

'DANCING LESSONS

by

Tracy Lea Carnes

*"A wise, funny, and slyly knowing novel about Sundance, filmmaking, writing, and creating not just the life you think you want for yourself—but discovering the life you actually need. As effervescent as a Perrier with a delicious bite of lime." -- Caroline Leavitt, New York Times Bestselling author of **With or Without You**, **Pictures of You**, **Is This Tomorrow** and **Cruel Beautiful World**.*

CHAPTER ONE

"Red or White?"

"I'm sorry."

"Wine," she tells me.

"Oh, um, white please," I tell her. I'm preoccupied.

"Well, I hope it's your next book keeping your thoughts in action. My club is just eating this one up," she gushes. "So beautifully written."

"Thanks, Kathy. I'm working on it," I tell her. The fact is, halfway through this new one, I'm stumped, un-motivated. I need a vacation. I've taken on additional freelancing work to get by. Being an author is not quite as lucrative as you would think. A fellow author I know made the bestseller list a couple of times. Sylvia Horton-Hicks. We share the same agent. She's lucky. But she has a lawyer husband who is the breadwinner so there's no pressure to earn the living. She has a nanny. She can write at her leisure. For me, it's become more work and less joy. Oh, to be so lucky.

I'm also an adjunct professor at the University of New Orleans. UNO. Composition and a Southern lit class. I get paid by the class. It's definitely not a living wage. It may even be below minimum. I've also been known to work the occasional shift at Banana Republic or Nordstrom's just for the discount on clothes before book tours. My meager advances go to pay off my credit cards or play catch up on my student loans from my undergrad degree and the MFA I thought I absolutely needed. That was a waste. My first novel, though, was turned into a cheesy adaptation of a Lifetime movie. My rights were worth a whopping fifty thousand dollars. After my agent took her fifteen percent, I bought a reliable used car, paid off a credit card, and put a down payment on a tiny renovated shotgun house in the French Quarter. Glamorous author, yeah, right. Unless you are constantly sitting atop the bestseller lists week after week after week and selling your rights to major movie productions, this is pretty much the life of a struggling, not even mid-list, author.

There are fifteen ladies and one very flamboyant man gathered around the courtyard of Broussard's to hear me read from my latest novel, *The Street Singer*. They all wear different variations of a tiara, some homemade, some your ordinary sparkling tiara. The flamboyant man sports the largest, a crown that would make Miss Universe jealous. Apparently, tiaras are a thing with the club. I like it. It's fun and it makes me feel at ease.

The book has been out well over a year and has just recently been picked up by Kathy Murphy's book club, The Pulpwood Queens, hence the tiaras. My agent tells me it's a very big accomplishment and honor. Evidently it's the largest book club in the world. Sales have definitely improved. I've gone from buying three dollar wine to five. It's really too early to see any significant impact but my agent and I are hopeful. Anything to boost sales and give me the literary career I've actually dreamed about.

In early February I will appear at the Pulpwood Queens Girlfriend Weekend with other featured authors. Sylvia will also be there. That's how my book ended up in Kathy's hands. Sylvia put it there. Thank you, Sylvia.

"Oh, I can't tell you how excited I am to introduce this author to your chapter of my book club," Kathy trumpets. Introduced. Funny. I think I've waited on half these ladies at Nordstrom's.

"This month's alternate selection, *The Street Singer*, is such a beautifully written tome set on the streets of your very own New Orleans." Kathy gushes. "Austen Landry everybody!"

I stand, smile at the gathering and make my way to the music stand substituting for a podium. I acknowledge their warm applause.

"Thank you. You're so kind," I say as their applause dies down.

"What inspired you to write such an amazing kiss to the city?" Kathy asks me. She smiles and puts me at ease.

"Oh, um, well... I was walking around Jackson Square one afternoon and I noticed this woman in a tattered and faded red cabaret dress singing Ella Fitzgerald acapella to the tourists," I tell them. The gathering leans in.

"I don't know how many times I've passed by her and not paid her any mind at all. But that day I stopped and lingered. I was in another era, transported by her voice to a N'awlins of the past." I notice my Southern drawl emerges and takes over from the mid-western nonaccent I tried very hard to acquire during numerous hours of speech lab throughout my undergrad days at NYU.

"And I wondered about her life and the journey that brought her to now... singing on the streets for pocket change."

"So very Eudora Welty, don't you think?" Kathy asks the gathering.

"*The Worn Path*," someone acknowledges.

"Exactly. *The Worn Path*," Kathy affirms.

"I don't know that it's Welty," I say, not feeling worthy of such a compliment but one of my coveted jacket blurbs says it, so it must be true. The thought boosts my confidence to continue my reading.

"All writers are observers," I say, "and everyone in this courtyard has a story."

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I smile and sign the copies brought by the club members. To top off my signing, now everyone wants a selfie with me. For why, I cannot fathom. I am no one of significance. In another month or so, these people will go through their photo app and wonder who the hell I am.

I look up at the last woman in line. She just stares at me and says nothing.

I raise the book toward her and ask, "To whom...?" and leave it hanging.

"Oh. To Eugenia."

"To Eugenia..." I say and scrawl with my sharpie. *Be your own song, Austen Landry*. I blow on the ink, close the book, and hand it to her.

"You look so familiar to me. I've been trying to place you all night. Are you with the Symphony League?" Eugenia asks me.

No, that's not where you know me. I probably sold her that gosh awful pantsuit she is sporting tonight.

I smile at her. "No, ma'am. Must be from my jacket cover picture there or perhaps from the papers. I have been in the news once or twice." I haven't lied. It's been quite easy to get local press thanks to my publisher's PR department and I've even managed to rate the occasional blurb or picture here or there in the Times Picayune. I'm world famous... in New Orleans. My fame tends to last as long as the weekend book conference, panel discussion or book signing. That's the thing about being a lowly midlist author. Paparazzi never seek me out.

* * *

I thank Kathy for the opportunity she's given me. Anyone promoting my work is always appreciated. With over six hundred chapters world-wide, this means sales and a hopeful renewal of my contract with the indie publisher I'm with as well as a continued relationship with my agent. If push ever came to shove, I'd rather lose my publisher than my agent; agents are an absolute bitch to obtain. I got lucky and absolutely love mine.

Kathy invites me to appear at her annual Girlfriend Weekend over in Texas. The thought of being around my peers and booklovers intrigues me and I accept the invite. She tells me there will be lots of fun antics and a themed costume ball at the end. Sylvia is the main featured author and also co-hosting the event. How can I say no. I need some fun in my life and this conference sounds wonderful.

I decide to forego the expensive cab and walk back to my house in the crisp December NOLA air. New Orleans at Christmas is a magical time. Smells of pralines, pine, spices and Lucky Dogs fill my nostrils while jazz and zydeco versions of beloved carols adjust my stroll to its rhythm. Sadly, the magic fades as a scantily clad young college student stumbles out of Razou's and barfs her hurricane, Jello shots, and whatever else

she's managed to consume. Another underdressed girl tails behind her and grabs her hair as the heaving continues. I shake my head as I walk by them and remember a time in the not so distance past my college roommate did the same for me outside a Williamsburg dive bar; such fun times. Well, fun until the next day.

It's that same roommate that sometimes stays at my house, Palmer Endicott. She has a place in Brooklyn and pays me rent when she's working down here on film or video projects. I'm so grateful. She works between the two cities as an up and coming cinematographer and sometimes director. She films a lot of shorts, the occasional indie film, and tons of corporate instructional and informational videos. Earlier this year she filmed an indie starring Radley Seager, that gorgeous actor you see on the covers of all the tabloids while waiting to check out at the grocery store. I can glean so much from the covers. Last week he and his girlfriend, Jaz Snow, were on the rocks. Jaz Snow? Really? I don't know who the hell she is but the name is lame as hell. This week she's sporting a baby bump and they couldn't be more in love. I shake my head. Who the hell cares about that crap? Doesn't interest me one bit. But I am happy for Palmer. Her career is building. Me, I just hope someone from the book club tonight is simply reading my novel and not passing it on to the used bookstore, and oblivion.

* * *

I reach my house on Burgundy and notice the lights lit up inside. Palmer made it in from New York. I walk in and find bags and boxes full of camera equipment littering my small living room. Yep, she's home.

"Austen, is that you?" Palmer yells from the back bedroom.

"Yes, it's me," I answer as I throw my keys in the bowl on the table by the door.

Palmer trots down the hall and into the living room. "Roomdog!" she greets me and hugs me. The visor on her tattered baseball cap pushes into my head. I pull back. The cap reads *Sundance* in faded embroidery. Palmer always has a hat on, covering up her thick, long blonde hair I'd kill to have. My thin brown frizzy hair is a bitch to style which is why I wear a lot of hats. Palmer's hair is fabulous yet she's always in a hat despite it. Always. She must have hundreds. More than I have, anyway.

"Where have you been?" she asks. "Your car is in the driveway."

"Book signing down at Broussard's."

"The restaurant?"

"The very one. A book club chapter rented out the courtyard for their meeting. I did a reading and a signing. I took a cab there and then walked home," I tell her.

"Interesting," she says. "Good turn out?"

"Fifteen copies sold and signed. Yea me."

"You're pulling in the big bucks now, Landry."

"Yes I am and blew the entire profits on the cab ride and a Lucky Dog."

Palmer would have driven and found a parking place right up front. If I had driven, the closest parking space would have been here in front of my house on Burgundy. Why even bother?

"Want some wine? I just opened up a bottle of that Chardonnay we both like," she offers as she makes her way into the kitchen to pour me a glass.

"Sure," I reply.

"I have news!" she shouts.

"Oh?"

In a few seconds she emerges with a nice big glass of wine for me.

We plop down on the sofa together in the living room to catch up.

"Remember that Radley Seager film I shot earlier this year in New York?"

"Yeah," I tell her. "Gawd, he's so hot."

"I know, right? Well, it got into Sundance!"

"No way?"

"My first feature film into a major festival. This could be so huge for my career," she tells me. She holds up her glass and we clink them.

A sudden pang of envy hits me. Huge for the career. I'm thirty-three years old. I thought I'd be where she is by now. I have an MFA in creative writing. Look where it's gotten me... in debt.

"Sundance is the best, I swear. All that swag and parties. Gawd, it's so much fun," she gushes.

"I miss that face cream you got that one year in all your swag," I tell her.

"Which one?"

"The one they sell at Nordstrom's for two hundred a jar," I explain.

"Oh, that one," she realizes. "Yeah, I liked that too!"

"You haven't been in a couple of years, have you?" I ask.

"No. I got that job shooting that damn tv show last year when it was going on, remember?"

"The one where you got fired a week later so the producer could hire his son who had just graduated from online film school?"

"Bingo! I hate nepotism, I really do," Palmer says then swigs her wine. "No wonder that show got canceled."

I sip my wine and think how glamorous and fun her work and life is. My work is done huddled over a computer for hours at a time. If I do get out of town, for a book conference or a signing, it's still work, and many times at my own expense, which is why my credit cards are always in need of paying down. It's expensive being an author, especially at a small indie press where their promotional funds are limited. You take the perks when you can get them.

"Sundance. Wow, Palmer, that's really amazing," I tell her, finishing my wine. "Congratulations."

"I know. Thanks."

Is what I'm feeling self loathing or envy? I can't tell.

* * *

I wake up the next morning, sluggish and exhausted. I didn't sleep well. My mind spent the night searching for motivation to continue forward on my next novel. I haven't written a word on it in over two weeks. Lately my words have been devoted to an article on the newly announced season of the New Orleans Opera, a sappy piece about friendship for a regional monthly glossy, and my little weekly column that runs in a top online section of a national mag. During the rest of the time I have been in front of the computer but it wasn't writing. No. Binge watching episodes of online tv shows in my pajamas all day. See, that's the life of a glamorous author – not coming out of your pajamas for five days. I live it. I breathe it. And after not showering for four days, I smell it, too. But Palmer's here for now

and I won't let her see me at my latest incarnation; that of slob. I will not show her that I'm falling into a shame spiral of despair.

In the kitchen I fill the electric kettle and turn it on; fill the French press with breakfast blend and then stare at the pot, waiting for it to boil.

Palmer bounces into the kitchen, dressed no doubt for work and sporting another Sundance hat.

"What's up for you this morning, Landry?"

"The usual exciting life of a glamorous novelist – eating cereal straight out of the box while getting wrapped up in a marathon of those sisters' reality show that plays on a continuous loop on cable."

Palmer rolls her eyes. "Chasing the Chastains?"

"Bingo!"

"Oh my gosh, Landry, do you have writer's block again?"

"Would seem so," I reply. She knows me better than anyone.

"Austen, this is not good," she says, placing her hands on my shoulders. "Not good at all."

I shrug as the kettle comes to a boil and clicks off. I turn and fill the French press and pour us both a cup.

"Are you still seeing that lawyer?" Palmer inquires. "What's his name?"

"Sometimes," I reply. "And his name is Eric. Eric Guillory. You've met him, remember?"

"The dude with the small..." Palmer holds up her pinky finger.

"That's the one."

"Girlfriend, this is New Orleans. You don't date boring lawyers with tiny penises. You date artists; a musician; hell, a Lucky Dog vendor."

"Starving artists, like me?"

"Girl, you are hardly starving."

"Tell that to my student loans," I say, bringing the conversation into the reality that it is.

"Things will pick up with you, too. You got that book club thing. That should help."

"True, but it will take time to see the benefits," I relate. "Unless I somehow garner instant fame, I don't see that happening right now."

"Wow, you really are on a downer."

"Yep." I sip my coffee.

I look up at Palmer and see her mind working. She's always up to something.

"You are in desperate need of a vacation, aren't you?" she asks.

"Probably but I can't afford one. Not now. Maybe after the next book comes out," I tell her.

"Next book? At the rate you're going?"

"Palmer, it's just not a good time for me right now."

"Why don't you come to Sundance with me?"

"Palmer! I can't afford that. I know how much it cost you a couple of years ago when you went. No, I can't."

"Think about it, Austen, please?"

"I'll think about it," I say but not with the enthusiasm she is looking for.

"Good." Palmer smiles. "I gotta run."

"Where are you going?"

"The hospital," she says.

"Hospital?!"

"Relax. Corporate video. Easy money," she says. "Gotta keep me in the lifestyle to which I have grown accustomed."

"I like how you think, Endicott." She means well but that last statement just hits my gut hard and drives my stagnant life home.

* * *

I linger in the shower and try to force myself to think about my novel and inspire the muse to come and visit my head. But I have nothing. It wouldn't matter anyway. Today is my teaching day at UNO and then two hours of office availability and the end of the semester. None of my students seem to care. They just want an easy A. They don't get Faulkner, O'Connor, and Welty. What they do get are Cliff's Notes.

I always like the drive out to UNO; Cabrini Park and The Fairgrounds, home of Jazz Fest. Palmer always has the best hookups for the festival and we see almost every act VIP. It's definitely the way to go. Lifestyle, yes, I guess I have become accustomed to it, too.

Today will be an easy day for me; final exams. It's boring watching students writing essays. It's always the one day I catch up on social media by promoting my books and articles. I hate self-promotion which is why I post the random cat video or dogs talking to their owners. It breaks up my selfish but necessary marketing. I try not to crack up and disturb the class but this particular cat video is quite amusing.

My phone buzzes. Text message. It's Eric. At first I brighten then realize, it's Eric and look down at my pinky and shake my head.

"You free tonight?" Eric texts.

I think about it as I look up at the class deep in thought about what to write in their essays. *"Yes. That would be good. Thanks,"* I text back.

"Pick you up at 7 then," he texts.

"K," I respond. He's not the most romantic, which makes me even less inclined to be romantic in return. But perhaps, at my age, I should stop and think about it. Is he going to be the best I can ever do?

* * *

I hear the horn of Eric's Porsche outside. He can't find a parking place. I look at myself one more time in the mirror... colorful skirt, short lace up boots, oversized cotton sweater and a hat in my signature boho style. I have no idea where we are going. Commander's, Two Sister's, who the hell knows. As a text message buzzes in my handbag, I scrawl a note for Palmer to let her know I'm out and probably won't be back until tomorrow morning.

"I'm coming, I'm coming," I say to my purse as my text goes off again. I walk out the door, lock it, and turn to see Eric, jamming to the latest Coldplay and drumming his fingers impatiently on the dash.

He doesn't even open the car door for me as I plop in the seat and shut the door.

"Hey," I tell him.

He looks at his watch. "What took you? We've got reservations," he says.

"Oh. You didn't tell me that," I reply. Nice to see you, too.

"What are you wearing?" he asks as he looks me up and down.

"What's wrong with it?"

"Nothing," he says and sighs. We take off down Burgundy.

"Where are we going?" I ask him as I press my hat further down on my head, feeling even smaller than he already makes me.

"Upperline," he says.

"Nice," I reply. "How was your day?"

"It was work. The usual," he says with no enthusiasm. "Did you write today?"

"It was finals, then office hours."

"You're never going to finish that book if you don't work on it. When's the last time you wrote, Austen?"

"I'm letting it stew for a bit. It needs stewing." What does he know about writing a novel anyway? It's not like writing a brief or planning an elderly lady's trust."

"You should discipline yourself, that's all," he says.

"When it flows, I do," I tell him. "But when it doesn't, I have to let my thoughts sort it out. And they always do."

"Do all writers do this?"

"Yes," I tell him. "We're all quirky and weird."

"I don't get quirky and weird," he says.

Then why are you with me, I wonder to myself. I'm the epitome of weird and quirky in his eyes. I'm one DNA strand away from sitting on a stool down on Frenchman Street and typing out spontaneous poems on a portable Smith Corona to the tourists and hipsters for money. He hates them with a passion. He calls them Noets. He's with me because he likes the idea of his girlfriend being slightly famous. A writer, no wait, an author. I make for good

conversation and exotic bragging rights. 'An author, how fabulous,' they gush. I'm his exact opposite and I think that maybe I'm perhaps the freak flag he's afraid to fly.

But I know why I'm with Eric. I think of the stability he would offer. I think of my friend Sylvia's successful writing career and I want that. More than anything. I'm envious of that and it drives me. She's a good writer because her focus is only on her work. My focus is on the roulette wheel that is my life. I long for it to stop spinning and just be about my work without having to worry about the rest of the crap. Eric could provide that. I'm just sad that Eric would actually have to be a part of that.

We arrive at Upperline and take our usual table in the back corner.

"Your usual wine?" the waiter asks Eric.

"Please," he says.

Everything is the usual. Usual wine. Usual gumbo. Usual rack of lamb with mint madeira sauce. It's always the usual with him. Change and spontaneity are not something in Eric's reality. Everything is predictable, even the sex. Yet here I am stuck in his reality and not mine.

"I've been thinking about houses lately," he tells me.

"What forever for?" I ask him. "You have a great place."

"But it's not enough for the future," he says. "I'm wanting to take the next step, Austen."

Oh, god.

"Next year I want us to get our act together," he says. "I want us to start making plans."

I take a sip of wine. What I've been longing for is here and now I'm scared to death because it's here. It's now. Maybe I liked the thought of it because I knew it was always in the future. Keyword meaning *future*.

"I care about you tremendously, Austen," he says. "And I want to take the next steps with you."

"You do?"

"Of course I do," Eric says. "I'm an estate planner, Austen. I'm ready to start planning my own estate."

I finish off my wine and reach for the bottle. Oh, dear god.

* * *

Back at his place, a loft overlooking the river and the Rice Mill, our sex is predictable, plain, flavorless, and unspontaneous, much like I imagine his law practice as an estate planner. Would our lives be like this, I wonder? I look at him asleep, his back turned toward me, and I have my answer. His apartment is orderly, proper and sparse. A house would be the same. My house is cluttered, eclectic, and warm, which he hates.

I pull on my oversized sweater and walk over to the large expanse of windows that overlook the river and the late-night lights of the city. New Orleans is colorful and spicy. I turn and scan his loft. The dark stained concrete is cold under my feet and the two stark white couches face each other like two blocks of cream cheese waiting for pepper jelly to be poured on them for a party that sadly will never happen. I told Eric he needs a rug but he has refused. He thinks I'm trying to hippie it up. But a life with Eric would mean stability, a home, and the time to write without pressure, just like Sylvia. But Sylvia has love. I don't

feel love with Eric. I don't even know if I feel like. This feels hollow and empty. And now he wants to plan a life with me. A boring, flavorless life.

Eric stirs and looks for me.

"Austen?"

"I'm here. I just got up for some water," I say. "I'm coming."

I walk back over to the bed, hoping for a cuddle. Instead, he gives me a kiss and turns back over to his original position away from me, falling asleep almost instantly; his dull snore breaking the silence. I don't know if I can take a lifetime of this. Maybe it's this sort of life that pushes bored housewives to shun their English lit degrees and write horrid romance novels about pirates kidnapping them to far off places of excitement, lust and love. I get it now. They've all married dull, predictable estate planning attorneys. This is not what I pictured the life of a successful author to be.

* * *

I walk through the front door and find Palmer in the middle of a sea of camera gear and gadgets spread out in the entire living room. To her it's her life and passion. To me, I couldn't even begin to tell you how they all go together.

"Good morning, Landry," Palmer announces.

"Hey, Endicott," I say as I put my keys and purse down on the only free space in the living room.

"Did you have fun?" she asks me then looks up at me and realizes the answer. "I'm sorry."

"It is what it is," I tell her and sit on the couch, worried I'm going to sit on a gazillion dollar lens.

"Then why stay with him?"

"He's nice to me and can offer a stable future," I justify.

"Nice? Do you want a boring, vanilla life?"

"Vanilla actually has flavor," I say to her. "This isn't even close. Maybe that's all there is after a certain point."

"Look at you. You are so not vanilla and right now you're wearing at least six or seven flavors there," she points out. "You're just in a rut. Why don't you think about coming to Sundance with me?"

"Seriously?"

"Seriously. I mean, it's the 'dance, Austen! The 'dance! And you'd have a free place to stay..."

"At Radley Seager's house?"

"Yes, at Radley Seager's house, where else would you stay?"

"Palmer, I'm not..." I start. "Maybe I could stay at a hotel or something," I think, then realize my bank account wouldn't allow it anyway.

"You wouldn't dare. You'd be my guest and I'm allowed a guest," she gushes. "Please just think about it. You need to get away."

"When is it?"

"We leave January 18th for twelve fun filled days."

"I'll think about it."

"It's Radley Seager, what's not to think about?"

It does sound lovely, glamorous, and fun, all the things I've been longing for in my dull life right now. "You're right," I tell her.

* * *

Andrea Moore is my literary agent and my whole career depends upon what she does for me. It took me a long time to get her and I must hold on to her for dear life. I dial her number. If I'm truly going to consider Sundance, I need some justification. Maybe I can do some press work or an article or two. *My week at Sundance* or something like it. Andrea will know what I should do.

"Austen Landry, how are you?" she asks me over the phone.

"I'm good, you?"

"Did you send that article in yet?"

"Two days ago."

"Fantastic," she says again. With Andrea, everything is fantastic.

"Look, I've got a chance to go to the Sundance Film Festival and I was wondering if you could wrangle me up an assignment or two, if there was anything..."

"Kind of late in the game, Austen, to be honest. Those assignments have probably already gone out."

"Oh," I say.

"Let me look anyway for you," she tells me.

I can hear her looking through things on her desk and on her computer. I know she's looking because she keeps saying, "No... no... no... no...", which means I do not fit for those assignments and makes me feel even smaller than I already feel, if that's possible.

I let out a sigh as she keeps shuffling papers and clicking keystrokes.

"Interviewer for a feature article on Radley Seager for Harpers," she says just loud enough for me to hear. "If only..."

"Interview with Radley Seager?" I ask.

"Yep. With Harper's Bazaar. What I wouldn't give to interview that hottie..."

"I'm supposed to stay at his place at Sundance," I tell her.

"Yeah, right," she says, not believing in me.

"Seriously. Twelve days at his rental in Park City, Utah. I'm not joking."

"Well Austen Landry, you lucky gal. How the hell did you score that invite?"

"My roommate, Palmer, was the cinematographer for a film he was in and it got into Sundance. She's the one that invited me actually."

"Well, well, well," she says. "You *are* the luckiest gal on the planet. Let me make a call to Harper's and see what I can manage."

"Thanks."

I hang up my phone and pray she can get me the gig. It will be a sign. If I get it, I will go. If I don't... If I don't get it, then what? My heart stops a beat. I know my life is in a rut; Eric, my book, everything. Everyone I know seems to be excelling in their careers and getting their lives together but me. I need a break. I need this.

Washing clothes is not my favorite activity but it passes the time while I wait to hear back from Andrea. I gather up my dirty clothes and stare at my closet. I live in a semi-tropical climate. We wear shorts at Christmas. If I did manage to go to Sundance, what the hell would I even wear? I don't have the heavy sweaters and coats it will require for a few days, let alone twelve of them. Why am I even considering this?

"Whatcha staring at there, Landry?" Palmer asks me from the hallway.

"The fact that I have no real winter clothes," I tell her.

"Sure you do," Palmer says as she enters my room and stares along side me at my closet full of cottons, linens, lightweight jackets, and thin sweaters. Nothing that screams going to a mountain ski resort.

"I see a pea coat in there, Landry," Palmer points out.

"So, then I'm all set, huh?"

"I'd say you're good to go there."

"I can't go to Sundance, Palmer," I tell her. "I can't."

"Don't let your closet dictate your opportunities, Austen. It's Sundance. It's Radley Seager. Radley freakin' Seager! And he's a doll. You'll like him. He'll love you."

"All the more reason why I shouldn't go. I don't belong. I'm nobody compared to him and even you," I point out. "Look what you've accomplished.

"Look what you've accomplished," Palmer says. "National Book Award.."

"Nominee," I correct her. "Only a nominee."

"Nominee. You're working on your fourth novel. You're a book club selection..."

"Alternate selection," I point out.

"Biggest book club in the world, Austen. And one of those books you've written has been immortalized as a cable TV movie," she says. "You belong there just as much as anyone."

"You had to bring up the movie, didn't you?"

"Of course!"

Palmer walks off and leaves me to ponder my accomplishments and my lack of appropriate wardrobe. I am accomplished. I worked damn hard on those novels. And even

though it was hideous, I can brag that one them was adapted. I smile. I do belong there even though my closet says otherwise.

As I stroll down the hall with a renewed self-confidence and a load of dirty clothes, my phone buzzes in my pocket. I pull it out and see that it is Andrea.

"Hello, An..."

"Girlfriend, you are one lucky gal," she gushes

"Really?"

"Normally, Harpers pays three thousand for a featured interview. I got you six thousand," Andrea says.

"What?" I drop the basket of dirty clothes.

"Since you'll have almost full access, Harpers has awarded you the interview plus they want a personal essay of your experience for one of their sister mags," she tells me. "Oh, and they're giving you a press pass and a reimbursement on your airfare and food. Girlfriend, you're in."

"Oh my god, I'm in." I hang up the phone after thanking her and scream for Palmer.

She sprints down the hall. "What's wrong?"

I start to hyperventilate.

"What?"

"I am interviewing Radley Seager for a feature in Harper's Bazaar. They're paying me six thousand dollars to go to Sundance," I tell her. "Plus expenses."

"Really?"

"Plus a press pass," I manage to spit out. "I'm going to Sundance!"

* * *

"What do you mean you're going to Sundance?" Eric asks me. "The film festival?"

"Yes, the film festival," I tell him over drinks at The Carousel Bar at the Hotel Monteleone. The slow moving bar that spins is typically my favorite place for cocktails but somehow Eric is managing to suck out all of the happiness I had earlier today.

"Why on earth would you want to go there?"

"Because I've been invited and I've been assigned some really good freelance work while there," I tell him. I don't want to tell him what the work is or where I'm staying. I know he'll blow a gasket. He may never say the "L" word to me but he is possessive as hell. I once had a date with one of my gay friends as his plus one to a party. It made the social pages and I thought his head was going to launch off his body and fly in geosynchronous orbit over the Crescent City, frowning at me over head.

"You hate movies," he says.

"No. I love movies," I tell him. "It's you who doesn't like them." Eric never watches movies. It's CNN, Sports, or CNBC. That's about his limit for television. I think we've gone to the cinema once and it was a documentary.

"Where are you going to stay?"

"With Palmer, of course," I tell him. "I'm staying with her." I can't tell him there will be more people in the house.

"Maybe I could go with you," he says.

"And do what, Eric?" I ask him. "It's a film festival. I'll be working all day."

"I could... ski," he says.

"Do you ski?"

"I could learn," he affirms. "It would be fun."

"Eric, it's going to be crowded. You don't even go to Mardi Gras parades because of the people. You'd need a credential to get around to some of the venues..."

"Get me one," he says.

"It's not my doing, Eric. It's for work," I tell him. "It's some very good work for me and it's an article for a major national publication.

"I didn't even know you were planning this," he says.

"It just came up. Palmer invited me to come with her and my agent enabled me," I say.

"How long will you be gone?"

"About twelve days," I tell him.

"Twelve days," he says and gulps his cocktail, waves at the bartender for another.

"What about house hunting?"

"We can do that when I get back," I tell him.

"And your job at the university?"

"My TA will teach my classes while I'm gone."

"You've just had it all figured out before you told me," Eric says.

But the truth is he has it all figured out for me. And while it sounds good on the paper in my head, I need the time to think and get as far away from the situation as I can. Is a life with Eric what I truly want? Right now all I feel like doing is getting off the carousel and running.

CHAPTER TWO

Wednesday before the Festival

My computer rests on the tray table in front of me with an interview of Radley pulled up and my notes in my lap. I couldn't get a seat assignment next to Palmer so I'm stuck seated next to a gabby woman in her seventies who is on her way to Salt Lake City to see her grandchildren. She is probably the only one on this flight not going to Sundance. Instead of knowing everything I need to know about Radley in preparation for our interview, I know everything there is to know about her four grandchildren and their dog.

"Is that Radley Seager on your computer?" she asks me.

"Yes," I tell her.

"Oh, you must be his second biggest fan," she says.

"Second biggest?" I ask her.

"I'm his first," she points out proudly. "I even belong to his fan club," she brags. "Isn't he a dream?"

I look at his picture. Perfectly coiffed black hair, sun kissed skin, and a tailored suit and tie. Everything a woman wants, even seventy year old ladies.

"Yes, he is," I tell her.

"He even sent me a personally autographed picture of him. 'To Geraldine. With Love, Radley,'" she says and swoons.

"That was very nice of him," I say. "Have you ever met him?"

"Oh, no, no, no. I haven't met him," she says. "Have you?"

I look into her mature eyes and see the smile on her face. I'm not even going to go there. This flight is long and I don't need her added attention.

"No, I've never met him," I tell her, which isn't a lie at all.

"That Jazmine Snow, though. She's not right for him."

"Oh?"

"She's way too young," she points out. "Oh, she's cute and perky but there's something not right there."

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"I don't think she loves him the way he loves her."

"They've been dating for almost a year now," I tell her. And then somehow I find myself realizing I'm in the same boat with Eric. We've been going out for over a year and we've both yet to tell each other the "L" word. Love. I scroll down to a paparazzi photo of Jaz and Radley out and about in New York City. She's on the phone, distracted, and he's smiling at someone else but only part of that person's body is in the shot. A man perhaps. Maybe just a fan. Palmer has told me he's very polite and generous to those around him.

"She's going to break his heart," the woman says.

"You think?"

"They always do."

* * *

I wait for Palmer at the top of the gangway at our arrival gate in Salt Lake. I flew coach while she flew first class on a last minute upgrade. She's engrossed in conversation with an obviously artistic guy, probably a musician. She has a thing for musicians, drummers especially. They stop outside the gangway and exchange numbers before he reunites with his group, who look like they might all be in a band.

Palmer looks up and smiles at me as the guy walks off.

"Who was that?" I ask her.

"You don't know who that was?" she asks me in disbelief.

"No, who is he?"

"The drummer for the band Hanley," she says.

"Oh, wow."

"And he's putting us on their list as guests for their concert this weekend," she practically squeals. "Guests. V-I-P. Damn, I love Sundance."

"So what's the plan?" I ask as we both roll our carry-ons down the concourse and toward baggage claim.

"Julian's plane comes in from New York in a bout an hour and a half and then right after that, Jaz and Radley arrive from Los Angeles."

"L.A? I thought they primarily lived in New York," I say.

"Primarily yes but it's awards season there, and they took meetings and such," she tells me.

"Of course," I say.

"And then we limo up to the rental."

And then we limo up to the rental. I love this.

* * *

The conveyer belt begins and the throngs of people push forward, eagerly waiting on their bags. I get crushed in the rush so I back off and let the people crowd in.

Palmer flirts across the conveyer to the drummer and the rest of his band. They grab their bags and cases shaped like guitars from the conveyer as it snakes around.

Fifteen minutes later the throngs of people have dissipated, and Palmer has her bag while I'm still waiting. Only a few bags remain on the conveyer, none of which are mine.

"Do you think someone took your bag?" Palmer asks.

"No, I've been watching. I haven't seen it come around," I tell her, panic starting to well up inside me. All those clothes I bought on a credit card I can't even pay off are neatly packed in an oversized suitcase I had to pay extra for. Why does this always happen to me? I have pajamas, robe, a change of underwear, a few toiletries that were allowed in my carry-on, some lamb skin boots, and a printed copy of my next novel for editing in case I get bored. Bored. Really, Austen? Why you needed to bring that manuscript and not a fresh pair of jeans in that bag was a stupid idea. Stupid.

"We'll go report it. They'll find it, I promise," she reassures me.

We make our way down to the airline's baggage claim office and report my bag. The guy puts my information into the keyboard and then smiles.

"I found your bag, Ms. Landry," he says.

"Oh great," I say. "Where is it so I can go get it?"

"It's on its way to Hawaii," he reports.

"Hawaii?!" Palmer and I ask in unison.

"Yes, ma'am," he says.

"Oh my god." I feel like I'm going to faint. "Hawaii?"

"How funny," Palmer says.

"Funny? No," I say, trying to catch my breath. Fifteen hundred dollars worth of new winter clothes with the tags still on them have decided to up and vacation in Hawaii. I'm sick.

"As soon as that flight lands, I'll have it put into turnaround immediately and I can have it delivered to you between one and four this morning," he tells me.

"One and four?"

"That's the best I can do, Ms. Landry," he apologizes.

Palmer can see I'm on the edge of crying. "That will be fine, sir," she tells the guy and scribbles down our address and hands it to him. "This is her first Sundance," she tells him.

I fight back the tears and smile at him.

"Don't worry, Ms. Landry. We'll get it to you."

"Thanks," Palmer says and escorts me out of the office. "Let's go get some coffee in the cafe and wait for the others. They'll be here soon."

* * *

After a welcome cup of coffee and a shared muffin, Palmer and I make our way down to transportation where a limo driver holds up a sign that reads *Seager*. Several photographers stand around the area, trying to catch the stars. As we approach the driver, the photographers suddenly raise their cameras and begin to click away, then stop.

"They're nobody," one of them utters as the clicks cease.

I've never felt so self conscious in all my life, like I'm standing in the middle of the airport naked, vulnerable and all the excitement and anticipation recedes from my body. I have been put in my place again. I am nobody.

Another man takes my carryon bag as well as Palmer's bags and places them into a white panel van. I walk toward it but am ushered instead towards a black stretch SUV limo. As we are about to get in, we hear the photographers yelling and clicking away. It's them. Radley Seager, dressed in jeans, a black sweater, black and white scarf, and sun glasses,

holds the hand of Jazmine with a 'z' Snow or Jaz as they call her; a tall, super skinny woman in expensive black skinny jeans, Christian Louboutin boots, and a black Stella McCartney sweater I saw last month in Vogue. She also sports sun glasses. Wow. Every bit the Hollywood stars they are in the tabloids I see at the grocery store. By tomorrow morning, their pictures will be all over the internet on the blogs and entertainment sites.

Trailing behind them is a somewhat intense looking guy, dressed in jeans, a black sweater, and a black pea coat talking on a phone. Behind him is a chisel-cut muscled man in jeans, a sweater and a blazer and a woman dressed fashionably in a black dress, boots, fur coat and fur hat, also on the phone. They all pay us no mind as they duck into the limo before we follow suit.

The limo is lined in two banks of leather benches with LED lights running around the mirrored ceiling. A full bar with crystal decanters and glasses splits one of the banks of seats in half. Jaz has taken her place on the side of the bar while Radley has positioned himself on the other side. Palmer and I find ourselves seated across from Radley with the fur clad woman seated next to Radley and the intense guy sitting across from Jaz. I look and see the chiseled-cut man take the passenger seat next to the limo driver.

Radley leans over and gives Palmer a hug and then sits back down.

"So good to see you again, Palmer. I've missed you," he says as he removes his glasses and pushes them up on his head. He has let his hair grow out a bit from the picture I saw on the plane. It's messy even. He has a day or two worth of facial stubble as well.

"So good to see you and Jaz again, too," Palmer says. Jazmine looks up from her smart phone and acknowledges Palmer but immediately goes back to her typing and scrolling.

Then Radley looks right at me and smiles. "So, you must be my new best friend. Austen is it?"

"Yes," I say a little nervously.

"Austin as in the city?" Jaz looks up from her smart phone at me. "I just love Austin. So much fun."

"No, Austen, as in Jane," Radley says. "This is the author Austen Landry," he tells Jaz. "She's interviewing me for... Harper's is it?"

"Yes, Harpers," I tell him.

The lady in the fur looks up from her small notebook at me. "I'll give you a protocol sheet when we get to the house. Some things are just off limits," she says and returns to her notebook and smart phone.

"Don't mind Liz. She wants you to think she's a pit bull," Radley says.

"I am a pit bull, Rad," she pipes up.

Radley shakes his head. "Liz is my publicist and I think the one responsible for this ostentatious limo?" he says. "Studio 54 on wheels. Why did I rent a house? This would have done perfectly."

As we swing by Temple Square on our way up to Park City, I laugh and relax, at ease in the moment.

I look over at the intense guy in black. He has finally finished his phone conversation and looks up.

"Nice of you to join us, Julian," Radley says. "Austen, this is Julian Winslow, our intrepid screenwriter and director."

I look over at him and give him a slight wave. Forget Radley being intimidating. This guy is brooding and quizzical. Intense. His brown slightly curly hair falls on his forehead and he brushes it back. Wire-rim glasses give him a studious look. He's handsome in a tortured artist sort of way.

"Nice to meet you," he says and extends his hand across Palmer to me. Palmer slaps it before we can shake hands.

"You're so rude, Julian," Palmer scolds him.

"My brother's a beast. He can't help it," Jaz says.

"Congratulations on getting into Sundance," I tell him.

"Thanks," he replies. "It was a group effort."

"Yes, it was, Julian," Palmer says. "You put together a great cast and crew. You deserve this."

"It feels good to get recognized for my work," he says.

"I know how you feel," thinking I said it in my head and then realizing I said it out loud.

"Well, since I'm paying for all this pretention why don't we take advantage of it," Radley says and begins pouring liquor from one of the decanters into the crystal glasses and passes them around. "Liz?"

"Are you kidding me?"

"I take that as a no," he says as he passes me a glass with caramel colored liquor in it. "Let the 'dance begin!"

* * *

As we laugh and let the alcohol take the edge off, we drive past Kimble Junction and on up Main Street. I can see the Sundance banners hanging from the street lights and the people scurrying up and down the streets, carrying packages, pushing crates, and putting finishing touches on the venues I hope to explore as the festival progresses.

As we meander up past Main Street the houses get bigger and bigger as we make our way further up the mountain above Park City. A few minutes later we pull into a circular driveway to the most beautiful log cabin home I've ever seen in my life. As we pour out of the van in the late afternoon sun, the glow of sunset bounces off the huge expanse of windows on the house facing us. This is our home for the next twelve days. The white van pulls up behind the limo. Our luggage. Well, everyone else's luggage, that is. But I don't care. I'm lost in the splendor and magnificence that I have the privilege of sharing. I look over at Palmer who is also taken away. In fact, all of us just stand in the drive way and stare at the house, even Radley.

"Long way from Waco, Texas, isn't it?" Liz asks Radley as she pats his back.

"Yes, it is, Liz," Radley says. "Yes, it is."

Liz walks up to the front door to let us in.

"Liz likes to keep Radley in style," Jaz gushes. "If it were only up to him, we'd be staying in a Motel 6."

"Yea, Liz!" Palmer cheers.

We file into the house and continue to be awed by its grandeur. The foyer opens up into a great room with furniture surrounding a huge fireplace. The room further spills into an open kitchen and a huge staircase leading to a balcony above.

"I could get used to this," I tell Palmer.

"This so isn't your shotgun house," Palmer tells me.

"Samuel," Liz calls out to the chiseled man who came with us. "Palmer, Samuel will take you and your friend up to your rooms. You too, Julian."

"Nice to see you again, Samuel," Palmer says as we all follow him up the winding stairs to the balcony. We all stop and stare at the view that has unfolded before our eyes. The glow of the sun setting over the mountains paints the snow and the lake below in a warm bath of burnt orange light. It is magnificent.

"And that's a view without a filter," Palmer points out.

Samuel opens the door for Julian and he files inside with his messenger bag. "I'll bring up your bags in a bit, sir," Samuel says.

"Thanks," Julian says as he enters and closes the door behind him.

We walk further down the hall and Samuel points to Palmer's room and across the hall is my room.

"Thank you, Samuel," I tell him.

"My pleasure, ma'am," he says.

"I'm Austen, by the way," I say and shake his hand.

"Nice to meet you. I hope you have a great time," he says.

"Thanks, I say and smile. "I think I will."

I walk into my room, which is almost bigger than my New Orleans house, and something tells me I have the small room. A canopy bed made from cedar branches occupies the focal point with a gas fireplace opposite it. I open a door and find an empty walk-in closet with tons of empty hangers just waiting for my fifteen hundred dollars of clothing which is vacationing in Hawaii at the moment. I sigh and close the door. The

second door in the room opens up to a huge en-suite bathroom with a beautiful soaking tub, shower, vanity, a bidet, and a toilet. "So this is the life they say we should all have," I think to myself. And it's all mine for twelve days. I do a little dance, plop down on the bed, and smile.

* * *

I clean up as best as I can with what little I brought in my overnight bag. Luckily the bathroom is fully stocked with shampoos, conditioners, a blow dryer, soaps, and even a tray full of perfumes and colognes. Even though Palmer is in the room next to me, she sends me a text that dinner will be served sometime around eight. It's almost six now.

I wander about the house and find myself downstairs in the kitchen. Julian is seated having a glass of red wine and munching on some peanuts. He sifts through a magazine. I will admit he is cute. The housekeeper pays us no mind and busies herself making what I suppose will be our dinner tonight. It smells delicious, whatever it is.

"Hi," he greets me. "You want some wine?"

"Sure," I say as I take a barstool next to him.

He slides over a glass to me and pours the wine into it.

"It's a Cab. Not too bad, actually," he points out as he sets the bottle back down.

I take a sip. "It's very good," I tell him.

"Palmer says you're a writer," he states.

"Yes, I write novels mostly," I say.

"Mostly?"

"I also take the occasional freelance assignment, hence the reason for my being here."

"Harper's, not bad."

"It was luck really," I say. I sip my wine and munch on a peanut. "How did you get Radley Seager in your film?"

"Jazmine's my little sister..."

"Really?"

"Yes, and well, she's been dating Radley for a while now. I had this screenplay I wanted to film with her starring in it and Radley agreed to star opposite her and match my funding."

"How fortuitous," I say. "I thought he only did big budget films."

"This was a passion project," he states.

"I can't wait to see it."

"I can't either," he admits.

"But you've seen it already," I point out.

"Yes, but not up on the big screen."

"Ah, it's like seeing my book. I wrote the thing but seeing it in book form propped in a bookstore window... that gets me every time," I tell him.

"How many books have you written?" he asks.

"Four really, but only two have been published," I say. "I'm in the middle of my third novel now."

"Impressive," he says.

"How many films have you done?"

"This is my first feature. I had a short in Sundance two years ago and several years ago before that my college short was nominated for an Oscar."

"An Oscar?"

"Nominated," he says. "I didn't win."

"Wow. That's still impressive," I say. "So you do this fulltime?"

He laughs. "I teach some courses at New York Film Academy, option the occasional script without them ever seeing a greenlight of day, and I shoot tons of music videos and weddings. Shorts cost money. They rarely make any."

"You sound like me," I tell him. "I was a finalist for the National Book Award for my first novel out. It's hard to live up to that sort of pressure your first published effort."

"It's almost the kiss of death," he says.

"Exactly," I say. I take a sip of wine and we both look at each other with a respect I only get from being in the room with other accomplished authors. We all commiserate, and it makes me feel like I belong. I'm feeling like I belong here.

Palmer approaches us and puts her hands on Julian's shoulders. "Has she told you about her made for tv cable movie yet?"

"Palmer!" I scold.

"You made a movie?" Julian asks.

"Yes," Palmer says as I say no.

"I sold my book's rights to a production company that adapted it into a movie for cable," I tell him.

"Did you do the screenplay?" Julian asks.

"No," I say. "They wouldn't let me. I had no control over it."

"You should always maintain control over your writing," he says.

"Yeah, I'm kind of figuring that out now," I say.

Radley bounds down the stairs, followed by Samuel, and approaches our group. "I see you found the wine."

"Yes, the housekeeper pointed it out," Julian says.

"Thank you... Margaret, is it?" Radley asks her.

"Yes sir, Mr. Seager," she says, smiling as if saying her name just made her year. "I'll have dinner ready for you and your guests soon, sir."

"Excellent," Radley says. "I'm starving. And call me Radley, please." He winks at Margaret. She of course, swoons.

Julian pours Radley a glass of wine and hands it to him. "Samuel, would you like a glass as well?" Julian asks.

"I probably shouldn't, but ..."

"Samuel, there's no paparazzi outside, no throngs of fans pushing through the door and I doubt Miss Austen here is a ninja," Radley says. "Are you a ninja, Miss Austen?"

"No, sadly I am lacking in that category," I say.

"So, relax," Radley tells Samuel, pouring him a glass and handing it to him. "Let's enjoy this evening."

* * *

With a roaring fire in the fireplace, we finish our delicious meal and pass around yet another bottle of wine. Truth serum. Our whole party is here, except for Liz, who is holed up in the guest house of the property, working. Radley tells us she's always working. Samuel is even relaxed, although he still can't seem to drop the ma'am and sir bit.

"This is nice having you all here," Radley says. "This is how it should always be. No paps, stalkers, crazed fans crouching in bushes..."

"Chicks sending death threats," Jaz injects.

"Really?" I ask.

"Oh, yeah," Jaz says as she sips her wine. "I have their man." She smiles and taps Radley on the arm.

"Even the seventy year old woman next to me on the plane wants you," I say.

"Geraldine is your biggest fan. She told me so," I tease.

"The seventy year old women are the reason why I have a job," Samuel jokes.

"I'm kind of glad I'm just the writer and director. No one wants a piece of me," Julian says.

"They will after the movie comes out," Palmer says.

Julian adjusts in his seat and gives a nervous laugh. He's a lot like me, I can tell. We want the success, just not at a loss of our private lives.

"When does it premiere?" I ask.

"Tuesday," Julian says. "But we have a press screening Monday."

"Just under a week from now" I point out.

"There's a lot of promotion to be done between now and then. Panel discussions, interviews, schmoozing, and just enjoying the festival," Julian says.

"Parties, free booze, swag," Jaz interjects.

"Swag!" I exclaim and lift up my glass. "I like swag."

"Who doesn't?" Palmer insists. "Here, everyone wants to give you stuff. T-shirts, beauty products, purses, messenger bags, watches, mugs..."

"Even me?" I ask.

"Oh, yeah. Even you," Jaz says. "And the bigger the celeb, the bigger the gifts."

"Which I give away to my foundation, by the way," Radley says. "I have everything I need."

"Not everything," Jaz says.

"Samuel, do you want some more wine?" Radley asks him, apparently deflecting the attention off Jaz's statement.

"I probably shouldn't," he replies. "I want to get an early start on reviewing the surveillance for the house in the morning and evaluating the perimeter of the property."

"Samuel keeps me safe and sound," Radley says. "Don't you?"

"I try," Samuel answers. "It's not always an easy task to accomplish."

"True," Radley concurs. "I don't know what I'd do without him."

Jaz coughs. "And me. Don't forget about me."

Radley gives her a kiss on her head. "I could never forget about you."

"You guys are so cute," I gush. "No wonder you two are together."

"We are convincing, aren't we?" Jaz concurs, winks at Radley and places his arm inside hers.

"Yes, we are," Radley says.

Samuel stands. "I think I'll take my leave," he says. "You need anything?"

"Always," Radley replies.

"Goodnight, sir," Samuel says, back into bodyguard mode.

"Goodnight, Samuel," Jaz says and blows a kiss to him as he leaves.

Our first awkward silence moment of the evening is broken up by Palmer's phone. She grabs it, looks at the screen, and smiles. "The drummer," she says, getting up from the table, grabbing her glass of wine, and retreating upstairs to her room.

"Maybe we should turn in, too, hun," Radley says.

"Sure," Jaz responds. "I'm beat."

"Tomorrow then," I say.

Radley gives me a big smile as they leave the table. "Tomorrow."

I pick up my wine. It's just me and Julian left.

"Would you like to see the movie?" Julian asks.

I look toward the living room and the television set. "Maybe I should wait and see it on the big screen."

"Grab your glass and come with me," he says as he takes his glass and the remainder of the wine.

"It feels so late," I say.

"It's only ten o'clock," he points out. "Come."

We walk downstairs into a massive room with couches, a bar and large billiard table. Through the hall I can see a room at the end with a small indoor lap pool and water fall. We turn the corner and Julian opens up the door to a screening room with two rows of plush leather easy chairs with soft pillows and a massive movie style screen.

"Will this work?"

"Holy cow," I say, "I gotta get me one of these."

"Yeah, me too," Julian says.

He picks up a remote and tells me to have a seat.

"You know how to operate this thing?"

"I used to run the projector at the cinema back home," he says. "Plus I came down here earlier and played with it."

"I feel like I need some popcorn and some Junior Mints," I say.

"Wait just a minute," he says and he runs out of the room.

I look around the room and take it in. So much money and opulence and it's only my first night. Palmer tells me it only gets bigger and bigger from here. I can't imagine that. I'm just glad I'm here. And it feels good. I don't feel like the odd man out that I thought I'd be.

Julian comes back in, sits beside me and hands me a bowl of popcorn and a box of Junior Mints.

"Wow, this house really does have everything," I say.

He takes a piece of popcorn from the bowl and pops it into his mouth. "Yep."

He points the remote and the lights come down, the curtain slides open, and the movie begins.

Flying to Brazil for the Night

A Film by

Julian Winslow

I munch on the popcorn and sip on the wine as I get lost in Julian's film. It's absolutely mesmerizing. I knew Palmer was good at her job but the cinematography is far better than anything I've seen her do. It makes me feel proud that everyone has made me a part of their inner circle.

Radley's character, Jason, has decided to go out for a night on the town with his friend, Chris. They go to a bar after work, order a couple of beers. Chris tells Jason, "I hope at least one of us gets to fly to Brazil for the night."

"Huh?" Jason asks. "Fly to Brazil?"

"One night stand, bud," Chris tells him. "You need to get back in the saddle, get laid, and get over Stacy. What's it been, six months?"

Everything around me disappears and I lose myself in the story of this couple getting to know each other over the course of an evening filled with adventures and misadventures in Manhattan. And what was supposed to be a one night stand turns into the love of a lifetime... in just one night.

The end credits roll and Julian turns on the lights to see me crying.

"That bad, huh?" he asks.

"It was beautiful," I tell him as I dry my eyes. "I loved it."

Julian sits back and smiles.

"Doesn't everybody cry at the end when they see it?"

"Besides Radley, and some of my crew, you're the first outsider to see it," Julian admits.

"You really like it?" Julian asks. I can sense the insecurity in his voice, much like I have on the day of publication for my novels. Will anyone read it? What will the reviews say? Will they all be terrible? What if no one buys it, not even my friends?

"Yes, Julian, it's wonderful," I tell him.

He smiles then leans in for a kiss. It is soft, sincere and warm. I begin to tingle as he pulls away.

"I'm sorry," he says. "That was presumptuous of me."

"No it wasn't," I say. "I liked it."

He removes the almost empty bowl of popcorn from my lap and kisses me even deeper. My toes curl in my lambskin boots and I feel the kiss all over. Deep, wet, cabernet

flavored kiss. I could do this all night. But I don't think I want to fly to Brazil just for the night with this man; not yet anyway. I pull myself back into reality.

"I probably should turn in," I tell him. "I have a book signing tomorrow afternoon and I'm told we have to go pick up our credentials in the morning."

"Oh, you have a book signing?"

"Yes, from one until three tomorrow at Dolly's Books," I tell him. "My publisher arranged it for me. I have another one later next week."

"Cool," he says.

"Your film is great, Julian," I tell him. "Thanks for showing it to me."

"My pleasure, Austen."

I make my way out of the room, down the hall and up the steps. The house is still and quiet. No one is stirring. Miraculously, my large bag is standing inside the foyer. I breathe a sigh of relief. It's heavy but I manage to pull it up the stairs, one step at a time until I reach the top. "Damn, I bought a lot of clothes," I think as I pull my bag along the balcony. I stop to take in the view through the wall of windows. The valley below glows from the light of the nearly full moon and it literally takes my breath away. My awe, however, is interrupted by a taxi pulling up the driveway, then stopping in front of the house. Someone runs out to meet it. Maybe Palmer is hooking up with the drummer. But as I look down, it's not Palmer at all. It's Jaz. No Radley. She gets in the taxi. It turns around in the driveway and heads down the road toward Park City.

Interesting.

CHAPTER THREE

THURSDAY, OPENING DAY OF THE FESTIVAL

I wake up refreshed and rested. Content even. I look at the clock and it is only seven thirty. Technically I've slept late with the hour time difference. But it feels good to indulge. I'm on a working vacation.

The beautiful en-suite shower revives me even further. I stand in front of the mirror and look at myself. Seize the day, Austen. Seize the Day. The week. Have fun. Let yourself go. Forget about Eric.

Eric. I had actually forgotten about Eric and his impromptu proposal. I'm a million miles away from all of that. I don't want to think about it. I'm at Sundance. Be in the moment. Be here. Not there.

I remember last night's kiss with Julian. Eric has never really kissed me that passionately, even during sex. Julian's kiss was soft and feeling. Eric's are always more like a merger. The thought of Julian's kiss warms me and restores my faith that there are other fish in the sea.

As a stroll over to the closet I notice a manila envelope has been slid under my door. I pick it up and open it and then pour the contents out on to my bed. It contains a schedule for everything going on for the week at Sundance, a ticket to the opening night film, and an invite to the opening night party at the Legacy Lodge, after party at Gray Carmichael's house, whoever that is, and a contact sheet with everyone's cell phone numbers on it, including Radley's. Liz rocks.

I put on new jeans, a bright red sweater, and boots. I look good today. I feel good and I'm ready to start the day. I bounce downstairs and into the kitchen to find Margaret has placed coffee cups and plates on the bar.

“Good morning, dear,” Margret greets me.

“Am I the first to wake this morning?”

“Oh, no. Mr. Seager and his bodyguard went downstairs to work out and Mr. Winslow drove into town to find a newspaper and wander around the town,” she tells me. “What would you like for breakfast, Miss Landry?”

“Oh, please don't go to any trouble,” I tell her.

“I make a mean omelet,” she says. “And I've got some wonderful cheese, tomatoes, onions, mushrooms...”

“Sounds great,” I say. “Where is the coffee?”

“I can fix you a latte, mocha, anything.”

“Oh, my. I'd love a café mocha, please.”

“Coming right up,” she says and busies herself to complete my order. Outside of a restaurant, I've never been this waited on before in my life, my mom included. I could get used to this.

She places a large cup of café mocha in front of me. I take a sip. It's delicious and exactly what I need to face the long day. “This is perfect. Thank you,” I tell her.

“I'll have your omelet ready in a bit,” she says.

I take my mocha and stroll around the main floor of the house and look out the large expanse of windows. It's snowing lightly and a taxi is pulling away. I lean on the window and see Jaz walking around to the back of the house.

"Margaret, is there a back entrance and staircase to the house?" I ask her.

"Yes, ma'am," she says. "There's a back staircase that runs from the garage entrance to the back wing where Mr. Seager, Miss Snow, and their bodyguard are staying."

"Oh," I say.

"You're on the guest wing with Mr. Winslow and Miss Endicott."

"Of course," I acknowledge. I look outside at the snow and the exiting taxi. Maybe Liz needs to give Jaz a schedule.

"Your omelet's ready, Miss Landry," Margaret says.

"Thanks," I tell her and walk back to the bar. "It looks scrumptious."

"You'll need your energy this week, Austen," Radley says as he enters the kitchen with Samuel. Both are sweaty and slightly out of breath. "Things start early here and end late."

"I've heard," I tell him as I eat my omelet.

"That looks good," Radley says and takes a grape from my plate. "I'll have what she's having but only egg whites, please."

"Same," says Samuel and they both sit down at the bar on either side of me.

"So when do you want to commence the interviewing?" Radley asks me.

"Good question," I say. "Most of these interviews happen with the reporter following the celeb around for a few days and also doing a sit down."

"Have you done a lot of these interviews, Austen?" Radley asks.

I laugh. "You're my first," I confess.

Radley laughs as well. "Let's make your first a good one then," he says.

"Thanks."

"Did Liz give you a schedule for the week?" Radley asks as Margaret places his and Samuel's breakfast in front of them.

"She did," I say. "That was very thoughtful of her."

"It's her job to do that," he tells me.

"She seems to do it very well," I say.

"Yes, I owe her everything," Radley says. "She makes my life easier."

"Is she like a manager, too?" I ask.

"Kind of. I like to keep some control over my life," he says. "But Liz keeps my public image in tack and therefore it allows me to have some semblance of a private life."

"I imagine it's hard to go anywhere now that you've become so famous," I say. "I can't imagine giving up my privacy like that."

"I've given up a lot, that's true," he says. "That's why I live in New York most of the time. No one really cares there and for the most part leave me alone."

"That's good then, for you and Jaz," I say.

"Yeah, I guess," he says.

I sense something must be going on with his relationship with her. They had such great chemistry in the film, yet when I see them together, they seem distant, almost as if they're going through the motions.

Samuel's phone rings and he picks it up and answers, "Richards, here." He takes his phone and walks into the living room to keep the call more private.

"I read your last book, by the way," Radley says.

"You did?"

"Of course. I'm a book worm," Radley says. "I read a lot. There's a lot of down time on set. Palmer gave me a copy."

"Did you like it?"

"Very much, actually," he gushes. "It would make a great a film."

I let out a half laugh.

"You don't think so?" Radley asks.

"My first book was finally adapted into a hideous cable tv movie starring Duff Adams," I tell him.

"Duff Adams," he says. "So that's what happened to his career?"

"Yeah," I say. "Cable tv movie hell."

Samuel comes back to the table and informs Radley that Jaz will have her own bodyguard by this afternoon. "He's coming up from Salt Lake," Samuel tells Radley.

"Good," he says as he finishes the last bite of his omelet. "Slopes?" he asks Samuel.

"Whatever you want," Samuel responds.

"Want to come?" Radley asks me.

"Skiing? Seriously?" I ask back.

"Why not?"

"I don't know how to ski," I confess. And now the thought of it scares me to death.

"We need to remedy that situation, Miss Austen," Radley says. "Later, then."

"Later then," I say. Much later.

* * *

Upstairs I knock on Palmer's door. She takes a minute and then opens it. She's still in her pajamas and ushers me in.

"Jet lag?" I ask her.

"The drummer," she replies. "We talked on the phone half the night." She gets back in bed and pulls the covers up.

"Very cool, Endicott," I say as I sit on the edge of the bed. "And..."

"And... he's playing tonight in Salt Lake again but he's coming up to Sundance tomorrow and we're going to hang out."

"Even better," I say. "So what's the plan for the day?"

"Oh, we need to go get our credentials this morning," she says, "and then we could get lunch and hang."

"I have my book signing at one," I tell her.

"Then I better get up and get going," Palmer says.

"Yes! A drummer, Endicott. That's hot!"

She smiles as she gets out of bed and throws a pillow at me.

"Sundance is for lovers," she says. "We need to find you someone for the week. You need a fling, Landry."

I smile at her. "Yes, I do."

"Give me twenty minutes and I'll be ready," she says.

I wander back down stairs to wait on Palmer and find Julian sitting at the bar, having a cup of coffee and enjoying his paper.

"Margaret said you had gone into town this morning," I say.

"Yes," he answers. "I wanted to post some movie posters on the kiosks before the crowds start coming."

"Good idea," I say.

"They have the window at Dolly's all decked out with your books in it," he says.

"Really?"

"Yep," he says. I walked by it." He takes the phone out of his pocket and shows me a picture of the window at Dolly's with my book adorning the front window and even a picture of me.

"Wow," I say. I've had tons of signings before and book tours. It always gets me when I see the books on display. It makes it real.

"I'm impressed," he says.

"Really?"

"Really." He emphasizes. "Who knows, maybe some big-time producer will see it and turn it into a cable tv movie," he teases.

I laugh, "Oh, I hope so!"

Twenty minutes later like clockwork, Palmer enters the kitchen, ready for the day.

"Nice to see you two chummy and having fun," she says. "But we all should go hit Main Street and get our stuff, you know."

"Yeah," Julian says. "You're right."

"Radley and Jaz should come, too," Palmer says.

"I think Liz has their stuff taken care of already," he says. "Jaz's phone is off anyway."

"And Radley and Samuel went skiing," I tell her. "So, it's just us."

"Ok, then," Palmer says. "It's just us."

* * *

Julian drives the Mercedes SUV down to Main Street. It's the first time I've actually seen Main Street up close. The snow flurries combined with beautiful people clad in skinny

jeans and fur trimmed coats strutting down the street give it an air of chic and sophistication. Hollywood is here and we get the privilege to live in that world for eleven more days. I roll down the window to take it all in. The air is dry, crisp, full of electricity and hope. We drive further down Main and into Prospector's square and the Marriott, where the Sundance Industry Office is located as well as the Press office.

Inside the Marriott we pick up our credentials and spot Liz at a far table bringing a young volunteer to tears.

"It's not hard, honey," she tells the girl. "but apparently you are the only person here who doesn't have a clue who I am. I'm Liz Singleton, and if you don't give me Mr. Seager's credentials, I will make sure you never..."

"Ms. Singleton, Ms, Singleton," a man yells out and waves to Liz. "I have your credentials. They're here. I have them."

"Well, saved by someone who actually knows me," she says and turns her attention to the man. "Steven," she says as if it were old home week. "I wondered where you were!"

"I'm so sorry, Ms. Singleton," he tells her and they give each other kisses as if they were in Europe. He escorts her behind the table and to the back where we can't hear them.

"I certainly wouldn't want to catch her wrath," Palmer says.

"Even Jaz is scared of her," Julian admits.

I watch her weave her web around poor Steven. I don't think I could do what she does. I don't have the heart. But then again, to do her job well, a heart is useless, I suppose.

"You mind taking me back up to Main Street?" Palmer asks Julian.

"Where ya headed?" Julian asks.

"The New York Production Alliance has asked me to set up a Red for display," she tells him. "It's in a gazillion pieces and they need me to set it up."

"You need help?" Julian asks.

"Sure," Palmer says.

"What's a Red?" I ask as we make our way out to the car.

"It's a digital camera," Palmer says. "It's what we shot Brazil on."

"Ah, Brazil... your movie," I say.

We get in the car and Julian drives back toward Main Street and the Festival proper.

"You see, Sundance is more than just showing films. It's a convention as well," Julian tells me. "There's panel discussions, workshops, showcases, tons of things that are related to the film industry."

"And I'm doing a demonstration and panel of the Red camera tomorrow afternoon," Palmer points out.

"That I would like to see," I tell her. "I would love to see more of what you do."

"Then come on down for it," she says.

We find a parking place and walk up the street to the Production Alliance lounge. Several people flit and flutter about the lounge or sit and talk shop in cozy chairs toward the back of the lounge. In a corner is a box labeled *EPIC-M RED DRAGON Pro*.

Palmer drags us to the corner and opens up the box as if it's Christmas and pulls out the parts and places them on the floor.

"Wow, that's intense," I say. All of the parts on the floor remind me of my living room floor when Palmer is in town. "You know, my signing is in less than hour, I think I'm going to go stroll Main Street and maybe grab a bite to eat."

"You sure?" Julian asks me.

"Yes, I'll be fine," I tell him.

"What time are you done?"

"Three," I say. "I'll be done at three."

"Meet me at the No Name Saloon, up the street when you're done," he says. "That's my office."

"Ok. See you then," I say. I look down at Palmer on the floor. She has stopped fiddling and turned her attention to the two of us, watching our conversation like a tennis match. She knows there's something between us. Good.

* * *

I sit at a table that has stacks and stacks of my books surrounding it, on display for my signing. I smile at the people wandering around the store. And they wander and smile back at me as if I, too, am strictly part of the display as well.

I sit for what seems like an eternity before the first person comes up and asks me to sign a book. *To Celia, be your own song! Austen Landry*. Maybe she'll get the party started.

But she doesn't. I sit and sit and twiddle my thumbs for another eternity until someone else finally approaches.

"Hi," I tell her.

"Hi," she says back. "Could you please tell me where the bathroom is?"

"Oh," I say. "It's right back there, past the cookbooks. You can't miss it."

"Thanks, sweetie," she says and heads past the non-fiction section.

Sweetie? Wow, didn't expect that one. Sweetie?

I finally sign another book. By ten minutes to three I have signed all of six books. Six. I'm on a roll.

I thank the manager for hosting the signing.

"It's the first day of Sundance," she says to me. "It will pick up as the festival really gets under way. Next signing will be better. I promise."

I walk out the front door. The snow is coming down a little harder than it was this morning as I bound across the street and up the hill toward the No Name Saloon.

I go in and walk up the steps to a large bar with a small crowd inside. I look around the place and find Julian nestled in a chair, engrossed in a book. He hasn't seen me yet.

I go to the bar and order a beer, then make my way to a chair opposite him by the fireplace. Finally, he looks up and sees me.

"Hey," he says. "Good book signing?"

"Very," I tell him. "I sold a whopping six books today."

He holds up the book in his lap. It's *The Street Singer*. My book. "Correction. Seven," he says.

I look at him and smile. I've known him for less than two days and he's already reading my book. I've known Eric over a year now and he's yet to even read the jacket cover. I can feel myself blushing. Gosh, I like this guy already.

"Professional courtesy," he says. "I made you sit through my film. It's the least I could do."

"And have you come to any conclusions about it?" I ask as I sip my beer.

"It's very good," he says. "It reminds me of Welty."

"You know Welty?"

"Well, not personally, but I have read a few things she's written."

"Is it too derivative?" I ask.

"Derivative? What?" He laughs. "Now you're talking like a filmmaker," he says. "No, not at all. Very original and quite visual actually. It's playing out in my head... like a film. I like it so far."

"Thanks," I say.

"You should think about screenwriting," he says. "You'd be good at it."

"I don't know anything about it, really," I tell him.

"I can teach you," he says.

"Are you a good teacher?" I ask, flirting with him. "I might need to see your resume first."

"Does an Oscar nomination help?"

"Well, I *am* a National Book Award finalist, so perhaps I can learn," I tease back.

He brightens as we hear commotion outside the bar. It breaks our flirtation as we both look out the window to see paparazzi swarming a couple. It's Radley and Jaz. Samuel holds back the crowd of fans and cameras as the couple enters the bar. The bar's bouncer holds the door and lets them enter while blocking the remainder of the crowd from coming in. Everyone in the bar stops what they are doing to look at the commotion and at the couple as they enter.

"Austen. Julian," Radley waves at us and takes Jaz by the hand to push their way to us. "What's up?"

"We were just talking about Austen's novel, *The Street Singer*," Julian says.

"I love this book," Radley says as he takes a seat and pulls Jaz onto his lap. "Palmer gave me a copy. You should read it, Jaz, you'd like it."

Jaz whispers something into Radley's ear and gets up. "Excuse me," she says and mouths *bathroom* at me.

"Take Samuel, hun," Radley tells her.

She puts her hand on Samuel's arm and shakes her head. "I'll be fine," she says and makes her way to the far back of the bar.

"Just keep an eye on her," Radley tells Samuel, then gives him money to go to the bar. "I think we're safe. For now."

Samuel takes the money and heads to the bar.

"Did you guys have a great time on the slopes this morning?" I ask.

"Yes, we did," he gushes. "Oh, my god. Just down from the house we found this sweet black diamond slope. It was amazing. You've got to come skiing, Julian. You too, Austen."

"I can't ski," I tell him. "I can water ski. I grew up in the South. We have water. Very little snow."

"Didn't you ever go on church ski trips as a kid?" Radley asks me.

"No," I say. "I seem to have missed all of that."

"I became a badass skier thanks to Waco First United Methodist," he explains. "Well, that and Samuel. He's a fantastic instructor. We'll take you out this week."

"Okay," I say with trepidation. "Do you ski, Julian?"

"Not a lick," he says. "Not one bit."

"You guys are worthless to me," Radley says. "Worthless."

Samuel brings back a bucket of beers and a bottled water. Radley takes a beer for himself and tosses one to Julian while Samuel takes the water. I feel sorry for Samuel. He's stuck in a bar watching us. That can't be fun. But then again, he isn't really here for fun. He's here to work. Personally, I've never understood the cult of celebrity personally. I look out the window and see faces pressed against the window, trying to look in and catch a glimpse of Radley.

Jaz returns to our group, cocktail in hand, and sits back on Radley's lap.

"Don't get drunk, baby," Radley tells her.

"Don't worry about me," Jaz tells him.

"I always worry about you," Radley says. "Just behave," he whispers in her ear.

Jaz scratches her nose which makes me scratch my nose as well. Since we've arrived I've noticed that my sinuses are brothing me as well.

"Your sinuses bothering you, too?" I ask Jaz.

"Oh, yeah," she says and scratches her nose again. "Must be the altitude."

"I think I'll visit the bathroom," I say. "Where is it, Jaz?"

"All the way to the back," she tells me. "All the way."

I smile at Julian and make my way through the crowd and to the back where a small line has formed for the women's one and only stall. Everyone back there looks at me. I feel so self-conscious. I sneeze and wipe my nose across part of my sleeve. People are still staring at me. I feel like I have something hanging from my nose and scratch it. Finally, I make it into the small bathroom to pee.

As I wash my hands I gaze into the mirror, fluff my hair, and notice the smile on my face. I'm no longer miserable. No longer worrying. I'm having fun and feeling as though I'm in my element despite the poor turnout at the signing.

I make my way out of the bathroom, scratching my nose, and a girl grabs my arm.

"Are you holding?" she whispers to me.

"Holding? What?"

"You know, *holding*," she insists. "Coke."

I'm shocked. Do I look like a cokehead? "Of course not," I tell her.

"You're with Jaz Snow, right?"

"So?"

"So... share," she demands.

I break away from her grasp, trying to get away from her.

"Bitch," I hear her call out to me.

I shake my head and weave through the crowd, back to my group. Palmer has joined us and I smile, except she has taken my chair and there isn't another seat. Julian looks up at me then slides over for me to sit in his lap. I sit and watch Palmer's face light up. I think she likes seeing me have fun for a change.

"Now this is cozy!" Radley says and raises his bottle. "To Sundance!"

We all raise our drinks. "Sundance!"

I look at Jaz on Radley's lap as she gulps her drink down. Her eyes meet mine as if she knows that I might know all her secrets. "Sundance, baby!" she says to me and bounces up and down in Radley's lap. Radley puts his hands on her legs to stop her. The smile fades from his face.

"Drink up," Radley says. "We've got a movie to catch."

* * *

We push out of the bar and out onto the street where the throngs of people have been waiting for Radley and Jaz to emerge. Radley holds Jaz's hand as we all follow suit, cross the street and up the hill toward the Egyptian Theatre. The cameras click and the photographers push and pull us, trying to get a picture of Radjaz in action at Sundance. Julian puts his arm around me and tries to shield me from the frenzy. Fans screaming Radley's name as we make our way onto the sidewalk and up the street, Samuel doing his best as Moses parting the paparazzi. I can see Liz out front of the theater, smoking her cigarette and motioning us to follow her. She stamps out the butt as we approach. We follow her as additional security lets us in through the barricade, down to the alley and through the side door.

"I've got everyone taken care of," she says as she ushers us in. People look up and stare at our entourage, even a few celebrities I recognize sitting in the audience. We go up the aisle and locate ourselves in the back so that we are not the focus of the event. Still, people turn around in their seats for a glance at Radley and Jaz. Even when the lights go down and opening remarks are made, people still stare at them. I don't even pay attention to the stage. All I can focus on are the heads turning and staring. I look over at Radley and Jaz who sit in their seats trying to watch the festivities. I wonder if they feel the eyes on them or if they've become numb to it all. I absolutely can't imagine that sort of scrutiny.

As the film rolls, I feel Julian's fingers caress my hand. I look at him and we both smile. We're on a date we didn't have to plan. A publicist planned it, I laugh to myself and the irony of it all.

I can see Palmer smiling at me on the other side of Julian. I think seeing me out of my element and into hers makes her happy. And I'm with her friend Julian. Julian affirms that there is more out in the world than just Eric.

* * *

Liz has our big SUV limo waiting outside of the Egyptian ready to sweep us away. We run outside the theater and into the limo, cameras click away to broadcast this illusion Liz has created for the world to be envious of. And I'm a part of it. Julian lets go of my hand as I duck inside the limo.

"Wow," I say as Samuel shuts the door and runs around to the passenger seat. Fans rush the windows and try to look in. "Is it like this everywhere you go, Radley?"

"Yes, Miss Austen," he says, "it's all a part of it."

"We heading to the opening night party?" Palmer asks.

"No," Radley says. "Better and private."

"We're going to Gray's house," Julian whispers to me.

"Gray?"

"Gray Carmichael," he says. "Our attorney."

"Attorney?" I ask, surprised.

"He's repping our film," he tells me. "He's having his own opening night party at his house."

"Oh," I acknowledge.

We pull up to a house much like ours up on the mountain, but at least half as small, and closer to the festivities

"Radley leans up to the window to speak to Samuel. "Were we followed?"

"Doesn't appear so," Samuel says.

"Good," Radley exclaims. "We're here."

We ease out of the limo and slush through the snow to the front door. Radley opens it and we all follow into the house. The dark foyer leads into a very large great room with a small kitchen, a dining room, and a large living area with two or three seating areas. This house was arranged for parties.

Several people are gathered around the great room, mixing, mingling, drinking, smoking. All are dressed in black. They look up from their conversations when we enter, look us all up and down, then go back to their conversations; a far cry from the crowds on Main Street.

I scan around the room to a corner where a keyboard, drums, a bass guitar, two electric guitars, an acoustic guitar and other instruments sit unused. A band perhaps?

"Radley Seager, you finally made it into Sundance," a tall, intensely good looking man in jeans, a black cashmere sweater, and after-ski boots calls out to Radley.

"This is Sundance?" he asks, jokingly and gives the man a hug.

"Julian," the man says and man hugs him too. "And Liz, my favorite girlfriend." He leans down and kisses her on the cheek.

"Yes, Gray, I'm the only girlfriend you have that hasn't tried to screw you," Liz says.

"You make me look good," he says.

"Gray Carmichael, this is Palmer Endicott, our cinematographer," Julian says to Gray.

"And this is Austen Landry. She's a writer."

"Screenwriter?" he asks.

"Novels," Julian corrects.

"Even better," he says then looks at me and takes my hand. "Someone who hasn't sold herself to the devil... Yet," he says with a smile. "Make yourself at home. Relax," he tells us. "We'll discuss some issues later," he says to Julian and Radley.

Gray goes back to his schmoozing and greeting his guests while we take off our coats and place them on a chair with the others as Samuel joins us with a twelve pack of beer and a bottle of vodka he places in the kitchen. A pretty blonde flirts with Samuel and takes the booze from him to put away.

Jaz has found a group of girls she knows and is deep in conversation, laughter, and cigarettes while Palmer has found a couple of guys she knows and dives on in to their technical foreign language. Radley, Samuel, and Liz find seats in the living room while Julian and I find ourselves still in the kitchen. People trickle in through the front door. Beautiful people. And all dressed in black.

"Having fun?" Julian asks me as he takes a couple of beers out of the fridge for us and opens them.

"Yes," I tell him and take the beer. "But what's with all of you guys dressed in black?"

Julian laughs. "P-I-Bs."

"P-I what?"

"P-I-Bs. People in black," he explains. "It's what they call us people from New York because we all seem to wear black here."

"Ah, I get it now."

Julian takes a drink. "This is more my speed."

"This is much better than the frenzy earlier," I say.

"I'm afraid Radley can't go anywhere these days," Julian says. "It's sad. Even Jaz can't really. They like the private parties."

"She must really love him to sacrifice her freedom like this," I say.

"It's good for her career," Julian says.

I give him a quizzical look. Why would he say something like that? "What?"

"I don't know how much longer she's going to stay with him," Julian says. "She's young. She hasn't sewn her wild oats yet."

"I haven't sewn my wild oats yet, Julian," I tell him.

"Come to think of it, neither have I," he says. We both laugh and smile at each other. I want to kiss this man. I want to be a giddy teenager again and go into a dark corner of the party and neck. I lean into him but feel a tap on my shoulder that draws me back into reality.

"Excuse me," a woman says to me and taps me on the shoulder.

"Yes?"

"You're Austen Landry, aren't you?" she asks me.

"Yes," I say and turn to look at her. She looks familiar to me.

"We were on a panel together at BEA," she says. "The art of the literary novel," she reminds me.

"Yes," I say, remembering. "Constance Everley, so nice to see you here." Wow she remembers my name. I'm flabbergasted and taken aback. "Julian Winslow, this is Constance Everley. She's an editor at Pickett Press."

"Nice to meet you," Julian says.

"And you have that movie my husband is just dying to see," she says to Julian. "My husband is Lance Everley with Ace Pictures in New York," she tells me. "He's very excited about seeing *Flying to Brazil*."

"Thank you. I'm excited for him to see it, too," Julian says.

"Well, I just wanted to say, 'hi,'" she says. "My husband is waving for me to come. We just stopped in before going to Phillip Levy's." A nice looking man in a sweater and jeans in the foyer waves to her. "Nice to see you Austen. I loved your last book. Tell Andrea to call me soon."

I watch her walk off with her husband.

"Did she mean 'the Phillip Levy?'" I ask. "The man who produces everything in Hollywood?"

"Yeah. That Phillip Levy," Julian answers. "The Everleys are the ultimate New York power couple."

"I see that now. My agent, Andrea, has been trying to get my last novel picked up by her publishing company for some time now. They're bigger than my current publisher and could get me wider distribution, including international," I tell him. "She hasn't even noticed that I exist until now."

"That's the thing about Sundance," Julian explains. "If you find yourself in the inner circle... their inner circle... suddenly you're presumed to be somebody worthy of their attention."

"Wow," I say.

"Looks like we're both looking for distribution," Julian says and clinks my beer bottle with his. "To distribution."

* * *

As the time creeps well past midnight, the gathering has turned into a much bigger party. 'A' and 'B' list celebrities mix and mingle with industry as Julian networks me through the assembly and introduces me around to the people he knows. The instruments that earlier were sitting idle have now been taken up by several guys who now play an impromptu concert. I look at the guitarist and lead singer. I recognize him. I think he's playing a concert later in the week at the ASCAP Café.

"Are you tired?" Julian asks me and touches my face.

"A little," I say.

"Let's go back to the house," he says and leads me to our coats. I look over at Palmer, engrossed in conversation and drink. She sees me getting ready to leave and nods her head in acknowledgment and waves. She'll let everyone know we've left. I take Julian's hand and we walk out the door into the heavy falling snow. He looks around for a car but doesn't see one and leads me up the walk to the street. An SUV turns its lights on and pulls up to us, like it knew we were ready to depart.

We hop in the back and snuggle up.

"Where to?" the driver says.

"9800 North Peak Drive, please," Julian tells him and off we go in the snow.

He takes my chin and brings my face to his and we kiss. Finally. A long, slow, deep kiss. We can't make it to the house quick enough.

He pays the driver and we both try to run to the front door, only to find the sidewalk slick. We fall down into a drift, laugh, and kiss again. The snow feels good and cools me down.

"I have an idea," Julian says as he pulls me up and takes me inside then leads me downstairs, back towards where we watched the movie.

"Another movie?" I ask.

"No," he says and smiles. He leads me to the French doors. "Look."

He points to the hot tub outside. Steam rises as the snow falls into it. With the soft lights, it's quite magical outside.

We strip down to our underwear and make our way to the hot tub. The cold pierces my skin but as we step into the water, the warmth envelopes us. He takes me in his arms and we kiss again.

"Are you warm?" he asks me.

"Yes," I say. "You?"

"Yes."

We intertwine our legs together. I can feel him and squeeze him harder.

"I want you," he whispers to me.

"I want you, too," I whisper back.

He reaches around my back and unhooks my bra and slides it off my body; cups my breast in his hand. I reach down and touch him between his legs. He lets off a slight moan. I pull his boxers off and let them float and swirl in the water. He pulls my lacy panties off and they form a dance with the boxers. We can't help ourselves. As the heavy snow comes down, we make love in the warm, glowing water of the hot tub.

CHAPTER FOUR

FIRST FRIDAY OF THE FESTIVAL

Faint light shines through the windows as I slowly wake and try to catch my bearings. I was having the best dream about water and snow. My eyes open and I realize that it wasn't a dream. I sit up and find myself not in my bedroom but in Julian's. I turn to find I am alone in the bed.

"Julian?" I ask. He doesn't answer. I look under the covers. No clothes. I draw up the sheet and duvet to me.

The door opens and it's Julian, wearing pajama bottoms and carrying a tray with two coffee mugs, an assortment of muffins and croissants, and a plastic bag with something inside. He smiles at me.

"Morning," he says.

"Good morning," I answer back.

"I brought us breakfast," he says and sets the tray on the bed, then leans over and kisses me softly.

"What time is it?"

"Not even eight o'clock yet," Julian says. "I think everyone is sleeping in."

"What's in the bag there?" I ask.

Julian laughs. "I ran outside and retrieved our drawers before anyone could discover them.

"You are a true gentleman," I tell him.

"You have no idea," he says and slides under the covers with me and takes his coffee from the tray.

"What's your plan for the day?" Julian asks me.

"Whatever's in that envelope Liz slipped under my door," I say.

Julian laughs. "Yes, she does do her job well."

"At some point I need to work on my interview with Radley, as that's why I'm here," I tell him. "But I'm also here to write about the Sundance experience."

"And how is the experience so far?" Julian asks as he sips his coffee.

"Amazing," I say.

"Want to see Sundance from a filmmaker's perspective?"

"Absolutely."

"Finish your breakfast and I'll show you my Sundance," he says.

We finish our lovely breakfast in bed, he gives me a kiss, and I return to my room and the beautifully made up bed I didn't sleep in last night. I look inside my purse to find my phone has died, so I place it on the charger and turn it on. Almost immediately it rings. It's Eric. Eric. I can't bring myself to answer it. I've just had the most incredible sex... with another man.

When I return to New Orleans I know what I will have to do. Break our relationship off. But in the year we've seen each other, there haven't been the feelings there that I'm having right now. Maybe I'm caught up in the moment here. Who knows. What I do know is that this one moment has been better than a year of moments with Eric.

* * *

I place Liz's itinerary, the tickets, the invites, the wristbands needed for a day's worth of access at Sundance into my bag. I pull my press credential badge and lanyard over my head. With my sweater, fake fur trimmed parka, snow boots, and credential, I strike the pose of a true Sundancer.

I meet Julian in the living room. Palmer, still in pajama bottoms and a Sundance sweatshirt, eats her breakfast.

"You guys left way too early last night," Palmer tells us. "The lead singer of Emerald Notion put on a concert for us. It was amazing."

"Emerald Notion," I say. "Very cool."

"Where are you guys going?" Palmer asks and smiles at me. I think she knows we got together.

"I thought I'd show Austen around Sundance and show her what it's like from a filmmaker's perspective," Julian tells her.

"Well don't forgot about our panel discussion today over at the Filmmaker Lodge," she reminds him.

"I have a panel discussion to give today," he tells me as if he forgot. "You can't get any more Sundance than that."

"What are you doing today, Palmer?" I ask her.

"I'll be down at the Production Alliance Lounge giving demonstrations on the Red for part of the morning, then the panel, and some mixers," she says. "And tonight, I'm the drummer's guest over at Deer Valley for Hanley's concert. Some talent agency or whatever. We're on the list."

"I'll see you later, Palmer," I tell her and give her a hug.

"You and Julian..." she whispers in my ear.

I smile at her.

"I like it," she tells me.

We take a taxi down the mountain. The sun shines brightly and sparkles on the six inches of new powder snow. I marvel at how clean and clear the street is after the heavy snowfall from last night.

"They clean the streets pretty quickly here," he says. "It's important for us to get down the mountain and spend money."

I laugh. "And I was under the impression everything was free here."

"It seems like, doesn't it?" Julian marvels.

"That's all Palmer raves about... the free stuff."

"One year I drove over here during film school. Slept in a sleeping bag in my car, cleaned up in the No Name's bathroom..."

"Hence your fondness for that place, huh?"

"It was my office," Julian states. "And I ate the free food at the lounges, drank the free booze at the parties that I could get into."

"How did you get your name on the lists?" I ask. "Did you have a Liz back then too?"

Julian laughs. "No. But I had office supplies?"

"Office supplies?"

"Yep," he says with a grin. "I would sort of hang out around the party I wanted to get into. And I would observe the people coming in or out to see what colored wrist bands they were wearing or putting on as they were entering or leaving. When I would determine the

color, then I'd go around the corner, put the appropriate wrist band on from my assorted collection, and go into the party, almost unnoticed."

"Wow," I say. "Now that's a cool Sundance experience."

"It was my first Sundance," he explains. "I was quick on the learning curve."

"So your first experience at Sundance was all about the party," I state.

"Oh, no," he protests. "I also saw over thirty films while I was here that year. Best film education I received."

The taxi drops us off in front of the Prospector Square Cinema, not far from where we picked up our credentials yesterday. People are standing in line waiting to get inside while another line forms on the other side of the entrance.

"What are they waiting for?" I ask Julian.

"Hoping to get a seat once the ticket holders have all been seated. If there are spare seats, they simply pay admission and get in," he explains.

"And they all get in?" I ask.

"Sucks being the guy just behind the last one to get in," he says. "Been there a few times. Luckily we have tickets."

"What are we seeing?" I ask him.

Julian hands me a ticket. *Shorts Program 2*, the ticket reads. We're going to see a selection of film shorts in competition.

"Short films," I say.

"Think of these as short stories and the feature films as novels," Julian explains.

"Who knows, some of these films may be launching the next Spielberg, Scorsese..."

"...or Winslow?"

"... or Winslow," he says and scoffs. "I'm not there yet."

"Yet," I tell him. "Now you have a feature."

"Yes, but this is where I started," he emphasizes. "This is where it all begins for a filmmaker. The short film."

We take our seats and the films begin. We see one about a woman who is hiding her backyard chicken coop from her neighbors... and the mob, which was hilarious; a film about a woman lost in the city with Alzheimer's... mesmerizing and real; one about a man locked in his thoughts and can't escape... scary but thought provoking; a film about a farmer on the day he turns his farm over to the bank... very real and moving; and one about a man dying of cancer and trying to make contact with a long lost daughter... sad and real. I'm in awe of the filmmaking. Visual short stories unfolded before my eyes, beautifully told and experienced. I'm lost in the storytelling and the images. The lights go up and I'm still awestruck.

"Wow," I say as we make our way out of the theater. "This is what I try to paint with words in my novels but there they are, the visualizations of what I see in real life."

"Exactly," he says. "To paint life."

"I love it," I say.

"This is why I love Sundance," he tells me. "This is what it's all about. Not the parties. Not the connections. This. Raw storytelling. I love telling the story."

I look at him and realize that is what I love about writing too. The storytelling.

* * *

We stand outside the theater in the sun and cold as people stroll out of the theater, discussing the films as we are doing.

"What next?" I ask.

Julian looks at his watch. "Let's check out Main Street," he says.

"Ok."

We walk to the transit stop and wait with everyone for the shuttle bus under a propane heater.

"Are you cold?" he asks me.

"Yes, a bit."

He opens his parka and wraps me inside of it. I feel his warmth as I look up at him in his glasses and wool hat. This feels comfortable. For the first time in so long, I feel like I belong with someone on my level for a change. Not someone trying to change me or me trying to change myself to be with them.

We pile into the transit bus. It is standing room only as we proceed down the road. I look at the people and then at their credentials. So many people experiencing the festival on different levels; It is interesting to see. Actors, producers, writers, film lovers, all on one bus.

A man points to Julian and asks, "You directed *Flying to Brazil for the Night*?"

"Oh, yes. Yes, I did," Julian answers back.

"Can't wait to see it," he says.

Julian and I look at the man's credential. It reads *Andrew Berry, Writer/Director Skateaway*.

"Your film debuts Sunday," Julian says. "How's it going?"

"Not too bad," he says. "Hey, you doing that panel at three?"

"Yeah," Julian says. "You?"

"Me, too," he says. "I'm on the panel as well."

"I'm Julian," he says. "This is my friend, Austen Landry. She's a writer."

"Hey, nice to meet you," he says. "I'm Andrew."

We ride over to the transit center just off Main Street, then make our way on foot over to the filmmaker lodge, the place where filmmakers and credential holders hang out, grab internet, naps, bathroom facilities, and refreshments during the festival.

"This is my other office," Julian points out to me as he leads us up the stairs and to a vacant couch with Andrew.

"Didn't you have a short here a few years ago," Julian asks Andrew.

"Yeah, I did," Andrew says. "Thought I'd be further along in the career by now, but at least I made it back, man."

"Same here," Julian empathizes.

"I'm living with my mom," Andrew says. "I'm pushing forty and still trying to do this shit."

"I'm with ya," Julian says. "Except I live in Brooklyn."

"You guys are so making me feel much better about myself," I tell them.

"Really?" Andrew says and I tell him that being a novelist isn't far from their lives at all. It's almost identical. I relate my story and we all commiserate. It makes me feel welcome. In. Part of a club. The starving artist club. It makes me forget that I'm not the only one suffering for my art.

"Andrew freakin' Berry," a voice says. It's Palmer. "How the heck are you?"

"Palmer Endicott," Andrew says. "Holy shit."

They hug each other as if they haven't seen each other in an eternity.

"Palmer here shot my first short," Andrew says.

"The one that got into Sundance?" I ask.

"Oh, hell no," he says. "The one I'm still trying to pay back my parents for."

"That was a good film," Palmer says. "It made Palm Springs."

"And Telluride," he adds. "It's all about the laurels."

"I thought I saw your name on the panel," she says.

"Wow, it's just old home week," I say.

"So you've met my best friend, Austen, have you?" Palmer asks Andrew.

"Yes, I have," he says. "And Julian Winslow, too. Small ass planet."

"Yep," she says. "I shot Julian's film that's here."

"Ah, no wonder it got in," Andrew says as we stand and make our way to the back of the lodge to a large open room set up with metal chairs and a long table in front for the panel.

"Sit here," Julian says and motions for me to sit on the aisle a few rows from the front. He's attentive, a real gentleman. I've only known this man for less than two days yet he makes me feel so comfortable and taken care of. I get why he seats me a few rows back and out of sight. Eric sat in the front row of a panel I gave once. He made exasperated faces of sheer boredom as spoke. I was a complete wreck and I still feel the embarrassment of it, even now.

The room fills up quickly to standing room only with filmmakers and wannabes waiting to hear what my friends have to say about the process of pre-production in a low budget feature. They talk about the technical aspects, money saving tips, and the planning and preparation needed in order to keep a film on track and under budget. Many of the

issues go over my head but I'm impressed with their knowledge and their professionalism. It's good to see Palmer in her element. I rarely get to see this side of her. Mainly we're just enjoying New Orleans nightlife together or the regular minutiae of living our lives that we forget that either one of us actually has a career.

I watch Julian as his passion for his work shows through in his words. I realize I've never seen Eric really doing or enjoying his vocation at all. He complains about his job, what his secretary has messed up, or what his associates have screwed up. He never talks about what he does with the kind of passion these people have for their work. Never. I'm in awe of their fervor. It's what drives me to write, even though I work several jobs for the privilege. They make films for the same reason I write. Because we must tell the story... no matter what it costs us.

* * *

We all decide to hit up one of the pop up lounges on Main Street with Andrew after the panel. We push through the festival goers and make our way to an interactive lounge sponsored by a camera company. We take goofy pictures together that will be posted on the web for download. As we stroll around the venue a photographer from Image Max snaps our picture for the wire service and takes our names and occupations. The photographer looks at me, asking me who I am and what I do.

"She's the author," Julian says. "Austen Landry."

"Very cool," the photographer says.

"Who is he with?" I ask.

Palmer explains to me that the photographer works for an outfit that takes pictures for a wire service and the pictures are posted for a price for newspapers, blogs, magazines, anyone wanting to use them.

"It's kind of cool to get your picture taken by them," Palmer points out, "even if you're sort of a nobody and no one will ever use them. They're watermarked if you just cut and paste them on your social media.

"Something to brag about at the lunch table at Home Depot when we get home," Andrew says.

We all look at him with a quizzical expression.

"Ok, only I get to do that," he says.

"You're in good company, Andrew," Julian says. "And we can't wait to see your film."

"We should play a game," Palmer says.

"A game?" I ask.

"Every morning, we count how many times our pictures appear on Image Max from the day before," she says. "Winner buys a round of beers at the No Name."

"You're on, Endicott," Julian says.

"I like this game," I say. "Even more free stuff for me to enjoy!"

Every place on Main Street is a sponsored venue. Beer, cameras, blue jeans, coffee, credit cards, computers, you name it, they've got a lounge or a party. We put on our blue wristbands and stroll past envious onlookers into a party sponsored by a premium brand of vodka. We are greeted by girls in blue bikinis, passing out blue martinis and gift bags.

"Free booze and swag," Palmer says. "My two favorite things."

"I see my sales rep over there," Andrew says. "It was good to hang with you guys."

"You too, Andrew," Julian says. "We'll see you around town."

"Absolutely," he says and disappears into the crowd.

"Is this part of the Sundance experience, too?" I ask.

"Yep," Palmer says. "If they want to give me free stuff, I will take it."

"Free stuff!" Julian and I both say as we raise our blue martinis to Palmer's.

Five parties later and they all begin to blend together. Gift bags and free booze. The conversations meld together as well. Who are you? What do you do? Who do you know? Who are you with? What have you seen? Did you get on the list to this or that party? If my cocktail is empty, someone replaces it with another.

I step back and look at my watch. It's not even seven o'clock yet. Palmer gives me a hug to say goodbye.

"I'm going over to Deer Valley to meet up with the drummer," she tells me. "You ok?"

I smile at her. "I'm fan-tastic," I say. "Fantastic."

"You sure?"

"I'm fine," I tell her.

She hands me a bottled water. "Drink water. You're at altitude. Pace yourself."

"Yes, ma'am," I say. "Have fun."

"Sure you don't want to come?"

"I'm good," I assure her and try to assure myself.

"Ok," she says. "I'll see you at Gray's later then."

"Grays," I say. "Ok!" I smile as she gets lost in the crowd of people. I look around the room. I see Radley and Julian in the corner talking to Liz with Samuel. People mill around me, schmoozing, and talking shop. I look down at the cocktail in my hand. I can't even

remember how many I've had. I sway and stagger. A hand slides into mine and leads me through the crowd to an outside deck with a wall of upscale port-o-potties in a row. A well muscled woman I don't recognize follows us. The hand belongs to Jaz. The well muscled woman must be her new bodyguard. We go inside one of the stalls, leaving the bodyguard to watch the door.

She laughs. "You are so drunk, girlfriend," she tells me.

"But it's a free drunk," I tell her.

"True," she says. "Stick your finger in your mouth and throw up."

"What?" I ask her.

She sticks her finger in my mouth and I suddenly throw up in the toilet. Vodka and beer. No food. Just alcohol. She holds my hair as I heave. When the puking stops she hands me a tissue to wipe my face.

"Better?" she asks me.

"Yes," I say as she hands me a bottled water.

"Drink," she says.

I drink it and feel better.

"Here," she says. "Take this."

"What is it?" I ask.

"It's a diet pill," she says. "Just a half for you. This will help sober you up and keep you going."

"Ok," I say and take the pill.

"It's all about the pacing," she says. "I'm going to kill Julian for letting you drink like that."

"It's not his fault," I say. "I wasn't paying attention."

She fluffs my hair as I check my makeup. I look pale but presentable. I could pass as a vampire.

"I got a new bodyguard," Jaz tells me.

"You mean Xena, Warrior Princess?"

"Yep," she says. "She's like an escapee from a Mad Max movie."

"She looks kind of scary," I say.

"I know. But hey, maybe she can get us on the list at the Thunderdome."

Someone bangs on the door. "Hurry up," they scream.

"Thank you," I tell Jaz.

"You're welcome," she says. "Just pace yourself. Stick to the beer. It's only 3.2."

Another bang, bang, bang, on the door.

"Alright, already," Jaz says. "We get it. You gotta pee!"

We both walk out of the stall together, surprising the girl who needs to pee.

"Oh my god," she says, "You're Jaz Snow."

"No, shit," Jaz says back to her.

"Can I have your autograph?" she asks.

"Seriously?" I say to the girl as we walk back into the party.

"Happens all the time," Jaz tells me. "Once I even had someone slip a tampon wrapper under the stall."

"No way?" I ask.

"You'd be surprised at what fans will do."

She leads me back into the party with Aunt Entity following us. Radley and Julian greet us. Samuel and Jaz's bodyguard watch over us.

"Where'd you go?" Radley asks.

"Handing out autographs in the bathroom," she says and winks at me.

Julian puts his arm around me and pulls me close to him. "You ok?" he asks me.

I feel the diet pill beginning to kick in and wake me up thanks to Jaz. I take another sip of water. "I'm great," I tell him. "Fantastic."

* * *

Six more parties later we pull up at Gray's after one thirty in the morning. Julian, Radley, Liz and Gray talk strategy for their PR push starting tomorrow. Shows, interviews, photoshoots, skype sessions. So much to do to make a film successful. Novelists, once published, have it so much easier. Apparently it's not enough just to get your film in; even if you do have one of the biggest stars on the planet as your lead. It all boils down to the distribution deal. This is why we went to the parties. The handshaking and the buildup.

"Where's Jaz?" Julian asks me.

"I don't know," I say. "She was just here." Xena, Samuel and I look around the party for her. "I'll go look for her."

I look around the gathering, checking the bathroom and the patio out back, party goers oblivious to the drama. She's just not here. I look past the fence and snow drift and see her trotting down the side street to an awaiting car. She sees me in the backyard and our eyes meet before she ducks inside.

"Did you find her?" Julian asks me as I stand outside and watch her taxi disappear up the street.

"No," I tell him. "I didn't."

We walk back inside. Julian looks at Radley and shrugs. I see Samuel chewing out the Warrior Princess in the kitchen. Not so tough looking when you lose your charge, I think to myself. I can tell that Radley is upset. He whispers something into Liz's ear. Liz just throws her hands up.

I see Palmer in the foyer, holding the hand, I'm sure, of her drummer. She sees me and waves me over.

"Hey," Palmer says. "This is the drummer." She makes our formal introductions and I pretend like nothing is going on. She's here to have fun and show off her new man. I can't blame her. "How's it going with Julian," she asks me.

"He's been great," I tell her. "I'm having a blast."

"That's the plan, Landry," she says.

Palmer's drummer immediately gravitates toward the drums as several other musicians find the instruments and begin a late night jam session.

"He's so intense," Palmer says to me. "And funny. I'm having a blast today. Tomorrow we start pushing the movie."

"So I hear," I tell her. "Lots of appearances tomorrow."

"What are you going to do tomorrow?" Palmer asks me.

"It's Sundance," I tell her. "I'm sure I can come up with something."

Julian puts his arm around me and gives me a hug and a kiss on the head.

"Did you get Jaz on the phone yet?" I ask Julian.

"No," he says. "She's a big girl. I just..."

"What?"

"Nothing," he says. "You ready to go back to the house?"

"Sure," I say. I can tell he's upset and worried.

I give Palmer a hug, find my coat, and follow Julian to a driver waiting outside. Our drive up to the house is silent. I want to tell Julian this is not the first time Jaz has slipped away but it's none of my business, really. As Julian said, *she's a big girl*. I don't want to get in the middle of it.

At the house, Julian leads me to my room and kisses me goodnight. As I try to go into my room, he doesn't let go of my hand.

"Do you want to come in?" I ask him. He nods and comes into the room, still wordless since we left Gray's house. I haven't seen him this silent since I met him. I take off my coat and he pulls me toward the bed. With our clothes on he pulls me on the bed and then under the duvet. We don't make love or kiss. He simply holds me all night long.

CHAPTER FIVE

FIRST SATURDAY OF THE FESTIVAL

I awake to see the dawn just breaking outside the window and Julian's sleeping face on the pillow next to me. I didn't really sleep very well, thanks to Jaz and her diet pill, but Julian did, holding on to me all night. He looks so vulnerable lying next to me, the weight of Sundance obviously bearing down on him. I try to move but he pulls me closer.

"Don't leave, yet," he says.

"It's morning," I tell him.

He draws me in even closer and opens his eyes to mine. "Let's stay in bed all day," he says to me and strokes my face with his hand.

"Don't you have a film to promote?"

"It's just a rumor," he says. "A dream. Pay no attention."

"This is your time," I tell him.

"I want to hang on to it," he says, "just a little bit longer."

"Ok," I say. I put my head on his shoulder but he pulls my chin up to kiss me, softly. I want to make love to him but I'm letting him take the lead. He intertwines his legs in mine.

"I like this," he says.

"What is this?" I ask him.

"I have no idea," he tells me. "But whatever this is, I don't want to let go."

"Then don't."

He slides out of the bed and pulls me with him. "Do you have a shower?"

"I have a very big one," I tell him.

"Oh, you do, now. Show me."

I lead him into the bathroom. He pulls off my sweater and unhooks my bra, which falls to the floor. He takes off his sweater and t-shirt, baring his chest. I open the shower door and turn on the water. It heats up quickly and steam begins to fill the interior. We quickly undress and step inside, unable to keep our hands off each other as the warm water rushes over us. He kisses me passionately then reaches around behind me and squeezes soap into his hands, lathering my shoulders and moving down my body, my breasts, my stomach, between my thighs. He takes more soap and places it into my hands, leading my hands over his body, covering him in soap all over as well. He pushes me against the tile wall, spreading my legs just enough for him to enter me. We both moan gently as we find the perfect rhythm, trying harder and harder to get closer to one another. I shudder in climax just seconds before him. We try to hold on as long as we can before sliding apart.

We both let the water run down us as we catch our breaths and stare into each other's eyes. I don't even know how long we've stayed this way.

"I think the label on the soap says 'lather, rinse, repeat,'" he tells me with a smile and reaches for the soap again.

* * *

When I finally get ready for the day and make my way downstairs, I find Julian, Radley, and Liz in deep conversation over coffee and muffins with Samuel and the Warrior Princess.

"She's got a full day of appearances," Radley says to Julian. "I can't have her ruining this. I've got too much in it as it is."

"I'll talk to her... again," Julian says as he notices me approaching. "Hey," he says, brightening.

"Hi," I say.

"Would you like some coffee and some muffins, dear?" Margaret asks me.

"Please," I say to her, then to Julian and Radley, "I know you have several things going on today and tomorrow."

"Yeah, but this evening we're going to do the parties again..." Radley says.

"Yes, I appreciate that," I say. "I'm hoping we can spend a little time on the interview between now and your premier, then after that as well."

"The full Sundance experience for Harper's," Radley says. "Yeah, let's sit down at some point this evening and line everything out."

"That would be great," I say.

"You got stuff to do while I'm off doing the filmmaker thing?" Julian asks me.

"I do," I tell him. "I think I'll go see a couple of movies thanks to Liz and maybe take in some of the venues."

"At least someone pays attention to my itinerary," she says.

"Some of us are just better at it than others," Radley says, a poke at Julian's sister, I'm sure.

"Ok," Julian says, then takes my arm. "How about I call you this afternoon and maybe we can catch a film or some music together. I want to see you."

"I'd like that," I say. "Very much."

"Then I'll see you this afternoon," he says as he walks outside with Liz, Radley, and Samuel out to the SUV.

I sit and enjoy my coffee and the homemade muffins that Margaret has fixed. I think I'm going to take her home with me. She could be my own personal Starbucks.

Palmer comes down the stairs, ready for the day. "I'm running late, Austen. I called a car service. You want to ride down?"

"Sure," I say. "I'm almost ready."

"Then let's hit it. I see the car."

I take a last sip of coffee and take the muffin with me. Margaret hands me another muffin for Palmer. "Thanks," I say.

We get in the car and head down to Main Street. Palmer is giving instruction on the Red camera and a panel at the Production Alliance today while I'm going to see a film and wing it this afternoon.

"How'd it go with the drummer last night?" I ask her.

"Incredible," she says. "He's hot. And lives just a few blocks from my house in Brooklyn."

"Even better," I say. "How long is he here for?"

"'Til in the morning. Then he's off to L.A. and Vancouver before returning home the following Sunday."

"Sounds promising," I tell her.

"So, you and Julian still..."

"Yes," I say to her with a smile.

"And..."

"And?"

"Oh my god, Landry, you're in love," Palmer blurts out.

"I am not," I say. "I'm in lust. Full on blissful lust."

"Keep telling yourself that," Palmer teases. "So Eric is now history."

"Eric? Who's Eric?"

* * *

Palmer heads to the Production Alliance while I stroll Main Street and kill time before I need to head to my movie. I pop into Java Cow and pick up a coffee. I walk the street and ponder this morning with Julian, the snuggle fest last night, and the intense shower this morning. I've had more passion in the three and half days I've been with Julian than the year I've been with Eric. I keep marveling at that. And in that year neither one of us has been able to tell the other we truly love them. The sex certainly doesn't express that. When I get home, I will tell him it's over. In the meantime, I have several more days of bliss with Julian in Sundance and I plan to live a lifetime in these next few days.

"Austen!" a voice shouts at me.

I look around and I can't find who's calling me.

"Look up, Austen," the voice shouts at me.

I look up and see Jaz waving at me.

"Come up," she yells to me. "Come up!"

I walk over to the door and two bouncers won't let me in. I look at the door and read that this is the office of E! I pull out my press pass and show it to the guys. They let me through. Wow, I think to myself, there is a tremendous amount of power in the laminated badge.

I make my way up where Jaz is talking to a couple of the hosts of a show. I see Furiosa the bodyguard standing watch in the corner.

"Austen," Jaz greets me and gives me a big hug.

"This is my friend, Austen," Jaz says. "She's a writer."

The hosts and crew nod, as if whatever Jaz has said was something profound. I just smile at them as they buzz around Jaz and set up for an interview with her.

"I just wanted to say thanks," she tells me.

"Whatever for?"

"For pretending to not notice me," she says.

"No problem," I say. "Where were you going?"

"Nowhere in particular," she says. "I just needed to get away. Things are just crazy right now."

"I wouldn't rat on you," I tell her. "It's none of my business and thanks for last night too. I drank way too much."

"The free booze is a killer." She gives me a hug. "You know, it's all just so intense sometimes."

"I can't imagine what it's like being in the spotlight like you and Radley endure," I tell her. "It has to be difficult. Bodyguards, paparazzi, fans. It's insane."

"We're ready to roll, Ms. Snow," one of the hosts tells Jaz.

"Stay," she begs.

"Ok," I tell her and move over to a corner, out of the shot.

"Welcome back to E! News at Sundance. We're with Jazmine Snow, star of the highly anticipated indie *Flying to Brazil for the Night*," the host says. "How is it jumping from a Sundance short to a feature film here?"

"It was such a privilege to be here a few years ago with my brother Julian's short film and now it feels like we've come full circle with a feature," Jaz tells the host.

"What is *Flying to Brazil* about?"

"It's about a relationship in just one night," she explains.

"And having Radley Seager as your boyfriend as well," the host gushes. "That had to create some great chemistry on the set."

"Well, we do have chemistry," Jaz says. "He's an amazing actor and just an amazing man. I feel lucky to have him in my life."

"Your star has certainly taken off," the host says. "You've got two other movies coming out later this year and you start filming on a new Tarantino movie next month."

"Yes, I do," Jaz says. "And I'm so excited and honored to be in it. He's an amazing filmmaker."

"There's buzz on the streets here that *Flying to Brazil* may be heading for a bidding war. Several studios have expressed interest, mainly Ace Pictures. What do you think your chances are?"

"I think the studio that acquires our little movie will be getting one heck of a film, whether it is Ace Pictures or any other studio."

"Well good luck and have a fantastic festival this week," the host says.

"Thanks. You, too."

"And cut," someone says.

"Thank you, Jaz," the host says.

"Thank you," she says then looks at me. "I gotta get out of here."

Jaz puts on a ball cap, sun glasses and then pulls her hood over her head. "Can you tell who I am?"

"You look like you're going on an expedition with Shackleton," I tell her.

"Is that a good thing?"

"Even your brother wouldn't recognize you," I say.

"Good," she says to me then over at the bodyguard, "Come on Jillian Michaels."

We stroll down Main Street with the bodyguard in tow. The sidewalk is crowded but no one seems to care about us at all.

Jaz grabs my arm. "I like being normal," she says.

"This is normal?"

"Very," she says.

"So, what sort of normal things would you like to do?"

"There's a condo party, a barbeque, up on Park avenue," Jaz says. "Wanna go?"

"I was thinking a movie maybe," I say. I can tell she's looking at me with puppy dog eyes through her disguise. "Don't you have some appearances to make today?"

"Nah," she says. "It's all good."

Near the No Name, we turn the corner and walk up a very long flight of metal stairs, up the mountain and toward a row of condos and houses above Main Street. On Park Avenue, we walk a block and see a crowd gathered at a beautiful Victorian style home.

"Whose house is this?" I ask her.

"Johnny Reardon's house," she says.

"The actor?" I ask. She nods. "Johnny Reardon's house. That's very normal."

"He's nice. I've got a movie with him coming out later this year," she says as we walk up to the door. She pulls off the hood of her jacket and removes the ball cap so people can see who she is. Immediately they recognize her and she blends into the guests easily. No one wants an autograph or her picture. I recognize a few of the guests here from television

and movies. No wonder they want to avoid Main Street. Here at this party they can all be 'normal.' Now it's me who doesn't feel normal here.

I sit down in a chair to keep an eye on Jaz. I look at the table next to me. A paparazzi photo of Jaz and Rad is on the cover of a weekly rag, *Losing his Jaz*, the cover says. How the music has gone out of the relationship. Maybe so.

I pull out my phone and notice a few texts. Palmer tells me she's giving a panel and the moderator sucks. Another is from Eric. He's missing me. Can't say the same to him. I ignore it. Another one is from Julian. *I'm missing your kisses.*

I'm missing yours, too, I text back.

I don't know what you're doing to me but I like it, he texts back.

I smile. *I like it, too.*

I get up and wander the party. I know absolutely no one here. I look for Jaz and find her in the kitchen, her bodyguard not far from her, and someone else trying to get cozy. I recognize him. It's Constance Everley's husband, Lance. Jaz sees me and pulls away from Lance.

"Austen, over here," she says, motioning me to come over.

"This is Lance Everley," she introduces us. "And this is Austen Landry."

"Ah, yes, Austen," he says. "My wife says nice things about your book."

"Oh, thanks," I say, not really knowing what to do.

"I've got to get going," Lance says. "I just stopped by to speak with some producers. Looks like I've bought my first film of the fest."

"Congrats," I say.

"Nice to meet you, Austen," he says to me. "I'll see you at my party later tonight," he says to Jaz.

"Wouldn't miss it," Jaz says.

Lance walks away as Jaz's eyes follow him out. "The most powerful man at Sundance," she tells me.

"His wife is a power player in my world, too," I tell her. "My agent calls her the Dragon Lady."

"I call her the Lock Jawed Town and Country Bitch," Jaz says.

"Why?" I ask her. Why would she care?

"Because she is one," Jaz says. "Let's go grab some food."

* * *

Back in her disguise, Jaz takes me and the bodyguard to the Pizza & Noodle, which she refers to as The Pizza Noodle. We stand in line like the normal people, people like me. I think she's having fun not being recognized. Me, standing in line waiting to order lunch is just like any other day waiting in line at Mother's in New Orleans. Except here, I don't think I'm going to get a delicious bowl of gumbo.

Jaz orders a salad, me the soup of day, and the bodyguard a stir fry. I can tell she doesn't want the bodyguard sitting with us but she doesn't have much choice as the place is packed. We take our seat next to the window where we can see what's happening on Main Street.

I look at the bodyguard across from us. She is silent as she eats, eyes always looking around in case she needs to pounce into action. "I don't even know what your real name is," I say to her.

She smiles, "It's Stella."

"Like the beer," Jaz says. "Cool."

"How did you get into the bodyguard business?" I ask her.

"I was an MP in the army," she says and tells us that she served two tours overseas and used to be a Krav Maga instructor in L.A. before being recruited by a security firm. Both Jaz and I are intrigued by her story and I think Jaz may finally be warming up to her.

"I'm sorry I'm a bitch sometimes," Jaz says to her, picking at her salad. "Sometimes I don't deal with the fame very well."

"Then why do it?" Stella asks her.

"Because working at Hooters sucks," she says.

"Yeah, but you have to admit, the tips were really good," Stella says.

"Oh, my god, truth," Jaz says.

"I sometimes work at Nordstroms," I say. "No tips but the clothes discount is well worth it"

Jaz laughs. "People give me clothes to wear. I do like this part of the fame," she tells me.

"I'd kill to have that Stella McCartney sweater you have," I say.

"It's yours, then," Jaz says. "No homicide needed."

"I can't take your sweater," I say.

"I've been seen and photographed in it," Jaz explains. "I can't ever wear it again."

"Thanks, Jaz," I tell her.

"My pleasure," she says. "This is nice. It reminds me of before. You guys don't know how lucky you are. You really don't."

* * *

We make it out of the Pizza Noodle without anyone recognizing Jaz. She seems happy. We all three just hang out on Main Street, checking out the lounges and ending up at the ASCAP lounge for some music. She finally takes off her disguise and people begin to stare at her and not the musicians. Stella pushes people away from us. This is Jaz's normal. She didn't have to take off the disguise. She's confused fame with normal.

Before the music stops we make our way out of the café and out onto the street. Jaz quickly tries to put on her disguise but it's too late. People crowd and push us but Stella keeps us close and pushes through the crowd until some security guards come up and control the small crowd around us. She makes a call as we walk up the street and within minutes an SUV pulls up and we get in.

"Where to?" the driver asks.

Stella directs the driver to our house on the Summit.

"Thank you for giving me normal today," Jaz says to me.

"Anytime," I say.

We find the house empty, except for Margaret who piddles in the kitchen. She offers to fix us a snack but we all scatter to our rooms instead.

I sit on the bed, try to relax and pull myself together. I know we have several parties to attend tonight and I'd like to fix up a bit before we leave. My phone ringing breaks my relaxation. It's Eric. I send it to voicemail. I just don't want to deal with him here. I want to deal with him in person. Back home. I do feel like I owe him that much.

I clean up, put on a pretty shirt and sweater, new jeans, and new boots. As I look in the mirror I realize I'm having the best hair day of my life. No humidity I realize. I should move here just to have great hair.

Downstairs Margaret tells me the guys are in the basement and that I should join them. I make my way down and find them enjoying a beer, talking and laughing. I look at Julian and we both exchange smiles as if we are school children.

I sit down next to him. He puts his arm around me and brings me closer.

"I like this particular Julian best," Radley says. "He's looser, not quite the intense filmmaker I've come to know."

"I'm not intense," Julian tells Radley. "I'm passionate for my craft."

"A hundred takes is not passionate, man," Radley teases.

"It wasn't a hundred," Julian says. "It was eighty-two and I didn't hear my sister complaining any."

"Austen, eighty-two takes to get the first kiss just right," Radley says to me. "Don't be surprised when he kisses you, he says cut and gives you notes."

"I'll keep that in mind," I say as Julian shakes his head. "So what's on for tonight?"

"Ace Pictures party at Riverhorse and then whatever," Julian says. "Film First Magazine has asked for an interview. They said they'd be there."

"That's great," I tell him.

"I'm kind of nervous," Julian says.

"About an interview?" I ask him.

"About Ace," he says. "They're pressuring us to screen the film before our Tuesday premiere."

"You have a screening room here," I say to him.

"It's not that simple," Julian says. "He wants the film but thinks there's going to be a bidding war. He's trying to skip that by attempting to acquire the film before its press screening, thinking we'll jump if the offer is good."

"With a Tuesday premiere," Radley explains, "it keeps them in anticipation through the festival and possibly runs up the bid."

"Possibly. There aren't any guarantees we'll be picked up at all," Julian says. "But Gray says keep him in anticipation and let the buzz escalate."

"I liked your movie," I say. "How's that for buzz?"

"You showed her the movie?" Radley asks Julian, shooting him a look of disapproval.

"Yeah," Julian says. "I showed it to her."

"So, you liked it," Radley says. "And..."

"...and I'd pay money to see it on the big screen even if I wasn't screwing the director..."

Radley lets out a big laugh. "That's about as unbiased buzz as you're going to get, Jules," Radley says. "Trust Gray. He's done this many times before. That's why you don't have a producer's rep. You have him. Don't piss him off."

"I won't piss him off," Julian says.

Jaz comes clicking down the stairs in thigh high Louboutin boots, low cut and tight skinny jeans, and a cropped long sleeve cashmere sweater, exposing her beautiful abs and stomach.

"Let's do this," Jaz says.

* * *

I hang back with Liz and let everyone exit the limo first to take full advantage of the photo opportunity going into the Ace Pictures party. Even Palmer is receiving some well-deserved attention, which I know she loves. Having a buzzed-about film at Sundance is everything, even for a cinematographer.

I come out of the limo and cameras click then end.

"She's nobody," they all say and drop their cameras.

That's right, I'm getting used to being a nobody. I smile and make my way to the entrance with Liz.

The security for the event is tight and even Liz has a word or two for the list nazi who gives me trouble as I give my name.

"She's my client, Austen Landry," Liz insists. "My clients do not stand outside in the cold." She winks at me and pushes me inside the event.

Just your typical cocktail party except here the people are divided into three groups: those that have the power, those who need something from them, and me. I kind of like being in my own little group; there's no pressure to be 'on' or 'expecting' anything from anyone. I can eat the food and consume the liquor knowing that no one wants anything from me. I'm the fly on the proverbial wall tonight. I exchange looks with Julian from across the room. People are wondering if he's going to be the 'it' boy out of the festival this year. I'm wondering if he might be my 'it.'

I watch Radley and Jaz move around the room together, working their charms and talking up the film. Samuel and Stella get to relax a bit on their security. These players do not want their charges' autograph unless it's on a contract.

Jaz makes her way to me and gives me a hug. "Having fun yet?" she asks me. She looks around the room as if she's looking for someone in particular.

"I like being the observer," I tell her. "It's what I do best."

"Same with my brother," she says. "He likes to move the chess pieces, not be one."

Jaz brightens as if she's seen someone she knows. She takes off her coat, hands it to me as if I'm a coat rack and glides across the room to her prey: Lance Everley. I watch her as she tries to give him a hug and he pushes her off him and whispers something to her. I wonder what she's up to. I take an hors d'oeuvre from a passing waiter.

"Quite the little starlet, your friend there," Constance Everley says to me from behind as I watch Jaz.

"It's her job to be charming and talk up the movie," I say, defending her as I stuff the hors d'oeuvre into my mouth.

"Is it her job to fuck my husband?"

I choke on the bacon wrapped asparagus. "Excuse me?"

"Been going on for some time now," she tells me.

"I'm sorry," is all I can muster up to say.

"Why? It's not your fault," she says. "I'm surprised Radley puts up with it, but then I suppose she's almost at the end of her usefulness."

I just stare at her with no words coming from my mouth. I'm a writer. I should always have words at my disposal. But I have nothing.

"Radley will find himself a new starlet soon enough," she says. "And so will my husband."

"Are you going to divorce him?" I ask her.

"Don't be silly. Haven't you heard? We're the ultimate power couple," she says.

"Enjoy the party."

I feel the asparagus lodge in my throat as I realize where Jaz has been sneaking off. I don't like secrets, especially these types of secrets. They're the toxic sort of secret that tear people apart. I watch as Julian and Radley catch up to her and Lance. What a crazy web that's been woven there. I watch as Radley pulls Jaz closer to him while she tries to subtly pull away.

"Old Lancey boy is chomping at the bit, huh?" Palmer says as she touches my shoulder from behind. "He really wants it bad."

"You know?"

"Of course I know," Palmer says. "He wants that damn screener."

"Oh, yeah," I say, still distracted by what I know.

"Everything okay with you, Landry?" she asks me.

"I'm fine," I lie. "I'm just tired."

"And the festival has barely started," Palmer says.

"Yeah, I know. It's very intense."

"Careers are made here," Palmer explains. "Lots at stake. And right now we're in the spotlight. You're just catching the residual heat from it, that's all. It's the altitude."

"I'm going to go back up to the house," I tell Palmer.

"You sure?"

"Yeah," I say. "Ya'll have a ton of parties to attend and I just..."

"Things move fast here, Landry," Palmer says. "You have to grab it while you can."

"I'll see you at the house," I tell her as I give her a hug. "I just need a little time to think."

"Ok," she says. "I'll let Julian know you left."

* * *

I slip outside the party and make my way up the street, a light snow falls down on the festival. I watch the people flitting between parties, movies, and general merriment. Maybe it is the altitude that's getting to me. Or maybe it's the speed at which Sundance moves. I'm caught up in it all. I'm just supposed to be an observer yet I've planted myself into the story. Their story. A break from it tonight will bring me back to the ground, even if the ground is eight thousand feet above the sea level I'm used to.

After a slow walk up and down Main Street I find a table outside of O'Shucks. A beer and a propane heater keep me somewhat comfortable. From here I watch the ebb and flow of Main Street. Watching people always brings me back to center and to reality. For two solid hours I drink beer and watch the people. I don't want to go back to the house just yet. The snow falling and the biting air keeps me sober. Well, that and the 3.2 beer. I resist the urge to call Eric and break it off with him on the phone. Drinking and dialing is not what I need tonight. I don't know what I need tonight. Another beer maybe.

I turn to find the waitress and signal her for another beer as the snow begins to fall heavier. People leave the patio to seek refuge inside but I remain at my post. I let the snow fall on my face and remind me of reality. When I look forward I find Julian sitting on the concrete wall staring at me.

"You escaped the craziness," he says to me. "I did, too."

"You did?"

"Yeah, and it is crazy out there," he tells me.

You have no idea how crazy, I think to myself. "Very crazy," I say.

"Want to get crazy?" he asks me.

"We started at crazy, Julian. The bar has been set pretty low for us, don't you think?"

"Good point," he says. "We should probably raise that bar up a bit, huh?"

"What do you have in mind?"

"I'd like to ask you on a date tonight," he says. "We haven't officially gone out on a real date."

"Kind of late notice," I say, playing hard to get, knowing that he had me at crazy.

"I'm a spontaneous guy," he says. "Come on a date with me."

"Ok," I say as the waitress brings me the beer I ordered. I don't even notice that the snow has lightened up into a flurry."

I pay the bill as Julian and I both drink the beer so as not to waste it.

"You hungry?" Julian asks me.

"I'm starved," I tell him.

"Then we shall feed you," Julian says and leads me out of the bar and up Main Street where we find ourselves at a pop up veggie burger bar for a free meal. "Anyone can buy you a meal, Austen, but at Sundance, the spoils go to the victor."

"Palmer brags that once she's here, she spends very little money because everything anyone needs or wants is free," I tell him as we find an empty table and enjoy our spoils.

"It's like a game to her. Everything here is like a game."

"It's a tedious game," he says. "I'm not very good at playing it."

"I thought you were doing quite well at it," I say.

He laughs. "It's all an illusion. Outside, I'm doing great. Inside, I'm a wreck."

"You sound like me," I say. "How did we get here?"

"Everyone thinks it's so easy. Oh, you got nominated, your life must be fabulous," he says. "What a crock."

"You're here now," I tell him.

"It just took so much to get here, though," he says. "I'm finding it hard to believe this is it."

"You have the movie everyone is buzzing about here," I say.

"It's because Radley's in it," he says.

"No, it's really good," I tell him. "How the heck did you score Radley in your movie in the first place? Because of Jaz?"

"You mean, what came first, the Jaz or the Radley?" he jokes.

"Yeah," I say. "He's the biggest box office draw on the planet right now and you've got him in your movie."

"My sister started dating him," he explains. "She begged him to read the script. He thought it was the best thing he'd ever read. He matched my funding and here we are."

"It's still all you, though," I tell him.

"His name carries weight," he says. "And he's also a really nice guy."

"But it's your film first, remember that," I say. "It's your film."

"Yeah, I know," he says and touches my hand. "And I'm here. And I'm grateful, and I'm grateful for you..."

"Me?"

"Yes, you," he says. "I am happy you're here."

"I am, too," I say. "I'm having a great time."

"Do you like to dance?" he asks me.

"I love to dance," I say. "More importantly, do you like to dance?"

"I've been known to embarrass myself on the dance floor from time to time," he says with a wry smile. "I realize this totally blows your perception of me."

"Would never have pegged you as the hoofin' type, I'll be honest," I say to him, teasing.

"I like being full of surprises," he says as he takes my hand and leads me out of the veggie burger bar and back down Main Street.

We make our way through the festival goers and find ourselves outside a large tent where crowds of people are held back from the A-listers by metal railing and bodyguards. People push and pull us as we try to make our way through the crowd to the entrance. "Where are we?" I ask Julian, shouting to be heard over the screaming fans.

"Tao," he says. "It's a pop-up nightclub," he tells me, pushing his way to where a woman in a parka stands holding the list next to a huge bodyguard, protecting the entrance into the inner sanctum.

"Winslow, Julian," he says to the girl. "And Landry, Austen."

She looks up at me as if I'm nobody. "Who?"

"I'm Austen Landry, the author," I say, as if the qualifier would somehow qualify me to get into this place.

"Oh, yeah, here you are," she says, nonchalantly and unimpressed with me or that I'm on the list at all.

We are escorted in, where, apparently, some famous high dollar celebrity DJ I've never heard of before is spinning the music. The venue is packed with all the beautiful people I've always seen in the tabloids and on the entertainment reporting shows. It's a who's who of genuine talent and fame whores, New York and Hollywood privileged elite... and me, inside the Sundance prom. At least I have a date and a cute date at that.

As we make our way to the bar, a photographer snaps our picture and stops us in our tracks. "You're Julian Winslow, Jaz's brother, right?" he asks Julian.

"He directed a film here," I tell the photographer.

"Sure, yeah, whatever, but you're Jaz's brother, though, right?"

"Yeah, I'm the brother," Julian admits and rolls his eyes. "And she's Austen Landry, the author," Julian says, building me up.

"Who?" he asks.

"Jane Austen, the novelist," I say.

"Far out," the photographer says with a smile and walks away.

"There's something kind of nice about not being recognized, isn't there?" Julian asks as we push our way up to the bar.

"It's supposed to be all about the work for us," I tell him.

"This is true," Julian says, handing me a beer. "But right now, I need all the press and buzz I can get."

"I'm finding this game with the photographers fun," I say, "even though I know I will never beat Jaz or Radley or even Palmer for that matter." They know how to work Sundance to their advantage. I'm just along for the work and fun, living vicariously through them. Being a writer is nice. No one pays attention to your author photo.

We take our free beers and bask in the grandeur of the venue. This is the place to let loose and I can see that Julian is relaxing and letting the music seize his body. His head bobs ever so slightly with the pulsating beat of the music. I think my head may be bobbing as well.

Julian grabs my hand and we make our way to the dance floor, beers still in hand. We fall into rhythm with all the other dancers, assimilating to their beat and step. All my worries have been erased and I find I'm swept away with the music and this beautiful man I find I'm falling for.

I find hands suddenly resting on my shoulders, look up, and find Radley joining our party. He gives me a hug and then we all blend back into the music.

I look around the venue and don't see Jaz. "Where's Jaz?" I ask, shouting to Radley.

He shrugs his shoulders and I see Julian wrinkling the side of his mouth.

"She's with her bodyguard," Radley tells Julian.

I realize people and cameras are trained on us, the Radley effect, no less. Maybe I'll make a decent showing of this photographic game after all.

Radley takes me by the hand and I take Julian by the hand and are led to a small banquet of two plush chairs that have been reserved by Liz just for us.

"Liz is the best," Radley says. "She can get anything!"

"Chairs," I say. "She got you chairs."

"Us," Radley exclaims. "Us."

"But there's only two chairs," I exclaim as Julian takes one and Radley takes the other. I hold onto Julian's hand but Radley pulls me into his lap.

"There's no escaping now," Radley says and winks at Julian. "I'm borrowing your girlfriend."

"You can have her," Julian shouts. "For your share of the movie and a pizza."

"You think she's worth it?"

"Absolutely," Julian says and smiles at me. "Absolutely."

"I think he likes you," Radley says to me.

"You think?"

"Oh, yeah. Definitely."

A waitress, scantily clad, brings us a bottle of vodka and set-ups. She places the tray on the table between the two chairs, obviously flirting and flashing cleavage toward Radley. He pays no attention. The waitress shoots me a 'who the hell are you' look. I bask in my new-found privilege and return the smirk.

"Wow, bottle service," I say. "Does everyone get this treatment at Sundance?"

"Just the VIPs," Radley says and points at me.

"I'm VIP, huh?" I ask.

"Of course you are," Radley says and pulls me close with a hug. "You are my new best friend." I can feel the cameras clicking away at us. Damn, I love this game.

CHAPTER SIX

First Sunday of the Festival

I awake in my room, spooned by Julian, his arms wrapped around me. Bliss. I stir and he pulls me closer, kissing my neck and sending tingles all over my body. He turns me over and we kiss.

"Good morning, my sweet," he whispers to me. "Did you enjoy last night?"

"Very much," I tell him. "You put together a very good date. I don't know when I've had a man spend so little on me and yet have so much fun," I tease him.

He laughs. "You're a very cheap date," he says and tickles me.

I pull him close, wrap my legs around him and kiss him deeply. Oh, I want this man. I want to wake up every morning just like this with him in my arms. I turn him on his back and immediately mount him, taking complete control and directing the lovemaking. Eric hates it when I do this. He always wants to be in control. Julian allows me to do whatever I want with him then I let him do the same to me.

"I could stay in bed all day with you," he says to me.

"Why don't you?" I ask him.

"Yes, why don't we?" he suggests.

"So tempting, isn't it?" I ask him.

He pulls me close and kisses me. "I think we both want to play hooky," he says.

"Radley wants to take you skiing today, you know."

"Ok, now I really want to play hooky," I say. "I pull the pillow over my head.

"You'll have a good time," he says as he removes the pillow from my face. "Radley and Samuel will take good care of you."

"But skiing?"

"You'll be in good hands, I promise."

"Hmmm, good hands, huh? You're not jealous?" I ask him.

Julian laughs out loud and kisses my chest. "Why would I be?"

"Because he's a hottie and what if I have a thing for him?" I tease him.

"He's not interested in you," Julian says, matter of fact as he kisses my stomach.

"Oh, because he's with your sister," I say and moan.

Julian works his way down to my thigh. "No, because he's actually with Samuel."

We both stop, leaving the revelation hanging in the air.

"Oh, crap," he says and pulls away from me.

And now it's out there. And I still have to interview him. Today. What is it with the Winslow siblings and their damn secrets?

"Did you just out Radley?" I ask. "Oh my god."

"You're going to print that, aren't you?" Julian asks me.

"Why would I do that, Julian? Why would I out him? Why would you think that of me?"

"I don't know," he says and sits up. "I'm under a very strict non-disclosure agreement, which I just violated to the one person you don't want to have that information."

"I'm not the bad guy here, Julian," I say.

"But you're the media." His words cut me like a knife. "You can make or break us with this information. There's a reason why he's not out. He's just now becoming a leading man."

"Careers could be ruined which is why I would never do that," I say, thinking about my career more than anyone's. I'd be the person who outed the biggest movie star on the planet. It would make me a pariah. I'd be the biggest jerk on the planet. I'd be the asshole that outed Radley Seager. "This is supposed to be a puff piece, not an expose'."

"Then please don't be an asshole and print this," Julian demands.

"Asshole?" I react. "Julian, I'm not going to tell anyone."

He jumps out of bed and pulls on his boxers. "How do I know that? Look, I don't know you that well and..."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I met you on Wednesday," he points out. "It's barely Sunday."

"And after spending all this time with me, you think I'd just go and tell the world 'Radley Seager is gay' just like that?" I ask. "Wow."

"I didn't mean it that way," he says. He takes a sigh as he puts his jeans on. "Maybe we should just..."

I look up at him from the bed. I'm suddenly feeling vulnerable, as if I was the one who blurted out the secret to end all secrets and I'm the bad guy who will destroy someone's career. I pull the sheet up almost to my chin.

He puts his sweater on, grabs his watch and festival pass from the nightstand. "I am so sorry," he says and walks out of the room, closing the door behind him and leaving me all alone to deal with his secret.

* * *

I descend the stairs to find Samuel at the kitchen bar enjoying his breakfast that Margaret has made for him. Two other coffee cups rest on the bar.

"Where's everyone else?" I ask Samuel.

"They're downstairs in the screening room," he says. "They'll be right back."

"Ok," I say. "How are you doing?" I ask him. I have a new-found respect for Samuel now that I know his secret. He, too, lives a double life, just to be with the one he loves. He protects him and watches over him. They play their parts well.

"I'm doing great," he says. "Something about being up here at altitude makes everything feel and taste so much better." He winks at me and then at Margaret, who smiles and pours me a cup of coffee. I think her confidence just shot up through the roof with Samuel and Radley around. They both have a positive and warm effect on the people around them. It's comforting.

"No, I only brought the two screeners with me," I hear Julian say. "I didn't want them to get out. One is still locked in my bag. The other I know I left in the dvd player downstairs."

"Why would you do that?" Radley scolds.

"I didn't think anyone would bother it," Julian says.

"You sure you didn't leave it lying around anywhere?" I hear Radley ask him.

"No," I hear him say. "The only other person who knew it was there is Austen and I know she wouldn't take it."

That makes me feel a little better. He trusts me.

"Nah, I don't think she'd take it either," I hear Radley respond. "Maybe the dvd player ate it."

They both round the corner and see me sitting at the bar. Julian gives a little sigh and Radley puts on the charm.

"Miss Austen, Miss Austen," Radley greets me and then hugs me. "I am so glad to see you."

"I am glad to see you, too, Radley," I say.

Julian takes his seat at the bar and motions for Margaret to pour him another cup of coffee. I can tell he's still upset. He doesn't quite look at me.

Even Radley and Samuel notice his distance from me.

"Margaret, could I please get a muffin to go?"

"Absolutely, Mr. Winslow," she says. She turns around and wraps up a muffin for him, then hands it to him.

"I'm off," he says. "If you all need me, I'll be down on Main Street trying to promote a film." He pats me on the shoulder. All the affection I'm going to receive right now.

Radley and Samuel watch him dash around the corner and out toward the garage then look at each other before looking at me for answers.

"Lover's quarrel?" Radley asks me.

"He seems edgy," Samuel says.

"I think he's just nervous," I tell him.

"He seems to have lost something valuable," Radley says.

"A screener? Why would someone take it?" I ask him. "I couldn't help but overhear y'all."

Radley looks at Samuel and gives him a face.

"Well, you were a little loud," Samuel says.

"Why would someone take it? Because screeners are just cool," Radley says. "Hell, I get excited when the SAG screeners come to the house."

"Yep, screeners are cool," Samuel says as he bites into some wheat toast.

"See?" Radley points out. "They're exclusive. All people want to see something no one else has seen or watch a movie just out in theaters from their couch in nothing but their underwear and a bucket of chicken."

I giggle.

"Too much information?" Radley asks me.

"I have to admit it was cool watching the film before most people have seen it," I tell him. "It really was."

"See," Radley says. "So, Julian needs to figure out what happened to it. It was last in his possession."

"Oh, wow," I say. "I hope no one stole it."

"Let's hope it's just in his backpack and he forgot it was there," Radley says. "So, are you still wanting to be the intrepid reporter today, right?"

"Absolutely," I say. "I want to expose Radley Seager to the world."

"Even the underwear clad, fried chicken eating Radley Seager?" he asks me.

"Yes, even that one?" I say, "You scared?"

"Yes, and yet I still feel compelled to tell you all of my deepest, darkest secrets," Radley says and hugs me.

"And I was under the impression this was supposed to be a puff piece," I say. "Maybe I'll write this for the Enquirer instead."

"No one seems interested in what makes me tick these days," he says. "So disappointing. They just seem to want to know who am I screwing these days and what am I wearing?"

"Well, we at the Enquirer just want to know when your twins are due with Jaz," I say as I sit down and place my digital recorder on the table.

"It's triplets actually," Samuel chimes up.

"I shall quote you as my anonymous source then," I say. "Could I have another cup of coffee and just a muffin, please, Margaret?"

"Of course, dear," she says. "Sure you don't want to have an omelet?"

"They're so good," Samuel says and smiles at Margaret. She smiles back at him.

"I'm not all that hungry today," I tell her. "But thanks."

"Ah, living on love," Radley says.

"Living on Sundance actually," I reply.

"That, too," Radley says. "So, you up for skiing?"

"Seriously?"

"Deathly serious," he says.

"That's what I'm afraid of: death," I tell him. "How am I supposed to interview you if I'm learning to ski?"

"I thought you were a professional, Miss Austen," Radley scolds.

"I am a complete professional," I say. "But how did I become the subject of this interview instead of you?"

"It will make it that much more fun," he pleads and gives me sad puppy dog eyes.

"I'm so going to regret this."

"Then let's do this," Radley says and jumps off the bar stool. "Let's jam, people!"

I down my coffee quickly as Radley grabs me by the hand with Samuel following me.

"I don't have any ski clothes," I say as we make our way downstairs.

"Not a problem," Radley says. "We'll ski naked."

My eyes widen. I'd heard about his unpredictability. The incident of him riding naked on a Vespa down the Champs Elysees is planted in everyone's mind, even if the stunt was being secretly filmed for a movie.

"You get used to the cold after a few minutes," Radley explains.

Radley opens a closet in the back hall to reveal tons of ski clothes in a multitude of sizes, weights, and colors, both men's and women's. Samuel rifles through the clothes and picks out a pair of ski pants and a parka.

"These should fit you," Samuel says as he hands me the clothes. "Give me your boots and I'll put them in the bag for when we get down to the city."

I go in the bathroom and change. I stand in front of the mirror looking every bit the professional ski bunny. Maybe the clothes will give me mojo. I place my digital recorder in my pocket together with an almost maxed out credit card, some cash, and of course my credential.

The guys have also dressed and put on their ski boots.

"Palmer told me you're a size eight," Samuel says and hands me a pair of black ski boots and some skis. "These are set for you."

"They are?" I ask him.

"They are," he assures me. "These poles should do it." He hands me some ski poles and then goes about putting my feet into the boots. I can barely walk in them. I hand him my new lambskin boots and he places them in a backpack with their after-ski boots and takes my bag as well.

"Ready?" Radley asks me.

"No!"

"Trust me, you'll love this," he exclaims.

I walk awkwardly out the back door. Samuel snaps my boots into the skis.

"Push with the poles. Keep your feet pointed in a 'V' shape and push. We're going to get over there to the ski trail." Samuel points across the backyard to a trail that seems a hundred miles away. I doubt I will ever make it out of the yard.

I do what Samuel tells me to do and find myself slowly moving across the backyard of the house and out onto the ski trail. I look up and see people riding the lift above me. With ski clothes, hats and goggles, no one knows that the biggest movie star on the planet and his bodyguard are teaching me how to ski below them.

"Just plow and place your weight on the leg of the direction to which you wish to turn," Samuel instructs. Easy for him to say, he flies down double black diamonds.

"Ok," I say with much trepidation. I place my weight on my right foot and suddenly I'm moving in that direction. "Oh wow!"

"See, Miss Austen, it's not so bad," Radley says to me.

"This is fun," I squeal. I put my weight on my left leg and now I'm moving in that direction. "I love this."

As I push with the poles the angle of the mountain and I'm assuming gravity as well, begin to pull me down the slope with accelerating speed. I suddenly realize I'm going faster and faster and faster, so I begin to panic.

"Push outward with both feet, Austen," Samuel instructs. Easy for him to say.

I push outward with my feet, slowing down and making a drift in the snow until I come to an abrupt stop and fall backwards on my rear end. I laugh as I sink in the powder.

Samuel skis in front of me and swishes to a stop. "Are you ok?"

"Oh, I'm fine," I tell him as he extends his hand to pull me up. I get back on two skis and try it again. This time I have the hang of it, following Radley with Samuel behind me down a blue squared trail. I zig and zag, plowing my way down the hill. I watch Radley as he parallels his way down the trail. I pull my 'V' into more of a parallel as well, letting the weight of my feet guide me. But just as soon as I realize I'm skiing like a pro I find myself face first in the powder with Samuel hovering over me and calling for Radley to slow down.

I spit out the snow and look up at Samuel. "I got a little cocky, didn't I?"

"You're doing splendidly, Austen," Samuel tells me as he extends his hand again to pull me up. "You're really getting the hang of it."

I get up and ski down to Radley, who waits patiently for us.

"Are you having fun, yet?" Radley asks.

"I love this!" I exclaim.

"See, told ya you'd love it," Radley says. "Shall we do a black diamond now?"

I look up at Radley in sheer terror.

"It's just like a blue square only it's a diamond and well, it's black."

"You know you're supposed to treat the journalist with dignity and respect," I remind him.

"But you're not a journalist, Miss Austen," he says. "You're an author. Let's go!"

Radley fakes like he's going to go down the black diamond but instead he continues on down the trail. I sigh with relief.

As we continue down the trails I get better and better. Not black diamond better, but beginner better. Confident. Skiers fly past us, oblivious to the movie star presence. And I get it. I get why he wanted me to come with them this morning. This is Radley's rare opportunity to be like everyone else: Normal. Just like Jaz yesterday. No one is demanding anything from him. No one is snapping his picture or clamoring for an autograph. Here on the slopes of Utah and the Wasatch Mountains a brief window of mundane normalcy has been snatched, something I take for granted every single day. I do not know the glare of the spotlight; my book appearances pale in comparison. But up here, behind layers of warm clothing, darkened lenses, and woolen caps, we blend into the scenery.

I look through the trees and glimpse the valley down below. Park City appears small and humbling as we wind our way far above the fray down below. We all know they're waiting on Radley, the movie star, to reappear.

* * *

By the time we make it down the mountain and ski into the Village at the Lift, I am now an old pro. Samuel and Radley have taught me well and I'm having a blast. Only fell about five times which Samuel says is excellent.

"You did so good, Miss Austen," Radley congratulates me. "See, it wasn't so bad, now, was it?"

"I loved it. I want to go back up," I say.

"We'll save that for another lesson," Samuel tells me as he comes out of his skis and helps me out of mine.

He takes my skis as well as Radley's and leans them on a bench before handing us our boots. I come out of the ski boots and it's instant bliss, like I've just removed vices off my feet. I didn't realize they were hurting until I removed the ski boots.

"Oh my god, that feels so good," I say, as if I've just had an orgasm.

"Do you need a cigarette, Miss Austen?" Radley asks me.

I laugh. "I didn't realize my feet hurt so bad," I say.

Samuel takes our ski boots and skis and carries them around the corner, then disappears. I take off my goggles and place them on top of my head. My eyes hurt from the blinding light of the late morning sun. Radley keeps his goggles on, basking in the anonymity for a little bit longer.

"You miss being able to go anywhere by yourself, without anyone recognizing you, don't you?" I ask Radley.

"All the time," he says. "In a few minutes we will be swarmed by paps and fans. But this morning, I got to be just me for a little while."

"Grab it while you can," I say to him.

"Yep," he says. "My private life is very precious to me. I keep it very guarded."

"I know that," I tell him.

"It's very complicated" he says.

"It's sad but I know why you do it," I tell him.

"What? You know? How do you...?"

"I'll sign whatever you want me to sign to keep your life... well your life."

"You'd do that for me, even though you are in a position to make a massive amount of money with that information?" he asks. "See, this is why I don't do interviews. I'm too transparent in person."

"I want to be known for my writing, not for being that asshole who... well, you know," I say to him. "I'm here to make Radley Seager, the actor, look damn good. I know you're two different people."

I can see Radley smile just above his scarf and below his darkened goggles. He throws his arms around me and hugs me. "I don't think you could ever be an asshole. Thanks."

"You're welcome," I say as Samuel comes around the corner, empty handed except for a lightened backpack.

"Thanks for teaching me to ski, Samuel," I say and give him a hug. "You're a good man."

"Thank you, Miss Landry." And now he's back to bodyguard mode.

"Shall we go pick up some swag?" Radley asks. "I think Austen needs some free stuff."

"I hear that," I say and stand up. Radley takes me by the hand and leads me into the Village at the Lift. As soon as he puts his goggles on his head and loosens his scarf, the paps and the fans swarm us as predicted and Samuel snaps into action as the bodyguard.

We are escorted into the venue where we find booth after booth of high end electronics, clothes, shoes, purses, jewelry, makeup, and anything that a brand can get into the hands of a celebrity and have their picture taken with them holding it, totally free of

charge. I remember the last time Palmer went to Sundance, she had to UPS the stuff to the house and then set out what she didn't want on my kitchen table for me and our friends to pilfer. We were so excited to get bottles of high end shampoo, samples of 'if you have to ask you can't afford it' facial creams, and certificates for Botox and minor cosmetic surgical procedures even. Anything with a brand name on it, it was on my dining room table.

"Welcome to heaven," Radley says. People all stop and stare at us. "How about a watch? Do you need a new watch?" He leads me over to a high-end jeweler's booth. The model-like attendant, wearing a bandage dress and stiletto Louboutins is on Radley faster than you can say 'golddigger.'

"Hi, Radley, I'm Cris-tal," she says as she puts her hands on his arm. "Do you remember me from the gifting suite at the Globes last year?"

"Cristal, like the champagne?" I ask her.

She looks her nose down at me, like who the hell do you think you are?

"Oh, yeah, hey," Radley says, not really remembering her, I can tell.

"How do you like the Yacht-Master we gifted you with last year?" she asks him.

"Great, just great," he says and smiles through his teeth. "Worth every penny of that forty thousand dollars I got for it for my foundation. After I wore it and tweeted it, of course."

"Of course. You have good taste, Radley," she says. "You've been given carte blanche in our suite today. Anything you see. Would you like to try on a Patek Phillippe?"

"Actually, I'd like to see what you have for a lady?" Radley says to her.

"Oh?" she asks. "For Jazmine?"

"Actually, for Austen here."

"Who?" she asks him. "I'm not following."

"Austen Landry, my favorite author," he says and puts his arms around me.

I smile back at her.

"Oh," she looks down at me again. "Well... we have this one here. It's our basic watch with a leather band.

Radley looks over all the watches. He zooms in on a beautiful rose gold piece with diamonds around the face. "Carte blanche, huh?"

She flattens out her smile, tilts her head and sighs.

"What about this one?" Radley asks.

"What about it?" she asks him.

"That's a Grand Complications, isn't it?" Radley asks.

"Yes, it is," she says, nervously.

"Let Austen try that one on," he demands. "Please."

She looks at me and then back at Radley. "Ok," she utters. She takes the beautiful watch out of the case and presents it on the velvet pad in front of us.

Radley smiles, picks up the watch and places it on my arm. It's gorgeous. I look up and notice paps flashing away at us. Radley buckles the watch on my wrist, camera shutters click away at rapid fire pace. "Do you like it?" Radley asks me.

"Oh my god, it's gorgeous," I tell him.

"You did say carte blanche, Cristal, didn't you?" Radley asks her.

She clears her throat. "That's an eighty-four thousand dollar watch."

"We'll take it," he says.

I nearly faint. I hold my arm out as the photographers snap my picture. Cristal puts its case in a bag and hands it to me while Radley signs the gift receipt.

I smile at the photographers who snap my picture and the bling on my wrist. I'm now caught up in the spectacle.

"A part of me wants so bad to keep this but I know you donate all of this to your foundation," I tell him. "But can I wear it for a few days first?"

"My foundation gets enough swag," he says as he holds my hand and leads me to the next booth. "You should keep this one."

I look up at him and just about faint. "I can't possibly..."

"Want some noise cancelling headphones and a new tablet computer?"

"Ok," I say. "How can I refuse that?"

"Then let's do it!" he says. "Christmas done come to Utah!"

* * *

Samuel takes our packages out of the venue and I assume to a waiting car outside. He has everything so planned out and choreographed. He does his job well. When he returns, we walk out of the venue and up the stairs to a pop-up café for the celebrity VIP. Samuel disappears outside and I am left alone with Radley to eat and conduct my interview in relative peace and quiet.

"I have to tell you, you've really surprised me this week," I tell Radley.

"How so?"

"You're so humble and unassuming," I tell him. "Not at all what I'd expect of a celebrity."

He laughs. "I'm just a simple guy from Waco who got lucky."

A waiter sets down two glasses and pours us some expensive bottled water.

"From what I gather, you worked really hard to get where you are right now," I say.

The waiter lingers, wanting to take our order.

"Tell the chef it's me and whatever he wants to make for us is fine," Radley says.

"Yes, sir," the waiter says and leaves the table.

"I did work hard," he says. "It by no means happened over night."

"You stayed home and went to Baylor, didn't you?"

"You did your homework, Miss Austen, I'm impressed."

"It wasn't easy," I tell him. "There's not a lot of information out there on you, except that you're the father of Jaz's triplets."

"That's by design," he says with a laugh. "As you've figured out, I'm very guarded about my personal life. I like being in control of it so I haven't given many of these interviews. Which is probably why the paps and the press hound me like they do."

"Is that why this assignment for your interview came up?"

"I told Liz I'd do this, and *Flying to Brazil* needs the press," he says. "I'm going out on a limb that our little movie is going to get bought this week."

"I think it will," I tell him.

"Barring any sort of unforeseen catastrophe," he says and knocks on the table for luck.

"What was your childhood like?" I ask him.

"What was yours like?" he asks back.

"Blissful, fun, full of magic and wonder," I say.

"Same," he says, taking a sip of his water. "But I was a late bloomer in high school. I was short, had acne, and tried very hard not to get beat up."

"Really?"

"Yeah, really," he says. "I was the biggest dork in school. Spent four years in the library. I was that awkward kid who didn't fit in. No one wanted to hang out with me, date me, or sit with me in the cafeteria. So, I read and found my niche in my imagination. I didn't bloom until well into college, and even then I was somewhat of a geek."

"What happened then?"

"I found the gym and the stage," he says. "The stage is home to me. It's where I feel most comfortable. I get a huge rush from the energy of the audience. You can't quite get that with film."

"You really disappear into your roles," I say. "That serial killer you portrayed in..."

"I don't know that I completely disappear," he interrupts me. "I just study the character and then get inside their head a little. I don't lose myself because every single character I play, I do put at least a little bit of my soul up there. I mean, even a serial killer is human."

"You don't ever get lost?"

"I have good friends and family that keep me grounded," he tells me. "Like I said, I don't really like talking about myself much."

"So how are we going to do this interview, then?" I ask him.

"Hmmm, conundrum," he says as the waiter brings us our food.

"These are grilled seiten kabobs with a coconut wasabi sauce, asparagus and purple Viking potatoes."

"Tell chef Roberto thanks. It looks fabulous," Radley says.

"Vegan?" I ask him and take a bite.

Radley nods as he enjoys his food.

"It's quite good actually," I say. "Living in New Orleans, it's just hard to beat but this is surprisingly good."

"I know, right?" he says. "I eat at his restaurant a lot when I'm in L.A."

"So how are we going to conduct this interview if you don't want to be interviewed?"

I ask him. "You're not making this very easy for me."

"I guess you'll just have to squeeze it out of me bit by bit."

"Bit by bit, huh?"

"Yep," he says.

"Hmmm, did you play any sports in college?" I ask him.

"I played rugby in college."

"Rugby?" I ask as I continue to eat my lunch.

"Rugby. I went to the gym and then I discovered rugby," he says. "I still play in New York sometimes."

"Aren't you worried about getting hurt?"

"Not really. And funny enough, I rarely get recognized," he brags. "But now that I've just revealed that to you I'm beginning to see reconstructive surgery might be in my future." He laughs as he eats his lunch. "Perhaps you should change that revelation to mini-golf."

"You're really not the average movie star, are you?"

"I don't know how to be the average movie star," he reveals. "I have a small quaint house in the Hollywood Hills that's very secluded. I live in a reasonably sized apartment in the Village in New York. I drive a Prius and a lower end Tesla. I don't even own a car in New York. This here at Sundance, is about as pretentious as I get."

"But you have to admit the spoils of your success are pretty good," I tell him.

"The spoils of my success allow me to do good things in return," he explains. "I don't keep much of the swag, I either sell it or donate the items to auctions to benefit the charities of my choice and my foundation. I don't need much to live a good and fulfilling life."

"Completely off the record, are you happy?"

"Are you?"

"I want to be," I tell him.

"I want to be as well," he says. "For the past five years I've amassed quite a bit of wealth, power, and cache in the business. Off the record, I've lived in utter subterfuge by design to get it. It may not be authentic and fair, Austen, but I've made it work so far."

"Radley, I'm not so sure what authentic is anymore," I tell him.

"Neither do I," he admits. "You ready to go out into the fray?"

"Sure," I say.

Since the meal is free, I notice Radley places a \$100 bill on the table. He can't help but be generous. It is in his nature. No wonder Julian thinks so highly of him. I do, too. Like everything here at Sundance, it's all an illusion. The only thing truly authentic here are the films.

* * *

We walk outside and are bombarded by paps and fans. Radley lingers, signs a few autographs, and takes a few selfies with fans. It's part of the job, the promoting and pressing the flesh. This is the responsibility of being a star and having a film in competition. I know that Julian is somewhere around here, also pressing the flesh and buzzing his film. I hope that he doesn't stay mad at me long and understands that the secret is safe.

Radley grabs my hand and we press onward up Main Street, with a parade of paps and fans in tow. It's a beautiful but cold day and the festival is hopping and crowded. There's an energy here and I feed off it. I'm in my element here, surprisingly basking in the creative flow and even the attention, getting to know this man that everyone else thinks they know but don't.

Samuel pushes back the people from us as we walk. A young woman practically throws herself onto Radley.

"I love you, Radley Seager," she screams. "I want to be with you. I have to have you."

Samuel peels the woman off of him. I have a newfound respect for Samuel. He's many things to this man and has to stay in the shadows, completely obscure and emasculated a bit. Seems to me even when they're not acting, they're acting.

We duck into the No Name Saloon where the bouncers and Samuel have to bar the door for a few minutes as fans swarm, just trying to get a glimpse of Radley, the movie star. They press their faces against the window, pushing and shoving for a glance. Every head in the bar turns to gaze at us. I'm feeling the residual effect of the celebrity by default. It's quite disconcerting.

"Do you ever get used to it?" I ask Radley.

Radley laughs. "I keep thinking people are actually staring at me because I have something hanging from my nose," he exclaims. "You'd think it would be a small price to pay but actually it's the biggest price... freedom is precious."

I look up and spy Julian in his spot by the fireplace. Samuel parts the water, so to speak, and allows us to make our way back to him.

"How goes the battle?" Radley asks Julian.

He looks at his smart phone quizzically. "Ace Pictures has offered us three mil," he says. "They haven't even seen it yet."

"Outside our very small circle, no one has seen it," Radley says. "Lance chomping at the bit a little?"

"Would seem so," Julian says and looks up from his smart phone and directly at me. He mouths a 'hi' and an 'I'm sorry.' I could melt. I smile back at him and take the chair on the opposite side of the fireplace from him. Radley takes the arm of my chair, takes my arm and admires the Grand Complication on my wrist.

"I swear, Miss Austen, that is a fine piece of jewelry adorning your wrist there," Radley says.

Julian looks at the watch. "Did you extract your revenge on swag again today?"

"Yes I did," Radley boasts. "I definitely think you should keep this one, Miss Austen. It really looks lovely on you."

"It costs almost as much as a house," I say. "I'd be scared to wear it anywhere."

"This is why I wear a simple Tag Heuer," Radley says, "Which, I might add, was one of my first pieces of swag that I actually kept."

"You really aren't the average movie star, are you?" I look up at him and ask.

"I never wanted to do things the normal way," he says.

"And an offer before the screening, that's not normal, Rad," Julian says, bringing the conversation back to the film.

"You think he got a hold of a screener somehow?" I ask.

"No way," Radley says. "Few people know where our house is. I don't even know where our house is."

"Not a chance in hell," Julian says. "I've misplaced it. It's somewhere in the house. I'll find it."

"What does Gray say?" Radley asks him.

"Thinks it's just posturing on their part," Julian says. "Hoping we might get excited and cave. Says that they think, even if the movie sucks, it will at least break even on your name alone."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence, Gray," Radley says and rolls his eyes.

"But it doesn't suck," I say.

"I love this girl," Radley says. "Don't you love this girl, Julian?"

Julian looks up from his smart phone, deep into my eyes, and smiles. Life is good right now as the waiter brings us a bucket of ice-cold beers. We clink our bottles in toast.

* * *

I see Palmer, out of breath, clutching her ipad, and looking desperately for us. She runs up the steps of the No Name and finds us. Samuel steps aside to let her through.

"Oh, my god, you guys, have you seen the tabloids today?" she asks, taking a beer.

"Too busy doing the Sundance thing to notice," Radley says. "What's up?"

"You have a new girlfriend," Palmer tells him.

"I do?"

"You do," she says.

"Who am I dating now?" Radley asks. "Jennifer Anniston?"

Palmer smiles and looks straight at me. "Our very own Austen Landry."

"Me?" I ask. "What the hell?"

"You don't like me?" Radley asks, pouting and teasing me. "It's my deodorant, isn't it?"

"Of course I like you but how did I suddenly...?" I ask, trailing off, flabbergasted. "I mean, as much P-D-A as Julian and I have done all over town, how can that be?"

"Because we are not on the tabloid's radar," Julian points out, "But he is."

"And they've seen Jaz out and about by herself the past few days," Palmer says.

"People are trying to put two and two together. They think you've split up and Austen is your new gal pal. You've been awfully chummy the past couple of days and they know you gifted her very personal items at the Lift, which, by the way, can I try on the watch, pretty please, pretty please?"

"You know about the watch?" I ask her.

Palmer points at the ipad. News travels fast here. She grabs my left arm and admires the watch. "I think I just came. Wow. Patek Phillipe." She takes the watch and tries it on.

"I've been a little careless," Radley admits. "I should have kept better tabs on her."

"I should have been my sister's keeper," Julian says. "She's reckless and we have too much in this movie to be that way right now. And she knows it."

"She's a big girl," I say, defending her. "She should be..."

"She knows better," Radley says. "We're here to promote a movie and our careers. We're here to work, not play." His phone vibrates. He pulls it out of his pocket and looks at the caller ID. "Liz." He answers it. "Hey, Liz... No, really?... I did not know..." He looks at me and rolls his eyes, the sarcasm coming out. "Yeah, sure... well, at least she's with her bodyguard... ok... ok... We'll be back up to the house in about an hour or so... thanks." he hangs up the phone.

"Liz ain't happy," Radley says. "I might have to give that watch to her."

"Over my dead body," Palmer says, guarding the watch with her life.

"Then let's get some more beers and relax for a while," Radley says, signaling to the bar to send more beer over.

"Well, beers are on Austen," Palmer says.

"What?" I react. "Me?"

"You have eighty-five pictures on Image Max and it's early yet," Palmer says.

"Fourteen more than Radley, actually, and thirty-two more than Jaz. You are the picture queen!"

"Holy crap," is all I can muster as I whip out my credit card to pay the waiter for the bucket of beers.

* * *

With the help of Samuel, we push our way out of the No Name. After an hour of enjoying beers and draining my cash, a frenzy of photographers, reporters, and fans have gathered outside the bar, awaiting our departure.

"Ms. Landry, are you and Mr. Seager in love?" one reporter asks.

"Ms. Landry, when did you start seeing Mr. Seager?" another shouts.

"Mr. Seager, what about Jazmine?"

"Mr. Seager, did Jaz leave you for Johnny Reardon?"

"Is it true Jaz is carrying Reardon's baby and not yours?"

A black SUV is waiting on us in the street and we all try to pile in quickly, the reporters screaming, cameras clicking and filming, trying to get an answer from us. I don't know whether to laugh, cry, or scream. I turn to look back but Radley pushes me into the car. Samuel slams the door and then gets into the passenger seat.

"Everyone here?" Samuel asks us, locking the doors.

"I think so," Radley says as he makes a head count. "We're all accounted for."

The driver slowly pulls forward while the reporters and photographers try to overwhelm us and keep us from moving. He finally finds an opening and we drive up the hill and back towards the house.

Julian grabs my hand and starts laughing. "You alright?" he asks me.

"Are you?" I ask him.

Palmer bursts out laughing. "Oh my god, Austen, you have a boyfriend."

We all burst out laughing.

"Is it always like this, Radley?" I ask him.

"All the time," he says. "I'm jealous of you, Miss Austen. You can go anywhere and not be mobbed."

"I don't think that's the case anymore," Palmer insists.

My phone suddenly goes off. It's Andrea, my agent. I hit 'accept' and take the call.

"Hi, Andrea," I say into the phone.

"Girl, you are my new hero if this is true," Andrea tells me.

I smile. "You mean me dating Radley Seager?"

"Oh my god, you slick little devil..." she says to me. "How fantastic if it's..."

"No, Andrea, it's not true..."

Radley snatches the phone from me. "Andrea, this is Radley Seager," he says to her and smiles. "Uh, huh... oh, yeah, we're a thing now... I even think she may be carrying my love twins."

I take the phone from him. "Andrea?... Andrea..?" She doesn't answer.

"Andrea?" The phone is quiet. I'm sure she's hyperventilating right now. "Andrea?"

"I could die now," she says to me. "I could literally die now."

"I think that was his point," I say to her. "What's going on?"

"So, it's not true?" she asks, again.

"No, Andrea, I'm just interviewing him. That's it."

"She wants to break up with me already!" Radley shouts at my phone. "What a hussy!"

"I'm sorry, Andrea," I say as I shoot Radley a look. "He's being incorrigible."

"Are you sure you're not dating him?" Andrea asks. "Sounds like you're pretty close."

"No, we're not dating. I promise you." I squeeze Julian's hand. He smiles at me.

Radley makes a sad face at me. He seems to be enjoying this way too much.

"Well, the media thinks otherwise and now Dolly's and Main Street books want bigger signings," she tells me. "The publisher is overnighting cases of books to both stores. They're selling out."

"They're selling out?" I ask, dumbstruck.

"Everywhere," she tells me. "All over the country actually. It's fantastic! Honey, *The Street Singer* is tracking to make the New York Times bestseller list. It's already number one on Amazon."

Now I am speechless and on the verge of hyperventilating.

"Austen?" Andrea asks. "Austen?"

Radley takes the phone from me again. "Whatever you said to her, Andrea, she's speechless."

* * *

As we enter the house, Liz and Jaz greet us.

"Wow, news travels at the speed of the internet, I take it," Radley says.

We remove our coats and plop down on the couch to pow wow.

"So how do we want this to play out?" Liz asks.

"How do you mean how do we want this to play out?" Jaz asks, looking at me, smiling, like suddenly I've taken a huge weight off her shoulders and I'm now really her new best friend.

"I'm going to release a statement that says you and Radley are still together and that Austen is simply interviewing Radley and there is no there there," Liz states.

"So, I'm still in, huh?" Jaz asks, disappointed.

"Yes, Jazmine, you are still attached," Radley says and frowns at her.

"But my contract is up soon, so wouldn't this be a good time to get out?" Jaz tries to defend her position.

Liz shakes her head at Jaz, as if that information is not supposed to be heard by me.

"She knows, Liz," Radley says. "It's ok. No more secrets in this group. Just whip out your NDAs. It's ok. We're all in."

"Ok, then. You are contracted as long as this film needs promoting," Liz says.

"We've only just started the promotion. Whoever picks this film up will want a press junket when they release it," Julian explains. "And it's not unusual for a release to take months."

Jaz sits down, folds her arms up, and sulks. "Months?"

Radley mouths "Months" to Jaz. She shoots him an angry look.

"Of course, no matter what type of statement I put out there, the press will believe what they want to believe," Liz states. "It's all optics." She shoots Radley a look.

I look at Jaz sulking and then back at Liz who smiles at me. I think she's enjoying this very much. Perhaps this is what all publicists live for. The publicist from my publisher never did anything big for me like this. Hell, I never even met my publicist. I just get an itinerary from her and plane tickets. All I have to do is just show up. She books my phone and email interviews, too. All I have to do is answer them. There really isn't much to it.

My events are small and intimate. I think the biggest turnout I ever had was maybe thirty-five and that included the sixteen people that worked at the big box bookstore. This is so overwhelming to me. It's one thing for a group of ladies to love your novel and want you to sign it and maybe take your picture with them. Then I go home and lead a normal life. New York Times bestseller. Until I see my name in black and white, I can't fathom the concept yet. And it generally takes two weeks before sales hit the list. I wonder how high I will hit. It doesn't matter. I will be a bestselling author no matter the number now.

"So, we've got a little time to kill before we have to be at the *Skateaway* premiere tonight and after party. We should make an appearance at Lance's football watching party and see if we can intimidate him a bit," Julian says. He looks at me. "Want to come?"

"Sure," I say. "You coming too, Palmer?"

"Oh, I can't. I've got this cinematographers party at five, then hitting up a couple of networking things," she says. "I could maybe meet up with you all at the *Skateaway* party though."

"That would be cool," I say.

Everyone goes their separate ways and leaves me and Julian alone.

"I had no idea this would be so intense," I tell Julian. "This was supposed to be a relatively relaxing getaway for me. Come to Sundance, she told me. You'll have fun, she told me. It will be relaxing."

"In my experience, Sundance is anything but relaxing," he says and kisses my forehead.

"It's so whirlwind," I say. "I wasn't expecting any of this. I'm a little overwhelmed."

"Maybe I could help you become less whelmed," he says. He pulls me close and kisses me deeply, so deeply I feel him vibrate until I realize it's his phone. He pulls away and looks at the caller ID, then silences the call and turns his attention back at me.

"You know you can take that," I say.

"It was nothing," he says and resumes his kissing on me. I feel the vibration of a voice message as his hand finds its way underneath my sweater.

He takes me by the hand and leads me downstairs, to the grotto and the indoor hot tub.

* * *

A large black limo pulls up to the condo and Samuel, Stella, Jaz, Radley, Liz, Julian and I pile in to go back down the mountain and work the festival. Lance Everley is throwing a football watch party at the Ace Pictures Lounge. It's important for everyone to know their part in promoting the film. Even I will talk it up if I can.

"I spoke with Andrea and she has put me on point as your publicist for a few days," Liz tells me.

"She did?" I ask.

"Well, your publisher has," she tells me. "They don't know how to handle this much press so she suggested they defer to me."

"Oh," I say. "That's nice of you."

"Honey, it's not nice," she says. "They'll be getting a bill."

"This is what I love about Liz," Radley says. "She never does anything for free."

"That's why I'm so good," she says as she pats him on the leg. "So, I spoke with the bookstores and I've got you signings tomorrow, one in the morning and one in the afternoon."

"It's Sunday," I say. "How are they getting books to them?"

"Don't worry about that," she tells me. "I'm good at what I do."

I look at Radley. He nods in agreement.

"New York Times book section will be here to interview you, too."

"Oh, wow. Ok, thanks," I say. "Wow."

I turn to Julian and he smiles at me. "New York Times. Impressive. Plug my movie."

"Yes, plug our movie," Radley echoes.

"What movie?" I tease.

This whole trip has been such a whirlwind and it's only Sunday. I have another full week to go. I sit back in the seat of the limo and bask in the company of these people who were strangers to me less than a week ago. Now they feel like my best friends. I feel my phone vibrate in my purse. I pull it out. Of course it's Eric. I press "decline" and place the phone back in my purse. Sooner or later I'm going to have to tell him I want to call it quits. But doing it over the phone is cruel and I don't have the time or patience to pretend we're still on. Thank goodness he doesn't read tabloid news.

* * *

The paparazzi are out in full force in front of the Ace Pictures Lounge. Liz holds me and Julian back to let Radley and Jaz exit the limo together and give the paps a picture of their perfect relationship. I can hear the cameras clicking and see the flashes from inside the darkened windows of the limo. The press scream questions at them as Samuel and Stella escort them inside the venue. I can hear my name in the frenzy. "Where is Austen?" "What about Austen?" "Is it true Austen is carrying your baby?"

Julian looks at me and laughs.

I look down at my belly and pooch it out. "I so should walk out like I'm pregnant, just to spite them," I say.

"For the love of god, please don't," Liz says as she slides toward the door. "Or I might have to charge you extra."

She exits the limo and adjusts her coat as she stands up, then motions for us to come out. Julian goes first and extends his hand for me. As I emerge the cameras go wild. Julian squeezes my hand tighter and ushers me inside the venue.

"Why aren't you with Radley?"

"Is it awkward with Jaz still in the picture?"

"Is Jaz pretending to be with Radley for the movie?"

"Do you love Radley?"

The flashing of the bulbs blinds us and we raise our hands to shield our eyes while pushing our way through the crowd. I now fully understand what it's like to live in Radley and Jaz's world. It's intimidating and violating. And it's scary. I had a stalker once in college. He followed me to classes and to my dorm. The campus police took care of him. But there is no campus police to take care of this madness. Not even a press release can take care of the frenzy. Radley Seager is the hottest movie star on the planet right now and everyone wants a piece of anything that is close to him, and right now that means me. But if it's seriously making my career right now, I'll take the glare. I look back outside one last time to see the mob trying to get a parting shot of access to me. I smile back at them as Julian pushes me through the door.

"Geez, that was nuts," Julian says. "You ok?"

I laugh and nod my head in the affirmative.

"Holy crap," he says to me. "You are one popular gal."

"To think yesterday I was nobody."

As I shake off the frenzy from outside, I look around the venue and notice the money that has been spent on the Ace Pictures Football party. Lots of food, booze, flat screens, and coordinated furniture designed by some up and coming fashion designer. Two weeks ago I hear this was a women's clothing boutique. And after Sundance it will return to being so again. But today I can tell even Radley's impressed. This is Hollywood to me.

I look at Jaz who is slowly pulling away from Radley and scouring the room, no doubt looking for Lance. Liz stays close to her, trying to keep her and Radley together to plug the movie. Samuel and Stella have moved back against a wall and are keeping constant eyes on their prizes. I'm wondering if I may need a bodyguard now.

I watch Jaz as her eyes follow Lance around the room. Then it hits me. Jaz gave the screener to Lance. Maybe it was to get into good graces with him, who knows. But whatever the reason, I know she's the one that took it.

The football game may be playing on all the screens but hardly anyone is watching it. Everyone is engaged in small talk, plugging their projects to the few journalists able to gain access into the party to cover the films and acquisitions. Julian and Radley talk up a writer for Indiewire while Liz moves Jaz around the room, keeping her from running away. I move over to the food and fix myself a plate. I have nothing to talk up and I feel like a fifth wheel right now. A fifth wheel dealing with too many secrets.

"Austen," I hear my name called. I put the shrimp tongs down to see that it is Constance Everley.

"Nice party," I say.

"It always is," she answers back. "I notice you've got two book signings tomorrow."

"Oh, yes," I say. "Yes, I do."

"You're tracking to make New York Times bestseller list."

"How do you know that?" I ask her.

"It's my business to know such things," she tells me. "As you know, not much gets past me."

"I see that."

"I would like to acquire your little book," she says to me.

"I have an agent," I say to her. "You can talk to her."

"I thought I'd skip the middle man," she says.

"I don't do anything without Andrea," I tell her.

"You've already earned out your advance from your current publisher," she says.

"They'll be hard pressed to meet your needs now. They're just too small to meet the demand."

"So far, they're doing just fine," I say. This is everything I've ever wanted and now it all feels so sleazy for some reason. I look to the far side of the room for Julian but instead I spy Jaz who has finally found Lance and is trying to cozy up to him.

"We both know that's a lie," she says.

"I don't feel comfortable making a deal here," I say to her.

"Look around you, Austen," she says. "Deals are being made left and right as we speak. I can guarantee you I can keep you atop the Times for several weeks and I can guarantee a film adaptation. You'll be a very wealthy author, Austen Landy. I can make sure of it."

I stare at her and then look across the room. I watch as Lance takes Jaz by the hand and disappear down a hallway and out of sight.

"Tomorrow is Monday," I tell her. "Talk to my agent. I want to see if the Packers make this field goal attempt."

I drop the tongs on the table and make my way through the crowd and toward Julian, my hands visibly shaking and my stomach now churning. I drop my plate on a table and spot him leaning on a chair, talking to a well-known film critic I've seen on TV. I slide

beside Julian and place my visibly shaking hand inside his. He takes it and before he can introduce me, he sees I'm not right.

"Excuse me, Nathan," he says to the film critic. "Austen, what happened?"

"It's just too much," is all I can say.

We take our coats from the coat check then Julian leads me to the door and outside but the paparazzi see us come out and begin clicking and flashing. We retreat back inside.

We turn around and he leads me to a door marked unisex bathroom. It's unlocked. He opens the door only to barge in on two people having sex.

"So sorry," Julian says as he shuts his eyes and tries to pull the door closed. I can tell he doesn't see who it is. But I do.

The woman looks up. It's Jaz... with Lance.

"Oh, my god," I say as Julian quickly closes the door.

"Oh, my god is right," he says. "Sundance sex. Someone's getting lucky."

I look at Julian and then down the hall to see a trash can and rush to it, throwing up everything I've eaten and drank today. I feel Julian pull my hair back as I puke the stress out.

"I know," he says as he rubs my back. "I know. Let it out. Just let it all out."

* * *

Julian leads me to a back door. He peers outside to see if the coast is clear then pulls me outside. The cold air is refreshing and it pulls me somewhat back to reality. I feel like I could throw up again but I push the feeling back down. We look around to find somewhere to go. We are in the back alley off Main Street and make our way around the corner and find ourselves near the Transit Center where the trolleys depart and return to shuttle the

festival goers to the films and venues. We board the bus labeled "Eccles Express" headed toward the Eccles Theater where Andrew's film *Skateaway* is to premiere.

We take a seat in the back of the bus, hoping no one notices us. I tuck my credential in my coat as people trickle onto the bus, all headed to the premiere I presume.

Julian texts Radley to let him know we left the party and are already on our way to the premiere. I can read the text and notice Radley asking where Jaz is. Julian sighs then texts back "*IDK.*"

"*Ok,*" he texts. "*Skipping premiere. Hoping 2 talk 2 Lance. Will C U @ afterparty.*"

Julian sighs again. I can tell he's exasperated with his sister but I'm glad that he didn't see her together with Lance. This film is everything to him. I want to tell him she's having an affair with the man that could collectively make his career but coming between siblings has never worked for me.

"What happened earlier?" he asks me.

"I think I just got everything I ever wanted," I tell him.

"You think?"

"And I don't know what to do," I say. "I just don't know what to do."

"Geez, you're shaking," he says and pulls me close.

The bus takes off and we make our way out of the Transit Center. I stare out the window as we bobble and glide down Main Street.

"I want to kiss you but you probably need a Tic Tac," he says with a laugh.

I laugh. "Oh, yeah." I reach in my coat pocket but find it empty. "Oh, well." I put my head on his shoulder as we wind through the snow-lined streets, orange-tinted from the setting sun. It's so beautiful. Julian holds me tightly and my shaking subsides.

"This is what we call magic hour," he says to me as he kisses the top of my head.

"Magic hour," I whisper as I look out the window. "Magic hour indeed."

* * *

The bus pulls up at Eccles Theater and we all pile out. There is a crowd of people lining up to see the film but thankfully no crazy paparazzi waiting to pounce on us. Quite the opposite actually. It's refreshing and welcoming. I relax and look forward to seeing this movie that's getting as much buzz as Julian's film.

Julian leads me around the building and away from the crowds. "Where are we going?" I ask him.

"Green room," he says. We approach a woman with a list and Julian gives her our names. She opens the door and lets us in. Another woman points for us to follow the others through a door. We're backstage.

Some of the cast members lounge around while I notice Andrew paces nervously. Julian shows me to a seat and then goes over to talk to Andrew. I watch him put his hand on his shoulder to talk him through tonight. Careers are made here. It comes fast. I didn't know how fast it was until today. It feels overnight although most of us have been working our lives to have our careers move up to the top level.

I smile at Julian and Andrew as I sit by myself. I don't know anyone else in the room although several of them I recognize. It takes a minute to realize that I didn't go to high school with them but that I saw them on tv or in another film. One girl in particular I notice from film. She's been in several things I've seen lately. I watch her get up and move over to Andrew and Julian, then hug Julian. Julian doesn't look like he's too happy to see her as she

tries to plant a kiss on him and he pulls away. He shakes Andrew's hand and then comes over to me.

"Let's go," he says as he puts his hand out for me to come along.

"Who was that girl?" I ask him as I look back to see her watching us.

"No one of any importance," he tells me.

* * *

Skateaway is terrific and it receives a standing ovation as the credits roll. Maybe I'm biased but it was almost as good as Julian's. I know it's going to get picked up quickly as the film meets or even exceeds the buzz.

Andrew and the cast are escorted out onto the stage for the Q&A portion, including the woman who was talking to Julian earlier. Cassandra Allen. She's a bit of an indie queen. She's in a lot of lower budget films and sometimes I see her guest starring in shows set in New York, Julian's territory.

"Andrew, you weren't even born in the time this film is set yet you captured the 70's perfectly. How did you do that?" an audience member asks.

"I grew up in a small town in the South," he explains. "This was my mom's era so it wasn't hard to translate my experiences into her decade."

"Cassandra," someone else asks, "You skated so beautifully. Was it hard to learn?"

"No, not really," she says. "I was going through a very tough time with my fiance so I threw myself into the work as a distraction."

"Let's go," Julian says to me.

"Oh, ok," I say, standing up with him. We wiggle through the aisle, making people move their legs for us and angering them as they try to listen to Cassandra speak.

"My breakup was a lot tougher than learning to skate," she continues.

We walk out of the theater and into the lobby where only a few people mingle and meander.

"Why didn't you want to stay?" I ask him.

"Just wanted to get ahead of the crowd," he says. "Maybe we could skip the party."

"Really?" I ask. "I was kind of looking forward to it."

"I just thought you might not be up to it," he says.

"I'm ok," I say. "Things are just coming at me way too fast. Lance's wife really wants my book."

"Oh, really? Wow," he says. "I did not know that."

"And she wants to buy out my rights at my indie publisher and put it out on her imprint instead."

"That's great, Austen."

"Yeah, of course, she's guaranteeing a film adaptation as well," I tell him.

"Holy cow," he says. "that's huge."

"I have a lot to think about," I say. "but right now I just want to have fun."

"Ok, she wants to have fun," he says to me and kisses me on the forehead. Let's go have some fun."

* * *

We take the shuttle back up to Main Street where a vodka company is sponsoring the *Skateaway* afterparty and make our way up Main Street to Park City Live. Luckily there is no sign of paparazzi again and we ascend the steps to the door and give the list nazi our

names. She gives us two light up wrist bands and ushers us inside. It's early yet and very few people have arrived. The DJ hasn't even started yet. We both search for a bathroom.

I find an empty stall in the women's bathroom and plop down on the toilet, tired and still reeling from the day.

I try to focus on the fun parts of the day but my tired mind keeps going back to Jaz. Voices entering the bathroom jolt me back into the here and now.

"I swear to god I'm going to have that Radley Seager if it's the last thing I do," one voice says. "He's on the outs with that Jaz bitch so he needs a new girlfriend. And it's going to be me. Until the day we die, he will be mine."

"I think you're going to have to get in line," another one says. "Who the hell is this Austen character who's out to get him? I mean, who does she think she is?"

I perk up. I can't even finish peeing now. I just listen.

"I saw her today down by the No Name. I tried to get close but that damn bodyguard of his wouldn't let me."

"And what's with the book?" the other one asks. "I mean, no one wants to read her damn books. I saw her book signing the other day at Dolly's. No one showed up. Hello."

"I don't know about that," the first one says, "but if I ever see her I'm going to tell her to back off him. If I can't have him, nobody will."

I pull up my pants, straighten myself up, then exit the stall with my head held high. As the two women primp in front the of mirror and the sinks, I go to the last sink, wash my hands then pull down my hat a bit and fluff my hair, all while giving the women a bit of side eye.

"Hey, Ladies. I've got another book signing at Dolly's in the morning. Do hope y'all can make it," I say to them, leaving them dumbfounded and dismayed as I walk out the bathroom.

I look for Julian. The venue has filled a bit and the DJ plays seventies music as invitees and guests filter in. I spy him all the way across the room. He's talking to that actress again. Cassandra. I get it now. They were engaged. I can see he doesn't want to deal with her but she keeps persisting.

I find the bar to get a drink. They hand me a cocktail called the "Toe Jam" after a skating move from the movie. Horrible name for a cocktail, though. I sip it and realize it's just an appletini. It's pretty strong. I have book signings tomorrow which could make my career, yet I have a man I care about a lot now talking to his ex. What I want to do is ten of these and self-sabotage. I stand at the end of the bar and watch Julian as he appears in a heated conversation with Cassandra far across the dance floor.

Someone takes my drink from me suddenly. It's Radley. "Time to dance, Sunshine," he says as he grabs my hand and escorts me to the dance floor. The disco music is uplifting and Radley is fun to dance with. It takes my mind off Julian as I spy the two women from the bathroom staring me down. Radley swings me around and dips me. I notice a couple of photographer flashes from the Image Max guys. If I score the most pictures tomorrow, please let me buy the free booze next time, I think to myself. Toe Jams for everyone!

Three professional skating couples in costumes resembling those from the movie skate onto the dance floor and roller disco to the music. They're as good as the couples in the film. On second glance, I notice they are some of the dance couples from *Skateaway*. I

was blown away by them in the film and now to see them in person, they are even more impressive.

When the song is over Radley gives me a hug, fueling the rumors even more, even inside our bubble of a private party. I glance over at the women from the bathroom again. I can tell they're chomping at the bit. Sucks being them, I think to myself.

It occurs to me that I, too, am keeping lots of secrets on this trip. My secrets about Eric, Radley's huge secret, Jaz's secret affair, the missing screener. It's a heavy burden. Even Julian has been keeping secrets. I didn't expect this festival to be so intense nor did I expect to find myself in the middle of so many lives, even the Everleys. Yet here I am.

Radley leads me back over to the bar. "What'll ya have, Landry?" he asks me.

"Water, please," I say to him. My heart wants shots but my head knows better.

"Two waters, please," Radley tells the bartender. "Shaken, not stirred."

"Who is that actress talking to Julian?" I ask Radley.

"Her?" Radley asks. "Oh, she's nobody."

"Come on Radley," I say. "I wasn't born yesterday."

"Ok," he relents. "They used to be engaged."

"Ah," I acknowledge. So, it was Julian she was talking about.

"She broke his heart," Radley admits.

"So, she's the girl in his film then," I say.

"Not really," Radley says. "I think the girl in the film is you."

"Me?" I ask. "He didn't know me then."

"Ah, but the hope of you was there," he says with a smile.

I like that thought. I turn around to look back at the dance floor and the skaters. And I look for Julian, but I see no sign of him. Anywhere. But I see Cassandra. She stares at me from across the room. Perception is everything tonight.

"Where is Jaz?" I ask Radley, trying to distract myself with small talk and trying to locate her in the crowd of celebrities and wannabes.

"Stella and Liz took her back to the house," he says to me. "She's on a bit of a lockdown right now. She has a ton of appearances tomorrow so Liz is going to go with her to make sure she makes all of them."

"Oh," I say. I wonder if he knows she was with Lance at the Ace Pictures party this afternoon. "I think tomorrow is going to be a big day for us all."

I look over to the bar and spy the women from the bathroom.

"Hi, Radley," the first woman from the bathroom says to him. "We should go dance." She holds her hand out for him to take.

Radley takes our bottled water from the bartender, places a twenty in the tip jar, and hands me one of the bottles.

"I'm sorry," he says. "I'm taken tonight." He takes me by the hand but I feel him being pulled in the opposite direction.

"I want you, Radley," she says and tries to pull him close to her. "I have to have you."

Out of the shadows Samuel leaps into bodyguard mode and comes between the woman and Radley like a ninja. As she struggles in his grasp she looks back at me. "You can't stand in my way, Austen Landry!" she screams. "I'll get him from you one way or another! I will have him!"

"Wow," I say. "Do you think she means it?" I ask.

"They're usually harmless," he tells me. "But I have seen her before."

"Really?"

"Yeah," he acknowledges. "She came to a premiere not that long ago and maybe a charity event I did."

"So, she's a stalker?"

"Maybe," he says. "I mean, I have an eighty-year old woman that shows up to all my Los Angeles events. Her name is Louise and I adore her. She's perfectly harmless. But I have had to file a couple of restraining orders before," he says. "Most of the time they just want to be close to the fame."

"They know you like family, yet you know nothing about them at all," I say. "That's got to be so weird."

"It is weird," he says. "Except Louise. I take Louise to dinner every once and a while. She's become family."

"How cool is that?"

"That's when I love the fans," he says. "That's when it's all worth it."

Samuel returns.

"Everything ok?" Radley asks.

"I've seen her several times before. L.A., New York, and even at an event in Paris once," Samuel says. "And I think I saw her outside the No Name today."

"Should I be scared?" I ask him. "I mean she did threaten me. And I did see her in the bathroom talking about Radley. She said if she can't have him, nobody will."

"I'll have you a bodyguard first thing in the morning, Austen," Radley says.

"Do I need one?" I ask.

“I’ve seen the tabloids, Miss Landry,” Samuel says. “Everyone thinks you’re his girlfriend.” Samuel winks at me, teasing but still serious and still in bodyguard mode. “She may be nothing, but it wouldn’t hurt. Better safe than sorry.”

“Ok,” I say. “My own personal bodyguard. Hmmm.”

Radley winks at Samuel. “I highly recommend them.”

“Can I get one as sexy as Samuel here?” I ask.

“I’ll personally make sure of it,” he says as he retreats a few steps away from us and back into the shadows to do his job.

“I’m sorry I’m being reckless. I forget sometimes that I’m not a normal person anymore. I can’t just be myself with everyone.”

“It’s ok,” I tell him. “I’m kind of enjoying it actually.”

“You’re so easy to be around and because of it, I’ve unwillingly put you in danger today,” he says. “And that’s my fault. I’ll take care of you, Austen. I promise.”

“You will?”

“Of course, I will,” he tells me and kisses me on the forehead, which of course makes every camera phone in the room flash. “See? I can’t be normal. Sometimes it really does suck being me.”

And of course, it does sink in to me. Everyone wants a piece of him. He’s a star. A huge star. People want to be near stars. I guess they believe the fame might rub off on them. I then realize that the fame has rubbed off on me. Because I’ve been so close to Radley the last couple of days, now I am the “it” girl. My signings tomorrow *are* because of him. In two weeks, I may be able to call myself a bestselling author, just by association to him. No

wonder everyone wants to be close to a star. It's intoxicating to kiss the fame and the payoff may be enormous.

I feel arms encircle my waist and realize they aren't Radley's but Julian's. My heart warms. "I missed you," he whispers in my ear and hugs me tight.

I turn around and embrace him back. "I missed you, too," I tell him. "Where'd you go?"

"I hooked Andrew up with Gray to help him negotiate his sale," he says to me. "His sales rep sucks."

"Who did it go to and how much," Radley asks Julian.

"Ace pictures. Eight and half," Julian says. "Bidding war. Fox Searchlight wanted it but stopped at seven."

"Was Lance there?"

"No. One of his underlings," Julian tells him.

"What happens if the film makes more than that?" I ask. "Is that all Andrew gets?"

"It's an advance on sales," Julian explains. "Just like a book almost. He crowdsourced his funding for the film. Two million so he gets to keep most of that money. He's got some deliverables to clear but other than that he's golden."

"What are deliverables?" I ask.

"Rights that have to be cleared before the deal actually takes effect," Julian explains.

"Wow. Instant millionaire, just like that?"

"Just like that," Julian says to me then looks back at Radley. "Where's my sister?"

"Lockdown," he says.

"Good," Julian says. "It's our time to shine now. And we need to shine. I think we're going to see ten million."

"I expect nothing less," Radley says.

"Wow," I say, blown away by the zeros. I'm beginning to see that my deal with Lifetime was massively underwhelming."

Julian laughs and rubs my back. "So, party at Gray's at one."

"One a.m.?" I whine. "It really is non-stop here, isn't it?"

"If you're not up to it, I understand," Julian says to me. "We both have big days ahead of us."

"No, I'm up to it," I say. I try not to sigh to give myself away that this is exhausting. "I can sleep when I'm dead."

"Good," he tells me.

Too bad I don't have any of Jaz's pills to take. It's going to be a long night.

* * *

Gray's house is packed. He seems to be the after-after party everyone wants to attend. He's the dealmaker at Sundance and come Tuesday he will make Julian and Radley very happy men.

"Austen, is it?" Gray asks me as we settle into his place for his nightly party.

"Yes, it is," I tell him.

"The author, not the city," he says. "I hear you're making some interesting waves here at Sundance. And you don't even have a film."

"Yeah," Radley says as he hugs me. "It's the Radley effect."

"I had hoped my novel would take off on its own," I say.

"You complaining, Austen?" Gray asks me.

"No," I say. "I will gladly accept the boost. Gladly."

"If you need a good attorney, please let me know," Gray says and hands me his business card.

"You represent authors?" I ask him.

"Gray represents anyone that can make him money," Radley says.

"You know me well," Gray says.

"I'm paying for this house here, aren't I?" Radley asks him, teasing.

"Touché," he says.

"I might need you then," I tell him.

"Oh?" Gray brightens.

"Pickett Press has offered to pick up my rights from my little indie publisher," I tell him.

"That's Lance's wife," Gray says.

"Yep," I reply.

"It's a small, small world we live in," Gray says. He scratches his dark stubble.

"I'm seeing that," I tell him.

"You're in the big leagues now. If you don't negotiate a good contract, they'll make all the money off your work and leave you owing."

"I'm tracking to make New York Times bestseller," I tell him.

He taps his card still in my fingertips. "Let me help you."

"Ok," I say and smile. I feel a burden lifted from my shoulders. God, I love Sundance.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Monday of the Festival

I awake before my alarm goes off to find myself spooned by Julian. He holds me close. I slide out of his arms and into my robe. It's book signing day for me and I want to look my best. I go into the closet and pick out a nice outfit from one of the many I bought. Today's work will more than pay off these clothes, I think to myself. Today is my day.

I shower alone, do my hair and makeup while still checking on Julian. He continues to sleep. He's so cute sleeping in my bed. I put on a brightly colored sweater and new skinny jeans. After only six days here, the skinny jeans are a bit loose. I smile at myself. I love this festival even more.

I kiss Julian on the forehead. He stirs slightly but doesn't awaken. What is it with guys and sleep? They can sleep through anything. Anything. A tiny ant can scream and it would wake me up.

Downstairs Margaret greets me. "Hello, Miss Landry. Sleep well?"

"I did, thanks," I say as I notice an unfamiliar face at the bar.

The woman looks at me and smiles. She's a pretty blonde dressed in tight leggings, boots, and a clingy sweater. She looks like an athlete. "Hi there," she says. "I'm Sarah. I'm your bodyguard."

"Nice to meet you, Sarah," I say, really expecting a hot guy. I can't complain. I have a bodyguard now." She is beautiful. I think this is Samuel's attempt at humor.

I look over to what Sarah has for breakfast. Margaret has fixed her an egg-white and spinach omelet with whole wheat toast; the breakfast of physically fit bodyguards. It looks

good but I just don't want to eat much. Today is a little overwhelming. I've been in front of large crowds before on panels and such at book conventions. And I've had booths there to sign books, too, so I'm always a little nervous before these things. I think it's making the New York Times bestseller list for the very first time that has me intimidated. And it shouldn't. This is what every author craves. And here I am.

"What will you have for breakfast?" Margaret asks. "I have muffins, I can make you an omelet, eggs benedict..."

"A muffin and coffee would be lovely," I tell her. "Has Palmer come down yet?"

"She came down for breakfast early this morning," Margaret tells me. "She's left already."

"Already," I ask.

"Who's Palmer?" Sarah asks.

"My best friend and one of the reasons I'm here and I've barely spent any time with her," I explain.

Margaret places the warmed muffin and cup of coffee in front of me. A bodyguard and a cook. So this is the life, huh?

"I understand we have a book signing at Dolly's this morning and then one at Main Street Books later in the afternoon," Sarah says to me.

"That is correct," I tell her. "How do you know?"

Sarah slides a printed itinerary to me as well as a few parties where my name is on the list should I chose to attend.

"Nothing gets past Liz," I tell her.

"I see that," Sarah says.

"She also said you would be interviewing with someone with the Times today as well. How exciting for you."

"Yes, I am excited," I tell her. I like Sarah but she doesn't seem to be the bodyguard type of person I expected. She sounds more like a co-worker I'd go have drinks with after a long day at the office. "You don't seem like the typical bodyguard."

She laughs. "I was a marine and I'm trained in Jujitsu and mixed martial arts," she says. "Does that sound more like a bodyguard?"

Now I'm scared of her. "Uh, huh," I squeak.

"Trust me, I can handle almost anything that can possibly happen."

"Grizzly bear attack?" I ask.

"Even grizzly bear attacks," she says.

"Ok, then," I say. "I don't have the crazy fans like Radley. Most of my fans are literary. Typically, they just assault you with knowledge about books."

"Then we should be great," she says.

Julian comes down the stairs in his jeans and nothing else on. Men may like women totally naked but women like guys with their clothes on or at least partially clothed. He's not cut like Radley but he does look good.

He gives me a kiss as he spies Sarah. "Who's your friend?" he asks me in a whisper as he kisses my ear.

"Sarah, this is Julian Winslow," I tell her. "Julian, this is Sarah, my new bodyguard."

"Bodyguard?" he questions. "That doesn't sound promising that you need a bodyguard. No offense, Sarah."

"None taken," Sarah says. "Mr. Seager felt she needed a bodyguard after last night."

"Did I miss something?" he asks.

"One of his fans might have threatened me is all," I say. "It was probably nothing."

"Might have threatened you?" He becomes concerned. "I don't like this."

"It was at the after-party last night while you were with Andrew," I say. "It was nothing and Samuel took care of her."

"It was nothing, she says to me in front of her new bodyguard," Julian jokes.

"Margaret, could I please have a cup of coffee, extra strong." He looks back at me. "What time's your signing?"

"Ten thirty," I tell him. Then I'm doing an interview with someone from the Times Book Review at the Filmmaker Lodge. Then I have another signing this afternoon at Main Street Books."

"Impressive," he says.

"And sometime in the middle of that I have to submit an essay to Harper's about my life at Sundance so far for one of their online sites," I continue.

"That should be interesting," he says as Margaret hands him a cup of coffee.

"And you?" I ask him.

"Press junket for the film," he says. "Then after that I'm taking my favorite author to lunch if she can spare the time."

I look him in the eyes and smile. "I'm your favorite author, huh?"

"Well, it's actually Kurt Vonnegut but he's not available for lunch today."

* * *

A black SUV pulls up in front of the house to whisk me away to my signing. It never gets old. Usually I have a host that escorts me to signings and events out of town. I've

ridden in all kinds of cars for those signings, too, the nicest being a Lexus and the worst being an old 1970's Gremlin. Being a mid-list or even no-list author these are the perks you get. You actually get those same perks as a best selling author most of the time, too. But I will enjoy being chauffeured around here in black cars and stretch limos. It doesn't suck.

I don my sunglasses, even though it's snowing and turning colder today. The SUV easily makes its way down the mountain. Almost everything here is four-wheel drive. I lean back on the leather seat and bask in the glory that is my fifteen seconds of fame as we wind down the mountain and onto Main Street.

I look to see a huge line wrapped around the corner and down Main Street. Must be something cool going on there, I think to myself until I realize that line is for me. It takes my breath away.

"Ma'am, I'm going to pull up around the back," the driver tells me.

"I don't want you exposed to the crowd," Sarah says.

"Ok, I say as I see the scope of the people here to see me. "Wow." I take a picture of the line for posterity and for Andrea to see.

I text the picture to her. *Line at the bookstore just for my signing!* She won't believe it.

She replies to my text almost immediately. I pull the phone back out of my purse. It's Eric instead. *Finally texting me back and you text this?*

Rats. I texted Eric by mistake. Damn, damn, damn, damn, damn.

My book signing this morning I text.

Interesting he texts back. *Call me later. Please.*

I text back, *K.*

Interesting? There’s a couple of hundred people lined up and his comeback is interesting?

I text the picture to Julian. He answers me back quickly.

So proud of you. Way to go!!! Also followed by five cat emojis with hearts for eyes. I might melt. What a difference.

Sarah assists me out of the car, escorts me through Dolly’s back entrance, and into the small stock room area of the store. I almost trip on the mop bucket.

“Miss Landry?” a timid voice asks me.

“Yes,” I say to the mousy little girl.

“You can leave your coat and purse back here,” she says.

I leave my coat but somehow don’t trust my bag being out so I bring it with me. Besides, I have a stash of pink Sharpies in there for the signing and a bottled water. She escorts me through the small store and to the same table I had at the earlier signing. The crowd claps and I smile. Sarah takes her place not far from me, her eyes darting the crowd, looking for the least little sign of danger.

I drop my bag at the base of the podium and pull out my dog-eared galley copy of *The Street Singer* to read from.

“Hello everyone,” I say. “I’m Austen Landry. Thank you so much for coming today. I’m so honored to be here. I’m going to read to you from my latest novel, *The Street Singer*,” I tell them as I reach down and pull out the bottled water from my bag and take a sip.

“Gemima Bourgeois removed the tattered cabaret gown from her cedar chest and held it up to her old worn out but capable body. The red color had long faded and much of the beading had come undone. She pulled the dress over her matted and unwashed hair.

The dress fell down over her threadbare slip and she smoothed out the creases and shimmied herself all the way in.

"To Gemima, she didn't see the age of the dress or herself for that matter. Instead she saw herself as she used to be, a stunning cabaret singer, who, back in the day, could draw a large crowd simply by signing just one note. She used to sing at the Black Cat, a club of dubious reputation on Bourbon Street down in the French Quarter of New Orleans."

As I continue to read, I spot her in the far back of the store, book in hand, and I freeze for a bit. I cover it up by coughing and taking a sip of my water.

The crowd claps at my reading. Except the woman. She doesn't clap. She just stares me down. It's creepy really.

I field questions which range from "how did I get my inspiration for such a character?" to "Is Radley Seager really as hot in person as he is on the screen?" I keep the myth up and say, "Of course."

I take my place behind the same table I had last time. The line forms and snakes outside into the cold and snow. I can see through the windows the snow is coming down hard now. Such devotion for a book they can buy online. I'm honored and truly humbled. I know I wouldn't stand out in the cold and snow for me.

Sarah leans down and asks how I am doing. I tell her that the girl from last night is here. She hovers nearby me and is vigilant. But the girl doesn't approach the table and I don't think Sarah gets a good look at her.

After what feels like thousands but in reality, only a couple of hundred people, I am done. My hand cramps from signing so many books. I'd complain but this is a good problem to have and I'm grateful for the pain. It's a small sacrifice for being a writer. This is the most

I've ever signed at one sitting. And I have another one of these this afternoon. I feel a little giddy.

Sarah escorts me outside to the awaiting SUV. I text the writer and let them know that I will meet them at the Filmmaker Lodge for the interview in half an hour. I then text Julian and let him know I'm on my way there as well.

We could have walked to the Filmmaker Lodge but it was nice to be chauffeured there, especially since the snow is coming down hard and the wind is brutally cold. Sarah lets me out and we run inside the building and up the stairs to the lounge to escape the cold. It seems everyone at the festival has the same idea. The door monitor doesn't want to let Sarah in without a credential but another volunteer clues him in that I am Radley's new girlfriend so I'm cool.

"Wow, I'm so cool I can even drop my own name here," I tell Sarah. We look around the lounge area and spy one seat only. When I plop down the person in the next seat lowers his Sundance Daily paper. It's Julian.

He lights up as do I. "I'm so happy to see you," he says to me and takes my hand and kisses it. "Did everything go well?"

"It did. I signed over two hundred books," I say as I flex my hand to remove the cramp. Julian takes my hand and massages it with a light and thorough touch. It feels so good. He kisses my hand and continues the treatment. "I thought you had a press junket."

"I did. Finished a little earlier than I thought so I came here," he says. "I'm doing a few mixers this afternoon with Gray while Radley and Jaz do some TV interviews and a panel discussion I think. And I think Jaz has a party to host for some online social media company or something. I don't know. Anything to keep my sister out of trouble."

"When's your press screening?" I ask him.

"Started about an hour and a half ago," he says. He kisses my hand again. "Better?"

"Better," I say. "Aren't you nervous?"

"Should I be?"

"No, your film is amazing," I assure him. "I'd still be a nervous wreck, though."

"We already have an offer on the table from Ace," he says. "That's not going anywhere although I can't figure out why he'd bid on something he or his people haven't seen unless he's going off Radley being in it and think I'd just cave at the first offer. I'm not that stupid."

"No, you're not," I tell him. I don't want to tell him where I think his screener went. It's just speculation on my part. I can't prove it. This is his sister after all.

"A bidding war will be nice, and we may even have a sale by this evening," he says.

"Ok, I might be nervous. My movie's going to sell."

A woman approaches and taps me on the shoulder, "Excuse me but are you Austen Landry?" she asks.

"Oh, yes," I say. "Are you from the Times?"

"I am, yes," she answers me. "We can go in the back and conduct the interview there if you'd like."

"Sure," I say and rise. "You going to be ok?" I ask Julian and motion for Sarah to take my seat.

"Heck, yeah," he says. "I'll sit tight and give myself a manicure." He brings his finger tips to his mouth and mocks biting his fingernails.

"I will quit worrying about you, then," I tell him.

* * *

After my interview we all three brave the near blizzard outside and walk down to a place called Firewood where it is warm and not too crowded. We shake off the snow and let our hostess escort us to our table. She stares at me and smiles. "Will you be having one more join you?"

"No, it's just us," Julian tells her and gives her a quizzical look.

"Oh," she says, sounding disappointed as she places the menus in front of us. "Your waiter will be with you shortly. "If your other party does decide to show up, I'll escort him right over."

"Oh..kay," I say.

Julian keeps looking at his phone for signs of anything good. His screening should be over now but his phone is dead silent.

"Silence is good, right?" he asks me.

"Of course it is," I tell him. "It's a great film."

He smiles back. "You're right. It's a good film."

"Julian has an amazing film in competition and the press screening is happening right now," I tell Sarah.

"That's wonderful," she says. "What's it about?"

"A one night stand, basically," he says not looking up from his phone as he types.

"It takes place over just one night," I tell her. "The film is brilliant."

Julian looks up from his phone and nervously smiles. I can tell he's getting more and more anxious by the minute. Gone is the Julian from the Filmmaker Lodge.

Our waiter comes and Sarah and I place our orders. Julian stares at his menu and then looks at me as if for help. He looks like he's going to break down from the stress.

"Just bring him a burger and fries," I say to the waiter. "And could you bring him a shot of your best bourbon, please, as soon as possible." I look at Julian who just seems to be losing it by the second. "Make that a double, please."

I take his hand. "It's going to be fine, Julian," I assure him.

"It is, isn't it?" he asks me. "I made a great film. I made a great film that's playing at Sundance."

"Yes, you did," I say. "Sundance."

The waiter comes back with a double shot for Julian and places it in front of him. He takes a sip of the liquor and sighs. Then takes a few more swigs until the elixir is gone. He places the glass on the table and relaxes.

"Better?" I ask him.

"Better," he says. "This is my moment and I'm falling apart."

"It's also the altitude," Sarah chimes in. "The altitude really plays on your emotions."

"Really?" I ask her.

"Oh, yeah," she explains. "It can cause all kinds of problems."

"Like?" Julian asks, obviously looking for answers.

"Anxiety, depression, moodiness, irrationality... you name it," she explains.

"How do you know all of this?" I ask her.

"I'm a marathon runner," she says. "And I live in Salt Lake City. Knowing how altitude affects my body in training is important."

"So, I'm not going crazy?" Julian asks her.

"I don't really know you, but probably not," she tells him.

"Ok," he says. "Ok."

The waiter brings us our food and we banter and try to take Julian's mind off his movie and the silence of his phone. He picks at his food.

"You should eat," Sarah says. "It will help. Seriously. Eat."

"Ok," he says and nibbles at his fries while staring down at his phone.

I take his phone away and put it in my seat. He looks at me and then smiles. "Listen to the bodyguard," I tell him. "She appears to know her stuff."

Julian relaxes and eats. "I do feel better. Thanks, Sarah," he says.

"You're welcome," she says. "I thought I saw an Oxygen lounge on our walk down. "Some oxygen would really help. We could go there after we eat."

"That would be great," he says. "I'm usually this cool and calm guy. I can't believe I'm letting it get to me like this."

"Where do you live?" Sarah asks him.

"Brooklyn," he says.

"You live at sea level," She explains. "Park City is above seven thousand feet."

"Wow," I say. "I live below sea level."

"You do?" She asks.

"New Orleans," I proudly say.

"So you do," she says.

I feel something vibrating between my legs and make a strange face. I laugh at the concept of that then realize it's Julian's phone. I look down at the caller ID and it is Gray. I hand the phone quickly to Julian, who takes it and immediately stands up and walks toward

the front of the restaurant to take the call. Eric would take the phone call at the table and speak in such a loud voice so that everyone in the restaurant can know his business.

"His film is probably going to a bidding war," I explain.

"Oh, wow," she says. "And this is the one starring Radley Seager?"

"Yes," I say.

"Ok," she says. "My agency filled me in a bit but I didn't have the full comprehension until now."

"I'm not dating Radley Seager," I tell her.

"I actually caught a glimpse of him earlier this morning at the house," she says. "I get the feeling it's complicated."

I smile at her. "So, what's your story? And I know there's a story there," I say.

"I'm married. I have a wonderful wife and she's expecting," she tells me.

"Congrats," I say. "That's fantastic."

"She wants me to quit... for the baby," she tells me. "But this money is good so it's a hard decision to make."

"You seem very good at your job," I say.

"Thank you," she says. "I try to be."

I look up to see Julian sprinting across the restaurant toward the bathroom.

"Oh, crap," I say as I run to catch up with him. I open the door to find him on his knees and hunkered over the toilet throwing up the contents of his lunch. I pull several paper towels from the dispenser and kneel down beside him. I stroke his back. He takes the towels and wipes his mouth as he stands up. The automatic toilet flushes on its own. He goes to the sink and rinses out his mouth and splashes his face as I rise.

"Ace Pictures rescinded their bid," he tells me. "They're passing on the film."

I look down and sigh. "Someone else will buy it," I say to him.

"You don't understand," he says. "It sets a precedent. Ace Pictures is the barometer for all sales. When they pass like that, it taints us in a light that we are now unsellable."

"Why would they do that?"

"Because my film sucks apparently," he says.

"But that's not true," I tell him.

"In their eyes it doesn't matter. Marketability is what matters and it's apparently not marketable. We're going to be scorched in all the papers."

We make our way back to the table and I motion for the waiter to bring the check. He quickly places it on our table and before I can grab it, Julian snatches it and tosses his credit card down for the waiter to take. He hangs his head down in despair and we sit in silence waiting for the waiter to bring us back the receipt. Julian takes it, signs it quickly, and pops his card back in his wallet.

He gives me a quick kiss. "I gotta get out of here for a while," he says. "I'll see you later."

I watch him leave the restaurant and disappear out into the heavy snow.

* * *

I hit send on my essay about life at Sundance as Sarah comes to get me to take me to my next signing. We forego the car and walk over. Again, the line is wrapped outside despite the snow. I pull my hood on my coat down and Sarah pushes our way through the crowd and into the bookstore.

A young man stops us. "Sorry folks, you'll need to line up outside..."

"I'm the author," I whisper to him.

"Oh... oh!" he says and smiles. "Come this way," he whispers back. He leads us to the backroom for us to put our coats up.

"I'm sorry the crowd is not as big as you're probably used to, Ms. Landry," he says.

I laugh. "It's wonderful," I assure him.

"I'm such a fan of your work, Miss Landry," he says to me.

"Oh, thank you," I say.

"That Lifetime movie of your book changed my life, I swear," he says.

"You're too kind," I tell him. Really too kind. "Call me Austen."

"Ok, Austen," he says. "I'm Richie."

"Thank you, Richie."

With everyone scrunched into the tiny bookstore, I text Julian to see how he is doing and then give my usual read before sitting at a table to sign away. Sarah acts as my official book sale counter.

"One hundred and seventy-six," she whispers to me. "I'm very impressed."

"That makes two of us," I say as I watch the remainder of the people mix and mingle. Sometimes there are stragglers and I have nowhere to be.

Richie brings me a box of books to sign for the store. "I'm sorry the crowd wasn't any larger. I think the snow has kept many of them away," he says.

"Oh, no," I say. "It was great and I'm truly humbled."

I continue to sign the store copies when I spot the girl from the *Skateaway* party again. She brings me a copy of my book and places it in front of me to sign. My breath is

taken away and I'm taken very much aback that she would be so brazen to purchase and ask me to sign the book after what happened last night.

I take a breath. "To whom do I make the book out to?" I ask her.

"Amy," she says to me.

"Ok, Amy," I say and open up the book to the title page where I typically sign. But she has already scrawled something on the page and in red ink.

If you do not leave Radley Seager alone I will make sure you never write another word ever again. Ever!!!!!!!!!! I look up at her and then at her arms which are exposed from her pushed up sweater. I can see she's cut her arms several times. It hits me that what she's written is in her own blood. I close the book and give it back to her and smile.

"Thank you, Amy," I say to her as I slide the book back to her. "I hope you have a nice day."

She leaves the book and and heads toward the door.

"Why did she leave the book?" Sarah asks me.

I open it and show her.

"Oh my god," she says, putting her hand up to her face. She sprints to the door after her. I look down at the book and those words again. They're the words of a truly troubled individual with delusions of grandeur. For the first time as an author I am truly frightened.

I check my text messages. Nothing, not even from Julian. I feel alone and vulnerable.

Sarah comes back inside the store, covered in snow and out of breath. She shakes her head at me.

The book store phones the police for me and they come quickly. I give them as thorough a report as I can possibly give. I don't have her last name. I don't have any info on

her. And to top it all off, they can't really do anything until she actually does something to me; like attack or kill me. At this point it is simply harassment. They put the book in an evidence bag, shake my hand, and go on their way leaving Amy still out there.

* * *

Darkness falls on Main Street as we leave the bookstore and make our way back over to the Filmmaker Lounge. I get Sarah and myself cups of coffee and we take a seat. It's not crowded and we are able to warm up and relax. Only I can't really relax. Julian and Palmer do not answer my texts. It's a big day for them, I know. They're doing press, panels, and preparation for the premiere tomorrow. But I'm worried about Julian.

I pull up Variety's coverage of the festival on my laptop and see a review of *Flying to Brazil* has been posted with the headline: *Ace rescinds offer despite rave reviews*.

A glowing review of the film, calling it the one to beat at the festival so far. I smile. I knew the film was good. I send the review to Julian even though I know he's probably seen it.

A simple search of the film's title brings up all sorts of blurbs of the film, all positive and gushing even. There is not one negative review that I can see.

My phone vibrates. A text from Julian with one single emoji; the cat with the hearts for eyes. I smile and put my phone away. I don't want to bother him with the stalker. He has enough to worry about.

Instead I try to focus on writing my article for Harper's on Radley. I sink into the leather seat at the Filmmaker Lounge with my laptop, my bodyguard standing watch over me, and consider that I am more than the interviewer in this story. Radley and his crew have made me a part of it.

* * *

Palmer texts me to tell me that she's at a party in Deer Valley and that I should come. She's probably a bit oblivious to everything that's going on right now. I text her back to tell her I'm just going to go to the house and crash. The day was too intense and I don't want to put myself out there more than I already have. I ask her if she knows where Radley and Jaz are. She thinks they are doing press and attending a dinner or something. *Why aren't you with Julian?* She texts.

He's doing press I text back. *Oh* she responds. She texts the address of the party and urges me to come if I change my mind.

I sit a little longer hoping maybe Julian might show up here. I know this is his favorite place to hang out. I caress the arm of the leather chair and imagine him spending afternoons sitting in this very chair at festivals past. I truly feel the connection.

My phone buzzes. *Have you seen Jaz or her bodyguard?* Julian asks.

"Is Jaz's bodyguard, Stella, from your firm?" I ask Sarah.

"No, she isn't," she tells me.

No, I haven't. Is she not with you or Radley?

No, he texts back. *She's a no show at her event.*

I call her to see where she is. It immediately goes to voicemail. Her phone is off. I leave a voicemail for her to call me back.

"How about we head back to the house now," I tell Sarah. She gets on the phone and calls for our driver.

When we walk outside the snow has stopped but it is considerably colder than this afternoon. I google the weather. It's twenty-two degrees and dropping. Wow. Sometimes it

hits just below freezing in New Orleans and we all freak out. This is bone chilling cold. I pull up my scarf to my mouth and pull on my hood.

The SUV pulls up and we quickly pile into its warm and cozy interior. "Back to the house, Charles," Sarah tells him.

We slowly drive up the hill on Mainstreet. Festival-goers stroll the streets in their big coats, scarves and hats. Despite the temps, people still brave the outside to enjoy the festival. I look at the people and wonder if Julian is among them.

We meander up the hill. You can tell the snow plow was through here earlier, but the afternoon snowfall hasn't been cleared and the snow crunches under the tires as the SUV slowly makes its way up the hill.

Charles honks the horn and I can see someone in the middle of the road walking up the hill. As we near the person I can see that something isn't right with them. Geez, they're wearing thigh high Louboutins, a spaghetti strap dress and dragging a scarf and purse through the snow. They stumble and stagger as they walk. Charles honks the horn again. The figure turns and holds her hand to her eyes. She looks like a deer in headlights. And then I realize who the figure is.

"Stop the car!" I yell. Charles comes to a complete stop and I rush out and through the snow to get to her. "Jazmine!"

She looks at me then starts to cry and collapses in the snow. She drops her bag. Some of her things fall out: a lipstick, a mirror, a small bag of coke, and a screener of Flying to Brazil. I round everything back into her bag as Charles scoops up her limp body while Sarah helps with the door. Sarah removes her own coat and wraps Jaz up in it in the back

seat. I get in and hold Jazmine's head in my lap. Charles spins the car around, turns the flashers on, and heads as fast as he possibly can back down the hill and toward town.

"How far is it?" I ask. I can see him putting info into the GPS.

"Not far," Charles says.

Jazmine shivers in my arms. I stroke her hair then remove my coat to put around her. I turn the vents toward her to keep her warm. Her skin is ice cold and her face and lips are a deep shade of blue. I reach down in my bag, pull out my phone and call Julian.

"Hey, you," he says to me. "Where are..."

"I found Jazmine," I interrupt with my shaky voice.

"Where?"

"We're on our way to the hospital," I tell him. "She was out in the cold without a coat walking up the hill toward the house."

"Oh my god," he says.

"Where is Radley?"

"He and Liz are at a documentary," he tells me. "I'll grab a ride and meet you at the hospital."

I toss my phone into my bag and stroke Jazmine's hair. She doesn't look at me, just shivers, shakes and moans. I place her bag inside of my larger bag. I'm more worried about the screener than the small bag of coke.

"You're going to be ok, Jaz," I tell her. "You're going to be ok."

* * *

Charles pulls the car up at the ER while Sarah runs out to retrieve some help. Less than a minute later, medics rush out with a gurney to collect Jaz. They pull her out of the

car and place her on the gurney and cover her up. They wheel her inside as Sarah and I follow. Charles moves the car to the parking lot.

As the medics take her through the double doors, we are stopped by a nurse in scrubs. "Are you family?" she asks me.

"I'm... I'm... I'm her brother's girlfriend," I tell her.

"And where is her brother?" she asks me, looking around.

"He's on his way here," I tell her.

"Who are they?" she asks me as she points to Sarah with Charles trailing behind her.

"They are my driver and my bodyguard," I say.

She looks at them and then back at me, unimpressed; condescending actually. "You can wait out here. I'll call you when we know something.

"Thank you," I say.

She frowns at me and walks on through the double doors.

We sit and wait. I pull out my phone and text Julian to let him know we made it and are waiting in the ER for word on her condition.

* * *

A few minutes later Julian bursts through the door. I look at him and begin to cry as he rushes to me and hugs me close.

A nurse comes through the double doors and approaches us. Julian looks at her. "How is my sister?"

"Lucky," she says. "Could you follow me so we can get her admitted?"

"Sure," Julian says. He looks at me and I nod.

He leaves us and I sit back down to wring my hands and wait. Cartoons play on the television and the music grates on my nerves. I search the room for a remote but only find outdated medical and fitness magazines and of course, a Highlights. I remove my phone from my bag to occupy my time and discover my battery is almost gone. I turn the phone off to save it.

"She's going to be fine," Sarah assures me.

"I hope so," I say.

After what seems like an eternity, at least by hospital standards anyway, Julian appears in the waiting room.

"She's going to be fine," Julian says to me as he hugs me. "Thank you," he whispers in my ear. "Thank you."

Julian explains to us that they're going to keep her in a room for at least a couple of days. This means she's going to miss the premiere.

"I phoned our parents," Julian states. "My mother is going to take the first available flight she can out here."

"That's good," I say.

"I'm going to let her have my room," Julian says.

"Ok," I tell him. "Where are you going to stay?"

"Well, I was hoping to stay in your room," he admits. "Would that be good?"

"Of course," I say. "I'd like that very much."

He smiles at me. "Tonight, though, I should probably stay here with my sister," he says.

"Julian, you have a ton of press and appearances tomorrow," I say. "She's going to be ok. You have a movie to market. I'll stay with her until your mother gets here."

"You'd do that?" he asks me.

"Of course, I would," I say. "She's also my friend."

"Thank you," he says and hugs me close. "I love you for that."

I sigh. My heart warms.

"Is, uh, Radley coming to see her tonight?" I ask.

I don't know," he says. "I need to call him anyway." He kisses me on the forehead, whips out his phone and goes to the corner to call him.

I let Sarah and Charles know that I'm going to stay up here tonight with Jaz.

"I'll stay with you," Sarah tells me.

"Why? In case Amy might wander into the hospital on the off chance I might be here?"

Sarah shrugs. "I'm also really good at moral support as well as being a good bodyguard."

"Ok," I say and smile at her. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," she says.

I glance at Julian in the corner on the phone. In all the months I've dated Eric, I don't think he's shown me this much love and respect combined. In less than a week I've grown to know and care deeply for this man. Maybe it's the altitude. I'd like to believe it's more than that.

Julian snaps me out of my gaze. "Liz is forbidding him to come up here," he says. "She doesn't want him making a scene and as you know, his mere presence causes one."

"True," I say. "How sad."

"Liz wants to keep this out of the papers if she can," he informs me. "This isn't the type of publicity she wants for us. She wants us to go about business as usual."

"You should," I tell him. "I'll be fine here."

A nurse comes through the double doors and approaches us. "Mr. Winslow," she addresses Julian. "We've moved your sister into a room now if you'd like to go up for a little bit."

"I would, thanks," he says. He grabs me by the hand. I take my bag and we follow the nurse through the double doors and down the hall to an elevator.

"You must be here for the festival," she says to us.

"Yes," I say.

"Have you seen a lot of films?"

We both laugh. "Not really," Julian confesses.

"Oh, that's too bad," she says. "My husband and I always get a locals only pass and try to see as many movies as we can."

"Oh, wow," Julian says. "That's an awesome way to do the festival."

"We're taking time off tomorrow to go see movies all day long," she tells us as the elevator doors open and we get in.

"Seeing anything special?" Julian asks her.

"We want to see that skating movie, that doc about the blind mountain climber, and that Brazil movie," she says as the elevator goes up.

I squeeze Julian's hand. He squeezes back.

We don't say anything to the nurse as we get off on the third floor and walk all the way to the end of the hall to his sister's room. The name plate by the door reads *Winslow, J.* We walk in and see her resting in a bed covered with blankets. IVs run to several bags hanging on the stand. She receives oxygen and sleeps. Jaz Snow is nowhere to be found in here.

"She's going to be out of it for the most part tonight," the nurse says, "but she's going to be just fine. She's got some mild frostbite but luckily it's not too serious."

"Frostbite, oh wow," I say.

"It's a milder form of frostbite," she informs me. "She's not going to lose any limbs or skin. She'll have a few places that may blister and turn black but they'll heal. She's not going to have any permanent damage, I don't think."

Julian goes to his sister's side.

"You have a lot of these cases here?" I ask the nurse.

"Sometimes we do, yes," she says.

"Her mother is coming tomorrow," I tell the nurse. "I'm going to stay with her tonight along with her bo..." I catch myself, "along with our friend, Sarah."

"That'll be good," she says. "Patients tend to do better when they have family and friends around them."

Julian kisses her forehead and gets up. "I'm going to go with Charles back to the house. I'm beat," he says. "I'll put together some things for you and have him bring them back up here."

"Thanks," I say. "Sarah is going to stay here with me, too."

"Ok, that's sweet of her," Julian says. "Once she wakes up, she may very well need a bodyguard."

I summon the courage up to tell him about Amy. "I had a bit of an incident today at my afternoon book signing."

"What?" Julian asks, startled.

"Radley's stalker thinks I'm the one standing in her way to eternal bliss with him,"

"Oh, geez," he says. "Seriously?"

"She bought one of my books and scrawled a threat in it... in blood."

"Oh my god," he says. "This is all too much." He runs his hand through his hair.

"Look, we'll be fine," I assure him. "Go home. Stop worrying. You have a premiere tomorrow. Jazmine will be fine."

"I can't help but worry," he says to me. He gives me a kiss and a hug. "Thank you. I just want you to know how much this truly means to me."

"You're most welcome," I tell him. He kisses me and then kisses my hand.

He and the nurse leave me alone with Winslow, J. The blankets are tucked up under her arms and her frostbitten hands rest on pillows. Her feet are also exposed outside the covers, propped up on pillows as well. Her manicured toes are red and slightly blistered as well. I want to cry. The dim light in the room casts an almost angelic look on her face despite the dark circles under her eyes and the red blotches on her nose and cheeks. Someone has removed her makeup and brushed her hair. She's a far cry from being a movie star although she looks much better since we found her.

There is a recliner and a chair in the room. I take the recliner and plop down. I know it's going to be a long night, so I try to make myself comfortable. I sift through my bag and

locate my phone charger and find a plug to juice it up. It comes back to life. I have several text messages and a voicemail from Eric.

Palmer wants to know if I need her here. I love that woman. I really do. I haven't seen her that much during the festival. But tomorrow is her day. This is her career being made here so I tell her to enjoy the evening and I'll see her at some point tomorrow. She tells me we'll do a spa day later this week. I send her a smiley face emoji.

Sarah enters the room, tiptoeing and takes a seat on the other side of the bed from me.

"Can I get you anything?" she asks me.

"No," I tell her, "but if you need to go get something to eat or whatever..."

"No, I'm good," she says. "Is she going to be ok?"

"I hope so," I say. I really hope so."

I look at the screener now sitting inside my bag. Oh, Jazmine, what the hell have you done?

CHAPTER EIGHT

Tuesday of the Festival

A light knock on the door wakes me up from my snooze in the recliner. "Yes," I say.

A nurse's assistant enters slowly into the dimly lit room, carrying a Sundance shopping bag.

"Ms. Landry?" she asks, looking at each of us.

"That's me," I say and stand up. I'm stiff from the uncomfortable chair. I look up at the clock on the wall. It's twenty after one o'clock. A.M. It's going to be a very long night, I think to myself.

She hands the bag to me and then checks on Jazmine, making sure her IV is working properly and her oxygen is flowing. She steps back and looks at her.

"Is she ok?" I ask her.

"Oh, yeah," she says. "I was just thinking she looks so familiar to me."

"You think?" I ask her, trying to cover up the obvious. I'm in protective mode now.

"I see people all the time coming in here," she admits. "Maybe she's been in here before."

"That could be it," I say. She leaves the room.

"You're a good friend, Austen," Sarah says to me.

"I don't know about that," I tell her, "but I do believe everyone has a right to privacy and as Winslow, J., hopefully she can continue to enjoy that privacy for a little while, even if it is in a hospital."

"Is that why she keeps ditching her bodyguard?" Sarah asks.

"Kind of," I say. I don't want to tell Sarah the real reason why.

I look inside the bag that has been sent to me and I find a pair of blue jeans, some slippers, and a worn NYU Tisch sweatshirt. I went to NYU but I didn't go to Tisch and this isn't my sweatshirt. Then it dawns on me that I never asked Julian where he went to college. He went to my alma mater, maybe at the same as me. He went to NYU. I pull the sweatshirt up to my nose, smell his scent, and smile. He sent me a piece of him. This is his hug to me. I love it.

I continue to look in the bag. There are some homemade cookies, some sandwiches packed in a plastic container, and some chips for us. I look inside the bag for anything else. That's it.

I take the sweatshirt and jeans together with my own bag and change in the bathroom. It feels good to come out of my clothes, get comfortable, and relax. I find a washcloth and wash my face as best as I can.

I sit on the toilet and sift through Jazmine's purse. I pull out the little bag of coke and set it on the side of the sink. Further investigation finds a small ornate box with several different pills of all shapes and sizes. I recognize some as being the diet pills she gave me the other night. I swipe a couple of the diet pills just in case I need them again.

I look around the bathroom as if someone might be spying on me and dump the pills and the bag of coke into the toilet. The pills and coke swirl around in a dance before disappearing.

An exploration of the rest of her purse is mainly typical female purse contents. A Chanel lipstick, a small coke stained mirror, a tampon, and her phone, some cash, and a few credit cards. I wash the coke residue off the mirror and place everything back into her purse. Everything except the screener and three diet pills which I just stare at before

slapping them over into the toilet. I stash the screener in my own bag then lean on the lavatory and break down in tears.

* * *

I emerge from the bathroom with Jazmine's purse and my and find another nurse in the room.

"Hi," I say to her.

"Hello," she says as she hangs a small bag to Jaz's IV. She untangles the lines and hooks the new bag to her existing line."

"What's that?" I ask.

"Oh, it's just an antibiotic," she explains. "We don't want her to get an infection."

I nod at the nurse while she inspects Jaz's feet, then her arms and hands. They have begun to blister even more.

"Will she have any long-lasting effects from all of this?" I ask her.

"Hard to say. She's going to have to have some follow-up care, that's for sure," the nurse says. "She sure is pretty."

"Yes, she is," I say.

"I'm sure she'll be fine," the nurse says. "Are you her sister?"

"No," I say. "I'm just a... well, I'm just a friend."

"When she wakes up, she's probably going to be in some pain," the nurse says. "You can buzz when she does, and I'll give her another shot."

"Thank you," I say.

The nurse exists and I sit back down in the recliner and pull out the goodies from the bag.

I open the container to find several sandwiches in a plastic box, all peanut butter and jelly, cut in quarters with the crusts removed. This isn't the handiwork of Margaret. This is Julian.

"Sandwich?" I ask Sarah.

He's also placed some potato chips in a plastic bag and homemade cookies in another plastic box. Bottled water rounds out our care package which I share with Sarah. It is a very welcome midnight snack.

We both try to make ourselves as comfortable as possible until we both drift off to sleep.

An hour later a moan jolts me from my snooze and I look to see Jaz is awake and uncomfortable. She looks at me, groggy and disoriented. "Austen?"

"Hey, yeah, it's me," I tell her. "I'm here."

"It hurts," she says in a low voice. "It hurts."

I press the call button and the intercom buzzes. "Yes, how can I help you?" the intercom squawks.

"She's in a lot of pain and she's awake," I say.

"It hurts," she whines a bit louder this time.

"Someone will be right down."

"Hurts!" Jaz begins to thrash around. "Austen!.. Please..."

"She's coming with a shot, it will make it go away," I promise.

Jaz thrashes around and bangs her feet and hands on the bed railing. She winces in pain and cries out even more. I start crying out of desperation and Sarah runs out of the

room to retrieve the nurse. A few seconds later she is back with the nurse who immediately pushes a shot through Jaz's IV tube.

"Miss Winslow," the nurse says. "I gave you a shot. If you'll lie still it won't hurt so much."

"It hurts," she says in more of a little girl's whine. She slowly calms down. She looks up at me and then at my sweatshirt. "He must really like you. He never lets anyone wear that shirt," she says as she falls off to sleep.

* * *

Dreams of Julian fill my head then are invaded by Amy when I am jolted awake by the lights blinding me and a voice calling out. I have trouble getting the recliner upright as my eyes adjust to the harsh hospital light. I look over at Sarah's chair but she isn't there. I feel slobber on my chin and I wipe it off with the sleeve of my sweatshirt before realizing I shouldn't have done that to Julian's favorite.

"Excuse me," I reply to the voice.

"I'm here to take blood," the young woman says.

"Oh," I say. "I get up and stretch before looking over at Jaz. She continues to sleep through the intense light. For a brief second I envy the sleep before realizing this is not the way to get it. Her hands and feet are swollen slightly but don't appear to have gotten worse than they were through the night. Maybe that's a good thing.

I step out of the room and stretch some more. Sarah walks down the hall with two cups in her hand; coffee. She really is a good bodyguard.

She hands me the steaming cup and I thank her profusely.

"Are you ok?" Sarah asks me.

"I'm good," I tell her. "Tired but good. Do you think Amy will try to hurt me?"

"It's hard to say," she tells me. "Most of them bark but don't bite. Her bark is pretty convincing though."

"I'm a little scared," I confess. "I've never been stalked like this as an author before."

"It's my job to protect you," Sarah says. "You just relax and enjoy the festival."

We both look around as to where we are. "Ok, relax as much as you can."

Jaz is awake again.

I go to her side and brush her hair from her face. "Hey," is all I manage to say to her.

"How did I get here?" she asks me. "Her voice is hoarse and low.

"We found you walking in the street, sweetie," I say. "Why were you out in the snow?"

"I got out of the car," she explains.

"Why did you do that?" I ask her as I fill the small plastic cup with some water and peel away the paper from the bendable straw. I hold the cup and straw to her chapped lips for her to drink. She sips the water then pushes away the straw with her tongue.

"Lance made me get out of the car," she explains.

"Lance?" I ask. "Ace Pictures Lance?"

"Yeah," she says. "He made me get out of the car."

"Why were you in his car?" She doesn't answer me. "Where was Stella?" I ask her.

"I ditched her when she went to the bathroom," she says.

"Jazmine, you've probably gotten her fired from her job," I scold her. "She's a good bodyguard."

"I know but I needed to see Lance again," she tells me.

"Again?"

"I was at Ace's brunch this morning," she says.

"Was Radley there?" I ask her.

"No, he was doing press," she says. "He wasn't there."

"What about Liz?" I ask her.

"She went out to use the phone."

"And..."

"We had a fight," she explains. "Can I have some more water?"

"Sure," I say and hold the straw up to her lips. She sips the water then pushes the straw away. "So, what happened?" I feel like an interrogator.

"He wanted to me to go back to the bathroom with him," she explains, "and I told him I wasn't going to keep screwing him until he left his wife. I want more. I love him."

"Is that why he pulled the bid?" I ask her.

"He said I'd be sorry if I didn't go back there with him," she says and begins to cry.

"I'm not some whore, Austen. I'm not!"

"Oh, honey," I say, and I begin to cry. Even Sarah looks like she's about to lose it. "No, you're not."

"So, I went to his house later to confront him about taking back the bid," she says.

"And I had to get the screener back. It's all my fault."

"No, it's not your fault," I tell her.

"I slept with him after he said he'd put the bid back," she tells me. "And then in the car on the way back to our house we fought about it and he threw me out of the car." She starts sobbing again, heavily this time. "It's all my fault."

"No, Jazmine, it's not your fault," I tell him. "It's Lance's fault."

Jaz continues to sob uncontrollably as a nurse comes in.

"What's going on?" the nurse asks.

"She was telling me why she was out in the cold," I tell her as she checks her out. She pushes the button for the blood pressure cuff then tries to take Jaz's temp but Jaz refuses to accept the thermometer in her mouth and continues to sob out of control.

"It's my fault," she keeps muttering as she cries while the nurse runs out of the room.

"Jazmine, it's not your fault," I keep telling her and rub her shoulder, but it doesn't help. She hyperventilates and thrashes about. She pulls out her oxygen and begins to pull on her IV as I call the nurse.

"Yes," the box squawks.

"She's pulling out her IV... I don't know what to do..." I panic while Sarah tries to hold her down and pull her damaged hands away from the IV.

"Jazmine," Sarah says, "you have to stop."

The nurse comes back with a shot. She checks the IV and retapes the parts Jaz pulled out then empties the shot into the line. She then replaces the oxygen back on Jaz's nose. Almost immediately Jaz begins to calm down and then drifts off to sleep.

Sarah and I slink back down in our chairs and relax.

"What a son-of-a-bitch," Sarah says. "This guy is piece of a work. I so want to go over to his house and seriously throw some skills on him. Who the hell does he think he is?"

"He's Lance Everley. He owns Ace Pictures," I explain.

"He's the most powerful man in Hollywood," Sarah says. "Wow. Now I really want at him. She needs to file charges."

"It's her word against his," I say. "He's got power, especially here. I seriously doubt they'd do anything." I sit back in the seat and sigh.

Sarah just shakes her head. "I guess the 'me too' movement isn't enough to stop them all, huh?"

"It's not a 'me too' if you're the me too that won't speak up.

"True."

"His wife is trying to acquire my little book now that it's selling," I tell her. "She's one of the most powerful women in publishing."

"A true power couple," Sarah says, shaking her head.

"They can make or break a movie or a book," I say.

"And make or break people, too, apparently" Sarah says. "She doesn't deserve this. No one does."

* * *

At six-thirty in the morning Sarah and I can no longer stand it. We turn on the TV to entertain ourselves. We click around and settle on a cable news show just in time to see that Radley has been nominated for his first Oscar for *THE HALLOWED*, the adaptation of Dan Price's wonderful and brilliantly written novel from a few years back. I had the pleasure of dining with Dan and a whole group of authors appearing at the Association of Writers and Writing Programs, or AWP as we call it, one year. It's so nice to see his book getting the recognition it deserves and the big budget movie treatment as well. I totally forgot Radley starred in it.

I smile at Sarah and look over at Jaz who still sleeps. I hope the Oscar nomination helps Julian's movie get back on track. I pull out my cell phone and send Radley a text.

Congrats on the nom!

I get a text back from him. *How's Jaz? And what nom?*

Hanging in there. Oscar.

My phone suddenly rings. It's Radley. "Hey," I say.

"Seriously, I got nominated?" he asks me.

"Yes," I say. "It's on TV so it must be so. You better go get Liz. I'm sure her phone is blowing up."

"Is Jaz awake?" he asks.

"No," I say. "The nurse had to put her out. She got excited when she was trying to tell me what happened last night."

"Geez," he says. "So why was she out in the cold?"

"Uhm, she went to confront Lance about the film," I tell him.

"Lance?" he asks. "Everley Lance?"

"Yeah," I tell him. "Radley, Jaz has been having an affair with Lance and it went sour yesterday."

The phone is silent for what seems like a long time.

"Radley?" I ask. "Are you still there?"

"I'm still here," he says. "Austen?"

"Yeah."

"You can't tell Julian this," he says. "It'll kill him."

"Oh, ok," I say.

"Austen, you can't tell him," he pleads. "Understand?"

"Understood," I reply.

"He's on his way up there," Radley says. "His mom should be up there shortly."

"She got a flight, huh?" I ask him.

"I found her a plane," he says. "Wheels down in Heber City sometime after six this morning."

"Radley, you are a saint," I tell him.

"I caused this," he says. "This is all because of me. It's the least I can do. The very least."

"This isn't your fault, Radley," I say. "You understand?"

The phone stays silent again. "If I see him today, I'm going to end up on CNN," he says.

"Don't do anything stupid, Radley" I tell him.

"I gotta go," Radley says. "Please give Jaz a kiss for me." The phone goes dead as Julian walks into the room.

He smiles at me and heads straight for his sister's side before giving me a huge hug.

"It looks good on you," he says.

"What does?" I ask.

"My sweatshirt," he says.

"Oh," I say. "Jaz told me you never let anyone wear it."

"Nope," he says. "I've never let a girlfriend wear it. Ever. You are the first."

"He likes me," I say to Sarah.

"I see that," she says.

"And thank you, too, Sarah," Julian says to her. "Thanks for keeping us safe. I appreciate it more than you know."

"My pleasure," she says.

"If I had another favorite sweatshirt, I'd let you wear that, too," he says then turns his attention to his sister. "How's she doing?"

"She's having a bit of a tough time," I say.

"Really?"

"She's scared, she's in pain..." I try to explain without bringing in the eight-hundred-pound gorilla on my conscience. I am the keeper of the secrets. So many secrets now.

"I don't understand why she was out in this cold like that," Julian says. "Why?"

"I don't know," I lie. I hate lying to him. It makes my stomach churn.

Sarah shoots me a look.

"How are you?" he asks me.

"I'm ok," I say. "I'm ok."

"Sarah, why don't you go on back to the house and get some rest," Julian says. "The car is outside waiting for me."

"I really don't want to leave Austen..."

"Sarah, I'll be fine," I assure her. "I'm headed back soon. I'm exhausted."

"Ok, thanks." Sarah gives me a hug and pats Julian on the back. "She's going to be fine."

"Thank you, Sarah," Julian says as Sarah grabs her bag and heads out the door.

As Julian is about to give me a kiss, Jaz wakes up and tries to reach for him.

"Jules," she says in a drunk tone. "Jules, I'm so sorry."

"Why are you apologizing?" he asks her. "You're going to be fine."

"I wanna go home," she whines. "I just wanna go home."

"Mom's coming and she'll be here soon," Julian tells her.

"Mom is here?" she asks.

"Yeah," he says. "Mom's coming this morning."

Jaz begins to cry. "I'm so sorry, Julian. I'm so sorry."

"Jazzy, it's ok," Julian says, "and you're going to be fine."

She looks up at Julian and then slips back asleep.

"Has the doctor been in yet?" he asks me.

"No, not yet. Just nurses," I tell him.

He slumps down in my recliner than takes my hand and pulls me onto his lap and holds me close. I put my head on his shoulder. "You look hot in my sweatshirt," he says.

"I can't believe you went to NYU, too," I say.

"You went to NYU?" he asks me.

"I did," I answer back.

"How 'bout that?" He rubs my arm and kisses the top of my head.

I laugh as I drift off to sleep in Julian's arms. I feel warm and safe there as I swear I hear him say 'I love you.'

* * *

The overhead light coming on in the room awakens me from my bliss as a very tall, dark and overly handsome man in a long white lab coat strolls in with a nurse and a nursing assistant to examine Jaz.

I get up from Julian's lap and he rises to meet the doctor.

"Hi, I'm Julian Winslow," he says. "She's my sister."

"I'm Dr. Anand," he says.

"I'm Austen Landry," I tell him as I shake his hand.

"The author?" he asks.

"Yes," I tell him and perk up. A hot doctor who knows who I am? What are the odds?

"My wife bought your book yesterday," he says.

"Oh, wow," I say. "I hope she enjoys it. Thank you so much."

"She's a voracious reader," he explains then turns his attention to Jaz.

Julian smiles at me. Jaz's doctor has heard of me.

"I'm going to go down to the cafeteria and grab something to eat," I tell Julian.

"Nice to meet you, Dr. Anand," I say as I grab my wallet and leave them in the room to tend to Jaz.

I walk down to the nurse's station and ask where the cafeteria is located. They direct me down the hall to the elevators and to the first floor.

On the first floor, I feel a little lost but find a sign directing me toward the cafeteria and the gift shop. It's a nice hospital and looks a lot like our house up on the mountain. Lots of wood and rock. Utah rustic.

I find a muffin and a very hot cup of coffee. As I stand in the line and wait, my eyes dart around and take in my surroundings. And then I see her and my blood runs cold. I am overwhelmed with fear. Amy stands in the hall, talking to someone. She holds a stack of files and I can see a name tag on her business jacket. She's dressed for work. Holy crap, she works here! I stand behind a doctor to hide myself. If I am going to be attacked here, it's

good I'm standing next to a doctor. They can do CPR on me and bring my back to life when Amy tries to kill me. I tap her on the shoulder.

"Excuse me," I whisper to her.

"Yes," the doctor turns around and addresses me.

"Who is that girl out there in the red business suit?" I ask.

"Oh, *her*," she says with a bit of disdain. "That's Amy Moss," the doctor says. "She works in the business office as a temp. Just started a few days ago and she's the worst."

"Thanks," I say as I continue to try to block myself behind the doctor in the line but also keep an eye on Amy. She finishes her conversation and then walks on out of view, oblivious to my existence in the hospital.

I hurry, pay for my food, and like a spy in an espionage novel, I make my way back up to the third floor and to Jaz's room, fearful that I might get caught by her.

I stop at the door to Jaz's and peer in. An older, very good looking woman dressed elegantly but comfortably is in the room with Julian. The doctor and nurses appear to have left. They don't see me as I stand behind the door and eavesdrop instead of going in. She and Julian argue.

"Drugs, Julian," she says. "Why is my daughter on drugs?"

"Mom, I don't know."

"I knew this Hollywood mess was not good for her. She's full of drugs according to the doctor," she continues. "I thought you and Radley were taking care of her."

"Mom," he defends. "She's a grown up."

"You and Radley promised me you would take care of her," she says.

Julian stays silent.

"This is all on you," she accuses. "This is your fault she's in this mess now."

I back away from the door and knock before entering.

The woman eyes me and looks me up and down. "He never lets anyone, not even his past girlfriends, wear that sweatshirt," she says and smiles. "You must be Austen. I'm Jane Winslow." Now I get it. I'm betting Julian's dad's name also starts with a 'J.'

She extends her hand to me, takes mine and then pulls me close for a hug. "Thank you for saving my daughter."

"How is she?" I ask.

"Better," Julian says. "She may get to go home Thursday or Friday."

I stand back and fidget a bit. Julian looks at me. "Something wrong?"

"Amy the stalker is here in the hospital," I tell him as I wring my hands.

"How the hell did she find you here?" Julian asks.

"She hasn't," I explain. "She apparently works here as a temp. I saw her when I was in the cafeteria and I asked a doctor who she was and she told me."

"What's this? Amy, who is Amy?" Julian's mother asks.

"Radley has a pretty nasty stalker and now she's after me," I confess to her.

She looks straight at Julian. "Dammit, Julian. What the hell kind of mess have you gotten Jazmine involved in?"

Julian and I go silent. We are caught in an angry mom's wrath.

"Julian, I told you getting Jazmine involved in all this Hollywood mess was going to be bad and here we are," she scolds. "You know what she's like."

"Mom..." Julian begins but his mother cuts him off.

"Jazmine isn't like you, Jules," she begins. "She's naïve, trusting, impulsive and vulnerable. She gets caught up in all of this... this Hollywood nonsense you and Radley have filled her up with."

"Mom, it's not nonsense," Julian explains. "Jaz's career has really taken off because of Radley..."

"Jaz," she says and shakes her head. "Jaz Snow's career has taken off. Look at her Julian. This is what being Jaz Snow has done to my daughter." Jane pulls the chair up to the bedside, takes a seat and strokes her sleeping daughter's hair.

Julian pushes me outside the room and into the hall. "She works here?" Julian asks.

"Yeah. Her name is Amy Moss," I say in a low whisper as a nurse's assistant strolls by.

Julian whips his phone out of his pocket and pushes a speed dial. "Radley... Yeah, she arrived... Thanks for that. That's means a lot to me and to my family... Doctor says she's got some recovery but she's going to be fine... We appreciate that, thanks... Look, uhm, that stalker, Amy... Yeah, she apparently works here at the hospital... Crazy, right? Amy Moss is her name... Yeah, I know... Ok... Ok... Good... How about we meet at..." Julian looks at his watch. "Say ten thirty at the Filmmaker Lod... ok, the Zen Lounge then... Nominated?... That's awesome, dude... Yeah, it helps the film... Screw Ace Pictures." Julian hangs up the phone.

"Stella is on her way up to the hospital, so we'll take the car back to town," Julian explains. "Look, I've got a ton of press today and we've got photo ops and interviews and I know you're tired."

"I'm exhausted," I say.

"Will you be my date tonight for the premiere?" Julian asks me.

"Of course, I will," I tell him and kiss him. "I'd love that."

He smiles and takes me back into the room. "Mom, I've got a ton of things today to get ready for the premiere tonight," he says. "If you need anything, you call me."

"I'm fine," she says. "You go do what you have to do. I'll do what I need to do here."

Julian walks over to his mother and gives her a hug and a kiss on the top of her head.

"I love you, Mom," he says but she doesn't return the affection.

"It was lovely to meet you, Mrs. Winslow," I say to her.

"You, too, dear," she says. "You're not Hollywood, are you?"

"No, ma'am," I say. "I'm an author."

"A bestselling author, Mom," Julian interjects.

"What do you write?" she asks.

"Literary fiction," I answer her.

"I like her already," she says. "I majored in lit at Columbia."

"My mother majored in husband hunting," Julian teases.

"And I landed a good one, too," she says. "I'll see you later. I do love you, son."

We exit the room and out into the hallway. He holds my hand and squeezes it tightly.

"I think you were a hit with my mother," he says.

"She seems great," I say as we walk down the hallway to the elevator banks.

"It's really cold outside," he says as he helps me zip up my coat and put my wool hat on. "You look like you're going on an expedition to the South Pole," he teases.

"Well, I am from the South," I say. "The deep South. Thirty-two degrees and people start burning the furniture and books."

The elevator opens and as I turn to get in, Amy, clipboard in hand, gets off. She doesn't even pay us any attention as I freeze and hold my breath in fear. She turns and heads down the hall toward the wing where Jaz is, followed by Stella.

I whisper Stella's name. She turns and squints.

"Austen?" she asks me.

I hold my finger to my lips to shush her. I try to explain everything, but she tells me she's been briefed but didn't have a picture of her. She pats me on the shoulder and hurries down the hall.

I look at Julian with a bit of desperation. "Go to the car and stay there," he says. "I'll be there in a bit.

I step into the elevator. It closes and takes me down to the first floor. I quickly walk to the front of the hospital and outside. The cold immediately sobers me up. Parked to the side of the portico is a black SUV. I hurry to it and knock on the window. The window comes down to reveal Charles, our driver from yesterday.

"Charles!" I say, happily. He immediately exits the car and runs around it to let me in.

"Julian will be down shortly," I tell him as I get into the warm car.

He gets in and closes the window he opened for me. I unbutton my coat a bit and shift in the seat until I get comfortable but I just can't. I am a writer and well read. I see all sorts of scenarios going through my head on how Amy can wreak havoc on our lives. A shot through Jaz's IV; a shot in Julian's neck; poisoned cafeteria food; a poisoned coffee for Stella... my mind wanders and I make myself sick thinking about it until Julian gets in the car. He's alive. He hasn't been poisoned.

"She didn't go in the room," he says, "but at least Stella knows what she looks like. She took a picture of her. Another bodyguard will come tonight so they'll know to watch. Luckily no one knows Jaz is in the hospital. I'm hoping we can keep it that way. I told Mom not to brag."

"Where to?" Charles asks.

"Let's take Austen home, please," Julian says as I lay my head on his shoulder.

"Home," I say and close my eyes.

* * *

Day sleeping after a night out in New Orleans is one of my favorite things ever. Once the party is over, curling up on the couch under a crocheted blanket is bliss to me. It's a different kind of sleep. It's a sleep that doesn't go deep but is still restful. If I dream, it's vivid and I remember them. Sometimes I can even direct the dreams when I sleep like this. Today is no exception. I dream about Julian. The dream is so vivid I can even smell him. I sigh as I realize we are both in our home office and writing together. We have nowhere to be but there, in our little office surrounded by books and all our framed book covers and movie posters. It's the life I always dreamed of.

As I sit in my blissful office I realize it's not me who is sitting there. It is Amy. I am on the floor, dead, choked by an NYU sweatshirt. My body jerks me into reality and out of the dream. I am sweaty and Julian's sweatshirt is pulled tight around my neck, choking me. I pull it off my neck and raise the collar to my nose. His smell makes me feel safe again and the sweatshirt still feels like a hug.

I shower, doll myself up, then gaze into the closet to find a pair of skinny black jeans and the gorgeous Stella McCartney oversized cable knit sweater that Jaz gifted me. Cool

biker boots and a black hat complete the ensemble. I place a crystal encrusted vintage bow pin on the hat to complete it. Totally me. If Amy does decide to knife me, I hope I don't get blood on this sweater. It's just too nice and pretty.

I hurry down the stairs to find Sarah sitting at the kitchen bar enjoying a cup of late afternoon coffee. The smell of freshly roasted coffee and coffee cake remind me of Café du Monde. Margaret notices me and immediately pours me a cup and slides a piece of that incredible smelling coffee cake my way. She might have a future in New Orleans if only I could afford her.

"I think we're going to have to run down the mountain instead of driving if we keep eating like this," Sarah exclaims. "This is amazing."

"I'm taking Margaret back with me to New Orleans," I tell her. "And that's saying something."

I dig into the cake, sip the coffee, and forget all the secrets I'm supposed to keep. I look at my phone and am reminded of one. Eric. He's called three times and left three voice messages while I slept. I've ghosted him all week. At some point, I will have to confront him. I'm surprised he's called so much. I've never known him to be this obsessive.

I think about him compared to Julian. I know I'm not what Eric wants. It's the idea of who I am that sounds glamorous. It's like a person who wants to be a writer without writing a word. Or a girl who wants to date a movie star because they are a movie star and not actually for who they are.

I think of Amy's obsession with Radley. Amy has no clue who he is and can't know. All she knows is what she reads in the tabloids or sees in the movies. One year into my relationship with Eric I realize he doesn't even know me at all, only a perception of me that

he has in his head. One week into my relationship with Julian and I feel I know him. I truly and deeply know him. And he knows me. I don't want to let him go. I don't want Sundance to end.

* * *

Twenty minutes later Sarah and I are in a black SUV and on our way to Julian's premiere and the after party. My heart swells as we approach Eccles theater and the thought that I will be with Julian. The car lets us off on the side of the theater and we are escorted inside and to the green room where we were for *Skateaway*. Sarah takes her place to the side with Samuel, looking after us.

Radley sees me first and gives me a huge hug.

"How is Jazmine?" I ask.

"Better," he says. "I guess. They won't let me see her for obvious reasons."

"I'm sorry," I say and frown.

"Thank you, Austen. Thank you so much for everything you've done."

"I was just in the right place at the right time," I respond. "It was nothing."

"No," Radley says. "Above and beyond. You're a really great person." He pulls me in and hugs me tight. The Imagemax guy clicks away in the room.

"The cameras are never going to leave us alone, are they?" I ask him.

"Nope," he says and dips me, then brings me back up into another hug. I hear the camera clicking away. "They're calling us Radsten."

I laugh, then look around for Julian. He is nowhere to be found. Palmer waves at me as she gives an interview to someone. Radley is ushered to the photo backdrop and he poses for portraits while Liz talks on the phone. I plop down in the same chair I sat in

during *Skateaway*. I pull out my phone to have something to fiddle with. I'm a part of this group but I'm not a part of this movie and because of that I'm reduced to spectator. A guest of the filmmaker.

As Radley, Liz, and Palmer mingle with their guests, which are some of the crew from the film and the press, I sit and pretend to be into whatever the heck it is that I am into. And I want to see Julian. It's his night, one of the biggest nights of his life, as this could move him up the ladder of feature writer-director status that has apparently escaped him. I fiddle with my phone and it goes off. It's Andrea so I have to take it.

"Andrea," I say as I answer it.

"Girl, fantastic news," she says.

"What?" I ask. I'm intrigued.

"Pickett Press really wants to acquire your book," she says. "Isn't that fantastic?"

I stay silent. It's anticlimactic and disappointing. It's everything I ever wanted. But if it means doing business with those people, I just don't want it.

"You're not jumping up and down," Andrea says. "Why aren't you jumping up and down? This is what you've worked hard for."

"I'm flattered, I really am, but..."

"but..."

"I just don't want to be a part of those people," I say. "Any other company but Pickett."

"But they're offering a movie deal as well," Andrea says. "Full on packaging."

"Any company but Pickett," I plead. "Just any other company."

"Ok...", Andrea says and pauses. "May I ask why?"

"They're just not the people I thought they were," I tell her.

"Austen," Andrea says. "Let me give you a great big piece of advice."

"Ok," I say.

"Don't ever let this get personal," she explains. "It's business. Don't look the gift horse in the mouth. It's business and the business is good, and they want to treat you very well. Understand?"

"I'll think about it," I say.

"Think hard, Austen," Andrea says to me. "They are offering you quite a bit of money. More than anyone. They want to make you a consistent best-selling author. They want to make your career. This is the big time few authors see and less than a handful of publishers can actually offer."

I say goodbye, hang up the phone, and contemplate this tainted offer. Maybe I'm being silly but the Everleys are not the sort of people I really want to get into bed with, so to speak. Look what happened to Jazmine and she literally was in bed with Lance. Maybe I'm letting my heart get the better of my head, after all, Sarah does say our emotions are hyper at altitude. Right now, my hyper emotions just want to see Julian.

A Sundance volunteer comes into the room and announces that it is time for us to take our seats for the film.

Palmer gives me a great big hug. "Here we are, Landry," she says to me. "This is it and I'm so glad you are here to share it with me."

"I'm glad too," I say to her. "We're a long way from NYU."

"This is where we're supposed to be," she says. "It all comes down to this, Landry."

The volunteer escorts us into the auditorium and to the section reserved just for us. I look around the theater; no sign of Julian. The theater is packed. I sit in between Palmer and Radley. Of course, Radley gets touchy feely because he's Radley which sets off all the camera phones in the audience along with whispers of why Jazmine isn't sitting next to him or sitting anywhere else that they can see in Eccles. But they do see me sitting next to him. Hello, people, we all have ears!

I look up and around the audience as the last people take their seats. I wonder if Amy is here. I look all around and up at the balcony. If she's here, I can't see her. I glance at the exit door near the stage. Samuel and Sarah watch over us.

I keep looking around and finally see Julian running down the aisle. He finds us and takes the last seat in our reserved section near the front of the audience. I look down the aisle to him on the end, out of breath and excited. He smiles and winks at me, all the way down where I am sitting and mouths what I think is 'I love you' to me. If a meteor hit Eccles Theatre right here and now, or my stalker became knife wielding and leapt off the balcony to kill me, I'd die happy and in love.

* * *

The audience is totally silent as the credits roll. My row sits with baited breath as it seems to take forever for *Flying to Brazil's* end credits to finish. Once they end there is an immense pregnant pause before the audience erupts in explosive applause, cheering, and a rousing standing ovation. I feel my emotions take over and I begin to cry. Julian's film is a Sundance success.

The programmer of the festival introduces Julian for the Q & A. He takes the podium and then brings up Palmer and a guy named Christopher who was the editor, a lovely

British lady named Jane Ryder who designed the costumes, and of course Radley. The crowd erupts again for him. He smiles and grandstands in pure Radley Seager fashion. The audience eats him up.

Most of the questions are about him and Jaz. 'Where is she?' 'Why isn't she here?' 'Is Austen here?' 'Are you in love with Austen?' The last question makes Julian laugh out loud but Radley takes the mic and announces, "Of course I'm in love with Austen," he says. "Why wouldn't I be? She's a great girl and a terrific author." He looks down at my seat and winks. I look over at Liz who rolls her eyes at him, knowing he's caused her yet another PR nightmare.

At least for now, Jazmine is safe and sound from the public and the press with an explanation of a 'bad case of flu' that's apparently going around. Coincidentally, I'm here and sat next to Radley through the movie. Calculated? Maybe. It dawns on me he's playing me for the press. Perhaps to help me out but to help him out as well. Who knows. At any rate, the story stays focused on him. He's good at what he does, manipulating the public perception and making me, the journalist, part of the story. It's deflection, survival for him and the part he's forced to play. Even in this massively liberal setting, some would be upset learning that the bodyguard standing watch nearby was the love of his life. The world is not yet ready for Radley to be in love with another man. On screen and off, Radley's acting skills though, are boss indeed.

* * *

Julian finds me once the Q & A is over and I hug him hard and long. "You did it," I whisper to him. "You did it." He doesn't want to let me go. Radley joins in our hug.

"I just want to hug people right now," he says and practically smothers us.

I feel the excitement. I feel the electricity. I feel the love. Creativity is love. I felt it every time I signed a book yesterday and now I feel it in the premiere of their film. I look over at Palmer. She smiles. She knows the offers will come for her now.

Radley lets us all know that the van is outside and that he's taking us all to dinner before the after-party. Christopher and Jane cheer and thank Radley for flying them out for the premiere. When we feel like the crowd has subsided enough for us to walk out, Samuel and Sarah escort us through the empty theater and into the lobby where a few people still mingle. They snap photos of us as we walk out the front and into the waiting van that Radley has hired for us. I keep expecting Amy to pop out of the shadows but she's nowhere to be found. That scares me more. Living in anticipation may be scarier than her popping out from the bushes or through the velvet ropes.

* * *

Our van pulls up in front of Riverhorse on Main and we are escorted through the crowded dining room and into a private room set aside just for us. We all sit and get comfortable. Julian takes a seat next to me and Palmer. Champagne is immediately brought out for us and poured. Radley toasts to the success of the movie and to a really big sale. Glasses clink and we all enjoy the night. Julian takes out his phone and places it on the table. Liz answers her phone and walks out of the room to take the call. I wonder how many dinners she's eaten cold because she's always doing her job.

As the two waiters work our table, Julian sits and fidgets. He glances at his silent phone. He knows if there is another offer, it will go straight to Gray first then to him. I try to take his mind off the film and pivot the subject to Jazmine and his mom.

"I saw them before the film," he tells me. "I tried to get Mom to come but she didn't want to leave Jazmine."

"So, how is she?" I ask him.

"Physically she'll be fine but mentally she's a mess," he says. "I don't know what's going on with her and why she would be walking around out there. I just don't get it."

I sigh, realizing my pivot isn't going down the route I wanted.

"When will she get to go home?" I ask him.

"Mom thinks it may be as late as Friday," he says.

"Friday?" I ask.

"They want to watch her," he says. "They think she might have been suicidal last night."

"Suicidal?" I ask.

"It wouldn't be the first time," Julian confesses. "She's done this before. She can be a bit dramatic."

"Oh, wow."

"She's going to need physical therapy and treatment so Mom's going to move her out to their house in Connecticut while she recovers."

"What about her career?" I ask. "Doesn't she go shoot a movie soon?"

"On hold for now," he says. "I just can't believe she would do something so stupid as this."

"I'm so sorry, Julian," I say and turn my attention to the menu.

"Thank you for rescuing her and staying with her," he says. "It means everything that you did that. I just wish I knew why she was there."

“I did what anyone would do, Julian,” I say as I stare at the ahi tuna appetizer description on the menu. “HMMMM. Ahi tuna looks good.”

* * *

The group savors the success of their movie and their hard work as the food is delivered and the drinks flow. For them, it’s old home week as they share stories from the set. For me and Julian, we simply stare at each other and pick at our food. The table sees we are oblivious to their reunion and pokes fun at us. Even Samuel gets into the act which snaps me out of my gaze.

“Y’all are making fun of us, aren’t you?” I say to Samuel.

“You’re kind of obvious,” he says. “It’s ok. We all think it’s cute.”

“I think the media’s going to mourn our breakup,” Radley says to me. “Leaving me for my best friend! That hurts, Austen. It really hurts.”

“Something tells me you will get over it, Radley,” I say to him.

Everyone at the tables ‘ooo’s’ him.

“Only if you name your babies after me,” he says and raises a glass to me.

We finish our meal with laughter then waddle out the door and out into the sobering cold air of nighttime. While everyone piles into the van, Julian and I decide to walk up the street to the after-party, held at the same venue as the *Skateaway* party and sponsored by the same vodka company. Sarah walks a couple of steps behind us.

The sidewalk is full of people and the street is alive with traffic, lights, and creative energy. As a writer, I spend most of my life hunkered over my laptop, isolated in a self-inflicted bubble. I have to work hard at summoning the energy to create. Here, that energy is more than present. It’s like static electricity. When you walk the street you just feel the

energy of creativity flowing through everything. You can't help but feel it. You're shocked by it. It makes you feel alive. Even at NYU, surrounded by a cocoon of creativity, I didn't feel it like I feel it here. Altitude be damned. This place is simply magical. A hedonistic creative high I don't want to come down from.

Julian pulls me into a side alley. I almost stumble while Sarah goes into bodyguard mode before realizing what is happening. She smiles at me and then turns her back to shield us from the crowd as Julian kisses and holds me closely.

"I've wanted to do that all day," he says.

"Do it again," I plead. He kisses me deeply.

"I don't want this to end," he tells me.

"Neither do I," I say.

"I'm falling hard, Austen Landry. Really hard."

"I am, too," I confess.

"What should we do about it?"

"Celebrate," I say to him. "They're throwing you a party. It's free booze. We have nowhere to be. Let's get drunk, forget about everything, and just have some fun."

"You think?"

"You are only going to have this once, Julian Winslow. Enjoy it while it lasts," I say to him. "Your film's going to be huge."

"I love this girl!"

* * *

A large crowd is assembled outside the venue for the after-party, no doubt there to catch a glimpse of Radley. I pull the hood up over my head as we push through the crowd and up to the girl with the list.

“Julian Winslow,” he says to her. She gives him a lighted necklace with a flashing product logo charm dangling from it, the same ones we received from the *Skateaway* party, only these are lighted pink. “And Austen Landry,” he says and squeezes my hand.

“I’m sorry but Austen Landry is already inside,” she says.

“But I’m Austen Landry and clearly I’m not,” I say as I pull my press pass out from inside my coat and flash it at her.

“I’m sorry, I’m under strict orders to only let the people in on the list and you’re already checked off,” she says. “I can’t let you in.”

“What’s the problem?” Sarah asks the girl.

“Austen Landry is already in the party and this woman here says she’s Austen. I can’t let her in.”

Sarah whips her phone out from her pocket and speed dials. “Samuel, Sarah here. Get Radley out of there,” Sarah demands. “I think our stalker is in there.”

“Oh my god,” I say and stand closer to Julian for protection then realize I may should stand closer to Sarah instead. Julian is hot but I’m not sure he has the mad karate skills that Sarah seems to possess.

“Let’s get you both out of here,” Sarah says and escorts us down the steps and back to the sidewalk. Light snow begins to fall on us and I shiver.

Sarah’s phone rings. “Yeah... Ok... Ok... got it.” Sarah puts her phone back in her pocket. “The van is coming, and Radley is going to come up through the bar on the side,”

she explains. “I want you both to get into the van and stay there while I get Radley and Samuel in, ok?”

“Ok,” Julian says.

The van pulls up and Julian opens the sliding door and helps me in. We get in the back and wait. The tinted windows make it hard for us to see but a minute or so later Radley piles into the van followed by Sarah and Samuel as the crowd outside hollers at him and cameras flash. Samuel quickly slides the door closed and the van edges into the street and then up the hill.

Radley gives the driver an address. I recognize it. We’re headed toward Gray Carmichael’s rental.

“Has he even called you yet?” Radley asks Julian.

“No,” he says. “My phone is silent.”

“Liz says we’re getting massive responses on social media. I don’t know why we aren’t getting bids yet.”

Julian puts his head in his hands. I rub his back and look at Radley who sits on his knees to face us in the back of the van. We stare at each other. This is because of Jazmine and Lance.

“Why is this happening?” Julian whines. “What did I do wrong?”

“I don’t know, buddy, but we’ll figure it out,” Radley says and puts his hand on Julian’s head. “Gray will know what to do.”

The van stops in front of Gray’s house and he meets us at the front door. “Come on in, come on in,” he says. We take off our coats and boots in the entry hall and hang them up on the coat rack and set the boots on the mat.

"I'll open up a bottle or two for us," he says and heads straight to the kitchen as we sit down on the sofa. Samuel and Sarah take a seat at the dining table and relax.

Gray brings us glasses and fills them with red wine. I lift the glass up to my nose. It's heavenly.

"Where are the offers, Gray?" Radley asks him.

"Everley has told all the distributors the reason why he pulled his bid is because you have too many deliverables to meet," he explains.

"What?" Julian asks, surprised. "That's bullshit."

"What are deliverables again?" I ask.

"Rights," Radley explains. "Music licenses, payments to the actors and crew, any right that has to be cleared or is outstanding before the movie can be distributed; movie stills, materials checklist, basically every part of the film ready to hand over to the party that acquires it. Everything must be in order."

"My team went through everything, clearing rights, putting together the materials list, everything," Gray states. "There are no outstanding deliverables. Lance is playing us for some reason."

"Why would he do that?" Julian asks.

"To get the movie deal at a desperation price, Julian," Gray explains. "And we sign a crappy deal because we've lost the leverage of a bidding war."

"He gave Andrew a hell of a deal," Julian says. "And he had a huge list of deliverables to meet." Julian stands up and walks to the window. "Where did I go wrong?"

Radley places his hand on my leg and squeezes it. Hard. I look at him and he shoots me that look. That look that I'm to keep my mouth shut. He's not playing around.

"You didn't, Julian," Gray says. "I'll make some calls in the morning. We'll get a deal."

Radley's phone goes off. He pulls it out of his jacket pocket. "Hey Liz," he says. "No... what's it say?.. I'll tell Gray... Thanks."

"What?" Gray asks.

"Variety is reporting that our film is unsellable according to sources at Ace Pictures."

Julian drops his wine glass. It crashes on the hardwood floor in pieces as the wine creates a perfect CSI crime scene.

I get up and make my way to the kitchen, grab the paper towels on the counter and head back to Julian. I bend down and clean up the mess, being careful to pick up the pieces of glass and set them on a paper towel.

"Where's your broom?" Sarah asks Gray.

"I don't know," he says and waves us to take care of the mess on our own.

Sarah opens a closet door near in the kitchen and finds a dust pan and broom. Teamwork makes the cleanup go fast as Julian opens the French door to the back patio and steps outside. I don't follow him. I pick up the wine soaked paper towels while Sarah handles the glass and we dump the crime scene into the garbage can. I look back in the den at Radley and Gray, who keep their discussion to a whisper now as guests arrive for Gray's infamous after-after party to begin.

I retrieve my boots and coat as well as Julian's and find him sock footed, outside in a chair in the light falling snow. I wrap the coat around him and set his boots down. He sits so still, not even shivering.

"Is this some family trait I should be aware of, Winslow?" I ask him.

"What?" he asks as if he didn't know what I said.

"Self-destruction via cold," I say.

"It's sobering," he points out.

"You should come in," I command.

"I'm ok," he says flatly. "You go on inside. I'll be there in a minute."

"You want to put your mom through this again?"

"I'm alright, Austen," he snaps. "Just leave me alone. You think you can do that?"

I tear up and leave him outside. I go in and find Radley pouring himself a glass of wine in the kitchen.

"You have to tell him, Radley," I say to him. "This is killing him."

"That'll kill him more, Austen," he says. "You can't do that to him."

I look around for Sarah but she's nowhere to be found.

"You people with your secrets and your deceptions," I say to him. "These are people's lives here and not some game. I can't deal with this, Radley. I can't."

I turn, walk to the entry hall, grab my purse and walk out the front door. I can hear Radley calling my name. I don't care.

A taxi drops off a couple. I yell for them to hold the cab for me as I crunch across the yard to get in.

"Where to?" the cab driver asks me.

"I don't care," I say.

"Main Street ok?" he asks me.

"Sure," I respond.

I text Palmer but she doesn't answer right back. She's in her own little world here and assumes I'm in mine as well.

The driver drops me off in front of the Egyptian Theater. I pay him as a group takes over the cab and asks to be taken to Gray's house.

A line has formed in front of the theater and so I proceed around the side to the standby line, which is relatively short to get into the midnight showing. I don't care what the movie is, I just want to escape reality and this shit show I've found myself in the middle of.

CHAPTER NINE

Second Wednesday of the Festival

Two fifteen AM I follow the crowd outside the theater and out into the cold. The snow is coming down hard now. I pull my hood up. I feel my phone vibrate. I know that it is Julian but I don't answer it. If I answer it I know I will have to tell him why his film has been black listed by Lance. I make my way up the hill and to Treasure Mountain Inn where a few people still mix and mingle for the Slamdance Film Festival that runs concurrently with Sundance. I find a chair in the lobby, slump down in it, and close my eyes.

"Ma'am," a voice says.

"Yes?"

"You can't sleep here," he says to me. "You can't sleep in our lobby."

I pull my hood off and look at him. "Sorry," I say. "I really wasn't going to sleep here."

"Oh, my god. You're Radley Seager's girlfriend," he exclaims a bit too loudly. People suddenly come out of the woodwork and stare at me.

I hear them whispering about it and pointing.

"I thought he was gay," I hear someone whisper. That makes me giggle slightly.

I grab my big purse and walk back out into the cold and snowy Main Street and back down the hill. My phone goes off again. I reach into my pocket and pull it up to my ear.

"Where are you?" Julian asks.

"Just leaving Treasure Mountain," I tell him. "Where are you?"

"I'm at the No Name," he says.

"Stay there," I tell him. "I'll meet you in a few minutes."

I enter the bar and find Julian in his favorite chair by the fire. Pensive yet calm, he looks like he's carrying the whole weight of the world on his shoulders.

I walk up the steps and take the leather chair next to him. The fire crackles and the heat from it warms me.

"You ok?" I ask him.

"Not really," he says. "This isn't going quite how I pictured it would."

"How did you picture it?" I ask him.

"I thought I'd be celebrating the sale of the film right now," he says.

"It will sell," I try to give him encouragement.

He hits his fist on the arm of the chair. If he was a girl he'd be in tears at this moment. Instead, he anguishes in a despair that I could ease. Or make worse. I hate this. I lean in a couple of times to tell him and then back off again. I fidget. "This will kill him" rings in my head.

I motion for the waiter. "Could I get a couple of shots of Vodka please?"

Julian cocks his head at me.

"Three point two beer just isn't cutting it tonight," I say. "This has just been way too intense for me."

Julian looks at his beer and shrugs. "You're probably right."

The waiter brings us two shots.

"You're going to get picked up, Julian," I tell him. "Have faith."

We down the shots and I order us another round.

"Gray is rounding up the distributors tomorrow morning," he says. "We're going to meet and try to fix this."

"That's good, I tell him. I feel myself sigh with relief. If he gets picked up, I don't have to confess to him. Everything will work itself out.

We take the next round of shots, clink glasses and down them. I let the vodka go down and numb my guilty soul.

* * *

I awake alone. I know that he's been there because his smell still lingers on his pillow and I can still feel the effects of our love making. I look at my Grand Complications watch on the nightstand. Quarter past nine in the morning. I guess I needed the sleep.

Showering still doesn't wash away all the secrets I've accumulated throughout the week. Maybe I need some space. Some air. A priest and a confessional. I sit down onto the tile and try to cry as the hot water rains down upon me. The tears won't come. I'm more miserable now than I was. Wet and miserable.

I dry off, do my hair, makeup and dress for the day. I look in the mirror. One week and I feel like I've lived a lifetime here already. It shows in my face. I sigh and take my culpable self downstairs. I find Sarah waiting for me. What if I slept in all day, would she just wait on me down here, drinking coffee and scouring social media?

"What do you have planned today?" she asks me.

For the first time since the festival started I have nothing to do. I can't decide if I'm happy or sad about that. I shrug at her.

"I need to work on my article for Harper's," I tell her. "I'm debating whether I should stay here or go out."

"You know that I can protect you, whatever you decide to do," Sarah says. "And you can still press charges if you'd like and file an emergency restraining order. It's up to you."

"I don't know what to do," I say. "I don't want to ruin her life but I do think she needs help."

"It's your call," she says. "I can help you with it, whatever you want to do."

"Thanks," I say. "It's all so intense. I was just supposed to come here and have a good time."

"Are you?"

"I'm having a blast," I say as I finally cry.

* * *

An hour later Sarah and I are skiing down the mountain. Ok, I'm plowing down the mountain while Sarah coaches me. We stick to the blue squared trails that meander and take us down to Main Street. The day is beautiful and my mind is finally pre-occupied with something other than Sundance. We take off the skis and hit up The Bridge Café and Grill for some brunch.

We are seated at a booth. It feels good to be away from the fray, the scrutiny, and above all else – the subterfuge. A waitress hands us a menu. Everything sounds yummy and amazing. We decide to splurge and go for the eggs benedict. We aren't let down.

"Thank you for distracting me," I tell Sarah. "I appreciate this."

"My pleasure," she says. "I felt like you needed it."

"I just didn't think Sundance would be so intense," I tell her. "I didn't expect to be part of the story yet here I am."

"Maybe you just need to take a step back from it all," she explains. "You're too invested. You have the weight of everyone around you on your shoulders and it's getting to

you. Step back from it and ground yourself or it's going to bring you and everyone around you down."

"You're right, Sarah," I say. "You're absolutely right." I smile and feel better. She's like a therapist and bodyguard all rolled into one. Maybe Amy did me a favor stalking me and requiring her services.

The waitress brings the check and I pay it. "How about another run?" I ask her.

"It's your day," she tells me. "I go where you go."

* * *

Sarah coaches me down the mountain several more times during the day. I feel like I'm a whiz at this skiing now, at least in my mind anyway, and I am so in love with powder. As the sun sinks low in the sky, we make our way across the bridge, back into town and back into reality.

When I pull my phone out of my pocket, I see that neglect has made the texts, missed calls and voice messages overwhelm my phone and are now overwhelming me. Two texts from Eric and three phone messages; five texts from Julian and one missed call; two calls from Radley; three calls from Andrea; four missed calls and one voice message from a New York phone number; and nine texts and missed calls from Jaz.

I decide to deal with Jaz first. Her texts are all the same. *Please call me as soon as you receive this. I need to talk to you.*

I put my phone back in my pocket while Sarah looks at me with concern.

"Everything OK?" she asks me.

"Seems to be a typical day at Sundance for me," I reply and laugh. "I need wine. Do you need wine?"

"Yes," she says.

We pull off our ski boots, place them in our backpacks and replace the boots with our street shoes. My feet, which are throbbing and aching, thank me.

We make our way up the street and toward the Filmmaker Lodge which, if memory serves, should be starting happy hour about now. It's also where I know Julian might be and after a day of trying to distant myself from him, I now yearn to see him despite it all.

My phone goes off half way up the street. "Hey Jaz," I say. "How are you fe..."

"Please tell me you have the screener from my purse," she says, frantically but in a bit of a whisper.

"I have it," I tell her. "He's been looking all over for it. He thinks he misplaced it."

"Did you tell him I had it?" she asks me.

"No, not yet," I confess.

"Please don't tell him I had it," she begs. "I showed it to Lance."

"I know," I say. "I figured that."

Jaz begins to sob. "I screwed everything up, didn't I?"

"Jazmine, I don't know," I say to her.

"I just wanted to help," she whines.

"Jazmine, please..." I try to console her.

"Please don't tell Julian," she pleads. "Please don't tell him."

I look over at Sarah as we stand in front of the Filmmaker Lodge and sigh.

"Please don't be mad at me, Austen," she implores. "Please."

"Jazmine, I've got to go," I say. "I hope you're feeling better, I really do."

"Ok," she whimpers. "Please come see me. My mom really likes you."

"When are you getting out?" I ask her.

"I don't know," she says. "Friday maybe."

"I'll come see you tomorrow," I tell her and quickly hang up. If there's one thing to know about me it's that I'm extremely non-confrontational. I will avoid confrontation like the plague. I will don a hazmat suit to avoid it. I've been known not to take clothes back to the store or put off phoning customer service because I just don't want to deal with the hassle of explaining myself. I won't send food back or complain to the cable company they double charged me for a movie. I truly hate this. And now I'm caught in Jazmine's issue with her brother. My beautiful day of not dealing has now been pissed upon. And that was the first phone message I've dealt with today.

We go upstairs to the Filmmaker Lodge and decide on a glass of happy hour wine. I look around the room but Julian is nowhere to be found. We sit with our wine and I look at my phone.

Julian's texts through the day range from *Where are you, I miss you* to *Are your OK, seriously where are you? I'm worried*. I no more begin my text to him as he walks through the door. In his New York PIB best black jeans, black sweater, and black pea coat, his light brown locks and his dark rimmed glasses strike the sexiest look of a man, at least in my book anyway. He does it for me. What can I say? He takes my breath away in this moment. Maybe this is what love is supposed to be in your thirties. I can't remember feeling this way about any man really. I at least never thought of them as 'the one.' This one feels like it.

He takes me in his arms and just holds me. Closely and tightly. "Where were you all day?"

"I went skiing with Sarah and we just spent the day escaping Sundance," I tell him.

"Things have been way too intense."

Julian looks over at Sarah and she nods affirmatively.

"I wish I could have escaped with you," he says. "I really do."

"Do you have a sale yet?" I ask him.

He shakes his head no.

"Oh, Julian," I say. "I'm so sorry."

"It's not your fault," he says.

But I know whose fault it is and it would kill you to know, I say to myself. The guilt is killing me. Damn you Radley Seager. It's hard for me to fault Jaz. She's young and she's caught up. Hell, I might even be caught up.

He takes a seat next to me on a sofa and across from Sarah. Rejections, whether you are a novelist or, I suppose, a filmmaker are hell and they play on your self-esteem. Julian is no different. I can see by his demeanor that not having a sale by now is bringing him down quickly. My first novel was picked up quickly by my small publisher so I haven't really known rejection on a major scale. My rejections have all been from agents. Agents can be harsh with their rejections though. They can truly bring you to the brink of neurosis.

"So what did you do today," I ask him.

"I had two Q&As at screenings today. Both sold out. All of our screenings are sold out for the rest of the festival," he explains.

"Good reception?" I ask him.

"Just like the premiere," he tells me. "It was standing ovation."

"But no sale?" I ask.

"Not a bite," he says. "And now my no sale is the biggest news of the festival. How ironic."

"Maybe they're just waiting until the end of the festival to buy it," I say, hoping that may be the reason.

"The distributors usually go home on Wednesday. This is Wednesday night," he explains to me.

"So what are you going to do?" I ask him.

"I'm going to continue to appear at my Q&As, do as much press as possible, and hopefully some distributor will ultimately take it. That's all I can do."

"I have faith in you," I tell him.

He takes my hand and kisses it then looks at Sarah. "I think I love this woman," he says to her. Of course, my heart swells.

We sit and enjoy the wine. So many festival goers come up to Julian and congratulate him on his film and tell him they genuinely loved it.

"How is Jazmine and your mom," I finally ask him.

"I saw them this afternoon in between screenings," he relates. "She's doing better physically but mentally..."

"Mentally?" I ask even though I know the answer. She was in love and now she's been spurned. Lance. I hate the Everley's even more now. They use and throw away people like they were disposable. I don't want to be disposable like that. And I don't want the people near me being disposable either.

"Something's going on with her," he says. "But then again, there's always something going on with her. She's a bit of a drama queen. She's scared and overwhelmed and Mom wants to blame me for this."

"So even more piled upon your shoulders. Wow."

"She doesn't understand any of this," he says. "To my mom, people don't make a living doing this sort of thing. And right now, she's not far off."

"You will get an offer," I tell him.

"I feel like the bastard step-child of Sundance," he says.

"Want to go see a movie?" I suggest to him. "You need a distraction."

"My film's showing at the Library at eight," he says. "I want to do the Q&A and see what the reaction is. Maybe we can do a late movie."

"We can do that," I say as I stand and extend my hand to him.

"Austen Landry?" a man asks me.

"Yes," I say to him.

"I missed your signing and I would dearly love it if you would sign my book," he says to me.

"Of course, I will," I say to him. As I take the book from him and sit down to find a pen to sign it, it's the first time I see that Julian is uncomfortable. He sighs and looks exasperated. Jealous even.

"I'm such a huge fan of Radley Seager," he says. "Huge fan. I'm so happy you're dating him. I wasn't a fan of that Jaz Snow woman. She wasn't right for him."

I look at Julian who simply rolls his eyes at me. Sarah tries to hold in a laugh.

"Do you have a pen?" I ask Julian. Again, he sighs as if we're all putting him out. He reaches in his messenger bag, pulls out a pen, and thrusts it into my hand. I shoot him an annoyed look.

"Am I making this out to you?" I say to him.

"Oh, yes please," he says to me. "My name is Thomas."

"Ok, Thomas," I say to him and smile.

"Is he here now?" Thomas asks me as he looks around.

"Who?" I ask him.

"Radley, of course."

"No, he isn't. I'm sorry," I say to him. I can tell he's disappointed. More importantly, Julian is now mad at this poor man.

"Have you seen his movie here?" I ask him, trying hard to appease Julian at this point.

"I have," he says and leaves it at that.

"What did you think about it?" I try harder to retrieve a review out of him.

"It wasn't his best work," he says.

I just smile up at him and then open the book to sign it and get him the hell out of here for Julian's sake. I open the book to the title page where I sign. Scrawled in red Sharpie are the words *Austen Landry Must Die*.

"Oh my god," I utter and drop the book on the coffee table. Julian looks at it and then at Thomas.

"Did you write that?" he asks him.

"What?" he says as he looks down at the book. "Oh my god, no. No."

Sarah looks at it and closes the book. "This needs to be taken to the police."

* * *

We all walk down to Main Street Books with Thomas apologizing profusely as we just catch the shop closing. Richie recognizes me and lets us all in.

Sarah shows Richie the book that was purchased here and we go back to the back where my novel is prominently displayed on a table. We open several copies and find the same thing; all have been vandalized with the same red Sharpie, some with more violent epithets than Thomas' purchase. He keeps apologizing as if he were the one who violated *The Street Singer*.

"Do you have cameras around the shop with footage that the police might want?" Sarah asks Richie.

"I'm sorry," Richie apologizes. "We just never got around to installing them." He looks at me and mouths an 'I'm so sorry.'

Julian walks around the table of books, then looks right at me. I can't tell if he's exasperated at me or at the incident at hand. He's impatient and distant now. I'm the one causing drama now.

Richie sifts through my books until he finds a book that hasn't been desecrated by Amy. He hands it to me and I sign it for Thomas so he can go on his way. He gives me a hug, another 'I'm so sorry,' and then he's on his way.

"I'd suggest a restraining order but that probably wouldn't have stopped this," Sarah says to me.

I look at the book in Sarah's hand and I lose it. I finally lose it. This woman is scaring the ever-loving crap out of me and messing with my life. Everything has now finally gotten

to me and it's all too much. And it isn't the altitude either. I sit on the floor of the bookstore and break down.

* * *

When I finally come out of the bookstore bathroom I find Sarah, Julian and Richie talking to the police. Sarah gives me a support pat on the back as Julian takes me in his arms and holds me close, protective close. I'm not so sure Eric would do this in this situation.

"Ma'am," the policeman says, "Would you mind answering a few questions for us?"

"Okay," I say and relate the whole story of Amy Moss to him. Sarah sends the picture that Stella took of her at the hospital to them from her smart phone.

"We'll put out an APB on her," one of the officers says. "Hopefully we'll have her in custody very soon."

"I hope so," Sarah says. "Thank you very much."

"Do you want to go back to the house?" Julian asks me.

I shake my head. "No, I want to experience Sundance." I say. "I don't want her knowing she got to me."

"Good," Sarah says. "I can protect you. I'll stay close to you. Both of you."

"Then okay," Julian says. "Let's do Sundance."

* * *

Julian has his screening times down almost to the minute and we arrive at the Library theater where they are currently showing his film. We all walk through the front and down the hall to a packed theater that watches the credits in total silence. It's sort of a weird thing. Maybe it's respect for the cast and crew, I don't know. But as the last credit

ends and the screen goes black, the audience breaks out in shouts, applause and a standing ovation. They absolutely love his film. He squeezes my hand as we survey the house. Not one person is seated. An announcer approaches the podium and calls Julian up for the Q&A. He gives me a quick kiss and runs down the aisle and climbs the steps to the stage. The audience continues its applause as he takes a half bow and smiles at the audience.

Finally, the applause dies down and Julian takes his first question, which I can't even hear from the back of the auditorium. But Julian heard the question and smiles.

"I was fascinated with the concept of love at first site. That you can meet someone and in an evening, you just know," he explains. "That you almost live a lifetime in just one night."

A woman stands up. "So, have you lived a lifetime in just one night?" she asks, responding to the last question.

Julian smiles and looks straight at me. "I didn't really think it was possible. I didn't believe in love at first site. Even when I wrote this film," he says. "Wishful thinking on my part. I've since changed my mind about that. When you meet your soulmate, you just know."

A man stands up. "I've never heard of a one-night stand being referred to as Flying to Brazil for the night. Did you coin the phrase?"

Julian laughs. "No. Not at all. My college roommate did though. Let's put it this way, he flew to Brazil a lot."

The audience laughs. Julian takes another ten minutes of questions as I duck out of the auditorium and into the front entrance of the Library. I look out the front door to see

that the snow is softly falling. I can hear the audience erupt in cheers and hollers. Julian must have said something funny.

I pace back and forth for what seems like an eternity before the crowd emerges from the auditorium and out into the snowfall. They pass by me and point at me.

"Oh, my god, it's Radley's new girlfriend," I can hear them say. Several stop and want my autograph. I oblige even though Sarah shakes her head at me. What else am I going to do. In this day and age of cell phone video, I try not to do anything embarrassing and hope that nothing is hanging out of my nose. I can feel the cell phones focused on me. Some click while others film. I've become a side show attraction, not known for my work but known for my comedy of errors show with Radley. If they only knew.

Julian emerges from the auditorium with Radley in tow, followed by a pack of adoring fans clinging to Radley like magnets to a refrigerator, all with cell phones out snapping and videoing. He's all smiles and "on" while Julian looks worn out and unamused. The audience uproar must have been the appearance of Radley, obviously coming in the back door to the auditorium.

He sees me and gives me a hug. The cell phones click, click, click. I look to Julian to rescue me but Radley puts his arm around me and forces me to play along with the ruse. "Take the publicity, Austen," he leans in and whispers in my ear. "Liz says your book is really exploding online. You're going to have the number one spot on the New York Times best seller list come next Sunday."

* * *

As we crawl into the black Mercedes SUV waiting for us in the parking lot of the Library Theater, I stare out into nothing, gobsmacked. I knew I was going to make the list but I

had no idea it would debut at number one. That means I've probably knocked a Pickett Press book out of the slot. Constance must be beside herself. I don't care. I'm feeling proud of myself right now. This is my small revenge for what Lance did to Jazmine.

"Where are we headed?" I ask after finally snapping back into reality.

"New York Film Alliance party," Radley says. "It's always on a Wednesday night and it's all the New York people."

"New York people?"

"Yep. All the PIBs will be there," Julian says. "Palmer is already there. She reports that the Everley's haven't made it there yet but she saw their names on the list when she went in."

"You know, I really want to know why Lance blackballed us," Julian says.

"Yeah," Radley says. "He was so eager. And he paid all that money for Skateaway. I mean, I liked Skateaway but it's no Brazil. And he didn't have his deliverables in order. We do."

"Yeah," Julian says. "I'm simply baffled."

"Hey," Radley says. "I've even heard our tickets have been scalped underground. That's major."

"Scalped?" I ask. "Really? I thought that was a no-no."

"It is," Julian states. "But it happens. Get caught and you're banned for life from Sundance."

"Oh wow," I say. "That's heavy."

"I just don't understand why another distributor doesn't buy you," I say.

"Because Ace sets the tone," Julian says, frustrated at explaining things to me. "If he blackballs it, it's dead."

"It's not completely dead," Radley says, trying to console Julian. "Gray will come through."

The SUV pulls up to the largest log cabin I've ever seen in my entire life, bigger than our big log cabin.

"Wow," I say.

"Yeah, this puts our little cabin on the mountain to shame," Radley says. "Owned by a hedge-fund broker in New York or something like it."

A valet opens our door and we pour out. We all pull out the wrist bands that Liz had slipped under our doors. They are red and have the New York Film Alliance logo printed on them.

"Hard to duplicate these," I say to Julian.

"Nah," he says. "I'd just use a blank red one and slip it under my sleeve."

We show the wrist bands to the guy at the door, who still asks us for our names, despite the wrist bands.

"Still think you could have gotten in?" I turn and ask Julian as we give our names.

"Absolutely," he says with confidence and smiles. "But thank god I've graduated and I don't have to anymore."

We walk into an expansive foyer with a winding log staircase. I follow Radley and Julian past the stairs and into a huge open kitchen and hearth room which is filled with people in black sitting around the fire and discussing the films of the week. A bartender tends the bar set up on the kitchen island and a huge spread of food welcomes the guests

on the dining table. The dining chairs have been arranged in conversation areas elsewhere in the kitchen for extra seating.

"This place is incredible," I say to Radley as several people look up at us, smile, but go back to their business. No one seems to care about us as the power couple of Sundance. I love it. I can tell Radley loves it as well. He's normal here. In his black jeans and black sweater, he melts into the crowd. Julian, dressed similarly, blends as well. Me, in the bright Stella McCartney sweater Jazmine gifted me, makes me stand out like a single strawberry in big bowl of black berries. You can't miss me. Yet here at this party, no one seems to care. It's sheer bliss.

Sarah and Samuel seem to be enjoying themselves as well. The security is tight. They both grab a bottled water in the kitchen and roam the party, checking the exits and scanning the guests for anything unusual.

I turn the corner to seek out the bathroom. Surely, they have a luxurious one somewhere in this house.

I look to my left and see someone emerge from a half bath and head toward it to figure out that all of the people standing against the wall are in line ahead of me, so I take my place at the rear. I look at the line and notice a couple of high powered people in the line, including a couple of Saturday Night Live regulars. No one is better than anyone else here. I love that I fit in.

"Is the line moving quickly?" I ask the man in front of me.

"If you've really got to go, it's moving slow but if you just kind of have to go, then it's moving fairly fast," he tells me with a smile. He's an older gentleman with the thickest head of gray hair I've ever seen and the most extraordinary German accent I've ever heard.

"I think I'm ok for now," I say to him, "but if my circumstances should happen to change, I shall let you know."

"I detect a distinct Southern accent," he says to me.

"And I thought I'd eradicated it years ago. It usually comes out if I've been drinking or am around other Southerners."

"No, it's still there," he says. "Where are you from?"

"New Orleans," I tell him.

"Oh, it is my favorite city in America," he gushes. "I could live at an oyster bar for the rest of my life and be totally happy."

"Acme or Felix's?" I ask him.

"Oh, Acme, most definitely," he says.

"Where are you from?"

"I'm from Berlin," he says. "Have you ever been there?"

"I haven't," I say. "But I hear great things about it."

"Oh, you should come," he says. "I will show you all the good parts."

"Oh, wow. That would be fantastic," I say. "And I'll do the same for you in New Orleans."

"Then I shall give you my card," he tells me and pulls out a very unassuming business card and writes down a phone number on it and hands it to me. "This is my direct number. You can call me anytime."

I return the favor and give him one of mine. I read his card. 'Jurgen Hauer – Producer.' The name's a bit familiar but I can't really place it.

"Oh, you're the author everyone is talking about," he says.

"Ah, my reputation precedes me, huh?"

"Just a bit," he says. "But I hear it is a very good book that I would very much love to read."

"Well, I'm having a signing tomorrow at Main Street Books. I will reserve you a copy for free if you'd like to pick it up. No charge, just for you."

"You are so sweet," he says as the person ahead of him finally comes out of the bathroom. "I will have my assistant to come pick it up then." He enters the bathroom and I stand and look around at the party that is going on around me. There is a huge gallery staring at me, including Julian and Radley with their jaws down to the floor.

I shrug at them and mouth "What?" at them as the man comes out of the bathroom and holds the door for me. "Thank you, Mr. Hauer."

"Oh, call me Jurgen, please," he says. "We are friends now."

"Well, thank you very much, Jurgen," I say. "It is a pleasure meeting you."

"Same," he says and walks away as I enter the bathroom finally.

When I emerge, my gallery is still waiting for me, as if I've accomplished something earth shattering. "Why the hell were you staring at me?" I ask. "Do I have spinach on my teeth or something? Toilet paper dragging from my boots?"

"You have absolutely no idea whatsoever who you were talking to in the bathroom line do you?" Radley asks me.

"Yes, I do," I say. "His name is Jurgen..."

"Jurgen Hauer," Julian interrupts me. "Four-time Oscar winning producer. He's one of the most nominated producers out there. Everything he touches is a hit. And he never talks to anyone. It's almost impossible to get a meeting with him."

"He gave me his phone number," I say. "Wants me to show him around New Orleans sometime."

"Let me see his card," Radley begs.

"No," I tell them. "He gave it to me and I assume in confidence and in trust." I look at the non-descript card and place it in my purse. Both Radley and Julian try to grab my bag.

"Guys, no!"

"Ve vill get it vone vay or another!" Radley tells me in a mock German accent.

"He wants a copy of my book," I gloat as we mingle around the party.

"He does not," Julian says, not believing me.

"You don't believe me?"

"Seriously?"

"I am a New York Times bestseller now," I remind Julian, teasingly. Unfortunately, he doesn't take it that way and the smile fades from his face.

* * *

As we relax in a small sitting room, I finally catch a glimpse of the Everleys. They have arrived and mingle through the crowd as if nothing has happened; just business as usual. I take in a deep breath as does Julian. He takes my hand and squeezes it. He has no idea what's really going on. I hate myself and I'm now beginning to hate fame. I get why Radley is so cynical about it. But he knows how to navigate it. I don't. It makes me sick at my stomach.

And then I remember what Radley said he wanted to do to Lance. I can feel Radley tensing up just from sitting next to him. I look at him and he shoots me a look. You can cut the tension with a chainsaw. I worry what's going to happen.

"Uh, Radley," I say, "you know we need to finish the interview for the article in the morning. Do you have time?"

"Yeah, I've got all the time you need," he says as he stares down Lance, who approaches us on the sofa.

"Radley, Julian," he says. "How are the sales talks coming? Haven't heard of anyone making any offers to you yet."

"Our attorney is speaking to people," Radley says, calmly. He's not coming unglued. I'm relieved. "He's got our best interest in mind."

"I'm sure he does," Lance says. "Oh, look. Jurgen is here. If you'll excuse me. I'm in talks to buy his film."

Lance hurries off in the direction of Jurgen, who sees Lance coming his way. He immediately turns and runs to the front door in what looks like a desperate attempt at an escape. It brings back a bit of a smile on Julian's face but I can feel the intense contempt Radley has for Lance.

"Common knowledge that all of Jurgen's films have had the exact same distributor since he started," Julian explains. "And it ain't Ace."

"I think Ace's days are numbered," Radley states.

"Really?" Julian asks Radley.

"Yeah, I think they are and I'm going to see to it," Radley says to Julian and then places his hand on my lap. "So yes, Miss Austen, let's finish this interview in the morning, shall we?"

"Ok."

I glance across the room to see Constance Everley looking my way. She gives me a polite smile then continues her conversation. I don't want to talk to her. Luckily, she doesn't seem like she wants to talk to me tonight either.

"Let's get out of here," Radley says.

"On to Gray's?" Julian asks.

"I just want to go home," Radley says. "Tonight feels polluted."

* * *

Seeing our 'small' log cabin as we pull into the driveway and garage is welcome respite and Sarah and Samuel seem happy that there were no more incidents this evening. We arrive in the kitchen to find Julian's mom sipping a glass of wine. She looks exhausted.

"Hey, Mom," Julian says. "How's Jaz?"

She takes a sip of wine and sighs.

"Want to talk about it?" Julian asks her.

Samuel, Sarah and Radley take this as their cue to turn in and they slip off upstairs.

"Maybe later," she says and looks straight at me. "I'm tired and I need to get up early and meet the physician in the morning." She finishes her wine.

I'm now mortified. What if she knows everything? What if Jaz spilled the beans to her mom? Maybe I just need to ignore Radley and tell Julian. But how do I do that? We all slink up to our rooms, with Julian bunking with me.

"I'm going to get up early and escort Mom to the hospital if that's ok?" he asks me as he sets the alarm on this phone and texts his mom.

"I think that's a great idea," I tell him. "I'm going to meet with Radley and finish my article."

"Ok," he says.

"I look at my phone to check for any messages. A message from Andrea about Constance's offer and a million messages from Eric. I've got to quit ignoring him. I seem to be ignoring a lot of things here at Sundance. Maybe because this just doesn't feel like reality.

The only real thing I know is that I am utterly in love with this man and I don't want to lose him. My emotions feel spread thin, as if I've run out of jam and trying to spread what little there is left over my biscuit.

CHAPTER TEN

Second Thursday of the Festival

I wake up to find Julian still in the bed, holding me close in a spoon position. I turn to face him. He smiles at me.

"I don't want this festival to end," he tells me. "I don't want to leave you."

"I don't want it to be over either," I say.

"Then let's not," he says. "Let's do this."

"How?" I ask him.

"I haven't figured that out yet, but I'm determined we are going to make this work," he says. "Austen, I love you."

"I love you, too." And like clockwork, Julian's alarm goes off on his phone, as if our relationship were on a timer.

He hits the snooze button and we make love, the regular way, in a bed as if we've been in a relationship forever and it's routine now. Familiar. The last Thursday of Sundance, after being here the whole festival is a bit of a forever. Things move fast here. I suppose it's the same for relationships, too. I forget everything that is happening here and let myself be swept up in the moment or at least until Julian's alarm goes off again.

He hangs his head. "I really have to get going," he says. We both frown at each other.

"It's ok," I tell him.

"No, it's not," he says as he gets out of bed. "We will continue this later. I promise."

"I'm counting on it," I say.

"Luckily there isn't so much going on this evening and we can sort of enjoy ourselves," he tells me. "Not like there are any distributors left here."

I feel so bad for him. And then the guilt hits me. I need to spill my guts. He deserves to know it's not his film that's the problem. This whole trip has been one wild ride.

I listen to him turn on the shower and debate joining him but decide to give him his space. I need to focus on why I'm here. To write a cover story for Harper's Bazaar. That's why I'm here. Focus, Austen. Focus.

* * *

"Your current publisher can't handle the demand for your book any longer and we must decide on a new publisher buying your rights from them," Andrea tells me over the phone. "Pickett Press wants it desperately."

"No," I say. "Anyone else but them."

"It's a great offer, Austen," she tells me. "Are you sure?"

"I'm more than sure," I say. "Not them."

"Then Chelsea House is the next best offer," she says.

"Then Chelsea House it is," I say.

"Do you want to look over the offer first?" she asks me.

"I trust you, Andrea," I tell her. "You've been great to me and I know you have my best interest at heart."

"Is everything ok, out there?" she asks me. "I mean, the tabloids are going nuts."

"Then I guess I should thank them for making me a best-selling author since I wasn't exactly making it on my own."

"You know you would have made it," Andrea says. "Modestly but you would have made it on your merit. But this kind of success so fast is rare. We have to grab the brass ring and take it while we can."

"Then take it," I tell her. "I want it. This imaginary tabloid relationship will be lining bird cages and filling landfills by next week and it will all be over. And then I can go back to being just some midlist author in New Orleans with at least having kissed success."

I hang up the phone and drink my wonderful café mocha that Margaret has prepared for me. Sarah lurks in the sitting area awaiting on me to leave the secure cocoon of the house. Julian and his mother have gone to the hospital, and I can hear the faint sounds of music coming from the basement gym, so Radley and Samuel must be working out.

Liz comes in from the garage entrance and plops a pile of tabloids down on the bar.

"No matter how hard I try to spin it, the press wants a certain narrative," she says. "With Jaz missing in action, you are now having Radley's twins."

"I am?!"

"You are. Check the internet."

"Oh, wow," I say. "My twelve-year old self would have been thrilled."

Radley and Samuel bound up the stairs and into the kitchen, glistening with sweat. Radley kisses the top of my head. "I can't wait for our twins to pop out. What a miracle that will be!"

"I so feel like putting a pillow under my sweater this afternoon and parading down Main Street as if biology was just a myth," I admit.

"Oh, let's!" Radley exclaims.

Liz shoots him a look. "You already don't want to see my bill for this festival."

"Miss Austen should be paying it now," Radley says. "I've made her rich!"

"Funny, but my bank account still looks like a struggling writer living on ramen noodles and Charles Shaw wine," I tell them.

"It soon won't look like that," Liz tells me. "And I hope it continues for you. In a normal, not so frenzied sort of way."

"Thanks, Liz," I say. "That's nice for you to say."

"She's not always the harsh bitch she wants you to think she is," Radley says.

"Being a harsh bitch with your publicity is why you're now the highest paid actor in the world and why your reputation is impeccable," She says and then looks straight at me. "And I plan to keep it that way."

"You know at some point secrets are going to come out," Radley tells her. "They always do."

"And I will be here to deny them," she says, "like I always do."

Radley squeezes Samuel's hand and gives him a hug. "Yes, Liz, you always do."

* * *

Radley and I sit down in the theater room of the house, where Julian and I had our very first encounter. Seems like a long time ago. But it's quiet down here and no one will disturb us so it's the perfect place for an interview.

"Thanks for not telling Julian about Lance," Radley says.

"I really don't want your thanks," I tell him. "It's killing me. He should know."

"Jaz and I have agreed that he doesn't need to know," he says.

"So, you're going to let him believe that Lance is just some jerk blocking his film for the fun of it?"

"Yeah, I am," Radley says.

"Why?" I ask.

"Because as much as I loathe Lance, my career, sadly depends on him."

"That's so sick and twisted," I say.

"But it's the reality of Hollywood," he tells me. "And it's a very small town."

"Julian deserves so much better than that," I say.

"Yes, he does and ultimately his film will get bought and life will be good again."

"How selfish of you," I say.

"Austen, despite what you want to believe, there are a dozen people or more whose livelihood depends on me," he explains. "I'm not a person. I'm a business and I have to think like that."

"Hollywood sure has changed you, hasn't it?" I ask him.

"It's why I give so much away," he says. "It's why I live a different life behind closed doors than I do on the outside."

"Don't you want to come out?" I ask him. "Don't you want to live an authentic life and change Hollywood for the better?"

"Desperately," he admits.

"Then why don't you?"

He grabs my hands and looks straight into my eyes. "Because maybe I just need the right person to come along and help me do it."

* * *

Palmer meets me down at the No Name Saloon for lunch. Of course, Sarah is in tow and I've donned a hat and glasses to try to throw the paparazzi off the scent. So far it seems to be working. Palmer has grabbed a table in the back and I'm hoping the No Name means no one discovers my name in here while I have lunch. Sarah takes up a spot at a table not far from us to let us catch up alone.

"It feels like I haven't seen you in ages," she says to me as she hugs me.

I sit down. "I know," I say. "I swear I see more of you back home."

"What a whirlwind, huh?"

"Tell me about it," I say.

"So how are things going with you and Julian?" she asks me.

I blush. "I'm in love," I confess. "Head over heels, dumbstruck love."

"And I assume he is, too?"

"Of course," I say as I pick up my menu and hide behind it.

"I knew you'd hit it off with him," she says as she picks up her menu as well.

"Oh, Palmer," I say. "I want to think that he's the one and not the altitude taking over."

"That's not the altitude when I see him looking at you," she tells me.

The waiter brings us water and asks if we're ready to order. We both order the soup of the day and beers because day drinking is one of our favorite things.

"So how is the drummer?" I ask her.

"Fantastic," she says. "We're going on a real date when we both get home."

"I'm excited for you," I say. "We both deserve to be happy."

"I hope I don't mess it up," I say.

"Why would you, Austen?" she asks me.

"I don't know," I say, trailing it off.

"Austen?"

"It's just so fast and there's just so much going on," I say. "I'm overwhelmed."

"Well, come Sunday we'll all be on our way home and it won't be so overwhelming."

"I hope so," I say. "I'll have a bit of a break getting the Harper's article finished and then I've got this author's convention over in Texas called Girlfriend's Weekend, which my agent has now informed me I've been moved up to one of their keynote speakers now alongside my friend, Sylvia. Guess all of those women are curious about my love affair with Radley Seager. Boy are they going to be surprised and disappointed."

"That it's actually Julian," Palmer says, "and not Radley."

I nod my head. "Yep, that's it."

"You're going to be great," she tells me. "You're a best selling author!"

"I am!"

"And I've booked my next gig, already," Palmer says.

"You have? That's fantastic!"

"Fully funded. A real studio picture," she says. "They're actually hiring more women on this film and I feel so honored to be included."

"I'm so proud of you," I tell her.

"So, Sundance has helped my career as well, it seems."

"I love this," I say. "I love that we are finally finding true success at exactly the same time."

"To us," Palmer says, and we clank our 3.2 beer bottles together.

"To us!"

* * *

Once again Richie greets me at the back door of Main Street Books and ushers me and Sarah into the shop through the back door.

"Your boyfriend is here," he whispers. "And it's a madhouse, Miss Landry."

"Oh, wow," I say, expecting to see Julian. Instead, Radley Seager is holding court in the middle of the bookstore, signing autographs of the postcards with the showing times of Flying to Brazil for all of the people there. Camera phones click and people squeal with delight.

"You are so lucky, Miss Landry," Richie says. "He is truly amazing. Showing up just to support you."

I smile at him. He's not here for me. He's here pushing the movie. Julian had said they were going to try to heavily push the film so that maybe it wins Audience Choice Award and forces distributors to take another look at it. As I scan the crowd, I then catch a glimpse of Julian, who stands there passing out the postcards that Radley signs. He spies me and gives me a shrug. I smile back at him. I can't fault him.

Radley motions me over to him and gives me a huge hug and whispers in my ear, "Just play along," he says. "There are police here and they are hoping to flesh out our stalker."

I suck in the fear as he holds me closer. "We are not going to let anything happen to you, ok?"

"Ok," I say. I pull back as all the camera phones click away. Sarah and Samuel are close by and they continually scan the room for any hint of the stalker.

Julian mouths an 'I love you' to me. I place my hand over my heart and smile at him. I want to feel safe.

Richey claps his hands and announces that everyone needs to line up with their purchases for the signing now. Radley signs his last postcard and announces he'll sign postcards later. "This is Austen's signing now," he proclaims and steps back behind me.

The people, one by one, approach me at my signing desk. Everyone is so nice and friendly. Some have disparaging words against Jaz and are glad I'm dating Radley instead of her and I assure them that she is truly a wonderful person. They don't believe me.

"I thought her suddenly coming down with 'the flu' was so lame," a customer tells me. "That's always code for 'they've run off with someone else'."

I just smile at the woman and ask, "To whom do I make this book out?"

"Me," she says.

"And your name is?"

"Oh, Shelly," she says.

"Shelly," I repeat and sign her book.

The line moves fairly quickly thanks to Richey keeping it moving along with no Amy Moss in sight. I'm kind of disappointed. I just want this ordeal to go away. Not that Sarah hasn't been wonderful to me, but I'm just not used to having a security detail and I don't know how anyone truly enjoys it. I want my freedom back.

Richey approaches the table escorting a familiar face. It's Jurgen Hauer. I smile at him as he approaches with my book to sign. I look over at Julian and Radley. Both are salivating to meet him.

"Mr. Hauer, you came," I tell him. "And without your assistant."

"No, my assistant is somewhere in all this craziness, but I wanted to come on my own and say hello again," he tells me. I stand up and give him a hug.

"I'm so glad you came," I tell him. I motion for Julian and Radley to come over. "May I introduce Radley Seager and Julian Winslow? Guys, this is Jurgen Hauer."

"Ah, Mr. Winslow," he says. "So nice to meet you. I happened to catch your film the other night. I was very impressed."

"Oh, wow," Julian says. "I'm honored."

"No, no, no," he says. "The pleasure's all mine. All mine. I understand you still don't have a distributor for your film?"

"No, sir, I don't," Julian admits.

"Well, perhaps we can fix that," he says to him. Jurgen feels in his pockets. "Hmm, I seem to be all out of cards," he admits. "Miss Landry, do you still have that card I gave you last night?"

"I do, sir," I say.

"Will you be so kind as to share my number with Mr. Seager and Mr. Winslow, please?"

"I would be glad to," I say as I sign my book for him.

"Thank you," he says. "I look forward to reading this. I hear good things."

"No, thank you, sir," I say.

"You boys call me tomorrow and we'll meet to discuss your distribution dilemma," Jurgen says.

As he walks away, Julian and Radley can hardly contain their excitement. "Isn't she just the best girlfriend ever?" Radley teases.

"She most certainly is," Julian says. "She most certainly is."

* * *

I stand at the back of the Library Theater with Sarah and watch Palmer, Julian, and Radley field questions during the Q&A of their film. The theater is packed and they both seem to be so giddy from meeting Jurgen at my signing. Even though most of the questions concern Jaz's whereabouts and me, and not necessarily about their film, their spirits are high.

"I'm sorry we haven't caught the stalker yet," Sarah tells me.

"Just wish it was all over," I say.

"I'm told she's M-I-A at the hospital," Sarah says. "I was hoping we could get her today."

"I just feel like a piece of prey," I say. "And it's like she was just waiting at the hospital for us like she knew."

"Nah," Sarah says. "This is a small town. I think she came to Park City in anticipation of Radley being here and she took a temp job to sustain herself. She doesn't live here. She's from somewhere in Minnesota. She's probably living in her car or in a cheap hotel out of town that takes cash. That's why she's so hard to catch."

"I'm still scared of her," I tell Sarah.

Sarah gives me a hug. "We will not let anything happen to you as long as we are with you."

I grab her hand and squeeze it. "Thanks."

"Are you and Austen Landry really having twins?" an audience member asks.

Sarah and I laugh, and I pooch out my stomach. "Oh, yeah! Food baby!"

* * *

I want to visit Jaz but I don't dare chance it. The press still haven't gotten wind of her whereabouts and it's just best to wait to see her tomorrow. It's obvious she has kept her side of the secret. I still feel so guilty. As we motor back up the mountain and away from the hubbub of Main Street, Julian speaks on the phone with Gray and explains that we are requested to phone 'The' Jurgen Hauer tomorrow to schedule a meeting to discuss distribution.

"Yeah, can you believe it?" Julian asks him. "It's all Austen's doing," he gushes and squeezes my hand. "Nah, I think we're going to stay in tonight," he tells Gray. "Yeah, I'll call you in the morning and we can get together and do this thing."

He clicks off his phone and gives me a kiss. "Palmer, I am so glad you brought this creature into my life," he says to her. "Isn't she just the best?"

"Well, I kind of like her," Palmer says.

"Jurgen Freakin' Hauer, man," Radley says. "Wow."

"And I just see him as a very nice man," I say, "who wanted a copy of my book."

"I kind of love that you are not afraid of people," Julian tells me.

"Because it's easy not to be afraid of people you don't know," I say. "I'm just happy it's all working out for you finally."

We pull up at the house and pile out. I have saved the day. The thing is, the day shouldn't have to have been saved in the first place. Lance is a monster and he's going to get away with hurting Julian's film and assaulting his sister. And Jaz will never press charges and he will continue to bully Hollywood for his own pleasure. Because that's how Hollywood works. I'm so cynical about Hollywood right now I could scream.

We go up to the bedroom to clean up and rest before dinner. "You seem down," Julian tells me.

"I'm just tired, that's all," I say. The guilt about Julian not knowing the truth is eating at me.

"So, Jaz is getting out of the hospital tomorrow morning, huh?" I change the subject.

"Yeah," he says. "Mom says she's doing so much better. She'll make a full recovery."

"That's great," I say.

"She's always been a bit of a drama queen," he says. "She's always creating some kind of incident when things are going great for her. To be honest, I'm not surprised she was out walking in the cold. It's such a Jaz move."

"You shouldn't be so harsh on your sister," I scold him.

"And you haven't lived with my sister all your life," he retorts. "If she's not the center of attention, she sure as hell is going to find a way to be it. Luckily, we have kept this incident out of the press. Imagine what would happen if they had picked it up."

"So, I guess it's been handy that I've taken the pressure off," I say.

"And look where it's gotten you," he says. "You're a best-selling author now. Aren't you happy?"

"Like I said, I'm just tired," I tell him. "It's been a very intense week and there's still a stalker lurking out there that kind of wants me dead so she can have Radley all to herself. It's all just a bit much. Not exactly how I thought my Sundance experience would be."

"Kind of not how I thought my Sundance experience would be either but here we are," Julian says.

I look in my purse and pull out Jurgen's card and hand it to him. "Here you go," I say.
"Change that!"

"Do you know how much I love you for this?" he asks and takes me into his arms.
"And I'll protect you, you know."

"With your mean ninja skills?"

"Well, I am dressed in all black," he says.

"My New York ninja!"

"Oh, I don't want this festival to end," he tells me and pulls me in even closer and hugs me. "Sundance is always so unexpected and wonderful. And you're so wonderful."

"I just don't want this to be some fling," I say, "and then when we return back to reality, we lose each other."

"This is reality, too," he tells me and pinches me.

"Ouch," I say.

"Felt that, huh?"

"I did," I say.

"This is real," he says. "And I want you, Austen."

"I want you, too, Julian," I tell him. "I really do."

He kisses me deep and hard. I almost go weak in the knees.

"We will figure this out," he tells me. "

"Maybe tomorrow we can take some time to just talk and see where and how we want this to go," I say. "There are direct flights from New York to New Orleans you know."

"Ok," he says. "But first..." He kisses me again and I let myself be swept up in the moment.

* * *

I wake up to an empty bed and a dark room. The sun has set but it's still early; not quite seven o'clock. I clean myself up and wash the sex off. It finally dawns on me that my life has completely changed now. There's no going back to selling suits to ladies who lunch or odd jobs to keep me afloat. And this will mean a raise at the university hopefully if I still want to keep teaching. And no more deluding myself with Eric.

I walk down the stairs to find everyone in the living room drinking wine and relaxing while wonderful smells from the kitchen waft towards my nose. Even Samuel and Sarah enjoy themselves. It's a nice sight to see.

"It. Is. Alive!" Palmer announces.

Julian rises and gives me a hug. "Did you sleep well?"

"I did," I tell him. "It was a good nap. Almost forgot what all is going on."

"They will find her," he reassures me. "I have to believe that."

I nod my head and take a glass of wine that Radley has poured for me.

"If they don't catch her by Sunday, then we'll be gone, and this will all be over anyway," Palmer says.

"What if she follows me to New Orleans?" I ask.

"Then we protect you there," Radley says.

"No offense but I don't want a protection detail following me around everywhere I go," I say. "I can't live like that."

"You shouldn't have to," Julian says. "No one should."

"And yet here I am," Radley snaps back.

"I didn't mean it like that," Julian says. "I mean... I don't know what I mean."

"We're all tired here," Radley says. "Let's just enjoy this wonderful meal that is being made for us and then go enjoy the rest of the festival like normal folks."

"Normal folks?" Palmer asks. "There's nothing normal about us."

Everyone bursts into laughter.

Nothing is ever going to be normal about my life again.

* * *

With Sarah in tow, Julian and I take a basket of goodies to the hospital for Julian's mom and Jaz. We have to be extra vigil while here, but the cover of night means less people at the hospital and hopefully no Amy Moss working the night shift. If she's at the hospital, surely the police can catch her. Sarah is on heightened alert and I am wearing a hat and sunglasses... at night. Perhaps the sunglasses make me stand out more than if I wasn't wearing them at all.

We make it to Jaz's room without incident. I breathe a sigh of relief and Julian squeezes my hand. Jane looks tired and worn out. Jaz opens her eyes and smiles at us. She looks improved but no longer like the young Hollywood starlet that the paparazzi have stalked all festival long. According to the news on my smart phone, she's already left Sundance and has totally abandoned Radley forever. Coincidentally, Johnny Reardon has left the festival as well, so conjecture runs rampant. Also makes her safer but the rumors of Radley and me have intensified. That makes me less safe. But in here right now, with both Stella and Sarah here to protect us, I feel much better.

"Austen," Jaz says and motions for me to come to her to give me a hug. "I'm so happy to see you."

"How are you feeling?" I ask her.

"Better but still worse for wear," she says. "The doctor doesn't want me working for a while. Says I need to heal."

"And he's right," Jane says.

"Listen to mom," Julian says.

"Yes, listen to mom," I echo. "Moms know."

"Julian, this one's a keeper," Jane says and smiles at me.

I met Eric's mom once when she came down to New Orleans from Monroe for a visit with her son. She barely spoke to me or had anything nice to say. She was as warm as an ice cube to me. I should have realized the apple didn't fall far from the tree back then. Julian's mom, even under the duress of dealing with a daughter in the hospital still finds something nice to say to me, a stranger. I hand the basket of goodies Margaret packed to her.

"You really are sweet," Jane says as she takes the basket from me.

"Are they letting you out tomorrow, Jazzy?" Julian asks.

"Yes," she says. "Radley is arranging for a private jet to fly Mom and I back to Connecticut once I'm discharged. We're not even going to the house, just straight to some airport in Heber City I think."

"Seems so pretentious to me but it's probably the best thing with the circumstances. I'm not going to look a gift horse in the mouth," Jane says.

"Luckily Radley is in a position to be able to do this so let him," Julian says. "It's not going to even make a dent in his bank account."

"True," Jaz says.

"So, I won't see you again until I get back home, huh?" Julian asks.

"No," Jane says.

"Then I'll see you after Sundance," Julian says as he gives his mother a hug and leans down to kiss his sister on the forehead.

Jane gives me a hug as well. "You come see us, too, Austen," she says. "You're good for him."

"Thank you," I tell her. "I look forward to seeing you up there."

"Austen," Jaz says to me. I turn and lean down to give her a hug.

"You still have that thing, right?" she whispers to me.

"I still have it," I tell her.

"Good," she says. "Thank you."

I put the hood of my coat over my head as we walk out into the hallway of the hospital floor but leave the glasses off.

"What was that about?" Julian asks me as he punches the button to the elevator.

"What was what about?" I reply.

"What Jazmine asked you as we were leaving," he says.

"Just girl stuff," I tell him. I move my hand along the side of my bag and feel the cover of the screener inside.

* * *

We arrive at Gray's house with a full party going on inside. Gray greets us at the door. It's obvious he's been celebrating for quite a while.

"Come on in," he tells us, slurring his words and puffing on a cigar. We enter with Sarah following us in.

"Whatcha celebrating, Gray?" Julian asks him.

"I negotiated that sale with that horror movie this afternoon," he tells us. "*The Area*. Ace bought it."

"Oh," Julian says. I can hear the disappointment in that one little word that it's not his deal. "I heard some audience members walked out of it."

"Yeah," Gray says, "but they'll turn a profit anyway."

We remove our coats to stay but it's obvious from Julian's demeanor that the sale of this horror movie is the last thing Julian wants to celebrate. He slides his coat back on and I do the same.

"Look, we're not going to stay," Julian tells Gray. "Just wanted to say that Jurgen Hauer wants to meet with us all sometime tomorrow to discuss *Brazil*."

"Ok, ok," Gray says. "Call me in the morning but not too early."

"Will do," Julian says as he takes me by the hand and leads me out of there. "I hope you didn't want to stay there," he says to me. He pulls his phone out of his pocket and summons a car.

"No," I say. "I just want to be with you."

"I think we can make the tail end of our movie showing over at the Holiday Village for a little Q & A," he says.

"Then let's do it," I tell him. Anything to spend time with this wonderful man before the festival ends.

* * *

Like a broken record, most of the questions that Radley, Palmer, and Julian field during the Q&A center around Jaz and myself. I can tell they all are tired of those questions. When a question about the plot comes up, Julian lights up and answers it.

"You know, love at first sight is real," he tells the audience. "I've experienced it. Recently, I might add. It's even more magical in real life than it ever is in the movies. So yes, I really do believe in it."

"That man has fallen hard for you," Sarah tells me as we stand in the back of the theater and watch the questions.

"I've fallen hard for him, too," I tell her.

"What are you going to do once the festival ends?" Sarah asks me.

"I'm not sure," I tell her, "but I hope we figure it out soon."

"My wife and I had a long-distance thing for a while," Sarah says.

"You did?" I ask her.

"Why do you think I'm a body-guard in Salt Lake City?"

"Ah," I say. "You sacrificed for her."

"I did," she says. "And I would do it again in a heartbeat. Love is worth it for the right person."

"You are right," I say. "You know I almost settled for someone."

"Really?"

"Yes," I tell her. "When I go home I have to break it off with someone I should never have dated to begin with."

"Oh, no," she says.

"In a week and a half, I know I'm in love and he's the guy for me," I explain to her. "In a year of dating Eric back home, he thinks he wants to marry me but has never even uttered 'I love you' to me. Go figure, right?"

"Oh, wow, Austen," Sarah says. "Without love, what do you have?"

"Eric," I say. "That's what you have. Eric."

"You're lucky, then," Sarah says. "Hate it for Eric losing someone as great as you, though."

"You know, something tells me he'll get over me quickly," I say with a laugh. "He would never act the prince and come ride up to Sundance on a shiny rental car."

Sarah laughs. "Doesn't sound like he would."

"I am worthy of love," I tell her.

"Yes, you are," Sarah says.

I look up at Julian on the stage and a warm and fuzzy feeling overcomes me. I finally realize that my life is on the track that it should be. I didn't force it. It just happened. Organically and unforced. I will have a lot of work cut out for me when I return home, first of which is letting Eric know that it is over. Clean up on aisle six.

* * *

Palmer gives me a hug outside the theater. "I've been invited to a condo party with a bunch of other camera people," Palmer tells us. "Want to come along?"

I look at Julian and I can tell he doesn't want to go. "I think we're just going to go back up to the house," I say to her. "A nice soak in the hot tub sounds lovely."

"I second that," Julian says.

"Ditto," Radley says as well.

We no more get into our car when Radley's phone goes off. It's Liz.

"Tell me something good, Liz," he says. As he listens the smile fades from his face. "Got it." He clicks his phone off. "Get us back to the house immediately, Charles. There's been a break-in."

We zoom back up the mountain and up to the house, careening and sliding on the slick road and pushing me into Julian's side. He puts his arms around me and holds on to me for dear life.

Flashing blue lights surround our once peaceful abode turning it into a major crime scene. Yellow police tape lines the front entrance. We pile out only to be stopped by police officers. Radley walks up to one of the officers and lets him know that it's his rental.

We stand outside and stare at the house in shock and wonder what exactly happened.

After what seems like an eternity but probably just a few minutes, an officer approaches us.

"Which one of you is Austen Landry?" the officer asks us.

"Uhm, I am," I say, reluctantly and confused. "What does this have to do with me?"

The police officer shows me a picture on his phone. My bedroom in the house has been completely destroyed, my clothes and belonging strewn and ripped apart. On the wall, in red paint is sprayed, 'Austen Landry will die!'

"Oh my god," I utter and put my hand up to my mouth. Julian puts his arms around me and pulls me into his chest.

"Did you catch her yet?" Julian asks.

"No, sir, but we have a BOLO out on her. Amy Moss," he tells us.

"She works up at the hospital," I tell him.

"We'll put someone there," the officer says.

"My sister is a patient there and my mother is with her," Julian explains. "She's got a bodyguard, but I'm worried that's not enough."

"I'll make a call and get a detail there," he says.

"You should have made out a restraining order on her," Julian says to me.

"It wouldn't have mattered," the officer explains. "When they are determined, a piece of paper won't make any difference at all."

"Please just get her," Julian says. "For all of our sakes."

"We will," he says. "I promise."

We watch as several police officers carrying bags of evidence emerge from the house.

Radley comes up to us and pats me on the back. "I'm so sorry, Austen," he tells me. "This is all my fault."

I give Radley a hug. "This is all on her," I tell him. "This is all on her."

* * *

After another eternity, we are finally able to enter the house. The downstairs appears untouched but as we make it to the top of the staircase I see a few of my belongings littering the hallway. He squeezes my hand as we follow my strewn belongings into my room. I freeze and stare at the scene in front of me. All of my clothing has been ripped up and flung around the room and bleach has been poured on most of them. I look down and see the beautiful Stella McCartney sweater that Jaz gifted me, all ruined with bleach. My bed has been slashed by something sharp. The spray paint on the walls is chilling. I look in the bathroom to find all of my makeup and toiletries have been poured and dumped into the commode and the mirror over the lavatory has been smashed. It looks like blood has been splattered on the tile, most likely her blood.

I start to sink to the floor and Julian catches me.

"Let's go see if my room is ok," Julian says and pulls me out of the room, into the hallway and into his room. The room looks untouched. I put my bag down on the dresser and then sob. Julian hugs me close. "I'll take care of you," he tells me. "I'll keep you safe. I love you."

That's all I need to hear right now to know he means it.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Friday of the Festival

I knock on Palmer's bedroom door as the sun just begins to rise. She's not my size but right now I have no clothes to wear for the day and need to borrow at least a sweater or something. She opens the door and gives me a huge hug.

"I'm so sorry, Austen," she says then leads me to the bed and points to her television. "Check this out."

On the television is a live news event from the Heber City airport where paparazzi surround Jaz, sitting in a wheelchair on the tarmac in front of a private jet. Liz stands next to her as well as Radley. "That's why I've decided to press charges against Lance Everley from Ace Pictures. He's the reason why I've been in the hospital all week."

"Oh, wow!" I exclaim.

"What kind of charges, Miss Snow?" a reporter asks.

"Assault," Jaz says to the camera.

"Does this have anything to do with Austen Landry, the author that is rumored to be Mr. Seager's girlfriend?" another reporter asks.

Jaz laughs. "She's not nor has ever been Radley's girlfriend. She's the girlfriend of my brother and she's also the reason why I'm alive today and I can't thank her enough with all of my heart," she says. "That's all I have to say right now."

As the reporters scream questions, Radley wheels Jaz up to the jet's steps and helps her climb aboard the plane. He then helps Julian's mother on board and gives her a hug before coming back down onto the tarmac.

"Holy shit, Endicott!" I exclaim.

"I told you Sundance would be exciting, didn't I?"

"Wonder how Lance's wife is taking it?" I ask. "Would love to be a fly on that condo wall."

"Can't be good," Palmer states.

A soft knock on the door brings us back. "Come in," Palmer yells.

The door opens and Julian peeks from around it. "Is Austen..." he stops and sees me sitting on the bed with Palmer. "Hey."

Oh, crap, how am I going to break this to Julian. It's going to be the biggest news out of Sundance all week and I've known about it this entire time. More so than anyone. And I've kept it from him. I just point toward the tv as he enters the room.

"To recap, actress Jazmine Snow, who had been attending the Sundance Film Festival to promote her movie, has formally pressed assault charges against Ace Pictures head Lance Everley in what appears to be a stunning revelation of accusations this morning," the reporter says to the camera. "At present we have no response from Everley about the allegations from Ms. Snow nor if there has been any arrest in the matter. Back to you, Jason."

Julian sits down, totally gobsmacked by the news. "Everley," he utters.

"Apparently so," I say.

"Oh, my god," he says. "Why didn't she tell me?"

I put my hand on Julian's leg, but I can't find any words to say to him in case the truth I've tried to hide comes out.

"It's very brave of her," Palmer says.

"Excuse me," Julian says and rushes out of the room leaving us alone.

"This isn't going to be good," I tell Palmer. Because we haven't really had that much time together, I haven't had an opportunity to fill her in on the complete story only that she knows a little bit more than Julian.

"How about we do that spa pop up down on Main Street?" Palmer offers. "I think you need it and Liz said she put us on the list already."

"That would be terrific," I say. "I need it. Desperately. This whole week has been so intense."

"I know," Palmer says. "I can't believe your stalker got in here. How did she find us?"

"Stalkers are clever," I say. "A lot more clever than I am. And scary, too."

"I can't believe she destroyed all of your stuff," Palmer says. "She didn't get your watch, did she?"

"No," I say. "I've been wearing it all week."

"Thank god," Palmer says.

"Which brings me to why I'm here," I say. "Can I borrow some clothes?"

"Anything you want, Landry," she says and hugs me. "Anything you want."

I take a shower in Palmer's bathroom instead of going back to Julian's room. One thing I've learned this week is to let him have some space when things get a little intense. Maybe it's his way of processing things. It's something I'm going to have to get used to as we take this relationship past Sundance and into the real world.

* * *

Me, Palmer, Julian, Radley, Samuel and Sarah ride down to Main Street together. The tension in the limo is so intense you can practically cut it with a knife. Julian's attention is

laser focused on his smart phone and reading all of the stories of his sister's ordeal at the hands of Lance Everley. Radley sits and exchanges looks with me.

"I can have Liz arrange for some clothing to be sent to you this afternoon if you'd like," Radley tells me.

"It's ok," I say. "Festival is almost over and I can make it until I go back home on Sunday."

"Ok, well I am going to give you some money for it," Radley says.

"Sure," I say. "Thanks."

"I feel sure they're going to catch her," he assures me.

"I hope so," I say. "But I'm determined she's not going to scare me. That's what she wants."

"So, you're going to meet up with Jurgen this morning, huh?" Palmer asks, obviously trying to relieve the tension.

"Yeah," Radley says. "I think Austen's going to do it for us."

Julian looks up from his smart phone and then at me. He smiles but then directs his attention back to his phone.

We pull up in front of the pop-up spa on Main Street. Palmer, Sarah, and me pile out.

"I'll call you when we're done and let you know how it went," Julian tells me. "Maybe we can go get some lunch later?"

"I would love that," I say to him. "Good luck and tell Jurgen I said, 'hi.'"

"Tell Jurgen I said 'hi!'" Radley mocks. "Oh, my god, you're killing me."

Charles closes the door to the limo, returns to the driver's side, and pulls away leaving just us girls to enjoy a celebrity spa, even if we aren't really celebrities.

We enter the spa. Soft zen-like music wafts from the speakers and a small water feature bubbles on the other side of the waiting room. A skinny, perky blonde sits at a small desk.

"I'm sorry but this spa is reserved for our celebrity clientele," she says, looking us up and down.

"And I'm sure if you check your clipboard, you'll find that Liz Singleton called here earlier and placed us on your list of 'celebrity clientele'," Palmer retorts.

She looks annoyed at us. "Name?"

"I'm Palmer Endicott," Palmer tells her. "And that's Austen Landry who just so happens to be carrying Radley Seager's twins."

"Triplets," I add.

"Correction, triplets," Palmer continues. "And we'd like the full spa treatment."

Unamused, she looks down at her list then back up at us. "There are three of you," she points out.

"That's Sarah, our bodyguard," Palmer says. "We'd appreciate it if you'd give our swag bags to her, please, and anything else you're offering for free. She deserves it just as much as we do. More so, really."

Sarah smiles at us. "Thanks, guys."

"You're welcome and thank you," I say.

The girl lets out a sigh. "Have a seat and wait, please."

We take a seat while Sarah looks out the front door. I wish we could let Sarah have a massage and facial, too. She's earned it and then some. But if Amy does walk in here to kill us all, a relaxed and naked Sarah probably couldn't help us so swag it is for her.

Finally, the skinny girl takes us back to the inner sanctum. Sarah follows us to check out the rooms and any escape plan, then takes a seat where she can watch the front door and us. I smile back at her. I really do feel safe with her around.

* * *

With our nails done and our bodies relaxed from the massages, we make our way across the street to the Filmmaker Lodge to relax and figure out what our day is going to be like. A huge crowd of festival goers, paparazzi, and reporters are gathered outside.

"What's going on?" Palmer asks one of the reporters.

"Lance Everley's wife is in there giving a press conference," she says. "He was arrested this morning and she's left his sorry ass."

"What?" I respond. "Didn't see that coming."

"I figured she'd stand by him," Palmer says. "What with them being such a power couple and all."

"There's more," the reporter says. "Two other actresses in L.A. have also come forward this morning with sexual assault allegations against Lance. When it rains, it pours."

"Damn," I say. "Guess the power just left the power couple."

People stream out the door of the Filmmaker Lodge followed by Constance Everley and her entourage. She looks up and sees me, then approaches me.

"I'm not my husband, Austen," she says to me then walks away with everyone following her to her awaiting car on Main Street.

I stand here and watch her walk away and realize she is a lot more like me than I want to admit. I was using Eric and I think she used Lance in the same way: to get to where she wanted to be in her career. Maybe now she sees she probably never even needed him

in the first place. So, I stand here and empathize with her now. She's not her husband, after all.

We ultimately arrive inside the lodge where the fallout of Constance's press conference still clings to the air. The greeter doesn't even ask us for our credentials any longer. She just waives us inside. Perhaps it doesn't even matter any longer. We grab seats on the couch as people get up now that the press conference is finished.

"Well, this is the craziest Sundance I've ever experienced," Palmer says.

"Yet, judging on the way things are going, someone is going to ask us to hold their beer and watch this," I say as I sit down in a chair.

I pull out my phone from my bag and see that my agent, Andrea, has left a few text messages with regard to Constance. I text her back and tell her that I just saw her coming out of the press conference and that I am in shock from it all as well.

I remove my computer from my bag, luckily something that Amy Moss didn't destroy, and type some words about my Sundance experience for Harper's other publication that I've been assigned. I don't even know what to say. No one would believe the week I've had.

My phone buzzes. It's a text from Julian: *We did it thanks to you.*

I text back: *I am so very happy for you. I knew you could do it.*

He texts back: *Lunch is on me. No Name in thirty minutes.*

I smile and look over at Palmer who also checks her phone. "It sold," I tell her.

"Thank god," Palmer says. "Want to see some movies?"

"Julian wants me to join him for lunch at the No Name," I say. "Want to join us?"

"Nah, you two need a date," she says. "I'll take in some movies today."

"Ok," I say. "Really hoping we can spend a nice, quiet day together. I'm not ready to go home yet and deal with my new reality. I like this reality much better."

"The end of the festival is a good time to catch up on movies, relax, and totally enjoy some of the venues you didn't get to experience at the beginning," Palmer explains. "I really love this part. And, you've got a new great reality going on, Landry. You're a best selling author now."

"I am," I say. "Feels so weird. Next weekend I have that author's conference where I've been bumped up to a keynote. It's exciting but before that I have to deal with Eric and I just don't want to."

"Break-up text," Palmer says. "That's how you avoid that situation. Break-up text."

"No, in person is best," Sarah says. "You owe him that much."

"You're right," I say. "I do. In person it is."

* * *

Sarah escorts me up the street to the No Name. The sky above is extra blue today and the snow that's accumulated around the town begins to melt slightly in the sun. I'm almost hot in this coat and scarf I'm wearing. The crowds have all died down from the beginning of the festival and while the air of the festival still feels magical, it's more of a relaxed feeling and the pace is much less hurried. I find myself smiling and enjoying myself just walking up the street despite the events of last night. Love is the air, at least for me anyway and I'm determined to not let anything ruin it, not even Amy Moss.

I look down at my phone to see several missed calls and texts from Eric. Why can't he just leave me alone, I think to myself. I just don't want to deal with him until after I get home. I loathe confrontation and I'm sure, now that I've avoided him all week, it's going to

be a good one when I get home. You never know how possessive a person is until you're away from them for even just a few days. I've never seen this in Eric and I've gone on several trips without him over the course of the year without even a text from Eric. Why now, I wonder.

At the No Name I spy Julian and Radley at the very back along with Samuel sitting at another table next to them. Sarah takes a seat with Samuel while I hug Julian tight.

"Thank you," Julian tells me. "Thank you for saving our little film."

"Did you get the deal you wanted?" I ask him. By the look on Radley's face I already have my answer.

"It's a record sale for Sundance," Julian tells me. "Gray is over the moon."

"I bet he is," I say as I take a seat. "Radley, are you happy about it?"

"Hell, yeah," he says. "We can relax today before the awards tomorrow evening. Buzz is that we're going to take a couple."

"That's terrific," I say.

"Jurgen wants to produce my next film," Julian says.

"Are you going to have Radley star in it again?" I ask.

"Wish I could," Radley says. "I'm booked for the next three and half years. Brazil was just good timing on my part. But producing is not out of the question."

We order our lunches as giddy girls occasionally walk by the table to gawk at Radley, some being brave enough to ask for his autograph and selfies. He's too nice not to oblige. He knows that anything caught on camera out in public can negatively impact his career, a career that has been carefully crafted by many people over the years. And while I do know the secrets, even my article on him has to be carefully crafted and run by Liz

before submission. As much as he wants to be out in the open, I don't think Hollywood is ready for him to do it and it's painfully obvious here at Sundance. You don't see the tabloids clamoring over a Radley and Julian union, even though the two have been together and chummy constantly while here. It's a girl they want for him. Everyone should be entitled to love and happiness no matter what. Sitting here at this table right now I feel love. I'm pretty sure it's not the altitude.

* * *

We decide to walk down to the Library Center Theater so Radley and Julian can do a Q & A. The weather is still beautiful and walking in the crisp air and sunshine feels great. With sunglasses and a ball cap Radley blends in and no one seems to notice or care that he's taking a mid-afternoon stroll through the middle of Park City.

"We should talk tomorrow night about how we're going to proceed after Sundance," Julian says to me.

"Proceed?"

"Yeah, proceed," he says. "I'm assuming we're going to want to continue this after the festival is over. Have I assumed wrong?"

"Nope," I say. "I've been thinking about it a lot too. I think we're going to accumulate a lot of frequent flyer miles."

"That will be nice," he tells me. "Maybe we can use them for a trip somewhere."

"I would like that," I say.

"Good." He leans over and kisses me.

"Do I get to have naming rights for your children?" Radley asks.

"Do you think you could do a good job at that?" Julian asks.

"Well, after all, Austen is carrying my twins," he says. "So for the boy I suggest Slartibartfast."

"Slartibartfast?" I ask. "So, we're going with a literary theme, then?"

"Well, I am named Radley and you are named Austen, so yeah," he explains. "For a girl I think Fanny, most definitely."

"And I have no input whatsoever, huh?" Julian asks.

"Tabloids say they're mine and if the tabloids say it, it must be true," Radley answers.

As we tease each other on the way to the Library Theater, Sarah's cell phone rings.

"This is she," she answers. "Uh, huh... Oh wow... Ok, then we'll be right there." She hangs up the phone and looks at us. "They've caught the stalker and want Austen to come identify."

I breathe a sigh of relief and Julian gives me a hug. Of course, Radley has to get into the act as well and hugs the two of us.

"Life goes on," Radley says. "Let's go see this wench off, shall we? I'll buy the champagne!"

"But what about the Q & A?" Julian asks.

"Did you really want to field questions about your sister and mine and Austen's twins?"

"Now, not all the questions are about that," Julian says. "But I'd rather see justice done. Let's go with Austen."

Radley summons for a car on his phone and within a minute a van shows up. Samuel sits in the front and we pile into the back.

"You're going to the police station, huh?" the driver asks us.

"Yes," I say. "We're out for justice today!"

"I guess this means you won't need me any longer," Sarah says.

"Oh, no," I tell her. "You're awesome. I hope when I'm stalked again, they send me you." I frown and squeeze her hand. "I'm going to miss you."

"I'm going to miss you, too, Austen," she says. "And I really want you to succeed and be happy."

"I don't think anything can ruin that now that she's been caught," I say.

Inside the police station, an officer escorts us inside to a room with a two-way mirror for us to identify the suspect they have in custody. I look at the table where a lone figure sits staring at the mirror. It's not Amy Moss at all. It's Eric. My Eric.

* * *

"What the hell is going on, Austen?" Eric demands as we walk out of the station and into the parking lot.

"Who are you?" Julian asks him.

"I'm Eric Guillory, Austen's fiancé. Who the hell are you?"

"Fiancé?" Julian questions and looks at me.

"He's not my fiancé," I tell Julian. "I don't even know why he's here."

"I'm here because I was worried sick about you." Eric says to me. "You don't answer my texts or my calls and then everyone at work points out as to why. You're all over the tabloids, Austen. No wonder you've avoided my calls and texts. So, is this the new Hollywood boyfriend you've left me for?" Eric looks straight at Radley and not at Julian.

"Radley Seager."

"Look, I don't know who the hell you are..." Radley begins.

Eric throws a punch at Radley. Funny but I never thought Eric had it in him yet here he is trying to fight for me. Where was this Eric hiding all year? That hero song from the movie *Footloose* plays in my head as I watch the scene unfold in slow motion.

Radley stops his punch, grabs his arm and pushes him away. Samuel steps in but Radley puts his hand up to stop him.

"Oh my god, Eric!" I exclaim. "Really?"

Eric stumbles then grabs me as Julian tries to help pull me away from him. In the pushing and pulling my bag flies off my arm and onto the concrete, spilling out all of its contents, including the lost screener to Julian's film.

Julian looks down and sees it, then lets me go and picks it up as Eric pulls me close to him before I finally break free.

Julian picks up the screener from the ground. "I don't understand. Why do you have my screener, Austen?"

"I can explain," I utter.

Julian just looks at me and walks away by himself, not wanting to hear the whys and the hows.

"Julian," Radley yells to him but Julian waves him off and continues walking. Radley looks at me.

"This is why keeping secrets hurts people, Radley," I say.

"Let's just go home, Austen, and forget about these people," Eric says to me.

"These people? Go home, Eric," I say. "Just go home."

"I just wanted to protect him," Radley explains.

"And now you've got your deal, Jazmine is getting her justice, and all is right with the world," I say to him. "It doesn't matter who gets hurt in the process, does it?"

"That's not why..."

Radley is interrupted by a police car that pulls up near us. The police get out of the front and pull Amy Moss out of the backseat. She sees us all standing out here as she gets out of the back.

"Austen Landry, I'm going to get you for this," she screams at me. "Radley, I love you. I'm going to get rid of her for you." The police escort Amy into the police station. "I love you Radley Seager!"

I pick up my things from the pavement and put them in my bag. Eric bends down to help along with Radley and even Sarah.

"What the hell is going on here?" Eric asks.

"It's obvious you're out of the loop here," Radley says, "but now is not the time to bring you up to speed."

Radley and Eric both stand up. Eric takes another swing at Radley, but this time Radley comes back with a fist into Eric's left eye.

"Guys, enough!" I yell. "Eric, just go back home. It's over between us. Just leave me alone. Just leave me alone."

"So, you are in love with this guy, huh?" Eric asks. "That's it? You're just going throw us away for some actor?"

"Eric..." I start.

"Some actor?" Radley is insulted.

"Guys," I say. I just shake my head walk toward the street. I press for a car ride on my phone.

"Austen, wait," Radley hollers at me.

"Leave me alone," I say. "Just go away, all of you."

Sarah runs up to me. "I'll come with you."

I stand in the parking lot of the police station with Sarah waiting for what feels like an eternity for a car to arrive.

* * *

Sarah offers to help me pack, but a survey of the room's carnage shows us there is nothing to pack. Even my stash of swag hasn't survived. Someone will have to clean this up and repair the room. I call the airlines and have my ticket exchanged for a flight out later tonight. Sarah offers to drive me into Salt Lake City and to the airport as her gig is obviously up. I try to phone Palmer, but her phone goes directly to voicemail. I change into the outfit I had on yesterday and leave the clothes I borrowed from Palmer on her bed. It's just me and my backpack now. The only piece of swag remaining is the watch that Radley gifted to me. I remove it from my wrist and place it in Julian's room with a note to return it to Radley.

Sarah is packed and ready to go within minutes. I guess that's the nature of her job: to always be prepared to depart quickly. The house appears empty and there is no one to say goodbye to right now. We exit out of the garage and get into Sarah's Cooper Mini. I look up at the large house that's been my home for these ten days and let the tears flow down my face.

* * *

The Salt Lake City International Airport is practically empty. No paparazzi are here, and simple comings and goings are nowhere near where they were when we first arrived that Wednesday before the festival. I stroll around the shops and browse. I've got another hour and a half to kill before boarding. Seeing as how I lost everything I brought here, you'd think I'd be eager to buy a Tumi suitcase and fill it with new stuff. I'm simply numb. Numb to everything. All I want to do is get back home. Sadly, I have an almost three-hour layover in Atlanta and my flight doesn't leave until almost midnight. With the layover, I won't make it back to New Orleans until after nine tomorrow morning. There simply is no quick way to get home so I can get in bed, ball myself up, and cry this all out. The numbness will have to suffice for now.

I make my way back to Concourse C, Gate 6 to sit and wait for boarding. I find the gate crowded, mostly tired festival goers making their way home like me. I look around to find a seat and take in a deep breath. Eric sits in the corner and spies me. His left eye now black and blue from Radley's punch. He gives me a grimace and the eye. I deserve it. It's going to be a long flight home.

I look at my phone and see a news story from one of the entertainment magazines. Like an idiot I click on it to see it's a story of Julian's movie being a record-breaking sale. It's accompanied by a picture of Julian standing next to that Cassandra Allen with her arms around him, labeling her as his off-again, on-again fiancé. Tears flow down my face. I hope this plane I'm about to board crashes. It would make the pain go away.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Thursday after Sundance

With my car packed up for my appearance at the annual Pulpwood Queens Book Club Girlfriend Weekend, I make it onto I-10 at just after six in the morning, heading for Jefferson, Texas which my GPS app says is six hours away. It will be a longer drive than that as I will make stops along the way and will no doubt be thinking of my time at Sundance, which will make this trip seem like an eternity. I promised Kathy I'd bring her some boudin sausage and the best place to get that is at a little roadside store just outside of Opelousas in a little town called Krotz Springs. I'm also picking up my friend Sylvia from the airport in Shreveport. I need this weekend's diversion from the almost constant cry fest I've held for myself since I returned home.

The theme for this weekend is Studio 54 and, luckily, I was able to pull together a few themed outfits from my Mardi Gras costume closet. Yes, I have a costume and formals closet. You can't live in New Orleans and navigate the social seasons without one. Everything down here has a theme and they recycle frequently.

As I make my way toward Baton Rouge, I can't help but pine for Julian. His film won most of the awards he was eligible to win at Sundance. He and Radley weren't even there to pick them up. Palmer told me that she did the honors as Julian and Radley left the festival on Saturday morning. I'm the reason they left, I'm sure. Palmer tried to give me excuses but I know it was my doing. The secrets that were built up at Sundance all fell heavily on me. Luckily Palmer knows the story, and she blames Radley. I can't blame him. He was trying to protect too many people. I just should have come clean with Julian about Jazmine and the

screener when it happened and then I wouldn't be having a cry fest in the Alexandria, Louisiana Raceway Convenience Store bathroom.

I make it to Shreveport with about a half hour to spare before Sylvia's flight arrives at the airport. I sit in the designated cell phone parking lot and peruse my emails that have come in while I've been on the road. One in particular is from Constance Everley, upping her offer again and another email from Andrea suggesting I entertain her offer seriously as the offer from Chelsea House hasn't been accepted yet.

Austen,

I want to apologize for my behavior at Sundance but want you to truly consider my offer to acquire your rights on your already published works and to extend to you a three-book deal which will include publication in several different languages, something your current publisher cannot offer you. In addition, I believe that THE STREET SINGER will make for an excellent film and I would like to help you with making that happen.

As you may have heard, I have left my husband and it appears that he will be facing criminal charges with regards to Jazmine and to many other women who are coming forward with their stories as I write this. Even I have a story, believe it or not.

I know you have struggled over the years to get your books read. This is what I want to do for you – get you read. I can do this for you. We're one of the largest publishing houses in the world and I want to be your editor. I promise I will not let you become lost in the shuffle. My team and I will be laser focused on promoting you and keeping you atop the best-selling lists. And yes, you are

that good of a writer. I want you to know that Pickett Press is committed to you, your writing, and your career. You have my word on this.

Constance

I look at the email in front of me. I dial Andrea's number and she picks up immediately. That's what I love about my agent. She picks up.

"Let's go with the offer from Pickett Press," I tell her. "But send over the contract to Gray Carmichael and let him go over the deal after you look at it. I'm not going to be cheap."

"I think you're making the right decision," she tells me.

"I hope so," I say. I hope so.

* * *

Sylvia and I arrive in Jefferson at the little B&B we booked. It looks so lovely and quaint. With its front porch and balcony, it looks like something you might find in New Orleans, so I feel right at home. I am assigned the East Wing and Sylvia gets the West Wing and so we retire to our respective suites to unwind and unpack.

At five we rejoin each other downstairs in the dining room where there is a bar and wine for us.

"Are you the same Austen Landry that dates Radley Seager?" the owner asks me.

Sylvia and I both laugh. "Well, I am that Austen Landry but the rumors that I'm dating Radley Seager are very much exaggerated."

"But you know him?" she asks me.

"Yes, I do know him," I say to her.

"Oh, what's he like?" she asks.

"Warm, generous, and very friendly," I tell her.

"You are one lucky duck," Sylvia says.

I laugh at that to keep from sobbing. "Yeah, I was very lucky to get to know him and his colleagues," I say. "The cinematographer on his Sundance film is my best friend."

"Oh, wow, I didn't know that," Sylvia says.

"Yeah, she's great. I've known her ever since college," I say.

"So, is that how you got to meet him?" she asks me.

"Yes," I say. "I stayed at his rental there at Sundance."

"You really do lead one heck of a life," Sylvia says. "I've always been jealous of you."

"Of me?" I'm shocked. "Why? I've been working multiple jobs and teaching."

"You were nominated for the National Book Award and you had one of your books adapted into a movie," she relates. "I haven't had any of that."

"Funny, I've been jealous of you all these years," I tell her. "Your books are best sellers and you get to stay home and write all day long."

"True but we've got the kids and they demand so much of my time," she tells me. "I have to grab increments of time at odd hours during the day to write and then when the deadline looms, I have to hire help so I can lock myself away and finish the book. It's horrible. That's why I like going on book tours and this conference. I can get away and relax for once."

We laugh and clink our glasses. Two authors who are envious of each other's lives. That requires another glass of wine.

* * *

With a bit of a light wine buzz going on, Sylvia and I stroll over to the convention center where the Girlfriend Weekend is being held. Kathy greets us, gives us both hugs and

gives us our packets for the weekend's festivities, including an itinerary, a name tag, etc. Kathy briefs us on the festivities for the weekend before the attendees arrive. I'm really excited and looking forward to this weekend. I need the diversion.

I mix and mingle with the other authors and feel comfortable and in such good company. It's the same feeling I had at Sundance. The feeling of being with like-minded creatives. There's something seriously special that happens to one's self esteem when you're surrounded by creative types. A positive energy forms in the room and one can feed off that energy and almost sustain themselves. It's one of my favorite things. These authors feed my creativity. I'm not asked about my tabloid relationship with Radley Seager. I'm a peer.

Once the attendees enter the large convention center and take their seats, the energy rises. I'm in my element. Several hundred people are here in attendance to see all of us. They've read our books and know our characters. It's exciting for an author. I know this is the same feeling Julian gets when he shows his films. We feed off this energy. This is why we do what we do.

All of the authors are introduced and then Sylvia and I are introduced last. The crowd cheers for Sylvia as she has been a favorite of the Pulpwood Queens for many years and she is so worthy of the accolades. She's just a wonderful storyteller.

"And now, let me introduce to you all our late alternate pick and just such a beautiful writer, Austen Landry everybody!" Kathy says. The audience applauds. I stand and smile. "Austen's novel, *THE STREET SINGER*, will remind you all of Eudora Welty. I had the chance to introduce her to my New Orleans chapter where Austen lives, and everyone agreed that her novel is reminiscent of Welty's *WORN PATH* in its observation."

"You're Radley Seager's girlfriend," someone announces.

Kathy looks at me. "Is that true? The actor?"

"Is he here?" Someone else asks. The audience starts looking around for him.

"No, I'm not dating Radley Seager," I tell them. I'm currently not dating anyone now.

I may have to face it that I will end up being just like Eudora Welty; several loves but died alone.

The audience lets out a collective let down 'ah.'

"But I do know him and I'm currently working on an interview with him for Harper's," I say. At least I still have that.

The audience seems to like that explanation. If they only knew.

* * *

Our breakfast at The Black Swan is amazing and I'm enjoying myself more than I ever thought I would. Perhaps it's the company of Sylvia and the slower pace of this conference that makes it enjoyable and a welcome distraction. Even though I cried half the night thinking about Julian and checking my phone to see no messages or calls from him, I feel better this morning than I should. I drink a couple of cups of coffee to make sure I'm wide awake for the day.

We're also dressed in the theme of the weekend. I've got on satin pants and a sequin top while Sylvia sports a polyester asymmetrical dress and a sequined cap. Our platform shoes are bit hard to walk in and we've got a little bit of a walk ahead of us to the convention center. Despite wearing our coats, we're both freezing in our costumes. It's hard to hurry in platform shoes but we do our best and get to the convention center just in time.

Kathy begins the day by welcoming everyone to Girlfriend Weekend and then Sylvia takes the stage for her keynote address. I am amazed at her talent and poise. She's been a successful author for quite some time now and she's got the speech down. Her new book, *LOOKING BEYOND INWARD* is simply brilliant and I understand it will hit the Times Best-Seller list on Sunday at number five with my book, *THE STREET SINGER*, debuting at number one. I feel a little bad that I might keep her book from going up higher on the list but she assures me she's proud of me for the accomplishment and to relish every day it's on that list.

Sylvia reads an excerpt from her book. I look around the room and see that the audience hangs on her every word. I get goosebumps listening to her prose. She was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize in literature last year. I read the winner's book and wasn't impressed. Sylvia was clearly robbed. Even the internet thought so, too.

The audience claps when she finishes the passage.

"Oh, Sylvia," Kathy says. "That's so beautiful."

"Thank you," Sylvia says.

Sylvia's Q&A goes very well. This is her fourth time to this conference, and it's become her favorite. As the morning program comes to a close, I wait on Sylvia to finish her signing. My program and signing isn't until tomorrow but already many of the attendees have asked for photos of me with them and, of course, they all ask about Radley, including a woman from the New Orleans chapter I met a few weeks ago.

"I knew there was something special about you," the woman says to me. "I'm Eugenia, from your hometown chapter, remember?"

"Oh, yes, Eugenia," I say to her. The woman I recognized from my not that long ago Nordstroms days. "I do remember you. How are you?"

"I'm having a blast," she tells me. "Our chapter was wondering if you'd join us at our table this afternoon. We really are a lot of fun."

"Oh, I'd love to," I tell them. "That would be lovely. Thank you."

"And we want to hear all about Radley Seager, of course," she says.

"Ah, of course," I say to her. "Will you excuse me?"

It's all I can do to make it to the bathroom and into a stall. I sit on the floor and burst into tears. It's not Eugenia's fault. I've been trying to hold it together since I left New Orleans for this trip. I thought I was doing so well, too. I'm not. I should have stayed home, bought one of everything from La Boulangerie, picked up a huge daiquiri to go, and thrown myself a really good pity party in my pajamas for a week or even two. That would have been the best thing for me. Instead, I have to pretend I'm wonderful and that for a little over a week, Radley Seager was my boyfriend and I'm the luckiest girl on the planet.

"Honey, you ok?" someone asks me as she pushes open the stall door.

"I'm ok," I say, stifling my sobs.

"Oh, you're not ok," she says. She pulls off some toilet paper from the roll in the stall and hands it to me.

I wipe my eyes, blow my nose, and stand back up. "Thank you," I tell her. I walk over to the sink and look at myself in the mirror. I am a disco hot mess.

"It's a guy, isn't it?" she asks me.

"How can you tell?" I ask her.

"Because women only go sit down on a nasty toilet floor and cry for one reason... a guy."

I laugh. "You're right."

"And I take it it's not the guy everyone thinks it is, either," she says.

"It's not," I say. "And I screwed things up."

"I don't believe that," she says.

"No, I did," I say. "I kept secrets from him and that did us in."

"Bad secrets?"

"No," I say. "I was trying to protect him and because of that I lost him."

"Does he know you were protecting him?" she asks.

"I don't know what he thinks of me," I sob. "He hasn't contacted me. I thought I was being so strong."

"Oh, honey, love makes the strongest of us weak," she says. "I ought to know, I'm a romance author."

I laugh. "You would know. Thank you." I dab at my eyes and wipe the runny mascara from my cheeks.

"You're so welcome," she says and gives me a hug. "I think he's stupid if he doesn't see how much you care about him."

"I'm just a fool in love," I say.

"No, honey, he's the fool."

* * *

For the Friday night festivities, all of the authors have been asked to serve all the participants of the Girlfriend Weekend. Thankfully I waited tables in college, so this is right

up my alley. Sylvia is also in her element as she used to work in her family's restaurant when she was younger. The romance author who helped me out in the bathroom, Prudence Taylor-Smith, seems lost and confused.

"You just stick to filling glasses with tea and passing out rolls," I tell her. "I've got your back."

"Thank you," she says. "I'm really a klutz in the kitchen. I'm a much better writer, trust me."

"Oh, I believe you," I say. I smile at her as I stack several dinner plates on a tray and carry them out to the dining area where the guests await. "Piece of cake!"

I take the plates out to the guests as all the authors try to do their best at serving. Some are better than others. Luckily Sylvia and I can take up the slack.

"What if I was chosen to be here strictly for my serving skills and not my book skills?" I ask Sylvia as we load up our trays again.

"Come Sunday you will have the number one book in the country," she says. "We writers really are that neurotic when it comes to our work, aren't we?"

"Of course we are," I say. "I don't feel worthy of all this attention."

"None of us do," she says. "So, take it all in while you've got it because next week James Patterson will knock you out of that spot, trust me."

"Or you might," I say. "You sold out of books today!"

"Ha," she laughs. "So, did you and you haven't even spoken yet!"

"I did?"

"They're having to order more from a bookstore in Shreveport," Sylvia tells me. "You're on fire."

I take my tray out to the diners with a smile on my face. I hope that people want to read my book because it's good and not because they believe that Radley Seager might pop up at this convention.

"I read your book last night," a woman tells me as she grabs my arm. "It's absolutely wonderful."

"Oh, well, thank you," I say to her.

"I've told everyone here to buy it," she says. "And they all did."

"Well I appreciate that very much," I tell her.

"We all think you're going to get book of the year," another woman tells me as I place her dinner plate in front of her. "It's what everyone is talking about."

"My book was just an alternate pick for December," I say. "I'm sure one of the other author's books is much more worthy than mine."

"We love your book," she says. "And when we love a book in this club, we *love* a book!"

"Oh, wow," I say as I place the last plate down. "Well thank you. I'm humbled."

"We can't wait for your next one," another woman says.

I take my empty tray to the back and smile. I feel validated once again.

* * *

Saturday morning comes early, and I am awake way before I have set my alarm. My mind wanders where it always wanders these past few days – to Julian. It's been a week and a day since I fled Sundance in shame, having lost everything as quickly as I acquired it. Well, almost everything. I still have my article which is due in a couple of weeks, as Andrea has informed me via email, and I will officially be a New York Times best-selling author

come tomorrow morning; yea me. Funny, but I'd trade it all in a heartbeat to get Julian back despite having worked and dreamed about becoming a successful author for most of my life. What's all the success for if you don't have love? I'm really hoping that they aren't mutually exclusive but the cynic in me sees it as likely. I am doomed to success without love.

Sylvia meets me in the dining room of our B&B for a fabulous breakfast casserole and the most wonderful coffee I've ever had. Or maybe I just think every time I have a terrific cup of coffee early in the morning, it's the best I've ever had. I'm determined to have a good day despite my yearning to go crawl back into the bed and feel sorry for myself.

When Sylvia and I were coordinating for this weekend, we decided to dress like ABBA for our Saturday skit and we have not disappointed. I'm the blonde one. She found these great costumes online and they work perfectly. Agnetha and Anni-Frid, eat your hearts out. Although we've only practiced just once, we're going to attempt a routine to *Waterloo* for a bit of entertainment. Good or bad, we're going on.

"You look great," she says as she sips her coffee. "You're not nervous, are you?"

"Oh, heck no," I say. "They'll love us. I'm more nervous about falling off that stage in these boots though."

"So, you're having a great time?" she asks.

"I am," I say. "Everyone has just been lovely and for the most part I haven't wanted to burst into tears for at least ten minutes now."

"That's good," Sylvia says. "Hopefully you won't have time today to do that."

"It's been a week now," I say. "I haven't heard a word from Julian. I'm guessing he doesn't want anything more to do with me. It's time that I accept that fact and move on. It was a festival fling and nothing more."

"I hate that for you, Austen," she says. "You're so deserving of love."

"With my book taking off and, I'm sure, a book tour, and then completing my next novel, I don't know when I'd even have time for a relationship, to be honest," I tell her. "He did me a favor really." Silly me, thinking I can have it all. My cynicism runs deep.

* * *

With my speaking time and Q&A out of the way, I sit at a small table and sign the books everyone has purchased. The line is long, and I feel bad that my signing is monopolizing the event. But on the other hand, I feel honored that they had to order additional books just for me and that everyone genuinely wants to read my book. I'm seriously going to thank Radley personally for making this book so popular. According to Andrea, the book is continuing to sell very well despite reports that Radley was seen in Connecticut going to Jaz's mother's house and several tabloids reporting that an engagement is eminent. She also reports the tabloids believe the fling between me and Radley is officially over. By the lack of tabloid photographers camped outside this convention center, I'm going to take her word on that.

To Karen, Be your own song, Austen Landry. I sign the last book and take a selfie with Karen. My hand isn't cramping nearly as bad as it did at Sundance. Perhaps I'm getting used to this.

"You know I read your debut novel and I thought it was wonderful," she tells me.

"I'm so glad you enjoyed it," I say.

"Do you have another novel coming out?" she asks.

"I do," I say. "Just as soon as I can take the time to finish it."

"I was so disappointed to hear that you and Radley Seager aren't really an item," she says. "I just adore him. I'd give anything to meet him."

"He's a very nice guy," I tell her. "I did an interview with him at Sundance and it will be coming out soon in Harper's."

"You are so lucky," Karen says. "Your life is truly glamorous. Movie stars, writing books, and magazine articles."

I just want to laugh at that. "It's all an illusion," I tell her. "Glamour is in the eye of the beholder. I spend most of my days alone, in pajamas, slumped over a computer."

"Well, it looks pretty glamorous from here," she says. "Sundance. Wow."

"Thank you, Karen," I tell her. "I'm sure your life is glamorous, too."

"I have eleven cats," she says. "I collect Hummels and read a lot. It's not hard for anyone else's life to be more glamorous than mine."

"I work three jobs most of the time and I just royally screwed up two relationships so now I have nothing," I tell her.

"But you were swept away by a gorgeous movie star," she insists. "Why can't that happen to me?"

"Movie stars and lovers just don't walk in randomly and sweep you off your feet," I tell her. "It just never happens that way."

"But wouldn't it be nice if it did?" Karen asks as she takes the book from the table and walks away.

Sylvia looks at me and shakes her head. "Wouldn't that be nice indeed."

"If only," I say.

"You ready to rock out?" Sylvia asks me. "Kathy says she's ready for us."

"Ready as I'll ever be," I tell her and rise from my seat at the signing desk. Sylvia waves to Kathy, who wears a white suit ala *Saturday Night Fever*. If Karen wants to find a glamorous life, she needs to look no further than Kathy. As I've learned over the course of this weekend, she's the one you really want to be and truly a rock star in the literary world.

"And now, taking you back to the seventies, I give to you... ABBA!" Kathy announces us.

Sylvia and I run through the audience and bound on stage as the music begins. We're a little out of step but holding our own. "*Waterloo, couldn't escape if I wanted to...*" we lipsync and dance to the beat. The crowd goes crazy and dances along to us. I smile and get carried away in the moment. "*Whoa, whoa, whoa, oh, Waterloo... Knowing my fate is to be with you...*" I sing. I'm having a great time up on the stage and then suddenly Sylvia stops and everyone in the audience stops as well, only I'm still singing.

Julian Winslow and Radley Seager stand in front of the stage with Samuel standing a few feet from them. Surely, it's just a mirage because I'm getting into the music. "... *finally facing my Waterloo.*" It's not a mirage and I'm the only one left singing in the whole convention center. Kathy even turns our music off for us.

"What are you doing here?" I ask them.

"We came for you," Radley says. "Palmer said you were here, so here we are."

"Oh, my lord, Radley Seager," Kathy squeals. "At Girlfriend Weekend."

"Is this where we are?" he asks.

"Yes," I tell him. I can't believe they are standing in front of me. I can't believe I'm even looking at Julian and he's looking back at me.

"I wanted to tell you that Radley and Jurgen want to make a movie of your book with me directing it," Julian says. "If you'll still have us."

"I thought you hated me," I say. "I saw pictures of you at Sundance that night with your ex-fiancée. The tabloids said you were getting back together."

"I don't hate you," he says. "And no, never. She grabbed me and the cameras began to flash; that's all. In fact, I love you."

A collective 'ohhhhhh' from the audience erupts.

"You love me?" I ask. "Why didn't you text me or call me then?"

"I thought a grander gesture might be needed in this case, Miss Austen," Radley says. "You are named after the greatest romantic writer in history. It's my fault for keeping you waiting. Are you Agnetha or Anni-Frid? I get them confused."

"I think I'm supposed to be Agnetha," I say. "Grander gesture, huh?"

"And I wanted to return this to you," Julian says. He steps up on stage and places the Grand Complications watch back on my wrist. "I believe you left this at Sundance."

"My watch," I say. "We've been through a lot together."

"So, will you let us make a movie out of your novel?" Julian asks me.

I look out into the audience. They hang on my decision. I look at Sylvia, who nods her head in the affirmative.

I look at Kathy, who holds her hand to her heart and also nods her head. I see Karen going absolutely nuts. Perhaps I was wrong about what I told her after all.

"I'm also going to ask Palmer to be my cinematographer again," Julian says. "It's only right."

"Yes," I tell him. "Yes, absolutely." He takes me in his arms and kisses me. Everyone's shouting and applause disappears as we kiss. "I love you, too."

Later that evening, at the main event of the weekend that is called The Big Hair Ball, we all get into the theme of the weekend and dance to disco in our craziest disco outfits we could concoct. Even Kathy helped Radley and Julian find some 1970s outfits at a vintage shop so they could get into the spirit of the night as well. As *Dancing Queen* blares over the speakers and the disco ball spins, Julian and I find ourselves lost in the dance.

"The Darlings of Sundance ride again!" Radley exclaims.

THE END

THE MOCKINGBIRD COMES OUT AND SINGS

by

Austen Landry

"Mockingbirds don't do one thing but make music for us to enjoy. Mockingbirds don't eat up people's gardens, don't nest in corncribs, they don't do one thing but sing their hearts out for us. That's why it's a sin to kill a mockingbird." – Miss Maudie in *To Kill a Mockingbird*

Named after one of the greatest iconic characters in American literature, Radley Seager, like Boo Radley, is a mockingbird. He may not sing his heart out, but he sure does act it; his recent Oscar win for *THE HALLOWED* confirms it. More elusive than reclusive, Radley Seager rarely grants interviews, doesn't maintain a presence on social media platforms, and keeps his love-life very private. So, when he is seen in the public eye, people impose on him all sorts of personalities they want to believe he embodies. And maybe Radley plays along just a bit, keeping the mystique alive; after all, that's what mockingbirds do, they mock.

Being called the luckiest woman on the planet, I had the unique privilege of hanging out with Radley Seager throughout the Sundance Film Festival, where he was promoting a film he not only produced but starred in as well – *Flying to Brazil For Just One Night*. From the moment he landed in Salt Lake City, Utah and walked up to the limo that would whisk us up to his mountaintop Park City rental, I knew there was something wonderful and special about him. Behind the vintage Lynette sunglasses, Seager oozes the kind of charisma and aloofness real movie stars are known for; that is until the limo doors close

and the paparazzi cameras are no longer clicking. When the Lynettes come off, he reverts back to being just a nice guy from Waco, Texas who's done very well.

A late bloomer, Seager didn't discover the stage until his senior year of college at Stephen F. Austin where he tried out for a performance of *Charley's Aunt* on a whim and won the role of Lord Fancourt Babberley, who spends the better part of the play in drag. "I found out I liked dressing up and becoming characters. And I was astonishingly good at it," he explained to me. "It became my drug and I was hooked."

Instead of pursuing a master's degree in business as his parents had hoped, after graduation he escaped to Los Angeles and enrolled in Stella Adler, where he overdosed in Shakespeare, Moliere, Chekov, and Williams. "I turned from being this gawky nerd in college to a Calvin Klein model in L.A. almost overnight. The gym transformed my body and the stage transformed my soul."

Modeling and playing superheroes to the tourists on Hollywood Boulevard paid the bills while he acted and auditioned. "I became laser focused on parlaying my love of acting into a real career that I had no time for anything else. Perhaps that business degree helped me out in that respect. It kept me grounded and determined to succeed."

Bit parts in television and film came his way but nothing that would cement his acting career until a modeling assignment for eyewear would plaster his face up and down Sunset Boulevard and change his course. He was cast from that in an independent film that became a South by Southwest breakout hit and sealed his fate. Radley Seager became a star right in his own backyard of Texas.

"The headiness of that experience, the instant fame, showed me early on that I needed to be guarded with my life," he tells me. "People were coming out of the woodwork

wanting things from me, wanting to be near me, using me. I knew from the start that my career would have to be treated as a business. Thank goodness for that business degree. Radley Seager the movie star was my job now; Radley Seager, the geeky kid from Waco, Texas would have to exist in his shadow."

As we ski down the mountain toward Park City, Radley Seager, the geeky kid from Waco, Texas can exist behind ski goggles and warm scarves. People ski past us, oblivious to the mega-watt movie star presence helping this writer down the mountain. To everyone around us, he and his constant bodyguard, Samuel, are just ski instructors coaxing me down the trail with promises of hot coffee and cool swag. This Radley Seager doesn't have to pretend.

It's not until we slide down the hill and into town that movie star Radley Seager gets put back on display. Even when he's not working, he's working. He is the brand and when in public, the brand behaves. Well, sort of. In a high-end gifting suite, Seager, who typically takes the swag that's offered to him, will have his picture taken with the product then donate it to his foundation to keep it funded. Today, however, he takes what he is entitled to, and gifts it to me, a gazillion dollar watch. He wouldn't let me give it back to his foundation. Instead, it went to pay off my house. This is the Seager effect and the power he knows he wields. "When you're successful and you can finally pay your own way, that's when everything is given to you for free," he exclaims. "Where was the gifting suite when I was struggling and needed my rent paid, huh?" This is Seager paying it forward.

His foundation contributes to many causes but mainly keeps the arts going in underprivileged schools and after-school programs as well as pays for school lunches for students who are struggling to pay at several schools in the Waco, Texas area. "They pay

me obscene amounts of money to act," he tells me. "My parents would be disappointed in me if I didn't give back."

So Seager lives small, compared to most super stars anyway. A small house in the hills overlooking Hollywood and a reasonable apartment in New York where he spends most of his free time. "The paparazzi tend to leave you alone in New York. You can literally walk down the street, take a subway, go out to eat, and no one will even bother you," he tells me. "New Yorkers don't flash their cell phones at you. They're too much in a hurry." Hats and sunglasses keep him somewhat anonymous, but I can attest, having followed Seager around Sundance for a week, the glare of the flashbulbs was intense and unnerving. As a relative nobody having suddenly caught their attention for a brief fifteen minutes of fame, I understand the loathing. They are relentless, intrusive, and merciless. There's no escaping their scrutiny and their lies are inexorable. It's a two-edged sword for Seager. Because of his reclusiveness and elusiveness, the press hound him, and scrutinize his every move, making up stories to sell their editions. The more elusive he is, the harder they chase him. After the paparazzi saw Seager's generosity on full display in a high-end gifting suite, I was then assumed to not only be his new love interest but to also be carrying his twins.

That's why it's so hard for Seager to live the authentic life he so desperately wants to live. After years of building up his credits and finally hitting mega-stardom, the press and the public have largely personified him as a heterosexual leading man, linking him with many starlets, the latest being Jazmine Snow whom he starred opposite in Julian Winslow's award-winning Sundance film, *Flying to Brazil For Just One Night* that he also produced. Once that persona had been established, the subterfuge began and Seager, the mockingbird,

lived two entirely different lives – the one the press saw and the one only a handful of people saw.

It's the persona that only a handful of people see that Seager now wants the world to see as well – that of a generous and private man; a gay man. While on the plane coming to meet and spend the week with Seager, I saw a tabloid picture of Seager and Jazmine Snow walking down the street. Jazmine was preoccupied on the phone and Seager was looking fondly at another person, a person that was cropped out of the picture. That person, I've come to know, is his bodyguard, Samuel. Samuel is the one that keeps Seager safe and has his love, attention, and respect. He's also been right there, by his side, this whole time, for over five years, in the shadows but in plain sight. With his career on fire and diversifying into producing and possibly even directing, he's done with being inauthentic. "I've never set out to deceive anyone," Seager says. "But the pressure to fit into the role of a movie star off screen is beyond overwhelming. Yes, I've dated and if dating me helped their careers, so be it. But I shouldn't have to sacrifice my happiness in order to entertain you. I'm an actor. You were ok with me being a straight guy playing a gay man on screen. Shouldn't it be ok that I'm a gay man playing a straight guy? I'm an actor for crying out loud."

And so the mockingbird comes out and sings a different tune, one that is finally his own song and on his own terms. "I'm still the same guy I've always been, just not hiding it any longer."