



American Romance®

THE SEAL'S CHRISTMAS TWINS

OPERATION: FAMILY

LAURA MARIE ALTOM

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The SEAL's Christmas Twins

«HarperCollins»

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The SEAL's Christmas Twins / L. M. Altom — «HarperCollins»,

Navy SEAL Mason Brown left Conifer, Alaska, and his broken marriage behind long ago. Until one call changes everything. His ex-wife has died in a tragic accident, and given custody of her twin baby girls to Mason and her sister Hattie. Hattie Beaumont always dreamed of having a family—and Mason—but never like this. Now, those old longings seem like betrayal, especially since playing house with Mason comes naturally. She can tell he feels it too, so why is he determined to leave? Mason knows Hattie and the girls are the greatest Christmas gift he'll ever get. But even though he's risked his life countless times, risking his heart again feels so much more dangerous.

His Toughest Mission Yet

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Mason found a fresh diaper and tried grabbing the baby's ankles to raise her behind, but she kicked so hard it was tough to get a hold.

Settling for one ankle, he tried lifting her sideways, then sneaking the diaper under.

"Not like that," Hattie complained. Nudging Mason aside, she caught the baby's ankles one-handed on her first try.

"As much as it pains me to admit this," Mason said with a round of applause, "you're good."

"I've had at least a little practice. You'll get the hang of it." She took the diaper from him and, once she had it properly positioned, stepped aside for him to finish. "She's all yours."

When Mason stepped back, their arms brushed. The resulting hum of awareness caught him as off guard as practically flunking his first diapering lesson.

He and Hattie had never been more than friends, so what was that about? Had she felt it, too? If so, she showed no signs, which told him to just chalk it up to his imagination and get this job done.

Dear Reader,

At this point in my career, I don't often have the opportunity to inject much of my own life into my stories, but something in Hattie, this story's heroine, struck a chord in me I couldn't ignore. All my life, I've been what I now dub a professional dieter. I've tried every fad diet and weight loss system, from Weight Watchers to Nutrisystem to Jenny Craig. They all work for a week or two, but then old habits creep in, and I'm soon back to the weight where I started.

Hattie, too, has struggled her whole life with weight issues, so much so that when her dream guy puts the moves on her, she doesn't believe he could honestly fall for a girl like her—a "fat" girl. Well, navy SEAL Mason Brown isn't an ordinary guy, and he sure isn't so petty as to allow a few extra pounds keep him from admiring all the amazing qualities Hattie has to share.

Hattie helped me conquer a few of my own inner demons. And, while I'll never stop striving to fit into my size-ten college jeans, I now realize there's way more to life than dieting—like truly living and loving my wonderful friends and family!

I so hope you enjoy Hattie and Mason's story of second chances and new beginnings, and remember it's never too late to start a new beginning all your own!

Happy reading!

Laura Marie Altom

The SEAL's Christmas Twins

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

After college (Go, Hogs!), bestselling, award-winning author Laura Marie Altom did a brief stint as an interior designer before becoming a stay-at-home mom to boy-girl twins and a bonus son. Always an avid romance reader, she knew it was time to try her hand at writing when she found herself replotting the afternoon soaps.

When not immersed in her next story, Laura teaches art at a local middle school. In her free time, she beats her kids at video games, tackles Mount Laundry and, of course, reads romance!

Laura loves hearing from readers at either P.O. Box 2074, Tulsa, OK 74101, or by email, balipalm@aol.com.

Love winning fun stuff? Check out www.lauramariealtom.com.

This story is dedicated to my fellow “professional dieters.” May someday soon scientists develop fat-free cheesecake that actually tastes of creamy, gooey goodness as opposed to cardboard!

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Chapter One

“Wait—she’s dead?” Navy SEAL Mason Brown covered his right ear so he could hear the caller. His team was at Virginia Beach’s joint base, Fort Story, immersed in close quarters combat training. If his CO caught him on his cell, there’d be hell to pay. Just in case, he locked himself in a bathroom and crossed his fingers to not lose his already-shoddy signal. “Come again. I’m sure I didn’t fully hear you.”

“M-Mason, I’m sorry, but you heard me right. Melissa and Alec died. Their plane went down, and...” Hattie’s voice was drowned out by the sort of electric, adrenaline-charged hum he usually only experienced at the height of combat. No way was this real. There had to be a mistake, because even though his ex-wife had betrayed him in the worst possible way, even though there’d been thousands of miles between them, he couldn’t imagine life without her at least sharing the planet. “I’m sorry to break this to you over the phone, but with you so far away...”

“I get it.” What he didn’t get was his reaction. Melissa had cheated on him with his old pal Alec six years ago. So why had his limbs gone numb to the point he leaned against the closed bathroom door, sliding down, down until his carefully constructed emotional walls shattered, leaving him feeling raw and exposed and maybe even a little afraid.

“Mason, I know this is probably the last thing you want to hear at a time like this, but Melissa and Alec’s lawyer needs to see you. He says you’re in the will, and—”

“Why would I be in the will?” He clamped his hand to his forehead.

“I don’t know. He wanted to call you, but I asked him to let me. I didn’t want this kind of news coming from a stranger.”

Isn’t that essentially what we are? Though he and Hattie used to be tight, once he and Melissa split, Melissa had taken custody of the rest of her family, as well. In Divorce Land, wasn’t that the natural order?

“Mason? Will you come?”

He groaned.

Just beyond the bathroom’s far wall, gunfire popped like firecrackers. That was his world. Had been for a nice, long while and he felt comfortable here in Virginia. Back in his hometown of Conifer, Alaska, he was a pariah—which still burned his hide, considering he’d been the wounded party.

“Mason? I don’t know why, but Melissa’s lawyer’s adamant you be present at the reading of her will.”

Pop, pop, pop. Considering the fire knotting in his stomach, those shots might as well have been to his gut. “Yeah,” he finally muttered. “I’ll be there.”

* * *

THURSDAY NIGHT, Hattie Beaumont volunteered for pickup duty. Her mother was too grief-stricken to leave her bed after having just lost her eldest daughter to a plane crash. Her dad wasn’t faring much better. Glad to be inside and out of the blustery October wind, Hattie lugged her sister’s five-month-old twins to the nearest row of chairs in Conifer’s airport terminal—newly constructed after the old one collapsed following a heavy snowfall.

River-stone columns now supported the vaulted ceiling of the otherwise modest space that housed three regional airlines, two charter air companies, one rental-car agency, a coffee bar, sundries shop and diner.

At nine, everything was closed. Only three other parties waited for the night’s last incoming flight from Anchorage.

The infants, finally sleeping in their carriers, had been heavy, but not near as heavy as the pain squeezing Hattie’s heart.

Her sister Melissa’s husband’s twin-engine Cessna had gone down in bad weather on Tuesday. Alec died upon impact, but Melissa lived long enough for a search-and-rescue team to get her to an Anchorage hospital, where she’d passed Wednesday morning.

The realization that her sister was well and truly gone hadn’t quite sunk in. It felt more like a nightmare from which she couldn’t wake.

Alec’s parents, Taylor and Cindy, understandably hadn’t taken the news well. They’d retired in Miami, and it was their flight she was meeting. They planned to be in town until Saturday’s double funeral. After that, Hattie wasn’t sure of their plans—or anyone’s plans for that matter. Would her parents and Alec’s share custody of the twins?

Covering her face with her hands, Hattie fought a fresh wave of the nausea that she hadn’t been able to shake since she’d first heard the news of Melissa’s accident. Granted, people of all ages died all the time. Funerals were a sad fact of life, but having a close family member die didn’t seem possible.

Then there was Mason...

Yeah. She’d table thoughts of him for another time. Too much history. Way too much pain on top of an already-crushing amount of grief.

Steeling herself for her eventual reunion with him at her sister’s funeral, then again at Sunday’s reading of the will, Hattie was thankful that she wouldn’t have to see him until then. Despite the fact that she’d had years apart from him to think of what she might say should she ever see him again, she still couldn’t quite string together the words.

How was she supposed to act around the one guy she'd secretly adored? The guy who hadn't just gotten away, but had married and divorced her sister?

Minutes elongated into what felt like hours.

She tried playing a game on her phone but, after losing a dozen times, gave up.

Finally, the drone of the twin-engine Piper Chieftain taxiing to the passenger offloading area signaled the near-end of her grueling night. She doubted she'd even be able to sleep, but if she did, the break from reality would be most welcome.

She rose to wait for Alec's parents. Since the twins were still sleeping, she left them in the seating area that was only thirty feet from the incoming passengers' door.

"Hattie?"

She glanced to her left only to get a shock. Mason's dad, Jerry Brown, stood alongside her, holding out his arms for a hug. "Girl, it's been ages since I last saw you—though I hear you and Fern visit all the time."

"True. I can't get enough of her shortbread cookies." Fern was Jerry's neighbor. She was getting on in years, and Hattie enjoyed chatting with her. What she didn't enjoy was passing Mason's old house. The mere sight reminded her of happier times, which was why she hustled by, carefully avoiding a possible meeting with Jerry. The last thing she wanted was to hear about his son. For hearing about Mason would only serve as a reminder of how much he was missed.

He laughed. "That makes two of us." His smile faded. "Addressing the elephant in the room, how're you and your folks coping? Both your sister and Alec gone..." He shook his head. "One helluva blow."

"Yeah." She swallowed back tears. "I'm here to pick up Alec's parents."

"I'm grabbing Mason. It'll be damn good to see him, though I wish our visit was under happier circumstances."

Mason will be here? Now? As in the next thirty seconds?

Considering her sister had just died, fashion hadn't topped her priorities. Hattie wore jeans, a faded Green Bay Packers sweatshirt a patron had left at her bar, and she'd crammed her hair into a messy bun—as for makeup, it hadn't even occurred to her. Jeez, what is wrong with you? Why are you worried about how you look?

She shook her head, suddenly feeling jittery.

Sure, she'd known Mason would be coming for the funeral, but she'd assumed they wouldn't run into each other until Saturday. This was too soon. What would she say or do?

Whereas moments earlier grief had slowed her pulse, panic now caused it to race. She couldn't see him. Not yet.

And then an airline representative stole all options for possible escape by opening the doors. In strode Mason. Out went her last shred of confidence.

She took a few steps back into a shadow. With luck, Mason wouldn't even see her.

The plan proved simple, yet effective, as Mason and his dad were soon caught up in their reunion.

Two strangers entered the terminal, and then Alec's parents. What were their thoughts about Mason having been on their flight? Or were they so absorbed in their grief, they hadn't noticed?

"Cindy? Taylor?" Hattie waved them over. "Hi. How was your flight?"

Cindy's eyes appeared red and sunken, her expression hollow. Taylor didn't look much better.

"It was fine," Taylor said, "but we're ready to call it a day."

"I understand. Should I get a cart for your luggage?"

He shook his head. "We don't have much."

"Okay, well...I'll grab the twins, and we'll be on our way." Awkward didn't begin to describe the moment, especially when she accidentally glanced in Mason's direction, but he turned away. Purposely? She hoped not.

* * *

SUNDAY AFTERNOON MASON shoveled for all he was worth, but still couldn't keep up with the mid-October snow. Located on the eastern shore of Prince William Sound, Conifer was known for impressive snowfalls. As an oblivious kid, he'd spent hours happily building forts and snowmen and, if he'd been really ambitious, even tunnels. Now he needed to dig out his dad's old truck, carefully avoiding the passenger-side door, which was barely attached to the vehicle after it had been rammed by an angry plow driver some ten years earlier.

His dad's trailer was dwarfed by towering Sitka spruce. Mason used to like playing hide-and-seek in them. Now, having grown used to the open sea, the dark forest made him feel trapped.

It had been six long years since he'd been home.

Best as he could remember, he'd once enjoyed the whisper of wind through the boughs. Today, the world had fallen silent beneath the deepening blanket of snow. If pressed, he'd have to admit the evergreen and ice-laced air smelled damned good. Fresh and clean—the way his life used to be.

"This is the last place I expected to see you."

"Same could be said of you." Mason glanced toward the familiar voice to find little Hattie Beaumont all grown up. He'd seen her in the airport when he'd come in, but with Alec's parents having been there, the timing was all wrong for any kind of meaningful conversation. That morning, at the funeral, hadn't been much better. "Not a great day for an afternoon stroll."

"I like it." At the funeral, he'd been so preoccupied, he hadn't fully absorbed the fact that the former tomboy had matured into a full-on looker. She was part Inuit, and the snow falling on her long dark hair struck him as beautiful. Her brown eyes lacked her usual mischievous sparkle, but then, given the circumstances, he supposed that was to be expected. "Feels good getting out of the house."

"Agreed." He rested his gloved hands on the shovel's handle. "Snow expected to stop anytime soon?"

"Mom says we could see ten inches by morning."

"Swell." Around here, pilots flew through just about anything Mother Nature blew their way, but a major storm could put a kink in his plans to fly out first thing in the morning.

"We still on for this afternoon?"

He nodded. "Two, right?"

"Yes. Benton's opening his office just for us, so don't be late."

He couldn't help but grin. "Little Hattie Beaumont, who never once made it to school on time, is lecturing me on punctuality? And how many nights did your mother send me out to find you for dinner?"

Eyes shining, she looked away from him, then smiled. "Good times, huh?"

"The best." Back then, he'd had it all figured out. Perfect woman, job—even had his eye on a fixer-upper at the lonely end of Juniper Lane. Considering how tragic his parents' marriage had ultimately been, he should've known better than to believe his life would turn out any different.

Joining the navy had been the best thing he'd ever done.

"Well..." She gestured to the house next door. "I wanted to thank Fern for the pies and ham she brought to the wake. Might as well check her firewood while I'm there."

"Want me to tag along?" He'd forgotten the spirit of community up here. The way everyone watched out for everyone else. He'd lived in his Virginia Beach apartment for just over five years, but still didn't have a clue about any of his neighbors.

"Thanks, but I can handle it." Her forced smile brought on a protective streak in him for the girl who'd grown into a woman.

"I'm not saying you can't. Just offering to lend a hand. Besides..." Half smiling, he shook his head. "I haven't seen Fern since she ratted me out for driving my snowmobile across her deck."

"She still hasn't built railings. I'm surprised nobody's tried it since."

"What can I say? I'm an original."

“More like a delinquent.” She waved goodbye and walked down the street, then shouted, “Don’t be late!”

“I won’t.”

“Oh—and, Mason?” He’d resumed shoveling, but looked up to find her biting her lower lip.

“Yeah?”

She looked down. “Thanks for coming. I really appreciate it.”

“Sure. No problem,” he lied. Actually, returning to Conifer had brought on an unfathomable amount of pain. Remembering Hattie’s big sister, Melissa—the love of his life—was never easy. Not only had she broken his heart, but spirit. She’d taught him trust should’ve been a four-letter word. He hated her on a scale he’d thought himself incapable of reaching.

Now that she was dead?

All that hate mixed with guilt culminated in killer heartburn and an insatiable need to escape.

Chapter Two

Hattie had believed her childhood crush on Mason long over. Then he’d gone and flashed his crooked smile, opening the gate for her flood of feelings for him to come rushing back.

Along with her parents—the twins were being watched by their neighbor Sophie—Hattie now sat outside the office of family friend, and the only lawyer in town, Benton Seagrave, waiting for Mason to arrive. The metal folding chair serving as his trailer’s bare-bones reception area made her squirmy. The scent of burnt coffee churned her stomach.

As with many folks in Alaska, Benton had a personal drive outside of his profession. He practiced law from October through May—and then, begrudgingly. His summers were spent on his gold claim in the Tolovana-Livengood region. The only reason he’d agreed to see the family today was because Mason and Alec’s folks flew out in the morning.

Holding her hands clasped on her knees, Hattie closed her eyes, contrasting her remembered images of Mason with ones recently gained.

He’d always been taller than her, but now she felt positively petite standing beside him—not an easy feat for a woman a few local teens still called Fattie Hattie. Not only had he grown in height, but stature. He’d shoveled in his Sorel boots, jeans and a brown long-johns top that had clung to broadened shoulders and pecs. When he’d shoveled, his biceps could’ve earned their own zip code. Sure, in the bar she owned plenty of fit men came and went, but none caused her stomach to somersault with just a flash of a crooked smile. Mason’s blue eyes had darkened and lines now creased the corners. His perpetually mussed dark hair shone with golden highlights. She was two years younger than him, and while the few other kids they’d gone to school with mercilessly teased her about her weight, he’d actually talked to her, sharing her love of astronomy and fishing and most of all...her sister.

On Mason and Melissa’s wedding day, Hattie had tried being happy, but in actuality, she’d suffered through, forcing her smile and well-wishes, secretly resenting her sister for not only her too-tight maid-of-honor dress selection, but for marrying the only man Hattie had ever loved.

Of course in retrospect, Hattie knew she hadn’t loved Mason, but crushed on him. Daydreamed of him holding her, kissing her, declaring it had never been Melissa he’d wanted, but her. Now that Melissa was dead, the mere thought of those traitorous longings made her feel dirty and disrespectful.

Melissa was—had been—the bronzed beauty every guy wanted. For as long as she could remember, Hattie battled jealousy and resentment she’d never wanted, but seemed to have always carried. When Melissa destroyed Mason by cheating on him, well, Hattie had secretly sided with him in believing her own sister heartless and cruel. Years later, when Melissa struggled to conceive, Hattie’s guilt doubled for believing her sister’s infertility was karma paying a call.

Now that Melissa was dead, self-loathing consumed Hattie for not only all of that, but not being able to cry. Since the accident, she’d been the strong one, shielding her parents from the painful process of burying their perfect child, their pretty child, the one their Inuit mother had called piujuq—beautiful.

From outside came the clang of someone mounting the trailer's metal steps. Seconds later, the door was tugged open. Mason ducked as he entered, brushing snow from his dark hair. He still wore his jeans and boots, but had added an ivory cable-knit sweater that made his blue eyes all the more striking. For a moment, Hattie fell speechless. Then she remembered she wasn't seeing Mason for a happy reunion, but the reading of her sister's will.

Her parents, still holding tight to their resentment over the divorce—and especially his attendance at an intimate family moment such as the reading of Melissa's will—barely acknowledged his presence.

"Am I late?" He checked his black Luminox watch, the kind she'd seen on divers around town. Certain times of year, Conifer was a bustling port.

"W-we're early." She struggled knowing what to do with her hands. "Alec's parents should be here soon, so Benton said to let him know when we're all ready."

"Sure." Mason shoved his hands in his pockets.

And then they waited.

No one said a word. Aside from wind gusts and papery whispers of Reader's Digest pages being turned, all in the cramped space had fallen silent. Thank goodness Hattie's racing thoughts and pulse had no volume or everyone would know the extent of her panic. For years, she'd dreamed of a reunion with Mason, but never under these circumstances.

Twenty minutes passed with still no sign of Alec's parents.

A muffled landline rang in Benton's office, then came a brief, equally muffled conversation.

"Look," Mason said, "if you all don't mind, I'd just as soon get started. I can't imagine what Melissa would've left me. The whole thing's bizarre."

"Agreed," Hattie's father said, also rising, offering his hand to his wife. Akna and Lyle led the way down the short hall leading to Benton's office.

Before Lyle had reached the door, Benton opened it. "Good, you're all here." He waved Akna and Lyle into the room. "That was Taylor and Cindy on the phone. They're not going to make it."

"Everything all right?" Lyle asked.

"As well as can be expected."

While her parents and Benton made polite conversation, Hattie hung back with Mason. He made the formerly smallish space feel cramped. She needed to get away from him. And take time to process what losing her sister really meant.

"Ladies first." He gestured for her to lead the way, which was the last thing she wanted. She felt most comfortable in jeans and a roomy sweatshirt. Her black slacks and plum sweater clung in all the wrong places and she'd never wished more for a ponytail holder to hold her long hair from her face.

The graying lawyer greeted them at the door, shaking their hands. "Damn sorry about all this. Melissa and Alec were good people."

Really? The weight of what her sister and Mason's former best friend had done hung heavy in the room.

Her parents had already been seated.

Mason cleared his throat. "I don't mean to be rude, but can we get on with this?"

Hattie sympathized with what he must be going through. Just as she had guilt, he must harbor anger. Granted, Mason had left Conifer years ago and his absence no doubt tempered the initial sting of finding his wife in bed with his best friend, but there wasn't a statute of limitations on that sort of thing. Hattie couldn't imagine how Mason now felt regarding the lovebirds' sudden deaths.

Benton's office could've been featured on a special episode of Hoarders. Stacks upon stacks of files leaned precariously on every available surface.

Behind his desk, Benton shuffled through three more leaning piles. He tugged one out, only to have the whole pile follow in a paper-work avalanche. "Oops." He flashed them all a reassuring smile. "Happens all the time. Give me a sec, and we'll be back on course. Hattie, Mason, please, have a seat."

Mason knelt to assist with the cleanup.

Normally, Hattie would've helped, too, but at the moment, she lacked the strength.

"There we go," Benton finally said, reassembling the file he'd previously held. "Thanks, Mason."

"No problem."

"All right, then, let's skip formalities and get right to the meat of the matter."

"Perfect." Lyle took Akna's hand.

Hattie wished for someone to comfort her.

Two additional padded folding chairs faced Benton's desk. Mason sat in the one nearest the window.

Hattie took the other.

To Hattie, Benton said, "Having Vivian and Vanessa changed your sister—softened her to a degree I'm not sure she allowed most people to see."

Resting his elbows on his knees, Mason grunted.

Hattie commenced with squirming, carefully avoiding brushing against Mason in the too-close space.

"She was highly superstitious about Alec's flying. After their marriage, he had me write up a will, stating her his sole beneficiary."

Sighing, Mason asked, "What does any of that have to do with me?"

Hattie pressed her lips tight to keep from saying something she might regret. Mason had a right to be angry with Melissa, but he didn't have to be rude. Even though Hattie had her own issues with her sister, when it came down to it, she'd loved her as much as everyone else had in their small town. Melissa's beauty and spirit had been irresistible. Their parents hadn't been upset with their eldest for having an affair. Instead, they'd believed Mason—formerly a commercial fisherman—in the wrong for being gone so many days at sea, especially at a time when she'd needed him more than ever.

The lawyer closed the file and sighed. "I'm afraid this has everything to do with you, Mason—quite literally. Alec left the entirety of his estate to Melissa...."

Akna held a tissue to her nose. "Please, hurry."

"Of course." Benton consulted the file. "Bottom line, Melissa bequeathed everything to Hattie and Mason in the event both she and Alec passed at the same time."

"What?" Lyle released Akna to stand. "That's ridiculous."

"Surely, not everything—not...the girls?" Tears streamed down Akna's weathered cheeks.

Benton nodded. "Afraid so."

"Why?" Hattie asked.

"This might explain." He handed a letter to Mason, but Mason held up his hands. "You read it. I don't want anything to do with any of this."

Akna shot him a dark look.

"Very well..." Benton took the sealed letter, opened it, then began to read.

"Mason—

If you're reading this, my dreams were indeed the premonition I'd feared. I know you never held much faith in my Inuit heritage, but we place great significance on dreams, and as I have had the same dream of Alec and me passing on three different occasions, I feel compelled to make arrangements should the worst indeed happen.

First, I owe you an apology. Our losing the baby was a horrible accident, nothing either of us could've prevented. I'm sorry I not only blamed the miscarriage on you, but was too cowardly to admit I'd outgrown our relationship."

Mason stood, hand over his mouth, eyes shining with unshed tears.

Benton asked, "Would you like to read the rest in private?"

"Get it over with." Hands clenching into fists, Mason stared out the window on the far side of the room.

"You're a monster," Akna said. "How dare you disrespect my daughter's last words."

"Honey..." Lyle slipped his arms about her shoulders.

Hattie wished for an escape hatch to open beneath her chair.

Benton cleared his throat, then continued to read from the letter.

"I'm ashamed to admit, my whole life was spent in the pursuit of pleasure. Now that I'm a parent, I understand how much more to life there is. Honor and self-sacrifice. The kinds of traits I now recognize not only in my sister and parents, but you.

I doubt you're aware of this, but Hattie has harbored quite the crush on you for as long as she could walk well enough to follow you around. If my dreams are true, and I am soon to die, I want to do something well and truly good.

The best thing I can think of is to play matchmaker. If you and Hattie end up together, not only will my gorgeous twins end up with a great set of parents, but my beautiful, kindhearted sister will live happily ever after with the good guy she's always deserved.

"That's it." Benton folded the note, returning it to the envelope. "Lyle, Akna, I hope that answers your questions as to why your daughter chose to leave her twins to Hattie and Mason."

"We'll contest it." Akna held a white-knuckled grip on her purse. "My grandbabies need to be with me. Family."

"Wh-what am I?" Hattie managed past the wall of tears blocking her throat.

"Your mother didn't mean it like that," Lyle assured her.

"Lord almighty..." While the wind howled outside the trailer's paper-thin walls and windows, Mason shook his head. "I feel like we've been here ten days. This is nuts. No one gives away kids based on a few stupid dreams."

Akna fired off a round of Inuit curses at Mason.

Hattie's chest had tightened. As much as she adored her baby nieces, in no way, shape or form was she ready to become a mom. Melissa had tossed around formally naming Hattie as the twins' godmother a few times, but that'd been just talk. Hattie had always dreamed of being a mom, but considering her lackluster social life, she'd resigned herself to the fact that unless Prince Charming breezed in on a white snowmobile, her only destiny was to become an old maid. She couldn't even process the fact that her sister had just outed her feelings for Mason.

"No." Mason paced the cramped, sterile office. "I want no part of this. Clearly, Melissa wasn't in her right mind, and I sure as hell don't believe Inuit dream voodoo."

"You hush!" Akna demanded.

Hattie shot him a look. "Leave my culture out of this." Of Benton, she asked, "Are you sure Melissa didn't want the girls to be with their grandparents? My mom and dad have already taken them in."

"As you heard in not just the letter, but on all legal documentation, Melissa was quite clear in her wishes. She wanted the girls raised in their own home by her sister and her ex-husband."

Mason snorted. "Look, I can tell you right now this isn't happening. I'm due back on base first thing Tuesday morning, and want no part of Melissa's twisted matchmaking scheme—no offense, Hattie. You're a great gal, but..."

"I get it," she said, mortified her own sister would stoop so low as to embarrass her from beyond the grave.

Benton said, "It's understandable you'd need a few days to adjust to something of this nature."

"There's no adjusting. Deal me out."

Hattie glanced over her shoulder to find Mason's complexion lightened by a couple shades. He'd narrowed his eyes and held the heels of his hands to his forehead.

"Hattie?" Benton asked. "How do you feel regarding the matter?"

She straightened, drawing strength from not only herself, but her ancestors. "If this is what Melissa wanted for her children, who am I to deny her? Not sure how," she said with a faint laugh, "but I will raise my nieces."

"This is wrong," Akna said.

"I agree." Lyle shifted on his seat. "Weren't there other letters from our daughter? Why'd she leave just the one?"

Benton rifled through the file. "That appears to be the only one. She gave me the packet herself. Before now, I never checked the contents. But, Hattie, if you feel capable of raising your nieces, there's no reason Mason should feel compelled to stay."

"Good." Mason now rested his hands on his hips. "Perfect solution. The kids are in capable hands, and I'm back on my base. Problem solved."

"Not so fast." The lawyer wagged a pen. "Mason, while I understand your reluctance to take on such a challenge, as of now, you and Hattie share legal custody of Vivian and Vanessa. A family-court judge can release you from this responsibility, but it will take time."

A muscle ticked in Mason's clenched jaw. "How much time are we talking?"

"Well, let's see..." Benton took a few endless minutes to consult his computer. "Ironically, the nearest family-court judge for five hundred miles is on maternity leave. A judge in Valdez is temporarily hearing her cases. First thing Monday morning, Mason, I'll get you on Judge Dvorck's docket, but considering the fact that, like it or not, Melissa's twins are your legal responsibility, I'd strongly advise you to assume their care until the judge releases you from all financial and custodial ties to the estate." Withdrawing a legal-sized envelope from his top desk drawer, he opened it, then passed along two sets of keys. "These belong to Melissa and Alec's home and cars. Counting real estate, life insurance and investments, the twins—and you—should live quite comfortably." He gave Mason and Hattie each copies of the files. "These contain detailed listings of all assets."

Hattie felt near drowning. Was this real?

Her mother quietly sobbed.

Lyle helped his wife to her feet. "Let's go. It's clear we're not needed."

Damn Melissa for doing this to their parents.

"So wait—" Mason said once Lyle and Akna had gone. "Me and Hattie are supposed to drag Melissa's kids from their grandparents, then camp out at Alec and Melissa's house until we see the judge?"

"That's about the size of it. Any further questions?" Benton raised his considerable eyebrows.

Oh—Hattie had plenty more she needed to know, but for the moment, the most pressing issue was how was she supposed to keep her sanity while playing house with stupid-handsome Mason?

Chapter Three

In the time they'd spent with Benton, the weather had turned from pretty lightly falling snow to downright blowing ugly. The trailer's grated-steel stairs were snow-covered and treacherous. This time of year, on a clear, bright day they only had maybe ten hours of sun. During the two hours they'd been inside, darkness had settled in.

Mason held out his hand to Hattie, who stood behind him. "Let me help."

"I'm fine!" she said above the wind.

Ignoring her, he took firm hold of her arm. "You won't make it five feet in those heels. Forget you live in Alaska?"

When she struggled to escape him, common sense took over and he scooped her into his arms.

"Put me down!"

He did—once he'd reached her SUV. "There you go. I'll follow you to your folks'. I'm assuming that's where the twins currently reside?"

"Not necessary. I'll take it from here."

"Why are you being so stubborn?"

She ignored him to fish through her purse for her keys, which she promptly dropped in the snow. They both knelt at the same time and ended up conking heads.

"Ouch," they said in unison, rubbing their noggins.

Mason had to laugh. "This reminds me of that time I took you salmon fishing and you damn near knocked yourself out just leaving the boat's cabin."

"I tripped and you know it."

"Yeah, yeah..." He found her keys, then pressed the remote. "Climb in. I'll see you in a few."

"Mason..."

Her dark, wary tone told him she'd prefer he stay away, but he'd never been one to shirk duty and didn't plan on starting now. For whatever time he was legally charged with caring for Melissa's kids, he would. Out of the memory of what they'd once shared, he owed her that much.

The storm made it tough to see the road, but Mason was familiar enough with the route to his former in-laws' he could've driven it blindfolded. He'd shared a lot of good times with Melissa and Hattie's parents. This afternoon, like the day of Melissa's funeral, wouldn't be one.

The back-and-forth drone of the wipers transported him to another snowy day. Weeks after his divorce had been finalized, he'd been fresh off the boat from a grueling two-month Yakutat king-crab season to find himself with his dad at the Juniper Inn's Sunday brunch seated two tables down from newlyweds Melissa and Alec. As if that weren't bad enough, Akna and Lyle were also in attendance. As long as he lived, he'd never forget their disapproving stare. Melissa's betrayal—and Alec's—had been hard enough to bear.

His dad counseled to play it cool. Not to let them get beneath his skin. They weren't worth it. But all through middle and high school, throughout his and Melissa's two-year marriage, he'd loved Akna and Lyle. They were good people. It killed him to think for one second they blamed him for his marriage falling apart. Yes, he'd spent a lot of time away from home, but he was working for Melissa—they. Their future.

Losing their baby hadn't been anyone's fault.

He remembered a fire crackling in the inn's too-fussy dining room. His chair had been too straight-backed and uptight. Even though the weather outside was bitterly cold, inside struck him as annoyingly hot. As long as he lived, he'd never forget the way the snow pelting the windows melted on contact, running in tearlike rivulets that reminded him of Melissa's tears when she'd asked for a divorce.

She'd claimed his distance had driven her to Alec—not physical distance, but emotional. She'd said the miscarriage changed him. Mason believed that a crock. She was the one who'd changed. His love had never once faltered.

On autopilot, back in the present, he parked his dad's old pickup in front of Akna and Lyle's house.

Though the temperature had dropped to the teens, his palms were sweating. Countless dangerous SEAL missions had left him less keyed up.

Hattie pulled into her parents' driveway ahead of him. She now teetered on their front-porch steps. What'd gotten into her? The Hattie he remembered struck him as a practical, no-frills girl who knew better than to wear high-heel boots in a snowstorm. But then, that girl had also been a tomboy, doe-eyed dreamer who'd preferred the company of her dogs over most people. It saddened him to realize he no longer knew the striking woman she'd grown into. They might as well be strangers.

She damn near tripped, so he hastened his pace to a jog.

"Slow it down." He took her arm. "You act like this is somewhere you want to be."

Wrenching her arm free, she grasped the railing instead of him. “Where else would I be? This is my family. Used to be yours.”

He snorted.

At seventeen, he and Hattie had helped Lyle build this porch over a warm summer weekend. Melissa had sat in a lawn chair, supervising. Over ten years later, the wood groaned beneath their footfalls. Bitter wind whistled through the towering conifers that had given the town its name.

The front door popped open. Lyle ushered his daughter inside. “Hurry, it’s cold. Your mom and I were just wondering what took so—” He eyed Mason. “What’re you doing here?”

“Nice to see you, too.” Mason trailed after Hattie, easing past her father. In the tiled entry, he brushed snow from his hair.

Hattie bustled with the busy work of removing her coat, then taking his.

Took about two seconds for Mason to assess his surroundings well enough to realize he’d stumbled deep into enemy territory.

Akna sat on one end of the sofa holding an infant wrapped in a pink blanket. Sophie Reynolds—a buxom busybody he remembered as being a neighbor and clerk down at Shamrock’s Emporium—held another pink bundle in a recliner. Despite a cheery fire, the room struck Mason as devoid of warmth. As if the loss of their child had sucked the life from Hattie’s parents.

Unsure what to say or even what to do with his hands, Mason crossed his arms. “Brutal out there.”

Akna flashed a hollow-eyed stare briefly in his direction, before asking her daughter, “I suppose you’re here for the girls?”

“Mom...” Hattie leaned against the wall while unzipping one boot, then the other. “Honestly? You probably need some rest. And it’s not like you can’t see the twins as often as you like.”

Sophie noted, “A body can never see too much of their grandbabies.”

Mason didn’t miss Hattie’s narrow-eyed stare in Sophie’s direction.

While Mason stood rooted in the entryway, Hattie joined her mother on the sofa, taking the baby into her arms. Her tender reverence reminded him that Alec had been the one who’d ultimately given Melissa her most cherished desire. Part of him felt seized by childish, irrational jealousy over his once best friend filling his wife’s need for babies. But then the grown-up in him took over, reminding Mason the point was moot, considering both parties were dead.

“It’s not the same, and you know it.” Akna angled on the sofa, facing her daughter and granddaughter. “Right, Sophie?”

Sophie nodded. “Amen.”

Akna said, “Your sister betrayed me.” By rote, she made the sign of the cross on her chest. The official family religion had always been an odd pairing of old Inuit ways blended with Lyle’s Catholicism. A gold-framed photo of the Pope hung alongside Melissa’s and Hattie’s high school graduation pictures.

“Oh, stop. Melissa loved you very much.” Hattie’s voice cracked, causing Mason to shift uncomfortably. As much as he’d told himself he hated Melissa, wanted her to hurt as badly as she’d hurt him, he’d never wanted this. Hattie regained her composure. She’d always been the stronger of the two sisters.

“Obviously, not enough. And how could she have ignored Alec’s parents? When your father called to tell them the news, poor Cindy had a breakdown. Taylor’s got them on the first flight out in the morning so she can see her doctor.”

“Such a shame,” Sophie murmured.

“Akna, I’m sorry about all this.” Mason left the entry to join them. “Which is why—soon as possible—I’ll sign over my rights to Hattie. What you all do from there is your business.”

“Hattie,” Akna asked, “with the time you spend at the bar, do you even feel capable of raising twins?”

Hattie shrugged before tracing the back of her finger along her sleeping niece's cheek. "If this is what Melissa wanted, I feel honor bound to at least try."

Lyle ran his hands through his hair and sighed. "A few weeks ago, Melissa and the girls rode along with me while I covered for one of my delivery guys." A former bush pilot, Lyle now owned a grocery distribution center that served many nearby small communities. "Looking back, she acted jumpy. She mentioned not having been sleeping. Didn't think much of it at the time—chalked it up to her being a new mom. She talked a lot about wanting Hattie to be the girls' godmother, and that if something ever happened to her, she wanted them raised young."

"What does that even mean?" Akna asked through the tissue she'd held to her nose.

"Ask me, this is all unnatural," Sophie said. "The girls should be with their grandparents who love them."

Hattie ignored the neighbor and forced a deep breath. "Mom, no offense to you and Dad, but Melissa brought up the godmother thing with me, too. At the time, I told her she was talking crazy, but she said she wanted the girls raised by someone young. I guess her friend Bess was taken in by her grandmother, then lost her, which is how she ended up in foster care until she turned eighteen. Melissa didn't want that for her girls."

"We'd never let that happen," Lyle said.

Hattie took her niece from Akna's arms. "Look, I know this is a shock for everyone—me, too—but if this is what Melissa wanted—"

Her mother interjected, "What about our wishes?"

Lyle sat beside his wife, taking her hand. "Honey, what we want doesn't matter. All we can do is support Hattie as best we can."

"I would be calling a lawyer," Sophie said.

"Sophie," Hattie said, "please, stay out of this family matter. And, Mom, I don't mean to be harsh, but you're acting petty." Standing, Hattie cupped her hand to the infant's head. Hattie's brown eyes narrowed the way they always had when she dug in her heels to fight for what she wanted. "Why can't we raise the twins together? As of now, Mason and I might have legal custody, but what does that really even mean? I'll move into Melissa and Alec's, which is—what?—three miles from you? You used to watch the girls all the time for Melissa and Alec. Won't you do the same now for me? Vivian and Vanessa will be raised in the only home they've known, by people they love. I fail to see how this isn't the best all-around solution—especially since Mason already agreed to take himself out of the equation."

"It isn't the best," Sophie said, "because grandparents are best. You've never been around little ones. How will you even know what to do?"

While Sophie, in her infinite wisdom, rattled on, Mason was unprepared for the personal sting he felt at Hattie's speech. Did she have to make him sound so heartless and uncaring? But what else could he do? He had no stake in these little lives. Prior to their parents' funeral, he'd never even seen the girls. If he had his way, he'd be on a return flight to Virginia first thing in the morning.

Akna had been silently crying, but her pain now turned to uncontrollable sobbing. "Wh-why did this h-happen?"

Lyle slipped his arm around her.

Sophie closed her eyes in prayer.

Mason felt emotionally detached from the scene, as if he were watching a movie. What was he doing here? This was no longer his life.

Sophie abruptly stood. The once-sleeping infant she'd cradled was startled by the sudden movement and whimpered.

"Here, Mr. Mom." She thrust the baby into his arms. "You think yourself an expert, take over."

Mason didn't even know which baby he held, let alone what to do when her fitful protest turned into a full-blown wail.

* * *

THIRTY MINUTES LATER, Hattie held Vanessa with her right arm, struggling to unlock her sister and brother-in-law's former home. Mason stood behind her with Vivian, who hadn't stopped crying since leaving her grandparents.

"She always like this?" Mason set the bulging diaper bag on the porch.

"Usually, they're both easygoing, but it's been a rough couple days—for everyone."

"Yeah."

She finally got the key turned and opened the door on a house cold and dark and lonely enough to have been a tomb. When Melissa and Alec had been alive, the A-frame log cabin glowed with warmth and laughter. Her sister had been a wonderful cook and she'd always had something delicious baking or bubbling in one of her cast-iron pots.

The storm had passed and the two-story living room featured a glass wall looking out on all of Treehorn Valley and Mount Kneely beyond. Moonlight reflecting off the snow cast a frosty bluish pallor over what Hattie knew to be warm-toned pine furniture upholstered in a vibrant red-orange and yellow inukshuk pattern.

"Cold in here." Mason closed the door with his foot. "Think the furnace is out?"

"Probably. It's a wood-burning system with propane backup. The temperature's been so mild, Alec probably didn't have it going for the season yet."

"Is it downstairs?"

She nodded, wandering through the open space, turning on lamps and overhead lights.

"I'll check it out, but in the meantime, what do you want me to do with this one?" He nodded at still-sniffing and red-eyed Vivian.

"I'll take her." Melissa kept a playpen in the warmest kitchen corner. Hattie set Vanessa in it, then took Vivian. Since the air was cold enough to see her breath, she kept the girls' outerwear on while she made a fire in the living room's river-stone hearth.

Being in her sister's home without Melissa unnerved her. Hattie normally occupied the one-bedroom efficiency apartment above her waterfront bar. It was small, cramped and cozy. Just the way she liked it. This space was too large for her taste. Though beautifully decorated in what she supposed was the classic Alaskan hunting lodge look, featuring an antler chandelier and an oil painting of snowcapped Mount Kneely over the mantel, this was her sister's dream house—not hers. Hattie thrived among clutter.

The house shuddered when the sleeping furnace lumbered awake.

A few minutes later when warm air flowed through the vents, gratitude swelled in Hattie for Mason handling at least that issue. She would've eventually gotten the unit started, but having one less worry was welcome.

Vivian fussed, reaching for her hat.

"I know, sweetie, it's annoying, but until it warms up in here, let's keep it on, okay?" Hattie knelt before the playpen, patting the infant's back.

Mason's boots clomped on the hardwood stairs. "Alec has enough wood to last the week, so as long as one of us remembers to feed the beast, we'll at least be warm for the time being. Before winter sets in, though, I'll have to stockpile a legit supply. I'll make a fire up here, too."

"Already did, but it probably needs stoking."

Both babies were back to fussing. Were they hungry?

Hands to her throbbing forehead, Hattie wished she'd taken more than a casual interest in her nieces. Playing with them had been a much higher priority than an activity as mundane as meals. Hattie knew Melissa had breastfed, supplemented by formula, but the exact powder-to-water ratio escaped her.

"Since I'm over here, handling man work," Mason said from the hearth, "how about you do something about the kids' racket?"

“Love to, but it’s gonna take a sec to get the formula mixed.”

By the time Hattie finished, dancing firelight banished the living room’s dark corners, but did little to ease the pain in her heart.

Both babies still fussed, which only made her fumble more. At the bar, she thrived under the chaotic pressure of a busy Friday or Saturday night. This was different.

“Need help?” Behind her, Mason hovered. His radiated heat further unnerved her. The situation was already beyond horrible. Tossing her old high school crush into the mix only made matters worse. And here she’d thought Melissa and Mason’s wedding had been hard? This was a thousand times tougher.

“Sure.” She managed to swallow past the emotional brick lodged in her throat. “You take Vanessa and a bottle and I’ll grab Vivian.”

In front of the playpen, he scratched his head. “Love to do just that, only I don’t have a clue which one is Vanessa.”

“You’ll learn. Although there are still times I’m not sure, Vanessa typically has a more laid-back disposition. Vivian has no trouble letting you know she’s displeased.”

As if she knew her aunt was talking smack about her, Vivian upped the volume on her wail.

He snorted. “Sounds like you and your sister.”

For the first time since the funeral, Hattie genuinely smiled. “Never thought of it like that, but you nailed your assessment—which makes me an awful person, right?”

“Not even close,” he said over the infant’s cry. “Melissa was a handful and were she here with us, she’d be first to admit it—with a proud smile.”

“True.”

When they each cradled an infant, they settled on the sofa in front of the fire.

Hattie plucked off the twins’ hats and mittens, then gave Vivian her bottle. The sudden silence save for the fire’s crackle and the twins’ occasional grunts and sighs made for much-welcomed peace.

“Sorry about what happened at my parents’. That was an ugly scene.”

“No worries.” He shifted Vanessa to hold her in the crook of his other arm. “I don’t blame them for being upset—Alec’s folks, too. They’ve got to be feeling out of the loop.”

“I suppose. But it doesn’t have to be that way. They’re welcome to see these two whenever they’d like. They chose to run back to Florida.”

“I know, but think of this from their perspective. Alec used to be my best friend, then I caught him sleeping with my wife and never spoke to him again. Cindy and Taylor were like second parents to me. Growing up, I ate more dinners at their house than mine. Everything’s so mixed up, you know? Part of me was glad to see them at the funeral—at least until I remembered they were part of the enemy team. I imagine they feel the same?”

“Probably.” Vivian had thankfully drifted off to sleep. Hattie gently leaned forward, setting the empty bottle on the coffee table. “Wonder if my sister even talked about her will with Alec? Or her prophetic dreams?”

“Guess we’ll never know.”

On the surface, Mason’s words were simple enough, but the finality of that word—never—hit Hattie hard. Up until now, she’d been too wrapped up in the ceremony of her sister’s death to consider the impact of losing someone she’d dearly loved.

At the hospital, during Melissa’s last hours, Hattie had stayed strong for her parents—especially her mom. Then there’d been planning the funeral and reception. Steeling herself for the reading of Melissa’s will. Now there was nothing left to do except begin her new life by essentially stepping into her sister’s.

How many times when Melissa had been married to Mason had Hattie prayed for just such a thing?

In light of her current situation, this fact shamed her. So much so that the tears she'd so carefully held inside now spilled in ugly sobs.

After handing Vivian to Mason, Hattie dashed upstairs, not even sure where she was going, just knowing she needed to be alone.

Chapter Four

Swell.

Mason glanced over his shoulder at Hattie's departing back, then down at the two sleeping infants. What was he supposed to do now? How had he even landed in this impossible situation?

From somewhere upstairs, a door slammed. But the house wasn't solid enough to mask Hattie's cries.

His heart went out to her. Losing Melissa had to be tough.

He'd have no doubt been upset himself if he hadn't already mourned their relationship's death. Then there was the stunt she'd pulled with her letter—the matchmaking bit. What the hell? Poor Hattie had plenty to be upset about, and he hoped she didn't think he'd taken any of her sister's ramblings seriously.

"Ladies," he mumbled to what amounted to maybe twenty pounds of snoozing babies, "I should probably check on your aunt, but that leaves me in a bind as to what to do with you."

They didn't stir.

Since he already cradled one, he made an awkward position change on the couch in order to scoop up the other. Holding both, he slowly rose, then headed for the kitchen, assuming the kiddy corral would be safe enough until he got back.

Their little arms and legs jolted upon landing.

The house was still on the chilly side, so he left them on their backs, wearing their coats.

At the top of the stairs was a loft library he ventured through to gain access to a hall. He forged down it, intent on not just finding Hattie, but stopping her tears. The sound ripped through him. Took him back to when she'd been thirteen and broke her ankle after using scrap sheet metal for a sled. He'd carried her home and made sure she was okay back then and he'd sure as hell do the same now.

He passed a bedroom, the nursery and a bath before reaching the one closed door Hattie had hidden behind. He opened it to step into what could only be the master. A miniversion of the living room's A-frame window wall overlooked a spectacular snowy night scene.

Hattie sat hunched over and crying on the foot of a king-size bed positioned to take maximum advantage of the view.

Mason's first thought should've been comforting her, but all he seemed able to focus on were Alec and Melissa. What they'd done in that cozy bed. How his wife and best friend had betrayed him to an unimaginable degree.

Snapping himself out of his own issues with the deceased, he sat next to Hattie, easing his arm around her as naturally as he always had. "I'm sorry."

She cried all the harder, struggled to escape him, but he drew her closer, onto his lap, where he held her for all she was worth, all the while gently stroking her hair. "Shh...everything's going to be okay."

"No," she said with a sniffle and shake of her head. "Part of me feels like I did this. I hid so much resentment that she had not one amazing man, b-but two. Then she got the perfect babies I'd always wanted. H-her life was everything mine wasn't. I used to wish I could be her—just for a day. But I never wanted her gone, Mason. I—I loved her so much...."

Sobs racked Hattie's frame, and for the first time since losing Melissa to divorce, Mason felt helpless. As a SEAL, he'd been trained to handle any contingency. Make flash life-or-death decisions, but this one had him stumped. How did he begin comforting Hattie when he harbored such ill will toward her sister and brother-in-law? Now that he was both legally and honor bound to care for their children?

It was too much.

“What if she’s somehow looking down on me? And knows I coveted what she had? But I never in a million years wanted it like this. She meant the world to me. More than anything when we were all kids, I wanted to be just like her. As an adult, I realized that wasn’t going to happen, but that didn’t stop the yearning. Still, I did love her. She has to know. Has to.”

“I loved her, too, Hat Trick.” He used to call Hattie that when she’d challenged him to pond hockey. “For her to leave you her children, you have to know she loved you every bit as much?”

She nodded.

Drawing back, he lightly touched her chin, urging her to meet his gaze. Though the room was dark, moonlight reflecting off the snow reinforced the fact that she was far from being the little girl and teen Mason remembered. Hattie was all grown up. Even tear-stained, her face was one of the loveliest he’d ever seen. In many ways, she resembled her sister—big brown eyes and long dark hair. Yet she had higher cheekbones, fuller lips. Where she lacked Melissa’s petite stature, her full curves made her more womanly.

Pushing back, she turned away, fussing with her hair. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to flip out on you like that. Some parent I’ll make, huh?”

“Give yourself a break. This is a full-on nightmare—even if neither of us had any issues simmering on the old back burner. Honestly, I didn’t even want to come to the funeral and figured the will could be handled via email or over the phone. Dad convinced me I’d regret it if I didn’t come.”

“Speaking of him, have you let him know?”

Mason shook his head. “I’ll give him a call.”

A few feet away, she shivered. She crossed her arms and ran her hands up and down them.

He should’ve gotten off the bed to hold her—at least find a blanket to wrap her in, but his feet were frozen in place.

“Guess I should check on the babies.”

“They’re fine. As open as this place is, if they were in trouble, we’d hear them crying.”

“Still...”

He sighed. “They’re fine.”

Ignoring him, she left the room, heading toward the stairs. A few minutes later, just as he’d suggested, the sound of her cooing over them carried all the way to where he still sat.

Honestly, he felt more than a little shell-shocked by the whole turn of events. Now he was not only mad at Melissa for hooking up with Alec, but for apparently thinking so highly of herself as to presume he’d want her matchmaking services. As if that weren’t despicable enough, she’d thought it a good idea to use her own babies as manipulative tools? The whole thing was psycho. He might’ve long ago loved her, but at the moment, he didn’t even kind of like her.

Hattie’s big brown eyes flashed before him, reminding him why he hadn’t told Benton to take a flying leap. His being here, in this house, in the very room where Alec and Melissa had made love, wasn’t about allegiance to his ex, but her sister.

Hattie had always been there for him and he now owed her the same.

He made a quick call to his dad, bringing him up to speed on the will and how he’d be staying at Melissa and Alec’s until his day in court. His dad wasn’t the chatty type, so once the facts were delivered, Mason hung up.

Downstairs, he found Hattie removing the girls’ coats and soft boots. “Want me to help you get them in their cribs?”

“Sure. But they both need fresh diapers.”

He blanched. “Not my idea of a good time, but show me what to do.”

Together they took the babies upstairs, and Hattie walked him through a diaper change. “Diaper removal is pretty self-explanatory. From there, use a few wipes, assess if you think she needs rash cream or powder, then—”

“Okay, whoa—I’m great at assessing, but I usually have a list of parameters to work with.” Hattie wrinkled her nose, and damned if she didn’t strike him as cute. “You lost me.”

“What am I supposed to look for in order to know if either of those contingencies apply?” She cocked her head. “In English?”

“What am I looking for? Like, if I’m supposed to use the powder or cream, how will I know?”

“Oh. Well, the cream you’ll use if anything looks red or irritated. As for the powder...” She shrugged. “Honestly, let’s table it for now. I’ll look it up online or ask Mom. Pretty sure it’s a moisture thing.”

“Want me to research it? I’m much better with that than diapering.”

“Sure. Thanks.” She returned her attention to the baby. “No sign of rash, so we’ll grab a fresh diaper, open it, then slide the back part under her—like this.”

Stepping alongside her for a better view, he nodded. “Got it. Next?”

“Pull up the front, fasten it with the sticky tabs, put her clothes back on and you’re good to go.”

“Wait—you didn’t say anything about the clothes. All of them come off?”

She sighed. “Now you’re being deliberately obtuse.”

“No, really. For whatever time I’m here, I want to be as much help as possible. I’m viewing this as a mission.”

“Wow. Please tell me you didn’t just equate my sister’s babies with battle.” Keeping one hand on the now-squirmy baby, she grabbed a pair of footie pj’s from a nearby drawer.

“What? You don’t want my help?”

“Mason, Vanessa and Viv are real-live babies—not burp-and-feed dolls you’d read about in a manual.”

“Duh. Why do you think I’m concentrating on what you tell me? I want to get this right. We’re in a zero-tolerance mistake zone, right?”

“Wow. Just wow.” She finished her task without so much as looking his way.

Whatever. He took her ignoring him as an opportunity to study the nursery layout. Two cribs, built-in shelves loaded with toys and books. Two upholstered swivel rockers. Changing table. Adequate stockpile of supplies on shelf beneath said table. Easy-access traffic flow—although down the line, the potted Norfolk pine in front of the window could pose a spooky shadow problem.

Overall impression? Way too much pink.

Once Hattie placed her baby in the crib, Mason took his turn at diapering. Forcing a deep breath, he rolled down minitights. It was still chilly, so he left the baby’s long-sleeved dress, undershirt, sweater and socks on her.

Watching Hattie, the diaper process had seemed straightforward enough. He easily undid the sticky tape but, upon lifting the front flap, was accosted by a smell so vile he damn near retched.

“Oh, my God...” He stepped back. Fanning the putrid air, he asked, “What the hell? Is she sick?”

Hattie glared. “Welcome to the wonderful world of babies. Lesson 101—poop stinks. Standard operating procedure.”

“If that last part was a dig at me, stow it. I’m doing the best I can here, okay?”

Her indifferent shrug told him she wasn’t impressed.

Had he really only a few minutes earlier felt sorry for her? Regardless, he forged ahead. “You didn’t mention Number Two in your lesson. Any special spray needed? Protective gloves or eyewear?”

“Want me to do it?”

“No.” And he was offended she’d asked. “I’ve got this.”

Dear Lord. Mason struggled to maintain his composure while cleaning the baby’s behind. Was this poop or tar?

He made the mistake of looking at the kid’s face and their gazes connected. Was she smiling? This one had to be Vivian—the baby whose personality matched Melissa’s. She’d get a kick out of seeing him tortured.

Finally finished wiping, with Hattie supervising, Mason found a fresh diaper and tried grabbing the kid's ankles to raise her behind, but she kicked so hard it was tough to grab hold. Settling for one ankle, he tried lifting her sideways, then sneaking the diaper under.

"Not like that," Hattie complained. "You'll put her in traction before her first birthday." Nudging him aside, she dived right in, catching the baby's ankles one-handed on her first try.

"As much as it pains me to admit this," Mason said with a round of applause, "you're good."

"I've had at least a little practice. You'll get the hang of it." She took the diaper from him and, once she had it properly positioned, stepped aside for him to finish. "She's all yours."

When Mason stepped back into place, their arms brushed. The resulting hum of awareness caught him as off guard as practically flunking his first diapering lesson. He and Hattie had never been more than friends, so what was that about? Had she felt it, too? If so, she showed no signs, which told him to chalk it up to his imagination, then get his job done. Another part of him couldn't get Melissa's words from his head. Hattie has harbored quite the crush on you for as long as she could walk well enough to follow you around. Could it be true?

Perhaps an even bigger question was, what did he feel for her?

Nothing romantic, that was for sure. For as long as he could remember, she'd been his friend. For sanity's sake, he planned to ignore that rush of attraction in favor of putting Hattie safely back in the friend zone.

Subject closed.

It proved no big deal to get the diaper perfectly positioned, and while a few of his new-father SEAL friends whined about the whole sticky-tab thing being tough to tackle, Mason thought that part a piece of cake. He liked lining them up perfectly straight. Precision in all things—especially diapers—was good.

"There." He couldn't help but smile upon completing his goal. "Now what?"

"Take her dress off and put these on." Hattie offered a pair of pj's that matched Vivian's sister's.

"Just a thought—" Mason struggled to unfasten the row of tiny buttons up the back of the dress "—but what if we started color-coding the twins? That way, we'd know who's who."

"You mean dress Vivian in one color and Vanessa in another?"

"Exactly. That way, they won't be sixteen and realize their whole lives they've been called by the wrong names."

"While I applaud your suggestion, I don't think we're in danger of that. Besides, they already have so many pretty matching clothes, I'd hate to toss everything Melissa bought and was given as shower gifts."

"Hadn't thought of that. When I'm researching powder, I'll see if I can find tips on telling twins apart."

"You do that." Though she didn't smile, he'd have sworn he saw laughter spark her still-teary eyes.

Once both girls had been tucked beneath matching fuzzy pink blankets, Mason asked, "Now what?"

"Know how to do laundry?"

"Sure."

She pointed toward an overflowing hamper. "Mind tackling that while I'm out?"

"Where are you going?"

"I have to at least make an appearance at the bar. I haven't been in since first hearing the news."

"But it's Sunday. Thought no alcohol was sold or served?"

She patted his back. "You have been gone awhile. Two years ago, the new mayor, who's a huge Cowboys fan, exempted every Sunday during football season."

As a general rule, Mason never pouted, but he was damn near close. "But I'd rather go with you than be stuck here doing laundry."

“Sorry.” She flashed a forced, unapologetic smile. “One of us has to bring home the bacon.”

“Hattie Beaumont, you turned mean.”

“Nah.” She ducked across the hall and into the bathroom. “Just practical.”

* * *

WITH HER PRACTICAL boots crunching on the city sidewalk’s hard-packed snow, Hattie realized she had never been happier to be away from someone in her whole life. Was she really supposed to live with Mason for however long it took him to get unattached from her sister’s will? Couldn’t he just fly up when it was his turn in court?

Aerosmith’s “Walk This Way” spilled out the bar’s door at the same time as Harvey Mitchell.

“Got a ride?” Hattie asked.

Breath fogging in the cold night air, he hitched his thumb toward the road. “Wife sent the daughter to pick-me-up.” His last three words slurred into one. Looked as though someone should’ve gone home a few drinks earlier.

Hattie waited outside for the few minutes it took for Harvey’s sixteen-year-old, Janine, to show. The bar stood at the end of a pier. She took a deep breath, appreciating the water’s briny tang.

With Harvey safely gone, she headed inside, glad for the warmth and cheerful riot of Halloween decorations she’d put up weeks ago before knowing how tragically the month would end.

“Hey, sweetie.” Her best friend, Clementine Archer, stepped out from behind the bar, enfolding her in a hug. They’d gone to school together since kindergarten. When Clementine’s husband had lost his job at the fish-canning factory, Hattie had suggested her friend take an online bartending class, then come work for her. Five years later, Clementine’s husband had run off to Texas, leaving her on her own with their two sons, but she still worked behind the bar four days a week. Her mom watched the boys. “How’s it going? You’ve gotta be a mess.”

“Oh—I passed mess a long time ago. I’m currently a disaster.” Hattie deposited her purse in a lower cabinet beside the fridge. Before leaving, she needed to run upstairs to switch it out for her usual cargo-style bag. Might as well grab extra clothes, too.

“You leave Mason with the twins?”

Hattie nodded. “He wasn’t happy about it. Pouted like a second grader.”

“How is it?”

“What?” Hattie poured herself an orange juice on the rocks.

Hands on her hips, Clementine shook her head. “Don’t even try playing it cool with me, lady. I’m the one person aside from Melissa who ever knew exactly how much Mason meant to you. No way is his being here not impacting your life.”

Hattie looked at her drink. “Yeah, so maybe I’d like a splash of vodka for this, but you know...” She stared at the crowd of regulars: some played pool, others poker, others still watched one of the four flat screens or just talked. Everything about the night was normal, yet not a single thing in Hattie’s life felt the same. Her eyes welled with tears again. She blotted them with one of the bar’s trademark red plaid napkins she’d had monogrammed with Hattie’s. “It’s all good.”

“Oh, sweetie...” Clementine ambushed her with another hug. “You don’t still have a thing for him, do you?”

“No. Of course not.” Which was why when he’d swooped her into his arms outside of the lawyer’s her heart had skipped beats. When he’d stood beside her in her sister’s kitchen or they’d shared feeding time on the couch or he’d tugged her onto his lap for a comforting hug, everything she thought she knew turned upside down.

And that was bad.

It didn’t matter that Melissa was no longer with them. Mason would always belong to her. Their bond had been unbreakable. So much so that not only had her sister reached from beyond her grave to ask Mason to raise her girls, but she’d had the audacity to suggest he also be Hattie’s man.

Chapter Five

“Thanks for bringing all of this by, Dad—and thank you, Fern, for driving.” His ditty bag and iPad couldn’t be more welcome sights in this unfamiliar home.

While his dad grunted, prune-faced Fern waved off Mason’s appreciation in favor of snooping about the kitchen. She’d tossed her red down coat on the granite counter, but still wore her orange cap and a hot-pink sweat suit with striped blue socks. She’d abandoned her sturdy Sorel boots at the front door. “Where’d Melissa keep her coffee?”

“Couldn’t tell you.”

“Times like these folks need coffee. Hattie didn’t make any? And Danish. Doughnuts. At the very least, she could’ve set out a bag of Oreos.”

Mason tried like hell not to smile. “In Hattie’s defense, she hardly expected anyone to be here. I’m sure her mother’s got plenty of food left from the wake if you two want to head over there?”

“Lord...” Hands on her hips, Fern surveyed Melissa’s top-of-the-line Keurig K-Cup–style coffeemaker. “Prissy and downright pretentious is what this is. If I were you, I’d run this straight out to the dump and get you a nice stove-top percolator.”

“Sure. I’ll see what I can do.” What he failed telling Fern was that he thought the whole single-cup thing pretty damned cool. He’d never known coffee technology existed until his friend Heath’s new bride, Patricia, had it listed on her bridal-shower registry. The damn thing had been pricey, so Mason and his pal Cooper had gone halves on it. Which reminded him, he needed to call his CO and SEAL team roomie about not being home as scheduled.

“Ready?” His dad, Jerry, joined them. “I’ve got shows.”

Fern furrowed the caterpillars she called brows. “For cryin’ out loud, Jer’, step into this century. Haven’t you heard of a DVR?”

“Haven’t you heard the government uses those things to bug your house—they put pinhole spy cams in there, too.”

After a grand eye roll, Fern sighed. “S’pose next you’ll be telling me sittin’ too close to my TV’ll make me blind?”

Jerry shrugged. “Judging by your outfit, you may want to push your recliner a ways back.”

“Oh, for God’s sake...” Mason grabbed Fern’s coat and held it out to her. “Get a room and leave me in peace.”

“I wouldn’t sleep with your father if he laid gold nuggets.”

“Thanks for that visual.” Wincing, Mason held out the garment, wagging it in hopes of enticing Fern to slip it on and then slip right out the door. “I appreciate you two bringing my gear, but if you don’t mind, I’ve got baby-care research to do. Oh—and, Dad, here are your keys.” Mason fished them from his pocket. “Thank you for letting me use your ride.”

“No problem, but what’re you gonna drive now?”

“I suppose Alec’s Hummer.”

“Talk about pretentious.” Fern snorted. “I don’t mean to speak ill of the dead, but I never did approve of that car—if you could even call it that. More like a tank.”

Jerry snapped, “You didn’t seem to mind much last winter when you stuck your Shirley Temple curls out the sunroof for the Christmas parade.”

“Shut your pie hole, old man. You’re just jealous no one asked you.”

Fingers to throbbing temples, Mason counted to ten to keep from blowing. Fern and his dad had always been combustible neighbors, but he’d forgotten to what degree. At least they could now retreat to separate vehicles.

After ten more minutes’ bickering, Fern and Jerry finally left Mason in peace. Only, even then he didn’t truly feel calm because of the emotions warring in his head. Guilt for not feeling more sadness in regard to Melissa’s and Alec’s deaths, confusion over the sheer logistics of caring for their infant twins, hurt over being treated like a pariah by two families he’d once very much loved and felt a part of.

Thank God for Hattie.

Even though she'd temporarily left him in charge, he appreciated knowing he wasn't ultimately alone. Knowing that by the time the babies woke she'd be back comforted him when otherwise he'd have been in a panic.

Mason tossed a couple logs on the fire, then grabbed his iPad, only to find the battery near dead. He rummaged through his bag for the charger but, when he returned to the sofa to do baby research, found his cord wasn't near long enough.

In need of an extension cord, he headed downstairs to the utility room. His first trek to the home's lowest level, he hadn't ventured farther than the heater. Now he noted the kind of party room he and Alec had only dreamed of when they'd been teens. A fully stocked wet bar complete with two kegs on tap and a loaded wine fridge. A few half-empty beer mugs sat on a counter covered in longneck twist caps sealed in clear acrylic. Mason had never seen anything like it. Had the creation been his idea or Melissa's or their architect or designer's?

A pool table sat lifeless with all the balls scattered as if fresh from a break.

Bright lights from three vintage slots and an assortment of pinball machines and video games stood out in the gloom.

A dozen or so weary red balloons hung at various elevations. Some waist-high. Others an inch from the floor. What had the happy couple been celebrating? Was their current group of friends comprised of the same old crew he'd once also considered his?

He caught a movement in his peripheral vision and discovered Hattie reflected in the mirrored wall behind the bar.

"Impressive, huh?" She trailed her fingertips along a felt-covered poker table still littered with cards and chips. "Almost as nice as my bar on the wharf, but I have more than one TV." Gesturing to a wall-mount model that was damn near half the size of his truck, she swiped at glistening tears. Her faint smile twisted his heart. He couldn't imagine what she must be going through.

"If you don't mind my asking..." He swatted a balloon. "What were they celebrating?"

"Remember Craig Lovett from your senior class?"

He nodded.

"It was his birthday." Behind the bar, she took the three mugs and washed them in the sink. "I'm surprised Melissa left even this little of a mess. Practically her only hobby was cleaning."

"Fun." He snagged the nearest balloon. "Want me to grab all of these?"

"Sure. Thanks." Though it'd been years since their last meaningful conversation, Hattie's current cool demeanor unnerved him. A childish part of him wanted things back the way they used to be between them. Hattie had been his go-to girl for when he'd just wanted to chill. They'd always been able to talk about anything from sports to politics to, hell, even stupid issues like annoying road construction.

Now he wasn't sure what to say.

Her new, more polished, infinitely more curvy look threw him for a loop. Not only didn't she look the same, but she carried herself with more confidence. Shoulders back, long hair loose, wind-tossed to the point of being a little wild. Her scent even threw him. Gone was the tomboy blend of sweat and bubble gum, replaced by a complex crispness that on this snowy night embodied the town's conifer trees and ice.

"Here's a trash bag." She held the top open for him while he shoved in the balloons. She was quiet for a moment and then said, "What's wrong?"

"Not sure what you mean?" He focused on his task rather than her uncomfortable proximity.

"You're tensed up—kind of like when we were in grade school and all of you guys used to freeze when the girls threatened to give you cooties."

"Whatever..." He shook his head. "I'm just tired." Of the whole situation. If Melissa and Alec hadn't died, he'd be safe and sound back in Virginia—even better, off on a mission where his thoughts

were occupied 24/7 by things that mattered. The issues currently fogging his brain were the kinds of details he found best avoided. Women and kids were so far off his radar they might as well be alien life forms.

“Me, too. Hopefully, after a good night’s rest all of this will feel less overwhelming.” Her eyes shone.

Mason knew he should say something kind and reassuring, but how could he when panic consumed him? Even worse, once they met with the judge, his ties to the whole mess would be cut, but poor Hattie was stuck with two kids for a lifetime. Inconceivable. “Yeah. I bet everything will seem better in the morning.”

* * *

HATTIE WOKE TO the not-so-melodic sound of her nieces screaming. She bolted from her guest-room bed, nearly colliding with Mason as he charged up the stairs from where he’d slept on the sofa.

She winced. “Thought you said everything would be better in the morning?”

“Yeah, well, guess I was wrong. You take the one on the left. I’ll take the right.”

Hattie scooped squalling Vivian from her crib.

Mason picked up Vanessa.

Neither baby showed any sign of calming soon. Above her nieces’ now-frantic tears, Hattie shouted, “I’m guessing both need fresh diapers and feeding, so should we divide and conquer?”

“What do you mean?” He lightly jiggled Vanessa, which only agitated her further.

“I’ll make bottles while you handle morning cleanup.” Honestly, could her sister have left her in any worse position? The instant upgrade from aunt to mom was rough enough; tossing in an incompetent baby daddy like Mason compounded her already-considerable woes.

His eyebrows shot up. “You mean you’re leaving me alone with them?”

After placing Vivian temporarily back in her crib, she patted Mason’s back. “I have total faith in you to do a great job.”

Five minutes later, bottles in hand, she’d just mounted the steps to check on Mason’s progress when she spied him carrying both babies and heading her way. Vivian and Vanessa were still red-eyed and huffing, but at least the near-deafening wails had calmed. While moments earlier, she’d have seen this as a good thing, the lull in the storm afforded her the relative luxury of getting her first good look at Mason that morning. He wore no shirt and a pair of low-riding sweats with Navy written down one leg. He’d always had a great body, but now? Wow.

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