

CHRISTMAS IN HARMONY BOOK ONE

# BOOKED FOR *christmas*



KALAYNA MARIE

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*for those unlucky in love:  
may you find your happily ever after*

## **Content Warning**

This book contains sensitive subject matter and may be triggering to some readers. For a detailed list of trigger warnings, please visit [authorkalaynamarie.com](http://authorkalaynamarie.com)

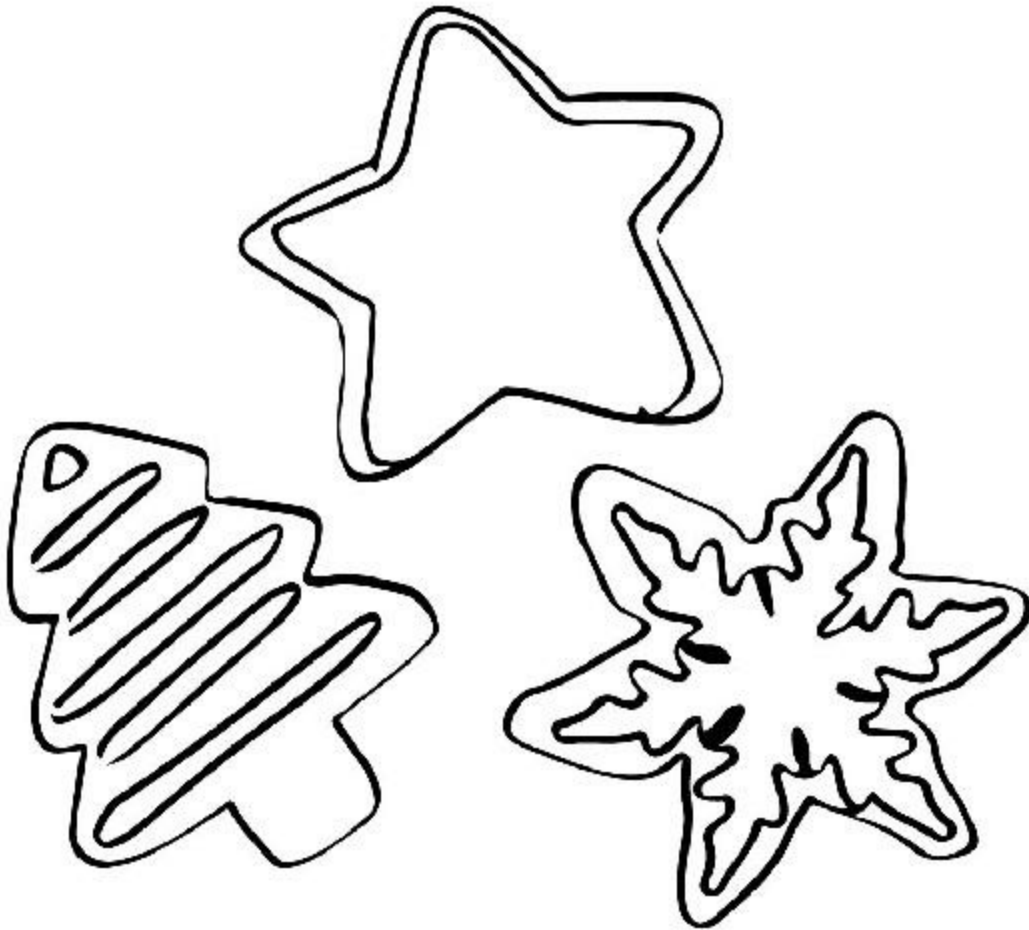
# Playlist

[Listen on Spotify](#)

Christmas Tree Farm - Taylor Swift  
Silent Night - Bing Crosby  
Christmas Eve - Celine Dion  
You Are In Love (Taylor's Version) - Taylor Swift  
Hometown Christmas - NEEDTOBREATHE  
Say Don't Go (Taylor's Version) - Taylor Swift  
Please Come Home for Christmas - Eagles  
Afterglow - Taylor Swift  
If December Never Ends - Anson Seabra  
Winter Dreams (Brandon's Song) - Kelly Clarkson

Chapter One

# Jana



Tears roll down my cheeks as I throw things into the suitcase I brought with me two years ago. I can hear George’s voice outside the locked door, the pounding of his fist against the wood doing nothing to calm me. Two years down the drain, and for what?

“Jana?” My best friend’s voice echoes into the room, and I scramble to

grab the phone from my bedside table. “What’s wrong? Isn’t it late there?”

“He’s banging the receptionist!” I sob into the device, cradling it against my ear as I toss my favorite sweater into the suitcase.

“Who, George?” Hadlee sounds incredulous, and I can almost picture her pretty face pinching into a scowl.

“What am I going to do, Lee?” Adrenaline pulses through me, pushing me to finish packing everything I can, as fast as I can. George has stopped trying to break down the door, but I can hear his heavy breathing on the other side as I sink to the floor beside the bed.

“Please, Jana,” he calls out, and I close my eyes, fresh tears sliding out. “Let me explain!”

“I moved out here to be with him,” I say to Hadlee on a hiccupping breath. Dropping my head against my knees, I suck in a deep breath. “I’m in a dead-end job with no prospects, and I can’t stay in this house. Not after this.”

“Jana, please let me in.”

“Come stay with me, J.” Hadlee’s voice rings loud and clear through the phone, and I blink away the tears that blur my vision.

“I couldn’t do that, Lee,” I say softly. I can still hear George outside the door, and my breaking heart reaches out for him. “I don’t want to put you out like that.”

“You know you’ve always been welcome here, Jana.”

“I know.” My breathing slows, the tears drying on my cheeks. I glance around the bedroom, the soft gray and blue hues bringing a sad ache to my chest. This is the first house I’ve lived in that really felt like home after my parents died, and now, I’m losing it. “I just don’t know if I can go back. I haven’t been home since their funeral.”

“I know, sweetie.” Her voice is low, and I know she’s feeling the same melancholy. Hadlee grew up in the house down the street from me, our parents best friends since college. When hers divorced, Hadlee practically lived at our house. Losing my mom and dad had been equally as hard on her. “But don’t you think it’s time? It’s been six years.”

I stay silent. Maybe she’s right.

“Jana, please. I can explain.”

“Maybe you’re right.” I catch my breath, looking around the room again. “It’s time I go home to Harmony.”





Snow falls in what feels like slow motion as I step out of the airport, my lightweight jacket doing little to keep me warm in the chilly winter air. I can't fight the smile that pulls at my lips, or the warmth flooding my chest seeing Hadlee standing a few feet away wrapped in the biggest coat I've ever seen. Her dark hair pokes out from her hat, and I can barely see her smile behind the many layers.

"Jana!" she squeals, throwing her arms around me. I laugh, hugging her back. "I'm so happy you're home!"

"Me too, Lee," I say, pulling away a little. I brush her hair from my mouth and laugh again, tugging my bag closer and glancing around. "I forgot how much it snows out here."

Her eyes dart over my figure. "You must be freezing! Did you bring a better coat?" she asks. She takes my bag and leads me to a waiting Subaru.

"I didn't need anything heavier than this back in Louisiana." I laugh, watching her struggle to heft my suitcase into her trunk. "Actually, this is heavier than what I needed in Louisiana."

"I can't even imagine living out there, J," Hadlee says, slamming the hatch and hurrying around to the driver's seat. I climb into the passenger seat, the heater slowly defrosting my frozen fingers. "The humidity alone would've been a disaster on my hair."

Looking over at her as she strips off her hat and overcoat, I grin. Her sleek black hair wouldn't have lasted a day in the New Orleans humidity. "You're right—you'd be doomed out there. My hair was curlier than ever, though."

"Oh, I love your curls." Hadlee pulls out of the pick-up line, and I watch out the window as we pass by parked cars, my heart sore at the sight of reuniting families and couples. Hadlee turns on the radio, the local station playing Christmas classics.

The drive back to Harmony takes just under an hour, and Hadlee fills my silence with stories of the salon she works at and the people around town. I don't hear much of what she says, though; my mind is stuck on George and the life I left behind. My head rests on the window as I watch the trees fly past, and it's not until I see the town limits that I perk up.

*Harmony, Montana  
Where you're family  
Population: 17,516*

“Oh, I ran into Mrs. Filly the other day and told her you were moving back.” Hadlee’s words ring in my ears, and it takes a moment for them to register. Mrs. Filly has owned The Little Button Bakery since it opened in 1982. I worked for her my entire high school career, right up until I left for college following my parents’ deaths. “She said you have a job there if you want it.”

“Really?” I ask, my interest peaked. Baking has been my passion for years, and with my degree in business management, I’ve always wanted to open my own bakery.

“Yeah, really.”

“I’ve been itching to get back into baking,” I say wistfully. “George hated it when I baked. He wanted me to lose more weight and made me feel awful anytime I made cookies or pies.”

“Are you kidding?” Hadlee looks furious. Since we grew up together, Hadlee is one of the only people to know about my struggle with my weight. I’ve always been on the heavier side, and it took almost starving myself to death to come to the realization that I didn’t need to be skinny to love myself. “I swear to God, I’m gonna kill him next time I see him.”

“It’s okay,” I say, brushing hair away from my face. “He’s not worth going to jail for.”

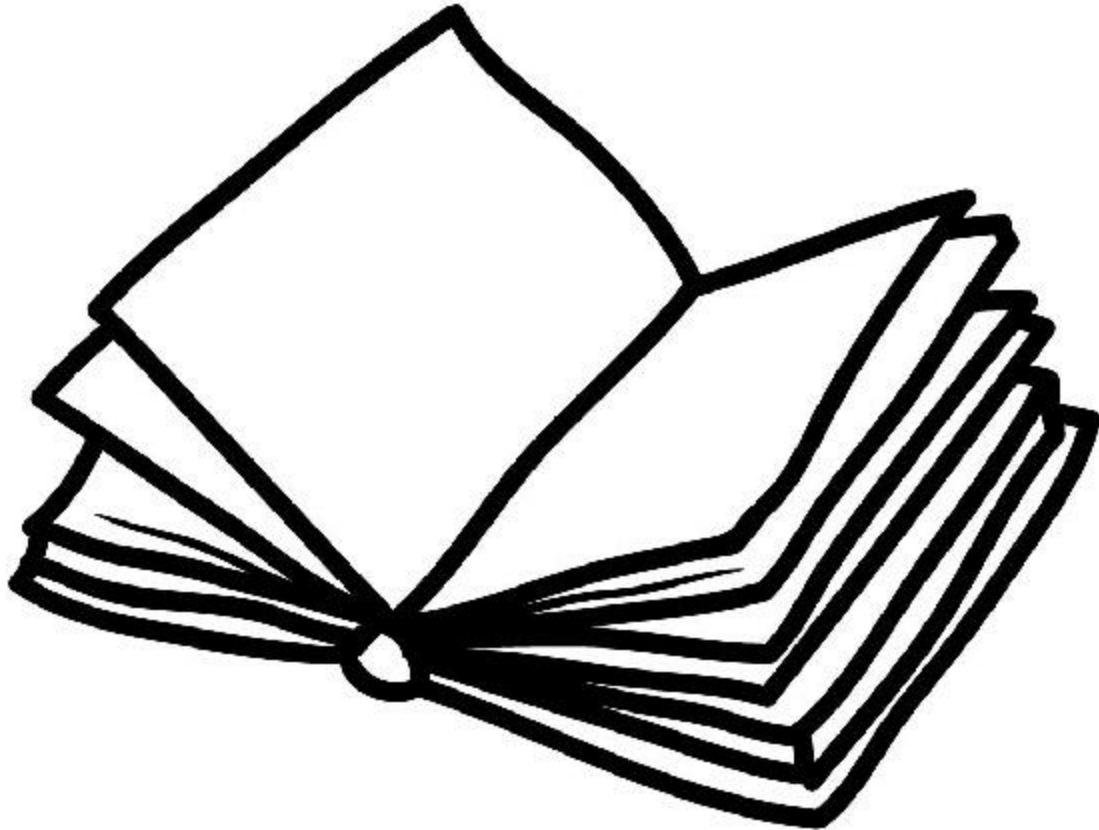
“I can’t believe he did that.”

“I’m okay, Lee, promise.”

“Do you want to swing by the bakery and make it official?” Hadlee offers after a moment of silence.

“Yeah, I think that’s a really good idea.”

Chapter Two  
**Alex**



“Hurry, hurry, hurry!” I call out to my girls, ushering them inside. It’s too fucking cold to be outside, and they refused to wear the damn hats I bought them. The bookstore is dark inside, but Maddie quickly flips the switch as she steps inside. I help Morgan hop up the last step, collecting the mail as we go. The little bell above the door rings as the door closes behind us, and I let go

of my youngest's hand.

"Daddy?" Morgan calls from the front window, her nose pressed against the glass. "When are we going to put pretty lights up like the rest of the shops?"

"I don't know, sweetie," I reply, turning my attention to the mail as I walk around the counter. *Another bill.*

"I want lights," Morgan cries. "They look like twinkling fairies."

"*Daddy.*" Maddie joins her sister's pouting. I sigh, taking in her crossed arms and disapproving frown. "It's almost Christmas, and we don't even have a tree yet."

"Are we getting a *tree*, Daddy?" Morgan asks in excitement, turning her chubby face toward me with the biggest smile. Her amber eyes, exact replicas of mine, light up in delight. "Mama loved decorating the tree."

My heart breaks a little at the mention of Laura, and despite my resolve not to decorate, I can't deny their hopeful anticipation. "Sure, we can get a tree."

Their chorus of excitement fills the bookshop, and I grin as they clasp hands and dance in a circle. Before Laura died, I promised her I would strive to keep the light present in their lives. A tree won't hurt anything.

The bell above the door rings again, calling our attention to the man who just stepped inside. Pulling his winter hat off, he tousles his dark brown curls with a free hand before barking a joyful, "Hello, family!"

"Uncle Benji!" The girls clamor over themselves to reach my brother, and he drops to his knees to welcome their hugs with a wide grin.

"What's this?" he says in amazement, holding the girls at arm's length. I roll my eyes at his antics as my girls giggle, waiting for him to continue. "You've grown so much since I saw you last."

"You saw us last night, Uncle Benji!" Maddie reminds him while Morgan dissolves into a fit of laughter.

"No, that can't be." Benji looks at me and frowns. "And who's that old man over there?"

"That's Daddy!" Morgan says through her giggles. I shake my head, fighting a smile.

"Daddy? When did he get so *old*?"

"Daddy's always been old," Morgan replies before she points at Benji's face. "And so are you, Uncle Benji!"

I guffaw, ignoring the pointed look my younger brother sends me. "Ah, but your daddy is older than me, Morg."

“Really?”

“Definitely,” he says with a sharp nod and a teasing grin. “And he’s even *older* than Auntie Carlee.”

“Auntie Carlee?”

“She came and visited when Mama died,” Maddie whispers to Morgan. “She has pretty yellow hair, remember?”

“Oh yeah.” My five-year-old nods along with her sister’s words, a frown puckering at her mouth. “I wanted to braid her hair like Rapunzel’s, but she wouldn’t let me.”

“Yeah, Auntie Carlee has a stick up her a—”

“Maddie, why don’t you take Morgan to play in the back?” I cut off my brother’s observation, smiling at my seven-year-old while simultaneously trying to glare daggers at Benji. Maddie smiles back and grabs her sister’s hand.

“Come on, Morg. We can play princesses in the reading nook.”

I watch them disappear around the corner before turning to face my brother. “What are you doing here, Benj?”

Benji pushes to his feet and strolls over, leaning against the counter.

“You’ve been mighty uptight lately, Lexi,” he says, fiddling with the stack of business cards beside the register. I swat his hand away with a scowl.

“Don’t call me that, Benjamin.”

“What?” He smirks, standing to his full height to tower over me. “Uptight? Or Lexi?”

“Either, thanks.”

“Aw, come on, Alex.”

“No, you *come on*, Ben.” I run a hand through my dark hair and sigh. Can you please just watch your language around the girls? I don’t need them cursing at school.”

“Sure, I’ll work on that.”

“Thank you,” I say, turning my attention to the computer. “So, what are you doing here?”

“Can’t I just visit my nieces?”

“Sure you can,” I say, glancing at him over top of the computer. Opening the store takes little effort from me, but Benji doesn’t know that. “Which is why you swung by the house last night for movie night.”

“I thought I could help out with the books.” Benji looks pointedly at the bills I tucked haphazardly beneath a stack of geography books when he

walked in.

“Oh, no, Ben,” I say, waving a hand in dismissal. “There’s no need.”

“Alex, I know the store has been struggling since Laura passed.” He reaches for the papers and, despite my swatting hands, pulls them across the surface. “It’s not a big deal, Alex. This is what I went to school for.”

Embarrassment floods through me, and I scowl at my brother. He doesn’t notice, though, since his eyes are busy scanning the bills and shipment invoices. Logically, I know he’s simply trying to help. He’s right—the store has been floundering for the last two years without Laura’s patient, guiding hand. A wave of regret rolls over me as I scan the rows of bookshelves. This place had always been Laura’s dream. I can’t sit by idly and let it die without a fight.

“Fine, you can look over the books,” I say, picking up the stack of books and walking around the counter. “But I can’t pay you.”

“No worries, brother.” Benji grins as he trades places with me. “You can pay me by getting a date.”

I shake my head, heading for the back of the shop. “I’m not dating Benj.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to get out and have a bit of fun?”

“I don’t need fun, Benji,” I reply, glaring at him over my shoulder. “I need to raise my daughters and keep Laura’s dream alive.”

“Do you really think Laura would want you to close yourself off from love?” His voice follows me to the non-fiction section, where I begin stacking the new books. “And what about the girls? Don’t they deserve a woman in their lives?”

“I’m not going to replace Laura just because you think I need to get laid, Ben.”

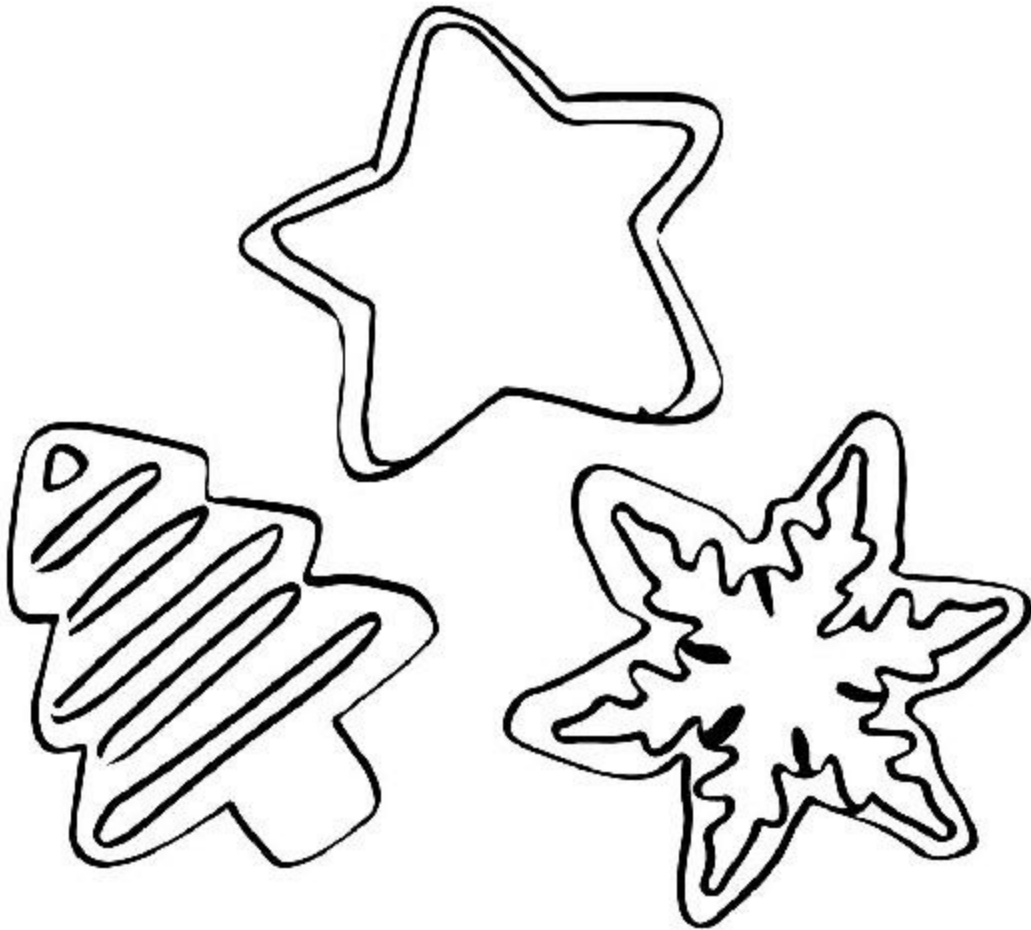
“I’m not saying you need to replace Laura.” His voice is soft and close. When I stand and turn, he’s there, leaning against the shelf with his arms crossed. “I would never suggest that, Alex. I know how much you loved her.”

“Love,” I correct him. “I love Laura. That’s not going away.”

“I don’t think it needs to. All I’m saying is that you should think about it.” He glances over my shoulders, and I follow his gaze to the children’s corner. Maddie and Morgan are sitting together, reading a book quietly. “Your girls need a mom, Alex.”

## Chapter Three

# Jana



“Thanks for all your help this morning, Jana,” Mrs. Filly says, leaning across the table and clasping my hand. I offer a wide smile, gently squeezing her fingers.

“Of course!” I say, pushing hair away from my face with my free hand. “Thank you again for giving me a job at the last minute! I don’t know what I

would do if it wasn't for you, Mrs. F."

"Oh, darling Jana," she coos, her kind blue eyes softening. "You were my best employee. I was so sad to lose you when you left for college."

"I've missed it here," I admit, letting my eyes drift around the small bakery. The last time I was here was after my parents' funeral, and not a thing has changed in all these years. It still has the same off-white walls and an old display case, the same checked flooring and mismatched tables and chairs. The only difference is the new kitchen appliances in the back.

"How long has it been since you've been back?"

"Six years," I say, letting my eyes rest on the collection of photos lining the back wall. I don't have to see them up close to know that at least three are images of my parents.

"Well, we're glad you've come home, sweetie."

*Home.* The word settles in my bones, raising the hairs on the back of my neck, and my fingers itch to tap against the linoleum tabletop. I don't have a home anymore.

"I should really be going." I smile as I push myself out of my chair. "Hadlee needs my help decorating today."

The lie slips out easily, and Mrs. F doesn't bat an eyelash. She smiles brightly and nods. "Ah, well, have a lovely afternoon, Jana."

"Thank you, Mrs. F," I reply, heading for the door. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"See you tomorrow, dearie."

I leave the warmth of the bakery and pull my jacket tighter around my body. I still need to pick up a new coat, but first, I need to get a thank you gift for Hadlee. When she invited me to stay with her, I had worried about putting her out. Luckily, her beautiful house has a spare bedroom with its own ensuite.

Walking down Main Street, I take in the beauty and charm of Harmony. The rows of shops hold true to their small-town roots, made of red brick and big glass windows. Snow lines the streets, the wrought iron streetlamps a stark contrast against the bright white. Snowflakes fall slowly, almost lazily, while Christmas lights glint in the afternoon gray.

I smile, nostalgia crashing through me. Six Christmases without snow—how did I ever live that way? The storefronts are all decorated with lights and garlands and bright red bows, and my heart warms at the sight.

I continue down the street, looking for the bookstore. Hadlee has always



loved books more than anything. In elementary school, we'd bonded over our love of fantasy novels—it was one of the reasons we were still such good friends.

I stop short when I see the bookstore across the street. It's in the same spot as the little bookstore of my childhood, but there's an utter lack of decorations, not even lights around the windows. The new owners have renamed the old store—it's no longer *Ivers Books*, but *Brooks Books*.

Despite the lack of familiarity, I hurry across the street and open the shop's door. A cold burst of wind follows me in, mussing my hair and scattering a few pages on the counter. Two men stand behind the desk, and both look up at my entrance. My heart flops, my stomach doing a somersault at the unexpected attention.

"Welcome in!" the taller one says, ruffling his dark curls as he grins at me. I smile back, stepping further into the building. They've reorganized the store, to the point where I'm not sure I'll be able to find what I need. There's a cute little reading area in front of the window display, just across from the checkout counter, with comfortable-looking armchairs and raw wood end tables. The displays are expertly organized, and there are less shelves than I remember *Ivers* having. *Oh God, I hope they have something Hadlee will like.* "Are you looking for something specific?"

"Oh, um...yes and no?" I say before I laugh. It's an absurd answer, and the man who has yet to say a word smirks a little. I swallow, letting my eyes dance over the shelves nearest me. "Do you have any cute Christmas romances?"

"Yes!" the tall one says, his smile never faltering. "Alex here can show you where they are."

I stand patiently, wondering what the silent conversation happening between the two is about. When Alex steps around the counter, I smile at him, and he returns it with a grimacing smile before he stalks forward.

"They're over here." His voice is rough, as if he hasn't used it in a while. He mimics the motion his companion made, cutting his fingers through his dark hair. When he passes by, his cologne whispers around me—it's woody, with a hint of citrus. I follow him around a bookshelf, only to almost run into him when he stops abruptly.

"I couldn't help but notice you haven't decorated the store for Christmas," I say, trying to make small talk as he scans the shelves. He flicks his amber gaze my way, irritation evident in their depths.

“That’s right.”

His sharp response has my hackles raising, and I clench my teeth together to keep from biting out a harsh reply. I inhale deeply, relaxing my shoulders and jaw on the exhale.

“I didn’t mean any offence,” I say calmly, letting my eyes drift over the titles on the shelf.

“Then why say anything?” he asks, sidestepping and dropping to a crouch.

“Because,” I bite out, already regretting the words. “Your shop is the only one not lit up and decorated for the happiest time of year. Though, now I can see why.”

“Oh, you can?” he asks, glaring harshly at me. “I suppose you’re going to share that unasked for opinion too?”

“What the hell is your problem?”

“My problem?” he scoffs, shaking his head and walking back toward the front of the store without showing me where the damned Christmas books are. I follow on his heels, furious with his attitude. “You come in here and immediately start criticizing my business, and you have the balls to ask me what *my* problem is?”

“No need to get your boxers in a twist,” I mutter. He rounds on me, his eyes burning with anger. I sigh, annoyed, but stand my ground. *Way to go, Jana. Day one, and you’ve already pissed someone off.*

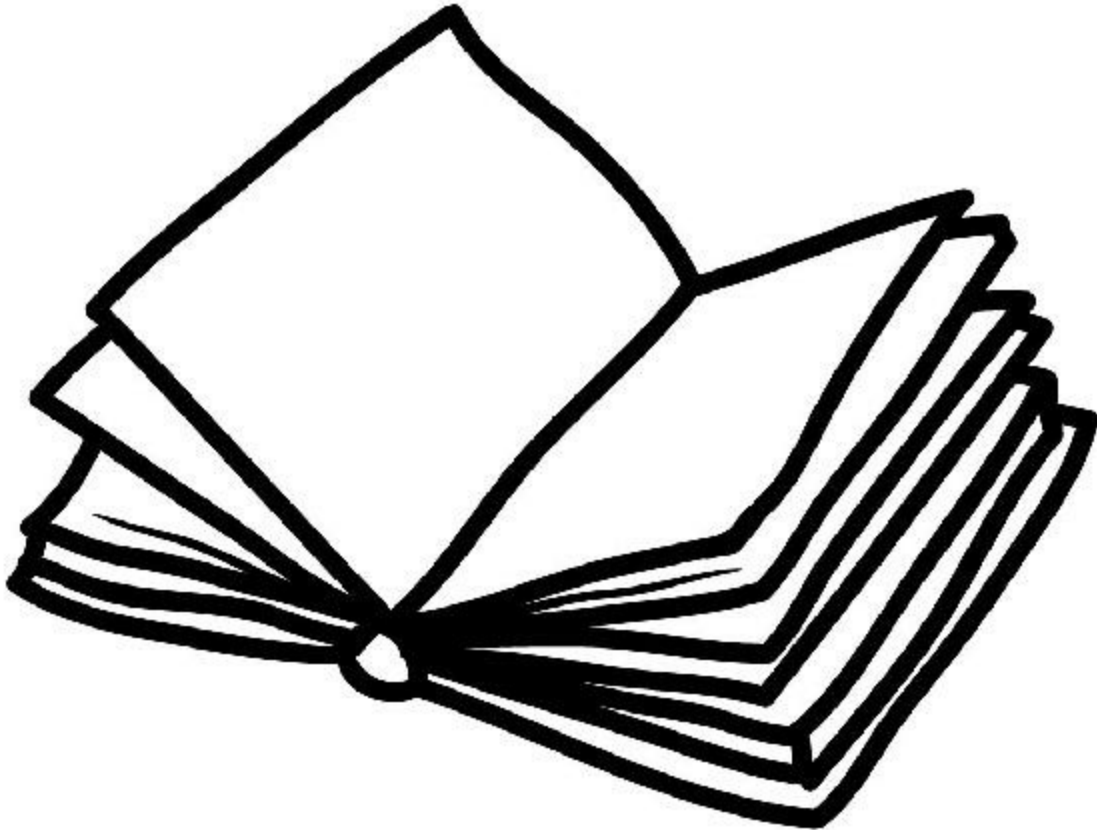
“I’m gonna ask you to leave,” he says, the muscles in his jaw jumping.

“You’re going to kick me out of your store for asking about Christmas lights?” I ask, my eyes widening. He gestures to the door, and I roll my eyes. “Can you really afford that?”

“Get the fuck out of my store!” he bellows. Narrowing my eyes at his tantrum, I step around him and hurry to the door. I turn back when I reach the door and send him a heated glare.

“Merry Christmas to you too,” I say, offering him my biggest smile before stepping out into the cold. The moment the door snaps shut behind me, I glare at the snow. “Asshole.”

Chapter Four  
**Alex**



I watch the woman leave, frustration simmering in my veins. Her soft brown doe-eyes had been curious, her smile honest, but for some reason, it irked me. My gaze follows her trek down the road, and I immediately regret throwing her out in the cold like that. *What if someone treated Maddie or Morgan that way?* I'd be furious. *So why would you treat a woman like that?*

I push Laura's voice aside, focusing on the anger the woman had inspired. It was almost instantaneous. The moment she walked into the store, I was irritated—probably due to Benji's nagging, but also from the gust of wind that had scattered my papers. And then there was the silent look Benji had sent me, as if to say *fate brought her*.

"Did you just kick her out?" Benji's voice comes from behind me, the words ringing in my ears as if to mock me.

"Yes."

"Why the hell would you kick out your first customer of the day?" He echoes the woman's incredulous tone, and I sigh out a heavy breath as I close my eyes and wipe a hand down my face.

"Does it matter?" I ask, stepping around the counter. It's barely after one o'clock, but I'm extremely tempted to close the store now and go home.

"Yes, it does *matter*, Alex." Benji's voice grates over my nerves, and I grip the countertop tightly. "You can't afford to be kicking customers out. You're barely bringing in enough to keep the place open as it is."

The heartbreaking truth: Laura's bookshop dreams are spinning around the drain, and I can't figure out how to stop them from disappearing completely. This shop is the last connection my girls have to their mother, and losing it would be like ripping her from their lives all over again. *I've got to figure this out*.

"I know," I mutter, glancing out the window again. The woman is gone, but she remains burned into my mind. Perhaps my reaction was harsh because of the attraction that burned through me at the sight of her luscious curves and ruddy cheeks. It was unexpected and confusing, especially after my conversation with Benji about my love for Laura.

"You know, maybe you could host book clubs or a weekly game night," Benji says, and my attention snaps back to him. He's flipping through a book, his immediate attention on the current statistics of killer whales.

"A weekly game night?"

He lifts his head with a grin. "Yeah, like bingo or something."

"That's the worst idea you've ever had," I say with a small laugh, shaking my head as I close out the register. "I need to find the funds to hire a teenager to watch the register in the afternoons."

"That's a good idea," Benji says, tucking the book back on the shelf beside him. I lift a brow, counting the same bills I counted this morning. *No one has come in today except that woman. Why go through the motions?* "Do you

have someone in mind?”

“Wren’s younger brother is looking for an after-school job,” I say. I recall my babysitter mentioning it in passing, an annoyed comment on her way out a few nights ago. “But I can’t afford to pay someone.”

“I can help you move things around to free up enough for the kid.” Benji glances at his watch. “Are you seriously closing out this early every day?”

“Yeah, I can’t afford to keep it open later.” I finish counting the till and lock it, pulling together my things before calling for the girls. “Besides, Maddie has ballet in the afternoons, and Morgan starts gymnastics soon. I don’t have the time to man the counter all day.”

The girls come running from the back, each holding a book.

“Can we take these home with us, Daddy?” Maddie asks, her green eyes wide and her lashes fluttering. Morgan watches her sister for a moment before copying her expression, a silly grin peeking through her pout.

“I’ll work on freeing up the cash. You work on saying no to your daughters.” Benji’s laughter follows him out the front door, but I ignore him.

“We have lots of books at home,” I say, wrapping my scarf around my neck. I hold Maddie’s jacket out to her, and she takes it with a frown.

“But we don’t have *these* books at home,” she reasons, tucking her coat under her arm and holding up the book she wants—a book about trains. I roll my eyes, holding up Morgan’s coat and trying to get her to put her arms in.

“I really want *this* book, Daddy,” Morgan says softly, her eyes staring down at the book in her hands. It has lots of princesses in it.”

“You know, girls,” I say conspiratorially, crouching down in front of them and pulling them closer to me. “Christmas is in a couple weeks. Why don’t you ask Santa for them?”

“Santa’s not real, Daddy,” Maddie says matter-of-factly, and I almost choke on my own tongue. *What?* I try to school my face, hoping my surprise isn’t obvious. *Who the fuck told her that?*

“Santa’s not real?” Morgan asks, her bottom lip trembling. I can already see the tears brimming in her eyes.

“Of course he is, sweetie.”

“But Maddie said—”

“Maddie, where did you hear that?” I ask my seven-year-old. Her hazel-green eyes are brimming with tears too, and my heart breaks a little at their disappointment. This was not on my radar for this year, and I wonder what Laura would say to ease their fears.

“A boy at school,” Maddie replies, wiping at her cheeks with the back of her hand.

“Do you believe him?”

I watch her face as she thinks. Her nose crinkles a little, her eyes narrowing as she tilts her head. She moves her lips back and forth, as though she’s got a nose itch she can’t get with her hands full. I see the moment she makes a decision, her face relaxing into a smile.

“No.”

“Do you believe in Santa?” I ask.

“Yes, Daddy.”

“See, Morg?” I say with a smile. “Maddie believes in Santa.”

Relief floods through me as the tears are wiped away, replaced with smiles and laughter. They pull their coats on and set the books on the front counter, agreeing to write Santa the moment we arrive home. Ushering them out into the truck, I pray nothing else goes wrong this Christmas.



“Thanks again for coming to watch them, Wren,” I say as I pull my coat on. She smiles, her blue eyes glinting in the light from the TV. Maddie and Morgan sit transfixed on the couch, watching the claymation Santa Claus sing and dance. “I know it’s hard with your mom’s condition.”

“Of course, Alex,” she says, pushing back her blonde curls and cocking a shoulder. “I love watching them, and besides—Mom’s already asleep.”

“I’ll be back in an hour or so, depending on how long this meeting goes.”

“No worries. I can have them all tucked in before you get back.”

“Thank you.” I wave as I step outside, hating that I have to go to this dumbass town hall meeting. Wren grins before closing the door, and I sigh out an irritated breath. Laura used to love these meetings, and I loved going with her. Since her death, though, I’ve dreaded every single one.

I hurry to my truck, the cold biting at my exposed ears. My phone rings in my pocket and I fish it out as I start the engine. Benji’s name flashes on the screen.

“What?”

“Is that how you answer phone calls? No wonder people don’t come into the store.” I groan at his pithy reply and contemplate hanging up on him.

“What do you need, Ben?”

“Just thought you’d want to know that I moved some things around, and

you now have enough money to hire Wren's teenage brother."

"Do I want to know?" I ask, backing out of the driveway. His voice fills the cab as I drive back into town. When we bought the house out here on the edge of town, the plan had been to raise chickens and maybe get some cows. Now, those plans have died.

"It's nothing crazy," he assures me. The line goes quiet for a moment, and I can almost imagine him running a hand through his hair. "Have you thought more about what we talked about this morning?"

I sigh. *Should've known.*

"You know, I can help you fill out a profile online," he says. "Unless there's someone specific in town you'd like to go out with."

Lucious curves and big brown eyes fill my mind, and I clench my jaw, shaking my head. "I already told you, Benji: I'm not interested in dating."

"I know what you said, but it's been two years."

I sigh harshly. "I know how long it's been, Ben."

"I just want you to be happy," he insists, the line going silent again.

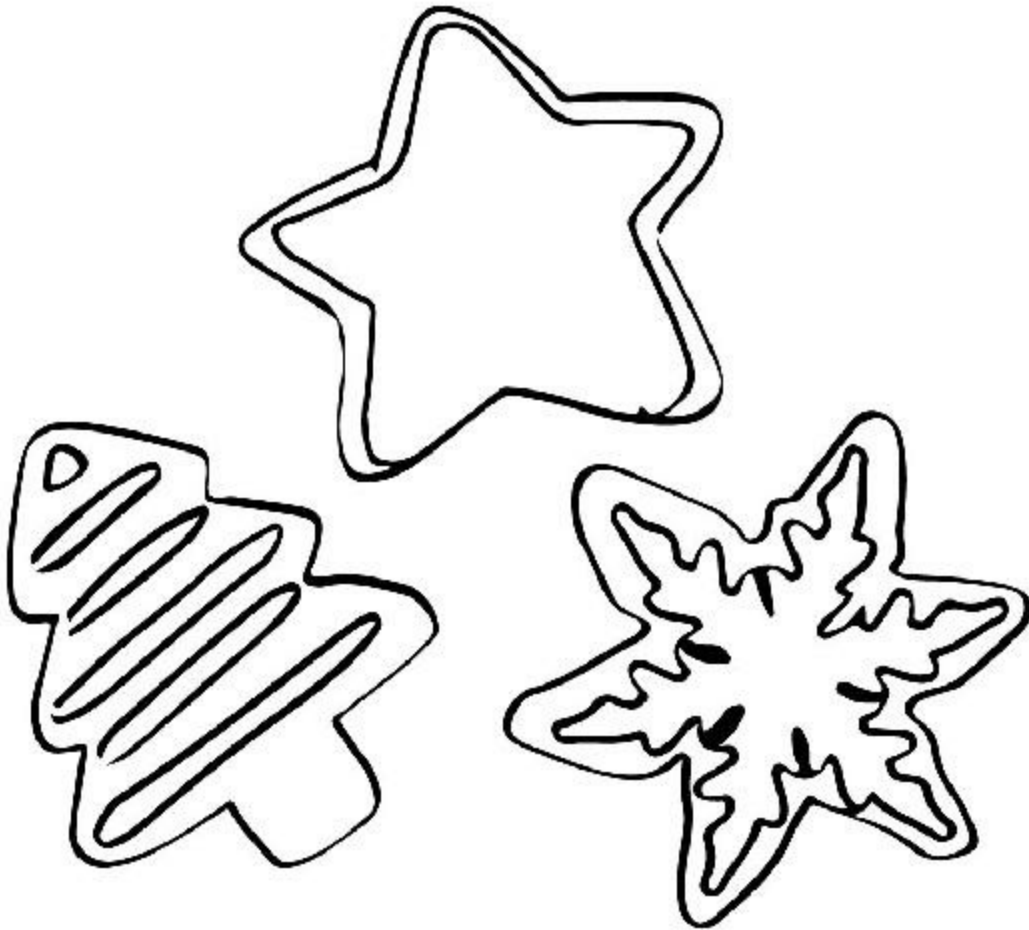
"I am happy," I say, despite the ache in my chest. I force a laugh. "I've got plenty of women in my life, Benj. They run it, even."

"Okay," he says, and I breathe out a sigh of relief. "I'll drop it if you promise to at least think about it."

"Sure," I lie, pulling up in front of Town Hall. "I'll think about it."

Chapter Five

## Jana



I stare up at the red brick building, taking in the grandeur of the historic town hall. One thing I can say about this town is that they knew what they were doing when they built it. I'm almost positive that every single building lining Main Street is original to the town.

I try to ignore the curious looks sent my way, recalling the conversation



from half an hour ago. Mrs. Filly had called frantically, asking me to attend the town hall meeting in her place. Her grandson's wife was in labor, and she needed to get to the hospital in Missoula—three hours away.

Hadlee links her arm through mine, adjusting the hem of her pretty dress as we walk across the street. I fiddle with my sweater, feeling obnoxiously underdressed beside my best friend.

"I thought this was just a town hall meeting," I mutter, taking in her sparkly red dress and heels.

"It is," she says, smiling at someone who passes us. I clasp my hands together and tap my fingers against the back of my wrist as anxiety crawls up my spine. *Tap, tap, tap, tap.*

"Then why are you wearing a cocktail dress?"

"Because I work at a salon," she whispers, waving at someone else as we meander inside. "I never get to wear my cute dresses anymore."

"Well, you could've told me to change," I say, letting my eyes drop to my feet.

"What's wrong with your outfit?" she asks, peering at my gray Columbia sweater, black leggings, and boots. "I think you look adorable, Jana."

"Oh, thanks," I say sarcastically, picking at a stray thread at my wrist. Hadlee pulls me to an abrupt stop, and I look at her in surprise as she takes my hands in hers.

"I don't know why you do that, but I'm serious." She cocks her head, a small smile gracing her lips. Her dark hair is pulled up in an effortless bun, her green eyes framed in dark lashes and liner. *She looks gorgeous, and I look like a slob.* "You look great! Any guy here would be lucky to have you."

I snort.

"I'm done with men, Lee," I say, pushing my glasses up and glancing around the room. "I'm so sick of putting myself out there. I've been cheated on twice. Why would I put myself through that again?"

"Okay, but they were assholes."

"All men are assholes, Hadlee."

"Okay, but some are only a little bit of an asshole," she says, pulling at her dangling earring. "Jon and George were freshly fucked assholes—big and full of shit."

I choke on a laugh, my cheeks heating as an older couple shoots us disapproving glares. "That's wrong on so many levels, Lee."

"But true." She grins, mischief glinting in the depths of her eyes. "Now,

let's get in there so you can take scrupulous notes for Mrs. F.”



I see him the minute I sit down: dark curls, scruffy jaw, amber eyes. *Alex*. I lift my hand to my lips, gnawing on the cuticle of my thumb. *Of course he's here*. I watch him take in the room, traitorous butterflies dancing in my stomach when his eyes land on me. He holds the eye-contact a moment longer than appropriate, but his expression is one of boredom. From this distance, I can't quite tell if he took in my messy bun or college sweater, but I feel more uncomfortable anyway.

“Why do you keep fiddling with your sweater like that?” Hadlee asks in a hushed whisper, swatting my hands away from the fabric.

“I'm self-conscious,” I mutter. The room we're in is something akin to a theater, with the most uncomfortable velvet chairs. There's a stage at the front of the room, a long table set up in the center—no doubt where the mayor and chair-people will sit. “I don't remember the last time I came to one of these meetings, and I feel like everyone is watching me.”

“No one is looking at you, J,” she says in an attempt to soothe my nerves. I cross my arms, trying to ignore the burning gazes of curious people. Disappear for six years, and this is what coming home gets you. “Besides, you're just here to take notes for Mrs. F, which is so far from attention drawing, it's like living in a cave.”

“I wish I was in a cave right now,” I mutter, sinking lower in my chair.

“Oh, stop being such a spoilsport.” Hadlee's brows furrow, and she turns her attention to the front of the room. “They're supposed to announce the Christmas festival tonight.”

“Welcome!” A strong voice echoes around the room, and my eyes fly to the man standing on the stage beside the table. He's tall, with ashy blond hair that falls in waves over his forehead. His smile is blinding, and he tousles his hair with a hand as he continues. “If we could have everyone take a seat, we can begin!”

The crowd settles, seats filling quickly and the din quieting.

“Do you honestly think all men are assholes?” Hadlee leans closer to ask, her eyes focused on the blond man on stage. My eyes drift to *Alex* standing against the wall, his arms crossed and a scowl firmly in place.

“Yeah, I do.”



I zone out for most of the meeting, scrolling through George's social media instead. I don't know why I torture myself this way, but somehow, seeing images of him and his secretary soothes me. I should've known the moment he hired her that this would happen, but I was in a blissful bubble, only seeing what he wanted me to see.

I sigh heavily, earning an elbow to the ribs. "Ow!"

"I thought you blocked him," Hadlee hisses, taking my phone and tucking it into her clutch purse. She gestures to the front of the room, where the handsome blond man is talking again. "This is not the time for a meltdown. Mayor Bradley just announced that the local stores are teaming up for booths this year."

"That should be interesting," I say, boredom dripping from every word.

"Now, we've already written the local business names on a strip of paper," the man—Mayor Bradley says, holding out a bowl. "I'll draw out two businesses, and they'll be paired for a booth. Sound good?"

There's a cacophony of agreement, and he reaches his hand into the bowl. "Casey's Cuts and Feldman's."

Hadlee groans, sinking back into her chair. "Feldman's? They're the worst one to be paired with."

"Why, because they're a hardware store?"

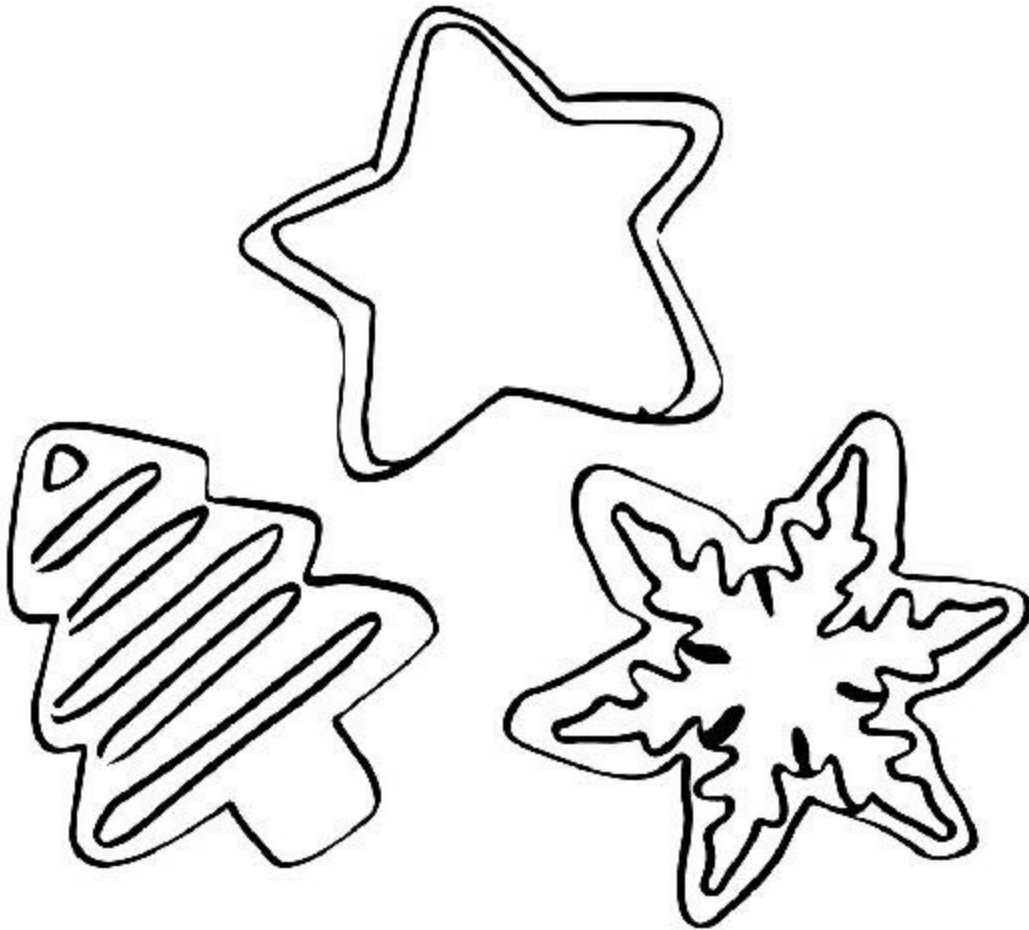
"Exactly! What's our booth going to be—who can nail a board faster?" Her brows furrow, her bright red lips pinching into a scowl. I shake my head with a laugh; she's going to pout about this for the rest of the holiday season.

Mayor Bradley's voice echoes through the hall, bringing my attention back to the name draw. "The Little Button Bakery and Brooks Books."

My jaw drops, and I swing my gaze across the room to where Alex stands, irritation clear on his face. *This cannot be happening right now.*

Chapter Six

## Jana



Settling the needle arm onto a new record, I wait until the soft strains of Bing Crosby's *'Silent Night'* play through the house before walking back into the kitchen. I wash my hands and spread a fresh layer of flour across the quartz countertop. A chill seeps into the room despite the heat rolling from the oven, and I adjust the sleeves of my sweater before dumping the bowl

onto the counter.

I press my fingers into the sugary mix, enjoying the sticky sensation as it creeps into every crevice of my hands. The motion of kneading dough relaxes me, more things on my mind than I care to admit. Lifting a hand, I wipe at an itch on my forehead with the back of my wrist.

My eyes dart up, landing briefly on the box of abandoned decorations by the couch. *We still need a tree.* I sigh. My usual cheer and excitement for Christmas is severely lacking this year, and I can only attribute it to George's betrayal.

I smack the dough roughly as a tear slips down my cheek.

"These cookies aren't going to bake themselves," I mutter, wiping my cheek on my shoulder. Sniffling, I start pressing the sugar cookie dough flat before I reach out and wrap my sticky fingers around the rolling pin beside me. It's not like I've got anything better to do than bake.

I roll the dough out with extra force, my mind stuck on the breakup. George hadn't even bothered to put pants on when I walked into our apartment to find him banging his secretary. *His goddamned secretary!* I smack the counter hard, the betrayal and fury rushing back full force. The door swings open, and I lift my head, meeting Hadlee's startled gaze.

"Are you angry baking again?" she asks, closing the door and tossing her keys into the small bowl on the entryway table. I sigh, relinquishing my tight grip on the rolling pin. She toes off her heels and holds out the bag in her hand. "I brought Chinese."

"Oh good!" I rub the excess dough from my hands before moving back to the sink to wash my hands again. "I haven't eaten anything since breakfast."

"You know you shouldn't skip meals, Jana," Hadlee scolds. Words neither of us say hang in the air, a constant reminder of my eating disorder.

"It was an accident, I swear. Mrs. F is still out, and the bakery got crazy, and I just...forgot," I say in my defense. While that *is* the truth, it's not the only reason. I gesture to the pile of mail I dropped on the coffee table before I started to bake. "They're getting *married*."

Hadlee sets the bag of food on the table and picks up the offending piece of mail as she drops onto the couch. I grab two glasses and a bottle of wine before walking around to sit beside her. Hadlee's brow furrows into a frown, her lips pinching in anger.

"Why would she even *let* him invite you?" she asks, tossing her glossy black hair over her shoulder. She tears the cream-colored paper in half and

drops it to the coffee table. “I would *hate* to have an ex show up to my wedding, but knowing he invited her? That’s just wrong on so many levels.”

She shakes her head and starts pulling boxes out of the bag. I fiddle with the wine bottle, struggling to open it with my mind elsewhere. George and I dated for a year and a half, and I genuinely thought I would marry him—until I realized he’d been cheating for the second half of our relationship.

“What is *wrong* with me?” I ask, pressure building behind my eyes for the third time today. Hadlee takes the wine and pops it open, pouring us each a glass before turning to face me. “Am I just...unlovable?”

“George is an idiot.” She pushes my hair away from my face and rubs her thumb over my chin. “You had flour on your face.”

“Okay, so George is an idiot,” I say, dropping my face into my hands. I can’t argue with her statement, because George *is* an idiot. “What about Jonathon? I dated him for three years. *Three years*, Lee, and what do I have to show for *that* relationship? Fucking trust issues, that’s what.”

“Who sleeps with their TA anyway?” I know she’s trying to make me feel better, but I can’t keep the tears back, even as a laugh pours from me. Hadlee pats my back softly. “Jonathon was an idiot, too, Jana.”

I lift my head, dashing the traitorous tears away, and reach for my glass. I swish the red liquid around in the glass, trying to ignore the way my heart sinks in my chest. “So what? I just have terrible taste in men?”

She looks at me with that *poor Jana* look, and I sigh, shaking my head.

“You just haven’t found *the one*, yet,” she says, rubbing soothing circles over my back.

“*The one*?” I bite out a belittling laugh. “Maybe there’s no such thing.”

“Just give it some time.” She sounds so certain, I nod, letting her words assure me. “You’ll find him.”



“Jana, I—sorry, sweetie,” Mrs. Filly says, her voice cutting in and out. “We’ve b—snowed in, and I w—make it back—til they—”

Her words cut out completely, and I stare at my phone screen in shock. The *call dropped* notice flashes before the screen goes dark. Quinn, the assistant manager of The Little Button, stares expectantly at me, her brown eyes darting to the phone in my hands. Her jaw works as she chews her bubble gum, then blows a bubble the size of her face.

“*Well*?” she asks, drawing out the word. “When is she coming back?”

“They’re snowed in,” I say, rubbing a hand down my face. “She’s probably not going to be back before Christmas.”

“I don’t know why she called you,” she says with a sigh, glaring at the wall behind my head. I don’t know either, so I keep quiet, waiting for her to decide. With Mrs. F out for the rest of the holiday season, Quinn is in charge. She twirls a strand of her red hair around a perfectly manicured finger, her chewing speeding up with anticipation. “Well, if she’s not going to be here for the festival, I guess that means you’ll need to stay on the booth while I manage the bakery.”

“Wait, what?” Staying on the booth was *not* an option. Not only is the idea of overseeing something so obviously important to the community horrifying, but I’m not about to buddy up with the only man in town who apparently *hates* Christmas.

“You’re in charge of the booth.”

“I would really rather work in the bakery, Quinn,” I say.

“And I’d love to go to Tahiti for Christmas,” Quinn says, crossing her arms. Her brown eyes glint as she pushes the bright pink bubble gum through her lips and blows another bubble. It deflates with a loud snap, and she smiles devilishly at me. “Unfortunately, we don’t always get what we want, do we?”

I bite back a scathing remark as she sashays past me.

“Oh, and Jana?” Quinn calls over her shoulder. “Don’t mess this up.”



Standing outside Brooks Books for the second day in a row, I glare harshly at the neon light in the window proclaiming they’re open. This is not how I was planning to spend my afternoon, yet here I am. Cold air wraps around me, threatening to freeze me in my tracks if I don’t get inside soon. Steeling my resolve, I climb the three steps and push the door open.

A soft bell rings above my head and a teenager pops his head out from behind the counter.

“Hey, welcome to Brooks Books,” he says, a wide grin taking over his face. His blond hair is combed back, but it’s just long and unruly enough that it falls to either side in a very 90s style. He’s dressed in jeans and a band tee, a nametag pinned to his chest. I smile, glancing around in search of the man I came to talk to. “Can I help you find something specific?”

“I’m actually looking for someone who works here,” I say, unsure. “I met him here yesterday—Alex?”

“Oh yeah, sure!” the kid—I squint at his nametag—Zachary says, nodding enthusiastically. “Mr. Hall owns the store, but he’s not here today.”

*Of course he owns the store.*

“Oh, um...” I bite my lip, trying to think. I need to connect with him, preferably in public where he can’t murder me, and sooner rather than later. “Do you know if he’ll be back tonight?”

“Probably not,” Zachary says, glancing at the clock. It’s just after four o’clock. “But you might be able to catch him at Sandy’s.”

“Sandy’s?”

“Yeah, the girls love the fries there.”

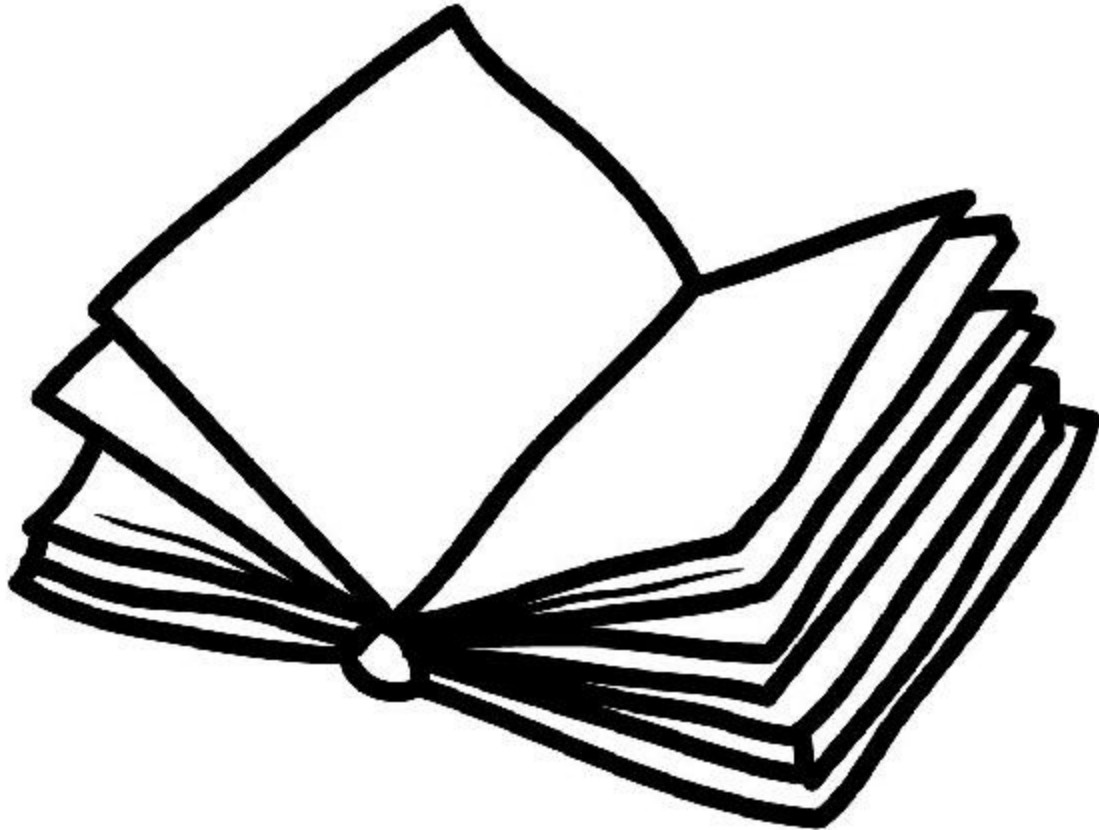
*Girls?*

“Oh, okay. Thank you, Zachary.”



Chapter Seven

# Alex



With my eyes closed, I can almost picture her hazel eyes and bright smile, her dark blonde hair flying out behind her as she runs through the field out behind the house, sunlight flitting through the dried grass and trees. But then, the chilly winter air hits, swiping me back into reality, and my eyes rest on a stone block, her name the only remnant of her.

**Laura May Hall**  
**Beloved Wife and Mother**  
**April 12, 1990-November 30, 2021**

Maddie stands in front of the headstone, holding the Christmas wreath in both hands, while Morgan clings to my leg. There are tears in both their eyes, the morbidity not lost on me. It's been two years since she died, yet somehow, it feels like just yesterday.

"Okay, Maddie," I say softly. "It's time."

My daughter looks up at me, Laura's eyes staring back at me. I nod, and she drapes the wreath over the marker as Morgan lets out a little sob. The holidays are the hardest time of year for all of us. I inhale deeply, regulating my own emotions before crouching to meet her.

"Hey, squirt," I say, giving her a big hug. She burrows her face into my chest, her little arms wrapping around my neck in a vice-like grip. "Are you missing Mama?"

Her head bobs against me, and I meet Maddie's sad eyes behind her. This was never something we planned for. I struggle to find the words to comfort my girls as the winter air whips around us. I could tell her that Laura wouldn't want her to cry, but that seems harsh. The thought of easing their pain with words of wisdom from their mother comes, so I open my mouth to share.

*Mama will always be with you.*

"Yeah, I miss her, too." It's not what I wanted to say, but the words seem to soothe the sobbing five-year-old in my arms. "Mama loves you both very much. She will *always* love you."

"Why did Mama have to leave, Daddy?" Maddie asks, huddling beside Laura's headstone. Her words strike my heart, opening the wound I've been fighting to keep closed for the last two years. I hold my arm out, and she runs into my embrace, pressing her cold nose against my neck.

"Your Mama wanted to stay, but she had to go to heaven," I say past the emotions pooling in my throat.

"With our baby brother?"

"Yes, that's right, sweetheart." I clench my jaw, glancing at the small plot beside my wife. Tears well in my eyes, but I blink them away.

**Maddox Hall**

*November 30, 2021*

“Morgan, why don’t you give Maddox the wreath you brought him?” I say, picking it up from where she dropped it. Her sniffles fill the air around us as she pulls away and takes the Christmas decoration.

“Here, Maddox,” she says in the softest whisper, draping the wreath over the corner of his headstone. We stand there for a few more minutes, the girls speaking in soft whispers to their brother’s grave. I sigh, sending out a pleading prayer to whatever God is out there.

*Please help me give them a happy Christmas.*



“Are you following me?” I bite out harshly, glaring at the woman from the bookstore. I still have no idea what her name is, and I honestly don’t care at this point. It’s the third time I’ve run into her in the last two days, and this time, it’s gone too far. We stand outside Sandy’s Diner, the girls watching from our booth inside.

“No!” Her brown eyes go wide, her smile faltering as she steps back. I cross my arms, standing firm. “I was just looking for you—I’m Jana.”

“I don’t care who you are,” I say, enjoying the way her dark lashes flutter in surprise before her eyes narrow slightly. She sets her jaw, her lips pulling into a small frown. *She’s cute when she’s angry.*

“Well, I just thought you might want to know who your booth buddy was.”

“My booth buddy?” I ask, and now it’s my turn to frown. I wrack my brain for what she’s talking about. It takes me a minute to connect the words with Mayor Bradley’s announcement at the meeting last night. *The Little Button Bakery and Brooks Books.* “No, my ‘buddy’ is Mrs. Filly.”

“Actually, Mrs. F is out of town for the holidays,” Jana says, quirking an eyebrow. A small, smug smile pulls at her full lips, but she bites down on her bottom lip to hide it. My eyes zero in on the movement. “So, I guess you’re stuck with me instead.”

“Why would I be stuck with you?”

“Because I work at the bakery, and the manager put me on festival duty,” she says with a shrug. Her fingers tap absently on her thigh as she scans our surroundings. “Anyway, I thought we could get together sometime and do a little brainstorming. I haven’t been to a Christmas festival in Harmony in years, so I mostly just remember the games and prizes.”

I sigh. Maddie's ballet class was canceled at the last minute due to a flu outbreak, meaning I would be free this evening. "Well, why don't you come by the house? I just had some time free up."

"Oh, um..." Jana chuckles a little as she pulls her lightweight jacket tighter around her body. "I was actually supposed to go get a tree with my roommate."

Unbidden, the memory of Maddie asking for a Christmas tree comes flying to the forefront of my mind. "Okay, we'll come with you."

Jana's full cheeks flush a pretty pink, and I relish the reaction. "We?"

"My girls have been bugging me to get a tree for weeks now," I say, nodding to the window. Maddie and Morgan are laughing, their chicken strips and fries laying forgotten on the table.

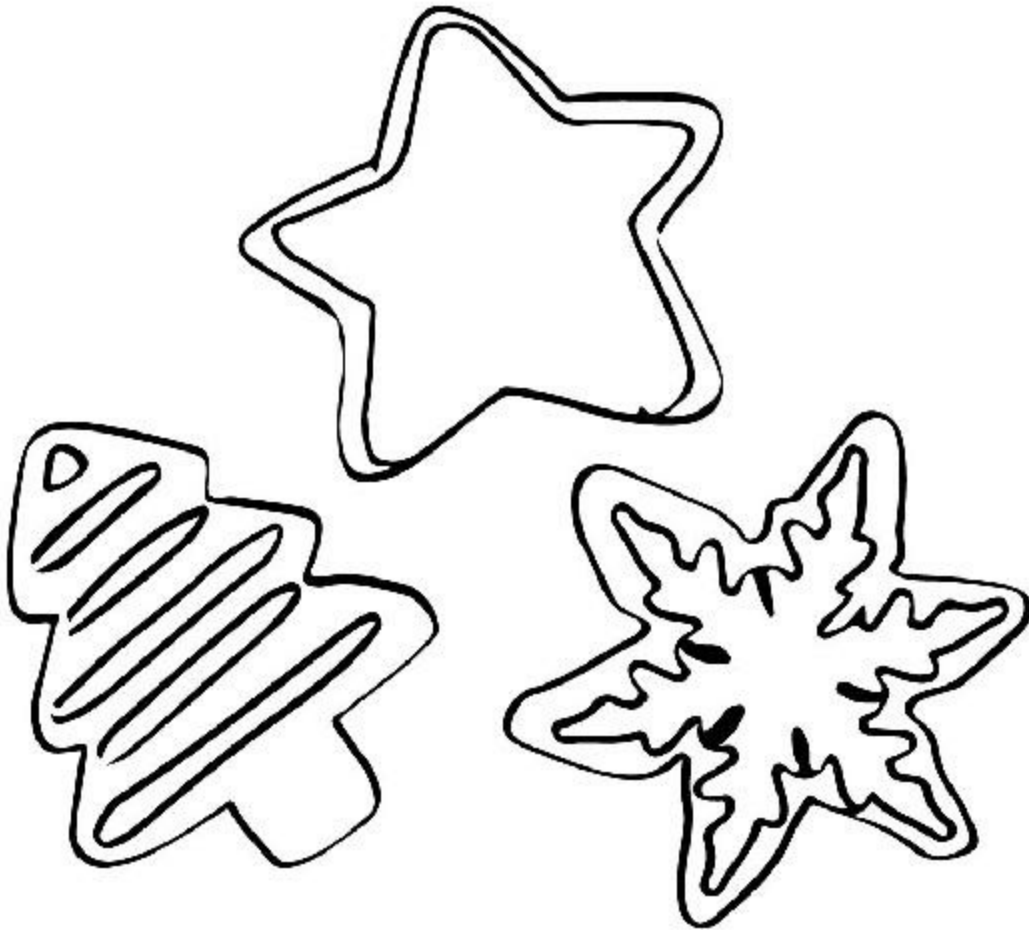
"You have kids." The surprised tone brings my gaze back to her. She stares in awe at the little girls, her brown eyes lighting up. *She's gorgeous.* The thought startles me, and I swallow quickly and clear my throat.

"It looks like they're finished," I say. "I'll pay the bill, and then we can go."

I hurry inside, away from Jana and her enticing smile.

## Chapter Eight

# Jana



My heart flutters with every glance he sends me. *No, don't react that way! He's a total asshole*, I scold myself. It's impossible to think straight when all I can smell is the woody-citrus scent of his cologne. There's an unexpected tension between us, and it takes everything in me not to break our silence. The two little girls in the backseat whisper back and forth, excited laughter

filling the truck.

“Are we really getting a tree, Daddy?” the younger one pipes up. Alex looks at me, his jaw tight, but when he lifts his gaze to the rearview mirror, it’s like he’s a whole different person. His amber eyes soften, accompanying his lips in a smile as his entire face brightens.

“Sure are, Morgan.”

Happy squeals flood the cab, and I can’t fight the smile that blooms at their delight. My eyes meet Alex’s, his smile softening as his gaze drops. *I’m imagining that, right? Surely, he’s not looking at my lips right now.* He turns his attention back to the road at the same moment I feel my cheeks heating in a blush. *Goddammit, what is wrong with me?* I press my palms into my thighs, hoping the pressure will ease my sudden nerves.

We turn right onto the snowy road leading to the Christmas tree farm, and the girls lean forward, trying to catch a glimpse through the windshield. The farm is picture perfect, with a giant red barn and horses standing out in a paddock beside the most beautiful farmhouse. To the left is a field of evergreen trees, covered in a fresh snowfall.

“It’s beautiful,” I whisper. It’s been years since I came to pick out a tree here, and it’s more surreal than I remember. “Like out of a movie.”

Alex parks the truck beside the gate before turning to me and the girls. His knee bumps mine, and I have to force myself not to react. I’m suddenly too hot, and my attention zeroes in on where we connect. The gentle pressure of his knee against mine feels nice, grounding.

“Alright girls,” he says, smiling conspiratorially at his daughters. I swear, I’m about to have a heart attack from these smiles he keeps throwing out. “Now, we can get a tree, but you need to remember how big our house is. We need one just a little taller than Daddy, okay?”

I grin as they both nod seriously.

“What about Miss Jana’s tree?” Maddie asks. I glance at Alex, but he’s already watching me. My cheeks flush with heat as they wait for me to explain.

“Oh, my house is very small,” I say, turning to face the girls. I try to pretend he isn’t studying the side of my face. “I need a little tree, something a little taller than Morgan.”

“That’s so tiny!” Maddie says, her face scrunching up.

“I’m not tiny!” Morgan argues back, her brows furrowing as she pouts.

“No, you’re not,” I say, calming her with a sugary-sweet tone. “It’ll be the

perfect size to go on my friend's piano.”

“You have a piano?” Maddie asks, awestruck.

“Yeah.” I smile, looking between the girls. “Do you know how to play?”

“Daddy used to play for Mama when I was little,” Maddie says with a wistful smile on her lips. I can tell I've struck a nerve when Alex tenses beside me. When I peek at him out of the corner of my eye, I notice his smile has dropped. Maddie's voice is small when she speaks again. “I miss her.”

“It's okay to miss your mama,” I say softly, settling my hand over hers on the back of my seat. I remember how devastated Hadlee had been when her parents separated, and she'd been older than these two. I can't imagine how difficult a divorce would be for them. My heart hammers in my chest, and I smile gently when she looks up at me through watery lashes. “I miss my mama too.”

“Where's your mama?” Morgan asks. I turn my attention to her, taking in her soft blonde hair and amber eyes—exactly like her dad's. Her bottom lip wobbles, and I offer her a kind smile.

“In heaven, I think,” I say, tilting my head. Her eyes widen, a delighted grin lighting her face.

“Do you think your mama knows my mama?”

I look at Alex, my eyes wide and my heart breaking for him. His warm amber eyes have misted over, and he rubs a hand over his jaw, as if that will hold the emotions threatening to bubble over at bay. I lick my lips, swallowing past the lump forming in my throat. My mind races, trying to find something to say, but knowing nothing I say will ease that pain.

“Definitely,” I say, giving a sharp nod as I smile at the girls. “I think my mama is sitting with your mama, and they're probably telling each other stories.”

“Mama loves stories!” Morgan giggles, blinking away the dampness in her eyes. Her chubby cheeks are tinged pink, and her pretty smile brightens the mood inside the cab. I grin back at her, glad I prevented it from progressing past misty eyes.

“So does my mama,” I say, looking between the girls. “You know what else she loved?”

“What?” they coo in tandem, and I offer a secret smile.

“Christmas.”



Hadlee: I got held up at the salon...  
you can get the tree by yourself, right?

Me: yeah, I guess?

Hadlee: you're a lifesaver

Hadlee: I'll help you decorate tonight!

Me: you bet!



Following Maddie and Morgan through the trees, I let my mind settle on my parents. I'm hyperaware of Alex's presence behind me, the soft crunch of his boots in the snow keeping me on edge, but talking to the girls about my mom brought up an unexpected amount of emotion. The grief isn't nearly as raw as it was before, but it settles around my heart now, darkening my mood like rain clouds hiding the sun.

I let my fingers caress the branches of each tree I pass, the prickle of the pine needles centering me.

My parents loved Christmas, so much so that Mom would go all out decorating the house every year. People would come from the next town over just to see the light show at the Thomas Villa. A small smile pulls at my lips thinking about their last Christmas. Mom had outdone herself, the display syncing to The Nutcracker ballet.

I dash away the tears that slip out, smiling when the girls look back at us before disappearing around a large evergreen. I pause beside the tree, looking up. It's exceptionally tall, probably too tall for their house.

Crossing the walkway, I make my way around another tree. It's about a foot taller than my five and a half feet, with full branches and a good color. It would be a lovely Christmas tree.

"Thank you," Alex says, his voice low. I peer at him over the branches, caught off guard by his words. He's been quiet since we climbed out of the truck fifteen minutes ago, keeping to himself as we followed the girls deeper into the trees.

I smile, my heart pitter-pattering at his sincerity, and the dark cloud



hanging over me disperses. I have a feeling he doesn't share his thoughts often, but when he does, it's almost always important.

"Of course," I reply, letting my fingers brush over the prickly boughs. I chew on my thumbnail for a moment, trying to gather my thoughts. The utter heartbreak I'd seen on his face when Maddie brought up her mother spoke volumes where he couldn't. I think about the years immediately following my parents' deaths, and the ache in my chest deepens. "I'm sorry to hear about your wife. I can't imagine enduring that kind of a loss."

When his eyes meet mine, it's like I'm trapped in the golden depths of them. Grief and uncertainty swirl within the amber irises, and even deeper, something more meaningful. My chest swells with the overwhelming, unspoken emotions between us, and it takes everything in me not to reach out to him. *He looks so lost.* His lips part, and I know he's about to say something important.

"Daddy, Daddy!"

Just like that, the spell is broken, and I'm back in the chilly Christmas tree farm. Morgan and Maddie rush us, smiles stretching from ear to ear. Alex catches Morgan, swinging her up and holding her on his hip.

"Hello, darlings!" he crows, all traces of vulnerability gone as he grins at his children. Maddie leans against my side, wrapping her arms around my middle as she rests her head on me. My heart jumps, and I smile down at her, smoothing back her soft brown hair.

"We found the perfect tree, Daddy," she says, out of breath.

"You did?" he asks, looking between them. They both nod enthusiastically. "Well, you'd better show us!"

Maddie grabs my hand and pulls me with her back the way they came. I laugh, feeling more excited for Christmas than I have the entire holiday season.



They truly found the perfect tree. It stands just taller than Alex, its branches full and wide. As Mr. Kent helps Alex tie it onto his truck next to my smaller tree, I hold the girls' hands, listening to their excited chattering, and I'm overcome with the sudden realization that this is exactly what I've dreamed of since I was a little girl: a family of my own to share the love of Christmas with.

Alex turns toward me, his entire countenance different from the first time I

met him. While his dark hair still falls over his forehead and his scruffy beard hides half his face, I recognize the same excitement in his expression that I see in his daughters’.

Warmth seeps through me, goosebumps raising on my arms beneath my jacket as our eyes meet. *What the hell is happening to me?* The rawness, the *realness*, is nothing I ever experienced with George or Jonathon.

“Daddy, can Miss Jana come help us decorate the tree?” Maddie asks, her hazel-green eyes blinking up at Alex as he approaches us. I feel my eyes widen as he looks at me, both of us surprised by her request.

“Yeah, can she, Daddy?” Morgan pleads, mimicking her sister’s puppy-dog eyes.

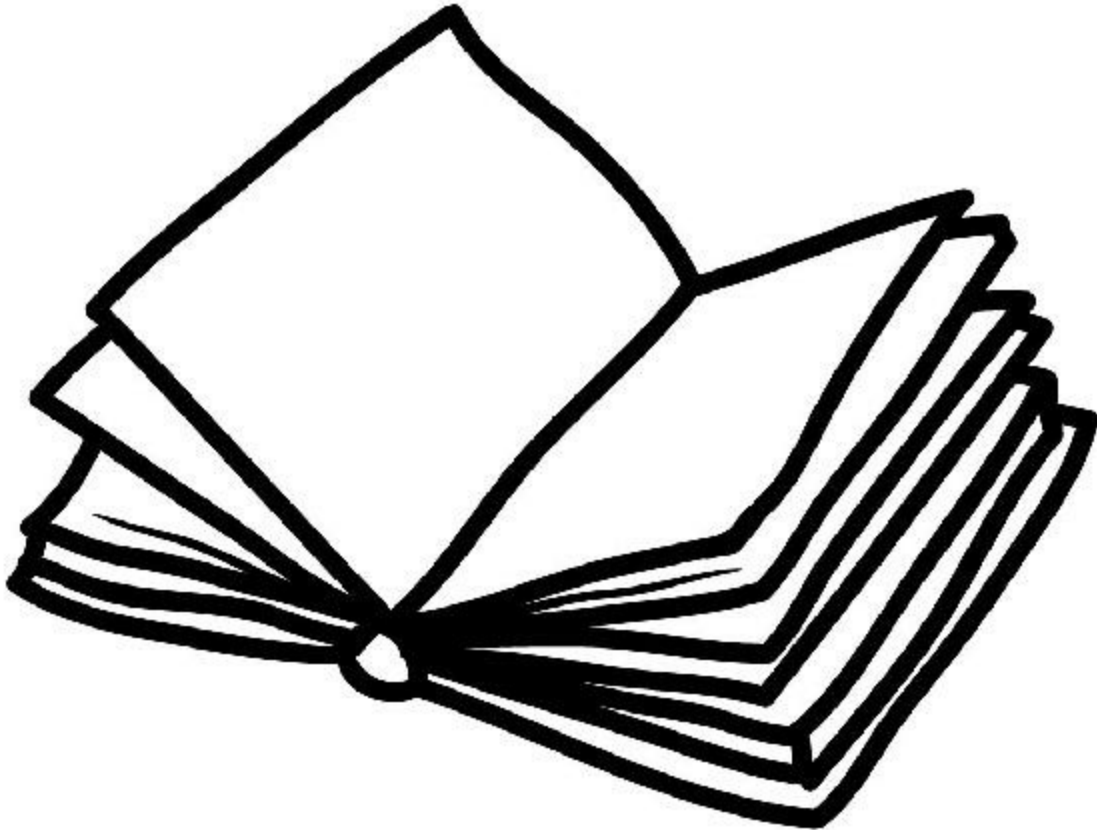
“I swear I didn’t put them up to this,” I say with a laugh, my cheeks burning with embarrassment. Alex chuckles, a sound I’m coming to enjoy hearing.

“Well, I suppose that’s entirely up to Miss Jana,” he says, and my stomach tightens as my name rolls from his tongue. My heartrate spikes, and I bite my tongue, trying to settle my nerves. The three of them look at me expectantly, waiting for my response.

“I’d love to help you decorate,” I say, feeling slightly breathless. The girls’ faces light up, and when I meet Alex’s gaze again, it’s all I can do to keep breathing.

*What is he doing to me?*

Chapter Nine  
**Alex**



“Daddy, can I put the angel on the top this year?” Morgan asks from her position beside Jana. I watch from the kitchen counter, where I’ve been designated the pizza maker, while they coo at each ornament as they hang it. The lights were the first thing to go on the tree, followed quickly by ribbons woven through the branches.

“Sure, baby,” I say absentmindedly. My heart pounds in my ears seeing Jana in the living room, surrounded by decorations while she laughs with my girls. I was worried at first that they would rebel at the thought of a new woman coming into their lives, but Jana’s presence here disproves that theory. I’m surprised at how taken my girls are with her, especially Maddie.

While Morgan was three when Laura died and barely remembers her, Maddie has distinct memories of her mother, as evident in their conversation about the piano in the truck. I’m still in awe at how elegantly Jana handled such a delicate topic and Maddie’s responding emotions.

“Can we get a train to go around the tree, Daddy?” Maddie asks, her voice straining as she reaches for a higher branch. I can’t help but chuckle as her obsession makes an appearance.

“What kind of train?” Jana asks, and I shake my head. *Oh, she’s started it now.* Even from my position in the kitchen, I can see Maddie’s eyes light up as she turns to our guest.

“I really want a steam engine,” she says. “Lionel has a really cool one that’s electric. It blows steam and everything—I just haven’t saved up enough to get one yet.”

“Oh,” Jana’s eyes widen. “You know a lot about trains then?”

“A lot? She’s practically an encyclopedia for trains, aren’t you honey?” I say with a laugh, sprinkling cheese on top of the sauced-up pizza. Maddie rolls her eyes but smiles despite herself.

“Really?” Jana asks. “What’s your favorite train?”

“Are we talking about steam engines or freight trains?” Maddie asks.

“Oh, um...” Jana pauses, a confused expression taking over her beautiful face. She bites her thumbnail, a habit of hers I’ve noticed. “What about both?”

“Well, my favorite steam engine is the Flying Scotsman,” Maddie says, tilting her head in thought. “Because it was in the Harry Potter movie. But my favorite freight train is the Santa Fe freight train because it can tow 180 tons—do you know how heavy that is? It’s 360,000 pounds.”

“Wow, that’s a lot!”

“I know!” Maddie sits on the arm of the couch, staring up at Jana in delight. “Did you know the oldest running train is called *The Fairy Queen*? Isn’t that so dreamy? *The Fairy Queen*—it sounds like something from a fairytale.”

“Maddie,” I warn, finishing the pizza and putting it in the oven. “Let’s

finish decorating the tree.”

Maddie’s shoulders slump, and I sigh. *I can never do anything right with her.* Jana’s eyes lock with mine, something akin to understanding flying across her face.

“Oh, I don’t mind,” Jana says, offering the girl a smile. Maddie’s face lights up, but she reaches for another ornament anyway. “How old is *The Fairy Queen*?”

“It was built in 1855,” Maddie says, walking toward the tree. Pushing up on her tiptoes, she reaches as high as she can to place the little glass ornament. “It’s in India. Did you know it’s got the world record for being the oldest running train?”

“That’s really cool, Mads,” Jana says with a smile, hanging her own ornament. “You know, I used to ride a train *every day* when I was in college. It was the best part of my day.”

“Really?” If possible, Maddie’s eyes widen even more. “That would be so cool.”

“It was,” Jana whispers back, sending me a wink, and I can’t help the way my heartrate speeds up and my palms begin to sweat. I wipe my hands on my jeans as I walk into the living room to help decorate the tree.

“Daddy, can we go on a train ride too?” Maddie asks, turning to me as I get closer.

“I don’t know if there are any trains around here,” I say. Jana holds an ornament out to me, and I take it, our fingers brushing as I do. An electric shock shoots from her hand to mine, and our eyes lock in surprise.

“I’m so sorry,” she says, her tongue swiping over her lip and drawing my gaze. I swallow past a lump in my throat, my skin suddenly feeling too tight.

“No worries,” I reply, collecting myself. “Probably just static electricity from my socks.”



By the time the tree is decorated and we’ve eaten the pizza, it’s nearing eight o’clock. The girls doze on the couch, and I shoot Wren a text asking if she can come over to watch them.

“I should probably get going,” Jana says softly, draping a blanket over Morgan and smoothing hair away from her face.

“I’ve got my neighbor coming over to watch the girls so I can give you a lift,” I say, stepping up next to her. She turns around, and I’m closer than I

realized. We're only a few inches apart, and from this vantage, I can see the splattering of freckles over her nose and the golden sunburst in the center of her dark irises.

"Thank you for letting me tag along," she says softly, her dark lashes fluttering against the gentle swell of her cheeks as she blinks. I'm oddly aware of the thump of my heart in my chest, my skin breaking out in goosebumps as her honey cinnamon-scented shampoo wafts over me.

"Of course." My voice is hoarse, and I swallow roughly before clearing my throat. "I'm glad the girls had such a fun time decorating with you."

I follow the way her lips tilt up into a small smile, shallow dimples evident in her cheeks. She's captivatingly beautiful, and I don't think she realizes it. A curtain of dark curls falls over her face as she looks down, the same way they have all night. My fingers itch to brush them away, to find out if her skin is as soft as it looks.

Three sharp knocks sound at the front door, breaking the trance we seem to have slipped into. I take a step back, putting some much-needed space between us as I walk toward the door. My eyes lock on the image of Laura holding baby Morgan while Maddie clings to her shoulders, and my heart drops. *How could I betray Laura like that?*



The drive to Jana's house is all too quiet, filled with a low humming from the radio. It takes maybe ten minutes to get to the small, relatively new neighborhood from my house, and by the time we get there, I have warring feelings boiling just beneath the surface.

I've loved Laura since I met her. We were college sweethearts, and I always knew I would marry her. We were married for eight years before she died from complications giving birth to our son. Maybe it would've been easier had Maddox lived, but his arrival had been somber. Laura passed away before Maddox arrived, and he died within a few hours of her.

I swore I would never love anyone the way I did Laura, yet the feelings I've had throughout the day with Jana...they were far too real for my liking.

I pull up in front of the small white house and shift into park. Jana clicks open her seatbelt and grabs her bag from the seat beside her.

"Thanks for the ride," she says, her voice barely a whisper. I nod, not trusting myself to speak, to even move. I keep my hands placed firmly on the steering wheel, my eyes locked on the large pine tree at the end of the street.

“I guess we can try to plan some other time.”

Again, I nod.

“Can I, um...” Her words trail off with a nervous laugh, and I peek at her. If it wasn't so dark out, I'm sure I would see her cheeks stained a pretty pink. My palms slip against the steering wheel, damp with sweat. *I swear to God...* “I thought maybe we should exchange numbers?”

That's when I notice she's holding her phone out to me. I take it, being careful not to let our fingers touch again, and I type my phone number in quickly. I send myself a quick text so I have her number before handing it back to her.

This time, our fingers brush, and heat spreads from the touch. I clench my jaw, pulling my hand away quickly. I hate the way her face falls, but I can't stop thinking about my betrayal of Laura.

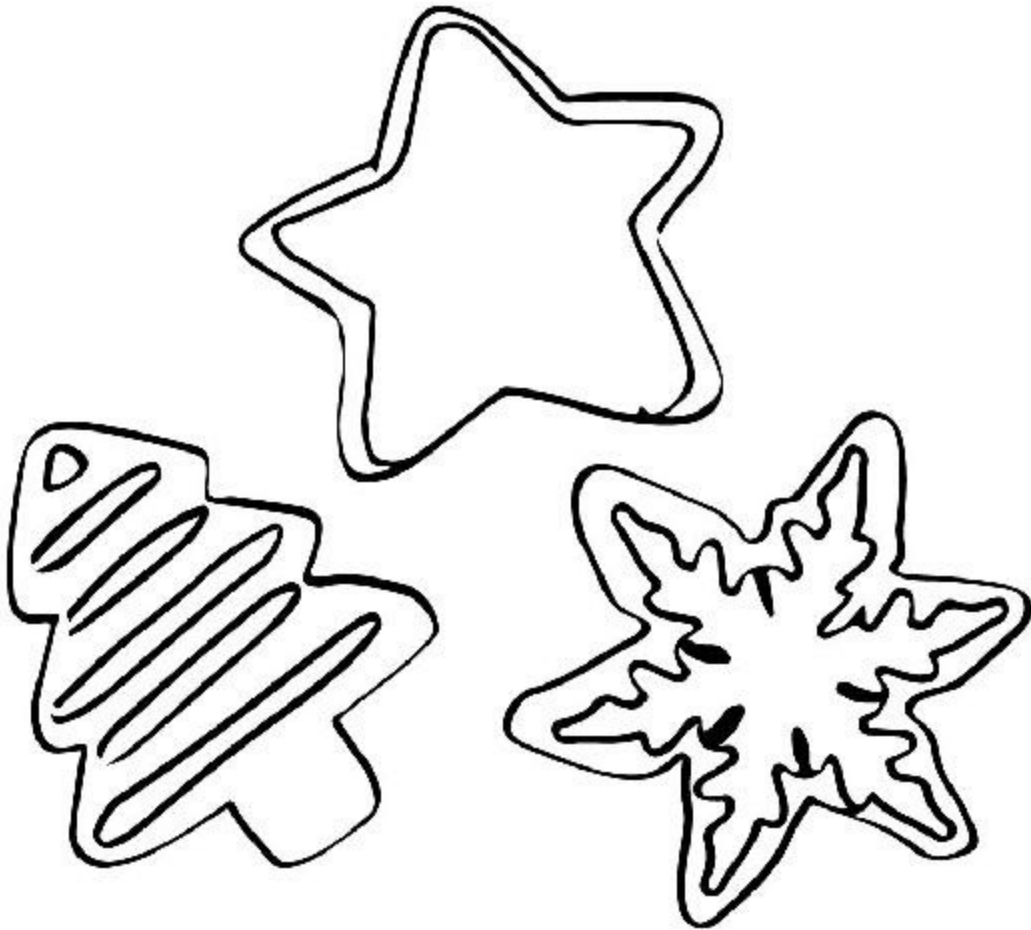
“Okay, well, I guess I'll text you?” Jana asks, opening her door. The cab light turns on, and I can see her face clearly again. *I was right*. Her cheeks are stained bright pink. She bites her bottom lip, and I zero in on the movement. *What is it about her lips that entice me so?*

“Yeah, sounds good,” I say with a nod. The way she smiles before climbing from the truck sends my heart racing, and I scold myself for feeling like a schoolboy with a crush. I watch her until she closes the front door, disappearing into the house. “Dammit, Alex, get it together. You've got kids to take care of, and a childish crush isn't helping.”

Despite my words, Jana's smile never leaves my mind.

Chapter Ten

## Jana



“Wait,” Hadlee looks at me through the mirror, her hands stilling in my hair. “Are you still sworn off guys? Or did you decide to forgo that now that you know the bookworm is actually a sweet single dad?”

I bite a little too hard on my cuticle and wince at the pain that blossoms. It’s been two days since I went to the Christmas tree farm with Alex and his



daughters, and I still haven't reached out to schedule a time to brainstorm our booth. Hadlee is still irritated that I forgot to bring our tree home, but the whole interaction with Alex in the truck that night had thrown me off.

"I don't know, Lee," I say, tucking my hands under my thighs. I've been full of nerves since that night with Alex, and my cuticles are taking the brunt of the emotions. "It was like one second, he was a total dick, and then suddenly, he's the sweetest dad. Then I find out that his wife died. I don't know how to feel."

"Do you think he's just guarded?" she asks, resuming the task at hand. She offered to cut my hair before we went to lunch, but it's already past her lunch hour, and I'm not sure we'll actually make it to the diner. I shrug. "It makes total sense, right? Maybe he's protecting his heart, and his daughters', by putting up this tough guy exterior."

"You think so?" I bite my lip, thinking about the other night. "I dunno. I mean, that doesn't explain why it felt like he wanted to kiss me, and then I got the cold shoulder the whole drive home."

I feel silly for being upset about the complete 180, considering it had only been one day, but still, it stung my ego.

"Maybe he's concerned his daughters will see him dating someone new as him trying to replace their mom," Hadlee says, crouching behind the chair. I feel the comb tug through my hair and then hear the unmistakable sound of shears.

"Where did that come from?"

Hadlee shrugs, meeting my eyes in the mirror. "My parents got divorced. When Dad got remarried, I was so mad he'd replaced my mom so quickly and easily."

It makes sense. The way Maddie spoke of her mom with utmost reverence, I could see why Alex might worry about that. "But I don't want to replace their mom."

"That won't matter to them."

"Hadlee, I don't even want to date Alex," I say, crossing my arms. I tap my arm as anxiety creeps in. Sure, I'm attracted to him, but that doesn't mean anything. I simply want to get through this festival with my heart still intact.

"Are you sure?"

"I told you—I'm done with men."



Me:  
Hey, Alex...

Alex:  
Yeah?

Me:  
could you bring my tree  
to the house tonight?

Alex:  
shit, is that still in my truck?

Me:  
yeah, I forgot to grab  
it the other night...

Me:  
sorry.

Alex:  
why are you sorry?

Alex:  
did you leave it on purpose?

Me:  
no!

Me:  
it was an honest mistake

Alex:  
okay then.

Me:  
so...

Me:  
tonight?

Alex:  
sure.

Me:

we can start brainstorming too

Me:  
if you want...

Alex:  
is it okay if I bring the girls?

Me:  
of course!

Me:  
we can bake some cookies

Alex:  
I'm sure they'd love that

Me:  
okay then

Alex:  
6 okay?

Me:  
perfect  
Me:  
see you then

Alex:  
see you.



I peer at myself in the bathroom mirror and run a hand through the meticulously styled curls. Hadlee did an amazing job, but it feels off. I miss my unruly mane of mismatched curls, but she'd be furious if I doused them. My stomach tightens in anticipation of tonight, and I flop my hair the opposite way.

"Jana, they're here!" Hadlee calls from the living room. I take one last, deep breath and tug at the hem of my sweater. It's the only Christmas sweater I could find in my size—bright red with snowflakes and a reindeer woven into it.

Leaving the bathroom, I drop my phone on my bed and hurry into the

hallway. There's a soft knock on the front door, and I shoot a glare at Hadlee.

"What? I heard his truck pull up."

"Can you please be on your best behavior?"

Hadlee smirks, her green eyes sparkling with mischief. "I'm always on my best behavior."

"Okay, be on *my* best behavior, then."

Her laugh follows me to the door. I swing the door open, revealing two grinning little girls. "Miss Jana!"

"Hello, darlings!" I coo, opening my arms to them. They rush into my embrace, and I hug them tightly. "Oh my goodness! You two look lovely today."

"I had ballet," Maddie says matter-of-factly, gesturing to her tight bun and leotard.

"Daddy took me to Sandy's for dinner," Morgan says before twirling in the pretty pink dress she wears.

I glance up at the mention of their father, and my heart skips. Alex clearly shaved recently, his beard no longer a scruffy mess, but a neatly trimmed shadow. He wears a plaid flannel shirt over his usual t-shirt and jeans. My small tree is hefted over his shoulder as he stands in the doorway, waiting for us to finish.

"Alex, hi." My voice is breathless, and the way he's watching me has my heart pounding against my ribs. I stand and pull the girls aside, letting him step inside before I close the door.

"Hello." His eyes never leave mine, and suddenly, I feel way too warm in this sweater. "Where do you want this?"

"Oh, um..." I trail off and bite my bottom lip.

"You can bring the tree over here," Hadlee calls from her position on the couch. He nods and walks toward her. "I'm Hadlee, Jana's best friend."

"Alex."

"Thanks for bringing the tree over, Alex." Hadlee stands up, crossing her arms over her chest as Alex brushes past her. "It is so unlike Jana to forget something so large and...important."

I send her a glare when she looks my way with a smirk, but she just laughs. I should've known she would tease me the whole damn time. The girls each grab one of my hands and pull me after their father. Alex sets the tree down, and Hadlee strolls over to his side.

"Why don't you help Jana set this up on the piano?" she says, leaning her

hip against the side of the baby grand. It was a gift from her father when she graduated from college with a music minor. We still laugh about the fact that she went into cosmetology afterwards. “I’ll take the girls, and we’ll get started on the cookie dough.”

“You’ll start on the cookie dough?” I ask with a raised brow. Hadlee hasn’t baked a thing since we were in high school, and she almost burned down the economics classroom.

“It’s not that hard to follow a recipe, J.” The teasing glint in her eyes belies the pout she wears. “I won’t burn down the kitchen. We’re just gonna mix some ingredients together.”

“Sure,” Alex says, sufficiently shutting down the brewing argument. “Do you have a pot or something you want it in?”

“Yeah, there should be one in the garage,” Hadlee says, pointing to a door on the other side of the room. Alex nods and heads for it while my friend moves to my side. Maddie and Morgan take off to explore the kitchen, their giggles filling the house. “You did *not* tell me he was that hot.”

“Hadlee!”

“What?” she asks, letting her eyes linger on Alex’s retreating form. “I’d let him be *my* daddy any day.”

“Oh my God,” I hiss, mortified by her comment. “I said best behavior, Lee.”

The smile she sends me is devious. “Oh, I know.”

“Hadlee, I swear...” I cut myself off as Alex returns with a pot in tow.

“I can get this potted if you two want to start on the cookies with Maddie and Morg.” His voice is rough, and my heart stops for a moment. *What if he heard Hadlee’s comment?* “And then we can start that brainstorming you mentioned.”

“Sounds good, captain,” Hadlee says, saluting. I grab her arm, my cheeks flushing in embarrassment.

“Hadlee!”



Maddie helps me put the cookies in the oven while Hadlee and Morgan debate over which movie to watch. It’s been about forty-five minutes since we started, and it only took two tries to get the cookie dough rolled out and cut into the shapes the girls wanted.

“Thanks, Maddie,” I say as she closes the oven. I set my little kitchen timer

and show it to her. “Ten minutes, and then we can get them out. Why don’t you go watch a movie with Morgan and Hadlee while your dad and I talk?”

“Okay, Miss Jana,” she says, a wide smile on her face. I watch her run into the living room with a smile. I’ve grown attached to her and her sister. I would hate to lose the relationship I’m building with them.

“You’re good with her,” Alex says, coming up behind me. I turn around, meeting him head on. He’s close enough I need to tilt my chin up to meet his gaze, and I’m overwhelmed with the woodsy-citrus scent that is Alex.

“It’s easy with her,” I reply, clutching the dish towel I’m holding tighter. “She knows what she wants and what she likes and she’s not ashamed of it. You’ve done a brilliant job with her—with both of them, really.”

“Thank you.” His lips tilt up, and I watch the movement in rapt attention. His lips are full, and I wonder if they’re as soft as I imagine them to be. “Should we start then?”

I blink, lifting my gaze to his. He waits patiently for my response, his smile morphing into a smirk the longer it takes me to answer. “Brainstorming, yes! Let’s do it.”

“I think it’s important that we include elements of both the bakery and the bookshop,” Alex says, walking to the other side of the island. He sits on a stool and opens a notebook I didn’t see before. I follow, sitting beside him and scanning the notes.

“That’s a good idea.” My arm brushes his, and I pull away quickly. Heat blooms from where we touched, and when I lift my gaze to his, he’s already watching me with an amused smile. “Um, what do you think of a prize wheel?”

“Spin the wheel, get a prize—that sort of thing?” he asks.

“Yeah, only instead of candy, you get treats from the bakery,” I say, nodding as more ideas come. “And we could get specialty bookmarks and pens too.”

“Do you think we should have anything else at the booth?” Alex asks, his hand moving across the page.

“We can sell our goods.” I lean my head on my hand, watching him. “Like gingerbread cookies or apple pies. You could do books—oh! Have you seen those ‘Blind Date with a Book’ things?”

“What is that?” He’s been scribbling in the notebook but looks up in curiosity. I laugh, folding my arms and resting them on the counter.

“Exactly what it sounds like,” I reply, tilting my head to look at what he’s

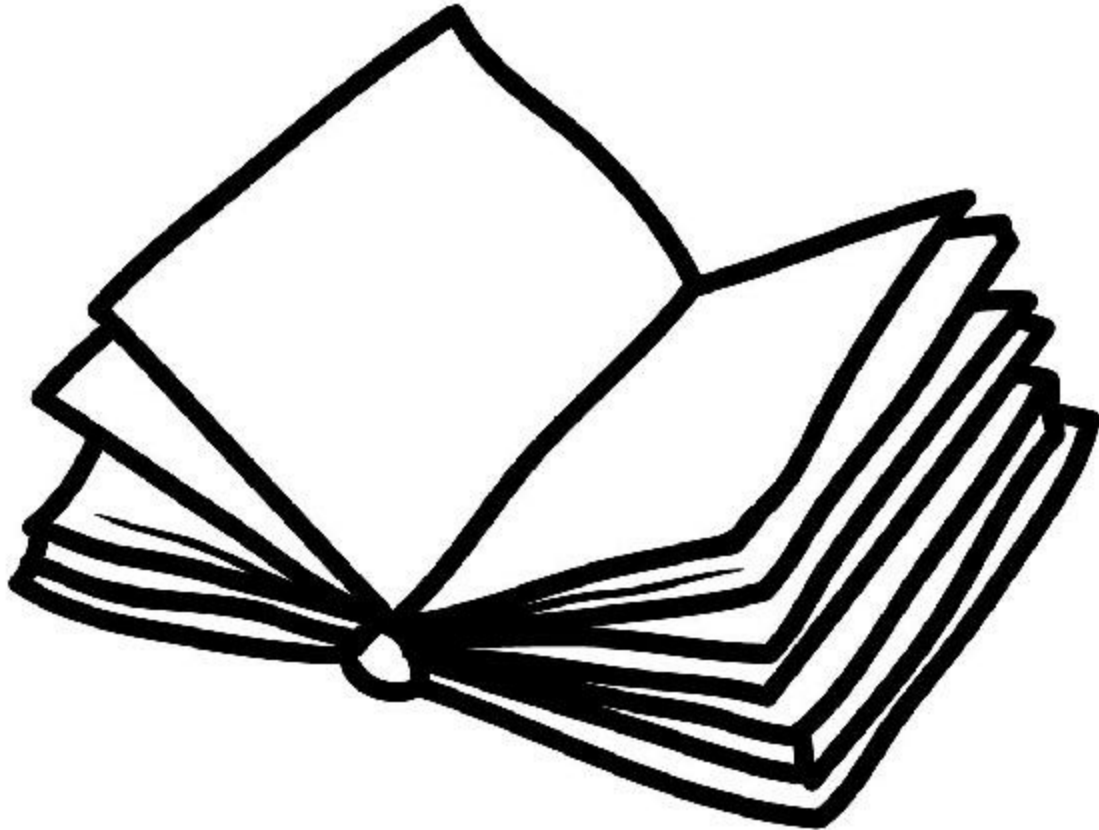
written. His handwriting is little more than chicken-scratch. “You wrap a book and write the very basics on it. Say it’s a locked door mystery thriller—you write that down with a very basic summary of the story so the person doesn’t know what book it is and can’t judge based on the cover or anything. It’s a fun way to explore new books.”

“That’s a brilliant idea, Jana,” he says with a grin, and my cheeks heat in a deep blush. Butterflies erupt in my stomach, and I bite my lip, fighting my own pleased grin. “Do you want to help pick out some books?”

“I’d be happy to.”

Chapter Eleven

# Alex



I stare absently at the screen in front of me, Benji's words flowing in one ear and out the other. Christmas is creeping closer, the festival even closer. Knowing that my time spent with Jana is coming to an end feels strange. It's like ever since we met, we've been pushed together, and soon, we won't have any outside forces drawing us together. My chest aches at the thought, but I



brush it off.

“Are you even listening, Alex?” Benji’s voice suddenly seems louder, and the numbers on the screen blare to life.

“What? Of course, I’m listening.” I wasn’t. *Obviously.*

“What is going on in that mind of yours, brother?” he asks. He turns to face me, resting his elbow on the counter. “You’ve been distracted all week.”

“Nothing. It’s all good, Benj.”

“You’re such a liar.”

I sigh, looking over the numbers on the screen. “What do these numbers mean?”

“I thought you were listening.” My eyes flash to him, and he lifts a brow, smirking.

“Shut up and tell me,” I growl.

“Your sales have increased.” I cock an eyebrow, disbelief swimming through me. Benji chuckles, leaning forward and pointing at the screen. “Yeah, by about 20%.”

“So having Zach in the store is actually bringing people in?”

“I told you, Alex.” Benji flips over the papers in front of him. “Customers like to see the store open when they can make it in—after work.”

“Does that mean we can hire more help?” I ask.

“Not yet, but soon,” he replies. “Do you have someone in mind?”

“No, but Zach wants some afternoons off.”

“He’s a teenager. Of course he wants some time off.” Benji chuckles then glances out the window. “You know, decorating would probably bring in more customers too.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” I say, running a hand through my hair. Now it’s Benji who’s distracted, and when I wave my hand in front of his face, he clears his throat. “Are you still good to watch the girls tonight? Jana’s gonna meet me here to help me pick out prizes.”

“Yeah, I’m good to watch them,” he says, his eyes going back to the front window. “Remind me again why Wren couldn’t watch them? Is everything okay with her mom?”

“I don’t know and I didn’t ask,” I say, turning to see what he’s looking so intently at. Wren stands on the sidewalk, her blonde hair flying around her face as she talks animatedly into her phone. “Why don’t you go ask her?”

“What?” he asks, his eyes darting to mine. He clears his throat again, shaking his head. “Oh, that’s fine. She’s obviously busy right now. What

time do you want me to come get the girls?”

“Five o’clock. Is that okay?”

“Sure, we’ll go get dinner and then we’ll watch a movie or something.”

“Thanks, Benj. I owe you one.”



The sun is just setting when Jana shows up at the bookstore. Her dark curls are frizzy from the snow, but her eyes shine with excitement as she steps inside.

“Alex, hi!” She’s breathless, her chest heaving as she inhales a big lungful of air. Her round cheeks are flushed a pale pink, and the mere sight of her makes my heart race. “Sorry I’m late. I was just finishing up gift certificates for the bakery.”

She holds out a stack of papers for me to take. The Little Button Bakery logo takes up half the design, with the words ‘*Harmony Christmas Festival: Valid for ONE free dessert*’ taking up the rest.

“These are adorable,” I say. I smile at her, loving the way her blush deepens with the compliment. “I found some brown paper wrapping at Feldman’s. I figured we could pick out a few different books and then wrap them.”

“Great!” Her enthusiasm sparks something in me, and I laugh.

“So, how many books do you think we should do?” I ask, walking to the couch and setting her coupons on the coffee table.

“Better to have too many than not enough, right?” she says, glancing at the shelves closest to us. “You know, you could set up a cute little display right here for the extra ones.”

“That’s a good idea.”

“Do you have an idea where you want to start, or do you just want to jump in?” she asks, shrugging her coat off. I’m glad to see it’s a new one, not the lightweight windbreaker she typically wears.

“I was thinking about twenty books. Do you think that’s enough?”

“Yeah, that’s probably fine,” she says. She lifts her hand to her mouth and chews on her thumb, thinking. “Like I said, whatever you don’t sell at the festival could go on a display up here by the checkout.”

“Alrighty, then. Why don’t you start there?” I gesture to the shelves behind her. “I’ll start over here.”

“Perfect. I’ll find ten, and you find ten, and then we’ll meet back here.”



I find my ten before Jana and decide to order Chinese takeout. It arrives as Jana is carrying her final selection to the front of the store, and I pay quickly. She sets the stack of books, precariously balanced, on the edge of the coffee table before sagging onto the couch.

“That smells delicious,” she says, glancing at the brown paper bag.

“I hope you’re hungry,” I say sheepishly, sinking to the floor as I start pulling out the boxes. “I haven’t eaten in hours.”

“I’m starved,” she admits. Her cheeks flush, and she bites her bottom lip. “Don’t tell Hadlee, but I forgot to eat lunch today.”

I look at her, my brows raising in surprise. “So you haven’t eaten since this morning?”

She shakes her head, a nervous laugh slipping out. She sits forward, her hands trapped between her thighs as one leg bounces. It’s obvious she’s uncomfortable, so I smile gently and offer her a set of chopsticks.

“Well, allow me to be of service, then.” I open the boxes, and my mouth starts watering. “I got a little bit of everything. Eat whatever you want.”

“Thank you, Alex,” she says quietly as she splits her chopsticks. The way her mouth forms my name sends my heart racing. She reaches for a box of chicken, sliding to the floor beside me, and we eat in silence for a few moments.

“How did you hear about our little town?” I ask finally, breaking the silence. Jana smiles like she has a secret and pokes at her chicken.

“Actually, I grew up here,” she says. My eyebrows raise in surprise, and she chuckles, nodding. “Yeah. I grew up in the house down the street from yours, actually.”

“What a small world,” I say. “Does your dad still live there?”

“No.” Her smile falters and her eyes go distant. “No, both my parents died in a car accident six years ago. I was away at college when it happened.”

“Jana, I—”

“It’s okay. You didn’t know.” Her warm brown eyes mist over, but still, she smiles.

“I’m so sorry.”

“I haven’t been back since their funeral,” Jana says softly, her voice breaking a little. She laughs sadly, wiping the corner of her eye before going back to poking at her chicken. My heart aches for her loss, empathy rolling

through me. “I didn’t really have a reason to, I guess.”

“What brought you back now?” I ask, setting my chicken on the table beside me. She bites out a laugh, shaking her head.

“I couldn’t stay in Louisiana,” she says, setting her food down. She leans her head against the couch and stretches her legs out under the table. “Hadlee’s all I’ve got left in this world, really.”

“I’m so sorry. That must be difficult.” I bring my knees to my chest and wrap my arms loosely around them. I study Jana’s face, her micro expressions offering more than I think she realizes. “I can’t imagine life without Benji.”

“Is it just the two of you?” she asks, tucking loose curls behind her ear.

I shake my head. “Nah, we have a younger sister—Carlee.”

“Alex, Benji, and Carlee?” She laughs, her eyes crinkling in the corners. “Was the alphabet thing on purpose, or just how things turned out?”

“Oh, definitely on purpose,” I say, dropping my head and looking at my hands. My wedding band stares harshly back at me as I twist it absently. “So was the ‘M’ thing with my girls.”

“Did your wife’s name start with an ‘M’?” Jana asks softly, and that’s when I realize I’ve shared nothing about Laura with Jana. Uncertainty fills me—I feel like I’m cheating on Laura by being here with Jana. I shift, trying to shake that feeling. I inhale deeply, settling again as I exhale.

“No, her name was Laura.”

“That’s a beautiful name,” Jana says. She shifts, tucking her legs under her so she can face me. “Will you tell me about her?”

The question knocks me off guard, and I’m sure it shows on my face. Thoughts and memories I’ve kept locked away come rushing back, of Laura’s life intertwined with mine. “What do you want to know?”

“Anything,” Jana says, placing her hand over mine. Her touch is warm and comforting, a friend in the darkness. I lift my gaze, meeting warm brown eyes that hold an understanding I can’t quite make sense of. “Sometimes, talking about those we’ve lost can help ease the ache we feel in our hearts. So...tell me about Laura.”

“I met her in college,” I say, thinking back. “She was in my sophomore English Lit class, and she knew the answer to everything. It drove me nuts, since none of it made a lick of sense to me. She ended up tutoring me.”

“That makes sense,” Jana says with a laugh. “How long did it take before you asked her out?”

“Our second tutoring session,” I say, smiling at the memory of Laura’s dirty blonde hair falling into her eyes as she studied, of the startled look in her eyes when I brushed it away. “Once I got to know her, it just felt right. We got married my senior year at Brown.”

“How long were you married?”

“Eight years.” I sigh and try to smile. “Maddie came about a year after we were married, then Morgan.”

“They’re precious,” Jana says, and I know it’s heartfelt. I’ve seen the way she looks at them, like she could love them forever. My heart pounds in my chest as pressure builds behind my eyes. There’s more to the story, more to share.

“Maddox was our little rainbow baby.”

“Maddox?” I can hear her breath catch in her throat, and I lift my eyes, meeting hers. The pain in my chest has dulled over the years, but seeing tears welling in Jana’s eyes brings it back full force. “You—”

“Laura died giving birth,” I whisper.

“Oh my God.” On her breathless whisper, tears slip down her cheeks, and I can feel the pressure break like a dam, my own vision blurring. “Alex, I’m so sorry.”

Her touch is gentle on my face, dragging through the tears on my cheeks. I haven’t cried like this since the doctor told me there was nothing they could do, that my wife hadn’t made it through the birth.

“Maddox lived for an hour,” I say softly. Jana’s warmth seeps into me as she wraps her arms awkwardly around me, her honey cinnamon scent invading my senses. It’s comforting, and I drop my legs, wrapping my arms around her. She settles on her knees, and we hold each other for what seems like forever.

Jana pulls away first, avoiding my gaze as she readjusts, settling farther away than before. I watch her, feeling calmer than I have in months. *This is okay.*

“I’m so sorry, Alex,” she says, her eyes darting everywhere but to me.

“I appreciate you, Jana,” I say, pushing to my feet and holding my hand out to her. She takes it hesitantly, and I help her stand up. “Thank you for allowing me to talk about Laura and for sitting with me in my grief.”

“Of course.” The empathy in her tone lets me know she means her words. “As humans, we need other humans to share our emotions with. It’s not healthy to bottle it up. I’m glad you opened up to me.”

“It’s easy with you,” I say softly.

She smiles, and I search her face. *Everything has been easier with her.* Thinking about the last two weeks, everything seemed to push me to Jana: our first meeting here, then being assigned to the same booth. Perhaps this is fate. Perhaps Jana is the answer to my prayer for a happy Christmas.

“I suppose we can finish this another day?” she says, taking a step back and gesturing to the stacked books.

“Definitely.” I glance at my watch. “Oh, yeah, it’s getting late. Do you need a ride home?”

“No, that’s okay,” Jana says, gathering her coat and bag. “Hadlee lent me her car.”

“Oh, perfect.” I’m disappointed, but I try not to let her see that. Instead, I follow her to the door and wait for her to shrug on her coat. “I’ll call you later to schedule a time to finish these then?”

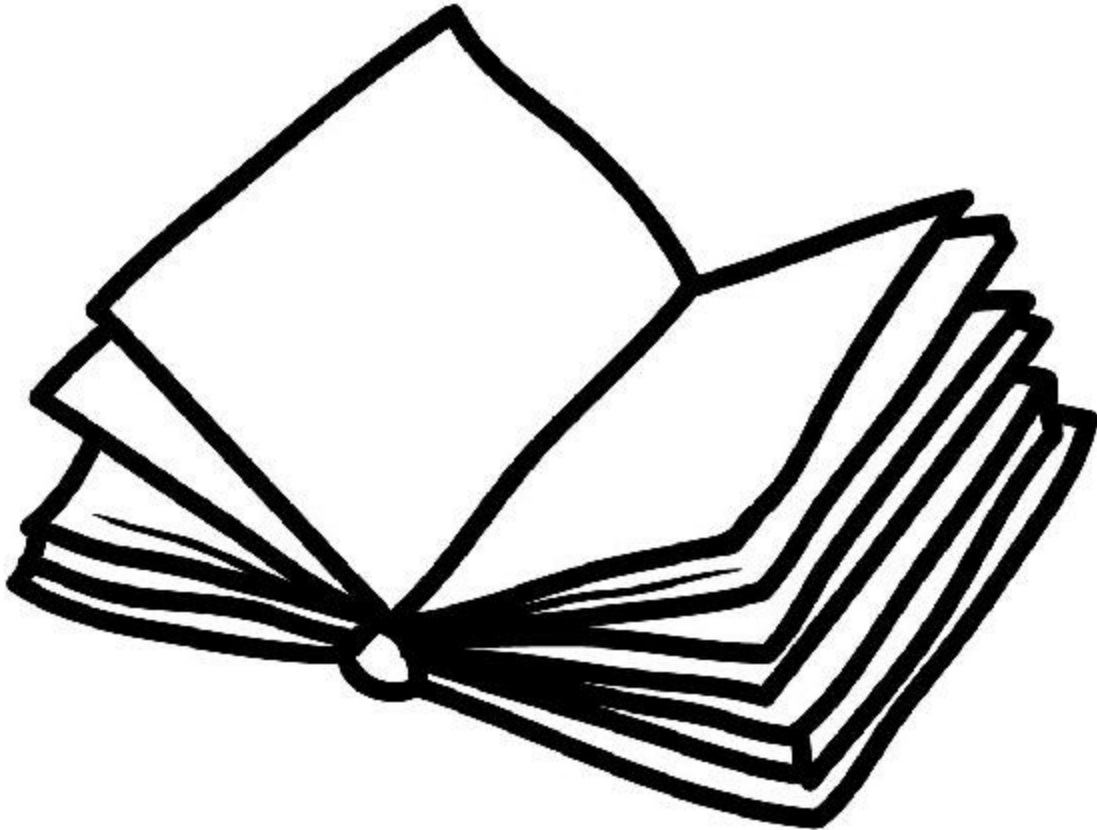
“Yeah, that’s fine,” she says, looking up at me. Her unruly curls fall in her face as she smiles. “I’ll see you later, Alex.”

Lifting my hand, I push the curls behind her ear. I can feel her heartbeat pulsing just below her ear, and I smile—it’s racing. Her big brown eyes are wide, her full pink lips parting in surprise. This is the most intimately we’ve touched. I lean down and press a soft, yet firm, kiss to her cheek, reveling in the softness of her skin and the hitch in her breath. I linger there for a moment, inhaling the scent of honey cinnamon, before pulling away and meeting her gaze again.

“See you later, Jana.”

Chapter Twelve

## Alex



Sharing with Jana closed a chapter I hadn't realized I'd been keeping open. Since that night, everything with her has felt attainable. I love Laura, and I always will. I know she'll always hold a piece of my heart, but now...loving someone else doesn't seem so impossible.

I watch Jana and Maddie hold hands as they circle the ice rink, big, bright

smiles on their faces. Jana is bundled up in her new red coat and a white cap, her dark curls hanging loose around her face. I smile at seeing them together. I know she loves my daughters; I can see it in the way her eyes light up, in the curve of her smile.

Morgan tugs on my hand, and I bring my attention back to her. She's in an adorable sweater dress and white scarf that match the ones Maddie's wearing: gifts from Jana. She smiles brightly, tipping her head back to look at me.

"Can we get hot cocoa, Daddy?" she asks sweetly, showing me her teeth.

"Sure, sweetie," I say, skating slowly toward the other two. Morgan's excited giggles draw their attention, and Maddie waves. "Should we get Maddie and Miss Jana?"

Morgan nods, her soft blonde curls bobbing with the motion. I pull her along with me as I lazily skate across the rink, keeping Jana and Maddie in my sights as people skate between us.

"Daddy, do you think Miss Jana loves us?" Morgan asks, her voice small in the din of the skate rink. My eyes follow Jana, and I nod.

"Yeah, baby, I think she does."

"Do you love her?" The question catches me off guard, and I crouch down in front of her.

"Why are you asking that, Bug?"

"Maddie said Miss Jana's going to be our new mama because you love her." Morgan's eyes stare back at me with so much hope that I fall onto my ass on the ice. She giggles, her nose crinkling in the same way Laura's used to.

"I don't know why Maddie thinks that, Morg," I say softly, swallowing past the lump forming in my throat. I hold her hands and pull her closer to me, watching disappointment fill her face.

"I think it would be nice to have a mama to comb my hair and tuck me in."

My heart cracks when I realize—this isn't just about me. My daughters' happiness is just as important as my own. I push to my feet and kiss the top of Morgan's head.

"That would be nice, wouldn't it, Bug?" Morgan nods as I take her hand. "Should we go get some hot cocoa now?"

"Yes, please!"



Jana blows on Morgan's cocoa then offers a smile. "Here you go, love."



“Thank you, Miss Jana,” Morgan says sweetly.

“Daddy, will you blow on mine?” Maddie asks, pushing her cup across the table. I meet Jana’s eyes over the rim of the cup as I blow over the hot drink. The steam warms my cheeks, and the smell of chocolate and peppermint fills my senses. Jana smiles, lifting her own cup to her lips.

“Here, Mads.” I pass the cup back to her, waiting until she has a solid grip on it to let go. She mutters a soft thank you before breaking her little sugar cookie into four pieces. She takes a bite then scowls.

“Miss Jana’s cookies are better.”

Jana laughs, a welcome sound to my ears. “Well, thank you, Maddie.”

“Do you make lots of cookies, Miss Jana?” Morgan asks before taking a big bite from her own cookie. She chews it happily, waiting for the answer.

“Sure do!” Jana says, setting her cup in front of her and leaning forward. “I make sugar cookies, and chocolate chip cookies—”

“Gingerbread?” Maddie asks, her hazel eyes hopeful.

“Gingerbread is my favorite,” Jana says conspiratorially.

“Mine too!” the girls exclaim together. I chuckle, shaking my head.

“What about you, Alex?” Jana asks with a grin. “Do you have a favorite cookie?”

“Gingersnaps.”

“That’s interesting,” she says, tilting her head.

“They’re better with cocoa,” I say.

“That they are,” she agrees.

“Miss Jana...”

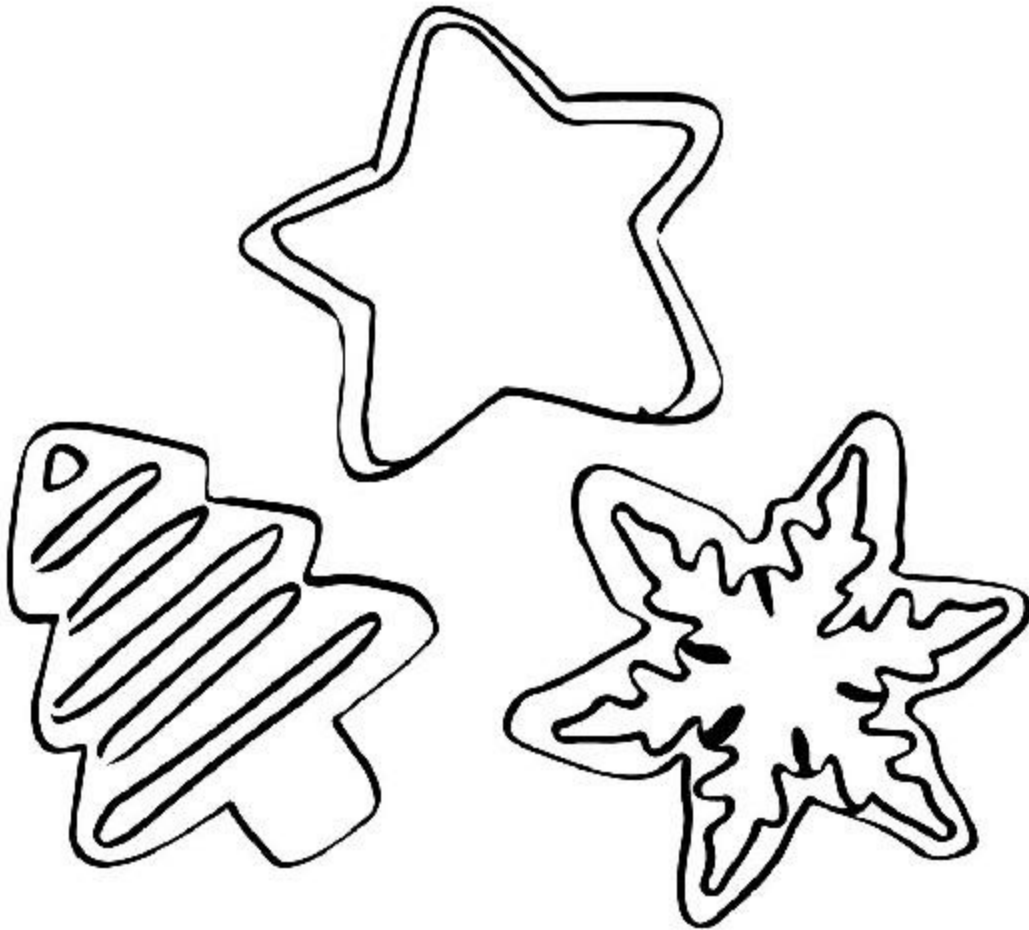
I watch her interact with my girls, my heart feeling at peace here with them—with her. For the first time in a long time, I’m not focused on the grief of losing my wife. As I twist my ring, Laura’s voice rings in my head. *It’s okay.*

There’s no guidebook to grief. No deadlines. Nobody to tell you how long is too long or how soon is too soon.

I catch Jana’s eye and grin. Everything feels perfect, and in that moment, I think I might be done waiting.

## Chapter Thirteen

# Jana



The smell of gingerbread fills the house, bringing the Christmas spirit to life within these four walls. Hadlee is putting the finishing touches on the tree while I clean up the evidence of my baking. I hum along to the Christmas song echoing through the house, truly feeling like myself for the first time in a long time.

“You’re happy,” Hadlee notes, reaching for one of the gingerbread cookies cooling on the counter. I smack her hand, but I grin despite myself. “I’m glad you’re finally smiling again.”

“What are you talking about, ‘*smiling again*’?” I ask as the timer goes off. I spin on my heel, turning the oven off and pulling the last batch out. “I’m always smiling.”

“No, this is different,” she says, her mouth full. I turn back to find she’s bitten the arm off of one of the cookies, and she smiles sheepishly when I glare half-heartedly at her. “You’re actually happy.”

“So?”

“So?” She scoffs. “So, you haven’t been this kind of happy in ages, Jana, and it’s not just happiness. It’s...it’s love.”

*Love?*

“Don’t be silly,” I say with a laugh. I shift the cookies to a cooling rack before dumping the hot pan into the sink. “I’m not in love with anyone.”

“Think about it, J.” She takes another bite of the cookie and sighs out a moan. “These taste *just* like Mama T’s.”

“That’s because I used her recipe,” I say, brushing off the ‘*love*’ comment. *I’m not in love with Alex. That’s just ridiculous.* “Could you please clean up the Christmas boxes? Alex and the girls will be here any minute.”

“*Alex and the girls,*” she mocks, but I simply smile and roll my eyes. Hadlee takes another bite from the stolen cookie and saunters around the couch. “Sorry that I won’t be here for movie night with the girls.”

“It’s fine, Lee,” I say, reaching for a piping bag. My hands shake, and I lift my gaze to Hadlee. She’s busy cleaning up her mess, so she doesn’t see the way her words have shaken me. *Love isn’t in my plans here. Alex is just a friend, nothing more...right?*

Hadlee leaves a few minutes later, calling over her shoulder, “Don’t wait up!”

The door slams shut, and silence settles around me. Sighing out a breath, I steady my shaking hand with the other one and focus on decorating the cookies. I appreciate the peace as I pipe out the eyes, but my mind keeps returning to her comment.

It’s been years since I was single. I had one boyfriend in junior high, but that ended horribly just before graduation. It wasn’t until I went to Columbia that I met Jonathan. Three years ended with him in bed with his TA, me with a broken heart, and then there was George. *Oh, George.*

*I need a break from love and dating.*

I came back to Harmony to get over George, not to find myself a new beau. Is Hadlee right? Am I throwing myself headfirst into a new relationship where I thought I was creating a friendship?

*I don't know.*

I pipe buttons and bows onto the gingerbread men, gnawing on my bottom lip as I go.

I wasn't looking for anything, but somehow, I've ended up here. My friendship with Alex has been nothing short of beautiful, and I have no intention of ruining that. Falling in love is not in the plans.

*Would it be so bad?*

No. Loving Alex would be easy. *Too easy.*

There's a knock on the door, startling me. My hand slips, and the buttons I was piping turn into a messy squiggle across the gingerbread man's chest. *Dammit.* I blow out my breath and set the icing down. A soft, scattered knock sounds again, and I can't help the laugh that seeps out.

Morgan and Maddie stand on my porch in matching pajamas, boots, and big pink coats. I grin as I usher them inside, my heart warming.

"What movie are we watching, Miss Jana?" Maddie asks, already shedding her winter gear. The door clicks closed, and I feel Alex's presence at my back.

"I have two movies to pick from," I tell her, enjoying the way her face lights in excitement. "Why don't you and Morgan go pick which one we watch first?"

The squeals of excitement bring goosebumps to my skin, and I smile, watching them rush into the living room. Alex's warm breath on the back of my neck sends heat down my spine and causes my pulse to skyrocket.

"Thanks for having us over, Jana," he says, his breath caressing my ear and neck. I swallow, trying to pretend I wasn't literally just thinking about how easy he would be to love.

"Of course. I love having the girls over," I say, turning around quickly. It's a mistake.

Alex is so close, our chests brush, and I can see his Adam's apple bob when he swallows. I stumble back a step, lifting my gaze to his as his hand shoots out to rest on my hip, as if he's worried I'll fall over in my retreat.

"Just the girls?" he asks, his voice low. There's something in his expression that has me moving closer without thought. My hands rest on his

chest as he lifts his free hand to brush a stray curl from my eyes, the pads of his fingers rough as they skim over my cheek.

“No,” I hear myself say. I can hear my heartbeat in my ears and feel his under my palms, and suddenly, I’m too warm.

“Daddy!” Morgan screams from behind me, and I let my eyes fall closed, part of me relieved at the intrusion. “Maddie won’t share the blanket!”

“Get your own blanket, Morg!” Maddie whines.

“I should…” Alex trails off, his thumb brushing over my bottom lip. I nod, licking my lips subconsciously. His hands linger for a moment before he drops them to step around me. “Maddie, please just share with your sister.”

“But Daddy!”

The argument fades into the background as I stumble back to the kitchen. My hands shake, and my throat is dry. *Was he going to kiss me?* My stomach twists as I slowly start moving the finished cookies onto a plate.

If Alex kissed me, it would change everything.

*Would that be such a bad thing?*

No. I already love his daughters with my whole heart.

And loving Alex would be easy.



Halfway through the second movie, the girls are asleep.

I collect the plate of crumbs and the mugs of half-finished milk and carry them into the kitchen. From the corner of my eye, I see Alex shift Morgan’s head from his lap onto a plush pillow before following me.

Pouring the milk down the drain, I turn on the faucet and let the water warm up. The nerves I’ve been fighting all night are reaching a pinnacle, and as I rinse the dishes, I try to ignore his body heat at my side. I reach for the sponge and douse it in soap before rubbing it roughly against the plate.

“I’ve never seen someone scrub at a dish so ferociously.” My scrubbing falters, my eyes flickering to the hot water cascading from the faucet. “Are you alright?”

“I’m fine. Why do you ask?” I say, rinsing the dishes and setting them on the drying rack. When I turn to face him, drying my hands on a dish towel, his brows are raised, and he wears a small smirk.

“You’ve been avoiding me since I got here.”

“No, I haven’t!” He chuckles at my outburst, and I shake my head. “Okay, so maybe I have a little.”

“Why?” His voice is soft, curious. His fingers brush my cheek as he tucks those damn curls behind my ear again, and I jerk away, putting space between us. *This is too damn confusing.* Something flashes in his eyes, and he drops his hand to his side. “Do I make you uncomfortable, Jana?”

“No!” I step forward again. I don’t want him to think I’m uncomfortable around him. “It’s the exact opposite—I’m too comfortable around you.”

“And that’s a bad thing?” he asks, his eyes softening.

“Yes!” I exhale sharply, pressure building behind my eyes. *Crying won’t help this situation, Jana.* “Alex, I like you. Like, a lot.”

“I like you too, Jana.” His lips turn up, and a silly grin takes over his face. My heart skips a beat, then another.

“I came here to get over my cheating ex,” I say, turning to face the island. My eyes scan the room, landing everywhere but Alex’s amber eyes, which hold an absurd amount of understanding. “I wanted to figure out who I am on my own.”

“I don’t want to be an obstacle for you, Jana,” he says, moving to my side. He doesn’t touch me, but his hand hovers near mine, as though he wants to comfort me with his touch. “I’m a patient man. I’m willing to be your friend until you’re ready for something more.”

“I can’t ask that of you,” I whisper. I shake my head as tears flow freely down my cheeks. I wipe them away in frustration, hating that I’m so emotionally charged. “You have Maddie and Morgan to think of.”

“I do.” He nods in agreement. “But you’re worth waiting for.”

“See, you’re just so thoughtful,” I say with a laugh. “George never said things like that. He always told me I was ungrateful and didn’t give him enough credit for the things he did for me. As if! He never paid for a damn thing! He made way more money than me, but somehow, I was always the one who had to buy things and pay for dinner. I’m so glad I didn’t marry him. Can you imagine me married to that *prick*? And now, he’s engaged to that slut he was sleeping around with, and I’m not even—”

Alex catches my chin with one hand, his touch sending a shock through me and cutting my words short. I blink up at him, and he chuckles, swiping his thumb over my lip. “Shut up about that asshole.”

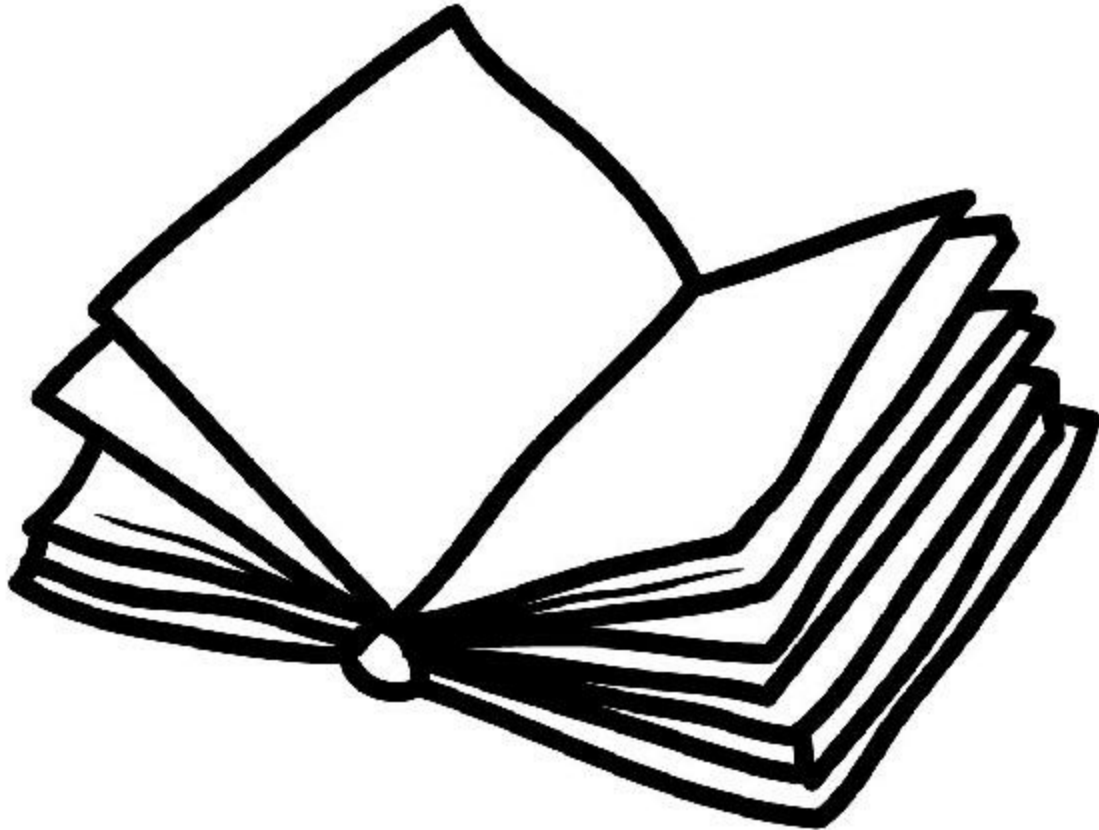
He’s close enough that our breath mingles, and then he’s even closer, claiming my lips with his. His lips are softer than I thought they would be, a perfect contrast to the scratch of his five o’clock shadow. The gentle pressure of his lips sends sparks through me, goosebumps rippling over my skin at his

touch. He pulls me firmly against his chest, one hand cupping my jaw while the other hugs my hip.

I'm breathless, weightless; my heart sings, and I feel like I'm flying and falling all at once. He takes his time, allowing each of us to acknowledge and accept these feelings rushing through us. When he pulls away, only to rest his forehead against mine, I know this can never be just a friendship.

Chapter Fourteen

# Alex



My mind is once again elsewhere as Benji talks about the numbers on the screen in front of me. Jana’s soft lips, her intoxicating scent, her deep brown eyes, and the splatter of freckles across her nose; she’s branded in my thoughts, my memories, my heart. She is *everywhere*.

“Are you—fuck, Alex! What’s the point of me explaining this shit to you



if you're not even gonna pay attention?" Benji fumes, slamming his pen roughly against the counter. The plastic casing shatters beneath the pressure and scatters across the desk.

"You've got my attention now, Benj."

"Fucking shit," he mutters under his breath.

"What's going on, Benji?"

"What's going on is that you're not paying a lick of attention to what I'm trying to tell you about your damn store," he growls, scooping the broken pen up and dumping it into the trashcan under the counter. "You're fucking distracted."

"I thought you *wanted* me to start dating," I say, raking my hand through my hair. He scoffs, shaking his head. I observe him for a moment, taking in his messy curls, the thick beard coming in, and the dark circles under his eyes. "What's going on, Benj?"

"Nothing." He shakes his head and rubs a hand down his face. "I'll just talk to you later about this shit."

My phone rings the moment he walks out, distracting me. I make a mental note to talk to my brother later as I fish my phone from my back pocket. Surprise races through me when I see my sister-in-law's name on the screen.

"Leslie, hey," I say. A sharp exhale comes through the speaker.

"Alex." Her voice is soft, surprised even, and then she laughs. "Sorry, I didn't know if you would answer."

"Why wouldn't I answer?" I ask, tucking the phone in the crook of my shoulder and picking up the pages Benji left scattered over the desk. The numbers and graphs make no sense to me, and I'm starting to wish I had been listening to my brother.

"You haven't picked up in the last two years," she says. I blink, staring at the bookshelves across the room in disbelief. *Has it really been two years since I answered her call?* "Mom and Dad gave up calling a few months ago. Everyone was positive you had written us off."

I sigh. "It's not like that," I say, dropping the papers back to the counter and running my free hand down my face. "I just...I couldn't face you. Laura's family."

"I get it." Her voice is calm, understanding. "I'm just glad you picked up."

We're quiet for a moment.

"Why'd you call, Leslie?"

"I'm in town." She's unsure now, her voice wavering. "I was hoping we

could get lunch, maybe?”



I sit at a small table near the windows of Sandy’s Diner, coffee sitting untouched in front of me as my fingers tap restlessly against my knee. I get why Jana is constantly tapping her thigh and arm if this is how she feels. A pit of dread settles in my gut, and no matter how much I try to focus on my breathing, it still feels rushed.

I don’t know what possessed me to agree to lunch with Leslie, but here I am, waiting for her to show up. When she said she was in town, I was shocked. I haven’t seen any of Laura’s family members since the funeral two years ago. Now, here I am, waiting for someone I haven’t seen in years, someone who will no doubt bring up unresolved emotions.

I’m about to bolt out the door when the bell above it rings and a slender blonde woman steps inside. I swallow roughly, past the lump of tears forming in my throat. *Laura.*

But it’s not my wife.

“Alex, sweetheart.” Leslie smiles, her cheeks dimpling. She takes the seat across from me and begins to shrug off her coat. “I’m so glad you came.”

“I’m not staying long,” I say, my throat scratching with every word.

“Oh.” Disappointment is clear on her face. “I had hoped we would get a chance to talk. It’s been so long since we’ve been in the same state, let alone the same building.”

“What are you doing in Harmony, Leslie?” I ask, resting my arms on the table and leaning forward. Her hazel eyes, so similar to Laura’s, dart between mine, searching for something I know I can’t give her. *Answers.*

“I’ve missed you,” she says softly, reaching across the table and resting her hand over mine. I pull back, folding my arms over my chest. She swallows, her eyes darting away for a moment before meeting mine again. “And the girls, of course. Where are they?”

“Maddie has ballet, and Morgan is spending the afternoon with her uncle.”

“Ah, so Benji was allowed to stay in their lives, but I wasn’t?” Her tone is clipped, and her chin quivers. It feels like a bullet to my heart, but I keep my expression schooled. “Why did you cut us out of their lives? Laura would’ve wanted them to grow up with grandparents and an aunt.”

I scoff and shake my head. “Laura wanted them to grow up away from her family. Why do you think we moved all the way out here after Maddie was

born?”

“Why would she let me stay with you for two years if she didn’t want me in her daughter’s lives?” she asks in a calm, low voice. Leslie has always been a slave to her emotions, and I’m impressed at the control she’s exerting. Her hands tremble, her jaw tightening as she bites her tongue. “I helped take care of them, changed their diapers. Are you telling me Laura told you to remove me from your life?”

“Laura wanted a better life for our girls than she had.”

“Laura wanted a better life for me too,” she mutters, her shoulders sagging. “Look, I didn’t come here to argue with you.”

“Then why are you here?”

“I told you,” she says, letting her eyes drift around the room. “I wanted to see you.”

“Leslie…” I sigh, running a hand over my face. “I just need some time.”

“It’s been two years, Alex.”

“I know how long it’s been, Les.”

“I know, Alex.” She breathes out a sad laugh, and I watch her stand and pull on her coat. “I’m in town for a few more days. Can we grab some dinner tomorrow?”

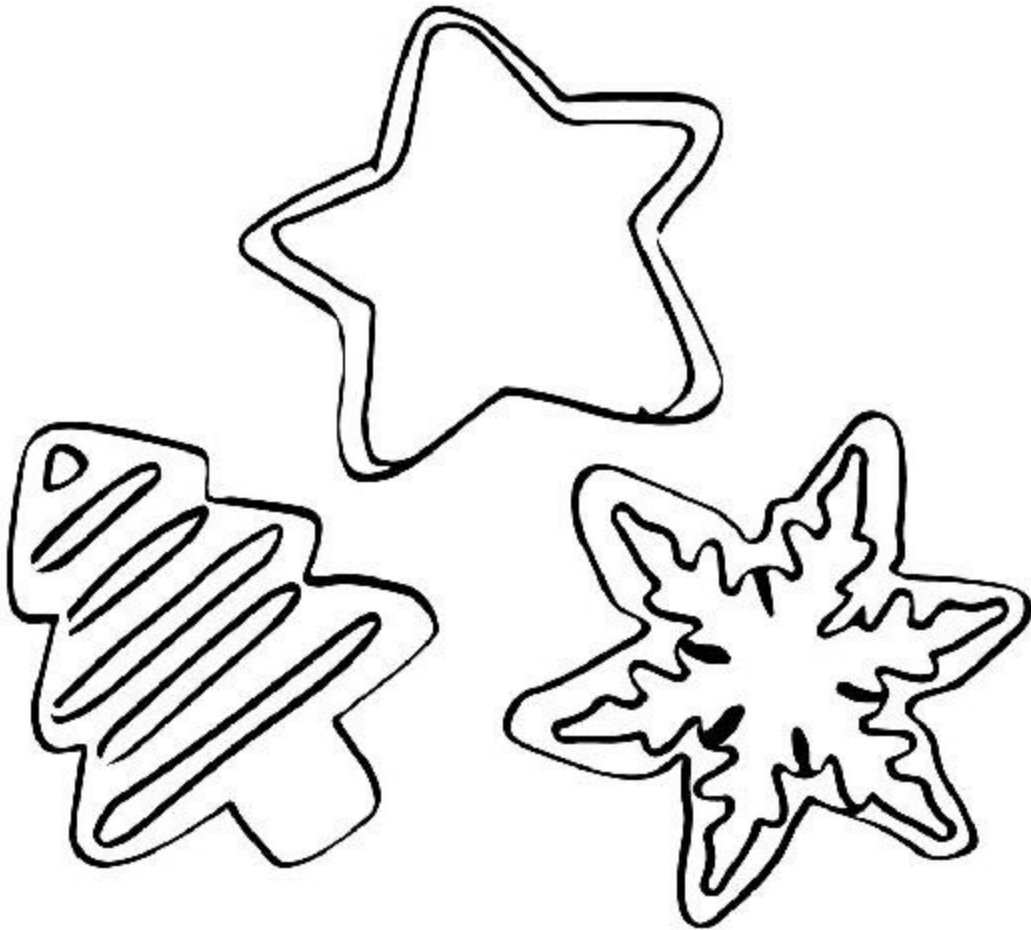
I nod reluctantly, already trying to think of an excuse to get out of it.

“Can you bring the girls this time?” she asks, flipping her hair out of her coat collar. “I would love to see them.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

Chapter Fifteen

# Jana



I pull my coat on and wave goodbye to Quinn before hurrying outside. With Mrs. F still out of town, Quinn has become overbearing, and if I don't hurry, she'll make me stay and finish cleaning out the giant mixers. Hadlee stands huddled outside, bundled up in black wool leggings, a black puffer coat, and a cream-colored beanie. The little poof on the top wobbles as she

jumps in place, trying to stay warm.

“What are you doing outside?” I ask, looking up and down the street. “Where’s the car?”

“It broke down and had to be towed,” she groans, pulling me to her side. She’s shivering, her shoulder knocking mine as we start our trek down the road. “But I saw Alex’s truck in front of Sandy’s, so I figured we can beg a ride off him.”

My cheeks heat at the mention of Alex, the memory of his kiss ingrained into my mind.

“What’s this?” Hadlee teases, nudging my side. “Are you blushing?”

“No!” I say on a laugh, my cheeks flushing even hotter. “It’s just cold out.”

“You can say that again,” she mutters. “But really, did something happen while I was gone last night?”

“Alex kissed me.” Before I can finish my sentence, Hadlee pulls me to a stop with a squeal.

“He *what?*”

“*Hadlee!*” I hiss, pulling her to the side. She giggles like a schoolgirl as an old couple glares in disgust. “Must you always draw so much attention?”

“Alex *kissed* you?”

“That’s what I said,” I say, glancing around. Sandy’s is across the street, and I can see Alex’s truck parked out front. The thought of seeing him sends my heart into overdrive and my stomach into knots. “I told him that I like him.”

“You said that?” Her eyes are wide, and I bite my lip in embarrassment. “And here I thought you didn’t want to date him.”

“I don’t!” I shake my head empathetically. “I mean, I didn’t. I don’t know, Lee. He looked at me with those gorgeous brown eyes of his and told me he’d wait until I was ready—”

“He said he’d wait?” she coos, her expression morphing into one of adoration. “That’s so cute!”

“And then I started talking about how awful George was, and...and he kissed me.”

“You brought up George?” Hadlee asks as we walk across the street.

“I was telling Alex how thoughtful he was, and that George never said anything remotely sweet to me,” I reply. “And he told me to ‘*shut up about that asshole*’ and then kissed me.”

I lift my eyes to the diner window and stop in my tracks. Alex sits in a

booth, a gorgeous blonde sitting opposite him. I don't know her, and my heart drops when she squeezes his hand before standing up.

"Who the hell is that?" Hadlee voices my question, but there's no one around to answer. "I'm gonna wring his neck."

"I'm sure there's an explanation, Lee," I say softly, watching the woman smile at Alex before walking to the door. I pull Hadlee to the left, ducking behind Alex's truck as the woman steps out of the diner.

"What're you doing? Let me at her."

"There's got to be an explanation," I mutter, my head feeling light. *This is how it starts.* "Maybe I imagined it all."

"Maybe Alex is a good-for-nothing, self-righteous ass—" Hadlee cuts herself off as Alex comes around the truck.

"Jana!" He looks surprised, his cheeks reddening as he grins. "What's going on?"

"Oh, um..." My brain sputters to a stop as he gets closer, his cologne wrapping around me and invading my senses.

"I was wondering the same thing," Hadlee says, venom pouring from her mouth.

"Hadlee's car is in the shop, and we saw your truck and thought we might hitch a ride," I say. Alex looks puzzled by Hadlee's outburst, but he nods along to my words.

"Sure. Are you heading home?"

"Yes, I just got off."

"I thought I smelled fresh baked bread," he says, opening the door. "Climb on in."

I scramble into his truck, hating the way his smile makes my heart skip. *There's nothing to worry about. Alex wouldn't do that to me—he wouldn't kiss me and tell me I'm worth the wait only to turn around and say the same thing to someone else. Right?*

Hadlee glares at the back of Alex's head, but I can't shake the feeling that there's more to the story. At least, I hope there is.



I smooth the paper with practiced fingers, folding and taping until the book is wrapped up in a neat little package. Despite my best efforts, Hadlee's voice rings in my head. *"You need to confront him about that woman, and then you'll know for sure. Either he's an asshole, just like Jon and George, or he's*

*got a real, honest-to-God reason for meeting with her, which I doubt.”*

I look up, letting my eyes rest on Alex for a moment. He’s tying the ribbons into bows on the books I’ve already wrapped, and he’s doing a great job, probably from being a dad to two girls. He’s been just as distracted as I have, leaving the bookstore in an uncomfortable silence.

I clear my throat, and he lifts his head, our eyes connecting. His lips tilt up as a smile takes over his face, warming me through. He sets the gift down and scoots closer to me on the floor.

“How was your day?” I ask, wondering if he’ll mention the woman. He drapes his arm over my shoulders and tangles his fingers into my hair as I swallow past the lump in my throat, trying not to get distracted by his warmth.

“Pretty average,” he says, his fingers rubbing gently against my scalp. I sigh out a breath and find myself relaxing into his side despite myself. “Maddie had ballet, and Morgan spent the afternoon with Benji.”

“That must’ve been nice, having an afternoon free?”

“Sure, I guess,” he says, his breath warm on my temple, his voice low in my ear. I pick up the black pen and start writing a basic description of the romcom inside. I focus on forming the letters, instead of the soft circular motions he makes against my scalp.

“Did you do anything fun?”

“Not really,” he says, sounding slightly bored. “After I dropped you off, I had to run to the store to get Maddie’s Christmas present. She’s been begging for that model train with the lights that blows steam.”

“Did you find one?” I ask, setting the book on top of the pile in front of me.

“Yeah, finally.” When I glance at him, his eyes are distant, and he mindlessly twirls a strand of my dark hair around his finger. “I had to drive out to Windham to get it.”

“That’s quite the drive,” I say, tapping my pen against the table in a soft rhythm. He offers a noncommittal hum, still distracted. Lifting my hand, I bite the cuticle of my thumb. George started acting this way a few months before I caught him in bed with his secretary. “Are you okay, Alex?”

“What?” He turns to me, blinking the fog from his eyes. I rest my hand on my knee, tapping, trying to relieve myself of the anxiety bubbling up. *This can’t be happening. Not again.*

“Are you okay?” My voice is small, mirroring how I feel.

“Yeah, of course,” he says, shaking his head a little and smiling at me. He pulls me closer and presses a kiss to my forehead. “Just a little distracted. Do you want a ride home?”

I feel the pressure of tears behind my eyes and mentally curse myself for being so emotional. Nodding, I struggle to my feet. “Yeah, it’s getting late.”

“Jana, is everything okay?” Alex asks, following me closely as I gather my coat and bag. I feel him at my back as I straighten up, the tears threatening to fall at any moment. I blink, begging them to disappear, with no such luck. Alex moves around me as the first ones fall, and even through the salt water, I can see the concern on his face. “Why are you crying?”

“Oh my god, I’m sorry,” I say, wiping away the traitorous tears. I wasn’t going to bring it up. I was going to let him tell me, but I couldn’t stop these damn waterworks.

“Sorry?” Alex looks confused. He cups my cheek, his thumb dragging through the path of the tears as he studies my face. “Why are you apologizing for crying? You’re allowed to have feelings, Jana.”

Even now, he’s better than either of my cheating exes.

“I saw you,” I say, my cheeks flushing as I get more worked up. He still looks confused, his amber eyes holding nothing but concern. I’m sure I look ridiculous, the flashbacks to Jonathon laughing in my face when I reacted to finding him with his TA coming in full force. “I saw you with the blonde woman.”

Understanding floods his countenance, and I hate the hurt that flashes across his handsome face.

“At the diner.” It’s not a question. He knows exactly what I’m talking about. “And you thought…”

“Alex, I—”

“No, it’s okay,” he says, a soft, sad smile appearing. “I meant what I said, Jana. I’m willing to wait for you. Forever.”

My heart does a little flop, my stomach tightening in anticipation. He’s so close, I can see the whisper of gray in his beard, the wrinkles in the corners of his eyes. When his lips touch mine, it’s like I’m frozen in time. Warmth seeps into me at his touch, and I let my eyes drift shut.

He holds me like I’m fragile, as though I’ll break if he puts too much pressure on me. It’s me who moves to deepen the kiss, swiping my tongue over his lips. When they part, slanting over mine, I feel like I’m falling, endlessly.



By the time we pull apart, my tears have dried, and my heart hurts a little less. Alex presses soft kisses to my lips and jaw, his fingers sliding down my arm until he laces our fingers together. I let him guide me back to the couch and settle beside him. We sit in silence for a moment, just existing in each other's presence.

"The blonde woman you saw at the diner." Alex pauses, looking down at our hands clasped against his knee. His brow furrows, his jaw jumping. He swallows roughly, his Adam's apple bobbing. "She's Laura's little sister—my sister-in-law."

"Oh." Sister-in-law? The chemistry between them seemed like so much more.

"You've got nothing to worry about, Jana," he says, lifting my hand to his lips and pressing a kiss to my knuckles. Don't I? My gut twists. The shared loss, the resemblance to his dead wife—how is that nothing to worry about?

I nod.

"Come on, I'll take you home."

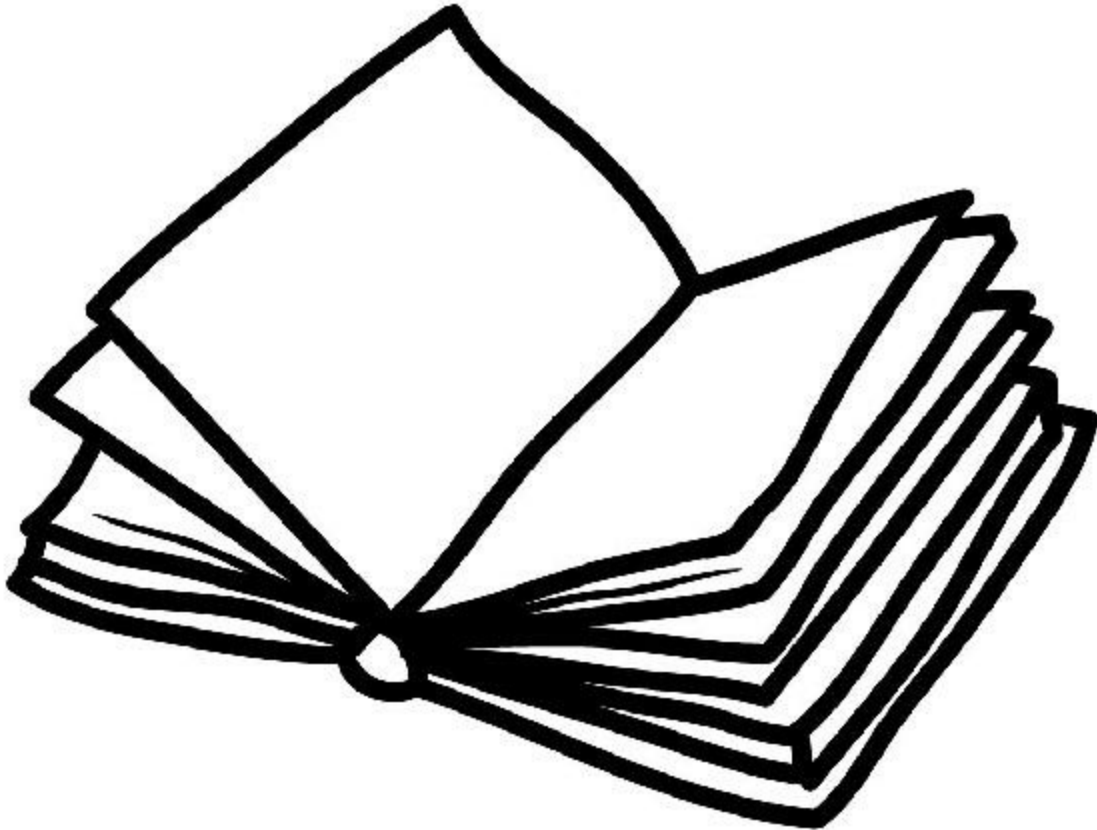
I follow his lead, walking to the door and pulling my coat on. As we step outside, fresh snow falling, I glance up and down the street while he locks the door. I inhale, the icy air burning down my esophagus before I exhale a shuddering breath. Nothing to worry about. I force a smile as he turns around.

"Are you really not going to decorate the store for Christmas?"

He laughs, pulling me into his side as we walk toward his truck. "Who knows. You might convince me yet, darling."

Chapter Sixteen

## Alex



“Yo, Mr. H!” Zach calls from the desk where he’s clocking in. I sigh and turn away from the door, adjusting the collar of my jacket. He leans against the counter, his arms crossed over his chest. He smiles. “Did you figure out if I can get some weekends off?”

“Unfortunately, I’m not able to hire someone yet,” I say, shuffling a hand

through my hair. Despite the bad news, Zach simply nods. “But we can reevaluate after the holidays. You’ll have a long weekend off for Christmas, and we can discuss another day off this month.”

Zach nods again, his blond hair falling over his forehead. He smooths a hand over it, pushing it away from his face, only for it to fall forward again. “I’ve got a date this weekend. Any chance I could get off early on Friday?”

I grin. *Oh, to be young and in love.*

“I think I can make that work, kid.”

“Thanks, Mr. H.”

I step outside into the cold winter air and zip up my jacket. I skipped dinner with Leslie the other night after my talk with Jana. It felt wrong to go to dinner with another woman when the one I truly care about is so anxious over it. Even though I knew nothing would happen with Leslie, Jana means more to me than a relationship with Laura’s sister.

I start walking toward the diner, excited to see the brunette who’s been on my mind constantly over the last few weeks. I know she’s been worried about our relationship, which is why I asked her to meet me for lunch today. I don’t want her to have a single doubt in that overthinking head of hers.

My heart swells as I think about her.

It’s been two years since Laura passed, and I honestly never thought I would feel this way about anyone ever again. I’m beyond grateful that Jana walked into my bookstore when she did, and that we were paired together for the festival. I can’t imagine my life without her in it now.

“Alex.”

I lift my head, surprised to find my path blocked by Leslie. A black hat covers her blonde curls, her eyes and nose red from tears. “What are you doing here?”

“You haven’t been answering my calls,” she says. My heart twinges at the hurt in her voice, but I say nothing. My hands ball into fists inside my pockets, my jaw clenching as she steps closer, wringing her hands. “I-I need to talk to you.”

“Leslie, I—”

“No, I need to get this out,” she says, her voice shaking. My brows furrow, and I step forward, placing a steady hand on her elbow.

“Are you okay?” She’s shaking like a leaf, whether from the cold or her nerves, I’m not sure.

“Alex, please.” She latches onto me, gripping my hand like it’s her lifeline.

“I can’t pretend anymore. I’ve tried to give you space to grieve Laura—I mean, I needed space too, but...I need to tell you the truth—you deserve to hear the truth, and I’ve waited ten years to give it to you.”

“You need to calm down,” I say, trying to pull my hand away, but her grip is clawlike. She pulls herself to me, clinging like a child to my arm. “What are you talking about?”

“I love you, Alex,” she sobs, tears falling as she moves closer, cupping my face with her free hand. She’s close enough that I can smell the alcohol on her breath, the stench of vomit clinging to her clothes. My eyes widen, my jaw going slack. *She’s drunk.* “I’ve loved you since we met.”

Before I can move away, she throws herself at me, pulling my face to hers and pressing a sloppy kiss to my mouth. I push her away, holding her at arm’s length as she tries to reinitiate the kiss.

“Leslie, you’re drunk,” I say, putting enough space between us that she can’t touch me. I fish my phone from my pocket and dial Benji’s number. “I’m gonna get Ben to come pick you up and take you back to the hotel to sleep it off.”

“No, don’t!” She tries to claw the phone from my hands, but I manage to keep it from her.

“Hello?”

“Benji,” I say into the phone, ignoring Leslie’s wailing. I force a smile as the Clarks walk past us, disgusted looks on their withered faces. *Always with the judgement, those two.* “Can you meet me on Main, in front of the pharmacy?”

“What’s going on?” I hear a door close on the other end of the line.

“Leslie’s been drinking.”

“I’ll be there soon.” He hangs up, and I shove the phone into my jacket. This isn’t the first time Leslie’s caused a scene while drunk, and I’m sure it won’t be her last. I lead her to the side, letting her rest against the glass window. She’s settled, resigned to the fact that Benji is on his way now.

“Look, Leslie,” I say on a sigh. I know she’s drunk, and she’ll probably be hungover later, but I still need to let her down easy. “You’re a great girl, but I’m in love with someone else.”

Her face falls, more tears falling down her cheeks. And then I hear a sound I wasn’t expecting—she laughs. “Of course you are.”

“I’m sorry, Les.”

“Do you remember when we met, Alex?” she asks, wiping her cheeks with

the sleeve of her cashmere coat. I sigh, staring out at the snow-covered street.

“That first Thanksgiving I came home with Laura.”

“No, that’s not it.” I look at her curiously, wracking my brain, and she smiles sadly. “We met first. In the library at Brown.”

“What?”

“You were looking for Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* for your English Lit class,” she says. She looks up at me, her green eyes filled with disappointment. “I was sitting at a table in the back corner, studying for my history midterm, and you came up to me with that damn smile, and I was hooked. I helped you find the book and you asked for my number, but you never called me. I guess we know why.”

She laughs again, and my shoulders slump. I don’t remember the encounter at all.

“Looks like I missed my shot again,” she says. “I’m so happy for you.”

“You’ll find someone,” I say, shoving my hands into my pockets. She bites her bottom lip and nods. “You’re smart and funny, not to mention gorgeous.”

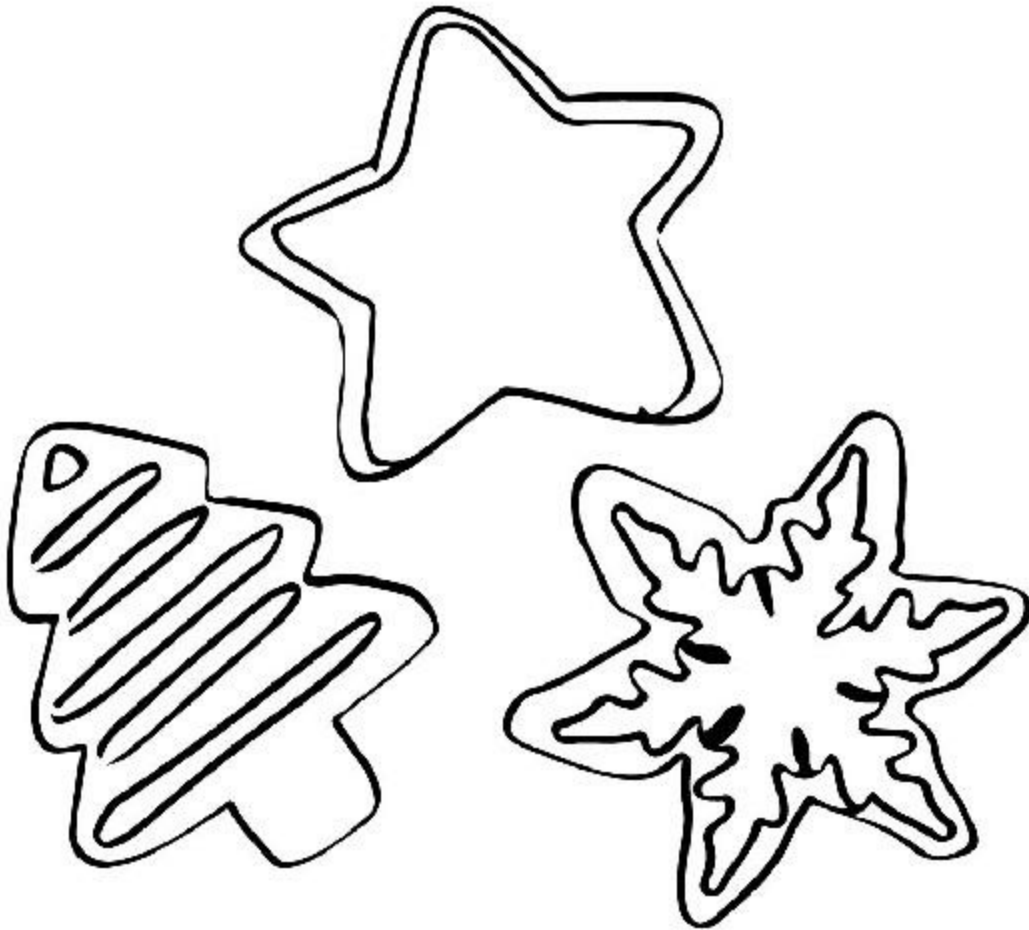
She laughs sharply, the first real smile pulling at her lips. “I really am happy for you, Alex. You deserve love in your life.”

“So do you, Leslie.” She looks away, tears welling on her waterline. Benji’s car pulls up in front of us, and he climbs out. “You deserve someone who loves you ferociously. Please don’t settle, okay?”

Benji walks around and opens the passenger door, waiting as Leslie gives me one last sad smile. “I wasn’t settling, Alex.”

Chapter Seventeen

## Jana



Alex is late.

I glance at my watch, then toward the door of the diner. He said he would head over as soon as Zach got in, so unless something happened, he should be here. I stand up and move to look out the window closest to my table. Instant regret seeps through me when I catch sight of Alex on the sidewalk in

front of the pharmacy, talking to his sister-in-law.

His hand rests on her arm as she cups his cheek. Pain shoots through my heart as she leans in and kisses him, their lips connecting in a hurried frenzy. I close my eyes, but the image is already burned into my memory.

Turning away, I gather my things and drop a few bills on the table for my hot chocolate before walking out. I don't even look toward Alex as I make my way down the street. Pressure builds behind my eyes, begging to be released as liquid tears.

It takes everything in me to hold them back until I find shelter in an alleyway. My heart feels like it's breaking all over again, and as the tears fall, I let it out in a sharp, screaming sob.

Crouching against the wall, I stare up at the sky as tears pour out and into my hair. *Why does this keep happening to me?* Three men, three cheaters. Maybe it's me. Maybe I'm the problem.



It takes me twenty minutes to find my way home. By then, my tears have dried enough that I can call Alex. I sit on my bed, staring at his number in my phone, unsure. I don't know what I'm going to say to him, but if he's waiting for me at the diner, he'll be waiting a long time.

My thumb hovers over the call button, my nerves getting the better of me, when my phone starts ringing in my hand. Alex's name flashes over the screen, and I let my eyes drop closed as I answer it.

"Jana?" A lump forms in my throat when I hear his voice, and I take a deep breath, trying to steady my emotions.

"Alex, hey."

"Are we still good to meet for lunch? Sandy said you were here, but she doesn't know where you went." He pauses. "I'm sorry I was late."

"Oh, um...I—" I clear my throat, tears falling silently down my cheeks. "I'm not gonna make it."

"Alright, no problem," he says, concern slipping into his tone. "Is everything okay?"

"I, um...I was about to call you," I say softly, blinking away the tears. "I think I need some space."

He inhales sharply, and fresh tears well in my eyes as my heart burns in my chest, shattering into a million pieces. "What's going on, Jana?"

*That's what I'd like to know.*

“Nothing, I just...” I stop, trying to pull coherent thoughts together. “I just need some time to think is all.”

“Okay,” he says. *He’s not even going to fight for me?* “Whatever you need, darling. Like I said, I’ll wait forever.”



By the time Hadlee gets home, I’m rewatching *It’s a Wonderful Life*, curled up under three blankets, tissues scattered across the floor beside me. I hear the door click open and shut, and then the soft click-clack of her heels against the vinyl flooring.

“J?”

I don’t bother to look up, my eyes glued to the screen, where George Bailey screams into the void of the river. I sniffle, reaching for another tissue as the tears threaten to start up again.

“Oh, honey.” Hadlee blocks the screen from my view as she crouches down in front of me. Her green eyes search my face, her expression awash with concern. “What happened?”

“You were right. I’m an idiot,” I say, trying to keep the tears at bay, yet failing miserably. “I just feel so *stupid*, Lee.”

“I don’t want to be right about this,” she says softly, pushing my dark curls away from my face.

“I saw him kissing her!” I feel like someone stomped on my heart, my chest in actual pain. “We were supposed to meet for lunch, and he was l-late. I saw him across the street, and he ki-kissed her!”

“Oh, Jana, honey...” she trails off, dabbing my tears with a tissue. “How did you get home?”

“I walked.”

“That’s like a twenty-minute walk,” she says, raising her eyebrows.

“I couldn’t face him.”

“You should’ve come to the salon, honey,” she says, taking in the pile of blankets on top of me. “I could’ve at least given you a ride home, so you didn’t freeze your ass off.”

“I needed time. I just...couldn’t do it.”

“Okay, that’s understandable.”

“He called me,” I say. Taking the tissue she holds out to me, I wipe snot from my nose. “I told him I needed space and time to think, and he didn’t fight me. He just...he told me he would wait forever for me.”



“Did you tell him you saw him kissing her?”

I shake my head. “No. I couldn’t bring myself to.”

“So he has no idea why you broke it off?”

“No,” I sob, feeling dumb over this whole situation. It’s my own damn fault that I’m heartbroken again.

“Hey, it’s okay,” Hadlee says. She smooths back my hair, the same way my mom used to when I was upset. “You did the right thing, breaking things off before you got more invested.”

“Then why do I feel like my heart’s been ripped from my chest?”

“Oh, honey.”

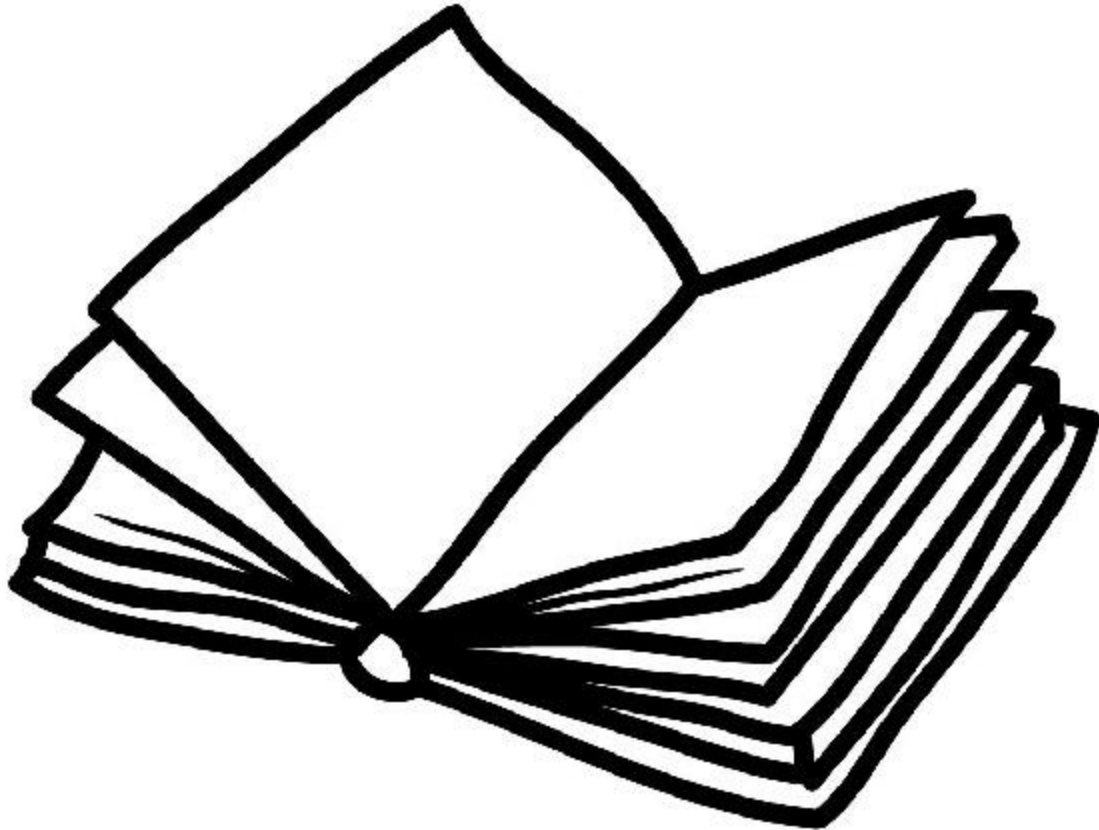
“I think I really love him, Hadlee,” I say dashing tears away as they try to blur my sight. “I saw a life with him and the girls, and now...now I feel so lost and broken.”

“I know,” she says, leaning her forehead against mine. “It’ll get easier with time.”

“It’s never hurt this bad.” I cry, hiccupping on every other breath as she hugs me tightly. “I don’t know how I’m going to heal from this one, Hadlee.”

Chapter Eighteen

# Alex



Benji and I sit in my living room, both of us wallowing in our own thoughts. Jana's words, bit out on the verge of tears, still ring in my head. My heart shattered when she said she needed space, and I knew there was nothing I could do but let her have it.

It'll be hard to explain to Maddie and Morgan why Jana isn't around, but

hopefully, with Benji's help, I'll be able to distract them.

"Why are women so fucking complicated?" Benji asks, breaking our silence. I glance at him over the piano keys I've been staring at for the last twenty minutes and chuckle.

"That's a good fucking question."

"I don't get it," he says, rubbing a hand over his face and sighing. "One minute, they act interested, and the next, you get the cold shoulder. I don't know what the hell she wants from me."

"Are we talking about a certain blonde nurse slash babysitter?" I ask, moving to the couch opposite him. I sink into the cushions and rest my head against the back.

"Or we could be talking about a certain brunette baker."

"Touché."

"What happened with that anyway?" he asks, avoiding the topic of his problems.

"She says she needs space."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"I don't know, Benj," I say, rubbing my hands vigorously down my face. Frustration and sadness war with each other in my gut. *I already miss her.* "It means she needs time to think about shit."

"What does she need to think about?" he asks, voicing my exact question. "I thought things were going really well between you two."

"So did I."

We sit in silence for a moment before the front door crashes open. Hadlee Scott bursts into my house, fury written across her face as she stalks forward.

"You're a fucking idiot, Alex Hall." Her green eyes glare daggers into my skull, and I hold my hands up in surrender as she approaches me. "I got home from work only to find my roommate sobbing while watching *It's a Wonderful Life*. She finally fell asleep during the *third fucking viewing*."

"Hadlee, I didn't do anything," I say, rubbing a hand over my face. Benji chuckles from his position on the other couch, and I shoot him a glare. "I was late to lunch, and then Jana told me she wanted space. So, I'm giving her space."

"*Didn't do anything?*" Hadlee scoffs. "She saw you kissing that blonde bitch you had lunch with on Monday."

My heart sinks at her words, and I let my eyes drop closed. *Of course, she had to see that.*

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Benji says, meeting my gaze. “You didn’t tell me you kissed her.”

“I didn’t,” I say, resting my elbows on my knees. I rub my face, frustrated with this situation.

“So you’re telling me my best friend made it up?” Hadlee asks, her fists balled at her sides. Anger rolls off her in tidal waves, and I shake my head.

“No, Jana saw a kiss.” I sigh, my shoulders sagging as I sink back into the sofa. “I was on my way to meet Jana for lunch when Leslie cornered me. She admitted she was in love with me and kissed me before I could react.”

“*Right.*” She drags the word out, rolling her eyes as she crosses her arms. “Because you’re *just that damn charming.*”

“I don’t go around kissing people, Hadlee,” I say.

“It sure seems like you do, *Alex.*”

I clench my jaw, anger brewing in my veins at her insinuation.

“As fun as it is to watch you ream him,” Benji interrupts, shooting a smirk my direction, “he hasn’t even thought of a woman since Laura died. Jana is the first woman he’s talked about in two years, and honestly, Leslie is a bit of a basket case when it comes to Alex.”

Hadlee looks between us and shakes her head. “Why wouldn’t you just tell Jana?”

“I was going to,” I say. “But when she didn’t show up for lunch, I got worried, so I called her. That’s when she said she needed time to think, and I decided not to bring it up. I didn’t know she saw it happen.”

“Oh, she saw it happen.”

“Are you telling me she needs space because of *this*?” I ask. Hadlee looks at me like I grew a second head. It takes a minute for me to connect the dots, and my heart breaks when I do. “She thinks I cheated on her.”

She nods, as if I’m an idiot for not realizing sooner. “Alex, she’s a mess because of that kiss.”

“You’ve gotta help me fix this, Hadlee.”

“You men are such idiots,” she says, but she moves around to sit beside Benji on the couch anyway. “What are you thinking?”

“Do you know her favorite flowers?” I ask, the beginnings of a plan forming in my head.

“Of course I do.”

“Well, what are they?” Benji asks, leaning forward.

“Lilies, but—”

“Okay, can you get her to the bookshop Saturday night?” I ask.

“Won’t the booths be set up by then?”

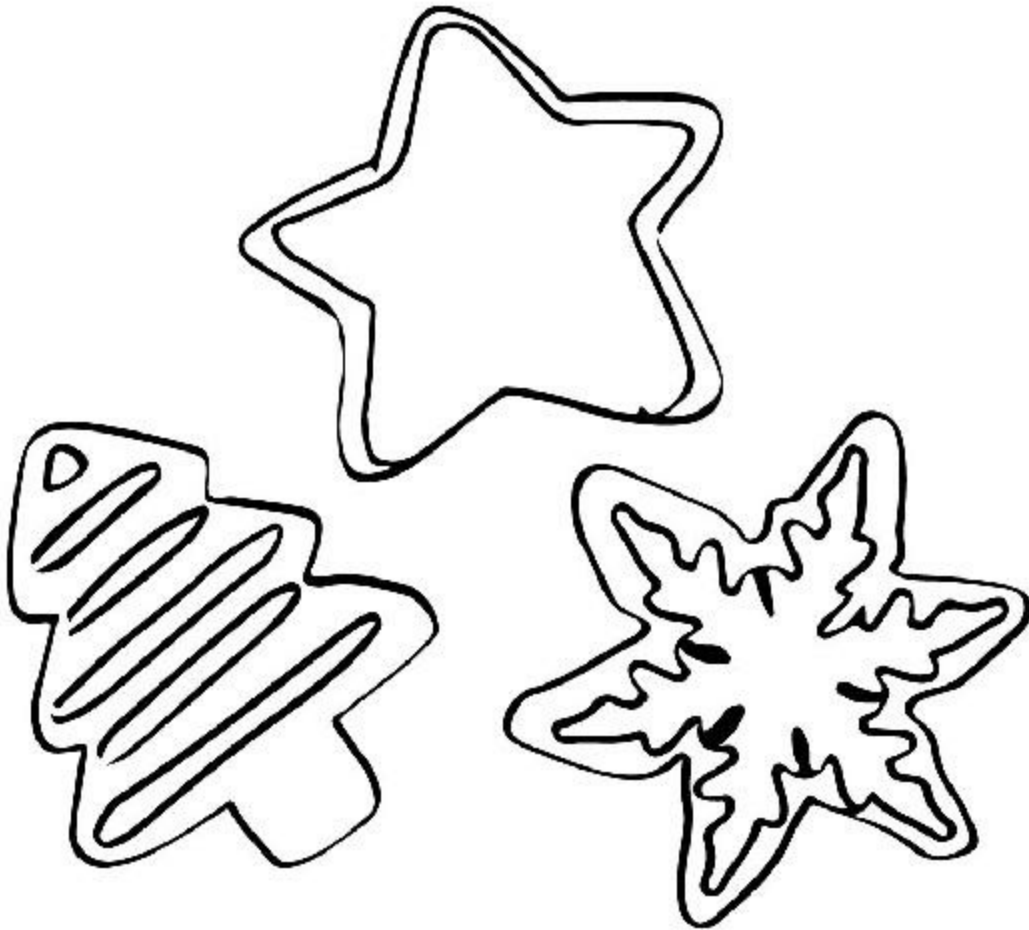
“Yes,” I say, grinning. “And ours will be in front of the bookshop.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Don’t worry about it,” I say. “Your job is to get Jana in front of the bookstore just after sunset. Benji and I will handle the rest.”

Chapter Nineteen

# Jana



“I really don’t want to go out, Lee,” I say from my bathroom. My hair is piled on top of my head, curls spilling out around my face, the dress she picked out hugging my curves perfectly. “I don’t want to chance running into him.”

“I told you, I’m taking you to a club in Bozeman,” Hadlee calls from the

other end of the house. “There’s no chance he’ll be there.”

Sighing, I smear my favorite lipstick over my lips and dust a final layer of blush over my cheeks. It’s been three days since I saw Alex kissing his sister-in-law, and I haven’t seen him since.

I breathe out, blowing away the pain that comes whenever I think about Alex. I miss him, more than I want to admit. My heart is battered, and I don’t know if I’ll ever let myself fall in love again.

“You look great,” Hadlee says as I exit my room. “Come on, let’s go.”



Hadlee pulls over in front of Sandy’s diner and turns the car off.

“Come on,” she says, opening the door. “I left something at my festival booth, and I need to grab it before we head to the club.”

I raise a brow in skepticism. “You left something you need for a club?”

“Yeah, my ID.”

“Why do I have to come with you?”

“Would you just get out of the damn car?” she grouches, her heels clicking against the icy road. I roll my eyes but climb out of the car anyway. It’s dark outside, but the street is lined with booths for the festival that starts tomorrow morning. Twinkling lights make it bright as day on Main Street.

“Can we just hurry?” I ask, tugging my skirt down and thanking God I remembered to put on my wool-lined tights. “It’s too fucking cold out here.”

“Come on.”

I link arms with Hadlee, and we slowly make our way across the frozen street in our heels. “This was a terrible idea.”

“I’m sorry I forgot my ID,” she huffs, laughing as she slides on the road. “They better put salt down tomorrow, or they’re gonna have a riot on their hands.”

“Where is your booth?” I ask, watching where I put my feet, so I don’t slip.

“Next to yours.”

I lift my gaze to the bookstore a few feet away, still dark next to the rest of the brightly lit stores. I never did convince him to decorate.

“Oh God, Lee,” I say softly, stopping in my tracks. “I don’t know if I can do this.”

“Jana, it’s all going to be okay, I promise,” Hadlee says, pulling me with her. She disappears under the pop-up tent, and my eyes drift to the booth

beside it.

Twinkle lights weave through garland wrapped around the poles of the tent. The 'Blind Date with a Book' stand is set up on a bookshelf, the giant wheel set up beside it. There's a small table sitting next to the wheel, ready for the bakery items. A tree takes up the back corner of the booth, prizes hanging from it like ornaments.

*It's absolutely perfect.*

"When did..."

A flash of lights catches me off guard, and I lift my eyes to the bookstore behind the booth. Tears spring to my eyes as Maddie and Morgan run out the front door, their giggles filling the night air.

"Miss Jana!"

"Do you like it? Daddy said you would love it!"

"I missed you, Miss Jana!"

I'm overwhelmed with emotions as the girls race into my arms. Bright lights frame the bookstore window, bringing attention to the new display. A tree stands to one side, books perched on the branches, and big white lettering across the other half of the window reads "*Merry Christmas, Jana!*"

"What do you think, darling?" Alex asks from behind me, his breath warm on my neck. My vision blurs as I turn to face him, his wood and citrus cologne enveloping me like a warm hug. The girls retreat from my side, leaving me alone to face him.

"It's beautiful," I say, my voice barely more than a whisper. His lips twitch, a smile pulling at his face.

"So are you, Jana."

He lifts a hand to my face, pushing away the damn curl that refuses to stay put. I want to lean into his touch, but the image of him kissing Leslie is burned into my mind, so I pull away instead.

"I can't do this, Alex," I say, my heart beating a mile a minute.

"Please, let me explain," he says, catching my hand as I spin away. "The kiss with Leslie meant nothing."

"Every kiss means something, Alex," I breathe out, hating myself for the tears that fall.

"The kisses we shared mean everything, darling," he says, pulling me close. Our eyes lock, and I'm lost in depths of amber. "*You mean everything.*"

Despite its broken nature, my heart skips.



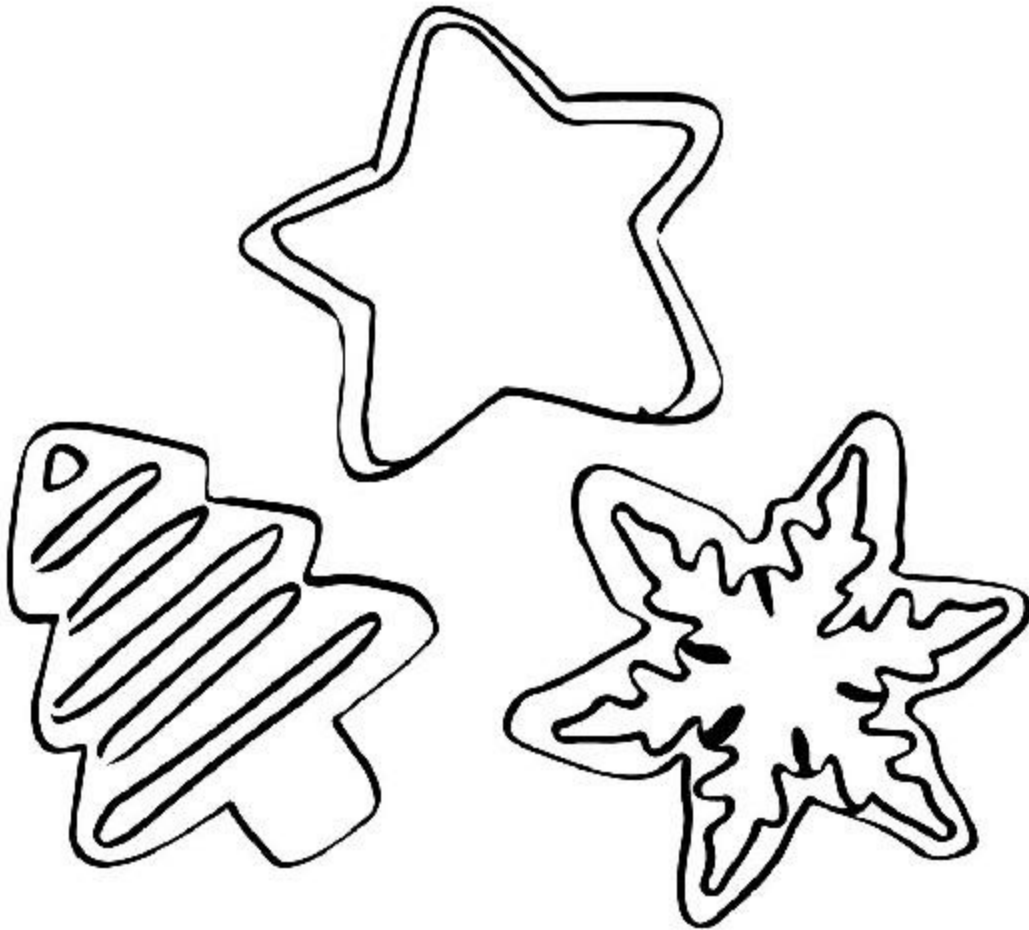
“If you’d waited, you would’ve seen me pull away from her and explain...” He pauses, caressing my cheek as he leans closer. The world feels like it’s moving in slow motion around us as he smiles at me. His lips brush mine in the lightest touch, and my eyes flutter. “That I’m madly in love with *you*.”

My eyes well with happy tears. “Alex, I lov—”

He cuts me off, wrapping his arms around my hips and lifting me up. When he kisses me, it’s like the whole world has frozen in time, and we’re the only ones here. He’s warm and gentle as his lips caress mine in slow, languid movements. I’ve never felt this way about anyone before, and knowing Alex feels the same sets my heart on fire.

Chapter Twenty

## Jana



I never imagined when I left Louisiana with a broken heart that I would find love in my hometown of Harmony, Montana, but even the best laid plans can go awry. Standing on Main Street, amidst the two dozen booths, fresh snow coating each tent and lamppost, I can almost feel my parents beside me.

My eyes follow Maddie and Morgan as they chase after Benji. They pause

at the ones that pique their curiosity, playing the ring toss and the ball toss before dragging their uncle to the pony rides. The laughter that rings through the festival warms my heart, and as Alex wraps his arms around my waist, resting his chin on my shoulder, I know I'm right where I'm supposed to be.

"Well, booth buddy," Alex whispers in my ear, making me chuckle. "We did it."

"What exactly did we do, *booth buddy*?"

"We made it to the festival without killing each other, for one," he says, pressing a light kiss to my neck. Butterflies erupt at his feather-like touches, a shiver racing down my spine. "And we sold out of 'Blind Date with a Book' on day one."

"We did?" I glance at the shelves, surprised to find them all empty. I turn around in his arms, excitement flooding through me. "Alex, do you know what this means?"

"What?"

"People love the 'Blind Date with a Book' idea! What if you were to make it a more permanent display in the store?"

"You think that'll drive more sales?" he asks.

"It might, yeah."

"Well, then, I think it's a great idea." He grins down at me. "Now, are you gonna keep people watching?"

I laugh and press a kiss to his jaw. He shaved this morning, so the skin is stubbly, scratching gently against my face. Turning around in his arms, I let him pull me closer, leaning into his embrace. "What are we going to do for the rest of the week now that the 'Blind Dates' are sold out?"

"I'm sure we can find some more books somewhere," he jokes, nuzzling his face into the crook of my neck. "So, how do you want to celebrate?"

"Celebrate?"

"That's right."

"And what are we celebrating, booth buddy?" I ask, raising an eyebrow. "Surely not the extra work we've just discovered."

He turns his head, pressing soft kisses to my neck. "How about the fact that the woman I love is in love with me?"

"Hmmm, that *is* something to celebrate, isn't it?" I tease.

He wiggles his fingers against my sides, and I yelp out a laugh.

"You bet your ass that's something to celebrate."

The End

## Acknowledgments

Writing a book is incredibly difficult and requires a whole lot of faith in yourself. I'm not great at believing in myself, and never have been. Luckily for me, I have an amazing team who believed in me when I couldn't.

First and foremost, I need to thank my incredible husband, Austin. Without him, I never would've quit my job to pursue my dream of writing love stories. From reading early drafts, making midnight snacks, to keeping our boys out of my hair, he was an integral part of bringing this story to fruition. Thank you, my love.

To my soul-sister, Tori Lewis, who inspires me every single day, without whom I would have given up ages ago. Thank you for staying by my side through every high and low, for talking me through meltdowns and cheering me on through every milestone. Thank you for being so authentically you and encouraging me to be unapologetically me. I love you.

A huge thank you to Alexa Thomas with *The Fiction Fix*, the best editor a girl could ask for. Thank you for being a sounding board, and for taking the time to make me and my book feel special. I appreciate the hard work and love you put into editing *Booked for Christmas*.

To my family. My parents, John and Tressa: thank you for instilling a love of stories in me from such a young age, and for encouraging me. Thank you for the sage advice and for sharing your knowledge with me when I couldn't figure things out on my own. My big sister, Victoria: thank you for being my personal cheerleader. I couldn't have done it without your encouragement and advice. My siblings, Colton and Briahna, Lauren, Nicolas, Evie, Allan, and Ian: thank you for your words of encouragement, and the space to be creative with you.

Thank you to my beta readers/friends: Holly Sadowski, Jess Riedy, Kristy Ballantine, Lauren Harris, Sam Snyder, and Sharon Voytac. Your thoughts and suggestions gave me a new view on the characters and plot, and I can honestly say you were all a fundamental part of bringing this story to life. Thank you for your constant encouragement and support.

To my writers' group, without whom I wouldn't be where I am today. Thank you for creating a safe space for me to share my writing and for

encouraging me to keep going when I doubted myself. I appreciate every single one of you.

And finally, to my boys, Jamie and Theo. Thank you for showing me how to live my dreams. You two were my biggest dream, and I thank God every day for you. Remember to be true to you, and always follow your dreams, even when you doubt yourself—you never know how many people are rooting for you to succeed. I love you, to the moon and back.