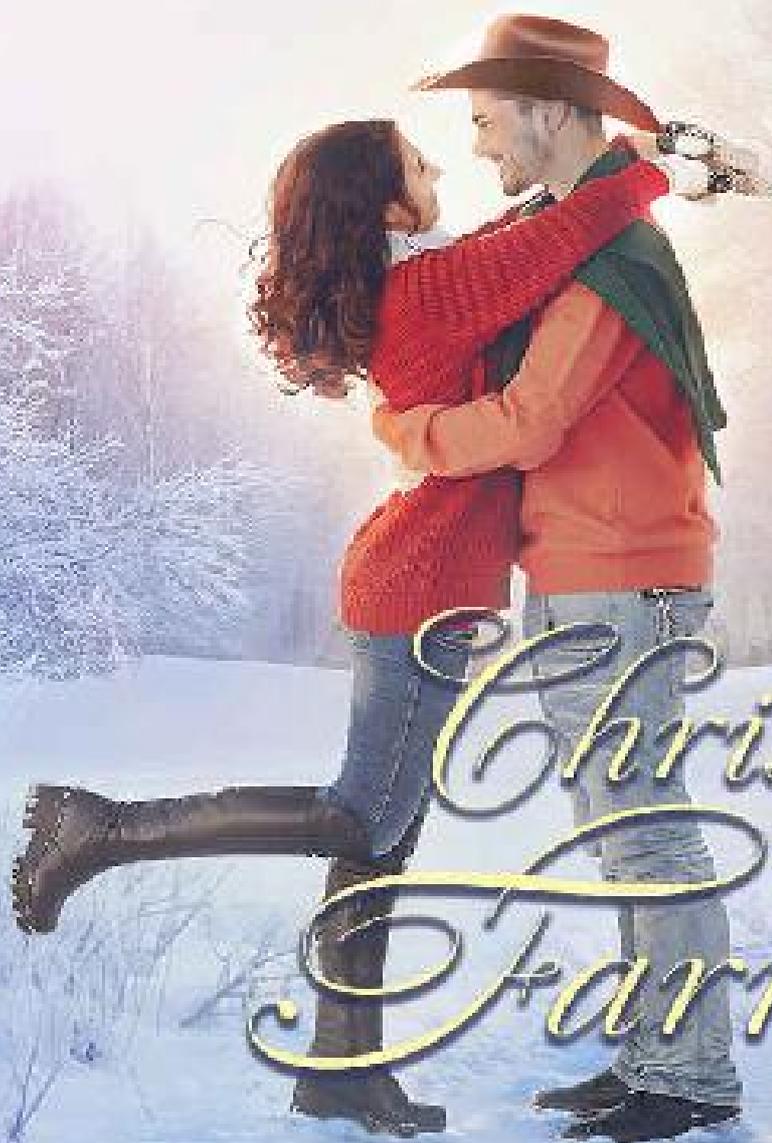


# CATELYN MEADOWS

A  
HAVENWOOD FARM  
NOVEL



*Christmas at  
the  
Farmhouse*



# *Christmas at the Farmhouse*

A HAVENWOOD COWBOYS ROMANCE, BOOK  
THREE

CATELYN MEADOWS

And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.

For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.

— LUKE 2:10-11

## Chapter One

I stared at the notebook paper in front of me, and it stared back. Blankly.

So much for brainstorming. No matter how hard I tried to conjure them, no ideas were forthcoming.

It was probably the stress of the situation. The more you forced something, the more stubborn that thing seemed to get.

“I’m trying too hard,” I muttered.

Sitting on the table beside my notebook with her paws curled beneath her, Sunny gave an agreeable meow. With the onset of winter, the orange tabby’s fur had thickened, making her a little puffier than usual.

*Happens to the best of us this time of year*, I supposed, smiling as I scratched beneath her ears.

“How can I not try hard, though?” I went on, talking to the cat as though she were a viable contributor to my dilemma. “Everything I’ve done so far hasn’t worked—but I just know it will.”

My resolve had gotten me through many tough scrapes before. That resolve had helped me take action to secure my place on the cheer squad in high school; it’d helped me get my associate degree; it’d even helped me push through opening my business, despite the surprise of Dad’s passing two years ago.

I wasn’t a quitter. I didn’t give up on things.

I wasn’t giving up on The Flora and Fauna.

I'd put too much into the store to let all of my efforts fail now. It'd taken money to invest in the building, to purchase inventory, not to mention the shelving and the racks for displaying that inventory.

My savings had been spent on branding, on advertising—I'd even hired a second employee to help man the store so I didn't have to be there all the freaking time.

I was not giving up.

Store hours were done for the day. I'd closed at four—mostly because customers rarely came in that late in the afternoon—and had come home to work on some marketing ideas, but I'd made little headway. If the grumble in my stomach and the clock ticking beside the door were any indication, it would soon be time to heat up some dinner.

Frustrated by my lack of progress, I folded my arms on the notebook and rested my forehead against them. Sunny's throat rumbled, and she rubbed her head against mine.

My dad always said everything would be better by Christmas. It didn't matter what the problem was or even what time of year it was when problems occurred.

The quarterback broke my heart? It'll be better by Christmas. Sprained my ankle during cheer practice? It'll be better by Christmas.

I'd held onto that adage with everything I'd faced thus far in my twenty-three years of life. And this conundrum with my store was no different—though, really, Christmas was in four weeks. I'd hoped the holiday season would drive up sales, but it hadn't. I couldn't see how I could save The Flora and Fauna in that timeframe.

When I lifted my head to pet Sunny, movement stole my attention. Through the open blinds, I caught sight of my neighbors moseying to their unit across the courtyard from mine.

Bex Cutler—now Bex Holden—wasn't just my neighbor; she was my employee. She and her cute kids had moved into the Wayfair Apartments last spring.

The handsome cowboy she'd eloped with last June, after she'd moved in, held one end of a tall pine while she and her young son handled the tip, and they scuffled step by step closer to their apartment.

The sight of them hauling a Christmas tree, with her two little girls toddling alongside them, warmed my heart. Bex and her kids had had that effect on me since I met her. She was kind and had this calming persona that made me instantly like her.

She felt like she was an older sister, somehow, like Leigh. Like someone I could look up to and ask for advice. When I found out she was my new neighbor and that she needed work? I couldn't help myself.

At the time, I knew I couldn't afford to hire her, but my hope had overridden sense, and I'd offered her a position anyway. We'd managed to make things work.

I wouldn't say the ends were being met. In fact, despite the many different ways Bex had tried to help me, finances were tighter than ever.

I wasn't about to tell her that, though.

I hurried to open my door. Instantly, brisk winter air blasted my cheeks, along with the sounds of laughter from Bex and her kids.

"Looks like you got a good one," I called.

The family paused. It took only moments for recognition to dawn in her eyes before Bex waved to me. Her blonde hair tufted out beneath her beanie. "We sure did!"

"Now we get to decorate it!" her newly four-year-old daughter announced, lifting her pink-mittened hand. The one-year-old ambling behind her sister jabbered something as well, making me smile and squinching my heart.

"Don't have too much fun," I said, and they all waved once more before I closed out the cold.

Drafts of frigid air still lingered and made the beating of my heart all the more noticeable, and my quiet apartment felt

suddenly lonelier than it had moments ago.

What would it be like to have a family like that? A husband who adored you, children who were rambunctious and sweet?

I hugged my chest, rubbing my arms to ward off remnants of Idaho's chilly November air. It had snowed a few days ago, a dusting rather than a deluge.

I hoped for more. I hoped for a white Christmas. It was hard to believe it would soon be December.

"I need to get a tree," I muttered, gazing around my immaculate but undecorated apartment. Really, trees and families and anything else were the least of my worries right now.

I had a store to save. And I was determined to do it by Christmas.

Moving often triggered my ideas. I slipped into my shoes and coat and braved the wintry walk to the mailboxes positioned at the end of the parking lot.

Mail retrieved, I lingered only long enough to shoot a prayer heavenward. The words were the same adage I'd said for months now.

*Dear God, please help me fix my store.*

My phone chimed. Tucking the mail beneath my arm, I swiped to answer.

"Hey, Mom. What's up?"

I kicked a few dregs of snow from my shoes and reentered my apartment. The pine-scented candle I had burning warmed me just as much as the heated room did. There was just something about walking into a place that smelled good—especially at Christmastime.

"Hey, Allie. I was calling to see if you wanted me to come pick you up for Belle's meeting."

I slid my shoes off on the mat by the door. "What meeting?"

“Don’t tell me you didn’t get an invitation. She mentioned she wanted family to come help her discuss a few things. I can’t blame her. Poor girl has no mother to turn to for something as big as a wedding.”

I skimmed through the mail I’d retrieved. Nothing indicated that it was from my cousin. Not that she would mail anything if she were only inviting people over to talk. A text would do the trick for that.

“Haven’t heard from her. I can’t say I’m surprised.”

“What does that mean?” Mom said. “You’re family.”

“Could have fooled me.”

I didn’t mean to sound so cynical, so I quickly attempted to redirect my thoughts. Belle and I had always had a rough relationship. We’d never gotten along well, not even as children.

Actually, that wasn’t true. Belle and I had plenty of good memories. Like the time we...

Or when Grandpa...

Or...

Huh. I was sure there was something we’d done when we were kids, but I couldn’t think of a thing we’d done that had connected us in any way.

Belle grew up with Grandma and Grandpa Toby after her mom had died. I’d come to visit, but admittedly, I’d left as quickly as I could every time.

It wasn’t that I didn’t like her. I got the sense that she didn’t like *me*. If she wasn’t inviting me to her wedding chat, I wasn’t surprised—and it didn’t hurt. Not really.

It was the whole reason I hadn’t approached her about the vintage ornaments she’d inherited from Grandma and Grandpa. I knew she had them. I knew they were worth a *lot* and could give me the leg up I needed.

“What is it between you two, anyway?” Mom asked as I sorted the mail and made my way to my bedroom.

My bed was made. Clothes folded. All habits that had been ingrained in me since I could talk. I retrieved a sweater from its basket in my closet. Slipping my arms into the sleeves and pulling it over my head, I trotted back to the kitchen.

“She’s all high and mighty because she got the house, Mom. You saw the way she glowered at Leigh and me when we went up to help clear it out. And that whole thing with Uncle Thomas—”

“Belle was hurt that we cleaned everything out so soon. That may have been Grandma and Grandpa’s house, but it was also hers, and she had a hard time watching all of us essentially gut it.”

What else did she expect? That she’d get to keep everything? And why did it sound like Mom was defending *Belle*?

“We didn’t take it all,” I said. “Belle got to keep Grandpa’s truck. And the antique ornaments.”

The antique ornaments.

The mere mention of them boomeranged back to me in a swift motion. Maybe Mom would know a way to convince Belle to give them to me.

“So, you know Grandma’s ornaments? Aren’t they, like, vintage? They’re worth a lot?”

As a teenager, I’d stayed at the honeymoon cottage while my parents had gone on a vacation over Christmas one year. Belle and I had helped our grandparents put up their decorations. We’d traipsed back and forth from the basement to retrieve boxes and snow globes, and I’d marveled over the tiny birds with real feathers Grandpa used to hang on their tree.

That wasn’t all he’d hung on their tree, though. Bulbs made of blown glass with glittering, faceted indentations; ornate caps made of thin metal, bumpy fruit; teardrop and fluted shapes with faded patina; or Santa or nutcracker figurines and faces.

Grandma had admonished us to be careful because the ornaments were old.

In fact, she hadn't let us hang a portion of them up at all but had insisted we keep them in their packaging. At the time, I couldn't see what the big deal was. Some of them looked weird. Others were downright creepy, like the elf one with a smudged face.

Grandpa had strolled in. "They're not just old. They're worth about a few grand."

"You're kidding," Belle said. "These?" She'd lifted a red bulb.

"Darn right. Your grandma's momma got those when she got married, and they've been in her family for years. Just one ornament is near-on four hundred dollars. Something as old as that is sure to fetch a high price these days."

Possibility had glimmered in my eyes. They were worth that much—and we were there hanging them up?

"What are we doing here, then?" I'd asked. "Why don't you sell them?"

Grandma and Grandpa had laughed. "Some things are worth more than money, Allie."

I couldn't grasp that at all. In hindsight, I could see the ornaments held sentimental value for the two of them...

But now?

I'd had the idea before but disregarded it because I didn't know how to approach Belle. But inspiration struck harder than a head-on collision and rang louder than church bells.

Sure, those ornaments had been sentimental. Once.

But they weren't just a cash cow; they were an entire herd! Assuming I could sell them for what they were worth. Why shouldn't I at least try for them?

I'd attempted to take off with them last summer. In my defense, I hadn't known Grandpa had insisted the ornaments stay with the house. The frustration when that fact had been

brought to my knowledge was stark. I'd nearly dropped the box—regret swam through me at the thought.

Yet another reason I hadn't approached Belle about them again.

"Does Belle still have Grandma's Christmas ornaments?" I asked Mom, cutting her off mid-sentence.

I hadn't been paying much attention to what she'd been saying. Sorry, Mom.

"...and half of the family won't be able to—what was that, hon?"

"Those antique ornaments. Are they still at Belle's?"

"As far as I know. Why?"

Grandpa had said it: some of them were worth upward of four hundred dollars apiece. Surely, there had to be collectors out there who would pay high prices to have something so rare and intrinsically valuable. If I could get my hands on even a box of them, that would be all I needed for a long time.

I'd tried other things—including asking the local theater to run an ad about my store during the other promotional videos they played while people waited for the movie to begin. I was still waiting to hear back from them on that, actually.

The fact that the ornaments idea returned again meant something, didn't it?

"Do you think she'd give them to me?"

Mom exhaled in frustration. "Have you been hearing a word I've said?"

I grimaced. No, I hadn't.

"Sorry," I said. "I got a little distracted when you mentioned those ornaments. I've been trying to find a way to save The Flora."

"I know. Have you made any progress?"

Before I could explain, she got it. "Oh, no. You're not saying what I think you are."

“Why not? Where could I sell them—eBay?” I’d have to look it up.

There had to be people out there who were interested in vintage ornaments. Collectors and the like. It would be nice to see exactly which ornaments Belle had, though. Just to give me the best idea of what I was looking for. I wondered if I could reach out to buyers directly...

“You’d have to research it—but honey, are you sure that’s a good idea? Those ornaments are priceless.”

“Actually, Grandpa told me otherwise.”

What? It was the truth.

Mom paused a little too long. I could tell she wasn’t happy about this idea.

Sunny appeared in the doorway, leaped onto the stool, and began licking her paw. I scratched her behind the ears.

“Allie. I’m not talking about this with you right now. I called to see if you wanted a ride. Are you coming to the meeting or not? You have an excellent sense of taste. I’m sure Belle would appreciate your opinion if she’s going to be talking about decorating for her wedding.”

“I haven’t been invited.”

“I’m inviting you. The least we can do is offer to help.”

Grandpa’s house had so much potential. Its design was unrivaled and had so many beautiful spaces. Was the wedding going to take place at the house?

We could do a lot with that staircase. We could do a lot with that porch.

While ideas for saving my store hadn’t flowed, ideas for the house burst into my mind now. Florals wrapped along the banister, coordinating table settings, exquisite layouts, and fabrics...

Assuming Belle would even want my help.

Offering to help could give me the perfect opening. I could segue into the idea. Keep it subtle.

“I suppose I could tag along with you,” I said, sinking back onto the barstool and thrumming my fingers on the countertop. “Have you been to the house lately?”

“Which house?”

Were we still talking about the farmhouse? Had I missed something else?

“The honeymoon cottage? Belle’s house?”

“Not since her engagement party,” Mom said.

“Neither have I. I want to ask Belle for those antique ornaments, but she’ll never give them to me.”

“You’re still on about those? I thought you were going to leave them be.”

“Mom,” I said.

She knew the predicament I was in.

“I’ve been going through my bills. I’m so in the red, it’s not even funny. If I can just get a leg up on some of these expenses, it’ll give me enough capital to keep things going until they pick up. I’ll have the wiggle room I need to get things moving again this spring.”

“Allie.”

I could sense a scolding coming. In fact, the use of my name sounded like both a reprimand and a regret.

I should have known Mom would take Belle’s side. She always did. I couldn’t help it, but that fact triggered the sense of resentment I’d had since we were young.

Belle’s mom had died a long time ago, so granted, that was a reason to show her some motherly love and affection, but sometimes, it had felt like Mom showed more for her than she had for Leigh or me.

I knew it was petty, so I never brought it up. But it still stung.

“How could you not see how devastated Belle was when we took everything from the house?” Mom went on.

“She was just sad about Grandpa. So was I!”

“Not like Belle was.”

My mouth dropped. I propped my feet onto the stool’s bottommost rung. Sunny hopped onto the empty stool beside me and lifted her head to peer at me.

“Why not? What’s so different?”

“Never mind,” Mom said on an exhale. “Please just leave the ornaments be. Grandpa wanted to keep those with the house. We should respect his request.”

Unbelievable. “Grandpa would give me some ornaments if he knew I could sell them to help my business.”

If he were still around, I wouldn’t have any qualms whatsoever about driving up to the honeymoon cottage, fixing him some lunch, and broaching the subject. Grandpa helped everyone who stopped by his house, whether he knew them or not. He’d been generous to a fault.

“Yes, he would,” Mom said as though she amended it.

“If Belle reveres him so much, she’ll do the same.” Or so I hoped.

Inspiration dawned, clearing the way like fog that was fading by the rising of the sun: Grandpa Toby—he was how to approach this.

Belle worshiped the ground our Grandpa had walked on. Bringing her around to see that helping me out was what Grandpa would have done, too, was the ticket.

I’d go to this meeting. Find a chance to pull Belle aside.

“So?” Mom said. “The meeting?”

“Yes,” I said. I hadn’t been officially invited, but I was coming anyway, and I hoped Belle would be open to hearing what I had to say.

## *Chapter Two*

**M**y resolve weakened the farther up Belle's driveway we went. With every passing mile, I became less and less convinced my cousin would hear a thing I had to say.

While it had taken a good twenty minutes to get from Burley to Bridgewater, the road to this old house once you turned off the highway was longer than the entirety of Bridgewater's Main Street.

Sundown came so much sooner in the winter than it did the rest of the year. I was amazed it was only seven in the evening and already so dark outside. Though the snow had been cleared from the driveway, it was so cold that the gravel itself had frozen to the dirt beneath it.

Once out of the car, my boots traversed the jagged terrain. So many cars and pickups were here that Mom had to park near the driveway's entrance, and we walked the rest of the way. Her hair was styled to perfection, and a glimpse of her pearl necklace peeked through the opening of her coat.

"Glad I didn't wear heels like I'd originally planned," Mom said, keeping her head bent to her feet.

I did the same, watching my steps carefully.

The usual sounds of animals were absent. That was either because of the nighttime, or the fact that it was freezing cold out here. Belle had had the llamas transferred to an indoor care facility, and the goats within their enclosure were uncharacteristically silent.

Light and life emanated from the house, though. The porch was decorated to perfection with pine garlands, fat red and gold bulbs, and twinkling lights around the main columns on either side of the wide, honeycomb-shaped entrance. It was festive and beautiful, and made my eye for style nod in approval even as my nerves kicked in.

Remnants of ice melt littered the steps, helping to steady our feet. That fact was ironic to me, considering how the closer we got to the door, the more unsure I felt.

Why shouldn't I ask Belle for the ornaments? I was Grandpa Toby's granddaughter just as much as she was. I had every right to the ornaments and the snow globes as she did. It wasn't like I was going to demand she give me all of them.

I inhaled, lifted my chin, and pressed the doorbell.

A shorter woman with cropped dark hair and age lines along her mouth and eyes opened the door. Recognition struck her face, and she smiled at Mom.

"Sarah! You made it!"

"Hi, Debra," Mom said. "I brought my daughter, Allie, along. I hope that's okay."

"Of course! Come in; come in. It's so cold out there." She waved us in.

Who was this woman? I'd never seen her before. I stepped in and removed my shoes as there was already a pile of shoes and cowboy boots collected on the hardwood near the door. Fortunately, the wet spots from tracked snow had been wiped up, so we didn't get our socks wet.

If I didn't know any better, I would have thought we were late. The living room—a room Grandpa had always called "the parlor"—was already filled with people.

Belle had invited this many people to help plan her wedding?

I inhaled the warm smell of pine and cinnamon, basked in the encompassing warmth, and took in the extravagant decorations, the garlands twining around the stair banister, and

the ornamental lamppost coiled with light at the base of the stairs.

A sliver of anticipation slipped down my spine—the tree in the parlor.

The tall boughs were ornate with charming, extravagant—and decidedly *modern*-style ornaments—and fat, massive bulbs, and tulle.

She wasn't using the vintage ornaments at all.

A bubble of encouragement swelled in my throat, and I took a steadying breath. That played in my favor.

This was going to work. Belle would be reasonable about this. It would. Work.

I couldn't say I blamed her for not using the antique ornaments—I wouldn't have either. If I remembered correctly, many of them were dated before 1920.

Debra turned to me and offered her hand. “And what did you say your name was?”

I pried my attention away from the appealing décor and smiled at her. “I'm Allie.”

“Belle's cousin?” she said, adding a genuine smile to the assumption. It made me like her instantly.

“I—yes. And you are?”

“Mother of the groom,” she said proudly.

At that pronouncement, several of the gathered guests turned in our direction. I was sledgehammered by the assortment of outrageously good-looking men.

There were no more than ten people here. The house wasn't as full as it had been during Belle and Luke's engagement party. This was more intimate and looked like it was only the brothers and Bex. Luke stood near the crackling fireplace with a mug in his hand, talking to Dawson, who sat on one of the armchairs across from Bex.

Bex's blonde hair was twined up away from her face, and her cheeks were flushed, giving her a lovely glow. When she

saw me, her lips lifted into a smile, and she waved.

I returned the gesture, wondering where her kids were. Were they at their dad's?

"Who's here?" Belle asked, strolling from the back hallway that led to the room she and I had shared once for a few nights as kids.

Had she managed to replace the horrific blue carpet in there yet? She'd made so much progress with this old house.

The same jealousy I'd experienced during her engagement party struck all over again, but as I did then, I squashed it back down. What good was resentment going to do me?

So this house had incredible bones and tasteful, classic architecture that I would have loved to play with and update the way Belle had. This was her house. Of course she was the one to inherit it. She'd grown up here.

Why couldn't my heart get the hint?

Belle's brown hair hung in loose ringlets past her shoulders. She wore a white cashmere sweater with buttons on the cuffs. I supposed we had the hair in common—and our brown eyes, for that matter, too.

I fixed my smile in place, bracing myself. Belle greeted Mom with a hug and an, "I'm so glad you could make it." And then her gaze fell on me.

Her displeasure was so imperceptible that the casual observer probably wouldn't notice. Maybe it was all in my head, but the disappointment in her gaze, the light dimming from her eyes, were landmarks to me. She hadn't wanted me here after all.

I lifted my chin, refusing to let that get to me.

We were family. She'd invited my mom. Why shouldn't I come too?

"Allie, hi," she said, hitching her smile back into place. "It's good to see you. You came with your mom?"

"Yeah," I said. "I hope that's okay."

Her smile widened—and fakened in the process. “Of course. Why wouldn’t it be okay?”

There were so many answers to that question. I wasn’t going to go there.

“Your home looks so Christmassy,” I said instead. Another sliver of jealousy twinged beneath my sternum.

Letting it go...

Letting...

Go...

“Thanks.” She cast her gaze to the stairs and the swags of pine and lights and inhaled. “This old place has really come a long way.”

“Belle!” a male voice called from the parlor. Luke, I assumed.

“Excuse me,” Belle said. “Glad you both made it. We’re about to get started. Why don’t you come in with the others?”

Mom nodded to her, and then once her back was turned, she gave me a pointed smile as if to say, *see?*

True enough. Aside from the shift in Belle’s expression at seeing me—and my extreme jealousy—that wasn’t so bad.

Mom and I moseyed into the living room.

“Allie!” Bex said. “Here, take my seat.”

She rose and strode past the coffee table that was laden with a lovely arrangement of red flowers with pointed petals in a shallow basket. She made for the edge of the gathering.

Dawson snatched her wrist as she passed and tugged her to his lap, which earned him a gale of laughter and a punch in the shoulder.

“Someone’s possessive,” the teenaged Holden muttered from his slouched position on the couch across from them. He had dark hair and a steel-cut jaw that I suspected would only get sharper as he continued his way to adulthood.

I couldn't remember his name, either. Aside from Luke and Dawson, I didn't recognize the rest of them.

"Just giving her somewhere to sit." Dawson planted a kiss on her neck.

"You'd better stop that, or I'll give you somewhere else to sit," Bex said, and the men in the room laughed louder.

Then Bex wrapped an arm behind Dawson and turned to me.

"So good to see you," she said. "I didn't realize you were coming."

Several others looked at me at her pronouncement. Luke strode in, hauling a dining chair to make more seating. He nearly placed it by the fireplace, but then, noticing the tall, brooding brother with dark hair and an impeccable jawline, he seemed to think better of it and placed the chair near Dawson instead.

Luke gestured for his mom to take the seat. Debra kept her attention on me as she did so.

"Yeah," I said, wishing people would stop pointing out the fact that I wasn't invited—especially because at Bex's greeting, I abruptly had every eye on me, including those belonging to Luke and Dawson's brothers.

The teenaged Holden looked only a moment longer before returning his attention to his phone. His brother, who had a more studious look and bonier face than the others, nudged him.

After bringing in a few more chairs, Luke and Belle sank onto the final two at the head of the room. Everyone else settled down in response. The teenager put his phone away—at the nudge of his mother this time.

I couldn't help but notice one brother in particular. If looks had a sound, he would be a whipcrack. He had this brooding, vampire vibe. I couldn't manage to pull my gaze away from the swoosh of his dark hair and the carved glower in his expression.

What was he so upset about?

Unlike others who had nowhere to sit, he hadn't been offered a dining chair. Maybe that had something to do with his pout, though I assumed his surly expression was because he'd noticed Luke's hesitation about placing a chair close to where he stood.

Why didn't he move closer to the rest of us if he was so upset about it? What was bothering him?

The chairs had been positioned around the rug so we'd feel more like the group, but he remained farther back beside the fireplace with his arms crossed over his chest, his hands on either opposite—admittedly impressive—bicep.

Let's just say the man knew how to wear a t-shirt.

What made him seem so separate from everyone else? There was plenty of room in the opening between his mom on the end of the couch and where Luke was situated by Belle near the fireplace.

Why hadn't Luke gotten him a chair?

Maybe he preferred to stand. Maybe he had a problem with crowds. Maybe he liked his own space.

It wasn't until his eyes slid to meet mine that I realized I was still staring at him. He raised a single brow.

My stomach knotted. I cleared my throat and turned my attention to Luke and Belle, who had been talking this whole time.

“And that's the reason we've asked you all here,” Belle said, sounding like she was finishing a thought. “Now that Thanksgiving is over, there is about a month to go. We wanted to make you all aware of events that will build up to the day of the wedding and reach out for help to make sure everything runs as smoothly as it possibly can for our big day.”

“When is it?” I asked.

Everyone glanced in my direction. I sensed Mom's shoulders tense, and I got the feeling Belle had just gone over that detail when I'd been distractedly ogling Luke's brother.

Belle's smile stiffened. "The wedding is the day after Christmas."

"The day after? Why not get married Christmas Eve? Then you can be each other's presents."

A snort resounded from the gathered crowd. I couldn't help but notice the hot outsider pin his bemused expression on me.

"Sorry," I said, meeting my cousin's glare. "That just slipped out."

"We have our reasons." Belle cleared her throat.

Plotches of pink smattered her cheeks. With his arm strung across the back of Belle's chair, Luke smirked at his lap, and Dawson full-on grinned at Bex, who was also blushing and grinning back at him.

"In any case, here is what we'd like to go over with everyone," Belle said, recovering her composure.

She rose and reached for a small stack of papers that I hadn't noticed on the side table and began distributing them to each of us.

Just before reaching Mom, however, the stack ran out.

"Sorry," Belle said, turning to see that most everyone—including me—held a paper in their hands. "Looks like I didn't make enough copies."

Heat flushed up the sides of my neck. She probably would have had enough if I hadn't come. Then again, what was one more?

After a quick glimpse at the top of the paper, which read *Important Dates*, I rose.

"Here, have mine," I said, thrusting it in Mom's direction.

I could get the info from her later if I needed to. Which I probably wouldn't. It was clear I wouldn't be welcome to any more of these gatherings after this.

"It's okay; she can look at mine," Belle said.

“No, I insist.” I crossed the room and set the paper on Mom’s lap.

The tension of the moment stretched thinner than organza.

“That’s sweet of you.” Belle relented, sank onto her seat, and began addressing the crowd, starting with tree hunting in a week’s time.

Mom cast an apologetic grimace in my direction, but I brushed it off and stayed where I was instead of returning to my seat.

With Belle’s attention on the crowd, with me already standing at the edge of the parlor, now was my chance.

I was clearly on the fringes of this family. My chances of being included were slimmer than black ice. There had to be some way to mention the ornaments to Belle.

Then again, was the reason she hadn’t put them up because *she* had gotten rid of them? That might be the first step. Before I asked Belle about them, I needed to know that she had them in the first place.

Just as with saving The Flora and Fauna, I was on my own. With everyone distracted, with me obviously not needed, I took advantage of it. I made for the basement, hoping no one noticed my absence.

Too bad I wasn’t going to be that lucky.

## *Chapter Three*

I stole a glance behind me. If anyone asked, I could tell them I was heading for the bathroom since it was located in the same direction as the basement door. Leaving the kitchen and dining room behind, I took a right down the hall leading to the pantry, laundry room, and basement entrance.

Memories smashed into me the farther I walked, and surprisingly, a lot of them included Belle.

Grandpa had often offered for random people in need to stay here, and he always had them stay in this back bedroom. I peeked in, wondering what Belle had made of the space.

Though I didn't turn on the light, I could discern well enough. A bed was still in here, but apparently, the room had become some kind of storage room.

Cans of paint were stacked along one wall. Boxes of flooring boards—some half empty—took up another corner. Wooden boards leaned against the wall, cardboard boxes had been haphazardly stacked, tools were strewn, and what looked like a tile-cutting saw had even been shoved back in here.

I did pass the bathroom, but I didn't stop there. With another glance behind my back and a prickle of warning down my spine, I made for the door right next to it and opened it.

A chain dangled from the ceiling—though I didn't remember ever being tall enough for it to strike me in the face after I pulled it. The cool chain brushed my cheek like a spiderweb. I jerked back, steeling myself.

Dim yellow light illuminated a set of carpeted stairs. I stared at the descent, fighting hesitation. A voice advised me to wait, to return to the others.

But why shouldn't I do this? It was harmless. I was just going to check something, and then I'd be right back up.

Casting the unease aside, I ventured down. The last time I'd been in here had been when Uncle Thomas, Mom, Leigh, and I had all come to take our inheritance after Grandpa had passed away. I'd helped haul shelving, an old rocking chair, and even some textiles from down here.

Most of the items that I'd inherited I'd already sold or donated. They were too dated to do much else with, and I'd gotten a decent price on some of the antique teacups and vases I'd been given.

Leigh and I collected the hand-embroidered throw pillows that Grandma had made, and the antiques that sold got me quite a decent chunk to help keep the store afloat while I rebranded. Unfortunately, that rebrand—and the investment I'd attempted—hadn't given the store the boost I'd hoped it would.

I was right back where I'd been. In the red.

The notion of having such poor finances, of having so much debt, wafted over me like a raincloud in cartoons. It made everything bleak and gray, and it added a gloom I could never fully shake, no matter how happy I seemed to be.

I was in a pit I couldn't dig myself out of.

This was my shovel.

The bottom step creaked, and I stepped into the single room at the stairs' base. The open area had very few items in it compared to the storage space it once was. A few similarities remained—the pull-down ironing board Grandma used to use, the washing machine and dryer, the furnace, and the antique stove.

My eyes were drawn to the boxes sitting on shelves in the corner, up off of the cement floor. From the largest one's emptiness and open flaps, Belle must have used Grandma and

Grandpa's pre-lit tree, but that seemed to be about all the decorations she'd touched.

Relief coursed through me. Relief and a sense of sneaky intrigue.

I darted another glance behind my shoulder. Laughter echoed from upstairs and trickled its way down. It stroked the hairs on my nape.

I paused a few more moments. The same warning I'd experienced earlier wedged itself into the crevices between my bones, but I was just going to look. If the ornaments were here, I'd take a few pictures. See what they were going for online.

Ignoring the sensation, I took another step toward the boxes.

Only a fraction of the bulb's soft yellow light reached this corner. Shadows crept along the room's edges, stirring my discomfort and the crawling sensation beneath my skin.

Grandma's familiar slanted handwriting labeled the box on top. *Snow Globes*.

I rubbed a finger along my lower lip, peered behind once more, and then reached for the box.

My fingers trembled. My anticipation heightened, casting away the shadows of foreboding. I plucked one edge of the lid, lifting it from its fold, and hefted it open completely.

The sound startled me, as did the deep voice that accompanied it.

"Something tells me you shouldn't be in here."

A small sound squeaked from my lips. I whirled around, my heart pounding.

My pulse took on a different cadence at the sight of the handsome Holden brother brooding at me with his vampire hotness from the creaky bottom step.

He was taller than Luke, and broader too, with darker hair and the slightest bit of scruff along his cheeks. He also dressed better, in that fitted shirt I'd noticed earlier and jeans.

The look accentuated his broad shoulders, trim waist, and long legs.

“You done checking me out yet?”

My face flamed. I retreated a step, knocking into the shelf behind me. “I wasn’t.”

“Then why are your cheeks red?”

I clamped my palms over the offenders. “It’s Christmas.”

One side of his mouth wavered. “And that’s supposed to make you blush? If I didn’t know any better, I’d think you looked guilty.”

Clearing my throat, I lifted my chin. “If I didn’t know any better, I’d say you’re nosy.”

“*I’m* nosy? I can’t think of a single reason why you’d need to be down here. You gotta admit—it’s suspicious.”

*Do not reveal anything.* Hot or no, that was no reason to spill anything to this man.

“This was my grandparents’ house. I wanted to see if something I used to love was still down here.”

“Did you ask Belle?”

“Are you the Asking Police?”

He took another step down, his hand still braced on the banister. “You’re Sarah’s daughter, aren’t you?”

The strain in my shoulders relaxed only a fraction of a fraction. “How do you all seem to know my mom?” Debra had recognized Mom instantly, too.

“She’s been at my mom’s a few times.”

“Really?”

Mom was friends with Debra? She hadn’t mentioned anything like that to me.

Then again, Mom didn’t exactly give me a play-by-play of everything she did on a daily basis, including which friends she visited.

I took a step toward him. Might as well iron things out as much as possible, and that was easier done once you knew who a person was.

It had nothing to do with the fact that I wanted to know his name.

“My name is Allie.”

He left the stairs behind. “Bryce.”

Now that he was a few inches closer, I got a better glimpse of his face and the shape of his features. He resembled Luke and Dawson in the eyebrows and the curve of his nose and mouth, yet his eyes had their own distinct look. And they were blue.

His hair was darker, too, feathered with the rarest traces of silver that only added to his appeal rather than diminishing it.

How old was he that he was starting to show signs of gray already? He had to be older than Luke. Definitely older than Dawson, since Bex had told me Dawson was younger than she was.

“What are you looking for?” he asked, casting his gaze behind me and lifting that incredibly sculpted chin in the process. “Maybe I can help you find it.”

“I know right where it is.”

He tucked his fingers into his jeans pocket and analyzed me a few moments longer. “You know the boogey man lives in basements like this, don’t you? What kind of man would I be if I left you to face him on your own?”

The boogey man? Was he serious? I saw his ploy for what it was—an effort to keep an eye on me.

Unless...

Had Belle sent him down here? My stomach plunged. Maybe she’d seen me slip away after all.

“I don’t believe in things like that.”

“No?” The same corner of his mouth that had almost lifted before tweaked. “I’ll leave you to it, then.”

Without another word, he turned around and climbed back up the stairs.

I didn't take a full breath until I was alone once more. But he left traces of himself behind—the smell of his cologne, the impression of his direct gaze. Somehow, I felt that glance *inside* of me, like he saw more of me than I let on. Even the sound of his voice lingered and replayed in my mind as I drank in several breaths.

I trudged to the line of boxes on the built-in shelves. His talk of boogey men had me slightly on edge in spite of myself. I shook my hands at the wrists and then pulled the one labeled *Snow Globes* toward me once more.

Opening the flap, I took in the wrapped bundles. I knew what I would find if I were to open one of them, but I wanted to see anyway, to appease my curiosity. Pulling one free, I gently removed its wrappings.

A lovely carved base was topped by a massive glass bulb. Inside, water sloshed, disturbing the sprinkles of white. I admired the tiny town within, with its quaint shops, trees, and minuscule horse-drawn sleigh. Angling my wrist, I rotated the glass ball and watched in admiration as the snow rose and slowly trickled down around the miniature scene.

I was an adult now, but the act had no less wonder for me than it did when I'd done this as a child.

Footsteps sounded—heavier and more insistent than Bryce's had been. Panic shot through me. My pulse catapulted. I spun, searching for the wrappings.

My vision blurred. My thoughts stemmed. I spotted the wad of white paper wrappings and reached for them, but my fingers fumbled.

“What are you doing down here?” Belle's voice was far less pleasant than Bryce's.

I jerked. Losing my grip, I watched in horror as the snow globe fell from my grasp. I dove for it, but wasn't fast enough.

“No!” I cried.

Belle's gasp was audible as the exquisite antique crashed to the cement floor.

The resulting silence was deafening. My heartbeat pulsed in my ears, and I stared at the pieces of glass, the remnants of snow, the broken sleigh, and crumbled buildings now scattered on the cement in a pool of water.

"That was my favorite one." Belle's voice held a hint of emptiness, iced over like frost on cold windows.

I chanced a glance at her. Her mouth was downturned, her brows pinched, and she stared at the broken shards on the ground between us as if she wasn't sure what she was seeing.

It took genuine effort to kick my brain into gear. I had to do something. I had to say something.

"I'm *so* sorry," I managed. "I didn't mean it. I'll clean it up."

Sense seemed to settle over her. Her attention flashed to the boxes behind me, and her eyes sharpened. "I should have known you'd be after the ornaments. Were you trying to steal them?"

"What? No—I just wanted to see them—"

Belle strode toward the mess. She bent and began gathering broken bits of glass in her hand.

"I know this used to be Grandpa's house, and you could go wherever you wanted when it was. But it's my house now. You can't just wander around someone else's house."

Emotion clogged my throat. "I wasn't wandering around."

"No?" She cupped the hand that held the broken glass and glanced up to the ceiling, the stairs, and back to me. I saw the question in her eyes: *Then what were you doing?*

"Here, let me help," I said, wanting to deflect.

She held up her other hand, stopping me. Her eyes closed. Her voice was deathly quiet.

"Everyone else is back upstairs talking and enjoying some snacks, and yet you're down here breaking my things?"

I was affronted. She made it sound like I was some kind of snoop!

“I was just looking for something we could use to decorate for the wedding,” I said, thinking fast.

And totally lying.

Belle’s scowl deepened for a moment before softening again. “Look, Allie. Your mom mentioned something to me about having your help decorating. I know you’re talented, and you’d do a great job, but I already have a wedding planner. I won’t need any additional help.”

Though she didn’t add the words, “*If you’d been upstairs with us, you would already know as much,*” but I heard them all the same.

The notion bulged in my chest like a rock. Belle dusted the glass into the garbage can in the corner and picked up the snow globe’s broken base. She frowned at the pointed shards that were still attached, and at the tiny village, which was now missing several of its buildings.

The more time passed, the more I was able to see things from her perspective. Shame knotted in my stomach, and I squirmed inside.

She was right. She was so right.

“Belle, I’m sorry. I didn’t think about it like that. I know this is your house now, and I never should have presumed I could go anywhere I wanted. And I really didn’t mean to break that.”

Honestly, what had I been thinking?

She inhaled, long and slow, keeping her eyes closed for several moments before speaking. Her voice had that practiced calm to it.

“I know. It’s okay. I get that you want to see the Christmas stuff since I didn’t put it out this year—but just ask me next time, okay?”

She gave the base a final glance before tossing it into the garbage, too. It hit the bottom of the receptacle hard, tinkling

against the broken pieces of glass and simultaneously striking me in the chest.

Whether it was the shame squirming inside of me or the coiling at being accused of stealing the ornaments, this was so not the time to mention the rest of them, not after I'd all but barged down here, and especially not now that I broke one of the antiques.

She'd acted like I was a nuisance, like I was the last person she ever wanted to see again. Belle clearly hated me—possibly even more so than before. I'd gone about this completely wrong.

How could I ever ask her for the ornaments now? There had to be some other solution, but in that moment, I couldn't think of anything else. Getting a loan, a second job, those options appealed to me about as much as going all winter without a coat.

I was already stressed out and stretched thin enough as it was. I couldn't handle taking on anything else.

The longer I thought about it, the more convinced I was. The ornaments were my best option.

I'd have to find some other way to convince Belle to give them to me, but at this point, I wasn't sure what that might be.

## *Chapter Four*

**W**ith finances being as tight as they were, I probably needed to give up a few of the more expensive habits I had. Like driving my Prius, my gym membership, or getting my hair and nails done every three weeks. But those last few things weren't just nice—they were necessities.

I needed to feel pretty. I had to look put together to fit in with the brand of the store.

And after that confrontation and my epic screw-up at Belle's the night before, I really needed to kick something.

I headed into the gym and doubled down on my kickboxing class, picturing—not Belle's face every time I walloped the air—but my own. What would have happened if I'd held on a little longer? Or better still, if I hadn't snuck down there at all?

Belle would never hear me now. She'd never again trust a word I said.

The music's dynamic beat thrashed and raved. I kicked, pumped my arms, and sweated hard alongside the thirty or so women and the few men lined up across from the instructor.

My endorphins flowed. Energy surged inside of me, giving me exactly what I needed:

A sense of accomplishment.

A renewed purpose.

Once class was over, once the instructor complimented us on keeping up with her, and the music died way down, I meandered to the side near the corner of the wall-length mirror

where I always kept my water and drew in a long, refreshing draught. It trickled down my throat, rejuvenating me.

My limbs were supple, my shirt and hairline were drenched, and though adrenaline flowed, I also had the impression that I'd gradually been tenderized during the last hour. My muscles had so many soft spots, you could mold them like Playdough at this point.

Natalie approached, smiling and just as sweaty as I was. The strands of her reddish blonde hair that had escaped her ponytail were matted to her neck. She lived in Bridgewater above the post office her parents owned, but she came to the gym in Burley three times a week since Bridgewater didn't have anything like that.

Though I'd known Natalie in high school, we hadn't had much to do with one another since. I knew she'd been on the town council with Bex, too. Bex had come with me to work out a few times and had been ecstatic to see her friend here. Since then, Nat and I had hit it off and reconnected as well.

"Today was a good one," Natalie said, taking a swig from her water bottle.

A circle of sweat dipped down the center of her lime green tank top.

"I definitely needed it," I said. "You headed back to Bridgewater after this?"

Sometimes, Natalie stayed in town to get some shopping done before making the twenty-minute trek back to her little town. Yet another reason I was glad I'd left Bridgewater. A trip to the grocery store only took thirty minutes rather than hours.

Natalie's bottle made a slurping sound as she finished this latest drink. "Yep. My parents need me to man the desk. And then Jensen is coming over after that. "

"Jensen?"

"My boyfriend." She chewed her lip as pink climbed her cheeks. "We've been dating on and off since last year."

“He’s not going to help sort mail, is he?” I asked in a knowing sort of way, nudging her with my elbow.

“He wouldn’t be allowed to, not without the background checks and the job-specific tests—”

“Nat, I’m kidding,” I said, smirking.

The flush on her cheeks deepened. I suspected she finally grasped the meaning behind my teasing.

My breathing was slowing to its usual pace. I creaked my neck from one side to the other, enjoying a gratifying stretch, and asked a different question.

“Do you help sort mail and all of that?”

“I mostly work as a clerk. Calculating postage, selling stamps—that kind of thing.”

“That’s so interesting to me,” I said.

“Why?” she asked.

“It’s just not something I really think about all that much, I guess,” I said. “I mean, I go to the post office to mail stuff like anyone does, but I don’t really think about the process of getting letters where they’re supposed to go.”

Natalie gripped her water bottle and stared off toward the windows perpendicular to the room’s wall-length mirror. “I don’t think I would, either, but mail has kind of been my life.”

“Is that what you want to do?” I asked.

She took another swig from her water bottle and braced a hand on her waist, now glancing toward the massive mirror on the wall throwing our reflections back at us. From the conflict pinching her forehead, I suspected my question had hit a nerve.

“I don’t know,” she said, sounding uncertain. “I haven’t quite figured that out yet.”

Hm. Either she truly didn’t know what she wanted to do, or she didn’t want to confess whatever it was to me.

I watched her for several more seconds, waiting to see if she might elaborate. She didn't.

An urge to offer her a job, the way I had with Bex, gushed over me. I pictured how much fun we would have together; three driven women stocking shelves, hanging lights, greeting customers.

I liked how good it had felt to do a solid for Bex when she'd needed it. How would it be to be able to help others like that whenever I needed to?

But I reined myself in. It was like strays. Just because puppies and kittens were cute didn't mean I could take every stray in. Sunny had been my one exception.

Natalie bent for her towel and her purse. She patted her neck and face with her towel, slung her purse over one shoulder, and tucked her water bottle under her elbow.

"See you next class?" she said, making her way to the door.

"Yeah, see you then."

Dawn had snuck in during punches and kicks, though it wasn't completely at its peak yet. The hazy glow of morning hovered like fog across the sidewalks and storefronts.

Even though the first of December was days away, now that Thanksgiving was over, Christmas had taken over the town. Lights were strung across Overland Avenue, zigzagging from one side to the other to create a dangling display over the main thoroughfare.

The little park across from the post office had also been turned into a winter wonderland, with displays of lights, colorfully lit trees, and a teepee-shaped tree of lights spearing skyward and topped with a star.

I really needed to get my Christmas decorations out. Though I'd failed to decorate my apartment thus far, the same couldn't be said for the Flora. I had an adorable display in the store window, complete with a tree, twinkle lights, and several presents wrapped in shiny paper.

Maybe it was all the sparkly, loud joy that was rammed in my face everywhere I went, but I couldn't get the ornaments off my mind. Regret soured my stomach every time the memory from the night before replayed.

All I had to do was ask Belle. Why did I have to go and break that snow globe?

It hadn't only been Belle's favorite—that one had been mine, too. Grandma had put her arm around me once when I'd admired it from the mantle, and she'd shared the story of how that had been her first snow globe, a gift from her father, and how it had been the culprit to inspire her to collect them.

I didn't think the snow globes were quite as valuable as the ornaments themselves, but shattering such a cherished heirloom was still a crying shame.

Especially doing so while having been caught red-handed.

I had to make this right.

I drove to my apartment, parked, and went inside. After a warm shower, I combed through my brown hair and settled onto my couch. Purring, Sunny padded her way to me and cozied into my lap. I petted her a few times.

"I'll just call her. Then I can stop freaking out over this so much. Right?"

The cat glanced up at me with her big eyes before rubbing her face against my hand. It wasn't too early—Belle would be awake by now, wouldn't she?

I scratched Sunny behind the ear and pulled out my phone.

Nerves zinged. I zinged back at them. I could do this. Belle was my cousin. I could talk to her.

I skimmed through and found her number. I tapped it. And then—

I hung up.

"What am I doing? Why is this so hard?"

Because she's Belle. Because...

I didn't know.

Seconds later, my ringtone chimed, and Belle's name appeared on the screen.

She was calling me back? No! What was I going to say to her?

Then again, it was nice of her to call me back. She *would* be nice.

I swiped. "Hello?"

"Hey," she said, "I think I missed your call. Did you need something?"

I couldn't believe she would call me back, not after the scathing looks and forced-calm reaction I'd gotten from her last night.

"I—"

I stared at my un festive apartment.

She didn't sound upset. I could give her a story. Tell her how I wanted to use the ornaments to decorate with since I hadn't gotten my tree out. Or I could just be straightforward and use the Grandpa line I'd meant to:

*Grandpa would have given me the ornaments if I needed them.*

Yeah. If that didn't sound manipulative, I didn't know what did.

I closed my eyes. I couldn't do it. "I just wanted to say I'm sorry for sneaking around your house while I was there. I really didn't mean anything by it."

"It's okay," Belle said. "I know it's probably hard for you to think of it as my house now instead of theirs."

"Yeah."

Crickets.

"Thanks for calling," Belle said. Her tone sounded like she was trying to salvage the conversation.

"You're welcome," I said, ready to hang up. "Bye."

“Bye.”

Tossing my phone onto the couch, I made a frustrated noise and plunged my head into my hands.

“I’m never going to get anywhere!” I groaned.

Rising and heading to sit at my computer in my apartment’s second bedroom, which served as more of an office and storage area, I logged in my expense report from the previous day, checked my bank account as well as the previous day’s purchases, and then readied for the day.

Bex was opening for me this morning, but she had to take her kids to the dentist later. It would soon be time to take over and let her head home.

Sucking it up like always, I put on my best face, lip gloss, hair done, all the things. And I went to Middle Avenue.

Small clumps of snow huddled in the gutters. Only a few cars were parked, and the leafless trees reminded me of scarecrows shaking in the morning breeze.

The store was wedged between a photography studio and a homeopathic medicine shop. Its brick exterior was lighter in color than the other two because the narrow building was its own separate entity.

The Flora and Fauna’s name was pronounced on the door in a cute script. My window display sparkled merrily and looked as welcoming as I’d hoped.

The bell chimed when I walked in, and warmth and the scent of peppermint greeted me. I breathed it in, looking things over and smiling.

Despite the headache this place gave me, I loved it. I’d taken pains to make it appealing for those who stepped through that door. Customers may not notice the meticulous paint job on the walls or the care with organizing dresses and sweaters on the racks, but I sure did.

Bex sat at the register. Her blonde hair hung in a single braid over one shoulder. She perked up, smiling and rising from the stool she’d been sitting on.

“Hey, there,” she said. “Just made a few sales.”

That’s what I liked to hear.

Smiling, I unzipped my coat. “You did? That’s great!”

“Yeah, a woman and her daughters came in, and she bought them each bags.”

“You’re kidding,” I said, whirling around to the center station where the upscale, faux leather bags in pastel colors had been the day before.

Sure enough, the soft purple, teal, and pink bags were gone. My grin spread.

“That’s fantastic! Those bags are so cute. It makes me happy when people buy cute things.”

Bex impaled the receipt onto its stand with the few others there. “I love that about you,” she said.

“What?”

“It’s not just about the money for you. You genuinely want people to have things that make them happy.”

I smiled and removed my coat, grateful for the shop’s heating even though I had to pay so much for it. “It kind of is about the money, too,” I said.

I couldn’t say I frowned at the fact that the bags had sold, not when they were listed at close to fifty bucks a piece. Of course, I didn’t make that much in the end, but a sale was a sale. And this wasn’t just one, but three.

Bex laughed. “How was your morning?”

Good. Awkward. But good, too.

“Fine,” I said, craning my neck again. The same creak I’d had earlier still nagged me. “Have you guys decorated that tree of yours?”

“Yes. Dawson put Paisley on his shoulders while we strung the lights, and the fact that he can do that now after his injury is so huge. He’s come such a long way.”

Dawson had struggled with a severe concussion after being kicked in the head by a bronc he'd ridden in the rodeo. It had left him bedridden for several months and unable to do simple things like going up and down the stairs or craning his head to look at the sky.

"Even so," Bex went on, "he lost his balance and fell right into the tree."

"Oh, my goodness. Is he okay?"

"He's fine." Bex gave a cheesy grin. "The kids ate it up, especially because he acted so silly about it. They just love him."

"He's so good with them," I said.

My heart warmed to see her so happy. Bex had been a good friend. She'd told me about the difficulties she'd had after her divorce, and how starstruck she'd been by Dawson from the start.

"The kids took over with the ornaments," Bex said. "Kody climbed the ladder to put some toward the top, but the majority of the ornaments are centered in one spot near the bottom of the tree because that's where Paisley could reach. I could rearrange them, but I don't have the heart to. She and Kody were adorable as they helped decorate it."

Bex pulled her phone out, tapped the screen a few times, and then showed me a picture. Sure enough, the tree was mostly bare along the top, with the majority of the ornaments clustering in one place on the lower lefthand side.

"That's cute," I said, smiling.

I could just picture the four-year-old placing ornaments all in one place, leaving the rest of the tree bare.

"Does the baby leave the ornaments alone, or is she all over them too?"

"They're in her reach for sure," Bex said, swiping a finger across her phone, "but she listens pretty well. She has one ornament that she likes to take off the tree and put back on again."

“That’s cute,” I said.

Bex showed her screen: a picture of Sophia’s toothy grin as she held an ornament in her fat little hand. My heart gave a longing little squeeze.

“Christmas trees really are magical,” I said. “They’re one of my favorite parts of the season, bringing light to places where it ordinarily isn’t.”

Bex’s phone droned before she could respond. Dawson’s picture, as well as the words *My Cowboy*, filled the screen in place of Sophia.

The two of them had been thrust together six months ago, after Bex’s divorce. They’d both been living at Belle’s farmhouse as guests and had ended up falling for each other.

They dated after Bex moved into the Wayfair, but Dawson had decided he wanted to be a permanent part of their lives and had proposed they get married.

The two of them wanted to keep the wedding small, and so they’d invited only a small group of friends and family. A handful of us clustered into the courthouse and watched them make their vows.

They didn’t even have a honeymoon, since both of them had new jobs they weren’t sure they could leave. But the lack of ceremony and fanfare didn’t seem to bother them. Bex looked more blissful than she ever had. Truth be told, she and Dawson were amazing together.

I supposed since she’d already been married once, she probably figured the big event didn’t need to be all that fancy. But when it came to my wedding, I would pull out all the stops.

Assuming a wedding ever happened.

“What are your plans?” I asked as she gathered her things from the register.

“When we’re done at the dentist, Dawson and I are going to Boise to visit my parents for the weekend.”

“That sounds nice.”

“Yeah, we haven’t been since we got married, and my mom wants some time getting to know him better.”

“Uh-oh. Is that a good thing or a bad thing?”

Bex tucked a piece of paper into the desk drawer. “Should be good. He wanted to hang out with his brothers today, but he’s being a good sport.”

“Oh? What are they doing up there?”

“Helping Belle and Luke with wedding stuff. Belle wants the yard as cleaned up as possible, so the guys are helping to clear weedy areas that didn’t get cleared before the snow fell. She wants to create more parking.”

The farmyard was big enough to accommodate a lot of people. I tried to picture having the wedding inside the house itself. To me, it sounded like marrying in a church and letting someone else worry about the parking would be less of a hassle, but who was I to judge?

What if I could offer to help, too?

I probably wouldn’t be included in anything since Belle had caught me snooping. Mom hadn’t said anything, so chances were, she wasn’t invited either.

But I *needed* to be.

I still felt off about what had happened. I hated that she thought I was nothing better than a snoop. What if friendship for us was possible?

It wasn’t only that. If I wanted any hope of talking to Belle and convincing her I wasn’t psycho, I had to get closer to her.

I could call her again, but Bryce had one thing right—it would be too suspicious, especially since I hadn’t reached out to her much before.

If she hadn’t suspected I was up to something before, she certainly would now.

Unless...

Oh, my gosh. The thought crept in like the Grinch’s.

It was an idea. A wonderful, awful idea.

Bex had said Luke's brothers would be going to help clear the yard with them. That was it. *The brothers.*

I couldn't attach myself to Belle...but Bryce had followed me into the basement. Everyone had known we'd spoken down there—or, at least, I assumed they did.

What if Bryce and I hit it off? What if the attraction had been so instant we couldn't help ourselves?

What if we were a thing?

Then I'd get invited to all the family gatherings, all the wedding preparations, to everything the brothers were involved in. Allie Vreeland would be there, with plenty of chances to kindle a friendship with her vacant cousin.

My previous mishaps would be forgotten. We'd strike up conversations. She'd ask how things were going. I'd dither, but eventually, I'd get to the store's plight—and then!

I'd let it all sink in. The ornaments. Grandpa and how he would have given some to me to help me out.

Everything became inarguably clear.

The bell over the door jangled. Bex had been scrolling through her phone, but as the woman entered, Bex placed the device down behind the register and rose to greet the customer like a good employee should.

Her phone. Her screen was *open*.

I didn't have any idea how to reach Bryce—but Bex was married to his brother.

Sneaking a glance at Bex, I dove for the phone. She had her back to the register as she directed the customer toward the shoe rack. She was distracted.

She'd never know.

I tapped and swiped until I made it to her contacts. Sure enough, Bryce Holden's name and number were there.

Feeling all kinds of grinchy and sneaky and yet grinning at my stroke of genius, I made a note of his number on a scratch paper I found beneath the register and stuffed it into my pocket, returning Bex's phone by the time the customer was browsing the collection of sweaters on the rack.

I supposed I could have just asked Bex to set Bryce and me up. But that would raise all kinds of questions with her—questions I wasn't ready to explore, especially with what I intended to propose to Bryce. It was best to leave others out of it.

The truth was, I needed his help. But I also didn't like the idea of using him.

At least, not without him knowing what I was up to.

Besides, I had to convince him first. Would Bryce even consider my proposal? Or was I risking another failure?

## *Chapter Five*

**M**y heart pummeled my ribs during the entire parting conversation with Bex as she clocked out and made small talk about how excited her kids were to be going on a trip, even one as short as the two-hour drive to Boise.

Once she stepped outside—and with the main floor free from customers—I unburdened my phone from my pocket and backed into the stockroom’s semblance of privacy before I lost my nerve.

I tapped in the numbers and waited for the dial tone, keeping an eye toward the front window in case anyone walked in. Though I’d spent the entirety of my time owning this store begging for people to come through that door—this was not one of those times.

All customers could stay far away, at least until I finished this call.

“Bryce Holden,” he said, in that way some men answered by alerting the recipient they’d reached the right number.

My heart was about to break right through my chest.

“Bryce?” The word came out only halfway. I had to clear my throat. “Bryce?”

“Yeah, that’s me. Who’s calling?”

“This is Allie Vreeland.”

“Allie, what can I do for you?”

Did that mean he remembered who I was? At least he hadn’t said anything about our awkward exchange in the

basement, where he'd totally caught me checking him out.

“I—”

I nearly tripped over a box of scarves. It scuffed across the floor, and I caught my balance on the metal shelf to my left. Words failed. What was wrong with me? I couldn't do this over the phone.

“I have something I wanted to talk to you about. Can you meet with me? I can come to Bridgewater.”

There was a pause. “You're talking lunch or what?”

I stared at my inventory, at the boxes and items still wrapped in plastic on the shelves. “Sure, we could do lunch.”

“Is this a business meeting?”

Why did he think this would be?

“Yes,” I said.

It was for the sake of my business—that meant it was business, right?

“When were you thinking? And what are we discussing?”

I was not going to lay anything out for him like this. I fingered the fringe on the end of a lampshade I hadn't found a place for on the floor. “I have a mutually beneficial proposal to offer you. How does tomorrow sound?”

“Tomorrow,” he said. “Sure. I'll be at the Elkhorn at one. Does that work for you?”

Tomorrow was a Saturday, one of my busiest days. Bex would be gone, but I could close the store for lunch. It wasn't like I was getting droves of people.

“Sure, I'll see you then.”

Another call came through as soon as I finished talking to Bryce. I didn't have time to mull anything over before swiping to answer.

The man on the other line introduced himself as Ray from the Burley Theater.

“Hi, yes,” I said. I’d called the theater earlier about the theater’s promotional opportunities.

“I understand you wanted to post an ad on the big screen,” he said.

That could be another weapon in my arsenal when I presented my idea to Bryce—should he ask what I’ve tried so far.

The last time I’d gone to a movie, most of the ads, which were from dentist’s offices or insurance agencies, featured the employees talking about how great their establishments were or showing happy customers in the dentist chair chatting it up with the hygienist. Like anyone was that happy at the dentist.

Lots of people went to the movies, didn’t they? Having an ad stream at the theater would give the store a lot of exposure. The idea wasn’t terrible.

Then again, having an ad featured at the theater would require me to record something. I gazed across the festive window display, the full-length mirror in the corner, the strings of lights along the ceiling, the displays of bags and earrings, the racks of shirts, skirts, and dresses.

I could write a script or something. We could make it happen.

But by Christmas?

“What might that entail?” I asked.

“You’ll need a promotional video,” the manager said. “Professionally taken, something that sheds your business in a positive light. Mingle this with a few lines about why people should frequent your business and submit it for approval. Once it’s approved, pay the fee, and we’ll cycle it through our ads for three months.”

“What’s the fee?”

“Six hundred.”

Oof. To some business owners, that was peanuts, but six hundred dollars was half of my next loan payment on the building.

I breathed past the fist in my stomach.

“And how soon would you be able to feature my promotion?”

“As soon as you have it ready.”

My hopes dimmed. It had seemed so simple, but from the sound of things, a lot more would go into this than I originally planned.

I'd have to hire a videographer. I'd have to write a script of some kind—assuming the videographer who would put the video together wouldn't offer that—and the last time I'd written anything profoundly helpful or inspiring had been when I'd contacted Jelly Belly for a school assignment and told them I didn't like their coffee flavored jelly beans.

They'd sent me my own personal package of a mix without the coffee ones. It was the best letter I'd ever written.

But it hadn't been publicized. This would be.

I thanked him and then hung up in frustration. I was still no closer to a solution than I'd been that morning. My previous marketing attempts had included ads in the newspaper and those Bex and I were running on social media. I'd considered an appearance at the local radio station, but so far, that was just words.

They weren't results.

Even though I was crazy nervous to meet with Bryce and talk to him, I was even more motivated now than ever.

Tomorrow, I'd be baring my soul to Bryce Holden. Was he the type of man to help a girl out? Or would he use my words against me?

What was I getting myself into?

\* \* \*

Winter had its own kind of drab beauty. I wasn't ordinarily one for gray skies, but when they were offset by white fields and

mountain peaks, it gave a new kind of appeal to the phrase “*In the bleak midwinter.*”

The road hugged the hills, first one way, then another, and then Bridgewater came into view. I’d grown up here, and though I was twenty-three now, and it’d been a handful of years since my teenage stomping grounds phase, the town hadn’t changed all that much.

The grocery store on the corner that had shut down my senior year was still closed. There was still that little church that no one used. A new taco truck, however, was parked across from the grocery store.

I wondered if Bryce might like to try it out sometime. Maybe once we got the ball rolling between us, we could...

Assuming he agreed to my crazy proposal.

I practiced wording my proposition the entire drive—past farmland blanketed with snow—as I took in the view of the mountains capped with white and the dreary but beautiful landscapes, crawled past the mercantile, and pulled into one of the few parking stalls in front of The Elkhorn next to a jacked up, power-color red pickup truck. The truck just screamed pompous.

Gripping the steering wheel with clammy hands, I exhaled through a small part in my lips. The Elkhorn had a wild west look to it, with its faux high storefront and awning-covered boardwalk blurred as surely as a mirage in the desert.

I willed my nerves to settle. I’d never get anywhere by staying in my car.

Winter air brought a welcome chill to my feverish skin, and I hurried onto the wooden boardwalk before stepping inside.

Past the receptionist’s desk, a bar was positioned to one side of the back wall with a miniature stage in the opposite corner. Scads of empty tables filled the rest of the space, and the fact that we weren’t surrounded by people made me breathe a little easier. Not much—but some.

Twangy Christmas music played overhead. A pretty waitress with her dark hair in braids greeted me. I said hi, took the menu she offered, and stilled.

I was vaguely certain the waitress had said something else, but I didn't catch a single word. I was too busy gawking at the tall slice of muscle staring right at me from under the brim of his cowboy hat.

Bryce Holden. Were his eyes really that blue?

His broad shoulders, his angled jawline, the quirk of his lips—they were all devices put in place for the sole purpose of scrambling my thoughts. I rapidly forgot what I was doing here.

Why was I standing there, staring?

But then he removed his hand from his pocket and strutted in my direction, and with a whiff of his musky cologne and the nearness of his proximity, I remembered exactly why I was here.

My stomach didn't stop tying itself into knots. In fact, it started one and then just kept right on going so that by the time he spoke, there was a whole clump in there.

"We meet again," he said. "You keep on staring at me like that, and I'm going to think that whole business proposition excuse you gave me for meeting up was just a ruse to get closer."

His mouth had a lazy curve, like a river hugging around a roadside with nothing to do but trickle, rendering him the casual, look-at-able kind of gorgeous that I couldn't take my eyes from.

"I'm not staring."

Please. I was totally staring. For some reason, having him begin our conversation that way only gave me license to look more.

"All right then. Me neither." He looked right at me. And the longer he looked, the more my stomach sizzled.

Several more moments passed before he said, “You wanna sit down?”

“Sitting is good.”

The air was growing thin. I needed something else to focus on before I hyperventilated and passed out. Bryce would have to administer CPR—and his mouth on mine was something I wanted to be awake for.

Oh, my gosh—where did that thought come from? Two minutes in, and I was already picturing kissing this man?

Then again, could anyone blame me?

I hid my smile, grateful when the waitress approached our table with glasses of water. I ordered a cheeseburger with fries. Bryce ordered the same, along with an appetizer. And then we were alone at the table, left with nothing to do but face each other.

“Lest you think otherwise, this is about business,” I said, beginning my practiced spiel.

I had to make that fact absolutely clear. This was biz-ness. Nothing more.

“Now you’ve gone and done it. You just used the word ‘lest.’ Things must be serious.”

I toyed with my utensils. “Is there something wrong with that word?”

“Just that I don’t hear many people using it. I’ll tell you right now: I don’t have much experience with medicinal-type things. If you’re looking for a doctor, I’m not your man.”

“I am not *looking for a doctor.*” I could hardly believe him.

Was he trying to be funny? What did he think the word *lest* meant?

He linked his hands on the table in front of him, only to glide them away when the waitress returned with a basket of the breaded zucchini appetizers he’d ordered. Bryce dipped one into the sauce, indicating for me to do the same.

I declined. I couldn't eat, not until I got this out.

I supposed I should make small talk and get to know him a bit first, but I was too flustered to think about anything else until I said what I needed to say.

First things first, though. "Do you have a girlfriend?" I asked.

Bryce burst into laughter, which turned into a heavy cough since he hadn't finished swallowing his appetizer. Hacking, he reached for his water glass and took a long swig.

"That's the last thing I expected you to start out with, but under the circumstances, I shouldn't say I'm surprised."

What did that mean? It was a perfectly reasonable question, considering where I was going with this lunch.

However, he didn't know that—not yet, anyway.

I hurried to clarify.

"I promise that question was necessary. I don't want to interfere with anything as we get into the reason I called you here, and if you have a girlfriend, that makes a difference."

"Oh, it does?" He wiped his mouth with a napkin.

"Yes."

The corners of his attractive mouth twitched as though he were fighting a smile. For some strange reason, this made my mouth do exactly the same thing. He mastered his lips, keeping them straight, which made them no less appealing.

*Stop staring at his mouth, idiot!*

"No, Miss Allie, I don't have a girlfriend. Should I ask if you're romantically involved?"

"Not yet."

"You mean you want me to ask you later on if you are?"

"No—I mean, I'm not romantically involved. Yet."

His eyes narrowed. He took another drink of water. "I'm guessing the word 'yet' has something to do with this."

Much better than *lest*. I knew he knew what *yet* meant.

“I’m not normally this transparent with complete strangers,” I said.

“We’re not strangers. And you aren’t being transparent at all.”

“We kind of are.” I ran my fingers along the tines of my fork. “I only know that you’re the brother of the man my cousin is marrying. Luke is a trustworthy guy. Dawson is too. So I’m assuming it’s a family trait.”

Bryce cleared his throat. He lowered his chin and then peered at me through his dark lashes.

“What are you trying to get at?” he said.

I was nuts. I never bared my soul to anyone like I was about to with him. It’d taken all I could do to confess the truth to Bex that the store was failing. This required being more transparent than I ever was—but I was *that* desperate.

For some reason, it was easier confessing all to this hot stranger than it would have been to bare my soul to my best friend. Not that I had one of those.

My sister Leigh and I weren’t that chummy. I thought of Natalie from the gym. Or Bex. They were probably the two closest friends I had, and they were only really friends on the surface, not women I truly connected with.

Who was I kidding? I didn’t have time for friends.

“I own a store in Burley. It’s been open for almost two years, and no matter what I try, I can’t seem to keep myself in the black. I’m on the verge of closing—and if I do, I’ll lose all the capital I’ve invested in it.”

Not to mention, I’d have to deal with the shame of closing and the awful financial crisis that awaited—and the prospect of working a regular job instead of one of my choosing.

I didn’t want to have a boss. I wanted to be the boss. I set my own hours. I handled all the parameters of my life, and that independence was everything to me.

Mom spent my childhood breathing down my neck to make sure I didn't step out of line. I wasn't about to let anyone do that to me ever again.

Bryce listened with rapt attention. "I'm in agriculture," he said, sitting back as the waitress brought our cheeseburgers.

The smell of grilled meat teased my stomach. The fat fries were sprinkled with some kind of red seasoning. I took one and dipped it into my fry sauce before taking a bite. The savory taste of fried potato with tingling seasonings made me salivate.

"I'd love to help," he went on, "but I'm not sure what you're getting at. You want to borrow money? Are you looking for an investor?"

This time, I nearly choked on my fry and started coughing. I took a relieving gulp of water.

"What? NO! Oh my goodness, that is not why I called you. I'm going about this all wrong. Belle is my cousin."

"Yeah..."

"Your future sister-in-law." I smiled. "I have an idea of how I can save my store."

Bryce remained quiet, watching, listening.

"Belle inherited our grandparents' house—as well as a collection of extremely valuable Christmas ornaments that I'd love to get my hands on. I want to ask her and see if she will give them to me."

He sank back into his seat, leaving his food untouched. "That's what you were looking for in the basement the other night."

"Yes. I had only gone down to see if they were still there."

"I see. I'm sorry. I'm still not seeing how I can help you out with any of this."

He took a bite of his burger. Tasty as mine looked, I couldn't do the same, not until I got through this; though, I did have another few fries.

I wiped my mouth before continuing.

“Belle hates me. She and I have the worst relationship cousins can possibly have.”

He considered this. “I’m not all that close to her either.”

“But you are the groom’s brother. You got her little list of important dates, didn’t you?”

“Yeah.”

“And you’ll be going to everything on that list.”

“Out with it. What are you getting at?”

“I need you to date me,” I said, spitting it all out. “If you don’t have a girlfriend, let me be yours. Be my boyfriend. Take me with you to these events. I don’t have a lot of time. The people who own my building are foreclosing on the first of the year, and I need to be there. I need a reason to be near Belle so I can broach the subject.”

I expected more laughter and mockery at my offer, but to his credit and my vast relief, Bryce took me seriously. He rested his forearms on the table and stared me down.

“Why this insistence on moving so fast? Is foreclosure your only concern?”

“It’s for my dad. He always gave me a Christmas deadline for things, and I’m sticking to that, too.”

Granted, once I got the ornaments, I’d have to find a buyer for them, but still, I’d be another step in the right direction.

His brows clustered. “You’re her cousin. Why don’t you just give her a call?”

The sounds of shattered glass and broken snow globes echoed in my memory.

“Remember the part where I said she hates me? The night you saw me in her basement? She caught me there just shortly after, and let’s just say it didn’t go well. If I try bringing up the ornaments again without building some rapport with her first, she’ll think I’m awful.

“Even if I were to get her alone, I’d never be able to swing the conversation in that direction without stirring up old feelings and making her think I’m only after the ornaments.”

Bryce’s lips thinned. “So I bring you with me to these events...”

“And that gives me time to talk to Belle before she gets married and leaves on her honeymoon. It’ll give me time to warm up to her, to change our relationship so we can get to the point where she might be more open to hearing me. She might be more willing to give me the ornaments.”

I knew how it made me sound. Pathetic. Desperate. Ridiculous.

But still, Bryce didn’t knock me for it.

He set his half-eaten burger down. “You could just get a loan.”

A loan was out of the question. I’d done that to open the store in the first place. Between my apartment, the lease on my Prius, and business fees, I didn’t need another payment.

“I’m already in the red. The point is to dig myself out of it.”

Bryce inhaled and sank back into his seat. His penetrating gaze never left me, and for the first time since I got here, I wished he would look somewhere else.

But this was a job interview. I kept his gaze, pinning mine to it, showing him how determined I was.

“What about investors?” he asked.

“Who’s going to invest in my failing boutique store?”

Most investors only put their money into something if they were guaranteed to make a profit. I was still working on the profit part of things.

Minutes ticked past. Growing uneasy under his scrutiny, I ate a few more fries. Skimmed the bar and the elderly couple who’d made the bell jangle over the door. The lyrics to *Winter Wonderland* resonated overhead.

“You should have asked Colton,” Bryce finally said.

“Colton?”

“He’s on way better terms with Luke and Belle than I am. Luke can’t stand me. I’m not sure I’m the best one to help you with your problem.”

That was the worst news ever. Was he serious? “You—”

“Luke and I had a falling out. The only reason I’ve been invited to any of these things is because my mom keeps insisting I be included. But I’m the black sheep. You should have seen the way Luke freaked out when I showed up at their engagement party. He can’t stand me. I’m not sure how much help I’ll be.”

Details from *The Night of the Broken Snow Globe*, as I was beginning to call it, trickled in with vague recollection. Bryce standing on the outskirts of his family gathering. Luke avoiding placing a chair near where Bryce stood. Bryce following me to the basement...

...because he had no one else to connect with that night.

His brooding, sulky, hot vampire face. He’d acted like an outcast—because he *was* one.

Go figure. I picked the wrong brother.

Intermingling with my disappointment, I also felt sorry for him. Bryce cast his gaze toward the exit, and I suspected he was trying to hide how much this distance hurt him.

But the pain lingered behind his expressive eyes. I could tell—he wanted to be close to his brothers. He wanted to be included.

My sympathy at that realization strung deeper because I knew exactly how he felt. The reason I’d been so ashamed about the snow globe debacle hadn’t been because I’d been embarrassed. Or not solely for that reason, anyway. This wasn’t just about the ornaments for me.

I was doing this so I could get closer to Belle. If she and I had been closer, I never would have felt the need to sneak down to the basement in the first place. I wanted to make

things right with her. It would be nice to patch up our relationship and not cringe every time she and I were in the same room.

I knew how terrible it was to be unwanted by those you should be closest to.

“I can help you,” I said.

This amused him. Bryce shifted in his chair, crossing his arms over his chest like he had the other night, and smirked in a way that made me want to stare or drool. I couldn’t decide which (and probably did both).

He lifted his chin. “How?”

“I’ll be getting Belle to open up to me, remember? I can tell them all how amazing you are.”

His eyebrow twitched. “Am I amazing?”

“I—”

Not knowing him personally, I could neither confirm nor deny anything at this point.

“You certainly look amazing,” I said.

Bryce barked that laugh again. The sound won a smile from me, too.

He placed his hands on either side of his plate. “You’re willing to risk the future of your business on a fake relationship with the bad apple brother of the Holden family on the hopes that being with me will get you closer to the bride and convince her to give you some extremely valuable family heirlooms so you can then sell them?”

I squirmed. Did he have to say it so loudly?

“It sounds awful when you lay it all out like that.”

Bryce slung back in his seat and crossed his arms over his chest. His thumbs twitched on his biceps. “How long are we talking here? How long do you want to date me?”

“A month,” I said.

I'd thought through all the parameters. At least, as many as I could. I liked to cover my bases.

"We break up after Christmas and remain unattached thereafter," I concluded.

"Just like that?"

"Just like that. As I said, this is a business proposition. A business resuscitation. I fix my shop. You fix your relationship with your brother. We both win in the end."

"Okay." He rubbed his chin and sat back in his seat. "So we'll be dating in front of my family. This will mean—"

My body temperature climbed, but I wasn't going to shy away, not now. "Holding hands, putting arms around one another. Kissing if it's necessary, but nothing more than that."

"Necessary, huh?" His eyes glinted. "Who gets to decide that?"

I swallowed, working to keep my emotions in check. To keep my gaze from flicking to his mouth again. That was a beautiful mouth.

"Necessary situations could include a range of possible scenarios. If we get caught under the mistletoe, if we're playing a game with your family, if they require proof because they somehow don't believe we're really together—"

Bryce chuckled and placed his hand on mine in the center of the table. His skin was warm. The touch was so startling, it shot a zing of electricity straight to my shoulder.

I jerked my hand away with the sense that we were kids in a back alley making a pact to keep a secret to ourselves.

"I'm in," he said, unfazed by my reaction. "I'll do it."

My brows lifted. "You—you will?"

Just like that?

I expected more arguing. I expected him to throw more reasons at me about why I was insane and petty, about how he would go with me to talk to Belle but wouldn't stoop low

enough to deceive his family, about how I was a coward and should just be straightforward.

All of which were probably true, but none of which would get me to my end goal.

Then again, this man had called himself a bad apple. He was willing to deceive his family for a total stranger.

Maybe I'd been wrong before. Luke and Dawson were absolutely trustworthy...but that didn't mean their brother was.

What was I getting myself into? I'd thought I'd thought this through, but had I? Really?

Before I could rescind, there was that smile again.

"I agree. Allie, will you be my Christmas girlfriend?" His eyes twinkled like the tree on the stage in the corner.

My insides were doing the conga. They whirled up one side of my chest and down the other, stirring everything inside of me so nothing was where it should be.

If I was going to back out, now was the time.

Then again, how would that sound? I make an outlandish offer. When he accepts, I pull the rug? If he didn't think I was crazy now, he certainly would then.

I had to do this.

"I—yes. Thank you."

We finished our meal in relative silence after that. I was too lost in my thoughts and in my embarrassment over the situation to initiate conversation, and I didn't know what Bryce was thinking.

About football, probably.

Was he the kind of guy who devoted hours to watching men in shoulder pads and cleats toss a pointy-tipped ball around a field and get knocked into for it?

To my surprise, he paid for my lunch. He insisted and winked at me when I protested, and so I let him. I slipped into

my coat and met him at the door. The blast of winter air once we stepped outside was exactly what my cheeks needed.

Bryce sniffed. He gazed at the mercantile across the street, lifting his hand to wave at the car passing on the street before turning to me.

“Colton and I just opened an ice-skating rink on that corner lot where Animal Days was held. I need to check things out Sunday evening since it will be closed. You want to join me?”

Ice skating. I’d never been ice skating. “Like a date?”

His eyes smoldered. “We’re dating, aren’t we? We’ll have the whole rink to ourselves.”

I tucked my hair behind my ear. Then I realized my hair was already snugly back, and there was no point. It’d been a nervous gesture, one that was probably more than obvious to him. I wish I had something to do with my hands.

“I—oh, I guess so. It’s only in front of the family, so I just didn’t think...”

“Bridgewater is a small town,” Bryce said. “It might not hurt to get some practice in.”

Was he still talking about ice skating?

Oh, dating. Being around each other. Right.

“Practice? I’ve had boyfriends before. I know how it goes.”

“It’s different with a practical stranger. Might be good to practice touching you so it looks as natural as possible when it’s showtime. Can’t have you jerking away from me if my hand contacts yours.”

My mouth went dry. I couldn’t drag my gaze away from his face.

He was ridiculously handsome. Every attractive quality had been put together to compile his features. This man was illegally gorgeous—and he wanted to practice touching me?

I couldn't deny I was eager for the prospect. It'd been a long time since Trevor and I had broken up, and there hadn't been anyone since.

"You—you could practice now," I said. The words were too shallow, too breathy.

Bryce's brow quirked. He took a step. "How's this?"

I forced myself not to back toward my car, but I wasn't sure I succeeded. "I think you need to come a little closer. Maybe that way, I'll be more comfortable."

A few more steps. The molecules between us heated, constricting my airways all the more.

"This?"

Not more comfortable. I was an unlit firework awaiting the approaching flame.

"Um."

His warm hand found mine. The touch was so striking—I was expecting it, for goodness' sake. Regardless, it exploded inside of me.

He twined only a few fingers with mine, gazing at me as though he were trying to figure me out.

"This?"

"Good," I said, the word coming out on a breath and riding the visible steam with it.

"You know," his voice was soft, "there's something else I need from you too."

I was bewitched, ensnared in the moment, and befuddled by this unexpected interaction. It took several moments before I could reply. "What's that?"

"Your number. I get a lot of calls and didn't save yours when you called. I need to add you to my contacts."

I freed my hand and used that as an excuse to step away. I had to clear my head.

The December air seeped in, dispersing the haze that had settled into place with him standing so close.

“Oh, sure.” I practically had his memorized for all the times I stared at it since calling him earlier.

I gave him my number, waiting while he tapped in my info, and then we stood together. Staring. Again.

“So?” he said.

“So what?”

“You never gave me an answer. Ice skating?”

I was never this scatterbrained. “Yes. I’d love to.”

“I’ll call you.” He gestured to the monstrous red man-machine parked next to me. “This is me.”

His pickup made my car look like a bug in comparison. It had a lift kit, huge tires, shocks, and all the trimmings.

I didn’t know much about cars or pickups, but I knew additions like that were pricey. Did that mean he was wealthy?

Did it matter?

Kind of. It was hot, if we’re being honest here.

Which, apparently, I was.

I was being vulnerably honest with total strangers. A handsome, wealthy, bad-boy cowboy who had just agreed to be my fake boyfriend and take me ice skating.

“This is me,” I said, pointing to my Prius.

I loved my little car. It was sleek, black, and classy. And it had me making outrageous payments that I told myself I could keep up with.

I still could. I *totally* could. Once I got those ornaments.

Assuming Bryce was true to his word and wouldn’t rat me out in the meantime.

## Chapter Six

Victory was what I lived for. I loved succeeding, and every time I did, it made me want to dance. However, that usual triumphant feeling I had when something was going my way never came.

Doubts crept in when I got back to my apartment after closing the store that evening, slinking like my cat keeping to the wall as she entered my living room.

Sunny meowed and rubbed her face against my hand. I petted her, feeling all kinds of doubtful. Bryce had seemed nice enough. He'd agreed to help me after I agreed to help him...

But worry still nagged at me.

"He said yes," I told Sunny.

The cat's tail twitched as she stared with her big eyes.

"I mean, I figured he would, and I hoped he would, but I totally went out on a limb—and he caught me before I fell off of it. He said *yes*."

I rubbed the cat's ears.

"But he also said I was making the wrong choice. That I'd picked the wrong brother. You don't think he'll tell anyone, do you?"

He didn't seem like the type of guy to hang my dirty laundry out to dry.

Scratch that. This was a handsome man. There would be no touching of laundry whatsoever here.

I shook off the absurd thought. I couldn't help but worry he would back out or that he would make me the laughingstock of family functions. Why hadn't I thought to make him sign a non-disclosure agreement or something?

Hours had passed, and he hadn't texted or called me once about ice skating.

Maybe it'd been a fluke. Maybe he'd jokingly agreed to date me and had then promptly called Luke and Belle, using me as a reason to get close to them, just like I was kind of doing to him.

Was he like that?

Sunday morning, I'd still had no word from him. I dressed for church, readying my brown hair into long waves and slipping into my cutest boots, before strolling out to the sidewalk. The church building was close enough, and the sky was clear, so I decided to walk.

Bex's apartment door across the courtyard opened, and laughter sounded, along with a sweet, high-pitched voice. "Dawson! Dawson wait!"

Dawson's shirt and tie were evident in his open coat. His hair was slicked to the side with gel, and he bent and opened his arms to Paisley, who leaped into his embrace.

"I thought you were leaving without me," she said, burying her face into his neck. His hands smashed the frilly skirt of her sparkly black-and-red dress as he held her.

"I'd never leave without you. I was just going out to the truck to grab something. Hey, there, Miss Allie."

I smiled before digging my hand from its pocket and waved. "Morning."

"You headed to church?" Kody asked as he stepped out of their unit.

Like his stepfather, he was dressed in a shirt and tie with his hair slightly spiked at the front. The eight-year-old boy crinkled his nose, which brought his glasses up higher onto his face.

“I am. Are you going with your brothers?” I asked.

Dawson placed Paisley onto the sidewalk. His direct glance brought heat to my cheeks that I couldn’t account for.

It was an innocent question, wasn’t it? I knew his brothers. Why shouldn’t I ask if he was going with them?

“I don’t rightly know where they go on Sundays,” Dawson said moments later. “We’ll be headed here in Burley, same as you. Like always.”

More heat plastered my cheeks. I gave off a nervous laugh.

I couldn’t help that I wanted to see Bryce again today, could I? It was curiosity, plain and simple. I wasn’t even sure where he lived, but of course, he wouldn’t be at church here in Burley if he, like Luke, lived in Bridgewater.

Did he? Personal details like that would be helpful if we were going to make this work.

“Sure, I’ll see you over there,” I said, trying to play it off like the conversation was as innocent as I’d meant it to be.

I didn’t normally have a hard time sitting and listening to the sermon. My eyes didn’t normally wander to the rest of the congregation. Bex must have noticed how much I fidgeted because she sent me a text in the middle of the reminder of Christ’s miraculous birth.

*Bex: Everything okay? You seem a little distracted.*

*Me: I’m fine.*

*Bex: You looking for someone? Dawson said you asked about his brothers.*

Face.

Palm.

I swallowed, so glad she couldn’t see my face or the expression of embarrassment I was sure marred my features that very moment. Then again, Bryce and I were dating. Sort of.

Why shouldn’t I say anything about it?

Me: *You'll never believe me if I told you.*

Bex: *Okay, now you have to. What's going on?*

My palms grew unaccountably clammy. Should I say anything? Bryce and I hadn't gone over the parameters of our relationship at all, but he wouldn't fault me for gushing over him to my girlfriends, would he?

It was what I'd do if I were actually in a relationship with someone.

Me: *What would you think if I told you I was dating Bryce?*

Bex didn't reply immediately, and her lack of response made me wish I wasn't currently sitting in a pew surrounded by so many people. A small family peered in my direction. The mom's eyes flicked to the phone in my hand and then back to my face. She sniffed in disapproval, presumably at the fact that I was on my phone in church—something *my* mom would give me all kinds of crap for if she saw it.

I craned my neck toward where Bex and Dawson sat a few rows back and to the right, closer to the window. Paisley and Kody sat beside Bex, their heads bent over a notebook Kody was drawing in. Sophia sat on Bex's lap, tapping on the book she held.

Dawson's arm was around Bex's shoulders. His handsome face was bent toward hers as her thumbs flew over her phone.

I gaped in prolonged agony, unable to make out his expression. His brows were gathered. His eyes flicked toward me.

I hurried to face forward.

I was in for it now. What was Dawson going to think? Would he berate me for dating Bryce, the self-proclaimed black sheep of his family?

Was Bryce really on the outskirts of his family, or was that only his perception? He'd mentioned Luke didn't like him much for something that had happened, but did that dislike include the other brothers, too?

Did Dawson feel the same?

Bex: *OM goodness, when did this happen?*

I wiped my palms on my skirt. So much for covering all the parameters. I really should have thought through this a little more before spouting it.

But Bex was my friend. I would tell my friends if I'd started dating someone who looked like Bryce Holden.

The fact that she was married to his brother was a minor detail.

Me: *Yesterday. We met up for lunch and hit it off.*

I hoped I wasn't sticking my foot in my mouth. As long as I acted like everything was as it should be, it would be fine. Even if Bryce tattled about my offer, I would play it off.

Bex: *That's exciting! I like Bryce. I don't know him all that well. He's kind of quiet at family things, but he's nice and says funny things.*

Me: *You think Dawson will mind?*

Bex: *Why would he? I'm so happy. We could be sisters!*

I lowered my phone. What was I going to say to that?

Anything I said would be an outright lie. This relationship wasn't going to go that far.

A pit of guilt lodged in my stomach as I turned my ears back on and took on the preacher's words. God didn't condone dishonesty. In fact, not lying was one of the major commandments.

Bryce and I weren't lying, though. Not if we both agreed to actually date. It wasn't a deception, not really.

*This is going to turn out fine*, I told myself, looking up at the cross hanging feet above the preacher's head and praying God saw things the way I did.

\* \* \*

I needed something to do while I waited for this bad seed to call like he said he would. Since my conversation with Bex and Dawson, I half expected an enraged message from Bryce calling everything off.

Another reason we should have signed something. I couldn't afford to have him back out, not now that the ball was rolling.

Once I got home from church—after deflecting questions from Bex and Dawson and the insinuation that they should have Bryce and me over for dinner—I changed into some jeans and a soft pink sweater with small white poms all over it and made a quick salad for lunch.

Sunny sat on the seat beside me, licking her paws and purring.

“What do you say, kitty cat?” I said once I cleaned my dishes and returned the blueberries, strawberries, and greens back to the fridge. “Should we put our Christmas stuff up?”

I didn't have much by way of Christmas decorations, but what I did have was pretty doggone cute, if I said so myself. My tree was half the size of the one Bex and Dawson had been pulling in the other day. And my apartment didn't have much storage space. Most of the things I had boxed up in totes were stacked in the second bedroom closet.

After tapping my Christmas playlist and throwing a batch of cookies in the oven for good measure, I carefully removed totes and unstacked items until I was able to reach the tall box in the back corner. I hefted it out to the living room first, followed by the other tote I had labeled *Christmas*.

I moved the lamp I normally kept on the end table nearest to the front window and set it on my desk in the second bedroom. Then I placed my little fiber-optic tree on its red tree skirt, plugged it in, and turned it on.

The skirt draped down to touch the carpet and made the table look like it was wearing a dress. Light didn't exactly flood the living room's corner. It was more subtle, streaming in waves of emerald, crimson, and sapphire.

I unburied my two boxes of ornaments, also in bright colors rather than the muted traditional red and green, and slung them each one by one on the tree. Sunny sat on the couch's armrest, head crooked to one side as if wondering what I was up to. Occasionally, he lifted a paw to bat at one of the ornaments, watching it waver.

"This isn't a toy for you," I told him, scratching him behind the ears.

Buzzing came from the counter behind me. Sunny's head swerved in that direction at the same time mine did. My phone danced across the counter as it vibrated.

The sound was an arrow that shot me dead center.

With a burst of adrenaline, I bounded over the open tote, swan-dived for the phone, accidentally knocking something from the counter's lip into the sink below, and I cringed at the subsequent crash. From the dirt that spewed over the sink, I knew it was the flowerpot I'd brought home from the store the last time I'd bought groceries.

Hoping the pot wasn't broken, I swiped the screen.

"Hello?"

"Hey. It's Bryce."

Had his voice always been that deep? Or that appealing?

"Hey," I said, knowing I sounded a little breathless and hoping he didn't notice.

It was *not* because of him. It was also not because I'd been nervous he would cancel—while also being eager to spend the evening with him and get another dose of that parting touch—or that I was keen to see if he minded that I'd told his brother we were a thing.

Like it or not, Bryce was invigorating my humdrum life. I had to be careful not to expect too much from him.

"You still up for ice skating?"

Nothing about Dawson. Did that mean he didn't know I'd told them—or that he knew and didn't care?

“You bet,” I said. “When?”

“Can you come out to the corner field on Five Hundred around eight tonight?”

They were just words. There was no reason for my body to react as though a bear was approaching my tent in the woods. I was not intimidated by the prospect of time with him in the slightest.

“Tonight is great,” I squeaked, cursing the hitch in my voice. I worked to clear it. “Eight it is. Do I need to bring anything with me?”

“Bundle up because it’ll be cold. See you soon?”

“Sure,” I said, though the single syllable came out as though I’d just swallowed a mouthful of cinnamon. “Soon.”

I tapped *end* and lowered my phone as though it were a brick. Sunny’s tail twitched as she eyed the imposing tree. She rose onto her hind legs and batted another ornament with her paw, this time succeeding at knocking it from the branch.

Shaking my head, smiling, I padded across the carpet, bent for the bulb, and held it in front of the cat. Sunny bopped it a few more times. I mussed the cat’s head, hung the ornament once more, and then scooped her up, needing the warmth of a body close to mine.

As it usually did, her motor kicked in almost at once. The soothing rumble of her purr reverberated against me, and I cuddled her close, glancing at the clock.

“He said eight, cat.”

Sunny’s ears perked. She tipped up and nuzzled her wet nose against the edge of my jaw. I laughed, scratching her behind the ears a few times before setting her to the ground.

*He’s just a man.* No need to let a pretty face or the electricity in his touch throw me off.

It was a good thing the weather would be cold tonight, because I was planning on keeping as much of that cool as I could.

\* \* \*

In the spring, this corner of the field was hopping with cars and families all out to see some newborn animals, to enjoy the bouncy house, and have a picnic. The field was vacant now except for Bryce's decked-out pickup parked near the newly assembled building marking the entrance to the skating rink.

Lights as tall as streetlamps were positioned at each corner of the basketball court-sized rectangle of ice. A line of benches was situated between the skating rink and the unlit building.

The electric nature of my car had taken some getting used to, but I didn't mind the quiet now as I pulled up next to Bryce's truck and shut the car off. I slipped my hands into the thin gloves sitting on the passenger seat, tucked my brown hair beneath the matching beanie, dabbed on some lip gloss using the rearview mirror, and stepped out.

Frosty air caressed my cheeks. I scanned the open parking area and then turned.

"You made it," Bryce said, stepping out of the shadows around the white building. His face was cast into shadows that I wished weren't there. I wanted to read his eyes, to see if he was as certain about our agreement as he'd seemed to be when we'd finished lunch the day before.

"I did," I said. "This is looking good."

"Thanks. So are you."

I dipped my chin and took a step away from my car. I wasn't sure what to do. Was he only going to show me the setup tonight? I'd been under the impression we'd be skating.

"You have a good time at church?"

I jerked my head back. The question had been simple enough. To my relief, the quirk on Bryce's lips suggested he wasn't upset.

"You talked to Dawson," I said, falling into step beside him.

“He mentioned you were talking about me.”

“Do you mind?”

“I didn’t know you and Bex were so close.”

“Yeah,” I said. “She works at my store.”

“That’s cool.”

I needed to shift the focus away from me. Clearing my throat, I gestured to the building. “So this is it?”

He turned and indicated the building. “Colt and I just put that up. People rent skates there. Pay for their fare at that window.” He indicated the darkened glass with a small counter outside its panes.

“That’s great. How long has it been open?”

“About a month now.” Sure enough, I glanced at the ice and saw lines from people’s skates scraped across its surface.

“Is there a time limit or anything like that?”

“Nope. People can skate for as long as they can stand the cold.”

I pictured the process. Walk in, tell your size, get a pair of skates, and broach the ice. “So it’s like bowling, except instead of shoes, they get ice skates?”

“Yes, ma’am. Ready to get yours?”

“I’ve never done this before,” I admitted.

“That’s all right. I’ve been a fair few times. I can help you.”

Together, we strolled to the shack. Bryce worked a key into the lock and let me in first, flicking the lights to life to reveal an intimate area with shelves beneath the window where people would line up to purchase skates and passes.

A stand was ready to hold a tablet to swipe credit cards with, though there wasn’t one in place. Probably because it was closed.

“We’re okay to be here? I mean…” I took in the line of ice skates racked across from the register.

“It’s my place,” he said. “The only opinion that matters is mine.”

My stomach sizzled. “Why open this? I mean, you have your farm, right?”

As far as I knew, he and Colton farmed together.

“Sure do, but I’m a firm believer in taking advantage of an opportunity. My family and I loved skating when we were kids, and I wanted to put this land to good use while it’s just sitting here all winter long. It’s been a hit so far.”

“So you started another business,” I said with amazement.

“Got a few. Might as well add another.”

I gaped at him. “A few? How many businesses do you have?”

“I run an online business selling stuff. Got another one for landscaping in the summertime. I help Colton with the farm. The skating rink isn’t too hard to handle.”

This man had a handful of businesses...and I was struggling to manage just one. I wasn’t sure whether I should be impressed or unsettled. Truth be told, I was a little of both.

Bryce turned toward the wall of skates. Shelves upon shelves were stacked, and each small cubby held a pair.

“What size are you?”

“Eight,” I said.

Bryce selected a pair. “Have a seat there. You can leave your shoes in these handy little cubbies.” He indicated the open shelves.

“You’ve thought of everything.”

“Just about.” He selected a pair of skates for himself and sank onto the bench across from me, removed his boots, and slid them into the bottommost cubby in the lineup.

“Won’t these tear up the floor?” I asked, examining the skate. A single blade cut across the bottom of the boot, and the

thought of balancing my weight on that knife edge added a lump in my throat.

“They got a cover on ‘em. You take that off before you hit the ice.” He secured the laces on his skates and rose. “You ready?”

“As I’ll ever be,” I said, taking his hand and joining him on the snowy path toward the ice.

A low wall encircled the rectangular rink. I wondered how he’d managed to have so much ice when we hadn’t gotten that much snow lately. He probably had a machine or something to pour the water and keep it frozen.

With a finger on the latch, he unhooked it, opened the gate, and gestured. “After you.”

Lifting my chin, determined to master this from the get-go, I clung to the gate and stepped onto the ice.

“Nice and easy now,” he said.

I fought the eye roll. “You go on. I’ll figure this out. Is it like rollerblading?” I’d been rollerblading plenty of times. Mostly as a kid at the skating rink in Twin Falls.

Bryce still had yet to step onto the ice. He was watching me.

I didn’t want him watching me.

“Sort of,” he said. “Rollerblading gives you more to balance on. The best way is to just go for it.”

My feet slipped. I made a mad grab for the side rail. “You just go for it,” I snapped, clutching the railing and cursing the instability.

“All right, then.”

He did. He zoomed off on the ice, keeping his balance like it was nothing, and circled back to me again. “Come on in. The ice is fine.”

“Show off.”

“Just doin’ what I’m told. You joining me or what?”

I wasn't about to be outdone by a man.

This was just like rollerblading, I told myself, setting off with my arms out on either side of me. The cold air rushed past my cheeks, but the victory of remaining upright won a smile.

"That's the way," Bryce said. He skated to join my side. "Looks like you got your rhythm," he said when we'd made a full circle around the ring.

"I'm a fast learner."

"With everything?" he asked.

"I try to be."

The sound of our blades scraped the ice and left little silver trails behind us.

"Tell me about you, Allie," he said.

I concentrated on my feet for a moment longer. "What do you want to know?"

"Your life story. What you want to be when you grow up. What you think about when you think no one is paying attention."

I eyed him. "Why do you want to know so much?"

He pivoted and skated backward. "I've been with girls before where it's only been attraction and nothing else. I want to get to know you so if anyone asks, I can talk about you like you're close to me. Like you're important."

He peered behind him and then swiveled around to skate at my slow pace by my side.

I wasn't sure what to say to that. He'd caught me completely off-guard.

I wasn't sure what I'd expected tonight. For his nearness to overwhelm me, yeah, I'd looked forward to that. But to have him act like he actually cared?

That wasn't part of the deal at all.

For a moment, the only sound between us was the scuffing of our skates against the ice.

“You’re really taking this seriously, aren’t you?” I said.

“Is there some other way I should take it? I made you a promise. I said I’d help you. I don’t like to do things by halves.”

I would have peered at him, but I had the feeling that would throw off what little balance I had. I stuck out my arms and concentrated on moving my feet.

“Then I will, too,” I said. “So what was first? My life story?”

We approached the rink’s curve. Bryce braced a hand on my elbow, helping me as we changed direction. “Cliffs Notes version,” he said.

“I was born in Utah,” I said once we were set going straight again.

“Where?”

“St. George.”

“Continue.”

When he said life story, he’d meant life story. I relayed the few times we’d moved and how Mom had decided to settle in her hometown close to her parents. I talked about how hard it was living somewhere so small, but Bridgewater finally grew on me so that by the time I graduated high school, it was hard to leave.

“Then why did you leave?” he asked as we curved again and approached the gate we’d entered the rink through. “Why move to Burley?”

I wasn’t about to tell him my frustrations with Mom’s helicopter tendencies, so I went with the other reason. “There wasn’t anywhere in Bridgewater to open a store. Even if there was, it wouldn’t have lasted long there.”

I waited for him to ask more, but he didn’t, so I went on. “My dad passed away from cancer about two years ago, and

that was when I opened up The Flora and Fauna.”

There was so much more to that story. It was painful to think of. Dad’s struggle through chemo. The stinging helplessness of watching him suffer through treatments. The times he’d come home from the doctor and expressed the terrible news that the treatments were ineffective.

The last days of his life were as stark as touching broken glass: holding his hand as he’d slipped from this world to the next, the utter and complete stillness in that moment, and just how badly I missed him now that he was gone.

“I’m sorry to hear about your dad,” Bryce said after several quiet strokes on the ice.

“Yeah. Thanks.”

I didn’t want to dwell on it. Christmas was hard enough without him around, without having to tell someone about the circumstances that played in my heart louder than bells.

“Your turn,” I said. “What’s your life story?”

“I was born in Twin Falls and grew up in Burley. I went to college, got a degree in Ag, and came right back here to figure out where I wanted to settle.

“My parents were divorced not long after that, and I moved in with my mom and Kyler to help how I could. I knew living on her own was hard for her.”

I chanced a glance in his direction. His attention was on the building, giving me a glorious view of his jawline. From the hard lines on his face, I could tell something about his parents’ divorce bothered him.

Was he upset that they’d separated? Who wouldn’t be? Mom missed Dad now as it was. I could only imagine the toll on your emotions having your parents leave one another intentionally would be.

“That’s sweet of you,” I said. “To stay close so she had some company.”

“I’m glad you see it that way.” Bryce’s tone was as hard as the line of his brow.

“Why do you say that?”

We approached the building and followed the curve around again. My feet were growing more and more accustomed to the motions by now, and I experienced a sense of freedom on these slits of metal that I hadn't anticipated.

“Not all my family thinks it's good of me to move in with her. Luke, especially. He was annoyed and accused me of mooching off our mom. Like I needed to.”

“You own all these businesses,” I said, trying to follow.

“Exactly. I was just there to help, but when Dawson had his accident, it got a little crowded in Mom's house.”

“So that's why he went to live at Belle's,” I said.

Bex had relayed the circumstances to me about her situation with Dawson at the farmhouse last spring as well. That had been an epic way to meet. If he hadn't moved in while she and her kids were living there too, the two of them would probably never have met.

And they were the most beautiful couple now. I couldn't imagine them *not* being together.

“Bingo. After that, I talked to my mom and Kyler and figured it was time. She was well-set. Kyler is a senior in high school now, and since I was no longer needed, I found my own place.”

“Where?”

“Renting a house in Bridgewater. That town needs some expansion. I didn't have a whole lot of other options.”

“Don't you dare,” I said.

Bridgewater was perfect the way it was. People lived there *because* they wanted the small-town feel. Expanding that town seemed as criminal as deforesting Yellowstone.

Bryce cast that devilish twist of his mouth in my direction, and the sight nearly made me skid.

“What? The town is so small it could be a flea circus,” he said.

I laughed.

“I’m only thinking of building a housing complex,” he said. “Maybe if there were more places for people to live, they could get a good shuffle going through it. Change things up once in a while.”

Housing complex? “Like an apartment building?”

“Townhouses,” he said. “People could rent or buy—either one. Need to bring the town into the twentieth century.”

“We’re in the twenty-first century.” I laughed again.

“Well, we need to bring it there, too. It might be something else my family will hold over my head, but I can’t live my life worrying about what others think all the time. I’d never get anything done.”

That was unexpected. I still hadn’t figured out just what the beef was between him and his family or why he considered himself the Holden Black Sheep.

“Your family wouldn’t approve of you building townhouses?”

“I don’t know,” he said, slowing and pulling off to the railing barricading the ice rink from the gathered benches and tables. “I don’t really care.”

“It kinda sounds like you do, though.”

Bryce’s expression hardened. He cast his glance toward the darkness beyond the lit rink. With the stars glimmering overhead, the moonless night was drenched in chills and shadow. His breath escaped from his mouth in visible steam.

“It just seems like nothing I do will clear my name, so I might as well just do the best I can, you know? That’s all I mean.”

Before I could respond, he took off on the ice again, catching me off guard. I let out a squeal and nearly lost my balance, holding out my arms to catch myself. Laughing, Bryce made his way in my direction again.

I tried to meet him halfway, but my arms windmilled. My feet went out from under me.

Bryce didn't get there in time. I fell right into him, taking out his feet in the process as well. He crashed on his back against the ice.

My hands went out, but it was no use. I biffed it, too, landing—yep.

Right on top of him.

The two of us slid a few inches before stopping.

He didn't push me off. If anything, his arms tightened around me. He lifted his head and grinned.

"I knew this was a good idea," he said, making me all the more aware of my body sandwiching his to the ice and of the sparks coursing between us from the impact.

He smelled so good, and my thoughts went berserk, slipping and sliding on their own personal sheet of ice.

"Sorry," I said, attempting to push myself up and away from his warmth.

"You don't hear me complaining, do you?" He grinned again.

We both got to our feet. He regained his balance much faster than I did, which was fortunate because I fumbled and nearly fell again. Bryce caught my arms, studying me.

Time stretched and stilled. Bryce kept his hands on my arms and planted his gaze on mine. His eyes gleamed, ensnaring me with the glimmers of light reflecting from the lights overhead and the obvious admiration lingering there. I somehow shivered and melted under the weight of that glance.

"I think touching you is easy," he said after several prolonged moments.

"I...is that a good thing?"

"Won't be hard to pretend there's something between us when it comes to the search tomorrow."

I had no idea what he was talking about. “What search?”

“It was on Belle’s paper thing. You should come with me to pick out some trees for her porch. The whole clan is going to be there. You should get the chance to talk to her. You ready for that?”

“I—yes. Thank you. Bryce,” I said, unsure how to continue.

Considering how Dawson already knew Bryce and I were somewhat of an item, it wouldn’t be that difficult to let the others know.

Or would it? His mom had seemed nice enough. Would she care that we were dating?

I couldn’t see why. It wasn’t a very *Mom* kind of thing to hold grudges against your own kids, especially not since Bryce had said he’d moved in with her so he could help support her.

Bryce skated his way back to the barricade once more. I followed and grasped the railing, relieved to have something solid to hold on to.

“Why does your family consider you the black sheep? Is that their opinion or your perception?”

Bryce wrinkled his nose and lowered his eyes to his hands. “It’s mostly Luke’s opinion, I guess. Although he’s shared so much dirt about me, I wouldn’t be surprised if they all felt that way. Except Colton.”

I couldn’t see that all of them did. Then again, I didn’t know them well. But Dawson hadn’t mentioned anything about not liking Bryce.

I was glad Bryce at least had a friend in Colton. Brothers should have one another’s backs.

Leigh and I weren’t all that close, but we didn’t have a problem with each other either. I was sure if I really needed her, she’d be there for me.

“Did he partner with you on this skating rink, or is this your thing?” I asked, casting my gaze on the vacant rink. Lines

from our escapades made circles on the ice, along with the spot where we'd collided and biffed it.

Where he'd held me to him.

"This is my thing," Bryce said, gesturing to the ice. "The only thing Colt does is farming."

That made sense. "And he doesn't think badly of you for... whatever happened?"

I wasn't going to push him for details. Bryce had asked for the Cliff's Notes version of my life. If he wanted to share with me, that could all come in time, couldn't it?

Not that we had that much of it.

I had to shake myself. This—whatever this was—between us was a fabrication. A means to an end. And if I was going to help him with his part, I supposed I needed to know specifically what made him feel like he was ostracized.

"You going to tell me what happened?" I asked, rotating to face the white building, then resting both of my arms on the railing.

"Lots of things happen."

"Bryce."

The muscles in his neck worked. His eyes were guarded as he glanced at me. "You had enough? I think we can safely say the ice is set and ready for opening day this next weekend."

Without waiting for a reply, he skidded toward the gate and opened it, standing by and waiting for me. I inhaled a long, cold breath and released it slowly. Then I nodded and made my way toward him.

I couldn't help but wonder what he was hiding from me or why he felt the need to do so.

## Chapter Seven

I hadn't heard from Bryce for days, so I assumed he was mad at me for asking about his family conflict. Since he didn't say anything about it, I opted not to either. This was a fake relationship, after all. We'd be getting together for the tree hunt tomorrow anyway.

I checked over my social media ads and grimaced at the amount of money being spent on them. Considering what I knew about the clicks-to-impression ratio, the ads themselves were working great. A few additional customers had come into the store as well.

"Things seem to be picking up," Bex said once she finished a transaction. The woman, who had bought a dress and a pair of earrings, carried her purchases to the door, which dinged on her way out.

I hugged the roll of gift wrap to my chest, setting it on the shelf behind the counter where it was usually kept. The snowflake-patterned paper was a hit.

"The ads seem to be doing pretty good," I said. "Time will tell, though."

"I hope it tells good things."

"You and me both."

"Dawson and I went to see *Big Plans* last weekend."

"Oh, yeah?" I'd been interested in the trailer I'd seen of the romantic comedy but hadn't had the inclination to see it at the theater this time. Generally, I was more of a wait-to-stream-it kind of gal.

Then again, if I had a handsome cowboy like she did...

I could ask Bryce. The two of us needed to be seen around town together, didn't we? Or would it be better to take things slow and stick to our main objectives rather than getting too involved together?

That would make things easier when it was time to split.

"That reminds me," I said. "I had this thought."

Bex strode toward the rack of dresses the woman had been picking through. She straightened one of the hangers that had been jutting out.

"You know how the theater streams all these ads from small businesses around town? I called to see about streaming something for The Flora and Fauna."

"That's a great idea," Bex said.

The roll of wrapping paper rolled off from its place.

"Would you be willing to be in the ad's video?" I asked her, returning the wrapping paper.

I couldn't do it all myself.

"Sure," Bex said. "We could get Paisley to ogle a few of the bracelets and stuff. Or I'm sure we could find someone from the complex to act like a happy customer."

"I'd prefer having an actual happy customer."

"Maybe that's something you could do," Bex suggested. "Post a notice about looking for reviews. Reviews are huge, and if you got a handful of people talking about what they love about The Flora on the video, you could stream it at the theater and maybe use it on social media, too!"

"You know, that's not a bad idea," I said, a flicker of excitement shining in my chest.

I loved prospects. I loved brightness and lights at the ends of tunnels, and this seemed like exactly the kind of hope I'd been searching for.

My whole scheme with Bryce was a definite move in the right direction. I could see how things went while cutting down trees with Belle and the Holdens on Thursday, but I couldn't bank everything on that panning out.

I still had to give saving the store all I had, and this ad idea would help.

"Let's do it," I said. "See if you can find someone who might be willing to record the ad for us."

"Dawson might," she said.

"Isn't he a little silly?"

"He's a goof, but he knows when to be serious. Or hey—what about asking Bryce?"

Her mention of his name lit like the edges of a Stop sign. I reeled, pausing in place as I got the wrapping paper to remain on the shelf by moving the roll of tape in front of it.

"Bryce? You think he might help?"

Bex snorted. "You'd know that better than I would. Didn't you say you guys were a thing?"

"I—we went skating at his new rink," I said.

"He's been over there a few nights this week, from what I understand," Bex said, pulling out the sleeve of another dress as though it were an item she hadn't seen before. Her gaze tripped along the floral fabric before she released her hold. The dress swayed back with the rest.

"Oh, yeah?" I grimaced.

That was probably something a girlfriend would know.

"Yeah, he's been working in the shop with Colton, getting equipment ready for planting season in the spring. Then I guess he's been overseeing that skating rink in the evenings."

Maybe he was experiencing the same misgivings I was. Maybe he hadn't contacted me in days because he didn't want to overstep this whole fake thing either.

Or maybe he was just busy.

My phone chirped from my pocket, and I lifted it. A wave of relief swept over me at the sight of Bryce's name in the screen's little text bubble.

Bryce: *You still coming with us to the mountains for a tree? Sounds like everyone's heading out after four tomorrow.*

After four? That meant we could close the store early. Bex already had the afternoon off—she was probably planning on going.

I could ask her, I supposed.

“Here's Bryce now,” I said, feeling Bex's eyes on me as I skimmed my phone.

I was also mildly gratified at having the proof to back up my foot-in-mouth from last Sunday. I wasn't full of it, people. Bryce and I were a thing.

Such as it was.

Me: *I'd love to come. Belle is going to be there, right?*

Bryce: *Well, yeah. Paper, remember?*

I refused to feel embarrassed for asking. I had to keep my eye on the prize, and Belle's ornaments were what I was after. I had given my copy of her paper that listed wedding events to my mom, after all. Bryce probably didn't know that little detail.

Maybe I should have Mom text me a copy.

Me: *Great. Should I meet you somewhere?*

Bryce: *I'll pick you up.*

The words brought an all-new tremble to my fingers. Bryce would be picking me up. He would be coming to my apartment. Why that made me nervous, I wasn't sure.

Bryce: *That means you'll have to tell me where you live.*

I was surprised Dawson hadn't said anything. Then again, I still didn't know how close the two of them were. He may have said Bex and I were friends, but that could have been the extent of it.

Me: *I live a few doors across from Dawson and Bex. We're neighbors. #9.*

Bryce: *Sweet. Be ready to Paul Bunyan it up. See you tomorrow.*

Me: *And we'll tell everyone then?*

Bryce: *Tell them what?*

Tell them what? Honestly.

Bryce: *That you're into me?*

My mouth fought the inclination to lift.

Me: *No way. You're into me.*

Bryce: *You threw yourself at me while we were skating.*

Me: *I was testing your reflexes.*

Bryce: *And?*

Me: *Razor-sharp.*

Bryce: *Sounds painful.*

I sent him an eye roll emoji.

“Good conversation, I take it.”

I jerked. I hadn't realized Bex was still here—or that my grin was stretched wider than the Rocky Mountains.

She smirked at me. “I get it. I see it. It's cute. When was the last time you dated anyone?”

I pocketed my phone and swallowed. “Trevor Mayfield. Maybe a year or so ago.”

“It didn't work out, I take it?”

“Not when he was trying to work things out with his ex at the same time.”

“Oof,” Bex said, returning to the register before picking up her phone and scrolling through it a few times. She tapped the screen in response to a message of her own and then set it down.

Trevor and I had been set up by our moms, and we'd hit it off from the start. He'd been charming and sweet, and he'd kissed like a demon. But then weird things began happening. People at the movies gave us curious looks, and he'd ditched halfway through. When I'd stepped out of the theater to see if everything was okay, I'd caught him talking to *her* in the hall.

Maybe that was why I stopped going to the movies.

In any case, one thing led to another. Rumors had trickled in and turned into facts, and I'd found out he was trying to get back together with *her*. That'd been that.

"Yeah," I said. "But I'll be coming to help pick out a tree tomorrow."

"You mean trees," Bex corrected.

"She's getting more than one?"

Bryce hadn't mentioned that.

"Yeah," Bex said with a tone that suggested surprise that I didn't already know this. "She wants to set up a few around the farmhouse for the wedding."

That made sense. I'd missed as much from their little chat, seeing as how I'd slipped away during the meeting. Remorse tweaked my stomach. If I wanted to resuscitate my relationship with Belle, I was not off to a great start.

That was okay. Thursday would be here before I knew it.

Thursday was my chance to start fixing everything. Assuming nothing else went wrong before then.

## *Chapter Eight*

I spent the evening cuddling with Sunny, watching Hallmark Christmas movies online, and working through a script for the movie theater ad. Every attempt I made at an introduction only sounded stupid, so I spent some time researching sales pitches and things other companies had done to introduce their businesses.

The next morning, I opened the shop and chatted with a few customers, but the store remained mostly empty as usual, which was disheartening, to say the least.

It amplified my anticipation for an evening with the Holdens that much more.

Like it or not, Belle was my last chance.

I closed the shop even earlier than I planned and headed home to get ready. I tied my hair into a braid down my shoulder, touched up my makeup, and slithered into fresh jeans, a cozy sweater, and warm socks, which I then tugged fur-lined boots over.

A knock sounded on my door several minutes before four, and my pulse hit my skin.

“Hey,” Bryce said, looking snow-kissed and handsome in his red coat. His jaw was freshly shaven, and I stared at him for several moments, forgetting to respond.

“You look good too,” he said with a smug expression.

I rolled my eyes, punching him in the shoulder. “Who said I was staring because you look good? You could have something hanging from your nose.”

He wiped a hand in that region, making me laugh as he offered his palm. “We’re good. You ready?”

“Ready,” I said, snatching my phone from its place on the counter and pocketing it.

I stuffed my beanie over my braided hair and followed him out, catching a whiff of his cologne as we stepped into the snowy evening. I inhaled, savoring the musky smell. Everything about him was tantalizing.

“It’s snowing?” I said.

“Seems fitting, doesn’t it? Hopefully, the roads in the mountains aren’t too bad.”

“Do you think they will be?”

“I don’t know. Whatever the case, we’ll be just fine in this beauty.” He gestured to his truck, which was a similar shade to the scarlet color of his coat. Exhaust spewed visibly from behind. He’d left the heater running, probably.

“Colton’s waiting inside for us,” he said.

I squirmed. “Oh.”

“That a problem?”

“No,” I said too brightly. It really wasn’t. “I just—it’s showtime, that’s all.”

Bryce chuckled and lowered his head. “Just act like yourself. That’s all I’m going to do.”

I exhaled and stared at my breath in the cool afternoon air. “Act like myself. Got it.”

Like it was that easy.

To my surprise, rather than going to his door, Bryce angled around to mine. He had the door opened for me by the time I reached it. Was he trying to earn bonus points for being thoughtful, or was he always like this?

“Thanks,” I said.

“Sure.” Once I was in, he strode to the driver’s side.

“Hey,” a man’s voice rumbled from the backseat. “We didn’t meet the other night. I’m Colton.”

I pivoted in the seat to find the good-looking, lankier brother sitting in the seat behind Bryce’s. He had a narrower face, kind eyes, and a shadow of a well-trimmed beard along his jaw.

“I’m Allie,” I said.

“I know.” He smiled, casting his glance at his brother as Bryce climbed into the driver’s seat. “Bryce has been talking about you since we left the shop.”

“Oh?” I gave Bryce an expectant look. “What’s he been saying?”

“Nothing good,” Bryce muttered, keeping his attention on the backup camera as he pulled out of the parking lot.

Colton chuckled but didn’t elaborate. I squirmed.

“If you don’t tell me, I’m going to wonder,” I said.

Bryce eyed me. “And something is wrong with that?”

“Come on. You can’t tell me he was talking about me and not elaborate.”

“He said you’re beautiful,” Colton said.

I smiled, sitting up a little straighter as something fluttered in the center of my chest. “Oh. What else?”

“Nothing you need to know,” Bryce muttered, pointing toward the complex to our right.

Unease climbed inside of me. Had he told Colton about our bargain? Was that why he wouldn’t tell me what they’d been talking about?

“Here they come,” Bryce said. “Belle and Luke are going to meet up with us on the way.”

Bex and Dawson trundled out, holding hands while Kody, Paisley, and Sophia meandered alongside them. I grinned and waved at Bex, who waved excitedly back.

Once they were situated in their vehicle, Bryce led out, taking the back roads toward the fields surrounding Burley and heading to the south hills.

While Burley and Bridgewater were both in the lifeless brown stages of emaciated trees and scant brush, as we drove up the mountainside, winter's bed had been made with soft snowy down that sparkled in the sun and created skirts around the base of every tree.

The snowfall didn't last long, and soon, the blue sky peeked through the gray clouds. As we drove, the fields quickly garnered more trees until the road snaked through mountain switchbacks.

"Should be good skiing up here," Bryce said as he steered his pickup along the curving, inclining road.

Pine trees thickened on one side while the mountain dropped completely down the other. The view overlooking the curvy valley below was breathtaking.

"Since when do you ski?" Colton asked from the back seat.

"I don't. I'm just saying it should be good."

"Leave that deduction to the experts."

Bryce peeked into his rearview mirror as if to see his brother's face. "What? You don't ski, either."

"Nah, but I'm not the one trying to sound like I know what I'm talking about."

I chuckled, enjoying their lighthearted banter and the bemused smirk Bryce tossed my way. His hand slid over to grasp mine, and he shook his head as if to say, *Can you believe this guy?*

The pit of my stomach sputtered. I tried really, *really* hard to act like holding this handsome man's hand was no big deal, even though my internal organs were the ones skiing off the high jump.

Was Bryce holding my hand for show? Did that mean he *had* told Colton we were legit? Did Colton know it was all a lie?

I had to act natural. I had to act like nothing was out of the ordinary whatsoever. Conversation was a good way to do that.

“So you two farm together?” I asked as the truck in front of us took yet another turn.

Regardless of my desire to change the subject, I was curious to know more about Colton. I hadn't heard much about him other than that they worked together. And any conversation that took the spotlight from Bryce and me was preferable.

“We do,” Colton said. “Our dad farmed, and I knew it was what I wanted to do, too. Took that blockhead up there behind the wheel a year or two to decide he wanted to join in, but we teamed up, and so far, it's working.”

He patted the back of Bryce's seat.

“It's definitely something,” Bryce said, slowing in response to the blaring red brake lights in the procession we followed.

“I can't vouch for how much work we get done,” Colton said.

From his dry tone, I couldn't tell if he was being serious or joking again. I had to peer back to see his face. From the twinkle in his eye, I suspected it was the latter.

“I work,” Bryce argued.

“Like a broken clock.”

I snorted. These two were fantastic.

Bryce tilted his head toward me. “Don't believe a word he says. The farm would be sunk without me. He's been full of hot air ever since I bought land without asking him first.”

“Now, that's a story I've got to hear,” I said.

We took several more turns, including leading down a one-lane road on a narrow snatch that made me fairly certain one wrong jerk of the steering wheel would send us careening to our deaths down the abrupt drop.

Eventually, the landscape widened once more. Luke's pickup pulled off into what looked like a grove, Dawson's pickup followed, and Bryce pulled in next to Dawson's.

I couldn't help but notice the distinctions between each of the Holden boys. Each brother had his own look, yet their features were similar as well. Aside from the differences in their hair color—Luke was the only one who could be considered blond, while Colton and Dawson had darker brown hair, and Kyler and Bryce had the brooding demeanors.

My attention shifted to the landscape. This area was beautiful. Snow looked to be about knee-deep in some places, while others had less. Pine trees stood like a cluster of ladies in vibrant green dresses in some places, and trees with branches higher up along their taller trunks were interspersed as well.

I hoped Bryce knew where we were because I had no clue. I could probably GPS it if I had to, except—yep. No cell service up here.

“This is it?” I asked.

“Looks like our stop,” Bryce said, killing the ignition and stepping out of the pickup.

I slid out into the snow as well. Good thing I'd bundled up. The air up at this altitude was at least ten degrees cooler than it'd been in town. My boots sank in, I pulled in a long, crisp breath, and I took a moment to bask in the surroundings.

Trees were everywhere, but this appeared to be a clearing of some kind. The path inclined, and several boulders interrupted the white ground. A rectangular wooden box was positioned in the center of a small clearing near where the trucks were parked, and what looked like a little path trailed alongside it.

“What is that?” I asked, pointing to the wooden box.

“A watering trough,” Bryce explained. “Idaho is an open-range state. In the summertime, farmers herd their cows up here. That trough fills with water from the spring, and cows—and elk, moose, and deer, probably—all come to it for water.”

“That’s cool. I would love to come here in the summertime to see that.”

“It is cool,” he said. “Though I can’t say I’ve ever seen it in use before. We do see the occasional cow now and then. Dawson might know better than I do. He’s the hunter.”

“Dawson, you hunt?” I turned my attention to him. He bent in front of Paisley, helping the little girl with her coat.

“Yes, ma’am,” he said. “I used to know these hills front and back.”

“You been this year?” Bryce asked, treading closer to him.

“I didn’t draw,” Dawson said. “Put in for elk and deer and got skunked for both.”

“I can’t say I’m complaining,” Bex said, sidling up to him.

She held Sophia while Kody traipsed behind her. He held a stick and tugged her coat. Bex turned to her son, but Dawson stole her attention first.

“What?” he said. “I thought you liked that elk burger I made for you.”

Bex’s eyes slid to Belle’s, who stood by a scowling Luke, and then to me. My coworker looked as though she were caught doing something she shouldn’t be.

Bex grimaced. “It was okay, but I can’t say I want a freezer full.”

“That’s what you get for marrying a hunter,” Luke muttered.

Dawson elbowed Bex, winking at her, and the rest of us laughed.

“Look at this,” Kody said, tugging his mom’s attention before she could reply. “Look at this cool stick I found.”

Bryce slipped his hand around my waist like it was natural. My entire body reacted to the touch as heat flared to my toes. Guess I wasn’t as used to it as we’d planned.

I darted my eyes around, unsure of how to act.

“This is normal, remember?” he muttered so only I could hear.

“I might need more practice,” I whispered back, earning a chuckle from Bryce.

True enough, I wouldn’t complain about practicing touching him in the slightest.

“We talking about hunting, or are we looking for trees?” Bryce said, either not noticing my nervous reaction to him or playing it off wonderfully.

Luke’s scowl deepened and speared straight into his oldest brother. For a minute, I was certain he saw right through us. He was going to call us out as frauds then and there.

I braced myself, trying to think of what to say when he lifted his chin and puffed out his chest. “What we do isn’t up to you,” Luke said.

Tension snapped louder than a crackling tree branch. It bounced from brother to brother as everyone took in the scene, but the discord strung tightest between Luke and Bryce.

Friction rolled from Luke’s body in waves of heat. Reality crashed in. He wasn’t bothered by Bryce showing me affection. He was bothered by Bryce, period.

Bryce lifted his hands, stepping away from me. “I didn’t mean anything by it,” he said. Then he added, “I was trying to be funny.”

“Trees,” Bex blurted, too obviously, prying her attention from Kody and the stick he was showing her. She smiled and looked at Belle as if prompting her to say something as well.

“Definitely trees.” Belle patted Luke’s chest and gave him a pointed look as if to say, *Don’t start that now*. “I’ve already got my quarry. No need for any more hunting.”

“Ha ha,” Dawson said, replying something and earning a laugh.

I didn’t hear his response, though, because Bryce pulled me close and muttered confidingly in my ear.

“Guess I won’t talk,” he said.

His warm breath was stark against my cold skin. I inhaled his musky scent and returned the touch, wanting him to know his confidence in me wasn’t wasted.

“That got a little tense,” I said.

“See what I mean? Black sheep.”

“This tree! This tree!” Paisley called out, stealing our attention. She danced around a scraggly-looking tree that was missing half of its branches.

“That is a Charlie Brown tree,” Dawson said. “I think Miss Belle might be looking for something with a little more green on it.”

Paisley didn’t take his words as a rejection. She turned and perused the others, darting to another tree and jumping up and down excitedly, vying for it instead.

She was darling. Something told me she was easy to please.

If only everyone could be, I thought, looking at Luke and Belle, who’d sequestered themselves feet away from the group and appeared to be arguing. Was she defending Bryce? What were they saying?

My objective in talking to her about the ornaments during this venture seemed less and less likely. Bryce was right—I’d picked the wrong brother.

Colton sidled up to Luke and showed him something on his phone, which earned him a laugh and a clap on the back. Their youngest brother, Kyler, moseyed over and kicked the base of a tree trunk, bending backward to stare at its topmost branches. He was too young, obviously, but I still couldn’t help but notice how easy Luke was with each of them.

Each brother except Bryce.

Bryce kept to the perimeter of the gathering—hands in his pockets—and prowled as though he were a lone wolf. A scowl had settled onto his forehead, and sympathy struck my heart. He still hadn’t told me what the problem was.

What had happened to make Luke hate him so much that he couldn't bear to even hear Bryce speak?

Luke had meandered with Colton, who lifted the camera around his neck and snapped a few pictures of what looked like a squirrel on one of the branches.

"This one," Belle called, hands on her hips and tilting her head back to take in the top of the tree.

I had to talk to her. This was why I'd come after all. Not just to patch things up between us or to get the ornaments, but to help Bryce.

I mustered my courage and stepped toward her. "That one looks great—" I began, when a plod of snow struck my shoulder, startling me and stopping me in place.

"I said aim for *Belle*," Dawson said, bending and resting his hands on his knees as he spoke confidentially but loudly with Kody.

"I tried," Kody said, sounding defensive and pushing his glasses higher onto his nose. "But she looks like Belle. Besides, Paisley pushed me."

His little sister giggled and skittered in a flash of pink, the tuft of her beanie sticking out as she hid behind her mom. I supposed to a young child, Belle and I did look similar, with our brunette hair, full mouths, and similar heights.

"It wasn't me; it was Popsicle," Paisley said.

I'd heard her reference her imaginary friend before, and another time, I might have found it adorable. Except that Belle dove toward the snow, ready for retaliation.

Belle lobbed a snowball—not at Kody, but at his stepdad.

Wiping the snow from his red coat, Dawson gaped at her, affronted. "What was that for?"

"For setting a bad example," Belle said with a laugh.

"I'll show you a bad example. Hey, Kody, remember that football takedown I showed you?"

Kody bent like a bull about to charge, readying himself in Belle's direction.

Bex intervened, her arm outstretched. "Don't you dare," she chided her son.

Bryce wandered close to me. I searched his eyes, looking for signs of hurt, but it looked as though he'd brushed off the encounter from earlier and lifted the corners of his mouth.

"You got a tree at your place?" he asked.

I nodded, more to warm up in the cold air than anything else. "Mine is store-bought and pre-lit. I like to keep things simple."

"Too bad," Bryce said, straightening with superiority.

"Why?"

"I was going to ask which one you'd pick."

He'd voiced the question as though it was something he was no longer asking, but his eyes said otherwise. I smiled. I didn't know him well, but so far, in every interaction we'd had together, Bryce was considerate and thoughtful.

I couldn't see him being the awful person Luke seemed to think he was.

I perused the trees, examining them from a personal perspective rather than as a remote view of the overall landscape. I considered the sizes, the shapes, the thickness of the branches.

"That's a good one," I said, pointing to a smaller specimen with just the right ratio of bristles to branches. It was the perfect thickness, too, thin at the top while fattening out toward the bottom.

"I'll get the chainsaw."

"What? No! Bryce, don't."

He grinned. "You don't want it?"

"I told you—I have one."

"Haven't you ever had a real tree?"

Even as a kid, we'd never gotten a real one. Mom hadn't wanted to deal with the mess of the needles falling off.

"Store-bought," I said.

"Then you are missing out. I'll get you that tree, Miss Allie. Then we can decorate it together."

My mouth gaped. Beaming as if pleased with himself, he bent in, wrapped an arm around the small of my back, and lured me in closer.

Time stilled. The world stopped spinning. Cold ceased to be cold, and nothing else existed outside of his embrace.

He dipped his mouth to my ear.

"Surprise," he muttered, and that one word weakened my knees and shot heat through my entire body.

I stood, gaping at him and attempting to reorient myself as he jogged across the snow to his pickup. He removed a chainsaw from the back and was sidetracked by Colton.

Was he really doing this? Was he really going to cut down that tree for me?

Any other time, I would have protested, but this was so sweet. Had he planned this all along?

"So it's true," Bex said.

I startled. I'd been so fixated on Bryce, I hadn't noticed her edge closer to me. I peered at her red nose, cheeks, and glittering brown eyes, at the smile brandishing all her teeth.

"What's true?"

"You and Bryce. When did that happen?"

"I know—I was surprised to see you," Belle added, trudging over and dusting snow from her gloves.

Was she surprised to find me here, period, or just surprised at the fact that I was here with Bryce? At least she didn't mention my faux pas with the broken snow globe.

I squirmed. Bryce and I hadn't gone over what our story was. I'd have to come up with something and fill him in later

—and hope he hadn't shared a different version with the guys.

"I met him at your house, actually," I told Belle, smiling and praying she didn't read right through me.

"Oh?"

I hesitated to mention her house at all, seeing as how she'd caught me in such an awkward way. Fortunately, she didn't appear to be upset by that interaction any longer, so I went on.

"He and I talked, and we met for lunch the other day. And things have just clicked from there." I kept the smile at full mast, hoping she read the expression as me being starry-eyed.

Truth be told, I kind of was, especially when the sound of a chainsaw gunning filled the quiet calm. The three of us jerked.

Belle made as if to go to him. "I haven't picked one yet," she said with concern.

"No," I stopped her, pulling on her arm. She looked at me curiously.

I lowered my hand. "He's getting that one for me." I tugged on my beanie. "He told me to pick one and said it was a surprise."

I hoped Belle wouldn't mind. Was that a tree she would have picked for her wedding?

Oh, no. I hadn't thought to have Bryce wait to cut it down until Belle found hers. It seemed like I did nothing but mess up around her.

She didn't act like that was the case. The worry lines on her forehead smoothed, and she and Bex swapped adoring glances even as the sound of the chainsaw cutting through wood heightened. A bird took off overhead, probably startled by the noise.

"That is the cutest," Bex said with a hand to her chest.

"So you're like—together?" Belle asked.

Like Bex, she appeared to be swept by the sweetness of it, though the slightest traces of doubt glinted in her eyes. Her

attention shifted to Luke, who was holding Colton's camera to his eyes.

Bryce shouted out, "Timber!" and then laughed with Colton and Kyler as the tree I'd picked came crackling down, disturbing the snow.

Holding Sophia, Dawson also braced Kody and Paisley against his legs as they clung to him, and I was struck.

Bryce was wrong—he was no black sheep. The other brothers didn't seem to have any problems with Bryce at all.

It was just Luke who kept his distance from him.

What was with that?

"Has he kissed you yet?" Bex asked once the sound of the chainsaw died.

My eyes widened. My cheeks scorched, which was all the more noticeable in the cold afternoon. Steam probably seeped from my skin.

"Not—yet—" I said. I wasn't sure we'd ever get there, though we had discussed the possibility of locking lips. If I freaked out every time he touched me, what would kissing him be like?

"Those Holden boys..." Bex glanced at Belle. "They know what they're doing, that's for sure."

She and Belle exchanged another smirk that deepened into full-on grins.

The thought made me want in on the secret.

"I mean, when they look like that, how can they not?" I said, gesturing toward where the testosterone was at its peak.

All five Holden boys were hard at work near the tree I'd selected. Bryce, Colton, and Kyler bent to heft it toward Bryce's red pickup. They launched it into the back and tied it down.

"I guess I'd better get picking, or we'll be out here all day." Cheerful, Belle reached a hand toward me and squeezed my arm.

“I’m happy for you guys,” she added, sounding genuine, before trudging toward Luke, who was motioning her to his side.

My relief was palpable. I’d thought she’d hold a grudge, but she was acting so...chill.

My chest expanded, my lungs high-fiving my ribs with every relieved breath. This could work. This could totally work. They’d bought Bryce’s show of affection. They bought the story. Now we just had to keep things going from here.

Luke and Belle spoke, and then Luke gestured to a few other trees.

Apparently, Belle had made her decision because the brothers congregated near another tree, arguing over who got to hold the chainsaw. Luke gave orders, which Colton and Bryce ignored because they were too busy laughing about something while Kyler twirled Bex’s baby, Sophia, and earned a hearty giggle that reached the treetops.

These men were definitely something else. Start with Kyler, for instance. How many teenage boys could you find playing with babies when there was a chainsaw around or a tree to be felled? And then there was Colton, so obviously taken by the scenery that he kept pausing to snap glimpses of it with his camera.

But my attention was mostly on Bryce. He was so handsome, so riveting—with his slim, strong build, his confident carriage, his kindness and sweet gesture—I couldn’t pull my attention from him.

The guys cut the trees Belle selected, hefting both into their pickup beds and strapping them down.

I’d been warm thus far, though the cold was starting to seep into the toes of my boots despite my thick socks. Standing feet away, closer to the trucks, Bryce caught my gaze and gestured to the trees, grinning. I returned it, ready to head toward him, when Luke pulled me aside.

“Hey, Allie,” he said.

His jaw was edged with scruff, and his cheeks and nose were pink with the cold. He sniffed, glancing around and then turning his brown eyes on me.

“Can I talk to you for a second?”

“Sure,” I said, pulling tight inside.

What was this about? I’d seen him the day we’d cleaned out Grandpa’s house and again at their engagement party. Though Belle had introduced me as her cousin, he’d never thought to initiate a conversation with me before.

That meant this had to be about Bryce.

I braced myself. Did he know? Did Bryce tell him this was all a fluke?

Or maybe Dawson had said something—though how he knew, I wasn’t sure.

Luke led me feet away from the others, through a cluster of trees that hid us and yet allowed me a glimpse of them near the pickups. Dawson and Bex were buckling the kids into their seats. Kyler had already climbed into Luke’s truck, and Colton and Bryce were in ours. Belle was the only one outside. She held a hand over her eyes, searching as though wondering where we were.

“I didn’t realize you and my brother were so close,” Luke said once we were out of earshot.

Everyone was waiting for us. We would be leaving soon. What was he doing?

“Yeah. We just started dating.”

Luke kept his focus on me. “How did you meet?”

“Belle’s house, actually. At your engagement party.”

“How long have you been dating?”

Belle and Bex’s questions had been sweet and sincere. This was more like a crime scene investigation. It seemed the longer the conversation went on, the more awkward it got. That was probably because I’d never really talked to Luke much before this moment.

I grew fidgety and defensive. I wanted to shout out that it was none of his business and he needed to return to his fiancé.

But I'd made a pact with Bryce to help him get back into his family's good graces. I couldn't do that if I wasn't in those good graces as well.

How long had we been dating? "Oh—you know."

A few days. And it was all fake.

Fortunately, Luke didn't wait for me to reply before he went on. "I'd be careful if I were you."

This was the last thing I expected to hear. Black sheep was one thing.

But dangerous?

"Be careful...with Bryce?"

I waited for Luke to act shifty, to avert his eyes or glance back at Belle again, but he looked at me. His gaze was steady, unflinching—and that fact almost made *me* flinch.

"Yeah. He's not the most trustworthy guy, and I'd hate to see you get hurt."

Was he serious? He was warning me away from his brother...for my sake?

"You don't know me, though."

I couldn't help saying it. Why did he care?

"Doesn't matter. Even if you weren't Belle's cousin, it wouldn't matter. I'd hate to see any woman get hurt, and that's what you get when you date Bryce Holden. He's not a good man, Allie. You deserve a man you can trust."

What happened to make Luke be this guarded about him?

"Why do you say that?"

He peered back toward the pickups. "Just trust me. Be careful. In fact, I'd end things now and save yourself the trouble."

"I like him, Luke," I said, and the words pealed so loudly they struck me.

I had to pause. It was true. I liked Bryce.

Luke squinted at me. “I figured. You’d better get out before that turns into something else you’ll regret.”

Like love? Would I regret anything with Bryce? What was I getting myself into?

I couldn’t figure this out. Why was Luke so against his own brother? What had happened between those two?

I wasn’t going to fall in love with Bryce. I wanted to tell Luke as much, to assure him he had nothing to worry about.

But I’d made Bryce a promise.

“He’s a good person,” I said, trying to put in a good word for him with his brother.

A scoff escaped Luke’s throat. He planted his hands on his hips and stared off into the trees. “That’s what they all tell me, but I can’t seem to believe it.”

I opened my mouth to argue, but Belle’s voice beat me to it.

“Luke!” she called. “What are you doing?”

“We’re headed back,” Dawson added, his voice carrying more than Belle’s and ricocheting off the trees.

Lines appeared on Luke’s forehead. “Just think about it, okay? Think about what I said.”

“I—I will.”

Luke nodded at me and then gestured toward the vehicles as though he wanted to accompany me back. Gentlemanly thing to do, I supposed, though his warning left me reeling the entire drive down the mountain. It was enough to distract me from the steep cliffs and drop-offs with every bend.

What had he meant by saying Bryce wasn’t trustworthy? He’d cut me a Christmas tree, for goodness’ sake. That was a sweet thing to do—

And it’d all been for show.

This thing between Bryce and me wasn't real, I told myself. There was little chance of me getting hurt from this. We were simply helping one another out.

That was all.

Yet, I couldn't shake the feeling that Luke could be right. The sooner I found out why he'd felt the need to warn me, the better.

## Chapter Nine

I needed to talk to someone.

Mom was out. I couldn't tell her I was in over my head with Bryce. I wasn't about to tell Bex this was all a hoax, either. I tried Natalie's number—but she didn't answer.

Sunny rubbed against my ankles as I stood in my living room. Her purr rumbled like a motor loudly enough I could hear it from where I stood. I bent and scooped her up, holding her against my chest and stroking her soft fur.

“Something's bothering me, cat,” I said, thinking out loud. “I had a really good day with Bryce.”

I lifted the cat away from my body, *Lion King*-style, and looked into her blue eyes.

“He cut a tree down for me. Did you know that? He did! I know—I was surprised, too,” I went on, as though she were actually participating in this conversation.

Sunny tilted her head, and I held her to me once more and stalked closer to the small tree I'd set up earlier.

“That means we'll be moving this little beauty as soon as he brings the other one over. I've never had a live tree before,” I said as Sunny inched up to nuzzle her wet nose against my face. “He said he'd stop and grab a few essentials and then be back.”

The cat sprung from my arms and padded to her water dish in front of the dishwasher. She bent for a drink, and a knock sounded on the door.

My pulse skyrocketed. I dashed to answer, more eager than I knew I should have been.

Bryce was a walking daydream, wearing the same red coat and dashing expression he'd had on before. Seriously, I could never get sick of his face, no matter how long I stared.

"That was fast," I said.

I'd barely had time to change out of my thick socks and play confession to my cat.

"What can I say?" Bryce said. "I like to get things done." He lifted something that looked like a green bed pan with three screws, one sticking out of each side.

"Am I supposed to know what that is?"

"This," he said, "is what we're going to plant your tree in for the rest of the month. Mind if I come in?"

"Sure." I stepped back and chewed my lip as he entered my apartment.

The last time I'd had a man here had been Trevor, and we'd broken up shortly afterward. I didn't exactly have that many male acquaintances. The space felt noticeably smaller with him there—and it smelled infinitely better.

"Where are we putting it? You keeping this one up?" After removing his coat, he strode the few paces to my little tree.

"I was going to move it into my bedroom," I said.

"And put the larger tree there?"

"Yes."

He set the base on the carpet and bent to the fiber-optic tree. "Allow me."

"Bryce—"

But he'd already unplugged the tree and had it in hand. "Back here?"

"Yeah," I said, hefting the end table along with it. I followed him into my room, sidestepped him while he waited by my bed—

Oh, my gosh, my *bed*.

A *man* was in my room.

I was cool. I was good. Everything was fine.

Everything—

A hot guy was in. My. Room. I kept my gaze away from the bed and its cushy pillows and from the wayward thoughts suddenly bouncing in my brain. My gaze kept scouring the floor for a stray bra or panties or something embarrassing like that. This was the first time I was grateful my mom had insisted I be relentlessly clean.

Setting the tree down first, Bryce then turned, took the table from me, and placed it in front of the window, where he then replaced the little tree and plugged it in.

Glittering and illuminating as the tree was, I couldn't take my eyes off him. From the shape of him in his jeans and well-fitted shirt. From the line of his jaw, and his tumble of dark hair. From the swell of muscle in his arms as he straightened.

“How's that?” he asked.

“Hm?”

He gestured to the tree.

I squeezed my eyes shut, blocking away my rampant thoughts. “Oh.”

Act natural. Act. Natural. I was *not* just checking him out. Again.

“Yeah. I think I'm going to like it,” I said, my throat tight.

“Going to?”

“I mean, it'll be festive. I've never had a man in my bedroom before, but the more I think about it, the more I like it.”

Bryce's lips quirked at the corners, and a bemused light glinted in his eyes. He took a step toward me.

“That's a first,” he said.

My thoughts scattered. What did I just say?

Bryce moved. I backed away. My feet hit the wall behind me.

The air in the room thinned. His cologne was far too prominent. His hands pressed on either side of me, caging me in until I was left with nothing but shallow air, shallower thoughts, and the fire in his blue eyes.

“You said you’ll like having a man in your room.”

I was too swept up in his body so close to mine, in the way his eyes flicked to my mouth to do much else besides blink.

Until he tilted in. As he did, so did realization. I grasped what it was I’d said.

“Tree!” I blurted, rattling from his proximity and this insane desire to wrap my arms around him and tug him closer. Inadvertently, my hand brushed against his rock-hard stomach. “I’ll like the *tree* in here.”

He didn’t laugh like I thought he would. His face was pensive, his expression smoky. Eyes glinting, Bryce lingered and contemplated my lips long enough that all of my internal organs turned to slush.

My lashes fluttered. I drowned in anticipation, my nerves firing as though a bouncy ball had been let loose inside of me.

Moments later, he backed away, lowering his arms and giving me room to breathe again. I drank in air by the bucketful and covered my cheeks with my hands.

What was that?

“Good,” he said, smiling. “Then let’s go get the grand finale.”

Flushed with embarrassment, I followed him into the living room. Bryce acted as though he hadn’t just taunted my entire existence. Like the heated moment we’d shared hadn’t affected him in the slightest when I was pretty sure I’d never stop wondering what it would be like to have his lips on mine.

He made himself at home. Rather than waiting to ask where things were, he acted. He held the green bed pan beneath the kitchen faucet, filling it with water.

“Should be enough. How’s this?” He placed the bed pan on the carpet.

“You’re the expert here,” I said. “I’ve never had a live tree before, remember?”

“It’ll be great. We’ll adjust it if we need to. Come on.”

He waited for me to don my boots and coat before soldiering on back outside and to his parked truck. The jacked-up pickup looked out of place in our tiny parking lot. The tree he’d cut for me earlier was propped in the bed.

Bryce hoisted himself up enough to loosen the straps holding the tree down. First on one side, then the other. Together, we hefted the tree, lowering it from the truck bed and carrying it across the lot, along the sidewalk, and into my apartment.

“Now this end,” Bryce said, speaking as he attempted to concentrate and walk backward at the same time. “This end goes in there.”

Everything started to make sense to me. Why he put the water in. Why the green thing was shaped the way it was. “Got it.”

Working carefully, Bryce lowered the trunk. He bent to tighten the screws on each and then stood next to me.

“There she is,” he said.

“There she is.”

He nudged my shoulder. “You picked a good one.”

“You think so?”

“Sure do. Now for the rest.” He bent for the bag he’d placed on the ground when he’d first arrived. “Lights. I wasn’t sure whether you preferred colors or white, so I got both.”

“Colors,” I said. “My ornaments go better with colors.”

“Excellent.” He high-fived me, making me laugh, and then we worked together to string the lights on the tree.

Bryce and I went back and forth, bumping into one another several times in the process. At one point, I pressed my hand to his abdomen and gasped again at the washboard beneath his shirt.

My gaze flicked up to find him grinning at me. “Bet you’ve never had a man in your living room, either.”

“Shut up.” I couldn’t suppress my smile, and he didn’t bother hiding his.

In fact, his smug expression continued until we finished stringing the lights and hung the ornaments I had.

“There now,” Bryce said, sinking onto the couch and spreading his arms across the back. He gazed at the tree. “*That’s* a tree.”

“Are you insulting the one I had before?”

“No, ma’am. Only stating a fact.”

I perched myself on one of my barstools. After sitting together in communal silence for several minutes, Bryce sat up.

“What do you think of it?”

“I like it,” I said.

“Now, don’t go saying that just to please me. What do you really think?”

“I’m serious,” I said. “No one has ever gotten me a Christmas tree before. It was really sweet of you.”

He rose to his feet and strode toward me, offering his hand.

“What?”

“I’m going to show you the best part. Come here.”

Tentatively, I slipped my fingers into his palm and let him guide me. Bryce positioned me almost directly in front of him, between him and the tree. Then, his hands rested on my shoulders.

I sensed his warmth behind me, tingling, and the sensation only worsened when he leaned in to rest his chin on my

shoulder and brush his cheek against mine.

“Now, close your eyes.”

My insides were fluttering too much to do anything else.

“And breathe.”

I did so, inhaling, drawing in a long breath. I could hardly process much at all with Bryce standing so closely behind me, with the sultry sound of his voice caressing my ear and his breath stroking my neck.

“You smell that?” His voice was a lullaby.

“It’s amazing,” I said. I didn’t realize I was leaning into him until moments later when his chest lifted against my back. I rotated to face him. “Thank you, Bryce. This was the sweetest thing.”

“Happy to make you happy.”

I swam in his tender gaze. I didn’t want him to leave now that we’d finished the task at hand. “Do you want some cocoa?”

“I’d love some.”

Rather than sitting back, Bryce was right there in the kitchen with me, stealing in small touches and tickling my sides as I reached for the mugs in the upper cupboard. He leaned a hip against the side of the counter as we waited for the water to heat up.

“How long have you lived here?” he asked.

“Almost two years now. Since my dad died.” The same hitch in my chest that always came while talking about Dad surfaced.

The microwave beeped. Bryce beat me to it, tapping the button and lifting both mugs—his was a candy cane mug, and mine was Snoopy—and setting them in front of me on the other side of my small kitchen.

I handed him a packet of cocoa, and almost in unison, we tore our packets open, dumped them into the mugs, and stirred.

“You’re quiet,” he said.

“Hmm?”

He lifted his mug to his lips and took a sip before gesturing toward the glittering Christmas tree in the corner with it. “If you don’t like the tree, I can take it out. I didn’t mean to force it on you.”

“What? No, I love it. Really, I love it.”

“Then what’s wrong? You’ve been staring at your mug for over a minute.”

Had I been? “I guess I’m a little distracted,” I said, finally lifting my mug to my mouth.

The taste of liquid chocolate dribbled on my tongue, warming me instantly.

“About what?”

I took another long sip and looked at him over the edge of my mug. Was Bryce the kind of person who would get defensive if I asked him about Luke’s warning?

I supposed there was only one way to find out. Bryce tipped his mug back. He must have finished his because he strode to the sink, rinsed it, and placed it in.

Tipping my mug back, I downed its contents and did the same. “I wanted to talk to someone—might as well be you since it’s about you.”

“Oh? What about me?”

“I’m confused about something,” I said.

I crossed back into the living room and sank onto my brown couch, tucking my foot beneath me. I patted the other cushion.

Bryce took the invitation. He angled his body toward me, his knee brushing mine. Sunny prowled from the hallway and made her way to the couch. But she didn’t sit on my lap. She claimed Bryce’s.

“Shoot,” he said, petting the cat, whose purr rumbled as loudly as it had before.

“I’ve been watching you with your brothers. Kyler seems to look up to you. You and Colton joke and bounce your banter back and forth. Even Dawson seems easygoing and goofy around you.”

He gazed off, the corners of his mouth lifting. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“So your question—”

“It’s just Luke who keeps his distance from you,” I said. “You claimed to be a bad seed, but you’re not. Are you?”

“Depends on who’s asking, I guess.”

“I’m asking, Bryce. I don’t know if you noticed or not, but earlier today, when we were in the mountains looking for trees, Luke pulled me aside and warned me to keep away from you so I wouldn’t get hurt.”

Bryce’s face remained impassive except for the slightest tick in his jaw. “Oh, he did, huh?”

I waited for him to elaborate, but he didn’t. He didn’t show anger, or any signs of emotion, really.

He couldn’t be this unaffected.

“Why would he warn me away from you?” I asked, getting right to it.

Bryce straightened his posture, looking far less comfortable than he had when we’d first sat down. Sunny’s ears flicked backward. “You want out?”

That was the last thing I wanted. “I want to know what’s going on. I said I would help you fix things with your family if I could.”

Bryce pushed the cat from his lap. He rose to the window and parted the blinds with two fingers before tucking those fingers into his jeans pocket.

He faced the Christmas tree. “It’s not exactly something I’m proud of,” he began. “I was stupid and made a mistake. And Luke’s never allowed me to live it down.”

I rose and moved closer to him. The pine scent in the branches grew a little more pronounced, and I inhaled the Christmassy smell.

“Are you worried I’ll think less of you if you tell me?” I asked.

I couldn’t fathom what it could be. What did he do that was so bad it made Luke hate him?

Did he kill Luke’s favorite dog? Tarnish his name in some way?

Bryce inhaled. “I don’t know. I’ve moved on. I told Nat I was sorry and tried to apologize to Luke, if the thickhead would ever hear me out.”

“Nat—Do you mean Natalie Brown?” The postman’s daughter? My kickboxing buddy?

“Gotta love small towns,” he said inwardly before he faced me with a dangerous kind of resolve in his expression.

“Look, when I was dating Natalie, I kissed her sister, Chelsea, when she was dating Luke. Like I said, it was a mistake. I shouldn’t have done it, and I’ve tried making things right, but he won’t believe me.

“Nothing I do or say makes any kind of difference to him. In his purview, I am the lowest of the low.”

He looked at me with guarded eyes, as if waiting for my reaction. I was still attempting to process the revelation. I was surprised, sure. It wasn’t a decent thing in the slightest, but in the range of horrible things a person could do to another person, it wasn’t *that* bad either.

At least, not bad enough for his brother to continue holding it over his head for the rest of his life.

“Go ahead,” he said, his tone hardening. “Lay it on me.”

“Lay what on you?”

“Your judgment. How wrong, how selfish I was. Heartless. Unfeeling. I’ve heard it all before—and you’re not wrong. I was all those things.”

I worked through a swallow. “Something tells me you’re not anymore, are you?”

He scraped a hand over his jaw. “Nat’s sister Chelsea and I got caught in a moment, and we made a wrong choice. I’ve learned since then to take better care with someone’s heart. We can’t ever fully know how what we do will affect someone else, but I hurt Luke and Natalie both.

“Nat was gracious and forgave me, but my own brother can’t seem to let it go. Not even when he’s found someone else and is happier with her than I’ve ever seen him.”

I didn’t know what to say.

“There you have it,” he said, running his hand behind his neck. “I kissed my girlfriend’s sister, who also happened to be my brother’s date. Messed up, I know.

“That’s why Luke warned you against me,” he said. “He thinks I’ll go on cheating, no matter who I’m with, because that’s what I do. Once a cheater, always a cheater.”

“I guess you’d be justified if it happened with me,” I said, “since we’re not really dating. If there’s someone else you’d rather be with, I can let this go. It’s okay.”

“Allie.” He said my name so pointedly that the sound struck my sternum.

He crossed to where I sat and offered me his hand. Bold move, considering how seconds before he’d thought I’d berate him for his actions with Natalie.

I took his hand, his skin gliding against mine and sending signals to the edges of my brain. He helped me to my feet. I stood before him, encapsulated by his breadth, by the rise and fall of his chest, and the charge in the air between us.

“I said I was in,” he said. “I’m in.”

I wasn’t sure what to say.

He slid his hand to my cheek. “You’re a beautiful girl. We get along great together. I like being with you—and I’m hoping that whole ‘necessary’ thing will come into play here soon because I think about kissing you more often than I should.”

I chuckled and ducked my chin. He didn’t let me.

He placed both hands on my face and guided me back to meet his eyes. Their blue was penetrating and stark. I couldn’t look away if I wanted to.

“You have to know I’m a changed man. I’d never do that to you or anyone else again, even if you view this as a fake or temporary relationship. I learned my lesson. I’m not that guy anymore.”

The words shivered through me. I knew there were some guys who would say anything to get what they wanted, but something told me Bryce wasn’t one of them.

“I believe you,” I said. “And—and I’m all in, too. I won’t cheat on you while we’re doing this.”

Not that I’d met anyone to consider doing so with, but it was worth saying.

“I never thought you would. Did you mean what you said? You’re all in?”

“Yes.”

His thumbs stroked my cheeks. His eyes burnished, his pupils dilating. “That settles it. We don’t have an audience right now, but it might be better to take care of this without one. I think we have one more thing we need to discuss.”

“What’s that?” The question was breathy.

Something between us had shifted during the last few moments of this conversation, and I was clambering to catch up.

The corner of Bryce’s mouth ticked upward. “How you like to be kissed.”

## Chapter Ten

The floor dropped from underneath me. My blood reacted before anything else in me did. It took several moments before I could form a coherent response. I was wandering, lost in the path his gaze offered.

“I—does anyone have an answer to that?”

“I do,” he said.

Of course he did.

I placed my hands on his and guided them away from my face. Then I stepped back, needing a little more oxygen than my room currently provided. My breaths were coming short and fast.

“I guess I haven’t put that much thought into it.”

He slipped his hands around my waist and pulled me back to him.

“What are you doing?”

“I think we’ve hit the point of necessary.”

I braced my hands on his forearms. “We’re not—no one is around to prove anything to.” He’d said as much himself.

“Not yet. But I’d like an answer to my question. And it wouldn’t hurt to be prepared. Just in case.”

I couldn’t think. Movement was impossible. I was immobile, enraptured, and completely taken in by his strong hands, by the firm yet gentle way they held me, by the way they guided me closer.

His body was feverish and powerful. His warm breath stroked my lips.

This was a crossroads. The prospect of kissing Bryce had spanned my mind more than once, but its actuality had never been within any kind of reach.

It was entirely possible that his claim to be *all in* was to prove he was no longer like that previous version of himself. Was he kissing me now to reassure me of that? To let me know I could rely on him as long as we were in this crazy agreement?

He needed to know he could rely on me, too—and if this was the way to do that, I was here for it.

“How do you like to be kissed? Soft?” Bryce’s tone matched the word, making my eyelashes flutter.

My heart was a drum as he lowered his face toward mine.

I felt as though I was standing on a precipice, one that would send me plunging headfirst without any hope of resurfacing. Inadvertently, I tilted my chin upward. He dipped in and pressed a gentle kiss to my lips. The touch tingled, trickling on impact and coursing straight into my bloodstream.

“Insistent?”

He dipped in again, increasing the pressure and fervency. This time, the kiss tipped the scales. It was more like a claim, like something he was taking because he was the master of it. His mouth worked against mine, hard and domineering and completely derailing so that by the time he pulled away, I was spinning, and I had to cling to him to remain upright.

“Or how about deliberate and long?”

I should stop him. I shouldn’t indulge in this.

“Top lip? Bottom?”

“Bryce—”

He snatched my bottom lip between his, and I was scrambled eggs. I was lost. I wrapped my hands around his head and held him in place, digging my fingers into his hair

and kissing him back long and deliberate and soft and intentional and in all the ways I could think of, and yet it took no thought at all because the minute his lips trapped mine, we just *worked*, no matter the method.

His arms wrapped more securely around me, and he guided me backward until my legs hit the couch. I sank down, and he followed, clasping me to him as our mouths continued molding together, creating delicious shivers in my stomach.

His hands stroked my ribs and down my spine. He angled his head, deepening our connection. I was pretty sure I'd turned from solid to liquid by the time he pulled away.

"That's my favorite," he said, his eyes half closed, his voice throaty.

"What?"

"Whatever you just did."

I laughed, and he guided me back to him again. For once, I couldn't allow myself to think about how this was going to end. Because, in that moment, I didn't want it to.

Impossible as it was, I wanted to keep Bryce Holden for as long as I could.

He'd said he was all in, but I knew it was only temporary. Somehow, I knew moments like these were fleeting, and I was only setting myself up for future regret.

\* \* \*

The next day was a Friday, and traction in the store was noticeably non-existent. I'd sorted through sales receipts. I'd cataloged inventory, though with the absence of sales, much hadn't changed. I'd even gone over a potential script for the ad I was hoping to record.

No matter how I rephrased things, the wording still sounded completely stupid to me. There was also the problem of finding someone to record the ad once I figured out the

catchiest wording. Maybe that was something I could see to while I waited.

Bex had mentioned asking Bryce. I hadn't yet, but I could.

Last night, he'd kissed me into oblivion. I was still reeling this morning from the memory of his mouth on mine, and though boredom crept in as I sat behind the register, I couldn't wipe the smile from my cheeks.

Music played in my corner speaker. The soft, festive song shifted to an accompaniment I didn't recognize. My shoulders began to shake. I bobbed my head. My foot tapped to the beat, and I nudged my phone to see who the artist was.

This was a newer Christmas song, a remake of a classic. It resonated with me. Maybe it was the mood I was in, bordering between giddiness over kissing Bryce and sadness over knowing I couldn't keep him, and the frustrations with my store and my inability to write this ad, but the soothing rumba beat strummed my heartstrings, pulling me free from my doldrums.

On impulse, I leaned toward the phone and inched the volume higher. No one was coming in. I might as well enjoy myself for a few stolen moments.

I grabbed a hairbrush from the display in the center and held it to my mouth to begin singing. I pointed to the mannequin at one part—it didn't interact, and so I resumed my loud belting of the chorus when fingers poked my sides.

A shriek escaped my lips. Clasping the brush to my chest, I whirled around.

Bryce Holden was in my store, wearing the same red ski jacket he'd worn during our tree hunt in the mountains and a devilish grin.

“Nice moves.”

He wasn't a large man, but his presence expanded and filled the entirety of my store, making me aware of him and only him. And of his mouth because, of course, I hadn't been able to think of anything else but the kisses we'd shared the night before.

I held up a finger, lunged for the phone, and turned the music down while my whole body blazed.

“Oh, my gosh, I can’t believe you saw that. What are you doing here?”

He jutted his thumb toward the door behind him. “Your sign said *Open*. I assumed I could come in. No wonder you don’t have any customers if this is how you treat them.”

He winked to soften the statement.

I flattened my hand to my chest, feeling my pounding heartbeat. “You startled me.”

“You beguiled me.”

I gaped at him. This man was way out of my league.

Bryce shifted and took a few more steps toward me. “I know what our next date should be. Dancing.”

I made for my phone and turned the volume back to its usual undertones. “Pfft. This is Burley. There’s nowhere to go dancing around here.”

“I’ll find something.”

Sure he would.

Bryce stared at me as though I were something he wanted to eat. His eyes were smoky, the half-lidded expression taking me in and consuming my thoughts.

I made a noise in my throat, but it didn’t clear the clutter there. “I didn’t hear you come in. Is there something I can help you with?”

“I’m seeing everything I needed to see.”

I didn’t know what to make of this man. Luke had warned me against him. He’d told me to be careful. The only danger I could see was that Bryce was a charmer.

“The store?”

“You. I wanted to see you in your element.”

Oh. Cute.

My teeth trapped my bottom lip to ward off a smile, but it didn't work. The smile won out.

He finally took his gaze from me, giving me room to gulp a breath as he turned to examine the shelf of shoes stacked behind him.

"I also have a farm auction to go to and wondered if you wanted to join me," he said.

"A farm auction?"

He continued his perusal of the store. "Colton and I need a new planter before spring and some pickups for a few of our new employees. It's fun to go see what's for sale and if you can get a good deal on something. It's exciting when you do get a good deal."

"I'm not sure how much help I'll be with that."

With his attention on the rack of shirts just down from the shoes, Bryce peered over his shoulder. His expression turned wickedly mischievous.

"Good thing I'm not asking for your help then."

I folded my arms. "What are you asking for?"

Abandoning the clothing racks, Bryce turned. In a few short steps, he stood before me, stealing his arms around my waist and pulling me close.

"Your company. And maybe a little of this, too."

He swept his lips across mine. The kiss zapped several brain cells so that by the time he pulled away, I had to cling to him to remain upright.

"You're not busy, are you?" His breath tiptoed across my skin. "Can you get away? Come with me?"

No one had come into the store thus far today. Would it be any different if I closed the store and enjoyed an afternoon with him?

This went against everything I was trying to do. I was trying to save my store, dang it, not flirt with handsome cowboys.

“When is the auction?” I asked, freeing myself of his hold so I could check a few things on my register.

“It starts at three.”

I peeked at my phone. That gave us about an hour.

“I need to finish writing the script for an ad—and—”

I’d hesitated before, but why not ask him for his help? From what he’d told me, his skating rink was thriving, and apparently, the farm was, too, if he and Colton had enough to buy new equipment.

“And?” he prodded.

I set my phone down and met his gaze. “How are your videographer skills?”

“I’m not sure they exist. Colton’s a pretty good photographer, though. What do you need?”

I remembered seeing Colton snapping pictures of things during the family’s tree hunt. Would he be willing to help me?

I set my phone back down and rested a hand on the desk where customers usually placed their items for purchase. “I’ll go with you today on one condition,” I said.

“Okay. What’s that?”

“I need help filming an ad for the shop. Is that something you or Colton can help me with?”

“What kind of ad?”

“You know how while people are waiting for the movie to start at the theater here in town, they play all these ads from local businesses?”

Light dawned in his eyes. “Oh, I see. Sure, Colt and I can help you with that.”

“You sure?”

He shrugged. “How hard can it be?”

The agreement was just soothing enough that I didn’t worry as I flipped the sign on the door from *Open* to *Closed* or as I killed the lights, closed the door, and turned the key.

In fact, walking away from the store brought with it a strange kind of relief. The feeling surged as I hiked into Bryce's pickup, as the seat heater warmed my backside, as the city gave way to a wide stretch of white countryside past grain silos and potato sheds toward the collection of towering white windmills.

"Just how far away is this farm auction?" I asked.

"Not much longer now."

I leaned toward the windshield for a closer look at the windmills. There had to be at least a dozen spaced out along out here. I gaped at the sheer width of their bases.

They reminded me of the Redwood Forest my family had visited when I was a kid. The trunks of those trees had been massive, and the sizes of these windmills were no exception.

"I've never been this close to them before," I said in awe. "I figured they'd have to be enormous in order to be seen from the highway, but I had no idea."

"Yeah, they're huge," Bryce agreed.

The vehicle slowed as we neared the farm on the left.

"You know, I've seen them haul the parts to these things on the freeway before," he said. "Just one of the turbines alone is longer than a semi-truck bed."

He pulled into the driveway of a large shed. Several pieces of farm equipment were laid out, each in various colors of yellow, green, and even red, and each with a ranging number of wheels.

I hadn't anticipated this many vehicles in one place. Were they all for sale, or did some belong to the farmer who owned this land?

"That's so many tractors," I said, gazing out the window.

"That's the only tractor here." Bryce pointed to a green machine before indicating several other pieces of equipment. "This one is what you'd call a planter. This one is a front-end loader, and that one is an excavator."

He signaled the last one that had a longer boom with a bucket on the end.

As he gestured, I realized each machine had its own distinctive elements: long booms, buckets on the end, rows of sharp metal appendages. I'd noticed the differences before, sure, but I'd never given it that much thought.

"I never knew each of their distinctions," I said.

"And yet you live in Idaho."

"They've all been tractors to me."

Bryce whistled as he shifted into park. "Then I'm glad I can enlighten you."

"Is that why you brought me?" I teased.

He glanced at me. "You're my girlfriend."

Hearing him say as much in such a simple, matter-of-fact way cinched my low belly. His gaze flicked to my mouth. I was ready to jump him then and there and pick up where we'd left off last night, but this was not the time or place, not if Colton was going to show up at any time.

"Fake girlfriend," I amended.

I couldn't forget that little detail.

A shrug. "That's contextual. This is something I'd bring my girl to."

His girl.

He opened the door and slid outside. I followed, dropping down several feet to the ground. My boots crunched against the snowy gravel, and though I'd stopped moving, my stomach had the gall to somersault like I was on a roller coaster rather than standing on flat, solid ground.

Cold air slipped into every crevice it could find in my coat. I wore my beanie, but I hadn't thought to bring my gloves. The cold nipped at my fingertips as well, and I drew them to my mouth to blow a hint of warmth onto them.

Bryce meandered toward several men congregated outside the machine he'd called an excavator. I took in its long boom and the narrow bucket resting on the snowy ground.

"I need me an excavator," a man with gray hair and a bristly mustache the same color as his hair said, circling the machine and kicking its base. The excavator had tracks instead of wheels, reminding me of a tank.

"You going for it?" Bryce asked, joining the conversation as though he'd been standing there the whole time.

"What are you here for?" the man asked beneath the mustache.

"Colt and I are looking for a new planter. This beauty's all yours."

The others laughed. "Who've you got with you?" the man asked, gesturing to me.

Bryce turned and slipped his arm around my waist. "This is Allie Vreeland. Allie, meet the guys."

He rattled off several of their names. Each of them inclined their head in turn. The only name I could remember was John Scott. Maybe it was because it belonged to the man with the mustache.

"John farms out past Belle's place," Bryce explained.

"Oh, you're Belle's neighbor?" I asked.

"Something like that," John said. "Belle is around my oldest girl's age. Maybe you know Janice Scott?"

The name wasn't familiar. "Belle's a few years older than me," I said.

"How about Camille?"

This time, the name rang a bell. "Camille Scott?" I said. "Yeah, I know Camille. She was a grade younger than me."

Which would make her what, twenty-two? Camille had been friendly in high school but was a bit sportier than I was. While I'd been cheering in the stands, she'd been shooting three-pointers.

I remembered Camille's wavy brown curls and seeing the name "Scott" on the back of her basketball jersey that she'd worn on school game days.

My jaw was starting to judder in the cold.

"She's a good girl," John said, dusting his hands. "Nice to meet you, Allie. I think I'll move on and see what else they've got for sale."

"Nice to meet you, too," I said.

"John's one of Colton's hunting buddies," Bryce said as the man traipsed off toward the barn where a green tractor covered completely with Christmas lights was parked.

"That's cool," I said, blowing air on my hands again. "So where's this auction taking place?"

"Right here," Bryce said, lifting his hands.

I gazed at the equipment all over again, taking note of the men wandering from machine to machine, inspecting and analyzing them.

My forehead furrowed. I glanced toward the large shed serving as the backdrop. "I figured it was here, but are we going in somewhere?"

"Should we?"

"You mean you stand outside?"

"Only for now. How else can we look at the equipment? The bidding takes place in the shop there." He gestured to the machines around us and the large white shop behind the house.

"Oh, good," I said, shivering again. "I hope it's heated."

"Besides," Bryce added, "the cold gives me an excuse to put my arm around you."

He did so, and though my coat added enough padding that the sensation wasn't as exciting as it would have been without it, I still savored it.

"I'm good with that," I said, leaning into him. "So, how does this work?"

“What? The auction?”

“Yeah.”

“The equipment has been up online for preview for a few weeks now,” Bryce said. “People from all over have been scoping out these machines, but today is the day. Those of us who are here will get a bidding number, but there’s also bidding online, too.”

“That’s crazy,” I said.

“Yeah, it can get pretty intense. Farmers are crazy for their hay and planting equipment. Look,” he said, gesturing to the thinning crowd and the people entering the large white shop on the property. “I think it’s about to start.”

Together, we approached the shop and followed the rest of the crowd trickling in. Instantly, the frigid cold outside was replaced by swarming heat. It was like walking into a hug. I savored the change, allowing my body to soak in as much of the warmth as possible.

I scanned the massive shop’s interior, taking in the mechanical sights. Tools hung on the far wall. Chains hung from joists overhead in the far corner, and several pieces of machinery I didn’t recognize flanked the opposite wall.

The shop’s center had been cleared and swept to make room for a miniature stadium. Dozens of chairs faced the front, where a microphone was set up.

Bryce got his card featuring his bidder number from a woman wearing an orange construction vest who was sitting at the table just inside.

“Let’s find our seats,” he said.

We did so. The auction was introduced. We were thanked for attending, and then the auctioneer took his place. As with Bryce, I couldn’t take my eyes off this man—though it wasn’t because I found him attractive, per se.

“That is the most epic mustache I’ve ever seen,” I said, leaning closer to whisper and inhaling Bryce’s cologne.

“Yeah, it’s like he’s got a coat rack under his nose.”

It was true. The auctioneer wore a plaid, button-up shirt, jeans, and cowboy boots, but the most remarkable thing about him was the fact that his beard had been parted down the center of his chin and twined upward to join with his mustache. Together, the combination of the two stuck out at least a foot on either side.

He really did look as though he'd twined his mustache/beard around wire to keep its shape that far out away from his face. Now, *that* was a serious mustache.

With the heaters running, sweat trickled down my back as the bidding began. I slipped out of my coat and watched the auctioneer with fascination.

His voice beat with resonance against the mic, rhythmically repeating numbers in a mesmerizing kind of way that came across more like a chant than speaking. Another cowboy was on hand, watching the laptop on the table in front of him for online bids while men in the gathered crowd lifted their numbered paddles.

"It sounds like he's singing," I said, taking in the inflections in the auctioneer's voice as he repeated numbers and pointed from one person in the gathered crowd to the next.

"One-seventy-five; one-seventy-five; do I hear two-hundred?" Then, his finger pointed in a flash. "Two-hundred, two-hundred."

The numbers climbed as he called them, his pointed finger bouncing from one raised hand to the next. Finally, the bidding maxed out on two-ten, and he pronounced the man on the outer edge sold. The man then lifted his number.

"He got it, then?" I asked, circling for a better look. Several others in the crowd did the same.

"He got it," Bryce answered, keeping his gaze on the auctioneer.

The auctioneer traded off with the man standing next to him. They appeared to be partners, trading off to note those who were nodding or lifting their hands to place their bids.

"You said you're here to get a planter?" I said.

“Yeah. Colton and I rotate our crops,” Bryce explained softly as the new auctioneer began anew. “We generally do four or five different ones because every four or five years, we can then get the same crop back into the soil. Some farmers just do grain and potatoes and share-crop, changing land with other growers.”

“Share crop?” I’d lived in farm country my whole life, but I’d never spoken in this much detail with a farmer before.

“It’s not good for the soil to do the same crop over and over from year to year. If one does wheat and beans and the other does grain and potatoes, then you swap so you can keep growing. So, say I’ve got a hundred acres, and another farmer has a hundred acres. We swap to make sure we can grow what we need to.”

“That makes a lot of sense,” I said, amazed at this new insight.

“Colton and I, though—we change up our crop every year and rotate it. This spring, we’re looking for a beet planter. Equipment only lasts for so many years before it’s time to upgrade it, you know?”

I didn’t, but I nodded all the same.

“Colton sold our old planter, and I’m out to get a new one that has better function. I’ve acquired more land, and I can’t cover it all with one planter, so I need two planters and two tractors going at the same time to get it planted in a timely manner. I’ve got another thousand acres to get everything planted on time this coming spring.”

A thousand. I couldn’t fathom a farm that large.

“And you found a precision seed planter.”

“I did. And it’s going to be mine after today.”

He watched the auctioneer with steely resolve.

“What if someone outbids you?”

His hand found mine, and the corners of his mouth quirked. “Then I guess they outbid me, but I’m hoping. I

always hope. My budget is around thirty to forty thousand. I can get a decent used planter for that amount.”

“Thirty—thousand dollars?” And I thought I was in the red in my business at thirteen.

“Nature of the beast when you have as many acres as we do.”

One acre was a lot of money—and he’d just purchased a *thousand*.

“What if you don’t get it?”

“Then we’ll cross that bridge when we get to it. There are other auctions. I’ll just check out another one.”

He was so easygoing about spending so much money. I watched him for signs of stiffness in his shoulders, the way the prospect would have tightened mine.

He was so confident, so at home in this setting. I knew farmers were wealthy, but...holy cow.

Not long into the auction, Colton slipped in, taking the empty seat beside Bryce. Wearing a wide-brimmed cowboy hat, he leaned over, waved to me, and then I heard him whisper to his brother.

“How’s it going?”

“They haven’t done ours yet—hold up—”

I assumed the machinery the auctioneer announced next was the one the brothers were after from the way they both cut off mid-sentence, straightened, and turned their full attention to the front.

I squeezed Bryce’s hand encouragingly. He and Colton both watched with rapt attention. And then, the bidding began. Bryce contended with several others, whipping his paddle into action, one against another. At one point, I was genuinely worried he would be outbid, but the man across the shop nodded to Bryce and backed out.

The auctioneer concluded with a single word. “Sold! Number 301!”

Polite applause broke out across the small crowd, and I turned excitedly to Bryce.

“You got it?”

“We got it.” Colton gave him a fist bump, and Bryce slipped his arm around me, pressing a kiss to my temple. “We got it,” he added again in a whisper to only me.

My entire frame tingled. This was fake. I knew it was, yet the motion felt so real.

The three of us lingered a little longer until the rest of the items were bid on, and the auction closed. Bryce paused a moment to speak with the woman at the desk and then waved to John Scott as we headed back out into the chilly winter afternoon.

A few hours had passed. The sun was much lower in the sky than it had been when we arrived, the light dimmer and grayer. It had been cold before, but with the sun setting, the air was decidedly more frigid.

Colton kept pace beside Bryce and me as we stalked past the equipment. The other farmers and men in attendance made for their pickups parked in various places around the vast yard. From the direction Colton took, I guessed he'd parked close to Bryce's pickup.

“We'd better get back if we want to have enough time to get the sleds ready for the morning,” Colton said, burying his nose into his coat.

Bryce faced him. “Get the sleds ready for what?”

Colton's breath left his mouth, a visible show of his hesitation. Then something shifted over his expression, and he emitted a groan. “He didn't tell you, did he?”

Beside me, Bryce tensed. “Tell me what?”

Colton shot me a look and then grimaced. “Luke invited the boys to do some snowmobiling in the south hills tomorrow morning.”

Bryce's tone hardened. “Who all is going?”

Colton dithered. He tapped his thumb against his zipper.

“Who’d he invite, Colt?”

“Dawson, Hoss, and me. That’s why I assumed you were included.”

Bryce swore under his breath.

Sympathy struck for him. I knew what it felt like to be excluded. It was how I’d always felt around Belle. She’d been treated like the favorite by Grandma and Grandpa. Even my own mother sometimes paid more attention to her than she would to me when we were together.

“Maybe he just hasn’t told you yet,” Colton said. “Have you checked your messages?”

“I’ve checked.” Bryce’s tone was dry. “Look, don’t worry about it. You guys go have fun. I have work to do anyway. I need to get out and check on the skating rink. We’re working on the equipment at the shop. Might as well check on the construction for the house, too. It’s fine. Really.”

Colton looked as though he might argue. The sympathy in his eyes was stark as well.

“Stop looking at me like that,” Bryce said, pointing to his brother. “I know where I stand. You go. Get on out of here.”

“I’ll talk to you later, okay?” Colton watched Bryce for several more moments and then turned to me. To my surprise, he roped me into a hug. “Good to see you, Allie. Take care of my boy here.”

“I will,” I said, patting his arm as he pulled away.

With a final glance, Colton stalked to his pickup, climbed in, and started the engine. Stone-faced, Bryce trailed to my side and opened my door.

“I’m so sorry, Bryce,” I said, wanting to say more but not knowing what.

His knuckles were cold as they stroked my cheek. He pressed his lips into a line before offering a hand.

I took it. I didn't need the help, but sometimes, a person needed to feel needed, so I let him help me.

Once I was situated in the passenger seat, he closed the door and climbed into the driver's side. He started the ignition. Cold air blasted us from the vents, and I hurried to turn the fan down.

"You want to talk about it?" I asked, my voice tiptoeing across the leather seats.

People processed pain in different ways. When my sister was upset, she closed herself in her room. For her, talking was a bad idea until she calmed down and had a chance to sort everything out in her mind.

My mom was similar. She shut down, closed people out—or she put on a brave face and acted too happy about everything until she was able to shut down.

Me? I was the talking kind. I needed a listening ear, a shoulder to cry on—the works.

"Being ostracized by your family? That sucks," I said.

With his hand on the shifter, he scowled at the odometer. "I'm invited to a few things, but on a personal level? I told you. They hate me."

"It sounds like the other brothers don't even know you're not coming. Colton didn't know you were excluded, at least. I'm betting the others don't, either. Why don't you talk to them?"

"It won't do any good."

"Why not?"

"Because Luke is the most hard-headed person I've ever met. He's ruthless and more stubborn than a mule. My mom has tried talking to him. Colton has, too. I think even Belle has tried—but he's got it in his head that I'm the worst person alive, and he refuses to see me differently." His tone was rigid and as cold as ice.

"Is there anything you can do for him personally? To show him you're different?"

“Like what? He’d never agree to talk to me one on one. Truth be told, we’d never make it far enough for me to apologize because I already have. He’s too bitter to hear anything I have to say. The only thing Luke wants from me is my distance. Maybe I’m the one being stubborn, and I should just back off and give him what he wants.”

“Do you really think that’s the best thing?”

He sighed and stared at his hands. I couldn’t bear to see this man looking so downhearted and dejected.

I rested a hand on his arm. Conflict roiled off of him. Conflict and disappointment.

“Hey,” I said, keeping my voice soft. “I made you a promise. I may not have a chance at helping to convince him that you are an amazing person, but I’m going to do what I can to keep that promise.”

“How?” Bryce asked.

His question sounded empty. He lifted his gaze to mine, and the light there had gone out.

“I’ll think of something,” I told him.

And I meant it. I had to do what I could to help Bryce—and not just for our bargain. But because I couldn’t stand to see him hurt and betrayed like this.

I’d said I would help him. If that meant talking to Belle or even Luke, so be it.

I only hoped my efforts would, in fact, help and not somehow make things worse.

## *Chapter Eleven*

I'd been too cowardly thus far to approach Belle directly for anything, but I could do this for Bryce. I still wasn't sure what I was going to say or do, but I hadn't been able to stop thinking about him since he dropped me off after the auction yesterday.

The Christmas tree he'd gotten for me was a fat reminder of his generosity, too.

Sure, he'd made a mistake, but didn't we all?

That was why I stood here in the winter's misty white morning on Belle's porch without a single word in mind of what I would say. I was taking action, moving in blind faith, because staying at my apartment or trying to act like nothing was wrong was no longer an option.

She and I had a tough history. It was time to do what I could to try to fix it.

The morning was cold, and a fresh layer of snow had fallen. Her front porch was as festive as ever, with strands of pine garlands adorning the door and the posts.

Maybe I could see if she needed any help for the wedding. As far as I knew, they'd gone through several more items on her list of preparations. What else had been on that list?

If only I'd asked my mom. I'd been too caught up with everything else going on to remember to do so.

That was another thing I could ask Belle, I supposed. I could say I was here for another copy of that.

Because a simple phone call wouldn't have been enough.

Ugh. She was going to see right through me.

In spite of the brusque brush of glacial air down my spine, I also felt a wave of warmth from somewhere inside. I pictured Grandpa standing at the door, giving me the thumbs up he always used to, smiling that smile of his, encouraging me to work hard and strive—but also to know when there was a need for balance.

It was almost as though Grandpa were there, telling me to slow down like he once might have done if he were still here.

He and Grandma always said I was in too big of a hurry to do things. I rushed to get piano lessons out of the way, to get back home, to get on to the next thing.

Take your time, they'd said. Slow down. Pick the apples. Smell the roses.

Being clear out here made that a little more possible. When I was back in town, there was a different feeling, but out here?

“Help me, Grandpa,” I whispered, not sure if he could hear me or not.

I hoped he could.

Nerves jittered beneath my skin, hiding under the façade of shivers from the cold. But I read them for what they were. And I wasn't going to let them hold me back.

I hadn't been able to approach Belle for the ornaments for myself.

“For Bryce,” I muttered.

The adage gave me the courage to take the final steps to the door. I knocked and waited.

Footsteps and shadows moved inside, and then Belle opened the door. Her cheeks were rosy-red, and her eyes glinted with a light that could be described as nothing else but joy.

“Hey, Allie. What are you doing way out here?”

I couldn't bring myself to come right out and say it. The old Allie might have done so, but after spending time with

Bryce and being around Belle, I was coming to understand where I'd gone wrong in my relationship with my cousin.

I'd always been too focused on myself during all of our interactions. It was time I shifted the focus to her. To Bryce.

"I thought I'd see if you needed any help. Your wedding is next week."

"Yeah, it is, isn't it?" She grinned like a lovestruck fool.

I couldn't help but return it.

"I can't believe that," she went on. "I wake up every morning and see Luke out the window at his little shed-house, feeding the animals or clearing snow off my porch, and the whole time I'm getting my boots on to head out and help him, I just can't believe it. Who would have thought I could be this happy?"

"I'm glad for you," I told her, smiling to hide the slightest twinge of jealousy.

The truth was, I'd agonized for a life like that. A love like this, free from care or worry and the stress of getting bills paid and staying afloat.

My normal reaction was envy. Leigh and I had talked about it more than once. Grandpa had *so much money*. Granted, it was all in the land, but still, he gave all that land to Belle.

I didn't realize how much I resented her for that fact until now.

Belle must have read the look on my face. "Is everything okay?"

I expelled a breath. "What am I even doing here?" I muttered.

I was tempted to turn around and head right back to my car, even if it meant getting snow in my shoes again.

"I'm sorry," Belle said. "Here I am, gushing, and you need help. Will you come in? Please?"

This was going all wrong. I was supposed to focus on her —not me.

I hadn't come out here for a heart-to-heart with my cousin, but something inside of me gave a coercive nudge at the thought. I fought my inhibitions and nodded. I stepped into the house, barely recognizing anything and yet taken away by its beauty all over again.

"This house," I said, not sure what else I wanted to say.

"Can I get you something to drink? Some cocoa?" she asked, leading the way to the kitchen.

Still too tempted to turn heel and make for my car outside, I couldn't move.

Belle came to me again. "Allie? What's wrong?"

I'd come for Bryce, yes, but another thought struck me with that same tender feeling that had been both caressing and hounding me since I'd gotten here.

*If thou bring any gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; Leave there thy gift before the altar and go thy way; first, be reconciled to thy brother and then come and offer thy gift.*

How could I help Bryce and Luke be reconciled when Belle and I had our own reconciliation to get through?

I was resentful of my cousin. I was angry that she'd inherited this house and all its land. I was bitter that she was thriving like new blossoms in springtime, and I was drowning in the lowest levels of a desolate bog.

I'd been sneaky, attempting to search her house without her permission. I'd been a coward, relying on Bryce to help me do what I should have approached on my own the whole time.

"I came here to ask you something," I told her, uncertain where the gumption was coming from.

Reassurance pricked my heart, encouraging me to continue.

“What is it?”

She offered me a seat at her dining table, but I shook my head. I couldn't sit. I wasn't that comfortable yet.

“You have this perfect life, and mine is falling apart,” I said.

Belle gave a nervous little chuckle. She hugged her torso and glanced around her immaculate dining room. “My life is amazing, but it's not perfect. Luke and I still have our disagreements.”

“But you got this house. You got all of Grandpa's land. You got the Christmas ornaments, and I could really—”

It sounded so petty. I couldn't finish. Emotion was raw and fledgling, and I had to blink it away.

Doggone it. Why had I even come?

Soft sympathy glazed Belle's eyes. “I never thought you cared,” she said.

I flashed her a look. “About what?”

“The house,” she said. “When we were kids, you hated being here.”

“What makes you say that?” I couldn't remember ever saying as much.

Belle pressed her lips together and gripped the back of one of her dining chairs. “Every time you came over, it seemed like you couldn't wait to leave. We had a sleepover in that room with the blue carpet, and you just complained the whole time about how ugly everything was.

“You hated being here, Allie. Grandpa loved this house—and I did, too. You came to visit, but this was my home.”

Tears stung my eyes. Hearing her relay my behavior stung. The worst part of it was, she wasn't wrong. Though I didn't remember doing so, I could see my younger self saying and behaving the way Belle remembered me doing.

I'd been prideful. I'd been sour and jealous, even then.

“I know it was. I just—you got everything.”

Belle tucked her lips between her teeth. “I know this is hard. It was hard to lose Grandpa. I don’t know how close you were to him, Allie, but he raised me.

“Having him die was like losing a father—and it was especially devastating to lose him after I’d lost Eli, you know? I know that doesn’t make it any easier, but maybe you can see things differently, especially since I know you lost your dad a few years ago.”

I knew Belle’s parents had been divorced, and when her mom died, her dad hadn’t wanted anything to do with her. Mom had reminded me of these details recently, but for some reason, hearing the news now tempered me inside in a way it never had before.

Grandpa *had* raised her. This was her home.

I’d forgotten about her losing her first fiancé in such a tragic way. Of course, she was soaring over the moon at having found someone new. No wonder every time I saw her, she looked as though Luke had given her the world.

“I’m sorry,” I told her, the words releasing something deep inside my chest, so it rattled inside. I had to conscientiously breathe. “I think I’ve misjudged you.”

“I’ve done the same to you,” she said with a little smile. “I’m sorry, too. I felt like you didn’t care about Grandpa, either, because when you and Leigh came, it seemed like all you cared about was getting his and Grandma’s stuff for your store.”

That pricked too. I could see how it might have come across that way, and I didn’t like it.

I had been upset the day of Grandpa’s funeral. I’d felt jilted that Belle had gotten so much, and we were left with the task of cleaning everything out of her new house.

Like she couldn’t have done us all a favor and done the work for us instead since she’d gotten so much.

“My store is failing.” It was a poor defense, but it was all I had.

“Oh,” Belle said. “That’s too bad. I’ve never actually been there. I should come and see what you have.”

I waved this away, exasperation cutting along with my shame. “Don’t come unless it’s something you want to do. Don’t do it out of pity for me.”

I wasn’t going to ask her for the ornaments, not now when my pride was Swiss cheese. Hearing things from her point of view made me sound so self-centered.

Maybe I was. I’d been mistaken about her, about the entire situation.

Belle placed her hand on my shoulder. Reluctantly, I lifted my eyes to hers. They were brown, not unlike my own. She didn’t appear to be angry. There were no traces of ire there, only compassion.

“I’m sorry about your store,” she said. “Thank you for coming to see if I needed help.”

I sniffed and stepped out of her reach.

“What can I do?” I asked, smearing a hand across my cheek and wishing there was some way to dampen these emotions raging inside of my chest.

I needed something else to focus on. I needed to see if she’d let me make things right.

“I’m still sorting through some of Grandpa’s papers in the library,” Belle said. “I need something else to focus on, too, so I don’t go crazy while waiting for the big day. Heaven knows I can’t wait to marry that man and have him finally move in rather than just coming and going. Want to come help go through Grandpa’s stuff?”

Sorting through papers? That sounded promising.

“Sure,” I said.

Belle smiled and led the way down the hall. Beyond the bathroom and the door to the basement, Grandpa’s library

lingered. He'd called it his study.

"Got rid of the orange shag, I see," I said, attempting to lighten the mood.

Belle laughed uneasily. "Yes! That was one of the first things to go. Can you believe he had all these books?"

"I can't believe he read them all." I rubbed my arms and looked over the collection of books on shelves, which had been installed over panels of dark brown siding.

This room definitely needed a makeover. The dark wood felt so out of place after being in the trendier, more modern, updated portions of the house.

"His computer is still here?" I asked.

The monitor was huge and bulky, and the computer looked dated, faded, and dusty. I suspected it had seen little use since his passing.

"Yeah. I've been focusing on the main rooms and the upstairs. Now that that's all done, I'm moving down here. I'd like to clear off the shelves, take them down, and either remove or paint over all that siding."

"That will really lighten things up in here," I said.

As it was, the brown siding was so dark and imposing.

"I think so, too."

Memories flashed of playing here and catching glimpses of Grandpa sitting at his computer, answering emails, and working on spreadsheets or things for his farms.

"It looks like you've gotten a head start," I said, gesturing to the table set up in front of the closet.

Papers littered its surface. This wasn't the same table Grandpa had always used. If memory served, Uncle Thomas had taken that table out of here.

This was a newer folding table, rectangular and lighter in color than anything else in this room. A filing cabinet was positioned in the corner beyond the table, and several drawers gaped open.

“I’m surprised Uncle Thomas left this all here,” I said.

“I know,” Belle said. “I think he thought he would get them regardless.”

“I still can’t believe he tried to cheat you out of this place.”

Belle paused midstride toward the curtains and peered back at me. “You heard about that?”

“Yeah. Mom told me.” I decided not to add that Mom had informed me of the story after I’d been complaining about Belle getting the house.

“I’m glad she came,” Belle said. “Your mom dropped everything to rush over here and verify to Uncle Thomas that the house had, in fact, been deeded to me. I don’t know what might have happened if she hadn’t.”

As nice as the story was, I didn’t want to talk about Mom right now. There was some lingering bitterness with Mom, too, and the way she’d always treated Belle like so much more than my cousin.

Belle and I were just starting to understand one another. I didn’t want to ruin that by bringing up more hard feelings.

“You want me to start here?” I asked, pulling open the top drawer of the second filing cabinet.

“Sure,” Belle said, taking the chair at the table. “Just throw away anything posted before the year two thousand. If there’s something you’re not sure about, add it to the stack on the table.”

“You got it.”

We worked for the next hour or so in communal silence, breaking our concentration to remark on papers or recall fond memories spurred by the sight of certain documents. Belle’s hug just before I left had a repairing quality. She thanked me for coming over, and her gratitude seemed both genuine and heartwarming, reflecting the peace I felt inside.

That peace didn’t last long, though. I was both warmed at the connection Belle and I were able to share and conflicted

about the fact that, no matter what, I was going to sever it again.

I had started to patch things up with my cousin, but I hadn't helped Bryce at all. What would Belle say once she finally figured out what he and I were up to?

## *Chapter Twelve*

Sunny curled around my ankles, meowing expectantly. I'd nestled on one corner of my couch, inhaling the scrumptious pine scent emanating from my Christmas tree, and stared at the paper in my hands.

"Hang on there, kitty cat," I said, chewing on the end of my pen.

I'd scratched so many lines over the other copies I'd made that I'd started over. This version was turning out to be the best, though.

After giving the last draft several failed attempts, I finally felt like I was making some progress on this ad.

"What do you think of this?" I asked the cat, bending to scratch her behind the ears.

She hopped onto my lap and padded my thighs a few times with her paws before circling and plopping down.

I read aloud, attempting to practice my inflections. The idea was to sound sales savvy, enthusiastic, and invigorated, without overdoing it.

"Start the New Year off right with our vibrant colors, trendy tees, new arrivals, and more. The Flora and Fauna on Middle Avenue can help you supercharge your wardrobe this winter without paying top dollar—and it's right here in Burley."

Sunny nestled her face against my thumb.

"Good? Yeah, I thought so too. We'll see what Bryce and Colton think."

He'd texted me earlier that morning to let me know that Colton had some availability if I was ready to shoot footage for my ad. That lit the fire I'd needed under me.

I'd been working on ad copy since six a.m. I considered calling Bex to read the ad copy to her, but I'd bothered her enough with this in my previous drafts. She was the whole reason I'd been able to get the wording to where it was now.

I'd just run it past the guys once we met at the store.

I sprang to my feet, checked my makeup and hair for what had to be the tenth time that morning—my hair hung in lazy curls, and I'd smattered on red lipstick for this—and bundled up before bounding out into the fresh snowfall.

New flakes drifted down in the sky, landing on my cheeks and nose with cold kisses. I turned to lock my apartment door and then hurried to my car.

The drive to the shop took only about eight minutes—not that anyone was counting. In all reality, my nerves were strung tighter than Christmas lights. I wiped my palms on my jeans, killed the ignition, and sauntered to the sidewalk just as Bryce's huge pickup pulled up beside my car.

He opened his door and stood on the running board, propping a hand on the truck's frame and staring at me as though I were stare-at-able. An invisible seam tightened in my stomach.

"You look incredible." He called so loudly from his truck, the two people standing near the stoplight several feet up the street turned their heads in our direction.

Colton retrieved a bulky-looking bag and a tripod from the backseat. The sound of his door slamming jarred Bryce enough that he jumped down and strode eagerly toward me.

"You're looking at me as if you've never seen me before," I said, unable to block my grin.

"Careful," Colton said, hitching the folded tripod beneath his arm. "I think you dropped something back there."

This shook Bryce. He turned around. "Yeah? What is it?"

“Your jaw.” Colton winked at me.

Bryce shoved him, and my cheeks burned at his corny joke. I couldn’t read too much into this. He was laying it on thick—because Colton was here. He was doing this for *Colton*. Not because he was actually into me.

Delving my keys from my pocket, I turned toward the shop as well, only to have Bryce catch my hand. He leaned in with ardor in his gaze, stymying me completely. It was like we were standing on ice, either about to crack open or tip us over and knock us on our backsides.

“Red,” he said, staring at my mouth.

A wick caught fire from the flames in his eyes. Burning. Consuming. I couldn’t handle this. His devout gaze had a hold on me, and I refused to let it.

“Is that what’s got you so turned upside down?”

He lifted my hand, opened my palm with warm fingers, and placed a kiss there that tremored through my entire frame, rattling my bones within my skin.

“Yes,” he said, unabashedly.

My brain detached from its stem. I was adrift, a cloud flurrying in a breeze.

“Are you two coming, or am I making the ad all by myself?” Colton’s voice traveled behind my shoulder. “I doubt I’ll do it justice, but I’ll try.”

It took more effort than it should have to shake off this Bryce-induced stupor.

Bryce recovered quicker than I did. “That’s a great idea, Colt. Maybe you could sample a few of the shirts or dresses,” he said.

He faced his brother but seized my hand, and I was reeling from the impact of his attention as I unlocked the door and flicked on the lights. My hands shook so hard I nearly dropped my keys.

Bryce strolled inside. “You could dance around to show the clothes at their full splendor.”

Releasing my hand, he went to the side rack, removed a dress, and held it up to check its specks against Colton’s frame.

Colton shoved the dress away, made a joke about what Bryce could do with the shirts and dresses in my shop, and all I could do was laugh.

Having these two around was both the best and the worst idea I’d ever had. I still hadn’t managed to regain my equilibrium from his attention. He’d never acted this overtly interested in me before. I needed him to take it down a notch or two.

“Do you expect me to be able to talk on camera after this?” I muttered.

If they kept this up, I wouldn’t be able to keep a straight face.

Bryce swept me into his arms and spoke low in my ear. “Oh, darlin’, I don’t expect anything from you except that red mouth.”

I shoved him too. My face could rival any fireplace at this point.

“None of that, or I’ll kick you out and do this myself. Best behavior, you got it?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Bryce said, but the smile didn’t wipe from his cheeks.

Colton set the bulky bag on the counter beside the tablet I used as a register and unlatched it, pulling expensive-looking camera equipment out. He removed a huge lens from one side of the bag and screwed it into place on the camera.

“Where do you want to stand?” he asked.

“I was thinking I’d be here, in the center near this display.” I’d fixed it up specifically for this, putting the cutest bags I had there, as well as several more pieces of jewelry.

“Perfect,” Bryce said, his expression slightly glazed over.

I really needed him to stop acting like an idiot. “With the mood you’re in, anywhere I stand is perfect.”

“You’re not wrong,” Colton said.

“What can I say? I’m biased,” Bryce said.

“I need you unbiased,” I said.

“Then you should have asked someone else. You’ll always be perfect to me.”

The words knotted inside of me. I know he was trying to be sweet, but this was overkill. Had something happened to make him want to try that much harder to convince Colton about us? It was almost cloying. It didn’t help that he was striking a nerve.

That level of perfection had always been something I’d strived for in everything I did. I knew he didn’t mean it that way, but his words were a reminder of just how much I *wasn’t* reaching that with my shop.

*He didn’t mean it like that, I told myself. So don’t take it there.*

In that moment, I wished I hadn’t asked for his help with this, Mr. I Have Ten Thousand Successful Businesses.

Colton fiddled with a few more things. He held onto a bar attached to the tripod and used that to easily adjust the camera’s direction. Bending in to check the lens, he then straightened and gave me the thumbs up.

“Ready when you are,” he said.

Bryce folded his arms, smirking and gaping at me as though I were the goddess Diana personified. I stared at him, at Colton, who raised his brow at his brother as if he’d never seen him act this insane, and then expelled a huge breath.

“I can’t do this,” I said.

“Jitters are normal,” Colton said, remaining completely cool. His composed and soothing demeanor was exactly what I needed.

Bryce's?

Wasn't.

I pressed my hands to my stomach and crossed the space toward Bryce. "I'll be right back," I told Colton, who nodded as though he understood what I couldn't bring myself to say in front of him.

Bryce's brows furrowed. "Everything okay?"

"Will you come outside with me for a minute?"

Bryce frowned at his brother and then nodded at me, following me out into the freezing December afternoon. I'd left my coat inside and regretted it almost instantly. The cold seeped into every single one of my pores. I hugged my torso, my jaw quivering.

"What's going on?" he asked.

"You're making me nervous," I said, shivering on the sidewalk in front of him.

"Okay," he said, sliding his hands to the small of my back. I couldn't say I minded his body heat. The man was a walking oven out here. "I know I've been super into you since you look so gorgeous for this. I'll stay quiet and let you do your thing."

"I just can't read your attention," I told him. "It's completely sweet, but Colton already believes we're a thing. You don't have to overdo it."

"I'm—not overdoing it."

I gripped the front of his coat.

"Would you understand it if I asked you to wait outside?"

A line appeared between his brows. "Why?"

"Because I'm just feeling really self-conscious about this whole thing, and I think I'll be able to think better if you're not around."

"Oof." A streak of pain crossed over his eyes.

"Bryce," I said, eager to help him understand.

He'd been rejected by his brother; the last thing I wanted was for him to feel rejected by me, especially when he was here at my request.

"Please, don't take this the wrong way. Being around you makes me lose my head."

"Yeah?" His wicked little smile reappeared.

"Yes," I said, resting my forehead against his chest. "I need to get this right, and I'm afraid you'll make me so distracted I'll have to keep redoing it over and over because I can't concentrate."

"I make you lose your concentration?" He sounded far too intrigued by this. His hands rested on my hips.

I pounded a fist against his chest. "Yes, you adorable man. Can you wait out here? Please?"

"You'll let me see it when you're done, though, right?"

"Yes," I said, hoping I wouldn't regret that promise.

He pinched my jaw between his fingers, stilling me with the rapture in his gaze. "All right then, Miss Allie. I will stay out here and guard the door, making sure no one comes in to interrupt until you're finished."

"Thank you," I said.

I was tempted to tiptoe up and press a kiss to his mouth. But no one was around to prove anything to out here, and I couldn't confuse the situation any more than it already was.

Bryce moaned as if I'd just denied him a spoonful of ice cream. I shook my head and strolled back into the store. Admittedly, I'd need a moment or two to recover as well.

The recording went smoothly, as far as I could tell. Colton had me do several takes, just to make sure we got the best possible version. He also had me recite my spiel in several different locations throughout the store, and then, once I was done, he took some footage without anyone in it at all.

Colton and I shared the occasional, harmless small talk, though he did reveal something that surprised me—after

Dawson had his rodeo accident, Bryce had helped pay his medical bills.

“He did?” I said, voicing my shock.

“Keep it on the down-low. He doesn’t want Luke to find out.”

That made no sense. Why wouldn’t he want Luke to know one of the nicest things he could possibly know about him? I didn’t get a chance to pester him further.

As luck would have it, as we finished, a customer came to the store, prompting Colton to film her browsing. Bryce was speaking with her outside, but I opened the door and invited her in to explain the situation and ask for her permission, and she readily gave it.

“For social proof,” Colton said by way of explanation.

My excitement grew the more the afternoon went on, so that by the time Colton was putting his recording equipment away, I was gushing out *thank yous* to him.

“Are you done yet?” Bryce asked, peeking his head into the store.

“You ruined everything,” Colton said, snapping the clasp on his bulky bag in disgust. “Now we’re going to have to start all over.”

“Ha ha,” I said, strolling to meet Bryce at the door. “Don’t mind him. We just finished.”

“So I can come in now?”

“Yes,” I said. “Please come in.”

“And I can do this now?” He planted a kiss on my mouth without warning.

A little noise escaped my throat, but I held on to the front of his jacket to keep from getting pulled under. *It’s just for Colton*, I told myself. *It’s just for show*.

“That’s my cue.” Colton faced us. “And you’re my ride, so you two better wrap up what you started later.”

“I have something I wanted to show you,” Bryce said, ignoring his brother. “You want to come with us? I can drop this guy off and take you out to see the land.”

“What land?” I asked.

“You know the townhouses I told you I wanted to build?”

“Yeah?”

Bryce’s expression turned boyish. “John Scott sold us the land for it.”

My brain worked through the name. John Scott, the farmer I’d met at the auction?

“So you’re moving forward with building them?”

“Yeah, you want to see?”

“Sure,” I said. “But Bex is working at her other job. I need to stay here until five.”

“Great,” Bryce said, swooping in for another kiss. “I’ll pick you up when you get off. We’ll grab a bite and head over. What do you think?”

I was on cloud nine, floating, hallucinating, daydreaming. Was he for real? He wasn’t. This wasn’t. I couldn’t let myself get caught up in that.

“I—that sounds great.” Then I turned my attention to Colton. “Unless you need help with the video?”

“It’ll take a few days to get it all put together,” he said. “You can give me your feedback then if you want.”

*Better by Christmas*, I thought, Dad’s old adage running through my mind again and leaving me fizzling like newly poured sparkling water. Thanks to the Holden boys’ help, I was going to get there. I would have this ad ready to run by Christmas or just shortly thereafter.

I knew they’d never let me pay them anything for this—even if I did have money to spare for it. But I’d have to think of some way to express my gratitude for their help.

“Sounds great. And Colton? If you wouldn’t mind, I’d love to have something I could share on social media, too. Would that be possible?”

“We could probably make something work. You coming?” he asked his brother.

“Yeah,” Bryce said, and then he pointed at me. “I’ll see you at five.”

I tucked a hair behind my ear. “Five it is.”

My insides fluttered. I watched as they both stepped out into the snow, as Bryce said something to make Colton laugh, as they climbed into his truck and pulled away.

It wasn’t until they were gone that I sagged with something like exhaustion.

Was he really taking me to see land? Or, like the kiss, had he only offered for Colton’s benefit?

## *Chapter Thirteen*

**B**ryce was as good as his word. He was there, right at five, right as I was turning out the lights and closing things down for the day. Only two other customers had come in after the woman who'd agreed to let us film her, and of those two, only one of them had made a purchase.

She'd bought a lovely salmon-colored cardigan. The coral buttons had a slight shimmer. I was so glad someone had picked it up. The majority of the items in my shop were things that I loved and would have purchased had I been the one shopping for them.

"Dinner at the Elkhorn?" Bryce suggested as he climbed into the driver's seat after helping me into his pickup.

He'd already turned the seat heaters on for me, so the leather was toasty against my backside. I couldn't say I minded climbing into a warm vehicle with how cold the evening had gotten. It was nearing ten degrees out here. Too cold to snow.

"Sounds delicious," I said.

"It can be an homage to our first date."

"That wasn't our first date," I said, squirming at the reminder of what this was between us.

"You're right. An homage to you checking me out then."

I barked a laugh, grateful for his lighthearted take on things. He so had me there. I did nothing but check him out every time we were together.

“I think you were the one who had me in your sights today. You couldn’t take your eyes off me.”

“Still can’t,” he said, sliding his hand over to grasp mine. “Maybe you’d better drive.”

I pinched my lips and turned away so he wouldn’t see my foolhardy grin.

We drove, sharing small talk about the equipment he and Colton had gotten from the auction, about my store, about how Colton said the ad was going to be a good one once he was finished editing it. A sinking feeling accompanied that news, though I couldn’t figure out why. I should be happy the ad was turning out well.

Why was I now having misgivings about it? Did it have something to do with the doubts I had about Bryce that hovered just below the surface?

Dinner was pleasant. Bryce sat on the same side of the booth as me this time, and we enjoyed some delicious burgers and steak fries.

Once we returned to his pickup, Bryce propped his sunglasses up onto his hair in the evening’s fading light. He didn’t go far before he slowed at the edge of a familiar patch of land situated almost at the mouth of the tiny town.

“There it is,” he said, pointing. Clusters of dirt broke through the snow, making the field look as though it were cookies and cream.

“So close to Bridgewater?” Sure enough, this land was a curve away from the outskirts of town.

“Is something wrong with that?”

“Not really,” I said. “I just expected it to be out toward Belle’s house or something in that direction. You’re expanding the town’s edges. It’ll just make Bridgewater feel too big.”

“Expansion is good. They’ve needed more places for people to live for a while. You know, John’s oldest daughter and her new husband are looking for a place to stay. I don’t

doubt we could fill every one of these when the time comes for it.”

I let that sit for a minute. Offering temporary housing in Bridgewater was a great idea. Bex could have used a little townhouse to rent when she'd gotten divorced. Then again, her life would have turned out completely differently if she'd had something like that.

“When are you starting construction?” I asked.

“Just as soon as we can. I think it'll do a lot of good for this little town. It'll bring in new blood.”

“Some people may not like that.” I couldn't help but think of Gina Hansen, Jeralyn Perry, and some of the other residents who've lived in Bridgewater for longer than I'd been alive. Old folks didn't take too well to expansion and change.

“Have you run this by the council?”

“Belle wrung me through the gears,” Bryce said, frowning. “Just one more thing for Luke to hate me for.”

“Belle did? Why?” As far as I knew, she wasn't even on the council. Then again, Bex had left an opening when she'd moved. Had Belle filled it?

“She wants things to stay the same around here,” he said. “But nothing ever really stays the same. We're all like rivers, flowing to and from places and changing. Growth will be good for this town.

“Who knows? Maybe they'll open a few more stores or even another restaurant. Plenty of people stop through on their way to the ski lodge or Rock Creek. I'm betting they'd love a few more places to eat, shop, and sleep.”

“Sounds like you want to turn Bridgewater into a tourist town.”

I couldn't say I liked that idea much, either. This town had its charm. If it got too big, some of that appeal would fade.

“Just providing more options for people,” he said, “that's all. It'll stay small.”

“Looks like someone else is closing in on your idea.”

I pointed to the house about two hundred feet away. It looked to be only half done. It had a structure and a roof, but no windows, no doors, and no finishing work.

The house was just bones.

“Oh, that?” Grinning, he pulled onto the dirt road leading to it. “That’s for my mom.”

“You’re—you’re building this too?”

“You sound so surprised.”

I knew it wasn’t polite to talk about money or pass judgment on a person’s decisions—but I couldn’t wrap my head around this.

“You’re—I don’t see how you can have your hand in so many pies. You’re manning the seasonal skating rink. You just bought really pricey farm equipment, which you’ll be using to farm with this spring. Now land to build townhouses—and you’re in the middle of building a house for your mom, too?”

Just how loaded was he?

“How are you managing all of this?” I asked.

The road bumped along, jostling me, so I had to cling to the door handle several times. Once we slowed just in front of the half-finished house, he shifted into park.

“I’m not doing it all myself.” He gave a little chuckle. “I oversee the construction. I’ve hired managers to run the skating rink. I check in on all my projects, but I’m not on hand all the time for every single one.”

“That’s really—impressive.”

Attractive. Incredible. Magnetic.

Here I was, struggling to keep one business afloat, and it sounded like he handled many with flying colors.

“Speaking of which, it’s been a while since I’ve seen personally how things are going with construction here,” he said. “I keep things on a bit of rotation and spend my time

checking in on guys I've got overseeing things. I haven't stopped by the house in a while, though. You want to walk through and check things out with me?"

"You mean now?"

"Is there a better time?" Bryce got out of the truck and came around to get my door without answering.

I beat him to it. Once I was at his side, Bryce trudged to the garage doors, which were the one thing that had doors in place.

Planks of wood, buckets, brushes, cords, and other sundry items were visible through the window, scattered within.

"Might be easier taking the back door," he said.

Sure enough, where the front had no steps and was several feet up from the ground, the back garage door was more level with the ground.

"This is a nice space," I said.

The cement had been poured, though the interior walls hadn't yet been covered. Beams stood like parallel soldiers, offering structure and a holding place for the panes blocking out the cold air.

"It's technically a two-car garage, but Mom won't need space for two vehicles. This other side will be for a lawn mower and four-wheeler."

"What about your younger brother? Kyler?"

"Oh, Hoss? Yeah, he's got a car, but he won't need his own parking space. He's graduating high school this spring, and then he'll be off to college."

"Why do you call him Hoss?" I'd heard him and Colton do it a few times now.

Bryce offered me his hand. I took it, feeling his warm, callused skin. He stepped from the garage into the house. The air in here was still chilled, but at least the wind couldn't bite.

"That's a story I'll leave him to tell you. This here is the laundry room. I know Mom would have loved a place like this

while we were growing up. Five boys and all the mud and mayhem we brought with us.” He snickered.

I pictured the completed room the best that I could. Writing marked several places on the floor and walls that I couldn’t decipher. Several water lines poked up through the cement and the wooden walls.

“There’s a special place in heaven just for her,” I said.

“There’d better be. She only had a small washer and dryer in a hall closet.”

“At least she had that,” I said, stalking into an open layout I suspected to be the kitchen and living room area.

Tape on the floor marked where the stove, the fridge, and the bar would go. Fading orange sunlight on the fringes of dark blue beamed through a trio of generous windows onto the exposed wooden floor.

“This is going to be amazing,” I said. “She’s going to love having all this space.”

“Yeah, this is something Colton, Hoss, and I agreed on when we came up with this idea. She’s always had such a little house, and the way it’s situated doesn’t allow for much direct sunlight, either. We wanted her to retire in style.”

“Does she know you’re doing this?”

“No, and we’d like to keep it that way.” His eyes glinted. “Can you imagine her surprise once it’s all finished?”

He gestured to the hall, and I felt suddenly intimate in this space with only him.

“A couple of guest rooms,” he said, indicating the two we passed that were collecting shadows in the dawning night. Bryce flipped the switch—at least the electrical had been installed. “And the main, complete with walk-in closet and personal bathroom.”

“So, are Dawson and Luke not in on this with you?”

“I can’t tell Luke anything. And Dawson’s been gone on the circuit before his accident.”

“I see.”

Who was keeping who in the dark now? Something told me Luke would be livid once he found out they’d built an entire house for their mom and hadn’t told him.

We headed toward the stairs, which, like everything else in here, were just boards without railings to hold onto. Bryce waited for me to ascend first, and then he followed. The intimate feeling I’d had earlier mounted.

We were just walking through, yet it felt like more than that. Probably because of the thoughts running through my mind.

I pictured this scenario with him under different circumstances:

This was our house. We were inspecting the space with the intent to move into it ourselves. With the intent to live here. Together.

I shook the daydream away.

“I went to Belle’s yesterday,” I told him.

“How did that go?”

“Good,” I said. “We ended up going through some of our grandpa’s old papers together, and I think that’s probably the most comfortable I’ve ever felt around her.”

“Why is that?”

“We talked, Bryce. It was...nice. We kind of laid our feelings on the table, and I feel like I understand her a little better.”

“That’s really good,” he said, though the raincloud darkening his expression suggested otherwise. Had something I said bothered him?

I stopped at the top of the stairs, turning to place my hands on his shoulders. As he was a few steps below, it put us almost at the same height.

“Maybe you could do that with Luke.”

He gripped my hands. “I know you mean well, but I’ve tried that. He won’t talk to me, remember?”

“Try. Tell him about this house. Tell him how you’re paid for Dawson’s medical bills. Tell him—”

Bryce’s brows lifted at the mention of his generosity. Did he know Colton had told me?

“There’s no point,” he said, recovering quickly.

“What if there is? I told you I’d help you repair things with him. I—what are you doing?”

His hands slid around my back, pulling me in close. “Your mouth is still red. Did you know that?”

His lids were lowered at half-mast.

“Are you trying to change the subject?”

“Maybe. Is it working?” His mouth hovered over mine. His warm breath dulled everything, and my thoughts skittered as he tugged me closer.

“Colton’s not around to prove anything to,” I said, the words frailer than I intended.

I no longer felt cold. In fact, I no longer felt anything but his heartbeat pounding against mine.

“Doesn’t have to be for me to keep my word.”

“What word?”

His lips tickled against the surface of my jaw. “I still owe you a dance,” he said.

Instead of kissing me, Bryce climbed the final few steps to the spacious landing situated between three bedrooms. He removed his phone from his pocket, tapped the screen a few times, and the tune “Christmas in the Country” by Thomas Rhett began to strum.

Bryce pocketed his phone and approached me with his arms open.

“Told you I’d find somewhere we could dance.”

I fluttered like a flag in a breeze. “If I had known you meant your mom’s house—”

“I’m resourceful.”

“I’m starting to see that.”

Bryce’s hands were assured, his steps steady. He held me to his body, and the closeness sent waves of dizziness over me, giving me the sensation that we were stepping on clouds, somewhere else entirely. A chorus of butterflies tittered through me, making every move, every touch, startle.

I was tempted to rest my head against his chest, but that was too in-the-moment. That was too accepting that this was real. He impressed me with several more moves and began a slow waltz when the song changed to something more fitting.

“I have something to say that you might not like,” he said, his voice rumbling in his chest.

“What’s that?”

“Have you thought it might be time to let things go?” Bryce asked, guiding me away and then pulling me to him again.

His feet picked up the steps right where he left off like dancing was second nature to him.

I frowned, completely derailed by his suggestion. Was he talking about The Flora?

“Not an option,” I said.

He was just there with me earlier today. He and his brother helped me film an ad, for goodness’ sake!

My misgivings about that ad had fluttered like fallen leaves—leaves that had once had their place but had been knocked down by the death of their lifespan and the change of a season.

I didn’t like that thought, either.

“Except that it *is* an option. You’re not permanently tied there, Allie. Letting go might be the best one for you at this point.”

I couldn't believe he was talking about this now. I stopped moving, stepped out of his reach, and shuffled toward the stairs. "Aren't we supposed to be dancing?"

"What if things don't turn around with your store like you want them to?" he persisted. "One ad is all well and good, but it might not do what you're hoping it will."

"It will," I insisted.

Because I had faith that it would. I'd believed in myself, in my store, for so long. You didn't walk away from that.

"How?" he said. "Burley isn't as small as Bridgewater, but it's still small. Most people shop in Twin Falls for things. Your sheer strength of will—impressive as it is—can't change that fact. I've seen it happen time and time again with small stores like yours."

His words riled me. They got my back up. This didn't just affect me. Bex worked at my store, too—how could I just give up?

"I've seen that too," I said, feeling the fierce need to defend The Flora and Fauna. The fact that he was attacking the store felt like a personal attack on me instead. "But I'm going to be the exception."

"That's admirable," he said, lifting his hands as though dealing with a cranky animal. "But why not be the 'acceptation' instead?"

He changed the way he said it, so I heard the root. *Acceptation*.

"That's not even a word."

"*Accept* that it didn't work, Allie. Sometimes, businesses don't. Colton and I—"

I was affronted. He was doubting me? How could he doubt me? He'd acted so giddy and goofy and supportive earlier.

I cut him off. "Stop it."

"No one will think less of you for not succeeding."

I closed my eyes. "That's what you think."

He stepped closer and rested his hands on my biceps. “Who, then?”

I turned my face away and shook him off, not wanting him to see me. If I’d known I was going to get a lecture from him tonight, I never would have come.

I worked through a way to answer his question. To defend myself.

“My mother, for one,” I said, the words contemptuous and constricted. “She has always given me outlandish standards that I’ve failed to meet time and time again. My family. My sister.”

Every person I came in contact with, basically.

“Word travels fast, and I want that word to have positive results,” I finished.

His expression was fixed on my failure, cloaked as sympathy. I couldn’t handle this, not from him. He’d readily agreed to be my boyfriend to *save* my store, and now he didn’t think I could? He was supposed to be my lifeline.

This ad was going to do that. Why—why did he think it wouldn’t?

“Take me home,” I said. I couldn’t be with someone who showed so little faith in me.

## *Chapter Fourteen*

**B**ryce didn't move. He just stared at me with that same stupid sympathy in his eyes.

"Now," I said, in case he missed my request the first time. I should have driven myself. I should never have gotten into this mess with him in the first place.

"Just hear me out," he said.

I couldn't. I didn't want to hear anything else he had to say.

Bex and I had been working on the store's social media presence. We'd been putting so many things into effect. Content marketing, optimizing a website, sandwich board signs around town. The only thing we hadn't yet tried was email marketing, and that was because we hadn't gotten around to acquiring emails from customers in the first place.

The fall of his boots on the naked wooden floor was loud. Bryce tapped his phone and turned the volume down. The resulting quiet only amplified my pounding heartbeat.

"You set your standards too high. No one is perfect."

"What's wrong with wanting to do my best?" I said. "It's what Jesus has asked of us."

Other than briefly talking about going to church, I hadn't mentioned religion with Bryce before, but I didn't think he would be bothered by it. Fortunately, he wasn't.

"Jesus didn't expect perfection, but He wants us to aim for it. He works with what we can offer and makes it better. He turned water into wine, after all. His grace is enough because

He knows we can never get there on our own. We give Him our best, and He makes it better. You tried. It didn't work out—and I'm sorry for that.”

“The store hasn't failed yet,” I said, fighting back tears and staring at the landing below, at the front door and the exposed wooden beams making up the house's walls. “I can't admit defeat.”

“You're not defeated. Nothing is ever wasted.”

The tears won. They trailed from the corner of my eyes, making my lip tremble. “All the money I've invested to this point will be.”

The dollar signs hounded me. I was so ashamed that I'd put so much into the store only to have it not give as much back. I was so badly in debt, I couldn't see straight.

I prayed Bryce wouldn't think less of me for that, either, Mr. I Have Thirty Thousand Dollars to Spend on Farm Equipment.

Bryce shrugged. “Chalk it up to education. Learning is expensive no matter what form it comes in. You took a risk, and you're learning something from that risk now, Allie.”

“That I'm a failure.”

His tone was adamant but gentle. “That you're strong. Kind. You pour your whole heart into what you do because you want the best results you can get.”

“I already knew that about myself.”

“Then think. What else have you learned from this? Budgeting? Keeping books for incomes and expenditures?”

He was right. I'd never handled stocking shelves, cataloging inventory, or managing an employee. From the amount of inventory in my backroom, I'd ordered too much to start with. That was something I could change next time. My stubborn side wasn't ready to admit it yet, but my willfulness cracked just a little bit to let some release in.

“You're also learning that letting go doesn't mean failing. It's just accepting that the timing is done.”

“To everything, there is a season,” I said, remembering the scripture.

I wanted to sink my head into my hands. Why did my season have to have such a high cost?

Bryce took my hand and led me to him. Music still chimed softly from the phone in his back pocket. He reached for it and tapped to shut it off.

“When I first started business with Colton, nothing seemed to work. We thought maybe it was a mistake to go into business together. You know what they say about mixing business with family.”

“I’ve heard that somewhere,” I said, wiping my tears. He took my hand and went on.

“He was mad at me because I made decisions on purchasing land and things without clearing it with him first. I thought I really had made a mistake and was ready to back out—until that land was sought after for community events.

“Colton relented. We made up the money that was lost, and we’ve been able to work great together since.”

I felt deflated inside. Withered and dried and ready to crumble in the wind. Peering around at the landing and the handful of unfinished bedrooms close by, I wished there was somewhere I could sit.

I turned away from him instead and stared down the stairs at the front door below.

“There’s more to it, isn’t there?” he asked, his voice treading softly behind me. “This obsession with saving your store.”

“I had a wish and a dream,” I said, gazing at the darkened night through the windows.

The sun had set completely while we’d been exploring. Snowflakes were now visible white specks in the stillness outside.

“I didn’t want to work for anyone else. I wanted to be an entrepreneur,” I finished.

“You and I have that in common,” he said. “I never wanted to work for anyone else, either.”

I hugged my stomach. “All I knew was retail since I worked at a retail store in Burley in high school. I decided I wanted to open my own store. I researched it, looked up the products I wanted to stock and offer to my customers, found a great location, and told my dad all about it.

“My mom didn’t care much other than to wish me luck, especially since I was brainstorming ways to raise enough to put down on the building.”

Bryce shifted for a more direct glance at me. “You’re buying the building?”

“Only where the store is.”

“Why didn’t you just rent the space?”

His tone was mildly accusatory. This raised my hackles just enough.

“I wanted the money, the investment, to be something that went into my own pocket, not someone else’s. Dad said he respected that. In trying to purchase all the inventory, the licenses, and all the small and big things that would go into this venture, I couldn’t afford the actual store space.

“The Christmas before he died, Dad gave me the investment capital I needed for the loan.”

Bryce rubbed his jaw while the storm clouds that had settled over him earlier gathered in his expression. Something about what I’d said bothered him, but I couldn’t figure out what that could be.

“Sounds like this store venture felt very sentimental to you.”

“It did. It does.”

Again, I thought of Dad. He’d been lying in his bed when he’d told me. The rounds of chemo hadn’t helped eliminate the cancer eating his pancreas, and in those last few months, the doctor had found that the cancer had spread to his liver and kidneys, too.

He'd been given mere weeks to live, so we'd made the most of our time with him.

Leigh had come up from Arizona with her kids, and we'd celebrated an early Christmas. Dad had given Leigh a third of his life savings. He'd given a third to Mom, and the rest to me.

*"Get your store,"* he'd said, squeezing my hand. *"This should give you enough to appease those sharks at the bank."*

I'd chuckled because he'd been the one to come with me to discuss loan options. At the time, Dad had warned against co-signing because he wouldn't be around to see it through, and that had pricked my heart as well.

The fact that he'd bestowed such a precious gift to me meant more than I could put words to. I wasn't sure how to explain as much to Bryce.

The side of Bryce's jaw twitched. His shoulders tensed. Was he upset?

"What's wrong?" I asked. I didn't like how quiet he was.

"Your dad probably wanted to do all he could for you before he left this world." Something in his tone lit off a warning within me.

"If you're going to blame any of this on him, you can stop right there."

I was having a hard enough time this Christmas as it was. Losing my store felt like I was losing Dad all over again.

"I'm just saying, if I had a daughter, I wouldn't want her to kill herself trying to make something work just because I was the one to support her idea to launch it. Your dad can't have wanted you to stress and worry like you are. If a building is on fire, you get yourself out of it. The ship is sinking. No need to go down with it."

I balled my hands into fists, staring at Bryce as though I didn't recognize him. "I'm not going down. Nothing is sinking."

"You told me it is."

“I’m not letting go.”

He grimaced. “Stubborn woman.”

“Belle has those ornaments. I’m—”

“You haven’t made an inch of progress getting anything from her. And even if you did get her to hand some or all of them over, you still have to take the time to price them out, list them, and then sell them. That could take months. You’re going to lose everything unless you do something else.”

Tears streamed unstoppably down my cheeks. “I can’t.”

I wasn’t sure exactly what it was I couldn’t—but I couldn’t. Whatever it was, whatever he was about to say, it was impossible.

“You can,” Bryce said with tender insistence. “Your dad should never have put that pressure on you.”

“He didn’t put any pressure on me!”

It’d been a gift. Hadn’t Bryce heard a word I’d said?

Dad had always said everything would be better by Christmas. I tried clinging to that, but the adage felt flimsier by the minute.

“It’s just not good business practice,” Bryce said. “When it comes to business, you can’t run things by your heart. You have to think logically about it, about what makes the most business sense.”

“He should have encouraged you to rent the space first until you were in a position where you could afford to buy it.”

“He’s gone—he—”

I couldn’t form a coherent thought, but I also couldn’t stand Bryce talking about my dad like that. Like Dad had made a mistake in encouraging and helping me achieve my dreams.

“He was helping me,” I finally managed. “He did it to help me.”

I couldn't be anywhere close to this man. It was becoming extremely clear why his family had ostracized him if he dealt with people like this. Blurting painful, unfair accusations?

No wonder Luke had kept him at arms' length for so long.

Luke had warned me against getting close to Bryce. I should have listened.

I'd been hoodwinked by good looks, charming smiles, and confident bearing. By the sweet things he'd said, and the way he'd teased me by touching me, and being a good boyfriend. By the way his kisses left me craving more.

Curse my foolish, desperate heart. He'd never been all that into me anyway. Someone who lectured me like this couldn't possibly be.

Bryce's lips turned down at the corners. He placed a hand on my shoulder. "His intentions may have been in the right place, but that doesn't mean what he did was good for you."

"Stop it." I shrugged away from him.

"I know it's hard to hear, but if you can just let go of the sentimental part of things, then maybe you can start doing what's right for yourself."

"And what about you?" I said, growing defensive. "You paid for your brother's medical bills. You do things, and you let everyone think badly of you even though you could repair everything if you wanted. You know what I think? I think you like being the black sheep. The outcast."

Bryce's throat worked, the muscles cording. "We're not talking about me right now. I'm trying to help you, Allie. I know it's not what you want to hear."

"Your help sucks. And I'm leaving."

"Allie."

"Goodbye, Bryce. I'm sorry I ever told you anything that was going on with me. Consider our relationship ended." My footsteps thundered down the stairs.

“Are you always this hot-headed?” he called from the landing above my head.

I glowered up at him before stalking out the way we’d come.

His voice carried in my wake. “You’re really leaving? Unbelievable.”

“My thoughts exactly,” I muttered.

The hall had darkened so much, I delved into my purse, pulled out my phone, and triggered its flashlight. Thanks to its soft yellow beam, I made for the back door.

He thundered down the steps and met me there. I couldn’t lift my chin to look at his face but stared at his broad shoulders instead.

“Let it go, Allie,” he said. “That’s my advice, though I know you don’t want to hear it. Sell the store and recover your loan. Save yourself before it’s too late.”

I shook my head and pushed past him, hopping down from the stepless foundation and storming out into the blasting snow.

Too late, I realized I hadn’t driven myself here. Bryce’s pickup had a good inch of snow on its hood and windshield.

Frustrated, I kicked the snow. I cursed it. I pouted. I sulked.

And against my will, I waited for Bryce to follow me out.

“I’ll take you home, if that’s what you want,” he said, stalking to his pickup and opening the passenger side door.

My jaw clenched. Wordlessly, I strode to the open door, climbed in, and closed it before he could. And we rode together back into Burley in total silence.

I went home and cried, cuddling up in my bed with Sunny while she curled and purred near my stomach.

I didn’t need Bryce. I didn’t need anyone else. It was time to be done with charades and lies and false boyfriends.

## Chapter Fifteen

I expected Bryce to message me, so when Colton texted the next morning, I was surprised, to say the least. I could only guess what he was contacting me for, and my assumptions ran thus:

Bryce had talked to him. He'd told him about his advice to me, about what he thought should happen to The Flora and Fauna. He'd told Colton to halt progress.

I swiped my phone, ready to stave off the bad news.

Me: *Let me guess. You're not doing the ad anymore.*

That would be so like Bryce, to tell his brother not to help me anymore. I couldn't believe him. I never should have—

Colton: *Why wouldn't I do the ad?*

I sat up against my pillows, accidentally kicking Sunny, who was nestled at the foot of the bed, warming my feet.

Me: *You mean Bryce didn't try to talk you out of it?*

Seconds ticked by. Was I being paranoid?

Colton: *Why would he do that?*

Without waiting for a reply from me, he went on.

Colton: *I've got the cut for this. Mind if I drop by to see what you think?*

That was how I ended up sitting beside Colton in my apartment thirty minutes later with his dark hair mussed. He wore a flannel, red-and-black checkered shirt and jeans.

His cowboy hat nested on the couch's armrest. Sunny stared up at it, twitching her tail and ears simultaneously as though expecting the hat to grow arms and legs and attack.

Colton positioned his laptop on my kitchen counter, and we perched on the barstools, looking at the footage he'd put together.

He'd combined scene shots flawlessly. One moved on to the next, and just as I'd thought he would, he'd used the views of me standing in various places throughout the shop to create the finished product.

"What do you think?" Colton asked once it ended. "I know it's pretty scrapped. With Christmas in three more days and the wedding just after that, I kind of threw it together. If you'd like to take more time on it, we can do that too."

"I think it's great," I said.

I didn't have the heart to tell him about my conversation with Bryce. I was *not* going to let The Flora and Fauna go. I still intended to give my marketing efforts a final push.

Bryce's words hurt so much. I refused to admit they held any kind of truth.

"Yeah?" Colton sounded surprised.

"Yeah. I can't thank you enough. I could never have done that on my own."

"If you're sure," Colton said. He stood from the barstool.

"I'm sure. It's exactly what I wanted."

And I meant it. He really had patched the transitions together well. I wished the misgivings inside of me would take a hint. Bryce was wrong. I wasn't giving up. I was going to see this through.

"Great," Colton said.

A beat of silence simmered between us before a knock broke in. I knew without looking through the peephole that it was Bryce.

I wasn't ready to see him. I hadn't dressed, had no makeup on, and my hair was tied on the top of my head, but I didn't care. If we hadn't just had a horrible fight the night before, I might have put more effort into my appearance.

There was no need to impress him. Not ever again.

"You gonna get that?" Colton muttered.

"That's debatable." If he didn't know Bryce and I were through, he would now.

"You guys fighting or something?" Colton's tone was level and smooth. He had a calming persona; I suspected if I told him all about my misunderstanding with Bryce, Colton would show a lot more compassion than his brother had.

"Something like that," I answered.

Bryce continued knocking and began shouting through the door. "I know you're in there. Your car is here. Colt's truck too. I was just at Dawson and Bex's—I know she's manning the store right now. Please let me in."

More knocking.

"Allie."

Still more.

"You gonna leave him out there all day?" Colton's question was sweet, of all things, as though he found this situation amusing.

I didn't know my other neighbors well. We hadn't clicked the same way Bex and I had, even after I'd brought over ice-breaking scones to say hi and introduce myself or welcome them to the complex, as the case was.

Something told me they wouldn't be too happy with the cowboy continuously knocking and shouting outside my door. I had a feeling Bryce wouldn't give up anytime soon.

"Fine," I said with a heavy sigh.

I thrust open the door. Bryce's dejected eyes pinned to mine. He zeroed in on my unwashed, unmade-up face, at the

unruly state of my hair, skimming down my t-shirt and leggings, and back up to my face again.

Though he looked tired, he swore in appreciation. “Miss Allie, I should catch you off-guard more often.”

I squirmed, more than aware of Colton watching us.

“What does that mean?”

“You’re beautiful when you’re all put together,” he said. “But this unfiltered version of you is pretty stunning. You’re stunning.”

I felt Colton’s gaze on us, and I was not amused. “Can we skip the bull? You’re just saying that to butter me up so I’ll let you in.”

“Is it working?”

I inhaled. I supposed we needed to talk after the mess I’d left last night, though speaking to him was the last thing I wanted to do. His words had haunted me since they’d left his lips.

Stepping aside, I waited for him to enter. He kicked the snow off his boots and then slipped them off his feet. Then he removed his coat, giving me a whiff of his cologne and driving me mad with it.

“Hey, Colt,” Bryce said, greeting his brother. “What are you doing here?”

Colton closed his laptop lid and tucked the computer beneath his arm. “Just showing Miss Allie her ad.”

“How’d it turn out?” Bryce’s tone was pinched. Careful. Almost like he wondered whether or not he should ask.

“Like you care.”

Both brothers’ heads swiveled in my direction. Colton shuffled past Bryce and bent for his hat. At his approach, Sunny hissed and bolted for the bedroom.

“I’ll just show myself out,” Colton said, placing his Stetson on his head and slipping his feet into his boots. “Allie, I’ll send the final cut to you?”

“Thanks, Colton,” I said, my pulse hammering as I met him at the door. “For everything.”

He smiled, turned the knob, and a stiff, chilled breeze swept through the cracks. Before stepping out, however, he bent in close enough to whisper.

“Whatever it is, I’m on your side,” he muttered, eyes glittering.

I smiled, heartened by his thoughtful joke.

“I heard that,” Bryce called from behind as Colton flashed me a grin and strode out to the parking lot, leaving Bryce and me alone.

Closing my door, I faced Bryce. He wore a button-up shirt open over a dark t-shirt and jeans. The scruff on his jawline was more pronounced than it had been yesterday, rendering him that much more attractive and making me hate him that much more for it.

I’d always had a hard time *not* staring at him. I couldn’t afford to give in now.

“What are you doing here?”

“I’ve been thinking about you all night. I wanted to talk. To explain myself.”

I folded my arms and kept my gaze centered on the Christmas tree. “I think you said enough.”

“Please, Allie,” Bryce said, reaching his hands in my direction and then seeming to think better of it. “Please let me stay. Hear me out.”

Unlike last night, his expression was remorseful. I decided the least I could do was talk.

Sniffing, I removed myself from temptation and stepped to the couch, sinking into it. Purring, Sunny pawed toward me and took her usual spot on my lap.

I indicated the barstools across from me, lifting my feet to take up the rest of the couch so Bryce wouldn’t think about sitting anywhere close to me.

“Have a seat if you want.”

He picked up a barstool and moved it closer to the couch, then roosted atop it and rested his socked feet on its bottom rung.

“I wasn’t just saying what I did, by the way,” he said. “You know. When I first got here.”

He didn’t take his eyes off me. “You don’t need your fancy duds and makeup to turn heads. When you opened the door this morning, you stole my breath.”

I fizzled inside. He had that effect on me regularly.

I wouldn’t let it matter though. Not today. What was he still pretending for? Colton was gone. No one was around to prove anything to.

“What do you want, Bryce?”

He scraped a hand behind his back, working the muscles of his neck before lowering it again.

“I’m not sure how to say what I need to say.”

“Maybe you should come another time, then.”

He extended a hand in my direction. “I was only trying to help last night. I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings or take away from the importance of the gift your dad gave you. I was trying to offer my advice as a businessman, and it ate at me all night, Allie. It was all I could do not to drive over immediately, but I thought I’d give you some time.”

I focused on the orange cat in my lap. My throat was tight.

“What you said was hard,” I said, working past the emotion the best that I could. “My dad gave me everything he had because he knew he was dying and couldn’t be there to help me see it through. I had to navigate everything on my own.”

“And I’m so impressed that you did. You’ve come a long way. I didn’t mean to downplay that at all—not in any way, shape, or form. What he did was generous. I’m only sorry he \_\_\_”

Bryce swore again and rubbed his chin. “I’m trying to word this so I don’t slaughter things like I did last night.” He grimaced and fidgeted. “I just meant—from my standpoint, investing in that building is what’s killing you. What if you rented out that space to someone else?”

“Why is giving up on my store the only option you see?”

“Just The Flora and Fauna,” he said. “I’m not saying give up on being an entrepreneur. Do you know how many businesses I own?”

A barricade appeared in my chest. I was all kinds of defensive. Now that he mentioned it, I didn’t know much about how he spent his days other than what he told me. Yet more evidence that our relationship was only skin-deep.

“Are you here to rub it in my face?”

“Five,” he said, answering his own question. “And there’s no limit. I’ve tried things, and they failed. My first business was sprinkler installation, and it completely flopped. I had to cut my losses and call it. I had to walk away, but that business led me to landscaping. And that one failed too.

“The next one was successful, and that gave me what I needed to invest in Colton’s farm. Everything has built up from there. Do you see what I’m saying?”

My stomach twisted, but my defenses lowered. I did see his point. And while I detested it, it made sense.

“Giving up isn’t really giving up?” I said.

“Exactly. Letting The Flora and Fauna go doesn’t make you a failure. It makes you a smart businesswoman because you know the steps to take that are best for your business. You keep looking at this like it’s the end. But you’re young, Miss Allie.”

I scowled at him. “How do you know?” As far as I knew, we’d never discussed one another’s ages. Sunny peered in his direction as if the cat wanted an answer as well.

His eyes turned shrewd. “How old are you?”

“Guess.” I lifted my chin.

He perused me. “You’re not thirty.”

“Don’t tell me what I’m not. Tell me what I am.”

“Twenty-five?”

“Close.” I was about to turn twenty-four in January.

“You’re young. You have drive and ambition, and that’s all you need to get going again. You’ll find the right venture. Sometimes, it takes trying a few things first. Go to business school. Explore some other options. God will open doors for you along the way.”

“How do you know?”

His eyes fastened to me. “Because He has done it for me.”

Tears threatened my eyes once more, but I wasn’t going to let them win this time. I blinked hard and put both feet on the carpet, facing Bryce fully just so he could get the complete impact of what I said.

“I don’t quit,” I said.

It wasn’t that I didn’t believe in God or that I doubted Bryce’s words. I knew God would open doors. I’d been praying for Him to do just that for months now.

I just despised the idea of wimping out. Giving up wasn’t something I did easily.

Bryce rose from the stool. His steps were quiet as he crossed the room and knelt before me.

He rested his hand by my legs on the couch. Sunny batted his fist, and he knuckled the cat’s ears. The little feline traitor leaned into the touch, her purr doubling in volume.

“You’re not quitting,” he said. “You’re using this as a jumping-off point to something else.”

I allowed my eyes to meet his. The blue in them was soft. “To what else?”

“That’s what you have to figure out, I guess. What do you really want?”

His words freed me in a way I hadn't allowed myself to feel in so long. It was as though roads that had been closed off to me were now open once more. I felt the expansive possibility to take any direction I chose.

The truth was, I'd been feeling this tug at me for some time now, but I hadn't wanted to accept this possibility. Having Bryce talk about it now, about letting go, the option gleamed like warm cinders about to catch fire.

"Do you want to stay in retail?" he asked.

"No," I said, the truth carving me out inside.

It was bittersweet, like admitting something you once loved had become a source of pain.

"I don't mind retail, but what I really want is something more reliable. Something people can't find anywhere else. I'm not sure what that could be yet, and maybe that's what's been holding me back."

"Once you figure out what that is, you'll be amazing at it."

I scoffed. "How do you know? I could be terrible at it."

He knelt up. His hand moved slightly, farther toward the back of the empty side of the couch, earning another bop from the cat.

Bryce ruffled the cat's fur on its head, and Sunny captured his hand in her paws, nibbling it. It must not have been hard enough to hurt, because Bryce didn't pull away. Instead, he turned his fingers and petted her again.

"I've got an eye for business," he said, slipping his hand free from Sunny's grasp. The cat's ears twitched.

"And right now, I've got an eye for you, and something tells me you're amazing no matter what you do. Forgive me?"

The hardness, the hurt I'd wallowed in since he'd dropped me off last night, crumpled and faded away. I could resent him longer, I supposed, but what was the point? Especially when his words made as much sense as they did.

He hadn't been saying all of that to hurt me. He'd genuinely been trying to help me. I saw that now.

"Yes," I said.

His shoulders sagged, and a relieved smile captivated his handsome face. The sight struck me all over again. He'd been worried about me.

How many times had I stuck my foot in my mouth before and then been grateful for others letting it go? Plus, it took real courage to speak the truth, even if—and especially when—someone didn't want to hear it.

"Thank you, Bryce, for having the guts to be honest with me."

"Thank you for listening. I didn't mean to trash you—not at all. That wasn't—"

"I know," I said, grabbing his warm fingers and staring at the tree to my right.

A new sense of helplessness wafted over me.

"Now, what do I do?" I said as Sunny leaped from the couch. "How do I move on from one to the next?"

I tilted my knees and patted the cushion. Bryce took the invitation, joining me on the couch and creating a flurry inside of me.

"One step at a time," he said. "Start with the bank first, I'd say. See what you need to do about that loan. And I'd suggest looking into listing that building of yours for sale, for starters."

The longer he spoke, the more the burden began to lift from my chest. I drew in a longer, more impactful breath than I'd been able to in what felt like years, though it had really only been two years since I'd opened The Flora and Fauna.

"Thank you, Bryce," I said.

Since Dad had died, I'd felt like I was going at this alone and that at every intersection along the way, I'd taken the wrong path. Colton had said he was on my side. For some

reason, despite our bargain, I got the sense that Bryce was on my side.

That was too slippery to rely on, though. I couldn't read more into his concern for me than simple decency.

He slipped a hand behind my back, and I let him. And then, before I knew it, he tugged me onto his lap and cradled me to his chest, holding me, keeping me close.

I couldn't relax here. I couldn't let him enfold me. Giving in was going to make ending things in a few more short days that much more painful. He was only trying to clear the air after our misunderstanding.

That was all.

Despite knowing the pain it would cause later, I nestled against him, enwrapped by his strong arms and the reassuring steadiness of his heartbeat. Bryce's hands clung securely around me. His scent, the movement of his Adam's apple, his chest rising and falling, became my focus as I closed my eyes.

"I want to kiss you," he said.

Startled, I pulled back to find a mischievous glint in his eyes.

"I thought we broke up."

His hand stroked my jaw. "I never agreed to that part of things. I told you I was all in, and I'm keeping my word. For all intents and purposes, we're still dating, right?"

I lost myself in his gaze, in his strong arms, in the thudding of his heartbeat.

"That was the agreement. But we're alone here. We're—"

Before I could sort through my thoughts, he kissed me. Bryce's lips were smooth and soothing, a featherlike lullaby that strummed my heartstrings. I was swept into their rhythm, into his heat as he rotated and laid me on the cushions beside the Christmas tree, and the two of us enjoyed a makeup session that crackled through my entire body.

The longer our kisses continued, the more they created a rift within me. I couldn't read more into this than there was.

How could I ever recover from this—from him? Christmas was around the corner. Once Belle and Luke married, Bryce and I were no longer going to be together.

He'd helped me more than I'd ever thought he would—but that didn't mean everything was good to go. Time was petering out. There was still the problem of reuniting him with his family.

As for the ornaments, I still needed the capital they could give me, too. Though I had the consolation of discussing my business with Bryce, talking didn't fix my problems. I was still in over my head with the store.

I needed to talk to Belle, and I was running out of time to do it.

## Chapter Sixteen

I'd thought coming to Belle's had been nerve-wracking before. It was nothing to the butterflies spasming in my stomach now.

Belle didn't seem to notice. She welcomed me in, pulling me into a hug before stepping back and tightening her hair into a ponytail. Her t-shirt said *Country Girl*, and her calf-length leggings were more befitting the summer than the winter.

The temperature inside her house was explanation enough for that, with the fire blazing in the parlor behind her.

The furniture had been cleared, and the two trees we'd cut in the woods were positioned in front of the windows. From the family group chats and gatherings, I knew Belle and Luke would be tying the knot right here in her living room.

"I thought I'd drop by and see if you needed any help," I said by way of explaining my visit.

She gestured to the suitcases at the base of the stairs. "I'm so glad you came by again. I need something else to do besides pack."

"Your honeymoon?" I voiced my assumption.

"Yes! It'd help if Luke would tell me where we're going." She grinned and tucked her arm at her side with the other.

I bent to remove my shoes. "Yeah, you don't want to pack shorts when you're heading on an Alaskan cruise."

Belle took my coat from me and hung it on the coat rack. "Or fill my suitcase with ski gear if we're headed for the Bahamas."

“Exactly. You have only days left. Tell him to spill the beans already.”

Her grin widened. She looped her arm through mine and walked with me down the hall toward Grandpa’s study. “Maybe I’ll just sic you on him.”

“I’ll help him see sense,” I said playfully, stepping into the study.

She’d made progress since the last time I’d come. Papers had been shuffled around on the table, and several more filing cabinet drawers hung open. Piles of books also created a small town on the carpet.

“Looks like you’ve got more done,” I said. “Are you going to keep all these books?”

At the time Uncle Thomas, Mom, Leigh, and I had cleaned things out of the house, the books hadn’t even been considered. I hadn’t given them a second thought.

“Not all,” Belle said. “Some of these don’t interest me at all. Like *Gardening* or *Marvel Comics*?” She lifted a thin, floppy book with brightly colored illustrations on the cover.

“Yeah, that’s all stuff you can find online now. Or, the gardening one, at least.”

I wondered if the comics had belonged to one of Grandpa’s many lodgers over the years. Superheroes didn’t really seem like his jam.

“It is. Luke started going through the books, but I’m tackling the filing cabinet for now. I think the rule is to keep tax information for seven years, isn’t it?”

She went to the table and lifted several papers, perusing their contents.

“I think so,” I said, making my way to the table’s other side.

We sorted in silence. I tossed papers whose dates were old enough—some dated back to the 1970s. Regardless of that, through everything, I saw the immaculate records Grandpa kept for his farms.

“He tracked everything, didn’t he?” I said, surprised and impressed as I examined ledgers for custom farm work that he’d hired out twenty years before.

Belle sorted through another stack before lifting it and tossing the whole thing into the open garbage bag beside her.

“He did. It’s a little daunting since I’m trying to keep track of all his land now, too. Luke’s been helping me.”

“That’s nice,” I said. “Bryce has been helping me, too.”

The transition to him happened so naturally that I almost stopped short at the realization of that fact.

Belle lifted her gaze to mine. “You two are cute together,” she said.

My body began to hum like a charged fence. One touch, one move too close, and I’d zap.

*Tread carefully*, I told myself. *I can handle this.*

“Luke doesn’t think so.” I kept my attention on the papers in my hands.

Belle waved this off. “He’ll come around. His mom keeps inviting Bryce to things. Seeing you with him is helping, I think.”

I went rigid. “Oh, yeah? Why?”

“I think seeing you so happy with Bryce makes him rethink things. He’s moved forward and found a great girl like you. I keep telling Luke that he’s changed.”

“He has,” I said, lowering the papers back to the desk and looking directly at her. “Bryce feels terrible about what happened.”

Bryce wouldn’t mind that I was saying this, would he?

I didn’t think so, not when he’d said he’d tried to admit the same thing.

“He told you about it?” Belle asked. She lowered the stack of papers she’d been perusing back to the table.

I pressed on.

“He did. I kind of weaseled it out of him after Luke warned me to keep my distance from him.”

Belle planted her palm on top of a paper stack. “He did not.”

I laughed. Belle’s reaction, and my response to it, helped ease the pressure bottling inside of me.

“He did.”

She turned back to the filing cabinet, slammed the drawer shut, and shook her head.

“Good grief, I’m going to give him a talking to. I could understand him being this mad if Bryce had committed some kind of felony that left Luke with skin grafts and a stump leg or something. But it was just a kiss, and it was so long ago.

“I keep telling him he needs to let it go and move on. I like Bryce.”

I fluttered at this pronouncement. Bryce’s conception of his standing with them all was so wrong. I knew it. They didn’t all hate him like he thought.

He was no black sheep. He was a good man, and I wasn’t the only one who saw that.

“I like him, too,” I said, cringing at the admission.

It was true—but that didn’t mean it changed anything. He hadn’t said anything about wanting to continue being with me. We would be breaking up in less than a week.

She sneered at me. “I’d be concerned if you didn’t.”

The two of us laughed again, and the sound was a bizarre release to the emotions coiling up inside of me. I was both heartened and chagrined by Belle’s words.

Unsure, I decided to continue pushing the subject. I had to keep up my end of things.

“When we first started dating,” I began tentatively, “Bryce himself tried to warn me away.”

“He did?”

“He told me I should date Colton,” I said with a chuckle. “Because I shouldn’t want the bad seed of the Holden family.”

A sound escaped Belle’s throat. “Bryce is not a bad seed. I haven’t talked to him much, I admit, but he seems nice, and Colton, Kyler—I still can’t get used to calling him Hoss—and Dawson seem to get along great with him. Sounds like I definitely need to give Luke a talking to.”

“About what?” Luke popped his head in the door.

His blond hair was ruffled, and the smell of hand soap drifted from his direction at the door. I wondered if he’d just finished tending the animals. I hadn’t seen him out there when I’d arrived, but maybe he’d been in the barn with the horses.

My fingers clenched the papers in my hands so hard they crumpled. Blood shot through my veins in double time.

We were caught. I was so caught.

On the other hand, Belle acted like Luke’s sudden appearance, and the fact that we’d been talking about him, was no big deal.

“Bryce,” she said without guile.

Luke’s eyes flicked to me. The air around him shifted and strained almost instantly. His entire demeanor changed from happy-go-lucky to threatened. He stalked farther into the room.

“He sent you here, didn’t he?”

“Actually, no,” I said, hoping he couldn’t read just how fast my blood was racing.

Luke stepped over and kissed Belle’s cheek before turning to me. “Does he treat you right?”

I was startled by how rapidly he shifted gears from frustration at his brother to showing affection for his fiancé and then concern for me.

He *genuinely* thought Bryce would hurt me.

He didn’t even know me—and he was this worried for my wellbeing. That made me all the more anxious to clear Bryce’s

name.

Luke was a good man. He'd been hurt, and sure, he was blowing things a little out of proportion, but he deserved to be at peace with things. Bryce was. Luke should be too.

Bryce and Colton seemed to have a great relationship. Dawson was nice enough, though I didn't know him all that well. Not Kyler, either, but he was close enough to Bryce and Colton that he was in on the house as a gift for their mom.

Wouldn't it be for the best if each of the brothers could share the same camaraderie with one another?

"He treats me right," I said. "He's sweet and kind. He told me what happened between you two."

"I'm sure he did." Luke folded his arms. "Let me guess; he fed you some made-up story about how I'm exaggerating things."

"He told me he messed up," I said, calling it like it was.

Clearly, Luke wasn't expecting that answer. He lifted his chin. A dash of wariness streaked through his eyes.

"He said he made a mistake and doesn't blame you for hating his guts. He said he's not that guy anymore—that he'd never do anything that stupid with people's feelings again."

There. The bomb had been set. The detonator pulled. Any minute now, the explosion would begin.

Only Luke didn't detonate. The line between his eyes creased more deeply. He peered at Belle first before returning his attention to me. I pulsed, waiting for his reaction, praying he'd finally let this go—that he'd be at peace with the past and accept Bryce into his life once more.

"And you believe him?" he said.

"I do, Luke." I wished he could know just how much.

I didn't let my gaze waver. I wanted him to read my expression, to know it was the truth.

"I know I don't know him as well as you do," I said, forging on. "I know Bryce has faults, just like anyone. He

feels genuinely sorry for what happened. He told me I could break things off if I wanted to, but I don't."

"You're not worried he'll cheat?"

"I'm not," I said.

I meant it. Bryce could have every chance to do something like that, especially since we weren't officially together, but he'd said he was all in.

He'd invited me to do crazy things like ice skating, like tractor auctions, like dancing in half-finished houses, like taking the time to know little things about me that I wasn't sure any other man I'd dated had taken pains to do.

"You have me," Belle said, her voice gentle as she turned to Luke. "What happened took place years ago. Bryce seems like a good guy. He keeps his distance during all our gatherings. I think you should let it go. Let him back in."

Luke rubbed a hand behind his neck. "If he even wants me to."

He wasn't arguing.

He *wasn't* arguing?

"He does," I said, hoping he could tell how much I meant it.

Luke kept his face directed at the carpet, but he lifted his eyes to peer at me from beneath his brows. "You two must be getting close if he's confiding all this in you already."

His statement reignited the colony of worms inside my stomach. We weren't that close, not really. It sometimes felt like we were. There were times when the lines between Bryce and me thinned so much I forgot what we had together was false.

Our relationship wasn't real. It had never been.

"Didn't take us long," Belle said to her fiancé, "before you confided your deepest secrets to me."

Luke smirked at her. He hooked a hand around her waist and tugged her to his side. His voice lowered, turning secretive

and sweet.

“I can’t wait for this weekend,” he muttered.

“Me, too.”

For a moment, I’d been forgotten. Love swam so thick between them you could slice it.

“So?” Belle said, placing a hand on his chest. “You going to let it go already?”

Luke exhaled. He nodded his head, kissed her cheek, and then crossed the room to me. To my surprise, Luke pulled me into a hug as well. It was briefer than the one he’d given Belle, but no less thoughtful.

“Should I give him a call?” he asked as he released me.

My stomach plunged. I couldn’t believe this was happening.

Luke’s entire demeanor had changed. The feeling in the room had lightened. This was legit. He was finally going to let this go.

“That’s up to you,” I said. “But yes. I think you should. Bryce would love it.”

Luke’s lips pressed together. He squeezed my shoulder with a firm hand, glanced at Belle, and then strode to the door, leaving the two of us alone. Leaving me with the agony of not knowing if he was actually going to make amends.

## *Chapter Seventeen*

I worried the rest of the time I helped Belle sort through papers. Had Luke called his brother? Was he really going to let things go?

I wanted nothing more than to contact Bryce and see, but if Luke was talking to him, I needed to give them time. Would he act immediately? Would he let it be until they could talk in person?

What if Luke didn't act before the wedding and continued to leave Bryce in suspense? How could I relinquish my relationship with Bryce if I hadn't kept up my end of things? I was determined to keep my word.

I'd done all I could in that regard.

Shifting my focus, while Belle continued tackling the papers on the table, I pulled open the bottom drawer of the filing cabinet. Where the other drawers didn't have any kind of organization or order, the papers within this drawer—at least, those placed toward the back—were separated into files.

Each file named one of Grandma and Grandpa's progeny: Thomas, Martin, Sarah. There were also files for Belle, Leigh, and me, as well as Uncle Thomas's kids.

"I didn't know Grandpa had files on all of us," I said, pulling mine out and opening it with interest.

Inside were cards addressed to Grandma and Grandpa written in a childish hand, poems I'd written and forgotten I'd given to them, copies of my school pictures or pictures I must have drawn for Grandma.

Belle peered over with interest. “Oh, yeah. I knew mine was in there, at least.”

Hers was significantly thicker than the rest of ours, but that made sense. She’d been raised here, after all. If Grandpa had kept everything about the farm, he’d definitely kept everything Belle had ever written or drawn from the time she was born.

“Rocking the glasses,” Belle said, pointing to my third-grade school pictures.

“Those glasses were my favorite,” I said, remembering fondly when I’d gotten to go with Mom and Dad to pick them out. I’d wanted these because they had sparkles on them and had only worn them for a few years before they were able to correct my nearsightedness.

“Here’s a Christmas ornament I made for them,” I said, pulling another creation out that had been put together with papier mâché pieces.

The words *Christmas ornament* left my lips with more resonance than I’d anticipated. The air around me grew spikes, like I would prick myself if I moved too quickly in one direction or another.

This was too obvious to be a coincidence. I cast a glance heavenward as my heart began pounding again.

Today was a day for courage. I’d had the guts to say what I’d wanted to about Bryce. Why not now with this?

“Speaking of ornaments,” I said, flipping through the file, finding various things and trying to keep it casual. “Do you think...?”

My words died away. A paper I didn’t recognize caught my eye.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“Hm?” Belle said, distracted.

*Notice of Legal Adoption* dominated the top of the page. My vision blurred, my blood throbbed.

I wasn't adopted. I couldn't be. I skimmed, searching for understanding, but it wasn't my name halfway down the page as I'd suspected I might find.

It was Belle's.

What were her adoption papers doing in my file?

My breath expelled, and I chastised myself for getting so worked up about it. Of course, Belle had been adopted. Grandma and Grandpa had become her legal guardians. This paper must have been funneled into the wrong file.

Only, a little ways down the page, while it did list Louise and Hank Toby as the legal guardians, it wasn't Miranda Toby and whatever Belle's birth dad's name was as the birth parents.

It said Sarah Vreeland.

The paper shook in my hands. My mind attempted to process the information, but I couldn't make any sense of it. My thoughts staggered and stumbled through my brain, as fleeting and disjointed as if I were drunk.

How could my mom be *Belle's* mom, too? And if this was true, why hadn't Mom ever told me?

"I—I have to go," I said, folding the paper in half and stuffing it under my arm.

"Everything okay?" Belle gazed at me from her place on the other side of the table, concern on her brow.

"It's fine," I lied.

I wouldn't say anything to her about this. Not until I talked to Mom and figured out what the heck was going on.

I didn't wait for a reply but instead made my sluggish way to the door. My boots waited. I attempted to slip my socked feet into them, only to have one tip over to the floor. I lost my balance and braced myself against the front door's glass window.

"Before you go," Belle said, reaching for my coat hanging on the hook just inside the door and offering it to me.

I took it, shaking, completely thrown.

“What’s up?” I asked, trying to keep it together.

“I know you and I haven’t always seen eye to eye,” she said. Her eyes glittered. “But I’m glad you’ve been coming over to help me. I’m glad we’ve had a chance to talk and get to know each other better, and I’d like to ask you something I probably should have asked before now.”

I clutched my arm to my side, pinning the paper as tightly as I could. My spine bent. My stomach roiled. I couldn’t fathom what she might be referring to.

“What’s that?”

Belle placed her hands on her stomach. “I know the wedding is in three days, but would you like to be one of my bridesmaids? I have an extra dress. It’ll probably fit you since it fits me, and we’re about the same size. I’d love to have you there as a special member of the family party.”

I was in a daze. I couldn’t give her an answer, not with this massive weight bearing down on me.

“I—thank you,” I said through an uncomfortably dry throat. “I’ll get back to you, okay?”

Her smile faltered. Concern creased the corners of her eyes. “Okay. I really am sorry—”

I reached for her hand, stopping her. The motion made me drop the paper beneath my arm. Shaking, I bent for it and then slipped into my coat before zipping the paper inside, close to my chest.

“You have nothing to be sorry for.” My words were rushed. “I promise, I’ll explain everything, but I do need to go.”

I made for the door and then remembered my manners. Stopping, I confronted the confusion on her face once more.

“Thank you for thinking of me, and for the invite. I’d love to be your bridesmaid—I’m just not sure you’ll want me to.”

Not with my deception. Not with this revelation.

“I do,” Belle said, resting a hand on the coatrack’s empty pegs. “Or I wouldn’t have asked.”

“Then yes,” I said, my chest rickety with every breath. “I’d love to.”

She beamed and pulled me into a hug. Belle constantly took me by surprise. I was stunned by her acceptance, by her kind affection. Belle retreated, the smile still radiant on her face.

“I’ll have your mom get the details for the wedding day to you,” she said.

Her words slammed the door on my subconscious. My mom. Oh, my gosh—*my* mom. I had to talk to her.

“Thanks,” I said, ducking out as quickly as I could.

I scurried down the porch steps and through the murky gravel toward my Prius while insecurity flooded me. Mom lived here in Bridgewater. I’d be passing her house on the way back to Burley.

Could I confront her about this? With Grandpa gone and Belle none the wiser, Mom was probably the only one who could give me a straight answer.

The real question was—would she?

Mom held such a fetish for perfection. Her hair and nails were always immaculate. Her clothes were trendy and high-end. She kept her house, her yard, and her life in the highest order and made sure to let me know anytime I didn’t fit into her cookie-cutter lifestyle.

I looked at my sparkly gold fingernails and the amount of growth at the base of each. The sight zeroed in like a camera lens on zoom. For a moment, I sensed it was somehow reflective of my shortcomings—at least in Mom’s eyes.

No matter how hard I’d tried, I’d never been able to manage to organize things as well as she did. I’d moved to Burley and didn’t invite Mom over much. I could breathe better without her giving me the stink eye for having my hair

out of place or for neglecting to organize my kitchen cupboards.

She would never have stood for a smudge on her life's perfect record. *What* was her name doing on Belle's adoption certificate?

I didn't make it back to the highway before my phone lit up with Bryce's name. The idea of not answering was appealing, but I also needed to talk to someone. We weren't dating more permanently, but he had become a friend in the short time we'd been at this whole façade.

My finger shaking, I swiped to answer.

"Hey, there," I said, bracing myself.

"What did you do?"

The question threw me. I couldn't tell if he was upset or not, but whatever it was, his voice was agitated and passionate, and his adamancy was enough to distract me from my own drama for the moment.

I gripped my steering wheel and stared at the road ahead. "What do you mean?"

"It was you, wasn't it?"

Great. I had this huge mystery, and now, Bryce was mad at me, too? "What was me?"

"You—you did this."

This time, he didn't sound accusatory. He sounded breathless.

"What's going on?" I said, my car roving along the bumpy gravel drive and passing a bend with a tall, quaking aspen hovering over a large, snowy rock.

From the fact that I could see several cars blazing down the highway, I was getting closer to the end of Belle's driveway.

"You're kind of freaking me out," I added.

“Luke just called me. I can’t quite wrap my head around what just happened.”

I was so engrossed in my own drama, it took several moments before his mention of his brother made a connection. Bryce. Luke. Of course.

I still couldn’t read this reaction. His tone was flat. Was he upset?

I’d thought Luke planned on making things right, but this seemed like the opposite had happened. Had their conversation made things worse between the brothers?

“Bryce, are you mad at me? Did it go okay?”

“I need to see you. Where are you?”

The end of the drive drew nearer, T-ing off to the highway.

“I’m driving to my mom’s,” I said, pressing on the brakes.

“Take a detour,” he said.

“What?”

“Please. Can you take a detour? I’m at the new house. Get your cute butt over here as quick—and safe—as you can.”

I choked the steering wheel. “Bryce, now isn’t a good time. I just found something that’s kind of rattling me.”

His voice was poignant. Pleading. “Please. It won’t take long. I need to see you.”

So many emotions rattled through me, I was sure I’d explode from the effort of trying to sort them all out. I couldn’t ignore the desperation in his voice, and my own concerns aside, I was excessively curious about what had happened between those two.

The highway curved past several farms and old homes. I followed its angle, slowing as I made my way back through Bridgewater. Going through the town took no time at all.

Once I reached the outskirts, I took the gravel road leading past the land Bryce had shown me for his townhouses and bumped along until I made it to his mom’s house.

Bryce was standing in the doorway, watching as I approached. He bounded from the stairless front door. Before I shut off the ignition, he was there. He opened my car door.

I cut the ignition, but I didn't manage to unbuckle before Bryce reached in to do it for me. He slung himself over me, blasting me with his musky scent, snapped my seatbelt free, slid his arms beneath my legs on the seat, and scooped me out of the car and into his arms before I knew what was happening.

"Thank you," he said, holding me to him.

I placed my hand on his cheek. Our breath mingled in the cold air, and I took in the raw vulnerability in his eyes.

My previous concerns, my confusion, the complete turn my mind had taken upon seeing that adoption notice vanished.

"He forgave you, didn't he?" I said.

"He did. Luke called me not twenty minutes ago, and—"

Bryce's eyes glistened with moisture. Rapidly, he blinked it away.

"Luke said he'd been an idiot for holding it against me for so long. He said you talked to him. He said your earnest belief in me made him rethink things—"

My heart swelled. "I'm so glad. Bryce, that's—"

Before I could finish, Bryce planted his mouth on mine. His kiss was desperate and anxious and hot enough to melt the snow. He held me to him while stalking toward his house. Abruptly, he broke the kiss long enough to set me inside the open front door before leaping up to join me, and then he scooped me against him into a possessive embrace the instant he could.

He held me tightly. So tightly.

"I can't thank you enough. Whatever you said, thank you."

I toyed with the hair at his nape. A whirlwind of butterflies twirled in my stomach. "It was all true. Whatever I said was true."

Bryce kissed me again. His lips were fervent, and though the interior of the house was almost as cold as it was outside, things between us heated pretty fast.

Before I knew it, Bryce had me up against the wall, pressed against him, and I was kissing him as intensely as he was kissing me. His mouth explored my jaw, my throat, all while he clutched me to him.

My eyelids fluttered. I couldn't wrap my head around his display of affection. I was floating, attempting to soak in every sensation while he lifted me to a different plane, to a place where reality was warped, where this connection between us was as definite as the feel of his firm shoulders and his arms around me.

His mouth made its way back to mine, and I knew I'd be sucked in if we weren't careful. This house may not be finished, but we were alone out here. I couldn't let him get too carried away. Not to mention, he was mildly delusional right now, overwrought by emotion and forgetting that our relationship was a farce.

"Bryce," I said as he trailed kisses below my ear.

"You drive me wild."

"Bryce."

He pulled away. His eyes were shaded with desire, and that husky look curved right into me with a hook and a snare.

I wasn't sure I'd ever had a man look at me like that. Like he wanted to devour me then and there. It sent a surge of heat through my low belly and made my entire body tingle.

I really needed to put some distance between us.

"I'm so glad," I said, stroking my thumb along the scruff on his jaw. "I'm so glad he called."

"Me too," he said, grinning like a fool. "I've tried apologizing, but he'd never hear me out before. I couldn't have done this without you."

He leaned in for another kiss, and this one was a little more on the gentle side, sensitive and tender. Our mouths melded

together. His hand settled at the small of my back, and I traced his scruff with my fingertips, until he pulled away and rested his forehead against mine.

“What can I do for you? Name it. Name anything.”

I smiled as he held me close. “You don’t have to do anything.”

“I do.”

“You’re already doing it, Bryce.”

This amused him. “You mean the boyfriend thing? Kissing you?”

I ran my thumb along the zipper of his coat. “Didn’t you say it was necessary?”

“Yes, it was. Is. Every time we’re together, kissing you is absolutely necessary.” After another kiss, he pulled away. “Seriously, though. I want to do something for you. A trip to Hawaii? Paris? Are you a jewelry kind of woman?”

“Bryce,” I said, a little firmer that time.

It was hard—I had to admit, having him buy me something sparkly was tempting. And who wouldn’t want to go to Hawaii when there was nothing but snow from every angle you looked?

But I couldn’t accept anything he might give. Every time I saw whatever it was, it would only remind me of how incredible he was. Of how I’d lost him.

“That’s not why I did what I did,” I said, grappling for reality. “You deserve to be reconciled to your family. You’re a good man.”

His eyes smoldered. “Thank you, Allie,” he said with deep heart rumbling through the words. “Don’t tell me you don’t want a weekend getaway with me, though.”

The notion was, admittedly, delicious. I pictured kicking back with him on a beach in the warm sun, basking in nothing but summer heat, ocean waves, and room service.

“Where would we go?” I asked, humoring him.

“You name it—we’ll go there.”

He wasn’t backing down from this. Did he seriously want me to answer?

“Bryce.”

“Say it. Where?”

“I can’t do that.”

“I want to,” he said. “I’m treating you.”

This man was over my head. My fingers continued toying with his hair, and I gazed into the fire in his blue eyes.

“Maybe after Christmas, okay? We can’t just up and leave before the wedding.”

He seemed to deflate. A groan escaped, and he slipped away from me, pounding a fist softly against the wall behind him. Seeming to think things over, his boots scuffing on the rough wooden floor, he stepped back toward me again.

“You’re right,” he said. “It’ll be better to travel after Christmas, anyway. And we have your store to save.”

We. Like the problem with my store was his, too.

“Why?” I couldn’t help asking. “I thought you told me to let it go.”

“That’s my advice. But I said I’d help you, and I will.”

For some reason, guilt nettled me more than I liked. It wouldn’t be fair of me to expect that of him. He’d already helped me enough.

My mess wasn’t his problem to clean up. I should never have made it that way.

He paused and then snapped his fingers. “That’s it. Our trip will be celebratory for us both. You think about where you’d like to go.”

“Where would you like to go?” I asked, giving in, because deep down, I knew he wasn’t serious.

We’d never agreed on continuing anything after Christmas. He’d never brought it up.

Truth be told, I didn't dare bring it up either. No matter how badly I wanted to ignore it, the same misgivings I'd felt about the ad, about the store, lingered with Bryce, too.

Somehow, I knew I was going to lose him. The phrase "too good to be true" wouldn't leave my mind.

He wasn't really all that into me. He was just overcome because he'd finally repaired things with Luke. After Christmas, he and I were no longer going to be an item. We were going to break up, just like we'd agreed to. The thought of that brought me physical pain in my chest.

"It doesn't matter, as long as I'm with you," he said, kissing me again.

The feel of his mouth brought tears to my eyes. I drank in the kiss as much as I could because, though he seemed impervious to that fact, I knew the truth. I knew what had to happen.

There would be no celebratory trips, and after Christmas, there would be no more kisses that emitted enough steam to boil water.

After Christmas, he and I were through. And that thought was getting harder and harder to grasp.

## *Chapter Eighteen*

“**Y**ou seemed upset about something,” Bryce said as he walked me back to my car. In his romantic gesture when I’d first arrived at the house, he hadn’t bothered to close the door. It had hung open the entire time we’d been in his mom’s house.

“I—”

All at once, the insecurity, disbelief, and confusion I’d experienced when I’d left Belle’s rushed back like water from a firehose. I grew lightheaded. My vision tunneled.

Should I tell him?

The paper was visible where I’d left it on the passenger seat. I bent in, snatched it, and then offered it to Bryce, steeling myself for his reaction.

“I found this while I was helping Belle,” I said.

Maybe he’d see something I didn’t. Maybe he could offer a different insight.

Bryce took the paper and looked it over. Recognition settled over his eyes, and his brows lifted in surprise.

“Belle was adopted?”

“That’s no secret,” I said, pointing to an important portion of the document. “But the line where it lists who her parents were? Sarah Vreeland is my mom.”

The pronouncement made me tremble.

Bryce lowered the paper. His gaze was far too penetrating. “Are you saying that you and Belle are sisters? Does she

know?”

*Belle and I are sisters. Not cousins.*

Sisters.

“I don’t think so,” I said. “I could hardly think after I found that. I left as quickly as I could—though not before Belle invited me to be a bridesmaid.”

“That’s a big deal, isn’t it?”

“For us, yeah, I think it is. She hadn’t invited me to be one before.”

“That’s good, then,” Bryce said. “That means you’re getting closer to her like you wanted.”

“Yes—but this paper could ruin everything!”

“How so?”

The emotion I’d battled earlier surged with renewed force. I kicked a plod of snow, and it tumbled apart when it hit my car’s wheel.

“She just opened up to me again,” I said, raging, setting my thoughts free. “What is she going to think when she finds out my mom is her mom too?”

“*Is your mom her mom too?*”

“I don’t know!” My voice reverberated off the house’s wooden beams. I hung my head, unraveling from the inside out. “That’s where I was going when you called.”

“And you came here first?” His voice was timid. Touched.

I lifted my gaze to find his plastered on me.

Bryce stroked my jaw. His fingers were noticeably warm against my cold skin. “Just another thing I have to thank you for.”

That killed me. I couldn’t rely on him anymore. It wasn’t fair of me. It had never been fair.

For some reason, the selfishness of my actions struck me with full force. “You don’t have to.”

He pressed that warm finger to my lips. “Shh. Yes, I do. I can’t tell you what it means that you came here first.”

He paused, letting the words settle between us before he asked, “Do you want to talk to your mom?”

“Yes. And no,” I said, sagging against my car.

Its cold frame bit through the back of my jeans, but I savored the starkness of it. It grounded me to reality when Bryce’s affection and this shock detached me from it.

“What if that paper is legitimate? That means she lied to me.”

“I don’t know about that,” Bryce said, grimacing. “Is withholding information the same thing as a lie?”

“I—” His question stumped me.

“Especially when you don’t know *why* she kept it from you, do you?”

“No, I don’t.”

“Then you should talk to her. Want me to come with you?”

My throat closed. I shook my head, staring at the dark hem of Bryce’s red ski jacket. For some reason, I couldn’t bring myself to meet his gaze. I could make no more requests of this man because, knowing him, he’d carry them out. And that wasn’t fair to him.

“No. I think this is something I’d better do on my own.”

“I can take you there,” he insisted. “I’ll wait in the car.”

When I didn’t respond, Bryce pinched my chin and lifted my face to his. Worry clouded his gaze.

The sight squeezed my ribs.

“Thanks,” I said, “but no. I can do this.”

His hand cradled my cheek. “Of course you can. I never doubted it. I’m just here if you need me.”

Bryce’s confidence in me was everything and yet somehow painful, too. Probably because I knew I didn’t deserve it. Like it or not, the idea of Mom’s deception felt

somehow like a mirror image of me, and I was having a hard time processing that.

Tremors coursed through me. I captured his hand in mine. “That means more than you know.”

He tipped down for another kiss.

I pulled away. I couldn’t accept it. Indulging in the feel of his mouth now would feel that much more selfish.

“Call me when you’re done?” he said, his soft voice crawling to me. I detected the slightest trace of hurt, though I couldn’t bring myself to look at him.

“Okay,” I said on a breath.

Tearing apart inside, I turned away from him, resting a hand on the side of my car. Hesitation spilled through me. Yes, I had reservations about learning the truth. But now that I’d seen that paper, I couldn’t act like I hadn’t.

I had to do this. I had to know.

“See you soon, okay?” I said without facing him.

“Good luck.”

He got my door and closed it again once I sank inside. The interior of my Prius was cold, probably thanks to the door being left open, but I couldn’t resent him for that.

Bryce’s response to my arrival had been completely sweet, another thing that only seemed to amplify the conflict ravaging me.

I was so happy for him, happier than I could say. The feelings would probably be stronger if I wasn’t currently being bombarded by doubts and dismay.

That fact gave me the courage I needed to shift my car into gear, turn it around, and trail down to the road and back into Bridgewater. Back to Mom’s house.

I only hoped she’d give me the answers I sought.

My childhood home was a double-level brick with a white railing on the porch. The large linden tree’s branches were

leafless, giving me a better view of the limbs I'd climbed, and that had sheltered me from the sun when I didn't want to work on my tan.

The snow had been cleared as Dad once did every day during winter. Mom paid one of the neighbor boys to tackle that for her now.

Sweat beaded down my spine, and trepidation slowed my steps, but I pushed through, lifting my feet from one step to the next until I stood on the porch.

I reached for the knob. It turned.

Heat flooded me instantly, along with the cranberry scent of whatever air freshener Mom had plugged in. Soft music trailed from within the kitchen, as did the sound of clanging pots and pans.

I kicked off my boots, unzipped my coat—setting it on the chair in the entry room—and trotted to the kitchen. Every step I took was charged and unsteady all at once.

The house was spotless, dusted, prim, and immaculate. I knew if I opened any cabinet or closet, everything inside would be perfectly folded, sorted into bins or baskets, and as orderly as a military regiment.

A skill I tried—and often failed—to maintain.

“Allie,” Mom said, elbow-deep in soapy water. “What are you doing here?”

Her brown hair curled to her shoulders. The bracelets she usually wore were on the corner of the granite countertop. Her makeup was immaculate as usual, her pearl necklace hanging just so around her neck.

“I found something, and I wanted to talk to you about it,” I said.

“Sure,” she said. “Pull up a chair.” She gestured with her elbow to the stools along the bar.

I did so, placing the paper on the counter. My blood skated through my veins, but I persisted.

“I’ve been helping Belle sort through some of Grandpa’s papers. And I found this.”

Mom frowned. She shut the water off, leaving the pan in the water, dried her hands, and then lifted the paper for a closer view.

The color drained from her face. That reaction was enough to make my stomach plummet. I gripped my car keys so hard they bit into my palm.

“Oh,” she said.

An entire world was encompassed in that single word.

“What does that mean? Is it true?” I asked. “Are you Belle’s birth mom?”

Her eyes misted. She lowered the paper, cleared her throat, and turned her back to me.

Remaining still was impossible. I stood from the stool and entered the kitchen. Mom hung her head as tears streamed down her cheeks, and dismay cast through me like a windstorm. I wasn’t sure I’d ever seen my mother cry like this, not even when Grandpa had died. And if she’d cried like this over Dad’s passing, she’d done it when no one was around.

“So it is true?”

“You’re going to hate me,” she muttered through her tears. “You were never supposed to see that.” Her fingers quivered against her cheek.

“It’s true? Grandpa and Grandma adopted her from you and Dad?”

Why had they never said anything? At the very least, I would have thought Dad would have told me.

“Not exactly,” Mom said.

Her chest worked as her breathing was labored. She heaved a sigh and reached for a tissue in the box on the counter, dabbing it against her eyes.

Mom had never shown this much emotion before. She was always so flawless. Always so put together. She always

seemed to know exactly what to do.

I wasn't sure what to make of this frazzled version of the woman who'd raised me.

"I won't hate you," I told her. "But I can't turn my back on this. I need to know."

Her chest pitched again, her breathing ragged. She clutched the countertop behind her.

The pinching of her lips created cavernous lines around her mouth and eyes. I'd seen the expression when Dad had died, and again when Grandpa had passed away, but never like this, with this emptiness.

She squeezed her eyes shut. Turned away from me.

She was shutting down. Shutting me out like she did whenever a problem arose that she didn't want to face.

"Please," I begged. "Please tell me."

"Your dad and I were newly married," Mom said, grief cloaking her eyes. "I wasn't very happy with some of the things he was doing, and I thought..."

She released a breath and dropped her chin to her chest. "I can't believe I'm telling you this."

"Please," I said, desperate, confused. So confused.

Mom's hands trembled as she pressed them to her stomach. "I was ungrateful. I wanted to show him that he took me for granted, so I made a choice. And it was a terrible mistake."

"Mom," I said, hardly able to believe it. "Are you saying you cheated on Dad to get back at him?"

Just what had Dad done that she'd deemed so horrible?

"I'm not proud of it. I was young and prideful. And vain, so vain. I felt like he didn't know how good he had it and wanted to show him he could lose me if he wasn't careful. I didn't realize until too late that I was the one in the wrong."

"I can't believe it. You never do anything wrong."

She laughed mirthlessly and wiped her cheek. “Believe me, I do plenty.”

“You—you always had this outrageous expectation for Leigh and me. To be perfect. To get A’s. To be the top of the class, valedictorian, the best in everything we did. Nothing less ever satisfied you. You constantly hounded me to wear the right clothes, to say the right things. All the while you—”

“I know.” Her voice split. “I did have those high expectations for you. I wanted you to be the best you could be.”

Angry heat rose behind my eyes. My body tensed, and I had the urge to shake her. To scream, to kick the wall like a child. I couldn’t make sense of this reaction. I wanted action, to demand justice, but I couldn’t get it.

“I didn’t get that message,” I said. “The message I got was that if I wasn’t the best, I wasn’t enough. You cheated.”

Her lower lip trembled. “I did. I’m sorry.”

My entire life felt like a lie. She’d demanded perfection, to project an image that we had it together more so than anyone else around us. Had that front all been to make up for her enormous mistake?

Spots flashed in my vision. I’d always admired my mom and knew I’d never measure up, but now? I didn’t know what to think.

“I can’t believe—so Dad. Did he find out?”

She scoffed. “He found out all right. I threatened to leave, and he told me to go right ahead. So I did, thinking of how much he would regret it, of how much he would miss me when I was gone. Then I found out I was pregnant.”

Pain shattered in my chest.

“Mom.”

“I had no education. Nothing to fall back on. And I had a serious change of heart. I realized too late just how much I loved your dad and how wrong it was for me to be upset by such small things. I begged him to forgive me.”

Her face mashed into sadness once more as the tears trickled all over again. The foginess in my mind cleared, swept away by my surprise at this statement. I was disoriented, but in that moment, I think I saw my mother truly for the first time.

She'd made a mistake, and it had broken something inside of her. Like the shattered snow globe, there was no fixing this.

Belle had been kind to me over that mistake. She'd let it go. Forgiven me.

Logically, I knew Mom's mistake was more than just shattered glass, but my reaction this time was far less condemning than it may have been had I learned this truth about her past at any other time. Regardless, that didn't mean I could forgive her as easily as Belle had forgiven me.

I hated this deception. My insides felt tarnished at the thought that I'd had a hand in a falsehood as well—I'd even enticed Bryce into it. Sure, we'd made progress with his family, but it was all based on dishonesty.

That soured my stomach.

My thoughts returned to Mom. I wanted to let this go, but something told me it wasn't going to be that easy. How this news must have devastated my dad.

"You guys made it work?"

Mom sniffed and reached for another tissue, using it to wipe her face.

"We did, but it wasn't easy. Your father told me I had to give up the baby. At the time, my sister had just gotten married, and they couldn't get pregnant. So we told everyone I was a surrogate mother for her."

"A surrogate mother?"

Mom breathed so hard that a small hiccup escaped. She wadded the tissues she'd used in her hand and tucked them under her arms. "Sometimes, if a woman can't carry a child, she has someone else do it for her. They artificially inseminate

her using the woman's egg and her husband's sperm, and the woman carries the baby to full term for her."

"You fooled everyone."

"Aunt Miranda was so happy. She gladly took Belle. It was a tragedy that, after all of that, she didn't live to raise her."

I stared at the paper on the counter behind Mom. "So Belle is my sister?"

Mom's eyes glistened. "Yes. Your half-sister."

The news swarmed through me like a dust devil, swirling up leaves and dirt in a small tornado that flurried in one concentrated place, not affecting its entire surroundings but causing enough of a stir, nonetheless.

"Did her—what about her—the dad?" I wasn't sure I'd ever really known what his name was. Belle's birth father had been absent her whole life, and therefore, had been rarely spoken of. What would she think if she knew she had a different father completely?

Mom shook her head, pinching her eyes shut tightly as if to ward off the memory. "He was long gone. We never kept in touch. He never knew about her, and I kept it that way."

I was—shellshocked. Flabbergasted. Utterly and completely thrown. My world was off its axis and spinning uncontrollably through space.

My perfect, exacting mother—

And Belle was my—

"Why didn't you tell me before?" The question was a whisper.

"You never needed to know."

"Does Leigh know?"

"No. And I'd prefer to keep it that way."

"What about Belle?"

I could never look at Belle the same. She was my *sister*. My half-sister.

Mom faced the cupboards and began putting the bracelets she'd removed back onto her left wrist.

"I suppose that will be up to you," she said. "If you think telling Belle will be in her best interest. Or we could just let her think what she already thinks."

I frowned. It sounded like Mom was leaving that decision up to me, and I wasn't sure what the best thing to do was, especially now that Belle and I were finally friends. We'd resolved our differences and grown closer than I ever could have imagined.

Yet, was that a lie, too? It'd been based on one. How could I carry on with things as they were?

With her bracelets back in place, Mom brushed my hair away from my shoulders. I cringed slightly at the touch and backed away, which brought a renewed glint of sadness to her eyes.

"I've done you a disservice in another way," Mom said.

"How so?" There was more? I wasn't sure I could handle more.

"A mother can't stand having to watch her children suffer and struggle. The only thing that makes it worse is when your child is making the same mistakes you made."

This revolted me. I took another step back. "I would never cheat on Bryce."

On my husband. On anyone.

Mom pursed her lips, her expression as pained as if I'd slapped her. "No, you wouldn't. That's not what I'm referencing."

"Then what are you talking about?"

She exhaled. "I've taken perfectionism to the extreme. The way I fold clothes and put them meticulously in the drawer, the way I clean my cupboards, or how the inside of the fridge and microwave has to be spotless.

“I passed it on to you, and it’s driving you to obsess over The Flora. It’s time we both let go of the need to be perfect.”

Bryce had been telling me the same thing, but I hadn’t wanted to hear it. Mostly because I knew what Mom would think if I did. I saw it now—all my life, I’d cared too much about what she thought of everything I did.

I’d thought I was keeping the store to honor Dad’s memory, and a small part of me was, I supposed, but I also had the struggle with perfectionism. I aimed for the best, but not for myself.

To please her.

Logically, I knew I couldn’t blame her for that, but the annoyance I’d felt toward her for loving Belle more than me compounded. Had Mom always loved Belle more? Would she have thrust the same expectations on Belle as she had on Leigh and me?

Belle hadn’t had to deal with those expectations. She’d been able to live her life how she wanted.

“I’m sorry I kept this secret from you,” she said. “I hoped you’d never have to know.”

Tears welled, and my throat fisted, trapping my breath.

“I was always so hurt by the attention you paid to Belle,” I said, the emotions I’d kept pent up for years pouring out. “Every time she came over, it seemed like you doted on her much more than you ever did on us.”

Tears glistened anew in Mom’s eyes as well. “I didn’t mean to. I guess I felt like I was trying to be the best aunt I could be for her since I couldn’t be her mother. I never meant to make you or Leigh feel lesser.”

Hearing her acknowledge that fact plucked at my heartstrings. My umbrage didn’t dissipate instantly as I wanted it to. If anything, it only became that much starker.

Unwittingly, I thought of the story of the prodigal son. After the rebellious son took his inheritance and wasted it all on what the Bible calls riotous living, he then returned and

offered to be his father's servant because he'd be treated better there than he would be homeless, penniless.

He returned home only to be welcomed with open arms by his relieved father. Afterward, he was showered with gifts and money. A party was thrown for him, and while the father was ecstatic, the son who'd remained home was jealous. He'd been the faithful one and had never received the kind of attention from his father that he now paid to his rebellious son.

It wasn't that the father loved the reliable, steady son less—he only showed the prodigal how relieved he was that the son he loved had returned.

I was sure eventually the jealous son was able to forgive his brother and his dad, but I suspected that forgiveness hadn't happened right away.

"I know it's a lot to ask," Mom said through a shaky breath and a hand on her cheek. "I'm sure this is all disturbing and difficult for you to hear, but can you forgive me?"

"I—I don't know," I said, honestly. Shaking. Indignant. Frazzled. "I want to. But I need some time."

"I understand," she said.

The air between us was tremulous. Skewed. This was one of those pivotal, life-changing moments, something we couldn't ignore, something we'd have to learn how to navigate differently around from here on out. I needed time to set my compass to true north, and I couldn't do it at the drop of a hat.

She turned for the paper, slipped it from the counter, and, after a final perusal, handed it to me.

"Why don't you hold on to that? Until you decide what you'd like to do about it."

Though I wanted nothing more to do with that paper, I took it. Robotically, I trundled back to the front door. Everything I did from that point on felt mechanical. Disconnected.

Mom saw me to the door, but she didn't offer to embrace me. I was glad. I wasn't sure I would have accepted.

I didn't remember the drive home or the stop I made at the grocery store for milk and cat food. I zoned out the entire way back to my apartment.

Bryce had wanted me to call him once I was done, but I didn't. He would ask questions; he would want to talk, offer a chance for me to decompress. I couldn't handle that right now.

I started a hot bath. I sank into it, soaking in emotion, overwhelmed with the shock of so many new revelations all at once.

Everything I'd thought my whole life had been wrecked. I'd been under the delusion that my mom had led a perfect life and that I needed to aspire to the same.

My focus was on the wrong thing. I'd lived my life to please and impress my mom and everyone else. As the tears streamed down my cheeks, as I sank in the hot water and stared up at the ceiling, I knew: the only person I should have been living for was God.

The longer I stewed in the water, the more convoluted things became. My life wasn't over, though part of me felt like it should be. I was still here, still breathing, and I had to make sense of this.

There was no going backward; I could only move forward.

What was the best way of doing that when everything inside of me felt broken?

## *Chapter Nineteen*

**C**hristmas Eve morning dawned with a brightness that brought out the snow's sparkle. The contrast of such brightness made the conflict carving me from the inside out that much starker.

Moving sluggishly, I retrieved the few gifts I had for people—a cute sweater for Bex, earrings for Mom, an early wedding present for Belle, and the inexpensive white elephant gift I'd gotten for Belle's family gift exchange that evening—and began wrapping. I found a minute amount of solace in the motion of cutting paper, folding it meticulously around the shape of each package, and taping those folds into place.

Bryce's gift gave me pause. I hadn't been sure what to get for him, but while passing the window of a small shop in town, I'd found the perfect thing. It was an ornament—meant to symbolize what had drawn us together in the first place. And it was a John Deere tractor, meant to symbolize the auction after he'd first kissed me.

At the time I'd bought the gift, I'd thought it might serve as a way to tell him how much I enjoyed his company and how grateful I was that he'd agreed to my crazy bargain.

Holding the little tractor with its silver string at the top of its porcelain cab, new feelings surged into me. Feelings of shame.

I was hurt by Mom's actions; my deception with Bryce made me no better than she was. I saw this gift now for what it was—for what it would have to be. A parting gift.

There was no way I could continue to be with Bryce now. Every time I saw him, I'd be reminded of what a liar I was. It would only be fair. Once I ended things, he'd no longer have to pretend so hard to be into me.

I really had to give it to him. He'd said he was all in, and there were moments when he'd almost convinced *me* that our relationship wasn't just an act. That was why my fingers shook as I held the ornament, and why he refused to leave my thoughts. I couldn't let myself hold on to him anymore.

Dad had too much of a rose-glasses attitude if he really thought everything—no matter what the problem was—would be better by Christmas.

All that work to film an ad, and I wouldn't have it showing before Christmas after all. Maybe Bryce was right. Maybe it was time to let the store go.

I'd have to talk to Bex. She had a second job working at a dentist's office—maybe losing her position with me wouldn't be so bad. Maybe then she could go full-time at her other job.

The store wasn't the only thing I needed to let go. If this whole situation with Mom had taught me anything, it was that you could never really trust anyone. My time with Bryce was coming to a close as well.

"How could anyone factor that kind of timing into their situation?" I grumbled to my scissors and tape.

The timeline I'd set for myself wasn't going to work. The store would foreclose. I was going to lose everything.

Nothing was working out like I hoped. And it certainly wasn't working out by Christmas.

My phone buzzed from its place on the carpet. I almost didn't answer it, but after thinking better of it, I reached for it, knocking the tape over, and swiped the screen.

"Hey, Mom."

"I thought I'd see how you were holding up." Her voice was more timid than usual.

I didn't blame her, since I'd been an emotional wreck since we'd spoken. I could only imagine how she was feeling.

"I'm good," I said, tapping my scissors against my knee. "Belle asked me to be a bridesmaid. I need to go over there and try on the dress."

"I know," Mom said. "She just told me. She asked me to get the schedule to you."

Better late than never, I supposed. Belle didn't seem too high maintenance—not like I would have been. The bridesmaid tasks were probably pretty low-key.

"What's the problem?" she said. "It sounds like something is wrong."

"Have you told her yet?" I said, sliding my feet out from under me and enjoying the stretch in my muscles.

A pause lingered on the other end of the line. "Do you think I should?"

"I do," I said.

This wasn't my burden to share, and I was suffering more than anyone trying to carry it alone. It might not be the best timing with Belle and Luke's wedding, but it seemed more cruel to continue keeping it a secret any longer.

"I would want to know the truth. Plus, I don't see how I can go over there and pretend like everything is the same as it was the last time I was there."

The slightest trace of displeasure laced my tone. I couldn't help it. I was so hurt by what she had done.

"All right," Mom said. "I will."

I pressed a palm to my throat. Knowing she would lift a weight from my chest. If only fractional, it was noticeable enough.

"I think it's the right thing to do," I said. Another buzz interrupted the call, and Bryce's name was visible, giving me an entirely different flurry inside. "A call is coming in, okay? I'll talk to you later."

Taking the other call, I rested my back against the front of my couch. Staring at the newly wrapped gifts, I filled Bryce in on as much as I could about how the conversation had gone with Mom the day before.

“That’s intense,” he said. “She’s telling Belle?”

“Yeah, she’s going to call her now.” I sank my head back against the couch cushion and closed my eyes, wishing I could transport instantly to next week when all of this would be over. Or better yet, that I could transport instantly to a new life, a version where families were faultless and money grew on trees.

“So you’re coming to the white elephant gift thing this afternoon, right? Belle wanted everyone there.” Bryce’s tone was sunny, and I could tell he was trying to help keep me above water.

“I’ve got to go try on my bridesmaid dress,” I said, locking my fingers behind my head and stretching back. “So it sounds like I’ll be there too.”

“Great. I can’t wait to see you.”

I hung up without saying goodbye. Bryce was sweet, but for all I knew, he was sitting in the truck with Colton during our phone call and felt like he had to say things like that.

I couldn’t credit his words any more than I could saving my store or having a mother who was truthful and reliable.

Something inside of me was tumbling faster than a line of dominoes, and I didn’t know how to stop it. The last thing I wanted was to be anything like my mother, and the lie Bryce and I had concocted, putting on a show for everyone around us, felt too wrong to continue.

It made me feel like I should confess everything, let Belle know exactly what had been going on. And then I’d bow out. Refuse her offer of being a bridesmaid. That would be easier for everyone.

But was that really the best thing right now?

No—it wouldn’t be easier for everyone. Just me.

And this couldn't be about me. Not right now.

Belle's wedding was in two days. I'd failed to get the ornaments from her. I'd failed to save my store. But she wasn't just my newfound sister; she was my friend—something I didn't have many of. I couldn't fail her in this.

I lingered in the parking lot a few more minutes before kicking my brain into gear as I shifted the car and headed for the freeway, opting to take it rather than the backroads I usually navigated to get to Bridgewater.

When I arrived at Belle's, Luke answered the door. He wore a fishing t-shirt and jeans, and his expression was solemn.

"That was some bombshell of a document you found," he said without another greeting.

Uh-oh. Luke was the master of holding grudges. Was he going to be angry at me for this one, too?

I staggered, wondering if I was no longer welcome. Any moment now, he would announce that Belle had changed her mind. She no longer wanted me to be a bridesmaid.

To my surprise, he pulled me into a hug.

I patted him awkwardly. "What's this for?"

"I'm sure the news hit you hard, too," he said. "It can't be easy finding out...something like that."

Luke's commiserating tone was bolstering. He knew the truth—that meant Belle did, too. And they didn't resent me. The thought gave me strength I didn't realize I was lacking.

"Where is she?" I asked, retreating.

He inclined his head to the stairs. "She's up in her room. Soon to be our room once we tie the knot."

*Our room.* I would have swooned out over that one at any other time.

"Can I...would she hate it if I..."

“Come on up,” Belle called, her voice carrying from the landing above.

Luke inclined his head in that direction, and I climbed the stairs as my heart scaled into my throat.

The last time I’d come up to this part of the house had been when Grandma was still alive. She’d had a stroke and had been clinging to life. Mom, Leigh, and I had all come over to say our goodbyes.

That had been an emotional time.

This was, in a way, just as emotional. My heart stuck in my chest while still somehow managing to keep beating.

“Belle?”

“In here.”

I followed the sound of her voice to Grandma and Grandpa’s old room. The space looked completely different than it had before. Like the rest of the house, the molding was now white rather than its wooden hue. The border with orange leaves that had lined both the wainscoting and the ceiling was gone.

The room was now painted a soft gray. A beautiful bed with a white head and footboard lay on a fluffy rug in the room’s center, and Belle sat directly on it, staring at her phone as if she’d forgotten it was there.

A tissue box rested on the bed beside her, and she held some crumpled tissues in her hand while a handful of others sat wadded near her ankles. She wore pajama pants and a t-shirt. Her brown hair hung down past her shoulders.

Her eyes were red, her cheeks tear-stained.

“She told you, I take it?” I said, not knowing what else to say.

Belle sniffed. Her watery eyes pierced right through me. “You’re my sister. Aunt Sarah is my mom.”

“I know the timing is terrible,” I said, “what with Christmas tomorrow and your wedding. It’s why I left without

saying anything yesterday. I couldn't believe what I'd found, and I'd wanted to get the truth from Mom before I showed it to you."

She nodded, staring off. "That makes sense," she said.

I inched into the room. Warmth emanated from the radiators beneath the windows and from the sunlight streaking in, too.

"So?" I said.

She sniffed and wiped her nose with one of the tissues. "So."

"What now?"

"Did you tell Leigh?" she asked.

"Not yet," I said. "Mom may have, but—"

"I'm glad," Belle said.

I grimaced. "Yeah, I know. You and Leigh get along about as well as you and I used to."

In fact, when we'd come to clean out the house after Grandpa's passing, Leigh had been less than friendly to Belle. Like me, she'd been so irritated by the fact that Belle had seemed to inherit *everything*. The house, the land. Leigh hadn't taken that well.

Belle shook her head. "No, that's not what I meant. I meant, I'm glad to know."

"You are?" The room spun all over again.

She snatched another tissue from the box. "I've always loved your mom, Allie. She was always so kind. She's—I'm glad. And I'm glad you and I made up before I found this out."

"Me too," I said, ribs tight, heart aching. "It would have been worse finding out we're sisters hating each other."

Belle stared at me. I stared back. And then she barked a laugh, a disjointed sound that implied she was too emotional to do anything else.

I wasn't far off, so I joined in too. She ambled off the bed, scooped her tissues into the garbage, and then wrenched me into a hug.

This embrace was monumental. It was accepting and commiserating all at once. For some reason, it loosened the tightness inside of me, turning it as surely as a faucet. Soon, I was crying too, and she and I were embracing, laughing, hugging, and weeping.

"I'm getting in on this," Luke said from the door, and then before I knew what was happening, his arms wrapped around the both of us.

His warmth and strength in that moment were substantial. Each facet surged into the crevices Mom's deception had created, burrowing and filling every one. Belle and I rested our heads against his chest, basking in the unity, the acceptance, the feeling of love swirling around us.

"Thank you," I said once the group hug ended, and I stood on my own.

Belle's expression was gentle. "You want to see the dress?"

"Just—just like that?"

"Just like that," she said, beaming up at Luke and then back at me again. "With Christmas tomorrow and the wedding the next day, we don't have a lot of time if there are any adjustments Debra needs to make."

"What adjustments?" Debra asked, sauntering into the room as well.

I hadn't realized Luke's mom—Bryce's mom—was here. I wiped my cheeks, hoping no traces of my tears were visible. Had she heard our conversation? Did she wonder what it was about—or did she know about the discovery?

"Oh, look," she said, her gaze turning wary and darting from one of us to the next. "I've gone and walked in on something, haven't I?"

“Not at all,” Belle said. “Allie is going to be my bridesmaid, and I wanted to see if you’d help with the measurements.”

“Abso-tootle-lutely,” Debra said, tweaking my chin first and then Belle’s.

Belle snuck into the closet and returned with a wine-red-colored dress that had ruffled sleeves and a high-waisted A-line. I didn’t have to put it on to know it was a lovely gown. Why did she have an extra?

Maybe she’d wanted one for herself. Or maybe she’d gotten an extra just in case.

Good thing she had. Being included right now, after everything that had happened, meant everything to me.

“What do you think?” Belle asked.

“The color is gorgeous,” I said, sliding my fingers along the fabric.

“Luke,” Belle said. “Do you mind—?”

“You don’t have to tell me twice.” He inclined his head at his mom and left the room, closing the door behind him.

I changed into the dress while Debra prattled on about flower arrangements and how she hoped the florist could get everything together by the day after Christmas since shipping was going to be interrupted by the holiday.

I admired my slim form in the mirror. The A-line accentuated my waist, and the full skirt had enough extra fabric I knew it would flow when I walked. Slowly, I turned to showcase the dress.

“Beautiful,” Belle said with approval gleaming in her eyes. “I don’t think any adjustments need to be made.”

“Thank you.” I pressed a hand to my stomach, hearing so much more in that statement than she probably intended.

“Of course. Now, get dressed. Everyone will be here. We’re about to have our white elephant gift exchange. One last

hurrah for Christmas Eve, Christmas, and the wedding festivities.”

The gift exchange. That meant Bryce would be coming too, and I was at once both eager and dreading seeing him again.

The gift I’d gotten for him was more specific than the random under-ten-dollar gift Belle had requested. I needed a way to give it to him privately. How was I going to do that while the rest of his family was here?

## *Chapter Twenty*

I changed back into my clothes and hurried out to my car to retrieve the gifts I'd brought. When I pulled the two packages from my trunk and slammed it closed, Bex and Dawson pulled up and were getting the kids out of the back of their van.

"Hey there," Bex called to me, waving as she set Paisley down in the snow.

"Hi, Allie!" Paisley called.

"Hi," I called back, joining Bex's side.

Dawson wove around the van, holding Sophia in one arm and a large box in the other.

"What've you got there?" I said, wondering what could possibly be inside. "The gifts were only supposed to be ten dollars or less."

"Who says this isn't?" Dawson said, passing Sophia to Bex and treading past to catch up with Kody and Paisley at the front door. He stopped them, reminding them to kick the snow off their shoes before they went inside.

"Two?" Bex said, eyeing the bundles I carried. "I thought we were only supposed to bring one?"

"This one's—"

"Don't tell me. For Bryce."

"You guessed it."

Bex grinned as if I'd just told her a tasty secret.

I couldn't return it. If only she knew what I was about to do with this gift.

"Hey, Bex," I said, mustering my courage.

This wasn't going to be an easy conversation either, but the thought had trailed through my mind so many times the path ahead was worn down, definitive, and clear.

"I have something else I'd like to talk to you about."

"Sure," she said. "What's up?"

"It's the store. I think..." My throat choked over the words. I persevered. "What if we had to close?"

"Oh, Allie," Bex said, her hand finding mine and gripping tightly. "Don't even worry about me. I'll be fine. The dentist has told me I can go full-time whenever I need to."

"Really?"

"Really. I'll be just fine. Thank you for thinking of me, though, and for all you did. You gave me work when I didn't have anything to fall back on. That means so much."

I muscled down the emotion. Bex must have noticed because she pulled me into a hug.

"I'm sorry it's come to this," she said with her temple pressed against my hair. "I know how much the store means to you. I know how hard you tried."

She squeezed me tightly and stepped away as the sound of a truck crunching the gravel stole our attention. Colton parked by my car and Bryce's pickup and hopped out, joining Bex and me as we ambled back into the farmhouse.

"The gang's all here," Debra said, lifting her hands in excitement.

True enough, Kyler, Colton, Bryce, and Dawson all stood together while Bex set Sophia on the floor to join her siblings. A small pang of sadness struck me at the sight. Once I broke things off with Bryce, I wouldn't be a part of this anymore.

Sure, I was still Belle's half-sister.

But I wouldn't be a Holden.

Luke ambled around the dining table, clapping hands and offering shoulder claps to each brother in turn. Without breaking a sweat, Luke pulled Bryce into a hug just like he did with Dawson, Colton, and Kyler.

“Whoa,” Dawson said, clapping both brothers on the shoulders and eyeing them like some kind of mediator. “Just like that?”

“Just like that,” Luke said, placing his hand on Dawson's arm and grinning.

Bryce grinned back, and I thawed inside at the complete change in the atmosphere between the two brothers.

Debra watched the exchange with her palms together and pressed to her mouth. Her eyes watered.

“It's so good to see you all getting on together like this,” she said, which then earned her a massive bear hug from each of her sons.

Belle and Bex laughed. Sophia, Paisley, and Kody clapped and cheered, and I found myself joining in, laughing and tearing up at the reunion as well.

At least something good had come from our ruse. Bryce deserved to be loved and included by all of his family.

“Cards first,” Belle announced, ramming the guys apart on her way to the kitchen, where a decadent spread of snacks, chips, and dip were splayed out on the bar. “We'll shoot the breeze a bit and then have our gift exchange. Did you all leave your gifts by the tree?”

“Which one?” Dawson asked, earning a chorus of laughter.

Belle pointed to the two trees situated in the hexagonal space at the other end of the parlor. “The one nearest the window.”

Footsteps thundered, and I followed the others into the parlor to leave our gifts by the designated tree. Dawson, Colton, Debra, Kyler, and Luke all shuffled back into the dining room.

The minute they were gone, Bryce turned and swept me into his arms.

“You’re amazing,” he said in my ear. “Thank you for this.”

His response made my heart judder in its place. It was either growing in size or cowering in fear over what I was about to do.

What I had to do.

He held me against his chest. My feet dangled a few inches off the floor until he lowered me back down again. His eyes gleamed with sheer pleasure. Uncertainty sweltered inside of me, but I couldn’t back down now. It was time.

He deserved to know, and if I didn’t do this now, I wasn’t sure I’d get another chance before Christmas.

“Hang on,” I said, bending for the gift I’d set on the couch. “I have something to talk to you about before we go back in there.”

Bryce took the small box with bent brows. “Isn’t this supposed to wait for Belle’s game?”

I tucked my hands into my back pockets. “I don’t want anyone else seeing this.”

Mischief toyed with his eyes. “Uh-oh. Should I be worried?”

“It’s for your eyes only.”

“You have me thinking all kinds of things I shouldn’t be right now, Miss Allie,” he said, swiping his finger through the paper.

My cheeks scorched. What did he think it was? That made my stomach squirm, especially in light of his recent offer to take me somewhere. Like I’d give something like that to him where others could see.

A gift like that would be wedding-present-only, a point I had to accept that he and I would never be at. I wasn’t going to mention anything like a wedding between us—not when I knew what the answer would be.

Everything between us was for show. It had only been for show. Touching me, ice skating, kissing, sweeping me off my feet the way he had where everyone could see. It had all been so we'd look legit in front of his family, not because he genuinely had feelings for me.

After the fallout with my mom, I couldn't afford to trust anyone closely again.

Belle and Luke were getting married. I'd helped him repair the breach. That meant our arrangement was about to come to an end, and I'd decided to do so sooner rather than later.

"What's this?" he lifted the glittering tractor ornament from its wrapper.

"It's stupid, I know, but I just wanted to say thank you for all you've done to help me. I'm bowing out, and I wanted you to have something to remember me by."

His eyes thinned. The delight in them dripped out and replaced with skepticism. "Bowing out of what?"

My heart pounded, but I continued. I'd given this a lot of thought. It was the right thing to do. Then he could move on. I could move on.

Laughter chorused from the dining room behind him. I strode closer, keeping my voice low. "You know what. I'm not going to bother with the ornaments anymore, Bryce. I think you were right. I'm letting my store go, and I'm letting the ornaments go, too."

I didn't say as much, but the implication that I was releasing him as well blasted louder than fire trucks at a Fourth of July parade. It was for the best.

Bryce's jaw hardened. "No, you're not."

"You can't tell me what to do."

He rubbed his jaw and swore under his breath. "I'm not. I'm saying I don't want you to bow out."

"And I'm saying it's time."

He huffed, peering behind him before tilting his head closer. “All right, then. Let’s pretend what you and I have means nothing. Think about it, Allie. We should ask Belle about the ornaments tonight. It’s perfect. It’ll be before Christmas, just like you wanted. I gave you my word. I’m seeing it through.”

“No, I can’t do that.”

“Why not? You guys have patched everything. You’ve made up. You’re sisters now.”

“That’s exactly why I can’t do it, not like this. We had a moment together up in her room. It was special. It was like we connected—and it was so real.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

How could I explain this? I didn’t want the stupid ornaments anymore. I’d been so flawed, so confused. My focus had been wrong for too long.

“If I ask her for the ornaments now, it will just look like I’m heartlessly taking advantage of a situation.”

“What’s wrong with that? It’s what you did with me.”

My mouth dropped. He had some nerve. “Heartlessly taking advantage?”

He grimaced, angling his head to one side. “That didn’t come out the right way. I just meant this thing with you and me was all a ploy. You helped me and held up your part. I want to help with yours. You can’t bow out before you’ve given me that chance.”

“You already did, and I’m grateful. But now isn’t the time.” He had to understand. He couldn’t ruin this for me, not when things with Belle were so fragile.

I’d needed his help getting closer to her. He had, in fact, helped me do just that.

For now, that had to be enough. Why couldn’t he just accept that?

Bryce gripped my arms, but behind him, someone cleared his throat.

His grasp hardened. Bryce froze and turned to find Kyler standing behind him in the mouth of the parlor with widened eyes.

“What the heck are you two talking about?” Kyler asked.

His eyes were brown like Luke’s, and they darted accusatorially between the two of us.

Bryce shushed him. “Nothing, Hoss.”

“You—what’s a ploy?”

“Your face as soon as I beat you at cards.” Bryce threw his arm around Kyler’s neck and knuckled his hair like he was five years old instead of seventeen.

Kyler shoved him away, scowling. “Seriously. What’s going on with you two?”

“Nothing,” Bryce said. “We’re good. She’s good. I’m good. You didn’t hear anything, got it?”

Kyler narrowed his eyes at his oldest brother. Then he glided his gaze to me. Shaking his head, he reached for the bag of chips that had been left on the floor beside the couch and stalked toward the dining table where the rest of the crew was gathered and playing cards.

“Are you guys coming in or what?” Dawson called. “Rebecca and I have some news.”

Bryce didn’t wait for me the way he would have before but marched into the dining room. It felt as though he’d torn off a waxing strip in the process. The aftereffects left me raw and burning.

My body was heavy and numb. I couldn’t account for the lump forming in my throat or the heat rising behind my eyelids. Ending things with Bryce was supposed to make the situation better, wasn’t it?

Why did I feel like I’d just lost the most valuable thing in existence?

He didn't act impervious. He acted...hurt. Like he cared about me. Like...

I wanted nothing more than to walk out of the house, to walk away from all of this and pretend none of it had ever happened. But Belle's voice carried, asking where I was.

Plucking my nerve from an unknown source, I mustered what I had left and faced the group, taking my seat beside Bryce.

His body slanted—away from me, though I may be the only one who noticed. The action prodded at the already vulnerable parts of me. I worked to center myself in the moment, to remind myself of all the reasons why ending things with him were necessary, but blood only pounded through my skull.

Kyler shuffled to his seat on the far end of the table. He didn't take his glare from Bryce. He shook his head and rolled his eyes.

Bex stood beside Dawson, their chairs pushed back, and the two of them glowed.

“Go on then,” Bryce said once we were all situated. “Sorry to keep you all waiting.”

Bex grinned and placed a hand on her stomach. “Dawson and I are going to have a baby!”

The reaction was deafening. Paisley and Kody exchanged gapingly surprised looks, shouting in excitement.

Debra rose from her seat and shuffled to hook a hand behind Dawson's head and pull him within kissing distance, where she then planted one on his cheek. Bex hugged Belle, and then Debra, and the two of them couldn't have looked happier.

“When is it coming?” Debra asked, pressing her hands to Bex's belly even though it was still as flat as ever.

“June,” Dawson said, his answer coming in unison with Bex's, and then the two of them laughed.

“Do you know what it is yet?”

“Not yet,” Bex said. “We’ve known for a few months, but we wanted to make sure I was far enough along before we said anything.”

I was so happy for them, but I also couldn’t miss the rain clouds that had settled over Bryce’s expression. Wordlessly, he rose from his seat and ambled around the table as well, pulling Bex into a hug first, followed by Dawson.

“Congratulations, you two,” he said, smiling, though the expression didn’t reach his eyes. “Don’t forget who the baby’s favorite uncle is going to be. You can name him after me. Bryce is a good, strong name.”

“Excuse me,” Luke said, “but I’ll be the favorite. Luke is from the Bible, after all.”

More laughter followed. I tried joining in. I tried breathing normally. I tried meeting Bryce’s gaze as he strode back around the table to take the seat beside mine. But he wouldn’t look at me.

A small feeling of panic slid in between my ribs.

What had I done?

“So the wedding is going to be here in your house?” Kyler said as Luke shuffled a deck of cards and began dealing them out. “Are you sure there’s room for everyone in here?”

“Luke and I have the seating all worked out,” Belle said with reassurance.

“If people won’t fit in here, we can always send them outside,” Bryce said, as cool as anything. Like nothing between us had just happened.

Like he didn’t care.

“With the goats,” Luke added with a grin.

Belle laughed. “They’ll never forgive us.”

“The guests or the goats?” Kyler asked.

Luke placed a card and glowered at her. “I’ll never forgive you. What’s wrong with getting married in a church?”

So much for having the seating arrangements all worked out.

Belle sighed in exasperation as though they'd had this argument many times before. "I want to get married here. Grandpa would have wanted that."

"Hank would have loved a wedding here," Luke said, agreeing readily enough to let us know he didn't put much stock in his earlier arguments. "He called it the honeymoon cottage, after all."

"Did he?" Debra asked from the other end of the table. "That's sweet."

"The house is obviously not a cottage. It's just because he and our grandma had their honeymoon here," Belle said, gesturing to include me.

Including me was thoughtful of her, though really, I just squirmed under the attention. I was too stuck in my unease, in watching Bryce, in silently begging him to look in my direction.

"Romantic," Debra said, placing a card on the stack.

Luke and Bryce battled it out, fighting to lay their cards down first. Their hands slapped the table in unison, however, and the brothers' eyes met. Rather than with glowers and discomfort, Luke lifted his hands in surrender.

"You got it, man," he said.

"Darn right," Bryce added, earning a nod of approval from Luke without reservation.

The whole dynamic was different between them, and I wasn't the only one who noticed.

"What's going on with you two?" Kyler asked, eyeing his older brothers. "Last time we were here, Luke hated your hide. Now it's like you're best friends."

"Water under the bridge," Luke said, offering a fist in Bryce's direction.

Bryce bumped it with his own, and Debra released a sigh. My chest fluttered as well, but I couldn't tell if it was more because I was happy for Bryce or relieved that Kyler hadn't said anything about what he'd heard.

There was still time. Once the games, the gift exchange were over, I could talk to Bryce again—the way I should have done earlier. We could work out a way to end things a little more peaceably.

That was all this gut-wrenching awfulness was—we just needed better closure. We could agree to still be friends.

“I'm just so glad you two knuckleheads finally got over yourselves,” Debra said.

“Just in time, too,” Belle said, bringing a tray of cheese and crackers to the table.

Shouting sounded from the parlor, and Paisley came running with mild terror on her face as her older brother darted after her. The siblings fought, and I zoned out, trying to process the wedge that had lodged itself in my chest.

“Is that the ploy you two were talking about?” Kyler said, jarring my reverie and placing a card on the table.

Bryce stiffened. My heart skyrocketed. Blood pulsed behind my eyes, blurring everything. What had I missed? What had he just said?

“Who?” Debra asked.

“Bryce and Allie. I walked in on them in the living room —”

“Say no more,” Dawson said, returning after solving the issue between the kids. “We don't need to know.”

“They talked like they had some kind of bargain going,” Kyler went on, ignoring Dawson. “Like this thing between them isn't real.”

He placed an ace on the deck and won the hand. No one seemed to notice, though, because every single set of eyes was pegged to Bryce and me.

“Of course, it’s real,” Debra argued. “Anyone who sees them together can tell that much.”

My throat was full of frogs. Why—why had I thought ending things with Bryce tonight was a good idea? I should never have said anything. I should have waited until the timing was better.

Bryce’s throat worked. His hand balled into a fist on the table, his cards left abandoned in front of him.

Kyler scooped the remaining cards toward him. “I heard him say it himself. He said this whole thing they got going on was just a trick to get into both of your good graces.”

“Is that true?” Belle said. “Are you and Bryce really dating?”

I saw the hurt in her eyes, and it was no wonder. She’d had just as big of a shock dropped on her as I had in finding out we shared the same mother. I could see the betrayal in her gaze all over again.

Though that instance had nothing to do with me, this one did. And I hated being the cause of it.

Belle had become my friend. We’d made progress over the past several weeks. This wasn’t about the ornaments anymore —

—at least, not completely.

Luke’s eyes were wide and livid with fury. His upper lip curled. “I knew it. I didn’t want to let go, but I finally did, and now, you pull this? I should have known better. I trusted you. I trusted you both.”

The stares around the table grew heavier and heavier. I wracked my brains, trying to think of something. Could we play this off? Call out Kyler as a liar?

No. Truth was better.

“It’s my fault,” I began. “I approached Bryce, and he—”

“Look,” Bryce said, placing a hand on my arm. The touch severed something inside of me rather than soothing it. “It may

have started out as a ruse, at least in Allie's eyes, but even though I agreed to go along with it, after the first few moments together, I knew she was more than that. I knew I liked her as more than just a temporary gig."

An empty pit dropped into my stomach. No, it couldn't be possible. Everything between us...the attention and affection he'd shown... It hadn't been real.

He was just saying it. This was what we'd spent time together for. Practicing skating. Necessary kissing. He was just placating his family. He was trying to help us both save face.

"And you?" Belle asked. Color patched her cheeks.

Kody and Paisley ran around, oblivious to the contention. Their cries of laughter echoed that much louder around us in the strained silence.

"I wanted to have Bryce help me get close to you," I said, gagging over the confession. "I needed help—and I knew you'd never hear me out. I knew you'd never let me get close enough to ask about the ornaments."

Belle pushed away from the table. Her mouth hung open. "That's what this was about? You want them that badly? Take them."

She flung her arm in the direction of the basement entrance behind her before spinning and heading in that direction as if to retrieve them herself.

Tears sprang to my eyes. I pushed to my feet as well and skirted around the table, hurrying to stop her.

Belle had passed the bathroom. She was on a death march toward the basement stairs.

I pulled her arm. "Wait, please," I said desperately.

Belle flung away my grasp. She rounded, not so much glaring at me as scowling with the same pained expression in her eyes.

I had to help her understand.

“It was never supposed to come to this,” I said, reminding me so much of Mom it was revolting. “You were never supposed to know.”

Her lips thinned. “I thought we were friends. Sisters, even. I thought you stopped by to help me.”

“I did!”

I’d enjoyed our time together sorting through Grandma and Grandpa’s old papers. We’d grown a bond I never thought I’d have with her over the last several weeks. I couldn’t bear that she thought our time together was just a hoax.

“Turns out you were just here to spread more lies,” Belle said. “I guess it’s a family trait.”

Oof.

Footsteps padded behind me, and then Luke’s voice chimed in. “Bryce is still up to his old habits,” he said, joining Belle’s side. “We should elope. Let’s get out of here. Leave this all behind for a while—”

“Don’t you dare,” Debra intervened, scurrying up behind us. Her face was shadowed, the only light coming from the direction of the dining room. “These two had no business doing what they did, but don’t you dare deprive me of a wedding the way Dawson did.”

“I didn’t deprive you of a wedding,” Dawson called from the kitchen. “You were there at the courthouse when we tied the knot.”

She shouted back at him. “No, but I didn’t get to help plan yours, did I?”

I gaped as Dawson and the other members of the family congregated in this tiny hallway. It would have been laughable in any other circumstance, but the strife that strung through the party had quickly stamped out the camaraderie that was here minutes before.

Bryce wasn’t among the other brothers. Where was he? Had he left?

“Things were different, Mom,” Dawson said. “I thought you understood that. You said you were okay with it as long as I was happy. And I’ve never been as happy as I am with Rebecca. I love her more than my own life.”

Debra pinched the bridge of her nose. “Did you rush to get married because you got her pregnant?”

“Does she look like she’s been pregnant this whole time?”

It was a good thing Bex wasn’t around to hear that particular accusation. She would have been mortified.

Belle pivoted toward the basement door. I was sick inside. They were never supposed to find out. The evening wasn’t supposed to have turned into this spectacle, into all this fighting.

I’d ruined everything.

This was the opposite of what Bryce and I had set out to do. Now, instead of uniting everyone, we’d caused more division than ever.

They’d never trust Bryce or me again after this.

He stood near the door, arguing with Colton. *Colton*. The brother he’d always gotten along with.

Bryce said something in agitation and yanked his coat from its hook, stuffing his arms into the sleeves and yanking open the front door. I had so many apologies to give, I wasn’t sure who to start with. I couldn’t let Bryce walk away, though.

I’d talk to Belle, and hopefully, she would come to forgive me for this. We weren’t just cousins. We were sisters. That had to count for something, didn’t it?

“Bryce, wait. Wait!”

I elbowed my way past Dawson, receiving a sympathetic grimace from him and Bex, and then danced around Paisley and Sophia, who were chasing one another around the dining room table.

Before I could get there, Bryce stepped outside, closing the door behind him.

I couldn't let him walk away, not like this. I ran after him, only just remembering to grab my coat on the way out.

The winter night sucked the life out of me, froze my nostrils, and I slipped into my coat's sleeves, regretting the fact that I was shoeless. Cold seeped through my socks.

He was already down the steps and partway to his truck.

"Bryce, wait."

He spoke without facing me, but his voice carried all the same. "Not now, Allie. I need a minute, all right?"

I zipped my coat. My feet were freezing, but that didn't mean the rest of me had to be.

"I'm so sorry. I never meant for this to happen."

The side of his jaw made a motion. "I can't talk about this right now, okay?" He looked at me with pain and pleading in his expression. He was hurt. So hurt.

"I—" Words failed me.

He turned his back and climbed into his pickup without a word.

Standing on the porch, with my breath coming out in puffs, with my chest feeling as though it were crumbling, and my heart decaying from the inside out, I had no desire to go back in the house either.

The family had all returned to the dining table, but the expressions on their faces were vastly different. I stood in the cold a moment longer, on the outside looking in, and I had an acute taste of exactly what Bryce had dealt with for so long.

He'd almost repaired that. And now, it was gone.

There was nothing I could do to fix it this time.

## *Chapter Twenty-One*

**S**lipping the door open just wide enough to retrieve my boots and purse, I grasped them and closed the door behind me. I jammed my cold, wet socks into the boots and trundled down the porch steps without saying goodbye.

The entire situation ate at me as I made my way to my car. Even if I had tried speaking with Belle, I figured her response would be similar to Bryce's—she needed time. Her wedding was in two days, for goodness' sake.

Why did this have to all blow up now?

I didn't want to go to Mom's. I didn't want to go home. Irrational as it was, I was suddenly angry at The Flora and Fauna for having so much hold over me that I kept making stupid decisions to save it when it clearly didn't want to be saved.

It was freezing outside, and my car hadn't quite warmed up enough yet to blast the heat I longed for. Snow fell lightly from the sky, and I inched down the snaking road toward Bridgewater.

I supposed I could go to the Elkhorn, but there were too many memories of my lunch with Bryce there for my liking. What was I going to do?

Without thinking, I pulled into one of the parking stalls in front of the malt shop. I could hardly see the lines because so much snow had fallen, covering them up, but I managed and stalked inside.

Several barstools sat empty at the counter, as did most of the tables in the establishment. It smelled like chocolate and peanuts, and the aromas swirled my stomach.

The sign on the door said, *Closing at 5 pm on Christmas Eve*—that left me with about half an hour. I supposed I'd have to find somewhere else after that, but at least I could get a savory, guilt-induced malt in the meantime.

My friends and I used to come here in high school. For a moment, I pictured the three of us sitting at these tables, laughing, talking, dreaming of our futures.

Teenage me would never have thought I could do something as heartless as deceiving and using an entire family for my own purposes.

The man at the counter smiled. "Merry Christmas," he said. "We'll be closing soon. What can I get for you?"

"Chocolate," I said through the rock in my chest.

"That's the best one."

I rounded, surprised at having the random feedback on my choice, only to work up a sad smile.

It wasn't the man who'd answered my request, but Natalie Brown from my kickboxing class. She sat at the bar and sipped what looked like a chocolate malt while she poured through the pages of a book.

What was she doing here, alone, on Christmas Eve?

I quickly paid for my order, and while the man turned toward the fridge behind the counter to get it going, I sat on the stool beside Natalie.

She probably wondered the same thing about me.

"Didn't expect to see you here," I said. "On Christmas Eve?"

"Hey." She placed a finger in her book to hold her place. Then, once she saw my face, she closed her book. "Is everything okay?"

“It’s fine,” I said, and then quickly backtracked. “No, it’s terrible.”

“Same.” She sighed and stared at her malt.

The man behind the counter held a tall silver cup toward a blender, and a loud whirring sound filled the shoppe momentarily. I stared at her book’s title. It was a romance, from the look of things, with an unshirted man with bulging pectorals and biceps, grasping a desperate-looking woman who gazed at him like he was her life source.

Not something I’d read, but I wouldn’t fault her for that.

“You first,” I said.

This felt so much like high school. It was uncanny, though it was her sister I’d hang out with, not her. Chelsea, Emily, and I would gather here whenever we needed to talk about boys, whenever we got our report cards, or had something else to celebrate or bemoan.

Using the spoon in her tall glass, she stirred what was left of her malt. “I thought Jensen was going to propose to me tonight. We’ve been together for months, but instead of popping the question, he took me out to tell me that he’s leaving.”

“That sucks,” I said, grimacing on her behalf. “Where is he going?”

“College,” she said. “He’s going back east, and he doesn’t want to try a long-distance kind of thing. He thinks dating long distance will be too hard.”

I worked to correlate what little details I knew. She’d mentioned Jensen as her boyfriend before. If I had it correctly, Jensen Cummings had graduated the year after I did, which made him a year younger than me.

“Where is he going to college?” I asked.

“He got accepted to a dental school in Mississippi.”

“You could move out there with him,” I suggested.

She thumbed the closed pages of her book. The actions made the man's bulging muscles waver on the cover. "He didn't want that. He said he thinks a clean break would be easiest. Doesn't want distractions." Her eyeroll said it all.

"When is he leaving?" I asked.

"Next week. His term starts in January, and he has to find housing."

"I'm sorry," I said, knowing the words weren't enough.

I could imagine how hard that would be. Dating sucked. Relationships sucked. Everything sucked.

She sipped her malt. "Your turn. What's Allie Vreeland doing in this malt shoppe on Christmas Eve? Why aren't you at your mom's?"

I exhaled and toyed with the zipper on my purse, which was currently sitting on my lap.

"That's a story in and of itself, and it'll have to wait for another day. I've been dating Bryce Holden."

Natalie's eyes flashed. She gave such a sharp inhale, I was struck. Too late, I realized Natalie was probably the last person I should talk to about my problems with Bryce.

"That's all I needed to know," she said, her manner turning instantly defensive. "Why would you be that stupid?"

"He's not the same guy he was when he was with you," I said.

"So he says."

Why could no one see how amazing he was? I wanted her to know, to understand what Bryce would probably never get the chance to explain.

"He feels really bad about what happened," I said. "I told him I'd help him patch things with his family if he helped me save my store. We teamed up and made everyone think we were dating—and things kind of just fell out with his family."

And mine, too, I supposed, since Belle was included in that definition.

I filled her in on the details. She clasped my hand and showed sympathy even when she was dealing with her own hurt. And I did the same for her, showing compassion about Jensen.

“I think I know what the problem is,” she said, sipping her malt, which had quite a bit less in its cup than mine did.

“What?”

“You seem like you’re trying hard to convince yourself that he’s not into you. Girl, he’s so into you.”

I choked mid-sip. It was all I could do to keep myself from sputtering and spewing it all over me. I reached for a napkin, daubing it against my mouth as the cold, chocolatey goodness seeped down my throat.

Was she right? There were moments between us, things he said, times he kissed me or showed affection and no one was around. I figured it’d just been more practicing, to maintain the deception.

His attention the morning we’d shot the video. The way he’d held me, kissed me, after he and Luke had patched things. Bryce had acted so concerned when I’d told him about Mom. He’d wanted to come with me. He’d been worried about me.

Why would he feel that way if he didn’t actually care? Did that mean he’d fallen for me?

“And,” Natalie went on while thoughts continued whooshing through my brain, “it sounds like you’ve fallen for Bryce.”

My vision clouded, filling instead with recollections of the conflict I’d dealt with since I’d given Bryce that tractor ornament. I hadn’t been able to figure out why I’d had a sudden onset of nausea, or why my heart had felt like it was shrinking inside my body.

The realization made my pulse race and gave me this excessive, manic energy. She’d called it. In one sitting, she’d known my heart better than I did.

“Yeah,” I said, staring in a feverish daze at my malt. “I think I have, too.”

How could I not have realized it? Love had crept in between us without warning. It had taken root and wrapped itself around my heart quietly, like morning glory.

Natalie watched me with concern. “What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know,” I said with despair.

I’d ruined everything. Bryce had offered me his heart—and like Jensen had done with Nat, I’d shoved it right back in his face.

“*Let’s pretend what you and I have means nothing,*” he’d said with skepticism as he’d tried talking me out of ending things.

He loved me. Oh, my gosh. Bryce *loved me*.

What we’d had hadn’t meant nothing. Our relationship had sprouted, blossomed, and taken root inside of me. Extracting him from my heart would be no easy feat.

Severely, I understood the reason for the pain I’d caused him. Why—why hadn’t I realized how I’d felt about him before?

Not wanting to dwell on that right now, I shifted back to her.

“What about you?” I took another sip to soothe the difficulty the last one had caused. “Talk to Jensen. See if he might be open to just...being open. Tell him to not write you off completely.”

“I don’t know,” she said, sitting pensively and staring at her malt cup. “I think he might be right. Change is hard, and I don’t want to let him go because we get along so great, but it might be time to move on.”

“You say that like it’s easy,” I said.

From my experience tonight, letting go was the hardest thing I’d ever done. Probably because I hadn’t considered just

how attached to Bryce I'd become.

She toyed with the tip of her straw. "I think it's going to be anything but."

She might as well be describing my life right now. What was I going to do? How was I going to make this right?

\* \* \*

I went home and cried, cuddling with Sunny. Most nights, I turned off the lights on my tree, but tonight, I left them on, sleeping out on the couch, needing the company their brightness brought. It wasn't like I expected Santa Claus to appear or magically provide presents to wake up to.

In fact, I had several presents I'd bought for myself and had yet to wrap because I'd been so caught up with everything else. I thought of the ornament I'd given Bryce. It was so stupid. I'd meant it to be sentimental, but I should have gotten him a snazzy, manly pocketknife or something useful. Something that had no inner meaning whatsoever.

Now, I supposed I'd never get another chance.

Christmas morning dawned with the saddest tones. I was glad there were no presents under my tree. Mom had invited me over, but I wasn't going to take her up on that. I wasn't in the mood to open presents or celebrate at all.

She did text, however.

Mom: *Morning! Merry Christmas, sweetheart!*

I suspected her use of exclamation points was compensatory. She didn't often employ that particular punctuation mark.

Me: *You too.*

I left the conversation there. She didn't need to know what had happened last night. She didn't need to know anything else or that I partially blamed her for the fallout.

Trust was an interesting thing. It came so easily to begin with. But once it was lost? It was like a dropped needle, almost impossible to find in the carpet and sharp if you touched it wrong.

I'd trusted Bryce—more than I'd ever realized. I'd fallen for him. I loved him.

And I'd lost him in the worst way.

I pushed my sorry butt into the kitchen and poured myself a cup of coffee. The black dregs were just what I needed: bitter and stern. Shortly after I'd finished and rinsed out my mug, my sister, Leigh, called me as well.

"Merry Christmas!" Leigh said cheerfully through the phone.

I had to force out the words. "Merry Christmas."

"Uh-oh. How come you don't sound that merry?"

"Because I'm not." Approaching my bedroom, I crawled into my blankets this time, wanting nothing more than to burrow there for the rest of my life. Since I didn't sleep here, the bed had no warmth yet; it would come soon enough.

I dug my face into the pillow and tugged my blankets up to my chin, turning onto my side and hugging the phone to my ear.

"Is it the whole Belle-is-our-sister thing?"

I sat up a little against my pillow. "Mom told you?"

"Yeah. It's crazy."

"You're not upset about it?"

"Nah. Everything works out because of Christmas, remember? That was always Dad's thing."

"I guess it kind of was," I said, watching Sunny jump onto the table with the fiber-optic tree.

Her tail hung down, twitching gently as she eyed the ornaments there, and my stomach twitched, too, at the memory

of Bryce bringing that tree in. The memory of him pinning me against the wall like he'd been going to kiss me.

He'd kissed me after that, though. And it had felt real. So real.

Why hadn't I believed it was?

I jerked myself back to the conversation with Leigh. "We did reconcile with her by Christmas."

"Not by the date." Leigh laughed. "Dad said that because it's thanks to Christmas that everything will *be* better."

I sat up against my pillow. "What?"

"Didn't you ever know that's what he meant?"

Too soon, the conversation shifted. We talked a little more about how her kids were excited to get hoverboards and new bikes earlier that morning. We talked about Belle's wedding the next day and about how Leigh wished she could be there, but there was no way she could afford the plane fare right now since her husband had lost his job.

By the time we hung up, I was completely frazzled.

Her words lingered in my brain like the Ghost of Christmas Past. I finally got it.

Dad's adage blazed in my mind like a new thing. His statement wasn't just an attempt at being optimistic. Nor was it some kind of time frame to make things right by Christmas, as I'd always thought.

Dad had always said things would be better by Christmas. *By* was a preposition when he really meant *because of*.

Things would be better because of Christmas.

"We don't have to wait to feel joy—we can already feel it because of Christ," Leigh had said. "Because of the Babe born in the manger. We don't have to worry if things don't work out. They will if we're following Him."

My life was made better by Christmas, through Christmas. Because of Christmas, a Baby was born who would save me,

and that meant everything else didn't matter as much as I thought it did.

I'd been too focused on other things, I'd forgotten that.

Feet in my slippers, I shuffled into the kitchen to replenish the water in Sunny's dish. My steps were a gift, a rejuvenation, like a new spirit flowed through my body after that realization.

Things had seemed so bleak, so hopeless. But with Christ?

Nothing was hopeless after all.

Heartened, I bent to place the silver bowl back onto the ground, accidentally spilling a few drops on the linoleum. My thoughts dashed, veering from ways to make things right with Belle to how I could fix things with Bryce. When I rose to reach for a paper towel, my heart stopped.

Through my apartment's front window, on the snowy walkway, Belle approached, dragging what looked like a wagon behind her toward my unit. Inside the wagon were several conspicuous boxes.

"She didn't," I muttered, wiping my hands on the towel and approaching the door before she got the chance to knock. I opened it.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

Her cheeks were pink, her eyes lively. The signs of hurt on her face last night lingered, but she offered a timid smile.

"Can I come in?" she said, gesturing to my door.

What was I going to say, no?

"Sure."

I widened my door and retreated to make room as she entered, pulling the wagon in behind her. It tracked snow in on its wheels, but I didn't care. She pulled it in far enough that I was able to close out the cold.

"I think you should have these," she said, resting a hand on the topmost cardboard box.

I recognized Grandma's writing on the boxes, labeling one as *Christmas Ornaments* and the other as *Snow Globes*.

"Belle, I can't take them."

She continued staring at the boxes. "You should. You need them more than I do."

"I was wrong," I said, stammering, wanting to get the words out before I lost my nerve. "I never should have thought to take them from you. I didn't know—"

"I'm sorry you didn't feel like you could talk to me," she said, giving me that miserable smile. "Of course, I don't have sole ownership of these. Grandpa would have wanted you to have them."

"Thank you, but I think it's time I let go," I said, reminding myself of Natalie.

Those were the words she'd said about Jensen Cummings. Bryce had given me the same advice. It was time to let The Flora and Fauna go, and that was okay.

Belle could keep the ornaments. I'd find a way to pay off the debt I'd accrued and consider a new business venture, going back to school and getting a job in the meantime.

I'd had a few ideas, but I decided it might be best to start with business school. It was probably something I should have done from the get-go. If Bryce could manage multiple businesses, I could figure out how to do the same, and school was my best bet.

"Come to the wedding tomorrow," Belle said, gripping my elbow and stealing my attention from the boxes in the wagon. Her eyes glittered, insistent. "Please. I want you to be there. You're my bridesmaid and my sister."

"Belle."

Tears stung my eyes all over again. She was forgiving me? She was accepting me?

This moment was a broken snow globe in reverse. It was the unshattering of glass. It was rift-sealing and repairing, and

those repairs seeped through my skin and drifted all the way into my soul.

*Better by Christmas.*

“It’s stupid to let petty things get in the middle of family,” she went on. “I’ll talk to Bryce, too, okay? Luke will come around. He did once; he’ll do so again.”

“I love him,” I blurted. Saying the words aloud made them resonate.

“Luke?”

A stupid little nervous chuckle escaped. “Bryce.”

Belle’s expression remained inquisitive. “Oh?”

“It wasn’t all just a fluke,” I said, the words gushing now that I finally allowed them to. “I love him, and I didn’t even know it. I don’t know what I’m going to do. Natalie and I talked last night because she’s facing the prospect of having her boyfriend move away—and Bryce and I aren’t really dating, but it felt like we were. It felt so real sometimes, and I think...I don’t want to let him go, Belle.”

“No one said you have to,” she said with a smile.

Except, he and I kind of agreed that we would.

I wasn’t sure what would happen when he saw me again. He hadn’t been able to bear looking at me last night, let alone talking to me. What would happen when I saw him at the wedding tomorrow?

## *Chapter Twenty-Two*

**M**y apartment seemed lonelier the longer Christmas Day dragged on. I'd determined to stay away from Mom's, but the more I sat alone on my couch, the more I pictured Mom doing exactly the same thing at her house.

Christmas was no time to hold a grudge.

"Grudges are for the weak," I muttered as I pulled my hair up into a ponytail, slapped on some mascara, jeans, and a soft sweater covered in snowflakes, and ventured out the door.

A quiet hush had settled over Burley as I drove toward the backroads that would lead me to Bridgewater. Snow blanketed the fields in every direction, keeping the contours of the hills the closer I got to my small hometown. Dirt poked through the snow occasionally, speckling fields and reminding me again of cookies and cream ice cream.

Mom's surprise at my arrival was genuine. She was perfectly put together, as usual. To see her without makeup, even when she was spending the day completely alone, was unheard of. For some reason, I was glad. It meant that not everything about her had changed.

"Allie?"

I fisted my hands inside my coat pockets, stroking my fingers on the uneven surface of my fingernails. That was another thing I'd resolved to let go of. I was done putting the pressure on myself to be perfectly put together.

Bryce had seen me undone and had said I looked even more beautiful than I had all made up. In all reality, I couldn't

afford to have my nails done. It was one more thing I'd have to let go of—and I was completely okay with that.

Maybe there would come a time when I could afford to have my nails done again. Once I got my life put back together.

“Hi, Mom. Mind if I come in?”

She had every reason to tell me no, especially considering our conversation the last time I was here. Fortunately, she stepped back.

“Please.”

I entered, removed my shoes and coat, and peered at the decadent Christmas tree in the corner of her living room. It was immaculate as ever, and several wrapped gifts in matching wrapping paper clustered around its base.

“You haven't opened your gifts?” I asked.

Her eyes glimmered with grief. “Not by myself. Want to join me?”

How long would she have waited? Would she have left them there indefinitely until she took her decorations down?

“Sure,” I said, thinking of my unwrapped and, therefore, unopened gifts back at my apartment, too. “I brought this.”

I pulled the box of earrings from my coat pocket, too, and handed it to her.

We sat together in noticeable discomfort. I focused on the gift Mom placed in my lap. Gradually, one tear of the paper at a time, I became more at ease, so that by the time Mom's new Bluetooth speaker that she'd gotten for herself, and the earrings I'd given her, the clothes, and the things she'd gotten for me lay sprawled between us, the mood had lightened considerably.

Gifts could do that. They had a way of humbling you when someone did something nice for you. Or when you did the same for others. Maybe that was why Jesus had been given gifts upon His birth—because He would eventually give each of us the ultimate Gift.

“I’m glad you came,” Mom said, setting her gifts on the couch beside her.

“Me, too.”

She inhaled and gazed around her living room, at the piano near the window, the couch beside it, the fireplace that was rarely used.

“Your dad always loved Christmas,” she said pensively.

“He did, didn’t he?”

Mom leaned toward me, resting her arms on her thighs.  
“Allie.”

“Hm?”

“What’s bothering you?”

The perception in her voice drew me out of my thoughtless reverie.

“Is it the ornaments?” she asked.

I release a humorless scoff. “Ornaments. That’s become a new curse word for me.”

“Uh-oh. What happened?”

I considered what to say. Did I want to open up to her again?

Mom had pulled a fast one on me. She’d betrayed my image of her, yes. But as I gazed around her living room, as she talked about Dad, being here brought back other memories, too.

Her mistake didn’t negate all the good she’d done for me. Mom had dedicated her life to creating a beautiful home for me to live in. She’d always been there for me, at every cheerleading competition, every dance performance. She’d comforted me after bad breakups and misunderstandings with my friends. She was my shopping buddy, having such good taste I could always count on her to help me pick the perfect outfit.

I couldn’t deny those facts, either.

Mom didn't love Belle more, as I'd thought. Belle had had no mother. And Mom had lost a daughter. What if, in the attention she'd paid to Belle, she'd been making up for lost time?

So I told her about what had happened with Bryce. About our bargain, about how he'd gradually cemented himself into my heart without my realizing it. I left out the part that I'd blamed her for the wrench I'd jammed into the spokes. My decision to end things the way I had had thrown off our trajectory, and we'd crashed. Hard.

"You can't give up," Mom said. "There is always hope."

"Thanks," I said, grateful for her and missing him like crazy the more I talked about him.

I stayed only a short time longer, helping to clean up the discarded wrappings. Mom offered to feed me, but I declined. I needed to head home. To think.

On the way back, I considered going to Belle's, to talk to her and try to make amends before tomorrow, but she was probably spending Christmas with Luke and his brothers, and I just couldn't face them all right now. Not when I hadn't had the chance to talk to Bryce.

I realized I didn't know where he lived. He'd told me he'd moved into a house in Bridgewater, but he'd never taken me there.

Dithering, I spent some time searching online for business schools that would be a good fit for what I wanted. I felt good about my decision to attend school. I never would have considered it if it hadn't been for Bryce.

My phone stared at me from its place on the desk beside my computer in my apartment's second room. I swiped for it before I lost my nerve.

It was a shot in the darkest of dark, but this was Christmas. What better time to let him know how sorry I was?

Me: *Merry Christmas. I'm really sorry about what happened.*

*Bryce: Me too. Merry Christmas to you as well. I'll see you at the wedding tomorrow?*

My heart lowered the tiniest nudge. The easiness we'd had from the start was gone. He'd jumped right to a question that would end our brief conversation. I read his statement for what it was: a dismissal.

He was done with me. As devastating as that was, I couldn't say I blamed him.

*Me: Yeah. Belle was really sweet and still wants me to come.*

*Bryce: Sounds good. See you then.*

I lowered my phone and stared at the cup of pens beside my computer screen. I'd hoped for more. I'd hoped we could chat, that we could get things back to the way they were.

Too soon, I was let down. He hadn't wanted to talk to me. He hadn't said he forgave me. He'd given no indication that he wanted anything more to do with me after this.

Why should he?

The next morning, I dressed in my bridesmaid dress, did my hair in little curly tendrils, and applied the red lipstick Bryce had liked so much.

I then had one stop to make before I headed to Belle's.

The day after Christmas, traffic was pretty non-existent through Burley. Like most of the other establishments, The Flora and Fauna looked forlorn and abandoned.

I trod slowly, scrutinizing the brick exterior, the vellum lettering adhered to the door, the front window display that I'd painstakingly staged. Goodbye was in my heart. I walked through the farewell, disturbing it like trekking through mist, stroking its lacy cloud with my fingertips.

Tipping my key into the lock, I turned it, remembering the times I'd cranked it in the wrong direction when I'd first opened the store and I'd had to unlock it because I'd accidentally done the opposite.

I took a moment to stroll the perimeter of the shop, stroking the clothing and regarding the other items on display.

“We’ve had a good run,” I said as though the shop could hear me.

Then, I lifted my head to the ceiling. “Dad, I’m sorry. I really gave it my best.”

I waited, not sure if I expected a sign from him or anything like that. Only silence responded.

My mind went to other memories, of Bryce in here, unable to keep his hands off me. His behavior that day had been real—genuine. Why hadn’t I grasped that?

Memories of Colton drifted in as well, sweetly, patiently helping me film an ad that I’d never ended up using. I didn’t have the money to pay to run the ad at the theater—and if I was closing my store, what was the point?

Poor Colton. He’d put so much work into that ad for me. Just one more person I needed to make things right with.

Sometimes, things just didn’t work out. And, as hard as it was, it was okay to accept that. Another realization I had Bryce to thank for.

I wished he was here with me. He would have spoken words of comfort. He would have made a few lighthearted jokes. He would have kept me together with his strong arms.

“I’ll miss you,” I told the shop, stopping at the door long enough to hang up the two large *Store Closing* signs I’d made the night before. One went in the display window. The other went on the door.

The minute they were in place, the hugest mass lifted from my chest. I placed a hand there, so shocked at the relief that swelled into place.

I was letting the store go, and it was the right thing to do.

“Thanks, Dad,” I muttered as I locked the door behind me.

And thank God, too. I’d prayed to know what to do, and He’d guided me. It was an outcome I hadn’t expected, but I

think God sometimes did that. He answered our prayers in the most unexpected ways.

I climbed back into my car and made the trek to Bridgewater. The boxes Belle had brought over were in my trunk. She'd been kind to bring the ornaments over, but I couldn't see how I could accept them now. I felt like I didn't deserve them.

Once Belle and Luke left for their honeymoon, I'd haul the boxes back down to the basement. They belonged with the house, not to be pawned off to the highest bidder.

The farmhouse was hopping. Many more cars were parked nearer to the barn than usual. Lights adorned every tree, including those on either side of the door on Belle's porch. The sight was remarkable.

I pulled in behind the garage as Belle had asked, snatched the cowgirl boots she had requested I wear, and scurried inside to see what I could do to help.

The house had been entirely cleared of its usual furniture. Chairs were now in place in the parlor, arranged to create an aisle down the center and leading toward the two Christmas trees near the windows where the preacher would stand.

Where Luke and Belle would stand.

"Don't leave that there." Bex's voice carried from the hallway leading to the basement.

She appeared in the dining room, barefooted and wearing a dress that looked exactly like mine, with Sophia in her arms and a massive stain on her shoulder.

"Where should I put it?" Kody asked, holding a rag as far from his body as he could manage.

The young boy looked dapper in a dark suit that had been tailored just for his small size, bowtie, boutonniere, and all.

"What's wrong?" I asked, stepping in.

My shoes were in one hand, my boots in the other as I made my way to the back room where we'd agreed to place

our shoes so the guests wouldn't have to trip over them when they arrived.

"Sophia got marshmallow on my dress," Bex said, looking frazzled.

Her blonde hair had been tied back but was coming loose and would have to be redone.

"Kody helped me wipe it off," she explained, "but we can't leave the wash rag in the kitchen sink like we normally would."

"Take it to the laundry room," I told Kody, smiling.

"Good idea." He darted past me and back toward that end of the house.

"Where did she get a marshmallow from?" I asked, taking Sophia from Bex so she could continue cleaning up and fix her hair.

The white sticky mess was gone, but now, a large wet spot darkened her shoulder, making the sleeve's ruffles stick to her rather than fan away.

"I think she got it out of Belle's pantry," Bex said.

"Mallow, mallow," Sophia said, grinning and clapping her hands, which had fortunately also been cleaned. She snuggled into me, and I breathed in her baby smell of powder and watermelon. I patted her back, hugging her close.

"Where is Belle?" I asked.

"Upstairs. Luke is getting ready in Dawson's old room." She gestured to the door just behind her. That must have been where Dawson had slept while he'd lived here.

Sound came from the direction of the front door, and a chilly breeze wafted in as Debra entered the farmhouse. She wore a dress in a similar red wine color to those Bex and I had on, but Debra's was styled more matronly, more like a suit than a gown.

"Good morning," she said, bending to retrieve her boots.

She darted into the kitchen, dug a hand towel out of the drawer, and returned to the wood floor near the entrance to mop up the snow that had melted there.

“Morning, Mom,” Bex said, coming over to take the towel from her.

Debra waved her away. “I’ve got it, I’ve got it.”

Bex fired me a grin and then turned back to her mother-in-law. “How are you holding up this morning?”

Debra straightened and expelled a breath. “Fine. Ecstatic. My boy is getting married, and I couldn’t be happier for him and for Belle. I’m also ready for a nap,” she said, shuffling over to take the towel to the laundry room. “No one told me hosting a wedding was so much work.”

The three of us laughed.

I was struck at being included in this camaraderie when the last time we were together, spats had volleyed among everyone in the house—and it’d been my fault.

“Debra, Bex, I owe you both an apology,” I began.

Neither of them had acknowledged my blunder thus far, but that didn’t mean it wasn’t an elephant in the room.

Debra waved this off and peered up at me with kindness in her eyes. She stilled in the morning’s busyness and took me by the arms.

“I don’t need an explanation. What you and Bryce had may have started out that way, but I saw the way my boy looked at you. I’ve never seen him like that with anyone else before.”

“Really?”

“Really. So even though you started out the way you did, I think you two ended up at a different place, didn’t you?”

“Yeah,” I said, squirming inside. “We did.”

Too bad I ruined that, too.

I wasn't sure if Debra noticed my gloomy tone or not. She tweaked my chin. "You can tell me all about the love in your eyes later. We've got to get this wedding going."

The love in my eyes? Were my feelings really that obvious?

Was that why Bryce had been so hurt about my actions when I'd given him that ornament?

He'd really thought I was as into him as he was with me. I prayed I hadn't ruined everything. I prayed he would hear me out and give me another chance.

I took the towel from her before she could pass me. "I can do this. Why don't you see if Belle needs any help?"

"I wondered if I might do that."

Debra and I exchanged a startled glance because neither of us had spoken. I quietened and turned.

Mom stood in the dining room behind us, wearing a dress similar to Debra's. She looked refined as always, but I couldn't deny the uncertainty in her eyes.

Was she asking for my permission?

I pressed my lips into a line. Bex gave me an understanding nod and reached for the towel I'd taken from Debra. I'd been sulky and hurt by Mom's actions and by the secret she'd kept from me, but thanks to our time spent together yesterday, I saw her differently in that moment.

She'd carried this burden for so long. She'd borne the shame of her wrong choice. She'd had to let a baby go to be raised by someone else.

To have her share a few moments with Belle before her wedding had never seemed more fitting than it did now that I knew the truth.

Belle would probably appreciate the attention as well, since the person she'd thought was her mom had been gone for over twenty years. Mom had served as a motherly figure for her throughout most of her life.

“You should go,” I said, stepping toward her and placing my hand on her shoulder.

Her eyes welled with tears. “You are a joy to me, Allie,” she said.

“I know,” I said, soothingly. “I get it. It’s okay. Go on up. She’s in Grandpa’s old room.”

A tear escaped Mom’s eyes. She peered from me to smile at Debra and Bex, and then turned and made her way up the stairs.

Emotion fluttered in my chest, more of that soothing rightness settling in.

Muffled sounds of men’s voices came from the porch. I turned to find the three unmarried—and unengaged—Holden boys kicking off snow and stepping inside.

My heart was a trapped bird in my chest—especially at the sight of Bryce in a tuxedo.

I’d always considered him a knockout, but now? Today, he was a wrecking ball.

Bryce’s dark hair was slicked into an appealing swish above his forehead. His broad shoulders, narrow waist, and long legs, brought out by the refined cut of his tux, knotted my senses and made me feel as though I were floating and falling all at once.

“I made the shot,” Kyler said, continuing whatever the brothers had been talking about on their way in. “But then Coach benched me because I fouled.”

Kyler’s words faded into the background. The snowy whiteness outside shrouded my vision, creating clouds everywhere else but Bryce. As cheesy as it sounded, he was all I could see.

His eyes laser-focused on me. Hands buttoning his tuxedo jacket over his crisp white shirt, he looked right at me as though he was also locked into the tractor beam he’d created just by existing.

“Hey,” he said. “You look beautiful.”

I pressed a hand to my stomach. “So do you.”

Kyler snorted, walking between the two of us. Still, he didn’t shatter the trance I was swept into.

Bryce was here. He was talking to me. He stepped closer, swirling my senses completely.

“How was your Christmas?” he asked under his breath.

“I missed you.”

The words came of their own accord. I couldn’t have held them back. This truth demanded to be told.

An emotion I couldn’t read registered over his face. His jaw angled to one side, and he bobbed his head.

“I have something for you. Something I should have brought over yesterday, but I wasn’t sure if you wanted to see me.”

“I wasn’t sure if you wanted to see me,” I said, mirroring his statement.

A line appeared between Bryce’s brows. He was concerned by something—I suspected his emotions were as tangled as mine were. Before either of us could say anything else, Dawson strode out from the room down the hall, wearing a dashing tux like Bryce’s and pinning a red boutonniere to his lapel.

“Are the rest of the bros here?” he called. “It’s almost go-time. Luke wanted a word.”

“The preacher’s here too,” Debra called, tiptoeing up to peer out the house’s front windows. Then she brought her hands to her mouth in girlish excitement. “The preacher’s *here!*”

Wordlessly, Bryce turned his back on me and broached the front door at the same moment Debra did. The action wrung my stomach into formidable knots.

I was inclined to think the worst. Bryce was done with me. He had something to give me, and then he was ending things

—for good. Emotion choked my throat, but I muscled it down. I couldn't lose it here, not now.

Debra paused to share a few words with the preacher. Then she took his coat to hang it in the back room, muttering excitedly under her breath. Wearing a suit of his own and carrying a Bible in one hand, the preacher nodded a greeting in my direction and made his way into the parlor.

Muttering struck my ears, though I didn't make much sense of it as Debra passed me and mounted the stairs, scurrying up at a pace I was sure she probably wished she could take faster.

Meanwhile, the men made their way down the hall toward Luke's room. Everyone was moving forward. Taking their places. And yet, I felt trapped and as though I were being left behind.

Our interaction smashed through my mind with bleary recollection. Had I been too hasty admitting I'd missed Bryce?

He hadn't reciprocated. He'd muttered something and then turned to help his mom—as a good boy should. I couldn't help but replay the communication over and over a thousand times in a single moment.

He'd said he had something for me. What could it possibly be? Probably better than my gift for him had been, that was for sure. My gift for him had been like giving sugar to a diabetic and then eating it right in front of them.

With excessive and irrational nervousness flurrying in my chest, I hurried upstairs as well, though it felt more like I was climbing a cliff I was about to be thrown from.

Belle was getting married. And once the wedding was over, I had to brace myself to let Bryce go.

## *Chapter Twenty-Three*

**T**he most important reachings of our lives should begin with prayer, and this moment shared among the Holden, the Vreeland, and the Toby women—because though I couldn't see Grandma, I felt her there with us—was no different.

Gathered in Belle's cozy bedroom, we joined hands. A beautiful intercession was given by Debra, and each of her devotional pleadings strummed through the center of me. Maybe it was the sound of her voice, the gentility and humility in her tone, but hearing her supplicate our Heavenly Father in Luke and Belle's behalf was stirring.

Hugs were shared. Wishes were expressed. Belle's hair and veil were checked, and then everyone left to take their places in the parlor.

Every seat was filled, and guests peered around anxiously, watching the other bridesmaids and me sidle in near the preacher.

The entire gathered crowd held their breaths in that moment of stillness, of quiet. Then, the violinist in the corner began her serenade, and Belle stepped down the stairs.

She was a beautiful bride. She wore a lovely, A-line gown with long sleeves and an exquisite, sweeping tulle skirt and train. The bodice was embellished with embroidering in the lace's V-neckline. The veil was merely an accessory, hanging down her back rather than shielding her face, and I was glad of it. I wouldn't have wanted to miss her jubilant expression.

A crown made of sprigs of pine and holly wreathed her head while her hair coiled past her shoulders. She wore no jewelry—her smile added enough of a sparkle—and every step she took revealed a pair of cowgirl boots through the skirt's folds.

She held a bouquet of amaryllis, lovely white flowers with sprays of emerald green and wine red to go with the garland on her hair, as well as those sweeping across the ceiling beams overhead.

My heart gave the smallest pinch. I realized I was no longer jealous of Belle—the pinch was startling. Happy. And I wasn't sure there was an unmarried woman in the room who didn't look at this lovely scene with longing. It was more a longing for my own wedding day—a day I felt would never come.

For some reason, I could feel Bryce's gaze. Sure enough, when I peered up at him, he wasn't watching Belle's exquisite entrance.

He was watching me.

He and I shared a glance that could roast a marshmallow. I wished I could read his expression better. I hadn't been sure during our brief exchange before. Was he angry with me? Was he still upset by what had happened on Christmas Eve?

Belle finished her approach and now stood across from Luke in front of the preacher. Luke gazed at her as though she were the star guiding his way in the darkness.

The ceremony was simple. Belle and Luke exchanged vows, pledging to love and cherish one another for all their lives. The preacher pronounced them husband and wife. They sealed those promises with a beautiful kiss, and then the crowd erupted as the two of them faced one another, and the preacher introduced them in their new status.

“May I present to you Mr. and Mrs. Luke and Belle Holden!”

More cheers erupted, and tears sprang to my eyes to mark the alacrity of the moment. Belle had been through a lot, that

was for sure. I couldn't imagine how heartbreaking it had been to lose her fiancé that night four years ago. What a beautiful thing for her to have found love again.

For one fragile second, it seemed as though everything hitched into perspective. Everything I'd been so worried about had been made better by Christmas. Not that Belle had been able to find a new guy in an allotted amount of time, but Christmas itself was what made everything better.

As Belle and Luke made their way down the aisle hand-in-hand, the front door clattered open, startling those who sat with their backs closest to it. To her credit, the violinist didn't break a single strain but continued serenading the now-distracted newlyweds.

Footsteps banged on the hardwood floor, and then Bex appeared, looking worse than she had when I'd first arrived. Her hair tumbled completely from its updo, and one of her flutter-sleeves was all the way up, exposing her shoulder.

"Bex?" Belle said, releasing Luke's hand and going to her. "What's wrong?"

Bex breathed so hard she might have been hyperventilating. Her skin was pallid, her eyes wide and watery. "I can't find Paisley."

## *Chapter Twenty-Four*

**L**uke stormed forward, and close on his heels, Dawson rammed through as well, gripping his wife by the shoulders.

“What are you talking about?” he demanded. “Where is she?”

Bex couldn’t speak without sputtering. Her chest heaved as though working against the emotion rattling through it. “She was right here. She was sitting next to me. We were watching the wedding. I was holding Sophia, and the next thing I knew, Paisley was gone.”

“Maybe she went to the bathroom,” Belle suggested, but Bex was already shaking her head.

“I looked in each of them. I checked her old bedroom, Dawson’s old room, your room. I checked the pantry, the laundry room—everywhere I could think of. I even went outside. Her footprints are out there, but she—”

Bex’s voice trembled, the despair seeming to overtake her.

Belle looked at Luke for a fraction of a second and then lifted her voice. “Everyone spread out,” she said. “We need your help.”

“We have a child missing,” Luke added, his voice carrying. “Her name is Paisley. She’s four years old with blonde curls.”

“She loves the chickens,” Belle added, looking at Bex. “Have you checked the coop?”

Bex wiped a shaking hand beneath her nose and shook her head. “If anything happens to her...”

“Nothing will happen to her,” Dawson said, taking his wife’s face in his hands and forcing her to meet his eyes. “Got it? We’ll find her.”

Bex nodded desperately, and then the crowd split. Footsteps thundered through the house. Voices clamored, expressing concern and prayers. People pushed for the door, some stalking past to where they knew the coats had been stashed.

I pulled Bex toward the kitchen, out of the way of the crowd. She continued staring straight ahead as if in shock. I knew I needed to help her, but I wasn’t sure how.

“Hey,” I said, touching her arm.

She jolted. “I was so distracted by the wedding,” she said, her voice shaking. “She was *right there*. Right next to me. I didn’t even notice she left. What kind of mother am I?”

“A human one,” I told her, offering what I hoped was a consoling pat on her shoulder. “You can’t beat yourself up about this, okay? This kind of thing happens. We’ll find her.”

Bex didn’t seem to hear me. I shook her. “Bex. Bex?”

Her head rattled, and she met my eyes. The house had cleared out by now. People were visible out the windows, scaling as much of the barnyard as they could. The urge to get out there and join them hounded me.

“Talk to me,” I said. “Where have you looked?”

She spoke in a daze. “The barn. The garage. Lately, she’s been into the goats—I haven’t checked there.”

“The goats,” I said, fueling purpose and reassurance into my voice. “Let’s start there. Come on.”

Bex paused, peering around as if distracted. “I have to get Sophia.”

“I’ve got her,” Debra said, her voice coming to us from the parlor. She sat on the end of the last row of chairs with Sophia in her lap, worry lines streaking across her face. “She’ll be fine. Go find Paisley.”

Bex placed a hand across her stomach and meandered to the door.

I didn't wait for her but retrieved my coat and stormed outside with the others. All over, people were shouting Paisley's name, stalking across the driveway, near the barn, beside the tree line beyond the llama enclosure.

Two men on horses appeared, exiting the barn's open doors. It took only moments for me to recognize Dawson and Colton as the riders.

"We're going to scout the perimeter and see what we can find," Dawson announced, and I nodded, not realizing until he and Colton had passed that he was telling Bex that, not me.

Belle gripped the thick skirt of her wedding dress, showcasing her cowgirl boots and tromping through the apple orchard beyond the barn. I scanned the area, searching for places people may not have checked yet. My gaze settled on a small drop-off near the driveway's entrance.

Carefully, I stepped down the slope and combed through the straw-like growth sticking out through the snow. Panic climbed my throat as grim thoughts swept through unbidden. What if we never found her? Had she fallen somewhere? Gotten trapped out here in the cold?

The air bit my nose and cheeks. It gnawed on the tips of my fingers and even seeped through the toes of my boots the longer I stood in the snow. A four-year-old couldn't last long out in winter like this. Not on her own.

The sounds of Paisley's name being called resonated like echoes. Bex stood on the porch with Sophia in hand, her face stained with tears, and the sight stole my heart from my chest.

"Please, God," I said under my breath. "Help us find her."

I climbed back out onto the driveway once more. Dawson and Colton rode in the distance beyond the tree line near the llama enclosure, scanning the snowy fields, looking like specks.

Paisley couldn't have gotten that far out, could she? Where was she?

“Here,” someone shouted, seizing my blood in my veins.  
“She’s here!”

“What?”

Like many others, I searched for the source of the announcement. Bryce emerged from the barn doors that Dawson and Colton had exited through. He held the little girl in his arms.

My entire being gushed in relief. Thank goodness. *Thank you, God!*

Bex released a haunted noise. Belle was back on the porch, her wedding gown making her look like a white blossom. Bex passed Sophia to her and tore across the snow so fast I thought she might barrel right into Bryce and knock him over.

She slowed just in time, taking Paisley from Bryce and clutching the little girl in an avid embrace. Luke was by her side in an instant, placing a hand on Bex’s back and helping her walk as she carried Paisley back to the house.

I scurried to meet up with Bryce. His cheeks and ears were bright red, and his chest worked a little harder than usual. Without waiting, I threw my arms around him.

“Oh, my gosh, Bryce. I’m so glad you found her. Where was she?”

He sniffed, keeping his gaze on the house, on Luke, Belle, and Bex stepping through the front door and getting Paisley in from the cold. He hesitated only seconds before wrapping his arms around me, too. The returned embrace was so accepting, I clung tighter to him.

“She’d collapsed near the woodpile,” he said, resting his cheek on my hair.

“What was she doing near the woodpile?” And during Belle’s wedding, no less?

“I don’t know. I’m guessing we’ll find out. Want to head inside?”

“In a minute,” I said.

Now that I had him to myself, I wasn't about to let this moment pass by without saying what I needed to say.

"I'm so sorry. I never meant to—"

Luke stepped out onto the porch. "Bryce," he called, holding his hand to his mouth. "Bryce!"

"Right here," Bryce said, waving.

My lips pressed tight as Luke glanced in our direction and then gestured for us to join him. "Get in here," he called.

Moment ruined, and with no other choice, I huffed and trailed along with Bryce back into the house.

People were gathered in the parlor once more, talking about what had happened, expressing relief, pacing in front of the stairs, and wondering what had made Paisley run off.

Disappointment sank into me. It seemed any reconciliation with Bryce was doomed.

Rightly so, I supposed, because Bryce took the stairs two at a time up to the second floor. I hurried after, following the brothers into Belle's room.

Paisley lay on the bed, with Bex kneeling against it in her bridesmaid dress. Sophia sat on the bed beside her big sister, and Kody stood at his mom's side, one hand on her back, looking at his sisters with confusion.

"What were you doing in the barn?" Kody asked.

"There were too many people," Paisley said, "and Popsicle wanted to see the horses. It was dark in there. I just couldn't find the light."

"Sweetie, you can't just take off to the barn anytime you want," Bex said. Her hand rested on the girl's small arm. "Do you know how scared I was to find you gone?"

"I'm sorry, Mommy," Paisley said.

"Thank you. You owe Belle an apology, too," Bex said, her voice growing stronger. "You know today was her wedding day."

Paisley shuffled and rolled toward Belle. “I’m sorry I ruined your wedding, Miss Belle.”

With the circumference of her skirt, Belle had a harder time getting close enough to the little girl. Bex leaned to the side and then rose to sit on the edge of the bed rather than kneeling by it.

“You didn’t ruin my wedding. I’m just glad you’re okay,” Belle said, sweeping Paisley’s blonde curls away from her face.

Other voices stole my attention. Luke and Bryce stood in front of the bedroom windows, caught in an adamant discussion. I wasn’t sure it would be welcome, but I sidled closer, curious, wanting to hear what was being said. Once I was close enough to hear, I regretted eavesdropping.

“We never set out to dupe everybody,” Bryce finished.

Luke raised an eyebrow.

“I mean—okay. We kind of did, but we had really good intentions.”

Luke muttered something that sounded like, “You know what they say about the road to hell being paved with those,” before his eyes darted to me.

He cleared his throat. Curiously, Bryce turned his head and peered at me. Then he faced me fully, and his expression was stripped bare.

What had he said before I interrupted? Swallowing, I backed away, not wanting to hear anything more. Maybe I’d been wrong about how he felt. Maybe I had to accept that we’d had our time together.

I wasn’t ready for him to make as much known, at least not here in front of everyone.

To my relief, Luke hit Bryce’s chest, stealing his attention back and offering his hand. Bryce watched his brother for only a moment before bypassing the handshake and pulling his brother into a hug.

“Sorry it took me so long,” Luke said, patting his older brother’s back.

“Sorry it happened at all,” Bryce said.

The two brothers held one another for moments longer, and I couldn’t miss Belle’s smile. Tears glistened in Debra Holden’s eyes—I could only imagine the joy this must bring to her as well, to see her sons getting past their grievances, loving one another, and mending that breach.

Beside her, Mom smiled as if she understood what had just taken place as well.

“The guests,” Belle said in a startled voice, as though just remembering other people were here. “The reception!”

“Most of them headed home,” Debra said, sounding apologetic. “Once they heard that Paisley was okay, they left their best regards and their gifts and headed out.”

“So we’re the only ones here?” Luke said.

“Pretty much,” Kyler said, edging in and lounging at the door. I wondered if he’d been out in the hall, waiting for the safest time to enter. “That one girl you used to date is still down there, cleaning.”

Did he mean Natalie? I was surprised she’d come to her ex-boyfriend’s brother’s wedding, but then again, she was friends with Belle, Bex, and me. Maybe she’d come to show her support.

“In that case, if you guys don’t mind,” Belle said, “I’d like to change into something else.”

The crew laughed, and we all stepped out of the room. Belle told Bex to leave Paisley, who’d fallen asleep in the bed. Dawson scooped Sophia into his arms and took Kody’s hand on the way out.

Debra, Bex, and I made our way down to the kitchen to pull out the meat and cheese trays that had been prepared for the guests. Sure enough, Natalie was still there. She’d retrieved a broom and was sweeping snow from the doorway outside.

Mom helped Debra retrieve items from the fridge.

“I don’t know what we’ll do with all this food,” Debra said. “The guests were supposed to stay and eat.”

“We can disperse it among the rest of us here,” Mom suggested as Kyler slipped in and stole a piece of cheese. He barely darted away before his mom managed to slap his hand.

We formed an assembly line and put together sandwiches just in time for Luke and Belle to descend the stairs. They now wore dressy casual clothing, nice jeans, and button-up shirts, and the smiles on their faces were pure bliss.

“Here, you two,” Debra said, handing each of them a packed lunch.

“Mom, we can stay and eat with the rest of you,” Luke said, his voice sounding chastising.

“Don’t be silly,” she said. “Get on out of here.”

Mom nodded her agreement.

“The honeymoon awaits,” Dawson added, receiving a jab in his side from Bex.

Belle and Luke grinned, took the bags from Debra, and strode down the hall. Minutes later, they reemerged with their suitcases in hand and bade each of us goodbye before venturing out into the snow.

We all followed, the air brisk but the mood significantly lighter than the last time a crowd had stood out here. The sun was setting, and the sky streaked with shades of blue, purple, and gray.

“Who did this?” Luke asked, pausing at the top of the porch and turning to gape at each of his brothers in turn.

“Who do you think?” Colton replied with a laugh.

He gestured to Luke’s pickup, which was covered in plastic wrap, pantyhose, and other unsavory articles.

The words *Just Married* were sprayed on the windows, and several ribbons attached to cans were strung near the toe hitch at the back. I was sure they wouldn’t have the same

effect while being dragged on the snow. Once they got out onto the road, that might be different.

“You can’t tell us you’re surprised,” Bryce added.

He, Colton, Dawson, and Kyler all exchanged smug glances. Mom and Debra rolled their eyes in unison. I wondered when the brothers had done this, but it had to have been after Paisley had been found, while we’d been up in the room with her.

Luke knuckled each of them and then turned to Belle. “Looks like we’re good to go.”

She beamed at him. “Yes, it does.”

The rest of us gathered up on the porch and watched Belle approach the truck before her new husband swept her into his arms and whisked her away. I knew they weren’t going far. They were going to spend the night at The Frontier Inn and then fly out to Hawaii the following morning.

“Figures,” Colton said as Luke and Belle drove away. “They go off to have some fun and leave us with the cleanup.”

“Colton,” Debra reprimanded, but the brothers grinned at one another.

Kyler’s eyes gleamed, and his smile stretched wide.

“Someday, it’ll be your turn,” Bryce said. “You’ll drive off into the sunset and leave us with all the hard work.”

“Ah, I can see it now.” Colton stared off as though the prospect were standing before him.

Dawson smacked his shoulder before turning and making his way back up the porch steps toward the front door. “Stop fantasizing and get to putting these chairs away.”

“Since when are you in charge?”

“Since the wedding ended and the rest of you are just standing there.”

“Now, now,” Debra said, smiling. She held the door, waiting for each of her sons, Mom, Bex, the kids, and me to straggle back inside.

The hardwood floors were covered with debris I hadn't noticed before. Natalie had swept a good portion of it into a pile near the kitchen.

"You don't have to do that," I said, approaching and offering to take the broom from her.

She winced. Her fists tightened around the broom handle, and she clutched it to her side. "Yes, I do. Please let me stay and help."

Perplexed, wondering what she meant by that, I read the insistence in her eyes. "Of course, we'd love to have your help. I only meant—"

"I know what you meant," she said. "I can't go home right now, okay?"

Then it clicked. I suspected this had something to do with Jensen, though I wasn't sure what. And I got the feeling from her tight-lipped expression that she didn't really want to elaborate either.

"This is sweet of you," I said, smiling and leaving her to her own thoughts.

The chairs in the parlor were significantly more disheveled than they'd been the last time they'd sat empty. Leaving Natalie to sweep, the rest of us dug in, putting chairs away, clearing tables, and hauling everything to the truck outside.

I busied myself with untwining lights from the trees near the altar when, to my surprise, Bryce joined me, offering his hand for me to string the lights around. Truth be told, I wasn't sure how to act around him right now, which is why I'd kept my attention on Belle and the house.

He'd removed his suit coat, and the sleeves of his button-up shirt were rolled to his elbows. Combined with the loosened ends of his bowtie dangling at his collar and the tangled tufts of hair dripping in his eyes, he'd never looked more attractive.

My nerves went into a tailspin.

“Thanks,” I said, wishing I knew how to repair things. Wishing I knew what to say.

He was here talking to me. That meant something, didn’t it?

“Someday, we’ll have a setup just like this.”

“This?” Frowning, I peered at the chaos that had taken over Belle’s parlor.

Was he making a joke? Was he hinting at how our relationship had fallen apart and, if you could hold it under a microscope, would probably look just as littered and barren as this room did?

“I mean, unless we get married in the summertime. That might be better, actually. I’d rather not deal with snow, especially since we’ll be traveling for our honeymoon.”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. “Bryce, what are you saying?” Hadn’t he just told Luke it was all a hoax?

He stopped me from unwinding the lights with a hand on the strand. His blue eyes poured into me.

“You can’t really think I’m letting you go. That ornament of yours was a nice gesture, but I don’t think I’ll accept it. That’s what I brought to give to you. I’m giving it back because I’m not ready to end things. If you’d ever admit how you feel about me, we can move past this.”

I nearly dropped the lights in my hands.

“You’re so bossy,” I said, needing to make light of this because I couldn’t think of anything else to say.

“Only when I have to be. I’ll let you call the shots from here on out.”

“Why? What brought this on? I thought you couldn’t stand me. The way you turned your back on me...You kept your distance. I thought...”

“It was this wedding,” he said. “I wanted to wait until we could be alone to talk, but you saw how dumbstruck Luke looked when Belle got to where he stood in front of the

preacher? Imagine that times ten. You're already the most beautiful woman I've ever seen on a regular day. Seeing you like that? Knowing you were about to become mine forever?"

For some reason, his words didn't have the effect he intended. They made me uncomfortable.

"Bryce—I don't get it."

"What don't you get?"

"I mean..." I glanced around.

Dawson and Colton were still putting up chairs. Kody and Paisley were playing with pieces of one of the garlands that Debra and Kyler were taking down. Even Natalie was still helping take things down. Broom in hand, she continued sweeping the debris into large piles on the wood floor.

It probably made being here easier for her, knowing Bryce was with me.

Except he wasn't really with me.

He was moving forward too fast. I hadn't wanted to break up with him—but to talk about marriage when we hadn't ever *actually* dated? Maybe that was why his words threw me so much.

Even though we'd been pretending the past several weeks, now that Luke and Belle had tied the knot, I'd been bracing myself for Bryce and me to untie whatever had been gathering between us. His vocal wedding plans were too baffling.

"You can't talk like this. It's—"

He held the strand of Christmas lights. "It's the truth."

"I can't think like that right now." Not until we slowed down a little and sorted everything out.

Pain struck his eyes. "Oh." He exhaled. Glanced around. Blinked a little too much. "All righty, then. I get it."

"Get what?"

"You keep talking like this isn't permanent between us. I should have taken the hint."

“Bryce, I—” Would he just let me talk?

“It wasn’t fake, not for me. Here I was, thinking you cared about me as much as I do about you. I’m an idiot. I get it. Really. If you’ll excuse me, I’ll leave you to finish.”

He hung the coiled strand of lights back on one of the branches and stalked out the front door. I was surprised at how much had been taken down since we started this. Many hands make light work. That wasn’t my main focus, however.

Hindsight reared its head with full force. Bryce had told me before that he was taking me seriously, that our relationship wasn’t fake. I hadn’t believed him because I didn’t know how to.

I’d tried keeping my head through all of his romantic talk as a buffer, because I knew if I gave in, once things ended, that would make everything that much harder to let him go.

He’d been serious in those declarations. And he’d been seriously talking about our wedding—

All while I was shooting him down.

“Bryce,” I said on a whisper.

I abandoned the lights and ran, hoping I could catch him before he drove off. Before it was too late.

I didn’t fail to notice Debra’s and the other brothers’ eyes on me as I dashed the opposite way down Belle’s wedding aisle. Cold blasted me the instant I was outside. Most of the cars were gone from Belle’s yard. Soon enough, I caught sight of Bryce’s pickup—and of him climbing into it.

“Bryce!” I called, grateful for Belle’s request that her bridesmaids wear cowgirl boots with their dresses.

It made tromping through the snow toward him much easier than it would have been if I’d been wearing some strappy heels. Talk about cold feet.

He paused, closed the truck door, and watched as I lifted my skirt and stomped my way through the snow toward him. Now that the sun had set, it was truly freezing out here. I’d guess it was well below thirty-two degrees.

His face was pinched, and his eyes were rimmed with red. Oh, my gosh, this strong, robust masculine man was crying? Because of me?

“Bryce, please wait.”

“Is everything okay?” he said.

This threw me. “What?”

“Are you hurt?”

“I’m fine—I came to find you.”

“Why?”

I hugged around my torso, rubbing my bare arms with my hands. “I didn’t think—I didn’t realize—this whole time with you has been amazing, and I don’t want you to think—”

“Out with it, woman.”

“I love you.”

Bryce inhaled. He closed his eyes. “That wasn’t part of the agreement. You don’t have to say it.”

“I know I don’t. I didn’t say it because I thought I had to. I didn’t think you meant all those times you said this was real for you. And you talking about our wedding just now—it would hurt too much to imagine that, to want it, only to find out you were only saying that because you thought you had to, because you were still trying to save face or keep up with the deception or—”

“Allie,” he said, silencing me with the sound of my name.

Tears gathered in my eyes, too. I couldn’t stop, not this time, not until I got out what I needed to say. So much for pronouncing things perfectly. I was botching this, thoroughly and completely.

“Don’t leave without knowing it felt real for me. It felt real. You were real. I was scared it wasn’t. I didn’t want to lose you. I didn’t plan on feeling this way. I didn’t plan on thinking of you every hour of the day, or dreaming about you, or wanting to call you all the time. I didn’t want to let this go.”

“Will you stop talking?”

“I love you. That’s what I wanted to say. And I said it. Now, you can go—” I couldn’t finish.

Saying as much only brought more tears to my eyes. I didn’t want him to.

Watching him walk away from me would be the hardest thing I ever did. Losing him would be far more devastating than losing my store. He was the one thing I couldn’t let go of.

The corner of his mouth twitched. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“You’re—not?”

“There’s still a lot to do, and I can’t leave my family to pick up the slack without helping.”

My heart sank. I forced a smile. “Of course.”

“I only came out here so I could cool down a minute or two.”

“Oh?”

“You made me cry,” he said, swiping a finger along his eyes. “I couldn’t bear to tear up in front of the guys. Can you imagine the crap they’d give me for that?”

“I?” I couldn’t wrap my head around that.

Sure, grown men cried. I’d seen my dad cry before he passed away. I just never considered that someone as masculine and strong as Bryce Holden would.

His glance skipped past me and back toward the house as he rested a hand on the side-view mirror on his truck. “There I was, imagining all of this for us, Allie. Every step Belle made down the aisle was you coming to me instead. Their vows, that kiss—it was all you and me in my head. I knew at that moment you were the only girl for me.

“I let my mouth rattle off—and when you didn’t buy into it like I thought you would, rejection struck me harder than a battering ram. I’ve always liked you, from the minute you invited me to lunch and asked if I had a girlfriend. It wasn’t

until you tried ending things with me that I knew I loved you. And losing you would be unbearable.

“I needed some time out here to collect myself. I’m not sure a woman has ever made me cry, but the thought of losing you sure did.”

He released a little chuckle and shook his head as though in disbelief.

My heart was swollen in my chest, so large, so full, I was fit to burst. In all the times I’d thought about the outcome of this relationship with Bryce, I’d never imagined it would lead me here.

“Then I’ll tell you every day, so you don’t forget it,” I said, moving in closer.

Heat radiated off his body, but he didn’t put his arms around me.

I went on. “I’ll give you all the reminders you need. I’m right here, Bryce. You’re not losing me. And I want that too. I want to walk down the aisle and have you as my destination at the end. I want that drive with the cans tied to your pickup. I want our house, our life, our everything.”

“You love me?”

“I love you.”

“Marry me, Allie.”

“Yes,” I said without hesitation.

Bryce’s mouth crashed on mine. His lips were cold, but the kiss soon warmed us both. He bent, reached below my backside, linked his arms, and lifted me so I was elevated above him, and he kissed me hard with real intention.

Every moment pooled into me, crystallized, solidified, like a flower being preserved so it could be enjoyed all year round.

Soon, catcalls whooped around us. Bryce pulled free, and we glanced toward the porch where Mom, Kyler, Debra, and Colton stood with their arms full of wedding paraphernalia, watching us with the biggest grins.

“Looks like Luke and Belle aren’t the only ones who need a room,” Colton shouted.

“That’s right,” Bryce called back, lowering me to the snow and linking our hands. “Because Allie just agreed to marry me.”

The brothers shouted, and Dawson came out of the house with Kody not far behind. “What’s all this noise out here?”

“Bryce and Allie are getting hitched next,” Debra said, beaming as Bryce and I approached. Mom hugged me first, followed by Debra’s warm embrace.

“Congratulations, sweetie,” she said, rearing back, smiling with tears of her own in her eyes.

“You’re crying again?” Kyler said. “You’ve been crying all day.”

“Weddings do that to me,” she said with a hand to her cheek.

“Watching mama cats carry their kittens does that to you.” Kyler shot a smirk at Bryce and then me, shaking his head lovingly. “Congrats, you two.”

“I’m just so happy,” Debra said, clasping her hands to her chest. “Three of my boys married. Now, all that’s left is Kyler and Colton.”

“Colton will never get married,” Kyler said, coming back from the trailer after dropping stuff off. “He’s too much of a weirdo.”

“I heard that,” Colton said as he strode past him toward the same trailer.

“Isn’t Hoss a little young?” Bryce added, waiting by the front door with his hand claiming mine.

“Well, he’ll have to graduate high school first,” she amended.

“And live a few years. Don’t get married too young.” Bryce pointed a finger at his adolescent brother.

Kyler's lip curled. His glance jumped from Bryce to his mom and back. "I'm not planning on it."

"I don't know. That Cambry Bennet you hang out with is pretty cute," Debra said with a singsong voice.

"Mom!" Kyler said, stalking into the house.

The rest of us on the porch burst into laughter. I tilted my head to rest against Bryce's shoulder.

Dawson stepped out again, holding a tool in his hand and gesturing inside the house. "Anyone need a Christmas tree?"

"No one needs a tree now," Bex said with a laugh from behind him. Kody and Paisley darted past, tottering on the newly swept floor.

"Yeah, isn't Christmas over?" Kody paused long enough to grin at the rest of us.

We re-entered the house. Bex scooped Paisley into her arms and held her tightly while Sophia prattled on about trees.

"That's good firewood," Bryce said, planting a kiss on my cheek before releasing me to return to the parlor and help Dawson. "Let's take it on up to the pile out there. We can chop it for the lovebirds for when they get back."

"Have at it," Kyler said, striding back toward the door with a pair of white folding chairs in his hands. "I'm on chair duty. Just as long as we're done talking about weddings for a good long while."

"Only until Allie and Bryce make their plans," Debra said, beaming at me. Her accepting, loving expression made froth in my stomach. I was marrying Bryce Holden. I was *marrying* Bryce. And I couldn't be more ecstatic.

While waiting for them to argue about what to do with the trees, I hurried out to my car to bring in the boxes of ornaments and snow globes. Bryce helped me haul them to the basement, returning them back to their places. And then he captured me in his arms, making everything spin with the most luxurious kisses.

“Any idea when the wedding will be?” Debra asked once we made it upstairs.

“Tomorrow?” Bryce suggested.

I snorted and elbowed him as he passed with one end of the tree and Dawson at the other. Debra hurried to widen the door so they could step through.

“What?” Bryce said, peering behind as he walked backward toward the door. “Dawson and Bex got hitched without a big ceremony or lots of to-do.”

Debra’s face hardened, her smile dripping from her cheeks. “Their situation was a little different. This is your first wedding—don’t you dare deprive me of planning it.”

“We have no regrets,” Dawson said, winking at Bryce.

He looked at me and raised his eyebrows. Bex and Dawson’s wedding had been simple and beautiful.

I scurried outside, following the men until they tromped to the wood pile behind the house and dropped the tree there. Dawson dusted his hands, giving Bryce and me a fleeting glance before stalking past and leaving us.

Bryce’s chest heaved. His smile was full throttle, and I couldn’t help but return it. He snaked his arm around me, tugging me to his warmth.

“You know I’m going all out for this, right?” I told him.

“That’s my girl,” he said, pressing a kiss to my lips. It was infinite yet insatiable, too, making me want more. I’d always want more.

“You know,” Bryce said when he pulled away. His arms held me tight beneath the moon, and we stayed close, basking in one another’s warmth. “I think your dad was right.”

“Oh? About what?” What could he mean since he’d never actually met my dad?

“Everything was better by Christmas.”

“Just about,” I said, leaning my cheek against his. “Just about.”

## *Epilogue*

Natalie kept her eyes down as she concentrated on the broom's bristles sweeping against the floor. The Holdens were a playful bunch. The lighthearted banter and easy mood among them was appealing, making her wish—not for the first time—that she'd had siblings to joke around with.

She'd always liked that about these boys, even back when she'd been the one dating Bryce.

That relationship—and all its painful memories—had left her unsure about coming to the wedding. But talking to Allie on Christmas Eve—and realizing that Allie had feelings for Bryce and that he'd moved on—had somehow made the prospect of being around him easier.

It wasn't that Natalie still had feelings for him. The farthest thing from it. It was just hard to be around Bryce after the way he'd broken her heart and embarrassed her the way he had. She was already dealing with enough heartbreak at the moment, thank you very much.

No, she didn't love Bryce. She loved Jensen.

And he was leaving her.

Belle and Luke had looked so elated, so completely blissful, so everything she'd been dreaming about with Jensen. He'd taken her out on Christmas Eve. They'd gone ice skating at the new rink on the corner field just outside of Bridgewater. He'd taken her to lunch, and she'd had every expectation that he would propose that day.

It was all the hints he'd kept dropping. All the statements—like how he'd never been with a woman like her, and how she made him rethink his life, and how he couldn't imagine being with anyone else.

What else was she supposed to have thought?

Her heart had been a rabbit's hind foot. All through their time together Christmas Eve, every time she thought he might slow and drop to one knee, he never did.

And then, at the end of their date, as he'd walked her to the door at the back of the post office leading up to the apartment she and her parents shared above the establishment, right when she'd expected the proposal the most, he'd shut her down.

He'd told her he wanted one last moment with her, that he'd wanted to make it as special as he could because he was leaving.

He'd gotten accepted to dental school in Mississippi. Wasn't that amazing? Wasn't she happy for him?

Even now, as she skated the broom's bristles along the edges of Belle's kitchen floor, she could hear Jensen's haughty excitement.

She had been glad for him, sure. But she might have handled the news a little better if he'd told her he was applying in the first place. If he hadn't given her every clue in the book that he wanted a life with her.

Natalie stopped and stared out of Belle's kitchen windows. The majority of the family was outside. The brothers carried items—chairs, boxes, garlands—to and from the trailer parked out front while Debra shouted to them from the porch.

This family was amusing. This family was a perfect distraction, a seamless excuse not to go home.

That was why she'd stayed to help clean. Jensen was coming over that night to say goodbye. She needed an excuse to not be there.

Hadn't his breakup been goodbye enough?

She wasn't ready to watch him walk away from her. If he was leaving, he should just leave.

With her mind distracted and her heart in knots, she bent to sweep the pile into the dustpan and rose.

Colton Holden stood near the bar, looking tall, lanky, and handsome in his white dress shirt and dark slacks. His hair was dark blond, like Luke's. His hazel eyes twinkled, and he offered a hand for the dustpan.

"I can get that," he said.

Natalie tightened her grip on the dustpan's handle. "I'm good, thanks."

Colton tilted his head to one side. "If you say so."

Instead of walking away, he leaned against the fridge and kept his gaze on her.

"Everything okay, Miss Natalie?"

Miss. She squeezed her eyes shut in annoyance. Bryce had called her that endearment, too. Was it a Holden thing?

Jensen never had, and she preferred it that way. She wasn't a schoolteacher.

"Just fine." She tried skirting past him toward the garbage can inside the pantry door, hoping Colton took the hint to leave her alone.

He didn't.

"Sure is nice of you to stay and help," he said.

Hmm. Maybe that was her cue. She didn't want to talk. Not to him, not to anyone. She needed a purpose. She needed something else to focus on rather than the crack tearing down the center of her heart.

"Glad to do it," she said, not wanting to be rude.

She hadn't yet finished, but she leaned the broom and dustpan in their places inside the pantry beside the garbage can and strode out.

“Guess I’ll head home.” Except by home, she meant she’d head anywhere else until visiting hours were over. Until she knew Jensen was long gone so she didn’t risk having him drop by one last time because that would be so like him.

“You have a good night,” Colton said, nodding his head at her and stalking to where Dawson and Bryce were hauling couches back into the parlor.

She bade goodnight and congratulations to Allie, retrieved her coat and boots, and stalked out into the glacial, starless night.

Natalie strode down the steps with a vengeance, wishing each stomp of her foot could smash the pain out of her heart. When she arrived on the ground, her foot caught the flattened snow at just the wrong angle and slipped out from beneath her.

With a cry, Natalie crashed onto her backside on the cold ground. Tears pricked her eyes, and pain shot up her tailbone.

“Add insult to injury, why don’t you?” she muttered to the cold darkness.

How many times had Bex, Allie, and the Holdens gone up and down these steps tonight, and none of them had fallen? What were the chances it would be her?

“Whoa, there,” a deep voice called from behind.

She slammed her eyes shut. Of course. On one of the worst nights of her life, while trying to keep it together the best that she could, she biffed it onto the snow. And, of course, someone saw her wipe out.

Steps thundered down the porch, and then Colton was there again. “Now then, Miss Natalie, I knew I should have seen you out to your car.”

He held a hand in her direction. Natalie glared at it. At him. “Why should you?”

“To keep you from falling.”

“Too late,” she muttered, pushing to her feet without his help. “Thanks for the offer. I’ll be okay.”

“If you say so,” he said again, like he had with the dustpan.

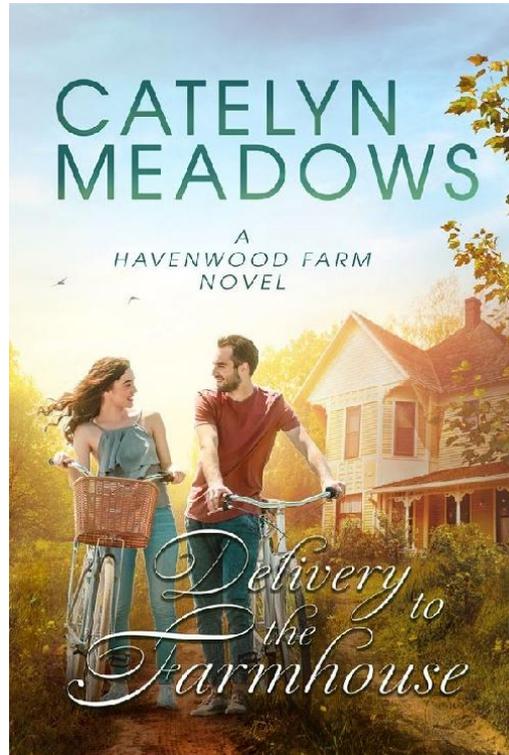
She was struck by the words. Yes, in fact, she did say so. Natalie was going to be just fine. She didn't need a man in her life. She didn't need anyone offering to help her sweep the floor or to heft her to her feet when she was down.

No matter how thoughtful or charming he was, she didn't intend on letting a man get close to her ever again.

The End...For Now.

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I have a group on Facebook where fans can gather, talk books, play games, and have all kinds of book fun regarding the titles from my two pen names.

(I write clean romance under a pen name. I also write clean YA fantasy romance and urban fantasy under my real name, Cortney Pearson.)

The group is called Cortney's Secret Keepers because all of my stories, regardless of genre, deal with secrets in one way or another.

We chat about books from both of my pen names. We also do giveaways and sneak peeks because who doesn't like freebies?!

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Hope to see you there!

-Catelyn

# *Catelyn Meadows'* *Booklist*

## **Once Upon a Billionaire**

[Goldie and the Billionaire Bear](#)

[Ella and the Billionaire's Ball](#)

[Alice and the Billionaire's Wonderland](#)

[Rosabel and the Billionaire Beast](#)

[Hazel and Her Billionaire Tower](#)

[Aaliyah and the Billionaire's Lamp](#)

[Lily and the Billionaire Prince](#)

[Snow and the Seven Billionaire Dates](#)

Juliet and the Billionaire's Cat

## **Havenwood Cowboys**

[Inheriting the Farmhouse](#)

[Fixing Up the Farmhouse](#)

Christmas at the Farmhouse

Delivery to the Farmhouse

Working at the Farmhouse

## **Santa's Radio Romances**

[Snowed In at the Cottage](#)

[Snowed In at Harper's Inn](#)

[Snowed In at the Event Center](#)

## **Harvest Ranch**

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**Clean Christmas Romance**

Christmas in Magnolia Glen

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Last but not least, I'm grateful to you, my readers! Thank you for your support and for sharing a love of books with me.

## *About the Author*

Catelyn Meadows writes small town contemporary romance. From fairytales retold with humor, heart, and hunky billionaires to budding friendships, rustic settings, and dreamy cowboys, she spins closed-door tales that you can enjoy at any time.

When she's not writing about spunky heroines or larger-than-life heroes, she's listening to audiobooks, playing the piano, or roving outside with her farm boy husband and four kids.

For a free book, join Catelyn Meadows' newsletter at [www.catelynmeadows.com](http://www.catelynmeadows.com).

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