

## Chapter One

### Tessa

I was late.

I hated being late.

Hopping on one foot, I slid one low-heeled pump onto my foot. I dashed into the living room, grabbed my laptop, and slid it into my computer bag. *Keys*. I needed my keys. I glanced at the kitchen island. No keys.

*Crap*. Where had I left them? I glanced at my slim, silver watch. If I left now, I had just enough time to stop at Mountain Brew for a latte. I had a to-do list a mile long today, but there was always time for caffeine.

My front door flew open.

“Tessa! I need help.”

My eight-year-old cousin Haley stood in the doorway. She was still in her Pokémon pajamas, and her fine, blonde hair was a tangled cloud around her face.

Her nose screwed up. “Simba escaped.”

I swallowed a groan. Simba was a bad-tempered tabby who hated being outside, but for some

reason was a dedicated escape artist. “Where’s your mom?”

“She had to go to the store early. For a delivery.”

My aunt owned a small gift shop in town.

“Where’s Josh?” I knew my oldest cousin would be tasked with watching over the brood.

“Still asleep. Leo is playing Xbox and Caleb is eating his breakfast.” She crossed her arms. “I wouldn’t ask Caleb for help, because he’s a dummy-butt.”

“Don’t call your brother a dummy-butt.”

Josh had just finished high school and was totally doing nothing this summer before he headed to Boulder for college next month. He slept, ate, kept an eye on his siblings during the day, and went out with his friends in the evening. Leo was fifteen and dramatic with it. He hadn’t had a growth spurt yet, and was short and skinny. He felt highly aggrieved about this. Caleb was nine, and he and Haley lived to aggravate each other.

I sighed. “Come on, then.” I spotted my keys on the coffee table with my cellphone. Scooping them up, I shoved them into my laptop bag and swung the bag on my shoulder.

After locking the door to my house, I shot the pots of colorful flowers crowding my pocket-sized, front porch a long look. My dahlias looked glorious but I knew it wouldn’t be long before I’d have to dig them up and store them for the winter. I added that to my mental to-do list. There seemed to always be something to do with my cute, little place.

“Come on, Tessa, Simba will be scared.” Haley grabbed my hand and tugged me across the quiet street.

I swallowed a snort. Simba was an evil despot trapped in the body of a cat. He didn’t do scared, unless he was terrorizing someone else.

We crossed to a house across the street that was a little larger than mine. I smiled. I’d spent a

large part of my childhood in that house. I'd run around in the yard, I'd broken the downstairs window beside the front door with an errant baseball, and I'd climbed the trees and made endless little-girl wishes. Orphaned when I was Haley's age, I'd thankfully had my awesome Aunt Emily to take me in. Against a hell of a lot of odds, she'd made a home for a grieving little girl and filled it with love.

"There." Haley pointed triumphantly at the large tree in the front yard.

I spied Simba on a branch, giving me the evil eye.

"I already got the step ladder," my cousin added.

Setting my bag down, I marched over to the ladder and dragged it under the tree. "Simba, I need to get to work, so let's make this quick. Got it?"

The cat turned in a circle on the branch and flashed me his butt.

*Charming.* I climbed up the ladder. "Let's go, you tyrant." I kept my voice low and singsongy. "You're making me late. I have a hotel to run."

I grabbed for him. He scratched my arm in response. Ignoring the sting on my forearm, I seized his bulk from the tree and hauled him down. He snarled at me.

"Asshole," I muttered.

"Simba!" Haley took him, hugging him tightly. The cat's rigid body went lax, and he nuzzled his face against Haley's neck and started purring.

I glared at him. He glared back.

"Thanks, Tessa. You're the best."

I stroked a hand over her flyaway hair. "No problem, Hay-bear. I need to get to work, but I'll see you later, okay?"

She nodded and hauled the bad-tempered cat away.

Snatching up my bag, I hurried down the street. Late. So late.

A brisk wind tugged at my hair. Summer was just about to hand over to fall. I grinned. I *loved* the fall in Colorado. I loved when the aspens turned yellow, and I could pull out my favorite throw blanket that my aunt had knitted for me. Not to mention my gorgeous collection of scarves and hats.

Also, I had pale skin, so summer didn't agree with me. If I spent too much time in the sun, I turned a lovely shade of virulent pink, then once the sunburn passed, I went back to pale. I couldn't tan, and I'd tried, lots of times. As a teenage girl, all I'd wanted were boobs, long legs, and tanned skin. I'd gotten one out of three.

"Morning, Tessa," a woman called out from across the street. She was watering her garden.

"Morning, Mrs. Mitchell." I waved.

I pretty much knew all the locals in town. I'd been born and raised here. Windward, Colorado—my hometown—was the best place in the world to live.

Yes, I was a little biased.

Windward was nestled in the Rocky Mountains, a few hours from Denver. I'd grown up skiing in the winter, hiking in the summer, and loving the heck out of every season. I'd ventured to Denver for college, but I always knew I'd come back. Windward never felt too small. With exceptional skiing and scenery, excellent resorts and restaurants, not to mention some fabulous shopping, we had tourists from all over the globe visit. It was like the whole world came to us.

Best of all, I got to manage the best hotel in town—the Windward Mountain Resort. I thrived on making sure things ran perfectly and my guests had a memorable visit. Then, after work, I could leave the fancy center of town for the eastern side of Windward that the locals called home. The hotels and high-end condos gave way to cute, little houses. I could kick off my heels

and snuggle up in my little cottage and putter around my garden.

Okay, I honestly didn't get much time to putter, but I didn't mind.

"Heya, Tessa."

I waved. "Hi, Mr. Schmidt." The local baker was making his rounds to the cafés, delivering his baked goods. He'd been doing it since I was a kid, and his honey cakes were the best this side of the Rockies.

The need for caffeine turned urgent. I eyed the nasty scratch on my arm. It sullenly oozed blood. *Thanks a lot, Simba.* I deserved a latte. I'd earned it. I could grab a coffee at work, but it wasn't as good as the magic from Mountain Brew.

Plus, when I got to work, I'd be inundated. My brain turned to the never-ending list of last-minute details for the charity ball tomorrow night. Every year, the resort hosted the Mountain Masquerade. Lots of guests came in from Denver, dressed up and put on a mask, and helped us raise a bunch of money for the Windward Valley Children's Charity. The charity was near and dear to my heart. It supported everything from local kids' sporting and arts groups, to subsidizing college for disadvantaged kids, and to helping orphaned and foster-care kids stay clothed and fed.

A grant from the WVCC had helped Emily and me when we'd needed it most. Without it, I'd probably have ended up in the foster system.

Every year, I ensured the Mountain Masquerade went off without a hitch.

I also had emails I needed to deal with. My stomach did an unhappy lurch. Yes, Windward Resort's newest owner was a workaholic dictator. He fired off a gazillion emails a day. I wondered if Langston would allow us to do the Mountain Masquerade in the future. At that thought, my stomach decided a lurch wasn't enough and tried for a knot.

“Just worry that all your staff still have jobs first, Tessa.” I took the next corner. The coffee shop was nestled in some buildings with a vague chalet-style look to them. There were already several people inside.

As I opened the door, a bell hanging from the frame above tinkled. The barista spotted me and smiled. “Hazelnut latte? Extra shot?”

I moaned. “Make it two extra shots and I’ll have your babies.”

Charlotte laughed. “I think I’m good, and that would be a little tricky since we’re both women. Besides, don’t you have a resort to run?”

“Oh, yeah.” I leaned against the counter and breathed in the scent of coffee.

“You must be busy now that the resort has joined the Langston Hotels group.” Charlotte pressed a hand to her chest. “I can’t believe we have a Langston Hotel here in Windward.”

A sour taste filled my mouth. I pasted on a smile. “It’s still the Windward Mountain Resort. The same old resort with the same old charm.”

“I know, but they’ll modernize, right? Soon, you’ll have even more rich and famous people coming to stay.”

*Ugh.* The Windward was polished wood, rugged stone, and mountain charm. We didn’t need glitz and celebrities. I loved the hotel just as it was. I’d loved it from the first time my parents took me there. I’d always had my special birthday dinner in the restaurant.

They’d died when I was eight. Grief wound around my chest. I touched the bracelet on my wrist. It was a pretty, delicate twist of citrine, garnet, peridot, and blue topaz that my parents had given me at that last birthday dinner. Just days after, they’d been gone. The grief never went away. It had lost some of the sharpest edges, but I thought of them all the time. A grieving eight-year-old was a lot for a twenty-year-old to inherit, but Aunt Emily had never wavered. She’d

kept up the birthday dinner tradition at the resort to this very day.

My phone dinged. I pulled it out and rolled my eyes. I'd been doing that a lot lately. Every time I got an email from Ambrose Langston. I was surprised I hadn't sprained my optic nerve.

Subject: Staffing Reports

Ms. Ashford,

Where are the staffing reports I requested? I asked that they be sent to me today.

Regards,

Ambrose Langston

Using two fingers, I furiously typed on my phone. I'd stayed up late working on the damn reports he'd requested.

Mr. Langston,

It is still today. As I always intended, I will email them...by the close of business today.

Have a wonderful day,

Tessa Ashford

Ms. Ashford,

I am aware of the day.

Ensure the reports aren't late.

Regards,

Ambrose Langston

I rolled my eyes again and muttered a few choice words. Lucky Langston wasn't in the vicinity or his ears would be burning. I scrolled through my emails to see he'd emailed me four times through the night with other requests. Did the man not sleep? Maybe he was part-cyborg. He didn't need to sleep, just plug in and recharge his battery occasionally, like Emily's electric car.

I also spotted more emails coming in. Most were from my assistant with questions about the masquerade. I needed to get to work.

Charlotte set my coffee on the counter. "There you go."

I snatched it up, sucking in the delicious scent. "Thanks, Charlie. You're a lifesaver."

"So..." She leaned in. "Is he as gorgeous as he looks in photos?"

I wrinkled my nose and sipped my drink. Ahh, sweet, sweet caffeine. I knew exactly who she was talking about. "Who?"

Charlie rolled her eyes. "The billionaire hotel magnate hottie who bought your resort. Ambrose Langston."

"Oh, him."

Scion of Langston Hotels Group who owned fabulous resorts and hotels around the world, workaholic cyborg, and the man who held the fate of my hotel in his hands. Suddenly, my latte didn't taste quite as good. "He's attractive, yes. I've only met him once."

He'd flown in and spent two hours at the resort when he'd been considering buying it. Who only needed two hours to decide whether to spend millions and millions of dollars?

I didn't have millions, so I had no idea.

He'd been abrupt, autocratic, and arrogant during his short trip. I noticed that more than his



tousled brown hair, sharp jawline, and perfectly sculpted mouth. Personally, I preferred a soul and good manners with my good looks.

“He was brusque and bossy, so I didn’t really focus on what he looked like.”

“Bossy doesn’t have to be bad.” Charlie sighed dreamily. “The man is hot with a very large H. And rich—”

“With an even larger R. I’ve got to run, Charlie.” I had better things to do than moon over a billionaire. Especially one who was giving me gray hairs.

“Bye.” The barista waved cheerily.

I hurried down the street. It was still early, and the boutiques and restaurants weren’t open yet. Even in summer, the businesses in Windward did a brisk trade. My aunt’s gift shop, The Nook, was one street over. She sold everything from locally-made candles and soaps, to artwork and jewelry made by local artisans.

I turned a corner, and my resort came into view. A little zing filled my chest like it did every time I set eyes on the place.

There was lots of natural stone, accented by dark wood and glass. The gabled roof continued along the long line of the building. I loved every inch of wood and stone. The resort logo—a stylized W made to look like snow-capped mountains—was engraved in brass by the large front doors. It always filled me with pride. The logo was also on the shiny Hotel Manager badge pinned to my shirt. I headed up the drive and jogged up the front steps.

“Good morning, Ms. Ashford.” A young valet smiled at me.

“Morning, Will.”

He held the door open for me, and I stepped inside.

The resort had a welcoming feel, but the view was the big winner here. The ceiling soared

overhead, showing off wooden beams, but the gaze was immediately drawn straight to the huge, triangular bank of windows. Outside, the mountain was lush green.

Comfortable armchairs were grouped by the window, where guests could linger for a minute, or comfortably check in. My heels clicked on the wooden floor. We had a long reception desk covered in more stone, and fresh flowers in vases topped multiple surfaces. I stopped to rearrange some of them.

“Morning, Tessa.” One of the receptionists called out.

“Hi, Archie. Everything running smoothly?”

His head bobbed. “It was a quiet night, but we have a flurry of checkouts coming up. We had one man with chest pains. Dr. Ramirez came in to look at him. Apparently, it was indigestion.”

That beat out the other alternatives. I hated those rare occasions when we had to deal with a dead body. “Thanks.”

“Idiot shouldn’t have ordered the steak and baked potato for dinner.” Coral leaned on the receptionist desk.

The older woman had worked at the Windward since the dawn of time, was in a perennial bad mood, and had her own thoughts on how the hotel should be run. Her gray hair was in a ruthless bob around her wrinkled face.

“Morning, Coral.”

She sniffed, then turned back to the computers.

“Here you go.” Archie handed me one of the staff radios.

“Thanks.” I clipped it to my belt, then cocked my head. “What’s wrong with your tie?” It was askew.

He looked down. “Oh, no. The stitching is coming undone. I’ll have to fix it.” He tried to tuck

the fraying edge of the tie out of view.

I strode over. “Don’t worry.” I unzipped the tiny leather pouch on my belt. It always rested on my hip—my emergency kit. I pulled out a safety pin and handed it to him. “Use this. That will do the trick for today.”

The young man smiled. “Thanks, Tessa.”

As Archie fixed his tie, I sipped my coffee and took in the stylish banners advertising the Mountain Masquerade. They showed a leaf-covered mask on rich navy blue, with the Windward Resort logo beside it.

Turning, I spotted another banner that had been set up by the reception desk. *The Windward Mountain Resort is proud to be joining the Langston Hotels family.* The fancy gold Langston Hotels logo sat proudly under the words.

“No, we’re not,” I muttered under my breath.

Then I spotted Everett, our head of maintenance, by the elevators, a toolbox at his feet. He had a panel in the wall open, and was wearing his usual uniform—jeans and a blue flannel shirt.

I hustled over. “Everett, please don’t tell me the elevator is out of order again. The masquerade is tomorrow.”

He turned and smiled. It was a slow, sexy smile that had driven the girls at our high school crazy. He’d been one year ahead of me. I’d had a crush on him back then, which had thankfully mellowed into solid friendship. Still, I had a pulse, and could appreciate the way he filled out his jeans. Despite the laid-back appearance, he had an engineering degree, and was totally overqualified. Still, he ran maintenance here in a way that made things less of a headache for me.

“No, I’m just tinkering, Tessa. Don’t stress.”

“Me, stress?”

His grin widened. “Stress is your middle name.”

“I’m *organized*, Everett, there’s a difference.”

He snorted.

I tapped my pass card to the reader on the door and headed down the corridor to the staff offices. The floor gleamed, the wood recently polished.

Two women came around the corner. One was petite, toned, and blonde, and the other tall and slim, with short, black hair. Well, mostly black hair. It had a few purple highlights in it.

The blonde was gesticulating madly with her hands and the brunette was yawning.

“Hey, you two.”

They both looked up. My two best friends. Sierra Kerr was the blonde, and she was bubbly and never ran out of energy. We called her Energizer. A California transplant, she was the Outdoor Events Coordinator, and ran all the outdoor activities for the resort. And while I was a respectable five foot six, standing next to Sierra, who barely scraped in at five feet, made me feel like a giant.

“Morning, Tessa.” Sierra tapped her clipboard. “Do you want to try out a new biking trail with me tomorrow morning?”

“Um...” Biking wasn’t really my thing. I skied in the winter, did the occasional hike in summer, but other than that, I did the odd yoga class and counted that as regular exercise.

“Ask her what time,” Allie Ford said.

Allie and I had gone to school together. All I’d ever wanted was to manage the Windward Resort. All Allie had wanted to do was escape our small town. She’d dreamed of working at a classy advertising company in New York, having a fancy apartment, and traveling the world.

My heart squeezed. She had moved to New York for several years, but when her brother and

sister-in-law had been killed, she'd moved back and taken custody of her five-year-old nephew. Obviously, the similarity of the situation to my own had hit me hard. I'd vowed to help her anyway I could.

She'd asked me for a job and all I had was the housekeeping supervisor position. She was woefully overqualified but one of my hardest workers. I admired how much Allie loved her nephew, even though the loud, fun-loving Allie had given way to hard-working, always-tired, and slightly grim Allie.

I pinned Sierra with a look. "What time?"

"Five AM. It's beautiful and peaceful then, and we'll have the place to ourselves."

I winced. "Um, I can't at five AM."

Sierra propped a hand on her hip. "You have plans?"

"Yes, I'll be sleeping."

Allie snorted, then looked at my arm. "Did you and Simba go a round before you came in?"

"Yes. That monster escaped and parked his fat butt in a tree. Haley begged me to rescue the poor, little thing."

Sierra shuddered. "That cat scares me."

"You can't show any fear. He can smell it."

"Don't you have a Band-Aid in your magic pouch?" Allie asked.

"In fact, I do." I unzipped my kit again and pulled out a Band-Aid.

"Let me." Allie ripped it open and pressed it over the scratch. "Let's do a cocktail night soon."

She ran a hand through her hair. "I need a margarita or seven."

"Alcohol is bad for your health," Sierra said. "Biking is healthy. It will give you natural endorphins."

“You always say that, but after I exercise with you, all I feel is hot and sweaty,” Allie said.

“I’ll add some fruit to my cocktail. And voila, healthy.”

Sierra huffed out a breath, but she was smiling. The woman loved a margarita.

“Cocktails sound great.” It had been way too long since we’d caught up. “After the masquerade.” I pulled a face. “And after I deal with any new consultants Langston Hotels sends up to do more preliminary assessments on the resort.”

Sierra bit her lip. “Any word on his plans for the hotel?”

“Nothing to report yet.”

“What about layoffs?” Allie asked, her mouth tight.

I grabbed her arm. “I will do *everything* in my power to ensure no one loses their jobs. Everyone is vital to the smooth running of this hotel.” I knew people were worried about their jobs. I understood. I had a solid contract for another three years, but I still worried about helping Emily with her mortgage and helping to pay Josh’s college tuition.

Allie nodded stiffly, but I could see she was nervous.

“For now, we focus on the masquerade. And upcoming cocktails.”

“I’ll ask Mrs. Jenkins to watch Ollie,” Allie said.

I knew her older neighbor often babysat for her. “I need to run and email reports to Tyrant Langston before he chases me for them again.” I bet Langston and Simba would get on. I squeezed Allie’s arm. “Cocktails. Soon. The man will no doubt drive me to drink.”

Hustling down the hall, I opened my office. My right-hand woman sat at her very messy desk. Mine—as neat as a pin—was on the other side of the room. The window gave us a view of the mountain. Okay, not quite. We got a sliver of mountain, and a whole lot of the hotel building.

Views were reserved for the guestrooms.

“Morning, Jazmin.” I dumped my bag on the desk.

My assistant’s dark gaze narrowed on my coffee. “You went to Mountain Brew and didn’t get me a coffee?”

“I didn’t think you’d be here. I figured your hunky husband would be making you breakfast and coffee.”

Jazz had married the love of her life. Hector owned the ski rental store in town, and a few others around Colorado and Utah.

“He had to go to Aspen for work.” A small smile flirted on her lips and she fluffed her glorious, tight, black curls. “He’ll be home tonight.”

I sat in my desk chair. “Don’t make me throw my coffee at you. Quit taunting me with your loved-up gooeyness.”

Jazz tilted her head. With her dark skin, curly hair, and curvy body, she took great pride in both her African-American and Latina heritage. Her dad was Black and her mom was Dominican. “You could meet a guy.”

I swiveled my chair, and it squeaked. “I hear an *if* coming.”

My assistant held up a hand. Her pride-and-joy manicured nails gleamed. She had a gorgeous set of French tips, and I had a serious case of envy, mostly because I had no time to get my nails done, and I’d break them if I did.

“If you actually dated, you’d have a greater chance of meeting a man,” Jazmin said.

“Jazz, you know I don’t have time, plus there’s a pretty limited pool around here.” It was one of the few downsides to small-town living.

“You could make the time, especially if you relaxed—”

“I don’t have time to relax.”

She shook her head. “If you relaxed your impossible standards.”

“My standards are not impossible. I want a good guy, with decent employment, who respects me, oh, and loves me.” I couldn’t seem to find that combination, plus I had no time to try.

Jazz sighed.

“Besides, I’m too busy since Langston Hotels bought us. I am too worried that Langston will fly in and wreck everything good about the Windward Resort.”

Jazz’s face turned serious. “I heard he purchased a beachside hotel in Jamaica recently.”

“And?”

“They leveled it.”

I rubbed the pain that flared under my ribs. That was my worst nightmare.

“It was run-down,” Jazz rushed to reassure me. “The Windward Mountain Resort is not.”

“I will do *everything* to convince him of that.” My tone was vehement. “I don’t want him to change a thing.” Or let any of my people go.

“Honey.” Sympathy filled my assistant’s face. She reached out and gripped my arm. “There will be changes; we can’t help that. But they won’t all be bad.”

I didn’t like change.

Change was waking up and discovering that your parents had died on an icy drive back from Denver. Change was the thing that upended your life and left you feeling adrift.

No, I wouldn’t let Ambrose Langston ruin my hotel, or hurt any of my people.

I’d just have to show him how great it was, just as it stood right now.