Chapter One

Piper

"I need the supplies next week, Duncan. And I want your best deal for them."

"Ms. Ellis, next week is—"

I listened to the building contractor drone on from the speakerphone and saw my temporary assistant appear in the office doorway. I held up a finger to her.

"You promised me next week." I kept my tone firm. "That's why I selected your company for the work. You assured me, several times, you could meet the schedule. So, I expect next week, or I'll go somewhere else."

The deliveries needed to be on time, or the renovation work I'd spent a lot of time scheduling would fall behind.

I never fell behind.

The renovations of the Langston Windward would be done on time and on budget. Just how all my projects went.

"I guess I can make that work, Ms. Ellis," Duncan grumbled.

"Thank you, Duncan. Email me the date and time." I ended the call and glanced up. "Kate?"

The young assistant bounced inside the conference room I'd claimed for my office, her dark ponytail bobbing behind her. I kept my face blank. I wasn't sure why she bounced so much. It must be a mountain thing. I'd been here in Windward—a tiny Colorado mountain town—for several months. I fought a grimace. The town was tiny, but thankfully not too far from Denver. At least it had decent internet.

Since the Langston Hotels Group had purchased this mountain resort, we'd been working overtime to update, upgrade, and integrate it into being a Langston Hotel.

I was stuck here for the foreseeable future. It was my job to pack the hotel full of the style and amenities our guests expected of a Langston Hotel.

As chief operations officer, I took my job very seriously.

Even if I had to forgo civilization for several months. To be fair, Windward had some charming boutiques that catered to the crowds that visited during the ski season, and some good coffee.

Not that I'd admit that to anyone.

"I have several quotes and contracts for your signature and approval," Kate said.

"Thank you." I took the stack from her. "Is the painting quote in there?"

She nodded. "Yes."

"And the contract for the electrical work?"

She bobbed her head again.

"Thanks, Kate." I'd borrowed her from her job working at the reception desk. She was new to assistant work, but a quick learner. "You've been a real help."

Her pretty, young face flushed with pleasure. "Would you like me to get you a latte?"

"I'm good for now, but thank you." I'd already had two coffees this morning. I could feel the

caffeine whizzing through my veins.

The phone on the table started ringing. “I’ll take that, then I need to go and check on the painting in the east wing.” The painters were setting up to get started. “Keep going through my emails and prep any files I need for my meetings later, please.”

“Sure thing, Piper.”

I took the call. Then another. They were all to do with issues at other Langston properties. Thankfully, my boss, Ambrose “Ro” Langston, and I only hired the best. Even though my team was spread across the world, they were very good at their jobs.

I crossed my legs, checked the first quote on the pile, then looked at my watch. I’d bought myself the elegant, slimline Cartier Tank watch when I’d landed the job at Langston. I needed to check on that painting. I needed the work done to my specifications and I didn’t want delays. It was January, peak ski season, so having rooms empty was not ideal. The quicker we got the rooms refurbished, the quicker we could get guests back in them.

Rising, I smoothed my hand down my black skirt, then checked my hair was still secure in the twist at the back of my head. When I stalked into the hallway, I spotted Ro leaving his office. With him was the manager of the Langston Windward.

They were holding hands.

Watching Ro fall in love had been interesting. He was one of the most guarded men I knew. He’d grown up with difficult parents, and being the heir to the Langston Hotels empire, and hence very wealthy, had taught him that most people were after him for his money and influence. The good looks didn’t help either. Ro filled out his Armani suit to perfection, and add the tousled dark hair and handsome face, and it was an irresistible attraction for the gold diggers.

He hadn’t been prepared for Tessa Ashford.

Tessa was born and bred in Windward. She was the smart, beautiful girl next-door. She had ink-black hair that contrasted with her pale skin. I had to admit, the woman was actually a nice person, and seriously in love with Ro. The pair was always touching and kissing.

I barely stopped myself from wrinkling my nose. I had no time for love and romantic nonsense. I had a partner penciled into my life plan, in about another five years.

Besides, I'd seen what love could get you. My mother had fallen for a handsome, charismatic man…who'd left her with two small kids and no job.

"Hi, Piper," Ro said.

"Afternoon." I nodded. "Where are you two headed?"

"We have some…contracts to review," Tessa said.

I arched a brow. I knew the look on both their faces. They were probably sneaking off to Ro's penthouse suite. These days, they split their time between Tessa's house in town, and the suite here at the hotel.

"Mmm hmm," I murmured.

Ro just smiled, while Tessa's cheeks pinkened. With her skin, she couldn't hide a blush if she wanted to.

God, they were so sickeningly happy. Ro deserved it.

I made a shooing motion with my hand. "Go. I have paint to look at."

"Sounds fun," he said.

"Oh, Piper, don't forgot that our new chef arrives tomorrow," Tessa added.

Yes, the old chef had retired—after Ro had offered him a very nice package—and Ro had worked hard to lure top British chef Jasper Harden to the Langston Windward. I'd eaten at his London restaurant, Noir, once, and his food was transcendent, but his desserts were the best

things I'd ever eaten.

The only downside was the man took temperamental and difficult to a new level.

"I'll be ready to welcome him to the team. And eat his delicious food." I gave them a wave, then turned the corner.

The back-of-house area behind reception contained all the offices and the conference room. It was a little dated and cramped, but Tessa said it did the job. I nearly ran into a scowling Caden.

Our head of security often scowled. He was former special forces, and I was pretty sure they taught them how to scowl for the most menacing effect. He'd been scowling less lately since he'd also fallen for a local.

God, I hoped this condition wasn't catching. Maybe I should stop drinking the water.

Now, I never expected Ro to fall in love, but I wasn't too surprised. If someone had told me that Caden Castro—the most closed-off, private man on the planet—would do it, I would've laughed until I burst.

Still, Allie Ford, the hotel's housekeeping supervisor, was perfect for him. She stood up to him and managed to get under his hard armor. Hell, I'd even seen him smile a few times.

"Everything good, Caden?"

He grunted. "A few kinks in the new security room. I'm heading there now."

He'd expanded and upgraded the hotel's security room. It was filled with new cameras and technology.

"Big kinks?"

He shrugged a shoulder. "Some cameras keep cutting out. Probably a wiring thing. We'll work it out."

"I have paint to inspect."

His lips quirked. “Good luck with that.”

We both stepped into the hotel lobby.

Okay, even a dyed-in-the-wool city girl like me had to admit that the lobby of the Langston Windward was amazing. The high ceiling and wooden beams gave a sense of space. The large, triangular bank of windows brought the killer mountain view inside. Add the polished wooden floor and the long, stone reception desk, and the place was an appealing blend of elegance with a rustic, mountain edge.

Sunlight glittered on a sprinkling of snow on the mountain. Now, my nose did wrinkle. I’d grown up in Chicago. For me, snow meant icy, dirty slush, and cold, gray winter months. I liked looking at snow through a window, but that was as close as I wanted to get. I liked nature. From afar.

Preferably in a nice, glossy photography book on my coffee table.

“Catch you later.” Caden strode directly to the security office behind the concierge desk.

The lobby was filled with bustling activity. It was check-in time—one of my favorite times in a hotel. Excited, eager guests anticipating a fun, relaxing stay. Or tired, travel-worn visitors ready for our hot showers and plush beds.

I strode across the space, my heels clicking on the wooden floor. I needed to check this painting job, then get back to my office. I had a video call soon with Paris.

My cellphone vibrated again and I glanced at it.

I saw a text message from my mom.

Hi, doll. I hope you’re finding some time to enjoy that cute mountain town you’re living in.

I rolled my eyes and tapped.

Mom, I’m working.

Then another text pinged. It was my grandmother.

You work too hard.

I rolled my eyes again, but I also smiled. The pair of them had raised me. Two strong, magnificent women. They'd always been my role models, and now I worked hard to make sure they lived easy. I tapped back.

My work pays for those yoga spa retreats you love, Gram.

Ha. I only go on those to spend time with you.

My smile widened. Every year, I booked us our annual trip. The three of us went somewhere fun, did yoga, ate well, and visited the spa. It was our time together and it had become so much more important to me. Gram had suffered heart problems last year and been hospitalized. My stomach clenched to a hard point. We'd almost lost her.

I'll FaceTime you tonight. I have work to do.

Any chance you've met a nice young man out there?

One of my grandmother's favorite questions.

I work for one.

But he's taken. I mean one for you.

I don't need a man, Gram.

I knew my grandmother would be grumbling over that. She kept telling me that she wanted me settled, with a partner. What she really wanted was great-grandbabies.

They were definitely nowhere in my life plan right now. Not until I'd grown my investments enough to know Mom and Gram were covered, and any child I brought into the world wouldn't ever worry about there being enough money to pay the electricity bill or for new shoes for school.

Then I got a final text from my mom.

Have you heard from Chance?

My stomach curdled. As it always did at the mention of my younger brother.

No.

I had no idea where he was. Chance floated through life, bumming off friends and family. If he managed to snag a job, he never kept it long. I didn't give him any money these days, but I knew Mom did. I'd learned years ago that I wasn't helping him, just enabling him.

Mom was a softer touch.

Chance liked to gamble. No, Chance *loved* to gamble. Cards mostly, but also every single get-rich-quick scheme or investment he could find. He was certain each one would make him an instant millionaire.

That still hadn't happened.

I shoved thoughts of my brother out of my head, just as a tiny bullet of a kid raced across the lobby.

"Dylan, no! No running." A harried mother chased after him.

The kid slammed into me.

My four-inch, black, patent leather Jimmy Choos made my legs look great, but they did not offer good stability.

I teetered.

The kid did too, and dropped the small bag of marbles he was clutching. They pinged off the floor, rolling everywhere.

What kid played with marbles these days?

"Dylan, oh no." His mother grabbed him.

I took a step backward, stepped on a marble, and lost my balance.

Oh crap. I windmilled my arms, falling backward…

Into a set of strong, muscular arms.

Instantly, I was engulfed by the scent of citrus, spice, and wood shavings.

That combination shouldn't be so enticing, but every time I smelled it, my belly coiled. I knew instantly who'd caught me. Every muscle in my body tensed.

I turned my head and looked up into gold-flecked, green eyes.

"Big city, I've warned you that you're risking serious injury wearing those ridiculous ankle breakers."

Everett Murray.

The flannel-shirt-and-jeans-wearing bane of my existence.

He was also head of maintenance for the Langston Windward. Although the man never wore his damn uniform.

I shoved away from him, trying to get back on my feet. It wasn't easy wearing a tight skirt that reached my knees, and with marbles of death under my feet.

Of course, Everett had a huge smile on his face. He was outrageously attractive. Not in a slick, city way. No, Everett was all mountain man. From his long, rangy body to his tousled hair, that was brown with glints of gold in it.

He gripped my hip until I steadied.

I would not admit to anyone that his touch burned through the fabric of my skirt all the way to my skin.

I sniffed. "My shoes are perfectly fine. The tiny balls of death are to blame." My gaze narrowed. "Where is the new uniform shirt I sent you? It was khaki. You said you didn't mind it

when I showed you the sample."

He shrugged. "It's cold today. It was definitely flannel weather."

I swallowed a growl. The man was the definition of frustration. I'd sent him dozens of work shirt samples.

His lips curled. "Besides, I told you what it would take for me to wear a uniform."

I glared daggers at him. Oh, I remembered. He'd told me he'd wear it when I wore a flannel shirt, with nothing else, and crawled to him. The asshole.

"You try to vex me on purpose, don't you?"

His smile widened. "Vex? Does anyone still use that word? Do you mean piss you off?"

Now, I growled.

"Dylan, you apologize to the nice lady right now."

The mother was standing nearby with her contrite boy.

The dark-haired Dylan rubbed an arm across his nose. "Sorry I dropped my marbles and you almost fell over."

I dragged in a steadying breath. I would not take out my frustration with Everett on a tiny boy. I crouched, keeping my knees together so I didn't flash anyone inappropriately.

"It's all right. I'm not hurt. Accidents happen, but we do have to learn from them so we can avoid them happening again."

His cute little face scrunched. "I shouldn't have run, and I shouldn't have opened the bag inside." He sighed. "Like Mama already told me."

I nodded. "That's a good idea. It sounds like your mama knows what she's talking about. Want some help picking up your marbles?"

The boy grinned at me. "Yes."

“Dylan,” his mother said with a long-suffering huff. “Yes, what?”

“Yes, please.”

I scooped up marbles, handed them to Dylan, and then felt a prickle on the back of my neck. I looked up and saw Murray watching me with a strange look on his face. I nabbed a few more errant marbles and rose. “Don’t you have leaky pipes to fix?”

“Yeah. Catch you later, big city.” His grin widened. “And I don’t mind literally catching you, either. You seem to be making a habit of falling into my arms.”

My eyes narrowed, but before I could fire back, he turned and sauntered across the lobby.

I watched him go. The first time I’d met him, I’d slipped on a wet floor and he’d caught me. So annoying.

I suddenly realized that my gaze was on his ass. A muscular ass that filled out his jeans oh-so well.

That’s when I noticed the boy’s mom was watching Everett’s ass too.

I cleared my throat. “Right, let’s finish collecting those marbles.”