

Chapter One

“I can’t do this.” Chelsea Callaghan slid lower in the front seat of her car and clutched her phone to her ear. “Why on earth did I let you convince me I could do this?”

Danielle laughed, just like she had when Chelsea first showed her the wedding invitation. “Because you were invited—and because you desperately need closure with your ex so you can move on with your life.”

If only it were that simple. Nothing had ever been simple where *he* was concerned. “What if he wasn’t the one to send it?”

“Oh, come on. This isn’t a giant conspiracy—this is one asshole trying to screw with you. Put him in his place and be done with it.”

Chelsea opened her mouth to tell Danielle the truth, the real reason she had driven all the way from Seattle to confront the ghost from her past, but she couldn’t. There had been too many years of silence to break it now.

“Come on, Chels. You’ve gone back and forth more than a dozen times. If you didn’t want to go, you wouldn’t be sitting in that parking lot, trying to talk yourself out of the whole thing. You’d be here, cramping my style.”

How well her best friend knew her. She’d been in danger of talking herself out of this mistake completely when she’d picked up the phone, hoping Danielle would support her change of mind. “This is a mistake. I just know it.”

“Maybe. You won’t know until you go inside. Shit, Chels, the hotel room is already paid for tonight. Worst-case scenario, you lock yourself in, order room service, and catch up on your soaps. Just get out of the car.”

Chelsea peeked through the front windshield, her gaze coasting over the sprawling grounds and large hotel situated directly in front of her. It wasn't particularly terrifying on its own, but she knew all too well what the occupants held in store for her. The building might be large, but even an entire city was too small when it came to *him*.

Just sitting there, she could almost feel the familiar pull in her chest that had drawn her to him in the first place. It might have been her imagination, but the twinge existed all the same. She rubbed the back of her hand over her chest and mentally vowed not to let fantasy get in the way of reality.

She could not trust this man.

Chelsea stuck her key back into the ignition. "I'm coming home."

"You can't."

"Excuse me?"

"You heard me. I have a guest staying over tonight and I fully plan on instigating the naked rule. Sorry."

She didn't sound the least bit sorry. No, Danielle sounded positively gleeful, though Chelsea was hard-pressed to decide if it was regarding the so-called naked rule or her current situation. "There's no such thing as the naked rule."

"Actually, there is—it's in place for when sexy-ass men like Sergei are around."

Chelsea shuddered. "Don't you ever get tired of trying to make your dad angry?"

Danielle's father was a four-star general. To say her best friend had problems with authority was a serious understatement. It was part of why they got along so well. Chelsea admired Danielle's complete and utter disregard for her father's—and anyone else's—wishes. Being around Danielle made her feel a little bit freer and less like herself.

“Actually, I don’t ever get tired of it. Now for the last time, get your ass out of the car and into that hotel. You’re there for a reason and you’re never going to forgive yourself if you don’t follow through on it. As for me, I’m going to go have sex on the kitchen counter.”

The line went dead before Chelsea could respond. She dropped her phone into her purse with a sigh. Right now, Danielle having sex on surfaces Chelsea ate off of was the least of her problems.

Her eyes settled on the hotel entrance. “I can do this.”

Sheer bravado got her out of the car, though she couldn’t stop herself from clutching her purse to her chest as if it were a Prada-shaped shield. Her heels clicked over the concrete, which made her wish she’d worn flats. The last thing she needed at the moment was her very own soundtrack, each *click* in sync with the beat of her increasing heart rate.

When no one appeared to accost her—though there was really only one person she was worried about—she walked through the front doors. Distantly, Chelsea acknowledged the beauty of the place, with its rustic décor. Exposed beams and dark wood dominated the lobby. She wasn’t certain how long the building had been around, but the entire room smelled of fresh-cut wood. It was a nice place to hold a wedding, and the oversize fireplace sent her creativity flowing and made her fingers itch for her camera, but the location wasn’t something she would have chosen for herself.

The irony of the thought made her laugh.

“You’re here.” The voice licked up her spine, raising goose bumps along her skin.

She whirled around, forgetting to keep calm, and nearly toppled when she overbalanced on her too-high heels. He caught her. He always had, until the end. Slowly, so slowly she thought she might be dreaming because this couldn’t possibly be happening, she looked up from where

her hands rested on his chest.

A small, petty part of her had hoped the years would have worn on him. Perhaps he'd have put on weight, or grown out his hair into a greasy mess, or something else like so many of their graduating class.

Of course she wouldn't be so lucky.

Nathan Schultz looked even better now than he had the last time she'd seen him. He'd filled out, the muscles under her hands markedly larger than they had been at eighteen. Surely his shoulders hadn't been quite so broad? She definitely would have remembered if they had been. Her heart stuttered at how good he felt, her body instinctively melting against him just like it had countless times before.

Realizing she was practically rubbing against him like a kitten in the presence of catnip, Chelsea snatched her hands off his chest. "What are you doing here?"

He raised a single eyebrow, a skill she'd never been able to master no matter how she tried. Not that she would ever admit to trying—not eight years ago and not now. "It's my brother's wedding," he said. "In what reality would I not be here?"

When he put it that way, her question did sound silly. Chelsea took a step back, the new distance between them forcing him to drop his hands from her upper arms. She told herself she didn't still feel the imprint of his fingers on her skin, but memories threatened. Of his hands on her body, his lips on her neck, his voice curling around her as he told her how much he loved her. It was everything she could do to keep the answering shiver contained.

Focus on the reason you're here.

Chelsea clutched her purse closer, comforted by the documents inside. "You know what I mean. Why are you in the lobby?"

“Maybe I’m waiting for you.”

A thrill went through her, though she couldn’t say for sure if it was from fear or something more...delicious.

She shook the thought right out of her head. It shouldn’t be like this. After what he’d done, she shouldn’t feel a single thing when she looked at his square jaw that had always caught the light so perfectly. Maybe she hadn’t outgrown those types of thoughts like she’d hoped, but she knew better than to be drawn in by them.

That she was anyway answered the question she’d been asking herself the entire drive to the lodge.

She really couldn’t do this.

The front door was only a few short steps away. It would be child’s play to smile and make some excuse about forgetting her phone in the car. Two steps—three—and she’d be in the parking lot and free, able to avoid the conflicting roil of emotions the sight of him created inside her. She could take the easy way out, send him what she’d come to deliver via mail—

“Nathan?”

Chelsea froze as a petite blonde approached, a smile on her face. She was beautiful in the fresh-faced girl-next-door way—the type of woman men labeled “the marrying kind.” A surge of white-hot jealousy hit Chelsea as the stranger stopped next to Nathan and nudged him with her shoulder. “Introduce me to your friend?”

Nathan smiled, and it was the only warning Chelsea received before he said, “Elle, I’d like you to meet Chelsea. My wife.”

My wife. Nathan couldn’t deny the surge of satisfaction he got from saying those two little

words. Chelsea actually took a step back, though he didn't know why he was surprised. She'd run from him once, and there was little to stop her from running again.

Except this time, he was more than willing to play dirty to keep her here.

He couldn't believe she'd come. Inviting her to the wedding had been a long shot, but here she was, in the same room as him for the first time in eight years, with her chin held high and her hair a mass of red waves that she'd never quite been able to tame. It was something she'd hated in high school, an imperfection in her family of blondes and brunettes, but Nathan had always seen it as a physical representation of the fire inside her—a fire she hadn't let anyone but him see.

She'd grown into herself, though, her face sharpened and her hair darkened to a slightly less fiery auburn that she probably preferred. Her body was still curvy in the pinup sort of way. The type of body he'd always desired over the stick-thin one so many women strove for. Then again, Nathan couldn't picture himself *not* wanting Chelsea, no matter how she'd physically changed since he saw her last.

Conflicting emotions twisted through him. Desire. Anger. Guilt. Faced with the possibility of touching her, talking to her, he couldn't avoid the truth that stood between them.

He'd fucked up. *Really* fucked up. And she'd left before he could fix it.

If there were any way to go back and do things differently he would, but it was too late to change the way things had fallen out. All that was left was to work through their issues and see if they had a chance at a future.

Next to him, Elle grabbed his arm. "Excuse me, I must have misheard you. I could have sworn you said *wife*."

"Actually—"

“That’s because I did.”

Chelsea made a choked sound when he interrupted her. She obviously hadn’t wanted *that* little piece of information to come out. Well, screw that. Whether she wanted to admit it or not, she was his and had been since they’d snuck off to The Hitching Post and he’d put a twenty-five-cent ring on her finger.

“I see.” Elle’s blue eyes were a touch too wide. “I, uh…” She cleared her throat and held out a hand. “Hi. I’m marrying Nathan’s older brother, so I guess that makes us related.”

Though it couldn’t be clearer that Chelsea wanted to run for the nearest exit, her inability to make a scene was too ingrained. It was one constant he’d always hated, but now he was betting the future on it.

Guilt rose, more potent this time. All through high school, Chelsea had been intent on saving face—on the appearance of things. It went along with being a Callaghan, but she took it to a truly neurotic level. Her older sister was the one who did everything right, from choosing the right career to marrying the right kind of man. Instead of doing what a normal kid would do and rebelling until she found her own way, Chelsea had practically killed herself trying to make her family happy.

Until him. Nathan knew full well he didn’t fit into the life they had planned for their daughter, but he’d fallen for her anyway. And she’d fallen, too. It was only once he and Chelsea realized they had to be together that she’d finally stood up to her family. It had been a glory to see, even if tears had streamed down her face and she’d gone hoarse from screaming.

She’d done it for him—for *them*—and it hadn’t meant a thing in the end.

Chelsea took Elle’s hand and even managed a smile. “Congratulations. Gabe is a wonderful person.”

“Yes, he is.” Elle smiled as well, though she still looked a little wide around the eyes. “Have you checked in yet? I swear my wedding planner—who also happens to be my best friend—has this weekend scheduled down to the last minute, but I’d really like to get to know you better if we can find some downtime.” She shot Nathan a glare. “Nathan hasn’t told us nearly enough about you.”

Because it was his burden to bear. And because it physically *hurt* to think about her, let alone talk about her. Their past was an open wound that had never quite closed. Lately it had felt like it was festering, the pain inside him only getting worse. It had finally gotten to the point where he *had* to do something about it.

Chelsea shifted and glanced at Nathan. “I’m not sure…”

She was going to run. The intent on her face couldn’t have been clearer if she’d said it aloud. He wanted to yell at her, spilling out all the words he’d kept locked inside over the years, and then pin her against the nearest wall and remind her just how perfect they were for each other. Forcing her to face the attraction that sparked between them was the only way he’d ever been able to break through her barriers, and he had absolutely no problem going there with her.

In fact, that was part of his plan.

Nathan took a step closer and wrapped his arm around her shoulders. “I’ll get her settled in.”

She held herself straight and stiff against him, but her uneasy smile never wavered. “I’m sure there will be time to talk over the course of the weekend.”

Elle’s gaze jumped between them. “Of course. I’ll catch up with you later.”

As soon as Elle was out of sight, Chelsea pushed him away, her amber eyes sparking with anger. “What are you doing? Why would you tell her that?”

Okay, so he hadn't exactly planned on blurting it out to Elle, but Chelsea had always done a number on his self-control. Only, this time, he wasn't letting her get away without a fight. "It's the truth. You, Chelsea Callaghan, are my wife."

"Stop it," she hissed, looking around as if her family was going to appear out of the woodwork. "Please stop saying it."

"It's too late to deny it. Hell, it's even too late to *leave*. What Elle knows, Gabe knows, and don't think for a second he won't track you down to ask questions."

Her hand flew to her chest, her eyes narrowing. "He wouldn't dare."

"You know my brother. Take a second to think about that." It wasn't the truth. Gabe and Nathan were adults, and they respected each other's boundaries—mostly. If Nathan told his big brother to back off, Gabe would do it. Chelsea didn't know that, but it suited his plans for the weekend to let her believe nothing had changed in the last eight years.

She frowned. "I've moved on. He'd never find me. *You* didn't."

Now probably wasn't the best time to remind her that he had, in fact, *mailed* her an invitation to the wedding, nor to admit he'd found her less than four weeks after he got back from basic training.

He forced himself to shrug, to hide the tension radiating through every line of his body. This bluff had to pay off or she'd leave and it all would be for nothing. "Where do you think he'd start looking?"

Recognition sparked. "No." She stepped forward and clutched his arm. "He can't go to my parents. Please, Nathan. You have to stop him."

The trap was set. All he needed to do was spring it. "I will." Nathan laid his hand over hers. "*If* you stay for the wedding."

“What?” Chelsea’s jaw dropped and she stepped back, releasing his arm as if he’d caught fire. “You’re...blackmailing me?”

“If you want to put it that way.” He’d do a lot worse if it meant a chance to get his wife back. It seemed like everyone around him was falling in love and getting their happily-ever-after, all while he sat around and pined for Chelsea. He wanted her back in his life, and he was going to do his damndest to create the opportunity.

“I *do* want to put it that way.” She took another step back. “I can’t believe you’d do this.”

“Don’t play the victim, Chelsea. It doesn’t look good on you.” The sheer audacity she had to look hurt after everything that had happened set Nathan’s teeth on edge. He might not be an innocent, but she wasn’t, either.

“You’re crazy. We haven’t seen each other in eight years and you want me to spend the weekend with you? That doesn’t make any kind of sense.”

He stepped forward, backing her against the wall, though he didn’t touch her. He didn’t need to. Being this close after so long was heaven and hell all mixed into one. He wanted to kiss her until they both forgot all their anger and hurt and the bullshit keeping them apart.

Not yet.

Nathan leaned down, noting the way she shook even as her eyes dropped to his lips. His mouth brushed her jaw, the touch so brief it might have been his imagination if not for the way her breath caught.

“A weekend isn’t all that long.” He dropped one hand to her hip, the thin cotton of her dress not much of a barrier between their skin. One good rip and it wouldn’t even be that. “And we have *a lot* to catch up on.”

She inhaled so sharply, her breasts pressed against his chest. A little noise escaped her lips,

one that didn't sound the least bit like a protest. She snapped her mouth shut, but it was too late.

He knew she was as affected as he was.

Good.

He released her and took a large step back. "I took the liberty of canceling your reservation. My room is two twenty-four. I expect to see you there."

He turned and walked away before his tenuous grip on his control broke and he dragged her into the nearest empty room to see just how badly she really wanted him to kiss her.

