

CHAPTER ONE

ASHLEY



THERE WERE ONLY SO many bills a person could stack on their desk before the pile fell over. Ashley, having reached this milestone twice, started a third pile with the most recent power bill—FINAL NOTICE stamped in bright, incriminating red ink across the front. While making a quick mental calculation of how screwed she and her mother were, her phone buzzed four times, her ex-husband’s face blooming onto the screen like toxic algae.

“Ugh,” she groaned while Murphy whined under her desk. Reminding herself to change Chuck’s caller ID pic to something more appropriate like a snake, or the devil, she put him on speaker. “What do you want?” *Be nice, Ashley. Three-piles nice.*

“What?” Chuck whined even louder than her dog. “Can’t I call my ex-wife every once in a while? Aren’t we friends?”

Ashley’s only response was an eye roll so profound she wouldn’t have been surprised if he sensed it all the way on top of his mountain.

“How are sales looking this season?” he asked with the snide confidence of a man who already knew the answer.

She considered bragging that season pass sales were stellar, the best year they’d had since her dad died. But Chuck could always tell

when she was lying. This was one of his villain superpowers. “How’s Deanna?” she asked instead of answering. “Or is it Tiffany now? I can never keep up.”

His laughter oozed like oil. “Jealousy was never a good look on you.”

If Ashley had been a cat, she would have hissed. “Why are you calling?”

“You know why, Ash.”

“My name is Ashley.” Whenever he called her *Ash* she wanted to light something on fire. She hated these calls, loathed them. After their divorce, she and Chuck had barely said a single word to each other for three blissful years—only when necessary and usually about their daughter. It wasn’t until he took the job managing Conquest Mountain Resort that he’d started calling once every few months, then once a month. Now the calls came almost weekly. It was always the same infuriating conversation, he’d ask how Bluebird was doing, wait for her to admit the mountain was losing money, then swoop in with an offer to buy her out. Despite how badly she wanted to tell him to go back to the circle of hell from whence he spawned, she never did. If she and Maude Alice couldn’t turn things around soon, she might have no choice but to accept his offer.

“Why do you insist on struggling when we could partner up and make Bluebird Basin part of Conquest? Nothing would change. It would still be your mountain to run. But you’d enjoy all the perks of corporate support—”

“Oh please,” she cut in. “Perks like ticket price hikes and blackout days? Like making this mountain inaccessible to the community that’s supported my family for over forty years? Perks like that? No thanks. Not interested.”

“Yeah but your community isn’t supporting you anymore, Ash. They’re coming here to Conquest. They’re supporting me now. You know I loved Max like he was my own father, but his old-fashioned ideas about family ski resorts have made you completely naive.”

If she had a nickel for every time he’d called her naive, she’d still

hate him for it, but at least she'd be able to pay the power bill.

"Come on." His voice dropped into that cringeworthy, insinuating tone he always thought was seductive when really it was just gross. "I could support you again too, if you gave me another chance. We were so good together."

She stared at her phone like tentacles had sprouted from the screen. After the cheating and the lies, the last word she would ever use to describe her marriage with Chuck was *good*. With her finger hovering over the 'end call' button, she said, "You don't get to talk about my dad, Bluebird is not for sale, and we are never getting back together. Goodbye, Chuck." She mashed the button, snatched her phone off her desk, and was a second away from hurling it at the wall when her mother breezed into her office.

"What on earth?" Maude Alice squinted at Ashley, and then at the phone still poised to fly. "Let me guess. Chuck?"

"Wouldn't be a day ending in 'y' without Chuck reminding me how dire our financial situation is, and how he could ride in on his white horse and save us all." Setting her phone back down on her desk, Ashley tried to calm herself by petting Murphy's belly with her foot. "Do you ever feel like someone put your entire life on a sled and just launched it down a hill? And all you can do is watch it slide away, knowing no matter how fast you run, you'll never catch up to it again?"

Maude Alice frowned. "What an absolutely dismal thought. Thoughts like that will only make your crow's-feet dig in deeper, which is the last thing you need. Happiness is a choice, Ashley. You just have to choose it. Like me. I'm ecstatic, and my skin has never looked better."

Evidently her mother had been listening to her podcasts again. "Never mind."

"But funny you should mention our finances. I have something for you." Beaming proudly down at her, Maude Alice set a document on Ashley's desk. "I think this might be the best idea I've ever had."

Suspicion mounted. Maude Alice's best ideas had a spectacular

track record of ending in epic shouting matches and ballooning credit card debt.

“What’s this?” Ashley asked. Reading over the first page of the document, she blinked, rubbed her eyes in case her middle-aged vision was failing her, and looked again at what appeared to be an employment contract between Bluebird Basin and some place called Little Timber Sober Living Home. “Tell me this isn’t what it looks like.”

“It’s what it looks like,” Maude Alice replied without remorse.

“Terms of employment include...” Ashley muttered, skimming the contract. “Drug tests? Parole officers?” Her voice ratcheted up with every word. “Mother, have you lost your mind!”

Startled by her outburst, Murphy bolted out from under her desk.

“Oh, she scared you, didn’t she?” Maude Alice crooned, petting the Saint Bernard behind his ears. She peered up at Ashley, a silver brow arched. “Of course I haven’t lost my mind. I’m innovating.”

Even though frigid air streamed in through the cracked window across from her desk, Ashley’s blood boiled. “I know things are bad, but they aren’t *this* bad!”

Ignoring her, Maude Alice spread the contract out on the desk, running a manicured finger along the terms. “Look how cheap they are. All they want is minimum wage, lodging in the staff cabins, and they’ll need ski lessons. We’ll save a fortune if we hire these men instead of college kids.”

Doing the math quickly in her head, Ashley couldn’t deny the savings would make it much easier for them to make payroll, something they’d barely been able to do all last season. And it wasn’t like college kids were crawling out of the woodwork to work at Bluebird anymore, not with Chuck’s mountain offering wages they could never compete with.

Ashley rubbed at her temples, her head pounding while studied the contract again. “It says here that some of these men have criminal records. Some of them have served time. Recently. And you’re telling me they don’t even ski?”

"I'm sure at least one of them skis," Maude Alice said thoughtfully. "Or boards."

When Ashley looked up again, she found her mother fighting a grin. "This isn't funny. We aren't doing this. We aren't hiring addicts and alcoholics who just got out of prison and who don't even know how to ski!"

"*Recovering* addicts and alcoholics," Maude Alice said. "And you're overreacting. Once you meet the owner, you'll realize how right I am. Look alive, dear. He arrives in," she checked her watch, "ten minutes."

"What!"

"You have a meeting with the owner, Matthew Madigan, at 10:00 a.m. sharp."

"Since when? It's not on my calend..." Glancing down at her desk calendar, Ashley spotted one word written in fresh ink and very tiny print at the corner of today's date: *Madigan*. "Did you just write this today?"

"No, I wrote it yesterday."

Grinding the heels of her palms into her eyes, Ashley said, "Does this Mr. Madigan have a background too?"

"Madigan, actually. He goes by Madigan."

She dropped her hands so she could give her mother an unobstructed scowl. "I'm not calling him that. It's not a real name. It's a pirate's name. And I asked you a question."

Straightening the picture of Davis at her high school graduation on Ashley's desk, Maude Alice said, "He may have a record, but he's on the up and up now. He's got quite the story, actually."

"You've scheduled a stranger with a criminal record to come and meet with me in ten minutes," Ashley waved a hand over her insulated overalls, "in my snow bibs?" She felt suddenly like her office was growing, or maybe she was shrinking. Maude Alice had an uncanny ability to produce both sensations.

"We both know you're at your best when you're set back on your heels."

Ashley gritted her teeth so hard a molar squeaked. “I’m at my best when I’m prepared and presentable. I’m at my best when I don’t have to tell a criminal named Madigan— Seriously, what the hell kind of name is Madigan, anyway?”

“*It’s Irish,*” came a deep voice from the hallway. Bright blue eyes, a salt and pepper beard, and the broad-shouldered man who owned them peeked in through the door. “I’m early,” he said apologetically. “I can come back.”

Ashley’s heart thumped hard enough to bruise a rib. Chuck’s call, the contract, and now this big, bearded man in her office... Everything was happening too quickly, control slipping out from under her like rapidly melting snow.

“Don’t be silly, Madigan. It’s wonderful to see you again.” Maude Alice strode across the room, giving him a kiss on the cheek like they were the best of friends. “This is my daughter, Ashley. She’ll be the final signature on our contract.”

Mr. Madigan, with his broad cheekbones and thick brows and million-dollar smile, nodded at her. “Nice to meet you, Ashley.” He held out his hand, and when she took it, he gripped hers firmly and said, “And I’m not a criminal.”

Her throat seized as she shook his hand once, quickly letting it go because her palms were itchy and awkward, and she was worried they might start sweating. “Oh, I didn’t—”

“I *was* a criminal.” A corner of his mouth quirked under his beard. “But that was years ago. Now I’m pretty much a glorified camp counselor for other addicts and ex-criminals.”

Ashley wanted to bury herself under the floorboards. “I’m sorry, Mr. Madigan. I didn’t mean... It’s none of my... Um, please, sit.” She waved him over to the chair on the other side of her desk.

Pulling off his snowcap with tattooed hands—the word HOPE inked across his right fingers and FEAR across his left—he revealed thick, dark brown hair that curled at the ends, strands of grey sprinkled in around his temples. His eyes were a piercing, crystal blue, like

the lakes in Glacier National Park. Ashley thought he might be older than her, but not by much, maybe late forties, early fifties.

When he noticed Murphy, his face lit up. “Whoa, check out that dog! He’s huge!”

“That’s Murphy,” Maude Alice told him.

“Hey, Murphy.” Dropping gracefully to his knees, he scratched Murphy’s head. “How’s the big man?”

“Murphy is a very expensive and very pathetic excuse for a rescue dog.” Maude Alice crossed her arms over her chest. “He seems to like you, though. If you want him, Madigan, he’s yours.”

“Mother!” Ashley blurted out. Then, catching herself, she insisted in a quieter, more composed tone, “The dog is not for sale. And he’ll make a perfectly fine rescue dog someday. He’s still only a baby.”

“How old?” he asked, making kissy faces at the dog.

“Almost three,” Maude Alice answered on her way to the door.

“Like I said, he’s only a baby. He just needs some time to develop, some patience and understanding.”

“What he needs is to start earning his keep,” Maude Alice countered.

Ashley’s nostrils flared, irritation swelling like a mushroom cloud until Mr. Madigan said, “I think you’re right, Ashley. He’ll come around.” Staring deeply into Murphy’s eyes, his voice went soft. “Some of us just take a little longer than others, isn’t that right, buddy?”

Apparently no longer controlled by her brain, Ashley’s head tilted longingly to the side while she came unacceptably close to sighing at the way Murphy stared back at Mr. Madigan, like he finally felt understood. But if Ashley wanted to sigh about Mr. Madigan’s soft voice and kind words—not that she did—she could do it later. Right now she needed to focus.

“Well, I’ll leave you three to it,” Maude Alice said while Murphy licked Mr. Madigan’s cheek. “Good luck, Madigan,” and then, under her breath, “you’re going to need it.”