

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

# SUSAN MALLERY

*best of my love*



~ A FOOL'S GOLD ROMANCE ~

BRAND-NEW STORY

Susan Mallery  
**Best Of My Love**

«HarperCollins»

## **Mallery S.**

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An irresistible new love story from the #1 New York Times bestselling author of the Fool's Gold series, set in a town Library Journal calls "so appealing, readers will want to start scoping out real estate" To overcome her painful past, baker Shelby Gilmore goes on the hunt for a friend—a male friend—to convince her stubborn psyche that men can be trusted. But where in a town as small as Fool's Gold will the petite blonde find a guy willing to not date her? Dark, charming Aidan Mitchell puts the "adventure" in Mitchell Adventure Tours...and into the beds of his many willing female tourists. Until he realizes he's inadvertently become that guy—the one-night Casanova—and worse, everyone in town knows it. Maybe Shelby's boy/girl experiment will help him see women as more than just conquests so he can change his ways and win back his self-respect. As Aidan and Shelby explore the secret lives of men and women, the heat between them fires up the Fool's Gold rumor mill. If no one will believe they're just friends, maybe they should give the gossips something to really talk about!

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[Praise for Susan Mallery and her New York Times bestselling Fool's Gold series](#)

"Susan Mallery is one of my favorites."

—#1 New York Times bestselling author Debbie Macomber

"Romance novels don't get much better than Mallery's expert blend of emotional nuance, humor and superb storytelling."

—Booklist

"Touching, insightful, and funny, this lively romance addresses some serious relationship issues as it delivers another satisfying, page-turning winner."

—Library Journal on Kiss Me

"Heartwarming... Deft characterization and an absorbing story line will keep readers coming back."

—Publishers Weekly on When We Met

"Ms. Mallery masterfully weaves new characters into the fabric of Fool's Gold, but always catches us up on the lives of its very unique residents. Fool's Gold has a certain rhythm that makes it a warm, homey place with a little bit of magic."

—Fresh Fiction on Thrill Me

"Mallery delivers another engaging romance in magical Fool's Gold."

—Kirkus Reviews on Just One Kiss

"The wildly popular and prolific Mallery can always be counted on to tell an engaging story of modern romance."

—Booklist

"Mallery infuses her story with eccentricity, gentle humor, and small-town shenanigans."

—Publishers Weekly on Summer Days

# Best of My Love

## *Susan Mallery*



MILLS  
BOON [www.millsandboon.co.uk](http://www.millsandboon.co.uk)

This book is dedicated to Sarah S. You are adorable and charming and I hope you love Aidan and Shelby's story as much as I do. This one's for you...

\* \* \*

Being the “mom” of an adorable, spoiled little dog, I know the joy that pets can bring to our lives. Animal welfare is a cause I have long supported. For me that means giving to Seattle Humane. At their 2015 Tuxes and Tails fund-raiser, I offered “Your pet in a romance novel” as a prize.

In this book you will meet a bichon frise named Charlie. He has a sparkling personality and couldn't be cuter. Every time he appeared in the book, I had the biggest smile. What a sweetie! I loved everything about him—from his trying to drive to his insistence that meals be on time.

One of the things that makes writing special is interacting in different ways with people. Some I talk to for research. Some are readers who want to talk characters and story lines, and some are fabulous pet parents. Charlie's real-life family adore him and he brings hours of pleasure to them.

My thanks to Charlie's family, to Charlie himself and to the wonderful people at Seattle Humane ([SeattleHumane.org](http://SeattleHumane.org)). Because every pet deserves a loving family.

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## [CHAPTER ONE](#)

“ABOUT LAST NIGHT...”

The words were softly spoken. Almost a question. Still, they were enough to make Aidan Mitchell consider pounding his head against the table. Or the wall. He was pretty sure the table was closer. Not that he was going to pick either because he honestly didn't need any more head pain. Not with the raging hangover he'd more than earned.

“I have nothing,” he admitted, squinting into the, what seemed to him, overly bright light of Brew-haha, the local coffee place. Because when a man felt as bad as he did, coffee was the only solution. “No excuse, no explanation.”

He wanted to say more. That it hadn't been his fault. Only it had been.

Aidan wanted to point out that he was usually a decent guy. He loved his mom, paid his taxes and ran a successful business, yet somewhere along the way, he'd become a total jerk. But why state the obvious?

The woman standing next to his table pointed to the empty seat across from his. “May I?”

He nodded, then wished he hadn't when more pain exploded across his eyes. He reminded himself it was a small price to pay for what had happened.

He pushed aside the steady thudding in his temple and did his best to focus on his new tablemate. Shelby Gilmore was petite and blue-eyed. Delicate, he thought. Pretty enough to get a breathing man's attention. But not for him, because he had it all figured out. No local women. Tourists were easier. And look where that had gotten him.

Her gaze was steady as she sipped her coffee. She seemed to be trying to figure something out. If it was about him, he should save her the trouble.

“Yes,” he said, aware his voice was gravelly. No doubt yet another manifestation of the alcohol probably still processing through his system. “I'm an ass. I'm sure there's going to be a memo about it in the paper.”

Her mouth curved up. “The paper's already out and I didn't see anything. Of course, I generally avoid the whole ‘ass’ section. It can be depressing.”

“Humor at my expense. Go ahead. I deserve it.”

Her hair fell past her shoulders. It was straight and kind of a gold-blond color. Long bangs covered her eyebrows. He knew she had to be in her late twenties, but she looked younger.

“I like that you're taking responsibility for what happened,” she said. “A lot of guys wouldn't.”

“Most guys wouldn't have gotten in trouble in the first place.” He leaned back in his chair and held in a groan. “I had it all figured out. That's what kills me. I had a plan.”

“The road to hell?”

Despite how he felt, he managed a grin. “Yeah. That was me. The guy with good intentions.” He stopped himself a half second before he shook his head again. “Avoid entanglements. It was working for me, too.”

She held her coffee mug in both hands. “So it's true. You dated tourists.” The corner of her mouth twitched. “I use the word dated out of general politeness. Also, it's New Year's Day, which is kind of a holiday.”

“Respect. I like that.” He sighed heavily. “Yes, I was the dog that picked up tourists. They were friendly and willing. Not to mention, only in town for a short time. No one's definition of dating.”

“I can see the general outline of a plan here. You assumed that by keeping it simple and short-term, you wouldn't have to deal with anything messy. Like a relationship. Why is that?”

He squinted against the bright light. “No offense, but do I know you?”

She laughed. “You mean beyond saying hello?” One slim shoulder rose, then lowered. “Not really. I admit that this is a very random conversation, but I'd still like you to answer the question.”

His brain was working at about two-thirds speed this morning. He felt like hell, both physically and emotionally. He was the biggest jackass around and he just wanted to crawl into a hole until he figured out how he was going to fix the problem. Which would come after he figured out what had gone wrong.

But all of that didn't explain why Shelby Gilmore was grilling him. Maybe one of her New Year's resolutions was to right wrongs. Sort of a seeker of justice for those whose hearts he'd accidentally broken.

He searched his memory for what he knew about her. She'd been in town maybe a couple of years. She worked in the bakery. Or possibly owned it—he couldn't remember, exactly. He'd seen her around. He was sure she was perfectly nice, not to mention Kipling Gilmore's sister. Kipling ran the local search-and-rescue department. Aidan knew him from that, and because it was Fool's Gold—a town where everyone knew everyone else's business. Oh, yeah. He and Kipling were part owners of a local bar. Which explained why he was having this conversation in the first place. Or did it? He looked at her.

"What was the question?" he asked.

The smile returned. "Why tourists? You're a good-looking guy with a successful business. Why aren't you married?"

"I don't want to get stuck," he blurted before he could stop himself. "Is this a job interview?"

"No. I don't mean to be intrusive."

"But you're going to keep asking questions?"

"Something like that. Stuck how?"

He finished his coffee. Before he could think about standing up to get another, Patience, the owner of Brew-haha, and about forty-seven months pregnant, waddled over with a pot.

"You look awful," she said cheerfully. "Still hungover?"

"Uh-huh."

"That's not like you. I can't remember the last time you got drunk."

Aidan didn't bother responding. There was no point. He and Patience had known each other their whole lives. One of the advantages—and disadvantages—of living in Fool's Gold. There weren't a lot of secrets. Which meant everyone from here to the Nicholson Ranch would soon know exactly what had happened last night.

Shelby frowned at her friend. "Why are you working? You're due any second."

"I know." Patience rested her left hand on her incredibly large belly. "I'm so ready for him to be born. I thought maybe standing on my feet for a few hours would hurry things along. I'm not sleeping, so why make someone else get up early on New Year's Day?"

Another nice woman, Aidan thought grimly. They were everywhere. He shouldn't even be looking at her, let alone having a conversation.

"Want some aspirin?" she asked.

"No, thanks. I'll be fine."

Patience grinned at Shelby. "I don't believe that, do you?"

"Not for a second, but it's fun to let him pretend."

They were mocking him. He was about to protest that he was sitting right there when he remembered that he deserved it. That and more.

Patience finished refilling his mug and then walked back to the counter. Before Aidan could refocus, Shelby leaned toward him.

"How would being married make you stuck?" she repeated.

She wasn't going away. He got that. So fine. He would tell her the truth. "If you love someone, you're stuck. You have to do things you don't want to do."

"You're not talking about going to restaurants you don't like, or taking out the trash, are you?"

"No."

“I didn’t think so.” She studied him. “So the tourists were a way to stay safe.” The smile returned. “And get laid. A twofer.”

“I really wish you wouldn’t put it like that.”

“Because it makes you a jerk?”

He thought about what had happened the previous night. “What did you hear? About the woman?”

“This and that. Tell me your version.”

He wasn’t sure if she’d been sent to make sure he got that he deserved to be punished or if this was just one of those happy accidents. Either way, he was going to spill his guts and let fate take care of the rest.

“I was hanging out at The Man Cave for their New Year’s Eve party. With friends.” He’d been drinking beer...at least at first. A hangover hadn’t been part of his master plan.

“This woman walked up to me.”

“Did you recognize her?”

“Of course.” Sort of. “I knew we’d probably hung out over the summer.”

“Hung out being a euphemism for had sex?”

He winced. “You’re a lot less delicate than you look.”

“Thank you. So she said hi, and...?”

Aidan sighed. “She didn’t say hi. She walked up to me and said she hadn’t been able to stop thinking about me. That the week we’d had together had changed her. She was hoping I felt the same way because she wanted to quit her job and move to Fool’s Gold to be with me.”

Shelby waited. He was pretty sure she knew the punch line to the joke that was his life, but hey, he could say it. In fact, saying it out loud was probably a good thing. Or at the very least, well deserved.

“It wasn’t a week,” he said firmly. “If it had been a week, I would have remembered.”

“Her?”

He cleared his throat. “Her name. I couldn’t remember her name. Or when she’d been here. She got that right away. She got mad and started yelling.”

The bar had gone quiet as the scorned woman had called him everything from a rat bastard to a male whore. He’d taken it because he honest to God couldn’t remember her name. He’d spent at least a couple of days with her, had talked to her, laughed with her, had sex with her and walked away without being able to remember who she was.

Which made him everything she’d called him and worse. He didn’t mind that he had had a lot of women in his life, but to not remember their names—that was bad. It was the hookup equivalent of a drunk waking up in a gutter with no recollection of how he’d got there. She was his rock bottom. Not that she would appreciate the fact, unless she could also bury him under said rocks.

“What happens now?” Shelby asked.

“Hell if I know. I didn’t like what I saw in her face. I’m sorry I hurt her. I’m sorry I’ve become that kind of guy. I want to do better. I have to change. I never meant to hurt anybody. That was the point. No one was supposed to get hurt.” He shook his head, held in a groan, then drank more coffee. “What does it matter? I am that guy.” He put down the mug. “Or I was.”

“You’re going to change?”

“Yeah. I have to. Not wanting to get stuck is one thing, but to be such an ass... That’s not me.”

Shelby’s gaze was steady. She looked at him for a long time before nodding. “Okay. Thanks for talking to me.”

“You gonna slap me or absolve me?”

“Neither. I was curious.”

“Whatever floats your boat.”

She laughed. “Keep hydrating, Aidan. And the next time someone offers you aspirin, you should probably take it.”

“Thanks for the advice.”

“Anytime.”

She stood and carried her mug to the counter and put it in the bin for dirty dishes. Aidan watched her shrug into her coat, then walk out into the cold morning.

Pretty, he thought absently. Not that her appearance meant anything to him because he knew at least part of the solution to his problem. Swearing off women would be drastic, but it would also help make things right. Yup, that was what he had to do. Give them up completely. Forever. Starting now.

\* \* \*

THE SIDEWALKS IN town were clear, with snow piled up by the curb. Christmas trees and holly wreaths still hung in store windows, along with banners proclaiming the New Year. Fool’s Gold was a town defined by the seasons and the festivals that went with them. Shelby liked the ever-changing decorations that hung off the light posts. By Monday all the signs of Christmas and New Year’s would be gone, replaced by the bright colors of Cabin Fever Days. Snowmen would appear in front yards and there would be an ice-sculpture competition in the park.

She’d already heard from several of the artists who’d sent her sketches of their designs. From those, she’d created a simple template, which was turned into a cookie cutter. During the popular festival, the bakery would sell the custom cookies in the store and in their two food carts.

This would be their second year operating the food carts and the first offering custom cookies. Both had been her idea and Shelby was excited and nervous about the cookies. Excited because she was sure they were going to be a hit. Nervous because they were her second big suggestion as a new business owner.

Last fall she’d bought into Ambrosia Bakery as a minority partner. There were days she still couldn’t believe she actually owned part of a business. Her! While she’d loved culinary school, she’d quickly realized that the pastry classes were her favorite and had changed her major to baking and pastry arts. Her internship had led to a job and her life had been on track.

For all of fifteen minutes, she thought ruefully. Then her mom had gotten sick and everything had changed.

Shelby paused at the corner. It was still early in the day. The bakery was closed for the holiday, so she could go home and enjoy a rare long weekend. Or, she could go to work and play with cookies—perfecting the decorating of the custom ice-sculpture-inspired shapes.

As home was a small one-bedroom apartment where no one waited for her—not even a goldfish—she turned right on Second and walked toward the familiar white storefront with the pretty silver awning. Before she got there, a car pulled up next to her and a blonde woman got out.

Shelby smiled at her friend Madeline. “Shouldn’t you be off being romantic with your movie-star fiancé?”

Madeline hugged her blue coat close and grinned. “I have been, but we’re taking a rest. I came home to get a few things and thought I’d say hi.” She wrinkled her nose. “I just knew you’d be working today.”

Shelby held up both hands. “I’m not at the bakery.”

“You’re three feet away.”

Shelby laughed. “Okay, yes. I’m going to play with the new cookie designs. Why not? It’s quiet and I like baking.”

“Any leftovers for hungry friends?”

“I’m sure there are.”

Shelby locked the front door behind them, then flipped on the lights. She loved being the first person in the building. Everywhere she looked, there was the promise of delicious things to come. The huge bowls, the racks brimming with supplies, the massive ovens—all ready to make magic from a few ingredients.

Shelby had always enjoyed cooking, but culinary school had given her the technical expertise that had freed her creativity. While she could appreciate the perfection of a smooth and spicy sauce or a delicious entrée, the truth was most people celebrated little moments with a cookie or a brownie or cake. No one said, “Yay, you got a raise. Let’s have a sandwich.”

She liked that, on a daily basis, she was a part of people’s lives. That Fridays were made a little brighter because of her doughnuts or pastries. That weddings and baby showers were prettier with her cakes and that birthdays came in all colors and shapes.

She pointed to the small bistro tables by the window. The bakery had more of a walk-in clientele, but they did have a few chairs for the odd tourist who wanted to eat in.

“What would you like? I have cupcakes, but they’re a day old.”

“I can make that work,” Madeline said with a grin. “Anything day old from you is better than fresh anywhere else.”

Shelby laughed. “I don’t care if you’re just saying that to be a good friend. I’m going to accept the compliment and hold it close to my heart.”

“As you should.”

Shelby went into the back and pulled out several large plastic bins, where the pastries that hadn’t sold were stored. After selecting an assortment, she piled them onto a plate before starting the small coffeemaker the employees used. She collected mugs and napkins, then took everything to the front of the bakery.

Light spilled in through the big window. Despite the chill in the air, the day promised to be sunny. The mountains to the east reminded her of Colorado—where she and her brother had grown up. Those had been fun, happy times, she reminded herself. More good than bad, at least when she’d been younger. Eventually the bad would fade and she would be left with only positive recollections.

She sat across from Madeline and studied her friend. Madeline’s eyes were bright with love and contentment and her skin practically glowed.

“Being in love agrees with you,” Shelby told her.

“I feel amazing. Like I’ve been waiting for Jonny all my life. When I’m with him, I can barely breathe and when I’m away from him, I can’t wait to see him again.”

“Young love,” Shelby said with a sigh. “I remember it well.”

Madeline laughed. “Oh, please. You’re twenty-eight, which means you don’t get to mock young love.”

“I wasn’t mocking. I was expressing gentle envy. I’m happy for you and I’d like a little of that myself.” She paused, then leaned forward and lowered her voice. “Not with Jonny, of course.”

“I knew that.”

Shelby stood. “Let me go pour the coffee, then we’ll eat sugary carbs until we can’t move.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Madeline followed her into the back. “You doing okay?”

The question sounded casual enough, but Shelby sensed the concern. Her friend had found her crying the Sunday after Christmas. She’d been phoning and texting regularly ever since.

“I’m fine. Better. I was just missing my mom.”

Shelby poured them both large mugs of coffee. Madeline added creamer to hers, then they walked back to the small table by the window.

“The holidays are hard,” Shelby admitted. “I always miss her, but it’s worse this time of year.”

“It’s your second year without her, isn’t it?”

“Uh-huh.”

Last year had been worse. She’d been in a new place, on her own. Kipling had still been in rehab after his skiing accident. She’d flown down to spend Christmas with him, then had returned to Fool’s Gold and her job. But through the entire holiday season, she’d been acutely aware of the fact that except for her brother, she had no one in the world. Something she wanted to change.

Madeline's blue eyes turned knowing. "So last Christmas you were dealing with a fresh loss, while this year, you're more settled. But Kipling's married now, with a baby on the way, so everything is still different."

"Possibly."

"I'll take that as a yes. How can I help?"

"You already are helping by being my friend."

Madeline grinned. "But that's so easy."

"I'm glad to hear that." Shelby picked up a peanut butter cookie. Even a couple of days old, they were still soft and sweet, with the perfect hint of crispness. The bite she took practically melted on her tongue.

"So," Madeline said as she leaned forward. "Have you decided? Are you going to go for it?"

Shelby thought about the alternative. Always making a bad decision for the very best of reasons. She wanted more. Of course, feeling safe was important, but she'd meant what she said before—she wanted what her friend had. A wonderful man to love who would love her in return. But to find that, to even start looking, she had to get over her fears.

Baby steps, she reminded herself. First a man as a friend, then a man as a significant other.

Shelby drew in a breath. "I'm going to do it," she said firmly.

Madeline's brows rose. "Seriously? Good for you. Have you picked the guy?"

"Aidan Mitchell."

Her friend's brows went up another half inch as Madeline's mouth fell open. "Aidan?"

Shelby nodded. "Did you hear what happened last night?"

"With Aidan? No. What?"

Shelby filled her in on the incident at The Man Cave. She'd heard a couple of different versions before getting confirmation from Aidan himself. She spared no detail of the poor woman's distress and Aidan's hungover self-loathing.

"So why is what happened a good thing?" Madeline asked, sounding doubtful.

"Because he feels awful about the whole situation. He's disappointed in himself and he says he wants to change."

For her plan to work, she was going to need cooperation. "When you think about it, he's kind of in the same position I am. We both want to be better people than we are now."

"No," Madeline said, interrupting. "You want to deal with something bad that happened in your past. He wants to stop being icky when it comes to women. There's a difference."

"Agreed, but we're both still heading in the same direction. What do you think?"

She wanted Madeline's opinion for a lot of reasons. Not only because she trusted her friend, but Madeline had grown up in Fool's Gold. She'd known Aidan all her life. If he had a dark or violent past, Madeline would tell her everything.

Her friend reached for a cookie and took a bite before answering.

"If he's serious about changing his ways, then he's a good choice. He was always nice. You know, in a guy way." Madeline's mouth turned up. "What about sex?"

Shelby rolled her eyes. "I'm not interested in sex. That part of me isn't broken."

"What if he needs the incentive?"

"I don't think he will. Not after what happened last night. This isn't about romance. It's about something more important. Both of us healing. For me, it's my heart. Or maybe my trust. I'm not sure how to explain it exactly. I just know that being friends, not lovers, is the answer."

"Good luck getting him to go for that."

"He says he wants to be a better man," Shelby said, not sure if she was convincing the other woman or herself. "If he is, then this is one way for that to happen." She bit her lower lip. She was taking a big step, but there didn't seem to be another way. "So you think he's an okay guy?"

"I do."

“Then I’m going to ask him if he’s interested.”

“Oh, what I wouldn’t give to be a fly on the wall. You’ll tell me what happens?”

“Absolutely. I think he’s going to be fine with it. We’ll help each other and then move on with our lives.”

“The road to hell,” Madeline murmured.

Aidan had used the same expression that morning, Shelby remembered. Intentions were practically resolutions. She had hers for the New Year. A plan to finally put her past behind her and move forward with her life. Now all she needed was a willing partner and in a matter of months everything would be exactly how she’d always dreamed.

## CHAPTER TWO

AIDAN DRAINED HIS bottle of water. He was dripping sweat and exhausted, but in a good way. It was the second day of the New Year and he was feeling better. His hangover was gone. He’d slept the night before, had eaten a healthy breakfast and just completed a grueling two-hour workout. He was on his way to being a new man.

He was going to make this New Year’s thing work for himself. He would drink more water and eat right and get lots of exercise. See his mother more often and if an old lady needed help crossing the street, he would be there. Maybe he would even get a dog. You know, to show some sense of responsibility. It would be good for him to have something other than himself to worry about.

He grabbed his gym bag and shrugged into his jacket. He would shower and change at home, then go into his office and complete some paperwork he’d been putting off. Yup, virtuous. That was his new middle name. Aidan Virtuous Mitchell.

Once outside, the cold air sucked the heat from his body. He took a couple of deep breaths as he walked to his truck. After he finished the paperwork he would—

Someone stood by his truck. A female someone.

The cold on the outside had nothing on the sudden knot of ice that formed in his gut. His throat tightened with dread as he wondered how else his past would come back to kick him in the ass. Or maybe it was the same woman, here for her pound of flesh. He wondered if he should simply let her beat him up. Maybe if he lay down, she could get in a couple of kicks. After all, he’d earned them.

He continued walking and quickly recognized the petite blonde. Shelby Gilmore was leaning against his door, but straightened when she saw him. She squared her shoulders, as if she was determined.

Her thick wool jacket dwarfed her. She had on a ridiculous red knit hat with a pom-pom on the top. She looked young and fresh and just a little bit sexy.

Aidan slowed his steps as he reminded himself that there was no sexy in his life. Not now and not in the foreseeable future. A—no women. B—no local women. C—see A.

“Hi, Aidan,” Shelby said, her voice cheerful. “Have a good workout?”

“Uh-huh.” He tightened his grip on his gym bag. He wanted to ask why she was waiting for him but couldn’t think of a way to phrase the question without sounding abrupt. And these days he was all about the good manners.

“I brought you some cookies.”

She held out a small silver-and-white-striped bag. Even from several feet away, he could smell chocolate and maybe peanut butter.

“I just ran six miles and lifted weights.” He had resolutions, he reminded himself. A need to be virtuous.

“Then you must be hungry.”

Her smile was soft and welcoming. Friendly. Which was close to sexy.

Aidan put the brakes on that train of thought. No sex for him, he reminded himself. Remember A and C. And B.

“You can’t show anyone the sugar cookies.”

He sucked in cold air. “Excuse me?”

She offered the bag again. “Some of them are iced sugar cookies. You can’t show them to anyone.” The smile returned. “Because of Cabin Fever Days. Several of the artists sent me drawings of their designs so I could turn them into cookies. But the designs are supposed to be a secret, so you can’t show anyone the cookies.”

“Because another guy doing an ice sculpture might steal the shape?”

She nodded. “Only some of the artists are women. You shouldn’t assume they’re men.”

“Obviously not.” He eyed the bag, tempted by the delicious smell. “I’m trying to eat right.” The comment was aimed more at himself than her.

“What could be wrong with my cookies?” Her blue eyes brightened with humor. “They’re really delicious. You should trust me.”

He wanted to ask why, then remembered she was also trusting him. With her cookies. Which almost sounded dirty. He sighed. The whole virtuous thing was harder than he thought.

“How do you turn ice sculptures into cookies?” he asked.

“I use the outline of the basic shape. I can add a few details, but not too many. If the details are too refined, they’ll bake out. Plus they can’t be too hard to decorate or I’ll spend all my profits frosting them. Not the amount of frosting, but the time.” She held out the bag again. “Sometimes I get a special order where I can really go to town, but the ice-sculpture cookies are an experiment. We’ll be selling them at the festival. In our kiosk.”

She was talking too quickly. Almost nervously. The bag shook a little and he instinctively grabbed it from her. Then wondered if he shouldn’t have.

“Shelby, why are you here?”

“I want to talk to you.”

“About cookies?”

“No. I brought those because I’m nice.”

That made him laugh. “Good to know. What do you want to talk about?” He hesitated. “In case it matters, I’ve given up women.”

Her mouth twitched. “Have you? That can’t be very fun.”

“It’s only been a day. So far it’s not so bad.” He was lying, but what the hell. She couldn’t know that.

Her smile returned. “Just so we’re clear, I’m not here because I’m interested in having sex with you. And I don’t want a boyfriend. Well, I do. But not you.”

He had no idea what to make of her or what she was saying. “So I should be grateful for the cookies?”

She laughed. “No. I hope you’ll like them, though.” The humor faded. “The truth is...” She swallowed. “Wow, this is harder than I thought. I want...”

The ice in his gut returned. Whatever it was, he wasn’t going to like it. He told himself, whatever it was, he would say no. He needed practice saying no and this would be how he started. N-O. Easy enough. According to his mother it had been one of his first words.

“I want us to be friends.”

\* \* \*

SHELBY UNLOCKED HER front door. She was cold and nervous. The first would be remedied by the furnace in her small apartment. The second was more of a problem.

Aidan hadn’t laughed at her. That was something. Nor had he walked away. Instead he’d thought for a long second, before saying, “Go on.” Which was when she’d suggested they talk at her place.

Now she waited while he followed her inside. Her already tiny apartment seemed to shrink. She pulled off her hat and fluffed her bangs, then hung both coats on the rack by the front door.

She turned and looked around her place, wondering what he saw. Or thought.

The apartment was newish, with big windows. From where she was standing, she could see the living room, the dining alcove and most of the kitchen. All in all, the place was pretty ordinary and she hadn't done that much decorating.

She'd left the walls white and added a few posters. Most of them were of wildflowers or sunsets, but the one over the sofa was of Kipling screaming down a mountain. He was in perfect focus, with the background behind him a blur. Both skis were several inches above the ground. His expression was intense, his mouth straight.

He'd won that race and she'd been there to see it happen. The picture was one of her favorites.

The rest of the room was less exciting. She had a navy plaid sofa with a single chair by the window. She's found the simple maple dining table and chairs at a thrift store. Back the other way was the short hallway that led to her bedroom. There was also a decent-sized bathroom.

Nothing fancy, but the place worked. The rent was reasonable, the neighbors quiet. She worked a lot of hours and didn't need any more. One day, she thought wistfully. One day she would have a house and husband and kids and maybe a dog. Until then, this was fine.

She pointed to the dining table. "I have cupcakes," she said. "I'll make coffee to go with them. Unless you want milk."

"You gave me cookies. I have them in my truck."

"They're for later. The cupcakes are for our conversation."

He looked from the platter in the center of the table back to her. "How can you eat like you do and still look like that?"

She felt some of her tension ease. "I taste rather than have a whole serving. Plus I work in a bakery. After a while, the good things start to be less tempting."

"I wish that were true for me."

He took the seat she offered. Shelby went into the kitchen and started her coffeemaker. She'd prepped it before she'd left, hoping things would work out. In a way, she was surprised they'd gotten this far. Her plan had potential, but it required cooperation. And Aidan not thinking she was insane.

Now that he was here, she didn't know what to say. How to start. She'd been practicing opening lines for a couple of weeks now. Ever since she'd figured out what she was going to do. She'd known the what, but not the who. Not until she'd heard about what had happened on New Year's Eve and had seen Aidan the next day.

He could have been blasé about what had happened, but he hadn't been. He'd been angry at himself and ashamed. He'd wanted to change. All of which was in her favor.

"Cream and sugar?" she asked.

"Just black."

She took her coffee the same way. Every calorie saved, she'd always thought. Now she carried two mugs to the table and took the seat across from him.

Aidan was tall, with broad shoulders. He still wore his workout clothes—a T-shirt over sweats. Both were loose, but she caught sight of the muscles lurking underneath. Given what he did for a living, it made sense that he was in good shape.

His face was nice, she thought. He was good-looking without being too pretty. She liked his dark brown eyes, the way they met hers steadily.

Silence stretched between them.

"This would be your meeting," he said as he reached for one of her cupcakes. She'd picked chocolate with a nice coconut frosting. Simple, but delicious. The best desserts usually were.

She drew in a breath and said the first thing that came to her mind. "I want to buy a house."

His eyebrows drew together. "I don't sell real estate."

"I know." She swallowed against the sudden tightness in her throat. This was going to be harder than she'd thought.

“Yesterday, you said you were sorry about what happened with that woman.” She sipped her coffee. “Are you still?”

He nodded, then took a bite of his cupcake. “These are good,” he said when he’d chewed and swallowed.

“Thanks. I like that you want to change. It’s not easy. Old habits and all that.”

“Yeah. I haven’t figured out what I’m going to do yet. I’m giving up women. That’s for sure.”

“And how long do you think your antiwoman pledge will last?”

“I don’t know. A few weeks. A couple of months.”

“A long time.”

His mouth turned down at the corners. “Tell me about it. But I don’t know what else to do. I won’t be that guy again.”

“Do you want to fall in love?” She held up her hands. “Not with me. That’s not where this is going. But ever?”

“I don’t know.”

An unexpectedly honest answer. “Because you’d be stuck?”

“I shouldn’t have told you that.”

“You were hungover. You couldn’t help yourself. I won’t tell anyone.”

Emotions flashed across his face. She tried to read them and couldn’t.

“I want to not treat women badly,” he said at last. “No, that’s not right. I was honest about what I wanted and if the lady agreed, then we had a good time. It was supposed to be okay for both of us. I don’t know what went wrong.”

“One of your temporaries wanted more.”

“And I couldn’t remember her name.”

He spoke with what felt like sincere regret.

“Now you want to be different.”

He looked at her. “If you think you can change me,” he began.

“I don’t.” She shrugged. “I don’t believe people can change each other. We have to make the choice to be different ourselves and then make it happen. You want to act differently around women, but you don’t know how. Has it occurred to you that maybe the problem isn’t that you couldn’t remember her name, but that you never saw her as a person in the first place? That you don’t see any of them as people?”

He glanced longingly toward the door. “Okay then. While this has been great, I need to go.”

“Five minutes,” she said quietly. “Give me five minutes. I’m really going somewhere with this and I think you’ll be interested. Plus, it’s not scary. I promise.”

He deliberately glanced at his watch. “Five minutes.”

“Thank you.” She paused while she figured out the best and quickest way to say what she was thinking, in a way that would get him to see her plan had real merit.

“You do what you do to avoid getting stuck. Which is the same as being in love, right? You don’t want the serious relationship.”

He gave her a brief nod.

“Logically you go the other way. A series of short-term, meaningless flings. And while there is some pleasure in that, it’s not exactly who you want to be.”

Another nod, this one slightly less cautious.

“Now you want to change, but don’t know how. I’m suggesting that part of the problem is you see women as either wives or playthings. You don’t have any women friends in your life.” She waved her hand. “I’m not counting family. Your mom, cousins and the like. I’m talking about the everyday garden-variety woman you interact with.”

He leaned back in the chair. “Go on.”

She told herself it was great that he hadn't bolted. Now came the tough part. Telling him about her.

"My mom was my dad's second wife. Kipling and I are half brother and sister. My mom was great. Sweet and loving. She adored my father." Shelby drew in a breath. She told herself to stick to the facts. To stay in her head and everything would be okay. It was only if she lost herself in the memories that she got into trouble.

"My dad was a difficult man," she began, then made herself stop. Martina, her therapist, was always reminding her to talk about the past with authenticity, no euphemisms. "No. That's not true. He wasn't difficult. He was violent. He beat my mother and when I got older, he beat me."

The stark words hung in the air between them. Aidan's expression tightened but he didn't say anything.

"One of my earliest memories was of my mom screaming as my dad hit her. I remember being so scared. But when I was little, he never hit me, so in a strange way, I was safe. He didn't hit Kipling—not like he hit my mom. Maybe it was because Kipling was his son. I don't know."

She reached for her coffee, then realized her hands were trembling and put down the mug. "Kip left when I was about ten. He was a great skier and went off to train. He swore he would always be there for me if things got bad." She felt her mouth twist. "That's how we described what happened. In terms of how bad it was."

Had he put her mom in the hospital this time? Were there broken bones? Because like so many families dealing with something awful, they spoke around the truth.

"I remember asking my mom why she stayed and she said it was because she loved him so much. It didn't make sense to me, but I knew in my heart she would never go. And he didn't hit me, so we just lived like that. With the unspoken rules. Don't make Dad mad. Don't try to protect my mom. Don't get in the way."

There had been so many awful times. Nights when she'd cleaned split skin and held ice against bruises. Times when she'd tried to figure out if a bone was broken and whether or not she should call 911.

"And then I turned thirteen."

Shelby still didn't know what had set off her father. Whether it was her birthday or the onset of puberty or what. But the day after she turned thirteen, he hit her for the first time.

"It hurts," she said quietly. "I'd heard her scream a million times, but until he decked me with his fist, I had no idea how much pain there could be. The shock of it stunned me. The sense of betrayal, of helplessness. My mom tried to stop him, but he pushed her into the wall and kept coming after me."

She'd been knocked unconscious. There had been dozens of bruises but no broken bones. To this day, she didn't know if she'd had a concussion because going to the doctor was out of the question.

"I called Kip the next morning. He was home in twelve hours and he got me out of there. He was already on the ski circuit, with endorsements and stuff. So he could afford to put me in a boarding school. I stayed there through high school. My mom would visit. Only my mom. I didn't see my dad again for years."

Funny how she could get through all this without tears. Maybe she'd cried herself out years ago. She wasn't sure.

"I would plead with her to leave him," she continued. "Kip would get us an apartment. Dad never had to know. But she wouldn't do it. She kept talking about how much she loved him and how he loved her."

She looked at Aidan and was grateful for the lack of emotion on his face. His dark eyes gave nothing away and that was how she preferred it.

"She was always bruised. She did her best to cover it up, but I knew what to look for. She would stay with me for a few days, then go back to him."

She shifted in her seat and put her hands on her lap. “We lived like that for years. Then she got cancer. It was bad. By the time she told me about it, she only had a few weeks to live. I went back to be with her. Which meant being with him.”

She squared her shoulders. “It all started again. I knew more and tried to protect myself, but he would come after me while I was sleeping. I would wake up with him beating me. It was horrible. More horrible than you can imagine. Kip was just starting back with his training after winning at the Olympics. I didn’t want to bother him, but I didn’t think I could take it anymore. Then he was injured and in the hospital in New Zealand. The doctors weren’t even sure he would walk again. I knew I had to get through my mom’s last weeks on my own. For her. I had to do my best not to let him surprise me. But it’s hard not to sleep. A couple of times I got a hotel room for the night, but that wasn’t a long-term solution. I was genuinely scared for my life when these two men showed up.”

Her tension eased as she remembered the shock of opening her mom’s front door and finding Angel and Ford on the steps. “They were from CDS. Mayor Marsha had sent them to protect me.”

Aidan’s brows rose. “How did she know what was happening?”

For the first time in several minutes, Shelby smiled. “You’re asking the wrong person. All I knew was that it was a miracle. My dad was arrested on multiple charges. Apparently he wasn’t only a bad guy at home. I stayed with my mom until she died and then I moved here.”

Aidan leaned toward her. “I’m sorry.”

“Thank you. I didn’t want to dump all that on you, but I didn’t know how else to explain what I want to do.” Now came the hard part. “There have been men in my life. Boyfriends. Sort of. I want what most people have. Love and a family. But I’m not good at picking the right guy.” She rested her hands on the table. “Because of what happened with my dad, and my mom dying, I started seeing a counselor. She helped me realize that I always pick a guy who can’t commit. The delightful charmer who will never stay or be faithful, or the guy who isn’t over his last relationship. On the surface, I look like I’m so together, but on the inside, I keep myself from getting involved with someone who can love me back because I’m afraid. Except for Kip, I don’t actually trust men. Because of that, I pick ones that are so flawed, the relationship can never work. That way I’m never truly at risk.”

\* \* \*

AN INTERESTING SET of facts, Aidan told himself, but it had nothing to do with the building rage inside of him. He didn’t know where Shelby’s father was right now, but he wanted to go find him and give him a taste of what he’d been doing to his family. He wanted to reduce the man to a bloody, broken mass of pain and suffering. Then he wanted to wait a few days and do it all again and again.

He could understand being annoyed or pissed or even furious. But there was no excuse to take out any of that on someone else. He’d grown up with four brothers, so he’d been in plenty of fights as a kid. But there were rules and one of them was you stick to your own size and gender. And after about age fifteen, you give it up. Aidan believed his own father was an asshole, but even he’d never hit a woman.

“Aidan?”

He looked at Shelby. “What?”

“You’re not listening to me.”

“Sorry. It’s your dad. Where is he now?”

“In prison. He’s serving consecutive sentences. Even with good behavior, he won’t be out for about fifty years.”

“I want to go find him and punish him.”

She reached across the table and lightly touched his hand. “Thank you. I appreciate the thought, but it’s not necessary.”

“I need to hurt him.”

“It won’t change him.”

Probably not, but that wasn't what had him telling himself to let it go. Beating up her father wouldn't help Shelby. That was the real point of it.

"I wish I'd known you then," he told her. "I would have helped."

Her breath caught and she cleared her throat. "Thank you for saying that. I believe you. Which is part of the reason I wanted to talk to you. About my problem. And yours."

"That you pick the wrong guy because you're not willing to trust a man not to physically hurt you and that I pick the wrong woman because I don't want to get stuck?"

She nodded.

He tried to remember the last time he'd had a conversation this honest and couldn't. Shelby had laid it all on the line. He figured he had to do the same.

"I'm not looking for home and hearth," he admitted. "I just want to stop being a jackass."

She laughed. "A worthy goal." Her humor faded. "I thought I was doing better. I thought I was healed. Then I went out with a guy I knew was a total flake. He swore he was seeing only me, but he wasn't. It was then I realized I wasn't as far along as I thought."

She pointed to the cupcakes between them. "Everything else is great. I went to culinary school and discovered I'm more of a dessert-pastry chef. I moved here and bought into the business. I have friends, I'm going to be an aunt in a couple of months. It's all good."

"Except for Mr. Right."

She nodded.

He was no longer as concerned about what she wanted from him. Shelby had been through a lot and if he could help, he wanted to. If she was looking for the perfect guy, by now she knew he wasn't even close. Anything else was doable.

"Where do I fit in?"

"I need to learn that I can trust a man who isn't my brother," she told him. "I was hoping we could be friends. Real friends who do things together. I thought if we could do that, we could get over what's holding us back. You obviously need to start seeing women as something other than short-term sexual partners. I thought we could work on this together. Hang out. Get to know each other. Develop a relationship based on trust and respect." She wrinkled her nose. "Without the complication of the whole boy-girl thing."

Honest to God, Aidan didn't know what to say. Friends? Her points were valid and he could see how her plan might work, but damn.

"Would there be a time limit?" he asked.

"Sure. I don't know. How long until we're both better? Six months?"

So until June.

"Just friends." Because he wasn't sure he'd ever been friends with a woman before. Not since maybe high school. "Nothing else."

"Nothing," she said firmly. "We'll do stuff and talk and you'll see that women are more than a booty call and I won't be scared anymore. In six months we'll both be better people and we'll go back to our regular lives."

He wanted to protest the booty-call comment but knew he'd earned it. Friends. Just friends. Was it possible? Did he want to bother?

The thing was, if he didn't, wouldn't he stay exactly where he was? And he knew he didn't want that.

"Maybe," he said slowly.

She brightened. "So you'll think about it?"

There were a lot of ways to answer the question, but he figured they both deserved the truth. "Shelby, I'm pretty sure I won't be thinking about anything else."

[CHAPTER THREE](#)

AMBER DUTTON CLOSED her eyes and made a low moaning sound at the back of her throat. “You’re killing me.”

Shelby did her best not to preen. Impressing her customers was one thing, but impressing Amber was harder. Amber had owned Ambrosia Bakery for over ten years. She knew the business inside and out and she’d tasted more than her share of chocolate mousse.

Amber broke off a piece of the dark chocolate shell that held the mousse and put it in her mouth. She let it melt on her tongue before swallowing. “Amazing. You made these, too?”

Shelby nodded. “It’s not that difficult. I’ve been working on the recipe for a while. I thought we could try adding more upscale desserts to the inventory. Maybe start on certain days to see if there’s any interest. With the city’s online connection, we could send out an email to men, suggesting the high-end desserts as a special surprise to take home to the women in their lives.”

“We just have to give out a few samples and we’ll be flooded with interest.” Amber took another bite of the mousse. “This is going straight to my hips and I genuinely don’t care.” She pointed with her spoon. “I thought that bread you did last week was the best new thing, but this is better.”

“I have a lot of ideas.”

“Hiring you that first day was the smartest thing I’ve ever done.”

Amber dug her spoon into the mousse. Shelby smiled as she basked in pride and happiness. She loved the creative side of her job. Back at her small apartment, she had an idea file overflowing with different items she wanted to try. Cupcakes and brownies, mousses and breads. On her days off she often played around with recipes. Finding the exact combination of ingredients, the right presentation and flavors took time. But the work was so fun and fulfilling.

Culinary school had been a revelation for her. She’d discovered that there were other crazy people who dreamed up recipes. She’d loved the technical classes as much as the practical information. She’d wanted to know more and more. Getting her first job had made her giddy. Then her mom had gotten sick and everything had changed.

Being trapped in that house, knowing her father was going to find that vulnerable moment and hurt her, had left her feeling shattered. While the bruises and welts would heal, every day that she was with him had drained her spirit, and she’d worried about that a lot more than the damage he would do to her body. Having Angel and Ford show up when they did had saved her. The invitation to go to Fool’s Gold had come with an introduction to Amber. Working in the bakery had been exactly what she’d needed.

Now she was a part owner and there were so many possibilities. Next on her bucket list was having Aidan agree to her wild plan so she could complete her healing and move on with her life.

Amber finished the mousse and dark chocolate shell, then licked her fingers. “I’m going to have to walk an extra hour on the treadmill to burn off those calories and it was so worth it.”

“You don’t have to do anything to burn off the calories,” Shelby told her. “You always look great.”

Her business partner—a tall, curvy, dark-skinned woman with beautiful eyes and long braids—laughed. “If only that were true. I passed forty nearly two years ago. I’m fighting gravity and a slowing metabolism, but I’m determined to win.” She walked around to the front of the display case. “The blue-and-white cookies are adorable.”

“I thought they’d be a quirky addition for the week.”

Patience had finally given birth to her son two days before. Shelby had decided to make some baby-inspired cookies. There were little ducks and small rattles and a square frosted cookie like a baby block. The latter had taken a lot of time, so it wasn’t a practical addition to their everyday menu, but she’d had fun with it.

“Maybe we could talk to Dellina,” Shelby said. “Show her some samples and see if she wanted to offer the custom cookies to her clients.”

Dellina Ridge was an events planner. She handled everything from weddings to corporate functions. Shelby had been trying to start a business relationship with her since she'd been hired at the bakery. Although Amber wasn't opposed to the idea, she also wasn't that enthused. Shelby told herself she could see the other woman's point. The bakery did really well already. Amber had an established business in the town where she'd grown up. Why do more?

But Shelby couldn't help wanting to expand things. There were so many possibilities.

"You exhaust me with your enthusiasm," Amber told her with a laugh. "Even so, I'm starting to see your point about working with Dellina. We could do custom work for her. It would be more time, but we could charge more. My biggest concern is the labor. We'd need extra help and I'm not sure where we'd get it. We don't need anyone on a daily basis, so this would be by the job. That's hard to find."

"You're right. Let me think about it. There has to be a solution."

Amber sighed. "To be that young and enthusiastic," she said with a sigh. "I'm envious. You work on the problem and I'll go pay our vendors. We'll meet in a couple of weeks and discuss it all. How does that sound?"

"Perfect."

Amber took a step toward the back office, then paused. She put her hand on her stomach. "I'm having the weirdest sensations lately. I just don't feel right."

Shelby didn't like that sound of that. "What do you mean?"

"Things are off in my tummy. I keep thinking it's going to be my time of the month, but it's not. My hormones are a mess." She grimaced. "I can't be going through the change, can I? I'm way too young. At least that's what I keep telling myself." She smiled. "Don't worry. I'll be fine. And if I'm not, I'll eat more of your mousse."

"It's in the refrigerator in the back."

Amber groaned. "I so didn't need to know that. Now I'm going to be thinking about it all day."

Shelby watched her go and hoped everything was all right. Probably just a stomach bug, she told herself.

Before she could get serious about worrying more, the door opened and a very pregnant Isabel Hendrix waddled in. Shelby looked at her and did her best not to wince. It wasn't that Isabel was so very far along as the fact that she was carrying triplets.

Her friend groaned. "Yes, I know. I'm a whale. And one of the really big ones. Which, in case you were wondering, is a blue whale. They can grow to over ninety feet. Unlike the smaller killer whales that tend to top out at thirty feet."

Shelby stared at her. "How do you know that?"

Isabel grinned. "Very random, huh? And impressive. I mentioned being a whale to Felicia and she gave me a brief lecture on the species."

Not a surprise, Shelby thought. Felicia was some kind of genius who knew just about everything. She organized all the festivals in town with a precision that left most of the citizens both dizzy and appreciative.

Isabel rested her right hand on her large belly. "You know why I'm here."

"I do and I have two loaves put aside for you."

"Thank goodness. I swear I would have started sobbing if you hadn't." She shook her head. "There is so something wrong with me."

"No, there isn't. You're pregnant and dealing. Give yourself a break."

Shelby had never been pregnant, but if Isabel was anything to go by, the cravings were powerful. Her friend had developed a love for pretzel bread that bordered on fanatical. Two months before, the bakery had run out and Isabel had cried piteously. Shelby had felt so badly about the upset that she'd stayed late, baking a batch. When she'd delivered it, Isabel had cried again, this time out of joy.

Talk about powerful weapons, she thought now. If someone learned to control hormones they could rule the world.

“I have the bread on the baking schedule,” she told her friend. “We’ll always have it for you. And if we happen to run out, I have a half-dozen loaves of dough in the freezer.”

Isabel rubbed her belly. “I’m sorry to be such a freak. I can’t seem to help it. You’re very good to me and I owe you. Seriously, if there’s anything you ever need, tell me and I’m there. If I’m busy changing the three or four thousand diapers I’m going to have to deal with every week, I’ll send Ford.”

An impressive offer, Shelby thought, considering Ford was a successful businessman and former navy SEAL. She doubted there was anything he couldn’t accomplish.

“You’re on,” she said. “I will call you first in a crisis.” For a second she thought about asking Isabel if she knew Aidan very well. They’d grown up in the same town and were about the same age. But asking the question probably meant explaining why and she wasn’t ready to share her slightly offbeat plan with anyone else. Not until Aidan had said if he was game or not.

She mentally crossed her fingers that he would see that she was right about both of them. Six months of being friends wasn’t a huge hardship and at the end of the time, they could both be healed. A worthy goal. But would he see it that way?

She had no way of knowing, so rather than dwell on the what-ifs, she got Isabel her bread and told herself she would hear when she would hear. If he told her no, there were other men she could approach. None immediately came to mind, but now that she knew the best way to move on with her life, she wasn’t going to let anything stop her.

\* \* \*

AIDAN DID A second check of the equipment, making sure bindings were secure and edges clean and smooth after the last trek. Taking novices out on their first snowshoeing adventure was both fun and stressful—the former for them, the latter for him. He had a perfect safety record and there was no way he wanted to risk that.

The weather was on his side. The reports were for the temperatures staying well below freezing. The trails he used for beginners had a nice base of snow without a lot of ice. More snow was predicted. After the mostly dry winter last year, extra snowpack was welcome news.

Aidan put the snowshoes back on the rack, then made sure the door leading outside was locked before he returned to the office.

Aidan’s mother had started Mitchell Adventure Tours when her children had been little—mostly to provide some steady income for the family. His father’s volatile personality combined with heavy drinking had meant dangerous outbursts. Not in the way Shelby had endured, he thought. Ceallach didn’t hit his children. Instead he turned his temper toward his other creations. Because he was an artist who worked with glass, a couple of hours of throwing and breaking could destroy months’ worth of commissions. Despite his fame and the amount people paid for his pieces, there were times when money was tight. His mother had filled in the gaps.

At first she’d offered a few walking tours of the city. Other local businesses had pitched in by recommending her to tourists. Eventually she’d started driving small groups around in the family minivan. As Del, his oldest brother, and Aidan had become teens, they’d pitched in.

Although Del was expected to take over the family business, Aidan had been the one to step up. He’d quickly grown the company, broadening the offerings and taking groups camping and fishing in the summer. Winter sports had followed. He’d bought out his mom nearly eight years ago and had added “Adventure” to the name.

Four years ago he’d moved the company to its current location. The new building had a big reception area with lots of wall space for maps, pictures of their excursions and a list of the tours the company offered. He had a private office in back, and there was a large room for the staff. In the back was the equipment storage, along with his repair shop. The equipment he bought was expensive and he believed in keeping it in good shape.

He walked into the office, where Fay Riley was handing over tickets to a group of twentysomethings. College kids, he thought. Here for a day of snowshoeing.

They looked to be in shape, which helped, but they were also going to be a handful. They always were. Unlike his older customers, the college crowd rarely listened. He made a mental note to make sure he brought enough GPS trackers for everyone. No one was getting lost on his watch.

Fay was in her late thirties and a relatively new transplant to Fool's Gold. She and her husband had ended up settling in the area after their daughter, Kalinda, had been badly burned and started treatment with a burn specialist at the local hospital. Rather than return to their hometown, they'd decided to stay close to her doctor. Fay had started working for Aidan part-time and was now the office manager. She was the perfect combination of organized and mothering. Not only did she manage the schedule, she was great with the summer help he hired every year.

"They'll be fun," she said, motioning to the college students studying the pictures on the wall. "You head out first thing in the morning. It's a six-hour tour. They wanted longer, but I told them to start slow."

"I'm surprised they listened."

"I can be persuasive."

Aidan grinned. "You mean bossy."

"That, too."

Fay had told him once that her daughter's horrible accident had changed her in ways she couldn't explain. She'd had to learn to be strong. To make demands. To face the unthinkable and do it in a way that kept up Kalinda's spirits. He supposed that life's adversities offered a fork in the road, so to speak. Either you learned your lesson and were a better person for it, or you got crushed.

He'd been successful at everything else he'd put his mind to—his current situation wasn't going to be any different. He didn't like who he'd become, so he was going to change. Find a better way.

"The blonde is pretty," Fay added playfully in a low voice. "Last I saw, you were on a blonde kick. Of course, redheads and brunettes are nice, too."

He didn't bother glancing at the group. "No, thanks."

She raised her eyebrows. "Aren't you feeling well?"

"I'm fine. I'm not going to do that anymore."

Her expression turned quizzical. "I don't understand."

The college students left. Aidan leaned against the counter. "I'm not going to date tourists anymore."

"You don't date them. You do them. Or whatever it's called. Hook up. It's not a relationship."

A blunt assessment made all the more uncomfortable by the honesty behind it. "I'm giving up women."

Fay laughed. The sound was light and happy. She touched his arm. "Oh, honey, I don't think so. You, give up women? That's not possible."

He resisted the need to step back. "I can do it. I want to. I'm changing."

She laughed again. "Uh-huh. I'd pay money to see that. I give you a week. Maybe two. Then you'll be seducing the next pretty tourist so fast, you'll break the sound barrier." She was still chuckling when she walked into the storeroom.

Aidan knew that Fay liked him a lot. She did a good job of running things, but more than that, she cared about him and trusted him. Last year, he'd been the one to teach Kalinda to ski the few weeks they'd had snow. Because of her burns, she had lots of scar tissue that limited her movements. But she'd managed to figure it out and he'd been right beside her when she'd taken her first run down the mountain.

So he knew that Fay's teasing came from a place of affection. But it still bothered him that she didn't think he could manage a little self-control. He wasn't that much of a dog, was he?

He dismissed the question as soon as he thought it. He could do anything he put his mind to. He was a decent guy who'd lost his way. He could change and he was going to. He knew why he'd gotten where he was, which meant changing it couldn't be that hard.

Shelby's offer loomed large, as it had since she'd made it. He had to admit there was a certain logic to her plan. He liked the idea of being friends with a woman. He wasn't sure how to go about it, but maybe they could figure it out together. Plus he would be helping her and that made him feel good. Maybe if he was a part of her healing, he would make up for past behavior. Like karmic justice.

With Shelby, he could learn to see women as people. Not just objects of desire. He would grow and change. That would be good.

"I'm going out for a while," he yelled toward the back of the building. "I have my cell."

"I'll call if I need you," Fay told him.

She said something else, but he didn't hear her. Nor did he bother asking her to repeat it. No doubt she'd made some crack about his inability to change. Well, he was going to prove her wrong. He was going to prove everyone wrong.

He left his truck in its parking spot and walked across town. Midweek in the winter meant fewer tourists. Aidan had to admit he enjoyed the quiet times. Yes, there was less business, but sometimes it was nice when it was just the residents. That would change soon enough. The festivals came regularly, even in winter. And with them came the crowds.

He crossed the street and headed for the bakery. He was going to tell Shelby yes. He would be friends with her for six months and use that time to break his pattern with women. Then he would start over—a different kind of guy. Better. As if he'd grown up with sisters or something.

He walked into the bakery. Shelby stood at the counter. As soon as he saw her, he was struck by how delicate she looked. A headband held her hair off her face while the back was caught up in some kind of nearly invisible hairnet. She wore a silver-and-white-striped apron over jeans and a long-sleeved shirt. She was helping Eddie Carberry pick out cookies.

"Do those have a lot of butter?" the eightysomething woman asked, pointing at a sugar cookie that had been dipped in chocolate. "My doctor told me to watch my cholesterol. I told him I'm too old and he can watch it for me. Now I'm feeling defiant, so I want cookies with butter and later I'll have a steak."

Shelby's mouth twitched, as if she was holding in a smile. "That's one way to handle it," she murmured.

"No one can live on salads and nonfat dairy," Eddie informed her. "Because that's not living at all. It's surviving. Life's too short. Now give me a couple of brownies to go with the cookies." The old lady, dressed in a bright violet tracksuit with a matching down coat, looked him up and down. "You're working out more these days."

He was, but how did she know?

"Gladys and I see you on the treadmill when we're at the gym for our water aerobics class. You should wear tighter clothes."

"Ma'am?"

Eddie rolled her eyes. "You know what I'm saying, Aidan. You've got the goods. Let's see them. Share the bounty. Take off your shirt once in a while. Put on tighter shorts." She sighed heavily. "Young people today. You're not as bright as my generation. That's for sure."

Eddie paid for her treats and left. Aidan stared after her.

"I honest to God don't know what to say," he admitted.

Shelby laughed. "I so want to be her when I grow up. Speaking my mind and ogling younger men. It's fantastic."

"Not if you're the younger man."

"Afraid?"

He grinned. "Terrified."

She held up a chocolate-dipped cookie. “How’s your cholesterol?”

“Excellent.”

She passed over the cookie.

“Thanks.” He took a bite. “I’m starting to wonder if you’re in league with Eddie. Feeding me all this stuff so I have to work out more.”

“While it’s a great plan, I never would have thought of it.”

“Eddie would.”

She laughed again. “Yes, she would, but I promise I have no ulterior motive for offering you a cookie.” She raised one shoulder. “Okay, maybe I have one reason, but it has nothing to do with Eddie. Did you think about what we talked about?”

He nodded as he finished the cookie.

“A lot?”

He nodded again.

“And?”

She was pretty. He liked how she met his gaze steadily. He didn’t have a type so much as he enjoyed all women, and while under other circumstances he would be tempted, he knew his relationship with Shelby wouldn’t be about sex. It would be about something far more important.

He thought about what she’d told him about her past. How her father had hurt her. He felt the anger rise up inside of him again, along with the need to protect. Not that he could do anything, but he told himself it was good that he still had that much empathy. He wasn’t a total jackass.

He wanted to be different and as far as he could tell, Shelby’s plan offered a way to make that happen.

“I’m in,” he said.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

She clapped her hands together. “That’s great. I’m very excited. I was hoping you’d agree. I’ve been thinking about the plan and we need to make sure we agree on terms.”

“Friends for six months.”

She nodded. Her eyes were wide and blue and right now filled with earnest determination.

“We’ll hang out and do things together,” she said. “Get to know each other. Develop trust. I’ll see you as a man who doesn’t threaten me and you’ll see me as a person, not a bed partner.”

“Agree. No sex. Nothing romantic. We’ll hang out and do stuff.”

She squared her shoulders. “Then in six months, we’ll both be better people. Healed. We’ll finish our experiment and go our separate ways.”

“That’s easy for you to say, but I’m not sure you can keep your end of the bargain.”

She frowned. “What do you mean?”

He grinned. “I’m a great friend. You might get hooked. I’m still friends with guys I knew in grade school. I can’t seem to shake ’em.”

She laughed. “I’m an excellent friend, as well. What if you don’t want to stop being friends with me?”

“That could be a real possibility.”

“All right,” she said slowly. “What if we commit—” She shook her head. “No, you hate that word. What if we dedicate ourselves to our plan for the next six months? Then, if we still want to be friends, we still will be. But regular friends, without a plan for mutual personal growth.”

He couldn’t imagine any man on the planet coming up with something like this, he thought. Which was why women should be ruling the world.

“Sounds like a plan.” He held out his hand.

She leaned across the counter and took it in hers. They shook.

“I don’t work Saturday,” she said. “Are you free?”

He had a couple of tours, but he could trade the afternoon one. “Sure. Say three?”

“Perfect. I’ll come to your place. It’s a date.” She frowned. “Not a date. A…”

“A nondate?”

“An undate?”

He grinned. “A friend date.”

She nodded. “Do you want another cookie?”

“No, thanks. I don’t want to have to work out more and have Eddie think I’m flirting with her.”

“Good point.” She bit her lower lip. “Do you think this is going to work, Aidan?”

He thought about the pain in her eyes when she’d talked about her past. He remembered the accusations the other woman had hurled at him on New Year’s Eve. Shelby had a good job and was part owner in a business he was pretty sure she loved. He knew he enjoyed everything about his company. Each of them had nearly all they could want and yet something was missing. Something big.

“We’re going to make it work,” he told her. “We know the problem and we’ll find a solution. We just have to show up and put in the effort. It’ll happen.”

Her smile returned. “You have a little motivational speaker in you. I didn’t know. I’ll see you Saturday.”

“I’ll be there.”

\* \* \*

AIDAN PULLED INTO the driveway of the house where he’d grown up. The roof had been recently replaced and the paint was new, but otherwise it looked exactly as it always had.

The property was a few miles outside of town, with plenty of land and a workshop for Ceallach out back. A giant workshop, where the gifted artist created his masterpieces. There was even a separate driveway and parking area for his various assistants who came and went. Because glass blowing wasn’t a solitary venture. Someone was needed at nearly every stage.

Aidan remembered being taken to his father’s workshop as a kid. While the power and heat of the furnace had intrigued him, he’d had no real interest in creating anything. His father had despaired of ever having a son to follow in his footsteps. Then Nick was born. From about two or three, he’d been obsessed with what his father did. Even his very first crude creations had shown talent. From that day, Del and Aidan had ceased to exist. At least for their father.

Different from what Shelby had gone through, he thought idly. But still not the happy childhood from TV sitcoms. He and Del had banded together—protecting each other, talking sports instead of art. The twins—the babies of the family—had been like Nick. Talented and interested in their father’s world. And so they’d grown up—five brothers divided into two camps. There had been affection between them, caring, but no real common language.

Aidan got out of his car, but before he could walk up the porch steps, the front door opened and a happy beagle dashed toward him. Sophie yipped in excitement as she raced forward, her long ears flapping as she ran. He crouched down and held open his arms. Sophie slammed into him with all the enthusiasm one delighted dog could contain.

“How’s my girl?” he asked, patting and rubbing her. She squirmed to get closer, then swiped his cheek with her tongue. Her tail slapped his arm as she wiggled and whined.

His mother stepped onto the porch. “She doesn’t do anything moderately,” Elaine Mitchell said with a laugh. “I’ve always admired that about her.”

Aidan climbed the two porch steps to hug his mom. She hung on tight. Sophie circled them both and barked. Elaine stepped back.

“I wasn’t expecting you,” she said, holding open the door. “This is a nice surprise.”

“I was in the neighborhood.”

He followed her into the kitchen and took a seat at the barstool by the island. Elaine collected a filter and tin of coffee, then poured water into the carafe.

She moved with energy, which he liked to see. The previous summer she'd battled breast cancer without telling anyone in the family. After the news had come out, he'd been able to look back and see how she'd been tired, with the strain of her illness showing on her face. Now he did his best to be more observant. While his mother had promised to never keep a secret like that again, Aidan wasn't sure he believed her. Theirs was a family built on information withheld.

"How's the business?" she asked after she'd started the coffeemaker.

"Good. I have a couple of snowshoeing trips along with the usual cross-country skiing." He offered guided tours for those not familiar with the area. Most of his tour guides were college students happy to take a light load in the winter and get paid to ski. In summer he hired the students who wanted to stay in the area over the long break. Either way, it was a win-win.

Sophie crossed to her bed in the corner and scratched the soft fabric several times before settling down. The little beagle had been there for his mom as Elaine had gone through her surgery and treatment. Totally faithful and supportive.

Once again he wondered if he should get a dog. Being responsible for another living creature would go a long way to bolstering his character. Plus a nice, big dog would be fun. He could take him hiking and camping. Fay liked dogs, so having one in the office wouldn't be a problem. Something to consider, he told himself.

"Your father and I are talking about going away again," his mother said. "Our vacation last fall was so nice for both of us. We're looking at taking one of those river cruises in Germany."

"That would be good," he said automatically, thinking that being trapped with his father on a boat was his idea of hell. But his mom would have a different view of things. "I'm glad you're getting away more."

"Me, too. Now that your father is slowing down with his work, we can think about other things."

Right. Because every part of their life was defined by Ceallach's work. That came first and the rest of it could wait its turn.

Stuck, Aidan reminded himself. Here was a prime example of why he never wanted to be in love. His mother was always the one who bent, who surrendered to whatever Ceallach wanted. He remembered being a kid and asking her why she didn't tell his dad to stop destroying his work. She'd told him it wasn't that easy—that Ceallach had his demons.

At eight or ten or twelve, Aidan hadn't cared about demons. He'd cared that he could hear his mother crying because another commission had been destroyed and there wasn't any money. That she didn't know how she was going to feed her children.

Whatever the problem, Ceallach was always right, always the important one. Theirs wasn't a partnership, at least not from his perspective. He'd often wondered why she stayed. No. The real question was why she'd married the man in the first place.

She poured them each a cup of coffee. "You should think about getting away."

He took the mug and grinned. "Mom, my life is a vacation."

"Not the business aspect of it."

"I don't mind that."

She studied him. "I guess you never did. You were always smart that way. It's interesting how you and Del are so different from your brothers."

"You mean not like Dad?"

"I mean different." Her voice chided ever so gently. "Speaking of your brothers, have you seen Nick?"

"Sure. A few days ago. Why?"

"I worry about him. But then I worry about all my boys."

He knew that in her way, she was telling the truth. She'd always been there for her sons, loving them, taking care of them. He'd known that she would listen, would do her best to understand, even if, in the end, she would side with his father.

Like every good mother, she'd always claimed to love her five boys equally. Still, if he was asked to say who was her favorite, he would have to admit it was Ronan. The irony of that truth was the fact that Ronan wasn't even hers. As he and Del had found out the previous fall, Ronan was their half brother—the result of Ceallach's affair. Yet when his ex-mistress had abandoned her child, Elaine had taken him in and passed him off as one of her own. Mathias's twin.

More secrets, he thought, wondering briefly what else he didn't know about his family. Of course there were things they didn't know about him. Like how badly he felt about what had happened on New Year's Eve. And how he was determined to be different. But no matter how he changed, he knew one thing for sure. He would never fall in love. The pleasure was nowhere near worth the pain.

#### CHAPTER FOUR

SHELBY WASN'T SURE what to expect when she showed up at Aidan's house on Saturday afternoon, but the small, well-kept bungalow was something of a surprise. There was a two-car garage, a wide porch and a huge snowman in the front yard. While most of the town celebrated Cabin Fever Days with snow people of all genders and sizes, she hadn't thought that Aidan would be one to participate.

His snowman was about five feet tall, with a sturdy shape and smiling face. A ski cap topped his head and two ski poles leaned against him, as if he was about to embark on an outdoor adventure. There was a whimsical quality about the snowman—maybe in the way he seemed ready to spring to life. Aidan might not have his father's talent to work with glass, but she would guess there were a few lingering artistic genes in him.

She walked up the porch stairs and knocked on the front door. In the few seconds it took him to answer, she acknowledged the nerves bouncing around in her stomach. Part of her wanted to bolt—there was no way this was going to work. But the sensible part of her, the part that had been to therapy and read a bunch of books and really wanted to get better, knew that showing up was the first step. That if her goal of healing from the damage done to her psyche was to be reached, she had to go through the process. Running away rarely accomplished anything.

Aidan opened the door. "Right on time. Come on in."

She did as he requested, careful to stomp the snow off her boots before walking into the house.

There was a forty-second bit of busyness to distract her from her nerves—unwinding her scarf, handing over her coat before stepping out of her boots. She noticed that Aidan was also in stocking feet, but his socks were thick and dark, while hers were covered with brightly colored cats. The contrast made her smile.

They were both in jeans and sweaters. His navy, hers dark pink. She hadn't known what to do about makeup and perfume and all that stuff. Because this wasn't a date. She was hanging out with a friend. But still, she'd wondered, and in the end had done what she did for work. Mascara and lip gloss.

They stared at each other. He was tall and broad. Masculine. The foyer was small and they were standing close together. Awkwardness pressed in on her. She didn't know what to do with her hands, let alone her body.

"Should we, um..." He cleared his throat. "Go sit down?"

"Sure."

She followed him into a good-sized living room. One wall was paneled, but not like in those scary midcentury grandma homes. This was rough-hewn, obviously old and well cared for. A big wood-burning stone fireplace stood opposite, with a large mantel stretching across the wall. A huge television hung above it. The furniture was black leather, the floors hardwood. A few paintings, mostly landscapes, were scattered on the walls. A patterned rug of reds and browns and greens anchored the room. The room was eclectic, but ultimately welcoming.

"I like it," she said. "It's very masculine, but not in a no-girls-allowed way."

Aidan shoved his hands into his jeans pockets. "I picked out most of it. Nick helped with the rug. He has an eye for color."

“The artist thing.”

He nodded. “That would be it.” He pointed at the sofa. “Have a seat.”

She sat at one end of the sofa. He took the other. They looked at each other, then away. Silence filled the room and awkwardness returned. Which made sense. She and Aidan barely knew each other. Rather than become friends in the normal way—over time, through shared interests—they were forcing it upon themselves. Where on earth were they supposed to start?

“What about—”

“Did you want to—”

They both spoke at the same time, stopped, and silence returned. Shelby decided there was no point in ignoring the obvious.

“This is really uncomfortable,” she said firmly. “But I think we can get past it.”

“Okay.”

The slow response was more neutral than agreement.

“We have a purpose,” she continued. “I want to fall in love and get married.”

Aidan’s expression tightened with what could only be described as panic. Some of her tension eased.

“Not to you,” she pointed out. “Don’t freak.”

“Then don’t say stuff like that.”

“Why not? Why can’t I be honest?”

“Because it’s not what any guy wants to hear. Not right off. It means you have a picture of what’s going to happen in your life and you’ll use any guy to get there. It makes us feel trapped.”

His words almost made sense. “Like what we want is more important than the outcome? Caring more about the bridal gown than the groom?”

“Yeah, that. Men and women want different things. You want to be committed.”

“And men want to cheat.”

His brows rose. “Who cheated?”

She tucked one foot under her opposite leg as she considered her words. “Wow. I honestly don’t know where that came from. Miles cheated, but we were barely dating, so I’m not sure it counts. I guess what I mean is I don’t trust men.”

“Shouldn’t you be afraid a guy would hit you rather than he would cheat?”

Talk about cutting to be heart of the matter. She held up both hands. “Yes, and maybe we could ease into the honesty just a little.”

“I thought women liked a man to say what he was thinking.”

She smiled. “That’s a myth.”

“For what it’s worth, I never cheated.”

“That’s because you were never in a relationship long enough to get bored.”

One brow rose. “So you get to be honest, but I have to be careful?”

Oops. She drew in a breath. “You’re right. Sorry. I take back my request that you edit what you say. I’m tough. I can take it.”

She thought he might make a crack about her being weak or broken, but he surprised her by nodding.

“You are tough. You’re taking control of your situation and that’s admirable. A lot of people are more comfortable being victims.”

“Oh. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

They smiled at each other.

“So what are we going to do?” he asked.

“What do you mean?”

“With our afternoon. We have to do something.”

“Why? We’re talking. That’s nice. We could go to Jo’s Bar and get margaritas.”

Aidan shifted back in his seat. If she didn’t know better she would swear he was starting to sweat. “No. Guys don’t go get margaritas and talk.”

“You go get beers. It’s the same thing.”

“We get a beer and watch sports. It’s not the same thing. Women want to talk everything to death. Guys don’t do that. If you ignore most problems, they usually go away.”

“Uh-huh. And how’s that strategy working for you?”

“I’m here, aren’t I?”

“Yes. Trying not to talk about what’s wrong.”

“We could do something,” he offered. “Like watch a game. Or go skiing.”

Shelby considered his options. “You realize none of those require conversation.”

Aidan relaxed a little. “Isn’t that great?”

“But we have to get to know each other. We have to talk about our feelings.”

He winced. “Why?”

“We just do. That’s what...” She felt her eyes widen. “We’re totally different. The man-woman thing is real. I want to go have a conversation about my life and your life and what we can do to help each other, and you want to physically do something with only the occasional grunt for conversation. As a man, you don’t want to talk about anyone’s feelings, let alone your own.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing. It’s not. Not talking about your feelings can be very relaxing.”

Which might be true but wasn’t helpful. “We really didn’t think this through.”

Aidan leaned toward her. “No. Do not give up on me now. We have a deal. We’ve gotten this far, we can figure out the rest of it. You want to do girl stuff and I want to do guy stuff.”

He gave her a slow, sexy smile. One that had her breath catching. But before she could do something ridiculous, like bat her eyes at him or flip her hair, she reminded herself that it wasn’t a slow, sexy smile. They weren’t involved that way. It was just a smile. She would ignore any subtext her hormones might read in to the situation.

“I know,” he told her. “We’ll alternate. Girl date, guy date. Not date, but you know what I mean.”

“That could work. We could each plan our gender event.” She grimaced. Avoiding the word date was harder than she would have thought.

“Gender event?”

“Do you have a better phrase?”

“I’m liking gender event.”

She laughed. “Okay, so you’re responsible for boy things and I’m in charge of girl things. And yes on the alternating. So who goes first?”

He stretched out his arms, one hand flat, the other curled into a fist. “Rock, paper, scissors?”

She shifted until she was facing him, then together they hit their fists against their flat hands and counted to three.

“Rock,” Aidan said triumphantly, then groaned when he saw her paper. “You win.”

“I know,” she told him. “Poor you. I grew up with a brother. Why do guys always start out with rock? It’s very predictable.”

“We can’t help ourselves.” He stood. “We’re going to get margaritas and talk about our feelings, aren’t we?”

“You know it.”

\* \* \*

JO’S BAR HAD been around for eight or nine years. Aidan had been there a few times, but it wasn’t the kind of place he and his friends liked to hang out. For one thing, the bar catered to women.

On the surface, that might seem like a good thing—lots of beautiful women hanging out. What’s not to like? Only it wasn’t that kind of place. For one thing, the lighting was way too bright. There were no dark corners or ratty old booths. Instead the booths were new and scaled down in size. There

were tables everywhere. The walls were painted some weird light purple color—Nick would know the name of the shade, but he didn't.

While there were plenty of TVs around, they were always turned to shopping or female-based reality shows. The menu had lots of salads on it and most of the drinks had a diet version. The only part of the bar that felt close to normal was the small room in back with a pool table, but even with that concession, Jo's generally wasn't a place men went to on purpose.

Now The Man Cave was different. More male-friendly. Not that Shelby led him there.

"Isn't this nice?" she asked as they walked inside.

"Uh-huh."

"Oh, look." She pointed to the televisions. "They're having an America's Next Top Model marathon. I love that show."

He'd never seen it. When he glanced at the screen, he saw women posing for pictures, which should have been appealing. Except they all looked really young and he wasn't interested in some skinny teenager, thank you very much. Not that he was interested in women at all, he reminded himself. There would be none of that for him—for at least six months.

There weren't a lot of customers on a nonfestival Saturday afternoon. A couple of groups of women seemed to be finishing up lunch. There was a young couple at a booth in the corner. He and Shelby took seats at a small booth in the back. Aidan had a clear view of a TV, which he considered appropriate punishment for all his past misdeeds.

Jo walked over and looked between them. "This is new," she said. Her gaze settled on him. "I thought you only did tourists."

"Hi, Jo." Because there didn't seem to be a better response.

"We're not dating," Shelby told the other woman. "We're friends. It's not romantic."

"If you say so. What can I get you?"

"A pitcher of margaritas and some nachos," Shelby said with a smile. "We're going to talk."

Jo's brows rose. "All righty then. I have carnitas nachos today. You want that?"

"Meat is good," Aidan said.

"Then meat." Shelby smiled at Jo. "Thank you."

Jo left. Aidan couldn't begin to imagine what she was thinking, or what rumors would be spreading through town over the next few days. Whatever they were, he would deal.

Shelby looked at him. "How was your week?"

"Fine."

One corner of her mouth twitched. "Could you expand on that? Maybe give me a few details?"

Because they were "talking." He drew in a breath. "Work is busy. We have a good snowpack this year, which helps with business. Lots of skiing. I'm offering a snowshoeing class for beginners. That meant buying more equipment, but I think it will pay off in the long run."

"With people coming back next year?"

"And telling their friends they had a good time."

"Is it difficult to learn how to do it?" she asked.

"No. It's like walking in sand with really big shoes. Level terrain isn't bad. Uphill is tiring and downhill is the biggest challenge."

"Gravity," she said with a smile. "It always gets you in the end. Kipling used to say that."

As an Olympic champion, he would know. "He had a bad accident a couple of years back, didn't he?"

She nodded. "In New Zealand. It ended his skiing career. For a while we were scared he wouldn't walk again, but he was determined. And lucky." Her expression turned wistful. "Now he's married to Destiny, with a baby on the way. He has it all."

Which was what Shelby wanted. A home. Family. Stability. Aidan knew her dreams would be considered normal. He should probably want them for himself. But there was no way. He just wanted to not be a jackass.

“You’re going to be an aunt,” he said to shift the subject to something slightly happier for her.

“My second time around. I consider Starr to be an honorary niece. She’s my sister-in-law’s half sister, and Destiny and Kipling have custody of her. She’s almost sixteen.”

He knew Destiny but wasn’t sure he’d met Starr.

Jo brought a pitcher of margaritas and two glasses. “Nachos are on the way. You both walking?”

“We are,” Shelby told her. “We’re good.”

“Just checking.”

“She always does that,” Shelby said in a low voice, when the other woman had left. “Makes sure we’re not going to drink and drive. It’s nice. People in town look out for each other.”

“Or she doesn’t want to get sued.”

“Don’t be cynical.”

“It comes with the territory.”

“It doesn’t have to.” She poured them each a margarita.

Aidan took his and braced himself for the too-sweet drink. When it was his turn, they were drinking beer. Or scotch.

“To being friends,” Shelby said and touched her glass to his. “Thank you for helping me.”

Her eyes were blue—sort of a medium color. Nice, he thought absently. “You’re the one who’s helping me,” he told her.

They touched glasses again. He took a sip.

“Not bad,” he said. The liquid was more tart than sweet, with a hint of salt. Not his favorite but he could get used to it.

“Wait until you try the nachos. They’re amazing. So what else happened this week?”

“I’m thinking of getting a dog.”

“Interesting. A big one, right?”

He nodded. “One I could take camping and fishing.”

“You could teach it to snowboard. It could wear one of those cute coats and eye goggles.”

“That is not happening. This is a manly dog.”

“It’s a dog that doesn’t yet exist, at least not in your life. Maybe you’ll fall for a poodle.”

“Never.”

“A Yorkie?” She giggled. “You could coordinate your shirt with her hair ribbon. You’d be so sweet together.”

“Why are you emasculating me?”

“It’s fun.” She rested her elbows on the table. “But I can be serious, too. Why a dog? Are you lonely?”

He was about to say no, of course not, when it occurred to him he might be. Work kept him busy and he enjoyed his coworkers, but his relationships with them were mostly casual. Until a couple of years ago, he’d had three of his four brothers in town, but Mathias and Ronan had moved to Happily Inc. and Nick was always off doing something.

He had friends. Guy friends. But everyone was busy with their lives. As for women, as the whole world knew, he’d done his damndest to make sure those encounters never meant anything.

“I think a dog would be good for me,” he answered, aware he was avoiding the question. “I’d have to be responsible for it. Take care of it. I’d bring it to the office. Fay would like that.”

“Fay is...”

“My office manager. She handles the scheduling and gets the tours ready.” He hesitated. “Her daughter is Kalinda. She was—”

Shelby nodded. “I know Kalinda. She loves peanut butter cookies.” She sighed. “I’m glad she’s healing, but what a difficult road for her and her family.”

“Fay does her best to stay strong,” he said, grateful he didn’t have to explain about Kalinda’s burns. The teen would face more surgeries over the years. He knew for Fay there were good days and bad days, but whatever happened, she loved her daughter unconditionally.

Jo came by with a huge platter of nachos. There were plates for each of them, along with bowls of extra salsa and guacamole. Aidan inhaled the scent of the marinated pork and realized he hadn’t eaten much that day. His stomach growled.

“Me, too,” Shelby said with a laugh as she grabbed a chip. “I was playing around with custom cookie ideas and the day got away from me. Then I didn’t have time to eat or I would be late.”

“Next time, eat,” he told her. “I don’t expect you to be exactly on time.”

“It was our first gender encounter. I wanted to make a good impression.”

He liked her teasing. The fact that she could be so charming and open meant that her father hadn’t broken her as much as she feared. Intense determination filled him. He was going to help Shelby get whatever she wanted, he promised himself. Not only because it would help him, but because it was the right thing to do.

They ate in silence for a few minutes, then Shelby said, “You’re one of five brothers, right?”

“I’m the second oldest. There’s Del, me, Nick, Mathias and Ronan. The last two are...” Twins. He always said twins. Only they weren’t. They never had been. It had all been a giant lie.

“Aidan?” Shelby’s voice was soft. “Are you okay?”

“You’re right,” he said bitterly. “Some men do cheat. My father did. I don’t know how many women there were. He claims just one, but I have my doubts. There had to have been others.”

“I’m sorry,” she said softly. “That’s so hard. Does your mom know?”

“She covered for him. For years.”

Shelby frowned. “I don’t understand. Why would it be an ongoing issue?”

He picked up his margarita and took a drink. “Because my youngest brother, Ronan, is his mistress’s son.”

Shelby’s blue eyes widened and her mouth formed a perfect O. She looked shocked and strangely appealing. Sexy, maybe. He pushed that thought away and focused on what had happened with his family.

“Del, Nick and I were practically babies when my mom had Mathias. We didn’t know what was going on. All I remember is that I had twin brothers. Four years ago, my dad had a heart attack. It turned out to be pretty minor, but at the time, we didn’t know how bad it was. I guess he was afraid he was going to die or something and he told the twins the truth. That Ronan was the result of an affair. When Ronan’s mom was going to give him up for adoption, Dad told my mom, who agreed to raise him as her own.”

Shelby’s eyes stayed wide. “Seriously? I can’t imagine.”

“It happened. Some days I think she’s a saint and other days I’m convinced she’s a fool. That Dad played her. He gets everything and she’s stuck with some other woman’s kid.”

“That’s harsh, but I understand your point.” She reached for a chip. “What I don’t get is how she did it. I mean every time she looked at him, wouldn’t she see that other woman? Imagine her with her husband? It must have been incredibly painful.”

Aidan hadn’t planned to talk about this. He never did. He and his brothers had spoken about the situation a couple of times, but with as few words as possible. And without talking about the lingering effects on the family. But he found himself comfortable discussing it all with Shelby.

“You’d think.” He took another drink of his margarita. “But it wasn’t like that at all. Maybe at first—I wouldn’t remember that. But by the time I was eight or nine, I knew that Ronan was her favorite.”

“That’s not possible,” Shelby breathed.

“It wasn’t anything awful. She didn’t tell us that or make it obvious, but we could tell. We used to tease Ronan about being a mama’s boy. She was always fussing over him. They were the closest. Even in high school, they talked all the time.”

He remembered ragging on his brother. How Ronan had said it was because he was the superior brother. All good fun. Elaine had been there for all of them, so knowing Ronan was the one she loved just a little bit more hadn’t meant much. He’d figured it was something every group of siblings went through.

“After Dad told the twins, they left. Packed up everything and relocated to Happily Inc.”

Shelby smiled. “I’ve heard of that place. It’s outside of Palm Desert, right? A wedding-destination town. It’s supposed to be lovely, in the mountains, with an underground spring and—” She stopped and sighed. “Sorry, I was momentarily distracted. I blame the margarita.”

Her humor faded. “Wait a minute. I’m just now processing. Ceallach told the twins about Ronan and who he was and that was it? He didn’t tell your mom that he’d told the twins the truth and he didn’t tell you or your other brothers, either?”

“Not until last summer. We figured they’d gone to Happily Inc. to get away from Dad and pursue their art. No one thought anything of it.”

“But what about them? How are they? They were twins for what, twenty-five years, and they suddenly find out they’re not? Poor Ronan, to find out he’s not who he thought. That the woman he thought of as his mother isn’t. Has he met his biological mom? Are he and Elaine okay? Do you guys talk about this stuff now?”

He held up his hands in the shape of a T. “I’m willing to do the girl thing today, but you have to take it slow, okay? Not so many questions.”

To be honest, he didn’t have any answers. Mostly because he’d never really thought about the situation from Ronan’s perspective. When he and Del and Nick had found out last fall, they’d had to deal with who Ronan was, or wasn’t. Not that having a different mother made any difference in the siblings’ relationship. They were brothers and they would always be brothers.

“Sorry. I’m just shocked. Poor Ronan. That had to have been tough for him. And Mathias. I mean they were a team. Special by virtue of being twins. Now that’s gone forever.”

“There’s a cheerful thought.”

“But it’s true.”

Not something he wanted dwell on, he thought to himself. Families were complicated—his more so than most. At least that was his impression. Maybe not. Maybe everyone else was dealing with the same level of crap.

“Do you and Nick ever talk about it?” she asked.

“No.”

“Because you’re men and men don’t have those kinds of conversations?”

He nodded and picked up the pitcher to fill their glasses.

“Maybe it would help.”

He finished pouring and put down the pitcher. “There’s not a problem.”

“Of course there is. Are you seriously going to tell me that your two brothers taking off like that is okay?”

She had a point, not that he wanted to admit it. “Mathias and Ronan have each other. I worry more about Nick.”

The words were unexpected and made him want to swear. Where had they come from?

“Why?” she asked gently.

Hell. “Because he’s not as happy as he seems. He’s working as a manager at The Man Cave, but in his spare time he’s hiding out in his secret art studio. I know he’s doing all kinds of things up there, but he won’t talk about it. He doesn’t want Dad to know. God knows what the great Ceallach

would say. How he would be pissed and bring Nick down. Yes, he wants his son to be an artist, but not one better than him.”

Shelby put her hand on his arm. “You should talk to Nick.”

“No.”

“It would help.”

“No.”

“You’re so stubborn. Guys need love, too.”

“Is this really what women do when they get together?”

“Uh-huh. We talk about our problems and our feelings. It’s cathartic.”

“It’s a nightmare.”

She smiled. “You’ll get used to it.”

“If I do, I’ll start to grow breasts.”

The smile broadened. “That’s very sexist of you.”

“I’m okay with that.”

She laughed and took another chip. Conversation shifted to the upcoming Cabin Fever Days and the ice sculptures taking shape in the park.

Later, when they’d left the bar and gone their separate ways, Aidan told himself that while he could go his whole life without having another afternoon like that, he had to admit talking about stuff was kind of good. He felt...relieved somehow. Not that he would share that piece of information with anyone. Ever.

#### CHAPTER FIVE

NEARLY A WEEK LATER, Shelby found herself back at Jo’s Bar, but under very different circumstances. Instead of sitting across from a surprisingly chatty Aidan, she was with her girlfriends for lunch. She sat next to her very pregnant sister-in-law, who kept shifting in her chair.

“I can’t get comfortable,” Destiny admitted when Shelby asked if she was all right. “Some days are harder than others. I can’t believe I still have a few weeks to go. I’m so huge.”

From across the table, Isabel eyed her warily. “Please stop saying that. I’m going to be that big times three. All I want to hear is how wonderful you feel and how great every second is.”

Destiny sipped her hot lemon water. “I’ve never felt better. It’s nothing. You’ll be fine.”

Isabel sighed. “Thank you for lying.”

“Anytime.”

Taryn, perfectly dressed as always in a leather and wool suit and ridiculously high-heeled boots, pointed to the plate of cookies Shelby had brought to the lunch.

“Are those as good as they look?” she asked warily.

“I hope so.” Shelby’s voice was cheerful. “I can’t believe how great the response had been. People are going crazy for the ice-sculpture cookies.”

“You shouldn’t be surprised,” Madeline told her. “It was a great idea. We get so many tourists coming in for the festival. Who doesn’t love looking at the amazing carvings, all done in ice? To be able to buy cookies that look like them is fun.”

Shelby appreciated the compliment. Being a part of the bakery was still new to her. She wanted to get it right all the time. Not possible, she knew, but it was nice that her ideas had been successful so far.

“I’ve heard from a few more of the artists,” she said. “They want cookies for next year. And a couple of people have placed orders to have cookies shipped to them at home.”

Felicia, the woman in charge of the festivals, looked at her. “You could start a mail-order business at the bakery. You already have a website. It wouldn’t take much to expand it.”

“I’ve been playing around with the idea,” Shelby admitted. “I need to get all my thoughts together and have more information before I talk to Amber about it.”

There would be start-up costs, of course, but not that many. Still, she wasn't sure what Amber would say. Her business partner hadn't been convinced about the food-cart idea, although she'd agreed to try it. Now the Ambrosia Bakery cart was selling briskly at every festival.

"The biggest challenge is decorating them," Shelby said. "While the work isn't that detailed, it's time-consuming. I don't want to tie up our skilled employees with something like this, but to sell the cookies beyond Fool's Gold, we'll need a process. Plus, the sales aren't going to be regular. So hiring someone means having to fill their workday with other things when we don't have custom orders."

"You need part-time help," Madeline said. "Someone who would be willing to come in when you had orders."

"You should hire teenagers," Taryn offered. "Young ones. A group of fourteen-year-old girls would love to come in and decorate cookies for a few hours. They could do it in groups. It would give them a nice break from babysitting and offer them a chance to earn some money."

Jo arrived with their lunches. After everyone had their food, Shelby picked up her fork. "I never thought of teenagers," she admitted. "But fourteen. Isn't that too young to be working?" Training wouldn't be an issue. It was basically coloring, but on cookies.

"There are strict labor laws in the state of California," Felicia announced. "They could only work for a couple of hours a day. There are also caps on the number of hours in a week. They'd each need a work permit. If you were in the entertainment industry, it would be easier, but it's still doable."

"How can you possibly know that?" Madeline asked.

Felicia shrugged. "I can't help it. I read."

"I don't remember an article on child labor laws in my latest issue of Vogue, but maybe I missed it." Taryn smiled at Felicia. "You are always entertaining and I say that with love."

"Then I accept it the same way."

Shelby laughed. "Okay, now I have a starting place for my research. Thank you."

"I can be a temporary worker," Isabel offered. "When I'm on bed rest. It's not like I'll have a lot to fill my day."

"Poor you," Taryn said, hugging her friend. "I'll visit. That will be entertaining."

"Yes, but not nearly enough. I'll be going over the books for the store and ordering inventory, but I think I'll still have some extra time. Decorating cookies would be fun."

"If you didn't eat them all," Madeline teased.

Isabel wrinkled her nose. "These days I'm more into salty foods than sweet ones."

Shelby thought about Isabel's cravings for pretzel bread and figured her cookies would be safe.

"Thanks for the offer," she said. "I may take you up on it."

"Assuming you have time for your new business venture," Felicia said. "What with your love life heating up?"

Everyone turned to Shelby, who was busy gaping at Felicia.

"What are you talking about?" she asked, just as Taryn murmured, "That would be my question."

"You're seeing someone?" Madeline asked, sounding hurt.

Shelby shook her head. "I'm not. There's no one."

"I heard you were out with Aidan over the weekend," Felicia said. "I'm sure my source is very reliable."

"Oh, that." Shelby shook her head. "No romance. Our relationship is strictly as friends." While Madeline knew the details of her past and Shelby was fairly sure there were plenty of rumors, she wasn't one to discuss her problems in a crowd.

"I don't have any guy friends," she said by way of edging around the truth. "Aidan doesn't have any female friends. We thought hanging out would be good for us."

Madeline relaxed, but everyone else stared at her as if she had grown a second and possibly third head.

“Why?” Isabel asked. “You have us.”

“It’s different. A male perspective is nice.”

“She’s right,” Taryn added. “I love my boys very much. While their advice is always different than yours, sometimes it’s helpful to hear it. I think all women should have male friends.”

Taryn’s “boys” were three retired football players who were also her business partners at Score PR, but Shelby still appreciated the support.

“See? It’s not weird.”

“It’s kind of weird,” Destiny said, “but good for you. Just don’t go falling for him romantically. From all I’ve heard, he’s not the long-term-relationship type. I’d hate to see you get hurt.”

“It’s not romantic,” Shelby assured her, knowing in that statement she was being completely honest. Aidan was a great guy. She’d enjoyed their afternoon together. And sure, he was good-looking and funny, but they were friends. Nothing more. She had a plan and nothing was going to stand in the way of success.

\* \* \*

ONE OF THE advantages of being part owner of a business was having access to it during off-hours. So while The Man Cave was technically closed, Aidan had a key, which explained why he and Shelby were playing pool at ten o’clock on a Saturday morning.

He didn’t know how it was possible, but Shelby had admitted she’d never played pool before, so he’d explained about striped versus solid balls and the basic rules of the game. Now Shelby was practicing how to use her cue stick to hit the cue ball. It wasn’t going well.

“I think it’s moving,” she said as her stick sailed past the cue ball and she stumbled forward.

Aidan held in a grin. “It’s not moving. You have to line up your stick with the ball.”

“But what about where I want it to go?”

“Let’s get you to where you can hit the cue ball consistently, then we’ll worry about direction.”

She glanced at him over her shoulder. “You sound very patient, but I know you’re laughing at me on the inside.”

“Just a little.”

She wore jeans and a blue sweatshirt. Her hair was pulled back in a ponytail and she wasn’t wearing much makeup. But when she smiled at him, her whole face lit up.

“Okay,” she said with a sigh. “Tell me again what I’m doing wrong.”

Aidan moved toward her. “Better yet, I’ll show you.”

He positioned the cue ball about a foot from the center pocket, then gently pushed her forward. “Stand with your feet a little bit more than shoulder-width apart. Place your left hand on the table. Bend your fingers like I taught you and rest the cue on your fingers.”

She did as he instructed, then moved her right arm back and forth. The cue stick moved with her.

“Now move with a little more force.”

He watched as she drew back the stick, then thrust it forward. It barely grazed the cue ball. The white ball jumped a little to the left and came to a stop. Shelby groaned, but Aidan saw what she’d been doing wrong.

“You’re moving smoothly in practice, but as soon as you try to put some force behind the movement, you pull up the end.”

“And that’s supposed to make sense to me?”

He chuckled. “I’ll show you.”

He moved behind her so he could hold the cue stick with her. He rested his left hand by her left hand and put his right on top of hers.

“This is your practice movement.” He slowly moved the stick back and forth, keeping it even. “This is what you do when you’re trying to shoot.”

He raised the back of the stick as he brought it forward. “You need to be consistent. There’s no pressure.”

“That’s so geeky,” she muttered. “Okay, let’s try this again.”

She completed the smooth practice shot, then went for the ball. This time she managed to keep the stick level and the white cue ball rolled across the table.

“I did it!”

Aidan straightened. “You did. Now try it again.”

Shelby hurried around to the other side of the table. She got in position. “Is this right?”

He nodded because speaking suddenly seemed difficult. Something was wrong with him. He couldn’t put his finger on it, but there was a tension inside him. Almost a tightness.

He shook off the feeling and circled around the table to watch Shelby get into position. He checked out her arm extension and how she held the cue, then found his gaze dropping to her butt as she bent over the table.

Her jeans pulled tight over perfect curves. Funny how he’d never noticed her ass before now and—

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