



Christmas in Paradise



BRITTANY LARSEN

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Book Cover by Cover Ever After

Dedicated to the memory of my grandparents, Otis and Kathryn Williams, who always made Christmas magical.

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Chapter

Prologue

Hope



My Bible-training should have warned me that a trip to Paradise would involve forbidden fruit. But I'm still taken by surprise when, at the wrap party for *At Home with Georgia Rose*, I'm tempted by the tasty bite at the dessert table.

He has dark hair, a slightly crooked nose that makes his face interesting, and a gaze that doesn't shy away when I catch him looking at me. Worst of all, he's got a don't-care attitude radiating from every pore.

This is a problem.

Bad boys have always been my weakness.

Flynn Rider was my first love. I was ten. He was a cartoon. Our relationship was doomed from the beginning.

Patrick Verona from *Ten Things I Hate About You* soon followed, although I had a side thing going with Jess Mariano from *Gilmore Girls*. There were also a few dalliances with the likes of Tony Stark and the Beast. And I was, and always will be, firmly Team Edward.

The common thread connecting all my crushes—aside from the age gap and having to keep the unanimated ones a secret from Mom—is they don't care what people think. They live by their own rules. They're shameless, assertive, and irresistible.

They're bad boys.

Which is all well and good, because they're fictional.

It's the real-life bad boys who are the actual problem. Because guess what? People have to live by rules. And maybe

guys can get away with not caring what people think, but that doesn't work the same way for the women who fall for them.

I know all of this, but my inclination for bad boys transcends fiction and has gotten me into trouble more times than I'll confess to. I've sworn them off at least a dozen times, only to be taken in by a good smolder.

Until Charly.

For three years, I've stuck to my vow of no more bad boys.

But summertime and vacation go hand—in—hand, and I feel an irresistible urge to take a break from my vow, even knowing the combination of sun, heat, and the taste of freedom invites stupid decision making. Particularly when it comes to love.

When I find myself looking at the guy at the party as often as he looks at me, I decide it's time to make a break for it. I wander away from the crowd celebrating the success of my stepsister Evie and her bestie Georgia's show to the shore of Smuk Lake (pronounced smock, as Evie has reminded me a thousand times).

I tell myself I'm going to dip my feet in the water or watch the sun's rays skim water-skipper-like across the blue water. But secretly, I might be hoping he'll follow me.

Either way, when ten minutes later my bad boy appears with his simmering smile, I should be on high alert. And when the sand shifts under us as he sits next to me, I *should* recognize the moving earth as the warning sign it is.

“Hey.” He hands me a skinny glass bottle of Coke. “You look thirsty.”

I hesitate before shifting my gaze away from the strikingly blue lake to his brown eyes. From far away, they looked black. But up close, they remind me of the topaz ring my grandmother left to me. They shimmer between gold and walnut.

He assesses me like a chess player sizing up the competition. I can almost see the question scrolling through his brain: Will she be enough of a challenge to make the game worth playing?

I unwrap my arms from around my knees and lean forward to see what he’s got in his opposite hand.

“You didn’t think I’d want one of those?” I nod toward his Corona.

“Didn’t know if you were old enough.” In a total Jess Mariano move, his lip pulls at the corner, and my no-bad-boys resolve slips with the sand beneath my feet.

I challenge his teasing grin with a raise of my eyebrow.

“Not old enough for a beer, but not too young for you to hit on?”

With a loud laugh, he tips his head back. His full lips are wet from his drink and shimmer in the sun.

It’s been a minute—or a thousand—since I’ve been kissed. I mean *really* kissed. And before I can stop the image from playing in my brain, I picture tracing a finger over his bottom

lip, across the stubble on his chin, past the Adam's apple, all the way down his neck.

And I don't even know his name.

I'm in trouble.

When he lowers his head, he looks at me from the corner of his eye. "I know who you are, Hope, and I know you're old enough for a beer." He's still testing me, prodding me for a reaction. "I didn't want to risk your sister's wrath. She's already warned me to keep my distance."

He drops this info casually, like he's talking about the weather, not the fact he's disobeying my sister—*stepsister*.

"*Evie* warned you away?"

The irony here is rich. I'm seven years younger than *Evie*. She's the one who introduced me to Patrick and Tony and Jess and every other boy—good, bad, or older—Mom's media restrictions were supposed to keep me from meeting.

Evie had no problem helping me break my mom's rules, and now she's making rules of her own for me?

It's like, instead of working the event-planning job she hooked me up with, she *wants* me to have a summer fling with this guy.

"Yep." He rocks the neck of his Corona between his thumb and fingers. "Said you'd break my heart."

Now it's my turn to laugh. "I *know* she didn't say that."

Probably the exact opposite.

This guy looks like he's in the heart-breaking game. His topaz eyes drink me in without leaving my face, and I can almost hear a Taylor Swift break-up song playing in the background. Odds are high he's got a drawer full of unreturned scarves and other trophies from past relationships.

"Maybe those weren't her exact words." He takes a sip of his beer and the muscles in his neck tighten, tempting me.

"And yet, here you are, ignoring her warning." I stretch out my legs and lean back on my hands. My sundress hits me mid-thigh, and one of the spaghetti straps falls from my shoulder. I look at him as I pull it back into place.

Do I know I'm playing with fire?

Yes.

Do I care?

No.

Should I?

Without a doubt.

But I only left Kansas yesterday, and I already miss Charly like crazy. My eight-week quasi-internship with my sister's wedding planner, Carson, is just the opportunity I need to learn the ropes while he gets his business up and running. But right now, the time stretches out long in front of me. I need a distraction. I need something I haven't had in almost three years: fun.

So right now, some heavy flirting with a man who's supposed to be off-limits sounds like fun. Maybe the only fun possible in this sleepy town that's even smaller than my hometown in Kansas. Especially when Evie and her fiancé, Adam, have already asked me to help at his restaurant, the Garden of Eatin,' when I'm not helping plan Evie and her friend Georgia's televised double wedding to the Thomsen twins, Adam and Zach.

It's a lot.

The point is: this guy may be exactly what I need to keep from thinking nonstop about Charly during whatever downtime I may have.

"Soooo," I twist the metal cap on my Coke, but it's already been loosened and comes right off. "What exactly was my sister's warning?"

He leans back on his elbows, squinting at the setting sun. "She said not to distract you from helping Carson and the wedding because you need to stay focused."

"Uh huh. I wonder if Evie warned everyone in town not to distract me, or ..." I sip my Coke, letting a little suspense build. "Is there something about you, in particular, she thought might distract me?"

His cheek twitches. And I think I've discovered his tell—the subconscious clue that means he's all in, ready to play.

Still leaning on his elbows, he lifts his palms as though to show me that *he's* the distraction.

He's not wrong.

I'm fighting hard not to get distracted by the way his long, dark eyelashes contrast with the shades of gold in his eyes. I'd kill for those lashes.

As if that weren't distraction enough, there's a tattoo barely visible under his white sleeve that covers his bicep and highlights the contours of his muscles. If his ink were barbed wire, I wouldn't give him a second glance. But it's something intricate—maybe even beautiful—and I want to study it closer.

And... I'm staring at his tattoo.

And he's smirking at me.

So, yes. Very distracting.

I force my eyes back to the lake, but not before catching his smug grin. It's that grin that snaps me back to myself and my resolve.

He thinks he's already lured me into his leather-jacket-wearing, motorcycle-riding realm. But I've had my heart broken more than once by a bad boy. I'm not getting smoldered again.

I'm NOT.

But maybe...I could be the heartbreaker this time.

In eight weeks, I'll go back to my normal life. Back to Charly. Back to full-time momming. I won't be in Paradise long enough to pine over a guy who's moved on to his next victim.

This is my chance to turn the tables.

I'll break his heart before he can break mine.

I'll break it for every girl whose heart he's broken. I'll break it to get retribution for the times I've had *my* heart broken by boys just like him. The kind who will take everything, then walk away without a word.

I'm considering whether I can really muster man-eater energy, or if my ego has taken control of my brain when he tips his Corona toward Evie, who's fast-walking from the party toward us.

"Looks like I'm about to get an earful." There's a lot of delight in his voice for a man who's in trouble.

When she steps from the dirt pathway to the beach, her high-heels sink into the soft sand. She barely breaks eye contact with me as she bends down and unbuckles the first tiny strap around her ankle. The irritation on her face makes my adrenaline pump harder. Danger is the only drug I've ever been addicted to.

I smile at her, then turn toward my heart breaker. "You want to get out of here?"

He glances at Evie who's shaking her head at us while tugging at her second strap, then grins at me. "My bike's parked on the street."

I almost laugh out loud. Because I totally called it. *Of course*, he has a motorcycle.

In the past, that would have been my downfall, but I'm not a teenager anymore (barely). I see his motorcycle for what it is: a prop to go with his image.

This guy is such a cliché, I can guess his every move. As long as I know what I'm in for, I'm in no danger of actually falling for him. And if Evie were really concerned, she wouldn't be on the verge of smiling as she slips off her other shoe.

He pops up and reaches for my hand, pulling me upright. I grab my sandals, and then we run, leaving Evie and our drinks behind.

"Hope! Wait!" she calls, but I barely hear her over my bad boy's laugh.

We both laugh all the way up the shrub-lined path leading away from the beach to the street. The whole thing is so ridiculous. I'm still laughing when we stop in front of a bike.

Not a motorcycle; a *bike*. The kind with pedals and a little bell.

Mr. Not-Quite-So-Bad hands me a helmet. "Get on. It's a two-seater."

"I see that." I hesitate long enough for Evie to call my name again, and I realize I'm too far in to back out now. I drop my sandals and shove my feet into them then I put on the helmet. "Is our first stop the gas station for Tootsie pops?"

"If you want it to be." He cocks a smile at me, then swings his leg over the seat. "If we're making this getaway, you'd

better climb on.”

“Hope!” Evie calls again, still hidden by the shrubs along the path, but getting closer.

I climb on the back of the bike, then realize there’s no bar behind me to hold, so I clutch the seat.

“Hold on!” My still-nameless accomplice yells before pumping the pedals. With one rotation, the bike jolts forward, nearly throwing me off the back.

“You okay?” he says. “Better hold onto me. These e-bikes go fast.”

E-bike. That explains the speed, but also makes our escape more fun than dangerous. My adrenaline drops at the same rate the bike picks up speed, but my heart feels safe when I wrap my arms around his waist.

I let go long enough to wave to Evie as we pass her.

“You’d better have her back by nine, Sebastian!” Evie calls, followed quickly by directions for me. “Don’t do anything stupid!”

Too late for that but running away on an e-bike feels like it will end in a much better way than a motorcycle escape would. We can’t be going more than ten miles an hour, and we probably look like a couple of kids. Instead of the roar of a motorcycle engine, the bike hums softly.

I thought I was grabbing a tiger by the tail. Turns out, I’ve got a regular old house cat.

Possibly a tomcat, but I'm going to give him the benefit of the doubt there.

“Sebastian? That's your name? Like the crab?” I tease, as a precaution. Because there are other more dangerous Sebastians, like Ryan Gosling's character in *La-La Land*.

“Or the narrator in *Fight Club*,” he says over his shoulder while pressing the throttle.

We pick up speed, and I tuck the loose hair blowing in my face under the helmet.

“Never seen it.”

I only know it's got a young Brad Pitt in it. I hope he's not Sebastian. That's not a safe Sebastian-association, at all.

“Or Lil' Sebastian in *Parks and Rec*?”

“What?” His head whips around. “Isn't that a horse?”

The bike wobbles, forcing me to hold him tighter. His shirt is thin, and his stomach is firm. With a mind of its own, my thumb traces the outline of his abs.

I stop when I realize what I'm doing, but the image is etched in my brain. “A miniature horse,” I say, swallowing hard. “He's adorable.”

Sebastian scoffs and turns the bike out of the Little Copenhagen resort onto the bike path paralleling the main road.

Cartoon crabs and miniature horses. That's what I'm going to think about when I think of the name Sebastian. Not dark-

haired, very nicely cut Sebastian Stan, aka Bucky Barnes from *Captain America*. Because the resemblance between superhero Sebastian and e-bike Sebastain is much, much too close.

“Just call me Seb.”

“How about Lil’ Seb?”

E-bike notwithstanding, he’s still throwing off bad boy vibes, and my willpower may not be as fireproof as I think it is. So sarcasm is my shield.

“I thought Evie was warning me to stay away from you for your protection. I’m starting to think it was for my own.” He talks over his shoulder, barely watching the road, loud enough to be heard over the line of passing cars.

I laugh. “You’re not the one who’s been voluntarily kidnapped and has no idea where she’s being taken.”

“That’s fair.” He speeds up to pass a family of bikers struggling to pedal in a way Sebastian doesn’t, thanks to the motor. “Have you got a swimming suit on under that dress?”

Now is my chance to get the upper hand. I press myself close enough for my lips to nearly brush his ear. “I think I need to know a little more about you before I tell you what’s under my dress.”

Seb laughs. “What else do you want to know?”

“Do you have a last name?” I put a few inches between us, satisfied I’ve *really* got his attention.

“Sparks. I’m twenty-seven, single, and run my own business.” He slows as we approach the one stoplight in Paradise.

“What kind of business?” I sit up straight, moving my hands from around his waist to his sides.

“I’m an electrician.”

“Shut up.” I laugh. “You do *not* play with electricity and have the last name Sparks.”

He turns right and points to a bank of old brick buildings. The lowest one has *Sparks Electric* at the top in block letters and a van parked in front with the same name scrawled across the side.

“Sebastian Sparks.” I say the name more to myself than to him, letting the syllables roll softly off my tongue.

I like it. It fits. Sparks is the verb I’d use for what Sebastian has done to me from the minute I locked eyes with him.

“Anything else you want to know?” he asks as we pass his business, hugging the side of the highway leading out of Paradise.

“Where are you taking me?”

“A hidden hot spring I know. Some friends are heading up there.” He reaches down to scratch his leg, brushing my bare thigh where my dress has slipped up. “If you’re up for it.”

“As long as you’ve got a swimming suit on under *your* clothes.”

Sebastian lets out a short, low laugh. “I’ll tell you if you tell me.”

Since we were just at the lake, I’m fairly sure he knows I’ve got a suit on under my dress. Jet-skiing and wakeboarding were options at the party, just not options that interested me.

But I’ll keep up the game with him. Playing carefully because I’m not the naïve teenager I once was.

The throaty excitement in his voice sends up a flag that, a few years ago I would have missed. It’s not quite red, but definitely an orange-ish shade.

Heavy flirting is one thing, but Sebastian and I need to be on the same page—my page. The page where nothing more than flirting happens.

Okay, and maybe some kissing.

But that’s it. I’ve got Charly to think about.

“Two piece, striped, full-cheek coverage.” I loosen my grip around his waist and thighs. “You?”

“These will have to do.” He tugs at the hem of his shorts, and I let out my breath. Same page, even if I can’t help but notice the outline of his thigh muscles under his shorts.

Sebastian isn’t as tall as Adam, or Adam’s twin brother Zach, and not even close to their brother Bear’s size, but he’s got just as many muscles as they do. Which is a lot. Put the three Thomsen brothers and Sebastian in a room and you basically have a human Costco. Everything is in bulk.

Against my better judgement I say yes to the hidden spring.

Twenty minutes later, after pedaling (with the help of the motor) up a mountain—a literal mountain—we pull into a turnout. Sebastian slides off the bike, then helps me off.

“It’s just up there.” He points to a group of trees with the thinnest of dirt tracks running through the center of them.

“That’s a trail?”

“Mostly.” Sebastian locks the bike to a guardrail, then takes my hand. He doesn’t let go as we walk toward the trail. “It looks sketchy from here, but I promise it will be worth the hike.”

My eyes drop to my thin-soled, strappy, not-made-for-hiking sandals. Sebastian’s gaze follows.

“It’s an easy hike once we get past those trees.” Then he squats in front of me. “Climb on. I’ll carry you through the first bit.”

I stare at his back, wondering if he’s serious.

For the past three years, I’ve been the one carrying Charly, taking care of everything. I don’t regret anything, but along with earning money, this summer in Paradise is supposed to be about me finding who I am and what I want to be.

And right now, I decide, I want to be carried.

It’s after ten o’clock when Sebastian pulls up to Evie’s. The moon is full, my dress is damp from my wet bikini, and there’s a chill in the air.

“That was fun.” I shiver and slide from the back of the bike.
“Thanks.”

I take a step back, but Sebastian grabs my hand and pulls me closer. “How about again tomorrow?”

His hand slips around my waist, and our lips lock, not for the first time that day. One kiss in the hot spring is all it took for us to figure out we are very compatible when it comes to kissing. *Very.*

So good that Sebastian didn’t even mind when I told him my boundaries. Not that he tried anything more than kissing, even before I set limits. I mostly had to say them out loud to keep myself from pushing them.

Not only has it been a minute since I’ve been kissed, but I also don’t remember ever being kissed with the level of desire and gentleness Sebastian seems to have perfected. Our five hours together passed in the blink of an eye. His friends came and went while I not only got lost in his kisses, but also his teasing and flirting.

And I’m about to get lost in his lips again when I hear Evie calling Sebastian’s name.

“You’re late, Sparks!”

We break apart, and I wipe my hand across my lips like that might erase the evidence of the kiss Evie’s already seen.

“Sorry, Ms. Barton!” He answers without taking his eyes off me, a wicked grin spreading across his face. “We were just at the library studying.”

“Don’t sass me.” Evie stays on her front step, looking torn between not wanting to act like a mom and wanting to ground me.

This is a surprise. I didn’t expect to get mommed when I left my parents’ house and moved in with her for the summer.

“I think we’re in trouble,” I mumble to Sebastian.

“I’ll pick you up again tomorrow. Eight o’clock.” He turns toward my sister and waves. “Bye, Evie!”

I give him a peck, then walk quickly to the front porch where Evie waits in a circle of white light, arms crossed.

“You’ve got beard burn.” Her eyes bore into me, and I draw my hand across my chin and cheeks. They had quite a bit of contact with Sebastian’s stubble today.

Evie follows me inside, shutting the door behind us. “He cultivates his scruffy look for the summer. He thinks it attracts more women.”

“He’s not wrong.” I float up the stairs to her condo, carried by the endorphins from a really good make-out.

“Hope,” she pauses, and I turn. “I love Seb. He’s a great guy. But he’s a heart-breaker. He’ll be honest with you about not wanting anything serious, but you’ll fall for him anyway. I saw it happen a dozen times last summer.”

We walk inside her place, and I turn toward my room. “I need a shower.”

Evie follows me. “I’m serious, Hope. You’re not going to be the only girl he takes for a ride this summer.” She air-quotes “a ride,” and I can’t help but smile.

“Good. I hope so. I don’t want anything serious either. All I want is to be kissed like that a few more times.” I laugh, then grab Evie’s hand and paraphrase Rhett Butler. “Because I need to be kissed, and often, by someone who knows how.”

Evie squirms away from me, trying not to crack up, but she’s laughing before she escapes. “You’re hopeless, Hopeful.”

“Blech.” I stick out my tongue and groan. “Don’t call me that. You sound like my mom.”

Evie’s smile disappears. “Look, I’m not your mom, and I’m not going to act like one...” She stops when my eyebrows bolt up. “Anymore,” she continues. “But I want you to know what you’re getting into with Seb, so you’re not blindsided. I want this summer to be great for you.”

“Thanks, Evie.” I wrap her in a hug. We haven’t done enough of this in our lives—laughing, teasing, hugging. But, despite her slip today, Evie is always good about treating me like an adult.

I pull back and look her dead in the eye. “You’ve got nothing to worry about. We’re going to see each other again, but we both know I’m leaving in two months.”

“Are you going to tell him about Charly?” she asks carefully.

I shake my head, then amend my answer with a shrug. “If for some reason things start to get serious, then I will. But I can’t

right now.” I swallow back the lump threatening to crawl up my throat and force a smile. “I’m twenty-two. I want to feel like it. I want to *be* a Taylor Swift song.”

I grab her hands again and break out into dancing, singing at the top of my lungs.

Her eyes threaten to roll, but she stops them and smiles instead. A smile that holds little faith in my ability to resist Sebastian.

And she’s right.

For the next three weeks, when I’m not helping out at the Garden of Eatin’, or learning the ins and outs of event planning with Carson Stevens as we plan Evie’s wedding, I’m with Sebastian. We go back to the spring, he takes me horseback riding, and for a ride on a real motorcycle. He takes me to the rodeo in Florence and on his favorite hiking trails.

But mostly, we just kiss. In the spring. On his bike. In his truck. Against a tree. In my room when I sneak him up one night while Evie’s downstairs at Adam’s.

Basically, there are very few places in Paradise where I don’t kiss Sebastian Sparks.

My favorite place, though, is on Smuk Lake’s beach at night with a million stars shining on us. He brings a blanket for us to lay on, but somehow, I always end up with sand in my hair.

Tonight I lay against his chest, in the crook of his arm, as he points out constellations. His heart beats steadily under me, and I realize that I feel safe here.

Not just in Paradise. In Sebastian's arms.

And that's not what I want to be.

Excited? Yes. Adventurous? Of course. Bad? *Obviously*.

Anything but settled and happy. That's not what this fling is supposed to turn into. It's only supposed to be fun. To distract me from the fact that getting experience as an event planner meant leaving Charly behind for eight weeks.

And if this is going to be more than just fun, I have to tell him about Charly. But I don't know if I'm ready to do that.

I inch away from Sebastian and ask the question I hope will turn my feelings back into what they're supposed to be: casual.

"How many other women are you seeing right now?" I ask it with a teasing smile, ignoring the hole opening in my chest.

He flinches with surprise. "What makes you think I'm seeing anyone else?"

I crook my arm and rest my chin on my fist. "Because that's what you do, isn't it? Date all the girls who come to town for the summer?"

Sebastian barks a laugh. "I don't date *every* girl who comes to town."

We're both smiling, back on safe ground. I'm just another girl. He's only a summer fling. "Uh huh. What exactly are the parameters for who you'll date? Only blondes? Anyone willing to ride on the back of your bike?"

He shakes his head. “I do have actual standards. I’m not a player.”

“Let’s hear them.”

“No married or engaged women. No cougars.” He counts off on his fingers. “No one under twenty...”

“Whew, I barely made the cut there.” I poke his side, and he grabs my hand.

“Actually,” He twines his fingers through mine. “I lowered the age limit when Evie warned me to stay away from you.”

I burst out laughing, and he bites his lip to hold back his own laugh, then says. “I love the way you laugh too much to spend time with anyone else.”

I go quiet, knowing I should take my hand from his, but I don’t have the willpower.

Kissing is one thing, but holding hands is a different level of intimate. And I’m enjoying his palm pressed to mine too much. I like the idea of being the only woman Sebastian wants to hear laugh.

“That’s the whole list of your rules? Seems like it leaves a pretty big pool to choose from.” I’m grasping for solid ground again.

Sebastian grows suddenly serious. “Okay, one more. And I’ve never told anyone this, so don’t judge... as soon as a girl says anything about a baby or a kid being cute, I’m out.”

“What?” I let out a nervous laugh, not sure if he’s serious.
“Why?”

“They’re the ones who are thinking about settling down.
They want kids.”

“You don’t?”

He shakes his head. “Not yet. Maybe not ever.”

I blink as the weight of his words sinks in. My head spins, and I take my hand from his. When I open my eyes again, I realize Sebastian’s words are exactly what I needed to hear to right myself.

I was in danger of falling hard for him. I still am. I see that now.

So after he takes me back to Evie’s, I pour everything into the last kiss I know we’ll share.

Then I work out a plan with Carson to work remotely, and Evie helps me pack my bags, assuring me Adam will be fine without me.

The next morning, as soon as the sun peeks its head above the mountains, I’m in my car, headed to Kansas.

On my way back to Charly.

Chapter 1

Sebastian



October

I pull open the heavy door and let the wind slam it shut behind me.

“Dude! Careful with my door!” my cousin Adam yells from the open kitchen of his restaurant, the Garden of Eatin’. “You break it, you buy it!”

I pull off my beanie and shake the snow from it, then stamp my feet on the vinyl mat. “Tell it to the blizznado blowing out there,” I yell back. We’ve watched all the *Sharknado* movies together. He’ll get the reference.

There may not be sharks in the weather happening here, but it’s as dangerous as a shark tornado. Just less bitey.

I take that back. The icy wind chews through everything. My North Face puffer. My Doc Martens. Adam’s stupid door. Nothing can keep out this freak storm with its freezing temps and flying snow.

“Seb!” Britta cries. “You’re getting water everywhere.”

“Sorry, cutie.” Adam’s younger sister has a soft spot for me. Which is true of most women, but Britta’s my cousin, so her tolerance for my messes is out of affection, not attraction.

She sighs loudly, but she’s already grabbing a dishtowel to dry off the water spots I’ve left on her wood host stand. “The rest of the band is here already.”

Britta's being snarky. It's impossible not to see for myself that I'm the last to arrive for practice.

This restaurant is a big, open square, and I can already see Bear setting up his drums on the makeshift stage. Evie is working on the mics and speakers, and our new addition to the band, Carson Stevens, is tuning his guitar. I don't need Britta to point out I'm the last to arrive. I'm always late, I've given up trying to be anything different and the people in my life roll with it.

We don't usually set up for practice this early on a Friday night, but I doubt people will brave this weather, even for the best food in town. Plus, Halloween is a few days away so the school is sponsoring an indoor trunk-or-treat that about everyone will be at.

I'd be there too—I love Halloween—but since we'll be playing at the Jingle Ball in a month or so, we need to practice. It's not like there's anything else to do, anyway. Paradise shuts down every winter, but especially when snow rolls in earlier than expected.

I toss my coat on a chair, then step onto the stage and nod to my soon-to-be cousin-in-law. "Hey, Evie."

"Hey, Seb," she says brightly, totally unaware how much I want to ask her about Hope and that I've wanted to every time I've seen her since the day Hope left.

And I've seen her a lot.

I glance at Bear who gives me a look. He's listened to me whine over one too many beers about Hope. We may be cousins and best friends, but I can tell he's nearing the end of his remarkable patience with me. If I don't talk to Evie tonight, he may disown me.

As she gets the mics set, I tune my bass. I glance at her every few seconds, waiting for the right opportunity to ask one of the questions Bear's been telling me for months I need to man up and ask her.

I loop my guitar strap over my shoulder and inch closer so she's the only one who will hear me.

"Evie," I say too quietly at the same time she says into the mic, "testing one-two, one-two."

So I move closer, plucking my bass strings, trying to act casual. But my heart pounds as loud as the beat I play.

Evie's wedding is a little more than a month from today, and I know Hope will be here for it. What I don't know is when. Days before? Weeks? How much time will I have to figure out what I did wrong and try to make it up to her?

By the time Evie gets the thumbs up from Adam, I'm behind her. When she backs away from the mic, I'm so close, she steps on my toes.

Evie lets out a small gasp and turns around. "Seb! Sorry. I didn't realize you were that close."

"It's okay. My fault." I keep my eyes down, focused on my strings.

Evie starts to walk away but I hiss her name. “Wait! I need to ask you something.” She stops and I move closer, still strumming, the heavy beat the background music for my question. “When’s she coming back?”

Evie flinches with surprise. “Hope?”

I nod. I don’t dare look her in the eyes or she’ll see just how much I want to know.

“I mean, will she be here days before the wedding? Weeks? December first is coming fast.” I keep playing, nodding my head to the beat, hoping she’ll answer the question I’ve wondered about since Hope left without a word almost five months ago.

Evie pauses long enough that I have to look up. Her head tilts to the side. “I’m not sure yet, Seb.”

She opens her mouth like she might say more, then clamps it shut and walks away from me.

But I haven’t plugged in yet, so I follow her. Because letting out the easy question has opened the floodgates, and the harder questions follow. I’ve held them in too long.

I catch Evie at the edge of our makeshift stage that’s only steps away from the square tables that surround it.

“Will you at least tell me why she ghosted me? So I know what to apologize for when I see her again.” I congratulate myself on not sounding as desperate as I feel.

Evie blinks. “Where is this coming from, Seb? You haven’t said one word about her since she left.”

Ouch.

If I'd known Hope wasn't going to answer any of my texts, I would have asked Evie the question a long time ago. But I waited too long, and there was never the right time to do it without sounding like the crushed idiot I am.

"That doesn't mean I haven't thought about her," I say quietly. "Will you tell me why she left?"

While I wait for her answer, I pluck out the first few chords of the White Stripes *Seven Nation Army*. Playing not only gives me somewhere to direct my nervous energy, but also because there's a line about Wichita. I know that's where Hope is.

That's about all I know. What twenty-two-year-old doesn't have *any* social media accounts?

Hope. That's who.

And what twenty-two-year-old can ignore a week-long string of texts?

Probably a lot of them. But did Hope have to do it to me?

"Seb, you didn't do anything wrong," Evie says gently, and I still my fingers over the bass strings. "You're a great guy. I mean that sincerely...Hope's just not the right girl for you." Evie squeezes my shoulder and gives me a pity smile. "When she's here for the wedding, you can ask her why, but she's got to be the one to tell you. Not me."

"Quit harassing Evie," Adam says from the kitchen, even though I'm sure he couldn't hear me over the burgers sizzling

on the open flame.

“I’m not harassing her.” I glance at Evie who raises her eyebrow.

“Okay.” I pick up the song where I left off. “But will you at least tell her I’d like to see her? Not to start things up again. Just to see her.”

Evie nods, and I walk back to the stage.

I’m not trying to be a creeper here, but I thought Hope and I really had a connection. Then she just disappeared. All I got was a text saying she’d had a fun time, but it was better if we didn’t stay in touch. I texted anyway. After a week of no response, I got the message.

For five months, I’ve respected her wishes, but that doesn’t mean I’ve forgotten her.

If anything, I’ve thought about her more than if she’d just told me goodbye face-to-face.

Maybe...

Honestly, probably not.

Hope left me with something that I’ve never felt with any other woman I’ve dated—and I’ve dated *a lot* of women—hope.

Hope left me with lowercase hope.

And, trust me, I know how cheesy that sounds. But it’s true. The first night I dropped her back off at Evie’s, I knew I didn’t want to spend time with anyone else that summer. One week

in to seeing her every day, I started to question my commitment to bachelorhood. The thought of forever even crossed my mind once or twice.

And forever is a long time.

If you're lucky.

Carson, whose love for the nineties grunge of his youth cannot be broken, plays the first chords of *Come as You Are*. Bear follows his cue, coming in on drums, while I plug in and join with the bass part. Adam is still in the kitchen, so we don't have anyone on vocals until suddenly Zach, who's just walked in, is caterwauling, "and I don't have a gun," at the top of his lungs.

He rushes to the stage and takes the mic. We all keep playing, but not without wincing. I spot Georgia, standing by Evie near the kitchen and send her a pleading look. She shrugs her shoulders and returns my look with an apologetic one of her own.

My eyes dart to Adam who's our last, best hope, but he doesn't meet my gaze. His jaw is clenched and he's rushing to finish the burgers he's cooking for us.

Britta comes to our rescue and unplugs Zach's mic. Bear's drums go quiet, but not his laugh.

Zach stops and glares at his sister. "Et tu, Britta?"

I stop and stare at Zach. "Are you trying to speak Italian?"

"It's Shakespeare, or something." Bear answers.

“*Julius Caesar*,” Adam calls from the kitchen. “Which is what you should stick to, bro. Being an *ac-tor!*” With a theatrical flourish, he throws his hand into the air.

Ever since Zach became the co-host of Georgia’s home reno show, *At Home with Georgia Rose*, Adam has teased him nonstop about being an *ac-tor!*, said with the same flourish every time. Which is out of character for Adam, who never makes jokes, but now that he’s found one he likes, he’s as committed to it as he is to Evie.

“You’re all uninvited from my beach house in Malibu.” Zach steps off the stage and walks to Georgia. “Right, babe?”

She shakes her head. “Probably not since we don’t have one of those, and I like all these people.” Rising on tiptoe, she cups his face in her hands. “But I like you best of all, even if you can’t sing.”

Georgia kisses Zach who lifts her high enough for her feet to dangle inches from the ground. She’s not wearing the heels she usually has on, but her boots are still high, and she has her purse full of tools.

As happy as I am for the two of them and their approaching double wedding with Adam and Evie, my gut twists with a strange sensation. It feels like jealousy, but why would I be jealous of my cousins getting married when that’s never been something I wanted for myself? And why can’t I stop thinking about Hope when I see them, or anyone else, all coupled up?

I catch Carson’s eye, and we both shake our heads.

“Are we gonna practice or what?” Bear gently taps his stick on his snare drum. “I’ve got things to do besides watch you all make out.”

I nod in agreement.

“Little brother, if you think this is making out, you are *not* getting enough action,” Zach says.

Adam almost laughs and pretend high fives Zach from the kitchen.

Georgia puts at least a foot between her and Zach, then gives him a stern look. “Don’t be a bro.”

Evie purses her lips and gives Adam the same look. Adam and Zach hang their heads, but as soon as Evie and Georgia look away, my cousins smile at each other.

“So are we playing?” Carson asks.

“Eat first.” Adam sends plates of burgers and fries and one salad across the pass-through window.

Evie carries the plates to the tables pushed together to fit all of us. This is where we like to eat when Adam cooks for us. Zach and Georgia help Evie serve the food. Bear nearly knocks over his drum kit rushing from the stage to the table. Carson and I are the last to sit down.

Then the conversation starts. We’re all family—even Carson who doesn’t actually share our DNA—so we talk over each other while we’re stuffing our faces in the comfortably impolite way that families do. Our talk centers around trying to figure out how to get in the practice we need to for the

Jingle Ball while Adam and Evie are also getting ready for their wedding.

“Mayor Voglmeyer wants to add more events to the Yulefest, and I’ve got this huge, televised double wedding I’m working on.” Carson winks in Evie and Georgia’s direction—he’s loved every minute of planning their wedding. “I don’t know when I’ll even have time to sleep, let alone practice for the ball.”

“Okay, I hate to admit this,” Georgia sighs. “But Darlene Voglmeyer’s idea to turn the Christmas Festival into a month-long Yulefest is genius.”

Carson gives her a gentle push. “Stop. You know I’m the one who planted the idea.”

Georgia smiles wide. “After I gave it to you.”

“Yeah, I can’t wait to have tourists here during the winter too when we’re supposed to have a break from them.” Adam shoots both a glare.

Evie lays a hand on his arm. “More tourists, more time together. That’s our mantra, remember? Say it with me.”

Adam scowls and repeats her words. He’s rewarded with a kiss that puts a rare smile on his face.

If that weren’t enough to tangle my stomach into a jealous knot again, Evie takes a bite of her burger, and Adam reaches over to wipe away a spot of sauce at the corner of her mouth.

“Aannnnnyway.” Carson drags out the word until he pulls Evie’s attention away from Adam. “Hope is doing great work from Kansas, but I could really use her here if I’m going to

have the barn and everything else ready for your wedding. I've tried not to pressure her too much—I know she's got her reasons. But I think it's time for her to come back."

Evie's eyes dart to me, but it's too late.

"Hope is still working for you? I thought it was just a summer thing," I say to Carson.

"She never stopped. Thanks to Yulefest and a couple small things I got hired for," he answers.

That's a surprise, but also confirms my suspicion that I'm to blame for Hope up and leaving. Most of the reason she was in Paradise was to learn about event planning from Carson as he managed all the details for Evie and Georgia's double wedding. He'd given her a huge opportunity to gain experience in the business from the ground up, which made it even more strange that she left so suddenly.

Carson narrows his eyes at me. "I didn't know you knew Hope all that well."

"We hung out a little while she was here." I finger the napkin in front of me, not meeting Carson's gaze.

Most people in town don't know Hope and I had a thing this summer. We tried to keep it under wraps. I didn't want anyone else warning her away from me the way Evie tried to.

Obviously, Evie knows about us. And, by default, Adam. And probably Zach and Georgia too. But that's it.

Except for Britta and Bear.

And maybe Uncle Pete.

“You *hung out*?” Carson wiggles his fingers in air quotes. “Is that why she left, and I can’t get her to come back? Because of you?”

“No! I swear I didn’t do anything!” Not that I know of anyway.

“Uh huh,” Carson says, unconvinced, before turning back to Evie. “I need help with more than spreadsheets and organization. I need her here, in person, dealing with the vendors and clients she’s been in contact with. Things are about to blow up, and that girl can narrow down details faster and easier than Bob Ross painting happy little trees.”

“I know. And you’ve been great with her, Carson. Her confidence has grown so much, and she loves working for you.” Evie picks up a fry but hesitates before putting it in her mouth. “But she’s still trying to work some things out.”

“All the wedding details she’s come up with? I need her here to make sure they come together,” Carson continues. “And Yulefest. I need a right-hand man—woman—to make sure everything goes smoothly.”

I stare at Evie, wondering why I didn’t ask my questions sooner. It’s not like I haven’t been close enough to see the wedding come together. Hope’s fingerprints are all over this wedding; I’ve just been too blind to see her.

Evie avoids my gaze and stares at Carson, but he’s too busy methodically forking all the vegetables in his salad to get a

little of each one.

“I told her to bring Charly, and she didn’t respond to that either,” Carson says before placing his curated bite into his mouth.

Evie’s head swivels from Carson to me and back again. She shakes it in tiny, frantic motions that I’m not supposed to see, but Carson’s the one who misses the signal she’s trying to send him.

“What?” Now I’m glaring at Evie because there’s even more about Hope she’s been keeping from me. “Who’s Charlie guy? Hope’s boyfriend? Is that why she took off without a word? She was just playing me?”

So much for keeping our relationship, or the feelings I still have for her, quiet. But I don’t care. I’ve been lied to, and I have a right to be mad about it.

Carson lets out a laugh. “Charly isn’t her boyfriend...”

Evie finally catches his eye, and he stops, quietly sets down his fork and puts his hands in his lap.

“He’s what then? Her *husband*?” I direct my question to Evie. She’s the one who should have told me this a long time ago.

Adam wraps a protective arm around her, but sends me a sad smile, and I realize he knows who this Charlie is too. I look all the way around the table, but no one meets my eyes.

“Are you serious, Evie? I’m the only one who doesn’t know?” I stand and toss my napkin on the table. “This may be

hard for you to believe, but I really cared about her. Still do. I know how crazy that sounds when we only knew each other a few weeks, but it's the truth." I grab my coat and head for the door.

"Seb!" Evie follows me. "Wait!"

I stop and turn back to her, ready to let her have it, but Adam is standing behind her. His tight jaw and warning glare are enough for me to rein in my anger.

"Whatever you think about me, I didn't deserve to be kept in the dark by any of you." I shove my arms into my coat and reach for the door, but Evie blocks me.

"You're right, but you told Hope you didn't want kids. That's why she left."

Evie watches me, waiting for her words to sink in, but it takes too long for my brain to process what she's said.

"Charly isn't a boyfriend," she says carefully. "Charly is her daughter."

Chapter 2

Hope



The gray blue of early dawn slips through my curtains as I peek into Charly's bed to make sure she's still sleeping. She has her thumb in her mouth, and I gently pull it from her lips, the future cost of braces in the back of my mind. The cost of everything is always on my mind, even if Charly is only three. There are already so many medical bills, and there likely always will be.

But Charly loves to suck her thumb, and as soon as I set her hand by her side, she blinks her eyes open. I lean closer so she can see the outline of my face. Recognition slowly washes over her, and a dreamy smile crosses her face.

"Mama," she whispers and holds up her arms for me.

"Good morning, baby," I whisper back as I pick her up, and she snuggles into me.

Mom will be frazzled with Charly up so early, but I'm grateful for the few minutes I get with her before my packed day starts.

Even though I'd love to climb into bed with Charly wrapped around my neck to try to get her back to sleep, there's already noise upstairs from my brother and sister getting ready for school.

So, I carefully lay her down to change her diaper. She lets out a short, tired cry when I strip off her cozy pajama bottoms and her legs are exposed to the chilly air, but it's one less thing for Mom to do. Hopefully, Charly will take an early nap for her.

By the time Charly has on a clean diaper, she's wide awake, and ready to move.

"See, Mama, see?" she asks crawling away from me.

"Hold on, Charly. Let Mama find your glasses." I scoop her into my arms, then find her tiny glasses on my dresser. I fit them over her head, and as soon as they're on, she breaks into a wide, happy smile.

"Hi, Mama." She pats my cheeks like she's seeing me for the first time.

This happens every time I slip the strap over her head and adjust her glasses over her eyes. She wakes up to the world around her with wonder and awe, ready to explore.

I love her curiosity, but it doesn't make getting her dressed easy. After flipping on the light, I carry her to the closet so she can pick out what to wear. I'm not surprised when she points to her favorite striped dress and proclaims, "Pink!"

"Again? What about this one?" I pull out a blue jumper Mom bought Charly and loves for her to wear, but Charly scrunches up her nose and shakes her head.

For some reason, this little act of mutiny fills me with pride, and I mumble, "That's my Charly-girl."

She's been a fighter from the minute she was born eight weeks early, and I don't ever want her to lose that spirit. She's going to need it.

After she puts on her dress, she insists on wearing her red ladybug rain boots, even though snow boots would be a better

choice. But her occupational therapist says letting Charly make choices and vocalize them helps her developmentally. So does letting her try to put on her own clothes and shoes, even though this triples the amount of time it takes to get her ready in the morning.

And for someone like me who likes things precise and orderly, it's an act of supreme willpower not to straighten Charly's dress or put the shoes on the right feet until after she's tried. Then I fix it.

I already get looks when people hear her call me mama. I had her at nineteen, and my small size makes people think I'm still a teenager. I feel their judgment for being a young mom and her mismatched clothes only gives them more reason to look down on me.

"Ready to do your hair?" I hold out my hand, and she puts her little fingers in my palm. My heart squeezes tight to keep from bursting, like it always does when she takes my hand with all the trust and confidence in her little body.

I lead her to the bathroom and set her on the counter. "What style today?" I ask while pulling elastics and ribbons out of the drawer.

"Buns!" Charly shouts.

Her answer is as predictable as her clothing choices. She always wants space buns, which is great. They're adorable, and they don't take long, which means she can sit through the process.

I part her dark blonde hair down the middle, then twist each side into a bun that I secure to the crown of her head with an elastic and ribbon bow. Then I hold up a hand mirror, like she's in a salon, so she can admire herself.

“Sooo cute!” She bounces up and down with a huge grin on her face that makes me smile just as wide.

It's times like this that I know I made the right choice keeping her, even though I'd planned to give her up for adoption. It changed everything, but I haven't looked back. There are times when I fantasize about the life I could have had—maybe I'd be running my own event planning business instead of working remotely for Carson. Maybe I'd have spent the full two months in Paradise instead of three weeks. Maybe Seb and I could have had a real relationship.

But I wouldn't be happier, and my life wouldn't be as complete.

I was meant to be Charly's mama and it's my best job. Just ... a complicated one I'm still trying to figure out.

The one thing I have figured out is that I can't leave her again. That seemed like the best solution this summer when Carson offered me a job unexpectedly, but Charly had doctor and therapy appointments she couldn't miss. Mom and my stepdad were all set to make sure she got to every doctor and therapist and take care of her all summer.

But I couldn't do it. I couldn't be away from Charly for so long.

And it's worked out fine. Great, even. My job with Carson has gone from an eight-week internship to five months of steady, part-time work. I'm still learning from him; I'm just doing it long distance, and it supplements what I bring in from my clerk job at the grocery store.

My only regret is not telling Sebastian about Charly, but I didn't tell anyone about her while I was in Paradise. I've had enough judgements piled on me here for being a single mom. I didn't need those judgements in Paradise, or the judgement that would come once people knew I not only had a kid, but I'd left her for months. Explaining that I *had* to because of her special needs would only make things worse.

I didn't expect Seb to keep texting me after I left or expect how hard it would be not to reply. But he'd made himself clear—no kids—and I realized the mistake I'd made thinking I could pretend not to have one.

I retained my dignity by not marrying Charly's dad three years ago when he made the feeble offer. I didn't want to risk losing that dignity when I told Seb the truth and watched the light in his eyes disappear. It's nice to remember that light during the redundancy of my day-to-day life. It was better to ghost him before he dumped me.

Now I just wish he'd disappear from my thoughts the way he disappeared from my phone when I blocked his number. Maybe if I'd actually delete his number I could delete him from my head too.

I also wish the countdown to Evie's wedding didn't include a countdown to when I'll see Seb again. Never ghost someone you know you're going to see again. One more lesson learned.

I check my watch, then take Charly off the counter and set her on the floor, crouching down so I'm at her level. "Mama's got to go."

"No! Mama stay!" Her lip quivers, and my heart breaks again, like it does every morning when she does this.

"You know I can't, baby. But you get to stay with Gigi." I try to be cheerful as I brace myself for the approaching meltdown.

"NO!" Charly screams and throws herself to the floor.

"Come on, Charly. Don't do this today." I pick her up and tuck her legs around my hip.

She's too big to carry like this, especially when she's kicking and screaming, but it's the only way to get her to the kitchen and Mom. Her back leg swings wildly while I hold her front leg across my belly. On my way out of our room, I grab her iPad, and one-handed, press play on the Sleepytime episode of Bluey.

The music immediately soothes her. She takes the iPad from me and stares at it, stray tears running under her glasses and down her cheeks.

I hate starting her morning with screentime. But I'm already running late, and the calmer Charly is, the easier it will be for Mom when I leave. Not just because Charly will be happier, but also because I'll feel less guilty leaving her.

When I get to the kitchen, Mom is already there making breakfast for my brother and sister, Luke and Ashley.

“Morning, Mom.” I walk behind her toward the table and Charly’s highchair.

“Oh, good morning.” She turns from the stove, holding a spatula, and wipes her other hand on her apron. “She’s up early.”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

“Why’s da baby up so err-we? What’s Gigi supposed to do wif her?” Mom walks to us, talking in her high, lisping baby voice, while I buckle Charly in.

“The speech therapist recommended we use less baby talk now that she’s getting older,” I remind Mom. Again.

My parents are amazing with Charly. I couldn’t be the mom I am without them, and I hate correcting them. But sometimes the line between parent and grandparent gets a little blurry.

“I know, but look how happy da baby is, even dough she’s up way too err-we, isn’t she?” Mom blows raspberries on Charly’s cheek. Charly giggles loudly, and there’s nothing more I can do besides smile.

Mom rubs Charly’s nose with her own, then walks past me back to the stove. “I’ve told you; we can put her in my room at night so that she doesn’t wake up when you have to get ready. I’m quiet as a mouse. Might make things easier for us all.”

“I know, but Dad snores so loud.” I don’t say that I like having Charly with me. I fill my travel mug with coffee, then

grab a granola bar from the pantry. “Today’s my late day. I’m at the store until two, then I need to do some work for Carson, so I’ll head to the library. I won’t be home until six or so.”

“Six? Oh no! I’ve got a church luncheon.” She stays calm and collected, like she always does, but there’s a tightness in her voice that gives away her disappointment. “And I’ve got a nail appointment this afternoon.”

“I thought I told you all this? Did we get days mixed up?” Mom does so much for me that I have to stay patient, even when I want to scream with frustration.

“I’m so sorry, sweetie.” Her voice grows tighter. “I don’t know how I double-booked myself.”

I know how. She never writes things down. She means to, but she’s always forgetting her planner, and she refuses to put things in the Google calendar I’ve set up for us. And to be fair, she’s got a couple of teenagers she’s still raising who are currently yelling at each other about whose turn it is for the bathroom.

“I can try to get off early at the store, but I really need good internet and no interruptions to get stuff done for Carson, and the library closes early tonight.” My voice slows to match the forced calm of hers, even though my pulse has picked up speed.

My sister walks into the kitchen and takes a piece of bacon from the plate Mom is filling. “What’s up? I can hear you two down the hall.”

“Nothing,” Mom says at the same time I say, “I’m gone all day today, and I need someone to watch Charly this afternoon.”

“I can do it,” Ashley answers with an easy shrug and tears off a piece of bacon. “I don’t have—”

“—That’s okay,” Mom interrupts. “I’ll just take her with me.” She bends over the highchair right into Charly’s face, talking in a high baby voice. “Does baby girl want to have lunch and get her nails done with Gigi?”

“Mom, I don’t think...” The rest of my protest gets lost in Mom and Charly’s clapping.

I glance at Ashley who shrugs. There’s no stopping Mom now.

I try anyway. “I’d rather Charly stayed here with Ash. I don’t want her getting sick.”

Charly’s special needs mean her immune system is easily compromised, and she’s prone to asthma attacks. But now that Mom’s planted the idea in her head, lunch and nails is pretty much a done deal. She loves spending time with her Gigi, and I don’t have the time or energy to talk Mom out of it.

“She’ll have more fun with me. Won’t you baby girl?” Mom boops Charly’s nose, and Charly erupts into giggles.

“Okay. Whatever. Just thought I’d offer.” Ashley sticks the corner of a triangle of toast in her mouth. “Gotta go.”

“You need to eat more than that...” Mom follows Ashley but not ten seconds pass before she’s back in the kitchen, shaking

her head. “That child never eats enough.”

“I’ve got to run too,” I say, grabbing my own piece of toast and kissing Charly goodbye. “I wish you’d let her stay with Ashley.”

Mom follows me out of the kitchen, telling Charly she’ll be “white back” on our way out. “Charly loves getting her nails done. We’ll have a girls’ day.”

“She’s too young, Mom. And you know how she gets when she’s overstimulated. You’re setting her up for a meltdown.” I hitch my backpack over my shoulder, trying not to meet Mom’s eyes. I know I’m lecturing her.

“I did the same with you when you weren’t much older, and you loved it.” Mom says cheerfully, helping me slide the other strap over my shoulder, like I’m seven years old. “I’ll dress her up and show her off. The ladies at lunch will fawn over her like fairies over a foundling.”

“She’s already dressed, Mom.” I pull the straps on my backpack tighter. Too tight, but I don’t have time to loosen them.

“Oh, she always makes such a mess, I’m sure she’ll need a change of clothes.” She walks me to the door. “I’ll put her in that cute jumper I got her.”

“Mom...”

Before I can finish my protest, I’ve been nudged toward the door.

“Better hurry! You’re late! I love you.” Mom shoos me out of it like a wayward bird who’s flown inside.

“Put her in something warm please!” I call as Mom closes the door, leaving me standing on the front porch in the bitter cold of an early Kansas morning.

As I climb into my car, I wonder—for the hundredth time—how to navigate parenting while I’m still being babied.

Chapter 3

Sebastian



Hope has a kid.

That thought has been playing on repeat for the last few days. And it's playing again as I sit in my office sketching the diagrams for the Yulefest lights.

Ever since Evie spilled the beans about Charly, I've had this compulsion to find out more about her. What I finally dragged out of Adam is that she's not just a kid; she's a toddler with special needs.

That's a whole bag of stuff I have no idea what to do with.

I got Evie to show me a picture of Charly. She's cute with these little, tiny glasses that magnify her blue eyes. Same blonde hair as Hope. Same pixie face with the same pointed chin.

I'm sure I could fall for her as fast as I fell for Hope, if I had any interest in being a dad right now. But I don't. Which sucks because I have a lot of interest in being with Hope.

I still don't get why she left without a word. She could have told me she had a kid. I told Evie as much, but she said the rest was Hope's story to tell. She'd already told me more than she was supposed to.

I push away the *feelings* that come up when I think about Hope not trusting me with her story. I know it was a jerk thing to basically tell her I wouldn't date a single mom, but I never would have said that if she'd just told me about Charly in the first place. I think that's what bugs me the most. We spent

three weeks together, and she kept Charly a secret the whole time.

But maybe I was the only one who thought what we had was a relationship. Maybe for Hope it never became anything more than the fling it started as.

For all those reasons, I'm better off putting Hope out of my mind for good. And soon. Evie still claims that she doesn't know Hope's plans, but the wedding is only a month away, so the sooner I forget these feelings, the better. I'll be able to sit in the same room with her, but on opposite sides.

I turn my attention back to my work and finish the last touches of my lights proposal. I'm the only electrician in town, but Mayor Voglmeyer is still making me take my plans to the city council for their approval before she'll officially hire me.

For once I'm not annoyed by government bureaucracy. By the time I can *officially* start the work I do every year, I'll have to work overtime to get everything done on schedule. The street lighting happens on December second, and with the added Yulefest events that will require special lighting, I'm going to be racking up extra hours. Which not only means more money in my pocket, but also less time to think about Hope.

I'll meet with the mayor and city council tomorrow, but the rest of the day today I'm committed to being on the set of *At Home With Georgia Rose*. It's time for electrical to go in the latest cottage they're renovating in the Little Copenhagen resort.

Business has been good since my first appearance on the show. Within days of that episode airing, my phone was ringing with people wanting me to do the electrical in the houses they're building not only in Paradise, but as far away as Florence. I've had to turn jobs down, I'm so busy. I could bring in an apprentice, but I like working alone. I don't want to be responsible for anyone electrocuting themselves because I didn't train them right.

When I get to the Little Copenhagen, I park down the street. The set is a hive of activity with people going in and out of the trailer parked in front of the house Georgia and Evie are working on. I like watching it all. The commotion and organized chaos that will end in something old being made new again. Not just the run-down cottage in a run-down resort, but in Paradise itself.

Little farm towns like ours have been dying for decades. Even Paradise, with its booming summer tourist season, can't keep younger people here. There aren't enough jobs during the off-season. If not for my grandpa pressuring me to take over Sparks Electric, I wouldn't have stayed either.

Not that I wanted to leave but staying meant giving up what I wanted to do—own my own bakery. There's only so much room for bakeries in a small town, and Paradise already has two, not including Breakfast at Britta's.

So, the thing I love is my hobby, while playing with electricity is my job and I get to live in Paradise. I'm happy with my life just the way it is.

But it's cool to see Georgia living her dream. She's built her passion for construction and design into her own home-reno show with a moneymaking side hustle marketing other brands while building her own. Not only that, but she's the shot of adrenaline this town needed to stay alive.

Paradise has been a summer destination for at least fifty years, but mostly for people within a few hundred miles. Georgia's show has put us on the map for people across the country. And her Yulefest idea will make Paradise a winter destination too, especially with the expansion of the ski resort just up the canyon.

Evie spots me as I approach the house, pulls her coat tighter, and waits for me to catch up. "Just in case you're interested, I think I've got a reason for Hope to come back sooner rather than later... Ike wants footage of her and Carson planning the wedding. And it's got to happen this week."

I stop. "He wants Hope on Georgia's show?"

Evie nods.

"That's a huge opportunity for her—*them*." I'm trying my hardest to forget Hope, but I can't stop the buzz of excitement that shoots through me at the thought of her being here *this week*.

"Huge. I think Carson is underestimating how big his business is going to blow up with this wedding being televised. He should hire Hope permanently." Evie shrugs her scarf tighter. "Anyway, if you've really been thinking about her since this summer, I thought you might like a heads up."

I huff a frustrated laugh and a cloud of breath hangs in the air. “I appreciate the information. Wish I knew what to do with it.”

“You’ll figure it out.”

We walk toward the front porch, but I stop before we get there and face her. “Why didn’t she tell me about Charly from the beginning?”

“So many reasons, Seb, and none of them really have to do with you.”

Ike, the director, yells from inside, and we continue our walk to the open doorway. I hold back the plastic sheeting and let Evie go through first.

“She didn’t tell anyone here,” she says. “I know it doesn’t feel that way, but I’m the reason the few people who did know knew at all.” Her eyes dart to the frozen ground, then back to me.

“You’ve got to understand how difficult it was for her to leave Charly for what she thought was going to be two months,” Evie goes on. “I think she didn’t want people to judge her for doing it, but it was too hard for her to even talk about Charly. You may be a small part of why she left. She didn’t want things to get complicated. But ultimately, she missed Charly too much to stay.”

I follow Evie into the construction zone that used to be a beach cottage, considering everything she tells me. I want to understand, but I’m still hurt. I get why Hope didn’t tell me,

but I also don't like the idea that I was a complication. Something to leave behind instead of to figure out.

“So she'll bring Charly with her?” It seems like a dumb question after everything Evie just told me, but I think I want to meet this kid.

“Yes. That I know for sure. Even though it will make planning Yulefest and the wedding harder, she won't leave her again.” Evie reaches the coffee station, and we find the Britta's cups with our names on them.

One of the perks of being on set is free coffee from Breakfast at Britta's. Adam's construction crew is hard at work around us, as I slip off my coat and tuck it in a tote to keep it from getting covered in sawdust.

Georgia waves to us from across the room where she's getting her makeup touched up by Amber. She motions for Evie to grab her coffee. I follow her to Georgia with the questions I still have.

“Why didn't she bring her this summer?” I say over the sounds of nail guns and hammers.

But I don't say it quiet enough, because as soon as Georgia reaches for the coffee Evie hands her, she says, “Are you talking about Hope?”

Evie nods and sips while she talks. “Charly has a ton of therapists and doctors she goes to. Her mom and our sister Ashley were willing to handle them this summer, and they'd do it again. At least, I hope they will, and that knowing she'll

only be here a little over three weeks before they can bring Charly will be enough to convince her to do it.”

“Charly can’t miss therapy for a few weeks?” I ask.

Georgia shakes her head in the middle of Amber patting her nose with something. “Charly could lose progress she’s made, even in that short amount of time.”

“Plus...” Evie’s sigh lets me know this is a problem she’s thought a lot about. “Charly’s got all these health problems too. Severe asthma. Something with her eyes where they worried the retina could detach, but she’s grown out of that. But other things that crop up out of nowhere. She needs to be close to doctors.”

Georgia smacks her freshly lipsticked lips. “Hope’s in a bind. She’s got to get something figured out before she can come here.”

“That’s a tough spot.” I stare at my coffee cup, wishing I could help.

“And it puts us all in a tough spot,” Evie says. “Carson can’t do everything here on his own. I’m worried he’ll have to hire someone else who can be in Paradise.”

“What kind of therapy does she need?” I take the lid off my coffee and sip slowly.

“Occupational and speech. She’s got developmental delays in those areas,” Evie answers.

I nod, like my pulse isn’t racing.

I think I might have an answer to this problem for Hope. I may still be mad she didn't tell me about Charly, but she's got an opportunity here with Carson that she can't miss.

Ike calls for her and Georgia on set, and the conversation ends there. But my mind is turning with ideas.

I take another sip of my coffee, then wander toward the utility room where the electrical box is located.

I don't want to have feelings for Hope, especially not when she's got a kid to take care of. She deserves someone who knows how to take care of someone besides himself. Someone who has enough love for her and her daughter. Someone who's had a father to teach him how to be a dad.

I'm not that guy.

But that doesn't change the fact that I messed up. She came here feeling like she'd be judged for having a kid and leaving her. Then I told her I wasn't interested in anyone who might want to settle down and have kids. Even if we were just having fun, which had to hurt. If she did have real feelings for me, like I have—*had*—for her, then I made her feel like I didn't think she was worth my time because she's a mom.

That guts me.

And I've got to do something to fix it. I want Hope to have the opportunity to show everyone what she can do. I want her to get her dream.

The cameras are off right now to set up for the next scene. *My* scene. Where I get to talk about wires and electrical boxes

and everything else that's part of the rough-in stage of construction. Easy stuff I know how to do. Easier than trying to figure out how to get closure with this relationship.

As contradictory as it sounds, helping get Hope here might do it. I can make up for what I did to her and move on.

There's enough noise going on inside that no one notices me go outside to make a phone call. But even with all the hammering and sawing, I make sure to go far enough away from the house that no one will overhear me.

Correction.

So no one will overhear Mom.

"Sebastian!" she cries after picking up on the first ring. "Why are you calling in the middle of the day? What's wrong? You're supposed to be on the TV right now."

Her words climb up and down, like a Vivaldi concerto, accented with Italian, her first language.

"Nothing's wrong Mamma." My own voice slips into an Italian accent. I barely speak the language, but the accent shows up whenever I talk to my mom. "But I know someone who could use your help."

Without missing a beat, she switches from concern for me to concern for a stranger. "Who? Who needs my help? I don't know what I can do for anybody, but I'll help how I can."

"You remember I told you about that girl Hope? This summer?" I glance over my shoulder to make sure no one is listening.

“The one who left without telling you?” Her voice switches again. Only this time it’s her mafiosi tone. “You want me to do something for the girl who broke your heart?”

“She didn’t break my heart, Ma.”

“Don’t tell me she didn’t break your heart! You pouted for weeks! You’re still pouting!”

I pull the phone from my ear. The noise inside has stopped, and the three guys on the construction crew all look at me through the spaces between the two by fours.

“Ma! Ma!” I quickly walk to the other side of the lawn, but even that may not be enough distance. “I’m fine. I’m not pouting. She’s got a kid. That’s why she left.”

It takes a few seconds for my words to register, then suddenly Mom goes quiet. “She has a child? She didn’t tell you? It’s not yours is it?”

“Come on, Mamma. Of course it’s not mine. The kid’s three years old, or something like that.” I kick at the frozen grass under me. The snow from the other night didn’t stick for long, so everything is brown and ugly now. My coffee’s gone cold, and I left my coat inside.

“But you want it to be your kid? You still like this girl?” The only thing worse than Mom’s loud voice is her soft whisper. It sneaks right to my heart.

“No I don’t want her to be my kid.” I don’t answer the second part of the question.

“It’s a girl?”

“Yeah. Her name’s Charly.”

“Charly! What kind of name is that for a girl? That’s a boy name.” Loud Mom is back, and I exhale with relief.

“I know, Mamma. I didn’t name her though.” A movement catches my attention, and my eyes dart to Ike the director walking out of the production crew’s trailer.

He points to me and yells, “You’re up!”

“And what is it you want help with for this girl with the boy name?”

“She needs therapy. Occupational and speech. And someone to take care of her while Hope works. She’ll be working a lot.”

I hear the sharp inhale on the other end and know Mom won’t say no.

“She wants me to help?” Her question is laced with excitement and hope.

“She doesn’t know you can, but I thought I’d tell her you could, if it’s okay with you.” I make my way slowly back to the house.

“If it’s okay? Why are you wasting time asking me this instead of telling Hope she has someone here to help her? Of course it’s okay. What a silly question.”

Mom keeps talking, right over my “I’ve gotta go.” She’s still talking when I end the call, and I’m smiling again.

I don’t even care if I look stupid. I’ve found a solution to Hope’s problem. She’ll have someone to help her with Charly.

Who cares if I still don't have a solution to how not to fall for her again?

I mean, I *should* care.

Because making sure she has to come to the house where I live every day is not going to make it easy to avoid her. And avoiding her might be the only way not to fall for her again.

Who am I kidding?

She's "avoided" me for five months, and I'm still thinking about her.

Chapter 4

Hope



I've lived in Wichita my whole life, but the three weeks I spent in Paradise has left me longing for mountains. There's too much space to fill in Kansas and the landscape stretches endlessly in front of me as I drive home from Charly's eye appointment.

It went well. Her eyes aren't improving, but they're not getting worse either, so that's a blessing.

Now I just have to figure out how to pay for her new glasses. She's grown in the last year and needs new frames.

That's on top of paying for her weekly speech and physical therapy sessions. Some of the occupational stuff I could do at home if I weren't working two jobs. Or if Mom would stay home long enough to do the exercises with Charly. But, as good as Mom is with Charly, consistency is not one of her strengths. She'll drop everything to go to lunch or shopping with friends, happy to take Charly with her, but also never in one place for long.

"What do you think, baby girl?" I glance at Charly in the rearview mirror. She waves her arms up and down while smiling out the window. "Are we excited about new glasses?"

"I see, Mama." She kicks her legs and tugs against her car seat restraints.

"Tell Mama what you see."

Charly babbles words that sound like "tree, flowers, car," but it's hard to tell.

Doctors and therapists say Charly's developmentally delayed by at least a year. So, while she should be talking in full sentences, she's still working on stringing words together.

The good news is, with therapy, she may eventually catch up to her peers. The bad news is, therapy is expensive, and state insurance only covers some of what Charly needs.

If not for my parents covering most of our living expenses, I couldn't do it. They never say anything, but I know it's a burden on them.

Charly's dad, Derek, has reached out more often in the past six months. I've never asked for any child support, and he's never offered, but lately he's talked about getting back together. If he'd said anything like that in the first year after Charly was born, I would have taken him back. But not anymore.

Not that I never think about it. If I got back together with Derek, she'd have a dad. A disinterested one, but still a dad. And my parents wouldn't have to support me. I'd have a different sort of independence ... and dependence. For as long as I could stand it... and then what?

I know we're not a good fit. He's a good guy in a lot of ways, but we have hugely different worldviews. He wouldn't want me to pursue a career—he's very conservative that way but he'll never make enough money to give Charly the kind of life I want her to have. A life where I can afford specialized treatments for her asthma or longer, one-on-one therapy sessions.

Derek really isn't an option. But it's taken me long enough to find good therapists and doctors for Charly that leaving doesn't feel like a good option either.

Charly is singing something that sounds like *Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star* when my phone rings and Evie's face lights up my screen from its holder on the dashboard.

"Hey," I say, relieved to have someone to take my mind off my worries.

When Evie *had* to spend time at our house because of her parents' custody agreement, we got along, even though she's seven years older and made no secret about the fact she didn't like my mom. But when she went away to college and grad school, she didn't visit anymore, and we lost touch beyond anything but holiday greetings.

It's only been in the last year or so that Evie's shown a real interest in being part of my life again. And even though Evie's talked to me about Charly and to Charly over the phone, she still hasn't met her in person. For the first couple years of Charly's life, she thought Charly was a boy. I guess Dad didn't mention the gender when he told Evie about Charly after she was born.

But since Evie met Adam, things have been better with our dad. Her dad, really, but Glen raised me, so he's always been more than a stepdad to me. I think Evie resented Dad for that, so it's a pretty big deal that our relationship is as good as it is. I also think part of the reason she hooked me up with Carson was to patch things up with Dad.

“Hey yourself.” Her voice is light and friendly. This is the best thing that came out of my weeks in Paradise—the easy banter that’s developed between us. “Are you sitting down? I’ve got amazing news for you.”

“I’m driving. Say hi to Charly.”

“Hi Charly!”

I look back to see Charly smiling and looking around for her Aunt Evie. They’ve been FaceTiming regularly since this summer when I talked to Charly every night while I was in Paradise.

“She says hi back, and she can’t wait to meet you. Only four weeks.”

“Or sooner.” Evie lets her words hang in the air, strung with suspense.

“What? You can’t move the date.” Panic rises to my throat with the thought she or Georgia may want to change things that can’t be changed. Carson hasn’t said anything to me about it, and we already have so much that still needs to get done, my chest tightens just thinking about it.

Evie laughs. “Are you crazy? The producers would kill us.”

I breathe a sigh of relief. “If they didn’t Carson and I might.”

“Hope.” I glance at my screen in time to see Evie’s grin grow even wider. “They want you in the wedding episode.”

“What are you talking about? Why would anyone care about having me in Georgia’s wedding special?” I turn from the

paved highway down the gravel road leading to Mom and Dad's old farmhouse.

“They want footage of the pre-wedding planning, and Georgia and I both said that has to include you and Carson.” Her eyes are wide enough to fill her whole face as she pulls in her lips.

I'm so focused on processing what she's said that I've slowed to a crawl. “Really?”

Evie nods.

Charly hums in the back seat as we bounce over a pothole-covered road.

“It took some convincing, but Hope! You get what a huge opportunity this is, right? It's one thing for Carson's company to be in the credits, but when viewers have faces to put with the incredible work you've done, his business is going to blow up the way every other business in Paradise has since Georgia's show.”

I park my car and look hard at Evie. “If it does, you think he could hire me full time?”

It's not really a question. I've talked through the possibility with her and Carson separately a dozen times. They both want it as much as I do.

“Exactly.” Her confidence this will happen radiates across the screen and the thousand miles between us.

I let out a nervous laugh and Charly yells, “swing!” and points to the swing she loves—the same one I loved as a kid.

“Too cold today, baby,” I say and her lip juts out.

“Swing!” she shouts again, warning me a meltdown is coming.

I check the temp in my car dashboard. We have time for one quick push on the swing if it’s not too cold.

Thirty-nine degrees.

I decide to risk it.

Adrenaline is pumping through my veins, and I need to release it somehow. I can’t just pick up and head to Paradise. I’ve got to think things through, even if every impulse is telling me to say yes.

“Hold on,” I say to Evie. “I’m going to switch you to my AirPods.”

After I’ve made the switch, I zip Charly’s coat up tight and pull up her hood before walking to the swing.

“Okay. Give me all the details, but make it fast.” I sit Charly on my lap, holding her around the waist, and push the swing back and forth with my feet. “I’ve got to get Charly fed and into bed before she loses it. She’s had therapy and a doctor’s appointment today so she’s really tired.”

“Look, I know Carson has been begging you to come out to help with Yulefest. Between that event and my wedding, people will see how talented you are. The producers want to include footage of you decorating and planning.” Evie’s words rush out so fast, they barely register.

“I’d actually be on TV?” I push back on tiptoe, holding back the momentum of the swing, Charly clutched in my lap.

“If you want to be, yeah. Especially if you get here soon.” Evie talks fast and my pulse picks up speed to keep pace.

“Swing, mama, swing!” Charly cries.

Evie raises her voice over Charly’s. “Once this airs, there will be so many people wanting to book the venue and Carson. He needs you now, and he’ll need you even more afterward! But even if you decide not to stay in Paradise, you’ll have serious credentials to start your own wedding planning business.”

Evie stops. I blink, then let the swing go.

I pump my legs gently, careful not to go too high while holding Charly in my lap. Evie’s words circle my brain. I’m ready to run inside, pack my bags, and leave tonight for Paradise.

Instead, I clutch Charly tighter and slow the swing.

“I can’t leave Charly,” I say to Evie, resolute, but angry at myself for feeling as disappointed as I do.

“That’s the best part.” Evie’s voice hasn’t lost any of its brightness, but I won’t allow myself to be sucked into it. “You don’t have to. You can bring her.”

I shake my head, and cup my hand around the one Charly’s wrapped around the swing’s chain. “She can’t miss her therapy appointments. She could regress.”

“Listen, you’ve said she could do most of it at home, right? In the right environment?”

“Yeah,” I answer slowly, still not willing to let her get my hopes up.

“What if I told you there’s someone here in Paradise who has years of experience doing the kind of therapy Charly needs? And she’s willing to watch her as often as you need,” Evie sounds breathless.

Or maybe that’s me.

“Swing, Mama, swing!” Charly cries louder.

But I’m frozen.

“For how much?” I ask.

“Next to nothing. Her name’s Gia, and she has a preschool here that includes accommodations for kids with special needs. Since Charly will only be here for six weeks or so, she’ll prorate what she usually charges. It’ll cost you a couple hundred dollars, at most.” I can hear the smile in Evie’s voice.

Because how could I turn down this kind of offer? I pay more than a couple hundred dollars a month for therapy alone, and she’s basically handing me the key to all my dreams.

And I want to say yes so badly, but I learned my lesson about being impulsive when I ended up pregnant. I don’t have that luxury anymore.

“Evie, that’s such a kind offer, and I really appreciate it, but Mom’s the equivalent of an entire village, which is what I

need to take care of Charly.” I press my lips to the top of Charly’s head, then reposition her on my lap.

“Hope, I can be your village. And so can Adam, and Georgia, and Zach, and all the Thomsens. We can find a way to make this work if you’ll trust us. It’s four weeks—three leading up to the wedding and then a few days afterward to finish anything the producers need for filming.”

I give into Charly’s cries, push off, and let the swing go a little higher than before. “Tell me more about this Gia person,” I say cautiously. “Her name sounds familiar, but I don’t remember meeting her.”

I hear the hesitation in Evie’s voice before she says a word, but finally she answers. “She’s Sebastian’s mom.”

“Seb?” I swallow hard, pushing back the guilt that rises every time I think about him. I should have told him about Charly. I should have said goodbye.

“Yep. This was his idea. He’s the one who convinced his mom to do it, although it didn’t take much convincing. Gia’s thrilled about it.”

Evie keeps talking, but I’m stuck on the part about Seb making the biggest obstacles to my going back to Paradise disappear.

I’m still thinking about it long after I tell Evie I’ll be there on Monday. Long after I take Charly inside. Long after I’ve told myself to stop thinking about Seb and go to sleep.

Chapter 5

Sebastian



The smell of Mom's lasagna hits me before I walk through the outside door into the mudroom, and my stomach immediately responds with a growl. Nobody makes lasagna like my mom. She brought the family recipe with her when she moved here from Italy after marrying my dad. Not on a recipe card or anything. Just in her head. Like all her recipes.

When I moved back in with Mom a year ago to buy Sparks Electric from Grandpa, while also saving money to buy my own house someday, her cooking softened the blow my ego took. A grown man living with his mom is not my best look. At least my bedroom isn't in the basement.

The smell of garlic, tomato, and sausage fills the air in the mudroom, even though the door to the kitchen is closed. I drop my coat and toolbox on the bench, slip off my boots, and in my best Puerto Rican accent call, "Lucy, I'm home!"

My mom used to watch *I Love Lucy* reruns growing up in Italy and always says my dad reminded her of a blonde Desi Arnaz, mostly because, in her words, "his Italian was so bad it could have been Spanish."

My younger sister, Stella, meets me in entryway to the kitchen and eyes the pile of stuff I left on the floor. "Dude, at least hang up your coat."

Living with Mom didn't get easier when Stella moved back in six months ago.

"Don't boss your brother, Stella," Mom calls from her spot at the stove. "I'll pick it up later. Come give your mamma a

kiss.”

I shoot Stella a smirk as I pass her. She rolls her eyes before going to the mudroom, hanging up my coat, and tucking my toolbox and boots under the bench.

“I have news,” Mom says after I kiss her cheek.

“Oh yeah? What is it?” I open the oven and carefully lift the tinfoil covering a casserole dish. Cheese bubbles, and I inhale the delicious smell.

“Get out of there!” Mom swats my hand, and my fingers brush the hot dish.

“Ouch! Ma!”

“That’s what you get for sticking your hand in my oven.” She wipes her hands on her apron, then goes back to her pan of garlic broccolini. “Stella, set the table.”

“Why can’t Seb set the table? I do it every night.” Stella puts her hand on her hip, but with one look from Mom, she takes three plates out of the cupboard.

“Your brother has been working all day. He’s tired.”

“I’ve been working all day too!” Stella scoops utensils from the drawer with an angry clatter.

With both hands, Mom waves away Stella’s protests. “What you do isn’t hard work, except on your brain. It takes no muscle to make your videos and socialist media.”

“*Social* media, Ma,” Stella says with a heavy sigh. “And my work is hard too.”

“It’s true, Ma,” I boost myself on the counter and steal a piece of garlic bread from the basket there. “Her thumbs get very tired from all that texting and posting.”

Stella glares at me and reaches for her own piece of bread. Mom swats her hand, and she drops it back in the basket. “Seb has one!” she cries, shaking her hand.

When Mom turns her back, I grab another piece of bread and hand it to Stella. Mom’s always tougher on her than she is on me, because, in her words, *it’s tougher to be a woman than a man*. She wants Stella to be able to handle whatever comes her way, just like Mom had to do when Dad died, and she had five-year-old me and baby Stella on the way.

But she also gives Stella the hugs and kisses she knows Stella loves. Mom is soft on her in all the ways Stella needs.

With bread poking out of my cheeks, I say, “Tell me your news, Mamma.”

She opens the oven and pulls out the lasagna. Steam spirals from the top when she takes off the foil, then places it on the table set for three. I hop off the counter, grab a fork, and sit in front of it.

“Don’t touch! It must sit!” Mom snatches the fork from me and tucks it in her apron pocket. She knows me too well to put it back in front of me. “Go wash up. Come back in ten minutes when it’s ready.”

“Fine.” I push out of my chair and go upstairs to wash my hands. There’s no way I can stay anywhere near the lasagna

without digging into it before it's time, so I spend ten minutes scrolling through TikTok before going back downstairs.

“News, Ma,” I say as soon as I sit down.

Stella is already at the table, but Mom still bustles around the kitchen, making all the final touches for dinner.

“I talked to your friend today, even though she broke your heart,” she says nonchalantly, but my eyes dart to Stella whose lip pulls into a satisfied grin. “A thing you probably deserved after all the hearts you’ve broken.”

“Please, Ma.” I scrape my hands through my hair and lace them behind my head, pretending I’m not going crazy wanting to know if my plan to help Hope is working.

Mom has a gift for stretching a one-sentence answer into an hour-long story. And at the rate this story is going, I’m not going to end up being the hero I’d hoped to be.

Not that my plan is perfect. I don’t know if Charly is in a pre-school specifically for kids with special needs. She won’t find that here—there’s not enough need. But Mom has the training to teach kids with special needs, so whenever kids in Paradise need extra help, they go to Mom’s pre-school.

“She’s such a nice girl,” Mom goes on. “We talked about Charly—her daughter with the boy’s name—and how she can come to my pre-school, and we’ll do the therapy she needs, and I can help take care of her as much as she needs.” Mom sets the bread on the table, but when I reach for another piece, I get the same treatment Stella did. “Wait for grace!”

“So Hope is coming?” I run my suddenly clammy palms down my thighs.

“She’ll be here Monday.” Mom takes her place at the head of the table and clasps her hands together.

“Monday?” I cough.

“Wait. Is this Evie’s stepsister?” Stella’s grin grows into a full-blown smile. “You still like her?”

“I barely know her,” I mumble over the sound of my brain exploding. *Hope will be here on Monday.*

“Yeah, but you’re not over her. I can tell.” Stella’s voice bounces off all four kitchen walls, like I needed my personal business broadcast in stereo.

“Shut up, Stella.”

“Leave your brother alone.”

Mom makes the sign of the cross. Stella and I quickly follow, bowing our heads just before Mom mutters a quick prayer. She ends, as she always does, with a plea for my father—who never converted—to be granted peace and rest.

Most Catholics don’t pray for their dead at every meal, but Mom has always done things her own way, even before she eloped with Dad while he was based in Italy.

“Don’t worry, Sebastian,” Mom says, which is my cue to worry. “I told her all the reasons you are afraid of single mothers.”

“Maaaaa, nooo.” I moan and tip my head back as she scoops lasagna onto my plate. “I’m not *afraid* of them.”

“Not like they’re scary or will hurt you.” She looks to Stella here. “What’s the word when someone is scared of someone else for no reason besides they seem stronger?”

“Intimidated.” Stella’s stares at me, a smug smile playing on her lips as she jabs her fork into her lasagna.

“Yes! That’s it! Single moms intimidate Sebastian!” Mom claps her hands together with satisfaction. “I told your Hope that it’s my fault. I did too much. I was too strong. You think a woman can do everything by herself because I chose not to marry again after your dad died.”

I shake my head; my cheeks are hotter than the oven I stuck my hand into minutes ago. “I’m *not* afraid of them.”

Mom grasps my wrist and leans close. “I didn’t marry again not because I didn’t need someone, but because I could never love anyone like I loved your father.”

Stella’s smile falls and I’m forced to meet Mom’s eyes. “Love like we had only strikes once. I knew that the minute I saw Erik for the first time.” Her face goes softer, and her grip on me loosens. “The way he looked at me with those deep blue eyes, like he saw everything in me, all the way to my core. And his muscles, the way he would make them look bigger, showing off for me...”

“Mamma,” Stella warns, but Mom is back on the military base in Italy where she and Dad met.

“He was so handsome. And so strong. But gentle. The first time we—”

“Ma!” Stella and I shout together, bringing Mom back to the dinner table instead of ... wherever it was she was going.

“When lightning like that strikes, you don’t run from it,” she says to me.

“I don’t want kids, Mamma.” I stick my fork in the lasagna, wanting to feel hungry for it again, but the moment may have passed.

“When lightning strikes, you don’t run from it!” she repeats more forcefully. “I didn’t raise you to be afraid.”

Stella scoffs. “You did raise him to be a man-child. He can’t even pick up after himself. How’s he supposed to take care of a kid?”

“Hush!” Mom orders, but I nod in agreement with my sister. One of the hardest things about living with her is that she babies me. I’ve quit telling her she doesn’t have to pick up after me.

“You can learn those things, just like you can learn to be a father even though you didn’t have one.” Mom unfolds her napkin and smooths it over her lap. “You had plenty of other examples. Your grandfather. Your Uncle Pete...” she waves away the rest of her thought and nods toward my food. “Now eat before everything gets cold.”

I take a bite of my food and chew over what Mom has said. I want to believe her, but her faith in me isn’t enough to cast

away all the doubts I have about being a father.

She may be right that I could learn how to do it, but there's no guarantee I wouldn't end up leaving a family way too soon, just like my dad did.

That's the thing I'm afraid of. Leaving a kid fatherless through no choice of my own.

And if a kid has already been fatherless once, it seems like a double whammy if it happens again.

So I try to push away any thoughts about Hope beyond the fact that I did a good thing making it possible for her to come back to Paradise. She'll get the opportunity she deserves, and I'll get the closure I need.

But what I can't forget is... lightning struck the first time I laid eyes on Hope.

Chapter 6

Hope



The sun peeks its yellow rays over the wheat field stretched across the horizon as Dad and I wheel my suitcases outside. While we load the car, Charly clings to Mom, watching from the big picture window. Or maybe it's the other way around: Mom clings to her.

"You want some help with those?" Derek asks, shifting only slightly but not moving from his comfortable position leaning against his truck.

"Nope," Dad answers briskly.

"Thanks though." I offer Derek a quick smile.

If he hadn't shown up to say goodbye to the kid he's only decided to acknowledge in the past year, I think Mom and Dad would both be fighting me more about leaving. They've never liked him. I don't blame them, and I'm not happy he showed up either.

But aside from Mom and Dad being more willing to let me go so I don't get sucked back into a relationship with Derek, this job with Carson has helped me see I can take care of Charly and myself. Even if it doesn't work out long term, I can find something else that will. I don't ever again have to think about Derek as an option to help me get out on my own.

What might be ideal is if this job works out in a way I can stay in Paradise. The further Charly and I are from Derek, the less likely he is to even think about us.

Dad and I walk back inside, and I wave for Derek to follow.

“Okay, Charly-girl! Time to go!” I say cheerfully, but it’s all a show. If I look at Mom, I’ll have tears to join hers.

I reach for Charly, but Mom holds her tighter. “I’ll buckle her in.”

“It’s pretty cold out there, Mom...”

She’s already on her way out the door, turning her back to Derek as he reaches to tickle Charly’s leg. I follow behind her, right back into the cold I just left behind.

“Did you get the snacks I packed for her?” Mom asks. “She likes the little cereal boxes of Fruit Loops best. Right out of the box. Not in a Tupperware.”

“I know, Mom.” I don’t let Charly have Fruit Loops—too much sugar—but I appreciate that Mom wants to keep her happy.

And to be honest, I’ll probably let Charly have them. We’ve got a long drive ahead of us. Over fourteen hours, if we don’t stop. Which is impossible with a toddler, so we’ll be staying the night in a cheap motel outside of Denver.

An awkward silence falls over us when we reach the car. It’s too cold for long goodbyes, but everyone’s too sad to make our farewell quick.

“It’s not too late to change your mind about leaving her,” Mom blurts when I open the back door where Charly’s seat is. “You’ll be able to work better without her, and she’s going to be with babysitters all day anyway.”

“She’s going to be with one sitter who’s also trained in the kind of occupational therapy Charly needs.” My voice is too stern, but I’m repeating what Mom already knows as much for me as for her.

I’ve questioned my decision to take Charly with me as many times as Mom has. It makes more sense to leave her with the doctors and therapists who know her so well and the grandma who loves her more than anything. I feel selfish taking her away from all of that.

But I’m her mom, and my mom-instincts are telling me that Charly needs to be with me as much as I need to be with her.

“Can I tell her goodbye, Hope?” Derek holds out his arms for Charly, and Mom reluctantly passes her to him.

But Charly starts crying the minute he takes her, so he quickly passes her back.

“You’ll be back in six weeks?” Derek says to me. “I’d like her to know me better.”

Dad—who’s not a confrontational person, but he is protective—lays a heavy hand on Derek’s shoulder. “You’re the one who gave up custody when she was born. The decision is Hope’s now.”

“She’ll be back in six weeks. Charly’s got doctors’ appointments,” Mom answers for me.

I press my lips together. If things go the way I’m hoping they will, maybe Carson will offer me a full-time job and I can

make a new life for Charly and me in our own place. Maybe in Wichita. Maybe in Paradise. Maybe somewhere else.

Now isn't the time to bring up the possibility of not returning to Wichita, let alone this house, with Mom. First, because it might not happen and second because I can't imagine raising Charly without her and Dad's help. They have been here every step of the way, even before Derek signed away custody and any responsibility for Charly.

"We'd better get her in the car," Mom says, nudging Derek out of the way. "She's starting to shiver."

While Mom buckles Charly in, I hug Dad goodbye.

"You take care. Tell Evie I love her." When he pulls away, he glances at Mom who's covering Charly with kisses. "I know this is a big deal. Your mom does too. Make this the start of everything you want, even if it means not coming back here," he says soft enough that Mom won't hear, but loud enough for Derek.

"Thanks, Dad." I open my car door, and Mom pulls herself away from Charly to hug me.

"Be sure to FaceTime me every night before bedtime so I can sing to her," she says while squeezing me too tight. "And don't be afraid to come home sooner if you need to. Or I can come get her... if it turns out she'll do better here with the doctors and therapists she knows and her Gigi."

There's no doubt in Mom's *if*. She's certain I'm making the wrong choice taking Charly away from her. Which is one more

reason why I need this job to work out. If I'm ever going to be Charly's one and only mom, I need space from my own mom.

I extract myself from Mom's hug and look her in the eyes. "We'll be okay. I've got help there, and we'll see you when you come for the wedding."

Dad pulls Mom gently to his side. "She's got Evie there."

Mom shoots Dad a glare. She and Evie have never had the best relationship.

With a final wave to Derek who looks as anxious to leave as I am, I climb into my old Honda. Mom and Dad wave as I back out of the driveway. Derek waits long enough for me to get to the end before jogging to his truck.

I look back one time as I drive away to see Mom and Dad still standing there waving at us as Derek turns down the street in the opposite direction.

I let out a long, only slightly staggered, breath. "Ready for our adventure, baby?"

"I want Booeey," she answers, her lip quivering.

I quickly pull over and get out her iPad. Within seconds I've pulled up enough downloaded episodes of Bluey to keep her occupied for at least an hour. I hand it to her, along with the Fruit Loops. She smiles, and we're on the road again.

We're halfway to Denver when my phone rings and Carson's number appears on my car dashboard.

“Hi! We’re on the road!” I say as soon as I answer. “We’ve only had to stop twice, so we’re making good time.”

“Girl, that’s good news, because I need you here yesterday!” Carson exclaims.

“I know, but we’re on schedule for the wedding. Even with me not working today and tomorrow.” I turn down the heat. Even though it’s getting colder as we gain elevation, I’m sweating thinking about the pressure I’m already under.

I love working for Carson. He’s been so good about letting me work from Kansas, even though he’s said a million times we’d be more efficient if I were in Paradise. But he runs at full speed all the time, and sometimes I can’t keep up.

“I’m not talking about the wedding anymore. Our workload just doubled. No tripled!” He lets out a harried sigh, and I can almost picture him fanning himself.

“What are you talking about?”

“Yulefest! The mayor just gave me the final schedule, and it’s ridiculous! She wants a Christmas market, *nisse*, *Syvspring*, *Ris a l’Amande*—”

“—Whoa! Slow down, Carson! I don’t know what most of those words mean.” I glance at Charly, asleep in the back seat. Luckily, she has her headphones on and can’t hear Carson’s near-shrieks.

Carson inhales, then exhales and continues in a slower voice, but not necessarily calmer. “Mayor Voglmeyer wants an Advent Yulefest—twenty-four days of Danish-inspired

activities, ending with people dancing around the Christmas trees lining Main Street on December twenty-fourth.”

I let out a soft whistle. “So all those words were Danish things? And we have four weeks to plan a month’s worth of events?”

“Ex-act-ly.” He draws the word out for at least a quarter mile.

“Is she crazy?” My voice has risen an octave above his.

“The short answer is yes,” he huffs. “The long answer is yes, but... we stand to make a lot of money on this.”

And now my interest is piqued. “I’m listening.”

“We get a percentage of every tourist dollar that comes in. People pay to go to the events we plan, and we get a cut. Vendors pay to be part of the Christmas market, and we get a cut. Every business we convince to buy spots in Yulefest advertising, we get a commission.” Carson has gone Leo DiCaprio in *Wolf of Wall Street* on me.

Not that I’ve ever seen that movie, I just imagine that’s who he’s channeling right now.

And I like it—because of the whole bad boy thing—even though Carson’s not my type, and I’m definitely not his. But the thought of bad boys has brought one particular Paradise resident to mind, even though I’ve tried my hardest not to think about a certain Sebastian Sparks.

“I like the money part of this idea, but is it actually doable? In four weeks?” I hope it is because the whole thing sounds

kind of magical. But also exhausting.

“If anyone can make it happen, Hope, it’s us.” Carson has switched to coach-mode now. He’s Coach Taylor, and I’m Tim Riggins.

Or Tim Riggins’s girlfriend. Because, mmm, Tim Riggins. Yum.

And thinking about that dark haired, brown-eyed beefcake brings my thoughts back to the man I don’t want to think about, even though every mile brings me closer to facing him again.

There’s no way I’ll be able to avoid Seb, even if I didn’t owe him both a big thank you for making this temporary move possible for Charly and me and a big apology for not being honest with him about Charly.

“You’ve spreadsheeted the heck out of Evie and Georgia’s double wedding, down to the smallest detail,” Carson continues, and I redirect my thoughts from *Friday Night Lights* and Seb to the wedding details. “You’ve haggled with florists and caterers and even the dress designers. And you’ve done it all from a thousand miles away.”

“I’m still waiting for the florist to confirm she can get canna lilies in December. She’s giving me the runaround.” I could list a hundred other tiny details I’m worried about, but that’s the biggest one.

“But you will!”

“You’re right! I will!” *Clear eyes, full heart, can’t lose!* I’ve been completely Coach-Taylored, and I’m ready to take the field. Who cares if I’m totally inexperienced and have to create all the plans for a new playbook?

“And we will plan the jingle bells out of this Yulefest!” Carson yells.

“Yes, we will!” I shout back.

Charly lets out a yelp of surprise and blinks her sleepy eyes.

“Sorry, baby,” I whisper. “Go back to sleep.”

Her eyes slowly close and her head tips to the side.

“We’ve got this!” I say, but this time in a whisper.

“Yes, we do,” Carson whispers back. “But first, you’ve got to get here.”

“But first I’ve got to get there.” I nod and glance at the green highway sign to the side of the road.

I still have a couple hundred miles to Denver, and then another five hundred tomorrow. I’ve got a lot of road ahead of me, but Charly’s got a lot of *Bluey* to keep her entertained while I think about how to make Yulefest a success.

“Send me the list of activities for Yulefest. I’ll brainstorm tonight and call you tomorrow when I’m on the road again,” I say to Carson before ending the call.

Then I pull up my motivation playlist and scroll to *We are the Champions*. I blast it loud enough to keep my adrenaline flowing, but soft enough for Charly to stay asleep.

For the first time since she was born, I feel like I might be able to achieve the dreams I put aside when I decided to keep her. I don't want to get too excited, but what if this works?

What if this goes as well as Evie and Carson expect it to? What if I catch the break of a lifetime? What if I can be independent and give Charly the life I want her to have?

A hundred questions follow those.

The only one I don't entertain for more than a few seconds is what if Seb hates me for what I did?

That one leaves me too worried to dwell on.

Chapter 7

Sebastian



The sky is already a dark blue sprinkled with the first visible stars when I pull into my driveway. I know this is the day Hope is supposed to arrive, but I'm still surprised when I see a familiar Honda with Kansas plates parked along the grassy curb in front of the house. Coming back to Paradise is one thing. Showing up at my house is another.

The fact she did might be a good sign. The hatchback is still stuffed with blankets and pillows, like she didn't take time to unload before she came over. Maybe she couldn't wait to see me.

Then I see the car seat and know that's not why she's here.

Mom starts taking care of Charly Monday.

So even though I'm not prepared to see Hope again, I grab my tool bag and walk to the side door—just like it's any other day. I'm determined to act like I haven't been counting down the days until she comes back or fighting the feelings I still have for her. Pretending I'm not still wrecked that she kept Charly from me or that I made her feel the way I did about being a single mom.

I drop my bag and coat, then call "Hey, Mamma! I'm home." A little louder than usual because I don't want to surprise Hope.

"Sebastian," she calls back before opening the door into the mudroom. "Hope is here. Come meet Charly."

As soon as Mom walks past me into the mudroom, I have a clear view of Hope and Stella, sitting at the kitchen table. And

she has a clear view of me.

A slow smile creeps across her lips, then suddenly disappears. It's replaced with a crease between her brows, and I follow her gaze to where Mom is hanging up my coat and putting away the boots I've slipped off. There's confusion on her face when she looks back at me, but I'm not sure why.

I follow Mom into the kitchen where the smells of chicken parm—my favorite—fill the air.

“Stop spoiling him, Mom,” Stella says. She adds, “Put your own stuff away,” as I pass her.

I scowl at her, but my cheeks grow warm. I think I've cleared up what Hope's confusion was about. Maybe her mom doesn't wait on her the way Mom does me. It's a bad habit I've slipped easily back into since moving home.

“Hi,” I say to Hope.

She lifts her hand in a wave, looking embarrassed, and I wonder if she's thinking, like I am, about how she left.

“I'm feeding Hope and Charly. They've had nothing but junk food for two days,” Mom says and motions for me to sit.

I slide into a chair, planting myself between Hope and the little girl in the other chair. I may not be dad material, but I can at least meet the kid. I turn to introduce myself to her, but Mom stops me short.

“What are you doing there?” Mom says. “I'm sitting next to Charly. I have to help her eat.”

“Oh! Sorry!” I jump up and move to the seat next to Stella and across from Hope.

Which puts me at a safer distance from her, but also gives me a direct view of her blue eyes and soft waves falling over her shoulders. And already, all I want is to hold her in my arms again.

“I apologize for my son,” Mom says, shaking her head but smiling. “He doesn’t know anything about children.”

“That’s because he’s still a child himself,” Stella says, returning my glare.

“So, this is Charly?” I say to Hope and turn my back to Stella, like that might shut my sister up.

“This is Charly.” Hope turns her gaze away from me toward Charly, but not before her cheeks turn pink.

“Hi Charly.” I wave to the little girl but get a frown in return. She hates me already.

She turns to Hope, and in a little voice says something I can’t understand.

“They’re almost ready, bambolina!” Mom scoops out spaghetti noodles from the pot, and I guess what Charly said had something to do with dinner. “She’ll eat them al dente?”

“She’ll eat them however you make them, Mrs. Sparks,” Hope answers. “Can you say thank you to Mrs. Sparks, Charly girl?”

The little girl's brow creases behind her glasses, and she closes her mouth tight.

"She's in a mood," Hope says, her eyes bouncing from me to Mom.

"Of course she is after traveling two days so far. And call me Gia, please!" She sets a bowl of spaghetti topped with butter and cheese in front of Charly, then bends down to meet her eye-to-eye. "Can you say Miss Gia?"

"Misshia," Charly says, then picks up a handful of noodles.

"Very good!" Mom beams while also prodding Charly to drop the noodles back in her bowl. "Let's try with a fork."

She helps Charly pick up a small plastic fork, then repositions Charly's thumb above her fingers so it's not wrapped around her hand. All the while, Mom explains to Hope that this will help Charly better grip a pencil and improve her fine motor skills.

"Noodles are difficult, but I want her to feel comfortable and happy here," Mom continues as she helps Charly maneuver spaghetti on to her fork. "And food is my language of love."

"Love language, Mamma," Stella says, but Mom waves away her correction.

"Check on the chicken, Stellina." Mom's eyes don't move from Charly as she helps her eat. "That's it, bambolina! Good job!"

I realize Charly is sitting chest-level to the table, and I peek under to see how Mom's made that happen.

She's got some contraption on the chair legs that has raised the whole thing. I don't know where she got it, or why it's better than one of those baby seat things that kids go in, but I know she's got her reasons.

When Dad died, Mom didn't want to leave Stella all day, even with family, so she opened a home daycare. But she found what she was really good at was working with kids who had some kind of disability. Kids who needed physical or other kinds of therapies usually had to be taken all the way to Florence to get what they needed.

Mom decided to get certified as an occupational therapist. Then she opened a preschool closer to the center of town. She brought in a partner who focused on curriculum while she focused on providing occupational therapy, both in school and as an in-home caretaker. In the last few years, she's limited the number of private clients she takes and focused on the preschool.

But now Charly will be her private client. When she's not at Mom's preschool, she'll get one-on-one therapy here with Mom, since we have more room than Evie does, which is where Hope will be staying.

I let my gaze drift to Hope who's watching Mom and Charly so intently, she doesn't notice me watching her. She chews her lip, but I don't think it's from worry. When she wipes a hand under her eye, I know what she's feeling is gratitude.

"You're so good with her already, Gia. I don't know how to thank you." Hope's voice is full of relief.

“My mamma is the best.” Stella kisses the top of Mom’s head, then sets a plate loaded with chicken parmesan, homemade pasta, and Caesar salad in front of Hope.

The next plate is for Mom, then she loads up one more and carries it my way. I’m about to take it when she sets it in her spot, then quickly sits down.

“Where’s mine?”

“On the counter. You can serve yourself.” She takes a huge bite and moans with pleasure.

“Ma,” I complain, but she shakes her head.

“I’m too busy to work out your problems with your sister.” Mom smiles and coos at Charly, encouraging her to use her fork and practice saying Miss Gia.

Hope sends me a questioning glance.

“The reason Mamma is great with toddlers is because she’s had twenty-eight years of practice with Seb. She’s never stopped treating him like a baby.” Stella forks another bite of chicken in her mouth and grins.

Heat floods my face, and I go to the counter to dish up the food there.

“Shut up, Stella.” I scoop a piece of chicken onto my plate but touch the hot dish and burn the side of my hand. “Ouch!” I yelp, then try to shake off the pain.

“I don’t treat him like a baby,” Mom protests. “I only like to do things for him. Just like I order special the make-up and

hair things you like. Besides, you'll both always be my babies."

The rest of the meal is more of the same. Me trying to work up the courage to make conversation with Hope while Stella finds another way to tease me. She's not trying to be mean. This is what we do at dinner. And afterward. And before.

It's pretty much what we do all the time. But it does not work in my favor tonight. It's one thing for Stella and me to have this banter back and forth, something else entirely to have Hope sizing me up based on Stella's insults. The more bad habits of mine that Stella divulges to Hope, the less interested she might be in me.

Not that I want her to be. But just in case, I don't want Stella to ruin any chance I may have.

Even though, with each passing second, I have to be honest with myself that I would like her to be interested. At the same time, I have to be honest that, in those same passing seconds, the idea becomes more and more of a fantasy.

There's no spark in Hope's eyes when she looks at me like there was this summer. Or even like there was when I first walked in the kitchen tonight. And she doesn't grin at me like I've seen her do. She just studies me like she's wondering what she ever saw in me.

She's immune to my charms. I've never had that happen before. A wink and a smile is usually all it takes to get a woman interested in me. That's about all it took this summer to get Hope's attention.

Stella interrupts my thoughts and says, “Shouldn’t you be at the Garden? It’s almost seven.”

“Oh, yeah!” I jump out of my seat.

We’ve got a show tonight—in half an hour. The rest of the guys are probably freaking out I’m not there to set up and mingle with the crowd. Since September, Adam has been closing early on Saturdays so people who have tickets to our show can come hang out with us and eat beforehand.

It was my idea, and we’ve made good money doing it. But Adam only agreed to it if he could stay in the back cooking while I did all the socializing. Which is why Mom always feeds me before I go. I’m too busy talking to eat.

I’m definitely going to hear from Adam about being an hour late. And I still have to change out of my work clothes.

I run upstairs and quickly throw on black, ripped jeans, a black T, and my black leather jacket—I’m going for a theme here. Then I rush back to the kitchen carrying my bass and amp. I’m about to wave goodbye to Hope when I make an impulsive decision.

“Hey, do you want to come to my show tonight?” I ask her, despite knowing I shouldn’t start anything with her again. I should have known I’d crumble the minute I saw her. Hope is not someone you just decide not to be crazy about anymore.

She blinks, then glances at Charly. “I don’t think so, but thanks for the invite.”

“You sure? I’ve got an in with the band,” I joke, hoping it’ll cover how desperate I am for this night not to end. “I can get you in for free.” I throw in a wink, which always gets the girls. In fact, it’s worked on her before.

“What’s she supposed to do with Charly?” The eyeroll in Stella’s voice could out eye-roll Tony Stark, and I do *not* appreciate it.

Especially because she’s right.

“Bring her!” I say, like we get babies to our shows all the time.

Hope shakes her head. “She’d last five minutes before melting down.”

“Mamma can watch her, right Mamma?”

Mom opens her mouth, but Hope is faster. “It’s been a long couple days. I need to get her into her new routine. She’s not great with transitions, so I’m sure she’ll wake up tonight. I need to be there. But, um, thanks.”

She pushes herself up from the table and reaches for Charly. Mom’s still cleaning her up, but Charly climbs into Hope’s arms and lays her head on her shoulder.

“Maybe another time,” I say lamely.

“Maybe.” She offers me an unconvincing smile that’s gone too quickly. “Thank you so much for dinner, and for everything,” she gushes to my mom as she gathers Charly’s things, handing her a tattered stuffed dog, while Mom clears the table.

As they talk, Stella leans into me and mutters. “You don’t have a chance with her, unless you grow up real fast.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I whisper back, waiting for Hope to finish so I can walk her to her car.

“You don’t even know how to take care of yourself. Let alone a kid.” Stella waves to Charly while talking to me under her breath, then bumps my shoulder as she walks out of the room.

And I don’t know if I’m more irritated with Stella for being right or myself for falling right back in love with Hope.

Chapter 8

Hope



I've been searching for a way to apologize to Seb since he walked in the door. Actually, since I walked out the metaphorical door without a word to him. Or even before that when I kept Charly a secret from him.

Even if he hadn't made it possible for me to be here by convincing his mom to be Charly's caretaker, he'd still deserve an explanation and apology for both.

But that's all I can give him. I can't risk losing my heart to him—not after I came so close this summer.

I have Charly to think about. Which means my entire focus must be on my job and creating a future for us. I don't have time for fun, whether it's swimming in the hot spring or kissing Sebastian on his bike.

Or watching him play bass.

No matter how tempting those things and the million other things I'd like to do with him are.

As we step outside, he says, "Let me walk you to your car. The ground is uneven and it's dark out here."

"Thanks," I mutter before an awkward silence falls between us. This is my chance to say I'm sorry, but I can't find the words to explain why I left the way I did or why I wasn't honest with him about having a kid.

When I unlock the car, he opens my door for me, but I've got to put Charly in her seat first. I reach for the back door handle, but he beats me to it. He lets my door close and leans against the hood while I buckle Charly in her car seat.

“I’m glad you’re back,” he says, holding my door open again.

I climb into the front seat and start the car, so Charly doesn’t get too cold.

“Me too.” I take a breath then launch into what I’ve been wanting to tell him. “I should have told you I was leaving, and I should have told you about Charly. Even if what we had was just casual, I shouldn’t have left like I did. I could have at least answered your texts. I’m really sorry.” I stop long enough to take another breath. “And I really appreciate you setting things up with your mom. She’s amazing, and I’m so glad I have someone I can count on to help me with Charly.”

Sebastian gives me his first genuine smile of the night. “I’m sorry too. If I’d known you had Charly, I never would have said anything to make you feel like there’s something wrong with that. But I also get why you didn’t tell me—at least, Evie helped me understand. Consider me helping you and Charly both get here my apology.”

My chest loosens, and I’m able to smile back. I remember why I missed him after I left. “That’s a pretty big apology. I feel like I still owe you.”

He shakes his head. “You don’t owe me a thing.”

I shiver, mostly from the cold, but also with a rush of emotion I don’t want to feel. “Thanks... I should go now.”

“Yeah. Me too.” Sebastian takes a small step back, then stops. “But if you really want to make it up to me...” he

slowly lifts his shoulders in a question. “Maybe we could spend some time together.” He licks his bottom lip and memories of tugging that lip between my teeth flood my brain. “We had a lot of fun together.”

His golden-brown eyes shimmer with the light of my car, and I want to get lost in them. I want to lie in his arms and look at the stars. I want to flirt with him, tempt him and tease him. I want to feel his lips on mine, exploring my mouth with his.

“Mama, I cold. Blankie,” Charly says from the backseat, bringing me back to reality.

I tear my eyes from Sebastian’s. “Blankie is at Aunt Evie’s.” It’s the one thing that got carried in on our quick stop there before coming to meet Gia. “We’ll get it right now. Hold Chilli until we get there.” I hand her the stuffed dog she loves even more than her blanket, and she hugs it tight.

Seb looks at Charly and says, “Your dog’s name is Chilli?”

Charly nods and puts her thumb in her mouth.

And maybe that’s Seb trying to connect with Charly, but it’s not enough for me to forget what he told me this summer or ignore the fact he let his mom wait on him all night.

With my eyes on the steering wheel, I give Sebastian the only answer I can. “I’ve got a kid, Seb. She’s my number one priority; never mind whatever I was trying to do this summer by not mentioning her—I’m so embarrassed about that.” I pause long enough to buckle my seatbelt. “When I’m not

working, I've got to be with her. I don't have time to spend with anyone else." I take a breath. This part is hard, but important. "Especially someone who I have no future with."

Seb nods and steps far from the open door, but he keeps his hand on the corner of it. "I know what I said about no kids, and I'm sorry. But I haven't stopped thinking about you since you left, and I want to prove to you that you're not some casual summer hook-up... I care about you."

"Seb," I say more forcefully this time before he can say anything else. "I have *a kid*. Nothing is just about me and you. Everything I do is for her. I made a mistake this summer because casual is not something I can do. Anyone who is part of my life has to be a part of hers."

Charly whimpers from the backseat, and I know tears aren't far behind.

"I've got to go, and so do you. Enjoy your show."

Seb lets go, and I shut my door. But before I back away, I hear his words through the glass, "I'm not giving up."

As hard as I try to brush off his words, my pulse doesn't listen. It races through my body, the pounding competing with Charly's fussing the entire drive back to Evie's.

But I don't know if it's Sebastian still showing interest in me or the thought of Sebastian himself that's sending adrenaline coursing through my veins.

Because there's a difference between the two. I mean, who doesn't like the excitement of being pursued? Not by a

predator, obviously. But by the kind of guy who makes you feel pretty and sexy, but also safe. Especially when you're a woman who spends a lot of time wiping little mouths and bottoms, which is not sexy *at all*.

I love Charly with all my heart, and I'm grateful for her every day. But having a baby when I was still a teenager means I skipped right over those years I could have been dancing and dating, chasing and being chased. One of the main reasons I liked hanging out with Sebastian last summer is that I got to experience all of that. I got to be young and carefree. I got to be a typical twenty-one-year-old.

But I also enjoyed being with Sebastian because he's a good guy. For all his swagger, he's pretty sweet and thoughtful. At least he was with me. Opening doors, making sure I was comfortable, never crossing any boundaries I put up.

That's not necessarily the Sebastian I saw tonight. He was sweet with his mom, and even with his sister, despite all the teasing between the two of them. But he expected to be waited on and taken care of. He didn't offer to help. He didn't even put his own coat and shoes away.

I don't know if that's because his mom dotes on him, or if his worldview is that a man is the king of his castle. No judgement if it is. I grew up in that kind of house.

But I've already got one person who requires a lot of care, and probably always will. If I'm ever going to add another person to our little family, I want it to be a partner, not someone else to take care of.

And Sebastian barely acknowledged Charly. As much as I might love the idea of him wanting to spend time with me, I don't have that kind of time and he doesn't seem to understand that.

Only the porch light is on when I pull into Evie's driveway. She has the top floor of the old Victorian house that's been turned into a condo. Adam has the bottom unit. Since he's in the same band as Sebastian, and they're performing at his restaurant, Evie is at the show too.

A part of me wishes I were too, especially when Charly's cries grow louder as I carry her up the stairs to Evie's.

She finally settles down after a bath and story time. By eight o'clock she's asleep, and I have the whole night alone ahead of me.

I'm too restless to watch TV or read a book. Not even TikTok can hold my attention. So I finally do what I know I have to do if I'm going to keep my focus on what's most important while I'm in Paradise.

I pull up Sebastian's number, unblock it, then send him the text I've been subconsciously composing for the last couple hours.

You're a great guy, but you're not ready for the responsibility that comes with being more than my friend. So let's keep it at that, okay? Just friends.

My finger hovers over the send button for a few seconds before I finally press it.

Then I breathe a sigh of relief.

At least, I think it's relief.

I don't let myself think too hard about it. Instead, I take out my laptop and open my Yulefest spreadsheets and tabs.

This is why I'm here.

To pursue my dream job and take care of Charly. That's all I have time for.

Even if I am checking my phone every couple minutes for a reply from Sebastian.

Chapter 9

Sebastian



During our ten-minute intermission, I stay on stage, drinking the beer Britta brings to me while scrolling through my phone. When I see Hope has sent me a text, my pulse skips.

I quickly scan it, then read it more closely.

Then I read it again.

And again.

I've never been sent to the friend zone, but I think this is it. Everything looks the same here—the Garden of Eatin' is still the Garden; Evie is still the only person who can get Adam to smile without trying; Zach and Georgia are still so in love it's gross.

But it *feels* different here. Lonely, even though I'm surrounded by my favorite people. Less exciting, even in the middle of a performance—a thing that pumps me up like nothing else. Dark, even with a spotlight shining on me.

The thing that I admit to myself is I've spent the last five months not only looking forward to Hope coming back to Paradise, but also with the expectation that she'd fall for me all over again as easily as she did the first time. And maybe that would be my revenge for the way she left.

Now I wonder if I was the only one this summer who didn't think our time together was just a casual thing. Maybe I misread the whole thing. Or worse, projected what I was feeling onto her.

Behind me, Bear taps his drums and Carson straps on his guitar. I follow their lead and plug my bass back in.

Bear strikes his cymbals, which is my cue to start in on the opening chords of *Under Pressure*. Which I completely butcher, even though I've been playing this song since I was a kid.

Things don't get any better after that. If I hadn't played an almost perfect set before our break, people might not notice. But my screw-ups are obvious, as is Adam's frustration. These shows are our dress rehearsals for the Jingle Ball. And since we don't have much time to practice together in between them, they need to be good.

I'm just as frustrated with me as Adam is. I should be able to blow off Hope's rejection, but it's hit me hard. I don't have any heart to put into these songs. I left it all on the curb when I told Hope I wasn't giving up.

So do I keep my word? Or do I take what she's telling me at face value and stay right here, firmly planted in the friend zone?

When we play the last song on our set, the crowd applauds, but not like they did after our first set. This applause is weak sauce. Just like my playing, so totally deserved.

The only good thing about my terrible performance is that I've killed the vibe and people leave quickly. If not for that, Adam would be even more annoyed with me.

But he wouldn't be more annoyed than I am with myself. To add to that annoyance, my sister—who showed up half way through the show—is the only person who doesn't leave.

As soon as Adam has locked the door, he walks straight toward the stage and me. “Dude, what was that? You know those songs.”

“I know. I’m sorry. I lost my groove.” I unplug my amp, waiting for Adam to really let me have it.

But he doesn’t say anything else. We all go about packing up our instruments in silence. Everyone else finishes quickly, but Bear and I take down the mics too. Evie and Carson go to the kitchen with Adam to get things cleaned up there while Stella and Britta put up chairs and sweep.

When we’re the last ones on stage, Bear asks in a quiet voice, “What was in the text that got into your head?”

I look at him ready to deny everything, but he raises an eyebrow. That’s all the warning I need to not try and hide it. Bear and I tell each other everything. He’ll know if I try to play off Hope’s text as no big deal—he already knows something’s up.

“Hope’s back,” I say with a sigh.

Bear knows how I feel about her. He’s the one I whined to most after she left.

“I heard.” He nods.

“She’s got a kid.”

“Heard that too.”

“Did you hear she came over to my house today too?”

He shakes his head. “To see you?”

Now it's my turn to shake my head. "To meet Mom."

"She brought her kid?" He winds the mic cord around his arm without taking his eyes off me.

"Yeah." I do the same with the other mic.

"And?"

"And what?"

"You're obviously still into her, but why? You're not ready for kids. Is it because she's not into you?" The innocent look in his eyes is a scam. He knows he's baiting me.

"No...*no*..." I don't think that's it.

Maybe a little bit.

But that's not all of it. I can't put my finger on what it is that draws me to her—maybe because she's fun. She's beautiful. She makes me laugh. I don't know for sure. I only know I'm not going to answer Bear's question.

"You want to start things again; you've got to get to know the kid first." He says this like it should have been obvious to me.

"What are you talking about, 'get to know the kid'? She's two years old. Maybe three. Or four. I don't know." I bag the mic then carry the stand to the closet where we store everything. We could leave it all up, but this is a family restaurant, and Adam worries too much about kids messing with our stuff.

“You could start there. Ask Hope how old she is. Better yet, ask the kid.” Bear follows, his steps heavy behind me.

“Then what?” I ask sarcastically. “Ask about her day? How work was?”

“Maybe not work, but you could ask about school. Or what she likes to watch on TV. Or if she likes Daniel Tiger.” He leans against the closet door frame, blocking my exit.

“Daniel who?”

“Daniel Tiger. It’s a kids’ show.” He crosses his arms, acting casual. Like this is a totally normal conversation for us to have when most of our conversations don’t go beyond hockey or music. Or, lately, Hope.

“How do you know this?” I squeeze past him, feeling way too claustrophobic being questioned in a closet.

Bear shrugs when I glance over my shoulder at him. “It’s not like Paradise isn’t crawling with kids. Half our friends already have a couple of them. I listen when they tell me stuff about them.”

I stop next to the counter and face Bear, pulling my phone from my back pocket. “All right Mr. I-Know-What-You-Should-Do...” I open Hope’s text and shove my phone in Bear’s face. “Tell me what to do about this.”

From half-way across the room, Britta picks up her broom and practically runs to where we are, and Stella follows.

“What to do about what?” she asks, going on her tiptoes to try and see over Bear’s shoulder.

I try to pull the phone away, but Bear takes it from me before I can. He lowers it enough for he and Britta to read it together. They both nod and hmmm, like everything makes sense.

But it doesn't to me, because if I want to hang out with Hope, it should be obvious to her that I want to spend time with her kid—*Charly*—too. At least, sometimes. I mean, I'm the one who got her into Mom's preschool and convinced Mom to help out with childcare too. Isn't that enough indication that I might be willing to get to know her kid?

"You want to be with her, you're going to have to go through the kid," Bear states matter-of-factly before handing my phone back to me.

Stella nods in agreement.

"I told her to bring Charly tonight." I glare at my sister. She was there. She knows I tried. "She said no. Do I do more stuff like that?"

"Dude," Bear closes his eyes and shakes his head.

"Late-night band practice is no place for a child. She told you that." Stella's voice is surprisingly gentle, even though her words aren't.

"You've got to make everything about the kid, not about you," Bear adds. "Show Hope you know how to take care of people."

His deep voice never sounds gentle, but his words usually do. So, even though I don't like what he says right now, I appreciate his confidence in me.

“Yeah, okay. I do care about other people. I can show her that.”

“Caring about other people is different than *taking care* of them,” Stella says. Again, the gentleness in her voice does not match the barbs in her words.

“I take care of other people,” I mutter, shifting uncomfortably.

Stella shakes her head while Bear finds whatever is outside the window very interesting. Meanwhile, I’m thinking about Mom picking up after me, even though I’m perfectly capable. I’m just being lazy.

At the same time, Adam, Evie, and Carson walk through the kitchen door. Adam shuts off all the lights except the ones in the entry way. “Time to go.”

“We’ve got to fix Seb’s Hope problem first,” Stella says.

Carson clasps his hands together, but Adam rolls his eyes while Evie narrows hers at me.

“Are you trying to win her back?” Carson asks excitedly.

“No,” I blurt at the same time Bear nods and Stella says, “Yep!”

“And what’s the problem?” Carson asks, even more animated.

Adam tugs on Evie’s elbow, but she crosses her arms and takes her narrowed eyes next level into a sharp glare.

“He has to learn how to adult,” Stella offers, very unhelpfully.

“I know how to adult. I run my own business; I’m lighting up this whole town for Yulefest...” I search for something, *anything*, else. “I bake.”

“I do love your pumpkin bars,” Britta says and offers me a side hug so full of pity, I almost resent it.

“He needs to prove to Hope he’s responsible. You know, dad material.” Bear says, only slightly more helpful than Britta’s hug.

“And are you?” Evie asks, daring me to stretch the truth even the slightest.

“Dad material?” I gulp. “I don’t know. Do we have to jump right into the very deepest end of the pool? Can I start in the shallow part first?”

“There’s no shallow end with Hope,” Evie says firmly, and it hits me that there are levels to that statement.

The reason I haven’t forgotten Hope isn’t because she’s fun, it’s because there’s so much more below the surface.

But it’s going to take more than a wink and a smile, or even my abs, to convince her I want to know more about her. I want to know *her*.

“You’ve got to be all in with Charly.” Evie’s words draw my attention back to her. “Hope doesn’t have time to teach you how to do that. You want to be more than a friend, you’re

going to have to prove from the get-go that you want Charly part of your life too.”

“I get it.” I don’t mean to snap, but I do. “I like Hope a lot, but I don’t know if I’m ready for a kid. And what if I go to all the work of learning how to be ‘dad material,’ and she decides to disappear again?”

Hope’s apology was sincere. I don’t doubt she’s sorry, but can I trust her not to do the same thing again if I say something stupid?

And I will say something stupid. I’m human.

“Relationships take work,” Adam offers with an impatient sigh.

“I know that,” I bite back.

But I needed a reminder.

I can’t walk away without trying if I have even the slightest chance at happiness with Hope. “I’m willing to try. That’s all I can promise.”

Evie’s face softens, but she keeps her arms crossed. “That’s good. But not enough. You have to be willing to fail. Because you will. You have to be okay with that and try again. Kids aren’t easy, Seb, and Charly’s needs take things to a different level.”

“So what do I do?” My eyes are glued to hers. She’s my in. She knows Hope better than anyone else here.

Her shoulders drop, and she sighs. “Start small.”

“Like with a puppy,” Adam scoffs. “Bear can help you out with that.”

“Molly’s puppies are all called for,” Bear says, like Adam was being serious about me taking one of his spaniel’s puppies.

“I’m not irresponsible enough to think taking care of a dog is the same as taking care of a kid,” I say to Adam. “Plus, Mom would kill me if I brought a dog home.”

Maybe if I had my own place, I’d consider it. I’ve always wanted a dog. And maybe taking care of a puppy *would* prove to all my doubters that I’m more responsible than they like to give me credit for.

“Any *good* suggestions for learning how to dad, or whatever?” I scan the faces of my closest family and friends, but all I get is blank stares.

“Pick up after yourself?” Stella finally offers.

“Be on time,” Adam adds.

“What’s that got to do with parenting?” I shoot back.

“People—kids especially—have to know you’ll show up when you say you’re going to show up,” he answers with a confidence I appreciate even less than the fact he’s got a good point.

“Okay. Got it. Anything else?”

Their answers are good, but I don’t know how picking up after myself or being on time would help me get over my fear

of leaving a kid behind if anything happened to me.

Evie offers me some hope when she says, “You’re going to have to figure it out as you go, just like every other person who’s ever fallen in love. Learn how to anticipate her needs and Charly’s and you’ll be okay.”

She slips her arm through Adam’s and looks at him as she says it.

“I think I can do that.” I nod as Adam leads her out the door.

Carson follows, patting my shoulder on the way. “Good luck. Hope is amazing. If you’re going to go for her, be worthy of her.”

He’s followed by Britta and Stella who says, “I have faith in you, big brother.” Britta nods in agreement.

Then there’s only Bear left by my side. We walk out together, past Adam who holds the door open before locking it behind us.

We’re almost to my truck when Bear, who’s been quiet for a while, says, “I was going to keep Molly’s last pup, but I think you should take her. See if you can handle her for a few weeks. If not, I’ll take her back. Puppies aren’t kids, but they do require attention and consistency. It’s not a bad place to start.”

I shake my head, laughing off the idea, but Bear keeps talking.

“Plus, kids love puppies. Might be a way to get to know Charly.”

I drop my hand from the door handle and face him again.
“Charly had a stuffed dog tonight. It looked well-loved.”

Bear’s eyebrows shoot up.

“I could just borrow it for a few weeks?” The more I toy with the idea, the more I think it’s not the worst one offered tonight.

“Yeah. Just know you’re in for a lot of work, so be prepared for it, but I’m here for you. I’ll help you.” Bear slaps my shoulder.

“Really?”

“Yeah.” He smiles. “I’m not going to let you ruin a dog I might take back.” He clicks his key fob and walks to his own truck. “Okay it with Aunt Gia first. I’m not getting on her bad side. I’ll bring her by tomorrow.”

“I’ll talk her into it.” I don’t know how, but I will.

I inhale deeply, then blow the air out of my cheeks and climb into my truck. This plan may be crazy, but it feels like a better one than any of the other ideas offered. I’ll still work on being on time and picking up my own stuff, but taking care of a puppy is something bigger. Harder.

And hopefully the first step to proving to Hope—and myself—that I can be what she needs me to be.

Wait. No...

I mean what she *and Charly* need me to be.

Chapter 10

Hope



Seb doesn't answer my text until the following morning. It's three words: **Friends it is.**

If it's possible to be both relieved and disappointed at the same time, that's what I feel. The only possible relationship for us is friendship. So why do I wish he'd fought a little harder to not give up?

I have nearly a week to mull that over before I see him again. But one afternoon when I pick up Charly from Gia, Sebastian's truck is parked in the driveway. I sit in my car for a few minutes, planning what to say when I see him.

We're friends now, but how well do we really know each other? We didn't spend a lot of time getting to know each other this summer. Getting to know each other's lips, yes. Getting to know each other as buddies, not so much.

And now I have to act totally natural, like I'm not thinking about riding on the back of his bike that first day we met, my hands wrapped around his waist. Thinking about Sebastian's abs, and how I could feel him under his thin t-shirt, can still make my skin hot on even the coldest day.

Not only that, but I have to pretend that a few days ago, Seb acted like he wanted to pick up right where we left off—or at least close to it. And I turned him down.

I turned. Him. Down.

I close my eyes and think *you did the right thing* three times before I'm ready to go inside.

Because I absolutely did do the right thing. I don't know if I'll have a job here after December. I don't know if I'll have a job *anywhere* after this wedding and Yulefest are over. Most of all, I don't know if Seb's ready for Charly. He barely interacted with her the other night.

We're here for a month—possibly a few weeks longer, depending on if Carson needs me here for all of Yulefest. I don't have time to waste on a relationship that has no potential.

After reminding myself of all those things, I walk to the side door. Before I even knock, I hear Gia, but I don't understand what she's saying. When she doesn't answer the door, I let myself in.

I'm greeted by a string of what must be Italian coming from the kitchen, along with a high yipping sound, and Sebastian's voice in English.

“Ma! I know! I'm sorry! I didn't think she had to go.”

I rush to the door, hoping he's not talking about Charly, but when I hurry from the mudroom into the kitchen, Seb is chasing a brown and white puppy around the table. Charly is in Gia's arms, giggling like crazy, kicking her legs to get down.

“No, bambolina, stay with Miss Gia,” Gia holds her closer, but even though Charly is small for her age, so is Gia.

“What is happening?” I say over the commotion.

As soon as Charly sees me, there's no holding her anymore. She escapes Gia, but instead of running to me, she joins Seb in trying to catch the puppy. Which delights the puppy, who yips louder.

"Doggy!" Charly crawls under the table, and the puppy runs out toward Gia.

She runs into the next room, cursing in Italian before hopping onto the couch. "Get it! Before it pees again!"

Seb rushes into the other room with Charly toddling behind.

"Charly! Come to mama!" I scoop her up around her waist while she cries, "Doggy, doggy, doggy!"

Seb dives for the dog, but it darts past him, straight for me. I run back to the tile-floor kitchen, hopping over a yellow puddle. After I clear it, I crouch, maneuvering Charly onto my lap.

With my palm out, I make kissy noises that draw the puppy to me. It puts its legs up on my knees and Charly's legs, which thrills her.

I help her gently stroke its head. The puppy tries to crawl into my lap too, so I scoop it up, holding it in one hand and Charly on my other hip.

"How did you do that?" Seb asks as he walks over.

"You've never had a puppy before, have you? Chasing makes them run more." I hand the dog to him.

As soon as it's in his hands, it pees. A yellow stream flows down his wrist, into the sleeve of his gray Sparks Electric shirt.

“Come on, dog!” He sets her down, but not before she sprinkles the front of his shirt and pants.

“You deserve it, bringing an animal into my house,” Gia says, walking past him into the mudroom.

I can't hold my laugh and Charly anymore. They're both squirming to get away from me. I let her down, and the puppy jumps on her legs, and I pretend that's what I'm smiling about.

The puppy is too small to knock her over, but I'm still surprised when instead of being scared, Charly sits on the floor and lets the puppy climb all over her.

Gia comes back from the mudroom holding a freshly-ironed, men's shirt I'd seen hanging next to the dryer. She hands it to Seb, then waits, palm up, while he unbuttons his shirt.

And while I'm fascinated by the dynamic that's happening between them, I'm more fascinated by the chest that emerges as Seb undoes each button, slowly, one –by one. Then equally fascinated by each ab that appears next.

I'm less enthralled by the smirk on his face when he catches me staring.

“I'm not a... What's the word? Person who takes care of zoos. Children only!” Gia complains, oblivious to the fact Seb and I have locked eyes.

“Zookeeper,” he says without looking away from me.

As much as I want to break eye contact, the gravitational pull between us won't let me. Or maybe it's the abs of steel that have turned my eyes to magnets.

“Zoo keyer—”

“—keeper.” His gaze stays glued on me through Gia's rant.

“Whatever,” Gia waves off his correction. “I'm not one of those. I teach children only. You teach this animal by yourself.”

After a million buttons, Seb finally takes off his shirt, and I see the full tattoo I only got a peek of this summer. It's a tree with intricate leaves and the roots exposed, and I want to trace each of its branches.

With one hand, he gives his shirt to Gia, and takes the one she's holding. The other hand he runs down the center of his chest, between his abs, while biting his bottom lip.

His fingers are almost to the top of his jeans when Gia slaps his hand.

“Stop that! No one is impressed with your apps. Put your shirt on!”

“Abs, Ma. Not apps. Different thing entirely.” He looks at me as he says it, turning on the smolder that captured me this summer.

Gia ignores him and makes a turning motion with her fingers. Seb reluctantly turns around, officially putting an end to the Magic Seb show.

“Go and change your pants now. And take your dog with you.” Gia waves her fingers toward the puppy, who’s curled up in Charly’s lap.

She disappears into the mudroom; I assume to scrub the dog pee out of Seb’s shirt for him.

I bend down next to Charly and pet the dog’s soft little head. “We need to go, baby.”

“She likes her.” Seb kneels next to Charly, watching them both. “Do you want to give the puppy a name, Charly?”

He asks her like he’s making a business deal, not talking to a child. Which honestly, after months of trying to convince Mom to stop the baby talk, I appreciate.

“Yes! Unkuhrad,” Charly answers without hesitation.

Seb blinks, then leans closer. “Say it again, please.”

“Unkuhrad!” Charly says louder.

Seb looks at me, his dark brows creased with confusion.

“Unkuhrad?” I try to repeat what she’s said, but she furrows her own little eyebrows behind her glasses and shakes her head.

“Un-kuh-rad,” she says slower and louder while she tries to pick up the puppy.

I grab her hands to help her gently cuddle the puppy on her shoulder. It licks her cheek, and Charly giggles.

“Like Booley’s unku,” she says though her giggles, and I finally get it.

“Oh! Uncle Rad!”

Charly nods and repeats the name again, without the *l* sound, because she doesn't have that yet.

“Is Booeey a friend?” Seb smiles at Charly but still looks confused.

Charly laughs. “Booeey's on my iPad!”

“She means Bluey,” I explain. “She's a cartoon dog, and she has an uncle named Radley. Rad for short. Charly loves him. He's an Australian shepherd. What's this dog? Some kind of spaniel?”

Seb nods. “She's a girl, though. Not really uncle material.”

Then I say to Charly, “What about a girl name? Like Frisky?” I turn back to Seb and add, “She's Uncle Rad's love interest. There's speculation they may get engaged soon.”

Seb's lip twitches, and I try not to think about the fact most women my age know about Taylor Swift's love life, not a side-character cartoon dog from a kid's show.

“Not Frissy. Unkuhrad,” Charly says in between kissing the puppy's head.

“Uncle Rad it is then. Radley for short.” Seb pushes himself up and glances at the wet spot on his pants. “Do you mind holding her a little longer while I change my pants? Maybe jump in the shower really quick?”

I tip my chin in a quick nod, and Seb disappears upstairs, knowing he's left me with an image of him and a shower.

Obviously, I couldn't say no. Not when Charly is in absolute heaven. But this interaction isn't helping my resolve to not get involved with Seb again. Not just because of the reminder of what his abs look like either.

He was really sweet with Charly, and I wonder if I judged him too quickly. Maybe his first interaction with her was a fluke. He wasn't on his best game.

Which would make sense. It was awkward for me too, seeing him for the first time since I ghosted him, with the kid I didn't tell him about.

Gia comes back into the room, spots us on the floor and shakes her head. "Did he leave you to take care of his animal? I tell him since the time he was a little boy, 'no animals.' No cats, no dogs, no little rodents in cages." She pinches her fingers together and moves her wrist back and forth as she talks. "And what does he do? He brings home an animal. Who's going to clean up after it? He doesn't even do his own laundry! I've spoiled him. I love him, but he's still a boy."

She finishes her rant by clasping her hands and squeezing them together for emphasis.

"Charly likes her. Seb let her give her a name." I don't know what else to say. Or why I feel compelled to defend Sebastian while also feeling grateful to Gia for pointing out all the reasons why he's not ready to be anything but friends with me.

"I don't know what he's thinking." She throws her hands in the air. "He says he wants to be responsible, then lets a puppy pee on my floor."

Gia opens the cabinet under the kitchen sink and pulls out a bin of cleaning products. “Then leaves me to clean it up, of course.”

She snaps on rubber gloves, which gets Uncle Rad’s attention. She wiggles out of Charly’s arms and follows Gia to the puddle.

Gia kneels and wipes up the spot, then sprays it with something that smells strongly of pine and alcohol. Why this excites Uncle Rad, I don’t know, but she yips and tries to jump on Gia’s back.

“Shoo! Shoo!” Gia yells, but her efforts to wave Uncle Rad away only get the puppy more excited. She jumps around Gia, nipping at her sweater.

One of Uncle Rad’s teeth gets caught in the cable knit. She pulls away, snagging the sweater.

“Oh you naughty dog!” Gia yells and stands.

For a second, Uncle Rad hangs inches above the ground, until the material gives. Rad drops to the ground, a piece of thread still in her mouth, and runs, unraveling the middle section of Gia’s sweater right before our eyes.

I grab Uncle Rad and unhook the yarn from her tooth just as Seb walks in, his hair wet and shining black from the shower.

“What happened?” He looks from me to Gia who’s holding the giant hole in her sweater together.

“There’s been another *incident* with Uncle Rad.” I hand the puppy to Seb, then scoop up my own baby.

Gia's face is flaming red. But it's her silence that's truly terrifying.

"We're going to go." I carry Charly past Seb.

"You sure you don't want to stay for dinner?" Seb rushes to open the mudroom door for me, but one glance at Gia tells me I do not want to stay for the explosion that's about to come.

"No, but thanks. We'll see you tomorrow, Gia! Thank you!"

Charly holds my neck tight and waves, calling, "Bye, Unkuhrad!" as I practically run out the side door.

Seb stands at the door, watching us, but I hear more shouting in Italian as I close my car door. He's definitely in for it when he goes back inside, although I don't think that's the only reason he stands outside until we leave.

It's not until I'm on the road to Evie's that I really let myself think through what Gia said about Seb wanting to learn to be responsible.

I have a sneaking suspicion that Seb might not be giving up on me as quickly as I thought he had.

Chapter 11

Sebastian



I'm on my knees cleaning up Uncle Rad's latest puddle I just found when I hear Bear and Carson talking to Mrs. Christianson at the front of my shop. Radley—I only call her Uncle Rad in front of Charly, who insists on it—runs around the coiled bundles of electrical wire, stopping long enough to chew through a section of the coating before moving on to the next one.

“Radley! Bad girl.” I leave the rag on the floor and run to grab the puppy before she ruins one more piece of expensive wire.

“Excellent dessert bars.” Bear walks into my office space, unwrapping the plastic covering over a pumpkin bar.

“Agreed,” Carson says, taking a bite of his own bar. “Tell me again why you're selling them next to lights, switches, and non-dessert items.”

“Did you bums pay for those?” I ignore Carson's comment. He knows why I don't open a bakery: Paradise already has a bakery, and I can make more money as an electrician.

I set Radley next to my desk, then go back to her pee puddle. Within seconds, Radley is back at the wire, pretending it's her giant chew toy.

“You shouldn't let her do that,” Bear says, taking another bite of his bar.

Carson folds the plastic wrap back around the bar and sets it on the one clean spot he can find on my desk. He takes the pocket square from his suit pocket and wipes his fingers.

Carson always dresses like he's just walked off a photo shoot for one of those men's fashion magazines.

"Is this the little lady I've heard so much about?" He tucks away his pocket square, then pats his knees for Rad. She bounds to him, yipping with excitement.

Then pees in front of him, narrowly missing his fancy dress shoes.

"Radley! Bad girl!" I yell and grab her.

She looks up at me with sad eyes, and I feel so guilty, I cuddle her instead of swatting her like I want to. "It's okay. I know you didn't mean to."

"Are you taking her out regularly?" Bear crumples up the plastic wrap and tosses it at me.

I swat away the wrap before it hits me, then glare at him, and answer his question.

"At least once an hour. But she never has to go until I bring her back in." I set Radley back on the floor, then grab the cloth I used to clean up her first mess and start scrubbing this latest one.

Of course, Radley tries to run away again, but Bear picks her up. "You have to wait there until she goes, no matter how long it takes," he says matter-of-factly.

Like that should be obvious to me. Which, now it is, but it wasn't half an hour ago when I was freezing, and Radley was running around in the weeds behind my shop doing everything except peeing.

“Good to know,” I mutter while wiping up her newest spot.

“Are you going to spray anything on that? Or at least get the towel wet?” Carson looks down at me—literally since I’m on my knees—his mouth twisted with judgement.

I look at Bear and roll my eyes, knowing he’ll agree Carson’s clean freak is coming out with that ridiculous suggestion.

Except he doesn’t.

“Even on cement, you have to clean it up really well or she’ll be able to smell it and will keep peeing there,” Bear lectures while scratching Radley’s tiny ears with his big, meaty paws.

Again, his tone implies this is common knowledge. But I didn’t know it until right now, and I’m more than a little annoyed by that fact.

“Is there a reason you’re here?” I glare up at them from all fours. “Or did you coordinate this visit to tell me how I’m doing things wrong?”

“I came here to check on my dog,” Bear says with a shrug and turns to Carson. “You?”

“Bro, you gave her to me. She’s my dog.” I climb to my feet and take Radley from him.

“I’m here for a different reason,” Carson says. “But now that I’m seeing all the things you’re doing wrong with the little princess who’s just pooped in the corner over there, I’ve got another reason to talk to you.” He ignores my glare and motions for me to hand him the towel.

He takes it from me between two fingers, then, as daintily as possible, crosses the room and uses the rag to pick up the poop. He carries the package at arm's length out of my office, and a few seconds later I hear the toilet flushing, then the water running for a very long time.

Bear and I watch and listen to all of this in silence. Radley squirms in my arms, and I set her back on the floor.

When Carson comes back, he's shaking water off his hands and the towel is nowhere to be seen. "You're out of paper towels in there."

"What did you do with the rag? She's going to make more messes. That's why she's here instead of home. Doesn't matter if she pees on this floor." I scan the rest of the space for more messes I might have missed.

I mean *dog* messes. The whole place is a mess of my own making.

"I threw that gross thing away," Carson says.

"Good call," Bear says, suddenly Mr. Clean, despite the fact he's tracked mud through my entire store and office.

"Why? What am I supposed to use now?" I turn in a circle, looking around for Radley who's disappeared again.

Bear points under my desk, then lets out a sharp whistle. Radley's ears perk up, and when he whistles again, she comes running. He picks her up and hands her to me.

"Don't let her down." He takes me by the elbow and leads me toward the hallway. "Come with me."

I don't argue as he walks me to the front of the shop. This area is more organized since customers come in here. I've got indoor lighting fixtures, unique light switch covers, outdoor lighting... lights. I've got a lot of lights and stuff.

And, of course, a tray of dessert bars, freshly baked. People who don't know me assume Mrs. C. bakes them since they started showing up after she retired from teaching and hired herself to be my assistant. And probably because she's a woman, even though there's plenty of famous pastry chefs who are men.

I'm out on calls most of the day, so Mrs. C. is here to help any customers, answer phones, and schedule appointments. Most of my retail business comes from online orders, but occasionally people come in.

"Hello, boys," she says, barely looking up from her knitting. "Have we got the puppy situation under control yet?"

"You're in on this surprise attack too?" This is the final blow.

"She's the one who planned it," Bear says, like this kind of betrayal is an everyday thing. Without missing a beat, he turns his attention to Mrs. C. "Let's see today's work." Now his voice is bright and cheerful.

Mrs. C. holds up the project she's working on for all of us to see.

To be honest, a lot of Mrs. C.'s "assisting" comes in the form of sitting at the front register knitting. But not just knitting.

The thing she does with big needles to create little animals, like foxes and frogs. Deer and moose when she wants to do something a little bigger.

She uses leftover wire for their bodies, so after she's done her needle stuff, she can pose them. In clothes. Because she makes those for them too.

And I'm man enough to admit, they're adorable.

"I've just started this little guy, but when I'm done, he'll be a squirrel with pilot goggles and a leather jacket. A flying squirrel." She flashes the same pleased smile she used to give me when I was in her second-grade class.

"I love it! That one will *fly* off the shelves." I wink at my joke, and she laughs. She's generous about laughing at all my jokes, so I'll forgive her betrayal.

In addition to desserts, I've got shelves full of Mrs. C's creations. People love them. Sometimes they come into Sparks Electric just for desserts and little posable animals.

"Does that one go on the shelf too? Or can I buy it from you right now?" Carson asks while examining her other creations.

"This one is for Lynette. You know how she loves squirrels." Still smiling, she goes back to needling—or whatever it's called.

"Oh, I know." I rub the back of my neck, thinking about the last time I encountered one of Lynette's squirrels.

She may be afraid of aliens and doesn't live in reality but every squirrel in town will eat from Lynette's hand. The

problem is, now they expect everyone to feed them, and they get a little aggressive when their target doesn't freely offer up a snack. I had one run up my leg and try to grab a pumpkin bar from me the other day when I was walking down Main Street.

It was terrifying, yet somehow cute at the same time.

"I hate to interrupt your work, Mrs. C., but could you do something for Seb?" Bear picks up the little frog sitting on the register.

Mrs. C. stops her work long enough to watch him as carefully as she used to watch me when I was anywhere near a girl. I loved to tease them. Despite his size, Bear is surprisingly agile. He moves its arms into a different position that somehow makes the animal look more real, and Mrs. C. smiles with relief.

"Of course. That's what I'm here for!" She sets down her project and stands.

"He needs the right equipment to train this puppy." Bear sets down the frog and grabs a pen and piece of paper from in front of Mrs. C.

"She's got a leash and collar. What else does she need?" I know there's more. Bear has told me that, but I've brushed off all his offers of help, because I wanted to be able to do this on my own.

I should have known this blitz would be the result of my stubbornness.

Radley squirms in my arms, but I can't let her down. She'll pee. Even though the floor is vinyl tile, I don't want to risk her wanting to pee here again. Because, apparently, I don't have the right cleaning products to erase the smell forever.

"Here's what we need," Bear says while he writes. "A crate, training treats, puppy pads, puppy chow, chew toys, pet stain remover. Oh, and food and water dishes."

"I've got bowls for her." Which reminds me: I haven't fed her.

I walk toward the back where I have the bowls in the hallway between the front of the shop and my office space. Bear follows me while Carson stays up front with Mrs. C.

"These?" He points to the bowls.

"Yeah." I set Radley down and scoop food from the open bag into her bowl.

Bear shakes his head. "No, you've got bowls and food for a grown dog the size of a horse."

I follow his eyes to Radley whose paws are on the edge of her water bowl, which is bigger than her whole body.

"She'll grow into it," I say hopefully.

"Only if she's got mastiff in her. Which she doesn't. She's a mini-aussie, cocker spaniel mix. I told you this." Bear picks her up and lifts her paws. "See how little these are? This is what she'll grow into, not something big enough to eat or drink out of those bowls. Did you listen to anything I told you about her?"

“Dude, I don’t know dog breeds. And no way was I going to remember everything you said.” There was a lot.

And I missed most of it because Radley was barking, but he might have said something about her growing to be about medium size. Whatever that means.

Bear sighs and takes out his phone. “You’ve got no business owning a puppy if you don’t know what you’re doing.” He taps the screen a few times, then hands me Radley and shows me the screen. “See this book about puppies? I’m ordering it, and you’re reading it, or else I’m taking Uncle Rad back.”

I look at Radley, considering my options. I hate to read, and she’s already so much work, I don’t know if I want to put even more effort into taking care of her.

“Maybe I should give her back to you,” I mumble.

Carson wanders into the hallway just then. “Give what back? Radley?”

Uncle Rad looks at me and licks my face, something I’m learning to like. I stroke her head. I really do like her, but I have to consider what the best thing for her is, because Bear’s right. I don’t know what I’m doing.

“Try the book first,” Bear says in a gentler voice. “And let me help, but don’t give up yet. You’ll get it. Puppies take months—even years—to train.”

“It’s normal to be discouraged the first few weeks with a puppy,” Carson adds as he brushes dog hair from his jacket.

The fact that someone as meticulous as he is can believe in me gives me some hope.

“Fine.” I nod. “I’ll read it.”

Carson claps a hand on my shoulder. “Relationships take work, be they human or animal.”

Bear nods in agreement.

And I know we’re not talking about Uncle Rad anymore. I want to protest that Hope isn’t the reason I got the puppy. But that would be a lie.

“You’re right,” I say with a sigh. “I just didn’t realize it would be so hard. I mean, this is harder than having a kid.”

Bear scoffs and Carson blinks slowly before saying, “I don’t have kids, but I’m one hundred percent sure that’s not true.”

I set Radley down, and she goes straight for the bag of food, clawing at it to make it fall over.

I grab food from the bag and toss it on the floor where she can reach it. “You’re probably right, but people are born knowing how to parent. Raising animals does not come naturally to humans.”

Bear shakes his head and mutters, “Duuuuude,” while Carson bursts into laughter. “Oh, you poor, simple, man.”

“What?”

“People learn how to parent. They don’t just ‘know how’ to do it,” Carson says.

Bear nods toward Radley. “That food is too big. She can’t eat it.”

I sigh, resigned to the fact I have more to learn than I thought I did. “Okay, so besides reading the book, what else do I have to do?”

Bear and Carson spend the next half hour giving me tips on how to train a puppy and be in a relationship. By the time Mrs. C. is back with a crate and all the other stuff, I’m totally overwhelmed with information, but I also feel more capable of taking care of Radley. Along with being embarrassed I didn’t take the help Bear offered a dozen times before today.

The first thing I do is take the blanket Bear sent with Radley and put it in the crate. Then I lure her in there with treats. The space looks way too small for her, but after eating the treats, she curls up and lays down.

“Does that mean she likes it?” I ask Bear, Carson, and Mrs. C. who are all watching Radley with me.

“Dogs are den animals,” Mrs. C. says. “They like the security of crates.”

“True,” Bear confirms.

“You knew this, and you didn’t tell me?” I say to Mrs. C. I’m a little annoyed I’ve been chasing Radley around this place for an entire week, and she never offered one piece of advice.

She pats my back gently. “Sebastian, I spent an entire year chasing you around, trying to convince you to stay in your seat

and stop talking. I've been having too much fun these last few days watching you get your comeuppance.”

Carson laughs. “Karma is a...”

He goes quiet at Mrs. C.'s warning look.

“Well, one of those,” he finishes and points to Radley.

“Now what?” I ask.

Mrs. Christianson looks at her watch. “Time for me to go home.”

“You do the same thing tomorrow and the next day, and the day after that. Consistency is the key,” Bear says, following Mrs. C. to the register. “Can I walk you out?”

“You're such a gentleman.” She hitches her purse over her shoulder, then puts her arm through Bear's elbow.

I wave goodbye and lock the door behind them. When I turn around, Carson is right behind me.

“Did you stay to give me more dog advice or relationship advice?” I walk to the back of the shop, turning off lights as I go while Carson follows me.

Carson smiles. “I didn't come here to give you dog advice, but I was happy to help where I saw a need.”

“Yeah, thanks. I didn't feel picked on at all.”

“Don't pout. You're going to like what I have to say.” He stops until he's got my full attention. “I'd almost changed my mind about telling you. But since you've decided you're in

charge and not Radley, I think you've proven you can handle what I need your help with."

I hold back the snarky comment on the tip of my tongue about him lecturing me. Next to Evie, he's the person Hope knows and trusts the most in Paradise. I suspect that if I want a chance with her, I'll have to go through both of them. And Evie's a no-go at this point.

"All the electrical work you've planned for Yulefest?" He waves his hand above his head for dramatic effect. "I'm putting Hope in charge of making sure all of that happens."

A sly smile slides across his face.

It takes a second for me to realize what he's proposing, but when the pieces fall into place, I smile too.

"So, I'll be working with Hope to make sure there's plenty of *electricity*?" My grin grows, and Carson chuckles.

"Exactly," he says. "And I have every confidence you'll be successful."

"I'll be successful? Or your little matchmaking scheme will be?" I open the back door, and we both walk out.

He considers for a second. "How about we say my scheme will speed up your own efforts?"

"However we say it, man, I appreciate your encouragement." I lock the back door, then face him again. "Thanks."

Carson gives me a salute, then walks around the building to the front where he's parked.

I watch him go, wishing I had as much confidence in my success as he seems to.

Chapter 12

Hope



I've been in Paradise for a little over a week, mostly working at Carson's party store, Pizzazz Paradise, which also doubles as his event planning office. When I'm not there, I'm driving all over the place, scoping out venues and vendors for the different Yulefest events we're planning.

We're on such a tight timeline, that my days are totally packed. The only time I stop working is during the few hours after I pick up Charly and get her into bed. Then I spend another couple hours on my laptop scheduling things, making detailed plans for each event, and updating the Yulefest Advent website Carson and I created.

With everything going on, I haven't had time to think about Seb. And I haven't even seen him since the puppy peeing incident.

But Charly talks every day about Unkuhrad like she's seen her. And if she's seen Seb's puppy, she's probably seen him too. But obviously, I can't grill my three-year-old about any interactions she's had with him.

Not that I don't try. I ask her flat out if Gia's son was there with the puppy, but she just says that Miss Gia doesn't have a little boy and goes back to talking about the puppy. Between her mornings at Gia's preschool with other kids and her afternoons at Gia's house, she can't keep all the different people straight.

And I'm not necessarily upset about not seeing Seb. It's for the best, for so many reasons. Mostly because I don't have time to "see" him like he wants to be seen.

Still, I'm really interested in whether he's trying to get to know Charly. I don't have a lot of faith that his puppy is any better behaved than it was the first time I saw it, but that doesn't mean I've forgotten how sweet it was for him to let Charly name her. Awkward, and totally out of his depth when it comes to communicating with a child, but sweet still the same.

But Seb's the furthest thing from my mind when I walk into Pizzazz. I wave to Carson's friend Steven Carson (they joke all the time about having the same name but switched around). He works the front register, looking totally out of place in his dark flannel shirt and work boots. But he has an amazing eye and can sell people party products they never knew they needed.

"Hi Steve!" I call while hustling to the back office.

"Morning, Hope! Make it a momentous day!" He says the same thing every morning—he's a creature of habit—and I love it more every time.

I love my little space in Carson's tastefully decorated back room where he has a couple of desks and display shelves full of party décor to give customers ideas for their events. That's where I'm headed as I scroll through email on my phone and turn the corner, running right into a broad chest in a brown leather jacket.

"Oof, sorry," I say, then look up to see the solid wall of a chest belongs to Seb.

No wonder it felt so familiar.

His lip quirks at the corner, and my pulse blips.

“What are you doing here?” I take a step back, feeling my cheeks light up like dry kindling.

“Hello to you too.” He hands me one of the Breakfast at Britta’s coffee cups he holds. “Carson asked me to come in to talk electrical stuff.”

“Thank you.” I breathe in the smell of toffee and cream with undernotes of nuts and chocolate.

He remembered my favorite coffee: a butterscotch dark roast. I take a sip, letting the motion and the warmth soothe my nerves. Because I should have known when Carson said he wanted me to manage all the lights and electricity needs for Yulefest, he’d be calling in an electrician to help. And there’s only one electrician in Paradise.

Sebastian Sparks.

My eyes dart to Carson, wondering if he did this on purpose. He’s *very* busy at his computer, and his mouth twitches in what might be a suppressed smile.

“All right, team,” he says. “Let’s get to work. Take a seat.”

I glance at Seb, who’s looking at me.

“Ladies first.” He sweeps his hand forward, so I take the seat at Carson’s desk across from him.

Seb takes the one next to me. It’s a tight space, and our knees are only inches apart. I swear he’s sitting closer than he needs to purposely distract me from what Carson is saying.

“I need both of you at the Old Barn today. The space is going to be difficult to heat, but we’re going to need it for all the Yulefest events there, plus the double wedding.” Carson runs down his handwritten checklist, clicking his pen on the desk while he talks. “Seb, we’ve got to have enough power for lights, sound, heat... all of it.”

“Got it.” Seb leans back in his seat, nodding casually.

“Hope, run through all the events we’ve got planned there, one by one. Make sure to go through each detail, even the food. If we’ve got anything that requires electricity, Seb needs to know.” I type everything he says on my iPad, not wanting to miss a word.

Everything must be perfect. Not only will the wedding be showcased on *At Home with Georgia Rose*, but the producers let us know footage of the Yulefest will also be included in the show. *I* will be featured on the show. Not a big part, but the producers have scheduled us into their shooting the week of the wedding.

This is such a huge break for me. Carson too. But I feel like I haven’t earned it, because I wouldn’t have had the chance to work with Carson if not for Evie. I have to prove to him that he should hire me full time on my own merits. I can’t make any mistakes.

Which means no distractions.

No distractions, Hope!

Including the way Seb's knee just brushed mine when he shifted in his seat. Or the fact that he's leaning closer to me now.

"That's it." Carson shuts his laptop and smiles. "Go be awesome."

"Already on it." Seb stands and looks at me. "You want to ride over together?"

I open my mouth to say sure, then remember the *no distractions* pep talk I just gave myself. "That's okay. I can drive myself." I push myself out of my chair, then scoot past it away from Seb. "Meet you over there in five?"

Half a second passes before he nods, then waves goodbye to Carson. I follow him back to the retail area, which is already awkward, but only gets more awkward as we walk in silence through the store, out the door, to the street parking. Fortunately, he's parked up the street, so we part ways.

Only to meet up minutes later when we both pull into the Old Barn at the far end of the Little Copenhagen's main cul-de-sac. We park right next to each other, as a final reminder it would have made more sense to ride over together.

I let him get out of his truck first while I stare at the Old Barn, as it is officially known.

This is the first time I've actually been to the barn. Carson had just purchased the old structure when I left this summer. Since then he's turned the rundown space that used to hold horses and hay into a beautiful event venue.

The entire structure, including the pitched, corrugated steel roof, has been painted white. It glows against the dry pasture surrounding it and beautiful Smuk Lake nearby.

When Seb climbs out of his truck, he's got Uncle Rad with him. He must have left her in his truck for the few minutes we were inside Pizzazz. Which can mean one of two things: he still has no idea what he's doing with that dog, or he's actually trained her enough that he can trust her alone in his truck.

Judging by the way she's walking on the leash without too much trouble, I think the second may be true.

"Do you mind if I bring her with us?" he asks. "I can't leave her alone for too long."

"Sure. I don't mind." I reach down to scratch her ears, thinking of how cute she was with Charly. I don't think that's normal dog behavior, but I don't know for sure. I've never had a puppy. I always wanted one, but Mom is allergic.

"Gotta get her to do her thing first. Don't want a repeat of the other day." He sends me an embarrassed smile. "I'll meet you in there when she's done."

The smell of coffee drifts from Britta's a hundred feet away in Little Copenhagen's small business strip. Seb walks Uncle Rad in the opposite direction, toward the pasture, while I punch in the code Carson gave me for the padlock on the barn doors.

By the time I've pushed them open, he's back, and I'm craving another cup of coffee. Maybe some ebelskiver to go

with it.

“That was fast.”

“I think she’s finally getting the hang of it,” Seb exhales. “At least I hope so.”

We step inside, Seb flips the breaker, and the whole place lights up.

Everything is pine, stained a beautiful golden color, including the floor. Lights are strung between the exposed ceiling beams and the bigger, industrial lights. There are more exposed beams in the walls, giving the whole space a rustic but elegant feel. The simplicity of it makes decorating for any event, using any colors, easy, but also authentic to the Little Copenhagen’s Danish feel.

“Turned out great,” Seb says, scanning the ceiling. “I wasn’t sure when Evie and Georgia agreed to have their wedding reception here. It’s always just been an old, rundown barn, as long as I’ve lived here. On occasion, a haunted house at Halloween.” He runs a hand over a beam. “But once they got it all painted and I got the lights in, it transformed everything.”

“You put in the lights?”

He nods. “Picked them out too. Then I told Carson he needed all the string lights, too.” He points to them, and I follow his gaze. “They make it feel more romantic.”

At this, his gaze drifts to mine, and we lock eyes.

Seconds pass before I come to my senses. “Yeah,” I clear my throat and look away. “And not a far drive from the chapel.”

Uncle Rad tugs on her leash, and Seb walks her a few steps away. I'm grateful for the distance.

It's hard not to think about whether I'll get my own wedding one day. Not when I'm in the middle of planning a huge double wedding for two couples whose romances have played out partially on social media and TV.

I want what they have, but it's hard to picture it for myself. Not when I come as a party of two. But that doesn't keep me from wishing for my own romantic wedding someday.

I watch Seb as he walks Uncle Rad around the perimeter of the barn. First to the back doors, which he opens wide. He folds his body over the barrier blocking the exit, letting his feet leave the floor and his head hang over the other side. I gasp. The ground outside is at least three feet below the door.

"You're going to break your neck!" I yell across the room.

He lowers himself back to the floor and shoots me a smile that says I reacted exactly like he'd hoped I would. I turn away before he catches my own smile, then walk toward the side door, trying not to look at him.

But I feel his gaze on me as he leads Uncle Rad to the same door. I glance at him when I hear her paws scraping the floor. He gently tugs on her leash, but he's let her have too much of it. She has too much freedom and won't listen to him.

To his credit, he stays patient with her as he crosses the room to stand next to me. The way he looks at me makes me

question, again, my decision to keep him at arm's length. Is he hoping I'll change my mind?

Judging by the look in his eye, he is.

Uncle Rad tugs the leash, trying to pull him in the opposite direction, but Seb stays planted next to me. He's wearing a thick jacket, and smells like leather and soap mingled with the barn's pine. It's a sharp, but not overpowering scent that conjures up images of roaring fires in libraries full of hard-bound books. Warm and comfortable.

Too comfortable.

I shift away from him and return my focus to what we're here to do. "We should figure out if we're going to need generators or other power sources to keep everything lit. How many outlets do we have? Are we going to need extension cords? Power surge protectors?"

"Let's check out the electrical box outside first. I installed it, but I don't remember what kind of wattage we're working with." He steps toward the door, brushing my arm, but Uncle Rad is immovable.

Seb slides the door open. At that moment, a couple of scampering squirrels stop in front of the open doors. Rad barks, tugging manically at her leash. Instead of running from her, they run toward all three of us. And maybe I'm imagining things, but I swear they're taunting us. Or maybe this is a coordinated charge and we're under attack.

Uncle Rad yelps and darts back to us, then turns around to bark at them.

“Stay still,” Seb says. “They won’t hurt you; they just want food.”

“I don’t have any food!” I yell over Uncle Rad’s manic barking.

Just before they reach us, Seb loses his hold on Uncle Rad’s, and she dashes toward the squirrels. The squirrels pivot in the opposite direction and run away with Uncle Rad chasing them into the frost-covered pasture, barking at the top of her lungs.

Seb runs after her, shouting her name. I rush to the other door to catch Rad from the opposite side and run outside out after her.

Uncle Rad is going crazy, running through weeds and sharp thistles stiff with cold, until the squirrels run up a lone, leafless tree. With her front paws on the trunk, Uncle Rad goes up on her hind legs and keeps barking.

Seb almost grabs her, but she dashes away before he can. I try to corner her, but she doubles back toward Seb who’s finally able to scoop her up.

She’s covered in mud and burrs and Seb’s face is red with fury. I cover my mouth, trying not to laugh. But the whole thing is hilarious.

But Seb doesn’t think so. He stomps back to me, scolding Uncle Rad, and obviously frustrated. “I don’t know why she doesn’t listen when I tell her to stop.”

“She’s a puppy. That’s why.” I can’t stop myself from laughing. “She doesn’t know better.”

He’s still scowling, so I try one more time to help him see the humor in the situation. I’ve never owned a dog, so I make the only comparison I can. “You should see the kind of stuff Charly does. She’s poured whole bottles of shampoo into the tub more than once, after I’ve told her not to. She likes bubbles as much as Uncle Rad likes chasing squirrels.”

“Those are Lynette’s squirrels. She’s fed them so often that now they’re menaces.” His jaw works back and forth as he kneels down to examine Uncle Rad.

“Is she the one who wears the tinfoil hats to protect her from aliens?” I bite back a smile, because now I’m picturing Lynette in her hat surrounded by squirrels holding out their little paws for food.

“That’s her.” He pulls a burr off Uncle Rad and tosses it outside. The wind blows it right back in, which only makes him angrier.

“Let’s go check out that box.” I step around Seb and his anger, out the open door into a cold wind, surer that he’s not ready for me and Charly. Not if he can’t laugh off the little frustrations that come with raising puppies and kids.

Not that I’m thinking a relationship with him would for sure turn into marriage. But this is what it is to be a single mom. Anyone I bring into my life has to be marriage and daddy material from the get-go.

I know what Carson is trying to do, sending Seb and me here together when I could figure everything out on my own and email Seb what we need. The fact he obviously thinks Seb and I should be together makes me think I should give Seb a chance.

Maybe if I had more time here, if I knew I was going to stay, knew I had a job and Charly had everything to meet her needs, I could give Seb more time. I could tuck away my worry about all three of us—Seb, me, and Charly—getting attached.

But this situation is only short term, and I think the growing up Seb has to do is going to take a lot longer than the few weeks I'm in Paradise.

And I hate how much that thought disappoints me.

Chapter 13

Sebastian



Rad is covered in burrs that are going to take a while to get out, but Hope is on the move, so I follow her. I can't decide who I'm more annoyed with, Rad or Lynette's squirrels. It's possible I'm frustrated with the entire animal kingdom right now, humans included. Lynette may top the list.

I wouldn't be as irritated if I had on work clothes. But I wore nice jeans and my best leather jacket today, knowing I would finally see Hope. I had no expectations of chasing Uncle Rad and squirrels through a pasture full of weeds and cow pies.

I know it will take more than appearances to win Hope over this time around, but looking good can't hurt my chances. And my chances of seeing her have been rarer than I expected. Work calls and other obligations have kept me too busy to just *happen* to be home when she picks up Charly. Plus, she keeps picking her up at different times, like she's trying to avoid me.

Which is possible.

Even though I've been disappointed every time I've missed her, I've also been trying to give her space. I don't want to scare her off. I want her to feel comfortable enough that she'll come to me when she's ready. I just have to keep showing her I can be who she needs.

Or trying.

This dog is *not* helping as much as I thought she would.

"We need to talk, Rad," I mutter to her, keeping a few paces behind Hope. "Your whole job is to be a good dog."

Rad answers with an excited yip and licks my cheek.

“We’re going to have to agree to disagree there,” I tell her. “You’re getting better, but you’re still not a *good* dog.”

She growls and nips at my nose.

“Ouch!” I swing her around so she’s not facing me anymore. “See there? That’s a bad dog move.”

She whimpers and tries to get down, but I hold her tighter. Her leash is covered in mud and stickers from being dragged through the pasture, so I can’t lead her. And obviously, she’s not going to follow.

“I didn’t say you were a bad dog. I said you made a bad dog move. There’s a difference.”

She doesn’t respond.

“I know you can be a good dog. It’s just going to take some practice.” I whisper as we catch up to Hope who’s stopped at the outbuilding where the breaker box is.

Rad turns her head and revs up her sad eyes, and I reluctantly scratch her ears. “I know you’re sorry. We’ll both do better.”

By this point, we’re close enough for Hope to hear, so maybe that last line is as much for her as for Rad. And it works. There’s a smile playing at her lips.

“Are you talking to Uncle Rad?” she asks, a suppressed laugh in her voice as I walk past her.

“Maybe...”

Her eyes dart to the floor, and I look behind me to the mud I've tracked in.

"Sorry!" I backtrack and stamp my feet in the gravel bordering the cement step. "Is there a broom somewhere? I can clean it up."

"It's all right, but we probably need to have mats down or else guests will be tracking in mud and snow. This is where we're setting up Santa's workshop during the Christmas market. That will all be in the barn." She takes her iPad from her purse and types in her notes.

"Yeah. And boot scrapers," I add. "Plenty of cowboys around here."

"Good idea," she says, still typing.

I look down and realize not just my feet are covered in mud. Uncle Rad's muddy paw prints are all over my jacket, t-shirt, and jeans. Plus, I still can't put her down because the leash handle is filthy.

"I'll be right back," I say to Hope then go back outside to the restrooms.

They're located in another outbuilding close to the barn. When I go inside, I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror, and my stomach drops.

Hope wasn't just laughing about me talking to Radley. There's mud splatters all over my face, and my hair looks like I've walked through a wind tunnel.

“Great.” I set Radley in the sink. “Look what you’ve done. You made me look like a goof. Worse. An idiot.” I run the water in the other sink and scrub the spots from my face and jacket, then go to work on my hair. “Are you listening to me, Radley?”

She’s not. She doesn’t even look up from licking her paws.

“Uncle Rad! I’m talking to you!”

Now, of course, she looks. Hard as I’ve tried, she won’t answer to Radley. She prefers Uncle Rad. She’s okay with Rad, if really pressed.

I sigh and talk to myself instead. “Pull it together, man. Just be cool.”

Five minutes later, I lead Uncle Rad by her mostly clean leash back to the barn. We’re both a little cleaner, but there’s no washing away the embarrassment still burning through me as I join Hope by the front doors.

But I fake my way through my humiliation and say, “Tell me about the events you’ve got planned.”

“Here at the barn?” she asks.

“Those first, so we can figure out what you need. But I want to hear about all the events. It sounds like you and Carson have done a ton of work already.”

A slow, pleased smile crosses her face. “We really have. Do you want to see the website we’ve created?”

“Yeah,” I nod, and after a few taps, she holds her iPad in the crook of her elbow to show me.

I move closer, grateful for the invitation. This is what I want. To be invited in. So I’m counting this moment as my one win for the day.

I lean in to look at the page. Under the Yulefest at the top, there’s a Christmas house with twenty-four days, like an advent calendar. Each number is highlighted.

“You open the pages like it’s a real advent calendar? That’s pretty cool.” I press the number one and the door opens to a page with information about Paradise’s Yulefest Parade.

“Thanks. It was my idea. Check this out.” She exits out of that page and opens the number ten door.

Behind that door is a video that requires the user to sign in. Hope taps in an email and password, and an under-construction sign appears.

“We’re working on a video right now that will teach people how to make those Danish heart and star decorations,” she says.

“*Julehjerter* and *julestjerner*? I used to love making those as a kid. We’d do it every year in grade school.” I try not to notice how close she is, but I smell a hint of cinnamon that wakes every cell in my body.

I don’t think she’s wearing perfume or chewing gum, so maybe the smell is left over from years of Christmas parties once held in this barn. The smell always reminds me of spiced

cider on cold, winter days. It's a soothing smell but invigorating at the same time.

"There's a former teacher who's going to do the video for us. She's perfect. She has the best voice and is completely engaging." Hope's face lights up as she describes the person who can only be one woman.

"Is it Margot Christianson? Mrs. C?"

"Yeah! You know her?"

"Everyone who's lived in Paradise in the last fifty years has had her for the second grade. We all know Mrs. C. She's worked for me since she retired." I hope the grin on my face doesn't look as mushy as it feels, but I can't help it.

I grow more excited as I tell Hope about Mrs. C's little animals and how her granddaughter is creating background scenes for them so they can make stop-motion videos together.

But it's not Mrs. C's hobby that's got me excited. It's seeing how in love Hope is with the idea of it. Her blue eyes grow wider and brighter, and I can't stop looking at her.

"That sounds completely adorable. Charly would love that," Hope says.

"Bring her into my shop sometime. Mrs. C's always at the front working on them in between answering phones and helping customers." My invitation sounds too hopeful. Too desperate. But Hope doesn't move away. "She could see Radley—I mean, Uncle Rad—too."

“I’ll do that.” Hope nods excitedly, then stops. “I mean, I don’t know when. Some day when I have a spare minute.”

“Whenever you want. Just let me know.” I bite my bottom lip, then decide to go for my next offer. “You can always bring Charly over to the house to see Uncle Rad too, when I’m there, obviously, since Mom is still not on board with having a dog in the house.”

At this Hope smiles, and I go on. “Charly’s been there a few times when I’ve stopped by for lunch, and she goes nuts over Rad. Rad loves her too.”

“Yeah. I’ll let you know.” She takes one step away, and I kick myself for being too eager.

“Can I see what else you’ve got planned? Are all the events free?” I shift just enough to give her a little more space.

“Yeah. Go ahead. Take a look.” She hands me the iPad. “Every event will be live, but there’s a virtual component to it also. People can pay for different levels of packages that include the events they want to attend or watch. So, while Mrs. C. teaches live, we’ll show the pre-recorded video of her teaching how to make the... whatever they’re called. But website visitors will have access to it after that night.”

“Brilliant!”

I go through more doors. Some have information about the free live events taking place in Paradise that won’t have a virtual component—like the Lighting Main Street night on

December second and the dance around the Christmas tree in the town square that happens on December twenty-fourth.

Then there are the events that can only be live, but also cost to get into. Like the Jingle Ball on December sixteenth and the candlelight walking tour around downtown that includes the history of Paradise's early Danish settlers. That one happens a couple nights a week.

There's a Christmas Market every Saturday, right here in the barn, where locals will sell their own hand-made stuff. There's also a Danish traditional Christmas dinner—a *Julefrokost*—that will be hosted here but Adam will be making all the food. And on December fifth, a night of folk dancing featuring dances from all over the world performed by children.

“Folk dancing? Will the kids be doing *Syvspring*?” I look at Hope, and she quickly looks away, like she's been staring at me.

“Is that the Danish one that has seven jumps in it, or something?” Her cheeks are a rosy pink, and I think she knows I caught her staring.

“That's it.” I turn my eyes back to the iPad to give her a break. “We used to learn it every year in school. I still know it.”

“Really? I asked your mom if she could teach a dance to her students, because I was hoping Charly could be part of the show. But she said the only one she knows is the tarantella, and one of the elementary teachers is already teaching her students a dance from Italy,” Hope says.

“Yeah, Mom resists anything that’s not Italian. Which is why she still has an accent even though she’s spent most of her life here.” I laugh, then I have an idea. One that scares the stuffing out of me.

But I offer it anyway.

“I could teach Charly *Syvspring*. I know all the teachers at the school. I can talk them into letting her perform it with them, if you think she’d like that.”

Hope blinks, and I hold my breath while she considers her answer. “I think she might like it. Sometimes she turns into a little performer when she’s in front of people. But, even if she didn’t get on stage, learning the dance would be good for her developmentally, as long as it’s not too difficult.”

I thought Hope’s face was bright before, but the way she looks now, talking about Charly? She’s the sun instead of a distant star.

“It’s literally turning in a circle and jumping seven times. She could totally do it, and I could go on stage with her. I could round up a costume for her too.” I try not to smile too big. I don’t want to scare Hope away again.

“That would be amazing. Thank you.” Her face still shines, but her words are slow and soft.

“You bet.” I hand the iPad back to her. “We’d better get to planning. Carson is expecting a report.”

“Right.” Her fingers touch mine, and maybe it’s my imagination, but time stops for a few seconds. “Let’s do this.”

We spend the next couple hours working together, figuring out details for as many of the events as possible. There's no more touching, and there's some back and forth when we don't agree on something, but for the most part, we work well together.

And that's got to count for something.

But maybe not as much as my offer to teach Charly to dance, even though my palms sweat every time I think about it.

I barely know what to do with a dog, and I'm supposed to teach a three-year old to dance? If I had any doubt before—and I didn't—that I still had feelings for Hope, I've for sure put doubts to rest.

Along with whatever dignity I may still have when I get on stage to dance with a bunch of elementary school kids. Charly's not the only one I have to hunt up a costume for. I'm going to have to find adult-size knee-length britches and wooden clogs, because I'm positive the costume I wore when I was nine doesn't fit me anymore.

But if Hope is one of those ladies who likes a man in breeches, then it will all be worth it.

Chapter 14

Hope



After three super busy days, I find enough time to meet Evie for lunch at the Garden of Eatin'. When I arrive, Georgia and Stella are there too.

I'm not easily intimidated, but these two women make me nervous. Georgia because she's famous, and Stella because she's Sebastian's sister. But they both greet me with hugs and praise for everything they've heard about me from Carson, putting me immediately at ease.

I slide into the seat next to Evie. "I hope you don't mind I invited Georgia and Stella," she says. "We've got some planning to do for the wedding episode, and I thought you'd want to be in on that conversation too."

"Sure. No problem, but while we're on the topic, I have some bad news." I've been dreading telling Evie and Georgia that the one big thing I'm covering for the wedding is the one thing that's not going so smoothly.

"Uh oh. What is it?" Georgia crosses her arms on the table and pulls her shoulders back like she's gearing up for a strategy session.

"The wedding cake." I take a deep breath. "I've gone back and forth with the baker in LA your producers want to use, but she wants to charge way more than they're willing to pay her. She says she has to make the cake here and wants all her travel expenses covered, plus enough money to rent a professional kitchen where she can make the cake, and that's before the thousands of dollars she wants to charge for the cake itself."

“Forget her.” Georgia waves her hand, like she’s swatting away a fly. “Find someone else. There are plenty of bakers who’d love the exposure my show will give them.”

And this is why Georgia is a girlboss. She does not tolerate nonsense.

“Okay, but we’ve got less than a month.” I, on the other hand, am not a girlboss. Yet.

Evie swings her arm around my shoulders. “You’ll find someone even better. We’ve got total confidence in you.” Then she drops her arm and passes me a cup of coffee. “Figured you’d need this. You’re burning the candle at both ends. Now, tell us what’s happening with Yulefest.”

“Thank you.” I press the mug to my lips, enjoying the warmth of it before taking a long sip. “Almost as good as Britta’s.”

“I won’t tell Adam you said that,” Evie says, then elbows me to let me know she’s kidding.

We’ve gotten close in the last six months, but before I stayed with her in the summer, we didn’t know each other well at all. And I’m still learning all the ins and outs of her personality. Like that she teases a lot, but sometimes she uses humor to cover what she’s really feeling.

“So, Yulefest,” Georgia says. “What kinds of demands is Mayor Voglmeyer making that are keeping you so busy?”

I tell her the basics while she sips from her water glass, her eyes narrowing in a way that reminds me of Charly’s books

that have sly animals always outsmarting their predators.

I can appreciate that look. Everyone, except the mayor, knows Georgia is behind all the Yulefest events. At least the ones that are new. She feeds her ideas to Carson who meets with the mayor and suggests them in a way that makes her think she came up with them.

If she knew Georgia was behind any of it, she'd never go for any of it, no matter how good it might be for Paradise. They've got beef going back to when Georgia was in high school but has gotten worse since Georgia refused to feature the hamburger place the mayor's son owns in one of her episodes.

At least according to both Evie and Carson.

But the idea behind Yulefest is genius—one more reason to be intimidated by Georgia.

Paradise is busy in the summer, which is when local businesses make most of their money. However, there's a ski resort forty-five minutes away that's expanding, and Georgia thinks there will be more opportunities for Paradise with that growth. Especially if the town can capitalize on its quaint Danish vibe during the Christmas season.

Its square houses with pitched roofs and cute downtown mean Paradise is a ready-made Christmas village. Especially when it's covered in snow. Which it always is by December.

Georgia's primary motive for turning Paradise into a Hallmark-Christmas-movie-worthy small town is to help

business grow so the town won't die like so many other small towns do.

But Yulefest will also help her own business. Highlighting the festival on *At Home with Georgia Rose* will guarantee she'll be able to sell all her renovated cottages in the Little Copenhagen at top price.

I'm nervous as I tell her about the events, giving Carson most of the credit for the ideas, but also taking credit for the ones that are mine.

"That all sounds amazing," she says when I finish, but she doesn't have that wily prey look on her face anymore. She's genuinely impressed. "Your ideas are going to generate revenue for this town. Evie wasn't wrong when she said you had a natural gift for organizing and planning."

"Thank you. That is huge praise coming from you." My chest expands, and I know Georgia's words will be carrying me through the next two and half weeks of putting final plans into place.

"To clever entrepreneurs!" Evie raises her water glass and the rest of us clink ours to hers.

"Oh, hey!" Stella says, brightly, but there's something a little too shiny about it. "Do any of you know why my brother is trying to find knee britches and clogs and listening to *Syvspring* music?"

"I don't even know what most of those things are," Evie says, but Stella's smile is directed my way.

“It’s the Seven Jumps dance we had to do every year when we were kids for the school Christmas pageant,” Georgia says to Evie and me. “Is he doing that dance for Yulefest or something? I thought only the little kids were doing it.”

I twist a lock of hair around my fingers and stare at it instead of looking at anyone else at the table. “He volunteered to teach it to Charly and convinced the teacher at the elementary school to let Charly perform with the class.” My hair is in a tight coil all the way to the nape of my neck, and my finger is caught in it. “I didn’t know he’d need a costume.”

I unwind my hair and drop my hands to my lap, feeling the weight of six eyes on me.

“My brother did what?” Stella asks.

“He hated doing that dance when we were kids. Everyone did.” Georgia looks ready to laugh.

“I take back all my warnings about Seb,” Evie says, smiling wide. “I didn’t think he could be tamed, but I think you’ve done it.”

“What are you talking about?” My face heats up hotter than the coffee I’m too warm to drink now.

“He offered to spend time with a three-year-old...” Evie looks at me like I should know what she’s trying to tell me. “Hope, Charly is my niece, and I love her, but have you heard me volunteer to do something with her?”

I shake my head, but I think I know what she’s getting at.

“Because I’m scared to be alone with her. I don’t know what to do if she has a meltdown or if I can’t understand what she’s saying.” Her voice grows more animated as she goes on. “I watch how patient you are with her, and I’m blown away by what a good mom you are. I don’t know if I could ever do what you’re doing pretty much by yourself.”

Before I can say anything, Adam appears carrying a tray full of food, even though no one ordered anything. This is what he does. Feeds people what he thinks they need.

But Evie just did the same thing for me with her words. She fed me exactly what my soul needs right now.

“Here you go, ladies,” Adam says, and I’m grateful that everyone’s attention is on him instead of me wiping my eyes. “You get to try out what I’ve got in mind for the *Julefrokost* menu.” He sets the tray on a nearby table and takes the first plate from it. “Who wants to try the breaded white fish with remoulade?”

When no one raises their hand, I do. I like fish.

“Good choice, Hope. You’ll love it,” he says, matter-of-factly.

Evie is the one who teases in their relationship. Most days I can’t tell if Adam is mad at something or just perpetually grumpy. But he’s a good guy and doesn’t let Evie get away with burying her feelings anymore.

“Dibs on the meatballs.” Georgia holds out her hands for the next plate before Adam can offer it to anyone.

“I figured. I made them just the way you like them.” He’s picked up the next plate by the time he’s finished his sentence. “How about the duck breast?”

“Oh, I’ll take that,” Evie says. “I love your duck.”

“I love *you*.” The corner of Adam’s mouth lifts with the tiniest of smiles when he looks at Evie.

“That leaves the pork tenderloin for you.” He sets the last plate in front of Stella.

“Whatever it is, you know I’ll eat it,” she says, already cutting into the meat. “You know I’m trying all of yours too.” She points her knife at each one of us.

“You can have one bite. That’s all I’m willing to share,” Georgia responds.

I’m happy to share anything with Stella, as long as we don’t have to talk about Seb anymore.

Charly’s supposed to have her first practice with him tonight at his house. I don’t know if he suggested six o’clock because it’s around the time I usually pick her up or if it’s because we’ll be expected to stay for dinner.

I’d be more worried that Seb was turning this into a surprise-this-is-a-date situation if he didn’t live with his mom. Gia will be there, and Stella probably too. And I won’t turn down Gia’s cooking. Her chicken parm is the best I’ve ever had.

Obviously, I have to stay for the lesson. I can’t just leave Charly there, expecting Gia to take care of her for an extra hour or so. Even though Seb’s the one giving the lesson, he

doesn't know how to actually interact with Charly. He may be able to teach her the moves, but he won't know how to change her diaper or how to calm her down if she gets upset.

At least, I don't think he does.

Honestly, I think he'd be even more terrified being left in charge of Charly than I would be leaving him in charge of her. His generosity doesn't extend that far outside his comfort zone.

But I have no doubt he's taken a giant step out of that comfort zone just offering to teach her. The responses from the other women at this table only re-confirms my certainty about that.

Their surprise over his offer also confirms that Seb is making a real effort to win me over. Not that I didn't already know that. Despite the squirrel incident at the barn, once Seb got over being mad, the rest of the day was great.

The time I spent with Seb during the summer was all about fun. But after collaborating with him for a day, then checking in periodically over the last couple days to go over what still needs to be done, I have to say, I really like working with him too.

I've seen a different side to him. He knows electricity on so many levels beyond physical chemistry. And I'm impressed with how much he knows about business. He's got a low-key confidence in his abilities that I envy. The man is more than just a pretty face.

As hard as I'm fighting to not give into my attraction to him, I feel my resolve slipping.

After talking to these ladies, I wonder if it's time to let it go and give Seb a chance.

Chapter 15

Sebastian



I turn the chicken cooking in the pan, then wipe my hands on my apron and check the next step in the recipe. Mom stands a few feet away, washing dishes that don't need to be washed. What she really wants to do is jump in and take over the cooking.

"I can cook the dinner, Sebastian. I don't need to go to line-dancing." She's resisted as long as possible and can't stop herself from peeking over my shoulder.

"I'm fine, Mamma. I should have told you Hope was coming over." I might have conveniently forgotten Mom has her line-dancing lessons tonight.

Usually I just warm something up on these nights, but I know Hope will be hungry after a long day, so I thought I'd make something for her.

I dump cooked ziti into a mixing bowl, then take a jar of Mom's alfredo sauce from the fridge. I'll confess to cheating a little by not making the sauce myself, but Mom makes the best alfredo. Why fix what ain't broken?

Before I can pour the alfredo over the pasta, she takes it from my hands. "Charly won't want to eat this. It's too rich." She sets the jar on the counter and scoops ziti into a smaller bowl. "Just a little butter and cheese on top for her."

"Thanks," I hadn't thought about Charly needing to eat, even though she's in the mudroom playing with Uncle Rad. Her squeals should have reminded me that she'd want dinner too.

I still have a lot to learn.

But at least Uncle Rad is having fewer accidents. She hasn't peed inside all day, which reminds me...

"I've got to take the dog out. I'll finish this when I come back." I don't bother taking the apron off as I rush to the mudroom.

I think it's been more than an hour since I last took Radley out, but I got distracted with making dinner. So I'm relieved when I step over the kiddie gate Mom put up and don't see any puddles.

"Thanks for taking care of Radley—Uncle Rad—for me, Charly." I pat Charly's head, not sure, even as I do it, if that's the right thing. "Come on, girl, let's go potty."

I hook Uncle Rad's leash to her collar and open the back door, but before I can step out, Charly slips her hand into mine.

"Me too!" she smiles.

I glance at our hands, and swallow hard, pushing back the unexpected emotion rushing from my chest. Her hand is so small in mine, and so trusting.

Is this what it's like to be a dad? To feel overwhelmed by a kid's vulnerability and their trust when you know your own limitations?

"Okay." My heart pounds so loud, I barely hear my own reply.

Cold air rolls in from the open door, and I grab my coat. There's a small one hanging next to it, that has to be Charly's.

And, of course, she's going to need a coat too.

I grab her coat and hand it to her. "Put your coat on first." My voice sounds harsher than I mean it to, so I make it higher, the way I've heard Mom do. "It's cold out there."

Charly takes the coat, and after many tries, gets one arm in the sleeve, but the coat is upside down. She turns in circles trying to get her other arm in. Uncle Rad, thinking this is a fun game, follows Charly in her tight circles, yipping loudly.

So, I guess three-year-olds still need help getting dressed?

"Hold on. Let me help." I get on my knees so I'm eye level with Charly and guide her out of her coat.

She smiles wide, and I realize I've never really looked at her this close. I'm always looking at her from two feet above. This view makes a stark difference. I can see her better. She's a real person.

And she's pretty cute.

I zip her coat and pull up the hood. "Okay. Ready?"

"Ready, Freddy," she answers.

"Oh, that's not my name. I'm Sebastian. But you can call me Seb."

"Ready, Sebby," she says and puts her hand back in mine.

And there's that feeling again.

Was I a grinch before this moment? Is that why it feels like my heart is growing three times its size?

We walk outside, and I lead Charly and Uncle Rad to a corner at the back of Mom's yard. I put down small rocks here last week to train Uncle Rad to come to this corner. I learned that from the book Carson made me buy, and it's actually working.

Not necessarily fast enough right now when it's as cold as it is. I keep looking at Charly to make sure she's not freezing. Her hand in mine doesn't feel cold, but maybe that's just because I'm holding it.

She seems happy enough, stamping her feet, repeating my encouragement in her tiny voice.

"Go peepee, Unkuhrad. Go peepee, and I give you treats," she says over and over.

After a minute or so, our encouragement works and Uncle Rad does her business. Not on the rocks, but close to them. In the general backyard corner vicinity anyway.

Just as I'm leading them both back inside, headlights flood the side of the house as a car parks along the curb. It must be Hope, and dinner's not close to being ready. This night is not going as planned, and panic rises in my chest.

Wait... is this what it's like to be a homemaker? Trying to get dinner cooked and take care of little people and puppies at the same time? Is this what Mom's life was like—minus the puppy but in addition to going to school and running a business—when I was a kid?

Charly sees her mom's car and wrenches her hand from mine. She runs toward the car before I can stop her, but I'm not worried. She's excited to see her mom, and I put her coat on her, so she won't be cold. Maybe Hope will notice that.

But then a second set of headlights appears as Charly darts in front of Hope's car to the driver's side. I don't know if Hope can see her. What if she opens the door and knocks Charly into the road, right in front of the oncoming car?

Without thinking, I drop Uncle Rad's leash and run. "Charly! Get out of the street!"

I barely register the surprise on Hope's face inside the car as I slide—stunt man style—across the hood of her car, still yelling for Charly to stop.

How I learned the hood slide isn't important. (Bear is to blame.) What is important is that I make it across the hood and almost stick my landing. But I clamber to my feet fast enough to pick up Charly just as the oncoming car...

Takes the turn fifty feet away to go down another street.

"What was that?" Hope asks as she climbs out of her car.

"There was a car coming." My words come out in breathless gasps.

Charly's legs dangle under my arms, and I notice one of her boots on the ground. "Mama," she says with a whimper, reaching for Hope.

Between the sounds of Charly's soft cries and my pounding heart, I hear Uncle Rad barking. My eyes dart to the spot

where I dropped her leash, then to the other side of the yard where her barking is coming from.

Her leash and doggy bag holder bounce behind her as she runs toward the road, then sprints down the middle of it.

“Radley!” I call and take off after her. “Uncle Rad! Stop!”

I send up a Hail Mary, praying another car won’t come down the street. She keeps running, and the closer I get I realize she’s afraid of the doggy bag thing “chasing” her. My chasing isn’t helping either, so I slow down.

“Uncle Rad,” I call as calmly as I can. “Come here, girl. Come to Daddy.”

I’ve never thought of myself as her daddy, but it seems appropriate here. I’m absolutely terrified she’s going to get hurt.

But she starts to slow, which means the doggy bag’s bouncing also slows. Then she stops and turns in circles.

I use my calmest voice as I walk to her until I’m finally able to scoop her into my arms. “You’re okay,” I coo—that’s what it’s called when you talk to a baby, right? Cooing?—and carry her back to my house.

Hope stands there with Charly in her arms, patting her back. The sight of her is both comforting and scary. There’s not enough light to see much more than her dark outline.

“That was exciting,” she says when I get close. She doesn’t sound mad.

“I’m so sorry. One second, she was holding my hand, the next second she wasn’t. And then there was a car coming, and —” My throat tightens, and I stop.

“It’s okay, Seb. She’s okay.” Hope takes her hand from Charly’s back long enough to squeeze mine.

I nod, catching my breath again.

But the fear still circles my brain, filling it with what-ifs.

What if I hadn’t gotten to Charly in time and the car hadn’t turned? What if it were the middle of the day when this street is busier? What if Uncle Rad had been hit?

That’s the thing with adding more people—and animals—to your circle of love. The what-if’s increase exponentially.

And looking at Hope and Charly both, I don’t know if I’m ready for that.

Chapter 16

Hope



I follow Seb into the house through the mudroom. He hangs up his coat, and I don't miss the trembling in his hands as he takes Charly's coat from me. The trembling is still there when he puts Uncle Rad in her crate.

I understand how he feels. I'm hiding how scared I still am too.

The car wasn't close. Charly was safe—I knew she was by my door. But moments like that one always remind me what little control I have as a mother. The thing I want most in the world is for Charly to be safe and happy. It's also the thing I know is impossible.

Not only impossible but would be bad for her. Danger and sadness are a part of life. Without them, she won't know what being safe and happy is.

So, while I do as much as I can to keep her safe and make sure she's happy, I do it knowing at times I'll fail. That's the hardest thing about being a mom. There's no way to plan for every contingency or do it perfectly. There are only occasional moments of perfection that pass all too quickly. And they're never planned.

Like when I pulled up to Gia's and saw Charly holding Seb's hand. An image of what my family could look like flashed before me. Not necessarily with Seb filling the role of husband and father, but someone who will treat Charly as tenderly as he was in that moment.

Charly and I will be fine if that “perfect” family never happens. But that doesn’t mean I’ll give up hope that it could.

And I’m not going to lie, seeing Seb rush to protect Charly has me looking at him differently. Because a man who doesn’t care about kids or who isn’t interested in being a father doesn’t do a running leap onto the hood of a car and slide across it on his butt to save a kid who’s not really in danger.

The Seb I saw do that has me *very* interested in being the woman he doesn’t want to give up on. Not only because he rushed to protect my baby, but also because he looked damn sexy doing it. And that image is not leaving my head any time soon.

“Where’d you learn to do that?” I ask him as he holds the door for Charly and me to pass into the kitchen, which smells heavenly.

“Do what?”

“The hood slide.”

“Oh. That...”

“Hood slide?” Gia sticks a pan in the oven and slams the door shut. “Is that what you were doing out there? You better not have put another dent in my hood.”

Seb’s ears go pink. “I told you I’d finish dinner, Ma.”

“You were taking too long. I thought you went to take the dog out, not do your silly stunts.” She hangs her apron on a hook, then stares daggers at Seb.

For the first time, I notice he's got on an apron too, and I wonder if he was helping with dinner. I assumed he didn't know how to cook.

“Shouldn't you go?” he says to Gia. “You're going to be late for line-dancing.”

And now I notice Gia is wearing a pearl-buttoned shirt, jeans, and cowboy boots. She looks adorable, but she's also not dressed for a quiet evening at home. I don't see Stella anywhere either.

So my suspicions about Seb making this a surprise date were on point.

I should feel more bothered than I do, but my brain is too busy replaying Seb's hood stunt.

“You didn't answer my question. Where'd you learn to do that?” I ask again.

Seb pulls his apron over his head, but he can't hide the color in his cheeks.

“Too much TikTok,” Gia answers with a wave of her hand, which I think is her signature move.

“What your daddy's name, Misshia?” Charly interrupts, tugging Gia's hand.

I don't break eye contact with Seb.

“My daddy? Antony. Why do you want to know, bambolina?” Gia answers.

Charly walks to Seb and tugs his hand. “Your name Tony?”

He glances down at her, “What? No. I’m Seb. Remember?”

“TikTok?” I ask.

His eyes dart back to mine and his face grows pinker, so I let him off the hook. For now.

Gia laughs. “Sebastian isn’t my daddy, Charly, he’s my son.” Then she pinches Seb’s cheek and raises her voice to preschool-teacher octave. “My little boy.”

“Oh! Sebby! I member!” Charly squeals, then says in her three-year-old L-less way, “He’s little big boy.”

“He’s all grown up, but he’ll always be my little boy,” Gia answers her, emphasizing the sound of each L.

“Time to go, Ma.” Seb grabs her by the shoulders and walks her to the mudroom door, grabbing her purse from the table and handing it to her as they go.

“Dinner is almost done. As soon as the cheese is a little brown,” she says as he guides her out the door.

When he comes back into the kitchen, he walks straight to the oven without looking at me. He peeks inside and declares the dish needs “a few more minutes.”

Still avoiding my eyes, he picks up a plastic dish with noodles in it. “Do you think Charly would like to eat right now? Or wait?”

“I don’t know.” I shrug. “You can ask her.”

“Oh...” With a stiff turn, he faces Charly. “Are you hungry, Charly? Do you want ziti with...” he checks the bowl. “Butter

and cheese?”

“No.” she stamps her foot. “I want noodie.”

Now I break eye contact with Seb. “Charly. Be polite. Ziti is noodles.”

“Oh, yeah. It’s noodles. With butter and cheese.” Seb lowers the bowl for Charly to see.

She reaches for the bowl, but I grab her hands. “Use your manners, please.”

Charly scowls for a second, but when I let go of her hands, she drops them and says to Seb, “Noodies, peas, Sebby.”

His lip quirks in what might be a smile, and he holds the bowl out to her again, but I pull her away.

“Get in your seat first, please.” I walk her to the table and help her climb into the raised chair Gia has for her.

Seb sets the bowl in front of her. Charly picks up a noodle with her fingers and pops it into her mouth. Seb smiles, then winces.

“Oh, she needs a fork, right? Or a spoon?” He opens a drawer and silverware clinks together as he searches for the right thing. “No, a fork.” He holds up a big metal fork, but before I can tell him she needs something smaller, he drops it back in the drawer and holds up a red plastic fork. “This is probably for her, right?”

I nod.

Charly looks at him and says, “Wewo.”

Seb blinks, gives up trying to figure out what she said, and hands her the fork. Which she throws on the floor.

“Charly! That’s not okay.” I rush to pick up the fork and carry it to the sink. “She wants yellow,” I explain to Seb while searching the drawer he just went through. “Usually I wouldn’t let her get away with acting like that, but I can tell she’s tired. If we’re going to get through a dance lesson, we want her happy.”

“Oh. Okay.” Seb is looking a little shell-shocked, and I guess I can’t blame him. A lot has happened in the past fifteen minutes.

It’s all everyday stuff—if you’re used to it every day.

I find the yellow fork and hand it to Charly, then turn to Seb. “We can do this another night. Or not at all. I know this is overwhelming.”

“Yeah,” Seb nods, and my heart dips. “I mean, yeah, it’s a lot.” He licks his lips. “But I can manage.”

There’s still a hole in my chest from the sudden exit of my heart—I didn’t know how much I wanted him to fight for me to stay until I thought he wouldn’t. I’m still processing the fact he doesn’t seem to be giving up, no matter what I throw at him. But I can’t stop myself from waiting for him to decide being with me would be too hard.

“You sure?” I suck in my breath and wait for his answer.

He meets my eyes, and even though neither of us moves, something powerful is pulling us together, filling the space

between us with a force we can't ignore.

“No, but I want to try. Is that enough?” The amber color in his eyes reflects the light above him, increasing the intensity of his gaze.

But that's not the real reason I can't say no to him. The real reason is that he's seeing me and my life in a way I didn't think he could. He's still seeing with limited vision, but at least he recognizes that.

He's trying.

“It's enough.” I nod. “But you still haven't answered my question.” I let a smile creep across my face. Because I never want things to just be serious with Seb. “Where'd you learn to hood slide like that?”

Chapter 17

Sebastian



While Hope helps Charly eat her pasta, I take the baked chicken alfredo from the oven. It looks like a lot of work for Hope, helping Charly guide her fork to her mouth with every bite. But I pretend not to notice.

I dish up a plate for Hope, with a side of bread and Italian salad, and set it in front of her while finally answering her question. “Bear and I like to watch stupid movies. We try to outdo each other to find the stupidest one.”

I take the seat across from Hope and continue. “I found this movie, *Dukes of Hazzard*, about these southern guys who are cousins. One is blonde. The other has dark hair.”

“Like you and Bear,” she says and takes a bite of her food. “Mmm, this is really good.”

“Yeah, like me and Bear. Anyway, the guys must have slid across the hood of their orange Dodge Charger—named the General Lee, I don’t know how they got away with that—at least a dozen times.”

Hope nods, and I don’t know if it’s the food or my story that’s making her look so happy, but I hope it’s me.

I can’t stop looking at her smile as I tell her the rest. “So then we went down this rabbit hole about hood slides that led us to the TV show the movie is based on and YouTube compilations of all their hood slides, and... long story short, we had to try it.”

“How’d that work out for you? Is it harder than it looks?” She asks while helping Charly with her food.

“I got pretty bruised up the first time I tried it, and Bear came down so hard he dented the hood of Mom’s car.” I take a bite of my chicken, enjoying it almost as much as Hope’s laugh and Charly’s giggle that follows.

“You used your Mom’s car?”

“We both have trucks.”

“Of course, you do.”

“Anyway, after watching a few how-to videos on YouTube, we got the hang of it. I never thought I’d actually need it though.” I realize I forgot to get us drinks and go to the fridge. “Can I get you a drink? Water? Wine? Milk?”

“Definitely not milk. I’ll take water. I’m too tired for wine not to go straight to my head.” She takes another bite of her food, then goes back to helping Charly. “Do you usually stick the landing? Or do you always end up on your butt?”

I huff a laugh. “I usually stick it, but I’ve never had to use it in an emergency. I got nervous.”

“I don’t know that I’d call the situation an *emergency*, but I appreciate that you got to show off your cool trick.” She takes the water from me, then pulls a plastic cup with a lid out of her bag. “Do you mind putting some milk in this for Charly?”

“It felt like an emergency.” I take the cup from her and go to the fridge. When I can hide behind the open door, I say what’s been on my mind since the incident. “I don’t know how you’re not stressed out all the time trying to keep Charly alive.”

She takes the milk from me, makes sure the lid is tight, then hands it to Charly.

“Tank you, Mama,” she says, then takes a long slurp from the straw.

“I stress about a lot of things, but stressing all the time about Charly would take the joy out of being a mom.” She takes a bite of her food, which is the fourth one she’s taken. Most of her time has been taken up helping Charly.

“How old are kids before they can feed themselves?” I ask.

“Usually by the time they’re two,” she answers, then picks up the cup Charly dropped on the floor. “But Charly was born premature, so she has developmental delays. She’s getting better with a fork, and usually I let her do more. But tonight’s going to be a late night, and I don’t want to have to bathe her when we get home. So I’m helping more than usual.”

“Is that why she needs the glasses too? Because she was premature?” My food is almost gone, and I wonder if I’m being rude eating faster than Hope.

“Yeah. She had retinopathy of prematurity as a baby. She’s grown out of it but developed nearsightedness in the process.” Hope says everything matter-of-factly, like having a kid when she was a teenager, and a kid who has problems on top of that, is no big deal.

I wait for Hope to finish her bite before I ask my next question, because it’s a big one. “What about her dad? Is he around at all?”

Hope sucks in her breath, and I try to backtrack. “I’m sorry. You don’t have to answer that. It’s too personal.”

“No, it’s fine. It just took me by surprise.” She sets down her fork and takes a drink of water. “I was eighteen when I got pregnant, barely out of high school. Derek was older—one of those guys who doesn’t care about rules. I had so many rules growing up, I think that’s what attracted me to him.”

Charly throws the cup on the floor again and laughs. This time I pick it up and hand it back to her, but my eyes stay on Hope, waiting for the rest of her story.

“Anyway, we hadn’t been dating that long, and when I told him he basically disappeared.” She shrugs, but I see the pain behind her eyes. “I let him know when she was born early, and he showed up. He even stuck around during the weeks she was in the hospital, but once the doctors started listing the problems they could already detect and warning us there were more to come, he offered to sign over custody and disappeared again.”

I stare at her, unbelieving. “He just left?” I don’t know how anyone could voluntarily leave a kid, let alone Hope.

She nods. “He came back around about a year ago, wanting to get back together. I thought about it for a minute, but I knew it wouldn’t work. I couldn’t trust him not to leave again.”

I’m about to say something about this guy being an idiot, but Charly throws her cup again, narrowly misses me. She laughs, but Hope doesn’t.

“Okay. All done.” She sets the cup where Charly can’t get it.
“Are you ready to get down?”

Charly nods and starts scooting out of her seat. Hope helps her the rest of the way down.

“I see Unkuhrad.” Charly toddles toward the mudroom, but Hope stops her.

“Ask Sebby first, please.”

Charly turns her magnified blue eyes to me, and I nod before she even asks, already getting out of my seat to open the door for her. “You want to help me feed her?”

She nods and takes my hand. I let her help me pour Uncle Rad’s food into her bowl, then carry her to the laundry sink so she can fill the water bowl. I’m nervous the whole time and don’t really know how to talk to her, but I want Hope to have a chance to eat.

I’m also replaying everything she’s just told me about Charly’s dad. I knew he wasn’t around, but I didn’t realize that meant not at all. Hope has been parenting by herself, taking care of Charly with all her stuff alone. Since she was a teenager.

I mean, I know she had her parents to help. But I look at her and see someone wise beyond her years. She’s getting her career off the ground and raising a little human who needs lots of help, and she’s barely out of her teens.

Meanwhile, I’m letting my mom pick up after me.

I've got a high bar to cross if I'm going to be the kind of man she deserves.

"Okay, Charly," I say once Uncle Rad is eating. "Let's go get your mom, and we can learn how to do a fun dance."

I sound so stiff. I'm a fun guy, so why can't I be that guy with this little person? She's just a smaller human, not an alien species.

"No." She gets down on the floor, takes food from the dog bowl, and presses it to Uncle Rad's mouth. "I feed Unkuhrad."

"Uh, I don't think that's a good idea." I glance toward the door, wondering if I should get Hope. But she really deserves to eat the rest of her dinner.

So I get on the floor and try to pry the food from Charly's closed fist while also protecting her from Uncle Rad, who's being very possessive of her food and lets out an uncharacteristic growl.

"Let's go dance," I try again, gently tugging Charly away from Uncle Rad.

But Charly makes one more grab for Uncle Rad's food, which the dog doesn't like at all. She nips Charly's hand, but with my pulling in the opposite direction, Uncle Rad's bite is as bad as her little bark. Which isn't very bad, but she does draw a tiny bit of blood.

Charly's eyes go wide and her lungs fill. For seconds, everything goes still, and my shoulders tense waiting for her reaction.

It comes in a loud piercing scream that sends Hope running into the mudroom.

“What happened?” She pulls Charly away from me into her arms. Charly sobs louder, and Hope pushes away from her to inspect all her body parts. “Are you hurt? Tell me where your hurt?”

“Uncle Rad nipped her,” I try to explain over Hope’s panic and Charly’s cries.

“Nipped her?” Hope grabs Charly’s hands and finds the injury on the fleshy space between her thumb and pointer finger. “There’s just a little blood.”

“Charly was getting in her food,” I say lamely. Because there’s really no excuse for Uncle Rad’s behavior. I should have trained her better. Or had all her teeth removed.

Not really. I don’t think you can do that with puppies.

“I’m sorry,” I say softly, before picking up Uncle Rad and putting her in her crate.

Then her cries join Charly’s, and the high-pitched noise bounces off the mudroom walls, making the space feel even smaller and tighter with so many bodies.

Hope examines the scrape closely, then stands. “It’s not bad. It’s not even bleeding anymore. But we should go. She’s tired. I’m tired. This probably wasn’t a good idea.”

“Yeah, okay. You’re probably right.” I step back so she can take Charly’s coat from the hook.

I should offer to do it another time, but I don't. I've messed everything up. I made Charly and my dog cry. I know I should do *something*, but all I can do is watch Hope get still-wailing Charly into her coat. I don't even offer to help.

When Charly is zipped up and Hope has on her own coat, she hefts Charly into her arms. The little girl buries her head in Hope's neck, hiccupping through what sounds like a goodbye to Uncle Rad. Followed by, "bad dog."

"Thank you for dinner. Please tell Gia it was delicious," Hope says with a tight smile.

And I want to tell her *I* made dinner, because then maybe she'll think I can do something right. But I don't.

Instead, I open the side door for her and let her walk out of it, not even trying to stop her.

She's halfway to her car when I think of something that might keep the night from being a total disaster.

"Wait!" I call.

Hope looks over her shoulder.

"I've got something for you. Don't leave! I'll be right back!"

I run to the kitchen and take the glass top off Mom's cake plate. I take two of the pumpkin shortbread bars from inside, then turn in a circle trying to think of something to put them in. I settle on a plastic baggie, carefully put them both in, then run outside.

Hope is buckling Charly into her seat when I get there. I shove them toward her. “Here. Dessert. It’s pumpkin shortbread cookies, and they’re delicious.”

“Thank you?” Hope gives me a quizzical look.

“So the night doesn’t end on a completely bad note.” My chest rises and falls, and I try not to look directly in her eyes, because my heart is threatening to explode.

Her lip curves into a sad half-smile. “The night was great, Seb. This is just what it’s like to have a kid. This kind of thing is the norm, not the exception.”

I don’t know how to respond to that. The idea of having another night like tonight threatens to make my whole body break into a sweat.

“This is what I was trying to warn you about, Seb.” Hope takes my hand and squeezes it. “It’s a lot. *I’m* a lot. Charly and I are a package deal, so I totally get it if you’re not ready for that.” She pauses, takes a deep breath, then forces me to meet her gaze. “But I hope you won’t give up.”

She rises on her tiptoes and kisses my cheek.

And I want to be able to tell her with the same surety as I did the first time that I’m not giving up.

But those words get lost in the feeling of failure washing over me. How can I do so many things right—my business, my music, my desserts—but I can’t get anything right when it comes to Hope and Charly.

I'm not sure I'm ready to take a chance if I don't have what it takes to be a dad.

Chapter 18

Hope



I've taken to stopping at Britta's every morning on my way to dropping off Charly at Gia's preschool. She likes the hot chocolate—lukewarm, with lots of whipped cream—and I like the coffee. Any flavor. It's all delicious.

But this morning I order an americano, triple shot of espresso, because I *need* a jolt of energy if I'm going to make it through this day. I wish I had time for an order of ebelskiver to split with Charly over a leisurely breakfast. Maybe this weekend, but my day is booked, and I was up late last night and early this morning.

So I grab our order, wave goodbye to Britta, and lead Charly back to the car. We pass a woman wearing a tinfoil hat feeding squirrels in the parking lot and I like that I know this is Lynette, who Evie and Seb have both mentioned, but I've never seen her before. But I smile like we've met because she's the reason Evie knew Adam had a big heart buried under his grumpy exterior, and I make a note to ask Evie about that story again.

I think about Adam being kind to Lynette as I help Charly buckle herself—this is progress—into her seat. And I remember how Seb, in the middle of all his frustration with the squirrels, didn't say anything mean about Lynette, only that she fed them too much.

So often it's the little things people do that reveal who they are rather than the really big things.

This is what kept me up late: thinking about the little things Seb did last night that gave me a better picture of who he

could be, if he keeps trying.

He doesn't know anything about kids, but neither did I before Charly was born. I haven't really thought about how I've changed since I became a mom until Evie told me the other day at lunch I was amazing. Her words have been on replay in my mind since then.

My ability to stay calm with Charly, to be aware of any potential threats, and to anticipate her needs isn't because I just knew how to do those things. Experience and practice has taught me.

Seb was totally overwhelmed last night. I saw it on his face and in his trembling hands. I know exactly how he felt because I've felt the same way.

But I also saw the way he held Charly's hand, tried to talk to her with a less serious tone, and asked me questions about her. He's learning, but more importantly, he's doing it because he *wants* to, not because he has to.

At least he did want to.

I'm not sure about that anymore. He didn't say he was giving up, but he didn't say he wasn't either.

I pull up to Gia's preschool hoping Seb's truck will be there, even though it hasn't been there any other mornings. There's no reason for him to be there, and this morning is no different.

When I take Charly inside, I linger in the classroom, hoping Gia will say something that Seb might have told her about last night. But she's too busy with all the children to do more than

smile, but with a question in her eyes, that tells me I'm overstaying my welcome.

So, I head to the office, taking the long way so I can pass Seb's shop. His truck is parked out front. Of course, he's there. His work ethic is admirable, but he's really chill about it. He acts like it's no big deal that he knows how to work with electricity without hurting himself or anyone else. I mean, it's *electricity*.

It hits me then what a contrast there is between how confident he is about his work, which involves real danger, compared to how scared he is about getting something wrong with Charly.

I pass Sparks Electric, wishing I had a reason to stop. Somehow, though, it's comforting knowing he's there. I don't know why. Maybe because it's evidence he hasn't run for the hills to get as far away from me as possible.

Carson is already at Pizzazz when I get there, and I carry the coffees I ordered for him and Steve inside.

"Thank you, dear," Carson says when I hand it to him.

I love that, even though he's only in his forties, he talks like a grandma. No matter how many to-dos he hands me, he always gives off this warm and cozy vibe.

"How did last night go?" He asks while taking the lid off his café au lait and breathing it in. This is always the first step in his morning coffee ritual. "Is our little princess a dancing queen now?"

Carson dotes on Charly, and I love it. My stepdad adores her too, but he's not super emotive, so Charly is getting a very different experience with a man like Carson in her life who give hugs freely and generously.

“Not so much,” I answer before taking a fortifying sip of my americano. “Seb was sweet with her, but between saving her from oncoming traffic and comforting her after Uncle Rad nipped at her, he was too overwhelmed to do any dancing and Charly maxed out. It was a mess.” I let out a laugh. “I may have scared him off for good.”

I'm mostly joking, but Carson shuts his laptop and gives me his full attention. “So, you're not interested in scaring Seb away anymore? This is news.” He points to the seat across from him. “Sit. Tell me everything.”

I do as he orders, realizing I've just said out loud the idea I've been toying with: I want to give Seb a chance. I meant it last night when I told him I didn't want him to give up on me. But the more important realization is that I don't want to give up on him.

And I'm grateful to have someone to talk everything through with. Evie wasn't around last night, and I rushed out the door this morning.

“Where do I even start?” I say with a sigh.

“Wait.” Carson holds up his hand, and for a second, I'm afraid we won't talk, but then he yells to the front of the store, “lock the doors, Steve. We need you back here.”

“He’s very good with relationship stuff,” he says to me.

“I’m not in a relationship...”

“You will be,” Carson smiles as Steve walks into the office and takes the chair next to mine. “With our help.”

I tense for half a second, wondering if that’s what I want... a relationship. But I quickly brush the thought away. I wouldn’t have asked Seb to keep trying if I didn’t. I wouldn’t feel a pang of jealousy every time I see Adam and Evie together.

So I welcome all the help Carson wants to give me. And, honestly, I don’t mind him inviting Steve to join us, at all. My love life is so hard for me to make sense of that Carson isn’t wrong to call in reinforcements.

They both angle their bodies toward me, giving me their full attention as I give them every detail about last night, from the hood slide to the dog bite. They nod and throw in a few ahhs when I tell them about Seb holding Charly’s hand and letting her help feed Uncle Rad. By the time I finish, Carson is clutching his hands over his heart, and Steve is smiling softly.

“I’ve known Seb all his life, but I’ve never known him like this,” Carson says. “Although I’ve always suspected he had a gentle, protective side.”

Steve nods in agreement. “His dad died when Seb was young. Did you know that?”

“I knew he’d died, but I don’t know much more than that.” I scoot further into my seat, prepared to hear everything they’ll tell me that can give me more insight into Seb.

“He was in the service, killed in action in Afghanistan,” Steve goes on. “There’s some plaques around town honoring him.”

“Great guy. Very manly,” Carson adds. “Seb was only five, maybe six. Stella wasn’t even born.”

“But how sad. That must have been hard for Gia. Seb told me she met his dad when he was stationed in Italy, and she left her whole family back there to move here.” I cup my hands around my coffee, thinking about the challenge Gia must have faced when her husband died.

I also feel a deeper connection to her, being a single mom, and having left my family to come to Paradise, even if that only ends up being temporary.

“She wanted to go back to Italy after Mike died, but that would have meant taking Seb away from the family he was already attached to here. He and Stella have always been as close as siblings with the Thomsen kids,” Steve says, settling into his role as family history expert. “Heidi—she’s Mike’s sister—was like a second mother to them when Gia went back to school, and even before Mike died, he was gone often enough that Pete was a surrogate father.”

I nod while Steve talks, finally piecing together all the family connections. “So, Zach and Adam’s mom is Seb’s dad’s sister? Got it.”

“Then there’s Mike’s parents, Jim and Elsie Sparks,” Carson jumps in. “Have you met them?”

I shake my head. I remember Seb mentioning them this summer, even pointing out their house. But that's it.

“Jim's a tough guy,” Carson says in a tight voice. “A good guy, but it's his way or the highway; the man's the head of the household, so don't question him; a woman's job is to keep her husband and children happy. All that jazz.” Carson pauses, and I get the sense he and Jim haven't always seen eye to eye. “He did what he could to fill the place Mike left as far as being a ‘male figure,’ for Seb.”

“Then you have Gia, on the other hand,” Steve jumps in, and I am here for all of it. “Babying Seb to make up for Mike not being around and to soften Jim's influence, but also reinforcing gender roles like women do all the cooking, cleaning, and taking care of kids.”

“Not that there's anything wrong with couples following traditional gender roles, as long as they're doing it because it's what works best for the families,” Carson's head bobs back and forth and his voice grows louder. “Not because they think biology determines who's capable of washing dishes. I just hate—”

“—Let's not get off topic here.” Steve holds up his hand, and I suspect that the topic of gender roles in society is a passion of Carson's.

Carson takes a breath like he's about to say more, with a warning look from Steve, he closes his mouth and lets Steve talk.

“The point is, you’re not wrong about Seb needing to make big changes if you want a partner to help you raise Charly,” he says.

I nod. “I do want a partner.” Not just a relationship. A partner. Someone to work with me, side-by-side.

“And you’re not wrong noticing that he’s trying.” Carson leans over his desk and clasps his hands together. “While also recognizing he’s going to feel overwhelmed in the process of figuring out the world doesn’t revolve around him.”

“Okay, so what do I do?”

Because now I’m the one feeling overwhelmed. Walking away from the possibility of Seb and me is one thing. A future where I might have to walk away from the reality of us because Seb isn’t able to be what Charly and I need him to be is an entirely different thing.

I’m surprised at the direction of my own thoughts and don’t want to spin out—but Charly changed everything for me; is Seb up for that? Do I have what it takes to help him be the guy we would need him to be?

“If you don’t want him to give up on you, meet him halfway,” Carson says, waving his hands with dramatic effect. “Show him his efforts are worth the... well, the effort.”

“When he gets discouraged, don’t let him give up. Fight for him the way he’s been willing to fight for you,” Steve says in his deep, calm voice.

Carson and Steve are complete opposites, but between the two of them, I'm feeling a little steadier again. I know what to do, even if I'm not quite sure how to do it.

“Okay. I can fight,” I say with a confidence that deflates too quickly. “Where do I start?”

Carson raises an eyebrow. “We start by planning what we're being paid to plan, Yulefest.”

My heart sinks. After all the advice they've given me, I'm suddenly rudderless.

But then Carson adds, “and while we plan, we find ways to ‘need’ Seb’s help. For example, scoping out the Old Barn to talk about electricity .”

For half a second, I miss his pointed reference. Then it hits me, and my whole body lifts. “I knew that’s why you sent me to the Old Barn with Seb! I thought it was weird we couldn’t just make the plans here. You little match maker, you!”

Knowing Carson has had my back all along restores my confidence, with an extra scoop of determination on top.

As we go down our list of Yulefest events, I find all the places Seb and I could work together, and the ones Charly could also “assist” with, giving Seb the chance to get to know her better. Because, if my suspicions are right, the more time he spends with Charly, the more his confidence about taking care of her will grow.

I don't *need* Seb to take care of us, but maybe I want him to.

The way last night ended was a setback, that's all.

If I can help him see that—help him see setbacks are a normal part of every relationship, especially when it comes to parenting—then maybe I’ll get the only gift I’ve decided I want for Christmas...

A second chance with Seb.

Chapter 19

Sebastian



I'm too focused on loading spools of Christmas lights into my truck to take notice of the car parked next to me. I'm backed into the spot that's right outside the back entrance to my shop, so maybe the car pulled in while I was inside grabbing more lights.

Or maybe I'm too stressed to notice anything other than the job at hand. I've got two weeks to finish stringing a million lights over every square inch of Main Street, so yeah, I'm a little preoccupied.

Then there's the fact that the only thing my brain has wanted to focus on for the last three days is the one person I'm trying to forget.

Or at least not think about twenty-four/seven.

There's no forgetting Hope Lytle. No matter how hard I might try.

First, because we're supposed to be working together on Yulefest. Carson wants us to plan things in person because our time is short, and he's convinced her that we're more effective when we plan things out face to face. What she doesn't know is that Carson is only saying that because he thinks it's what I want. We could coordinate everything by text or email. Which is what we've been doing because I keep putting off meeting.

Secondly, I can't forget Hope because she's everywhere I go in this small town. Since the night of the dog-bite fiasco at my house, I've had to dart out of Britta's and Thomsen's Grocery and the Garden at least half a dozen times to avoid running

into her. If I didn't know better, I'd swear she was *trying* to run into me.

I fumbled badly the other night. I'm nervous about trying again, even though she said she hopes I don't give up on her. Her encouragement should have boosted my own confidence, but instead all I can think about is how she and Charly deserve someone better than me.

The last reason I can't forget her is that, when I shut the tailgate of my truck, and finally look at the other car in the parking lot, Hope is opening the back door of the car where Charly is buckled in.

I rake my hand through my hair and sigh. There's nowhere to run, and she's obviously here to see me. The other businesses in this strip are a barber and a bar. Hope doesn't need a haircut—even if she did, Larry's go-to is a buzz cut—and it's nine am. She might need a drink this early, but she's not taking her baby into a bar.

Plus she's already waved to me, and I'm transfixed watching her help Charly out of the car. She leans far into the backseat to get something, and I'm reminded what attracted me to her the first time I saw her from behind.

If only that were the only thing I was still attracted to. But there's so much more to Hope than her tiny waist and perfect... figure.

There's her natural intelligence. Her scrappiness. Her courage. Her kindness, her patience, her sense of humor, her gentleness.

Hope is the whole package.

It's the little something extra that has me running away every time I see Hope.

The little something extra who's waving to me now, tugging at my heart string when she calls out, "Hi, Sebby!"

Hope has her big purse on one shoulder and holds Charly's hand while she carries a cardboard box in her other arm.

"Sebby," Charly repeats a few more times, like she enjoys the sound of it.

I enjoy the sound of her saying it, that's for sure.

I think I'm falling for Charly as hard and as fast as I'm falling for Hope, and that scares the salt right out of me. A twenty-eight-year-old-man who still lives with his mother and can't even potty train a puppy has no business falling for a woman with a three-year-old who has special needs.

That fact was made painfully clear to me when Charly nearly got run over and dog-bit in the one hour she was with me.

For that reason, I wish I could ignore the happy feeling creeping into my chest as Charly tugs Hope in my direction, still calling my name.

When she gets to me, she sticks out her hand and says words that I translate into, "I've got an owie."

She points to the band-aid on her palm, right where Uncle Rad bit her. Words come out of her mouth so quickly that it takes a little longer for me to interpret them this time, but I

think it's, "I have a Band-aid, and Uncle Rad bit me. Where's Uncle Rad? I want to play with her."

And while the band-aid is a painful reminder of what happened, I can't help but be proud of the fact I can understand her happy chatter better than I used to.

"That's a nice Band-aid, Charly." I bend down to meet her at eye-level without reminding myself to do it. "Uncle Rad's inside, but are you sure you want to play with her after she bit you?"

Hope coughs, and I look up to see her making a cutting motion across her throat. When I look back at Charly, she's got a confused look on her face.

"I wuv Unkuhrad," she says, then pulls Hope toward the open back door calling, "Unkuhrad! Come're puppy!"

"Let me take that," I say and lift the box out of her arms before she can protest.

Then I follow her, a little confused by what's happening. I thought Charly would never want to see Uncle Rad again, but she didn't think twice about giving her a second chance.

Between being pulled by Charly and hitching her giant purse higher, Hope says over her shoulder, "Charly's already forgotten about what happened with Uncle Rad. That scrape was on her other hand, and it's already gone. She grabbed something hot with that hand and insisted on a band-aid, because she loves them, not because she needed it."

“Oh.” My shoulders relax for the first time since Tuesday night.

I set the box down when we reach Uncle Rad’s crate, and after getting a blanket for Charly to sit on, I let Uncle Rad out for her to pet.

Hope stands close to me. I tell myself I should give her more space, but my feet don’t listen. Our arms are inches apart as we watch Uncle Rad put her paws on Charly’s shoulders and lick her face. Charly giggles madly and rolls to her knees. The wrestling match between the two of them that follows almost makes my chest burst.

Grandpa Sparks used to tease me about saying words like *cute* and *adorable*, but, man, there is no other way to describe what’s happening at my feet with my dog and the cutest little girl I’ve ever seen.

Hope and I laugh, and she leans a little closer. “Were you still worried about Uncle Rad nipping her?”

The concern in her voice hits me right in my vulnerability. “Uh. Yeah. She was bleeding and crying when you left.”

“She was tired, and it was a tiny scrape that bled a tiny bit, looked red for a day, then disappeared.” Hope sets a hand on my shoulder, shooting more waves of electricity down my arm than a live wire. “Kids get hurt, Seb. They get tired. They cry and howl. Then they stop. That’s part of being a kid. Her crying wasn’t your fault, and that car wasn’t going to hit her. It was nowhere near, and I knew she was there. Just in case you were still worried about that too.”

“I was. Thanks. You’re not mad?”

She doesn’t sound mad, but that doesn’t make sense at all. I messed up. Her kid got hurt. She *should* be mad.

But Hope shakes her head, and smiles. I exhale deeper than I have in days, but then her eyes get this twinkling look they always do when she’s about to tease me for something.

“But if I tell you I am, will you give me another one of those pumpkin bars to convince me not to be? I’ve been craving them all week.” She shifts closer to me, smelling of cinnamon again.

“I have some in the front.” I’ve never been so grateful that I decided to bring a fresh batch of cookies and bars in today.

“Really?” Her eyes widen, growing deeper blue as she picks up her box.

“Yeah, I’ve got a whole selection of goodies.” I take the box from her, ready to take it and Hope up front, but Charly’s giggle stops me. “Will she be okay here for a minute?”

Hope scans the entire backroom, and as she does, I see the ordered chaos through her eyes. I’ve got sharp tools, spools of wire and cables that weigh as much or more than Charly, and boxes of nails and screws.

“Don’t answer that,” I tell Hope, then with Hope’s box under my arm, I put Uncle Rad’s leash on her and attach it to my belt. “We’ll all go. Mrs. C. is up there. We can show Charly her little animal things.” I pause for a second, then take a leap

of faith and hold out my hand for Charly. “Come on, Charly. I’ve got something to show you.”

My heart does the same thing it did the first time Charly took my hand, and I wonder if that will always happen. If I’ll have a surge of happiness course through me every time she wants to hold my hand. Because if I feel that when this little girl I barely know takes my hand, what would it be like with a kid of my own? My heart might be in danger of exploding.

And I think I might be okay with that. Maybe it would be enough to offset all the worry that goes along with being a parent.

The smile that appears on Hope’s face sends a different kind of joy through my body. I’ve never understood what people meant when they talked about different kinds of love, but I think I might have an idea now. I love Mom and Stella, so I thought that’s what all love felt like. But what I’m feeling for Hope is totally different.

“You’re leash-training?” she asks as we walk to the front.

“Yeah. I want to take her to job sites and be sure she’ll stay close.” Once I made it through the puppy training book Carson made me buy, I found another one.

Uncle Rad was supposed to help me win over Hope, but I’m the one who’s been won over by Uncle Rad. I’m learning a lot about raising a puppy, but not much about what it’s like to raise a kid. Although I did see leashes for kids when I was researching dog leashes. After my experience with Charly

darting into the street, I think I might get one of those for Hope for Christmas.

Mrs. C. is at the front desk knitting—or whatever it’s called—when I introduce Hope and Charly.

“I thought Charly might like to see your animals, like the flying squirrel,” I tell her while setting the box on the floor by the register. “Are you working on another one?”

“No, these are for the Christmas market.” Mrs. C. holds up her project, which looks like a bright red beanie with...

“Are those moose antlers?”

Mrs. C. nods enthusiastically and holds up a finished beanie. “I fashioned some of your wire into the antler shape I want, then I made a form with this plush fabric and sewed the wire inside so the antlers will keep their shape. Then I stuff the form full of cotton, sew it shut, stitch them onto the beanie, and there’s your moose rack! Here, try it.”

“They’re so cute!” Hope takes the finished beanie from her and puts it on.

She has giant antlers sticking from the sides of her head, and I have never seen anything so adorable. (That’s right. I said adorable. I don’t care if Grandpa Sparks thinks it makes me sound girly).

“Mama look si-we,” Charly giggles.

Uncle Rad yips her agreement.

“Now I just have to decide what to embroider on the front: Moosy Christmas or Merry Moosemas.” Mrs. C. comes around the counter, carrying a smaller beanie, and asks Charly, “Do you want some antlers too?”

Charly nods, and Mrs. C. helps her put on the hat.

The cuteness factor in Sparks Electric increases exponentially once Charly has her own moose rack. Between these two and Mrs. C’s shelf of miniature animals wearing vests and what she calls breeches, Grandpa would be very disappointed in what I’ve done to his shop if he walked in right now.

Good thing he spends winters in Arizona, because if I have my way, I will fill this place up with baked goods, silly hats, little-girl giggles, and yipping puppies.

Also hope.

And Hope.

Chapter 20

Hope



While Mrs. C. shows Charly all her little animals, I split a pumpkin shortbread bar with Seb. Charly and I still have on our matching moose rack hats, which I insisted paying Mrs. C. for, with the promise that I'd leave them long enough for her to stitch a Merry Moosemas patch across the front.

I'm late for work. Charly's late for preschool. And I'm enjoying every minute of this. I made the right decision this morning to pull into the parking lot when I saw Seb loading his truck.

I still haven't gotten around to asking Seb the question I came to ask. I'm supposed to be on official Yulefest business, but that can wait.

It's taken me a few days to work up the courage to follow Carson and Steve's advice to not let Seb give up, especially when he kept running every time I saw him. I wondered if he thought I was mad about Uncle Rad nipping Charly or if he was mad that I left early after he'd made plans to teach Charly the dance.

But I think he felt uncertain about how to get to know not just Charly but also *me* as Charly's mom.

I wasn't joking when I told him I'm a lot.

But he figured out by himself that a room full of electrical products is not a safe place to leave a child alone. That's progress. He didn't leave his dog in the same room. *That's* progress. He reached for Charly's hand before she reached for his.

That's adorable.

I know I should listen to what my head is telling me about Seb being a bad idea, but my instinct is telling me not to give up hope that he'll keep figuring out what to do. Because, if there's a chance even a little bit of our chemistry from the summer could become something more, I might have the kind of relationship I've only dreamed of.

"These are delicious." I pop the last bit of bar in my mouth. "Did your mom make them?"

Mrs. C. is explaining something about a little fox to Charly, but without missing a beat, she shoots Seb a raised eyebrow and a warning look that only a teacher could perfect. That look that says, *there's a right answer to this question.*

"You know what your hat needs?" He narrows his eyes at my forehead, completely ignoring my question. "Lights."

"Lights?" This is a more interesting topic than his mom making dessert bars.

"Yes. Lights." He takes the hat off my head, then asks Charly if he can take hers too.

She hands it to him, then bends down to pet Uncle Rad who's still attached by her leash to Seb's belt loop. He unties her and hands the leash to Mrs. C.

"Do you mind? So Charly can pet her?" he asks, even though he's already forced the leash into her hand.

"Hope asked who made the bars. I think you should tell her." Mrs. C. holds the leash back to him.

His face folds into a challenge, but she drops her hand.

“Fine,” he relents and turns back to me. “I made them. I like to bake. It’s kind of a hobby of mine.”

Mrs. C. smiles with satisfaction and lets her hand follow. “Good boy.”

Seb glares at her then heads to the backroom.

“Wait!” I drop my purse to the floor next to the box of gnomes I brought. I glance at it long enough to make sure it’s still closed.

Then I run after Seb, trying to keep up with his long, quick strides. “You like to bake?”

I follow him to a table tucked in a corner in the back room. Tools hang on a pegboard on the wall behind and to the side of the table. He drops the hats, then goes to the opposite corner where there are boxes of supplies.

“Why haven’t you told me this? How long have you been baking?” I prop myself onto the table and watch him rifle through the boxes. “Is that why you were wearing an apron the other night? Because you’d been baking?”

“Ah ha!” he holds up something from one of the boxes, then goes back to searching the other boxes. “I was wearing an apron because I’d made dinner, but yes, I’d also been baking.”

“*You* made dinner? Why didn’t you tell me?” I swing my legs back and forth, thoroughly enjoying watching him at work, along with all the bending over his search requires.

“You didn’t ask. Why did you assume Mom had made it?” He glances over his shoulder, and I raise an eyebrow, because we both know the answer to that question.

He laughs and goes back to his search. His long sleeves cover his tattoo, which I haven’t thought much about because he’s never in short sleeves. But I’m reminded of it now, maybe because his shirt stretches tight across his shoulders. Which is an incredibly good look for him.

And an excellent view for me.

“Now answer the rest of my questions.”

Seb pulls something from a box, then stands and turns around. His gaze falls on me and a hunger fills his eyes that makes my pulse spike. He walks slowly back to the table I’m sitting on without breaking eye contact.

Despite my racing pulse, my breath slows. Time has a way of going still when I’m with Seb. The world falls away. There’s just us right now and the undeniable force that draws us together.

In the words of Darth Vader, *it is useless to resist.*

When Seb gets to the table, he stands so close that my arm brushes his. The one with the tattoo. “Remind me what your question was.”

“When did you learn to bake and why didn’t you ever tell me?” I ask, breathing in the smell of his soap mixed with the sharp tint of the metal that fills his shop.

“That’s two questions.”

“I’ve never been good at math.”

Seb laughs and leans across me to grab wire cutters hanging on the pegboard to the side of the table. His face is so close, I see a spot he missed shaving. I resist running my thumb over it, but I can’t stop the memory of kissing him when he was unshaven. His stubble rough against my skin at the same time his lips were soft and gentle.

“I learned from my Aunt Heidi. I spent time with her at the Garden when she ran it. She was a great cook, but an even better baker. Her grandma—my Granny Sparks’s mom—was the original Britta at Breakfast at Britta’s.” While Seb talks, he picks up a strand of miniature Christmas lights, cuts them in half.

“And that Britta is Granny Nielsen? The one whose house Georgia renovated first on her show.” I’ve been trying to keep everyone in the family straight, but it’s hard when half of them go by Granny or Britta. Or both.

“You got it. I’m impressed.” Seb cocks a grin at me. “The Nielsen-Thomsen-Sparks family tree isn’t easy to keep straight.”

I grin back, pleased with myself, but my thoughts turn quickly back to Heidi. “Evie’s told me about Heidi. She wishes she would have known her before the Alzheimer’s.”

Adam’s mom has early onset Alzheimer’s and isn’t doing well. The bits and pieces I hear about what she was like before she got sick make me think I would have liked her.

Seb pulls in his lips and nods. “Yeah. She was amazing. It’s hard to see her the way she is now—withdrawn and kind of lost. She was always the center of things.” Seb focuses hard on the wire he’s stripping, using more force than he probably needs to.

Then he sets down the wire cutters and faces me with the smirk and the intense look that convinced me to get on the back of his bike almost six months ago. His arm presses against my thigh, and even through layers of clothes, I feel the heat of him.

“As for your other question.” His eyes dance between light and dark as he tips his head to the side. “I suppose I didn’t get around to telling you I like to bake because we didn’t do a lot of talking when you were here before.”

A pang of regret shoots through me, reminding me I shouldn’t have kept Charly from him, but it passes quickly when I don’t see any hurt of judgment in Seb’s eyes.

He runs the tip of his tongue over the inside of his lip, then bites back a smile. I feel my own lips tug into a grin as my eyes drop to his mouth.

I don’t know what I want more right now: to give into temptation and kiss him or enjoy the excitement and anticipation building between us a little longer.

Charly’s squeals travel from the front of the store to us, interrupting the moment like a sudden rainstorm in the heat of summer. It’s a welcome relief, but that doesn’t mean I don’t miss the heat.

“So what are you doing to my moose rack?” I scoot further back on the table, putting space between Seb and me.

His mouth pulls to the side in a conspiratorial grin.

Because I am sure that we both know resistance is futile. Now might not be the time, but we *will* revisit the chemistry we shared last summer. The anticipation that idea brings is equal to seeing wrapped presents under the tree weeks before Christmas morning, and I am very much looking forward to whenever our unwrapping happens.

“See these wires?” He holds up the sections of lights he’s cut from the longer strand and shows me exposed wires. “I attach them to this battery pack.” He holds up a tiny plastic box and rigs the wires to it. “Then I’ll wind them around the antlers.”

He wraps electrical tape around one end of the lights, then opens a small hole at the tip of the antlers, and tucks that end inside. After winding the lights loosely over that side of the moose rack so the light bulbs hang down, he does the same with the other side and another short string of lights. He attaches both sides to the battery pack. “Mrs. C. can create a pocket on the inside of the beanie to tuck this into. All you have to do is flip this little switch, and, voila!” He holds up Charly’s lit moose rack beanie with pride. “You’ve got a rack no one will miss.”

I don’t miss the mischievous glint that sneaks into his eyes when he says the last part. I try to glare at him, but it takes too much effort to hold back my laugh.

“Genius,” I say with a smile. “The hat, not the line. Now do mine.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” He pretends innocence as he starts work on my hat. “I’m just saying you had a nice rack before, but this *moose* rack is going to be lit.”

I burst out laughing. “You may have more to learn about kids, but you’ve definitely got the dad jokes down.”

He beams, and I don’t think it’s just because he made me laugh.

“What’s your favorite thing to bake? Like, do you have a favorite family recipe or something like that?” I ask.

I enjoy watching his fingers move quickly and with assurance as he goes through the steps of cutting, stripping, and splicing wires together. Even more than that, I’m impressed by the easy confidence he has creating something he thought of fifteen minutes ago.

“Actually,” he pauses. “And I’m not telling you this because you’re a wedding planner, but Aunt Heidi taught me how to make wedding cakes. They were my favorite thing to make with her when I was a teenager working at the Garden part time. I don’t know why, but—”

“—Hold up. You make wedding cakes?”

Seb shrugs. “I mean, I know how. I’ve never actually made one for a wedding. At least not one anyone knows about. Heidi let me make a couple by myself that she’d been hired to do. She never told the people I was the one who did all the work.”

“Well, I happen to be involved in the planning of a little double wedding you may have heard about, and I’ve fired the baker. So, basically, I’m in the market for a new one.” I move a little closer because he may have just solved a huge problem for me. “You can make them look pretty? And they taste good?”

“Of course, I can.” Seb switches on the lights on my rack and holds them up. “What do you think, I take pride in ugly, yucky cakes?”

He smiles at me with an openness that makes my breath catch, and seconds pass before I can respond.

“I think you’re the baker I want,” I say in a voice that invites him closer.

A flicker of understanding crosses Seb’s face, and the air grows tight between us. Then he steps between my legs, so my knees are at his waist, and puts the blinking moose rack on my head. “You sure you don’t want to sample the goods first?”

I can’t fight the smile that spreads across my face or the temptation to wrap my arms around his neck. So I don’t. I let the smile out and slide my hands across his shoulders to meet at the nape of his neck.

“If I remember right, I’ve sampled them before, and they were more than good.”

“We’re not talking about cake anymore, are we?” His hands cup my waist, and I shake my head.

We both move in to close the little distance left between us. The air is charged with electricity, and not just because of the blinking lights flashing on both sides of my head.

For months I've resisted hoping for Seb to kiss me again, but I've never stopped thinking about what it feels like to have his lips on mine.

In the almost two weeks I've been back in Paradise, I've resisted being pulled into his orbit again, while wanting it so much.

Now my whole body relaxes into his arms as I lay down my armor and give up fighting the inevitable. This kiss is happening. I don't know what comes after—there's a lot that still needs to be worked out—but I'm definitely ready to enjoy this moment.

His lips graze mine, teasing and tempting me to scramble for more, but I hold back. I let him take the lead, returning his next soft kiss just as gently. When our mouths meet again, it's with more wanting, and we don't part as quickly.

When Seb pulls back, a smile plays at his lips, and I know we're done going slow. He slides his hand under my jaw, curling his fingers through my loose hair, and I tip my face to his. He moves closer, and I close my eyes, my blood pulsing with anticipation.

“—Sebastian! Hope!” Mrs. C.'s voice echoes around the entire back room, slicing through the mere inches—no centimeters—between Seb's lips and mine.

Seb jumps backward, and I yank my hands from his neck, then peek around him. Mrs. C. leans through the doorway with half of her body still in the hallway.

“Oh. Sorry,” she says in her sweetest grandma voice. “Didn’t mean to interrupt anything.”

“You didn’t interrupt anything,” Seb says in a rush from the other end of the table where he’s picking up and setting down different tools for no reason I can decipher.

I wonder how he got so far so fast, but before I can form the entire thought, Mrs. C., says, “We’ve got a bit of a situation up here.”

I’m already off the table running for the doorway when Uncle Rad zips by her, then past me, her leash bouncing up and down behind her.

Charly follows seconds later, yelling, “Bad doggy! Bad doggy! Bring it back!”

Seb jumps in front of Uncle Rad to intercept her, but she jukes and turns back in my direction.

That’s when I see she’s got something in her mouth. Something red and green, and very familiar. My excuse for talking to Seb in the first place, until I got distracted kissing him.

Chapter 21

Sebastian



Uncle Rad dashes by me, but instead of lunging for her, I step on the leash dragging behind her. Luckily, she's not going quite fast enough for her breakaway collar to unbuckle or for her to get any more than a gentle jerk backwards. I've learned a few tricks over the past few weeks.

But not enough to tell her to drop whatever is in her mouth instead of grabbing it from her. Puppies have surprisingly strong jaws, and Uncle Rad is not interested in letting go of the stuffed thing. She whips her head side to side, enjoying every second of the game she thinks we're playing.

Hope, on the other hand, is not loving it.

"No, no, no!" she cries as she rushes toward Uncle Rad and me. "She's ruining it!"

"Oh dear," Mrs. C. says, waddling over to us. "Not another one."

I stop tugging, realizing the seriousness of the situation. "Leave it, Uncle Rad."

Charly repeats my words, and Uncle Rad smiles at both of us with the thing clamped tightly in her jaw.

"Please let my gnome go," Hope pleads, but stops herself from trying to take it from Uncle Rad. She's smarter than me, obviously. For so many reasons.

"Peas," Charly repeats and gets on her hands and knees right in front of Uncle Rad.

To my surprise, Rad drops whatever she's got right at Charly's hands.

"Good puppy!" Charly sits on her bottom and pulls Uncle Rad into her lap.

"How did Charly do that?" I mutter, but a gasp from Hope draws my attention away from the cute-TikTok-worthy scene playing out in front of me.

"How did she get into the box?" Hope picks up the thing Uncle Rad dropped.

"I'm afraid that's my fault." Mrs. C.'s face wrinkles with concern. "Charly wanted me to see what was inside. I must not have closed it tight after we looked."

"Look what Uncle Rad did." Hope holds up a chewed-up something that vaguely resembles the kind of gnome Grandma Sparks has all over her house at Christmas. She calls them *nisse*. It's a Danish thing.

They wear tall, pointed hats and long beards. Sometimes they have short cylinder-shaped bodies, like the one Hope is holding once did. The only part of the face that's ever visible is a round nose that pokes out under the hat, through the *nisse's* beard.

Except this *nisse* doesn't have a nose anymore. Or really much beard left. Or hat. Or body.

Basically, it's a mess.

But I'm not quite sure why Hope is moaning and rubbing her forehead. Like I said, they're all over the place at Christmas.

“I’m sorry.” I move closer, not sure what I can do to comfort her, and even less sure when she inches away.

A couple minutes ago, we were kissing. We’d both let our guard down. There were no boundaries between us.

Now Hope’s guard is back up, but I have no idea where the boundaries are. Do I put my hand on her shoulder? Do I try to take her hand? What am I allowed to do here?

“I can get you another one,” I say lamely, standing close but not too close, one leg stretched out long so I can keep Rad’s leash under my foot.

“You’ll have to get more than one,” Mrs. C. says. “She’s chewed up a couple others.”

Hope’s face goes white, and her shoulders slump. “Oh no.”

“I’m so sorry, dear.” Mrs. C. does the thing I couldn’t and puts her arm around Hope. “Charly and I were busy playing, and I didn’t notice Uncle Rad had found them.”

“Oh no,” Hope repeats over and over.

“My grandma has a ton of them, I can get you more,” I say desperately before shooting Uncle Rad a glare.

She’s too happy getting her belly scratched by Charly to notice. Her back leg shakes like crazy while Charly coos to her.

“You don’t understand. These are for the gnome scavenger hunt.” Hope holds up the critically injured gnome again. “I’m supposed to deliver them today to businesses who want to be

part of the search. That's why I stopped by, to see if I could hide one here."

"Oh, yeah, of course. But really, I can get you more. Today even." Although grandma is in Arizona, and I'm not sure where she keeps them. Or if she'd actually let me touch them. She's very particular.

"But these are Mayor Voglmeyer's. She wanted her 'special, heirloom gnomes' to be used, so that we can put *sponsored by Darlene Voglmeyer* on the clues." Hope exhales with frustration. "She's going to kill me. Or, worse, Carson. She gave him specific instructions that he was in charge of them, and they should be hidden out of reach of children."

"But isn't the hunt supposed to be for kids?" I ask slowly, wanting to be careful of Hope's feelings.

But Darlene Voglmeyer is a pain in the neck and always has been. Leave it to her to make a fun kid's scavenger hunt a marketing ploy that takes the joy out of the whole event.

"Oh, for heaven's sake," Mrs. C. says and takes the gnome from Hope. "Darlene Voglmeyer is a menace. Why someone else doesn't run for mayor and get her out of our hair, I'll never understand." She examines every inch of the gnome while she talks. "I can fix this, and she'll never know the difference. And if she does, you have her come to talk to me. She's been afraid of me ever since I threatened to have Lyle expelled from the elementary school for pinching girls' bottoms like some juvenile pervert."

With her arm around Hope's shoulders, she leads her toward the front of the store. "Let's see what the others look like. I don't think they're as bad as this poor little feller."

I tie Uncle Rad's leash to my belt loop, then hold out my hand. "Come on Charly. Let's go with your mom."

She slips her hand into mine without hesitation, and for a second, I wonder if parenting might be easier than puppy training.

Then Charly says, "I poopy."

I don't know much about parenting, but I do know kids' poop requires more than a doggie bag. And I am *not* ready to tackle that.

Charly and I walk to the front register where Hope and Mrs. C have the gnome patients laid out on the counter.

"It looks worse than it is. I can fix these up in a jiffy," Mrs. C. says, patting Hope's back. "Just give me a day or two. You'll still have plenty of time to get the scavenger hunt set up."

Hope nods and swipes under her eye. I'm relieved Mrs. C. can help, but Hope is obviously still upset. Which makes what I have to tell her even harder.

I clear my throat and Hope glances over her shoulder at me. "Someone needs her pants changed." My cheeks warm, which is dumb, because it's not like this is the first time I've ever talked about poop.

“Oh, Charly.” Hope’s chest sinks. “Remember, you’re going to tell Mommy or Miss Gia when you need to go?”

She takes Charly’s hand from mine, then says to Mrs. C. “Potty training isn’t going so great.”

Mrs. C. nods in solidarity. “It’s never easy.” Then she holds out her hand for Charly to take. “Let me handle this one. Your morning has been rough enough already.”

“Oh, that’s okay. You don’t—”

Mrs. C. holds up her hand to stop Hope. “—I’m the reason Uncle Rad got your gnomes. The least I can do is change a diaper.”

“Thank you.” Hope’s voice is full of gratitude as she hands her purse to Mrs. C.

Mrs. C. and Charly disappear down the hall toward the bathroom, and Uncle Rad tugs at her leash to follow. But I’m not letting her out of my sight again. Ever.

I’m also not leaving Hope alone. Her back is to me, and she’s examining the gnomes, but I get the feeling she’s upset with me.

“I think I’m the one to blame here. I shouldn’t have put the box on the floor in the first place.” I take a chance I can make things up to her and move behind her, my chest nearly brushing her shoulder. Uncle Rad curls up at my feet, like she knows I’m in for a long conversation.

Hope shakes her head but keeps her back turned. “I’m the one to blame. I should have been more careful with them.”

“How about we blame Uncle Rad?”

That gets a laugh from Hope, and she faces me.

“I really am sorry.” I let out my breath and take a tentative step closer. “I swear she’s getting better, and I’m trying to be consistent with her, but she is still a puppy. I should have known better than to leave her with someone else.” Words rush out, but none of them sound right.

Hope offers me a sympathetic smile. “It’s really okay, Seb. I’m not mad at you, and I don’t blame you.”

“Really? Then maybe we could pick up where we left off.” I reach for her hand, but she tucks both behind her back and leans into the counter.

I let my arm fall back to my side and take a step back.

“Seb, I have to stay focused,” she says sternly before lowering her hand. “This job is so important; I can’t mess it up.” A sad smile crosses her face. “And you are too much of a distraction.”

I shift my weight from one foot to the other, considering what she’s said. “Why does that sound good and bad at the same time?”

Her smile loses some of its sadness, and my chest loosens. “Because it is. Because I’m as mixed up as the signals I’m sending you. Because it means I like you, but I don’t have time to like you right now.”

I nod, thinking.

Not right now isn't the same as never.

“Are you saying you'll have time to be distracted after Yulefest and the wedding?” I ask, carefully.

“Seb, I don't even know if I'll be here then.” Her answer is sharp with frustration. “I don't know if I'll still have a job once these events are over. Carson has to have enough work to hire me full time, but he also has to have the confidence I can do this job.”

“Hope, he knows you can do this job. We all do.” I instinctively move closer but stop myself when she stiffens. Minutes ago, I had her in my arms. Now I feel her slipping away again.

“If Carson does hire you—and I don't doubt that will happen—will you stay here?” I force the question out, even though the thought of her leaving Paradise crushes me.

“I don't know,” she tips her head to the side, and her blonde waves spill over her shoulder. “I like it here. But it *must* work for Charly too. She has to be able to get the therapy she needs.” Her eyes dart to the floor then back to me. “Would you want me to stay?”

That I don't have to think about, even if what that means scares me. “More than anything.”

It takes every ounce of willpower not to show her just how much I want her to stay in Paradise. I squeeze my hand into a tight fist to keep from touching her.

“That’s what’s so hard, Seb. You’re one of the reasons I want to stay, but I don’t know if I’m in a position to be in a relationship. Charly and I are a two-for-one deal; you know this. But are you okay with it?” Her forehead wrinkles with worry, and I wish I could answer that question with certainty.

Instead, I answer it honestly. “I’m still scared, but you told me not to give up, so I’m not giving up.”

She raises her eyes to mine, chewing on her bottom lip. “I’m scared too.”

Now I do move closer. If she’s feeling what I’m feeling, we both need a hug, so I pull her into one.

“Tell me what you want to do, Hope, and I’ll do it.” That’s the surest answer I can give her.

She rests her forehead against my chest before pulling back to meet my eyes. “We know we have the electricity, Seb. Now we’ve got to take the time to build something to contain it. Live wires are dangerous, right?”

I laugh, loosening my hold on her, but keeping my hands at her waist. “If you don’t know how to handle them, yeah.”

“I don’t, Seb. And I’ve got Charly to think about.” Her eyes grow dark and serious.

“I respect that.” I nod with my whole body.

We’ve been here before, but it feels like a turning point. Instead of warning me away, Hope is inviting me to help find a solution. We know we want to be together, but that doesn’t

mean we should. The potential for heartbreak goes beyond the two of us.

“We could work on being friends. All three of us: you, me, and Charly,” I say. “Build on that?”

In a blink, Hope’s eyes shift from dark to twinkling. “Are you friend zoning me?”

She doesn’t look upset about it, and I pull her closer, because her teasing has always been an invitation. “I believe you already friend zoned me, so maybe think of this as a reminder. We’re just friends.”

“My friends don’t usually stand this close.” Hope raises an eyebrow, and I’m tempted to show her just how close I can get.

But Uncle Rad takes her challenge as a cue to walk between Hope and me, like she knows she’s doing both of us a favor. I take a step back and catch my breath.

“I’m definitely friend zoning you, friend.” My voice is not convincing, and the gaze she’s locked me in is more dangerous than friendly.

“Good. I like it here. It’s very cozy. Like a cup of hot chocolate.” With her eyes still glued to mine, she smiles in a way that takes my breath away again.

“Warm chocolate. Not hot. Just cozy.” I push back the desire threatening to escape.

“All done!” Mrs. C. calls at just the right time. “She’s ready to go.”

Hope and I break apart in time to see Mrs. C's pointed look and raised eyebrow, but she doesn't say anything about interrupting us again.

"Thank you so much," Hope says hurriedly, taking her purse and Charly from Mrs. C. "I'd better get her to school."

She glances quickly in my direction and waves, before heading to the door.

I watch her for a few seconds before coming to my senses.

"Wait!" I jog to catch up to her. "I'll walk you to the car. Charly will want to say goodbye to Uncle Rad."

The smile Hope sends me is more than friendly.

It's grateful.

And enough to let me know I'm doing things right.

Chapter 22

Hope



I've barely dropped Charly off at Gia's when I get my first text from Seb:

Hi friend. Good seeing you today.

I laugh and text back.

Nice seeing you too, friend. Have a great day.

Then I head into work and spend the next few hours working on details for the two nights of the live nativity and creche displays. A local church is hosting the event and taking on most of the work to put it together, but I'm doing the marketing for it as part of Yulefest and helping collect creches locals own from around the world.

Mrs. C. gave me names of locals who collect the little nativity scenes when they travel, and they've been generous about sharing.

In general, everyone in Paradise has been amazing. They've been welcoming and so loving with Charly. She's already made friends at Gia's preschool, and she's made so much progress developmentally in the three weeks we've been here. The daily one-on-one therapy with Gia has worked miracles. And when Gia's not doing therapy with her, she dotes on Charly like a grandmother.

Which, honestly, I can't think too much about. The idea of Charly having two grandmas is appealing for a lot of reasons. The idea of *Gia* being one of those grandmas is also appealing for a lot of reasons, Seb being the biggest one.

But I refuse to get ahead of myself.

I can't just follow my heart here. I have to use my head and take things slow. I want to build something that lasts. My conversation with Seb was unexpected, but so, so good, and I feel like we might be on a path that stretches further into the future than I've ever let myself imagine.

Now if my future with Pizzazz Paradise were a little more certain...

I love working for Carson, and I think he likes collaborating with me. But I still have so much to learn. And once things slow down after Yulefest and the wedding, he may not need me anymore.

Ideally, the publicity he'll get from planning the Thomsen wedding will increase demand for his talents. The wedding is going to be aired as a special on the network, so he could get a lot of exposure.

Or editors could cut most of the scenes with him in them or even any mention of Pizzazz, other than the one they're contractually obligated to include.

So I have to give Carson a reason to keep me full time, past December, no matter what. That's the only way I'll be able to stay here. With Evie getting married, I won't have a free place to live anymore. I need to make enough money to pay for my own place, and I need insurance so that Charly can get the care she needs.

Or I need to move back in with Mom and Dad in Kansas.

And I don't want to do that. I like being on my own. I like being here in Paradise where everyone feels like family after only a few weeks.

And I like being "friends" with Seb.

Over the next five days, we text often. First thing in the morning to say *good morning, friend!* Or, even better, *mornin' mate!* Then sporadically throughout the afternoon, and again at night. Although those texts usually turn into FaceTiming once Charly is down for the night.

We talk about Yulefest, and I love bouncing ideas off him about how to make the activities more engaging and the marketing more targeted. The more people I get participating online, in person, or both, the more potential future clients Carson will have. So Seb is more than happy to help.

And he really does help. I shouldn't be surprised by how creative he is after seeing him add lights to a moose rack hat and tasting what he can do with pumpkin, but I am. Every day there's another happy surprise when he gives me an idea that is spot on.

Our conversations always end with some synonym for friend. Pal. Companion. Buddy. Amigo. Compadre.

We try to outdo each other, until one night Seb says, "Goodnight, Bestie!"

A pause follows while I catch my breath. "I think that one is my favorite."

His face goes soft, and his mouth pulls into a smile. “Mine too. It’s a keeper.”

When I go to bed that night, I stare at the ceiling, surrounded by dark but knowing I’m glowing. I feel lighter than I have in years.

I’ve always loved the idea of being in love with a best friend. I watched Georgia and Zach’s story play out on Instagram and was invested in every minute of it. Even when Evie told me they were acting for Georgia’s fans, we both agreed they were really falling in love.

That made me love their story even more and want something like it for myself. But I have struggled to keep the dream that it might be possible.

Now, though, I think I might be falling in love with Seb as a friend and more. I still want to kiss his face off—which is why we stick to texting and Facetime instead of much IRL contact—but I also really like talking to him. When we have to work on Yulefest stuff together, I’m excited just to be with him. Which is good, because we’re always surrounded by people, so I can’t kiss him anyway.

But the day comes when we can’t avoid being alone together. I have to try his wedding cake, which I can’t do over the phone. Georgia and Evie are too busy with the show to bother with the cake, so they’ve given me carte blanche to decide what flavors and what it will look like.

I haven’t told them yet that Seb is the one who will be making the cake. Honestly, I don’t know how they would feel

about it if they knew. But he's sent me pics of what he's thinking of doing, and pictures of what he's done with Heidi in the past, and I think they're going to love it.

At least I hope so, for my sake and Seb's.

The day before Thanksgiving, I go to Gia's in the early afternoon to pick up Charly and to try Seb's cake.

I'm not too worried about either of us stepping out of the friend zone since Charly, Gia, and Stella will all be there. But I'll admit to being a little disappointed we won't have the opportunity.

Seb opens the side door for me before I can knock and immediately makes me smile. Not just because I'm happy to see him in person, but also because he's wearing a flowered apron with scalloped edges over his dark Henley and black jeans. He's got leather biker boots on to complete the look.

"This is a good look for you." I point to the apron.

"Thanks, Bestie."

"You're welcome, Bestie."

"It's good to see your face." He takes my coat from me and hangs it up.

"Good to see you, too. Did you hang that one up too?" I point to the North Face parka I've seen him wear.

"Yep," he says proudly. "I'm a big boy now."

"Yes, you are." My eyes drop to his shoulders and chest, then to his abs. They're all covered, but their shape has taken

up a sizable portion of my monkey brain.

Seb narrows his eyes at me, then turns me around. “No breaking the rules, *friend*. You’re here for cake, not eye candy.”

He marches me into the kitchen where Charly and Uncle Rad both greet me with excited yips. I tense when Uncle Rad circles me, then rises on her hind legs and paws my knees. The last time she did this, she barely missed peeing on my feet.

“Down Uncle Rad,” Seb orders, and Uncle Rad drops back to the floor, without a drop of pee anywhere.

“Impressive.” I bend to scratch Uncle Rad’s belly and pull Charly into a hug.

When I release her, she darts back to the other room, calling, “I see Stewa.”

Uncle Rad chases after her, and I glance at Seb to see if I should stop her.

“Stella likes Uncle Rad and Charly time when she gets home from work. They’ll be okay.” He doesn’t move from his position leaning against the kitchen counter with his legs crossed in front of him, watching me.

He’s totally casual, in a carefully cultivated way. But there’s nothing casual about his gaze. His eyes shimmer with color, moving between a dark chocolate brown to chestnut tinged in gold. They hold me with an intensity that sends a charge of electricity buzzing through my entire body.

“When do I get to try this cake?” I fail at sounding as casual as he looks. Like I’m just here to eat dessert with a friend when we both know he’s the dessert I want.

Seb responds by scooting to the side without taking his eyes off me. As he moves, he reveals a small, round, cake, beautifully frosted white. I move closer to not only examine it, but also to stand next to Seb.

And that’s all it takes for him to drop his cool façade.

“I know that naked look with the cake not quite covered with frosting is popular, but I also know Georgia loves frosting. So I went with this swirled technique that makes the frosting look like flowers. That was Heidi’s go-to, so I thought Adam and Zach would like that too.” Seb talks fast, with a nervousness I haven’t heard in his voice before. “Hopefully Evie will be okay with it.”

“It’s beautiful. I hate to even cut into it. What flavor is it?” I dart a look at him, then swipe my finger through the frosting at the bottom where I won’t mess anything up too much.

“Hey!” Seb grabs my hand before I can lick the frosting off my finger.

But then we’re touching, and a look of hunger crosses Seb’s face. I don’t know what he sees in mine, but it must be something about permission. He sticks my finger in his mouth and sucks off the frosting, never breaking eye contact with me.

And I am not sorry about it at all.

“That was supposed to be for me,” I say with a heavy breath. My body is on fire, and I can’t take my eyes off the lips that lit the kindling.

Seb shakes his head, his lip pulling with satisfaction at what he’s done to me. “There are consequences for picking at my cake. Lunch first. Then you can have a *slice* of cake.”

He hasn’t let go of my hand, and we are definitely in danger of exiting the friend zone, so desperate measures are needed to cut the sexual tension between us.

“Gia made me lunch?” I ask with a smile. “How nice.”

I slip my hand out of his and walk away with a slow glance over my shoulder before sitting at the table.

Seb narrows his eyes and pushes away from the counter. “I made you lunch, thank you very much.” He opens the oven and pulls out a plate with a grilled cheese and a bowl of tomato soup. “I kept them warm in here. Charly already ate.”

“You fed Charly?” I ask as he sets the plate in front of me.

He tips his head to his shoulder. “Mom did. But I knew to tell you. That counts, right?”

“It counts.” I pick up a triangle of sandwich, dip it in the soup and take a bite. “Mmm. This is so good,” I say around the explosion of flavors.

The cheese isn’t regular old cheddar but a goat cheese and... I take another bite to determine the second flavor. Havarti, I think. And the soup is rich with fresh tomato flavor and basil.

“This is the perfect cold weather food,” I say through another bite and glance out the window at snow gently falling.

“I know, right?” Seb sits across from me with his own plate and bowl.

We eat and make small talk between bites. When we’re both done, he clears the plates, rinses the bowls, and puts everything in the dishwasher. Not the sink for his mom to do later, but right into the dishwasher.

Then he cuts me a slice of cake. The answer to my flavor question is chocolate, which is perfect. Evie loves chocolate.

I take a bite, expecting it to be good.

It’s not simply good.

I stare at the cake, trying to find the words to describe what I’m tasting while Seb eyes me from across the table.

“Seb, this is fantastic,” I say, as breathless as I was with the finger-licking incident. “I mean, I’ve had good wedding cake, but this is incredible. It’s dense, but not too dense, and the perfect amount of moist.”

I stab the cake and take a bigger bite. “I can’t believe you don’t advertise you can make something this good. Why did you ever become an electrician when you can do this?” I point at the cake with my fork, then shovel another bite in my mouth.

Seb smiles wide, and his cheeks go pink with pride.

“I’m serious, Seb. You must love baking to make something as good as this and all the other desserts you make. Did you ever think about opening your own bakery?” I set down my fork, having completely devoured the cake.

It takes as much willpower not to lick the plate as it did not to stick my finger in the frosting and let Seb lick it a second time.

“I thought about it, but there’s already a couple bakeries in town, and I didn’t want to be in competition with them. And people hired Heidi to do cakes before she got sick, so I didn’t want to take business away from her either.” He pauses and looks at his hands. “And my grandpa really wanted me to take over Sparks Electric. He thought being a baker wasn’t ‘manly’ enough. And he worried I’d never make enough money to take care of a family.”

“Do people around town know you can bake like this? Does your grandpa know you still do? Or do you keep it a secret from him?” I chew my lip, waiting for the answer, but there’s a bigger question I want to ask.

“I don’t necessarily keep it a secret, I just don’t advertise the fact.”

I give him a *why* look that makes him laugh. “I guess I’m kind of worried what people might think, and yeah, definitely worried what Grandpa might think if he knew I still loved to bake,” he finishes.

I nod, then tread carefully to my big question. “You’ve never told him you might not want a family?”

He rubs his chin, then slowly raises his eyes to me. “I may be coming around on that, so maybe he knew more than I did about my potential.”

His mouth quirks into a grin that I can’t stop myself from returning, but I’m not about to press the issue any further. He might bolt.

“Maybe you’ll change your mind about being a professional baker too,” I say casually, like my heart isn’t beating a million miles an hour.

Seb shrugs. “I doubt it. At this point, I think making baking a business would take the joy out of it. It’s not that bad coming home from a job I like well enough to do something I love just for fun.”

“Okay, Mr. Professional Baker for Fun, let’s talk money. How much for more of this cake? Like, three tiers more, plus a couple of double-layered ones on the side?” I give in to temptation and swipe my finger across my cake plate to get the last bits, then stick it in my mouth.

When my eyes meet Seb’s again, his jaw is slightly open and his eyes so dark with desire, I have to bite back a smile.

He shakes his head and comes back to himself. “They’re not paying me.”

I narrow my eyes. “I know Evie, Adam, and everyone else will want to pay you for the wedding cake, so give me your price.”

“Zero dollars. That’s my price. Along with not telling them it’s me.”

“I am totally sold on this cake, Seb, you are a multi-talented man. We’re on a budget, so I probably can’t pay you what it’s worth, but does five hundred make it worth your time?” I could negotiate up to a thousand, but that will impact the other wedding food and I’m hoping since he doesn’t have specific overhead that we can agree to a lower price.

He’s still shaking his head, and I lean across the table to be closer to him, like that might convince him.

“Come on, Seb. Give me a price.”

“No way! Think of it as my wedding gift to the four of them. Saves me the trouble of looking up their wedding registry.” Seb crosses his arms and leans further back. “Plus, if they know, they’ll all tease me, and Grandpa Sparks will find out. He’ll be at the wedding and will give me a hard time about it.”

I sit back, searching for an argument that will change his mind, but he doesn’t give me time.

“I’ll make it, but those are my conditions,” he says decisively.

I don’t like not giving him the acknowledgment he deserves, but what else can I do except agree?

At least until tomorrow.

I’m eating Thanksgiving dinner with the Sparks and Thomsen families, and I will be bringing the rest of this cake

for them to try. And if I have a chance to shine a spotlight on Seb's talents, I'm going to do it.

Everyone should get to see Seb in the same light I do. He deserves to shine for something more than being good with electricity and women.

That's not who he really is. At least not the player part. That may have been what attracted him to me when we first met, but it's the real Seb I'm falling in love with.

Chapter 23

Sebastian



Thanksgiving is my favorite holiday for a couple of very important reasons. Number one, there's delicious food, like the apple, pecan, and pumpkin pies I've baked. Number two, I love sitting around a big table at the Garden of Eatin'—where we always have our Thanksgiving feast—with my Sparks and Thomsen relatives. Ever since my dad's death, over twenty years ago, the day has been a reminder that I have a lot of people who love me. I appreciate that more every year.

For whatever reason, that fact hits me harder than usual this year when I walk into the Garden and see so many people—Hope and Charly included—who I care about. Including my Grandma and Grandpa Sparks who we were not expecting now that they are snowbirds. They rush to me, Mom, and Stella as soon as we walk into Adam's restaurant.

“Surprise!” Grandma calls before wrapping me in a hug.

“Why didn't you tell us you were coming?” Mom asks when Grandpa releases her from his signature don't-hug-too-long-or-too-close embrace.

“We decided last minute and didn't want anyone to fuss over us.” Grandma rocks side to side with Stella in her arms. “And you know how much I love surprises!”

Grandpa humphs with reluctant agreement, then points to the bag Mom is carrying. “There pie in there?”

Mom rises on tiptoe and kisses his cheek. “Of course. What would Thanksgiving be without pie?”

The corner of his mouth tics into the closest thing Grandpa has to a smile. “Just another day.” His eyes narrow at her. “They’re your pies? Not store bought from somewhere?”

Mom’s eyes dart to me, and I take the opportunity to re-tie the laces on my boots.

“No they’re not my pies,” she answers, and Grandpa’s face falls. “They’re your pies! Made just for you,” with this, Mom slips her arm through his. “But I hope you’ll share with me.”

Mom leads Grandpa to the table, but not before I see the tips of his ears go pink. No one can flirt like Mom can.

Okay, maybe me. But obviously, I come by my skill honestly.

Grandma follows Mom’s lead and slips her arm through mine, then her other one through Stella’s. “Your mom’s pies remind me so much of Heidi’s. All her desserts do.”

Grandma gives me a pointed look that Stella doesn’t miss, judging by her smirk.

“Uh huh,” I answer. “Speaking of, Heidi should be here soon.”

That’s all they’re getting. I know Grandma suspects I made the pies—just like I do every year. She knows Heidi and I used to bake together, but she’s never come right out and asked me if I’m the one baking these days. This is the first time, though, that she’s dropped such a big hint that she knows it is.

We walk into the dining room and the table Hope told me she’d been assigned to decorate.

All the tables have been moved together to create one very long table to accommodate all of us. There's a long strip of burlap or something running down the middle of the tables and all kinds of pumpkin and squash decorations on top of it. Plus a bunch of candles in gold candlesticks.

The table is usually decorated, but not this fancy. I don't have a sense for this kind of thing, but even I can tell it took a lot of work. It's really pretty. There are plates stacked on top of gold chargers, cloth napkins, and name tag things to assign the seating.

I peek at one tag and see Evie's name. I wonder if Hope will be sitting next to her. The only kid here is Charly, and there's no kid table like there used to be when I was little, so she gets to sit at the grown-up table.

I assume she'll be sitting next to Hope. My mom might be on the other side. Which means, I'm not going to be sitting anywhere near Hope.

Unless I'm across from her.

I can think of worse views.

I scan a few more of the cards, checking the names as Grandma—still on my arm—goes on and on about how beautiful everything is.

She's not wrong, but then I see Hope. And nothing in this room comes close to touching her beauty. I can't help but stare as we move closer to her, standing near the end of the too-long table, talking to Uncle Pete.

Hope's hair is up, but curls frame her face, drawing attention to her eyes. Like they weren't already impossible to miss. The blue turtleneck she wears makes them look even brighter. The same blue as the lake is in Fall—a dark turquoise that hints of nights by the fire with a hot drink.

If she sees me, she doesn't give any indication. I don't mind. I like watching her laugh and smile at what must be Uncle Pete's terrible dad jokes. His chest puffs up when Hope puts her hand on his arm, and I haven't seen him this happy since Aunt Heidi got sick.

Charly tugs on Hope's hand, clearly not as entertained by Uncle Pete's jokes. Then she spots me and calls, "Sebby!" and breaks away from Hope.

She runs for me, and I feel this weird surge of joy at the thought she's happy to see me. I even wonder if she's going to give me a hug.

I take my arm from Grandma and bend down. "Hi Charly!"

But she stops when I hold out my arms, scrunching her little eyes and nose into an unhappy face.

"Where Unkuhrad?"

I drop my arms and hope no one saw me get rejected by a three-year-old. "Oh. I had to leave her home." I smile and try a different tactic. "I didn't want her to eat all the pie I—I mean, Miss Gia—made."

"I don't like pie." She crosses her arms in a huff. "I want Unkuhrad."

“And who’s this?” Grandma asks, while I stand, and Hope makes her way over.

“This is Charly and her mom Hope,” I say as Hope puts her arms over Charly’s shoulders. “Hope is Evie’s stepsister.”

“Oh!” Grandma clasps her hands over her chest. “Then I’m about to be your grandma! Step-grandma, but you can just call me Grandma.” She pulls Hope into a hug, then bends close to Charly. “And I’m going to be your great-grandma!”

Charly’s brow creases with confusion, but then Grandma reaches into her purse and pulls out a silver-wrapped piece of gum. “And that means, if it’s okay with your mom, I can give you this.”

With a nod from Hope, she hands the gum to Charly who lights up. With help from Grandma, Charly unwraps the gum and sticks it in her mouth, chewing loudly.

“Who are you?” Charly asks Grandma.

“You just call me Granny.” Grandma holds out her hand, and Charly takes it. “Let’s go take a look at the dessert table, shall we Miss Charly.”

They wander off, leaving me alone with Hope and a weird feeling of jealousy that Grandma won Charly over so quickly. What do her and Uncle Rad have that I don’t? I mean, besides gum and an adorable face?

Before I can ask Hope this question, I notice something on the dessert table.

“You brought the sample wedding cake?”

Not only did she bring it, but it is front and center on a white cake stand.

Hope nods. “The wedding couples need to try it. I don’t have any doubts they’ll like it, but I know Adam will be grumpy about not having a say in the cake if he doesn’t get one. He’s a chef.”

I raise my eyebrows. “This all sounds very suspicious. You’re not planning on telling everyone I made it, are you? Because my grandpa is here, and he won’t take it well.”

I nod toward the kitchen where Grandpa is lecturing Adam. Probably telling him a woman’s place is in the kitchen, not a man’s. I’ve heard him say it before.

Hope cranes her head to see who I’m talking about, then faces me. “He looks... nice.”

My head whips in Grandpa’s direction, and I wonder if she sees the same person I do. “I guess if you consider a buzzcut and former tight-end belly *nice*.”

But then the front door opens, and Britta and Bear walk in behind Heidi who’s pushing her own wheelchair. On her good days, no one can keep her in the chair because she feels good enough to walk and doesn’t understand it’s for her.

Both Grandpa Sparks and Uncle Pete make a beeline for them, but Grandpa gets there first. He glares Pete away before wrapping Aunt Heidi in a tight hug.

Even though we’re too far away to hear, I know exactly what he’s saying to her. *How’s my little girl?*

That's what he's always called her—my little girl—for as long as I can remember. So, he's probably called her that since she was born. And he and Uncle Pete have fought to be the man she loves best since she married Pete, according to Mom.

The amazing thing is, when Grandpa steps out of their hug, Aunt Heidi seems to step back into time. There's no confusion in her eyes like there usually is, and she takes Grandpa's hand as though she's exactly what he called her: his little girl.

Every time I see Aunt Heidi, she seems to have more trouble walking, but today she almost rushes toward the dessert table where Grandma and Charly are. Grandma drops Charly's hand, more focused on her own little girl than the one she just met.

“Look, Daddy!” Heidi says as she and Grandpa pass Hope and me. “Look at all the cake!”

Everyone in the room watches as Heidi stops and scans the entire table before pausing at the wedding cake.

“Is this for me? Did I make it?” She looks around, still smiling, but obviously confused, especially when Pete returns her smile with a sad one of his own.

“You bet it's for you!” Grandpa grabs a plate and knife, rushing to bring Heidi back to the memory of him being her daddy.

Charly edges between Grandma and Heidi and says to Grandpa, “Can I have cake?”

Heidi looks down, her confusion growing. “Britta? Why is Britta wearing glasses?”

“I Charly,” Charly answers, smiling wide. “I like cake.”

Heidi returns the smile. “Me too!”

“Here, sweetheart.” Grandpa hands Heidi a plate with a hefty slice of cake on it, then another smaller piece to Charly.

“I got it,” I say to Hope before rushing to help Charly with the plate.

“Let me help you, Heidi.” Grandma tries to take Heidi’s plate, but Heidi jerks it away from her, nearly launching the cake into the air.

Heidi quickly picks up the cake with her hands and takes a bite at the same time I reach Charly. With cake still in her mouth, she looks at me. A flash of understanding crosses her eyes, but it’s too fast for her brain to catch it.

“I know you.” She stares at me and takes another bite.

I don’t break eye contact, hoping for the fog to clear—even for a few seconds—so she can remember me for the first time in months.

Then it happens. Her whole face lights up brighter than Main Street will next week.

“We made this!” she yelps. “But where are the bride and groom?”

She turns in a circle looking, I assume, for someone in a big white dress.

I send Grandpa a nervous glance before stepping closer to Heidi and putting my arm around her shoulders. “Adam, Evie, Zach, and Georgia are getting married, but not today. Next week. This is our practice cake.”

Heidi nods and takes another bite of cake. “Adam and Zach both? Did I know that?”

“You’ve been busy. It’s easy to forget,” I say to her, but I’m looking at Grandpa for his reaction.

“You made this cake?” He asks in his gruff voice that still scares me a little.

I hesitate, but then I nod. I don’t want to confuse Heidi even more and I love that she remembers this used to be our thing.

Adam and Zach approach, and Adam says, “Hope said she’d found a baker. She didn’t say it was you.”

“I didn’t want you to know. I was worried you might think she hired me... for other reasons besides my baking abilities. But, yeah, if you’re both okay with it, I’d love to make the wedding cake. Some of my best memories—” Adam pulls me into a hug so tight I can barely finish my sentence. “Are baking with Aunt Heidi.”

By the time all the words are out, there’s another pair of arms squeezing the air out of me. Fairly sure it’s Zach.

“Of course, it’s okay. Better than okay,” Adam says with a snuffle that might be tears.

“And, dude, we all know how talented you are.” Zach squeezes the last bit of air out of my lungs. “The only weird

thing about it is you trying to keep it a secret.”

He loosens his hold enough for me to register something wrapped around my legs. The only thing I can move is my eyes, so I can barely see the little arms holding my knees.

But then I hear Charly’s voice. “I like hugs.”

And her hug may be the one I’m enjoying most.

Especially because there’s another set of arms wrapped around me now that definitely belong to Bear, and I am probably going to die in this group python hug.

“Me too, Charly,” I gasp. “Me too.”

“Alright, enough of this nonsense!” Grandpa’s voice rumbles through the entire restaurant, breaking us apart.

Except for Charly. She’s still got my knees.

I hazard a glance at Grandpa. His cheeks are red, and his jaw is clamped shut. I’m about to explain that the baking is just a hobby and won’t get in the way of running Sparks Electric when he steps so close there’s less than a foot between us.

And there are tears in his eyes.

He claps his hand on my shoulder and squeezes. “It’s good cake, Sebastian. Just like my little girl used to make.”

He lets go too soon and turns slowly to Heidi, who has cake on her hands and face. “Come on, honey. Let’s get you cleaned up.”

I watch him lead Aunt Heidi to the kitchen, with my grandma following. I’ve never seen him gentle or tender, but

he's both right now. And I wonder if that's how he was as a father.

Charly loosens her grip on my knees, and Hope takes her by the hand to pull her away. I can move again, but I don't want to. I want Charly hugging me again and Hope right there with her.

If it's possible for Grandpa to love someone the way he does Heidi, then maybe there's hope for me.

Chapter 24

Hope



For everyone else, the day after Thanksgiving may be for shopping and eating leftovers, but for Carson and me, it's t-minus-seven days until both the Twenty-Four Days of Yulefest kickoff and the Thomsen twins televised double wedding.

Which is to say, we are stretched to the limit. The only thing we're shopping for is last-minute supplies for the wedding, craft paper for the *Julehjerter* demonstration, and battery-lit candles for the candlelight tour of downtown. Evie and Georgia keep thinking of more things to add to the decorations, and we've had more people RSVP to attend Yulefest events in person than we anticipated.

These are all good things—I mean, except the designer brides making more last-minute adjustments—but it does mean Carson and I are in for an even busier week than we'd planned.

He's at his desk, muttering under his breath, while putting together the seating chart. "Divorced parents are the hardest. Where am I supposed to put Evie's mom?"

"As close to Evie as possible," I answer. "Closer to her than her dad."

Even though Glen—Evie's dad—is my stepdad, I have a better relationship with him than Evie does, although they've been working on theirs for the past few months.

"Where am I supposed to put this guy, Ralph, who wants to sell reindeer jerky at the Yulefest Market?" I let out a loud sigh. "Obviously not close to Santa and his real reindeer."

“Definitely not.” Carson answers, then thinks for a minute. “Nick Johnson—who’s playing Santa Claus—told me his grandson is supposed to man the Nick’s Edible Delights booth, but he can’t make it. If you’ll work on this seating chart for a minute, I’ll give Ralph a call to see if he’ll take care of Nick’s booth if he can sell his jerky there.”

“Sounds good... Wait,” I say. “Should we be more worried about what kind of edibles Nick is selling at his booth?” An edibles-selling Santa? Paradise is full of surprises. “Can you ask Ralph to say it’s something besides reindeer too?”

Carson shakes his head. “An unfortunate name for a gourmet food shop that sells the best cheese and bread in a five-hundred-mile range.”

I breathe a sigh of relief. “And Ralph? Is he setting himself up for disaster selling reindeer jerky?”

“I’ll see what I can do about possibly rebranding his product,” Carson answers with a smile.

I click over to the wedding files on my computer and navigate to the seating chart while Carson calls Nick and tells him his idea.

When I’m done with the seating chart, I check in with Gia. The preschool is closed today, but she offered to take Charly all day.

“She’s dancing with Sebastian right now,” Gia tells me when I ask to say hi to Charly. “I’ll get her if you want, but they’re having so much fun. She’s learning all the seven jumps.”

“No, that’s okay. Let her keep doing what she’s doing.” I try, and fail, to hide the surprise in my voice.

“He’s very good with her, carissima,” Gia says in her soft, rolling tongue.

I nod, even though she can’t see me, and tell her I’ll be there before dinner time. When we hang up, I have to take a minute to process what she’s said.

Seb started so reserved and stand-offish with Charly that I’m still surprised with each step he takes toward a relationship with her. He’s definitely made real strides. But the fact he’s teaching her a dance without my being there is still kind of a big deal.

Of course, Gia is a little—or a lot—biased when it comes to Seb, so her idea of being “very good” with Charly may be different from mine. But he deserves credit for working on it. I can even let myself hope that with more practice he will be “very good.” Even great.

Carson and I work the entire day, going back and forth with the different details for both the wedding and Yulefest. We make a good team, even if I do say so myself. I liked working for Carson remotely, but I love working in the same office with him. He’s an easy boss, and I’m learning so much.

I know he likes working with me, but right now he doesn’t have many events scheduled after December. Enough for me to stay part-time, but that’s it.

And I can do what he needs for those events remotely, so it doesn't make sense to pay rent in Paradise. Especially when long-term rentals are hard to find and are expensive. Property owners want short-term renters during the summer season because they can make more money on them than on people like me who want to pay the same rate every month. Why rent for a thousand dollars a month when you can get that weekly for four months straight?

So I'm crossing all my fingers and sending up all my prayers that the wedding and Yulefest will bring in enough business that I can not only stay full-time, but also get the raise I'll need to rent a place of my own. All those details sit in a corner of my mind, reminding me why I have to work so hard on these projects.

By the time Steve pops his head into the office to tell us he's closing the store for the night, the sun has set.

"Shoot, I didn't realize how late it is." Carson pushes away from his desk. "I was supposed to pick up the mistletoe from Thomsen's this afternoon so we can use it in the barn tomorrow."

"Do you want me to pick it up? I can swing by on my way to get Charly from Gia." I check my watch.

It's time for dinner now, so I'm already late. But I know Carson still has phone calls to vendors to make and a million other things that must get done by tomorrow. I'd like to stay and help, but Charly has been at Gia's all day. I need to get her

home, fed, and in bed. Then I'll go back to work, but at the kitchen table with my laptop instead of here at the office.

"If you don't mind, that would be amazing." Carson is already scooting back to his computer and picking up his phone.

"I don't mind." I grab my purse and shut down my desktop. "I'll see you bright and early at the barn."

I walk behind Carson's desk to squeeze his shoulders and kiss the top of his head where his hair is starting to thin. This is the relationship we have now. He's like a surrogate dad. Or at least a much older brother.

"Thanks again for letting me bring Charly. I'm afraid she's starting to think Gia is her new mom. I'll have her iPad and other stuff to keep her entertained."

"Of course." He squeezes my hand on his shoulder. "I'm sorry things are so crazy, but you're doing splendid work. I'll let Pete know you're on the way."

I'm not sure how we'll get all the mistletoe we've ordered in my Honda, but we'll figure it out. Not only do we need it for the wedding, but we also need it for the Jingle Ball and Yulefest decorations. Carson ordered *a lot* of mistletoe, because, as he said, "once it's gone, it's gone." We don't want to run out.

And fake mistletoe is not an option. Especially for the wedding. Evie and Georgia made that clear.

When I arrive at Thomsen's Grocery and Hardware store, I park around back. Pete has a fresh mistletoe contact, so he put in the order for us, and he's got it stored in the Christmas tree tent that sprung up overnight in the store's parking lot.

"Hello, Hope!" Pete greets me with a big hug, and I wonder again how Adam is his offspring.

At his best, Adam is a side hug guy. And that's when he really knows a person. I'm still waiting for mine.

"Come on to the back," Pete says, and I follow him around the tree tent. "The boxes aren't heavy, but there's a lot of them. I've already got them on a flatbed cart. I made sure to put them somewhere safe though. I didn't want anyone accidentally selling my soon-to-be daughters' mistletoe. Gotta start off on the right foot, don't I? And with the mistletoe shortage this year, it'd be hard to get anymore."

Pete talks the whole way to the corner of the parking lot behind the tent where mesh-wrapped Christmas trees are on their sides, stacked two feet high. There's not much light back here, but even as we get closer, I still can't see any boxes. At least not any that are intact.

There's smashed boxes strewn around, and a lot of pine needles and other debris. But I don't see any boxes full of mistletoe, no matter how hard I squint in the dim light.

Something scurries in front of me, and with a yelp, I practically jump into Pete's arms.

“What in the world?” Pete fumbles with his phone, then shines a light in front of us.

My heart immediately slows when giant eyes meet mine, and I let go of Pete’s arm. “Oh, it’s a squirrel! Whew. I thought it was a rat.”

I almost laugh at myself for being so scared, especially because the squirrel is soooo cute with its little paws holding a green, leafy thing while he—*she?*—nibbles on it.

“That’s adorable,” I say. “And look! There’s more! They’re everywhere!”

Half a dozen pairs of squirrel eyeballs dart from me to the tasty snack between their adorable little...

A horrifying realization hits me at the same time Pete’s words do.

“That’s our mistletoe!” He waddle-runs toward the vandals, waving his arms. “Shoo! Shoo! You get out of here!”

The squirrels don’t move, other than to reach their paws into what’s left of the boxes they’re standing on, around, and in, and take out more mistletoe. They stop only long enough to regard Pete with polite disinterest before they go back to their super-speed nibbling.

“I should have known better than to leave these boxes out here.” Out of breath and with hands on his hips, Pete shakes his head. “These are Lynette’s squirrels. That’s why they’re not running. She’s tamed the darn things. But only enough to not be afraid of people, not enough to like us.”

As if to confirm what Pete's said, the squirrel closest to me tosses aside her bare branch and slips her paw into the opening of the box she's standing on without breaking eye contact with me. She smiles triumphantly—I swear that's what she does—as she pulls a beautiful, fresh sprig of mistletoe from the box and holds it in front of her mouth. Then her little jaw moves at lightning speed to gobble up *my* wedding and Yulefest décor.

That's when I do the only thing I can.

I pull out my phone and turn to Google.

“Mistletoe is poisonous,” Pete says with real concern. “They're going to make themselves sick... or worse.”

“Uh, not for squirrels it isn't. They love the stuff.” This is the only fact Google gives me about squirrels and mistletoe. Nothing about how to get them away from it.

“Is that right? Well, let's worry about saving the mistletoe instead of the squirrels then.” Pete takes off after the squirrels again, this time more aggressively. Which for Pete means yelling “get!” instead of *shoo*.

And even though they're still stinking adorable, I join Pete in chasing them away.

Or attempt to.

I knew squirrels were fast, but I didn't know how determined they are. And smart. At least these ones are. They work in teams—maybe Lynette has trained them to do that, too—and they use their cuteness to their advantage.

The minute I chase one away, another one comes running back for more mistletoe. That one eats as fast as it can while its co-conspirators distract us. We turn our attention to the next, and it stops, blinks its big eyes and waves its bushy tail, then darts away.

One of us chases it. But as soon as we're busy chasing, a couple more squirrels take their places at the buffet table, until all of us are caught in a vicious cycle. Although only one species seems to be bothered by it.

Aside from my growing panic that imitation mistletoe may be in my near future, being outsmarted by a pack of squirrel thugs is not great for my ego.

Then Pete comes to a sudden stop in front of me. "This isn't working." He leans over, breathing loudly. "We've got to slow our roll."

"Slow our roll," I repeat, nodding like this is a clear strategy.

"I'll take the rear. You stay here. At my signal, we walk slowly toward them. Pick up as much mistletoe as possible. We've got to save what we can, while we can." He huffs through his instructions, while I worry that if he collapses, I don't know how I'll drag him safely away from the battlefield where the squirrels clearly have the advantage.

Pete makes his way in a wide circle to the neat stacks of trees. I shake out my hands and take deep breaths while I wait for his signal. I've never been on the counter-offensive when it comes to squirrels. I'm not sure what to expect. Ten minutes ago, I would have assumed they'd scurry away, stopping to

wave goodbye before disappearing into the pine trees that surround Thomsen's.

But I was younger then. Naïve. I believed in the Disney squirrels from *Enchanted*—or was that a chipmunk?—and *Ice Age*. Squirrels who only ate nuts and weren't very smart.

Lies. All lies.

At Pete's signal I inch forward, keeping my eyes on the squirrel closest to me. The ringleader. The kingpin. The squirrel mastermind.

He—only a male could cause this much trouble—watches me too. I reach the first bunch of mistletoe and bend down to pick it up. He narrows his big eyes. (As much as a squirrel can narrow those big orbs).

I stand up slowly, clutching the mistletoe close to my chest. Pete sends me an encouraging nod, and I take a few more slow steps to an unguarded box that's relatively intact.

The squirrel—I name him Grinchy, because he's determined to ruin Christmas—cocks his head to the side, which should be cute, but is, in fact, terrifying. I pick up the box as quickly and carefully as possible. Grinchy darts toward me. I let out a squeak, and he stops, inches from my feet.

Inches.

"Pete..." My voice wobbles as I call softly for him.

"They think we *want* to feed them." Pete, who's in a stare down with a skinny-tailed squirrel who's definitely seen action, doesn't look my way.

But another squirrel does. Maybe he senses my fear, or maybe he's named Pete too. Either way, I've got his attention, and I am not excited about that.

He scurries over to my other side, following Grinchy's lead and stopping less than a foot away from me.

"Pete..." My voice cracks.

Another squirrel looks up.

How many Petes are in this gang?

Pete Two strides slowly toward me, grinning like a madman. Or like a squirrel. I can't see the difference anymore.

And then the squirrels have me surrounded.

I'm tempted to back away, but I don't know if there's another one behind me. What happens if I step on him? Will the other squirrels see it as an act of aggression? Will they attack?

"Pete," I say again.

He blinks, losing the stare-down, and his squirrel opponent scampers merrily away to another box of mistletoe. Finally Pete looks at me.

His eyes go wide. "Don't make any sudden moves."

"Okay. No sudden moves," I repeat as though I'm not frozen in place with fear.

"I'll be right there. Just keep your eyes on me. Don't look down." He talks slowly and calmly while carefully making his way to me.

The night goes still, except for a few flakes of snow that swirl to the ground. The only sound is Pete's soft steps on the snow-dusted pavement. Even the other squirrels have stopped eating, sensing, perhaps, that we're in a stand-off.

Pete takes his time, stepping over and around boxes, avoiding the ones already claimed by the squirrel gang. And his tactics work, even if I'm beginning to wonder if I'll die of old age before the squirrels attack.

He's within feet of me when, in skirting around a final box, he accidentally kicks it. The scraping sound startles me, and I fumble the box in my arms. Luckily, I catch it before it hits the ground, but not before the flaps fall open and mistletoe spills out.

I throw my arm over the open flap, but it's too late. The squirrels have been waiting for this moment. It's feeding time.

Grinchy leads the charge, running up my pant leg, over my arms, right on top of the box. Our eyes meet. I scream and drop the box. No parasite plant is worth defending from rodents.

But Grinchy is too quick. He doesn't care about the mistletoe anymore. It was never *about* the mistletoe. It's power he wants. It's always been power.

The box falls to the ground, but he clings to my arm, his little paws not so cute anymore as they grip my parka.

The Petes follow. They're on my legs, then on my chest as Grinchy pulls the remaining sprigs of mistletoe out of my

arms.

I scream louder, turning in circles and flailing my arms, but they will not get off.

Then Pete's yells join my screams and heavy hands are swatting my back and hair, followed by pinpricks of little claws scampering down my legs.

I'm still screaming long after I don't feel them anymore. In my mind, I know they're gone, but in my heart, this is just the beginning. They'll never truly be gone.

"Hope!" Pete yells and holds my arms down. "Are you okay? Did they hurt you?"

The thought of blood makes me go still with fear. "I don't know! Did they bite me? Do I have to get a rabies shot?"

Pete circles me. "No, squirrels don't spread rabies. And you look okay. You've got on too many layers for them to do any real damage, but you've got a tear in your coat."

My breath slows, and I pull myself together enough to look down and confirm nothing is bleeding. The only thing, besides the mistletoe, which didn't escape the squirrel attack is the sleeve of my parka. Down filling pokes out of a small tear.

Pete guides me back to my car, talking the whole time. "You're okay. Go home, take a nice bath, and put all of this behind you."

"What just happened? That was too crazy to believe," I say as he helps me into my car. "Was that a coordinated attack? Do squirrels do that? I thought they lived alone."

“Sometimes they nest together when it’s cold out, but Lynette’s squirrels tend to run as a pack. She’s made them a family. An unruly family of unsupervised, teenage boys.” He tries to smile, but there’s no hiding his frustration.

“They got our mistletoe, Pete. What are we going to do?” Now that the shock of a squirrel attack has worn off, the real problem stares me in the face.

“I know some other mistletoe dealers. We’ll get everything squared away before Evie and Georgia ever find out, and in a couple days, we’ll be laughing about this.” Pete’s walkie talkie crackles, and he pulls it off his belt loop.

He shuts my door before answering, but I don’t miss what he says to whoever is on the other side.

“Round up the posse. We’ve got a squirrel problem to take care of.”

I pull away, trying not to think about what Pete and his posse intend to do or Grinchy’s big, wide eyes. Those eyes may still be cute, but I know what lies behind them now.

Pure evil.

Someday I’ll be able to look back on this night and laugh. Maybe I’ll even like squirrels again.

But right now, all I want to do is pick up Charly and take Pete’s advice to soak in a warm tub.

Right after I tell Seb what happened. Because I could really use a hug. And he’s the one person besides Charly whose arms I’d really like around me right now.

Chapter 25

Sebastian



Hope is late. Really late. And she's not answering her phone.

And I really, *really* need her to answer her phone.

Because what started out as a fun ebelskiver-making night with Charly has turned into a Nutella and whipped cream disaster.

Charly is covered in both. I don't know how a kid gets chocolate up her nostrils, but Charly's done it. She's got it in her ears too. And all over her hands, up to her elbows. I even see some on her bare toes.

And that's before all the butter, which she's rubbed over her entire body.

Her *entire* body.

I turned around to flip the ebelskiver in the pan, and seconds later—okay maybe longer. There may have been minutes involved—when I turned back around, she'd stripped off her dress and was rubbing soft butter all over her belly. The little bun things on top of her head are shiny with it, like rolls right out of the oven, and her arms gleam in the light.

“Charly, what are you doing?” I reach for the stick of butter, but she presses it harder against her chest, and it squishes between her fingers like soft clay.

“I a bean!” she says proudly, and I immediately regret settling on butter bean as a nickname for her today.

I thought a nickname would make her feel more comfortable with me, like a buddy. So all day long it's been “come on,

butter bean,” or “let’s do this, butter bean.” And it seemed to work, as far as making her like me. But now I wonder if she’s been waiting all day to prove she still has the upper hand in our relationship.

I’ve brought this butter disaster on myself.

I could call in reinforcements to help me with clean up, but I insisted I could manage Charly and sent Mom off to line dancing. And Stella’s out with friends in town for the weekend. Although, I’d have to suffer through being laughed at before she’d help me.

So I do what I can to unbutter Charly without sticking her in a bath. I don’t know how Hope would feel about me crossing that boundary. Seems like that would put me in the creepy friend zone. Hence, why I am trying to get ahold of her to ask what she thinks I should do.

Also, I don’t even know how to bathe a kid. Especially when there’s a half pound of butter involved.

So once I wrangle the butter from her, I wipe her down with dish towels. When I run out of those, I move on to paper towels.

Charly giggles when I rub her belly, and her little laugh is cute enough to make me smile. One day I’ll laugh about this, but not before my skin absorbs the butter that I’m slick with by the time I finish cleaning up Charly.

“Where’s Mama?” she asks with yawn when I’m done.

“She’ll be here soon, bu—” I stop. We’re done with butterbean.

Charly’s lip quivers. “I want Mama.”

Her eyes fill with tears, and I have to think fast, because what is happening here? One minute she’s in butter heaven, and now she’s ready to cry. Is this normal three-year-old behavior? Are they all this manic? And just when I thought I was getting the hang of this toddler stuff.

“How about ebelskiver? Are you hungry?” I grab a plate and toss the round pancakes on it, then remember she needs a plastic plate, but I don’t know where those are, so I grab the last paper towel and put them on it.

I plop the ebelskiver on the table, then hold out my hand. “Come on, Charly. Come sit down. Look, you can eat the pancakes we made.” I switch words, English words are easier for her to say than Danish ones. Go figure.

And, oh no. A tear just dropped. My heart stops.

“I want choc-ut.” Her voice waivers with her quivering lower lip.

“Chocolate? There’s chocolate inside of them.” I grab an ebelskiver and break it open to show her the chocolate-y middle.

“I want choc-ut.” She sniffs.

I’ve got a decision to make here: risk making Hope mad by stuffing Charly full of sugar, or risk Charly melting down.

I decide I'd rather make Hope mad and have to clean up another chocolate mess than have Charly cry.

“Okay! You sit down, and I'll get the chocolate.”

She takes my hand, and I help her into her chair. Her dress is still on the floor, so I grab it and then the Nutella and take both back to the table.

“Let's get your dress on you first.”

Charly raises her arms, and I slip the dress over her head. At least this part is easy, except she had tight things on earlier, and I have no idea where those are.

I scoop a big spoonful of Nutella out of the jar and drop it on Charly's plate. She sticks her finger in the middle of it and smiles wide before sticking it in her mouth.

“I wuv choc-ut,” she says and dips again.

There's no doubt she's going to be a mess and that Hope will think I don't know what I'm doing feeding her kid mountains of white carbs and chocolate for dinner. But at least Charly's not crying.

In fact, she smiles and laughs each time she sticks her fingers in the chocolate and in the middle of the pancakes. I don't know how much she's actually eating, but maybe this counts as one of those therapy things Mom's been doing with her to make her motor skills better.

I watch for a minute or two, wondering if I should help her. But she seems fine eating without my help, so I fill Uncle Rad's bowl, so she can eat dinner too.

“You wanna pancake, Unkuhrad?” Charly holds out an ebelskiver for Uncle Rad.

“Dogs can’t have chocolate, Charly. You eat it for her.” I lead Uncle Rad back to her bowl before she can grab the pancake.

When I look back at Charly, she’s stuffed the ebelskiver in her mouth. So I did something right, because at least she’s eating now. Even if it is a dessert dinner.

While she chatters and eats, I wipe up the mess we made. There are bowls of dough, open containers of sugar, flour, and all kinds of toppings scattered across the counter, and little flour footprints on the floor.

The sink fills with dishes as I clear the counter, and I feel pretty good about cleaning up after myself. Mom will be surprised. Maybe even proud. I can’t remember how long it’s been since I washed dishes.

I get so focused on cleaning that I barely notice when Charly’s running monologue stops. When I do notice the silence, I panic and turn around.

Charly’s not in her seat anymore, and I’m ready to be greeted by a new mess until I see her.

She’s curled up with Uncle Rad on the too-big bed I bought for Rad. Her eyes drift open and closed in slow blinks as she runs her hand down Uncle Rad’s back. For her part, Uncle Rad is in heaven licking the butter out of Charly’s hair.

And that seems like a win-win situation, so I let them be and go back to disaster clean-up.

I don't get far before I hear a knock at the door.

“Gia? Seb?” Hope calls from the mudroom.

I rush to the door and open it. “Man, am I—”

The rest of my words catch in my throat.

Hope is a mess.

Her hair sticks out in clumps all over her head, like maybe she's been in a hair-pulling fight. The only time I've ever seen it look like this is after the make-out session—never mind. It's not important.

She has black make-up under her eyes, and she has mud spots—or are they tiny paw prints?—up her legs and all over the front of her coat.

I stare at her, my jaw gaping. She stares back.

“What happened to you?” We both say at the same time.

“Mistletoe mishap,” she says over my “ebelskiver disaster.”

“Did you say ebelskiver?” she asks and unzips her coat.

“Yeah, you want some? Charly and I made them.” I help her take off her coat and hang it up.

“Uh oh. Does she look as bad as you?”

I look at her, then down at myself.

My apron is covered in chocolate smears, sticky spots of lemon curd, raspberry sauce, and flour. Powdered sugar dusts

my black jeans and boots, and my skin is still shiny with butter.

“Maybe?”

“Worse?” Her mouth pulls down in a worried frown.

“Probably?” I wince. “But we had fun together.”

Hope’s face smooths, and she steps closer. “You’ve got chocolate here.” She rubs her thumb on the side of my mouth. “And some here.” She rubs the other side, moving even closer. “Some flour here.”

Now her fingers brush my cheek, sending charges of electricity across my skin. Her eyes lock with mine, and the energy flowing between us could power entire cities. The intensity of it scares me. I don’t know how much longer I can fight it. The friend zone boundaries are very fuzzy right now.

But it’s my responsibility to redefine them. Until Hope is ready to see me as something more than a friend, I can’t act on my attraction. Or let her act on hers. I don’t want to do anything that either of us will regret, but I especially want to protect Hope. Charly is her priority.

So I put a few inches between us. It’s not much, but enough to turn down the charge between us. Then I pat the side of her head. “You’ve got a hair out of place.” I do the same on the other side. “And a few more over here.”

I keep my eyes focused on her hair. If I look in her eyes and see the slightest invitation, I will kiss her. And if I kiss her, I won’t ever want to stop.

Hope laughs and brushes her hands through her hair. “Does it look like a squirrel’s nest? Because I’m serious, I just had a truly terrifying squirrel encounter.” She looks through the open door to the kitchen, releasing me from her spell. “Where’s Charly?”

“She’s in there with Uncle Rad.” With my hands on her shoulders, I guide her into the kitchen. “Tell me all about your squirrels while I make you a fresh batch of ebelskiver.”

She walks into the kitchen, then stops so fast, I nearly run into her. “You weren’t joking about a disaster, were you?”

I thought I’d done a decent job on clean up, but when I look at the kitchen through Hope’s eyes, I see the dishes stacked haphazardly in the sink, the chocolate and flour spots on the counter, and the batter streaks dripping down the cabinets.

I rush to the dishwasher and start shoving dishes inside it, while Hope walks to Charly and squats down.

“She’s asleep,” she whispers. “With Uncle Rad. They’re both out like a light.” Then she pulls out her phone and takes a picture. “This is probably the most adorable thing I’ve ever seen.”

I stop what I’m doing and agree. Hope taking a picture of Charly asleep with Uncle Rad on the dog bed is the most adorable thing I’ve ever seen.

Hope leans closer to Charly. “Is her dress on backwards? And inside out?”

“Maybe?” I shrug. I hadn’t noticed when I put it on her. “Honestly, it’s probably better that way.”

She fingers a lock of Charly’s hair, before standing. Then a confused look crosses her face, and she rubs her fingers together, then smells them. “Does she have butter in her hair?”

I quickly look away and turn on the oven to warm up the ebelskiver pan. “Annnnyway. Tell me about those squirrels.”

Hope walks to the sink and begins rearranging the dishes I’ve shoved in the dishwasher. “Seb, they ate all my mistletoe. Literally all of it. Your Uncle Pete and I had to fight them off.”

She talks in an animated, but quiet voice, as she washes dishes and tells me all about the two squirrel Petes and Grinchy. “Now that I think about it, Grinchy had a strong resemblance to Walter White. I could totally see him in a fedora and sunglasses. And he was definitely in charge of their operation.”

“Like from *Breaking Bad*?” I interrupt. “You really think there’s a squirrel drug kingpin?”

“Mistletoe is their drug, Seb,” she says, completely serious, while water from the plate she’s holding drips down her arm . “And he’s definitely the dealer. Obviously, he didn’t make the stuff, but he knew it was good product, and he was willing to fight for it.”

By the time she finishes telling the story, the dishes are half done, she’s got a plate of delicious ebelskiver, and I’ve got tears streaming down my face I’m laughing so hard. Not just

at her description of the squirrels as a local rodent drug cartel, but also at the image of her and Uncle Pete waving their arms around to scare away Walter and his gang, only to be cornered by them.

“So what are you going to do now?” I sit across the table from her while she digs into her ebelskiver.

“Pete said he’d find more.”

As soon as the words are out of her mouth, her phone buzzes and she pulls it from her back pocket. Her eyes roll across the message, then she throws her hands into the air. “Yes! He came through!”

“Uncle Pete always does.” I smile just because Hope does. I don’t care about the mistletoe; I just care that Hope is happy.

But then her face falls as another message comes in. “It’s in Florence. I’ve got to pick it up first thing tomorrow morning. Early. The florist has other people who want it.”

I glance out the window over the sink. Snow is falling gently, but half an hour ago, it wasn’t falling at all. It’s supposed to pick up and continue all weekend, which will make the canyon pass to Florence slow, and possibly treacherous.

“What time do you need to be there?”

“Seven am.”

I let out a soft whistle. “That’s going to be rough.”

“I’m going to have to get Charly up so early. But I can’t leave her all day again tomorrow.” Hope chews her lip and stares at her phone screen.

And I stare at her.

An idea is forming. An idea that might get me out of the friend zone.

A day taking care of Charly was good. I liked spending time with her. I might have liked it a lot. Even the butter part. I think I’ve made progress, not only with my own comfort and confidence with Charly, but also with Hope.

But a day with Charly *and* Hope might be just the thing to prove to all of us that, maybe, we could pretend to be a family and see how that works out.

Chapter 26

Hope



An hour after Pete texts me about the mistletoe, I transfer Charly's car seat from my little Honda into Seb's truck. Then I get her buckled in and tuck a blanket around her. She's in her favorite cozy pjs and her moose rack hat, lights flashing. Usually I make her take it off at night, but nothing about this night is usual, so I let it go.

Once Charly's in, I climb into the passenger seat.

"Ready?" Seb asks and shuts his door.

"Ready." I hope I sound more confident than nervous. Because I'm definitely nervous about the fact Seb and I are going to spend the night together.

Not in the same bed, obviously. Not even in the same room. But we're headed to Florence together, and we won't be back until tomorrow.

He looks over his shoulder and smiles. "And how about you, Charly moose? Ready to go?"

Charly grins and gives him a thumbs up, then sticks the thumb in her mouth.

"And you, Uncle Rad?"

Uncle Rad yips, and Charly puts her hand on the puppy's neck. The puppy responds by turning in a tight circle before lying down and resting her head on the edge of Charly's seat.

"Alrighty. Let's do this. Operation Mistletoe Retrieval is a go." Seb flips on his lights, lays his arm across my seat and looks over his shoulder while he backs out of the driveway.

Snow swirls in the headlights and sticks to his windshield as we pull onto the road. By the time we hit the canyon for the hour and half drive to Florence, Charly and Uncle Rad are both snoring softly in the back seat.

“So, did you find somewhere for us to stay?” I smile and push back the anxious tickle in my throat.

“I did.” Seb smiles. “And it wasn’t easy. The big game is this weekend and Florence State University is in the playoffs. First time ever, so the place is packed.”

“But you got two rooms?” This time I can’t hide my nervousness. It rushes out with my question.

“I did. The only two rooms left in Florence.” Seb hooks his wrist over the steering wheel with a relaxed confidence that eases my own worry.

“Great,” I breathe out, and my chest loosens.

I’m not worried about going to Florence with Seb at all. It might be fun. In fact, I’m sure it will be. I have no problem having fun with Seb.

I also have no problem wanting to kiss him. Or hold him. Or have him hold me.

That’s the problem.

I can’t stop wanting those things, no matter how hard I try. It’s easier to allow myself to want something that feels so right than to take the more practical, smart choice to repress my feelings into oblivion.

So, sharing a hotel room with him is *not* an option, even if we have Charly and Uncle Rad to chaperone us. Because, let's be honest, neither of them is qualified for that job.

“Thanks again, Seb. I really appreciate you doing this for me.” I sink deeper in my seat and focus on the snow falling to try and distract myself from the smell of leather, soap, and Seb that fills the cab of the truck.

“I'm glad I could help.” He rolls his shoulders, then grips the steering wheel. “I wouldn't want you driving this canyon alone with snow coming down like this.”

We both lean forward and look out the front window. Every swish of the wipers clears new snow from the windshield. “We'll be able to get back tomorrow, right?”

“Sure. We'll be fine.” He hesitates a beat too long before answering. “I just didn't want to take any chances the road might close tonight and keep you from getting your mistletoe.” He glances at me and must see worry written on my face. “Hope, I've driven this road a million times. It hardly ever closes. I'm being cautious, that's all.”

“Okay.” I exhale and relax into Seb's certainty.

“We'll get the mistletoe first thing in the morning, then leave. Home before noon. Easy, peasy, lemon squeezy,” he continues, growing more confident with his plan. But then he sucks in his breath and adds, “The hotel has wi-fi in case you need to work—I checked on that. And I booked us for two nights, just in case.”

I sit upright. “You just said we’d be back mid-morning.”

Seb reaches across the seat and puts his hand over mine. “We will. This is me being cautious, Hope. Responsible even.”

At that I laugh and relax back into the seat, but I don’t move my hand. Despite my reaction, the thought of being stuck in Florence with Seb isn’t terrible. Stressful, yes, but only because of work. I’ve got way too much on my plate to even entertain the idea of spending an entire day with Seb, away from Paradise and all the pressures there.

Away from everyone who knows him so well. Away from everyone who’s ever worried about the two of us together.

Wait.

That’s me.

I’m the one who’s been worried about the two of us together.

But a day with the *three* of us—four if we count Uncle Rad—could be the perfect opportunity to see what that might be like on a more permanent basis.

I drop my eyes to Seb’s hand still covering mine. Without a second thought, I flip over my hand, so our palms are pressed together and slide my fingers through his.

His eyes slide to our hands, then to me. “This is nice. Very friendly.”

“Very.” I swallow back the fear trying to force its way up my chest.

This is just a quick trip, but it's a quick trip with the three of us. That hasn't happened before, and it may not happen again. I don't know what the future holds, but right now Seb wants to be with Charly and me. And I want to do something I rarely let myself do.

Enjoy the moment.

I slide a few inches closer to Seb, so he doesn't have to reach quite as far, and rest our hands in my lap. "What's Christmas in Paradise like?"

He takes a deep breath, then smiles. "I've never spent Christmas anywhere else, so I don't have anything to compare it to, but it's magical."

"Magical?"

"Yeah," he glances at me and nods. "I mean, not as magical as it will be this year with Yulefest, obviously."

"Obviously."

"But Paradise has always had some kind of Christmas Festival with all the folk dancing, and the town square lighting ceremony." Seb keeps his eyes glued to the road as he talks, navigating the curving road and the increasing snow with ease. "When we were little, we'd go to Santa's workshop set up in the town square. Nick Johnson was Santa back then too."

"What other traditions did your family have?" I like picturing him as a little boy. I can see him being excited about things like visiting Santa and unwrapping presents on Christmas morning.

“Midnight mass. Mom always made us go. And a big Christmas dinner with all the Sparks and Thomsens.” His face grows more animated as he talks. “We’d spend Christmas Eve together too, singing around the tree, playing games, eating Heidi’s ebelskiver and Mom’s panettone.”

“What’s panettone?” I ask.

“Italian Christmas cake.” He takes his hand off the wheel long enough to rub the corner of his jaw, right on the spot where I know he likes being kissed.

“Is it good?”

He looks at me, pauses, then shakes his head. “Don’t tell my mom though.”

I drag my fingers across my lips and make a locking motion.

Seb laughs and focuses on the road again. “And sledding. We’d always go sledding on Christmas day. I don’t remember ever having a Christmas without snow. The one Christmas I really remember with my dad we had great snow. I don’t know how many times I made him take me down the hill.”

His voice drifts away, and his eyes grow soft with the memory.

I squeeze his hand tighter. “Do you miss him?”

He presses his lips together, and his chest rises. “He was gone so much that I think I miss the idea of him. I miss that I didn’t have him to show me how to be a man. I mean, I’ve had Grandpa Sparks, but his idea of manhood never really fit me. Not that I don’t love him. We’re just different.”

I nod. I've only had one interaction with his grandpa, but I understand what he's saying. "Your dad wasn't like him?"

Seb thinks for a few seconds before answering. "I don't think so. I don't remember him so much as I remember what I felt around him."

"What was that?"

"Loved." He nods like saying it out loud has brought him the realization. "I felt good."

I wait for him to say more, because there's a question forming in the back of my mind that I'm dying to ask, but I'm not sure he's ready to answer. But as minutes pass, and he doesn't say anything, I can't hold it in anymore.

"I'm going to ask you a big question, but you don't have to answer it if you don't want," I say in one breath.

His head whips to me, then back to the road, and he lets out a nervous laugh. "Okay. Thanks for the warning."

"Do you think losing your dad that young is part of the reason you don't want kids—or at least, don't want them yet? Maybe ever?" My face grows hotter and hotter the more I try to make the question less intrusive.

Seb shakes his head. "It's not part of the reason. It's all of the reason."

He looks at me and shrugs.

Because what do we do with that, other than acknowledge it? But at least we're at a point where he's okay being honest

about his reason. At least he's aware of it. That's something.

“Now you,” he says, rolling his shoulders back, shaking off the vulnerability pressing in on both of us. “Tell me about your Christmases.”

I'm only too happy to change the subject, so I launch into my own family traditions: opening pajamas on Christmas Eve, going to church, driving around Wichita to see the best Christmas lights.

I tell him about Christmases when Evie was with us—those were usually my favorite. We talk about our favorite gifts we ever got. Mine was Heelies. I skated everywhere for months. Seb's was one of his dad's medals.

We talk until we crest the last hill and Florence's lights greet us.

That's when I ask, “What hotel are we staying at?”

“Um, well...” Seb slides his hand from mine and rubs the back of his neck. “It's actually more of a bed-and-breakfast, anniversary, honeymoon, kind of place.”

“Oh.” That could be awkward. “They're okay with kids though? Charly will have her own bed?”

His mouth pulls into a frown. “They don't usually allow kids, but I begged. And because it's kind of a romantic place, only one bed per room.”

“Oh.” The thought of staying at a *romantic* hotel with Seb reduces my vocabulary to that word.

But I quickly come to my senses. We have two rooms, and he's obviously gone to a lot of trouble just to get us those rooms. "That's fine. She can sleep with me. Totally fine."

It's fine. Everything is *fine*. I'm not thinking about every Christmas Hallmark movie ever with a snowstorm, an inn, and only one bed. That doesn't happen in real life.

No matter how much I may be impulsively wishing for that very thing right now.

I knew I shouldn't have held Seb's hand. I know better. Hand holding is the gateway drug to full-blown kissing. Or, worse, full-blown attachment. You think it's no big deal, but then when you try to quit, you want more. You want commitment. You want a hand to hold all the time.

And, if you have a hand to hold all the time, there are always lips that come with it. An entire face even, willing to kiss and be kissed.

"What's this place called anyway?" I ask to prove everything is fine. I'm not thinking about the million-to-one possibility of having to share a bed with him, or the hand holding and kissing that could happen in that bed.

I'm *not*.

Seb lets out a nervous laugh. "You're not going to like it. Especially after your squirrel ordeal."

"Are we staying at a hotel for squirrels?" I'm only half joking. He's got me nervous. For so many reasons that have nothing to do with squirrels.

Seb laughs harder. “No. It’s not that bad.” He turns down a narrow street and parks in front of a large brick house and points at the snow-covered sign.

I can barely read the name, but when I do, all I can say is, “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

Chapter 27

Sebastian



One of the hazards of being an electrician is getting shocked on a fairly regular basis. Not the kind of shocked that knocks you on your feet. The kind that buzzes through your body so fast, it's already gone before you realize what's happened. It doesn't hurt, just surprises.

Honestly, I like it. It's a reminder that I'm surrounded by electricity, an invisible force so powerful, once scientists learned to harness it, it changed the world.

Even though we've been holding hands for over an hour, when I tell Hope we're staying at a romantic inn, a similar force is palpable in the cab of my truck. It pulsates between us for the last few miles of our drive, tempting us closer together, even as we try to keep our distance. We make small talk, pretending we're not dancing around the live wire of attraction, acting like we don't know how much we want each other.

So when we pull up to the bed-and-breakfast and Hope sees the name, it's like someone has flipped off the main breaker powering the tension between us, giving us both some relief.

"Mistletoe Inn?" She lifts an eyebrow. "Really."

"I asked if they're a squirrel gang safehouse, and they said no. But I checked Yelp reviews too. No mention of any squirrel problems." I press my lips together to keep from laughing.

"I hope you're right." Hope drags a hand through her hair, which is all back in place, but the memory of the squirrels

there is still fresh.

“I really did try to find somewhere else.” I open my door and slide out. “There aren’t many that allow pets, but I couldn’t leave Rad with Mom.”

When I open the back door to get our bags, I swear I hear her mumble something about squirrels not being the thing she’s worried about. It’s the mistletoe.

A wave of excitement washes over me. There’s no real worry in her eyes, but they shine with anticipation. I don’t actually believe in the kiss-inducing properties of mistletoe, but I do believe in the power of temptation. And right now, I don’t think Hope or I have the power to resist any excuse to kiss.

I grab our bags and Uncle Rad as quickly as possible, so Hope doesn’t see the fire warming my face. Hope gets sleeping Charly out of her seat. Snow blankets the sidewalk to the front door, and in the dim light I can see mistletoe hanging in every entryway to the inn. Not only that, but the eaves over the front porch are carved with mistletoe.

Things don’t get better when we enter.

Mistletoe Inn is an old Victorian mansion converted into a bed-and-breakfast. Like most old homes built before “open-floor plan” was a thing, it’s divided into several small rooms, each one with its own doorway. And a lot of doorways means a lot of mistletoe.

To our left, there's a cozy parlor with bookshelves, a warm fire, and wingback chairs. And mistletoe. Above the doorway and hanging from the tall fireplace mantel.

To our right is a dining room with round wooden tables covered with lace tablecloths and circled by matching wood chairs. Mistletoe hangs from the doorway and the light fixtures in the room, and it's in the decorations on the table.

In a nook under the staircase, our host waits behind her stand to greet us. Mistletoe hanging over her head.

“Hello!” She says brightly. “You must be the Sparks. We've been waiting for you!”

“Oh no,” Hope says quickly. “We're not together... I mean we are—we came here together—but we're just friends. I'm not a Sparks.”

She shifts Charly's weight in her arms, and she snuggles her face deeper into Hope's neck. “We're staying in separate rooms,” she adds with a loud exhale.

Margene—that's the name on her nametag—looks down at her paper roster, scanning it with her pencil in hand and shaking her head. “I'm afraid not. We only have one room for you. The other was cancelled.”

“No, that's not right.” I step forward and lean over the stand to see her book. “I reserved two rooms for tonight. The first room you gave me wasn't dog friendly, so you switched me to the one that is. It should be right there in your book. Or

computer. Do you have one of those?" I look around, like a computer might appear out of thin air.

Margene purses her bright pink lips and pulls the roster closer to her, so I can't see it. "I'm sorry, but that's just not the case. The notes here say you reserved one room for two people, one child, and one dog. Not two rooms."

"We need two rooms," Hope and I say together.

"Then you'll have to find them somewhere else if you can. We don't have an extra room here." Margene sticks her pencil behind her ear and with one red-painted fingertip, she scratches a spot above her pencil without breaking eye contact with me.

I open my mouth to argue, but Hope stops me. "Seb, it's fine. We'll figure it out. I need to get Charly settled for the night."

At her name, Charly blinks her eyes open and takes a staggered breath like she might cry.

I nod and take the key Margene hands me, then follow her directions to the room, three doors down, to the right, near the back exit where the dog yard is. We pass at least half a dozen sprigs of mistletoe on our way.

"They are very committed to their mistletoe theme," Hope says as I unlock the door.

"Yes, they are. I thought it was just for hanging in doorways, but they've found a way to hang it everywhere. You have to

admire that level of commitment.” I open the door and let Hope go in before me.

She stops just inside. “I mean... I just... Yes. The level of commitment is admirable. And completely manic.”

I swipe at the mistletoe above my head, then take in the whole room.

It doesn’t take long—it’s not big. In fact, most of the space is taken up with the four-poster bed. Mistletoe is tied to each of the four posts and the chandelier that hangs in the middle of them.

“Is that a mistletoe quilt?” I ask.

“It is.” Hope nods. “And that’s mistletoe on the fireplace mantle and above the window seat.” Her voice is tired, and she grunts softly when she hefts Charly higher on her waist.

“Put her in the bed.” I squeeze behind her and drop the bags and Uncle Rad’s crate in the one space available, the window seat.

Hope carries Charly to the bed, and I rush to pull down the quilt, dragging Uncle Rad with me. Hope tucks Charly in, gently removing her moose rack hat and turning off the blinking lights.

Charly curls up in a ball on her side and sticks her thumb in her mouth. Hope kisses her cheek, then steps back, almost into Uncle Rad who’s sitting behind her. I grab her waist to stop her, then let my hands linger at her hips.

When she turns, I drop my hands and nod to Uncle Rad. “Sorry. Didn’t want you to step on her.”

My fingers tingle where they held her, and she holds me tight in her startling blue eyes.

“We should go to bed,” she says with a heavy breath, then her cheeks go red. “I mean, we should go to sleep... somewhere... not in the same bed.”

“Of course! We should sleep. It’s late. We’ve got to be up early tomorrow.” Words come out fast—too fast—but I stay planted in front of her.

Uncle Rad sits between us, panting and looking back and forth, like she’s waiting for something to happen. She shifts her front paws, then her hindquarters; wags her tail across the wood floor—once, twice—then gives up and drops onto her belly.

“Guess I’d better get her into bed too.” I smile, then swallow hard. Because it’s hard not to notice the bed-shaped, mistletoe-covered, elephant in the room.

I turn quickly and head for the door. “I’ll take her out to do her business while you... do what you need to get ready to go to,” I swallow again. “Sleep.”

“Okay. That works.” She wraps her hand around the post closest to her. “But where are you going to sleep?”

My eyes dart involuntarily to the bed, and heat rushes to my cheeks again as I force my gaze to the plush rug in front of the fire.

“There.” I point to the faux fur rug that looks like it’s seen better days. “I’ll turn on the fire, and it’ll be like camping. Better because I won’t freeze.”

And, if I curl up like Charly, I’ll almost fit.

But I don’t say that part out loud.

“I’m sorry.” Hope scrunches her nose—an expression so cute I want to wrap her in my arms and never let her go every time she does it.

“It’s fine.” I smile. “Go to bed. I’ll be back in a bit.”

I tug Uncle Rad out the door and take a deep breath, which slows my pulse but doesn’t cool my blood.

Snow is coming down hard when I take Uncle Rad out. Luckily, she goes quick. I suppose she doesn’t want to stay outside any longer than I do.

When we go back in, I hang out in the library room, looking at books I’ve got no interest in. But I want to give Hope time to get into bed and fall asleep. The sooner she does that, the sooner I can crash on the floor and try to pretend she’s not three feet away.

I wait fifteen minutes, but when my eyes begin to drift shut, I head back to the room.

The lights are out, but the fire is on in the gas fireplace. In the glow of the flames, I see a pillow and thick blanket on top of the rug.

I glance at the bed where there's a Hope-shaped form under the covers that slowly rises and falls with deep breaths. On the other side of the bed, Charly has thrown off the quilt and her thumb hangs loosely from her mouth.

I walk to her side and cover her again.

Minutes later, after changing into sweatpants, I climb into my makeshift bed. If I stretch out my feet, they hit the wall. But if I curl onto my side, my knees hang off the rug and hit the wood floor. And then there's the thoughts I'm having about Hope being in the bed next to me that make me even more uncomfortable.

I'm shifting side to side, trying to find a comfortable spot when I hear Hope whisper my name.

"Seb?"

"Yeah?" I whisper back, holding my breath.

"There's a lot of mistletoe in here."

A quick, loud laugh escapes, and I clamp my mouth shut.

"So. Much," I reply when I can do it quietly.

A long pause follows, and I wonder if Hope has drifted to sleep.

But then she whispers, "Charly really likes you."

I smile at the ceiling and sink into my bed. The rug isn't soft enough for me not to feel the hard floor underneath me, but there's no place I'd rather be right now.

"I like her too."

“Good,” she says.

Another long pause, then she says, “Maybe we could all spend more time together.”

“I’d like that.”

“Good.”

The sounds of heavy breathing follow, interspersed with Charly’s tiny snores.

I didn’t know kids snored.

One more thing I’ve learned in the past few weeks. I add it to my growing list of things I never knew I wanted to know but that now make my life a little fuller.

Chapter 28

Hope



Sleeping in the same bed with Charly is like trying to sleep during a wrestling match. Like, curling up with a blanket in the middle of the mat while two people are grappling. She repositions her little body all night long trying to gain ground against her opponent: me.

At some point I must have fallen asleep because I wake up in the morning with her feet in my face and the rest of her body stretched across the entire bed.

Honestly, though, I could have slept through all of that—I've done it before.

The thing that really kept me awake is knowing Seb is only feet away, wondering if he's as hyper aware as I am how close we are. Wondering if he's as tempted to curl up with me as I am to lie next to him, press my body against his back, and slide my arm around his waist.

And not just because I saw his dark outline as he pulled off his T-shirt. The shifting light of the flames in the fireplace emphasized the definition in his shoulders, biceps, and obliques, highlighting each one. The logs in the fire snapped and crackled their approval with such intensity, I couldn't have looked away even if I'd wanted to.

(Okay, they didn't really do that. It's a gas fireplace; the logs are fake. The snapping and crackling was my brain exploding).

The real reason I couldn't sleep, aside from shirtless-Seb-fueled adrenaline rushing through my veins, is sweet-Seb-fueled gratitude washing over me.

He took care of Charly all day yesterday, teaching her the Danish folk dance, making her ebelskiver, not freaking out over the butter. So. Much. Butter. And that was all before he insisted on driving me here, to pick up mistletoe. A job I could have done by myself, but he insisted he didn't want me driving through the canyon in a snowstorm.

I didn't fight him too hard on that. I know I could have done it, but he said he wanted to spend the time with me *and* Charly.

If he was slowly stepping out of his comfort zone before, I feel like yesterday he got shot out of it in one of those circus cannons.

The best part, though, is that he's not dashing to get back inside that comfort zone.

And that's what makes me want to wrap my arms around him and never let go.

But first, mistletoe.

I've got to get to the florist by seven am, which means getting myself and Charly ready before then. So I slip out of bed and tiptoe toward the bathroom, quietly stepping around Seb on the floor, so I don't wake him.

"Morning," he says sleepily, making me jump. "Sorry. Didn't mean to scare you."

I take a breath to slow my racing heart. "I thought you were asleep. Did I wake you?"

Seb stands and shakes his head, stretching his arms over his head. This is the closest view I've had of his tattoo. It's even

more intricate up close. “Nah. I didn’t sleep much. How about you?”

I tear my eyes away from the tree covering his bicep, but they get snagged on his chest. It’s only inches away, and even more distracting close up. And all I can do is shake my head in answer to his question.

“Charly’s still asleep,” he says, looking over my shoulder.

“I’ll get her up after I shower.” I tear my gaze away from his chest to see the confusion in his eyes.

“Why?”

“So we can get to the florist by seven.” I’m a little surprised he’s forgotten that was the plan all along.

Seb shakes his head, then stretches toward the mantle and picks up his keys. “Don’t wake sleeping babies. That’s the rule, right?” He dangles the keys in front of me. “You go get the mistletoe; I’ll stay here with her.”

“Really?”

“Of course.”

I glance at Charly, peacefully sleeping. “Okay. Thanks.”

I take the keys from him, then carry my clothes into the bathroom, very aware of the mistletoe hanging in the doorway and Seb’s proximity.

And I can’t resist.

I turn around, stretch on tip-toe, and kiss Seb’s cheek. “Thanks again. For everything.”

He grins softly, his eyes dancing, both tempting me to *really* take advantage of the moment and go for his lips instead.

But this time I do resist, backing slowly into the bathroom and shutting the door behind me.

Thirty minutes later, I emerge, ready to go. Seb is at the window seat, peeking through the curtains with Uncle Rad on his lap.

“It’s still snowing out there. Looks like we got at least a foot last night.” He lets the curtains fall closed and turns. “Roads should be plowed but be careful.”

I smile and grab my coat and the keys. “I will.”

This isn’t my first snowstorm. I’m from Kansas. But it’s sweet that he’s worried.

Then I go outside.

And Seb wasn’t lying. The walkway that was dusted with snow when we arrived last night is completely covered. There’s an old guy shoveling it, but he’s barely made it past the porch steps. Which means I make my way down what I think is the sidewalk, taking big steps through deep, weirdly powdery snow.

I lift my knees high to get my foot above the snow, but with every step forward, snow falls down the top of my boot. By the time I make it to the truck, I’ve got an inch of snow around the top of my boots, and at least that much inside them.

I climb into Seb’s truck and slam the door shut, shivering already. “Dorothy, we are *not* in Kansas anymore,” I mutter as

I start the engine.

The florist is on the other side of town, and it takes me half an hour to get there over the unplowed and traffic-filled main road. It takes another half an hour to inspect the mistletoe to make sure it's all fresh and then more time to load it into Seb's covered truck bed.

In the meantime, the snow doesn't stop. It's noticeably deeper as I make my way back to Mistletoe Inn.

On the way, I pass a big flashing road sign at the turnoff that leads to the canyon road connecting Florence and Paradise. I slow and read the warning that the road is icy and unplowed.

"Oh no." It's not closed, but I wonder how dangerous it is.

More dangerous than staying another night with Seb in a small, mistletoe covered hotel room?

Obviously, the road is more dangerous. *Obviously*. We could be putting our lives at risk if we try to navigate it right now.

But my heart is definitely at risk the more time I spend with Seb.

He's being so good with Charly that I really think I'd be okay with all of us getting to know each other better and spending more time together. We could move slow and take our time learning if we could be a family.

But it's November twenty-fifth. My work in Paradise will be over in exactly one month. Then I go back to Kansas and either find an event-planning business to work for there or

hope Carson has enough business to keep me working remotely, part-time.

The only way I can afford to stay in Paradise is if I have full-time work. Gia has been very generous taking care of Charly for these past few weeks for very little money, but if I stay, I'd have to find after-preschool care for Charly. Gia has always been a temporary solution.

Then there are the doctors for her eyes, her asthma, and her developmental delays.

Those are all the worries occupying my brain when I get back to the inn. I walk through the door, wave to Margene, and down the hall to my room, propelled by my spinning thoughts. My steps are heavy as I go down my mental checklist of all the things I have to get done today, starting with getting Charly dressed and fed.

I don't have time to be stuck in a hotel room in Florence fighting an undeniable attraction to the man I'm stuck there with. I never would have wished it if I thought this kind of thing *actually* happened.

To be honest, I'm a little bitter about the whole situation. I know this one bed trope plays funny in books and movies, but I'm not laughing living it. I'm just stressed. That's all. Stressed and not laughing.

When I'm almost to my room, the door opens, and Charly bounds out with Uncle Rad.

“Wait for me, Charly!” Seb calls from inside, then appears a second later.

“Mommy!” Charly sees me and runs with her arms out, letting go of Uncle Rad’s leash that Seb rushes to grab.

I know I took out her buns last night—she hates to sleep with them—but she’s got two uneven ones on the sides of her head. The buns bounce, coming a little more undone with each step she takes.

By the time she throws her arms around me, Charly’s hair is flying all over without a bun in sight. “Sebby did buns,” she says into my neck before pulling away. “See?”

She pats her head, but her smile falls when she can’t feel her buns. “Where they go? I wost dem.”

Seb reaches us, and Charly looks up at him with her finger pointed to her head. “Where my buns?”

He looks down, and his whole chest falls. “They came out already? It took me forever to do those things! I had to watch a YouTube video, like, a thousand times.”

“I’m sorry, baby. We can fix them later.” I stand and smile at Seb. “I can’t believe you did her hair.”

I don’t say a word about the fact that Charly’s sweater is on over her overalls, which will make it impossible for her to go potty, something she is finally so close to getting.

“I figured it would save you time, plus she was ready for breakfast. I wasn’t sure what the protocol there was. Whether she could go in pajamas or what.” He sways side to side,

letting Charly swing his arm back and forth while Uncle Rad tugs at the leash in his other hand. “Did you get the mistletoe?”

“Mission accomplished.”

“I hungry!” Charly stops the swinging and picks up both her legs to hang from Seb’s hand.

“Well done.” He tips to the side with Charly’s weight, but quickly recovers his balance and holds her in the air. One-handed. Like it takes no effort at all.

I’ve seen plenty of pictures of shirtless men doing bicep curls, holding a fifty-pound weight, lifting it like it’s nothing. I’m not denying those pictures aren’t nice to look at. They are.

They’re just not as nice as the view I’ve got right now of Seb dead lifting my little girl. His muscles strain against the long-sleeve shirt clinging to them, their outline visible in his sleeve. Somehow imagining them is sexier than seeing them.

“Let’s go get some pancakes, monkey!” Seb lowers Charly to the floor, then takes her hand.

But his eyes stay on me.

Because, apparently, I’m staring at him.

Or studying.

Studying is a better word for what I’m doing. Because I thought I had Seb all figured out. But he keeps surprising me, and every time he does, I have to recalculate who he is and then what I think we could be together.

But I think I've finally found the answer.

Good.

Really good.

That's what I think we could be together.

I take Charly's other hand, and the three of us walk toward the stairs. Charly chatters about what Uncle Rad will eat for breakfast and Seb nods, even slipping in a joke about the puppy eating little girl toes like she tried to this morning.

Charly giggles hysterically, and I realize she's never done that with another man. Not her dad. Not my dad.

I glance over her head at Seb, who catches my eye and smiles.

And I know in that moment that what I feel for Seb has become so much more than want.

What I feel for him is a deep need. The kind that makes my heart wrench when I think about being apart from him. The kind that sends a flash of panic through my chest when I try to imagine life without him.

The kind that lasts forever.

Chapter 29

Sebastian



Hope tells me about the road sign for the highway home, and I check my phone for more info. All I get is the same thing she's already seen.

I've driven that road in bad conditions, and my truck has done fine. But I don't feel good taking Charly and Hope over it. On a good day, if there's an accident it takes at least half an hour or more for emergency responders to get even part way through the canyon.

So after breakfast, I explain that to Hope and tell her to go to the library room across the hall and work. "I'll keep an eye on the roads. As soon as there's an announcement about plows working on them, we'll leave."

She reluctantly agrees and lets me take Charly upstairs to hang out in the room. But after an hour, Charly and I are both going stir-crazy, Hope is texting every ten minutes to check on us, and the roads aren't getting any better.

I grab Charly's coat and take her and Uncle Rad downstairs to find Hope. "It's supposed to stop snowing this afternoon. Maybe we can leave then. You work. I'll take care of Charly today."

She opens her mouth like she might protest, but then smiles. "Okay. That's a good idea. As long as you don't mind keeping her entertained."

We both glance at Charly who has the sucker I gave her stuck to her hand. She opens and closes her fingers, laughing at the way they stick to her palm.

I gulp, then lie. “I’ve got this. No problem!” Saying the words out loud actually increases my confidence, and my head fills with all kinds of ideas. “We’ll go to an indoor trampoline park I know, eat chicken nuggets, watch *Bluey*—I still need to watch the Uncle Rad episodes. We’ll have a great time, right Charly?”

“Yes!” Charly launches herself out of her chair and throws her arms around me.

Now her fingers are stuck to my neck, but I don’t even care. Who knew three-year-old hugs could be such a dopamine hit? I’ve never done drugs, but if someone could bottle up what I’m feeling right now, the street-value would be incredible.

Against Charly’s protests, I leave Uncle Rad with Hope. A trampoline park is no place for dogs.

Then I take Charly to the Florence Fun Factory and spend way too much money to chase her through a soft play jungle gym thing with awesome slides, jump on giant trampolines, launch ourselves into a foam pit, and win prize tickets playing video and carnival games.

And it’s worth every penny. Who knew hanging out with a kid could be so fun?

I don’t know how I didn’t realize this before—maybe because I’ve never hung out with a kid. But it makes total sense. You can act like a kid when you’re with a kid, and no one thinks it’s weird.

Mind. Blown.

I have a whole new perspective on parenthood. All thanks to Charly.

By the time we get back to the inn with our kids' meals, I can't remember being this exhausted and happy. We take Uncle Rad from Hope, and head to the room where I turn on the TV, and we sit cross-legged on the bed eating chicken nuggets—don't judge; they're delicious—and watch *Bluey*.

We're into our second episode when Charly climbs onto my lap, snuggles into my chest, and sticks her thumb in her mouth. Two minutes later, she's out like a light. But when I try to transfer her from my lap onto the bed, she wraps both arms around mine and holds tight.

So I scoot myself back against the pillows and lie back with her head in the crook of my elbow and her body curled against my chest. Then I close my eyes and fall asleep to the sound of her contented breathing.

I wake with a start when I feel fingertips on my face. I open my eyes to see Hope leaning over me, brushing hair from my forehead.

"Sorry," she whispers with a smile. "Wanted to make sure you were still alive."

I take a deep breath to cool the heat left behind from her touch, then glance at Charly who's still sleeping.

"Feeling more alive now." And not just because of the nap, but I leave that part out. I think Hope may be able to see it in my eyes anyway. "How's it going?"

“So good, given the circumstances.” Hope sits on the bed and tucks one leg under the other still hanging off the side. “The St. Nick parade line up is done, and Santa’s village will be up by Friday. The lighting ceremony is ready to go; all the online events are scheduled with their links posted on the website; Mrs. C. texted that the gnomes are repaired, and she even delivered them to the businesses where they need to go—including Sparks Electric.” She pokes my side when she says this. “And everything is set for the Jingle Ball, including the amazing band. Today was all about getting confirmations and making sure everyone is on point and, they are.”

She is beaming and I’m so relieved that the change in plans didn’t mess with her work.

“I’ve heard the band playing the Jingle Ball is really good.” I resist the urge to reach for her hand only inches away.

She grins at me while absently picking at a loose thread on the mistletoe quilt. “There’s more: Adam has the Danish Christmas dinner under control, school kids are working on the folk-dance night, and I’ve got all the vendors ready to go for the Christmas Market. The only thing left to finalize, I think, is the live nativity.” Hope’s eyes drop to her hand. “Pastor Ruth says they’re short a shepherd and a sheep.”

I have a sneaking suspicion, based on the pink color her cheeks are turning, that she has an idea of who can fill those roles.

“Uh huh.” I decide to make her work for what she wants. “Well, there’s plenty of people who have sheep, so you

shouldn't have a problem there.”

“Yeah, but it's in the church, so live sheep aren't really the best option. Apparently, they poop a lot.” She shrugs here, on to my game. “But Pastor Ruth says she has the cutest costume that's the perfect size for a two or three-year old.”

I nod like I'm considering who could *possibly* fit into a costume that size. Then I snap. “I know! What if Charly played the sheep! And you'd make a fantastic shepherd. There were female shepherds, you know. Equal gender representation.”

“I love the idea of Charly playing a sheep, and I wish I could play a shepherd,” her lips pull into a disappointed frown. “But I have to be available at all times in case there's an emergency, and cell phones aren't really historically accurate to the time period.”

“If only there were someone willing to be Charly's shepherd. Any ideas?” I speak too loudly, and Charly opens her eyes, then closes them again.

“You two seem to be pretty tight now.” Hope's eyes dart from me to Charly, then back again, her smile growing.

And there's no way to resist her soft gaze or the way she scrunches her nose when she wants something.

“You want me to be Charly's shepherd?” I ask as Charly, awake now, pushes herself up using my chest as leverage.

“Hi Mama.” Charly reaches for Hope who leans across me to lift Charly into her lap and arms.

Then Hope puts her hand over mine, weaving her fingers through mine. “There’s no one I’d trust more.”

I turn my palm up and squeeze her hand tight. “You had me at shepherd.”

She grins wide, her hand still in mine. “Good. Because I already told Pastor Ruth you’d do it.”

“I figured.” I push myself up and move closer to her so that the only thing between us is Charly’s head and moose rack hat. “I’d be honored to do it.”

I let go of Hope’s hand, straighten Charly’s moose rack hat, and flip the switch so it lights up. “Are you done for the day, then? I haven’t checked the roads in a while.” I reach for my phone, but she stops me with her free hand.

“The road is closed, but at least the snow’s stopped.” She raises her eyes to mine. “We have to admit defeat. We’re stuck here for the night.”

“All right, then.” I swallow hard. If Hope keeps looking at me the way she is now, it’s going to be even harder to sleep tonight than it was last night. “How about we find something to do? Maybe bowling and pizza?”

“Pizza!” Charly yells.

“I guess that settles it.” Hope smiles softly, then stands.

I follow her off the bed and take Uncle Rad out for a cold, short walk, that I need more than she does. Then she’s back in her crate, and the rest of us head out.

We spend the late afternoon bowling, then get pizza for dinner. Florence is packed with people in town for the game, so the pizza place is full. Charly looks ready to lose it a few times as we wait to be seated and then for our food, but Hope distracts her, and the moments pass. But I'm amazed at how she can anticipate and diffuse Charly's fits.

After dinner we take a drive around Florence to see Christmas lights. Luckily most people are inside to watch the game or at the stadium itself, so traffic isn't bad. By the time we get back to the inn, Charly's eyes are drooping, but she insists on walking Uncle Rad with me.

That leads to fifteen minutes of getting her all bundled in the snow gear Hope brought—just in case—then another half an hour of playing in the new snow covering the inn's large back yard. Ours are the first steps in the smooth blanket of white stretching from the back door to the fence line. The snow is so deep, it comes to Charly's thighs, and she can barely lift her legs high enough to step through it.

So Hope and I each take one of her hands and swing her through it. Then we fall on our backs and make snow angels. Uncle Rad runs across our chests, and Charly can't stop giggling.

By the time we go inside, we're all soaking wet.

I dry off by the fire in our room while Hope gets Charly warmed up in the tub. When they come out of the bathroom, a pillar of steam follows them. Charly's hair is wet, hanging

long down her back, leaving a wet imprint on the back of her *Bluey* pajamas.

“Your turn.” Hope wags her head toward the bathroom.

Her hair is wet too, hanging over her shoulders, resting right above the V-neck of her pajama top. I try not to let my eyes drift to the spot as I squeeze past her, breathing in the floral scent of her shampoo.

But I can’t stop thinking about that V on her chest. And the lingering smell of her in the bathroom doesn’t help. This day has been too good for me to not want to end it curled up next to Hope in the same bed.

And thinking about being in the same bed with Hope leads to a whole bunch of other thoughts I shouldn’t be thinking, and a very long shower.

When I come out of the bathroom, I expect the lights to be off and Charly and Hope asleep in the bed.

Instead, Charly and Uncle Rad, who’s not in her crate, are asleep on the floor, in my bed. Hope is in the bed, propped up against pillows, watching *At Home with Georgia Rose*.

“Charly insisted on sleeping in the ‘cozy fwoor bed’ with Uncle Rad,” Hope says casually. Like this is a perfectly normal, predictable situation. But then her breath catches. “Is that okay?”

“Suuure.” I grab the frame around the open door to the bathroom and glance over my shoulder. “I guess I get the tub?”

Hope snorts a laugh, then pats the bed next to her. “We can trust ourselves, right?”

I stare at her, wanting to say yes, but I know it would be a lie.

“Hope, I want to kiss you so bad right now, there’s no way I can trust myself not to if I get anywhere close to you.” I grip the door frame tighter.

Hope’s chest rises and falls under the mistletoe quilt. “Then you should probably come closer, because I really want you to kiss me.”

She tucks her chin into her shoulder, and a slow smile spreads across her face.

And that’s all the invitation I need. I let my hand fall to my side, and with two quick strides I’m on the bed, kneeling next to her.

She shifts toward me, but the angle is awkward, and she can’t move far with me on top of the quilt. But there’s no way I’m removing that barrier between us.

Hope invited me to kiss her. Nothing else.

And she can trust me that I won’t push past that boundary. I didn’t this summer, and I won’t now.

But I will make the most of the kiss she wants.

I swing one leg over her, so her legs are between mine, and I sit up tall on my knees. She tips her face to mine, and her hair

falls down her back. Her eyes widen, and her mouth opens just the slightest bit.

I cup her face in my hands, and she sits taller, wrapping her hands around my wrists. Together we close the distance between us.

Our lips touch—once, twice—as we step gently back onto ground that’s both familiar and new at the same time. She tugs at my bottom lip. I tug on hers. Our lips meet again, tentatively exploring places we’ve been before.

Then Hope slides her hands under my T-shirt, her fingernails digging into my skin. She pulls me closer, and we collide into an explosion of desire. Like a match to dry kindling, my whole body lights on fire, and I reach for the headboard behind her to steady myself.

Her lips move from my mouth to my jawline, down my neck, and I grip the headboard like I’m holding on for my life. I moan softly when she reaches the spot where my T-shirt meets my collarbone.

At this, Hope pushes me back with surprising strength for such a little person, and we trade positions, so she’s straddling me, the quilt tangled between us. She smiles over me, her hair curtaining both of us, and I wrap my hands around her waist.

With no hesitation, she kisses me again, long and hard.

“Hope...” I breath.

“Seb,” she breathes back with a smile that says she knows exactly how much she’s torturing me.

Then she sits back, takes a deep breath, and lies down next to me. She traces the part of my tattoo that's visible under my sleeve. "Tell me about this. Why a tree?"

I push my sleeve up over my bicep so she can draw her finger over the whole thing. "These are your parents names. And Stella's." She leans closer, her t-shirt gapes wide, and I force my eyes to her face. "Are these your grandparents too?"

I nod, barely able to speak. "It's a tree of life. All the most important people in mine."

She draws her finger to the top of the tree. "You know there's room here for more names."

"I do now." I roll to my side and slide my hand under her jaw, ready to pick up where we left off.

I lay a gentle kiss on the side of her mouth, then go in for another. "Hope," I whisper, but the words I want to say fail me. A kiss will have to do.

My lips have just grazed hers when Charly cries from her bed, "Mama!"

Without a second thought, Hope quickly rolls out of my arms and off the bed and goes to Charly. She sings a soft lullaby that soothes Charly's staggered breaths into gentle snoring.

When she comes back to the bed, I'm sitting up, covers pulled tight to my chest. I've put a pillow in the middle of the bed to create a barricade, which Hope scowls at.

“I’d like to do more than kiss you, but I’m not going to. However, this bed is a lot more comfortable than the floor, so...” I point to the pillow. Which, honestly, is not much of a barrier, but will have to do.

Hope smiles, then crawls under the covers. “Okay, but that kiss was a lot of fun.”

“Too much.” I turn off the lamp next to my side of the bed, then burrow under the covers with my back to her.

“Seb?” Hope says into the dark.

“Yeah?”

I feel her shift, and when I look over my shoulder, she’s propped up with her head in her hand. “Were you going to say something else? Before Charly woke up?”

I turn all the way over onto my back and tuck my hands behind my head. I take a deep breath in, then meet the gaze I can feel more than see. I’m grateful for the dark to hide how vulnerable I feel right now.

“Just that I’m totally in love with you, and with Charly, and I know I don’t deserve either of you, but I—”

Her mouth swallows mine before I can finish, holding me in a long kiss that stops my breath—the pillow was easily conquered. When I do take in air, it’s Hope. She’s all I want. She’s all I breathe.

When she breaks away, it’s to toss the pillow between us to the floor and lay her head on my heart. She slides her hand across my waist, and our chests rise and fall together.

“We love you, too Seb,” she exhales.

And we fall asleep wrapped in each other’s arms.

Chapter 30

Hope



Waking up in Seb's arms is the best feeling in the world. Watching him help Charly slip on her snow boots, turn on her moose rack hat lights, zip up her coat, or do anything with her is a close second.

He does all those things as we pack up to get on the road back to Paradise before more snow falls. I hate to leave behind what's turned into our own little refuge away from the busy week that lies ahead.

But there's mistletoe to be delivered, reindeer to be rounded up, and a double wedding to be televised.

So we hop in Seb's truck and barrel down the road to Paradise. Literally, but also—I hope—figuratively.

Charly chatters most of the drive, petting Uncle Rad while asking Seb the same questions over and over. He takes it all in stride, even though his shoulders sag with exhaustion when she asks, for the one millionth time, who his favorite *Bluey* is and tells him hers is Uncle Rad.

“It's how she processes information,” I tell him and squeeze his hand.

Holding Seb's hand is my third favorite thing.

But as we get closer to Paradise, the anticipation of the week ahead hits me. And the reality of how short-term my time with Seb may be delivers a second blow.

Maybe Seb senses this, because he holds my hands tighter and says, “we'll take it one day at a time.”

I love that he knows what to say to soothe my anxiety. I repeat his words over and over through the next five days, which are packed full of wedding and Yulefest kickoff prep.

Just to make things extra stressful, both events are scheduled for the same day: December first. Charly is only interested in the kickoff, including the parade with Santa and his reindeer.

But she's a flower girl in the wedding, so that's the only one of the two she *has* to attend. And as part of the wedding planning team and one of the bridesmaids, I have to be there too. Even though, honestly, going to a parade and waving to Santa would be so much easier.

Mom and Dad arrive the day before the wedding for the rehearsal, where they also get to meet Seb. I introduce him as my friend, but we stand too close together, and Seb is way too nervous to just be a friend. They're not fooled. I can tell by the looks they shoot Seb through the entire rehearsal and then afterward at the Garden for dinner with the entire wedding party and family.

We're all sitting together at a table with Georgia and Zach. While Seb and Zach talk, Mom leans over and whispers, "Tell me who this boy is."

"Adam's cousin. We met this summer. He's really great, Mom. I promise." Then, to distract her from asking more questions I don't know the answer to—like what happens when I go back to Kansas—I ask her if she'll take Charly to the parade.

“Oh, I wish I could,” Mom answers while squeezing Charly tight to her chest, rocking her and cooing, “I missed my baby girl sooooo much.”

“But?” I lean closer and feel Seb put his hand on my back.

“I’d be happy to keep her at the house while I get ready for the wedding, but I don’t think I’ll have time to take her to the parade,” she says to me before burying her face into Charly’s hair and raising her voice to the baby talk octave. “Gigi’s got to put her face on for the cameras.”

I take a deep breath and bite back any comments about Mom not being the one who’s on camera. Because I don’t know for sure that she won’t be. She had her own TV career on Christian networks before she and Dad got married. I know she misses the spotlight, but she also won’t want to get caught in it without looking her best. And the time between the parade and the wedding is tight.

“I can do it,” Seb says.

Which gets both Mom and Dad’s attention.

“You have to get ready for the wedding too,” I say.

Seb lifts his shoulder. “All I have to do is throw on a tux. Groomsmen have it much easier than mothers or sisters of the bride.”

His attempts to charm my mom fall short, but I reward him anyway. “And I’m looking forward to seeing you in that tux.” I rest my chin on my hand and lean in for a kiss.

He complies and purses his lips. But our mouths barely brush before Dad clears his throat. I don't need to see Dad's face to know Seb has not charmed him.

We both sit back, but as soon as Dad isn't looking, Seb moves his hand to my knee, sending a surge of heat up my thigh.

"You won't have time to get her ready if she goes to the parade," Mom says to me.

Charly turns her head back and forth to make the lights on her moose rack hat wiggle. "I see Santa amorrow."

I can't disappoint her, and Seb has proven he can handle Charly. Ignoring Mom, I turn to him. "I'll do her hair before you go. If you get a spot right at the start of the parade, you can leave as soon as S-A-N-T-A goes by. If you don't let her get messy, then all I have to do is get her in her dress in time for the wedding."

"Got it." He salutes me, then winks. "Totally doable."

I narrow my eyes at him. "No ebelskiver, Seb. No matter how much she begs."

He's got her addicted, and there will be a stand at the parade selling them. Not Britta, obviously, because of the wedding. But ebelskiver, nonetheless.

"No ebelskiver." Now he winks at Charly, who responds by using her fingers to pull one of her eyelids down in her own wink.

“I wike ebbesive...” the final letters disappear into a babble of nonsense words.

And right then, I should know this isn't my best plan ever. In fact, it may be my worst.

Because the next day when Seb runs into the church preschool where all the bridesmaids are getting ready, it's fifteen minutes before the wedding starts, he's carrying Charly around her waist, and she's definitely had ebelskiver. Her face is clean—mostly—but her clothes are covered in powdered sugar and some kind of jelly.

“Seb!” I cry, trying to keep Charly at arm's length as I take her from him.

“Sorry! But she had fun!” He dashes off toward the other side of the church where the men are getting ready.

I shake my head, irritated that he didn't follow my directions. But then I look into Charly's eyes. She's glowing like she does whenever she spends time with Seb, and I know she's had fun, because he made the morning about her and what she wanted to do.

I also know she's on a sugar high and will be crashing sooner than later. Hopefully later. Like after she's made it down the aisle.

“I need help, girls,” I say to the other bridesmaids as I set Charly in the middle of the room.

“What happened to her?” Cassie, Georgia's roommate from LA asks.

“Seb and ebelskivers. That’s what happened to her,” Britta answers, assessing the damage.

Izzy, Evie and Georgia’s college roommate, steps into the circle we’ve formed around Charly. “I’ve seen worse. I once had a kid finger paint herself and a goat five minutes before pick up. I had her cleaned up and ready to go before her parents got there.”

She teaches kids’ goat yoga in Creeksville, Virginia, so she’d know. But then she adds, “They were fifteen minutes late, but still, I got the kid clean.”

“Let’s get to work, before Evie and Georgia walk out of that bride’s room and freak out.” Stella puts down her bouquet and runs to the sink in the corner of the room. She pulls handfuls of paper towels from the receptacle, wets them all down, and runs back to us.

I pull Charly’s clothes off. I put her in a button-up shirt this morning, so I wouldn’t risk messing up her hair when I changed her, but her hair is already a mess. To Seb’s credit, I can tell he tried to redo the buns, but they look even worse than his attempt at the Mistletoe Inn.

While the other ladies go to work wiping Charly down, I fix her hair. She whimpers a little as I wind up her buns and put the elastics around them, but Stella pokes her bare belly and makes her laugh. I look around at the women surrounding me and my little girl and think how lucky Evie is to be connected to them.

Suddenly, someone is tugging at my dress. I look down to see another bridesmaid, Tessa, wiping at a section of my tulle covered skirt. “I think she got a little something on you, but I’ve got it.”

I smile, feeling like I’m also a part of this family Evie has created and is about to marry into.

When she and Georgia walk out of the bride’s room, Charly has her tights and dress on, her hair is perfect, and she’s got her basket of flower petals ready to go.

“Everything is perfect!” Evie exclaims, and Georgia nods. “Absolutely.”

There’s a knock at the door, and Dad peeks his head in. “It’s time. Ready?”

Evie smiles at him and there’s a genuine love and care between them that I know has taken a lot of work.

Georgia’s dad follows mine inside, and the two men crook their arms for their daughters to hold down the aisle.

I bend down to Charly and whisper, “Ready, baby?”

She presses her cheek next to mine and says, “Where we go, Mama?”

And a little ball of panic rises in my chest. “We go down the aisle like you practiced yesterday, remember? For Aunt Evie’s wedding.”

She sticks out her lower lip. “I want Gigi.”

Cue the sugar crash.

“Gigi is out there.” Trying to stay calm, I point to the chapel where everyone is sitting, waiting for us. Waiting for Charly. “You can sit with her as soon as the wedding’s over.”

Music drifts through the doors from the chapel. That’s the bridesmaids’ cue. I’m the second to last in line, which means I go before Charly.

“Everything okay?” Dad asks.

I open my mouth to ask for his help, but he looks so nervous and happy at the same time to be standing next to Evie, ready to walk her down the aisle, I don’t say anything. He didn’t think Evie would want him to do this, and I don’t want to ruin their moment together.

“I want to go now.” Charly bounces on her toes, a pot ready to boil over if I don’t turn down the heat fast.

I’m silently cursing Seb’s name, but then I switch tactics. Since he’s partly to blame—like ninety percent at least—he can be part of the solution too.

“Would you like to stand next to Sebby?” I cross my fingers and send up all the prayers that she’ll agree. The rest of the bridesmaids are already lined up at the door.

Charly’s eyebrows crease behind her glasses, then she breaks into a smile. “Okay!”

“Okay?” I hope I heard what she actually said and not what I want to hear.

Charly nods.

I can barely breathe I'm so relieved. I take her hand and lead her to the line. "Remember, when Britta gets all the way to the front, then it's your turn to go."

When Britta hears her name, she waves at Charly. "You can do it Charly! Just follow me!"

I squeeze in front of Britta and behind Izzy just as Carson gives our cue to go.

Tessa, who's first in line, starts down the aisle at the same time Seb squeezes into his spot with the groomsmen who are already lined up at the front of the chapel. He buttons his tux, then drops his hands to his side, and looks up.

I'm steps behind Stella, but he looks past her to me. Our eyes meet, and his light up. He likes what he sees. But I'm doing everything I can to keep him from seeing how much I like what *I* see.

Not just him in a tux looking incredibly sexy, but this whole event. The melding of two families, two lives—*four* actually—in a ritual that I helped make beautiful. And I wonder if this is what could lie ahead for us.

I'm still mad at Seb for ebelskivering Charly, but I can't help hoping for a future with him.

But all my anger melts away when he moves his hands, right above his waist and curls his thumbs and forefingers together to form a heart.

Then I turn into a puddle and melt right there in the middle of the wedding with the entire world to see because it's being

filmed for TV.

Not literally. At least not the melting part. But the camera woman zooms from Seb's direction to mine, and unless it gets edited out, Georgia's viewers are going to see one bridesmaid with the goofiest, most lovesick grin on her face ever.

But a few minutes later, when the camera pans across the line of bridesmaids, they're going to see me with a look of sheer panic on my face.

Because that's when I look at the back of the chapel and see Charly refusing to move, despite Dad's gentle nudging.

"No!" she shouts.

The whole church goes still, even the organist whose hands are raised and ready to play the wedding march.

"Sebby! You walk too!" she yells even louder, scowling at Seb.

His eyes dart to mine, wide-eyed and panicky. I wag my head toward Charly and raise my eyebrows to signal for him to follow her orders before we have a real problem on our hands.

I don't have any faith he'll understand all of that—or even any of it—especially when he shrugs his shoulders.

But then he looks at Charly, smiles, and jogs down the aisle toward her.

The church stays silent as everyone's eyes follow Seb to the back of the church, though a few giggles slip out from some of the guests.

That guest is me. I'm the problem, it's me.

When Seb reaches Charly, her grin officially steals the show. And that's before she reaches into her flower basket, hands him petals and orders, "Trow dese."

Charly takes his hand, and they start down the aisle, but a few feet in, she stops. Her face scrunches into a question. I freeze, afraid for what's next.

She lets go of Seb's hand long enough to reach into her basket, throw petals on her feet, and hand Seb some more to throw. Then she takes his hand again, walks a few more feet, and does the same.

If anyone else's kid were taking as long as Charly is to go down the aisle, I might think it's cute. But not when it's my kid at the wedding I've been paid to help plan. I worked so hard with Charly to prepare her for this day. *This* was not part of the plan.

The third time she does it, I feel the entire pew-filled church tense. Heat climbs up my neck. At this rate, it will be Christmas before Evie and Georgia get to march down the aisle. Which is what we're all here for, as cute as Charly is.

But Seb comes to the rescue again. He slips the basket handle over the hand he's been holding so it hangs at Charly's elbow. Then he takes her hand, grabs petals, and tosses them. Charly grins wide, satisfied with his solution, and does the same.

They do this all the way down the aisle, and I know I'm not the only one who's sighing with the cuteness of it. Ohs and ahs fill the church, and everyone falls a little in love with Seb.

Except for me.

I've already fallen a lot in love with him.

Chapter 31

Sebastian



Does the fact I got Charly down the aisle and increased the cuteness factor of Evie and Georgia's televised wedding by at least fifty percent make me a hero?

Some people—Hope in particular—might say so, but I just like to think of myself as an ordinary guy who did something extraordinary when the opportunity presented itself.

True, not every guy would have been comfortable playing sidekick to a flower girl while being filmed for a national audience. In that sense, you might say I'm extraordinary. But honestly, I just did what the moment required. Any real man would have done the same.

At least, that's what I say into the camera a couple hours later at the reception when Bear asks—while he knows we're being filmed—if I'll be a flower girl at his wedding, if that day ever comes.

"Dude," he shakes his head. "This is why no one in the family likes to tell you when you do a decent job. It goes straight to your head."

I take the drink he hands me without saying thank you. "Funny. I didn't hear a compliment in your question about being a flower girl."

"I wouldn't have asked if I didn't think you'd done a good job flower-girling." He tips back his beer bottle, trying, and failing, to hide his grin.

Zach sidles up then and joins us, a drink in his hand and his bowtie loosened.

“Congrats, man.” I clap him on the back. “Still can’t believe you and Georgia finally figured out you belong together.”

“Yeah.” He blows out a long breath. “If *I* can figure things out, there’s hope for you, too.”

For half a second, I hear Hope instead of *hope*, which makes my heart shoot into my throat. I take a drink to steady my sudden nerves.

Bear lowers his drink, and his eyes dart to the dance floor where the bridesmaids are all dancing with Charly in the middle of them. “Did Grandpa tell you Georgia’s friend Cassie has been looking at the old garage? He’s really going to sell it.”

“Nope.” I shake my head. “He didn’t even tell me he’d put it on the market. I can’t believe he’s willing to let it go. It’s been in the family for generations.” I sip from my beer and watch Hope swing Charly’s hands back and forth, dancing her in a circle.

“Yeah. I’ve told him for years I want to buy it.” Bear’s eyes narrow, and I follow his glare to Cassie.

“Do you have the money? And what would you do with it?” I’m more interested in Hope smiling at me than this conversation, but I’ll humor Bear.

“He wouldn’t do anything with it,” Zach answers for him. “Except keep his old cars there, taking advantage of Grandpa’s generosity.”

“I don’t want it for my cars. I’d tear it down, drain the old irrigation pond behind it, and build a community ice rink. Kids could finally play hockey all year round, not just when the pond freezes. Kids who are really into it wouldn’t have to drive to Florence to be on a team.” Bear’s eyes zero in on Cassie, and I get why he’s upset. He could have gone far with hockey if Paradise had more resources.

Zach says something about getting city council approval for a community center, but I don’t hear anything else. The DJ has switched to a slow song, and I want to be with Hope right now, not my cousins.

When I reach the dance floor, I take her hand and spin her and Charly under my arm. Then I hold Charly with one arm and wrap the other around Hope, so we’re all dancing together. Charly wraps one arm around my neck and the other around Hope’s, bringing our faces closer together. Close enough that I’m able to steal a kiss from her.

Charly demands one of her own, and plants a wet, sloppy kiss on my cheek. It feels a little like getting licked by Uncle Rad, but I like it so much more.

We dance in a slow circle, talking and laughing until the song ends. Then I set Charly down, keeping hold of her hand, and pull Hope close. While Charly twists under my arm, I press my lips to Hope’s.

Her mouth is warm and soft, but there’s nothing gentle in my kiss. There’s an urgency racing through my veins fueled by

utter and complete happiness. I have no words for it, only the force of my affection.

“I love you,” I whisper when we break apart.

She presses her hands to my cheeks. “I love you, too.”

The DJ interrupts us with the announcement that the brides are going to throw their bouquets. Hope circles Georgia and Evie with the other bridesmaids and guests while I take Charly back to the table we’re sharing with Hope’s parents and siblings.

Faith, Hope’s mom, has her eyes laser-pointed on me. I hang my jacket over my chair and sit down. Faith doesn’t blink once.

After clearing my throat and trying to look anywhere but at her or her husband, I finally give up and meet her stare.

“What are your intentions for my daughter and granddaughter?” she asks, still not blinking.

I glance at Glen who pulls his lip back and shrugs his shoulder, communicating that I’m on my own.

“To be honest, Ma’am, I’m not sure yet. We haven’t gotten that far, but she and Charly both know I love them.” I muster as much confidence as I can, hoping the dim light covers the flush I feel in my cheeks.

Glen smiles at my answer, but Faith raises an eyebrow. “Love is one thing, but you can’t live on love. Love won’t pay for medical bills or therapy or all the other things my granddaughter needs.”

“I have a good job.” I scramble to make up ground I didn’t even realize I’d lost until it was too late.

“You have a job *here*.” Faith points a red-painted nail at the floor of the Old Barn. “Charly’s doctors are in Wichita. Hope’s family and all her support is in Wichita.” Mrs. Barton—I don’t think we’re on a first-name basis anymore—sits back and crosses her hands in her lap.

“We have doctors here,” I say, but even I hear the lack of confidence in my voice.

Mrs. Barton shakes her head. “You don’t have specialists in Paradise. Charly needs special care.”

“We have those in Florence,” I mumble, feeling stupid.

Because why didn’t I think of all these things before? That’s what a real parent would do: think of all the things a kid needs and how to get them.

But not me.

I’ve only been thinking about the next fun thing Charly and I can do together. Find the hidden gnomes; visit Santa; look at all the Christmas lights; dance the Seven Jumps dance together; play a shepherd and sheep in the nativity: all the fun things going on during Yulefest.

I wasn’t thinking beyond that to what it will mean for Hope and Charly to stay in Paradise. And I never considered that I might have to leave to be with them.

“Florence is an hour away, at least.” Mrs. Barton continues. “What if there’s an emergency, or a snowstorm and you can’t

get through the canyon, or both of you have to work when Charly's got an appointment? Who's going to take her?"

My mind races with every new possibility she piles on, and my eyes dart to Glen. All he has to offer is another shrug, which is not helpful. If he doesn't know the answers to Mrs. Barton's questions, who does?

Not me. There are so many possibilities for failure, and I can't believe I didn't think of any of them.

Mrs. Barton's mouth sharpens to a fine, razor-thin line before she lobs her last grenade. "You have no idea what you're getting into, and it's Hope and Charly who will suffer for it."

She's right, and I can't believe I ever thought I knew what I was doing.

That's when I feel Hope's hand on my back.

"Mom, are you interrogating my boyfriend?" She leans into my side, and I find the strength to slip my arm around her waist.

I need something to hold onto to keep from drowning.

"Just asking a few questions about your plans." She sends Hope an adoring smile.

I look to Hope for help, but she only smiles back at her mom, her face brighter than the candles burning on the table.

"I don't know, but I just caught Evie's bouquet." She pulls the flowers from behind her back, then winks at me.

A few minutes ago, I might have dropped to one knee right now then raced with her back to the chapel for our own ceremony while the bouquet was still fresh. But that was before Mrs. Barton pointed out all the ways I'm not prepared to be a dad. Or reminded me that Hope doesn't have a job here and will need to go back to Wichita once all the Yulefest festivities are over.

I've made a point of not thinking too much about that. Just like I've made a point of not thinking about all the hard parts that would come with being Charly's dad.

When I don't say anything to her, Hope tips her head and studies my face. Then she lays the bouquet on the table and takes my hand.

"Can you keep an eye on Charly for a minute, Mom?" She doesn't wait for Mrs. Barton to answer before pulling me toward the dance floor.

The song isn't slow, but Hope wraps my hands around her waist then slides hers behind my neck. I don't resist, but I also don't meet her gaze. I let my eyes drift to the people dancing around us.

"Seb." She grabs my face and forces me to look at her. "What's scaring you?"

Her eyes scan my face. They're as dark blue as a winter sky above a snow-capped mountain. But there's no worry there.

A worried laugh escapes my throat. "So many things." I let my eyes drift to hers and hold them. "But mostly that I don't

know what happens next. What if you don't get to stay here? What if you do? What if we can't find doctors for Charly? What if you don't have anyone to help you the way your mom does? What if Charly hates me?"

Hope moves her hand to my mouth and presses her fingers to my lips so I can't speak. "What if we don't worry about any of that until we have to? What if we just enjoy the next few weeks and see what happens from there? One day at a time, remember?"

My lips pull into a smile behind her fingers. I take them in my hand and press my lips to her fingertips. My chest loosens, and I can breathe again.

With her hand still in mine, I wrap my arms tighter around her waist. She rests her head against my chest, and we rock back and forth on the edge of the dance floor while everyone else does the Electric Slide.

For the rest of the night, I'm able to put Mrs. Barton's voice out of my head.

But the words she said keep circling in my brain, like sharks stalking prey, reminding me that Hope and Charly could suffer because of me.

Chapter 32

Hope



The next two weeks fly by too fast, but Seb and I make the most of every minute that we're not working, or that I'm not spending with my parents, who are still here. Which, honestly, I don't mind because Mom has been a huge help with Charly while I've been working so much.

Since Evie moved in with Adam after the wedding, Mom and Dad have been staying with me in the upstairs unit I used to share with Evie in the converted Victorian house. She and Adam are just downstairs, but we're giving her lots of space with her new husband.

Mom and Dad wanted to stay to get to know Adam, see him perform, and see all the work I've done on Yulefest. Which is sweet, and at least Luke and Ashley went back to Kansas, so we're not as crowded as we could be.

But there aren't enough opportunities to kiss Seb when Mom and Dad are always around.

A lot of my work requires attending the Yulefest events to make sure they go as planned. So, whenever possible, and whenever we can shake my parents, Seb, Charly, and I attend the events together, just the three of us. Most of the time, though, we're a party of five.

Luckily, after hearing me talk about it, Mom and Dad decided to check out the Mistletoe Inn for a couple nights. Which gave Seb and me some much-needed alone time last night, after Charly went to bed. Five minutes into a movie, I fell asleep on the couch, but at least we got a few kisses in before then.

Mom and Dad will be back tonight to see what I've done with the Jingle Ball and to hear Adam and Seb play, but until then, I get Seb and Charly to myself. Sort of. We'll be with all the other people headed to the Christmas Market today. But while they'll all be going for entertainment, I'm going for work.

So, yeah, Charly and Seb are going to work with me.

But Charly doesn't know that. She's thrilled with everything the minute we drive into the Litte Copenhagen.

Mother Nature has cooperated (depending on how you look at it) by sending half a foot of fresh snow, and everything in the resort, including Breakfast at Britta's, is decorated with mistletoe in the doorways and candles in the windows. The whole place looks like the North Pole, which is exactly what I planned.

The Christmas Market is set up in the Old Barn, with vendors' stalls lining both sides, and the minute we walk in, Charly's face lights up. She's enjoyed everything we've done, but I can tell this is her favorite. Mostly because she knows she'll get to see Santa, but also because it's all magical, even outside the Market.

As we wander through the stalls, I see people I recognize, but plenty I don't. Seb points out that he also doesn't recognize many of the shoppers. Which means, our little Yulefest is doing exactly what it's supposed to—bringing tourists to Paradise in the winter.

And why wouldn't they want to come? Warm cider and ebelskiver are for sale at the entrance and carolers sing Christmas songs at the back of the barn. Beautiful mistletoe wreaths hang on the walls and miniature, fresh Christmas trees with twinkling lights dot the spaces between vendor stalls. The whole place smells of cinnamon, pine, and magic.

The vendors sell everything from homemade treats and gourmet jams to carved creches; porcelain Christmas ornaments to moose rack beanies—which, of course, are Charly's favorite. She's got hers on now, and she begged me to wear mine.

Mrs. C. is at her booth, and judging by the number of crocheted and knitted crafts she has for sale, Seb has been paying her to do something at Sparks Electric besides reception work. But he doesn't mind, which is one more thing to love about him.

Charly reaches for a moose rack hat. "Sebby need one too."

Mrs. C. carefully moves the hat out of Charly's reach. "I'm afraid this one is too little for Sebastian's big head. I only have kid sizes left."

Seb's brows crease with confusion and he scratches his perfectly-sized head. "They look like they'd fit."

With spot-on timing, Charly tugs at my hand, and I let her pull me to the next booth. But first, I send Mrs. C. an appreciative smile.

I already had her make one for Seb, and Grandpa Sparks added lights, so when he opens my gift on Christmas, Seb, Charly, and I will match. Like we all go together. We're a team.

Which is what these weeks together have felt like. We're learning to work together as a *team*. I try not to use the F-word—family. That feels too soon, even if I allow myself to fantasize about it occasionally.

Okay, it's more often than that. Maybe even a lot.

I don't want to get my hopes up, but I can't stop myself from picturing us like this forever. I think that's where we could be headed, and that thought is both terrifying and thrilling.

Seb still has stuff to learn about being a dad, and there are moments where I sense how nervous he is about the whole idea of parenthood. But they pass.

I watch him sink more comfortably into the role we both know he's auditioning for. He is aware of Charly whenever she's with us, making sure to hold her hand, talk and listen to her, even carrying her when she's tired. It all seems to come naturally to him now that he's not afraid of it.

The one thing that doesn't come naturally is telling Charly no.

But we can work on that.

Our morning at the Christmas Market passes quickly, ending at the outbuilding where Santa's workshop and reindeer are. Nick Johnson is the spitting image of Santa with his white

beard and round stomach, and Charly is immediately charmed. When she climbs onto his lap, they have a long conversation about whether she's been good (she has) and then what she wants him to bring her on Christmas.

She answers without the slightest pause and with perfect annunciation. "Uncle Rad."

Nick nods and says, "Uncle Rad." Then he looks to me for clarification.

"From Bluey," I explain.

His eyes widen with understanding. "You want a Bluey toy?"

Charly brushes her fingers over his beard and shakes her head. "No. Just Uncle Rad. And Sebby needs a moose hat."

"Like yours?" Nick pats her beanie.

Charly nods and the little lights hanging from the hat sway back and forth.

"And what about your mom? What does she want Santa to bring her?" Nick looks at me and winks.

Charly tips her head to the side and considers. "Maybe she wants a puppy."

"A puppy. I'll see what I can do." Nick winks at me, and suddenly he's *too* convincing as Santa Claus.

"I don't want a puppy," I scramble to say. I'm legitimately worried I might find sooty, Santa-sized footprints near the fireplace and a puppy in my stocking on Christmas morning.

Seb leans close and whispers, “Not even Uncle Rad?”

I slide my hand into his. “Only if you come with her.”

He squeezes my hand but doesn’t say anything else, and I wonder if he’s thinking the same thing as I am.

Carson hasn’t said anything about hiring me full time, other than he’d like to, if Pizzazz has enough business. And that’s a big if. There has to be enough demand for Pizzazz in the areas surrounding Paradise for Carson to hire me. Because there’s not enough going on in town.

That could change, though. The wedding aired last night on Georgia’s show, and as more people see the episode, I’m sure Carson will get new customers booking him and the Old Barn as a wedding and event venue. And we’ve got Paradise Pizzazz plastered everywhere possible, so people know Carson’s company is the one behind Yulefest.

In fact, Paradise Pizzazz is sponsoring the Jingle Ball happening tonight, which means I have to cut our time short at the Christmas Market. The Old Barn would have been the perfect place for the Jingle Ball, but since the Christmas Market is already set up here and will go through every Saturday and Sunday until Christmas, it didn’t make sense to make vendors take down their stalls so the ball could be here.

Instead, it will be in the high school gym, since that’s the biggest venue in town. We’re expecting a big turnout, so the gym is the right size, even if that’s exactly what makes it difficult to decorate. And it smells like sweat and old tennis shoes—but that’s a separate issue.

I've got a crew putting up a false ceiling to make the space less cavernous. But now I've got to head over and supervise the rest of the decorating. Evie offered to keep Charly for me, but Seb insisted he could do it.

So, I'm letting him. He's proven he's good with her—mostly—if there's not ebelskiver involved.

Today, he's planning to take her sledding, then to make gingerbread houses for the competition that starts Monday. The first sounds fun. The second sounds like a disaster waiting to happen. But I love his optimism.

Once Charly climbs off Santa's lap, we walk to the parking lot. We transfer Charly's car seat and bag of snow clothes to his truck, and then he buckles Charly into it. All by himself. She waves goodbye to me, and I blow her kisses. But Seb gets the real thing.

"All her stuff is in her bag. She'll need a nap after sledding, and she'll be hungry..." I go down my mental checklist, trying to think of every contingency Seb should be prepared for.

"Hope." He stops me with a peck on the lips. "We'll be fine. I know what to do. I'll call Mom if I don't." He kisses me again. "Go do what you've got to do."

I exhale and smile. "I wish I could go sledding with you."

"Next time." With a last kiss he climbs into his truck, and I go to my car.

I'm halfway to Paradise High School when my phone rings and Carson's name appears on the screen. I send it to

Bluetooth and answer.

“Are you sitting down?” he asks without a hello.

“I’m driving, so yes.”

“Pull over. You’re not going to want to sit when I tell you my news. You’ll want to dance.” Carson’s excitement pulses across the miles between us.

I check my rearview mirror, then swerve to the side of the road, my heart pounding with possibility. “Okay. Tell me.”

“I’ve been on the phone all morning with people who want to schedule Pizzazz for weddings and other events. Mostly weddings.” He pauses, I assume to give me time to process what he’s saying.

“Does that mean what I think it means?” I grip the steering wheel, waiting for Carson to say what I’m ninety-nine percent sure he’s going to say, but still afraid of that one percent chance I could be wrong.

“I need you full time.” The smile in his voice is audible.

I clasp my hands together and close my eyes, letting relief wash over me in a soothing warm wave.

“Are you dancing yet?” Carson asks.

“I think I’m in the tearing-up phase.” I wipe at my eyes. “I wanted this so much, Carson.”

“Me too, Hope. For you as much as for me.” His voice cracks, and how could this not be my dream job with a man like Carson as my boss?

“Thank you, Carson.”

“Don’t thank me before I give you the details. You may decide this isn’t the right job for you, and that’s okay if you do.” His voice turns serious, and I sit up straighter.

“I doubt that but tell me.”

“There’s a lot of people wanting to come here, but I didn’t expect people to want us to help them from other locations—I’ve had a dozen inquiries about whether we schedule other destinations.” Carson lets out a loud breath. “It’s got my wheels spinning,” he says with a nervous, but excited, laugh.

Then he gets serious again. “If we can position ourselves to take that on, I could hire you full-time, but you would need to do the traveling if Steve and I are going to keep up with the local things here. Having you in Kansas all these months has shown all of us that you can work remotely, which is part of why I can even consider these out-of-town requests, but I know it’s not what you were hoping for.”

If Carson thinks *his* head is spinning, mine is revolving faster than one of those throw-up rides at the county fair. I don’t know if I’m feeling woozy with excitement or anxiety. Traveling was not ever part of the job plan.

“Most of the pre-work can be done from wherever you decide to work, but the job will require travel,” Carson finishes.

I let his *where you decide to work* sink in. “So, you wouldn’t need me in the office?”

“Right,” he says carefully. “If you need to stay in Kansas so you have your mom’s help with Charly when you have to travel, we can make that happen.”

I suck in my breath. Carson has anticipated the exact problem I’m already worried about.

“That’s not to say I wouldn’t love to have you in the office,” he rushes to add. “And I know you have help here, but I want you to know I’ll do what it takes to work with Charly’s needs.”

“I appreciate that, Carson.”

We both go quiet. The million thoughts swirling in my head make the only noise I can hear.

“Hope?”

“Yeah?”

“You don’t have to decide right this minute.” His voice is bright and hopeful, which quiets my own worries. “I couldn’t have done any of this without you. You’ve got the skills to work at any event planning company. Or start one of your own.”

“Thanks, Carson. That means everything to me.”

His vote of confidence throws open the door for all my excitement. It shoots through me with a surge of happiness I haven’t felt since I held Charly in my arms for the first time and knew she would be okay. Whatever developmental problems she might have, she was alive.

That's how I feel now. Whatever logistical problems lay ahead, I accomplished what I wanted. Everything else will work itself out.

“Hope?”

“Yeah?”

“It's time to dance.”

And that's exactly what I do. Right there on the side of the road, in broad daylight, with cars driving past, and absolutely freezing. But I stand outside my car and dance.

Chapter 33

Sebastian



Look, I can decorate cakes and cookies, and I did a pretty impressive job stringing lights around everything in downtown Paradise, but what Hope has done with the high school gym is mind blowing. I mean, I spent twelve years at this K-12 school, wrestled hundreds of matches, and attended every other sports event in this gym. And I don't recognize the place.

If there's such a thing as a winter wonderland, that's what this is. Lights twinkle in the false ceiling, making the whole space feel small and intimate. Hope's put all that mistletoe we picked up to good use. It's everywhere, but at the same time, not too much—unlike certain inns. Giant balls that look like the kind that go on Christmas trees hang from the ceiling, and tall, lighted pine trees border the temporary stage where our band is setting up.

It's beautiful, and I'm so proud of her.

I can't tell her that now because we're both too busy getting ready for the Jingle Ball.

So I save all the words I want to say to her until after Adam, Bear, Carson, and I finish playing our hour-long set. The crowd loves our songs and dance along, but the lights are too bright to see if Hope is one of the people cheering for us. If she's not, I know it's because she's busy making this whole event happen.

And there's that surging pride again.

My girlfriend is amazing.

I finally see her after we pack up all our equipment. She's waiting next to the stage with Charly and Evie, and, unfortunately, her parents.

Don't get me wrong. I like them. It's been... *great* getting to know them over the past two weeks they've been here. They're nice to want to come hear Adam and me play tonight. Mrs. Barton has been taking care of Charly a lot since she's been here, which has given my mom a break. Even if it's a break she didn't ask for or want.

I'm trying to be positive, but Mrs. Barton is a little *too* helpful. I swear Charly has regressed since she's been here because Mrs. Barton doesn't let her do very much by herself.

And, I could say the same thing about Hope. I've seen her confidence slip a little with her mom around. Not that Mrs. Barton isn't encouraging—she is—but then she undermines it by making Hope feel like she can't do things by herself. Like telling her Charly really needs her therapists back in Kansas, even though Mom has told Hope that Charly has made huge strides and really doesn't need the intensive therapy she's been getting. Especially since Hope is so good about encouraging the little things Mom says will help Charly. Like eating on her own and dressing herself.

Then there's the running dialogue I've been having in my head with Mrs. Barton ever since she told me Hope and Charly are the ones who will suffer because I don't know what I'm getting myself into.

In my heart, I tell her Hope and Charly belong here with me.

But in my head, I know that may not be true.

They would both have to sacrifice to be here. Even if Charly doesn't need as much therapy, she still needs doctors. And she may need to be closer to specialists that we don't have here in Paradise. Then there's all the help Hope gets from her mom. I've had a front-row seat to that in the last two weeks.

So, unless it's Hope's choice to stay, I don't want to put any kind of pressure on her.

But I try to put all those worries to the side when I wrap Hope in my arms and gush about what an amazing job she's done tonight. Even though I'm very aware of Mrs. Barton's presence and careful with my words.

"Thank you!" Hope vibrates with excitement that feeds the adrenaline already coursing through my veins. "You were amazing. I loved every song. Could you hear Charly and me screaming for you?"

"I couldn't hear anything past the stage." I reach toward Charly, who's in Mrs. Barton's arms, and run my hand over her head.

My palm covers her crown, and I'm reminded just how little and fragile she is. It's hard not to want to shield her from everything that might hurt her. I don't blame Mrs. Barton for acting on that instinct.

The DJ who's taking over for us puts on *Shake it Off*, a song I know Charly loves. "Are we going to dance, Charly?"

She sticks her thumb in her mouth, then burrows into Mrs. Barton's neck.

"She's so tired. It's way past her bedtime," Mrs. Barton explains, with a touch of accusation in her voice, while rubbing Charly's back. "We'll take her home now and get her into bed," she says, leaning past me to Hope. "We really enjoyed your show, Sebastian."

"Thank you." I nod to her and Mr. Barton, then wave to Charly as they all make their way to the exit.

As soon as they're out of sight, Hope tugs on my hand. "I have something to tell you!"

I let her lead me out of the gym to a classroom filled with empty plastic totes, boxes, and extra supplies they didn't use to set up. We let the heavy door close behind us, shutting out the noise and lights on the other side. The square window in the door lets in the only light.

"First, I have something for you, but you can't open it until Christmas. Just be warned, it's silly, but also a sign of what I hope lies ahead." She grabs a gift bag from a desk near the door and hands it to me.

"You expect me to wait ten more days after that description? Why can't I open it now?" I try to peek inside, but she clamps the bag shut.

"Because it's not Christmas, and I want you to focus on the news I have." Shadows hide her face, but I feel her eyes searching mine.

“Fine.” I loop the bag handles around my fingers, then put my hands behind my back. “What do you have to tell me?”

“Carson is booked. He offered me a full-time job.” She offers me a cautious grin, and I feel her holding her breath.

“He did? Of course he did!” I throw my arms around her waist and lift her off the ground. “He’d be crazy not to. Look at everything you’ve done!”

The bag is light enough that it bounces up and down on the back of her legs as I spin her around. When I set her down, I kiss her hard to keep from bursting with excitement. I think this means she’s staying in Paradise, but I force myself not to say that out loud. I know she wants the job, but there’s always a chance she won’t take it.

I will *not* influence her one way or the other.

But I do have to ask, “What did you tell him?”

She takes my hands and moves them from her waist to her side, holding them tight while also putting distance between us. My mind races with what that might mean.

“I haven’t told him anything yet, but I’m going to say yes.”

I can’t stop the smile that comes out. “So, you’re staying in Paradise?”

She takes a breath, and the pause that follows makes me hold my own breath.

“Maybe... he says I can work here or back in Kansas. That’s what I have to decide. Stay here or work remotely.”

She glances at me for a reaction, but I keep my emotions in check and just nod, doing an excellent job of not influencing.

“There’s going to be travel involved,” she continues. “Carson is concerned I’ll need Mom’s help with Charly, so he’s made it possible for me to work from Kansas, if that’s what I want.” Her eyes drift to mine.

I wish I had enough light to read the expression on her face, but I’m grateful it’s too dark for her to see what I’m sure mine reveals.

I want her here more than anything. Every part of me wants to beg her to stay. Not just in Paradise, but with me. She won’t have to worry about who would take care of Charly—*I* will.

I fell in love with her the first time I saw her, and I’ve fallen deeper in love every single day since. But I can’t tell her that.

Because if I count all those days, they aren’t many. And the days we’ve been together as an actual couple are even fewer.

The fact of the matter is, we’re still not a couple. We never will be.

There are three people in this relationship, and Charly’s needs come first. Not mine. Not even Hope’s.

So as much as I want to say, “stay,” I don’t. Instead, I put Charly’s needs first.

“It won’t be easy for you to leave her. You’d have to find new doctors for Charly, too. If you came here,” I say slowly. “But you’ve probably already thought of that.”

Hope nods and steps back. She doesn't drop my hands, but she doesn't hold them either. She keeps a couple fingers hooked around the tips of mine and her face pointed to the floor.

"Yeah. I've thought about that. I started looking at doctors in Florence weeks ago." She let's go of one of my hands and rubs her forehead. "It's just a long drive, especially if I'm working full time."

"But my mom is here for therapy." I can't help myself. I have to point out something that could work. "That's her biggest need, right? Weekly therapy?"

Hope nods. "Yeah, I've thought about that, for sure. But what about as Charly gets older? Will the public school be able to provide all the services she might need?" Now she drops my other hand. "There's so much to think about even before who will take care of her if I have to leave town for three or four days. But that's the biggest one. Mom is the person I'm most comfortable leaving Charly with overnight. She's the only person I *have* left her with for more than a day."

I nod again, pulling my lips in tight to keep from yelling that she can trust me. That would be crazy. I don't trust me to keep Charly overnight. But she'd have my mom. And Evie. Stella, Britta, Georgia, Mrs. C.... there's a whole town here ready to help Hope with Charly.

But none of us are her own mom, and that makes a huge difference.

“Could your mom come here to watch Charly? Would she do that?” As soon as I say the words, I know this is a solution that’s best for me, not Hope or Charly. But I’m desperate for her to stay.

She shakes her head slowly. “If it were every once in a while, sure. But I’ll be traveling once a month or more. Mom can’t leave my brother and sister that often. Plus, she’s got a life of her own.”

“That’s a lot to consider,” I say finally, the last of my hopes gone. We both know what the best decision is.

“Obviously, I’d like you to stay.” I hold her with my gaze while my arms ache to pull her close. “But I don’t think you should. You have to do what’s best for Charly. We both know that.”

Hope nods, then says. “I don’t have to decide tonight. I can think about it.”

“That’s true.” I keep my tone measured, keeping all the hope she’s just given me out of my voice.

But if I don’t get out of this room, I’m going to explode. I’m going to take everything back I just said and beg her to stay.

“You know what? I’m going to put this in my truck.” I lift the gift bag clenched too tightly in my fist. “Without looking at it...” that gets a smile from her. “Then, we’re going to dance this night away and celebrate your new job.”

She smiles, and I open the door.

Light floods the room, shining on the sadness written on Hope's face.

And I hate feeling that I may have put it there. That maybe she wanted me to say how much I want her to stay. Or that she can see the hurt on my face at the thought of her leaving again rather than how happy I am for her.

I wish I could take her sadness away. I want this to be a happy night for both of us. A celebration.

But all I can feel right now is the emptiness I felt the first time she left. Only now it's bigger.

This time there's a hole big enough for two forming in my chest.

Chapter 34

Hope



I t's Sunday, and I'm getting Charly ready for the live nativity. I haven't talked to Seb since last night. We've texted a little bit, but mostly I spent the day lying on the couch, watching TV while pretending to relax for the first time in weeks. Really, I was just too tired to do anything else.

I didn't sleep last night. There were too many questions racing through my head. Too many feelings. Too many worries.

Did I want Seb to beg me to stay in Paradise and tell me he'll do whatever it takes to help with Charly?

Yeah. That would have been nice.

In my secret heart of hearts, did I hope he might say, *hey, let's get married?*

Maybe.

Would I have said yes?

Possibly...

Probably...

I don't know.

The running dialogue between my mind and my heart is making me crazy. I wish I could kick Seb and our conversation from last night out of my head. Then maybe I could make a decision about this job based on what's best for Charly and me, not on my feelings for Seb.

The problem is that I don't know if I scared Seb away by telling him I might stay. He said he'd *like* me to stay but then

told me to go. So, maybe he's not ready for the kind of commitment my staying would mean. Maybe some space would give him the room he needs to get comfortable with the idea of an insta-family.

Or maybe that space would let him decide he's not ready.

But now, if I stay, I'll wonder if he wanted me to go.

And if I go, I'll wonder if he really *wanted* me to stay and just didn't say it. I'll worry that I've given him too much space to walk away from something that could be really good.

The hardest part is, I don't want to go back to Kansas. I *want* to stay in Paradise, even if it's not the smarter move. I'll have to pay rent, find new doctors for Charly, figure out who will take care of her when I'm gone, and be on my own for the first time. All of that is scary to think about.

But it feels right.

At least, it did until I talked to Seb last night.

Now, on top of all my other questions, I'm worried it's going to be super-awkward if I stay. What if things don't work out? This town may not be big enough for both of us.

And I hate that now I feel like I have to make the decision based on Seb rather than just on what's best for Charly and me.

Except...

I think Seb may be what's best for Charly and me.

“Hold still, baby. Let me help you with your costume,” I say to her and attempt to slip the sheep costume over her head.

“No!” She grabs it out of my hands. “Gigi do it!”

“Did I hear my name?” Mom comes from the other room, waving her hands so her nail polish will dry.

Charly throws her costume at my mom’s feet. “You help.”

“Charly, say please,” I tell her, but I’m too tired to fight.

She’s made so much progress with Gia over the past six weeks, but in the two weeks Mom’s been here, Charly has slipped back into acting like a baby. It’s easier for her, and Mom loves it because she gets to be the fun grown-up who Charly wants all the time. I mean, of course Charly does. Mom gives her whatever she wants.

“You want me to help you with your costume? Of course, I will!” Mom says in an abnormally high voice. But at least she pronounced all her letters. “Just let Gigi’s nails dry.”

“I want nails!” Charly exclaims.

“You can have nails,” Mom coos at the same time I say, “We don’t have time.”

Guess who wins that one.

And this is how we end up fifteen minutes late for the live nativity with a sheep who has bright, red-painted fingernails and toenails. I rush her backstage where Seb is draped in robes and holding a big shepherd’s hook. As soon as he sees me, his whole body relaxes.

The smile he sends me unwinds the knot in my stomach.

He takes Charly from me and nuzzles her nose. “Where’ve you been little sheep?”

“Wook!” She sticks out her hands to show him her polish.

Seb looks to me for clarification.

“Her fingernails,” I whisper.

“Oh! Look how pretty!” he says to her, then leans in to kiss my cheek. “I thought I was going to have to go on without her and look totally ridiculous without a sheep.”

And I can’t help it. I have to say it, even though I’m still kind of mad at him for not telling me to stay in Paradise. “Were you scared sheepless?”

He shakes his head and fights a smile while I bite back my own grin. “You feel good about that joke?”

I nod. “Maybe not my best work, still pretty good.”

“Come here.” He puts his arm around my waist and pulls me in for a kiss. “I’ll see you after my big debut as Seb, the Scared Sheepless Shepherd?”

“Probably. If all this fame doesn’t go to your head, and you forget me.” I raise a warning eyebrow.

His face goes soft. “I already tried to forget you once, Hope. It’s not possible.”

Charly tugs on his fake beard, and I straighten it for him, stealing a kiss in the process. Then I kiss the top of Charly’s head just as the director calls for quiet on the set.

I go back to pews up front just as Pastor Ruth reads the first lines from Luke about Jesus' birth. I slide in next to Dad who pats my knee.

"Everything good?" he asks.

"I think so, Dad. I think so." I lean closer to him and watch as a girl younger than I am lays a newborn baby in what's supposed to be a manger.

And it gives me all the feels. Because I know what it's like to be young and overwhelmed with the task of raising a kid. Obviously, Mary had a much bigger job than I do, but she was still a mom. I wonder if she questioned herself as often as I do or hoped she was getting it right, just like I do.

"You know," Dad leans in to whisper to me. "The way we tell this story isn't really accurate."

"What do you mean?"

Dad used to be a youth pastor, so he knows his Bible, and I've never heard him say anything like this before.

"They were likely staying with relatives, not in search of an inn like we think of them," he whispers with his eyes on the stage where Charly is crawling and baaing with Seb close behind. "There may not have been room in the family area of the house, so they stayed below with the animals, which were kept in the house or nearby cave, not a separate stable."

"Really?" I look at him, wondering why I've never heard this version before.

“And Mary would have had help from the women there to deliver baby Jesus, if she wanted it. She would have been surrounded by people. She was part of a community who loved her.” He smiles at me, then points to the stage. “I think you and Charly have found that here.”

His words are so unexpected that tears pop into my eyes before I can stop them. “Maybe we have. That’s what I’m trying to figure out.” I choke out the words, past the huge lump in my throat.

“You will. Wherever you land, you’ll have people who love you.” He pats my knee again, I lay my head on his shoulder, and he lays his head on mine.

We watch Charly, then clap for her, Seb, and the rest of the cast. Mom, though, cheers loudly, even calling Charly’s name. And I love her for it.

It’s going to break her heart if we don’t go back to Kansas, and as much as I love everyone in Paradise, I know they won’t take care of Charly and me the way Mom does.

Except for Seb. I think he might.

And now, I’m right back in the middle of the question whirlpool, spinning in circles with no way out.

Well, one way out.

I need to talk my questions out with Seb. There’s no way around him being a factor in my decision, so I’ve got to tell him what I’m feeling. Then I’ve got to decide what’s best for Charly and me.

“I’ll get Charly,” I say to my parents when the nativity is over. “Be right back.”

I walk to the back rooms to find Charly and Seb. It takes a minute to work my way through the groups of people picking up their kids who were in the play or congratulating the other actors on their performances. It’s chaotic and crowded and people whose names I barely know wave and tell me how much they’re loving Yulefest.

That feels good.

When I finally reach Seb and Charly, my cheeks hurt from smiling. Charly is still pretending she’s a sheep, circling Seb’s feet, and baaing, while Seb slips out of his shepherds costume to reveal jeans and a t-shirt underneath. As usual, the tree tattoo peeks from under his sleeve.

I haven’t seen much of it since the Mistletoe Inn night when he explained it to me. He’s always in long sleeves. But it’s a reminder now of what family means to him.

Everything.

The thought that Charly and I could be his everything makes my breath hitch, and I quickly school my emotions, so my face doesn’t reveal how much I want that.

“Very authentic.” I point to his clothes, leaving enough space between us for Charly to keep treading her path around him.

“Thank you. That’s what I was going for.” His lip pulls at the corner. “Without any lines, I really had to put myself in the sandals of a shepherd to get the part right.”

“Oscar worthy performance.” Our eyes lock, sending a charge of electricity through me.

Charly baas and paws at my legs, and I break the current between Seb and me to bend down. “Hello little lamb. You were the cutest sheep up there.” I scratch her behind the lamb ears on the hood of her costume.

Suddenly her eyes dart toward the door, and she points. “Mama! Santa!”

I look behind me and see Nick walking into the hallway with a group of people. Charly darts toward him, but I grab her hand.

“Hold on. Let’s get this costume off, then we can go see him.”

She wiggles so much that I can barely pull it over her head, and when I do, her glasses fly off. They land a few feet away, and in an instant, Charly is running in the opposite direction after Nick.

“You get the glasses, I’ll get her,” Seb says, already dashing after her.

Charly snakes her way around people milling around. Seb has a harder time getting out of the room, but I know he’ll catch up to her. She can be fast when she wants to be, but she won’t be able to outrun him, especially without her glasses.

I push away the worry that she might get hurt, especially with no glasses to help her see. I have a million of those

thoughts every day. If I listened to all of them, I'd never let Charly out of my sight.

I pick up the glasses and follow Seb, but he's way ahead of me. When I get into the hallway, Pastor Ruth is there and points to the outside exit. "They went that way."

The prick of worry I've brushed away comes back as a sharp stab. The exit leads directly into the very full parking lot.

I move faster, pushing the door open at the same moment the sound of screeching brakes fills the air.

Then I run.

Chapter 35

Sebastian



I spot Charly in the middle of two rows of cars at the same time the headlights of a giant old Cadillac flip on. The Cadillac she's directly behind.

“Charly!” I yell.

Then I run, pushing people out of my way. I hear them yell at the driver—old Mr. Patrick who always forgets to turn on his hearing aid.

Charly looks side to side but doesn't move. The car does. Mr. Patrick inches nearer to her. Not fast, but he's closer to her than I am.

He's a foot away from Charly when I reach the rear tire. The long back end of the car will hit her before I can get her, so I do the only thing I can.

I slap my hand hard on the trunk, jump butt first on top of it, slide, and push myself off between the car and Charly.

The noise alerts Mr. Patrick, and he screeches to a stop as I scoop up Charly. His car bumps the back of my thighs, and I lurch forward a step, curling Charly into my arms to protect her if I fall.

I catch my balance. I don't know how, because my whole body is shaking. A rush of noise hits me at the same time and with the same intensity as the reality does of how close Charly came to getting hurt. Or worse.

Her cries are the loudest. Dazed, I pat her back while she sobs, “I want Santa!”

People surround us both, saying things like “That was so close,” and “What a miracle.” Mr. Patrick is next to me, apologizing, close to tears.

Then Hope is there. In front of me. And the look of fear on her face shatters me.

“Is she okay? Is she okay?” she says over and over as I transfer Charly to her arms.

All I can do is nod.

She asks if I’m okay. Says something about a coat and how I’m shaking.

I say the first words that come to my head and make any sense.

“I can’t do this.”

Hope winces. “What?”

“I can’t do this,” I repeat, stepping backwards. Away from her. Away from the crowd. Away from what just happened.

I turn and see my truck parked across the street on the side of the road. And I run.

Hope calls after me, but I can’t face her right now. I can’t look at Charly and think about how close I came to losing her. And I can’t even entertain the thought of losing Hope. The one thought clearest in my head is that I don’t know what I’m getting myself into. Hope and Charly are going to suffer because of me.

I'm still shaking when I get home. Mom is already there. When I walk in the door, she takes one look at me and panics.

“What’s wrong? What happened?” She rushes to me, takes my arm, and sits me down at the kitchen table.

There’s a cup of tea there. Mom likes chamomile tea before bed. She pushes it toward me. “Drink. Where’s your coat? You’re freezing!”

I take a sip. It’s hot and burns my throat all the way down to my belly. Mom rushes out of the room, coming back a minute later with a big blanket. She wraps it around my shoulders, then sits next to me, staying quiet longer than I ever thought possible.

With more sips of tea, I stop shaking from the cold. But my pulse is still racing.

“Tell me what’s wrong, caro mio,” Mom says.

And I’m ready. I have to talk about it with someone. “Charly almost got run over. If the car hadn’t stopped, we would have both been mowed down.”

Mom gasps. “Are you okay? Is Charly okay?”

I nod, then look at her and shake my head. “I don’t think I am okay.” I dig my palms into my eyes, then look at her again. “How did you do this? How did you lose Dad and not worry every second Stella and me wouldn’t be taken from you too?”

Mom smiles sadly. “Who says I didn’t?”

That's not the answer I was hoping for and my chest falls. "I can't live like that. Worrying all the time. Afraid something will happen to the people I love most."

She sits up tall, no longer smiling. Her face is firm and determined when she takes my face in her hands and forces me to look at her. "You don't live with worry. You live with joy for every single minute you get with the people you love. And you're grateful for all of it, even the moments that scare you to death."

I suck in my breath. It staggers down my throat, past the emotions working their way out of my chest. I drop my head to Mom's shoulder.

"I'm so scared of not being enough for them. Of taking them away from the support system they already have, only to mess things up."

"Then you do whatever is in your power to make sure you don't."

Mom holds me close, brushing her hand through my hair like she did when I was a little boy. She smells of chamomile and a touch of garlic from the dinner she made earlier. The scent is familiar and comfortable but doesn't take away my worries.

"There's no way I won't mess up." I stay buried in her arms. "I already have. I told Hope I can't do this."

"Of course you made a mistake. No one can be perfect, especially as parents." Her words are fast, but soothing, and my pulse slows. "I mess up all the time. Every day."

Now I sit up and look at her. “When have you messed up?”

She purses her lips, thinking hard. “According to Stella, I’ve made mistakes by picking up after you. Treating you like a baby.”

I mirror her pursed lips and creased brow. “We both know she’s wrong.”

“Well then. I take it back. I make no mistakes.” She claps her hands together, and I smile. Then she tilts her head to the side. “Whatever mistake you think you’ve made, you can fix. Whatever mistakes you *will* make, you can fix.”

I take a deep breath and nod. “Thanks, Mom.”

She squeezes my cheeks, then kisses them both as she stands. “I think we need cannoli.”

“Good thing I made some then.”

She walks to the fridge, but on the way, she picks up the gift bag from Hope that I left on the counter last night. “I think you may want to open this,” she says, handing it to me.

I take it from her, remembering again what I said to her tonight. *I can’t do this.*

That’s the biggest mistake I’ve made.

I said the words without thinking. I said them because I was overwhelmed with everything that had happened in the minutes before. I said them because I couldn’t stay there, in front of her and Charly, feeling everything in the middle of the chaos surrounding us.

I didn't say them because I didn't want to do *us* anymore. But I'm afraid that's how she may have heard them. How could she hear them any other way? Especially after I told her she should go back to Kansas the night before.

Okay. So I've made a lot of mistakes in the past twenty-four hours.

But she said her gift was a sign of what she hopes the future holds, and I need a sign right now. I have to figure out what to say to fix my mistakes, and whatever is in this bag may help.

I tear it open, pulling the card out first. It's handmade with a child's drawing of three circles, each with four lines sticking from them. There are also dots and what could be smiles in the middle of the circles. Underneath each one, Hope has written a name. Sebby. Mama. Charly.

I smile and look more closely at the details. The stick arms are touching. Like the three of us are holding hands.

My chest might burst.

I open the card and read what's inside.

So we can be the Three Mooseketeers. Get it? But mostly because we love you.

I know what's in the tissue paper even before I pull out the moose rack beanie, but I still let out a laugh when I see it. There are even lights hanging from them, like the ones I made her and Charly. I don't know how she made that happen, but it definitely took effort.

I turn them on and pull the beanie over my head.

It fits perfectly.

When Mom turns around, she laughs. “It turned out perfectly.”

“You knew about this?”

“Of course. She told me her idea, and I told her to get your grandpa to help with the lights.”

“Grandpa helped?”

Mom nods and holds out a plate with cannoli, but I shake my head. “I’ve got a mistake to fix.”

Because I’m not going to lose Hope or Charly. I’m not letting them go without a fight.

Chapter 36

Hope



After the scene outside the church, all I want is to get Charly home as soon as possible.

Unfortunately, the crowd in the parking lot has a different idea. Every person wants to tell me what happened, and everyone has a slightly different version. What I piece together from their stories together is that Seb modified his *Dukes of Hazzard* hood slide to a trunk slide and saved Charly from getting run over.

The part no one has to tell me is the part where Seb told me it was over between us and ran away. I was there for that, and it replays in my head about a thousand times as I make my way through the people surrounding us.

Mr. Patrick, who I don't even remember meeting, apologizes profusely, and asks over and over if Charly is okay, like he's known both of us forever. Mrs. C. rushes up to us as I walk back into the church to find my parents.

"I just heard. Are you okay? Is Charly okay?" She hugs us both, and even though Charly and I are physically unhurt, Mrs. C's hug drives away some of my pain.

Person after person finds me to check on us both. I worry Mom and Dad are going to be upset that it's taken me so long to get back, but when I find them, they're surrounded by Thomsens, even though Adam and Evie already left to take Heidi home.

"There's the star!" Pete says when he sees Charly. "She did such a good job!" Before I can thank him, he's got his arm

slung around my shoulders. “And this one! You should see her fight off squirrels. Can you believe what she’s pulled off here with Yulefest?”

My face flushes, then grows even warmer when I see the look of pride on my parents’ faces.

“Both my girls are amazing,” Mom says and reaches for Charly.

Charly shakes her head and burrows deeper into my arms. Mom looks hurt, and I know I have to explain what’s happened, even if she’ll probably freak out.

“There was an incident in the parking lot,” I tell her.

Before I can say more, someone behind me interrupts.

“Old Mr. Parker nearly ran over her.” The man in uniform—Officer Tuttle, I think—hitches up his belt and holster and goes on. “Seb Sparks leapt over the car, stopped it with one hand, and scooped up the little girl with the other. Never seen anything like it. He may have saved her life.”

He finishes, then juts out his hand to my parents. “Ted Tuttle. You must be Hope’s folks. Saw you at the wedding.”

Mom’s eyes are wide, her face white as she shakes Officer Tuttle’s hand. Dad isn’t quite as shell-shocked and manages to choke out a “nice to meet you.”

“Well, that’s our Seb, right Bear?” Pete nudges Bear who’s standing next to him.

“Yep. Leaps tall buildings in a single bound. That’s Seb,” Bear jokes, then grows serious when he looks at me. “He’d do anything for you and Charly.”

I blink back the tears trying to escape because I know he’s right. I just don’t know if Seb realizes how capable he is. I’m still shocked that he ran. I know he must have been scared, but how could he not see how good he is at protecting and taking care of Charly?

Not just Charly. Me too.

He drove me all the way to Florence, so I wouldn’t have to drive in the snow. He’s helped me come up with and implement ideas for Yulefest. He’s kept me from crossing my own intimacy boundaries when I know he’s wanted to cross them too.

“Where is he now?” Mom scans the chapel.

“He left.” My voice is barely above a whisper.

“Tell him thank you for us, please,” Mom says to Pete. “If we don’t see him before we leave tomorrow, I want him to know how grateful I am.”

We make our goodbyes and finally get to my car an hour after the nativity ended. An hour after Seb left. An hour after I nearly lost Charly.

During that hour, one thing became clear: Dad was right. I have a community here, a whole support network. I have a family...

With or without Seb.

But do I still want it if it doesn't include him?

I already know the answer.

Once we're all in the car, on the road, I take a deep breath.

"I'm going to stay in Paradise," I blurt. "Carson wants me full time, and I think this is where Charly and I should be."

Dad reaches from the back seat and squeezes my shoulder. "Me too."

Mom stares out the window, her fingers pressed to her lips. Long seconds pass before I can't wait any longer for her reply. "Mom?"

She turns slowly, tears in her eyes. "No one will take care of Charly like I do, but..." She reaches across the seat to squeeze my hand. "If you're sure this is what you want, it's a good place. Good people." Her voice cracks. "But I'm going to miss both my girls so much."

"I know," I say, feeling a shake in my voice as I grasp how far away I'll be from everything familiar. "We'll miss you too, but we need this. Being a full-time mom to Charly these last weeks made me realize how much I have relied on you all to do my job."

I wipe at my eyes. "It's been hard, but good, and Charly is thriving here. I wouldn't stay if I didn't think it's the best thing for her. And for you. You deserve to just be a mom to Luke and Ashley instead of dividing yourself between all of us."

The road blurs with the tears I can't keep from spilling, and I slow down. "I could never have taken care of her without you

all, and I don't want this to feel like I'm taking any of that away from us, but I'm ready to have a life of my own. Charly is too."

"This is about Seb," Mom says as she wipes her own eyes.

I'm so grateful that I can answer that question honestly. "No, Mom, it isn't. I don't know what's going to happen with Seb." I take a breath to keep from thinking about what he said to me. I can't give up hope.

My voice is steady when I continue. "If things do work out with us, I'll be so excited to have a family of my own. If they don't work, I'll be grateful for what he's helped me learn the last several weeks—he's been very good *to* me and very good *for* me. None of my time with him was wasted."

My chest loosens, and I know I've spoken the truth. I've made the right choice. I'm still nervous, but it feels right.

Now I just need to decide if, and how, I'll tell Seb. And when.

Not tonight. We've all had enough excitement for one night. Charly is conked out in the back seat from it. As I turn the corner to home, I'm ready to follow her lead and crawl into bed for at least twenty-four hours.

That's when I hear what sounds like shouting.

"Do you hear that?" I ask my parents.

"What in the world?" Dad says, pointing to a man standing in my front yard with something blinking on his head. "Is that Seb?"

“I think so,” I say at the same time Seb shouts again.

“Hoooooope!” He calls with his hands cupped around his mouth and his head tipped up toward the front window of my condo.

The last notes of my name die as I pull into the driveway. Seb turns, sees me, and drops his hands from his mouth.

“Is he wearing Charly’s moose rack hat?” Dad asks.

“No. It’s his own,” I answer, smiling. My heart picks up speed so fast, I can barely breathe.

Mom reaches over and squeezes my hand. “You go. We’ve got Charly.”

I’m already out of the car by the time she finishes her sentence. I shut the door quietly to keep from waking Charly, then walk slowly to Seb, even though I want to run.

He waits in the middle of the yard, snow falling gently around him, his face lit up alternately red, blue, and green with the blinking lights of his beanie.

“What are you yelling about?” I ask as I get closer.

“You didn’t answer your phone or the door. I thought you didn’t want to see me.” He’s breathless and fidgety, shifting back and forth.

I shake my head. “I wasn’t here.”

“I know that now.”

His eyes are locked on mine, and his breath hangs in the frigid air with each heavy exhale. I barely register my parents

carrying Charly into the house.

“You weren’t supposed to open that until Christmas.” I point to his hat.

Something about those words opens the gate, and he rushes to close the last few feet between us. His arms go around my waist, and he pulls me close enough to press his forehead to mine.

“I don’t want you to go. I should have told you that last night. I should have said it tonight when...” he closes his eyes and pulls back enough to shake his head. “I can’t lose you or Charly. That’s why I ran tonight. Watching her almost get hurt brought home how much I love you both. I don’t want you to go back to Kansas. At least not without me.”

He takes a deep breath, then presses his forehead to mine again. “I don’t want to be anywhere without you and Charly.”

I cup my hands around his face. The stubble on his cheeks pricks my palms, and I run my thumbs under his eyes to wipe away the wetness there.

“We’re not going anywhere Seb. Not without you.” I slide my hands from his face around his neck, then I’m the one to close the distance between us.

I press my lips to his, breathing in his warmth while increasing the heat growing between us. He pulls me so close and so tight, my toes leave the ground. I doubt they’ll ever touch ground again. Not if Seb kisses me the way he’s kissing

me right now, with enough love and tenderness to make me float and enough desire to make me melt.

When he sets me down, it's only long enough to ask, "You're going to stay?"

I nod. "You're stuck with us, Sparks. Get used to it."

With a yelp, he lifts me higher and spins in a circle. I throw back my head and laugh. But when he slows, I slide back to the ground.

Our lips meet again in a kiss that makes the rest of the world disappear. There's only Seb and me.

Tomorrow there will be Charly too.

But right now, I get him all to myself.

He's mine.

The End

Epilogue

Christmas Eve



My Sparks and Thomsen families are all gathered together in the Garden of Eatin' for an early Christmas Eve dinner. The bar is spread with Italian, Scandinavian, and good old American dishes, plus a few desserts made by yours truly. Hope decorated the main table again—like she did at Thanksgiving—but this time there's lots of red and green. And plenty of mistletoe.

She and Charly are in the opposite corner from me, talking to Pete and Zach, and I can't keep my eyes off her. Her hair is pulled back in a red headband, and she's still wearing her wool coat. We came straight from the dance around the Christmas tree in the town square.

It's a Danish tradition to dance around the tree on Christmas Eve, holding hands and singing Christmas carols, so my family has always done it. I thought we might be the only ones who showed up for the last Yulefest event, but half of Paradise was there. Instead of holding hands to make one circle, we had to make three. The whole thing lasted less than an hour, but the sense of community filled every song. It was the perfect way to end Yulefest.

And Hope made it all happen.

She catches me staring and smiles, the soft light above her creating a halo of her blonde hair. Her eyes pull me closer, but suddenly my way is blocked by a buzz cut with a beer gut.

“Hey Grandpa.” I try to look around him at the more enjoyable view I just lost, but he blocks me again.

“Are you going to ask that girl to marry you?” His voice is gruff in a way that makes his words more of a very strong suggestion than a question.

“What?” I make the mistake of meeting his gaze, and his steely gray eyes bore into me.

“When are you proposing?” He sips his drink—loudly—without breaking eye contact.

“Uh... I... um... I don’t know,” I stutter.

Obviously I’ve thought about it. A lot, to be honest.

Hope is planning to move here in January even though she’s still working out what to do with Charly when she travels. Her first trip is in February. If we were officially a family, there’d be no question about who would take care of Charly: me.

And Mom, of course. I’d need her help during the day.

But if Hope and I had our own place, Charly wouldn’t have to go anywhere at night. She could stay home.

“What’s stopping you?” Grandpa asks.

I blink, trying to pinpoint a reason he’ll find legitimate.

Hope and I have only known each other six months, and four and a half of those were spent apart.

That’s no excuse. My parents knew each other a month before they eloped, and Dad was deployed half the time they were married. They still loved each other like crazy.

I’m still scared I’m not good enough for her or Charly.

Grandpa would agree with me, then tell me to get over it and not let the best thing that's ever happened to me get away. And he'd be right.

So I settle on the most practical reason. "I want to buy a house first. So we have somewhere to live."

Grandpa narrows his eyes, and I wait for him to tell me that when he and Grandma got married, they lived in a room at the back of the auto shop his dad owned. The whole place reeked of oil and Grandma hated the smell so much she told him he had to find a different profession. That's how he became an electrician.

I've heard this story a time or two.

"Do you have a place in mind?" he asks, and I flinch.

That was not the response I expected. "Um, not really."

Grandpa crosses his arms and glares at me, but when he speaks, it's in a gentler voice than I'm used to. "Grandma and I want to spend more time in Arizona. I'm too old for cold weather. You could buy our place. If you want."

My jaw falls open. "That's really generous, Grandpa. I'd have to talk to Hope first but thank you."

Even as I say the words, I know Hope would like the house. Grandpa and Grandma built it not too long ago, so everything's new. It's got a great view of the lake. But the selling point for Hope, I think, would be that it's close to Mom's house. She'd be close if we needed her, but not in the same house.

“So now what’s stopping you? I want that girl for a granddaughter, and I want her daughter for a great-granddaughter.” Grandpa widens his stance like he’s still the tight end he used to be when he played football.

None of my reasons for waiting to propose are getting past him, but I try one more anyway. “I have to get a ring first. She’ll probably want a say in what it looks like.”

His mouth pulls to the side, then he spots Grandma and waves her over. She’s talking to Mom, so they both walk to us.

When they reach us, Grandpa leans over to Grandma and in a low voice says, “Who do we know who can get this kid an engagement ring fast? He needs to propose to Hope soon. That girl can’t move here without knowing she’ll have some stability.”

Grandma beams at Grandpa. “You’re so thoughtful. Always looking out for everyone.”

Grandpa’s ears turn pink, and his mouth tugs into a shy smile. And, for the first time, I see him for who he really is: a man who would do anything for his family. Including teaching a snot-nosed kid some of life’s most important lessons so he could grow up and be a responsible adult.

I’m still working on the responsible part, but I feel a deeper sense of gratitude for everything that Grandpa’s done for me than I ever have before.

“Give her mine.” Mom slips off the wedding ring I’ve never seen her without and hands it to me. “And do it tonight. No

sense waiting.”

I stare between her and the thin gold ring with one solitary diamond. It’s simple and beautiful, and I think it would mean a lot to Hope, but I can’t imagine Mom’s hand without it. “Mamma, are you sure?”

“I’ve been saving it for just this moment.” She flashes a smile, then grows serious again. “But only if you picked the right girl. And you have. So quit stalling.”

I glance at my grandparents. Grandma’s hands are wrapped around Grandpa’s arm like it’s the lever to release the party balloons, and she’s just waiting for her cue to let the celebration begin.

Grandpa looks less excited and more... threatening?

No, that’s not it.

The intensity on his face isn’t about getting me to do what he wants, but about hoping I’ll do the thing he knows is best for me.

But he could look at me all day long with that face, and I’d never come around, if I didn’t know he was right. Hope and Charly aren’t only the best thing for me, they’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me, and the best thing that ever will.

“Okay. You’re right. I’ll do it as soon as the time is right. I’ll propose.” I expect them to meet my announcement with the same level of excitement I’m feeling. But their smiles all look a little forced.

“Tonight.” Mom says finally with the kind of smile I expected a few seconds ago. “Right here.”

“Oh, yes! What a wonderful idea!” Grandma claps. “You’ve got the ring, you’re surrounded by the people who love you best. It’s perfect!” Then she gasps, and her whole face grows rounder and fuller, like *she’s* the party balloon. “You could have Santa do it! We’ll give him the ring, he can pull it out of his bag last, and then you propose.”

“Excellent idea.” Grandpa nods and actually smiles.

“Except that Santa’s not real,” I say slowly.

“Of course he’s not, son,” Grandpa says, like *I’m* the one who made the Santa suggestion in the first place.

“We’ve hired Nick to play him,” Grandma leans close and whispers. “As a surprise for Charly. He’ll be here right after dinner.”

“Tonight?” I’m not talking about Santa anymore.

The idea of proposing to Hope right here, right now, tonight has me sweating bullets. “What if she says no?” I direct the question at Mom. “I don’t think she will, but is this too fast?”

My eyes dart across the room to Hope, who happens to be looking at me. Her mouth pulls into a soft smile that slows my racing pulse. Then a look of confusion crosses her face, and I realize Mom, Grandma, and Grandpa are all staring at her too.

We all turn away from her at the same time. Not at all suspicious.

“Okay, let’s do this,” I say to my co-conspirators. “But I need a box to put it in.” I squeeze the ring in my hand tighter. “And it needs to be wrapped with a bow. I don’t know where to get any of that.”

Grandma is already motioning for Evie to join us. “Evie and I can manage that part.”

“Okay, then, I guess that’s all there is to it. I just wait for Santa to show up, pull the box out of his bag, then pop the question? That’s the plan?” I scan all their faces. The whole thing sounds a little too easy for it to be the biggest moment of my life.

“You’re asking Hope to marry you?” Evie’s voice is too loud, and we all shush her.

I glance in Hope’s direction, but she’s busy helping Charly straighten her moose hat. Watching the two of them together, I’m sure I don’t want to wait any longer for us to be a family. Tonight is the perfect night to propose.

“Yep. I’m proposing tonight,” I tell Evie, and the grin that spreads across her face lifts my confidence that Hope will say yes.

That’s when everything fires into action. Evie and Grandma go to the kitchen to see what they can do with a take-out box, Grandpa and Mom corner Hope and Charly to keep Hope distracted while I run home for the one thing—besides the ring—I know I’m going to need.

I'm nervous all through dinner, but with excitement. There's no fear. This is what I want, and Hope and I have been dancing around the words *marriage* and *family* since we started seeing each other. She was clear from the beginning that dating her meant doing it with the intention that we could be a family.

Still, I'm about to crawl out of my skin waiting for the jingle bells I know Nick will ring when he arrives. When I finally hear them, I break out in a cold sweat. I'm not afraid to ask Hope to marry me, I'm afraid I won't be able to get the words out. I'll make a fool of myself.

And I've got a half hour to get really nervous, because that's how long it takes for Santa to pull out presents for everyone in the family, one at a time. He calls out a name, followed by a spot-on "Ho, ho, ho." Then that person sits on Santa's knee and tells him what they want for Christmas.

There's no real sitting. We're all adults here, except for Charly, and big ones at that. Bear, especially, would crush Nick if he actually sat on his knee. But we love every minute of it, because it reminds us of being kids again. Our grandparents used to hire Nick every year to do this.

With every package Nick takes from his red velvet bag, Charly yells, "Mine!" Every time he says someone else's name, she crumples with disappointment, and I wish we'd made hers and Hope's present first.

The third time she nearly loses it, I squat down and whisper, "Santa has something really special for you and your mama,

but he needs you to wait until everyone else gets their presents. Will you be patient for him?”

Charly’s eyes grow wide behind her glasses, and she nods. “Is it Unkuhrad?”

“It could be,” I say, and her smile stretches across her whole face.

She holds my hand with one of hers and Hope’s with the other, bouncing up and down. I’m bouncing on the inside.

Finally, Nick peeks into his bag and says, “I’ve got two gifts left. One for Charly and one for Hope.” He pulls out a big red and pink wrapped box with a bow on top, then reaches into the bag again. This time, he pulls out a smaller, cardboard box. Not ring-sized. More like French-fries to-go size. But it’s got a beautiful bow and other stuff on top to decorate it.

Charly dashes to Nick, while Hope sends me a surprised look. “I wasn’t expecting anything.”

“You’ve been so patient, Charly.” Nick holds her on his lap, while patting his other knee for Hope to sit on. She’s small enough, she’s not going to break anything. “Would you like to open that gift right now?”

Charly doesn’t wait for him to finish the question before she’s tearing into the wrapping paper.

“And how about you, Hope?” Nick says. “Would you like to open your gift?”

“Oh, no. That’s okay.” She shakes her head. “I can—”

“Open it!” Evie yells.

Hope’s sends Evie a confused look. “O-kayyyy.”

She pulls the bow off the top, and that’s my cue. While she digs through the tissue paper inside, I put on my moose rack beanie that I retrieved from home and kneel down in front of her.

A gasp escapes before she takes the ring from the box and holds it up, her hand shaking. Her eyes find mine, and there are already tears in them. Mine and hers.

“Mama, look!” Charly squeals. “It’s Booeey!”

I glance at her just as she turns to Santa and tips her head. “I want Unkurad,” she says in her happiest voice. There’s no disappointment she didn’t get what she wanted, but the expectation she still can.

I turn back to Hope. “I want her to have Uncle Rad too. I want us to be a family. I want you to be my wife. I love you, Hope. Will you mar—”

She hops off Nick’s knee and throws her arms around me, stopping my question with a kiss. After she pulls away, she says softly, “Yes. Of course, yes. I’ve been—”

Now it’s my turn to stop her words with a kiss. I slide my hand under her jaw and tip her chin, then press my lips to hers. Part of my brain registers the cheering around us and Charly saying something about Sebby kissing Mama, but not for long.

Everything besides Hope and me melts away in our kiss. The noise. My nervousness. Any remaining fears I have about

being enough for her and Charly.

When we finally separate, I scoop Charly off Nick's knee with one arm and tug Hope closer in the other so we're in one big hug.

"You'll have to take me with Uncle Rad, Charly. We're a package deal." I press my forehead to hers.

She giggles and pats my cheek.

I'll take that as a yes.



Thank you for reading Hope and Seb's story! Did you love Yulefest? Would you like to see more of it? Then I've got just the thing for you! Head to my website, brittanylarsenbooks.com to read *Hope's Yulefest Diary*. You'll not only get descriptions of each day's activity, but also more of Hope and Seb! To receive it, you'll be asked to join my weekly newsletter where there's another FREE gift waiting for you. Plus, you'll get the latest news about my upcoming releases and promos I may be running.

If this is your first introduction to my Love in Paradise Valley series, make sure you read the first books in the series

too! You can get them all right here. You'll find Adam and Evie's story in *The Grumpy Side of Paradise* and Zach and Georgia's story in *(Not So) Famous in Paradise*. Bear's story is coming soon!

Finally, I love hanging out with my readers and getting to know them better. Come say hi in my Facebook readers group, Brittany Larsen Books Readers and Fans and/or follow me on Instagram at @brittanylarsen.books I can't wait to meet you!

Oh, and, if you have a minute to leave a glowing review of *Christmas in Paradise*, here are the links: Amazon, Goodreads, Bookbub.

About the Author



Brittany Larsen is an Idaho girl living the California dream. If that dream includes wearing sweatpants all day and gorging herself on chocolate-covered gummi bears (Don't judge. They're delicious). She's written ten sweet romantic comedies and a couple of historical romance novellas set in the Old West. When not writing, she teaches yoga and takes naps. Her sweater-sporting, mini Aussi-doodle Bo, is her favorite writing companion, but her favorite people are her husband and three daughters.

Acknowledgements

I didn't think writing a Christmas book could be so fun. *Christmas in Paradise* was supposed to be shorter than my other books. Somehow it came out longer as memories of my childhood Christmases came back to me. Memories of big family gatherings on Christmas Eve at my grandparents' house where I danced the Virginia Reel with and played musical chairs with my siblings and cousins while my grandpa—later my uncle—played the organ. (I am not as old as the sentence makes me sound, I swear). While we laughed and played—all of us gathered in Grandma's big living room, no TV in sight—we'd listen for the loud bells that signaled Santa had arrived.

As a kid, Santa was the best part of the night. As an adult, the relationships I still have with my extended family are what I appreciate most about those Christmases my grandparents—grandma in particular—made happen. Those memories fueled so much of the family interactions and celebrations in *Christmas in Paradise*.

Speaking of family, my sister Amber is possibly my biggest fan and supporter, despite the fact I still treat her like a little sister. Thanks, sis. Love you. Keep up the good work; our sweet niece, Anna, is hot on your tail to replace you as my biggest fan.

Josi Kilpack is a master of story, and her insight and deep edits made Sebastian and Hope's story deeper and richer than I could have done on my own. Jenny Proctor's keen understanding of what makes a romantic comedy a romantic comedy made *Christmas in Paradise* a much better romcom

than it started as. Becca Wilhite added the finishing touches with her sharp eye for all the little mistakes. You have all my love, my thanks, and my admiration. I probably owe you my first born, but we all know how hard adult kids are, so I'll keep her. (To be honest, I like her too much to give her up).

Somehow I've managed to insert myself into two amazing critique groups, one virtual, and one sometimes not virtual. Thank you Josi, Nancy, Jen, and Becca for letting a California girl who writes romcoms join your circle of amazing Utah women who write (mostly) historical romance. I'm honored to Zoom at the feet of greatness. And, as always, thank you to my local critique peeps, Teri, Jen (not the same one), Aubrey, Tiffany, and Melanie, for not only cheering for me, but also pointing out all dumb stuff. To quote Jen, "it's so hard when you're stupid and you're trying to write a book." All of my critique partners help my words be less stupid, and retreating with my Utah and California groups is my favorite. I love and adore you all!

I like to switch up my editors because I know so many great ones, I hate for any to not have a chance to point out dumb things I do. This time Jolene Perry at Waypoint Authors gave me valuable feedback that added so much to this story. Thank you, Jo!

Cathy JeppSEN (I got it right this time!) is my right-hand woman who remembers things I don't, like... see? I've forgotten already. Thanks for doing the stuff I usually use as excuses to not write. I literally couldn't have written this book

as fast as I did without you taking away all my procrastination tools.

Bookstagrammers, ARC readers, and Launch team, you are my favorite online people! Thank you for reading my books, for promoting them, and for supporting indie authors like me. I'm continually blown away, not only by your creativity (looking at you bookstagrammers!) and reading speed, but by your kindness. You are amazing.

This is the part where I stress out about who I'm forgetting because I didn't make this list as I wrote. Or I did make the list, but I've forgotten where. Oh! I know! My parents for giving me the idea of the Old Barn, which is a real wedding venue in Paradise, UTAH, an actual town, unlike my Paradise, Idaho. Check it out here:
<http://thebarninoldparadise.com/gallery>

To my three darling daughters: thank you for going to Dad for all the things the last few months. I love and miss you every day.

Finally, my husband, Shawn, deserves the most thanks of all. With no one but the two of us at home, he's the only one I neglect any more—which has to be lonely—when book deadlines loom.

My grandma once told me the story of when she and Grandpa were first married and living in a tent while he worked on some project building bridges over the Snake River. He was always gone, so one day she packed her suitcases, hid them, then hid herself under the bed until he

came home. When he saw all of her stuff was gone, he sat on the bed and said, “Well, I guess I should have known she’d leave.” Then she jumped out and surprised him, and he was so happy she hadn’t left him.

Shawn, you have every right to do the same, but please don’t. You know I hate being scared. (Plus, even though Grandma stayed, I don’t think Grandpa worked less, but we all got tater tots out of the bargain, sooooo...worth it?)

Thanks for sticking around even when I’m not here. You are my favorite. (But for real, not like how my grandma used to say that to each of us when no one else was around).