

Chapter One

Allie

With a bone-cracking yawn, I pulled my favorite cardigan on over my pajama shorts and tank top, then stumbled out of my bedroom.

I'd kill for another hour of sleep, but alas, that wasn't happening anytime soon.

I flicked on the light switch in the living room, narrowly avoiding stepping on a toy car, but managed to put my right foot on a tiny piece of plastic torture also known as a LEGO brick.

"Ow." Hopping on one foot, I raised my voice. "Ollie, are you up and dressed? I'm making breakfast."

The pain subsided. Quickly, I rushed through the tiny living room, collecting toys and books, and shoving them in the huge basket in the corner. Wandering into the kitchen, I yawned again, then put the coffee machine on. I'd stayed up too late. I'd realized I was behind on laundry and had done two loads after Ollie had gone to bed. I'd also needed to stitch a button back on a pair of his jeans. A seamstress, I was not. It had taken me way longer than it should have, because the button had fallen off twice after I'd finished stitching it.

There were never enough hours in the day lately. I pulled out some plates and glasses. Next, I

put some Pop Tarts in the toaster. I winced. My brother would kill me, knowing I was feeding his kid Pop Tarts.

“Sorry, bro. I’m running short on time today.” I poured a glass of orange juice, just as my nephew came in.

He did it quietly. Ollie had never been the loudest kid in the room, but he’d become even quieter and more withdrawn since his parents had been killed.

Who could blame him? My heart squeezed. Fuck, I missed Sean. My brother had been the person I was closest to in the entire world.

Our parents had divorced when we were in our teens. Dad had remarried and moved to Denver. Mom had focused on mom, getting into yoga, the spa, and cruising. She lived in Arizona now and had a wealthy boyfriend. Sean and I had thankfully had each other. He’d understood me. He hadn’t judged. He’d supported me, no matter what.

I pressed a palm to my chest, letting the grief sit there.

Now, it was just me and Ollie.

As the five-year-old climbed onto a stool at the small kitchen island, my heart squeezed even harder. He was so quiet. Too quiet. And he looked like a mini-Sean, with his dark hair and gray eyes. It also meant he looked like me, too. People always assumed that he was mine.

“Morning, kiddo.”

“Morning, Allie.”

I circled the island and pressed a quick kiss to the top of his head. “It’s a Pop Tart morning.” That got me a flicker of a smile. We both shared an unhealthy love of Pop Tarts. I pushed the glass of juice across the island in front of him. “Drink that, so I can pretend that you’re getting some vitamins.”

I served up the breakfast of champions, then gratefully drank my coffee. As I gulped it down, I could feel the caffeine hitting my veins, my brain cells soaking it up.

“Right. I have work. You have school.” I paused. “Who are you going to play with today?”

He toyed with his glass. “I don’t know.”

My heart squeezed, yet again. I’d gotten a lot of ‘I don’t knows’ since he’d started kindergarten the month before. I knew he was having trouble making friends, but the teacher kept telling me to have patience.

Sean, I hope to hell I’m not screwing up your kid.

The last thing I’d expected was to become a single mom at age twenty-nine. After ten months of it, it had me questioning everything I thought I’d known. I honestly didn’t know how parents did it.

But I had a grieving five-year-old to care for, so there was no time to worry or wish like hell that my brother and sister-in-law hadn’t been carjacked by a maniac.

“Okay, go brush your teeth, my man, and grab your backpack.”

Once he’d disappeared down the hall to his room, I sprang into action. I grabbed a discarded hoodie off the floor, some socks, and a scarf. I dashed to the laundry room and dumped them in the hamper. The condo wasn’t tiny, but it wasn’t huge, either. I’d had to sell the four-bedroom house my brother and sister-in-law had owned. There was no way I could afford to pay the mortgage. My nose wrinkled. I still felt bad. So much had changed in Ollie’s life, and maybe it would have been better for him if he could’ve stayed in his own home. Or maybe it would have been worse, filled as it would have been, with all the memories of his parents. I had no idea.

Shaking my head, I raced into my bedroom. I quickly dressed in my uniform.

Before everything in my life had changed, I’d worn sleek suits, and lived and worked in New

York City.

I tried not to think about Before too much. Now, it was all about After. In my life now, I was a housekeeping supervisor at the Langston Windward—the best resort in the small mountain town I’d grown up in. Sean and I had attended the same school that Ollie went to. All through my childhood, I’d dreamed of escaping Windward to a glamorous life in the city, with a fast-paced career, great shoes, an exciting nightlife.

After I fastened my brown pants, I tugged the tunic-style top into place. Now, I was back in Windward. Back walking the same streets I had as a kid, back shopping in the same grocery store, back smiling and waving to the same people I’d known all my life. Pretending not to see their sympathy and pity was new, but I was mastering that well.

I brushed my short, black hair with my fingers, then swiped on some minimal makeup.

Now, I had a kid to worry about. Nothing else mattered. Not that I’d given up my New York dream, not that I had no time to sleep or exercise, or that I worried constantly I’d make a mistake with Ollie. I looked at my reflection in the mirror. Yikes, it was impossible to miss the dark circles under my eyes. I sighed.

Suck it up, Ford.

I strode out. “Okay, Ol-ster, let’s roll.”

He was already waiting for me at the door, with his backpack on and his face solemn. He nodded at me.

We headed out of the condo and I locked the door behind us. Our place was at the end of the second floor on the corner. The bonus was that we had extra windows—with views of the thick trees outside that I loved—and our door was tucked around a corner, so it was private. I’d put a cute little planter beside the door with a plant I desperately tried to keep alive. There was also a

tiny fairy statue stuck in the soil. She peeked out through the leaves with a mischievous look on her face. Ollie called her Sparkle since she was dusted with gold.

That was my little secret—I collected fairy statues. Sean had bought me one when I was ten, and I'd loved collecting them ever since. My dresser in my room was covered in them.

We headed down the hall and passed our neighbor's door. Mrs. Jenkins was a lifesaver. She often babysat Ollie, if I had an out-of-school-hours shift, or had a chance to go to cocktail night with my girlfriends. She baked, and he liked her and her cookies.

Outside, a brisk wind whipped down the sidewalk. The condo building didn't have a garage, just assigned parking places in the tree-lined lot in front of the building. It was great in summer, but I wasn't looking forward to the winter and digging the car out when it snowed.

We headed toward my beat-up Toyota RAV4. I hadn't owned a car in New York, but when I came back to Windward, I'd needed one. I hadn't saved much money since living in the Big Apple was expensive, and I'd made the most of living in one of the most exciting cities on Earth. Sean had talked about looking into life insurance, but he hadn't gotten around to it. He and Sylvie had been young, fit, and healthy.

No one could have predicted they'd be violently murdered by a criminal out on parole.

My stomach did a sickening turn. Swallowing, I unlocked the car. "In we go, kiddo."

Sean and Sylvie hadn't owned their house for very long, so they hadn't built up much equity in it. I'd used what little I gained from the sale of the house to buy the small, second-hand SUV—and the rest I'd socked away for Ollie.

Once Ollie was buckled into his booster seat, I drove to school. It killed me that Sean and Sylvie had missed seeing their little man start school. I managed to find a parking spot in the drop-off chaos outside the main school building. I cursed, as a woman in a Mercedes SUV cut

me off and stole it. But I did it under my breath so little ears wouldn't hear. After snagging another spot, I walked Ollie to the gate.

"You make sure you eat all your lunch."

"Okay."

"And remember, it's not just about learning to read, it's making friends, having fun."

His nose wrinkled. "I know."

"All right, you have a great day." I crouched down in front of him so that we were eye level. God, I never knew how much you could love someone until you stared at a kid you were responsible for, and they looked back at you with pure trust.

Ollie nodded.

"We're going to go and see Miss Catherine this afternoon, okay?"

He looked at his feet.

Catherine was his therapist. She assured me that he was doing well, and just needed time to deal with his grief.

"Ollie?"

He looked up. "I like Miss Catherine. It's just... When I talk about mommy and daddy, I feel sad."

"Oh, kiddo, that's normal." I hugged him. "I feel sad sometimes, too. I miss them so much."

He looked at me with those solemn, gray eyes. "I do, too."

I ruffled his hair. "Want me to walk you in?" I didn't have the time. I'd be late to work, but I didn't care.

He nodded.

We walked side by side, his arm brushing mine. He hadn't let me, or anyone else, hold his

hand since his parents had died. My heart hurt. *It'll be all right, Allie.* I walked him to his classroom, and smiled at his teacher. When a little blond boy motored over, talking a hundred miles a minute to Ollie, I felt relieved.

Ollie gave me a small wave as I left. Back in the car, I headed to the hotel. Glancing at the dash, I accelerated. I *might* still make it in time.

Windward attracted a lot of visitors. It was especially busy in the winter, and as soon as we got snow, the skiers and snowboarders would descend like an avalanche. The central part of the town was quite glitzy, with lots of high-end shops and restaurants that catered to the tourists. The eastern part of town was where the locals lived.

Then, the Langston Windward came into view.

It was a solid, sprawling building with a gabled roof, constructed of natural stone, dark wood, and glass. Until recently, the historic hotel had been owned by a Windward local, but after he'd sold it, it had been purchased by the Langston Hotels Group. I drove around the back and parked in the staff parking lot, then hustled to the staff entrance. I fumbled and pulled my ID card out. I was only five minutes late, so that wasn't too bad.

The lock beeped and I shouldered through the door, my brain turning to everything I needed to get done. I'd start with checking in with my team, who'd be in charge of cleaning the guest rooms this morning.

I'd barely taken a step inside, when I slammed into a brick wall.

A brick wall that shouldn't be in the middle of the hallway.

I almost fell backward, but the wall had hands and grabbed my waist. I looked up into brown eyes that were so dark they looked black.

Oh, hell.

“You’re late, Ms. Ford.”

Of all the people to catch me running behind. “Five minutes, Broody.”

His dark gaze narrowed at the nickname. Broody was actually Caden Castro, head of security for Langston Hotels. After the sale, more than just the hotel logo had changed. We now had the Langston Hotels executives underfoot, as they renovated and updated the hotel. Broody had been skulking around every corner of the hotel for two months. I was pretty sure that *paranoid* was his middle name. Or maybe *distrusting*. Maybe both.

“Late is late,” he said.

I rolled my eyes. “So sue me. You’re making me even later.”

And sending my stupid body haywire.

That was my huge secret—bigger than collecting fairy statues—and I hadn’t told anybody. For some insane reason, Caden Castro flipped every switch I had. Anytime the man was near me, my pulse took off, my stomach felt fluttery, and I got tingles. *Tingles*.

I wasn’t a woman who got tingles.

And I didn’t have time for tingles. I barely had time to sleep.

Any time Caden’s dark gaze swung my way—assessing and intense—it reminded me that I hadn’t had sex in over a year. I hadn’t had an orgasm in months. I was too tired.

And don’t get me started on the man’s thighs. I’d never in my life ogled a man’s thighs before, but any time I saw him shift in a way that had his suit pants pulling taut on those long, muscular—

Snap out of it, Allie.

Jeez. I cleared my throat and realized his big hands were still gripping my waist, digging into my skin. My traitorous heart did a weird thump.

“I can’t get to work until you let me go.” God, my voice was husky. Please don’t let him notice.

His hands flexed, his dark eyes locking on mine. Then he released me.

I sidestepped him and took off.

“No time for dark, broody men,” I muttered. “Even if they have killer thighs. And inky-black eyes, and...” I cursed and forced Caden out of my head.

After dumping my things in the locker room, my heart rate finally evened out. I met my team of housekeepers in our main area. They all wore the same brown uniform as me. Their carts were all stocked and lined up, like they were ready for battle. Sometimes cleaning the hotel actually did feel like a battle. Most days, things were normal, but every now and then, some guests sprung a disaster on us. I’d seen it all: blood, snot, vomit, semen, and some bodily fluids I couldn’t identify, which was probably for the best. I clicked my radio onto my belt and snatched my tablet off its charger.

“Morning, all.” I got nods and hellos. “I hope you had a good breakfast and are well-caffeinated.” Now I got a few chuckles. “All right.” I swiped my tablet screen. “No changes to the room allocations today, or special instructions. I have a note from the night team that someone was ill in room 407. They had to change out the sheets and towels. Amy, can you check in on them and see how they’re doing today?”

The brown-haired housekeeper nodded. “Sure thing, Allie.”

“If it’s contagious, don’t share the germs,” another housekeeper called out.

There were murmurs and nods.

“Luckily, our cleaning products contain commercial-grade disinfectants.” I smiled. “Let’s all get to work. You know the drill. If you have any issues, radio me.” I held up a hand. “And never

forget that we're the backbone of this place. Because of our work, the Langston Windward is such a great hotel. Go, make it shine."

There were grins as my team headed off, carts rattling.

"Allie?" One of my younger team members, Wade, stepped in front of me. "I'm *really* sorry, but I need a few days off next week." He clasped his hands together like he was praying.

Great. Last-minute roster changes always sucked. "Why?"

"My mom is moving house. I need to help her pack and move." He shot me a pleading look. "If she didn't need the help, I wouldn't ask."

I blew out a breath. "Message me. I'll sort it out for you."

He smiled. "Thanks. You're the *best*, Allie."

I ran through the notes from the night supervisor. I shunted a few maintenance requests to Everett, our head of maintenance. He was another Windward local. We'd gone to school together. Tucking my tablet under my arm, I headed through to the staff office area, when a female voice called out my name.

"Allie, there you are." Tessa Ashford bustled toward me in her tight-fitting, navy skirt, and white shirt.

She was the hotel manager and my best friend. We'd grown up in Windward together. Unlike me, all Tessa had ever dreamed about was managing this hotel. She'd made her dream come true, and had recently also fallen in love.

"Hey," I said.

"Morning." She was sipping a coffee from Mountain Brew. It was the best coffee shop in Colorado. Yeah, I was biased.

I stared at that cup long enough that Tessa huffed out a breath and handed it to me.

“It’s only half full.” Her brow knitted as she scanned me. “You look like you need it.”

“I stayed up late doing laundry.”

“You wild thing, you.”

I gulped the coffee down. *Oh*. I closed my eyes and savored the latte goodness. It was so delicious. I didn’t have the money to buy expensive coffees anymore. I’d also had to give up my favorite chocolates. I’d learned quickly that kids outgrew their clothes and shoes insanely fast.

“Do you need a moment?” Tessa asked, amused.

I opened my eyes. She was glowing. I guessed that was one of the perks of being crazy in love. Tessa had fallen for the new owner of the hotel, billionaire hotelier Ambrose “Ro” Langston. She could afford good coffee, and got regular orgasms from her hot guy.

“You woke up wrapped around a billionaire, who no doubt gave you multiple orgasms before breakfast, *and* got you a Mountain Brew. I stepped on a LEGO brick, ate Pop Tarts for breakfast, and dropped my kid off at school.” I held up the coffee cup. “This is as close to orgasms as I’m getting.” I took another sip.

“How’s Ollie?”

I noticed she didn’t refute the multiple orgasms thing. I sighed. “Sad, too quiet, won’t hold my hand.”

She grabbed my arm. “He knows you’re there for him. He just needs time. His mind is still processing everything.”

I nodded. Tessa would know. She’d lost her parents at eight years old in a car accident, and had been raised by her aunt. I knew that was a big reason why she’d bent over backward to give me a job at the hotel and help me out. But I also knew she’d done it because she was a good person and a good friend.

“I’d better get to work. Broody already razzed me for being five minutes late.” I rolled my eyes.

My friend’s lips twitched. “Did you call him Broody to his face?”

“Yep.” I held up the coffee cup. “I’m keeping this.”

She waved a hand at me. “My gift to you.”

I took a step away.

“And Allie?”

I glanced back over my shoulder.

“If you need help with anything, laundry, babysitting, whatever, just ask.”

I stared at Tessa’s earnest face. She was such a good friend and had already done so much. There was no way I’d take advantage of that friendship, not when she was busy integrating the hotel into the Langston Hotels group, and especially not when she was enjoying time with her new man.

Pasting on a smile, I winked at her. “You bet.”

I moved through the door and into the lobby. Next on my To-Do list was checking on the new floor cleaner we were using. If it wasn’t doing the job, we’d need to switch again.

A smile hit my lips. I loved the lobby. With its high ceiling, wooden beams, and polished wood floor, it shouted rustic mountain elegance. But the large, triangular bank of windows was the real star. Those panes of glass showcased the mountain view. Right now, the trees outside were a riot of yellow, orange, and red.

A long, stone reception desk sat on the other side of the lobby. A huge vase of fresh flowers scented the air. There were several groups checking in, but one of the receptionist’s gazes snagged on me.

Oh, great. Coral. She was older than dirt and had worked at the Langston since before I was born. Her gray hair was always styled in an unforgiving bob around her wrinkled face. She gave a new meaning to the term battleaxe. Coral wasn't afraid to share her bad mood with anyone.

I picked up my pace, but a second later, the woman intercepted me.

"You look like crap."

"Thanks, Coral. My new face cream must be working, then."

She sniffed. "You should sleep more."

"It's on my To-Do list." Along with five hundred other things.

The older woman paused for a second. "How's your boy?"

I softened. "He's okay."

She nodded. "By the way, the new floor cleaner is shite."

Aw, at least I could trust Coral to share nothing but the unvarnished truth. "Thanks for the feedback."

I'd already noted that the wood floor wasn't as shiny as I liked. Lifting my tablet, I made a quick note.

Loud voices, followed by deep, masculine laughter, interrupted my thoughts. I glanced over at the reception desk. A group of young, fit guys in their late twenties was checking in. They had large bags of outdoor gear. I saw one gesture toward the front doors, and I swiveled around to look through the glass. Four rugged mountain bikes were parked outside.

"Trouble." Coral sniffed and stalked back to the desk.

One of the guys was tall and cute, with ruffled, blond hair. I remembered him. This group had been here last winter, snowboarding. They were into extreme sports. They'd been spending most of their time on Windward's famous Back Runs. Wilder terrain for more experienced skiers.

He'd told me they'd be back for mountain biking and paragliding in the fall.

I couldn't remember his name. Brandon? Blake? Bryce?

The blond looked up and caught my gaze. He gave me a slow smile.

He'd asked me out last winter, but I'd had to say no. I was coping with selling Sean's house, and Ollie had been sleeping in my bed every night. I'd been sorry to turn him down because the timing was bad and I'd thought he was attractive.

Funny thing, now, I didn't even feel a blip.

No, instead, I thought his hair and eyes weren't dark enough, and his body was too lean.

Dammit, Broody had broken me.

I shot Brandon/Blake/Bryce a polite smile, then kept walking.

I had work that needed to get done. And I definitely had no room for men—either young, blond ones, or darker, older, intense ones.

All I had room for was my nephew.