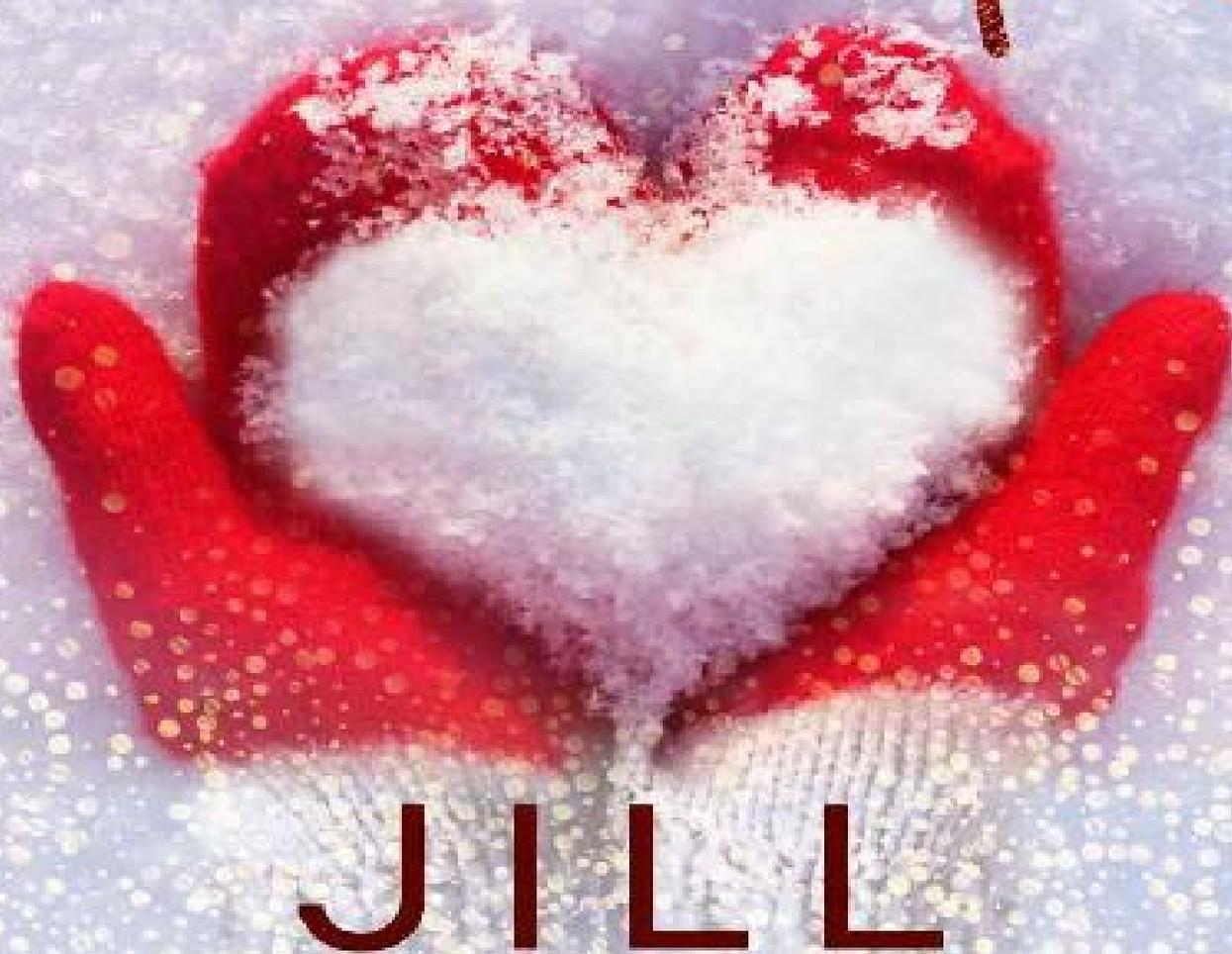


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JILL
DOWNEY

A TINSEL TALE

ONCE UPON A CHRISTMAS

JILL DOWNEY

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A Tinsel Tale

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EVIE

I lean all my weight against my bulging suitcase so I can zip it up. Packing for six weeks isn't easy. I glance at my watch. Eleven o'clock. Dang it! I wanted to be on the road by ten. After hauling my suitcase to the door, I shrug into my winter coat and slip on my leather gloves. I live in a modern, upscale one bed, one bath apartment in downtown Chicago. Pricy but worth it. About as opposite as you can get from my childhood home. The only thing the same is the lake view from my balcony. My apartment has stunning views of Lake Michigan and Downtown Chicago and it's close to everything. It has a rooftop outdoor pool, indoor spa and fitness center, a resident lounge... which I never have time for.

Honestly, there's a reason I'm dragging my feet. I'm in no hurry to return to my Michigan hometown. I haven't been back in almost a year. A hectic work schedule is always my excuse, and although it's true, it's not the whole truth. Since my mom died, it's too painful to go back. Do I feel guilty for leaving my dad to deal with his grief alone? Yep. Does that motivate me to do better? Nope.

Then there's the other fly in the ointment... *Jamie*. My first love. A flash of dark hickory eyes and a wild mop of hair liberally streaked with copper catapults my belly into a freefall. The last time I saw him was at my mom's funeral almost three years ago. He'd been with some stunning blond clinging

to his arm. I'd been so out of it with grief that she'd barely registered... until much later. He'd hugged me so hard, but I hadn't let him penetrate my protective walls, nope not me. I'd remained stiff in his arms even though all I'd wanted to do was sink into his embrace and never let go. But if I'd surrendered, I'd have never survived. Prior to my mom's passing we'd hardly been on good terms, but I guess tragedy levels the playing field.

Sighing, I leave my apartment and close the door behind me. I've tried to prepare myself for this homecoming. It's so hard to go back there with mom gone. And I'm sure to run into Jamie at some point, which I dread. It's a small town. I assume he's still working for the fire department, but I don't ask, and everyone back home knows better than to bring him up. From football hero to firefighter. Not a big leap.

I feel more vulnerable now without the emotional shield of Vance, even if it was an illusion. I finally got smart and broke up with him six months ago. I woke up one day and decided I'd had enough and ended it. I needed more. The sex was great, but it had become more of a habit than a relationship.

The fact that he was my boss had complicated the relationship but even more so the split, but I'd done both anyway. He is still not on board with the breakup. He now promises to include me in his personal life, make our relationship public, he even offered to marry me if that's what it took to keep me happy. So romantic of him. I'd declined. Too little too late and I don't love him. I thought I had but I'd been fooling myself.

It's been tense at the office since then. Now I'm taking a leave of absence to help take care of my dad after his knee replacement surgery and it couldn't come at a better time. Since my firm doesn't schedule the nonessentials between Thanksgiving and the new year, the timing is perfect for multiple reasons.

It won't be so bad to be in snowy Michigan over the holidays, I say, trying to convince myself. I swear, my hometown could be featured in a Hallmark Christmas movie. My parents' homestead sits right on the lake. My

grandparents bought the property in the early '50s. They'd never be able to afford a home like this now. Lakefront property is prime real estate,--throw in a couple of acres, the barn, and like many of the OG's, my parents are sitting on a small goldmine.

Dad. Not my parents. The tightness in my chest feels like a million tears bottled in a too-small container. Even after three years it's almost more than my mind can comprehend. Mom and I won't be drinking hot cider while we decorate the tree listening to Christmas tunes. Dad won't be teasing Mom with his corny jokes, the two of them acting like newlyweds after forty years of marriage. It feels like yesterday and forever at the same time.

The ache in my heart is the main reason, but not the only reason, I don't want to step foot back in my hometown. An old memory sneaks through my defenses before I can intercept it. Mom, Dad and me bundling up, loading the ax in the pickup, driving to the Barrington Farm, then taking forever to find the perfect tree. Jamie Barrington helping us chop it down and load it up while we exchange heated glances, counting the hours before we can be alone with each other.

Before I head to the parking garage, I stop to say goodbye. "Hi, Warren." I smile at the doorman with the twinkling gray eyes and warm smile. I love this man. Handing him a colorfully wrapped Christmas gift, I say, "I know it's early, but I'll be gone until the first of the year."

"Thank you, Evie. It won't be the same here without you," he says, looking pleased as he accepts my gift.

"I'll miss you too. Have a wonderful Thanksgiving. Your grandkids will be here for Christmas, right?"

His face lights up. "Yes. My wife is already decorating and shopping. Lord, help me."

"That's the fun of it."

"If you say so."

"My dad's surgery is the week after Thanksgiving. Send some good

thoughts his way.”

“I’ll keep you both in my prayers. He’s lucky to have you,” he says.

“I’m the lucky one. I haven’t been much of a daughter lately. Pretty much a failure in fact, but thanks for saying it.” Impulsively, I give him a big hug. Warren is one of the sweetest men I’ve ever met and is a constant in my crazy, hectic life. Lately I feel like I’m living in a pressure cooker.

I step outside to the parking garage and press the key fob to my white BMW convertible. Probably not my most practical decision but what the heck. Not great in the snow or ice for sure. One of my extravagances after winning a big case last year. I’d definitely earned it. That case had been brutal. Long hours, pressure beyond belief with the stakes so high, an innocent man’s life. As the lead defense attorney, I felt like it had all rested on my shoulders. But we won and gained national attention.

The satisfaction of clearing an innocent man is about as gratifying as it gets, but during the trial my life was not my own. It was out of control, like my career owned me. It was all-consuming and overwhelming, and it’s even more so now, if that’s possible. Especially since the *Dateline* episode aired. News flash... the reward for success is more work than I can possibly handle.

Brr. It’s freezing on this blustery mid-November day. Even in the parking garage the cold air cuts right through me. I throw my suitcase in the back then slide into the soft leather seat and buckle up before calling my dad.

“Hey, Dad.”

“Evie! Are you on the road yet?” His eagerness kills me. I am such a horrible, selfish person.

“Just getting started. I’m going to stop and get a coffee to go, then I’ll be on my way.”

“Drive safely. I can’t wait to see you.”

“It will be good to be home,” I say, and I think I even mean it. The sky is gray and depressing as I pull out of the parking garage. “I’ve missed you, Pops.”

“We’ll have a lot to catch up on,” he says.

“I’ll see you in a few hours.”

“I’ll have a fire roaring in the fireplace and apple cider waiting to be served,” he says.

“Can’t wait. Love you, Dad.”

“Love you too, Kiddo.” My eyes fill with tears. I guess I’m lonelier and more homesick than I thought I was. Suddenly I can’t wait to be there. One stop for a latte then I’m on my way. It should take me less than four hours to get there.

Chicago traffic is horrible today and I keep relaxing my tight grip on the steering wheel. I hate city driving. I don’t have to tackle it much because it’s easier to walk or hail a cab or use the fabulous public transportation system than it is to drive. As I leave the city behind, the layers of stress that have been weighing me down dissipate with every mile.

On my drive, my mind wanders and I allow myself to think about home. I do miss Michigan’s lakes and trees, the open spaces and fresh air. Winters there are cozy and full of outdoor activities followed by a good thaw around a roaring fire. The close-knit community that seemed suffocating in my teens beckons like a favorite pair of old slippers. It *will* be good to be home, I tell myself.

*F*our hours later I drive slowly down the pine-edged lane. The first thing I see as I pull up is my dad stepping outside onto the wraparound porch. Mags and Bruiser are at his side barking and wagging hello. He’s in his winter retirement garb, a flannel shirt and jeans. He waves his arm overhead, smiling from ear to ear. I’m swallowed up by love, guilt and grief in equal measure. My eyes sting with tears as I tear out of the car and rush up to greet him. “Daddy.” I throw my arms around him, and he gathers me tightly against his strong burly body. He smells outdoorsy and familiar, and the tears

spill over.

“Hey, Kiddo.” His voice is gruff with emotion.

I keep my face buried against his chest, refusing to let go. My voice is muffled by his shirt. “I’ve missed you. I’m sorry it’s taken me so long to come home.”

“You have nothing to apologize for. You’re here now. Look at me.” He tilts my chin up and his warm brown eyes are glassy and shine with affection. “Your mom and I knew when you got your law degree, you’d be swooped up by some big fancy law office. I’m proud of you... so was your mom and don’t you ever forget that. My daughter the hotshot trial attorney.”

“Thanks Dad,” I snuffle. “How’s Puss and the horses?”

“Puss is... well Puss. When he’s not sleeping, he’s being naughty. As for the horses, they’re officially pasture potatoes. These two,” he nods at Mags and Bruiser, “have taken to sleeping on the couch when I’m out and about. You should see how guilty they look when I sneak up on ’em.” He chuckles. “They’re going to be over the moon to have you here.” I crouch down to pick up Mags the small wiry-haired rescue who is dwarfed by Bruiser, our Great Dane. “But you know who’s missed you the most? Bunny. You’re going to have to dust off your boots and take her on a few trail rides.”

“I can’t wait. I plan to get in a lot of riding,” I say. We step inside the cozy farmhouse that my parents remodeled when I was still in high school. They’d knocked down a couple of walls to create a spacious open floorplan. I breathe in the smell of wood burning in the fireplace and immediately know I’m home. I set Mags down and she scampers to Dad and jumps up and down his leg until he picks her up.

“You weren’t kidding about being spoiled,” I say. I see Dad wince as he stoops to pick up the ball of scruff. “How are you feeling, Dad?”

“I’m fine sweetie. Hobbling around like an old man but I’ll be good as new after the surgery.”

“I know you will be. Danny’s still helping out around the place?”

“Yes, he’s a great help. He’s pretty much doing most of the barn chores. Since we’re down to three horses, a rooster and a few chickens it’s not too bad.”

My cousin Danny loves the farm and all things horses. He’s been helping Dad since he was a little kid and now Dad pays him to work part time. He’s a published author and has written several best-selling western series. We’re close to the same age so we grew up together.

Dad clears his throat and looks at me nervously. “You may not want to hear this, but Jamie’s been checking in on me now and then, bearing pies. He helped Danny unload the hay bales and stack them last week.”

My heart sinks. I shrug nonchalantly but I can tell by my dad’s sympathetic expression I haven’t fooled him. “That’s sweet of him,” I say. The odds of running into Jamie just went up exponentially.

“He’s a good kid.”

“Dad!” I snort with laughter. “He’s thirty-four!”

Dad chuckles. “I still see the high school quarterback I coached. Can’t help it.” I flash back to me cheering him on as he made touchdowns look easy. I could never quite believe that all that athletic gorgeousness was mine. But he had been. He’d only had eyes for me.

“And you probably still see your geeky daughter with her nose buried in a book.”

“You mean my brilliant and beautiful daughter with a heart of gold.”

I roll my eyes affectionately. “Out of the mouths of parents,” I joke.

“It’s true. You were the prettiest girl in the county. Also, the smartest. Still are.”

“So,” I drawl out aiming for casual, “Is he seeing anyone?”

His lip quirks as his brows lift knowingly. “Jamie? Not that I’m aware of. You can ask him yourself. He’s coming over this afternoon with a load of firewood.”

“Dad!” I shriek. “I don’t want to see him.”

“May as well get it over with,” he says. “Best to rip off the bandage all at once.”

I take off my coat and hang it on the peg next to all the other outerwear then toe off my shoes. “No thanks. I’ll be conveniently hidden in my bedroom or on a trail ride.”

“That’s not very neighborly of you,” he says. I glare. What does he expect from me? I ignore his comment and amble over to the plate of cookies sitting temptingly on the kitchen counter. Nabbing one, I take a bite. “Mm. Delicious. When did you learn to bake?”

He grins sheepishly. “I haven’t. Jamie brought those over yesterday.” I resist the urge to childishly spit it out as it turns to sawdust in my mouth. I look around the house I grew up in, absorbing all of my mom’s homey touches... the jersey cow cookie jar, a collection of salt and pepper shakers on the shelves to the right of the sink, the country valance covered with colorful chickens and roosters that hangs above the window. The scenic view of the lake just outside. I feel her so hard that my heart squeezes. How does Dad do it?

Picking up my favorite knick-knack, a cow jumping over the moon, I glance at him. “How can you stand to stay here without Mom?”

He meets my gaze, his warm eyes full of sadness, compassion and love all at the same time. “I wouldn’t have it any other way. I feel close to her here. I couldn’t bear to lose that.”

I plop onto the bar stool and lean my chin on my folded fists. “All these mementos only remind me of what I’ve lost. I can hardly stand it. It hurts.”

My dad walks over and sits on the stool next to me. “Can you imagine if I sold this place? How would it feel if you didn’t have the farm to come back to? I may sound crazy, but for me it feels like I’m getting her warm hug every time I walk in that door. I talk to her a lot you know. And no, I’m not losing it. I’ve been going to a grief counseling group for the last six months and it’s helping a lot. I’m meeting new people and making new friends. Doesn’t take

the pain away but it helps.”

My eyes widen. “Really? That’s great, Dad.” I chew on my cookie thoughtfully. “I guess I never really thought of what it’d be like to lose this place. I think it would be like losing her all over again.” Somehow that shifts my perspective a little.

“Maybe you can go to a meeting with me while you’re here... I mean before the surgery. We meet Sunday nights in the church basement on High Street.”

“I’ll consider it.” I smile. “I’m happy for you, Dad. Mom would be, too.”

His eyes look extra bright as he tweaks my nose. “Don’t get me wrong, I miss your mom terribly, but I also feel like she’s still with me. Hard to explain.”

“I get it,” I say. “I feel her here too. Maybe I’ve been looking at it all wrong.”

“We all grieve in our own way, honey. I’m just glad you’re home.” He wraps his arm across my shoulder and squeezes me against his side. “I’m going to take full advantage of having my daughter here. We’re doing the holidays up right this year. Bout time we got back to our traditions and make some new ones.”

“I’m in,” I say and hug him back.

JAMIE

I finish loading the wood onto the bed of my truck and slam the tailgate. Whistling, I climb into my cab and buckle up. My Blue Heeler-Border Collie mix, Huxley, sits next to me in the passenger seat waiting patiently. I ruffle the fur of his neck then start the engine.

“Well, Hux, we may run into Chicago. She’s back in town.” Huxley’s ears perk up attentively. “Not sure how I feel about it. I guess we’ll have to see what happens.”

I take my time cruising down the back roads leading to the Parkers’ property. All the leaves have fallen, and it’s like someone hit the pause button as we wait for the first snowfall. Not gonna lie, I have mixed feelings about Evie Parker. No doubt she was my first love and I’d thought she’d be my last. You never forget your first, they say.

Back then she was as sweet as a summer day is long. I picture her with that long wild auburn hair hanging down her back, those big curious green eyes I’d wanted to drown in, and her young ripe body. Her dainty nose was usually buried in a book... in the beginning anyway... that is until I’d cast my spell and caught her hook, line and sinker. We’d loved so hard back then. My chest still aches if I dwell on it too long. But that was the old Evie.

When she first left for college, she’d return on the weekends, and was home the entire summer after her freshman year. I tried my damndest to see

her, but she totally ghosted me. I never heard from her, and she wouldn't return my calls. When I did run into her, she acted like I was a serial killer or something. Every time I'd tried talking to her, she'd shut me down cold. Message received. It really was over... there was no going back. It had practically killed me, but I probably deserved it. I'd handled the whole breakup thing badly. Plus, college life had obviously gone to her head. She thought she was better than me. Truth was... she was right.

Her dad was my football coach and mentor all through high school, and in my opinion, as close to a superhero as a man can get. He coached all my brothers too. My youngest brother Cam was two years behind me, and he'd gone on to play college football. Now he teaches social studies and is the high school football coach. Full circle.

Evie's different now. She's one cool customer and as prickly as a cactus. Not that I've spent more than a few minutes at a time with her since she left for college, but enough to know she's not the same girl that I loved in high school. A law degree and big city life have changed her. She's too big for small town life now. Last time I saw her at Ginny Parker's funeral she was as cold as ice. Zero emotion. Fine with me. Adios.

I'd do anything for Coach. Now that he needs me, I'm not about to turn my back just because his snobby princess daughter decides to finally return home and take some responsibility. About time she steps up and does the right thing. I may sound harsh, but I've watched Bill Parker struggle through his grief alone. Her mom was barely in the ground before she burned rubber racing back to her lofty career and city slicker boyfriend who hadn't even bothered to show up for the funeral. Maybe they do things different in the big city. What do I know? All I know is that she left her dad here to cope alone. At least our small community came out in support. It was sad. Ginny Parker was one special lady. Fuck cancer!

I flip on my turn signal out of habit even though there's nobody behind me. The gravel crunching under my wheels and the clicking of my turn signal

is the only sound I hear as I pull down their drive. Their house sits about a couple football fields down the lane and my truck kicks up dust as we go. Huxley starts whining and pacing. “Where are we fella? You gonna get to see your girl, Mags?” Hux yips his reply.

I put my truck in reverse and back up to the firewood stacked neatly against the outbuilding, then shut off the engine. The front door opens, and I tense until Bill steps outside alone. I’m relieved and disappointed at the same time. It will be interesting to see how it plays out between us. We can’t avoid each other forever. Town is too small. I’m guessing she’ll try though. She’s a pro at avoidance. Bill waves cheerfully as he approaches, leaning on his cane with Mags and Bruiser racing ahead. Huxley barks excitedly and leaps out right behind me. I smile as they sniff and dance around each other like the besties they are.

“Hello, son,” Bill says slapping me on the back.

“Hey, Coach.”

“I don’t know how to thank you. I really appreciate all you’ve been doing for me.”

“No biggie. You’d do the same.”

“What do I owe ya for the wood?”

“A smoked brisket sometime after your surgery. Nobody can touch your smoking skills.”

He chuckles. “Consider it done.”

I lift my University of Michigan ball cap and rake my hair back then put it on backwards.

He nods at my hat. “Big game coming up.”

“Yep. Playing Ohio State Saturday. We’re having a gathering at my place to watch it on the big screen. A kegger... tons of food. Open invite, but with your daughter here and all I’m sure you want your quality time.”

“We’ll see. Maybe I can convince Evie to come.”

I contain my eyeroll... just barely. “I’m sure she’d rather have a limb

amputated than spend time with me. Can't say I blame her."

Coache's eyes turn serious, and he gives my shoulder a sympathetic squeeze. "Don't be too hard on yourself. You were both young."

I shrug. "What can I say? I screwed up, didn't handle things well. I will say this. I know she's your daughter and all, but she's changed. The Evie I used to know wouldn't have abandoned you after Ginny died."

"Everyone handles grief differently."

I mumble under my breath, "And some people only think of themselves."

"Evie has her reasons. It wasn't easy for her. She and Ginny were about as close as you can get. She took it hard."

"I'm sorry Coach, I mean no disrespect. I should have kept my big trap shut. She's your daughter."

"And you're like a son to me. I don't mind you speakin' your mind. I just don't agree with your assessment."

"We'll agree to disagree." I hold up my hands in surrender. "What do I know, anyway?"

Bill opens the bed of my truck. "I can help," he says.

"Oh, no you don't! I've got this."

"Um... that would be a hell no," a husky female voice says, startling us both. I would know that voice anywhere. And there she is coming around the corner. I take in her cowboy boots... the faded jeans that hug her long thighs and brown sherpa-lined jacket that accents her startling green eyes. Her tousled auburn hair cascades around her shoulders in thick wild waves and I expel the breath I was holding. *Fuck me*. She's even *more* smoking hot if that's possible. I notice that there is some hay tangled in her hair and I stuff my hands in my pockets to keep from brushing it away. I gave up that right a long time ago.

She looks at me through narrowed eyes and says, "The local hero delivering wood to a family in need? How thoughtful."

I grit my teeth. *Wrong thing to say, Chicago*. "Hardly a hero. We look out

for each other around here. Maybe you've forgotten what small-town life is like."

"The tedium you mean?" she says sweetly.

"Oh, I'm sure life is pretty dull around here compared to your exciting life. I'm surprised you can carve out the time to get back here being as you're famous and all. Congratulations."

"Hardly famous, or was that sarcasm?"

"No need to be modest. You were the talk of the town after that *Dateline* episode. Pretty big deal to us bumpkins. A case featured on *Dateline*? I'd say that's pretty epic. Come on, Chicago, lightning doesn't hit this town often." I know I sound like a dick, but I can't help myself. It kinda' feels good.

Coach puts his arm around Evie and gives her a squeeze. "We're proud of our girl," he says.

She shoots daggers at me before turning her shamrock green eyes on her father with a sweet, butter-wouldn't-melt-in-her-mouth smile.

"Well, I best get this firewood unloaded," I say.

"I'll help," Evie offers.

I snort. "I'm sure city life hasn't prepared you for farm chores."

"What do you know about city life? Have you ever heard of gyms?"

I scoff. "Hardly the same."

"We'll have to see, won't we," she says as she grabs an armful of wood. I glance at Bill and he's grinning from ear to ear.

"If you're sore tomorrow don't say I didn't tell you so." She ignores me and piles the wood on top of the stack.

"I need to get off my knee for a bit. I'll leave you both to it," Bill says.

"Okay, Daddy," she purrs. I know she's intentionally trying to annoy me and it sure as hell is working.

We unload the firewood in silence. She holds herself rigid and refuses to look at me. When we're done, I whistle for Hux and he comes galloping back to me from the barn, tongue lolling.

“Huxley,” Evie calls, her face finally softening for my damn dog. “Come here boy. So, you’re the famous mascot my dad keeps talking about,” she coos, crouching down to pet him. “So handsome.” He proceeds to lick her face while she giggles. *Traitor.*

I open the truck door and grumpily command, “Load, Hux.” He looks up at me and cocks his head curiously but obeys and jumps right in. I climb in behind him. “Enjoy your time with your dad,” I say. “It’s been real hard on him. He’s missed you.” I start my engine and glance over as she flips me the bird. I bite back a satisfied grin as I drive away. *Score.*

EVIE

*A*sshole. I watch him pull away steam practically coming out of my ears. What a judgmental prick. I mimic him, “Enjoy your time with your dad. It’s been hard on him. He’s missed you.” Screw him! I’m so mad right now I want to chase after his truck snarling like a rabid Rottweiler. That would play right into the picture he’s trying to paint of me. He’s the bad guy here, not me!

I take several slow steadying breaths and count to ten. I’m not going to let him spoil the afterglow from my glorious trail ride. It was heaven, pure and simple. The cold breeze blowing in from the lake, Bunny full of piss and vinegar, her ears pricked forward, a prance in her step. She was as excited as I was to hit the trails. My butt’s a little sore because we rode longer than I’d planned but I don’t care. It was the best I’d felt in a very long time, riding down old familiar trails through the woods then following the worn path parallel to the lake.

I walk into the house and my dad’s eyeballing me with undisguised curiosity. I pull off my boots at the door and turn to face him.

“What?” I grumble knowing full well what he’s about.

“Nothing. Jamie looks good, doesn’t he?”

I shrug. “He’s alright I guess if you like his type.” *Liar!* I couldn’t help but notice his broad shoulders and thick muscular thighs. Or his loose curls

with highlights the color of a copper penny peeking out from under his ball cap. And those eyes! The very same eyes that used to smolder with passion when we made love.

Dad chuckles. “There was a time when he was one hundred percent your type.”

“Don’t remind me of my stupidity.”

“How long you gonna hold it against him? You were just kids, Evie.”

“What do you mean? I let go of that a long time ago,” I lie again. He looks at me knowingly over his reading glasses.

He says, “You know, it wouldn’t hurt for you two to talk about it. Holding onto the past hurt and grudges doesn’t do anyone good.”

“I’ll take that under advisement,” I say.

“I’m sure he had his reasons. Why don’t you ask him? You may be surprised by his answer. He more than likely thought he was doing right at the time. I don’t think he knew how to handle his injuries and losing his scholarship. It cost him his dream. I don’t think he wanted to hold you back from yours.”

“I wish you’d quit sticking up for him,” I say, my hands on my hips. “He’s not the hero everyone thinks he is. He dumped me with no warning and told me his feelings had changed. He said we were too young to settle down without exploring the world. There *was* no conversation about him holding me back. You’re seeing him through rose-colored glasses. He dumped your daughter. End of story. Not everyone is as romantic as you, Dad.”

“Jamie is a good man. That I do know.”

“Not surprising you’d take up for him,” I say, sounding like I’m twelve.

“I’m not taking up for anybody. I’m only offering my opinion. He was all set to join you before the accident. Full football scholarship, then poof, it’s gone. Try and put yourself in his shoes.”

“His shoes? What about my shoes? He broke my heart! You know, Dad, let’s change the subject. Life’s too short to waste it on him. He made the

decision all by his little ole self and broke my heart. And don't forget, he waited until the day I left for college! I can't believe you're defending him."

"Says the famous *defense* attorney. I hope you haven't lost your soft side, Evie. You've always been able to see both sides of any story. That sense of fairness is something I admire the most about you. It's what makes you a brilliant defense attorney." He pauses then says softly, "I'm not so sure he ever gave up. You want my opinion, he was waiting for you to finish school and come back. I think two hearts were broken back then."

"If that's true, there were a million solutions that would have been better than him breaking up!"

"You were both kids."

I feel a moment of doubt but barrel on through it. "That excuse is not going to fly. While you're busy sticking up for him, remember he's the reason I couldn't come back home!" I turn on my heel then head to my bedroom to change, shutting the door more firmly than necessary.

Get a grip. It's not Dad's fault. Don't forget he doesn't know the whole story. Nobody does. I don't think anyone knew quite how devastated I was when I left for school without Jamie. Right after classes started, I was late with my period. Panicked, I immediately purchased a pregnancy test and sat on the toilet in sheer terror waiting for the results. When I saw the pink positive, I collapsed onto the bathroom floor and lay there for God knows how long. There was no way I could burden Jamie with it considering his injuries. Plus, he'd just broken up with me. But it was so hard! I was overwhelmed, homesick, terrified, and I'd missed him so much I thought I'd die.

For a torturous week I lived with the weight of my decision. I would pick up my phone to call Jamie and change my mind. I must have done that ten times a day. He was the person who always made things right in my world and now he was gone. I could barely eat or sleep. I couldn't concentrate in class. I was wrecked. I never let on to Mom and Dad, my roommate or even

my best friend, Dee, what I was going through.

I finally made my decision on another sleepless night... all alone at three am. I'd complete the semester, have the baby, and postpone my education for a year. Once I'd made up my mind, a calm enveloped me. I immediately bonded with the baby growing inside of me and although I dreaded it, I knew I'd have to tell Jamie. It was only right.

Several days later, I woke up in the middle of the night with excruciating pain and cramping. Multiply my worst period by a thousand and that's what it felt like. My roommate was staying at her boyfriend's, so I miscarried all by myself in the bathroom. I lost our baby.

Even though I was probably only about six weeks into the pregnancy it had gutted me. I had already been picking out names. I'd begun to dream. I'd always wanted kids, and it was just going to be earlier than I'd expected. Losing the baby had seemed like the ultimate *screw you* from the universe. I'd lost one dream... the one where I'd grow old with Jamie, have a gaggle of kids, open a small law practice and serve my community, only to lose another.

I dove into school like it was my lifeline. While everyone else was partying and doing sorority rushes, I was studying. I dated a few guys casually until law school then there was simply no time. I immersed myself, joining extracurriculars in my second and third years to gain experience. I was driven. I tried out for Moot Court, since I wanted a litigation-heavy career, and was accepted. I also interned for a prestigious firm and gained a ton of experience which set me up well for landing a job with my current firm.

I look in the mirror and give myself a pep talk. *You're a successful trial attorney, enjoying an exciting career that you love, damn it. You live in a gorgeous apartment in a fabulous city and can take care of yourself. You don't need anyone!* Then why do I feel like I'm eighteen and living the breakup all over again?

JAMIE

All I can think about is my pillow. After a busy day at the station yesterday, we got called out in the middle of the night to fight a barn fire over at the Smith place. Thank God we managed to get the horses out in time. No lives were lost, but the barn couldn't be salvaged. I'm dog tired after the 24-hour shift I pulled with little sleep, but the good news is I've got two days to rest up.

"You leaving us, Sunshine?" Deacon asks as I stow my gear in the locker. He throws a tennis ball and Huxley chases it and returns to lay the ball at Deacon's feet. He sits down, looking at him expectantly. Deacon throws it again.

"You got that right." I yawn. "I didn't even get a nap in yesterday. I can hardly keep my eyes open."

"No bueno."

"Huxley is ready to break out of this joint," Deacon says, watching Hux race to get the ball again.

"Yeah, I'll probably drop him off at my parent's farm while I catch a few winks. Let him blow off some energy."

Deacon nods and scratches Huxley behind the ears. "Good boy," he praises, then stands. "I'm gonna grab some grub before Tank eats it all. Catch ya later. See ya, Hux."

The station has adopted Huxley as their mascot. I rescued him from a fire a couple of years back. Unfortunately, the owner succumbed to smoke inhalation and didn't make it, leaving poor Hux homeless. He bonded with me immediately and the rest is history.

Sam rounds the corner from behind the fire truck. "Not staying for breakfast?"

"Naw. Too tired to eat."

"I heard that barn fire was brutal. Bad enough to deal with the burn, but throw in twenty terrified equines," he shakes his head, "glad I was off. Rumor has it you were like a damn horse whisperer. Good work."

"Thanks, but I wouldn't go that far," I say. "Wasn't my idea of a good time that's for sure."

"At least it's not dead of winter. Hopefully they'll be able to find accommodations for the horses before the weather turns. It will take some time to replace the barn."

"For sure. Knowing this community, they're probably already taken care of. I'm out of here guys. Have a good one. See ya in two."

A chorus of goodbyes follow me out the door. I love my job and most of the guys I work with are great. It's an exciting and rewarding career but not without drawbacks. Especially for family men with wives and children. Our shifts run 24 hours on, 48 hours off, and we often work on holidays and weekends. Emergencies are a given around the holidays; they never seem to get the memo.

I open the door for Huxley and climb in behind him. I lean my forehead on the steering wheel before taking off. The adrenalin rush from last night's rescue is long gone and I could almost pass out right here. Huxley whines and licks my face, rousing me from my coma.

"Good boy, Hux. You've always got my back. Let's go," I say starting up the truck and heading to my folks' house.

let Hux out and he immediately runs to the barn to find some action. I pop into the shop to let Mom know I've dropped him off and I'm heading home to catch a few Zs.

"Hey, Mom."

"Hey, sweetie. I heard about the fire! I'm glad no one was hurt."

"Yeah, it was touch and go with the horses for a bit."

She looks at me with concern in her eyes, "You look terrible."

I laugh. "Thanks, Ma."

"I mean it. Why don't you go up to the house and take a nap here?"

"I'll sleep better in my own bed. But thanks."

"You don't need to thank me. This will always be your home." She puts two blueberry muffins in a bag and hands it to me.

"I know. Thanks, Mom." I cover a huge yawn.

"Git," she says, shooing me away. "Huxley will be fine. The boys'll keep an eye on him, and he and the other two mutts can tire him out," she says, referring to my wild ass nephews, Joseph who's nine and Daniel who's six.

"Supper's at 6:00. Set your alarm."

"See you then." I slog back to my truck and Huxley races to my side. "No Hux, you're staying here for now." He tilts his head consideringly then turns and runs back to the barn. I chuckle. I swear that dog is human, he's so damn smart.

After waking from a six-hour coma I'm back, sitting at Mom's dinner table. Dad passes the bowl of mashed potatoes to me. I load up my plate and pass it over to my brother Cam. It's just the two of us joining Mom and Dad for supper tonight. We're the only Barrington kids not married off. Cam and I are the two youngest and closest in age. Cam turned thirty-two this year and I'll finish my thirty-fourth trip around the sun the end of November. I pour about a quart of gravy over my pot roast and mashed potatoes and pass it on.

Mom is a magician in the kitchen.

“I hear Evie is back in town,” Cam says around a mouthful of potatoes.

“Yep.”

“Have you run into her yet?”

I nod and continue eating. I don’t want to talk about Evie Parker. It’s a sore subject and I intend to keep a tight lid on the past.

“How was it?” Cam presses.

“A nothing burger. We said what we had to say. Hello, goodbye, yada yada.”

I feel my mom’s eyes on me and keep mine on my plate of food. She is way too good at reading me and I am not turning this dinner into a Jamie pity party.

“How did she act?” Mom asks.

“Cold as a polar bear’s breath,” I say. Cam snorts out a laugh.

“No, really,” Mom insists.

“Really. We exchanged barbs, she helped me stack the wood, then I left.”

Mom gives me that sympathetic look that feels like a hug, her eyes soft and knowing and I say grumpily, “Can we please change the subject? I didn’t bring any Tums.”

Mom tsks. “You’re not going to be able to avoid her you know. She’ll be here through the new year. Plus, Bill is going to need your help. Why don’t you try to talk to her?”

“Why would I want to go and ruin a perfectly good life?”

At mom’s stern look I sigh loudly. “If the time is ever right, I’ll try again.”

She smiles. “That’s settled then. You make sure you *find* the right time.”

“Now, Sue, let Jamie eat in peace. It’s none of our business.”

“Of course, it’s our business,” she says in a huff.

Dad just shakes his head, but Mom does drop it.

We talk football, the farm, the family biz, who will do what job during

the holiday rush. I help out here on most of my days off. We have two full-timers, and during the summer tourist season and the holidays we hire high schoolers to help in the shop and with the Christmas tree sales. We also have a part-time baker to help Mom out with the pies. Between that and my parents, my three brothers, sister Taylor and me, it's pretty much covered. Gets a little hectic sometimes, but that's a good thing, right?

My great-grandparents were the OG's... ran a small dairy farm and sold milk and cheese to the locals. Each generation has expanded and now we've got a gift shop with a small café attached where we sell pie slices and ice cream, coffee and cider and whole pies to go. We sell Christmas trees, cut your own or buy one already cut. Junior, my oldest brother, got the bright idea to set up a small lot to hold goats and cows so city folk could get up close and personal. I laughed at him at the time, but damn if it isn't the most popular attraction around. Kids love it. In the fall we do hayrides and sell pumpkins.

Our Michigan town is an all-season destination for travelers because of its small-town charm and cozy vibe. We have spectacular fall foliage. The colors are unreal. Winter brings cross-country skiers and people who want to rent a cabin on the lake and enjoy hunkering down by a fire. Obviously, spring and summer attract people in droves for the outdoors, lake beaches, boating, kayaking and fresh seasonal food. Did I say that I love my hometown? You couldn't drag me out of here with a hundred Clydesdales.

That had not always been the case. My dream in high school was to be a pro-football player. I'd been courted by the big ten colleges and had my choice of where to go with a full scholarship. Evie and I picked the University of Michigan. We'd wanted to reach our goals together. Unfortunately, a neck injury, blown-out knee and torn rotator cuff in my senior year turned that dream into a nightmare. My chances were shot. I had to have several surgeries and extensive rehab, derailing all my plans. I hadn't known how to cope and slipped further and further into depression. I felt like

I had nothing to offer anyone. No goals... no future. I hadn't been about to drag Evie down that hell hole with me.

Did I do the right thing by breaking up? I think so. I knew I'd only drag her down. She had way too much going for her. What could I have brought to the relationship back then? At the time I was a washed-up high school jock already put out to pasture at the ripe old age of eighteen. It's pretty obvious it was the right call for her. She's living her best life. At the top of the career she'd dreamed of.

Was it right for me? Who knows. I've had a few relationships that fizzled out. I do love being a firefighter and I'd be close to aging out of football now anyway with a hell of a banged-up body to show for it. So, I have to say it probably worked out for the best all the way around.

Liar.

Bottom line, it is what it is. As the old saying goes, that was then, and this is now.

EVIE

Tomorrow is Thanksgiving and I'm out running errands and buying last minute groceries for the feast. My best friend, Dee, her husband, Caleb, and their two-year-old daughter, Eloise, are joining us. I'm relieved it won't be just Dad and me. I haven't seen Dee since I got back home. Can't wait. She and her family visited me in Chicago a couple months ago and had a blast. Nothing like lifelong friends.

I scratch off wine from the list and scowl. The next stop is Barrington Farm to pick up the two pies we ordered. The bell rings when I push through the door. I see Mrs. Barrington helping a customer so I take a few minutes to browse the gift shop side. I pick up a quilted stuffed pig that I notice is made by a local artisan. I know Eloise will love it.

I look around and see wire baskets stacked for shoppers, so I grab one and throw the pig in. They've really expanded their inventory. Local artists, weavers and woodworkers have displays. There are handmade cards and stationery, ceramic keepsakes, and high-quality boutique t-shirts *by Theodore*. I add a box of stationery and a couple of colorful potholders to my basket and take mental notes for Christmas gift ideas.

The customer Mrs. Barrington was waiting on departs, so I slowly wander over to the café attached to the gift shop. It's charming as well. Gleaming wood floors and high ceiling with exposed beams and a cozy gas fireplace

roaring in the corner. A dozen café tables are scattered around the room. Behind the counter is an ice cream dipping station and barista set-up where they serve all sorts of specialty coffees that I see hand-written on the white board above.

I'm just about to call out when Jamie steps from the back room carrying a toddler with the Barrington's signature copper hair. Seeing Jamie with a baby in his arms leaves me weak in the knees. I'm rocked by how hard it slams me. The little boy is giggling, his chubby arms wrapped around Jamies neck.

Would our baby have had that same beautiful hair? Well, that thought sure feels like a sucker punch to the gut. Why is all this baby stuff resurfacing now? It was over fifteen years ago! *Grrr*. It must be the damn holidays. I duck partially behind a coffee display trying not to freak out and I shamelessly eavesdrop.

I hear Jamie's deep voice say, "Hey, Mom, I found this little mouse in the pumpkin patch. What should I do with him?"

"I no mouse," he says. "I Henry."

"Henry the mouse?" Jamie teases.

"No, Uncle Jamie. I not mouse." His dark eyes dance. "I is a dog."

"I *am* a dog," Mrs. Barrington corrects him. I peer over the display. The cutie smiles at his grandma, his little chicklet teeth slightly protrude in an adorable way.

"I'll go grab the rest of those pies from the back." Jamie ducks out and returns with pastry boxes piled six high while balancing the toddler on his hip. "Mom, where do you want these?"

She glances up from her task and absently waves her hand towards the glass door refrigerators behind her. "Put them in the fridge," she says. I try to scoot inconspicuously back to where I came from but the movement catches Sue's attention. And of course, that would have been too easy.

Sue Barrington's voice booms out, "Is that Evie Parker?"

I reluctantly step forward and force a smile then approach the counter.

“Hi, Mrs. Barrington,” I say.

“Please call me Sue. We’re all adults now,” she says smiling warmly.

“I’ll try to remember,” I say. “It’ll take some getting used to.”

“Or call me Mrs. B if you prefer. Mrs. Barrington is too stodgy.”

I look at the bright-eyed toddler staring at me. “Who’s this little guy?”

“It’s Taylor’s youngest, Henry.”

“Hi, Henry. I’m Evie.”

“I is a dog,” he says grinning impishly. I bite back a smile then glance over and catch Jamie’s intense gaze. Predictably, my cheeks heat.

“Doesn’t Taylor have twins as well?” I ask.

Sue Barrington is all smiles in stark contrast to her son’s broody stare. “Yes. Two girls. They’re four years old already. Time sure does fly. Jamie’s babysitting Henry so Taylor can take the twins to an appointment.” I nod at him then proceed to pretend he’s not here. Not easy when his muscly deltoids and biceps are on display in that tight t-shirt. He’s let his hair grow out a little, I hadn’t noticed before with his ballcap on. The copper curls brush the nape of his neck. There ought to be a law. His eyes are boring into me, and he looks decidedly grumpy. Apparently not happy to see me either.

“I’m going to have to put you down little man, so I can help Nana,” Jamie says setting him on the ground.

“We’ve missed you dear. We were so happy when Bill told us you were going to be here through the holidays. Weren’t we, Jamie?”

He leans against the counter and crosses his arms. “Ecstatic,” he says dryly. I ignore him.

Mrs. B continues, “Congratulations on your big case. And *Dateline!* Now *that* must have been thrilling. It was all anyone here could talk about.”

“Thank you. I have to admit, it was a thrill. Surreal, actually. The satisfaction of saving an innocent man from a life sentence made up for having no life of my own outside of work. It’s hard to explain what a huge responsibility it is to represent someone when there’s so much riding on it.”

“We watched your interview on *Good Morning America* too. Didn’t we Jamie?” I almost laugh when his cheeks turn a little pink. His mom tries her best but it’s about as subtle as a hammer to the head when she declares cheerfully, “I hope you don’t mind but I have to go check on something up at the house. Jamie will ring you up. Have a wonderful Thanksgiving, honey, and don’t be a stranger. It’s been way too long. Tell your dad hi.” She scoops up Henry then bustles out before I can get a word in, leaving us warily staring at each other. My stomach sinks. All alone with Jamie. That was not on my bingo card for today.

“I saw your name on a couple of pies. Hang on a sec.” He turns to the fridge and pulls out two pastry boxes with Parker written in magic marker across the top. “One pumpkin, one apple, two pies,” he states.

“I see you hung on to your math skills,” I say. “Glad my tutoring didn’t go to waste.”

His jaw clenches and I smile inwardly with satisfaction. He’s so easy.

“Glad to see you’re putting your sharp tongue to good use,” he responds.

“It’s a skillset.”

“It didn’t used to be.” He winces and I can tell he hadn’t wanted that to slip out.

I’ll admit, it stings a little. Or a lot. Part of me wants to explain *No, I’m not like that, and you deserve everything you get for wrecking my life*. But of course, I don’t say it aloud. Let him think the worst. Who cares? *Me*, a timid voice inside my head says. I ignore her.

“Got big plans for Thanksgiving?” he asks.

I frown. “Not really. Why?”

His brows lift and he nods at the white boxes. “Two pies.”

“Oh, yeah. One plus one,” I say cheekily. He squints at me. “Dee and Caleb and the baby are joining us.”

“Nice. Eloise is adorable,” he says.

I bristle feeling oddly territorial. “You see them much?” I ask snippily.

Am I really feeling jealous of my best friend right now? I know Dee wouldn't tell me if they'd been hanging out because I've been very clear I don't want to hear anything about Jamie.

"Caleb and I hang out, catch a game here and there. We're friends. We did play ball together you know. Small town... or have you forgotten what that's like?"

"Hardly," I say through gritted teeth. He is so annoying. Was he always like this? A memory of him kissing me senseless under the stars one hot summer night comes unbidden and I feel myself respond. Suddenly I'm sixteen again. Guess he wasn't *always* annoying.

He nods at the basket I'm white knuckling and I loosen my grip. "You finished shopping?"

"Yes." I set the basket on the counter. "You've got wonderful things. I found some great Christmas gifts and some 'me' stuff too. I'll be back," I admit grudgingly.

"Thanks. We like supporting local artisans." He empties my basket and I'm distracted by his large strong hands and his sinewy forearms dusted with soft hair. He ties string around the pie boxes and bags the rest while I stick my debit card in the credit card machine. When I see 'approved' across the screen I remove it then slip it back into my clutch. Grabbing the pies by the string I take the bag Jamie is holding out for me with my other hand. And yeah... it's awkward. A thousand unspoken words hover between us like an army of ghosts.

"Um... well thanks. Hope you have a nice Thanksgiving," I say grudgingly.

"You too. Tell Dee and Caleb hi from me and I'll see them at my party."

I arch a brow. "Party?"

"Yeah. Wolverines versus Buckeyes. U of M is going to kick some ass. I'm having a shindig at my place... kegger and all. I told your dad about it. Invited you guys. He didn't mention it?"

“No. Not really my thing anyway,” I say, dismissively. I grimace inwardly because I know I sound like a snob.

He smirks. “Oh really? You used to love football. And what *is* your thing nowadays?”

I flush realizing my mistake. I have no life besides work. “Um... you know... restaurants, plays, museums, art galleries, that sort of thing,” I lie.

“Sounds... um... what’s the word?” He snaps his fingers. “Got it, tedious,” he says triumphantly, throwing my own words back at me. I glare, shooting daggers straight at him. Doesn’t seem to faze him one iota. “To each his own,” he says with a shrug. “Tell Coach I’ll be around to drop off feed for the horses over the weekend.”

“You don’t have to do that. I can pick it up.”

“It’s already been arranged. You’re welcome.”

I bite my lip. I do sound rude. “Thanks. I’m sure Dad really appreciates all your help.”

“No problemo,” he says.

I stand there stiffly for a second before turning to leave. “Well, bye then.” I walk away hating my conflicting emotions. It’s confusing. I’m as drawn to him as much as I ever was, yet I want to rip him apart. The worst thing is I can’t shake off the feeling that I’m leaving a piece of myself behind. I don’t look back. If I do I think I might make a fool of myself. My emotions are all over the place and I hate it.

JAMIE

J watch her leave and it riles up all sorts of old feelings. For one thing she seems so alone. She has dark smudges under her eyes and when she introduced herself to Henry, she's looked kind of sad. She kept her head held high and shoulders erect, but it'd sure seemed fake as hell to me. I almost felt sorry for her. It can't be easy for her to be back home for the holidays without her mom here. If only she didn't act so damn superior, it would be hella easier to be decent.

I used to know Evie as well as I knew myself. Could she really have changed that much? I remember when we used to spend every second we could together, couldn't get enough of each other. We'd talk for hours about nothing and everything. We had so many plans, hopes and dreams.

I wonder if she still likes to get up early to watch the sun rise or lie back on a blanket and watch the clouds float by? Does she still like instant ramen noodles with parmesan cheese sprinkled on? Does she still set her alarm an hour early so she can press the snooze button a half dozen times? Does she ever think about us and wonder what could have been?

Honestly, I wish she wasn't here. It's hell of a lot easier to forget about her when she's not in my face. Her being here just brings up all the old shit!

As I replay the whole encounter we just had, I start to laugh. *My math skills*. She always was funny as hell in her dry sort of way. Blast from the

past for sure. She tutored me in algebra freshman year. Coach had set that up because I was failing, and he didn't want me kicked off the team. Thought I'd died and gone to heaven. Tutored by Evie Parker, the girl I'd been crushing on since the sixth grade.

I think I may have enjoyed that exchange we just had a little too much. *Huh.* I scrub my hands over my face. That's something Mom doesn't need to know and I'm going to give her an ear full for her little matchmaking stunt. I shake my head. Could she be more obvious? She tells Evie I'm babysitting then scoops Henry up and leaves us alone together.

The bell jingles and I smile as a group of women with varying shades of gray enter the shop. "Hello ladies," I greet them, turning on my high voltage charm.

"Hello Jamie," they chorus. Mrs. Grant, the local buttinsky says, "Was that Evie Parker getting into that fancy white car?"

"Sure was." I wink and smile.

"I hear she's moving back," she says digging for the exclusive. My body freezes for a second until I realize Coach would have said something to me if that was true.

"Nope. As far as I know, home for the holidays is all. Through the new year. Bill is having knee surgery."

"Oh my," she says looking over my shoulder. "Are you here alone?"

"For the moment," I say. Her eyes gleam then I understand why with her next statement.

"It must be nice to have Evie back. Were you catching up?"

"It was good to see her."

"I'm sure Bill Parker is relieved to have her back. A little bird told me you spend quite a bit of time with him." This woman missed her calling. She should be working for TMZ.

"I help out when I can. He won't need me as much after he heals from his surgery."

“I’m sure that’s not true. None of us are getting any younger. You’re a good boy, Jamie.”

Mom’s neighbor to the south of us pipes in, “Is your mom ill?”

“No, she had to take care of something.” *My love life*. “She’ll be right back,” I say.

“Evie looked upset when she peeled out,” she tsks. “Poor dear. Home for Christmas without Ginny here must be hard.” I tamp down my guilt for not being more welcoming to Evie. I can do better. I *will* do better.

“I’m sure it’s hard. Ginny Parker was the best,” I say.

“I know you’re like part of the family. You and Evie being so close and all.” She pats my hand. “You were so cute together. We all thought you two were meant to be.” She shakes her head. “It’s a shame.”

I clear my throat. “Can I help you find anything, ladies?”

“We’re going to browse. I ordered a pie, but I want to shop first. Then we’re going to sit down and have a slice before we go, aren’t we girls?”

Thank God my mom finally reappears. I shoot her the stink eye and she smiles innocently, then greets the granny squad. I grab Henry and use him as a shield backing out of the shop. “Bye now,” I call cheerfully. They’re already huddled no doubt talking about the fact that Evie and I were here alone. Small towns do have their drawbacks.

“Let’s see if we can get into some good trouble before you take your nap,” I say to Henry.

He stiffens in my arms. “No nap.”

“Not yet buddy. Let’s go to the barn and round up Huxley,” I say putting him down. He immediately waddle runs towards the barn screaming, “Huxie!”

I smile. Evie and I used to talk about having a half-dozen kids. Now that I have a realistic idea of what parenting entails, I’d be happy with two. But I’m lucky that I have nieces and nephews to love all over.

We play around with the goats and the cows for a bit then I carry Henry

up to the house to put him down for a nap. I gotta admit, when he puts his thumb in his mouth and looks up at me with his heavy-lidded eyes, so much like mine, I'm mush. I love this kid. He smiles sleepily around his thumb, and I lean down and kiss his forehead. "Dude, you're killing me."

"Dude," he says smiling around a mouthful of thumb.

I change his pull-ups and put on his jammies then stick him in a crib in the spare room. "Okay little man, your pick." I hold up stuffed animals one by one as he rejects them all, until I get to the purple elephant. His little fingers open and close as he reaches for it.

He removes his thumb long enough to say, "Dat."

"Excellent choice, my man. This was my favorite when I was a little kid." Henry hooks his arm around the plush toy and squeezes it tight. I brush back his coppery hair and feel an ache in my chest. "See you on the other side, kiddo." He's already half asleep as I turn and leave the room. I keep the door ajar so I can hear him if he stirs, then head to the living room to take a snooze myself.

EVIE

*T*ake my time driving home. I dodged a bullet when I left the Barrington's shop. When I spotted six pairs of gawking eyes, I practically sprinted to my car. I got out of there as fast as I could without spitting gravel, smiling at what was about to descend on Jamie Barrington.

When I get home, I sit in my car for a few minutes enjoying the lake view and the smell of horses. I'm in no rush and it's a strange feeling. My body and mind haven't quite caught up with the fact that the pressure is off. Nowhere I have to be. Nothing urgent pulling me in a million different directions.

It's almost as if I can feel my stress dropping away like leaves in the fall. Will it render me bare and exposed like the trees? Who am I without my busyness... my career? I guess I have six weeks to find out. Kind of daunting. I can't even remember the last time I took more than a long weekend off. Not even after my mom's funeral. I would have lost my mind if I hadn't buried myself in work. *Poor Dad*. There's that niggling guilt again. Am I a selfish person? Jamie seems to think so. He's probably right.

I get out slowly and stretch. "Well, Mom, I'm finally back home. I'm sorry I haven't taken better care of Dad. I'll do better. I promise." A sudden cold breeze picks up some fallen leaves and they swirl around me like tiny dancing angels. It feels like a sign, and I'm comforted. Dad says he talks to

Mom all the time. I never have until now. I've got to admit, it makes her seem close. I think I needed the breathing room of time. There's no way I could have handled this much space for all these thoughts and feelings before now. Now there is room to grieve and acknowledge all I've lost. It's not the raw unbearable grief I felt in the beginning but rather the gentler, deeper pain of acceptance.

My Dad's voice calling my name breaks through my reverie. I wave my arm. "Hey Dad." I grab the pies and my packages and head to the house.

"How was your outing?" Dad asks a few minutes later as he hands me a mug of hot cocoa. I'm happily snuggling on the couch, warming my hands and feet in front of the fireplace. The dogs are curled up on their beds snoozing.

I take a sip and the rich creamy chocolate pleases my tongue and warms my throat going down. I pause, closing my eyes savoring the chocolatey bliss. "Mm, this tastes so good. It was fine. I ran into a posse of senior investigative journalists on my way out of the Barrington's shop."

He arches a brow. "Oh? Sounds interesting."

"I pretended not to see them. A couple of your former colleagues along with Mrs. Grant and Mrs. Barber—oh, and Betty that owns Posies in town, and the pharmacist, I think. I'm sure the fact that I was all alone with Jamie Barrington will have their tongues wagging."

He sits down next to me with his own steaming mug. "I'm listening..."

I snort with laughter. "You're just as bad as they are."

"Moi?" he says innocently.

I decide to give him a break and toss him a crumb. "Mrs. Barrington was there and waiting on customers when I got there so I looked around. Very impressed with what they've done with the place."

"Yes. They've invested wisely."

"Well, anyway, Jamie showed up with Taylor's little boy, Henry. He's a doll baby."

Dad chuckles. “He looks like a mini-me of Jamie.”

Pang. I palm my chest. “He does,” I say my voice sounding thick. Dad pats my shoulder. He doesn’t miss a trick. If he only knew the half of it.

“Anyway, Mrs. B left with Henry, I think she was intentionally leaving us alone, then there we were. He’s annoying.”

“I’m assuming you were civil this time.”

“I’m always civil,” I complain.

He clears his throat teasingly. “I’ll leave it at that,” he says.

“Good call.” I grin. “Want to play a game of chess?”

“Thought you’d never ask.”

We play for a while, then eat an early supper so we can turn in at a reasonable time for the big day tomorrow. The plan is to stuff the bird and get it in the oven by ten. I finish drying the last of the dishes and stifle a yawn. “I hate to admit it but I’m tired from doing nothing.”

“It’s from living in that pressure cooker. Your body is finally letting down. You need rest.”

“The fresh air probably has something to do with it too.”

“Take yourself to bed. I’ll be turning in after I let the dogs out.”

“I think I will. I just started the latest Grisham novel.” Chuckling I say, “I’ll probably get all of two pages read before the lamp goes off.” I give him a hug then head for the stairs. “I love you, Dad.”

“I love you more. I’m glad you’re home.”

“Me too,” I say on a yawn. “Goodnight.”

“Night, Kiddo.”

EVIE

The following morning, Dad and I are busy in the kitchen and Taylor Swift's tune *Shake it off* comes on. I dance up to Dad and bump my hips against his. "I love her!" I say, then continue singing along. I feel so light, it's strange and unfamiliar.

"She's quite the businesswoman."

"I know, right? Plus, she has such a strong positive message."

I crack up when Dad shakes his hips, and sings along... endearingly out of tune, "Play, play play." He has Mom's ruffled flowered apron wrapped around his waist and is wrist-deep mixing stuffings. At 61, my dad's still a very handsome man with his broad shoulders and dark hair heavily streaked with silver. He still has the build of an athlete with a smidge more around the middle. We're preparing our turkey and yes, we are in the 'stuffing the bird' camp. I wrap my arms around him from behind and give him a big squeeze.

"I love you, Dad."

"Love you more," he says, like he always does. The sameness is comforting. There's a lump in my throat the size of a golf ball. I'm so sentimental these days. Everything makes me want to cry. I do know that I will never ghost my father again no matter what. This trip has been revealing. We're creating new memories and mom is still very much a part of them. She's everywhere. In fact, I have her handwritten brussels sprout salad recipe

out in front of me right now. We're also making her corn pudding and sweet potato casserole as sides to go with the fresh turkey we bought from the Smith farm down the road.

"Are you nervous about your surgery?" I ask.

"Not so much the surgery itself. I have heard horror stories about the recovery though."

"You're a tough old nut," I tease. "You'll do fine."

"I have the advantage of having a drill sergeant for a daughter. I'm sure I'll be following the doctors' orders."

"I'll take excellent care of you, Pops."

He chuckles. "No doubt. Evie, you seem lighter this trip. I'm glad you dumped him. You deserve so much better."

"You and Mom never liked Vance. Why?"

He looked sheepish. "Were we that obvious? We thought we were hiding it."

"Don't worry, Vance was clueless. He liked himself enough for everybody." Dad belts out a laugh.

"I agree," he says. "In fairness, we didn't spend a whole lot of time with him. That was part of our gripe. He only visited here... what maybe two times? Then when he couldn't even make it to your mom's funeral, that was the straw that broke the camel's back for me. That showed his true colors."

"Thank you for never judging me for my lousy choices."

"We all have to learn on our own. It'd be pretty great if we could learn from others' mistakes, wouldn't it?" He turns his head to grin at me.

We continue in companionable silence, prepping what can be done in advance while bebopping to Taylor Swift. My dad is the coolest. I do feel better. Being home is good for me this time. I'm the happiest I've been in what feels like forever.

round four o'clock, I throw more logs onto the fire then light a couple of *A* candles, making sure they're out of Eloise's reach. I've kid-proofed the best I can. I set a huge Disney gift bag full of goodies from Chicago in front of the coffee table. I added the pig I scored at Barrington's. This gift bag should keep her occupied for a while.

The dogs make a mad dash to the door before our guests even have time to knock. Their Christmas-bell collars jingle in time with their barking. The thrill of a mad dash to the door is comical. They don't get much action around here.

I open the door and welcome our guests. "Happy Thanksgiving!" I say. The guard dogs immediately stand down and are now competing for attention from our intruders.

"Mm smells wonderful. I am so hungry," Dee says. "We skipped a snack this afternoon so we could pig out."

I take Eloise from Caleb so he can go back to the car and retrieve all the essentials every parent has to lug along. Glancing over at Dee, my jaw drops when she removes her jacket. "Is that a baby bump?" I squeal.

She beams. "Yes. Another girl."

"Oh my God! Congratulations." I catch the hint of wistfulness in my tone, and I can tell by Dee's scrutiny she heard it too. *Where is that coming from?* That ship has sailed. With my busy schedule I'd never have time for a child, and I wouldn't want to hire a nanny to raise my little one.

"I'm just glad we hung onto all of Eloise's clothes. That's going to save us some cabbage," Caleb says walking back out for the second load.

"Smart move," my dad pipes in from the kitchen, where he's pulling a casserole from the oven.

Caleb returns, setting the booster seat and a diaper bag down, then takes off his coat. I take off Eloise's coat and shoes and lead her over to the gift bag. I sit on the floor in front of the fireplace and point to the present. "This is for you," I say.

She claps her hands, blue eyes go wide, sparkling with excitement. “Me?” she squeals in delight.

“Yes, my angel.”

She reaches into the bag and pulls out the pig. “Piggie!”

“Yes, are you going to name her?”

“Taywer,” she says immediately.

I look over at Dee and burst out laughing. “We’ve recruited another Swiftie.”

“She dances up a storm every time I play her.”

“Adorbs,” I say, ruffling Eloise’s silky blond hair. I inhale her baby scent as I lean over and peer into the bag. “What else ya got in there?”

Her chubby hand reaches into the bag and pulls out a puzzle box with a picture of farm animals. I point to each one and Eloise recites them easily. “Good job!” She giggles and bounces on my lap.

“We’ll put this together later,” I say. “What else is in there?”

She squeals when she pulls out a soft fuzzy pink plush purse with her name and My First Purse embroidered on the front. Inside is a cloth cell phone that rings when you push it, a soft compact mirror, a credit card with crinkle, and a set of plastic keys on a ring.

“That will keep her occupied for a bit,” Dee says. “Good score.”

“Right? I want one.”

Dee sits down beside us, and we watch Eloise play with her new toys.

I look up and catch Dee studying me. “What?”

“Nothing.”

“It’s not nothing. You’re looking at me like you’re at my funeral.”

She snorts. “Am not! It’s just that I worry about you sometimes. I mean most of the time I’m jealous of your exciting career and living in a big city and all but then I catch glimpses of sadness and I wonder if you’re really happy.” She shrugs, looking embarrassed.

“I’m happy enough.”

She smiles. “Sometimes when I’m changing my fifth diaper of the day or slogging through laundry, I’ll wonder, *what is Evie doing right now?*” She glances over at Eloise to make sure she’s occupied, and continues, “And I feel like I’m missing out on something, like life is passing me by. I feel guilty even thinking that way. I wouldn’t trade my baby for anything in the world... it’s just hard sometimes. Ya know? Now I’m about to have another one. But I know this is going to go by so fast and I want to slow it down. Except when I’m bored.” Dee laughs. “I sound like a crazy person.”

“No, you don’t. Life is full of paradoxes. I hate to burst your bubble, but I don’t lead a very exciting life... I mean, I have to admit I’m a workaholic. Surely you know this about me,” I say.

Dee touches my arm. “I see how good you are with Eloise, and I catch a hint of longing... sorry, I hope it’s okay to say that, and it reminds me that the grass often looks greener on the other side. Probably for both of us.”

I look down at Eloise, her angelic little face, her purity, and I do wonder what it would be like to be a mom. “You aren’t wrong. When I’m in Chicago I barely have time to breathe, so I rarely think about what’s missing. When I’m here everything slows down and I start to question what the heck I’m doing with my life. The hectic pace... the stress... it doesn’t feel sustainable. I miss you and Dad and my horses.”

“And Jamie?” she asks, wincing slightly as if afraid she had gone too far.

I bristle. “What about him?”

“Come on. It’s me you’re talking to.”

“He blew it. Anyway, isn’t he still seeing that blonde he brought to mom’s funeral?”

“That was short-lived. As far as I know he’s as single as you are.”

“I don’t want to be having this conversation. Jamie and I were a lifetime ago. We were kids. Let go of that fantasy. Reality is, sometimes we don’t get our happily ever after.”

“I don’t want you to wake up in twenty years and have regrets.”

“I love you,” I say with a sigh. “But you don’t need to worry about me. I’m figuring things out.”

“Mama,” Eloise says, holding up her set of plastic keys. “We go bye-bye.”

“She’s so smart,” I say and Dee beams.

“Sometimes I feel like I’m going to burst with love,” she admits.

“Wait till she sees the princess castle play set,” I say. Dee peers into the bag and grabs the castle by the handle and unzips it for Eloise, so she can pull out the plush toys inside.

“Look, Eloise, it’s a princess. And see this is her friend the unicorn.” Dee puts the princess on the back of the unicorn and pretends the unicorn is trotting along, which makes Eloise giggle and reach for them. “Oh, looky, here’s a magic wand!”

I kiss Eloise’s soft cheek then hop up. “I’m going to see if Dad needs help.”

“Can you say thank you to Aunt Evie?”

“Tank you,” she says.

“You’re welcome, little one.” I nod towards the dining room where Caleb is setting the table. “Good man.”

Dee gazes at her husband, her eyes taking on a dreamy quality. “He really is the best.”

“His mama raised him right.”

“That’s for sure.”

“Dad, what can I do?” I ask.

“Could you keep stirring the gravy for me, so it doesn’t clump?” he asks, handing me the spoon.

“On it.”

“Caleb, would you pull the bird out for me?”

“Sure thing, Coach. Where do you want it?” Dad points to the countertop with his spoon where he’s placed a huge wooden cutting board.

“Got it,” he grunts as he pulls the 20-pound bird out of the oven. The skin is a golden brown and the legs look like they’re about to fall off the bone.

“The meat thermometer is in the drawer right below. Could you do the honors?”

Caleb sticks it in the thigh and announces “One-hundred eighty degrees.”

“Perfect. All I have to do is finish whipping these potatoes, then we can eat.”

We load the dining table with food and take our seats, putting Eloise’s booster seat between the parents. The dogs sit expectantly, eyes locked on the bird. Dad bows his head saying grace then says, “Dig in, folks.”

There is a cheerful hubbub as we pass and pile food on our plates. We laugh and talk, telling stories as we stuff ourselves. After supper, we settle in the living room. Soon, Caleb and Dad are snoozing on the sectional with Eloise asleep between them, her legs slung over Dad’s lap. Dee and I decide to play a game of backgammon while I enjoy a glass of red wine. There’s a knock at the door and I frown.

I jump up, trying to catch the door before the dogs start barking and wake everyone. My breath catches in my throat. “Jamie! What are you doing here?” I self-consciously run my fingers through my hair. I probably look like a total wreck.

“Um, well, I was driving by and noticed your gate by the road was open. I wanted to make sure the horses were in the back pasture or in the barn.”

I clap my hand over my mouth. “Oh no! I haven’t brought them in yet and they were in the front pasture all day.” I’m grabbing my coat and toeing on my boots before I finish talking. I wave to Dee who jumps up to join us.

“I’ll help,” she offers.

Jamie shakes his head. “Evie and I can handle it. They might have already let themselves into the barn. Chances are they didn’t wander too far. We’ll text you if we need you.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. Positive.” We walk out into the cold dark night. He places his palm in the small of my back guiding me as we walk towards the barn. His touch, even through my clothing, wakes up the dormant butterflies in my belly. It’s so proprietary and protective. Not gonna lie, Mr. Take Charge does something to me.

“Hopefully they were tired of waiting on you and decided to turn in by themselves.” His voice is low and gruff, making my mind go places I wish it wouldn’t. It’s sexy and comforting and *oh so familiar*. I can almost believe time has stood still and we’re back in high school sneaking behind the barn. And like a bomb dropping, the truth flares like the rockets’ red glare... I am still in love with this guy and probably always will be.

EVIE

*I*t's pitch dark outside as we make our way to the barn, except for the lights coming from the house and the sconce by the barn doors... oh and did I mention a brilliant sky full of sparkling stars so close it's as if we could reach out and touch them? It's so cold I can see my breath. Jamie still has his hand pressed into the curve of my back and I wish it didn't feel so natural. He lets go long enough to grab my hand and start jogging towards the barn. When we get inside, I turn on the indoor barn lights and am relieved to see Bunny and Fred munching on hay they'd helped themselves to, by pulling it down from the stacks piled high against the center aisle wall.

I panic.

"Randy's not here!"

"We'll find him. Let's put these two up," he says, voice low and calm. He grabs a lead rope, slinging it around Bunny's neck, and she follows him into her stall. He throws in a flake of hay and secures the latch, then does the same with Fred. I feel useless. My hands are shaking, and my imagination is going wild. Randy hit by a car, Randy in a panic. I'm really not sure if it's from the cold, the missing horse, or the shocking revelation of a few moments ago, but I'm a wreck.

Jamie looks at me, eyebrows dipping with concern. "It's gonna be alright. You look as pale as a ghost."

“My imagination is in overdrive,” I admit.

“Let’s go find Randy.” He takes my hand and weaves his fingers through mine and squeezes. “We’ll find him.” He grabs a halter and lead rope off a peg and slings it over his shoulder. He grabs the flashlight by the door then pulls me along behind him. “Let’s hoof it first then we’ll come back for the truck if we need to.”

I nod. He stops and turns, then wraps his strong arms around me crushing me against him. “I’ve got you, girl,” he says gruffly into my hair. He smells so good... all outdoorsy and manly. The years between then and now vanish and I’m seventeen again and he’s holding me after my dog Zoey died. His comfort washes over me and I feel a sense of calm. Then he releases me and takes my hand again. We walk the perimeter of the pasture calling and whistling for Randy. Nothing. When we reach the open gate, we step through onto the deserted road. I hear an owl in the distance; the sound carries clearly on this cold November night. *Who cooks for you?*

“Thank God we live on such a quiet road,” I say.

He squeezes my hand. “Got that right. Just you, me, and the owl. I’ve been a first responder to a collision between a horse and a car. It still haunts me. Wouldn’t wish it on my worst enemy.”

I shudder. “I can’t imagine.” Suddenly we hear nickering and Jamie shines the light on the chestnut gelding. I hear him blowing nervously. “Randy, it’s okay. It’s just me and Jamie. Come here, boy,” I croon softly. He whinnies then trots over and just like that he’s haltered and we’re walking back to the barn.



“*I* know I didn’t open that gate,” I say as we fill everyone in on Randy’s escape and rescue.

“I never open that gate unless I have to get the tractor through,” Dad says

his brow furrowed.

“Probably some kids pulling a prank, Coach,” Caleb says. “Or maybe the latch rusted out.”

“That’s what I’m wondering. You’ll have better luck figuring it out in the daylight. But if it were me, I wouldn’t use the front pasture for now, until I can get a sturdy lock and reinforce the gate,” Jamie says.

“Definitely not,” Dad agrees. “I’ll snoop around tomorrow and see if there’s anything suspicious. Thanks for stopping. My God, I’m sure glad you caught it.”

“Right? By the time I would have let them in for the night, anything could have happened,” I say.

Jamie stands by the door, thumbs hooked in his front jean pockets. “I’ll let y’all get back to your visit.”

“Stay and have some pie,” Dad says.

Impishly I say, “We have two.”

His eyes crinkle and he winks. “That’s a fact. But I start my 24-hour shift tomorrow, so I need to turn in. I’m still stuffed from supper. You know Mom. Enough to feed an army.”

Dad stands up and walks to the door. “Can’t thank you enough. Me and Evie will be by this Sunday to pick out our tree. You working?”

“Yessir. I’ll make sure to allow a couple hours so the princess can find the perfect tree.” I stick my tongue out at him, and he chuckles. I still have that weird sense of déjà vu like I’m back in high school again. How is that possible after all this time?

Caleb says, “We’re going to wait until next week to get ours. I’ll do the chopping but if you’re working that day and it’s not too crazy you can help us pick. If you think Evie’s bad, wait till you pick a tree with Dee.” He rolls his eyes heavenward. “She’s the worst.”

“I remember. This ain’t my first rodeo,” Jamie jokes.

Dee puts her hands on her hips squinting at her husband. “You’d pick the

first tree you saw if it were up to you. I have standards.”

“I’ll see you at my house for the Saturday game, right?” he says to Caleb.

“Yes, Dee’s parents are going to babysit.”

“How about you, Coach? Did you talk Evie into it?”

Dad looks at me and smiles. “Not yet.”

Dee jumps in, “Evie, you have to come. I hardly ever get to a party!”

I shake my head. “No, I think I’ll sit this one out. But Dad you don’t have to miss out on my account.”

“I’m not going unless you do,” he says. *Great.*

“Well, you’re all welcome to come. Evie, I hope you change your mind. Happy Thanksgiving everybody.” He shoots me a warm glance that goes straight to my belly and then he’s gone. I feel like all the air has been sucked from the room.

Soon after Jamie leaves, Caleb and Dee make moves to follow. Caleb makes several trips to the car to load up and I help Dee put a sleepy baby’s coat on. We exchange hugs and Dad forces leftovers on them.

“Please!” I insist. “It’s just Pops and me.”

When we finally shut the door behind them, I smile at Dad. “I’m exhausted.”

“Me too but it was fun.” We high five each other and laugh. “Good thing Thanksgiving is only once a year,” he says.

“Fact,” I say.

JAMIE

*A*fter Huxley and I clock in at the station, I dump my duffle bag on my bunk, take off my coat, then head to the kitchen. I unload my cooler full of Thanksgiving leftovers into the fridge. If I know these guys, there'll be nothing left but crumbs by the end of our shift. They're animals. Deacon watches over my shoulder. "Sweet! Mama Sue comes through again."

"Always," I say. We head to the lounge, and I plop down on the couch and lean back, lacing my fingers behind my head. The guys fill me in on last night's happenings. We talk about the evidence pointing to arson at the Smiths' farm. It makes me think about the gate left open at Evie's and I frown. I know they aren't even close to the same crime, but it worries me, nonetheless.

I'm still trying to wrap my head around what happened between me and Evie last night... if anything at all. I know we had a moment. It's possible I made the whole thing up, but the way she'd looked at me, damn, it felt like we'd done a rewind. It was as if the last fifteen years had dropped away, and we were still a couple. She'd looked at me with so much trust in her eyes just like she used to... like she knew I could fix anything. Thank God, I hadn't let her down is all I can say.

As if reading my mind, Sam says, "Not to change the subject but I saw Evie Parker getting out of her fancy car the other day. Man, that girl is fine!"

“She always was,” I say.

“Thirties look good on her,” he says. “Have you spent any time together?”

“Not really. I’ve run into her... we’ve talked.”

“I guess since she’s a celebrity now she might not give our friend here the time of day,” Deacon jokes. “It’s probably gone to her head.”

“Naw. Don’t think so,” I say. I can’t believe I’m defending her when I actually agree with Deak.

“If she has copped an attitude, a few weeks in the sticks will bring her around,” he says laughing.

Tank chimes in, “She was always a sweetheart. I can’t see that changing.”

I cast a warm glance at Tank. *Takes one to know one.* He’s always been a softie. Biggest kid in high school, played offensive line, but was a teddy bear at heart. Still my best friend.

I stand up and stretch. “I guess I’ll tackle the inventory and restock.” We’re a little behind on cleaning the equipment and our annual station open house is coming up.

I no sooner begin, when an emergency call comes in. A pre-alert comes through the speakers, then a set of tones that are specific to us. I spring into action and run to my locker to grab my gear. I jump into the passenger seat of the ambulance where Sam waits for me. He flips on the siren, and we haul ass away from the station towards the reported accident, the fire engine right on our tail.

As we near the crash site with sirens blaring, I survey the scene. I see the intersection with a mangled minivan pushed into a corn field. First glance it looks like a truck ran through the stop sign and T-boned the van. We’re the closest responders and therefore the first to arrive at the scene, beating the paramedics. I blast out of the truck like a bazooka. I quickly size up the situation. We’re going to need the jaws of life to get the passengers out of the mangled van. There’s a distraught guy standing on the side of the road

talking on his cell, and I assume he is the driver of the Hemi that plowed into them.

“Go talk to the kid, make sure he’s okay,” I bark at Sam as I rush to the van. I peer inside and I see a woman slumped over the steering wheel, unconscious, air bag deployed, and it looks like her legs are trapped under the dash. Then my blood turns cold when I look in the back seat and see a young boy of about five strapped in a booster seat. He appears to be wedged in by the collision. There’s blood pouring from a gash on his forehead and he’s crying.

“Hey, buddy, I’m Jamie.” I wedge my hand through a small opening, and he grips it. “We’re going to get you outta here. Sound good?”

His face is flushed a bright red and mouth wide open on a wail, but he nods. I turn to the fire crew who approach with the spreader and cutter, the generator already powered up. I continue to talk with the terrified kid as they begin the work of extracting his mom.

“What’s your name?”

“Ba...ba... Bobby,” he gets out between sobs. “Is Mommy okay?”

“We’re going to take good care of your mommy, I promise. First, we need to get you both out of here,” I say. In the distance I hear the sirens of reinforcements on their way... hopefully paramedics and surely state boys. I breathe a sigh of relief. The kid appears to be stable, but his mom doesn’t look too good.

“Can you cover your face with your arms... like this?” I say demonstrating. “Can you do that for me? We have to break the window so we can get you and your mom out.”

Still red-faced and crying, he buries his head in his arms while Deacon busts the driver’s side window. He reaches in to check for a pulse, and I wait. Deacon nods. “Got one.” I breathe a huge sigh of relief. My crew employs hydraulic rescue tools, using the spreader to wedge the driver side door open as far as they can, but it’s not enough. They switch to the cutter and remove

the door entirely. Since the driver is unconscious and the child appears stable, she's the priority. Time is of the essence, and they work quickly and efficiently to extract the unconscious woman. Thankfully she has a steady pulse, and the paramedics take over transferring her to a gurney before hustling to the waiting ambulance. I jump inside the van and lean over and grab his hand.

"Mommy!" Bobby says in a panic. I overhear the medics mention airlift, so I know she'll be transported by helicopter to a larger hospital once they reach the local one. That leaves me with the kid who is gripping my hand like I'm his lifeline.

"They're taking her to the hospital where the doctors are gonna take good care of her. I guess you're stuck with me for now." As the ambulance pulls away with lights and siren, screaming, Bobby panics again and cries out for his mother.

"You want your mom to get help, right?" He nods solemnly, his watery blue eyes looking at me with terror, but also clinging like I'm his savior.

"Are you going to leave me?" he says. Man, that chokes me up, not gonna lie. I just want to gather this kid up in my arms and take away this nightmare.

"Not for a million bucks, kiddo. I'm right here. I'll stick to you like a burr on a horse's tail. You're going to get to ride in an ambulance, sirens... the whole bit. I'll be right beside you, okay little man?" He nods. Big eyes like saucers stare up at me. "Have you ever been in an ambulance before?"

His voice is so small it's barely audible as he answers, "No."

"It goes fast, and the sirens are loud, but they let everyone know we're coming. Nothing to worry about." I nod at Sam. "My buddy here is going to drive. Sam knows what he's doing. Right, Sam?"

"Heck yeah!"

"Hang in there, we've almost got you out." I continue talking, trying to distract him from the chaos. "Do you have a dog or cat?" Bobby's lip quivers and his eyes are still full of unshed tears, but he shakes his head no. Sam and

Deacon continue to cut through metal then peel it back to get to the boy. When they see it's not enough, they change tactics and begin to remove the driver's seat which is what has him pinned.

Deacon says, "You should meet Jamie's dog, Huxley. He's the smartest dog in the world."

"He is?" His wide eyes look at me full of innocence and curiosity. It punches me right in the gut knowing his mom might not make it, and he's putting his faith in me and my bros.

I grin trying to swallow my own pessimism. "Pretty much. You know what he did the other day?" He shakes his head again. "I fell asleep on my couch and left him outside and he actually rang my doorbell. Can you believe that? I never taught him how to do that." The little boy giggles and his face lights up for a moment and I feel so much love for this kid. I send up a silent prayer *Please let his mom make it*. Deacon wrestles with the seat and it finally comes free and we're able to get Bobby out. Since the paramedics left with Bobby's mom, his care and trip to the hospital is on us.

We transfer him to our squad, and I immediately get him comfortable, then begin checking his vitals and start an assessment. I talk to him calmly throughout the exam and by the time we pull up to the hospital he's pretty chill. I have a chat with the nurse and pass on all the info to the healthcare team at the hospital. She pulls me aside to tell me that Bobby's dad has been notified and he's on his way. Apparently, they're separated, and he lives an hour away. "He should be here any minute," she says as we return to Bobby.

"Bobby, this is Katie. She's your nurse and is going to take over from here."

"No! You promised you wouldn't leave me."

"You're not wrong. I did tell you I'd stay with you. Now we're at the hospital and it's time for the nurses and doctors to take over. They know a lot more than me about boo boos, but even better, your dad is on his way."

"He can't come. He's at work."

“Not true, he’s on his way and will be here any minute. Right Katie?”

“Yes,” she agrees.

He starts crying again. “You sa...a...id you wouldn’t leave me. I want my mommy.”

I look at the nurse who gives me a sympathetic smile then says, “You know what Bobby, I’ll bet Jamie here will come back and see you after the doctors examine you. Right Jamie?”

“How about this,” I say, “I’ll go find a candy machine... what’s your favorite?”

“Skittles,” he says through tears.

“Ok, first choice Skittles, what’s your second favorite just in case?”

“Reese’s Pieces.”

“Ok. You go with Nurse Katie, and I’ll find the candy machine. After the doc checks you out, I’ll hand deliver the candy.”

We turn as a deep male voice calls out, “Bobby!” and rushes to his side.

“Daddy!”

“I’m here Bud. I’m sorry it took so long.” He looks at Katie and me and smiles gratefully. “How is he?”

“We’re about to take him back for an exam, but Jamie,” she gestures towards me, “was the EMT at the scene and did the initial assessment. He’s stable with no apparent injuries except a scrape on his head. We’ll do x-rays and anything else the doctor deems necessary.”

“I’m going to duck out and find those Skittles, my man. I’ll catch up with you soon.” I ruffle his hair. “You are so brave.” His dad holds out his hand for me to shake and I take it.

“Thanks for taking care of my son.”

“He’s a great kid. I promised him some candy. I’ll scout that out, then come and say goodbye.”

An hour later, after delivering some Skittles, Sam and I are heading back to the station.

EVIE

“*I* can’t believe I let you talk me into this,” I complain to Dee as I lean forward and apply mascara in front of my vanity.

“You need to lighten up. We’ll have fun. You love football as much as me and it’s practically a sin to miss a game like this one.”

“Dad and I do have a television you know,” I grouse.

“And deny your dad a chance to hang out with his ballers? Plus, it’s more fun to watch a big rivalry like this with a group.”

I stand and pull my University of Michigan t-shirt over my head then comb my fingers through my mussed hair. I tuck in my shirt and slip a belt through the loops of my low rider jeans. “Should I braid my hair?” I ask.

Dee tilts her head and appraises me. “You could. Or I could French braid it for you.”

I grab my ballcap with the U of M emblem and stick it on backwards. I face Dee. “Well? Braids or down?”

“Two braids. Sit. I’ll do it.” I obediently plop back down. She weaves my hair into two thick side braids then hands my hat back to me. I stick it back on and look at myself. My eyes look huge in my pale face which makes my spattering of freckles stand out even more.

“You look adorbs,” Dee declares. “Jamie will be eating his heart out.”

I glare. “Like I care.”

She shrugs grinning impishly. “Even if that were true, which is doubtful, revenge is still satisfying.”

“Does Jamie know you’re plotting against him?”

“You’re both my friends, but he knows I’m a girl’s girl and we’re besties.”

“Do these jeans look alright?” I say, standing and turning from side to side in front of the mirror.

“You look drop-dead gorgeous.”

I bite my lip. “I’m nervous,” I admit.

“You’ll be fine. Jamie won’t know what hit him. Let’s go. The guys are waiting for us.” Dad and Caleb are watching the pre-game football coverage, but spring up the second we appear.

When we pull into Jamie’s place and park in the grass beside one of a dozen or more vehicles already lined up, I’m shocked to see what he’s done with the old Plyler place. It was a run-down dump when we were kids. I know he’s been slowly fixing it up since he bought it a few years ago. I heard he’d practically had to gut it... but wow!

What used to be a small concrete stoop at the side entrance is now a huge deck attached to a new room addition. The deck has a hot tub, arbor and double French doors leading inside. Some winter-dormant vines wrap around the trellis, and there’s steam rising from beneath the hot-tub cover. The keg sits in a plastic tub outside and Tank is standing there filling a pitcher with beer.

“This way,” Dee says. I follow her up the steps that run the entire length of the deck. Dad and Caleb take up the rear. We can hear the partiers before we even get inside.

Tank turns and his face breaks into a huge smile when he sees me. “Why if it isn’t Evie Parker!” He sets the full pitcher down on a table and scoops

me up in a bear hug lifting my feet clear off the ground. There's a lump in my throat as I hug him back.

"Hey, Tank. How've you been?"

"Same ole. I'm real sorry about your mom. I'm sorry I didn't get a chance to talk to ya at the funeral. She was the best."

"Thanks. I understand. It seemed like the entire population of Michigan was there. Have you been keeping out of trouble?"

"Besides working at the fire station, I have a side hustle designing and selling t-shirts."

"Putting your graphic art degree to good use," I say.

"Tryin' anyway. I sell some things at Betty's and at Mama Barrington's shop."

"I saw your shirts at Mrs. B's. They are fabulous! I had no idea those were yours. It said designs by Theodore. I never put it together. I think I forgot you had another name besides Tank."

He shrugs, his cheeks coloring. "Mom's the only one that ever calls me Theodore. Do you want a beer?" he asks.

"Sure," I say. He grabs a red Solo cup from the stack and tilts it up to the nozzle, expertly filling it with minimal foam. Dee, Dad and Caleb go inside while Tank and I catch up.

"It sure is good to see ya, Evie. I guess I never did thank ya for all the free tutoring you used to give me in study hall. We had some good times back then, didn't we?"

"Heck yeah! You were always a riot. Plus, the biggest sweetheart in the entire school."

"Fraid not. That title belonged to you." Loud voices blast us as the French doors open again.

"Well, well. Color me shocked. To what do I owe this honor?" a deep, familiar voice drawls. When he reaches my side, he smiles at me like I'm the grand prize and my knees go weak. His lips are so kissable... how many

times have we kissed? A thousand... more? He was hotter than a five-alarm fire in high school but Jamie the man, lordy, no comparison. His jaw is strong and defined, dusted with afternoon stubble and the laugh lines around his eyes only add to his attractiveness. He's taller and his shoulders and chest are broader, thighs more powerful than his younger self and he moves with an easy grace that is sexy as hell.

"Coercion," I say smartly as I take a sip of my beer. Why in blue blazes does he have to look so damn good? Those freakin' sunbeams seem to find every strand of copper hair on his head and accentuate them. His thick dark brows highlight his smoldering brown eyes that are currently sparkling with amusement.

"Welcome. Tank's taking care of you I see. Game's about to start. Let me give you the ten-cent tour, then we can get this party started," he says. "Follow me." He turns and doesn't look back, knowing I'll follow. I'm so tempted to ignore him and stay planted in the safe zone with Tank, but nosiness wins out and I trail behind like a lemming to the seaside cliff.

When I step inside, the generous den is packed with people. The room has cathedral ceilings with exposed beams and a wall of windows on the south side. There is what must be at least a 55-inch flat screen mounted on one wall and a bunch of eyes glued to the television... my dad's being two of them. He's surrounded by past students and ballers he's coached, all chatting him up and he's glowing. I smile, suddenly glad I came. Jamie grabs my hand and tugs me along weaving through the guests. A few say hello as I pass. I recognize some but not all of them. I've been away a long time.

From the den we enter the dining room that continues with the same hardwood flooring and opens to a large eat-in kitchen. I gasp. "Wow, Jamie. It's beautiful." And it is. All gleaming stainless-steel appliances, white cabinetry with glass backsplash beneath, granite counter tops and slate gray tiled flooring. A small kitchen table with a white tiled surface inlaid in wood sits under a large window with bird feeders right outside.

“It’s modern and inviting at the same time. I love what you’ve done with the place,” I say.

His eyes flash warmly. “Thanks. It’s a work in progress. Helps to have three brothers and a fire department on my side. I haven’t started on the second floor, but I’m almost done down here. Come on, I’ll show you the master suite. I turned two bedrooms into one.” I follow him into a sumptuous space that could be featured in any HGTV episode. Wood flooring, light gray walls with moss green accent chairs and throw pillows, a king-sized bed with a cream cushioned headboard and duvet with more accent pillows makes my jaw drop.

“Did you pick out the color palette?”

“That all depends. Do you like it?”

“I love it!”

“Then the answer is yes,” he grins. “My sister helped some. But thanks. I’m pretty pleased myself.” He walks to the wall and throws open a double door that leads into a walk-in closet where lights come on automatically when the door opens. Then he turns, waving me toward the bathroom and I’m blown away. There’s a double sized walk-in shower and next to it sits a jacuzzi bathtub. The walls and floors are all tiled with a his and hers sink sitting under a six-by-six-foot mirror and vanity.

“I still need to finish the trim in here, but for all intents and purposes I’m done.”

“I’m impressed.”

“It’s been a lot,” he admits. “But I enjoy remodeling. I like creating and I really like carpentry... working with my hands. Who knew,” he jokes.

I look around in awe. “I think it’s amazing.”

He looks at me and I have a hard time reading him. He reaches out and tugs on my pigtail, his voice a little gruff when he says, “I never thought in a million years I’d get to show you this place. I’ll admit sometimes when I was picking out fixtures and shit like that, I’d think about you and wonder if it

was something you'd pick."

My stomach drops and my knees go weak. Did he really think about me like that? I say, "I wouldn't have come even close to this level. Seriously."

"I'm glad you're here and get to see it. Let's go catch the game."

When we get back to the den the game is in full swing. The only seats left are beside Dee on the couch and there is barely room for one butt... let alone two. Dee waves me over and scooches closer to Caleb to make room. "Sit," she says patting the plush cushion. I plop down next to Dee and sink, getting swallowed up by the couch.

"I'll go grab us another beer," Jamie says taking my empty cup.

When he returns, he hands me the beer and to my surprise and consternation Jamie squeezes in right next to me. *Oh my God, oh my God... this can't be happening.* I pretend to be unbothered but *oh my*, am I ever bothered. We are squished together like canned sardines, and I am engulfed by his scent, his toned arms and bulging thighs pressed against mine. My stomach feels like I'm bungy jumping off Mount Everest. My mouth has dried up, so I take a huge gulp of my fresh beer and of course it goes down the wrong pipe and I choke.

Jamie presses his lips close to my ear and drawls, "You alright, Chicago?" I nod as I continue coughing, my face growing hot. He pats me on the back. So embarrassing. When my coughing fit is over, he places his large, tanned hand on my thigh and squeezes. I hear the game and all the voices around me but it's like I'm insulated from it all and there is only Jamie and me. I'm mesmerized by the hand resting on my thigh and by the cadence of his voice as he talks trash with a Buckeye fan. It's like a deep rumble that ripples through my body, settling in my girl parts and setting me on fire. Cymbals are crashing south of my belly button so I down half of my beer in one long slug. *Liquid courage, do your thing.*

I relax when he finally removes his hand from my thigh. It's short lived, though, as he snakes his arm behind me and rests it along the back of the

couch across my shoulders. So now I'm smooshed into his armpit, with his hand dangling casually by my side. I force myself to breathe. Dee gives me a side-eyed look and I narrow my eyes daring her to comment. She smirks then cheers when the Wolverines intercept the ball.

Jamie is unconsciously circling his fingers against my arm while talking animatedly to my dad, who has pulled up a chair next to us. I cannot give in. I refuse to let myself enjoy his touch. I will *not* think about how long it's been since I've been held. I *will* ignore my traitorous body that is thrumming with need... craving more.

I'm getting a slight buzz from the beer and it's making me feel kind of loosie goosy. Feels pretty good. I've been wound so tight for so long. There is no reason in the world that I can't relax a little. How long has it been since I've felt this at home in my own skin? *Mm*. It's lovely really, kind of like I'm floating on a cloud, warm and fuzzy... I burrow in a little closer to Jamie and he shifts to pull me in tighter, like it's the most natural thing in the world. *Mm...* so comfy. Yikes! My eyes go wide. I struggle to sit up, but the couch seems to have other ideas. I'm trapped. Between being sucked in by the overstuffed couch cushions and wedged between bodies, I can't move. At least not gracefully or without spilling my beer. I dare a glance up at Jamie and we lock eyes until his drop to my lips. Sinful, carnal lust. I want it. I need it. I want him to kiss me.

"Going somewhere?" he whispers huskily.

Tank breaks the spell when he yells over the clamor, "Hey Evie, ready for a refill?" and the mood is broken. I nod vigorously. He takes my empty cup and returns minutes later with a refill. My third but who's counting? I notice him and Jamie exchanging a meaningful glance and I guess it's probably about me.

Again, I chug half the glass in one big gulp. It's going down a bit too easy and my inhibitions are evaporating like a rain puddle on a hot day. I feel downright adventuress. And sultry. Have I ever felt this desirable before?

Don't think so. *Sexay*. I cover my mouth and giggle catching Dee's attention. She looks at me curiously and I cross my eyes at her. She shakes her head and turns back to the game.

After I finish the third beer I have to pee. I tip my head up to look at Jamie. I'm inches away from his strong jaw and I have an almost irresistible urge to lick it. I'm consumed by all things Jamie. All five of my senses are engaged. Oh, I haven't tasted him yet. Four out of five then. He looks like a god, smells of leather and spice, feels hard and muscular against my body and his deep voice resonates in my core. His lips are so close... tempting me, maybe it's time for that taste.

"Evie?" he says huskily.

My eyes pop open. Oh yeah, I have to pee... like five minutes ago.

"Jamie?" I say huskily.

His eyes narrow. "You okay?"

I giggle. "I have to pee, and I'm stuck."

He chuckles then stands, smoothly displaying the gracefulness of an athlete. *Gaah*. He hoists me from the soft cushion, and I giggle again. Dee looks at me frowning. I can't remember giggling this much in forever. I repeat myself, announcing loudly, "I have to pee."

"Need my help?" she asks.

"Sure. You can show me where the main bathroom is. That wasn't part of my tour." Dee stands and orders Caleb to save our spots then grabs my hand and drags me along behind her.

EVIE

“*W*hy are you looking at Jamie like he’s a steak dinner?”

I giggle again, then realize I’m really tipsy. *What a lightweight.* “I’m not,” I whine.

“Um... well you’re both doing it. Do you want me to sit between you?”

“That would be negatory, Captain,” I say, wobbling.

“Don’t say I didn’t try.” Dee pushes me into the bathroom then closes and locks the door behind us.

“I haven’t had this much fun in... well, forever,” I declare as I pull my pants down.

“How many beers have you had?” Dee says suspiciously.

“Who cares? You wanted me to have fun... now I am and you’re going to turn into my parole officer?”

Dee bites her lip. “You’re right. I just don’t want you to have any regrets. Nobody would be happier than me to see you let go and maybe even have a little fun with our boy Jamie.”

I finish, then wash my hands studying my flushed cheeks in the mirror. I make a funny face at myself then ask, “Am I sexy?”

Dee snorts with laughter. “How many times do I have to say it? You are the sexiest,” she says.

“No, I’m sherious,” I say, but the slight slur in my speech belies the

statement.

“You just don’t get it. But I guess your insecurities only add to your charm.”

I scoff. “Me, charming? I’m bor-ing,” I say in a singsong voice.

“You’re the last person I’d call boring.”

“Remember my high school yearbook tag line? *A beauty taking on the world... one book at a time.*”

“And you took that as an insult?”

I stick out my bottom lip pouting. “To me it said boring with a capital B.”

“Books and boring are not synonymous, not even close. You’ve never been boring! Smart yes, boring no. And why focus on the book part? Don’t forget the beauty part,” she says firmly.

“I got teased so much about being a brain that I developed a complex.”

“Even though you were going steady with the hottest guy in the entire school?”

“Fluke. He was blinded by dating the coach’s daughter. And that’s another thing,” I say putting my hands on my hips, “it didn’t help that Mom and Dad were prom King and Queen back in the day. He was the star football quarterback, and she was the head cheerleader. I always worried that I was a disappointment to Mom. She didn’t have a cheerleader to pass on her tips to.” I hiccup and pinch my nose, holding my breath then swallow three times. It doesn’t work and I hiccup again and giggle. “Instead, she was shtuck with me. A bookworm.”

Dee looks incredulous. “You and Jamie were a power couple. Everyone wanted to be you. I’m sorry I never realized how insecure you felt back then. I must have been a terrible friend.”

I wave my hand and wobble a bit as we leave the bathroom and pause in the hallway to finish our talk. I throw my arm across her shoulders and kiss her cheek. “I promish you, it’s not your fault. I did everything I could to hide my insecurities. You are the best friend anyone could ever ask for.”

She sighs. “I guess I was busy dealing with my own nerd complex. My nickname was Mouse, if you’ll remember.”

“What a joke,” I snicker. “Obviously coined by someone who knew nothing about you. With Jamie and me, I could never quite believe that all that athletic gorgeousness was mine, ya know?”

“But he was. He only had eyes for you. Half the guys in school had the hots for you.”

“I only got popular because of Jamie Barrington.”

“And you got boobs,” she teases. “All I know is I wouldn’t go back for a million dollars.”

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times,” I quote Charles Dickens. “That about sums it up for me.”

“Speaking of our past, I forgot to tell you, I spoke with Eric a couple weeks ago.”

“Really?” He made up the third member of our merry band of three, who now happens to be a professional gamer making boo coo bucks.

“He said to tell you hi and sends his love. Speaking of revenge of the nerds, right? He’s doing great. Who knew he’d wind up being the richest guy from our graduating class.”

“We did. He’s brilliant.”

We return to the couch to reclaim our seats. “What did we miss?” Dee asks.

“Ref called pass interference against us,” Caleb says.

“Dang it!” She says sitting down then tilting her head up for a kiss.

Caleb leans down and kisses her on the lips. “Love you, Babe,” he tells her.

“Love you,” she replies. I sigh. They are so lucky.

I’m disappointed that Jamie moved from the couch. I do my best nonchalant perusal and spot him across the room standing with a small group of people I don’t know. A couple of cute guys in their twenties and two

attractive young women. Jealousy grabs hold of me when the pretty brunette grabs Jamie's arm, laughing up at him. Seems pretty chummy.

The room erupts in a collective groan, a few F-bombs get tossed out... and I missed it because of course, *all* of my attention is otherwise engaged. I glance at the game for all of three seconds, then I return to a certain someone who looks up and catches me staring. Our eyes lock. I boldly hold his gaze. My eyes purposefully skim down to the hand still clinging to his arm and I glare. Not gonna lie, I know I'm playing with fire here. *Don't play with matches if ya can't handle the fire.* I finish my beer, stand up then sashay outside for a refill.

I don't look up when a blast of noise comes from the door opening behind me. I don't look because I already know it's Jamie. His warm palm presses into my back. "Here let me." He takes over my personal space, his hip and thigh touching mine. "Tilt your cup," he says. My pheromones go into overdrive at the body contact and I'm here for it.

"Seems like the beer goggles are working in my favor today," he teases.

I bite back a grin. "Don't get cocky."

"Wouldn't dream of it," he says as he finishes topping off my beer.

"Who's the pretty brunette?" I ask.

"She bartends at Cheers and Beers."

"Ah." I squint at him through narrowed eyes leaning my butt against the deck railing for balance.

"Am I imaginin' things or did your green eyes get a little greener?"

"Ha! Don't flatter yourself."

He leans down and dips his nose nuzzling my hair. "Have I told you that you smell like a little bit of heaven?"

"Is that what you told the pretty bartender?"

He huffs out a breath and rakes a hand through his hair. "Chicago, you

have to know you're the most stunning woman in the room."

Suddenly the cynicism melts away and I'm standing there utterly defenseless. "But I don't know that," I say softly.

Before I know what's happening, he dips his head and plants the most tender, sweetest, softest kisses at the corner of my mouth. "I've been wanting to kiss that freckle since your first day back. I seem to remember having to convince you how special you were way back when. I figured by now you'd be on top of the world and full of yourself. Guess I was wrong. Again."

I clutch at his jacket and bury my face against him as memories come flooding back. My first kiss, my first crush, my first love, my first lover, my first heartbreak. "I think I've regressed," I mumble into his chest. His scent is activating all of the feels and I know I should pull away. He smells exactly like he used to. But anyone could walk out here and see us and misunderstand. No sooner do I think it than the door opens, and the pretty bartender comes out for a beer. I straighten and pull away, embarrassed.

"Sorry to interrupt," she says cheerfully. "It'll just take me a sec," she promises, then refills her cup. "Have fun you two." She goes back inside leaving us alone again.

"Busted," Jamie says chuckling.

There is an awkward silence for a moment, then waving my hand between the two of us, I say, "I know I'm giving you mixed messages and I'm sorry. This isn't a good idea."

"I disagree," he says quietly.

"You would, wouldn't you? You're not the one that had your heart stomped on."

"You don't think so? Think again. I was fuckin eighteen years old Evie. I lost my way and didn't know how to handle it. I thought I was protecting you from me."

My eyes well with tears thinking about the baby we lost. "You have no idea what I went through."

“Then tell me. Let’s get together and talk about it.”

I shake my head moving away. “Not now. I can’t do this right now. Let’s go watch the game.”

“This conversation is not over Evie. I promise you that.”

“I agree... just not here... not now.” He slings his arm around my waist, and I wiggle out of his hold. I’m still unsteady. Frowning he grips my arm and leads me back into the party without another word. *Well, I haven’t lost my touch for killing a mood.*

EVIE

It's Sunday and we're getting ready to go buy our Christmas tree. I'm looking for my old holiday winter scarf because it is *cold* out there—the wind blowing in over the lake is frosty and the forecast calls for snow. I find it buried at the bottom of the drawer and wrap it around my neck. I pull on my cream knit hat with the red pompom on the end and grab my matching red mittens.

I walk into the living room and Dad is waiting. “Ready?” he asks.

“Yes. Balsam fir this year?”

“Yepper. I loaded the ax and saw. Ready to roll.”

We hop in the truck and Dad starts it up. We sit while the truck warms up. “Dad?”

“Yes?”

“I need to say that I don't want you doing any matchmaking. Things are already weird enough between Jamie and me, I don't need your help.”

“I noticed you spent most of your time together at the football party,” he says.

“I was tipsy.”

“Aha.”

I hold up my hands. “Dad, I'll admit I'm attracted to him. What warm blooded female wouldn't be?”

“We’re talking about you, Evie.”

“I just don’t need any pressure. I’m finally unwinding. It’s nice to be home. It’s made me realize how much stress I’ve been living under. No lie. It’s like I’m coming out of a trance or something.”

“I can see a change from when you got here, and it’s only been a week. As your father, I can’t tell you how happy I am about that. I feel like I’ve got my daughter back. And I’ll try not to tease you about Jamie... I’ll do my best anyway. Never let it be said that I added any pressure to your life,” he says cheekily.

I punch him lightly on the arm. “No trying, only doing.” I turn on the radio and find a station with Christmas music and we take off down the lane singing along to “Jingle Bell Rock.”

Dad finds a space sandwiched in with a long line of tree shoppers and backs the truck neatly over the dormant winter grass. It would seem like everyone in town picked today to buy a tree. Sunday after Thanksgiving... duh! It’s been three years since we cut our own. It hits me hard. Last time we did this was pre-diagnosis; Mom was here, and we had no idea what was ahead of us. The following year she was gone, and we didn’t put up any decorations. Last year Dad finally bought an artificial tree. Tears spring to my eyes and I glance over at Dad and see his are glassy too. I know he’s thinking the same thing.

“Your mom would be very happy that we’re doing this,” he says gruffly.

I swipe my mitten across my eyes and nod. “I know.”

I grab his large hand and squeeze. “Let’s do this.” He nods, then opens the driver’s door and steps out.

“Do you need your cane?”

“No. I’ll send you back for it if I get tired.”

I meet him on the gravel path, link my arm through his, and we head to

the shack that serves as the checkout post and the hot chocolate and Christmas cookie station.

A smile lights up Junior's face as we approach. He steps out from behind the counter and gives me a big bear hug. He's the oldest of the Barrington brothers. He looks so much like an older version of Jamie and my heart squeezes. There was a time when Jamie's family was like my own. I ate as many suppers with them as I did at home. It was fun to be surrounded by a loud boisterous family of seven. A whole different world.

"Evie! I heard you were back. How's it feel to be home?"

"Honestly? Great. I feel about fifty pounds lighter."

"It's the small-town, lake effect," he says, grinning.

"And good people," I reply. "How are you doing? It's been too long."

"Still ornery as a hog," he says. "My kids are my payback. Thrills Mom to no end."

I laugh. "I'm sure. You were pretty wild."

His eyes widen in mock outrage. "You don't have to agree."

"What's the current kid tally?" I ask.

"Three boys and a baby girl. Twelve going on thirty, nine, six, and oops... two," he says, dark eyes twinkling.

I shake my head. "I can't believe Chance is twelve already."

"Right? I miss the days when he thought I was funny. We've entered the sullen stage. Too cool for Dad, but hey, at least Uncle Cam and Uncle Jamie are still cool, except cool ain't cool... so they're dope."

I laugh. "It's impossible to keep up. No fair," I say sympathetically. "By the way, did you name your youngest Oops?"

He throws back his head, belting out a hearty laugh. "Aubrey wouldn't let me. I thought it had a nice ring to it. Her name is Rose. She's the opposite of Chance. All I have to do is make a funny face and she bursts into a fit of giggles. So easy," he says beaming.

"Are you still aiming for a basketball team?"

He leans in close to my ear and whispers, “Got snipped after Rose was born.”

I snort out a laugh. “So soon?” I tease.

“Wife insisted.”

I shake my head. “Party pooper.”

He laughs heartily. “Help yourself to the hot chocolate and cookies. But I don’t need to tell you that. You’ve done this once or twice.”

“Dad, what do you think? Should we wait until we’ve cut the tree and we’re frozen solid?”

He rubs his gloved hands together. “Let’s find our tree first.”

“My brothers are out there somewhere. Jamie will find *you*, I’m sure.” My cheeks heat when he winks at me.

“Come on Dad. Tell Aubrey hello for me.” I grab the ax in one hand and slip my other through Dad’s. We wander through the rows of trees, sizing them up, stopping to chat when we recognize people we know. Everybody’s cheeks are rosy from the cold and there is a happy festive atmosphere with kids running through the trees laughing and screaming in their outdoor voices. I look up, a smile splitting my face as the first big fat snowflakes start to fall. “Dad, it’s snowing,” I exclaim. I stick my tongue out like a little kid, catching the flakes. I *feel* like a little kid. His warm eyes crinkle down at me with so much affection that I have to swallow yet another lump in my throat.

Suddenly I’m grabbed from behind and lifted off my feet then twirled around in circles. I squeal, then cry out, “Hey!”

“Bout time you came home,” says a male voice I recognize immediately... Jamie’s youngest brother and closest in age, Cameron. “We’ve missed you.”

“Put me down, you lug,” I say elbowing him in the ribs.

He complies then faces me. Plunking his huge hands on my shoulders, he pierces me with those Barrington eyes. “How are you?”

“I’m hanging in there. It’s hard without Mom, but Dad and I are actually

finding our Christmas spirit this year.”

“Ginny would love that.”

“How about you? What grade are you teaching?” I ask.

“Ninth grade social studies. Plus, I’m coaching football. We made it to state finals this year.”

“That’s fantastic.”

Cam slings his arm across my dad’s shoulders. “Learned from the best. Coach taught me everything I needed to know.”

Dad says, “I’m sure you learned a thing or two playing in college. You and your brothers were all born athletes.”

I squint up at him. “So, are you seeing anyone?”

“Still single ready to mingle,” he says wagging his eyebrows.

“Peter Pan,” I say.

“You’ve got room to talk. I don’t see you settling down.”

“I don’t have time. My job consumes me.” His knowing warm eyes stare into mine so long I begin to squirm. “What?” I grumble.

“It’s a choice. I never took you for the big city type,” he says. “I saw you coming back home and setting up shop here. We miss you.”

“That was the original plan. Things change.” I can’t seem to stop the tinge of bitterness that creeps into my tone.

I look down when I see compassion in his eyes. He says, “I know its ancient history, but you do know my brother was crushed when you left, don’t you?”

I shrug and keep my gaze locked on my boots. “Could have fooled me. He’s the one that broke up with me. Not the other way around. Everyone around here seems to forget that minor detail. I feel like I’m the bad guy.” I kick at the gravel with the toe of my boot.

“Nobody is the bad guy. That’s my point.”

I mumble under my breath, “Right.”

“You freezing him out bout killed him. After everything, I thought you’d

at least stay friends.”

“It was complicated, and I probably didn’t handle things the best back then,” I admit.

“Jamie said you’re talking now. That’s a start.”

Start of what? I keep that thought to myself.

When I hear Jamie’s voice, shivers go down my spine and I turn. “What line is my brother feeding you? Don’t listen to a word he says.” He is so bright and full of life, my breath catches.

He looks like a cover model on the winter edition of GQ magazine. Cheeks ruddy from the cold, copper curls escaping from his orange knit beanie hat, warm brown eyes smiling down at me. I’m utterly tongue-tied.

He looks at Cameron and says, “I’ll take over from here. How tall ya talkin’, Coach?”

“I’d say a seven-footer. We’re interested in a balsam fir.”

As Cam turns to go, he says, “Great to see you, Evie. Don’t be a stranger while you’re here.”

I hug him. “I won’t be.”

“Later, Coach.”

“Follow me,” Jamie says. I fall in line behind him and admire his butt in the Carhart coveralls. That combined with his work boots are projecting the sexy lumberjack vibe. He turns and catches me staring and flashes a full-on gleaming white smile that dispels any chill I might be feeling from the elements. *Had I actually believed I was going to be able to avoid this man? Okay, who am I fooling, am I really trying that hard?*

He points out several trees which my dad dismisses then stops beside a nicely shaped tree that looks about the right height. Dad circles it, stoops down to look at the trunk then nods his approval. “Looks nice and straight at the bottom. What do you think Evie?”

I squint, picturing balls, colored lights and tinsel. “It’s the one,” I agree.

Dad picks up his ax, but Jamie holds up a hand. “Let me. I didn’t get any

workouts in this week. It's my exercise."

"I can't argue with that," Dad says. I smile at Jamie gratefully. Dad has a hard time admitting how much his knee is limiting him. I can't wait until it's all behind him. Jamie makes short work with the ax then finishes felling the tree with a saw.

"There you are," a sultry voice says. "I've been looking all over for you." Jamie looks up and smiles. I look around and it's the bartender from the party. She's all glammed up in a fashionable oversized white fleece shearling jacket with a matching plush beret perched appealingly on her gorgeous head. Her black winter leggings and thigh high black suede boots are on another level. What's wrong with this picture? *I'm* supposed to be the city girl and it looks like we've switched roles. Next to her I feel like Hannah Montana before she grew up and became Miley the pop princess.

"Hey, Casey. Here to buy a tree?"

"Yep. With your help. A tiny one for the bar," she says.

"I'm finishing up here. I've got to load them up then I can help."

Why do I feel like growling and pushing her into the accumulating snow? She sticks out her hand and says, "Hi, I'm Casey. We almost met yesterday."

I feel my cheeks heat remembering being caught canoodling with Jamie. Reluctantly I take her hand. "I'm Evie."

"Ah! Well, *hello* Evie. It's great to make it official." I detect no sarcasm and she seems genuinely friendly.

"This is Evie's dad, Bill Parker," Jamie says. "He was my high school football coach. And English teacher freshman year. Coach, Casey bartends at the Beers and Cheers."

She shakes Dad's hand and says, "So nice to finally meet. I've heard so much about you."

Surprised, Dad raises a brow and smiles. "Well thank you, young lady. Nice to know I'm thought of. I've heard the new bar owners really fixed the place up."

“It’s great. You should stop in. We’re more of a sports bar now instead of the local watering hole. Brings in more tourists,” she jerks her thumb towards Jamie, “and we’re still a local favorite. That keeps us solvent.”

Jamie chuckles and says, “What are you trying to say? Coach, if you ever need to bend an ear, Casey here is the best therapist in town.”

“Don’t tell Lori that,” she says, referring to a local hair stylist.

Dad smiles, then I catch him grimacing and note the strain on his face, so I push things along. “It was nice meeting you,” I reply. “Good luck with your tree.”

“Thanks.”

Jamie grabs the tree by the bottom and begins hauling it towards the entrance. “Look around Case. I’ll catch up with you as soon as I load this sucker.”

Case! Ugg. How cozy. I’m mad that I feel disappointed he won’t be joining us for hot cocoa and cookies but even more... I hate that I’m jealous of Case. I scoff. I suppose she’s nice enough... shouldn’t I be happy that Jamie may have found someone? I guess I’m not that good a human. If I’m miserable, he should be as well. Nice Evie, I chide myself. Way to be the bigger person.

I make Dad sit on a bench while I fetch him a cup of steamy hot chocolate and a decorated sugar cookie, then meet Jamie at the truck to help tie the tree down. I’m silently cursing him as I catch the twine he tosses to me from across the truck bed. I loop it through the tie-down hook and cinch it. We continue until Jamie is satisfied it’s not going anywhere then stand awkwardly, staring at each other over the bed of the truck. He walks around and takes my shoulders in his bear paws and turns me to face him.

“You sure got quiet all of a sudden,” he says, a peculiar glint in his eye. *Is he laughing at me?*

I cover my mouth, faking a yawn. “Did I? I’m tired I guess.” The snow is really coming down now and a few flakes have settled on his preposterously

long lashes. A girl should be so lucky! Without thinking I reach up and brush my mitten across them. His pupils flare and the moment is suddenly charged with sexual tension. Until I remember Casey waiting for him amongst the snow-kissed Christmas trees. “You better get back to *Case*,” I say exaggerating her name. Sorry not sorry. I can’t help myself. His eyes light up and a slow smile engulfs his face. I want to scream. He is so arrogant, and I am soooo obvious.

He freakin’ tweaks my nose and says, “Guess you’re right. See ya round, Chicago. Better get some rest.” Then leaves!

Well. That’s all I need to know. I stomp back to Dad and choke down a cookie and cup of cocoa, determined to forget all about Jamie F’ing Barrington. *Done!*

JAMIE

J whistle as I search the rows for Casey. *Case. Ha!* I can't wipe the stupid grin off my face. Am I a complete asshole because I love seeing Evie in a sulky snit? She was jealous. Makes my lil ole heart go pitter patter.

I catch up with Casey. "Hey, Case. Find anything?"

"I like this one," she says. She looks at me sideways. "She's beautiful."

"Don't I know it," I growl.

"What are you going to do about it?" she asks.

I shrug. "What can I do?"

"I don't know... something... anything." Then she grins. "If looks could kill..."

"We'd both be dead," we say at the same time and burst out laughing.

"She's still crazy about you."

I narrow my eyes. "Don't be too sure. Old habits die hard is all that was."

"Trust me. Call it women's intuition but I'd say she's still in love with you. She wouldn't feel threatened by me if she wasn't at least interested. A little jealousy may be what the luv doctor ordered."

"It could also backfire. She barely talked to me as we were loading up the tree."

She waves her hand. "Temporary. You'll see."

I blow out a breath. "I hope you're right."

“Have a little faith. It is Christmas after all. The most magical time of the year.”

“I could use a bit of magic bout now. Thanks for that,” I say gruffly. Casey has had her own heartbreak. She moved here a couple of years ago after a painful divorce, looking for a new start. She’d visited on a girl’s trip and decided to pack her things and move here permanently. Now I consider her a good friend. I keep hoping the flirtation between her and Tank will turn into something more. That’d be excellent.

“Let’s pick out your tree and I’ll deliver it tomorrow,” I say.

“You’re an absolute angel. If that’s the case I can go a little bigger.” She settles on a fat round five-foot White Pine, and I chop it down, drag it to our lean-to, and put a red sold ticket on it before setting it aside.

“Do you need some garland or a wreath?” I ask.

“I could use some garland for the back bar. Thanks.” She smiles, pleased with the suggestion.

“I’ll bring that too. Tank and I are off tomorrow. I’ll get him to help me set it up.”

“Tank?” Her eyes spark and I know I’m not imagining it.

“Yep. I won’t even have to twist his arm. Got a tree stand?”

“Yes, I have the stand and decorations. Thanks.”

“We’re in business, then.” I walk her to her car and when we get there, she is suddenly serious. “Do me a favor?” she asks.

“Anything,” I say.

“Don’t blow it. Go get the girl. Don’t let her go this time.”

“Sounds good in theory but she lives in Chicago and I’m here.”

“It’s a four-hour drive, tops. Not insurmountable.”

“She’s a hot shot trial attorney now. She’s married to her career.”

“Nice try. Is this how you talked yourself out of a relationship last time—by mansplainin’? Did she get to weigh in?”

I feel my ears grow hot. “Not sure,” I mumble.

She cups her ear. “Didn’t quite catch that,” she says.

“Probably not.”

She pats my arm. “You’re older and wiser now. I have full confidence in you.”

I roll my eyes. “Bye, Casey.”

“Goodbye, Jamie.”

I scratch my head under my knit beanie as I watch Casey walk away. Am I defining Evie? I’ll admit I thought I’d had her all figured out. She’d turned her back on this town and everything she’d known and loved. I figured she thought she was above us now. I was wrong. Underneath her sophisticated exterior, I’ve caught plenty of glimpses of the old Evie. She’s older, more worldly yes, but not as detached as she’d like me to believe. And if I’m going to be honest with myself, I bungled that breakup. Big time. Complete idiot. But has anything really changed since then?

That old self-doubt still nips at my heels. Who am I to insert myself into the life she’s made for herself? She’s happy, successful, living her best life. How can I compete with that? She’s made something of herself... followed her dreams and now she’s at the top of her game. What do I have to offer? Same as before. I’m not about to uproot and move to Chicago... right? I’d hate living in Chicago. I like small town life. My family is here. My job. So *that would all be on her?* Inconveniently, my conscience is deciding to weigh in. I ponder this as I seek out the next customer in search of a tree.

Hours later, me and my brothers are laughing our asses off as we watch the last car drive out of the lot. The humongous tree on the roof practically swallows their Ford Fiesta. We close up shop and head to the homestead for supper. It’s been a long day and, thank God, I’ve been too busy to think any more about one tantalizing and complicated Evie Parker. Even better, I’ve paused the self-flagellation for now.

EVIE

Dad and I enter the church basement and there's a circle of metal chairs with a dozen or so people already there, some seated, some standing around talking. Harsh florescent lighting illuminates the room. There's a kitchenette behind a long bar where a large stainless-steel urn of coffee sits with Styrofoam cups stacked beside it. Packets of sugar and sugar substitute along with powdered creamer are laid out next to it.

The walls are cinder block, painted white, with the lower half wood-paneled wainscoting. I'm sure the spotted linoleum dates back to the sixties. There are bulletin boards with posters of events pinned up and positive messages taped to the walls. I see a notice of weekly AA meetings next to a printout of The Twelve Steps of AA.

After helping myself, I juggle my store-bought cookie wrapped in a napkin with the Styrofoam cup full of hot coffee as we find our seats. A very attractive fifty-something woman, with dark eyes and blonde hair streaked with a touch of silver, motions Dad over. Her face is open and friendly, her smile bright.

"I saved you a seat, Bill. This must be Evie," she says.

Dad beams with pride as he introduces me. "*This* is my Evie. Evie, I'd like you to meet a special friend of mine, Gwen."

I take her outstretched hand. "Nice to meet you, Gwen," I say.

“I feel like I know you,” she replies. I peer at her curiously over my cup as I take a sip of the terrible brew. The group leader, a kind looking man in his sixties, rings a bell and everyone takes a seat.

“Good evening, and welcome,” he says, smiling at each of us as his eyes circle the group. “Good to see old faces and a few new ones. I’m Charlie, the pastor of this church, but you don’t have to go to church to be here. Everyone is welcome. For those newbies, we’re an informal grief support group that meets once a week. No rules except be kind to one another and judgement has no place here. Sharing is optional. Most of all, you’re not alone. We will all lose someone we love at some point. None of us get out of here alive.” I like him. He’s relatable, exuding warmth and empathy.

“We’re continuing our theme from last week, getting through the holidays. It’s hard to wade through all the difficult reminders that our loved ones are no longer with us. The first couple of years suck, everything feels different. It’s painful. Pushing it away and pretending everything is normal can work for a while, sometimes it’s the best we can do, but eventually it comes out one way or another,” he says. “I thought we could talk about how we’re all coping and if any of those suggestions we talked about last week are helping. But first let’s go around the circle and introduce ourselves and share anything you like... or not,” he says, grinning.

I groan inwardly. I hate this so much. Everyone introduces themselves and when it gets to me, I say, “I’m Evie. I’m just here to support my dad.” I cross my arms protectively. I don’t need a support group.

The woman next to Charlie, Judy, I think her name is, says, “Hi, everyone.” Her voice quivers and she dabs at her eyes with a tissue. “As most of you know, this is my first Christmas without my husband, Steve. He died last January. It’s been really rough. He loved Christmas. I miss him so much.”

I squirm in my seat. Geesh, I’m already holding back tears. I have an irrational urge to run out of the room. Why did I ever agree to come here?

I've been doing so well. I definitely don't need this.

"I am so grateful to this group," she continues. "After our meeting last week, my daughter and I took the grandkids to the Christmas tree lighting downtown, then came home and told stories. The kids seemed to brighten before our eyes. They shared their funny memories of Grandpa and we laughed and cried. The oldest boy said he'd been afraid to talk about Grandpa because he didn't want to make his mom or me cry. That really hit me. I don't want them to forget him. I realized we'd been avoiding mentioning him, as if that could magically make the loss less painful. Honestly it was making things worse. Nobody loved Christmas more than he did."

Okay. Now I'm bawling and sniffing into the tissue Dad just handed me. I blow my nose as discreetly as possible and fight down panic. I don't want to be doing this. I'm suddenly overcome with grief, and I can't breathe. My dad puts his arm across my shoulders and tugs me against his side. He pats me comfortingly. I hear others sniffing and I look up, glancing around the circle, I see that quite a few people besides me are teared up. Nobody is staring at me. *So maybe I'm not overreacting. It's not just me.* Also, everyone looks open and accepting. Some are nodding in understanding but every single person in the circle is relating to Judy's story.

Dad clears his throat. "I brought my daughter Evie with me tonight. Evie came home to help me with my knee surgery. Like you Judy, I wasn't sure whether to talk about Ginny. I was afraid it'd be too painful for my daughter. I wanted to protect her. I know she's found it hard to come home since we lost Ginny. I didn't want to make it harder for her. But I took the things said at the last meeting to heart and I opened up. I don't want to bury my feelings or the great memories we have. It wasn't working anyway." The group chuckles.

"So, me and my beautiful daughter are making new traditions and carrying on with some old ones. Today we went and bought ourselves a tree from the Barringtons' tree farm." Dad tears up and holds his hand pausing for

a beat, then continues. “That’s one of the old traditions we’re going to keep. It was really nice. Wasn’t it Evie?”

“The best,” I agree. The meeting continues with more stories, more tears. I had no intention of sharing but to my surprise I raise my hand.

“Um,” I stammer, “I didn’t expect to talk but in the face of so much courage I have to. I am in awe of everyone here. I’ve been so terrified to face my grief, to feel it, that I’ve been running as fast as I can to escape. For someone who is supposedly bright,” I flash a watery smile, “not so much. I thought I could numb my way through it, anesthetize myself with exhaustion, bargain with fate and go around it. Anything but through it.”

I pause and collect myself. “I’m ashamed to admit that I’ve avoided coming home, leaving my dad all alone, instead of supporting him and facing it together.” I choke back a sob. “I left right after the funeral. I didn’t even stay with Dad that night. Somehow, I’d convinced myself I was coping. Doing just fine folks, thanks for asking. Guess what? Surprise!” I say sarcastically. “I was lying to myself.”

“But... coming home this time has been different... healing. Dad and I have talked about Mom. I’ve even talked *to* Mom. I swear she heard me. I’m not sure I could have done it any differently before, really, because I truly think I might have died, but I don’t need to run anymore. I have a whole lot of forgiveness to ask for from my dad and myself too, for being so selfish. I’m touched by all of you who have shared tonight and laid yourselves bare. It’s such a generous gift. Thank you.”

Charlie says, “Thank you, Evie. You’re not alone. A lot of people cope by escaping. Trust me, it’s not uncommon. In the beginning that was the best you could do. Some losses are just too big. Too overwhelming. You can’t blame yourself for needing time. We all grieve in our own way. I hope you take this in, you did nothing wrong and I’m glad you’re here now.”

I put my hand over my heart and nod my thanks. “Can I say one more thing? Tomorrow is Dad’s knee surgery, and I’m a nervous wreck. Any

thoughts and prayers would be so appreciated.”

On our way home Dad reaches over and takes my hand. “I’m really proud of you, Evie. It took a lot of courage to share with a group of strangers like that. We’re going to be okay.”

I feel like I’m about seven when I say, “I’m not gonna lie, I’m worried about tomorrow. I’m having PTSD. I couldn’t bear to lose you, too.”

“I’m going to be just fine. Hear me?” he says sternly.

“Promise?”

“I’m not the least bit worried and neither should you be. We’ll get through this together. Now pull out your phone and put Jamie and Gwen’s numbers in. I promised them you’d call when I was out of surgery.”

I don’t know why, but that comforts me. It feels like I’m not alone. I enter them into my contacts and pocket my phone. I feel a sudden calm come over me thinking of Jamie. I remember way back, when his confidence and steadiness had always made me feel safe. But... I’m not going to think about that right now.

JAMIE

“*I*’ve packed a loaf of crusty bread in with the casserole,” Mom says. “Tell Evie to pre-heat the oven to 350° for the casserole and bake it for forty minutes then throw in the bread for the last ten minutes.” Mom made her homemade chicken and noodles casserole which is neatly tucked in an insulated tote to drop off at the Parkers’.

“Thanks, Mom,” I say. “Gotta go. Don’t want to be late.” Hux follows me to the door his ears perked up until I say, “Hux, you’re staying here with Grandma. I’ll be back later.” When he gets the message I’m leaving him behind, his ears go back. He is not a happy camper with this turn of events. I’m getting the stink eye. “I’ll take you next time. Three dogs are three too many for Coach today.” I guiltily close the door in his face and take off. My body is humming as I drive over there.

Coach came through surgery like a champ. I visited him at the hospital all three days and got to meet his new friend, Gwen, yesterday. The first time I showed up, Coach was still in surgery and when Evie looked up and saw me, she slumped with relief. Made me feel pretty good. Cranked up my alpha male protector for sure. What hot blooded male on earth is immune to a little adulation from a smokin’ hot woman? I sat with her until Coach was out of surgery then we both went to the recovery room to see him. I was surprised when Evie asked me for help getting him into the house today. I’m meeting

them over there now.

Bill has a couple days of physical therapy under his belt, so I'm not worried about him getting up the porch stairs. But I figure it's better that I be there. That's what I'm telling myself anyway. Plus, I don't want the dogs jumping up or tripping Bill. That would be terrible. His bed and the main bathroom are on the first floor, so Evie didn't have to set up a hospital bed.

Bill will be on a walker or crutches for the next month. Then a cane until he can walk with an even stride. Just ask me about knee surgery. I can tell you all about it. Painful as fuck. I don't envy Coach one bit. I didn't have to have a full joint replacement like him, but the rehab was still brutal.

I drive down the lane and see that they aren't here yet. Good. I have time to let the dogs out to blow off their excess energy. I use the key Coach gave me shortly after Ginny died and call to them. Mags and Bruiser greet me like I'm their best bud until I let them out. Then I'm yesterday's burnt toast the second they hit the door. They zoom around the yard like they've been cooped up for days. Bruiser finally stops to hike his leg while Mags sniffs daintily until she finds the perfect spot to squat. I go inside and take the casserole out of the cooler, placing it in the fridge, then head back outside.

I trudge around the barn to the back pasture to check on the horses. They're huddled together towards the tree line and perk up and come running when I whistle. I pull out a few oat treats from my pocket and give one to each of them. Randy flattens his ears while trying to hog Bunny's but I'm top dog here.

The dogs bark and then I hear tires crunching over gravel and see Evie's flashy white car coming slowly down the lane. My pulse kicks up a notch. I call the dogs and secure them in the paddock until we can get Coach settled inside.

Evie looks tense, her face pinched with worry. Bringing a loved one home from the hospital is not for sissies. I remember bringing Dad home after his back surgery. It can be overwhelming. You feel like you aren't

qualified to handle patient care. The ole 'what ifs' can take over.

I approach the passenger side and open the door where Coach is sprawled, his seat pushed all the way back, injured leg stretched out. "Hey, Coach." I see why Evie is stressed. Bill is as white as a sheet and in obvious pain. "I've got you," I say. "Is the walker going to be enough or should I get the wheelchair?"

He forces a tight smile. "Walker is fine," he says.

Evie is already setting it up. Coach pushes himself to the edge of the seat and I say, "How about if you wrap your arms around my neck and use me to stand?" He nods so I lean down and help him up. Evie positions the walker beside us, and he lets go of me and grips the bar.

"I'll be right behind you going up the stairs," I say. Evie hovers nervously wringing her hands. I squeeze her shoulder. "He's doing great. We've got this. I'll be right behind him."

She chews on her bottom lip and nods. We make it inside and Bill wants to go directly to bed. Evie sprints ahead of us to turn down the bedding. I see she's already removed the throw rugs in preparation for the homecoming. I help Coach into bed. "Mom sent a chicken and noodle casserole for supper. It's in the fridge. Be prepared to be wowed."

Bill smiles through obvious pain. "Tell her thanks. You've done too much as it is."

"I can never repay you for all you've done for me Coach," I say, choked up at seeing my hero so vulnerable. "I'll leave you to it. Get some rest. Might not seem like much but being discharged and transported takes its toll."

"Thanks, son. I do have one more favor to ask."

"You name it."

"I was hoping you might help Evie set up and decorate the tree. It's in the barn. I can supervise from my recliner, but I won't be of much use otherwise."

Evie's eyes go round. "Dad, I can do it myself. Jamie has..."

I quickly interrupt, "I'd love to help."

"That's a relief," Coach says weakly. I narrow my eyes at him. Did I detect a bit of subterfuge? That crafty fox. When he winks at me, I'm sure of it.

Evie rolls her eyes and says, "Dad, I'll walk Jamie out then get you set up."

"Take your time. I'm not going anywhere."

When we reach the living room I say, "I'll go get the dogs."

She stops me with a hand on my arm. "Don't listen to Dad. I'm a big girl. Danny can bring it in, and I can decorate the tree by myself."

"A promise is a promise. Friday night work for you? It's my weekend off at the fire station."

Her brow wrinkles. "Are you sure?"

"Are you kidding me? I love decorating Christmas trees."

Her eyes twinkle. "I almost believe you."

"What time?" I ask.

"How about six?"

"Perfect. I'll bring pizza. You still like pepperoni, extra mushroom and extra cheese?" I ask.

Her eyes widen in surprise and a smile blossoms. "Good memory."

"I remember everything," I say tapping my forehead.

She laughs. "Now that's a scary thought." She squints at me. "But are you sure about Friday? I feel like the Parkers are taking over your life."

I itch to run my thumb across her forehead, smoothing out the worry lines. My eyes dip lower to her tempting lips. She tucks her hair behind her ears and stares back her expression unreadable. "Evie, I want to spend time with you. That may be inconvenient but it's the truth."

"Jamie, I'm not sure it's a good idea. It's so confusing. The past is fusing with the present in a weird way. I'm not sure what's even real."

Expelling a long breath, I put my hands on her shoulders and step close.

Leaning my forehead against hers, I say, “Evie, I’ve missed you. I’m so sorry I fucked up back then. I was a stupid kid and I handled things so badly.” She shudders and I hear her sigh. Then my fingers are tangling in her hair. I cup her head then dip down softly, kissing her lips, and it feels like home. There is no awkwardness as she parts her lips, inviting me in. My body remembers everything about Evie... her taste, her smell, it all feels familiar and right.

I slide one hand down and press into the curve of her back pulling her against my hardness. I hear her breath hiss, but she doesn’t pull away. Her fingers grip my biceps, biting in. I cover her mouth and rediscover what used to be mine. Her hands circle my waist, and she moans into my mouth. I want her. I need her.

The barking dogs and a car door slamming breaks the spell. I lift my head. Her eyes are glazed over with lust. I’m sure mine look the same. I hug her to me, resting my chin on top of her head and sigh. “Evie, how is it that you feel so right in my arms?”

There’s a knock at the door and she pulls away, running her fingers through her mussed hair. “I’d better answer that.” She walks to the door and opens it.

“Gwen! Come in.”

“I won’t stay. I just wanted to drop off some cookies I baked. Chocolate chip. The patient’s favorite.”

“Thank you. Do you want to say hello to Dad?”

She waves her hand. “Another time. He needs to rest. I’ll check in later this week.”

Taking a chance, I say, “Gwen? Would you like to help us decorate the tree Friday night? I’m bringing pizza.”

She beams. “I would love that! What time and what should I bring?”

“Six, and no need to bring anything. Anything you don’t like on your pizza?”

“No worries. I like everything,” she says. “Tell Bill I’ll see him soon. Bye

now.” She leaves and we’re alone again.

Instinctively I reach to caress Evie’s cheek then stop mid-motion and drop my arm back down to my side. My lips are still tingling, and I have a semi in my pants. I need to put the brakes on. The last thing I want to do is spook her. “See you Friday, Evie.”

Her lips part like she’s about to say something then she nods.

I let the dogs out of the paddock, and they run straight for the porch. Evie lets them in and meets my gaze. She waves then shuts the door.

EVIE

“*A*lexa, play Christmas songs,” I say, as I grip the tree about mid-way up the trunk. The needles are uncomfortably scratchy against my skin. Jamie lies prone on the floor under the tree, tightening the screws on the stand. All that is sticking out is his fine backside and muscular legs, looking mighty tasty in his faded Levis. Alexa replies and holiday tunes begin streaming through my Bose speakers.

“Is that better?” he says, voice muffled.

“Almost. It’s still leaning slightly to the right.” We placed the tree to the right of the fireplace, which is burning brightly, casting a warm glow over the room. Mags and Bruiser are settled on their beds while Huxley hyper-vigilantly watches every move Jamie makes. “What do you think, Hux?” Huxley’s eyes dart to me for a millisecond then back to his person. The herding instinct is real, folks. I chuckle at his focus. “He’s locked in,” I explain to Jamie.

Puss is lounging on the back of the couch paying rapt attention and making mental playdates with the tree.

“How’s that?” Jamie says, voice strained.

“Better. Hold on a sec, I’ll step back and take a look.” I walk backwards a few paces and study the tree. “I think we’ve got it.”

I watch his delectable ass as he army crawls out from under the tree. He

hops up in one fluid motion, then fluffs his hair with both hands, dislodging any clinging needles from his wild mop. He takes a look at his work and agrees. “Perfect. Where are your lights? I’ll start stringing them.”

I lift the lid off a large plastic tub and pull out several strings of lights to test. “Let’s start with these,” I say. I plug them in one at a time to make sure they all work. I hand them to Jamie then I return to the tub to search for the Christmas star. “How many lights do you think we’ll need?”

“I’d say at least two or three more strands. This tree is massive.”

“Here’s the star,” I say. I carefully take it out of the box. My mind drifts back to the year Mom and I bought it while we were out Christmas shopping in downtown Chicago. It had been a blustery December day and Mom had come down to spend a couple of days with me during the holiday season. I’d actually taken two days off work. Shocking. The star was ridiculously expensive, but we couldn’t resist. We giggled, pinky swearing not to tell Dad we’d spent sixty-five dollars on a tree topper. “Wait until you see it lit up. It’s a light show all on its own,” I say. Setting it aside, I dig out three more strings of lights to test.

Jamie looks over at the star and chuckles while untangling a string of lights. “You think it’s big enough?”

“Don’t laugh. You’re going to want one after you see it.”

“No doubt.” He smiles at me, and I swallow hard at the warmth in his gaze.

“I’m glad you came a little early to get started before Gwen gets here,” I say.

“What time is it?” he asks.

I look at my watch. “She’ll be here any minute. Why, are you hungry?”

“I was born hungry. I had to smell that pizza the entire ride over. Huxley and I were tortured.”

“Poor dears,” I say. “I’ll go check on Dad and get him settled in his recliner.”

“Sounds good.” He lays out the sorted lights and starts towards the kitchen. “I’ll pre-heat the oven...” he stops short and pivots, “if you don’t mind?”

It’s so weird because it’s completely natural that he should make himself at home. This was his second home all through high school and yet, there’s a lifetime of experiences between then and now. I’ve traveled, visited Italy and Spain and Thailand without him. I completed college and law school, passed the bar exam, tried big cases, conquered a million fears... all without him. In some ways we’re strangers but I feel like we’ve been here before. It’s so confusing.

“Of course,” I say, quietly. “You never have to ask, Jamie.” His eyes flare. The chemistry between us is unreal. I’m ready to jump his bones, confusion or not.

I go back to Dad’s room and he’s sitting on the edge of his bed pulling on a thick maroon cardigan over his navy polo shirt. “Looking snazzy,” I say.

“This old thing?” he jokes.

“I really like Gwen.”

His eyes sparkle. “I’m glad. I do too, but I don’t want you to get the wrong idea, we’re just friends.”

I pull his collar out from under the sweater and straighten it, then pat his chest, biting back a grin. “A-huh,” I say. “Friends are important.”

Dad says, “I see where this is going.”

“I didn’t say a thing.”

“You didn’t have to.”

“All I’m saying is I like her, and I wouldn’t mind a bit if you decided to pursue something more than friendship.”

Dad scrubs the back of his neck uncomfortably. “It’s hard. I do like her, but I feel guilty. And before you say it, I know Ginny would want this for me. She said as much before she passed. But I don’t know, I just...”

“Dad, why wouldn’t you have some guilt? Just don’t let that ruin

something that could be wonderful. You deserve to be happy. Mom *would* want this, and so do I.”

I hear a burst of deep hearty laughter followed by a female cackle. “I guess Gwen’s here.”

“And Jamie is already charming her by the sounds of it.”

“Doing what he does best,” I agree. “Let’s go eat pizza and decorate us a tree.”

Dad gets situated in his recliner and Gwen serves him a plate with several slices of pizza. “What do you want to drink, Bill?” Gwen asks.

“How about some cider?”

“Sounds good,” she says. Dad watches as Gwen walks back to the kitchen area to grab his drink. She looks sharp and classy in her dark denim blue jeans and oversized light-yellow sweater. She is trim and shapely, the sweater accentuating her dark eyes. Her hair is pulled up in a chignon. Very elegant. She is beautiful, really. When she looks at my dad, I can tell she, at least, is way past the friend zone. Scratch that. When I see the way they look at each other, they’ve both crossed over that bridge. Dad just needs time to catch up with himself.

Jamie and I lock eyes and I know he’s thinking the same thing. I swear it’s like we’ve never been apart in some ways. He could always read my mind back then. “Hey, Chicago, how many slices do you want?”

“You don’t have to wait on me,” I say, approaching the pizza.

“I want to,” he says sweetly.

My heart is doing funny things in my chest. I know if we were alone right now, we’d be in danger of ripping each other’s clothes off. I sigh and relent. “Three pieces please. And lots of paper towels.”

He tsks. “I remember that about you. Very messy.”

I push him lightly. “Am not. Pizza is messy, not me.”

“I only need one square of Bounty. I’ll bet you a dollar you need a half dozen.”

“Whatever,” I say and return to sit on the couch next to Gwen. The dogs have roused from their inertia and are now begging adorably from an acceptable distance of three feet away. Jamie hands me a plate and an entire roll of paper towels then sits down next to me. We’re all facing the tree and fireplace. It’s cozy and companionable. “Rudolph, the Red-Nosed Reindeer” by Harry Connick Jr. starts playing, and I sing aloud, calling out the reindeer’s names. As I sing, I pick up a few carolers... my dad first, then Gwen and finally Jamie. We sing until we get to the shiny nose part then the pizza reigns supreme.

I take my first bite of pie and moan. “Gino’s has the very best pizza. Even better than Chicago pizza,” I say with a mouthful. Jamie nods in agreement while taking half the slice in one bite.

“When I was growing up in Chicago, my dad owned a pizza parlor,” Gwen shares.

“Are you Italian, then?” I ask.

“Half. My father was Italian, and my mother was Welsh.”

“How did you wind up here?” Jamie asks.

“My husband and I came here on vacation and fell in love with the town and lake living, then when he retired, we bought a house and moved here. We had five beautiful years here before he died.”

“Do you have any children?” I ask.

“Three. Two sons and a daughter. They all live right outside of Chicago. I haven’t convinced them to move here yet. My youngest daughter keeps trying to get me to move in with them. My grandchildren are in on the coercion. But I keep saying no. I like it here too much to leave. Plus, I like my independence.”

Dad and Gwen exchange a look. Dad says, “I’m glad you’re here.” She reaches over and squeezes his hand. I inwardly sigh. I can totally see them together.

When we finish eating, Jamie makes a production of counting the

crumpled paper towels on my plate as he adds them up. “One, two, three, four... Lord, save a tree, five!”

“Save a tree?” I whoop indignantly. “You own a Christmas tree farm!” We all laugh.

He shrugs. “Sounded good. Plus, we replant what we cut down and then some.”

“Thirty lashes with a wet noodle,” Gwen says. “Are we ready to tackle the tree?”

JAMIE

J reach down to take the Christmas ornament Evie is handing up to me.

“This is one of my favorites,” she says on a sigh.

I examine the blown glass penguin wearing winter gear and skis. “I remember this one,” I say.

She looks up at me in surprise. “You do?”

“Sure. Every year when we’d decorate, you’d say the same thing.”

She laughs. “Did not.”

“I swear,” I say as I hook it onto a top branch. She hands me another. “I remember this one, too,” I say. “We bought it our first Christmas together, freshman year.”

“I can’t believe you remember that.”

Gwen chimes in, “This guy here is a true romantic. I wish he’d spend a little time with my sons. He could teach them a thing or two.”

“Don’t give him a bigger head than he already has,” Evie grumbles.

“By the way, Coach, did you figure out how the front gate got damaged?”

“Car went off the road. Skid marks and tire tracks in the ditch right up to the bent gate. Pretty clear.”

“Mystery solved. Need me to put a new gate up for ya?”

“Danny already saw to it. Thanks.”

We have kind of a train situation going on here. Coach rifles through the

tub and pulls out ornaments, Gwen adds hooks if needed and passes them on to Evie who hands them to me. The cat's tail twitches, his golden eyes still watching the tree-trimming with a little bit too much curiosity. The mutts are stretched out—all except Hux of course, who takes his job more seriously. Michael Bubl  is singing "Santa Claus is Coming to Town" in his uber crooner's voice.

My chest tightens. Man, is this really happening right now? I never thought in a million years I'd ever get the chance to spend another holiday with Evie Parker. I feel like I won the lottery. The only girl I could ever imagine spending my life with smiles up at me and I'm a goner. Her olive-green wool pullover makes the green of her eyes that much more striking. Her hair is tumbling down around her shoulders and back in thick, soft curls. What I wouldn't give right now to lace my fingers through it and kiss her senseless.

She's wearing a pair of scrunchy Christmas socks with candy canes and reindeer that overlap her gray leggings. This is the Evie I remember. Geeky, fun, sassy, and bright. I hardly recognize her as the same exhausted, stiff person who arrived here two weeks ago. She's slowly letting me back in and I'm down for it. Not just down for it. It's making me want the things I lost a long time ago and that scares the shit out of me.

"What about this one," she says, holding up a moose ornament.

I roll my eyes. "I remember. My ninth-grade competition bought that for you. Maybe I should drop it."

"You better not. Besides, Eric wasn't competition, he was just a friend."

"You girls can be so obtuse sometimes. He had a massive crush on you. He was just too shy to do anything about it."

"He did not!" she shrieks.

"What do you think, Coach?" I ask.

"Well, sorry, honey, but I have to agree with Jamie on this one."

"Why am I not surprised," she says sourly. "Gwen, what are we going to

do with these two? One says jump and the other says how high.”

“Not sure but... ah, I love this one!” she exclaims holding up a weathered glass Santa and obvious antique. It was Ginny Parker’s favorite, if memory serves me, partly because she’d had it when she was a little girl. I see Evie and Coach exchange a look and I know I’m right.

“That was Mom’s favorite,” Evie confirms. “It was the only ornament that she had from when she was little.”

Gwen studies it, handling it like the treasure it is. “Here Evie. I think it should be front and center.” Evie secures it to the tree and the colorful tree lights reflect off the silver and red painted St. Nick.

“Ladies and gent, do you think we have enough decorations on the upper part?” Since I’m six-foot-three, I always get the jobs that, for most folks, would require a ladder. We continue covering the tree until the Parkers are satisfied.

“It’s tinsel time,” Evie says gleefully.

I look at Gwen sternly. “Now, Gwen, if you are going to partake in the tinsel topping you must follow the Parker rules. Putting on more than one strand at a time is a punishable crime in this household. Do you agree to those terms?” I ask.

Evie snickers and Coach guffaws before saying, “Busted. He’s not wrong.”

Gwen crosses her heart playing along. “One strand at a time, I promise.”

I arch my brows at the Parkers. “Well? What do you two think? Can we trust her?”

“Yes,” they chorus merrily.

“Let us begin then.” We all take a handful and begin the final touches on the magnificent tree. When we’re empty handed, we step back and marvel at the showpiece as Frank Sinatra croons, “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas.”

Evie clasps her hands. “It’s beautiful,” she sighs, staring at it in wonder. It

really is. Probably magazine worthy. One of the best I've ever decorated.

"We could start a business," Gwen says. "It's truly the loveliest tree I've ever seen. There must be magic in the air. A tree decorated with love makes for the best ones."

I notice Evie's cheeks turn pink and I wonder why. Could it have been the love comment? And could she be any cuter? I'd like to haul her into my arms and give her something else to blush about.

"Time for hot chocolate," she says hurriedly. "Taking orders."

"I'll help," I say.

Gwen sits next to Bill, and I follow Evie. When she opens the refrigerator, I slip my arms around her waist from behind and rest my chin on her shoulder. I whisper into her ear, my breath stirring her glorious hair. "Feels like old times, doesn't it?"

She melts into me and nods without turning. When I lift her heavy hair from one shoulder, she tilts her head to allow me access. I nuzzle her neck, aware that we're in full view of Bill and Gwen if they turn around, but I don't care. She smells sensual and earthy, sandalwood and a lingering touch of pine in her hair. I've had to watch her all night long without touching and I'm going nuts with a need to hold her in my arms.

"I'd like to take you out on a date. No pressure. One date. What do you say?" I say softly against her ear.

She turns in my arms and licks her bottom lip. I'd like to be the one licking that lip. "To what end?" she asks.

"Does there have to be an end game? Just a date, Evie. I can't stop thinking about you. I have some things I need to say. We can go out and grab something to eat then go bowling afterwards. Come on, it'll be fun. We have nothing to lose." I see hurt flash in her eyes and immediately feel like a dope for saying that. "I'm sorry. What I meant by nothing to lose is we're obviously fighting an attraction so why not see where this goes?"

"Jamie, its different for me. I can't handle another heartbreak."

“One date. We each get to tell our stories. I want to know what you’ve been up to... everything. Every single thing you’ve been doing for the last fifteen years. Catch me up. Please,” I beg.

She surprises me and caresses my cheek. My heart thuds in my chest. “Okay,” she says.

My mouth drops open. “Okay? Really?” I’m shook.

Her eyes twinkle at me, cheeks nice and rosy so what else can I do? I pick her up and whoop as I swing her around. “That’s great! Thank you!”

“What did we miss?” Coach calls out.

“Your daughter agreed to go out on a date with me. Ain’t that the sweetest thing you’ve ever heard?” I say.

Coach is smiling from ear to ear and Gwen is looking like she’s watching the world’s best rom-com, a dreamy look in her eyes. I know the feeling.

JAMIE

*J*rinse off the shaving cream and slap on some aftershave my sister-in-law bought me last year for Christmas. I peruse my closet looking for the perfect shirt that says I care, without being over the top. I opt for a thin khaki sweater with a zippered neck and relaxed fit jeans. I grab my watch from the top of my dresser as I head for the door. I slip into my fleece lined down jacket, pull on my Nikes then walk out the door whistling. I've got a date with Evie Parker.

*E*vie is already running across the yard to meet me when I pull up. She climbs into the passenger seat, eyes glittering, cheeks flushed. "I never saw this happening in a million years," she says buckling in.

"That makes two of us. I'm glad it is, though." I pull onto the road and head towards town.

"I heard there was a fire at The Wellington Restaurant last night."

"Yes. Grease fire. Contained to the kitchen. They'll be shut down for a couple weeks. Bad time of year to lose business. They book a fair number of private parties over the holidays."

"At least no one was hurt. It could have been the entire building."

"True." I can feel her studying me. I cock a brow at her. "What?" I ask.

“Nothing.”

“Evie, this is me you’re talking to. Go ahead, you can say anything. I don’t mind.”

Frowning, she bites her luscious lower lip. “Well, to be honest I was thinking about your career and how much you loved football. It was your dream since you were a little kid.” Her hand presses to her chest. “I guess I’m wondering how it is that you’re not bitter. You seem so happy... well-adjusted.”

I snort out a laugh. “It took a few years. I was pissed at the world for a while. Poor me, why did this happen to me? What did I ever do to deserve this yada yada.” I look over at her; she’s listening attentively. “Your dad helped me a lot.”

“He did?”

“Yeah. He saved my ass.”

“I wouldn’t know.” She wrinkles her nose. “Mom and Dad were forbidden from mentioning your name to me. But you know they’ve always loved you.”

I lift one shoulder. “I don’t know why. I don’t blame you for hating me, Evie. I fucked up everything.”

“Pretty much,” she says.

I wince. “Ouch.”

“You broke up the day before I left for college! What can I say? I was shocked. I wanted to die. I was so in love with you. We had our lives planned out together. I felt like I died that day.”

“I know, I know. It’s hard to explain what depression does to a person. I was in a dark place and for a while I couldn’t find my way out. One minute I’m a star athlete and in the blink of an eye I can’t even walk without crutches. Just like that, every plan I’d made went up in smoke. Fire reference... did you catch that?” I joke to lighten the conversation.

“I wanted to help, and you pushed me away. You wouldn’t talk to me

about it, you withdrew. I felt helpless,” she says.

I grab her hand and hold it. “I know Evie. I’m so sorry.” I pull into the lot of the Cozy Diner and park. “This okay? Not that glam but you always loved their burgers. They haven’t changed.”

“It’s perfect.” Her phone pings and she looks at the incoming text. Scowling she stuffs it back into her pocket.

“Everything alright?” I ask. She nods. I get out and walk around to open her door. I take her hand and help her out. She looks so cute in her knit beanie with the pompom. I want to kiss every one of her freckles, especially the one at the corner of her upper lip. I realize I’m staring, and clear my throat. “You look great. I think Michigan suits you much more than Chicago. Just sayin’.”

Her smile lights up her face. “I didn’t realize how stressed out I was until I got away from it all.”

“Hard to see the forest for the trees, for sure.”

We walk into the brightly lit diner and grab a corner booth with the hope of some privacy. The server approaches and I grit my teeth. Suzy Jameson. She sets two clear hard plastic cups with crushed ice and water in front of us. “Hey Jamie,” she says flirtatiously before glancing over at Evie and gasping. “Evie Parker? As I live and breathe.”

“Hi, Suzy,” Evie says coolly.

“OMG! I feel like I should get an autograph or something. I saw you on *Dateline* and I said to my husband, I know her. I went to school with her.”

Evie smiles uncomfortably. I know for a fact that Suzy and the head cheerleader Natalie Clark, were the mean girls in high school. Natalie used to give Evie a hard time because she had set her sights on me and refused to take no for an answer.

Suzy continues, “I told him no surprise, you were always such a brain.”

I interrupt to say, “When did you start working here, Suzy?”

“About a month ago. Brad got laid off so I’m working part time for now.

So, you two are back together after all these years? Wait until Natalie hears this.”

“I think we need a minute to look over the menu,” I say pointedly.

She cackles. “My bad. MYOB, right? Study away. I’ll be back in a jiffy.”

I frown as she walks away. “If I’d known she was working here we’d have gone somewhere else. Sorry.”

Evie shudders. “Flashbacks.”

“What can I say? Gotta take the bad with the good in a small town.”

“Suzy Jameson is definitely in the bad category,” she mutters.

“I remember that group of girls were all so jealous of you they couldn’t see straight.”

“Only because they were all crushing on you.” Evie gives me a warning kick under the table and Suzy walks by with coffee to refill the booth right next to us.

“Be right with you after I take table three’s order,” Suzy says to us.

We quickly study the menus and close them. Evie arches her brows at me in question. “Burger and fries,” I say.

“Me too, and a chocolate milkshake,” Evie says.

Suzy returns and takes our orders and I finally have Evie’s undivided attention again. I could look into her eyes all day long.

“Where were we?” I say.

“The part where you admitted what a jerk you were,” Evie says.

I lean forward and fold my hands on the table. “I’d pay a million bucks for a redo. It may sound lame but at the time, I truly believed I was doing what was best for you. In my own defense, I don’t believe I ever thought the breakup would be permanent. I swear. I never stopped loving you, but I knew you deserved a shot at your dream without me weighing you down. You were going places, Evie. You didn’t need an albatross like me hanging around your neck.”

Her lips twist. “For my own good? Right. Do you know how patronizing

that sounds? I was devastated. I could hardly function. It was a set-up for failure. How in the hell could that have been what was best for me?”

I pinch the bridge of my nose. “I know that now.” Her eyes look huge in her face. I’m surprised to see they are brimming with unshed tears. “Baby, I’m so sorry. I never meant to hurt you like that.”

She takes in a ragged breath. She looks around before continuing in a low voice. “Jamie, there is something you don’t know. I never told another soul.” She chews on her bottom lip nervously.

I slide my hand palm up across the table and she grasps it. “What?” I ask.

“Right after I got to school, I was late with my period.” I freeze, knowing what’s coming but not wanting to know.

“I bought a pregnancy test right away, and it was positive.” A tear escapes and I reach across and wipe it away with my thumb.

I cast around for the right words and come up short. “And you couldn’t tell me.” I say quietly, my voice hoarse with regret. I scrub my face with my hand feeling like I’ve been sucker punched in the gut.

“You’d just told me you wanted to have freedom to explore... live your life. We were too young blah blah blah. You were still recovering from your injuries. Then I’m supposed to saddle you with a baby?”

“I didn’t mean any of it. It was all a lie. Fuck, Evie, what did you think? That I could really turn it off that fast?”

“I didn’t know what to think. I was too hurt to think.”

“Evie, I shouldn’t have said that. None of it was your fault. Why wouldn’t you take my word for it? I’m so sorry. I should have been there... I hate that you were all alone. What happened? Did you decide to terminate the pregnancy?”

“No! I wanted our child. I decided I’d finish the semester, drop out, take the year off and return to school after the baby was born.”

“Oh.” Not gonna lie, I’m gutted. I’m almost sick to my stomach. We’d always talked about having kids. I want to be a father in the worst of ways

and just thinking that we lost a child, our child, is hard to hear.

“A couple of days after I took the test, I miscarried. I’d wrapped my mind around having this baby and was already picking out names and fantasizing about being a mom. Then another dream was ripped out from under me.”

“And here I was busy wallowing in my own fucking misery,” I say, defeated.

“I hated you back then. I felt like you’d ruined my life.” She shrugs one shoulder then reaches across the table and strokes my cheek. “Now, I’m sorry I didn’t tell you before. I can see how shocked you are... hearing it for the first time, you’re probably feeling all those feelings of loss I had back then, like it just happened. Jamie, I need to say you can’t beat yourself up for something you didn’t know about. I was going to tell you back then. In fact, I had planned on coming home that weekend. Then, like that,” she snaps her fingers, “there was no reason to come home anymore.”

Suzy arrives carrying a round tray and places our burger platters in front of us. “Here you go,” she says.

Evie mumbles thanks, and I nod without looking at her. She sniffs loudly but gets the hint and leaves us alone again.

“I’ve kind of lost my appetite,” I say. “I can’t imagine you going through all that alone. I feel sick about it. We were going to have a baby,” I say numbly. My eyes sting and I pinch the bridge of my nose. “What did you do... I mean after?” The rasp in my voice doesn’t even sound like me.

“I buried myself in books and studying. I was pretty shut down for a long time. Then, I dated a little in undergrad, but in law school there was no time. I was running as fast as I could. I couldn’t let my losses catch up with me.” She shakes her head. “Did the same after Mom died.”

“You’re strong as hell, Evie. You can call it running. I call it resiliency. Took a lot of courage to push on through.” We’re both picking at our food like it’s boiled sheep head. She absently nibbles on a fry.

“Jamie?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m sorry, too. I never gave you the benefit of the doubt. I needed to blame you for blowing up my life. I was selfish not to see that yours was just as shattered as mine.”

“Does this mean you can forgive me?”

She bites her bottom lip and smiles. When she nods my heart soars. I’ve been waiting for this since I was eighteen.

“How about you?” she asks.

“Forgive you? For what? As far as I’m concerned, it’s all on me.”

“Not really. You were doing the best you could. I guess we both were. The baby wasn’t meant to be. I still think about her.” She smiles shyly. “I felt like it was a girl. She’d be fifteen. Can you imagine?” There are tears in my eyes as we laugh together.

“We’re getting old, Evie,” I say. I pick up my burger and take a bite, my appetite miraculously returning. “Mm.” Double fist my sandwich, I incline my head towards her plate. “Eat up.”

Evie picks hers up and opens wide to fit the “everything on it” cheeseburger she ordered.

She swallows then sips her milkshake. “Wow. Delicious.” She leans towards me and whispers, “It’s even worth going through Suzy to get it.”

“Agreed. Ready to get your butt kicked at the bowling alley?”

“Big talker. We’ll see about that.” We eat every last bite and I feel like a thousand-pound weight has been lifted from my shoulders.

EVIE

I watch the roadside illuminated by the truck's headlights as we head to the bowling alley. I'm always on the lookout for deer or other critters even when I'm not driving. I'm not gonna lie, I'm a little rattled by what transpired at the diner. Did fifteen years of hurt really get resolved in one freakin' hour? I sneak a glance at Jamie and as if sensing me he flashes a winsome smile, drawing me in like a bear to honey.

"Like what you see, Chicago?" he says.

My eyeballs drift heavenward, but truthfully, I think he's the most captivating man I've ever met. "And if I do?" I tease.

"Important that I check in now and then... see if the answer has changed. Well? Don't be shy." He leans sideways across the truck seat tapping his cheek. "A kiss on the cheek says yes. If not, I'll have to hang my head in despair."

Impulsively, I sway towards him and plant a kiss on his cheek. "Yes, Jamie Parker. I like what I see, as if you didn't already know that." He grabs my hand kissing my palm and I quiver inside. *This guy!*

"When was the last time you bowled? Do they even know what a bowling alley is in Chicago?" he asks.

"Are you kidding me? One bowling alley has a sports bar with fancy cocktails, epic food, ping pong, billiards, arcade games and about twenty

bowling lanes. So there.”

“Huh. Have you been?”

“That’s beside the point.”

“I knew it!”

“I went once. Honestly, it’s too big for me. It’s like the superstore groceries. I like smaller places. Too many people, too noisy, too everything.”

“That’s my girl. You know what they say, you can take the girl out of the small town but...”

I finish for him, “You can’t take the small town out of the girl. This trip is certainly proving that.”

“Don’t tease me like that.”

“I mean it. I feel like a different person from the one who got here.”

“Don’t you miss the excitement of city life?”

“I’m not sure. I mean, I love Chicago. There’s always something interesting to do, but I work so much that it’s not an advantage. I love my condo. It has a fantastic view of the city and Lake Michigan. I have a few friends I met through work. We do the occasional girls’ night out that must be penciled in a month in advance and subject to change.”

“Sounds like a nightmare to me,” he says.

“Maybe. I thought I’d be bored to death stuck here for six weeks but time is flying by. I love being able to mess with my horses again. Muck stalls, trail ride, spend time with Dad... and you,” I add. “And there’s always bowling,” I say as he pulls into the parking lot.

*W*e walk in, and the first person I see is Tank. I clutch Jamie’s arm and point. “Look who’s here!”

Jamie waves enthusiastically. Tank motions us over.

“Did you just get here?” Jamie asks.

“Finished our first game. Casey is in the bathroom,” Tank shares.

Jamie's brows shoot up in surprise. "Ooh. Big date?"

"I wish. Pretty sure she's relegated me to the friend zone."

"I wouldn't be too sure."

Tank scratches his blonde buzz cut. "You want to join us or is this," he sizes us up, "private."

"I'd love to hang out with you guys," I burst out.

"Me too," Jamie says. "We'll go get our bowling shoes, pay, then meet you back here. Need anything from the bar?"

"Casey's got it covered."

"Be right back," Jamie says. He takes my hand, interlacing our fingers and I'm transported right back to high school. Tank, Jamie, Dee and I used to bowl together all the time. Now I'll be able to size Casey up and see if she's interested in more than friendship with Jamie. She seemed nice, but I was too into my feels to get past the jealousy the other day. Plus, Jamie and I are in a totally different place now. A pleasant warmth envelops me as I'm thinking that. I start hunting for the right ball while Jamie pays. I find a light-weight ball with the perfect finger hole size just as Jamie walks up. "Found one," I crow.

"Here are your shoes," he says his fingers dangling them by the heels.

I take them and snicker. "Some things never change. Am I a weirdo for taking comfort in the ugliness of bowling shoes? Same design, same two-tone."

He holds his up with a wry expression. "I mean I knew my feet were big but..." I double over laughing because his size twelves look like banana boats.

"I'm going to find my lucky ball after I put these on." He sits down on a bench and toes off his Nikes before slipping into the lace-ups. I sit down next to him and follow suit, then wait until he selects his ball. We join Tank and Casey, and her greeting is warm and sincere.

"This is great!" she exclaims. "I was hoping to get to spend some time

with you while you're home."

My jaw drops. "You were?"

She chuckles. "Why are you so surprised? You're pretty famous around these parts. Plus," she jerks her thumb toward Tank, "he's quite a fan."

I go over and hug Tank. He's so big and solid I can't even get my arms around him. "Did you miss me?" I ask.

He hugs me back. "You know it." My heart swells. I always loved Tank. He *always* took my side whenever Jamie and I bickered. He's a big teddy bear.

"Girls against guys?" Casey challenges.

"That'd be like taking candy from a baby," Jamie trash talks.

"Oh really?" she scoffs. "We're not afraid, are we Evie?"

"Nope."

"Have you forgotten we were athletes and champion ballers back in the day?"

"'Back in the day' is the operative phrase. Move over, chumps, there are new ballers in town." Casey says. She's a character and I find myself liking her immediately.

"Girls against guys," I declare. Jamie folds his arms across his chest pouting.

"Quit sulking, you'll still be able to canoodle," Casey says.

"Is my buddy sulking because he didn't get his way?" Tank chimes in.

"Yeah homey, aren't you supposed to be on my side?" Jamie grumbles, shoving Tank.

Tank grabs him and gives his head nookies. They wrestle for a second, like two big kids.

I swear it's like I've found a lost treasure. *My guys*. I'd spent most of my teens hanging with these boys, both of whom I loved completely and unconditionally in very different ways.

Casey and I win two out of the three games, and we aren't shy about

boasting as we leave the bowling alley. “Girl power,” Casey singsongs, fist bumping me.

“The ballers were out balled,” I joke. Jamie’s arm is slung casually across my shoulders as we walk to his truck. We reach Casey’s car first and stop to say our goodbyes.

“Don’t forget the fire station open house Saturday from noon to three,” Jamie says to Casey. “We’ll have tons of food and beverages.”

“I can make that,” Casey says. “I have evening shift that night.”

Tank squints down at her. “You’ll come?”

Casey is all smiles when she answers. “I’d love to. I wouldn’t want to miss the chance of seeing my local hero in action.”

The six-four linebacker blushes. “Aww, shucks,” he says. As I mentioned, the biggest teddy bear, *ever*.

“Well, it’s true. I admire you guys. Fighting fires is dangerous work.”

Casey gets into her car and rolls down her window. “I had a great time. Let’s do this again.”

“For sure,” I say.

With one last wave, she pulls out of the lot.

Jamie elbows Tank. “Bout time you step up and show her why she can’t live without you. Like Taylor Swift’s tune, “You Belong to Me.” What she’s been looking for is right here.... has been here the whole time. Right?”

“Shut the fuck up. You’d better pull that log out of your own eye,” Tank replies. Tank hops up into his truck and starts the engine. He grabs the door handle and spouts off before shutting it, “Hey, Mr. QB, you telling me to step up my romantic game is like telling me to parachute out of the plane while you’re still buckled in.”

“Get out of here. See you tomorrow.”

Jamie and I stroll to his truck, in no hurry. The waning moon is bright in the sky as I gaze up and point out the Pleiades star cluster. “See the brightest star over there?” I say pointing. “That’s Sirius.” It’s by far the brightest star

in the sky on this cold December night. “Did you know that it’s two times bigger than the Sun? If they were side by side, Sirius would outshine the sun. Weird, isn’t it?”

Jamie leans against the truck and pulls me to his chest. “I love how smart you are.” He kisses the tip of my cold nose. I tip my head back parting my lips. He dips down and kisses me... leisurely, lingeringly, satisfyingly... a soul deep kiss that makes my toes curl. His lips are insistent, his tongue licks, explores... he tastes like popcorn and the Twizzlers he just ate. His mouth and tongue are leaving no hostages as he devours me. Breathless, I bunch his hair between my fingers, holding his mouth to mine. His hands slide down to cup my butt and he tugs me tight against his hard cock. I moan into his mouth. I want him so bad I’m trembling.

Against my lips he murmurs, “My place?”

“Yes,” I answer breathlessly. He presses his lips to mine one last time, releasing me before he opens the door and I climb in. We can see our breath and the windows fog up while we wait for the truck to heat up. He blows into his hands then rubs them together. He grabs a cloth from the middle console and wipes the condensation from the windshield. When he looks at me his eyes are smoldering with need.

He takes a deep breath. “I’ve never wanted anyone or anything as bad as I want you, Evie Parker. I feel like a horny teenager.”

A shaky laugh escapes. “Same. It’s crazy.”

He brings my hand to his lips and presses a kiss on the tender skin of my inner wrist. My lady parts respond immediately. The low hum is like a current traveling through my body, landing right in the epicenter of my desire.

“Let’s get the hell out of here,” he growls. Abruptly he puts the truck in gear and practically peels out of the lot.

EVIE

When we get to Jamie's, he pulls off my hat and tosses it on a bench, then unzips my jacket slowly sliding it down my arms. It joins my hat, then he's reaching for me. His hands cup my face as he plants a soft kiss on my lips. Breathing my name, he sighs, "Evie, God, I've missed you." Jamie crushes me against his chest, and I cling to him as he peppers kisses across my brow, my eyelids, my nose, his stubble rough against my cheek. The sound of Huxley scratching at the door to get back in, interrupts us and I want to cling to him as he breaks away. I feel robbed... deprived. It's overwhelming how much I want him.

He returns, shrugging off his coat, his ridiculously broad shoulders and pecs outlined through the thin sweater that hugs his beautiful body. After flinging his coat next to mine, he clasps my hand and leads me to the living room. "Can I get you anything to drink? Beer, glass of wine?"

I cock my head, caught off guard by the question. It's the weird little things that throw me. "You drink wine?"

"I'm quite refined these days. Haven't you noticed?"

"Tell me it's not in a box, and I'll pick wine."

"What do you have against boxed wine?"

"Puleeze! Call me a snob, I don't care. Wine is the one thing I'm picky about."

“Phew. What a relief there is only one.”

I glint at him. “Ha ha.”

“Red or white?”

“I’m in the mood for red.”

“Sit your sumptuous self on the couch and I’ll light a fire then grab the wine.” I watch him until Huxley plunks his head in my lap, drawing my attention. I stroke him behind his soft ears as he stares soulfully up at me. “Handsome boy,” I coo.

Jamie returns with the wine and shakes his head in disgust at Huxley. “Opportunist,” he mutters. “I’m jealous of my damn dog. Hux, don’t be a pest,” he grouses.

“He’s not a pest, are you Huxley?” I murmur. He nudges my hand for more and I laugh.

“See?” Jamie gloats. He turns on some soft jazz, then bends down to grab a ball, tossing it across the room. “Go get it boy.” Hux practically flies without touching the ground. Jamie quickly plunks down next to me and stretches out resting his head on my lap. “That’s more like it.”

“You’re such a kid,” I say, brushing his hair back from his brow.

He grins at me. “I’m all man.” His gaze sweeps my face, eyes darkening with need and my body responds as fast as a cosmic ray. He tugs my head down for a kiss. Closing my eyes, I savor his strong hand splaying through my hair, his fingers tangling as his mouth engulfs mine.

I need to be even closer. I swear I could crawl under his skin, and it wouldn’t be close enough. I slip my hand under his sweater and glide over his hard delicious six pack abs. Dragging my fingertips through the soft hair on his chest I skim down to his happy trail. He smells like the outdoors, all male. His ruggedness makes me feel soft and delicate... and needy. I’d forgotten how sensual raw masculinity is, and what it’s like to be consumed by insatiable hunger. It’s almost painful. I release a shaky breath.

A tidal wave of pleasure swallows me when his large hands span my

waist. I am greedy and want him to take me... need him to dominate until we're both used up and exhausted. He shudders and I smile against his lips. *Good. He wants it as much as I do.* He sits up long enough to hook his arm under my knees and reposition us so we're lying down with him on his side next to me. His hands explore my body, skillful and confident, rough against my soft skin. God help me, he feels so familiar.

"Evie," he groans, voice raspy. My senses are on overload, the past and present colliding. Memories compete with the moment. The past echoes through me... I remember everything, the sounds of our ragged breath, the smell of leather, the texture of his skin beneath my hands, his gentle touch, our first time.

On a hot summer night, we'd parked his truck alongside the lake, under the moon and the stars and the cricket's serenade, we'd made love. We hadn't planned it but all the pent-up longing and fooling around, only taking it so far, had us both delirious with need. I remember how gentle Jamie had been... so worried he'd hurt me our first time. We'd explored with our hands, our lips, our tongues, marveling at the intensity of our desire. I remember the press of his cock against my bottom, his low husky voice in my ear, his breath stirring my hair. It was raw and innocent... when he'd entered me there was only us... wild, primal and uninhibited.

His rough hand reaching under my sweater brings me back to the moment... *Jamie*. He's really here... touching me, kissing me. He hitches up my top, exposing my belly. Leaning down he brushes soft kisses all over my tummy. His breath caresses my skin as his fingers fumble with the button of my jeans. I am drowning in need. I feel his rock-hard cock pressed against me and I whimper. My fingers tangle in his hair as he sweeps lower, nuzzling between my thighs. The way his hot mouth feels through my silk panties has me panting and thrusting against him.

When he tugs my jeans down, I lift my hips and he smoothly slides them off. His fingers find the elastic of my panties, slipping under the silk he drags

them slowly down my thighs. Reaching between my legs he explores my wet center and pushes his finger inside. I see stars. My tightness contracts around him as he inserts a second finger.

“You’re so wet, so tight,” he murmurs huskily against my throat as he pushes in deeper. “Do you like this?” I pant his name, tugging at his hair and riding his fingers. When he withdraws, I groan in frustration. He crawls back up, hovering over me. Leaning his weight on his forearms, breath labored, he asks, “Evie, are you sure this is what you want?”

“Yes, yes!” I say breathlessly, then blurt out, “We’re safe... I mean, I’m protected.”

“Ah. We’re good then, yeah?” He is so aroused it feels like a steel rod pressing against me. I reach between us and slip my hand under the waistband of his jeans then inside his briefs. I wrap my fingers around his erection. His sizeable cock is rock hard and feels like silk against my palm. I stroke him, rubbing my thumb over his wet tip. With a growl he kneels, lifts my sweater over my head, and tosses it to the floor. The bra follows and his eyes devour me, burning a scorching path over my breasts. I feel desirable, alluring... beautiful even, and insatiable.

He pulls off his own sweater, wickedly sexy as his muscles ripple with each movement. The cut of his triceps and pecs as they flex make my belly flutter. I run my palms up his body flicking my thumbs over his nipples. He squints down at me, biting his bottom lip. “Oh Evie. I’ve dreamed about this moment a thousand times.” He leans down, burying his face against my neck then assails me with open mouth kisses against my throat. His soft chest hair brushes against my bare breasts and I shudder.

He lifts his head, eyes glazed over with desire. “Evie, where have you been?” he whispers.

“I’m here now,” I reply softly raking my fingernails down his back.

Deep, husky laughter ripples across my senses. “What took you so damn long?”

His eyes darken as he massages my full breasts, pinching my erect nipples between his fingers. I arch into his cupped palms as he leans down and sucks a nipple into his hot wet mouth. He tugs and suckles and my body hums. His mouth and tongue hit every note, warm, erotic ... evoking a bottomless vessel of yearning. He releases my nipple with a pop and tucks one arm underneath to hold me closer, his other hand running roughly up and down my torso, his breath ragged. He continues the assault, teasing me with licks and nibbles.

My entire body is on fire, skin on skin, my breasts pressed against his chest quickening my pulse, stirring my libido until I cry out with need. When his hard cock rubs against me through his jeans, I begin to beg, "I need you inside me."

He stands long enough to shove off his jeans and briefs and when I see his cock erect and bobbing, I moan. He settles between my legs, spreading them wider, the head of his cock sliding against my entrance. He fills me completely with one hard thrust.

He throws his head back. "Fuck, Evie, you feel so good." Shuddering out a breath, he slowly rocks his hips, thrusting inside me again and again. He pushes my wild hair away from my face, then cups my cheek as he pumps in and out. Every thrust sends waves of sensation throughout my body. His dark glittering gaze pins me, and I can't look away. I'm his. He gradually picks up his pace all the while mesmerizing me with his heated gaze. He presses his thumb against my bottom lip then slides it against my tongue. I swear it feels like he's fucking my mouth.

"Jamie, please," I pant, arching against him. Bending down, he bites my bottom lip, then pushes his tongue in my mouth, his hips never losing their seductive rhythm. He bends my knees towards my chest, and I feel his hands trail up and down my outer thighs until he grips my hips for purchase.

My breasts bounce with each hard thrust. I watch passion overtake my lover, mirroring my own hunger as the staccato rhythm becomes unsteady.

He groans my name, “Evie.” I don’t know how long he rides me because I’m lost in a world where only Jamie and I exist. Our bodies slick with sweat, breath labored, like feral animals as we bring each other to the edge.

“Evie, I’m not going to last much longer,” he grinds out as he begins to pump faster and more erratically. He gives one hard thrust and pauses, seating himself deeply between my thighs and taking my mouth in a devastating kiss. I’m lost. My orgasm is close to bursting and when he begins to move his hips again, I feel the tension build. When the quakes begin, I cry out and wrap my thighs around his waist. He buries his face in my neck and shudders as he jerkily thrusts, coming inside me.

His hot panting breath on my neck gives me goosebumps. The shock waves of my climax reverberate against his softening cock, which is still inside me. I nibble on his ear and lick the sensitive skin right below. He buries his nose in my hair. My breath is shaky and my hands tremble as I sift my fingers through his mop of curls.

“Jamie,” I breathe out in a sigh.

“Evie,” he answers gruffly. “What the hell just happened?”

“I’m not sure,” I whisper, still stroking his hair. He rolls onto his back, taking me with him and I melt into his body. I could stay here forever. Just like this. Wrapped in his arms in our own little cocoon where the only thing that exists is us.

JAMIE

*W*e lie there silently for a bit, and I savor the feel of her incredibly soft skin and the weight of her on top of me. Her wild hair drapes over my chest and shoulders in unmanageable, riotous waves. I stare at her, drinking her in like a man dying of thirst. I'll never get enough. I cup her sweet ass with one hand while my other caresses up and down the length of her backside. My cock twitches as she snuggles closer, her thighs stretched along either side of me, which positions my cock perfectly between her legs.

She's so sensuous and cuddly right now. She looks down at me, all creamy skin, huge green eyes and kiss-swollen lips. She takes my breath away every single time I look at her. She leans up onto her elbows and I watch the feminine line of her creamy throat as she swallows, her pulse fluttering there. Her gaze is downcast and her thick lashes rest against the curve of her cheeks. She is exquisite. Age has only improved on perfection. Where her cheeks used to be more rounded in her youth, they're now pronounced, the high cheekbones flushed from our lovemaking. Her face is delicate with fine bone structure and currently devoid of any make-up that I can see.

She raises her eyes and grins at me as we lock gazes. She kisses my nose. "I love your nose," she says playfully. She kisses my jaw. "I love your sexy jaw." Her tongue darts out and she licks my lips. "I especially love your

mouth.”

“You do, do ya? What else do you love?”

She reaches between us and rubs my cock. “Mmm, this gets an honorable mention.”

“Oh really? But you don’t love it?”

Her cheeks turn pinker. “I wouldn’t say that.”

“You can’t possibly go shy on me now,” I say. I tuck her hair behind her ears then touch the pulse fluttering by her throat. “After all that screaming, I’ll never see you the same.”

She slides her arms around my neck, her eyes sparkling with humor. “You’re telling fibs again. I only screamed once, and it wasn’t really a scream.”

“What would you call it?”

“An exclamation point.”

“Oh, I see.”

Evie stretches and sighs. She grasps my wrist to look at my watch. “I hate to say this, but I’d probably better get back home. I’m sure Dad’s fine but I wouldn’t want to leave him alone all night just yet.”

“Yeah, I agree. He’d argue that point, I’m sure.” But neither of us move. She slides over, nestling next to me and rests her head in the crook of my arm. She circles her fingers through the hair on my chest, her brows furrowed in thought.

“Spill it,” I say.

She looks up through her lashes. “You could always read me. How do you do that?”

I chuckle. “Evie, you’re like a freakin’ open book.”

She laughs and sticks her tongue out. “Am not.”

“Are too,” I argue. “Quit deflecting. What’s going on in that complicated head of yours?”

“I’m afraid of the crash. Ya know? What does this all mean?”

I huff out a breath. “I have no idea but it’s whatever you want it to be. I’m not gonna lie Evie, I don’t want this... us... to end.”

“But how? I live in Chicago, you live here. I’m entrenched in my career. You in yours. You’re a small-town guy... and...”

I raise my brows. “And?”

She shrugs, biting her lip.

I stroke her long hair. “Have you gone completely over to the dark side?” I tease, trying for lightness.

She brushes her fingers across my jaw. “Do you still want kids?” she asks suddenly.

I blow out a breath, hesitant to answer. “I’ve always wanted kids. That hasn’t changed, but at this point I’ve accepted that it may never happen, and I can live with that.”

“Are you sure you’re not giving up? I’m sure there are a half a dozen women right now that would love to make babies with you.”

I tilt her chin up. “Um Evie, I don’t want kids just to have kids. I want a family. I want to raise my children in a house filled with love. I’m not shopping for a baby mama.”

“I didn’t mean it that way. It just seems like a huge sacrifice.”

“What about you? You always wanted children back in the day.”

She shrugs. “Things change. It’s not a priority anymore.”

“Are you sure *you’re* not the one giving up?” I throw her words back at her and hold my breath waiting for her answer.

She rubs her eyes. “Maybe. I don’t know anything anymore. Down is up and up is down since I came home.”

I exhale. I can live with that answer. “You don’t need to have all the answers. Give everything time. When I push myself, it’s like I’m pushing away the clarity. When I throw my hands up in the air, the answer sits down on my lap and mocks me,” I say, and she giggles.

“I’m not even sure what I am anymore. I never thought I could move

back here and be happy after living away so long... but I'm not so sure anymore. The time here has been a revelation on all sorts of levels."

I'm almost afraid to breathe... afraid to hope that this could mean something... that I actually have a shot. "Don't tease a guy like that," I say gruffly. "You want me to have a heart attack or something?"

She strokes my face. "I'm not. There's a lot to consider. We're not teenagers anymore. Life is more complicated. A long-distance relationship would be hard... even if we're only four hours away."

"Maybe it doesn't have to be long distance. Maybe I could check out jobs in the Windy City."

Her eyes well up with tears. "Jamie, you'd be miserable in the city. I know you. I'd never ask that of you."

"Isn't that *you* defining *me* this time?" I ask.

"Quick learner," she says, on a laugh. She blows out a long breath. "All I do is work. You'd never see me. My job is so demanding, I can't see that changing."

"Let me live with my delusions for tonight. Okay? Nothing is insurmountable. Right? We'd better roll," I say reluctantly. Hux whines by the door so I hop up and walk naked to let him out. Evie whistles a cat call then claps appreciatively. I strike a pose and say, "You just want me for my body."

She laughs as she pulls up her lace panties. "Ditto."

We finish dressing and head to the truck. I feel like I'm going to a funeral. I don't want this night to end. Hux sits between us on the way home, happy as a clam. When we pull in, we hear Bruiser and Mags barking and Hux yips his reply, impatient to get out. It's the middle of the night, and fortunately Evie took care of the horses before we left. I walk her to the door, and she lets the dogs out to do their business and tussle with Hux for a few minutes before calling them back. I take her in my arms, we kiss each other senseless, then I let her go.

“Night, Evie. Tonight was epic.”

Her eyes sparkle. “One for my diary. Night, Jamie.”

I can’t seem to let go of her hand. “Don’t forget about our open house on Saturday.”

“I won’t. I’m going with Dee and Eloise.”

“Good. I work tomorrow but I’ll text or call you when I get a chance.”

“Okay. Thanks for everything,” she says softly.

I kiss her one last time, then turn and whistle for Huxley to load and we drive away.

JAMIE

I'm perched at the top of the firetruck's aerial ladder about one-hundred feet in the air to the delight of the small crowd gathered right outside the fire station. I'm in full bunker gear, part of the previous reenactment of what happens during an emergency call. I wave to the cheers and clapping below. A great turnout for our open house this year. Lots of families with kids, loads of questions. The food and beverages are taking a sizeable hit.

All is well, except no Evie yet. Maybe she changed her mind. Our brief conversation on the phone the day after our date had been slightly clumsy. She didn't respond to my text this morning, so I have no idea what's going on. Tank is chatting with Casey and her friend, but stops and signals to me, so I begin my descent, boots clanging on the steel steps. Deacon is set to take over the demo, leading small groups to sit inside the fire engine while he shows them all the bells and whistles.

I tag Deak and wave to Case, then lumber inside to remove the heavy outer gear, leaving on my boots, t-shirt, station pants and suspenders. I whistle under my breath as I return to the party. We did it up right this year. Tank and I hung up garland and lights everywhere and put up a small tree. We let Sam and Deacon decorate it. I've got three under my belt already. After Coach's, it was Mom and Dad's, then my own. That's my hard limit.

I'm munching on a cookie when I feel a tug on my pant leg. "Mr. Jamie?"

a child's voice says.

I pivot and look down, a wide smile splitting my face. Ruffling his hair I say, "Bobby! Hey bud, what are you doing here?" I crouch down so we're eye level. "It's great to see you buddy." He smiles shyly and points to his mom and dad. "Look who's here," he says.

I nod a greeting at Bobby's mom whose arm is in a sling with a cast from shoulder to wrist. Her other hand is tucked in his dad's. I hide my surprise. If memory serves, I thought they were divorced. "Hello, Mom and Dad," I say. "Thanks for coming." There's a slight lump in my throat. It's always moving to see someone you thought might not make it from an accident alive and well.

The mom removes her hand and sticks it out. "I'm Izzy, this is Bobby's dad, Brad. You must be Jamie. Bobby can't stop talking about you. A true hero."

I take her hand and nod at Brad. "We met briefly at the hospital," I say, standing. "I can't tell you how much this means to see you here." I spot Sam across the room and call out waving him over.

"Sam, look who's here!"

Sam's face lights up as he approaches. "Bobby! This is fantastic!" He turns to Izzy and his jaw drops. "Wow. Am I ever glad to see you!" he says, eyes suspiciously bright. "We weren't sure..." he begins, then glances down at Bobby and catches himself.

"I was in the hospital for about a week. Unconscious for about..." she frowns, "What was it honey?"

Brad says, "About thirty-six hours. Felt like a year. Very scary time. But she's going to be fine," he assures us. "A few cracked ribs, concussion, broken arm and wrist, I think that's it."

Izzy says, "We're the next county over, but when I saw you were having an open house today, we decided to come and thank you all personally. You saved my life," she said. "Words seem inadequate, but thank you."

She couldn't be more than twenty-five tops. A young mother with her whole life ahead of her. This makes all the risks and long-ass hours' worth it. I punch my fist to my heart. My voice is a little rough when I answer. "Just doing our jobs. Man, it's so good to see you."

I look down at a beaming Bobby who is staring up at me like I'm superman or something. "Want a personalized tour?" I ask him.

He says, "Can I have a cookie first?" We all laugh. "Wouldn't have it any other way." I take his little hand in mine, and it's swallowed up. As I turn towards the concessions table, I see a flash of auburn hair and glance around catching Evie staring. The look on her face makes my heart thump. She's definitely giving me the goo goo eyes... all soft and warm and sentimental. I'm thinking it's the kid. She wore the same look when I was holding Henry. *Score.*

"Hey Bobby, I've got to go say hi to someone. Want to tag along?"

"Sure," he grins up at me. As we walk towards Evie he says, "Dad and Mom are back toogever. They ain't gettin' no 'vorce."

"That's great, my man. Some good came out of the bad," I say as we reach Evie.

I could bask in the warmth of her gaze for a thousand years if I had my way. "Hey, Evie, Dee. And how's my little squirt, Eloise?" She reaches her chubby arms out to me squealing with delight so I take her in my arms. "Bobby, this is Eloise. And Dee and Evie."

"Hi," he says. "I might be getting a baby thither sometime. Mom says she's ready to start..." he shrugs, "whatever that means." The adults exchange amused glances.

"I was getting ready to give ole Bobby here a personalized tour. Would y'all like to join us? We have to hit the cookies first."

"We'd love to," Dee says.

"Caleb couldn't make it?" I ask over my shoulder leading the way.

"No. He volunteered to work at the food pantry. They're short on help."

I hold Eloise with one arm and clasp Bobby's hand in the other and we make our way over to the food table. Deacon's wife Theresa and Sam's wife Jen are in charge of refreshments and cheerfully assist Bobby in choosing the very best Christmas cookie. "Um... I can't dithide," he says, his little brow furrowed. "I wike thanta but I wuv Rudolf."

"I think you should have them both," I say. He looks up at me doubtfully. His mom and dad walk up, and Bobby asks his mom if he's allowed.

"Yes, but you have to save one for later, okay?"

"Okay," he agrees and takes the Santa, swiftly biting his head off.

"Ouch! Brutal. Poor Santa," I say. He giggles and takes another bite. Eloise is getting crumbs all over me as she gnaws on her sugar cookie.

"Here let me take her so you can be a proper tour guide," Dee says. I hand Eloise over and brush off the crumbs.

"Follow me," I say, making sure to extend the invite to Izzy and Brad. I show them the lay of the land, the office, kitchen, bunk room, group living quarters where we relax and hang out when we're not catching Z's or on a call or the million and one other tasks we have to do in a day. Bobby loves the fire engine and decides on the spot he's going to be a fireman when he grows up.

All the while I'm aware of Evie's gaze. When we lock eyes, the air between us practically sizzles. Not feelin' particularly clumsy today. No siree. Feeling more like I'm back in high school ready for classes to end so I can meet Evie Parker under the bleachers and make out. I'm back in business.

The first chance I get, I grab Evie and practically drag her to the storage room. I shut the door behind us and lock it. She throws her arms around my neck and stands on her tip toes and lays a big smooch on me.

"This is torture," I say. "I want to tear your clothes off."

She laughs softly. "The children," she jokes.

I dip my nose in her hair inhaling deeply. "You smell like sunshine," I say.

She wraps her arms around my waist and lays her head on my chest. “I’ve missed you,” she sighs.

“That’s good news. What are you doing tonight?”

“No plans.”

“How about I pick up a couple of steaks and cook dinner for you?”

Her eyes twinkle as she stares up at me. “Tempting. Throw in a baked potato and you’re on.”

“Deal. Maybe now I can get through the rest of the day.” I lean down and kiss her again then step away. My cock is already half hard. “Girl, what you do to me should be a crime.”

She glances down at my bulge and snickers. “Pretty obvious. You better let me go out first and take a minute.”

I reach down adjust myself. “Good plan.” I chuckle when she opens the door and looks stealthily around before stepping out into the hallway.

She looks back at me and says, “All clear.” Then blows me a kiss and slips out the door.

*A*n hour later we’re making short work of the clean-up, the decorations stay put till the new year. We’re all happy about how the event came off. Fortunately, no emergency calls come in during our open house so that is a big check in the plus box. It was the most successful one we’ve held yet. Every year we get more people. We’ve got a levy on the ballot next year so any PR work we can do to educate the public is good for us.

I’m off until Monday so I grab the trash bags to carry to the dumpster and call out to the guys as I leave. “Good job, everyone. See ya Monday,” I say.

“Got any big plans?” Deacon asks.

I grin. “I’m cooking steaks tonight for the lovely Evie Parker and I somehow got wrangled into a Christmas shopping marathon with Evie, Dee and Caleb tomorrow.”

Deacon laughs and cups his ear. “Sounds pretty domesticated. I hear the death knell on bachelorhood.” I flip him off and head out the door.

EVIE

I wave cheerfully at Dee and Caleb as they pull into the parking lot beside us. I'm so excited that we convinced the guys to come along. Nothing wrong with a day of shopping with my bestie, but I only have two more weeks here before I head back to Chicago, and I want to spend every second I can with Jamie.

Last night with Jamie, I felt like we'd taken another step forward... to where, I have no freakin' clue. After a fabulous dinner we watched a Christmas movie then made leisurely love—in his bed this time, with the fireplace roaring and soft music playing. Jamie is such a romantic. I am still floating on a cloud of sensual pleasure from our lovemaking.

I jump out of the truck and run over to Dee, giving her a big hug. Clapping my mittened hands together I sing the first line of *Jingle Bells* in an obnoxiously loud voice, just for the boys' benefit. Jamie picks me up from behind in a big bear hug, lifting my feet off the ground. Dee looks adorable in her puffy down coat and long brimmed bucket hat. Caleb is smiling from ear to ear, looking as excited as I am.

I'm leaning against Jamie, his arms still wrapped snugly around me as we talk shopping strategy.

"I have no agenda except for me and Dee's big date, getting a burger and beer at Beers and Cheers after we're done shopping," Caleb says.

“We’re just here as eye candy and bag carriers,” Jamie says.

“Don’t you have any shopping to do?” I ask.

“I’m done,” he brags. With my hand in his, we stroll towards the quaint little downtown shops.

“I didn’t see any presents under your tree,” I say.

“Not wrapped yet.”

I look at him coquettishly. “Did you get me anything?”

“Are we exchanging?”

I bump him with my shoulder. “That’s fine, I saved my receipt.”

He stops and steps in front of me. “Give me a clue.”

“No way.”

“One hint.”

“No! You always guess. You spoiled my surprises every year. Not happening this Christmas.”

He cups his chin and looks skyward contemplating. “Hm, can I wear it?”

“See you guessed already... a muzzle.”

He laughs and we pick up our pace to catch up with Dee and Caleb.

The chamber has outdone themselves as usual. All the lamp posts are decorated with red, green and white lights to look like candy canes. There is an enormous Christmas tree in the center square with Santa’s workshop sitting next to it. It’s open every day through Christmas Eve offering pictures with St. Nick himself. There are musicians on selected street corners and in front of shops freezing their butts off for the cause. We stop and listen to a quartet playing *Deck the Halls* and clap and cheer along with the small crowd gathered.

I point across the street to the pet store. “Let’s go there first,” I say. Everyone agrees, and we cross at the pedestrian crosswalk and enter the store. It’s packed with holiday shoppers. They have a table with cookies and hot cider for anyone interested. I grab a cookie for Jamie and me and I nibble on mine while I look at dog stuff. “Oh my God! Look, Jamie. This is perfect

for Huxley,” I say holding up reindeer antlers.

“Um... no. I’m speaking for Huxley.”

I smirk and drop them in my basket anyway. “He’ll love them. Oh, and this collar!” I grab the green collar with bells and check for the size. “This one is extra-large. That seems right.”

Jamie grins. “Yep. We’ll know when he’s coming.”

“Now for my boys,” I say. I find two matching coats in plaid for Bruiser and Mags in their sizes and add them to my growing pile. “Now they’ll match Dad. Won’t they look adorable?” Next, I peruse the cat aisle and land on a sparkly red collar, with a dangling bell for Puss. She’ll probably hate it and exact revenge. Oh well... it’s Christmas. Cat treats, homemade gourmet dog biscuits, stockings for the mantle, and I think I’m set. I’ll deal with the horses when we go to the feed store.

As I’m checking out, Dee stands next to me oohing and aahing over my treasures. “The toy store is a couple doors down. Should we hit that next?” I ask. She smiles around a big bite of cookie and nods.

Jamie leans around me and grabs my packages as we leave the store then wander to our next stop. And so it goes. The riches accumulate with every store until Jamie and Caleb are so loaded down, they decide to unburden themselves and make a trip back to our vehicles.

“Okay, let’s meet at the Coffee Bean,” Dee says.

“Good plan,” Caleb says. “I’m about shopped out.”

Dee glares. “You promised. No complaining. Look how sweet Jamie is being.”

Jamie sticks out his chest, and grins. “Yeah, see? This is how ya do it, my friend. Take notes.”

“Oh brother. Spare me. That’s not what he whispered to me a minute ago,” he grumbles.

Jamie gives me his wide-eyed innocent look. “I never!” We all laugh then part ways.

Dee and I order our drinks, then find a small table tucked in the corner and sit. I sip my yummy peppermint hot chocolate and look around. “I can’t believe how much I dreaded coming home,” I say.

“I’m glad you’re here. I miss having my bestie close by.”

“I know. I’m realizing a lot of things I’ve missed. You’re at the top of the list.”

“Things seem to be heating up with you and Jamie,” she says. “I’m glad, Evie. I think you were always meant to be. Maybe you both had to experience life a little, in order to appreciate your happy ending.”

I scoop some whipped cream onto my finger and lick it off. “Maybe. I don’t know. I know Jamie wants kids. Seems impossible. My clock is ticking and I’m in Chicago, he’s here. You can’t raise a family together from two different states.”

She frowns. “It is complicated,” she agrees. “But... I’m a hopeless romantic. It’s obvious you two are meant to be. It will sort itself out.”

“I don’t see how. Seems like one of us would have to give up on their dreams to make it work. Either I give up my career or he gives up on fatherhood.”

“That’s pretty black and white thinking.”

I arch a brow. “Well? Do you have any better solutions?”

“Not yet but I’m sure there is one.”

“Let me know when you figure it out.”

“Figure what out,” Jamie says sitting down next to me.

“Girl talk,” Dee says, reaching over and patting Jamie’s hand.

“What did you get?” I ask him.

“Dark roast with two shots of espresso.”

“Watch out world,” Dee says.

“I got the same. Shopping is exhausting,” Caleb whines.

Dee waggles her finger at her husband biting back a smile. “For the rest

of the day, for every time you complain, you have to watch a Hallmark movie with me.”

“No-o-o!” he grouses. “Anything but that.”

“Your choice,” she chirps. “You promised not to be a grump today.”

His lip quirks up charmingly. “I’m actually having fun,” he admits. He leans down and plants a kiss on her cheek. “I have to yank your chain a little.”

“Naughty or nice. I’m keeping a list. Your choice.”

He looks at us and winks. “See what I have to put up with? I have a hard time believing her nickname was ever Mouse.” We all burst out laughing.

“Those of us who really knew her, knew better,” I say.

We take our time, enjoying the company and easy comradery between old friends. I notice some people waiting for a seat and say, “I guess we should give someone else a chance to sit down and rest.” We bundle back up, toss our cups, and head into the holiday fray.

The afternoon flies by. We walk back to the parking lot and say goodbye to Caleb and Dee. They’re heading to Beers and Cheers and we’re heading home. I feel like crying as I buckle up. They’re more than friends. They’re family. When I think about returning to Chicago and my condo, I feel depressed and lonely. But I’m not going to think about that right now. I wave goodbye as they back out and drive away.

Jamie chucks my chin. “Cheer up. You still have me.”

I bite my lip. “I know. I’m trying not to think about all this coming to an end soon. I’m really going to miss this.”

“But now you can come back more often.”

“Maybe. Work makes that almost impossible.”

“I’m sure you have some say about that,” he lightly chides.

“Let’s change the subject. I don’t want to end on a sour note.”

“Why don’t you call your dad and see if he wants pizza for supper. We can pick it up on our way home.”

I punch in my home number and Dad answers. “Hi, Dad. Does pizza sound good?”

“Excellent. Can you order a side salad with ranch as well?”

“Absolutely. Not sure how long it will take, we’re phoning it in now.”

“No rush. See you when you get here.”

“Love you.”

“Love you more, Kiddo.”

I swallow a lump in my throat. Geesh. Sentimental much? I miss my mom so much but I’m also seeing everything that I still have. How can one feel joy and sorrow at the same time? But I do. I’m grateful that I still have my pops, my friends, Jamie. *And* I miss my mom. All of that is true. I look over at Jamie who is waiting to call in our order. His chocolate brown eyes are brimming with kindness and understanding. *This guy!*

He holds up his cell. “I have the number on speed dial. Between being single and living part time with a bunch of dudes, pizza is pretty much a staple of my diet.”

“Could be worse,” I say. “Dad wants a side salad with ranch. Make that two.”

“Got it,” he says. I lean back and close my eyes and listen to his warm pleasing voice placing our order and feel safe and cared for.

I touch his arm. “Thank you,” I say.

His brows dip. “For what?”

“For being you. You’re such a great guy. I had to bury everything back then, for sanity’s sake. I had to focus on the anger to get through it. Now I’m remembering this was always you. How could I ever have forgotten?”

His cheeks redden. “I was a mess back then. You were right to be angry.”

“Yes, but you were still a great guy. I’m glad you’re back in my life.”

His voice husky he says, “You have no idea.” Leaning over he kisses the side of my mouth then straightens and starts the truck.

JAMIE

*J*rinse out my coffee cup, turn off the music and head towards the door. Evie invited me over for a trail ride today. Is this really my life right now? When she first got here, we were at each other's throats and now I can't get enough of her. It's been a over a year since I've been on a horse and I'm looking forward to it. I'll probably ride Randy. He's ornery as hell and by far my favorite. Added bonus, he's burly enough to accommodate me. "Come on Hux, we're going to the Parkers'."

It's cold but sunny, and the crisp air has a bite to it. I'm early, so I tool along slowly, enjoying the snow-covered trees from last night's light snowfall. Hux looks like a rocket about to launch... ears forward, eyes bright, watching attentively out of the front window. He's always game for anything. I reach over and ruffle his fur. "Well, Hux, I feel like you look. A couple of eager beavers. I'm in pretty deep here." He glances over, then out at the passing scenery.

I wave to Danny as he pulls out of Parkers' drive. He grins and flashes me a thumbs up. I avoid a few ruts in the drive, making a mental note to fill them. I park then make my way to the barn and find that Evie has the horses saddled and almost ready to go. She's wearing a blue fitted down vest over a thick white sweater and blue jeans. She left her hair loose and it cascades out from under a blue knit ski cap. "Hey beautiful," I say. "Looks like you got a

head start.”

“Hey there,” she says while tightening Randy’s cinch. “Randy likes to puff out when I’m saddling him, so I had to adjust his cinch. This guy’s a smart one. Danny helped me tack up. He just left.”

“Yeah, I passed him coming in.”

When she finally looks up her eyes are full of heat and awareness. *Mm.* After yesterday things seem more intimate. I can see our lives intersecting and blending. The caveat is she’ll be heading back to Chicago and leaving me behind. Then what? I spend too many nights fantasizing about a future together. I’m royally fucked.

I stride forward and wrap my arms around her waist and gaze down into her incredible emerald eyes. Rubbing my nose across the tip of hers I say, “I thought noon would never get here.”

Biting her bottom lip, she nods. “Me too.” She closes her eyes and leans into me.

Bending down, I press my lips to hers. “Yum,” I murmur. “You taste like apples.”

“The horses had to share,” she says on a giggle.

“Breakfast of champions.”

“Something like that. Is Hux coming along?”

“Yeah. I assume we’re not doing anything too crazy.”

“Nope, mostly walk, trot... slow and easy. I figure we’ll be gone for about an hour or less. Sound good?”

“You’re the trail blazer. Where you go, I follow,” I say, sounding dead serious. She looks away then squirms out of my arms. *Alrighty then. Guess we’re not going there today.*

She hops onto Bunny gracefully and I mount Randy. “Ready Hux?” He lets out two sharp barks. Evie clicks her tongue and Bunny steps out of the barn and into the bright winter day. The sky is a brilliant cerulean blue, the air crisp and clean. The dusting of snow covering the ground from last night

is untouched. Randy snorts as we start down the trail, falling in line behind Bunny. Hux takes off ahead of us, disappearing into the trees.

There's a hush as we enter the woods, everything quiet, except for Huxley running through the underbrush and the horses' footfalls crunching over dried leaves and fallen twigs. All the trees have been stripped of their colorful fall foliage, so we have a clear view of the lake as we ride along the parallel path.

There's something holy about riding a horse out in nature. It's not only the bounty of our surroundings. It's the unspoken communication magically transmitted between horse and rider that either makes or breaks trust. I struggle for the right words to express the intangible. I respect the fact that this animal knows more about what's going on in the moment than I ever could.

"Feels like we're in church," I settle on.

"Yeah. That's a good way to describe it," Evie replies. "I always feel cleansed of my sins after a ride, like I've unpacked a load of sorrow and regret and left them on the trails."

I nod my head in agreement. "Renewed," I add. Randy grunts and farts when we step over a log, and I chuckle. "I'm not that bad, am I Randy?" I joke.

Evie laughs and turns in her saddle to look back at me. "He's out of shape. Pure and simple. Don't take it personal."

I pat his muscular neck. "He seems to be enjoying it as much as I am," I say.

"I think they get bored too," she says.

I've lost sight and sound of Hux, so I whistle and immediately hear him crashing through the woods. "Good boy," I say as he sidles up next to us, tongue lolling. "You'd better not be rolling in any scat." Evie's warm laughter ripples through me.

She brings Bunny to a halt and we stop a few feet behind her. "Hux stay,"

she commands, pointing out several deer some distance ahead. Hux understands the assignment and freezes, eyes locked on the deer. They see us and stand stock still, staring back at us. The only thing moving are their large ears, like receivers trying to pick up alien transmissions. The horses snort and puff, Bunny takes a couple of nervous side steps. Evie's steady, soothing tone quickly deescalates the situation and the deer finally scamper away, white tails pointed high in the air.

"What a good boy you are, Huxley," Evie croons. His tail wags and he looks like he's smiling.

"He's a glutton for praise," I say.

"Aren't we all," she replies.

"Ah... giving away your secrets. I'm taking notes. By the way, I've been meaning to ask, do you still eat the filling of your Oreos before the cookie part?"

"Are you part elephant? How do you remember this stuff?" she jokes. "Hm... well I think the last time I ate an Oreo was in college and yes, it's the only way to get the full experience."

She continues, "Speaking of burning questions, do you still put one sock and shoe on one foot before moving on to the other one?"

"That's what everyone does, isn't it?" I ask genuinely shocked.

"No. Most people put their socks on both feet then their shoes."

"No way."

"Yes way."

"Has there been a study?" I ask.

"By me. Because of you."

I snort. "Show me the data."

She turns, flashing a full-on smile, then taps her temple. "It's all in the vault." She nudges her reins and takes a small path to the right heading towards the lake. The land slopes down and erosion has made the footing trickier, so I let Randy have his head. I'm enjoying the view, Evie's backside

and long legs, glimpses of her profile, her long hair loose cascading down her back and her amazing confidence as a rider. She looks like she was born on a horse. Takes me back to when I used to watch her compete in the 4-H county fair. She took home plenty of ribbons too. She's always excelled at everything.

We reach the shoreline and stop. I watch as the wind catches her hair and she tucks it behind her ears staring out across the vast body of water.

"This view never gets old," I say.

She doesn't respond right away. I get a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach. I can almost feel her retreating and want to scream, '*Don't go!*' Instead, I say, "What's wrong?"

She continues to stare out at the choppy water. "I don't know exactly. Maybe everything. Afraid of falling. Afraid of losing... you... myself... I don't know."

"I promise not to hurt you."

"That's the thing, Jamie. You can't promise that. There are no guarantees."

"You know what I mean. I mean I will never be the one to leave. I fucked up once and lost the love of my life. It won't happen again."

"I know you believe that. Let me ask you this. What if something happens to you again? You get hurt, disabled somehow? Do you love me enough to stay this time? Or will you decide for both of us that you know what's best... for my own good?"

That shuts me up. A few weeks ago, I was thinking that I wasn't good enough for her and that it was selfish to pursue her.

"Did I hit a nerve?" she asks gently. "See, life is complicated. I know you'd take care of me Jamie, no matter what. But would you let me take care of you?"

"Of course." *Liar.* A small group of ducks cruising by grab my attention. "I mean, I think so."

“See. It’s not so black and white. What are *you* afraid of?” she says, turning my question back on me.

“Honestly? That you just want me for my body,” I joke. That goes over like a lead balloon. She literally snarls. I hold up my hands. “Okay. Truth? I have no clue why you’re even interested in me. I’m not good enough. You’re smarter, more successful. You could have anyone you want and I’m just some small-town schmuck that’s nuts to think I could ever have you again.”

Her eyes look sad. “Oh Jamie,” she says. “You are the best man I know... right up there with my dad, and that’s a tall order.”

“Thanks for saying that,” I say gruffly.

“It’s true. Besides being flat out gorgeous, you’re smart, kind, funny, strong. I feel safe with you... like you’d take on the world for me. You’ll have to trust me on this, you’re more than good enough. It’s just that... oh I don’t know. I’m so confused. It’s so much more complicated at this age. We’ve got more baggage, more fears. More what-ifs.”

“Why not see where this takes us?”

“I need time to think. This has all happened so fast.”

“Maybe because it’s right, and I’d hardly call fifteen years fast,” I say grumpily.

She laughs. “Let’s head on back before my nose gets frostbitten.”

“To be continued.” I say.

“Absolutely,” she agrees.

I take a last long look at the lake and the ducks, which have meandered along and are almost out of sight. I press my leg into Randy, and he follows Bunny up the incline. When we reach the main path, Evie picks up a trot and we make it home in half the time.

JAMIE

We exit the woods and beeline towards the big red barn. I'm relaxed and looking forward to catching some football at my brother Cam's later this afternoon. Perfect day. I spot an unfamiliar car parked next to my truck. A fucking Tesla. I look over at Evie and she looks pale, her smile replaced by a grim line.

"Do you recognize the car?" I ask.

"Unfortunately," she says, voice clipped. We reach the barn and dismount then lead the horses to their stalls to untack. Randy startles and throws his head back when a jarring voice intrudes, piercing the quiet of the barn. I shoot the man walking toward us a death glare. He strides in like he owns the place. I don't need to be told who it is... if his hundred thousand-dollar car didn't tip me off, his fancy shoes and perfectly groomed hair are a dead giveaway. The infamous Vance Wagner. Older than I expected... handsome in a too-put-together kind of way, in my opinion. He could be the poster child for *GQ*, the OCD edition. He reaches Evie and grabs her shoulders pulling her roughly into his arms.

"Evie. God it's so good to see you. Why haven't you returned any of my calls or texts?"

I tense, prepared to step in if I need to. What a tool. I relax a notch when Evie disentangles herself. This guy is wound tight. I've seen Chihuahuas

more relaxed than this dude. His pea coat is devoid of any horse or dog hair, which is unheard of in my world. As I'm thinking this, he looks down distastefully and brushes some transferred Bunny hair from his navy coat. I choke down a laugh.

I clear my throat then hesitate, not sure if I should leave her alone with the bastard or not, but I offer anyway. "Evie, I can finish with the horses if you'd like to have some privacy."

As if he's just noticing me, he narrows his eyes in my direction then plasters on a fake smile. "We'll take you up on that," he says. I glance at Evie and she looks beyond annoyed.

"Why are you here, Vance?" she says through gritted teeth.

"I see country living hasn't softened your edge. I'm here because I have some exciting news that couldn't wait. I thought it was better to tell you in person. And I wanted to see you. Find out how your father is. I've missed you."

She frowns then looks at me apologetically. "Are you sure you don't mind, Jamie?"

"No problem."

Vance's brows dip. "Jamie?" He's obviously heard of me because he's scowling at me right now.

She tips her chin challengingly. "Yes. Jamie Barrington. Jamie, this is my boss, Vance Wagner." I know all about Vance the asshole. Coach is not a fan and neither am I.

"You sure you're okay?" I ask squaring off with Vance and scowling right back at him.

"I'm fine." She wraps her fingers around my forearm and squeezes. "Thanks for everything. We'll talk later."

"Sounds good," I say. Vance's voice grates on my one last nerve as he commandeers Evie out of the barn and into his waiting Tesla. Fuck.

I finish with the horses and Hux and I head to the house. I knock then let

myself in. “Coach?” I call out.

He responds from the back den, and I wander down the hall. He’s watching a game on TV with Puss sprawled out on his lap and the dogs curled up by his chair. Coach motions me to sit down. He takes one look at my face and says, “I guess Vance caught up with you two.”

Shaking my head I say, “I’ll never get it. What did she ever see in that dude?”

Coach shrugs. “Who knows. I guess he’s handsome enough, but he is pretty standoffish.”

I snort. “Is that what you call it?”

“Sometimes we get caught up in the idea of someone. They were both attorneys, working together on important cases, I can see it happening. Before you know it, you’re entangled. Isn’t that what Jada called it?” I laugh at the pop culture reference.

“Pardon my French but he’s a dick.”

“I don’t disagree. I wonder what he’s doing here. I know Evie called it off in no uncertain terms.”

“That’s what I thought. I’m sure with her gone, he’s had time to appreciate what he’s lost. He’s realizing she’s more than just a piece of office furniture,” I huff.

“He said he had some important news that couldn’t wait. I can’t imagine what that would be.”

“Maybe he’s going to offer a partnership in the firm,” I say.

“Could be.”

“I hope not,” I admit. “Don’t get me wrong, it isn’t the promotion. I don’t want her attaching herself to his star.”

Bill sighs. “She seems so much happier now. When she first arrived, I was worried. She looked tired and defeated. Now that sparkle is back.”

“I’ve noticed. Coach, I really want to try again with Evie. Hopefully get it right this time. I love her. Always have.”

Coach smiles kindly at me. “I would be the happiest dad alive if that were to happen. I think you two have a good shot at it. You’re good for her, and you know how I feel about you.”

“Even with the distance?”

“Even with the distance. You’re both smart, you can figure that part out. Your biggest obstacle is overcoming your past. Not just forgiving each other, but yourselves as well.”

I lean my head back on the couch cushion and close my eyes. “Do you think I’m good enough for Evie? Honest opinion.”

He chuckles. “I think you are a perfect match. You know, Jamie, you don’t have to be a football star or some celebrity to be good enough. You’re already enough. All you need to be is yourself. That’s all Evie ever wanted. She loved you whether you were the star quarterback or the scruffy-haired goofball failing math.”

“You think so? She’s brilliant and beautiful... I’m a washed-up jock.”

“I remember the bright-eyed confident kid I coached all through high school. Nothing stood in your way. You’re still that guy. You have my blessings and encouragement to go for it.”

My eyes sting. “Thanks Coach,” I say gruffly.

“Don’t mention it, Son. Don’t let your insecurities get the best of you. She lights up whenever you’re around. You could always make her laugh.”

I grin. “Guess I’ll have to take your word for it.”

We hear the door slam then footsteps running down the hallway and up the stairs. We look at each other, concern etched on Coach’s face. “I’ll go check on her,” I say. He nods.

“Stay, Hux,” I command. He lays his head back down and I take the stairs two at a time. I pause outside Evie’s bedroom. I hear her crying through the door and I knock.

EVIE

“E vie,” Jamie says through the door. I’m face-planted in my pillow, trying to muffle my sobs. “Can I come in?” he says, voice gentle. I don’t answer. “Please?” he pleads.

“Yes,” I mumble. The door opens and I hear his footfalls as he comes to my bedside. The mattress sinks as he sits down beside me. His warm hand touches my back, rubbing soft circles.

“Babe. Talk to me.”

“I-I-I can’t right now,” I say.

“Okay. I’m right here whenever you’re ready.”

“It ma-ay take a-awhile,” I say voice muffled by my pillow.

“I’ve got all the time in the world. I’m not going anywhere.” He continues stroking me, softly, soothingly, murmuring comforting, honeyed words. He leans against the headboard and stretches out his legs, brushing his fingers through my hair as I cry into my drenched pillow. I think I may never stop but eventually the storm passes and all that’s left is a bad case of the hiccups. I turn my face to the side and look up at him. I know I look like a sniveling mess. His warm eyes, shadowed with a mixture of worry and compassion, confirm it. He collects my tears with his thumb then pats his chest invitingly. “Come on up here, sweetheart.”

I crawl up and bury my face in his chest. He cradles me, kissing my hair

then gently brushes it away from my brow.

“He offered me partnership,” I whisper miserably.

“And that’s a bad thing? I thought that was what you always wanted.”

I start to cry again and tap my fist against his chest. “That’s just it. Why now? It’s what I’ve worked so hard for and now I don’t care. What’s wrong with me? I should be over the moon, instead I’m empty. I feel nothing.”

“Give it some time. He caught you off guard. You’re dealing with a lot here. You have time to think about it right?”

I nod miserably. “I’m so confused. Vance and the other partners have dangled this carrot in front of me for so long, I thought it would never get here. Now since the *Dateline* episode aired, we are suddenly Chicago’s ‘go to’ firm for defense. And I’m in popular demand. The firm wants to make sure I stay and don’t go off on my own.”

“Have you considered that?”

“Yes. Especially after Vance... you know, since the breakup. But with the good comes the bad. Not everyone I defend is innocent and recently I’ve been wondering if it’s a good fit for me anymore.” I cover my face with my hands.

“It must be a lot of pressure. But Evie, baby, you are one cog in the wheel of justice. You’re not God. Even the criminals have the right to a good defense. Right?”

I lace my fingers behind his neck and pull him down for a kiss. He is so gentle, kissing me as if I’ll break. I feel his breath against my cheek, his warm hands holding me. I remember him comforting me back in high school after I’d had a brain freeze during a debate contest. I’d been humiliated and inconsolable. I was such a perfectionist back then. I couldn’t stand to fail at anything. The only one that could talk me down had been Jamie. He knew all the right words to say. He always had and I guess he still does.

He kisses me tenderly then nibbles my ear. It tickles and I start giggling which makes me feel like a crazy person. How can I go from wailing to

laughter in less than ten minutes?

“Babe, we should go down and talk to your dad. He can’t make the stairs and I know he’s worried,” he says.

“You’re right. Let me splash cold water on my face and freshen up. I’ll meet you down there.”

He buries his nose in my hair his arms tightening. “Hold up. Just one more minute, okay?” He scooches down and pulls me with him then rolls on top of me kissing me silly. He growls in my ear, “You are a gifted attorney. This is just a blip. Partnership or not, it doesn’t define you or your career. You’ll figure it out.”

“Thank you,” I say, tears welling once more.

“Not the water works again?” he teases.

I brush them away and push his chest. “Get off me.” He kisses my eyelids then stands. I slip my hand in his and he hauls me up. “I’ll be down in a sec,” I say, then head into the bathroom to freshen up.

EVIE

I can't believe it's the night before Christmas Eve. The Barringtons invited Dad and me to their annual ugly sweater themed party. There is a prize for the ugliest. Gwen is celebrating with her family in Chicago so she couldn't come. I kind of miss her. This will be Dad's first big outing other than to doctor and physical therapy appointments. He has on his ugly Christmas sweater which, if it doesn't win, I don't know what will. Mom and I bought it one year when he was still teaching. He got a kick out of making his students laugh.

I'm pretty proud of mine. It's a red, green and cream wool weave with a young girl in PJ's standing next to a Christmas tree. It has every holiday symbol known to man plastered all over it. Then in bold black lettering it reads, 'Most Likely to Peek Under the Christmas Tree.' I could win too.

I have decidedly shelved my work and relationship conundrums until after the holidays. I'm relaxed tonight, and I'm trying not to fret. Jamie helps. Just thinking about him and my belly flutters. He's been the absolute best and he's good at keeping me in the present. He made me promise to quit worrying about everything and to stop trying to figure out the future. "Them's the rules Evie." And so far, I've followed them... that is, until the lights go out and I get in bed at night. Then it's a different story. But tonight, I have a party to attend and I'm down for it.

Dad brought his crutches along just in case he needs them. He's gotten pretty skillful. Who knew athletic ability would transfer over to crutches. I guess it makes sense. Good balance and upper body strength are in his favor and the fact that he was in great shape going into the surgery has served him well. The doctor says he's way ahead of the healing curve.

The house looks like a first-place winner on the reality competition, *The Great Christmas Light Fight*. Over the top and I love it! We walk down the candy cane-lined sidewalk to the door and ring the bell.

Seconds later Junior throws the door open wearing a hideous sweater, Santa hat and huge toothy grin. His voice booms as he takes me up in a big ole bear hug. "Well, looky who's here. My favorite almost sister. Hello Coach. Welcome, come on in." He steps back and waves us into the formal entry. Pure pandemonium. I hear laughter, kids squealing, Christmas music blaring, there are twinkle lights framing the entries, and a life-sized plastic Santa greeting us. The Griswolds have nothing on the Barringtons. I almost get plowed over by two running boys, who barely miss knocking into the massive Christmas tree right next to Santa.

"Scuse me," one yells over his shoulder, "Hiyah Coach." Before disappearing into the adjoining room right off the foyer.

Junior laughs. "Sorry, that was Chance and Joseph. My two oldest hellions."

"I can't believe that's Chance!" I say. "He's so tall! Another baller in the making."

"Evie, you can throw your coats in the first spare room to the right," he says, pointing down the hall. "Then join the party that away. You remember your way around don't ya? I'll tell my baby brother his girl is here." I feel my cheeks heat. Of course, I remember my way around. I practically lived here all through high school. Jamie and I had split our family time between my parents' house and his.

I walk into the bedroom and throw our coats on top of the bed already

piled high with outerwear. I sense him before he makes a sound.

“Hey, Chicago.” His voice sounds like liquid honey and sends shivers down my spine. He comes up behind me and buries his face in my hair, which I’ve left loose because he likes it that way. “You smell like a little bit of heaven.” He nibbles on my ear and my body heats.

“I’m surprised your parents didn’t have live reindeer flown in for the party,” I say.

He laughs. “Shh. Don’t give Mom any ideas.” I turn in his arms and stand on my tip toes to plant a kiss on his smiling lips. “Are you ready to join the chaos?”

“Can’t wait.” We pass through the foyer and a sizeable flex room where kids have a Twister game going on. The great room is the party hub and it opens into a large kitchen where it appears an entire bar and restaurant are set up on the expansive island. And... surprise! Another massive tree. I wave to Dad who is sitting comfortably on the U-shaped sectional couch in an animated conversation with Whitt, Jamie’s dad.

Sue runs up to me with a small square of paper with number thirty-five printed in red marker. She sweeps me into an affectionate hug then says, “Here’s your number sweetie. I’ll pin it to your back. The idea is we vote on the sweater we think is the ugliest. There’s a box on the table next to the tree with pens and paper. After you make your decision, write the number down and slip it into the box sometime in the next hour or so. Easy peasy,” she says enthusiastically as she pins on my number. “Can you believe my second born, Berk, decided to skip out on us this Christmas? He’s in Turks and Caicos right now. He went snorkeling today. The nerve.”

“Sounds like fun. But how he could miss out on this, I’ll never know.”

Jamie casually slings his arm across my shoulders and I’m hyper aware of his solid bod pressed against me. I point and snort with laughter when I catch sight of Tank across the room. There is no hiding when you’re six-four and built like a Mack Truck. His back is to me and his sweater looks like the hind

end of a cartoon reindeer. The white tail is loose and dangling, strategically placed smack in the center of his butt. He's wearing antlers on top of his head and the number twenty-two pinned to his back. "Hm. Twenty-two. Tank may get my vote," I say.

"Wait till you see the front. Hey, Tank," he yells over the din. Tank turns and I double over. He has on a red nose that blinks and the entire front of his sweater is a cartoon reindeer with antlers that protrude from the shoulders. Best I can tell, based on the red and green rings hanging from the antlers, they are not just decorative but serve as a ring toss as well.

"He's in 3D," I say gleefully. When I look up, Jamie is looking at me with such tenderness that I can't breathe for a second. He leans down and kisses my nose. I melt inside. Now my legs feel like jelly.

"I love you," he whispers in my ear. *Gulp. Really! Now you're going to say that in the midst of a gazillion people?*

JAMIE

I really didn't mean to drop a bombshell and it's not like my feelings aren't obvious. Evie's eyes are huge and her delicious mouth is forming the perfect O, a flush staining her cheeks.

I swallow a laugh at her expression. "You can't tell me you didn't already know."

Cameron chooses that moment to bounce into our orbit. "Hey love birds. Why don't you join the rest of the party. We've got a game of ornament guess going on over there," he says waving to the far corner.

"What do you want to drink? I'll grab it then mosey on over." I wink at Evie and can't keep the amusement from my voice. I mean, her reaction is everything. Her cheeks are still pink and she looks like she's in a state of shock.

"Wine?" she says tentatively, making it sound more like a question. "Red?"

"Come with me my sweet," Cameron says, taking her arm and propelling her away from me. I move towards the makeshift bar and make small talk with the group gathered there. Glancing around, it appears everyone is in the holiday spirit and having a great time. Cam is blindfolding my babe and I smile.

Looks like a good mix of ages are playing pin the tail on the reindeer at

the other end of the room. Right now, Casey is also blindfolded and just finished being twirled around by Tank, who now has his huge paws on her shoulders pointing her in the direction of the reindeer pin-up. I glance back at Evie and she's laughing at something Cam's saying.

"Earth to Jamie," Deacon says.

"Did I miss something?" I say.

"Yeah. Sure was nice when my best bruh wasn't some lovesick bull moose," he says.

I scoff. "You still act like you're on your honeymoon half the time."

"Beside the point. Anyhoo, as I was saying, we got the kids a small four-wheeler for Christmas. They're going to be psyched."

"Brave."

"Right?" he laughs. "I had one as a kid and survived."

"We all did," I agree. I take a slug of my beer. "What did you get the wife?" He turns to look behind him. "Coast is clear," I say. "She's busy talking with Sam and Jen and my sister Taylor."

In a stage whisper Deak says, "We're going on an Alaskan cruise, my man. In July. All booked and paid for. My mom and dad are watching the kids."

"Dude!" I high five him. "That should score you some points."

"Ya think? Expensive as shit!" he jokes. "What about you? I know you were whining about what to get for Evie. Come up with anything?"

"She's got everything. She makes three times what we make and has nobody to spend it on but her dad and herself. What the hell. So, I kept it simple. I took one of our high-school prom photos, one taken at the actual dance, and had it transferred onto a custom blanket. Obnoxious but sentimental at the same time. She's going to love it. Then, I had a keychain made with a pic of me in my old football uniform. I was quite the stud. But the real gift is a telescope. She's always been into stargazing."

"Cool! All sentimental, bruh."

“Thanks.” I pour a glass of wine for Evie. “I’m heading over to the game, catch up with you later.”

“Yeah, I’d better check on the little monsters or I’ll hear it from Theresa the whole way home.”

“As it should be,” I say.

“Grateful to your mom for hiring the neighbor girls to watch over the smaller munchkins. Good idea.”

“She should be a party planner. Later,” I say.

I walk up to Evie and hand her the wine. She pins me with a flinty stare, clearly not over my declaration. Eyebrows arched she says, “Really?”

All wide-eyed innocence I say, “What did I do?”

She steps right up into my personal space and pulls my head down... none too gently. Her warm breath smells like the wine she just sipped. “I love you too.” She steps back with a satisfied grin as she watches my jaw drop.

“Touché,” I gulp.

She tips her glass at me and grabs the blindfold from Chance and says, “It’s your uncle’s turn.”

“Ouch,” I grumble, wincing as she cinches it extra tight around my head. “You big bully,” I complain. I hear her and Chance giggle.

“Come on Uncle Jamie,” Chance says, leading me to a chair. He pushes me into it then hands me a glass ornament. “You get three guesses,” he says, his pubescent voice cracking. I get it right on two.

Evie and I keep squaring off, doing battle with our eyeballs. We make sure to get our vote in for the ugliest sweater on time. She tries to see what number I write but I hunch over, shielding it from her view.

As Shakespeare said, “the swiftest hours, as they flew”, and we’re now gathered to find out the winner.

Mom calls out the top four. “In no particular order, if I call your number step to the front next to me. Number twenty-two.” Everyone cheers as Tank steps forward pumping his fist in the air. “Number thirty-four.” Coach takes

his place next to Tank. I'm surprised to hear my number called. "Number six," Mom says. "Last but not least, number seventeen." Sam's wife Jen stands next to me. "An honorable mention goes to my grandson Joseph. Come on up here dear. You get to announce the winner." She leans down and whispers in his ear.

The tips of his ears are pink, his smile shy as he announces the winner. "The winner is Tank," he says and the crowd goes wild.

Mom says, "Tank, the prize is a hundred-dollar gift card to La Piazza."

Tank holds his arms overhead, fists clasped like he won a prize fight. "I want to thank everyone who voted for me. I also want to thank my dog Biscuit. I wouldn't be here without his support." We all laugh.

Everyone is packing it in for the night. Coach looks tired, and after goodbyes, Evie and I go fetch the coats. When we get there, I pull her one door down into another spare bedroom and shut the door behind us. I smother her lips with an open-mouthed kiss. She kisses me back.

"You drive me crazy," I say against her lips.

"Likewise," she replies, voice breathy.

We make out like teenagers and I push my hands under her sweater. I need to feel her soft skin. My hands splay her waist and she grips my sweater in her fists as I plunder her mouth. "Evie," I rasp, reluctantly lifting my head. I withdraw my hands and straighten her sweater. "Your dad is probably wondering where we disappeared to. I'll see you tomorrow night, at my place, yeah?"

"Yes."

"It's going to be a long twenty-four."

Her eyes are sparkling like the most brilliant gemstones and I swallow hard. I don't want to think about the fact that in one week and a day, she'll be heading back to Chicago. I push that thought aside and we grab their coats and I walk her and Coach to the door.

EVIE

I knock at Jamie's front door then let myself in. I have my overnight bag packed with the essentials and gifts for Jamie and Hux. I call hello as I stomp the rest of the snow from my boots before toeing them off. The glow from the fireplace, the colorful Christmas tree, and a lamp by the couch are the only lights illuminating the room this Christmas Eve.

Huxley runs from the kitchen to greet me, the bell on his collar jingling. Soft Christmas jazz plays in the background. At the stove, Jamie has his chefs' apron on and is stirring something. I slip my arm around his waist and peer into the pan. He's caramelizing onions for the quiche he's making for supper. The pie crust sits on the counter waiting to be filled.

"Smells delicious. Anything I can do, lover?" I say, biting his shoulder playfully.

"Pour us some wine," he replies. "Everything else is under control. All I have to do is add the filling to the crust and pop it in the oven."

"Mm. Glad I saved my appetite."

"Me too. I made Tiramisu for dessert."

I clap my hands. "Yay! Yummy."

He leans down to peck my lips then takes the pan off the stove and turns off the flame. He covers the bottom of the pie crust with the sautéed mixture then adds a generous portion of grated cheese on top of that before he covers

it all with the creamy egg custard and pops it in the oven.

He chuckles. “I actually set the dining room table. I don’t even remember the last time I ate in there.”

“Ooh, fancy,” I say, peeking around the corner into the dining room. He has long tapered candles already lit and a white tablecloth set with delicate China and shiny cutlery for two. I turn back and watch him hungrily as he takes his apron off. He’s barefoot, wearing a navy sweater that hugs every inch of him and brings out his brown eyes and copper hair. His relaxed fit jeans hang low on his hips and the way the denim molds to his muscular thighs makes my mouth water.

“Come here you tasty morsel,” he says. I sprint into his arms. He picks me up and I wrap my thighs around his waist as he squeezes me tight. I bury my face in his neck and breathe in the masculine scent, committing it to memory for the lonely nights ahead in my very near future. But I’m not thinking about that now.

“I do love you, you know,” I say softly.

“I know,” he says. I hear the melancholy in his voice and want to make it go away.

“I know what we can do! Why don’t you open your presents while we wait for the quiche?”

He puts me down and I grab his giftbag from my overnight case and head to the couch. He sits next to me then reaches in and pulls out a small jeweler’s box, a smile playing around the corners of his mouth. “What do we have here?” he jokes flipping it open. He chuckles when he pulls out a two headed coin with a naked babe on either side that reads *Tails you get tail*.

He flips it in the air catches it and slaps it onto the back of his hand. His thick brows hike and he says, “What do ya know, I win.” He pushes me onto the couch and sprawls on top of me. I giggle as he kisses my neck and finds my ticklish spot. He finally lands on my lips and he pushes his tongue in my mouth. He explores, licking and tasting, his erection pressing against my

thigh. Breathless I say, “Come on, I’m anxious for you to open the rest.”

He grumbles but sits back up, hauling me with him. He pulls out the fancy truffles and chocolates then hauls out a pair of hideous Christmas socks.

“I couldn’t resist,” I say. He reaches the bottom and draws out a square box. When he opens it his eyes light up. “Babe, no way!”

“Yes way.”

“It’s too much,” he says, while removing his old watch and putting on the new platinum Rolex. “Wow, I can’t accept this.”

I giggle. “Looks like you kind of are.”

He holds up his sexy forearm—one of my biggest turn-ons—and admires it.

“Do you like it?” I ask.

“Like it? I love it but...”

I put my finger over his lips. “Shh. I can afford it and your forearms are some of my favorite eye candy. They must be adorned.”

“Wow, Evie. I don’t know what to say. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” I am so pleased, I feel joy all the way to my toes.

The timer goes off signaling the quiche is done, so we move our party to the elegantly set dining room table and eat.

I’m sitting on the couch, my feet tucked up under me while Jamie grabs my presents from under the tree. He sets them beside the couch and sits next to me. Hux is busy running around the room squeaking his new toy ducky.

Jamie hands me a package and says, “Open this one first.” I narrow my eyes seeing the devilish glint in his eyes.

I shake the dress sized box figuring it’s clothing of some kind. Ripping off the paper I lift the lid and I squeal in delight as I pull out a full-size

blanket, customized with our old prom picture on it. “Oh my God. We were so young.” I rub the soft material against my cheek. “I love it!”

“I kind of knew you would,” he says. “It’s corny, but I like it,” he admits.

“I will use it every night when I’m curled up on my chair.” *Oops.* I wish I could take the words back the second they leave my mouth when I see the pain flash in his eyes.

“Here, open this next,” he says, voice more subdued.

“You’re spoiling me,” I say. He ruefully taps his Rolex as a reminder. I rip the paper off and gasp at the beautiful, intricately carved music box. I lift the lid and there are two ballroom dancing figurines spinning to the tune, “Can’t Help Falling in Love.” “It’s lovely,” I say, my voice thick with tears. One escapes and he catches it.

“*You’re lovely, Evie.*” He leans down and his soft lips brush mine. “You really like it?”

“It’s right up there with my blanket. Two out of two. You’re on a roll.”

He hops up from the couch. “Hang on a sec. Close your eyes and don’t peek.” I comply and hear rustling around the tree. “Okay. You can open them now.”

“Oh my God! A telescope. I’ve always wanted one.” I gasp and jump up to throw myself at him and land a big sloppy kiss on his lips. “You are the very best man on this planet.”

“What about Coach?” he teases.

“Shut up and kiss me,” I say. He does. Like a volcano erupting, we’re suddenly wild, ripping at each other’s clothes as we stumble to his bedroom, leaving a trail of clothing as we go.

We’re both panting when we dive onto the bed. He covers my body with his. Our underwear is the only barrier between us. His chest presses against my full breasts, and I spread my legs wide to feel more of his cock against my sweet spot. He greedily takes control, a certain desperation to his lovemaking. He winds my hair around his hand, bunching it close to my

skull, holding me there as he plunders my mouth, tongue pushing, entangling with mine.

He reaches under me with his other hand and unclasps my bra. I hold up my arms and he slides the thin lace off before flinging it aside. Skin on skin, his chest hair abrades my sensitive nipples. I arch into the sensation. He releases the grip on my hair and dips down, landing open kisses all over my body and I writhe under his skillful attention. His lips and mouth are hot and greedy, and my body is on fire.

He drags my panties down, and my thighs quiver as his lips and tongue leave a wet trail behind. When he gets to my ankles, he slips them over my feet, then cradles first one foot then the other, kissing my sensitive arches. I moan. It's almost more than I can take. Every nerve in my body craves release. He stands long enough to yank off his briefs, never breaking eye contact. His eyes are intense, dark pools that sear my soul. They're burning embers, spitting flames that strip me of my will and I surrender completely.

He straddles me, shoving both hands through my hair, now a tangled, tousled mane splayed across the duvet. Breath ragged he says, "I'll never get enough of you."

When he dips his head and sucks my nipple into his mouth I cry out. He palms my breast, suckling until I think I'll lose my ever-lovin' mind, then he switches to my other breast, giving it the same expert attention. I clutch his head between my hands, holding him there while his hot wet mouth exquisitely tortures me. Eyes glazed, he releases my nipple and rolls onto his back taking me with him.

I'm straddling him, his hard cock perfectly aligned between my thighs. I circle my hips rubbing myself against him as he grips my hips growling. I fist his cock and shift, engaging my quads as I hover over him. His heavy-lidded gaze watches me as I slowly sink down, taking his full length inside of me. He grunts thrusting upwards and I rock my pelvis. He moans as my muscles contract around his cock.

“Fuck, Evie, you are so perfect.” He trails his hands up my torso then palms my breasts. I begin to move faster, gyrating and rolling my hips, using him for my pleasure. My movements escalate, becoming unsteady as I lose control. I bite my lip, our gazes locked as I ride him.

“I’m about to come,” he says, his voice hoarse like he’s coming undone. I tighten my muscles around his cock and lean forward my hands on either side of him, my hair tumbling around his chest. My nipples harden as they brush against him. He meets me thrust for thrust. I am so very close, I feel the heat building, my body pulsating around his cock as I climax. I’m barely coherent as he pants my name and I collapse on top of him. I’m limp. A liquified puddle of sensation.

We lay spent and satiated our breath mingling, slowly returning to normal. Our bodies are slick with sweat. His face is buried in my hair and I can feel the steady beat of his heart.

“Tails, I win,” I say and we both laugh weakly, too spent to accomplish much more.

EVIE

*S*neak in the front door and tiptoe quietly up the stairs, so I don't disturb Dad or the dogs. It's six am and I'm floating on postcoital bliss. Jamie and I showered together before I left and made love again. It was hard to leave. He's on duty for the next twenty-four hours and left when I did. It feels like we're counting down the days before I leave, even though we're trying hard not to. We're both pretty good at pretending this can go on forever, but it's there in the background. I pile my hair up on top of my head, slip into sweats and a soft sweater and go back downstairs to put on a pot of coffee.

Dad left me a note by the coffee pot. **Merry Christmas, Kiddo. You'll always be my little girl. Love, Dad.** My eyes sting with fresh tears. I guess I'm making up for lost time. I haven't cried this much in forever. I scoop the coffee into the filter, fill the reservoir and hit the brew button then stare out the window at the dark lake outside. Dawn will be breaking soon.

I hear the rooster crow as the smell of fresh coffee fills the air. I pull down my mom's special mug. Her favorite, and the only one she ever used. It was one I'd made for her in a high school pottery class I took freshman year. An amateurish attempt, but she'd loved it. On the bottom, I'd engraved a heart with *World's best mom* written inside the heart. *This is the one I'll use today, Mom. Merry Christmas. I love you.*

The dogs hear me pattering around and join me, tails wagging. "Merry

Christmas you two.” I grab biscuits from the canister and make them sit. “Good babies,” I say. “Take it nice.” They take their treats angelically then run to the living room and gobble them down. I let them outside to do their business and watch them romp in the freshly fallen snow. I start a fire in the fireplace then plug in the tree. The coffee maker beeps, and I pour myself a steaming cuppa, add half and half, and snuggle into the overstuffed club chair in front of the fire, feet curled under me.

After Dad gets up, I’ll prepare the horses’ special warm winter mash and give them their Christmas treats before I muck stalls. I sigh. I’m sure going to miss that routine. I love the Zen of the barn, where time ceases to exist. I frown thinking about the office and the pressures that go with my job. It seems so far away. A lifetime ago. I’m a different person than the one that drove away from Chicago five weeks ago. Maybe that’s not quite right. Maybe I rediscovered the person I used to be before escapism and ambition took over. I thought that Evie was long gone. The one that had hopes and dreams. That wasn’t afraid to feel. The one with an open heart. My phone pings with a text. I pull it out of my pocket and smile.

Jamie: I miss you.

His timing is on point. I quickly type back.

Me: I miss you too. XOXO

I slip my phone back in my pocket.

“Merry Christmas, Kiddo,” Dad says. “Coffee smells good.”

“Want me to pour you a cup?” I ask.

“Don’t get up. I’ll help myself. I’m no longer an invalid you know.”

“I know. But I may as well spoil you while I can.” I stand and stretch, then yawn loudly.

“What time did you get in?” Dad asks.

“Around six.” I reach for a mug and pour Dad a cup. Two teaspoons of sugar and a hefty shot of cream later, I set it on the island in front of him. I refill mine and he raises his eyebrows when he recognizes Moms’ mug.

“Nice,” he says.

I hold it up for a cheer. “Merry Christmas, Pops.” We clink cups and smile.

“When do you want to open gifts?” he asks.

“I’m ready anytime you are.”

“Let me finish this cup and I’ll play Santa.”

I clap my hands. “Can’t wait.”

As dawn breaks on this beautiful Christmas morning, we open our gifts. Dad’s thrilled with his new boots and sweaters. I love the leggings I asked for and the fuzzy pink slippers. I open the long jewelry box and nestled in silk is a beautiful heart shaped pendent necklace.

“Daddy, I love it!” I jump up and hug him. “Thank you. Will you put it on me?”

“Sure, Kiddo.” I sit at his feet and he fastens the necklace. I swivel and lay my head in his lap. He pats my shoulder. “I’ve got one more thing. From your mother.”

My head pops up. “From mom?”

“Yes. She asked me to give it to you when the time was right. I think that time is now.”

He stands up and walks to the tree, reaching for a wrapped package hidden in back. “Here you go.” He sits back down and with trembling hands I hold the present in my lap reluctant to open it.

Blowing out a shaky breath I remove the holiday wrapping. It’s a scrapbook. I run my fingers over the cover, knowing that my mom had been here, had created this with her own beautiful hands. In the center of the cover is a photograph of me and Mom at my college graduation. I remember that day like it was yesterday. Dad took this shot. He was doing his best to crack me up, but I was a hard nut to crack back then. He’d finally managed to get the perfect picture, capturing the bond between us as we’d laughed together... at him. I reverently turn the pages, as I let the tears flow freely.

Photo after photo with little side notes from Mom. Dad sits down next to me looking over my shoulder, hand comfortingly resting on my back. When I turn the last page there is a sealed envelope with my name scrawled on the front in Mom's unmistakable handwriting. I look at Dad and he smiles encouragingly.

*D*ear Evie, My heart. I don't know if you know this story, but your dad and I didn't think we'd be able to have children. We'd tried for several years with no luck. We decided that maybe it wasn't meant to be. Imagine our delight when we finally let go, and I got pregnant. You were special from the moment you were born. Even before. I used to sing to you when you were in my belly, and your dad read bedtime stories to us, his head on a pillow right by my belly so you could hear him. Tee hee.

If you're reading this now, I know time has passed since we last saw each other. The hardest part about dying was leaving you and your father. I needed you to be okay. I prayed every day that you would both heal and thrive and love. Baby, our bond will never be broken. Remember, Winnie The Pooh said, The most important thing is even when we're apart I'll always be with you.

Promise me you'll keep your heart open and look for all the tiny miracles that happen every single day. They're there you know. The first snowfall, the stars at night. The break of dawn, the lake at sunset. And that indescribable feeling when there is a song in your heart and someone else hears it too. That's what I want for you my sweet girl. You and Dad have each other, and I know you'll be okay. I am the luckiest mom in the world. All my love, my darling precious girl. Love, Mom

I look at Dad and we're both crying full on. "She was so special, your

mom.” He dabs at his eyes with a hankie.

“My dad is pretty special too. Thanks for giving this to me now. You were right to wait. This was the perfect time.”

*M*any hours later, the sun has set and we’re watching a holiday movie when a knock on the door startles us both. We literally jump, then laugh.

“Better see who it is,” Dad says.

I open the door and there stands Gwen. “I decided to come home a day early instead of waiting. I wanted to spend time with my second family. I hope it’s okay to drop in like this,” she says.

“Gwen, come in!” I say delighted to see her. I turn and Dad is right behind me with an adorable flush creeping up his neck and a thousand-watt smile lighting up his face as he greets Gwen.

“We’ve missed you haven’t we, Pops?” I say.

“Yes, we have. Hello Gwen. Come... sit... what can I get for you? Wine, snacks, beer?” he says eagerly.

“I’d love a glass of wine.”

“I’ll get it. We were watching a funny holiday rom-com. It just started. Are you game?” I ask

“I love a good rom-com.” She settles on the couch and I retrieve her drink and set the bowl of popcorn on the table in front of us.

We line up with Dad in the middle and I prop my feet up on the table. It is so comfortable, and I feel so happy for Dad.

Several hours later Gwen leaves and we call it a day.

I close my book and place it on the nightstand then snuggle under the covers. Before I turn off my lamp, I text Jamie.

Me: Merry Christmas. Thanks for knowing the song in my heart.

He may not get the message until tomorrow. He might be asleep or on a call. It doesn't matter. I fall into a sound sleep thinking about chocolate brown eyes and a beautiful heart.

EVIE

SIX WEEKS LATER

I kick off my shoes in the entryway of my condo and throw my bag on the side table. I'm exhausted, and my feet are killing me. I picked up Chinese on my way home and I carry it to the kitchen and grab some chopsticks from the drawer. I don't even bother to put it on a plate, I just eat it out of the cardboard container.

I'm not sure if it's work overwhelm, the air quality, or my homesickness. Probably the new schedule. I thought I'd have adjusted by now... got back into the groove, but it isn't happening. At all. I like myself a whole lot better when there's room to breathe, and I'm getting at least six hours of sleep a night. Neither is happening right now. My impatience has returned. When I can sleep, I wake up with a sore jaw and headache from grinding my teeth all night. I can't believe this used to feel normal. Sane even.

Jamie had the weekend off last week, so he drove down for an overnight. Wasn't nearly enough. I cried like a baby when we said goodbye. That part of me hasn't left yet. The emotional part. That's still all over the place. And yes, I'm lonely. I miss my dad, I miss my horses, I miss Dee, and most of all I miss Jamie. I am getting zero satisfaction from my job. Since my return I feel like I'm getting all the questionable characters. Some don't even pretend to be good people. Is this really what I'm supposed to be doing with my life? For what purpose?

I plop down with my chicken lo mein and pull out the scrapbook Mom made for me. I flip to a page I keep returning to again and again. It's a list I made in tenth grade of my goals. I don't know where Mom found it. Smiling I read them again. 1. Marry Jamie Barrington. 2. Have his babies. Lots of them. 3. Get my law degree and pass the bar. 4. Open a practice and serve my community. 5. Live happily ever after. There's a photo of me and Jamie standing in the backyard holding hands. Beside my list, Mom had written *Excellent Plan!!!* And a smiley face.

A wave of nausea overtakes me, and I make a mad dash for the bathroom. Just in time. As I sit on the bathroom floor leaning over the toilet, I know something has to give. Too much stress. I'm going to have to have a talk with the partners tomorrow and tell them I need to cut back on my case load. I'm still putting them off on the partnership offer, but they've increased the pressure. Especially Vance. *Ugh*. It doesn't feel right.

The following day I wake up nauseous again, and get sick at work. Thank God I'm too busy to entertain the niggling thought at the back of my brain. That works... until lunch time. I decide to go home but, on my way, I pop into the pharmacy. A half-hour later I'm staring in disbelief at the pink positive sign on the stick I just peed on. Talk about déjà-vu! I'm stunned. I'm still on the pill. Okay, I did miss a couple days over the holidays, but really? I throw the wand away and put my hands over my belly and breathe.

Well, hello little being. Are you really there? I pause and wait. Yes, you're here. I know you are. I can sense you. A little boy this time.

A picture of Jamie holding Henry flashes across my mind. A feeling of utter euphoria washes over me. I'm having Jamie's baby. Number two on my list. I'm going to be someone's mama. What did Mom say in her letter? Look for the tiny miracles that happen every day. *Well, Mom, this one is a whopper*. I'll call off work tomorrow and drive home! I pick up my phone a

dozen times to call Jamie but talk myself out of it. I can wait until this evening.

I return to work still dazed but determined. I'm dressed in my power suit, a navy blazer and pencil skirt with killer heels, hair in a chignon. When I arrive there is the usual after lunch office hustle bustle, which I once loved. It made me feel powerful and successful. On top of my game. Now it all seems stupid. I buzz the four partners and call for a meeting. I know they probably think I've made my decision about the partnership.

I face the four men of Wagner, Becker, Shultz and Dunn. Men I respect for the most part. I take a deep breath and give my notice. There is an audible collective gasp from all four of them.

"But..." Vance sputters, "you can't do that."

"I can, and I am doing that, Vance."

"What can we do to sweeten our offer?" Dan Becker asks.

"I really appreciate everything you've done for me over the years. I'm just ready to move in a different direction. I'm moving back to Michigan and taking the bar there. If all goes well, I'm going to open a small law practice. That was my original dream a lifetime ago."

Vance is as pale as a ghost. Two of the other three look like they swallowed something unpleasant. Only Dan offers me a sincere smile and congratulates me. "I wish you the best, Evie."

"You're making a huge mistake," Vance says, sounding desperate.

I shake my head. "Not this time." I stand up and they follow suit. "Of course, I'll stay long enough to brief everyone on my current cases and tie up loose ends. I'm thinking that will take about a month, max."

Somehow, knowing it's finite, the day flies by and I feel as light as a

feather as I make my way home. I'm practically floating. I immediately change into my sweats and a t-shirt, then wrap my Christmas prom blanket around my shoulders and make a nest on my couch. No sooner have I settled in than the nausea hits. I spend about an hour sitting on the bathroom floor until I feel well enough to shuffle to the kitchen and nuke some canned chicken noodle soup.

I'm forcing the soup down when my apartment doorbell buzzes. Frowning, my first thought is Vance. No way can I deal with him now. I look through the peep hole and my belly lurches. *Jamie. What is he doing here?* I throw open the door and I'm swept up in his arms.

"Evie, I can't take this anymore. I miss you too damn much. I've been making calls and calling in favors. If you'll have me, I want to move here with you. I don't care what your hours are, as long as we fall asleep and wake up in each other's arms we can make the rest work. I may have a job already lined up." I grab his arm and tug him forcefully into my condo, shutting the door firmly behind us.

"Babe, are you alright? You look a little green." Jamie says, as I cover my mouth and run to the bathroom.

He follows and squats down beside me, bunching my hair in his hand, holding it back from my face as I dry-heave into the commode. Thank God there is nothing left to come up.

Jamie stands up and wets a washcloth in cold water, then dabs my forehead. It feels so comforting. "Jamie?" I croak.

"What, babe?"

"Look in the trash can." I wave towards the small pink plastic receptacle next to the sink.

"What?"

"Just look. Right on top," I manage to croak out as another wave of nausea hits me and I wait for his reaction.

JAMIE

I pinch the bridge of my nose. We're going to have a baby. We're going to have a baby. I repeat that to myself several more times. "Are these things that accurate?" I ask waving the stick like an idiot.

"Yes, ninety-nine percent."

I sit down on the cold tile floor next to her and pull her onto my lap. "Are you happy about this or...?" I pray her answer is yes. For my part, I feel like superman, ready to leap from the tallest building.

"Yes! I gave my notice at the firm today."

My jaw drops. "You what?"

"You heard me. I'm moving home. Not just because of the baby, but he certainly sped up my decision."

"He?" I ask.

She nods. "I think so."

"Babe, I don't know what to say." I scrub my hands over my leaking eyes. The way I feel right now is profound and I can't find the right words. "I..." My voice breaks and suddenly I'm bawling, and Evie is on my lap rocking me. Here on the bathroom floor... in a luxury condo... in downtown Chicago, with the love of my life. Could life *get* any weirder?

"Shh," she says.

"I'm so fuckin' happy right now," I say.

“Me too,” she says quietly.

“We’re having a baby,” I say again a grin splitting my face. “We’ll make the spare downstairs bedroom the nursery—” I pause. “I’m sorry. I’m getting ahead of myself. Evie, will you marry me and make my big old house a home?”

She laughs and says yes. So... did I mention how weird life is?

“Just think Evie, one day we’ll get to tell our kid that I proposed to you sitting on a bathroom floor and you actually said yes.”

EVIE

SIX MONTHS LATER



Epilogue

I wash and dry my hands and look down at the thin band on my left ring finger. Mrs. Evie Barrington. *Cross number one off my list, Mom.* Who said they had to be in order? Dee and Gwen are hovering over me like I'm going to break if I so much as lift a finger. Jamie is the same. Oh, and Dad too. I'll admit, I kind of like being pampered. I waddle back to the den where I find Jamie on a ladder with Dad passing him blue streamers to hang up from the ceiling.

Dee is throwing us a baby shower and we decided our place is the best venue. It's plenty big and will accommodate the gang. *Our place.* As in Jamie's and mine. The nursery is done, all set up and ready for our baby boy. Asher. I rub my huge belly when I feel him kick. Jamie catches me wincing and hurries down the ladder. "You okay?"

"I'm fine."

"But I saw you wince."

"It's just Asher, letting me know he's ready to get this party started."

Jamie's smile could light up the room. He leans next to my belly and

says, “Don’t be in too big a hurry. Your Mom and I haven’t finished our Lamaze classes yet.”

Dee comes over and hugs me. “Sit down,” she bosses. “Everyone will be arriving soon.” Before I sit, I grab Jamie’s wrist and glance at his watch. We have about fifteen minutes. All the Barringtons will be here, kids too. Tank and Casey, Jamie’s friends from the fire station who are off today, Gwen and Dad of course. And our friend Eric is supposed to be here any minute. He flew in from Portland yesterday. I can’t wrap my mind around the fact that this is my life.

I took the Michigan bar in July, but the results aren’t released until November. I’m not worried, I’m sure I passed. I’m not in any hurry to set up my law practice anyway. That will be sometime next spring. Huxley seems to be taking his cue from Jamie and is acting like my personal service dog. He’s plopped down at my feet gazing up at me adoringly. I pet his head as he rests it in my lap.

Jamie is back up on the ladder, but I notice him checking in on me every two seconds. We lock eyes and he winks. I feel that familiar heat. I am married to the sexiest man on the planet. Asher shifts, then settles back down. I rub circles around my enormous belly.

“You are going to be so loved, little one,” I say as the first guests arrive.

The End, for Now...

Thank you for reading Jamie and Evie’s love story! I hope you enjoyed reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it. Some books seem to write themselves and this was one of those. I’ve had many get-aways in the beautiful state of Michigan and I hope I’ve captured the feeling I have when I’m there.

Watch for Tank’s story, from A Tinsel Tale, (Or Theodore as his

mom likes to call him) in early spring of 2024. And...

Watch for West Coast Billionaires Book Two coming in 2024!

Below are the universal links to my other books.

West Coast Billionaires, Book One:

<https://mybook.to/WestCoastBillionaires>

The Triple C Ranch Series:

Cowboy Magic:

<https://mybook.to/cowboymagic>

Cowboy Surprise:

<https://mybook.to/Cowboysurprise>

Cowboy Heat:

<https://mybook.to/cowboyheatTripleC>

Cowboy Confidential:

<https://mybook.to/CowboyConfidential>

The Triple C Complete 4-Book Box Set:

<https://mybook.to/TripleCBoxSet>

The Carolina Series

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<https://mybook.to/SeducedbyaBillionaire>

Secret Billionaire:

<https://mybook.to/SecretBillionaire>

Playboy Billionaire:

<https://mybook.to/Playboybillionaire>

A Billionaires Christmas:

<https://mybook.to/billinairexmas>

The Carolina Series: A Complete 4-Book Box Set:

<https://mybook.to/boxsetbillionaire>

Heartland Series: A Complete Romance Series

3-Book Box Set

<https://mybook.to/BoxSetHeartlandSeries>

BOOKS BY JILL DOWNEY

The Heartland Series:

More Than A Boss

More Than A Memory

More Than A Fling

The Carolina Series:

Seduced by a Billionaire

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A Tinsel Tale