



# Candy Canes & Caroling



KATIE METTNER

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*Bells Pass Book 7*

Katie Mettner



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*For the 'Stars' of the world.*

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# Chapter One

September

“Where did that dog get off to now?” I muttered, putting my hand on my forehead to block the sun. The question was rhetorical, of course, since I was alone, but I needed to find him sooner rather than later.

I was looking for a German Shepherd with a yellow tennis ball in his mouth, but I couldn't see a thing. Unfortunately, or fortunately, depending on how you looked at it, the park was overflowing with people. It was a beautiful fall day, and the people of Bells Pass packed the park for the back-to-school picnic the school district held every year.

“Star!” I called, pushing my wheelchair down the path in the direction I'd thrown the ball. “Star! Return!”

Star had been my service dog for three years, and he'd never run off while playing fetch. I'd removed his vest to give him time to enjoy the day, but that wasn't unusual. He always got rest time, but what was unusual was him running off. He never left me alone, even when he wasn't wearing his vest. Star knew that even rest time could quickly turn into work time if something unexpected happened.

Apparently, disappearing was the theme today. We were supposed to meet the newly hired social worker for New Beginnings, our low-income housing facility in Bells Pass, during the picnic, but the mysterious Hazel Cane never showed up. Mayor Tottle had headed out to look for her about half an hour ago, but I hadn't heard from him since. I would be of little help in finding her, though. I'd only seen her picture once when I read her bio online to familiarize myself with her career. They'd kept me out of the hiring process since I was the director of the new housing project and I'd have to work closely with Hazel. I'd fully supported that plan. I wanted to be on even footing with her. I chuckled. Okay, so I'd never be on even footing, but I wanted her to feel like we were a team and not like I was her boss. Had I been on the interview committee, that would likely have happened.

I noticed a familiar face ahead, and I rolled over just as she turned to me. “Irving!” Ivy exclaimed. “Great to see you here today! Are you having fun?”

A smile tipped my lips at her constant enthusiasm about life, even if I wasn’t enthusiastic about anything other than finding my dog. “It’s hard not to have fun whenever a large group of Bells Passers congregates. I’m stuffed full of burgers, sweet corn, and that delicious Nightingale Diner blueberry pie.”

“You know there will be no pie left by the end of the day!” Ivy glanced around my chair. “Hey, where’s your shadow? He never leaves your side.”

“It seems I’ve lost Star,” I said with frustration. “We were playing fetch, and he didn’t return after the last throw. He’s never run off before. I’m nervous there’s something wrong.”

She motioned with her arms until four other people jogged over to us.

“What’s up, Ivy?” Gabe Dennison asked. He was a detective with the Bells Pass police department, and if that weren’t enough, he was also an EMT and the director for the high school madrigal choir, of all things.

“Irving can’t find Star.”

Gabe turned to me immediately. “Where did you see him last?”

“I took his vest off, so he could have rest time,” I explained. “I was throwing his ball, and he didn’t return after the last toss. I threw the ball toward the woods to keep him out of the way of everyone, but he could be anywhere by now.”

“Has he ever run away before?” Gabe asked.

“No.” The one word held a multitude of emotions and revealed the fear I thought I could hide. “He’s never not come when I called him before, either. Service dog theft is not an uncommon thing. I have to find him.”

“You’re right, but he’s not wearing his vest, so someone would have to know he was a service dog some other way. We



have that on our side.” Gabe turned to the group gathered behind him. “Let’s fan out across the park. Ask anyone you pass if they’ve seen a German Shepherd.” He turned back to me. “What should they do if they come across him? Can they touch him?”

“Say, go visit,” I said. “He’s not wearing his vest but will still respond to the command. That command means he should come to you so you can pet him. Once he’s by you, you can grab his collar. If he still won’t come to you when you say go visit, say, get dressed, followed by, return. He will sit next to you, and you can call me.”

“Everyone got it?” Heads nodded, and everyone took off in different directions. Gabe turned back to me and pointed to his left. “I’m going toward the gazebo through the woods. You follow the path and see if anyone spooks him toward you. You’ve got my number?”

I held up my cell phone and noticed my hand was shaking. “I do. Call me if you find him.”

“We’ll find him,” he assured me with a shoulder pat before he took off through the woods.

I pushed my chair down the concrete path, calling his name and whistling every few seconds. The park was busy, which made it hard to hear any response he might give me. I hadn’t thrown the ball that far, meaning he had gone beyond where he would have found it.

“Star! Return!” I yelled the basic command for a dog to return to his handler. If he could hear me, he would follow that command.

I paused at the path’s edge when I heard a bark I recognized immediately. I jammed the wheels forward on my chair and rolled into the parking lot.

“Star! Return!” I yelled, frantically searching for his furry shape among the cars. I didn’t want him to get hit as people pulled in and out of the park. When he didn’t follow the command, I knew something was wrong, which I confirmed when Star barked again.

His bark came from my left, near the last row of cars that butts up to the grass. As I rounded the side of the cars, I finally put eyes on my dog. He bounced back and forth between his front feet as he nuzzled someone in the grass.

“Star, return!” I said the command firmly, but he didn’t even turn to address me. I was going to have to bring out the big guns. “Star, look at me.”

This time, he turned and made eye contact. His eyes said he was distraught. I rolled closer and realized the person on the ground was a woman who was not responding to Star or me. I grabbed my phone and called Gabe immediately.

“Gabe, I found Star. He’s guarding a woman in the grass on the west end of the parking lot. She’s unconscious. I can’t get close enough to her to check for a pulse.”

I heard the instant Gabe started running. “Call an ambulance. I’m on my way!”

The line went dead, and I immediately called 911. Gabe was an EMT, but we would need an ambulance ASAP. After giving the dispatcher the pertinent information, I hung up my phone and rolled closer to Star and the woman.

“Stand,” I commanded the dog, and this time he stood, then put a paw on the woman’s arm that lay in the grass. I noticed she held a set of keys with a candy cane keychain and the truth hit me in the gut. I’d found my missing colleague. Star whined low in his throat as though that would make the woman pay him some attention.

Gabe came tearing out of the woods and was beside the woman in a heartbeat. “What happened?” he asked as he assessed Hazel.

“I have no idea. I heard Star barking and finally found him here, standing over her. An ambulance is on its way.”

“Excellent, thank you. She’s breathing and has a pulse but is out cold.”

“I’m no expert, but I don’t think hands are supposed to lay that way.” I motioned at her left hand, and Gabe immediately looked down and grimaced.

“Nope,” he agreed just as we heard the siren headed toward us. “That’s going to leave a mark. I don’t recognize this woman.”

“She’s new to town,” I said. “That keychain tells me we just found Hazel Cane, the social worker for New Beginnings.”

Gabe’s eyes widened. “Listen, I need you to take Star and get him away from here. We’ll need room for the stretcher. Then, you need to call Mayor Tottle.”

“Star, come,” I said, grabbing his collar. When he didn’t, I growled the command by his ear. “Leave it and return.”

With a whine still low in his throat, Star finally returned to my side. “Get dressed,” I said, and he sat, allowing me to put his vest on just as the ambulance pulled into the lot. “Over here!” I yelled when I heard the doors to the rig open. I grabbed Star’s lead, and we backed up, leaving room for the EMTs to do their work.

A crowd gathered, and I turned my chair, motioning everyone back by pushing the chair forward. When I turned my chair back around, the EMTs had my colleague on the stretcher as they ran with her toward the ambulance.

A strange sensation filled me. I couldn’t explain it, but the only word that came to mind to describe it was *protect*. I hadn’t met her yet but something told me she needed protection.

“Come, car,” I ordered Star, and he ran along on my left side until we reached my SUV. I let him into the backseat, rolled around to the driver’s side, and transferred into the vehicle. By the time I got my chair apart and stowed next to me, the ambulance had pulled out of the parking lot with the sirens blaring and the lights flashing. At the park exit, I should have turned left and headed to city hall to find Mayor Tottle, but I didn’t. I flicked the right turn signal on and followed the ambulance. It was time for an official meet and greet with Miss Hazel Cane.



*Why does my head hurt?*

When I opened my eyes, the bright lights above the bed made them burn. I blinked a few times to get my bearings. That was when I realized my left hand burned far more than my eyes.

“Help!” I yelled, surprised when it came out like a whisper. “Help! I need help!” I strained to yell loud enough for someone to hear me.

A woman I didn’t know came running into the room and stopped at the bedside. “What’s the matter?”

“Where am I?”

She held her hand out, and I noticed her name badge. It said, ‘Sandy.’ Good, I could still read even though my head felt like someone hit it with Thor’s hammer.

“You had an accident and you’re in the Bells Pass Hospital. Can you tell me your name?”

*I was in Bells Pass, but they didn’t know my name?*

“I’m Hazel Cane.”

“Can you tell me how old you are?”

“I’ll turn twenty-eight on Christmas Eve.”

Sandy messed with a machine by my bed before she answered. “Do you know what month it is?”

“It’s September. I’m the social worker and programs director for New Beginnings. I was supposed to meet Mayor Tottle—oh, my goodness, I need my phone! Where’s my phone? I have to call Mayor Tottle!” I tried to pat the bed, but my left hand was encased in something. I held it up in front of my face. “What’s wrong with my hand?”

“Slow down, Hazel, and take a deep breath.” Sandy gently grasped my left arm and lowered it to the bed while I took a deep breath. “Mayor Tottle knows where you are and that you had an accident. Do you remember what happened?”

I closed my eyes, hoping the memories would return, but all I saw was darkness. “The last thing I remember was getting in my car this morning. What time is it? Did I miss the event at the park?”

“I’m afraid you did,” Sandy said. “It’s after four p.m. You made it to the park, but something happened to you before you met up with Mayor Tottle. At least, that’s what the witness told us. His dog found you in the grass near the parking lot.”

“I...I don’t remember. I’m sorry.”

“That’s okay,” Sandy assured me, patting my shoulder. “That’s quite common with a head injury. Don’t try to force anything. Just give yourself a little time. Eventually, the memories may return. Do you have any chronic health conditions? Things like diabetes or seizures?”

“No, no,” I said, touching my hand to my forehead as I tried to think. “I’m healthy as a horse. What about my hand? What’s wrong with it? I need my hand!”

She gave my shoulder a reassuring squeeze. “We’re waiting for the x-rays to come back and then the doctor will decide what needs to happen from there. Are you in any pain?”

“My head and my hand,” I whispered, blinking again mostly to fight back the tears threatening to fall. Everything was messed up now and I couldn’t afford to lose this job.

“I’m sure you’re hurting. There are only certain medications I can give you because of your head injury, but I’m happy to get you something for the pain. Just hang tight.”

*Hang tight? Where am I going to go?* I wondered as she walked out of the cubicle. I was literally tied to the bed with wires, not to mention I feared what would happen when I stood up. If the pounding in my head was any indication, I might collapse.

I swiped away the tears with my right hand before they could drip down my cheeks. Show no weakness. That was the mantra. I lifted my left hand and rested my elbow on the bed. My hand was in a giant inflatable tube that looked like bubble

wrap. It was slightly hooked to the left. I closed my eyes and tried to force a memory, but instead drifted off into sleep to escape the pain.

## Chapter Two

“I’m sorry, Irving. I can’t give you any information about the patient without her permission,” the charge nurse said from the desk. “We’ll have to wait until she is done with the doctor and then I can ask her if she wants company.”

“Sure, I understand,” I said, biting my lip. “But Mayor Tottle had to leave, so he asked me to stay and keep him updated. Hazel and I will be living together, so I want to be here for her.”

“Living together?” Nurse Sandy’s brow went up at the same time my hands started waving in the air.

“No, no, not like that! I meant that she’s the new programs director and will be my neighbor in the same building. We’re getting ready to open in January. I know it’s a year late, but we ran into some big issues with New Beginnings.” I could see Sandy’s eyes glazing over, so I cleared my throat and tried to relax. “Anyway, Hazel will be living in the apartment next to me. She doesn’t know anyone in Bells Pass, so I wanted to be here for her in case she was scared or confused.”

Wearing a smile that I couldn’t decipher, Sandy patted the top of the nurse’s station. “I’ll go stick my head in and see if they’re done. Sit tight.”

“Literally,” I said, tongue in cheek and she grimaced before she laughed.

“I never said I wasn’t socially awkward.” She gave me the palms up and then disappeared into the back of the ER.

I glanced down at Star who sat by my left side, awaiting his next command. “I guess we sit tight.”

The emergency department was quiet, which surprised me. With the events at the park and the games going on around town, you’d think there would be more action in a place like this. I wasn’t going to say that aloud and jinx them, though. My time working in a hospital taught me how things could go from quiet to off the rails in the blink of an eye. I would be

happy to get an update on Hazel before things went off the rails.

When Mayor Tottle was called away on city business, I assured him that I would text as soon as I heard anything, but so far, my attempts had been futile. I was praying Sandy could get me in to at least reassure Hazel that we knew she was here and that we'd take care of her.

Gabe had also arrived to take her statement, but the docs wouldn't allow it since she had a head injury. He left frustrated but with a promise from me that I'd reach out as soon as she was released. We had no idea if a crime was committed, but if that was the case, every minute that passed gave the perpetrator more time to get away. Gabe would need to talk to her and with any luck, Hazel would remember what happened and be able to give him solid information to find the person responsible. There was no way she had done this to herself, so whether on accident or purpose, someone else was responsible.

I stroked the top of Star's head absently while I ran Hazel's bio through my head. She was a social worker, like myself, who had worked with several large community groups in Florida for the last six years. Her first job was working with people with developmental disabilities which led her into her job as a community social worker for a school to work program. Both were difficult positions, but she had published several papers on activity-based day programs and carried a masters in social work. She transitioned into social programs for seniors before she applied for the job in Bells Pass. That's why I found it strange that she was here. The Bells Pass center was nowhere near the size or caliber of the one she left, and that made my human side suspicious but my social worker side concerned. Had something happened to make her run away? Then again, maybe she was burned out of city work and wanted a smaller, more intimate place to work for a few years. I was man enough to admit that she intrigued me, even though we hadn't met yet.

"Irving?" Sandy called and I looked up, my daydream broken. "Hazel said you can come back. We're still waiting for



the doctor.” She motioned me to follow her, so I unlocked my chair.

“Forward.” Star stood and walked alongside me on the left as I pushed my chair around the desk and toward Sandy. “Switch,” I commanded, when Sandy was holding the curtain open on the left side. Star walked around the back of my chair and took up a position on my right side inside the tiny cubicle.

“That dog is something else,” Sandy mumbled as she dropped the curtain and walked away.

“Sit,” I said and he lowered his butt to the ground, but just barely. The moment he’d laid eyes on Hazel again, he wanted to check her over.

“Hi, I’m Irving Wallace. It’s nice to officially meet you, Hazel, though I wish the circumstances were better,” I said to the woman in the bed. “Seems you had a bit of a debacle.”

“A fiasco, you might say,” she said with a weak smile. “It’s nice to officially meet you too, Irving. I guess you’re my hero.”

I struggled to find words. “Oh, no, it wasn’t me—”

“I was talking to your dog,” she interrupted, finger waving at Star who was barely containing himself to hold my command.

I bit back the amused snort, so she didn’t think she was funny, but did let a smile lift my lips. Something told me she was going to be okay. “This is Star,” I said to introduce them as I smoothed my palm down over his head. “Is it okay for him to come by the bed? He won’t settle down until he knows you’re okay.”

“Absolutely,” she said, making gaga eyes at my dog.

“Star, go visit.” I dropped his lead and he galloped for the bed. He was too short to reach her so he looked back at me with a whine in his throat. “Paws up,” I commanded and with permission granted, he stuck his head through the guardrail of the bed for an ear scratch.

“Who’s a good boy?” she cooed at the dog as she scratched his ears. “Star’s a good boy. He’s going to get all the best doggie cookies.”

“I’ll allow it, because if he’s getting the best doggie cookies, I should get the best human cookies. I did call the ambulance after all.”

“Does he get a cookie for knowing three numbers, Star?” she asked him while he nuzzled her hand for more scratches. When she lifted her gaze to make eye contact, she smiled. “But seriously, thank you. I don’t remember a thing about what happened. I’m lucky you and Star found me.”

“Star ran off to get his ball and never returned, so I got worried. When I found him, he wouldn’t leave your side until Gabe arrived. Speaking of Gabe, he will want to talk to you once you’re out of the hospital.”

“Gabe?”

“Sorry. Gabriel Dennison. He’s a detective with the Bells Pass Police Department. He’s also an EMT and was first on the scene after I found you. He stopped by earlier to take your statement, but since you have a head injury, the doctors told him it had to wait.”

“I don’t know why he’d need my statement. Is that something police do here for every accident?”

“Accident? Hazel, this wasn’t an accident. If it was an accident, it turned into a hit and run when they didn’t stop and render aid.”

“Hit and run? You think someone hit me?”

“From what Gabe tells me, yes. I don’t want to say too much and give you false memories, so give your brain some time to recover and maybe you’ll remember what happened when you got to the park.”

She rubbed her forehead and sighed. “All I can remember right now is leaving my hotel this morning. The rest is just a blank.”

The curtain was pulled aside, and Sandy stepped in. “I’m sorry to interrupt, but I found this when putting your clothes in a patient belongings bag.” She held a card out to Hazel, who accepted it. I noticed her hand shake as she brought it to her face to read. “It says to call him in case of emergency.”

“Did you call him?” she asked, her words barely audible.

“No, since you’re conscious, I decided to give it to you.”

“Thanks, I’ll take care of it once I talk to the doctor,” Hazel promised with a smile.

I noticed her slip the card under the blanket as Sandy left the room. “Star, return.” The dog lowered his paws and trotted back over to me where he sat relaxed, content that his patient was okay. “Don’t try to force the memories,” I said to bring us back to the conversation. “You have other things to focus on.”

“Like my hand,” she said, lifting it off the bed to show me the blow-up cast holding it securely. “I can’t lose this job.”

“You don’t have to worry about that, Hazel. Mayor Tottle has already instructed the police to use all resources to find the person behind this. This wasn’t your fault and you won’t be fired.”

“If there was a person behind this,” she added and I nodded once.

“Right, but either way, we’ve got you covered. Please, stop worrying about anything until we know what the doctor has planned for your hand.”

“Easier said than done, Mr. Wallace,” she quipped.

“Trust me, I know,” I promised. “There have been plenty of ‘oh no’ moments in my life, but they always work out if you trust in your support system.”

“I don’t have one. That’s the problem. I’ve been in Bells Pass for less than three hours.”

“And I can promise you that the news has already spread far and wide. Ivy, the owner of the diner and bakery, will have more food delivered to your apartment than you can ever eat. Mrs. Violet, our town busybody, and sweetest lady you’ll ever

meet, will fuss over you the moment she meets you. Gabe is already investigating what happened. His wife will probably cut your hair for free from this day forward, and,” I glanced at my watch for a moment and nodded. “Yep, your car was already dropped off at New Beginnings by one of the local mechanics. I assure you that all your fluids have been topped off and your tires rotated.” I chuckled at the last joke until I noticed she wasn’t laughing with me.

“How did they move my car without the keys? How did you even know it was my car?”

“It wasn’t hard. Your keys were in your hand when you went down. Gabe passed them off to someone and after a couple honks from the remote, they found it parked in the back row,” I explained.

“Why would they do all of that for someone they don’t even know?”

Her words were slurring, which meant she was getting tired and needed to rest, so I had to wrap this up. “That’s Bells Pass for you. People do things here because they want to help. They’re naturally kind and giving. When the mayor asks them to do something, like drive someone’s car to their new apartment, they don’t ask questions. They just do it.”

“The mayor?”

“Yes, your boss. Mayor Tottle.”

“Asked someone to move my car?”

“Yes, and it was done, so you don’t have to worry about it anymore, okay? All of your things are at the community center and once you’re released, we’ll get you there too. Would you like to borrow my phone to call your emergency contact? I don’t want someone needlessly worrying about you.”

“No, no,” she said, waving her hand at me. “It’s fine. I’m too tired.”

“Why don’t you close your eyes and get some rest before the doctor arrives?”

“Isn’t there a thing about not sleeping when you have a concussion?”

My chuckle was soft while I answered her question. “Yes, you aren’t supposed to sleep more than two hours without being awakened. I can assure you that no one will let you sleep for two hours uninterrupted in this place.”

She gave me a weak finger gun before her eyes drooped and her breathing evened out.

I glanced down at Star who was gazing up at me. “Well, boy, I think life just got a lot more interesting.”

The woman stretched out in the hospital bed was stunning even as she lay there pale and sore. Her reddish blonde hair spread out across the pillow and her blue eyes, when open, paired perfectly with her alabaster skin. Hazel Cane carried an aura about her that radiated kindness and understanding. It was weird to be so sure about that when I barely knew her, but it was the only thing I could think as I gazed at her relaxed in sleep. I knew her accolades and now, after meeting her, I agreed with all of them. I was still surprised that she’d left Florida to work in the small town of Bells Pass. It’s a great community, but it’s nowhere near the caliber of work that she had in Sarasota. Yes, it was the opportunity to set up social services programs from the ground up, but there had to be plenty of opportunities for her in Florida as well. I was definitely burning with curiosity to find out the answers to all my questions.

Then I remembered the look on Hazel’s face when Sandy handed her that emergency contact card. My initial gut reaction that she needed protection sat heavily again. There was no doubt in my mind that when it came to Hazel Cane, she was far more than meets the eye.



A loud moan escaped my lips. I was awake, but didn’t want to be. Being awake meant another day of *rest*. I wanted to work. It had been a week since the accident that had broken

half of my left hand, requiring surgical reconstruction of my ring and pinky finger. A person would think the moan of pain was from that, but that wasn't the case. It was my head that hurt.

I woke up every morning with a massive headache. The only upside was that once I was moving, it tended to fade away. The doctors assured me this was normal, and it would eventually stop, but I didn't have the patience for eventually. I had a new job to do and I couldn't do it with my hand in a cast and my head pounding. Speaking of pounding, it wasn't my head. It was my door.

“Hazel! Are you awake? I've been sending you texts for half an hour.”

Ah, the one and only Irving Wallace, my new neighbor and coworker. It seemed he felt responsible for me now since his dog was the one to find me after the accident. Don't get me wrong, I'm not complaining. It's nice to have a friend and to feel cared about, especially in a town where I knew no one.

I struggled out of bed and sat on the edge, waiting for my head to stop pounding. Once I was on my feet, I glanced down at what I was wearing and immediately grabbed my robe from the end of the bed. There was no way I was answering the door to my extremely attractive colleague wearing boy shorts and an old t-shirt from high school.

The first time I laid eyes on Irving Wallace all I could think was—GQ model. When I made eye contact with him for the first time, though, I knew instantly that he was more than just a pretty face. And it was, pretty that is. He had perfectly coiffed dark hair that highlighted his intense, deep brown eyes that engaged you every time. The smile that beamed from those cupid bow lips warmed you from head to toe, too. He was kind, caring, and considerate without being pushy, which he proved when he waited at the hospital through my surgery to make sure someone was there for me when I woke up. He and Star even returned the following day to help me get home and settled in my new apartment.

What did I expect when I walked into my apartment four days ago? Not this. I figured it would be another cold, barren apartment that I'd sleep in, but not live in. Instead, I walked in to find all my belongings from my car placed carefully in my bedroom, which was fully furnished as promised. It was welcoming the moment you walked in with freshly painted walls, and a newly remodeled open kitchen that flowed into a living room and dining room. Those rooms boasted plush carpet and furnishings that were comfortable and inviting. Irving later explained it was the apartment that they'd used for tours for potential investors. It was small, but lovely, and more than I needed to be happy. As long as I worked at New Beginnings, this would be my apartment. It was right next to Irving's, which was convenient since we'd be working together every day.

After a deep breath in, I grasped the door handle and turned it.

*The man waiting on the other side is your colleague, I reminded myself. He can be nothing more.*

"Irving," I said leaning heavily on the door once it was open. "I'm sorry. I must have slept through my alarm."

"Good morning, Hazel," he said, wearing a smile. "No need to apologize. I was just worried there may be a problem."

Even though we were the only two working here right now, Irving always wore a dress shirt and tie regardless of what was on the agenda for the day. He was a consummate professional as the social worker and director of the community housing program for Bells Pass. When he was taking care of me, he was the consummate friend I needed in the moment.

"Still have a headache?" he asked, his brow in the air.

"Yeah, always when I wake up. I'm finding I can get it to dissipate with a shower and food. Did you need something?"

"No, I just got worried when you didn't show up at our agreed upon time."

I rubbed my forehead with my right hand while splinting my left hand against me. “Again, I’m sorry. Let me throw some clothes on and run a brush through my hair. We were supposed to be working on what again? My short-term memory is a bit lacking.”

His smile lifted his lips and my mood. “You have no lack of short-term memory. I didn’t tell you what we’d be working on.”

I thought back to the conversation we’d had the night before. “Come to think of it, you’re right. What are we working on today? I hope it’s nothing that requires a lot of brain power. Mine isn’t fully charged yet.”

“Unless plowing through a plate of eggs and hotcakes takes a lot of brain power, you should be okay.”

“You made breakfast? I have all this food here from Ivy,” I said stepping back from the door so he could wheel in. The wide doorways allowed him to move around our units easily in his wheelchair. Since this was a former nursing home, that was to be expected. What wasn’t expected was the pushback from the council about making some of the apartments fully accessible for people with disabilities.

“Wow,” he said, chuckling when he looked at the pile of goodies on the table. “I warned you about Ivy, didn’t I?”

“You did,” I agreed, a smile taking shape on my face.

Irving told me that meeting Ivy for the first time was overwhelming, but I didn’t believe him until that moment arrived for me. She was a whirlwind of energy that never seemed to stop. Ivy had left so much food and baked goods that I had to share it with him the last three nights so it didn’t go to waste. She also brought a beautiful handmade quilt from the Bells Pass quilting group. They wanted to officially welcome me to Bells Pass and had added squares on the blanket of all the places I should visit. There was a square for the park, the gazebo, and the Nightingale Diner, just to name a few. I hadn’t made it to any but the park, and didn’t even remember that day. Ivy was so sweet, and her daughter, Lucy, had sat on my lap and stroked my upper arm as though she



could heal the bones with just her touch. She was such a bright light in the world that I couldn't wait to see her again.

"Well," Irving said, breaking into my thoughts. "I received a phone call yesterday from Ivy and was told, and I quote, everyone is dying to meet Hazel! You've got to bring her to the diner for breakfast!" He held up his hands as though it was out of his control.

"She really is wonderful, isn't she?" I asked, lowering myself to a chair.

"Ivy is the reason this town flourishes. Well, her and her team of helpers. She has surrounded herself with some wonderful people, and they all want to meet the mysterious Hazel Cane. Sharing breakfast at the Nightingale Diner will accomplish that goal."

"I don't know," I said, hesitating at the thought. "The last grand entrance I made resulted in a two-hour long surgery to fix my hand." I tried to laugh, so he knew it was a joke, but he probably heard the nervousness in the words.

"I know you had a rough start to your career here as the new recreation and programs director, but people truly are excited to meet you and learn more about you. This project has been a long time coming for them. I know we're behind schedule, but as we get closer to opening this place, the community wants to learn as much as they can, as soon as they can. That includes getting to know the people running it. When I first got here, life came at me fast, and I didn't have surgery in the midst of it, so I understand that you're feeling overwhelmed besides being sore. I will tell you it was so worth it to get to know the wonderful people in this town, though. Does Bells Pass have issues? Of course. Every community does. But this community is proactive, and wants to be part of anything that makes their lives better."

"I know, and that is the only reason we've gotten this far," I agreed and he nodded. "I just realized you don't have Star with you. Where is he?"

"In the apartment. He was sleeping on his bed and I didn't want to disturb him since he'd be working later today. I

figured I could manage to roll next door without his assistance.” He gave me a wink, but I didn’t laugh.

“I wasn’t worried that you were going to need his help. I just wanted to see him!”

Irving’s laughter filled my apartment and it filled me with a sense of acceptance, joy, and safety. It was like he knew I needed all three, even though I had never said the words aloud to him. He just knew.

“You can call him. He’ll come over.”

“Is he dressed?” I asked before I stood and walked to the door.

“Well, look at you picking up the lingo,” he said with a whistle.

“I actually have quite a bit of experience with service dogs,” I informed him. “I used to work with a lot of people who had them, or medical alert dogs, for various reasons.”

He gave himself a forehead smack with the palm of his hand. “Of course, I’m sorry. I forgot that you came from a big city with a varied population. I’m the only one here with a service dog, and my world has become small again. He’s off the clock, so feel free to love him up.”

I rubbed my hands together and grinned. “Star!” I called, my voice excited and not scared, so he didn’t think Irving was in trouble. “Come to Hazel, boy!”

In less than three seconds we heard claws skittering on the floor in the hallway and then a burly ball of fur came running through the doorway. He went to his handler immediately and checked him over, then sat, waiting for a command.

“Go visit!” Irving said with enthusiasm, and the dog immediately zipped over to me and stuck his nose under my chin after I sat on the comfy chair by the door.

“Good morning, Star,” I cooed, rubbing his ears while he huffed into my neck. He worked himself between my knees and let me rub him down while he moaned his happiness.

“You two are something else,” Irving said from across the room. “It’s embarrassing. Like, is he even my dog anymore?”

“I’ll let you borrow him,” I said, tongue in cheek as I kissed the top of Star’s head. “Who’s a good boy?” He gave one bark, which had us both laughing instantly. “That’s right, Star is,” I said, rubbing his neck. “But Hazel has to get going. Your boss has orders we must follow. Do you like eggs and hotcakes?”

“He loves them, but he won’t be having any today, right, Star?” Irving lowered his brow and looked down his nose at the dog who flung his head toward the door to ignore him.

I bit back a snort and patted his head. “I’ll save you some of mine for when you’re not working, Star.”

“Oh, great, so now he’s got a dealer, too. Just what I need,” Irving said with a playful eye roll. “Star. Return.” The dog gave me one last exasperated look and then trotted over to his owner and sat. “I’ll give you thirty to shower and get ready but then we’re going to breakfast. Capisce?”

“Got it,” I agreed as he rolled out the door and back to his apartment.

I closed the door and leaned against it, still wearing a smile until my gaze landed on the pile of goodies on the table. Was I ready to meet the entire town in one fell swoop? The answer was no. Not as poorly as I felt, but I couldn’t put it off any longer. I was here to do a job and part of that job was getting to know the people of Bells Pass. I wanted to hear about the kinds of services they’d like to see available within the community we’re building, and after what happened in Sarasota, I needed a community now more than ever.

I pushed off the door and headed to the shower, knowing I’d kept the town waiting long enough. My purse started to ring and an exaggerated groan fell from my lips. I doubled back and pulled the flip phone out of my purse. As low tech as it was, I didn’t need the caller ID on the front to tell me who it was. Only one person had this number.

“Hazel, so nice to hear your voice.”

“Cliff? Why are you calling me? Everything is fine and I haven’t missed my usual check-in date. It’s only been five days.”

“While that may be true, the information I have doesn’t jive with everything being fine. I’d love to hear what’s happened since you arrived in Bells Pass. How’s the hand?”

I lowered myself to a chair. “You have someone watching me?”

“No, but that doesn’t mean I’m not doing my due diligence.”

All I could do now was spin this in the best possible light.

“My hand is healing,” I answered, glancing down at the splint. “Just a little mishap.”

“Run it down for me.”

“There’s nothing to run down,” I replied, putting it in air quotes even if he couldn’t see them. “I fell at the park and the good people of Bells Pass helped me out.”

An exasperated sigh filled the line. “Hazel, you’re a terrible liar. Tell me the truth.”

“Fine,” I said with an equally long sigh of frustration. “I don’t remember what happened and that’s the truth. I remember leaving Saginaw after I talked to you and then woke up in the hospital. They found me on the grass in the park and my car in the lot.”

“Which means someone hit you, whether accidentally or on purpose.”

“Or I had a seizure or low blood sugar,” I retorted.

“Have you had either of those since?”

“No, but—”

“No buts, Hazel. We talked about this!”

“I swear that I’m not in any danger, Cliff. I’m following the rules and nothing has happened since the incident in the

park. I truly believe this was an accident and unrelated to anything in Sarasota. The police are looking into it.”

“You’re following all the rules?”

“Absolutely,” I lied, because what he didn’t know wouldn’t kill him. Then again, it might kill me.

“I’m moving our check-ins to weekly in light of this.”

“Cliff—”

“Don’t push me, Hazel, or I’ll make it daily.”

“Fine,” I answered through gritted teeth, “but I don’t like being watched, so keep your goons in Florida.”

“My goons,” he said in a way she could picture his eyes rolling, “will remain out of your sight as long as you don’t miss the deadlines.”

“I can’t ask for more than that.”

“Good, now, let me tell you what I know.”

“Have things changed?”

“No, not regarding the investigation or scheduling, but some of the key players are missing.”

“Missing?” I asked as my legs began to tremble. I was glad I was sitting down. “Missing how?”

“Hard to trace kind of missing. He’s likely underground somewhere, so no need to worry, but I’m putting it out there. We’re looking for him.”

“Do I need to worry?”

“Not yet, but that’s why we’re keeping you on a tight leash and have people nearby to help you if need be.”

“January is a long way off, Cliff,” I said, glancing at the calendar that still said September.

“As you know, Dr. Felding was a white-collar criminal, not a violent one. Do I think he’s coming your way? No. I think he’s headed for a country without extradition, but that’s our problem, not yours.”

“It’s my problem if he comes for me first,” I answered between gritted teeth.

“He’d have to work hard to find you and as you know, he doesn’t like to work. Relax, follow our guidelines and you’ll be just fine.”

“Heard and understood,” I said, still unsure but knowing there was nothing I could do about it. “Our time starts over now?”

“Yes, a week from today, I’d better see your number on my caller ID and earlier if there’s a problem. SOS if there’s an emergency, such as being knocked unconscious and breaking your hand.”

I could almost hear his eye roll, but I didn’t care. I was technically following his guidelines. No crime had been committed to my knowledge. It was nothing more than an unfortunate accident.

“Noted. Talk soon, Cliff,” I said, before I closed the phone and lowered it to the table.

Felding was gone, which meant one of two things: this was almost over or it was just getting started.

## Chapter Three

Thankfully, by the time we arrived at the diner, the breakfast crowd had dispersed and the lunch crowd hadn't arrived yet. Hazel pulled the door open and held it for Star to pull me through the opening. I was used to people having to open the door for me, but it was frustrating when the kit to make doors accessible was less than a thousand dollars and DIY to install.

I rolled forward and waited for her to close the door behind me. "Where would you like to sit?" I asked, motioning her down near me so I could whisper. "I'd suggest the back of the diner. You'll be less noticeable to everyone who comes through the door."

Her laughter followed her as she stood up again. "That works for me. Less sun right now wouldn't be bad for my head either."

"Let's do booth six then," I agreed, urging Star forward and stopping by the booth at the back that had no windows. I matched the chair up to the booth seat, locked the wheels, released Star's leash, and prepared to transfer. When I swung my legs over the hangers on the chair, Star walked under them for support until I was on the seat and comfortable.

"Rest time, Star," I said, and the dog lay down near my feet.

Hazel was shaking her head when I glanced up from the menu. "What?" I asked. "Do you need to leave?"

"No," she answered as she leaned forward on the table. "I'm always so in awe of what Star does to help you."

"He's a good boy," I agreed with a smile. "On occasion he has to be my footstool if my feet can't touch the floor. If there's no brace for my feet, I'll slide right out of the seat."

"Why don't you just stay in your chair? It would roll under this booth," she said, checking to see where the table leg was."

“It sure would,” I agreed but bit back the eye roll. “That said, it looks rather unprofessional to eat like this—” I brought my elbows up to my ears and imitated eating.

Her frown told me the visual was all she needed to understand. “You’re right. The table height is wrong. Man, people really need to do better.”

“I don’t say anything. Ivy is too sweet and it would bother her to know it’s a problem.”

“But you can’t make a change if you don’t say something, Irving,” she scolded.

I lowered a brow at her. “I’m aware, but I’ve been fighting this fight for twenty-five years. There are times when you have to speak up immediately. Then there are times when you can wait for people to see the issues on their own and then step in to help them facilitate the change when they ask.”

Hazel leaned back on the seat and eyed me. “You’re playing good cop. You’d rather give the advice when asked than when unsolicited and unwelcome.”

I pointed at her with a wink. “Now you’re catching on. I’ve learned that trying to shove the ADA down people’s throats doesn’t get you very far. Showing up and letting them see the struggle a few times is the only thing that shifts their mindset.”

“I’ll remember that. Thanks for making me think outside the box on it. I’m not disabled, so it’s easy for me to say you should do XYZ but harder for me to see the reason why you don’t.”

“You’re welcome. Now then, whatcha having? There isn’t a thing on the menu that isn’t good.”

“I’m torn between hotcakes and sausage, or eggnog French toast.”

“All three,” I said with a head nod. “We’ll share.”

“Irving and Hazel!” Ivy called as she ran through the swinging door. “I didn’t know you were here.” When she



came to a stop in front of us, she was all eyes on Hazel. “How are you feeling?”

“Better,” Hazel assured her. “My mind is a bit fuzzy sometimes but my hand doesn’t hurt as much now, so it’s just a matter of time until it heals.”

“I’m glad to hear that, Hazel. Everyone has been so worried. We’ll get you back to feeling one hundred percent with good food and friends. In the meantime, we’ll do the heavy lifting until you can again.” She glanced at me with a mischievous grin that made it clear I’d better watch myself around Ivy Lund.

“I still have so much food at my apartment from your last delivery,” Hazel assured her quickly. “But I know it’s time to meet the people of Bells Pass as I’m sure they’re curious about the unconscious woman from the park.”

“You certainly did make an entrance,” Ivy said with a wink. Star chose that moment to whine from under the table. Ivy stoically didn’t speak to him, though I could tell she wanted to.

“Star, go visiting,” I commanded.

The dog wormed himself out from under the table, tail thumping on the floor as Ivy loved him up.

“Oh, my sweet Star,” she cooed. “You work so hard. You need some breakfast too. What can I get you to eat, sweet baby boy?”

My giant German shepherd was lying on his back and smiling at the woman giving him a belly rub.

“Ivy, you’re going to make my dog fat.”

“I’ll do no such thing! Besides, he’s a working dog and wears off everything he eats!”

I glanced at Hazel, who was currently biting her lip to keep from laughing. “Okay, fine, Star will have a scrambled egg with a slice of bacon. Hazel and I will share an order of hotcakes, sausage, and eggnog French toast. Star, return,” I

ordered the dog, who slunk back under the table with one final longing glance at Ivy.

Ivy clapped with excitement. "Perfect. Coffee?"

"I'll have tea," Hazel said.

"Tea? We make great coffee," Ivy said, her voice singing.

"I'll have to take your word for it," Hazel replied. "I'm allergic."

Ivy waved her hand in the air as she took a step back. "Allergic? Like to coffee?"

"Yep," Hazel said with a chuckle. She glanced at me. "I love telling people I'm allergic to coffee. I get that reaction every time."

"I didn't even know it was possible," I replied, hoping I didn't have the same look on my face as Ivy did.

Hazel shrugged. "You can be allergic to anything. Coffee just happens to be a rare one. Unfortunately for me, I get the whole can't breathe, face swells up, lips turn blue look with it."

"We don't want that!" Ivy said, waving her hands. "Is it okay for Irving to have it near you?"

"Oh, yeah, that's fine," she said, brushing her hand at my empty coffee cup. "It's only if I get it in my mouth."

"A coffee and a tea it is, then. I'll put your tea in a disposable cup for you, just to be sure that there isn't residue on a cup or something," Ivy told her.

"That's so thoughtful," Hazel said, a smile on her beautiful face. "Most people don't think about things like that." Her gaze drifted to mine for a second and I noticed the twinkle in hers.

"I would never want anyone to get hurt on my watch," Ivy answered before she turned to me. "Is it okay if I move your chair closer to the wall? It will make more room for the servers."

I took a deep breath so I didn't lose my patience. "I'd prefer if you left it there. It's my legs, and I don't think you'd want to store your legs somewhere that you can't reach them."

Ivy was silent for a moment before she tipped her head. "I never thought of it that way. It was rude of me to suggest. I apologize."

"No apology needed," I assured her with a smile. "Understanding other people's disabilities is a learning process, and you're already way ahead of the curve by employing several people with disabilities."

"Everyone deserves to have a job that fulfills them. I'm lucky to have Becca, Mel, Lance, and Brittany. I'll put your order in and get your drinks. Fair warning. The girl gang should be here any moment."

I chuckled and nodded at Hazel. "I prepared her ahead of time. We're ready when they swoop in."

"You do know them well and you've only been here a year—"

The diner's door whooshed open and laughter spilled into the room. From my vantage point, I saw the girl gang head inside, all with their mini-mes attached to their hips as they headed straight for us. Ivy scurried away, likely because she had sent out an alert on her phone the moment we walked into the diner.

I met Hazel's gaze. "Deep breath," I said, taking one in, and she followed. "Here we go."

"Well, hello, dear," came a voice from the group. I hadn't even seen Mrs. Violet in the gaggle of giggles, but there she was, now leading the pack.

"Hi, Mrs. Violet," I said with a wave.

She came to a stop by the booth and gasped when she saw Hazel. "Miss Cane! I'm so happy you're out and about today. Such a terrible thing that happened. On behalf of all of Bells Pass, accept our apology for such a rude and disrespectful welcome to our lovely town. Oh, I'm Audrey Violet," she said, patting Hazel's good hand. "I'm kind of like

the grandma ringleader of this group. I get to hang out with the cool kids and play with their babies.” She gave a wink as everyone else crowded in to introduce themselves.

I leaned back in the booth with a smile on my face as I watched Hazel’s eyes dart from person to person while they asked question after question. I’d give them a few more minutes and then jump in to save her, but it was better to experience the beauty and love of Bells Pass in all its glory without interruption the first time. Hazel would come to understand that despite her initial introduction to the town, she’d made the right choice in taking the job here.

As I watched her engage with everyone, answer questions, and accept hugs, I realized it was Mayor Tottle who had made the right choice. She was going to change Bells Pass for the better and I couldn’t wait to be part of it with her.



“That was...wow,” Hazel said with laughter as we left the diner. “I don’t know how to describe what just happened.”

“You just met the girl gang.” My wink was playful and garnered the response I wanted—laughter.

“The girl gang *and* Mrs. Violet. Don’t forget her.”

“Trust me. It’s impossible to forget Audrey Violet. She’s an honorary member of every girl gang in Bells Pass. Do you feel officially welcomed?”

“So much so my head hurts again.”

I brought my chair to a halt, and Star stopped at my side. “I’m sorry. I should have thought of that. Let’s go back to the center. No sense making it worse.”

She shook her head a bit before she glanced over at me. “No, I’d like to go to the park. I want to see if anything jogs my memory when I get there. Besides, I probably need fresh air more than anything. I’m used to living in Florida where I’m outside more than I’m inside.”

“Forward,” I said to Star as I pushed my wheels. “We’ll go for a bit, but if you start to get tired or sore, we’ll head back home so you can rest. The doctor said it could be—”

“Up to a month before I stop getting headaches,” she finished for me. “Yes, Dr. Wallace.”

My laughter traveled up the street ahead of us. “I just want you to take care of yourself. I don’t want what happened to put a bad taste in your mouth about Bells Pass.”

“Oh no,” she gasped. “If anything, it did the exact opposite. It made me realize how wonderful this town is in a real and fast way.”

“Real and fast way?”

“No one knew who I was, but my life was on the line, and they jumped into action without a thought about anything other than helping me. They didn’t worry about who I was, if I could afford to pay for my care, if I was a good person, or anything else. That’s how I describe real in a situation like this. It was also fast because I met everyone much faster than I would have working at New Beginnings and slowly integrating into the town. Does that make sense?”

“It does,” I agreed after she finished. “I hadn’t thought of it that way, but you’re right. The community always rallies around anyone who needs them, and they did that, but once they realized who you were, they wanted to be sure you didn’t leave out of fear that the town was bad. It’s not. It’s a wonderful community to live in compared to other places I’ve worked.”

“I’ve been here five days, and I couldn’t agree more. I’m excited to see the park for real this time. Everyone talks about the gazebo with so much love.”

“That’s for sure,” I agreed. “It’s wonderful year-round, but from what I hear, it does have a legend.”

“A legend of the gazebo?”

“Yep,” I said, popping the P. “As the legend goes, the gazebo picks a Christmas couple each year. If that couple

kisses under the roof of the gazebo while the Bells Pass Christmas tree is lit, they'll be married by the next Christmas."

"That's quite a story," she said, chuckling as we turned right into the park's parking lot.

"Legend," I reminded her. "You don't want to call it a story in front of Ivy Lund. You'll get an earful!"

She giggled, and the sound was melodic and joyful on a beautiful fall day. It reminded me of bells chiming at Christmastime. Hazel Cane had a way about her that immediately put you at ease and made you want to stay in her atmosphere. I didn't know her past, but it was easy to see that she'd already seen a lot in life. She saw people and understood that everyone's backgrounds were different and that impacts who they are present day. Something told me that was true even for herself.

"Of course, I will never be one half of the Christmas couple," I said as we started up the path toward the gazebo.

"Never say never, Irving."

"Well, unless they somehow make it accessible, I'm safe to use never," I explained. "It was so embarrassing the last time I was under that gazebo roof that I assure you, I'll never be again."

"What happened?" she asked as the sun shone down on our backs, warm and relaxing. "You'll have to forgive me. I haven't seen the gazebo, so I don't know how it's set up."

"It's up off the ground with a full AV room under it," I explained. "There are stairs that lead to the entrance, but there's no ramp. When Mayor Tottle introduced me last year during the tree lighting ceremony, I had to be in the gazebo, so he got two guys to carry me and another guy to carry my chair up the stairs."

"I'm sorry," she said with a frown. It was easy to notice her joy for the day had dissipated. "There is so much in life that isn't accessible."

"You're not kidding. There have been many situations where I've passed on participating to avoid that type of

manhandling, but that was one time I didn't have a choice. I hoped they would add a ramp after seeing how inaccessible it was. Needless to say, my hopes were dashed at the last board meeting when they tabled it."

"Wait." She stopped and turned to me. "You were there and they still tabled it?"

"Star, wait," I commanded, and he stopped walking. "The concept was easy, but they kept getting hung up on the aesthetics."

"What was the concept?"

"Come on, and I'll show you," I said, motioning her and Star forward.

We rolled up the path another hundred feet before the structure appeared.

"Oh, wow," she sighed. "It's gorgeous. How old did you say it was?"

"It was built in the 1930s but has been lovingly cared for ever since."

"That's obvious," she agreed when we stopped before it. "That tree is beyond huge. Is that the one they light up?"

"You guessed it. I've only seen it lit up once, but I look forward to it this year. From what Becca tells me..." I paused when recognition didn't cross her face. "The little one with the prosthesis and the baby bump."

"Oh! Yes, she's delightful. I put my foot in my mouth with her and didn't realize it. Hope she doesn't hold it against me."

"You didn't know she had PTSD or that cameras set it off. Asking for a selfie isn't unusual these days. I was proud of her for reacting calmly and being able to ask you to put the camera away, even if she shook while she did it. From what I hear, before she met Cameron, she would have run. Cameron helped her get the help she needed to live a more comfortable life."

“I like how you didn’t say a better life,” she responded as she lowered herself to one of the gazebo steps.

My shrug was slow but purposeful. “When you’re in my position, you understand the difference. Becca told me that a few years ago, when she and Cameron were the gazebo’s Christmas couple, the tree had been damaged by a storm. Cameron is an arborist and made a graft for the tree until it healed. As you can see, he did a bang-up job with it. The tree is stronger than ever, and I swear it’s grown since I was here last time. Could just be that I’m down here instead of up there,” I said, pointing at the gazebo floor.

“That would do it,” she agreed with a smile. “I can just picture all the picnics, family reunions, and weddings this gazebo has seen.”

“Probably thousands,” I agreed. “That’s why I wanted it to be more accessible for everyone, but the board feels it’s too much of an undertaking.”

“What do you think?”

“I think they’re worried that a ramp will distract from the beauty of the building.”

“It could be done tastefully, though.”

“Agreed. My suggestion was to build a two-tiered ramp at the back. The landing would meet the gazebo with a break in the railing, which wouldn’t be noticeable from the front. A paved path from here to the back could be run through the grass to make the ramp accessible, and the problem would be solved.”

“It would be,” she agreed. “A ramp like that wouldn’t distract from the beauty of the front of the gazebo but allow for a more gradually graded ramp at the back for safety.”

I motioned at her as if to say, exactly. “It’ll have to wait until enough board members think it’s worthwhile.”

“No,” Hazel said, defiantly crossing her arms. When she did that, I noticed her chin jutting out in a perfect little peak. “Legally, they need to do it now. They’re already not in compliance with the ADA; now that it’s been brought to their



attention, they can't claim ignorance. Considering why they hired us; I'm putting it back on the agenda this evening."

"No, Hazel, please," I said, reaching out toward her to calm her. "Let's not start problems. We have enough on our plate as it is. Besides, it's too late to add it to the agenda for tonight."

"There's a public comments time for a reason, and I have no problem using it for this reason."

I blew out a breath of frustration and then squared my shoulders. "I love that you want to fight for the cause, but doing it wrong will only have them digging their heels in harder. I have firsthand experience with that. I'm not against bringing it up again, but I'm all for doing it measuredly."

"Measured manner sounds a little too political for my tastes, Irving."

"Not political," I assured her. "Just smart. I've researched designs and products that work well for this application. Let's concentrate on research and some community polling. Once we have a plan to back up with facts, then we take it to the board."

Her lips wiggled around as she considered my plan. "That's going to take time, Irving."

"There's no rush at this point since they can't start paving a path and building a ramp this close to winter. Even if it's approved next month, we can't beat Mother Nature. Once we have our information ready, we'll approach the city works committee during their meeting. I happen to know someone on that committee."

"City works is who would build the ramp?" she asked, scooting down a stair toward me.

"Yes. Our best bet is to present the plan to them. The funds will come from their park budget, so if they approve it, then it goes to the board for a rubber stamp of approval. It would look bad if the board didn't approve it after the people who will do the work, and pay for it, give it the green light."

“Is the person you know on the city works committee influential?”

I shrugged nonchalantly. “His name is Shepard Lund.” I gave her a wink, and she tossed her head back and laughed. Her long red hair slid down her back and brushed against the wooden steps as she faced the heavens. When the sun shone down on her face, it made her freckles pop and her blue eyes shine.

“Okay, okay,” she said, meeting my gaze. “We’ll do it your way on our off time?”

“Works for me. It’s not like I have a raging social life these days.”

“Same,” she said with a smirk. “I’ll look for some grants that we can apply for to get the funding. That would make it even harder for the board to deny it.”

“The ramp won’t cost much, Hazel. They can easily budget it out by next spring.”

She pointed at me while she licked her lips. “You’re right, but if we apply for and win a grant to make accessibility improvements, the money can be used to update sidewalks, park paths, buildings, and crosswalks at stoplights. Some even allow businesses to apply for a portion of the grant to bring their buildings under ADA compliance.”

“Don’t even mess with me about that,” I said, shaking my head.

“I’m not. The grants are real. People don’t know the money is out there or how to access it.” She stood and walked back to my chair. “I’ve always been a champion of the underdog, Irving Wallace, and I’m a dog with a bone when someone I care about is wronged,” she glanced at my dog standing at attention. “No offense, Star.” I couldn’t help but smile at how she was always all in, no matter what she was doing. “We will help this little town see that change isn’t bad. It can bring about wonderful things for its people. You with me?”

“I wouldn’t be anywhere else, Hazel Cane,” I said with a smile and a little bit of hope in my heart that there were real changemakers in the world. “Every little bit we do to improve Bells Pass will have a ripple effect for years to come.”

“I vote we get started now. No time like the present, considering the board is still tying our hands with New Beginnings.”

“Let’s head home,” I said, taking her good hand in mine for a moment before I turned my chair. “Star, forward.”

The path was straight, so I didn’t have to push. She slipped her hand back in mine as we moved down the path, and I noticed hers was soft, warm, and tender—three words that could easily be applied to who she was.

*When someone I care about is wronged.*

That sentence kept coming back to me as we made our way home. She’d only been in Bells Pass for a few days and already felt comfortable saying she cared about me. Logically, I knew she didn’t mean it romantically, but knowing someone cared enough to go to war with me felt terrific. More than that, it felt good to know that someone cared. It had been years since I could say I had a real friend I could turn to in good times and bad. Spending time with Hazel told me that dry spell had ended. We both needed a friend, and I could see us being best friends effortlessly. When we arrived back at New Beginnings and she gave my chair a little boost over the new threshold into the building, my heart said I could only be so lucky.

# Chapter Four

November

“It’s beginning to look a lot like Christmas,” sang a voice, and I groaned.

“Not again, Star,” I sighed, shutting down my computer and tucking it into my bag. “Does she ever stop singing?” Star turned his head right and then left before he barked once. “I know you like Hazel. You make it quite obvious every time you see her. Always making those googly eyes at her like your job as a service dog isn’t fulfilling enough for you.”

His only answer was a huff. He huffed at me! I’ll show him.

“Star. Get dressed.”

After throwing me an evil eye, he stood and walked over to me so I could fit his vest and prepare him for our outing. Then he helped get the bag on the back of the chair, so I had everything I’d need for work.

“Forward, door,” I said, and he marched to the door and hit the button, waiting for it to open. I rolled through, and he followed behind me as we moved into the main room of the recreation center.

Hazel was dancing around the open space with a box of tree ornaments in one hand and a candy cane in the other.

“Christmas carols? Halloween was just yesterday.”

Hazel set the box of ornaments on a table and turned toward me. “Let me guess. You went as the Grinch?”

“Ha-ha,” I said, sticking my tongue out like a third grader. “I know you love Christmas, but there’s still one holiday before it. Slow your roll.”

She motioned around my face with her pointy candy cane. “Whenever you give me that look, it sends me back to third grade when Mr. Hightower would look down his nose at me for singing in class.”

“Maybe Mr. Hightower had a point?”

“I like to sing. What can I say?” She finished the question with a shrug to tell me it was rhetorical. Then she popped the candy cane back in and let it hang out her lip like a cigarette.

“There’s nothing wrong with singing appropriate songs during the appropriate times of the year.”

“Hmmm, appropriate songs for the time of the year.” She stood and tapped her chin. “Sorry, can’t think of any. I’m pretty sure there isn’t a Thanksgiving song. You just want me to stop singing.”

“What’s all of this?” I asked, motioning at the table rather than reply. “Are you already collecting decorations?”

“Is my name Hazel Cane?” she asked, planting her hand on her hip.

“I’m not sure. I thought it was Candy Cane.”

She snickered, and a smile nearly broke free on her lips. “I do love a good candy cane. Thank goodness Mrs. Beesweasel stocks them year-round. I’m so happy I don’t have to order them anymore.”

“You ordered candy canes? Don’t you get tired of peppermint?”

“There are other flavors of candy canes, you know. Roll into the twenty-first century, Irving.”

“You can’t call those fruity things you eat a candy cane. They’re just a sucker in the shape of a J.”

“You say sucker. I say candy cane. Either way, they’re yummy. You should try one someday. You never know. You might like it.”

“Oh, I’m sure they’re good, but I’ve worked too hard on this body to feed it processed sugar.” I glanced down at myself momentarily and then back up at her. “Okay, so I’ve worked hard for my upper body to look this good. Leg days, for me, have a whole different meaning.”

While she bit her lip to keep from laughing, I wondered if my humor sometimes made her uncomfortable. She often didn't know how to respond or wanted to laugh but held back. I'd been in a wheelchair for the last twenty-five years and there was no way I would stop cracking jokes about it now, so she'd have to learn to give me the same sass right back. "You can laugh," I said, my gaze intent on her lips. "It's not rude if I'm the one who makes the joke."

"I was just thinking that sometimes I'm unsure if you're joking."

"Must be my deadpan delivery. I'll work on that next time. Anyway, I stopped in to see if you wanted to have lunch and review tonight's committee meeting information. I want to be sure we're both on the same page about everything."

"Lunch sounds great, thanks! In your office?"

"If by my office, you mean The Nightingale Diner, then yes, my office."

She grinned and rubbed her hands together. "I like the way you think, Irving. Are you walking or driving?" I raised a brow, and she paused for a moment. "I'm sorry. I did it again." She hung her head and shook it. When she lifted her head, I saw real shame in her eyes.

"You did, but I think it's funny. Remember, I've been in a chair all my life. I've used the same jokes myself dozens of times. If it helps, you can pretend that the wheels have little feet on them. Ten on each side, all wearing tiny Converse tennis."

Her laughter finally rang free. "Great, now I have an image of a squashed centipede stuck to your tire."

"What can I say? I'm here for you," I teased as she gathered her things from the table. "I just thought it would be nice to get some fresh air. Besides, it won't be long and I'll have to drive, so I might as well take advantage of the nice weather."

"I suppose winter for you is a wet, arduous adventure here?" she asked while she jogged to a closet and pulled out

her purse. Then she shut down the lights. “I’ve lived in Florida my entire life, so this will be my first winter.”

“Wet and arduous is an understatement,” I agreed while we put on our coats. Star stood and waited for a command while I struggled with my coat. “If the sidewalks are plowed, the access ramps to cross the street aren’t, or they’re filled with giant chunks of ice from the plows.” I finally got the coat to cooperate and got it up over my shoulders. “Star, coat.”

Star used the back of my chair as a brace for his paws, then used his nose to secure the Velcro on the back of the coat. I tucked it around my legs and behind the wheel guards to keep it clean.

“That’s a cool coat,” Hazel said as I rolled toward the doors. “I’ve never seen one with the back cut out.”

“It’s the most common coat design in adaptive clothing. Imagine sitting in a big bulky coat in a chair like this.”

“It would get uncomfortable quickly. That chair fits you like a glove as it is. I can’t imagine having all that fluff around you,” she agreed, as I rolled into the hallway. “The Velcro is a cool feature.”

“It’s for people with limited mobility of their arms, which I don’t have, but it’s still handy. I have Star close the Velcro to add to his skills if something happens to my hands.”

She held up her left hand where the last two fingers had a kink in them. “It could happen at any time, I suppose, and he is a service dog, after all,” she said, walking beside me on the left while Star walked on my right. “I could see where it would be important to think ahead.”

“I’m always thinking ahead in every aspect of my life. In Bells Pass, besides the grocery store, there aren’t any shops I can get in and out of without hurting myself. I learned a long time ago it’s not worth damaging my hands or my chair in an attempt to do so. If I can’t order something to be delivered, I drive to Saginaw to shop.”

“I’m sure anyone here would be happy to help you, Irving. I’d happily pick up anything you need.”

“I know,” he agreed. “I appreciate that, but I don’t want you or Ivy picking out my underwear.”

She held up her hands by her chest and waved them. “Hey, you’re on your own with that one!”

My laughter filled the air as we rolled toward The Nightingale Diner. “Now you see my point!”

“I do,” she agreed with a head nod. “The time I’ve spent with you since September has shown me that this town has a long way to go if they truly want it to be inclusive.”

“All the more reason that we dig in and do our part,” I answered, nodding at her bag. “That starts tonight.”

“Operation Gazebo begins now,” she said while laughing.

“More like it begins once I have a plate of sweet potato nachos in front of me.”

“Oh, are they on the menu again?” she asked excitedly.

“Is it Thursday?” She nodded, and I tipped my head with a smile. “Then they’re on the menu. Hopefully, it’s not too busy. That way, we can get the booth in the back.”

She glanced at her watch. “It’s already one, so we’re probably fine. I don’t know how much work we’ll get done there, though.”

“Let’s face it. We aren’t going there to work. We’re going there for nachos,” I said, laughing while she nodded eagerly. “Besides, there’s a better place to work on this, so we’ll head there when we’re done eating.”

“Care to share?” she asked with a brow raised in the air.

“Nope, but you’ll love it,” I promised with a wink.



The walk to the diner was always short but refreshing. Growing up in Florida, I had never seen a diner quite like The Nightingale. In the shape of an old train car, it was the gathering place for all Bells Passers. At any given time of the



day, you could walk into the diner and recognize at least one person enjoying a meal out. Some might say that was too small-town living, but I'm not one of those people. I grew up where you never saw the same face twice, and everyone was only out for themselves. Being part of a community where people liked each other was refreshing.

Don't get me wrong. Bells Pass has plenty of problems. All small towns do, but lacking community interaction was not one of them. That was why I was surprised by how inaccessible the town truly is. It probably shouldn't have surprised me, considering the buildings were built before the ADA even existed, but the lack of effort to be inclusive by everyone did surprise me. It wouldn't take much to make things easier for Irving or anyone who wanted to frequent their establishment.

Lost in thought, I almost tripped on Star when they stopped, and I didn't. "Oh, sorry, Star," I said, barely missing his paw with my shoe. "Let me get the door."

"No need," Irving said, his voice holding enough shock that I swung my attention to the front of the building where an accessible door plate was fixed to the exterior wall near the door.

"Well, look at that," I said, my heart filling with pride and gratitude to Ivy for stepping up and setting an example. "I think you ought to be the one to push it."

We both moved out of the way of the door and he hit the button. When it swung open, even Star looked startled by the change of routine. I waited for Irving to roll through the door and followed him in. Ivy was standing at the counter but turned when she heard the bell ring.

"Irving!" she exclaimed, running around the counter to hug him. "I was hoping you'd be in today for the nachos." She stood back up and hugged me next. "Hi, Hazel. Glad you guys stopped in."

"Me too," Irving said, pointing behind him at the door. "That's new."

Ivy giddily clapped her hands. “Shep installed it last night. I had no idea how inexpensive they are now!” She dragged the word *now* out long enough that she had to take a breath before she finished speaking. “I asked Cameron if there was money in the grant fund to install accessible door openers on all our buildings. When he told me how inexpensive they are, and how easy they are to install, I couldn’t order them fast enough. Hopefully, Shep and Mason can install the one on the Bells Pass Bakery door tonight.”

“That’s wonderful, Ivy,” I said, squeezing her shoulder.

“I can’t express my appreciation enough,” Irving said, patting Star on the head when he sat beside him. “I won’t lie. It isn’t easy moving about the community. There isn’t much accessible, but with food as good as yours, I’m always willing to figure out a way.”

Ivy put a hand on her hip and shook her head. “Well, you shouldn’t have had to. That’s on me. I didn’t realize how simple it would be to retrofit the restaurant to make it more accessible. When you compared your chair to your legs, I realized I needed to do better. I wouldn’t want to be separated from my legs while eating dinner!” We all laughed because how could you not? The image alone was enough to make you giggle.

“To be honest, the biggest reason I want the chair next to me is that I often get tired of holding myself up on the seat. I need to get back into the chair to have support for my legs and back.”

Irving explained his reasoning quickly and efficiently without making people feel bad about the situation. There were a lot of people who could take lessons from him on how to problem solve without causing more problems.

“That makes sense,” Ivy agreed. “I should have thought of it myself.”

“Cut yourself some slack, Ivy,” Irving said. “You’ll never think of all the different needs someone might have, and that’s not your job.”

“You’re right, but it is my job to make sure my patrons can come in and enjoy a hot meal with a friend. So, follow me.”

Ivy turned and walked toward the back of the diner. I shrugged and motioned for him to go ahead. When we got to the back, Ivy pointed at booth six. “I hope you enjoy your meal.”

“Ivy!” Irving exclaimed as he rolled his chair under the newly lowered table. “This is perfect.”

“It took some time to get the lowered booth seats in,” she explained, motioning at the two new booth cushions.

I slid into one and set my bag down. “And it’s still comfortable for me.”

Ivy gave me a finger gun. “Exactly. Everyone is welcome at The Nightingale Diner, and I want everyone to be comfortable. In fact,” she held up a finger and dashed between the swinging doors. She wasn’t even gone long enough for me to say a word to Irving before she returned with a contraption in one hand. She lowered it to the ground next to Irving’s chair and pointed at it. “Even our furry friends should be comfortable. That will at least keep him up off the floor in the winter when it’s cold and wet.”

“Ivy,” Irving whispered, clearly touched that she would not only adapt the restaurant but also think of Star. “This is too much. You are the very best of Bells Pass. I hope people know that.”

“Oh, stop,” she said, brushing her hand at him. “I’m just trying to set the example of how to be a decent human being for my kids.”

“Kids?” Irving asked with a brow in the air.

“We’re thinking about it,” she said with a wink. “In the meantime, the rest of the booths will be replaced by Thanksgiving.”

“Star, rest,” Irving said, pointing at the new bed, and Star happily jumped up and settled down.

“Rest of the booths?” I asked with confusion. “What’s wrong with the rest of the booths?”

“They’re not accessible,” Ivy answered, as though I had just asked a stupid question.

“Ivy, all the booths don’t have to be accessible,” Irving clarified. “Your restaurant is small enough that one accessible table meets the ADA requirements.”

“Maybe it meets the ADA requirements, but it doesn’t meet the Ivy Lund requirements. These booths are ready to be replaced. We do that every five years anyway, and now that I know how easy it is to make them accessible, they will all be that way. I can’t have just one table accessible. If someone else is sitting at it when you or someone else comes in who needs it, you end up waiting. You shouldn’t have to wait for a table, and moving people in the middle of a meal complicates things. If all of the booths are accessible, that will streamline everything. Since I can’t make the counter seating accessible, hopefully, no one will report me to the ADA if the rest of the seating is.”

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “No one can report you. Well, they can, but your building was grandfathered in, so you don’t have to follow the rules that new builders do. You can only do so much retrofitting with an old building, and that’s understandable.”

“And what you’ve done here is above and beyond,” Irving said. “I will sing your praises at the committee and board meeting, Ivy Lund. Others need to follow suit.”

“Please don’t,” she said, folding her hands in the prayer pose. “I’m embarrassed it took me so long to figure out I could do it, and I don’t want anyone to know how lame I am for not doing it sooner. I mean, you’ve been in town for a year!” she exclaimed, shaking her head. “It’s shameful.”

“It’s not,” Irving said, taking her hand. “It’s a learning process for all of us. I’m confident that had you hired a person who uses a wheelchair, you would have made the changes immediately. That’s who you are. Obviously, you’ve been putting this in place for a few months. Don’t beat yourself up.

Accept my thanks and tell other business owners how easy it was to make these few changes. Maybe they'll follow suit."

"Oh, don't worry. I plan to do that at the next community business meeting. There is one thing I haven't figured out how to fix, though."

"What's that?" I asked, leaning forward on the table. "We'll help anyway we can."

"Don't think there's much you can do. It's the restrooms. They're completely non-compliant. Unless I knock out half the kitchen and the back of the restaurant, there's no way to fix it."

Irving held up his hand. "Again, there's not much you can do with a building this age, Ivy. It is what it is. Don't stress about it. They didn't make wide doors back then. I'll be honest with you, there are a lot of newer, bigger businesses that do an abysmal job with accessibility. I'll make sure to go potty before I leave home."

Her laughter filled the diner again and made me smile. Ivy Lund deserved the title of a nightingale. There wasn't a soul in this town who didn't love her and for good reason.

"I'm glad you've been warned. So, I say, you need to break in this new table," she said, tapping the top. "You're the first to inaugurate it! Two orders of sweet potato nachos?" She pointed back and forth between us until we both nodded yes. "Do you want pop?"

"Sprite," we both said in unison, making her smile.

"I'll put your order in and bring out the surprise Brittany made for Star!"

Irving held up his finger, but Ivy was already off putting the order in the computer. He dropped his hand and shook his head. "She's a firecracker."

"That's an apt word to describe her."

He leaned back in his chair and ran his hands over the table as though it might disappear from under them. When he glanced up at me, he wore a smirk.

“I know, I know,” I said, chuckling. “You were right with your wait-and-see approach. She went all in.”

“That’s Ivy, though,” Irving said with a nod. “She doesn’t do things halfway.”

Ivy scurried toward us with the pop, so we hushed our gossip about her. She set down two glasses and a plate of cookies. “Brittany was sure you’d be in today for her nachos, so she made a special treat for Star. Sweet potato cookies.”

Irving lifted a brow. “He does love sweet potatoes.”

“They’re all natural with nothing bad for him. Brittany used organic oat flour, sweet potatoes, eggs, and a little honey. I googled, and it all looked safe for dogs.”

I picked up a cookie and sniffed it. “It smells good enough to eat. I’m not going to lie.”

“That’s what I thought!” Ivy said, laughing. “I told Brittany she might have to start making dog cookies for the bakery!”

“Well, I think you need a taste tester then,” Irving said. “Star, are you hungry?”

He held the cookie out, and Star gently took it between his teeth, being careful of his master’s fingers. He laid it on the mat, sniffed it, and immediately turned into Cookie Monster. Crumbs flew. Crunching ensued. Chops were licked.

By the time we finished laughing, Star was resting on the bed again, quite satisfied with his treat. “Seems legit,” Irving said, still giggling. “Man,” he said, wiping his eyes. “Give him a few minutes to reboot and have Brittany come and give him one. She needs to see that.”

“I agree,” Ivy said, wiping her own eyes. “We might be onto something, though. We could make sweet potato or peanut butter.”

“That one,” I said, pointing at her. “Star is always stealing my peanut butter sandwiches.”

“No,” Irving said, pinning me with a critical eye. “You’re always giving him your peanut butter sandwich because he

bats his bushy eyebrows at you and smiles.”

I tipped my head back and forth as I thought about it. “He’s right. That’s what happens.”

When Brittany hit the bell, Ivy giggled and headed to the window to get our nachos.

“Well, this is a red-letter day,” Irving said, pushing the cookies out of the way to make room for our food. “Now all we have to do is keep the momentum going until the committee meeting tonight.”

“We got this!” I said enthusiastically, but inside, I was afraid we would have nothing at the end of the meeting.

We’d done our research, but we’d fail if we couldn’t convince the committee that there was a need for the ramp beyond just one person having access to the gazebo. It’s a concept that’s hard for people to understand. You build the ramp, even if it’s only one person. That one person deserves access to the space. I was confident it wasn’t just one person, though. If they made the gazebo accessible, people who never bothered to go to the park would start going. That was a win.

Ivy set two steaming hot plates of nachos in front of us and returned to the counter. We dug into the food without further conversation, and all I could think was we needed an ace in the hole, but all we had was jokers.



“The park?” Hazel asked as we entered the parking lot and headed up the pathway. “I thought we had work to do.”

“We do, and we’re doing it.”

“Taking a walk in the park prepares us for the committee meeting?”

“You ask a lot of questions,” I said, laughing as we rolled along the pathway.

“You don’t like to answer any of them!” she exclaimed. One might think she was upset, but I could hear the laughter in

her words.

“I was aiming for mysterious.”

“Mysterious. Right. That’s the word I’d use.”

“Well, to answer your question, this will help us prepare. Or rather, he will,” I said, motioning ahead at the gazebo where Shep stood.

“Maybe you are a little mysterious,” she said as we rolled up to the front of the gazebo. “Shep,” Hazel greeted him with a quick hug.

“Hey, guys,” Shep said after their hug. He stuck his hand out for me to shake. “Glad you could make it.”

“We just left the diner,” I explained, flicking my eyes to Hazel for a moment to see her smirking. “I can’t thank you enough for installing the door opener and booth. It was enjoyable to eat in my chair and get in and out of the diner without risking injury.”

“No thanks needed, my friend. We should have done it a long time ago. We didn’t realize how easy it was and how much adaptive equipment is available now.”

“Most people don’t,” I agreed, motioning at the gazebo. “As per the reason we’re here.”

He turned and stared at the building with a nod. “I’ve been pushing them to do something with the gazebo since you rolled into town. I’ve always felt it should be accessible, so let’s do the work to make it so.”

“Do you have the model?”

“Model?” Hazel asked as she glanced between us.

Shep held up his finger and jogged over to the gazebo. He lifted the model gazebo off the floor, and I rolled closer while Hazel followed to get a better look. “Shep, this is so detailed,” I said as I stared at the miniature gazebo.

“That’s easy to do with a laser printer these days.” He turned the model so we could see the back of it. “The specs



said the ramp had to be thirty-six inches wide and no longer than thirty feet without a resting spot, correct?”

“Yes, but the grade matters, too. If it’s too steep, I can’t get my manual chair up without help. The model is awesome, but it’s not what we discussed.”

“You’re correct,” he said, stepping back to take in the gazebo. “I tried to fit all the guidelines in and get it on the gazebo’s left side as we discussed in the plan.”

“Away from the tree,” Hazel said, and he nodded.

“Doing it that way, the ramp would have to come too far out, and the council would say it was unsightly. To combat that, I talked to my guys, and we all agreed a path around the tree was easy to pour. They were happy to have one for access to the tree in the fall for preparing the lights and the back of the gazebo in the winter. With the path there, shoveled in the winter, I could bring the ramp out further away from the gazebo, make the first landing, then slope the second ramp to come right out into the gazebo.” He used his finger to go up the ramp, as he explained. “Then we cut out that part of the railing,” he said, motioning at the back of the gazebo, “and connect the railing to the ramp. It will look like it was always there.”

I blew out a breath and nodded. “It’s beautiful, Shep. I love how you made the railings match. That should hopefully appease those complaining about the aesthetics.”

“And the best part is, we can use composite wood to build the ramp, so it will last forever,” Shep explained.

“That’s less maintenance and repairs over the long run, even if it is a bit more expensive on the front end,” Hazel said in agreement.

“We get a discount, so materials will be under two thousand, and then it’s just manhours to build it. I have several talented carpenters willing to do the work on their own time if needed.”

“Are we telling the council that?” I asked, and he shook his head.

“I’m saving that for my ace in the hole. They should pay them to build the ramp. We shouldn’t even be having this conversation. It should have been done the day you brought it up or before it was needed. Everyone deserves dignity; you did not get that on your first night here. The committee will be an easy sell tonight, but their approval should help us when the full council meets.”

“I hope we can, man,” I said, shaking his hand. “I love the model, and as an end user of the ramp, I can promise you the design is solid and will last for years. I’ve used enough ramps in my life to know.”

“What do you think our chances are with the committee, Shep?” Hazel asked as she rubbed her crooked fingers. I noticed she did that when she was anxious, which seemed to be a lot lately.

“The committee is a slam dunk. We’re the boots-on-the-ground guys who see what happens within public works and parks that the board members don’t see. We believe anything we can do to improve Bells Pass’s accessibility is a win for everyone, businesses and community members alike.”

Hazel enthusiastically pointed at him. “That. Just that. We shouldn’t even be standing here,” she said, motioning around the park. “Everything is a constant fight with the board and it’s taken me by surprise. The board sanctioned New Beginnings, but they want to micromanage it to the point we’ll never get it open.”

Shep lowered himself to a stair and sighed. “It’s three board members who have banded together to make sure that New Beginnings doesn’t bring ruffians into town.”

“Ruffians,” Hazel repeated. “They do realize that the candidates are screened, must have a job in Bells Pass or a surrounding town, and must agree to a stringent behavior code before they can move in?”

“They may not realize that, actually,” Shep said. “I think the housing board doesn’t always do a great job of conveying to the full council what is happening with your project. That causes issues where there shouldn’t be any.”

Hazel glanced at me and then back to Shep several times. “I can fix that easily enough.”

“How?” I asked, my head cocked in confusion.

“We invite them to take a tour of the property. While they are there, we go through all the requirements for the tenants. That way, everyone is on the same page, and no one can say they didn’t know. Right?”

“Right,” I said with a tip of my head. “That could work. Should we make the offer at the board meeting?”

“Might be smart,” Shep said, standing and wiping off his pants. “That way, you can finally find tenants to fill those apartments.”

I laughed loud enough to scare Star, who glanced back at me. “Find tenants?” I asked in shock. “Do you know how many applications we already have?”

“I didn’t realize an application was already available,” Shep said.

Hazel held her hand out at him. “This is why we need to do a tour. Everyone should get on the same damn page.”

“She’s right,” Shep agreed. “When you hold the tour, give me a heads up. I’ll bring a couple of my city works guys with me. You’ll have your own maintenance people, but we’re responsible for the pipes and other utilities. It will be good for the guys to get a feel for everything.”

“Everyone is welcome,” Hazel agreed. “The sooner we get the go-ahead to open, the better. I’m sure the one hundred and fifty-four applicants feel the same way.”

“One hundred and fifty-four?” Shep asked, his tone incredulous. “You only have half that many units.”

“Our point is made,” I said. “We need to get the units open. I’m tired of this back and forth. It’s incredibly frustrating when they literally pay me to do what they don’t want me to do.”

Hazel lowered her hand to my shoulder and squeezed. “We’ll get there—one step at a time. We focus on the

committee meeting tonight and the board meeting in a few weeks.”

“I think you both have a handle on what needs to happen,” Shep said as he hefted the model into his arms. “To make it easier, I’ll have this at the meeting for you tonight?”

“That would make life easier,” I agreed.

“I’ll head back to work then and leave you two to plot your evil plan for this evening. See you there.”

“Thanks, Shep,” Hazel and I said in unison.

“Anytime, guys. And I’m serious about being looped in on that tour of New Beginnings.”

“You’ll be first on the email,” I promised, and with a nod, he headed back to the parking lot, the mini gazebo in tow.

“That’s a fantastic model,” Hazel said, lowering herself to the stair. “I think it’s going to make all the difference tonight.”

“I hope so,” I agreed. “When I say I’m tired of all the back and forth, I mean I am literally exhausted. It’s so hard to stay politically correct when they are paying you not to do the job that they hired you to do.”

She nodded as she gazed at the giant tree next to the gazebo, her head tipped to the sky. “I can only imagine. I’m already frustrated and I haven’t been here for a year twiddling my thumbs. You’re doing all you can by early vetting applicants and everything else you do to put programs in place for when we do finally open. You can’t do much more other than slowly turn up the dial of urgency on the board. Winter is approaching and we need to get people into stable housing.”

“Exactly!” I exclaimed with frustration, and she turned her sweet face back to me. “They all sit in a comfortable home that’s warm and happy. They can’t relate.”

Hazel shot up from the stair as though it had burned her. “That’s it!”

“What’s it?” I asked in confusion.

“Forget the tour. That will not give them the same sense of urgency that experiencing it firsthand will. We’ll host a sleep-out for the housing insecure instead.”

I took a moment to let what she said sink in. “A sleep-out for the housing insecure?”

“Yes! We let them experience for a night what the housing insecure go through every time they can’t find a shelter or room.”

“I like the idea, but how do we convince them to do it?”

Hazel paced in front of me, her finger tapping against her lips. “I haven’t gotten that far.”

“We don’t have much time. The board meeting is in two weeks and if we want to have it planned, we need to move.”

When she turned, she had a brow in the air and her hands on her hips. “Dinner, wine, and plotting at my place tonight?”

A sneaky smile appeared at the thought. “You’re on, Hazel Cane.”

As we walked back toward the parking lot, I couldn’t help but sneak a peek or two her way. I’d worked with a lot of people in my time as a social worker, but none quite like Hazel. If my cards had been dealt differently, I could see myself asking her out. But I was a pair, and she was a full house. The only way to win this hand was to enjoy her friendship while I had it.

## Chapter Five

I slid the sandwiches off the panini maker and onto plates. A casual evening was planned, so I'd kept the food casual too. Once I cracked open a bottle of wine, I set it to breathe on the table and opened the apartment door. Irving and Star would be here any minute ready to conspire, and I was here for it. If, in the process, I got to know Irving better, well that was just a bonus. When it came to his personal life, he was quiet and never revealed too much about himself. It was easy to see that was on purpose, practiced, and in a sad kind of way, expected.

That said, I hadn't missed the looks he sent my way or the quick glances he'd take when he thought I wasn't looking. There was no doubt we were both crushing on each other a little bit. When we're together, I'm drawn to him. I want to know more about him, to know everything about him, even though I have to stay hands off. My last relationship had been a disaster. It took me two years to see I was with a frog in prince's clothing, but once I did, he was relegated to the pond immediately. Was I over him? When the only thing I felt after we broke up was relief, it was evident to me that I never loved him, so losing him didn't hurt.

Losing Irving would hurt.

Considering my situation, there would come a day when I would lose him, one way or the other. Was it better to lose a friend than a boyfriend when my time in Bells Pass was over? I tried to convince myself that answer was yes, but my heart kept whispering something else. Would I stay in Bells Pass if given half a chance? Absolutely. Was that possible? Not even a crystal ball could tell me that. All I could do was let it play out. If my luck holds, I would be allowed to make a career in Bells Pass, but if my luck runs out and I have to pay the piper, my career ceases to exist.

My gaze flicked to that drawer again. The one that held the phone I kept hidden from Irving. Whatever happened in the park the first day hadn't been repeated, so I had to hope it was nothing more than a freak accident. A freak accident that might affect me for the rest of my life. The fingers they'd

repaired hadn't healed correctly. They were bent at a ninety-degree angle now, and x-rays showed the bones were fused, so the only way to fix them would be to rebreak them and try again. A shudder skittered through me at the thought. I had no plans of doing that any time soon. Since I didn't plan to learn the piano or guitar in the near future, and I could still type on a keyboard, I was going to roll the dice rather than sign up for more months of pain and physical therapy.

"Are you coming, Star?" Irving called from the hallway and I put aside thoughts of everything but the man rolling toward me. "Time to go visiting. I bet Hazel even has a sandwich for you!"

A flash of fur came through the door and landed at my feet, belly up and tongue hanging out while he waited for a belly rub. "Well, good evening, Star," I said while I laughed. Squatting, I rubbed the soft fur on his belly until his eyes went closed and his paws fell in relaxation.

"Aw jeez, you'd think he never got any attention," Irving said as he wheeled through the door, shaking his head at the giant furball.

"Aw jeez?" I repeated, laughter filling my voice. "Now that's an accent I haven't heard from your lips before."

Irving put his hand to his mouth and sighed. "Sorry, I think my Wisconsin just slipped out."

"Your Wisconsin?" I asked as I stood and washed my hands so I could serve dinner.

"I grew up in Milwaukee, and worked around the state for several years. We have some colloquialisms that set us apart from others. I've done my best to stem them, but occasionally, they slip out."

"You're not kidding," I said, carrying the plates to the table. "For a second there, I thought I was talking to a Canadian."

His laughter lifted my heart and set it up on a plane it's never been on before. It was comforting and uncomfortable at the same time. Why did Irving have such an unusual grip on

me? It was almost as though the more determined I was to keep him at arm's length, the closer he got to me. It was disconcerting to say the least. Especially since I didn't think it was conscious on his part.

"Something Wisconsinites are often compared to. This looks amazing," he said, pointing at the sandwich on his plate.

"Cubanos," I said as I sat across from him at the small dining table. "They're pretty standard where I'm from, so I thought you might enjoy them. I made one for Star without the pickles." I pointed at a smaller sandwich off to the right.

"No wonder he loves you so much," Irving said as he cut up the sandwich for the dog. "You spoil him rotten."

"Well, he is a working dog and a very good boy."

Irving smiled as he lowered the plate to the floor. "He is a very good boy. I'd be lost without him. Come on, Star. Snack time." Star lumbered to his feet and walked to the plate. He gave the sandwich a sniff and then all you heard was snuffling as he tucked into his treat. "I guess he's a fan."

Conversation ceased for several minutes while we ate our sandwiches. I could tell he appreciated the flavors and nodded along as he chewed, finally stopping long enough to take a sip of wine. "That's the best thing I've eaten in years. I had no idea they were so good."

"You'd have no way to know, since a true Cubano is probably not served in too many places in the Midwest. At least not the way we make them down south."

"I've honestly never seen one on a menu anywhere in the Midwest. I think you should make one for Ivy. They'd be on her menu the next week."

My brows went up as I finished chewing. "You think so?"

"Heck yeah. What do I always order at the diner when I want something fast?"

"A club sandwich."

He pointed at me with a nod. "Because I can eat them with one hand while I'm working. The diner is filled with



factory workers and construction guys day in and day out and they love nothing more than a good, filling sandwich. I'm serious, Hazel. Make one for Ivy."

"I don't know," I said, finishing my sandwich and sitting back with my wine to enjoy it. "It takes specific ingredients, not to mention the Cuban bread, to make it taste like that."

"If Ivy decides to put something on the menu, she does it right every time, Hazel. That's how she's stayed in business all these years. Besides, she owns a bakery. I think she can manage to make Cuban bread. Is that what this was? It was fantastic."

"It was," I said with a nod. "It's generally the only bread I eat, so I learned how to make it."

"You are full of surprises, Hazel Cane," he said with a smile. "Next you're going to tell me you're Cuban."

"Nope," I said, sipping my wine. "My dad is."

"But you just said—"

"Sorry." I waved my hand to stop him. "Technically, he's my step-dad, but he adopted me when I was three, so I've called him Dad all my life. My real father went MIA before the test showed two lines, and my mom raised me on her own for the first two years of my life. She met my dad at work, they're both chefs, and the rest is history, as they say."

"Chefs? Now I see where your skills come from in the kitchen. I'm surprised you didn't follow in their footsteps."

I shrugged as I finished my wine then refilled my glass. "I love to eat, as you can tell," I said, patting my well-padded middle. "But cooking, for me, was about spending time with my parents and enjoying good food. I had no desire to do it for other people, at least not the way they do."

"Did you cook for other people?"

"In a way, I suppose. It's how I got into social work to begin with, actually. As a teenager, I spent my weekends and summers cooking at the soup kitchens and doing outreach on the streets."

“Wow,” he said, his expression telling me he was impressed. “Now, it’s easy to see why you went into social work. That’s starting out in the trenches.”

“The trenches in Florida are deep and wide when it comes to the housing insecure. I did what I could, but I could see if I wanted to have a true impact, to work in a place like this where low-income housing is the goal, I needed an education.”

“I speak for all of Bells Pass when I say we’re glad you’re here, Hazel.” He lifted his glass in the air and I did the same before I took another swig.

“Leave the dishes,” I said as I stood. “Let’s go sit somewhere more comfortable.”

I grabbed his glass of wine from the table and held it while he rolled to the couch and transferred into the corner, then I handed him his glass.

“Thanks,” he said, as I lowered myself to the cushion and pulled the small writing table over from near the chair where I’d moved it. I wanted him to have space to move his wheelchair around easily, so I didn’t have a coffee table to write on.

“What about you? What was your reason for social work?”

He motioned at his chair as though that should be enough of an answer. It probably was for someone like me who had insight into the career. Not so much for someone who didn’t.

“What part of the chair made you want to be a social worker?”

“Every experience I had growing up, Hazel. Long story, but suffice it to say that I had a lot of interactions with social workers. Some good, some not so good. I wanted to be one of the good ones who got things done for kids who needed help, and for the disadvantaged who put their trust in me to help them at the lowest point of their lives.”

“Did you deal with the social workers because of your accident?” I asked the question in an unassuming way because

if there was one thing Irving avoided like the plague, it was talking about what put him in the chair.

He tipped the wine glass up to his lips and finished it off, twirling it back and forth between his fingers as he stared into the empty depths of it. “That would be an understatement.”

I bit my tongue rather than jump in and carry the conversation. I sensed that he was looking for a way to talk about it and I didn’t want to interrupt his concentration. Instead, I sipped my wine while I tucked my feet up under me.

“I lied; you know.” I raised a brow and he tipped his empty glass toward the door. “To everyone when I first came to town. You weren’t here then, but Mayor Tottle introduced me at the tree lighting ceremony. I told everyone I was in a wheelchair from an unfortunate accident when I was four.” He shrugged and lowered the glass to the couch. “Not so much a lie, I guess, as an oversimplification.”

“I don’t think Mayor Tottle expected you to tell them your life story that night, Irving.”

“True, but since then, when people ask what the unfortunate accident was, I tell a boldfaced lie every time.”

“If that makes it easier for you, then I see no problem with it. It’s no one’s business but yours anyway.”

He laughed and it brought a smile to my lips, even though the room was filled with uncomfortable energy. “Ironic that I’ve had no less than three other social workers tell me the same thing.”

“Must be a thing then,” I said with a wink. “You have the right to protect yourself in your physical and emotional space, Irving. There’s nothing wrong with that.”

“Logically, as someone in the business, I know that, but as a human, I still feel bad every time the lie rolls off my tongue. I do it for them, though. Most people can’t handle the truth of what really happened.”

“Which means glossing over it keeps the look of pity off their faces and avoids uncomfortable situations in the future?”

He pointed at me with the glass. “In a nutshell. Especially when you factor in what I do in the community. I need to hold that neutral space with everyone.”

“I totally agree,” I said with a nod. “There’s no other way to play it.”

“You do?” he asked, his fingers no longer spinning the glass. “I figured you’d say there was a lesson to be learned in sharing the truth.”

“I would venture to guess you already learned that lesson by the track of this conversation.”

“Huh,” he said more in a puff of air than in words. “I never thought of it that way, but you’re right. The lesson learned was, not to sound like Jack Nicholson, but people can’t handle the truth.”

I gave him a head nod in agreement then stood and grabbed the wine bottle, refilling his glass in hopes the wine would relax him and take the edge off before we talked business.

He took another sip and shrugged. “The truth is, I was shot by my father during a domestic incident.”

I forced myself not to react and to keep my expression neutral. Irving trusted me with the story, and I didn’t want him to see pity or think I would treat him differently because of the truth. “You were young?”

“Barely three,” he agreed. “Young enough that the incident itself is hazy and I don’t remember anything but life in the chair.”

“That can be a blessing and a curse, though at three I’m going to say blessing.”

“With age and maturity, I agree. I don’t remember my parents, at least my biological ones. From what they tell me, I got caught in the crossfire. My father started shooting at the car as Mom drove away with me in the backseat. She was killed and ran the car into a tree. A bullet came through the car and hit me in the back. Apparently, there was quite the manhunt for my father. They eventually found him and locked

him up but his big mouth got him in trouble in prison too and he died by way of a head bashing in the shower. Good riddance. Not that I ever knew him, but you get back the same energy you put out into the world, you know?”

“I can agree with that while still hating what happened to you and your mom.”

“From what my aunt tells me, my mom’s sister, Mom was leaving him to make a better life for us. He was supposed to be at work but came home early to find her moving out. I don’t remember her much. I’m thankful that she tried to give me a better life since he clearly wasn’t going to provide it. In a way she did. Unfortunately, it just wasn’t with her.”

“That is sad, but she would be proud of who you are now, Irving. I know that for sure.”

“That’s what my aunt says. My aunt and uncle ended up raising me with their boys. They weren’t wealthy, but we got by. When it came time for college, I got a full scholarship,” he glanced up with a smile, “but not for football.”

I couldn’t help but laugh while I shook my head. “Soccer, right?”

He winked and finished his wine. “Track and field, actually.”

I only had to glance at him to see that this time, it wasn’t a joke. “I didn’t see that coming.”

“Most people don’t,” he agreed. “Back in the day, I could throw a shot put far and away past the abled tossers. I kept the team happy in several events but low-key honesty, it was mostly an academic scholarship. I worked off part of it in a low-income school district for two years after graduation. It was a great learning experience and taught me some important things about myself.”

“Like?”

“The biggest would be that I didn’t want to work with kids in that arena.”

“I’m surprised. I know you’re all about the underdog.”

“While that’s true, working in a school is a whole different animal. There was so much government involved that it was hard to do anything to actually help the child or family.”

“I suppose that’s true. Not that we aren’t dealing with government here.”

His laughter was relaxed now and I was happy that he was over his earlier anxiety about telling me the truth. He had nothing to be ashamed of and I hoped he knew that now.

“Trust me, Mr. Thompson is nothing compared to what I dealt with in a school. Speaking of Mr. Thompson, we have work to do. Now that you’ve had time to think about it, do you still want to move forward with the sleep-out idea?”

“Absolutely, and not just for Mr. Thompson. I think many people will be surprised by what they’ll learn. It might even spark more dedicated volunteerism. Bells Pass is great about volunteering, but it’s always the same people supporting the same events. We need people willing to focus their efforts on everyday needs, not just special events.”

“Completely agree,” Irving said with a nod.

“Rather than tie it to any other organization, I’d like to make it our own.” I grabbed a notebook, so I could jot down our ideas.

“What do you mean?”

“I want to focus on what Bells Pass Bungalows and New Beginnings is doing to curb housing insecurity for families, young adults, and veterans. I want to educate people about what we’re doing and how they can get involved.”

“Great idea. It’s better to act than to react.” He pointed at the notebook. “Let’s get a basic structure down for it.”

For the next hour, we tossed ideas back and forth. Some we kept, some we decided against, but in the end, we had an event that would utilize New Beginnings and help us reach our goal of getting this place open. We were making a list of what each of us needed to do to make this happen when Irving’s phone rang.

“Hey, Shep,” he said when he answered. “How did it go?” He nodded along, a smile growing on his lips right before he gave me a thumbs-up. “That’s excellent, Shep,” he said, his voice triumphant. “I’ll let Hazel know, and we’ll start our prep for the next board meeting. Thanks again. I may be in the spotlight right now, but I know there will be more people in Bells Pass over the years who will appreciate having access to the gazebo.”

After he hung up, he grinned. “The city works committee passed it unanimously! They will take the money from the park funds if we don’t win a grant before they start building it.”

I threw my arms around him in excitement. “That’s wonderful, Irving!”

His warm arms wrapped around me, and he sank into the hug. I’d never hugged someone who needed human contact more than this man. “It is, but we still have one tall hurdle to jump. I was never very good at hurdles in track and field.”

“Always with the jokes, Mr. Wallace,” I teased, still hugging him. “Maybe we have one last hurdle to jump, but you’ve taught me one thing over the last few months. When you’re determined to do something, you’ll find a way to do it, and I know this time will be no different.”

The way his arms tightened around me said more than any words could have. The fact that he didn’t let me go and we remained locked in an embrace for far longer than appropriate between two colleagues told me so much more.

## Chapter Six

I slammed the SUV door once Star was clear of it. “Forward,” I growled, my voice low and angry. I wasn’t mad at Star, but sometimes, I was mad at the world, and he understood. The entire day had been one frustration after another, and I was over it.

At least the Nightingale Diner was easy to access now. Once I was through the door, Star walked behind me and followed me to a booth. I motioned to the dog bed. “Paws up. Rest time.” The dog hauled his body onto the bed and let out a huff. He was as over me as I was over this day.

“Hey, Irving and Star,” Indigo said as she approached the booth with a glass of water for me and a bowl for Star. If there was one thing the servers were good at here, it was taking care of their human and canine service professionals. She set the water down on the table and held up the bowl. “Does Star need a drink?”

“Probably, thank you.”

She set the bowl down near the dog and stood again. “You look rough, Irving. Everything okay?”

“Just Jim Dandy, unless you count the thirteen different ways that I got hurt trying to move around this town today.”

“I’m sorry,” she said with a frown. “I’ll give you a few minutes to decide what you’d like to order.”

I reached out and grasped the sleeve of her shirt. “I’m sorry for being short. I’ve had a terrible day. It’s almost impossible to get around this town in a wheelchair. I had to go to the pharmacy for a prescription. While I was there, this happened.” I held up my hand to show her the bandage I had wrapped around my palm, now soaked with blood. “I never did get the prescription. I’m tired and hungry, but that doesn’t give me the right to take it out on you. I apologize.”

“It’s absolutely no problem, Irving. You have opened our eyes to how inaccessible things are in Bells Pass. We hope the



new community center and apartments will change some of that.”

“First, I’d have to get them open,” I said with a shake of my head. “I’m not sure that’s ever going to happen. I’ve been working on this project for a year, and we still don’t have any long-term tenants.”

“You’ll get there,” she encouraged me. “Sometimes, when we’re doing good work, the setbacks can make us feel like it’s not worth it. I remember when we were trying to reopen the bakery. We had a lot of those moments, but here we are years later, the bakery is humming along, and it was worth all of the heartache and headache. I hope you’ll feel the same way once the apartments are full of people looking to make Bells Pass their home.”

I finally managed a smile and I nodded once. “I hope you’re right, Indigo. Right now, it feels like I’m wading through a never-ending sea of bureaucracy. You know what, I think I’ll take something to go. I should probably go home and tend to my hand.”

“I agree with that assessment. Actually, you should probably go to the hospital.”

“Hard pass,” I said with a chuckle. “They’ll try to stitch it, and then how do I roll the chair?”

“Carefully?” she asked with a raised brow. “Seriously, Irving. At least have someone look at it and make sure it will heal. Does the pharmacy manager know what happened?”

“Lord, no. I hope no one saw my attempt to get into a place that didn’t want me there. It was embarrassing. Anyway, how about a club sandwich and fries?” I asked to change the subject.

“Sure, I’ll put that order in. Anything for Star?”

Laughter escaped, and it was the first time my heart felt lighter all day. Leave it to Star and Indigo. “Star would like one of everything on the menu,” I said with a wink, “but I think I’ll feed him when I get home.”

She gave me a finger gun and returned to the counter to put in my order.

“Well, Star, not a stellar moment for me,” I said, resting my hand on the table. “And she might be right about this hand, but we’ll keep quiet about it.”

It was only two o’clock in the afternoon, but I wanted to go back to bed. I should have gone home after I cut my hand, but I hadn’t eaten yet today, and there was no food at home either. I added grocery shopping to my to-do list. At least that’s a store I can get in and out of without nearly dying.

“Irving?”

I turned and came face-to-face with Hazel. I quickly turned my left hand over and smiled. “Hey, Hazel. What brings you here?”

“I heard a rumor that you had an issue,” she said, sliding into the booth seat. “Thought I’d come see if it was true.”

“Where did you hear that from?” I asked. “Indigo?”

“Nope, the pharmacist called me. He thought he saw you fall, but when he got out to the street, you were gone.”

“I didn’t fall. All is well,” I promised. “Do you want to order something? I plan to take lunch to-go and head to the office to finish preparing my comments for tonight.”

“I already ate. Also, that doesn’t look well,” Hazel said, pointing at my hand.

“Eh, just sliced it a bit—no big deal. I’ll clean it up when I get home. I’m used to dinging up my hands.”

“Irving,” she said lowering a brow. “It’s dripping blood onto the table.”

I glanced down and was shocked to see she was correct. “Shoot. Grab me some napkins?”

Her eye roll was mighty when she stood from the table and went to the counter to talk to Indigo. She returned with a towel that she wrapped around my palm and secured at the back of my hand. “Now, you were saying about it not being a

big deal? How about I take you to the clinic to have it looked at?”

“I think it will be fine once the bleeding stops.”

“Probably, until you use the hand and it starts bleeding again.”

“Listen, Hazel, you’re not hearing me. If this hand doesn’t work, I don’t roll.”

“And you’re not hearing me, Irving. If that hand gets infected, do you think you’ll be able to roll? At least have it looked at before you have a much bigger problem on your hands.” She winked and shoulder-bumped me. “See what I did there?”

“You’re hilarious,” I said dryly. My leg chose that moment to spasm and hit the table, jostling the water and splashing it across the top while my leg jiggled like I’d had four pots of coffee.

“What’s happening right now?” she asked as Star lumbered to his feet.

“It’s just a leg spasm. Doesn’t hurt, but we’ll have to wait for it to pass.”

“I’ve never seen you have one like this before,” she said, sliding into the booth again and sopping up the water with a towel she’d grabbed from the counter.

“Normally, I take my anti-spasmodic in the morning and evening. I was out this morning.”

“Which is why you were trying to get into the pharmacy. Why didn’t you have it delivered?”

“I was literally wheeling past the place and I should be able to get in there!” I exclaimed, hitting the table for emphasis, forgetting about my hand. “Okay, that smarts,” I admitted, pulling it toward my chest. “I need to get it together. We have less than five hours until the board meeting.”

Hazel held up her hand and brought her phone to her ear. When someone answered, she informed them that I was at the

diner, injured, and needed my medication. She said a few yeses and then hung up.

“What was that about?”

“I called the pharmacy. They’re running your script down so you can take the missed dose before we head to the clinic.”

“We’re not headed for the clinic. We’re headed home, once my food gets here. If it ever gets here. Damn, I’m hangry.”

Her laughter lifted above the din of the diner and made me smile too. “You are hangry, but I think you’re also fed up, and that’s understandable. I respect the way you’re feeling because I can only imagine how frustrating it is while you’re living it. What can I do to help?”

“I hate to ask this, but would you rub my calf? I’d do it, but.” I held up the bloodied hand. “If you rub the calf from top to bottom, it will stop the spasm after a few minutes.”

“You should have said something sooner!” she exclaimed, sliding under the booth to grasp my still quivering leg. “Like this?”

“I guess,” I said, biting back laughter. “I can’t feel it.” Ducking my head under the table awkwardly allowed me to see what she was doing. “Yep, like that.”

Indigo walked over and set a plate with fries and a sandwich in front of me.

“It was to go,” I said, but it sounded more like a question.

“It was, until your friend here told me you’d be eating it here so you could go to the clinic afterward.” She raised her brow and gazed at the hand with a smug smile. “Do you need me to cut the sandwich more so you can eat it easier?”

“Thanks, Mommy, but I have two hands,” I quipped, waving my right one.

“I’ll grab your pop. Eat.”

My leg had slowed its angry jiggling enough to eat without getting food all over me. I reached down with my

right hand to check it, and our hands collided. I lingered when hers connected with mine, even though I should have pulled back. It was nice to feel connected to someone in this world. When you've spent as much time alone as I have, you crave the touch of another person sometimes. I often denied myself the hassle, but there was something different about Hazel. It was as though she could see through any disguise, so there was no way to hide. She always wanted a person to be their true self, for better or worse. She was certainly getting my true self today. A Mr. Grinch, for sure.

"I'm sorry I'm such a hot mess," I said, slowly slipping my hand away from hers. I wanted to grab hers and hold it, but I knew better. That was a one-way ticket to heartache. Been there, done that, wasn't doing it again.

"Irving," she said in that soft voice of hers that I imagined she'd use in the middle of the night in my bed.

*Bad Irving, a voice scolded. You know better. Keep it professional.*

I'd love to keep it professional, but that train left the station a long time ago. We were colleagues, but we were also friends and I wouldn't change that for the world.

"The fact that you're struggling today breaks my heart because I know it was preventable."

I took another bite of my sandwich with a tip of my head. "I suppose," I answered after I swallowed. "But that doesn't change the fact that I'm a dumpster fire and we have a meeting in four and a half hours."

"We'll make it. Once the pharmacy arrives with your meds, we'll get you over to the clinic and have the hand looked at. We'll have plenty of time to get home and changed before the meeting."

Nodding, I gobbled up more of the food, the hunger kicking in again now that the spasm was over. She snuck a fry with a wink and ate it before she spoke again.

"I have everything ready to go for tonight, including the few quick changes to the gazebo model that the city works

committee suggested. Shep sent someone over with the model, so we'll take that tonight."

"I'm glad the committee agreed it was time to make it accessible," I said, wiping my face with a napkin.

"Me too, but I think it helped that several committee members now have parents with accessibility needs. If they wanted a family picture at a reunion under the gazebo, they couldn't do it. Around here, family is a heavily motivating factor."

I pointed at her as I finished chewing and washed the last of my sandwich down with some pop. "It is, and we need to use that to our advantage at the meeting tonight."

"Oh, don't worry, wait until you see my notes," she said with an evil giggle.

The gasping of a woman behind us drowned out my laughter. "Irving!" Ivy said, as she came around to look at my hand. "What on earth happened?"

Fighting the eye roll that wanted to escape, I waved away her worry. "I cut my hand on the door of the pharmacy. It's no big deal, Ivy."

"Looks like a big deal to me considering the blood on my bar towel."

"I'm sorry," I said with a grimace. "I'll replace it."

She patted my shoulder and shook her head. "Not what I meant, and you don't need to replace it. That said, your hand needs medical attention."

"We're headed there as soon as the pharmacy arrives with the meds he was trying to pick up when he hurt himself," Hazel explained.

"What did you cut it on?" Ivy asked, keeping an eye on the door.

"I'm not sure. I was using my left hand to pull myself in, which means it has to be something on the doorframe. When it happened, I let go and rolled back out the door. I'm lucky I didn't tip the chair in the process." I glanced down at the left

hand-rim. “Looks like I’ll have to clean that up too. It’s covered in blood. Star probably is too.”

“What I want to know is, why didn’t you go directly to the hospital? My diner is many things, but a medical facility it is not.”

This time, I did roll my eyes, but it was with laughter on my lips. “I didn’t think it was that bad. I just wrapped it in the car and was going to grab a sandwich and go home. I thought the bleeding would stop, but it hasn’t.”

The door opened, and in walked a frazzled pharmacy technician. She spotted us and headed to the table, a bag in her hand. “I’m so sorry, Irving,” she said as she set the bag on the table. “We would have delivered the prescription. All you have to do is call.”

“Trust me, from now on, I will,” I assured her. “I happened to be rolling by so I thought I’d just stop in and grab it. Instead, something grabbed me.” I held up my left hand as example A.

“We are so sorry! Go to the clinic and get it checked out, please. You probably need stitches and a tetanus shot. Do whatever they tell you to do, and send the bills to us. The pharmacy will pay them.”

“That’s not necessary,” I insisted, but she waved her hand in the air with frustration.

“I have my orders, and I’ve delivered them.”

Hazel jumped in before I could. “Would you let the pharmacist know to check the left side of the door frame? That’s what he was holding onto when he got cut.”

“The left side of the door frame going in,” I clarified. “If you’re coming out, it’s the right side. About midlevel.”

Her eyes widened and she nodded once. “I will. I wonder what on earth it could be.”

“You’d be surprised what a small nail or piece of metal can do in my situation,” I said with a shrug. “I’m used to it.”

Thanks for delivering the prescription. We better head to the clinic.”

“Of course, again, make sure the bills come to us.”

I gave her a salute and she finally laughed, which made me feel better. The one thing I hated the most about these situations was making people feel bad. She waved and headed back out the door, which meant it truly was time to suffer through a trip to the hospital when I’d rather be doing anything else.

“If you’d grab my check, Ivy, I’ll square up and head out.”

“Lunch is on me,” Ivy said with a shake of her head. “Just go get your hand fixed before you develop a bigger problem.”

“You sure?” I asked and she nodded once. I opened my wallet and pulled out a ten. “Would you give that to Indigo? I wasn’t very nice earlier and I feel terrible about it. She deserves a tip for putting up with my hangry butt.”

Ivy sighed, but relented and took the bill. “I’ll pass the message along, but I don’t think she’s upset since she’s the one who called me looking for back-up.”

This time it was Hazel who laughed as she opened the pharmacy bag and took out the bottle. “If nothing else, Irving,” she said, handing me a pill, “think of it as everyone has your back. They only want what’s best for you.”

I took the pill and swallowed it with a drink of water. She wasn’t wrong; it did feel good to know people cared. “I’m getting used to that idea,” I agreed with a smile. “It’s nice to know people want to keep me around. That hasn’t always been the case, which is why I truly enjoy living here, even with the frustrations I face. On days like today, frustration can get the best of me, but I won’t let it get me down.”

Ivy patted my shoulder and smiled. “That’s the right attitude, Irving. Now, let’s get you on your way.”

Hazel grabbed the prescription bottle and left the booth, so I could turn my chair, using my left fingers only. This was



going to be a futile struggle without help. “Star, return.” He jumped off the bed and walked to my right side. “Chair,” I said, holding out the clip on the bungee leash. He waited while I connected his vest and commanded him forward.

Hazel held the door open as we rolled through and waved at Ivy after the door closed. “Your car is here. Do you want to drive or roll?”

“Let’s just roll. I can manage one handed when he’s pulling. Once I’m in the room, maybe you can come back and get the SUV and bring it down?”

“Absolutely. Let’s do it,” she said, waiting for me to command Star forward.

Once we were on the sidewalk and headed toward the small urgent care clinic, I noticed her discreetly direct the left side of my chair. Almost as though it was second nature to her to see a problem and offer a solution. Come to think of it, that was Hazel Cane in a nutshell, and I was a lucky man to have her by my side as a friend and colleague.



How did people who didn’t understand the laws get on a board that governed them? That question kept running through my mind as we sat listening to the board debate the pros and cons of making the gazebo accessible.

“Let’s table this until our next meeting,” a councilwoman said to end the debate.

My heart sank and I met Hazel’s gaze in time to catch the fire that filled her eyes. My eyes likely held a lifetime of disappoint but the fire I had for fighting this fight had dimmed many years ago. I could see she was about to stand up and start a fight, so I shook my head at her to tell her to let it go.

“What on earth is wrong with this council?” Shep asked from the back of the room as he walked toward the front. “No one is asking you to be out there with a hammer building the ramp. We’re asking for your approval on something that has

the funding in place, and in all honesty, should have been done years ago. Is it because Irving is new to town that you don't want to build this? What if I got hurt on the job tomorrow and needed to use a wheelchair for the rest of my life? Would that be a good enough reason for you to build the ramp? What if Lucy, Noel, or one of your kids or grandkids had an accident and couldn't access the gazebo? What if your elderly mother's last wish was to sit in the gazebo, but you couldn't get her there? Every community member deserves the same dignity you enjoy sitting up there tonight."

"Mr. Lund, you are out of order," the president of the council said.

"Maybe I am, Larry, but our goal within city hall has always been making Bells Pass a community for everyone. To make it a place where people can raise a family and be safe and welcomed. It's always been about keeping the nostalgic feel of a community from days gone by while incorporating modern technology and advancements to make what we do here benefit people all over the country. Those of us working on the ground have done that. Many of you who work in the community as police officers, firefighters, business owners, and factory staff have done that. Yet, your blatant disregard for how important accessibility is in the twenty-first century is staggering and disappointing. You hired Irving and Hazel to make New Beginnings the best facility in the area, but you're blocking them at every turn! Stop for a moment and remember we all want the same thing here, or we wouldn't have gotten this far. Try coming at this from the angle that our goal is to make Bells Pass a better, more inclusive community."

Shep grabbed a folder off his seat and brought it forward, setting it in front of the president. "In my admittedly unscientific research poll done at the diner, I'd like to share the communities' opinions as well. I asked them one simple question. Should the gazebo be accessible to all."

Larry picked up the papers and scanned them. "There are over two hundred responses here, Shep."

"There are, and that was just one shift at the diner. Please, share with your colleagues the result of the poll."

“All two hundred and thirty-six responses were yay with comments such as ‘duh’ and ‘why is this even a question?’” Larry read from the paper. I had to bite my lip to keep from smiling and risk one of them seeing me.

Larry passed the papers around to the rest of the council and it didn’t take long before Mr. Thompson had his lips pressed together in anger. After the papers were passed back to Larry, Councilwoman Lisa spoke. “I make a motion to vote on the item before us to approve the accessibility ramp to the Bells Pass Gazebo as put forth by city works.”

“I second that motion,” another council member said.

“All those in favor of approving the ramp to begin construction in the spring, raise your hand,” the president said. After he counted, I could tell he had to bite back an eye roll. “All those not in favor, please raise your hand.”

Only one hand went up. Mr. Thompson. From the corner of my eye, I noticed Hazel roll hers. He was going to be the reason we never got New Beginnings open. She had her secret weapon yet to deploy, though.

“With a vote of five to one, the item passes. The city works committee will now take possession of the project. I hand it off to Shepard Lund for implementation.”

With a smirk, Shep walked to the council table and accepted the paperwork with a nod. I wanted to do a fist pump, but that would be unprofessional. Then Shep walked by and held his fist out. How could I not bump it? I did, to the joyous laughter of those in attendance.

“If no one else has other matters that require our attention, the council will go into closed session to discuss employee concerns and compensation.”

Hazel stood immediately and walked to the podium. “I have one last thing to bring to the council’s attention,” she said, pulling the flyers from her folder. “It’s time-sensitive, which is why I wasn’t able to get it on the agenda, so my apologies.” She handed the flyer to the council and waited for them to read it.

“A sleep-out?” Councilwoman Lisa asked. “Is this something new?”

“Not at all,” Hazel said, walking back to the podium. “It’s been around for many years. It’s an event for people from all walks of life to show support and solidarity to those experiencing housing insecurity. We thought hosting a sleep-out would be a wonderful way to show the community what our goals are for New Beginnings.”

“This is only a week from now,” Larry said.

“Yes, sir,” Hazel agreed. “It’s the Friday before Thanksgiving.”

“And people have to sleep outside?”

“No,” Hazel said, commanding the room as she always did when the floor was hers. “They can if they want to, but they don’t have to. We’ll borrow the fire pits from the park and have fires going all night long. New Beginnings will also be open for people to use the facilities and warm up. We will, of course, use best judgment regarding sleeping outdoors, which will be dependent on the weather. Mainly, it’s a chance to talk with people you may otherwise not have the opportunity to meet, but whether you stay for ten minutes or ten hours is up to you.”

“What do you need from the council?” Larry asked.

A smile played at my lips. She had them.

“Just the permit to allow the community gathering and the council’s blessing. Irving and I will take care of everything else.”

Larry lowered the flyer to the table. “I suppose that is what we hired you to do, so as long as you file the proper paperwork for the permit, which I am quite sure you already have completed, you have the council’s blessing to proceed with the event.”

“Don’t we need to vote on this?” Mr. Thompson asked. His tone told me he was going to vote no, just like always.

“No,” Larry said, turning to him. “Ms. Cane was simply keeping us abreast of the events occurring with the new housing facilities. As long as she’s issued a permit from city hall for the gathering, there is nothing for the council to do.” He turned back to Hazel. “Thank you for bringing this event to our attention and we look forward to watching it unfold. This adjourns the public portion of the meeting. Thank you all for attending.”

Hazel walked back to me with a smile and wink before we joined everyone leaving the room. The man I wanted to talk to was pulling his coat on when we approached. “Shep,” I said, waiting for him to turn. Once he did, I stuck my good hand out to him. “Thank you so much for going to bat for the ramp. You didn’t need to risk your job, though.”

Shep chuckled and shook his head. “They won’t fire me because I pushed back on them. As you saw, only one person didn’t want it. All I did was give them a way to vote and end his constant blathering. You should come over to the diner. I know Ivy will want in on the sleep-out,” he said, holding the door for us.

“Star, forward, chair,” I said, reminding him that he was pulling my chair now that my hand was bandaged.

“We sure could use volunteers,” Hazel agreed.

Shep stopped by his SUV and smiled. “I’ll meet you there.”

Once he was on his way, Hazel shoulder-bumped me with her hip. “I guess we’re going to the diner. Up for some pie?”

“Always,” I said. “And this time, I hope it comes along with a heaping helping of community spirit.”

## Chapter Seven

I glanced at Irving before we got out of his SUV. “We don’t have to go in. I know you’re tired, and your hand probably hurts. This meeting can wait until tomorrow. “

“I’m okay,” he promised with a smile. “It’s been a long day, but I do need to eat something and I’d love to spend the evening with you.”

I tried not to melt at his words. He wanted to spend the evening with me even though his hand had to be killing him. He opened himself up to me, and I wouldn’t let the moment go unnoticed. I squeezed his shoulder and returned the smile. “I would love to spend the evening with you, Irving. I always enjoy your company, but if you get tired and need to leave, just say the word.” After he nodded once, I opened the door. “Okay, let me get your chair. We need to give your hand a break as much as possible if we want it to heal. I’m sure those stitches are tender too.”

“Yeah,” he agreed, holding his hand up. “I wasn’t expecting to have five stitches in my palm. I can’t believe that nail did so much damage.”

“It was nasty, and I’m glad you finally agreed to get it checked,” I said, climbing from the car and opening the back door. Star waited on the seat expectantly, and I gave him a little love and a kiss on his forehead. “Good thing you have this good boy to pilot your chair,” I cooed as I attached the wheels to his chair and locked the brakes.

Irving’s laughter from the front seat made me happy. He’d had a rough day, and I’d do anything to make his day a little bit better. “Have I ever mentioned how much I hate transfer boards?” he asked as he slid across one and into his chair. “They’re so time-consuming.”

“You prefer to be Superman, I know,” I said, as he straightened himself in the chair. “But sometimes you have to do what’s good for the hood at the time. Trying to transfer the way you usually do using your hands is going to stress those stitches too much.”

“Yes, mommy,” he said tongue in cheek as he got Star out of the car. “I’ll be good, but it’s going to be a long ten days.”

“Not if we have an entire event to plan and supervise,” I reminded him as we walked to the diner. My smile grew when I noticed it wasn’t just Ivy in the diner, but a few of our other favorite people had gathered as well.

He stopped his chair to look up at me. “Looks like Shep has rallied the troops.”

“Let’s not keep them waiting!” I said with glee as I hit the button to open the door.

“Irving!” Ivy exclaimed as she ran toward us. “Hazel! So glad you stopped in. How is the hand, Irving?”

He held it up to show the large bandage across the palm. The doctor had agreed that typical bandaging of the palm wasn’t going to work for him, so he felt confident Irving would keep a clean and dry bandage over it until the stitches came out. “Turned out to be worse than I thought,” Irving said to Ivy’s eye roll. “Five stitches later, they sent me on my way with a warning to be careful. As though I needed them to tell me that.” Irving rolled his eyes in mock annoyance before Ivy leaned down and hugged him around the shoulders.

“I’m glad you got it taken care of. We heard the council meeting went well!”

“It did,” I said as we moved further into the diner. “Thanks to your husband. He really went to bat for us.”

“It was appreciated, considering there was only one hold out and we all know who it was,” Irving said with sarcasm.

“Ivy,” I said in a whisper. “Irving needs some food. He’s running on low.”

“Oh! Of course. Everyone is waiting to talk to you about your new event. You do that and I’ll get you some dinner.”

“Thanks, Ivy,” Irving said, smiling. “Star, forward,” he said until we stopped at booth six, where Heather, Becca, Indigo, and Mrs. Violet sat.

“Hey, girls,” I said, leaning in to give Mrs. Violet a squeeze. “I’m surprised to see you all here so late.”

“Star, rest,” Irving said, and Star jumped up on the bed next to his chair to rest. I scooted into the booth next to Mrs. Violet.

“We were just finishing some work for the cookie walk,” Heather explained. “I know it’s over a month away, but it takes a lot of planning. Mel and Addie wanted to be here, but they both have little ones who are under the weather.”

“Oh no,” Irving said with a frown. “Tis the season, but it’s always hard when the little ones don’t feel well. Shep must be with Lucy?”

“Yep,” Becca said, as she stabbed at her pie. “He wanted Ivy to be here to chat with us about this new event you’re doing. We’re all happy to help.”

“That’s great,” I said, as Ivy set a to-go cup of tea in front of me and poured a cup of coffee for Irving. “We’re going to need a lot of help to pull this off.”

“Tell us your goal,” Ivy said, pulling a chair over to sit next to Irving.”

I explained to them what the event was and why I wanted to do it so quickly.

“You plan to get the council there so they’ll get moving on the decisions that need to be made to open New Beginnings?” Ivy asked to clarify.

“Exactly,” Irving said. “I want them to experience the difficulty of being housing insecure and also the challenges of being disabled without a home. Until they experience it first hand, they’ll never quite get it.”

“I agree,” Becca said. “I’ve been there and it’s scary.”

Mrs. Violet squeezed Becca’s shoulder. “I was never more upset than when I found out where Becca had been living when she first came to Bells Pass. It was condemned, but she had no place else to go, or so she thought. You let me work my magic to make sure all the council members are



there. They may not stay overnight, but if they stay for a bit and see the need for themselves, it will still leave the impression you want.”

“Agreed,” I said with a thankful smile. “I appreciate that, Mrs. Violet. They’ll be the toughest sell. It won’t be hard to get community members like all of you to attend. The reality is, New Beginnings would be open already if the community had the helm. I know everyone is as frustrated as Irving and I are about the constant stonewalling.”

“Which I don’t understand,” Ivy said. “The Bells Pass Bungalows are already full, so why aren’t they filling New Beginnings? Does no one want to rent them?”

“Just the opposite,” Irving said with a frustrated shake of his head. “I have enough applications to fill the place twice over, but what I don’t have are finished rooms. The council has to approve all changes, and they’re once again hung up on the expense of making the rooms accessible. Well, three of them are, but a vote of three nay and three yay does not get us anywhere.”

“True,” Heather agreed, biting her lip. “New Beginnings is already accessible, though, right?”

“The entrances and central areas are,” I said with a nod. “When the rooms were converted to studios and apartments, they weren’t all made accessible, and by accessible, I mean an accessible bath, kitchen, and living space. Irving can roll into my apartment, but he can’t do much from there. Our applications tell us that we should have at least a dozen fully accessible apartments like Irving’s.”

“That means accessible bathrooms, lever door handles, and hardwood floors. We aren’t talking about lowering the kitchen cabinets or anything other than the microwaves being under the cabinets rather than above the stove, as well as a fridge with the freezer on the bottom. Simple changes, but they will allow those who use wheelchairs or have limited hand mobility a place to live and thrive.”

“It doesn’t seem like that much to ask. I feel like this doesn’t have anything to do with accessibility and everything

to do with power?” Becca asked. As someone who needed accessible features just like Irving, I could understand why she saw it that way.

“Insightful,” I said in agreement. “Irving and I believe that’s the case as well.”

“The money is already available through Seeds of Hope, which is Cam’s foundation,” Heather said. “I don’t see why they’re debating this so much when the funds are there.”

“The council still has to approve the changes,” I explained. “They keep dragging their feet wanting this study done and that expert to look at it blah, blah, blah. If we could just get them to sign off to approve the recommendations, the rooms can be completed quickly and we can start moving people in.”

“We could start moving people into the completed rooms now,” Irving explained. “However, the council won’t let us do that either. They say there’s still construction to be done in the building so it’s a safety hazard. All the construction would be on the first floor while the second floor sits empty.”

“So, it’s an endless cycle you can never break,” Mrs. Violet said and we all nodded. “Then we break it,” she said with determination. “Cold weather is coming and what good does an empty building do? Let’s rile these people up and show them just because they’re sitting in a warm house on the hill doesn’t mean everyone is. Becca and Indigo, can the bakery supply pastries for the morning breakfast?”

“Absolutely,” they said in unison. “We’ll also do cookies for snacks and eggnog during the night event,” Becca assured her.

Mrs. Violet was already writing things down in her notebook while Irving and I looked on with a smile.

“The diner will provide a hot breakfast in the recreation room,” Ivy said. “Eggs, sausages, pancakes and whatever else you want to go with the pastries. Indigo will be your go to person.”

“Addie and I will do free haircuts for those in need,” Heather added. “I know many of our veterans and housing insecure will come looking for services. I’ll take care of that aspect with Cameron and have it ready to go along with personal hygiene grab bags for them.”

“I love it,” Mrs. Violet said as she wrote.

“What about entertainment?” Ivy asked. “Maybe we should have a family movie playing for the kids who come out to the event?”

“Great idea,” I said. “We can project it on a sheet near the fire pits so they can stay warm. Of course, we’ll have the recreation room open and the facilities available for people to use.”

“I’ll ask Shep to have the city crew bring the fire pits over from the park with their truck. They can pick them back up before the tree lighting,” Ivy said, making notes in her phone.

“That would solve a huge problem for us. Thank you,” I said, squeezing Ivy’s shoulder.

Heather raised her finger. “Did the new construction remove the roll in showers on each end of the building?”

“Not all of them,” Irving answered. “We kept one on each floor since they had just been updated before they closed the nursing home. In the back of my mind, I wanted it there for use by tenants who didn’t have an accessible bathroom in their apartment. I know that we can’t make all the apartments accessible, that’s logical. In my mind, if it’s a matter of not being able to house someone because we don’t have a room with a shower they can use, or asking them if they agree to use the shower at the end of the hall, it’s a no brainer to me. As someone who has struggled to find accessible housing my entire life, I’d readily agree to showering outside of my apartment if it meant I had a place to lay my head at night.”

Mrs. Violet smacked her pen down on the pad. “I’m sorry, but it just makes me so angry that this is still a problem in this day and age.” She picked her pen up again and muttered

under her breath as everyone around the table bit back smiles. Mrs. Violet got a bad rap for being a busybody but the reality was, she was just a wonderful person who didn't like to see injustice in the world.

"The reason I asked," Heather said, to bring it back around to her question, "is if I'm doing haircuts, a lot of these people would also need a shower and a place to wash up."

"I'm on it," I said without a thought. "I'll make sure the one on the main floor is clean, stocked and ready to go."

"We still have the salon room," Irving said. "That was another room I wanted to keep. There's only one chair, a sink, and a small countertop, but would that be helpful?"

Heather clapped her hands with excitement. "Yes! I'm so glad it's still there! Addie and I will bring our supplies over on Friday and prepare it. You don't have to worry about a thing other than checking the water lines and ensuring the sink works."

"You got it," I said, making notes on my phone. "I can't tell you how much this has helped us," I said, smiling at Irving. "We expected to stop in for pie and maybe round up a few volunteers, and in ten minutes, we've got the whole event planned. This would have taken Irving and I days to work out, make calls, and arrange volunteers."

"This is what we do," Mrs. Violet said as all the heads around the table nodded. "We use our skills to help others in our community. The young folks would say, what? Okay, boomer?"

Becca laughed as she took a drink of her water. "Some might, but it's our job to teach the next generation how to build a community. I'm learning from you, Mrs. Violet, and I hope I can one day teach my little one what you've taught me."

Mrs. Violet brushed a tear off her cheek. "That's so sweet," she said, her hand to her heart. "I'm glad others think the work I do is worthwhile. I know people are always rolling

their eyes at me, but I keep on hoping my contributions make a little difference to someone somewhere.”

“I think it’s safe to say that your contributions have made more than a little difference over the years,” Ivy said as she set a plate in front of Irving and then one for me. “Your contributions are what keep half of these events alive. You work harder than anyone knows and do it for nothing but love.”

“That’s right,” Mrs. Violet said, straightening her spine as she picked up her pen. “I do it for love. Love for this community, even if the young kids think that’s lame or suss.”

Becca chuckled again and shook her head. “No one thinks you’re lame or suss, but we do think you love teaching, and that’s why you do what you do.”

“Exactly,” she said, her hair bobbing with her nod. “What else do we need?”

“More volunteers,” Irving said around the bite of the burger in his mouth. When he swallowed, he moaned a little. “Thanks, Ivy, I’m starving.”

Ivy patted his back and motioned at the plate. “Eat up. As for volunteers, since Indigo can handle the food obligations, I’ll be in charge of the volunteers. I’ll get together with you in the next few days, Hazel, and we’ll make a list of how many we’ll need and where we’ll need them?”

I nodded as Indigo spoke up. “I’ll talk to Lance about the breakfast buffet. See if he has some students who are advanced enough to work it with him. Maybe even do a made-to-order omelet bar?”

“That would be great practice for the kids in Lance’s program,” Ivy agreed. “Let us know what he says.”

“Seriously, guys,” I said with a shake of my head so I didn’t start crying. “I can’t thank all of you enough.”

“Not to worry,” Heather said as I dug into my burger. “The rest of the girl gang will be helping as well, and if you need literal manpower, we have that too. Gabe will be there,

and hopefully, some of the firefighters will also come to talk with the kids about holiday fire safety.”

Everyone started tossing ideas back and forth while Irving and I finished our food. I couldn't stop myself from meeting his gaze and offering a smile. He returned it as he wiped his lips. Lips I had never wanted to kiss more. Instead, I settled for a shoulder squeeze that said, *we've got this*.



I had no sooner returned to my apartment from the diner when my purse rang its annoying ringtone. I dug through it until I found the burner phone and flipped it open.

“Cliff. Any news?”

“On Felding?” he asked, and I rolled my eyes.

“No, on Frosty the Snowman.”

His chuckle was light. “I guess that was a stupid question. We don't have Felding yet, but we have a couple of leads. Fair warning, once he's back in custody, everything changes.”

“How so?” I asked, lowering myself to the chair. I was fighting the anxiety that I always got when talking to Cliff. It was hard not to feel like I was the one who'd done something wrong.

“While not an admission of guilt, jumping bail and going on the run means he's now facing a myriad of new charges. If we can prove he has money stashed overseas, that adds to the case too.”

“You're saying the trial won't be in January?”

“I'm saying in my years of experience, this will change the landscape. It will depend on the judge he draws when we get him back and if any deals end up on the table.”

“Deals? Please tell me Felding isn't going to walk for this.”

“I can’t tell you that, Hazel, and you know it. This little stunt he pulled makes it far less likely, though.”

“So, there’s that,” I said with a sigh. “All is quiet here, and no new people are hanging around town.”

“There would be no way for you to know that.”

When I laughed, it released the pressure in my chest and reminded me how much this town had changed me. “Trust me, Cliff. No one gets past Ivy Lund and Audrey Violet. If someone is watching me, they’re doing it from afar.”

“Which is also a real possibility. It’s not as if you’re following the rules and staying out of the public eye.”

My gaze dropped to the flyers on my table about the sleep-out. Did he know about it? It didn’t matter, in truth. It broke the rules, but my choices were slim.

“I have to do what the job requires, Cliff. I’m not in witness protection.”

“Maybe not, but you also can’t make our job harder.”

“You guys put me here!” I exclaimed in frustration. “What did you think was going to happen?”

“Nothing when Felding was in our custody. Now, every ball is in play.”

“That sounds like a you problem,” I spat.

“That may well be, but now it’s also a you problem if you aren’t willing to come in.”

“I won’t live in a safe house for months while the FBI screws up this case. Forget it.”

“Fine, but you need to keep your eyes open and stop putting yourself in situations that could potentially make you discoverable. We’ll talk in a few days.”

Rather than say goodbye, I slammed the phone shut and threw it on the table. Guilt filled me. I desperately wanted to tell Irving the truth about why I was in Bells Pass. Even if the FBI would let me, I wouldn’t do it. If Irving knew, I could be putting him at risk too. I couldn’t be the reason he got hurt.

They had to find Felding soon. If they didn't, and he somehow tracked me down, there was no telling what he might do.

That said, I doubted he'd go to the bother to find me. Dr. Felding was great at embezzling and defrauding insurance and Medicare, but he'd never been violent. Then again, when people are cornered, they tend to lash out in an attempt to save their hide. I had to remember that going forward.

If my Christmas wish comes true, Cliff will have Dr. Felding back in custody within a few days, and I can stop worrying about the boogeyman waiting for me around every corner. I grabbed a candy cane from the bowl on the table and pulled the wrapping off. When stressed, they were the only thing to make me feel a little better. How could you not feel happy when eating a candy cane? The peppermint soaked into my tongue, and I sighed with contentment. I was an easy woman to please as long as you had a steady supply of candy canes, or suckers, as Irving called them.

I ran Dr. Felding's case back through my head and sighed. I may have been the one to turn him in, but the documents they found in his office did the real damage. His legal team had much bigger problems to deal with. At this point, getting rid of me does nothing to help their case and everything to pound more nails in the coffin of a man who doesn't deserve the title of human being, much less doctor. When this was over, I'd make it my mission to let the entire world know that Dr. Travis Felding is a lying sack of humanity.



## Chapter Eight

After a shower to shake off my talk with Cliff, I lowered myself to the couch with a notebook and a cup of tea. While we'd gotten a lot done on the event at the diner, there was still plenty to do. In order to keep track, I planned to write it all out in a timeline pattern.

It was still hard to believe that we'd walked into the diner thirty minutes after announcing the event and we already had so many wonderful people ready to help us at a moment's notice. Having lived in a big city all my life, I wasn't used to that kind of camaraderie. I had been more comfortable and at ease with the fighting and debating that had gone on during the council meeting than I was with how they worked together once Shep got involved. I don't know what that said about me, but I was hoping it was something this little town could change.

On the way home, Irving questioned if Shep had stepped in, and the council finally agreed, out of embarrassment since he was sitting there. Did they feel like they had no choice but to approve the ramp after a verbal chastising? I didn't think that was the case, and I told him so. Shep played the *what-if game* with the council members, which was something we couldn't do without it coming off as disingenuous since we don't know people the way he does. I was grateful that Shep spoke up and that the ramp got approved. I wasn't going to look a gift horse in the mouth. Irving assured me he wasn't either, but I could tell he was a bit embarrassed, thinking they were guilt-tripped into something they didn't want to do.

If the sleep-out event works a little magic and helps us get New Beginnings over the final hurdles, this will be a perfect holiday season. While there is no ADA requirement for the number of accessible units required in a building, our plans for New Beginnings did require that we have the ability to house people with disabilities. When they built The Bells Pass Bungalows as small family units, it was agreed they would be accessible as required by new construction laws only—meaning Irving could get in and out of the building and into

the apartments, but there would be no other accessibility features. New Beginnings was a better facility for those in need of those living situations, and they thought they'd hit a homerun when the bungalows opened and they were nearing the end of construction at New Beginnings.

Now, a year after the bungalows opened, New Beginnings remains empty. If the council would allow it, we could move single people or couples into the apartments that are finished, but the council fought us on that too until we gave up. With winter closing in, I wanted to push them, but Irving and I agreed to wait until the other rooms were done. I didn't want our tenants with disabilities to feel like they were an afterthought when the truth was just the opposite. The entire time we've been fighting for them.

This was getting me nowhere but upset. I had to focus my energy on making a change, and this event was the best chance we had to do it. I tipped my head. Was that scratching on my door. Before I could stand, there came a bark.

Did Irving change his mind and decide to do more work tonight? I hoped not. He was trashed by the time we got home and I figured he was already asleep.

"Irving, you should be in bed—," I paused when Star sat outside the door alone. "Star? Did you come for a good night hug?" I put my arms around his furry neck and he barked once in my ear until I sat back. The dog was trying to tell me something. "Star, does Irving need help?"

He barked again and headed down the hall to their apartment. I quickly turned the lights off and locked my door. Star was pacing by the bathroom by the time I caught up.

I noticed the bathroom door was open. "Irving?" I called, not wanting to walk in on him. "Do you need help?"

"You could say that," came his voice from the bathroom.

"Is it safe for me to come in?"

"I have a towel on me if that's what you mean."

That was good enough for me so I hurried into the bathroom, surprised by the sight. "Irving," I greeted him as I

jumped into action. He was balanced precariously between his wheelchair and the shower bench. I immediately hooked my arms under his armpits so he didn't fall. "Count of three, I'm sliding you over, okay?" He nodded once and I counted to three and then slid him over into the chair with little difficulty.

He leaned back and let out a breath. "Thanks, Hazel."

I walked around to the front of the chair to face him. "Where's the transfer board?"

He pointed to the corner with an eye roll. "I thought it would be more work to use it since the chair is literally right next to the bench, but I didn't take my fatigue into account. Also, I think the hand got tugged." He held up his left hand that was encased in a vinyl glove and taped at the wrist.

"You used my idea," I said, pulling the tape off gently from his wrist and very carefully tugging the glove off.

"It was that or hire a shower attendant," he said with a chuckle.

"Let's look at it and if need be, I can take you to the ER." His sigh told me how he felt about that, but I would drag him there tonight rather than risk an infection in the hand. Once I got the bandage off his palm, I could see there would be no need. "It's oozing again, but the stitches are all in place and none have pulled out." I rested it on his lap on the towel and turned to get some peroxide and another bandage from the bag the clinic sent home. When I turned back, Irving was studying me.

"Thanks for saving my bacon, Hazel, but you don't have to be a nurse too."

"I know," I said, dabbing the hydrogen peroxide on the palm much to his dislike. He hissed, which made me frown. I didn't like being the one to cause him pain. I waved my hand over it to kill the burn. "I'm sorry. I knew that would sting but we want to keep it clean." Once I had the wound washed, patted dry, and rebandaged, I cleaned up the mess and then grabbed his t-shirt from the pile of clothes on the chair. "Let's

get you dressed and into bed before more calamities befall you.”

He slipped the t-shirt over his head and across his broad, muscular chest. His chest was so much more defined than his suits and ties led you to believe. He had a weight set in the apartment and he used it, there was no doubt. To take my mind off his undeniable sexiness, I handed him the lounge pants. He fumbled with them until I opened them up and handed them to him, ready to put on.

“I’ll turn my back,” I said, but he grasped my arm with his right hand.

“As much as I don’t want you to see my legs, I have to worry less about what you think and more about being safe. I’m tired tonight, and if I bend over too long, I’ll fall out of the chair. Would you get them over my feet for me?”

“Irving, you don’t have to worry about what I’ll think about your legs. No judgment from me, okay?” He nodded, but I could tell he didn’t believe it. “I’ll get them up to your knees and then turn so you can finish. Are you okay with that?”

“Yes,” he said with a tight smile. “I should be able to handle that.”

I lifted his left calf and slipped his foot into the pants, and pulled them up before putting his foot back on the footplate. I glanced up at him and met his gaze. “Want me to put your socks on?”

“I do that in bed,” he answered, his teeth clenched, so I nodded and continued with the pants. His right leg was as thin as his left, but the ankle was bulbous, and his foot twisted inward. “Irving, what happened? Does it hurt?”

As promised, I brought the pants up to his knees and then turned my back so he could finish the job.

“I broke my ankle when I was fifteen,” he said, and I could hear in his words that he was struggling to get the pants up. Everything in me wanted to help, but I did as I promised and stayed turned away. He’d ask if he needed help. “It never

healed right, and that's the result. It's not the only bone I've broken in my legs. Both of my femurs have compression plates in them."

"From falls?" I asked as I heard him finish pulling his pants on.

"From life," he said with a chuckle. "People with spinal cord injuries lose almost half of their bone mass within a few years of their accident. By the time I was fifteen, I had only thirty percent bone mass, and the sports I played were proving it. After the second femur surgery, I decided it wasn't worth it to keep playing. That's when I switched to track and field since it was less contact than basketball. You can turn around."

With a smile, I hung his towel on the rack for him, then walked out of the bathroom so he could follow. "I think you should just go to bed, Irving. You can start fresh tomorrow."

He tipped his head in agreement. "I have to let Star out first, and then I will."

"No, you'll get into bed while I let Star out."

"You don't have to do that, Hazel," he said with frustration.

"I don't have to do anything, Irving, but I want to. It's not a sign of weakness to occasionally accept help from someone. I'm sure you feel you're always accepting help, but that's not the case. You're so independent that sometimes you push yourself too far."

"Like today, you mean," he said, stopping by his bed.

"That would be a good example," I agreed, adding laughter at the end so he knew I was teasing. I let Star out the doggie door that led to his potty area and then returned to help Irving transfer into bed. His adjustable bed lowered to the floor, and he was ready to transfer over when I held his shoulder. "Use the board, Irving. Even if only for today. You have to be careful with that hand. Try not to hoist yourself until those stitches can do their job."

"Fine," he said with a sigh. After I grabbed it from the bathroom, I stepped back so he could position it correctly.

Once he slid into bed, I lifted his legs onto the mattress and moved the board to rest across the chair so he had it if needed during the night.

He started to elevate his bed while I went to let Star in, but when I returned, he was lowering the bed again.

“What do you need?” I asked, stopping him from transferring into his chair. “I can get it.”

“It’s a bit embarrassing, so I’d rather do it.”

I paused and took a moment to look over the situation when it hit me. “You need a bag for your catheter. The hook is there, but there’s no bag. Where is it?”

“In the bathroom hanging near the toilet. That’s where I put it after I wash it out every morning.”

“Get your bed ready. I’ll grab it.” By the time I got back with it, he had his socks on and his bed situated. He lifted his shirt, pulled the capped catheter tube from his belt around his waist, and then attached it to the bag. Once it was done, he hung it on the hook by his bed and laid back.

“Thanks. It has to be gravity drained at night since I might not wake up if my bladder is full.”

“What happens if you don’t wake up?” I asked, leaning on the side of the bed.

“Best case is it leaks, and I have a mess to clean up. Worst case, my blood pressure increases and my body goes into autonomic dysreflexia.”

Autonomic dysreflexia was a common syndrome in patients with spinal cord injuries. Their blood pressure increases when the nervous system’s automatic part is activated. My body would automatically fix the problem using my other nervous systems, but his can’t respond to any situation below his injury, so in layman’s term, his body goes haywire. That puts undue stress on his heart and can cause a heart attack and even death.

“It’s happened a few times, and it’s extremely unpleasant. Since I’ve had the catheter for so long, I know when to empty

it throughout the day, but it's safer when I live alone to use the free drain system in bed."

"I agree with that assessment. Do you need anything else?"

"I'm good, thanks. I have a central remote for the lights. Is Star in his bed?"

When I checked the corner, the dog was already snoring. "He's out," I said with a chuckle.

"Good. Well, I guess I'll see you in the morning, Nurse Cane?"

"Don't do that," I said immediately, shaking my head. "That's not what I'm doing here. I'm helping a friend who was injured by no fault of his own today and many years ago. There is room for kindness in the world, Irving."

"So they say. I'm just not used to people helping because they want to and not because they have to."

"Well, you can put me firmly in the want-to category, okay?"

"Noted," he said with a smile. "I'll try to be less of a disaster tomorrow so we can get some work done."

"You're not a disaster, Irving. You had a bad day. We all have them. We're all human, no matter how we move around the earth. Let me offer up my first day in Bells Pass as an example."

His laughter was natural and I liked that my being here had relaxed him and made him smile. "I'll give you that."

"You get some rest. Good night, Irving."

He took my hand and held it, twining our fingers together for a moment before he tried to let go. I didn't let him. He needed human contact. He needed someone to remind him that he wasn't alone. I was lucky enough to get to do that, so I untangled our hands, walked to the other side of the bed and climbed in.

○○○○○○

Hazel pulled the blanket over her legs as she climbed into my bed and rested her head on the spare pillow. Her right hand reached for my left, where she gently linked our fingertips, being careful of my palm.

*Why was she in my bed?*

“Hazel, what’s going on? Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” she said as she hit the remote to turn off the lights. The rope lights along the baseboards slowly came to life, and the LED lights would stay on all night in case I needed to get up. It was one of my favorite accessibility features since turning the lights on meant I’d be awake again for hours.

“Why are you in my bed then?”

“Sometimes we need a friend when we’ve had a bad day, so I’m staying.”

“Because I need a friend?”

“Yep, even if you don’t want to admit it.”

“Admitting it isn’t the problem,” I said, staring at the ceiling. “Counting on someone is. I’ve learned that investing too much of myself into a relationship ends with me being hurt.”

“I can only assume you’re talking about women?”

“Romantically speaking, yes, but in general, everyone. It’s hard being friends with the guy in the wheelchair. What do you do when everyone else wants to go hiking or golfing? I spent a lot of time alone. Probably why I had my master’s degree by the time I was twenty-four.” I meant for the comment to be funny, but it just sounded pathetic.

Before saying anything, she flipped her hand around to grab my wrist, allowing me to hold hers without hurting my palm. “I didn’t need you to tell me that you’ve spent a lot of time alone. Sometimes, I feel like you pull a string and pop up a life vest around yourself. Everything and everyone bounces off of you to keep you safe.”



The sound I made was halfway between a gasp and a grunt. “That image is powerful.”

“But true,” she said with a shrug of her shoulder. “It’s a reflex. Something you do whenever someone asks a question you don’t like or tries too hard to break down your walls.”

“Someone like you?” I asked with a wink, turning my head to face her.

“I’ve felt it. I won’t lie. Just now when you called me Nurse Cane, I pictured that airbag vest blowing up. What I want you to know, though, is that I understand. You can come at me with your puffed-up vest, and I can bounce off you, but you may as well know I’m coming back for more.”

I couldn’t help but laugh because what do you even say to that kind of sweetness? “Now that much I knew. Hazel Cane has the *never give in, never give up* kind of attitude when she finds herself a charity case.”

“No!” she exclaimed, sitting straight up in bed. Star growled from the corner.

“Star, you’re fine.”

“He might be, but I’m not,” she said, crossing her arms over her chest. “I’m insulted and hurt. A lot bounces off of me after all my years in social work, but not that.”

I bit my lip and refused to make eye contact. After too many moments of silence, I knew I had to say something. “I think my vest blew up again.”

“Exponentially,” she said with a sigh. “First of all, none of my clients are charity cases. As a social worker, you know that!”

I held up my hands in defeat. “I know, and you know I feel the same way, but that doesn’t mean I can’t think of myself as one, Hazel. That’s my right,” I dug my finger into my chest to make the point. “While I would never call a client that, those words come from my heart when I think about myself. My early life set me on that path, from my injury to my family life to my college experience to my first job—not to mention my friends and girlfriends. They all saw me that way,

so it's hard not to internalize that, no matter how positive I am in my job."

Her shoulders relaxed a tad, and she let out a long sigh. "You know I can't argue with how you feel about yourself on the inside, even if it's not true. No one around that table tonight at the diner thought you were a charity case. You know that, right? They're your friends because they want to be and for no other reason."

I tipped my head to the side to hold her gaze. "Why do you think I've stayed in Bells Pass? Why do you think I've held onto this frustrating job for almost a year when nothing I've done has been appreciated or heard? Everyone is so genuine that when I'm lonely, all I have to do is go to the diner or the pub, and there's someone to talk to. I didn't have that in the big city where alone felt like alone. You're different, though, Hazel Cane."

"Tell me how," she said, resting back on the pillow to keep me in her sight. "What makes me different? Is it because I'm from the big city and don't feel genuine like the people here do?"

I shook my head on the pillow. Frustration filled me and I wasn't sure how to even explain how I felt about her. "You're different than anyone I've met before, Hazel. You're so unapologetically you that you make it impossible not to care about you. The thing is, I know that caring too much will result in a broken heart, so I have to roll this line I drew in my own mind so I don't come off as a jerk but also, so I don't come off as clingy."

"Are you coming at it from the angle that I'll eventually leave?"

I pointed at her with a nod. "That. Everyone else has."

"I'm not everyone else," she said, as though that should be obvious.

"No, you certainly aren't," I agreed with a laugh that held more frustration than mirth.

She settled into the bed deeper and pulled the blanket over her shoulder before retaking my wrist and waiting for me to grasp her forearm. “Here’s the way I look at it, Irving. When we protect our hearts to feel safe, we accomplish that goal, but in the end, we don’t feel safe as much as we feel lonely. In theory, if we don’t put too much of ourselves out there, we don’t get hurt when a relationship falls apart, right?” she asked, and I nodded. “In practice, that’s never the case. Usually, the relationship fails because we hold too much of ourselves back. We end up hurt and feel that void the other person left anyway. That tells me that holding back our hearts doesn’t keep us from being hurt. It blocks us from having intimate, open, quality relationships with people as friends and as lovers.”

“It’s better to have loved and lost,” I said and she nodded, her long red hair brushing against the pillow.

“Than never to have loved at all,” she agreed. “I’m not asking you to give more to this relationship than you’re comfortable giving, but I will be giving everything I have to our relationship. I want you to see, hear, taste, and touch that someone will keep coming back, no matter how many times you push them away.”

“Our relationship?” I asked in confusion. “Work relationship?”

“Work, friendship, or something more. I can’t define it right now, and that’s okay. All I know is, I’m in it for the long haul, so you better get used to this face.”

She pointed at her face with a wink, and I smiled. “You won’t get an argument from me, Hazel, but I don’t know how much I can—”

Her finger came down on my lips, and she shook her head. “Don’t. Don’t justify why you feel something or don’t feel something. Don’t try to lay out parameters for our relationship. Just give it time to unfold and show its true self. At some point, it will. Maybe it will be a working relationship only. Maybe we’ll have an epic friendship. Maybe we’ll have

an epic love story, but whatever the case, don't stunt it here tonight by saying something neither of us can forget."

"That's fair," I whispered once she moved her finger to my cheek to caress it. I was so tired that her skin against mine was relaxing me and I could hardly keep my eyes open.

"Sleep now, Irving. I'll be here when you wake up and every day after that."

I closed my eyes and imagined how it would feel to have her hands caressing the rest of me like a lover would. The scary part was I could imagine it. I hadn't allowed myself to do that for years. Was there a chance that we could be more than friends? Was there a chance we could have an epic love story? As I drifted to sleep feeling loved for the first time in too many years, I understood that the chance rested squarely on my shoulders.

## Chapter Nine

The diner was quiet when I entered at barely five a.m., but the scent of cinnamon rolls and coffee filled my senses. Though I couldn't drink it, I still loved how the smell made me feel inside—especially mixed with baked goods. It reminded me of Saturday mornings at home when my parents didn't have to work, so they made a big breakfast for us to share. There was so much nostalgia in the smell of coffee that it was a shame I couldn't drink it. Especially today when I needed a jolt to my soul.

The sleep-out event was tomorrow night, and we had all agreed to meet here for the final meeting before Friday. When they suggested meeting here for breakfast, how could I turn them down? Irving would have come, but I convinced him to stay home and catch some extra Zs. When I climbed out of his bed at four-thirty, he'd stirred, but I encouraged him to go back to sleep after I put Star out. I had slept in his bed every night since he'd hurt his hand, strictly platonic, of course, but after a few days, I noticed he was more relaxed at work, and with me.

Over the last week, he smiled nonstop and even laughed as I sang Christmas carols around the building. The Grinch hadn't joined in yet, but my goal was to convince him to sing one song before the holidays ended. I hoped he would be a completely different Irving than the one I'd met in September once he'd soaked up enough of my nonjudgmental care and tenderness. Don't get me wrong, I love who he is, but he'd lost his ability to love—to truly commit to loving someone wholly—no matter the consequences. I desperately wanted to give that back to him.

He was making great strides just by me sharing a bed with him. By showing him that he wasn't alone, he's starting to take better care of himself. When he got an infection and an embedded stitch in the wound, he asked me to take him to the clinic to address it. After a round of antibiotics and removal of the one stitch, it has slowly healed up, so we're hoping they'll take the rest of the stitches out at his next appointment on

Friday morning. Will I go back to my apartment to sleep once that happens? I wish I could answer that. I tipped my head for a moment as I unwound my scarf from my neck. If I was truthful with myself, I could answer that question already. I wanted to stay in his bed, wrapped up in his arms come the morning light with his head against mine. The last ten nights had shown me that Irving wasn't the only one who needed to learn how to risk their whole heart again.

"Ivy?" I called, taking my gloves and hat off. It was below freezing this morning and I could smell the snow in the air. We'd get some before Friday, but not enough to cancel the event. Just enough to prove our point about the need for housing for everyone.

"I'll be right out!" Ivy called from the kitchen.

I was the first to arrive, so I grabbed a booth and slid into it, hanging my coat on the hook by the bench. I was barely settled when the door opened and a whoosh of cold air ushered in a gaggle of giggling girls. This booth wasn't going to be big enough, so I scooted in as close as I could as Heather, Mrs. Violet, Addie, Mel, Becca, and Indigo tromped in, shedding layers of clothing as they did so. They all hung their coats on the coat tree and greeted me with broad smiles and open arms.

"Good morning," I said, leaving the booth to accept hugs from Mrs. Violet, who had, of course, gotten in line first.

"Good morning, gorgeous. It's going to snow!" She was as exuberant as a little kid watching the sky for the first flakes and I couldn't help but laugh.

"That's what I heard too," I agreed. "Maybe it will flock the tree just so for the tree lighting next week."

I hugged the rest of the girls as Ivy bustled in from the kitchen and slid a pan of cinnamon rolls across the counter so she could get in on the hugging. Then she shooed us into the booth, which we did, three deep, and that still left Ivy and Mrs. Violet to grab chairs. Ivy passed out coffee, tea, and rolls than sat down to join us.

“Where are your companions?” Mrs. Violet asked between sips of coffee. “Isn’t Irving part of the team?”

“He is,” I agreed, “but I convinced him to stay in bed this morning. I let Star out and told him to get a few extra hours. His hand isn’t healing well and we’ve been burning the candle on both ends to get this event ready all while doing our other work.”

“Wait, you were in his apartment this morning?” Heather asked with a sly smile.

“What? No,” I said, adding a psshht to the end for emphasis. “I just stopped over there before I left.”

“Then why couldn’t he let Star out by himself, dear?” Mrs. Violet asked. I could see from the corner of my eye that she was trying not to smirk. Ivy was practically vibrating with all the questions she wanted to ask.

I had to play this carefully. Breaking Irving’s trust now would be game over and that was the last thing I would let happen. I motioned with my hands for them to settle down. “I have access to his apartment in case he has a problem, especially right now with his hand. I’ve had to help him out a few times with household stuff. I went to his apartment and told him to stay in bed and then let Star out so they could sleep in. That’s all.”

“That’s nice of you, dear,” Mrs. Violet said.

I let out a breath. Mission accomplished. I had to be more careful about what I said around this group. They were too savvy, and with so many of them, someone always picked up on an innocent comment and ran with it.

“Irving is a great guy and a solid work colleague. As we’re the only two living in the building, it makes sense that we’re friends too. Anyway, I told him I’d fill him in on anything that changes after the meeting. Something tells me we aren’t here to talk about the event as much as we are to have breakfast and gossip.”

“Maybeeee,” Ivy said, dragging the word out while we all laughed. “We do have business to attend to first. Audrey, how

is it coming with the council members?”

“Five out of six ain’t bad?” she asked sardonically.

The diner was filled by the groan heard around the town. “Mr. Thompson?” Ivy asked, and Audrey rolled her eyes.

“Who else? That’s okay, though. I’ve already talked to Russ from the paper and he’ll be attending. He has every intention of doing a big write up about the event and New Beginnings. If Henry doesn’t show up, Russ will call him out on it. I’ve also made it known that the paper will be there taking pictures for an article.”

“You’re diabolical,” Becca said laughing, but the words were filled with love. From what I’d gathered, Audrey had taken Becca under her wing once they found out about her circumstances. When it came out that Becca couldn’t read well, Audrey had sat right down to tutor her so she could get her GED and go on to take business classes. My guess was, if I had a dollar for everything Mrs. Violet did in this community, there would be hundreds more for the things she’d done that no one knew about.

“I like to think of it as inventive,” Audrey said, giggling as she took a drink of her coffee.

“It’s going to be disappointing if he doesn’t show up, so thank you for trying so hard, Mrs. Violet.”

“It’s Audrey, dear, and it’s no problem. Henry has always been stuck about four centuries behind the times. I don’t know how he got on the council, but he’d better figure out how to change with the times or when his term comes up, I’ll make sure someone runs against him that will fill his seat with some modicum of human decency.”

Everyone in the room was silent. It wasn’t often that Audrey said something so pointed and with such fervor.

“I mean, she’s not wrong,” Ivy said with a shrug of her shoulder. “If I had time, I’d run, but lord knows that’s not happening for another eighteen years or so.”

Becca put her hand on her baby bump. “Same here. I can’t believe I’m halfway through the pregnancy already. It’s



almost time for the gender reveal.”

Ivy stood up instantly. “Do you know what you’re having?”

“Uh, no,” Becca said, laughing at Ivy’s dramatics. “That’s kind of the point of a gender reveal.”

“When do you have the ultrasound?” Mel asked, flipping her notebook open.

“Tomorrow.”

Mel raised a brow. “Want to do a gender reveal on Saturday at the farm for family day? We could make it fun and have the kids decorate stroller cookies in pink or blue frosting. The adults could guess for a chance to win a gift card to the store. After Stephan reads the book, we’d have you and Cameron cut a cake where the frosting on the inside will be pink or blue.” Again, the room was silent as we all glanced at each other in curiosity and amusement. Mel huffed. “Fine, so maybe I’ve been thinking about a fun way to do a gender reveal for Becca!”

We all bust out laughing, including Becca, until she finally waved her hands in the air. “I love this idea, Mel! We’re all about the farm, so this is a perfect way to let our regular Saturday families participate too. I’ll have to run it past Stephan, but—”

“He’s going to squeal, clap his hands, and run to find a book about a new baby joining the family!” Heather said as they all laughed.

“Who’s Stephan?” I asked, glancing between them for answers.

“You mean you haven’t been to the farm to meet Stephan?” Indigo asked, obviously taken aback.

“No, I haven’t been to the farm at all, honestly. I was going to suggest it, but I know it’s not exactly wheelchair friendly, so I didn’t want Irving to feel left out.”

Indigo waved her hand in the air. “It is accessible. At least the pathways and the store as of now. I know you guys

are working on making the other paths accessible as well, right, Becca?”

“Oh, yes,” Becca said. “We’ve got a parking pad for people who use wheelchairs that’s heated underneath, so there’s never ice or snow on it, and the same goes for the walkway to the store. Since we couldn’t do that for the tree paths, we laid down rubber tiles of sorts that run through the first part of the cut your own tree lot. That makes it easy to keep them cleaned off of needles and snow. It’s not great once we get a lot of snow, but by then, Christmas is usually over. That said, we always have precut trees you can pick from if you don’t want to cut your own. You guys should seriously come out! Cameron has put a lot of thought and effort into making the farm accessible and welcoming to all since he met me.”

“She’s right,” Indigo said, finishing her cinnamon roll. “Lance is so busy working with the culinary kids out there that he had to give up his work here.”

Ivy frowned. “We miss him so much! Brittany has stepped up and filled his shoes seamlessly, which says a lot about how well Lance can teach people to cook, but she misses him. Lance was with her every step of the way from dishes to line cook, and look at her now.”

“Now she’s making delicious dog cookies for the pooches of Bells Pass!” I said, laughter erupting around the table. “Sorry, Star told me I should get a plug in for those sweet potato ones. He’s a fan.”

Ivy wiped her eyes of the tears when she finished laughing. “Oh, I’ve seen it. He certainly is. Why don’t you tell them, Mel.”

Mel smiled and leaned forward, as though she had a big secret to tell. “We’re going national, and we’re using Brittany’s dog cookies to do it!”

Silence.

“Color me confused,” Addie said. “Going national?”

“We’ve got a contract with a pet store chain to supply organic dog cookies nationwide. It’s a collaborative effort between the diner, bakery, and Lance’s culinary kids. We’ll also have the Family and Consumer Education Kids and Future Business Leaders of America help us package and ship them. Brittany’s cookies have been such a hit at the bakery that it’s the logical thing to do.”

“The logical thing to do is to sell them at the bakery in Bells Pass,” I said when she finished. “That’s the logical thing, but Bells Pass logic and the rest of the country’s logic seems to be a bit different.”

“Just a bit,” Ivy said, holding her fingers together. “We wanted to continue to fund Seeds of Hope in a way that incorporates what Cameron has already started, is fun, gives jobs to people with disabilities, and will hopefully be successful. If it’s not, we’ll pivot, but I think we have an excellent plan in place.”

“You know Irving and I will help get the word out. Star would be happy to taste test new recipes and be a spokesdog!”

Ivy burst out laughing and pointed at Becca. “What did I just say? Between Star and Bradley, we’ll know if the cookies are winners.”

“Anything else on the agenda for the sleep-out event?” Audrey asked to get us back on track. “The clock is ticking.”

I turned to Heather and Addie. “My job today is to get the salon ready. Do you want to stop over later and check out the setup? You can tell me what I need to have available for you.”

“That’s great,” Addie said with a nod. “We don’t open until ten today. Could we stop over this morning around nine?”

“I’ll be there. Just ring the bell at the back door, and I’ll let you in.”

“Okay, check that off the list,” Mrs. Violet said. “The gym is covering towels, soap, and shampoo,” she reported. “They wanted to know how to help, so I thought that was a great option. They have the towels and the ability to wash them back at the gym, so I jumped at the chance.”

“Excellent!” I agreed with a clap. “That was one thing that slipped my mind. I’m glad you thought of it.”

“The food for the event is coming in tomorrow morning on our truck. Brittany will attend to the buffet and make sure everything stays filled. Lance and one of his more advanced students will run the omelet bar,” Indigo said.

“I’ll deliver all the snacks and pastries Friday morning,” Becca said. “Does ten a.m. sound good? That gets us past the morning rush at the bakery.”

“Absolutely,” I said, typing it into my phone.

“Well, I think that just leaves us with the agenda item of Indigo’s wedding,” Audrey said, closing her notebook.

“Um, my what now?” Indigo asked as all eyes pinned her.

“You got engaged nearly a year ago, dear,” Mrs. Violet reminded her. “It’s time to set a date.”

I noticed her twist her ring around on her finger a couple of times. “Lance wanted to do it somewhere that Michelle could see us.”

“Who’s Michelle?” I asked, glancing between everyone.

“Lance’s mom,” Ivy answered. “She passed away suddenly last September. She was a single mom and raised Lance alone, so they were very close.”

“Oh no,” I said with a frown. “That’s terrible. I can understand why he feels that way.”

“Right,” Indigo agreed. “That said, we’re busy with the Christmas light competition in the neighborhood, not to mention how busy Lance is at the farm.”

“You know that Cameron will give him all the time off that he wants to get married, right?” Becca asked.

“What’s the Christmas light competition?” To say I was completely confused by the entire conversation was an understatement.

“Lance and Indigo still live in Michelle’s house, and that neighborhood has a Christmas light competition. It was

Michelle's favorite thing to do with Lance, so he and Indigo have kept it going. Last year they did a breathtaking live nativity," Ivy explained.

"No, you guys did a breathtaking live nativity," Indigo corrected her. "We just set up the lights." She turned to me. "It's kind of Lance's way to keep her memory alive."

"That's really very sweet," I said with a smile. "I can see how Lance would do that for his mom."

"Let's pick a date in the new year, then!" Mrs. Violet said. "Not much going on in January or February. If he wants Michelle to be present, maybe you could do it in the hospital chapel." She leaned over to me. "Michelle was a nurse at the Bells Pass Hospital."

I nodded in understanding but hadn't taken my eyes off Indigo. Something didn't sit right. She was nervous having this discussion when most engaged women would want to do nothing but talk about their wedding. I leaned forward and took her hand to stop her from fiddling with her ring. "Indigo, have you changed your mind about marrying Lance? It's okay if you need to take a step back."

"No!" she exclaimed immediately. "No, that's not it at all. I love Lance, and we're very happy. It's just that," her eyes darted to Ivy briefly before they dropped to the table. "We're already married. I don't wear my wedding band at work."

"What now?" Addie asked, looking around Heather to see her friend. I was shocked Ivy hadn't said anything, so I turned to glance at her, and she sat stock still, her mouth hanging open.

"You all know how Lance is, right?" she asked, and everyone nodded but me.

"He's shy, quiet, and doesn't like a fuss being made," Becca said.

"You also know he has the traumatic brain injury and sometimes, things get stuck."

"Things like ideas?" I asked and she nodded, finally looking up at everyone.

“Not in a bad way, but in an emotional way. He was very stuck on getting married where Michelle could see us. I told him that wherever we were, she’d be there, but—”

“Lance’s brain pathways don’t reason like that all the time,” Ivy said and Indigo nodded.

“Ivy, he was so,” she moved her hands around in front of herself in a flutter. “Churned up? I guess that describes it, so I finally agreed to get married wherever he thought was best. I don’t have any family, so it’s not like they were going to come. He promised we’d have a reception later on, so I agreed to just the two of us and the justice of the peace at the cemetery by his mom’s grave.”

Ivy let out a breath that sounded pained. “Let me guess. You got married on September seventeenth?”

She didn’t need to nod for us to see the truth. “He wanted a new memory for that day, Ivy. I couldn’t be the one to deny him that by being selfish.”

Ivy reached over and took her hand, squeezing it tightly. “You did the right thing, honey.”

“Absolutely, dear,” Audrey said, her gray hair bobbing as she nodded. “That boy has been through enough in life. You offered him grace by putting your wants aside. That’s what makes a strong relationship.”

“Don’t get me wrong, it was a beautiful day,” she said, taking out her phone. “The sun was shining, the birds were singing, and leaves were just starting to change.”

She passed her phone around to show everyone the image of them holding hands in front of the justice of the peace.

“That,” I said, gazing at the image, “is the definition of intimacy. You were locked together in that moment, and being alone made it easy to be vulnerable with each other at the most important event of your life.”

Indigo took the phone back. “You think so? I’ll remember it forever as the day we were bound together by more than rings and paper. He agreed to let me hire a photographer to take some pictures, as that was my only hang-up. You know I

don't have any family, so if we have kids and they want to see our wedding photos one day, I want to have something to show them."

Ivy squeezed her shoulder and nodded. "I agree with you. It will be nice to have those as the years go on. Maybe it's time you start wearing your band at work. Lance too."

Indigo dug under her shirt and brought out a chain where a wedding band hung. "We still wear them, but maybe it's time to put them on our fingers."

"Why haven't you told anyone?" Becca asked. "It's been months."

"I was afraid of how you'd react. Like, logically, I know it was our choice. We could do what we wanted, but Bells Pass expects a wedding every Christmas, and we weren't going to give them that this year."

I groaned quietly. "Let me guess, the legend of the gazebo?"

Heads nodded from around the table, but it was Audrey who spoke. "It's a real thing, dear. You'll see." The wink she punctuated that sentence with was enough to tell me I wasn't off the hook from the gazebo legend just because I was new here.

"While it's always exciting to have a wedding to celebrate, we understand why you did what you did," Ivy said, surprising a few of them by the looks on their faces. Ivy waved her hands in front of her. "I know, I know. I usually pester the new couple about getting married, but I felt it would be different with Lance. We could hold your reception if you'd like, which would still be a celebration!"

"We tried to plan one, but the community center was booked until after Christmas," Indigo said. "What can you do?"

"Use my rec center," I said without hesitation. "Since we don't have anyone living in the apartments yet, I couldn't decide if I should decorate for Christmas, but I really want to! Please, say you'll do it, and then I can make the place festive!"

Indigo looked at Ivy and Audrey with a raised brow before she pinned it on me. “Is that legal? Like, can you have gatherings there?”

I glanced at Heather, who shrugged. “As far as the housing foundation goes, you absolutely can. The insurance is in place, so nothing is stopping you in that regard. I would guess you’d need to make sure your permit for gatherings is up to date, which it should be, and that you don’t exceed the fire code.”

“Fire code is two and a quarter,” I said, already knowing the information from planning the sleep-out event.

Indigo laughed and shook her head. “I don’t want over two hundred people at my wedding reception.”

“Besides,” Heather said. “Between the event on Friday and a booking for a wedding reception, it shows the council that the community will use New Beginnings if they move things along. Neither event is technically what the place was intended for, but if it can be used by the community as a whole, that extends its reach. I like the idea if Indigo and Lance do. I’m happy to run it past Cameron and the rest of the housing board just to be sure.”

“Would you?” Indigo asked with excitement. “We would love to have the reception sooner rather than later, and I’d love to showcase New Beginnings at the same time if we can. I moved in with Lance out of desperation, but I had planned to transition into those apartments in January. Imagine if we hadn’t fallen in love and gotten married. I’d still be waiting!”

“A lot of people are still waiting,” I said with a frown. “We’re extremely frustrated that they’re paying us to do a job that we can’t do. We can’t even do intake paperwork yet because we don’t know how many apartments will be accessible.”

“We do know how many,” Heather said with frustration. “We don’t know when they’re going to give us the go ahead. That’s the difference. This should be done and open by now, but oh no, can’t help anyone who might be in a different place



in life than you are.” Her eye roll punctuated the end of the sentence.

“Agreed,” Audrey said. “That’s why I’m hoping the two siding with Mr. Stick in the Mud come to the event on Friday. If they do, and we can flip their view on what you’re doing there, then it doesn’t matter if ole Henry votes no at the next meeting. It’s a done deal.”

“Like I said. Diabolical,” Becca said, starting to laugh. She turned to me. “Are you doing tours of New Beginnings? I know I’d love to tour it but I wasn’t sure if it was safe or allowed.”

“Yes, we plan to run tours on Friday night. We’re hoping Audrey gets those board members to show up, so even if they toured New Beginnings at the start of the project, a second tour will show them how much it has changed. I’ll help Irving clean and spruce everything up since his hand is still out of commission.”

“That’s very kind, dear,” Audrey said, patting my shoulder as everyone bit their lips to keep from smiling. “I’m sure Irving needs the help.”

“Friends help friends,” I said with a shrug. “He doesn’t *need* my help to clean his apartment. He takes care of his business handily, but he needs to get those stitches out sooner rather than later. We can’t risk it getting infected again.”

“He must be miserable,” Ivy said in agreement. “Did you hear that Pharmacist Richie asked me after the last business owners’ meeting how to install a door opener on the building?”

“No!” I exclaimed, giving a small clap of approval. “That will be wonderful if he does!”

“Chuck wants to, but has to check with the owner of the building. He feels bad that he may have to put it on the back door, forcing those using it to walk down a hallway to get to the main pharmacy, but he doesn’t think it would work on the front door.”

“I’m sure anyone who needs it doesn’t mind using a different door. That’s quite common for safety, parking availability, and sidewalk accessibility. He shouldn’t feel bad about that. I’m glad he’s being proactive about it.”

Ivy crossed her fingers. “Me too. If we want to fill jobs in this community, we have to give them housing and start making everything accessible to everyone. It’s a nonstarter if we don’t.”

“Looks like we’ve covered our agenda then,” Audrey said. “Everyone knows what their jobs are going forward?” Heads nodded in agreement, and Audrey clapped her hands together before she stood. “Good, then let’s get to it, ladies! We have less than twenty-four hours to make this a night to remember for Bells Pass!”

Her enthusiasm was catchy, and we all filtered out of the booth, motivated to head out and do just that. As I pulled my coat and hat on, I was focused on the brown eyes of the guy waiting for me at home.

Home.

Was this home now? I wished it to be, but only time would tell if that wish could come true.



After checking out the old salon area, Addie and Heather had just left the building. They were confident they could do two haircuts at a time, and Heather’s husband, Gabe, would organize those who want to shower. As a cop, he’s always involved in the community, and he wants people to meet and interact with him positively the first time. That way, they tend to remember he’s a decent guy when his job gets involved in their business.

I strolled down the hall to the community area while humming a Christmas carol. Irving might not like them, but the stores had been playing them for almost a month, and there was no avoiding it any longer, especially since Indigo’s

reception was on the docket for approval. I couldn't wait to deck the halls! I'd been looking forward to it for days, even if I had to do it alone. As soon as the sleep-out event was over, I'd get to work decorating the main gathering area and the hallways near our apartments and the office. I needed some Christmas cheer, especially since the latest update from Cliff was not what I wanted to hear. They still hadn't found or captured Felding. What was the old saying, no good deed goes unpunished? Extremely accurate, I had learned.

The side doorbell rang and when I got to the door, I noticed Mayor Tottle standing on the other side. I pulled the door open and ushered him in. "Mayor Tottle, how nice to see you."

"Good morning, Hazel. Please, call me Jack."

"Jack? I thought your first name was Orlando?"

"It is, but can you imagine using a name like Orlando when you're six?"

I laughed as I nodded. "That's fair. I'll give you a point for that. Jack it is."

"Are you busy, or do you have time to talk?"

"I have all the time in the world for you, Jack," I said, closing the door behind him.

"Is Irving about? He needs to be here for this."

Now I was nervous. If the mayor was here, there could be a problem with the city permits for the sleep-out event. I would have thought we'd know by now since the event was happening tomorrow, but I put nothing past the government. "He's in the office. I'll call him."

After walking to the intercom to ask Irving to join us, I offered Jack a cup of coffee while we waited. He politely declined but did walk around the community space with an eye to the details.

"I heard you were submitting a permit to hold a wedding reception here."

“Wow, word travels fast,” I said, leaning against a table. “We just talked about it this morning at the diner.”

“Bells Pass is outgrowing the one space we do have for public gatherings. I spoke with Cameron this morning when he called after talking to his sister. We both agree New Beginnings is a great backup option for people, especially around the holidays. As long as it won't be a problem for the tenants once the facility is open.”

“Essentially, I was looking at Indigo's reception as a way to test the waters with holding small parties here. If it goes over well, I would ask the lawyer to add a clause to the lease stating there would be private events held here and the ground rules for tenants would be spelled out. Since our hall is relatively removed from most of the apartments other than mine and Irving's, I don't think events will have much impact on the tenants. We wouldn't hold the prom here. We'd only host smaller more intimate events, and we would have the right to decline if the situation didn't fit with our goals.”

Jack nodded in agreement. “I'm glad you've thought it out. It might be a way to fund other community events and programs you want to host.”

“Yes!” I agreed, shaking my finger at him. “My hope is we can use the rental fee from events for other community outreach programs throughout the year. That requires less draw on the foundation, and more community involvement means more community acceptance.”

“I couldn't agree more,” Irving said as he rolled into the room with Star. “Good to see you, Jack.” Irving stuck his hand out to shake once he was close enough. “What do we owe the pleasure?”

Jack pulled an official-looking envelope from his pocket and handed it to Irving. “A request from the town of Bells Pass.”

Irving lowered a brow but opened the envelope and read it aloud. “It would be the full honor of the citizens of Bells Pass if Irving Wallace and Hazel Cane would be the honorary tree lighters for the fiftieth annual tree lighting in the Bells

Pass Park on Friday, November twenty-sixth at six p.m.” He lowered the paper to his lap and glanced up. “Really?”

“Truly,” the mayor answered.

“This is the fiftieth anniversary?” I asked, my mouth still hanging open. “That honor should go to a longtime community member.”

“As tradition, we always have the owner of the newest business light the tree, or a community hero if there is no new business.”

“We didn’t open a new business,” Irving pointed out. “We just did our jobs as asked by the housing council. Cameron or the housing council should do the honor.”

“Trust me, after much discussion this year, which is why the invitation is so late, it was voted that you and Hazel would flip the switch. Bells Pass is nothing if not traditional, and we’ve done the same thing for fifty years. Then you two came in and made a change that had been necessary but arduous. You say you’re just doing your job, and you are, there is no doubt, but you bring another dimension to that job. You live where you work and fight valiantly for the underdog at every turn, all while keeping your public face positive and welcoming. It takes a special kind of person to do that, especially in a small town, but we lucked out and found two of you. So, the invitation is made with the utmost respect for what you’ve done here and what you hope to do in the future. Bells Pass needs this change and the positive impact it’s already making on our town.”

Irving glanced up at me with a smile. “What do you say, partner?”

“With that kind of confidence and appreciation for what we do, we’ll be there,” I said with a nod and a handshake with the mayor.

“Excellent! Everyone will be so pleased that you agreed. Irving, the city works has installed a temporary ramp over part of the stairs leading to the gazebo. It’s steep, but someone will be there to make sure you get up it safely with far more dignity

than last year. We plan to leave it through the Christmas season so people who would like to have a picture under the tree, but need accessibility, can do so. By next year, the new ramp will be built, of course.”

Irving put his hand to his chest. “I so appreciate that, Jack, since I was sitting here thinking how to move everything down to the walking path.” He patted Star’s head. “My buddy here will help me get up the ramp, but we’ll do it before you start the festivities so as not to put on an unintended show.”

“That’s good enough for me. You’ll find me there preparing by five-thirty, but I’m sure you’ll be in the park long before that.”

“We will be,” I assured him. “We’ll be helping Audrey with the food donations for the food pantry and making sure anyone who didn’t get to the Thanksgiving dinner the day before can pick up a coat and winter gear if needed.”

“I’d expect no less,” Jack said as he pulled on his gloves. “I will take my leave then, as I’m sure you have much to do before tomorrow night.”

He walked to the door, and I followed, unlocking it and holding it open for him. “Will we see you tomorrow night?”

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world. Cynthia and I are looking forward to the new era of Bells Pass and something tells me, tomorrow night is just the start.” With a wink, he was gone, whistling a Christmas tune as the powdery snow that was falling puffed out from under his feet.

After locking the door, I turned back to Irving who sat with the same expression I suspected was on my face. “I’m shocked,” he said, shaking his head slightly.

“Me too. Did you know it was the fiftieth year? Audrey never said a thing about it.”

“No,” he said, shaking his head again. “No one has said a thing, which means they’re keeping everything under their hat. Be prepared for quite the celebration.”

I leaned over his chair and smiled. “I’m looking forward to it because I get to spend it with you, Irving Wallace.”

Before I could give into temptation and kiss his lips, I pushed off his chair and walked away whistling *Santa Claus is Coming to Town*.

## Chapter Ten

“Where are we heading?” Hazel asked as I steered the SUV down a dirt road.

“Tent city. I want to distribute some of the sleep-out event flyers there.”

“We’re going down into an encampment while it’s snowing and you’re going to use your wheelchair?”

I glanced at her quickly as I crawled around a corner on the dirt road. “Do you want to carry me instead?”

“Har-har,” she said, but I noticed her lips tipped up. “Aren’t there other places to put the flyers?”

“Sure, but I want people to actually see them and that means bringing it to them. I figured you’d be fine with this considering your past work experience.”

“I have no problem distributing the flyers at the tent city or talking to anyone there. I do have a problem with it being snowing and you being one day away from getting stitches out of your hand after two long weeks.”

“I told you before that it’s all healed, and the infection is gone. I brought a vinyl glove along to wear under my regular ones. That will keep it clean and dry. Besides, if my guy is here, I may not even have to get out of the SUV.”

“Your guy?” she asked. “You have a guy?”

“More like a contact,” I said, parking the SUV outside an area that was usually packed full of tents but was almost empty now. “Looks like people have already taken off.”

“I can’t imagine living in a tent in the winter. I’m sure they don’t have a choice but to find a shelter or something warmer than a tent.”

“A lot of veterans with disabilities live out here,” I explained. “Many of them are missing limbs and use wheelchairs. There’s no way to live out here in the winter. Hopefully, word will travel about the event if they’re hiding out in town somewhere.”



Hazel grabbed some flyers off the dashboard and held her hand out to me. “Stay in the car. I’ll pass these out to those who are left and see if they have any immediate needs we can fill. Who’s your guy?”

“His name is Dawson. He has an eye patch and is missing fingers on his right hand.”

“Got it,” she said, opening the door to a gust of wind and a swirl of snowflakes.

Before I could say more, she was out the door and walking toward the tents. Before she made it two steps, three men stepped away from a tent and faced off with her. I put my window down so I could call out to them that she was cool, but before I could, she was handing out the flyers and talking to them like old friends. To say I was impressed was an understatement. It took me several trips out here to win anyone over and even then, no one laughed and smiled the way they did with her.

“Then again, I’m not a beautiful redhead, am I, Star?” I asked the dog, who sat at attention in the back seat. I swear he snorted, but I couldn’t be sure.

I noticed Hazel motion behind her toward the SUV, so I waved through the window to let them know we were together. She nodded several times and then pointed at the SUV before jogging back and climbing in.

“They said Dawson is at the library.” She rubbed her hands together in front of the heater vents. “They’re going to make sure the flyers get out to everyone.”

“Thanks, I appreciate the assist,” I said, turning the SUV in the tight space and heading back to the main highway. “We’ll go meet up with Dawson at the library.”

“Want to tell me about him?” she asked, settling back against the seat as we headed into town.

“Dawson was one of the first to apply to New Beginnings. I can tell you this because you work there,” he clarified and I nodded. “He’s a veteran with a disability and has been living on the street for must be close to three years

now. He faithfully checked on the construction progress and the status of his application over last winter. When summer hit and we still weren't open, I offered him some work on the grounds. He was the one who got Star's pen fenced in and kept it mowed for me along with some other chores that fell to me but I couldn't do. He's desperate for a place, but I can't even let him move into one of the empty apartments."

"That's why this is so frustrating!" she exclaimed as she stared out the windshield. "It's so unnecessary."

I wanted to grab her hand and calm her down, but using hand controls meant I couldn't. "I know," I whispered, allowing her to settle into her feelings for a moment so she could let her frustration out. "That's why I agreed to this event. I'll do anything to get our point across, and I'm confident this is a good start. If it doesn't work, I'm afraid we're going to have to move forward without accessible units just to get the place filled."

"We can't do that, Irving! There has to be accessible units in any new build."

"Then we agree to get the minimum finished, move people in, and try to utilize the accessible showers we still have. I don't know the right answer, but we can't keep doing a phantom job. Yes, we're working with the bungalow tenants, but that's not going to be enough to keep us both busy forever."

Her hand came up to rub her forehead and I could see the frustration drain from her shoulders as sadness set in. "I don't even want to consider that until after we do this event and attend the next board meeting."

I pulled up in front of the library in an accessible space and nodded. "I agree. Let's go talk to Dawson and then we'll head back to the center to tie everything up for tomorrow."

"He hangs out at the library a lot?" she asked as she got my chair out of the back hatch and rolled it around for me. While I transferred into my chair, she dressed Star and had him waiting when I was done.

“Thank you,” I said, taking his leash from her, our hands brushing together as I did. I didn’t realize how much I relied on her touch now, but just a brush of her hand calmed me and reminded me that I wasn’t alone. “He likes the library. It’s quiet and he can read without being disturbed. It’s warm and the librarians don’t mind that he’s here.”

She held the door for me to roll through. Once inside, I glanced to my left and right, looking for the man who had made an incredible impression on me over the last year and was now my friend. I spotted him in the back by a computer and motioned Hazel forward. Thankfully, the library was empty on this snowy day, so we could talk to him without disturbing anyone.

“Dawson,” I quietly said as we rolled up to him. “How you doing, man?”

Dawson stood immediately, grasping my hand for a shake before going in for a man hug. “I’m great, Irving. How are you? Long time no see. Do you have good news to report?”

“I wish I did,” I said, noticing his shoulders sink slightly. “But I have a favor to ask that might just get you moved in sooner rather than later. First, I want to introduce you to our recreation and programs social worker for New Beginnings. She’s in charge of events, programs, and other aspects of running the building for the tenants. This is Hazel Cane.”

“Nice to meet you, Hazel,” Dawson said, shaking her hand.

“I’ve heard many great things about you, Dawson. I appreciate your help at the center. From what I hear, you’re the reason Star stays safe every day when outside and that’s a huge relief off our shoulders.”

“It was no problem, ma’am. I was happy to help my dude out.” His gaze flicked to Star, but he didn’t speak to him, knowing he was working. “You know I’ve got both of your backs now, so tell me what you need and I’ll try to help.”

I took a few minutes to fill him in on what was happening with New Beginnings and the sleep-out event. “We shared

flyers at tent city, but I was hoping you'd stop in tomorrow night and talk with some of the people there."

"That's an easy ask," Dawson agreed. "To what end?"

"To make it real and bring it home to the council members that we need to get New Beginnings open yesterday. If we don't do something soon, the implications of this delay will have a massive ripple effect that I'm not sure we can come back from."

"I'll be there," Dawson said with a nod. "Are there services for my buddies?"

"Yes," Hazel said, jumping in. "We'll have hot showers and haircuts available. We'll also have grab bags, food, hot coffee, and contact information for other services."

With a head nod, Dawson smiled. "I'll let people know. The more people in my situation who show up, the more real it will feel to people who aren't used to seeing this area's housing insecure all in one place. All I ask is, if anyone comes and helps you out, that you consider their application first for housing."

"Done," I said, shaking his hand. "You know we're prioritizing veterans with disabilities, veterans, and young adults for New Beginnings. We don't have a lot of applications for veterans, so please, encourage others to apply. We will get this building open."

After chatting for a few more minutes, we took our leave, heading back to the front door. "Oh, look," Hazel said, stopping next to a sign on the bulletin board near the door. "They're having a poetry slam here next Tuesday night."

"A poetry slam?" I asked, turning my chair to read the poster. "Huh. I didn't know poetry was a big thing in Bells Pass."

"Maybe they think a poetry slam will change that," she said. "I used to go to them in Sarasota and they're a blast. There's no stuffy poetry being recited at these events. It's a lot of original, off the cuff, and emotional poems told by the original writer. I always had a great time."

“Would you like to go?” I asked, my gaze holding hers. “Together, I mean? We could listen to some poetry and then hit the diner for dinner afterwards before the busyness of the end of the week hits.”

Hazel turned and squeezed my shoulder. “I’d love to. Consider it a date,” she said with a wink before she held the door open and I rolled through with a giant smile.

A date with Hazel Cane. The old Irving would never let that happen, but the new Irving—the Irving I’ve become since I met Hazel—wasn’t afraid to take her out on a date. What blew my mind was that she *wanted* to go out with me. She wasn’t going out with me out of pity or obligation. Hazel wanted to spend the evening with me and wanted to be seen in public with me.

A few months ago, I would never believe that was possible. Then Hazel came along and dug in, insisting that she wanted to be in my life in some capacity, whether friends or more. For the first time in my life, as I started the SUV and pulled away from the library, I wanted it to be more.



The big night had finally arrived! After snowing on and off all day yesterday, the skies cleared off and brought in some chillier air for tonight. Earlier this morning, Irving had his stitches removed and we picked up all of the shower supplies from the gym. That was just the beginning of our day. The rest was spent organizing and preparing all the moving parts required to make this event happen, but seeing it in action made the long day worth it. Thanks to the Bells Pass city crew, the firepits were up and running to keep our guests warm as they watched the family movie or chatted with other guests. Indigo had set up the coffee, eggnog, and hot chocolate station inside where people could get out of the weather for a few moments and use the restrooms.

I was surprised by the turnout considering the snow, but I loved that entire families had come out to support the cause.

Irving was helping Gabe with the housing insecure and veterans who had come seeking services. As soon as we realized the need far outweighed what we'd been prepared for, we called in extra help and set up a station to call for rides to bigger shelters and offer as much help and guidance as possible.

Addie and Heather were busy in the salon, and the steady flow of people in and out finally made New Beginnings feel alive. I'd held many sleep-outs in Florida and didn't get half the turnout in the warm weather that we did tonight in the cold. That was a testament to Bells Pass and its people.

Audrey had upheld her end of the bargain and got five out of the six council members here. Mayor Tottle, his wife, Cynthia, and the entire housing board had also spread out across the event to help where needed. Cameron was handling the tours of mine and Irving's apartment as well as the completed units on the second floor. It gave everyone a feel for the amenities while reassuring them that they weren't exorbitant or outlandish. I would check in with Cam and ensure the two board members that we needed to flip to the yay column had a full tour before the night was over.

"Miss Cane?" a voice asked and I turned to face a young girl.

"Hi, Holly," I said, happy to see her. "Are you having fun?"

"Yes, thank you for asking, but Uncle Gabe asked me to find you. He thinks Mr. Wallace has a problem."

Before she finished speaking, I motioned for her to lead the way. "What's wrong?"

"Uncle Gabe doesn't know but he said Star is acting weird and even though Mr. Wallace keeps saying he's okay, he doesn't think he is."

"It is unusual for Star to act weird if Irving is commanding him, but there are a lot of people here tonight."

"That's what I said, but Uncle Gabe said that shouldn't matter since he's a trained service dog."

“Hmm, he makes a point. Thanks for coming to find me. I’ll talk to Irving and see if I can get him to rest.”

“It’s no problem, Miss Cane. I’ll stay with Uncle Gabe and help him as much as possible.”

“Just call me Hazel, please,” I implored the girl. She was so well-mannered and well-spoken it was delightful, but I preferred to be called by my real name. “I can ask Mayor Tottle to help if you both get overwhelmed.” I doubted that would be the case. If there was ever a person you wanted helping when things were busy, it was Holly Hadley. She may only be twelve, but she has the multitasking skills of someone twice her age and the ability to bark commands like a drill sergeant. She was training at the bakery under her mother’s guidance to work on the new dog biscuit side of the company. Something told me she’d be managing it in a few years.

When we arrived to the area where we’d set up our tables, I noticed Star pacing back and forth in front of Irving while he spoke to a man. Gabe noticed me and nodded at Irving, then took over the discussion. When I caught Irving’s eye, I motioned him out from behind the table. When he did, he seemed fine, but Star definitely wasn’t. I made a snap decision to get them both back to his apartment.

“Hey, let’s go back to your apartment and grab your warmer coat. Some of the people outside were asking to speak with you.”

“I need to stay and help Gabe.” Star whined until Irving flicked his gaze to him.

“I’ll stay with Uncle Gabe,” Holly piped up. “I can always come and get you if he needs more help.”

“Okay, thanks, Holly,” Irving said. “Star, home,” he said and the dog followed us back to the apartment and opened the door for his master. I could see the relief in Star’s eyes when I shut the door and Irving commanded him to rest for a minute.

“Star is acting odd,” I said to ease Irving into the conversation. “Is he hungry?”

“No. He’s been fed and went out. I don’t know what’s wrong with him. Maybe I’ll leave him in here while we go outside. He could be tired.”

I leaned down and rested my hands on his chair. “First, I want you to stop. Close your eyes and go through your checks and balances for all your systems. Star is acting weird because he knows something is off with you. That’s his job. Listen to him.”

Irving’s gaze snapped up to meet mine and he blinked. “Okay. You’re right.” He closed his eyes and I stood up, giving him the space to go through his checks the way he does whenever he starts to feel off. “I think it’s my bladder,” he said when he opened his eyes. “It’s been hours since I emptied and I’m not wearing a bag.”

“Let’s empty it then and see if Star settles down,” I suggested. The dog still hadn’t rested as per his owner’s order.

“What? No lecture?” he asked as he rolled into the bathroom.

“I have no right to lecture you, Irving. I haven’t eaten since breakfast because we’ve been so busy. Should I? Yes. Will I? Probably not unless someone forces food into my mouth.”

I kept talking while he unrolled his tube and held it over the toilet. The stream that came out was slow and sputtery.

“It’s never done that before,” I said, surprised as he patiently moved the tube back and forth until the stream normalized a bit.

“Not while you’ve been around,” he agreed, letting it hang over the toilet seat to let gravity finish emptying it. “It has sediment in it and needs to be flushed. Then I’ll have to wear a bag and let it free flow the rest of the night or I’ll be in the hospital in the morning.”

I clapped my hands together once. “We can’t have that. I need my partner here to help me with all of this. What can I do?”



“I don’t want to move the tube now that I have it running again, so if you’d grab the supplies from the third drawer under the sink, I’ll walk you through it. I’ll need a leg bag too, which is in the second drawer.”

Following his directions, I loaded the syringe for him to flush the tube properly. While he irrigated it, I saw Star sleeping in the doorway. “We must have problem solved correctly,” I told him, taking the syringe. “Star is taking a siesta.”

Irving’s sigh was loud in the room. “Gabe told me he was acting weird, but I didn’t listen to him.”

“Gabe sent Holly to get me. He thought maybe I could convince you to take a break.”

“Good thing he did. I’ll have to thank him and make sure Star gets an extra treat.”

Star lifted his head and barked once, making both of us break out into laughter. I handed him the bag and he connected it to the tube then opened the Velcro.

“Unfortunately, to keep this draining and the sediment from flowing back in, I need you to either hold the bag or pull my pants down so I can attach it to my leg.”

“I’ll take the bag,” I said, holding it where he had been while he slid his trousers down. I handed it over and he connected the bag below his knee.

“Wow, all the way down there?” I asked in surprise.

“My thigh isn’t low enough. If I were staying in, I’d go to bed, but that’s out, so this will do. Besides, checking and emptying it is easier where it is.”

I washed my hands and then moved aside so he could do the same. Once he’d dried his, he took my hand and squeezed it. “Thanks for your help. You kept me calm and helped me think through everything logically.”

“I’m just glad the solution was an easy one.”

“Well, all the same, I know it’s awkward, and I—”

I brought my finger down on his lips until he hushed. “It wasn’t awkward, so don’t get all weird on me, Wallace, okay? When I’m uncomfortable doing something, I’ll tell you. This was not that.” I squeezed his hand again before he nodded and smiled, releasing my hand to turn his chair.

“Star, return,” he said, and the dog lumbered to his feet immediately and trotted to his side, where he got a thorough loving up while I found Irving’s wheelchair parka and prepared it on the bed. “Who’s a good boy?” I heard Irving say, and Star barked once. “Go tell Hazel you need a good boy treat!”

A ball of fur came whizzing over to me, stopping with one sharp bark at my feet. I gave him some love and one of those good boy treats while Irving prepared to move the party outside. Once he was dressed and ready to go, he got Star dressed in warm boots, and we headed out of the apartment.

“I’ll text Gabe and let him know we solved the issue,” I said. “I’ll also tell him you’ll be outside in case he needs you, but it looks like the traffic has slowed considerably.”

“Sure does, but most of the people seeking services got here earlier than we even planned to start, so I’m not surprised. Did the man of the hour show up?”

“Not as of thirty minutes ago when I came inside,” I answered and noticed his smile falter a bit. “But the other two holdouts did, so we hope they learn something here tonight that might sway them toward a different vote at the next meeting. We don’t need three votes. We don’t even need two. We only need one.”

“Good point,” he said with a head nod. “I’ll talk to them immediately when we go out. I don’t want them to think we’re ignoring them.”

“They don’t,” I promised, holding the door for him and Star. “I spoke with both of them and explained what you were doing. That held their interest as much as the event happening around them.”

“Really?” he asked, rolling out to the fire pit area where people laughed, chatted, and sipped at cups of coffee. “That’s good. I’m glad they can see that our outreach goes beyond New Beginnings.”

“Me too,” I said just as Mayor Tottle noticed us and motioned us over.

“Irving! Hazel! There’s someone I’d like you to meet!” he said over the crowd’s din.

“Looks like break time is over,” I said with a wink. “Let’s work the room. You never know, maybe we’ll make that vote five to one in our favor this time around.”

## Chapter Eleven

“Colder tonight than predicted,” Dawson said, rubbing his hands together. I edged closer to Irving to get his attention. Once I had it, I flicked my gaze to Dawson talking to Councilman Thompson. If we could stay where we were and look busy, we’d be able to hear their conversation.

“Seemed it happened overnight,” Henry said as he stood near the warming fire.

“Oh, I assure you,” Dawson said with a chuckle, “it’s been a noticeable decline, with every night dropping a few degrees more than the last. The snow yesterday didn’t help matters.”

“Glad we didn’t get snow tonight,” Henry grumped. “I would be home where it’s warm if you know what I’m saying.”

“Can’t say that I do,” Dawson answered. “My home is a tent or whatever shelter has a bed for the night. The shelter is warm, but the tent? Not so much.”

Startled, Henry looked Dawson up and down. “You live on the streets? Your jacket led me to believe you were a veteran.”

“I am,” Dawson said without bitterness. “First Lieutenant Dawson Knight.” He stuck his hand out to shake Henry’s, and you couldn’t help but notice the two missing fingers on his right hand.

“Army? I guess that explains the—” Henry motioned at Dawson’s hand and eye patch.

“Yep,” Dawson agreed. “IED exploded under our vehicle. I walked away. Most didn’t. Not sure why.”

“Why you walked away?”

“Yep,” he answered, holding his hands out near the fire. “Being stateside again hasn’t been what the government promised it would be.”

“Meaning?” Henry asked, fully engaged in the conversation now.

“I guess it means living any kind of respectable life. The recruiters make these promises to get young boys to sign on the dotted line, but when you return from serving your country, they forget about you. The healthcare system is overwhelmed, there’s no affordable housing for veterans, especially veterans with disabilities, and all those promises they made about paying for school are nowhere to be found when push comes to shove. Maybe if you have a support system to help you assimilate back into society, then things are different. I don’t know. I know that too many of us are in the tent city every night.”

“Tent city? Where is that?”

Dawson’s laugh was tense, and he shook his head. “As if I’m going to tell you. Doesn’t matter much now, I suppose. With the weather getting colder, we’ll have to find shelters or truck stops to sleep in. I like to avoid that when I can, but Michigan weather doesn’t care about those of us on the streets either.”

“Wait. You’re straight up homeless?”

“I’m not sleeping in a tent city for fun. I’ve been on the streets for almost three years now. Would I love to get an apartment so I could get a job? Yes, but that’s not happening for me.”

“Son, you gotta get a job first to get the apartment.”

“In theory,” Dawson agreed. “The problem is, if I want to get a job, I have to give them an address. If I don’t have an address, I can’t work, so I can’t get an apartment.” He drew a circle in the air with his finger. “Never-ending.”

“I didn’t realize that was the case.”

“Most don’t,” Dawson said with a shrug. “I applied for housing here.” He hooked his thumb toward the building. “Even volunteered to sleep in the broom closet and do all their custodial work for free. I want to apply to the school district for grounds and custodial work, but again, I need an address.”

Irving offered me work around here this past summer and paid me in cash. Probably from his pocket, but it helped me prepare for a winter on the streets again.”

Henry was quiet for some time before he spoke. “Doesn’t seem right that you served the country, were injured, and still came back to nothing while we all go on about our lives.”

“It doesn’t seem fair, but it’s not an untold story. Nearly seventy thousand veterans live on the streets, and over half are disabled. You can understand why it’s difficult to get services or help when the need is beyond what the federal government can handle.”

“You’re saying the individual states need to do more?”

“It would be a start. I’m thinking about grabbing a bus to Minnesota. They have a better program in place for displaced veterans. I hate to leave my home state, but you can only do this for so long before you find a more permanent way out of the situation, if you know what I’m saying.”

“That’s not a solution,” Henry said with a shake of his head. “I can help.”

I raised a brow at Irving, who appeared to be equally as shocked as I was by what was unfolding before our eyes.

“I know the city crew is down a man. Going into winter, that’s going to stretch them thin.”

“I don’t think you want me driving a snow plow,” Dawson said, pointing at his eye patch.

“Can you drive at all?”

“Sure can, but a snow plow would be tough. That’s a two-eyes kind of driving experience.”

Henry nodded along. “What did you do in the service?”

“I was a polyglot.”

“A what now?”

“A polyglot. It means I speak multiple different languages.”

“Still?” Henry asked in shock.

“I think so,” Dawson said, glancing around, but I noticed the smirk he was trying to hide. He said something in a language I didn’t recognize before he smiled. “Yep, still got it.”

“How many languages do you speak?”

“I speak and write six modern languages and several that are old and dead.”

“You write and speak them?”

“Yes, sir. I’m currently learning two more.”

“Just because?”

“I do have a lot of time on my hands,” Dawson said with a shrug. “Since I love learning languages, I always have something to do. Mostly, it allows me to hang out at the library for hours without getting kicked out. It’s a super useful skill if you have the education to go along with it, but since I don’t, it’s as useless as a tent in the snow.”

“It’s a unique skill,” Henry said in contemplation. “I can’t believe they don’t need someone like you within the government.”

“They do,” Dawson agreed. “The problem is, I struggle with high-stress situations now. Interpreting at a hospital? No problem. Doing it at the UN for diplomats? That would be a problem.”

“I have an idea, but I need to run it past some people before I say anything.” Henry looked around, and when he noticed Irving and me by the firepit, he motioned us over.

“How is your evening going?” I asked the question as though I hadn’t listened to their entire conversation.

“Enlightening,” Henry said. “Dawson tells me he’s applied to live here.”

Dawson gave Irving a nod as permission to confirm. “He did. He qualifies for the housing as set forth by the committee, and he is also a veteran with disabilities, so we have funding to

subsidize his apartment. I had hoped to move him in and have him work as the buildings' maintenance manager, but things have gotten tied up."

"Are the apartments move-in ready?"

"Some are and some aren't. We're still waiting to see about the accessibility concerns."

I thought using the word concerns was a bit too kind of Irving, so it was good that he was answering Henry and not me.

"I ask because I'd like to move Dawson into an apartment to keep him in Bells Pass. He has a unique skill set we could utilize in multiple ways within the local municipalities. He's thinking about leaving, and we don't want that."

"I agree," I said, just in case they wanted my opinion.

"We have a finished studio available on the second floor. It's small but efficient, and there's no one else up there right now. Hazel and I have apartments on the first floor."

Dawson vibrated with hope as he stood beside me. If we won Henry over, the rest would fall into place like dominos.

"From what you said at the meeting last week, everything is in place regarding insurance and utilities?"

"It is, sir. Of course, the building is insured, and the utilities will be charged to each apartment. Laundry services aren't available in this building yet, but they'll be hooked up once the construction is approved."

"Do you have time now to give us a tour? I want to take a closer look."

Irving glanced up at me, and I nodded, so he turned back to Henry. "Absolutely, as long as we aren't breaking any rules with the council."

"Let me worry about the council, son. Are you up for a tour, Dawson?"

Dawson's eager nod was hard to miss. "I've been curious to see inside one of the upstairs apartments. Renovating a



place like this had to be tricky.”

“It wasn’t as hard as you might think,” I said, leading the way into New Beginnings. I held the door open for Irving and Star as they rolled through. “The reality is, there are so many empty buildings all across the US that could be converted into low income and family style housing. There’s even money available to do it.”

“Sure, but where there’s no profit, there’s no interest,” Dawson said as we took our coats and hats off. “They’d rather build brand new buildings they can charge thousands in rent for every month than house the people who made sure they had the right to do so. Us veterans call it the *profits over people theory*.”

“You’re not wrong,” I agreed. “It’s the same in all parts of our country.”

“That’s why I want to make our housing project a model others can use as an example,” Irving said as he urged Star forward. “Why don’t you both grab coffee before we start the tour.”

The two men turned toward the table where Indigo filled cups for those looking for a warm-up. Dawson and Henry continued to chat as they fixed their coffee, and I couldn’t stop the smile that worked its way across my face.

“I don’t know what’s happened, but I’m afraid to blink and risk it being a dream,” Irving whispered as he rolled his chair on the rug to dry the wheels.

“It is a dream. A dream come true,” I whispered with a wink.



Saturday dawned bright, sunny, and a bit warmer than the night before, and as a wheelchair user, I was glad for it. Once we finished our tour with Dawson and Henry, Hazel and I made the tough call to send everyone home around midnight. It was cold, and we didn’t want anyone trying to sleep outside

unsheltered. Hazel and I got a few hours of sleep before we got up early to help start the breakfast food. It seemed half of Bells Pass returned in the morning for the promised breakfast, and the center was packed for hours with people enjoying the camaraderie of others while they ate. Overall, we were both pleased with what we'd accomplished with the event in such a short time. Hazel had been smiling ear to ear the entire time we drove to Cameron's tree farm.

"Was last night a dream, or did Henry Thompson decide that getting New Beginnings open sooner rather than later is the right thing to do?"

"I do believe it was real," she said, laughing as we pulled into the parking lot of Evergreen Acres and found the accessible spaces Becca had mentioned. "When you asked Dawson to talk to anyone who may ask about being housing insecure, I had no idea he'd make such an impact. He's incredibly well spoken in a way that tells you he's educated but also struggling. He's living in the trenches even if he's back on home soil. Besides, we never dreamed Henry would show up, much less engage with anyone."

"That," she agreed with a nod before she glanced behind us at the barn. "Do you think we missed their announcement? We're later than we thought we would be."

"Maybe, but no matter when we find out, it will be a surprise."

"True, okay, let me grab the chair." She hopped out of the SUV and pulled the chair out of the rear hatch. We'd fallen into the habit that if she rode shotgun, she put the chair in the far back rather than take it apart. Since it was winter now, it did keep the interior cleaner and dryer.

Once I was in it with Star beside me, we followed the path to the store. "This is my first time out here, but Becca and Indigo were right. Everything is relatively accessible. The place is packed, too, which is a testament to what they're doing."

"I'm surprised it's so busy after everyone was out so late last night and then back for breakfast this morning."

“Hard to resist the lure of a great reveal,” she teased. “Will it be a boy or a girl? What’s your bet? Better tell me now in case we get in there and the question has already been answered.”

“I’m no expert at this, but my gut says boy,” I answered, slowing the chair as we neared the door. “What say you?”

“Girl. I feel like that’s what she’s got in there.”

I hit the door opener and smiled. “No time like the present.” Once the door was open and Star was clear, I rolled in, only to stop in my tracks at the scene before me.

The store was an old barn they’d remodeled into one of the most incredible spaces I’d seen in Bells Pass. Handcrafted items like blankets, candles, and home goods lined the shelves. A sitting area near the fireplace was packed full of kids and their parents listening to a young man read a story. He alternated using silly voices that made the kids giggle while their parents looked on in happiness.

“Looks like we haven’t missed it yet!” Hazel said with excitement.

Ivy spotted us and jogged over, hugging us both silently since the story was still being read. “You made it! We thought you might be tired and stay home. We would have understood.”

“We wouldn’t miss a chance to celebrate with our friends,” I said, squeezing her hand. “This is one of those first times you don’t want to miss. The first baby and the first time you find out boy or girl.”

“I’m so glad you made it. Unfortunately, there’s no time to decorate a cookie, but you still have time to make a guess!” She was practically vibrating with excitement as she bounced up on her toes.

“Boy,” I said, while Hazel followed it with ‘girl.’

“A split decision. Who will be right?” she asked in a silly, spooky voice.

“You must know, right?” Hazel asked, pointing at the cake sitting on the table. “You had to make the cake.”

“Nope, Mel is the only one who knows. She’s the cake decorator and the keeper of the secret. She’s lording it over my head too!” Ivy’s sentence was punctuated with a foot stomp that made me laugh.

“Good thing the time has almost come,” I said, motioning at the circle of kids who were finishing the final actions of the story.

Ivy clapped and grabbed Hazel’s shoulders. “I have to run and get ready to take the pictures. I’m the only one Becca allows to do that, so no phones, okay?” We both nodded, and she smiled. “Stick around after the cake is cut, and I’ll give you a tour.”

“We’ll be waiting,” I assured her as she galloped off to the cake table as the rest of the kids and parents surrounded it.

Becca and Cameron walked to the table, hand in hand, to stand behind the cake.

“Gosh, they look so happy, don’t they?” Hazel asked as they prepared to cut the cake. “The way Becca tells it, Cam rescued her from a living hell. The way Cam tells it, he didn’t start living until he met her.”

It struck me that I sat firmly in both camps. Hazel had rescued me not from a proverbial life of hell but from an abstract one of loneliness, sadness, and anger. As much as I hated to admit it, I didn’t start living until I met her. Not knowing what to say, I simply smiled up at her momentarily before turning my attention back to the cake table.

“Let’s do a show of hands,” Cameron said, standing before the cake in the shape of a baby t-shirt. Half of the shirt was blue, and the other half was pink. “Who thinks it’s a boy?” In the most comical fashion, hands went up and down in a wave of indecision. “Who thinks it’s a girl?” he asked as Becca laughed hysterically next to him.

“Just cut it!” Heather exclaimed as the room filled with laughter.

Cameron picked up the knife, and Becca put her hand over Cameron's. Once they'd cut down into it, they removed a slice and held it up. The shock on their face spoke volumes right before they both started crying. The cake was forgotten as they held each other, swaying back and forth as Cameron whispered in Becca's ear.

"It's a girl!" Ivy shouted when it was clear they weren't going to announce it.

Heather squealed joyfully and threw her arms around Mel as the crowd cheered and clapped for the couple. After the applause died down and Cameron and Becca were still hugging, Heather slipped up to the table and whispered something in Cam's ear. "Cam and Becca need a moment," Heather said to the group. "Let's eat cake, and then they'll be out to visit with you all."

Cameron led Becca out of the room, and Mel started serving cake as Indigo brought two more sheet cakes from the back room. "I'm worried about Becca," Hazel said, biting her lip as she glanced behind us.

"Give Cameron some time alone with her. I'm sure they both need time to process, and it's hard to do that in a room full of people."

"Especially for Becca," she said. "Her history dictates that being a girl means you're weak and voiceless."

"And she just found out she's having a girl," I finished, the scene coming into focus for me. "I didn't think of that, but you're right. That might be a shock."

"Yep," Hazel said, glancing behind her again.

"I'm surprised they decided to do a gender reveal in public. Becca had to have known there was a fifty-fifty chance."

"Becca probably didn't know she'd have this kind of reaction. It wasn't on her radar, so to say, until it happened. That's how PTSD works sometimes."

"Sneak attacks," I sighed, glancing behind us.

I would have to take Hazel's mind off it for a bit, or she'd run back there to comfort Becca. That was one of my favorite things about her, though. She cared about everyone, even those she just met. "Since everyone is in here, we should go out there," I said, motioning to the door. "Let's go check out the tree farm while the sun shines!"

Hazel glanced behind her one more time and then met my gaze. "I know what you're doing and I'll allow it, but only if you agree to let me check on Becca before we leave."

My sneaky smile was front and center when I winked. Of course, she knew I was playing her, but I crossed my heart anyway. "We won't be out there long since I'm not wearing layers, but I'd like to look for the trees we need at New Beginnings." I turned my chair back to the door. "Star, forward," I whispered, hoping to escape before Ivy saw us leaving.

"Trees?" Hazel asked, following alongside my chair until we got to the door. She pushed it open and held it for Star and me to go through.

"We need to decorate the rec room for Indigo's reception, correct?" I asked, and she nodded. "Then we need a big tree for the rec room. I thought I'd put one up in my apartment, and I figured you might want one for yours too." My shrug was almost noticeable as I pushed my chair down the path toward the first part of the tree grove. The rubber tiles squeaked under my wheels, but I was surprised by how accessible it was for wheelchairs. "I figured we could pick out the ones we want and have someone from the tree farm deliver them for us whenever they have time."

We wheeled between the first row of trees, and Hazel grasped my arm, so I had to stop propelling. She leaned down and braced her hands on my chair. "The Grinch wants a tree?"

"I'm not a Grinch," I said with a sigh. "I just don't have warm Christmas memories like you, Hazel."

"Something tells me there's more to it than that," she said, still fully engaged and forcing eye contact, which made me uncomfortable. "My love for Christmas comes from my

birthday being Christmas Eve. Where does your dislike for it come from?”

“Your birthday is Christmas Eve?” I asked, unable to keep the surprise from my voice.

“Why do you think I love Christmas so much?” she asked, her eyes sparkling.

“You aren’t going to believe me when I tell you this, but my birthday is Christmas Day.”

“What?” she gasped, her eyes rounding like saucers. “Are you serious?”

“Never been more serious. I was born at three minutes after twelve on Christmas morning.”

“This is so cool!” she exclaimed, clapping her hands like a giddy child. “I knew there was a reason I took the job here.”

“Birthdays were never a big deal in the family I grew up in. We never had parties, cakes, or gifts and even more so for mine. I was told early on that I wasn’t allowed to make Christmas about my birthday, so I pretended my birthday didn’t exist. That made it easier on the day I missed my mom the most, and I wondered what kind of life we could have had together. I’ve lived that way for twenty-five years, but you’re changing that for me this year. Your enthusiasm for the holiday has shown me that it’s okay to celebrate Christmas and my birthday without guilt. I’ll need your help to decorate my tree, though. Otherwise, all the ornaments will be at waist level or below.”

“Points for that one, Wallace,” she said with a smirk. “How about if we pick out two trees? One for the rec room and one for your apartment. That’s two trees for me to decorate and one to sit by in the evening with the only person I want to spend Christmas with this year.”

“You sure?” I asked, my gaze intent on hers. Hazel could never hide her true emotions, and what I saw in her eyes took my breath away. She was sure about the trees and where she wanted to spend Christmas—or rather, who she wanted to spend it with. Me.

“If there’s one thing you can be assured of, Irving, it’s that I say what I mean and mean what I say. I’m so glad I came to Bells Pass and met you. It happened at a time in my life when I thought I’d never be happy again, but you changed all of that just by being you.”

“Complexes and all?” I jokingly asked.

Her finger came down on my lips, and she pursed hers. “You mean your charm, wit, and diverse life experiences?”

“Exactly what I meant,” I agreed with a nod. “Mostly, that I was lucky enough to be in the right place at the right time when you arrived in Bells Pass. Now I understand the burning need I had to turn down all the other offers and come to this small town. I was supposed to be here when you arrived.”

“I’m so glad you are,” she whispered, lowering her lips to mine for a kiss.

My mind short circuited the moment her lips found mine and I inhaled the scent of evergreens mixed with the scent of her peppermint lotion. It was as though I fell in love with Christmas right there for the first time and it had everything to do with the woman before me. She was an angel’s song and the devil’s fire all wrapped up in one.

Nothing could have prepared me for the way her kisses made me feel. I thought I was prepared after sleeping with her night after night, but this kiss—this first kiss—offered a settling in my soul for the first time in years. Her touch brought me peace and respite in a world where those two things are hard to come by.

I slipped my gloved hand behind her neck to pull her to me then deepened the kiss to show her how much I loved having her in my life this year. Her soft moan of pleasure filled the trees around us, and I released the one I’d been holding in. It echoed with hers down through the rows and into the sky. She broke the kiss, keeping her lips almost on mine, to grab a breath of air.



“Something told me our first kiss would be fire and I was right,” I whispered against her lips. “You’re incredible, Hazel Cane.”

“I’ve wanted to do that since the first day I met you,” she said, leaning back just far enough to gaze straight into my soul. “I’m glad I waited. It’s pretty damn magical out here.”

“Do you think that’s the reason?” I asked, tangling my hand in her hair to keep her close.

“The reason I want to take you home, throw you down on the bed and have my way with you?” she asked, waiting for confirmation from me that I felt the same way. When I nodded, she kissed me again, not giving me a chance to say a word until another breathless kiss was shared. “No, I don’t think where we are is the reason,” she said, her chest heaving from exertion. “The reason I feel this way is sitting in front of me, but I plan to test that theory when we get in the car and I kiss you there. We’ll test it at home when we kiss again.”

I laughed around her lips, but slid my other hand up into her hair. “Not if I kiss you first.”

“I’m a supporter of equal opportunity kissing,” she murmured before she dove back in to take my lips for another walk in our winter wonderland.

“Hazel,” I moaned, wishing she understood all the emotion I poured into those five letters. “No one has ever made me feel this way—”

“Oh, crap. Turn around,” a whispered voice said. It filtered into our ears at the same time and I ripped my lips from Hazel’s. Becca and Cameron were making an escape down the row of trees. “Didn’t mean to interrupt. Ignore us,” Becca said, backing up until she ran into Cameron.

“You cannot tell a soul,” Hazel said when the spell was broken. “Please! Especially not—”

“Ivy or Audrey?” Becca finished.

“Just to name a few,” Hazel agreed.

“Don’t worry,” Cameron said with an easy smile. “We’ll keep your secret.”

“It’s not like that,” Hazel said as she grabbed my hand. “It’s not a dirty little secret or anything.”

“We get it,” Becca said, glancing up at her husband. “I remember being unsure of what was happening between us and trying to keep it from other people, until I was sure. It’s stressful, especially in a town like this, so we’ve got your back.”

My shoulders relaxed and I smiled. “I appreciate that, Becca. Especially since we work together. I don’t want to do anything that slows down the opening of New Beginnings now that it’s finally moving again.”

They both zipped their lips and threw away the key.

“I was worried about you earlier,” Hazel said, stepping forward to address Becca. “Are you okay?”

Becca glanced up at Cameron with a smile before she answered. “I’m okay. I had a small freak-out attack when I saw the pink icing. My whole childhood flashed before my eyes, and I lost it. Embarrassing, but it happens.”

“No, you didn’t lose it,” Hazel immediately said. “You reacted to a present situation based on a past experience. We all do that in one way or another. You don’t need to be embarrassed. Everyone in the room thought you were simply overcome with joy. That’s not an unexpected reaction. No one thought anything else of it, I assure you.”

“You did,” Becca said, pointing out the obvious.

“Yes, but I have special training that most people there don’t have, so it’s not a fair comparison. I’m just glad you’re feeling better.”

“I am.” Her words were firm, even, and free of anxiety. “Cameron reminded me that if something happened to us, dozens of people in this town would fight tooth and nail to take care of our child in a loving home.”

“First and foremost, my sister, who is one ridiculously excited aunt at the moment,” Cameron added.

“I noticed her reaction,” I said with a smile. “Get ready for major spoilage of that little girl.”

“Oh, I am!” Becca’s laughter filled the air around us, releasing more tension in Hazel’s shoulders.

“This little girl is already so loved,” Cameron said, stroking his wife’s cheek. “She will never be alone with the entire community of Bells Pass behind her.”

“Just like Holly,” Becca said with a firm nod. That was enough to tell me Cameron had to remind her that another little girl had come to Bells Pass with a lot of traumatic experiences behind her, but flourished due to the love she found here.

“I can’t wait to hear the names you have picked out!” Hazel exclaimed. “I’m sure they want you back inside, though. We shouldn’t keep you.”

“We accepted congratulations for a few moments while people were eating cake, and then we faked an emergency so we could leave,” Cameron said with a smirk. “We just wanted a few moments in the silence of the trees to welcome this little one. What are you guys doing out here besides making out?”

“That wasn’t intentional!” I exclaimed, all of us laughing together. “We wanted to pick out a couple of trees. We hoped you could deliver them to New Beginnings when you had time?”

“Absolutely. Our deliveries are tight until after Thanksgiving. Is that too late?”

“No, not at all,” Hazel answered. “We won’t have time to decorate them until after Friday anyway. Next weekend would be fine.”

I held my hand up to interrupt. “Would you mind just picking out and cutting the trees for us? I’m not lumberjack material, and Star would struggle to hold the axe.”

“What am I?” Hazel asked. “Chopped liver?”

“No, you’re absolutely not chopped liver, but I’d prefer you didn’t mess up that bum hand again right before we open New Beginnings.”

“Valid,” she said, biting her lip to hide her smile.

Cameron pulled a notepad from his back pocket. “Tell me what you need, and we’ll make it happen.” After explaining where we would put the trees, Cameron made some notes and nodded. “Piece of cake. I’ll text you to set up a delivery time next weekend. Speaking of cake, you should have some. It was delicious.”

“We’re on our way,” I promised, knowing they wanted to be alone. “Come on, Star. Maybe they have a pup cup for you.” Star barked and started trotting back toward the store before I even got my chair turned around. “Congratulations again. You both deserve so much happiness.”

“So do you guys,” Becca said with a wink as we disappeared down the row.

The warm hand Hazel kept on my neck told me she agreed.

## Chapter Twelve

“I really can’t thank you guys enough,” Dawson said, following us to the elevator with his duffle bag slung over his shoulder. “I had no idea that was the guy you wanted me to talk to until we were twenty minutes into the conversation.”

I pushed the up button on the elevator while I laughed. “We weren’t even sure he’d show up. I’m glad he did, though. You made a huge impression on him.”

“I didn’t say anything that wasn’t true, but it seemed like it was the first time he’d heard it. I doubt that’s the case.”

“Oh, it could be with him,” Hazel said with an eye roll. “He may be present at those meetings, but I often wonder how much he hears versus how much he filters out as not suiting his opinion at the time.”

The elevator door opened and we trooped on, Star hitting the button for floor two, to all of our amusement. When we returned from the tree farm yesterday afternoon, I received an unexpected phone call from Henry Thompson that the council had scheduled an emergency meeting on Monday to address the construction issues surrounding New Beginnings. In the meantime, he asked me to process Dawson’s application and move him into an apartment on the second floor since construction was done there. Dawson had been hired by the city crew to work nights and needed a place to live. Now here we are, less than twenty-four hours later and moving our first tenant into New Beginnings. All I could do was keep praying he was one of many in the coming weeks and months.

“Henry seems to have changed his tune now,” Dawson said, dropping his duffel bag. That was all he had when he showed up to do the intake paperwork. I dropped my gaze to Star with the thought that I had always considered myself alone, yet Dawson had no one and nothing, but he still overflowed with gratitude. I could learn a lesson or two from him.

“We sure hope so,” Hazel answered. “I would love to finish the last bit of construction and finally start moving

people into these wonderful apartments.”

“For now, you’re the captain of the second floor,” I said when the elevator dinged and I ushered him out.

“First Lieutenant,” he corrected me. “I’ll take good care of the place. I can’t believe Henry got me on the city crew so quickly too.”

“Shep Lund is the city shop manager,” I explained as I rolled to the end of the hallway. “He’s a good guy and is desperate for help.”

“As long as it’s not driving the snowplow,” Hazel said with a wink.

“No one wants to see that!” Dawson exclaimed. “Including me!”

We stopped by the door to apartment seven, and I handed him the key. “Welcome home, First Lieutenant.”

Dawson accepted the key and fit it into the lock. I met Hazel’s gaze as he turned the knob and stepped inside. The studio apartment wasn’t big, but there was room for a bed, a small sitting area, a galley kitchen, and a three-quarter bath.

Dawson dropped his bag to the floor. “There’s a bed! And furniture! Where did all of this come from?”

“Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow has partnered with us to help those who need basic furniture and household supplies. The thrift store employees have been taking in donations and storing them for us for use as needed. For those who come here with nothing, they provide the things you need to get you back on your feet. There’s also a voucher for clothing. Take it into the store and grab anything you’ll need for work. You have two sets of sheets and linens in the bathroom,” Hazel explained, showing him the supplies.

“This is too much,” Dawson said in amazement. “I would have been happy in my sleeping bag on the floor.”

“We know,” I said, staying out of the way while he investigated the kitchen. “But it’s Christmas, and that’s the season of giving in Bells Pass.”

Dawson opened the fridge and took a step back. When he closed it, he spun around to face us. "It's stocked full of meals!"

"Compliments of The Nightingale Diner and Bells Pass Bakery," I finished. "Just so happens Shep's wife owns both. She's extremely grateful that you'll be working over the holidays to help her husband."

"The massive number of meals in there makes that pretty clear," he said, his voice full of awe. "I'll make sure to stop in both places and issue a formal thank you."

"I'm sure they would appreciate that," Hazel said. "For now, we'll leave you to check out your new digs."

"If you need anything or have a problem, the intercom on the wall goes directly to my office," I said, pointing at it. "If you don't get an answer, you may have to hunt us down."

"Noted," he said with a nod. "I'm pretty handy so there isn't much I can't fix. Not to mention, everything is new."

"That helps," I agreed while laughing. "We'll keep you posted going forward on when the construction will be completed, so we can start filling the place. Are you still interested in the janitorial position?"

"I am," he said with a nod. "As long as my other job doesn't keep me too busy."

"Then there's that other project Henry is working on," Hazel said with a wink.

"I'm still confused about that," Dawson admitted. "He was so secretive you would have thought he was James Bond. It doesn't matter, though. I have a job where I can prove myself again, and that's all I've ever wanted. I'm also happy to help you guys out here on anything free of charge. I'm just so damn grateful for this chance. I feel like I won the lottery or something."

"We are so happy you're the first one to move in, but you, and your work, have value," Hazel said, patting him on the shoulder. "Never forget that."

“Yes, ma’am, but the way I look at it, anything I do to help you here builds our community, and that’s payment enough.”

Hazel tipped her head for a moment before she nodded. “I like the way you think, Dawson. I couldn’t agree more.”

“Once we hear back from the VA on your housing stipend, we can work out a plan for the janitorial work,” I explained. “We will have wing managers as well, and they will work with other tenants and come to us with problems they can’t fix. You’re the first one here, so you get first dibs if you want that instead. Each wing manager will get a discount on their rent as well. Being a leader isn’t easy, so we will reward those who step up. We want this to be a strong community, which means we’ll need strong leaders.”

“Looks like that starts with you two. You make quite the team, and Henry told me they’re lucky to have you. Even if you do push back all the time, his words, not mine,” he said with a smile.

“We do,” Hazel said. “Early on we could see that if we didn’t, we’d get nowhere, so we drew our lines in the sand.”

“From the bottom of my heart, I thank you for that,” Dawson said as I rolled out the door with Star. “Have a great day. I’m going to sleep since I start work tonight!”

His enthusiasm was catchy, and I couldn’t help but grin. “Good luck!” I called as we headed down the hall to the elevator.

“Just think,” Hazel said as we rolled onto the elevator again. “That was just one of many happy people who will fill this space.”

I nodded, the smile still on my face. “It’s such a high to help someone start over in life. That said, we suddenly have a lot of work to do if Henry pushes this through at the council meeting tomorrow night.”

“I was thinking about that too, but even if they okay the last bit of construction on the units, that will take some time, and then we’ll have the final inspection to do on the first floor,



too. We'll need to have our ducks in a row, but I'm confident we have a solid month before more people move in."

"I can't tell you how glad I am that we did the final inspection on the second floor as soon as construction was done. That was the only reason we could move Dawson in."

The door dinged, and I rolled off the car with Star in tow. "Do you think we should start moving people into the second floor now rather than wait?"

We'd discussed it in a hypothetical situation, but now that we had someone living up there, it was essential to readdress it.

"Let's wait until we see what happens with the meeting. While we technically can, if they agree to finish the construction, that's a lot to juggle. We also don't want the new tenants to move in and deal with construction noise for weeks."

"Their situations are so dire construction isn't going to bother them, Hazel," I said, playing the devil's advocate.

"Maybe not, but I'd still like to wait and see what happens at the council meeting before we jump the gun. I've also been struggling with—well, it's not important. Let's make our final decisions on the order of offers for tenants. That way, we can start intake as soon as we know a timeline and the tenant accepts the offer."

"You've been struggling with what?" I asked, stopping my chair. "Don't hold back on me, Hazel. We're a team, remember?"

When she blew out a breath, she looked anywhere but at me. "I don't want to start moving too many people in before the first floor is ready. It could look to our tenants with disabilities that they were an afterthought."

"That's not the case, though, Hazel. The reason we aren't open is because we've been fighting for them!"

She held her hand out to calm me. "They don't necessarily know that, Irving. If the second floor is full of

people when they finally get a chance to tour the facility, how is that going to look?”

“Like we consider them second-class citizens,” I said with a frown. “I see your point. I was coming at it from the angle that they’d be so happy to have a place that they wouldn’t care who moved in when.”

“That’s a fair angle, too,” she said, working her lips around in a circle.

“I can see in your eyes that you have an idea.”

Her lips pursed for a moment. “My eyes tell you that I have an idea?”

“Yep,” I said, laughing as I wheeled toward the office. “A little starburst flashes in your eye when you think you’ve solved a problem.”

“I might have,” she agreed, and I stopped again to hear her out. “What if, once the council meets and we find out what they approve for accessible housing, we go through our applications and decide who will fill those apartments? We reach out with an offer to lease and then bring them in to tour your apartment. Once they’re here, we can talk to them about how the apartments are still being completed because we saw the need and wanted more than originally planned.”

“Include them on the journey so they know we’re working for them and want them here, even if we aren’t quite ready for them.”

“Yes! They will have something to look forward to and feel like they’re part of the process.”

I shook my finger at her for a moment before I started wheeling again. “Yes, let’s do it. We don’t need approval for that. We only need to wait for the meeting tomorrow night to see if they approve all twelve units. I have most of that work done, as I’ve been preparing for this since I started working here. I’ve reached out to about half of the applicants on the list for the second floor, and only two have found other housing. I’ll get to work on contacting the second half of the list for the second floor, and then we can tackle the first floor together?”

“Sounds like we have our jobs for the afternoon. While you do that, I’ll work on the community center’s decorations.” She sighed and followed me into my office, perching on the corner of my desk while her leg swung lazily. “We need a better name for that room. I don’t like calling it the community center since Bells Pass already has one. Calling it a rec center is even worse. It conjures up the idea of basketballs and sweat.”

“We can have a community center too.”

“The Bells Pass Housing Authority Community Center is a mouthful, Irving,” she said with an eye roll. “We could call it New Beginnings Community Center or New Beginnings Gathering Room?”

My lip curled slightly, and I shook my head. “Those aren’t exactly catchy, are they?” I unhooked Star and sent him to his bed in the corner to rest.

“I want to define it from the main community center, but I also want it to be a second option for people. Like we’re doing with Indigo’s reception. I want people to know that it’s not just for the tenants to use.” Hazel snapped her fingers and stood up like a shot. “I’ve got it. Let’s do a contest to name the hall!”

“A contest?”

“Why not?” she asked, throwing her arms out wide. “We want the community to have input, so what better way?”

“What’s the prize?”

She stood quietly for a moment and then snapped her fingers again. “They can book the room for an event at no charge.”

“Okay,” I said as we tossed ideas back and forth. “I can get behind this. Call Cameron so he can run it past the housing board. If they’re okay with it, we’ll announce it at the tree lighting Friday night? Does that sound good?”

“Yes!” she exclaimed, jumping up and throwing her arms around me. “I love it. I’ll go call Cameron and report back, but

first,” she whispered, lowering her lips to mine. “I’m going to kiss you to celebrate our first successful move-in.”

“Is that all that has to happen to get one of your kisses?”

“No, I just needed an excuse to kiss you,” she whispered, her lips millimeters from mine.

“My sweet Hazel, you never need an excuse to kiss me,” I said right before our lips connected.

I didn’t care that I was in my office, that we were supposed to be working, or that someone could walk in unannounced. All I cared about was having her lips on mine as she straddled my wheelchair to get as close as possible. Her soft moans of pleasure filled my head and made me wish I was the kind of man who could pick her up and carry her to bed, where I’d make love to her for hours with no limitations, just the way she deserved. The thought was a bucket of cold water on my overheated libido, and I leaned back to break the kiss.

“Don’t. Whatever thought you just had, it isn’t true,” Hazel whispered, forcing me to make eye contact.

“That’s where you’re right, Hazel. The thought I had was to pick you up, carry you to my bed, and make love to you for hours. I can’t do that. The thought will never be more than a daydream, but you deserve someone normal to pick you up, toss you onto the bed, and ravish you without limitations.”

Hazel put her finger to my lips. “Normal is boring and overrated, Irving,” she said, lowering herself to rest across my legs. “I’ve had normal, and I assure you, of all the normal men I’ve kissed,” she said, putting normal in air quotes, “not one of them made me feel the way you do when we connect.” I opened my mouth to speak, and she held up her finger. “Don’t say it. You don’t get to make decisions for me, nor do you get to tell me that what I feel is wrong.”

“I was just going to ask why you’re sitting on my lap?”

Her shrug was sassy and I knew whatever she was about to say would make me laugh. “To prove you can pick me up and take me to bed. All you have to do is think outside the box you have firmly put yourself in when you don’t belong there.

You've spent your life thinking outside the box, so stop pretending you don't know how. Start applying how you think about your life, and how you move about it, to our relationship, and you might surprise yourself at how seamless it becomes."

"Our whatever this turns out to be relationship?" I asked, tucking a piece of hair back behind her ear.

Hazel leaned in and let her forehead touch mine before she spoke. "Every time we kiss, there's a voice low in my belly that whispers we're on the right track. Do you hear the same voice?" I nodded, unable to lie to her face, especially when we were this close. This intimate. "That's the voice to listen to, not this one," she said, tapping my temple.

"If I listen to this voice," I said, caressing her belly in a circle longer than necessary. It was so damn soft that I wanted the barriers to be gone so I could touch her sweet skin. "I could end up hurt worse than I ever have been before."

"Which is terrifying," she agreed in a whisper. "The question you have to ask yourself is, do you want a life where you never feel that sense of total..."

Her hand worked in the air as she tried to think of the word she wanted, but I lowered it and twined my fingers in hers. "Intimacy?"

"Is that the word that keeps running through your head too?"

"Every time we're together. Even when we're surrounded by people, there's this connection between us that makes it feel like we're alone. Every look. Every touch. Everything is effortless."

She traced my cheek with her finger before she buried her hand in my hair. "You stole the words from my lips, Irving Wallace. Now, I'm going to kiss you again, but this time, I want you to listen to that voice low in your belly and let it guide you."

Before she could initiate the kiss, I tipped her head and kissed her like a man possessed. If she wanted me to succumb

to the intimacy, I would, but she'd have to do the same. When she moaned and leaned into me, connecting our chests as her tongue danced with mine, I knew she was all in for taking this undefinable relationship to a new level. When our desire for each other was sated, our lips fell apart, and she leaned against my chest. As I wrapped my arms around her and her heat soaked into me, I was reminded of the importance of listening to my gut. If I didn't, I could miss out on some of the best things in life.

"I suppose we can't sit here and make out all day. We're supposed to be working."

"It's Sunday," I said, kissing her lips again. "We're technically off the clock, but I suppose we do have a lot to do."

"Pick this up later?" she asked, stroking my chest with her palm.

"You can bet on it," I promised, accepting another quick kiss before she stood up and practically skipped out of my office.

I glanced down at Star, who was watching the whole scene unfold. "She's something, isn't she, little buddy?" I rubbed his head as he nuzzled my hand. "I know you like her. You can't hide it."

The look he gave me said that statement was the pot and the kettle. He wasn't wrong.

## Chapter Thirteen

I wheeled my way from the office to the rec room and found Hazel sorting craft supplies from large bins. “I wondered where you’d gotten off to,” I said, stopping by the table.

“Hey,” she said with a smile when she glanced up. “I’m making lists of what supplies I have and what I need for the events I’m planning once New Beginnings is open. The meeting was last night, and we haven’t heard a word, so I’m also trying to burn off nervous energy.”

“I have good news and bad news then,” I said, leaning an elbow on the table. “Which should I lead with?” I asked, trying to hide my smirk.

“The bad news, of course,” she ordered, dropping the tagboard to the table. “That way the good news will cheer me up.”

I forced a somber expression to my face and sighed. “The bad news is, the council approved making the apartments accessible.”

“Irving! That’s not bad news, that’s the news we’ve been waiting for!” she came around the table and threw her arms around me, doing a little hop as she hugged me. When she stepped back, she wore an expression of deep concentration. “Wait, if that’s the bad news, what’s the good news?”

“They didn’t approve twelve accessible apartments,” I said, and watched a frown mar her beautiful face. “They approved eighteen!”

The room was silent as she stared at me, her mouth opening and closing several times before she blinked twice. “Eighteen?” she squeaked.

“Yes! Once Henry was onboard, it was easy to get things done, from what Jack told me. Some of the rooms will be more accessible than others, as we planned, but the six extra they approved they want to be fully accessible like mine.”

“This is such amazing news, Irving!” she sighed, hugging me again. Having her wrapped around me felt so good that I didn’t want to let her go. I wanted to kiss her, but we’d agreed to stay platonic at work since Dawson lived in the building now. “Wait,” she said, standing again. “Is there really any bad news?”

“There is,” I said, a real frown taking the place of my smile. “They can’t start the construction on the apartments until January. While the board was dragging its feet, the construction company moved on to other jobs. Now we have to wait for them to finish their current one before they can return and finish ours.”

Hazel leaned against the table. “That’s fair. The board was being a pain, so I don’t blame the construction company for walking.”

“What do you think our next move should be?”

She thought for a moment and then pushed herself up. “I say we go back through those applications and find six more people who need housing. Once we have all eighteen applications chosen, we contact them. If we let them know the apartments are under construction and they can sign their lease now, we can move other people in without looking like we forgot about our friends with disabilities.”

“Yep, I like the way you think, Hazel Cane. I have the applications on my screen in the office because that was my plan too. It’s exciting to think we’re just weeks away from filling this place up!”

“Let’s do it!” she said, forgetting about her sorting as we wheeled toward the office. “Nothing brings me more joy than telling people we have a home for them. Somewhere to start fresh that’s safe, clean, and welcoming. I’ll never get tired of it,” she said as she skipped ahead of us into the office.

All I could think as I watched her disappear was, I’d never get tired of her and the joy she brought me.





What on earth am I doing up here? *You're doing what Hazel keeps telling you to do. Force a change.* I tried not to snortle at the thought. As if that's going to happen with a poem, but what's the old saying about nothing ventured? Here goes nothing.

The room was silent, so rather than introduce myself and change the vibe, I opened with the first line. "Sunshine. Breeze. Fear. Hurry. Pack. Run. A bullet hanging in the air. No feelings. No desires. Only direction and velocity. A gentle breeze. A tethered breath. A life changed. Shredded dreams. Tears. Pain. Hunger. Lonely days and endless nights. The only relationship is loss. No score kept. No hurt tendered. No expectations. No judgment in the night as I lay on a feather bed of stone under shriveled, matchstick, lifeless legs. No pain. No joy. No commitments. No gentle touch of a lover, only self-pleasure in a bed of what could have beens, while the soul overflows with raging self-hatred of circumstance and fate. A shadow. An empty shell. A soul without a mate. A sunny afternoon. A bullet. An endless run on desolate, barren limbs."

You could hear a pin drop when I lifted my chin. Before I could roll away, they started clapping, standing one by one until only one sat, and then she stood. She stood with her hands near her lips and tears in her eyes. Did I see pity in those eyes?

From a distance, all I could see was understanding, acceptance, and a touch of sadness. I also saw an abundance of hope, but there was no pity. Hazel made me want to risk everything, but as I rolled forward, the chair reminded me that she deserved more than I could ever give her. In a way, refusing to commit to her was a twisted way of loving her.

I didn't get far before the rest of the audience circled me. For the next ten minutes, I was trapped in a group of people who thought I was so inspirational for *splaying* open my pain—they actually used the word *splaying*. Then came the encouraging stories about someone they knew, *kind of like you*, who found love, so never give up. It was a very

inspirational porn kind of feeling that I needed to escape. They meant well, but their platitudes were hollow, and their ability to understand, to really put themselves on my level, was superficial. Finally breaking through the crowd, I rolled over to Hazel, where she held Star for me.

“Hey,” I said, but it was awkward and stilted. I took a moment to listen to that voice in my gut, and what it said was I had just changed things between us, and we both knew it.

Hazel held Star’s leash out. “Hey. Ready to go?”

I guess that voice in my gut was correct. Usually, she wanted to know everything all at once, so it was unusual for her not to ask a million questions. As we left the library, I realized that was one of the things I loved about her. Her curiosity was so innocent and childlike, but she owned it in a way that made you want to answer all her questions.

“Do you want to go to the diner or the pub for dinner?” I asked, hoping to spark some conversation with her as we hit the sidewalk.

“I’m not hungry,” she answered, her voice far away. “Is it okay if we just go home?”

Rather than wait for an answer, she turned toward New Beginnings, which blessedly wasn’t far away. This walk had turned awkward quickly, and I struggled with the questions I wanted to ask. I reminded myself that, ultimately, it didn’t matter what her answers were. My poem was a reminder that as sweet, caring, and wonderful as Hazel is, none of that is for me. Alone meant my heart didn’t get hurt again.

*But did it?* I no longer felt safe with Hazel. I don’t mean in a physical sense but more in an emotional sense. Working with her is a joy I’ve never had in the workplace before. She’s witty, intelligent, empathetic, and a problem solver. She isn’t afraid to admit when she doesn’t know something and willingly seeks answers from those who do. Her ego is nonexistent unless you’re talking about candy canes. Then she might toss the expert word around, but mostly, she’s genuine in a *what you see is what you get* kind of way. The problem is, I’m a physically in-your-face guy who can’t pretty up his life

when a woman enters it. I remembered the night in my bathroom when I had to send Star to get her. Did I expect her to stay? No. While the situation had been unfortunate, I had hoped it would keep her from wanting more than I could give. When it comes down to it, that's the truth of the matter. My ability to give away my heart is as paralyzed as my legs after so many years of living through loss.

That's not what happened, though. Hazel hadn't helped me get back into my chair and leave me to my business. Instead, she took my request for help as an invitation to stay. She didn't recoil at the sight of my legs or my request for help. Instead, she climbed into my bed and comforted me when I was desperate to feel something other than shame. The strangest part is that she never left.

I glanced at her as she trudged down the sidewalk, her shoulders slumped in defeat, and corrected myself. She hadn't left yet, but that changed tonight. I had no doubt when I saw the look on her face as she held the door open for us.

"Forward," I commanded Star. He pulled me through the door to stop on the rug as he'd been trained.

"Thanks for going with me tonight," she said, pulling her hat and gloves off. "I'm going to head back to my place to shower. Do you need any help?"

"Nope, I'm good," I said, unsure what to say to her. Reading her was suddenly impossible, which I never expected. She was usually an open book, but she'd slammed the covers closed tonight. Was I supposed to say something to make her feel better, or was she drawing a line in the sand? Was she trying to tell me that our relationship had converted to colleagues and nothing more?

Hazel headed down the hallway without so much as an ear scratch for Star. Not that she should with him wearing his vest, but she usually would have at least asked to love him up a bit. Star looked back at me after he watched her go, and I could tell he was as confused as I was.

"Women, Star. You know I don't get them either."

Despite that, as I let myself into my apartment, I couldn't help but wonder what Hazel was thinking. She hadn't said a thing about the poem, but again, she didn't need to. Her reaction said it all.

"You know what I always say, Star." I unhooked his vest, dried his feet, and filled his food bowl. "I can't make her feel better about my disability. That's a her problem not a me problem."

I rolled down the hallway to the bathroom, and couldn't help but wish that wasn't true. It didn't fill me with the same sense of flippancy when I said it about Hazel Cane. It filled me with sadness. If there was one woman I expected to understand, it was her, but that hadn't been the case. While that was disappointing, I couldn't say it was unexpected. "Better now than later," I reminded myself, but that platitude sounded just as hollow as my empty life.



I threw my keys and purse on the table and sank into a chair, lowering my head to my hands and letting the tears fall. It had taken every ounce of strength I had not to cry all the way home, but I couldn't do that in front of Irving. I couldn't let him see how his poem broke my heart into a thousand pieces. He didn't need to see my tears and think they were pity tears for him. They were anything but pity tears.

A muted ringing reached my ears and I ignored it. I didn't want to talk to anyone right now and if Irving needed help, he'd send Star. I remembered that my phone was in my pocket, not my purse, which meant it was Cliff calling. With a sigh, I stood and walked to my bag, digging around until I found the phone and answered.

"Cliff, to what do I owe the pleasure?" I asked, cringing when I heard my voice.

"Hazel? Are you okay? Are you sick?"

“I’m fine, Cliff,” I said, trying to force cheerfulness back into my voice. “I was outside in the cold and my nose is plugged. Why are you calling? It hasn’t been a week.”

“I’m checking in since Thursday is Thanksgiving and I’m off for the next two days. I didn’t want to interrupt your holiday, so I’m calling tonight instead with an update.”

“I hope the update includes you having Felding in custody.”

“It does not,” he said with a heavy sigh. “He’s still in the wind, but we’re close to him.”

“Your update isn’t much of an update, Cliff. How did the FBI bungle this so badly?”

“I wish I could tell you that,” he answered, sighing again. “That’s above my paygrade, though. For now, keep a low profile and you’ll be fine.”

My mind went to the invite from Mayor Tottle for the tree lighting ceremony on Friday. That wasn’t keeping a low profile, but it couldn’t be helped.

“Who do I call if I have a problem before Friday?” I asked, rather than address his earlier statement.

“If you have a problem, call my number. I’m off, but still on call. If anything happens, call me, don’t worry about interrupting my holiday.”

“Trust me, I wouldn’t,” I said, my eyes rolling. “I’m not the one who did anything wrong, Cliff.”

“I know, Hazel. I’m sorry this has become such a circus, but all I can do is my job. If you do the same, we’ll get through it.”

“I sure hope so because my regrets are multiplying by the minute. No good deed goes unpunished.”

Even though I was sequestered in the Midwest, I wondered if that saying was true for me anymore. If I hadn’t turned Felding in, I’d still be in Sarasota and never have met Irving or found satisfaction in my career again.

“I know it feels like you’re being punished, but I promise you, once this is over, you can return to Florida and pick up your life again.”

“Let’s face it, Cliff, that yacht sailed,” I said, walking to the bathroom and flipping on the light. “I’m a pharaoh in Florida and will never work there again. I’m tired, so I’d like to get on with my night if you have nothing else.”

“Check-in moves to next Wednesday night at nine p.m.,” he answered. “Have a good Thanksgiving, Hazel.”

“That’s going to be a little difficult knowing there’s a guy out there who wants me dead, but I’ll give it a shot.”

“We don’t know that, Hazel,” Cliff corrected me.

“I’m not a protected witness for no reason,” I retorted. “We both know that cornered dogs bite, Cliff. Find him.”

Rather than wish him a good holiday, I slammed the phone shut and set it on the sink. I couldn’t care less if he had a good holiday. I wanted him to do his job and find the guy who threatened to feed me to the sharks at his last hearing. I stripped out of my clothes and threw them in the hamper. After Friday, I’d have to start following Cliff’s orders and lay low until they had Felding back in custody. I couldn’t risk the people around me getting hurt because of this fiasco.

When I stepped into the shower, I reminded myself that I had done the right thing, even if the right thing had upended my career and put my life at risk. I refused to do anything but the right thing, and that included the man next door. I didn’t do the right thing tonight, so he was next on my list of wrongs to right.

## Chapter Fourteen

I walked down the hallway to Irving's door and rang the bell, standing back so he could see me in his doorbell camera. When the door opened, the look of shock on his face was honest and unfiltered.

“Hazel? Is everything okay?”

I held up the bottle of wine in my hand. “It's all good now. Do you want to share some wine and talk?”

He turned his chair and my heart sank, but then he motioned me in while he held the door. Star came over to investigate and I gave him some love after I set the bottle of wine down. “Hello, again, Star,” I cooed, rubbing my face on his soft head. “Are you ready for sleeps? I bet you are! You worked hard today,” I said, ruffling his fur until he shook it out, making both of us laugh.

“To bed, Star,” Irving said, and the dog gave me a lick up my cheek and then trundled off to bed.

I was still laughing when I washed off my cheek and grabbed two glasses from his cupboard. I'd been in his space enough to prepare food and drink for us without feeling awkward about it. It was comfortable, and I liked comfortable when it came to Irving Wallace. Tonight, we didn't feel comfortable. Tension rolled off him when I turned with the glass of wine, so I motioned him to his bed. He was already in his night clothes, which told me I had interrupted his bedtime routine.

“It's been a long day, why don't you climb into bed and get comfortable,” I suggested, as he wheeled toward me.

“I'm confused,” he admitted as he locked his chair by the bed. After he transferred and adjusted himself, I handed him his glass and walked to the other side, sliding in myself since I decided to wear my lounge clothes after my shower.

“About what,” I asked, sipping the wine.

He motioned between us as though that should be enough explanation. “This. About thirty minutes ago you said goodnight.”

“That’s fair,” I agreed. “I needed to think, cry, and find a place to be with the poem where I could talk about it.”

“It was just a poem, Hazel. One I made up on the fly, essentially.”

“Wait. You made that up as you spoke it?” I was more than surprised. Shocked was a better word. “You performed it like you’d written, rewritten, and bled over the words.”

“I did, just not on paper,” he said, staring into the glass. “Every day of my life for twenty-five years, I picture that bullet hanging in the air until the breeze tips it a little to the left. I picture the word it had written on it. Alone. It’s a word that means nothing and everything to me.”

“That explains why your poem left me bereft of hope when you finished yet strangely uplifted too.”

His eye roll was strong as he took a sip of wine. “So inspirational, right? I must have heard that thirty times before I could escape the crowd tonight. They mean well, but—”

“But living life, having a job, and being a community member isn’t inspirational simply because you use a wheelchair.”

He held up his glass, clinked it against mine, and then took another long drink. “Exactly. Bereft of hope,” he repeated as though he was pondering the idea. “Come to think of it, that’s how many of us in the disabled community feel. We might have a great job and wonderful people in our lives, but hope for a different future is hard to find. The inspirational porn fans think we eat, sleep, and dream hope, but we don’t. We often feel more hopeless than hopeful regarding different aspects of our lives, if that makes sense.”

“That makes total sense. I would venture to say that the abled can often feel the same way. I would also venture to guess yours is more focused on not having a human connection?”



“That, but also the fight wears us down. We’re always fighting for something, whether it’s better equipment or affordable housing. We’re in a constant tug of war with insurance companies over coverage for even the most basic equipment we need to survive. Nothing steals your joy quicker than being told that our durable medical equipment is functional in our home, and that’s all they care about when approving claims. We can’t even put that aside and go on with our lives. The equipment is the only thing that allows us to keep doing our jobs and contributing to society. However, as much as they say they want us to work, they’d rather keep us in our homes away from the rest of society.”

“I get that,” I said. “Not in a personal way, of course, but as part of my job. I’ve spent a lot of time on the phone fighting for clients to get what they need so they can continue to work.”

“Then you can understand why we don’t want to put that on someone else, especially when the someone else isn’t disabled. It’s a lot of stress and frustration to deal with when you don’t have to.”

“While that’s true, what if the other person doesn’t look at it that way? What if they look at it as sharing the burden?”

“That’s a romantic way of saying someone is signing up for it. Noble but not true.”

“What do you mean?”

“The other person says they’re here for it, right?” he asked and I nodded. “Maybe they are for a few months or years, but slowly, the constant considerations, expense, and lack of accessibility wear on them until they realize they hadn’t signed up for that much and ditch.”

“You speak from experience.”

“Been there, done that,” he agreed.

“Not doing it again?” He tipped his head and shrugged his shoulder as though he wasn’t sure how to answer.

Silence pervaded the room for a moment until I spoke. “You know, now that you mention it, I’ll never date a

businessman again. Blue-collar workers only for me from now on!”

“What does that have to do with this conversation?”

“The guy I dated for two years and almost married was a businessman. He turned out to be a lying sack of used toilet paper.”

“I’m sorry, Hazel, you didn’t deserve that but not all businessmen are like him.” I raised a brow rather than speak. “Not the same thing,” he added.

“It kind of is,” I said, pushing back. “The last person I dated may have broken my heart, but that doesn’t mean the next person will do the same. It doesn’t mean they’ll all walk. It doesn’t mean they’ll cheat. It doesn’t mean anything other than the person who broke our heart wasn’t the right one.”

“Then I’ve had a lifetime of wrong ones,” he said, finishing the wine. “It all comes down to inconvenience for women. The chair. The dog. The activities I can’t do. The sex.”

“The sex?”

“Oh yeah,” he said with an exaggerated eye roll. “Sex was too hard for them.”

“Sex was too hard?” I asked to be sure I’d heard him correctly.

He dumped his head back on the pillow and shook it. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have said that. My filter disappears when I’m tired. Maybe you should go.”

“I’m not going anywhere. We can discuss the hard stuff, too, Irving. That’s how two people get to know each other.”

“This is the intimate stuff that only couples talk about, though,” he said, staring at the ceiling.

“That may be true, but it also applies to the discussion we’re having, so fill me in. How was sex too hard for them?”

He rolled his head to the left to face me and took a breath. “I need adaptive equipment, which takes time to set up.

Foreplay has certain requirements since I can't get psychogenic erections. Touch is required, but I also have to be on the watch for autonomic dysreflexia when it comes to orgasm. That's just for starters. Aren't you glad you asked?"

"I am glad I asked. This is how we learn about each other and our differences. What else? You said that was just for starters."

"The catheter," he said, motioning below his navel. "Will you go home now? I'm uncomfortable."

It was easy to see this was difficult for him, but I wouldn't fold that easily. "Why are you uncomfortable? Is it the discussion or the company?"

"Both?"

"You don't think this is an important discussion to have or?"

His sigh was heavy when it left his chest. "Listen, I understand that the learning curve is different for everyone when interacting with the disabled community. Obviously, you're way above the curve. That said, everyone starts with good intentions, and then when things get complicated, the not-so-tough get going. I've been in this chair as long as I can remember, so I get it, but I also don't see the point of doing the same thing repeatedly and expecting different results."

I set my glass aside and leaned up on my elbow. "What about the one time doing the same thing gets different results?"

"Never going to happen, Hazel."

"You're right, especially when you give up on happiness like you have. Yes, it's disappointing when someone lets us down, but that doesn't mean everyone will."

"I wish I had your optimism, Hazel," he whispered. "I'm tired of being alone but being alone with a broken heart is so much harder. It's not even that you may have thought that person was the one, but when you're treated as too much bother, the broken heart comes from losing a dream rather than

the person. The dream that a day will come when you find the right someone and you're no longer alone."

"That day is today," I said before my lips landed on his.



Had she heard nothing I'd said? That was all I could think of as Hazel pressed her lips to mine and wrapped her fingers in my hair.

*Do you care if she didn't?* that voice asked.

When my lips opened to her probing, I decided they answered that question. The truth was, I didn't want her to listen to me. I wanted her to be unapologetically her, as she always is, and tell me exactly how she felt about the subject. The ruse had worked, and she'd dug in for more openness and honesty than you get by talking.

Her soft, velvety tongue slid inside my mouth to collide with mine, and what ensued was a kiss I wouldn't soon forget. I hated to do it, but I pulled away for a minute and sucked in air while she did the same.

"That was incredible," I whispered between breaths. "Why did you do it?"

"I wanted to," she said without moving out of my space. "To prove that not all inter-abled relationships are wrong. That kiss told me you aren't against us. You're against being hurt."

"Does it feel good to be right?" I asked somewhat sarcastically.

"Not even a little bit," she whispered, stroking my cheek with her finger. "It's not about being right or wrong, Irving. It's about how I feel when I'm with you. I feel good about myself and like someone cares about my opinions and ideas. More than that, I feel like you get who I am at my core. I've never had that before, and it's life-changing not to have to hide who I am all the time."

I tipped my head in confusion. “Why would you do that? If someone doesn’t like you for you, then screw them. Keep doing you.”

“I agree, at least personally, but professionally, that can be impossible. It was hard to leave Florida, but I’m glad I took the chance and came to Bells Pass. If I hadn’t, I wouldn’t have met you.” To punctuate her declaration, she kissed my lips again in a short, sweet and caring peck.

“I’m glad you’re here too,” I whispered, smoothing her hair back off her cheek to tuck behind her ear.

“I don’t know where to go from here, but I know I’m happy to be right here.”

“Me too,” I agreed with a smile. “I’d like to do more than kiss you, Hazel Cane, but there needs to be more discussion about that first. Spontaneity is no longer in my vocabulary.”

“You’re wrong,” she insisted. “That kiss was spontaneous, right?” I nodded, and she shrugged. “The poem you performed tonight was spontaneous, right?” I nodded again. “It’s not that the word isn’t in your vocabulary, but you’re looking at the definition wrong. Take pleasure in the little spontaneous things we do every day, like walking to the diner for dinner or sharing a bottle of wine on the couch with a movie when we finish our work early. When something comes up that requires more planning or preparation, take pleasure in knowing that we’ll be prepared, and we’ll be able to enjoy ourselves without worrying.”

“Are you talking about sex now?”

“I’m speaking in generalities, but I suppose sex fits in there. Your level of injury is T6?” she asked, and I nodded. “Then we make sure we empty your bladder beforehand so we don’t have to worry about autonomic dysreflexia. We light candles, turn on soft jazz, and prepare your adaptive equipment. Intimacy isn’t about the act of intercourse. It’s about everything that leads up to it and after it. This, tonight, is intimacy. We can be intimate without having sex.”

“You’re okay with that?” I asked in surprise. “Most women aren’t okay with that.”

“I’m not most women,” she answered patiently. “I’m me, and I’ve never equated sex with intimacy. Do I like sex? That gets an enthusiastic two thumbs up, but it’s not about the act for me as it’s about the intimacy shared. It’s about the little pieces of each other that we share with no one else. You can have sex with someone without an intimate connection. Does that make sense?”

“It does,” I agreed, leaning my head back on the pillow to gaze into her eyes while I caressed her cheek. “Tell me what this looks like for you because I’m unsure.”

“Unsure about us exploring what’s between us or unsure what it looks like?”

“Mostly the latter but a little of the former.”

“I know it will take you some time to trust that I’m not like those other women. I accept that without being upset about it. All I ask is that you allow me to do that without letting your past experiences hold prejudice against me.”

“I can do that,” I whispered. “You’re different from anyone I’ve ever known, Hazel. There’s no way to compare you to them because your soul is completely different from theirs.”

“Good, then let’s move forward with no strings attached.”

“No strings attached?” I asked in confusion.

“Whatever happens, happens. We don’t overthink it but are open about how we’re feeling and what we want from each other at any given time.”

“At any given time? Sorry for the questions, but I want us to be on the same page.”

“What I mean is, every time we connect, we’re open about how we’re feeling and what we want from each other at that moment. Not a week, a month, or a year from now.”

“No strings attached.” I nodded and tipped my gaze to the ceiling for a moment. Could I do no strings attached with

someone I already had feelings for? I wasn't sure, but not having her in my personal space was out of the question, so if she wanted no strings attached, I'd give her that. Honestly, having a companion over the holidays, by any definition, was better than being alone. "I can do that."

"Me too." Her whisper was soft as she snuggled against me with her head on the pillow. "Tell me what you want from me right this moment."

My gaze drifted to hers and locked in. "I want you to kiss me again until we're too tired to keep our eyes open. Then I want to hold you as we drift off to sleep, knowing that tomorrow, we will keep trying to make Bells Pass a better place for everyone."

She traced my lips with her finger before she spoke. "Ironic because that's exactly what I want too."

Then her lips were on mine, and her kiss settled deep inside me. I felt a tug in the part of my soul I thought had lost sensation forever. A stitch had been placed, and I prayed it held. I hoped that each time I kissed this woman, she'd add another stitch until my fractured soul was whole again.



The night was quiet and I couldn't help but stare at Hazel as she slept. It was late, or early, depending on how you looked at it. I had awoken when Star snuffled in his sleep, but now, I couldn't tear my eyes off her long enough to fall back asleep.

Last night, I'd gathered her into my arms and held her until we dropped off into dreamland. When I woke, she was facing me, her beautiful red hair framing her gorgeous face that in sleep showed me the innocence of the child she still carried within her. It was all I could do to keep from tracing the lines of her cheek with my finger, but I didn't want to wake her.

We'd been burning the candle at both ends the last few weeks, and she was exhausted, so I let her sleep. Things would only get busier, which wouldn't help with my desire to learn everything I could about her, but I would take every chance I could to spend time with her. I wanted to know what it was like growing up in a Cuban American family and about the volunteer opportunities she'd worked before coming to Bells Pass.

Maybe that was the opposite of no strings attached, but neither of us appeared to be very good at that in practice. Our jobs taught us emotional distance, but we didn't appear to be great at applying it to our personal life. Did I still feel the need to protect her? Yes, even if I didn't know why. Was she the best part of my day? Yes. Every second we spent together at work was so easy and comfortable that I often felt like we weren't even working.

Lately, she was the best part of my nights too. I didn't want to admit it but I had no idea how I would sleep when she returned to her bed—and I had no doubt she would. A woman like Hazel wouldn't be satisfied with a life like this for very long. Eventually, she'd be ready to move on and leave Bells Pass in her rearview mirror. I didn't know how to deal with that so I chose not to think about it. Instead, I thought about her lips on mine and the feel of her hair twined between my fingers.

“Are you going to stare at me all night?”

“Shh, go back to sleep,” I whispered.

Those blue eyes popped open. “Not until you do.”

I gathered her into my arms and kissed the top of her head. “That might not happen, but I'll hold you while you sleep.”

When she flipped around, she assessed me momentarily before speaking. “Does something feel off? Are you uncomfortable?”

“Yes,” I whispered, leaning down for a kiss. After a short peck to her lips, I kept my mouth close to hers when I spoke.



“I feel off when you’re not with me. I fear I’m going to be terribly uncomfortable when you stop sleeping in my bed.”

The smile that tipped her lips was brighter than the moon. She was sleepy and sexy and the combination was making me want far more from her than I ever had the right to ask for in this life. “Guess I’ll just have to keep sleeping here then. I don’t want you to be terribly uncomfortable.”

“Your kindness is always at the forefront of everything you do,” I said with a wink before I closed the gap again and kissed her like a man obsessed with the taste of her. The soft moan that filled the room had me pulling her to me until she was straddling me and taking control of the kiss. I was sure I was going to combust from the heat of our tongues lashed together, but at the last moment, she trailed kisses down my jaw to my ear where she playfully nipped at my lobe. “Hazel,” I moaned, guiding her lips back to mine. “I yearn for your touch even if I get burned.”

“You won’t,” she promised before her lips were back on mine in a tangle of tongues that added fuel to the flames. She ground her hips against me until more than just my lips burned for her. “Oops,” she said, cocking her lips in a smile that told me it was no accident. “I caused a problem.”

“In my opinion,” I moaned against her lips. “That’s a good problem to have.”

She slipped her hand down my chest and across my hardness. My sleep pants allowed just enough heat from her hand to reach my skin and remind me I was still alive and wanted this woman. She broke the kiss long enough to sit up on her knees and grasp the bottom of her sleep shirt. With a brow in the air, she slowly lifted the hem, revealing her creamy skin a little at a time until her nipples peeked at me from the perfect mounds on her chest. They puckered slowly as the cool air hit them, but all I could do was gaze at her. It wasn’t until she took my hands and placed them at her waist that the spell was broken. “Touch me, Irving.”

Permission granted, I slid my hands up her waist to her ribs and ran my thumbs across the edges of her breasts.

“You’re so gorgeous, Hazel Cane,” I whispered, right before my lips found a nipple to tease and taunt. Her sharp intake of breath told me that was exactly what she wanted, so I spread the love to both breasts before returning to her lips for a scorching kiss of need and desire. With my hands on her breasts and her tongue in my mouth, I had to wonder if internal combustion was a real thing. If it was, I was going to die a happy man.

As we kissed, she slowly worked my shirt up until she lifted her lips long enough to pull it over my head. The cool air teased my skin, immediately followed by her warm hands tracing the hard lines of my chest. “Irving,” she whispered against my lips. “I knew you were ripped, but...”

“It’s out of necessity, not vanity,” I assured her, nuzzling her neck and placing a kiss below her ear.

“That doesn’t mean I can’t enjoy the fruits of your labor,” she moaned, dropping her head back as I kissed my way down her throat to suckle her nipple.

My laughter vibrated against her skin and she moaned again. “I won’t stop you.”

She took a tour of my chest then, kissing, nipping, and tracing each muscle with her tongue until I was sure she’d mapped out my physique to memorize in her mind. It wasn’t until her hands tugged at the waistband of my pants that my anxiety overruled the sensations surrounding me and brought me back to earth.

I grabbed her hands to stop her. “What are you doing?”

“Getting to the good stuff?” she asked, a brow in the air.

“But we aren’t prepared for that.”

“Do we need more preparation than you, me, and how we feel together?”

The question was genuine so I decided to answer it with honesty. “I’m not like most men. You’ve seen my legs, they aren’t attractive.”

“I’m not worried about your legs, Irving. My focus is a little higher up.” She toured my erection again, caressing, squeezing and rubbing her thumb across the tip until I wanted to come right there under the pressure from her hand.

I forced my eyes open so I could try to explain what worried me. “My catheter is still hooked up to the night bag and I don’t have any of my equipment ready.”

“Leave your catheter alone. It’s not in the way, and as far as I can tell, the only equipment we need is already ready and willing. Trust me, Irving.”

She didn’t give me a chance to answer before she pulled my lounge pants down and off. Every part of me screamed to put them back on and shield myself from the pain of disappointment and rejection. Instead, I tightened my fists around the bed sheet, determined to fight my way through the anxiety of shame as she drank me in head to toe. She lowered her lips to my right knee and kissed her way up my thigh.

I grasped her hair to stop her. “Hazel. I can’t feel anything down there.”

She lifted her head and held my gaze for the longest time before she spoke. “Maybe your body can’t, but your soul can, Irving.”

As though that were enough explanation, she dropped her lips to my skin again and continued her voyage.

*Your soul can.*

The emotions welling in my chest told me she was correct. Each kiss was a tug—another stitch that healed a tiny part of me. The part of me that believed it would have been better if I’d died that day in the car. Hazel’s kisses told me that I survived for a reason and that reason was her.

Her thumbs stroked a pattern up across my hardness to the tip where she slipped her hand around me and slid it back down. I moaned, wishing I could thrust my hips against her hand and have some control over the tension building in my midsection. I couldn’t, so I focused on her motions.

After a moment, I wrapped my hand around hers. “Let me show you the best way to keep me hard,” I moaned, helping her with my hand until she had it down and I could let go.

She kissed my lips again, her hand still holding me as she rubbed the tip against her center encased in her tiny sleep shorts. “Thank you for showing me how to offer you pleasure, Irving,” she hissed against my lips. “Hopefully, I get the next part right.”

“Next par—”

She disappeared from in front of my face and reappeared at my waist with her lips around my tip and her hand around my base. The two sensations were enough to freeze the breath in my chest for a moment.

When it rushed back in, I cried her name. “Hazel!” I squeezed her butt cheeks as they wiggled at me and then hooked my fingers in her waistband and pulled them down. If she wanted to play this game, she would be as open, naked, and vulnerable as I was. Her breath hitched in her chest but she never stopped what she was doing, even when I slid a finger against her and found her dripping wet. “Hazel, my God,” I whispered, stroking her as I felt an orgasm building slowly within me. Her pleasure was just as important as my own, and no matter what, she’d have the orgasm of a lifetime tonight.

Slowly, but with great precision, she ended her exploration of me. “Do we need protection?”

“Side drawer,” I managed to say, my gaze glued to her gorgeous body as it shimmered in the moonlight.

Hazel held up a box of condoms. It was the economy pack. “You have plans?” she asked, one brow cocked in a sexy swagger.

“It turns out, when ordering condoms on Amazon, you should check the box counts before hitting buy now.”

“Amazon?”

“You didn’t think I would buy them at the pharmacy, did you? They’d probably think I would use them for water balloons or something.”

“We still might,” she said, shaking the box. “Do they change how you experience sex?”

“They make orgasm more difficult,” I agreed. “Not impossible, but they block some of the sensations. That said, kids also make orgasms more difficult.”

Hazel bit her lip to keep from laughing but it snuck out around her lips anyway as she tossed the box back in the drawer. “We don’t need to worry about kids or condoms. I’m doing the heavy lifting there. Now, what’s this?”

Before I blinked, she had a black leather thong hooked on one finger. “That’s my cock ring,” I answered truthfully. “I have to use it during self-pleasure to stay hard long enough to come.”

“Mmmm,” she hummed, letting it swing from her finger. “Now that I’d like to see.”

“Seriously?” I asked, grasping it and tossing it back into the drawer.

“Why does that surprise you so much?” she asked, pressing her breasts against my chest as she leaned in for a kiss. “You’re an incredibly virile and sexy man, Irving Wallace. I want to learn what makes you feel good and how you like to come.”

“You make me feel good, Hazel,” I whispered before taking her lips again. “As for how I want to come, that would be inside you.” She was straddling me and rubbed her wet heat against my hardness while her tongue tangled with mine. We filled each other’s mouths with needy moans until she pushed herself up against my chest to pose my tip at her opening. On a long moan, she slid down the length of me until my tip was buried inside her very core, throbbing for only her. “Hazel!” I moaned in surprise and adoration. “How is this even happening?”

“Trust,” she whispered, doing the work for me as she raised and lowered her hips to stroke me with her heat. “Communication,” she sighed, her thighs tightening on me as her orgasm built.

“You’re so beautiful,” I whispered, sliding my hand alongside her cheek and pressing my thumb against her lips. She kissed it just as I slipped my other hand down to tease her swollen bud. She jerked when my hand made contact and then clamped down on my hardness, her body quivering. I continued to flick her bud, holding her gaze as she started to come apart. She threw her head back and her breasts bounced as her breath quickened, drawing my gaze. I wanted them in my mouth, but I settled for flicking one thumb across her nipple lazily as my body warned me of an impending orgasm.

“I can see the sky,” I cried. My orgasms were different than most people’s. For me, there are steps that lead to the sky. As the orgasm builds the steps disappear until I’m at the top, where I rest on a cloud and float there at climax.

“Me too,” she cried, her hands now grasping my shoulders as she rode me hard, squeezing every last bit of sensation she could before she fell over the edge.

The tightening at my base told me the time was now, so I grasped her waist and helped her vary the degree of penetration while I climbed those stairs to wait for the cloud. “I’m going to come, Hazel,” I cried, not even halfway up the stairs. “I can’t stop. I can’t stop,” I chanted, before my grunt of pleasure was covered by her cry of ecstasy when she came with me, her face buried in my neck as she cried my name. Her body spasmed around me, drawing more pleasure for me each time she did. I held her waist tight against my groin while I shuddered and sighed, letting the last of her moans fill my head. I wanted to memorize it all in case it never happened again and all I had were memories of her for the rest of my life. As her muscles relaxed and she sagged against my chest, I realized I’d be okay if all I had were memories. Hazel had given me the greatest gift here tonight.

“Thank you,” I sighed, nuzzling her neck with my nose.

“For what?” she asked, kissing my cheek.

“For teaching me what it means to make love to someone.”

She kissed my temple, letting her lips linger there for a moment before she spoke. “I don’t understand.”

“I’m trying to,” I admitted, snuggling her into my side and pulling the blankets over us. She stroked my cheek, both of us still naked but uncaring. “You made me feel normal, spontaneous, connected,” I said, rubbing her shoulder. “You didn’t make it about what I couldn’t do or what had to be done before we could do the next step.”

“You are normal and can be spontaneous, Irving.”

“Maybe with the right person,” I whispered, kissing her forehead. “I’ve never experienced sex like that before.”

“I’d be lying if I said I had,” she whispered.

“Normally, orgasm is as much mental as it is physical.” I found having nothing between us made it easier to be vulnerable with her in the dark. “I have to picture myself climbing the stairs into the sky and jumping onto the cloud. Tonight, I couldn’t control it and didn’t need the stairs or the process I usually use to come, Hazel.”

“Why do you think that is?”

“I know why it is,” I said, my laughter soft as I kissed her forehead again. “It was easy to trust that you weren’t going to hurt me or be weirded out by my body. Seeing you as into it as I was, shifted something deep inside me.”

“I’m never going to hurt you, Irving. Your body doesn’t weird me out. This body houses your soul and that’s what I was making love to. That’s what was connecting, not our bodies. Don’t get me wrong, that was the best orgasm I’ve ever had, but I can pinpoint the reason for that as the connection we made beyond our bodies.”

My hand strayed to her chest, resting between her breasts as I kissed her forehead. “Undeniably so,” I whispered as we dropped off to sleep.

## Chapter Fifteen

Thanksgiving had arrived right along with a snowstorm the weatherman said could drop over a foot on us by morning. I glanced out the window and noticed it was nearly dark and the snow had started, which meant our window was closing when it came to getting everyone home safely from the big Thanksgiving dinner at the Bells Pass Community Center. I promised Irving we wouldn't stay long, but we both agreed we needed to make an appearance at the event.

"Thanks for all your help today, Hazel," Ivy said, finishing her cleanup work. "We couldn't have done it without you."

"I didn't do much," I insisted, helping her carry the empty pie tins to a bin for her to take back to the bakery. "I enjoyed seeing everyone again. We've been so busy at New Beginnings that we haven't had time to get out into the community the way we'd like."

"Not what I heard," Audrey said from the butcher block table where she sat sipping a cup of coffee. I didn't know how she did it, but she'd worked harder and longer than any of us and still looked put together and relaxed. Then I remembered she used to be a teacher, and it all made sense.

"Me either," Ivy said, a smirk on her face as we walked back to grab some coffee.

My gaze drifted to the giant window that opened to the great room where Irving sat playing cornhole with Holly, Noel, Noella, and another girl Holly's age that I didn't recognize. They were helping the little ones get the beanbags into the holes while Irving cheered them on. Addie's little girl, Noella, kept toddling over to Irving to touch his wheelchair. According to her mother, Noella had an insatiable curiosity, and today, her hands opened and closed as she talked to Irving. I couldn't hear what he said, but the next thing I saw tipped my lips upward. Irving picked her up and sat her on his lap to pet Star. The giant dog sat patiently while Noella stroked his



head. The entire time she continued her conversation with the man I love.

Yes, I said the man I love. Making love to him sealed the deal for me. Irving Wallace was my soulmate. None of that mattered, though, if I couldn't convince him to take a chance with his heart again. It wouldn't be easy for him to consciously do what he was already subconsciously doing, and that was to love again. The intimacy we'd shared the past two nights wasn't about the act as much as trust, understanding, and acceptance.

"Right, dear?" Audrey asked, and I snapped my attention back to the table. Mel and Addie had joined us, which meant I had missed a good portion of the conversation.

"Uh," I said as Ivy started to laugh. "I would say right, but I feel like you just asked me if aliens had landed in Bells Pass."

"You were a bit distracted from the conversation," Mel agreed.

"Sorry." I sheepishly rubbed my forehead, forcing my eyes off Irving. "I was watching Noella with Star. She's such a sweetheart."

"She loves dogs," Addie said with a shake of her head. "Irving has been more than patient with her always wanting to pet Star."

"Noella is too young to understand that she can't," I said with a shrug. "He understands that, but it's also a good time to start teaching her that dogs wearing those vests are working and she has to ask to pet or approach. Irving is very patient when it comes to kids. He wants them to ask questions and be curious about his disability, so they can understand that he's just like everyone else, even though he uses a chair to walk."

"Inclusion," Mel said, and I pointed at her, feeling like a bumbling idiot. "I'm glad he's joined our community. He has a way with the little ones and big ones alike. Holly loves him to death. She says he's wise beyond his years, just like she is."

I tipped my head for a moment as I thought about it. “She’s not wrong. He’s seen a lot in his lifetime.”

“That’s what I heard,” Audrey said. “One of my friends was at the poetry slam on Tuesday night. She said his poem was dark.”

The grimace happened before I could stop it. “It was dark, but only because it was brutally honest. He could have prettied it up, but then it wouldn’t be authentic to how he feels inside.”

“It seems the story he tells the world is a whole lot different from the truth,” Audrey said, sipping her coffee. “I wonder why he performed that poem if he didn’t want people to know the truth about his past.”

“Maybe he wanted just one person to know the truth and that was the only way he could tell it,” Mel suggested.

When I looked up, four sets of eyes homed in on me. “I already knew what happened to Irving,” I said to shut them down.

Ivy shrugged so nonchalantly it was the surefire sign I was in for it. “You knew the sequence of events, but I bet you didn’t know the sequence of emotions he expressed in that poem.”

“Were you there?” I asked in curiosity, glancing at all of them. “I don’t understand how you all heard this poem.”

Ivy bit her lower lip for a moment before she spoke. “The librarian recorded it. He doesn’t know?”

My eyes widened and I shook my head as I leaned in. “No, he has no idea. Neither did I! What did she do with the recording?”

“She put it on the website like always,” Ivy answered. “Honestly, I thought it was great. That was the most powerful, emotional poem I’ve heard in my lifetime. More people need to hear it. It makes you stop and think about the fragility of our bodies and how our lives are often changed in an instant.”

I glanced behind me again to see Irving in contention for winning cornhole against Holly. “He told me he made it up as he spoke it. He just closed his eyes and said what came to him.”

“That’s because he was performing that poem for you and you alone,” Audrey said. “He was desperate for you to understand how that bullet changed him, for a reason that’s between you two. All I can say is, it brought tears to my eyes to hear him so desolate and pained. He is so loved in this community, but it also helped me separate his public life from his personal one. It told me that the face he shows the public isn’t always how he feels.”

I nodded; glad the heat was off me now. “You nailed it. That was exactly what he was trying to say with the poem. We all have two personas, a public and a private, but for some reason, people think the disabled are inspirational and full of hope all day, every day. The poem was a way of saying a lot of what you see when he’s facing the public is an act. Yet, after he finished performing, he still had to wade through all the *you’re so inspirational* comments before he could leave. People didn’t understand what he was trying to say.”

“One person did, though, right?” Ivy asked with a brow up.

“Of course, Ivy, but the thing is, I didn’t need the poem to understand. I already knew his heart.”

“Is that because you love him?” Audrey asked, matter of fact.

“I don’t think that’s anyone’s business but ours,” I said as Mel and Addie snorted.

“So, that’s a yes,” Mel said. “I remember the first Thanksgiving dinner where I was grilled about living with Mason. Don’t worry, you’ll live through it,” she promised with a wink.

“Okay, listen,” I said, my teeth clenched together. “We haven’t gone there. We’re colleagues.” There was never a

more accurate definition of lying through your teeth than what I just did.

“Colleagues who are in love,” Addie said, her gaze focused over my shoulder. When I turned, Irving was giving Noella a tour of all the parts of his wheelchair while she touched each one. “He’s one of the good ones. You shouldn’t let him get away.”

As I gazed at him, all I could think was I may not have a choice. If they don’t find Felding soon, and get him back under lock and key, I’m putting all of these wonderful people at risk for a problem that is mine alone.

“I just want to take it slow, okay? He’s been through a lot of bad relationships, and honestly, so have I, so we’re both being cautious.”

“As long as it’s cautiously optimistic,” Indigo said as she walked up to the bench. “Because the way he looks at you when you’re not looking says it all.”

“Hi, Indigo,” I said rather than respond. “Are we still on to decorate the hall Monday? Cameron is dropping off the trees on Sunday.”

“I’m ready!” she exclaimed, jumping up and down. “Who’s coming to help?”

Four hands went high in the air and we all broke out in giggles as the conversation turned to Christmas decorations and cookies. My attention was on Irving as he cleaned up the cornhole boards and then glanced up, searching the room. It wasn’t until his gaze met mine that he smiled. I returned it, stood, and walked out of the kitchen, entranced by the emotion shining in his eyes.

Love coursed through me, but a thread of anxiety followed it. I could lose this man as quickly as I found him because I had no control over the situation in Florida. I vowed to stay in Bells Pass and not fold to the fear of knowing Felding was out there looking for me.

I reminded myself there was no need to be afraid. When I looked into Irving’s eyes, I saw one word. *Protect*. Some

might think that was ridiculous in light of his physical situation, but he'd been protecting me since day one, and I would bet on him every time.



Hazel tucked her leg under her as she sat down on the couch. “That was Dawson. He’s at work but wanted to let us know that they’re working on the power grid. The snow is coming down so hard they’re struggling to fix it.”

“Welcome to Michigan,” I said, lifting my glass to her with a smile.

“I’m used to power outages from hurricanes in Florida, but when that happens, you’re usually sweltering to death instead of freezing to death.”

I leaned back on the couch with a wink. “The good news is, you can always add more layers and blankets to stay warm, but there’s only so much you can take off without getting arrested.”

She giggled, and I could hear that the wine had relaxed her as I had hoped. “So true.” Hazel grabbed her blanket, pulled it over her, and leaned against me.

“What are you doing?” I asked, glancing right into her beautiful sky-blue eyes.

“Sharing body heat,” she said with all seriousness. “I heard if you’re ever caught in a blizzard, you should wrap up together to share body heat.”

A smile spread across my face, but I held in my laughter. I could tell she was serious and didn’t want to hurt her feelings. “Smart,” I said with a nod. “I think we’ll be okay since we’re inside. We have the generator for the building, but it’s not hooked up yet since the construction isn’t done. We’ll have to snuggle together all night.”

“That’s something I’m completely okay with,” she promised before she kissed my lips once. “I have to tell you something,” she said, her expression serious.

I set my wine glass down and gave her all my attention. “I’m listening.”

“Audrey and Ivy told me that the librarian recorded the poetry slam and put it on their website.”

“I know,” I whispered, kissing her nose.

“You know?” I could hear the surprise in her voice. “How do you know? You’re not upset?”

“Audrey and Ivy weren’t the only ones to watch it. Ellis mentioned it to me, and so did Mason and Gabe. Am I upset about it? No. In the world we live in now, you have to assume someone is recording everything you do. I wouldn’t have performed the poem if I wasn’t comfortable with that.”

Hazel was silent for several moments before she nodded. “That makes sense. I’m just glad you aren’t upset. I was worried because I was the one who talked you into going.”

“I would never blame you for something I chose to do, Hazel. I knew what I was getting into when I went up there, so don’t worry about it, okay?”

“Okay. What did Ellis have to say? He’s such an insightful guy.”

“He so is,” I agreed. “He told me his story and now I can understand why he felt the poem to his core. He said it was dark, but it was life-changing in the imagery. It made him think he had to stop taking his physicality for granted and remember it can be taken away at any time.”

“That’s what Audrey and the girls said too. They were touched by the poem, even if it was dark.”

“In a very inspirational way, right?” he asked with an eye roll.

“No, not at all. They said it was like you were trying to explain your emotions to one person, so it didn’t matter what anyone else thought about the poem.” I lifted a brow, and she held up her hand. “I’m just telling you what she said. Was she right?”

“Does it matter, Hazel?” I asked with a sigh. “Acknowledging it won’t change anything.”

“Actually,” she said, a fierceness in her tone that wasn’t there a few moments ago. “Acknowledging it makes it real. Acknowledging it means you can’t keep living life in a tunnel. Acknowledging it means you have to face the truth. Then, if you do nothing about it after you acknowledge it, it becomes cowardice and you have to own that.”

“What are you, a psychiatrist or something?” The sarcasm was loud and clear in my voice.

“Technically, a psychologist, but this has nothing to do with my degrees and everything to do with being a human.”

“Wait,” I said, holding her out by her shoulders. “You’re technically a psychologist?”

“Yes. I double majored in psychology and social work. I wanted to have all the tools at my disposal to help the people I worked with get better and improve their lives. Social work is my true love, but psychology is important when you’re doing the work we do. More so down south than here. The job here is wildly different than what I used to do, but I like that about Bells Pass.”

“Dang,” I said, suddenly uncomfortable. “Your bio doesn’t say you have a degree in psychology.”

“On purpose,” she said with a shrug. “I’m already walking into the room as a social worker, which, as you know, can hold a bad connotation for a lot of people. I don’t need to add to that prejudice.”

“True,” I agreed, staring over her shoulder rather than into her eyes. “That explains a lot of things.”

“Like?” she asked, her head cocked.

“Your innate ability to pick up on things people are hiding. You see right through the act, like with Dawson, and find the truth. At the same time, you don’t act like the person needs to be fixed. You acknowledge that their struggles are valid. Not many people can do that.”

Hazel slipped her hand into mine and squeezed it. “Thanks, Irving. That means a lot coming from you. I want to make a difference in the world, and social work is the only thing that lets me do that. The psychology aspect gives me insight, but it’s not a changemaker.”

“You’re a changemaker,” I whispered, squeezing her hand. “You’ve changed me in so many ways since you arrived.”

“Tell me about her,” she said, leaning her head back on the couch.

“About who?”

“The woman who broke your heart.”

“Nah,” I said with a shake of my head. “No need to bring up ghosts long buried.”

“Except I don’t think she’s buried. I still feel her between us whenever the conversation turns to emotions.”

I laughed and the harshness of the sound made Star lift his head from his bed for a moment. “Just like that, she brings out the psychology.”

“Not at all,” she insisted. “I don’t need a degree in psychology to see that whatever happened between you two profoundly changed you. You wear that like a cloak.”

“It doesn’t matter, Hazel,” I insisted. “I’m not asking you about your past relationships, am I?”

“That’s true,” she agreed. “If you did, I’d be honest with you. The man I dated for two years was supposed to be the man I married. We were perfect together, on paper.”

“On paper?” If she wanted to tell me what happened with her past relationship, I’d encourage that to keep from talking about Norah.

“We checked all the boxes for the perfect couple,” she explained. “But we weren’t. Daniel had some serious character flaws I saw but ignored.”



“Character flaws,” I said with half a smile. “Most people refer to those as red flags.”

“Maybe,” she agreed. “I took into consideration that to me they were character flaws, but to someone else, they wouldn’t be, if that makes sense.”

“Meaning you weren’t compatible because he had beliefs you couldn’t respect.”

“That’s exactly what I meant. Though, I don’t know too many women who are okay with a man who steps out on a relationship unless it’s an open one.”

I grimaced at the thought that someone stepped out on Hazel Cane. “If he thought he would find someone better than you, Hazel, he wasn’t worth your time. There is no one better than you.”

“Thank you, Irving,” she said with a smile. “That makes me feel like I’m a decent human being, which is all I ever wanted to be in this world. Cheating was my hardline, though, so I had to walk away. It’s been two years, and I know I’m better for it. I was living under a false truth that kept me from exploring the things I had looked forward to doing.”

“Like what?” I asked, glad to be moving on past her need to know about my last relationship.

“I’ll tell you, right after I assure you that I haven’t forgotten your avoidance in answering my first question. We’ll get back to that.”

A tight smile was all I could muster at that, and she winked.

“One of the things I wanted to do was take the skills I learned in Florida and apply them in different parts of the country. I wanted to see if people’s experiences differed by region or if we shared global human experiences regardless of where we reside.”

“That’s why you’re in Bells Pass?”

“Bells Pass is where I ended up, I guess?”

“You tell me,” I said with a brow raised.

“When I left Florida, I worked my way up through the states,” she explained. “I set up volunteer opportunities around the country. I wanted a goal and place to be so as not to get distracted in one state or by one organization.”

“How did Bells Pass come to be then?” I asked with curiosity. “I always just assumed you left Florida and came straight here.”

“Yes, and no. I was back in Florida and looking for something career-wise that I couldn’t define. When I saw the listing, the opportunity to build a program from the ground up intrigued me. It felt like what I was looking for, so I decided to apply.”

“And the rest is history. Do you miss Florida?”

“I miss my parents, but not Florida as a whole. Down there, you were alone while surrounded by people. Here, you’re surrounded by people who care and you never feel alone. I was looking for that in my life, but I never dreamed I’d have to travel the full length of the country to find it.”

“There’s something to be said about the Midwestern nice idea,” I agreed, running my finger down her cheek.

“Stop being nice and kiss me, Irving,” she sighed.

I lowered my lips to hers and drank from her in the flickering candle light. I wanted her more than I’d ever wanted any woman before. She was the whole package no matter how you looked at it, which made it hard to believe that I was the man she wanted to kiss. The man she wanted to make love to. I tipped my head, and traced her lips with my tongue. When she opened, I darted in and we danced together until my chest burned with the need for air. I broke the kiss long enough to take a breath, her soft mewls and moans driving me back to her lips to fill my head with them.

“Irving,” she whispered against my lips. “This feels so right.”

Her words jarred me and I broke the kiss. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have lost control like that.”

“Why? It seemed to me like you were enjoying it.”

My laughter was soft, but sarcastic. “You have no idea how much I was enjoying it, but despite how we feel when we’re together, we can’t have a relationship.”

“This comes back to what’s her name, right?”

“Norah,” I said, finally using her name. “Her name was Norah.”

“Not all women are like Norah, Irving.”

“I don’t want to do this tonight, Hazel,” I said, staring at the ceiling.

“Do what? Be vulnerable? Be honest about how you feel? Or admit that you’re afraid.”

“You think you know a lot, don’t you?” I ground out, wishing I could get up and walk away, but that wasn’t going to happen, which was partly my point.

“All I know is how I feel when we’re together, Irving. I wouldn’t pretend to know what you feel. Those were just guesses based on how I feel about our situation.”

I rolled my head to the left to make eye contact. “You feel vulnerable and afraid?”

“Rejection hurts, Irving, no matter the reason.”

I laughed again but this time it just sounded sad. “I’m not rejecting you out of want, Hazel. I’m keeping you at arm’s length out of need.”

“Need not to get hurt again?”

“I certainly don’t need a broken heart,” I agreed.

“Don’t you think that’s kind of unfair to me?”

“What do you mean?”

“Assuming that I’ll hurt you without taking into consideration that I won’t.”

“Oh, trust me, I’ve taken that into consideration, but in the end, I don’t want you to live the life I live, Hazel. It’s frustrating, costly, and time consuming.”

“Being afraid to love someone for those reasons is sad, lonely, and defeating.”

“You don’t get that I’m giving you an out, do you?” I asked, sarcastic laughter bubbling from my lips. “I know you’re not Norah, but I also know you have so much potential to do great things, Hazel,” I said with emphasis, taking her hands. “I can’t weigh you down or hold you back from being what you’re supposed to be.”

“What if,” she said, squeezing my hands back, “I’m supposed to be with you? What if I’m supposed to be part of this community where we build a life together? What if everything in our pasts led us here to this place because what we’re supposed to be is each other’s?”

“Those are what-ifs I can’t afford to ask myself, much less answer, Hazel,” I whispered, running a finger down her cheek. “If I do, how I feel about you will outweigh all the reasons we shouldn’t be together.”

“I don’t see any reasons we shouldn’t be together, Irving. That’s the part I don’t think you understand. Your wheelchair is the way you get around, it’s not who you are, right? It’s your legs, but we don’t think or feel or love with our legs.”

“But legs do many other things that I can’t, Hazel.”

“And none of those things are insurmountable when we work together, which ultimately is the crux of the problem. You’ve been with so many other women who didn’t want to work to be in a relationship with you that you’re afraid I’m the same. Relationships indeed take work, so if they weren’t willing to do the work, that reflected on them, not you. It meant you weren’t right for each other. I’m not them.”

“I wouldn’t say *so many* women. It’s only been three, but that was one thing they all had in common. They wanted our relationship to be something it could never be. Don’t get me wrong, I understood where they were coming from, which is why I stopped dating.”

Hazel stood up from the couch and paced to the other side of the room, peeking through the window at the snow before

she paced back toward the couch. She rubbed her arms up and down as she paced, and I could tell she was worked up and out of sorts. I was about to transfer to my chair when she knelt and grasped my knees, holding my gaze.

“I have a confession to make, and you probably aren’t going to like it, but it needs to be said before we go any further. We’ve already shared the ultimate intimacy, and it was supposed to be no strings attached, but it wasn’t for me. I couldn’t do no strings attached because I was already in love with you, Irving Wallace.”

“Wha—what?” I asked, my chest hitching at her declaration. “You fell in love with me?” Her head nod was earnest, eager, and full of fear. “When did that happen?” The question was whispered in stilted words as I tried to take it all in and process it.

“When I opened my eyes to see you sitting beside my bed after my surgery. That was when I knew you were my protector and why I came to Bells Pass. It wasn’t like a lightning bolt of love struck me or anything. It was more a calming of my soul that made me feel safe. Over the last few months, as we got to know each other, I started to understand why I felt that way and could love you so quickly and easily. I haven’t said anything, in hopes that you’d see my love in my actions and words. Since you haven’t, I wanted you to hear me say the words before you roll out of my life.”

Was this woman on her knees declaring her love for me? Was this really happening? My heart skipped around in my chest, alternating between happiness and fear as I gazed into her eager eyes. She sat before me with her heart and soul open without knowing what my reaction would be. In the end, she risked her heart to help heal mine. I grasped her arms and pulled her up onto the couch to straddle my waist, and buried my nose in her neck to inhale her scent of peppermint. I was afraid to speak and lose the tight hold I had on the tears building behind my lids. I was afraid to speak and lose all hope of keeping her firmly in the friend zone. I was even more afraid to speak and lose my heart to this woman forever.

Hazel cradled my head in her hands and kissed the top of it. “I’m sorry if I’ve upset you, but I had to get that out,” she whispered. “I know you can’t say it back, Irving, and I don’t expect you to, but it was time I was honest with myself and you.”

*It was time I was honest with myself.*

I kissed her neck and inhaled a deep breath. “Then maybe it’s time I’m honest with myself and you, too.”

Hazel leaned back and put her finger to my lips. “Don’t say anything you don’t feel, Irving. I said those words without expectations or demands.”

“I know,” I promised, kissing her finger until she removed it from my lips. “That’s what I love about you. The day Star found you, I was holding him back as they loaded you into the ambulance and one word settled over me. Protect. I didn’t know why at the time, but I followed my gut and did what I was led to do. How a guy like me could protect someone as vivacious, beautiful, and capable as you, I didn’t know, but I had to try. I’m still trying, but somewhere along the way, protecting you became loving you. I know it was supposed to be no strings attached, but I guess I’m not great at that kind of relationship. Does that complicate our lives? So much, but denying it is getting us nowhere. The fear of being in love with you and it being a mistake is making me miserable. It’s not hard to believe that a guy like me could fall in love with someone as wonderful as you, but it is hard to believe that a woman like you could feel the same way about me.”

She kissed my lips then, showing me exactly how a woman like her could love a guy like me. “Can I ask you a question?” I was so drunk on the declarations of love that I simply nodded. “Did you love Norah or any of the other women who left you? Did you ever share your feelings with each other?”

“Share our feelings? No. We dated and had sex, but that was as far as it went.”

“You liked it that way, right? It gave you a chance to lay out what your life was like in every aspect, so they could decide for themselves if they wanted to stay?”

I wanted to pop off and tell her she didn't know what she was talking about, but I couldn't. She spoke the truth and pretending she was wrong wouldn't get us anywhere. “I never consciously thought about it that way, but you're right. I led with my disability instead of my heart.”

“What was different when you met me?”

“We were on an even playing field from day one. In my opinion, my disability was never a factor in our relationship initially.”

“Until?”

“Until you started doing all those little things you do to help me and I realized you didn't know you were doing them. You direct my chair with a nudge or position my legs on the couch when I transfer. You don't mind stowing my chair in the SUV so you can ride in the front with me, and you treat Star as an important part of our lives without acting put out that we have to take him with us. You're almost as attuned to my body as I am, and you willingly stop what you're doing to make sure I'm safe and not ignoring a problem. The way you taught me to enjoy intimacy as much as sex, and the way you put me at ease about a sexual relationship in a way no one has before. You see what needs to be done and you do it without making it a chore or making me feel bad that I can't do it.”

“I would never do that, Irving,” she whispered, my face in her hands now. “All those little things, that's what a relationship should be. It's about being there for each other and anticipating what our partner needs before they need it.”

“Like making sure you always have a steady supply of candy canes?” I asked with a wink. Her laughter was lighter. Happier. More relaxed than I'd heard it in too long. That was when it hit me. “You've been stressed about this for a long time, right?”

“Longer than I care to admit,” she agreed. “You were only okay with no strings attached. I was trying to abide by that so I didn’t jeopardize our relationship by asking for more than you could give.”

“What changed tonight?”

“When you said that Daniel wasn’t the one for me. It hit me that with as much certainty as I have that he wasn’t, I know you are. I couldn’t be all in if you weren’t in at all, so it was time to know if there was even the slightest chance that we could be more. We may not know what that looks like right now, but I had to know if there was a chance.”

“I hope it looks like cuddling in bed, supporting each other in work and life, eating Cubanos at eleven p.m., and having seriously hot sex more often than not.”

This time, her laughter was low and sexy, making my stomach tighten with anticipation. I was going to be seriously ticked if I woke up in the morning and this was all a dream. I cupped her face in my hands and stroked her temples. She was real. We were real.

“I don’t know how I got so lucky, but I’ll follow you wherever you go, baby,” I whispered, leaning in to steal a kiss from her lips.

“I’m not going anywhere except to bed with you.”

Then her lips were on mine, and we let our hearts do the talking.



## Chapter Sixteen

“Hazel!” Heather exclaimed as I left the coffee booth to find Irving. “This crowd is insane!”

“I was wondering if it’s always like this because I’ve never seen anything like it before at a tree lighting ceremony.”

“The Bells Pass tree lighting event has certainly gotten bigger over the years, but this is a whole new level. It must be because it’s the fiftieth anniversary.”

“I’m still shocked that they asked us to light the tree. For such a significant anniversary, the honor should go to a pillar in the community. “

“You’re from a big city, right?”

“Born and raised in Sarasota.”

“That tracks.”

“How so? I’m completely confused.”

“In a big city, it’s always about me, you, him, her, but it’s never about us. In Bells Pass, it’s about us. It’s about the community and building it together for everyone and every future generation. While you look at it in a tunnel of, ‘I haven’t been here long enough to be given the honor,’ the truth is just the opposite. Why do you think they have the newest business owner light the tree each year?”

“To show support for them so people will go to their business?”

“Wrong. I mean, sure that probably happens, but the real reason we do it is to foster community, and to welcome someone new into the town. Someone who in some way will change the face of Bells Pass for the next generation.”

It took me a moment to think about what she was trying to say. “You’re actually spot on about the city. All my life it wasn’t about what can we do for you but what can you do for me? Wow,” I said on a breath. “That changes my whole way of thinking about this, Heather. Thank you for such wonderful insight.”

Heather patted my shoulder and offered a wink. “I’m happy to break it down for people who are new to town. We love new blood and want you to stay. I’m so excited for you and Irving to get to flip the switch this year!” she exclaimed with glee. “I did it a few years back and it’s so magical. Enjoy every moment of it!”

“Thank you,” I said, squeezing her hand. “I just have to find Irving before it gets much later.”

“I just saw him,” Ellis said as he came by. “He said he was going to the pavilion to warm up.”

“Thanks, Ellis,” I said to the young, white-haired man. From what Addie told me, as the lighting of the tree neared, he’d be preparing for his grand entrance as the big man himself.

He loped off with a wave so I thanked Heather and followed him toward the pavilion. I was concerned. If Irving was already cold, we had to be careful how much longer he stayed outside. If he got too cold, autonomic dysreflexia would kick in and we’d end up in the ER rather than his bed by the end of the evening. When I opened the pavilion door and our eyes met, he smiled. We’d agreed to keep our feelings for each other private and proceed with the public face of coworkers only, as hard as that would be. Especially since he sat next to a space heater, warming his legs.

“I heard you were cold,” I said, closing the door and walking to him. At least we were alone. “Everything okay?”

“Hey,” he said with a smile. “I’m fine, but that wind cuts right through my clothes. I had to warm up before the ceremony, or I could get in trouble.”

By trouble he meant his body would try to warm his lower extremities, but couldn’t because the messages would be transferred wrong. His other nervous systems would take over in an attempt to do what his brain was telling them to do and raise his blood pressure too high.

“We don’t want trouble,” I said, glad he’d listened to his body and did what he had to do to stay safe. “Is the wheelchair

bag not enough?" I motioned at his sherpa lined wheelchair bag he used when outside for more extended periods. It looked like a sleeping bag, with a zipper down the front. He had it open now to warm his legs better by the heater.

"The wind is just too much for it tonight. The blizzard might have blown out of here, but with over a foot of snow on the ground and this wind, it's too much. I can't move around enough to stay warm."

"I'm going to talk to Mayor Tottle and let him know he'll need pinch hitters for us. We can't risk you out there if you're already having problems."

He waved my suggestion away. "I'll be fine. I talked to Gabe right before he had to start directing his choir. He sent Holly to the ambulance they keep onsite for the event and she's bringing some heated blankets to pack around my legs. We'll zip up the bag and that will insulate it and hold the heat in long enough to flip the switch."

"Great idea," I said, relieved he had a plan. After what Heather had told me, I didn't want to let the people of Bells Pass down.

"It will work for the lighting but then I'm afraid I'll have to head right home. I'll need to let my body warm up slowly and then take a hot shower. If you'd like to stay, I'm sure Ivy would drive you home."

"Absolutely not," I said, leaning on the arms of his chair. "I'd walk right now and take you home if that's what you said had to happen. I love you, and would never put you at risk for an event that means nothing to me if you aren't by my side. Okay?"

"I love you too," he said, leaning forward to kiss me while keeping an eye on the door. "I know we said we'd keep it professional last night, but it's hard when you're near me and we're alone."

"I'm glad you were alone when I walked in so I could be girlfriend concerned instead of colleague concerned."

"Girlfriend?" he asked, a brow raised and I shrugged.

“I figured if we loved each other we had to be more than friends, right? At least when we’re alone?”

“For the time being I’ll agree to that,” he said, kissing me again. “After Christmas, we’re going to be more than friends all the time.”

“Why after Christmas?” I asked with confusion. “We’ll still be working together after Christmas.”

His smile was sneaky when he hit me with it. “I have no problem telling the housing board that we’ve fallen in love and are in a relationship, but I don’t want Audrey and Ivy to think that the legend of the gazebo is real and we’re the Christmas couple for the year.”

“Wow,” I said, laughter filling my voice. “You really are the Grinch!”

“I am not!” he huffed, crossing his arms over his chest. “Why does that make me a Grinch?”

“Instead of leaning into the gazebo legend and letting the holiday spirit fill you enough to encourage love in this town, you have to be the thief of joy and crush their dreams. That’s what a Grinch does.”

“That’s not fair,” he hissed. “You were the one who said we had to keep it professional when we were in public.”

“I thought you didn’t want the board to know and risk our jobs! I didn’t know it was because you wanted to Grinch your way through Bells Pass!” My laughter told him I was kidding, but also, I wasn’t kidding.

“You’re saying we should let them think we are the Christmas couple for the year?”

“I mean, they already think that,” I assured him. “I got quite the grilling after the Thanksgiving dinner yesterday. Honestly, are they wrong?”

“Yes,” he answered immediately. “We haven’t kissed under the gazebo roof with the tree lit.”

“True, but we could do that after tonight.”

“What if some other couple kisses under the gazebo roof tonight and falls in love?”

“Then the legend of the gazebo is true,” I said in a spooky voice, tickling his belly.

He grabbed my hands and held them while trying not to laugh. “Maybe we should kiss under the gazebo roof tonight once the tree is lit to ensure we get the coveted spot?”

“Hmmm,” I said, tapping my chin. “We could, but as soon as Santa jingles his way into the park, we’ll have to jingle our way out.”

“No law that says we can’t come back later when everyone is gone,” he said, a brow up.

“What? Has the Grinch’s heart grown three sizes tonight?”

“No,” he answered, kissing my knuckles. “But he just realized he should take any and every opportunity, real or make believe, to ensure the beautiful woman before him doesn’t disappear once the holidays are over. If believing in a silly legend is what it takes, this Grinch can do that with the hope it makes other people happy too.”

I tipped my head back and forth a couple of times. “I like the way you think, Mr. Grinch. Let’s do it. We’ll go home, warm up, and return for our clandestine mission!”

He tried to bite back a smile, but failed. “You always know how to make me laugh when I feel like I’m more trouble than I’m worth, Hazel Cane.”

I put my finger to his lips as my brow lowered in frustration. “Never say that again. You. Are. Important. Did you hear me?” He nodded and I sighed. It was a little bit frustrated and a little bit resigned. “We’re all different, but we’re all the same, Irving. We all deserve respect and happiness, regardless of whether we take a little bit longer to do a task or get from one place to another. Anyone who told you otherwise can get on the high horse they rode in on and ride it right back out.”

“Tell me how you really feel, Hazel,” he said with a wink. “Would you remind me to text a few people when I get home and tell them to find their horse?”

His sarcasm was always spot on and I couldn’t help but laugh. “I’ll help you find their numbers, but for now, the only numbers that count are in this room. You, me, and Star have a job to do.”

His salute was jaunty and then he tucked a piece of hair behind my winter cap, which was red and white knit that swirled to look like a candy cane with a red pom-pom at the top. It was festive and so very Hazel Cane, in Hazel Cane’s opinion.

“What time is it?” he asked, flicking his watch. “We only have ten minutes? I hope Holly gets back soon. If we don’t meet Mayor Tottle at the podium at a little before six, he might worry.”

“I have his number,” I said, pulling my phone from my pocket. “I can call him—”

The thought was interrupted when the door burst open and Holly appeared, red cheeked and puffing while wearing an elf’s costume. “I ran as fast as I could,” she said, slamming the door shut. “The EMT put them in this bag to keep them hot, but I didn’t want to risk it,” she explained, handing me the bag.

“You’re the best, Holly,” Irving said, giving her a high five. “You saved the tree lighting!”

“Holly is on the job as head elf of Bells Pass,” she said proudly.

To say I was surprised by how into the whole elf and Santa thing Holly was at her age, was an understatement. According to everyone in Bells Pass, she truly believed that Ellis David was the real Santa Claus. It was the space-time continuum that kept him in both places at once. While I wasn’t sure how this came about, I also couldn’t say it wasn’t true. The reasons she believed it weren’t ones I was privy to, so I wouldn’t judge her for what made her happy during the

holidays. One day at the diner, Mason had explained to me how Holly had come to Bells Pass, so I knew that situation, but how she'd decided the real Santa Claus lived here was still a mystery.

“We'd better wrap these around his legs and get him zipped up. Can you help me?” I asked, setting the bag on the table and unzipping it. Heat poured from the solar bag, and I wrapped a blanket around his calves, while she did the same with the other blanket around his thighs. When her hands were clear, I zipped the bag closed and patted his knees. “I know you can't feel it, but hopefully your nervous system can.”

“I can feel it,” he said. “It's starting to warm my core. That's how I know I'm warming up. First my belly and then my chest starts to flush. This is great. Seriously, Holly, you saved me from a trip to the hospital.”

She tucked the bag back under her arm like it had been all in a day's work. “It was no problem, Irving. We're here to serve. Just remember, the warmth won't last forever, so the EMT says you have to pay close attention to your signals.”

This time, Irving saluted her. “You got it, Head Elf Holly. I hope I can make it, since I want to see your grand entrance!”

“Oh!” she exclaimed, hopping once and running to the door. “I gotta get this bag back to the ambulance and then meet Santa and the reindeer to run through our final preparations. Good luck tonight!” she exclaimed, giving us two thumbs up before she headed out the door in a swirl of Christmas spirit.

“Wow,” I said, laughter filling my voice. “That was a lot.”

“A lot of awesomeness,” Irving agreed. “Considering what she's been through, she has every right to be quiet, shy, and anti-social. Instead, she's joy. Just pure joy, doesn't matter the time of year.”

“I can see that,” I agreed, still smiling. “So helpful, too. It doesn't matter if it's with the little ones or running warming blankets through the park to save the tree lighting. Holly is on the job!”

“I think you’re starting to see why I don’t want to leave Bells Pass,” he whispered. “This town has changed me over the last year, and something tells me they’ve barely scratched the surface.”

My mind drifted back to what Heather had said and I knew how true that was. “Something tells me you’re right. Are you ready to make our mark on Bells Pass in the best possible way?”

He held out his fist for a bump. “Lead on, Miss Cane. We’re right behind you.”

With a wink of my eye and a twitch of my nose, I opened the door, and off we went into a new shared adventure that we’d never forget. If I remembered nothing else about this Christmas, I would remember the feeling of walking down the path next to the man I loved to share a little piece of my soul with a town that had filled it to overflowing since the day I arrived.

When I glanced down at Irving wheeling toward the gazebo, I knew that he, and the love he offered me, would be what I remembered about this holiday season.



Mayor Tottle stood at the podium, ready to speak when the madrigals finished *Rockin’ Around the Christmas Tree*. I couldn’t help but notice that Hazel had a beautiful singing voice. When she sings at work, it’s more goofy than serious. I didn’t realize that when she’s in the right environment, she flourishes. It gave me an idea, but I decided to look into it more and maybe talk to Gabe before I mentioned it to her.

“Thank you for coming to the fiftieth year of the Bells Pass Christmas Tree Lighting in the Park!” Mayor Tottle said, earning him a roar from the crowd. “I know you’re probably cold and ready to head home, so I’m going to keep my comments short this year, but what a banner year it has been!” Another cheer went up and it took Mayor Tottle time to get everyone calm again. “I could bore you with the crime rate



statistics, it's low, or the exciting changes coming to main street and beyond, more to come in the new year, but I won't because I want you to meet some truly wonderful people. I know many of you met Irving Wallace and Star last year in this very park, and this year, they're back with a friend in tow. Her name is Hazel Cane, for those of you who haven't had the pleasure, and she is the second half of the team for our housing development at New Beginnings."

Clapping and cheering went through the crowd and I glanced up at Hazel, giving her a wink as her cheeks heated from embarrassment. "See," I whispered when she leaned down by me. "You really are all that and a bag of candy canes."

Her laughter made her shoulder's shake, but always the consummate professional, she stood with an easy smile on her face and waved at the crowd.

"Though they didn't open a business, they were chosen by the council and business leaders to flip the switch this year. They were integral in implementing the finishing touches to the Bells Pass Bungalows, our new family housing complex. They also worked with the families until every i was dotted and t was crossed. They're working just as diligently to get New Beginnings open as soon as the accessible apartments are finished, which should be any day now, right?" he asked, turning to us. We both nodded and gave him a thumbs-up. "The new options for housing here will change the face of Bells Pass for years to come and we couldn't have done it without their time, talent, and appreciation for the future we're trying to build here."

This time, the applause was joyous and appreciative at the same time. It wasn't loud or rowdy. There wasn't a sound other than their applause. I couldn't help but feel loved by these people even though I hadn't met half of them. There was camaraderie and respect between those who knew what they had and those who wanted to work hard for the same thing.

"Before Irving and Hazel take the podium to speak, I'd like to invite all of the prior Bells Pass Christmas Tree Lighters to come up and join us under the gazebo. Of the

forty-nine prior years, I believe thirty-seven are in the park tonight!”

Hazel leaned down into my ear. “Did you know about this?”

“Not at all,” I said, shaking my head. “It’s a great idea, though.”

“It is!” she said, laughing as familiar faces jogged up the stairs to hug us.

Ivy and Shep, Mel and Mason, Addie and Ellis, Heather and Gabe, Becca and Cameron, Lance and Indigo, Mrs. Violet, several council members, business people I knew from the community and at least a dozen people I had never met before filled the gazebo to overflowing until they trailed down the stairs to stand. The girl gang had surrounded us as soon as they were in the gazebo, laughing at our surprise since they knew Jack had planned this all along.

Once everyone was quiet, Jack motioned at those of us behind him. “A round of applause for all these faces tonight! They have built Bells Pass from the ground up and made it the thriving, lively, prolific entity we are today!”

The celebration began, and I looked up at Hazel when it passed one minute. “They need to move this along,” I said loud enough that Ivy and Gabe heard me.

Gabe put his hand on my shoulder, but only I could feel his fingers taking my pulse. “You’re good yet, but I agree.” He stepped over to Jack and said something into his ear. The mayor nodded and spoke into the microphone, asking for calm. While the crowd settled, I noticed Shep slip away. He had to be under the gazebo when we flipped the switch since he was the one who made the tree light up. Our switch was just for theatrics.

“Now, without any further ado, and please, hold your applause until they’ve finished speaking, I give you Irving Wallace, Hazel Cane, and Star, everyone!”

When Jack stepped out of the way, I rolled to the side of the podium while Hazel stood in front of it.

“Thank you for the warm welcome, everyone. As the mayor said, I’m Hazel Cane, and the last time I came to this park to meet you all, things took an unexpected turn, so I’m happy to get a redo. Irving and I are so thankful to be here tonight to celebrate fifty years of Christmas in Bells Pass. We don’t consider ourselves changemakers as much as mere facilitators of the change that all the people behind us started years ago. If it weren’t for the business people creating jobs and bringing in new, fresh talent, there wouldn’t be a need for new housing. What they’ve done in a town this size is nothing short of a miracle, and now our generation must step up, take the baton, and continue down the track to keep our talented young people here. We must continue to build a community that encourages and inspires others to come to Bells Pass and build a life here.”

Hazel handed me the microphone, and I brought it to my lips. “Thank you, Hazel. I couldn’t have said that better myself. Thank you to everyone who came out and supported us last week at our sleep-out event. As we know, Old Man Winter didn’t cooperate with us, so we couldn’t actually sleep out, but it was still a wonderful event that we look forward to again next year. Don’t worry,” I said, holding up my hand, “We’ll do it earlier next year.” Chuckles were heard throughout the crowd as people nodded their heads. “To that end, we’d like to extend the offer to all of you to submit a name for the great hall at New Beginnings via the website. We want to name it something inclusive and welcoming to all, not only to our new housing complex, but to this wonderful town. After the housing board reviews the submissions and chooses a name, the person who submitted the name will win use of the space for a party or event at no charge.” A cheer rose, and I winked at Hazel while we waited for them to quiet. “Go to the Bells Pass Housing Authority website to read all the rules there. With that, I think it’s time to light this tree! Let’s start the countdown!”

The park erupted with sound as they counted down from ten while Hazel and I made it to the switch and hovered our hands over it.

“I wouldn’t want to be here with anyone else,” she whispered as the crowd got to one, and we flipped the switch.

Blue lights lit up the night sky, but I paid them no attention. I was too busy gazing at the most beautiful light in my life.

## Chapter Seventeen

“Ready?” she asked, and I nodded. Considering the steep grade, she got a running start and zipped me up the ramp faster than I expected. The wind had finally died down, which was the only reason I could convince her to return to the park with me. I didn’t want to tell her that sealing the deal under the gazebo roof was what drove me to come back out in the cold. I have to keep my hope that we really are the gazebo’s Christmas couple on the down low.

Once we were on the gazebo floor, I took control of my chair and spun it around. “You’re right. There’s something magical about being under here when the tree is lit.”

“Come here,” she motioned me over to the railing by the Christmas tree. “Look up.” She knelt next to my chair and tipped her head back to see the top of the tree, so I did the same. It shifted my view of everything into 3D, unlike anything I’d seen before. It was as though the tree did touch the stars.

“My word,” I said with a breath. “I’ve got goosebumps. I didn’t get to see this last year.”

“It’s magical,” she whispered. “We had Christmas trees in Florida, but not like this. This is Christmas personified, in my opinion. When we hit that button tonight, and the lights swirled around the tree, all I could think of was peace. It was the first time I’d felt that kind of peace when surrounded by so many people. I’m so glad we could come back tonight to see it alone.”

“I’d say I’m sorry we had to leave right away, but I’m not. I’m glad we waited and returned when the park was empty.”

“I had no problem going home and getting warm with you under the covers for a bit,” she said, wagging her brows.

“That part was fun,” I said, smirking when I remembered how we’d showered, had some hot soup and then climbed into bed. One thing led to another, and we almost decided against

going back out, but I'm glad we did. "It was nice to have the last few days to relax."

"It was, since I know we have a long way to go to get the facility open."

"As long as you're by my side as we work through each new twist in this adventure, then I'm all in," I promised, rubbing my thumb over her cheek. "You're so beautiful, Hazel. The way the light shines down on you makes me think you are an angel. Sometimes, I think you were sent here to show me the true meaning of Christmas."

"I'm not an angel, Irving, but if I can play a part in teaching you to enjoy this season, then I'm honored to be the one chosen to do that. All I want for you is happiness, both professionally and personally. Life is easier when you're happy, even if life is still complicated as yours will always be. Life is also easier when you have someone by your side who loves you. I promise you that's the truth."

"I'm starting to trust that I can believe that's true, if that makes sense?" I asked as she nodded. "When I wake up and you're next to me, the first thing I do is smile. I'm grateful that you found your way to Bells Pass and weren't afraid to love me."

"I'd be nowhere else, Irving. Now, right at this moment, I'd like you to kiss me, good sir."

I glanced up at the gazebo's roof. "Are you sure you want to be the Christmas couple of Bells Pass?"

"If you're the other half of the couple, I'm all in, Irving Wallace."

When our lips connected, there was a settling in my soul that said I'd found that happiness she spoke of. Spending this Christmas with Hazel was more than I could ask for, much less all my Christmases to come. When she moaned softly, my only thought was, if the legend of this gazebo was real, I was here for it.

"Do you think we'll be here this time next year?" she asked, her lips against mine. Then she leaned back, and her

eyes widened. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to say that out loud. Forget I asked."

"I won't," I said, slipping my hand up her face to caress the back of her neck. "Do I think we'll be here this time next year? I don't know the answer to that, but I can say I hope we are. I hope we're right here enjoying the tree for our second Christmas together. That sounds like a dream come true for a guy who was too afraid to dream."

Hazel knelt on my left side and smiled. "Never be afraid to dream, Irving. We have to believe in our dreams, even when everything is working against them."

"I love you, Miss Cane," I whispered, my lips teasing hers into a kiss.

"I love you too, Mr. Wallace," she whispered back against my lips until I stole her words with my tongue.

With our lips locked together, time didn't exist. It was just me, her, and the spirit that filled the park as the tree shone light down upon the new snow. I no longer feared death if heaven looked and felt like this.

"Shh, back up," a voice whispered, and I opened my eyes to meet Hazel's. "Oh, crap."

I bit my lip for a moment and grimaced before we both turned our heads to see Gabe and Heather standing on the path halfway to the gazebo. We both did that pathetic finger wave everyone does when caught in the act.

"Hey, guys," Hazel said after clearing her throat. "We thought we were alone."

"We can see that," Gabe said as they walked toward us. "We'll go and pretend we saw nothing."

"Ha!" Heather said. "Says you!"

"You can't say anything!" I exclaimed, holding my hands out.

Heather climbed the stairs just as Hazel stood up again. "Are you worried it looks unprofessional to be kissing your colleague under the gazebo in the town park?"

“At least until I read my contract about workplace relationships,” Hazel said.

Heather waved the comment away. “There’s nothing, I assure you. I want you both to know I’m squeeing inside.”

“Squeeing?” Hazel asked, and Heather jumped up and down, clapped, and did a fist pump as Gabe laughed from behind her.

“Ahh, squeeing. Can you squee quietly so no one else finds out?”

“You might be able to convince me to keep quiet about this as long as I get the first wedding invite.”

“Wedding invite?” I squeaked, making Gabe laugh out loud. “It was just a kiss, Heather.”

Heather turned to Gabe and patted his cheek. “Remember when I said the same thing? That was about a month before you proposed?”

“More like six weeks, but we did kiss under the gazebo roof when the tree was lit, so it was inevitable.”

My gaze darted to Hazel who was biting her lip to keep from smiling. Our plan was working! “Why are you here, anyway?” I asked, figuring I could distract them until we made our escape. “It’s pretty late.”

Heather gazed up at Gabe momentarily before she turned to answer me. “We always come out late on the night of the tree lighting. We kiss under the gazebo to keep the legend primed.”

“The legend primed?” Hazel asked, and Heather nodded.

“No one knows how the legend works, so a group of us have decided to keep love under its roof so it never runs low. As long as there is love here, it can be spread.”

I smiled and winked at Hazel before I responded. “That’s very sweet, Heather. In my opinion, there can never be enough love spread throughout the world. Well, we’ll leave you to it and head home. Nice seeing you again. Talk soon.” I turned



my chair; suddenly glad we'd left Star home to rest and warm up. At least we could make a quick exit.

"Not so fast, buddy," Heather said. "Aren't we going to talk about this?" she asked, circling her hand around the gazebo where we sat.

"Dear," Gabe said as he grabbed her hand. "I think it's self-explanatory."

Hazel held up her hands to encourage calm. "Irving and I have developed feelings for each other, but we don't want people to know yet. I mean, Becca and Cam know, but—" She waved her hand as though it didn't matter.

"What?" Heather exclaimed, planting a hand on her hip. "My brother knows? How long?"

"The day of the gender reveal, Cam and Becca kind of caught us kissing in the tree grove," I said, biting my lip to keep from laughing at her expression.

Gabe didn't succeed and burst out laughing, the sound echoing through the park. "This is better than any Christmas couple story I've heard to date! Maybe you should stop making out in public places?"

I hit him with a finger gun and nodded my agreement.

Hazel was the one to speak. "The thing is, Indigo's wedding reception is coming up, so we wanted to keep it between us until after that so we don't steal her thunder."

"True," Heather said, biting her lip.

It was easy to see where Hazel was going with this, so I jumped in. "The Christmas couple from last year should get their happy ending before the gazebo announces the new couple, which means..." I put my finger to my lips.

"It's all starting to make sense," Heather said, nodding. "The thing is, everyone kind of already knows you two are..." rather than say the words she just motioned back and forth between us.

"That doesn't mean we can't keep it under our hat until they're ready to officially go public," Gabe said with a wink at

me. "It's not our place to share their news anyway. We don't have that right."

Heather's shoulders slumped as she nodded. "No, you're right. I'm just so happy I want to tell everyone! But I won't," she promised, crossing her heart like a first grader. "Gabe is right. This is your life and your decision."

"Thank you, Heather," Hazel said, giving her a hug. "I appreciate that more than you know. I'm new in town and don't want to step on any toes over a silly legend."

Gabe fake gasped. "Silly legend? How dare you?" he asked, laughing as Heather shook her head.

"You all make fun, but I know the truth. That said, I won't say a word." She zipped her lips and tossed away the key. "We'll take off and leave you in peace."

"No, stay," I said, holding my hand out so they wouldn't leave. "I've been out too long as it is. Time to go home and warm up."

"Everything good?" Gabe asked, stepping forward.

"All good," I assured him. "Enjoy yourselves and don't do anything we wouldn't do," I said on a wink as Hazel helped me down the ramp.

We rolled down the pathway to the sound of their laughter until the darkness swallowed us as we neared the SUV. "You do know this will be all over town by tomorrow, right?" Hazel said as I transferred into the driver's seat.

I waited for her to climb into the car before I answered. "I can't wait to see which way it goes," I admitted, backing out of the spot and heading toward New Beginnings.

"You mean you don't think Heather is going to tell everyone she knows that she caught us kissing in the gazebo?"

"That all depends on just how much she believes in that legend. She may not say a word if she doesn't want to jinx it."

Hazel sat back against the seat and crossed her arms over her chest. "Hadn't thought of that, but you could be right. Want to place wagers on it?"

“Wagers, eh?” I asked as I drove through the deserted streets. “What did you have in mind?”

“If anyone calls us out within a week that they heard we were necking in the gazebo, you have to sing a Christmas carol with me like you mean it.”

“Like I mean it? You drive a hard bargain,” I said, grinning as I drove. “I’ll take that bet, but if no one calls us out within a week that they heard we were necking in the gazebo, you have to admit that your candy canes are just suckers in the shape of a J.”

Her gasp echoed in the SUV. “How dare you?” I bit back my snicker even though she couldn’t. “I can’t believe the blasphemy coming from your lips!” Her huff told me she was only partly kidding about the blasphemy part. “Okay, I’ll agree to those terms, even though they’re not suckers.”

“I don’t think that’s how agreeing works,” I said, full-on laughing. “Gosh, I haven’t laughed so freely,” I paused, trying to remember the last time but finally shook my head. “Maybe ever.”

She didn’t say a word. Instead, she leaned her head against my shoulder and offered me peace, love, and hope. Those three things had been missing from my life until she walked into it. As I pulled into the parking lot at home, I vowed to do anything to keep this woman by my side for all my Christmases to come.



I rolled into the diner with Star and was pleased to see the booths had all been replaced. Not only had Ivy replaced the booths, but she’d decorated for Christmas, including the donation tree she put up every year. Anyone who brought mittens, a hat, or a scarf for the tree got a free piece of pie. The thought made me pause. What if we did the same thing at New Beginnings but collected hygiene items for people experiencing housing insecurity. I grabbed my phone and

typed out a reminder to talk to Hazel about it when I returned home.

I wasn't sure if it was my perspective or the season, but the diner felt fresh and festive at the same time. I unwound my scarf and pushed the chair forward, planning to grab a booth and wait for Hazel to finish decorating with the girl gang for Indigo's reception. We'd been so busy that we hadn't even had time to decorate the tree in my apartment. Cameron delivered the trees yesterday, and Hazel got it put up in the stand with water, but we were too exhausted after working all day to get the lights on it. That was okay. It was barely December first, so we had plenty of time. It could wait until after Indigo's reception if that's what had to happen. I'd rather Hazel was relaxed and happy when we did it than exhausted and burnt out.

"Irving," a voice said, and I stopped my chair when I realized Gabe sat alone in a booth, sipping a cup of coffee.

"Hey, Gabe," I said, turning my chair to roll under the booth. "Waiting for Heather?"

"You know it," he said, wrapping both hands around his mug. "I just finished the first madrigals practice for Christmas Eve in the park. It's going to be a fantastic show this year."

"I was meaning to talk to you about that," I said. "Do you mind if I stay until Heather and Hazel arrive?"

"Of course not. I welcome the company."

"Star, rest time," I said, dropping the leash, and he lowered himself to the floor. Sandra noticed me when she exited the swinging door and grabbed the coffee pot and a menu as she headed over. I flipped my cup up as an open invitation, and once she poured it, I waved away the menu. "No food tonight?" she asked, sliding the menu under her arm.

"I'm waiting for Hazel, and we'll eat together if that's okay?"

"Absolutely," she said with a smile, refilling Gabe's cup. "How about the prince? Could he use a cookie?"

One glance at Star and I started to laugh. “Looks like that’s an affirmative.”

She reached into her pocket and pulled out a crisp, round cookie. “A new recipe. Crazy for Carrot Cake—”

Before she could finish her sentence, Star snatched the cookie and chomped it down, crumbs flying everywhere. Once our laughter died down and the crumbs had been licked up, Sandra motioned at the kitchen. “Let me know when you’re ready to order.”

“Don’t worry. I’m sure you’ll hear the gang arrive,” I assured her with a wink.

When she was gone, Gabe lowered his coffee to the table. “What did you want to talk about with the madrigals?”

“Not the madrigals so much as your input on my idea. I don’t know anything about singing, though.”

He smiled wider this time. “Hazel calls you the Ebenezer Scrooge of Christmas carols.”

“In my defense, she plays them all day long starting in October!”

“Oh, she’s one of those who enjoys it when the stores start playing Christmas carols in September.”

I pointed at him and rolled my eyes. “It’s not that I don’t like them, but they have a time and a place. When Hazel sings them around New Beginnings, she’s always goofy and off-key, but at the tree lighting, I realized she does that on purpose.”

“How so?”

“When the madrigals were singing during the tree lighting, she was singing along. She has a beautiful voice and it surprised me, but it also got me thinking about how much she would love a real old-fashioned caroling event.”

“Like door to door through town?”

“Yes!” I exclaimed with excitement. “I was thinking we could have groups go to different neighborhoods to sing and then all come together to carol through the new family

apartments before finishing at New Beginnings for treats and drinks. It would be something fun for the community members who like to sing, and to bring joy to those who maybe can't get out as easily as others to attend concerts or the park event."

"I love this idea," he said, grabbing a small notebook from his pocket and flipping it open to make some notes. "Let me talk to my madrigals kids and take a poll of who would be available. As long as I can have one of my kids in each group, we wouldn't need to practice ahead of time. They could start each song for the group to keep them on key. Anyone signing up to carol would know the songs, so there's no need for sheet music either." He tapped his pen on the paper. "I wonder if we could coordinate this through the cookie walk."

"The one Heather organizes?" I asked and he nodded.

"They're moving it to the Bells Pass Community Center this year rather than the park. The park poses challenges for many when it comes to mobility and age. Last year's cookie walk was so cold and there was so much snow everyone suffered. We're going to have the same problem this year. At least at the community center, everyone is welcome and there's enough room to spread out. That said, they decided to have a piano player playing during the event rather than caroling."

"This sounds like the perfect tie in then," I agreed. "We could spread the promotion work out and even have a sign-up form where people could request carolers go to specific homes that may have shut-ins or the elderly."

"I like it," he said with a nod. "Let me talk to Heather tonight and see what she thinks. Then I'll get a head count on my kids. The cookie walk is scheduled for December tenth, which gives us plenty of time to organize it once we have a list of ready and willing carolers."

"What date would work best, do you think?" I asked, pulling out my phone to open my calendar.

"There's only one date, Irving. Christmas Eve."

"That's Hazel's birthday."

“Do you think she’d care if you made plans for her?”

“Care if I make plans for her to go caroling on Christmas Eve? No, I don’t think she’d care!” I started laughing and shaking my head. “It would be the best birthday ever.”

“Then let’s do it!”

“Give me a ring after you talk to Heather and the kids. We’ll go from there. I would plan to hang back at New Beginnings and prepare while everyone is out since—” I motioned at my wheels.

“Understood,” he said, tucking the book in his pocket. “As an EMT, I can’t disagree with that decision. The weather will not be your friend.” He lifted his cup to his lips and set it back down.

I noticed he didn’t take a drink. He lifted it and set it back down several times as though he thought he was drinking it. We sat in silence, and as soon as I realized something was weighing on his mind, I waited him out.

“Is everything okay with you and Heather?” I asked, leaning in so no one else heard me. The diner was relatively empty at this time of night, but all the same.

“Fine, yeah, great.”

“That’s a lie,” I said, leaning my elbows on the table and propping my chin on my hands. “You’ve been fake drinking that coffee for ten minutes.”

Gabe glanced down at it as though he just realized it was still there. He rubbed his forehead a bit but wouldn’t make eye contact. “Sorry, I’m a bit distracted. I didn’t mean to be bad company.”

“You’re not bad company, Gabe. I’m just concerned something is wrong, and you’re afraid to ask for help.”

“Nothing’s wrong,” he said, finally looking at me. “I have to make a decision that could change our lives, and I don’t know how to do it.”

“Are you thinking about leaving Bells Pass?” I couldn’t hide my surprise. Gabe and Heather were as invested in this

town as Ivy and Shep. He was a detective and still took shifts as an EMT. Heather had a business and worked with her brother on the housing project.

“Oh, God no,” he said, holding up a hand. “We’re Bells Passers for life, Irving.”

“That was always my impression,” I said. “Something is eating at you, though.”

“Heather can’t have children since she had surgery for her pituitary tumor.”

“I see,” I said, even though I didn’t. “I didn’t know Heather had a brain tumor.”

“When she was a teenager. It’s the reason she developed acromegaly. Her health concerns are under control now, and she’s stable again on a new regimen, but that’s to keep her hormones in tight check. A few years ago, before we married, she went into a health crisis when her hormones became imbalanced. The hormonal changes in pregnancy would likely kill her since adjusting her medications to balance them out would be nearly impossible.”

“That makes sense. It’s unfortunate. I’m sorry?”

“You made that a question,” he said with a chuckle and waved his hand. “I was aware when I married her that we wouldn’t be able to have our own children. I’m okay with that. My genes are a bit like Russian roulette. My family has some severe mental health issues, and while I don’t, my brother very much did.”

“Wait, you have a brother?”

“Had a brother,” he said. “Long story, but he passed many, many years ago.”

“Okay, so I’m confused. You’ve already decided not to have kids, so I’m unsure where this is going.”

Gabe rubbed his hands over his face and shook his head. “Talking to you about this is uncomfortable.”

My hands went up in the don’t shoot position. “I’m not prying, Gabe. If you don’t want to talk about it, we don’t have



to.”

“See, that’s the problem. I need help, but talking to you about it could make me look like an ass.”

“I highly doubt that’s possible, Gabe.”

His laughter filled the diner briefly before he closed his mouth again and shook his head. “Heather and I have been approved to be foster parents on track for adoption.”

“Wow. Well, that’s fabulous, Gabe.”

“Thanks. We both want kids, but we know it’s better if our home is a place for a child who otherwise wouldn’t have one.”

“Admirable, but also tricky,” I said. “You have birth parents to deal with besides the county. You also have trauma considerations and behavioral health situations that stem from them.”

“Yep, which is why we talked with the foster placement about taking a very young child available for adoption. We would foster for a while before we adopted to make sure we were a good fit for the child.”

“But?”

“They called me today that they have a child who needs a home. She was abandoned at a hospital in a different county, but no one could or would take her beyond an emergency placement for a few days. If we don’t take her, she’ll have to go to a state home.”

“Wow, that’s a hard decision to make. You know for sure the baby has been abandoned?”

“Yes. Her mother signed over her rights within the first seventy-two hours, and the father is unknown. We still have the waiting period where mom can change her mind, but she has no means to care for her, so the baby girl is essentially an orphan.”

“That takes away any trauma considerations.”

“It does, but her mother signed off her rights because the baby girl is paralyzed from the waist down, Irving. She has spina bifida.”

“Lack of prenatal care probably explains that,” I said to buy time. I was unsure what to say to him, so I went with the obvious. “Have you talked to Heather?”

“Nope,” he said with a shake of his head. “She wants a child, Irving. If I tell her about this baby, Heather will be at the hospital tonight.”

“You’re concerned she will leap without considering the implications of fostering, or adopting, a baby with a disability?”

His head hung as he spoke. “I told you I’d sound like an ass.”

“Thinking through the considerations of not only what the child’s life will entail but how it will change your own, does not make you an ass, Gabe. I would be far more worried if you had come to me with no concerns. Here’s the thing. No parent expects their child to be born with a disability or considers that their child could become disabled early in life. It’s not something we think about in those happy days of starting a family. Sure, if you’re disabled, maybe those questions enter your mind, but no matter what, we still don’t expect it to happen to us. We can’t predict or keep them from happening, but we can arm ourselves with knowledge and love to navigate them. The question you need to ask yourself isn’t what can’t this child do, but what can she do.”

“You mean, like, is she of normal intelligence?”

“I’m sure that’s a question that no one can answer right now, but typically children with spina bifida, while they have mobility considerations and some have learning disabilities, are generally of normal intelligence. I have several friends with spina bifida who use wheelchairs but have had extremely successful careers and lives, regardless of how they get around. My question was more about what the child will do within your family unit.”

“She’d make my wife a mother and me a father. Both things we didn’t dare dream possible. She’d bring so much joy to our home, along with sleepless nights and ten tons of worry.”

“Just like any new parent,” I agreed with a smile.

“The thing is, my house isn’t accessible.”

“Gabe?” I asked, and he stopped his muttering to look at me. “You have time to worry about that stuff. The baby is three or four days old?” He nodded, and I smiled, holding out a calming hand. “It will be years before you have to worry about her accessibility needs in the home. You’ll be carrying her for the most part for many years. You’re thinking long-term, which is important, but you’re forgetting to think about the present. When you think about holding a baby, what do you picture?”

“Blankets, bottles, pacifiers, a rocking chair. My wife cradling the baby while singing a soft lullaby in her ear.”

“What you’re picturing there is called love, Gabe, in the purest form. It doesn’t matter that the little girl can’t move her legs. She needs love. If you can offer love, then that makes the decision easier. If you’re fostering, you take her, offer unconditional love, and accept hers in return. You can talk to the experts, get advice from doctors, and do the research you need to do to make informed decisions before adopting her. When I see you around the community, I see someone who steps into dangerous and scary situations to help others daily. There is nothing more dangerous or scary than becoming a parent. That puts your heart out there walking around on this earth at risk of being hurt. Considering what you see on the job, I imagine it’s hard to fathom for you.”

“There’s that,” he agreed as he rubbed his temple.

“I also see the person who loves everyone he helps unconditionally, whether for a moment or a lifetime. Talk to Heather, and bring up your concerns about the future for you as parents of a child with a disability, but also, remember that where there is love, there is hope and joy.”

A natural smile finally lifted his lips, and he nodded once. “Where there is love, there is hope and joy. I like that, Irving. It’s so true, too. Would you mind if I dip? I want to pick Heather up at the center and take her home to discuss this. I’m supposed to let the social worker know in the morning what our decision is.”

“I’d drive you myself,” I said as he hurried out of the booth and offered a handshake. “Good luck, and for the record, you and Heather will make excellent parents to this little girl. That’s coming from someone in her position, so you can believe it when I say she’d be a lucky girl to have you and Heather loving her, even for only a little while.”

Gabe gripped my shoulder for a moment and closed his eyes, his head nodding as he did so. When he opened his eyes, they were clear, and he smiled. “It’s funny how the universe always puts someone in our way when we need them most. I’m grateful that I ran into you tonight and that you noticed me struggling. Hazel is a lucky woman to have you loving her, Irving.”

He patted my back and took off for the door at a trot, reminding me of a man who just found out his baby was on the way. When the door closed, and I was left alone to stare out the window, I couldn’t help but think about his parting words. That was where he had it wrong. I was the lucky one to have Hazel love me, even for a little while.

## Chapter Eighteen

The lights were low, and Christmas carols played on the speakers. Irving was in the kitchen while I strung the lights and sorted the ornaments.

“It’s so nice to finally find time to do the tree,” I called out as I wound the lights around it. “I feel like we’ve been running nonstop since Friday.”

“Probably because we have been,” he said, rolling toward the table to set a plate on it. “Thanksgiving, the tree lighting, the wedding reception planning, and work.”

After the lights were on, I walked around the tree to the table. “I love being able to tell our tenants that we have a place for them, though. I’ll never get tired of their joy and thankfulness.”

“That part is pretty great,” he agreed with a smile. “I made some cheese ball and eggnog.”

“Cheese ball?” I asked, eyeing the plate that held a ball of cheese covered in nuts.

“It’s a Christmas tradition in Wisconsin,” he explained, grabbing a plate and breaking into the cheese with a knife before he set crackers on the plate for me. “Do you like cream cheese and cheddar cheese?”

“Yes, but not together.” I took the plate from him with hesitation and eyed the concoction.

“Trust me, you’re going to love it.”

Still unsure, I spread some on a cracker and popped it in my mouth, chewing a few times until all the flavors came together. “My lord,” I said, lowering myself to a chair by the table. “That’s delicious.”

His grin was enough to tell me he knew he’d won me over. We sat and ate cheeseball until our bellies were full and the wine was gone. “You don’t know how long I’ve been looking forward to being alone with you again,” he said, taking my hand and kissing my knuckles. “I know we’re alone

at night, but we're so tired we pass out as soon as our head hits the pillow. It's nice to be a normal couple sometimes."

"Ah ha," I said with a grin, leaning forward to kiss him. "A normal couple. I love how you see us that way now, Irving! We are a normal couple, and I can't wait for others to know it too."

"Speaking of which," he said, pushing the plates out of the way. "No one has said a word to me about us kissing in the gazebo. Have they said anything to you?"

"Nope," I said with a shake of my head. "Today is only Wednesday, so we have a few more days. You haven't won yet, mister!"

His naughty grin told me he still thought he had. "Oh, wait," he said, his breath short in his chest. "I may know why."

"Why no one has heard?" I asked, and he nodded. "Heather is hopefully keeping up her side of the bargain?"

"I ran into Gabe Monday night and I told you we chatted, but I didn't tell you about what."

"Is Heather sick?" I asked, worry filling me. "She was here on Monday night and seemed fine, though Gabe did pick her up early."

"He picked her up to talk to her about something that would change their lives forever."

"I'm confused."

"They're newly approved foster parents and a baby needed a home. He wasn't sure if they would take her, but he had to talk to Heather about it."

I gasped with my hands to my mouth. "Irving! Do you know how huge this is? Heather and I discussed her condition and that she can't have kids. She was so excited to finish the foster care approval program. Don't you think we'd know if they brought a baby home?"

"Probably not yet," he said, his gaze glued to mine as though I was the only thing that mattered to him. That was just another thing I loved about him. He was always dialed in on

me and whatever we were doing without being distracted by phones or work. It was refreshing after dating Daniel and his phone for two years. “The baby has spina bifida and is still in the hospital,” he said and my lips made an O.

“Which is why Gabe was struggling to make a decision.”

“Also, why he didn’t want to talk to me about it. He felt uncomfortable and thought I’d think he was an ass for questioning whether they wanted to take a child with a disability into their home.”

“What did you tell him?”

“I’d be more worried if he didn’t have second and third thoughts, but he had to talk to Heather about it and make the decision together. He tells me the baby is paralyzed from the waist down. Mom didn’t have a lot of resources during the pregnancy.”

“That explains it,” I said, and he nodded.

“No prenatal care most likely, and as soon as she gave birth, Mom signed away her rights and abandoned the baby. Gabe said the little girl would be in the hospital about a week, so they had a little time. It’s been eating at me to know what they decided, but I didn’t want to interfere with their decision-making process.”

“Maybe you should call them,” I suggested. “It’s been a couple of days. They may have more questions they need an answer to.”

“You think so?” I nodded and handed him his phone. “Now?”

“No time like the present, sweetheart.”

He found Gabe’s number in his contacts and hit the button. I heard Gabe’s voice on the other end. “Hey, Irving.”

“Hi, Gabe,” Irving said, nervousness in his voice. “I wanted to follow up on our discussion on Monday night. How are things going?”

“I’m so glad you called,” I heard Gabe say, and I shot Irving a smile and a wink before I stood and walked to the tree

to give them some privacy. I wrapped the tree in garland and ensured the lights were spaced evenly before I walked back to the table as he was finishing the call.

“Seriously, anytime, day or night,” Irving said, nodding as Gabe spoke on the other end of the line. “I’m so happy for you and Heather and can’t wait to meet her.” He nodded again and smiled before he winked at me. “You keep our secret, and we’ll keep yours. Talk soon.”

I lowered myself to his lap when he set the phone on the table. “Good news?”

“Great news!” he exclaimed, kissing my lips with zest. “They decided to foster the baby girl for six months. That’s the waiting period to ensure the mom doesn’t return for her.”

“Which means if she doesn’t, they’ll adopt her.”

“From the way Gabe talked about her, without a doubt.” His laughter was so full of joy as it rang out. “They already met her. He said she was beautiful, and Heather couldn’t leave her the first night. She slept in the NICU with the baby on her chest. He’s going to send a picture.”

His phone dinged, and he picked it up, opening the text messages. What I saw melted my heart into a puddle of goo. “Oh, my goodness, look at them!” A tiny pink bundle lay on Heather’s chest, skin to skin. The baby’s little head was covered in a Santa hat. She had an oxygen tube and a feeding tube in her nose, but was pink, plump, and had dark hair sticking out from under the hat.

“These kinds of images really get me,” he said, and I could hear the emotion in his voice. “That little girl had no one, and now she’s got two of the best. She’s going to be just fine.”

“She is,” I said, looking up to meet his gaze. “So are you, Irving. I love you.”

“I love you too,” he whispered as I put my arms around his neck for a hug. “You’re the best thing to ever happen to me, Hazel. I keep waiting to wake up and discover this was all a dream.”



“I assure you, it’s not a dream. We are real. Do you know how I know?”

“How?” he asked, ending the hug so I could sit up.

“There’s a Christmas tree in the apartment of Irving Wallace that’s ready to be decorated! Surely, if this were a dream, it would be a nightmare, so it has to be real life.” I tossed him a wink so he knew I was kidding, but he tickle-attacked me as he laughed.

“You think you’re so funny, don’t you?” he asked, leaning in for a kiss. “What do you say we get it finished?”

“Let’s do it!” I said, hopping off his legs so he could wheel over to the tree. “I’ll do the top branches if you do the bottom,” I explained, pointing at the ornaments I had set out for him on the couch so they were easy for him to reach.

We got to work, hanging the ornaments while the Christmas carols played, and I sang along, the spirit of the season filling me as I pictured Heather and Gabe holding their new baby girl on Christmas morning. What better gift was there in this world than a lifetime of love?

“When I was a kid,” I said, hanging a star ornament on the tree. “We each had our own ornaments that we hung. My mom and dad had theirs from childhood and collected them for me over the years, so by the time I was a teenager, the tree was full of personal ornaments that reminded us of the things we liked at certain ages and favorite characters, things like that.”

“That’s a great idea,” he said, hanging an angel on a branch. “I could see where it would make the tree personal and more fun during the season. If I ever had a child, I’d want to do that. Where are your ornaments?”

I froze with a bauble near the tree and swallowed down the grimace. I hated telling another lie, but I didn’t have a choice. “They’re at my parent’s house. I didn’t know if this job would work out, so I decided I could always have things shipped.”

“But you didn’t have them shipped?”

“Couldn’t,” I answered, finally hanging the bulb on the tree. “My parents are working on a cruise ship until the new year. Once they return home, I’ll have them send me my things.”

“A cruise ship? I thought they were chefs?”

“They retired a few years back and sold their restaurant. They wanted to travel and discovered they could work on a cruise ship as chefs while they saw the world, so that’s what they did.”

“Not a bad idea,” he agreed, wheeling his chair backward to take in the tree. “Getting paid to see the world is a win-win.”

“What do you think?” I asked as I stepped back and stood by his chair.

“I think it’s beautiful and wish I hadn’t waited so long to put one up.”

I rubbed his neck as we silently gazed at the beautifully decorated tree. I had saved the red and gold ornaments for his tree. I also used soft white lights and gold garland as accents. “It’s not done until we...” I paused and jogged to the bag I had brought in earlier. “Put on the candy canes!”

“Of course,” he said, laughter falling from his lips as I handed him the bag. “Don’t we need a tree topper too?”

“Well, look at you,” I said, whistling. “You’re barely even a Grinch now!”

He swatted my bottom as I walked by to hang a candy cane, and I laughed, ducking behind the tree so he couldn’t get me. I took a candy cane and pulled the wrapping down on my way back.

“I hope they’re fresh,” I said, hanging it on my lip to taste. “Oh, yeah, there’s nothing like a candy cane as you decorate the tree. Try it,” I said, motioning at the bag.

“You know I don’t like them,” he insisted. “Except when I kiss the peppermint off your lips.”

“You told me you don’t like Christmas trees either.” I raised a brow as a challenge.

“Fine, fine,” he said, shaking his head as he unwrapped a candy cane and eyed it as though it would taste like dirty feet or garlic.

“These are gourmet candy canes. They’re impossible not to like.”

Irving rolled it across his tongue before he closed his lips around it and inhaled. “I don’t know if I like the candy cane for what it is or if it’s because it reminds me of your essence,” he said, holding it while he spoke. “I think it’s the latter.”

After setting my candy cane aside, I leaned down and kissed him, tasting the sweet peppermint on his lips. “I like the taste on you,” I whispered when the kiss ended. “It turns me on.”

“That’s all it takes?” he asked, popping the candy cane back in his mouth and sucking while he wiggled his brows.

I kissed him playfully and then grabbed my own candy cane to finish. “I think it’s time for the topper. My family always hung an angel on the tree, but in this crowd, the topper can be nothing but a star.”

I said the word, and Star looked up at me and gave a bark, making us both laugh.

“I think he agrees!” Irving said. “Let’s do it.”

I lifted the new topper from the box. “I saw this at Mrs. Beesweasel’s store, and I couldn’t help but grab it. The gold garland and the white lights perfectly complement the rest of the tree.”

After setting it in place, I trailed the plug down the back of it and peeked around the corner. “Ready?” I asked, waiting until he nodded. Then I connected the plug to one of the light strands already on. The star lit up the top of the tree and shone down upon the other branches like an umbrella of light.

“Gorgeous,” he whispered as I walked around the tree to kneel by him.

“I love it,” I said, my voice filled with awe. “Your first Christmas tree.”

“With my first girlfriend,” he finished, turning his head to kiss me.

“I’m not your first girlfriend.”

“But you are,” he said, holding my chin. “I understand that now. I never accepted the other women completely or called them my girlfriend because they didn’t accept me as I was. There is no question in my mind that you do, so you’re the woman who deserves that title. I hope you’re my last girlfriend, too.”

“Me too,” I whispered, holding his hand to my chest. “I can’t wait to tell people you’re my boyfriend, but I think it’s fair to say we have to let the bet go about Heather. She has other things on her mind.”

“I agree,” he said with a wink. “Maybe we should debut our relationship at the caroling event.”

“Caroling event? We aren’t having a caroling event.”

“Surprise!” he exclaimed quietly. “Gabe has been helping me with it, and he told me tonight that he had everything lined up.”

“Everything what lined up?” I asked, completely confused by the turn in the conversation.

“When we were at the tree lighting, I heard you singing, like for real—not using the silly voice you use when you sing around here. I really like your voice, Hazel. I didn’t realize how beautiful it is.”

“Thank you,” I said with a smile. “I know you don’t like carols, so I sing them in a silly voice. I feel like you’d hate your life less that way.”

“I don’t hate my life anymore, Hazel, because of you. Your voice is beautiful. You are beautiful. Please, sing normally from now on?” His question was so honest and vulnerable I couldn’t help but nod.

“I’m still confused about the caroling event.”

“I was sitting there Friday night and could picture you walking the sidewalks of Bells Pass singing carols like they used to do during Scrooge’s time.” I gave him a smirk but didn’t interrupt. “I asked Gabe about it when I saw him Monday night. He said it would be easy to do if he could get enough of his madrigal kids to lead each group. He just told me he had kids lined up, and they’ll advertise it at the cookie walk on the tenth. There will be a sign-up sheet for carolers and for people to list addresses of shut-ins or people who can’t get out to the park.”

“This sounds like so much fun!” I exclaimed, clapping my hands with excitement. “When do we carol?”

“Well, Christmas Eve, of course,” he said with a wink. “As soon as the event is done at the park, each group will go out and carol in their assigned neighborhood, meet back at the Bells Pass Bungalows to carol there, and then finish here at New Beginnings for eggnog and cookies provided by—”

“The Bells Pass Bakery!” I said, laughter escaping as I threw my arms around him. “Christmas Eve is my birthday.”

“I know,” he whispered, tenderly kissing my neck. “I couldn’t think of a better gift than to let Hazel Cane carol her way through Bells Pass.”

“There truly isn’t one,” I said, tears in my eyes. “It’s going to be so much fun.” Then it hit me, and I leaned out of the hug. “Wait, Irving. We can’t do the neighborhood caroling. It would be too hard on you and Star if the sidewalks aren’t cleaned off, or it’s super cold that night.”

“I’m not going,” I said, kissing her nose. “I don’t sing.”

“Then I’m not going either,” I said, crossing my arms over my chest.

He laughed softly as he tugged my arms down and held my hands. “You have to go. You’re the whole reason the event exists.”

“I don’t want to spend Christmas Eve away from you. I’m also not participating in anything that excludes you. It’s not happening.”

“Baby, listen,” he said, and I realized that was the first time he’d called me anything but Hazel. It was like he was settling into the idea of loving someone for a lifetime. “I don’t even like to sing, so I’m not upset that I can’t go caroling. The reason I set this up was so you could do something you enjoy on your birthday. I did it fully aware that I wouldn’t be joining you in the neighborhoods. I will meet you at the bungalow and carol with you there, even though I sound like a frog in a bucket, and then we’ll come back here together. We’ll be apart less than an hour and I’ll use that time to get the rec room ready for the carolers. Deal?”

I thought about it for a moment and finally nodded. “Only because you’re the one who set this up and you did it already knowing you couldn’t go out with us. I love you for thinking about what I would love to do on my birthday. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” he said, kissing me softly. “I’ll miss you, but I want to spend the evening with you here and not in the hospital, so I’m more than happy to leave the outside stuff to you while I concentrate on the inside stuff.”

“Speaking of inside stuff,” I said, starting to unbutton his flannel shirt. “We should do some of that.”

“What did you have in mind, Miss Cane?” he asked as my fingers deftly popped his buttons.

“Mmm, well, I was thinking you should show me how to set up that special equipment you’ve got so we can give it a go.”

“Oh yeah?” he asked, rolling the chair backward as I followed. “Are you sure?”

“Do you like using it?” I asked as he motioned at the closet where he kept it.

“Oh, baby, it’s incredible. It lets me make love to you instead of the other way around.”

I opened the closet, and he pointed at a bag and a cot. I hauled both out, and he showed me how to set them up. The cot went in front of the chair and the chair offered a natural

gliding motion that used his upper body to move it rather than his legs.

He transferred into the chair and motioned me forward to finish undressing him. “This could take a little getting used to for you,” he whispered, pulling my sweater over my head. “Tell me if you don’t like it, and we’ll stop.”

I put my finger to his lips and sat on the cot while I did a little striptease to remove my shirt and bra. “Open communication is important,” I said as he popped the button on my jeans. “But when we’re intimate, I’m never worried that I can’t tell you something that bothers me. For instance, I’m uncomfortable right now knowing that when I lay down, you will see my belly and think I should stop eating so many candy canes.”

“No,” he said, holding my chin while he kissed me. His tongue was hot and demanding, and the heat that swirled in my belly said I would enjoy the next thirty minutes of my life. “I can’t wait to see every inch of your delicious body. That’s one of the things I like most about using this setup. I get to see, touch, and feel everything. It makes me feel like I can be more of a participant than an onlooker.”

“I love you,” I whispered as I pulled my pants off, leaving only my panties in place before I laid back on the cot and gave him the pleasure of removing the last bit of lace.

“Oh, Hazel,” he said when they were gone. “You are breathtaking. Let me touch you.”

His hand roamed my body, up my thighs, across my breasts, then down to my belly. He left his hand there, splayed across my softness, and closed his eyes. “I love doing this,” he whispered. “Every time I do, I feel a stitch inside my soul. In my spine. In the place where that bullet tore me in two. Each stitch holds in a little bit more happiness each time. It holds in hope and trust that I can be everything society has told me I can’t be.” He stopped speaking, and I quickly brushed away the tears from my cheeks. The imagery was powerful, and I couldn’t help but think about what he’s been through and how I never wanted him to feel that way again. His fingers

tightened on my skin for a moment, and then he opened his eyes and smiled. "I love you," he said as his finger slid south to my center.

"Irving." I sighed when his finger slipped inside me. "I love the way you love me."

"Scoot forward, baby," he whispered, slipping a second finger inside me. "Right to the edge and put your legs on my shoulders.

"Let me get you ready first."

His laughter was naughty when he slipped a third finger inside me, and a moan fell from my lips. "I'm ready, baby. Where did you think my other hand was?"

I couldn't do anything but moan at the thought of him pleasuring himself as he pleased me. I followed his directions and slid down to the end of the cot, noticing handles spaced evenly. I grabbed each one, and this time, it was his moan that filled the room.

"I love that you already know you're going to need those," he hissed. Before I could respond, he pushed inside me while gripping my hips tightly to hold himself there. "Hazel," he moaned, a shiver going through him. "I don't know how long I'll last, and that's saying a lot about what your heat does to me."

"Don't hold back, Irving." He glided in and out at varied speeds until we stood at the edge of a precipice, waiting to fall. "Trust me with your love, Irving," I whispered, then pushed forward until I could squeeze his base, keeping my heat wrapped tightly around him.

I watched as he lost control and I lifted my hips just enough to do the same and join him in the place that didn't care how we walked, spoke, or heard. It was a place where nothing mattered but love.



## Chapter Nineteen

Where was that lip balm? I dug around in my purse until illumination pointed me to it, and I grabbed it up, realizing a moment later where the illumination came from—my burner phone. I flipped it open, and there was a message on the screen. All it said was, ‘call me.’ I was never more grateful that I’d run home to shower this morning before work. Since I was alone, I dialed Cliff’s number and waited while it rang.

“We got him,” Cliff said, his voice clipped and gruff. “He’s back in custody, but this is a real mess.”

Cliff’s frustration and anger came through the line loud and clear. “I have to pull you, Hazel. Someone helped Felding escape, and we don’t know who.”

“I’m not leaving Bells Pass on a whisper of a threat, Cliff. Nothing has happened since I first arrived, and there’s no reason to believe that will change now.”

“Everything has changed. That’s what you don’t understand.”

“I fully understand what you’re telling me, Cliff, but I’m not in danger here. If something happens to me now, Felding knows he’s going away for life. He won’t risk that when he has much bigger fish in the frying pan to keep from burning.”

“Valid,” Cliff said, and I heard a note of relief in his voice. “Still, you play by the rules and stay out of the public eye until I have a better handle on things here.”

My mind picked that moment to remind me about the caroling event on Christmas Eve. That was almost three weeks away, meaning I could wait for more updates before deciding to back out. Not that caroling was exactly in the public eye. “Sure, I’ll stay out of sight, if you’ll work toward a resolution of this nonsense. I want to stay in Bells Pass and have no interest in returning to Florida other than to testify against Felding.”

“If we get lucky, you won’t have to. At this point, Felding may plead out and go to prison to avoid a trial.”

A snort escaped before I could stop it. “Sure, you let me know when that happens. In the meantime, I won’t be holding my breath.”

“Keep this phone near you. If I have to pull you, this is the only way to contact you.”

“It’s faster to email me,” I said, reeling off the address. “I get alerts to incoming mail immediately. I can’t check this phone during work hours in case someone notices. I only saw it today because I was digging in my purse.”

“Fine. The email subject will be, pack your bags for a fun-filled holiday trip.”

“Gee, I bet it will be fun-filled. Noted, but hopefully, it’s not needed. I want to remain employed in Bells Pass when this is over.”

“I doubt that will happen once they find out you lied to them.”

“It wasn’t like I could tell them the truth,” I said defensively. “I’ll come clean just as soon as you tell me I can, so get your crap together over there and end this madness, please.”

“That’s something we can agree on. I’ll reach out with updates, otherwise, we’ll talk next week.”

“I’ll be here, doing the job I came here to do,” I said, wishing neither of us had to be in contact with each other. Cliff was a nice enough guy, but I wanted this as over and done with as he did.

“I’ll be doing the same. With a little Christmas magic, maybe we can get this resolved sooner rather than later.”

I shut the phone and put it back in my purse with a sigh. All I could think was Cliff might be right. Dr. Travis Felding could still end my career here in Bells Pass, if only by default. There was nothing I could do about it now, though. I’d been in town long enough that any excuse I had for not telling them would sound hollow.

After last night, I knew one thing for sure. It was time to tell Irving why I was here and make it extremely clear that I was staying, even after this fiasco with Felding was over. Tonight, as soon as we're done working, I'll make him dinner and explain everything. All I could do was pray he would understand why I kept it from him, and why he couldn't tell anyone else until it was over. Irving is a smart guy, so I'm not worried he won't understand the implications of not keeping this between us. I had to pray he understood why I couldn't tell him and that the Florida situation had no bearing on what's happened between us.

My gut told me it was going to be a hard sell. Irving doesn't trust easily, but now he trusts me wholeheartedly. I swallowed down the heartburn and shook my head. If he genuinely loves me, he'll understand, right?

I blew out a breath, squared my shoulders, and left the apartment to find the man I'd fallen head over heels for in the blink of an eye. If our love is as strong as a soulmate's love, he'll understand and keep me safe until this is over. With my rose-colored glasses firmly in place, I was ready to start a new day.



“Last night was wonderful,” Hazel said as we hung garland in the rec room.

“Which part?” I asked with a smirk.

“All of it, but I especially enjoyed the part that came after the tree was decorated.”

“I agree that was also my favorite part of the evening. I loved waking up and finding a sleeping Star under the tree. That picture you took will be framed.”

“He probably thought he needed to protect you from the tree that suddenly grew inside the house.”

“I hope he doesn't lift his leg on it!” I exclaimed, laughter bubbling up from my belly. It had been doing that a lot lately

whenever Hazel was around. The great part was I wasn't even upset about it.

"I never thought of that!" She made the Home Alone face. "You don't think he would, do you?"

My laughter gave away the joke before I could, and she punched me lightly on the arm. "No, Star's a trained animal who has seen a Christmas tree before. I just wanted to see your reaction. It was worth it."

"All I can say is, I'm glad you suggested it. It makes your apartment feel like home."

"More than yours?"

"Honestly, my apartment is more like a storage unit. I spend all my time at your place unless I'm showering or working."

"Showering. We should try showering together. I bet we could do it," I suggested, wiggling my brows.

"I like the way you think, Mr. Wallace," she agreed. "Look at you being all adventurous now."

"It's easy to be open when you feel safe," I answered with a shrug. "I know I'm safe with you. I hope you feel the same way about me."

"I do," she promised, moving the ladder to the next spot, so I wheeled forward too. I held the garland for her as she strung it above the serving window. "Speaking of safe, I ran into Gabe at the store earlier this morning."

"Safe because he's a cop or?" I asked confused

"No. Gabe told me how hesitant he was to talk to Heather about the baby, but you helped him sort out his feelings about it so he could. His exact words were that you opened up a safe space for him to speak without worrying about looking like a jerk."

I shrugged as I rolled the chair forward so she could pin the next bunch of garland to the wall. "Any friend would have done the same."

“Nice try,” she said, laughing. “No one else in this town shares the same perspective you do, Irving. You were the person he needed then, and you showed up. You didn’t do it because you’re a social worker. You did it because you’re his friend. A friend who was also an orphan and paralyzed. Different reasons, but same result.”

“If I contributed in even the slightest way to their decision to bring this baby into their home, then I’m happy to have been part of it. She’s in good hands.”

“I can’t wait to meet her. She’s such a nugget. How sweet is it that Becca’s little girl won’t be much younger? They’ll have built-in family playdates.”

“Seems the good old Christmas magic has filled Bells Pass this year.”

“It sure does,” she said with a smile, climbing down the ladder to kiss my lips. “I love you, Irving Wallace.”

“I love you too, but I thought mum’s the word,” I hissed. “We shouldn’t be kissing at work.”

Hazel tipped my chin back to face her. “When people are here, I’ll keep my lips off yours, but we’re alone. Dawson is upstairs sleeping, and Star isn’t going to tell anyone. Besides, don’t you think it would be easier if we came out as the Christmas couple? It would make things less complicated for the next three weeks.”

“I thought you wanted to wait until after Indigo’s wedding reception?”

“True.” She worried her lip between her teeth. “I mean, half the girl gang already knows, so maybe I should just ask her if she cares.”

“I know she won’t care,” I said, laughing at the expression on her face. “You’re the one that cares, because you’re a good friend. Talk to her, and in the meantime, we’ll just act cool.”

“I’ll call her after we hang the garland,” she said before she plastered her lips back on mine.

“You have no chill, Hazel Cane,” I mumbled around her lips.

“Fine, I’ll stop for now,” she said, going in for one last peck. “We’ll pick this up at lunch at the diner.”

“We’ll do no such thing!” I exclaimed to her raucous laughter. “Oh, my lord, imagine Ivy Lund walking in to see us making—”

“Well, well,” a voice said from behind us, and Hazel froze. “If it isn’t the two Christmas love birds.” Hazel’s eyes widened, and she took a step back, walking into the ladder and nearly falling before she steadied herself.

“Wha—what are you doing here?” Hazel stuttered. Her eyes told me more than her words when I saw terror reflected there.

I turned my chair slowly and came face-to-face with a woman holding a gun pointing right at me. “Whoa,” I said, holding up my hands. “I don’t know what’s wrong, but we can figure this out without violence. Who are you, and how did you get in here?”

“I’ll let Hazel introduce us,” the woman said, motioning at the woman who now stood behind me.

“This is Marissa, Dr. Felding’s assistant from Sarasota,” Hazel answered, and I could hear her swallow back fear.

“Why is she standing in front of us with a gun?”

“For that answer, you’ll have to ask her,” Hazel answered. “How did she even get in here?”

“It wasn’t hard,” Marissa huffed. “That doggie door is very easy to jimmy. I just had to wait until the mutt wasn’t around.”

My gaze darted to the left, where Star had been sleeping. He was nowhere in sight, and my heart thumped in my chest. Where was he? Was he hiding?

“I’m still confused about the gun,” I said, my hands up near my chest.

“Put the gun down, and we’ll talk, Marissa,” Hazel said from behind me.

“You don’t get to tell me what to do, Hazel Lago, or should I say Cane. Nice touch there. For once, your stupid addiction came in handy.”

At first, I thought my heart would pound out of my chest, but suddenly I was worried it was about to be shattered to smithereens. Had Hazel been lying to me all along?

Hazel stepped to the side and walked around my chair, putting herself in the line of fire. Everything in me screamed to protect her, but I didn’t know how. Not when I was on the wrong side of the gun.

“Wait,” Hazel said, her body stiff as she faced off with this unstable woman. “Were you involved with Dr. Felding’s crimes?”

Marissa started to clap slowly, jostling the gun each time she did. “It took you long enough. This small-town love affair must have muddled your brain, Hazel. You’re usually much quicker on the draw.”

“I don’t understand. Felding was the doctor. How did you get involved in this?”

Marissa’s shrug said we were in real trouble, and probably weren’t getting out of this one alive. My heart broke knowing that whatever secrets Hazel was keeping, she didn’t think she could trust me with them. That decision meant we’d never have a life together like we’d imagined. We’d have no life at all if this woman had her way.

“Travis is the doctor, but his claims of innocence are true. He had no idea I was using his practice to file extra claims for real, fake, and dead patients. It wasn’t hard. Florida has a high geriatric rate, and with so many elderly people requiring care, it was easy to slip those claims in and have them pay out.”

“Why on earth are you still here then? It’s been over a year!” Hazel exclaimed while I watched her anger boil to the surface. “You could have left town months ago.”

“This is where your high and mighty thinking goes wrong, dear Hazel. You assume I stopped filing the claims when he was arrested. You’d be wrong. He wasn’t the only doctor I was using for this purpose. It’s good that you zeroed in on Felding and didn’t dig any deeper. It afforded me so much extra time and money. While you were here playing kissy face, I was raking in millions of dollars in payouts. I appreciate the assist, but our time together has now come to a close. It’s getting a little too hot to stick around Florida, so I decided on a little detour to Michigan to cool off, end your perfectly pretty life, and abscond with my riches like Robin Hood.”

“Robin Hood steals from the rich to give to the poor, you idiot,” I muttered.

“That’s exactly what happened. I stole from the rich to give to the poor. Me. I’m the poor,” Marissa hissed, tapping herself in the chest with the gun. The woman had clearly never used a gun before. “Not anymore, though. Now the only poor one will be pitiful Hazel. I imagine the funeral will be touching. Too bad I can’t stick around for it.”

“Were you the person who hit me in the park in September?” Hazel asked. It felt like she was buying time to formulate a plan, but I only had one. If I got the chance, I’d take it. It would result in me taking another bullet in this life, but if it kept Hazel safe, I’d gladly take all the bullets in that gun.

“What? No. I didn’t even know where you were until three days ago. It’s a shame that didn’t finish you off. I could have saved a trip.”

“Did you help Travis escape?” Hazel asked as she inched to the side more until she was in front of me.

I couldn’t let things go down this way. She would kill us both if I didn’t do something, and I wasn’t okay with that. Moving my chair was going to be difficult, though. It wasn’t as though I could hide what I was doing.

“Now why would I do that?” she asked, starting her pacing again. When her back was turned, I rolled to the side of



Hazel, who gave me a side eye that could wither weaker men. “The idiot ran because he was terrified of going to prison. He cut off his ankle bracelet and took off for greener pastures. Too bad he didn’t get very far. Hard when all your assets are frozen and you have no friends willing to stick their necks out for you. When I heard he was back in custody, I decided it was time to get out before I was next. The FBI was breathing down my neck and I didn’t like the smell of their breath.”

“You do realize once the FBI knows their witness is dead, they’re going to know it was you.”

Witness? Was Hazel in the witness protection program? None of this made any sense! I was about to die because of something that happened in Florida. Something Hazel brought to this town and didn’t think would impact us? I drew a deep breath and tried to remember that she couldn’t tell anyone if she was in witness protection.

“Maybe,” Marissa said. “But by then, it won’t matter. I’ll be on the beach in the Maldives. Don’t worry,” she said, turning back to Hazel. “Every Christmas, I’ll have a candy cane in your memory.”

“You’re never going to get away with this,” Hazel said, shaking her head.

“Maybe not,” Marissa said, her face twisted in a sadistic smile as she walked toward us. “But it will make me feel better to watch you go from high and mighty to broken and small, the same way you always treated me!”

“I did no such thing, Marissa!” Hazel exclaimed.

Anger, hurt, pain, and fear rocketed through me at the terror in Hazel’s voice.

“I treated you like an equal!”

The fist Marissa threw was so fast Hazel never saw it coming. Her head twisted to the right, and blood flew across the room. “Ha!” Marissa exclaimed, her body shaking with rage. “You acted like you’d done me such a favor by getting me that job and rescuing me from a life on the streets.” She paused and tapped her chin with the gun.

The way she flung it around, I wondered if it was even loaded. She would shoot herself instead of us if she didn't stop using it as a prop. Not that I'd complain. My gaze was tacked on Hazel, who was still standing, but the punch had knocked her silly. She was dazed and tipping to the right momentarily before she righted herself. Her lip was split open and bleeding, and her cheek and eye were starting to swell. She reached down and squeezed my hand as Marissa spoke again.

“Technically, you did rescue me from a life of petty crime on the street. You opened up a new world for me, Hazel. You helped me to become my true self. A professional thief. Someone who sees the inequity in the world and wants to shift the weight of millions off the rich's shoulders to show them they aren't untouchable. I blossomed while you treated me like dirt on the bottom of your shoe. I should thank you for that, so thank you.” Marissa lowered the gun until it steadied in the middle of Hazel's chest. “I'm not great at hitting my target the first time, so this may take a few tries. It's too bad I have to kill lover boy too,” she said with a sad shake of her head as she swung the gun toward me. “I think I'll take care of him first. Make you watch his lifeblood drain from his eyes before I take you out. That'll be fun. Don't worry. I'll try not to hit his face. It's too pretty to blow apa—”

“Who are you and what are you doing with that gun?” a voice asked from behind us.

Marissa swung the gun wide, and I took my opening. I jammed the chair forward and ran directly into the woman, hitting her at the knees and knocking her back onto the floor as the gun went off. I registered Hazel's scream as my chair tipped, and I toppled onto the floor.

“Irving!” Hazel screamed, which told me she hadn't been hit.

The gun blasted again as Marissa swung toward Hazel's voice. I saw the woman I love fall to the ground and hit her head on the floor. There was a flash of fur and then a hair-raising scream as Star's jaws locked onto Marissa's arm, rendering the gun useless. Dawson ran into the room and

kicked the gun out of the way as I heard sirens approaching the building. Star had gotten Dawson, who called the police.

I pulled myself forward, my useless legs more hindrance than help as I tried to reach Hazel. She was on the ground and not responding as I screamed her name. Blood trickled from her temple while fear lodged in my gut. “Hazel!” I screamed, hoping it would jolt her back to consciousness.

An EMT appeared before me, and I batted his hands away. “You have to help her!” I screamed, pointing at Hazel.

The EMT ran to her as Marissa started screaming while the cops tried to cuff her. “This isn’t over, Hazel Cane!” she yelled, fighting against the cops who had pulled her to her feet.

Star ran over to me and sniffed my cheek, bumping me with his nose until I made eye contact with him. “I’m okay, buddy,” I said, smoothing his fur. He whined, and I nodded. “I know. She’s going to be okay.” I had to believe that so my heart didn’t pound out of my chest.

The EMT looked up and yelled at his partner. “We need an evac!”

There was so much commotion in the room that I couldn’t follow any of it. I just knew I had to get to Hazel. Dawson knelt beside me and steadied me for a moment before he looked up. “I need an EMT over here!”

“I’m fine,” I said to hush him. “Help me back into my chair. I have to go with Hazel!”

“You’re not going anywhere, Irving,” Dawson said, his eyes fixed on my legs. “Your ankle is in bad shape.”

“My ankle always looks like that. It’s an old injury. Help me into my chair!” I demanded, but he shook his head.

“This looks like a very new injury, I assure you.”

The room spun when I tried to see what they were doing to Hazel, and I had to put my head down so I didn’t vomit. When it started to pound, I wondered if I’d hit it when I fell out of my chair. I heard a stretcher ratchet as they lifted it, and

then ran out of the room with the woman I love on a stretcher for the second time since I'd met her.

"Irving," Dawson said. I noticed his voice sounded far away this time. "I'm going to take care of Star," he said, gripping my hand momentarily until an EMT pushed him out of the way. "I'll bring him to the hosp—"

My head chose that moment to pound hard twice and then the room faded to black.



I tossed another bag in my car and paused when my head reminded me that it was only five days ago that I'd taken a bullet to the temple. Thankfully, Marissa was indeed a lousy shot and had managed to leave me with only a flesh wound and a concussion, at least to my head. I glanced down at my left hand, which was in a splint. Yeah, I had some healing to do, but it wouldn't be in Bells Pass. I slammed the door on the car and took a deep breath before heading back into New Beginnings. The walk alone tired me out, but I had to get this car packed sooner rather than later.

"Going somewhere?" a voice asked, and I jumped in surprise.

"Ivy?" I asked, turning to see not just her but Audrey Violet too.

"I will be soon," I said, pulling open the door to the building. I tipped to the side with the effort, and Ivy braced her shoulder against mine until I was upright again. When they followed me down the hallway, I sighed. "Did you guys need something?" I asked, letting myself into the apartment.

"We needed to talk to you, dear," Audrey said, going to the kitchen and rummaging around in the cabinets while I lowered myself to a chair and Ivy sat on the couch next to me.

"You can't leave Bells Pass," Ivy proclaimed. "We need you here."

“I can’t stay here, Ivy,” I whispered, staring at the floor. “I’ve caused this town enough problems.”

“I don’t see a problem, do you, Audrey?” she asked the woman in the kitchen.

“The only problem I see is you have no food in this apartment.”

“That’s because I was never here,” I muttered, leaning back on the chair. “Everything hurts.”

“That will happen when you get shot,” Ivy said, pushing back my hair to check my cheek and lip, which looked like I went ten rounds with a professional boxer. “You must be in terrible pain between your head and hand.”

“It’s livable,” I answered, but that was a lie. The fatigue was killing me, and I could barely stay awake long enough to pack a box before I had to rest. “I have to get this done so I can leave.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea, dear,” Audrey said, carrying a cup of tea over for me. “I don’t think you should be driving in your condition.”

“Do you know the truth about me?”

“We do,” Ivy confirmed. “You’re one brave lady.”

“More like stupid,” I muttered. “I should have kept my mouth shut. Now I’ve lost everything.”

“What have you lost?” Audrey asked, rubbing my shoulder. “The board didn’t fire you, did they?”

“No, but I resigned. I came here under false pretenses and lied to everyone for months about who I was and why I was here. It doesn’t matter that I fell in love with this town and its people. It doesn’t matter that this has been the most fulfilling job I’ve ever done and that I don’t want to leave. Integrity matters, and I must accept that mine has been compromised.”

“I don’t know about that, dear,” Audrey said. “Integrity means being honest, but it also means having strong morals and moral uprightness. If you ask me, what you did in Florida showed your integrity above all else. It’s not your fault that

you had to leave town or be protected. You came to Bells Pass and did the job you were hired to do. You didn't deceive anyone about who you are or what you wanted to accomplish here. You couldn't tell us you were a protected witness, or you'd have jeopardized yourself. That makes sense. Learning the truth didn't change my opinion of you other than to make me even more proud of you."

"I wish everyone saw it that way," I said, sipping the tea. Why did tea always taste better when someone else made it for you?

"By everyone, do you mean Irving?" Ivy gently asked. "Everyone knows you love each other."

"I can't deal with this right now, Ivy," I said, shaking my head. "I have to pack."

"You have to talk to Irving," she answered. I wanted to speak, but a tear leaked from the corner of my eye. "Honey, have you talked to him?"

"He won't talk to me, Ivy," I said, my lips trembling. "He won't answer the door or even leave his apartment."

"Why do you think that is?"

"He hates me?" I asked, trying to laugh, but only a sob came out.

"I know for a fact he doesn't hate you," Ivy said, grabbing a tissue and wiping my eye. "When I brought Irving home from the hospital, he begged me to tell him everything about your condition. He was terrified he'd lost you. He told me that he decided to tackle Marissa and take the bullet. He was willing to die if it meant you could live. That's something a soulmate says about the woman they love. You can't walk away from that, sweetheart. You have to fight for it!"

"I want to, but he doesn't!" I exclaimed. "I don't even know if he's okay. I only know he's home because I hear sounds from his apartment."

"He had a bit of trouble," Audrey said, wiping a tear away for me. "A bullet went through his ankle, but it missed

the bone. He has to wear a special compression bandage and boot until they know it will heal.”

“I saw him fall out of his chair, and I’ve been so worried,” I said, biting back another sob.

“He did fall from his chair, and from what Dawson says, he wanted back into it so he could go to the hospital with you. Then the EMT said his blood pressure was high and he was bleeding. They took him to the hospital behind you while Dawson kept Star.”

“Is he okay?” I asked, sitting up, my heart pounding. “AD can be deadly in trauma situations.”

“He’s fine, dear,” Audrey said, patting my knee. “They got him to the hospital in time, and the doctors could care for him before things got out of hand.”

“It’s funny, you know,” I whispered. “They say no good deed goes unpunished, and I always thought that couldn’t be true. If you hold the moral high ground and call out the injustices that you see, how could you be punished for doing what’s right?” I shook my head against the chair and laughed sadly. “How naive can you be?” I asked rhetorically, of course. “Turning in Dr. Felding was the right thing to do, but now I’m going to lose the job I love and the man I love because of it. There’s just something not fair about that, you know?”

“You don’t have to lose either, honey. You and Irving need to talk, but you can’t do that if you run away. Every time you’re together, we see how you complete each other. We know you’ve spent more time in his apartment than this one over the last month.”

“Ivy—”

She slashed her hand in the air to hush me. “Let me finish. When you find that one person you connect with on that soul-deep level, you want to spend every minute you can with them, right?” she asked, and I nodded. “You don’t even make a choice, right?”

“Right,” I whispered. “It’s a force that connects you and draws you to each other in undeniable ways. After I shared his

bed for the first time, platonically,” I said, holding up my hand, “there was no way I could sleep without him again. That was our time to be alone and learn about each other without prying eyes or whispers behind our backs. That was our time to let our souls connect and be one with each other.”

“That’s a lovely way to explain it,” Audrey said, brushing a tear away from my cheek. “I don’t think you’ve slept much since you’ve come home from the hospital, have you?”

“I’m so tired, but all I can think about is that wall that separates us. Is Irving okay over there, or is he—”

“Just as lonely, scared, and sad as you are?” Ivy asked, and I nodded.

“I think that’s how he’s feeling. Gabe told me when he explained to Irving the situation, he nodded, said, ‘That sounds like my Hazel,’ and then rolled away without another word.”

“My Hazel,” Audrey said. “That’s a man who knows who you are and is afraid of losing you to bigger and better things.”

“There’s no one better than him,” I said, my damaged lip trembling and reminding me of the pain I had brought on myself. “He deserves someone who can be honest with him and not hurt him like I did.”

“That’s hogwash,” Ivy said, shaking her head and adding an eye roll. “You were honest with him about everything that mattered. Would you have eventually come clean about the protected witness aspect of your life? Yes. I have no question in my mind that you wanted to tell us but knew you couldn’t until the trial was over.”

I nodded sadly. “At least not before I had to testify,” I said. “The day Marissa showed up, I had decided I would tell Irving that night. He needed to know, just him, so he wasn’t blindsided by the whole thing when I had to leave for Florida or if the FBI pulled me early. My biggest regret is waiting.” I closed my eyes and put my hand to my head. “I’m so tired.”

“Come on,” Audrey said, sliding an arm behind my back. “You need sleep. I will tuck you in and sit by your bed until



you fall asleep. If you don't, you'll end up back in the hospital.”

Audrey walked me to my bed while Ivy cleaned the kitchen. Once Audrey had my shoes off, she literally tucked me into bed and pulled the shades. “Sleep now, and I promise that everything won't seem so bad when you wake up.”

I snuggled into the pillow and sighed as my eyes closed. Sleep would help me heal, but the chances were good when I woke up everything was still going to hurt, including my heart.

## Chapter Twenty

The knock on my door was firm, and I flicked my watch over to see who it was. Dawson stood at my door, and thankfully, I didn't see anyone else around him. "Star, door," I said, and the dog leaped toward the door and hit the button. The door swung open, and Dawson stepped in before the door closed.

"Hey, Irving," he said, giving Star some attention. "I thought I'd check in before I go to work and make sure you're doing okay."

"Thanks, Dawson. I'm bored but fine. I hate elevating and icing this so many times a day."

"True, but that's better than ending up in the hospital, right?"

"Been there, done that," I agreed. "Thanks for stopping by. I appreciate that you're checking in on me." I was hoping that would be enough to get him to leave. Instead, he sat down on the corner of the couch.

"I noticed Hazel packing her car."

"Is she?" I asked with a shrug. "I wouldn't know. I can't see the parking lot."

"I heard she resigned her position, too."

My shrug was the only answer I could give because my heart was breaking. I suspected she would leave, but getting confirmation was a knife through the heart.

"That's all you have to say?" Dawson asked and I shrugged again, making a show of fixing the ice on my ankle so I didn't have to make eye contact with him.

"Have you talked to her?"

"Nope," I said, popping the P. "Nothing to say. She's not who she says she is, and that is a real relationship buster."

"I don't know," he said, leaning forward on his palm. "From what I can gather, Hazel didn't lie about who she is or even why she came here. Besides her last name being

different, she's still the same person she's been the last three months you've worked with her. You're not being fair if you're mad that she didn't tell you about the protected witness situation."

"I'm not being fair that she didn't tell me she was a protected witness? I'm not being fair? I was shot because she was reckless and didn't care who she put in danger!" My voice rose with every word until I forced calm back into my soul. I couldn't let the situation spiral out of control any more than it already had.

"Hazel couldn't tell you that, Irving, so instead, she told you more important things."

"More important things?" I asked, completely confused.

"Things like her heart and soul. She shared herself with you the only way she could because she wanted you to know her. Are you surprised by what she did in Florida now that you know?"

"Not in the least," I admitted. "Hazel is always going to do what's right first and worry about herself second."

"If you think about it that way, she gave up a lot to do what she did, but she didn't hesitate because it was the right thing to do. When are you going to do the right thing?"

"When am I going to do the right thing? I didn't do anything wrong, and look where it got me."

"From where I'm sitting, it looks like it got you one hell of a woman who will always stand up for those without a voice and make sure they're heard. That's my take on it, but I'm not part of this relationship. I will say this, and take it from someone who has had to—and still does—keep a lot of secrets that he's not allowed to tell. It sucks. You have to put those things in a little box and set them aside if you want to live a normal life. That's what Hazel was doing. She was trying to live a normal life when her entire world had been upended. About two weeks ago, she told me something that shifted how I thought about life."

“What was that?” I asked, wishing I didn’t want to know but still wanting to know.

“Hazel told me that we can live our lives because of our circumstances, or we can live the life we want in spite of our circumstances. She said the difference is we get to decide if our circumstances define us and that’s why we live the way we do or if we’re letting our circumstances hold us back. I decided my circumstances define me, and I will live the life I want to live because of them.”

“This conversation is confusing the hell out of me, Dawson,” I admitted.

“It did for me at first, too, until I sat down and thought about it. My disabilities define me, but not in a bad way. I gave up a lot to protect this country, including physical parts of me. Now that I’m back, I will use those experiences to help others. I’ll make it my mission to be part of the change that this building will make in Bells Pass and the changes we can make across the government of Michigan. The way I see it, someone has to, so why not me?”

“You’re saying that’s all Hazel was doing?”

Dawson stood and tipped his head to the side in agreement. “That’s the way I see it. She didn’t want her circumstances to define her, so she lived in spite of them.” He walked to the door and pushed the button for it to open. “Think about it, but don’t think too long, or you just might be living with circumstances of your own making.”



Audrey stood and moved the chair away, leaving room for mine. Once I had rolled to the bed, she patted my shoulder and smiled, giving me a nod that said I was doing the right thing. As she and Ivy left the apartment, and I gazed down at the woman I still loved with all my heart, I knew Dawson was right. If I didn’t talk to Hazel, I would live with a broken heart forever without knowing why. I deserved to hear from her lips as to why she didn’t trust me with the truth.

My gaze traveled over her, and my heart squeezed tightly. Her face was swollen and bruised, her lip was cracked, and her tongue came out every so often to wet it in her sleep, which told me it still hurt. Her left hand was in a special splint that kept her fingers separated and the last two had apparatus attached to hold the bones in place. Why wasn't she in the hospital? She had to be in excruciating pain from her hand alone.

Ivy told me Hazel had been sleeping for several hours, but they didn't want to leave her alone after seeing her condition. That was fair. She was in no shape to do anything but sleep, much less pack an apartment or get behind the wheel. The things Gabe told me kept floating through my mind as I stared at her and it tore my heart and soul in half. On the one hand, I was so damn proud of her; on the other, I was mad at her.

The gasp was quiet, but I heard it before I noticed her eyes were open. "Go back to sleep," I whispered, smoothing my hand down her hip. "Sleep is good."

"You're here," she whispered, but it was a bit muddled from the swelling of her face. "I'm so happy to see you," she whispered, tears running down her cheeks and over her cracked lip. "Are you okay? Ivy said you had an AD episode. I was so worried."

"I'm okay," I said, wiping a tear from her cheek. "They got me to the hospital quickly and reversed it."

"Thank God," she said, sobbing softly into the pillow.

I wasn't sure she was fully awake yet, but she was in real distress that couldn't be faked. "Sweetheart, take a deep breath." I squeezed her right hand in mine, brushing the hair back off her forehead before wiping away some of the tears. "I'm sitting right here, and I'm fine. Just take some deep breaths."

"I'm a terrible pa—person," she said, hiccupping on the word. "I never should have put you in danger. I didn't believe there was any danger and disregarded Cliff's concerns so I could stay here with you! I'm so sorry, Irving."

Hot tears rolled from her eyes, and I could only imagine they were tears of regret. I transferred onto her bed and pulled her up into a hug, wrapping my arms around her as tightly as I could to help calm her. No rule said you couldn't offer someone empathy and comfort even when you were mad at them, right?

Hazel wrapped her good arm around me and held me, her face buried in my shoulder as she struggled to get her emotions under control. Part of me registered that she had positioned herself at the exact right angle to support me on the bed so I didn't fall to the side. The same part of me that registered that, tried to convince the other parts of me to give her a chance.

Once her sobs had turned to hiccups, and her breathing evened out, I loosened my grip on her. "I need to get back in the chair, but I'm not leaving, okay?" Her nod against my shoulder and the tightening of her arm told me she understood but didn't want to let me go.

"Let me help you," she said, lifting her cheek to face me, but I shook my head.

"I don't need help. Just be careful with that hand." I transferred back to my chair and positioned my legs on the footplate.

"What time is it?" she asked, resting on the pillows she'd made into a reclining ramp.

"It's almost seven."

"At night?" she asked.

I couldn't help it and had to laugh. "Yes, at night. Audrey said you hadn't slept in days."

"I couldn't," she said, that lip trembling again. "You wouldn't talk to me, and every time I laid down, all I could think was what an awful person I was for doing what I did. I was worried you were alone and hurt over there. Not only did I put you in danger physically, but I lied to you and broke your trust."

“Is that hindsight, or did you consider those things when we got involved?”

“Not hindsight,” she said, staring at the splint on her hand. “I wanted to tell you so many times, but Cliff said I couldn’t.”

“Who’s Cliff?”

“The FBI agent assigned to keep me safe.”

“Fat lot of good he did,” I muttered, taking in her physical condition.

“I was only a protected witness, not part of witness protection in the true sense,” she clarified.

“It appears you should have been,” I said, motioning at her face and hand. “When you went down, I would have died right on the spot if it meant you lived,” I whispered, caressing her temple. “I don’t know if the high blood pressure was from my injury or because I was so worried that you’d been shot.”

“I had been,” she said with a rueful smile. “Thankfully, Marissa had terrible aim and just grazed me. Unfortunately, her punch left me dizzy and off-balance, so the impact of the bullet spun me. I fell, but not before I took out this hand on the ladder.”

“It’s broken again?”

“The pinkie was,” she explained. “The doctors said if they had to fix the pinkie, they may as well do the ring finger simultaneously. It made sense, so I agreed. Now I’m in this for another six weeks.”

“We’ll get through it,” I promised, kissing her forehead. “You were saying about why you were a protected witness.”

She blinked a couple of times but then nodded. “Right. I was protected because I hadn’t testified yet. Dr. Felding was in custody and a nonviolent offender, so moving me out of Florida should have been enough to keep me safe. Even Cliff didn’t know someone else was involved, though they started to suspect it when Felding didn’t know key things about the case.”

“Dr. Felding is the person you reported?” My question held confusion, and she nodded.

“He was a doctor I worked with in Florida. I started to suspect he was committing Medicare fraud by filing false claims for tests and procedures my clients weren’t having done. Once I had proof of it, I took it to the police, who got the FBI involved. Felding was arrested, and his records seized. They moved me out of Florida to keep me safe until the trial started.”

“The whole story about volunteering across the country was another lie?”

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “The only thing I lied about was why I was in Bells Pass, Irving. You can be assured of that. Everything else—every emotion, how much I love you, why I love who we are together, every life event and family situation I ever shared, and my love of candy canes—was real.”

I couldn’t help but smile at that comment. “I never doubted your love for candy canes.”

“Did you doubt my love for you?” she asked so quietly I barely heard her.

I tipped my head to the side. “I didn’t want to—”

“But you did, and that’s my fault too,” she said, finally making eye contact again. “I love you, Irving. I don’t deserve to say those words now, but it’s true. I came to Bells Pass for a fresh start and a new life. I was searching for a place to start over and find joy in my work again. A place that welcomed me into the community and wanted me to stay, contribute, and make it my home. I didn’t come to Bells Pass to fall in love, but the moment I met you, I knew I was never leaving this little town unless you were by my side.”

“You had to go back to Florida, though,” I said, burying my hand in my hair. “I’m confused because Gabe told me you have to go back to Florida.”

“I do, but only to testify. I repeat—I’m not in witness protection, though they could have done a better job of



keeping me safe. I must return to Florida long enough to testify, but I don't have to stay there."

"Why is your car half-packed then?"

She motioned at the door with her hand while her lips trembled. "I couldn't stay here if I couldn't be part of your life, Irving. You wouldn't talk to me when I knocked. You wouldn't answer my calls either. I knew I'd hurt you. I'm scared."

Those last two words broke me. I motioned her to me, and she draped herself across my lap. I rolled the chair forward and managed to get us out of the apartment and into mine with the help of Star. Once I had her situated in bed, I transferred into bed and pulled her into me so I could rock her. I don't know how long we sat locked together, but as I stared at the Christmas tree in the corner, little parts of my soul tugged at me. Each tug reminded me of a stitch this woman had placed in my soul to hold me together.

"It was wrong of me to deceive you," she whispered, her left hand hanging in the air and shaking as though she didn't know what to do with it. I grabbed a pillow and placed it between us, then encouraged her to rest the splint on it. In a few minutes, I'd have to return to her apartment and see if she had pain medication. She was going to be in agony without it. "I planned to tell you the day Marissa showed up. I was going to tell you after work so we could discuss it without interruption. I knew I could trust you and that you wouldn't tell anyone, but you had to know in case I disappeared one day."

"Did Cliff say it was okay to tell me?" I asked, stroking her upper arm in hopes of calming the spasming muscles a bit.

"No, but I was past caring what he said. You're the most important person in my life, and needed to know what was happening. That was only fair. I should have told you sooner. I know that now, but I can't go back and change what happened."

"No, you can't, but we can move forward, right? We're never truly stuck in one spot. Tell me what happened in

Florida.”

I listened as she told me everything, including how she had helped Marissa get off the streets and find a job in Dr. Felding’s office. Eventually, Marissa worked her way up to be his assistant.

“Marissa said I treated her as though she was beneath me,” she said, her voice breaking on the words. “I tried to treat her as an equal, Irving. This whole thing is my fault. I brought her into the organization and gave her a chance because I knew she could do great things. How could I have been so wrong? Not only did I ruin my life, but I ruined Dr. Felding’s!”

“Hey,” I whispered, kissing the top of her head. “That’s not on you. That’s on Marissa. She’s the one who broke the law, not you. As for Dr. Felding, the courts would exonerate him if he had no part in this. At least we know Marissa wasn’t behind the accident at the park. Gabe told me he believes it was a random and unfortunate accident for you.”

“I don’t look at it that way,” she whispered. “It sucks that my hand is all messed up, but I got you out of the deal and for that I’m eternally grateful.”

I kissed her forehead, leaving my lips there to inhale the scent of her and remind myself that she was safe. “Marissa is in custody?”

“Yes. Cliff came up to get her and transported her back to Florida. She’ll remain in jail as they try to sort this out.”

My arms tightened on her in reflex. “I’m so glad you’re safe,” I whispered. “I won’t lie. I was angry with you. All I could see were the lies you told me when I should have focused on the truth I knew.”

“That I’m a terrible person?” she asked but I shook my head.

“You’re not a terrible person, but you were in a terrible position. The truth is, Hazel, I can’t live without you. I’ve tried the last few days and it’s quite literally impossible for me to do anything but lay here in this bed and think about you. When

Dawson came over to talk to me, I felt like it was an invitation for a second chance.”

She leaned back and held my gaze. “A second chance?” I nodded, and she fisted my shirt in her hand. “With me?”

“There is no one else, Hazel Cane, which is what I’ll always call you, no matter your real name. You’re my Hazel Cane, and I hope to God I’m yours, too.”

“You are,” she said, leaning in for a hungry kiss until our lips connected, and she hissed, pulling back at the painful contact.

I brushed my thumb over the bruise on her cheek and smiled. “You’re going to have to be careful with that for a few more days, but I’m not going anywhere, and neither are you. You do have to promise me one thing.”

“Anything,” she said, nodding, but I could see she was starting to fade as the adrenaline flowed from her and the relief flooded in.

“No more secrets between us, okay? You can trust me with anything and know I’ll always have your back.”

“No more secrets,” she said with a nod and half a smile. “I love you, Irving.”

Slowly, her eyes closed, and I kissed her forehead. “I love you more, Hazel Cane. Always will.”

# Epilogue

## Christmas Eve

The hall was filled with people talking, laughing, and singing as they ate cookies and drank eggnog after a successful caroling event. Despite Hazel's injuries, she insisted we go on with the event as it gave her something to look forward to. Despite the pain and trauma Marissa had inflicted on her, she was determined to be well enough to go out and carol with her group. I had to admit that it was a beautiful way to end the holiday season, and as I gazed out at the room before me, I realized all of these people had become family in one way or the other over the last year.

Indigo and Lance stood in the corner eating cookies and laughing with Stephan, who had come caroling to spend the evening with Cameron. It's a tradition at the farm that the employees and their families spend Christmas Eve with Cameron and Becca since it's also Cameron's birthday, and this year, they chose the caroling event to participate in.

In light of Hazel's injuries and inability to work, Indigo and Lance pushed their reception back until January. It was a kind thing for them to do, but in the end, that summed up Bells Pass. Indigo loved Hazel and would rather postpone their reception than have Hazel miss it. The people in this town always thought about others first and themselves second. After being here for a year, it was easy to see that was the reason the town kept growing.

A tiny wail reached my ears and I turned my head to the left to see Heather jiggling a tiny pink bundle in her arms. "Forward, Star," I said, rolling the chair over to where she stood with Becca while they waited for Cameron and Gabe to return from singing. Since Becca is an amputee and pregnant, she decided against walking on the sidewalks that might be snow-covered and slippery and opted to stay with Heather instead.

"Is our little one unhappy?" I asked, coming to a stop by the two women.

“Hi, Irving,” Heather said as she patted the baby’s back. “She’s getting sleepy but Gabe is better at getting her to sleep than I am.”

I motioned for her to give me the baby, and she placed her in my arms, fixing the blanket around her to keep her warm. “Hello, little Joy,” I whispered as I swung her gently from side-to-side. “Aren’t you just the sweetest thing to come to Bells Pass?”

“I can’t even tell you,” Heather said as Becca put an arm around her. “When the hospital told us we got to name her, Gabe just looked at me and said, Joy. When I asked him why, he said you told him where there is love, there is hope and joy. I’ve been through a lot in life, and it required holding onto hope to get through it. Now comes the joy. I still get goosebumps when I think about it. I want to give you something if that’s okay,” she said, holding up a finger as she dug into the diaper bag.

Joy had fallen asleep with her little pink pacifier in her mouth as her long lashes fanned her cheeks. She was honestly the sweetest and most gorgeous baby I’d had the pleasure to hold in a long time. I handed her off to Becca, who was ever the proud auntie, and accepted a box from Heather.

“What’s this?”

“Just a little something to remind you of this Christmas.”

Once I had the lid off the box, I gasped in surprise. Inside was an ornament. It was a candy cane, but when I took it out, the hanger was at the bottom so when you held it up, it was a J.

“Hazel says you always claim her candy canes are actually just a sucker in the shape of a J,” Heather explained.

Laughter escaped my lips as I nodded. “At least once a day.” The ornament twisted, and I noticed the painted words on the back. “Where there is love, there is hope and Joy,” I read. I noticed that Joy was capped on purpose. “You painted this.”

“I did,” Heather said with a smile. She was known for her artwork all over the area and I was pleased as punch to receive a piece of it.

“I’m thrilled to have a Heather Robbins original for my tree,” I said, holding it to my chest for a moment. “The sentiment means more, though. Thank you for allowing me to be a small part of your family. It means the world to me. If you ever need a babysitter, you know who to call.” I pointed at my chest while mouthing ‘me, not her’ as I motioned with my eyes to Becca.

“Nice try, buddy,” Becca said quietly. “You’re second runner-up until at least April.”

I put the ornament back in the box and then into the bag on my chair so it didn’t get lost. “I can accept that because then there will be two little girls to fight over!”

Our laughter was quickly drowned out by beautiful voices singing *Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas*. The room quieted and we turned to see the smaller group of carolers who had gone to the bungalows to sing, now leading a procession of families toward the rec room. I only saw one woman as she walked toward me, a smile on her face as they finished the song.

The room erupted with applause before everyone shared hugs, love, hope, and joy.



“Hey, handsome,” Hazel said, coming up behind me to hug me around my shoulders. “It looks like things are wrapping up.”

“Hi,” I said, leaning back to steal a kiss. Her face had healed with only a tiny scar on her lip and temple. In a way, it was proof she’d cheated death. We could only hope her hand healed as well. “I was just thinking it was time to make the big announcement before everyone left. Will you help me rally everyone together?”

“I’ve already got the head elf on it,” she answered with a wink just as I noticed Holly walking through the crowd and whispering.

In a matter of minutes, the room was quiet, and everyone’s eyes were on us. I swallowed nervously and cleared my throat. “Thank you for coming tonight, everyone. I want to wish Hazel and Cameron a very happy birthday!”

A round of applause went up until Ivy yelled out. “And a happier birthday to you tomorrow, our little Christmas babe!”

Hazel’s laughter behind me told me she had spilled the beans to the world, so I held up my hands. “Thank you, I appreciate it. This year is the first time I’ve celebrated both my birthday and Christmas. I must say that I’m starting to see what all the fuss is about.” When their laughter died down, Hazel picked up the announcement.

“Before everyone leaves tonight, we wanted to announce the winning name for this very hall we’re standing in. There were so many great entries, but there was one that stood out to the council in its simplicity and appropriateness.”

I rolled over to the room entrance, where a sign hung covered by a black sheet. “Congratulations to Ivy Lund for winning the contest with her submitted name of,” I pulled the sheet until it fell to reveal the painted sign. “Seeds of Hope Legacy Hall.” The gasp from the back of the room came not from Ivy but from Cameron and Heather. “After all, the foundation is why we can stand here tonight ready to fill this building with the next generation of Bells Passers. Thank you to Ivy for the insightful submission, and Cameron and Heather for having the vision that started this all.” A round of applause went up again as everyone hugged Cam and Heather. You could easily see they were embarrassed by the attention, but accepted it with gratefulness in their hearts for their friends.

“When’s the party, Ivy?” Hazel called out. “The room is all yours!”

Everyone chuckled as they turned to Ivy, who stood with Shep’s arm around her, and Lucy hugging her leg. “I was thinking about saving it until closer to June,” she said,

glancing up at Shep, who smiled. “Then booking it for a baby shower.”

“Are you serious?” Becca squealed, running to her friend. “You said you were just thinking about it.”

“I didn’t want to say anything until now, but Baby Lund number two will arrive sometime in June.”

“It’s a banner night for announcements!” Becca exclaimed as she hugged Ivy. Everyone took a turn congratulating the couple while I fidgeted in my chair.

Hazel leaned down into my ear. “Are you okay, or do you need to go to the apartment?”

“I’m okay,” I promised. “Just shifting my weight.”

She patted my back, and I nodded at Holly, who winked at me before she worked her way through the crowd again. Everyone quieted and turned their attention back to the front of the room.

“Thank you, Head Elf Holly,” I said as she laughed. “I’m sure everyone is tired and ready to climb into your beds where visions of sugarplums will dance in your heads, but before you go, I have one more announcement.”

Hazel leaned down. “There’s another announcement?”

“Yes, but you don’t know about this one, birthday girl,” I said, deftly turning my chair so I could take her hand. “I know how much you love Christmas, and I’m man enough to admit that over the last few months you’ve taught me to love it too. From the Christmas carols, candy canes, Christmas trees, Christmas cookies and everything in between, you’ve shown me that the season isn’t about any of those things at all. It’s about joy, love, and peace, but most of all, it’s about hope for the future. My hope for the future is you, Hazel Cane,” I said, reaching into the corner of my wheelchair and pulling out a box. When I cracked the lid, a gasp went up through the crowd, but I had eyes for no one but my beautiful Hazel.

“It’s a candy cane,” she whispered, staring at the ring for a moment before her gaze met mine.



“Rubies and diamonds because you are the shining light in my world, Hazel Cane. I know what everyone out there is thinking. We barely know each other, and here I am holding up a ring and asking you to marry me, but we know each other, don’t we?” I asked, my voice cracking on the last word.

“We know each other’s soul,” she agreed, her lips trembling.

“You have stitched mine closed over the last few months and taught me that our past experiences don’t have to be our future. You’ve taught me that soulmates exist, and you are mine, Hazel. I can’t get down on one knee, but I am holding out this ring and saying I love you so much and want you to be my wife. Will you roll through this adventure that is life with me, Hazel, and marry me?”

Without answering, she knelt in front of my chair on one knee and cupped her hand around mine which was still holding the ring. “I’m down on one knee to show you that I will always support you through life, no matter the task. Also, I don’t care what everyone else is thinking—”

“Everyone else is thinking you should say yes!” Audrey Violet said with a giggle.

I bit my lip to keep from smiling. “I’m thinking the same thing, but no pressure.”

Hazel tipped her head back and laughed, the sound filled with joy as the energy built. She wore the most beautiful smile I’d ever seen when she pinned her gaze back on mine. “Oh yes, I will be your wife, Irving Wallace. I will marry you in that little gazebo in the park and celebrate with our family here in Seeds of Hope Legacy Hall. When everyone goes home and we’re all alone, I’ll dance with you to one last song before we go to sleep, having lived the first day of the rest of our lives as soulmates, lovers, and friends. I love you, Irving Wallace.”

“That was a solid yes if I’ve ever heard one!” Gabe yelled out, and I nodded, biting back the tears from my eyes.

“I was just thinking that myself,” I said as I pulled the ring from the box. “I’m so glad the doctors decided to fix that

left ring finger, and I can't wait to put this ring on it. For now," I took her right hand and slid the ring onto her ring finger. "I love you, Hazel, and I promise in front of all of these people, who will call me out if I don't keep my promise to love, honor, and cherish you, that I'll also keep you in a steady supply of candy canes all year through."

"A girl can't ask for more than that," she whispered with a smile and a wink.

"With the power vested in me by the State of Michigan and the Interwebs," Ellis called out. "You may now kiss the bride!"

"With pleasure," I said as our lips came together, and the room erupted in laughter and applause.

There was love here, both in the people who surrounded us and the building we resided in. There was also hope in our hearts as we fused ours together on this cold December night. As she leaned back and took my hand in hers, I realized that this room overflowed with joy—joy for the love of a community. In the end, that's really all any of us can ask for in life.

As we accepted congratulations from our friends, I knew that three things remained: Love, hope, and joy, but the greatest of these is—and always will be—love.

## About The Author

**Katie Mettner**



Katie Mettner wears the title of ‘the only person to lose her leg after falling down the bunny hill’ and loves decorating her

prosthetic leg to fit the season. She lives in Northern Wisconsin with her own happily-ever-after and spends the day writing romantic stories with her sweet puppy by her side. Katie has an addiction to coffee and dachshunds and a lessening aversion to Pinterest — now that she's quit trying to make the things she pins.

# The Bells Pass Series

## Meatloaf & Mistletoe

Ivy Lancombe:

Age: 25

Looks: Short, chestnut brown, and buxom

Favorite Food: Blackberry Pie

Status: Single, but secretly in love with her best friend

Shepard Lund:

Age: 26

Looks: Tall, blond, and skinny

Favorite Food: Meatloaf

Status: Single, but secretly in love with his best friend

Shep and Ivy are the biggest dating disasters of Bells Pass. They've spent years ignoring their feelings for each other, but this Christmas, the townspeople of Bells Pass, Michigan have a plan. It won't be easy, but they'll work together to teach Ivy and Shep to stop ignoring their hearts' desires and explore their love. It will take an old spinster, an infamous diner, a mysterious man, and a hefty dose of Christmas wishing to get them under the mistletoe. Once there, they'll let a dash of good old Christmas magic do the rest.

Inclusions: Hero is a brittle asthmatic

## Hotcakes & Holly

Melissa Murano

Age: 24

Looks: Bite-sized, bleach blonde, and curvaceous

Favorite Food: Hot Cakes

Status: Single, but secretly in love with the cook at work

Mason Hadley

Age: 30

Looks: Lanky, sandy brown, and athletic

Favorite Food: Pot Roast

Status: Single, but secretly in love with the waitress at work

Mel and Mason now hold the title for biggest dating disasters of Bells Pass. They've danced around each other at The Nightingale Diner for the past four years and everyone can see what they can't; they're perfect for each other. It will take a burning motel, an important wedding, and a mysterious disease to convince Mel and Mason to admit their feelings for each other. This Christmas, everything will change in Bells Pass, and no one will be untouched by the magic of Holly.

Inclusions: Heroine has autoimmune disorders

## **Jam & Jingle Bells**

Addie Collop

Age: 25

Looks: Tall, ginger, and curvaceous

Favorite Food: Jam

Status: Single, but secretly in love with a Bell's Pass yoga instructor

Ellis David

Age: 25

Looks: Lanky, white, and thin

Favorite Food: Tater Tot Hotdish

Status: Single, but secretly in love with Bell's Pass's premiere cosmetologist

Addie and Ellis now hold the title for biggest dating disasters of Bells Pass. Each afraid their differences are too much to overcome, they pretend friends will be enough for them forever. It will take a broken window, a broken leg, and a magical sleigh to convince them that their differences are what make them unique together. This Christmas everything will change in Bells Pass, and no one will be untouched by the magic of old Saint Nick.

Inclusions: Hero has congenital heart disease

## **Apples & Angel Wings**

Heather Robbins

Age: 26

Looks: Tall, platinum blonde, and curvaceous

Favorite Food: Apple pastries from The Nightingale Diner

Status: Single, but secretly in love with Bells Pass's police detective

Gabriel Dennison

Age: 27

Looks: Tall, dark, and handsome

Favorite Food: Baked Chicken from The Nightingale Diner

Status: Single, but secretly in love with his favorite cosmetologist

It's Christmastime in Bells Pass again, but Heather and Gabe are anything but jolly. A disastrous homecoming dance in high school hurt them both, and neither knows how to cross the gulf of pain between them. Old bets, hidden truths, family secrets, and tiny angels will come together to show them true love does conquer all. This Christmas, Gabe and Heather might be the couple that proves the legend of the Bells Pass gazebo isn't just a legend after all.

Inclusions: Heroine has acromegaly

## **Eggnog & Evergreens**

Becca Estay

Age: 24

Looks: Petite, jet black, and sweet chocolate brown eyes

Favorite Food: Eggnog

Status: Single, but secretly crushing on Bells Pass's very own Paul Bunyan

Cameron Robbins

Age: 34

Looks: Rangy, tawny blond, and piercing blue eyes

Favorite Food: Eggnog pie from The Nightingale Diner

Status: Single, but secretly crushing on Bells Pass's Eggnog Champion

It's Christmastime in Bells Pass, but Becca and Cameron are more spicy disasters than dating disasters. They've both been hurt in the past, and now, they're too scared to risk their already battered hearts. Chosen by the legend of the Bells Pass Gazebo as the new Christmas couple, the townspeople know they'll have to work together if they want to keep their matchmaking streak alive. This Christmas, secrets are revealed, and hearts are mended, but not before two people risk it all for a chance at an evergreen love.

Inclusions: Heroine wears a leg prosthesis due to a birth defect

## **Gumdrops & Garland**

Indigo Dickson

Age: 27

Looks: Short, curvy, and jet-black hair with eyes to rival her name

Favorite Food: Gumdrops

Status: It's complicated

Lance Garland

Age: 28

Looks: Tall, dark, and handsome, with the saddest brown eyes in Bells Pass

Favorite Food: The Lancenator

Status: It's beyond complicated

Lance Garland and Indigo Dickson can't be dating disasters if they refuse to date. They've caught on to the Legend of the Bells Pass Gazebo, and this Christmas, they're steering clear



of it. Until Lance suffers a devastating loss and looks to Indigo to help him through the holiday season. Complicated doesn't begin to describe their relationship, but old misunderstandings and damaged pride stop them from admitting the truth—they're perfect for each other. The townspeople of Bells Pass know they'll need all of Santa's magic to prove it to these childhood friends before the clock strikes twelve on December twenty-fifth.

Inclusions: Hero has a traumatic brain injury

## **Candy Canes & Caroling**

Hazel Cane:

Age: 28

Looks: Tall, red hair, and curvy

Favorite Food: Candy Canes

Status: Single, but has her eye on a certain social worker in town

Irving Wallace:

Age: 28

Looks: Dark and handsome, accessorizing with a hip-hugging wheelchair and a furry German Shepherd

Favorite Food: Sweet Potato Nachos

Status: Happily single

Irving Wallace is a bit of a Grinch, a Scrooge if you will. He's too busy opening the Bells Pass Housing Project to worry about caroling and Christmas trees. Enter Hazel Cane. Intrigued by her new colleague, she makes it her mission to help his heart grow this holiday season. With a candy cane on her lips and a song in her heart, she gets some unexpected help from an infamous diner, an angel in disguise, and a whole lot of Christmas spirit. Can Hazel convince this Grinch that Christmas can mean a whole lot more?

Inclusions: Hero is a paraplegic with a service dog

**Bells Pass Christmas Box Set #1-3**

**Bells Pass Christmas Box Set #4-6**

# Books By This Author

## [Katie Mettner Books](#)

Torched  
Finding Susan  
After Summer Ends  
Someone in the Water  
The Secrets Between Us  
White Sheets & Rosy Cheeks  
A Christmas at Gingerbread Falls

Sugar's Dance  
Sugar's Song  
Sugar's Night  
Sugar's Faith  
Trusting Trey

Granted Redemption  
Autumn Reflections  
Winter's Rain  
Forever Phoenix

Snow Daze  
December Kiss  
Noel's Hart  
April Melody  
Liberty Belle  
Wicked Winifred  
Nick S. Klaus

Calling Cupid  
Me and Mr. IT  
The Forgotten Lei  
Hiding Rose

Magnificent Love  
Magnificent Destiny

Inherited Love  
Inherited Light  
Inherited Life

October Winds  
Ruby Sky

Meatloaf & Mistletoe  
Hotcakes & Holly  
Jam & Jingle Bells  
Apples & Angel Wings  
Eggnog & Evergreens  
Gumdrops & Garland  
Candy Canes & Caroling

Seducing Serenity  
Protecting Pia

Cupcake  
Tart  
Cookie

Butterflies and Hazel Eyes  
Honeybees and Sexy Tees

Blazing Hot Nights  
Long Past Dawn  
Due North  
His Christmas Star

Going Rogue in Red Rye County  
The Perfect Witness  
The Red River Slayer

# A Note To My Readers

People with disabilities are just that—people. We are not ‘differently abled’ because of our disability. We all have different abilities and interests, and the fact that we may or may not have a physical or intellectual disability doesn’t change that. The disabled community may have different needs, but we are productive members of society who also happen to be husbands, wives, moms, dads, sons, daughters, sisters, brothers, friends, and co-workers. People with disabilities are often disrespected and portrayed two different ways; as helpless or as heroically inspirational for doing simple, basic activities.

As a disabled author who writes disabled characters, my focus is to help people without disabilities understand the real-life disability issues we face like discrimination, limited accessibility, housing, employment opportunities, and lack of people first language. I want to change the way others see our community by writing strong characters who go after their dreams, and find their true love, without shying away from what it is like to be a person with a disability. Another way I can educate people without disabilities is to help them understand our terminology. We, as the disabled community, have worked to establish what we call People First Language. This isn’t a case of being politically correct. Rather, it is a way to acknowledge and communicate with a person with a disability in a respectful way by eliminating generalizations, assumptions, and stereotypes.

As a person with disabilities, I appreciate when readers take the time to ask me what my preferred language is. Since so many have asked, I thought I would include a small sample of the people-first language we use in the disabled community. This language also applies when leaving reviews and talking

about books that feature characters with disabilities. The most important thing to remember when you're talking to people with disabilities is that we are people first! If you ask us what our preferred terminology is regarding our disability, we will not only tell you, but be glad you asked! If you would like more information about people first language, you will find a [disability resource guide](#) on my [website](#).

Instead of: He is handicapped.

Use: He is a person with a disability.

Instead of: She is differently abled.

Use: She is a person with a disability.

Instead of: He is mentally retarded.

Use: He has a developmental or intellectual disability.

Instead of: She is wheelchair-bound.

Use: She uses a wheelchair.

Instead of: He is a cripple.

Use: He has a physical disability.

Instead of: She is a midget or dwarf.

Use: She is a person of short stature or a little person.

Instead of: He is deaf and mute.

Use: He is deaf or he has a hearing disability.

Instead of: She is a normal or healthy person.

Use: She is a person without a disability.

Instead of: That is handicapped parking.

Use: That is accessible parking.

Instead of: He has overcome his disability.

Use: He is successful and productive.

Instead of: She is suffering from vision loss.

Use: She is a person who is blind or visually disabled.

Instead of: He is brain damaged.

Use: He is a person with a traumatic brain injury.