Fletcher’s Plan by Richard Panchyk

Part 1

Chapter 1

Sydney ducked behind the giant pine tree and collapsed into the freshly fallen ankle-deep snow, hands clasped around her knees, rocking back and forth and trying to catch her breath. *Why did I run this way*, she wondered briefly before refocusing herself. *Into the middle of nowhere.* She looked around to get her bearings. In the distance to the right was the gentle rise of Mount Mason. She could just make out the mostly full ski lift that was inching up toward the peak, carrying dozens of skiers happily anticipating a fun glide down the slope. To the left and behind her were meadows dotted with some bushy evergreen shrubs and scattered pine trees. The ski lodge was maybe a half mile back now, along with her cozy cabin. The resort’s accommodations consisted solely of individual cottages, dozens of them, all well-appointed with luxuries and “the finest rustic décor” as the website advertised. But that was what got her into this whole mess, the cabin. It was a stupid idea, coming here for vacation instead of a normal resort hotel.

She lifted her head and looked straight. A hundred or so yards ahead was a forest, which was both promising in the cover it offered and terrifying in its seeming vastness and potential for not only losing *him* but also getting completely lost herself.

To get this far she’d sprinted from one hiding place to the next. All the while, she could hear him calling after her. “Hey! You!” and “Stop running!” and “I’m not going to hurt you!” It’s a bad sign when someone says they are not going to hurt you. That always means they are in fact going to hurt you. Or worse. She’d seen enough movies to know this.

He called out again as she sat shivering behind the tree: “Where’d you go?” His voice, with its vague folksy twang, sounded more distant now. Good! She put a hand to her chest and felt the thumping of her heartbeat. It was out of control. She had to rest a couple of minutes more before she could run more.

*Okay*, she told herself. *Think. What will he do to you when he catches you? If he catches you. He will take the other earring and then he will kill you.* She put a frozen hand up to her ear and felt the four-carat diamond stud. It was a poor decision to bring these to the resort. And to put them on during last night’s dinner at the lodge restaurant celebrating the special guest speaker, an Olympic gold medalist downhill skier. How many people noticed those earrings? To the untrained eye they could have easily been cheap knockoffs. But to those who knew, they’d be able to tell by the intense refraction and sparkle that they were genuine. And worth thirty thousand, the pair. An overly generous wedding anniversary gift from her ex-in-laws. She had been bracing for them to ask for the earrings back since the divorce happened so soon afterwards, but they never did. Probably because that was such a pittance for them, being owners of Vermont’s Best Jam. It was more than just jars of assorted preserves now, they it was an entire experience. They offered tours of the factory, a make-your-own-jar-o-jam experience, and all kinds of merch. It was quite a profitable venture geared toward tourists and more recently, a web-based business that shipped globally. The earrings were so extravagant she liked to flaunt them even though it was risky, but this was to be the last time, because she needed the money. She had been planning to sell them as soon as possible.

Her cabin was on the outermost ring of accommodations, and she’d purposely selected it due to its isolation from the others. She mostly wanted to keep to herself this trip. Except for the banquet. That was fun. The Olympian’s speech was inspirational. But wearing the earrings, that had not been a good idea. She felt many pairs of eyes on her as she walked to her table. On the way back to her cabin she kept turning around to make sure she wasn’t being followed, yet she had an eerie feeling she wasn’t alone. This morning she’d gone out for a walk to enjoy the fresh crisp air, and foolishly left the earrings out in plain sight, instead of in the room safe. She didn’t trust that thing; it didn’t look very secure, and there was a handwritten note taped to it that said *In case of emergency, contact Resort Security.* When she got back to the cabin after an hour’s walk around the ski village, her door was ajar (she’d sworn she’d locked it behind her but maybe not). Instead of going straight to the lodge office or calling for help, she pushed the door open and went inside. She called out “Hello?” twice and nobody answered so she figured it must have been her own mistake. But then she noticed one of her earrings was gone, the one she’d placed on a tissue atop the dresser. The tissue was still there but the earring wasn’t. Not on the floor either, or behind the dresser. She started to feel a wave of panic well up within her. She’d been distracted last night and removed the other earring a few minutes later; it wound upon the nightstand next to her pill case – still there. Thank God for that at least. She grabbed it and quickly stuck it into her ear.

And then a muffled male voice from behind said slowly and loudly, “Give me that.”

She must have interrupted his pillaging. He must have heard her coming and hid in the bathroom, then peeked out and saw her find the other earring. She didn’t turn around. She didn’t scream. She remained still for a second and then ran as fast as she could manage, out the door and toward the open swath of snowy field that flanked the mountain. Foolishly, instead of heading toward the ski village, toward possible help. *What was I thinking?* It didn’t matter anymore. What was done was done.

Her legs were already aching from her long walk, and now she was on the run. So stupid. She should have just given him the earring. But if she had turned and faced him, she could have identified him. And then what? He would have locked the door and rained down violence upon her. She winced at the thought of what might have happened. No, she was indeed smart to run. Just not in this particular direction. After a few minutes, after the first couple of hiding spots, she’d tried her phone. No service. The village had Wi-Fi but beyond the boundaries the signal vanished quickly. So much for that.

It was at least a sunny day, though in the low thirties. She could not stay sitting still behind the tree for too long or she’d get frostbite. Still, there was a chance he’d be thrown off by her disappearance and she’d lose him, just by hiding. That would be ideal. He’d give up and then she could return to the village and report the theft to the authorities. Or authority, at any rate - there was one security guard on duty in a little kiosk right in the middle of the village from eight am to eight pm, in the high traffic area next to the statue of Martin Mason, after whom the mountain was named. It was quaint, the little ski village, with its cobblestone paths, souvenir shops, and fancy boutiques. But all that picturesque scene seemed a thousand miles away now. Some help that guard was! Sitting there in the booth probably falling asleep while life-threatening drama was happening here. *Well,* y*ou should have run to the booth instead of into the wild,* she admonished herself again.

How long had she been sitting here in the snow now? She looked at her smart watch. Five minutes already? And he’d not caught up to her yet. That was a good sign. It had been about three minutes since the last time he’d called out for her. Another good sign. She’d wait another few and then cautiously start heading back, using the same approach, ducking behind a shrub or a tree here and there.

She brushed some snow off her pant legs and retied her boot laces. They were an old light gray pair, a Christmas gift from her bestie a few years back. They were a little big but she’d been too lazy to return them. They had to be tied tightly or she flopped around in them. High up in the blue sky above, she watched a hawk circling. The air was crisp but fresh. This place was idyllic. Save for the current situation – which would hopefully be over soon, though. The crazy thief had probably veered off toward the ski lift, thinking she’d gone that way to try to get help. Only a fool would keep running further away from civilization. She watched the time advance to the next minute. Time to stand up.

“Oh hey, are you okay?” Startled, she looked up to see a tall athletic-looking man in a puffy brown coat and dark blue snow pants standing a few feet away from her, hands on his hips. His face was mostly hidden behind a black ski mask. The color washed out of her face. This was it. She scrambled, trying both to stand up and get away from him at the same time, but tripped over her still untied laces and fell on her hands. How could she have forgotten to finish tying them? Stupid boots. Stupid everything.

“Just take it, please. And leave me be. I want to live.” She started crying as he hovered over her. It was strange to hear those words fall from her lips. She’d never really thought about death before, never had any near-death experiences or dangerous moments. Until today.

He pulled off the ski mask, revealing a friendly if slightly gaunt face lit by long-lashed bright blue eyes and rosy cheeks. His mussed up hair was short and bright blond. He smiled at her, flashing brilliant white teeth. Or was it just the sun that made them seem so perfect. Well, if this is it, then at least he’s attractive, she thought in her delirious state.

“Take what?” he said, raising an eyebrow. He was pretty cute. It figured. *Meanwhile, I probably look horrible*. Her shoulder length red hair was a mess with all the wind, and she had no makeup on.

“Well I don’t mean pull it off, let me give it to you.” The thought of him yanking it out of her ear sent a shiver down her spine.

He reached out a gloved hand. “Let me help you up…my name is Fletcher by the way.”

“Oh nice. I’m Sydney.” She almost said Sage, her best friend’s name. But what was the difference if he knew her real name when she was going to die anyway? He should have just left the mask on and then she would not have had to be killed. Ugh. Why did he need to show his face? Maybe just to taunt her with his good looks before…ending her.

She took his hand and he effortlessly pulled her to her feet. “Better tie that,” he said, pointing at her boots.

“Yeah.” Important to go out with a tied lace. Or maybe he suffered from OCD and she had to be symmetrical before he offed her. She bent over and fixed her lace anyway. If nothing else, to appease him a little. She thought back to the final days with Carter. They could have stayed married. There was nothing *that* wrong. She was just bored with him. If they’d stayed together she’d not be here right now, about to die. Fletcher would probably leave her body in the soon-to-be red-tinged snow. Eventually a search party would find her, probably a few days later. Awesome.

Fletcher was at least a nice name. She’d never met a Fletcher before. And it was certainly his real name, because why not? She’d take that piece of information to the snowy grave with her.

“Look, please don’t hurt me,” she said meekly, hands clasped together, tears starting to form in the corner of her eyes.

“Hurt you?” he seemed genuinely affronted. “What is going on here?” he asked, peering into her eyes.

“You chased me. You tell me.”

“I did what now?” He smiled again and it was disarming. Her heart hurt that such a nice-seeming guy could be rotten, could want to take her diamonds and kill her. He didn’t look the part. “Dude. I was just having a walk. I’m staying at the resort but the cheesiness of the village was starting to get to me so I wanted to get a little nature this morning. And then I noticed you sitting here.”

“You weren’t chasing me?” she asked.

“Why would I chase you? I mean...in this context at least?” He winked at her.

“So wait…” she started, but then off in the distance came the guy’s voice. The same one who had been calling after her before. “Hey!” he called.

“Oh my God!” she said softly, relieved and terrified at the same time. “It’s him. And you’re not him.” She ducked back behind the tree and pulled him along.

“Who is him? What on earth is going on?” he asked. He smelled really good, a wintry musky earthy scent with notes of cinnamon.

She quickly filled him in, looking into his eyes as she summarized the events of the last thirty minutes in thirty seconds. He blinked nervously and looked back at her. She tried to read his face. Was he scared? That would not be helpful. She needed him to be brave and strong. No, he seemed confused more than anything else. Understandably so.

“And you thought I was that creep?” was all he said. He shook his head slowly and cracked a slight smile.

“Do you blame me?” she said studying his face, the way his cheeks dimpled, the cute freckle just above his lip.

Fletcher was about to speak when the guy called out again, voice booming: “Hey where are you?”

“Don’t answer,” she whispered.

“Obviously,” Fletcher replied.

“Can you hear me?” The guy sounded closer than before. Crap!

“We have to move,” Fletcher said softly. He peeked out from behind the tree then grabbed her hand. “Now!” And they started to run towards a large holly bush about fifty feet ahead. They hid behind the bush, which was filled with bright red berries. She’d just met Fletcher and yet she was ready to place her life in his hands. As Sage had told her when they were teenagers, “Trust can be earned slowly or it can be learned quickly.”

Sage would be proud of her right now. She hoped to live to tell her all about this, over a coffee at their favorite shop back in the suburbs of Hartford. If the ski village seemed like a hundred miles away, then Hartford seemed like another planet right now. *I trust you, Fletcher. Save me!* she thought.

“So what’s your plan?” she whispered. Her plan had been running away, and that had not worked out so well. Fletcher’s plan would be much better. It had to be, or they were both dead.

“Well, first question, is he armed?” Fletcher asked.

“I don’t know…I don’t think so.”

“Good. Then it’s two against one!” She had taken karate back in middle school but had only achieved a couple of belts. And that was forever ago. She’d be useless in defending herself. So two against one was not a fair assessment. More like one and a half against one. But that was still decent odds, right?

It was quiet again, and her new friend furrowed his eyebrows. “Too quiet,” he said. “I don’t like it. Stay here.” And he took a few steps out from their cover. The voice was back now, yelling, “Hey! You! Where is she?”

“Crap. I’ve been spotted!” Fletcher said ducking back behind the holly bush. “I’m sorry. I was careless. But I think we can handle him.”

“What does he look like?” She had never actually seen him. She had been too busy running away. She should have assessed at some point.

“Yeah. He’s not that tall. Hard to tell from a distance but he looks older. Maybe fifties. He’s pretty far away still. The snow is slowing him down. I think we can take him.”

Now the guy called out again, “This is Sykes. The resort security guard. Who are you? Identify yourself!”

“The security guard?” Fletcher repeated in disbelief. The hawk squawked high above and they both looked up. “This is very strange.”

“Thank God then,” Sydney said. “We’re safe. He’s not going to hurt us! Let’s go talk to him.” All that panic for no reason. It was typical Sydney: working herself up over nothing.

“Wait!” Fletcher said, holding up a finger, eyes burning with revelation. “Don’t you see? Who else besides the cleaning staff and the desk clerk has access to all the room keys?” His eyes were wide with terror now and she wasn’t sure why. What did he mean? And then it hit her.

“Oh my God. The security guard. It was him all along.” This was a scandal of epic proportion. How many people had the guy robbed while working here?

“He was at the banquet last night, on duty. I saw him there. He probably noticed your earrings. You locked your door this morning but I bet he was outside waiting for you to leave, went to your room and saw the first earring but was flummoxed when he couldn’t find the second one so he stayed too long. When you ran, he followed so he could get that other earring.”

“But why did he only identify himself now?”

“He probably thought he could just catch up to you without saying who he was. Or maybe he thought you recognized him already. But just now he saw me, and that complicated things. He’s outnumbered. Now he wants to use his authority to make us trust him. We stop, trust him and then he surprises us. I bet he’s carrying.”

“Carrying. Jesus.” This was getting worse by the minute but still, she felt safe with Fletcher on her side. He was smart. He’d figure this out. “So what’s the plan then?” she asked.

He thought for a moment. “We head into the woods, and then ambush him when he enters. It’s the best bet. He could have a knife or worse. We don’t know. If he invaded your room and stole your jewelry then who knows?”

“Ambush! That sounds dangerous. Isn’t there another way? I want to live.” I want to live and get to know you better, she almost added. It would be a crazy but fun and romantic story if they wound up…*Okay slow down,* Syd, she told herself. *You are being chased by a diamond thief and yeah this guy is helping you but you don’t know anything about him*.

“We will be fine, Sydney,” Fletcher reassured, squeezing her hand. His eyes were beacons of hope and light. So filled with life. His breath was pleasantly peppermint-tinged. She wanted to lean in and kiss him. This was not the right moment, though. There would be time later.

“Why don’t I stay here and you go handle him,” she said with a weak laugh. He smiled again and kissed her cheek softly, his light stubble brushing her face and sending tingles through her chest.

“We’ll be fine.” He ran his fingers through her hair, brushing it away from her face and she could hardly breathe. *There is definitely a spark between us*, she promised herself. *I can feel it.*

She took his hand, sensing they were ready to make the dash toward the woods. She felt safe. *He’s earned my trust, Sage*. And more than my trust. She took a deep breath. Focus, she reminded herself, or all the trust in the world won’t help you through this, if you drag him down.

“On three,” he said and counted down. They sprinted for the forest, hand in hand, the snow crunching under their feet. She would remember this moment forever, she already knew it. And then the unthinkable. A loud noise echoed right near them. She was confused for a moment, but Fletcher cleared that up with a murmured, “He’s got a gun. Dammit!”

They ran harder, not saying anything else until they reached the woods. The guy however, called out again. “Stop! Just stop! I won’t hurt you!”

“That’s a pile of crap,” Fletcher said. “He just missed. He was aiming at us and missed.”

“All for a stupid earring. I’m sorry, Fletcher. I bet you wish you’d never met me. You were having a perfectly lovely little walk and I messed it up.”

“Hey,” he said, catching his breath. “You didn’t mess up anything. And I am definitely glad I met you.” He flashed a quick smile. “It’s okay. We’ll be fine.” His eyes told her that he believed it. But she still had her doubts. Two against one with a gun was not good odds at all.

“I should just hold my earring up and tell him he can have it, tell him I’m going to leave it for him on that stump,” she said as they hid behind a trio of young trees just inside the cover of the woods.

“Not a bad idea, but he will not want us to identify him as the thief. He will probably still try to kill us,” he said. “He has a gun and is willing to use it. Someone who’s armed is dangerous no matter what they say. Believe me. I used to be in law enforcement myself.”

“Oh that’s cool,” she said. *Cool. That sounded stupid.* *Ugh. Just calm down, Syd*, she told herself. *We have more important things than worrying about what you say to this possible love interest you just met while being chased by a thief who wants to kill you both.* But former law enforcement, that was promising. That gave them an advantage. Still, she wanted to ask why he “used to be” in it. He was young. Too young for retirement. Unless she misread his age. It was possible. *Focus, Syd, focus, there will be time for questions later. Over a nice candlelight dinner at the lodge tonight, hopefully!*

“I know you’re in there,” Sykes said. “I don’t want to hurt you. I just need to talk to you. Both. So come out.”

“Shhh, don’t say a thing,” Fletcher whispered. “We have the advantage. We can see him coming.”

For the moment, they both saw nothing except the snowy meadows and their own tracks. It was such a beautiful day other than the nonsense that was happening now.

“Thank you. For saving me,” she said, rubbing his coat-covered arm. He turned to her and winked.

“Anything for you, Sydney. But I haven’t saved you yet.”

She remembered another thing Sage had told her, this one just last year, just after her divorce. “You’ll meet a new guy. And it will be in a most unexpected way. Knowing you.” And know her Sage did. They practically grew up together. Sleepovers, study dates, Taylor Swift concerts, a few weekend trips to DC and Virginia. She almost invited Sage to come along on this trip, but Sage had used up all her days off from work already, and actually had a two-day work seminar to attend over the weekend. They agreed it would be good for Sydney to get away on her own for the first time since the divorce.

Another gunshot rang out, this one apparently aimed for a high branch in one of the nearby trees, because a large pile of snow fell to the ground just to their left and a couple of squirrels scampered down the tree trunk.

“I am not going to hurt you! Just trying to get your attention. Let’s talk.”

He *is*, she told herself, and at that moment, Fletcher said those same words she was thinking. “He is going to hurt us.”

He stroked his chin for a moment, then looked out toward the snowy landscape. They could see the guy now. He was brandishing the handgun, waving it around in the air. It was definitely the security guard, she could recognize him. He was about three hundred feet away.

“We are going to all go back to the village and sort this out,” the guy yelled. “Now come out of there.”

“Sort this out,” Sydney said. She turned to look at Fletcher and saw the momentary fear in his eyes before they cleared and showed steely determination.

“Okay, I don’t think he can see us. We are going to ambush him.” Fletcher looked around and spotted a large snow covered tree branch laying on the ground. He crouched down low, ran to retrieve it, and returned. He seemed pleased with his choice; it was about five feet long and two inches in diameter at the middle. “You are going to lure him this way. I will hide behind this tree and when he comes, I will whack him with the stick.” She blinked a few times. This plan seemed doomed to fail. “Trust me,” he said. “It’ll work. He won’t be expecting it. The element of surprise is on our side.”

“Okay. What do I do?” *I trust you with my life*, she thought. *Don’t let me down.*

“When I say so, go over there and yell to him, say okay, we can talk.”

“So trick him.”

“Trust me. He does not want to talk. He has a gun and he wants to harm us. He will take the earring and kill us both.” And as if on cue, another shot rang out, this one ricocheting high off a tree about twenty feet away.

“Not going to hurt you. I am aiming away from you.”

“Aiming away for now,” Fletcher said. “He wants us to trust him, we will. And he will walk into our trap!”

She wanted to run out there and strangle the guy herself, and scold him for stealing her earring and trying to interfere with her potential new love interest.

“Okay, he’s getting close. Now. And once you say it, step off to the left side. I will be here on the right side and swing hard when he comes.” Fletcher took a deep breath and pulled off his gloves. No wedding ring. Good! He cracked his knuckles and gripped the tree branch tightly. “And if we start struggling, run behind the holly bush if you can, get as far away as possible in case the gun goes off.”

“Be safe,” she whispered, squeezing his hand and then stepped out, hands up in the air. “Okay, we can talk. Stop shooting the gun please!” She tried to sound helpless and hopeless. She said a quick prayer for Fletcher and ducked off to the side like he’d told her, and waited.

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Fletcher remained behind the tree, branch in hand, poised to strike. It would have to be a perfect shot to both surprise and disable Sykes. It might not work but it was something at least. He didn’t want to give Sykes much of a chance to say anything. He could hear the crunch of snowy footfalls getting closer. *Come on, speak so I know where you are.*

“Hey there. It’s okay. I’m not going to hurt you guys. Come on out. This is all a big misunderstanding!” Sykes was close, approaching fast. The sound of his footfalls changed when he entered the woods and Fletcher braced himself for action. He saw the Glock first, Sykes had it drawn and pointed straight ahead. Fletcher took a deep breath and jumped out from behind the tree at the same time swinging the branch like he was aiming for the fences at Fenway Park. He hit Sykes square in the stomach, knocking the wind out of him and causing him to drop the gun. The tree branch broke in half but it had served its purpose nicely.

“What the…” Sykes managed, doubled over. Fletcher scrambled for the gun and Sykes pushed him so he fell face first into the snow. He managed to turn over but before he could get up, Sykes was on him. The gun was a few feet away. Sykes wrapped his hands around Fletcher’s throat.

“Okay that’s enough, we can stop this charade,” Sykes said tentatively. But he knew something was wrong. This was not the plan.

Fletcher sent a knee into Sykes’ groin and he howled in pain, falling over to the side and allowing Fletcher to roll over and grab the gun. He held it steady, trained on Sykes’ chest.

“It’s over,” he said to Sykes. Shame it had to end like this but he really liked the girl. And besides, he didn’t trust Sykes. This was not supposed to happen.

“Hey Fletch, come on. We had a…” Sykes started but Fletcher put a hand over his mouth.

“Shut it. Don’t speak.”

Sykes used Fletcher’s awkward position to make a play for the gun and now both men were on their knees, wrestling and grabbing for the weapon with both hands. A shot went off, high into the trees. Sydney screamed and Fletcher’s pulse quickened even more. “I’m okay!” he called out. *I have to be okay. This was such a bad idea. Why did I let myself get talked into this?* He and Sykes had been on the force together back in Springfield and Sykes was a bad influence. Terrible, in fact. He’d gotten them both kicked off the job with his schemes. Now Sykes was stationed here in this small-scale Epcot-like winter village wannabe. And he, Fletcher, on a quick weekend getaway to see his favorite athlete speak ran into his old partner and within a few minutes a new plot was hatched. He’d been clean for years. Why did Sykes have this effect on him?

He managed to get control of the gun again and pointed it in Sykes’ face. “It ends here,” he said, feeling nothing toward this miserable man. *Sydney trusts me*, he thought. *But so did Sykes.*

“Did you get it?” Sykes muttered, unable or unwilling to understand that the deal was off, that this was no fake struggle and he was a dead man.

“I said shut up.” It had to stop now. Or things would spiral. And everything would end even worse than what was about to happen. *Don’t think, just do it. He would not hesitate to shoot if the situation was reversed.* It was Sykes’ own fault anyway, for not keeping watch outside her cabin like he was supposed to. Sykes grabbed at the gun again and for a second it twisted towards Fletcher’s face, but he quickly managed to strongarm it towards Sykes’ chest. He pulled the trigger. Sykes gasped with the impact of the bullet. “Sorry,” Fletcher whispered, and stood up. “I’m okay, it’s over!’ he called out. He put the Glock on the body and shook his head.

“Thank God,” Sydney replied, emerging from the cover of the bush and starting to head his direction.

“No, no, stay there. You don’t want to see this,” Fletcher said. She was beautiful, and her voice was soft and kind. She smiled at him and even from a hundred feet away, it was radiant. “Okay!” she said and turned away. He stood up, reached a hand into his right pants pocket and retrieved the diamond earring he’d taken from her dresser less than an hour ago, and started to walk in her direction. “I got your earring back, too,” he said.

Chapter 2

As they walked back toward the ski village in stunned silence, tears welled up in Sydney’s eyes and began to roll down her cold cheeks. She didn’t want Fletcher to know she was crying but holding it back only made her start sobbing uncontrollably. He instantly put his arm around her and pulled her closer. She was upset but she felt safe. It was all going to be okay. He would not get in trouble for killing the thieving security guard; it was self-defense. They’d call the police as soon as they got back to the village. He’d give a statement and then they would…She stopped herself. Do what exactly? She was supposed to head home in two days. Sure, she could extend her visit, but she had no idea how long he was staying or where he lived. If he was not from the Hudson River Valley or western New England, it would be too far away for any realistic dating scenario. And besides, he might have a girlfriend. *Slow down, Syd. You know the deal. Sage has to meet the guy first. She’s the best judge of character.* It was true. She’d predicted a boring and unfulfilling marriage to Carter Close even while admitting that he was a decent guy. She knew things, though that mainly applied to others’ romantic choices. Left to her own devices she made poor choices with her last two boyfriends, both of them were garbage and one of whom Sydney was never even allowed to meet *because I know you will dislike him and give me hell so I have to muddle through this one on my own.*

“Hey,” Fletcher said suddenly. “I’m sorry.”

“Why are you sorry?” She wiped the tears from her face with the back of her leather glove. If she’d looked a mess before, it was even worse now. She tried to read his face for emotion but he was expressionless, staring straight ahead at the last bunch of scattered shrubs before they reached her cabin and the village.

“For what you went through.” He rubbed her back and then patted her shoulder gently. “I feel so bad for you.”

A scrawny gray rabbit scampered across the snow up ahead and Sydney was just about to comment on it when the hawk swooped down noiselessly, grabbed it with sharp talons, and flew away as it squealed in terrified recognition of its sudden peril. “Oh no,” she said. “Poor bunny!”

“Wow. I’ve seen a lot in my time but I have never seen that happen,” Fletcher said. They both looked up to watch the hawk fly to a nest high up in a distant pine tree near the ski lifts. “In the animal world, that’s natural, but sadly the human world is filled with predators like that too, like Sykes, who swoop in and prey on others.”

“I would have been perfectly happy not to see that,” she said. “I’ve had enough excitement for one day.” It was just after eleven o’clock in the morning. By this time she was supposed to be getting suited up for the ski slopes, not recovering from an attempted diamond heist turned self-defense killing. *Look at the positives*, she reminded herself. *You met him.* She was not exactly a believer in *everything happens for a reason*, more like *when bad things happen look for a silver lining because there usually is one*. But if he lived too far away then she would be crushed. And she had to know now. To understand if there was even a possibility of a romance. That was more important than the girlfriend question. A girlfriend could be overcome more easily than two thousand miles of distance.

“Where are you from, by the way?” She tried to sound cheery and casual. She inhaled and then watched her frosty breath dissipate into the winter air, hoping his reply didn’t evaporate her dreams of a potential romance.

He squeezed her hand. “I am originally from Brattleboro, Vermont.” He paused and then laughed. “Voted one of the best small towns in America,” he added in a movie preview announcer voice. “Not by me and not sure why, but let’s just go with it. And now I live in South Deerfield, Massachusetts.”

Massachusetts! That was perfectly doable! And South Deerfield was just north of Amherst, if she remembered correctly. Only about an hour from where she lived. She waited for him to ask her the same question, but he didn’t. Odd. Did that mean anything*? No, silly. He’s a guy. He may not ask you, but it doesn’t mean he isn’t curious. Just tell him. Oh but maybe he’s just waiting for some reaction from you first.* *Speak, girl. Move your lips and form words.*

“Oh nice, Massachusetts is a pretty state.”

“Where I’m from is okay, yeah.” He laughed again and she smiled. “The Berkshires to the west are nicer. And there are parts near me that aren’t so great. Springfield is kind of boring. Unless you want to visit the Basketball Hall of Fame, then it’s great.”

“Well, I’m pretty sure South Deerfield is a lot nicer than Windsor, Connecticut.” Wethersfield, population 27,000. *There’s a Lot to do in Windsor*, as they liked to brag on their website.

He stopped in his tracks and spun around to face her. “Did you say Windsor?” He looked more shocked than when she’d told him that she was being chased through the snow.

“Yes, I did.”

“My parents are from West Hartford! They moved to Vermont just before I was born. Mom was six months full of me at the time and complained that they should have waited until after I popped out. But Dad had taken a job at a factory on the Vermont-Massachusetts border and the commute was killing him. They still live there to this day.” His eyes were bright and full of excitement. There was a spark between them. It was plain as day. West Hartford and Windsor were only about ten miles apart. It was ideal.

*Damn. He is so cute. Six months full of me. I should just kiss him already. What do I have to lose?* She shoved aside her impulses for the moment, knowing that timing was important. To act, she had to feel more than just a spark, she had to feel that he wanted her to kiss him. Or better yet, maybe he’d just make the first move himself.

“That’s quite a coincidence,” she said, trying to calm down. If his parents still lived there then probably he made that trip somewhat often. This could really become a thing!

“So yeah, you are correct,” he said. “Western Massachusetts does beat out the greater Hartford metro area, by a nose and a half.” He winked and then leaned in and for an incredible half second she thought he was about to kiss her, but he reached into her hair and plucked out a bright red holly berry and held it up, amused. “Look at that!”

“Occupational hazard of hiding from diamond thieves, I guess,” she said and they both laughed.

He tossed the berry into the snow and they continued walking. They were close enough to the resort now that it was time to start thinking about next steps. There was a dead man in the woods back there, after all. His boot prints were easily visible, as were what must have been Fletcher’s, which veered off to the far left about two hundred feet from the village. “So what do we do?” she asked tentatively, brushing the windblown hair out of her face.

“Well, we can maybe start a coalition to clean up the greater Hartford area so it can be a little nicer.”

“I mean about the…dead guy.” She almost said *the guy you killed* but he had no choice, really so phrasing it that way was not exactly fair.

“Oh that.” His voice trailed off and he was silent for a few seconds, then he nodded. “We go report it. At the front desk. Since he’s the one we’d be reporting it to normally but, well, you know. They’ll call in the cops from the nearest town, that one we all pass on the way in, about ten minutes from here. And they will take our statements and then hopefully we can try to salvage the rest of our vacations.”

Getting past this mess had to happen before any plans for the rest of the day could be made. There was after all, an element of the unknown to it. They could report the incident and be done in an hour or so. Or they could both be detailed for extensive questioning that took up the rest of the day. Heck, one or both of them might even be arrested on suspicion of murder. Her stomach started to get tight. She squeezed his hand. “We’d better be able to,” she said.

“We will. A nice dinner and we’ll forget the whole thing,” he assured. *Wait, did he say romantic dinner? No, he just said nice dinner. Okay. Still.* She pictured them at the Fireside Grill, that romantic eatery she’d been avoiding in favor of the more neutral and casual Downhill Cafe. The Grill featured a two huge fireplaces, candlelit hewn oak tables, and vintage snowy photos from when the place first became a resort back in the 1920s. She imagined their entire evening in about two seconds, from perusing the menu to becoming sweatily entangled under the unusually soft cotton sheets, as they stepped from the snow onto the flagstone path that ringed the outer periphery of the village and led to her cabin, the sight of which snapped her back to the present.

“Well, he may have been a thief but at least he closed my door after himself when he followed me,” she observed. He was head of security after all, so maybe despite his thievery he wanted to make sure nobody else could get in her room.

“We will get them to change the lock on your door. Just so you feel a little safer.” *What would make me feel safer,* she thought, *is spending tonight in your room.*

“Can we stop in and just have a couple of minutes to decompress before we go report this?” She was dying to wash her face, brush her hair, and just sit for a moment and compose herself. She was not vain, not like some women she knew, but a little self-care was much needed after that harrowing experience. *Should I invite him in? Of course I should. It’s the right thing to do.*

“Sounds good. Why don’t I head back to my cabin for a few and then we can meet here in front of your place in say fifteen or twenty minutes?”

“Sounds great,” she said. Missed opportunity. *Oh Sydney, why do you do this? What is actually wrong with you?*

And as she berated herself, he leaned in and kissed her quickly on the lips. “I’ll see you soon,” he said, smiling. It was quick, but delicious, and her mouth tingled, sending sparks of excitement through her chest and up and down her spine. He gave a little wave and then turned and started down the path that led to the cluster of cabins on the right side of the village. She stood there until he disappeared around the bend in the path, and sighed. *I should have asked for his number,* she lamented. *But it’s okay. I’ll see him soon enough.*

Chapter 3

Sydney splashed a handful of ice cold water on her face and patted it dry with one of the many luxurious hunter green towels of various sizes the resort provided on the elaborate Art Deco brass rack above the toilet. For the price she was paying, they’d better have the finest towels. But it was peak season, after all. And this was a resort. People came here to be pampered. A few cabins even had whirlpool sauna tubs (when she booked online and was about to check out, a window popped up asking her if she’d like to “upgrade her accommodations for only $105 more”). She looked out toward her bed and realized that the intruder Sykes had been standing in this very spot just an hour and change earlier, and watching her. *Creepy.* She shivered and frowned at her reflection in the large oval mirror. What a mess! Next up was the resuscitation of her hair. It definitely needed help. She grabbed her brush from the counter and ran it through a dozen times until she felt more presentable. Maybe a spritz of perfume too, on her neck.

She again considered leaving the earrings in the room safe but that sign stuck to it gave her little confidence, so decided to keep them on, in defiance of the whole situation. It was Sage who’d suggested she bring the earrings, her fanciest dress, and her slingback pumps, and live it up at the resort. Of course she wouldn’t hold that advice against her bestie, but boy wait until Sage heard what had happened! It was more than she wanted to get into via text, and anyway Sage was busy this weekend, so she decided to save it for when she got back to Wethersfield. Instead of an ordinary vacation story, she’d have quite a lot to tell Sage. *I was chased by an armed thief and met my future husband in the space of thirty minutes!* Her mind jumped to the messy state in which she’d left her duplex. *I have so much cleaning up to do back home if I’m going to invite Fletcher to drop by the next time he’s in town to visit his parents. Or maybe even before that! And there I go again getting a mile ahead of myself. More like two hundred miles, actually. But whatever, it’s good to have goals and aspirations. And tidying up is always a good thing, Fletcher or not.*

She needed to go through her clothes (much of which was two sizes too big now) and put a bunch of stuff aside for Goodwill. And also get that new sofa she’d been meaning to buy since the old tan one was grandma’s, screamed the 70’s, and had seen its last good days in the 90’s (not to mention the musty smell that just wouldn’t leave). And there was also repainting the bedroom ceiling after that leak from the upstairs bathroom sink had discolored it. Her to-do list was growing longer by the second. But at least now she was motivated to get all that done. She smiled and glanced at her watch. Twelve minutes. Almost time to go outside and wait for him. She pictured his handsome face and felt a desperate need, a hunger, to see it again. She blushed. How could she be this smitten so quickly? And yet, here she was. *Just go with it, girl.* *Even if it’s just a rebound fling, you need it badly.* But in her heart, she knew it was not just a rebound. He was special. She wanted more than just a night or two here. She wanted this to be *a thing*. And it was on the verge of becoming *a thing*. She hoped their brief break had not killed the momentum between them.

Thirteen and a half minutes after they’d parted ways, she stepped outside from her dimly lit cabin into the bright winter day. The sun was strong enough now that the icicles on the roof eaves were starting to melt and drip rhythmically onto the flagstone. Squinting, she reached into her purse and pulled out a pair of Ray Bans. Ah, much better. She could hardly believe that just six months earlier she was still married and a getaway vacation at a ski resort was not even within the realm of possibility. Carter hated winter, and especially despised the snow. He would not be caught dead anywhere near a ski slope or skating rink. His disdain for the fluffy white stuff even extended to imagery featuring snowmen or wintry scenes of any sort. He refused to sit and watch the movie *Fargo* with her, one of her favorites. *Too much snow*, he complained. His ideal winter vacation was in Sarasota or Palm Beach, places she found boring. The last time they went to Florida in January all she could think about was the seven inches of glorious fresh snow they’d left behind, while he rejoiced at the humid eighty degree temperatures and sunny, crowded beaches. *Season-appropriate vacations are the best*, she always told him. He laughed whenever she said that, and replied with *the only season that is appropriate is summer, period.* He did not belong in New England. He was simply not cut out for it. A wintry retreat had long been her dream and now here she was finally, and getting more than she bargained for. But it was all good. Any moment now she’d see her tall, strong, future boyfriend walking along the colorful stone path, a great big smile on his lips, open arms ready for a warm embrace. She couldn’t wait for dinner! It was going to be so fun. Of course, she’d be sure to look her best. She’d brought her dark blue dress with the sequins but hadn’t worn it yet. She’d originally intended to go all out, for herself, but it wound up feeling too depressing to get so dressed up by herself. Her outfit last night at the banquet had been a very demure and boring long black dress. If it hadn’t been for the earrings, nobody would have given her a second glance. The blue dress with the diamonds, though – now that pairing would look stunning.

She had the sudden urge to call Sage and tell her friend about this exciting new prospect she’d met in the most unconventional way. She pulled out her phone and called but it went straight to voicemail. Her finger then did something seemingly independent of any logic – she called Carter. She had to tell someone about Fletcher.

“Syd? Hey. Haven’t heard from you in a minute,” he said.

She inhaled deeply. This was a mistake, she knew it already. But she could not contain her excitement. She couldn’t stop herself from telling him. “I’m at a ski resort and was just thinking how much you hate the snow,” she said as a lead-in.

“Haha, I sure do. Well good on you then. Doing things you’d have to drag me to kicking and screaming.” Was that resentment in his voice? She couldn’t really tell.

“Well on top of it, I met someone.” *Oh boy, I actually said it. And now he’s not reacting. Keep talking, fill in the silence.* “His name is Fletcher and…” The memory came back to her. South Deerfield. That was the home of the Yankee Candle factory complex. A place she and Carter had visited a couple of years back. “…he’s from South Deerfield. Remember Yankee Candle?”

“Oh wow, yeah. How could I forget. You bought like two dozen candles.”

“More like three dozen. And I still have at least one dozen.” She laughed but he didn’t.

“Well good luck and have a fun time. I have to go though. Thanks for calling. Hit me up when you get back, will you? Don’t be a stranger.” And the call disconnected. Even though it was somewhat awkward, she still felt better telling *someone* about Fletcher. Even if it was her ex.

Sydney checked her watch again. Sixteen minutes had elapsed. Come on, Fletcher, hurry up. She should have asked for his cabin number, but she couldn’t be expected to think of everything in the moment. It was all happening too fast. Anyway, it wouldn’t matter, he’d be here very soon and then she could ask a million questions and get his phone number, address, and all his socials (he must have a *really* cute profile pic). And his last name. Unless that was his last name. She chuckled at the thought. Maybe it was! His first name could be something unflattering like Elmore so he decided to go with the last! Elmore Fletcher. Or conversely his last name could be something long and awkward. Or maybe Fletcher was his whole name. Like Sting. Or Usher. She shook her head. *Okay, you can stop being ridiculous now.* At seventeen minutes she started to walk in the direction he’d gone, just to make their time apart shorter. He couldn’t be in the cabin just past the bend or he’d have commented on its proximity. She kept walking, slowly. No sign of him. *But he did say fifteen or twenty minutes, didn’t he?*

She saw someone sitting in front of a cabin up ahead and was briefly hopeful but it soon became evident that it was only an old man who had set up a yoga mat in front of his door was cross-legged doing some stretches. *So where are you, Fletcher? I’m getting impatient.* She backtracked to her cabin just to be sure he hadn’t taken a shortcut and just missed her. But nope, he wasn’t there. Maybe he had flopped down onto the bed, exhausted from the little adventure, and fallen asleep. *Uh, no. He’s not a five-year-old.*

That’s when it hit her. Maybe he wasn’t as into her as she thought. Maybe he was just being polite and didn’t know how to reject her. These things were possible. Maybe there was a reason he hadn’t given out his number or his cabin info. She looked down at her dirty Uggs. Foolish me. He helped me and saved me, but that doesn’t mean he wants to be with me. *But he kissed you*, she reminded herself. It was a very sudden, last minute thing. Almost like a goodbye kiss, not an *I’m crazy about you kiss*. *A souvenir in recognition of our nerve-wracking time together* kiss. An *I’m about to stand you up even though I said we’d spend time together so please forgive me* kiss. Or a combination of all three. That would be par for the course of her life. She was proficient at making things into more than they actually were, for as long as she could recall. An upcoming five-question history quiz in high school became a highly anticipated stressful event, and after she spent seven hours studying for it and got a 100, she learned it would count for exactly five percent of the semester grade. *Five stinking percent.* Or how about at the office when her boss flashed a thumbs up at her and said *good job*, and she turned that into a raise and promotion that would certainly be happening the next week. And she got neither. Sometimes you just have to take things at face value and see them for what they are. She was terrible at that. She loved books, probably for that same reason. Or did reading a lot contribute to the problem? Was she stuck in some kind of fairytale world on account of the romance tropes she devoured? Friends to lovers, enemies to lovers, fake dating, forced proximity. This wasn’t some paperback novel with a cartoony picture on the front cover, of her and Fletcher walking through the snow holding hands. Romance novels could guarantee you some kind of relationship by the time you turned to the last page. Life wasn’t quite like that. Life was like this: meet a really attractive guy who saves you from peril and…and nothing happens. That’s what life was like. She’d been so eager to find the elusive true love after her marriage with Carter fizzled into a big yawn, that she was ready to take the first guy who showed any interest and turn him into Finn, the hero of the *Love’s Flames* series of books by Tricia Sariola. Every book in the series opened with Finn rescuing a woman from something, they become friends, then enemies, then lovers, then enemies again, and then they get married. Yeah, that was not how life worked.

Just then a smooth, friendly male voice boomed over the resort’s public address system, speakers for which were strategically placed all over the village and around the cabins. “Attention ski friends! The mid-day session is about to begin. If you have purchased midday ski tickets they will be good for the next three hours. Those who signed up for lessons please report to the green sign at the base of the Chipmunk Trail.”

*He's not coming. Don’t embarrass yourself and stand around for an hour. He won’t show.* She wanted to cry – as much out of disappointment with herself for believing, as she did for the lost potential relationship that she had apparently imagined. It had now been twenty-two minutes. Another five and then she would move on with her day. No sense in wasting it on account of him. He’d definitely saved her, and for that she was grateful. But if that was all, then so be it. Though she still felt that at a minimum they needed to go and report what had happened - together. But, if he was going to stand her up then he could do it by himself. After all, he was the one who had killed the security guard. That was the only thing that was an obligation to report. If she wanted to keep the earring theft part of it to herself, that was her decision.

“Whatever,” she said aloud. “Onward.” She was proud of herself for being able to shift gears like this. For being able to recognize her own impulsive foolishness. The behavior itself was lamentable but the ability to see it and call it out for what it was, that was commendable. She didn’t always have that ability. She was learning, and it started with leaving Carter finally, instead of remaining terminally unfulfilled. Still, as she walked toward the village, a nagging doubt gnawed inside her. They’d not committed to much except dinner, tentatively. So why would he just ghost her right away. That didn’t make sense.

She sat on a bench by the fountain for a few minutes, watching the water cascade noisily down the three tiers underneath the statue of Martin Mason. The bearded bronze man holding the walking stick had something of a shocked look on his face, as if he had suddenly envisioned that this uninhabited mountain where he’d settled and built a small sawmill would a hundred years later be carved up and turned into a winter wonderland. She looked past the fountain to the security booth, which was empty, of course. Maybe *she* should go report what had happened to him? But then the cops would come and she’d have to face their questions without Fletcher by her side. And without him, she’d be the prime suspect in Sykes’ death. No, she’d wait on that. Across the way, a group of four college kids laughed over coffee at one of the Alpine Coffeehouse’s outdoor tables. *Hmm, a nice hot drink might be a good stress reliever.* She got up and walked across the plaza to the Mason Maxx coffeehouse with its quaint red gingham tablecloths and mini Swiss flags on each table. She stood there for a moment, but instead of grabbing a steaming cup of hot caramel mocha latte topped with abundant cinnamon dusted whipped cream, she decided to continue past the tempting eatery and left the village behind until she was standing in the wing of the ski lodge that served as the lobby of the resort. A young couple with matching bright green down jackets and surrounded by a collection of a dozen snow-white designer bags of all sizes and shapes was at the desk arguing with the clerk that their cabin should have been ready by now. Finally, the clerk told them to take a seat while he sent someone to go get their accommodations ready and sternly reminded them it was way before the stated check-in time. Sydney stepped around their abandoned suitcases and stepped up to the counter.

“How can I help you?” the clerk asked, still huffing over the insistent couple after he finished talking to the head of housekeeping, a compact, angry woman with a pale face. She made eye contact and smiled pleasantly at the clerk.

“Hi. So, I made a new friend today and we were supposed to meet a few minutes ago but he forgot to give me his cabin number.” The clerk frowned as if this was a commonly employed and highly disapproved of tactic that common criminals used to get proprietary information. “His name is Fletcher,” she said. “But I don’t know if it’s his first or last name.” She tried to put on her nicest dealing-with-skeptical-customer-service smile.

He sighed mightily and typed into the computer. “I can only search by last name, I’m sorry,” he said. “And there is nobody with that last name registered here.”

“Well, can’t you just scroll through the names or run a report so they’re all on one spreadsheet and you can quickly check? That name would stand out I’m sure.” She brought her hands together pleadingly.

The clerk shook his head. “This is shaping up to be a highly annoying morning. I shouldn’t do this, but fine. One minute.” He stabbed at some more keys, frowned, typed some more and then slammed on the enter key. He seemed pleased now, nodded, and studied the screen, lines of data reflecting in his round glasses. “Let me see here, ah yes. Fletcher. Cabin 31.”

“Oh good, thanks. Can you tell me his last name?”

“Sorry, no. Next!” The clerk looked past Sydney and gestured to the elderly lady behind her to step up.

Chapter 4

Fletcher walked quickly toward his cabin, whistling the Noah Kahan song that had been stuck in his head the last few days. The temperature had warmed a little in the last hour, the sun was bright, and the resort complex looked especially cheery. Once he could leave this dark business behind, he’d breathe much easier. Luckily, it was not premeditated on his part, so there was no trail of evidence leading him to Sykes. Unless they dug deep and went years into Sykes’ past, which of course they might. He could just be proactive and volunteer their previous relationship to the police, but saying that in front of Sydney without telling her first would be awkward. He had to come clean with her. He had no choice, even if her reaction was to disown him completely. He had to tell her everything. But not now. Not yet. It was too soon. *Better too soon than too late,* he reminded himself.

His cabin was about a thousand feet away from hers along the curving pathway, closer to the ski village but still on its periphery, on the outer ring of accommodations. When he first found this resort while Googling potential vacations, he’d been fascinated with its layout. The village itself was circular, with a fountain and statue in the middle of the cobblestoned plaza and quaint (but pricey) boutiques, gift shops, a shoe store, a hair salon, a dessert joint, and even a grocery ringing the plaza, all two-story buildings that were designed in some kind of generic half-timbered alpine style. Cobblestones might seem like a poor choice for a snow-prone locale, but the staff did a remarkable job of keeping them free from snow and ice. On his first full day here, just after a few inches of new snow had fallen overnight, Fletcher witnessed the crew in action, using ten snowblowers and wheelbarrows full of salt to clear, melt, or relocate the mess within minutes of the last flake falling. Only the shop roofs retained snow, which gave them an added measure of authentic mountain village feel.

There were four paths leading away from the village. The one to the west led to the ski lodge and the two main restaurants, which in turn led to the ski lift and slopes. The other three branched out to more paths along which were the log cabins, in two concentric semi circles around the village itself. To the north and east the outermost cabins faced the woods fronting the access road that led into the large parking lot just outside the resort, behind the lodge building. The northern cabins like Sydney’s and his own, were the quietest, closest to the open meadows and offering the best views of the mountain. Though the place remained open in the summer, offering a zip-line and whitewater rafting on the nearby Placer Brook, it couldn’t possibly hold as much charm as in winter with the cozy snow covered vistas and the Switzerland-like feel to the place.

It was a nice resort, but a few days was quite enough for him. He’d envisioned tearing up the slopes like a champion but after an eight-year break since his last downhill adventures, he realized he was no longer so proficient. One harrowing trip down the expert slope sent him straight for the intermediate trail, which was itself almost too challenging for him. Trent Buxton’s speech last night was enjoyable but also made Fletcher feel like a failure at skiing (and more broadly, at life in general). So he was done with Mason Mountain Resort. Well, until he met Sydney. Now he wanted to revisit all the corners of the resort with her by his side. And if she wanted to ski, he’d go with her. Even if it meant breaking a leg or two on the way down. He chuckled at the thought. He’d not mind being nursed back to health by her.

He was nearing his cabin now. A quick bathroom visit and a change of his sweaty shirt (and maybe some deodorant) were really all he wanted to accomplish before going back to Sydney’s cabin. *I really should tell her the truth*, he said aloud.

“Yes, you should,” a familiar voice answered to his right. As he started to turn, a gloved hand covered his mouth and he felt something hard poke into his side. “See what she thinks of you then.”

“What…?” Fletcher turned to see Sykes, risen from the dead and holding the gun he’d been shot with.

“Walk with me and don’t try to run or you’re done,” said Sykes hissed.

“How the hell…” Fletcher began.

“I wear a vest,” Sykes said. “Department issued. I never gave it back when I left. That’s how. Usually quite unnecessary around here but today it proved to be a lifesaver. What the hell happened back there? Why did you deviate from the plan?”

“Me deviate? You’re the one who deviated.” Fletcher caught his temper flaring and took a breath. “Look, man, we just crossed wires.” Fletcher coated his words with as much saccharine sweetness as possible, but Sykes was not buying it.

“Crossed wires? More like you crossed me. You turned on me. I should kill you for what you did. But I need you, so for now you live.”

“For what? Why do you need me?” Fletcher asked. He knew exactly why but he was hoping desperately that it wouldn’t be the case.

“Into your cabin, let’s go.” Sykes nudged him. He started to reach into his pocket and felt the gun at the back of his neck now. “No funny business!”

“Hey, take it easy. I need to get the key.”

“Yeah, okay, well hurry up.” Sykes inched the gun higher up Fletcher’s neck towards the back of his skull.

Fletcher fumbled the key out of his pocket, and into the lock, almost dropping it in the process. The tumbler clicked and he opened the door. Sykes followed him in and quickly shut the door behind them. He motioned Fletcher to sit on the still-unmade bed.

“Listen, can we be sensible and just move on from this mess?” Fletcher pleaded. Sykes’ small dark eyes revealed no emotion, though his flared nostrils signaled agitation. This was a Sykes trademark. His ability to detach himself from feeling empathy for anyone made it easy for him to commit crimes. Though his first name was Tommy, nobody ever called him that. It was always just Sykes, at his own insistence. He didn’t want anyone getting emotionally attached to him. The closest he had to a friend was Fletcher. And now that had all gone to hell what with the diamond heist betrayal and then the attempted murder of his ex-partner.

“We cannot,” he replied. “I need those earrings. And you are going to get them for me. And this time, you get nothing out of the deal. Except your life. If you’re lucky.”

Gun or not, Fletcher was getting annoyed with Sykes. “We could have just settled for the one earring. That could have been okay. But no, you wanted us to go chase her. That’s on you. Instead of one we have none.” He braced himself for his ex-partner’s reaction. Sykes hated anyone arguing with him, over anything. One time he punched a fellow cop in the mouth because the guy wouldn’t let him have the last poppyseed bagel on Breakfast Friday.

Sykes leaned in close to his ex-partner. He brought the gun between Fletcher’s eyes and teased the trigger with his finger before pulling it away. “*You* had the one earring. And *you* gave it back to her. I heard what you said when I was laying there seeing stars on account of your close range shots.”

“I thought you were dead. I didn’t need the earring. So I gave it back. I wanted to be done with this.”

“Well I wasn’t dead and that’s not how this works,” Sykes said, glaring at Fletcher.

*If I agree I can always figure a way out of this*, Fletcher told himself. *I can say yes and then double-cross him.* But even the thought of agreeing was repulsive. He couldn’t put Sydney at risk, and agreeing would probably put her in danger. And she’d already been through enough.

“I just can’t do it.”

“You’re sweet on that girl, aren’t you? Figures. You always were the weak link. If it wasn’t for you, we’d never have been caught.” Sykes rolled his eyes.

There he went again with that revisionist history he liked to spout. It was Sykes’ own carelessness that got them kicked off the force, not anything Fletcher did. Greed and carelessness. Trying to steal from his own precinct instead of sticking to setting up liquor store robberies, blackmailing local thieves, and threatening business owners. Ironically, that night in the captain’s office was a similar scenario to this bungled resort job. Sykes had learned that Captain Bender kept five gold Krugerrands in his desk drawer, a gift from a grateful banker after the department had safely recovered his kidnapped daughter. Of course, city employees receiving gifts was forbidden to begin with, but Sykes overheard the captain on the phone with his girlfriend recounting the story of the coins. The captain had decided to keep them locked up at the office for a while and then eventually drive to the next town and pawn them and pay for a nice weekend out for the two of them. Well, when Sykes approached Fletcher about stealing the coins, Fletcher was already over being dragged into these high-risk, low-reward crimes. *Just stand watch outside the office and I’ll do the rest*, Sykes told him*. You’ll get one coin for your troubles. Two grand for standing there.* *What about security cameras*, Fletcher asked. *There are none. I’ve checked*, Sykes reassured. According to Sykes, the department had a broken camera on the outside of the precinct house but none inside. It would be fine. The station house was open from 5 am until 1 am so they had a decent window in which to work. Fletcher said okay. And vowed this would be the last time. Vowed to ask for a transfer or just find another job if Sykes ever asked him to do another scheme. The guilt and the stress of it all was getting to him.

But he’d promised to do this job, so he had to follow through. Two days later, Sykes and Fletcher showed up 2 am to the precinct. Sykes had an assortment of master keys and pins that he thought would make that 1940s maple desk drawer lock easy to quickly pick. Except it wasn’t. It was some kind of rare mechanism and none of the keys worked. At 2:30 am they were still there and Sykes was now trying to see if he could somehow punch through the drawer bottom with a Bowie knife from the evidence locker. At 2:45, Captain Bender himself arrived at the station, weapon drawn, having been alerted by the security camera system – the one Sykes had insisted didn’t exist – that intruders were in the building. Luckily, Fletcher heard the door open and the two ran for it out the emergency exit in the back of the station. The surveillance videos were poor quality and could not prove the intruders’ identities, but Bender had been suspicious of them for a while by that time. The next day they were suspended without pay, and the day after, they were both dismissed effective immediately. Fletcher still remembered Bender’s disheartened look and his exact words when he called them into the office where Sykes had been toiling away just hours before. *You leave me no choice but to fire you guys. I will scrub the video and not file charges, but you are gone, both of you.* They turned to leave and Bender told Fletcher to stay back for a minute. When Sykes was gone, he shook his head and said in a low voice *You’re better than this, Fletch. Stay away from him and get your life together. There’s hope yet.* Fletcher stood there, blinking, silent. *Now go, get out of my sight*, Bender added with renewed disgust at the man who’d once been one of his most promising rookies. The renewed memory of that terrible couple of days brought Fletcher’s blood to a boil.

“I’m done with this,” he told Sykes. Bender was right. He was better than this. “It’s over now. If you’re smart you’ll leave her alone and find someone else to rob. Drop this now and I won’t report you.” It was cocky behavior for a man who was in close range of a bullet, without the protection of a Kevlar vest. Outside the cabin, a couple chattered away happily about their morning ski run.

“You will do what I say!” Sykes waved the gun in Fletcher’s face.

“Get the earrings yourself if you’re so hot to trot.” That earned him a backhanded smack across the face from Sykes. It stung but he didn’t react.

“No. You will. You blew this plan, so you need to fix it.” Sykes stared at Fletcher, and the cold emptiness told him that Sykes might indeed just kill him if he continued to resist. Need him or not, pushing his luck too far would result in disaster. He had no choice but to agree.

“Okay, okay. Fine. I will do it. Or at least try.”

There was silence for a minute. Sykes was thinking, mulling things over in his warped mind. He studied Fletcher and nodded slowly. “Hmmm,” was all he said. He brought the gun to the corner of his own mouth and for a second Fletcher thought he was going to kill himself, but he was just relieving an itch. *You can’t trust the judgment of a man who would scratch himself with a firearm.*

Rather than wait for some additional nonsense from Sykes, Fletcher spoke. “So give me like twelve hours to get them. Okay?”

“Get up,” Sykes said, which Fletcher took as agreement, but the crooked smile that was spreading across his bony face told Fletcher that Sykes had something else in mind, and it wasn’t good. Sykes was only thirty-eight but looked much older. His hair was thinning his forehead wrinkled, and his hands veiny and covered with liver spots.

“I have a better idea,” he said. “Open the door and go where I tell you.” The gun was on his back once again. Fletcher was going to pay the price for his initial resistance. That was typical Sykes. He’d not dealt with the man in so long, he’d forgotten how vindictive Sykes was.

Sykes led him off the path and into the snow, around the outer ring of cabins. “Stop,” Sykes ordered when they were out of sight of the nearest cabin. He pulled Fletcher’s scarf from his neck and used it as a blindfold, tying it tightly around his head. “Keep moving,” the security guard said.

“Jesus. I can’t walk very well if I can’t see,” Fletcher protested.

“Try your best. Now keep walking.” It reminded Fletcher of a game he’d played with his older brother as a kid. They took turns walking from their backyard to the front door of the house with eyes tightly shut; whoever got the farthest without walking into something won. It wasn’t a game he’d ever willingly played. Steve had forced him to do it, and he lost every time, over the course of a three-year period until his brother got bored with winning and stopped asking him to play. Looking back, it amazed Fletcher how little he’d learned in all those attempts. He’d never got halfway down the driveway before walking into Mom’s Toyota. His sense of direction was terrible.

“Where are we going?” Fletcher asked.

“If I wanted you to know I wouldn’t have blindfolded you, moron,” he said with a laugh. “You always were funny, weren’t you?” They started on flat terrain but soon hit an incline. It was a slight angle at first, but it soon became steeper, so much so that it became more like a climb than a walk. Sykes was impatient and kept prodding him with the gun. “Hurry up, man,” he said.

“You try doing this blindfolded,” Fletcher admonished.

“No thanks, I’m good,” Sykes said flatly. “Walk!”

Not only were trudging up a steep hill now; the snow was also getting deeper. It was well past Fletcher’s ankles and every step was an effort. Fletcher heard people talking somewhere but they weren’t very close. Another few minutes of climbing and finally they began to go downhill. But that only lasted for a minute before Sykes told him to stop. He pulled the blindfold off and Fletcher found himself standing in front of a little cabin, nothing like the ones that served as accommodations – much smaller, older, and in a state of severe neglect. Judging from their tracks, nobody had been here since the snow had fallen the other day.

“This was the caretaker’s cabin in the early days of the resort. It hasn’t been used in decades. Well, until I came into the picture, at any rate,” Sykes said, poking the gun harder into Fletcher’s side.

The cabin was built in a slight valley surrounded on three sides by a hill and one side by a swath of young deciduous trees. It was indeed falling apart. The roof had been pierced by a fallen tree limb, and the windows were boarded up. Sykes pulled a key ring from his pants pocket and unlocked the small padlock on the front door, then kicked it open with his boot. “Allow me to introduce you to your new home for the immediate future,” he said, gesturing at the bleak and sparsely furnished single room. It was a dank and musty place that smelled of bird droppings and mold. The only light came in through the hole in the roof or filtered in through cracks in the window plywood or between the logs of the uninsulated building. The broad planks of the floor were warped with age and water infiltration.

“I don’t understand,” Fletcher said. He was tempted to try a sudden grab for the gun, but he knew Sykes would not hesitate to shoot him. It was too risky. He had to wait and see what the lunatic had in mind.

Sykes gestured to a Victorian era side chair in the center of the room, its broad round wicker seat warped and sagging. “Sit,” he said, waving the gun. Fletcher obeyed and the chair creaked loudly. A bright red cardinal fluttered in from the hole in the roof, landed briefly on a nearby table, then flew out through a window. Outside, Fletcher heard a distant male voice yell something unintelligible. They were still near the village; that much was good news at least.

“I thought you said you needed me. What good am I in here?”

Sykes licked his lips and said thoughtfully, “Oh, I need you alright. Just not in the way I originally planned.” He kept the gun trained on Fletcher while he rifled through an old three-drawer metal filing cabinet. When he got to the bottom drawer he let out a cry of triumph, removing a long jumbled mess of yellowed rope. “This should do nicely,” he said.

“What are you…” But Fletcher already knew what was about to happen.

“You’re my hostage. The ransom will be the earrings. Your friend will receive an anonymous note telling her where to leave the earrings if she wants to see you again in one piece. Simple yet effective. And less risky than letting you supposedly try to get them from her yourself. I know I’d never see you or her or the earrings again. I’m not stupid, you know.” Sykes untangled the rope and studied his prisoner’s situation, then nodded in approval of his thought. “Hands behind your back,” he ordered. He went behind the chair and looped the middle of rope around Fletcher’s torso, pulled the ends tight behind him, and then did another two loops before he double knotted it just above Fletcher’s wrists. “There, that’s for starters,” he said, proud of his work. Satisfied that he could leave Fletcher unattended for a minute, he turned his attention to the drawer again, until he found more rope, this time what looked to be hemp twine. Fletcher thought briefly of trying to stand up and rush Sykes, chair and all, but when he shifted his weight as a test, the chair proved to be heavier than he thought for a sudden movement; he’d be shot dead before he was halfway there. He stayed put and let Sykes tie his legs to the chair legs.

“This really isn’t necessary,” Fletcher insisted. He tried wriggling his wrists but there was not much give in the rope.

“Hmm, well, it wouldn’t have been necessary if you hadn’t betrayed me. Would it?” Sykes had a point. What was there to say to that? “Oh! Forgot one important thing. Where’s your phone?” When Fletcher didn’t answer, Sykes squatted down and waved the gun in his face. “When I speak, you answer.”

“Inside coat pocket. Sheesh. Can you stop pointing that thing at me?”

“Considering you tried to kill me with it, no.”

“It was a struggle for the gun, tempers were heated. I didn’t set out to shoot you.” It was true and Fletcher hoped Sykes would catch the earnestness in his voice.

Sykes ignored what he’d heard and reached around in Fletcher’s pocket, found the phone and held it up like it was the cup containing the Blood of Christ. He walked to the door, opened it, and hurled the phone into the snow. “At least a hundred feet. Not bad. I’ve still got that high school quarterback arm, apparently!”

Meanwhile, Fletcher’s mind was racing. If tying him to a chair was all Sykes planned on doing, it would be pretty easy to escape, albeit still attached to the chair. Sykes read Fletcher’s thoughts and said, “Hmmm, well this is no good.” He raised a boot and kicked Fletcher square in the chest, knocking the wind out of him and sending the chair tottering backwards, hitting the cabin floor with a thud. Pain shot through his arms and spine from the impact. Sykes nodded vigorously. “Ahh yeah, that’s more like it. And, to enhance your captivity experience…” Sykes went back to the filing cabinet and dug through the top drawer until he found a large coffee can. He reached in and pulled out handfuls of rusty thumbtacks, which he proceeded to scatter all over the floor under and around the chair. “This ought to encourage you to stay put,” he said thoughtfully and tossed the empty can to the floor.

Fletcher stared at the beams of the rotting cabin roof. He’d be lucky if the whole thing didn’t collapse on him at any moment, from the weight of the snow. “What if she doesn’t comply?”

“Oh she’ll comply. She likes you.” He smiled. “I’ll get the earrings. And nobody has to get hurt, hopefully.”

“Why are they so damn important? I don’t get it.”

“Better that way.” Sykes grabbed a corded blue rectangular metal box from atop a junk-filled table. “This old space heater still works. Wouldn’t want you to freeze to death, now, would we?” He plugged it into the wall and set it down on the floor a few feet away from Fletcher’s face, and flicked it on. The motor rumbled to life and the coils behind the grill slowly started to turn bright orange. The fan kicked in and began to blow hot air. Old technology was pretty efficient. The air in the cabin was colder than outside, so the warmth felt good. “Hopefully this thing won’t catch on fire,” Sykes said. “I’ve never used it for more than a couple of hours and by then it was starting to smoke. Plus the wire and plug are really old, and the outlet and wiring in here are also ancient. But this will work in a pinch.” He looked around the cabin one last time and smiled. He scratched his chin and then went to a small desk in the corner of the cabin and opened its drawer. He took out a pen, some paper, and an envelope and started writing. He crumpled two sheets before he got it right, then seemed satisfied. He cleared his throat and read: *If you ever want to see your friend Fletcher alive again, put the earrings in this envelope and bring it to the abandoned ski ticket booth at seven pm and slip it into the slot in the window. Do it and he will be released. Disobey, or involve anyone else, he dies.*

“What do you think? Do I get my point across?”

“You’re not going to get away with this,” Fletcher said, repeating a line that had been uttered in countless movies. While on-screen villains typically didn’t get away with whatever it was in the end, this was not a film. And it was probably not the smartest thing to say to Sykes, but Fletcher was angry. At Sykes, and at himself. It was a dumb plan to begin with, and now the whole situation had spun out of control. He wanted a do-over.

Sykes headed to the door then turned around. Now he had his own phone in his hand. “One more thing.” He bent over again and shoved the phone in Fletcher’s face. “I want you to say these exact words: *I’m okay for now but please remember, seven o’clock.*”

Fletcher shut his eyes tightly in protest. Sykes smacked him across the face. “Don’t get me more worked up than I already am. Do it!” Fletcher thought for a second and then said the line but added an extra word. Sykes stomped his foot. “Why didn’t you do what I said? What’s with the extra word? That makes no sense!”

“Oh, that’s my pet name for her. So she knows it’s me for sure.” Hopefully she’d get what he meant. He was counting on it. He had to warn her that Sykes was behind this kidnapping.

Sykes squinted and studied Fletcher’s face, and then his features suddenly softened after a moment of consideration. “Hmm, okay then. I guess that was smart to add.” He stuffed the phone back in his pants pocket. “So it’s goodbye for now. Stay put. I’ll be back, hopefully, when I have the diamonds. And maybe I’ll show you mercy. Unlike what you did to me. Traitor.” He shook his head and smirked.

Sykes never thought anything through. What did he think would happen after he got the earrings and released Fletcher? How would he prevent Fletcher from talking? Maybe he was just going to kill Fletcher and keep working here at the resort as if nothing happened. Why were the earrings worth all this trouble, felony charges of grand larceny and kidnapping to start with, and more depending on what else happened? It didn’t make sense. But Fletcher knew this was not the time for questions. He had to focus on getting free and helping Sydney. He didn’t think Sykes would hurt her if she complied but if she didn’t, anything was possible. His determination was dangerous. *That’s why you agreed to help him in the first place, when he told you he wanted to rob a girl of her earrings. To prevent her from getting hurt.* He wasn’t sure if he was just making this up now to feel better about the whole thing, or if it was a truth he’d just taken for granted at the time. Either way, he sure didn’t want her getting hurt now.

Sykes just stood there, towering over Fletcher as he lay helpless on the floor. Sykes tilted his head left and then right, and stroked his chin. He was contemplating some new malevolence, Fletcher could tell. “Just for good measure,” he said. And then Sykes lifted his right leg, boot raised and poised for a kick, before everything went black.

Chapter 5

Sydney stopped at the large framed resort map on a stand in the entry of the lodge. Everything was in tiny print and the cabin numbers seemed to be doled out randomly but after a couple of minutes of squinting, she finally located Cabin 31. It was a few cabins past the bend, only two away from that of the yoga man, who was in Cabin 25. Her heart raced. She would see Fletcher whether he liked it or not, and either get an apology for running late/forgetting/falling asleep or for purposely standing her up. Either way there would be resolution. *Not so ready to move on after all, are you*, she taunted herself. *No, I’m not, so shut up.*

Her walk turned into a sprint as she neared the pathway (officially called Alberto Tomba Way, per the map, after the Italian gold medalist in Giant Slalom) that led to their cabins. Her breathing was shallow as she approached Cabin 31. For a moment she just stood there, afraid to knock. She put her ear to the door and heard nothing. *Okay, here goes. Knock. Knock knock knock.* And then three seconds later she added, “It’s Sydney. Hey, Fletcher. Open up. You’re late, you dork!” Heart pounding, she waited for the sound of footfalls and the door to swing open to his flustered (or apologetic) face, but nothing happened. The cabins all had front-facing windows flanking the door, one on each side, and a small bathroom window facing the back. The blackout curtains of Number 31 were drawn in the front, so she couldn’t see anything. She went around to the right side and peered in. She could see the unmade bed and his open suitcase on the dresser, a pair of running shoes on the floor. No sign of him though. She peeked into the bathroom window and saw some toiletries on the sink counter, along with what looked to be an electric shaver and a bottle of cologne. She rapped loudly on the bathroom window just in case he was in the shower. Nothing. *If he’s not here, he has to either be in the village, or on the ski slopes.* And there’s no way he’d be on the slope already. And without her. He wouldn’t be taking another walk since he’d already done that – and it had ended badly. She knocked once more, this time yelling, “Fletcher, are you in there?” so loud that old yoga man shot her a look. That gave her an idea. She approached the man, who was now apparently in the cool down mode. “I’m sorry about that. It’s just...my friend is missing.” The word missing made her shiver. It was never a good word, whether you were missing someone or they were missing. Painful. Upsetting.

“Missing, eh? What’s he look like?” Yoga man was surprisingly buff for his age. She made a mental note: *try yoga soon.* She had amassed an intimidating stack of mental notes since the divorce. *Do this. See that. Try this*. There the notes remained mental only. Writing them down would be too daunting.

“He’s tall and about my age, maybe a few years older, and he’s in Cabin 31 two doors down. Did you notice him walk this way earlier? Maybe forty minutes ago?”

The old guy tilted his head to one side and then the other and stretched his bony arms in the air. “Come to think of it, yes. He passed by just as I was setting up out here. Seemed in a good mood. Was whistling.”

“Oh okay. But you didn’t see him again after that?”

“I was busy with my yoga, so no. Now I need to finish my cooldown or I won’t be able to move tomorrow. When you’re my age the cooldown is extra important. If you please.” He gave a curt wave and then crossed his arms in front of his body and rolled his neck in a circle.

“Okay. But if you see him again, can you tell him Sydney is looking for him?”

“Sure, whatever, Sydney looking for him,” he said.

So where was Fletcher then? It didn't make any sense. She retraced her steps back to the village plaza and stood there staring at the water spouting from the fountain. A giggling young couple made their way out of one of the boutiques, hands full of shopping bags. Maybe he’d gone into town to report the death of Sykes directly to the police. Maybe he just wanted to leave her out of it. That would be gallant, right? No, it would be thoughtless, doing that without telling her and getting her all worried like this. If she camped out in front of his cabin, he was bound to come back sooner or later. *And waste your day at this expensive resort waiting for some guy you only just met? Don’t be a fool, Syd.* She tried to figure out whether she was truly worried about his safety or just desperate to see him again for the sake of a connection she’d (apparently mistakenly) felt. Or was it just that she needed validation from others? This was one of the main reasons she dreaded getting a divorce – the fear of rejection. At least with her marriage to Carter, though he was unenthused about her passions and hobbies, she *knew* he was into her. He liked her, he enjoyed her company. Leaving him meant being single and facing potential rejection by a dozen, a hundred, a thousand men. Everyone who saw her dating profile and swiped right was rejecting her. A first date with no second date was a rejection. A second date without a third one was rejection. The dating scene was going to be too much for her to bear, apparently, since she couldn’t even handle being stood up today on what was not even technically a date.

"What, you’ve never seen one of these before?" A deep, friendly voice chimed in from behind.

She turned to see a tan, fit-looking and quite handsome man in his mid-forties wearing a thick black turtleneck sweater and black jeans and a black resort logo baseball cap (It had the fancy script MM in large white letters, with the right legs of the M’s made to look like a ski slope; she’d thought about getting one but they were forty-five bucks!) smiling at her.

“I'm sorry?" she replied. He looked and sounded familiar but she couldn’t place it.

“Well, you seem obsessed with this fountain. You’ve been staring at it for like ten minutes now like it was your very first fountain,” he said with a wink.

“Ten minutes?” She glanced at her watch. Ugh, he was probably not far off. “So I have. I guess I just got lost in thought,” she said, slightly creeped out that he had been watching her this whole time.

“I saw you last night,” he said, wagging a finger and nodding his head. “At the banquet. You kind of stood out from the rest of the crowd, what with those gaudy earrings. I could see them well from my vantage point. In fact, the lighting was so angled such that every time you shifted your head, I was momentarily blinded.” He winked. She felt her ears to make sure the stupid earrings were still there.

“Say, do I know you?” she asked. She was sure she did.

“Well, not personally but I *was* the guest speaker last night so I guess you sort of know me. If you were paying attention, that is.” He removed his cap and tried to settle his unruly hat hair, as if that would help.

“Oh my gosh! Trent Buxton is that you?” Of course! She could see it now. Last night he was wearing a gray Armani suit and a crisp blue tie. Her cheeks grew hot and red. “Sorry! I didn't recognize you without the Olympic medals around your neck.” She laughed weakly.

“Yeah, I don’t wear them everywhere I go. They’re not as exciting as those diamond earrings.” He laughed. “I thought you were trying to upstage me last night. More people were looking at you than paying attention to my speech. They’re not real are they?”

*Say no. Say no.* “Yeah. They are.”

“No kidding! Well nice to meet you, and your little entourage there on your ears. Trent Buxton at your service.” He bowed stiffly as if he were a British butler in an old movie. “I will call you Diamond Girl unless you give me something else to work with.”

She just blinked at him dumbly until she realized he was asking her name. “Oops! Sorry I'm Sydney Laughton and I’m distracted so please forgive me.”

“Consider yourself forgiven, Sydney Laughton.” Trent Buxton paused and turned his eyes skyward in thought. “How do you spell that? Like the actor Charles?”

She laughed. “Yes, same spelling. I am shocked you know who that is. He’s very old school.”

“Course I do. *Captain Kidd* is one of my favorite movies of all time. Should I be shocked that *you* know him?”

“Well, truth be told, I am actually a distant cousin of his. Second cousin thrice removed. Something like that. That’s mainly why I know who he is. Because my parents forced me to watch like all his movies when I was a kid.”

“Even *Abbott and Costello Meet Captain Kidd*?”

“That was the only one I asked to watch again, since it was more my thing.”

“Well that is very cool, Sydney cousin of Charles Laughton!” It was a bit of trivia that had little meaning to most people; this was the first time in years she was able to impress anyone with it. “So what’s distracting you, if I can ask?” Trent’s New York City accent was even stronger out here in the wild. He’d toned it down a little when reading his speech. She knew his story pretty well. Stoop ball playing Brooklyn kid whose parents made the three-hour drive a few times each winter so their kid could become a world-class skier. It was their master plan, and it worked. He went from scrawny and clumsy little six-year-old with thick glasses to a tall, buff athlete with contacts and a multiple sponsorships from the likes of Nike, Rossignol, Land’s End, and LL Bean. And that was even before the Olympics. That was when he was only sixteen, and still coming to Mount Marion Resort. He made the US Ski and Snowboard Team at seventeen and from there it was a quick rise to the top of his sport. Once he medaled (a silver and two bronze) in Turin in ’06 his fame grew, and then by 2010 in Vancouver his gold medals got him even more sponsorships and a few commercials too.

Before she could answer he said more. “I'm a little distracted too at the moment. More accurately, a little upset because I was just given a talking to by resort management. While everybody last night seemed to love my speech, apparently the owners were expecting it to be more of a love letter to the resort, since this is where I learned how to ski and where I spent winter vacation for twelve years straight as a kid. They wanted a forty-five minute ad, which made no sense to me anyway, since the audience was already here, they already know about this place. They didn’t need convincing. But they were kind of sore about that. I didn’t mention it in my speech because I thought it was common knowledge that I used to train here. Heck, there’s even a trail named after me. I thought people would rather hear my thoughts about the controversial win in 2010 against Fabrizio Castiglioni.” He looked at Sydney to gage her reaction. She nodded vigorously even though she had only a vague recollection of the incident. Something to do with the Italian skier using a banned wax substance on his skis, and getting his final score thrown out, which led Buxton to be declared the gold medalist. “Judging from the applause, the audience enjoyed the story, but management thinks they were shortchanged and they want me to do another event before I leave. An impromptu one tomorrow at lunch time so that I can talk about my formative years here. He shook his head slowly in disgust. So yeah I'm distracted too.” He reached a hand into the fountain spray and used the water to slick back his jet black hair. “Now, what's going on with you?”

She wasn’t sure how much she wanted to share, but it was Trent Buxton after all, five-time Olympic medalist, operator of the Trent Buxton Fitness Centers (twelve in the Northeast with three more opening this year, as the billboards along I-91 in Connecticut proclaimed) and all-around good guy. At least that’s what the retro-style Wheaties commercials had depicted. And of course, last night's speech seemed to back that up, he came across as both humorous and self-effacing. He was a likable guy. He was a known entity. He was Trent Buxton, a man with his own line of skis and insulated thermos bottles (*This is Trent Buxton reminding you that snow is cold but your coffee doesn’t have to be!*) “My friend stood me up and he seems to be missing so I’m a little worried.”

Trent splashed more fountain water on a particularly unruly tuft of hair and combed it down with his fingers. The man was on television so often he was probably trained to look his best at all times. “Oh no, that's not good. How long has he been missing for?”

This was the part that she was embarrassed about. “An hour and five minutes,” she said.

“An hour and five minutes,” he repeated blankly. He opened his mouth as if to say something, then paused and stroked his dimpled chin. “No, I totally get it,” he said. “Some friends are the *only start to worry if you haven't heard from them in a year* type and other friends are the *worry a lot if you haven't heard from them in an hour* type.”

She was waiting for him to laugh but he didn't. He understood. He put a hand on her shoulder. And looked into her eyes. “Shall we go find him?” he asked. “It’s a finite place, this resort. I used to explore every corner of it as a kid. And it hasn’t changed much since then so I know it pretty well. He has to be somewhere. We will find him. You ski?”

“I try,” she said. “Was planning to get back on the slopes today, but not under these circumstances.”

“Okay. We’ll make the rounds down here first, then we’ll check the slopes and make sure he didn’t veer off and get injured or something.” He read the panic on her face and eased back his statement. “I mean, highly unlikely, but we will cover all the bases. Just to be certain.”

They spent the next hour covering every inch of every shop and cafe in the village, asking every store clerk and proprietor whether they’d seen Fletcher. Everyone either said *no* or *so many people come through here on any given day how am I supposed to remember?* At Mason Souvenirs, Sydney smiled at the sight of a shelf filled with an assortment of Vermont’s Best jams. Despite her split from the Close family, she felt a certain pride over for her former in-laws’ business. She picked up a jar to see the price was fifty percent what they charged at the main store in Vermont, shook her head and muttered, “Well I’ll be damned, what a markup.”

“These kind of shops are always marked way up,” Trent told her, “But I think you can get this brand in certain supermarkets. If you’re interested.”

“Ha. No, it’s just that my ex in-laws own Vermont’s Best. So I’m just amused whenever I see the jams in a store somewhere. They’ve expanded so much even since I…” her voice trailed off. After her ill-advised phone call to Carter earlier, she vowed to try not to think about him the rest of the trip, but she’d already broken that promise a couple of times.

“No kidding? That’s pretty wild. I love their stuff. That’s some top notch preserves right there. I even considered going to them for an endorsement deal, some years ago.” She smiled at his phrasing. Top notch preserves. “In fact, if you don’t mind, I think I’ll get myself a blueberry jam. I have never seen that flavor in a store.”

The sales clerk at Mason Souvenirs, an older woman with brightly dyed orange hair and a pair of bifocals on a silver chain around her neck ambled over. “They’re in the news today, they are,” she said as she rang up his purchase.

“Pardon me?” Sydney replied.

The clerk grabbed a newspaper from the stool next to the register and slapped it onto the counter. She jabbed a wrinkled finger at one of the headline stories: Vermont Jam Factory Expansion Rumored.

“That’s the lead story? There must not be a lot going on around here,” Trent joked. Sydney smirked and shushed him with an elbow and started to read the article. *Vernon, VT – Local legend Vermont’s Best has been a New England fixture for decades, but in recent years its products have been seen as far away as Pennsylvania and Maryland. And though the main factory complex has tripled in size since the early 2010s, rumors have been swirling that an announcement of a major expansion is planned to coincide with the imminent listing of the business on Nasdaq. At the same time, other rumors are circulating that the business is strapped for cash….*

The woman snatched the paper away before Sydney could finish reading and gestured at a rack near the door. “There’s copies of it over there if you want to buy one.”

“Nah, I’m good but thanks,” Sydney said. She could just ask Clark Close herself for the inside scoop.

The clerk put the glasses on the tip of her nose and stared at the edge of the jar. “Well land sakes, this one expired six months ago. You can take it, no charge.”

“That was rude,” Trent said as they exited the store.

“Her giving you expired jam?” Sydney asked with a laugh.

“No, I mean rude of you to try to read that story without buying a copy of the paper.” He laughed and she shook her head. “Anyway, on that note, there’s something I should tell you regarding Vermont’s Best…”

His confession was interrupted by the old shopkeeper, who came out waving her hands frantically. “I forgot to mention – there are security cameras everywhere. So if you really want to find your friend, try going to our head of security and asking to look at the tapes.” She gestured toward the security booth, and then saw it was empty. “Must be on break again. That guy is not very reliable. Anyway though.” She shrugged and turned back toward the shop.

“Would have been a great idea, though,” Sydney said. “Oh, hey, what were you going to tell me? Something about Vermont’s Best?”

Trent held up a hand. “Nah, not important, we should get back to our search. Now that we’ve gone through all the shops, let’s comb the rest of this resort.”

They walked every one of the cabin pathways and then they moved on to the massive lodge, both restaurants, and the fitness center. No sign of him there either and nobody recalled seeing him. They even stopped in the first aid office and checked to see whether any mountain rescues had been required in the last hour (nope). Their final stop was the massive parking lot. No sign of him there either. While a large section of the parking lot was set aside for the general public coming to ski for the day, the cabins all had assigned spots that were closest to the lodge, and the vehicle for Cabin 31 was still there. Fletcher drove a white 2022 Volkswagen Atlas, in excellent condition, though currently splattered with salt stains from the winter roads. Massachusetts plates, so he was telling the truth about that. In fact, the plate holder in the front was black plastic adorned with the words “Vic’s VW of Amherst ” in raised gold lettering. A pretty versatile vehicle, though a bit large for one person. She peeked inside but there was nothing to see. The interior was immaculate. The only signs of habitation were a red metal tumbler in one of the cupholders and an air freshener that was Freddie Mercury’s face. They had not even got far enough in their “relationship” to talk about favorite music, one of the first things that usually came up. Well, back in her dating days five years ago before she met Carter. Trent felt the hood with the back of his hand and then stuck two fingers into the exhaust pipe, and declared that the engine was cold and the SUV had not been used in the last hour or two.

“Take a pic of his license plate. Just in case,” Trent advised, swallowing hard.

“In case what?”

“I don’t know. Just good to have.” She snapped a pic and then they left the parking lot and walked back toward her cabin.

"Besides the ski slope, which is our next stop, the only other possibility is that he’s visiting someone else’s cabin, but you didn't get the impression he knew anyone else here did you?"

"No, he was alone and didn't mention anybody else."

“So we’ll rule that out as well.” Trent Buxton blew into his hands and looked at Sydney. “The next thing we do is put the security guard on alert. But he must be on break or on assignment or something cause he's not been in the booth for a while. I’m sure he’ll be back soon.” *He definitely will not.* She had the urge to tell him the whole story. But was it even relevant? *Yes, silly, of course it is.* And then it struck her, the icy reality of the possibility freezing her heart, that the earrings were somehow related to what happened to Fletcher. She broke down and told the champion skier an abridged version of the story. He remained calm throughout and only then she was done did he let out a low whistle. “So the security guy, he’s *dead*.” It was a statement not a question. “Well damn. This has suddenly become complex. I’m glad you told me this.” A hint of frustration that she’d left this small detail out until now.

“You don’t think…his disappearance has anything to do with what happened?” *Please say no.*

“Yes. It may well. But I can’t imagine what. We will find him though. He has to be here somewhere and like I said, I know this place very well. Probably better than anyone else. By the time I was fourteen, I had free rein of the whole resort. Once I finished my daily training sessions I was allowed to have some down time, which usually meant me going off exploring and playing in the snow. Back they only had half the cabins they have today. Right after I went to the games in Italy and medaled, they saw a surge in bookings so quickly built the other half. I came back here in ’07 to take a victory lap and sign autographs, it was my manager’s idea. During the 2010 games they put up huge television screens all around the village, showing non-stop coverage of the Olympics. When the alpine skiing event was broadcast, there were 1,500 people here that weekend. It was so crowded they had to set up tents and port-a-potties. They invited me that spring but I was too busy doing appearances on morning shows and Jay Leno and Conan and that stuff. I haven’t been back here since 2007.” He lowered his eyes. “I’m sorry for the tangent. Your friend is missing and here I am telling you about the glory days of my career.”

“No, it’s fine. The upshot of all that is that you know this place so well, which gives me some reassurance that we will find him.” The blue skies had vanished in the last twenty minutes, behind some puffy gray cloud cover that had blown in. It started to flurry a little. Trent was a reassuring presence. His self-confidence was contagious.

“Well, the next thing we need to do is check the mountain itself. After all, there is that little lookout area at the top with a few benches. Who knows? Maybe he's sitting up there reading a book, blissfully unaware that he’s being considered missing. Maybe he’s just a stoner who forgot that he's supposed to meet you.” She didn’t get that impression at all, but anything was possible. *You don't know him* she reminded herself. *You’ve learned more about Trent Buxton than you know about Fletcher.* Yet getting to know this famous athlete only reinforced for her that the feelings she had for Fletcher were genuine. Trent was kind and funny, and certainly had lots of stories to tell. But she didn’t have feelings for him. There was no romantic spark. She was glad to spend time with Trent and she was certainly thankful for his help, but there was no flame of attraction burning within. Whatever that was with Fletcher was real but she had put it aside for now, replacing it with a growing concern that something was very wrong. And yet, at the same time, Fletcher seemed like a distant memory already.

“Agreed, we should look.” She had no idea how he proposed to check all nine of the trails, but she’d leave that to him. They might need a few trips up to be thorough. Her body was so tense, her muscles so taut that she felt like skiing was a terrible idea. *But hey, you’ll be able to say you skied with an Olympic gold medalist. How many people can say that?*

As they walked, they passed a rather uneven snowman with a carrot for a nose but two political campaign buttons for eyes. “Gross!’ they said in unison and then nodded. “So we lean the same direction,” Sydney said approvingly.

“Yeah, unlike the snowman who seems to be leaning the opposite way.” He smiled and they walked on.

“We should both get changed for the slopes. I’ll meet you at the lodge in 20 minutes. And yes I’ll actually show up, I promise.”

“You’d better,” she said. “Finding one missing person is hard enough.” She paused. “Hey are you still carrying around that old jam? You’re not going to eat it, are you?”

“Naw,” he said.

“Then you should get rid of it.” Without a word, he whirled around and flung the jam jar at the snowman’s head, now fifty feet away, hitting him right between the eyes and knocking both buttons off before the jar fell unscathed into a snow drift below. “Wow! Good aim,” she said as he sprinted to the snowman, retrieved the jar, and dropped it into a nearby trash can.

“I was a star pitcher on my high school team before I was sure the whole skiing thing would work out,” he said with a wink. “Okay anyway, twenty minutes then, right?”

She nodded and they stared at each other awkwardly for a moment, unsure how to part ways, so she offered her hand and he shook it vigorously.

A lot was bubbling through her mind as she walked back to her cabin, but she tried to focus herself on skiing. She was going to ski with an Olympian. Sheesh! She’d have to rent skis again, like she did yesterday. Affixed to the front of each cabin was a ski rack capable of holding up to six pairs of skis, which could be locked using your room key, but many people just chose to rent their skis at the lodge. She’d had skis as a kid, when her parents took her to Powder Ridge in Middlefield every President’s Day Weekend until she was thirteen and outgrew the little skis. By then Dad had lost his good job at the insurance company and was working as a clerk in the department store in Hartford, so no more ski trips. Though she still enjoyed skiing occasionally, she’d ever bothered to buy her own skis because she had no place to store them. Then she married Carter and skiing was out of the question.

She assumed Fletcher didn’t have his own skis either, because there were no skis in his rack when she went by his cabin. But that also sparked a slight hope within her that maybe he *had* brought his own skis and was on the ski slope currently. Maybe he had fallen down, hurt his ankle, and was slowly walking down the mountain. She thought of the poor rabbit being grabbed up by the hawk and carried to its certain death. Life was fragile. It easily could have been Sykes not Fletcher who survived the struggle in the woods earlier. Or they could have both died. Those people riding contentedly up to the summit on the lift, skis dangling happily as they took in the scenery, had no idea what was going on a half a mile away, either with her and Fletcher or with the rabbit and the hawk. She tried to console herself with the thought that even if she and Trent couldn’t locate Fletcher, that wasn't the end of it. The police would then be called and an even more thorough search would be mounted, and they would locate him. Two civilians simply didn't have the resources that the police did, no matter how well one of them knew the resort. But she hoped it wouldn’t come to that. Her heart couldn’t take it. For a brief moment she had the urge to call Carter and cry to him over the phone, but would be weird for her to do that, especially after the earlier phone call. From swooning to panicking in the space of an hour and change. With Carter it had taken four months and eight dates for her to start feeling anything close to what she was feeling for this stranger she had just met in a snow-covered field while being chased by a diamond thief. Who else could she call? Sydney’s parents were in an over-55 community in Arizona, had no cell phone despite her insistence, and were always off on some adventure to Taos or Santa Fe or were busy playing pickleball or swimming in the huge pool at the cactus-dotted complex. She’d had maintained a decent relationship with her in-laws even throughout the whole separation and divorce process, but she wouldn’t dare call them to vent and cry over a situation instigated by their own wedding gift.

*How did I get here? How is it that I am at a ski resort searching for a man I just met and fell for on the spot? I’ve known him for less time than I’ve been searching for him.* That thought made her angry at herself. Why was he so damn important to her?

But this is how life works. Sage would tell her, *one thing leads to another. Life is nothing but a domino effect or a series of connected links in a chain. You can't get from point A to point Z without going through B through Y first. And just because Z is be the final destination that doesn't mean the other points aren’t important too. And you never knew where it stopped. Sometimes B was a road to Z, and sometimes B was the final destination and became your Z.* Sage had never actually said those words, but Sydney could quite easily imagine her saying all of it. She could picture Sage brushing the long red hair away from her bright green eyes, her slightly raspy voice (still suffering the effects of ten years of smoking even though she’d quit at the age of twenty-six, six years ago) explaining the interconnectivity of everything. Their relationship was at that point now where Sage’s advice could be conjured up for any situation, even without her presence or any knowledge of what Sydney was going through at that moment. Sydney told her this once after some excellent but invented advice about a used car negotiation had saved Sydney three thousand bucks, and Sage laughed hysterically at the notion. *That is the funniest thing I've ever heard but I understand it*, she told Sydney. *I guess you know me that well.*

Sydney finished changing, amused at how ridiculous she looked in the puffy powder pink snow suit, an impulse purchase last week. *Everyone looks at least mildly ridiculous out there on the slopes*, she reminded herself. Even Trent Buxton had worn some outlandishly bright snow suits with eccentric zig-zag patterns on them over the years. It was a thing. She shrugged and shut her cabin door. Oh right, Fletcher had promised he’d get them to change her lock. She sighed and walked the path through the village and toward the ski lodge.

As she approached the little jewelry store she had a thought. She went inside and the bell attached the door clattered and clanged, sending the proprietor rushing out from the back. He was a bent old man with messy white hair, dressed in a plaid flannel shirt and dark pants held up by suspenders. He had bifocals perched on the end of his long pointy nose. “How can I help you, miss? Having a lovely day here at the resort I hope?” He apparently did not recognize her from earlier when she and Trent came in to inquire about Fletcher.

“Not quite as lovely as I would hope, but I’m working on it,” she said with a polite smile.

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear that. How can I help you? Looking for something in particular? Maybe a little impulse buy to brighten things a bit? We’re having a sale, everything in this case is twenty-five percent off.” He gestured at a display featuring lots of gold pendants and bracelets. All the price tags were turned face down as was usual in jewelry stores.

“Actually, I was wondering if you do appraisals here?”

The old man shuffled closer to her and leaned over the counter. He scratched at his nose with a too-long fingernail. “Well, not officially. I’m not set up for that. Mostly I cater to romance-seeking visitors who want to surprise their significant other with a spur of the moment present or even an engagement ring or something like that. Or also the ladies who take neglected to bring jewelry and want to look snazzy for a cozy dinner at the restaurant or a special occasion like last night in the banquet room.” He finally noticed her earrings and his eyes lit up. “But I’d be happy to take a look for you and see what I can do. No charge of course.”

“Well, I appreciate that.” She took off the earrings and handed them to the jeweler who fumbled around in the drawer under the counter and finally pulled out a black plastic loupe. He held one of the earrings with a tweezer while he examined it under the light with the loupe wedged in his eye. He handed that one back to her and then looked over the other earring. “Remarkable!” he said, “Simply remarkable.”

“What’s the matter,” she asked. “Are they fake or something?” That would be the ultimate irony wouldn't it?

“Fake? Heavens no! On the contrary, they’re very real. These are the highest quality diamonds I’ve ever seen in my life and I've been in the business for 60 years.”

“Oh, well that's good, I guess,” she said. “I was told when they were given to me that they were worth about twenty or twenty-five grand but that was a few years ago.”

“Twenty-five thousand for these? Haha.” He waved his hand dismissively. “Whoever told you that was an idiot, pardon my language. That’s completely inaccurate. Like I said, I'm not set up to do a proper appraisal and I can't give you a certificate or anything, but it's my considered opinion that these earrings are worth 50k.”

She stared at him. Maybe he was senile. He looked like he was about ninety years old. “Fifty thousand for these earrings!” she repeated. “That's crazy. Are you sure?”

He shook his head violently. “No, no. Not fifty thousand for the pair. Fifty thousand *each*. They’re about five carats, and nearly flawless. Miniscule inclusions and colorless. These diamonds are worth a fortune and I may be off. It could be even higher than that, but it's definitely not lower than that. If I may ask, where did you get these?” Was he suspicious or just curious?

“They were a gift,” she said.

“Hmm, must have been from somebody who really loved you quite a lot.” He handed the other earring back. “I'm not even going to ask you if you’re considering selling them because I don’t have anywhere near that kind of money to offer you to buy them. So keep them safe is all I can tell you. They belong in a safe, to be honest, and definitely not floating around the Martin Mason ski resort.” He smiled and shrugged. “But then again you had no idea they were worth this much, so you can’t be blamed.”

An interesting thought crossed her mind so she paused before leaving the shop. “Just one more question, if you don’t mind,” she said.

Chapter 6

When Sydney arrived at the lodge, Trent was already there, standing by the ski rental desk in an orange and black snow suit on which was embroidered his trademarked TBux logo, holding a pair of GlideFast Trent Buxton Gold Medal Elite Performance skis. He was an industry onto himself. His appearance in full sport attire had attracted some attention among the guests and he was taking a few selfies when she walked in. He noticed her and said goodbye to the young couple he was chatting with (the woman gave him a hug and giggled giddily) and walked over to Sydney, his ski boots clunking awkwardly on the slate floor.

“You’re the one who’s late. I was starting to worry,” he said.

“Sorry. Had to make a stop along the way. It’s all good though.” She had the urge to ask for a selfie too. Maybe later, this was not the time for that.

“Alright! Time to hit the slopes and find your boyfriend.”

Boyfriend. She wished! It was way too early to call him that, but she didn’t correct Trent. Maybe saying it would manifest it into happening. Boyfriend. She’d had a husband and now she was back to looking for a boyfriend. Back to the beginning again, but this would be a promising start.

She tried to remember the point of no return, the point at which her relationship with Carter was doomed, the moment she realized there was no future for them. It’s difficult to pinpoint such moments because the deterioration of pretty much anything, whether a relationship or a building or the human body itself, is always gradual and incremental. You notice a gray hair one day and then another pops up and then another and you stop looking, and then one day you glance in the mirror and suddenly your head is covered in silver follicles and you wonder how and when it happened. But there was no single moment.

Life with Carter seemed ideal at first. Little things cropped up here and there but she swatted them away. But then a year ago it was starting to become more noticeable, the growing chasm between them, the difference in their perspectives and outlook on life. The last trip they took together was to Bermuda, but as soon as he booked the airline reservations, she panicked and invited Sage. Carter didn’t blow up like she thought he might; instead he invited his parents to come along too. It turned from a romantic getaway to a group outing just like that, and they were both okay with that notion. Not that the trip wasn’t enjoyable. It was a quick flight to Bermuda and everybody was in pretty good spirits during the five days they were there. She and Carter hardly spent any time together. She wanted to explore Hamilton and St. George and he wanted to lay on the sand or poolside so she wound up seeing the sights with her in-laws while Sage and Carter lazed around on the beach. Maybe it was for the best then that there were five of them instead of just two. Everyone could do the things that they liked without an argument, and reconvene later in the day for a hearty meal, in good spirits, instead of annoyed at the activities they didn’t get to do or the compromises they had to make. Yes, it was a good vacation, but not the prescription for a happy long-term relationship. They couldn't take all their trips with friends and family along for the ride.

Afterwards, when they were back home and talking about the trip and sharing pictures with each other, she realized that they barely had any common reference points besides the flight, the airport, and meals. They had two entirely separate vacation experiences save for a few group activities that they all did together, like Crystal Caves and the shopping center at the Dockyard on the northwestern tip of the island. It was a sobering realization. That was the moment when she knew it was over. Anyway, Carter seemed to have had more fun than she did. He seemed okay with the idea of spending time apart. Sure, he and Sage really hit it off and she and her in-laws became closer than ever, but none of that was enough to save a marriage. To make matters worse, not long after the trip, Carter and his parents had a falling out, and he was fired from his job in product development at Vermont’s Best, and that stressed him out and caused marital friction.

*Overall, Carter is a good guy. He just isn’t my guy.* Those were the two sentences she’d scrawled in her diary that day, and those were the two sentences to which her thoughts kept returning. *He’s just not my guy. He’s somebody’s guy just not mine.* When she had lunch with Sage the week after they came back from Bermuda, her friend was bubbling over with things about Carter that Sydney hadn't really noticed or more accurately things that she didn't really care about, interests he had that she didn't really understand (a longtime fascination with perpetual motion gadgets, which came out while he and Sage were browsing in the hotel gift shop and saw a small stainless steel desk toy featuring two guys balanced on a teeter-totter). While Sage was still in the middle of explaining why perpetual motion was so interesting, Sydney put her hand atop Sage’s and looked her in the eye. Sage stopped talking, sensing something serious was about to happen. Sydney swallowed hard and said, *I think it’s over*. Poor Sage looked like she’d seen a phantom, thought Sydney talking about their friendship. *We’re over?* she asked, pale faced and lips quivering*. No silly, it’s over between me and Carter.* Sage’s face remained ghostly white. *Oh no, I’m sorry* was all she said. She never liked seeing her best friend in pain. But Sage must have known it was inevitable, she could see it coming by how things went in Bermuda. *I just thought you two would...* Her voice trailed off but Sydney knew what she was about to say. *I just thought that you two would start a family, raise kids, buy a house, live the life that I always wanted*. Sydney found herself in the weird and uncomfortable position of having to reassure her friend that everything would be okay about her marriage crumbling when she was the one needing reassurance, but bestie relationships could be weird like that sometimes. *It’s fine, Sage*, she said, taking another big gulp of her blue margarita. *I'll be fine and he'll be fine. It's for the best. Really much easier doing it now then in a few years when it could get really messy. I just think that there's no sense in pretending that we're a good match. I mean I thought we were and then Bermuda happened.* Sage sighed heavily. *Did you tell him yet?* she asked. *No, not yet. Tonight, probably. He’ll be okay too, hopefully. We’re both still young enough to figure things out and be fine. So instead of 40 with two kids, a dead marriage, and a mortgage, I'm 32 with no kids and possibilities.*

Carter took it better than she’d expected. Maybe a little too well, like it was an act. But that was how he got when upset, he retreated into an inner safe space and projected an air of stoicism. She decided not to take it personally, instead looking at it as a positive. No visible rancor or animosity was a good thing. After that she and Sage made vague plans to go away together somewhere, just the two of them, but it hadn't happened yet. This ski trip was the first chance Sydney had to take a vacation since Bermuda and unfortunately Sage couldn't make it. And while Sydney liked her in-laws, now that they were ex-in-laws it would be pretty awkward to go on a trip with them even though they were not winter-averse like their son was.

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While she was donning her rental snow boots, her phone buzzed from the depths of her jacket pocket. Whatever it was would have to wait because she was struggling to get the buckles properly clamped. She was becoming frustrated but did not want to have to ask Trent for help. Luckily, he was not watching her spastic efforts; he was standing a few feet away, talking to a ruddy-faced young guy in an all gray snowsuit about the snow conditions of the day. *Maybe this is why I don’t ski more often.*

She finally managed the right boot and then the left was a little easier. She pulled her phone out and looked at the notification. It was a missed call from Sage, who’d left a message. She played it back:

*Hey bestie, I had a break at my conference so thought I’d check in and see how you’re loving the vacation. I hope we picked well. Anyway, sorry I missed you. If you get this in the next few call me back! Love you!*

Trent was still busy, now explaining the snow-making capabilities of Mount Mason as compared to other ski resorts in the area. Though the mountain was not as high and there were fewer trails here, they actually had quite the snowmaking capacity. Whatever. She called Sage and her friend answered on the first ring.

“Sydie! Oh my gosh yay, you caught me in time. How’s it going?” Sage sounded happy but harried. She had not been looking forward to this conference. It was in a boring part of New Hampshire just outside Portsmouth, and it required her to be on duty during the weekend, which was usually her sanctuary time.

“It’s…going okay. Just heading to the slopes now, actually.”

“You sure you’re okay? You sound weird.” Sage knew. She always knew when something was off.

“Yeah. I’m fine, mostly. Will tell you all about the vacation when I get back. How are you though? How’s the conference?”

“Never mind this stupid conference. Tell me more about you.”

“Well, not only did I get to listen to Trent Buxton's speech last night, I got to meet him and we’ve kind of formed a friendship. He’s standing right near me; we’re about to go ski together!”

“Oh that’s great. He’s hot.”

“Eww no,” Sydney laughed. But she wasn’t wrong, objectively speaking.

“It’s time you met someone anyway,” Sage said.

“Well, I…” Sydney had wanted to tell her friend about Fletcher before, but not now that he was missing.

Sage paused as an announcement boomed in the background. “Oh, ugh they’re calling us back into the ballroom. I have to go. Say hello to Trent for me! Good to talk, will see you in a couple of days.”

Chapter 7

Tommy Sykes sat on the edge of the unmade bed in Cabin 20, which was undergoing extensive remodeling due to a damage from a fire last winter. Work had started but then stopped abruptly when hotel management realized that the smoky odor still pervaded everything even after they replaced all the furniture, carpeting, drapes, and ceiling tiles, so the renovation was on hold until they figured out what to do in the meantime. Sykes didn’t find the smell (which reminded him of overcooked bacon – just the way he liked it) particularly obnoxious so he used it as a crash pad on nights when he worked late, like last night, or simply as a place to watch TV on his down time. Since he lived an hour away, going home for short periods wasn’t convenient. If he thought he’d be working here long-term, he’d have rented a place closer. But it wasn’t worth it; he didn’t want to be at this place indefinitely.

He’d made sure that nobody spotted him as he snuck into Cabin 20 a few minutes ago, shut the door, and pulled the curtains closed. It was exactly an hour since he’d rerouted Fletcher. *Rerouted.* A much better word than kidnapped. Time to move forward with the rest of the plan. It was a gamble of course. There was a chance the girl had been so frightened by the encounter in the snow that she had up and left already. Or maybe there was nothing between her and Fletcher after all and she would think the note was some kind of joke. But no, the chances of that were minimal. When Fletcher didn’t show she must have freaked out. When the note arrived she would panic and do exactly what she was told. He wanted to get this over with sooner not later but 7:00 was the safest option since the only slope open for night skiing was far away from the old ticket booth. It had been abandoned 10 years ago when the resort switched over to a digital-only ticketing system. He’d occasionally caught kids hanging in the old booth smoking weed but once he installed the heavy duty combination lock on the rickety door that had pretty much stopped.

His phone started vibrated and he was tempted to ignore it but decided to at least glance at the caller ID. It was that burner phone again. “Shit,” he said, knowing he needed to answer.

“Yeah,” was all he said. He did not want to deal with this right now.

“Wow. Is that how you greet me?” the voice at the other end asked testily. To think he used to love this voice!

“Sorry,” he said. “Hi.”

“Better. Hi. So do you have them? Say yes. I need to hear a yes.”

He was tempted to lie and say yes, because he *would* have them. Well, almost definitely, but even that tiny degree of uncertainty made him wary of lying. If anything happened and he didn't get the earrings, it would be a lot harder to explain how he had lost them. Anyway, if he was asked to send a picture of them now, he couldn’t do it. He had to tell the truth. “Not yet, but soon, very soon,” he replied, trying to sound confident. The less said, the better.

“Not yet? Why not? You were supposed to do it this morning. We discussed this. You said was a plan. I need them.” He could hear the impatience and even a touch of anger.

“I know but it went…a little off kilter.” That was an understatement. He wanted to say he’d almost been killed in the process, but that was on him. He was supposed to accomplish this alone, not bring in anyone else to help him. He’d already disobeyed and he was not about to admit it.

“Off kilter? What does that even mean?”

This was not going well. “I'll have them later. And I’ll still bring them over tonight like we discussed. So nothing changes on your end. Don’t worry.”

“Don’t tell me not to worry. I will worry until I have them. The pressure is on me, so the pressure is on you. So you’d better get them.” There was a thoughtful pause. “Listen. Maybe I’ve been going about this the wrong way. I think there’s something you want more than money. I have a new offer for you…”

Sykes listened, his eyes growing wide at the new offer.

“Damn. I’ll get them,” he said and the call disconnected. The greater the reward, the more the pressure. Sykes phoned the assistant manager of operations, Clare Wiseman, and told her that something had come up and he needed a couple of hours off. She was sweet on him so she quickly said okay and he thanked her profusely. She even offered to go to the booth and put the “Back soon – in case of emergency go to Front Desk in the lodge” sign up for him. Perfect. Now nobody would be looking for him. He promised her that lunch date that she’d asked for – soon, very soon. She hung up quite happy. He had no intention of eating lunch with her but she didn’t need to know that right now.

Sykes stared at the ransom note which he had removed from the envelope to reread. Once he had the diamonds, he’d make the run to hand them off, and eagerly accept get his reward. And the best part would be that he wouldn’t have to give a thing to Fletcher. That guy didn’t deserve to live after shooting him in the chest. But the truth was, it would be much less messy if nobody got hurt. That was after all how it was originally supposed to go. It was supposed to be clean and quick, to the point where Sydney wasn't even sure that they’d been stolen, where she could be convinced that they had simply gotten lost. No mess, no fuss. No evidence. No sign of forced entry. Nothing. She would have reported the earrings missing at the front desk, and they in turn would have sent her directly to the head of security, and of course Sykes would have been very understanding of her plight and helped her as best he could. He would have sprung into immediate action and made a good show of it, searching everywhere for the missing earrings, even recruiting a few of the bellboys and restaurant wait staff to make a thorough search of the grounds around her cabin and at the banquet hall. Oh, she’d insist that she remembered taking the earrings off the night before, and he’d regale her with stories of similar incidents with a ruby pendant, a sapphire ring, and an aquamarine anklet, all of which had disappeared and two of which he'd retrieved successfully for the panicked owners. They were all true stories. One time a woman approached the security kiosk frantically because her rose gold anklet (a family heirloom, no less) was missing and she knew it had to have been stolen. After talking to her for two minutes, he noticed that the missing anklet was on her wrist. She had mistakenly put it there while still half-awake and decaffeinated that the morning, put it on the wrong limb and then freaked out. Those stories would lead Sydney to believe the earrings they were simply, sadly, lost. And after a valiant effort, the resort staff would inform her that they had checked everywhere, even under her sheets and in her pillowcases. Heck, he’d even have somebody snake the bathroom sink drain just to make sure they hadn't fallen in there. She’d be devastated about losing the jewelry. He’d promise to keep an eye out for them until they turned up. The hotel, despite their typical “we are not responsible for valuables…” policy, might even throw her some money to avoid bad press. He’d see to that. She’d be very grateful and would leave an excellent review on Google and mention him by name, and management would be thrilled with his dedication and give him a raise. It would all have worked out okay.

That was how it was supposed to go, but the moment Fletcher double-crossed him, it had all gone haywire. Involving Fletcher at all was a mistake. If Sykes had been the one in her room, he’d have located both earrings in about thirty seconds flat, and she’d never have caught him in the act. Fletcher had clearly stayed clean since they parted ways a couple of years back, and he was rusty. Thanks to him, getting the diamonds had now become complicated. There was no simple option anymore. Fletcher couldn’t be trusted again to obtain them. Sykes should have just done the whole thing on his own. He’d been doing fine since the two of them split, he’d made a few thousand bucks on opportunities (he did not think of them as crimes) that had practically fallen into his lap, but the chance meeting with Fletcher here at the resort sparked in Sykes some kind of an overblown fantasy of a renewed partnership that was much more profitable and smoother than before. What better way than to start than with a diamond heist, even though this was not his idea. He’d been taken completely by surprise when the original call came in, requesting he steal the earrings. In retrospect it was a horrible idea. He hated having to work for someone else, no less someone with whom he had a personal history. While his reward for delivering them would be incredible, he was tempted to just sell the diamonds. But a double-cross was too risky. He’d have to deliver them as promised.

He put the note back in the envelope and sealed it. Regrets would get him nowhere. It was time for action.

Still, he needed a little more time to formulate the rest of his plan because there were still a few holes. Pretty big ones at that but he’d figure it out. The first step would be locating Sydney. He pulled out his phone and opened the resort security app which was connected to a series of thirty cameras installed at various locations around the resort, providing a constant live feed and with a thirty-minute rewind capability. While he was at it, he made sure to delete the footage of himself and Fletcher entering and exiting his cabin. Almost forgot that! He wiped his brow once that was done and focused on trying to locate Sydney. It might take a while but if she was anywhere other than inside her cabin he would find her.

Chapter 8

When Fletcher came to, his left temple was throbbing and swollen. Confusion and panic gripped him as he struggled to figure out where he was and what had happened. The confusion dissipated but the panic remained after he remembered that Sykes had taken him here, tied him up, and then kicked him in the head. He had no idea how long he’d been out but it must have been at least a half an hour*. Great. Precious time lost.*

*Okay, think. I can’t untie my hands if they are crushed underneath me like this. I can try to rock the chair until it falls over sideways, land with my full weight onto a pile of tacks, then work on undoing the knot. I can yell and try to call for help but there’s only a slim chance anyone would hear me*. The heater was pretty powerful. It seemed only to have one setting – inferno. Fletcher’s face was flushed and even a little singed from the heat. He turned his head the other direction and felt his hair heating up. If he stayed here for much longer he’d suffer burns, and probably dehydration too. Meanwhile, he was losing feeling in his hands from the pressure of his weight on them. He’d have to get himself free, and quickly.

Fletcher rocked sideways but the chair hardly budged. His hands were numb now from being underneath him. He started to panic but reminded himself that he was at most a few hundred feet away from the ski village, and Sykes’ plan was flawed and he’d be caught. That calmed him a little, but then he realized that Sydney must have thought he’d blown her off. That was actually the worst part of this. And maybe that was intentional on Sykes’ part. Separating them. Punishing Fletcher for choosing her over him. Newly determined, he tried harder, changing his body motion from a simple sideways rock to more of a twist. It started to have an effect. The chair teetered a little. He twisted and turned more, at the same time trying to loosen the rope a bit. He should have tried to wrest the gun from Sykes. He’d already done it once today. He shifted his body weight again and again, grunting as he did, like tennis players when they hit the ball in the fifth set of a grueling match. Finally, he felt the chair lift a little off the floor to the left side and he leaned and twisted hard to the right. More lifting. Again to the left and it lifted higher, one more time to the right and that was it – the chair tipped on its side and Fletcher crashed to the floor, a dozen thumbtacks penetrating his legs and arms in various places. He yelped in pain.

*Great! I succeeded in this part of the mission but I still have to get myself untied*. To his dismay, he realized just how tightly his hands were bound. There was no wiggle room and there was nothing with which to cut or loosen the knot. Next, he tried his feet and found that those ropes were much looser. He shifted his ankle from left to right repeatedly and it loosened the rope even more. He couldn’t see his watch but he imagined that about 90 minutes had elapsed since he’d been taken by Sykes. That would put the time at about 12:30 or 1:00, six hours until the deadline for dropping off the diamonds. But who knew, Sykes could come back at any moment and just shoot him without even a word. He had to act quickly. He needed to get out of the cabin and find Sydney. Sykes could kill them both if he was angry enough. Fletcher kept moving his ankles in a circular motion until both ropes were fairly loose. His legs were still bound to the chair but he could at least move his feet around somewhat. He flexed his left foot up, pressed the edge of his boot against the floor, and then leveraged the chair an inch forward. *Okay, movement is good. But now I need to figure out how to use it to get free.* He definitely could not manage to stand up as it was, without use of his hands and with the chair strapped to him. No, he needed to move himself toward something at ground level that was sharp enough he could use it to cut through the rope.

He scanned the room carefully. The only thing that held any promise was the sharp edge of the rectangular iron drawer handle of the filing cabinet. If he could sidle up next to that maybe, just maybe if he rubbed against it long enough it could cut through the rope enough he could get free. It took five minutes of hard work to reach the cabinet but then realized he’d need to turn about 45 degrees to get in the proper position to reach the handle. A few more minutes and he was finally in position, moving his wrists up and down. He could not really tell if it was working, but by the sound of the friction there was a chance.

*This what I get for falling in with the wrong crowd*, Fletcher thought. It brought back from the depths his ugly, blocked memories the fraternity hazing he’d endured. He’d banished that from his mind entirely for fifteen years but now images of that terrible day flashed through his head. Because a couple of his future frat brothers thought he was too cocky for his own good, they devised a special treatment just for him. They stripped him down to his underwear (of course, the pair with a big hole on the butt side) in the middle of the night, and then tied him to the flagpole in front of the science building. Then they just left him there. All night. When morning came and the campus yawned to life, it was two sophomore girls who happened across him first, and they untied him, trying unsuccessfully to hold back their laughter. It didn’t help that he’d wet himself, unable to hold it in. He was accepted into the fraternity and promptly quit. From then on he was pretty much a loner, choosing not to get attached to anyone, until he met Sykes and they formed a bond. At first, Sykes seemed decent. He was good company and the mostly boring routine police work they did together was less painful to endure in his company. But then he started to complain about not being able to afford a new flat screen television *but* there was a way to make a little cash, was Fletcher interested? It was the first of many such ventures, each one more illegal and risky than the one before. When he pitched these ideas, Sykes was a likably manic maniac, fast-talking, optimistic, chummy, hopeful, and ever-careful to minimize the criminal aspects of the plots. Fletcher said yes the first time and every time after, and it went from rescuing and reselling an abandoned shipment of black market (aka fake) Swatches to outright robbing people. None of the schemes was ever that profitable and most were dangerous. The first gig involved grabbing the watches from a dumpster outside a downtown storage unit (Sykes had tipped off the importer that the cops were going to bust him, so he cleared out his unit of thousands of dollars in electronics and left the watches in a designated spot for Sykes as a thank-you). Fletcher’s job that night was just to stand watch while Sykes literally dove into the dumpster to get the box; Sykes almost broke his ankle jumping back out and they were only able to sell the timepieces for three hundred bucks, of which Fletcher got seventy-five.

The unpleasant memories were not helping Fletcher feel any better about his life choices, and worst of all, it didn’t feel like he had made much progress with sawing the rope. There had to be a better way. Stupid file cabinet. If he could open the cabinet there might be useful tools inside. That was where Sykes had found the rope, after all. *Well, you can open it, you just can’t reach inside. That’s it!* Back in college, the knot around his wrists was too tight for the girls to untie without a little assistance; one of them had a knitting needle in her backpack; she used that to pry the knot loose.He had been approaching this the wrong way. He managed to get the heavy steel drawer open a few inches and quickly stuck his wrists into the opening. Now he had a couple of surfaces against which to pull and wriggle the rope, with the hopes it would help loosen and undo the knot.

Chapter 9

By the time the ski lift transported Trent and Sydney to the top of Mount Mason, the clouds had cleared out, the sky was bright blue again, and the temperature had risen to thirty-five. It was a perfect afternoon for skiing. The view from the summit was expansive and she actually took a moment to take it in this time. The layout of the lodge and village and cabins below made much more sense from this perspective. Yesterday she’d been so focused on not falling as she dismounted from the ski lift that she neglected to take a moment to enjoy the beauty of the scenic view. Somehow, dismounting from the lift chair as it reached the top of a mountain had always been an issue for her, figuring out the timing of inching her butt to the edge of the seat and scooting herself off and forward, out of the way. Ever since the incident when she was eleven, she’d been afraid that it would happen again where she’d stand but not move forward fast enough and the lift chair would hit her in the back and knock her down and everyone would stare at her. Dismounting from the chair had been a bit of a nerve-wracking proposition yesterday, but today with Trent Buxton by her side there was no issue at all; they hopped off the lift in unison. People were looking at them for sure, but for different reasons. He was The Trent Buxton and she was that Girl From Last Night With the Big Earrings.

Instead of heading straight down Algonquin, the most straightforward, popular trail, and the most likely candidate for someone like Fletcher to have chosen, Trent took her aside to a little mountaintop nook that she hadn’t even noticed before. It was a little ways beyond the Lost and Found Bin (containing the various gloves, hats, and random items people inadvertently dropped from the ski lift) and it faced the back side of the mountain, a semicircular platform ringed with several benches and one of those old-fashioned coin operated binocular viewers. In the distance rose several other modest snow-covered mountains of about two or three thousand feet, but the view was mainly lots of evergreen trees and a scattering of small towns. After she figured out her bearings, she knew they were looking east, and that the view therefore stretched to Massachusetts and Vermont. As scenic as it was, there was nobody enjoying the breathtaking view except for them. Everyone went straight from the lift to the slopes.

“You’d think this spot would be packed with people taking pics for posting on Instagram,” Sydney observed. “hashtag lookatthisview.”

“Mhm, yeah well, thing is,” Trent said, “most of the people who take the lift up are here to ski. And, yes, it’s a nice view. But if you are a regular skier then you’ll know this view is nothing compared with some of the great peaks in New England. So chances are they're not going to spend too much time standing around and looking at this. They want to go down, not stand around over here. Most of the selfies I’ve seen people tag Mount Mason in are them at the bottom of the mountain, after a run.”

He was probably right, and he of all people would know. This was a beautiful high-class ski resort to her but he’d been to some of the world’s greatest, never mind America’s or New England’s. He’d seen views from the Italian Alps and the Pyrenees. He’d even skied the mountains in Honshu, Japan. This was nothing compared to those. She wanted to make a snarky comment but thought better of it, since he was donating his time to help her find Fletcher it was advisable to keep herself on his good side.

It was windy atop Mount Mason, so Sydney pulled her hood over her head and Velcro-ed it closed. Despite its apparent mediocrity she stood there transfixed by the view and remembered the time she drove to the summit of Pikes Peak in Colorado. These Eastern mountains were mere bumps compared to the majestic fourteen thousand foot high Rockies of course, but to her it was still beautiful, this view. A wave of sadness washed over her and she started to cry, but luckily Trent couldn’t see past her puffy hood as he stood there next to her. *Where are you Fletcher, what happened to you?* She got a strange vibe from him for a moment, as if he was about to put his arm around her, but instead he stretched it and pointed off to the right.

“If I’m correct, that’s Schroeder, Massachusetts over there, and that shiny building is the Crescent Arms Diner. My parents and I stopped there on the way back from a ski trip to Jiminy Peak. By that point I’d outgrown this place. Anyway, we were at that diner when I got the call that I'd made the US Olympic team and I was so excited and shouted out loud *I’m on the Olympic ski team!* repeatedly. Everyone there, the customers, the wait staff, even the owner came over to congratulate me. I was so happy about it.” A wind gust blew her hood off, despite the Velcro. He looked at her and saw the tears on her pink cheek. “Oh man, I’m sorry, Sydney. Here I am going on and on about myself when you’re upset and worried. Hey, we’ll find your friend. Okay? I promise.”

“It just seems hopeless,” she said, wiping the tears from her cheek with the back of her glove. “Where the hell is he?”

“It’s not hopeless. We will find him soon. And I'm sure there’s a perfectly good explanation for where he is. Speculation just leads to worry, so we won’t focus on that, we’ll just find him.”

She closer to the iron chest-high railing. “Be careful,” he warned. “That railing was always wobbly and from the looks of it, I don't think they’ve ever fixed it. It’s a pretty long and dangerous way down.” He was right. The drop off at the back side of the mountain was steep. The first couple of hundred feet were mainly boulders and smaller but sharp-edged rocks, before it eased off into a gentle tree-covered slope that eventually led back down to the access road to the resort. She tried gently jiggling the rail and he was right. It was very loose, reminded her of her childhood, checking a baby tooth to see if it was ready to be pulled. “I mean it should be fine unless someone really puts their weight against it. I’ll remind them again later to fix it. But it’s been years so if they haven’t done it yet, I don’t know if they’ll do it now. Anyway, you ready to go down?”

“Yes, I’m ready.” She wasn’t. She could not shake the feeling something bad had happened to Fletcher. It would be very hard to ski safely while worrying this much.

“Remember, we’re not necessarily looking for him among the regular skiers. We’re looking for anything that seems strange. Anybody who is walking down the slope, laying down, sitting down, or just generally acting oddly. And we’ll try to look along the sides of the trail to make sure there’s nobody who lost control and skied into some trees. So I’d suggest we just snow plow the whole way down and go as slowly as possible, stay side by side, you look to the right and I’ll look to the left. You know how to snow plow, right?” He put his ski visor on.

“Yeah, of course,” she said. “I’m not a complete novice.” Only a partial novice.

They turned from the scenic overlook and slowly glided toward the Algonquin trail. Just then a teenaged boy in a bright blue snow suit sidled up to her and tapped her leg with his ski pole. “Hey miss. You Sydney?”

She raised an eyebrow. “Yeah, why?”

The kid pulled an envelope from his jacket pocket and handed it to her. “This is for you.”

She took it and was about to question the boy, but he launched himself down the mountain before she could say a word. Trent lifted his goggles. “What’s this now?”

Her heart thudding rapidly, she removed her gloves, shoved them in her coat pocket, and opened the envelope. Just as she pulled out the paper started to unfold it, a strong gust swept across the mountaintop and blew the paper out of her hand. They watched in disbelief as it flew away, dancing and fluttering up and down, soaring away from them high above the skiers before it finally dropped into the lower branches of a tree partway down the slope.

“Follow me,” Trent said. He pushed off powerfully and swooshed down the slope, rushing to get to the tree before the paper blew away again. She followed him slowly, watching his Olympic form, the way his legs flexed over the terrain, the arch of his back, the arrow straight tuck of his poles under his arms. She could only imagine how inelegant she looked compared to him. He pulled up a few yards from the tree, snow spraying as he came to a full stop, quickly removed his skis and boots, and shimmied ten feet up the tree trunk to the branch where the paper had come to rest. She was waiting for him when he hugged the tree trunk and shimmied his way back down, paper in hand. She said *oh my God* and handed it to Trent, who read the note aloud:

*If you ever want to see your friend Fletcher alive again, put the earrings in this envelope and bring it to the abandoned ski ticket booth at seven pm and slip it into the slot in the window. Do it and he will be released. Disobey, or involve the police, he dies.*

“Oh my God,” she repeated. “He’s been kidnapped.”

“So that’s why he’s missing,” Trent said.

“Shit.” *He’s going to die and it will be my fault. My stupid earrings. If I had just given the other earring to Sykes in my room this morning, this would never have happened.*

“It’s going to be fine. He will be okay.” Trent did not sound like he believed it.

“This handwriting looks familiar,” she said. “I can’t place it but I've seen it somewhere before. The blocky letters, the pen pressure, the slant of the writing.” It all just so familiar. She’d seen it very recently too, somewhere here at the resort.

“Well you think about that,” he told her. “In the meantime, I imagine we have no choice but to do what the note says.”

“This doesn't feel right,” she said.

“Well I would imagine that a kidnapping and ransom never feels right,” Trent Buxton said. He was a bit of a snot and she didn’t appreciate that, especially at a time like this. Perhaps it was all those medals and fame that had gone to his head. He’d had several high-profile relationships over the years, the most notable one being an engagement to fellow Olympian Tara Melody, which was broken off when she cheated on him with that Grammy-winning country singer.

“I'm just saying it's a sense I get that something is off with this whole thing. Like there's a missing piece that I’m not understanding.”

“I think we should call the police,” Trent said, changing the subject.

“No! We can’t. This whole thing is weird, but one thing I’m pretty sure of is that going to police will result in Fletcher’s death.”

Trent picked up his ski poles and stabbed them back in the snow. “Okay. If you say so.” He paused. “I’m just thinking this transaction could go bad. They could take the diamonds and still kill Fletcher. You realize that right?”

“Yes, I realize that. But I can't chance it.”

One of the resort’s first aid team members pulled up next to them, a big red cross and the word “Medic” emblazed across his white snowsuit. The tall man, who looked young enough to be a college student, pulled up his goggles and cleared his throat. “You guys okay over here?” He looked at the tree and then again at Trent.

“Yeah,” Trent said. “She just lost something and we had to retrieve it before it blew away.”

“Okay then. Be careful merging back onto the slope. We had a bad accident last year when someone who had pulled over got back onto the slope and another skier collided with him.” The medic put his goggles down again and skied off.

“Well, I guess we can stop searching for him now,” said Trent with a shrug.

She planted her poles firmly in the snow and clapped her hands together. “No! The opposite. We have to look even harder for him now. He’s here somewhere, in this resort, and he's in danger. Like I said, something's off. I don't like this at all.”

The public address system crackled to life just then and Fletcher’s voice echoed across the mountainside.

*I’m okay for now but please remember rapid, seven o’clock.*

She started to cry, the tears flowing easily. His sweet, kind voice – it seemed like a year since she’d heard it, but it had only been a couple of hours. He sounded hopeful yet scared. *He’s alive. Or at least he was when he recorded that.* Trent put his arms around Sydney and let her sob. *For now.* Those words played over in her mind. He was in danger.

The message came across the address system again. *I’m okay for now but please remember rapid, seven o’clock.*

Sydney disengaged from the embrace. “Hold on. What does he mean by that, *please remember rapid*?”

“I don’t know, I would think his message was dictated by the kidnapper. Maybe he was nervous and missed a word or two? Please remember *to be* rapid?”

She shook her head. “No. That still doesn’t make sense.”

A pair of female skiers in bright pink snowsuits passed by, shouting in unison, “Heyyy Trent! Love you!”

Thankfully, he ignored them and remained focused on the conversation. “What if he was trying to insert a hidden message to you in there. Are you sure he said *rapid*? To me it actually sounded more like…rabbit.”

“Rabbit? No! That would make no sense at all. At least rapid could have some context.”

The speaker system came to life once more and a different voice announced breathlessly *Please disregard the previous announcement, it was an unauthorized use of our public address system. Thank you.*

“I will think about it. There must be a reason he said that. But let’s keep looking for him in the meantime.” She put her gloves back on and took a deep breath. Her stomach was churning and she felt dizzy. *Pull it together*, she told herself. *He needs you.* In most relationships (*okay this is not a relationship yet* her brain interjected), she was the one who needed – help, attention, love, kindness, safety. Now for a change *she* was needed. It was frightening and daunting.

“Okay, if you say so.” Trent watched as skiers zoomed by. This was clearly torture for him, staying motionless in the middle of a ski slope. “But keep in mind that whoever sent the note might be watching us. And if they see us poking around trying to find your friend Sketcher, they will not be happy.”

“It's Fletcher. Not Sketcher,” she said, rolling her eyes. “And we can’t just sit around the lodge sipping hot chocolate until seven o’clock. We have to do *something*.”

“Oh right, Fletcher. Sorry. But you get my point. Besides, except for the ski trails, we've looked everywhere already. And now that we know what happened, he's definitely not going to be in plain sight on the slopes. So now what?”

“You know what? I bet he’s stashed in one of the cabins. There's that one I passed that’s being renovated. He could be there. We should check.”

“And how exactly do you propose to do that? Get a key from the front desk? Break in?”

“Yes,” she said flatly. “Break in.”

“Solving one crime with by committing another crime isn't the best practice.”

Why was he being so difficult*? Probably because he’s not in love with Fletcher, that’s why. He’s not being difficult, he’s just being logical. He’s an international star who does not want to become gossip page fodder on account of some weirdo he just met.*  Still, she felt she had a point to make. “Are you kidding? Have you ever watched a detective movie or read a crime novel or thriller? The good guys *have to* trick the bad guys. They have to lie and do whatever it takes in order to get them. Level the playing field. The only way to catch devious people is to become one. Beat them at their own game. Crime is a different set of rules and if we play by the law-abiding cautious citizenry rules, we will lose.” *Who is this woman speaking right now* she wondered. *It’s sure as heck not me.*

Trent shifted his weight back and forth between legs. He was definitely getting antsy just standing around partway down a snow-covered mountain while others whizzed by. “Fine. We will go take a look, alright? And see what we can do. If that makes you happy.”

“Happy is a strong word. Satisfied, maybe. Happy will be when this mess is over and Fletcher is safe.” She was being hard on Trent and she knew it. She hoped he understood she was just on edge; it was nothing personal. She realized that alienating him could result in Trent just walking away and washing his hands of this entirely.

Trent said nothing. He nodded, turned and checked for an opening in the skier traffic, and then pushed off down the slope, flying along gracefully as he did years before on her television screen. She followed, slowly and awkwardly, unable to enjoy the trip down, both panicked at the thought that Fletcher was being held hostage and relieved that this whole thing could be over in a few hours.

By the time she finally got to the bottom of the mountain, Trent was already sitting on a bench, skis off, rubbing his gloves together. When he saw Sydney, he clapped his hands and held one out for a high five.

“Did I do that well?” she asked with a nervous laugh.

“No! You are terrible,” he said with a wink. “But I am excited because I remembered something. There’s one more place we haven’t checked yet.”

Sydney sat down next to Trent and grabbed his arm. “Oh! Well, what is it?”

“My third year here, there was a snowstorm on a Saturday afternoon. It started slowly, and people were happy to ski while it was snowing. I did a couple of runs and then decided to enjoy walking around in the wonderland, exploring the area past the lodge. While I was walking the snow got really heavy, turned into a blizzard. Visibility was barely fifty feet. I got turned around and wound up getting a bit lost. I came upon a cabin and thought I had finally found my way back to the village, but it was not one of those. It was a different sort of cabin, all by itself in a little valley. I knocked but nobody answered. The door was unlocked so I pushed it open and went inside. It was some kind of abandoned storage cabin, but I waited out the blizzard in there. After an hour and the snow eased up, I left and found my way back to civilization. We need to locate that cabin. Your friend could be there.”

She patted Trent’s back excitedly. “Yes! Let’s go!” She was a sucker for hope, for grasping at whatever twinkled in the distance, however faint it was.

“Only one small problem. In the years that followed, I tried to find the cabin again but never succeeded. I’m willing to go look for it; I have a general idea of where it should be. But I think I had better go alone,” Trent said. “It’s better if we’re not seen together, in case they’re watching us.” He handed her his phone. “Put your contact info in here so we can stay in touch.”

She did it and handed it back. “Your phone is at five percent,” she said.

“Oh crap. I forgot to charge it last night. Okay. If you don't hear from me before then, we meet back at the lookout spot at the top of the mountain at four o’clock, okay? Here, I’ll text you now so you have my number too. Her phone buzzed and the text came through *Meet me at scenic overlook 4 o’clock.* “Meanwhile,go check out that cabin that’s being renovated. See what you can find out.”

Chapter 10

After the boy came back down the mountain and confirmed to Sykes that he had delivered the note, Sykes gave the goofy kid another twenty bucks and sent him on his way. This was good. This was a solid plan. He would get those diamonds. They were worth far more than what he was going to receive in return, and as much as he wanted his reward, it was actually starting to really irritate him. Even if he hadn’t received that call, he might have hatched a plan to steal them once he spotted the diamonds last night at the dinner. Then he would have had them all to himself. Plus, he really didn’t feel like driving an hour out of his way to deliver the earrings. By itself, the payoff wasn’t going to be enough, as tempting as it was. He needed some additional measure of personal satisfaction. Revenge against the traitor Fletcher. That would make it worthwhile. He was tempted to just go back to the cabin and shoot him in the head, but that was not his style. Even in all his time on the force, he’d never killed anyone before. Maybe Fletcher had, judging from the ease with which he shot his ex-partner in the chest twice. If not for the vest, Fletcher would have succeeded, and lied to the police, pretended Sykes was the bad guy. *Well, I am*, he mused. *But not fully. I was only the lookout, while Fletcher was the real thief.* He did deserve to die, but doing that would just complicate things. Then he’d be much less likely to get away with it. Fletcher could live; if he talked then they’d both go down. No, he didn’t need to physically harm Fletcher, but he sure wanted to make him suffer emotionally by taking away the woman over whom he’d been double-crossed. It was a noble cause, though. Not strictly vengeance. The woman deserved better than a lying thief as a boyfriend.

There was an annoying kink in his plan, though. Sydney was suddenly tight with that Olympian guy. She was with him when the ransom note was delivered. Not a great development because having anyone else involved would complicate matters, especially if the anybody was a somebody, a sports hero. And matters were never good when complicated. But being a seasoned problem-solver that he was, Sykes knew he could figure out how to handle Trent Buxton. It would take a little diligence and trickery. Luckily those were two of his strongest suits.

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Sykes sat cross-legged on the floor in Cabin 20 monitoring the security cameras on his phone. It was too bright outside to really see anything on his screen, so this dark cabin was a much better spot. He popped a piece of bubblegum into his mouth and tossed the silver wrapper on the floor. He’d quit smoking, again, last week. Gum was not a great substitute, but it kept his mouth busy. He stared intently at his screen, focusing on Camera 8, which showed the skiers coming to the bottom of the mountain. He needed wanted to keep an eye on Sydney, at least for the time being. Minutes passed and still nothing. *Come on. Come on,* he said. *Come down the mountain already.* Skier after skier came to a stop at the bottom; couples, families, teenagers, groups of friends. Minutes passed and Sykes was getting impatient and nervous. Were they onto him? Were they trying to elude him? Did they know about the cameras? His mind, like most deceitful minds, raced in the direction of being tricked himself. If he could lie then others could and would lie to him. Liars didn’t believe in the goodness of others. Of course this was not how the real world worked, but in Sykes’ mind everyone was out to get him. He spent his days walking around wondering who was going to try to deceive him, or catch him in the act of some illicit activity.

Never mind that he didn’t trust the star athlete who was accompanying Sydney. Of course, he didn’t let himself get too bogged down by the irony of a thief not trusting someone else. Still, for some reason, Sykes had suspicions about Mr. Trent Buxton ever since he’d laid eyes on the guy when he arrived at Mount Mason to a throng of adoring fans seeking autographs and pictures. Something seemed off about the guy. He’d called in a favor to one of his old police buddies and asked for a background check. After all, as a former cop, he couldn’t shake those instincts that had saved him on more than one occasion – knowing who was lying to him or seemed phony, like the guy in the liquor store pretending to be the clerk just before he pulled that gun. Sykes had anticipated and shot the guy’s hand before he could harm anyone. But when Bobby Jax called him back, he had nothing to report. Trent Buxton had a clean record. Squeaky clean. He was unblemished, not even a speeding ticket.

Sykes was pulled back into the moment when he finally spotted Trent zooming down to base of the mountain. He smiled. *There he is, ever eager to show off, racing down without waiting for the woman. It figured.* It took Sydney a full ninety seconds longer to reach the bottom. She joined Trent on one of the benches in front of the ski lodge. Sykes switched cameras to get a better view of them. They were talking, but not for long before they parted ways. Hmmm, interesting. He could see the envelope in Sydney’s hand. They must have been talking about the note and what to do. When they parted ways, Sykes had to make a decision who to follow. Sydney was the one with the earrings; they were so ostentatious he could even see them on the camera feed. But Trent was the real potential problem. Maybe they had some kind of plan to trick the kidnapper and get Fletcher back. He decided he would follow Trent, switched to Camera 11, and watched as Trent walked along the path through the village. Another camera switch to watch Trent heading toward the cabins, passing the first ring and then on to the outer ring. Where was he going? Not to his own cabin; Sykes already knew what number that was. No, the Olympian was headed in the opposite direction.

Sykes got to his feet quickly and exited Number 20. He scurried along the pathway just as Trent disappeared from the last of the cameras views, but luckily he could see the athlete up ahead studying footprints in the snow behind Cabin 12 - Fletcher’s and Sykes’ footprints - before he disappeared from sight. He was definitely off in search of Fletcher. That must have been their plan, to find Fletcher and intercept him, rescue him before the drop-off. That would spoil everything. Without the earrings, Sykes would be in big trouble. He ducked behind Cabin 12 and spotted Trent marching through the snow up ahead about a hundred feet away. If he continued to follow the footprints, he would wind up directly at the caretaker’s cabin. Maybe he’d veer off before that, since a bunch of kids had been playing in the snow back there before the terrain became steep, and what had been clear footprints of the two men became muddled into a big mess. Sykes couldn’t take that chance because if Trent passed that point, then their footprints up the hill would be the only ones and it’d be easy to find the cabin. Sykes started to run, without even knowing what he’d do when he caught up with Trent Buxton, only knowing he had no choice.

In the time it took to catch up to the famous athlete, Sykes had formulated the bare bones of a plan, which began with him yelling “Stop!” as soon as he was close enough to Trent, about halfway up the incline. The famous skier whirled around and froze at the sight of the man approaching him.

“Oh hey. Can I help you, are you lost?” the famed skier asked. Even in this moment of decision, Sykes had to admit he was a bit awed being in such vaunted presence.

“Sorry sir, you need to stop here and turn around. Visitors are not authorized past this point.” He held up a hand and tried to sound very official but not too threatening, deepening his voice and talking slowly, enunciating every syllable very clearly.

“And you are?” Trent asked with a tilt of the head.

Here goes, Sykes thought. “Head of resort security. Sykes. I’m going to need you to come back down and return to the village. We’ve had some reports of illegal activity outside of the main village boundaries so we’re cracking down on any trespassing beyond this point.”

Trent took a step closer to Sykes and raised his eyebrows. “Sykes? I thought you were dead.”

“Oh wait, you’re that Buxton guy aren’t you?” He sure was that Buxton guy. Tan and confident, not quite as muscular and sleek as he was in his prime, but still impressive. A potential problem to be dealt with swiftly and decisively. “So you heard the story then. Or at least one version of it. Word travels fast. You must have talked to the woman, Sydney.” Trent nodded. “No, I’m not dead. I was wearing a vest. He tried to kill me because I was on to him and was about to expose him as a thief. I was out cold for a while after he shot me. The impact was so severe that I thought maybe the bullet had penetrated. But I woke up and have been looking for him since.” When lies contained truth he actually felt justified in saying them.

“On to him? What do you mean? Fletcher has been kidnapped. That was his voice on the PA system a little while ago.”

“Aha. I heard the voice and knew it was him but didn’t understand what the message meant. Makes sense now. If you’re telling me he was kidnapped then I am sure it’s his own doing and he’s not been kidnapped at all. I bet he’s in cahoots with a partner. Hearing his voice over the PA system only confirmed that he’s got help.”

“Him and a partner, two thieves running loose around the resort? That sounds dangerous. I am out here looking for him right now.” Sykes read Trent’s eyes. They bore the same trusting look as those two old men he had scammed into buying five hundred dollars’ worth of fake raffle tickets, buying every word of his spiel about how the tickets undersold but the drawing would go on anyway because the rules said so, and thus they each had a one in two chance to win one of ten grand prizes of five thousand dollars.

“You’re looking for him too? Well, honestly that’s ill advised. He’s dangerous, tried to kill me and will stop at nothing to get what he wants.” Lies were easier to speak when they were coated with truth. “I’m trying to nab him before he causes any more damage. And to think he fooled that poor woman.” Sykes paused to make himself seem thoughtful. “Hey, why don’t we team up? Together I think we can find him. I'm actually heading for an old caretaker's cabin just over this hill, not far from here. He might be hiding out there.”

“No kidding,” Trent said. “That’s exactly what I was looking for, that cabin. I remember stumbling upon it as a teenager but I can’t recall exactly where it is.”

“Well come on!” Sykes put on his friendliest voice now, as if they had been pals for years. “I'll take you there and we’ll see what’s what.” He paused. Had to be thorough. “Did you tell Sydney where you were going?”

“I'm supposed to meet her at the scenic overlook on top of the mountain at four o’clock if she doesn't hear from me otherwise, and my phone just died so that’s what it'll be. Hopefully by then I'll have news of Fletcher's whereabouts.” He paused and added: “Although if what you say is true, it'll be bittersweet for her knowing he’s safe but finding out that he’s a criminal.”

“Bittersweet indeed.” Sykes said, nodding in his head gravely. “I had a friend run his name through the system earlier. I’m a retired cop, so I still have access to all kinds of records. Anyway, come to find out he spent five years in prison for grand larceny. Wouldn’t guess it by the looks of him but isn’t that always the case. So theft is nothing new for him.” Sykes was pleased with his improvisation skills. Just like when he was a cop, the authority vested into the position here as head of security gave him instant credibility. He could say pretty much anything and people would believe him. Maybe that was why he was attracted to law enforcement to begin with. To be heard. To have people take him seriously. Growing up with six older brothers and sisters, his voice was lost. He was an afterthought, a mistake (as his mother admitted one night during bedtime after having finished a large glass of brandy). So his desire to be heard was born of logical intentions; he just happened to overcompensate by using his authority to his own advantage.

“Aw damn, the poor woman. She will definitely be crushed. That’s pretty shitty he tricked her like that!”

“I saw him eyeing Sydney last night at your event and made a mental note of it. They always have me at events here because large crowds are conducive to crimes. He seemed sketchy then but I had no idea it would turn into this!” Sykes channeled his exasperation at the real situation into believable frustration over the fake one. Sykes tried to hold back the smile that wanted to break out on his face. *Trent Buxton may know his ski slopes well, but he does not know a liar when he encounters one. But then again, I’m pretty good at it.*

The two men ascended the remainder of the hill, silent except for the crunch of their boots over the already compacted snow within his and Fletcher’s recent footprints. Sykes stuck his right hand into his jacket pocket and felt the reassuring textured grip of the Glock. The old cabin was now within sight. “That’s it!” Trent exclaimed, and Sykes quickly shushed him.

“I’m aware. But we have to be quiet in case he’s in there,” Sykes whispered.

“Oh. Okay,” Trent nodded.

Sometimes you didn’t need to do the dirty work. Sometimes all you had to do was plant the seeds, set the wheels in motion, and let others destroy themselves or each other. That had been his mistake before and now he was stuck grabbing up diamond earrings for someone else because he wasn’t smart, wasn’t ruthless, because he actually had a heart and didn’t finish what he started. But he’d learned from his mistakes. He would put Fletcher and Trent together like two betta fish, and let nature take its course. Trent would accuse Fletcher and tempers would flare and they’d probably wind up killing each other. Four o’clock was only an hour away. Sydney would definitely be there, at the scenic overlook, and he'd make sure he got the earrings from her.

“Listen, I’m going to open the door,” Sykes said in a barely audible voice, gesturing at the lock. He dug the key from his pants pocket and held it up. Trent nodded. “You go in first and I’ll cover you.”

In that moment, Sykes’ anger and greed kicked in. To hell with everything. He would get those damn earrings and he would keep them. He would show up, get his reward, and keep them anyway. And deal with the consequences later. It was the scammer’s principal anyway. Fake it and take it, until you make it, and worry about the rest eventually. He who has the goods is in control. The key was getting the earrings without resorting to blatant theft or violence. The rest he’d figure out when the time came. If his phone rang and he was asked to provide another update, he would just say he was unable to get them. Who would know the difference? Worrying about the future was not helpful. A good lie was totally in the moment and was piggybacked upon assumptions and promises about the future, ones that could not be met or kept. A good lie got you diamond earrings and a good lie also got you off the hook from delivering those earrings to the person who hired you. He was ready to graduate to the big time. Enough with a few thousand here and there. With the tens of thousands he could get for these diamonds, he’d be set for a while. He could get that new car he'd been thinking of, the red convertible BMW.

Sykes slowly pulled the key out of the padlock, removed it, and with a fluid motion he’d been practicing in his head for the last five minutes, he swung open the door, shoved Trent inside, and then pulled the door shut and quickly locked it again.

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Fletcher stood tiptoed on the chair that he’d precariously balanced on top of the filing cabinet. Getting the rope off his wrists had been a mind-numbingly tedious and muscularly painful ordeal, but it had finally worked, in part due to the fact that the rope Sykes used was probably fifty years old and was already fraying and deteriorated. From his perch on the chair (avoiding the center for fear the wicker would give way), he could just barely reach the edge of one of the broken logs that framed the gaping hole in the roof. The log didn’t seem very stable but this was his best shot of getting out of the cabin – pulling himself up onto the roof and then sliding down and jumping off to the ground, where his fall would be cushioned by the snow. He’d already tried smashing through the plywood on the windows with the chair, but it didn't work. The filing cabinet would have done the trick, but it was too heavy to throw. He search the rest of the cabin and found no suitable tools or objects that would make any impact, so the hole on the roof was the only option.

Just then he heard a male voice outside exclaim, “That’s it!”

Someone was coming. Fletcher debated calling out for help, as it could be some innocent, random person wandering by – but then again it could be Sykes come to finish him off. That was a gamble he was unwilling to take. He grabbed a firm hold of the log and tried to pull himself but it must have been rotten because it broke off in his hands and he almost lost his balance and fell off the chair. He quickly shifted his feet slightly so that he could reach a different piece of wood protruding lengthwise from the hole in the roof. This one seemed sturdier and also gave him a better handhold. It had been a long time since pull-ups and rope climbing under the watchful eye of Mr. Carloni in high school gym class. While he tried to stay in shape, upper body exercise was not his favorite. *Come on Fletch, all you’ve got to do is get your elbows up there and then leverage the rest of your body.* He heard a key turning in the door lock behind him. *Hurry up, you have less than three seconds.* He pulled with all his might and managed to get one elbow up onto the slanting roof and then quickly got the other one taking a deep breath. He vaulted himself up onto the snow and ice-covered roof just as the door creaked open. The timbers groaned as he flung himself onto the roof and the layer of ice underneath the snow crackled as it fractured. He shimmied himself down away from the hole so he wouldn’t be visible.

He heard the door slam and a voice from within the cabin calling out. “Hey! What are you doing? Why are you locking me in here?” And then a shot rang out below and all was silent. Jesus, who was in there and what had just occurred? Fletcher tried to maneuver himself back toward the hole to see who it was and if they were okay, moving slowly and carefully on the cold and slippery surface. As he moved, the timbers under his body groaned even more, and started to shift and crack under his weight, and then suddenly he was falling along with a big chunk of the roof, ten feet below onto the cabin floor.

Chapter 11

The door to Cabin 20 was unlocked. Sydney clenched her eyes shut tightly for a moment before she let herself in. *Please let him be in here and okay.* She said it out loud three times. She wanted to rescue him just like he’d rescued her. What a love story that would be! She eased the door open slowly, calling out, “Anyone here?” as she did. The cabin was empty but it looked like someone had been there recently. A few gum wrappers were on the floor next to the bed, along with some cigarette butts, and there was a copy of this week’s edition of the local weekly newspaper on the edge of the bed, an issue featuring none other than Trent Buxton on the cover, touting his imminent arrival at Mount Mason. There was no sign, however, of anyone having been held prisoner here. Just that someone had been in the room recently, which proved nothing. She sighed and checked her watch. Trent was off in search of the caretaker’s cabin and she had nothing to do for the next hour. Her stomach growled and she realized she’d not eaten a thing all day. It was time to grab a small bite, even though she was not craving food, she was just running out of steam and needed to refuel.

At the café in the village, she sat alone stewing in her thoughts, desperate for an update from Trent. She texted him but he didn’t read it. His phone must have died. Hopefully he would be there at the top of the mountain as they had arranged. With news of Fletcher’s whereabouts. She bit into her crumbly blueberry muffin and took a sip of green tea and watched the clock until it was time to go the lodge and get ready for the ride to the mountaintop.

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At five minutes to four, Sydney got herself off the ski lift successfully and started to cautiously make her way to the scenic overlook, when she heard her name being hissed in an insistent whisper. There was a man standing by the fence, gesturing at her with a ski pole, but it wasn’t Trent. She made her way over and her jaw dropped as she got a closer look at him.

“Hello Sydney,” Sykes said, pulling his hood down. “It’s me, Sykes.”

“You…” she started but the words wouldn’t come. The thief who had set this nightmarish day into motion was standing before her.

“Don’t be alarmed. I was wearing a bulletproof vest before. The shots bruised my ribs badly and knocked me out cold, but I’m quite alive.”

“What do you want with me?” Sydney asked. “Please don’t hurt me.”

“Ha, no. You have nothing to fear. It’s not me who’s the criminal. It’s Fletcher. The only reason he wanted me dead is because I know the truth. He pretended to be innocent but it was his plan all along to steal your diamonds. You couldn’t hear it when we were struggling there in the woods this morning, but he was telling me to be quiet because he didn’t you to overhear anything that would incriminate him. And then he shot me and left me for dead so he could go on his merry way and pretend he was the hero when all along he was the culprit.” Sykes shook his head slowly at the thought of such insidious behavior and rolled his eyes.

“Okay but where’s Trent? Why are you here? I was supposed to meet him here,” she said. This seemed wrong. Very wrong.

“Oh yeah, Trent,” Sykes said nodding slowly. “The Olympian …you were supposed to meet…” He glanced at his watch. “Now. I was supposed to tell you – I ran into him a little while ago and he told me he was off looking for some old cabin that he found years ago when he was a teenager. I have no idea what he’s talking about but he could be onto something. He told me all about the kidnapping. And he said he was supposed to meet you here at four o’clock but he thought he was close to remembering where that cabin was and wanted to keep looking for it. He asked me if I could meet you instead, cause his phone died and he didn’t want you to worry. Of course I had to warn him to be careful because that Fletcher guy is dangerous.”

“I just can’t believe…” Sydney began. She wanted to say, *I can’t believe any of this. I can’t believe you. I can’t believe he would do such things.*

“But of course he didn’t count on me being alive. And now he’s hatched this scheme to get your diamonds anyway, pretending to be kidnapped.”

“Whoa,” Sydney said. “Pretending? How…why would he do that? That’s so awful.” He *would not* do that. She didn’t really know him but she knew him enough to be certain he would not do that to her. Well, mostly certain. He couldn’t possibly have had any part in this scheme. Or could he?

“It all makes sense. When stealing them from your room failed, Fletcher’s new plan was to trick you into thinking he was in danger so you’d give up the diamonds. I’m sure of it. I’ve been watching him since he arrived here at the resort. Had a couple of complaints about him the first day he got here. Suspected of picking someone’s pocket, for example. He’s nothing but a sweet-talking thief, a con man with a killer smile. I bet he’s scammed a lot of pretty women in his time.” His words stung her, sending a wave of nausea through her chest.

“But he gave me back the earring…that you took,” she insisted. “He took it from your pocket and gave it to me.”

“No!” Sykes stomped his foot in the snow. “Not true! *He* took it from your room. And then he gave it back to you from his own pocket. He gave it back so you wouldn’t suspect him.”

“Just so he could try to get the earrings back from me again later? That makes no sense.” Yet Sydney had the odd sensation that at least some of what Sykes was saying was true. His anger seemed genuine, the way his fists clenched tightly and his left eye twitched, as he spoke those words. Fletcher had after all, shot him and left him for dead, and then didn't seem overly concerned about reporting it right away. Why had they gone back to their cabins first? Didn’t reporting a fatal shooting take priority?

“So where is he then?” she asked. “What happened to him?”

“I'm not sure. I've been looking unsuccessfully for him for the last few hours, he’s definitely somewhere around here. Close enough to have written that ransom note Trent told me about, and broadcast that message we all heard over the intercom system. Sydney, I think you’re in grave danger. This man is a menace. He’ll stop at nothing to get those earrings. I wish I could have warned you. I wish you had let me catch up to you back there in the snow. I should have probably explained myself, but I didn’t want to yell across three hundred feet and scare you.”

“Well, you did scare me following me like that.” It was a nerve-wracking experience.

“I was openly trying to get to you. I was not trying to hide. It was Fletcher who was stalking you stealthily until he caught up with you, then tried to trick you into trusting him. And it worked.”

Sykes did have a point. He had been in plain sight for much of the time, not trying to sneak up on her. Still, there was something strange about the look in Sykes’ frequently blinking eyes. She thought back to Fletcher’s broadcasted message and the mystery word he’d uttered. She thought back to the ransom note and the handwriting that looked familiar. Sykes did have a point, who else would have kidnapped Fletcher? Who else could be involved in this? It was just Sykes chasing after a Fletcher in Sydney. Why were there be suddenly another person involved? Could Fletcher really have faked his own kidnapping to get the ransom from her counting on her feelings for him? That would be awful but again she didn't know him that well. She didn't know what he was capable of. She had a lot of questions but she knew this wasn't the time to ask them and she also knew that Sykes didn't have the answers for her.

“Why didn’t you identify yourself sooner?” she asked.

Sykes took a deep breath and then exhaled, the vapor a visible cloud. “The heat of the moment, I must have just assumed you knew it was resort security. I was at the banquet last night, I figured you’d have recognized me.”

“So what do we do now?” She was curious what he’d say.

“Well, I think that the drop is a trap,” he said gravely.

“A trap,” she repeated. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, I think Fletcher is hiding somewhere and come seven o’clock, he’s going to stake out the ticket booth. Possibly even intercept you before you get there or if you don't show track you down and just take them forcefully from you.” He nodded slowly, and then shuddered as if picturing harm coming to Sydney.

*Please remember, rabbit. Seven o’clock. Rabbit.* Those words kept playing in her head. She was sure now that it was rabbit and not rapid. *Wait a minute.* Rabbit, they did have a reference point for that. He was sending her a secret message. The rabbit they saw being swooped up by the hawk. The hawk. A jolt of ice cold realization shot through her body. The hawk that Fletcher had compared to Sykes. Fletcher was the rabbit. Sykes was the hawk, the one who’d kidnapped him. She swallowed hard and gripped her ski poles tightly.

But Sykes was still talking, not paying attention to her suddenly quivering lips. “So I don't think you should do the drop off. I should do it. I think you should give me the earrings and stay out of sight. That way you will be safe. He might be armed.”

“It’s supposed to be me. If he’s watching he will see it’s not me.”

“I’ll borrow your jacket. In the dark that’ll be enough to fool him.”

She had to remind herself. This was Fletcher. Sykes was talking about her Fletcher. She was a judge of character. She could tell he was good. Not evil, right?

The ransom note was still bothering her, but now an image started to materialize from the mists in her head. She was seeing the handwriting that this resembled, she was visualizing letters on a piece of paper. A small piece of lined paper. Not too many words. It was taped to something. In her room. Yes, that's where she saw it - in her room, in her cabin. It was on the paper that was taped to… To what? *Think Sydney, think! Picture it.* The piece of paper that was taped to the room safe. Yes, that's what it was! The paper that said *In case of emergency contact resort security*. It was his handwriting. It was a perfect match. It was Sykes. He wrote the ransom note.

“No, I really don't think that’s a good idea,” she said coldly. “I'll just do it.”

“Are you telling me that you trust Fletcher? You really shouldn’t.”

“I don’t know who to trust anymore,” she admitted.

“You can trust me,” Sykes said gently. “I want to protect you.”

She couldn’t play this game anymore. She had to confront him. She took a step closer, to show him she was not afraid, even though she was petrified. “I can’t,” she said.

“Yes you can.” His left eye twitched more, until he stopped it with his hand, swatting at it angrily with his fingers.

“No. I know it’s you,” she said staring into his small eyes. “The handwriting on the ransom note. It’s the same as the one on the room safe that you wrote.”

“Oh yes, I did write it because he made me do it. He had a gun pointed to me at me and he made me write the note.”

She believed it for a second, a split second. He’d answered quickly, but the slightest of hesitation told her he was lying. And even if it was the truth, he’d been lying by not telling her this critical piece of information, by acting confused about the note and the announcement over the PA system.

“All right, Sydney, if you’re going to make this difficult then so will I.” Sykes pulled a gun from his pocket, his coat pocket and aimed it at Sydney’s chest.

“What are you going to do? Kill me?” she said defiantly. She was more angry than scared.

“Just give me the earrings.” He put out his other hand and motioned impatiently.

“I knew it was you all along,” she said.

“Fletcher is guilty too, but he’s not getting these, I am.”

“Tell me what you did with him,” she demanded.

“Oh, he’ll probably be fine,” Sykes said. “Unless he doesn't survive the fire.” He snickered.

“Fire? Jesus. Tell me where he is!” Sydney demanded.

“Find him yourself,” he said. “Now hand ‘em over.”

She took an earring out of her right ear and held it up. “You want this? Here.” She tossed it to him carefully, in a high arcing throw.

“Are you crazy?” Sykes began taking a step backwards and then another step, reaching his free hand high into the air. He hit the fence just as he caught the earring. “Aha!” he said triumphantly just before the fence gave way under the weight of his body’s momentum. Sykes disappeared over the side of the precipice, his expression changing from triumph to horror as the fence splintered. His brief scream was followed by a series of thuds and then a telling, eerie silence.