## Chapter 1

The danger of living in a big family was that to do anything of notice, a person had to go big or go home.

And Amelia had leaped, hoping to grab ahold of her dreams, show every one of her five siblings that she was just as amazing as the rest of them.

The whole thing wouldn't have been so epically tragic if Amelia hadn't harbored such high hopes.

A year in Prague, chasing her vision of becoming a professional photographer.

Go big . . . or go home.

Amelia moved to take a wider-angle shot of the couple. Sabine, her lush brown hair up in a loopy, messy bun, was caught inside the embrace of her groom, Kirby Housten, swaying to the Blue Monkeys' version of "I've Had the Time of My Life." The song lured couples onto the tiled dance floor, under the twinkling lights strewn from the faux pine trees that framed the reception and pool area of the Mad Moose Motel.

A rock-edged garden area brimming with early blooming violets and irises, combined with the aroma of potted hydrangeas on the tables and the heady smell of the roses twining up the wedding arch, managed to conjure the necessary magic for a north-shore-in-early May wedding despite the chlorinated air. More, tonight, the heavens were cooperating, the stars sprinkling the glass canopy with hopes of tomorrow, the moon a perfect halo of divine approval.

The viewfinder framed a life Amelia Christiansen knew she should want. But after the crash and burn in Prague, and her high-tail back to the one-sled-dog town of Deep Haven, Minnesota, she wasn't sure *what* she'd describe as her own personal happily ever after.

Adventure? True love?

Maybe just a good reason to get out of bed in the morning. And that didn't include big brother Darek's list of housekeeping to-do's at the Evergreen Resort, thank you.

At least she'd landed a gig, albeit free, taking pictures at her friend Sabine's wedding.

She adjusted the focus on her Canon EOS Rebel, taking a number of burst shots as Kirby twirled Sabine out and back in. She checked the shots, increased the shutter speed, and climbed on a chair, just in case one of the dancers decided to cut into her frame.

"For crying out loud, Amelia, you act like you're stalking Sasquatch. It's a wedding, not a show on Animal Planet." The voice came from behind her, a husky, familiar tenor that could still send ripples through her entire body.

She held out her hand, not taking her eyes from the viewfinder, and pinched her fingers together. "Zip it, Seth. I'm working."

"You're not working—you're not even the official photographer."

She glanced at him now. "One does not need to be paid to do a good job. Sabine asked me to take photos, and one of these is going to be—oh, shoot!"

Kirby swung his bride down into a dip as the song ended. And it would have been exactly the breathtaking shot she'd waited for—Sabine's head thrown back, her dark hair trickling over Kirby's arms, a smile playing on her lips: the intoxicating surrender of a woman in love.

"Now I missed it." Amelia snapped one last smooch between Kirby and Sabine before climbing off the chair, Seth's hand at her elbow.

"I've no doubt you have about three thousand good shots from tonight. Now, please put the camera down and dance with your boyfriend."

He smiled at the word, and Amelia didn't have the heart to contradict him. Later she'd remind him that she hadn't agreed to officially date again. Just because she'd failed in her first post–high school launch attempt didn't mean she'd returned to pick up where they left off.

Except, Seth's voice could still elicit the sweet tingle of heat inside her, just like it did when he used to find her after a victorious football game, his blond hair wet from his shower, smelling of Axe and turning her world just a little smoky.

He'd always slicked up well off the field also, tonight wearing a white dress shirt, open at the neck, the fabric tight against frame, honed by hours of cutting wood at his father's lumber mill. He wore a pair of black dress pants, slim at his waist, creased to a fine edge as if he might be trying to prove something.

His blond hair brushed his shoulders, begging to be tangled with her fingers, and his brown eyes fixed on her so long it should stop her heart in her chest.

It occurred to her that maybe God had returned her to Deep Haven after a semester abroad because she should have never left.

Now Seth's voice turned soft as his hand closed on the camera and urged it out of her grip. "Please put the camera down, and let's dance."

On the dance floor, Kyle Housten, drummer for the Blue Monkeys, took the mic. He'd shucked off his grey vest, wore his black shirt rolled up at the forearms, beaming as he found Kirby and Sabine, then the audience. "You might not know it, but my little bro is an Elvis junkie. Kirbs, this one's for you and your girl."

Behind Kyle, his wife, Emma, strummed the introductory chords.

His low baritone began, "Wise men say only fools rush in . . ."

Amelia wanted to wince at the way the lyrics rubbed along her conscience, hitting her choices from the past year and, most recently, the blowup at the Christiansen family home. But Seth seemed to not notice as he unwound the camera strap from her neck. "I've been waiting all night to have you to myself," he said.

"Seth—"

But he set the camera on a folding chair and took her hand. "It'll be there when you get back."

She couldn't exactly protest with the town watching. Besides, Deep Haven expected them to dance. Probably thought they'd be next.

A thought Seth confirmed as he took her into his arms. "Maybe we should start thinking about our own wedding playlist."

Oh. Boy.

He wrapped one big, linebacker hand behind her; the other he held out for her to grasp.

"Since when did you learn how to do more than sway?" she said as she took it.

"I may not be as fancy as that jerk from Europe, but I am house-trained."

Yep, clearly something to prove. She couldn't be sure where he'd gotten his information about her recent unexpected guest, but someone—maybe even a traitor from the house of Christiansen—had spilled her secrets, probably in an attempt to keep her from repeating her mistakes. She'd hunt down her brothers and pry out the truth at the next family campfire.

Now she met Seth's eyes and recognized hurt behind the veneer of redneck bravado. "Roark is gone, and he's not coming back."

There, she said it out loud. Without wincing.

Despite the echo of Roark's words, rising up to haunt her.

We belong together! Please forgive me.

"Mr. James Bond had better not show his face in Deep Haven again," Seth said, "or he'll get a taste of what—"

"Seth, stop." She pressed her hand against his lips.

He made a face. "Sorry. You're right."

Amelia leaned into him, winding her arm around his shoulder, laying her head on his chest. The familiarity of being in his broad, safe embrace caught her up, spoke to her. Maybe she needed this,

needed Seth. The boy she'd shared her first kiss with. Shared dreams and unraveled her fears with as they lounged under the stars on a beach blanket of stones, the great Lake Superior lapping at their feet.

Always, until she left for Prague, those dreams had included each other.

"Amelia! There you are!" The voice was too high, too loud, to be sober—and of course it belonged to Vivien Calhoun. "Hey, Seth," she said, then took Amelia's hand. "C'mon, I got something to show you!"

"Viv, we're dancing here," Seth said, a growl in the back of his throat.

"Oh, whatever, Seth—deal. C'mon, Ames." Vivien tugged her through the dance floor, leaving the hint of something stronger than wine in her wake. Amelia threw an *I'll be right back* glance over her shoulder to Seth.

Except, maybe she wouldn't because Vivie pulled her across the reception area—Amelia breaking free long enough to grab her camera—then through the lobby and outside to the parking lot, where the sky shimmered with starlight, the night air sweet with the buds of spring. "What?"

"You'll see!" Vivie wore her sable hair long and loose, in waves, and if possible, she'd lost even more weight since jetting off to an NYC film school, her body rail thin in a light-blue baby doll dress, her legs as long as the Empire State Building in wedge platform sandals.

She looked like the movie star she longed to become.

At least one of Amelia's high school friends had reached for her dreams—and not fallen on her face.

Except, Sabine, the bride, *also* had her dreams safely in her grip, finally tying the knot with the boy she'd loved since sixth grade, even if he didn't figure it out until last summer.

Vivie wove her way through a tangle of cars, then out into the long drive of the motel, where more cars edged the grass. "Look what I'm driving!"

She pointed, even as Amelia stopped, shot her a look. "No, really?"

"That's right, bay-bee, a vintage, 1967, cherry red convertible Mustang." Vivien slid onto the hood and posed like she might be Bettie Page. "And it's all mine. Sorta."

Amelia slid her hand across the hood, glanced at Ree Zimmerman, sitting the passenger seat. "Sorta?"

Ree, an aspiring journalist, wedged in freelance hours at the Deep Haven paper between helping her parents with the twenty-four-room Mad Moose Motel. Tonight her short blonde hair was held back with a gold headband, wore a faded jean jacket over her lime-green dress. She'd pulled off her sandals, now held them in her grip, dangling out the window. Amelia should have grabbed her sweater to put over her own coral swing dress.

"How long have you known about this?" she said to Ree.

"Just now. She pulled up, and . . . I thought I'd better come along quietly." Ree made a face.

"Get in the driver's seat. I grabbed the keys." She dangled them from her hand.

"Hey, those are mine!" Vivien said, sliding off the hood and leaning over to swipe them away. She missed, and Amelia opened the driver's door, pulled down the front seat.

"Get in, Vivie. We'll pretend it's red carpet night."

Vivien climbed in, sitting high on the back, as if she were Miss Minnesota. "So? It's a wicked ride, right?"

Amelia slid behind the wheel, ran her hand over the red leather seat, the shiny red steering wheel, the polished chrome radio knobs. "Is it really yours?"

"It is for now. My new boyfriend let me borrow it."

"Your *boyfriend* let you borrow his vintage Mustang?" Ree said. "Sheesh, Viv, who is this guy?" She shot a look at Amelia.

Amelia could read the question on her face. What did he get in return?

Or maybe she just heard it inside. Amelia had managed all of two emails to Vivien since hopping the pond to Prague and back. She simply couldn't face her own failures against the shiny victories of her girlfriends. But maybe she shouldn't count Vivie's new role as a victory.

"Just a producer friend." Vivien said it like they all inhabited that world. "But . . ." She slid down onto the backseat. "Let's talk about Rrrrrroark." She enunciated the name with a long roll of her R's. "Dahling, a Brit? Was he royal?"

Just when Amelia thought she'd shaken off the specter of her mistakes for the evening. "How about we talk about something—"

"Oh no, honey," Ree, the betrayer, said. "We want all the juicy details. I didn't even know there was a scandal until a couple weeks ago, after the dust up with your brothers."

"It wasn't a scandal—" Amelia started

"Not true," Vivie said. "Everyone's talking about the hot souvenir Amelia Christiansen brought back from her trip to Prague."

"He wasn't—"

"Hot?" Ree turned to Vivie, "For the record, he could melt a girl from fifty feet. Tall—he's probably six two—with dark curly hair and blue eyes brimming with mystery. Very MI6, super spy with a nice stack of muscles—"

"Ree!"

"He went swimming. I looked. Shoot me. But oh, the shoulders! I'm sorry, but Seth is all brawn. This one is . . . chiseled."

"Stop."

"And did I mention the accent? He was all 'fancy' this and 'rubbish' that, with a few 'blimeys' and 'chips' and 'horses for courses' thrown in. I'd work the front desk just in hopes he'd come down and ask for more towels."

"He stayed here?" Vivien said, leaning forward between the seats.

"Where else was he going to stay?" Ree said. "My parents offered him a room half-off after the Christiansens practically tarred and feathered him and rode him off their property on a rail."

"Oh, we did not," Amelia said.

Well, they sorta had. Or her brothers had. Got in his face, yelling—Casper just might have hit him had her father not intervened. And more yelling outside, in the driveway before he finally drove away.

And the memory elicited a groan that made Amelia bury her face in her hands.

"How bad was it really, Ames?" Vivie said.

Amelia leaned back, stared at the stars overhead. More Elvis—"Love Me Tender"—drifted out from the reception. Maybe Seth was on his way to rescue her.

Except, what she really wanted to do was put the car in gear and drive away, flee the humiliation—not to mention her future, the one she saw before her like handwriting on the wall.

Not quite the life she'd dreamed of when she jetted off to Europe last fall.

"Start with where you two met. Was it romantic?"

The Charles Bridge at sunset, turning the Vltava River to deep crimson, the sky mottled with tufts of light purple, maroon, and burnt orange.

The smell of roasted pork and cinnamon trdelnik, the taste of adventure rich and full as she caught the laughter of nearby lovebirds, tossing wishes from the bridge.

"It was Prague. Everything in Prague is romantic."

Ree glanced at Vivie. "And this is why I want to escape Deep Haven and see the world. I'd like to meet a handsome man in some exotic location."

"What, you don't think covering the doings of the city council for the *Deep Haven Herald* is exotic enough?" Vivie said.

Ree ignored her. "What did he say—first thing—when he met you?"

"That wishes come true if you touch the cross on the plaque of Saint John of Nepomuk."

The voice, low, sharp with accent, and belonging to a man dressed in a pair of pressed jeans, a gray printed T-shirt, a blue cardigan, open in the wind, that only accentuated the mottled blue of his eyes. He wore a messenger bag over his shoulder, held a camera . . .

"Oh, Amelia . . ." Vivien rested her head on the seat, sighing. "What happened?"

What happened? Was it possible to look at someone and just . . . know? To see your own future in his eyes? Probably not. Amelia blamed the magic, the adventure, of Prague.

"He . . ." Made me feel brave. Smart. Beautiful. . . . Foolish

"I heard he was older than you. Hmmm." Vivie said.

"Five years, but it didn't seem that way. He was just another photography student in my group. Then, by the time I found out, it didn't matter. I met him first on the Charles Bridge, then in Old Town Square, then we started working on assignments together. Anyway, of course he was charming, and I read way too much into it."

"Oh no." This from Ree.

"It was after we'd spent Christmas together on the same trip to Italy, Switzerland, and France that I thought we were . . . well, I thought I loved him. Then, one day, after we got back to Prague, I was walking to class and saw him on the Charles Bridge, in the arms of another woman."

"Jerk!" Ree again.

"We had a big fight. I was so angry, I refused to talk to him, even after he claimed they were just friends. And then he just left the country. Vanished. No explanation, nothing. And I realized . . . I had read way more into the relationship than he had. In fact . . . "She wanted to wince at this part. "That's when I put it together. He didn't have a job. He spent money like he didn't care where it came from, and he knew food, art, wine, and—"

"Women! Oh, Ames, you fell for a European playboy!" Vivie said, clamping her hand over her mouth, eyes wide. "Girl, I didn't know you had it in you!"

Amelia winced, but didn't contradict her. Yes, that was the worst part—feeling like just another conquest by a man she thought she could love. Not that it went that far, but the realization horrified her.

Humiliated her.

"No wonder your father dragged you home," Ree said.

"He didn't exactly drag me home. He and Mom came to visit for Valentine's Day, and by then Prague had lost its luster." Or rather, her bravado had vanished and left behind a girl she didn't know. Afraid. Unseated.

"And then, two months later, Roark has the nerve to show up at your house and ask your forgiveness?" Ree said. "Okay, your brothers are heroes in my book for chasing him away."

"Wow, you dated a European playboy." Vivie seemed caught on some version of Roark that Amelia knew needed amending. "Did you kiss him?"

"Once. On New Year's Eve."

"That's it? A New Year's Eve kiss?"

Even Ree shook her head.

"See, maybe we weren't even dating. Maybe I just made it up in my head. Maybe I overreacted to the whole thing. And now I feel even more foolish. Thankfully, it's over now. He's gone, and I can just . . . start over again." Except, three months after returning home, she still struggled to get her footing. She'd forfeited the rest of her one-year photography course by fleeing home—too late, sadly, to enroll in another course. And maybe she didn't even want to.

Maybe this simply proved she wasn't the adventurer she hoped to be.

"But wait—Roark came all the way over here. Faced your *family*. Playboy or not, that sounds contrite to me," Vivien said. "Even romantic. Apparently you made more of an impact on him that you thought. Please tell me you forgave him."

Amelia leaned back, lost herself in the swirl of stars. So much light against the darkness. So many what-ifs.

Like, what if she had forgiven him? What if she had believed him when he said he hadn't meant to hurt her? What if she'd held onto her courage, stayed in Prague?

She might be having a summer of adventure in Italy instead of sitting in a parked Mustang, trapped between a Prius and a Ford Silverado.

"How was she supposed to forgive him with a wall of Christiansen brothers standing there, glaring at him?" Ree said.

"I'd do just about anything to have even one of the Christiansen brothers glance in my general direction," Vivie said. "But that's a dream that'll never happen. So—did they really run him off the property?"

Amelia sighed, remembering Casper's disbelief, then Darek's suggestion that Roark leave. Not to mention the sudden hovering of her brothers-in-law, Max and Jace, as if they'd adopted the family role to meddle in her life.

"It wouldn't have been so bad, maybe, if Casper hadn't spilled to the family just how much he hurt me, adding in a few of Vivie's suggestions about him being a European playboy. Roark didn't contradict them, and my dad asked him to leave, and he . . . he just stood there. As if he wasn't leaving.'

"Oh, it's so west-side story!" Ree said.

"No, it was scary! It got suddenly very silent, and father took one of those . . . deep breaths, and then he made the face."

"The one he made when he found us playing spin the bottle in the basement with Seth and the guys?" Ree said.

"Mmm-hmm."

"Oh, I remember that face," Vivien said. "No wonder Roark ran."

"That's the thing—he didn't exactly run. My brothers pushed him out into the yard, and even after he drove away, he stuck around, calling—"

"And you never talked to him?" Vivie shook her head.

Amelia closed her eyes, and suddenly the sight of Roark, dressed in his oxford and suit coat, every inch the dashing European hero, except for the contrite expression, shuffled through her mind. "I . . . should have. I wanted to . . . but . . ."

"But he'd already humiliated you once. You didn't want to give him the chance again," Vivien said, the sound of experience in her tone.

"Something like that." More, it had to do with the fact that she couldn't bear to repeat her mistakes, lead with her foolish heart. Disappoint herself again.

"So, after a week, he finally checked out," Ree finished for her.

The thought turned Amelia's throat raw all over again.

"Oh, Ames," Vivien said, wrapping a hand over Amelia's shoulder. "Are you okay?"

She brushed her cheek, found it moist. Took a breath. "Yeah. It's more than the fact that he hurt me. We're from different worlds, and I see that clearly now. I'm a small-town girl from Deep Haven. And . . . maybe that's all I'll ever be. Maybe this is the life I'm supposed to have. Besides, it's not like he's going to jet over here, settle down in one of the cabins, and become a lumberjack. Even if he isn't some kind of rich playboy, he clearly has a big life—a European life—and we don't belong together. Not really, despite the fairy tale I bought into last year."

The question of who she belonged with went unasked. Already answered.

Because the *who* suddenly appeared, ambling down the driveway, his hands tucked into his pockets, a causal mass of muscle that could probably wrestle down a moose. Seth Turnquist, high school sweetheart, defensive end for the Deep Haven Huskies, and the man most likely to meet the approval of the Christiansen mob.

"So, what are you going to do now? Stay in Deep Haven? Go to college?"

"I don't know, okay? I always thought I was . . . well, the adventurer of the family. I think maybe I ventured too far." Amelia turned to Ree. "I've got an interview at the paper, so maybe I can get on as a freelance photographer. Maybe get more wedding gigs and senior photos. I'm pretty good at capturing the lives of others."

It was her own that seemed, over the past few months, out of focus.

It wasn't just her colossal embarrassment with Roark.

It was that she no longer trusted her own instincts.

"I'll put in a good word with Lou at the Herald," Ree said.

Seth edged up the car. Whistled. "Hot wheels, Viv."

Vivie was probably grinning up at him from the backseat, flirting. Seth leaned down, caught Amelia's eyes, and lowered his voice into something soft, husky. "They're getting ready to throw the bouquet, and I thought you might want to be there to, you know, catch it."

"Of course."

He grinned, slow and sweet, and it syruped through her, into her pores. Then he popped a kiss on her lips, just like old times.

It wouldn't be a tragedy for her to end up living happily ever after with Seth Turnquist.

He backed up, opened her door, winked at Ree, and narrowed an eye at Vivie.

"What?" Vivie exclaimed, but Seth ignored her and took Amelia's hand.

"It's a beautiful night," he said, lifting her hand to kiss it. Then he tucked it onto his arm, pulling her close, his body warm, strong. Solid.

She didn't need instincts to figure out that she had a happy ending waiting for her, right here.

Time to stop looking back and start living the rest of her life.

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"You've had some crazy ideas in your life, Roark, but this time you are certifiably off your trolley."

Ethan Barlowe folded his arms, creasing his Alexander Price wool suit—one he'd probably picked up on his last trip to Milan—and sat on the settee in the living room, watching as Roark St. John finished signing the last of the stock transfer agreements and real estate contracts.

"And instead of selling the place, how about we just rent it out? Please."

Outside the open window, pigeons cooed, perched on the metal railing that overlooked the four-story drop to the street. A sweet, jasmine-laced breeze fluttered the chiffon drapes. The Eiffel Tower rose to dissect the cityscape just across the river.

Roark would miss the view of it at night, the cascading lights on the hour, the memories he'd shared with Francesca. But the place wasn't his—not really, and never had been. Time to let go. "No. Sell it, Ethan. And transfer the cash and the shares into my account."

"This is it, you know. The last of your father's equity in the company. The walkabout is over.

You'll be officially broke if you don't take over the company as your grandfather instructed." Ethan shook his head. "Billions to broke in a day. This girl better be worth it."

"I'm hardly broke. And keep your horses in check. I plan to take the helm, and then yes, I'll inherit the family stocks."

"Good, because I was starting to think *if* more than *when* you take over. Two years is a long time to grieve." Ethan got up, took the file off the table. "I know you loved Francesca. And blamed yourself—"

Roark held up his hand. "Enough. I can't fix that mistake. But this—this I have the power to fix. I promise I'll be back by July's quarterly board meeting."

"That's what you said last July. You offered your so-called scouting report, as if you were seriously looking for future locations, sold more stocks, and took off again. I got that, then. But now—be serious, Roark. This girl dumped you. I know that's a bruiser to your massive ego, but it happens to the best of us." Ethan shook his head. "There's no such thing as true love, mate. I promise you that."

But, see, that was the problem. There was. He'd found it, finally, in Amelia.

Roark had never been the type of guy to believe in love at first sight, and it wasn't until after she'd left the country that he'd figured out how to put feelings into words, , but yes, something different, and real, and terrifying had happened the day Amelia Christiansen wandered into his viewfinder on the Charles Bridge, in Prague.

God had finally called a truce, perhaps. Because right there, the urge to keep moving, to not settle too long in one place, died a quick and long-overdue death.

Amelia Christiansen was his best—and last—hope to leave behind the man he ran from And start being the man he saw in her eyes.

Honest. Responsible. Honorable.

The man he longed to be. Not the guy with so much carnage in his wake, but a fellow traveler, a little lost, hoping to find the one person to bring him home.

"Women want too much from us. Not just our hearts, but our wallets. Our very souls." Ethan opened his satchel, slipped the file in. "The worst part is, you already tried to apologize."

"I did it poorly. I went in thinking I could throw out an apology, hand her flowers and some jewelry, and she'd fall into my arms."

"But you didn't even do anything wrong!" Ethan picked up the satchel and flung the shoulder strap over himself.

"I kept secrets. And I lied to her-made her think I was someone else."

"You had no choice."

"I had every choice. I was a coward." He stuck his hands into his pockets, walked over to the window, leaned against the frame as he stared at the tower. "Just like I have been all my life."

Behind him, Ethan sighed. "I know you have demons, mate, but you're hardly a coward."

But Ethan didn't see the rest, the man afraid to face the way he'd disappointed God. Or the fact that God kept reminding Roark he couldn't outrun His wrath.

With Amelia, it had all dropped away. The fear, the regret—as if being with her made him new. Or better.

A man worthy of winning back the woman he loved.

"Didn't her family practically throw you out? What makes you think they'll be all, 'Glad you popped by! Come in for a spot of tea'?"

Roark smiled at that. "I have an in with the family—a local who claims to know their bark is worse than their bite. And a job."

Ethan raised an eyebrow.

"I'm working in a coffee house."

Ethan shook his head, put his hand on the door latch. "I know you like to live on the edge, fast and loose, without a plan. But this might take more finesse that you think. In the case that you don't come back, though, I want the keys to the Fiorano."

"Don't be coy. I know you already have a set. Just keep it clean."

Ethan smiled. "You really *don't* have even a smidge of a plan, do you?"

"Just one. Win her back, then tell her the truth. Beyond that, I'm following my heart, hoping it's enough."

"You might consider going at that backwards. Secrets first, then love."

Roark sighed. "But then, how will I know it's real?"

A pulse of camaraderie passed between them. Then Roark took a breath. "I'll be back in two months. With the woman I love."