after story about expectations for the great Brett Barringer. Of course. I wanted to vomit. I massaged my temples with my index and middle finger. I kept reading.

*Brett Barringer was on track to being one of the top ten hockey players of all time. He's scored more points than any of his current competition but just can't pull the team together. With three conference losses, four missed playoffs, and one playoff loss, Barringer seems destined to keep missing the prized jewel of the hockey world, the Stanley Cup. The Seattle Kraken, the newest franchise in the league, took a gamble on Barringer, scoring him, at least, the largest contract in league history. It seemed the gamble was going to pay off, as the Kraken headed into the season with a record setting year of wins. That is, until Barringer took a hit to the knee and was benched until after the new year.*

I stopped reading. I didn't want to know any more about him. I groaned. Why did I seem destined not to be able to escape that world?

I closed the browser and pulled up my calendar for the

week. A few shifts on the patrol and a few annual check-ups for people trying to use up their flexible spending accounts before the end of the year. I hoped for nothing more than the common cold this week. Then again, the holiday skiers did tend to bring more broken bones, sprained wrists, and twisted ankles, so I might be busier than I wanted to be.

When I'd taken this job, it was supposed to be for a few months while the local family practitioner went on an around-the-world cruise with his wife of forty years. After they disembarked in New Zealand, he sent an email to the board tendering his resignation. And here I am.

I thought about Margo and sent a text off to Thomas: *Did Margo get home?*

While I waited for a response, I stared at the red circle on my voicemail box icon. "You can't avoid talking to me," it seemed to say.

Todd whined and lifted his head from my feet. His ears perked and he stared out the window. A moment later, headlights shone on the driveway. Whimpering with excitement, Todd trotted down the stairs. I followed.

A car door slammed and heavy boots tread up the steps. I opened the door to Thomas. "Hey, everything ok?"

He hunched his shoulders from the cold. "Yeah. I'm good. I just wanted to make sure you got home ok. Can I come in?"

I opened the door wider so he could step inside. "Of course. I just sent you a text. How was Margo?"

"Drunk. But I got her home safely."

"I was going to go to bed soon, but I can light the fire if you want to stay for a bit."

He stepped into the center of the room and turned again to leave. "I should go."

I shook my head in confusion. I hadn't even let go of the doorknob before I had to swing it open again. "Oh. Ok."

He stopped in front of me, looking a bit flustered. "I'll see you tomorrow."

He turned and left before I could respond that he probably wouldn't. But it didn't seem like something that needed to be corrected. Careful not to slip on the steps, he held the railing and was gone before I could figure out what had just happened.

And he'd never answered my text.

Todd sat patiently waiting for me, ears perked. "That was weird, don't you think? Yeah, me too." He tilted his head as if equally confused. "Want to go for a walk?"

His tail wagged as I put on my coat and boots and took him outside, not venturing too far because the temperature was below freezing. I was ready to burrow under my down comforter for a good sleep.

When Todd and I returned, my phone was blinking again. I sighed.

I readied myself for bed. Propping two pillows up behind me, I pulled the comforter up to my waist and put the phone on my lap. I settled myself and pressed play.

"Elizabeth, it's your mother. There's still time to come home for Christmas. You haven't been home in three years. We miss you. You're going to need to get over this. Sulking does not suit you. Elizabeth? Can you hear me?"

I rolled my eyes. Would she never understand that she wasn't talking to an answering machine?

"Elizabeth! I want you home for Christmas. This is your mother. Please call me."

I had a half second before the next messaged played. This one was spoken in a softer, kinder tone.

"Elizabeth, sweetie, you may not have heard, what with you being so far away, but..." she paused. "Sweetie, Amanda is getting married in May."

My chest constricted. I took a deep breath. "Oh, my God." Anguish consumed me. I couldn't even cry. I couldn't breathe. Why won't this just go away? My vision blurred.

Then the tears came, wracking and heart-wrenching. My mom's voice droned on. I could barely pick out pieces.

“I wish you would talk to her.”

“She will want you there.”

“She loves you.”

“I know you love her.”

“This has to end.”

“We miss you.”

I deleted the message.

I turned off the lamp, pulled the covers over my head, and cried myself to sleep.

\*

The sky was still dark when my alarm went off at 6:30 a.m.

With a quick, easy morning routine, I managed to get dressed, eat a small bowl of cinnamon roll flavored oatmeal with blueberries, and drive the six minutes into the so-called town all in under forty-five minutes. A definite perk from the sometimes one-hour drives in traffic-jammed Denver.

I turned into the small parking lot of the local clinic that also functioned as a hospital and emergency room. As usual, I parked my car in my personal parking spot, noted by the sign reading “Dr. Cain”.

Not that I needed a spot. The parking lot of the dark gray, two-story structure had maybe fifty parking spots. I could definitely walk the twenty yards to the front door. But that’s how protocol worked.

An ambulance sat parked around the side of the building. It’s lights off. The emergency room, quiet.

“Good morning, Dr. Cain. How was your weekend? Did you patrol?” Jenna the receptionist greeted me from behind a round administrative desk as I came through the glass front doors. Silver garland hung in bows across the length of it.

“Good morning, Jenna. I did. It was a nice weekend. How are the twins?” I stomped the snow off my boots.

Her face broke in a smile. She pushed her glasses up

off her nose with her forefinger. "Growing so fast. I can't believe they're already six months old."

I walked towards the stairs that led to my office and gestured toward the blue and silver decorated Christmas tree in the front entrance. "Did you put that up?"

"I did."

"It looks beautiful. And the garland?" I pointed to the greenery wrapped around the railing. Silver balls and white lights flickered from behind the branches.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Thank you, Jenna. It looks very festive." I walked up the stairs. "My first patient is at 8:00. Can you send them up to the waiting room when they get here?"

She smiled up at me. "I will. Should I bring you some coffee?"

"No thank you, I can get it. I appreciate your offer."

She rewarded me with a grateful smile and a nod.

The stairs led to a large waiting area furnished with comfortable gray chairs and couches. A Keurig coffee machine sat on a large side table at the end of the room. Mounted in the corner was a television. The morning news played on the screen, sound off and subtitles rolling.

A door on the right separated the patient rooms from the waiting area. The door on the left gave way to four offices. A large corner one for me, and three others for part-time doctors - a gynecologist, a pediatrician, and a sports therapist.

Everyone that lived farther south and down into the Kenai Peninsula could make use of the clinic. The roads to Anchorage were sometimes inaccessible in the winter, so many of them came here.

At exactly 8:10 a.m. my nurse, Rebecca, knocked on my door. "Your eight o'clock is here. She's all checked in."

"Mrs. Viscotti?"

"Complaining of her arthritis." She smiled knowingly. Mrs. Viscotti was in every other week.

“Thank you. I’ll head over.”

I grabbed my white lab coat, put my stethoscope in my pocket, stepped out of my boots and slipped on a pair of navy heels I kept under my desk. My day had officially started.

Just before noon, my stomach growled. I had an hour before my next patient, so I went back downstairs to the Emergency Room lounge to heat up some soup and fill my water bottle.

Double doors just off the main entrance led to the Emergency Room, which took up one half of the downstairs. Sports Therapy occupied the other half.

I pushed through the double doors and found Rebecca, my nurse, plus two EMT’s, one male and one female. The male EMT had his feet up on the desk, twirling a fidget spinner in his hand. “Hey, Dr. Cain, heard you saved a life this weekend.”

The female EMT shoved his legs off the desk with her booted foot. “Seriously, Tyler?”

He laughed, flipping his bangs out of his face. “Easy, Babe, these legs are highly insured. You don’t want to be responsible for the deductible.”

She rolled her eyes. “Only you would think your skiing career is going anywhere.”

We all knew she was teasing him. Tyler was close to making the Olympic ski team. With trials coming up in just a few weeks, he was highly protective of his legs.

I leaned against the counter, resting my elbow on the top. “Hi Kate.”

“Hi, Dr. Cain.” She said pleasantly.

“Does everyone know?”

Kate scrunched up her nose. “Sadly, yes. But if it makes you feel better, all the girls think it is incredibly romantic.”

I nodded thoughtfully. “Hmmm.”

“I saw you at the bar with him last night. You actually looked happy. You were laughing a lot.”



"I was being polite." I tried not to smile.

"He looks a little rough. Like he's been in a few too many barfights." She swiveled around on the office chair.

"He's a hockey player." I said before thinking. I hoped it wouldn't come up, so I wouldn't need to explain I googled him.

She started to laugh. "Pucks to the face?"

"I would imagine."

She continued. "Are you going to see him again?"

The radio on the desk crackled with an incoming transmission, "Calling Girdwood, St. John, this is Alyeska Station Alpha-107."

Tyler's face turned serious as he pressed the button, "This is St. John, go ahead."

"We got a priority one trauma for you, let me know when you're ready to copy."

All eyes turned to me. I nodded.

Kate stood, grabbing her coat. Tyler grabbed the emergency log. "Go ahead, I'm ready."

"I got a male patient, early thirties, skier on the mountain. Found unconscious. He's being brought down now. Blood coming from under his fractured helmet."

I listened intently.

The sender at the other end, continued, "I've got blood pressure 155 over 117. That's one-five-five over one-one-seven. Pulse showing seventy-eight on the monitor. Oxygen stats are ninety-eight. He's been bagged."

Good, good, I thought to myself. He's got a breathing mask on.

Tyler responded, "Ambulance will be there in five minutes."

"Very good. Continue transport. See you in five."

Tyler and Kate ran to the ambulance. Tyler shouted as he ran backwards smiling, "Looks like today just got a little more interesting."

The lights switched on, reflecting into the emergency

entrance. Sirens blared as the ambulance pulled out of the bay and up to the mountain.

We waited.

## **END EXCERPT**

You can read the rest of Elizabeth and Brett's story by clicking [\*The Beauty\*](#)

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And don't forget to join my Romance Newsletter on the homepage at [www.RieAnders.com](http://www.RieAnders.com)!

\*

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 2:30 p.m. 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 2:30 p.m. 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.”

My eyes glassed 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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