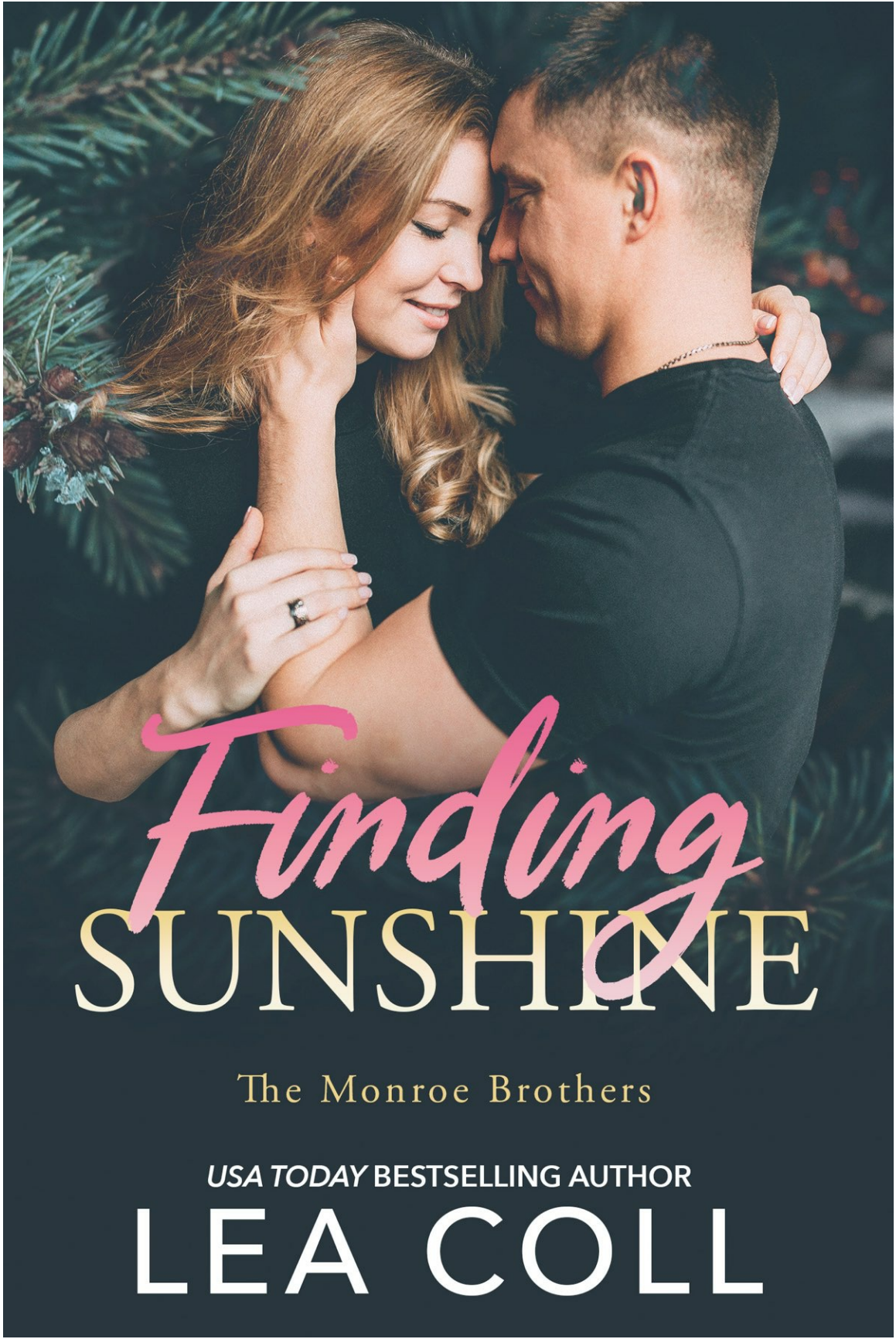


Finding
SUNSHINE

The Monroe Brothers

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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CHAPTER 1



SARAH

“*M*ommy, do you see the lights?” Addy asked as she opened the door of the SUV and hopped out.

My heart stutter-stepped because the handsome landscaper I’d seen around the neighborhood was hanging Christmas lights on my porch.

“I sure did.” Other than the occasional chin lift or head nod, he’d never said anything to me.

Addy tugged her hand from mine and ran up to him. “You put up the lights like I asked.”

He wore his signature baseball cap low on his forehead, a T-shirt stretched taut across his chest and biceps, worn jeans, and work boots.

“You asked him to do this?”

Addy gestured down the street. “The rest of the houses on the street are decorated. I asked Knox to make ours match.”

“Mr. Knox does this as a service. People pay him to decorate. You can’t ask people to do things for free.”

Knox stepped closer to us and lowered his voice. “I wanted to do this for you.”

Something about the intensity in his eyes and his words had my heart pounding for a different reason. “I’m so sorry about this. I’ll talk to her.”

“Please accept the lights. It makes her happy, and I wanted to do this for

you.” Knox gestured in the direction of his crew. “My family wanted to do this for you.”

For the first time, I took in the rest of the crowd. There were three other men who were similar in stature to Knox, with dark hair, and a woman. I wondered if these were his siblings.

“See, Mommy? Knox had fun putting up our lights.”

A chuckle erupted through the crowd.

When it quieted, I said, keeping my gaze on his family, “I can’t thank you enough for doing this for us.”

Knox touched my elbow, sending my pulse racing, and guided me to the porch, where everyone stood. “These are my brothers, Talon, Heath, and Emmett, and this is Emmett’s girlfriend, Ireland.”

Talon crouched down to Addy’s level, talking to her about the wire decoration in the shape of a present propped next to the steps. I think he was explaining how he’d made it, but I couldn’t concentrate.

Emmett and Ireland said their goodbyes to Knox, and I managed a stiff smile.

When it was just me and Knox, I turned to face him. “Thank you for doing this, but—”

Knox held up his hand. “I don’t expect you to pay me or give me anything in return.”

“I don’t understand why you did it. Were the neighbors giving you a hard time because I was the lone holdout for the holiday decorations?” I crossed my arms over my chest, trying not to feel less than because I was a single parent and didn’t have a partner to help with these kinds of things.

There was a fierce holiday decorating contest in the neighborhood. I couldn’t hope to compare, so I hadn’t even bothered putting up our meager decorations.

“Addy asked me to make your house look the same, and I said I would,” Knox said carefully.

I nodded. “She’s hard to resist.”

For the first time, Knox’s lips twitched. “I’d probably give her whatever she wanted.” Then he rushed to add, “Please don’t tell her I said that. I’ll be in trouble.”

I smiled, lowering my arms to my sides. “I won’t.”

Knox stepped back, gesturing to the porch. “We hung lights on the roof and twisted lights around the garland on the railing and columns. Then Talon made the present to give your house that extra something. You probably won’t win any contests with this.” Knox gazed out over the neighborhood, where each house had blow-ups of Santa, Frosty, and Rudolph on their lawns and roofs, in addition to the lights.

I rested my hand on his forearm, where his flannel shirt had been rolled up to expose his skin. “I really appreciate it. Sometimes I feel like I’m failing at this parenting gig. Between work and activities at school, I feel like I’m always behind.”

Knox’s face filled with understanding. “I didn’t mean to make you feel that way.”

I shook my head. “You didn’t.”

He nodded toward Addy. “I wanted to make her smile.”

“I was worried she was bothering you when you worked on the neighbor’s lawn.” A couple of weeks ago, Addy was home with a day off from school, and Knox was next door, working on flower beds along the fence line. Addy talked to him through the fence, but I didn’t say anything because it was only for a few minutes.

“Talking to her was the highlight of my day.”

That made me pause because Addy’s father went months without seeing her, and he never said he missed her and wanted to see her. But this man, a stranger to us, enjoyed her company. “Ever since she was a baby, I called her my sunshine because she brightens everything around her.”

Knox nodded. “I think so, too.”

I blinked away the unexpected sting of tears, unsure how to deal with this unexpected kindness and revelation.

The rest of his brothers said their goodbyes, and I thanked them for their help.

When they were gone, Addy asked Knox, “Would you like some hot chocolate?”

“I’m sure Knox has other places he needs to be.” He could have someone waiting for him at home, or maybe even a date. Just because my life was ruled by the elementary school schedule didn’t mean this man didn’t have a life.

“I’d love some,” Knox surprised me by saying.

“See, Mommy?”

I unlocked the door, and Addy stepped inside.

I hung back for a second to talk to him. “Seriously, you don’t have to hang out with us. I’m sure you’re busy.”

“I don’t have anywhere else to be. I’d love to spend more time with Addy and you.”

My cheeks heated. I’d secretly crushed on him when he was a nameless man who worked on various yards in the neighborhood. It was safe to have naughty thoughts about the way his muscles stretched the cotton of his T-shirt. I never thought I’d talk to him or that he’d be walking inside my house.

I followed him into the kitchen and pulled out the ingredients for hot chocolate. Addy piled toppings on the kitchen table, mini marshmallows, and candy cane shavings, and she grabbed the whipped cream from the fridge.

I heated the milk on the stove while Addy explained her favorite choices for toppings.

“I’ll have to try that,” Knox said, his deep voice resonating around the small space. I couldn’t remember the last time I had a man in the house who wasn’t my father.

When my ex, Gary, visited, he met Addy outside by his car and took her

out for dinner or to the playground. He never came inside. He sent a check for child support every month but never asked how we were doing or if we needed any help or anything else. But then again, I wasn't his concern, and he'd done his duty if he paid the child support.

"Do you have a Christmas tree yet?" Knox asked Addy.

Addy frowned. "Not yet. Mommy said we'll go to the lot when we have time."

My heart pinched. There never seemed to be enough time. I was always putting her off about something. Then there was the issue of how I'd get a real tree into the house. "We have a fake tree we could put up."

Knox rested his palm against his chest. "First you said you were getting a tree from a lot, and then you said you had a fake tree. I can't believe you'd say that to me."

My forehead wrinkled. "Why?"

"My family owns Monroe Christmas Tree Farm."

"I didn't realize," I said at the same time as Addy gushed, "You own a Christmas tree farm?"

"My family does. My brothers and I run it with our mother." A hint of sadness raced across his expression, but it was gone before I could even register what it was about.

"Will you take me there?" Addy asked.

Knox chuckled. "I'd love to. I can help you cut down a real tree."

Addy's eyes widened comically. "Mommy, please?"

The trees on the lot were expensive. I couldn't imagine what they'd be if we cut down a fresh one. "I don't want to take up too much of Knox's time, sweetie."

"We're busy this time of the year, but I can make time for you. I wouldn't want you to suffer without a tree. Why don't you come before opening on Saturday, and I'll help you out?"

I waved a hand at him, still uncertain how I'd pay for it. "You don't have

to do that.”

“Let me do this as my treat for you two. I can’t let you put up a fake tree.” He shuddered as if the idea was distasteful to him.

Addy giggled.

He’d put me in a position where I couldn’t say no, and I was curious about what it would be like to have a real tree.

“I’ll bring it by after close on Saturday and help you put it up. Do you have a tree stand?” He looked around as if I kept one in the corner for him to drop by and offer his help.

“I do have one.”

“Will you help us decorate it, too?” Addy asked.

Before I could say no to that suggestion, Knox rushed to say, “I’d love to.”

I bit my lip, not wanting to remind Addy in front of Knox to not invite people to do things without asking me first. We needed to have a conversation when Knox wasn’t standing in front of us, looking too good to be true.

His navy cap read *University of Colorado*. I pointed to it. “Is that where you went to school?”

Knox took off his hat and ran a hand through his short hair. “That’s right. I worked for an architectural firm before I returned home to help on the farm.”

His face was pinched, and I wondered if there was a story behind his moving back. He hadn’t mentioned his dad, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t around.

I mixed the cocoa into the steamed milk and poured the liquid into three mugs. In the spirit of the holiday, I used the ones from the movie *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer*.

“What would you like in your hot cocoa?” Addy knelt on the bench seat at the table and used a spoon to lift the mini marshmallows into her Rudolph

mug.

“The works.”

Knox could easily have told her he'd do it himself, and I appreciated that he allowed Addy to do it. He seemed to be at ease around her. “You seem good with kids.”

Knox glanced up at me as Addy dropped the candy cane shavings into his mug. “I have a niece, Ember, who's in the same grade as Addy. That's how I knew you'd be out tonight. I wanted to surprise you.”

I was so surprised by his admission I couldn't form a response at first.

“I know Ember. She's in my class and in the play at school,” Addy said as she dropped marshmallows into my Santa mug.

“She told me an Addy was in her class, and I put it together. You have a unique name.”

“So does Ember,” I said.

“She's the light that keeps our family burning bright.” Knox shrugged. “That's what my brother, her father Sebastian, always says.”

“I love that.” Her name had meaning, and it was eerily similar to my description of Addy.

“She's the only kid in the family, and we spoil her.”

I smiled, imagining the brothers who were on my porch smitten by a little girl. “I can imagine.”

“Thanks for the hot chocolate,” Knox said when Addy pushed the Abominable Snow Monster mug in his direction.

“You have to taste it,” Addy said pointedly, and Knox dutifully lifted the mug to take a sip.

“Mmm. It's delicious.”

“Mommy always makes the real kind. Not instant.”

“It's good,” Knox said with a wink in my direction, which heated my entire body.

I shrugged off the cardigan I wore and filled a glass with ice water. I

needed to cool down fast.

Addy frowned. “You don’t want hot chocolate?”

“I’m just really thirsty.”

Thankfully, Addy accepted my explanation.

I avoided Knox’s gaze. He was young and most likely single, or at least not looking for a relationship with a single mother. I worked from home and, in general, felt frumpy. I wasn’t old, but I didn’t go out to the bars or hang out with girlfriends. I was more concerned about homework and soccer practice than going out and meeting anyone.

Addy stirred her hot chocolate with a spoon and drank from the mug. The liquid spilled onto the table and her shirt.

Before I could move, Knox grabbed a paper towel from the roll on the counter and mopped up the mess. “Don’t want you to get it on your sleeve.”

“Thanks, Knox,” Addy said to him, and Knox’s entire body relaxed. His lips stretched into a smile. “You’re welcome.”

I’d never seen another man interact with Addy like this. No one besides my father. It was heartwarming.

“Would you help me with a puzzle?” Addy scrambled off the bench and headed toward the living room without waiting for Knox.

“If you need to go...” I said quietly.

Knox winked at me. “Let me see what this puzzle looks like.” Then he followed Addy into the living room, where we’d set up a card table and chairs. We enjoyed working on puzzles all winter.

I used to do them with my grandmother and passed the tradition on to my daughter. This puzzle was a silly one of a snowy mountain. There was a ski lodge, a lift, skiers, people drinking hot chocolate, and a group of people decorating trees. Each time we sat down to do it, we discovered a new scene. It was so busy it took some time to take it all in.

“Wow. This is a big one,” Knox said as he sat in the chair.

Addy chewed on her lip as she searched for the piece she wanted.

I turned on my holiday music playlist. “Is this okay?”

“It’s perfect,” Knox said.

“You don’t get sick of the holiday stuff after working at a tree farm and decorating the entire neighborhood?”

Knox sighed. “Mom pumps the holiday music in the shop and by the tree lot. I work in the fields, so it’s not too bad.”

“You get to cut the trees down?” Addy asked, sliding her piece into the spot.

“Sometimes. Or I assist with securing the trees on the tops of the cars. I go wherever I’m needed. My brother, Emmett, doesn’t like the crowds, so we let him work the fields.”

“Is he the one who had the girlfriend?” I asked him, curious to know more about his brothers.

Knox chuckled. “You’re never going to believe this, but Ireland was supposed to get married on the farm on Thanksgiving weekend.”

“To your brother?” I asked, a little confused.

Knox shook his head. “She was engaged to someone else. She discovered he was cheating on her right before she walked down the aisle. She ran through the fields, hoping to have a quiet place to think, and ran into Emmett. He hung out with her for a while, and then they got snowed in at his cabin for a few days.”

“Are you saying their relationship formed after she ran from her own wedding?” I asked carefully.

His lips twitched. “It’s unconventional, but I assure you, their feelings are real.”

I frowned. “Her ex doesn’t sound like a good guy.”

“Definitely not. Emmett and Ireland said it was because they were meant to be. Everything happened like it was supposed to. It was fate, or something like that.” Knox waved a hand.

“That’s so romantic.”

“Are you talking about kissy stuff?” Addy asked.

Knox chuckled. “I guess so.”

Her face screwed up. “Gross.”

“She doesn’t like kissing in movies. Even if it’s animated.”

Knox nodded. “I guess it’s the age. Ember doesn’t like it either.”

“I’m not in a hurry for her to like it.” This stage of not liking boys could go on forever, as far as I was concerned.

Knox shared a smile with me, and it felt intimate, like we were here on a date, and he was getting to know my daughter.

We worked on the puzzle in silence for a few minutes. Knox was quick to help Addy when she needed it.

Reluctantly, I glanced at the clock. “It’s time to get ready for bed.”

Addy’s shoulders dropped. “Do I have to?”

“It’s eight-thirty.” Usually, I’d make her get ready earlier, but she was having such a good time with Knox that I didn’t have the heart to tell her it was time.

Knox stood. “It’s about my bedtime, too. I need to be up early tomorrow.”

“I bet you’re busy this time of the year,” I said as I followed him to the door.

“It’s a lot, but it’s just for a couple of months. Then I’m back to the landscape business.”

“Addy, go on up and get in your pj’s,” I called to her.

Instead of listening, Addy stepped in front of Knox. “Thank you for the lights. They’re beautiful.”

“You’re welcome,” Knox said, ruffling her hair.

My heart squeezed at the sweet interaction.

“Night, Knox.”

“Good night.”

I opened the door and followed him onto the porch. The lights twinkled

around us, giving me a warm and cozy feeling inside. “Thank you so much for what you did. It was so nice and unexpected.”

“I’m just happy you like it.”

“Don’t feel like you have to help us with the tree this weekend.”

He raised a brow. “I promised Addy a tree, and she’s getting one.”

“I don’t want you to feel obligated to help us.”

He rested a hand on my shoulder. “I don’t.” Then, with a flash of a smile, he turned and jogged down the porch steps. He stopped at his truck. “I’ll see you on Saturday.”

My heart pounded in my chest. I was attracted to him but never thought he’d be in my life. Not in any significant way. In one day, he’d surprised us with a beautifully decorated porch, and now, a tree.

I didn’t know what to make of him or the situation. I just didn’t want either one of us to get hurt. At the end of the day, it was just me and Addy. I needed to protect our hearts at all costs.

CHAPTER 2



KNOX

The entire evening had gone in a different direction than I'd planned. I'd wanted to decorate the porch and be gone before they arrived home.

I wanted to do something nice for Addy, who'd kept me company the day I was tending the flower bed in the neighbor's yard. I hadn't meant for her and her mother to come home and find me decorating their porch. I certainly hadn't planned on introducing her to my brothers.

I shouldn't have gone inside and accepted the mug of hot cocoa or stayed to work on the puzzle with them. It only complicated everything. I'd noticed Sarah coming and going in the neighborhood, but I wasn't looking for a relationship, and I figured a single mother was off-limits.

Working on my family's Christmas tree farm made me see that the holidays were a magical time of year for many people. You need a few things to make it happen: a fresh-cut tree, hot chocolate, and holiday music playing in the background, and I wanted to give Addy that magic in her home.

I didn't want her to feel like she was different from the other families in the cul-de-sac because she didn't have lights on her porch or a tree in the front window. Addy told me she lived with her mother, and her father worked far away. I sensed that Sarah didn't feel comfortable cutting down a tree and wrangling it home on her own.

What started out as a good deed had turned into so much more. I'd

unwittingly intertwined my life with theirs. As I turned onto the lane for the farm, I reassured myself that I didn't have to see them again after I helped them get a tree.

I ignored the voice in my head that said I'd had fun tonight. Spending time with Sarah and Addy didn't compare to meeting women at bars. There was depth and a mystery to Sarah's life that made her intriguing.

I tried not to notice the way she filled out those skinny jeans or how her sweater molded to her ample breasts, but it was impossible. I'd been attracted to Sarah since the first time I saw her, even though it was only ever in passing.

I'd paid more attention to her barren front yard flower beds and the overgrown bushes on the side of the house. That kind of neglect usually irritated me, but I guessed that Sarah was overwhelmed with being a single mother and that lawn care wasn't at the top of her priority list.

I assumed she maintained the lawn and the property by herself. She hadn't hired my service to maintain the lawn or create flower beds to enhance her yard like almost everyone else in the area had. So, either she couldn't afford it, didn't have the time to deal with it, or she truly didn't notice the lawn.

That last one was hard for me to believe because it was the first thing I noticed about a house. I'd been obsessed with plants since we were little and my father explained the growing process of the Christmas trees on our property, and then later, when I helped in my mother's garden.

I enjoyed making things beautiful. It had started as a way to earn money in the offseason, but it had grown. When I entered one neighborhood, it was common for other neighbors to request my services, as well.

Hanging lights on porches had started out as a favor to a homeowner who'd asked if I could hang their decorations. I did it for a nominal price, but then word spread. Sebastian warned me I wasn't charging enough for my services, but I was afraid I'd lose customers if I charged more.

But when Addy asked me to make her house look like the others on the street, I couldn't say no. The day she talked to me through the fence, she was adorable, talking a mile a minute about the play she was in at school, her soccer team, and her teacher at school.

She clearly loved to socialize, while her mother seemed more reserved. Addy easily worked her way into my heart, the same way Ember had. It felt like we were friends. Maybe now Sarah would say hi to me when she saw me in the neighborhood.

I groaned as I parked the truck in front of my cabin. I shouldn't want to spend more time with them. No matter how adorable the little girl was, I sensed Sarah wasn't interested in getting to know me.

I didn't blame her. She had enough going on in her life if she was a single mother. She didn't need me complicating things for her.

After high school, I went to college and then got a job at a local architectural company in Colorado. I worked long hours and enjoyed my work, but I was more interested in designing the landscaping than the buildings themselves.

When I got the call that my father had had a heart attack, I came home and never left. Nothing was more important than family. My mother and my brothers needed me. I wouldn't make the mistake of being selfish again. Sarah and Addy were a distraction I didn't need.



“*J*ust got off the phone with a woman who said she’s meeting you to cut down a tree this morning,” Mom said as I walked into her kitchen Saturday morning. “She wanted to confirm that it was still okay to arrive before we opened at eight.”

“I don’t have her number. I didn’t even think of that when I scheduled it,” I said.

“What, exactly, did you schedule?” Mom asked, pushing a plate of freshly baked muffins in my direction.

“Sarah lives in the house we decorated the other night. Her daughter, Addy, asked me to decorate her house like the others in the neighborhood. I couldn’t say no.”

Mom nodded. “I heard. That was nice of you.”

“It was supposed to be a surprise, but she came home early. Addy invited me in for hot chocolate. I noticed they didn’t have a tree and asked if they planned on getting one. Sarah said they usually use a fake tree, or they could go to a lot in town.”

Mom huffed out a breath. “You can’t buy a tree from a lot. Who knows when it was cut? It won’t last until Christmas.”

I nodded, having heard this a billion times from my father growing up. “I know, and I told her that. But I don’t think she’s ever cut one before and wasn’t sure how to handle getting it home.”

“You offered to help her? That’s so sweet of you.” She shook her head. “Sometimes I wonder if I did right by you boys, but other times, you surprise me.”

“Thanks, Mom. I try to be a good person.”

She patted my cheek. “You’ll make a nice husband one day.”

My stomach twisted. I dated one woman seriously after college, and when my father died, she stopped calling and didn’t come to visit. I was planning to ask her to marry me, and she couldn’t even be there for me when I needed her most. It was a good reminder that we don’t really know people at all. Then my brother Emmett’s fiancée left him at the altar. Other than my parents’ relationship, I didn’t have a great example of a good relationship.

“I know you were burned in the past, but you can’t let that one woman ruin your future.”

My jaw tightened. I couldn’t imagine letting anyone else in. They’d have to know that my family and the farm came first. Always. I made the mistake

of focusing on myself once, and it cost me everything.

“I love having you boys close, but sometimes I worry about you. You had that job, and you quit when your father died.”

The first few months, Mom had wandered the property aimlessly, almost as if she were looking for something. Emmett came up with the idea of lighting the paths. It gave the property a nice, warm glow. “You needed help, and I love the farm. I always planned on coming back.”

Mom’s face pinched. “But not that soon, and you’re not doing anything with your degree.”

I smiled to reassure her. “You know my first love is landscaping.”

“I just want you to be happy.”

I didn’t want Mom to think that she was a burden or that I didn’t want to be here. “I love my cabin, the property, and being so close to my family. I couldn’t imagine not seeing Ember as often as I do.”

“I’m glad, honey. But I just want you to be open to the idea of more. That maybe there’s something else out there for you.”

My jaw tightened. “I won’t entertain anything that would take me away from the farm.”

Mom’s phone buzzed. “Your friend just drove in. You should close the gate until opening so you’re not disturbed.”

I’d opened the gate for Sarah this morning, We had to keep it closed during the off-hours, or visitors would come in and wander the property, thinking we were open for business.

“I’m on it.” I popped another muffin into my mouth.

She pointed a finger at me. “And Knox, make sure she gets that tree into her house.”

“I told her I’d bring it by tonight after closing.”

“Why don’t you leave a little early? Heath’s on the schedule tonight. We don’t need you.”

“That would be good.” I didn’t mention that Addy asked me to decorate

the tree, too.

“Remember what I said,” Mom called as I walked through the house and out the front door.

Sarah’s SUV was parked at the barn, so I headed there first. She was just getting out with Addy.

Addy ran to me. “Knox.”

I crouched down to return the hug she clearly wanted. I never knew I loved hugs so much until Ember wrapped her arms around my neck for the first time. I closed my eyes, breathing in Addy’s scent. “You smell like cinnamon,” I said when she pulled away.

“Mommy made me oatmeal with cinnamon.” She tripped over the word, and it came out more like *cimmanon*. “I got some on my shirt.”

Sarah followed at a slower pace. “I called the shop this morning to make sure we had the time right. I wasn’t sure if you’d changed your mind.”

I straightened, taking her in. She wore tight jeans, tall boots, and a heavy jacket. “I should have gotten your number before I left so we could touch base before today.”

Sarah raised a brow. “Your mom was surprised.”

“I didn’t mention it to her, but I should have. Mom knows everything that goes on around here. Let me close the gate so we’re not interrupted, and then I can take you to the field.”

“Can I help?” Addy asked.

“Sure, hop in the golf cart, and we’ll stop at the gate first.”

“Hat and gloves,” Sarah prompted as she handed her the items.

Addy bit her lower lip as she worked her fingers into each hole, then pulled the fuzzy hat over her head.

Sarah fussed over her hair while I got into the golf cart. Most people hiked to the fields, but we kept the golf carts for those who needed the lift. I didn’t want to waste time hiking when we could spend it picking out the perfect tree.

Sarah sat next to me, and Addy got into the back.

Addy was practically bouncing in her seat. "This is so fun."

I looked back at her. "We haven't done anything yet."

"We're at a Christmas tree farm. There are trees everywhere," Addy said, with her hands spread wide.

"I get to live here. How cool is that?" I asked her, feeling happier than I had in a long time.

Addy's eyes widened. "You *live* here?"

"My mom lives at the main house, and that's where I grew up. I have a cabin closer to the road, but it's hidden by the trees. Most of my brothers have houses here, too. Talon's is behind mine, and Emmett's and Heath's are on the opposite side of the mountain from ours. Sebastian was the only one who didn't build one. He lives in town with Ember. You probably know him from school." I wondered if Sarah was interested in him. They had a lot more in common than we did.

"He's a nice man. Quiet, though."

I stopped the cart to get out and close the gate. When I climbed back in, I said, "If we don't close it, people will drive to the barn and start walking around, whether we're officially open or not. It got to be a problem in the evening, too, when we couldn't get people to leave."

"Sounds like the gate's necessary. I hope we're not making your day longer."

"Mom said I could take off early tonight to help you with your tree."

"That's nice of her. She sounded surprised yet happy to hear that I was coming this morning."

I shook my head as I drove up the lane toward one of the prime fields. "She's probably matchmaking." As soon as the words were out of my mouth, I wanted to take them back. Why had I mentioned it? So far, I could play this off as me helping someone out. But now, I'd opened the door for it to mean something more, and I wasn't sure if I was ready for that.

I felt Sarah's gaze on my face before she finally asked, "Is there something going on?"

I glanced over at her, her red hair loose around her shoulders, her blue eyes more vibrant with the jacket she wore of the same color. She was gorgeous, and if circumstances were different, if I were free to have a relationship, I'd be interested. "We're really busy on the farm this time of year. I don't really have time for anything."

"I can imagine," Sarah murmured, and I wondered if I'd hurt her feelings. It was the last thing I wanted to do.

I parked the cart near the field of Fraser firs, and Addy took off through the rows of trees. Her squeal of delight trailed behind her.

I touched Sarah's arm to stop her from following Addy. "I'm not available for anything more, but it doesn't mean I don't find you attractive and wish things were different."

A pink flush appeared on her cheeks. "I'm not sure whether to be flattered or not." Before I could respond, she continued. "I'm not looking for anything, either. I'm wrapped up in Addy. I don't have much of a life outside of her."

"Same here. It's the farm and my family."

"Maybe we can be friends? I've never been to a Christmas tree farm. Tell me everything."

"We stagger the planting of the fields, making sure we have enough to cut for each season. This field has one of our more popular trees—the Fraser firs. I thought you'd like to look here first."

"I don't know anything about trees. So, I'll defer to your expertise."

"You can't go wrong with any of these. It comes down to how tall and full you like your trees. Anything you pick should be fuller than a fake one."

"I love the smell of these. I think I'm going to be spoiled after this and want a fresh tree every year."

I smiled. "Then I've done my job."

She laughed, her head falling back slightly, and it was the most beautiful sound I'd ever heard. I suspected she was as lonely as I was, even though she lived with her daughter. She needed adult companionship. Maybe we could be friends with no expectations.

I couldn't let my needs and desires overshadow what my family needed and wanted from me. I could give her a tree, my time, and maybe even friendship, but anything more was out of the question. No matter how much I wanted her.

CHAPTER 3



SARAH

The air was crisp, but the sun warmed our skin as we made our way through the rows of trees. Knox stayed by my side as Addy ran ahead, yelling over her shoulder, “Too short. Too skinny.”

“I’m worried we’re not going to find anything.”

Knox smiled, and it took my breath away. “She can take as much time as she needs. My brother Heath’s working today.”

I watched his face to gauge his expression. “I can’t help but think this is a huge imposition on your time.”

He gave me a pointed look. “You know, if we’re going to be friends, you’re going to have to stop apologizing for taking up my time.”

I smiled. “I’d like to be friends. There are some amazing perks, like holiday lights and Christmas trees.”

Knox nodded. “I’m an excellent friend.”

“You are.” We smiled at each other for a second until Addy skidded to a stop in front of us. “Are you listening? I found it.”

“What did you find, baby?” I pulled my gaze from Knox’s.

Addy rolled her eyes. “Our tree, silly.”

“Right,” I said, as Knox chuckled. It was his fault I was out of sorts. He threw me off balance. I could have sworn there was interest in his gaze, but he’d said he wasn’t looking for a relationship. Maybe he was only interested

in one-night stands or flings, and I wasn't in the market for one of those.

No matter how many times my sister, Grace, urged me to date, I hadn't bothered to in a while. I had to think about Addy, and reliable babysitters were hard to find.

Addy grabbed Knox's hand and pulled him to a tree she'd thrown her red scarf on. "Ta-da!"

"Is this the one?" Knox asked as he walked around the tree, carefully inspecting every inch of it and testing the sturdiness of the branches.

"It's perfect," Addy beamed, reminding me why I called her sunshine.

"What do you think?" Knox finally asked me.

"I think it would fit in the living room." Size was the most important criterion for me. Our house was cute but short on space. This tree had a beautiful blueish tint to it.

Knox winked at Addy. "You can't have a tree that's too big."

"How big is yours?" Addy asked him.

Knox cleared his throat. "I haven't gotten one yet."

"Do you usually?" I asked, curious about a man who lived on a Christmas tree farm.

"If there's time. We get one for the main house, and we always decorate an outside tree. It's a family tradition."

"You decorate trees outside?" Addy asked.

"Yeah, our parents would let us hike the property to find the perfect tree to decorate. Then me and my brothers would check on it each morning and fix the ornaments that fell off during the night."

"That's such a wonderful family tradition. When we were little, we used to buy one from a lot, then we switched to a fake tree."

Knox covered his ears. "Don't tell me about fake trees."

Addy giggled. "You're silly."

"Are you going to help me cut down your tree?" Knox asked Addy.

Addy nodded seriously. "Uh-huh."

“I’ll use the saw, and you just need to hold it so it doesn’t fall.” He showed her where to place her hands in the middle.

“I can do that.”

“Sarah, can you help her?” I moved into position, then he got down on the ground to cut the base. As he cut, the tree swayed, and our job got harder. “That’s it.”

The tree’s weight shifted toward us, but Knox hopped up to grab it. “I got it. I’ll tag it, and we’ll take it down to the barn later.”

“Should I pay for it at the shop?” I saw a sign that mentioned paying for all trees inside the barn.

Knox’s face screwed up. “Don’t worry about it. I told you this was my treat.”

“I can’t—”

He silenced me with a finger to my lips. “Let me.”

I’d let him do anything he wanted to me if he had that look on his face. His eyes turned dark with desire before he reluctantly pulled his finger away. “Friends, remember?”

I wasn’t sure how I could repay him. How did one return the favor of a Christmas tree? “Maybe we could make you cookies as a thank-you.”

Knox grinned, and I saw a dimple on his right cheek I’d never seen before. “I won’t turn down cookies. My mom makes them for the shop, so we’re not allowed to snack on them anymore.”

“Can I have some?” Addy asked.

“My mom sells them in the red barn. She won’t bring them out until later, though,” Knox said, regret filling his voice.

I smiled at him. “We’ll make some for you when you get to our place tonight. It’s the least we can do.”

Knox nodded. “I’m looking forward to it.”

He dragged the tree to the side and placed a tag around the top to indicate it was ours. “Let me take you to your car. The gates will open soon, and

you'll want to leave before the crowds arrive. There will be a line down the street since it's Saturday."

"I didn't realize how popular tree cutting was," I said as we returned to the golf cart.

Addy ran ahead of us.

"It's good for business. The only problem is our busy season is only seven weeks, depending on when Thanksgiving falls. We're looking for ways to expand the business. It's tough because so many of my brothers and I don't like having crowds of people on the property. It's our quiet place, you know?"

"I live in town, but I'd love to have more property. We don't have a lot of privacy or room to play."

"I like to sit on my deck in the morning and drink my coffee. It's high up, so it feels like I'm in a tree house. I can go for a hike whenever I want to. I love being so close to nature. But during the holidays, it's like the place isn't ours. I can't relax until the gates are closed each night."

"How will you expand the business without inviting more people onto the property?" I asked.

"Ireland has some ideas. She's helping my mom in the shop in her spare time, and she's the one who suggested selling the cookies. She's actively working with local artists to consign their work at the shop. They're hoping to have the store open year-round with holiday-specific items for sale. Sebastian's worried that it's not enough."

"Could you grow apples or pumpkins and expand into the fall market?" I asked him.

"As much as we want more income streams, I don't think we want to become a fall farm. It would be too much. We offered to host a few weddings, but we're limiting it to no more than five a year. We'll see how that goes."

"I'm sure you'll figure it out."

“We have our side hustles. I have the landscaping business. Heath is working for Morrison & Sons Contracting. Talon has his artwork, and Emmett makes furniture. Sebastian handles our books and has an accounting firm in town. Mom would like more of the income to come from the farm. We want her to feel supported.”

“That’s so nice that you live here and take care of her and the farm.” I loved that he and his brothers were family men.

Emotions crossed over his face, maybe guilt or regret. Then he said, “We do our best. I’m just never sure it’s enough.”

Addy was sitting in the driver’s seat of the cart. “Can I drive?”

“No,” I said firmly.

“I can teach you when you get a little older. But you can’t reach the pedals yet.” Knox showed her the pedals, and her lips turned down.

“Oh.”

“When you get tall enough, I’ll take you out.”

Addy moved into the backseat. “When will I be tall enough?”

Knox’s lips twitched. “I don’t know. Maybe when you’re a teenager.”

Her shoulders slumped. “Uh. That’s forever.”

Knox’s lips twitched as he turned on the engine. “Is she always this dramatic?”

“Yes.” I was so used to being alone with Addy. There was no one to share these moments with. My parents watched her when they could, but it wasn’t the same as raising her with someone.

Gary had broken up with me while I was pregnant. He didn’t pressure me about my decision to keep her but said he wasn’t interested in being a father.

We slowly wound our way down the mountain. I enjoyed being in nature more than I thought I would. The air was cool, but the sun was shining. I bet the lights strung from poles on the path were pretty at night.

Knox parked the cart by the red barn. He climbed out and shoved his hands into his pockets. “You should come back when it’s dark. The lights on

the paths are all lit. It's nice."

"I was just thinking about that. Do you have any more of those lights you put on our front lawn? The one that's shaped like a present."

"No, but Ireland asked if we could do a walk-through or drive-through light show with those. I think Talon is working on a few of them. Maybe we'll have something ready before New Year's."

Addy's eyes were wide. "A light show?"

"Mmm. Would you like that?"

"That would be neat."

"High praise from a kid," Knox said solemnly. "We'll see what we can do. Heath contracted someone to build a second lane on the other side of the mountain for secondary traffic, whether it's for an event or a wedding, or maybe even a drive-through light show."

"I can't imagine living here. It's so magical."

"Without the crowds, it is. Speaking of..." He nodded toward the road where cars were already lining up at the gate. "Let's get you out of here."

I touched his arm as Addy ran to my car. "Thank you for helping us this morning. I know you're busy with the season. I can't thank you enough." I kissed his cheek, the stubble tickling my lips, and the brief touch was enough to send my heart stutter-stepping in my chest.

I headed toward my car, clicking the locks so Addy could climb in. Knox made his way to the gate, holding up his hand as he waved me through.

I didn't let out the breath I'd been holding until we made a left onto the road and were headed back to town.

"That was fun. Can we come back?"

"Knox mentioned something about seeing the lights at night."

"That would be amazing."

It didn't take much to impress kids, not at Addy's age. But I had to admit, the farm was magical. With the lights at night, it would be even more so. I never imagined that the man who worked landscaping around our

neighborhood lived on a Christmas tree farm. “Can you imagine growing up here?”

“I’d run through the trees all day,” Addy said wistfully.

“What did you think about him and his brothers decorating one of the live trees?”

“I’d decorate them all,” she said, gazing out the window.

I smiled. “I guess it’s good you don’t live there, then. We’d run out of decorations.”

“Just buy more,” Addy said, like it was no big deal.

I tried to keep worries about finances from her. But the reality was, I was a single mom. Even with Gary’s checks, I had to be careful about how I spent our money. I wished things were as easy as she thought.

When I was alone at night, I longed for companionship. Someone to share my hopes and dreams with. I’d resigned myself to raising Addy alone and assumed most men weren’t interested in the baggage that comes with being a single mom. But Knox made me wonder if there were guys out there who would be interested in me *and* my daughter.

We stopped at the store on the way home and bought enough baking ingredients to make several batches of cookies. I wanted to show Knox how appreciative I was that he spent his morning with us when he could have been drinking his coffee alone on his deck, or even going for a hike.

He’d thought it was important for us to have a tree of our own, and I was forever grateful he’d shown us his farm. We played holiday music in the background as we baked.

“I can’t wait for Knox to come. Then we can decorate the tree and eat cookies.”

“I think you’re eating plenty of cookies now.” I pointed at the empty spots where cookies had been.

“I’ve only had a few,” Addy insisted.

“Uh-huh.” I was sure she’d snagged more when I went to the bathroom

earlier. When they were cool, I placed them in tins. We managed to make gingerbread and sugar cookies. In the afternoon, we decorated them with white icing and red and green sprinkles.

We made a mess, but it was so much fun. I couldn't remember the last time I baked cookies for the holidays. I was usually so tired on the weekends that we just went to the playground or watched movies on the couch. It was normally a low-key day. I never had something like Knox to look forward to at the end of the night.

Today we created memories I knew I'd hold on to for the rest of my life. Even if nothing came from it.

CHAPTER 4



KNOX

A Saturday had never flown by so quickly, and I think it had everything to do with my impending date to set up Sarah and Addy's Christmas tree. I wanted to see the looks on their faces when the tree was draped with twinkling lights.

Mom insisted I take some fresh-cut garland in case they wanted to decorate a mantle or a railing. I loved that she wanted to make them happy, too.

When I pulled into their driveway, the lights we'd hung on the porch were shining brightly. I unhooked the tree from the truck and carried it to the porch, where I leaned it against the siding.

The door opened before I could ring the bell, and Addy stood in the doorway. "You're here."

Sarah appeared behind her in dark jeans and a hunter-green sweater. "Addy, you're not supposed to answer the door when you don't know who it is."

She rolled her eyes. "I know who it is. It's Knox."

I moved closer, my lips twitching at her cuteness. "Listen to your mother."

"Can we put up the tree now?" Addy asked me.

The smell of cookies wafted outside, and my stomach rumbled.

“Have you eaten?” Sarah asked me.

“Mom brought me a sandwich this afternoon. I can’t remember when, though.” On days like today, the hours blurred together, and I had no sense of time.

Sarah stepped back, ushering me inside. “We made pizza. It’s nothing special, but there’s a few slices left over if you want it.”

“I’d love it. Thank you.” I stepped inside, where it was just as quaint as the other night. Except this time, I could tell that Sarah had made an effort to tidy the countertops, including the stack of paperwork that seemed to consist of Addy’s school drawings and work.

“After Knox eats, we can put up the tree,” Sarah said to Addy, whose lower lip protruded.

Cookies rested on the cooling racks, while others directly on the counter were already iced. The rest of the counter was covered in red and green sprinkles. It reminded me of Mom’s kitchen when Ember was helping to bake. “These look great.”

“We spent all day making cookies,” Addy said proudly.

“You made these for me?” I asked.

Sarah blushed. “We needed to make some for the holidays. It was the perfect timing.”

“We haven’t made cookies in a long time,” Addy said.

I chuckled at Sarah’s discomfort. “I’m glad I motivated you to make some.”

Addy wandered into the living room to watch a show that was playing on the TV.

Sarah put two slices of pizza on a plate and heated them in the microwave. “I can’t keep any secrets with her around.”

I winked at her, enjoying the glimpse I was getting into their lives. “I kind of like it.”

When the microwave beeped, she placed the plate in front of me. I ate

standing up, inhaling the warm pizza.

“You must have been hungry,” Sarah observed, and I couldn’t help but wonder if this is what it would be like to come home to her. A meal heated up in the oven or microwave, freshly baked cookies, and smiling faces.

“I get so busy I don’t even realize I haven’t eaten in a while.”

“I get like that when I’m working from home. There’s no one to talk to, and I’m motivated to get everything done before Addy gets home from school.”

“What do you do?” I asked, curious to get to know her better.

“I work for an insurance company as a claims supervisor. That’s just a job. I edit authors’ books on the side. That’s what I enjoy doing.”

“You work for a publishing company?” I was impressed.

“I work for authors who publish themselves as opposed to going through a publishing house. The ability to publish independently has really opened up the market. Publishers used to determine what readers wanted to read, but now, the market determines it. If you want to write about a certain subject, there’s bound to be someone who’s interested enough to buy it.”

“Why don’t you edit full time if that’s what you prefer doing?” I asked her, genuinely curious about her.

“It’s nice as a side hustle; it gives me extra income. But what would I do about health insurance, and what if I can’t fill my calendar? I wouldn’t be able to pay the mortgage or our other bills. It’s scary to take that leap.”

“Owning a business can be stressful at times.” If she wanted to be an editor and support herself with her earnings, I hoped she found a way to do it full time. Life was too short to stay in a job that didn’t fulfill you. I learned that when my dad died a few years ago. I quickly reevaluated my life and realized I wasn’t happy at the architectural firm. I wanted to be working outside, designing landscapes and gardens, not inside designing houses or buildings. I chewed the last bite of pizza, then rinsed the dish and put it in the dishwasher. “Are you ready to put up the tree?”

A few seconds later, Addy ran into the room. “I am.”

“You have your tree stand set up where you want the tree to go?”

“It’s in here,” Sarah said, gesturing for me to follow her into the living room.

Addy stood by the tree stand, which was in a bump out with a bay window. “The tree will go here.”

“Perfect. I’ll bring it in. Why don’t you get your lights and decorations ready?” I asked Addy, wanting to give her something to keep her occupied. Her energy was infectious.

Sarah opened the front door for me. I cut the netting we placed around the tree for transport. I trimmed the base of the tree so it would soak up water more easily, then carried it through the house to the stand.

Sarah closed the door behind me and rushed to hold the tree in place while I tightened the screws for the stand.

“How does that look?” I asked them.

Addy stood in front of the tree with her eyes slightly rounded. “It’s beautiful.”

Her appreciation for the little things I’d done for them sent a pang of longing through my heart. I wanted to say something to her to capture the moment, but there was a lump in my throat.

Sarah moved across the room and studied it carefully. “It’s leaning a little to the right.”

“Let’s get it how you want it.” We adjusted it several times until Addy declared it perfect.

“Now, the lights,” Addy said, pulling the multi-colored strands of bulbs out of a nearby box.

“Colored lights will look great.”

Addy beamed at my praise.

Sarah helped me unravel the strands and drape them around the tree. Addy followed us, making tiny adjustments to the way we hung them on the

branches.

It was nice to spend time with someone who wasn't my family. Their home was warm and cozy. Even though it was small, it was packed full of framed photos of family, various holidays, and school events, and there were books stacked on the shelves—everything from children's books to worn paperbacks. Blankets and pillows were strewn on the floor as if Addy had made a fort and then given up.

“Let's see if they work.” I plugged the lights in and stood back.

Sarah clasped her hands together in front of her mouth, and if I wasn't mistaken, her eyes were a little shiny. “It looks beautiful. Thank you, Knox.”

Addy danced around the tree, singing something about rockin' around a tree, but I couldn't take my gaze from Sarah. She looked so beautiful, bathed in the light of the fire and now the tree. If her daughter wasn't here, I might have told her what I saw when I looked at her.

When she glanced at me, my breath caught in my throat. “Do you like it?”

“I love it.” But I wasn't referring to the tree.

Warmth spread through my chest, and I cleared my throat. “Do you have a star or something for the top of the tree?”

Addy rushed to a box, dug through the tissue, and lifted a star. She handed it to me, her eyes shining with excitement.

“You want this on top?” I asked her.

She nodded. “Yes, please.”

My heart squeezed at her politeness. I carefully set the star on the lone branch at the top and adjusted it until Addy deemed it straight.

I plugged it in, and Addy squealed with delight. “We have a real tree.”

“Now, it's perfect,” I murmured.

We took in the tree only for a moment before Addy rushed to grab more decorations from the boxes.

Sarah put hooks on the ornaments while Addy placed them on the low-

hanging branches, and I handled the top. I made sure to ask her about my placement occasionally.

She'd tip her head to the side, consider it for a second, and then say it was either perfect or needed to be moved. The process took longer than it needed to, but I enjoyed interacting with Addy.

I loved my niece, Ember, but this was different. I was getting to know this little girl and her mother.

After we'd placed every ornament, the tree looked a little busy to me, but Addy was pleased with the end result. I finally sat on the couch to admire it, my arms spread wide on the back of the couch. Every muscle in my body ached from working on the farm.

"Let me get some cookies for you," Sarah said as she went into the kitchen. "You deserve a snack after that."

I hadn't realized how much my feet hurt from walking around all day. I pulled off my boots and set them aside, wiggling my toes.

"Are you tired?" Addy climbed onto the couch and curled up next to me. She seemed to have no sense of physical boundaries.

"It was a long day for me. Are you tired, too?" I asked.

Addy shook her head and said seriously, "I got my second wind."

She was so adorable I couldn't help but chuckle.

Sarah carried a plate of cookies into the room and placed them on the ottoman. "More like her eighth wind. This girl can go all day long."

Addy reached for one, and Sarah said, "Just one. You had a bunch earlier."

"Can I have more than one?" I asked Sarah.

"You brought us a tree and helped us put it up. You can have as many as you want."

"No fair," Addy whined.

"Eat your cookie. It's time for you to go to bed," Sarah said firmly.

Addy ate her cookie in a few bites and drank the apple cider Sarah

brought her.

I should have moved off the couch and made a move to leave, but I was so comfortable here, with the tree in view.

“Now, it’s time for bed,” Sarah said to Addy before turning to me. “You enjoy your cookies. I’m going to put her to bed. There are glasses in the corner cabinet if you want to get some water. Sorry I’m not a better host.”

“Don’t worry about it. You have Addy.” I understood how hard things were with kids. Not that Sebastian complained, but we saw how demanding Ember could be. And when we weren’t there to help, he was on his own.

Sarah moved toward the stairs, and Addy surprised me by crawling into my lap and wrapping her arms around my neck. “Thank you for our tree. I love it.”

Everything inside me melted. “You’re welcome.”

My voice came out gruff because my throat was thick with emotion. When she scrambled off my lap, her knee dug into my thigh. I didn’t even feel it because her sweetness caused my heart to ache for things I shouldn’t want.

“Night, Knox,” Addy said with a shy smile.

“Good night. Sleep tight.”

Then she laughed as she took off for the stairs. “That’s what Mommy says.”

Then they were gone, and I was alone in their living room. The tree was festive and cheerful. A few minutes later, I felt a surge of energy, so I grabbed the garland out of my truck and placed it on the mantle for Sarah to arrange as she saw fit.

Sarah came downstairs a short while later. “Oh, wow. I didn’t realize you brought garland. It looks great there.”

Suddenly uncomfortable, I moved away from the mantle. “You can put it wherever. My mom wanted you to have it.”

“That was nice of her. I can’t thank you enough for everything you did

for us. It's such a wonderful memory for Addy."

"I hope it was a good one for you, too," I said before I could think about how my words would land.

She smiled softly. "We wouldn't have been able to do this without you."

"If you ever need help in the future, just talk to me or one of my brothers. We'll get it set up for you."

Her expression fell slightly. "That's very generous of you."

"That's what friends are for, right?"

She sat on the couch and looked uncertainly at me. "But we've only just met."

I sat next to her. "I like doing nice things for you. Maybe it's because you're a single mother, or maybe it's because Addy's adorable. I just know how hard things are for Sebastian as a single dad, and maybe you don't have the same support system he has."

"My parents watch Addy when they can. But they have an active social life."

I grabbed another cookie from the tin. The gingerbread men were crispy on the outside and soft on the inside, just how I liked them. "The cookies are payment enough."

Sarah smiled softly. "I'll put some in a box for you to take home."

"I hope my mom doesn't get jealous that I have a new cookie supplier," I teased.

Sarah laughed, and again, I was enthralled with the sound. When had I cared if I pleased anyone else, much less made them laugh with abandon? It was becoming one of my favorite challenges.

She straightened and rested a hand on my thigh. The warmth of her palm seared through my jeans, and my breath caught in my throat. Then she lightly squeezed my thigh, and desire shot straight to my dick. I nearly groaned when she removed her hand. "You're sweet. I bet your mom loves having so many boys."

“I don’t know if she’d say that. Growing up, we were a handful,” I said, trying to distract myself with thoughts of my mother.

“I bet.” Then she tipped her head to the side. “What were you like?”

Our faces were close, but I didn’t want to lose the connection, so I didn’t dare move away. “I was a daredevil. Emmett tried to corral us, but I was the second oldest, and I didn’t feel the same need for safety or adherence to authority.”

“*You* were wild?” Sarah asked, leaning in even more.

“I’d say adventurous, with no care for my safety.”

She tipped her head back and laughed. “I love it.”

“Emmett was grumpy, even back then. He was the one who’d get the most flack from my parents. He was supposed to know better.”

She smiled at me, sending my heart tumbling. “But not you?”

“I had a little more leeway. Looking back, I feel a little bad about it. But at the time, it was fun.”

“I bet. What was Sebastian like?”

“He brought a book with him everywhere we went. He wouldn’t necessarily participate in whatever crazy scheme we were involved in, but he’d be there with us. He’d help us when we ran into a problem, especially if it involved numbers or measurements.”

“So he was always good at math.”

“Scary good. The rest of us were more all over the place with grades. But I excelled at things where I could use my hands.” Then my cheeks heated, even though I hadn’t intended to make an innuendo.

“Oh, really?” she asked, amusement evident in her voice. “I would think all of you would be good with your hands since your brothers work in construction, art, and furniture making.”

“I suppose that’s true.” But I wanted her to think of me. Not my brothers. I was tempted to ask if she preferred someone more studious, like Sebastian, who had an office job. But I didn’t. I told her I wasn’t interested in a

relationship, and I shouldn't lead her on.

"I think what you're doing on the farm is amazing. With your family working together, you've created a magical place."

"We need more people to think like that. The farm does okay, but it has to sustain us for the whole year. That's why we have side hustles and are continually coming up with ways to make it more profitable."

"I don't have any advice. Although I'd love to see the drive-through light display. Addy would, too."

"I think it would be time-consuming to make a lot of those structures. The present Talon made for you was small. But I'll see what he thinks about it. I know he's busy with commissioned work this time of the year."

"I think I've seen some of his work at a shop downtown."

"He does consign his work and takes orders for custom pieces. I think he'd prefer to go to custom pieces in the future."

"I wish I had a talent for something like that."

Knox smiled. "I'd imagine you're good with grammar."

I rolled my eyes. "That's not exactly an exciting or interesting career. Besides, most people hate commas."

"I don't have a strong feeling about them one way or the other. I don't put things into words often for my work. Although, I probably need a new contract."

Sarah tipped her head to the side. "Why's that?"

"I have a number of people not paying on time. Sebastian keeps saying I need to tighten the language in the contract and charge more for my services. Customers will take advantage of any loophole."

"I have to agree. I struggled with the same when I first worked as an editor. Do I make authors sign a contract? Should I charge a deposit when I receive the booking or the manuscript? I realized if I wanted this side job to make enough money to be my full-time job, I need to be smart about it."

"Would you mind looking at my contract?" I asked her, wanting to extend

our relationship, even if it was business-related.

Sarah nodded. "I'd love to help. You've done so much for us."

"I'd appreciate it if you could look at it when you have time."

Sarah smiled, and the warmth went straight to my chest.

I wanted to close the distance between us and kiss her. I wanted to hold her in my arms and tell her she was doing everything right with Addy. I wanted to do nice things for her.

Instead, I pulled on my boots, feeling a little like I was jumping out of my skin. I'd said we were friends, and we were doing things that friends did. But it didn't feel like any other friendship I'd ever had. My mind and my body were going in opposing directions. Then I stood and headed toward the front door.

Addy and Sarah were so grateful for the small gestures. It made me feel good. But I couldn't forget my responsibilities. I needed to get some rest so I was fully functional on the farm tomorrow.

"Do you get any days off?" Sarah asked as she followed me, then grabbed a tin of what was most likely cookies.

"This year, I'm splitting my time between working on the farm and hanging lights on houses. I don't have time for much else. It feels like I don't have a life." Although tonight was different.

Her hand landed on my arm. "I don't believe that."

"I'm so tired at the end of the night that all I do is grab something quick to eat and fall into bed. Then I get up and do it all over again the next day. Besides, Emmett isn't as reliable as he used to be. He has late mornings with Ireland and early nights. I'm happy to work extra so he can have that time with his new girlfriend."

She patted my arm before opening the door. "You should take care of yourself, too."

"We just have to get through to January," I said, repeating the familiar phrase my family had said for as long as I could remember. I stepped through

the doorway and onto the porch.

She followed me outside, wrapping her sweater around herself. “You still have people buying trees after Christmas?”

“Not so much, but we have sales on our holiday décor, and people come out in droves for those. That keeps us busy from Christmas to New Year’s. Then we officially close for the season. Although, Ireland and Mom have been talking about keeping the barn open longer for Valentine’s Day. I guess we’ll see if that’s worthwhile.”

“I know it’s just a short time that you’re so busy, but I hate to see you do too much and exhaust yourself.”

Other than my mother and maybe Emmett, no one had ever worried about me like this.

Instead of expressing the emotions coursing through my body, I said, “I’ll be okay. I always am.”

“Thanks again for letting us pick out a tree and helping to put it up.” Then her eyes widened. “Are you sure I can’t pay you for this?” She made a move as if to go inside, and I stopped her with a hand on her elbow. “Don’t worry about it. Remember? It’s my gift to you.”

She smiled brighter than the lights on the porch. “Then that’s one of the best presents I’ve ever received.”

I moved closer to her, one hand moving to her hip. I brushed a strand of hair off her forehead. I wanted to drop my lips to hers and see if she tasted like cookies and cider, but I didn’t. “Then you haven’t been with the right guy.”

Her cheeks turned pink.

Before I could do something stupid like kiss the woman I said I wanted to be friends with, I forced myself to let go of her arm and stepped back. “Thank you for a nice evening. Please tell Addy the same.”

“I will,” Sarah said softly.

I turned and walked away. We were friends, but it didn’t feel right.

Nothing felt as good as stepping close to her and imagining what it would feel like to kiss her.

This thing with Sarah and Addy was dangerous because I wanted a lot more than friendship. It started out as doing something nice for a single mom, but it had turned into so much more.

I got in the car and turned on the engine, waiting a beat for the cabin to heat up. The engine whined as I backed up.

Sarah stood on the porch, her arms holding herself against the cold. I wanted to be the man to warm her on nights like this, but it wouldn't be fair to either of us. I couldn't be the man she needed. I needed to be present for my family, and I couldn't do that if I was distracted by her and Addy.

Sarah would find a nice man who worked a regular nine-to-five. That man would love Addy as if she were his own.

Jealousy coursed through my chest as I drove home. I didn't want to see them with anyone else, but I couldn't stake a claim to them.

CHAPTER 5



SARAH

On the porch the other night, I thought Knox was going to kiss me. In that moment, I wanted it more than anything, but today, I wasn't sure. He'd said he wasn't looking for a relationship, and I wasn't sure what to make of that and his conflicting actions.

I wasn't sure it was a good idea to get any closer to him if he wanted friendship and I wanted something more. That was a recipe for disaster. I didn't want to get hurt, and I didn't want to invite another man into Addy's life who wouldn't be there for her in the long run.

Whenever I looked at the tree or the decorations on my porch, I got this warm sensation in my chest. It was like being wrapped in a cozy blanket. Knox made me feel seen and cared for. Other than my parents, I didn't get a lot of that in my life.

I was the caretaker, the one thinking of Addy all the time. No one took care of me. I couldn't get too used to Knox being around because I wasn't sure I'd see much of him after last night. We hadn't made plans to do anything else together, and I knew he was busy with the farm.

On Thursday morning, I volunteered at Addy's school, and on the way home, I picked up lunch.

When I saw a Monroe Christmas Tree Farm truck parked at the curb and a man who looked a lot like Knox hanging lights on a porch, I parked behind

him. I was already grabbing my lunch and climbing out of the car before I could question whether this was a good idea.

“Knox?” I asked as I approached him.

He lowered his arms and made his way down the ladder. “Sarah. What are you doing here?”

Knox wore a baseball cap pulled low on his forehead, a navy tee that stretched tight over his chest and biceps, worn jeans, and work boots. I’d never been attracted to someone who worked with their hands, but I was getting it now. He was sexy and completely unaware of his good looks. It was a potent combination.

“I was driving by and saw you. Thought I’d stop and offer you half my sub. If you’re hungry, that is.” I lifted my carryout bag.

“I could eat,” he said as he moved closer to me, and my cheeks heated at the thought of him eating me.

Knowing he couldn’t have been thinking what I was, I asked, “Would you want to eat lunch together, or did you have other plans?”

He brushed off his hands and sat on the porch steps. “The owners are at work, so we could eat here.”

I sat next to him, unwrapped my sub, and handed him half. “It’s just turkey with lettuce, tomato, and mayo.”

He took a large bite, chewed, and swallowed. “This is great. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” We ate in silence for a few seconds before I asked, “Did you eat all of the cookies we made?”

Knox nodded his head. “Those didn’t last long.”

“I can bring you more.”

Knox chuckled. “My mom is going to wonder who’s baking me cookies.”

I smiled, enjoying our back-and-forth. “You could tell her it’s a woman.”

He groaned. “That’s never a good idea. Even if it’s platonic, she’ll get other ideas.”

I couldn’t blame her. I was already having thoughts of more. So much

more. “I volunteered at the school this morning. I quiz the kids on their math facts.”

He gave me a thoughtful look. “That’s nice of you to do that.”

“I can usually take off once a month to help out.” I wanted to have the flexibility to volunteer even more, but that would require the courage to quit my job and make a go of my editing business.

We ate in silence for a few seconds before I asked, “Is holiday decorating part of the Monroe Landscaping experience now?”

“I think I told you it started out as someone asking if I minded putting them up, and then he must have told his neighbors because the word spread. I didn’t charge enough that first time, and now I feel like I can’t increase it.”

“You can always reevaluate where you are, taking into consideration your time. You’re busy this time of year, and if customers want you to do this, then you deserve to be compensated for it.”

“So you’re saying be stronger, and stick to my guns.”

I laughed. “Something like that. Although, I don’t listen to my own advice. I want to do a good job, but I worry I’m not charging enough. Sometimes I think it’s best to have fewer clients paying more, rather than more clients paying less.”

Knox nodded. “I think you’re right. I’ll have to think about what you said. Why don’t you give me your number and email so I can shoot you over the contract?”

“Oh, right. I almost forgot about that.” Thrilled we’d have a reason to continue to talk, I gave him my information. Then I stood, gathering our trash. “I’d better get back. Good luck with the rest of your decorating.” He followed me to my car, and when I reached the driver’s side door, I turned to face him.

His blue eyes were more pronounced next to the navy-colored shirt. “Thank you for stopping by with lunch.”

“You’re welcome.” Was I coming on too strong? Was this not something

that a friend did? I'd been working from home too long to know what the right thing was to do in this situation. "I'll see you around."

"Sarah?" His tone was soft and pleading.

I hesitated. "Yeah?"

He leaned toward me, and my breath caught in my throat, thinking he was going to kiss me this time. Instead, his lips brushed lightly over my cheek, and his scruff abraded my skin in the most delicious way. Then he turned and walked away.

I willed my racing heart to slow. A brush of his lips shouldn't send my nerves into overdrive.

I slid behind the wheel and turned on the car. Had it been so long that I had no idea how to interact with a man? He was a friend. It was a platonic kiss on the cheek. I shouldn't be feeling any sort of way about it.

As I drove away, it sure felt like the promise of something more. I wanted his lips on mine. I wanted more, but I had no business feeling this way.

Maybe I wasn't cut out for this. I couldn't be friends with a man who made me burn hot every time I was in his presence. I shouldn't be stopping to share my lunch with him anytime I saw him around the neighborhood.

I went home and tried to lose myself in work, squeezing in time for edits before Addy got off the bus. We ate dinner quickly and then rushed to get ready for the first night of the musical. Technically, it was a series of skits and holiday songs. The director kept everything short so the kids could manage it. I'd seen bits and pieces of it but not the whole thing at once, and I was looking forward to it.

I wondered if Knox would be there for the first performance since Ember was in the play. "Come on, Addy. We're going to be late."

"I'm coming," she called as she ran down the hall and slid in her stockinged feet toward me.

I'd tell her not to run, but we were in a hurry.

"Do you think a lot of people will be there?" She sat on her butt to put on

her shoes, and I leaned down to button the straps for her.

I stood and slung my purse over my shoulder. “I would think so. You’re not nervous, are you?”

As we walked outside, Addy couldn’t quite meet my gaze. “What if I mess up?”

“It will be fine if that happens. You’re doing this for fun, remember?” I asked gently.

“Yeah.”

I helped her into the back seat. “You’ll be great. I promise.”

Addy sighed. “I hope so.”

“Besides, you’re my sunshine. You light up everyone around you, and it will be the same when you’re on that stage.”

Addy’s lips curled into a smile.

I climbed into my seat and pulled on my seat belt before turning on the car. “I’m excited to see it all together.” As I drove, Addy talked about the rehearsal practice the day before and how one of the kids forgot his lines.

The red truck with the Monroe Christmas Tree Farm emblem on the driver’s side door was parked in the lot when we pulled in. I purposely parked a row over so if it was Knox, he wouldn’t think we were following him.

When I opened Addy’s door, her gaze snagged on it, and she asked, “Will Knox be here? That’s his truck, isn’t it?”

I took her hand and helped her out, then shut the door behind her. Clicking the locks, I said, “It might be his or one of his brothers’.”

She skipped ahead of me in the parking lot, narrowly missing a puddle. “That’s so cool. I can’t wait to see him.”

“I don’t know if he’ll be here,” I said as we walked toward the entrance of the high school auditorium.

Inside, I followed the signs for the performers. I hugged her, wished her luck, then I went back to the lobby. I was alone because my parents weren’t

coming until the Friday performance. I'd told Gary about it, but he hadn't expressed any interest in coming, and I didn't want to get Addy's hopes up.

There was a white Christmas tree in the corner, and holiday music played from a speaker. I felt nervous or anxious, and I didn't think it had anything to do with Addy's upcoming performance.

I looked around the room for anyone to talk to, but I didn't have a lot of friends at Addy's school. Sometimes it felt like there was a wall between the parents who were divorced and the ones who were still married. My gaze caught and held on Knox, who was leaning against the wall in the corner. I headed toward him without looking away from him.

When I stood in front of him, Knox moved off the wall. "I should have realized you'd be here."

"I wasn't even thinking about it when I saw you earlier." *And vowed not to find myself alone with you again.* "Is your family here?"

"Tonight, it's just me and Sebastian. My brothers and I are staggering our attendance so we don't leave the farm short-handed."

That only ramped up my nerves. I ran my fingers over my skirt, smoothing the nonexistent wrinkles. "That makes sense. Where's Sebastian?"

He nodded toward the auditorium, where people were starting to file inside. "He's supposed to be saving me a seat. Want to sit with us, or are you here with someone?"

I cleared my throat. "My parents are coming tomorrow night, so it's just me."

Knox smiled, lightly touched my elbow, and guided me toward the entrance to the auditorium. "You have to sit with us."

We grabbed a program, and I rifled through it to find Addy's name listed as a member of the chorus. I was so proud of her. I just wished she had the same support from her father.

Knox leaned down to ask. "Do you mind if I ask where Addy's father is?"

I sighed. "He wasn't interested in coming. I'm not sure how else to

explain it.”

Knox winced. “That’s unfortunate.”

“It is, but I’m here for her, and my parents are, too.”

“Don’t forget about me,” Knox said as we made our way down the aisle.

Knox sat next to a man who wore black-rimmed glasses, and his brown hair was longer in the front. “Sarah, this is my brother, Sebastian, Ember’s dad.”

I reached over Knox to shake Sebastian’s hand, feeling the heat of Knox’s body as I did. “It’s so nice to officially meet you. I’ve seen you around at school events.”

“Her daughter’s Addy,” Knox said to Sebastian.

Sebastian smiled in recognition. “Ember talks about her. We should get them together for a playdate.”

“That would be nice.”

Next to me, Knox stiffened, and I wondered if it would be stepping over a line to hang out with his brother. But I planned playdates all the time for Addy.

“Is Addy nervous?” Sebastian asked me.

“You know, I didn’t think she was until we were driving here. The size of the auditorium isn’t helping matters. How was Ember feeling?”

Sebastian smiled. “She was excited about it. She feels that the location makes it more official. Ember loves performing. She takes dance classes and has recitals a few times a year.”

“I bet she’s used to it, then.” I tried to focus on my program, wondering how I’d gotten into this situation. Instead of creating space between me and Knox, we were only seeing more of each other.

Knox nudged my shoulder. “They’ll both do great, and even if they mess up, it will be enjoyable.”

“That’s what I told her,” I said as the auditorium lights dimmed, and the director came onto the stage to introduce the play.

When she finished speaking, everyone clapped, and the red velvet curtains opened. The chorus stood in the middle of the stage on risers, and she directed them through their first song, “We Wish You a Merry Christmas.”

When they were finished, the crowd clapped, and Knox leaned over to say, “I love this stuff. It’s a good thing Sebastian has a daughter, and I have an excuse to come.”

I smiled, loving that he enjoyed it. “You love all musicals, or just kids in general?”

He shifted his body so he was closer to me, and it was easier to talk. “I think it’s the kids.”

“Why am I not surprised?” I asked.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” he whispered.

“That you’re a big softie underneath that mountain man thing you have going on.” I couldn’t believe I’d said that out loud.

He shifted in his seat and gave me a look. “Mountain man?”

“Yeah, you know, you’re built, wear flannels, and probably wield an ax like no one’s business.”

Knox nodded seriously, as if he couldn’t help but agree with me. Then the skit part of the performance started, and we fell silent, both lost in the performance.

When one of the kids messed up a line or grabbed the wrong prop, everyone laughed. The kids were smiling and appeared to be having a good time.

Knox leaned close, his breath ghosting over my ear. “Does Addy have a speaking part?”

I shook my head, hyperaware that he was close. “She was too scared. Maybe next year.”

Knox gestured toward Ember, who was crossing the stage. Her voice rang out loudly across the auditorium. She threw her arms out as she delivered her

lines and helped the boy in the scene with her when he forgot his.

When it was over, the entire chorus erupted into song again.

“She did great,” I whispered, and Knox smiled at me. Each time we shared something, I felt that warmth in my chest. I wanted to feel it all the time.

When the performance was over, we stood and clapped as the kids came out onto the stage and bowed. They looked happy and relieved at the same time.

When the kids ran off stage, Knox touched my shoulder as he slid past me in the tight space. “I forgot the flowers in the truck. I’ll be right back.”

When he was gone, I said to Sebastian, “Ember was so good up there. She’s a natural on the stage.”

He pushed his glasses up his nose. “I don’t know where she gets it from. I’m not into this stuff at all. I’d much rather be behind the scenes, maybe helping with the set.”

“What’s her mother like?” I asked, tipping my head to the side.

“She’s a bit more dramatic than I am, but she never performed in the high school plays or anything.”

“Sometimes your kids surprise you with talents that you have no idea where they came from.”

We made our way to the lobby to wait for the kids as they came out to greet their family members.

Knox rushed up to us with two bouquets in his hands. “Did I miss them?”

“They just started to come out,” Sebastian said.

Ember rushed up to Sebastian just as he crouched down to hug her. “You did great.”

Sebastian pulled back, and Ember asked Knox, “Did you see me?”

“You were amazing up there. I’m so proud of you.”

Ember smiled wide.

Knox handed her one of the bouquets. “These are for you.”

Before I could ask who the other one was for, Addy found me. “Mommy, Mommy,” she cried as she grabbed my hand.

I dropped down to her level. “You sounded amazing.”

“It was easier than I thought.”

“Did you see who’s here?” I asked when I straightened.

“Knox?” she asked, looking up at him, her eyes wide with surprise.

“Hey, you were great. I wanted to give you these.”

“You bought me flowers?”

“I brought flowers for Ember, and when I remembered you were in the play, too, I split them. I hope that’s okay.”

“I don’t mind,” Ember said.

Addy took the bouquet and sniffed the petals. “They’re pretty. Thank you.”

I wondered if she was wondering where her father was. “Don’t forget, Grandma and Grandpa are coming to see you on Friday.”

Then Ember grabbed her hand and tugged her over to some kids who were talking and laughing.

“You didn’t have to give her the flowers. She would have been okay.” The emotion was making my throat a little tight.

“I wanted to. She seemed to enjoy them.”

He was being nice to us, showing us attention we didn’t get from other males besides my father. It was nice, and it made me think that Knox was a good guy who had a lot to offer the right woman. I wasn’t sure why he was holding himself back.

“We’re going out to dinner. Do you want to join us?” Sebastian asked.

I shook my head. “Oh, I wouldn’t want to intrude on your family dinner.”

“We’re just going to the Italian restaurant. You’re welcome to join us. I’m sure Ember would prefer Addy’s company to ours.”

“Let me see what Addy wants to do.” When she returned, I asked, “Do you want to go to dinner with Ember and her family?”

“Could we?” Addy asked me.

“If you want to. I wasn’t sure if you wanted to hang out with just me.”

“I want to go with Ember. It will be fun.” Addy smiled at Ember, who seemed enthusiastic about the idea, too.

“I guess it’s settled. As long as you don’t mind?” I asked Knox.

“Not at all. The more the merrier. It’s rare I get an evening off during the season. I intend to enjoy it.”

We met them at the restaurant. The girls sat together on one side of the booth, Sebastian in a chair on the end, which left me next to Knox.

As we perused the menus, his thigh fell against my left leg, the heat searing my bare skin. It was distracting. I wondered whether he noticed or if he’d done it on purpose. We placed our orders and waited for the house salad and breadsticks to arrive.

The girls were talking about every misspoken word and misstep during the performance.

“Will you be here every night?” I asked Sebastian.

“Yeah, I wouldn’t miss it.”

My gaze crossed to Addy. I hoped she hadn’t heard him say that. I never knew what would get her upset about her father not being there for a particular event. Sometimes she didn’t notice, and other times, it was tough.

“I’ll be here every night, as well. Maybe we could sit together.”

Sebastian nodded. “That would be nice.”

“I’d love to talk to your mom about the farm, too. It’s so interesting to hear Knox talk about the shop and what she and Ireland are trying to do.”

“We’re playing around with a few different options to bring in more money: events and weddings and opening the shop year-round. Maybe just a few days a week to start. That’s manageable, but I’m not sure artists will want to consign their work if it’s open only for a limited time.”

“Ireland wanted to plan some field trips with the local schools, but that will probably happen in the fall. If they come in October and early

November, there won't be any overlap with the tree crowd."

"That's a good idea."

"I'm not sure it's enough, but we'll see," Sebastian said as our salads arrived.

The girls grabbed breadsticks and munched on them without missing a beat in their conversation.

"Knox mentioned that you all decorated a tree when you were little, as a tradition. Do you still do that?"

Sebastian nodded. "Now that we have Ember, we have to do it earlier in the day. We just haven't found a good time yet. The farm is open from eight a.m. to eight p.m., essentially."

"It sounds like a fun tradition. I hope you can continue it."

"Would you want to come and do it with us? I'm sure Ember would love the help in picking a tree," Sebastian said.

"Are we finally going to decorate one of the trees?" Ember asked her father.

"We're trying to plan a time," Sebastian said.

Ember rolled her eyes. "You'll probably be too busy."

"We'll make it happen," Knox said, eager to appease his niece. "I'll talk to the others and set it up. Even if we have to close the farm an hour early one night, we'll make it happen."

"Emmett decorated a couple of the trees by the waterfall when he and Ireland were snowed in," Knox said.

"I love the story of how they met." It was so romantic.

"It's nice when the farm is shut down for snow... until we open up again. Then there's a mad rush for trees." Sebastian sipped his water and then added, "You should join us, Sarah. It's one of my favorite memories from when we were kids."

Addy's excited gaze rested on me, so I said, "That sounds wonderful."

"My favorite memory is rushing to get ready for school in the morning so

we could race each other to the tree and make sure the ornaments were on the branches and not on the ground.”

Sebastian smiled. “Then you guys would fight over who got to put the ornaments back on.”

“You didn’t get involved?” I asked him, curious to know more about their dynamic.

Sebastian shook his head slowly. “I’m smarter than my brothers.”

“Hey,” Knox said, smacking him on the arm.

Addy covered her giggle with her hand.

Sebastian smirked. “I usually stood back and let them fight it out.”

Knox shook his head. “It was more like you put the ornament on while we were fighting.”

“I said I was smarter,” Sebastian quipped, making the girls giggle.

Knox growled, and I couldn’t help but laugh at their banter. “I think it’s great that you got along as well as you did. I don’t come from a big family like that.”

“Stick around; you’ll get your fill. No, but seriously, when we’re together, it’s loud but so much fun,” Knox said.

A warmth spread through my chest. As a single mother, I wasn’t as involved in school as I wanted to be, and I felt isolated from the intact families. But I loved that the Monroe brothers included me. It gave me hope that my life was turning around.

CHAPTER 6



KNOX

“*I*t looks like you could use a break.” Talon handed me a bottle of water as I stepped back from the machine we used to wrap the trees in netting before we secured them to the roofs of the cars.

I drank the water in long gulps. “Thank you. I can’t remember the last time I ate or drank anything.”

“You need to be more mindful.”

I wiped the sweat from my brow. “Kind of like how you do when you’re working in your shop?”

“Do as I say, not as I do,” he joked as he leaned against the wall of the barn. “Seems like another busy season.”

“It’s good, even though I want to sleep for the rest of winter.”

Talon’s lip curled. “Tell me about it.”

“I’ve been meaning to talk to you about something.”

Talon dipped his head. “Go on.”

“Would it be possible to make more structures like the present you made for Sarah and Addy? I’m thinking about different holiday shapes, even larger, if possible. We could set them up on the lane, and have people walk or drive through. I did some research, and we could charge quite a bit per car. Or we could do a walk-through and offer more of an experience, serving hot chocolate and cookies, maybe even renting out bonfires. Each group could

have their own campfire with seating and wood for a few hours.”

Talon shook his head. “You have been busy.”

“It was something that Ireland mentioned, and then once I saw that present you made for Addy, I couldn’t help but think it could be amazing. If word spreads, we’d get cars from all around the area driving here to see the light display.”

“Are you listening to yourself? Since when do we want more people on the property? Right now, we only have that one entrance, which also serves as the exit.”

“No one likes more people except maybe Mom, but we need additional streams of income. This one is relatively painless, and Emmett’s already planning on clearing land for a second lane. That should be ready by next season, and we could move the light display there.”

Talon raised a brow. “It’s not easy and painless for the guy making the structures.”

“Is it possible you could make a few to test?”

“I could do a few small ones and just see how it goes. I wouldn’t be able to make larger ones before Christmas.”

“I was thinking that we’d have more visitors in that week between Christmas and New Year’s. They don’t want trees, but we could give them something else. This would be for the people who aren’t willing to let go of Christmas.”

“I have to admit, I like the idea.”

“You do?” I’d been brainstorming as I talked to him and wasn’t sure how it would be received. Emmett usually shut everything down a few times before he’d even consider something. “What do you think Emmett would say?”

Talon smirked. “I think if Ireland wants it, we have a chance.”

“This would be a big project for you. I don’t want it to take you away from your commissions.”

“I could do it on the side. Besides, it would keep me busy and not thinking about other things.” His gaze wandered to a woman in a puffy blue jacket, jeans, and boots who was walking toward the entrance to the barn.

“Holly Jenkins? You still thinking about her?” They’d dated in high school, and something happened their senior year. I wasn’t around for it because I was already away at college. I didn’t know the details, but he hadn’t dated anyone seriously since.

“Of course not,” he said, just as her gaze snagged on him. Talon nodded in her direction, and other than a slight widening of her eyes, she didn’t acknowledge the gesture.

Once she’d gone inside, I asked, “Are you guys cool to be in the same room?”

“Nope,” Talon said as he raised his bottle and drained it. “She’s going to have a bunch of boxes in her car to carry inside. Can you help her?”

“Are you sure you don’t want to do it?” I asked.

Talon sighed. “I don’t think she wants me around.”

I shifted off the wall and squared my shoulders. Emmett and I shared the responsibility of teaching our younger brothers how to treat women. “Is there something you want to tell me about what happened between you two?”

“I guess I screwed up. I wanted to be there for her, but she wouldn’t let me. I know I’m not making sense, but I’ve never understood it myself.” He dropped his water bottle into the recycling can. “I’ll work on a few smaller metal structures that we can place along the lane. I’m not promising anything spectacular.”

I held up my hands. “Anything would be great. Even if it was a tree and we put it next to the sign at the entrance; that would be nice.”

Talon nodded. “That’s an idea. I like that.”

Once he got an idea, he couldn’t let it go. “Don’t work too hard on it.”

Talon chuckled, and when the door opened, he said, “I’m going to start working on it.”

Holly came out and watched his back as he walked away.

I approached her. “You need help with some boxes?”

She nodded, her expression troubled. “I brought more ornaments to put in the shop.”

I fell into step next to her. “Ireland was the one who asked more artists to supply their wares in the barn.”

“I’m grateful. There aren’t many Christmas shops around. I’ve been to the stores on Main Street in Annapolis, and only one was interested. Many don’t want the trouble of offering consignment to artists who only make holiday-specific items.”

“Have you thought about making crafts for other times of the year?” I asked as I fell into step next to her.

“I’ll probably need to.” She stopped at the trunk of a small sedan and pushed the button for it to open. The back was stuffed with boxes.

I hefted two into my arms. “I’m sorry about Talon.”

When her surprised gaze flitted to mine, I rushed to assure her. “I don’t know what happened between you two, but it seems unresolved.”

She sighed and grabbed a brown paper bag. “I didn’t handle things the best when everything went down. But I don’t know how to broach the subject now. You see him. Every time I’m nearby, he leaves.”

I followed her. “My impression is that he thinks that’s what you want.”

Inside, the shop was packed. There was a line for those who were paying for trees and another for the shop itself.

As much as I loved seeing the number of customers inside, I preferred to be outside. “It wouldn’t hurt to talk about it. Maybe you could get some closure.”

Pain and regret flashed across her face. “I don’t know if that’s possible, but I’ll think about it.”

I placed the boxes in front of one of the trees where her items were displayed. “Talon hasn’t been with anyone seriously since you dated. Maybe

it would help him move on, too.”

She smiled, but it didn't quite reach her eyes. “Maybe.”

“If he did anything to hurt you—”

“I promise. It was nothing like that,” she rushed to reassure me. “Talon was good to me. It was my fault.”

I didn't like the idea of letting it go, but they were adults now. It wasn't my business.

She pulled out the ornaments from the boxes before inserting hooks and hanging them on the tree. Extras would go in the baskets just under the lowest branches.

“I'll get the rest out of your car.”

She handed me the keys. “Thank you for helping out, and for being a good brother to Talon. He always spoke highly of you and Emmett.”

“We tried to instill manners and how to treat a woman right, but I don't know if it stuck.”

She smiled softly. “Talon's a good man. He was nothing but nice to me. You're a good brother for taking the time to worry about it.”

“Now that our father isn't here, I feel the weight of that responsibility.” Emmett was with Ireland and preoccupied with her needs. The family's issues rested on my shoulders now.

Holly frowned. “You know it's not your responsibility to make sure your brothers stay in line.”

I grunted. “I don't know about that.”

She smiled wider. “You're a good man, too, Knox. You'll make a good husband one day.”

I shook my head. “That's not what I want.”

She bumped my arm with her shoulder. “Maybe you'll change your mind when you meet the right person.”

I couldn't help but think about Sarah. “I see how you switched things from you to me.”

She grinned wider. “It worked, didn’t it?”

“I’ll grab the rest of the boxes.” I turned away as her laugh carried through the store. At least I’d helped ease that stress and anxiety I’d seen in her eyes when she saw Talon.

Whatever happened between them felt heavy and intense. I wasn’t sure if it was the usual teenage misunderstandings or something more. I’d said my piece, and I’d leave them alone for now.

If their relationship becomes an issue on the farm, I’d revisit it. But I couldn’t fault him for giving Holly a wide berth. I understood that it hurt too much sometimes to face things head-on. And who was I to push him to deal with his issues when I was still wrapped up in guilt for not being here when my father died?

I made one more trip to her trunk before helping her unpack the extra ornaments into the baskets.

Talon didn’t appear again, and I hoped he was busy working on the pieces for the light show. I wanted to see Sarah’s and Addy’s faces when I showed them the display. I’d do anything to make them smile.

They seemed somewhat isolated, with Sarah working from home. I never saw anyone coming and going from their house. She’d mentioned parents in the area but no friends. I wondered if she socialized enough. Then I shoved the thoughts aside. What Sarah did wasn’t any of my concern. Even though I could be worried about a friend’s well-being, this felt like more than that.

I stood outside for a minute to make sure the lot and the line for the trees were running smoothly. We didn’t want anyone waiting too long. When that happened, Mom brought apple cider to the kids in line. This year, Ireland was helping with that on the weekends.

Mom brought me a cup and handed it to me. “Thought you could use this.”

“I helped Holly bring in her things.”

Mom frowned. “It’s a shame she and Talon don’t talk anymore. They

were so tight in high school.”

I blew on the cider to cool it before testing it. “I wonder what happened between them.”

“It was the summer before college. Whatever it was, he wouldn’t talk about it. I even had your father try. No luck.”

“I was hoping you had some insight.”

“You know how things seem so big when you’re teenagers. I’m sure, looking back, it wasn’t that big of a deal. They should talk it out and move on so they can work together. I’d love to have her help at the shop, but I’m afraid to ask.”

“I suggested they talk, too. She said she’d think about it.”

“Those two are so stubborn. I think Talon would have stayed with her. He was gone for that girl, and maybe it was a first love that would have lasted. When things end prematurely, I think you always wonder what if.”

“It sounds like you’re speaking from experience.”

“You know your father and I were high school sweethearts. He was my first boyfriend. There was no big breakup. We were strong and steady from the beginning.”

“Sometimes I wonder if I’ll ever find something like that.”

She patted my shoulder. “You can’t find what you aren’t looking for. You need to open yourself up to the possibility.”

I wondered if that’s what I was doing with Sarah, opening myself up without the risk of getting hurt. If I kept it on a friendly level, then I wasn’t truly giving us a chance.

“You’re spending a lot of time with that single mother and her little girl, aren’t you? Sebastian said you all went out to dinner after Ember’s play the other night.”

“Ember and her daughter, Addy, are friends.”

“Is there anything there?” Mom asked.

“I said we were *friends*.”

Mom's expression turned thoughtful. "Is that what you want to be?"

"I know I'm not ready for anything else."

"Is that true, or is it what you've been telling yourself for so long that you don't even know what you want anymore?"

I laughed without any humor. "Probably the latter. I've been closed off to the possibility of finding anyone for so long, I feel stuck. But when I'm with her, everything makes sense."

"Stop blocking what could be by telling her you want to be friends. Be honest with her and yourself about your feelings. Then see where it goes."

The thought was scary. Could I tell Sarah I was interested in her as more than friends? Is that what she wanted? I thought back to our interactions. They were easy and natural. Maybe that's how a relationship was supposed to feel.

"Sebastian invited her to decorate the tree with us this year. The one we do outside."

Mom smiled. "Let's do it on Sunday. We're not open as late in the evening. It would be perfect for the girls."

"I'll tell Sarah."

Mom grinned. "If she's going to date you, she'll need to see what we're like."

"We're too much for most people, I think." Emmett's former fiancée said she didn't like the farm, but I wondered if we were part of the equation.

"It would be better to figure that out sooner rather than later."

"True." Maybe Mom was right. I just needed to remember how I felt when I was with Sarah. Whenever we spent time together, I felt good. Relaxed and happy. Content even. I wanted to show her and Addy a good time. "That's a great idea. Thanks for the advice."

"Sometimes I lead people in the right direction."

I raised a brow. "But not all the time?"

"I've never been able to guide Talon. He's stubborn. Doesn't talk to

anyone.”

“He doesn’t talk to us either, but then none of my brothers talk about their feelings.”

“It wasn’t easy raising five boys, but I think you turned out okay. A little closed off with your feelings, grumpy around people, but you’re kind to others. That’s all I can ask for.”

“Surely, you’re talking about Emmett being grumpy?” I teased just as Emmett approached us with a scowl on his face.

“Just because I don’t like crowds—”

I squeezed his shoulder. “I know, big man. Relax. Go kiss Ireland. When you spend more time with her, you’re less surly.”

“I’m not surly.”

Mom gave him a dubious look. “Are you sure about that?”

“I’m not.” Emmett’s expression softened as Ireland moved into his side, placed a hand on his chest, and smiled up at him.

I laughed. He’d just proven my point.

Mom waved a hand at us. “You’re all grumpy. Maybe meeting the right woman will be good for your disposition, too.”

Ireland smiled brightly at our mother. “Oh, are we matchmaking?”

I shook my head. “Definitely not.”

“We’re decorating the outside tree tomorrow after closing. I hope everyone can make it.”

Ireland smiled. “We’ll be there.”

Emmett’s arm tightened around Ireland. “Can we start by the waterfall? I wanted to show the girls what we did for the trees there.”

Mom nodded in agreement. “Maybe we’ll get lucky, and the girls will decorate one of the trees nearby. You boys made us hike the property, arguing about the perfect tree before you finally made a decision.”

“You loved it,” I said, remembering the look of affection on my mom’s face whenever we got excited about something.

“I’m getting old now and don’t want to hike the property after dark.”

“I doubt the girls will want to do that either. Maybe we can promise them a bonfire if they hurry up,” I said.

“I love that idea. I’ll make sure we’re stocked up with the fixings for s’mores,” Mom offered.

No one liked how crowded the farm got during our busy season, but I loved these pockets of time when we were able to be together as a family. I loved the wonder on Ember’s face when we introduced her to our family traditions. It made me imagine what it would be like when I had children of my own.

CHAPTER 7



SARAH

Over the weekend, I was busy with the shows and a cast party after the Sunday matinee. Afterward, I was exhausted and wanted nothing more than to curl up on the couch and watch holiday movies while eating cookies until bedtime.

But I'd promised Knox we'd join his family for their annual tree decorating outing, and I'd been looking forward to it all day.

"Are you sure you're still up for going to Monroe Farm to decorate the tree?"

"Uh-huh." Addy nodded as she watched her TV show.

"You realize we're decorating a tree outside?"

She looked over at me. "That's what makes it so fun."

"It might be cold."

Addy sighed. "Mom. I know."

"And you're okay with that?" I asked, knowing I was pushing it.

She gave me a look but didn't answer.

"You're too young to act like a teenager."

"Then stop asking me so many questions."

Sometimes I wondered if Addy talked so grown-up because she was around me all the time. She didn't have any siblings to play with or other kids in the neighborhood. I wondered if I was hurting her by staying close to the

house or only signing her up for one or two activities at a time. I did it because I could only do so much as one parent. But maybe I was doing Addy a disservice by not getting out there and trying to find more people who could be part of our lives.

But the thought of signing up for one of those online dating apps made my stomach twist. And every time I thought about dating, Knox's face popped into my head.

The more entrenched in the Monroe family I became, the harder it would be to switch from friendship to anything more. I liked his family, and I didn't want to lose that connection.

My phone buzzed with a text from Knox.

We're starting by the waterfall tonight.

Thank you for including us.

I couldn't help but think we were invading a sacred family tradition, and I wasn't sure what it meant that Knox had invited me. Did he truly see us as friends, or was the invitation a sign of how he felt about us?

Ember will love the company, and I will, too. My mom's excited to have guests.

Just your mom is excited?

I couldn't help but ask.

I'm looking forward to it. The season feels long sometimes, and it's these little traditions that remind me why I love the holiday.

I loved that Knox and his family had these traditions. I was even more excited that he wanted to include us. Knox might not see us as being more than friends, but I held out hope that there were feelings simmering under the surface he just wasn't ready to acknowledge yet.

“Are you ready to head to the farm?” I asked Addy.

Her eyes wide, she nodded. “Is it time?”

“Go to the bathroom and put on your shoes. I’ll fill your water bottle and pack a few snacks.”

I wasn’t sure how long we’d be hiking to find the right tree. Knox mentioned something about hiking the property to find the perfect one. Addy didn’t love the cold, so I wasn’t sure how long she’d hold up.

I packed her snacks and water. Then I grabbed mittens, hats, and jackets, and we headed out to the car.

Every time I saw our decorated porch, I thought about what Knox had done, and my chest filled with affection for him. It was such a nice thing for him to do, and I loved that he wanted to please my daughter.

On the way to the farm, Addy chatted nonstop about the perfect tree and whether we’d be able to see the lights from the road when we visited.

After today, I wasn’t sure we’d have a reason to visit the farm again. We had a tree, and there was no other reason to stop by unless we wanted to shop at the store. And I wasn’t sure it was worth fighting the crowds.

When I reached the gate, a man was at the entrance. He looked like one of the Monroe brothers. I just wasn’t sure which one.

“We’re not letting any more cars in tonight. We have a family party scheduled.” He was larger than Knox, and his tone was brisk.

“Knox invited us to decorate a tree tonight.”

He raised a brow. “You’re Sarah?”

“That’s right, and my daughter, Addy. She’s friends with Ember.”

“I’m Heath, if you don’t remember from the night we decorated your porch. Go ahead and make your way to the main house and park there. I’m not letting anyone else in, so you shouldn’t run into many cars. We’re just waiting for the rest of the customers to pay for their trees and leave.”

It sounded like all the Monroe brothers weren’t too keen on having guests on the property. “We’re excited to see this tradition of yours.”

“Don’t worry. It will be tame. Ember’s nothing like we were at that age.”

“Oh, yeah? And how were you?” I asked, curious to know more.

He grinned and winked. “Wild and crazy.”

I laughed, loving the way the Monroe family talked about themselves. “It sounded like you had a lot of fun, though.”

“And we gave our parents all the gray hair on their heads.” Heath waved me on as he moved to talk to the car that had pulled in behind me.

“No one else is allowed at the farm tonight?” Addy asked as she bounced in her seat.

“Nope. It’s closed for the family event.”

“I can’t believe we were invited.”

“Me either.” The family talked about their traditions with such reverence it was odd that we were included. But I was too curious to back out. I wanted to see Knox interact with his family. Maybe if we were lucky, we’d hear more stories about them growing up. I couldn’t get enough of them.

“I wish I had a brother.”

“Are you sure about that? When you’re kids, you fight a lot and get jealous of each other. The way it is now, you don’t have to share my attention.”

“Mmm,” she said noncommittally.

I parked at the main house next to several Monroe Farm trucks. I knocked on the door, and what looked like Knox’s mother answered.

“Come on in.” She ushered us in. “I’m Lori. We talked on the phone when you came to get your tree.”

“I remember. Thank you so much for inviting us,” I said as we took off our jackets.

She waved a hand at us. “The more the merrier.”

Ireland entered the foyer. “It’s so nice to see you again.”

“We love the decorations on the porch. Thank you for helping with that.”

“It was so fun. I want to make it a thing where we pick a house to

decorate every year. But then Emmett asked what if they don't want their house decorated." She rolled her eyes. "He always expects the worst from people, but I would think it would be a fun surprise."

"Me, too. Maybe if you know someone needs the help already, then it would be okay."

Ireland clasped her hands together. "Yeah, let me know if you know of anyone who could use some holiday cheer."

"It's usually Emmett that needs the cheer," Lori said dryly, and we all laughed.

"Are you talking about us?" Emmett asked as he walked inside with Heath, Knox, Sebastian, and Ember.

"We were talking about surprising a homeowner with a decorated porch and how you think it would be an invasion of their privacy." Ireland smiled at him as he wrapped an arm around her shoulder.

Emmett nodded. "Not to mention it's trespassing."

"You're so serious all the time. I think it would be fun."

"Of course, you do. But let's make sure we know the person so that they don't get mad and call the police."

"You didn't know me, and you decorated my porch," I said, loving their interaction.

Knox approached with a wide smile. "We knew this girl, though. She seemed certain that you wanted lights but didn't have the time or energy to do it yourself."

"She was right," I said, with a matching smile.

The brothers wore the same Henleys that said *Monroe Christmas Tree Farm*, with a little tree as their emblem. They'd pushed up their sleeves as if they were hot from a long day of manual labor and being outside. Everywhere I went on the farm, it smelled like evergreen and outdoors. It was a smell I was growing to love and associate with Knox.

"Where are we starting this year, girls?" Sebastian asked.

“Uncle Knox said the waterfall,” Ember said.

“Does anyone need cookies before we go?” Lori held out a tin of cookies, and everyone’s hands reached for them at once.

Knox handed Addy one. “I had to grab one for you. These guys will eat them all if we’re not careful.”

Addy smiled up at him with so much trust in her eyes, and for the first time, I wondered if this relationship would be healthy for my daughter. What if she came to love Knox or to expect him to be part of our lives, but he didn’t want that anymore?

We ate cookies, and the family ribbed each other. It was fun and jovial, and I felt completely at ease with them.

“They’re a little crazy, but you get used to it,” Ireland said to me. “Not that I’ve been around them long, but I quickly fell in love with the Monroes.”

“They’re easy to love,” I said as I met Knox’s gaze across the room, where he was pouring hot apple cider into to-go mugs for everyone.

“Is there something going on between you two?” Ireland asked, her voice low.

I forced myself to look away from Knox. “Oh, no. We’re just friends.”

Her expression fell. “That’s disappointing. I was hoping for another girl around here. Lori’s used to being surrounded by men, but me, not so much. At work, it’s all women.”

“You work at Happily Ever Afters, right?”

“It’s like working with a bunch of your friends. It doesn’t even feel like a job. And I love planning weddings.”

“That does sound fun.” She got out of the house and was able to interact with people. Normally, I enjoyed working from home, but I was starting to miss human interaction. Especially now that I saw what it was like with this family.

“I’m hoping to plan a few events here on the farm. We’ll see how it goes. The guys don’t like to have a lot of people on the property, and certainly not

year-round, so it's a balancing act."

"Are we ready to get started?" Lori asked.

A collection of cheers ran through the group, and we headed toward the door, donning gloves, mittens, and boots. Then we spilled out into the yard, where Emmett led the way toward the waterfall.

Knox fell into step with me because Ember and Addy were running ahead of everyone. "We built a few landscaping features on the property. It was meant to be an advertisement for my business, but we loved it so much we kept adding to it. But it all started with the waterfall, and that's Ireland's favorite feature on the farm.

"I love the lights." The paths were lit with twinkling lights, and it gave it a cheery feel.

"We built those for my mother when she'd walk late at night, but everyone's grown to love them. They're a great addition."

"I agree." I could just imagine what it would be like to live here and walk these paths whenever you wanted. "It's like having your own holiday wonderland."

"We were talking about getting tickets for the ice sculptures in DC. There's a new holiday theme each year. I think this year is Rudolph. Would you like to join us?"

I remembered those tickets being expensive. "I'm not sure."

"Addy would love to go, and Ember would love the company. She's always hanging out with her uncles. Please come."

"You have your mom and Ireland."

"Ember would love it if Addy were there."

I nudged his shoulder with mine. "I feel like you're manipulating me."

"What are friends for if not to encourage you to do more things that are fun?"

I couldn't help but smile.

"I'll get the tickets and pick you up."

“Okay. That sounds fun.”

Knox smiled wide, and I wondered again what his intentions were. Did he truly want to be friends with us? Was Addy a convenient friend for Ember, or was it something more? Did he enjoy our company? My mind hurt from the questions swirling in my brain.

“We’re going to go that week after Christmas when things slow down for us.”

“That sounds perfect.”

“I don’t know about you, but I enjoy the holidays even more after Christmas.”

“You can slow down and enjoy it.”

“I think you’re right.” Knox smiled at me, and the effect was a zing of lightning through my stomach. This man’s smile was dangerous to my equilibrium.

We were walking as a group, but people had paired off to have their own conversations, leaving Knox and me in our own bubble.

“I think Ember and Ireland make Emmett like our holiday traditions more.”

“Was he a scrooge before?”

“That’s a good way to describe it. It’s not that he doesn’t like the holidays. He doesn’t enjoy crowds, and this is the worst time of the year for that here.”

“That makes sense.”

The girls squealed when we reached the top of a hill and looked down to see a few trees lit and decorated with garland and red and white bulbs.

The waterfall flowed despite the cold. “Does it freeze?”

“When it gets cold enough, we’ll turn it off,” Knox said.

We moved closer to the trees, where Emmett was explaining how each tree was named after one of the seven dwarfs. There were a few jokes from the brothers when he revealed one was grumpy and the other happy.

The girls were enthralled with the story and how he and Ireland decorated these trees during the snowstorm after Thanksgiving.

“The more I hear about Ireland and Emmett’s story, the more I can’t help but think how romantic it is.”

Knox chuckled. “Don’t tell Emmett that. That characterization doesn’t fit with his view of himself.”

“I think it’s sweet.” I thought it was nice how Knox had decorated my porch and invited my daughter to participate in their family traditions.

“What do you say, girls? Want to hunt for your tree now?” Lori asked.

I couldn’t help but wonder if it was their father who used to start it off. I wondered if it made them sad, but I’m sure having the girls here helped.

The girls talked to each other and then took off at a run. Sebastian followed them.

“Don’t worry. Sebastian will keep an eye on them. Plus, he has a GPS tracker on Ember just in case she gets lost.”

“That doesn’t make me feel better,” I said wryly.

“Ember knows this place well. She won’t wander off the paths.”

I shivered, despite wearing my thickest jacket.

Knox wrapped his arm around me.

“Who started this tradition? Do you remember?” I asked to keep my mind off any worst-case scenarios.

Knox was quiet for a few seconds. “I think it was my father. He wanted to make sure that we had time to celebrate. The farm business took over.”

“I can understand that.”

“Making new traditions and keeping the old were important to him, and now that he’s gone, it’s up to us to carry them on for the next generation.”

“I love that,” I said, but Knox’s eyes were sad.

“You miss your dad?”

“I wish he could have known Ember as more than just a baby or gotten to see Emmett meet Ireland. He would have loved all of it.”

But there was more than just sadness there; there was regret, shame even. “Do you feel responsible somehow?”

“I wasn’t here, you know. I should have been. Instead, I was busy in my first job away from home, loving the independent life. I wasn’t thinking about everyone back home. For the first time, I was free from the farm and what that meant. I didn’t have anyone to answer to.”

“That sounds normal for a twenty-something-year-old.”

“I was immature and reckless. But after he died, I quit my job and came back home to help. I’m needed here.” His tone was bitter.

“I’m sure if you wanted to do something else, you could, though, right?” I asked, wondering if he was only here because of his family. That made me sad for him.

“I love what I do here. I love my family and the farm.”

“That’s good.” I was glad it had worked out for the best, but I wasn’t sure that was entirely true. Knox had a different life that he’d given up to return home. I couldn’t help but wonder that if he got involved with us, would he regret it, too? Having a child was just one more responsibility, and it seemed like Knox had enough of that in his life.

He took on the bulk of the farm management because Emmett didn’t like dealing with people. Sebastian was more behind the scenes, since he did the books, and Heath was here but not really involved in the day-to-day since he had another job. Talon was wrapped up in his artwork, and I didn’t see him around the farm itself much. But then again, they were the younger brothers. Maybe the responsibility had always fallen on Emmett’s and Knox’s shoulders, and since Emmett struggled with certain aspects of the business, Knox took over.

I wanted to know more about the load Knox was carrying, but I had a feeling he didn’t see it that way and wouldn’t want to share.

CHAPTER 8



KNOX

This year was the first one where Ember could participate fully in this tradition. And having Addy here made it even better. There was nothing like kids' laughter to get you in the mood to enjoy the holiday.

Seeing things through Sarah's eyes made the day feel more magical. I kept my arm around her, and she tucked herself easily into my side. It felt right to keep her close.

I was following my heart like Mom said to. With Sarah around, the weight of grief and the responsibility for the family didn't feel quite so heavy. I hadn't told her everything, but the little I had shared with her felt good.

Sarah was sympathetic, and I could tell she had more questions, but she didn't ask them. I knew I needed to be prepared to answer them in the future. Sarah wasn't someone who'd let a friend hurt, not once she knew about it. She'd want to help me.

I wasn't sure how I felt about that, but I was going to enjoy the evening with her and my family.

The girls stopped at various trees, declaring them not right.

Finally, Ember stopped short and said, "We should decorate the tree by our sign."

"That way, everyone can see it from the road," Addy added excitedly.

We'd planted a few trees by the entrance. One was a good size for them to decorate.

Sebastian clapped his hands together. "I think that's a great idea."

We headed back down the hill. Now that a tree had been decided on, the girls held hands and skipped down the hill, laughing and joking around. The mood was light and happy. I couldn't remember a time recently when I'd felt better. Except perhaps the other times I'd spent with Sarah and Addy.

We grabbed more boxes of decorations from the porch on the way to the entrance. We stacked them by the tree, and the girls got to work wrapping lights around it. We'd have to figure out a way to get electricity to the tree. I knew my brothers would do whatever it took to make that happen, even if we had to run an extension cord from the barn.

The tree was decorated in no time, with all of us helping. Then we took pictures of the girls and the entire family in front of it. I pulled Sarah into the picture when she tried to move out of range.

"I'm not family," she said to me quietly.

I tipped my head toward Addy. "With that logic, neither is Addy, but she's in the picture."

Sarah smiled and turned to face Emmett's camera. "I can't argue with that."

I smiled wider than I ever had for a family photo before, and I couldn't wait to print it and hang it on my cabin wall. I had a lot of family pictures hung, but none with Sarah and Addy. None where I felt as hopeful as I did in this moment.

I was still sad about my father missing this, but for the first time, I wondered if I could find happiness outside of my family. If someone could fit into our life as easily as Ireland had with Emmett. It was almost too much to hope for, yet I was open to the idea. Just like my mom said.

If I believed it wouldn't happen for me, that I'd never meet someone who loved the farm as much as I did, then it was a self-fulfilling prophecy. I'd

never know where this thing with Sarah could go if I didn't pursue it.

We took the empty boxes back to the main house and gathered inside while Mom heated the dinner she'd prepared earlier. We helped her carry the dishes into the dining room, where we ate at a large table.

I had a lot of good memories here. When the farm was closed and we could just be a family.

Sarah sat next to me, and Addy sat across from us and next to Ember. "Thank you for inviting us. We had the best time."

"I did, too," I said as I smiled and squeezed her hand that rested on her thigh.

For a second, no one else existed but us. Then I forced myself to let go of her so we could eat and not attract any ribbing from my brothers.

We talked about past tree decorating nights, entertaining the girls with our antics. Here and there, we embellished, but for the most part, it was the truth. After we ate, we donned our outerwear while Emmett and Heath built the fire out back.

This fire pit was only used for family, but we'd played with the idea of renting bonfire pits during the season. But it would mean people hanging out on the property for hours. Emmett usually tabled the idea, and as the oldest, he tended to have the final decision about anything on the property.

Mom brought the fixing for s'mores, and we got to work roasting marshmallows. Someone played holiday music from their phone, and chairs were pulled from the porch area so everyone could sit.

The girls ate marshmallows, danced to the music, and played a game of tag. It was fun, but I couldn't help but think it would have been even better with more kids. In five years, would we all be settled down with our kids racing around the fire? I liked that idea.

Across the fire, Sarah had been drawn into a conversation with Sebastian. They had more in common because they were both single parents, but I still didn't like it.

Emmett dropped into the chair next to me. “What’s going on with you? We haven’t had much of a chance to talk lately.”

I smirked and nodded in Ireland’s direction. “I think you’ve been busy with Ireland.”

“I’ve neglected our relationship.”

I sipped the warm cider. “Since when do you care about maintaining our relationship?”

“Since I started dating Ireland, I guess. She’s opened my eyes to things.”

“About how much of a cranky bastard you are?” I teased.

He shook his head. “I’ll give you that because it’s true. I made some mistakes, but I’m trying to be better now.”

“I think that’s great, but I’m fine. No need to worry about me.”

“Mom seems to think you’re hanging out with Sarah a lot.”

“Just a few times. I helped her get a tree and then saw her at Ember’s play. We all went out to dinner afterward.” The only time we’d spent alone was when we decorated the tree, and even then, Addy was there.

“You’re interested in a single mother?”

“I’m not even looking for a relationship.”

“But you like her.”

I shrugged. “I’m not going to deny it.”

He nodded in Sebastian’s direction. “You hate that she’s talking to Sebastian right now.”

“They have more in common. But I don’t have to like it.”

“Maybe you should stake your claim. You have a lot of single brothers, and Sarah seems like a nice woman.”

“Are you saying that one of our brothers is going to make a move on her, when I’m the one who invited her into the family circle?” Irritation burned in my chest.

“You’ve been telling everyone you’re just friends. What kind of message are you sending?”

“Are you telling me to go over there?”

“Do you feel like you should go over there?”

“I don’t like these riddles.”

“I’m not going to tell you what to do, but if you want someone, you have to go get it. Sitting here, nursing your cider, isn’t going to get you what you want unless you want to be alone.”

“A few weeks ago, that’s exactly what I would have said I wanted.”

“And now?”

I shook my head. “I don’t want to watch her date Sebastian or any of my other brothers.”

“Maybe don’t present it to Sarah that way.”

I rolled my eyes. “I’m not a Neanderthal.”

“Are you sure? It’s been a while since you dated.”

“You’re the one who invited Ireland to your cabin and then told her to leave.”

He groaned. “Not my finest moment. But I fixed it. We’re happy.”

I settled back in my chair. “You think Sarah could be good for me?”

“Only you can decide that. How do you feel when you’re with her?”

“Like I don’t have to worry about Dad or the farm.”

“Why are you still worried about Dad?”

Too late, I realized my slip. “You know, I was out there living my life, not worried about the shit going down here.”

“He had a heart attack. No one knew he was even at risk for it. How could you have done anything different?”

“I could have been here for you, for Mom and Dad.”

“There’s nothing you could have done. We had no warning.”

“I can’t shake the feeling that I should have done something more, checked in more often, moved back home.”

“I’m telling you, there was nothing you could have done. If you feel somehow responsible, you’re not.”

“I want to believe that.” If I’d been home, would I have noticed that Dad wasn’t in good health? If Mom hadn’t, would I? I’d never know the answer.

Emmett slapped my shoulder. “Believe it. You have nothing to feel guilty about. If you’re here out of some misplaced sense of responsibility—”

I shook my head. “I always wanted to move home. I just did it a little sooner.”

“And if it’s stopping you from living your life, from doing what you want to do, then it needs to stop. I thought I wanted to be alone, that I was content living in the cabin and working on the farm, but I wasn’t. I didn’t realize any of that until Ireland came into my life.”

“So, you’re saying I should pursue Sarah?”

“If she’s what you want. With Ireland, I didn’t have to pursue anything so much as I was resisting her. She’d just come off a breakup, and we were stuck together in my house. Would it have been a slower or more difficult journey if we weren’t forced to spend time together? Probably.”

“It’s fate, then.”

“That’s what Ireland said.” Emmett said it with a soft expression on his face as he watched Ireland interact with Ember and Addy.

Emmett didn’t have to make this decision. Ireland was there, and he couldn’t resist her. I think it would be the same if that happened to me and Sarah. Things might be different with Addy around, but I’d still feel the same about them. I wanted them in my life, and I sure as hell didn’t want one of my brothers making a move.

I stood without saying anything further to Emmett and felt his gaze on my back as I made my way around the fire to where Sarah stood with Sebastian and the girls.

“Hey, where’ve you been?” Sarah asked.

“Talking to Emmett.” I gestured in his direction.

“Sebastian’s been telling me stories of when you were kids. I love hearing about it.”

“I hope it’s nothing embarrassing.”

“I was hoping your mom would get the photo albums out at some point. I bet you were adorable when you were little.”

“I was scrawny.”

“You got that right,” Sebastian said with a smile.

I resisted the urge to tell him to shut up. Instead, I touched Sarah’s elbow. “Do you want to go for a walk? Addy’s fine here. Seb will keep an eye on her.”

He smirked. “Will do.”

He knew exactly what he was doing when he was talking to Sarah. He was forcing me to make a move. But I couldn’t fault him for it. I would have done the same thing to him.

I touched Sarah’s elbow and maneuvered her around the crowd to the path that went toward Emmett’s house. Not wanting to go there, I took the adjoining path that veered to the left.

“Where does this go?”

“If we keep walking, it goes to the pond, but that’s far. We can do that during daylight sometime.”

Sarah tipped her head up to the sky. “I love this place.”

For the first time, I saw it through fresh eyes. The fields dotting the hills, the paths lined with poles of twinkling lights. The farmhouse and the barn. It was cute and quaint. “You know we each have a cabin on the property, right?”

“I remember you saying something about that.”

“Except for Seb, of course. I think he’s working on building his cabin soon. But the property is so large it still feels private. You could go for a walk and not run into anyone.”

“I love that. You’re close to family yet still have privacy.”

“Exactly, and tonight, I couldn’t help but think what the next five years will bring. Will there be more kids dancing around the fire and choosing a

tree to decorate? I love the idea of our kids growing up together.” I hoped none of my brothers was lured away by a different job or even a woman who didn’t like the farm. It was entirely possible, but the idea made me sad.

She linked her arm through my elbow. “That’s an incredible picture. I bet your mom will be ecstatic if Emmett and Ireland have kids, and your other brothers, too. Do you want kids?”

“You know, I haven’t given it much thought. I always thought I would, just not anytime soon. I hadn’t met anyone who made me consider it.

“What about you?”

“I always wanted kids, but I hadn’t made that conscious decision with Gary. We were new when I got pregnant.”

“You didn’t talk about having kids?”

“It was so early in the relationship. We were just having fun.”

“What happened when you told him you were pregnant?” I was curious about Addy’s father.

“He was distant, more so over time. He wasn’t interested in the doctor’s appointments or the ultrasounds. At some point in my third trimester, he said he didn’t want a child. He’d support me but wasn’t sure how much he wanted to be involved. It hurt, but it wasn’t a huge surprise at that point. I’d already resigned myself to being a single mother. I was lucky because I had my parents and my sister nearby.”

“He sounds like an asshole.”

Sarah smiled sadly. “You can’t force people to want the same things you do.”

“This is different. Addy’s his child.” I already loved her, and I’d only recently met her.

“I have Addy, so I don’t regret a single thing. I wish he was a better father to her. But I’m so grateful to have met your family. They’ve opened us up to so much love and happiness.”

“You’re enjoying yourself on the farm, then?”

She smiled wide. “I love it, and Addy does, too. She’d live here full time if she could.”

“Mom would love that.” My heart was thumping hard in my chest.

“I’ve said it before, but this place is magical. When I see the lights, I feel like there are limitless possibilities. Like I’ve closed myself off to things that I see as too risky or not responsible when it’s exactly what I want.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked, afraid to ask if she was talking about me.

“Work. I’ve stayed in my nine-to-five because it’s steady and reliable. I have good insurance and a guaranteed paycheck. But I’d really love to do my side business full time.”

“Then you should.”

“It’s not that simple. I have Addy to think about.”

“Does your ex carry her insurance?”

“He’s required to.”

“Then it’s just you that you have to worry about in that regard.”

“It’s scary. What if it doesn’t work? What if I don’t generate enough money to support us?”

“You can talk to Sebastian. He can give you a plan. He’s good at that stuff. He’ll recommend how much you’d need in savings and if your business is viable as your sole income.”

“That would be amazing. By the way, I took a look at your contract and made some notes on it. I think you could be more restrictive, requiring them to pay you monthly with an automatic payment. You should consider offering different contract periods. Right now, it’s month to month, and I notice you have a lot of cancellations. What if you made it a six-month time period or enough to cover the typical grass-growing period in the spring through the fall? You’d know what to expect, and they’d get the full experience. By the end of the contract, they’ll be spoiled and won’t want to go back to mowing their own lawn.”

“That’s kind of genius. I hadn’t thought of it like that before.”

“You mentioned in your email that clients do one or two months and then cancel. This would eliminate that. You’d be able to predict your income and know if you’d need to hire people to help. You could expand your business.”

“I love that.”

“I also noticed that you don’t have anything about the lights in your contracts.”

“That’s something I do on the side.”

“Maybe that’s why they’re taking advantage of you. You could only offer it to your landscaping clients as an add-on. Then you set a fee based on the square footage of the house. Then there’s no way for them to negotiate the price.”

“That’s an interesting idea.”

“You’re giving them an extra service you don’t offer to everyone. It limits how many clients you have and encourages others to sign with you for the season. Or maybe even have work done they’ve been putting off. How are you pulling in the clients who want a patio or a retainer wall?”

“That’s usually word of mouth. A neighbor sees the work and asks for my information. I have images of the work I’ve done on my phone that I send to them.”

“That’s good, but what if you had a glossy brochure or even a website where people searching for something specific would see your business?”

“A website sounds so official.”

“You have one for the farm.”

“Talon’s in charge of that. It’s mainly to tell people the hours and what trees we’re selling.”

“It’s to disseminate information, but isn’t that what you could do? Right now, if they search for lawn care companies, you don’t come up. It’s all word of mouth.”

“If I create a website, I’m worried I’ll be inundated with customers.”

Sarah laughed. “Isn’t that the idea? You want more customers willing to pay your prices. If they see your information on the site first, you’ll only be getting the ones who are okay with your stipulations and prices.”

“You’re pretty business savvy. Why haven’t you gone out on your own yet?”

She shook her head. “Fear. I can tell you the right thing to do, but I can’t do it myself.”

“You don’t have a website?” I asked her.

“It’s all word of mouth. And that’s been sufficient for part-time work. But if I want it to be full time, I’ll need to build one.”

I was impressed with her suggestions. Even Sebastian hadn’t come up with her ideas. I think it’s because he was risk averse as an accountant. He wanted to see more money in savings before I expanded the business. Maybe I’d used it as an excuse not to take the risks in my business I needed to level up.

CHAPTER 9



SARAH

I was on a romantic walk with Knox, and I was talking about business. I was out of practice when it came to dating and relationships.

We stopped when we reached a little clearing. There was a white gazebo in the middle of it, adorned with garland and lights.

“This is beautiful.”

“Emmett built this when he was practicing furniture making. There’s one by the pond and then this one.”

I circled the structure before I stepped inside. “I never would have known it was here.”

“There are a lot of hidden elements in the woods. It’s kind of our thing.”

“You didn’t make this with your customers in mind?”

I shook my head. “Mom can come here if she wants some peace and quiet, or one of us could bring a woman here.”

“Is that something you do often?” I asked, even as my stomach sank. I was so deeply entrenched in the friend zone he felt comfortable talking about other women with me.

“Never, actually.” Knox stepped closer to me, and my thoughts scattered.

“It’s a romantic spot.” I was trying to understand why he’d brought me here when he’d said we were friends.

He brushed a strand of hair off my forehead, and my heart stumbled. “I

wanted to talk to you about something.”

“What’s that?” I asked, my heart practically in my throat.

He stepped closer. “About whether it’s too late to take back my words.”

“Which ones?” I asked, my heart tripping to life.

“When I said I wanted to be friends with you…” He trailed off.

“Are you saying you don’t want to be friends anymore?” The thought sent a pinprick of pain through my heart.

His brow furrowed. “The opposite, actually. I like you, Sarah. I thought I was protecting both you and me by keeping a boundary between us, but I can’t ignore this attraction anymore. I like spending time with you, and the more we’re together, the more I want to kiss you.”

“I like you, too,” I admitted, not quite believing this was real.

He cupped the back of my head and stepped even closer. “I don’t know if this is a good idea, but I’m following my instincts here, and everything inside me is telling me to kiss you.”

I licked my lips, and his gaze snagged on the motion. “Then you should.”

With a groan, he lowered his lips to mine. His touch was tentative at first, as if testing my response. My hands went to his biceps to hold on as he deepened the kiss, taking me to a place I never thought I’d go with him. My heart fluttered in my chest as I sank into him, the warmth of his body and the firm grip of his hand in my hair.

When he slowed the kiss, he said, “I’ve been holding myself back, thinking I’m not the right man for you or that you deserve better.”

“Don’t you think that’s for me to decide?” I asked, keeping my tone light.

“I’m going to do what feels good, and right now, that’s pursuing whatever this thing is between us. But I don’t want to do anything you’re not ready for.”

“I want that, too.”

“You don’t think Addy will be upset if you’re dating someone?”

Pleasure coursed through me that he wanted to pursue this. “I’ve been on

dates before. She understands it, and I think she'd be thrilled if that man was you. But I have to be honest, if things don't work out, then she might be hurt."

"I won't cut you out of the farm or my family. You'll always have a place here. Not that I'm thinking we're doomed or anything."

He'd said he wasn't ready for a relationship before, though. "What changed your mind?"

"I talked to my family about it, my mom and Emmett. They made me see that I was closing myself off to something that could be good for me."

"I'm glad you changed your mind."

He smiled. "Me, too." He kissed me softly, as if he wanted to reassure himself I was real. "We should probably head back before they send a search and rescue team looking for us. I have to warn you, my brothers can be obnoxious."

I barked out a laugh. "I have a feeling they'll be harder on you."

He grumbled. "They do seem to like you."

"That's a good thing, isn't it?" I wanted his family to like me. They were good people, and if I was going to date Knox, then it only made sense that their opinion mattered.

We followed the path out of the clearing, toward the main house.

"I have to admit, I get jealous when you talk to Seb. I worry that you two have more in common."

"Sebastian isn't the reason I'm here. I've seen him at school events, but we didn't know each other before, and I'm not interested in him."

Knox let out a breath. "I'm relieved to hear you say that."

"You don't have a reason to be jealous."

"I'm getting that."

Then I smiled. "But I'm kind of enjoying that you were. It's been a while since I've held a man's interest."

He draped an arm over my shoulder and pulled me into his side. "You're

having fun at my expense.”

“I’m enjoying the attention.” Warmth spread through my limbs, and it had nothing to do with his body heat.

“I can’t promise that this will go anywhere. Next week, you might decide that a farmer doesn’t hold your interest.”

I held my arms out to my sides. “You’re not a farmer. Your family owns this property, and you own a business. You’re smart, resourceful, and a family man. Everything I look for in a guy. You’re kind and thoughtful and sweet to my daughter.”

“You make it easy. And Addy’s a sweetheart. As are you.”

“I hope you always think that.” Ever since Gary left, I wondered if I wasn’t enough. If Addy wasn’t either. I didn’t want her to feel that way, but sometimes those negative thoughts came up. And if I let them, they festered and derailed my confidence.

“I don’t see that changing, but this is about us getting to know each other. Our lives and our families. Things are bound to come up. It’s how we choose to deal with those issues that will define us.”

“I like the idea of dealing with it together.” It had been a long time since I’d been considered someone else’s other half, and it was an attractive idea.

“I’m feeling hopeful about us.”

I grinned in response, my cheeks hurting from all the smiling I’d done today between Knox and his family. They were a lot of fun, and I was excited to get to know him even better.

We heard the din of his family’s conversation before they were in sight. I wasn’t ready to lose this private moment with him. He must have felt the same way because he paused and faced me.

His hands went to my cheeks and held my face as he lowered his lips to mine. It was slow and sweet.

When he finally lifted his head, he asked, “Are you ready to deal with my family?”

“As ready as I’ll ever be,” I said as he intertwined his fingers with mine.

“Do you want to wait on the PDA until you talk to Addy?”

As much as I wanted to walk toward the bonfire as more than friends, it was probably the right thing to do. “I should talk to her first.”

“I respect your decisions when it comes to Addy. She comes first.”

His words sent a tingle down my spine. Not even her own father put her first. He lifted our joined hands and kissed the back of mine before letting it go. My heart swelled inside my chest. As we walked toward the bonfire, Addy spotted us and ran toward me for a hug. “Are you having fun?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Are you getting tired?” I asked her.

“I want to stay.”

“I know, but you have school tomorrow, and you need to take a bath.”

“We’re leaving, too, Addy,” Sebastian said as he gathered Ember’s things.

“When are you going to build your house on the property so you can be here more often?” Lori asked.

“I think it’s time. Ember wants to be here with her cool uncles and grandmother. I can work remotely if I have to.”

“Yay,” Ember said.

“Let’s take a look at the plans and make sure you still want the same things,” Heath said.

“Why are you working for Morrison Brothers? Shouldn’t you be out on your own?” Sebastian asked.

“One day. I figured it would be better to start with the best and learn all I can before I do that. But in the meantime, we can do your house. I want you here with us.”

“Me, too,” Knox said.

“I want all my babies home,” Lori said, her eyes shiny with unshed tears.

I couldn’t imagine what it was like to lose your husband of so many

years, but her children had rallied around her in support. I thought she was incredibly lucky. But then again, maybe it had everything to do with the love she raised them with.

“I’ll walk you to your car,” Knox said as the group started breaking apart. “Emmett will handle the fire.”

I led a reluctant Addy toward the car. The only thing that worked was that Sebastian and Ember went with us. I suspected she would have stayed all night if she could.

“Can I see your house one day?” Addy asked Knox.

“Sure, you can. Maybe you can help me decorate my tree.”

“Oh! I didn’t know you put one up.”

“I don’t have one yet. Maybe if you come over, it will motivate me to cut one down.”

“You have to have a tree,” Addy said seriously.

“How about Friday night? That’s my next evening off from the farm.”

“I don’t think we have anything that night,” I said as we reached my car, and Addy climbed into the back seat while saying goodbye to Ember.

“Maybe we can do an overnight with the girls,” Sebastian offered.

“Can we, Mom?” Addy asked.

“We’ll see.” I was worried she was too young for a sleepover. She hadn’t even gone to a drop-off birthday party yet.

Addy shut the door. We waved to Sebastian as he drove down the lane.

Knox stepped close. “An overnight would give us an opportunity to have some time alone.”

“Mmm. That does sound good.”

He dropped his head slightly. “I want to kiss you.”

“Addy might be watching.”

“I know. Not giving in to my desires is hard.”

I laughed. “I think it’s called being an adult.”

He grumbled. “Being an adult sucks.”

“Right? That’s the life of a single mother.” I wondered if he was regretting his decision to date a single mother.

“Holding back will be good. It will make everything more heightened when we’re alone,” he said before he kissed my cheek.

“I’m looking forward to it.”

He stepped back and waved at Addy in the back seat.

“We’ll see you on Friday,” I said as I climbed into the car.

“I hope we can manage lunch or something before then.”

“I’d like that,” I said as hope soared in my chest. Maybe I’d finally found the right man for me and for Addy. I’d been disappointed before and made wrong decisions. I prayed that wasn’t the case this time.

I turned on the engine and slowly made my way to the gate and turned left to go toward town.

“I like them,” Addy said from the back seat.

“The Monroes?”

“They’re so fun.”

“I think so, too.”

She was quiet for a few seconds before adding, “I wish they were my family.”

And what could I say to that? “You have Grandma and Grandpa and Aunt Grace.”

“I know, but they don’t have a Christmas tree farm.”

I laughed at that. “Not many people do.”

“It’s so cool, though.”

“They’ve invited us to family gatherings, and I’m sure we’ll be invited again.” I just hoped that I hadn’t ruined everything by dating Knox. I didn’t want to lose their family. We’d only just met them.

“Can I have a sleepover with Ember?”

“We’ll see. I’d like to get to know them more. Let’s plan a few playdates first.”

“Okay,” she said, always happy to have playdates. I suspected she needed them more than other people because she didn’t have any siblings. Ember was in the same situation, except she had so many uncles looking out for her. She was a lucky girl.

I sensed that if I dated Knox and we were serious, Addy and I would be welcomed into their tight-knit family.

“I like Knox.”

I looked at Addy in the rearview mirror. “Me, too. He’s a good friend. Are you excited about decorating his tree?”

She nodded. “We’ll do a much better job than he would.”

I laughed. “Why do you say that?”

Addy glanced out the window, probably searching for holiday lights on the houses we passed. “That’s what Miss Lori said. Her boys don’t have any taste when it comes to decorations.”

“I don’t know about that.”

Addy met my gaze in the mirror. “Knox asked for our help. He needs us.”

I loved the idea of Knox needing us. I wanted to be there for him like he had been for us. “It’s a good way for us to repay him for how he’s helped us with our porch and the tree.”

“Do you think Santa will bring me everything I want this year?”

“What are you asking for?” She was past the point of wanting to write Santa a letter with her list, so I had to be creative. I’d handed her a few toy catalogs that came in the mail, hoping she’d circle what interested her, but she hadn’t even looked at them.

“I want a dad.”

Not *my* dad. A dad. I wonder if her wording was intentional. “You have a dad. He just lives far away.”

Her lips pursed. “Why isn’t he here like the other dads? He doesn’t come to school stuff. He’s never met my teachers or my friends.”

How do you explain away a father’s disinterest in their own child? “He

usually visits around the holidays.”

She sighed. “It’s not the same.”

She wanted a man who’d care for her, look after her, and love her. She deserved that. And for the first time, I wasn’t so sure she’d ever get it from Gary. I tried to be everything to her, but I couldn’t replace the role of her father in her life. Could someone else?

“He’ll be here.” I’d call her father and find out what his plans were. It sucked that he didn’t realize his daughter needed him. I didn’t want to nag him and have to remind him of his responsibilities, but I didn’t want Addy to be hurt.

Addy didn’t respond, and for the first time, I wondered if Gary’s actions were hurting their relationship irrevocably. In the past, she was disappointed when he didn’t visit often, but he was still her father.

Could a man come into a kid’s life and replace their father? Would Knox even want that role? If he knew how much Addy wanted a father in her life, would he be intimidated by that? He was still grieving the loss of *his* father. He might not be ready to fulfill that role for a child, especially one that wasn’t his.

We pulled into our driveway. The lights on our porch never failed to lift my spirits.

“Mom. Look. There’s something new.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked as I got out of the car.

Addy raced out of the vehicle, leaving her door wide open. She stood next to the present, where there was a snowman about the same height.

“Knox mentioned something about asking Talon to do more pieces like the present. I wonder if this is the second one, and he wanted you to have it.”

I snapped a picture of Addy admiring the lights and sent it to Knox, asking him to thank Talon. He couldn’t have known that Addy was struggling tonight, with the holidays coming up and her father’s absence feeling bigger than usual.

“Let’s do a selfie with our new lights,” I said to Addy as I knelt on the ground next to her and held up my phone.

We smiled brightly as I snapped a few pictures and saved them to my screensaver.

“I love Christmas,” Addy said as we headed inside, and I breathed a sigh of relief that she’d momentarily forgotten about her father.

How could someone’s absence feel so big? I had a feeling his inattention would always hurt her on some level, even when she stopped expecting him to show up for her. I hoped that another man would be that person for her. I just didn’t know if it was Knox. There were too many variables that had yet to play out.

CHAPTER 10



KNOX

Last night, I'd gotten the picture of Addy in front of the new snowman, and I'd forwarded it to Talon. He hadn't told me he planned on giving one of the new designs to them. Since I hadn't heard from him yet, I took my coffee to go and walked to his cabin, which was closest to mine on the property. He had a work shed out back where I knew I'd find him.

I knocked before I opened the door but walked in when I didn't get a response. Usually, he wore headphones while he worked. He was hunched over his workbench, working on something, when I touched his shoulder, not wanting to startle him.

He pulled off his headphones and goggles. "What are you doing here?"

"Have you slept at all?"

His face was drawn with dark circles under his eyes. "I made a snowman, and I dropped it off at Sarah's last night. Then I was so excited about the possibilities that I came back to sketch some more ideas." He gestured at his worktable, which had renderings of various light displays, some more elaborate than others. He'd included characters from nursery rhymes and the traditional holiday decorations like Santa, stars, and sleds.

"You missed the tree decorating," I said as I leafed through the papers.

"That was last night?" He scrubbed his eyes.

"Mom would have liked to see you there. You know how she prefers it

when we're all together.”

“I forgot. I'm sorry.”

“I'm sure everyone texted you.”

“You know I don't look at my phone.”

“Did you see the picture I sent last night?” I asked as Talon patted his pockets and looked around for his phone. He finally found it on a table near the front door. He'd probably dropped it there when he walked in and promptly forgot about it. It was always on silent, so it was impossible to talk to him unless you showed up while he was working.

Ever since I talked to his ex, Holly, I wondered if he was trying to forget about something and not just getting lost in his work, as he claimed.

When he saw the picture, his expression softened. “Did they like it?”

“Sarah sent me another picture this morning.” This one was a selfie of her and Addy. Both of them were beaming. It was the sort of picture you'd expect to see on someone's holiday card or social media profile. I tilted my screen so he could see it.

“I'm glad they liked it. I originally made it for the farm but couldn't resist giving her that one. I have a tree you can put up at the entrance.” He gestured toward the wall, where an outline of a tree rested.

“This will look amazing by the sign. Thanks for doing this.”

He ran a hand through his hair. “It was a good challenge. I'm enjoying it.”

“I thought you found lighting to be your challenge.” He made light fixtures that graced interior design catalogs and had requests for his one-of-a-kind creations year-round. He picked and chose which commissions he took. He insisted he was an artist and couldn't produce on demand.

“Those customers can be demanding, but this—the kids are going to love these.”

“The adults will, too. You think you can have a display ready for Christmas? Maybe we can debut it in front of the family.” I hoped things with

Sarah were going well by then. I wanted to show it to her that night.

I didn't like the idea of not seeing them on Christmas, but I had no idea what their plans were. Sarah said her family lived in town, but what about Addy's dad? He wasn't involved, but surely, he'd visit on Christmas. Maybe he took Addy for the day. The thought sank like a rock in my stomach.

"I think that's doable."

"I don't want you to work nights to get it done, though." I was concerned about him.

Talon grinned. "You know me."

"I do know you. That's why I think you won't be getting much sleep the next couple of weeks."

"I like to keep busy."

"You need a life." I felt conflicted because I wanted the light display done.

"I have my work. What else do I need?"

"Someone to spend time with at the end of the day." I enjoyed my solitude. But that was before Sarah and Addy came into my life, and now I saw events as an opportunity to spend more time with them. "You could cut a tree and decorate it for the holidays."

He shook his head. "All I do is sleep at home. What do I need a tree for?"

"I'm putting one up."

"You're just like Emmett. You find a woman, and you get all into the holiday stuff. I thought our motto was that Christmas was for the customers. We were too tapped out by it to bring it into our houses."

"That is what I thought before I met Sarah and Addy." And none of us would have said that to our mother.

Talon shook his head. "I'm disappointed in you. I thought you'd be a bachelor forever."

"I'm not saying that Sarah's the one for me. We only just started seeing each other."

“You’ll get wrapped up in her life and won’t have time for the farm anymore.”

That pierced my heart because it was the one thing I was worried about. “I won’t let that happen.”

“Sure, you won’t. Look at Emmett. He’s not even as grumpy as he used to be. You used to joke that you were married to the farm.”

“That was after Dad died.” And I was mired in guilt.

“So, what changed? You meet one person, and your priorities are messed up?”

“They’re not out of whack. I’m still doing my job.”

“Are you, though? You usually work every night. Now you’re taking evenings off.”

“Are you listening to yourself? You’re mad because I’m taking my time off.”

“You never did before.”

“And I probably should have. We can’t work twenty-four seven. We’ll burn out.”

“I haven’t yet.”

His clothes were rumpled, and I was suspicious he’d been wearing them longer than twenty-four hours. Who knows when he’d showered last? “Maybe if you met someone, you’d shower, change your clothes, and eat some food. You know, take care of yourself.”

“What’s the point? I’m doing what’s important. You wanted these decorations ASAP.”

“Not at the expense of your health.”

“I’m not yours to worry about, dear brother.”

We usually took turns as a family checking up on him, but I wondered when the last time was that anyone had. Talon was good at setting us up with no expectations of him showing up at family events or even working the farm. We all made excuses for him. He’d never gotten over that girl. He was

grieving Dad. He was an artist who couldn't be disturbed when he worked. But maybe we'd been too lenient with him. We should have insisted he talk to one of us. That he'd get some help if he needed it.

"What are you thinking about for the lane?"

Talon pulled out a piece of paper that showed the possible layout of the various decorations. There were different themes, and they were grouped together according to those.

"This looks amazing. But it's ambitious."

"I won't get all of that done this year. But I can work on it in between my other projects."

"You don't mind that we might use this to charge people to view it?"

"That's what you wanted it for, right?"

"What will you do if people ask for them? Will you make more?"

"That's an interesting idea. Or do we make it exclusive to the farm? If you want it, you have to come here to see it."

"I like how you think."

"I might make some pieces for a few special people."

"Are Sarah and Addy included in that?" I asked, pleased he'd included them.

"You know they are."

"Why?"

"Because you like them, and they appreciate my stuff." He nodded toward my phone, where I had the image saved to my screensaver.

"I'd make one for Sebastian, but he lives in town."

"He's talking about building his cabin again."

"It's about time. We should all be on the farm. That's what we envisioned when we were kids. Living here and working on the farm. Making it so all of us could have a place here. There's no reason for him to be in town."

He put on his goggles, and that was my cue to leave. I left, knowing he wouldn't want to talk anymore. I was lucky he'd given me as much time as

he had. He didn't like to be interrupted, saying it messed with his creative flow.

I couldn't help but think all of us were better off with Ireland and now Sarah in our lives. We were grumpy bastards who kept to ourselves. Maybe it was a good thing that I met Sarah and Addy. They were helping me to see the good things about Christmas. The ones I'd glossed over because I was so exhausted from selling trees and dealing with cranky customers.

For the first time in a while, I appreciated the smell of evergreens, the twinkling of the lights on the path, and the random placement of decorations that Ember and Addy left on the trees on Sunday.

I was lucky to live here. Maybe the farm was magical, like Sarah said.

My feet felt lighter as I went through my day. I even cracked a smile or two, mainly at the kids who declared their tree the biggest and best ever.

But Friday night couldn't arrive quickly enough.



On Friday, I got to work early, determined to leave on time so that I could enjoy my evening with Sarah and Addy. I wouldn't be able to cook, so I thought of options for dinner if they were hungry, figuring I couldn't go wrong with pizza.

I found myself humming as I helped put trees on the roofs of cars and vans in the early evening.

“What are you so happy about?” Heath grumbled.

“I have a date with Sarah and Addy. They're going to help decorate my tree.”

“I can't believe you're putting up a tree.”

“They love holiday stuff, and it's an excuse to get them to my house.” I never had guests there. We usually hung out at the main house or the barn near Emmett's house.

Heath sighed. "I don't like that everyone's starting to pair off."

"We're new, so it's really just Emmett and Ireland."

"I still don't like it."

"No one said you have to date or even be nice to people. You can keep being your grumpy self and warning everyone away."

"I'm not grumpy."

I lowered my voice so the customers wouldn't hear. "You know you are. We all are. We like our solitude, and this time of the year messes with that."

"I'm not sure it's worth putting up with."

"Mom loves it." I nodded to where she stood with a tray of sample ciders to hand out to the kids waiting for their trees to be stowed.

Heath chuckled. "I do it for her. I want her to be happy."

"Me, too." If Dad had still been alive, we might not have felt the same way. We would have resisted any expansion, but we needed her to have the security that came from the farm. She wouldn't want us to support her, even though we technically lived on the farm rent free.

Now that Dad was gone, she was our responsibility.

"You don't think she'll remarry, do you?" Heath asked.

I paused where I was securing a tree to a van and looked down at him. I'd never even thought about the possibility. "Why are you asking that?"

Heath shrugged. "It's been a few years. She has to be lonely."

"She loved Dad."

"But he's gone. He wouldn't want her to be alone forever."

The thought of Mom moving on hit me square in the chest. It was difficult to breathe as I finished securing the tree and hopped down. I told the man it was ready to go and to enjoy his holidays before turning to Heath. "I'm not ready for that."

Heath just laughed. "I don't think you have anything to say about it."

"Did something happen? Is she dating?" I asked, lowering my voice.

"Not that I know of, and she'd probably keep it from us. Gauging by your

reaction, Emmett, Sebastian, and Talon won't be okay with it either."

Mom greeted each child with a smile. She loved this time of the year. "She deserves to be happy."

"Then when it happens, you won't act like a spoiled child and tell her she can't date."

"I wouldn't do that."

Heath just gave me a look.

I couldn't believe Heath was the one of all of us who was emotionally mature enough to even think about Mom dating again. It chipped away at some of the anticipation I had about seeing Sarah later.

It made me rethink everything. Why did I think I couldn't be in a relationship if Mom was moving on? I could still have someone in my life. I felt better knowing that Sarah and Addy would be at my home when I got off tonight.

When Emmett replaced me on the lot, I lingered for a few seconds.

"I thought you were all hot and bothered about seeing Sarah?" Emmett said, amusement tinging his tone.

"Don't be an asshole. Addy's coming, too. I wouldn't do anything in front of her."

Emmett smirked. "So, you weren't making out in the gazebo the other night?"

"How did you know?" I asked, wondering if one of my asshole brothers installed cameras on the property.

He grinned wider. "You just confirmed it. It was a lucky guess."

"I don't think I like you happy. You were more fun to be around when you were grumpy."

He snorted. "You have Ireland to thank for that. What do you think about a Christmas wedding next year?"

"I thought we were limiting it to five events a year. So, we could do one at Christmas," I said, checking my phone to see if Sarah had arrived. I'd

texted her directions to get to my house and gave her instructions to tell whoever was at the gate that she was here to see me and not get a tree.

He sobered. "I meant mine and Ireland's."

I raised a brow. "You're going to propose?"

He nodded, his face full of love. "On Christmas. But don't say anything to Ireland or Mom."

I hugged him, slapping his back. "Congratulations. I'm happy for you." The more I thought about it, the happier I was for him. "Love looks good on you."

"I don't know about that. But I'm happy, and I want more of her in my life."

"Lock her down. I like the way you think."

"Maybe we should get married sooner. Is this New Year's too soon?"

"You should probably ask her first. What if she says no?"

The thought must not have entered his mind because he stilled. "I hadn't thought about that. You think it's too soon, and she's not ready?"

"I mean, it's possible. But your entire relationship has moved faster than most. When you know, you know, right?"

He nodded. "That's exactly how I feel. It's what I want to do."

"Good luck. I'll be cheering for you."

"Don't tell Sarah, either. I know Ireland wants to reach out to her and be friends."

"I won't say anything." My phone buzzed with a message from Sarah. "She's here. I'll see you tomorrow."

"If you need to sleep in, let me know. I don't mind covering for you."

"Her daughter will be there. There won't be a sleepover."

"Yeah, okay," Emmett said with a grin as he moved on to the next customer.

I headed down the lane to my truck, texting her that I'd meet her at my cabin. I couldn't wait for her to see it. I spent a lot of time on the design,

wanting it to feel cozy and inviting. I wanted a respite when I came home at the end of the day. And Emmett made sure all of us had an amazing view from the backs of our houses.

I'd cut two trees earlier in the week, putting one in the front window and one in the back great room. I didn't need two trees, but I knew Addy would love it.

When I parked next to Sarah's small SUV, they were already on the porch. Addy had been looking in my window and turned to wave at me.

My heart filled with hope that this wouldn't be the last time they'd be waiting for me. Maybe in the future, they'd even live here. It was too soon to be having thoughts like this, but it was nice to finally acknowledge that it was what I wanted.

I didn't want to be alone. I wanted to share my life with someone who appreciated the good things and wasn't afraid of taking a leap of faith with me.

I got out of the truck, unable to contain my smile. "Hey, you two."

"Knox!" Addy yelled, as she hopped from the steps into my arms. I tucked my chin into her neck, loving her exuberance. "I'm going to invite you over every day if this is my greeting."

"Yes," Addy said, as she wiggled down a second later.

Addy pressed her hands together as if she was praying. "Can we go inside? I want to see the tree. Do you have a fireplace? Santa can't come if you don't have one."

"Luckily, I have a fireplace."

"Addy, give him a minute to answer your questions before you ask another one," Sarah chided.

"I don't mind." I reached for Sarah and pulled her into my side, kissing her temple. "It's good to see you, too."

I kept the interaction brief, not wanting to concern Addy with our relationship. There was something about inviting these two into my space,

where I'd lived alone for years. It felt right, almost as if they belonged here.

CHAPTER 11



SARAH

The front porch was large and wrapped around the side of the house. Knox unlocked the door, allowing us to precede him inside. The interior was open and airy, with wood beams on the ceiling and stonework on the fireplace. It looked rustic, yet still warm and inviting. The cabin fit with the wooded property.

The kitchen was traditional, boasting wood cabinets and a large island with white countertops, overlooking a sunken great room. There was a study, with a natural wood desk and black leather chair to my right, where a tree stood in the front window. A large staircase curled to the left, separating the kitchen and great room from the office.

“This place is amazing.”

Addy ran from the tree in the front room to the one in the great room. “There are two trees.”

“You normally have two trees?” I asked, my heart thudding in my chest.

Knox’s lips twitched, and he lowered his voice. “I don’t usually put up a tree. But please, don’t tell Addy.”

Something about his request struck me square in the chest. “Don’t worry. I won’t. Is there a reason why you did this year?”

“I wanted an excuse to invite you over.” Knox smiled at me as if we shared a secret, then he joined Addy in the sunken great room. “I always have

lights on the deck.”

He turned on the lights outside, and I was immediately drawn to the wide deck that spanned the length of the house, where there was nothing but trees.

“It’s like living in a treehouse,” Addy said, her voice full of wonder.

This deck was the one I’d been imagining for my dream house. When I thought about where I wanted to live, there was always a deck backing up to the woods. I imagined drinking coffee out there in the morning, working during the day, and eating dinner with my family in the evening. Knox’s cabin was so close to my actual dream house that I was having trouble drawing a deep breath.

Knox returned to me. “Are you okay?”

I pasted a smile on my face. “I was just admiring your deck.”

“You have to be on it to get the full effect.” He opened the French doors and gestured for me to follow him. Addy squeezed between us and darted onto the planks. The entire deck was open, with a grill and a table on one side and large couches with cushions on the other.

“If I lived here, I’d spend most of my time out here.” The deck was private.

“I do when I’m home. I drink my coffee here and then relax at night. I don’t watch much television.”

“Why would you when this is your view?” The lights gave it a warmer quality.

Addy had stopped running on the deck and stood expectantly in front of us.

“Are you ready to decorate a tree?” Knox asked, probably sensing Addy’s growing boredom with the deck.

“Do you have decorations? We brought some for you.”

“My mom stocked me with the basics, but what did you bring?”

I smiled sheepishly, not sure how he would take it. “We spent the week making decorations. Addy got the bug, and I didn’t have the heart to tell her

no.”

“You made decorations for me?” Knox closed the door to the deck and leveled his gaze on me.

“Addy wanted to give you something to remember us by, and it snowballed into this whole project. We made popcorn garland and ornaments out of paper. It’s nothing fancy. Nothing like what Holly makes for your shop. So don’t get too excited.” I chuckled nervously. Gary never liked Addy’s artwork. He said it didn’t match his décor.

Knox’s eyes filled with an emotion I couldn’t pinpoint. “I’m touched you went to the trouble.”

“It was mainly Addy. She wanted to do it for you.”

Knox cleared his throat, then clapped his hands together. “Let’s get these decorations. They sound better than what I have.”

Addy ran out the front door to the car I’d left unlocked. “If you don’t like them, you don’t have to keep them up. But please don’t say anything to her tonight.”

His forehead wrinkled. “I’m sure I’m going to love them. No one’s ever made me decorations before.”

“Don’t get too excited until you see them.” I knew Knox wasn’t the same person as Gary, but I wanted to protect Addy from any criticism, no matter how impossible that task was.

“I’ll love them because you and Addy made them.” Knox smiled, and his affection for us was evident.

“I hope so,” was all I could manage as Addy returned with the bag of popcorn garland.

“We should start with the lights, then put these on,” Addy said, opening the bag and pulling out the strands of popcorn.

“Wow. This is amazing. How did you stop yourself from eating the popcorn?”

Addy paused to look up at him. “We ate a lot of the popcorn.”

I laughed, finally relaxing now that I saw that Knox wouldn't reject her creations. "We made and ate a ton of popcorn this week. The garland isn't easy to make. We had to put the string through each piece."

Knox helped Addy pull the strands out of the bag. He rested them gently on the large sectional.

While he put the lights on, I brought in the rest of our decorations. I'd wanted to buy some, but Addy insisted on making everything.

"Which ornament should we put on first?" Knox asked Addy when I returned.

Addy's eyes lit up as she reached into the box and dug out one she'd made in preschool with her picture laminated on the outline of a star. "This one, so every time you look at the tree, you think of me."

"I don't need your picture to do that, but I love it," Knox said as he took the yarn hook and hung it by the top branch.

My breath caught in my throat.

"Every time I look at the tree, I'll remember how you made everything on it."

"I didn't make the lights," Addy corrected him.

Knox chuckled. "Right."

I loved watching the two of them interact. I expected Knox to get sick of having her around or to be impatient with her. But so far, he hadn't.

With each ornament we pulled out of the box, Addy explained how she made it. She filled the conversation, so I put on holiday music for the background and handed them the decorations when they were ready for another one. Then I watched the two of them as they discussed the perfect placement. "We might be here all night, at this rate."

"These things can't be rushed," Knox said with a wink, and my skin heated.

Gary wouldn't want to spend his evening decorating a tree with homemade decorations. What was it about Knox that made him different?

Knox enjoyed kids, but it was more than that.

Being good with kids wasn't a characteristic I was looking for in a boyfriend when I got pregnant with Addy, but maybe it should have been.

"What do you think?" Knox asked me.

I refocused on the tree that had colored lights, popcorn garland, chains of green and red construction paper, and various decorations of stars, snowmen, and Santas hung by loops of yarn. "It's beautiful."

Knox grinned. "I think so, too." Then he ruffled Addy's hair. "You did good."

Addy beamed at him. "Should we do the second tree?"

My stomach rumbled.

Knox grinned at me. "I think we should order pizza, then we can work on it while we wait for it to be delivered."

"Yay! Pizza!"

I didn't order out often, and when I did, it was a treat.

"Do you care where we order from? There's only one place that delivers here, and they only do it because we give them a discount on their trees." Then he smirked. "The discount is a free tree."

"That's fine. I just don't want to go out again tonight." I was having too much fun to leave. The house was warm and cozy. A fire crackled in the stone fireplace, and the lights made it more inviting. The weird thing was, I felt like we were home. Like this was our place. Even though I hadn't been here before and had nothing to do with its construction or design. It felt good to be here with Knox.

Knox ordered the pizza while Addy rifled through the rest of the decorations to decide on a theme. "Let's put all the stars on this tree. Do you have white lights?" Addy asked Knox when he returned.

"Sure do. There's never a shortage of lights around here. It's the easiest way to brighten up a room or porch, and it fits with the theme of Christmas we want around here."

“I love how your outdoor lights are year-round,” I said to him.

Knox chuckled. “Don’t fool yourself. That’s pure laziness. We don’t have to take them down in January and put them back up in November. We leave them up year-round.”

“I love it.” I shared a grin with him. It showed that he wasn’t perfect. That he had the same flaws as the rest of us.

We hung the white lights and then took turns placing the main stars on various branches of the tree. “Addy loved making these. It kind of got out of hand.”

“I love that I have a themed tree. White lights and gold stars. It’s perfect for my office. When I’m working or coming home, it will be the first thing I see.”

“Me, too,” Addy said as she hung yet another star on the lower branches.

She sat back on her heels. “I have to go potty.”

“It’s down the hall on the right,” Knox said as she took off in that direction.

“Thank you for placating her tonight. I know it’s a lot to put up homemade decorations. Especially when a child made them.”

Knox approached me, pulled me against him, and kissed my temple. “What are you talking about? I love that she made these for me.”

Encouraged, I went on. “She came home after school so excited to do something for you.”

“No one’s ever made me anything. Talon said he wouldn’t waste his work on me. Like I wouldn’t appreciate them or something.”

“Sounds like typical brother ribbing.”

“Yeah, maybe, but don’t doubt me. I love the trees, and I’m touched you went to so much trouble.” I trembled in his arms because it was the exact opposite reaction that Gary had.

“You’re welcome.”

His thumb settled on my lower lip. “I love having you here in my space.”

“Me, too.” He lowered his mouth to mine in a short and sweet kiss, both of us knowing we only had a few seconds before Addy returned.

Then he dropped his forehead to mine.

When footsteps sounded in the hall, we reluctantly pulled away.

“Is the pizza here yet?”

Headlights shone in the front window, and we laughed.

“Looks like it,” Knox said as he headed toward the door.

I made a move toward my purse. “I can get it.”

Knox held up his hand. “I’ve got it.”

I didn’t want him to think I expected him to pay, and I was touched that he took care of it. When he paid for and got the boxes, I said, “Thank you for dinner.”

“You decorated my trees. It was the least I could do.” He set the large boxes on the counter and popped the tops. “We have plain cheese and pepperoni.”

“Plain,” Addy said as she climbed onto a stool.

I searched the cupboards until I found plates, while Knox grabbed a slice. It was easy and efficient, and I enjoyed moving around the kitchen with him.

He poured Addy some cider and water for us. Then we sat at the counter to eat the warm and gooey pizza. It was the perfect evening.

“You want to watch a holiday movie after this? They have a new Santa show on one of the streaming services. Ember said it’s good.”

“Can we stay, Mommy?” Addy asked, and I couldn’t say no. “For a little while.”

We ate, cleaned up, and then made our way to the living room. I tidied the leftover and broken decorations that didn’t make it onto the tree while Knox cued up the movie. Then we sat on the couch with cozy plaid throws.

I sat on one side of Knox, and Addy curled up on the other.

“This is cozy,” Knox said with a smile.

I didn’t detect any sarcasm. He was genuinely enjoying spending time

together. “Oh, I almost forgot. I brought cookies and left them in the car.”

I got up to grab my keys, and Knox followed. “Go ahead and start watching, Addy. We’ll be right back.”

Addy was already focused on the opening credits and didn’t bother to acknowledge him.

“You don’t have to help. It’s not a heavy container,” I said as he opened the front door for me.

Knox flashed me a smile and leaned in to say, “I figured I could give you a proper hello.”

I flushed, feeling a little flustered and a whole lot excited as we headed outside. I reached inside to grab the tin of cookies and closed the door to my car.

With a hand on my elbow, Knox spun me until my back was against the door, and his body pressed against mine. He took the tin and placed it on the roof of the car.

I sucked in a quick breath. “What if Addy walks outside?”

His lips quirked. “She won’t. But in case she does, we’ll be quick.”

But it didn’t feel rushed as he lowered his head until his lips hovered over mine. His eyes fluttered closed as his lips finally touched mine in a feather-light touch. “I like having you here in my house.”

“I like it, too.” There was something about being here that felt like coming home. I almost had a sense of *déjà vu*, which I hadn’t experienced since I was a kid.

He kissed me again, one hand tangled in my hair and the other on my hip, anchoring me in place. I felt surrounded by his warmth and the ever-present scent of evergreen. He was like my own personal Christmas tree.

I sank into him as the kiss deepened, and I lost all sense of time. When he finally pulled back, I felt like a different person. One who was adored by a man. “That wasn’t quick.”

He tugged on a strand of my hair. “That was my fault. I got a little carried

away.”

I sighed. “I can’t blame you, but we should get inside before Addy wonders where we’ve gone.”

Knox grabbed the cookie tin and then my hand to tug me along with him toward the house. “We’ll tell her we had a hard time finding the tin.”

My lips twitched. “She’ll never believe that.”

“Oh, I can be very convincing,” he teased, and I enjoyed this back-and-forth even more than the kiss. I let myself fall a little more. I imagined that this was my life, that we spent evenings at his house or mine, and we spent holidays together and planned vacations at the beach.

“Where were you?” Addy looked away from the TV to us when we came in.

“The tin fell on the floor, and we had to look for it.”

“Seriously?” Addy asked, probably concerned they fell on the floor.

“I’ll make some hot apple cider,” Knox said, and I was positive it was to distract her.

I opened the tin and shoved the container under her nose. “Cookies?”

She raised her gaze to mine. “How many can I have?”

“Two for now.”

“Yay,” Addy said, our disappearance already forgotten.

I settled onto the couch, leaving a space for Knox. He brought in two mugs, handing them to us before getting his own.

“Mmm. Good,” Addy murmured when the cider was cool enough to sip.

“I aim to please,” Knox said, flashing her a smile and placing his arm over the back of the couch. He cradled the mug in the hand nearest to me.

I wanted to touch his thigh, to feel connected in all the ways, but I couldn’t. Not with Addy here. I was surprised when Addy cuddled into his side and rested her head on his chest.

Knox’s startled gaze moved to mine, and I smiled my assent. Then I took the mug from his hand so he wouldn’t accidentally spill the hot liquid on her

and curled my feet under me.

“Do you like the movie?” Knox asked Addy.

“It’s not a movie. It’s a show. I think there are six of them.” Her voice was softer, almost sleepy.

“We’ll have to plan to watch every one.”

“That sounds perfect to me.” The series was about introducing a new Santa to the North Pole. It was both funny and endearing. The best part was that none of us had seen it before. We watched two episodes before I realized that Addy had fallen asleep against Knox.

“I’m sorry. We can go.” I moved to close the tin and grab the empty mugs.

He stopped me with a hand on my arm. “Don’t. Why don’t you put her in the guest room, and we can spend more time together? Just us.”

“That does sound nice.” I liked the idea of getting more time with him, here in his space where he felt comfortable.

“We only get to spend time together in the evenings, between the farm and my light decorating clients.”

I let out a breath. “I suppose it’s okay. If she asks, we’ll say she was tired, and we didn’t want to wake her by taking her all the way home.”

“I’ll carry her to the guest room. Want to follow and tuck her in?”

“Sure.” I moved out of the way while he shifted to carry her up the steps. It felt domestic, as if he were her father. I followed the two of them to the top of the stairs and into the second doorway on the right.

“She’ll be comfortable in here,” Knox said.

The room had a double bed, but the comforter was pink. “Ember stays here sometimes.”

My heart squeezed that he’d decorated a room specially for his niece.

I turned down the comforter so he could lay her down. Then I removed her shoes and tucked her in. I didn’t have any pajamas for her, so it would have to do.

I kissed her forehead and whispered, “Good night.”

“Night, sweet Addy,” Knox whispered as we backed carefully out of the room.

“Are you sure you don’t mind?” I asked when we stood in the hallway, her door partially ajar.

He grinned. “I wasn’t ready for you to leave. Maybe you’ll fall asleep, and I’ll have to carry you to bed.”

A lightness spread through my chest. I felt almost giddy to have a few hours alone with him. The evening was ripe with possibility, and I wouldn’t mar it with worries of what-ifs.

CHAPTER 12



KNOX

As a single guy, a little girl sleeping in my guest room should have freaked me out. Instead, I felt more settled than I ever had before. It felt good to have them here. I didn't want them driving home late.

"I can't remember a night where I've been out."

"You consider this being out?" I asked as we settled back on the couch. This time, she sat along my side, her leg touching mine.

She smiled. "The life of a single mother. It's not glamorous."

"I like nights in. This works out perfectly for me. I got time with Addy, and now I have you all to myself."

"I would think you'd want to go out and grab a beer with friends," Sarah said.

"You don't know me well. We might stop in at Mom's after the farm closes. She'll make us a meal or a snack, but we rarely go out. The farm is my life." If that was a problem for her, then this was her chance to back out.

Instead, she lifted my arm and pulled it over her shoulder. "That sounds good to me."

My heart felt incredibly full as she snuggled up against my chest. I tightened my arm around her, wishing this was the norm for us.

"I know we're new, and we're just getting to know each other, but I'm really enjoying spending time with you and Addy."

She looked up at me. “So am I.”

I touched her chin, lifting it slightly so I could kiss her. It felt good to touch and kiss her whenever I felt like it. When I pulled away, I asked, “Is it too much to ask if you’d want to come over tomorrow night? Maybe we could do a game night.”

“I’d love that.”

Or maybe I could get a carriage here. We could take turns with the family to ride it around. I’d call one of the nearby farms and see if we could rent it for the evening. We’d done an event once before with the carriage. But I just wanted to plan something special for them. Especially when they seemed so enamored with the farm. It was the perfect way to show the property to them.

I turned on the TV, and we watched a holiday comedy we’d both seen a million times before. It allowed me to revel in the smell of her shampoo and the warmth of her body against mine.

“You’re staying overnight, right?” There was no point in moving Addy now.

“I can.”

“You want to sleep in the other guest room?”

“That’s probably for the best. If Addy wakes up in the middle of the night —”

“We won’t make any move that you don’t agree with. If Addy isn’t ready to know about us, then we wait. There’s no rush.” I didn’t want to wait forever, but I had a feeling Addy would be on board with us. It was just a matter of time.

“Thank you. I don’t know many guys who’d be as understanding as you’ve been.”

“You call the shots here. She’s your daughter. Her needs come first. You haven’t said much about her father, and I suspect he’s not that involved. That’s his loss. She’s an amazing kid.”

She seemed overcome with emotion, so I asked, “Are you ready for bed?”

At her nod, I turned off the TV and put out the fire in the hearth. We headed to my room so she could grab my clothes to wear and use the bathroom. She came out wearing my T-shirt and a pair of sweatpants. I was lying on the bed with my arm folded behind my head.

I smirked. "You look sexy in my clothes."

She smiled as she placed one knee on the bed and crawled toward me. "They're huge. How can this possibly be sexy?"

I didn't bother to stop the groan. "You're crawling. That's hot as hell."

She giggled as she curled up next to me.

I couldn't believe she was here with me, in my bed. It seemed like an opportunity too good to pass up. Her smile fell as I touched her chin and lifted it slightly. I kissed her, harder than the times before, as I rolled over and covered her body with mine. Her legs spread to allow me room between them.

I didn't stop kissing her as I lifted her shirt to touch her warm skin. Her breath hitched as my hand roamed higher, over her ribs, to the tantalizing underside of her breast.

"Knox. Touch me." Sarah lifted her hips slightly, as if seeking friction.

I braced myself on one hand as I palmed her breast, her nipple scraping my palm.

She sighed in pleasure as I rolled her nipple between my fingers. "That feels so good."

I guessed it had been a while for her, and I didn't want to rush her. I wanted her to feel good. I lifted her shirt higher and sat back so I could see her breasts. "You're beautiful."

I leaned down to suck one nipple into my mouth, and her fingers tangled in my hair as she kept me tight to her. I lifted my head. "Can I make you feel good?"

"Yesss," she hissed as I kissed down her stomach and pulled her sweatpants down as I moved lower. Her shirt was still pushed up, so she

lifted herself and pulled it over her head. I drew her pants down and tossed them to the floor as I settled between her legs.

I kissed her hip bone, the scrap of yellow lace making me hard. “Do you mind if I remove these?”

“Please, Knox,” Sarah pleaded with me as her thighs trembled under my touch. I eased the lace panties over her hips and down her long legs.

I took my time, placing kisses as I went. When she was naked, I looked my fill, my cock throbbing with need as I resettled between her legs, breathing in her scent. Her pussy was glistening, and I hadn’t even touched her yet.

I cupped her butt and lifted her to my mouth, licking her from the entrance to her swollen nub. Her hips jerked in my hands. I devoured her with my lips, teeth, and, eventually, my fingers. I couldn’t stop thinking about how good it felt to have her here and how much I wanted her to feel everything. The slow rise, the tumble over the top. I wanted her to let go with me.

When her muscles tensed, I knew she was close. I sealed my mouth over her clit and sucked while my fingers pumped inside her, mimicking what I wanted to do with my cock.

She cried out as her body spasmed around me. I eased her through the waves of pleasure, kissing her clit one more time before wiping my mouth on the sheet and moving up her body to where she rested, sated with her skin flushed.

Her hand reached for me, and I went willingly, gathering her in my arms.

“I have no words,” she whispered, her voice breathless.

“You’re welcome.”

She laughed softly. “You wrecked me, and that’s all you have to say?”

“There’s a lot more of that coming your way.”

“Please and thank you,” she murmured with a smile on her lips.

“Now sleep.” I kissed her solidly on her lips.

She lifted her head, her hand moving lower on my stomach. “Can I return the favor?”

I wanted nothing more than her hands and sweet mouth on my dick, but I wanted to take things slowly. To give her pleasure with no expectation of it being returned. I stopped her movement with a hand on her wrist. “Not tonight. That was for you.”

She smiled and burrowed into my chest, her leg going over mine and her palm resting on my still-racing heart. “You’re a good man, Knox.”

I propped my head on my folded arm and waited for her breath to even out. There was nothing like having her in my arms, soft and warm. I should have moved out from underneath her and slept on the couch or moved to the other guest room, but I didn’t want to leave her.

Nights like this would be few and far between since she had a child. I wanted to cherish every minute I had alone with her. She trusted me enough to let go with me. It made my heart throb with affection and something even heavier for her.

I wanted so much more, but I needed to go slow. The best things in life took time, and I could be patient. There was nothing more important to me than having Sarah and her daughter close by.



The next morning, I woke with the sun shining through the curtains. My eyes popped open. It was late. I never slept in this long. A glance at the clock told me it was already seven-thirty. The farm opened at eight. I threw off the sheets, noting that the other side of the bed was cold. I wondered if Sarah had already left with Addy but hoped she hadn’t.

I took care of business in the bathroom and threw cold water on my face before I dressed in jeans, a farm shirt, and a heavy flannel for the day. Layers were important because I got hot when I was lifting and carrying trees.

I checked my phone that was on the nightstand. There was a missed message from Heath.

I can cover you this morning if you have guests.

I ran a hand through my hair, chuckling in relief.

I'll take you up on your offer.

Heath sent back a heart-eyed smiling emoji. I shook my head and went downstairs to see if my guests were still here. The smell of pancakes greeted me when I hit the top of the stairs. In the kitchen, Sarah stood next to Addy, who was on a kitchen chair, mixing something.

“You’re making pancakes?” I asked, my voice cracking. The image of the sun shining on their heads, their smiling faces as they saw me, was everything. I wanted to wake up to this vision every day for the rest of my life.

“We’re trying to make pancakes.” She nodded toward Addy. “Someone is making more of a mess.”

I took in the flour covering the island and the cupboards, my heart constricting. “I don’t mind.”

“We need lots of chocolate chips,” Addy said as she popped a handful into her mouth.

Sarah moved the bag of chocolate out of her reach. “You’ve had enough chocolate for one day.”

Addy pouted, even as her hands were covered in melted chocolate.

“Come on. Let’s get your hands washed.”

To my surprise, Addy immediately hopped down off the chair and took my outstretched hand. I led her to the guest bathroom and helped her wash her hands, then mine. “Did you sleep well last night?”

“Uh-huh.”

“That’s Ember’s bedroom when she stays over.”

Her eyes widened. “She comes a lot?”

“Maybe once a month or so. She has a lot of uncles she spends time with, as well as her grandmother.”

Addy bit her lips, seemingly lost in thought.

“You’re welcome to stay over any time your mom says it’s okay.”

“Maybe we can do a sleepover with Ember?” Addy said excitedly as she dried her hands on the towel and dropped it onto the floor. I wasn’t sure what the protocol was, but I was fairly certain she wasn’t allowed to drop towels on the floor. “Please pick up the towel and hang it on the rack.”

She gave me a look as if gauging my reaction to see if I was serious. “Uh. Fine.”

“My house is no different from yours. Your mom’s rules still apply.”

She grabbed the towel and draped it over the rod.

“And I’m not sure about sleepovers with Ember. That’s up to your mom.”

I followed her back down the hall, where Sarah was cooking the pancakes on my griddle.

“Thank you for making breakfast.” She already hit *brew* on the coffee, so the pot was full. I filled my mug while Addy went back to her spot on the chair.

“Addy gets up early, and she was hungry.”

“I like seeing you in my kitchen.” I cooked eggs, but I didn’t make any extra effort to make bacon or pancakes when it was just me here. If I wanted a spread, I’d go to Mom’s. She usually kept the extras on hand in case we stopped by for breakfast.

Sarah flashed me a smile. “Thanks for letting us sleep here last night. We were both really tired.”

“Anytime.”

“Mom, can I have a sleepover with Ember here? Knox said that it was Ember’s room I slept in.”

“I told you we’ll see. You’re a little young to be having sleepovers.”

“It will be so much fun.”

“What if you can’t sleep, or you miss me?” Sarah asked her with a pointed look.

“You can stay here, too. Like you did last night,” Addy said without skipping a beat.

I wondered if Addy knew her mother had slept in my bed last night. Knowing Sarah, she was probably careful and woke before her daughter did.

“We’ll talk about it later.”

“Can I watch TV?” Addy asked, and when Sarah looked to me for approval, I nodded.

“Go ahead.”

“Yay,” Addy said, as she scrambled off the chair and raced toward the living room.

“Does she need help?” I asked, gesturing the way she went.

“She can figure out a remote. She’s better at technology than I am.”

“You know, it wouldn’t be a bad idea to have Ember and Addy over one night. It would be a good place to test it out. We’d be here in case she got lonely.”

She flashed me a smile. “It’s a good idea. But I’m not sure I’m ready for sleepovers. Playdates are one thing. I mainly stick around for those, but soon, she’ll want to be dropped off.”

I chuckled. “She’s growing up.”

Sarah flipped the pancakes. “Don’t you have to get to work?”

“Heath is covering for me, but yeah, eventually, I’ll need to relieve him.”

I checked to ensure Addy couldn’t see us from her spot on the couch and wrapped my arms around Sarah. She leaned into my chest as I tucked my chin into her neck.

“You smell good.” Like chocolate and dough.

“Mmm. Thank you for last night.”

“No need to thank me. I enjoyed it.”

She moved so she was facing me and wrapped her arms around her neck. I couldn't resist the draw of her lips, lowering my head to kiss her.

When she drew away to check the pancakes, she said, "I could get used to this."

"Me, too," I said honestly. "My house has just been me for so long. And I thought I liked it that way. But now that you and Addy are here, I don't know if I can go back to the way it was before."

She patted me with a palm on my shoulder. "You're going to have to. We can't be here all the time."

"I know. You have Addy, and we don't want to move too fast." I wanted to. It scared me because my feelings were so different than they'd ever been before. I wasn't sure if she'd come into my life when I was ready to make a change or if it was just her.

"Last night was fun, and this morning..." She trailed off.

"What about this morning?" I asked as I cocked a hip against the cupboard.

"It's everything I thought about when I dreamed of having a family. I didn't think it would ever happen for me. I wasn't open to letting anyone in, either. This is kind of a surprise for me."

"It is for me, too." I crossed my arms over my chest, watching while she removed the pancakes from the griddle and stacked them on the waiting plate.

I grabbed the syrup and butter and placed them on the table. I almost never ate at the table, but it had an incredible view of the forest.

"I'd suggest we eat on the deck, but it's too cold for Addy."

"Maybe she'd like to do it at night. We can make hot chocolate, and I can bring out a bunch of blankets."

Sarah flashed me a smile. "That sounds amazing. Addy, breakfast is ready."

"Yay! Pancakes!" Addy said as she skidded into the kitchen.

I needed to make a call about the horse carriage for tonight. I had a feeling they'd love it. I helped Addy get her pancakes as Sarah cooked up another batch, and then I sat across from them and ate a stack.

Sarah raised a brow. "I didn't realize how much you eat."

"It's a good thing you made a ton."

"I was thinking you'd have leftovers for lunch if you came back."

"I don't usually, but that was a nice thought." The pancakes were gone by the time we were done eating.

I helped them clean up, and too soon, I was helping them out the door and standing next to their car.

"Have a good day at work."

"I'll see you tonight." I kissed her cheek, thinking it was an acceptable thing to do in front of her daughter.

Her arms wrapped around my waist, and she pulled me close for a hug. My heart constricted again, and I closed my eyes to revel in the sensation of her warm body pressed against mine. I was ready for another round after what we'd shared last night. But I could be patient and wait until the time was right.

"See you tonight," I said, pleased we were seeing each other again so soon.

"See you." With a smile, she climbed into her car.

I backed away with my hands tucked into my pockets. I'd see them again in a few short hours, but I couldn't mistake the pang in my chest. I'd miss them.

If they lived here, they'd spend the day in my home, maybe join me in the fields or help at the lot. It was a nice picture. My future was looking different than I originally thought. Maybe I'd have kids of my own who would grow up like I had, loving the property and the business. It was a future I hadn't even realized I wanted.

CHAPTER 13



SARAH

Today, we were supposed to spend the day with my family, so we went home to shower and change. Then we drove to my parents' house. They lived in a ranch-style home in an older neighborhood with mature trees. The development was more spread out, but they had a lot of kids who lived nearby and rode their bikes around.

I wasn't sure if Addy would mention Knox, but I thought it would be a good idea to let them know what was going on in my life.

When we arrived, Dad was already on the porch with a string of lights in his hands.

"You need some help?" I asked him as we approached, and Dad bent down so Addy could hug him. He wore old jeans, work boots, and a worn flannel shirt.

He gave me a look. "I heard you had some help with your porch."

"A landscaper started putting up lights as part of a side business. It's the off-season for him."

"You paid for that?"

"No, actually. Addy mentioned how she wanted our house to match the others in the neighborhood, and he did it as a surprise."

Dad raised his brow as Mom and my sister, Grace, came out onto the porch. I hugged and kissed them, hoping Dad would let it go.

“Some man surprised Sarah by decorating her porch with lights.”

“How romantic,” Grace said as she sat on the swing with Addy.

“He’s not some man. He’s a landscaper who works on my neighbor’s property.”

“Does he work on yours?” Grace asked with a sly smile.

“You know I don’t have extra funds for that.” I did the best I could to mow it and trim some of the weeds. But flowers and bushes were beyond me.

“So, he did it for free?” Mom asked, always concerned about people’s motives.

“Addy asked him to make our house match, and he couldn’t say no. You know how she is.”

“Knox is nice. I love his house,” Addy said, like it was the most natural thing in the world to tell my family.

Everyone’s gaze moved to me.

“We’ve spent some time together as friends. He helped us get a tree, and we decorated his last night.”

“So, you’re spending time with this guy? Is that a good idea?” Mom asked.

“He’s nice, and it’s been a long time since I’ve met someone. You know how meeting people on the dating apps are. There are a lot of bad ones to sort through, and I don’t have the time.”

“He lives on a Christmas tree farm.” Addy kicked her feet to make the swing move.

“Oh? Which one?” Mom asked as she helped Dad undo a knot on one of the strands of lights.

“Monroe Christmas Tree Farm. It’s about twenty minutes outside of town.”

Dad frowned. “I can’t say I’ve ever been there. But I think I read that they provided Annapolis’s tree this year.”

“Yeah, I think that’s true.” I leaned against the railing, enjoying spending

time with my family.

“You want a snack?” Grace asked Addy, and when she nodded, she led her into the house. When the door was closed, Mom asked, “Is there anything going on between you two?”

My face flushed at the memory of what had happened in his bedroom last night. “Originally, he said he wanted to be friends, but I think it’s turning into something more.”

“Is he one of those types who doesn’t want to be in a relationship, or is it because of Addy that he took his time to get to know you?”

“He loves Addy. He’s so good with her. He returned home to live on his family’s farm a few years ago when his dad died. I think he feels some guilt about not being there when it happened. I get the impression he wants to focus on the farm and the family business. His family is close.”

“I like that he’s a family man, but not so much that he doesn’t have time for a relationship,” Dad said gruffly.

“I think he’s changed his mind about that. He wasn’t looking for one when we met.”

Mom nodded. “Just make sure you’re taking things slowly. You don’t want Addy to be hurt.”

Mom and Dad exchanged a look, and I was positive they were thinking about Gary and how he’d treated Addy like someone forgettable.

“I’m being careful, but I really like him. I love his farm. How close he is with his family. How he treats me and Addy.” Being with him last night felt natural and real. I don’t remember how it was with Gary in the beginning, but we were young. We weren’t necessarily looking for a long-term commitment. We were having fun. When I got pregnant, that became abundantly clear.

“You’re smart. I know you’ll make the right decision.”

I let out a breath. “Thanks, Dad.”

My parents’ support meant the world to me. When Gary stepped back and eventually moved out of state for a job, they were my lifeline.

Dad moved to the ladder and hung the lights on the edge of the roof.

“I’m seeing him again tonight. He invited us to the farm. Each brother has a cabin on the property. I haven’t seen them all because each one is private. But Knox’s is gorgeous. It’s rustic and charming, yet so open and airy. You’ll die when you see the deck. It’s like being up in the trees.”

“That sounds amazing,” Mom said, knowing how much I wanted a deck.

“His brother, Sebastian, has a daughter named Ember, who is in Addy’s class. So, they play together.”

“He sounds nice. Are you going to bring him by so we can meet him?”

“At some point. I think we’re taking things slowly but enjoying spending time with each other.”

“It’s good that he likes Addy,” Dad said.

“It would be a deal breaker if he didn’t.”

“Speaking of, will Gary visit for the holidays?” Mom fed the strands to Dad as he moved the ladder a few feet along the porch.

I sighed, my chest tightening. “I’m not sure yet. I need to reach out to him.”

“I don’t know what the right thing to do is in this situation. Parenting is more than providing financial support.”

“I appreciate that he does pay child support. I know many don’t. But it would be nice if Addy were a priority for him. The thing is, I can’t control or change him. He is who he is. Even though I know it bothers Addy.”

“And it bothers you because you don’t want your daughter to be hurt. To feel looked over and rejected by her father,” Dad said.

It made me wonder that if I met someone, if things with Knox worked out, would he become that father figure for her? Is that what I wanted?

Grace returned with a mug of hot apple cider and goldfish for Addy, effectively ending the conversation about Gary. No one talked about him unless Addy brought him up, which almost never happened.

It wasn’t like he made nightly calls or made himself a presence in her life.

He was as much as an afterthought for her as she was to him.

“I’m happy that you met someone. Even if he’s just a friend. It’s good for you to get out more. You work from home all the time,” Mom said.

“My social life is school and my virtual coworkers.” I blew air over my cider.

“That’s kind of sad,” Grace said. “Why don’t you come out for a girls’ night?”

“I have Addy.”

“Mom and Dad could watch her.”

“I know.” I didn’t like to take advantage of their goodwill. There were times when I needed them to help with doctor’s appointments and things at school. I wanted to save those favors for necessities, not so I could go out and have fun.

“We’d love to have a night to make cookies. I want to teach you how to make Grandma’s famous nut rolls.”

“Are you sure?” I asked her.

“Of course. I’d love a night with Addy.”

I let out a sigh. “All right.”

“Yay! We’ll have so much fun,” Grace said.

“Nothing too crazy,” I warned her.

She pouted. “We’ll grab dinner and a drink. It will be fun.”

“That does sound nice.” I couldn’t remember the last time I got dressed up and went out.

“Why can’t I go?” Addy asked.

“You can another time. I need some sister time with Aunt Grace,” I said, trying to placate her.

“I want a sister.” Addy’s lip protruded.

I sighed. We’d had this conversation more times than I could count. “You need another person to have a child.”

“You have Knox.”

“We’re just friends.”

“Maybe you could be more than friends.”

My eyes widened. “Would you be okay with that?”

She shrugged. “I like him.”

“If we dated, we’d spend more time with him.”

She gave me a look. “I want to spend time with him.”

“Sometimes we’d spend time together alone, and you’d be with Grandma and Grandpa or Aunt Grace.”

“I think that would be okay.” Then her eyes brightened. “Or I could be with Ember.”

“We’d need to clear that with her dad.”

Grace smiled triumphantly. “No more excuses.”

Knowing that Addy was okay with the idea of us was a relief for me. But I knew her feelings might change. I’d keep checking in with her to make sure she was okay.

We helped with the other side of the porch, and the work was done in no time. This year, Dad bought blow-up decorations of The Grinch. That took a bit more time to set up, but we got him blown up, and Addy loved it. I couldn’t remember my parents decorating like this after Grace and I moved out.

It was Addy who made them want to celebrate the holidays and do all the traditional things. It was interesting because the Monroes seemed to carry on with the traditions even before Ember was born. It was a vital piece of their family. It made me want to create similar traditions with Addy.

She might not have a traditional family with a biological father, but I could give her my best. I could create memories she’d always cherish.

When we were finished, we ate a late lunch and talked some more before finally saying goodbye. I was excited to see Knox again tonight. It felt like I was going on a first date. I was a little nervous and excited, which was ridiculous. I felt comfortable when I was with Knox.

We got dressed in thick sweaters, jeans for me, leggings for Addy, and tall boots. I wanted to be warm in case we were spending part of the night outside.

When we arrived, there was a small line at the entrance. Heath greeted me. “You here to see Knox?”

“Yeah. Should we go to his cabin?”

He nodded toward the farmhouse. “You can head up to the main house. Mom wanted to talk to you about something.”

“Oh. Okay.” I smiled to hide my discomfort. What could his mom possibly have to say to me?

Heath flashed me a smile before moving to the car behind me. I moved slowly up the lane, following the line of cars, then veered off to the main house when the other cars continued to the barn.

“Why aren’t we going to Knox’s?” Addy asked, leaning forward from the back seat.

“I don’t know. Maybe they have something else planned.” I said as we got out and made our way to the porch steps. I couldn’t remember the last time I spoke to a date’s mother. Did she even know we were officially seeing each other? My heart rate picked up.

I knocked on the door, my hands trembling slightly as I did.

Lori opened the door in jeans and a sweatshirt.

I managed a smile. “Heath said you wanted to see us?”

“Oh, yes. Come inside.” She moved to the side as we came in, the smell of freshly baked cookies in the air.

There were cookies in tins and others on the cooling racks on the large island counter.

“Would you like one?” Lori asked us.

Addy looked at me.

“You can have two,” I said to her, my mind still on what Lori would need to see me about.

“I put up my holiday village in the living room if you want to take a look.”

Addy followed her hand, where it pointed at the shelves filled with houses and buildings.

“Wow. This is impressive,” I said as Addy moved closer.

“Each year, my husband, Carl, would buy me a house. It became a tradition of sorts, and my boys have taken it over the last few years.”

“It’s so pretty,” Addy said as she munched on a gingerbread man.

“Did you need something?” I asked, feeling a little forward, but I couldn’t take the anticipation.

Lori waved a hand at me. “Knox asked if I’d entertain you until he was ready for you.”

My brow furrowed. “Is he working late? He could have called—”

“Nothing like that. He has something planned for you, I think,” Lori said with a smile.

“He does?” I couldn’t think of what he’d have planned unless Talon had finished more of his creations.

“I hope you like it. We do this from time to time, and it’s enjoyable.” Her smile faded. “I think it’s been a few years now, though. Maybe since before Carl’s heart attack.”

“I’m sorry to hear about Carl. That must have been devastating.”

“It was. Thank you for your kind words.”

“The farm must keep you busy,” I said, relaxing now that this wasn’t about her needing to speak to me about something.

“I love greeting people. I know my boys come across as rough and antisocial, but they like the farm, too.”

“Knox takes pride in what he does, both here and in his business.”

“They’ve turned into fine young men. You do your best when you’re raising them, convinced you’re screwing them up. But now they all have their own businesses and help with the farm, too. They have a strong sense of

family. I think I did a good job.”

I thought about how nice Knox had always been to us, starting with the lights on our porch. “I agree. From what I know of Knox, he’s a good man.”

Addy ran her hand over one of the Christmas trees and knocked over a few people and a dog.

“Don’t touch, okay?” I asked her.

Lori shook her head. “They’re meant to be touched. Don’t worry.”

“But they’re breakable.”

“If my boys haven’t broken them yet, then they’ll be fine. I don’t mind if she enjoys them. That’s what they’re here for. Besides, Ember plays with them, too. How can you resist?”

Addy carefully righted the people. “They’re playing chess.”

“If you look closely, there are a number of little scenes like that. A family decorating a tree. One doing a puzzle, and even one playing with a toy train. I love the details. I think I’ve collected everything they’ve released in this series.”

“Can we get a Christmas village?” Addy asked me.

“It would be a nice thing to start. I love your traditions.” I had a feeling it was an expensive collection. One I didn’t want to start until I felt a little more financially secure. I was never sure when that would be. I made enough to get by, and I knew if I was ever in a bind, I could ask my parents. But I didn’t want to. I wanted to make it on my own.

We heard bells outside and the clip-clopping of horses. “I didn’t realize you had horses on the property.”

Addy’s eyes widened as she raced toward the windows.

“We don’t, usually,” Lori said, with a glimmer in her eyes.

“It’s a carriage,” Addy said, looking outside.

“Let’s go onto the porch so we can get a better look,” Lori suggested. “Don’t forget your hats and gloves.”

We hadn’t taken our jackets and boots off, so we stepped onto the porch,

seeing a white carriage with red velvet seats sitting in front and two horses at the end of the reins.

“Your carriage awaits, miladies,” Knox said with a little bow.

“Is this for us?” Addy asked the question that was on my mind.

Knox grinned. “It’s yours for the night.”

“You didn’t want to take a ride?” I asked Lori, who was beaming by the door.

She waved us away. “Oh, no. This is for you. Enjoy your time.”

Knox held out his hand and helped me step onto the carriage, and then he lifted Addy to sit next to me.

“There’s a blanket you can pull onto your lap,” Knox said as he climbed in next to us and took the reins. “Where to?”

“I have no idea,” I said, a little shell-shocked. I’d never been in a carriage before. I wasn’t even sure I’d seen one.

“Can we go to the pond?” Addy asked shyly.

He tapped her nose. “That’s exactly what I was thinking.”

“You don’t need to work any more tonight?” I asked, seeing the people still milling around the red barn.

“Not tonight. I’m all yours.”

“Have you offered carriage rides here before?” I asked, wanting to know more about the operations on the farm and the Monroe family.

“We’ve hosted a night just for carriage rides, and those were successful. Tonight, it’s just for you.” He veered onto the private lane that went past a cabin. I’d never been farther than the little waterfall and the gazebo before.

“This is a nice way to see the property.” Here, it was quiet; there weren’t any people hiking the grounds. The guys kept the customers in the few fields where cutting was permitted. It felt like we were alone. The only sounds were the clip-clopping of the horses’ feet and the occasional snort.

Addy asked questions about the carriage and the horses, and I listened with half an ear while I took in the farm. The twinkling lights made the ride

even more romantic.

He pointed out Emmett's cabin, which was smaller than his, and another barn he said was used for family events and even Ireland's failed wedding reception. When the trees thinned, we saw the pond.

"I had no idea this was even here," I said to him as Addy sat up taller to get a good look.

"The path goes around the pond, so we'll be able to see everything."

"Really?" Addy asked, her voice full of awe.

"It's neat, isn't it?" Knox asked Addy.

"There's hot chocolate in your cups." He pointed to the cup holders in front of us where there were to-go containers.

"I can't believe you went to all this trouble." And it must have been after we left this morning. Because he'd only asked us to spend time together last night.

"Our neighbors let us borrow the horses and carriage as long as they aren't using them. They're just down the road, so it's not a big deal. They don't even have to go on the road to transport anything. They just ride it over."

"That's so cool." Addy's eyes were round.

"You want to live on a farm now?" I asked Addy, wondering if I was neglecting her in some way by living closer to town, where the properties were smaller and closer together.

"Uh-huh."

Knox nudged her shoulder with his. "You can visit anytime you'd like. In the off-season, there aren't any people here buying trees. It's just us."

"I'd love to see it then." There was something about being alone out here that made the property seem vast. I never thought of myself as someone who wanted to own a lot of property, but being here was opening my mind to the possibility.

CHAPTER 14



KNOX

When I planned this evening, I wanted to show Sarah and Addy a good time. I had no idea if they'd enjoy a carriage ride, but I was pleased they seemed to. They were enraptured with the property, and Addy had a lot of questions.

"Where are your other brothers' houses?" Sarah asked.

"Talon is on my side of the mountain. We call it a mountain, but it's really just a hill. Then Heath is out on this side. He's close to the neighboring property. There was an inn on it, but the owner closed it years ago and died recently. I'm not sure what's going to happen to it.

"An inn or a B&B nearby would be amazing."

"It hasn't been open in years."

"It would be something to restore it."

"Heath would love to do that. When we heard the owner died, he looked into buying the property, but her granddaughter inherited it, and I haven't heard if she's interested in selling. She lives in California. I can't imagine she'd want to come back and deal with it. We're hoping she'll just sell it, and then we might go in together to buy it."

"Would you run it as an inn?"

"It's an option. Ireland thinks people would come here to visit the farm. Of course, it would mean more visitors."

“I think it’s a wonderful idea. You could decorate the house with lights, and they could take carriage rides through the property.”

“If that happens, we’ll have to look into getting our own horses and a carriage.”

“The possibilities are endless. I’m so excited for you.” Sarah bumped her shoulder with mine. Her energy was contagious.

Sarah looked beautiful with her cheeks flushed from the cold. “Are you warm enough?”

“This is perfect,” she said, gesturing to the throw blanket on her lap.

“Drink your hot chocolate before it gets cold,” I reminded Addy.

Addy sipped her hot chocolate as we slowly made our way around the pond. I couldn’t rush the horse, and I wasn’t in any hurry to get back. This was the perfect way to spend the evening.

“What will you do with the horses when we get back?” Sarah asked me.

“Heath will take them back to the neighbor’s farm. It’s the one that borders Emmett’s side. I think Callum’s family refers to it as King’s Ranch.”

She gazed out over the land. “Your property is larger than I thought.”

“Over the years, Dad wanted to sell parts of it when we fell on hard times, but Mom wouldn’t let him. Even though it’s his inheritance, she’s always identified with the land. She couldn’t let go of it.”

“That was smart of her. And brave. I couldn’t imagine needing to sell off land to survive.”

“We always came up with another way to increase the revenue. It’s a continuing theme.”

“I think you’ve done a wonderful job with the farm.”

“We probably need to spread the word more so that people travel past Pine Valley Farm and visit us. But Emmett is against too much marketing. He’s worried it will bring in more people.”

Sarah shook her head. “But don’t you want more people so you can earn more money?”

I chuckled. “That’s the part that Emmett struggles with. Our business is people, not just the farm. And he doesn’t like people.”

“How can he not like people?” Addy asked, and I realized my mistake, speaking so openly in front of a child.

“He doesn’t like to be around a large crowd. It makes him nervous.”

Addy nodded. “That makes sense. I don’t like to speak in front of the class.”

“I’d imagine it’s just like that.” I breathed a sigh of relief that I hadn’t messed up with her too badly. “This is our home. We want to make money off the farm while still maintaining our privacy. Right now, we only have visitors from Thanksgiving until New Year’s. Then we’re by ourselves for the rest of the year.”

Addy nodded eagerly. “Like Santa. He’s busy those few weeks.”

“I’d imagine he’s busy all year building the toys.”

“You think so?” Addy asked.

I shrugged. “How could he make all those toys in just a few weeks?”

Addy was thoughtful for a few seconds. “I guess you’re right.”

I felt Sarah’s gaze on the side of my face, and when Addy wasn’t looking, I winked at her.

She responded with a grin, and the warmth of her smile spread through my chest. The carriage ride was a good decision. Sarah liked it when I included Addy in our plans. But it was more than that. I enjoyed all of us hanging out as much as I enjoyed alone time with Sarah.

I wondered if they’d spend the night again or if I’d have to say goodnight before I was ready. I held out hope for more but assumed it would be a while before I had Sarah to myself again. I wanted to pick up where we left off last night.

“My sister wants me to go out for a girls’ night next weekend.”

“Yeah?” I asked, wondering what that entailed.

“She promised me it would be low-key. Just dinner and drinks.”

“That sounds like fun.”

“Yeah, I haven’t been out in a long time.”

“You need me to watch Addy? We could have a movie and pizza night.”

“Can we?” Addy asked.

Maybe I shouldn’t have mentioned it in front of Addy without talking to Sarah first.

“Remember? Grandma and Grandpa had plans to make cookies. Maybe another time.”

I mouthed, “Sorry,” to Sarah, but she smiled and shook her head as if it wasn’t a big deal.

Navigating things with her daughter would take some getting used to, but I didn’t want to mess anything up. I wanted to take her lead as the parent.

“I don’t go out with Grace often. Or with anyone, for that matter. So, it might be a while before that will happen.”

“Maybe you should go out more often. If you had a reliable sitter, you could enjoy yourself with friends, or maybe pick up a hobby.”

She laughed. “What’s that?”

“I enjoy gardening. Emmett builds furniture. Talon has his art. There has to be something you enjoy doing.”

“I like to read. And since I’m usually editing in my spare time, I don’t get to do it as often as I’d like to.”

“There you go. I’ll watch Addy while you take a few hours to yourself. You could go to a spa, take a bath, and just relax while you read a book.”

“That sounds nice. Decadent, even.”

“It shouldn’t be something you do once in a while. You should recharge more often. It doesn’t take away from your role as a mother. I’d imagine it would only enhance it.”

Sarah sighed. “I know people say that it does.”

“Self-care. Isn’t that what people call it these days?” I asked her.

“Yeah, I think so.”

We were quiet for a few seconds, enjoying the scenery and the sound of the horses. There was something about being in nature that I'd always enjoyed. But it was only heightened when I was with Sarah and Addy. "When it snows, I'll have to take you out on the snowmobiles, and we can go sledding. The farm is beautiful when it snows."

"Where do you sled?" Addy asked, and I went through all our usual sledding hills. "The best one is at the main house. There are no trees on that hill, so you don't have to worry about running into any."

"I can't wait for it to snow."

"We had that one storm on Thanksgiving, so it's possible."

"Sometimes, one big snow is all we get around here," Sarah said.

"I don't know about you, but I'm hoping for a white Christmas," I said to Addy.

"Me, too," Addy said, her voice filled with excitement.

"What are your plans for the holidays?" I didn't think they'd have any time for me, but I was curious.

"We do our own thing in the morning. Addy opens her presents, and we take our time making breakfast and watching the parade. Then we head over to my parents' in the afternoon. It's a full day."

I wanted to ask if Addy saw her dad but didn't want to bring it up in front of her.

"If you have time in the evening, you could come over to the farm. I'm planning a little surprise. But we could just as easily do it the next night." I hoped Talon came through for me.

"That's my birthday," Addy said.

"Your birthday is the day after Christmas?" I asked her.

She nodded eagerly. "I get lots of presents."

I chuckled. "I bet. You're a lucky girl."

Sarah laughed. "At Christmas, she thinks so. In the summertime, not so much."

Addy pouted. "I have to wait a whole year to get presents."

"Do you ever plan a half birthday?" I asked Sarah.

"We did once. We had a pool party in July. That was nice. But Addy said she preferred to celebrate it on the day."

"Will you have a party this year?" I asked her.

"The problem with a winter birthday is that you have to have it inside. And some of the options are expensive if she wants to invite her whole class."

"Why don't you have it here? We could put up the lights and have a bonfire. It could be fun. We could also use the barn by Emmett's house if you want to be indoors."

Sarah tipped her head to the side. "Are you serious? You'd want twenty-some six-year-olds on the property for a party?"

"We've been talking about hosting school field trips. Besides, this is for Addy. I'm not opening the farm to parties for other kids. Just her."

"What do you think about that, Addy?" Sarah asked her.

Addy looked up at me. "Could we have a holiday-themed birthday party?"

"I don't see why not." Maybe the lights would be ready, and we could take the kids to see that, too.

"That's incredibly generous of you. Let me know what you'd charge for that." There was a tremor of concern or anxiety in her voice that I couldn't quite place.

"It's our pleasure to have her party here. You're practically family now." I flashed her a wide grin.

Her brow furrowed. "We're not, though."

"Tell my mom that." She was ecstatic when I said I was borrowing the horses and carriage for our night together. She'd said it was romantic, and she must have raised me right. "She would love to host her party."

"Can we have it here, Mommy?"

“I don’t see why not. If your friends don’t mind driving out here.”

“It will be so fun.”

We’d rounded the pond and were heading back toward Emmett’s house and the barn.

“When we arrived at the main house again, it felt like it was too soon, but I sensed that Addy was getting a little bored being cooped up.

“Why don’t you go inside and grab a snack while we get the horses to the neighbors?”

Once they went inside, Heath said, “I’ll take them over. You go with Addy and Sarah.”

“Are you sure?” I asked him.

“You did this so you could spend time with them. So go spend time with them.”

I clasped his shoulder. “I appreciate it. I’m happy to return the favor when you’re seeing someone.”

He laughed without any humor. “I have no plans for that.”

“You’re not seeing anyone?” Heath wasn’t the type to pick up women at a bar, and I hadn’t heard about him seeing anyone seriously. If he was, he was keeping it quiet.

“Haven’t for a while. I’m busy, between working for Morrison and the side jobs I’ve been picking up.”

“Don’t work so much that you miss out on something or someone under your nose.”

Heath shook his head. “When you have a chance, we should talk about the inn. Go over a number with Seb that we’re willing to offer for it should it come on the market. I want to be prepared.”

“If you want the inn, we’ll make it happen. It would only enhance our offerings. Doesn’t it have a stable?”

“It does. I don’t know what kind of shape it’s in, though.”

“We could get our own horses and a carriage. Have you talked to Emmett

about it?”

“He’s not happy about it. But he said if it’s what I want, he’ll support it.”

“Good. That’s good.” Emmett usually said no about ten times before he’d consider a new idea. I had a feeling Ireland had a hand in him being more open to the idea.

“Get your date. You don’t want Mom to get out the photo albums.”

“She wouldn’t,” I said as panic coursed through me.

“Oh, she would. I wouldn’t leave them alone too long with her.”

“Thanks, man,” I said as I took the porch steps two at a time. It wasn’t that I was afraid of what Sarah would see in the pictures. But I wasn’t ready to revisit that time. When Dad was alive, we thought he’d grow old with Mom. Every time I thought about it, my chest felt tight.

I opened the door, and the smell of cookies greeted me. “It smells amazing in here,” I said, as I followed the sound of voices into the living room. “Seriously?” I asked when I saw the three of them sitting on the couch with a photo album open between them.

Mom shrugged. “Addy asked to see them.”

I propped a shoulder against the doorway. “I’m sure that was after you mentioned their existence.”

“Details. Details.” She patted the couch next to her. “Come sit with us.”

I reluctantly sat next to Mom, and Sarah gifted me with a sweet smile. “You were so adorable.”

I groaned when I saw her finger on the picture of me in the tub with Emmett. “Why that picture?”

Addy leaned over Sarah to say, “You were so chunky. Look at those rolls.”

Mom smiled affectionately as she patted my bicep. “My boys love to eat. That hasn’t changed. They just work out more now.”

“Seriously, Mom. Why are we doing this tonight?” I let exasperation seep into my tone, but I was enjoying Sarah’s interest.

Mom smiled apologetically. “Sarah wanted to see what you boys looked like, and I couldn’t resist.”

I couldn’t deny my mom when she was feeling nostalgic. She loved to remember better times, when Dad was alive and we were still little. I wasn’t sure why because we had to be hellions. But maybe there was a short time when we were sweet and listened to the rules.

She flipped through the pictures, going from preschool graduations to various holiday celebrations and then to our athletic years.

“You played baseball?” Addy asked.

“And football. But Mom didn’t take many pictures of that. She was too worried we’d get hurt.” I reiterated what she always told us when we asked why there weren’t more photographs of us playing football.

“I don’t know why your father let you play. I didn’t like it,” Mom said.

“He wanted us to get the energy out, and football was the best sport for that. We used to wrestle all the time.”

“You used to make elaborate forts out of the couch cushions, which always ended in wrestling on the ground, fighting, and someone getting hurt.”

“That was only until we toughened up.” We learned not to cry out for Mom or complain that someone hurt us. If we did, we’d have to stop whatever we were doing. That meant that when we did get hurt, it was usually bad. Broken arms and deep cuts. But it never stopped us. We started building forts with sticks in the woods instead of cushions in the house.

“I can’t tell you how many pillows and cushions they destroyed. I threatened to get rid of the couches altogether and make them sit on the floor.”

Addy’s eyes were wide. “You were allowed to jump on the couch?”

“We weren’t supposed to, but we weren’t great listeners.” Catching Sarah’s wide eyes, I rushed to add, “But you should listen to your mom.”

When we finished the album with our high school graduations, Sarah

said, "You were so handsome, even in high school. I bet the girls loved you and your brothers."

"They did have a lot of trouble with girls calling the house and begging them to go out. But my boys weren't into girls until later. Only Talon found a girl young. Then they broke up that summer after high school graduation." Her finger glossed over the picture of Talon and Holly at their prom. "I always thought they'd last, like me and your father."

"You never know," I said, remembering how Talon and Holly were still hung up over their breakup. I sensed there were unresolved issues and big emotions between them.

I couldn't imagine liking someone for so long and not doing something about it. Especially since they ran into each other more now.

Mom closed the album and stood to put it back on the shelf with the others. "You probably have plans tonight. I don't want to keep you."

I stood up, eager to head back to my place and have some privacy. I always loved living so close to my family, but now I could see the drawbacks. I wanted Sarah and Addy to myself.

"Thank you for the refreshments and for showing us his albums. I enjoyed it," Sarah said.

"I bet you did," I couldn't help but mumble.

Mom waved her hand in my direction. "Oh, please. You were an adorable kid."

It was true. I never went through the awkward teenager phase. I was a little lanky, but I escaped the bad skin that so many of my friends had. The only problem was that girls noticed me early, and I didn't like the attention until later.

"If you ever need me to watch Addy, I'd be happy to do it. She's a joy," Mom said to Sarah when Addy ran for the door. I followed her, not wanting her to run out without an adult.

"That's kind of you to offer," Sarah said.

Mom walked with Sarah to join us.

“The carriage ride was magical. You should have a night open for guests. I think it would be a wonderful addition to the farm.”

“The boys are talking about acquiring the inn on the property adjacent to ours. I believe it has stables.”

“That’s what we were thinking about, but we have no idea if the granddaughter is interested in selling.”

“I can’t imagine a woman from California would want to move here and tackle that inn. How long has it been sitting there vacant? Five, ten years?” Mom asked me.

“I can’t remember. Just that it hasn’t been open since I returned home.”

“It would be a nice addition to our farm, but we can’t count on it yet,” Mom said, kissing my cheek. “You three have a good night. Stay overnight if you get too tired to drive home. There’s plenty of room in Knox’s house. When he built it with so many bedrooms, I asked if he planned on having lots of children.”

“What did he say?” Sarah asked her.

“That he had no idea. But this was the house he wanted.”

I shook my head. “You have to stop telling them all my secrets.”

“That’s not a secret. Sarah just wants to get to know you.”

“Night, Mom.” I made a mental note not to spend too much time at the main house. Not unless I wanted all my secrets and embarrassing moments from my childhood to be revealed to the woman I was attracted to.

“I think your mom is sweet,” Sarah said when we reached her car.

“She means well, but she really wants us to be together.”

Her brow furrowed. “Is there anything wrong with that?”

I shook my head. “What I meant was that she wants us to be together, but then she shows you naked pictures of me and reveals all my embarrassing moments.”

Sarah smiled. “It was sweet. I loved learning about you as a child. I feel

like I know you so much better now.”

“Then it was worth the embarrassment,” I said to her as Addy shut the back passenger door.

“I think so.”

I brushed a hand over her cheek, wishing I could kiss her now. “I’ll see you at the house.”

I waited until they backed out of the spot and made their way down the lane before I got into my truck and followed them. The only lights were the ones along the path that would be lit for a few more hours. I loved the property when it was like this. When everyone was gone and it was just us.

I almost wished we never had to open the property to other people, but it just wasn’t feasible. Mom loved the farm, and it was our duty to keep it open.

At my cabin, I parked next to Sarah’s car. They were already getting out and making their way to the porch.

“Knox, there’s a present at your house, too,” Addy exclaimed.

“Well, look at that,” I said as I closed the truck door. “I knew Talon was working on some more decorations for the front entrance, but I didn’t realize he was making them for us, too. He must be working around the clock to get everything finished.”

“He doesn’t work on the farm?” Sarah asked as Addy admired the present he’d attached to the railing by the steps.

“Only when we’re desperate. Even when we ask him, he may or may not show up. He gets really into his work, and you can’t reach him.”

“That’s neat that he’s so into his work.”

“It’s a little frustrating when you need him for something. But then he does something like this, and you can’t complain. It’s not like I can create something like this.”

CHAPTER 15



SARAH

*K*nox unlocked the door, and we went inside.

“I bet you make beautiful flower beds and patios,” I couldn’t help but point out.

Knox nodded. “I landscaped my brothers’ homes, and I maintain the flower beds around the main house and barn.”

“Heath builds the houses, you do the landscaping, Talon provides the lighting, and Sebastian handles the money. You all contribute something. I think it’s great.”

“It must be nice to have a big family,” Addy said, her lips down-turned.

I touched her shoulder. “It doesn’t matter how big your family is. We have Grace, Mom, and Dad.”

“Your mother’s right. Your family is special, and the cool thing is that you have the Monroe Family, too.”

Addy gazed up at him with so much hope in her eyes. “Are you saying your brothers are my uncles, too? Like Ember?”

Knox looked uncomfortable with that question, so I was quick to answer. “Not exactly. But they’re our friends. Friends can be part of your family, too. Not everyone’s family looks the same.”

“I know,” Addy said, as if she’d heard this explanation before.

“If you need us for anything, we’ll be there for you. We love you,” Knox

said, and my heart skipped a beat at his words.

It was the one thing I wanted Gary to say to her, and he never had. His message was more like *I'll answer your phone call if I have time or think to check your message. But don't get your hopes up. I'm a busy man.*

“Would you come to the daddy-daughter dance in February? All the other girls are going with their dads.”

“I thought you were going to take Grandpa?” I asked, a little surprised. I'd heard that a couple of grandfathers would be there for girls whose fathers had passed away.

Knox looked from me to her, unsure how to respond. “If you want to go with your grandfather, then you should do that. But if you want me to go, I'm game. I can't say I'm an amazing dancer or very cool, but I'll do my best not to embarrass you.”

Addy giggled, and the heavy moment was gone. “We can practice dancing.”

“We should,” Knox said, surprising me.

Addy grabbed my phone and put on some music before holding out her hand. “Come on.”

“Oh, we're doing this now?” Knox asked.

I smiled when he looked to me for help. “You offered.”

Knox followed Addy into the living room.

“Can you show me what to do?” Knox asked Addy.

“I think you hold your hands like this.” She showed him, and it was the sweetest thing I'd ever seen. When I imagined having a child with someone, I thought I'd have more memories like this. Moments when her father held her in the rocking chair in the middle of the night, walked her to school on the first day, or even taught her how to ride a bike. But those moments never happened.

As they moved around the room, with Knox trying not to step on Addy's toes, tears stung my eyes. I finally pulled myself together to snap a few

pictures.

“Should I dance with your mother, too? She might be feeling a little left out.” Knox tipped his head in my direction.

Addy stepped back. “Can I have a cookie?”

I nodded as she flew past me.

Knox turned and held his hand out to me.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” I didn’t get the impression he wanted to dance, but he did it for Addy. To make her happy.

“I want to hold you, and it’s the perfect excuse right now.”

I laughed as I moved easily into his arms, and he held me against his body. He lowered his mouth to my ear. “This is nice.”

My heart thumped wildly in my chest. I wanted so much more with him. I had a feeling Addy was eating more than one or two cookies, but I wanted a few minutes alone with Knox. I was willing to risk her eating too much junk food for once.

Knox lowered his head so that his voice skated over my ear. “Will you stay overnight?”

“We shouldn’t.” But I wanted to.

“But what feels right?” Knox asked me, pulling back slightly to see my face.

I smiled. “I want to stay.”

“Do you think Addy would be okay with it?”

“Addy loved staying over last night. She asked if she could do it again.”

“Then it’s settled.”

My forehead wrinkled. “I don’t know what we’re doing...”

“We’re enjoying each other’s company and getting to know each other.”

But there was heat in his gaze. We wanted more than that, but we couldn’t talk about it with Addy in the other room.

Knox rested his forehead against mine, and I felt the pull of his body. He wanted to kiss me, but he was holding himself back. I liked him even more

for having restraint. It made the moment that much sweeter.

“You don’t have to take her to the dance. My dad can.”

“I’ll do whatever she wants, but I don’t want to upset your father.”

“He went last year, so I don’t think he’d mind.” In fact, I think he’d like it if Knox took her because he wanted me to meet someone who could take Gary’s place. He’d always believed Gary was missing out on Addy’s life, and at some point, I’d meet someone who would value me and Addy.

I wasn’t sure my heart could take it if he took her to the dance. He was flirting with everything I’d ever wanted. What if this thing between us didn’t work out? I’d be even more crushed than when I realized Gary didn’t want anything to do with his child.

“I don’t want to upset you either.”

“You’re not. It’s just, I’ve always wanted Addy to have these moments with her father...”

“If you don’t want me to step in—”

We’d stopped dancing altogether. “It’s not that. I promise. It’s just hitting me harder than I thought it would. I’m a little overwhelmed. I’m happy and sad for her at the same time. It should be her father who’s doing these things. But I’m struggling with the idea of it being okay if someone else does them instead, whether it’s my father or someone like you.”

“I don’t think it matters who does them. All that matters is that she’s loved and the people in her life step up in moments like these. Any one of my brothers would be there for her. My mom would, too. I wasn’t kidding when I said she has us on her side.”

“Thank you for that. We have our family, but it’s nice to be part of something bigger.” It felt like our family had expanded since we’d met the Monroes.

“Can we watch that Santa show?” Addy said when she came into the room with icing on her face.

“Just as soon as you wash your face.”

Knox chuckled as she raced out of the room. “She doesn’t do anything slowly, does she?”

“She’s usually in a rush.”

“Mom made some chocolate-covered popcorn earlier. Would you like that? Or should I make some fresh popcorn?”

“Chocolate-covered sounds amazing,” I said as Addy returned.

She picked up the remote and navigated through the menus until the show we watched yesterday was ready to go.

“Let me get the popcorn. You want anything to drink? I have water and juice.”

“Juice for me,” Addy said.

“I didn’t hear a please,” I said automatically.

“Please, may I have some juice, Knox?” Addy asked in a sweet voice.

“Of course, sweetheart. Coming right up.”

I helped Knox carry in the bowls of popcorn and drinks. Addy clicked start on the movie as soon as we were settled on the couch. Addy sat next to Knox, resting her head on his shoulder. He didn’t seem to mind that she snuggled up to him.

He took everything that came his way in stride. It made me like him even more. This time, when Addy fell asleep, Knox moved to take her upstairs right away.

When he pulled her door so that it was slightly ajar, he moved so that my back was against the wall, and his body pressed against mine. “I wanted all the time with you I could get.”

My heart thumped wildly in my chest. “What did you have in mind?”

“More of last night.”

“Yes,” I said as he kissed me. After a few seconds, my skin was hot, and my nipples pebbled with desire. He pulled back with a wink and grabbed my hand to pull me down the hall into his bedroom. He closed and locked it behind him. “Are you sure?”

I nodded. "I've never been surer of anything."

He'd left the lights off, but the light of the moon was bright tonight and shone through the ample windows in his room. He kissed me as he backed me toward his bed, his hand flirting with the edge of my sweater until he finally pushed under, and his palm rested on my stomach. He was warm and big, and my stomach muscles fluttered under his touch.

His hand moved around to my side as he spanned my waist and kissed me deeper. I wrapped my arm around his neck, pressing myself into his body. I felt every hard ridge, his belt buckle digging into my stomach, but I didn't care. I wanted to feel every inch of him. I wanted to savor this moment.

He eased back, lifting his shirt over his head and baring his upper body to me. My hands drifted lower, touching every hard ridge and valley of his body. I kissed him, loving how hot his body felt under my lips.

He was like a furnace, burning hot. I should have been afraid he'd sear my skin, but I was sure he was branding my soul instead.

"I love how it feels when you touch me." His voice was guttural, spurring me on and making me brave.

I kissed his chest as his hands moved higher, palming my breasts. I paused, unable to move or think, while his hands and fingers caressed my breasts and rubbed my nipples through the lace of my bra.

"I want to see you."

I stepped back, drawing my sweater over my head, and when my hands went to the button of my jeans, he stopped me with a hand on mine. "Let me."

First, he unclipped my bra, and I let it fall from my shoulders, onto the floor. "You're absolutely gorgeous."

The admiration in his tone and his eyes was too strong to ignore. He thought I was beautiful, and it was everything. He lowered his head, sucking first one nipple, then the second into his mouth. He took his time until I was shaking and begging for release.

When my legs were shaky, he worked the button and shoved them over my hips and down my legs. I kicked them off, leaving me in my panties.

“I love you in lace,” he said, even as his fingers hooked in the sides and pulled them down, ever so gently, over my hips. He lowered himself to the floor, following their path.

“Apparently not, because you immediately took them off.”

“Can you blame me? I want to see you out of them, too.”

I shook my head, my voice escaping me as he settled onto his knees, his shoulders urging my legs apart. He breathed me in before blowing air over my clit. I moaned as my hips bucked toward his mouth.

“Knox. I want your mouth on me.”

“I love that you know what you want and aren’t afraid to ask for it,” he murmured as he settled between my legs and kissed my clit.

It was something but not enough. “Knox, please.”

“I know what you want, baby, and I’m going to give it to you. But you might have to be patient for a little while longer. I’ve waited a long time for you to come into my life, and I’m in no hurry to rush this.”

My heart constricted at his words. I felt lightheaded as he licked me, his hands on my hips keeping me steady.

I bit my lip to stop the moans from erupting. I didn’t want to alert Addy. Instead, I rocked toward his mouth, needing suction and a firmer touch. It was like he was keeping his touches feather-light to tease me, to keep me wanting more.

I tightened my fingers in the hair on his neck. “Knox.”

“I got you, baby,” he said as he looked up at me, the intensity in his gaze anchoring me to this moment. It was just me and him. His touch and his lips. The adoration in his eyes. I’d never get enough of this, of him. I wanted to take a snapshot and remember this moment forever.

The feel of his calloused hands on my ass as he devoured me with his mouth. With a renewed sense of urgency, he used his fingers to enter me,

making me shaky on my feet.

My entire body flushed hot as he continued his assault with his fingers and his mouth. When he sucked hard on my clit, the orgasm shot through me, and I spasmed around his fingers. I clawed at his shoulders, needing him on top of me and his cock inside me.

It wasn't enough. When he stood, he wiped his mouth before kissing me. I loved that I tasted my essence on his lips.

I shoved his jeans over his hips, and he helped me, pushing them off and to the side. He left me long enough to grab a condom out of his wallet, then he lifted me onto the bed and came over me. My skin felt every inch of him as he settled over me, his cock nudging my entrance.

He swallowed his name on my lips as he took me in a deep, passionate kiss, his cock sliding through my folds, searching for that spot that would join us forever.

In my head, I was chanting his name, urging him to slip inside, to make me forget everything but being with him. I didn't let those words escape because it was too soon for the emotion that was bubbling to the surface.

He ripped his lips from mine, grabbed the condom he'd set aside earlier—making quick work of the wrapper—and smoothed the rubber over his rigid cock. Then he braced his hand next to my head as he fisted himself, then lined up with my center.

I licked my lips, anticipating the moment he entered me, the stretch and the burn.

His gaze lifted to mine, and when I nodded my assent, he pushed inside. Tingles traveled down my spine as he continued to fill me. He leaned over me, kissing me as he eased inside.

“You feel so good. So tight. So hot.”

I nodded my agreement, unable to voice aloud everything he made me feel.

When he filled me to the hilt, he rested his forehead against mine and

murmured, “Perfect. You feel like everything I’ve ever wanted, all my hopes and dreams wrapped up in one amazing package that I want to unwrap for the rest of my life.”

Then he started to move, and I was incapable of responding verbally, other than with moans. With every thrust, my breaths became shallow, my skin tighter, and the burn in my core more intense. I needed him to push me over that razor-thin edge.

I gripped his forearms as his powerful thighs moved us higher, to the point of oblivion. I didn’t want this connection to end, but I was hovering at the top, needing to be nudged over the edge. He reached down and touched my clit, circling it slowly and then harder as he ground his cock inside me.

I bit my lip, and my body spasmed around him. I wanted to keep him inside me. I never wanted to lose this connection or forget the way we felt when we came together. I felt whole, cherished, and adored.

The muscles in his body tightened as he thrust once, twice more, and went over. He collapsed on top of me. I happily accepted his weight, needing to feel that this was real. That I hadn’t imagined this thing between us. It was surprising and unexpected, yet it gave me hope that I could finally have everything I’d ever wanted. A man to love me and support me and my daughter.

I didn’t need it, but I wanted it. I just hoped I hadn’t misjudged this thing between us. Maybe he was having a good time and would push us aside when the holidays were over. Maybe this was a holiday fling, brought on by the highs of the season. I couldn’t be sure.

I had to trust my intuition and that what I felt was real.

He kissed my forehead, easing out of me. “I’ll be right back.”

The sweat on my skin cooled quickly without his considerable body heat warming me from the inside out. I heard the water run in the bathroom and listened for any signs that Addy had heard us and woken up. Not hearing anything else, I relaxed.

When the bathroom door opened, he moved toward me with a washcloth to clean me between my legs. It wasn't necessary, but it felt good. I'd never had a man consider my needs as much as Knox. He discarded the washcloth and climbed into bed with me, gathering me into his arms with a kiss on my forehead. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm freaking out a little."

He eased away from me slightly to see my face. "Why?"

"That was more than I expected."

"I think when you feel more for someone, everything is more intense."

I lifted onto one elbow so I could see his face. "You're not worried."

He caressed my hair. "How could I be when it felt so good?"

"Maybe I'm overthinking it." Or was he just caught up in great sex and not overanalyzing what it meant? That this was more than just the physical. But no, he'd said he felt something for me. Was it the same intensity as what I felt?

"Your mind is moving at lightning speed." He tugged me until I collapsed on his chest, his hand banding around my waist to hold me to him. "We're not going to get many moments like this. Feel how my skin is warm against yours. Notice the tickle of my hair against your leg."

"I feel it."

He kissed me. "Focus on this. Don't worry about tomorrow or anything outside of this room. We have us and what we just shared."

Those words curled around my heart, drawing me deeper into the lull of his voice.

"You'll stay the night?" he asked gruffly.

"Of course."

"Good. I want to do that again."

I wanted to stay up all night and see how many orgasms we could give each other, but I was tired. Being outside on the carriage ride had stolen any leftover energy I had. It wasn't long before I fell asleep to the rise and fall of

his chest.

CHAPTER 16



KNOX

I stayed awake for a while last night, just holding Sarah in my arms, reveling in the tickle of her hair under my chin and the warmth of her breath on my chest. I wanted more nights like that, although I knew I couldn't hope for more when she had Addy to consider.

When I woke, my heart felt full, my chest swollen with affection for what we'd shared. I knew she was worried about what everything meant and where we'd go from here, but I wanted to stay in the moment. We had this morning, then I'd go to work, and she'd get ready for the week ahead.

As she stirred and stretched, I wondered if they could spend the day on the farm. I could show them what we do. Would they even want to?

Sarah's eyes blinked open. "Morning."

I kissed her softly. "Morning, beautiful."

"I want to wake up every day in your arms," she said as she stretched.

I smiled. "I want that, too."

Then she groaned as she rolled over. "I don't want to get up."

I followed her, cradling her ass against me as I palmed her breast. "We don't have to."

It was still early, and I wasn't sure how soon Addy would be awake, but I was positive we could make the best use of our time.

She pushed her ass against my hardening dick. "What did you have in

mind?”

I kissed her shoulder as I rolled her nipple between my fingers. “Do we have time?”

Sarah widened her legs so I could slide my cock between her folds. “I sure hope so.”

I plucked her nipples as I slid my cock between her thighs. I eventually reached for the condoms I kept in the nightstand drawer, quickly sheathing myself, then lifting her leg so I could enter her from behind.

She bit her lip as I pushed inside, loving the feel of her tight walls pressing against me. “You feel so good.”

She moaned in response, her eyes closing as I filled her, and then I pulled back out to the tip. I turned her face so I could kiss her, smothering the moans that threatened to escape. I wanted her in my bed every morning. I wanted her hot, wet heat surrounding me. The feel of her soft skin pressed against mine. I wanted it more than my next breath.

I knew it wasn’t possible right now, and I wasn’t sure how long I’d have to be patient. But I was willing to do whatever it took to get there. I wanted Sarah to be mine.

She reached down to touch her clit, and desire surged through me. There was nothing hotter than a woman seeking her own pleasure.

Her breathing was erratic, and I lifted her leg higher to give her more access, her finger touching my cock with each thrust.

She was so wet, and I couldn’t hold out much longer. When she tightened around me, I let go, wanting to go over at the same time. This orgasm washed over me in one long wave of pleasure.

As we came back down, I kissed her shoulder, then eased out of her. I took care of the condom and grabbed another washcloth to clean her, but then decided to take a shower with her instead. When I opened the door, she was curled on her side, her hands under her cheek. “You want to take a shower with me?”

Her eyes fluttered open. “Okay.”

I held my hand out to her as she made her way out of the sheets and toward me.

My dick twitched at the sight of her naked. “I want as much time as we can get together this morning.”

“She’ll be up soon,” Sarah said as she joined me in the bathroom. I’d already turned on the water, hoping it would warm up quickly.

“We’ll make the most of our time.” I kissed her as I guided her under the steady stream of water, sighing when she soaped her hands and covered my chest with bubbles. She seemed fascinated with my body, and I was all too happy to let her explore.

“You’re so hard everywhere,” she said as her gaze flicked to mine.

I couldn’t help but flex my pecs. “It’s probably from working on the farm and then my regular job.”

She smiled mischievously at me. “I like it.”

“Do we have time for more?” I asked her softly, hoping I could convince her.

Her smile dissipated. “Probably not.”

“We might need to think about a sleepover soon.”

Sarah laughed. “You mean with Ember?”

“I love Addy, but this is so new. I want to spend time with you, too.”

“She wants the sleepover, so it’s not like we’re being selfish.”

“I like the way you think.”

“Let me ask Sebastian.”

“I’ll take care of that. Now, let’s see if you have one more orgasm to give me,” I said as I turned her, pulling her back against my chest. My hand traveled down her stomach to the spot between her legs that needed me most.

Her head fell back against my shoulder as I worked her over. I sucked on her skin, wanting to mark her. I couldn’t imagine waking up without her or showering by myself. It hadn’t taken long for her to infiltrate my life

completely.

When she moaned, I kissed her, building her up quickly and reveling in her falling apart in my arms. I'd always be there to catch her. I just hoped she'd realize that.

We washed quickly after that, worried that Addy would wake up and look for us. Sarah dressed first, kissing me before going to check on her.

The sheets on my bed were tousled, and I was positive they smelled of sex. I'd never invited a woman back to my house, and I didn't think I'd like having anyone in my space. But Sarah had proven me wrong. By the time I made it downstairs, my girls were cooking in the kitchen. "It smells amazing."

"It's the bacon," Addy said, her hair tousled and her pajamas wrinkled.

"Did you sleep good?" I asked her, wishing we were at the point where I could hug her good morning. I'd let her take the lead on our relationship.

"It's so quiet here," she said to me.

"There are no cars or sirens to wake you up here," I said.

Sarah smiled. "It's like being on vacation. I love it."

My home felt warmer somehow. And it wasn't just the decorations or the trees; it was their presence. The love and light they brought to it. I never wanted to let them go, but I knew we weren't in a place where I could ask them to move in.

I made coffee while they finished cooking the bacon and eggs. Then Sarah cut the bacon into small pieces and mixed them with the scrambled eggs.

"This looks good. Thank you," I said when she put my plate in front of me. She leaned down to kiss me, and it was the most natural thing in the world to do. But then we both tensed, remembering that Addy was watching us.

"Are you kissing?" Addy asked, disgust evident in her tone.

Sarah straightened. "Does that bother you?"

Addy's nose wrinkled. "I don't like it."

I had a feeling this didn't have much, if anything, to do with me and her mom kissing. "Do you mind if I date your mother? Because I really like her."

Addy frowned. "Do you have to kiss in front of me?"

"Sometimes, we'll want to." I wasn't sure I'd be able to control myself around her, but I could keep it tame.

"You know, other moms and dads kiss. Maybe you just aren't used to seeing it because I've always been single," Sarah said gently.

"Yeah, maybe." Addy was quiet for a few seconds, thinking about what her mother said. Finally, she looked up at me and said, "I like you, Knox."

"I like you, too, Addy." I more than liked her. It was so easy to love this little girl. She was vibrant and happy and just wanted to be loved back. Why her father couldn't see that, I wasn't sure. I suspected he was an asshole. He had to be to let these two go. "We'll try not to do anything that makes you uncomfortable."

She frowned but said, "Yeah, okay."

She was in that stage where she was uncomfortable with seeing anyone kiss, whether it was in a movie or in person. Part of it was her age, and the other was she wasn't used to seeing it. I hoped we'd normalize it for her.

She should know and see what love is. I intended to show Sarah how I felt about her every day, whether that was holding hands, hugging, or kissing. I wouldn't go too far in front of Addy. But she should see others giving and receiving affection.

We ate breakfast, the moment forgotten for now. I'd have to be more careful in front of Addy. It was so natural to be with them it slipped my mind that we hadn't discussed the situation with her first.

When we finished eating, we cleaned up. "Do you have plans for today?" I remembered that last weekend, she spent a day with her family.

"We'll probably catch up on cleaning and laundry. Grab some groceries."

Addy's face fell.

“Why don’t you spend the day with me? You can see what I do and maybe even help.”

Addy’s eyes widened. “Really?”

“We wouldn’t want to be in the way. I know how busy it gets.”

“You wouldn’t be in the way. I promise.”

“Can I see the shop?” Addy asked.

“Of course. Mom would love to show you around.”

Sarah’s brow furrowed. “Are you sure?”

“My mom would love to have her there. Besides, there’s more for her to do at the shop. When you get bored of it, you can help me put trees on the cars.”

Addy’s eyes widened. “I don’t think I’m big enough to help with that.”

“You can tell us if the tree is centered on the roof.”

“I can do that,” Addy said eagerly. “Can we, Mom? Please?”

“I don’t know how I could say no to an offer like that.”

I shook my head. “You don’t. I get off a bit early tonight. Then I can help you with your chores.”

“You don’t have to do that.”

“If you help out on the farm, it’s only fair I return the favor.”

Sarah’s shoulders lowered, and she said, “Okay. That sounds fun.”

Addy let out a scream of excitement, and we rushed to get ready. I offered Addy some extra clothes that Ember kept in the dresser, and Sarah wore one of my farm sweatshirts.

I texted Mom to let her know Sarah and Addy would be joining us today. She responded that she couldn’t wait to show Addy around. That’s what I loved about my family. They were quick to include anyone who was important to us.

It was too soon to have thoughts about a few months from now, much less things like forever. But I wanted to think that this was the real deal. That I’d have these two in my life for a long time to come. Only time would tell.

I drove my truck to the main house and parked. We kept our cars out of the barn lot because it was so crowded this time of the year.

The first customers were already trickling in, so we walked to the red barn, and I took them inside to get started.

Mom approached us. “There you are. I’m so excited to have a helper today.”

Addy’s eyes widened almost comically. I had a feeling she wasn’t used to being needed by anyone. Her father made her feel like she wasn’t wanted, and whether she realized it or not, that feeling would only intensify as she got older.

Mom talked to her about the register, the process for checking out, the packaging, and the gift wrap, telling her what she’d need to help with.

“It looks like you’ve got this. We’re going outside to help with the lot.”

“You two have fun,” Mom said, with barely a glance in our direction.

Mom was practically glowing as she guided Addy through a real checkout with a woman buying a lawn ornament.

“She’s good with kids,” Sarah said as we made our way outside.

“She said she’s been practicing her whole life for grandkids. I think she said that when we were kids, too. We just laughed because none of us could imagine having kids back then.”

“And now Sebastian does.”

“That wasn’t planned, but he adores her. Wouldn’t have his family any other way.”

In the lot, I explained the various types of evergreens, and Sarah helped customers find their perfect tree. I alternated between the lot and helping Heath secure trees to the roofs of the vehicles. As the day went on, I noticed Sarah checking her phone and looking agitated.

At lunch, I grabbed sandwiches from Mom’s fridge, and we sat on the porch to eat them. “Is everything okay? You looked upset.” I nodded toward her phone, which was upside down between us.

“I keep getting calls from Addy’s dad, Gary.”

I tensed. “Is he in town?”

“He wants to know when he can see Addy. It’s funny because we’ve been wondering, and I’ve reached out a few times with no response. But when he wants something, all of a sudden, it’s an emergency. He expects me to drop everything and give him an answer. The other thing is, I’m not ready to let her go at Christmas. He usually doesn’t take her for long, but I worry he changed his mind and will want to take her for a few days.”

“What does your agreement say?”

Her face pinched. “He gets her for Christmas Day this year.”

“Has he ever had her on the day before?”

“I think he took her when she was a baby, and it was too much. He brought her back in a few hours. When he doesn’t take her when he’s supposed to, he expects other days. I feel like I should give it to him because she should see her father.”

“That is a tough situation. Have you talked to an attorney about it?”

“Not about this. I worry about it every year, and it usually ends up working out. Something will inevitably come up, and he can’t see her. She’s disappointed, and I’m relieved. I feel bad about that.”

“He’s stressing you out. You spend most of the year without him, and then he calls and demands you comply with his requests during the most stressful time of the year.”

She let out a breath. “It’s exactly like that.”

“Where does he live?”

“He’s in California. He works some tech job and makes good money. It means he pays child support on time, but he can’t work anywhere else. That’s where he has to be.”

“That’s what he tells himself.”

“I think it’s true to some extent, and honestly? He’s never been much of a father. We haven’t missed him. I’ve missed having someone to share in the

load but not him specifically. If that makes sense.”

“It does,” I said, rushing to reassure her.

Her shoulders were tense. “I’m sorry that he’s intruding on our time.”

“I knew when we started dating that you had Addy and everything that came with that, including her father. I wondered how involved he was. I assumed he wasn’t because you almost never talk about him.”

“He doesn’t utilize his visitation because he’s in California. I worry about the day he asks to take her there. He has the right to keep her for two weeks in the summer, but she’s so young he hasn’t even offered.”

“I’d talk to your attorney and see what she recommends.”

“That’s good advice. I want to hold him to our agreement, but at the same time, I don’t want her to be with him on Christmas Day.”

“Do you get the morning?”

“Yes. Because his family celebrates later in the day.”

“You get the two most important parts of Christmas, and if Addy wants to spend time with him, maybe you should let her go.”

“I’ll talk to her and see what she wants to do.”

“If it were me, I’d adhere to the agreement. No visitation outside of it. If he misses the scheduled times, then it’s his loss. That way you aren’t upset by his phone calls, and there are no decisions to make.”

The tension in her shoulders finally eased. “That would be nice. I don’t want to argue about it or worry about what he wants. Thanks for listening.”

I wanted to help her, but at the end of the day, she was the one dealing with him. I hoped she set some boundaries soon because I didn’t like him upsetting her. I didn’t want to step in. It was her situation to deal with. But if he kept making her feel bad, I might. She was mine to worry about.

We finished our sandwiches. Mom had taken Addy to eat earlier, and they were back in the barn, working.

“You want to keep going, or do you need to get home?”

She stood and brushed off her jeans. “I’m having fun.”

I moved to throw out the wrappers in the kitchen, and she followed me inside. With a palm on my chest, she went up on tiptoes to kiss me. Her lips pressed against mine were slightly desperate.

I lowered my head and deepened the kiss. I was happy to oblige. I wanted her to feel good and to forget her asshole of an ex.

When she broke away, I followed with a soft kiss to her lips. “I wish we had more time.” And we weren’t standing in my mother’s kitchen. My brothers could stop in for lunch at any time.

“I needed that,” Sarah said with a smile as she stepped away.

I grabbed her wrist, tugging her against my body. “I’m not nearly done with you.”

“You’ll have to wait until Addy goes to bed,” Sarah said.

I’d offered to go home with them, and I hoped I could stay overnight, or at least long enough to try and sate this desire for her. I didn’t think it would be enough time, but I’d have to make do with whatever I could get. “I’m a patient man.”

She kissed me again, and I wanted to break all the rules and take her on this counter. Only the threat of my family members walking in kept me moving outside with her.

CHAPTER 17



SARAH

I'd felt tense all morning with Gary calling and texting. I didn't want to stop doing what I was doing to deal with him, but my responding texts advising him that we were busy weren't stopping him. I didn't feel relief until Knox mentioned setting boundaries.

I felt like I had to accommodate Gary. That it was important for me to make it easy for Addy to see him. But for the first time, I wondered if the way he dealt with visitation was unhealthy for us. He called and expected me to drop everything. It wasn't right, and it would be easier if we adhered to the agreement. I'd always hated the idea of giving Addy to him on holidays, and I had a feeling Gary used that against me.

He knew I wouldn't want to give up Christmas Day, so he'd make all sorts of other demands, knowing I'd do anything to keep her that day. What would happen if I called his bluff, if I told him it was the agreement or nothing? The idea was so out of character for me, yet I felt better the more I thought about it.

We spent the afternoon helping Knox in the lot. Eventually, Lori brought Addy out to us, saying she needed to run around outside. I had a feeling she wanted Addy to see more aspects of the farm. No matter what we did, we fell more in love with the farm.

Knox was patient, explaining the differences in the types of trees and how

to direct customers to the best option for their homes. He even let Addy secure a tree to a van. He mainly held her on a ladder while she clipped one side to the railing.

It was a little nerve-wracking for me, but I knew Knox would never do anything to hurt her. I trusted Knox with Addy. If he wanted to watch her so I could go out, I was okay with that. It felt like a big step because no one besides my family had ever watched her for me. Being a sole parent increased the pressure to make the right decisions all the time. I didn't have anyone to share the burden with.

At the end of the day, Knox said, "I'm ready to get out of here. How about you?"

"I think you promised us you'd help with laundry."

He winced. "I'm regretting that right about now."

"You don't have to if you don't want to."

"No. You helped me, and I promised I'd do the same for you. Right, Addy?" He ruffled her hair.

"You promised."

My heart pinched. Promises were important to Addy because Gary broke them so often. It didn't matter to him, but every missed visitation was a strike on her heart.

Knox met my gaze over her head. "And I always keep my promises."

"Mommy said that means you're responsible." She stumbled a little over the word responsible, but my heart squeezed at her meaning. She liked and respected Knox. He was becoming a bigger part of her life. I hoped nothing would happen to upend her trust in him.

"Your mom is a smart woman. I am responsible. My family depends on me to help on the farm. See how busy we've been all day?" At her nod, he continued. "If I hadn't shown up to do my part, it would have been harder on everyone else. Customers wouldn't have gotten their trees, and business would have suffered. Our farm has a reputation to maintain."

Addy nodded thoughtfully, and I wondered if she'd made the connection with her father. That she couldn't depend on him and what that meant for her.

"You want to meet us there?" I asked him.

"Why don't you send me your grocery list? I'll pick everything up and grab a pizza. After we eat, I'll tackle your laundry."

Addy giggled. "You can't tackle laundry, silly."

Knox nodded seriously. "You sure can. Stick around and you'll see."

Addy shook her head as Lori came up to us. "I suppose you want to get out of here. Eat some dinner."

"I promised I'd help them with some chores around the house since they were so generous with their time."

"You were such great helpers. Holly wanted me to give you one of her creations." It was a glass ornament with a nutcracker painted on the side.

"It's beautiful, but we can't accept that," Sarah said.

"Holly wanted Addy to have it. I think you guys must have bonded when you restocked the tree earlier."

"She's nice," Addy said as she took the ornament and carefully cradled it in her hands.

"Here's the box if you want to put it inside for safe transport." Lori handed it to me.

"Thank you so much. We enjoyed hanging out today."

Lori smiled. "You're welcome anytime. We love having you here."

We said goodbye and walked toward Knox's truck. We'd need to ride with Knox to his house to grab my car. At his house, Knox touched his stomach. "I'll hurry with the shopping. I'm already starving for pizza."

"Me, too," Addy said as she climbed into the back of my car and shut the door.

I kissed Knox's cheek. "Thank you for a wonderful day. I can't remember the last time I had so much fun."

He smiled, his grin a little wicked. "I didn't realize that's all it took to

show you a little fun. If you love to work around the farm, then I can really use you guys.”

His good-natured teasing felt nice.

“I didn’t say that. But we had fun. Thank you for another wonderful day. Everything is different with you. I never know what to expect.”

“I’m glad,” he said, pulling me in for a hug.

I breathed in his scent, reveling in his strong arms holding me close. I loved the feel of his chest against my cheek, his breath in my hair. The longing to have him in my life for longer than the holidays intensified. I forced myself to draw back. “I’ll see you soon.”

Knox winked at me and waved at Addy. “Be there as soon as I can. I don’t want to leave you hungry.”

As I drove away, he stood in the driveway, smiling and waving to Addy, who was giggling in the backseat. What if he was ours? What if he was the man we could count on forever? It was so scary and so far outside the realm of my current reality that I almost couldn’t wrap my mind around it.

“You really okay with me dating Knox?” She’d said she was the other night, but I wanted to check in with her.

“I like Knox.” She was quiet for a few minutes, and then she asked, “Does it mean he’ll be my daddy?”

My stomach twisted. “No. You’ll always have your father. But do you think Knox could be there for you, too?” I wasn’t even sure if he wanted that beyond us dating casually. We hadn’t discussed the future or what he wanted.

“I like spending time with him. He’s fun.”

“Is that because his family owns a Christmas tree farm? Will you feel the same when the holidays are over?”

“He’s fun at our house, too.”

“Yeah, I think so.” He was nice and attentive. He liked Addy. And our chemistry in the bedroom was off the charts. I was a strong believer that we created our own happiness, but being with him elevated my mood even

higher.

We went home, changed into comfortable sweats, and then we played card games on the couch. Knox texted me questions about the grocery list and sent pictures I shared with Addy. Even his shopping for us was fun. When he realized Addy was the one responding with emojis, he started sending pictures of him making a silly face next to the product.

“If you don’t stop sending him emojis and GIFs, he’ll never pick up the pizza, and I’m starving,” I teased her.

Addy handed me the phone. “He said he’s on his way now.”

I rested back on the couch and patted my stomach. “Thank God. I’m starving.”

When was the last time I’d had a man bring me dinner or buy me groceries?

A short while later, we heard his truck pull up, and Addy raced to the door to open it.

“Put on shoes and a jacket before you go out there,” I chided her.

“Fine,” she huffed as she raced to put on her shoes, and she ran down the sidewalk with her jacket streaming from her hand.

“Hold up, little lady. You need to put your jacket on before you can help.” He helped her put the jacket on, and my heart squeezed tighter as I joined them. He was so good with her.

Between the three of us, we had groceries put away in no time, and the pizza box was open on the counter. We were so hungry we devoured the slices quickly.

“I didn’t realize how much you two eat.”

“We worked hard all day,” I said, and Addy nodded in agreement.

Knox took the box to our recycling bin outside. When he returned, he rubbed his hands together. “Now, where’s the laundry we have to tackle?”

Addy laughed, hopped off the kitchen stool, and sped up the stairs.

“You don’t have to—”

Knox smiled and leaned over to kiss me. “I don’t break my promises. Remember?”

His voice was soft, and the words penetrated the remaining walls around my heart. If I was wrong about this man, then I wasn’t sure who I could trust. He’d been nothing but supportive and sweet since we met. Even when we were just friends. I wanted to let go of any misgivings and give him a fair chance. At least until Knox made me feel like I couldn’t count on him, and hopefully that day wouldn’t come.

I listened to them gather the clothes, her telling him about our process and which clothes went into which basket. Then they came downstairs to the laundry room just off the kitchen. When the washer was started, he came back out to the kitchen, where I was loading the dishwasher.

“That room is tiny.”

“Tell me about it.”

“Those cupboards are so far back, there’s no way you could reach them. What if we built them out to be even with the washer and dryer you have in there? I suspect those cupboards were designed to go with the old-style washers and dryers.”

“That’s not necessary. We can make it work.” The room had no usable storage, but we’d gotten by so far.

“I’ll talk to Heath. He might have some old cupboards he can switch them out with. And they wouldn’t be old. People switch out new cabinets when they buy a house because it’s not to their taste. You can only fit two in there.”

“I can’t afford to fix the laundry room right now.”

“We get the cupboards for free. They go to the dump if we can’t repurpose them. And the only other issue is labor, which we’re providing for free.”

“You are impossible to turn down.”

He kissed me solidly on the mouth. “Get used to it.”

That warmth I always felt in my chest when he was around spread

through my whole body.

“Now, do we have time for an episode of that Santa show while we wait for the laundry to get done?” Knox asked Addy.

“We do.”

“Addy, why don’t you get that ready while I help your mom finish the dishes?”

Addy took off for the living room, and Knox said, “Before you say you don’t need my help, just save your breath and accept it.”

“You’re spoiling me, but I appreciate your help,” I said softly as we worked together to empty the washer and place the clean dishes into the cupboards.

“That’s the idea.”

I shook my head.

“What’s wrong?”

“I don’t want to think about the negatives, but what if we don’t work out? What if...” *I get used to this treatment and it doesn’t last?*

“Let’s focus on what’s working. I’m happy, and if you’re not, you let me know. I don’t see any pitfalls in our relationship. Things are good right now. Let’s not invite any trouble. Think you can do that?”

I’d vowed to do just that a few minutes ago. “I can try.”

“That’s all I ask. I’m here for you and that little girl in there. There’s nothing I wouldn’t do for you. The way I see it, I’m busy with the farm this time of the year, and if I can help here and there, then I’m going to.”

“Thank you,” was all I could manage. My throat was thick with emotion.

Since I got pregnant with Addy, I’d felt alone. I had my family to rely on, which was more than a lot of other single parents, but I longed for a partner who’d make my needs a priority.

“You’re not alone anymore. You’ve got me.” He closed the dishwasher and pulled me into his arms. He held me tight as if he were willing me to believe him.

My hands curled around his neck, and I looked up at him in wonder, my chest pressed against his. Everything about him and this situation felt so good. If I let go and believed in him and his actions, then how much farther would I fall for him?

I couldn't help but be cautious, but I wondered how much it was hindering any progress or forward momentum in our relationship.

"You might not believe me today, but I hope to show you every day how important you are to me and what I'm willing to do for you and Addy."

"I don't know what to say." I was worried I'd always be fearful when it came to trusting people.

He kissed me softly. "Say you're in this with me."

"I'm in this with you." My heart tumbled in my chest.

"Then that's all that matters. I'll be here for you."

It was a trite statement, but combined with his touch and the sincerity in his tone, I believed him.

"Are you ready to watch the movie? Can I hit play?" Addy called from the other room.

Knox smiled mischievously. "We'll be right in."

Then he kissed me. It was deep and passionate, yet full of promises. I wanted to hold on to each one and put them in a jar in my room. I wanted to watch them grow and expand and become bigger than either one of us.

I was falling more for him each day. He didn't make it easy to protect my heart. He was lowering the walls around it, leaving it open and vulnerable.

I worried I'd get hurt. But I worried more that Addy would. But I trusted him in this moment to take care of us. To keep the promises he'd made.

He rested his forehead against mine. "I fall more for you each day."

"I was thinking the same thing."

"I've never felt like this before."

"Me either."

"Then we're here for each other, caring for each other's feelings and

nurturing this relationship. Nothing will come between us.” He kissed me one more time, then pulled me into the living room. “We’re here. Dishes are done, and laundry is washing. How many episodes can we watch tonight?”

“Just two. I need to take a shower and go to bed early.”

“You got it,” Knox said as he cuddled with Addy on the couch.

His relationship with her was easy and fun. She didn’t shy away from his affection. In fact, she seemed to soak it up. She was like a flower wilting in the sun without water. She needed more love than I had to give. I just hoped I wasn’t making the biggest mistake of all falling for this man.

As much as I wanted to trust myself, I’d never been successful in a relationship before. It was hard to see how things could change now. But I’d promised him I would give it a chance.

Knox winked at me over Addy’s head, and I settled in to watch the holiday show, feeling content and loved.

CHAPTER 18



KNOX

Last night, I helped Addy and Sarah sort and fold the laundry and then put it away. It was domestic and not something I'd ever done for a woman I was dating before, but I liked helping them. Our relationship was different and more fulfilling than any other I'd had.

I just hoped that Sarah was all in with this relationship like I was. At times, I felt like she was too scared to let herself believe that this was real and possible. I suspected she was holding herself back. She was unhappy with her ex's interactions with her and her daughter; she was dissatisfied with work and her side hustle.

She wanted more for herself but kept her life small. It was almost like she was afraid to take any risks. I understood that being a single mother made those risks more like jumping off a cliff without a safety net. But she had her family's support and now mine.

I hoped that she saw that she could do anything, even if she didn't have our love and support. That she could take a few more risks and still have a good life with her daughter. That things would be even more rewarding when she took that leap of faith.

But I could only do so much. She needed to see how special she was and how much she deserved the life she wanted to live. That included me.

I got a message from Talon when I was drinking my coffee on the deck,

so I rushed to finish it and get ready for work. I stopped by his house on the way. “You need my help with something?” I asked as I went inside the work shed.

His hair was disheveled, as if he’d run his hands through it a billion times. His clothes were wrinkled, and his face was lined with exhaustion.

Various metal designs were leaning against the wall—a Santa with a sled, Rudolph, a nutcracker, and more presents. There were even a few nursery rhyme characters. “This is amazing.”

“I’ve been working around the clock to get these done. Can we set them up somewhere and see how they look? We don’t have an area on the lane, but maybe one of the paths?”

“We’re going to need more help than just us.”

“That’s why I called everyone. It’s around that time of year when business is slowing during the week.”

“That’s true.” Evenings and weekends were still rushed, with customers wanting to buy a tree at the last minute. But most people worked during the day and didn’t come to the farm with their families. “We’re moving these today, then?”

“That’s the idea. It would be nice if we could showcase these before Christmas. Get an idea if this will be something we can expand next year.”

“I have a feeling it’s going to be a big hit.”

“People love light shows. Add in the Christmas tree farm and the holiday shop, and people are going to love it.”

“I hope so. I worked hard to get them done.”

“I can see that. Have you eaten anything or slept?”

He tipped his head to the side. “I ate a sandwich at some point. I just can’t remember when.”

I went to the fridge we’d installed in the workshop when we realized he would skip meals and pulled out a Vitamin Water and a premade sandwich. “Eat while you’re waiting for everyone else to show up. You’re going to need

your energy to haul this.”

“Heath is bringing the trailer,” Talon said as he sat at another workbench that was mostly cleared of debris and tore into his sandwich.

I sat across from him with a water. “You need to take breaks to eat and drink. Maybe even shower occasionally. You stink.”

Talon balled up his sandwich wrapper and threw it at my head. I ducked, used to his reaction.

“Not all of us have time to shower and go out with women.”

“You could if you wanted to.” I had a feeling he buried himself in work so he didn’t have to deal with whatever happened between him and Holly.

“You asked me to get as many of these done as possible before Christmas.”

“I didn’t realize you’d make so many. Or that you’d sacrifice your health to get it done.” But I should have. That’s just how Talon was. He was a hard worker, but it was more than that. It was like he didn’t care about anything but his art. He didn’t make time for us, dating, or even Mom. Maybe he was still grieving Dad, and this was his way of avoiding having any feelings about it. Would anyone be able to deter him from his method of doing things? Would a woman change his life the way Sarah changed mine?

“You should be happy. I think we have enough to start a good display.”

“I thought you’d do just a few. I’d show Addy and Ember the lights, and next year we’d do more. It’s going to be amazing.”

“I hope so.” Talon’s shoulders lowered, and I wondered if he was more than just exhausted and overworked. It was like he was running or avoiding something—or multiple things. Eventually, it was going to catch up with him, and he was going to crash and burn. We needed to check on him more often and make sure he was taking care of himself. But at the end of the day, he was an adult who should be able to take care of himself.

I wished he’d let us in and give us a clue as to what was bothering him the most. Was it Dad, Holly, or both? Was it something else? He kept things

so tight to his chest that it was hard to know.

I heard Heath's truck pull up just as Talon finished his sandwich and drained the Vitamin Water.

When Heath walked in, he took in the metal pieces and Talon. "Where are we hauling these to?"

"Can we put them on the path by the waterfall?"

Heath walked slowly around the room, taking in each piece. "I hope they work."

"They work. I tested them," Talon said through gritted teeth.

Heath grunted. "Let's do this. We might want to sell some trees at some point today, too."

Sebastian showed up to help a short while later, and it only took a few trips to get all the pieces by the lane. Then we left Talon to set it up. He'd call us if he needed help, and we couldn't leave the farm to run itself for long. Eventually, someone would need help to cut a tree or put it on their vehicle.

I couldn't wait to show the lights to Addy. I knew she'd love them. Maybe we could make a party out of it. Then I remembered how I'd promised her a birthday party on the farm.

When there was a lull in customers, I went to the barn to talk to Mom.

"What are you doing in here?" Mom asked, knowing we all avoided the shop as much as possible.

"I wanted to talk to you about something."

"Let me get you some hot chocolate."

I waited while she poured me a cup and handed it to me. "Now, what can I help with?"

"Addy's birthday is the day after Christmas."

Mom smiled. "How wonderful."

"Planning a party is always difficult that time of the year. I was wondering if we could use the second barn for it. They'd want a bonfire and s'mores."

“When were you thinking? Maybe that week between Christmas and New Year’s? We could make it a holiday slash birthday bash.”

“I think she’d love that.”

Excitement shone in her eyes. “We’ll have cupcakes made with snowflakes on top, the makings for s’mores, and maybe they could make those melted marshmallows in the cones? You guys always loved that. They could play games outside, too, if they wanted, capture the flag or graveyard tag.”

“I can’t believe you remember all of that.”

“Those were your favorite things to do. It was like one long summer camp around here.”

“I have fond memories of growing up here.” I hadn’t given much thought to having kids of my own and what it would be like for them to have the same childhood. But now that I had Sarah and Addy, it was becoming more attractive to me.

“I love sharing the farm with future generations. I hope you boys will have more grandchildren so that they can share in the magic. I’d love to throw a party for Addy. Maybe you can bring her and her mother by so we can discuss what she wants.”

“They’d love that. I’ll handle the costs.”

Mom raised a brow. “Will Sarah be okay with that?”

“Probably not, but I want to cover this for them. Besides, it’s just food and drinks.” It wouldn’t be that expensive. I didn’t know what their financial situation was, but she stayed in a job she didn’t enjoy. I suspected it was for financial security for her and her daughter.

“You’re a good man.”

“I try to be.”

“I see how you are with your brothers. You worry about them, too.”

“Speaking of, I’m a little worried about Talon. I know he gets lost in his projects, but it seems worse lately.”

“I’ve been thinking the same thing. But he’s a grown man. All we can do is be there for him when he wants to talk about whatever’s bothering him.”

“What if he never does?” I asked, the worry spreading through my body.

“He’s going to have to deal with it sooner or later.”

“We set up his light display by the waterfall. I was thinking we could have people see it, but I wanted to do something with just family. Maybe on Christmas or the day after.”

“Are you including Sarah and Addy in that?”

“I’d like to. I don’t know what their plans are yet, though.”

Holly walked by with a box.

“Holly, we’re showcasing a new light display around Christmas. Do you think you and your family would like to see it?”

“I don’t know. I’d have to see.”

“I’ll let you know when it is when we figure out the details,” Mom said, and Holly kept walking toward one of the display trees to add her ornaments.

“Are you playing matchmaker?” I asked her.

“I’m not sure those two are meant to be together. I think they have some unresolved issues, and neither of them can move on until they deal with the past.”

“That’s smart.” So, Mom wasn’t ignoring Talon. She was dealing with him in her own way.

Mom winked. “That’s what your father always used to say.”

“You’re always working behind the scenes.”

“The trick to dealing with so many men is to make them think they’re making all the decisions.”

I chuckled. “But it’s really you orchestrating everything.”

Mom squeezed my shoulder. “You know.”

I sobered. “I don’t know if forcing Holly and Talon into the same room is a good idea.”

“I didn’t say anything about a room, did I?” Mom asked as she moved

behind the counter to help a customer who was buying a wooden lawn ornament of a reindeer with a red ribbon.

I felt a little better knowing Mom was worried about Talon, too. I could talk to Emmett, but he was so wrapped up in Ireland. I didn't want to interfere.

The weight of my responsibilities felt heavier when I discounted Emmett from the equation. He had Ireland and shouldn't need to be so involved with his brothers. That job rested with me now. I wouldn't let them down. Just like I shouldn't have let Mom and Dad down when Dad had his heart attack. Maybe I couldn't have prevented it, but I could have been here, shouldering the responsibility.

I didn't spend much time in the barn, but I had to admit it was nice. Several trees showcased the ornaments and decorations we sold on consignment. Talon made a few metal decorations to hang on the wall or on siding. There were a few new ones that had the same type of lights he'd made for the display on the lane.

I wondered if he'd make more of those for sale in the store. It would only increase awareness of his other work. It was his lighting that hung from the ceiling of the barn. Twinkling lights hung from the beams, and the smell of hot chocolate and cookies drew people inside. We even had bathrooms inside. Mom had insisted on indoor plumbing when Emmett suggested Porta Potties. He hadn't wanted anything so permanent, but I had to admit, it set our farm apart from the others.

Customers had a pleasant experience when they came here. I hoped we could add to that with the addition of the light display. At the very least, Ember and Addy would enjoy it.

When I went outside, watching the lot and making sure the trees were secured correctly on top of the vehicles, I couldn't help but feel pride that my father had built this place, and we'd only grown it more with everything we'd added over the last few years. It would support Mom well into retirement. If

we were smart, maybe we'd even build generational wealth going forward.

I'd talk to Sebastian about investing some of the money into the stock market so we could continue to build the savings. I wanted my mother, my brothers, and Ember to be taken care of. I couldn't help but think about the possibility of having children—not just Addy, but kids of my own. Would I want them to carry on this legacy or have the choice to do whatever they wanted in life? I wanted to give them the money, means, and support to follow their dreams.

I might have enjoyed working in architecture, but that didn't mean it was my passion and what I would have spent my life doing. I breathed in the scent of evergreens, knowing this was where I belonged.

Everything and everyone I loved was here. I'd protect them at all costs. I hoped that I could count Sarah and Addy into that equation going forward.

CHAPTER 19



SARAH

After Sunday night, I felt settled in my relationship with Knox in a way I hadn't before. He'd spent an evening with us, doing exactly what we did to prepare for the week. We did laundry, dishes, and cleaned the kitchen. Knox had even helped Addy get her backpack ready for the next day. He hadn't balked at doing any of it.

I hadn't realized how much Gary's indifference had affected my interactions with other people. I accepted help from my family, but not from others. If I wanted a solid relationship with Knox, I needed to let him in. He was a protector, a fixer. He wanted to help me, and I needed to let him. When I let go, I could be grateful and enjoy what he was doing for us. I didn't have to do everything on my own anymore.

I needed to make some changes in other areas, too. The first thing I did was call Gary. I didn't usually call him often, other than to verify visitation times. The conversations always left me feeling helpless and out of control.

When he finally answered, he said snidely, "Are you finally not busy?"

I almost said we spent the weekend at a Christmas tree farm before I remembered it wasn't any of his business. "I have a few minutes to talk."

"I wanted to figure out the holidays."

"There's nothing to figure out," I said, with my heart beating hard in my chest.

“We haven’t decided on anything yet.”

“Our agreement states that I get Addy for Christmas Eve and until noon on Christmas Day. You get her that evening through noon on her birthday.”

He sputtered. “We’ve never followed that.”

“We are now.” I vowed to say as little as necessary to get my point across. I wouldn’t bring emotion into this. We had a legal agreement, and we’d follow it.

“Why the sudden change?”

“Not knowing the schedule is disruptive to my life and Addy’s. We don’t need to discuss it or plan for everything because we already have everything in writing.”

“It’s always been easier to make our own plans,” Gary said reasonably.

“Not anymore. Not since I realized how much it drained me.”

“This isn’t about you. This is about Addy spending time with me.” Gary’s tone darkened.

He was trying to guilt trip me, but I wouldn’t fall for it this time. “You’re the one who’s in control of seeing her. You can see her anytime we outlined in the agreement.”

“You’re being ridiculous. What happens if I can’t make it on Christmas?”

“Then you get her during the next visitation period. You get her every other weekend.” I didn’t want to give up that much time with her, but it was his right to see his daughter.

“You know I can’t travel that often.”

“There’s going to come a time when Addy gets it. When she realizes how often you make time to see her.” And I’ll be there to pick up the pieces, to soothe her aching heart.

“You’re stopping me from seeing her,” he hissed into the phone.

I ground my teeth together. “I’ve never done that.”

“It’s what you’re doing right now.”

My gaze snagged on the picture on my desk of me holding Addy as a

baby. We were alone, and back then, I didn't realize how often that would be the case for us. "You can see her per the terms of the agreement."

Gary's voice raised. "Then I'll be in town this weekend to take Addy on her scheduled visitation."

I knew this might happen. He'd call my bluff, threatening to use his time. But I had to stay strong. Unless he was planning to move to Maryland, it was unlikely he'd be able to see her often. I was more worried about him taking her for the two weeks over the summer, but I'd worry about that when it happened. "I probably won't tell her until you're in town. So let me know when you are."

He hung up without saying anything further. In the past, I'd tell Addy when he said he was coming, and she'd be disappointed when he didn't show up. I avoided that by not telling her until I was positive he'd come.

When I put my phone down, my hands were shaking. I hadn't realized what a toll that conversation would take on me. At the same time, I felt good about sticking to the agreement.

Then I spent the afternoon looking at the number of clients I had for editing, the rate I was charging them, and whether it would cover my bills. I worked out the number of clients I absolutely needed to get by, and a number that would feel even better. I decided to put some feelers out to see if I could bring in more clients.

By the end of the day, I heard back from a few clients saying that they had referrals for me. I'd slowly start increasing my workload to see how doable it was. Once I got to a certain number of bookings, I'd give my notice at work. It was scary, but the thought of working one job instead of two was attractive.

Especially since I'd be my own boss. I brainstormed other services I could offer, like writing blurbs, series bibles, and query letters for authors trying to go through a traditional publisher. These items would take less time than editing a full manuscript.

Satisfied it was a real possibility, I felt better than I had in a long time. I had Knox, I was handling Gary, and I had a plan for my future.



On Wednesday night, I went over to my parents' for dinner. Grace couldn't come because she had to work late, but we were going out for drinks afterward.

"What's new with you?" Mom asked, probably expecting me to say nothing because nothing new had happened since Knox came into my life.

Addy was reading her library book in the living room with Dad, so I felt like I could be honest with her.

"A lot, actually." I'd worked the same job for years, needing consistency and security. I was stuck, afraid to make any decisions or take any risks. But for the first time, I felt hopeful about the future. Like I was in control of my destiny and not the other way around. Maybe I could build a better future for my daughter.

One where I didn't even need to rely on Gary's child support to get by. Maybe it would be extra, and I could put it into a college fund for her.

I felt stronger than I had since I graduated from college and was truly on my own. There was something to feeling like I could take care of myself that was addicting.

Mom pulled the casserole out of the oven. "Tell me. I'm dying to know."

"I evaluated my finances and editing clients to see if making it a full-time gig was feasible, and I think it is. I'm going to continue growing the business before I give notice."

"You know we'll help if you need it," Mom said.

"I appreciate that, but I don't want to rely on you. I can do this myself."

"I'm proud of you, but what prompted you to consider it?" Mom asked.

"Knox opened my eyes to the possibilities. That maybe I'm not stuck in

this life I'm living now. That I can create a new one that takes care of me and Addy. I want to make enough money that I don't need Gary's help.

"I don't want to say he pushed me or anything. He just made me see that there's more to life than this careful existence I've been living. I've been afraid to take any risks."

"You're a single mother. I can understand that."

"I'm tired of the way Gary treats us. I want to remove him from the equation. I want to know what to expect when it comes to him. The only way to do that is to stick to the agreement." I spoke faster, my heart racing as I admitted it out loud.

"Good for you," Dad said as he walked into the room. Addy was still on the couch, reading her book.

"You think so?" I asked, needing reassurance that I hadn't started something I couldn't handle.

"He's been jerking you around for years. I didn't say anything because it's your life. But I didn't like it."

"What do you think he'll do? I'm worried he'll take her for the two weeks in the summer."

"He should see her more. What if it forces him to have a better relationship with her?"

"I don't think we can force him to do anything," I said to Mom.

"That's true. It has to be better than what you have now. He barely sees her, and when he does, he calls you asking for help, as if he's never watched a child before."

"That's fairly close to the truth." His only experience was with Addy, and I was always there to help him.

"Make him stand on his own two feet. If I were you, I'd send him her activity schedule and tell him Addy would love for him to be there. If he doesn't come, that's on him. But agonizing over what to do about these things isn't helping you. Give him the opportunity and space to be involved.

It can't hurt," Dad said.

"That's a good idea. I'd love to offload some of this guilt."

"It's not your fault that he's the way he is. We all love her, and she has so many people to support her," Mom said gently.

"Are you saying she doesn't need him?" I asked.

"I think every girl needs her father, but what if she gets what she needs with your father or someone like Knox?" Mom asked.

"He's so good with her, and he doesn't have much experience with kids beyond his niece."

"I feel like you've decided this is all you can have, and you've lived in that truth for years. But what if you're wrong? What if there is a different life you could be living?"

"That's what I'm exploring. I was so scared to change anything before."

"I'm proud of you. If he takes her for those two weeks, it might be a good thing for both of them. They can get to know each other. She's old enough that he can handle her, and if not, you go back to court and ask that he get less time with her. But I don't think that will be necessary. Gary might surprise you."

I laughed. "I gave up on expecting much out of him years ago."

"People change. Look at what you're doing," Dad said reasonably.

I sighed. "You're right."

Mom shook her head. "I think this will be better for both of you. Worrying about when he wanted to see her was rough for all of us. You stressed about it and then had to chase him down at the holidays to get his answer."

"I feel more in control now. I'm not sure what he'll do or how he'll react, though. That's the scary part."

"Know that you can handle anything that comes your way. You're strong and independent. You've been raising her on your own. You've made all the decisions about schooling, health care, and what kind of food to feed her. He

wasn't involved in any of those decisions. You can do this, too."

"It's empowering to think that way."

"You always should have been thinking this way because it's true. I wish you'd see it like we do," Dad said.

"I'm getting it now." I was a strong person for doing this on my own. My parents offered their help, but I did most of it on my own.

"Dinner's ready," Mom called to Addy.

When she didn't respond, Dad went in to tell her. When she was reading or watching TV, it was tough to get her attention.

"I think you're doing the right thing. I'm proud of you," Mom said as I helped her set the table.

"Thank you. It's scary, but I think I'm on the right track."

Mom touched my shoulder. "You don't give yourself enough credit for how much you do and how far you've come."

"I have a few more things to do yet." I was excited for the future for the first time in a while.

"We're always growing and developing into better versions of ourselves. Or at least, we should be."

I sighed. "I'm not sure Gary is."

"But he's not your responsibility. You can't control him. But you can control how you interact with him and who you bring into Addy's life."

"I'm happy with Knox," I said to her, feeling lighter to admit it. "He offered to host Addy's party on the farm. Will you come and meet his family?"

Mom grinned. "I'd love to."

It was a big step to mix our families, but I thought it was time. I wanted the two most important parts of my life to converge.

"He said he'd do a bonfire and s'mores and music," Addy said as she climbed onto a chair.

I spooned out the taco casserole for her and placed it on her dish.

“Mmm. Yum,” Addy said.

I never knew when she’d decide she didn’t like a food she liked last week. So I was relieved this was still one of her favorites.

We dug into the casserole and talked about the farm, the Monroes’ plans, and the adjoining property that housed the old inn.

“What do you think will happen with the property?” Mom asked.

“Knox said they wanted to buy it. Heath wants to renovate the inn and incorporate it into the farm’s offerings.”

“That could be good,” Mom said.

“Yeah, but he doesn’t know what the woman who inherited the property wants to do with it. They’re hoping to get it, but if not, they’ll have to be okay with that.”

“I think what they’re doing is wonderful. We need more places where you can go and have an experience, whether that’s a pumpkin farm or Christmas tree farm,” Mom said.

“There’s one close by—Pine Valley or something like that. It’s good for a tree, but I don’t think they have a shop or carriage rides. There definitely isn’t a light display,” Dad said.

“Well, that’s new, and I’m not sure if it will be ready this year. But I think Addy’s hoping it will be. Talon is talented and works hard.”

“I love his lights. I’m always admiring them at the shop downtown. Lavender, I think, carries them.”

“I think his fixtures have been featured in magazines,” I said.

“I don’t doubt it. They’re unique and trendy,” Mom said.

“I don’t know if I’d like them for our house,” Dad said thoughtfully.

He preferred more traditional lighting, but Mom was more adventurous.

“If Talon finds out Mom likes them, he’ll probably make something for you.” All of Knox’s brothers were good with kids, despite how grumpy they were in general. They didn’t like to socialize much, but when they let people in, they were all in.

“I can’t wait to see the lights. Knox said it might be ready by my birthday,” Addy said, drinking her chocolate milk.

“I don’t know if Talon will get it done in time. I know he’s working hard on it.”

“I can’t wait for Christmas, my birthday, and my party,” Addy said.

“You have a lot to look forward to,” Mom said.

It was a wonderful time of the year, and meeting Knox only amplified that. I just hoped the magic didn’t dissipate after the holidays.

CHAPTER 20



KNOX

*B*y Thursday night, I was exhausted by the mad rush of last-minute shoppers to get their trees. On top of that, the fields were emptying, and we only had so many trees in the lot. It meant there were customers who couldn't get the tree they wanted.

I encouraged customers to take a walk and check out the light display. It was small for now, and we decided not to charge for it. Talon assured me that next year it would be bigger, and we'd charge for it. For now, it was a little bonus for those who were buying their trees. We'd even gotten returning customers who just wanted to see the new light display.

"How are things going with you and Sarah?" Mom asked when I stopped by for a snack.

"I haven't seen her this week. We've both been busy."

"Why don't you surprise her?"

"You mean show up there? Is that a thing you do with a single mother? I don't want to interrupt her routine."

"I think she'll appreciate it, and if she doesn't like it, you could always go home."

"That's true. I'm not sure what it means that I'm taking relationship advice from my mother."

"It means you're smart. If you haven't seen her, and you want to, then

you need to make it happen.”

“I might do that.” I missed them. We video-called most nights, with Addy taking over the phone and telling me about her day. I loved listening to her chatter. After she went to bed, sometimes I talked to Sarah. She was excited about some changes she’d made at work and with Gary. I was proud of her for taking those steps, and I hoped it meant that she was open to the possibility of a future with me, too.

I understood that we couldn’t rush things, but I wanted to see her more often. I wasn’t sure when it would be the right time to ask her to move in with me. But at the very least, I wanted them to spend more overnights with me. She worried about moving too fast or Addy not being ready.

I grabbed another cookie and said, “I’m going over there.”

“Good for you.”

“You can call me if you need anything.”

Mom rolled her eyes. “I won’t need you, and even if I did, I have Heath and Talon.”

“I’d call Heath. I’m not sure Talon charges his phone.”

Mom laughed. “You’re probably right about that.”

Tonight, I had a singular purpose: I wanted to see Sarah and maybe even Addy, if she was still up.

I headed home to shower and then headed over to Sarah’s. It was nine before I knocked softly on her door, wondering if I should have texted that I was on my way.

I finally texted her to tell her I was on the porch.

A few seconds later, the lock clicked, and the door opened. Sarah smiled shyly. “What are you doing here?”

“I wanted to see you.”

She stepped back. “Addy’s sleeping.”

“I wanted to see her, too, but—”

She smiled teasingly as she closed the door. “But I’ll do?”

“You’ll more than do. I missed you.” I moved closer until her back hit the door, and she was pressed against me.

“I missed you, too.”

“Can we go upstairs?” I whispered, not wanting to wake Addy.

She nodded.

I leaned down and kissed her softly. I refrained from touching her because I didn’t want Addy to see us, and I knew I wouldn’t be able to control myself.

“What are you waiting for?” Sarah asked when I pulled back slightly. With a naughty smile, she grabbed my hand and tugged me upstairs. She wore sweatpants that hugged her ass and a form-fitting long-sleeved T-shirt. Her hair was up in a messy bun. I’d never seen her quite so relaxed looking, other than when she made me breakfast. I liked the soft look on her.

In her bedroom, she closed the door and locked it. Then she stood with her back against the door and licked her lips. “Now, where were we?”

I moved so that my body was once again pressed against hers, my hands roaming her body, down her sides, and up her shirt.

“No bra?” I asked when my palms encountered her bare breasts.

She smirked. “I was getting ready for bed.”

“I came at just the right time, then.” I palmed her ass, then slid a hand down her pants and under her lace panties. I groaned into her mouth, needing her. “It’s been too long.”

She lifted her shirt over her head, and I helped her, pulling it up and over. Then she slid her sweatpants over her hips and down her legs until she stood in front of me, naked.

“You’re gorgeous.” Better than what I’d been imagining the last week when I was alone in my bed. Between kisses, I said, “I don’t like being apart from you.”

She nibbled on my lower lip. “Neither do I.”

“I want to be with you all the time. I want to come home to you. Wake up

with you.”

“That sounds amazing.”

“I don’t want to rush you.” I toed off my work boots, shucking my shirt and jeans.

Sarah moved to the bed, where she lay on her back, spread her legs, and dipped a finger into her wet heat. “You can rush. I need you.”

Her head fell back as she bit her lip.

“Fuck.” I couldn’t look away as she slid her finger inside and alternated with circling her clit. “That’s hot as fuck.” But I wanted to be the one who made her feel good.

I rested my knee on the bed as her fingers fell away, and she reached for me. I moved over her, kissing her while she pulled me tight to her. I loved the feel of her soft skin against my hard body. “You feel so good.”

I’d never get enough of her. There was a roaring in my ears as I lowered my head to lave at her nipples. I didn’t rest until they were hard peaks and she was trembling with need. I moved down her body, pressing light kisses as I went. When I settled between her legs, I knew I was home with her. “I don’t want to be apart from you anymore.”

“Neither do I.”

“I don’t know what that means. You have Addy and other things to consider, but can we try to be in each other’s space more?”

She smiled softly. “I’d like that.”

I rewarded her with a kiss on her swollen clit. “Are you wet for me?”

“I need you.”

“I want you,” I said as I used my fingers to stretch her, pumping inside before I sucked on her clit. I worked her over without any pretense or teasing. I wanted her to come hard, and then I wanted to fuck her. I wanted to feel her tight walls pulsing around me. I needed that.

When she went over, her whole body tensed and arched, then trembled with pleasure.

“I love to watch you come.”

When she settled, her skin was flush, and her eyes were bright. I kissed her softly. “Do we need a condom?”

“I’m clean.”

“I am, too. I want to feel you bare, but only if you’re okay with that.”

“I want that, too.” Her hands went to my ass, and she pulled me to her. I lined up my cock and entered her, one inch at a time, savoring the feel of her wet heat surrounding my cock. The feel of being bare inside a woman for the first time was intensified because it was her.

There was nothing between us. I’d bared my soul to her, and she’d accepted me. She wanted this, too. I let those feelings wash over me as I seated myself deep inside her. I waited a few seconds for her to adjust before I pulled out and thrust inside.

Her hands moved to my forearms, where she held on tight.

I wanted her to feel me tomorrow. I wanted her to remember this. Any time she felt alone, I wanted her to feel me inside her. It was a heady feeling, one that had me barreling toward an orgasm faster than I would have liked.

“I need you to get there,” I gritted through my teeth.

“Almost.” She reached down and circled her clit, causing the tingle to start at the base of my spine and spread like wildfire. I felt like I was going to burst into flames when we went over at the same time.

I dropped my head down, knowing I’d never be the same after this. Sarah wrecked me in the best way. I was gone for her. No one else would ever compare.

I gathered her to me, our thighs sticky with my release. “I need to clean up, but—”

“Not yet.” Her arms tightened around me.

“I never want to move.”

“Me either.”

“I’m glad I came over.”

She laughed softly. “Me, too. You can come over whenever you’d like if that’s what happens.”

“I didn’t come over just for sex. I wanted to see you. I thought I might catch Addy before bed.”

“She goes to sleep at eight-thirty.”

“Ah. I’ll know for next time.”

“It was a nice thought, and I thoroughly enjoyed your company.”

I played with her hair, wondering what she thought of what I’d said. “Would you consider moving in with me at some point? I meant what I said earlier. I don’t want to rush you, but I’d love to come home to you every night.”

“I want that, too.”

“You’ll let me know when you’re ready for that step?” I asked, holding my breath for her answer.

She was quiet for a few seconds before she said, “Let’s get through the holidays first.”

“Of course. We’re still new.” But it didn’t feel like that. We’d shared so much already. I felt like I’d known her for a long time. Maybe it was because we were technically friends first.

Sarah propped herself on an elbow to see me. “Addy really likes you.”

I smiled. “That’s the idea.”

Her face was serious. “It means that you have the power to disappoint her.”

I wondered if she was thinking about Addy’s dad. “I don’t know what you went through with her father, but I want to be there for her. Like I’ve said before, I’m not going to make promises I can’t keep.”

Her face screwed up. “What if something happens between us?”

“I can’t predict the future, and I wouldn’t want to. But I have a good feeling about us. You just have to have a little faith.”

“I can do that.”

“That’s all I ask. Now, do you want me to leave before Addy wakes up?”

“You can stay.” Sarah settled into my arms.

“I can set an alarm.” I moved to look for my phone.

She stopped my movement with a hand on my arm. “Don’t. Addy would love to see you in the morning.”

Pleased at the idea, I said, “I would, too.”

“Then it’s settled,” she said as she got up to unlock the bedroom door so Addy could find us in the middle of the night if she needed us.

This felt like another step in our relationship. One where we trusted Addy to be okay with us. I only saw things getting better from here.



The bed bounced erratically, waking me the next morning. “What’s Knox doing here?”

I slowly opened my eyes to see Addy’s shocked expression.

This wasn’t how I intended to greet her in the morning. I had visions of being dressed and making her pancakes in the kitchen. I grabbed the sheet to make sure I was covered.

“He stayed overnight,” Sarah said, like it was a normal occurrence and nothing to be worked up over. “Why don’t you go to the bathroom and get dressed? We’ll make something special for breakfast.”

Addy tipped her head to the side. “Will you make pancakes?”

“I think we can manage that,” I said as I glanced at the clock. It was early.

When she bounded out of the room, we exchanged a relieved look and rushed to get dressed before she returned.

“That was a close one,” I said.

“We should get dressed before we fall asleep next time.”

I moved behind her and wrapped my arms around her. “I like the idea that there will be a next time.”

“Me, too.”

I felt rather than saw her grin.

Footsteps raced by the door. “Come downstairs with me.”

Sarah turned. “She doesn’t like to be downstairs by herself in the morning.”

“I’ll go. You take your time getting ready.” I kissed her softly, already dreading having to leave her to go to work.

I met Addy at the top of the steps. “What kind of pancakes do you want? Pumpkin?”

Her nose scrunched as we made our way down the steps. “Ew. No.”

“Banana?”

“Knox,” she whined.

“Why don’t you tell me what kind you’d like, and I’ll see if your mom has what we need?”

“Chocolate chips,” she said, like it was the only intelligent answer to that question. “She keeps them with the mugs.”

“That’s an odd place,” I said as I pulled them down.

“It’s so I can’t reach them.”

“Do you sneak them?” I asked, remembering how we’d find any junk food in our house growing up and devour it.

“Maybe.”

I chuckled. Being around kids was fun. “I’ll be sure to put them away after we’re done with them.”

I moved to grab the pancake mix, knowing our time was short this morning, and mixed everything together. Addy snuck chocolate chips but not so many that I worried about her stomach.

I started the mini pancakes on the stove before Sarah joined us. She was carrying my phone. “This was buzzing.”

I wiped my hands before grabbing it. “I forgot about it.”

It was rare for me not to check it immediately upon waking. But then

Addy surprised us. When I grabbed it, I saw missed calls from Heath and Sebastian. “Can you watch the pancakes?”

Sarah moved to take over for me. “Of course.”

I went into the living room and listened to the voicemail from Heath. *Knox. Mom’s having chest pain. We’re taking her to the hospital.* My heart stuttered to a stop. With each voicemail, my brothers’ voices grew more frantic as they couldn’t reach me.

I called Heath, hoping everything was okay.

“Where’ve you been?” Heath’s tone was short.

“I’m sorry. I spent the night at Sarah’s.”

“And turned your phone off?”

I closed my eyes at the accusation I heard in his tone. It must have been on the floor, because I never heard the vibration. I was distracted, and it cost me again. “I’m sorry. How is she?”

“They’re doing testing to see what’s going on. Are you on your way?”

That snapped me into action. “I’ll be right there.”

Heath clicked off without another word, and I didn’t blame him. They were in the hospital all night without me. I hadn’t been there when they needed me. Again. It was my responsibility to make sure everyone in the family was okay, especially my mother.

I ran upstairs to grab my boots and make sure I had everything. Then I returned to the kitchen. “My mom’s in the hospital. I have to go.”

Sarah’s face filled with concern. “Is she okay?”

“I don’t know.” I felt numb. “I just need to get there.”

“If you wait a few minutes, I’ll go with you.”

“You have Addy. She has school.”

“I can join you after.”

“Don’t worry about it. You have your job, and I’ll be okay. I have my brothers.” I wouldn’t be okay. I was screwing around and wasn’t there when my mother needed me.

“I hope your mommy’s okay,” Addy said, and I couldn’t help but go to her and pull her in for a hug. “She will be.”

I didn’t believe it, but I wanted Addy to feel okay. “Have a good day.”

I couldn’t promise to see her later because I wasn’t sure what was going on. Did my mom have a heart attack? I couldn’t believe this was happening all over again. The only good thing was she was alive. They could run tests. With my father, Mom had found him at some point after the heart attack, and it was too late.

I consoled myself with the idea that I’d get another chance. This time, I wouldn’t mess up. I wouldn’t let anything, or anyone, distract me. My place was on the farm and with my family.

“I have to go.” My voice felt flat, my feet heavy as I moved toward the door, wondering how I’d drive to the hospital.

Sarah’s arms wrapped around me from behind. “She’ll be okay.”

“You can’t know that.” My voice was harsher than I intended. But I didn’t like people trying to tell me things would be okay when I knew they wouldn’t. I’d screwed up, and there was no way around that.

I didn’t turn around. I didn’t offer any false platitudes. I needed to get to the hospital. I needed to do my duty and be there for my brothers.

I don’t remember walking out or driving to the hospital. The next thing I knew, I was standing at the emergency room counter, asking to see my mother. My heart was pounding in my chest, and my palms were sweaty. I never made it to the hospital last night because I was so far away.

I followed the nurse’s directions to the area where Mom was staying. My brothers were waiting on benches outside the room.

Sebastian stood when he saw me. “Where were you?”

“I was at Sarah’s. I’m sorry I wasn’t here.”

“You didn’t answer your phone.” Talon sat on the bench.

“I didn’t hear it.” It wasn’t an excuse. “What’s going on?”

“They’re running more tests. They haven’t said what happened yet. It

could be nothing,” Emmett said.

“Or it could be a heart attack,” I said, not willing to relax yet.

“We won’t know until the testing has been completed. Have a seat.” Emmett pushed a hand on my shoulder until I sat next to Seb.

Ireland was next to him, which only made my heart hurt more. My brothers and Ireland were here for Mom last night, and I wasn’t. It was my worst nightmare. I came home so this wouldn’t happen again. But nothing had changed. I still wasn’t where I was supposed to be.

CHAPTER 21



SARAH

I watched the pancakes cook on the stove without really seeing them. Addy was concerned about Lori, and I couldn't blame her. I was worried, too.

I was even more upset about how Knox reacted after checking his phone. His face was ashen, his forehead creased with anxiety. He was upset about his mother and missing the calls from his brothers.

It wasn't surprising that we missed the vibration if we were sleeping. He couldn't blame himself. It could have happened to anyone, and it sounded like his brothers were there for her.

But I couldn't shake the feeling that he was connecting what happened last night to his dad's heart attack. He felt responsible, even though he wasn't living here at the time, and that same sense of duty was kicking in now for his mom.

Or maybe it was just frustration that he couldn't be there last night when she needed him. But everything in my body was telling me this was bad. He blamed himself, and I was going to be part of that. If he hadn't been distracted with me, he would have been there.

He could just as easily have missed the calls at his house, but I had a feeling he wouldn't see it that way. He took his family responsibilities seriously. He'd never forgive himself if something happened to his mother

and he wasn't there.

"Will she be okay?" Addy asked for the fifth time when I set a stack of pancakes in the center of the table.

"I hope so. Try to eat something. You have a spelling test this morning."

But neither of us were particularly hungry anymore. I cleared the dishes, prompted her to brush her teeth, and walked her to the bus stop. I hugged her tight when the bus arrived, telling her to have a good day. She gave me a sad smile that I had a hard time returning.

I wasn't sure anything would be okay, especially with Knox and our relationship. I had a feeling everything had just changed, and I wasn't sure what to do. It didn't sound like he wanted me to be there for him, but I texted him anyway, telling him I'd come if he needed me.

He answered after an hour, telling me to stay and work. He'd let me know what was happening. Even though I checked the phone throughout the day, I didn't get another message.

It felt weird to reach out to one of his brothers, but I needed to know if his mother was okay. I finally texted Sebastian since his was the only number I had.

He'd responded, saying that they'd run tests and couldn't find anything. She had heart palpitations and shooting pain in her chest. They didn't think it was a heart attack. Maybe too much caffeine or stress.

I could see that, with it being so busy at the farm. I thought about reaching out to Knox again, but I wasn't sure what to say. *I talked to Sebastian, and everything sounds okay. So why aren't you calling me?*

But he didn't need to worry about me when his mother was in the hospital. I'd give him a day or two to calm down and realize that he'd overreacted.

Then I got a message from Gary saying he was in town for his weekend visitation. The one I wasn't prepared for. I didn't have Knox here telling me everything was going to be okay, and I was a bit of a mess.

I didn't have a choice. It was his right to see her. I just hoped he gave her back at the end of the weekend. I'd heard horror stories of parents taking off with kids, and my mind was racing with the worst-case scenarios.

By the time Addy got home from school, I couldn't think straight. "Your father's here to see you this weekend."

She frowned. "He's in Maryland?"

"That's what he said."

"He never takes me on weekends."

"He wants to see you. Are you okay going with him?" If she wasn't, then I'd have to figure something out.

"I want to see him," she said carefully, and I knew what she wasn't saying. She didn't want to be hurt or disappointed.

We packed her a bag, and when his car pulled up to the curb on time, I let out a sigh. Waiting for someone who was a no-show was the most painful thing for a child. As he greeted her and helped her into the car, I wondered what I had ever seen in him.

"Where are you staying?" I asked him.

He didn't bother to look at me. "With my parents."

"That's good." I liked his parents, even if they weren't that involved. I knew Addy would be safe with them.

"I'll bring her by on Sunday," he said stiffly.

"I'll call at bedtime."

Gary nodded.

I hugged and kissed Addy, my heart breaking as Gary drove her away. I had the whole weekend spread out before me without my daughter, and nothing but my anxiety to take over. What if Gary moved to Maryland? What if he wanted to see Addy more often?

I was worried about things changing, but it was good for Addy to have a relationship with her father. I just hoped this wasn't a fluke, and he'd disappoint her again.

I wished I could call Knox, but he had enough going on. He didn't need me distracting him. I wanted to be there for him, but he obviously didn't want me to be involved. It hurt and made me think that our relationship wasn't as strong as I thought it was.

I sent another text, telling him that Addy was with Gary, and I was free to be there for him. He didn't respond that night. I would have thought he would have asked if I was okay.

I had trouble sleeping that night. I was worried about Addy and Knox. My head was a mess. By the time I got out of bed, I felt like I'd gone a few rounds in a boxing ring. My muscles hurt, my eyes burned, and a headache was forming at the base of my skull.

It wasn't going to be a good day. I brewed coffee and wrapped Christmas presents. It was the perfect opportunity with Addy at her father's. Usually, I had to stay up after she went to bed, wrapping a few each night until they were done.

I tried to get excited about the holiday, but I couldn't. Everything seemed dimmer with Knox not here. He'd pulled away, and I had a feeling it wasn't temporary.

I finished the presents by the afternoon, then hid them in garbage bags in the unfinished area of the basement. Addy never went down there.

Then I made myself a sandwich. I felt pathetic, but I wasn't sure what else I could do.

When I cleaned up the kitchen, there was a knock on my door, which startled me.

I pulled open the door, my stomach twisting. "Knox? What are you doing here?"

"Mom's on her way home. I thought I'd stop by." His jaw was tight.

"Come in, then." It didn't sound like he intended to stay for long. I didn't have a good feeling about this visit.

He stood in the kitchen with his jacket still on and his hands stuffed in his

pockets.

“How is your mom?” I asked.

“She’s okay. They don’t think it was a heart attack. Her heart looks good.” His voice was clipped.

I let out a sigh of relief. “That’s great news.”

“She still needs to take more time off and relax. The doctor said the chest pain was stress induced.”

“That makes sense.”

“We’re going to take over the shop for the rest of this season so she can rest.”

I nodded. “That sounds like a good plan.”

“I just wanted to let you know. I’m sure you were worried.”

“I was. I wanted to be there for you—” I broke off, unable to finish my sentence.

He looked at me with regret in his expression, and I knew what he was going to say next. “I wasn’t there when my mother needed me. I was distracted.”

“You were asleep. It could have happened to anyone.”

Knox shook his head. “If I’d been home, Heath could have knocked on my door.”

“You can’t always be home.” But my voice sounded weak to my ears.

“I can, and I should be there. I moved home to be there for my family. They’re my number one priority.”

I swallowed hard. “That’s commendable.”

“I don’t want or need your opinion about how I handle my family.”

I crossed my arms over my chest as if I could protect my heart from his words. “I’m confused. I thought we were in a relationship and were there for each other.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea. I have things to deal with, and I can’t be away from the farm.” His eyes were blank.

“Just for now, or forever?” I forced myself to ask.

He shook his head, a muscle in his jaw ticking. “It’s just not a good time for us.”

What happened to how we felt in each other’s arms? How special it seemed? “Will there ever be a good time for us to talk?”

Knox shook his head. “I don’t know. I don’t want to lead you on. I enjoyed my time with you and Addy.”

Anger pistoned through me. “Why did you pursue me when you had no intention of having a serious relationship?”

His Adam’s apple bobbed up and down. “That’s not true. I liked you, maybe even loved you.”

“You involved Addy when you knew how worried I was about her getting attached to you.” I couldn’t stop myself from continuing.

“She’s always welcome at the farm.”

“As nice as that is, you know it’s not the same as when we’re seeing each other.” I didn’t want to go there and see the looks of pity on his brothers’ faces.

Knox glanced around the empty kitchen. “She’s with her father, isn’t she?”

“This is going to sound crazy, but I expect more out of you than her father. You were good to her, and now you’re just going to walk away? Pretend like what we shared meant nothing?” My voice raised with every word.

“It was nice. But I need to be there for my family.” His tone was flat.

“So, you’re saying that in order for you to be there for your family, you can’t have a relationship with anyone? Not someone who loves you and wants to be there for you?”

Knox turned away as if to leave. “It’s just not a good time.”

“I can’t believe you.” I was so angry at him. I knew it wouldn’t accomplish anything, but I couldn’t help it. “You came into our lives and

made us fall in love with you, and you're leaving just as quickly. How could you?"

When I started my tirade, Knox looked over his shoulder at me and winced when I said *fall in love*. How could he not know how I felt? How was this a surprise to him unless he didn't feel the same?

At that moment, I didn't think he knew what he was doing. It wasn't intentional. He hadn't set out to hurt us, but he had just the same. He was protecting himself. He wasn't thinking about our feelings, and somehow that hurt even more.

I wanted to be with someone who put us first. I wouldn't have hesitated to prioritize his family. He didn't do anything wrong, but I couldn't convince him of that. Only he could come to that realization on his own.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have started anything with you. I thought things could be different. It was a mistake." He turned the knob and walked out.

His words sent piercing pain through my heart, and I struggled to catch my breath. I couldn't move, much less run after him. When the door shut behind him, tears streamed down my face. I fell to the floor, sobbing into my hands. How would I explain this to Addy?

Not only had her father disappointed her too many times to count, but Knox was gone from her life, too? She would assume it was her fault, and I'd have to tell her it was him. He wasn't ready for us. He was too immature, too something... I don't know. But she wouldn't understand, not really.

He'd convinced himself he needed to be the one who was present for his family at all times, and last night, he'd failed. He felt responsible, even though he was the one who made himself feel that way. It wasn't like his family was telling him that. I'd never seen or heard anything coming from them. It was all him.

He carried unresolved guilt about his father's heart attack. He'd never dealt with it. Now it was rearing its ugly head again.

Everything inside me ached from sitting on the hard floor and not getting

enough sleep last night. I finally stood and went to the couch, where I burrowed under a blanket. The only saving grace was that Addy wasn't here. I could fall apart without worrying about what she would think.

A short time later, a knock sounded on the door. My heart pounded, hoping it was Knox returning to tell me he'd made a mistake by leaving.

I hurried to the door, swiping at the trail of tears on my face and wiping my nose as I turned the knob.

"Grace," I said, stepping back as she rushed inside.

"I was worried about you since Gary has Addy this weekend. Is she okay? She's not hurt, is she?" Grace's eyes widened. "Oh, my god, tell me he didn't show up."

I nodded as I closed the door behind her. "He did. She's with him. I video-called her last night. Everything seems fine."

She tipped her head to the side, scrutinizing me. "Then what is it? Are you upset because she's with him?"

"This has nothing to do with Gary and Addy. It's Knox." I went into the living room, where I'd strewn wadded-up tissues everywhere. Embarrassed, I started picking them up. "His mother was in the hospital. She's okay now. But he was understandably upset."

"Why aren't you with him if Addy's with Gary?" Grace asked.

"He didn't want me there," I said, and the tears flowed again. I didn't think it was possible to cry any more.

"What? Why?" Her voice was filled with despair.

"He said we were a mistake. That he shouldn't have led me on."

Grace shook her head. "He seemed so into you, or at least that's how it sounded. I don't understand."

"I don't either. The only thing I can think of is that he has unresolved feelings about his father dying when he wasn't living here. He feels responsible somehow. The night his brothers tried to reach him, he was here and didn't hear the phone. It was the middle of the night, though. It could

have happened to anyone.”

“He thinks being here was the reason he wasn’t there for his brothers and his mom?”

I nodded miserably as I threw out the tissues and sat next to her on the couch. “I don’t know how to get through to him. He’s decided that he was responsible somehow for his father’s heart attack, or he blames himself for not being here. So now, he’s sentenced himself to living on the farm and being available to his family twenty-four seven.”

“He said he can’t date anyone so he can be there for his family?” Grace asked carefully.

I sighed. “Or it was an elaborate *it’s not you, it’s me* excuse. But I think he was being genuine.”

Grace’s shoulders lowered. “I’m upset for you. But I don’t think you did anything wrong or distracted him. He needs to be able to balance having a life and his family. No one expects him to be available all the time.”

“Try telling him that,” I said as I dabbed at my tears with a tissue.

“You can’t change his mind. Hopefully, he’ll figure out what an idiot he’s being.”

“But what if he doesn’t? What if he’s perfectly content with never seeing us again? What will I tell Addy?” My voice rose in desperation.

Grace held up her hands. “It’s too soon to jump to conclusions. You might want to move on from him before he changes his mind.”

It felt like there was a vise around my chest that tightened as I went over the details of what happened. “It hurts.”

“I know.” Grace hugged me, holding me through another wave of tears.

“Why can’t I stop crying?” I asked miserably as she handed me yet another tissue.

“Do you love him?” Grace asked gently.

I nodded. “I told him so when we were arguing. When he said we were a mistake.” The words felt bitter on my tongue.

Grace squeezed me tighter. “I want to say he’s an asshole, but I think he means well. He feels responsible for his family, and that’s not a bad thing.”

“Only when it interferes with the rest of his life,” I said bitterly.

“I didn’t say he’s handling this well, or even correctly. But his heart’s in the right place.”

I lifted my face from her shoulder. “And Addy and I are just collateral damage?”

Grace loosened her arms. “Only you can decide how you feel about this situation. You control your feelings and reactions.”

I wiped my cheeks with the tissue for what I hoped was the last time. “I want to get a handle on my emotions because Addy could come home at any time, and she can’t see me like this.”

“What do you need to do to feel better? Shower and then some food?” Grace asked, and I was grateful she was here for me.

I nodded. “That sounds good.”

“You shower. I’ll scrounge up some food.” Grace stood and made her way to the kitchen.

When I was halfway up the stairs, Grace called out, “You survived Gary walking away; you can handle anything.”

I continued up the steps without responding, hoping she was right. I’d need every ounce of strength I had over the next few days to survive Knox walking away.

I stood under the steady stream of water, going over everything Knox said to me. Then I flipped it to something positive. Our relationship wasn’t a mistake. I wasn’t a distraction. I loved him. I was there for him. I repeated the new mantras until I believed them.

Then I stepped out of the shower, dried off, and dressed in jeans and a nice sweater. Even if there was a pit in my stomach, I felt better when I took care of myself and dressed nicely.

“Much better,” Grace said when I joined her in the kitchen.

“I feel better, too.”

She brought me an omelet with avocado slices on top.

“Thank you. This looks wonderful.”

“Do you want to do anything today?” Grace asked as she sat across from me.

“I wrapped presents for Addy but realized I wanted to buy things for a few other people.”

“You want to go shopping on Main Street in Annapolis? They have the cutest shops.”

“That would be perfect.” I wanted to get a present for Lori and my parents. It would give me something else to focus on.

“You’re going to be okay,” Grace said as I ate.

I didn’t answer her because I knew she was right. I’d survived much worse than this. I was raising Addy on my own and handling Gary. I could rise above anything. When Knox realized his error, I wasn’t sure how I’d feel about anything.

CHAPTER 22



KNOX

I felt shaky as I drove home. I kept flexing my fingers over the wheel. I couldn't quite believe that any of what just happened was real.

I'd walked away from Sarah and called our relationship a mistake. The words that came out of my mouth were horrifying, but I couldn't maintain a relationship with her and be there for my family. It just wasn't possible.

I went home to work on the farm. We were late opening and were suffering the consequences of it now. Everyone was rushed and harried. Sebastian set up a schedule for someone to be always with Mom. She needed to rest, and she wasn't the best patient.

I was positive she preferred to be in the shop, helping us. But we couldn't ignore the very real scare that happened last night. We got a second chance with her, and this time, we'd do everything right. She wouldn't get up from the bed or the couch. Not if I could help it.

Every time I thought about what could have happened, I sucked in a deep breath around the searing pain in my chest. I couldn't imagine the shop or the farm without Mom. An empty main house was impossible to think about. The house was the center of the farm, and she was the center of the family.

Without her, what would any of this mean? My brothers might leave and do their own thing. The farm would cease to exist. Then Ember wouldn't grow up with her uncles and grandmother surrounding her.

I hated the idea of a future without Mom in it. Nothing could happen to her. I wouldn't let it.

"Are you okay?" Heath asked when I lifted the next tree by myself and heaved it onto the sedan.

"Of course," I said as I wiped the sweat off my brow.

"Have you eaten anything today?"

"I had eggs this morning with my coffee." Except I couldn't quite remember eating anything. I'd wanted to talk to Sarah, to end things with her.

"Sure, you did," Heath said like he didn't believe me.

"Why would I lie about that?" I asked, irritated with him.

"I don't know. Why would you lie about something like that?"

I paused, my forehead wrinkled. "Are you mad at me or something?"

"We all want to know where Sarah was last night. I understand she has Addy, but she couldn't have come for a minute or at least called to check on you?"

I shook my head. It didn't sit right with me that my brothers were mad at her. "I told her I didn't need her there."

"You did what?" He paused, his voice raising.

"I told her we had it handled. It's a family matter."

Heath nodded toward Talon, who was helping today, and pulled me by the elbow away from the lot. "What the fuck are you talking about?"

Through gritted teeth, I said, "I didn't need her there. This was about Mom."

"You think that Sebastian would turn away a woman who loved and cared for him? You think he wanted to raise Ember by himself?"

"I don't know what Sebastian's situation has to do with me."

Heath shook his head. "You're an idiot. When you're with someone, they're supposed to be there for you. That's the point of a relationship. It's not just sex and good times. They're there for you during the bad times, too."

"I needed to be there for Mom and you guys. I can't be distracted."

“Sarah’s not a distraction. She’s a good person who probably wanted to be there for you.”

“She wanted to be there. But I didn’t answer the phone when you all called because I was at her house last night.”

“You didn’t answer the phone for any number of reasons. It was the middle of the night. Your phone was on vibrate. The same things could have happened if you were at home.”

“You could have gotten to me at home, though. You would have knocked on the door.”

“We did, actually.”

I ran a hand through my short hair. “See?”

His jaw tightened. “You don’t get it. The problem isn’t your relationship with Sarah and Addy. It’s you pushing them away.”

“I don’t need the distraction of a relationship right now. None of you are seeing anyone. I don’t see what the problem is.” I edged away from him, needing to be done with this conversation. I didn’t like the scrutiny of my actions.

He held up his hands. “We’re not seeing anyone because we haven’t met anyone who was worth it. Ireland was there for Emmett last night.”

I shook my head. “That’s different.”

Heath crossed his arms over his chest. “Tell me how it’s different.”

“They’re in a committed relationship. They’re probably getting engaged soon.”

“They haven’t known each other long.”

“Is there a point to this conversation? We need to get back to work.” I’d do anything to get away from Heath and his scrutiny.

“How do you feel about Sarah and Addy?” he asked softly.

I shrugged, trying to ignore the erratic beating of my heart that said otherwise. “It was nice while it lasted.”

“Not the relationship. How do you feel about them specifically?” Heath

persisted.

“I don’t know what you mean,” I said, even as I remembered Sarah telling me she loved me during our argument.

Heath raised a brow. “Are you in love with her?”

“Does it matter?” I asked, not ready to scrutinize my feelings too closely. To walk away, I had to put up a wall and push those feelings away.

“Of course, it matters. You can be there for your family and love Sarah,” Heath said reasonably, as if he had any idea what he was talking about.

I shook my head before he finished his sentence. “I think I proved otherwise last night.”

“We were here. There’s always someone nearby who can help Mom. The responsibility for the family doesn’t just fall to you or Emmett.”

“It’s falls on me now that Emmett has Ireland.” I realized too late what I’d revealed.

He gestured at me. “That’s what I’m talking about. You aren’t responsible for this family.”

“Someone has to be. Look what happened to Dad.” The words felt like I’d dug them out of a deep well and then flung them into the air between us. I never should have thrown them out there for him to analyze and find lacking.

Heath’s mouth dropped open, and he seemed stunned. A few seconds later, his voice gentled. “Dad had a massive heart attack. Either the signs weren’t there, or he was ignoring them. He wasn’t going to the doctor like he should. You couldn’t have prevented that.”

“You can’t know that. I wasn’t here. Where I should have been.” I gestured around me, at the farm.

Heath shook his head. “You went to college and got a job. You were doing exactly what you were supposed to.”

“I wasn’t there for Mom, Dad, or any of you. I won’t let that happen again. Then last night, I was distracted. I was at Sarah’s. I shouldn’t have been. If I were here, I could have—”

“You could have done exactly what we did. We didn’t need you there. We handled it, and no one blames you.”

“I’m pissed at myself.”

He sighed. “You have to let this guilt and blame go before it festers and consumes you.”

Talon approached. “What are you guys talking about?”

Heath raised a hand in my direction. “He has his head up his ass.”

“Nice,” I said to his back as he walked away.

“Did something happen between you and Sarah?” Talon asked.

“I broke up with her. Not that it’s any of your business.”

Talon shook his head. “We’re always in each other’s business.”

“I didn’t think you noticed. You’re always hiding out in your shop.” I couldn’t help the hateful words spewing from my mouth.

His shoulders tightened. “I’m trying to do better. I’m here, aren’t I?”

Mine lowered as my anger deflated. “I’m sorry. This has nothing to do with you.”

“Why did you break up?” Talon asked.

“Because I don’t have time for a relationship. I’m needed on the farm. Mom needs me.” As I listed off the reasons, I suddenly felt exhausted.

Talon’s expression hurt more than anything because it was a mixture of understanding and pity. “If I hadn’t messed everything up, my life could have been different. I might have shared it with someone who loves me. I might have kids—” He broke off with a shuddering breath. “I’m worried that you only get that chance once. Don’t make the same mistake I did.” Then he walked away, leaving me gutted.

I plopped down on the straw bale that was there for decoration and dropped my face into my hands. It was where Emmett found me a few minutes later. “Why don’t you go check on Mom and grab a sandwich?”

I stood. “Yeah, that sounds like a good idea.”

“You’re not doing us any good here,” Emmett said to me as I walked

away.

I resisted throwing him the middle finger over my shoulder because customers were around. The walk to the main house felt long. I felt defeated, numb, like there was nothing worth living for. I could make sure Mom rested, and I could help my brothers on the farm, but what else was there? Had I screwed up like Talon said? Did we only get one shot with one person, and if we walked away, that was it? But I'd decided I couldn't be with anyone and be there for my family.

I opened the door and grabbed a sandwich from the always-stocked fridge. I didn't want to call out to Mom in case she was sleeping.

"I'm in here," Mom finally said from the living room, where she was sitting on the couch with her legs on the cushions.

"You mind if I eat in here?" I asked her, pleased she had some color in her cheeks.

"Go ahead. I want to talk to you anyway."

I grimaced as I unwrapped the cold lunch meat sub. "What about?"

She gave me a pointed look. "Why hasn't Sarah been around?"

I groaned. "I don't want to talk about it. I'd much rather hear how you're doing."

Mom gave me a look. "I'm fine."

I took a huge bite of the sub, hoping it would save me from talking any more about my feelings.

"Now, tell me what's going on with Sarah," Mom said firmly.

"I needed some space. I'm busy with the farm—you."

"I'm disappointed in you," Mom said softly, but the words hit their intended target with precision.

Despite the searing pain in my chest, I chewed, swallowed, and drank from the bottle of water I'd grabbed from the fridge. "I should have been available last night. I'm sorry."

"I'm not talking about you being at the hospital. But Heath said you

didn't hear the phone vibrating. It was the middle of the night, and I was well cared for."

"I wasn't there." That's all that mattered.

"I wasn't alone. You came as soon as you heard. That's all that matters. And even if you lived far away, it would be the same. You don't have to live on the farm. I enjoy having you here, but not at the expense of your dreams."

"The farm is my dream. I wasn't happy in that architectural firm. I want to be outside. You know that."

"I wasn't sure. After your father died, I was worried you came home out of guilt. But I was too grateful to have all my boys here to argue with you about it. But nothing matters if you're not happy."

"I'm happy," I said, though the words felt like ash in my mouth.

"You're happy breaking things off with Sarah and Addy?" Mom continued, without giving me an opportunity to respond. "Because I have to say I'm not. I'm heartbroken. I loved those girls. I loved seeing you so content. You won't understand until you have kids, but the only thing a mom or dad wants is to see their kids happy."

I cleared my throat, feeling uncomfortable. "I didn't know that."

"You don't look happy now," Mom said pointedly.

"I did what I had to do." But now that I'd said it so many times, I wasn't so sure.

"You had to break their hearts and yours? Explain this to me because I'm not understanding it."

"I've already talked to Heath and Talon. I'm not up for this."

Mom gave me one of her looks, the one that combined *I'm not happy with you*, and *you're in big trouble*, all wrapped in one.

"I did what I had to do." When Mom didn't respond, I continued. "I can't be there for you if I'm wrapped up in her."

"I want you to be wrapped up in someone. I want you to fall in love and have your own life. It's all I've ever wanted for you. I want you to be happy."

“I love Sarah.” It was something I’d been wrestling with for a while. I had these big feelings and emotions, and I wasn’t sure how to describe them. Not until Sarah expressed her feelings first.

“I know you do.”

I wadded up the wrapper. “I don’t know what to do.”

“You broke up with her.”

“I thought I was doing the right thing. I wasn’t there when Dad died, and I wasn’t there for you.”

“You were there for me. You showed up as soon as you heard. You’re here now. And you didn’t do anything wrong when it came to your father. You didn’t have to move home, but you did.”

“I love it here,” I said, looking out the window.

“And Sarah loves it here. Does she love you?” Mom asked.

“She said she does,” I said as my stomach fell. I wasn’t sure she’d feel the same way about me now that I’d blown her trust. I’d broken up with her and called our relationship a mistake. I didn’t respond when she said she loved me. “But I hurt her.”

“I know you did. But you need to start fixing it. You can have a life and be there for your family. You can have it all.”

My face pinched. “That’s not what I’ve heard.”

“I worked here on the farm and had my babies. We had it all. We created the life we wanted. You have that beautiful house, but it’s empty.”

“I want to fill it with love and laughter,” I said, remembering what it was like to come home to Addy and Sarah. To share my family traditions with them.

“What are you going to do about it?” Mom asked, her voice stronger.

I drained the water. “I need to fix things with Sarah.”

“Do you know how you’re going to do that?” Mom asked.

I shook my head. “I could apologize to her.”

“It has to be bigger than that. Is Talon’s light display finished?”

An idea came to me that had me standing up to pace the living room. “I think it needs one more thing.”

“I think so, too,” Mom said with a smile.

I kissed her cheek. “Are you going to be okay?”

“I don’t need you hovering over me, but if it makes you feel better, send in Emmett. I want to talk to him about Ireland.”

“You messing with his relationship, too?” I asked with a smile.

“I don’t mess with anything. I help.”

“Well, thanks for helping me see the light.”

She nodded toward the door. “Go get your girl. I don’t want to see you until you have Sarah on your arm.”

“I’ll do my best,” I said as I left.

I grabbed Talon and told Heath he was in charge of the farm because Mom wanted to see Emmett. Ireland was covering the shop for Lori. “I need you to do a favor for me.”

His eyes narrowed. “You realize this is the first time I’ve left my workshop in... I don’t know how long.”

“Please.”

Talon sighed. “What do you need?”

I explained what I wanted to do, and Talon smiled. “It’s a challenge, but I think I can get it done in time.”

“I appreciate it.”

“Was it what I said that changed your mind?” Talon asked.

“That and what Mom said. Heath talked to me, too.”

“You’re hardheaded sometimes,” Talon said as we walked toward his workshop.

“You are, too. Why haven’t you talked to Holly to get some closure?” I felt bolder now that he’d opened up to me.

“I probably need to, but the situation is tough.”

My forehead wrinkled. “How so?”

Talon sighed. "I don't want to talk about it. I promised I wouldn't."

What could have happened between them that she asked him to keep it secret? "Did she cheat on you?"

His jaw tightened as he opened the shed door. "It's not what you think."

"My imagination is just going to run wild until you tell me."

"You'll be waiting a long time. I won't break my promise to her."

I considered him. "I can appreciate that."

He opened the door to his shed. "Let's get to work. Why don't you help me if you want this done quickly?"

"I can do that." I was grateful I had a family that stood by me through everything. They took the time to explain to me what an idiot I was being. On some level, I knew I was being stubborn, but I couldn't seem to pull myself out of it. It took my family talking to me before I realized I wasn't looking at things right. I was making the wrong conclusions.

I made the biggest mistake of my life by pushing Sarah away and then breaking up with her. I hurt her and her little girl. I wasn't sure she'd forgive me. It might be too late to rectify my mistakes. "Do you think this will work?"

"It's the only chance you have. You can't just walk in there and apologize. It has to be bigger than that. Brighter," Talon said with a smile.

I gestured at his worktable. "Work your magic. I'm going to need it."

"Don't worry. She won't be able to resist you or this place."

"This place grabs hold of you and just won't let go."

Talon nodded. "It's why I've never been able to leave, despite everything."

"Would things have been easier if you didn't have to see Holly?" I asked him, sensing that he was open to talking about it today.

"She's why I moved after college and stayed away for a few years afterward, but I couldn't be gone forever. This place is in my blood."

"It's in mine, too. I can imagine raising kids here, growing old, watching

the trees grow,” I said, looking out the windows at the property. It never failed to settle me.

Talon flashed me a smile. “There’s nothing like it.”

I was grateful for my family, this farm, and the hope of a future with Sarah and Addy. If the universe sent them back to me, I wouldn’t do anything to screw things up again. They’d know they were loved and wanted. I’d never take their love for granted again.

CHAPTER 23



SARAH

The weekend passed slowly. On Saturday, I shopped with Grace and had dinner with my parents. They did a commendable job of distracting me from the way my life had imploded. By the time Gary dropped Addy off on Sunday, I was feeling more like myself.

“Can we see Knox?” Addy asked as soon as her father pulled away from the curb.

“I think he’s busy, between the farm and his mother being sick, remember?”

“I hope she’s feeling better.”

“We can go see her in a few days when she’s had a chance to rest.” I didn’t want to intrude, but it would be good for Addy to see she was okay. Besides, Knox said I was always welcome at the farm.

Addy pouted. “I miss him.”

I ruffled her hair. “I do, too. How was your visit with your father?”

Her lips twisted. “It was okay. He doesn’t remember what I like to eat.”

“Your tastes change, sometimes daily, so give him some slack, okay?” I asked, surprising myself by being generous when it came to Gary’s parenting style.

“Yeah, okay.”

“He’s trying.” I gritted my teeth because he shouldn’t be trying at this

point. He should be fully engaged. If standing up for myself and our needs meant he came around more often, then that was a good thing.

“He said he’d see me on Christmas.”

“That’s the plan. You’ll be with me on Christmas Eve and Christmas morning, then with your dad from noon on Christmas until the same time on your birthday.”

“What about my party?”

“I know we talked about having it at the farm, but it’s such a busy time of the year.” I couldn’t be around the Monroe family right now. I’d break down, and I needed to be strong for Addy.

“Knox promised, and he never goes back on his promises.”

“He did say that.” But he went back on his promise to me. That he would talk to me if his feelings changed. I guess he did, just not the way I expected.

“Then we’ll have my party on the farm.”

“We’ll see.” I dreaded telling her we wouldn’t be seeing Knox anymore. I’d barely processed it myself.

The phone buzzed with an unknown number. Since it was local, I answered. “Hello?”

“Sarah? It’s Lori.”

I let out a shaky breath. “How are you?”

“I’m great. I wanted to see if you had time this week to discuss Addy’s party.”

“Are you sure that’s a good idea with everything that’s happened?” I wasn’t sure if she knew about Knox breaking things off, and I didn’t want to mention it in front of Addy.

“I’m positive. You and Addy are always welcome here, and we promised that little girl an epic party.” She sounded excited about the prospect.

Why should Addy be punished because Knox wasn’t thinking straight?

“We’ll plan to hold it on her birthday, the twenty-sixth. Does that work for you?”

I looked at Addy, who'd moved closer to listen in, and she nodded enthusiastically. "That's perfect."

"You send the invites, and we'll handle the details," Lori said.

"Does that give us enough time?" I asked, my mind reeling with everything we'd need to do.

"I'm a pro at planning parties."

"Are you sure that's what you should be doing? Didn't the doctor say to rest?" I didn't want to stress Knox out any further. Or be the cause of something happening to his mother.

"Ireland's helping us. She'll do the bulk of the work. If anyone asks, I'm sitting on the couch."

My lips twitched. "If you're sure."

"Nothing would make me happier," Lori said firmly.

"Thank you so much for helping us, and I'm glad you're feeling better."

"I almost forgot. Ireland was hoping you could come over tomorrow so we could plan decorations and food."

"I think we can manage that." Addy would be thrilled to go to the farm, even though I wasn't sure how to explain that Knox wouldn't be joining us.

"Perfect. I'll see you then." Lori hung up, and I was left wondering how awkward this party was going to be. I'd go through with it because it was for Addy, but I wasn't sure it was a good idea. What if she asked where Knox was? He was the one who'd promised to throw the party in the first place.

We spent the afternoon making holiday cards for family members. It kept my mind off Knox, but I felt sad. Maybe I'd misjudged how Knox felt about me. Maybe after the holidays, I wouldn't be surrounded by decorations and trees anymore, and it would be easier to get some space from him.

I sent out the electronic invites via email and was pleased to get a bunch of RSVPs. It sounded like the parents were looking for something to do with their families while school was out, and they were thrilled to be going to a Christmas tree farm. I'd texted to ask Lori if it was okay if families came, and

she'd said the more the merrier.

When Addy was asleep, I climbed into bed and let the tears fall. I only had to get through the next few days. Then I could tell Addy that Knox was busy with work, or something, and we wouldn't be seeing each other as much.

I had to get through this. I didn't have a choice. I couldn't let on that I was upset, or Addy would be, too. It wasn't her fault that I trusted someone I shouldn't.



School was already out for the holidays on Monday. I did my best to keep Addy busy while I answered phone calls and emails. I couldn't help but think that if Knox and I were together, she might have spent the day with him. She would have loved it.

When would my heart heal? When would I get over him and the future we could have had? It wasn't fair that he couldn't see what I did. That he was so lost in his guilt and shame that he couldn't see what was right in front of him.

By the afternoon, it was impossible to get much done. Addy was sick of the TV and electronics and wanted my full attention. She was excited about the party and going to the farm tonight.

"Will Knox be there?" Addy asked when we got in the car.

My eyes flicked to hers in the rearview mirror. "I'm not sure. They probably still need people working the farm."

"Who doesn't have a tree yet?" Addy asked incredulously.

I laughed. "You'd be surprised. Not everyone gets things early. They wait until the last second."

"I want to keep ours up all year."

"We can't do that because eventually, the branches will dry out, and it

could become a fire hazard.” I didn’t want to scare her, but it was a real possibility.

“If we had a fake tree, we could keep it.”

“I think Grace and I tried that when we were little, and it got super dusty. Besides, what’s the fun in that? Christmas is a special time of the year, but if celebrated every day, it would lose its magic.”

“I want presents every day,” Addy said stubbornly.

I chuckled. “Of course, that’s what you heard me say. But wouldn’t you get tired of having so many toys to play with?”

She crossed her arms over her chest. “Nope.”

“You just have to trust me. It wouldn’t be as special.”

Her lips turned down. “If you say so.”

When we turned onto the lane for the farm, Heath was at the gate, and he greeted us with a huge smile. “Is there a birthday girl in here?”

Addy giggled. “It’s not for a few more days, silly.”

“I think you get to be the birthday girl all week,” Heath said easily.

“It’s Christmas, though.”

“Your birthday is just as important.”

His words were sweet, but it only made me sadder for what we were missing. I loved Knox and his family. I loved the property and the history here. It was going to hurt when we went back to our regular lives. The ones without the holiday cheer and magic. I couldn’t imagine the Monroe brothers not being in our lives, and it had only been a few short weeks.

He gestured to the farmhouse. “Head on up to the main house. Mom and Ireland are excited to plan your party.”

I lowered my voice. “Are you sure this is okay for your mom to be doing this?”

He chuckled. “Don’t worry. Knox already called her doctor, and he cleared her for party planning as long as she rested as much as possible. So, no decorating for her.”

“I’ll help decorate,” Addy said from the back seat.

“We’ll all pitch in. It’s going to be great. Just wait until you see what Talon made for you.” Then he hung his head. “Sorry, I wasn’t supposed to say anything.”

“What did he make?” Addy asked eagerly.

Heath winced as he lifted his head. “You’re going to have to wait until the twenty-sixth.”

“Aw. No fair,” Addy mumbled.

“You bring the guests, and we’ll take care of everything else.” Heath smiled and then waved us forward, as another car pulled in behind us while we were talking. I slowly made my way up the lane, my stomach tightening as we drew closer.

When we got to the house, Ireland was sitting on the front porch. “Lori wants to show you something for the party, but she can’t walk that far right now. Emmett will take you to it.”

I followed her arm as she pointed toward the horse and carriage I’d missed, waiting on the side of the house.

“Another carriage ride?” Addy asked, her voice raising in excitement.

My heart stumbled because the last time we were in the carriage, it was a special moment, just the three of us. Tonight was going to be so much harder than I anticipated. Being here reminded me of everything I loved about the Monroes, the farm, and Knox.

Emmett helped us into the carriage, and we settled under the blanket. I wanted to ask where Knox was, but it was like the words were stuck in my throat. I felt awkward talking to Emmett about his brother, and it wasn’t right for him to be placed in the middle.

“Where are we going?” Addy asked.

Emmett flashed her a smile. “It’s a surprise.”

When he snapped the reins, the horses clip-clopped forward. The steady cadence of their feet competed with the erratic beat of my heart.

“How are you holding up?” Emmett asked me in a low voice.

“Not great.”

He nodded toward Addy. “Does she know?”

“No,” I said, wondering why he was asking.

He nodded grimly. “That’s good.”

I wanted to ask why that was good, but we were turning down the lane toward Emmett’s house. “Where are we going?”

“I can’t tell you since it’s a surprise.”

“There are lights,” Addy cried out, and when I followed her finger, I could see the outline of something in red and green.

“What is it?” I asked Emmett.

“This is what Talon’s been working on,” Emmett said easily.

As we got closer, it was easy to see that it was Santa in his sleigh with his reindeer.

“Look, it’s Santa,” Addy said, gripping my arm.

“I can’t believe he had time to make all of this,” I said.

“There’s more,” Emmett said, nodding down the lane. He slowed the horses so that we could look our fill of the first display before heading toward the next one.

“Is this for the party?” I asked him as we came upon a nursery rhyme series of displays, with the woman and her kids in the shoe, a duck with a nursery rhyme book, and Jack and Jill next to a well.

“He has more plans for this area, but this was all he had time for. He assumed most people would prefer the holiday displays.”

“These are amazing. I don’t know how he had time to make these. Or where he got the inspiration.”

“He’s been busy,” was all Emmett said.

When Addy was done chatting about each nursery rhyme, Emmett continued forward. The next one had reindeer jumping from one side to the other. The display was so impressive I couldn’t believe it. “This is amazing.”

“He surprised us with this one. It doesn’t always work, though.” Emmett stopped the horses and slipped out of the sleigh, but we were too engrossed with the leaping reindeer to pay much attention.

The carriage rocked as Knox climbed aboard.

“What are you doing here?” I asked him.

Addy climbed over me to climb into his lap. “I missed you.” She wrapped her arms around his neck and clung tightly to him. Even though I hadn’t said anything about the situation, she must have sensed that something was wrong.

My heart hurt for her because I was going to have to tell her the truth.

“I missed you, too,” Knox said to her, turning her so she was facing forward in his lap. “I have one more thing to show you.”

“Is this for my party?” Addy asked him, resting her cheek on his shoulder.

“It’s for everyone.”

The next display was an open book held on either side by nutcrackers. “What is this?” I asked, just as words popped onto the pages. The words *I Love You* shone clearly.

“What’s this from?” I asked, confused. We’d seen a Santa display, nursery rhymes, and reindeer jumping, but I couldn’t place this one.

“This one’s for you,” Knox said cryptically.

“I don’t understand.”

Emmett appeared next to the carriage, and Knox handed Addy down to him. They wandered off, with Addy talking a mile a minute to him about the kids who lived in the boot we’d passed.

“Knox?” I asked when their voices disappeared into the night behind us.

“This is for you.” He nodded toward the page, where more words were added. *Always and Forever*.

“You love me?” I asked cautiously, almost too afraid to let it sink in completely without some confirmation from the man himself.

He took my hands in his. “I love you. And I’m sorry I let the weight of my family’s responsibility come between us. I made promises to you, and I broke them. I broke your trust in me. I’m not sure if you can ever forgive me.”

“What happened?” I asked him, needing to know everything, even as my heart soared with the sweet declaration of his love for me.

“I let the guilt and shame from my father’s death overcome me when my mom was in the hospital. I thought I had to be alone to be there for them.”

“You know you can have a family and a life of your own, right?”

He squeezed my hands. “I know that now. Everyone talked to me until I got it. I was thick-headed.”

“How do I know that it won’t happen again?” I asked, my heart leaping, even as my brain urged caution.

“Because I’m aware of my thoughts and feelings, and when those thoughts pop in, I’ll counter them with different ones. I can have you and Addy and my family in my life at once. I’m not doing anyone a disservice by adding more love to it.”

My eyes filled with tears because I believed him.

He squeezed my hand. “And you’ll be there by my side to gently remind me when I’m being an idiot.”

“You’re not an idiot. You meant well. You wanted to be there, and you felt guilty when you weren’t.”

“But my brothers were there. I’m not the only one who can care for my mother. I’m lucky enough to have a bunch of brothers and Ireland. We’re not alone in this.”

“You have me and Addy, too,” I gently reminded him.

His face filled with regret. “That, too. I’m so sorry I pushed you away.”

“I wanted to be there for you.” The memory of how he hadn’t let him be there for him seared into my heart as fresh as the day it happened.

“I know you did, and it would have helped. I was stubborn and

shortsighted, and I hope to make better decisions in the future. And when I don't, I'll have you, my brothers, my mom, and Ireland to set me straight."

I laughed, part in relief and part in excitement, because he was right. We were all there for him, and we wouldn't let him spiral into the guilt and shame like last time. We'd be aware of it.

"I love you, Sarah. Will you give me another chance to show you how much?"

I nodded through the tears that blurred my vision as he pressed his lips to mine. "If you trust me with your heart, I'll protect it and care for it this time."

"I believe you."

He sighed, and his entire body relaxed. Then he gathered me in his arms until the only thing I could see was the book where he declared his love for me.

"I love you, too."

He chuckled, and his chest rumbled in my ear. "I know. You told me when we were fighting."

I pressed my cheek against his chest, savoring the feeling of being here. "I wasn't sure you heard me."

"I don't think I processed it until later. I was so lost in my head."

"I love your faults, you know. I love everything about you."

"I love you, too." He kissed my temple.

"Did she forgive you?" Emmett asked as his entire family appeared out of nowhere.

Knox looked at me with so much love. "I'm a lucky man."

"You sure are," I said as he kissed me, and Addy said, "Ew."

I didn't feel bad about kissing Knox in front of her. I was just so happy that Knox had come to his senses and realized that he wasn't doing his family any favors by shutting us out.

"What are you all doing here?" I asked them.

"We wanted to see the lights," Lori said from her golf cart.

Knox helped me down from the carriage. Addy walked ahead, with Knox's brothers trailing behind her. Knox put his arm around me and kissed my temple. "I can't believe you're here."

"I can't believe it either. I thought it was going to be the worst night ever. I was dreading having to tell Addy we were over."

"I'm so thankful you didn't. I never want to let you or her down again. I won't," he said firmly.

"No one is perfect."

"I want you to feel the force of my love, no matter what's going on in our lives. I don't want you to doubt me again."

"I want that, too." We walked slowly behind his family, with Addy chatting a mile a minute and everyone chipping in to answer her questions. I loved my family, and I was happy that Gary was trying, but there was something about being part of the Monroe family that was even better.

I loved this family, and I loved the farm. And most of all, I loved Knox Monroe. I felt part of something bigger. I had a feeling this farm held magic year-round and not just at the holidays.

EPILOGUE



SARAH

We planned Addy's party, then spent Christmas Eve with Knox's family. They had a huge bonfire behind the main house, and we made s'mores and ate chocolate-covered popcorn, chocolate-covered pretzels, and cookies. The treats and refills of hot chocolate were endless.

Knox stayed overnight with us so he could open presents with Addy and me in the morning. I never thought we'd be in a place to be this close on Christmas, but I was so grateful for everything we went through. His mother's health scare triggered him but enabled him to deal with his unresolved issues regarding his dad.

After a lazy morning watching Addy open and play with her presents, we went to my parents' for brunch. Then Gary picked Addy up from there.

We spent that night on the farm, taking a walk to see the light display and talking about our future. As much as I hated being away from Addy, it was good for Gary to have that time with her, and for me to have some to myself. I was hopeful that Gary would step up more and use his visitation.

The morning after Christmas, I woke up at Knox's house. He pushed my shirt up and kissed my stomach. "How soon can you move in with me?"

I blinked away the sleep to see him clearly. "Are you serious?"

His lips lifted into a smile. "I like waking up with you in my bed."

"I have Addy, though. Are you sure you're ready to be a full-time parent?"

You'll have to be a parent figure for her. I don't want to rush you if you're not ready."

He sobered as he lifted slightly off me. "I want her here, too. I love you both."

Warmth spread through my chest. "I love you."

"Addy loves it here, too. With Seb building his house, Ember will be spending more time here. They can play together. But enough about the kids. I want to know when you want to move in with me." He pulled down my pajama pants, along with my panties. Then he blew air across my clit.

I held on to the sheets at my sides. "It's hard to think when you're doing that."

"That's the idea," he said with a naughty wink and then reached up to palm my breast, rolling my nipple between his fingers.

"You don't play fair." My words came out breathless, his touch sending zings of electricity to my clit.

Then he sucked on my clit and used his finger to slide inside my pussy. I arched off the bed, needing more.

I was lost to his touch, his mouth where I needed him most, and his fingers curling inside me, hitting that spot that sent me flying. As I trembled from the aftershocks, Knox moved up the bed, kissing me. "I love you."

I smiled. "I love you, too."

He slid inside, and I loved that we'd forgone condoms. It made coming together that much more special. "I want everything with you. The house. The family. Everything." He slowly thrust inside me as if to emphasize his words.

"I want that, too."

His heated gaze flicked to mine. "So, you'll move in with me?"

I nodded, and my breath hitched when he hit that bundle of nerves inside me. "I have to talk to Addy, though."

"I know. I wouldn't expect anything less. When she's ready, you'll live

with me.”

“Yes.” It felt freeing to say it out loud.

He braced his hands on either side of me and increased his pace. “I never want to be without you.”

His words penetrated my chest and went straight to my heart. I let his words, his touch, and the essence of his gaze seep into my soul. “I’m yours.”

“Yes,” he hissed as he kissed me, not moving away until we’d both crested the same wave. On the way back down, he gathered me to him and wrapped me in his arms. “I love waking up to you.”

“Me, too.”

“I don’t know how many mornings we’ll get uninterrupted, but I want to let you know that I love all of our mornings—even when Addy jumps on the bed to wake us up.”

My heart felt so full. I never thought I’d meet someone and like them enough to let them into my heart and my life. I certainly didn’t think that person would love Addy just the same. “You’re more than I ever could have hoped for. I didn’t think someone like you existed.”

He kissed me and then pulled away. “We need to get ready. Addy will be home soon, and then she’ll want to help get ready for the party.”

“I wrapped her birthday presents, and they’re waiting for her downstairs. What else is there to do?”

He just grinned like he had a secret.

“What are you up to?” I asked as I sat up.

“I might have gotten her something that wasn’t on your gift list for her.”

“What did you do?” I asked carefully, my mind reeling with the possibilities.

He sucked in a breath. “I might have bought her a puppy.”

“What?”

Knox’s expression was sheepish. “Emmett got Ireland a puppy for Christmas, and I couldn’t say no to his brother. They were at my mom’s

house last night, and I took Emmett's to his house early this morning so he could surprise Ireland."

I laughed. "That explains why you were awake so early. So, where's our puppy?"

"He's in a crate downstairs." Knox grinned eagerly as he shot off the bed and pulled on a pair of jeans. "You're not mad that I got one without talking to you?"

I pulled on a T-shirt and sweats. "This is your house. You don't have to clear anything with me."

Knox stood in front of me, cradling my face with his hands. His voice gentle and soft, he said, "Have you been listening to anything I've said this morning? I want a life with you. A future. Whatever we do from here on out, we do together. But I really hope you love the puppy because I can't give him back."

"Can't or won't?" I asked as he grabbed my hand and tugged me down the stairs.

He gave me a look. "Won't. I'm already in love with him."

"You have such a big heart."

Knox placed a hand on his chest. "I already took a million pictures. Just wait till you see him. He's adorable."

I didn't say it, but Knox was the one who was adorable. When he was honest with his feelings, and he was true to himself, there was nothing he couldn't accomplish, and he never failed to make me happy.

I heard the whining when we entered the kitchen. The crate was set up by the table, and a yellow lab puppy was staring at us with pleading eyes. "Poor guy. Who locked you in this crate?"

"Mean Daddy, that's who. I had some things to take care of this morning. You understand, right, buddy?" He unlocked the crate and scooped the dog into his arms.

I stepped close and petted his head.

“You’re in love, too, right?” Knox asked over his head.

“So in love,” I said, not sure whether I was talking about him or the puppy, but probably both.

“So, we can keep him?” He gave me the same pleading eyes that Addy did.

“Of course, you can. Addy’s going to love him.”

He grinned. “I’m counting on it.”

“Wait a minute. Did you get the puppy so Addy would want to move in?”

“Do you think it will work?” Knox grinned but then said, “But seriously, we need some Monroe dogs around here. They can be our brand. When people visit, they’ll expect to see our dogs. They’ll love them.”

“How could they not?” I asked as he handed me the squirming puppy.

Just like Knox, I hadn’t expected or even wanted a puppy, but he’d burrowed his way into my heart.



When Addy arrived, she wanted to open her birthday presents. She was thrilled with everything I got her: a drum set, an art kit, and a cozy chair for her room.

“Can we get the barn ready for the party?” Addy asked when she was done.

“Not yet. We have one more surprise,” Knox said with a grin.

The puppy was in the crate, but we’d moved it to Knox’s bedroom so she wouldn’t hear him whining. But at that moment, he let out a sharp bark, as if reminding us he was still here.

Addy’s eyes widened. “What’s that?” Then she took off, following the barking. “You got a puppy!” she cried as she raced up the stairs, down the hall, and into the bedroom.

She dropped to her knees in front of the crate. “Aw. He’s adorable.”

Knox unlatched the door, and the puppy raced toward Addy as if he'd been talking to her the entire time. He crawled into her lap, and she wrapped her arms around him. "I love him."

Knox met my gaze over her head. "I knew you would."

Addy looked up at me with tears shining in her eyes. "Can we keep him?"

"Of course. But he's going to live with Knox for now."

Her eyes teared up. "I don't want to leave him."

Knox smiled wider. "He loves you, too."

"Emmett and Ireland got his brother and named him Dash, as in Dasher."

Addy's eyes widened. "Oh, a reindeer name. Can we name him Comet or Cupid?"

Knox winced. "Comet, maybe. Not Cupid."

"What are the others?" I asked as I sat next to Addy.

She listed them on her fingers. "Dasher, Dancer, Prancer, Vixen, Comet, Cupid, Donner, Blitzen, and Rudolph."

"I think Comet or Blitzen sounds the best," I said.

Addy petted his head. "I like Comet."

"I like that, too," Knox said, petting the pup while he squirmed on Addy's lap.

Addy kissed him and cuddled him close. I didn't think we'd be able to go back home after this. Comet won her over as easily as Knox had. My heart was so full. I had everyone I loved in this room, and tonight, both of our families would be together for the party.

"Dad wanted to know if he could come to my party," Addy said tentatively.

"I don't see why not. Want me to tell him the time and location?"

"I already did."

For the first time ever, we'd celebrate Addy's birthday together. It would be weird but also good for Addy. When he dropped her off, he mentioned something about looking for jobs in Maryland so it would be easier for him to

see Addy. It would be nice if he was around more and we were able to do things together. I couldn't help but think Knox coming into my life was the impetus for my improved relationship with Gary.

I was so grateful for everything we had, but the brightest part of the day was our future, the one I could see clearly with Knox. We'd live here at his house, with Addy and Comet growing and maturing together. Maybe Comet would sleep with her in her bed, and we'd have more kids, giving Addy the brother or sister she'd always asked for. The possibilities were endless, and I was excited to explore all the possibilities with Knox.

The thought of a little boy with Knox's dark hair sent a pang through my heart. I wanted that with him. I wanted more Christmases and never-ending love.

I'd even gotten a few more referrals for editing jobs recently, and it made me hopeful that I'd be able to consider quitting my job this year.

"Can Comet come to the party?" Addy asked.

"I don't see why not. I'll have Emmet bring Dash, and they can play in a playpen if they want. I have a little structure that will keep them from getting into trouble," Knox said.

"They'll be the highlight of the party." How could two puppies not be the center of attention?

Addy rubbed her cheek along the soft fur on his head, and I couldn't help but think having a puppy to care for would be good for her.

After we cleaned up the debris from the wrapping paper and ate a snack, we headed over to the barn, where Ireland and the rest of the Monroe brothers had already decorated the barn. This was the one near Emmett's house that was used for family get-togethers. There was a bonfire just outside, where fixings for s'mores were set up.

Lori wanted to serve finger foods like chicken wings and pigs in a blanket inside for a quick dinner and then go outside for the bonfire.

The evening was perfect with the crisp air and clear night to see the stars.

Inside, it was warm, and holiday music piped through the speakers.

“We can switch to something else if you prefer, birthday girl,” Ireland said to her when we arrived.

“I love Christmas music.”

Ireland smiled at her. “Then we won’t change a thing.”

We put the dogs in their playpen so they could play while we finished getting the decorations up. We hung snowflakes and large ornaments from the ceiling, and the windowsills held fresh garland. There were trees in each corner, decorated with a different theme. One was beach, one was birthday, one was all white stars, and the last was pink. Addy had a blast decorating them.

When the guests arrived, Addy took off with her friends. The pile of gifts grew larger on the back table with each family that arrived.

When my parents arrived, I introduced them to Knox, Lori, and his brothers. Then we watched the kids as they played a game of charades. Ireland stood in front of the group, helping them pick a card and reminding them of the rules.

Eventually, Mom wanted to see the puppies, and Lori and his brothers went to the food table to eat.

Knox introduced the two puppies with pride in his voice when he described their mother and father and the farm he bought them from. Mom crouched down to see the puppies better, and I knelt beside her.

“These two are too cute.” Ireland had tied large red bows around their necks, and they were doing their best to unravel them. Finally, Comet succeeded and became tangled. I carefully worked the ribbon out from around his belly, set him on his feet, and tied another bow around his neck.

“You bought my girls a puppy,” Dad said to Knox.

He was speaking quietly, and I pretended to be engrossed in Comet and Dash’s antics as they resumed their game of unraveling the ribbon, while I listened for Knox’s response.

Knox cleared his throat. “Well, sir, I hope that they’ll soon be *my* girls. I know you’ve been the father figure in Addy’s life for a while now, and I don’t want to take away from your role, but I’d like to be one more person in their corner. I want to be the man they can count on.”

Dad was quiet for a few seconds, and I resisted the urge to check his expression. “I think Addy and Sarah will be in good hands with you.”

“Thank you, sir. I look forward to getting to know you and your family more.”

“We’d like that,” Dad said.

“You’re welcome to visit anytime,” Knox said, reminding me of what it felt like when I first met him and his family. Despite how grumpy the Monroes seemed on the outside, they were warm and gooey on the inside, and I wouldn’t want it any other way.

“Maybe we should have more events like this,” Knox said into my ear.

I leaned into his chest. “I thought your family doesn’t like having a lot of people around.”

“This was fun, though.” Maybe it wasn’t that the Monroe brothers didn’t like parties and people, but that it wasn’t with the right people. Each one had to meet someone who could love them for who they were. I was positive there was someone out there for all Knox’s brothers, who would make them see how special this place was.

When the evening wound down, we moved outside for s’mores. We helped the kids with the marshmallows alongside Talon, Heath, Emmett, and Sebastian. When everyone had eaten their fill, they played around the fire, chasing each other, laughing, and giggling. Everyone seemed content to just hang out. Even Gary was talking to some of the parents and seemed to be having a good time.

“Are you up for a walk?” Knox leaned close to ask.

“Don’t we need to stick around?” I asked, looking at everyone having fun.

“My brothers can handle a few kids.” He took my hand and led me away from the crowd of people.

“Where are we walking?”

He shook his head. “I thought we’d head toward the pond.”

“Okay.” He took us up the mountain. He didn’t take the path that would lead to the gazebo in the woods where we’d shared a kiss. It seemed so long ago when he’d asked if it was okay if we dated.

“The lights you hung on the poles create the perfect ambiance.” It was so romantic.

“You like it here?” Knox asked, and suddenly, he seemed nervous.

“You know I love it here.” I wondered what this uncertainty was about.

As we got closer to the pond, there was a rose on a stick in the ground, and another further ahead. “Are these new additions?”

“Mmm,” Knox said. “Talon made them.”

“They’re nice.” But not really related to the holidays. I wondered why he’d chosen roses to line the paths.

As we walked, there was one after the other. As we walked along the edge of the water, there were letters in white lights that spelled out, *Will you marry me?*

“Knox, what is this?” I asked him, but he’d dropped to his knee in front of me, his hand still holding mine.

My free hand covered my rapidly beating heart.

“Sarah, you came into my life and reminded me what it was like to live again. I love you more than words can say. Will you marry me? Will you share my life with me? Will you walk side by side with me on these paths for the rest of our days?”

Tears blurred my vision. “Yes, yes.”

His forehead wrinkled. “I know it’s soon.”

I shook my head. “It’s not too soon. It’s exactly right.”

Then I tugged him up and kissed him. My hands tightened around his

neck, and I tried to get closer to him.

He finally pulled back and rested his forehead on mine. “Do you want to see the ring?”

I nodded, unable to talk over the emotion in my throat.

He opened a velvet box, and the diamond was a sparkling princess cut. “It reminded me of a snowflake, sparkling and unique.”

“I love it,” I said as he slid the ring onto my finger. “Ireland and Emmett got engaged this morning.”

“And they got a puppy, too. But our journey is unique.”

I smiled up at him, so happy. “I think so, too.”

“Whatever you want to do, whether it’s move in or get married, we’ll do it when you and Addy are ready.”

“Thank you for always taking our needs into consideration.”

“I wouldn’t be a good fiancé if I didn’t.”

“*Fiancé*. I like the sound of that.”

“Don’t get too used to it. Soon it will be husband.”

I smiled wide. “I like that even better.”

I had everything I’d ever wanted. A man to love me and my daughter, a large family around us, and this amazing farm.

His thumb brushed my cheek. “I felt like I was living in the dark for so long. I never anticipated that I’d find the light with you. It was like seeing the sunshine after years of rain.”

My heart contracted in my chest. “I love that.”

“I love you,” he said as he kissed me, and our lives spread out before us like the rows of trees on the farm. It may not be a straight path, but we’d always be side by side while we made our way. We’d have each other and even our families to support us.

“You and Addy are my sunshine.”

I loved that we could be that for him. “You’re the same for us.”

He closed his eyes, as if he were overwhelmed by the emotion. There was

nowhere else I'd want to be, except here with Knox and my family.

We walked for a bit before Knox's phone buzzed, and he looked at the screen. "Heath wants to show us a new light display that he and Talon set up. It's past Heath's house."

"Can we see them?" I asked, not ready for the evening to be over.

"We can do whatever you want. We're close enough that we can walk to it, but Heath said he'd bring Addy, Mom, and a few others by golf cart. If Addy gets tired, we can go back."

I loved that he was always thinking of her.

We walked for a few more minutes until lights shone up ahead, and the golf cart pulled up next to us. Addy got out and ran up to us to give us hugs.

"Did she say yes?" Addy asked Knox.

"She did. Thanks for your help."

"You told Addy about your plans?" I asked Knox.

"Absolutely. She was a big help," Knox said, ruffling her hair.

Addy looked ahead and squealed. "Soldiers."

There was a set of nutcrackers lined up. The details on the metal structures were amazing. "These are beautiful."

But there was a woman standing in front of the last Nutcracker. Her hands were on her hips. "These—" She gestured behind her. "Whatever these things are, are on my property."

Heath stopped in front of her, with Talon next to him, offering support. He crossed his arms over his chest. "Your property?"

The woman nodded. "I just inherited it."

Confused, I looked at Knox, who shrugged. "She must be the granddaughter of the original property owner. I've never met her."

"We thought you lived in California and would sell it," Heath said, the uncertainty in his tone evident.

She huffed out a breath. "Well, you assumed wrong."

"What are you planning to do with the inn?" Heath asked.

Her lips twisted. “It’s none of your business.”

“We were hoping it would reopen. It would be good for our farm.”

“I’m not doing what’s good for you, Heath Monroe.”

My eyes widened, and I lowered my voice. “Do they know each other?”

“They must,” Knox said.

Heath held his hands up. “Do you have a survey? We didn’t go on your property on purpose. It’s just no one from your family has been in these woods for years.”

I wondered what he was talking about. Did these two know each other as kids?

Knox lowered his voice and said, “She’s younger than me, probably Heath’s age. Maybe they went to school together.”

“Or they ran into each other in the woods,” I said, curious about their history.

“Not that it’s any of your business, but I’m planning on renovating the inn and reopening before the holidays next year.”

“I, for one, would love to see the inn renovated and open again. I think it will be great for the surrounding area,” Lori said.

“There aren’t any hotels nearby, so people have to stay farther away in a hotel or rent a house if they can find one,” Knox said to me.

The woman’s shoulders lowered slightly at Lori’s words. “Grandma would have wanted me to bring it back to life.”

“I’m so sorry for your loss, dear,” Lori said.

She took a step back and seemed to deflate. “Thank you.”

“I’m going to head back. I’m tired,” Lori said to everyone, and then to the woman, “It’s good to have you back, Marley. Let us know if you need anything at all. My boys would be happy to help.”

Heath’s jaw tightened.

I wasn’t so sure he wanted to help her. I hadn’t realized acquiring the property was so important to him.

Talon climbed into the golf cart with Lori and headed back down the path.

“We should go,” Sebastian said to us, his hand around Ember’s. Addy was next to her, chatting about the nutcrackers. The girls seemed oblivious to the tension.

“You think these two will be all right?” Knox asked.

“Heath’s an adult. He can handle a little boundary dispute with a neighbor,” Sebastian said with an easy smile.

We turned and walked with him down the path.

“Talon wouldn’t have put the structures here if he knew about the property line. I wonder if we operated as if it were ours all these years, but when the property transferred ownership, someone did the survey and realized the Matthews’ property extended further than anyone knew.

“It’s too bad you won’t be able to acquire the property like you wanted,” Knox said.

Heath appeared. “She moved here thinking she could renovate that inn and make a go of it. But what does she know about business ownership or construction?”

“Are you saying you think she’ll change her mind?” Knox asked him.

“I’m counting on it,” Heath said firmly, a muscle ticking in his jaw.

I hope you loved Sarah and Knox’s story! Read more about their happily ever after in their [bonus epilogue](#).

Heath and Marley’s story is next in [Reviving Hearts](#). Get 30% off the ebook when you purchase on Lea’s Shop. Use Code: [REVIVINGHEARTS30](#).

“I’m not doing what’s good for you, Heath Monroe.” I was vaguely aware that we weren’t alone. But my gut churned with his betrayal.

I thought I was done thinking about him in any capacity. But now he was standing in front of me, looking way too good for words.

Heath raised his hands in a defensive stance. “We didn’t go onto your

property on purpose. It's just that no one from your family has been in these woods for years."

My face flushed. Was he referring to how we'd meet up in these woods when we were teens? "Not that it's any of your business, but I'm planning on renovating the inn and reopening it before the holidays." I couldn't believe I'd said that. I didn't have any plans other than to renovate it and possibly sell it. What was it about Heath that had me saying things I didn't mean?

"I, for one, would love to see the inn renovated and open again. I think it will be great for the surrounding area," Heath's mom, Lori, said from her seat on the golf cart.

"Gram would have wanted me to reopen the inn." When she was alive, I knew she wanted me to come home and manage it. But I didn't want to return to this town. Not where I'd grown up in a trailer with parents who didn't view me or my brother, Aiden, as a priority.

I'd felt awful about it, but I'd built a beautiful life for myself in California, and I hadn't wanted to come back to the one place I'd always felt less than.

"I'm so sorry for your loss, dear," Lori said as she rose from the golf cart and moved closer to where Heath and I stood across from each other in a tense standoff.

I'd always envied the Monroe brothers, with their tight-knit family. Whenever I saw them interact, there was so much love.

"Thank you." I took a step back from the group, feeling out of place. They'd obviously come here as some sort of family gathering, and I was the one intruding. I didn't belong here.

"It's good to have you back, Marley. Let us know if you need anything. We're happy to help." Lori patted my shoulder and returned to the golf cart. "I'm going to head back. I'm tired."

Talon got into the driver's seat and drove away.

"We should go," Sebastian said, with his arm around a little girl with dark

hair. There was a second girl next to her. I wondered if she was Heath's.

I vaguely recalled the updates Gram would give me when I called to check on her. Their father had died a few years ago, which must have been devastating for them. And Sebastian had a little girl now. I'd blocked out whatever she said about Heath because I didn't want to hear if he was happily married with kids. It was probably childish, but I'd never been mature when it came to him.

Now that everyone was leaving, my heart beat erratically in my chest. I wanted to escape to the haven of the inn.

I wrapped my arms around myself, mainly to shield myself from the cool wind but also to protect myself from Heath. He had the power to hurt me before.

"You're cold." Heath moved closer, his voice gruff.

"I should go back to the house," I said, but I stood rooted to the spot as Heath came within a foot of me and then stopped.

He was bigger and broader than I remembered. He was one year older than me and was best friends with Aiden.

When Aiden enlisted, Heath had stayed close to home, helping on the farm and attending a local college. That's when we'd run into each other in the woods. I'd find a place to journal or read for the afternoon, and he'd insist he was looking for the perfect spot to build his cabin.

He wasn't like the other boys in school, who were only interested in trucks or sports. He was responsible. He had chores to do on the farm, and he cared about his family. That combination was intoxicating for a girl who didn't get positive attention from anyone.

"How have you been?" Heath asked, and all I could see was that letter he'd left, breaking off our relationship. I could still see the words in his messy script on the loose-leaf paper: *I'm sorry, but I can't betray your brother.*

All I could think about was that he'd chosen his friendship with my

brother over me. It was one more person who'd decided I wasn't important enough.

I shivered. "You lost the right to ask that question a long time ago."

He sighed and nodded toward the nutcrackers. "I'll move the lights."

"You don't want to see a survey?" My realtor had insisted on one when I mentioned wanting to sell the property from California. But now he was trying to convince me to renovate the inn to increase the value.

"I trust you."

At one time, I trusted him not to hurt me.

He shoved his hands into his pockets, his expression filled with regret. "Look, I'm sorry for how I handled things back then. I was young and stupid."

I wanted to ask if he was upset that he'd broken up with me, but I couldn't make the words come out of my mouth. We hadn't officially dated because Heath never wanted anything to get back to Aiden. Instead, we spent time in the woods, talking, playing games, and getting to know each other.

We eventually progressed to heavy make-out sessions, but we never went all the way. I should have been thankful for that, but I wasn't. Heath had always been someone special to me, but I'd wondered over the years if it was because I was so young. I'd idealized our relationship. It was so easy for him to walk away; maybe he hadn't felt the same way.

His expression pained, he continued, "I didn't want to do something with you that I'd regret when your brother returned."

"I remember what you wrote." I burned the letter in the fire pit behind my trailer and vowed never to let another man hurt me.

Heath sighed and looked away. "Of course, you do."

He never reached out to me, even though I held out hope that he'd change his mind. Aiden would always be between us.

"I never told you, but Aiden asked me to look after you when he left. You know how your parents treated you—"

I didn't need him to finish that sentence. We both knew that I couldn't rely on my parents for something as simple as a kind word or a meal. "I had Gram."

Heath's compassionate gaze met mine. "But you deserved so much more."

His concern only hurt more. "I lost your friendship when you broke things off."

His lips pressed into a firm line. "That's how it had to be."

I held up my hands. "I don't want to talk about it anymore. I don't want to rehash our past. I just want to do what I came home to do and go back to my life."

"You're not staying." It wasn't a question.

I laughed without any humor. "There's nothing for me here."

He winced. "Lila told me how you were doing over the years."

Gram never mentioned it to me. "When did you see her?"

"We took turns going over there to check in on her and maintain the property. Mom would bring her meals and drive her to the doctor. They'd sit and chat over a cup of tea."

I felt a pang about not being the one who was there for her the last few years. I'd been wrapped up in myself. But Lori and Gram had been friends despite their age difference.

Heath scrutinized me, and I wondered what he saw. The successful businesswoman I was now or the teenager who would have followed him anywhere.

"You look good."

I wanted to say that he did, too. In fact, he looked better than he had when we were teenagers. He'd filled out, his shoulders broad underneath the red-and-blue-checked flannel that hung open over a green Monroe Christmas Tree Farm shirt, and his thighs stretching his worn jeans.

I bet he'd learned a few things since we used to mess around. He'd

always been attentive and skilled with his tongue and fingers. Now that he was a man, I wanted to experience it again.

Shaking that image from my head, I took a few steps back, needing to distance myself from him. Being around him stirred up feelings and emotions I thought I'd buried long ago.

“Where are you staying?”

“At the inn.” Gram had moved into a room on the first floor after the inn was closed so that she didn't have to manage the stairs. She'd closed off the rest of the house and let it go.

I was a little concerned if there was anything living in the house that I should be concerned about. Gram's bedroom, the kitchen, and the living room were still in good shape, even if it was outdated.

“I don't know if it's a good idea for you to stay there. Is it safe?”

I let out a huff. “It was good enough for Gram.”

“Why don't you let me look at it tomorrow? I can do a quick walk-through and let you know.”

“My realtor has been through it, and he didn't fall through a floor.”

Heath's expression remained stoic. “That doesn't mean anything.”

“As much as I appreciate your concern”—I really didn't because I didn't need him in my space—“I don't need your help. I'm a big girl now.”

His gaze slowly perused me. “I can see that.”

My face flushed from his appraising gaze.

“If you need anything, you have my number. I built a cabin through those trees.” He pointed in the direction of some lights.

“I'm the closest to your property.”

It was close to our spot. I wondered if he'd chosen it on purpose.

“Knox's cabin is on the other side of the mountain and closer to the road. Talon's cabin is behind his. I'm building a cabin for Sebastian next. His will be closer to the main farmhouse. He wants to be close to Mom. We were hoping that she could watch his daughter, Ember, but with her recent health

scare, he might need a nanny.”

My heart skipped a beat. “What recent health scare?”

He shook his head. “We thought it was a heart attack, like my dad had, but it was just an anxiety attack. The doctor wants her to slow down and reduce her stress. Gram didn’t talk to you about my family?”

“She talked about Lori and your brothers.”

He smiled. “She didn’t talk about me?”

I looked away. “If she did, I didn’t want to hear it. It’s not that I’m still hurt by what you did. I just couldn’t…” I couldn’t say the words.

“I enjoyed listening to her talk about you. Lila was so proud of you. How you put yourself through school and wouldn’t accept her money.”

I scoffed. “Of course not.”

“And how you built an online business and were living in a house in Malibu.”

My throat tight, I said, “I’m proud of everything I’ve accomplished. I wanted to get out of this town, and I did.”

“I’m glad you’re happy,” he said.

I wouldn’t have said I was happy. I would have said I felt safe and secure now that I had money. I was able to buy an amazing house and whatever else I wanted. But money wouldn’t bring Aiden home or protect him when he was deployed. Money had elevated my station in life and provided amazing opportunities, but it hadn’t given me lasting friendships or even a good man to spend time with. “Are you?”

“I hate that my dad died and won’t get to see Emmett and Knox happy with their significant others. He won’t get to see Ember grow up. But I love working on the farm and being close to my family.”

I wanted to know if he’d realized his dream of owning a contracting business. When we used to talk, he mentioned his internal conflict about working at the farm and pursuing his own dreams. I’d bet that had intensified since his father died.

“I’m sorry about your dad, but I’m glad that things seemed to have worked out for you. And I’m sorry about confronting you about the lights. I thought there were teenagers out here drinking beer and causing trouble.” That didn’t explain why I continued to yell at him when I realized who it was. That was my frustration with seeing him again and my traitorous heart that picked up at the sight of him.

“It’s okay.”

I threw my thumb over my shoulder. “I should head back. I have a lot to do.”

Something passed over his face, a hint of longing. It was so quick I almost thought I’d imagined it.

“I’ll stop by to check your place tomorrow.”

There was no point in arguing. Heath was stubborn.

“I’d appreciate that.”

When we were teens, our relationship felt exhilarating because it was forbidden. I’d wondered over the years if that’s why my connection to Heath felt different. But now that I’d run into him again, I still felt that undeniable pull. He was like a magnet I couldn’t help but be drawn to. But I knew if I got too close, there was the possibility I’d get burned.

I needed to stay away from him so I wouldn’t be sucked into his vortex. Nothing good could come from getting close to a man who’d hurt me in the past.

Only a fool would do something like that.

Read *[Reviving Hearts](#)*. It’s available now on Lea’s Shop for 30% off with coupon code: [REVIVINGHEARTS30](#).

I’ve inherited my grandmother’s Inn and I have no choice but to go back. It’s not as simple as just selling the property, it needs to be renovated first. When the realtor said he knew just the guy, I never suspected it would be Heath. The moment he steps back into my life, I can’t deny that the attraction is even greater than it was all those years ago.

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