

GRACE MEYERS

Christmas in Maine

A Winter
Romance
• 2 •



Christmas In Maine

A Winter Romance Book 2

Grace Meyers



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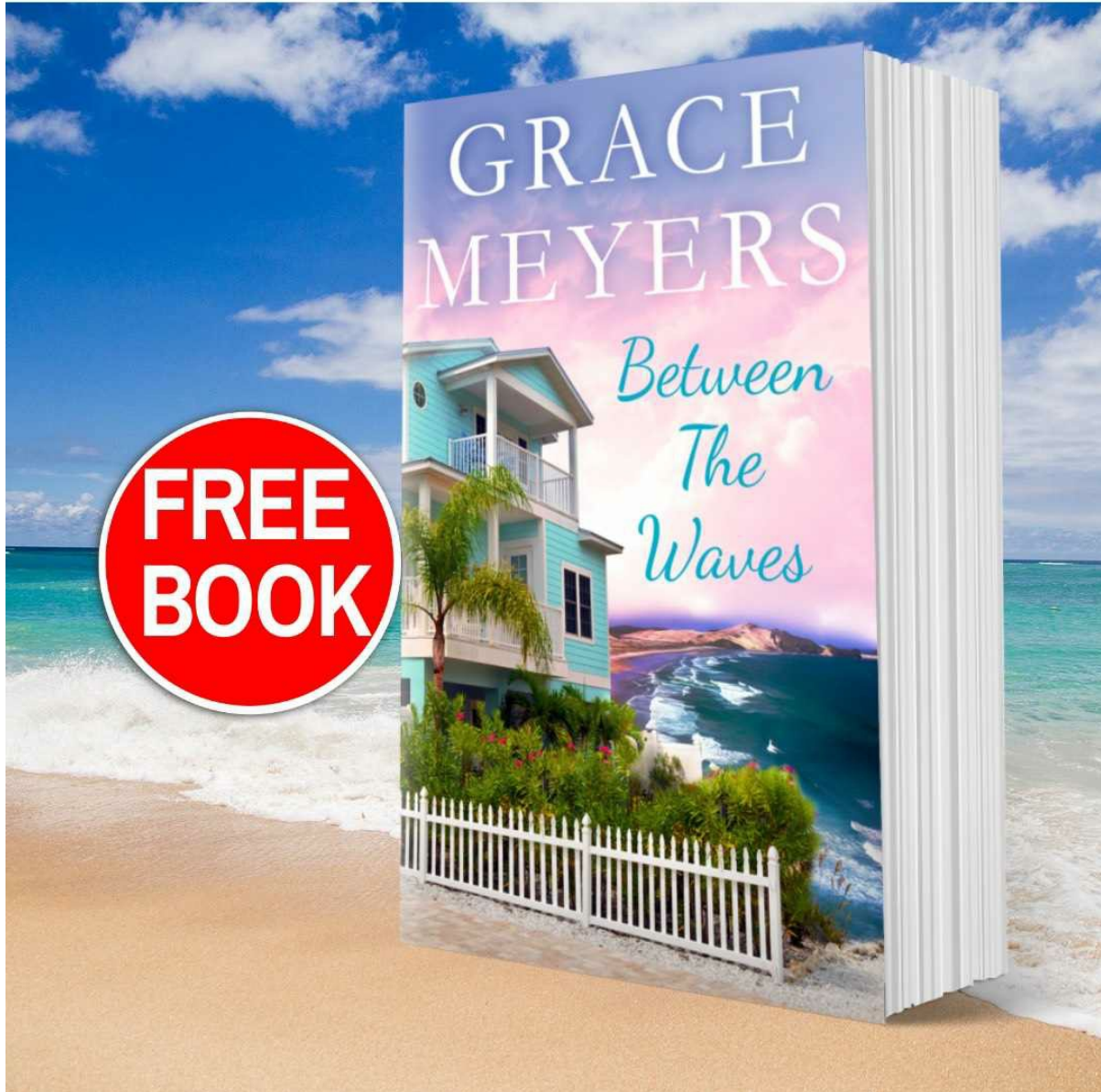
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Chapter 1

Sage



Sage could barely move as Travis helped her back to the house, her insides felt hollow, her stomach hurt, so much pain and hurt. “How could someone do this? I just don’t understand?”

“These things happen. Try not to get too upset. It’s a tree, I’m not trying to make it less upsetting than it is but your family wouldn’t want you to be miserable over a tree.”

Tears welled up in her eyes as he sat her down on the couch. “You just don’t understand.”

Travis handed her a tissue. She took it and blew her nose, a sense of looseness deep inside her. “That tree was very important to our family, and it meant a lot to me. I can’t imagine why that tree, of all trees, would... It was like someone took it on purpose.”

Her blood boiling, she imagined someone slinking across the snowy backwoods to that spot and purposefully cutting down her family's tree while smiling. “What an awful thing for someone to do.”

Travis wasn’t saying much. Had Sage been in her right mind she would have noticed his silence and paid more attention. When he finally spoke, he was direct and not as sympathetic as she would have preferred.

“Well, they took other trees, whoever they were.” His back was to her,

the faint sound of a spoon clinking against the side of a mug. Then he turned suddenly and strode to her, a cup in his hands. "Here, have some cocoa, calm yourself, maybe take a nap. I'm going to sit here and write everything I can think of relating to my holiday event and then we can talk later."

Sage wasn't in the mood to do business, but still the thought of being alone upset her. "Fine." She tossed a blanket over herself, sipped the good cocoa, and lay down, staring at the ceiling.

The wood beams reminded her of Christmas trees, and the scent of pine and cinnamon wafting through the cabin's air from the few decorations unnerved her.

The next thing she knew, Travis was waking her, a bowl held out in front of her face. "Wake up, princess. I ran home and got some leftover chili I made for us to have for dinner."

She sat up quickly. The scent of spice and warm beef and beans made her mouth water. "This looks really good. Perhaps you should cook for this party you're having and I'll just arrange everything else."

His smile was heart-stopping. "No can do, not unless everyone wants to eat chili and hot dogs, those are the only things I'm really good at, that and burgers. Although we could do a barbeque."

One taste of his sinfully good chili and Sage forgot about her tree for a few moments after it came back to her on waking. "Well, I am going to make it my mission to uncover who it was that took those trees. I don't know how long or what it will take but somehow, someday, I'm going to figure it out. In the meantime, we need to finish decorating tomorrow. Show me what you wrote while I was plotting destruction in my sleep."

He flashed her another alluring smile. "That's my girl. So, here is the list of things I wrote. You can decipher it however you want. Did you know you snore?"

"I do not!"

"Yes you do, but that's okay, at least you don't sleepwalk, that is much harder to control. What's that over there?" Travis was at it again, making himself at home in her family's cabin and getting overly inquisitive about everything.

His feet took him to the mantel where a tiny box sat between a bunch of family pictures. Sage wasn't surprised when he didn't ask if he could open it and simply helped himself, its blue velvet exterior clasped gingerly in his big hand.

“That’s the first engagement ring my grandfather gave to my grandmother. It's made of wire and he hand-made it himself because at the time he didn't have the money to buy a really expensive one, but two years later he bought her a real diamond engagement ring which she happily took to her grave.”

Travis smiled. “So it would be appropriate if your suitor, if you will, did the same, made something special like this to mark the moment. Exquisite and carefully crafted, I’m impressed.”

Sage felt a strange tingle in her spine as their eyes met, something undefinable as he held the box in his hand. After a moment of unbelievable connection that sent her insides scattering in every direction, she pulled her eyes away.

“Thank you, he was very good at a lot of things and he believed gifts should be personable and handmade always, at least the important gifts. My grandmother cherished it. I would have too, it's so simple but made with love.”

“The best kind of gifts to receive.”

Sage distracted herself with his list and started planning by grabbing paper and pen to jot down notes. There was so much to do in such little time, and this would be the perfect time for her to dive into a project to distract herself from yet another issue she needed to deal with—her family's missing trees.

Somehow, he wandered her house for a while, chatting in the background. Sage got so used to it, that she didn't even comment anymore. Most of what he said didn't require commenting, just a set of ears it seemed so he didn't feel so alone.

When he came back carrying a lovely angel with gold and silver wings, Sage smiled. “Oh my, I’d forgotten about her. Thank you. She came off my key ring, and I was frantically trying to find her before all this began. Where was she?”

“On the stairs, tucked into the corner of a step. You wouldn’t want to lose her before driving down the road.”

Their fingers brushed lightly as she took the small angel from his hand. A jolt of electricity shot through her fingers clear through her hand and up her arm to her chest. “Oh, my! Did you feel that?”

His face changed, an odd look of confusion and amusement. “I did, I don’t know, it could be love at first touch or something like that.”

Sage made a face. “I think they call it love at first sight, not first touch, but whatever. You and I could never fall in love, neither of us is looking and we are so very wrong for each other, so don’t even go there.”

She peeked from under her hooded eyelids as she closed them for a moment to settle her body from that electrical jolt. He was smiling at her, a challenge in his eyes. “Don’t even think about it! I am not interested in that sort of thing, even if it’s just a game or to prove a point.”

Travis held up his hands in surrender. “Point taken, you’re right, you’re not my usual type of woman, you’re too quiet and too bossy. Not to mention you cry and get emotional at the drop of a hat, not sure how I’d feel about that.”

Acting upset, Sage tossed a fluffy pillow at him and laughed when he easily dodged it and headed for the door. “Well, I was going to invite you to my place for the night so you didn’t have to sleep alone over here, and I over there. With that attitude, I think it might be time I get going while I still have a head.”

His laughter was the last thing she heard when he closed the door behind himself. She was too slow with her second throw; the red sequined pillow flung from her hands and hit the door, sliding gently to the floor. “Good riddance.”

Chapter 2

Travis



Travis felt an excitement he hadn't felt in years, and yet worried Sage was going to find out about her family's beloved tree before his party. Travis hadn't realized at the time that he'd cut that tree down to use for a project. There was nothing that could be done now.

Still, once the holidays were over and she'd had a blast at his party, he promised himself he'd do the right thing and tell her.

On the way back to his place he stopped to watch her through the large great room window. Her silhouette, subtle against the glimmering lights behind her, looked like an angel. "My angel."

Quietly, he crept away, determined to bury his secret and the challenge she'd cast between them without realizing it.

Come morning he'd put all that behind him, but the urge to see her again, every chance he got was undeniable. The moment he opened his eyes, a vision of her lovely face crept into his brain before he had coffee.

As he worked, there she was, shadowing his ideas, lingering in the background waiting for her moment. Travis waited as long as he could to go to her cabin. He feared her getting so agitated with him, she would permanently throw him out.

That was the first time in his entire life that Travis held himself in check

to not misbehave, and it shook him to his core. When he finally arrived sometime between breakfast and lunch he brought with him a lovely white poinsettia. “Hey, I thought you might like this for your place. My mother loved them, and she had half a dozen of them inside the house tucked into closets and dark places.”

Her eyes looked adoringly at the plant. “Oh my, what a lovely plant. I love it, thank you!” Sage found the perfect spot for it on the table and turned to him. “We have some errands to run today, I want to get a few more things and I want to consult with the owner of that lovely bakery in town. I think it would be so nice to have a beautiful dessert table. During the holidays, everyone loves dessert, and it’s a nice way to send your clients off after they’ve stopped in to visit.”

“Okay.” Travis followed on her heels as she led the way to his property, determined to get it done as quickly as possible. “Would you like to drive? We can take my motorcycle since it’s such a nice day.”

Stopping in her tracks, Sage turned, her eyes questioning even though no words left her beautiful lips.

“What?” His thoughts were unclear, he couldn’t stop focusing on those lips as he wondered how it would feel to kiss her on the spot.

“You want me to go for a ride on your motorcycle *now*, today? I know it’s not snowing, but it’s cold and windy and the sky looks awful. What if we get caught in some strange storm? What will we do with what we need to bring back?”

It took a concentrated effort for Travis to focus his energy on her question, his mind was so wrapped up in wanting a kiss. It was insane, and he knew it, shaking his head a little to pull out his irrational thinking.

“Harold works at the hardware store, he lives nearby. Sometimes I pay him some money to deliver my stuff so I don’t have to stop working. I’m sure if we asked, he would do it for us. He’s a really nice man.”

Travis didn't want her to reply, he kept moving, letting her debate with herself. If he focused one more minute on her lips he was going to kiss her senseless right in the middle of the open air between their properties. He’d likely get smacked for it, and deservedly so.

“Wait! *Are* we taking the motorcycle? I’m not sure I’m dressed....”

“Yes, it will be fun, you’ll have a good time, and stop worrying.” Today was one of those days Travis was more thoughtful than usual. Having Sage around was having a beneficial effect on him. Instead of his curiosity and

adventurous nature being directed in fifty places that usually got him into trouble, it was all on her.

He tossed open his garage and handed her a helmet off the counter. “Here put this on.”

“Oh, my goodness! I didn't realize you had so many vehicles!”

Travis smiled, admiring the surprised look on her face. “Yes, well, we men get bored sometimes. I get bored more than most. It's a luxury my mother hated, she said ten cars and five motorcycles were plenty. Then I bought two pickup trucks, a boat, and well, there's the snowmobile over there, and the jet ski, the lawn tractor and I have an ATV too.”

Her eyes were enormous and round. “That's a lot of toys, do you have anything else?”

Being sarcastic, Travis tapped his chin thoughtfully. “Well, I have dirt bikes and an enduro but that's in the shop, then there is the helicopter, I have a pilot's license. Did I tell you?”

He saw the annoyance in Sage's eyes as she pointed her finger at him. “Don't even think about taking me for a ride on that, I'm not going. Men! So crazy for their toys.” She adjusted the helmet as best she could, to not ruin her hair.

“That's what my mother used to say.”

It didn't take long before they were cruising along the rugged roads into town. It felt good to have her pressed tightly to him, her arms wrapped around him, hands pressed frighteningly firm to his belly.

The ride was peaceful, the cold air waking his senses as he tried to take it as gently as he could, so he did not completely scare her half to death. When they landed in town at the Bold and Buttery Bakery, she hopped off so fast it was comical. “I take it my driving is less than favorable?”

“Not at all.” Her sarcasm was showing on her face. “Although there was that one turn back there where I regretted not having my Will in place. Goodness, is there anything you don't do?”

Her hands were laced in her hair, exactly where Travis wanted to put his, but he clenched his hands tight together. “Lots of things, but I'm not about to share that with you.” He could feel himself getting weak, he'd pushed himself too far, and it was early yet. Fighting the urge to collapse, he reached for the small bag he stowed in the storage compartment. “We'd better get inside so I can grab some of that sweet frosting before I go down, this one's coming quick.”

Travis almost felt sorry for Sage, her hand came out to help him instantly, the banter between them forgotten. “Goodness, I’m going to have to keep an eye on you. Come on.”

He smiled but let her lead the way. Thankful for her kind heart and thoughtfulness again. “It’s not like I’m going to drop to the floor in ten seconds.”

They barely made it into the bakery before he had to sit. Thankfully, a chair was close by and two women came rushing out to help with Sage beside them. Through the delirious fussing, he barely noticed until his blood sugar came back up, and then he saw the flustered, fearful look in Sage’s eyes.

“It’s okay, princess, this isn’t my first rodeo and I know the game plan. The only thing I forgot today was the candy.”

“Well, next time we’re going to have to tie a string to your belt and attach a pack of Skittles to it so you have it with you. I can put one on each side, and attach those little silly kids’ lollipops which seem to work fast.”

A half-hour later after everything settled down, and they tasted way too many sugary treats, Travis was on a roller coaster high from the sugar. He’d given himself a shot and took a few cookies for the road.

“I think we got an excellent selection of goodies. Originally, I thought about getting stuff from Boston but local is by far better. It will be fresher and much more appreciated.”

She became quiet after that, Travis knew something was up as she sat down on a nearby bench, and closed her eyes. “You okay? I could get you a few more of those sugar cubes in there they call cookies.”

She waved her hand in the air at him. “No. It’s not that. I’m sorry.” The tears came again.

Travis sat down and did the only thing he could think of to do with her tears falling. He held her hand, and laced his fingers with hers, as Sage did the best she could to control herself.

“It’s just being in there, seeing the wedding cakes lined up on the shelf, the pretty brides and grooms to choose from, all the lovely icing flowers, it reminded me of...”

That was it, she began to bawl her eyes out. Operating on instinct, Travis wrapped his arm around her and pulled her close. “Now, none of that, I might have to make you drive the motorcycle back to clear your head of that nonsense. Come on now. I might have to cry with you if you’re gonna do this.” His humor did nothing to lessen her emotions so Travis tried again

when his eyes landed on the tree in the town center. “You know what you need, you need to do something from someone else.”

“What?” She stopped crying for a minute.

Travis thought she never looked more beautiful than the moments she was completely out of her element, overly emotional, and letting it all out. He smiled. “Let’s get over to that tree and pick off two paper ornaments so we can make some kids happy. Not everyone has a blessed Christmas, and remembering that and what we can do, helps.”

He helped her stand, every muscle flexing and tightening to continue to hold her close and protect her as they walked through the small crowd of people around the tree.

Sage’s eyes lit up as she stared at the brightly lit tree. “This isn’t the one they usually have.”

“No, they light the big one over there now. This one’s for families and children in need who are less fortunate. They can attach an ornament, no questions asked, with their holiday wants and needs. Other people in town can provide them and the church over there distributes it all.”

The tears were gone just like that as she took three ornaments off the tree. “Oh, look at this. Clearly, it was written by a kid, see the handwriting? I want to take them all.” She took two more off.

“Okay, let’s start out with that. We can always take more. It’s early yet and more people will put their stuff on here. Let’s go see about getting some of this stuff and we can have Harold bring it back to the cabin.”

Travis was relieved to have diverted that minor disaster but then his curiosity switched into high gear as they headed for the toy store. “Are you a fan of Legos? When I was a kid, I loved those and Lincoln Logs, it’s amazing they still have them here.”

Like a kid again, he wandered the aisles of the toy store, touching this and holding that. He pulled handles, twisted knobs, pushed buttons, and got way too carried away forgetting himself until they checked out and left the bags with the manager for Harold to deliver.

“Wow. I have to say, you probably touched a thousand dollars worth of stuff in there. Were you the kid that wasn’t allowed to touch anything when you were growing up?”

“No, I’ve just always had a curiosity for things, exploring what they do, how they work. My mother used to say I was going to be a scientist one day because my mind worked in overdrive. The toys they have today are so

surreal when I think back to all those cardboard boxes and basic toys I got as a kid.”

Sage’s eyes got misty as they stood beside his motorcycle again. Travis braced himself, plotting his next diversion tactic. “I just love that we got all this stuff for the kids. They are going to be so happy!”

Travis sighed, relieved. “Me too. You can wrap these up and make them look all pretty and stuff.”

“Oh, no. You’re helping me. I’m not doing this alone. Thank you for what you did earlier. I was feeling so miserable and you knew exactly what to do to make it better. I really appreciate that.”

Travis had climbed on the motorcycle, his nod was all that was needed before she climbed on behind him, and clung to his waist. Sage was a tremendous surprise for Travis, the rest of the afternoon they wrapped gifts and talked about life.

It felt so comfortable, so easy, like it had been with his mother, it took him by surprise. “So where is one place you’d go if you could go, anywhere in the world, right now?” Sage had just attached a pretty green bow to a little wrapped box that held a doll for a girl.

“I’d go everywhere, I’d take a plane, my own, and head to every country in the world. I wouldn’t stop until I visited every country... Brazil, Chile, Australia, China, you name it. I’d go everywhere and explore just a piece of each. What about you?”

Travis looked at his wrapped package, a toy dump truck for a boy with a silver ribbon that looked more like Barney the Dinosaur stuffed in a beach ball. He smiled and tossed it aside, moving on to the next.

“I’d go to Scotland and Ireland. I’d love to see Norway too, but I’d probably go to Greece too.” Sage laughed. “I’m never flying with you, I imagine you jet-setting around the world and giving me whiplash like when we were on your motorcycle earlier. We’d be in one city for an hour, then off to another. Geez.”

Travis raised his eyebrows at how animated she appeared. “Well, obviously you’ve spent quite a few minutes thinking about vacationing with me... that says a lot.”

She tossed a red bow at him, missing by a long shot. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Chapter 3

Sage



Sage was getting used to the way she and Travis bickered—like old best friends or an old married couple. She wasn't sure how she felt about the latter but it didn't matter. By the time they were done, they had a stack of gifts and a few gift cards for the toy and department store so the kids could pick out some things of their own choosing.

“Thank you so much for helping wrap this stuff. It was a pleasant break from planning your event and from my melodrama. Honestly, I am so tired of being dramatic about it, I can't even get away from myself anymore. I thought coming out here would be good, a holiday for myself, but it will never happen.”

“It's perspective. You could look at it as devastation that you and your boyfriend of forever didn't get married or a relief that you didn't marry the wrong man.”

Sage didn't know what to say, she knew Travis was right, but her heart still ached. “I know, but tell that to my heart, my soul, and my mind that had set up the rest of my life on something that didn't happen. Now I'm left empty-handed.”

He stopped and took the three steps to clear the distance between them, smiling down at her. Sage thought for sure her heart was beating so hard it

would jump right out of her chest.

The tenderness in his eyes, the way his hand caressed the side of her face, the careless lopsided grin, it was too much to process. “I...I guess....”

His fingers trailed to her lips and Sage stopped instantly as they came to rest there. “Well, let me be the first to tell you that your hand is never empty, it has mine to hold.” Travis slid his fingers away and down her arm to her hand, and laced them together. “You're not empty-handed, never. Neither of us are. Just because things don't work out, doesn't mean you're empty-handed, ever. I got you, you got me and together we will find ourselves this Christmas season. Since you've arrived, I've found a really good reason to get up every day, and that has nothing to do with my work. Hopefully, being my neighbor helps you too.”

For the first time in her life, Sage wanted to say something, anything, she tried to draw on her inner resources and contemplated what would be appropriate. So touched by his kindness and gentle, caring ways a tiny part of her heart fell madly in love with him at that moment.

Then she mentally shifted back a few steps, smiled and laughed, and tried to make light of the emotionally deep moment he'd just created out of nowhere. “You're right, we have each other. It's wonderful to have friends and who says that those friends always have to be of the same gender. I'm so happy we are friends and we have each other to support and spend time with this Christmas. Thank you, Travis.”

When he touched his lips to her hand and kissed it, her lungs froze, no air would come in or out, and she could only look. “You're welcome, Sage.”

Her mind was racing a hundred miles an hour to get away from the things that were quickly developing between them. Sage didn't know how she'd gotten to where she was with Travis, it happened so subtly and in such a short time.

Smoothly, she stepped backward, watching him fall back into place at his side, and turned away to the packages they'd just wrapped. “I think I'm getting tired and we have so much to do tomorrow. Can we call it a night, Travis? I really need to get some rest and I want to take a hot bath. I bet you and that loveable dog of yours need to relax. Tomorrow you should bring him with you.”

She glanced sideways and saw the confusion and disappointment there, which he quickly masked. “Yeah, you're right. I need some rest and I have to get home. This has been fun and we have a lot to do tomorrow. I'm gonna go,

I mean head home. It's been a lot of fun, and I don't want to interrupt your bath."

There was an awkwardness in his voice as if he didn't know what to say, which was so unlike her neighbor. She'd upset him but didn't know what to say, certain she'd fumble over it and make matters worse.

Sage tried her best and smiled at him. "Good night, Travis." She felt drawn to him as if to ease his discomfort and hugged him. "Thank you again."

The warmth of their bodies pressed together, the way his hands pressed against her back felt too good, too perfect. She hurried to step back and look into his serious eyes.

"Good night, Sage." Travis gave a quick wave, turned, and went out the door without another word.

Sage had a hard time sleeping that night, her mind replaying those last moments repeatedly in her head. Her grandmother's wisdom repeated in her head like a broken record. "When you know you've found the one, you'll know. There will be no mistaking it. Your heart will know."

"Oh, grandmother. No, it can't be. I'm not ready, he's not ready, neither of us are ready and I won't let either of us be hurt again." She shoved those thoughts to the back of her mind and tried to focus her energy on the feel of the cozy bed she lay in instead.

At the crack of dawn the next morning, Sage woke to the smell of coffee brewing and knew right away who it was. Her emotions were in overdrive from last night and all the things she was still feeling inside.

Travis was a handful for anyone, Sage was not in the right frame of mind to deal with his chatty, overly positive, perspective as he liked to call it. Stumbling down the stairs she found him at her kitchen stove, cooking.

"Hey, champ. I figured you were going to sleep in, you really do like to sleep. I thought we'd get a head start on the day, and the only way to do that is to enjoy breakfast together so we can talk. I made some bacon and toast, and the waffles will be ready in a minute. Was your grandmother or grandfather a fan of Mickey Mouse?"

Her coffee cup came into focus and rather than start yelling or bickering before her first sip, she bit her tongue and kept her thoughts to herself as she nibbled on the bacon. Five minutes later after a few sips of coffee, she took hold of his plate just as he was about to sit down and lead him to the door. "I am not in the mood to deal with you this early. Take your breakfast and go

home and don't come back until you bring that adorable puppy. And you can stop entering my cabin unannounced."

Annoyed at Travis for his forward attitude, and herself for her rudeness after nearly slamming the door in his face, she sat down and ate. Sage hated herself even more after tasting the maple sausage cooked perfectly and the waffles he made her with strawberry jam just like grandma had done years ago. "How does he do that?"

"I heard that, it's a talent, I know you better than you think I do. I know you better than you do yourself."

Sage glanced over and saw him peeking through a window, stuck out her tongue, and continued to eat. "Go away."

She knew Travis wasn't going far, she could hear noises outside, and it annoyed her even more. After getting dressed and doing her hair and makeup, Sage marched downstairs prepared to ignore him.

She might have planned to ignore him but her curiosity got the better of her and she peeked out a window to see what Travis was doing. "Goodness gracious!"

Off she marched to the door and down the steps to stand in the driveway and turned toward her house. "What in God's creation are you doing on my roof? Get down from there, Travis!" Hands on hips, Sage vowed to find the courage to climb that wooden ladder and drag him down.

He smiled and waved his hand in the air, acknowledging her presence, but then continued what he was doing. "I'll be down soon, in a few minutes right after I finish hanging up these lights. You are going to love this Santa once you see it. I have one but he looks a little different, a little newer I think, but he's cool."

Sage held her breath as Travis danced near the edge of the roof, certain she'd be calling the ambulance when he fell off the roof. "Get down, please."

"Stop. I'm fine. I love it up here. Can I interest you in a walk on the wild side?" Travis laughed.

"No thanks, I'm good." Sage pressed her hand to her chest and said a silent prayer that he wouldn't fall.

Twenty minutes later, Travis climbed down the ladder and stood back next to her, hands folded over his chest, a wicked smile on his lips. "You can't get rid of me that easily. I'll just find something else to do."

Sage studied the outdoor decor, the series of lights he'd hung up on the roof when he lit them up. "Impressive. You're just lucky you're so good at

hanging Christmas lights, otherwise, you'd be in big trouble."

Prepared to take her leave, she admired the lights, feeling the first stirrings of holiday cheer, recalling all the years her grandfather would do the very thing Travis had just done. "Thank you."

She was inside the door, closing it behind her before Travis finished his sentence, but she heard it nonetheless.

"She likes me. I'm irresistible." Travis' amusement was heard for quite a while after she went inside. Sage wrapped more gifts, planned a bit more for his party, and did a few other things to prepare for her own festivities.

Originally, the holidays had been the last thing on her mind. She carried a desire to cocoon herself in her grandparents' cabin and forget the world beyond. Now that she'd met Travis, she was forced out of her shell to deal with his upcoming holiday business party along with every other thought and feeling he had rolling around in his head.

It felt good to be of service to another, even if Sage wanted to rip her hair out more than once since arriving in Freeport, Maine.

She spent a good part of the morning and afternoon ignoring him, hoping Travis would give her space... but he didn't. Around lunch time Travis barged through the door, Christmas bells wrapped around his neck. Honey, I'm home, what's for dinner?"

Sage blinked, and stared at the man standing in front of her as she held her book. "What are you talking about, Travis?" She couldn't resist a smile for him, his eyes twinkling with merriment.

Hands on his hips, he looked anything but innocent. "I don't know. I've always wanted to say that and now seemed as good a time as any." He shifted his weight, unwrapped the bells from his neck, hung them on the inside of the door, and held out his hand. "Come along princess, I have something to show you!"

Sage felt a familiar stirring of emotions in her belly, giddiness, likened to the joy a child felt on Christmas morning, and couldn't refuse his request. Without taking a moment to think and rationalize the moment she stood up and took his hand. "This better be good!" She laughed.

He clasped her hand tight and led her down the stairs. As they turned the corner and headed down the driveway to the main road, slowly she saw what he'd done. "Oh, my! Travis! What did you do?"

Laughing hysterically she clutched her belly, filled with the wonder of her childhood Christmases before. Lining the driveway, the sides of the

cabin, and along the front of the property was every decoration her grandparents ever put out.

“I figured the best way for you to chase away the blues is to have Santa chase it down. Then I figured a snowman would help, and some reindeer and a few elves. When I was done with that, I felt sorry for leaving the Santa bear, the Christmas tree, and a couple of presents behind. I got a little carried away and brought everything out.”

She threw herself into his arms, forgetting who he was for a moment and letting her feelings flow through her. “This is the best Christmas I’ve had so far in a long time. You do not know...”

Sage snapped out of it, letting go after he stopped swinging her around and stepped back. “Sorry, I forgot, Travis.”

Immediately she turned around, he seemed as confused as she was by her actions. “No need...” Travis cleared his throat. “Christmas lights do that to me too.”

Sage cried, she was so emotional these days—it was becoming a regular thing. The only difference now was these were tears of joy. Hands clasped in front of her face, the laughter kept coming until her belly hurt. “Don’t be surprised if we have guests. You know how people love looking at Christmas lights.”

His eyes were a mystery of emotion as he regarded her. Sage felt every inch of her skin tingle. “Well then, we can put a donation box out front, let them give donations and we can give it to the kids or families in need on New Year.”

Sage looked again, everything finally sinking in. “There are no words to express how beautiful this is. You are such an amazing man, Travis. I can’t imagine how you are still single and some lovely lady hasn’t snatched you up yet.”

Chapter 4

Travis



Travis saw the embarrassment on her face. She'd said too much and they both knew it. His own embarrassment over her thoughtful compliment made him smile as he rocked back on his heels and studied the lights. "Thank you. I'm not sure yet but I think you inspire me. There is something about being around you that makes me do silly things. My mother would smile from ear to ear right now, wondering when I was going to do the same thing to our property."

"I'm sorry she's not here to see it."

The sincerity in her voice patched up a piece of his broken heart. "She is here with us, she's in the air, she's in the earth, all around. She's energy and I know she is with us in some way, watching, laughing, and enjoying this moment, maybe even more than you and I."

"Do you really believe that, Travis?"

"I do. I was raised by a mother who had a deep faith and connection to God. It was said that her mother talked to the spirits all the time, even though they never talked back. My mother did the same, and she used to tell me we are never gone, ever. Our bodies are just the shell, the essence of a tiny piece of the spirit we are, and when we pass over, God gives us the ability to take trips back to visit those we love."

Travis could still remember the very conversation he spoke of with his mother. It was like seeing an angel talk about home. “I used to imagine God handing out little tickets like you get on those amusement rides at the carnival.” He laughed at the memory.

“Your mother sounds amazing, and you sounded like a smaller version of the mischievous man you are now.”

Travis followed when Sage turned and headed back up the driveway not eager to abandon their conversation yet.

“So I guess for all that hard work you at least deserve some hot cocoa. Come on, Santa's helper, I got some in the house.”

When Travis finally arrived home, he was tired but restless. He worked on a few projects for his customers and slept little, pacing back and forth, eager for some excitement and adventure. He stared out the window that looked toward Sage’s cabin and saw the tip of her rooftop. “You just do something to me Sage, I’m glad you're here.”

By morning he heard the faint sound of cars moving down the usually unhurried road. It was early, and usually, no one but the mailman and a few straggler neighbors on their early morning errands didn’t come out this way.

Curious, he headed toward the road in his pickup and stopped short when he saw the local news reporting on the lights he’d hung up the day before. Of course, Travis had to make an appearance and stir the pot.

“Hey, Pete, how’s things? Whatcha doing?”

“Hey, Travis, good to see you this fine morning. I’m doing well, I’m just out reporting on the local holiday cheer. You know every year we list local homes in the news, this way the community can come and have a look and vote for the winner. I have to say this neighbor of yours certainly did a wonderful job this year. I’ve seen nothing like it, so creative and bright. I can’t wait to come back tonight and see it under the cover of the moon.”

“Interesting. Did you notice she put out a donation box? I think she plans on donating to local charities with any funds that are given for the beautiful views. Just saying.”

Of course, Pete wrote that down in his little notepad, smiling. “Awesome. I’m going to note that in the news. I wonder if we can get anyone else to do that. What a wonderful way to give to others while enjoying a beautiful holiday light show. Hopefully, I’ll see you later.”

“You bet.” Travis was just about to back up and get back to business with his own agenda when Pete stopped him.

“You say *she*, do you know who the new owner is?”

“Some big city event planner from Boston, Sage Harvey, she's the granddaughter of the previous owner.”

“Really! Interesting, a new local.” Pete nodded then waved and took off.

Travis wished he hadn't mentioned all that, Pete had a way with the ladies, he was quite the charmer and an old high school rival with the girls. He'd been Prom King and captain of the football team.

The following day, after spending all his time annoying and making himself unforgettable in Sage's world, he sat in her living room listening to her snoring peacefully as he sipped a cup of coffee.

The tree looked beautiful, other than that it leaned to the left a little *too* much thanks to their disagreement over it last night. His instincts to touch it were getting the better of him just when her snoring stopped.

He smiled, knowing it would only be a few seconds.

“Don't you ever stay at your house anymore? Goodness, I would have thought you had work to do.” Her slippered feet took her swiftly past him, headed for the coffee pot.

“You know the tree is leaning....”

“I know, thanks to you. Don't you dare touch it! I don't care if it falls over. All those ornaments are so heavy and it's pathetic.” Sage plopped down on the couch unceremoniously loud and careless. “The angel on top looks like she's ready to plan out her own rescue.”

“So what are your plans today?”

She seemed a bit more relaxed than usual, sipping her coffee while staring at her pathetic tree. “I'm going to spend the entire day baking cookies. It's one of my favorite pastimes, and when I'm done, I want to work a bit more on your party. I'm going to call the caterer, and check on the supplies, table decor, and flyers.”

“Okay, what cookies? I love cookies, although I am not a fan of those chewy oatmeal ones, I leave those for last.”

“All kinds, and a few pies too, and maybe a cake, I don't know yet. Baking is my favorite pastime and I want to submerge myself in sprinkles, colored sugar, and frosting.”

Travis' mind wandered. “I could definitely help with that. You saw how good I am at outdoor decor.” He pulled a newspaper from the table beside him, smiling. “Did you see the news this morning?”

Sage frowned. “No, I didn't. You're holding it and I just woke up to find

you sitting here *again*.”

Travis handed over the paper and waited.

“Oh, my goodness! How did they get my picture!”

He tried unsuccessfully to ignore the tickling feeling in his chest that had him cracking up, grabbing his ribs. “Oh gosh, I was talking to Pete the other day, he works at the newspaper and was commenting on your lights and wanted to run a story on local light shows. Well, I slipped up and told him your name, he seemed highly interested.”

He felt the newspaper hit him smack on the head; it didn't hurt and incited a riot of chuckles as he heard her footsteps storm up the stairs. “What’s the big deal, you're on vacation, you're an event planner, and you have pretty lights gracing the front of your family's cabin—all truths. And no one is expecting you to entertain them, although this might bring in some extra business for you.”

The slamming of her bedroom door shook the cabin a bit. Travis had the good sense to stop laughing and calm down. He amused himself reading the news while waiting for her expected return.

A full hour later, and after he'd drunk the entire pot of coffee, she showed up. “Well, I thought you'd never come back. It's so nice to see you, and looking so festive in your beautiful red and green dress.”

She glared at him.

“Well, and what lovely red daggers shooting from your eyes, Sage. Very nice indeed, quite beautiful.”

Travis had the good grace to turn away and put some distance between him and Sage before anything happened. Pans and other things were rattled around behind his back, and Travis was afraid to look.

“The least you could have done was let me know. You didn't tell me anything at all, just waited until it was in the news.”

“It's not really a big deal. I'm not sure what all this drama is about?” Travis turned around and watched as she'd already set up a station with many colored items to decorate the cookies. Pans were scattered all over, bowls and plates too. “Who are you baking for, the entire town?”

“I told you, I like to bake. Now if you have any sense in your head, you'll go take a walk, find something to do, like bring that cutie pie dog of yours over here.”

Travis got a little closer, curious and wanting very much to join in the fun, eager to see what she baked and taste them. “My mother loved to bake

while I loved to eat the goodies. If you need any help to taste test them to make sure they're not bad, just let me—”

Her hand came up and touched his lips. Travis smiled, kissed it lightly, and saw the way her eyes changed and darkened.

Her voice was shaky when she spoke. “Not another word, my baking is a sacred time. If I am interrupted, it turns out terrible and then I turn into the Grinch, so do me a favor and grant me this one wish of a few hours' space so I can do what I love.”

Travis nodded. “Your wish, princess, is my command. I understand the creative process.”

She made a face, then laughed. Her finger slid away from his lips. “Would you stop calling me princess, I feel like I’m twelve again.”

“And that’s a bad thing?” Travis stole a bunch of green sprinkles and dumped them in his mouth. He didn’t wait for her answer, exited the house, and went about his day, focusing his energy on a secret project he was working on.

Chapter 5

Sage



Sage was thankful Travis let her be that day. Between the whizzing of cars passing by and slowing in front of her house as the day turned to night, and all her stress she'd burned more than a few batches of cookies.

By her fifteenth batch of cookies, Sage knew Travis was due to show up. The sound of car doors slamming began to annoy her and out of interest, she peeked her head out the window.

Much to her surprise, she caught wind of three cars full of people admiring the bright lights at the edge of her property and up the driveway. The lovely elderly woman sitting in the passenger seat of one car smiled and waved at her.

Sage could have easily been disgruntled by this intrusion but she was too happy with the lights to care. Still, when she was down to her last batch of cookies, she'd heard enough distant whispers to make her burn them too.

"Drat! Now I don't have the same amount of Snickerdoodle."

Just like on a movie or TV production set, Travis waltzed in ready to say his lines. "Hey, princess. How's the baking queen from Boston doing with her cookie creations?"

For a couple of seconds, Sage thought she'd left the same word and entered the world of The Twilight Zone. "Well, I was doing great until you

showed up. Those people looking at the lights are driving me crazy. I burned half my cookies and one pie. I'm miserable."

She couldn't resist pouting for added effect and saw the silly smirk on his face. "Aw you poor girl, what a miserable day you had. I don't suppose you have a few cookies for an aging diabetic man who already ate his weight and then some in candy since dawn."

He was irresistible, but Sage couldn't wrong him for it, shaking her finger at him, she handed a chocolate chip cookie over. "Just one, and only one. I think you should consider a New Year's resolution."

"What... and risk breaking my all-time record of eating all the Christmas cookies before Valentine's Day? Never."

Sage knew better than to contest him on that statement. "Well, have you seen my wrapping paper? I can't find any of it and I know I had more after we wrapped the kids' gifts."

Travis looked like the cat that is the mouse as he stood quietly on the other side of the counter, eating his cookie. "Can't say that I do, but if I see any elves running off with a roll of it, I'll let you know."

"Thank you, very kind of you for being so thoughtful."

His grand gesture of bowing in front of her like a queen incited a riot of giggles from Sage. "You are the quirkiest, most eccentric, and unusual man I've ever met, and yet so charming."

When Travis stood up, their eyes met and his hand touched his chest. "Be still my heart, what a lovely compliment, fair lady."

Sage smiled, confused by this game they were now somehow playing. Her only relief was that there wasn't a stitch of mistletoe in sight. She knew Travis would be the one to insist they kiss under it.

"For that beautiful sentiment, I have something special for you." Once again, Travis held out his hand. Sage licked her fingers of sugar and quickly wiped them on a napkin, eager to see what unusual treat he had waiting for her outside.

They walked to the door, his hand holding hers lightly. He paused and turned to her, grinning. "Now I don't want you to get too excited when you see this. I know it's going to be hard but try to contain yourself, dear Sage."

"I'll try." She smiled, assuming the need to play along with his drama. "I can control myself when I need to do that."

He nodded and then flung the door wide. Confused, Sage stepped into the open doorway with him and looked around on the porch, down the steps, and

on the driveway. “I don’t understand...”

Their eyes met, Travis’ eyes filled with a sudden splash of amusement that Sage couldn’t comprehend. His head moved, so he was looking heavenward, or toward the top of the doorjamb.

Sage knew she didn’t have to look to know. Sighing, she closed her eyes for a moment and then opened them, and looked up as he was doing. “Yes, well, it is hard to control oneself when you see a spritely sprig of mistletoe above your head. But I...”

He kissed her, just like that, Travis leaned down and silenced her every thought, and feeling in one breath. It was sudden; it was intense and fireworks went off inside her. She would have swayed through the dizzy haze claiming her bogged mind, but he’d caught her in his arms.

Strong as they may be, his arms held her tight for but a moment as his lips were a stark contrast to the tenderness of that alluring kiss. When he let go, she teetered a bit on wobbly legs and rested her hands against his chest. “Oh, my goodness. That was...well I’m certain it was something if I could only form a coherent thought in my head, Travis.”

He smiled, kissed her again, this time on the forehead, and then pulled her back into the house to close the door. The draft sweeping through the open door stopped shaking the ornaments long enough for Sage to come around.

Fanning herself she hurried back to the kitchen unsure of what to say at this point. Travis had slid to the couch as if nothing out of the ordinary had just happened.

When she finally thought of something to say, she said the only thing she could think of. “My helpers will come soon. I expect their arrival in the next two days. I hope all goes well as they can be a handful sometimes.”

“I love company, the more the merrier, and if they are anything like you it will be a happy day for me.” He winked at her, snuck another cookie, and started fussing with the tree.

Sage was slowly coming down off her cloud and reality was hitting hard. “Do you think you can take the mistletoe down?”

“Why would I do a thing like that, Sage? We just shared the most beautiful kiss I’ve ever had in my life. No way.”

Sage’s lips still tingled with the memory of their touch, and it played in her mind leaving her a little perplexed. “I think you’re going to regret saying that but it’s fine, it’s up to you. I know these people, and you might wish that mistletoe was down.” It was a good excuse but an honest one, her family

could be very unpredictable.

“Nah, all good. Hey listen I have a lot of work to do but later I’m going to bring over some fried chicken. I made it last night when I couldn't sleep. It's not that good but I think it's edible. It's my first attempt really, you inspired me to do it and I want us to try it together. I have so many gifts to finish making and I'm running out of time. If I don't start working through the night, I'm never going to finish. I'll be back later.”

She watched as he left through the door where they'd just shared their kiss, as he left the mistletoe hanging. Sage didn't have the heart to take it down, considering it was the place where he'd stolen yet another piece of her heart.

Over the course of the day, Sage watched people come up and drop donations in the box. She didn't dare touch it, Travis had done all the work and he would be the one to empty that donation box.

Still, the pleasant waves and greetings she got when she went for the mail surprised her, as did all the work it was taking her to finish getting things ready for his party. There was still so much to do and her mother and aunts were arriving any day.

When her mother Belinda called, she was thrilled to hear from her. “Hey, Mom. How are you?”

“I'm good, dear, we are just leaving Salem now and I hope we will be there tonight, although tomorrow morning might be better. You know how your aunts are, they get sidetracked by everything. Debbie came too, just so you know.”

“Okay, Mom. I have so much to do yet and I need all the help I can get to make this a success.”

Her mother's voice was concerned. “Never mind that, Sage. I want to know how you're holding up after everything that happened. You know I told you so many times that man was not for you.”

“I know, Mom. I don't really want to talk about it.”

“Maybe not but we are going to talk when we get there. I am not taking no for an answer. That man hurt you and he didn't deserve my precious angel. But have no fear, one day a man will come along who is going to surprise you, whisk you off your feet, and marry you before you even think about how you feel.”

Sage rolled her eyes. “I know, I know. But maybe by the time he does, I won't be interested anymore. I'm not exactly young anymore, Mother.”

Her mother was on speakerphone, and Aunt Sherry spoke up. “Nonsense, age has nothing to do with love. I just found the love of my life six months ago, you know that, honey. Don’t sweat it, he was not the man for you and now it’s time to clean house and start fresh. I think when we come back to Salem you should come with us, it would be so....”

“No. No, thank you, everyone. I’m happy here until I head back to Boston. It’s really simple.”

Her Aunt Sherry sighed. “You’re right. You have your own life to live. And neither I nor your mother or anyone else should try to tell you how to live it.”

It was getting late and Sage had seen little of Travis, intrigued by his absence, and with a delightful wish to see him working in action, she tiptoed over to his property while casually chatting with her mom and aunts.

“What’s that sound? That sounds like someone carving something. Where are you, Sage? You’re not working with tools like that are you?”

Sage stood back watching, Travis unaware as he worked, his back to her. “No, no. It’s the neighbor, his name is Travis, and he has a business carving wood and ice sculptures. He’s brilliant really, and I desperately wanted to see what he was up to since he can’t seem to leave me alone. Now it’s my turn to bug him.”

There was a long silence, Sage didn’t really recognize it, then she did. “Really! You have a neighbor named Travis. Ladies, did you hear that, Sage has a handsome wood and ice-sculpting neighbor.”

Sage gritted her teeth, regretting her slip-up since that would only bring her family quicker and sooner.

“How old is Travis?”

“About my age, maybe older, I’m not sure.”

“Interesting. And you say he’s always bugging you?”

Intrigued by his creation, she forgot herself again. “Yes, all the time. He shows up when I’m still asleep, makes my coffee, and does all kinds of crazy things. It’s insane, and neither of us is looking for anything but I can’t get him out of my head. It’s madness.”

Another long silence and then the sound of laughter around her mother. “Well darling, we will see you soon. I am so excited we are coming to help. I can’t wait to meet your new friend and see all his creations. We are going to have such a wonderful time, and I promise this party you are working on will be a tremendous success.”

“Thank you, M...” Her mother hung up before she said goodbye.
“Typical.”

“What’s typical?” At some point, Travis had become aware she was behind him and he was smiling at her now.

Chapter 6

Travis



After giving Sage the grand tour and showing her all the pieces he made for his family and friends minus a few, they walked to the donation box at the end of her driveway. “I can’t wait to see how much we have so far.”

“Me too, but I refused to open it and look since you put all this up.”

When they reached the driveway’s end, Pete was just pulling up, a smile on his face. “Well, if it isn’t the woman of the hour. It’s a pleasure to meet you, Ms. Harvey, or would that be Mrs. Harvey?”

“Ms. Harvey.” Sage held out her hand, a warm smile on her lips and then they shook hands.

Travis didn’t miss that charmed look in Pete’s eyes. “Yeah, she’s just getting out of a nasty breakup, so she’s here trying to have some peace and relax a bit. You know how it is when your heart is broken, you’ve broken a few yourself, Remember that time you che....”

He saw the murder in Pete’s eyes and knew he’d hit the mark, smiling as he wrapped his arm around Sage’s shoulder knowing she’d be unaware. Meanwhile, Pete knew exactly what Travis was doing, and Travis wanted to do a little dance.

Pete redirected his attention to Sage. “Well, Ms. Harvey, if you ever tire of this woodland creature you can find me at the newspaper. I’d be delighted

to spend a few hours helping you forget all about a broken heart.”

He tipped his head and backed up slowly. “Gorgeous lights, by the way. I bet you're going to win this year.” Off Pete went, down the road, not looking back once.

“He seemed nice.” Her eyes were still watching the back of Pete’s truck as he took off. A slight smile on her lips.

“Yeah, about as nice as a chocolate sundae on a hot summer day.” Travis counted the money, smiling. “We've gotten close to two hundred dollars so far. That’s amazing.”

He had his arm over her shoulder, and since he was feeling possessive and still territorial from his little clash with Pete, he kept his arm there. “You know those cookies you made, the burnt ones? They're delicious.”

She made a face. “I don’t like them.” They walked together back to his house, side by side. The desire to wrap his arm around her shoulder again and hold her close was so intense that he had to put his hands in his pockets and keep them there during the walk.

“So I really like the things you're making. I am so impressed by how easy you make it seem. I know you showed me before, but seeing you work uninterrupted, was something to watch.”

“Thanks.” Travis let the sense of pride when someone complimented him, sink into his bones. “That’s exactly the reason I do it, because of the appreciation. I was thinking of starting something new next spring. I want to offer classes so other people can learn my craft and carry on the tradition. I don’t have any kids, and one day I won’t be here so it would be nice to know that other people are as passionate about creating these things as I am.”

“That sounds exciting, and I bet you’d be really good at it.”

“I hope so, in fact, you're going to be the first person to learn in the next few days. I think it might be good for you. We can create something for you to give to someone special and get a feel for creating something with wood unless you’d like to try ice?”

She waved her hands in the air suddenly as if she couldn’t handle what he’d just said. Amused, he watched as she planned her reply. “I don’t know about that, Travis.” She cleared her throat and shuffled along beside him. Her legs were moving faster than before... She was stressed. “I would love to learn, but who am I kidding? I’m nervous as can be that I’ll break something.”

“Don’t worry. I can assure nothing of mine will get broken while you are

creating. If anyone is going to break my stuff, it'll be me." Travis took her hand and held it, swinging slowly between their bodies. "So why are you always so emotional? You seem so intelligent and thoughtful and yet your emotions are so easily scattered and out of control."

"I don't know. It just happens. I guess it's kind of like when you talk too much, it just happens and comes out with nowhere to go."

Sage's response was warranted. She'd won round one, smiled, and kept walking.

"Touche, that's two points for the lady." They were back at his place in no time, and Sage was kind enough to help him clean up the mess in his studio. With that out of the way, Travis could take a few moments to enjoy the time they were spending together without worry.

Chapter 7

Sage



S pending time with Travis was becoming a habit Sage looked forward to each morning. What had begun as annoyance was now a breath of fresh air to chase away the blues and all her emotional drama.

Each day she woke with a feeling of happiness and excitement and she no longer thought about her failed relationship and marriage. Her family was on their way and it was only a matter of time before everything was turned upside down before it turned right side up.

The following day, Sage woke with a feeling of bliss she hadn't felt in far too long. Of course, Travis was waiting for her, which gave her the odd sensation of a married couple, even if just for two seconds.

Mindlessly, she brushed that off and continued with her day as they ate and went about planning for his party. He surprised her by going for a hike. It still irked her that her trees were missing but mostly the original tree her family had planted.

"I want to create a new tree over top of the stump of my family's trees. Will you help me?"

Sage's family had two outbuildings far from the cabin, a barnlike structure, and a storage shed they had used way back when during a short stint her grandparents sold trees for the holidays.

As she stood in front of it realizing she'd been in Maine for a while now and hadn't checked it out, curiosity got the better of her. Sage flung the door wide, Travis standing right beside her.

"Of course, we can definitely do that. It sounds like a really good idea as compared to whining and bellyaching over the missing trees."

Sage threw him a look, his insensitive nature was sometimes a bit unsettling. "You know the one thing your mother never taught you is to have a filter on your words. You say whatever is in that beautiful mind and don't care who you say it to."

A strange look crossed his face, then he smiled. "You think I have a beautiful mind, I take that as a compliment."

"Yes, and I am wise enough to not always blurt out my thoughts and risk offending someone. Although maybe it's just me, I don't notice you doing that around other people."

That thought left her something to contemplate for the next few hours as Travis helped her prepare to turn the tree graveyard into a mini copse forest. The storage shed and barn were filled with everything she needed and for a while, Sage forgot how good it felt to work with the trees.

Every time she touched them, the bristle green needles that feathered in her hand reminded her of her youth. "I have to do this too because my mother is going to flip out when she discovers this tree is gone. My aunts are a whole other story to begin with, I can't even go into that now."

Sage realized she'd said too much, she hadn't intended to tell Travis yet, who was coming to help. Since the cards were cast, what was done, was done. She kept working by his side and waited for his response.

Nothing was said at first, which surprised and worried her. Their friendship meant a lot to her already, as it was the only one she had currently in Maine, at least that she knew of in Freeport. They were comfortable, and friendly, if not a little bristled and annoyed at times.

"I think your family might surprise you. It's a tree, I know it meant a lot, and I feel terrible it happened, but sometimes new growth brings the strangest things. Your mother and aunts might be pleasantly surprised to see what we're doing here and consider it a good idea under the circumstances. I know they might be a little upset, like you. The original tree is gone, but that leaves way for a new beginning too."

Travis' words gave Sage a lot to think about as they worked. After they were done with the trees, they did some work at his barn and landed back at

her place for lunch. “So tell me, what is your favorite thing about what you do?”

Sage made her and Travis some chicken soup out of a can and served it with some grilled cheese sandwiches she made on the panini grill. As she sat down next to him, the comfort of his presence chased away lingering feelings of angst that sometimes came out of nowhere in her day.

“I’d have to say the creative process. My clients give me an idea of what they want. Perhaps they want a bear totem pole for their front yard. They tell me this but it leaves the interpretation up to me. That is the creative process, the next few hours, days, or weeks I take to cultivate an idea that aligns with their project. Maybe I drive past their house, maybe they give me information on a particular theme, such as yogi bear, or whatever and I go from there. I love that part, the ideas flowing through my head. Sometimes I don’t have an epiphany until after I touch the wood I choose. It’s different for every client.”

“It sounds much like when I take on a project, event planning has its creative moments too. The client will tell me what they are looking for, and all the details they know, and then it’s up to me to plan it out and execute according to those ideas.”

Sage wrinkled her nose at her soup. “I don’t like canned food.”

“You should have made homemade, it doesn’t take long, a cooked chicken, some boxed broth, and some veggies.”

“I thought you didn’t know how to cook, Travis?” Sage nudged him sideways as they sat shoulder to shoulder.

“I don’t, but it’s not too bad. Besides, I’m more worried about all those cookies you made going stale.”

The urge to tap his hand as he reached for yet a third cookie was intense. “You’re a diabetic, they aren’t good for you all the time.” Sage gently slid the tray that sat in front of them to her side and out of his reach. “There, that should be far enough for you to keep your hands where they belong.

His snicker surprised her, and she waited for him to reach across and try to grab one. Nothing happened.

“That’s not what I was talking about, I think we should take them to the church up the street tomorrow. I think they are having some event, a day for the kids with Santa, breakfast, or something. We can drop a bunch off and get rid of them since you were so eager to start your own catering business in the middle of the holidays.”

“We can’t, Travis, some of them are burnt.”

“I’ll eat the burnt ones and you can make more for yourself. We can take the good ones over to the church.”

Feeling relaxed, she forgot herself and rested her head against his shoulder. “You’re right and you’re just the man to help me with that tomorrow.”

Chapter 8

Travis



It was morning, and spending time with Sage at her cabin was quickly becoming a habit that came as easily as brushing his teeth in the morning.

Travis hurried over to her place, eager to listen to her snoring throughout the quiet cabin while contemplating how to straighten the tree without her noticing before the angel toppled over and broke.

He noticed something about himself as he wrapped the cookies onto the small trays he found in the cabinets. *“Travis my man, Sage is having a positive effect on you just like Mom used to do. All that constant chatter and need to do that circles around in your brain every day is gone. Now you don’t even think about it anymore.”*

He didn’t know how or why it happened by spending time with her, helping her, and talking to her helped soothe the beast inside him. His curiosity was more content, his thoughts less scattered, and his ideas more focused.

Travis could have attributed it to anything, the season, getting over his grief about losing his mother, or work. He knew the only thing that had changed recently was Sage coming into his life.

“Good morning.” Like a ray of sunshine, she rounded the stairs and skipped down in her pink fuzzy slippers.

“Good morning, princess, I like your pajamas.” She wore a purple pair of pajamas that boasted cupcakes and unicorns on them. “Very mystical, just perfect for a princess.”

“Thank you. So I expect my family to arrive at any moment. Today or tomorrow, they will be here soon. They are going to be helping with your event. My aunts and mother are so good at this type of stuff, I think that’s where I got my skills from.”

“Well then, I look forward to their help. I can only imagine how lovely they are, and await their arrival.”

Sage seemed more worried about her helping relatives than Travis thought necessary. Family was always good to have around, and since they were all probably close to his mother’s age, he knew they’d perfectly plan his event to a tee.

Things were looking brighter every day. “Tell me, is your mother as lovely as you are? Or did you get your looks from your father?”

“My mother, but I have a bit of my father in me too. She is quite unusual though, not in looks or personality. I just want to warn you when you first meet them, don’t be taken aback by how they act. When the three of them, and Debbie, my mother’s friend get together it’s quite the show.”

Travis couldn’t imagine what Sage meant by this and didn’t attempt. “Whatever the theater production is, I’m sure it will be lovely and fitting for the season.”

They spent the day at the church, dropping off the cookies and enjoying the merriment. Everyone seemed eager to know Sage. The event planner from Boston had an insane amount of decorations out in the front of her house for the holidays.

Travis hung back and watched as she mingled with locals, enjoying every moment as she blossomed into the woman he knew she was in Boston. Watching her work her magic reminded him of the delicate nature of women.

Like his mother, Sage had a strength about her, a quiet, thoughtful strength that could be seen but not fully experienced until you got to know her. Table to table, as she laughed with the kids, and watched them make art, or when she stopped to chat with Santa and his elf, she smiled.

His heart skipped a beat more than once as he watched from the sidelines amusing himself with the dads and men who didn’t know what to do with all the holiday cheer. Usually a social magnet because of his business, clientele, and personality Travis was content this day to just be, and witness it all.

“This is so amazing, I’ve met so many lovely people here today. I can’t believe they do this every year for the kids. That woman over there, Candace, said she remembered my grandfather would invite the kids to come to the property and play games. I did not know he did that in the last few years of his life. It is really amazing. We have this in Boston but it’s different, not as elaborate nor as cozy and friendly.”

Travis smiled and listened intently to every word, seeing that sparkle in her eyes meant so much to him. She mattered, and that thought frightened him right down to his boots. “I get it, the city, crime, and so many people.”

“Exactly. But here, it’s different.” Sage laughed as she watched a couple of kids run around the tree, cookies in their hands laughing and playing. “Candace also said my grandmother was active on the committee that put this together every year until her death. She was into all the events, handling the Easter holiday and summer fun on the Fourth of July. I don’t even know how she and my grandfather did it at their age.”

“They had each other, it means a lot when you have someone by your side that you care about. Someone who will take the burden off of you so you can do what makes you happy. He probably stayed home and cooked dinner on the days she was volunteering and planning and vice versa. Still, when they needed to be together and support each other they did that too.”

“I know you’re right, I suppose I’m a little cynical. It’s one thing to think about my grandparents and their happy marriage supporting each other but another to face my reality of a failed relationship and nothingness. Maybe friendships are just better, friends don’t hurt you like that, you don’t, anyway.”

The tightness in his chest when Travis looked at Sage was hard to ignore. Suddenly he felt every muscle tense and flex. His heart was thumping in his chest so hard he had to let the air out of his lungs with a sudden whoosh.

“Yeah well, I think you just had the wrong man.”

She tore her eyes away but not before he saw the question there. “Go ahead, you can ask me.”

“What?” She looked at him briefly again. “Oh, I was just wondering how you’re so sure he was the wrong man. It’s clear I was the wrong woman.”

“No, that’s not the case. Too often we spend so much energy looking for flaws in ourselves when sometimes we just have to accept that the people around us aren’t meant to be in our little circle.”

Sage said nothing more and took off toward the tree, determined to

straighten a wayward star that was falling off, and then became engrossed in the event again. Travis watched intently from the sidelines, chatting here and there.

A few times he was taken aback by how his words hit home with them. He appeared to be like the husband standing by on the sidelines supporting a wife doing her thing, and keeping a watchful eye.

Had he been a man that was easily disturbed by such thoughts he would have put his running shoes on and hid himself in his workshop until spring. Rather than get all worked up about things he did not understand his curiosity eventually took hold again and Travis ended up outside.

“The sky is changing, we are supposed to get a little storm tonight. I don’t know, something is telling my gut, that it will not be as little as those silly weather folks always predict. I’m betting we’re going to get a doozy of a storm this time.” Martin Moyer who lived a good mile from him was standing close by, trying hard to put out his cigarette.

“Only time will tell, I guess. I have a generator, I bet you do too. Is the wife still nagging you to quit that nasty habit?”

“She is and is very adamant about it. I tried to tell her to give me until New Year and I’d make it happen. The holidays are so stressful but she is having none of that. I see you and that woman Sage Harvey are pretty close. It’s nice to see you with someone for a change.”

Travis blinked, stuffed that comment where it belonged, and stared at the changing skyline. “Yes, well she is a lovely woman, very sweet and intelligent. She’s helping me with my holiday party this year because Mom isn’t here.”

“Your mother would be happy. She always wanted you to find someone to marry, settle down, and be normal like the rest of us.” Martin chuckled.

“Well normal is relative, it’s all in the perspective, but thanks a lot. She would be happy that I had a friend who is so vivacious and creative, like myself. Sage inspires me, so it’s all good.” Travis had to get away before his emotions got the better of him. His dislike for people who put themselves into imaginary boxes and thought everyone else deserved to be that way too was hard to ignore. “I’m heading inside, I think it’s almost over. You might want to snuff that out before Erin catches you with it.”

It was too hard to resist, the amusement of seeing Martin look around to see if his wife was coming, then stomp the cigarette to the ground before tossing it in the trash. “You’re right, one of these days I’m going to quit, I just

can't deal with the holiday stress, five kids will do that to you, my friend. Just keep that in mind when you are saying those wedding vows soon."

Travis had all he could do to *not* crack up laughing. Neither he nor Sage was in any position to even be thinking of such a thing. Then again, when two people were seen together for any length of time beyond five minutes in Freeport, people talked, and before one knew it wedding bells were ringing.

"I'm ready to go if you are." Travis stood behind Sage as she was chatting with two women from the church.

Their eyes met, and she smiled. "Of course, sorry, I got a little carried away. They want me to bake the cupcakes for the bake sale right before Christmas. They are having a dance here on New Year's Eve. An adult couple-only dance, it sounds like fun."

Clueless about what she was hinting at, Travis smiled at the other ladies. "Have a good day."

"You too." Bertha and Missy were glowing, the sisters were long-time residents of Freeport, their father the minister.

"That was so much fun. I can't believe how many people I met, and all of them were very nice."

"I can't believe you don't know half of them. You spent a good amount of time here growing up, you said and you don't know any of them." Travis helped her into his pickup truck, closing her door after she was situated.

"I do, I know a few of them but time changes things and you forget, not to mention we were all so young."

"So I'm thinking we should go to this dance together, you and I. We're already making a stir around town about being a couple, and wedding bells are ringing in their ears. We might as well give them something to really talk about." Travis drove the short distance to their cabins, determined to do whatever made Sage happy.

It was silent, a little too quiet, and her lack of response worried Travis. Nervously, he glanced sideways and saw the serious look on her face when he turned into this driveway and pulled to a stop.

"I suppose you're right, but I don't know. I think that would fuel the fire a bit more. We aren't a couple. I have no intention of doing so with each other. We're just friends. Right?"

The hint of fear in her voice didn't surprise him. Travis wanted to soothe her worry and ran his hand gently down her lovely dark hair and smiled. "Right, princess, just friends, nothing to worry about. We can skip it if you

want to do that. You just seemed excited, and I thought it would be fun.”

The tightness in his chest was unbearable. Never in his life had he felt so much for any woman and there had been enough for him to choose from. “You’re so beautiful, you’re like that perfect angel on a Christmas tree everyone wants to touch but no one ever really holds. Maybe one day…”

He let that hang in the air between them, for them both to contemplate. Travis knew he was a goner whether the rational side of his brain would acknowledge it or not.

“I have to, we should, I mean, I should get back to the house.” Intense fear formed in her eyes. Her lips were parted, and he saw the slightest hint of her bottom lip quiver. “I have to go.” She climbed out of the truck before he could get out and help her.

“Sage, wait, let me drive you back. You don’t have to go back this way. I just thought maybe we could get something done.”

His words trailed off as she disappeared, gone from his sight. Travis kept to himself most of that afternoon and evening, waiting her out. He didn’t want to crowd her, her thoughts were already doing enough of that and so were his if he was honest.

Still, he kept a close watch on the sky—things were changing for the worse. As the first snowflakes fell from the sky, he walked the distance between their cabins. His goal was to make sure she was okay and let it be.

Travis had also been shaken up by the moment in his truck, and it left a lasting impression on his heart and soul he couldn’t shake. However, safety and bad storms took precedence over such feelings in his eyes and there he stood on her porch.

He wanted to knock, knew he should but that out-of-character behavior would throw them both off balance. It wasn’t who he was as a man, and not how he had behaved toward her since Sage had come to Freeport. Tonight did not differ from any other night.

Letting go of these thoughts, he went to open the door and found it locked. A touch of sorrow smacked him hard. “Gosh, I must have really frightened her.” Begrudgingly, he knocked, and the door clicked open.

“Hey.” She smiled, moved aside, and let him in. “Sorry, I thought it best to start locking the door. It’s not you, it’s me. Sorry about the way I left earlier.”

Sage looked troubled, a crochet blanket wrapped tightly around her slender shoulders, her furry Christmas slippers peeking out from under her

plaid pajamas.

“It’s okay, I just wanted to check on you. It says the storm is going to be nothing, a bit of snow, some wind, and freezing temps but one never knows.”

He sat down next to her on the couch, unsure what to say or do at this point. He was still shaken up by her locking the door, which sent a simple message about their relationship. The friendship had boundaries, and she expected him to adhere to them now for whatever reason.

“Thank you. I appreciate that.”

“I wanted to invite you to my place if it gets too bad. I have a generator, two fireplaces, and plenty of everything. It won’t be any trouble.”

“Thank you, I’ll keep that in mind.”

Confused by her lack of bubbly conversation that had become the norm between them, he headed for the door feeling out of his element for the first time in a while. “Alright well, I can see you’re good, and I made the offer. I’m just over that way if you need me. I’ll leave you be, I wish you a good night princess.”

“Good night, Travis, and thanks.” She followed him to the door, and he heard the faint click of the lock when she closed it. A piece of his heart broke with that sound but he walked away, stomping that and his feelings into the ground.

Chapter 9

Sage



The weather was getting bad but Sage couldn't bring herself to go to Travis. The situation between them was getting deeper than she intended and the last thing she wanted to do was hurt Travis or be hurt herself.

The snow was getting deep but not so deep that one couldn't walk, but soon she didn't know if that would be the case. The wind had picked up to a roaring fierce coldness, and the windows were frosting over despite her meager fire.

Unsure of what to do, go to bed or sleep on the couch, Sage laid back and closed her eyes for a second then opened them again. "Goodness me. I hope..."

The lights went out, and all power shut off in the cabin suddenly. Sage stared at the fire, thankful for its light and the moon illuminating the room through the windows. Sage waited, hoping it would turn back on, as happened in Boston sometimes.

After a few minutes, she gave up hope, tossed her confusion into the background, and made the trek through Mother Nature's angry storm to Travis' door. She knocked, heard the faint sound of stumbling footsteps, and the door flew open.

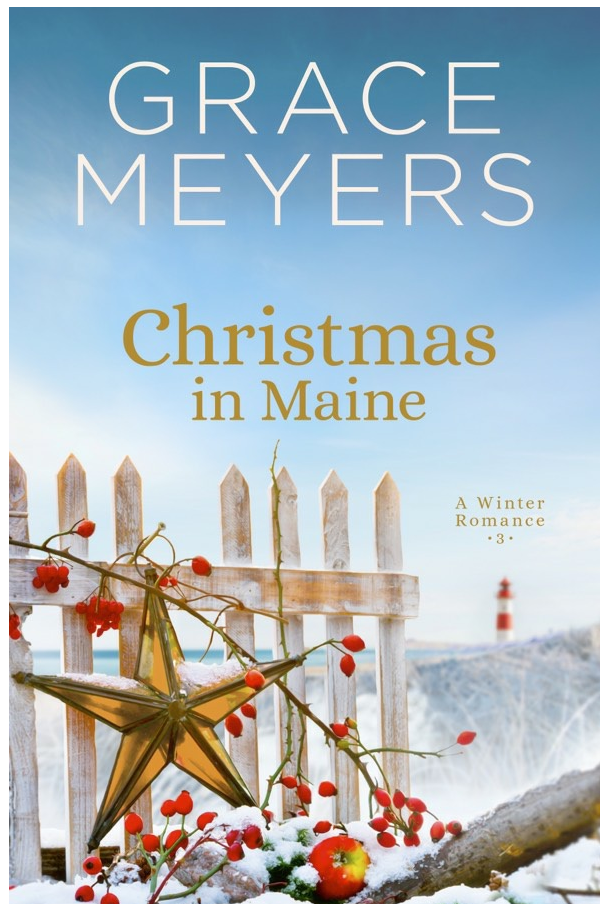
Sage didn't know what to say, she felt out of place, as if she was

expecting Travis to take her in. Her insides had turned to knots on the walk over, the snow was building up; it was icy and her nose was freezing.

Travis looked angry as could be, his eyes fiercely staring at her, then he smiled, suddenly. “I knew you’d come. Mother nature knew too, judging by this wicked storm. Those weather reporters are always wrong. Now, if I could only figure out where my ten thousand dollar generator went...”

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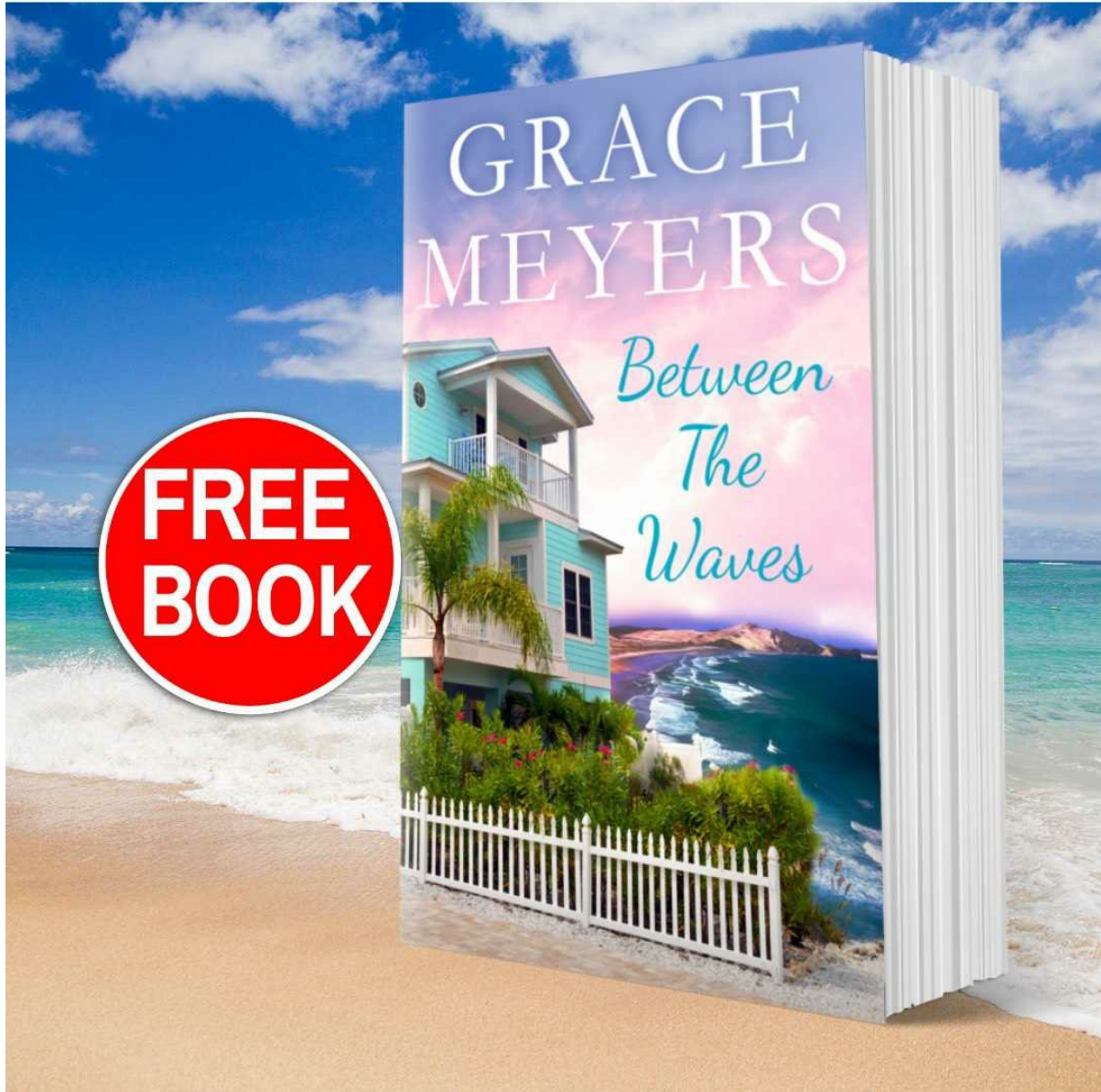
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