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för the

HÖLIDAY

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
MEGAN MATTHEWS

PELICAN BAY ORCHARDS

FOUR FOR THE
Holiday

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
MEGAN MATTHEWS

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Edited by Amanda Brown

*To all the holiday lovers who can't wait for the first snow of
the season.*

Thank you for purchasing Four for the Holiday. I hope you enjoy the third story in my new Pelican Bay series. If you haven't met the former SEALs download book 1 for free on all retailers.

- You can also buy the rest of The Boys of RDA series by visiting my website -



These two stories are only available to newsletter subscribers!

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Procrastination might kill me. Or help me find the love of my life.

Out of pure insanity, I saved Oceanview Orchards as one of my last farm inspections. Now the days are running low before the new year, and I haven't finished my reports. The family-owned farm is always a problem, and this time, I might not survive what they throw at me.

A broken fence, power outage, and a snowstorm leave me stranded with only the youngest Halliday son as my entertainment guide. It turns out that Hale is not like his brothers. It's hard to dislike him when his true colors shine, but if I'm not careful, I might enjoy being stuck with him too much.

If I don't stop procrastinating, I won't have a job in the new year. I'm not at the orchard to fall in love and definitely not with Hale. One incredibly hot Halliday brother and the farm of horrors won't stand in my way.

The front door, one floor below me, rattled with a heavy knock.

Ugh.

I rolled over and shoved my head under a pillow on the lumpy bed.

The knocking persisted.

“What now?” I said as Ruffles, my brother’s golden retriever, jumped off the bed and charged down the stairs to attack the door and whoever dared disturb our slumber.

Lil’ Miss, the hairy black and white dog, chased after him. Those two were trouble.

Ruffles ran back into the bedroom and nudged my uncovered foot with his cold nose. “No.” I flopped over again. “Go away.”

The knocking started again, but this time, the dogs picked up a steady beat of barking in a perfect chorus. Now I’d never get back to sleep.

“Fine.” I threw back the covers and crawled out of the bed-and-breakfast guest bed.

The dogs clambered at my feet as I prodded down the stairs. As I hit the bottom step, I ran a hand through my messy brown hair and did my best to smooth it into something reasonable. The Oceanview Orchards Bed-and-Breakfast was empty and quiet except in the noisy circle that surrounded me.

“I’m coming!” I yelled, trying to push my way past the dogs as they jumped and barked. A friendly reminder, just in case I hadn’t figured out someone was at the front door.

Everyone else in the family vacated the farm after the holidays and left me as the last man standing. My older brothers and their significant others headed to warmer weather in Florida. My parents were on a cruise. Holly, my twin, ran off with the enemy to celebrate winning a regional taste-off competition, and even the youngest Halliday planned to ring in the new year with friends in Michigan.

Apparently, family had to stick together unless blue skies and temperatures in the eighties were on the agenda. Then all bets were off.

Ruffles gave the door one last jump. His paws rattled the wood, and I pushed him away to open it. “Enough, Ruffles. I’m aware.”

Snow fluttered into the renovated home as I opened the door. It scattered across the floor and both dogs shuffled away as if the snow might cause them to melt. Lil’ Miss barked at a piece before it blew past her.

“Yeah?” I asked, my gaze traveling past the person on the porch to take in the storm raging beyond the driveway. Three or more inches had already accumulated since I fell asleep the night before. We were in for a doozy.

Looked like the weather report tagged it right when they warned about the impending snowstorm. It'd hit us just like they predicted. Possibly worse.

“Mr. Halliday?” the light female voice drew my gaze lower until I met her eyes. The woman wore a light blue button-up shirt with the county seal on the left pocket. She had one hand on her right hip and clutched a clipboard with papers in the other. A tight braid kept her blonde hair off her shoulders.

Adele Flowers.

County inspector.

Person who almost single-handedly shut down the farm two years ago.

“Yeah,” I said again without a smile.

It was nothing personal, but a visit from the county inspector never counted as a time to celebrate.

She rolled her eyes dramatically and flipped her head to the side. “Not falling for that again. I need Holston Halliday.”

I propped myself against the doorway and closed the door against me to keep the cold out and the dogs in. “He’s not here.”

She turned around and glanced back at the white county truck she parked at an angle in front of the bed-and-breakfast like she expected him to be hiding from her. “He’s not?”

Adele and Holston may have settled their differences, and he considered her an ally, but I wasn’t ready to welcome her with open arms. She still worked for the county.

“It’s December twenty-eight. Some people take vacations around the holidays,” I said as an explanation. When you were

a Halliday and ran the best apple orchard in the county, the only time of year you took a vacation was the few weeks the farm slowed down after the holidays.

Adele bristled. Her entire body jerked in annoyance, and her eyes widened. Snow fell on her head and melted against her hair. We were both freezing, but the cold didn't seem to bother her as much as it did as it whipped across my face.

The county inspector was hot, but she was obviously a work-a-holic with a habit of shutting down struggling family farms. You had to look past the beauty to see the dark insides, and I wanted nothing to do with a woman I didn't respect.

Although, she hurt her leg on the bed-and-breakfast porch steps with Haden and didn't sue. She may not have been all bad. Only mostly.

Adele released a breath and a steady stream of fog against the chilly air. "I need a report in by year's end. I only have two places left because I tried to wait for a non-busy time."

She glanced behind me, and I swear she whispered something under her breath, but I couldn't make out the words. From her widened eyes, she spoke the truth, but her reports weren't my problem.

A crack broke through my persona. I hated being an asshole, even if some times warranted it.

"Okay, let's go." I stepped toward her and froze when a gust of wind blew snow toward the door. "Let me get a coat. I handle the farm's books, but after the last time when you almost shut us down, Holston made all of us learn the important bits of running the place."

Adele bit her lips, but I didn't miss the way the ends of her mouth tipped up into a smile. "I'll be quick."

I reached to the side for the coat hook and came up empty-handed. “Okay, I’ll meet you out front.”

Adela nodded and turned away as I shut the door. Where the hell did I leave my damn coat? The dogs followed me as I checked the back door hook. The coat to my father’s Santa costume hung over two hooks, and I dug under it to find a Carhartt from one of my brothers.

“Not playing Santa this year,” I said to the dogs as I rehung the coat. “Calm your paws.”

Both animals followed me back to the front door and then nosed their way past as I opened it and stepped into the frigid weather. Snow cascaded around me as I met Adele by her truck.

“You ready to go?” she asked, clicking her pen against the clipboard.

I nodded. “Let’s start in the barn.”

She followed beside me, and together we checked out the equipment and other pieces she had to checkmark for her report. Holston ran a tight ship and was determined never to fail another inspection. I expected this to go quickly with an A+ mark.

The wind blew against the barn, shaking the walls as snow piled up at the open door. Adele shivered and zipped her coat higher. The cold aggravated my head as I battled a headache. The weather always did it to me, but the leftover eggnog I’d finished the night before probably didn’t help.

Even with a splitting headache, I paid attention and answered each of Adele’s questions. I wouldn’t be the second brother to almost get the farm closed. We were gaining ground and prestige in the local market. A few more years and

Oceanview Orchards would be a top contender in Maine's apple orchard market.

Adele made her way around the barn, adding checkmarks to her list with matching head nods. She hummed as she worked, and I watched her for a few minutes before we moved to a new area.

“You really don't take a day off?” I asked.

A snowstorm raged outside during the week between Christmas and New Year's Eve, but she was checking cooler temperatures in a barn. Weren't county workers supposed to be lazy? She didn't fit into the picture.

She was too... sunny and bright. Summer in a world of winter.

Adele answered with a delicate laugh. “Nope.”

“I thought farmers were the only people who kept insane schedules and never took a vacation.”

She shrugged and flipped her clipboard from one hand to the other. “I have to get these reports in before the new year so I can start fresh. And...” she stared out through the barn's open door as snow covered the apple trees in her view. “I actually enjoy the snow.”

“You like winter?” I'd lived in Maine my entire life, and even I sometimes had a hard time maintaining a positive outlook during the winter months.

Adele's smile never faltered as she continued to gaze out at the orchard. The wind blew in harsh gusts, spreading snow among the rows of trees and piling up at their trunks. It covered the branches and hung on the few remaining dead leaves, which hadn't fallen earlier in the year.

“It is beautiful,” I agreed with her. If I had it my way, I’d just rather watch the view inside next to a blazing fire. Nothing was wrong with winter in Maine, but I liked it best when my toes were warmer.

Everyone in the family ran off to warmer parts of the world, but I volunteered to stay behind and tend the animals. Since I had no one to celebrate with, I didn’t desire putting my toes in the sand.

The wind howled, and the door rattled. Adele switched her gaze toward me. “I guess we need to keep going before we blow away.”

I laughed. No way would even that wind tear me away, but Adele’s tiny frame might not fare as well.

A hundred and twenty-two minutes later I huddled in my coat next to a large tractor as I watched Adele check the fire extinguishers in the last barn. She brushed her hands off against her legs and made a last check on her clipboard before turning.

“Okay, I’m finished,” she said with a grin, which I read as we passed. “Let’s go inside. You can sign off and I’ll get out of your way.”

I let her walk out first and then stayed behind to close up the large door behind us. The wind continued to batter against the barn’s sides, and I huddled into my coat to stay warm.

Snow had built up against the building while we’d been inside. We had to have over a foot of snow since the storm started. I eyed it carefully. The weather showed no signs of stopping.

“It’s getting nasty out here,” I said as we walked to the bed-and-breakfast.

Adele nodded while bundled in her coat, the edges up to her cheeks.

The dogs barked at the front door, wanting to get out even though I'd put them in the house an hour ago so they didn't freeze after being outside for so long. "Monsters."

They were never content. When they were in, they wanted out, and when they were out, they wanted in. You couldn't win.

A crack split the quiet evening. Both Adele and I jerked and followed the noise with our gazes.

"Oh shit," she said.

At the edge of the woods, a tree split. Its top hung in midair for a second and then toppled to the side, falling against a fence with a heavy thud. Fence boards splintered under the weight, and I shook my head. Not good.

Hale stared in horror as the tree jerked, fell another two feet, and then a crack broke through the air around a gust of wind. He jerked, and I took a step back in awe. Mother Nature was a fickle beast. She gave and then she took away.

I loved it.

From Hale's expression, he did not.

"Is that an important fence?" I asked. The orchard didn't have a ton of animals, but they kept a few for the whole farm theme.

Hale sighed and hung his head. I assumed that meant it was, but I waited for his answer. He'd zipped up his tan Carhartt jacket reminding me of a commercial for L.L. Bean. They could have him model and sell out on whatever item he was wearing. Probably boots. My heart thudded extra hard every time he was around during my inspection, but I thought I'd hidden my response to him well.

I'd only met the youngest Halliday son in passing, but I never missed how he lumbered across the farm. He had a lumberjack build and rugged stubble along his chin. If I had a kryptonite, it came as Hale Halliday. For some reason, he did it for me.

But I'd never let him know that.

Nope. I kept my secrets locked up tightly.

They were in the vault. Double locked. Guarded by two big guard dogs. Snarling beasts.

Nothing like the two adorable dogs roaming Oceanview Orchards.

“Yeah, the goats are out there. They're in the barn now, but those assholes never stay where they should.”

Poor goats.

Hale stared at the destroyed section of fence with worry and heavy eyes. Repairing a fence took a toll on a regular day. Add in doing it during a snowstorm, and the work easily doubled. Plus, Hale had no one here to help him.

I flipped my wrist and checked my watch. It was only lunch.

Wind beat at my cheeks.

Technically, I had time.

I didn't want to spend more time out in the wind, but I couldn't leave him to repair the fence alone. I'd have to delay my second inspection for the day. But it's not like I called places and told them I was coming, so they'd never know I'd be late. There wouldn't be much surprise if they knew my expected arrival time.

“Let me check in, and I’ll help you move the tree and get the fence fixed.”

Hale dropped his hand against his thigh and shook his head. His lips pursed as he stared at me. “That’s not your job.”

So he was one of *those* men. The kind who refused to ask for help, even though he desperately needed it. From my dealings with the other brothers, it seemed to be a family trait. The female Hallidays fared little better from some stories I’d heard circling Pelican Bay.

“You’re the only one here?” I asked him, even though we’d talked about his family members being on vacation while I checked out the first barn.

He gave me another sigh, the breath escaping him in a cloud. “Yeah.”

I patted him on the back before continuing on toward my truck. “I grew up on a farm, so I know mending a fence alone is damn near impossible.”

Hale jogged to catch up with me. He watched as I chucked my clipboard onto the seat. He studied me and I raised an eyebrow at his silence.

“You grew up on a farm?” he asked. He leaned up against my truck, dusting snow off the edge.

“In Vermont.” I shut the truck door, disturbing more snow from my windshield. “Yeah. Where did you think I came from?”

Did I have a city-girl image?

He grinned. “I always assumed they grew government workers in a lab.”

My mouth dropped open, but Hale laughed.

“I’m kidding,” Hale said. “Now that you mention it, I can see it.”

Wait. Was that a good or bad thing? Did I give off farm-girl vibes?

Hale laughed again. “I appreciate the help, but let’s at least get lunch before we toil in the snow. I can use a warm-up.”

“Hot chocolate sounds good to me.”

The left side of his lips stretched higher. “Not a coffee girl?”

“Not this late in the day.” I stepped back to the truck’s driver’s door and opened it. “But don’t worry. I packed my lunch.”

Pelican Bay didn’t have any fast food options, and my wallet couldn’t handle eating at the bakery every day. My waist couldn’t handle the bakery’s daily treats either.

“Well, let me get lunch,” Hale said. “I’m starving.”

Hale turned around, but my words stopped him. “I normally eat in my truck.”

He shook his head and snorted. “It’s way too cold out here for that. Come on. I’ve got a large table.”

He walked back toward the bed-and-breakfast, and I definitely did not watch his ass as he made his way to the porch.

Okay, I totally did.

He had a nice ass.

Like really nice.

I licked my lips, and the cold immediately dried them.

Hale turned back at the beginning of the porch. “I think some pie is left in the fridge.”

I didn’t turn down a decent pie bribe. Only a fool left Oceanview Orchards’ pie on the table.

“Okay,” I said and followed him up the steps. “Is it apple?”

I’d eat any of Mrs. Halliday’s pies, but apple had to be my favorite. Every fall, we ordered five of them for the office Thanksgiving pot luck.

Hale chuckled as the dogs dove at the door when we approached. “Of course.”

He held the door open, and I slipped inside, immediately met with two wet slobbery dog noses. They jumped and nuzzled the back of my knees, pushing me forward. My snowy boots left a mess behind them.

“Sorry about the floor,” I said as Hale closed the door.

“Don’t worry about it. This place is over a hundred years old. It’s seen worse.” He removed his coat and stomped his feet. “Children, sit.”

Both dogs stopped and sat at Hale’s feet.

“Wow, they really listen to you.” I walked around them, and they never moved their attention from Hale.

He chuckled. “That’s a first. Trust me.”

The odor of cinnamon coated the air, and I stopped to stare at the tall Christmas tree set up in the room’s corner. The tree’s lights were off, but ornaments adorned every branch, and gold ribbons were interwoven along with them. A bright red tree skirt covered the floor around the evergreen. It was lovely.

Hale left the room, and I followed him through the space, not wanting to be left alone. “No bed-and-breakfast guests right now?”

He led us through a dining room with the long table like he promised and straight into a kitchen. “Nope. That’s why Haden decided they should get out while the getting is good around here.”

I laughed with him as Hale stuck his head in the glossy black fridge. The new appliance looked out of place in the older kitchen. The bed-and-breakfast was a mix between old world and modern convince. I loved every piece.

Hale pulled away from the fridge with a white plate in his hand. A thick piece of pie sat right in the middle. “There’s only one piece left, but it’s big enough to split.”

He set the pie on the counter and then returned to the fridge, pulling out more ingredients.

“It looks great.”

Hale brought his collection of stuff to the table in the dining room, and I sat across from him, waiting with my lunch pail in front of me. “I should be a gentleman and give you the entire piece, but it’s a damn good pie.”

I laughed. “It is. No hard feelings, but I’m definitely eating my half.”

He’d offered me a piece of pie, and I was eating my pie.

As I pulled out my turkey sandwich, Hale began creating a masterpiece. He shoveled two scoopfuls of ice cream on both sides of the pie, lobbed two dollops of whip cream in the center of the delicious dessert, and then topped the creation off with two cherries.

I had half my sandwich finished by the time he completed creating his dessert. The only thing that stopped me from eating my first bite while he returned the ice cream carton to the freezer was the missing forks. You had to have a fork to eat pie with. A spoon just didn't work the right way.

"And we're ready," Hale said as he entered the room and passed me the utensil.

"Where's your lunch?" I asked when he sat down and waited expectantly for me to take the first bite.

A gentleman, after all.

"You're looking at it," he said and slid his fork into the pie after I already had a bite in my mouth.

A piece of pie didn't count as lunch. Not when we had a fence to build.

"Okay," I said, and lowered my fork before I grabbed my second bite. "You can eat the entire piece. I can't steal your lunch."

"Naw, don't worry about it." He waved his fork toward me so I'd shove mine into the pie. "I'll grab a meat stick."

I rolled my eyes with a shake of my head and a smile. One of those stubborn Halliday men at it again.

"What?" he asked as I chewed my next bite, doing my best not to moan as the pie's delicious flavor hit my tongue. They did something to their apples. Oceanview Orchard apples were the juiciest in the county.

I lowered my fork and picked up the less exciting sandwich. "Are all farm men this stubborn?"

Hale snorted and broke off a piece of the crust. "Yes, it's a condition of employment."

“Makes sense. My brother is the same way.”

Hale nodded. “I have four siblings, and one is a twin. It’s the only way to survive around here.”

“Your family seems close.” You had to be when all of them worked at the farm and most lived nearby, too.

One dog nudged Hale’s leg, and he pushed it away. “Yeah, now that Hope is going to be our children’s nature program coordinator, we’re all here. It could be a reality show.”

“I bet.”

“Is your brother here or in Vermont?”

I ate my last bite of sandwich and rewarded myself with more pie. “He lives on the state border. He’s a good guy, but we don’t get together often. Holidays mostly.”

“You’re alone in Pelican Bay?” he asked and pinched his lips together like that fact bothered him.

I flipped my short braid off my shoulder. “No, I have my cat Milkshake to keep me company.”

Hale chuckled once. “What is it with weird animal names around here? If I ever get a dog, I’m going to get a big one and name it something manly, like Brute.”

Our forks clinked together as we both went for the last bite of pie, but Hale removed his, giving me the okay to finish the piece. I shouldn’t have, but I did. Sue me. Pie made me a different woman.

The wind howled outside and rattled the windows of the old bed-and-breakfast.

Hale set his fork on the side of the plate. “I guess it’s time to get out there and fix that fence.”

I agreed. “Best to get it done now before it gets worse.”

I had to fix Hale’s fence and then get to my next inspection. Paperwork didn’t wait for snow.

Hale was the first to leave the table. I shoved my wrappers into my lunch box and pushed my chair back. My fingers had warmed while at the table, but my bones were still cold.

I hovered by the front door as the dogs jumped at it, and Hale zipped up his Carhartt jacket, turning him into the lumberjack of my dreams. The cold blasted us as soon as he opened the door. The dogs rushed out and slipped on the porch before jumping off the steps.

“It’s still coming down,” I said, staring at the snow flurries as they continued to cover the ground.

Hale glanced up at the sky. “Yeah, we need to hurry. Let me grab the supplies.”

He jogged off to a barn, and I waited by my truck after tossing my lunch box inside and using the vehicle as a block against the wind. My boss said the weather guy called it the storm of the year. I guess he got it right for once.

A few minutes later, right as my nose turned red with the cold, a motor started and Hale drove out of the barn on a black four-wheeler. Behind him, he pulled a small trailer with three pieces of fence rail and a toolbox.

I raised an eyebrow as he stopped the machine next to me. “We can see the broken fence.”

“Yeah, but this way is more fun,” he said and then slapped the seat behind him. “Hop on.”

I slipped on behind him and wrapped my arms around his middle. “You sure this thing is safe?”

I hadn't been on a four-wheeler since we lived on the farm. Even then, my brother and I only used them to get into trouble.

“Absolutely. Just hold on tight.”

Hale gunned it, and the four-wheeler immediately jerked to the side as it slipped on a patch of ice.

“Hale!” I squeezed his middle, but we were falling sideways. My butt skimmed across the seat, and I slithered left. My numb fingers lost their grip and my butt fell off the side of the seat. “I'm slipping.”

At Adele's yell, I reached behind me with one hand and pushed her back onto the seat. She wiggled and clutched my middle tightly.

"I got you," I said as I brought the four-wheeler back in line and gained control of the wheels. "Hold on tight."

She squeezed in closer, putting her chest right against my back, and I gunned it again, heading toward the broken fence. Wind beat against my freezing cheeks as I punched the gas. The weather had only grown more brutal as the day continued. The storm wasn't letting up or showing signs of clearing. We were in for a pounding.

Snow blew to the side as the four-wheeler's tires ripped through the fresh piles. Adele laughed in my ear as we broke through a tall bank of snow drift.

The dogs ran beside us, and I slowed as we approached the fallen tree. Adele jumped off the four-wheeler when we stopped and slapped me on the shoulder when I joined her.

"I can't believe you did that. You're crazy. We almost died!"

I laughed. "I had it under control the entire time."

She pinched her lips together like she was biting the backs of them. “Unlikely.”

Smart woman. Those few seconds right before she yelled were terrifying, but I’d never admit it. “Come on. Let’s hitch up the tree and get that out of the way first.”

It was too cold to use a chainsaw and cut the tree up. That’s why I brought the four-wheeler. It wasn’t just for showing off although it worked nicely for that, too.

I unhitched the trailer and grabbed the bungee cord from the side. Adele met me at the tree and I tossed over one end to her. Together, we worked to strap the branches down, and then I attached another to the four-wheeler.

“You want to drive it off?” I asked Adele.

She clapped her hands together once. “Hell, yes.”

Before I had the chance to give her directions, Adele jumped on the back of the four-wheeler and took off without a second glance at the controls.

The wheels kicked up snow as she gave it gas, driving away from the tree. The rope pulled tight, and Adele gunned it as the tree lurched to the side. I stepped back, making space between me and the tree in case the cord didn’t hold.

Adele laughed, throwing her head back, and then gave it more gas, tugging the tree more as the engine roared. She might be a natural. Or she might burn out the motor on the four-wheeler. Screw it. I’d figure out an explanation for Holston if we had to buy a new one next year.

I hated to admit it, but as the snow spun and shot past Adele Flowers’ head, she was absolutely gorgeous. The tiny county inspector always seemed like such a hardass when she’d been at the farm in the past. Nothing like the carefree

woman currently destroying my brother's beloved four-wheeler.

In the next second, the tree jerked forward and Adele yelled out a yip as it gave way, and she pulled it a few feet away from the fence. She let off the gas and turned the vehicle around, letting the rope gain slack.

Her cheeks were red and her eyes bright as she met me beside the broken fence. She'd enjoyed it, and that made it worth it. "That was so much fun. Do you get to do that all the time?"

I laughed. "Only when trees break fences."

I'd actually never used the four-wheeler for this reason, but now I wanted to use it to drag around a few branches for kicks.

"You should come over on your next day off, and we can ride the snowmobiles on the trails. They're as much fun, too."

"Really?" she asked, with her eyes wide and shining. "I've never ridden a snowmobile."

"You'll love it."

"That sounds great." Her face fell a second later.

Was my offer out of line?

Damn it. Of course it was.

You didn't befriend the county inspector. It had to be breaking a long-written rule somewhere.

Just when I worried she'd report me for bribery or something, Adele finally smiled.

"Yeah, maybe I can," she said, rescuing me from my misery. "I bet I'm faster than you."

I gawked. “Absolutely not.” I sped around these trails every day as a kid. No one knew them better than I did.

Her smile grew as the wind blew snow in front of her face. “Yeah, I’m so going to beat you.”

I yanked a large broken branch to the side and returned to the trailer to grab the pieces of railing. “None of my siblings can beat me. I hold the record.”

Adele stared at the tree when she spoke. “Enjoy it because that record won’t last long.”

My word, she was gorgeous, smart, spunky, and held her own in friendly banter. Nothing made Adele more attractive.

Minutes later, she held up the end of a fence rail, and I screwed it into place. My fingers stung, and I regretted forgetting my gloves. The electric screwdriver jerked to the side and slammed into my hand.

“Fuck,” I said, holding the hand to my face.

Adele dropped the post, creating a mushroom cloud of snow at our feet. “Let me see it.”

“It’s fine.” I shook the hand at my side, trying to shake the pain away.

She popped out a hip. “Show me your damn hand, Hale.”

I held it out for her.

Adele flipped my hand between hers, inspecting the skin. “You’ll live.”

“I told you,” I replied, sounding a bit like when I responded to Holly about something.

She grabbed the board again and put it back in place. “You men are ridiculous.”

I screwed in the board and then added another for additional support. We had one rail remaining and worked together to get it hung quickly. As I bent down to attach the screw, Adele leaned forward, putting our faces just a few inches apart.

She watched my work, and I tried not to breathe in case I had apple pie breath. Everything smelled cold, but I swore a hint of lavender circled Adele even outside in the frozen air.

With the last screw in, I stood and backed away from her. The snow never let up as we worked and continued to fall around us. The drifts had to be piling up on the roads. We'd be over two feet if it kept at this pace.

It was time to get Adele home, even if a part of me didn't want her to leave.

What the hell? Did I just think I didn't want the county inspector to leave?

That made little sense. Still, having Adele goad me all morning made the hours pass quickly. Something about her put me at ease.

Ruffles ran at Adele and then slid to a stop, putting his snowy paws over her shoes.

"Ruffles, get away," I said, but the dog didn't listen. I guess I already used my one time of them following orders.

He barked and darted off toward Lil' Miss, getting lost in the trees.

"It's coming down pretty heavy. I appreciate the help, but we better get you on your way."

Adele didn't respond.

I turned. "Adele?"

A ball of solid white soared at my head and exploded against my chest.

“What the hell?”

She laughed and bent over, collecting more snow and pounding it into a ball. “It’s great packing snow, Hale.”

I raised my hands, holding them in the air. “I don’t have gloves.”

“You should have come better prepared.” She lobbed the new snowball at me, and I turned. It hit me in the shoulder with a splat, and snow shot off in every direction.

I darted toward the four-wheeler for cover, grabbing snow along the way. “Damn it, woman. You can’t aim for the head.”

A snowball detonated against the seat of the four-wheeler as I darted behind it and chucked a ball at Adele but missed.

“I’m not,” she said, sliding to the left to miss my attack.

“Your aim is that bad?” I asked, starting on my second snowball. My fingers tingled with the chill, but I couldn’t allow her to get two unreturned hits against me.

I kneeled beside the four-wheeler and then popped up and threw a ball at Adele’s chest. It lost steam in the snow and hit her in the leg.

“Hey!” she hollered with a grin.

I dropped behind the four-wheeler for cover as a snowball sailed over my head. “There are no rules in snowball fights.”

Another half-made ball dropped on the other side of my feet. Damn, she had a horrible aim.

I lobbed another half-packed ball at her, hitting her on the other leg, and laughed.

Ruffles sprinted between us, kicking up snow and barking with each step. Adele watched him, and I used it as a distraction. With her attention elsewhere, I dashed out from behind the four-wheeler and ran at her with two snowballs in my frozen fingers.

“Ahhhh,” I yelled and chucked the balls at the same time.

They hit Adele in the chest, and she brushed the snow away while laughing. “Okay, okay. You win.”

I tried to stop, but my feet skidded across the snow and I stumbled. My hands flew into the air and flailed as I regained my balance. Adele realized my trajectory a second too late. I plowed into her and knocked us both to the frozen ground.

Ruffles ran circles around us, barking the entire time.

Adele and I landed in a tangle of arms and legs. I did my best to wrap my arms around her to protect her from hitting the ground too hard, but we landed solid anyway. The snow did little to pillow our fall and she let out a grunt on impact.

I reached for her, worried I’d hurt her, but she raised her head in a laugh. “Wow, you’re a sore winner.”

My expression matched hers as I hovered over her. “It’s a victory dance.”

Adele’s lips stretched further across her face. “Then you need new dance lessons.”

Only inches separated our faces as I stared into her eyes. Snow coated Adele’s blonde hair, turning it white.

“Adele,” I started.

She kept her gaze on me. “Yeah?”

Lil' Miss returned from the woods, barking the entire way as she shot snow around her and ran right for us. I stuck my arm up to stop her from crashing into Adele, and my phone rang as she jolted to the left and missed us. A puff of snow shot up and fell around us as she ran toward the barn and then circled around.

“Shit. I need to get that,” I said but didn't move.

She nodded. “You probably should.”

“Right.” I rolled off Adele and stood, holding out a hand to help her up as well.

My fingers were frozen solid and burned as I shoved them in the pocket of my jeans to retrieve my phone. Hope, my youngest sister's name, flashed on the screen as I swiped my finger to answer the call.

“What's up, chicken butt?”

Adele glanced at me. She'd obviously heard how I addressed my sister. It wasn't my fault Hope had a chicken butt.

“Hale, are you at the bed-and-breakfast?” she asked.

“Yeah. Where else would I be? Did you make it to Michigan?” Hope left with her best friend Chance and a few others to visit a college friend at Michigan State University and ring in the new year on campus.

The phone cut in and out. “No. We're stranded in DC at our layover because the airport in Detroit is closed for weather.”

“That bad, huh?” The storm must be pounding an entire swath of the US. “What are you going to do, kid?”

“We’re going to hang out here for a while and hope they open the airport and resume flights,” she said.

“Do you need cash for a hotel room?” I didn’t want my sister spending days at an airport.

She groaned so loudly I heard it through the phone and wind. “No, Father. I have this fancy thing called a credit card.”

“Real funny, Hope. Are you going to be okay?”

Adele inched closer like she wanted to listen in on the conversation or planned to use me as a blocker against the wind.

“Yeah, I just wanted to call and let you know. Mom and Dad are already on the cruise, and I didn’t want to bother anyone on a vacation.”

I smacked my lips together. She didn’t mind bothering me because I was supposed to be home, hanging out in my underwear. Not in a snowball fight with a gorgeous county inspector. “Okay, well, if that changes, call me immediately.”

“Can do. I’ll keep you posted.”

“Stay safe,” I said and then disconnected the call. I’d be more worried, but Hope was a smart kid, and she was there with Chance. She’d do the right thing, and he’d keep her safe.

I slipped the phone back in my pocket. “Sounds like they’re closing everything down with this storm. We need to get you home.”

Snow drifted in through the open barn door as Hale parked the four-wheeler and trailer behind a small tractor. I grabbed the drill and cords we used to move the tree from the trailer and handed them to him.

I hesitated by the door. Hale said the storm closed the airport in Michigan, but it hadn't made me kick my butt into gear. In fact, I might have slowed. Something kept me from charging forward to my next inspection or home to bundle up and wait out the weather.

When nothing was left for me to do in the barn, I waited for Hale on the other side and helped him close the large door when he finished.

Both dogs followed me to my truck. They ran in front of my steps and crisscrossed around the trail I made in the snow. The black and white pup named Lil' Miss stopped every few steps to shove her face into the snow and then dart out, shooting snow everywhere.

I laughed as she did it again and almost ran into the front tire of my truck. "Whoa, little lady."

The ground around my truck had frozen over, and I slipped on an icy patch. My hand shot out to grab on to the side mirror

for balance. Hands hit my back and held on to keep me standing. My feet slipped and slid, but Hale never let me fall.

“I got you,” Hale said as he helped me steady myself.

I laughed as my feet slipped in front of me, but he never loosened his hold.

My feet finally steadied, and he stepped away. “Thanks.”

“No problem. You can’t have another accident on the farm.”

My cheeks turned red, but neither of us noticed because the wind already had them a cherry color. “Right. Don’t want one of those.”

I hovered at the door of my truck, not sure why I couldn’t get in and leave.

Oh shit.

Was I falling for Hale Halliday?

No.

That’s crazy talk.

Oceanview Orchards was... a farm of problems.

Like a lot of problems.

The most problematic farm I had on my list. Sure, they’d gotten it together since the big issue with the eldest Halliday a few years ago, but they always had drama at this place.

They even had a shooting at Easter. I definitely wasn’t falling in love with a one-fifth owner of the shooting orchard.

I had standards. Yes, Hale checked off all my guy boxes, but that didn’t mean his family did.

I’d gone to the bakery. I heard the stories.

Two words. Easter. Shooting.

Crashing through a step on their front porch and injuring my leg were minor compared to bullets. I'd even survived a terrifying drive to the hospital in the backseat of a car while praying we didn't crash and die. The Halliday family had put me through enough already.

I might not survive the next incident.

Right.

Definitely not falling in love with Hale Halliday.

I opened the truck door and pulled myself into the seat. Hale stayed in the opening, blocking some of the wind as he stared at me without speaking.

"Well, then..." I said, keeping eye contact.

"Yup," he said but didn't move.

I pushed the keys into the ignition. "I should get back before the storm gets any heavier."

"These tiny trucks aren't great at unplowed roads. Make sure and drive slowly."

"Sure will. Hopefully, the plows are out in town." Although my next inspection was on the other side of the county and down another dirt road. With the way the snow continued to coat the ground, it might be best to reschedule it for later.

Hale eyed the truck and me in the driver's seat as I clicked my seatbelt. "You want me to take my truck and drive you to your house?"

I laughed. Definitely had a savior complex. "No, I've got it. Thanks, though."

He tapped the side of my door and nodded before stepping back and shutting the door for me. Hale and both dogs waited on the bed-and-breakfast steps as I started the truck and pulled out from my parking spot. The three of them almost looked sad to see me go.

Before I turned the corner and lost sight of Hale, I raised my hand in front of the steering wheel and waved.

He returned it and watched until I turned onto the main driveway and toward the county road. Air blasted from the vents, and the truck hadn't warmed up enough to make a dent in my chill by the time I passed the front of their land.

I slowed at the end of the Oceanview Orchards' long driveway and turned left onto the dirt road. My back tires slid to the side. I took my foot off the gas and let the truck finish the turn before righting it and starting on my way.

The roads really were in horrible shape. It didn't look like a plow had even attempted to clear the county road as fresh snowfall beat against the truck's window. I had the wipers on full blast and still had a hard time seeing past the white cloud of flakes as it thundered toward Earth.

The drive took time as I slowly slogged my way down the road so I didn't lose control of the vehicle. The Oceanview Orchards' inspection papers sat beside me on the truck's bench. Rather than head to my next inspection, I'd return to the office, file today's inspection report, and visit the other farm the next day. Hopefully, by then, the county would have the plows out and roads cleared.

A powerful gust of wind tossed the truck to the side, and I slowed even more. The speedometer barely touched twenty miles an hour. At this rate, I'd take me an hour to get home from the farm.

Better yet, I'd take the papers home with me, complete my work there, and file the paper documents in the office the next day before my last inspection.

The road stretched on in front of me, and my thoughts ran away with themselves. Had Hale flirted with me that morning? Or was he just a nice guy?

Were my feelings and me being stupid?

Probably.

The winter did weird things to people this far north.

I laughed as warm air finally blew out of the vents for the first time.

Yeah, I definitely wasn't falling in love with Hale Halliday. Nor he with me.

My knuckles were white as I held on to the wheel tightly, keeping the truck in the middle of the road so I didn't get sucked into a side drift of snow.

He was hot, though.

Like super-hot.

And sweet.

The dogs listened to him that one time.

He seemed fiercely protective of his family, even though they're crazy.

The back tires spun again, and I squeezed the wheel harder, keeping the truck on the road. The truck righted itself and I slowly stepped on the gas, moving us forward.

After a few more feet, I released the breath I'd been holding and repositioned my hands on the wheel after giving them a quick shake.

I'd only made it about a half a mile on a twenty-minute drive on the empty road. Hale was right when he said I should have left earlier. I just couldn't bring myself to do it. Now the roads were a disaster.

That reluctance would cost me extra hours of my life as my drive time went from minutes to hours.

A flash of brown darted out from the side of the road, coming from a patch of thick pine trees. The deer ran right in front of the truck and stopped, turning its head in my direction.

"Shit!" I said and slammed on the brakes. The back tires spun as the truck lurched sideways. I spun the wheel, trying to keep it on the road, but the back end continued in the wrong direction.

The right tire fell off the side, and the snowbank pulled the rest of the truck into the ditch. The jerk slammed me against my seatbelt. I came to a stop half in the ditch and half out. I glanced out the side mirrors and watched the back tires spin in the snow.

"Damn it." How did I explain this to my manager?

The deer scampered across the road, and I flipped him off for good measure. I leaned forward and stepped on the gas, hoping the truck could climb its way from the deep ditch. We jerked forward, climbed two feet, and then slid backward, stopping deeper in the ditch than my starting point.

Shit.

No way could I dig the truck out. Not in this weather. Without enough weight in the back end, I'd never be able to drive myself out of the ditch either.

I turned off the engine and pounded the steering wheel once. I'd watched enough safety videos to know snow had to

be crammed into my tailpipe, and if I sat in the truck with the heater on, I'd end up dying from carbon monoxide poisoning.

My phone had two bars, but who did I call to get me out of this mess? More than likely, the tow trucks weren't working in these conditions. Everyone in the county would be working to send out plow trucks and emergency services. The truck had to wait.

Since I shouldn't keep the truck running for carbon monoxide fears, I had only one option left to me.

I had to walk back to Hale Halliday.

I searched my inspection forms for a number, but the only one listed belonged to Holston Halliday. There wasn't any point in calling him since he wasn't in the state. With no way to reach Hale and ask him to rescue me with his snowmobile or four-wheeler, my only option was to walk back to the bed-and-breakfast.

In the cold.

And the snow.

Resigned to my fate, I rezippered my coat and shoved my gloves back over my fingers. I left my papers and lunchbox on the bench of the truck and locked the door as I left it behind me on my trek to Oceanview Orchards.

I'd barely left the cold when the first gust of wind cut through the little warmth I'd gained from the truck's heater.

The snow drifted across the roads in patches. I tried to walk through the holes the truck made when I'd driven through them, but some were already drifted shut again. I had to break through these new drifts with my body, and soon snow coated the bottoms of my jeans.

My fingers felt like icicles and my cheeks were raw as I inched closer to the farm with each step.

The wind battered me, and I hunched into my coat to keep myself warm. Hale never gave me that cup of hot chocolate at lunch, and thoughts of a mug full of warm liquid kept me going. I didn't have to make it far. Just to Hale.

I passed the halfway mark and focused on visions of my next beach vacation. Winters might be my favorite season, but next time I got to travel, I planned to do so somewhere warm. With sand. Palm trees. Those drinks in coconuts. Maybe a swim-up bar.

My brother had one of those on his honeymoon, and he said it starred in his dreams for the next year. I needed a year of vacation dreams. A mailbox with Halliday written on the side finally came into view and I tried to pick up my steps and walk faster.

The last little bit of the walk felt like it took forever. My steps grew heavy, and the wind pushed my body to the side as it shot down the driveway. Everything felt so cold. Like my body had frozen from the outside in.

I stumbled on a few steps and almost fell, but the farmhouse came into view and my spirits grew. Just a little further and I'd be safe and warm.

My teeth chattered, and as my foot hit the ground on the next step, I slipped, and my leg shot out in front of me. Hands flailing, I shouted as I attempted to regain my balance but failed, continuing toward the snow-covered ground.

Lil' Miss scratched at the back door, yipping with a sad whine.

"I miss her too, but she's gone," I said, turning back to commentary on the upcoming New Year's Day college football games.

Ruffles ran back and forth in front of the large living room window, disturbing the curtains. "If you fuck up Ember's decorating, she will kill us both."

He didn't heed my warning and instead stuck his nose against the glass, trailing doggy snot across it. His tail wrapped up in the long drapes as he pulled the fabric around with his movements.

"Seriously, dude. Not cool." I shooed him away from my spot on the couch, but he ignored me.

The dogs were monsters, completely fluffy adorable sweet annoyances. My apartment complex didn't allow dogs, but once I settled into a more permanent home, I planned to grow the family. Until then, I had to be happy being a doggy uncle.

Lil' Miss scratched at the door, her nails raking against the wood.

"Ugh."

Those dogs were crazy, but even they didn't need to go out that often. It'd been a little over thirty minutes since I forced them inside. No way they wanted to run out in the snow again. Lil' Miss barely had her hair dried from the snow she had caked into little balls in her fur.

They were dumb but not that dumb.

I let out a groan of annoyance and dropped the blanket beside me as I stood up and prepared to investigate. When the weather got bad, most animals hunkered down, but it wouldn't be out of the realm of possibility to have something looking for cover. Hopefully not a bear that didn't make it to hibernation. They would be dumb enough to take on a bear.

With Ruffles nudging my leg, I peeked out the front window.

Nothing.

He darted around me, ran up the flight of stairs, barked at something up there, and then flew down the stairs to dig at the door with Lil' Miss.

"I'm putting this behavior in your Uncle Hale daycare chart. Your parents will not be happy."

The threat did nothing to deter their behavior. Not in the slightest.

They scratched harder.

Fine. I'd go out in the cold and risk frostbite to find out what all the fuss was about.

I unlocked the door and opened it an inch. "Are you happy?" I asked Lil' Miss.

She wagged her tail.

I rolled my eyes.

Dogs.

The snow pummeled us with gusting winds and a near whiteout conditions. At first, I saw nothing. Just a white abyss beyond the door.

Right as I almost headed inside to call the dogs crazy for the five hundredth time, movement in the driveway caught my eye.

“Adele?”

A person with the same body shape, height, and coat color as Adele Flowers shimmied her body against the snowy driveway. Her arms flailed above her head and she let out a yip before her legs went out from underneath her and she landed on her ass. Hard.

I slipped on a pair of house Crocs and raced off the porch to help her without a coat or mittens.

She'd worked herself back to standing by the time I made it.

“Hale, your driveway is an ice rink,” she said, pushing back strands of her hair that had come undone from her braid.

I put my arm around her and helped her walk toward the bed-and-breakfast. “Where is your truck?”

She hesitated on one of the porch steps and leaned on me as we walked up them. “In a ditch about half a mile up the road. A deer ran out in front of me.”

“Are you okay?” I asked, giving her a quick glance to make sure she wasn't bleeding. Her face looked okay, and I didn't see any blood.

Adele nodded. “Yeah, I missed him, but skidded out and I couldn’t get the truck up the embankment.”

She shivered as I rushed ahead to open the door. Light poured out from inside, and I got the first look of her red cheeks and snow-coated hair. “You should have called me.”

We had a slew of machines that could have made the drive to her.

Adele tipped her head at me and stared from the corner of her eyes. I definitely got the “no shit, Sherlock” vibe from her expression.

“I don’t have your number and didn’t want to bother Holston on his vacation. The walk didn’t seem too long until I was already in it.”

We made it over the threshold, and even the dogs seemed to realize Adele needed her space. They backed up, pawing at the ground and sniffing her shoes. She pounded her feet on the mat as I helped her take off her coat.

“Come over here. There’s a heater.” I pointed to the large floor vent in the living room and then went to turn up the heat at the thermostat. We couldn’t have the county inspector losing a toe or dying from the elements.

Adele hovered over the vent, and when the heat turned on, her features slackened. “That’s nice.”

“Do you want me to build a fire? We always keep logs inside for one.”

Holston loved to light a fire for bed-and-breakfast guests. The city folks considered it part of the Northern charm.

She shook her head. “No, it’s fine. This is helping. It’s not so much the temperature but the wind. It’s crazy out there.”

“The drifts created by this wind will shut down the whole county by morning.” Snow fell outside the window in sheets, and the flakes lit up by the porch light as the sun began setting.

And we didn't even consider this a storm of the century. Just our first big snowstorm.

Times like this, most Mainers new to buckle down and stay home. Which was exactly what we'd have been doing if Adele hadn't shown up for her inspection.

I left her by the vent and went to the kitchen for more supplies. “You want a hot chocolate?”

Mumbles came from the living room, which I took as a yes. I filled a mug with water and stuck it in the microwave, hoping to cut down on the prep time. Ember kept a bucket of homemade hot chocolate in the cupboard, and I rooted around until I found it and a spoon by the time the microwave dinged.

Adele met me at the dining room table as I stirred in the chocolate mixture. She took a seat at the table and slipped her coat over the back of the chair.

“Thanks,” she said and wrapped both hands around the mug after I passed it to her.

We stood on either side of the table, staring at one another. I searched for something to say while she blew on her hot chocolate and returned to the right temperature.

Fucking A. She was beautiful. Even with her blonde hair a mess, a good quarter of it no longer contained in her braid, her cheeks red and raw from the wind, and her teeth lightly chattering, she looked like she'd get back out there and kick ass if I asked her to.

She had heart.

She reminded me of a Halliday.

The silence stretched on, and one of us needed to fill it before my staring took me from concerned status to creeper.

“Sounds like this weather snowed us in.” I tapped the table twice.

She nodded and took her first sip of hot chocolate, leaving her tongue out at the heat. “Yeah. It’s not safe out there right now.”

If we were stuck together here, which didn’t sound like the worst thing to happen, we might as well get comfy.

“You hungry? It’s almost dinner.” Early for a regular dinner, but when the sun set before six, food needed to come earlier, too.

Adele sipped her hot chocolate and waved a hand in front of her mug. “Oh, no. I can’t impose.”

Woman gets her truck stuck in the ditch and is stranded at my place but doesn’t want to impose. I almost rolled my eyes at her.

“I think you starving might be a bigger imposition.”

Adele laughed and finished the hot chocolate.

I left her at the table while I searched the kitchen for something edible enough to call dinner. Since I was the only Halliday home for the week, I’d planned to eat microwavable meals every night. I stacked the freezer full of delicious Salisbury steak and potato options. They reminded me of sick days staying home from school as a kid.

Microwaving a plastic container of questionable meat didn’t seem like a great way to show Adele how I had my life together.

The cabinets banged, drawing unwanted attention as I quickly searched through them, looking for anything I might throw in a pot and call food. They had three boxes of macaroni and cheese, but that would not win me any points.

Dang it.

The condiments in the fridge rattled as I let the door close with too much force behind my push.

“You okay in there?” Adele asked as she peeked into the kitchen and then took a cautious step over the threshold.

I leaned up against the fridge, presenting calm and totally under control vibes. “Absolutely.”

Please let her buy my lie.

If we were at my place, I’d be able to at least throw something together. I wasn’t a complete food failure. I kept the essentials. But we were at the bed-and-breakfast. They didn’t keep food in the kitchen now that no one lived there full time.

I opened the cabinet next to the fridge, looking busy. Inside they had a bottle of Mrs. Dash and a container of sugar.

From her one eyebrow raised expression, Adele did not buy the lie. “You sure?”

“Oh yeah. I’ve got it.” I could bake the sugar into... sugar.

Shit, Hale.

Rather than leave me to my misery like I’d have appreciated, Adele took up a place, leaning against the kitchen wall. She watched me without saying a word.

Now the heat was on to figure out something. I closed the cabinet, giving up on the sugar idea, and opened a cabinet I’d already searched. Those plain noodles didn’t look so

unappealing after seeing what the rest of the place considered ingredients.

I found a box of egg noodles, the mac & cheese boxes, and a loaf of bread. They piled up nicely on the counter.

Now what to do with them?

“Mac and cheese sandwiches?” she asked, leaning over my shoulder.

I jumped, my back hitting her chest. “Shit, you scared me.”

She snuck up on me like a ninja. A food critic ninja. “Sorry.”

“No, it’s fine.” I shook my head, getting back into the game. Her lavender scent was still noticeable, even with the day’s activity and the walk through the snowstorm. “And um, no. No mac and cheese sandwiches. I’m just considering our options.”

We had none.

I stepped in front of my lackluster pile, hoping she’d forget they were there. If I got the dogs to keep Adele entertained, I could heat the two Hungry Man meals in the freezer and put them on bed-and-breakfast plates, pretending I made them.

It was the best plan I had.

“Any pasta sauce in the cupboards?” she asked.

I slipped past her and opened the cupboard by the sink. Holston had no freaking system for food organization when he lived here. “Yeah, a meat sauce. Is that okay?”

“Perfect.” She smiled, and with it, her entire face lit up. “What about cheese? Every meal needs cheese.”

It’s like she fell from heaven.

“Agreed,” I said, and moved to the fridge. I bought two bags of it to sprinkle over my microwave dinners. They never had enough cheese in those things. Sometimes none.

Adele gathered up all the ingredients and moved them to the stove. “Okay, I need a pot.”

I hurried to find her one from the cabinet. “I can cook this. You should rest and warm up.”

“Standing by the stove will do that job.”

She had a point, but I still wanted to cook for her. Call it my manly desire to provide or some shit, but I wanted to stir the noodles.

The lights flickered, the bulb hummed as the light in the room dimmed and then returned to full power.

“Shit. We better hurry,” I said, filling the pot halfway with water.

Cooking in the dark would make everything harder. If the power went out, we’d be in trouble.

Adele turned on a burner, the flame sparking to life on the gas stove.

Lil’ Miss barked once, and the power surged, giving off a loud zap before darkness settled on everything in the kitchen.

Crap. There went the power.

“**A**t least the stove still works since it’s gas,” I said, placing the pan of water on the lit burner. It would keep the kitchen warm too, in case the power stayed out too long.

Hale stood beside me, watching me work, and kept a wary eye on the kitchen window, glancing outside at the falling snow. The power didn’t so much as flicker again. It was definitely staying off.

“Probably ice on the lines or the wind took down a pole,” he said.

That was usually the culprit in situations like this. That or something worse—a car took out the power from an accident. I’d hope for something that didn’t involve injuries.

The noodles cooked quickly, and Hale drained the pot for me. I dumped in the can of sauce and topped it all with cheese, giving it a good mix and letting everything heat for a few minutes over the flame.

When I finished, Hale scooped my newly invented pasta dish into bowls and we ate at the dining room table, where he set a lantern between us as the sun started its final descent across the horizon.

“The worst part about losing power in the winter is how quickly the sun sets every day.”

He nodded. “That and the cold.”

I stabbed a few noodles and shoved them in my mouth. “Yeah, that too.”

“This is amazing for what you had to work with,” he said after a few more bites. The dish was pretty simple, but I appreciated his compliment.

“What were you planning to eat?” I asked jokingly.

We’d held a steady conversation while I cooked, and the longer we talked, the more I felt like I’d known Hale my entire life. He had a certain ease about him. Now that the farm completed their inspection, it no longer seemed like we had this extra task hanging over our heads. Things weren’t so businesslike as they’d been earlier.

Hale glanced away, but I didn’t miss the slight tip of his lips. “I brought over a few freezer meals to sustain me.”

“This is definitely better than whatever those are.”

Poor guy was probably planning to eat a Salisbury steak micro-meal all week. Maybe after the storm cleared, I’d bring him a casserole or something.

We ate in silence for a minute, and a question plagued me. I’d heard the gossip in town but wasn’t close enough with any of the Hallidays or their friends to get confirmation.

I stabbed my last few pieces of noodles and chewed slowly, staring at Hale to judge how he’d respond. He wouldn’t throw me out into the storm.

Probably.

“What?” he asked, obviously catching on to my stares.

I bit my lips. “Nothing. It’s fine.”

I shouldn’t pry into family business. No one wanted to hear they were the talk of town gossip. Even if everyone gossiped about everyone else in Pelican Bay.

He tipped his head to the side and scraped out the last of his meat sauce. “It’s going to be a long night. You should just ask or say it.”

“Okay, fine. If you’re going to force it out of me.”

Hale chuckled. “Yeah, it seems forced.”

I waved my fork at him. “What’s up with your sister dating William Causebay’s son?”

They were supposed to be mortal enemies.

Hale groaned. “Ugh, do you know his name is actually William, too? My father tried to call him by his middle name for the last six months, but my mother finally told him he had to get over it. I side with Dad.”

“So it’s true?” I had to process the first part.

He nodded. “Yup, he eats dinners here and everything.”

“Is he an asshole like his dad?” The Causebay farm was not in my jurisdiction, but I’d heard horror stories from other inspectors. Every year someone cried. Even the men.

Hale paused and let out a deep sigh. “Sadly, no. It’d be easier to hate him if he was, but in reality, he’s not a horrible dude. Don’t tell my twin I said that, or I’ll deny it to my dying day.”

I laughed. Poor William. I wondered how his family felt about the relationship.

“There’s always drama at the orchard.” I grabbed his empty bowl from across the table and stood.

Hale laughed and met me at the dishwasher. He didn’t prerinse the bowls before tossing them in. “That’s Pelican Bay for you.”

We hesitated in the kitchen, unsure of what to do next.

“With no power, there go my plans to make you watch a marathon of Mom’s home videos,” Hale said with a laugh, but I wasn’t sure it was actually a joke.

He left the kitchen, and I followed him out. “What? Did she make all five of you participate in dance recitals or something? Any Hale Halliday in a tutu videos?” I’d definitely watch those.

Hale glanced back at me with a devilish expression. “Who have you been talking to?”

My eyes widened. There were!

No.

He had to be joking.

Right?

I never really knew when he was serious or not.

He laughed and so I laughed with him, but mine sounded suspicious. Because it was.

If there were photos of Hale in a tutu, I needed to see them. Asap. I’d have to ask his twin. She’d know.

Ruffles, the Golden Retriever, ran in front of us, bringing with him a gust of cinnamon coated air from the living room. He and Lil’ Miss darted to the front door and barked, scratching at the bottom with their thick claws.

Hale paused beside it and shook his head in dismay. “Really, guys?”

“They obviously don’t hate the snow.” It had to be cold on their little paws.

Hale reached for his Carhartt coat by the door. “If Lil’ Miss doesn’t get her nightly walk, she turns into a gremlin. I’ll let them run a few trails, but you should stay inside and keep warm.”

His idea sounded like a good one. I considered it for about a second. I’d already been in the cold enough for one day, but winter didn’t bother me that much, and I hated to miss out on time with Hale.

The thought stopped me in my tracks.

No, Adele. Definitely not falling for the Halliday. I should stay inside like he said.

“I’ll go,” I said instead.

Hale handed me my coat from beside his and then held the door open. Both dogs rushed outside and headed for the wooded section of land to the right of the bed-and-breakfast.

“I am not chasing after them,” Hale said as he watched their two forms get lost among the trees. “They’ll come back once they’ve had their fun.”

We stood side by side on the covered porch. He might have been okay standing around, but I wanted to see how much snow we’d gotten since I’d left my truck in the ditch. I’d be able to tell by how much of my truck tracks had been filled in by fresh flakes.

I made it down two of the porch steps before my foot slipped out from under me and I lurched backward. My life

flashed before my eyes as my head went back and the only thing I saw was the porch ceiling.

I landed with a heavy thud in Hale's waiting arms. "I got you."

"Damn, those stairs are out to kill me," I said as he helped get me standing and we stared at one another.

His eyes glistened in the evening air. They had a sparkle in them that made even the most embarrassing situation okay. His lips tipped up into a slight smile, and he nodded at me once when I didn't make a move to leave his embrace.

Right then.

He helped me regain my balance and then held on to my shoulder until I made it to the bottom of the steps. "They really are. I don't even see any ice on them."

I took a few steps away from him, not only to get a better view of my footprints, but to give me space from Hale. Did he really just save me from a head injury by catching me mid-fall?

"It looks like the snow is slowing," I said, staring down at my shoeprint with only a light dusting covering it.

Hale tilted his head back and stared at the darkening sky. "Maybe they'll get the plows out soon."

Bright yellows and reds streaked against the sky as the sun lowered in the distance. It lit up the surrounding areas and brightened Hale's face. Sunbeams hit the trees, casting the woods into the last remnants of the day's glow.

"It is gorgeous out here," I said to Hale as he watched the area for the return of the dogs.

“Yeah, I’m glad Holston kept the place going and made it big enough to support all of us having jobs on the farm.”

I spun in a circle, my boots crunching snow in my wake. Being at Oceanview Orchards brought back memories of my old childhood. We didn’t have an apple orchard, but farm life was farm life no matter where you were or what you raised.

Peace. Family. Simple.

They were common themes with farm life. Neither my brother nor I wanted to be corn farmers, but that didn’t mean I lost appreciation for the things I’d had as an adolescent.

“I’m worried I’m going to have to go after those dogs,” Hale said, still staring at the woods with his hands in his pockets.

A lone bark sounded from far away. “They’re using the last of their energy up for the night. Would it help take your mind off things if I hit you with another snowball?”

I laughed, but he turned with one eyebrow raised in suspicion. “Who won that fight, eventually?”

“Yeah, eventually.” I leaned over to pack some snow into a ball.

“I’ve got a better idea,” Hale said, pulling gloves from his pocket. “We should build a snowman.”

“Yeah?” A snowman? I couldn’t remember the last time I’d made one of those.

With one eye searching for return fire, I finished packing my snowball, but rather than toss it at Hale, I put it back on the ground and rolled it around in the loose snow, collecting more with each pass.

“I bet I get the biggest ball first,” Hale said as he raced across the side section of the house to reach a large open patch of snow.

I pushed my ever-growing ball toward him. No way would I let him win. “I bet you can’t.”

I wasn’t losing to Hale Halliday. I pushed the ball faster, doing my best to roll in a straight line so I didn’t miss any snow. The ball grew large as the fingers inside my gloves cooled. The wind had died down, but snow still hit me in the face as I hurried to make the bottom part of the snowman.

“Thirty seconds left!” Hale yelled out a deadline I didn’t know existed.

I pushed harder, my feet kicking out faster to help me gain the last bits of snow into my ball. Hale brought his closer, heading in my direction as he counted down the clock out loud.

“Two, One, time!” he yelled in the now dark sky.

I panted in exhaustion and stopped my ball next to his. “Yes!”

He frowned at the fist bump I gave the sky to celebrate my win.

“They’re close,” he said, eyeing his ball.

“Close only counts in horseshoes and hand grenades.”

Hale laughed. “Yeah, yeah, okay. You win. Now the winner has to help me get the middle one on top of the bottom.”

I met him at the other side of his ball, and on three, we lifted it into place.

“Since you’re so good at it, you can make the head, and I’ll pack snow around these two to keep them in place,” he said.

I set off to find more snow on Hale’s truck, and the dogs barked somewhere in the woods. They sounded closer than they had earlier. They must have almost finished their run.

My nose froze as I carried my smaller head over to the snowman—we definitely had a fat guy with a little head thing going on since the two bottom pieces were so large—and steadied it on top of the snowman. Hale waited until I had it in place and then packed more snow around the bottom to secure it.

We stopped with each of us on one side of the snowman’s head and met each other’s gaze. Neither of us exchanged any jokes, and I drew in a breath when Hale opened his mouth like he wanted to say something.

A dog barked.

His lips moved, and then he tumbled to the side like someone jerked his feet out from under him.

“Hale!” I yelled.

Adele scrambled as Lil' Miss jumped on my back, driving me into the snow harder.

I pushed her off and stood, shaking snow from the front of my jeans. Damn, it was cold. "Monsters."

Ruffles jumped on Adele, leaving wet footprints on her leg. "I guess they're ready to go inside."

If Lil' Miss and Ruffles hadn't broken up the party, there's a considerable chance Adele and I might have shared a kiss beside that snowman. I'd never forgive them.

We left the snowman unfaced, and I walked behind Adele up the porch steps in case she almost fell again. This time, she made it up safely and stomped her boots at the door before going inside.

I slipped out of my coat and hung it beside hers on the front entrance hooks. We weren't hit with a blast of warm air once we were inside the house. "Crap. It feels like the temperature dropped in here while we were outside."

Adele grabbed her arms and hugged herself to warm up. "Yeah, that was fast."

"Old house, and we haven't fixed the insulation yet." The bed-and-breakfast had most of the cosmetic changes finished,

but we still had a few behind-the-scenes things like insulation, sliding, and window seals.

“Let me grab the lantern from the table,” Adele said, and felt her way in that direction.

We needed to fix the heat problem and fast before the place turned frigid. We didn’t want any pipes to freeze. “I’ll start a fire.”

Thankfully, we kept firewood beside the fireplace to satisfy my brother’s weird need to light a fire for guests every time the temperatures fell below forty degrees. Someone stacked a small pile of wood on the fireplace hearth, but if the power stayed out too long, I’d have to go outside and gather more from our supply.

I tossed a few pieces into the fireplace and used a page from the local newspaper to light the fire. Pierce Kensington’s smiling face went up in flames and caught the wood into a nice burn.

Adele sat on the couch, watching me. “Impressive. I normally have to get out the lighter fluid.”

“We don’t want to risk it inside if we can help it. Hopefully, it will keep burning.” I handed her a blanket from the stack beside the couch and grabbed one for myself—an old farm house staple.

Now that we had the fire going and there wasn’t any way to watch television, what were we supposed to do? I’d normally play a game on my phone, but I didn’t want to waste the charge.

And seven was too early in the evening to go to bed. I twiddled my thumbs on the couch next to Adele as the fire grew and slowly warmed the room.

None of those issues were the real problem. The actual issue was much worse. I had a desirable woman in the house and no way to occupy her. She required more than a stupid football game or talk about the weather. I suddenly felt like the dumbest person in Maine.

I mean, there were other ways to keep her entertained, but they were highly inappropriate ways.

Damn it, Hale. I had to get my thoughts under control and figure out something to do with her.

“This fire will heat the entire house, but we might need to stay here to notice. Otherwise, I’d put you in a room.” There, that sounded nice and formal. Friendly even, but without crossing a line.

It wasn’t a huge bed-and-breakfast but big enough I’d give her a room way down the hall from me. Far enough away to be appropriate. A few closed doors between us would help my lingering thoughts. The dogs paced in front of the fireplace, walking in circles, following one another, and then settled down on top of the big fluffy beds at the base.

Ruffles let out a sigh, letting us know he was down for the evening. That outside play time always did the trick.

“I agree. I’d prefer to stay close to the fire, but should we grab extra blankets? Maybe a pillow?” Adele asked, not looking at me, but rather keeping her gaze on the fire.

I pushed back the blanket and stood. “Good idea. I’ll run upstairs and raid the closet.”

My steps quickly took me away from the living room, leaving Adele on the couch. I needed to get away from her for a minute to clear my head.

“Wait!” she shouted and then almost ran into me at the base of the stairs. “You can’t leave me down here alone. What if the place is haunted?”

She glanced back at the fire and both dogs resting on their beds. They hadn’t even lifted a head when we left. Horrible guard dogs.

“The only ghost who would even want to haunt this place was my grandma, and no one has seen her.”

Adele grabbed on to the back of my shirt as I took the first step. “Let’s not risk it, then. Wouldn’t want this place to get a bad rap.”

I climbed the stairs with her right behind me, twisting her fingers in my shirt. “Actually, we should start a ghost story rumor. We could charge more to stay here around Halloween.”

Holston would love that kind of idea, but it might take too much away from the whole “old-world” vibe he tried to present with the place. It wasn’t my worst idea, though. Maybe just a local rumor we could pass around at the bakery rather than making it a big thing.

I had to write it down and talk with Holston when he and Ember returned. Maybe a haunted bed-and-breakfast would get us a spot on a Travel Channel show.

Adele followed me upstairs in the dark, never once letting go of my shirt. “How do you know where you’re going?” she asked as we reached the top of the steps.

“It’s down the hall. There’s nowhere else to go.” If I’d known she planned to come along, I would have grabbed the lantern, but I could walk the halls of this old house with my eyes closed.

Ember kept the linens in the closet at the end of the hall and you couldn't miss them as long as you walked straight. Adele kept pace as she crouched behind me, and I did my best not to laugh at her behavior. If we saw a ghost, I'd keep her safe.

"I promise it's not haunted," I said when I opened the closet and grabbed a stack of white sheets and two pillows.

I tried to pass them back to her, but she refused to let go of my shirt. As I turned, she grabbed on harder and moved her body with mine. "No hands."

A slight laugh slipped from my lips. "Okay. I've got us."

I made our way back down the hallway and to the top of the stairs, balancing all the linens and walking slowly so Adele didn't fall down the steps. It wasn't all altruistic. If she went down, she'd probably take me with her.

Ruffles let out a large snore as I dropped the pile on the couch. I shook my head at him. They were like toddlers.

"I'll make up the couch for you and I can take the floor," I said, grabbing a sheet from the pile.

Adele had let go but stood on the other side of the couch, facing me as I fluffed out the sheet. She glanced at the large space in the living room. "You know what we need?"

A working furnace.

Power.

A dog sitter.

Four chocolate chip cookies from the bakery.

More pie.

“No,” I answered, sure she didn’t mean any of the things I came up with in my head.

“A blanket fort.” She clapped twice.

“Here?” We didn’t have many places to hang things.

Adele’s eyes widened, making her eyes glow with the fire’s light. “Yeah. It’s perfect. We can use the banister for one end and some chairs from the dining room.”

“Okay, but we can’t get too close to the fire.” I didn’t want us to burn to death, but hell, if she wanted to stack some blankets up to avoid ghosts, I’d play along.

Adele rolled her eyes. “Obviously, we’ll keep it away from the fire and the dogs. I’ve seen what they do to pretty things.”

I laughed. “They’d definitely start a fire.”

She walked around the couch, surveying the area. “Having the sheets will help trap the heat in, too. Oh.” She clapped again and grabbed a sheet from the pile. “Do you have any of those pant hangers with the clips?”

I bit my lips as she made little crab pinching movements with her fingers. “No. I don’t think so.”

Adele’s expression fell. “Hmm. How are we going to attach the sheets to the chairs?”

My siblings and I never lived in this farmhouse, but we made tons of forts at my parents’ house using their chairs. “We have enough sheets. We can just tie them off.”

“Your brother won’t care?” she asked, but she was already on her way to the dining room for a chair.

I didn’t plan to let any Hallidays learn about this fort thing. I had a reputation to keep. This would totally blow my tough

brother persona out the window.

Adele dragged a chair from the dining room and placed it halfway between the couch and fireplace. “This is probably as close as we should get.”

Ruffles raised his head and sniffed the chair before tucking it under his paw and going back to sleep. I grabbed two more chairs from around the table and placed them in the room where Adele directed. Together we tied off the sheets and created an air igloo by wrapping sheets around the middle to keep the warm air inside our little space.

Fifteen minutes later, I stood outside the fort, eyeing it for structural weaknesses. “We do good work together.”

Adele scooted over when I joined her inside our creation. “Told you it would be exceptional, and I swear it’s already warmer under here.”

“I will never doubt you again,” I said with a laugh.

We settled with our backs against the bottom of the couch on our large makeshift floor bed, and I sighed. Now we were right back to where we were earlier. Together, alone, with nothing to keep my thoughts at bay.

“Did you do this a lot as a kid?” Adele asked.

I laughed. “Yeah, one of my sisters were always asking us to make them, and as the youngest boy, it normally fell on my shoulders because my brothers were too old to bother.”

She bumped her arm against mine, her hair cascading around her head. “Yet you let me figure out the malfunction on the east side. Here, you probably knew exactly how to fix it.”

I shrugged. “You were doing such a good job. It was a nontraditional fix, but it got the job done.”

“I didn’t have the practice. It was only my brother and me in Vermont, and we didn’t have time for cool stuff like blanket forts.”

The light from the fire cast a glow around our man-made tent and lit up Adele’s face. The room smelled like burning pine and two dogs snored in its warmth. If this wasn’t the picture of perfection, I didn’t know what counted.

“Growing up, the farm here wasn’t as active. We had a lot of time way out here in the country. Hope still has a scar from a family game of Uno. Our mom almost banned it after that.”

Adele laughed. “Even I know there’s no family in Uno.”

“See!” I said loudly, disturbing one of the dogs. “Our mom did not get it. She hid the cards for a full month until we could prove ourselves.”

“What made her give them back?” Adele asked, smiling at the tale.

“It was a rainy spring, and when it got too wet to kick us outside to play, she had to give in and let us entertain ourselves, even with the threat of death.”

“I think I’d like your mom.”

I nodded. She’d like Adele too. Mom put up with Holly dating William Causebay, so she fell in love with anyone as long as her kids liked them. Not that I’d be dating Adele.

We grew silent again, our shoulders leaning against one another, each lost in different thoughts.

“Hale,” Adele said.

“Yeah?” I turned my head, and she was right there. Our noses almost touched. Rather than push away, I held my ground, waiting for what she had to say.

Our gazes met, and she held mine. Adele leaned forward a fraction of an inch, and her lips hit mine. They lingered there until I pushed forward and finished the kiss. Her hair tickled the side of my face, and I ran my fingers through the first few strands before she pulled back, gasping in a breath.

“I’m so sorry. That was totally inappropriate.” She hung her head and tried to move away. “Oh, my word. What was I thinking? Please don’t tell my boss.”

“Adele,” I said, holding on to her shoulder, but she didn’t raise her head. “I’ve thought you were gorgeous since you walked on this farm two years ago.”

“You did?” she asked, slowly raising her gaze to meet mine again.

I nodded. “If we’d met in a bar rather than this farm, I would have totally put the moves on you.”

Me, the orchard owner, and her the county inspector.

Adele’s lips tipped into a sad smile. “But we are who we are. There are rules.”

“Yeah, but I’ve decided I don’t care anymore. Screw the rules.” One of us had to take the plunge.

I’d handle the family and the county.

When she didn’t move, I did it for her. My palm cradled her chin, and I brought her head closer. Adele came willingly. My lips found hers, and the fire sparked as we connected. She drew in a breath, and I used it as an opening to let my tongue tangle with hers.

Our kisses increased, and I held on to her hips, getting ready to slide her across my lap, when a tangle of blankets

dropped on us from above. The east side of the fort gave way, and the blankets slowly pulled across the living room.

Adele pulled back with shock written on her features. “Quick! We have to rebuild!”

“I thought you couldn’t cook,” I said, more an allegation than anything. While I waited for an answer, I shoved another huge bite of eggs into my mouth and chewed, letting the flavor spread over my tongue.

They had to be the best sunny side up eggs I’d ever eaten. Better than anything I made.

Hale shrugged and dipped his toast in his egg. “I can’t cook anything that’s served past noon.”

I laughed. “My favorite dinner as a kid was breakfast. And it was one of the few things my mom let me cook.”

Both my brother and I used to beg my mother to serve breakfast foods for dinner. Her French toast sticks were her best.

“If the whole accountant thing doesn’t work out for you, you have chef possibilities in your future.”

Hale’s eyes widened. “Don’t say that too loud. Holston will put me in charge of cooking for the bed-and-breakfast guests. I much prefer numbers.”

“Did you always want to be an accountant?” For as much as Hale and I had talked the last few days, we hadn’t discussed our jobs. Both of us flitted about the fact he was part owner of

Oceanview Orchards and I was here to inspect them, but that's as far as it went. Two people who were not meant to be friends, especially with our history.

Hale thought about my question as he chewed. "Not necessarily. I was in school for business but hadn't picked a concentration yet. When Holston started talking about improving the farm, he mentioned how having someone on the books would be helpful. I made accounting my concentration, and the rest is history."

"If you like accounting, it all worked out in the end." I finished up my last egg, sad to not have any left.

"It did. I enjoy accounting. Everything lines up the way it should. Once we have a better routine on the farm, I'm thinking of taking on a few local tax and business clients after I finish the testing for my CPA."

Ruffles' tail hit my knee, and I glanced under the table to see him standing in front of Hale, wiggling his entire body. Hale gave him a pet on the head and then casually slipped him a piece of sausage.

I jerked my head up to meet his gaze. "Have you been feeding the dogs this whole time?" No wonder they were behaving so well.

Hale laughed. "Someone has to be the favorite uncle."

"Weren't there three dogs here?" I swear they had more the last time I'd been called out for the county.

Hale made Lil' Miss sit and give him a handshake before he chopped off the end of his sausage and fed it to her. "Yeah, Bacon is with my sister Holly and William." He said William's name with exaggeration and rolled his eyes.

I laughed. He might complain, but from the way the two acted, Holly and William were the real deal.

Hale separated his sausage piece into two equal bites and fed one to each dog. He held his hands up, signaling he had none left, and laughed as they left him now that he'd run out of things to offer them.

“Wow, that was cold,” I said and stood with my plate.

Hale took it from me and walked to the kitchen. “That’s family for you.”

“Steal your food. Marry the enemy.” I stopped in the doorway and watched him drop the plates in the dishwasher crooked.

He twirled around. “The worst.”

I laughed. That was the thing about Hale... he made me laugh. Smile. Not worry about the problems in the world. He had this weird juxtaposition about him. Half rule follower who didn't bend but still the guy who fed the dogs from the table and told a good joke.

Against all my efforts, I really liked him.

Plus, he kissed well, too.

Not that we could let that happen again.

I stared out at the snow-covered yard past the kitchen window. At some point last night, the snow stopped, and now the sun was even attempting to poke through the clouds, but the power hadn't turned back on.

Hale glanced at what held my attention. “The roads should be clear enough by now. We can get you to your house and figure out how to get the truck from the ditch.”

I stepped back, needing the space between us. “I called my boss this morning. He said they’d get a tow truck out here this afternoon so I can just head home.”

I left out certain parts of my story. Like kissing Hale in our blanket fort and sleeping next to him on the couch all night. At least my boss promised me I wouldn’t receive a write-up for putting the county truck in the ditch. Everything seemed okay.

As long as Hale didn’t report me for kissing him, I might get through this entire experience unscathed. Mostly.

“You don’t mind giving me a ride into town?” I asked.

“Nope, but I probably need to take the dogs. Is that okay?”

I patted Ruffle on the head. “Sure. Milkshake will love a visitor.”

She’d probably claw my eyes out the next time I fell asleep. Her cat life was calm while Ruffles and Lil’ Miss were not.

The three of us—me, Ruffles, and Lil’ Miss—followed Hale to the front door. He handed me my coat and helped me put it on. My heart did a stupid little beating thing at the gentleman behavior.

“Since I have to bring the dogs, we’ll take my truck. They can sit in the back seat,” he said.

Our boots crunched on the snow as we walked across the small makeshift parking lot in front of the bed-and-breakfast.

Hale held the door open for both dogs, who jumped in the backseat and promptly got snow all over his vehicle. He shook his head as he closed the door on them and opened the driver’s side. “This is why we can’t have nice things around here.”

I laughed. “My brother says the same thing about my nephew.”

I figured they were both worth it—the cute nephew and the adorable dogs.

Hale started the truck and backed us up before turning onto his long drive. Ice covered certain areas, and he drove slowly, taking his time. “I’ll have to plow when I get home.”

“It looks like they’ve done the back roads.” I pointed out the obvious when we hit the end of his driveway and spots of the dirt road were uncovered, leaving only sweeping blade marks.

Ruffles kept his nose plastered to the window. His snout created a figure eight as he moved. While he drove, I watched the world go by out my side window, wearing a slight smile for no reason. Just being in the truck with Hale made me feel safe. Happy. It was weird.

I’d gotten by on my own for years. After college, when I took the job at the county and moved to Maine, I wasn’t sure how I’d get by being so far from everyone, but I made friends and now considered Maine my home. I belonged here.

I didn’t need anyone else. Milkshake and I were happy, never wanted for more, but sitting next to Hale made me wonder what more might be like. Things were solid in my job. Maybe it was time for me to get out and date. Have more fun in life.

Hale picked up speed and, and almost immediately his back tires spun. Ruffles barked at him from his seat behind him.

“Nope, not going to try that,” Hale said as he let off the gas.

They may have plowed the roads, but they were still crappy. It would take the sun coming out to melt off the remaining layer of snow before we saw real improvement. “Hopefully, the city streets are better.”

“How far did you make it?” Hale asked.

I scowled at the reminder of my truck. “Not much further. Just around this corner. The deer came out of that patch of woods.”

Hale took his eyes off the road just long enough to give me a “what the hell” glance. “You walked this far.”

“Yeah, it didn’t seem so bad at the time.” I’d been training all my focus on not freezing to death.

Hale made the corner and slowed as we passed my truck. Only a few inches of snow covered the top of it, but the city plows had pushed snow against my front tires, making it even more stuck than when I left it. The tow truck would have its work cut out for it.

“Put my number on your phone for next time.”

I hoped there’d never be a next time, but I still punched in Hale’s number as he rattled it off to me.

“Got it?” he asked.

I nodded. “Yes.”

“Good, next time use it. No matter where you are.”

I rolled my eyes as I finished filling out the contact information. “I’m saving it under Bossy Halliday.”

He shook his head. “I would have gone with most handsome Halliday, but whatever works.”

The roads significantly cleared as we hit the main road into town. Hale sped up when his tires hit the well-plowed paved road. “Where do you live?”

I gave him directions to my house and watched the buildings on Main Street pass us by. The plows had kicked the snow up into the sides of the road, but since few people had been out and about yet, the entire place reminded me of a winter wonderland.

Some people questioned why anyone would vacation to this part of the world during the winter months, but not me. They came for this right here. The perfect New England holiday. Perfectly undisturbed snow covered all the business awnings. It coated the tops of light poles and even rested on the edges of the shop windows.

This was a Hallmark movie anyone could star in. You only had to walk outside and take a stroll.

The sun broke through the clouds and glistened off the snow, sending off sparkles of light in every direction. From the warmth of the truck cab, I watched it with awe. This was why I didn’t hate winter. Why I stayed in Maine and why I rented in Pelican Bay.

“Right here,” I pointed at my snow-covered driveway. I’d have to get out later with a shovel and make a path.

Hale parked on the side of my home. “Where’s your car?”

“Back at the county building. I’ll get a ride to pick it up later.” We both hesitated inside the truck.

“I can take you,” Hale said, opening his truck door.

“No, it’s fine. I’ll have a friend give me a ride.”

He rolled his eyes. “You argue as much as my twin. Let’s check on Milkshake, and then I’ll take you later today. It’s not a big deal. You have someone to plow out your drive?”

“No, I’ll just shovel it out later.” I waited as he let the dogs out of the back and they pranced around in the snow, leaving footprints in their wake and then trampling over those.

Hale let out a sigh. “The dogs and I can shovel for you.”

“Oh,” I said, my eyes widening. “Do they have opposable thumbs now?”

Hale laughed. “Smart ass.”

“At least it looks like the power didn’t go out in the city.” I unlocked my side door and let everyone inside. Milkshake ran from the back hallway into the kitchen and jumped on the counter to say hello. “Milkshake, get off the counter.”

She probably wanted to register a complaint about not getting wet food the night before. I tried to shoo her away, but she let out a pathetic meow and made no move to leave her perch. At least until both dogs came bounding into the home in front of Hale. Milkshake’s eyes widened, her back arched, all the hair on her body stood on end with her tail puffed out, and she screeched like someone had ripped out her whiskers one by one.

“Milkshake,” I said, running for her. I never expected that reaction.

Ruffles and Lil’ Miss came to a skidding stop as they hit my kitchen cabinets and I darted in front of them to rescue Milkshake.

She wasn’t having any of it and ran down the counter, climbed up the screen of the kitchen window and then launched herself to the ground and made a mad dash for the

bedroom down the hallway. Both dogs darted after her, but Hale let out a loud whistle and stopped them in their tracks.

“Is she going to be okay?” Hale asked as he stepped inside hesitantly. “I can put the dogs in the truck.”

Was she? I stared where I’d last seen Milkshake. “I had no idea she’d respond that way. She’ll probably be okay once she calms down.”

Or I bribed her with a ton of treats.

Hale stomped his feet on my rug and called the dogs toward him. They both ignored him completely to continue sniffing my furniture. At least they’d lost interest in Milkshake.

I slipped out of my coat and rubbed my hands against my arms. “Is it cold in here to you?”

After years of training by my father, I never set the heat above seventy, but it felt way colder.

Hale removed his coat and crinkled his nose. “A little.”

“Crap. It’s only fifty-six in here,” I said, reading the thermostat. Did they lose power in town? Had my furnace died now?

Hale read the device over my shoulder. “Where’s your furnace?”

“In the basement,” I said, pointing to the closed door in the kitchen.

He jerked his head in that direction. “Let me check it out.”

“I can show you,” I yelled, but he’d already made it halfway down the steps.

The basement wasn't that big. He'd find his way, and the last time I went down there to do a load of laundry, I'd seen a giant spider in the corner by the furnace. I wasn't going down there again until I had a vacuum with me.

The dogs jumped on the couch and circled around each other, hitting one another twice before they both took up spots where they could see out the large front window. "I hope your feet are dry."

We all knew they weren't.

The stairs rattled, scaring me, and I turned to watch Hale climb them.

"Looks like your pilot light is out."

Worry etched Adele's face as she met me at the top of her steps. "It's expensive. Isn't it?" she asked again when I didn't answer her originally. The fresh smell of citrus in her kitchen replaced the powerful laundry soap smell of the basement.

A dead pilot light could mean a dead furnace, but I didn't think that was the case for her home. The furnace looked newer. "No, it might have just gone out if the city lost power at all last night. Or you might just have a dirty sensor. Nothing too hard to fix."

She stepped back, her shoulders relaxing. "Okay, that's good. How do I fix it?"

I smiled, excitement growing that I'd be the one to solve her issue. Hopefully. "I turned it off to stop the gas. We'll give it about five minutes and I'll try to relight it for you. Do you have a lighter?"

Her nose instantly crinkled. "Like a cigarette lighter?"

Adele's kitchen was spotless. The only thing on the counters besides a small black microwave was a short, round, bright red candle. "Preferably something a little longer. For like candles."

I didn't want to shove my hand in her furnace and light the thing with a short lighter. I'd never heard of anyone blowing themselves up while relighting a furnace, but Adele lived in Pelican Bay. It wouldn't be the strangest thing to happen even in the last year.

Her features brightened. "Oh, yeah. I've got one of those."

I waited by the door to Adele's basement while she opened the door on a long blue cabinet underneath her living room television.

"What in the world?" I asked and tentatively took a step in her direction.

Adele turned back, looking sheepish, and continued to dig around in the cupboard. "I like candles." Her hair fell to the side of her face and uncovered her shoulder, giving me a perfect view of her smooth skin. She'd taken out her braid that morning, and her hair had waves in it.

I stopped behind her and leaned over to get a better view. "I can tell."

Candles of all different shapes, sizes, and colors filled the long cabinet. She'd stacked them on top of one another three high and the stack on the end rattled as she moved things around to find the lighter.

I wanted to reach out and touch her but wasn't sure where we were anymore. Clearly, we were no longer just inspector and one-fifth land owner. The kissing last night changed that, but what did that make us now? Did she regret what happened between us?

Adele retrieved her lighter and shut the door on the cabinet like it was her dirty secret. An array of sweet smells wafted out from the action, leaving me to hope they smelled better

when individually burned. Combined, they stank like a Yankee Candle store threw up in her living room.

“Can you light the candle on the counter before you use this to do whatever?” she asked, handing me the long-stemmed candle lighter.

I clicked it once to make sure it worked and then lit the red candle, stealing a glance at the name. Holidays at Home.

Cute. If you were into that kind of thing.

“Candles, huh?” I asked, repositioning the short, fat candle on the counter.

She shrugged with a smirk. “Hey, it could be drugs.”

“With that collection, it might be as expensive,” I said, hovering at the opening to the basement.

“Hale?” I made it halfway to the basement when Adele’s call stopped my descent.

“Yeah?” I called up and turned to see her silhouette blocking the light from the kitchen.

She hesitated for a minute, her unsure posture making her look frail rather than the fortress of strength she normally portrayed. “If you see a big, fuzzy black spider down there, can you squish it?”

I chuckled under my breath. “Sure thing.”

Holly hated spiders, too. I’d been killing them in the farmhouse for years by the time we graduated high school.

One moment later, Adele’s pilot light sparked to life, and I leaned back, thinking of ways to make it sound more complicated that it actually was so she’d see me as a hero.

The furnace kicked on and air rushed through the ducts above me.

“It worked,” Adele yelled down the basement steps. “The spider is over by the washing machine if you see it as you walk by it. No big deal, though,” she tacked on at the end.

It wasn’t the screaming dance thing my sister did when she saw a spider, but the big deal was clear in Adele’s voice. I took my time and found the spider next to the washing machine without having to look too hard. It’d made a web between the washer and dryer looking for bugs.

I swatted it to the ground and then stomped on it before it took cover and I lost my chance to be a genuine hero of the day.

With all the tasks in the basement complete, I climbed the stairs to the kitchen slowly.

Now that I’d seen Adele home safely and fixed her pilot light, I couldn’t think of a reason to prolong my visit any longer. But I desperately didn’t want to return to the empty bed-and-breakfast at the orchard. Those Hungry Man meals were no longer appealing. Not when I could eat a thrown together pasta dish across from Adele.

I wanted to make mixed pasta meals with Adele or cook her eggs three times a day just to watch her eyes light up with the first taste.

She’d perched herself against a kitchen counter when I made it upstairs and handed back the lighter.

“You should be all good to go now,” I said.

Both dogs were still lounging on her couch, keeping guard over anything happening outside the large front window.

“Thanks.” Adele flopped the lighter back and forth between her hands. “So...”

“I guess we need to go,” I said over her.

“It’s so soon,” she mumbled. “But I guess you’re right.”

Silence stretched between us for what felt like an eternity, each of us waiting for the other.

Just go, Hale. Before you make a bigger fool of yourself.

Obviously, I was feeling something for Adele that she didn’t return.

I grabbed my coat from the hook by her door and turned to call the dogs.

“Hale, wait,” Adele said. “Do you... want to get lunch?”

My phone’s clock read 10:30, and we’d just had breakfast before leaving my place.

I wasn’t opposed to lunch.

“As a thank you for everything you’ve done for me,” she continued in a rushed state.

“I’d love lunch. We could walk to the diner.” It was still hella cold outside, but the sun was peeking out from the clouds, and walking would take longer than driving. Taking longer meant more time with Adele.

“Walking would be great. I love the smell of the fresh air after a good snow,” Adele said and leaned over the counter, blowing out her candle.

Ruffles dropped his head on the couch, giving up the search for errant squirrels. “Will the dogs be okay here with Milkshake?”

Adele's lips pursed as she bit the backs of them. "I don't know if we'll ever see Milkshake again. She might never forgive me."

I helped her put on her coat with promises that I'd bring an apology gift to Milkshake—i.e., Another chance to see Adele. We had a pet store just outside of town. I'd pick up a bag of treats.

We left the dogs behind and let our boots make fresh sprints on the sidewalk in front of the homes that hadn't shoveled yet—Adele's included. I'd volunteer to do that for her when we returned from our early lunch.

Rays of sunshine poked through the clouds, and even though the air was still chilly, the wind wasn't blowing in from the ocean, and the temperatures seemed warmer. It had to be above thirty degrees for sure.

"Careful of the ice." I pointed out a clear patch of sidewalk ahead of us. Someone had shoveled, but not laid down the proper amount of salt.

It was a two-trick method in these parts.

Adele held on to my arm as we made our way over the icy sidewalk patch. The entire stretch of the house was one sheet of ice. "I wonder if Mack is out of salt at the hardware store?"

"Or these guys are just lazy." I glared at the house as we walked past.

We rounded the corner and turned onto Main Street, with the diner only a block away.

"They haven't shoveled out the parking spots in front of the diner yet. Good thing we didn't drive," Adele said, pointing at the mounds of snow.

“My truck could handle it.” I bought it for snow and farm work. Most of my family considered me the least country. It didn’t help my status that rather than manage the farm or keep the trees healthy, I’d tasked myself with the books. My truck was the most country thing about me, and I planned to keep it that way.

The diner came more into view as our steps led us closer. The lights were off, and Adele scowled as we passed the large open window in the front.

“Looks closed,” I stated the obvious.

Adele’s shoulders slumped. “That sucks. They must be waiting to open until all the streets are clear.”

Further down the street, someone hunched over inside their coat walked into the bakery on the corner.

“We can see if the bakery has anything warm to drink,” I suggested, pointing at the closing door as the mysterious person slipped into the establishment.

Adele perked up and headed that way. “They always have great cookies, too.”

The shop owner Anessa used to live above the bakery, meaning she’d be available after a snowstorm, but I’d heard my sister’s gossiping over Christmas that she’d recently moved in with her boyfriend. The bakery looked open, but there might not be fresh cookies if she had to drive in from Bennett’s home.

Adele looped her hand through my arm as we walked together. Her steps were light in excitement of our new journey. “Do you think they have any cupcakes?”

“Maybe,” I answered with a laugh. If not, I bet my mother had a box of cake mix at her house.

When we reached the bakery, I held the door open for Adele, but we both stopped one step into the bakery.

What the hell?

“Pearl?” I asked as the older woman from town turned around behind the counter with a teacup saucer in her hand.

“Well, look at you two,” Pearl said, setting the cup on the counter by the register. “Can I get you two anything?”

“Umm,” Adele tried to walk forward, but I held her back. For safety.

My eyes narrowed. “What are you doing alone in the bakery, Pearl?”

The older woman rolled her eyes and flipped her braid behind her other shoulder. “I came to help after the storm.”

“Does Anessa know?” I asked.

“The tea tastes better here. Roland can’t make a cup of tea to save his damn life. I’m not a pleasant person when I don’t have my tea, Hale Halliday.”

Obviously not.

“You two going to buy something?” she said, pouring the steaming water into her cup and dunking a tea bag in.

Anessa had not been cooking through the storm to provide the town with fresh baked goods, but she had leftovers from the day before. Pearl watched her tea steam with a terrifying smile on her face, so I released Adele’s hand and let her approach the case.

Adele checked the case, and together we picked out two chocolate cupcakes and four chocolate cookies.

“Do you think we can do two cups of hot chocolate?” I asked Pearl.

She glanced at the carafe she’d poured hers from. “There’s probably enough left. I can make more if I need it.”

I handed the crazy old woman a twenty as she passed over our warm paper cups with lids halfway attached. Pearl stared at the register with narrowed eyes. She mashed a button and when nothing happened, hit another three in quick order.

The machine beeped, but the drawer didn’t open, and nothing printed from the register. She shrugged and then crammed the bill into the empty tip jar. “Anessa appreciates your tip.”

I laughed and handed Adele her cup of hot chocolate. No one argued with Pearl.

Pearl watched us walk out as she made her way to the small round table in front of the side window, where she sat with a muffin and her tea.

I waited until the door completely closed on us before I spoke. “That was crazy.”

“Uh-huh,” Adele said, giving the bakery a backward glance as she cupped the hot chocolate with both hands, letting it warm her mittens.

I shook my head. “This whole town is crazy.”

“I love it,” she blurted with a grin.

“Of course you do.” I laughed. The women in Pelican Bay had to have a certain level of crazy in them to survive living in town. I used to think just my family had lost their minds, but the older I got, I noticed the entire town was drinking the same crazy juice.

We headed back to Adele's home, sipping hot chocolate and discussing if we'd eat cupcakes or cookies first when we made it inside.

Ruffles and Lil' Miss barked at us from her large picture window as we turned the corner on her street. "I hope they aren't tearing up your couch."

"I'm sure it's fine." She grimaced as Ruffles balanced his entire body on the back of her cushion. "I don't have videos of you in a tutu, but I do have electricity and Netflix—two things you're lacking if you go home. Do you want to stay until they turn your power back on and binge watch something?"

We hovered by the side door. My brain wouldn't let us in until he answered. Nerves raced up my spine and down my arms. I'd overstepped again. I swore he'd been flirting earlier. It looked like he didn't want to go home.

It's possible that wasn't flirting, but that Hale was just a nice guy being a nice guy.

Damn it. What if I'd read the whole situation all wrong? He probably wanted to get the hell home and away from me, and here I was asking him to stay. What a moron.

Hale's lips tipped up as he stared at me. "Sure."

I did a little mental fist bump and then panicked. Shit. Now I had to have Hale in my house. With me. And the dogs. And Milkshake somewhere.

What would we watch on Netflix?

Did we even like the same stuff? Who knew?

I guess we were about to find out.

Claws dug at the door, breaking me from my worry pattern. I slammed my key into the lock and pushed the door open. Hale cut in front of me, his arms out and low as he yelled at Lil' Miss for clawing.

“Let me just check on Milkshake really quick,” I said to give me time to have a panic attack in the bedroom. “Will you light that candle?”

“Can do,” Hale said, as I left him alone in the living room.

I shut the bedroom door behind me to keep the dogs out and have privacy for the freakout.

Get it together, Adele. It's just a guy.

A really hot and sweet guy who gave me belly tingles. But just a guy.

I worked with lots of guys. They were everywhere. Of course, those guys were total assholes, but they were there. An entire ocean of them. They were cod. I wanted the mahi-mahi in my living room.

Damn it.

“Milkshake,” I called in a calm whisper.

No response.

I dropped to my knees and crawled next to the bed. “Milkshake. Come here, baby.”

The cat in question, my adorable calico with big patches of orange and black covering her back, bared her teeth and hissed.

“Still salty, I see.” I reached a hand out for her, but she batted at it. “Come see Momma.”

Another hiss.

Okay then. Milkshake was not ready to forgive and forget. We'd work on it.

“Fine, be that way. I'll bring you treats later.” I couldn't let her starve, even with her poor attitude.

Since I didn't want to risk my life, I couldn't use Milkshake as a distraction, which meant I had to face the man in the living room.

"What do you want to watch?" I asked Hale when I found him already sitting on the couch.

The holiday candle burned brightly from the counter and both dogs were circling a spot between the couch and kitchen, looking for an area to lie down.

"Anything but a holiday romance. My family makes me watch them from October until Christmas."

I laughed. "No Hallmark then."

The couch wasn't huge. Three seats—just enough to fit two people. I sat on the opposite side of Hale and grabbed the remotes before tossing them toward him. "You're the guest, so you can pick."

He clicked on the television. "I won't make you watch any super hero movies, but what about a comedy?"

"I like super hero movies, but comedies are good too."

Hale scrolled through our options, barely pausing on each movie or television show. "Oh, this is on Netflix?"

He'd stopped at the latest horror movie. It'd come out in October but then hit streaming this week. "It's new."

I got the email alerts to new programming every Sunday.

"It's not a comedy, but I heard it's great. Can you handle scary?"

I scoffed. "I can handle scary. My brother used to force me to watch all the scary movies as a kid." I wasn't a child. Plus,

it was a little after noon. The sun wasn't shining brightly outside since the sky was still full of clouds, but I'd be fine.

I didn't admit it to Hale, but I'd been planning to watch that movie the next time I had a free afternoon. The holidays had been busy, and then I had to finish up my year-end reports. Once I finished both things, it was on the top of my list. I'd wow him with my scary movie skills.

"Let me turn out the light and grab a blanket," he said with the movie on the screen, but not yet started.

"I bet you flinch before I do," I joked as he flicked off switches at the wall, but the room barely darkened.

Hale draped the blanket over my lap and then settled under it. A cloud covered the sun, and the room fell into shadows—not dark, but definitely not as bright as I'd like it.

Hale hit start on the video, and I settled in for the show. No way would I flinch before he did.

A scream filled the air, and Hale jumped.

"Ah-ha!" I shouted and pointed a finger at him.

He laughed. "That doesn't count. The movie hasn't started yet."

"Don't be a sore loser because you lost to a girl, Halliday."

Hale chuckled harder. "Okay, best two out of three."

I met his smile with one of my own. "Fine."

He already had a flinch spot down. I could totally take him.

The movie started slowly. For the first ten minutes, neither of us moved, each sitting ramrod straight as we waited for something to jump out of the shadows.

“I expected more blood,” Hale said as the main actress, Alissa Montague, crawled through a graveyard, trying to avoid detection by the axe-wielding maniac chasing her.

Without taking my eyes off the screen, I answered, tugging the blanket toward me. “I’m glad. I like scary but not bloody.”

“You’re also a blanket hog,” Hale said, scooching closer on the couch so he didn’t lose his half of the blanket.

An axe chopped the gravestone by Alissa’s head. I screamed and jumped. “Damn it.”

“One to one,” he said with a grin.

I narrowed my eyes at him with determination not to lose. With my head turned toward Hale, I missed the action on the screen, but he jumped another inch toward me from the movement.

“I win.” My finger pointed at him as I turned back to the television, not wanting to miss what happened next.

Hale laughed, this one deep and slow. “Fine, but now you have to cuddle me so I don’t get scared again.”

“Alright, you big baby. Come over here.” I lifted the blanket higher, making it easier for him to move over.

We were thigh to thigh by the time he stopped, and then Hale wrapped his arm around my shoulders. I snuggled in next to him without taking my gaze off the movie. I didn’t want to miss how Alissa survived.

“No way the bartender did it,” Hale whispered in my ear forty minutes later. His breath slipped across my ear, and I almost shivered.

“What?” I asked without turning toward him. “It was totally him. He has beady eyes.”

“He saved her from the stalker,” he argued in a whispered tone.

I shook my head and laid it on his shoulder. “He saved her then so he could be the one to kill her later.” It was a classic killer movie.

Hale tucked his chin against me and squeezed me closer until I was almost sitting on his lap. “You’re scary.”

I shrugged. “I’ve watched a lot of horror films. That’s how they do it.”

Hale’s hand lingered on my thigh, and I wished I hadn’t worn jeans, but it was winter. You had to wear jeans if you didn’t want to lose a limb to the elements. Especially while on farms.

His hand trailed up and down my leg as we finished watching the movie. Alissa’s character ran through the dark parking lot in the rain. She reached the heavy wooden door to the bar, and I tensed in Hale’s arms.

“Don’t go in there,” I whispered. She was just making it easy for the bartender to kill her.

Alissa pounded on the door, begging someone to let her in. She’d watched four of her friends get axed, and now she was about to face off against the main bad guy. With horror, you couldn’t guarantee she’d live.

I covered my ears, but kept my eyes on the screen. It was easier if I didn’t have to see and hear it.

Hale pulled me close and kept his arm wrapped around me.

The bar door swung open, showcasing nothing but darkness. Neither of us breathed as we waited to see who would appear from the shadows. I leaned closer to the screen.

The end of a gun came through first. As the barrel poked through the mist floating out from the bar's doors, the head of the bartender slipped through the opening. He eyed Alissa and then gave her a head jerk to come inside. She stepped around him—sealing her fate—and then watched from over his shoulder.

“Told you it wasn't him,” Hale said.

“Shhh. He might have a partner.” Hadn't he watched any horror movies from the nineties? That was my favorite era.

The bartender waited until the axe guy burst through the mist. He lunged at the couple and a shot rang out. The bullet from the shotgun tore through the man's middle and he dropped to the ground. Alissa screamed, and the bartender turned toward her. He closed the bar's door and said, “Now you're safe.”

“No, now she's in for it,” I whispered.

She thanked him for saving her, and they kissed.

The credits rolled over, their two bodies locked in an embrace.

“Wait? What?” I asked no one in particular and sat up straight. “No, that's not the ending. That can't be how it ends. There has to be end credits.”

Hale laughed. “I told you it wasn't the bartender. What do I win?”

I blinked at him in shock, our faces only inches apart. “That's the worst movie ending ever. Who ends a movie that way?” It just ended. I couldn't get over the lackluster ending to process what Hale asked.

He lifted an eyebrow at me. “My prize?”

“I won the first competition.”

Hale shrugged and motioned toward the television when the credits ended and no last scene played out where the bartender killed Alissa. Pity. “You didn’t ask for one. I’m asking.”

He had a point—a weak one, but a point.

“Okay, then. A kiss,” I said, lifting an eyebrow at him. At least I hope that’s what I did. I tried, but it might have come out looking more like a seizure. Being cool was never my strong point.

I leaned forward, expecting to give him a peck on the cheek, but Hale turned his head at the last second and his lips connected with mine in a weird sideways glance. I chuckled, but the laughter cut off when he slid his fingers in my hair and tugged my head toward him.

An excited tingle washed away the nerves as Hale kissed me. Somehow, being with him seemed effortless and right. I inched closer, moving my leg around his, and Hale tilted my head, giving himself better access to my mouth. His tongue snuck in and ran along my teeth. I moaned, and my hands fisted in his T-shirt.

“Is this okay?” he asked.

I nodded and then returned to the kiss, not wanting it to finish yet. My tummy tightened and my shoulders relaxed. Time passed quickly as we kissed until Hale leaned forward, laying me down on the couch so his body hovered over mine.

“If we move too fast, tell me to stop, okay?” His kisses moved to my neck and up over my ear.

I tucked my hands under his shirt and let my nails score across the middle of his back. “I promise, but we’re good.”

Hale's hand found my left breast, and he squeezed.

I squeezed Adele's breast, and she moaned. Her butt wiggled on the couch and we repositioned ourselves. The new spot put me evenly over her, making it possible to stare into her eyes.

She leaned up and pressed her lips against mine. I squeezed harder, wanting to draw another moan from between her lips so I could taste it on mine. When she opened her mouth more, I nibbled on the bottom of her lip.

The candle on her counter filled the room with a warm mulberry scent I would forever remember as pure Adele. Holidays were special to my family, but this moment would forever color every week between Christmas to New Year's Eve for the rest of my life. The spicy, happy scent was everything I thought of when I looked at Adele.

She pulled on the hem of her shirt, trying to get it over my hands. We were moving quicker than I wanted, but the growing bulge in my pants liked her idea. I wanted to see more of Adele. To strip her bare and let my eyes work on memorizing every part of her. To guarantee this moment lived on forever.

I took over for her hands and slipped the shirt up her chest. Adele raised her arms, making my job easier. When I'd freed

the shirt from her, I tossed it on the floor, barely missed hitting Ruffles in the face.

With a white lace bra the only thing covering Adele's chest, I let my hands roam up the expanse of her skin. My fingers left goosebumps in their wake, and she watched my movements with half-lidded eyes.

When my fingers reached the bottom of her bra, I slipped them under the material and then around. She arched her back, and I unhooked the material, pulling it over her arms as well. The bra fell in the same area as the shirt, just an inch away from Ruffles. He snorted.

Adele's nipples pebbled as I ran my thumbs over their tops. She leaned her head back and closed her eyes. With one hand, I pinched her nipple softly and then covered the other with my mouth, letting my tongue run over the nub.

She moaned, and her back rose, making it easier for me when I sucked her soft skin into my mouth. Adele tasted like freshly fallen snow on a bright winter's day.

Ruffles repositioned himself, lying right over Adele's clothing I'd thrown beside him. Thankfully, she didn't turn her head to see. Lil' Miss grunted a disapproving sound and then repositioned herself with her head on top of Ruffles' back.

A snowblower kicked on outside Adele's front window, and she froze. I popped my mouth from around her breast and met her worried stare as she tried to sit up.

“Don't worry. No one can see us from here.”

She glanced to the side, still trying to see over the side of the couch. “Are you sure?”

“Positive. I wouldn't let anyone else get a glimpse of you.” Everything about her was perfect and for my eyes only.

She smiled and popped open her eyes, meeting my stare. “It’s not really fair.”

“What isn’t?” I asked, before returning my attention to her breasts. This time, focusing on the other side.

Adele pulled at my shirt. “You should be just as naked.”

I’d never argue with that request. “Done.”

She jerked at my shirt, and I steadied my knees beside her and tugged the material off. I tossed it toward all the others, and it hit Ruffles in the face before falling to the floor when he shook his head.

Adele laughed. She’d never seen where her clothes landed or how Ruffles was now using them as his personal bed.

Her hands roamed over my chest and back. I left her to play as I popped open the button of her pants. My dick throbbed, and I wiggled in my spot, trying to relieve some tension. It did no good. The only thing that might relieve my ache would be Adele’s hands on me.

She lifted her butt, and I lowered her pants just to the tops of her thighs. Any further and I’d have to move, which I wasn’t willing to do. I wanted us touching, always. Her bare skin reminded me of soft silk.

My index finger ran along the edge of her underwear and then slipped underneath. I explored by drifting my finger inward and higher, letting my fingertips run along the sensitive skin of her opening, but not entering her.

Adele moaned as my thumb grazed her clit and heat flooded me as my two fingers stopped at her opening before plunging in. She coated my fingers. Adele moaned and cast her head back on the arm of the couch. I ground my pelvis into the side of her leg, needing some kind of release. Anything.

My fingers glided in and out, her aroma an aphrodisiac that seemed to call my name. Her body writhed under me as my tempo increased and my thumb sought her clit. I ran mismatched circles with the pad of my thumb over her clit and continued on, keeping pace.

Her eyes stayed closed, and she moved her hips up and down with my fingers. “Shit, Hale. Don’t stop.”

I chuckled and let my gaze lower to watch my fingers against her body. “Wasn’t planning on it.”

I also hadn’t planned on getting her off yet, but now I wanted to watch as Adele came apart because of me. Her hips rose higher, and I pumped harder.

A slow moan escaped her lips, and then she froze. Her body clenched and latched on to my fingers. Adele grabbed on to the sides of the couch. I watched her orgasm rather than lean over and lap it up.

When she finally relaxed, her back dropped to the couch and her eyes popped open. Her cheeks were red, matching the color of her plump lips. “Wow. I did not expect that.”

“Best Christmas gift I’ve ever received.”

Adele covered her eyes with the back of her hand.

“Hey, that was perfect.” I removed my hand from her underwear and hovered over her on my knees as I moved her pants lower until she kicked them off her ankles. Her underwear came next, and I lowered them slowly, hooking two fingers over the sides and letting my tongue follow the path as I jerked them down her leg.

Adele shot upward, her hand reaching for my pants. She found the heavy bulge and ran the tips of her fingers around

my cock. I moaned as her fingers follow the outline of my pants.

Her tiny hands barely covered the swell of my cock. My gaze searched for her, only to find her staring at where she caressed between my legs. I lowered my attention and stared as she stroked me. Visions of those bright red lips wrapped around my dick clouded my senses. I thrust in her hand as she toyed with my pants' button but could not ease it open.

I moved her hand out of the way and undid my pants, lowering them before getting back into my position on the couch.

Adele cupped my dick and ran her middle finger over the tip, rubbing a bead of pre-cum around the edges. Her small hands barely fit around my girth, but she squeezed tightly and tugged toward her.

My eyes closed, and I moaned, letting her touch all she wanted. Her fingers felt like minor miracles as they grazed my skin and ran along the rim of my cock. I wanted her hands on me forever, but I also wanted to bury myself deep inside her pussy and feel her as her tight shaft quivered around me with another orgasm.

“Your hand feels so nice,” I said, barely above a whisper.

She squeezed hard, and I bit my bottom lip, doing my best not to move so she wouldn't stop, even though I wanted to pump in her hand. “You know what else would feel great?”

My eyes burst open. “What?”

“You in my mouth,” she said with a small smile.

I moaned and my eyes fluttered. More pre-cum met her finger, and she rubbed it in. If I didn't get inside her soon, I'd lose my load like a preteen.

“Next time,” I promised.

Adele pouted for a moment and then nodded her agreement.

Fuck me. It felt like every second we were together she became more perfect. I’d noticed her from afar on the farm before but didn’t realize she was more than her beautiful face and bright eyes. She matched me in personality as well.

Two winter souls found one another in a Maine snowstorm, and I never wanted to let her go. I’d promise her all the candles in the world if she stayed by my side even on the sun-filled days.

Adele held on to my upper arms as I grazed my bare cock against her pubic bone, hating to move and lose our position. I raised one finger, warning her not to worry, and then fumbled through my pants pockets for the small, sealed, square package.

She raised an eyebrow as I repositioned and held the condom between us. “Prepared, huh?” she asked with a smile.

I laughed. “Hopeful.”

I’d been thinking about getting her body beneath me every second of the day since our make-out session the previous night. I wasn’t prepared and missed out on something amazing. Since then, I’d been determined to not let it happen again.

Adele took the condom from me and ripped the corner, peeling off the top line before handing it back. My hands shook as I rolled it over my length and secured the base.

One day, eventually, soon, I’d have her with nothing between us.

I lined myself up against her opening, and Adele squeezed my arms as she watched and waited. The tip of my cock pushed through her folds, and she released a breath. After covering the head, I waited, giving her time to adjust. Adele squirmed herself lower on the couch, so she was flat.

With a deep breath, I pushed the rest of the way inside her in one smooth motion, aided by her wetness. She moaned, her fingers dug into my skin, and I stilled.

“Are you okay?” I asked, not wanting to rush this and hurt her.

She nodded and bit her bottom lip. “Definitely.”

One of her legs rose, resting on my hip. I grabbed it and the other, looping my arms over her thighs and holding them higher. The new position made it easier for me to glide in her, and I set a slow pace, wanting to remember the feel of her against my cock.

Adele moaned, and her head fell to the side. I worked myself in deeper and faster. My balls grew tight and tingles crawled up along my spine. Her insides clenched around my cock, holding on and making me push harder to get inside her.

Sweat beaded on my brow. My cock sang, wishing for relief, but I wouldn't give in yet. I wanted her shouting my name and squeezing everything from me before I released.

I leaned over, bringing our bodies together and giving her a kiss to remember as my thrusts grew shallow. When I pulled out, I leaned back up and let my fingers play with her clit.

She grunted and squeezed her eyes tightly, her hips moving in time with me. I circled my fingers over her clit in the same rhythm as my thrusts while keeping her legs tucked against me.

A quick, “Hale,” crossed her lips before she jerked, and her nails dug into my arm, creating half-moon patterns in my skin.

I pumped harder as her pussy squeezed me and her hips slammed up to meet me. Adele half moaned and half screamed her orgasm as her body clamped against me.

“Shit.” I tried to keep my consistent pace, but as she jerked beneath me and her chin jutted to the ceiling, my balls exploded and my cock filled the condom with my release. I pumped harder, giving her every drop and then lowered myself to her, our foreheads meeting as we both sucked in air.

“Wow,” she said when I moved back and her eyes opened.

I nodded. “We should definitely do that again.”

Bright sunlight filtered in through my open bedroom window. I tossed an arm over my face to shield my eyes and rolled over, trying to get back to sleep.

It didn't work.

I rolled over again and my hand snaked out across the bed. The sheets were cold, even though Hale's cologne served as a reminder that I hadn't dreamed our entire evening together.

But the bed was empty.

Hale did a pump and run.

I flopped back on the pillows and stared at my ceiling, silently berating myself for being so stupid. This was why they made the three-date rule before sleeping with someone.

Just because my night with Hale would go down as the best night of my life didn't mean he felt the same or planned to stick around. My heart ached, but I refused to admit I'd gotten so hung up over a man in only a few short days. Hours if I wanted to be technical. Which I didn't.

Determined to get on with the day, I pushed off the covers and threw my legs over the side of the bed. Beams of sunlight painted my floor in a rainbow of colors that reflected off the mounds of snow in the side yard and lit up the room. Just

because the skies were cloudy didn't mean it wasn't bright as shit out there. I wore sunglasses more in winter than in the summer. People didn't warn you about that special feature of snow.

I let out a deep sigh and mentally planned out my steps for the day. I needed to finish the reports on Oceanview Orchards and then finish up my next farm inspection before the new year. With only two days to do it, I didn't have time to waste.

A dog barked.

I froze, listening for the sound.

Nothing.

Damn it, Adele. Get a grip. I shook my head, clearing out the possibility Hale might not have left. It was probably a dog in the neighborhood.

He'd definitely snuck out in the middle of the night.

A second dog bark stilled my movements again. This time it sounded closer.

Definitely not him. Right? I leaned over the bed to see underneath it. A fat calico cat's gaze met mine, and she hissed, backing up another inch as a third bark widened her eyes in fear.

"Calm down, nut job," I said and lifted myself up. I guess Milkshake wasn't looking for any canine brothers.

The backdoor to my house flung open, hitting the wall, and then a mad scurry of feet slipped and slid over the tile kitchen floor as two bodies ran, what I had to assume was head first, into my kitchen cabinets.

I smiled.

Hale hadn't left.

An orchestra of dog barks emanated from the kitchen as Hale hushed them. Without the pauses between each bark, it sounded like he had five dogs out there making a mess of my place.

Hale swore as I gathered my robe from behind the door and went out to see how exactly they were destroying my kitchen.

“Do not bring that snow in here, Ruffles. Wipe your damn paws.”

I tipped my head into the kitchen and shock forced my mouth open. “What in the world?”

Hale held Lil' Miss around her middle and was trying to bounce her up and down on my backdoor rug. “She's wiping her paws.”

Lil' Miss kicked her legs out around him, trying to get free as he bounced her two more times and then gave up. As soon as he let her go, she stopped in the middle of the kitchen and shook, shooting little balls of snow around the floor.

Hale threw his head back and grabbed wildly for the paper towel roll on the counter. “Shit. I'm so sorry about the mess. They are heathens.”

He unrolled a long trail of paper towels, covering half the length of my kitchen, and then dropped them to the floor, soaking up the melting snow.

“Seriously, Hale, don't worry about it. The floors have seen worse.”

Not listening to a word I said, he continued to mop up the mess using an almost full roll of paper towel. I watched him as

he leaned over and scrubbed. The muscles in his arms bulged with the movements and his back, the one I'd raked my nails down many times, flexed.

The man was hot.

And he cleaned up after himself.

He wadded up the paper towel, and I stared at his powerful hands, remembering how they'd touched almost every inch of me in bed. My core twisted, and I bit my bottom lip.

Hale tossed the huge wad of wet paper towels in the trash can and had to push on the lid to get it to stay down. He turned, finding me on the other side of the kitchen. A thick counter separated us, but it felt like we were worlds apart.

I leaned against the counter and then stood back up so we were at similar heights. My hands rested on the countertop and then I moved them closer to me and grabbed on to the edge. What was I supposed to do with my hands? My feet? My face? Where did I look?

The awkwardness grew, and I glanced everywhere but at Hale. The dogs ran in circles in the living room before settling and trying to eat the rest of Milkshake's food, even though they'd finished it off last night.

"So..." I said.

Hale spoke over top of me. "Well."

Ugh.

I'd never woken up next to an extremely hot guy I worried I'd developed feelings for and had to figure out what to do with him and his two dogs. No one prepared women for this.

He clapped his hands, getting the dogs' attention. "I should probably go."

My head fell, staring at the speckles in the counters.
“Yeah, um, sure.”

I didn't want him to go, but I didn't have a reason for him to stay. Damn my working furnace.

“Unless you have something else you need me to do,” he said as Ruffles bumped into me and I teetered against the counter.

My head popped up, and I met his gaze. Did I have something for him to do? On the outside, my face didn't change expression, but inside my brain was freaking the hell out. I wanted to come up with something. Hell, if needed, I'd break something for him to fix.

Shit, but anything I came up with now might make me sound like I was using him. I mean, I had projects needing to be done, but when Hale made the offer, he probably had more pressing matters in mind. He definitely didn't mean he'd unclog my slow shower drain or tighten the screw on the cabinet handle.

“Oh, no,” I said, my voice shaky. I grabbed the candle lighter from the counter and pressed the trigger. Nothing happened. “We're totally fine here.”

I pressed harder. Still nothing.

Fucking work, you piece of shit, I silently commanded and shook the lighter.

Hale was going to think of me as a complete damsel in distress if I couldn't light a damn candle. I didn't want his pity tasks. It's not like I slept with the guy and then wanted him to become Mr. Handyman around my house.

“Here, let me help,” he said, reaching for the lighter.

I jerked it back. “No, no. I’m fine. It’s fine.”

Hale softly took the lighter from my clenched fingers and, in one strike, lit the candle for me. “It’s just that I have to feed the goats breakfast or they get bitey.”

“Right. The goats.” Seemed like a legitimate next day’s escape plan.

Hale hesitated by the counter and then placed the lighter by the candle. “You could come with me.”

“Oh, no. I don’t want to impose.” Plus, he’d just lit the candle. He clearly didn’t want me to come if he was going around lighting candles. “I have a ton of work to finish today.”

“Right, those deadlines,” he said, petting Ruffles on the top of his head.

Hale turned to leave, and my shoulders sagged. I’d officially lost a man to a goat. It had to be the saddest excuse anyone had ever heard.

Irritation bubbled up, and I grabbed the lighter back, holding it at my side and trying to flick it on. I wouldn’t lose Hale and be bested by a lighter on the same day. “You don’t want to leave the goats waiting.”

Hale stopped at the back door as he reached for his coat, with both dogs following behind him.

“You don’t want them to get hungry,” I said when it looked like he had something else he wanted to say.

“Okay, then,” he said, putting on his coat slowly and never taking his eye off me. I kept my gaze on the candle. “I’ll see you around.”

“Oh, yeah, sure.”

Ugh.

He'll see me around? How horrible. What a way to be left the morning after. Ditched for a goat. I'd officially hit an all-new dating low.

"Ruffles, Lil' Miss, let's go," Hale said and gave his thigh a pat.

Both dogs came running for him. They were happy to leave, too. The goats probably smelled better than my winter candle.

The back door closed behind Lil' Miss' fluffy tail and I blew out the candle before they made it to Hale's truck. I didn't want the aroma to remind me of him. I'd have to pick something fresh from the candle cabinet later and fill the house with a better scent. One with less heartbreak.

Maybe it was time to break out the spring flower candles.

A nice Lilac or Lavender scent might do it.

"You can come out now, Milkshake. The big snarly beasts are gone."

No big fat calico cat came bounding out of my room. Apparently, Milkshake planned to stay angry for longer. I probably deserved the ire.

I tightened my robe around me and headed back to my bedroom. Even though Hale had left, I didn't have time to sit around and be upset about it yet. I had to finish those reports and figure out how they planned to get my truck out of the ditch.

Hale offered to drive me to my vehicle at the county building, but I didn't expect I'd ever see him again.

“Can you believe it, Hale?” Roland Ashwood said as he pounded his fist against the wooden table at the Oceanview Orchards’ bed-and-breakfast. “It’s highway robbery.”

I shook my head. There were so many things about his visit I couldn’t believe. “You’re right, unbelievable, Roland. Where’s Pearl?”

It was a bad day when you asked for Pearl to be the reasonable one in a conversation.

Roland scoffed and tightened his ponytail full of long, gray hair. “She’s at the bakery. Doing that woman’s stuff. I’m the one concerned about the government stealing my money. You’d think she didn’t care by the way she talks about it.”

He punctuated his comment with another fist bang. They were rattling around in my head and were about to give me a headache.

“It’s twelve dollars a year, Roland.”

The county recently passed a vote to include a nominal fee for trash pickup for all the residents. It was a great deal since most people paid more than twenty dollars a month before the new contract. Roland strongly disagreed.

“You’re missing the big picture, Hale. It’s twelve dollars now. Then next time it’s fifteen dollars. Then twenty! The government doesn’t belong in my pocketbook.”

“There’s not a lot we can do, Roland. The measure passed the ballot in November.”

He thumped the table again. “As my tax guy, I want you to fight it.”

I rubbed a hand against my forehead, trying to quell the headache. Roland and Pearl Ashwood were staples in this community, but I swore they got nuttier every year. Had to be the weed brownies they were pumping out of their kitchen every week.

“I’m not your tax guy.”

Roland unclenched his face. “You’re my tax guy.”

I waited until he finished, and then shrugged to disagree. “I’m no one’s tax guy.”

My family would probably con me into filing their taxes for them when I did the farm’s, but if I admitted that to Roland, he’d start talking about how we were long-lost cousins or something.

“I’m confused,” Roland said as he stared deeply at me.

He wasn’t the only one.

“I’m doing the books for the farm.” Sure, I’d considered opening up a tax office and maybe taking on a few more local businesses, but I wanted to get a handle on the farm before I branched out.

“Pearl said...” Roland trailed off.

Ugh. Pearl.

This is why you mentioned nothing at the bakery unless you were looking for free advertising through their gossip chain. I'd stopped in and asked Anessa if she'd have a need for someone to do her books. She'd almost hugged me when I told her what I was thinking, but that didn't mean I'd planned to start right away. Or that I'd do regular filings for people.

Pearl must have overheard, and with Pearl, one thing always led to another.

The whole town probably knew. Pearl and the bakery girls were probably checking out office space for me to rent as we spoke. They'd have signs and everything.

I shuddered.

Hopefully, Katy didn't get her favorite megaphone involved.

"I don't know what to tell you, Roland. I'm not planning to do taxes for anyone but the farm next year."

The odor from my Hungry Man microwave lunch had finally dissipated as Roland kept me at the table for too long. He might be here until it came time to eat dinner if I didn't do something.

I glanced at my silent phone. Not that I had anything else to do.

I hadn't heard a peep from Adele since I left her place yesterday.

Roland shuffled the stack of papers he'd carried in with him two hours ago. I could swear I saw a yellowed receipt in the stack from The Biscuit Barn. The place closed in 2003.

"You don't want my stuff now?" he asked, glancing at his jumbled stack like I'd offended his newborn grandchild.

If his stuff included a receipt to The Biscuit Barn, I definitely didn't want it.

But he'd never leave until I did something.

I sighed. "No, just give it to me now."

Roland perked up instantly and slid the leaning stack of crap across the table. Sometimes, when you lived in Pelican Bay, you had to slide into the skid. Eventually, I'd be thanking Pearl for the business. It's just how it worked here for some odd reason.

It wasn't the first time the women at the bakery meddled in town affairs, and it wouldn't be the last.

"Good because the clock is ticking. I didn't want to be late," Roland said, giving his stack one last little heave in my direction.

I sighed again. It was going to be a long tax season. "It's New Year's Eve. The tax deadline isn't until April."

Roland shook his head. "You can't wait on these things, Hale. I've never been this late turning over paperwork."

"Okay." When addressing crazy, you just had to go with it.

"Pearl and I like to ring in the new year without the tax burden of government nut jobs hanging over our heads. We don't want to give big brother a reason to knock on our door."

I nodded like he wasn't absolutely the nut job in the conversation. "Of course. Perfectly logical."

The huge weed garden they kept in the backyard would be the only reason the government might come knocking on the Ashwoods' door.

It'd been twenty-four hours without Adele, and she'd never left my mind. Everyone in town was gathering with the person they wanted to ring in the new year. She was the only person I thought of when I considered the possibilities. But rather than her, I had Mr. Ashwood at my table.

Roland continued to drone on about the government's misuse of people's funds—from gathering taxes and his desire to create a “taxation is theft” flag. I barely listened. Just enough to give him a nod here and there.

Adele probably paid her taxes on time and didn't complain about it. She wouldn't give her tax guy a receipt from a defunct shop a decade late. I laughed and Roland thumped the table, thinking I'd been agreeing with him.

In reality, I was visualizing Adele's tax paper pile. She probably had everything organized and paper clipped together. Hell, she probably read the new laws each year and just took the standard deduction—a tax accountant's dream.

She was my dream.

Damn it. I'd been stupid to leave and not say something. Now that so many hours had passed, I didn't even know what to text. Anything I came up with sounded stupid.

“Well then, as long as you can get those back to me by the end of January, we should be good to go, young man,” Roland said.

“Wait? What?” I asked, standing up when he did.

Roland walked toward the door. “I don't want to keep you.”

I checked my watch. He'd been pounding the dining room table for over two hours. “Uh-huh. About the taxes, Roland.”

He stopped with his hand on the knob. “No, no. Don’t worry about them tonight. I’ll let you get to your parties. I remember how you young kids are these days. Just get them back to me no later than the end of January.”

Freaking January? Most people didn’t even have all their tax documents by late January. The government wasn’t even ready to accept taxes in January. Hell, I didn’t think you could file until February. And I didn’t for one second believe Roland had given me everything I’d need, even if I did his taxes. What did his old tax person do?

Ruffles ambled up to Roland and sniffed at his leg. “You have someone special you want to ring in the new year with tonight?”

He gave Ruffles a few good pats on the top of his head as he waited for my answer. The dog wouldn’t let him leave without a goodbye rub down.

A smile stretched my lips. “Yeah, I have someone I want to be with tonight.”

I didn’t know how I’d make up for being a dumbass who left her house and then didn’t text her for a day, but hopefully, Adele had a forgiving heart.

There were reasons we shouldn’t be together, but they didn’t matter. Everyone else in my family threw caution to the wind. No one cared when I told them to make smarter decisions. Why did I have to be the lone holdout? I liked Adele, and she liked me. What more did we need?

Screw her job or what might happen.

I’d regretted leaving her from the moment I stepped out of her door. I should have turned around the second I realized I made a mistake.

“Hold up, Roland. I’m going to follow you out,” I said, grabbing my coat from the hook.

I tried to lock the dogs in the farmhouse, but they pushed past and kept pace with Roland and me off the porch.

Roland nodded once at me before he got into his truck. “That’s the Halliday spirit. You go get her.”

“Okay.” I laughed. The crazy old man. “Come on, you mutts, everyone in the truck.”

I held the door open for them and patted my knee. Ruffles jumped up first and Lil’ Miss finished peeing by my tire before she followed. I shut them in and wasted no time heading to Adele’s home.

A mile later, we passed the spot where her truck had been trapped in the ditch. The only remaining evidence were the tracks and mud the tow truck created when they’d pulled it free. The next snow would cover the final evidence she’d even been at Oceanview Orchards. I couldn’t let her only visit to the farm be when she did her yearly inspection.

I practiced my speech to win Adele back the entire drive, but hadn’t come up with the final version by the time I stopped in her driveway.

No vehicle was parked by her home, but that didn’t mean she wasn’t inside since she’d left her car at the county offices before putting her truck in the ditch.

“Stay here,” I told the dogs and squeezed my way from the truck so they wouldn’t jump out.

The house windows were dark, but I approached the side door anyway. Maybe she’d slept in.

I knocked, and when no one came, I knocked harder.
“Adele!”

Still nothing.

Shit.

She wasn't home.

I trudged back to the truck, reviewing my options. Where would she be?

I'd hunt Adele down and grovel until she accepted my apology.

I just had to find her.

I stepped over the pile of cow poop and walked into Mr. Wilson's front barn. The cow pile was awfully close to the barn where he said they kept their cider supplies.

"Are cows allowed to roam here, Mr. Wilson?" I asked the farm's owner.

The eighty-two-year-old man scowled at the poo pile as he adjusted his overalls. So different from the Oceanview Orchards' farm.

"Hell, no. Bessy is just a looker if you get what I'm saying." He winked.

I shook my head. "Not really."

Mr. Wilson released a deep breath between his teeth, obviously tired of my questions and the answers he had to provide. "She wanders over here looking for our bull to give her a good time."

My eyes widened. "Oh."

It still wasn't okay if Bessy was nosing around the cider equipment, but I really didn't want a bulls and heifers lesson from Mr. Wilson. I scribbled a note about wandering cows in the margin of my paperwork—a problem for another day.

We walked closer to the cider press he kept at the back of the barn. A stack of boxes, taller than my head, were piled up at the front of it. I squinted to read the label while trying not to breathe in the thick aroma of squished apples and Bessy's present. It was also hard to mouth breathe with your eyes narrowed. The cider machine didn't have any protective shielding around it. Definitely not up to code. But he had bigger issues.

"Is that fertilizer, Mr. Wilson?"

He grunted as we passed it. The bright red label was a dead giveaway to its contents. I took it as a yes.

Mr. Wilson continued on ahead toward the end of the cider equipment, but I stopped by the tower of the weed killer and fertilizer. "We really have to talk about the fertilizer, Mr. Wilson. You can't store it so close to your food equipment."

He jerked his head up and stared at me. "Why the hell not?"

Really?

My faith in common sense took a nosedive since starting this job. Too many Mr. Wilsons roamed the world.

"Because what if someone mistook it and used it on or near the cider press?"

The long metal machine that pressed apple, collected the juice, and then discarded the apple bits sat dead beside us, but that didn't mean the fertilizer wasn't an issue. Especially if the tower was still there while the machine was operational. He could kill someone.

"Young lady," he said, sounding put out like I was the moron in the situation. "No one on this farm is stupid enough to mix up fertilizer with a cleaning agent for the cider press."

“But what if?” I mean, why store it there and make it easier for them to poison someone? It broke more than one safe storage law and all the rules of common sense.

“That would never happen,” he argued.

I rubbed at my forehead. Look, I could lead a horse to water, but I couldn't shove his head in and make him drink. Or in this case, see the error of his ways. I checked off the proper box, signifying I'd checked the area and then wrote a note failing him in proper hazardous chemical storage.

My head thumped as he led me around the machine and talked about repairs they'd had to make in the last year. I'd need an Advil after this inspection.

Whatever.

If there were ever a night to drink, it was tonight. New Year's Eve gave me a perfect excuse to have a glass of something stiff or a nice white wine when I plopped down on the couch at the end of my workday.

“And that's why we have the best cider in the county,” Mr. Wilson said while waving his hand at the cider press.

No, that was the reason I'd be adding his orchard to my list of places I couldn't eat. The longer I worked the job, the longer the list grew. At some point, I'd have to leave the county to eat at a restaurant.

Wonderful.

Gravel sprayed outside the large cider barn, and Mr. Wilson jerked in that direction. He was limber for a man of his age.

“What the hell is going on out there?” he asked and then took off for the barn's entrance.

I followed behind him and grimaced as he stuck his foot right in Bessy's present from earlier. The fragrance nor sudden squish slowed him from his mission.

A black extended cab truck came to a stop in the snow-covered grass in front of Mr. Wilson's farm house.

Two dogs barked out a steady stream of woofs as the driver's side door opened, and the driver yelled out a clear, "Adele!"

Mr. Wilson stopped. "What in the hell?"

What in the hell, indeed, Mr. Wilson?

The two large dogs pushed past Hale and jumped from the truck. They ran circles around one another and barked nonstop. Something had them all worked up.

"Adele!" Hale yelled at the quiet farmhouse. He turned and rounded his truck.

Mr. Wilson and I started for him. "Hale? What's going on?"

Seeing him again tugged at my heart, but something serious must have happened for him to be tearing through Mr. Wilson's driveway with both dogs, yelling my name to the heavens.

Hale's steps halted, and he turned toward us. His concentrated face broke out into a huge smile at seeing me with Mr. Wilson. "Oh, there you are. I've been looking for you."

I touched a hand to my chest. "You have?"

Ruffles and Lil' Miss both charged in my direction. They ran at me and then circled my legs, their wet noses leaving prints on my jeans.

“Bessy doesn’t like dogs,” Mr. Wilson said with his arms crossed over his chest.

Hale continued toward us. “I’ve looked everywhere for you.”

“How did you find me?” I asked, giving Ruffles a pet on the top of his head.

Mr. Wilson jerked his hand away. Both dogs ran toward Bessy’s holiday present and barked at the pile of chocolate-colored poop.

“Don’t touch that,” Mr. Wilson yelled, waving his hands at the dogs.

Hale grabbed my hand, my freezing fingers warming wrapped up in his. “I checked your house and all the places in town. Finally, I had to bribe your boss with a Sensational Seasonal Family Four-Pack trip to the farm next cider season.”

My eyes narrowed. “What’s that?”

Hale shrugged. “I have no clue, but he loved the idea, so we’re going to have to figure that out and set it up before next September.”

I laughed.

It obviously wasn’t something too serious if he had to bribe my boss to get my location, but what made Hale barrel his way into Mr. Wilson’s farm?

A dog bark came from inside the cider barn and Mr. Wilson chased after Ruffles as the dog’s tail cleared the barn’s opening.

“Okay, but what’s wrong, Hale?”

He froze. His eyes widened, and he stared. “I forgot.”

“What? You forgot what?” How did he forget what brought him out here?

Hale clutched my hand harder, as if he worried I’d pull away and leave him. “No, I forgot what I wanted to say. Shit, Adele.” He used a hand to wipe at his forehead, even though it was much too cold out to be sweaty. “I had this whole thing figured out. I practiced it in the truck.”

“You did?” My grin stretched my lips, but I bit the backs of them to keep it under control. I failed.

Hale nodded. “Ruffles agreed it was great.”

“Okay, but what are you talking about?” And why did the dog get a say?

Hale’s shoulders slumped, and I cringed, hoping I hadn’t pushed too hard.

“Fuck it,” he whispered to himself.

Oh no. I had pushed too much, and now he’d leave without saying what he needed to say.

Right when I thought he’d push me away, Hale pulled me closer with my hands.

“Adele,” he said.

“Yeah,” I answered with now widening eyes to match his own.

“We just met, but I feel a spark with you. Something I’ve never experienced in my entire life. My siblings have talked about it with their significant others. They’re always blathering on about the moment they *knew*. I always figured they were full of shit, but then I met you.”

“Really?” Hale Halliday said he felt a spark with me. I wished I had recorded it.

“One-hundred percent. Leaving you was the stupidest thing I’ve ever done. I should have whisked you away to the bed-and-breakfast. I can’t redo the last day, but I can make sure it never happens again. Come to the farm and start the new year with me.”

“I don’t know.” I turned back toward the barn a fraction. Enough to see Mr. Wilson trying to tug Ruffles away from the barn by his collar. “I’m barely finished with Mr. Wilson’s inspection.”

Hale glanced down at the clipboard I still had in my free hand. “Is he going to pass?”

I snorted. “Hell no.” Not with that unrecognized fertilizer issue.

Hale grabbed the clipboard and tossed it behind him. It cut through a mound of snow and disappeared. “Then screw it. Worry about it next year.”

“I’ve never been late with my reports.” This year only got away from me because of all the early bad weather and the fact the county gave me an additional fifty establishments to inspect after we had someone quit.

Hale shrugged. “And Roland Ashwood hates late taxes, but there’s a first time for everything.”

“What’s wrong with Roland’s taxes?” I asked.

Hale laughed. “Roland doesn’t matter. You’re what matters. Say you’ll forgive me for being stupid and let me show you what it’s like to really date a Halliday.”

I stared at him, biting the back of my lips again.

“Trust me, it sounded way better in the truck,” he said.

Lil’ Miss’s tail whacked me in the leg. She bumped my knee with her nose and pushed me into Hale’s waiting hands.

“Okay, yes.”

“You will?” Hale asked, his eyes lighting up like he thought I might actually turn him away.

“Yes, absolutely. I will have to finish Mr. Wilson’s report, though.” And somehow fish it out of the snow.

Hale laughed and then he grabbed me at the waist and hauled me up against his body, giving me a spark-creating kiss. My soul fluttered. By the time he put me back on my feet, I recognized I’d never fit in another man’s arms the same again. Hale Halliday was it for me.

“Hale?” I asked, just above a whisper.

He ran his hand over my cheek. “Yeah?”

“I feel the spark, too.”

Ruffles barked behind us, and Mr. Wilson yelled something after him, but none of that mattered because Hale had me wrapped up in his arms again, and then he kissed me like he never wanted to stop.

We watched the television screen as lights from the Christmas tree to our left twinkled in a steady rhythm. The large, round, flashing ball from the New York Times Square New Year's Eve special sank lower on its pole.

The crowd counted down, each second getting closer to the new year. I wrapped my hand around Adele's middle and brought her close as we sat on the floor together and used the back of the couch to lean against. Her hair tickled my ear as she laid her head on my shoulder.

"Five," the crowd chanted, and the ball lowered.

Adele's hand fell to my knee. "Four."

"Three." I turned toward her and lifted her chin to mine.

"Two," she whispered.

I leaned in, letting my lips linger against hers. "One."

The crowd cheered, and I kissed Adele with everything I had in me. Her lips were soft against my hard kiss, and I swept my tongue past her lips. She moaned, and I pushed my hand up her shirt.

Ruffles snorted, his hot breath blowing across our faces.

Eww.

“Really, Ruffles?” I said, pushing him away from us.

Adele laughed and patted her leg. He laid his head on top of her hand and then waited until she’d pulled it free and given him pets.

The New Year’s Eve special aired couples kissing while a band played in the background. Adele continued to give Ruffles pets as his tongue hung out, leaving a wet spot on her pants. The lights from the Christmas tree cast different shades of blue and green against her skin.

“So we’re really going to do this?” she asked when she caught me staring at her.

I gave her a quick kiss on the cheek after pushing a few strands of her hair behind her shoulder. “Yup.”

Ruffles whined when Adele stopped petting him, and his neediness made me miss Milkshake. Maybe I’d let Adele’s grumpy calico turn me into a cat person.

“I have to tell my boss to find you a new inspector.” She tipped her head to the side and grimaced.

I laughed. There she went, always following the rules. I loved it. Together, we could check off the boxes of life. Adele understood my need for order. For things to line up and make sense.

“Hopefully, they send us as good of an inspector as you,” I said.

She shook her head and chuckled. “That’s a hard task, because I am the best.”

“I bet you are.”

Adele’s playful grin fell. “No, really, you’re probably going to get Arthur.”

“Arthur isn’t a super-hot and helpful woman of my dreams. Is he?”

Her cheek twitched. “No. He’s a sixty-year-old man who refuses to retire because his wife makes him eat vegetables at lunchtime if he’s home.”

“Sounds fun.”

She bit her lips. “Yeah, he’s a riot. I’m sure it will be fine.”

Something in her voice sounded like she wasn’t sure at all.

I pulled her close again, upsetting Ruffles’ position on her legs. “Are you leaving us to the wolves?”

Adele laughed. “I’ll tell him to go easy on you.”

I nibbled on her neck as the band started a new song on the television. When she was beside me, it felt like the new year every day. “And here I was highly considering becoming a cat person.”

She tipped her head back, giving me easier access to a better angle. I took advantage of it and ran my tongue up her neck. “Milkshake might never forgive you for bringing the dogs into her domain.”

I tugged on the bottom of her ear. “I’ll get her a playmate and call him Fry.”

Adele chuckled, and when the movement separated us, she twisted her fingers in the material of my shirt. It stretched the fabric as she tugged and I leaned into her pull. My hand splayed out against her ribs. I wanted to touch all of her but also didn’t want the time to end too quickly between us. We had forever to spend together.

Ruffles would have to get the hell out in about two seconds because I planned to lay Adele on the floor and make love to

her under the Christmas tree. I wasn't sure what the future held for us, but I'd make sure she'd always be my priority in life, regardless of our journey.

Soon my family would return from their various trips and meet the newest addition to our tribe. I couldn't wait to see the look on Holston's face when I told him.

I chuckled, and Adele pulled back from where I'd been sucking on her neck. "What's so funny?"

"Nothing," I snorted out around another laugh.

"Hale. You better tell me. Is there something in my hair?" She ran her fingers through the back of it.

"No, you look perfect. I was just picturing Holston's face when I introduce him to his future sister-in-law."

Her eyes widened, and she jerked back. "Sister-in-law?"

"Just for effect," I said, but silently promised myself it would happen sooner rather than later.

She shook her head, giving me a smile. "Okay. I can jump out of the closet and yell surprise."

I nibbled her neck, holding back a laugh. "This is why you're perfect for me."

My leg vibrated, and it wasn't just from Adele's touch. Dang it.

"Hang on a second," I said, grabbing the phone from my pocket. "This better be an emergency."

It wasn't a call but a text from my youngest sister, Hope.

HOPE: Don't freak out but... I got married!

EPILOGUE

Nine months later.

Hale

Holston stopped by the white county truck and ran his finger through his hair after shaking the older man's hand. The summer sun blazed on their meeting as the farm's new inspector slammed his truck door and squinted at the farm.

"It's nice to meet you, Arthur. I'll be walking you around today and answering your questions."

Arthur narrowed his eyes even more at my brother. "I don't need an entourage."

Holston glanced behind him. "It's just me."

"See that it stays that way," Arthur said and took three steps away from my brother, creating a wide space between them.

Lil' Miss barked from inside the farmhouse. Her nails scratched at the glass window as Arthur watched. "You normally let that dog out to run loose on the farm?"

Holston's eyes grew wide, and he glanced at me.

I hid a laugh with the back of my hand over my mouth. He was on his own this time. Adele gave us the general rundown about her coworker, but they were mostly thinly veiled warnings to not piss him off. It seemed like most things in life pissed off Arthur.

From the way he turned from Holston and glared at the sun, he had a big beef with... everything.

“No, she’s an inside dog,” Holston said, waving a hand behind his back to get Lil’ Miss to quiet.

Arthur huffed. “In my day, dogs went to the bathroom outside. My niece has this small fluffy rat thing she lets pee and poop right in her house. I don’t know if the thing has even stepped foot on grass. It’s against nature.”

Holston sucked in a breath. “Lil’ Miss loves grass. She’s a big grass pooper.”

I bit my lips so they wouldn’t catch me laughing.

“I hope no grass within fifty feet of your food service machines.” Arthur’s attention fluttered toward the big red barn beside the house.

“Definitely not,” Holston said. The cherry color of his face wasn’t from the sun but from exacerbation. “Do you need your clipboard? Adele always had a clipboard.”

Yes, she did. Adele loved her clipboards. She even had two in her house—one for to-do lists and one as a backup in case she ever lost the original. I planned to buy her a second spare for Christmas. Something with succulents on it.

Arthur blatantly scowled at Holston. “I don’t need a clipboard. You think I’m weak?”

He pulled on his jeans, untucking part of his county-provided polo shirt, and stormed toward the barn.

If things continued on this way, Holston would ruin our inspection without the help of our brother this year.

I followed right along behind them and grabbed my phone before turning on the camera. Adele asked me for picture evidence of this encounter when it happened, and I planned to oblige.

“My mind is as sharp today as it was thirty years ago. I’ve been inspecting farms longer than you’ve been alive, young man,” Arthur continued to yell at Holston as they entered the barn.

I snapped a picture from behind to send to Adele. She’d love it.

“I remember everything up here,” Arthur said, tapping at his temple.

“Of course, yes, sir,” Holston stammered. “Would you like to see the cider press? It’s top of the line.”

Arthur twisted his head to look at Holston, once again giving him an unkind expression that hinted at his belief that Holston was a moron. “I can see the press from here. It takes up half the dang barn and is behind a glass wall. I’m not blind.”

“Right,” Holston said.

I covered my mouth harder to stop more laughter and snapped another picture. Adele would love this. Holston spent the last three months grilling her on Arthur once we received official notice of the change in inspectors. She didn’t prepare him sufficiently.

I silently snapped a picture of Holston's expression as he drew in a breath and looked like he wanted to die. He glared at me, probably realizing what I was doing with my phone in front of my face. I sent the photo to Adele while giving Holston my biggest grin.

"This machine is no good, Holston," Arthur said and thumped his hand against a metal brace of the large cider press machine after he let himself into the space without the required shoe booties.

Holston stepped, blocking him off from the expensive new shiny toy he'd bought less than five years ago. "It's top of the line."

Arthur snorted again. "Top of the line, my ass. This is will be top of the junk heap in ten years. You young kids always buy the new sparkly things, but they don't last. In my day, metal was dull, but it lasted a hundred years."

Adele loved the new cider press.

"We did a lot of research."

Arthur's head snapped up at Holston. "You believe everything you read on the internet?"

I snorted and dropped my gaze so Holston wouldn't kill me.

Adele's name lit up my phone screen, and I hurried to the side of the barn to answer her call.

"Hey, babe."

"How's it going?" she asked right away.

I chuckled again, deep in my throat so Holston and Arthur wouldn't hear. "About as you expected."

She outright laughed, not worried about being heard. “I tried to warn him.”

“I don’t think anyone could have prepared him for this.”

“At least Holston’s torture will be over quickly. Arthur always forgets his paperwork and then does his inspections from memory. What he can’t remember, he normally just passes people on those parts.”

“Really?” I stepped out of the barn as Arthur hit the cider press again and caused a ringing sound to echo through the rafters.

“Yeah, I don’t eat at any of his places,” Adele said. “What’s for dinner?”

“You,” I answered quickly.

She laughed, thinking I was joking. “That’s funny. I was thinking Mexican.”

“This is why we’re made for each other.” I glanced back into the barn while Holston tried staying in front of Arthur as he walked to a different section and stepped out of our sterile area for apple production without following any of the safety rules.

“Actually, we might need to reschedule the tacos and eat at the diner tonight. You have to buy Holston his favorite sub.”

“That bad?” Adele asked as I pictured her cringe. “Let’s do pizza for the whole family from Buddy’s.”

“Sounds good. I’m going to monitor him so Holston doesn’t murder Arthur. I’ll call you later. Love you.”

“Love you,” she said and hung up the call.

The door of the cider press area slammed closed behind Holston as he followed Arthur out of the barn. He glared at me, and I suppressed my hundredth laugh before rejoining my brother.

“Adele says dinner’s on her,” I whispered to Holston.

He narrowed his eyes. “She better bring dessert, too.”

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—

Megan Matthews loves writing humorous romantic suspense featuring heroes with unbelievable abs, billionaire bosses, and heroines with attitude for days. She lives in Michigan with her techie husband, homeschooled son, their cat, and two guinea pigs.

When she's not writing, you can find her on Instagram posting about reading, home life, half-dead plants, her ridiculous notebook and fancy pen collections, plus the occasional crochet project.

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**FIVE TIMES THE HOLIDAY SNEAK
PEEK**

****Continue reading for a sneak peek of Five Times the
Holiday ****

FIVE TIMES THE HOLIDAY CHAPTER 1

“**D**id you make it to Michigan?” Hale, my brother, asked as I sat in front of the large open airport window, watching a plane taxi past my spot.

I was supposed to be at Michigan State University to ring in the new year on campus and watch a football game. Instead, our entire group ended up nowhere near Michigan.

The phone cut in and out on Hale’s end. “No. We’re stranded in DC at our layover because the airport in Detroit is closed for weather.”

My best friend Chance gave me continuous weather updates every twenty minutes. If he told me one more time how the storm was battering the East Coast, I planned to take away his phone. He was too young to be that obsessed with the Weather Channel.

“That bad, huh?” Hale asked. “What are you going to do, kid?”

“We’ll hang out here for a while and hope they open the airport.” We didn’t have another option. The other three people in our group wanted to walk around and see the national monuments, but I visited DC in tenth grade and didn’t need to do it again.

“Do you need cash for a hotel room?”

I groaned and rolled my eyes. “No, father. I have this fancy thing called a credit card.” Chance said if they canceled us totally, they’d probably give us a room by the airport. Looking at monuments for a second time sounded more fun than hanging out in an airport hotel room, but neither were high on my list.

My options weren’t looking great.

“Real funny, Hope. Are you going to be okay?”

I freaking loved Hale, but sometimes he drove me insane with his overprotectiveness.

“Yeah, I just wanted to call and let you know. Mom and Dad are already on the cruise and I didn’t want to bother anyone on a vacation.” Hale was home watching the dogs and probably a buttload of television. If I had to bet money, I’d say he planned to spend this week in the same pair of pajama pants, eating microwave meals.

I placed a hand on the window, leaving behind fingerprints. Oops.

“Okay, well, if that changes, call me immediately.”

“Can do. I’ll keep you posted.”

“Stay safe,” he said and disconnected the call.

A thick fry odor came from the restaurant across the walkway and my stomach growled.

“Okay, then. Good bye, love you too,” I said to the dead phone. Brothers.

He acted like he had some place to be. Like talking to me wasn’t the highlight of his entire day. Weirdo.

I stared as a plane taxied out of sight and the sun shone against the dark pavement without an inch of snow. Not a drop of white stuff in DC while apparently everywhere north of us were in Chance's words, "Being pounded by a snowstorm of the year."

This was what we got for buying the cheap tickets. I told Chance having a layover in the wrong direction of our final destination was stupid.

He told me that's how airlines did it.

A hand tapped me on the right shoulder and I turned to my left, ending up only inches from Chance's face. "Seriously, dude. You have to get new moves."

Chance laughed. "You still fall for it half the time. How did your brother take the news?"

I shrugged. "You know how Hale is."

Chance had been my best friend since fifth grade. He'd experienced my brothers and their moods. He nodded and ran his hand through his dark brown hair as he bit his lips and smiled.

I raised an eyebrow at his suspicious behavior. His smile was too wide. That was never good.

"Did he demand you come home?" he asked and immediately bit his bottom lip again.

This happened when you were friends with someone for so long. You knew all their quirks. "No," I said, holding back a laugh at my predictable brother. "He took it better than expected. Asked me if I needed money for a hotel room."

Hale was the uptight brother, but when you really needed help in a pinch, he normally came through. Actually, his

behavior on the call was a little weird, even for him. The longer I thought about it, the more questions I had.

Hopefully, sitting around in the big empty bed-and-breakfast alone didn't turn his holiday into a Stephen King novel. I had enough crazy people in the family. I didn't need any of them to become actually crazy. We had like five axes in one barn.

Chance stood beside me, his smirk growing. I loved it when he smiled that large. It made his green eyes sparkle in playfulness. It also meant he was definitely up to something. We'd been friends too long for him to hide it from me.

"What are you up to?" I asked him.

Chance's smile only stretched further across his face. Caught him. "What?"

"Dude," I said, and raised both my eyebrows. "You have that look."

Chance smacked his lips. A dead giveaway. "What look?"

I laughed and pushed him against his shoulder. "Chance, we've been friends too long for you to get away with whatever you're plotting. I know you too well. Just spill."

He shook his head. Bingo. Chance never kept up his ruses for long.

"Okay, listen," he said and grabbed on to both of my shoulders and gave me a little shake. "Everyone else wants to take the meal credits and hit up the city, but I have bigger plans."

Chance always had plans. That's why I loved him. He didn't just want to get through life. Chance planned to make

every day an adventure and, thankfully, he normally took me along.

“Just tell me.”

He dropped his hands from my shoulders and twisted his fingers with mine, the phone sticking between our joined palms. Whatever crazy idea he'd come up with, he expected me to argue.

“I talked to the woman at the gate, and we can hang out in the city that we've already seen or,” he laid it on pretty thickly at the end, “switch our tickets and go somewhere fun.”

I raised my eyebrows higher and gave him a tilt of my head. No way had he brought this idea all the way over to me without already having a spot. Chance didn't do half plans.

“Where?” I asked. It had to be somewhere good for his excitement level.

He lit up as a plane took off further off on the jetway. “Vegas, baby.”

“Vegas?” I questioned without his enthusiasm.

“Vegas, baby,” he answered and waved his hands close to his head in a demented version of jazz hands. “You've always wanted to go.”

I laughed. Chance knew how to make me smile, and that usually meant he got his way. I also wanted to visit Vegas. We'd talked about it more than once when planning future wishful trips. I'd even suggested it for this trip but had been outvoted.

But it wasn't exactly how I envisioned a Vegas trip.

“What about the game?” We had big plans to hang out with our friend from high school in East Lansing and watch

the football game with a bunch of his friends at his place. It wasn't Vegas, but we'd been planning our get-together with Jay for the last three months.

Chance shrugged. "Babe, it's Vegas. There will be other games and other chances to sit in Jay's apartment and drink cheap beer with his frat brothers."

"True." I grabbed my backpack from my feet and looped it over my shoulder.

Chance ran a hand through his hair again and adjusted his bag. "Plus, with this storm, we're not getting to Michigan, anyway."

Another good point.

I only had one more question. A big one.

"What about a hotel?" We had no place to stay in Vegas.

He looped his arm through mine and tugged me away from the window. "It's on me."

"You know I hate that." Yes, Chance had the money, but I hated when he used it. We didn't all have rich families and could reciprocate.

"Hope, you're my best friend. Let me take this one."

We stared at one another.

He tipped his head to the side and tried for puppy dog eyes, giving me a pleading expression.

I bit my cheek. Vegas sounded fun, and I'd always imagined going.

Chance made the puppy dog eyes bigger. He really wanted this. "Pleaseeee."

I sighed. It really wasn't that horrible for me to say yes.
"Okay, let's do it."

Chance wrapped his arm around my neck and spun me around. "Great, let's go."

"What's the rush?" I asked, following him. I wanted to buy some of those smelly French fries.

He tugged me forward. "The plane boards in twenty minutes."

I kept pace with him as we passed the restaurant with the smelly fries, trying to get Chance to take a detour. "And..."

"It's on the other end of the terminal."

I jerked toward him with widened eyes. "Shit, Chance. Get a move on it."

We'd never make it in time.

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