

CHRISTMAS
Falls



GRINCH

Küsse

D J JAMISON

GRINCH KISSES

CHRISTMAS FALLS



DJ JAMISON

Grinch Kisses

By DJ Jamison


Copyright 2023 DJ Jamison

Published by Must Love Books LLC

Cover design by Morningstar Ashley

This ebook is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This ebook may not be resold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each recipient. If you're reading this book and did not purchase it, or it was not purchased for your enjoyment only, then please return it to Amazon.com or your favorite retailer and purchase your own copy. Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are fictitious. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

 Created with Vellum

CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

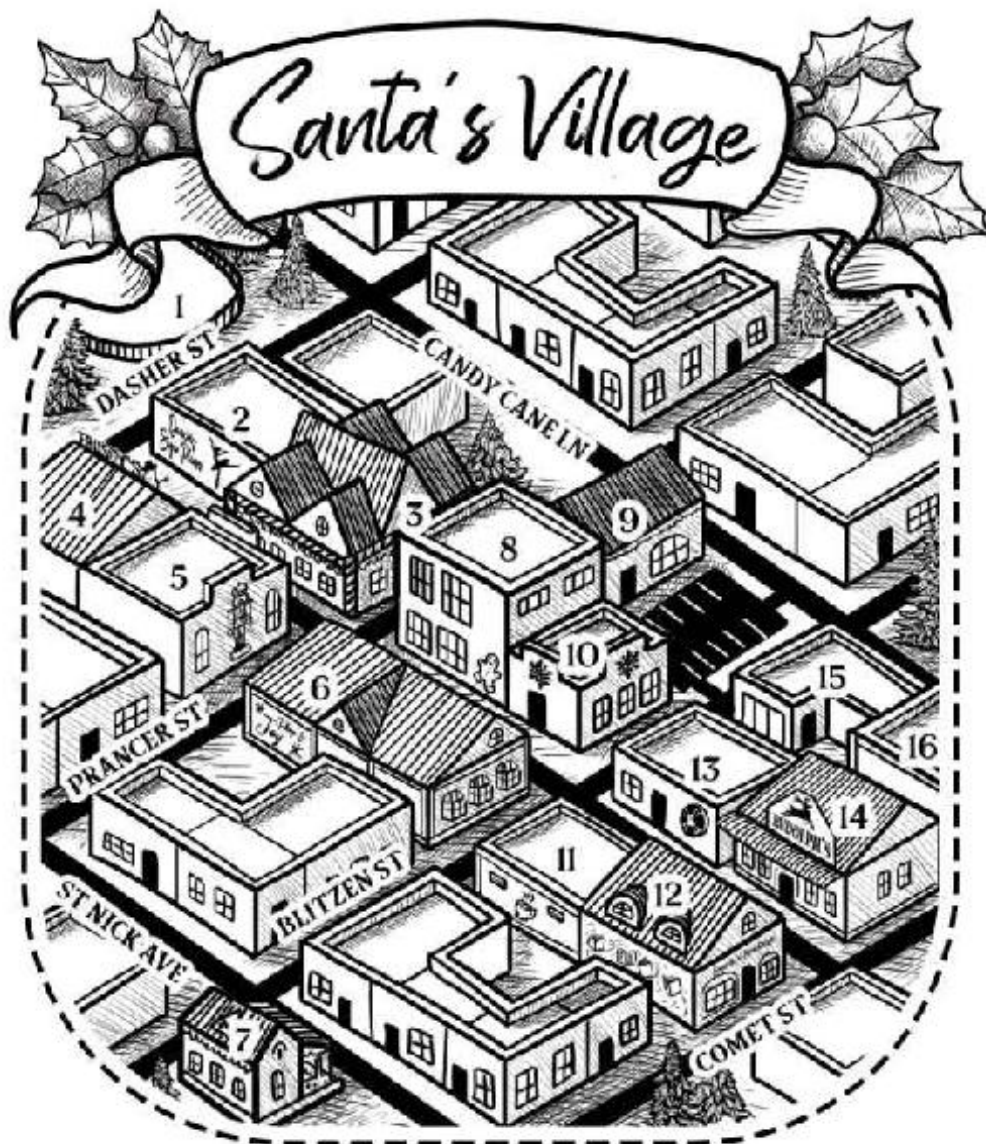
[Chapter 26](#)

[EPILOGUE](#)

[Also in Christmas Falls](#)

[Also by DJ Jamison](#)

[About the Author](#)



- 1. Ice Rink
- 2. Dancing Sugar Plums
- 3. Santa's Workshop
- 4. Frosty's
- 5. Nutcrackers
- 6. Tidings & Joy
- 7. Gingerbread Cottage
- 8. Ginger's Breads

- 9. The White Elephant
- 10. The Snowflake Shack
- 11. Jolly Java
- 12. Season's Readings
- 13. Mistletoe Movies
- 14. Rudolph's
- 15. Christmas Falls Festivals Inc
- 16. Festival Museum

CHAPTER 1



GRIFF

I HELD MY BREATH AS THE MAYOR FLICKED THE SWITCH ON THE long winding strings of lights that wrapped around the town's official Christmas tree. Beside her, NFL star Jem Knight waved to the crowd, a home-grown celebrity to add a dash of excitement to the tree-lighting.

A wash of red, green, blue, and white flickered to life, and a cheer went up from the crowd that had assembled in Sugar Plum Park.

Thank fuck something had gone right today. I'd been running nonstop putting out last-minute fires as we prepared for the kickoff of our five-week holiday festival that kept our businesses afloat by drawing tourists from near and far.

Even now, before Thanksgiving weekend when we'd really see our numbers swell, people crammed into our little park, standing shoulder to shoulder. They clutched hot chocolate or cider and snickerdoodles from Ginger's Breads bakery in their mittened hands, eyes bright as they delighted in the sight of the twenty-foot evergreen.

I envied them a little. They'd come out for a bit of holiday cheer, not because their job required it. They got to enjoy those lights without knowing how many it took to illuminate that tree. Eleven hundred bulbs to be exact—and only because we used a larger size than the standard indoor Christmas tree. When we'd used smaller ones, it had taken closer to three thousand to get the job done.

The crowd here also hadn't needed to scramble to problem-solve when one of the twenty strings of lights didn't come on during our final test this afternoon, nor call Joel from Ginger's Breads for a last-minute favor when Joelle and Holly of Jolly Java came down with the flu and couldn't deliver the treats we'd promised.

There were a million little parts to an event this large, and there was one man responsible for everything running smoothly.

And that man was me.

So while townspeople and tourists rubbed elbows, smiling and chatting about the start to the season, I simply breathed a sigh of relief that everything had gone as planned and I could check off one more item on my to-do list.

"You'd think they'd never seen a Christmas tree before," Bruce Brooks grumbled beside me.

I snorted with amusement. "Don't pretend you don't like everyone oohing and ahing."

Bruce was the owner of the Milton Falls Tree Farm, which had donated the tree. He hummed. "Well, everyone likes to be appreciated."

"Although, I've been considering switching it out for a fake one. Maybe a fifty-foot-tall symbol of Christmas kitsch."

He gave me a disapproving look. "But mine are *real*, Griff. No one wants some cheap silicone knockoff when I can satisfy just fine."

I chuckled. "I think those fake trees are plastic, not silicone."

"Oh, are we still talking about trees?" He attempted to maintain a straight face, but he failed, lips twitching. "My mistake."

I laughed. "Get your mind out of the gutter. There are happy families here!"

Bruce gave a mock shudder. "Scary. I think I'll head out for a beer. Gonna need one to make it through the madness

ahead of us in the next few weeks.”

“Good idea. I could use a drink too. Let’s head over to Rudolph’s.”

Frosty’s was closer—and looked a little less like a bunch of Christmas elves threw up all over the place—but I suspected it’d be even busier than usual with the spillover of tourists from the tree-lighting.

The ceremony had gone off without a hitch. Mayor Grayson had made her speech, the crowd had pretended to be interested until the highlight of the evening, and now they were happily drinking their hot chocolate, the locals in little clusters where they could indulge in a bit of small-town gossip.

No doubt they were speculating about how long Jem Knight would remain in town, or perhaps another rumor had started up that the rivalry between pub managers Mik Gilmore and Rudy Snow was born of more than dislike. Either way, my job was done.

I’d nearly escaped before my mother waved at me. “Griffy! Wait. Where are you going?”

I groaned under my breath, and Bruce shot me a look of pity right before abandoning my ass like a prisoner fleeing Alcatraz. “See you over there.”

“Disloyal bastard,” I muttered, but without heat. I’d have done the same damn thing.

My mother tugged me close enough to kiss my cheek above my beard. “Griff, the tree looks amazing!”

I smiled gamely. “Thanks, but you know it looks the same every year.”

“Oh, hush. It’s been better every year since you came home.” She looked to my father for backup. “Hasn’t it, Arthur?”

“Sure has.”

He’d learned a long time ago not to argue with my mother.

“Well, we transitioned to LEDs around that time,” I said. “Makes for brighter lights.”

My mother beamed. “There, you see! You’re doing great work for the town. I don’t know where we’d all be without you.”

I certainly hoped *LEDs* weren’t the only great work I’d done in seven years on the job—seven years that I’d been divorced, seven years without my children—but I wasn’t about to sink into a debate over everything my job entailed. One thing I’d learned was that people wanted to enjoy the holiday magic, not see the man performing tedious tasks behind the curtain.

Holiday magic I’d once thought might help bring me and my children closer together, but I’d been wrong.

“Thank you,” I said. “I’m actually headed out, though, so...”

“Griff,” she said, a world of disappointment in her tone. “You did all this for us.” She swept her arm toward the rest of the park, encompassing the Christmas tree, the bakery stand, and the milling residents. “You should take time to enjoy it. I noticed Katie Foster looking a little lonely in the line for hot chocolate. Maybe—”

“I did enjoy it,” I cut in before Mom could continue that line of thought. “I enjoy that all those lightbulbs work, but tomorrow I’ll be onto another event, and I could really use a beer with a friend right now.”

She perked up. “A friend, you say?”

“Easy there. It’s just Bruce.”

She deflated with a frown. “He’s about as cheerful as those grumpy-faced gnomes that Murphy carves.”

“Eleanor,” my dad gently chastised.

She sighed. “Sorry. You go. So long as you promise to enjoy your night.”

“You have my word,” I said as I hurried to escape before someone else spotted me and insisted I have a cup of hot

chocolate for my hard work, or perhaps wanted to pitch a brilliant idea for a new event that I should most definitely work into the schedule despite it being set months ahead.

Rudolph's was a short walk down the street, and it was glowing with warm light as I approached. A Christmas tree stood in the window, advertising holiday cheer, but that was Christmas Falls. Every business had to play to the tourists they wanted to lure inside. As a result, it was damn hard to find a quiet spot to enjoy a beer.

"What can I get ya?" Rudy, the manager, asked when I stepped up to the bar. He was a good-looking man with the strong body of a one-time professional athlete, but the scruff on his jaw made him look a little more at home here. He'd come to town only a couple of years ago after retiring from a hockey career.

"Whatever's on tap, as long as it's not *seasonal*."

He chuckled as he grabbed a chilled mug to pull my beer. "Just wait until the festival cocktail hours start. We're taking seasonal to a whole new level."

I sighed, resigned to the fate of my hometown during this season, but as the man pulling the strings, I could hardly complain. The festival kept this town going, and my job did the same for me.

"Just promise you'll keep my wheat beer on tap," I said.

"You got it."

I carried my beer over to the dark-wood booth where Bruce was already seated.

"You look tired," he said.

"Christ, don't say that," I said as I slid into the seat. "It's only the first day of festival season."

He grinned. "Sorry. I meant to say, you look peppy."

"Never been accused of that before," I said with a rueful smile.

“Don’t worry, Grinch. You’re in no danger of losing your nickname.”

I flipped him my middle finger and took a big gulp of beer. I’d picked up the nickname partly because I wasn’t the cheeriest festival planner and partly because I had the bad fortune of a name that started with G. The folks of Christmas Falls couldn’t resist a little good-natured ribbing.

It was done with love, so I smiled through my annoyance. Besides, it wasn’t like I didn’t bring it on myself. I was a mopey asshole at the best times, and the years since my divorce? Not my best times.

My phone rang in my pocket. I set down my beer to fish it out. “There better not be something wrong already.”

“They couldn’t pay me enough to do your job.”

“Who says they pay me enough?” I muttered as I checked the screen, relieved to see it was my sister, Jessica.

She rarely called, so I clicked Accept. “Hey, Jess. Everything okay?”

“Yeah, it’s fine. Can’t a sister call her brother?”

“I don’t know. It hasn’t happened in so long...”

“Ha-ha. As if you ever pick up the phone yourself.”

Fair point.

“What’s up?” I asked. “I’m out with a friend, and you know the holiday season is madness around here.”

“I know. Actually, I’m coming up for Thanksgiving.”

“Well, I figured.” Our parents hosted a big family gathering every Thanksgiving, and every branch of the family tree was invited to visit during the festival. Some of them left after a few days, and others stayed all the way until Christmas.

“So, I’m bringing a date with me this time,” she said.

“A date? Jess, you know Mom and Dad will never let you share a room with a boyfriend. They’re old-fashioned that way.”

“I know, which is why I was hoping he could stay with you.”

I scowled, making Bruce raise his eyebrows.

“Jess, the last thing I need right now is a houseguest. Besides,” I teased, “I don’t want to be on Mom and Dad’s shitlist for letting you sin under my roof instead of theirs.”

“I said, I was hoping *he* could stay with you. Not both of us. I’ll be with Mom to keep the natives happy.”

“I don’t know...”

“Please, Griff? It hasn’t been that long since Rob and I broke up. If I come alone, I’ll spend the whole visit with Mom and Dad worried about my *last* relationship when they could just be happy for me instead. And you *know* how Mom gets when she’s worried.”

Did I ever. I was the target of Mom’s worry more often than not.

“Yeah.” I sighed, pinching the bridge of my nose. “Work is crazy—”

“And you’ll barely know he’s there,” she promised. “He’ll sleep there, but he’s *my* date, not yours.”

I smiled wryly. It had been so long since I had a date there was no danger anyone would make that mistake. Still, my house was my only escape from the holiday cheer everyone insisted I should share. I wasn’t exactly eager to offer it up to a virtual stranger.

“Please,” Jess said when I took too long to answer. “Pretty please with a cherry on top, my favorite brother in the—”

“All right,” I blurted in exasperation. “He can stay with me.”

“Really? Thank you, Griff. You’re a lifesaver!”

Before I could second-guess my decision, she disconnected the call. I set my phone on the table and took a big gulp of my beer.

Bruce gave me a curious look, and I shook my head in resignation.

“My sister better get me a damn good present for Christmas this year.”

CHAPTER 2



LOGAN

I Poured three packets of sugar into my cup and grimaced as I took a sip. The owners of Glazed Holes in Granville, Nebraska, might make great doughnuts, but they sure knew how to ruin coffee.

Still, I needed it after my late night at The Stag Pub pouring one out with the guys of Potter Landscaping, where I'd worked as a seasonal employee the past few months. They no longer needed me on the crew, and I was beginning to feel the itch to move on anyway.

"Come back next year, and we'll play with more big equipment," one of the owners, Wes, had said with a flirty wink.

Beckett, his stepbrother and husband—and what a trip that was—had thrown a coaster at him. "You better mean a real backhoe."

"Aw, don't worry. You're the only ho I play with."

Everyone had laughed, even Beckett, though he'd shaken his head in exasperation. That their friends and employees had accepted their relationship was one of the things I loved about this quirky little town. Maybe I would come back if I didn't find another job that suited me. It wasn't as if I'd put down roots anywhere else.

It was probably a lost cause, but I added more sugar to my coffee and the one I'd ordered for Jess to go with half a dozen glazed doughnuts. Jess was going to need sugar and caffeine for the long drive ahead.

She seemed a little nervous about heading home for the holidays after a bad breakup. Apparently, her mom was the type to fret and Jess worried her sad love life would overshadow the entire holiday, so she'd lured me into playing boyfriend for a few days with the promise of finally seeing the Christmas-crazy hometown I'd heard about ever since we met.

Very few people knew it, but I had a soft spot for the holidays because they reminded me of my parents. My father had always gone all out, taking me to the parade and spending days designing the Christmas light display he'd install in our front yard. Mom had baked cookies for me to decorate, along with all kinds of holiday candy, from sweet, fluffy divinity to thick slabs of chocolate and peanut-butter fudge.

My absolute favorite memory was of my father reading me *'Twas the Night Before Christmas* and my mother tucking me into bed with promises of sugarplums dancing in my head.

But that was all before.

Before my parents died in a terrible head-on collision when their car hit a patch of ice and crossed the center line.

Before I bounced from foster home to foster home, never quite finding a place to call home.

Before I realized that I'd never have another Christmas like the one I'd had with them ever again.

It should have made me hate the holiday, maybe. But once I aged out of the system, I reclaimed the love for it that they'd instilled in me. When Christmas rolled around, I always felt closer to the people who'd loved me more than anyone else in the world.

A couple of weeks ago, I'd had one too many beers and blabbed the truth to Jess. I'd been trying to make her feel better about going to see her family, and it had worked—just not in the way I'd intended. She'd immediately insisted she had to take me to her little hometown in Illinois.

I could go as her boyfriend, Jess had said excitedly, so she could avoid her well-intentioned family's fretting over her breakup.

Fake boyfriend, obviously, because I'd never dated women and didn't plan to start now. I wasn't so sure I wanted to be the fake kind, either, but I'd been too curious about the town of Christmas Falls to say no.

So here I was in Glazed Holes, picking up a few supplies before we hit the road, unsure if I'd ever return but knowing I'd never forget this quirky little place. Maybe I'd come back next summer for more work, or maybe I'd find a better opportunity up near Christmas Falls since it was only a few hours' drive from a number of larger cities. Either way, I'd miss being able to grab a doughnut at a place with the name Glazed Holes, of all things, or do my grocery shopping at Meat Market.

I'd miss working at Beaver Hole Park.

My inner twelve-year-old boy snickered whenever I saw any of them. It didn't matter what was going through my head; I'd see the sign for Glazed Holes and instantly smile. That was the magic of this place.

Christmas Falls had a lot to live up to. But really, I never stayed anywhere. Maybe it was because I was a foster kid, but I never really felt settled for long. Or maybe that's just what happened when you lost your whole world in one night.

Miles Sinclair watched me from behind the cash register. "Need some cream?"

"Ugh, yes. Please."

He reached for the creamer instead of hitting me with the innuendo I'd come to expect from him.

"Damn, I don't even get a come-on?" I ran a hand through my messy sandy hair. "I know I rolled out of bed early, but toss a guy a bone, will ya?"

"Sorry," Miles said. "I'm just distracted this morning, but you know you're as gorgeous as ever. I promise the next time I see you there will be cream and bones for everyone."

I chuckled. "Well, thanks, but I'm actually headed out of town. I'm not sure if I'll be back. I'm going up for a holiday

vacay in a little town near Chicago and since I'm between jobs..."

"Aw, say it ain't so," Miles said. "It's been a treat to have you around. Especially since you're not coupled up yet and I can flirt with you guilt-free." He winked at me. "I get dirty looks from half the town whenever I hit on Hunter Rhodes. I can never tell if the women are judging me or just jealous that they can't take a swing at him now that he's living with that adorable Clark Fletcher."

The door opened, letting in a chilly breeze, along with a grumpy-looking Jess.

"I've changed my mind," she said dramatically. "We should hibernate for the rest of winter."

I took one of the creamers Miles offered me and dumped it into a coffee cup then held it out to her. She flinched away as if it were poison. "Oh hell no, I'm not drinking that toxic waste."

"Harsh," Miles said, sounding entirely unbothered.

Everyone knew their coffee was crap, even them. It had almost become a strange point of pride. Despite how bad it was, people regularly ordered it as if they couldn't believe it could be so bad *every day*—or maybe it was a challenge to see if they could tolerate it. Whatever the case, Miles and Jake showed no signs of wanting to improve their brewing skills.

Jess grabbed the bag of doughnuts off the counter and pulled one out, taking a big ravenous bite that honestly was a little scary. She was not a morning person.

I pushed the coffee at her again. "You need caffeine."

"Ugh, fine." She took a gulp, pulled a face, then took another and sighed. "Let's hit the road and get this over with."

I mouthed a silent apology to Miles for her rudeness, though he didn't seem offended, and grabbed my duffel bag from the floor beside the coffee station.

Once we were in the car, I turned to Jess. "What's up? I thought you were excited to show me Christmas Falls."

“I am. It’s just...ugh, it’s too embarrassing to tell you.”

“C’mon, Jess, if you can’t tell your boyfriend, who can you tell?”

She gave me a weak laugh as she started up the car and reversed out of the angled parking on Main Street. “Well, if you must know, dearest, I drunk-dialed another man last night. The one who was *actually* my boyfriend. I left a truly horrifying message.”

“It probably wasn’t that bad.”

“Oh, it was. I’d had a lot of wine.” She flipped on the blinker with excessive force and turned onto the road that would eventually take us out of town. “Anyway, long story short, he didn’t call me back. So I guess I know where I stand.”

I winced. “Ouch. Sorry, babe.”

“It was stupid,” she said with a hard shake of her head. “We had something good, and I left it behind for a management position. I should have known long-distance couldn’t last. I mean...how long was he supposed to wait to become a priority? I’m an idiot.”

Jess had told me a little of her history. The fact that the man she loved was in Chicago, a handful of hours from her hometown, probably wasn’t helping. He’d be so close and yet still unreachable.

“Hey, you put yourself first,” I said gently. “That’s not a bad thing.”

She waved a hand. “I’m sure you don’t need to hear about all this anyway. You’re my boyfriend now.” She gave me a saucy grin. It was a bit forced, but I could tell she wanted out of her funk, and I wasn’t going to push her to spill all her regrets.

“Don’t get any ideas, lady. I may be your boyfriend, but I’m not that kind of boy.”

She pouted out her bottom lip. “Bummer. You’re pretty hot.”

“I know.” I ran a hand through my hair. “Miles almost always flirts with me.”

“Only almost?” She chuckled. “Guess you have some work to do.”

“Mean.”

“Aw, sorry, sweetie. I meant to say, you’re the most precious man in the world, and Miles would be lucky to even be in the same room. Better?”

“Much.” I lifted my coffee and nearly spit it back out. “But if you love me, you’ll find a gas station so we can get something to drink that doesn’t taste like battery acid.”

“Now you admit it’s terrible,” she muttered. “Way to make me look like an asshole in front of Miles.”

I smiled at her. “You do that all by yourself.”

She laughed. “Watch it, or there’s going to be a breakup before we get to Christmas Falls.”

“Eh, it’s a six-hour drive. Plenty of time to make up again,” I said with a wink.

“Ooh, I’ve heard makeup sex is the hottest.”

“Don’t push your luck.”

She sighed dramatically. “Fine. You’ll be my very platonic date who stays with my brother instead of me.”

“I’m not staying with you?” I asked, surprised.

“My parents’ house is overflowing with visiting family members, and they’re a bit traditional so they wouldn’t want us sharing a bed anyway.”

I should have considered where I’d be staying before now. I’d just assumed we’d get a B&B or something, though that was the thinking of someone without family. Of course Jess would opt to stay with her parents.

“Are you sure your brother is okay with having a stranger in his home?” I asked. “I’m not really comfortable staying somewhere I’m not welcome.”

“I called and asked, and he said it was okay, but Griff can be a little standoffish. If that will bother you, I can ask Mom if she’ll make an exception. The house is pretty full, but we might be able to find you a spare couch or a sleeping bag for the floor or something.”

“No,” I said quickly. “That’s okay. I’m sure it’ll be fine.”

I felt a bit awkward about staying with Griff, but imposing on one guy sounded a hell of a lot better than staying with another family that didn’t have room for me in their lives.

I just hoped seeing Christmas Falls was worth the trouble.

CHAPTER 3



GRIFF

“WE’VE GOT TO BUMP YOU UP IN THE PARADE LINEUP BECAUSE the reindeer float has a glitch. Hank is working on it, and we hope it pans out, but I can’t chance a dead spot right behind our parade marshal. Everyone’s eyes are going to be on Jem Knight.”

We’d only scored Jem for the role because he’d torn his tricep, ending his season with the Charleston Condors early.

“Sure, I understand,” Arlo Harper said, always easygoing and happy to help, which was probably why he made such a great B&B owner. “I can make it work.”

“I really appreciate you being flexible. I *detest* rearranging plans like this. It opens us up to other fumbles, but better safe than sorry, right?”

“Right! Hey, the parade will be fantastic, and I can’t say I’m sad to get a better position to promote the Gingerbread Cottage.”

Arlo’s B&B was a hot ticket in Christmas Falls during festival season, so I knew he didn’t really need to advertise his quaint cottage, but I appreciated his positive attitude.

My phone beeped, the screen displaying an incoming call from my mother. I glanced at the time, after 4 p.m. already, and winced. The day had flown by with the festival occupying so much head space, which was just the distraction I needed from thinking about the unanswered call to my ex-wife’s house, where I’d left an awkward message to wish my two children, Jonas and Rissa, a Happy Thanksgiving.

I already knew I wouldn't get a call back. That's just how things went these days.

"Thanks again, Arlo," I said. "I've got to take this call. My mother doesn't care how many last-minute lineup changes I've got to deal with. She'll flat-out kill me if I don't make it over there in time for pie."

Arlo chuckled. "As she should! You need to make more time for yourself, Griff."

"Yeah, well, this festival doesn't organize itself."

"We thank you for your service," he said in a grave voice, the tone similar to the way someone would thank a member of the armed forces.

"Bah-humbug," I replied, knowing Arlo was just teasing me for how seriously I took my job.

Maybe I *did* go the extra mile—or thousand, as it were—but no one would be complaining tomorrow when they were sitting in their lawn chairs up and down Christmas Boulevard, cozy under mounds of blankets while they watched the Parade of Lights brighten the sky.

They'd be delighted by the gingerbread house float Arlo pulled behind a pickup and wowed by the larger semis with elaborate light displays that appeared to dance through the night. What they wouldn't be was disappointed that their favorite hometown football star was followed by a spot of darkness due to a glitchy float.

Jem would be a highlight of the parade, and I intended for our event to do him justice.

I clicked the Answer button. "On my way, Mom."

"Griff." She sighed. "Every darn year."

"I know. We should move the festival away from the holidays. Oh, wait..."

"You watch that smart tone with me, young man. You may be forty-three, but I can still kick your butt."

I laughed. “All right, I’m sorry. I’ll be right over, and I promise to eat a whole heaping plate of leftovers *and* two-thirds of your chocolate-pecan pie.”

“Oh, you think we saved that for you?” She chuckled. “You snooze, you lose.”

I gasped. “Mom!”

She laughed, her voice fond as she said, “Oh, you know I saved you some, so get your butt over here, mister.”

The drive from festival headquarters, a warehouse for festival decorations and supplies, float assemblies, and office space for administrative work—namely my job—to my mother’s home took less than ten minutes.

When I arrived, the small bungalow was lit up with hundreds of lights. I cursed under my breath, not because my parents going all out surprised me, but because Dad was too old to be climbing ladders. It looked as if he’d added some more damn elves to the roof. Christ. If he fell and broke his neck, all in the name of *another freaking elf*...

It was no secret that the Christmas season was all work, no play for me. But I’d given them the number of Hank, my go-to guy for odd jobs and offered to pay for the installation of their lights. Dad had just shaken his head and said, *We make our own holiday magic, Griffin. We don’t hire it out.*

To which I’d responded, *I hire out most of the festival that keeps this town alive.*

Not that it’d done any good. Why must they be so stubborn?

I grabbed the package of Kona coffee on my front seat, as well as a bottle of wine I knew Mom and Jess would enjoy later this evening, and headed for the door. I was still muttering under my breath about stubborn parents and excessive light treatments when the door opened and a jaw-droppingly gorgeous man stepped out.

He nearly knocked me over, and he grabbed my arm to steady me, his grip so strong it sent a shiver down my spine.

“Sorry about that.” His voice was as smooth as the most delicious cup of dark roast. “I just needed a bit of fresh air.”

“Yeah, I don’t blame you. It gets a bit claustrophobic in there...with... uh...”

I trailed off as I looked into his blue eyes, feeling as if the ground beneath my feet had shifted.

Christmas Falls was a small town, and I knew every single year-round resident. There were a fair number of tourists, of course, so I regularly saw strangers downtown. On my mother’s porch? Not so much. But there were a number of aunts, uncles, and cousins who descended on us every holiday season.

I tugged at the scarf wound around my neck above the collar of my black wool coat, suddenly finding it difficult to breathe. “Please tell me you’re not Lena’s new husband?”

His lips quirked. “No, I’m not.”

“Well, you can’t be Penny’s fiancé.”

“Nope.”

“*Good.*” The word came out just a touch too emphatic.

The Adonis standing before me—hair a sandy color with a slight wave that gave him a bedhead vibe that was sexy instead of messy, broad shoulders and toned arms that were evident through the clingy Henley he wore, and sinfully smiling lips—looked as if he knew exactly why I was so relieved.

So I was attracted to a man. Sue me. It had been a long time since someone had taken my breath away at first glance. Not that I was that superficial. I dated people who were more than just sexy shells. But damn, this man had a *sexy* shell, and I was human, after all. It had been months since I’d been laid and *years* since I’d actually had a *good* lay.

He thrust out his hand, and I fumbled my coffee and wine under one arm so I could grasp his palm, which was so big it enveloped my more slender fingers. I felt the calluses of a working man.

“Why *are* you here, then?” I asked. “On my mother’s porch, I mean.”

His eyes widened a touch. “Oh, you’re the brother. I should have realized...”

The brother.

Blame the sex pheromones or my poor neglected libido, but it took me longer than it should have for his meaning to sink in.

My heart dropped and my stomach twisted.

“You’re here with Jess.” I looked down to see our hands were still connected, and I hastily pulled away. “You’re the new boyfriend?”

He looked away, a frown tugging at full lips that looked incredibly soft and inviting—

Stop it, Griff! Stop lusting after your sister’s boyfriend.

“We drove up today,” he said, his bright smile a little strained. “I’m Logan.”

God, had he seen how interested I was? Probably not. Most straight men didn’t look for those signs. But I could have sworn he was sending me some signals of his own before he realized who I was.

“Right, of course. Jess told me about you. You’re going to be staying at my place.”

“I hope it’s not too much trouble,” he said, his smile shifting into something more genuine, crooked and charming, and one adorable dimple popping in his cheek.

“No,” I lied. “No trouble at all.”

CHAPTER 4



LOGAN

“I SCORED YOU THE LAST PIECE OF PIE.” JESS HELD OUT A paper plate decorated with gingerbread men. “It’s Griff’s favorite, so I had to do battle to get it.”

“Oh, you didn’t have to do that...”

Jess perched on the arm of the recliner I’d claimed in the corner of the living room, half behind the Christmas tree. I’d been gazing into the lights, trying to feel something of the joy I’d gotten from being with my family as a child, but instead I felt like an imposter. I was surrounded by a lovely family. The house was full of chatter and laughter. But I wasn’t one of them.

I wasn’t even the real boyfriend of one of them.

Just a guy who didn’t belong.

This was why I’d stopped trying with my foster families. Sometimes, being alone in a group was worse than being on your own.

Jess pushed the plate into my hands. “Take it, Logan. You’ll be doing him a favor. He’s already had two pieces. Probably to sweeten that toxic coffee he likes.”

I chuckled. I’d had a cup of the dark roast Griff had brewed in his mother’s kitchen, and it was *strong* and bitter. But somehow that seemed to fit the tall, dark, and handsome—but glowering—man.

When we met on the porch, he hadn’t glowered, though. His dark gaze had caught mine, lingering long enough to give

away his interest. Of course, the slow perusal of my body had been pretty obvious, too. He'd seemed the tiniest bit flustered and then dismayed when he discovered I was not only his sister's date, but his houseguest.

He'd gone inside right after, mumbling something about his mother and pie, and I'd continued my stroll around the house, catching a much-needed breather from the chaos within.

The meal had been *great*. Turkey and all the fixings, including the best apple-pecan stuffing I'd ever eaten. There'd been enough food to make us all need a larger size of pants and a good, long nap.

Jess's parents had greeted me with genuine warmth, easily accepting one more guest into their full house. Though it was no wonder there'd be no room for me to stay overnight.

I dug into the piece of pie Jess brought me, even though the last thing I needed was *more* sugar. She ran her hand through my hair, startling me.

"Act natural," she muttered. "I'd like people to actually *believe* you're my boyfriend."

I winced. "Sorry? I never claimed to be a good actor."

"That's for sure."

When Jess had first introduced me as her boyfriend, one of her cousins had openly teased me about how quickly I must have moved in when her relationship ended. Her ex lived in Chicago, but they'd maintained a long-distance relationship for nearly a year before admitting it was no longer working.

And that joke was just one indication of why Jess thought she needed a fake boyfriend buffer. The other had been her mother unsubtly mentioning that Jess's high school sweetheart, Blake, was in town for the holidays too, while her father shook his head in confusion, muttering, "It just doesn't make sense to give up on Rob."

"Dad," Jess had protested, "Logan is *right* here."

“Sorry, son, I’m sure you’re perfectly nice,” her dad said. “It’s just that she and Rob were together a long time.”

“A very long time,” her mother added with a wistful sigh.

Clearly, Jess’s ploy of passing me off as her boyfriend was less convincing than she’d hoped it would be. It probably didn’t help that I was more attracted to her brother, my gaze drawn to him again and again throughout the night. There was something quiet and intense about him that intrigued me. But...seeing as he thought I was dating Jess, there’d be no exploring how that intensity played out in the bedroom. Unless...

“Do you think Griff believes our story?” I asked her now.

She glanced at her brother, who was texting on his phone, a rather focused expression on his face for someone enjoying pie and coffee on a holiday.

“Yeah, I do. Griff is smart and resourceful, but he puts all his energy into his work. I wouldn’t say he’s *perceptive* when it comes to people or their emotions. He tends to take things at face value.”

“Not always a bad thing,” I said.

“I guess.” She shrugged, before turning to me with narrowed eyes. “Why? Thinking of throwing me over already?”

“Would you let me?”

“Hell no,” she said with a laugh.

My brow arched with intrigue. “If I wasn’t your ‘boyfriend,’ would *he*?”

“Be into you? Maybe. He’s bi. But don’t even think about it. You saw how awkward it is with my parents. It’d be ten times worse if they found out I was single. Dad would brood over my broken heart or maybe even go confront Rob about why he hurt his baby girl, and Mom would go into matchmaker mode and try to find me the perfect guy.”

“Even though you don’t live here?”

“That would be a plus in her book. What better way to lure me back?”

I grimaced. “Tough crowd.”

“They mean well.” Jess’s annoyance softened into affection. “I couldn’t ask for a more loving family. They’re invested in my happiness.” She bent close to my ear, as if she were whispering sweet nothings to me. “Better to bring the perfect man myself and save us all the trouble, don’t you think?”

“If you say so.”

“I do, so no hitting on my brother.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I said with a chuckle. “I’m just here for the free food and the holiday fun.”

“And to emotionally support your best friend,” she said pointedly.

“Right, right. That too.”

Griff disappeared from view as I finished my pie. Jess swiped her thumb over the corner of my mouth. “You missed a spot.”

“You’re enjoying this,” I accused.

“Just a little,” she said. “Don’t worry though. You’re not my type.”

“Harsh. I’m everyone’s type.”

Jess snorted a little laugh. “Yeah, you kind of are. You sexy jerk.”

Beside us, someone cleared their throat. I glanced up—and directly into Griff’s eyes. He shuffled his feet, seeming uncomfortable.

“Sorry to interrupt, but I’m headed home. Did you want to bring Logan over later or...”

I jumped up so fast I nearly dislodged Jess from her perch. “I’ll go now.”

“Are you sure?” Jess asked. “We’ll heat up more leftovers soon. Watch a movie, maybe.”

“Ugh, I can’t eat anymore,” I said.

Griff chuckled. “You’re a lightweight around here, then.”

I nodded. “It’s been a long time since I’ve been at a holiday dinner like this. I haven’t properly trained for the food Olympics.”

“Well, you’ll get plenty of practice,” he said. “There’s no way Mom is letting us go without a container of leftovers.”

Griff left to say his goodbyes and patiently wait while his mother packed leftovers, as promised, and I collected my coat and duffel bag from the alcove off the front hall. Jess came with me, then gave me a tight hug at the front door.

“Thanks again for being here with me.”

I grinned. “Free holiday for me, right?”

“Right. You deserve a proper vacation. No job hunting while you’re here.”

“I should put out some feelers. I’m going to have to eat into my savings to replace my pickup.” The engine had blown a head gasket, and the repair cost hadn’t been worth it on such an old vehicle. I’d sold it for scrap and resolved to find something reasonable, but my savings were modest at best. Working paycheck to paycheck, I didn’t have a lot of opportunity to stockpile wealth, even though I lived a relatively thrifty lifestyle.

“Nope, not happening,” Jess said sternly. “You never take a break, and we agreed you’d enjoy at least five days of holiday fun.”

I heaved a put-upon sigh. “Fine.”

“Thank you.” She wrinkled her nose. “I’m sorry you can’t sleep here though. We could stay up late and whisper secrets and sneak more pie in the middle of the night.”

My eyebrow arched. “There’s *more* pie?”

“Mom always makes an extra and hides it,” she said casually, as if it were nothing. But really, she didn’t know how precious it was.

A soft ache flared in my chest. “You’ve got a great family.”

“Yeah, I do.” Her eyes were filled with too much understanding. “I’m happy to share them with you.”

“I don’t think it really works that way,” I said. “But if you mean your hot brother, then maybe...”

She whacked my arm, and I laughed. As much as I liked teasing her, I had no intention of jumping Griff. The man thought I was dating his sister. He’d either be horrified by my actions, or I’d be horrified by his. It was a no-win scenario.

But a little extra eye candy for my weekend, a little harmless flirting, and a chance to share the holidays with someone? I wouldn’t say no to that.

CHAPTER 5



GRIFF

WE STEPPED OUT ONTO THE PORCH, AND LOGAN'S EYES WENT comically round as he took in the view of Christmas Falls at night. I braced for the inevitable commentary on the twinkling lights illuminating every house on the block. At least two of them were moving musical displays with enough flashing to give someone a seizure if they weren't careful. Across the street, Meredith Adams had put out an inflatable train driven by Santa.

Logan's lips quirked in a bemused smile.

"C'mon, let's get going," I said. "You can ooh and ahh from the car as we drive through town."

Logan turned his gaze on me, just a touch too perceptive. "You see this all the time. I doubt it's very exciting to you anymore."

"Something like that." I started down the steps, and he followed me to my silver Toyota Camry.

Once we'd both buckled up, I started the car, Logan just a little too *present* in the seat next to me. The spicy scent of his cologne drifted over, making me aware of him in a way I should *not* be aware of my sister's boyfriend. When he spoke, his soft voice was an intimate curl of sound that raised goosebumps on my skin.

Fucking hell. It just figured that I'd go years without meeting anyone that truly stirred me—then immediately get the hots for my sister's date. Fate was a cruel bitch.

While I drove the six blocks to my house—which included a stretch of downtown Christmas Boulevard—Logan swiveled his head side to side, eyes wide as he tried to take in everything. The quaint shops with holiday-themed names like Season’s Readings, Jolly Java, Santa’s Workshop, and Tidings & Joy. The plate-glass windows, some frosted with fake snow and others lit up to display Christmas trees, reindeer, gnomes, and other kitschy crap. The street signs wrapped in garland and topped with illuminated red bows.

Logan seemed enamored, but he hadn’t been too annoying. He didn’t yammer on excitedly as some folks did. So I decided it would be too rude, even for me, to remain silent the entire drive when he was so obviously curious about his surroundings.

I gestured out the passenger window. “This is where the parade route will run tomorrow, if you’re interested in that sort of thing.”

He chuckled. “Of course I am. But are we talking Macy’s Day Parade or a small-town trail of cars to promote business?”

“Well, this isn’t New York,” I said dryly. “But I like to think our parade is something special.”

“I’ll make sure to get a good spot then,” he said. “I guess you’re probably not going? You don’t seem too into all this holiday stuff.”

I reached Prancer Street and took a left, because yes, even our street names were ridiculous. The rearview mirror danced with the twinkling lights behind us. Not *every* block of houses was lit up like...well, like Christmas, especially as you got farther from the downtown area where tourists flocked, but most of them were.

“Oh, I’ll be there,” I said. “It’s pretty much required attendance or you lose your Christmas Falls residency card.”

Logan gave me a surprised look before he laughed. “Yeah, right. Tease the new guy.”

I shrugged a shoulder, warmth unfurling in my gut. I liked making him laugh. Liked the way his face lit up and his eyes

crinkled at the corners and his mouth widened.

Liked it too damn much for anything good to come of it.

“I’m just making sure you’re properly initiated,” I said with a small grin I couldn’t suppress. “You might be charmed by all this holiday magic and decide to move here. You should know what you’re in for.”

“Do you think Jess would want to move back?”

Jess. As in my sister, his girlfriend.

My smile died a shameful death.

“Ah. I don’t know.” I considered it. “She’s been driven by her career, and there’s only so far you can go here. Folks who live here, they usually do it for other reasons.”

“Like what? Why did you choose to stay?”

I turned onto my street. “I didn’t. I left for college. Stayed away for nearly twenty years. Only came back after.”

“Why—”

“This is my house,” I interrupted, not wanting to get into the pitiful story of my divorce or my misguided hope that the Christmas Falls magic might help repair the relationship with my children. It hadn’t.

“Why am I not surprised you’re the only dark house on the street?”

I started to answer but was distracted by the group of people I spotted on the sidewalk, Santa hats on their heads, bells swinging from their hands. Only a single light illuminated my porch, but that wasn’t stopping them from traipsing across my lawn toward the steps.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake!” I growled. “It’s not time for caroling yet. There’s a sign-up for that.”

I work my ass off every year to make a coordinated schedule that kept Christmas Falls vibrant and hopping for the whole season, so there was always plenty for tourists to see and do. When people ignored it...

I huffed and flipped my blinker on a little too aggressively, then made the turn into my darkened driveway.

“You have a sign-up for caroling?” Logan sounded incredulous.

“Welcome to Christmas Falls,” I said dryly.

I opened my door and stepped out. “Hey! No one’s home.”

A chorus of ringing bells greeted me, and Rebecca Lively, the head troublemaker of the bunch, grinned at me. “Hey, Grinch! You know we had to come *try* to cheer you up.”

Logan joined me in front of the car, duffel bag over his shoulder. “Grinch?”

“It’s nothing,” I said, starting toward the porch. I wasn’t going to be held hostage by a bunch of cheery carolers. If I let this bunch have their way, I’d be inundated with them all season long, and there was only so much fa-la-la’ing a guy could take.

“Which song do you want to hear?” Rebecca asked, a cheeky tone to her voice because she knew very well I had no interest.

“I’m going inside,” I said. “Maybe you should try Paul or Lila’s place. You know they love this stuff.”

Rebecca’s smile widened. “And what about your friend here?”

There was a subtle question in the phrase. I reluctantly introduced them so that there wouldn’t be rumors I was bringing home hot men for a tumble in the sheets. Not that I’d mind such a rumor, but Jess and Logan might not appreciate it. And Christmas Falls was nothing if not gossip-central among its core residents.

“This is Logan. He came up with Jess from Nebraska. He’s just crashing with me because my mother’s house is overflowing. You know how it gets this time of year.”

Rebecca chuckled. “I do.” She turned her gaze toward Logan. “So, would you like a song?”

Logan glanced at me hesitantly. “Uh, this is Griff’s place, so it’s really up to him.”

“If one of you doesn’t choose a song, we’ll be forced to sing *You’re a Mean One, Mr. Grinch*.”

I scowled. “Well, we can’t have that. Go on, Logan. I can tell you’re dying to be serenaded.”

Logan chuckled. “Uh, well, I have always enjoyed *White Christmas*.”

There were worse songs to choose, I supposed. It had a certain wistful quality that spoke to me, even as it was delivered by our smiling, ornery carolers.

When they finished, I noticed Logan blinking hard. Hell. Was he actually moved to tears? I wondered, suddenly, why he chose that song in particular and if there was a reason beyond it sounding nice.

“Thank you, Rebecca,” I said, since Logan seemed to need a minute to compose himself.

She smiled wide. “Oh no, thank you. I can’t wait to tell everyone we finally got Grinch to let us sing for him.”

“Please don’t,” I said.

She cackled with delight as she went down the steps, taking her merry troupe with her. “Just try to stop me!”

Logan slanted me a small, bemused smile. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to get in the middle of your festive feud.”

I rolled my eyes.

“Dashing debates?” he tried.

I shook my head.

“Cheery chaos?”

I pulled open the door. “Get inside. I can tell already you’re going to be trouble.”

Logan wiggled his brows, smile widening. “Maybe you need a little trouble in your life.”

His flirty tone worked on me, even though I was pretty sure he was just trying to hide his reaction to that song. When he brushed past me, tingles trailed behind at each point of contact. Yeah, I was pretty sure Logan was exactly the kind of trouble I did not need.

I might have been a shit husband and an inadequate father. I might be the grumpiest holiday festival coordinator in history. But I was a halfway decent brother, so I valiantly averted my eyes as I followed him inside instead of admiring what I was sure was a gorgeous ass.

I will not lust after my sister's boyfriend, I told myself sternly. I will not dream of letting him make my days merry and bright.

CHAPTER 6



LOGAN

GRIFFIN'S HOUSE WAS NICE ENOUGH, WITH THICK, SOFT carpeting and dark leather furniture. There were three books stacked on an end table, biographies and historical fiction, by the looks of them. Maybe I'd borrow one if I had trouble sleeping.

A few family photos sat propped on the fireplace mantel. One of his parents and one of him and Jess, but my gaze caught on the third, showing a younger Griff with two children, a girl and a boy.

"You live alone here?" I checked.

He shut the door with a click, then flipped the lock. "Yes, but I've got a guest room." His gaze caught on the photos before me. "Those are my kids, Jonas and Rissa. They live in California with their mother."

"Oh, sorry. I wasn't trying to pry."

"That's all right. I put their pictures up because they're important to me." He sighed. "I wish they were here, but family is complicated."

"Yeah," I agreed.

I might not have my own family, but I'd seen enough in my foster kid days to know that much was true. It was complicated, sometimes messy, but on rare occasions, really wonderful. Those were the times it hurt the most, seeing what was just out of reach.

Griff nodded toward the hall, changing the subject. “How about I show you to your room?”

“Yeah, thanks. I hope it’s not too much trouble having me here.”

“It’s no problem. I’m sure you’d be happier staying with Jess, but Mom and Dad are a bit too traditional to have their baby girl sharing a bed with her boyfriend, even if she is in her thirties. Put a ring on her finger, and it’s a different story.”

I gave an awkward laugh. “Uh, well, it’s a new relationship...”

“Right.” Griff gave me a tight smile. “Let me give you the penny tour.”

“Wow, not even worth a nickel?”

“Nothing exciting enough for that.”

He strode down the hall ahead of me, and as I followed, gaze drawn from his thick head of hair to his slim hips and pert ass, I couldn’t help thinking the view was worth a lot more than a nickel. Not that I could let him know it.

He pointed to a door on his right. “Bathroom, should you need it.”

“I probably should shower,” I said. “We hit the road pretty early.”

He paused, glancing over his shoulder at me, and I could practically read the thoughts going through his eyes. The man was picturing me naked.

“You in the shower,” he said, voice strangled. “Yes, you should...” He paused to clear his throat. “There are spare towels under the sink. Let me know if you need anything.”

Like a back scrub? Tempting...

He continued a few feet farther and opened a door on his left. A full-sized bed sat in the center of the room, covered in a midnight blue duvet. A mahogany dresser took up most of one wall.

“This is your room.”

I set my duffel on the bed. “Thanks. This is great.”

“Just make yourself at home. The kitchen is on the other side of the living room. If you want anything from the fridge, grab it.”

Just make yourself at home. Such a casual, everyday phrase and yet...I wouldn't even begin to know what it meant to have a real home.

“I know it's not all that late, but I've got a full day of work ahead of me tomorrow, so if I don't see you again...”

“No worries. I'm sure Jess will have plenty of plans for me.”

“Right. Christmas Falls can be a lot when festival season kicks off.” He rapped his knuckles on the doorframe. “Better get your beauty sleep.”

I resisted the urge to ask whether he thought I really needed it. That would be playing with fire. Because, *damn*, he sure didn't need any help in the beauty department himself. The man's dark hair and eyes gave him a distinguished air, but with an edge of mystery. Even his grumpiness was strangely attractive. Instead of putting me off, it only made me want to crack open that shell and see what was inside.

That would put a bit of a kink in Jess's plans to pass me off as her boyfriend, so I resisted, just barely.

After he left, I unpacked—which took all of five minutes—then showered and climbed into bed. I wasn't sure how I would sleep. As someone who floated from place to place, I generally adapted to most environments pretty easily. But I'd never been all that comfortable as a houseguest. I always worried I was intruding, probably thanks to leftover foster kid insecurities.

Jess and I had hit the road early though, and after texting with her for a few minutes, in which she sent me photos of the pie and mulled wine I was missing out on, my eyelids drooped.

I plugged my phone into the charger, closed my eyes, and the next thing I knew, it was morning.

Early morning, because my recent working hours had reprogrammed my internal clock—possibly forever. I picked up my phone and scrolled through social media, replying to a few messages from my old crew in Granville.

WES

Is it as Christmasy as you expected?

BECKETT

Pics or it didn't happen

LOGAN

I don't recall you providing pics when you got married in Vegas

WES

Beck wouldn't let me send out the sex tapes

BECKETT

Funny

LOGAN

I'll send you something later. But to answer your question, I only saw the town for about ten minutes last night, and the answer is hell yes. So much Xmas!

I tugged on a pair of sweats and ventured into the kitchen, stopping short when I saw Griff. He had his back turned to me as he poured a mug of coffee. He was dressed already, wearing a pair of charcoal slacks that clung to his ass in ways no respectable piece of clothing should. His black dress shirt wasn't exactly making him look bad either, hugging his slender torso.

Stop it. This man is off-limits.

I cleared my throat, and Griffin stilled, as if startled, then glanced over his shoulder. His gaze hit my chest and stuck

there for a moment, making me aware I'd not bothered with a shirt. I'd expected to find the kitchen empty at this hour.

"You're up early," he said. "Never thought Jess would put up with a morning person."

"Ah. Yeah. Well, my last job was landscaping, so..."

Griffin's gaze returned to my chest, this time sweeping over my arms and stomach too. "I guess that explains why you're in such great shape."

My skin prickled under his regard. *Damn*. I raised a hand to the back of my hot neck, rubbing at it. "I, uh, have worked a lot of jobs, but I guess most of them have been manual labor, yeah. Some construction. Some landscaping. Other odd jobs."

Griff tore his gaze away. "Well, I've got coffee brewing. Do you want breakfast? I have to leave soon, but I could—"

A knock on the door interrupted him.

"Ah, that's probably Jess," he said.

Did I imagine the disappointment in his voice? I didn't think so. The sinking sensation in my gut was definitely not my imagination either. Did Jess really have to get up so early? I'd half expected her to sleep away the day after all that wine.

"I need coffee," she blurted the second she came in, blowing right by Griff and making a beeline for the kitchen counter.

"Sure, help yourself," he said, sounding a little bemused.

"I have a pounding headache," she confessed, "but I had to get out of that house. People *everywhere*. Doesn't anyone want to sleep anymore? This is vacation!"

Jess was gesticulating wildly with one hand while she poured coffee from the carafe with the other. She lifted the full cup to her mouth, took a gulp, and then winced. "Shit, that's hot."

"That's generally how people like to drink it," Griff said dryly.

She glanced toward me, gaze landing on my chest. Damn, I was really regretting not pulling on a shirt this morning. “Shit, Logan, you’re hot.”

Griffin snorted. “Is that a surprise to you?”

“I-I mean...”

I laughed. “Jess never makes any sense before she has her coffee. I’ll go get dressed. We should get out of Griffin’s hair, right, babe?”

She nodded. “Oh, definitely. I’ve got big plans for you.” She wiggled her eyebrows. “Dress warm though. The wind is freezing today.”

“You got it.”

As I started to pass Griff, he put a hand on my arm. I froze, my heart lurching. I half feared he’d call out our bad performance, half wished he would. If the charade ended, maybe...

“I’ve got to get going. I noticed your jacket last night was a bit thin. Feel free to borrow something from the closet. It might be tight across the shoulders, but it’ll do until you can buy something else.”

“Thanks.”

Griff squeezed my arm, then looked down with alarm, as if just realizing he was touching me. He pulled back quickly before turning for the door. “Bye, you two. Have fun!”

Jess was watching me over the rim of her coffee cup when I finally dragged my gaze from where he’d high-tailed it out of his own house.

“What?”

“I’ve never seen my brother so touchy-feely before. You didn’t...”

“Didn’t what?”

“You *know*,” she said, giving me a pointed look that was clearly asking if we’d hooked up.

“Of course not,” I protested, even as the thought sent a sizzle of interest through me. “He thinks we’re dating.”

She nodded. “Yeah, no. Griff wouldn’t.”

“And you think I would?” I didn’t know whether to be offended or flattered that she believed I could seduce him so quickly.

“Well, you’re not really my boyfriend.”

“I’m aware,” I said dryly. “Speaking of that, though, how did it go after I left?”

She brightened. “Actually, it was really good. We drank wine and talked and laughed, and Mom didn’t fret over my love life even *once*.”

“So it was worth the trouble,” I said, glad to hear Jess had a nice time with her family. That was the point of all this fake boyfriend business, after all.

“Yeah. I’ve never seen Mom so relaxed.” She rubbed at her temples. “Though I’m going to pay for all that wine today.”

“We could take it easy,” I suggested. “Just chill and watch movies.”

“Are you kidding? I dragged you here for the ultimate holiday experience, not to nurse my hangover. Go get dressed, Logan. We’re gonna fill you with so much Christmas cheer you want to burst.”

“That sounds dirty.”

She snorted, then winced. “Don’t make me laugh. Just get ready. I’m dying for a cranberry muffin from Ginger’s Breads. If anything can make me feel better, that will. Oh, and a hot chocolate at Jolly Java. It’s the best.”

“Is this going to be a tour of the town or just its food?” I joked.

“Both,” she said, eyes bright despite the hangover. “I’ve missed so much stuff. You’re gonna love it, Logan. I just know it.”

Her excitement was infectious, and I found myself smiling back, my earlier disappointment that I didn't get to spend a few more minutes alone with Griff fading away. He was a handsome distraction, but he wasn't the reason I was here.

I still remembered the joy I'd felt with my parents each holiday season. Though I'd never entirely recapture that feeling, I did my best to honor the faint memories I had of my family by decorating, listening to holiday music—songs like *White Christmas* and *Silver Bells* that we'd sung together while my mother had played the piano—and wrapping up gifts to put under the tree, even if they were only for me.

But here, where Christmas had virtually taken over the entire town? Well, here, I wouldn't have to try so hard to feel close to those memories. Even if it only delivered a small fraction of the joy I'd felt as a child, it'd be well worth the trip.

CHAPTER 7



GRIFF

MY BREATH PUFFED OUT IN A CLOUD OF VAPOR, ILLUMINATED by the glow of the tablet in my hands. My gaze flicked from the parade route and moving dots on the screen illustrating where the lead float was, along with a timer for the length of the event, to the waiting volunteers in our staging area. The actual Parade of Lights happening off-screen was a beautiful spectacle, but one I'd only caught a few glimpses of when I'd checked in with my assistant, Paige, who was live-streaming the event for the city.

Beside me, a semitruck idled, the flatbed behind it holding an elves workshop all lit up in green and white lights. Volunteers were ready with bags of candy and miniature toys like tops and yo-yos to throw to the crowd.

I held up my hand, a signal for them to wait, watching the dance troupe ahead to get the timing right. The parade was running a little faster than planned, so these kids dressed in a mix of Santa hats, reindeer headbands, and outfits covered in blinking lights were the perfect way to slow it down. They intermingled their marching with abbreviated dance routines for the crowd, and I waited a few extra beats before waving the semi ahead.

Our most impressive floats were at the front of the parade: a firetruck with Santa's sleigh and all his reindeer atop it—looking as if they were floating through the night—and a series of floats designed to look like a long train, each car topped with different decorations: overflowing candy on one, a bag full of presents on another, and piled-up snow on a third.

We had a flashy marching band from a nearby community college; a color guard with their flags lit up as they spun through the night; and a whole host of pickups, tractors, and flatbed trailers decorated with inflatable snowmen, grinchies, gnomes—all bright beacons of holiday cheer.

I waved the last one along, breathing a sigh of relief. It was short-lived though, because while all the floats were in motion, the parade wasn't over. I tucked the tablet under my arm and ran down the sidewalk, weaving around groups of people camped out in chairs with blankets over their laps.

I made it back to the livestream point and checked in with Paige, glad to see that technology wasn't failing us tonight, then messaged ahead to the volunteers at the end of the parade route, at Sugar Plum Park, to make sure everything was going smoothly on their end.

As I stood, catching my breath, I caught sight of Jess and Logan in the crowd. They were with my parents and two sets of cousins, but my gaze caught and held on my sister's boyfriend. There was something about the smile on his face—wide and happy, and not the artificial kind of happy where people cheer for something fun, but genuine *joy*. It made my steps falter and my breath catch. He was a handsome man wearing any expression, but right now? He made my heart skip a beat.

His eyes were wide and bright, and he turned his head from side to side, as if he couldn't bear to miss a single detail.

It took me a minute to notice Jess waving me over, my attention fully mesmerized by him.

I made my way toward them, a spring in my step. The parade was nearly done and my handiwork was being appreciated. Logan might not know it, but that smile was *for* me. For my effort.

“Hey, I've only got a minute or two,” I said, accepting hugs from my mother and Jess. “The parade's nearly over, and then I've got to supervise the cleanup.”

The streets were littered with candy and other promotional giveaways, as well as streamers and other small decorations that fell from the floats. The sides of the street would also be strewn with candy wrappers and abandoned drink cups. We'd pick it all up tonight so that tomorrow tourists in town could enjoy their shopping in our quaint downtown without any unsightly trash in the mix.

“Jess told me you help with the events here?” Logan said.

I glanced at Jess. “*Help* with?”

She raised her mittened hands. “Hey, I didn’t use that word. I just said you’re involved in the festival plans.”

I looked back at Logan. “I *am* the festival plans.”

Jess snorted. “So modest as usual.”

“I’m the lead festival planner. I coordinate all the events, the schedules, the volunteers. I’ve got one assistant and five scheduling apps that help me.”

“And a whole fair committee and three dozen volunteers,” Jess put in.

“That I have to herd like cats,” I shot back, before realizing I probably sounded like an ungrateful ass. “But yes, they are tons of help. I couldn’t do it without their commitment.”

Logan’s gaze continued to be drawn to the last few floats passing by, but I didn’t mind because it gave me the freedom to really study him. He wore a stocking cap over his hair tonight, with just a few tendrils peeking out, and it made his blue eyes seem even larger than usual. Even with a strong jawline and dusting of stubble, the wide smile, bright eyes, and adorable dimples gave him a boyish charm.

I didn’t know if I wanted to kiss him or take him under my arm and cuddle him close, and for fuck’s sake, I shouldn’t want to do either of those things to my sister’s boyfriend.

I forced my attention to Jess, only to find she was already watching me with a too-knowing gaze. I cleared my throat. “Well, I better get going. But, Jess, I think you’ve got a keeper on your hands. This man already loves Christmas Falls.”

She chuckled. “I knew he would. That’s why I brought him.”

I tilted my head. “I thought you brought him to meet Mom and Dad.”

There was a split-second of hesitation on Jess’s face. She looked away from me before saying, “Yeah, of course I wanted that too.”

She was lying. I didn’t know why, but ever since we were kids, Jess hadn’t been able to look anyone in the eye if she was being dishonest.

“It’s been so much fun,” Logan said with a huge grin. “We went to Jolly Java and Ginger’s Breads and got the most delicious peppermint mochas and cinnamon rolls, and we stopped by the old-fashioned candy shop. This place is so awesome. We spent hours at the huge arts and crafts fair, and holy shit, man, I’m going to be broke when we leave.”

Jess was grinning as she looked at him. “He was like a kid on Christmas morning. It was adorable.”

“Shut up,” he said with a laugh.

A strange longing hit me. They’d had so much fun, were so happy, that I wished I could have been there. Then my phone chimed with a text from a volunteer and I remembered that these events weren’t fun for me. They were work.

I didn’t have anyone special to share them with, anyway.

“The crafts fair is a great place to find Christmas gifts for your family,” I said, just a throwaway comment as I prepared to leave.

Logan’s smile dropped. “Actually, I was just shopping for me.”

“Oh.” The swift change in his mood caught me off-guard. “That’s fun too?” I said, not really meaning to make it a question, but that’s how it came out.

“I guess,” he said, his tone wistful. Then he returned his gaze to the parade, pasting a smile back on. It wasn’t the same,

though. This one was for show. “The parade is really amazing. You should be proud.”

Earlier, I *had* felt proud. When I’d seen the unfiltered joy in his face, I’d appreciated my work in a way I hadn’t in a very long time. His expression had made it seem more meaningful than Christmas decorations and some pretty lights. But I’d clearly ruined that somehow.

“I should go,” I said. Really, I should have already left, but I’d been reluctant to give up the sight of Logan’s happy face. But seeing as I’d erased that, it seemed my work here was done. “I’ll catch you all later?”

There was a round of goodbyes from Mom, Dad, and the whole brood of cousins. But Jess hooked her arm through mine. “Let me walk with you for a minute. I need to tell you something.”

Logan’s gaze flickered between us. “Should I come?”

“No, I’ll be right back,” Jess said. “Enjoy the end of the parade.”

We set off down the sidewalk, me trying and failing not to cast looks back at Logan.

“What did I say?” I asked. “I wasn’t trying to be an asshole for once.”

She laughed quietly. “For once you’re right. It’s not your fault, but Logan... He doesn’t really have a family.”

“Oh.” I sighed. “Shit.”

I could relate to that. I had Mom and Dad and Jess, of course. Not to mention all the cousins. But the absence of my children was an aching void in my life, and I hated the idea that I’d poured salt on someone else’s wounds.

“I don’t want to say too much about it,” she said. “He should choose how much of that to share with you. I just wanted you to know so you could avoid putting your foot in it like tonight.”

“Yeah. Tell him I’m sorry, okay?”

“Why don’t you tell him yourself? I, uh, have to go to Chicago tomorrow, and I was *hoping* you’d keep Logan company for me.”

“Chicago? Why?”

“I’ve got a little work emergency. The MedBalance headquarters is up there.”

“Right, I remember you worked there before you transferred to a Nebraska branch to manage your own department.”

“Yeah, well, they’ve got a little tech crisis and their director of IT is out of state, so I’m going to fill in. I don’t want to drag Logan along when I’ll just be working, you know?”

I nodded slowly. “I’m sure the family could keep him occupied.”

She rolled her eyes. “Do you really want to inflict that on Logan?”

I groaned. “I see how it is. You’re asking me while I feel guilty about wiping that smile off his face. But you know how busy I am during festival season. I can’t just babysit your boyfriend.”

“Logan is hardly a baby,” she said.

Damn. Wasn’t that the truth? But it wasn’t the advantage she thought it was. Logan was entirely too much man—and a taken one at that—for this to be a good idea.

“I don’t know, Jess. He barely knows me.”

“Please, Griff? You can give him the behind-the-scenes view of Christmas Falls. He’ll love that! He can help you if you’re busy. He’s pretty handy. He’s done all kinds of odd jobs. I bet he could be really useful to you.”

“You’re laying it on thick, huh? How does Logan feel about you ditching him?”

“I don’t know yet.”

I stopped in my tracks and stared at her. “Are you kidding? You can’t just bail on your own boyfriend!”

“I’m not bailing,” she protested. “I’ll talk to him about it tonight. I had to make sure he would be taken care of while I was gone, didn’t I?”

“Sounding more and more like a baby-sitting job,” I muttered.

“Come on, Griff. When’s the last time I asked you for a favor?”

“Before you asked me to let him sleep under my roof, you mean?”

“Yes, okay, but this is just an extension of the same favor when you think about it.”

Ugh, siblings.

“Please do this for me?” she begged, unleashing big wide eyes on me. “It won’t be any trouble. Logan really is a fully functional adult.”

I bet. I shook the thought of all the ways Logan might be fully functional from my mind. It was better if I thought of him as a nuisance.

“Fine,” I said. “But you’re gonna owe me one.”

“I’ll owe you a dozen!” she called, already spinning on her heel to jog back toward the crowd.

I caught sight of Logan watching us, brow furrowed.

Shit, the parade had ended, and I was going to be late getting to the park to organize the volunteers. That *never* happened.

I hadn’t even taken over Logan-watching duty yet, and he was already fucking up my schedule.

I dragged my gaze from him and broke into a jog, running away.

If only I could run away from my promise to Jess so easily.

CHAPTER 8



LOGAN

I WOKE EARLY, AN UNCOMFORTABLE BALL OF TENSION IN MY gut, though I wasn't sure why at first. I was used to new places. I hadn't had a permanent home since I was eight. I'd accepted that fact, even embraced it by taking on a migrant worker lifestyle. It was harder to miss something if you didn't give yourself time to want it. But as my brain came online, memories of my last conversation with Jess filtered in.

"I'll only be in Chicago for one day, maybe two if I get done too late to drive back. I'm so sorry. I know it's crappy timing, but I asked Griff to let you hang with him while I'm gone, so you can still enjoy the festival."

"I don't know, Jess. Maybe I should just go with you."

"No way. You promised you'd take a real vacation, and I'll be back before you know it. I want you to enjoy your time off, not wait on me while I work long hours or scout around the city for a job."

"I need a job though."

"Logan, you've only been off work for like two days!"

I laughed. "Okay, okay. But what about your ex? Isn't he up there? If I came, we could show him what he's missing."

"You're a good friend, but no. I brought you to Christmas Falls so you could enjoy it. There's nothing enjoyable about watching me mope over my ex. I'm a big girl. I'll deal with it."

I'd eventually agreed to stay behind, realizing that Jess felt guilty about the situation and me going to Chicago would only

add to it. Besides, it wasn't as if I didn't have a comfortable place to stay in Griff's house.

I just really hated feeling like an intruder.

I was a grown man, though, not a helpless foster kid. I could get a room, explore Christmas Falls on my own. I didn't *have* to inconvenience Griff.

With that in mind, I showered and dressed, then went into the kitchen to leave a note for him. I considered brewing coffee, but the man was a purist, and I had a feeling he had exacting tastes. Instead, I searched around for a notepad and pen. Unfortunately, I'd failed to get Griff's phone number so that I could text him.

"Looking for something?"

The raspy voice came from behind me, making me jump. I spun to see an immaculate Griff, already dressed in charcoal wool pants and a dark blue sweater over a dress-shirt and matching tie for a business casual look.

"I wasn't snooping," I said quickly, flashing back to my anxious adolescent self trying to live in a stranger's house.

"I didn't think you were," he said. "Besides, you're welcome to help yourself to anything you find. But if I can help you find it..."

I chuckled, feeling awkward, and rubbed the back of my neck. "Actually, I was just searching for paper and pen to leave you a note."

He raised an eyebrow.

I responded to his unasked question. "I figured I'd go grab a cup of Peppermint Mocha at Jolly Java, then figure out a way to entertain myself for the day. You've got better things to do than play tour guide just because Jess left for a day."

Griff nodded, his gaze assessing. "Well, I won't stop you if you really want to spend your time alone, but it would be a crime to send you off on your own if you think that Peppermint Mocha is *good*."

I laughed. "Are you kidding? It's *amazing*."

“Not as amazing as my coffee, which is a quality roast and not filled with sugar or fake holiday cheer.”

“If I drink it, do I still get to have a cinnamon roll from Ginger’s Breads?”

“I’ll allow it,” he said. “But the carrot cake is even better.”

“You’re a strange man. Everyone knows a cinnamon roll is the best.”

Griff smiled, and even though it was hardly more than a quirk of his lips and a cute crinkle around his eyes, it hit me in the chest. He wasn’t a man that was overly free with his emotions, and I enjoyed making him smile.

It wasn’t until we were both sipping mugs of coffee—which was a quality roast, unlike at Glazed Holes, though I still secretly preferred a hefty dose of sweetness—that I realized my discomfort had faded.

Griff cleared his throat. “So, I’m just going to make the rounds of festival events and troubleshoot any problems that come up today. You’re welcome to come along if you want a behind-the-scenes look at Christmas Falls.”

“I don’t want to be in the way.”

“You won’t be,” he said. “And Jess says you’re good with your hands.”

I blinked at him, a little nonplussed. “Uh…”

“In a handyman way,” he said hurriedly. “You know, in case something needs fixed, not, you know, in more personal ways.” He clapped a hand over his face. “Christ.”

I laughed. “Well, yeah, I know how to handle most tools.”

Okay, yes, that came out flirty. But the innuendo was right there.

Griff’s face was red from his verbal slip. “Right, great, so maybe you can help if needed.”

“You’re sure you don’t mind? Don’t do it just because Jess asked. I really am fine on my own.”

“I’m sure.” Griff’s dark eyes were warmer than the rest of his expression let on. “As long as you don’t mind working around my schedule.”

“Of course not.”

“Good, it’s settled then.” He stood and picked up our coffee cups, his empty and mine still half-full. He frowned at my cup as if offended, but didn’t comment on my lack of appreciation for good coffee. “Go grab a coat, and I’ll get you some sugar and carbs before we head over to Sugar Plum Park.”



I sighed with bliss as peppermint-chocolatey goodness from Jolly Java coated my tongue, then nearly choked when Griff suddenly swerved and stomped his brakes. He’d relented, stopping by Jolly Java and the bakery to fulfill my sugar and carbs cravings, and we were now headed down Christmas Boulevard toward Sugar Plum Park.

Griff parked the car alongside the curb, staring at me. No, staring *past* me, out the passenger-side window. I turned my head. We’d stopped beside a brick building behind the old-fashioned candy shop Jess had taken me to the day before.

I didn’t recognize the building, but it was obvious what had caught Griff’s attention. Someone had spray-painted the word Christmas in fat, decorative letters that were stacked vertically to resemble a Christmas tree. Beneath it, presents were painted in, looking as if they held up the tree.

“Whoa. Cool art.”

“Not cool,” Griff said tightly as he threw open his car door and got out. I followed him onto the sidewalk, where he was scrutinizing the graffiti. “We’re in the middle of festival season. Christmas Falls is supposed to be quaint and adorable, not...*covered in graffiti.*”

He sounded so scandalized I nearly laughed. But his expression was dead serious.

“Griff, it’s hardly gang signs. It’s a Christmas tree and presents. No one’s going to see that and run screaming.”

“It’s still graffiti,” he said stiffly, “and it’s not part of the plan.”

“What plan?”

“*My* plan.” He threw his arms out wide. “This whole festival is carefully orchestrated. These events don’t organize themselves. Every detail matters, from the garland wrapped around our street signs to the pet pictures with Santa in that park right across the street. Every event, every decoration...it all *matters* because our town relies on this.”

Griff was working himself into a froth. Laughter and the yips of happy dogs drifted across the street from the park, accompanied by the strumming of a guitar. The sidewalks downtown were full of tourists out shopping. Christmas Falls was quaint and picturesque, but right now, Griff seemed oblivious to all that.

He threaded his fingers into his hair and tugged, looking as if he was witnessing an atrocity instead of some friendly holiday art. Maybe it *was* graffiti, but it was damn festive graffiti that only added to the town’s charm.

I set my mocha on the car roof, then took hold of Griff’s wrists. “Hey, man, it’s okay.” He shook his head but allowed me to tug his hands from his hair. “It really is.”

He huffed a breath. “I need to tell the building owner. Maybe call the city manager.”

“Okay. Do what you need to do,” I said, squeezing his hands in reassurance.

Griff looked down as if just realizing I was holding his hands. I released him and took a step back, my heart skipping. I hadn’t thought before reaching out. Griff had seemed so stressed, and I’d just wanted to help.

He was strung more than a little tight, but all that did was make me want to step in and loosen him up. Unwrap him like a present and see what was inside. Why did this tempting man have to be Jess’s brother? Talk about unfair.

Griff excused himself to go find the building owner. A few minutes later, a round-faced, red-headed woman joined us. She beamed a big smile as she looked at the graffiti. “Isn’t it great? I think it’s so much fun.”

Griff looked astonished. “But someone *spray-painted* your building.”

She nodded, looking pleased as punch. “Being off Christmas Boulevard, I don’t get quite as much attention. This artwork sure makes the building more festive though, doesn’t it? It looks like a fun place to take pics. People love that stuff.”

“They do?” Griff said, sounding bewildered.

“Oh, it’ll be great for selfies,” I said. “In fact, let’s take one to send Jess so she knows we’re getting along without her.”

He squinted at me as if he didn’t understand, so I fished out my phone and held it up. “C’mon, Griff. Let’s take a pic and post it. You can make it look like this was part of your plan all along.”

He was still frowning, but a bit of the tension in his shoulders eased as he huffed an exasperated sigh. “All right. I guess this is one of those situations where I have to turn lemons into lemonade.”

“That’s the spirit!”

His lips quirked in a reluctant smile as I tugged him into position beside me and lifted the phone up. “Say ‘Merry Graffiti!’” I ordered.

Griff gave a startled laugh, and I snapped the picture.

“Let’s take two more. We want to make sure we get our best sides.”

“Do you have a bad side?” he muttered.

I smiled wider in the next photo. Was I milking the situation to spend a few extra minutes close to a man I couldn’t have, a man who was probably too tightly buttoned-up to ever be with a laid-back guy like me—even if I weren’t his sister’s so-called boyfriend?

Yes. Yes, I was.

But in my defense, seeing Griff let go of that tension and actually smile was heady stuff.

It made me want to make him smile again and again.

Made me want to kiss that smile and drink it down like my delicious peppermint mocha. I was certain it would be just as sweet.

But unlike the mocha, it came with a cost too high to pay if I wanted to remain Jess's friend.

So I took one last snapshot and reluctantly stepped away, tucking my phone into my pocket, already knowing I'd pull it out later and stare at these pictures and wonder *what-if*.

What if we'd met under different circumstances?

What if Griff didn't think I was Jess's boyfriend?

What if I was free to kiss that trademark grimace off his grouchy face?

Would Griff kiss me back? Would he welcome me into his bed? Would he—

“All right, we better get over to the park,” he said, sounding gruff. “I'm already behind schedule.”

His comment knocked me out of my fantasy and made me realize just how silly it was. Griff had a job to do, and I didn't want to slow him down. I grabbed my coffee cup off the top of the car and followed him across the street, ordering myself to stop being so fanciful.

I was here to play the role of Jess's boyfriend. It was time I got my head in the game.

CHAPTER 9



GRIFF

MY SKIN WAS BUZZING, AND I FELT A LITTLE TOO HOT UNDER my collar despite the nippy winter air as Logan and I crossed the street to Sugar Plum Park. There was still a prickle of agitation nagging at me. That graffiti did *not* belong, regardless of how happy it made the building owner or how positively Logan tried to spin the situation. But...he did make me feel better.

Maybe a little too much better.

I was overly aware of his presence at my side. The park was full of stimulation: owners with yapping dogs in Santa hats and reindeer ears—even one cat, kept in a carrier but yowling its protests *loudly*—Santa and his North Pole props for photos, a table staffed by volunteers, food trucks, live music, a twenty-foot Christmas tree, and an ice-skating rink. Yet, my attention was consumed by *him*.

By the smile spreading across his gorgeous face as he took in the scene before us. The way the wind ruffled his hair, occasionally blowing a strand into his eyes that he impatiently shoved back. The fit of his coat across those broad shoulders...

“This is so adorable,” Logan said, eyes bright. “Although that cat sounds like it’s ready to do murder.”

I grimaced. “Yeah, Hazel brings her cat every year, and he’s never excited about it. Last year, Santa nearly lost an eye to some angry claws.”

“Oh no.” Logan laughed, then clapped a hand over his mouth, looking guilty. “Shit, that must have been awful for Santa. I’m a terrible person.”

“No, you’re not,” I said with a confidence that surprised me. I’d barely met Logan, and yet I was one hundred percent sure of him. He’d been nothing but friendly, a considerate houseguest, and pretty damn sweet in his attempt to reassure me over that graffiti. “We all laugh about it...now.”

He smirked, drawing my gaze to those soft lips framed by a delicious stubble I wanted to feel rasp against my mouth. I jerked my gaze up to his eyes, but that was no better. I fell into the blue depths as silence drew out between us.

I sucked in a sharp breath, fearing I’d given myself away. It was entirely inappropriate to feel this attracted to my sister’s boyfriend. The man probably wasn’t entirely straight—I definitely got a vibe from him the first time we’d met—but he was *taken*.

“Griff! Yoo-hoo!” Marlene called from the volunteer table.

I broke away from our staredown, relieved for the interruption even though my mind spun with questions. I knew why *I* had drowned in his gaze, but why had he seemed just as frozen in that moment? Was I reading into things? I had to be. Even if he was bi, he was a nice person. He wouldn’t betray my sister’s trust, especially with her own damn brother.

Marlene smiled brightly as I reached the table.

“Record adoption applications this year,” she said excitedly. “Moving us to the weekend right after Thanksgiving was a great decision, Griff.”

I explained for Logan’s benefit, “The pet photos are mostly for the local residents, although a few tourists who come for just a day do bring their pets. We try to make Christmas Falls a pet-welcome community. But because we’re holding it here at the park, a lot of tourists get sucked into our evil plans and end up adopting a pet before they go home.”

Logan chuckled. “You’re quite the mastermind, aren’t you?”

“Oh, he is,” Marlene agreed as my cheeks heated a bit. Hopefully Logan would just think the red flush was from the chill chapping my skin. “Griff suggested moving the event to earlier in the season because this weekend, in particular, we get a bigger surge of visitors from Chicago and Springfield. Even some folks from Indianapolis and Des Moines. They come for the parade and Black Friday shopping and then head home Monday.”

“So most of your tourism is on the weekends, then?”

“To an extent,” I said. “As we get further into December, we’ll get more families making a vacation of it. But the longer they stay, the more likely they’ve traveled farther to be here. It just isn’t as convenient for them to adopt a pet. We can still raise awareness, but—”

A snarling broke out, accompanied by a horrifying hiss-yowl combo, and I whirled around just in time to see Mr. Tinkerbelle streak across the lawn, having escaped Hazel when she opened the carrier. Santa was swearing up a storm as the dog in his lap jumped up and down, barking wildly. Cal Evans, our volunteer in the suit, probably hadn’t imagined his belly would jiggle like a bowl full of jelly *because* of a dog using him as a trampoline.

That pooch wasn’t the only troublemaker. Several owners were dealing with dogs straining their leashes as Mr. Tinkerbelle set off their predator instincts.

As for Mr. Tinkerbelle? Well. He had instincts of his own.

And they carried him directly to the town Christmas tree, which he jumped inside of and climbed, up, up, at least fifteen feet high. I thought of all those meticulously strung lights and ornaments placed with care.

And I started swearing just as much as Santa.

“If that cat ruins our official town Christmas tree, I’m going to ban Hazel from this event forever!” I growled. “Actually, maybe I’ll do that anyway.”

“Really, Griff?” Logan sounded aghast. “She’s just a sweet lady who wanted a Santa pic with her cat. And cats climb

trees, right? It's in their nature."

I pinched the bridge of my nose and forced myself to take three deep breaths. "That Christmas tree has twenty strands of lights, each containing fifty bulbs, for a total of eleven hundred lights, Logan!"

Logan turned his head and gazed at the tree. "Huh. I thought it could use a few more strands, to be honest."

"Everyone's a critic," I muttered.

He smiled charmingly, when *charming* was the last fucking thing I needed right now.

"I'm just kidding. It's beautiful, Griff. You did an amazing job. We just need to get the cat back out of the tree. Easy-peasy."

"Right." I turned toward Marlene. "Let's get the county animal control on the line. Find out if they can extract Mr. Tinkerbelle, and if not, let's call Bruce at the tree farm and see if he can help us out, or if there's a local tree trimmer who could—"

"Honey," Marlene interrupted timidly.

"What, Marlene?" I asked impatiently. "We need to get the cat down before he decides to chew through a strand of lights and we end up with an electrified cat like in *National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation*. It was funny in the movie, but it won't be funny here, Marlene! It'll be a lawsuit."

She was smiling indulgently at me. Why was she smiling?

"It's being handled, dear."

"What?"

I turned, realizing Logan was no longer at my side. He was, in fact, carrying a ladder across the park toward the tree. I glanced behind him to see Hank, a handyman around town I often called to assist with odd jobs, watching from beside his pickup, his ladder missing from the back.

I took off at a jog across the park, arriving in time to help Logan prop the ladder carefully against the tree.

“What are you doing?”

“Getting the cat out of the tree.” Logan’s lips quirked. “You seemed concerned.”

My eyes widened. “I am, but I don’t know if this is safe.”

“Eh, I’ve climbed more than a few ladders. You just hold it steady, and I won’t fall.”

“Unless Mr. Tinkerbell decides to take out your eye,” I pointed out.

Hazel was hovering by the tree anxiously, cat carrier in her hand, as she called up to her cat. “Mr. Tinkerbell, come down! Please! Mommy has goodies! I have treats!”

Mr. Tinkerbell peeked out of the foliage, yowling pitifully. Dogs continued to bark their heads off, which was doing us no favors. A small crowd of onlookers had gathered, including one of my volunteers.

Mr. Tinkerbell wasn’t going to come easily or safely when his hackles were up. I turned to Marlene, who’d joined the gawking crowd. “Let’s give Santa a mid-morning break. Point the pet owners toward the open end of the park where their dogs can work off some energy *away* from here before we resume the pictures. We need this cat to calm down.”

“Sure thing.” Marlene began herding the crowd toward the other side of the park, and I turned to the fretting cat owner. “Hazel, can you give us some of those treats and the carrier. Let’s see if we can coax Mr. Tinkerbell into it, where he’ll feel a bit more protected.”

“Okay,” she said, handing it over then digging into her purse for treats. “He really doesn’t like the carrier though.”

“I know, but I’m banking on him liking it more than dogs or strangers trying to grab him.”

Logan took the carrier from me. “Good idea, Griff. I’ll have to thank you for saving my eyeballs.” He winked, playful and relaxed even in this mini crisis, though admittedly it wasn’t so much a crisis as a spectacle to everyone but Hazel and me.

My inner control freak was *not* happy that we were interrupting the event, but it would be even worse if Mr. Tinkerbell—or anyone else—ended up injured.

“Are you sure about climbing this ladder?” I checked with Logan. “I don’t want to have to tell Jess you broke your neck.”

“I’ll be fine, Griff. I’ve worked as a landscaper, a roofer, and a painter. This is not the first ladder—or tree—I’ve climbed.”

He started up the ladder rungs, carrier in hand. I braced the base of it to keep it steady, forced to watch as he climbed higher and higher. Mr. Tinkerbell yowled, less pitiful and more get-the-fuck-away from me now.

My whole body vibrated with tension as Logan balanced the carrier on a branch. Thankfully, the barking was a bit more distant now. Mr. Tinkerbell still seemed wary, so Logan took a treat from the carrier and placed it on the branch ahead of it, then another, slowly coaxing the cat forward. His voice was pitched higher than usual, but with a seductive lilt. “Come to me, baby. You’re okay. I’ve got you. You’re safe with me. I promise.”

Mr. Tinkerbell edged forward, Logan’s seduction slowly working its magic. On the cat. Not me. But also...me.

Damn it.

The cat paused in front of the carrier, sniffing at the entrance where more treats waited. Logan continued coaxing, but Mr. Tinkerbell wouldn’t take that final step to get in. Finally, Logan gave up cajoling and swept the cat inside the box and slammed the door to lock him in. The ladder shook a bit in my hands as his weight shifted in the process.

My heart lurched and I held tight, but Logan steadied himself with ease and began to descend gracefully, despite the cat carrier shaking with an outraged Mr. Tinkerbell inside, his yowls and hisses letting us all know that he was *not* pleased by this treatment.

I held the ladder until Logan’s outer thighs brushed my arms and he paused, glancing down at me. “Think I’m close

enough to the ground now, Griff. You can let go.”

The back of my neck burned with embarrassment as I hurriedly stepped back to give him some space. When he handed the carrier to Hazel, she broke down in tears, interspersing her thank-yous with soft, crooning apologies to her cat.

“Maybe it’s best Mr. Tinkerbell not attend this event again,” I said gently, aware of Logan watching me. Where before I might have been thinking solely of the event, now I had Hazel and her cat’s well-being in mind.

She sniffled. “I know you’re right. I just wanted a nice portrait with Santa.”

I nodded. “Well, maybe we can work something out, Hazel. A home visit from Santa. What do you think?”

Her eyes lit up. “Really? That would be so much better for Mr. Tinkerbell.”

“All right. I’ll set something up and call you, all right? You get Mr. Tinkerbell home safe and sound.”

“I will. Thank you, Griff!” She turned to Logan. “And thank you! I don’t think we’ve met... Are you Griff’s *special* friend?”

Way to be subtle, Hazel.

Logan didn’t seem weirded out by her assumption he might be my boyfriend. I didn’t have many relationships, but the whole town had seen me date both women and men over the years.

“I’m just visiting,” Logan said, not correcting her to my surprise.

“This is Logan Reid,” I added. “He came up with Jess for the holiday.”

“Oh, Logan! I’ve heard all about *you*.” Her eyes danced. “That Jess is a lucky gal.”

“Thanks,” Logan said, sounding uncomfortable. It took a while to get used to just how friendly a small town could be, I

supposed, although Jess had said her new home in Granville wasn't a whole lot larger.

Hazel finally excused herself to take her menace of a cat home. The pet photos had resumed behind us, their short break coming to an end, and most of the dogs had forgotten about Mr. Tinkerbelle while having a romp.

All was well that ended well.

"I should thank you too, Logan," I said. "You saved us a lot of time by jumping to action, but you didn't have to do that. You're here as a guest."

"I was happy to help."

"I just don't want you to think that's expected. Just because you're with me, and I have to troubleshoot problems —"

Logan squeezed my shoulder, making my words sputter to a stop.

"Griff, I want to help. I'm good with my hands, remember? That was Jess's big selling point with you."

I swallowed hard, one of those hands hot and heavy on my shoulder, and forced myself to step away before my mind went to inappropriate places regarding those hands on my body. Those hands were for Jess.

"Right, well, of course I appreciate it. Just don't feel obligated."

"I don't," he said, sounding sincere. "I volunteer as tribute in the Christmas games, okay?"

I chuckled. "To save my sister?"

"Nah. To save you."

"Me?"

"From hassles that will interrupt your carefully orchestrated events," he teased. "It's the least I can do after sleeping in your house and drinking your coffee."

"You didn't even appreciate my coffee," I grumbled.

“You know what I would appreciate?”

“What’s that?”

“A spin around the skating rink over there.” His tone grew wistful. “I haven’t been skating since I was a kid.”

I glanced over his shoulder, to where folks were circling a small pop-up ice rink enclosed with white fencing and decorated with big red bows. The thought of skating side-by-side with Logan was too much. I had an office to get to, messages to return, schedules to realign. Between the graffiti and Mr. Tinkerbell, I’d been delayed far too long already.

Part of me wanted to offer up *myself* as a tribute to make Logan’s every wish come true. But that wasn’t my place.

“I bet Jess would love to go with you,” I forced myself to say. “She’s always been a good skater.”

He turned back to me, his smile no longer wistful, but strained. “Something to look forward to then.”

But something in his tone told me that he wasn’t looking forward to it.

Not the way he would if I was the one taking him up on the invitation.

I just didn’t know why.

CHAPTER 10



LOGAN

I WAS A LITTLE DISAPPOINTED THAT GRIFF HAD SIDESTEPPED my hint to go ice-skating, but not really surprised. The man was focused on work, and soon after, we arrived at his office. It was inside a huge warehouse, which was kind of interesting. The drab cubicle where he worked was less so.

“I just have to check in with my assistant, Paige, and then we’ll be on the move again,” he said. “Most of my work is done on the go.”

Given the sad fluorescent lighting, gray walls, and concrete floor, I was kind of relieved.

Griff and Paige confirmed schedules, wrangled volunteers who’d gone MIA, and tried to predict problems that would crop up during the week’s events. He seemed to be half fixer and half fortune teller—and entirely impressive. I did love a man who showed his competence, though, and Griffin had that in spades.

While he worked, I explored the building, which also housed half-built floats and enough decor to light up a city three times this size. Some of it was old and dusty, as if it hadn’t been used since the eighties.

The other half of the building housed a museum celebrating the town’s history and festivals. There, I looked at exhibits of old floats and read placards about the small unincorporated town of Milton Falls being formally established as Christmas Falls in 1945, after a Christmas decorations factory moved in.

That explains the scary amount of tinsel.

At some point in my meandering, my phone rang with a call from Jess.

“Hey, miss me already?” I said.

“Logan, I wanted to give you an update.”

“Uh-oh. Sounds serious.”

“Yeah.” She sighed. “This is a bit more complicated than I was led to believe. MedBalance had a system hack, and I’ve been working with their IT department to determine whether any data has been compromised.”

“That’s not good.”

“Yeah, I don’t know how long it’ll take to resolve, but it won’t be just one day. I’m so sorry.”

“Shit.”

A touch to my shoulder startled me, and I turned to see Griff watching. “Everything okay?” he asked.

I lowered the phone. “Jess’s work emergency is going to take more time than she thought.”

“Ah, that’s unfortunate.”

“I can get a hotel room though,” I said quickly. “I’ve already taken up too much of your time.”

Griff shook his head. “There won’t be any vacancies during the festival.”

“Oh. Maybe I should just head to Chicago then. I don’t want to be a bother.”

“You’re not a bother. You’ve already saved me one major headache today.” He reached for my phone. “May I?”

I handed it over, and he lifted it to his ear. “Jess, hey, I’m fine with Logan staying as long as he needs, but for his sake, try to wrap it up. He came up here with you. The man wants to go ice-skating with you and—oh? Well, yeah, it’s been a few years.” He paused to listen for a long minute. Then nodded. “Uh-huh. I know. I *know*, Jess.” He shot me a look that seemed

to say, *Sisters, am I right?* I shrugged, because what the hell did I know about that? Griff's lips quirked into an almost-smile, then he said into the phone, "All right, I will. Don't work too hard."

He handed the phone back to me.

"Well?" I asked.

"We're going ice-skating," he said gruffly.

My eyes widened. "What?"

"Jess suggested that I could stand to take a break from work now and then to actually enjoy the festival I work so hard on." He rolled his eyes. "It's not the first time I've heard that."

"You don't have to take me skating."

"Oh, I do now. I promised." He winked, the friendly gesture setting off flutters in my gut. "Besides, you deserve to have some fun on this trip. It's not your fault Jess has to work."

I thought about protesting again, but the stubborn jut of his chin told me that would be a waste of time. Besides, I *wanted* to go, so I couldn't bring myself to fight it too hard.

We grabbed lunch from the food trucks at Sugar Plum Park, then laced up skates at the little pop-up rink that had caught my eye earlier in the day.

Watching Griff glide onto the rink was a thing of beauty. He generally held himself stiffly, all tightly contained energy ready to be carefully aimed at the next problem. At least, that was how it seemed in the small time I'd known him. I'd seen it at the parade and again at the graffiti site, though there he'd been wound so tight I thought he'd crack down the middle.

But on the ice, he was smooth and graceful. There was a looseness to his movements that I hadn't seen before.

I could skate. That was about all I could say for myself as I matched my stride to Griff's while we circled the rink.

"You must skate more than you let on," I said.

Griff veered left to avoid a small girl in a puffy pink coat before answering. “Why do you say that?”

“You’re very comfortable on the ice.”

Comfortable was an understatement, but I couldn’t tell him he was so gorgeous it made heat simmer under my skin despite the nippy winter weather. This fake boyfriend situation was *killing* me. Why hadn’t I insisted on coming up with Jess as a friend only? But I knew why. Because I *was* her friend, and she’d needed a favor.

Now I was stuck in the friend zone with Griff too.

“Well, growing up in Christmas Falls, I went skating every year. I still find it surprisingly relaxing.”

“Yeah?” I hit a rough patch on the ice, wobbled, and tensed every muscle in an attempt to catch my balance.

Griff grabbed my arm, and I latched onto him, clinging like a desperate person about to drown, as I steadied my feet beneath me.

Griff’s body shook with his laughter, and I found myself laughing with him.

“You’re right,” I choked out. “So relaxing!”

He continued to chuckle. “I think we’re okay now.”

“Easy for you to say,” I muttered, still not trusting my feet.

“Just relax. I’ve got you.”

My muscles slowly unclenched and I became aware that we were very, very close. My hands were locked on his shoulders, his on my waist, and I was practically straddling his right leg. I wasn’t sure if my flailing had achieved this intimate position, or if Griff had shifted his legs so our skates wouldn’t tangle.

Either way, a rush of awareness hit me, blood rushing south.

Our eyes met, tension suddenly in the air between us rather than my flailing limbs.

“You can let go now,” Griff said, hands flexing on my waist as if he wasn’t sure whether to pull me closer or push me away.

“Do I have to?”

I meant it as a joke, but it came out sounding flirty. There was no way around it. I wanted this man.

“Er, yes.” All the tension between us seemed to flood into him, his body going rigid as he released me.

I dropped my hands, and Griff slid away, skating backwards to put space between us.

“Sorry, I was just—”

“I’ve got to get back to work is all,” he said, cutting me off.

He thinks you’re dating his sister. Get a grip.

I forced a smile to my face. “Yeah, of course. Thanks for doing this, and uh, keeping me on my feet.”

“Anytime,” he said.

Despite the awkward situation, he stayed close to me as we skated toward the exit, ready to catch me if I slipped. Griff struck me as that kind of guy. Steady. Reliable.

Always ready to catch the people he loved.

Whoever did end up with him would be a very lucky person.



The next couple of days followed a similar pattern, minus the ice-skating—or any significant amount of alone time.

Griff made his “good” coffee in the morning, then took me by Jolly Java, grumbling about sugar and carbs and unplanned graffiti all the way to his office. There’d only been the one spray-painted scene as far as I knew, but apparently that was one too many for Griff.

We'd settled into a routine of sorts. While he worked at the office, I explored downtown, then we met back up to go check in at events. We'd yet to have a single sit-down meal together, though. His coffee in the morning was the most he slowed down.

During the day, we grabbed food on the run. In the evening, he inevitably had to run to the office to do one last thing. I wasn't entirely sure if he was that busy, or if he was trying to avoid alone time with me, but either way I was an unwanted houseguest and I wasn't going to challenge his desire for space.

He dropped me by his parents' place the first night for a family dinner. It was awkward, being the new guy in their midst. But they'd all been so warm and friendly—and chaotic—that I'd relaxed before long and simply enjoyed the show as Sarah, Griff's teenage cousin, caught hell over her latest choice in boyfriends; Rick, her stepdad, pretended his heart couldn't take much more of her teen drama; and Lena, her mom, entertained herself by pretending to flirt with me.

Which was ironic, considering the person I wanted to flirt with most was nowhere in sight.

By the next evening, most of the other extended family had left, so Lena dragged me to a wine-tasting, insisting she needed some company. While we were there, she'd grilled me about my relationship with Jess. I knew Jess moderately well as a friend, but it turned out that wasn't well enough to suit Lena. She'd given me more than one skeptical look, eyes narrowed in suspicion.

When she changed the subject, I'd been relieved, but the next night, when I was caroling with the family, she pulled me aside. "What's the real story with you and Jess? Why didn't you go up to Chicago with her?"

"She didn't want me to miss out on the festival."

"Hmm." She sounded unconvinced. "I'd think you'd want to be around while she worked with her ex-boyfriend."

I searched for a response. "You know about that?"

She winked. “I know everything. Including the fact that Jess isn’t really over that man.” She raised a challenging brow. “You’re some kind of decoy, aren’t you?”

I winced, realizing I was busted. No way I could lie in the face of such a direct question.

“Okay, yes, I...came as her date, but we’re not seriously involved. Please don’t tell everyone, though.”

“She wanted a buffer with the family, huh?”

I shrugged. “She said her mom has been worried about her. She just wanted everyone to enjoy the holiday instead of fretting over her love life.”

Lena nodded, looking sympathetic. “Eleanor *does* get a little intense, but in her defense, it’s her way of coping with Griff.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, aware that I really shouldn’t pry but unable to resist the flare of curiosity.

“Well, he’s divorced, and it hasn’t been pretty. He tried really hard to have a relationship with his kids. That’s half the reason he came back here and took the job to manage our events. He thought his children would love to spend the holidays. But...” She shrugged, a frown creasing her brow. “His ex got remarried and moved the family to another state. Griff made a few trips to see them, but he could never get them to make much effort.” She scowled. “He should have gotten a lawyer and fought for custody, but he was too nice for his own good. He hasn’t seen them in a few years now.”

I regretted indulging my curiosity now. “That’s a shame.”

“He’s dated here and there.” She gave me a pointed look. “Men and women both. But nothing serious. Nothing real. I think he avoids it.”

“Well...” I wasn’t sure what to say.

Griffin’s mother interrupted, and I’d never been so thankful, suspecting that Griff wouldn’t appreciate Lena’s info dump about his private life. If there was more to his story, I wanted to hear it from him or not at all.

“Hey, we’re going to head over to The White Elephant for dinner. Logan, you’ll join us.”

It wasn’t a question or even an invitation, it was a statement of fact. I actually liked that about Eleanor. How could I feel like I was intruding when the woman ordered me where to be and when? I could see where Griff had gotten his organizational skills, though.

Like mother, like son.

CHAPTER 11



GRIFF

I CRANED MY NECK BACK TO WATCH LOGAN USE A STAPLE GUN to attach a string of lights near the roofline of Henry Morgan's house.

"I feel like I should be paying you at this rate," I called.

His laugh floated down to me. "I had no idea that managing a festival would involve so many ladders."

"Only for you," I grumbled, not liking the way he leaned out to the right, balancing on one foot. "I usually call in a professional for situations like this."

I'd gotten a call this afternoon that Henry had a string of lights that weren't working for some unknown reason and a sprained ankle that kept him from switching them out. Considering the Holiday House Light Tour was supposed to begin tonight and was a favorite of tourists, especially those taking reindeer sleigh rides, that was far from ideal. I'd come over to assess just how much work the display would need before calling someone in.

But Logan had leapt forward to help once again. He really was quite generous with his time and energy.

"I *am* a professional," Logan said as he *finally* returned both feet to the ladder and started the climb down. "My old landscaping crew is doing this very thing back in Nebraska. It's how they make money when there aren't lawns to mow or snow to shovel."

“Still. Jess will not be happy if I don’t return you in one piece.”

He turned to face me, grin on his face, and spread his arms wide. “Here I am, the whole package.”

He was that, indeed.

“Thank you,” I said sincerely. “I owe you one.”

“Well, there is something you could do for me...”

I raised an eyebrow. “Sure. Want me to call Jess and tell her to get her ass home?”

When she left for Chicago, it was supposed to be for a day or two at most, but it had stretched into a week. She gave us regular updates, and it sounded like her company had a huge mess on its hands, but I couldn’t help feeling bad for Logan. He’d been abandoned with a family he barely knew.

“Nah, I’ve been having fun with you,” he said.

Which, frankly, was a first. Most people did *not* consider me fun. Of course, I’d realized that Logan wasn’t *most people* within hours of meeting him.

He continued. “Jess has to focus on her work, so it’s all good. Unless...” He suddenly looked uncertain. “Are you tired of having me tag along with you?”

“No, of course not.” I waved toward Henry’s house. “You’re the best volunteer I’ve got.”

He smiled. “Okay, good. Then I was thinking maybe you and I could go out tonight.”

“Oh. I’d have to check my schedule...”

“The thing is, I really like your family, Griff. But I could use a break, you know? And your mother, she doesn’t like to leave me to my own devices. She’s so welcoming, and I appreciate that, but...”

I winced. “Say no more. The whole Calloway clan can be overwhelming.”

Logan shrugged. “Don’t get me wrong. They’re sweet. I really am glad they’ve been taking me out or I’d have missed a lot of the evening festival events. But I’m not used to hanging out with a family.”

Damn. I’d been a crappy host, dragging him along to work but skipping out on any kind of fun activities since we’d gone ice-skating. I’d just felt such a charge when I’d caught him. The hardness of his chest against mine and his breath against my neck had almost been my undoing.

At the time, it had seemed as if he’d felt something too, but I was sure now it had been my imagination.

“I suppose we could grab dinner and drinks,” I said.

His smile went supernova, and my damn heart stuttered at the sight. “Yes! Finally. I can get to know the mysterious Griffin Calloway.”

“What?” I laughed. “I’m not mysterious.”

“Oh, you are. You’re broody and mysterious. Were you the bad boy in high school?”

I scoffed. “Not even close.”

His eyes twinkled. “Well, you’ve got the vibe down now.”

“And what about you?” I challenged. “Were you the football quarterback who dated the cheerleaders?”

“Cheerleaders weren’t really my type,” he said.

“I guess that makes sense, considering you’re dating Jess.”

She was a mouthy brunette who made a sport of eating oreos over physical activity. Not exactly the profile of a cheerleader. Still, Logan seemed surprised by my words.

“Uh, right,” he said, sounding a little uncomfortable with the answer.

“Or maybe you’re bisexual, like me?” I said tentatively.

His eyes met mine, and I felt the impact of that gaze deep inside. “I’ve dated men, yeah.”

I nodded once, certain now that I'd read him correctly when we first met. There'd been a spark there between us. Not that anything could come of it.

“Thanks for telling me.”

His gaze was searching. He probably wondered why I'd wanted to know, and not even I could answer that. I almost wished I hadn't asked. It was just one more way he seemed perfect for me while still remaining untouchable.



Rudolph's was teeming with people when we arrived for a festival cocktail hour after going home to shower and change clothes. I'd dressed down in dark jeans and a burgundy button-down I usually reserved for dates. Logan wore blue jeans and a light blue sweater, which gave off a wintery vibe and made his eyes glow. The man was mouth-wateringly gorgeous.

Tourists dressed for a night out had overrun my usual spot for grabbing a beer with Bruce, many holding champagne and martini glasses in their hands. Servers moved among them with platters of appetizers, giving the pub a swanky party atmosphere.

Despite my aversion to festival madness, the transformation Rudy pulled off impressed me.

“Wow,” Logan said. “I didn't know this would be so...”

“Yeah,” I said wryly. “Festival season is something else around here.”

There was a buffet table along the back wall covered with an array of treats, including a fancy fig salad with shaved Asiago cheese, as well as desserts like cinnamon buns, but the line was three deep. Logan, like me, didn't seem too eager to wade into the fray, so I diverted our course toward a table in the back corner.

We were lucky to find a place to sit, considering the crowd, but many of them were up and mingling.

“Is this okay?” I asked. “If you’d rather meet other people...”

“No, this is great. I went to the wine-tasting at The White Elephant with Lena, but it wasn’t so packed.”

“Weekends always get busier with day-trippers.”

“That makes sense.”

Billie, a regular server at the pub, came by our table. “Can I interest either of you in one of our drink specials? We have a poinsettia or a pomegranate sangria.”

“Are you trying to poison us with this holiday crap now?” I grumbled. “Poinsettias are toxic, last I heard.”

“Oh, Grinch!” She swatted my arm. For Logan’s benefit, she said, “Our poinsettia is orange liqueur, cranberry juice, and champagne garnished with a sprig of rosemary and whole cranberries. It’s perfectly safe to drink. Plus, it’s delicious.”

“I’ll play it safe with a beer,” I said. “Whatever’s on tap.”

Logan considered. “I’ll take the sangria. When in Rome, right?”

She smiled. “Good choice. Will you two want any food?”

“Yeah, bring us menus, if you don’t mind. The buffet is under siege over there.”

She nodded. “All right. Enjoy. There’s a scavenger hunt you can participate in, or you can check out the collection of board games scattered about. Help yourselves.”

When she’d gone, Logan turned to me. “Grinch? Why did she say that like it was your name?”

“You know what?” I said. “A board game sounds good. How about I grab one?”

“Fine, but you’re not getting out of answering my questions tonight!” he called as I slipped out of the booth.

I did a quick circuit of the pub, glowering at anyone who approached because I didn’t want to get drawn into conversations about festival events when Logan was waiting

for me. It wasn't as if I didn't have a grinchy reputation to live up to, anyway.

Jenga was getting a lot of play with a group of four, who were shouting and laughing as the blocks went tumbling, but I spotted a deck of Uno cards and grabbed them.

When I returned, our drinks were on the table, one a plain, no-nonsense mug and the other dressed up with a festive garnish.

Logan sipped his with an appreciative hum, then grinned when he saw the game I'd chosen. "This should be fun."

"It was this or Scrabble."

"You think I can't spell?"

"I didn't say that. I could grab it if you'd prefer."

Logan grinned. "I'm joking. I mean, not about spelling. I really can't spell for shit."

I nearly choked on my swallow of beer. Still grinning, Logan opened the deck and began dealing cards. "So, tell me why the server called you Grinch."

I grimaced. "Is it really that hard to guess? My name starts with G and I'm a little..."

"Grinchy?"

I sighed.

"You've got them fooled, huh?" Logan said.

I glanced at him in surprise. He had a knowing look on his face.

"You may not *love* these holiday shenanigans," he said, "but you're a softy inside. Otherwise, you wouldn't work so hard to make the festival perfect for everyone else."

"It's just my job," I hedged.

"It's more than a job. You're passionate."

Heat flooded my face, and I tugged at the collar of my shirt. "So, why aren't you with your landscaping crew?"

“Nice subject change.”

“It’s your turn to stop being so mysterious.”

He chuckled and tossed down a blue eight. “Fine. Let’s make a deal. For every turn we take in the game, we answer a question about ourselves?”

“There’s a lot of turns in Uno.”

“I know,” he said with a glint in his eye. “So, what’ll it be, *Grinch*?”

“Fine. Answer my question, then, and never call me Grinch again.”

“I never stay with any job long. I move around the country, picking up work.” Logan shrugged. “I don’t really have roots anywhere.”

“But why—”

“Ah-ah, *Griff*,” he said, emphasizing my name and sending a small shiver down my spine. “Your turn.”

I flipped through my hand and drew three cards, then tossed down a blue six.

“Why do you dislike the holidays so much yet work so hard to make them great?” he asked.

I groaned. “Not pulling any punches, huh?”

“Nope.”

I frowned at my cards. “I don’t know. I guess...the holidays changed for me after my divorce.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

I glanced at him. “I know how special they can be for families. I want the ones who come here to have a really amazing time, even if that’s not an option for me.” I shook my head. “Or maybe I’m just a workaholic.”

“It’s more than that,” Logan said, sounding certain. “You care a lot.”

“Your turn.”

He tossed down a green six.

“You said you don’t have roots anywhere, but you’re dating Jess,” I said. “So, how does that work?”

“Oh.” He looked flustered. “Yeah, I guess I just meant in the past.”

That didn’t quite ring true, but I wasn’t sure why.

“My parents died when I was young,” he added. “I grew up in foster care, and...I don’t know. No place has ever really felt like home, you know? Not since I lost them.”

My heart clenched. “My god, Logan. I’m so sorry.”

His smile was bittersweet. “It’s okay. It’s something I’ve lived with for a long time.”

I leaned in over the table. “Something like that is never okay. Here I am moping about losing my family because I was a shitty husband and you’ve experienced *actual* tragedy.”

Logan put his hand over mine and squeezed, his eyes warm. “We’re all allowed to have our personal baggage, Griff. It’s not a competition.”

I exhaled. “Still, it puts it in perspective.”

“Yeah,” he said quietly. Then, “Your turn.”

After that, we asked lighter questions, both of us seeming to need a break from the serious topics. We finished our first drink over the game, then ate burgers and fries off the pub’s regular menu, though Billie brought us a cinnamon bun to split before they were gone.

By the time we’d polished off everything, I realized the place had emptied out. “We should probably head home,” I said.

“It’s getting late,” Logan agreed.

Still, neither of us rushed, finishing the last of our drinks before Logan paid the tab, insisting it was the least he could do after sleeping in my house every night. I reluctantly allowed it, sensing it was important to him.

The trip home was quick, the darkness a blanket broken by the flashing of Christmas lights through the car windows. The drive tonight felt worlds apart from the first time I'd taken Logan to my home. That night, he'd been a stranger. Tonight? He was a friend.

I glanced sidelong at his profile, and my heart skipped.

In different circumstances, he could be so much more, but I had to be happy with what life had dealt me. It was sure a hell of a lot better than the hand Logan had gotten. He'd told me tonight he loved the holidays because they reminded him of his last special memories with his parents, and that Christmas Falls made those memories a little sharper, a little more real instead of a faraway dream.

I was glad he'd found that here, but my heart still ached for him as I pulled into the driveway.

He deserved so much more.

CHAPTER 12



LOGAN

GRIFF'S HOUSE WAS DARK BUT TOASTY AS WE STEPPED INSIDE. I slipped off my coat, and he took it from my hands, our fingers brushing briefly before he turned to hang it in the closet. My eyes slowly adjusted to the gloom, and I watched him untie the belt of his black peacoat, then work open large buttons. It was so easy to imagine those fingers on other pieces of clothing. Maybe his pants. Maybe mine.

Heat pooled in my groin, my cock plumping, and I bit my inner cheek to keep in a sound of pure need.

“Tonight was nice,” he said, his voice loud in the cloak of silence that had descended between us. “Thanks for dragging me out.”

“Anytime, Griff.”

I could hear the roughness of my voice, but I couldn't stop it. Not with the desire raging through me. I drifted closer to him, even though I shouldn't.

“I like spending time with you,” I whispered, like a confession in the dark.

He turned toward me, most of his expression lost to the gloom. “I hope you know that you never have to be alone in this world.”

His words caught me off-guard. They were so sincere.

“My family is your family,” he continued. “I mean, if you want a family. I know there's a lot of us, and we're loud and overwhelming, but if you let us, we'll all love you.”

My heart twisted hard. “*Griff...*”

“I mean it.”

He did. I knew he did.

Which was why I couldn’t resist reaching for him.

I raised my hand to his jaw, his beard so soft against my palm, and leaned in. I came close enough to taste his exhale before he turned and my lips skimmed his cheek.

“We can’t,” he said, stepping back. “My sister...”

Shit. In the fog of want, that little detail had floated away. But of course it wouldn’t for Griff.

“It’s late,” Griff continued. “We should get some sleep.”

He whirled away, walking fast, gone before I could even formulate a proper apology. *Fuck.* He was going to hate me, wasn’t he? He was going to think I was a jerk who wanted to cheat on his sister.

This couldn’t go on.

I fled to my bedroom, shame heating my cheeks even though my relationship with Jess was a fiction. I never should have put Griff in that position. With trembling fingers, I pulled out my phone and texted Jess.

We have to tell Griff the truth!!!

While I waited for an answer, I stripped down to my boxer briefs, then tugged on some sweats for bed. The second the phone dinged with a text, I snatched it up, heart racing.

What happened?

I started typing, then stopped. Then started again. The phone rang before I’d finished my message.

“Just tell me,” Jess said.

“I tried to kiss him.”

“*Logan!*”

“I know! But it’s not fair to either of us to continue pretending. It was bad enough when you’re here, but *what is*

the point when you're in Chicago?"

"Ugh, I'm sorry. I never meant for it to happen this way. I can tell them when I get back..."

"But who knows when that will be?" I protested. "It's delay after delay. I'm not saying we have to tell everyone, but I can't keep this from him. Not after tonight."

"You really like him, huh?"

"Yeah. I'm sorry. I know it's inconvenient."

"Please," she scoffed. "*I've* inconvenienced *you*. Besides, maybe this is a good thing. I've been talking to Rob while I'm up here, and I think we might try again. You know I regretted leaving him behind when I decided to take that—"

"Jess." I cut her off. "That's great and I'm happy for you, but I'm kind of in crisis mode here."

"Sorry. I'll talk to Griff. That's what I'm trying to say. If I can connect with Rob, you should be free to do the same."

"So you'll call now?"

"It's late. Maybe I should wait till morning?"

"*Jess*," I practically growled.

"Okay, I'll do it now," she said quickly. "You really are worked up, huh?"

"I need him to know the truth. Immediately. If you don't tell him tonight, I really don't feel right staying here."

Her tone shifted. "I'm sorry, Logan. I shouldn't have put you in this position. I knew my family would be worried about me, but..." She sighed. "Don't leave, okay? I'll call Griff right now, and I'll be back in Christmas Falls soon. We can explain to everyone else that you were always more of a friend. How does that sound?"

Some of the tension leaked out of me with a gusty exhale. "Really good."

"Okay. Get some sleep. Tomorrow, you'll be a free man."



GRIFF

I needed sleep, but I couldn't relax. Logan had tried to *kiss* me. And wrong as it was, I'd wanted it too. Even now, I half wished he'd show up at my door, though that would surely end in disaster.

My stomach churned with guilt, but a sense of desperate hope assailed me. There *had* to be some mistake. The Logan I'd been getting to know wouldn't be disloyal. He'd gone through life without any family to call his own. If he loved Jess, he wouldn't throw that away for a fling with her brother.

But he *had* tried to kiss me. At least, I thought he had. Could my mind have been playing tricks? Conjuring up what *I* wanted so desperately? No. I was sure he'd meant to kiss me. He'd been so close I'd felt his breath tickle my lips.

I huffed an annoyed breath as the memory played back, fighting the temptation to fantasize about a different ending.

My head was such a mess that I nearly missed the rattle my phone made as it silently vibrated on my bedside table. I saw Jess's name on the display and almost didn't answer. I was so fucking conflicted right now.

But maybe hearing her voice was the dose of reality I needed.

"Hey, Jess," I said when I picked up the call. "Everything okay?"

"Actually...Logan asked me to call you."

My chest grew tight, and my voice came out strangled. "He told you?"

"Yeah," she said softly. "But Griff, it's okay. We're not really dating."

I blinked. "What do you mean?"

“Well, remember how I promised to bring you a really great Christmas gift this year?” she said, her voice light and teasing. “Surprise! He’s all yours.”

I made an inarticulate sound, too shocked to formulate a response. Jess rushed on as I collapsed onto the edge of my bed.

“I’m sorry I told everyone he was my boyfriend,” she said quickly. “You know how much Mom worries, and I just didn’t want to spend the holidays talking about my heartbreak. And that’s all behind me anyway, because I think Rob and I might be getting back together!”

“You haven’t been up there working?” I asked, temper beginning to flare.

“No, I have! That’s all true. The security breach has been a mess, but Rob works here too, and we’ve spent a lot of time collaborating, so—”

“Wait. Hold up. Just give it to me straight. Is Logan your boyfriend or not?”

“Nope. He’s all yours! But I’d appreciate it if you didn’t tell Mom and Dad before I get back. I’ll tell them everything, I swear. I’d just like to do it in person.”

“So, was Logan *ever* your boyfriend?”

“No.”

“A casual date?”

“No.”

“Have you ever hooked up, or made out, or...”

“No, Griff. He’s completely free of Jess germs, okay? You can kiss him with a clear conscience.”

That was all I needed to hear. I tossed the phone on the bed, ignoring my sister’s voice still streaming from the speaker, and yanked open the door.

It was late. Logan might already be asleep.

But if he wasn’t...

I walked down the hall, heart hammering, and knocked firmly on his door.

He opened it almost immediately, dressed in only a pair of sweats. My gaze dropped to his bare chest, heat simmering under my skin.

He's not hers. He can be mine.

I forced my eyes to meet his, which were filled with worry.

“Jess called,” I said curtly.

His eyes fluttered shut, and he was so fucking beautiful it hurt.

“Griff, I’m so sorry about ev—”

I grabbed his face and kissed him.

He gasped, tensing up, and for a second I’d feared I’d misread the entire situation. But then his arms came around me. He fisted my shirt, pulling me closer, and his tongue met mine in a sinuous stroke. I groaned, kissing him harder, feeling my tenuous grasp on control break.

“Want you so much,” I growled between kisses.

“Yes,” he muttered, shuddering as my lips moved to his neck. “Take me. Please. I’m yours.”

“Not Jess’s,” I felt the need to confirm, even though she’d told me herself.

“No, never,” he said, the words music to my ears. “I’m gay, Griff. The only one I want is you.”

I pulled back to look him in the eye. “Then get on your knees.”

With a groan, he sank down in front of me. Seeing him there, such a big, strong man ready to give me what I wanted, was heady stuff. But the way his eyes burned with desire, his pupils big and dark, was even hotter.

I slipped my fingers through his silky hair. “Tell me what you want,” I said.

“I want to suck you. Want you to fuck me.”

“Yeah? Is that all?”

He looked up at me, wetting his lips, seeming nervous.

“I want you to hold me afterward, if...if you don't mind.”

I tightened my grip on his hair, tugging his head back a little so I had his full attention. “Logan, I will never mind a chance to have you close. I've wanted you since the moment we met.”

“Me too,” he admitted. “You're so tightly controlled. I've been dying to see you let go.”

“Well, now's your chance,” I said. “Let's see what you can do with that sexy mouth.”

“Fuck yes,” he groaned, reaching up to pull my sweats over my hips. I didn't wear underwear to bed, so my cock sprang out, hard and moist at the tip.

I gripped it at the base and directed it to Logan's parted lips, heat rushing through me at the sight.

If he wanted to see me lose control, he was about to get his wish.

CHAPTER 13



LOGAN

GRIFF WAS INTENSE, HIS DARK EYES BORING INTO ME AS HE fed me his cock. I wasn't really surprised after that first kiss.

He hadn't been hesitant or sweet, as I'd imagined he might be. His kiss had been forceful but desperate, full of raw passion.

Of course, after pushing down my desires all week, after telling myself again and again that I couldn't have him, I was feeling a little desperate myself. I closed my eyes in bliss as his cock filled my mouth, widening my jaw and tilting my head to take him as deeply as I could.

I worked my tongue along the underside of his shaft, all the way up to the divot beneath his cockhead and reveled in the tightening of his fingers in my hair.

"Fuck, Logan," he rasped, voice shaking a little.

I sucked him more enthusiastically, loving that his composure was slipping, wanting—*needing*—him as out of control as I felt. His hips bucked, and his cock shoved into my throat. I choked gladly, taking my reward as he let go of his restraint. He gripped my hair and fucked into my mouth, thrusting deep three times before pushing me away.

I fell onto my ass, gasping for air, eyes watering. I couldn't be too offended when I looked up to see Griff with an iron grip around the base of his shaft, face tense as he fought back his orgasm.

"I wasn't going to last," he muttered. "Sorry."

I pushed to my feet. “I’ll take that as a compliment. Don’t apologize.”

He huffed a little laugh. “You should. Your mouth is impressive.”

I cupped his face, his beard incredibly soft beneath my palms. “I’ve been dying to get it on you.”

We kissed again, softer this time. Not hesitant or sweet, but drawn out and delicious. He gripped my hips, then stroked his hands over my ribs and to my pecs, fingers digging into muscle as if he appreciated my strength.

I grabbed the hem of his shirt and yanked it up. “It’s past time for you to be naked.”

When we’d started this, Griff had ordered me to my knees and I’d gratefully gone. But as rigid as he was about his work, he was more flexible in my arms. He gave and took in equal measure. I liked that. Sex was enjoyable in many different ways, and I never restricted myself to just one role or dynamic.

Griff let me guide him down to the bed, let me pin him with my weight, as we continued to kiss. Every time we shifted, my cock rubbed some part of him, sending sparks of pleasure through me that was slowly stoking an unbearable fire.

“Do you have condoms in here?” he asked.

“In my duffel.” I scrambled off the bed to dig for supplies. When I returned, I straddled his thighs and Griff took the opportunity to slide his hands over more of my body. He caressed my thighs, gave my cock a stroke that had me craving more, then cupped and squeezed my ass.

He parted my cheeks, a dry finger brushing over my hole. “You don’t mind if I top?”

“Not at all. I need a little prep, but not much. Just some lube.”

“Allow me, then.” He held out his fingers, and I squeezed some slippery liquid onto them.

While I rolled the condom down his cock, then lubed it up, he circled my rim with a slick fingertip and slowly pushed in. I exhaled and relaxed, letting him inside, rocking back as he added a second finger. There was a burn as I stretched, but I'd learned how to let that sensation feed my anticipation, and it only served to ramp up my arousal.

"That's good," I said. "I'm ready."

Griff removed his fingers and I shifted forward, guiding his cock to my entrance and slowly sinking down. He moaned as my heat enveloped him, but he was patient as I stilled to let my body adjust to the intrusion.

"You're so gorgeous," he murmured, gaze slipping up my body. "Can't believe I get to have this with you."

That feeling of surprised gratitude swamped me again too. I pressed my hand to his face, stroking his beard, and leaned down to brush my lips over his. "I feel so lucky."

His breath caught, his gaze searching mine, as if he found that hard to believe. Then I shifted my hips, and we were both thrown into the pleasure of the act. I straightened up and rode him, thighs burning as I worked my weight up and down.

When I began to tire, Griff pushed me onto my back, then re-entered me with a forceful thrust that made me cry out. He hiked my legs over his shoulders and fucked me hard.

"Yes yes yes," I chanted, giving in to the building tension and reaching for my cock. I squeezed and stroked in time with his thrusts, and my climax hit hard, my ass tightening around his shaft as my cock pulsed cum over my fingers.

I'd wanted him to lose control, but I was the one shaking and coming apart.

But I didn't have time for disappointment. Griff's thrusts grew erratic before he swore loudly as he shoved into me as deep as he could go, shuddering with his release. I couldn't feel him come, not through the condom, which was a shame. But his body jerked against mine, and when I thought he was done, he jolted again with a broken moan, little quivers rolling through him all over again.

I wasn't in any hurry to end this, so I tightened my arms around him and threaded my fingers through his thick hair.

"Damn," he muttered against my neck as his body calmed.

"Yeah," I agreed.

He slowly withdrew from me, taking care to be gentle, which was the sweetness I'd expected from him before that first passionate kiss. He brushed soft lips against my shoulder, giving me the softness I'd always known was there beneath the urgent need we both felt.

"That was amazing," he said.

"It really was."

He rolled away to dispose of the condom, then glanced over his shoulder, hair messy and falling over his forehead, sweat glistening through the dark curls on his chest, a flush still mottling his skin.

Griffin Calloway, the carefully put-together, reserved man, looked entirely well-fucked, and I loved it.

"I know I said I'd hold you afterward, but—"

"That's okay," I said quickly, embarrassment flooding me even as my chest ached. "I was just being needy. I don't expect ___"

Griff leaned forward to kiss the words from my lips. "As I was *saying*," he said, sounding stern, "my bed is more comfortable. Why don't we move there?"

I hesitated. "You're not mad about the fake boyfriend thing?"

"Hard to be mad when you're naked in my bed." He paused. "Or will be, once I've convinced you to move there."

"So I'm forgiven, just like that?"

"Yeah, let's not waste any more time. Jess did enough of that for us."

"I'm sorry."

“Don’t apologize. You barely knew me, Logan. You were just being a good friend. My sister on the other hand... She’s getting coal in her stocking.”

I chuckled. “That seems fair.”

“Now will you get your ass in my bed, so I can hold you?”

I grinned, reassured that Griff meant it this time. “Well, when you put it that way, there’s nowhere I’d rather be.”

CHAPTER 14



GRIFF

I WOKE WITH LOGAN'S ARMS AROUND ME, A TOASTY BLANKET of heat against my back, and smiled into my pillow. I remembered every detail of what had happened last night, though it felt surreal in the light of day. If it weren't for Logan's presence in my bed, I might not believe it had really happened.

I stretched and shifted, and Logan made a noise of complaint and tightened his arms around me. I'd discovered very quickly that Logan was a cuddle monster, clinging to me in sleep as if afraid I'd sneak away while he was unconscious. I didn't mind, because as it turned out, I was feeling a bit touch-starved myself. It had been too long since I'd shared my bed with someone, much less someone I wanted to hold close.

Still, as much as I enjoyed the intimacy, I had other needs. I pried his arm loose and slipped out of the bed to pad to the bathroom. Then I went by the kitchen to brew coffee and poured two mugs. I added milk and sugar to Logan's, because I knew he didn't enjoy it black.

When I returned to the bedroom, he was sitting up in my bed, drool-worthy chest on display, blankets pooled in his lap.

"Good morning," he said hesitantly, as if unsure of his reception.

"Morning." I handed him a coffee cup. "I put in a bunch of sugar for you."

"Really?" He took a cautious sip then smiled, making my heart flutter. This man had wanted to share my bed. *Incredible.*

“I thought you said that would taint the purity of a good cup of coffee.”

“Oh, it does.” I smirked. “I just make an exception for gorgeous men who sleep with me.”

“Way to make me feel special. You probably have one of those every other week.”

I scoffed. “Not even close.”

“Beautiful women?”

“I’m married to my work,” I said dryly, “or did you forget that?”

His smile turned wicked. “Didn’t stop you from fucking me.”

I set my coffee down and drew him into a long kiss. “You’re the exception, Logan. Not the rule.”

He wrapped an arm around my waist, tugging me down over him. “Is spending the day in bed out of the question, Mr. Workaholic?”

I sighed mournfully. “I’m afraid the festival must go on.”

“I figured.”

“But it does slow down now and then...” I dipped my head to kiss his neck, loving the way he shivered in response. “I don’t have to be anywhere *immediately*.” I stroked my left hand along his flank. “I don’t think I’ve properly appreciated this gorgeous man in my bed nearly enough.”

He chuckled, the sound vibrating through him and into me where our chests connected.

“By all means,” he said teasingly. “Appreciate me thoroughly.”

I made my way down his body, kissing and nipping, savoring each inch of firm skin over his hard body. Logan was not a man to sit idle. He was in shape, not bulked up like a gym rat, but honed by labor.

“All that ladder climbing must pay off,” I muttered as I squeezed one muscular thigh.

Logan laughed quietly and ran a hand through my hair. “Got you to look at my ass, so I’d say that’s a win.”

I looked up at him, surprise flaring. “Are you saying you teased me *intentionally*?”

He bit his lower lip, but his eyes were full of playful amusement. “I would never...”

“Just for that, I’m going to have to tease you.”

I rubbed my beard between his thighs, watching his stomach flex and his cock leak precum, then kissed my way down one leg and up the other, ignoring where he really wanted me, until he was a begging, pleading mess. Only then did I finally take his cock into my mouth, working him until he shot into my throat and collapsed into the bed a quivering, sweaty heap.

It only took a couple of strokes of my own hand to come over him. When I was done, I looked down with satisfaction at the mess I’d made of him.

“You look like you need a shower,” I told him. “Come on, I’ll help you clean up before we head out.”

Logan rolled out of bed on shaky legs, seeming dazed, and I felt a flare of pride. He might be the sexiest man I’d ever had in my bed—and the first one in two years—but I still pleased him.

I turned on the shower and guided him in, then joined him. Logan was quiet as I shampooed his hair, sighing as I scratched my nails against his scalp and then used a loofah to scrub down his strong back.

“You’re not like I imagined,” Logan said when I’d finished soaping him up and was rinsing the suds away. “In bed, I mean.”

“Oh? Should I be worried?”

He licked his lower lip, looking downright sinful. “Not at all. You’re so sexy and confident. I just thought you might be

reserved or guarded, that I might have to work to get you to loosen up, but...you're not like that."

"Hmm yeah," I agreed. "I do still like to be in control."

He chuckled. "I noticed. I don't know if anyone has ever told you, but you're a little intense."

I paused in my scrubdown, eyes meeting his. "I guess I am. Does that bother you?"

Logan swallowed hard, his Adam's apple bobbing. "No, but I don't want to mislead you about where this is going."

"You're not. I'm fully aware you don't live here." The shower made the conversation feel more intimate. We were naked together, wet, enclosed in a small space. There was no better place for honesty. "We can still enjoy the time we have together."

Logan searched my eyes, looking for some sign that I was covering how I felt, maybe, but I wasn't. Did I want more than a few days or weeks with Logan? I was pretty sure I did. But I was nothing if not realistic. He hadn't come here with the intention to stay long-term, and I could accept that. I sure as hell wasn't going to let it keep me from the most amazing man I'd ever met. I knew from just the few days we'd known each other when I thought I *couldn't* have him that there was no way I could resist our connection.

When he left, I'd deal with it the same way I did everything else. I'd throw myself into work and forget the rest of the world existed. Until then, I wanted everything he could give me.



Sugar Plum Park was just beginning to fill up as we arrived. One of my most capable volunteers was on hand, and Marlene assured me everything was on track to go smoothly for our kiddie "reindeer games" and "Polar Express" train ride.

We had special musical performances by choirs from Bradley University, a branch of Illinois State University, and a

couple of regional churches starting up today too, so I left Logan happily chatting with Marlene to check in with the musical directors and show them how to operate the mic and speaker setup in place on our pop-up stage.

Happy voices and laughter cut through the air, and I paused to let it wash over me. I remembered that sound from when my kids were little. Those were the happy times, before the cracks in my marriage widened, but I tried not to dwell on what I'd lost.

I glanced across the park, catching sight of Logan bending down to fasten a bracelet around a little girl's wrist, and smiled. How could I not in the face of his sunny, sweet nature?

He could have easily stuck to my side, or even just chatted with Marlene, but he'd jumped straight into helping out.

"Excuse me, sir, but someone said you're in charge?"

I turned to find a middle-aged man who looked more than a little overwhelmed.

"Yes, how can I help you?" I asked.

"I was just wondering when the Santa photos are starting up again? My son is playing with the other kids, but I don't want to miss them. Someone also mentioned an arts and crafts fair going on somewhere near here. I'm sorry. This was a last-minute trip and I didn't properly prepare. I had no idea this festival would be so big!"

I chuckled. "It's a lot to take in, but don't worry. If you want a photo with Santa, you're in the right place."

I continued answering his questions, trying to hide my impatience to get back to Logan, my attention drifting toward him again and again.

Usually, I put the festival ahead of everything else, but even with an anxious dad on my hands and my phone chiming with an email about a problem at the arts and crafts festival, I couldn't stop thinking about Logan. I wanted to get closer—to get him back into bed, yes, but also to talk like we had at the cocktail hour last night. Just the two of us getting to know each other better.

When I finally got free, Logan was crouched down to tie a little boy's shoe before sending him back into the "reindeer games," which were just a handful of kid-friendly games like hide-and-seek, a beanbag toss, and a scavenger hunt for items hidden around the park.

The boy looked a little like my son, Jonas, had at that age, with messy hair tumbling over his forehead. But of course, Jonas was a teenager now, and it had been many years since he'd displayed that kind of excitement for anything in Christmas Falls.

I lowered my hand to Logan's shoulder, unable to resist touching him, if only to remind myself that what happened between us last night was real and for the moment, at least, he was still in my life.

Logan looked up at me, soft smile on his face. "Hey, stranger."

Marlene's gaze was too curious, so I pulled my hand away. Hopefully she would think I was trying to get his attention, not *stroke* the man. I might know the truth, but all Christmas Falls still believed he was Jess's boyfriend and I'd rather not get the reputation of a cheating bastard. Even if it was proven to be untrue later, that kind of thing was hard to shake when small-town gossip did its worst.

I cleared my throat. "You ready to go? I've got some things to take care of."

"Sure." He straightened to his full height and glanced toward Marlene. "Thanks for letting me help."

"Oh, honey, volunteer any time you like," she said, looking as enamored with him as I was. "The kids love you."

"You have my number if you need anything," I said.

She waved us off. "Yes, yes, go work your magic, Griff."

Logan turned to me. "Do we have to rush off? I was hoping to talk you into another whirl on the ice rink."

I hesitated. I really *should* get over to the arts and crafts fair, but... Well, maybe I could let someone else handle that

little issue. Skating with Logan might be the only opportunity I got to put my hands on the man in public without raising eyebrows—if only to keep him from landing on his ass.

“Let me just shoot off a quick message and we can go.”

He brightened. “Really?”

“Yeah, why not? It’s Sunday. I can’t work all the time, right?”

Except that’s exactly what I did in festival season. I worked *all the time*. I could delegate more, but I liked to remain in control. I’d always told myself that it was quality assurance. If I managed everything, then I could ensure the festival remained consistent and up to my standards.

But Logan’s time here was limited. I didn’t want to waste even a minute of it digging out extension cords when I could be making memories.

I fired off a text to a volunteer working in the same building as the crafts fair, then pocketed my phone.

“You don’t have something more important to do?” Logan asked.

“Nope,” I answered honestly. “There’s nowhere else I need to be right now. I’m all yours.”

CHAPTER 15



LOGAN

“YOU’VE GOT TO BE KIDDING ME.”

“What?” I turned around to see a small crowd milling outside of the Snowflake Shack. The diner was a popular lunch spot, but there wasn’t usually a crowd of people waiting on the sidewalk, especially before noon. “Whoa. Are they giving out free ice cream or something?”

“I wish,” Griff grumbled.

He held out his phone, the screen displaying a social media post about another cheery bit of Christmas graffiti decorating the front of the building. This time, the image depicted children building a snowman while snowflakes, ornaments, and gifts all drifted down from above their heads, a holiday *blizzard* of sorts.

“It was bad enough at the first spot, but at least that was facing a side street. This is on the main drag and tons of tourists will see it! Adam is probably so upset.”

“Adam?”

“Adam Trent, the owner.”

“Oh. Well, this post seems pretty positive. It’s talking about how much fun this festive art is. Like a little surprise at the bottom of a cereal box.”

Griff turned to me, eyebrow raised.

“What? I’m just reading the post. And look...isn’t that the owner right there?” I pointed toward an older, gray-haired man

wearing an old-fashioned soda jerk hat tilted at a jaunty angle. “He’s smiling.”

“He’s faking it, no doubt,” Griff said. “Let’s go check out the damage.”

“Griff, hold up...” I caught his arm and waited for his dark, intense gaze to meet mine. A little flutter started up in my gut at the eye contact.

We’d had an amazing few days since falling into bed together. By day I’d tagged along and watched Griff be the amazing, competent man he was and by night, we’d had incredibly intense sex.

No one was more knowledgeable about the holiday festival or so skilled at adjusting plans, pivoting to solve logistical problems, or—most surprising to me—smoothing over ruffled feathers to defuse conflict.

Half the town called Griff by his nickname, *Grinch*, though they did it lovingly. And it was the scowl on his face right now that inspired it. Griff did so many things right, but the one thing he’d been lacking was the ability to appreciate the very thing he was trying to create: *holiday magic*.

“I know you like to be in control...” I said hesitantly.

“And you like me in control.” He said it so matter-of-factly, so confidently, I had to suppress a shiver. Yes, I loved the way he took control of my body in bed. I might have fantasized about unraveling the uptight man, but I’d come to appreciate the finer points of a man who knew exactly what he wanted, especially when what he wanted was to wring as much pleasure out of me as humanly possible.

“Yes, yes, I do,” I said, my voice dropping in register. I cleared my throat and attempted to keep us on track. “But if those people over there are happy, then I think you should keep in mind that something out of your control isn’t automatically bad. Right?”

His forehead creased in a frown, and he glanced across the street again.

“Christmas Falls projects a certain wholesome image. We’re aiming to give visitors a Hallmark experience.”

“And you do,” I reassured.

“But graffiti doesn’t fit that image.”

“Maybe it can,” I countered. “This is *art*, and it’s holiday art, Griff. Just keep an open mind.”

I wasn’t sure if I was overstepping, but after another look at the crowd buzzing around taking photos, he sighed. “All right, I’ll try. For you.”

My heart skipped, even as my stomach twisted at the words. *For you*. I wanted him to mean those words, and yet it also scared me.

What I had with Griff really did not compare with one-time hookups or even a few of my casual dating arrangements.

Everything with Griff was just...more.

Everything with Christmas Falls was more.

I felt as if I’d taken a dive off a high cliff, and I was plummeting toward a hard, painful landing. This couldn’t last forever. And yet, the free-fall was a hell of a ride, one I couldn’t regret.

The only regret I did have was the position Griff and I were in with his family. It was one thing to pretend for Jess when I didn’t know them, but now that they’d all welcomed me so warmly, I couldn’t imagine lying to them about my relationship with Griff. As a result, we’d both been dodging their invites throughout the week, usually with excuses about Griff’s work taking priority.

But as we crossed the street toward the Snowflake Shack and the latest graffiti art to appear, we ran right into the whole Calloway clan coming out of the diner’s front door.

“Well, hello, stranger,” Griff’s mother said, swooping in to envelop me in a big hug. “Isn’t this artwork just fabulous? We saw it on the way in.”

“Yeah, great,” Griff said, sounding less than pleased, but at least he was trying?

Lena snorted. “Way to sell it, Griff.”

“It wasn’t part of the festival plan,” he complained. “I have no idea who’s painting these things or what they might do next.”

I placed a comforting hand on his back. “So far it’s all been family-friendly holiday art.”

“I know.” He sighed. “You called it before. I don’t like giving up control.”

Our eyes met again, a reel of sexy images playing in my head.

“You two have sure been busy lately,” Lena said, sounding knowing. “Working *all hours* of the day and night.”

“You know how festival season is,” Griff said stiffly.

I looked at my shoes, willing Lena to direct her attention elsewhere.

Griff’s mother patted my arm. “Griff works so hard. I think it’s great he’s got you here to help, but this is your vacation, sweetie. You should enjoy it.”

I gave her a strained smile. “I am. Really.”

I knew Griff was dying to drag the Snowflake Shack owner aside and question him about the graffiti art, but he stuck by my side. “It hasn’t been all work. I took Logan to the ice sculpture demo the other night.”

“Oh! Well, that’s nice. I almost went, but I was on the phone with Jess. It’s just a mess up there at her corporate headquarters, isn’t it?”

I nodded. “She thinks they’re nearly done with installing the extra firewalls and updating their emergency protocols to counteract a data breach in the future.”

“It’ll be so nice to get her back here and have a proper visit! She’s promised to spend Christmas with us since she

worked so much of this vacation. I hope it hasn't been a problem for you to extend your stay, Logan?"

I fought the urge to check Griff's expression. "No, not at all. I'm between jobs right now." I realized how that sounded and hurried to add, "I'm not mooching off Jess, though! I'll find work when my vacation is over. Though I don't want to overstay my welcome."

"Don't be ridiculous," Griff said. "You're the perfect houseguest."

"Besides, the room would just sit empty otherwise," his mother added.

If she only knew how empty it was most nights...

"Well, thanks for being so understanding," I said.

"Of course, dear. Jess likes you, and so do we!"

Lena chose the moment to chime in. "You and Griff seem to have hit it off, too."

"Yeah." Griff cleared his throat. "Logan's been really helpful with the festival."

"Just don't work him too hard," Eleanor scolded.

"I won't," Griff said with a chuckle. "I've already promised to take him to see the falls tonight."

"Oh, that's a beautiful spot," she said.

Lena's eyes sparkled. "It sure is romantic. Rick took me the other night."

"Uh...right." He quickly changed the subject. "Well, I need to go talk to Adam real quick, and I'm sure you all want to get back to your day. Can you believe this graffiti nonsense?"

"Lighten up, Grinch," Lena teased. "Enjoy the holiday spirit." She eyed me. "In whatever shape it might take."

Griff slipped away to catch the building owner's attention while I lingered to exchange longer goodbyes with the family. I waited for Griff to finish his conversation with Adam, then

joined him. When I reached his side, he linked his pinky finger with mine between our bodies.

“How did it go?”

He shrugged. “You were right. Adam really was delighted by the graffiti. I seem to be the only one concerned.”

“Sorry?”

He shook his head. “Don’t be. If Adam is happy, who am I to complain? It’s his building.” He turned to look at me. “But what was that with Lena’s comments? Does she know something?”

I winced. “She does sort of know I wasn’t seriously dating Jess. She sussed it out early on.”

“That didn’t seem like all she knew,” he said.

He wasn’t wrong. She’d definitely been tossing out innuendoes to toy with us.

“Yeah, I think she can tell something’s going on with us. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t ever apologize for that,” he said. “I’m grateful for every day I get to spend with you.”

“Even when your mother still thinks I’m your sister’s boyfriend?”

He sighed. “No, that part needs to change. I’m going to call Jess tonight and insist she get her butt home for family brunch this weekend. No more excuses. Even if she has to turn around and drive back to Chicago, it’s time to set the record straight. You, Logan Reid, are *mine*.”

My stomach swooped. That was a heck of a claim, though I couldn’t deny it did things to me. Still, we really should keep this casual, right? I’d be leaving before long.

“Griff...”

“I know.” He chuckled. “I just sounded like such a Neanderthal. You don’t belong to anyone. But while you’re here, I’d like it if you’d consider yourself to be with me.

Because, Logan, I'm yours for however long you want to keep me."

His eyes bored into me, and even though I knew I should tell him again to keep this casual, I couldn't resist that intense gaze.

"Do you think there's time to sneak back to your bed before we have dinner? Maybe claim each other in total caveman fashion?"

"If there's not, I'll *make* time," he said in that firm voice that went straight to my dick. "Come on. First stop, my bed. Later, I'll take you out for a night you won't forget."

"And here I thought the sex was supposed to be the unforgettable part," I joked.

He placed a hand on my lower back, guiding me across the street, and flashed me a grin. "That's a given. Every time we're together is amazing. But this is pretty good too. I'm going to make you fall in love—"

My steps faltered.

"—with Christmas Falls once and for all," he finished.

His expression was a little too neutral when I glanced sidelong at him. That pause had been intentional. Griff was testing me, and I was failing, because for every time I reminded him my time here was short, my heart grew more attached to this man and this place—this family and this home—that would never be mine.

I'd learned long ago to stop wishing to belong and accept that I never would. For my own happiness, I had to stop longing for something that didn't exist.

But Griff made me want to believe in the impossible.

CHAPTER 16



GRIFF

IT WAS JUST GETTING DARK AS I LED LOGAN TOWARD A RUSTIC barn tucked in a clearing with what looked like a forest of evergreens beyond it. The barn was actually a store where people paid for their tree purchases and could browse other items such as wreaths, ornaments, and knickknacks.

Also, it was the place where you could sign up for a wagon ride over to the waterfall that contributed to our town's name: first as Milton Falls, then Christmas Falls. That was our ultimate destination for the night.

I smiled and nodded to a couple exiting the store, then stepped inside. It was toasty warm after our trek through a night with a breeze cold enough to bite.

"This is cute," Logan said, moving toward a table displaying some wood-carved figurines. He picked up a grumpy-looking gnome and grinned. "This guy looks like the perfect gift for our resident grinch." He paused. "And...kind of like that huge gnome at the entrance to Sugar Plum Park?"

"Yep, Murphy Clark is our resident gnome-carver. He did both. But save your money. I've got about five of those grumpy little guys already."

He laughed. "You're kidding."

"Sorry, love, but a *lot* of people had that idea before you."

He gave me a wide-eyed look. "Careful, Griff."

"What?"

“I’m still supposed to be Jess’s boyfriend,” he whispered. “If someone overheard...”

I ran the words back through my head and nearly cringed with embarrassment. It wasn’t only that someone might overhear and think I was stealing my sister’s boyfriend. I’d called Logan *love*. That was a pretty strong endearment for what was supposed to be a casual fling.

Of course, it wasn’t casual to me. Not in the slightest. But I didn’t want to scare Logan off. He’d be leaving soon enough without me hurrying the process.

“I’m sorry. I wasn’t thinking.”

He shook his head. “It’s fine. I just don’t want anyone judging you.”

I raised an eyebrow. “But they can judge you?”

He shrugged and smiled sheepishly. “I’m the one just passing through. You have to live here.”

That should not have made my heart ache, but it sure as hell did. Time for a distraction. I turned and tried to catch Bruce’s eye.

He was standing off to one side, engrossed in a conversation with a couple of men who were waving their hands about emphatically. Bruce was nodding every two seconds, and I could practically feel his impatience from here.

When his gaze met mine, I spotted a clear cry for help in his expression.

“Hey, Bruce!” I called. “Got a minute to show me those trees for the festival next week?”

The tree farm was donating trees that local businesses would decorate in a variety of themes to raise money for a regional charity called the Holiday Hope Foundation. It was always fun to see the creativity on display. Our local bookstore had once decorated a tree entirely with bookmarks—some paper, some metal, some with cute little charms. And last year, our candy store dressed a tree with nothing but colorful candies.

Bruce excused himself from the customers and made his way over. “Thanks. I thought I’d never get away from them.”

I chuckled. “Did they buy something, at least?”

“Yeah, they picked out trees earlier. Wanted to go out and have the full experience of chopping them down. I had to advise them on technique, which led to them needing to prove their manliness by talking about cars for an hour.”

Logan laughed beside me, a low melody that warmed my insides. It caught Bruce’s attention too. He gave Logan a quick once-over, as if he couldn’t resist. Not that I could blame him.

“So, you must be the man who’s kept Griff too busy to have a drink with me lately.”

“I guess so,” Logan said. “Do you and Griff go out for drinks often?”

Bruce smirked, one eyebrow hitching. “Often enough. Does that bother you?”

“What? No, I was just curious,” Logan said quickly, but he sounded flustered and red was crawling up his throat. Was he jealous? I tucked that away to think about later.

“Don’t worry about Bruce,” I told Logan. “He’s a good friend and not really the type to gossip about us.”

“I’m too damn busy to spread rumors.”

“You hired someone to help for the season, didn’t you?” I asked, concerned.

“Yeah, but you know how it is. I could always use more help.” He gave us an assessing look. “But just to be safe, why don’t you tell me what I’m not gossiping about. Just so there are no misunderstandings.”

I glanced at Logan, and he gave me a small nod of acceptance. I was the one who had to live here, as he’d said.

“You’ve already heard that Logan is Jess’s boyfriend.”

“I have,” he said, but with one look at us together, I could tell he’d already put the pieces together. “I’m guessing that’s not as true as folks think?”

“No, but my sister still has some explaining to do before anyone can know...”

Bruce grinned. “Aha! I knew something was going on with you.” He slapped my back. “You were way too cagey the last time we spoke.”

I chuckled. “Yeah, yeah, just keep it to yourself for a while. Hopefully it’ll be cleared up soon.”

“Yeah, no problem. So, did you really come out here to check on the trees?”

“Well, I thought I might as well sign off on them while I’m here. Then Logan and I can catch one of the wagon rides over to the falls.”

His eyes lit up. “Ah, let’s get to it then. I don’t want to keep you from romancing your new man.”

We followed Bruce out into the nippy night, and not seeing anyone nearby, I slid an arm around Logan and tugged him close. “Might as well keep warm,” I told him.

Truthfully, I was having more and more trouble keeping my hands off the man. Especially after the intimate sex we’d just shared. We’d slipped back to my place for what I’d thought would be a quickie, but Logan’s teasing comment about unforgettable sex had lodged in my head and I’d been motivated to show him, in every way possible, just how incredible and memorable sex between us could be.

Every touch had felt supercharged with all the things I couldn’t say.

How precious I thought he was. How cataclysmically different he was from anyone I’d ever met. Especially anyone after my divorce, but also from my ex-wife.

I’d loved Melanie, of course, but our connection had been different. More grounded in shared goals and expectations than true passion. Careers, marriage, kids. It was what you were supposed to do, and it was what we thought we wanted, too. And I *loved* having a family. But Melanie wanted more than a spark that guttered out over time and was replaced by a

partnership. She wanted an eternal flame, and I couldn't give her that.

I didn't know yet if I could give it to Logan, but we had more than *sparks* that could easily be doused. We had a conflagration. Even though we'd known each other only a short time, I burned so hotly for him I couldn't imagine the fire going out.

And it wasn't just about the sex. We *connected*. It seemed as if he were the first person to see me, to see past the workaholic, grumpy exterior to what was inside.

I thought I saw him too. And if I was right, then maybe he was feeling just as much as I was—even if he wasn't ready to admit it.

Bruce gave me a quick preview of the trees he'd selected for the Christmas Tree Festival. I hadn't really been worried; he knew his business. But he was happier if I signed off before hauling trees across town, and I could respect that.

Afterward, we loaded up in a wagon with a few other people for the bumpy ride over to the river. We followed a winding trail through the forest of trees the farm cultivated, each side lit up by outdoor Christmas lights staked into the ground at intervals.

As the river came into view, the rushing sound of the waterfall filling the night, Logan leaned forward eagerly. "That's just beautiful."

I watched the smile bloom on his face and could only agree. "It is."

He glanced at me, as if realizing I wasn't talking about the falls and gave me a surprisingly shy smile given how naked he'd been with me earlier tonight. Before us, a river that wound around the outskirts of Christmas Fall widened out into an almost placid-like lake, the water from the falls foaming where it hit the surface.

It wasn't a large waterfall. In this part of the country, we didn't have large mountains for that. This one poured down a

series of three bluff-like cliffs. But it was still beautiful, especially at night when it was all lit up.

At a loading dock, a party pontoon boat bobbed in the water, glowing with strings of Christmas lights.

“Come on,” I said. “Let’s take a ride.”

“That’s what he said,” Logan joked.

“Get your mind out of the gutter,” I scolded, my mouth close to his ear. “You can ride me later.”

Logan shivered, and I didn’t think it was just from the cold as we got into line to join the next mini-cruise on the river. “Promise?”

“Anytime,” I said, meaning it far more than I should.

Anytime today, tomorrow, or next year, I was his for the taking.

The line moved forward, and we followed along until we were stepping up onto the boat and finding seats on a bench along the side. There were throw blankets available, and I tossed one over our laps. Everyone was huddling for warmth, so we didn’t get any second looks by sitting close, and besides, just about everyone on the boat was a tourist tonight.

Logan was gazing out at the view, taking it all in as the boat started moving.

“Lena was right. This is really romantic.” He glanced around the boat. “Almost everyone here is a couple.”

He wasn’t wrong. Families with kids tended to catch one of the earlier rides.

“Is that okay?” I asked carefully. “Me taking you out for a romantic night, I mean?”

Logan grasped my hand beneath the blankets, entwining our fingers, and flashed me a small smile. “Yeah, Griff. It’s more than okay.”

The ball of nerves in my gut loosened. It wasn’t a love confession. Far from it. But Logan’s permission to romance him felt significant.

As if maybe he was entertaining the possibility of more, despite his continued warnings he'd have to leave before long.

I hoped so. Because with every day we spent together, this thing we called life felt a little easier. When Logan was around, people smiled easier. Colors seemed brighter.

Festival season, one of the most stressful times of my life, felt almost...*magical*.

I'd always considered myself the man behind the curtain, but it seemed Logan was the real wizard, and I was fully under his spell.

CHAPTER 17



LOGAN

THE FRONT DOOR FLEW OPEN BEFORE WE'D EVEN MADE IT TO the top of the steps at the Calloways' house. We'd agreed to have brunch with Griff's family, and Jess was supposed to be arriving to set the record straight, so I was nervous.

"You're here!" Griff's mother, Eleanor, beamed at us before looking over her shoulder. "Arthur, they're here!"

"About time," he grumbled, coming up behind her, sounding so much like Griff it made me smile.

"We're not late, are we?" I turned to Griff. "You said eleven o'clock, right?"

Griff checked the time on his phone. "We're not late."

Eleanor made a cooing sound and put her hand over her heart. "Listen to how they're saying *we*, Arthur!"

"Well, they did arrive together," Arthur said dryly.

She swatted his arm. "Oh, you know what I mean! They're both so handsome. Just *look* at them!"

"I'm looking," he said, a grin tugging at his lips.

"They're so *cute* together!"

That's when it clicked. *Jess must have told them.*

Maybe I should have realized sooner, what with Jess's plans to arrive today, but I honestly thought she'd put it off for as long as possible. I'd braced for an awkward confession where Jess and I fumbled our way through an explanation. I

had *not* prepared for the excitement coming off Griff's mother in waves.

"So I guess Jess beat us here," Griff was saying beside me.

"She did." Arthur grinned. "She told us the whole ridiculous tale. A fake boyfriend. *Honestly*. I didn't know anyone did these things outside of books and movies."

I shuffled, feeling awkward. "I'm sorry."

Eleanor waved off the apology. "Water under the bridge. You were just being a good friend. Besides, this couldn't have worked out better! I knew you weren't the right match for our Jess." She paused and winced. "Not that you aren't lovely, dear. You're *perfect* for our Griffy. You two are just adorable!"

"Get it out of your system now," Griff said dryly. "Because I don't want to hear the words *cute* or *adorable* once we're inside."

Arthur chuckled. "You might be on the porch for a while, then."

Eleanor enveloped each of us in a hug, saying, "Cute cute cute cute!"

I couldn't help but laugh. I'd come here today expecting some amount of judgment for pretending to be Jess's boyfriend, even if the Calloways hadn't known me long enough to become attached. Instead, Griff's mom was practically doing a happy dance that I was dating her son.

She finally backed off. "Okay, come on in. The food should be just about done."

The house smelled divine as we stepped inside, like sausage and gravy and syrup and coffee. My stomach rumbled now that it was no longer tied in knots. We followed Griff's parents into the living room, where Lena perched on the arm of the sofa, coffee cup in hand and a big smirk on her face that told me she'd been eavesdropping. Her husband kept his eyes fixed on the TV, looking as if he wanted no part of any family drama, and Lena's daughter, Sarah, was texting on her phone, seemingly oblivious to everyone else.

“I thought I heard voices,” Jess said as she came from the direction of the kitchen, big grin on her face. “Hey, boyfriend!” She swatted my ass. “I missed you while I was in the big city.”

For half a second, I wondered if I’d somehow mistaken everything that had transpired. Then Griff growled, “Hands off,” and tugged me toward him. Suddenly, I could picture them as children fighting over a toy.

Jess raised her hands. “Just kidding! I told Mom and Dad everything, as promised.”

“You could have been honest from the start and saved us all a lot of confusion,” Arthur grumbled as he made his way to the recliner on the other side of the room. “I knew Rob was a keeper.”

Jess’s smile faltered. “I’m sorry. I just didn’t want you to worry about me.”

“That’s our job,” he said.

I got the feeling this conversation had played out more than once since Jess returned.

Eleanor patted her cheek. “Oh, don’t worry about that fussbucket. He’ll be fine once he gets to eat.”

Jess nodded. “Yeah, everything is almost ready.”

“I’ll go check on it,” Eleanor said, seeming to understand we needed a minute to talk. As soon as she was gone, I turned to Jess, speaking quietly so Arthur wouldn’t overhear from across the room.

“How bad was it? You could have waited and told them with me.”

Jess shook her head. “It was fine. They were actually very understanding. Besides, I dragged you into enough drama without making you sit through that.”

“You should be thanking me,” Lena said. “I knew something was up, and I told Eleanor that I didn’t think you two were serious. She wasn’t all that sad to find out the truth. Especially when Jess showed her that rock.”

I raised my eyebrows, and Jess lifted her left hand, displaying a diamond ring. “Surprise! I’m engaged.”

“What?” Griff exclaimed.

I swept her into a hug. “I take it Rob forgave you?”

She gave a watery laugh. “He did. He’s actually setting the table.”

“*Was* setting the table,” an amused voice said behind us.

I turned to see a good-looking but slender guy with short dark hair. He looked like a businessman, exuding a sort of executive vibe that I’d never have. It was easy to see why Jess’s family hadn’t been totally shocked to find out I wasn’t her boyfriend. I was nothing like this guy, not in looks, not in style.

“This is my fiancé, Rob,” Jess said, sounding a little nervous. “Rob, this is Griff, my brother, and Logan, his... boyfriend?”

“Well, that’s better than introducing him as your former fake boyfriend,” Rob teased.

Jess blushed, which was something I’d never seen before. But her hesitation raised a good question. Was I Griff’s boyfriend?

We were supposed to be having a holiday fling, but I couldn’t deny it felt like more. His family clearly expected more, too, which made me nervous. They’d accepted I wasn’t Jess’s boyfriend, but they’d reassigned that role directly to Griff, and I didn’t know how they’d feel about me being nothing more than a holiday hookup.

“Food’s ready!” Eleanor called. “Come get it while it’s hot.”

Arthur pushed out of his recliner with a groan, and Jess turned to Rob. “Ready?”

He grinned. “Are you kidding? I’ve been drooling over the smells coming out of that kitchen.”

“Are you okay?” Griff asked in a low voice as we followed the rest of his family toward the dining room.

“Yeah,” I said quietly. “It’s just...Your mom was so excited. I worry about their expectations for us.”

Griff looked pained, which made my heart twist. I didn’t want to hurt him, but I had to be honest. I’d never intended to stay in Christmas Falls. Before long, I’d need a job. I had no one else to rely on, no large family to support and comfort me.

I’d always been a guy who stood on his own.

“I’ll talk to them about that,” he said. “Don’t worry.”

“Griff...”

“Let’s just enjoy this moment, all right? The big questions can wait.”

My stomach let out another noisy growl, and I gave a startled laugh. “I guess I could eat.”

He grinned and wiggled his eyebrows. “We *did* work up an appetite this morning.”

“We sure did,” I said in a low voice, heat curling through my belly at the memory of our quiet, sexy morning.

We joined the family in the dining room, taking two chairs that had been left empty on the far side of the table. Jess and her fiancé sat across from us.

“I can’t believe you got engaged,” I said. “Congratulations, if I didn’t say it before.”

“Thanks,” Jess said, turning a soft smile toward Rob. “We both put our careers first for a long time, but I knew it was a mistake after we ended up so far apart.”

“I lost Jess once,” he said. “I knew that if I ever got another chance, she was the one for me. I wasn’t going to let her go twice.”

“Aww.” That was Eleanor.

Lena followed it with a swoony sigh. “So romantic.”

Silverware clinked for the next few minutes as everyone filled their plates with biscuits and sausage gravy, scrambled eggs, and fresh fruit. Once we were all eating, Eleanor looked over the table with a smile.

“It’s so lovely to see all my children happy. This is just the best Christmas present...”

Jess smirked. “See, I told you I had a great present for you, Griff.”

I rolled my eyes. “Sitting right here, an actual *real* person with free will.”

Griff pressed a kiss to my cheek, murmuring, “You’re still the best gift I’ve ever been given. But don’t worry, I give *you* the credit, not Jess.”

“I heard that,” she said with a playful pout. “But I’m the one who brought him here.”

“Yeah, for a *short* visit,” Griff said.

Everyone stilled around the table, eyes turning to us.

“Are you not staying, Logan?” Eleanor asked. “You mentioned you were between jobs, and Jess told us you’ve already given up your apartment in Granville. I guess I just assumed...”

I chewed my lip. “I’m not sure where I’ll go next. I kind of just travel from job to job and I’ve already been out of work for too long. I can’t just live with Griff forever.” I laughed nervously. “Even though he’s been a great host.”

“I bet,” Lena said with a smirk.

“Well, why not find work here?” Arthur asked. “There’s plenty of seasonal jobs right now.”

Eleanor bounced in her seat. “That’s a great idea! Griff knows everyone. He can find you something to do. Dancing Sugarplums is probably hiring.”

“I don’t know if a candy store is the best fit,” Griff said, obviously trying to let them down easily.

Then Jess opened her big mouth. “Logan did landscaping before he was here. I bet Bruce could use some spare hands at the tree farm.”

My gaze flew to hers, and she was giving me that challenging look she got sometimes when she wanted to push an issue.

I could practically read the messages she was beaming at me with that look. *Don't make the mistake I did. Don't give up someone great over a job.*

It wasn't the same for us, though. I wasn't career-driven or chasing the opportunity to run my own department. I was simply a rolling stone, someone without ties anywhere, that went from job to job because I had nowhere else to be.

But looking around the table, it sure seemed like I had a few ties to Christmas Falls that I had not expected. And none of those even came close to the strength of the connection I felt to the man beside me.

“Okay,” Griff said, “let's just eat. I know you're all happy and you like Logan, but we haven't been dating that long. Let's not rush him into any decisions, okay?”

He put his hand over mine, squeezing it in reassurance.

I looked at this beautiful man, who was trying to protect my right to leave even though he didn't want that, and his beautiful family, who'd welcomed me even though I'd come to them as part of a lie.

And I knew there was only one decision I could make.

“Call Bruce,” I told Griff. “Find out if I can pick up some work.”

His eyes were intense when he looked at me. “Are you sure that's what you want?”

“Yeah.” I swallowed. “I'm not promising I'll move here, but I could stay for the rest of the festival and see what happens. I mean, if you want me to stay? I don't know if I'll be able to find another place to stay since all the hotels are full.”

“I want you to stay with me,” he said.

He didn't qualify the statement. There was no *while you're here* or *until you can find another place*.

Griff meant it, and that even though that scared me, it also sent a thrill of possibility through me. What if this time was different? What if I didn't get that itch to leave and just... stayed somewhere?

Could this little Christmas town be the place I finally belonged?

I didn't know, but I owed it to myself and Griff to find out.

CHAPTER 18



GRIFF

I WASTED NO TIME PUTTING OUT A CALL TO BRUCE ABOUT A job when we finished brunch. He was happy to take Logan on for the season, as I'd expected, but it was still exciting to make it official.

Logan hadn't promised he'd stay past Christmas, but I had to believe him taking a job was a good sign. With it, he could begin to build his own life in Christmas Falls that didn't revolve around helping me—even if I'd miss his cheerful influence in my work now that I'd gotten used to it.

Before Logan, I'd never been able to experience the festival events the way our town's visitors did. But something about the joy and appreciation he had for it had opened my eyes. What I did wasn't just about keeping our town financially viable, though that was important. It wasn't about the spreadsheets and calendars and attention to detail. It was about giving families an *experience*. Giving them memories to cherish for their whole lives. Just as Logan cherished the memories of spending Christmas with his parents before they were gone.

I'd let my own fractured family tarnish my view of that for far too long.

After we stuffed ourselves, we all lazed around at Mom's while we digested, spending the afternoon watching movies. Mom looked like she was in heaven with all her children snuggled into the arms of a loving partner.

Eventually, Logan grew a little restless and I needed to check in with my volunteer staff at the Beer Fest. When I suggested going, Jess hopped up too.

“We can come along and head off any rumors you stole my man,” she teased.

She wasn’t far off the mark. I knew there would be talk about me and Logan, no matter how we spun it. Small towns ran on gossip, and now that we weren’t obligated to stay a secret, I had no intentions of sneaking around.

If I had any chance of convincing Logan we had a future, it had to start with showing him what a long-term relationship with me would look like.

When we got to Sugar Plum Park, the kiddie playland of a week ago had undergone a transformation to a beer garden with tables under colorful tents, music, and an all-adult crowd. Rob and Jess went inside while Logan and I stopped to chat with a couple of the volunteers working the admission booth.

Hayden fastened a paper bracelet around a young woman’s wrist, flashing her a bright smile that seemed to fluster her. He was barely old enough to drink himself at twenty-two, but with his dark hair and killer grin, he was striking. He’d certainly caught and held Joel’s attention. Rumor had it he and our local baker were dating.

Hayden noticed me standing off to the side. “Hey, Griff! You going in?” A teasing glint entered his eye. “You have to wear a bracelet. No exceptions!”

Logan laughed. “It’s almost like someone gave you strict rules to follow.”

“It’s almost like you two think you’re smart,” I grumbled.

Yes, I could be exacting about the rules, but it wasn’t as if I didn’t have good reason. We’d had more than one instance of a volunteer going off script and causing messes I had to clean up.

Logan and Hayden had a little more fun winding me up, and I took it in stride, letting Hayden fix a bracelet around my wrist before waving me in. “Don’t forget to have fun!”

We crossed the grass, weaving between pavilions and vendor booths until we spotted Jess and Rob at a picnic table.

While we'd been chatting with the volunteers, they'd grabbed a good spot, right next to a big outdoor heater so we could stay warm. A few sample-sized beers and hard ciders already sat in the center of the table, and Rob was nursing a full-sized pint of what looked like a dark stout.

"Hey, thanks for getting us drinks!" Logan said playfully, bending down to press a kiss to her cheek before swiping one of the samples and downing it.

"Who said that was for you?" she demanded with a pout.

They were play-acting like a couple better than they had when they'd actually been pretending.

I attempted to ignore the flare of jealousy at the display. Logan was gay, not bi like me. Jess would never be a romantic threat. But it'd been barely over a week since I found out Logan wasn't *hers*.

"Whoa, easy, Griff," Jess said, laughing. "He's all yours. Please don't kill me."

I blinked, realizing I was glowering at my sister. Logan reached for my arm and tugged me down onto the picnic bench beside him with a smile.

"That's right. I'm all yours for a little while longer, assuming Bruce doesn't fire me right away."

I scoffed. "Please, you'll be the best employee he ever has."

"And how would you know that?"

"Because you were the best non-employee I've ever had," I said, tipping forward to kiss his smiling lips.

Behind us, there was a gasp. "Grinch Calloway, what are you doing with that man? And *right* in front of your sister!"

Dottie Miller and Stella Latham came into view, two of the ladies who participated in a knitting circle and contributed

projects to the Holiday Hope Foundation. Dottie was clearly the one who'd spoken, her face outraged.

"Oh, this is fun!" Stella said, looking delighted as she took in the scene, her eyes dancing with delight.

"Dottie, Stella, it's nice to see you both...at the Beer Fest."

"You're never too old to have a beer, Griff," Stella said.

Dottie sniffed. "But you *are* too old to steal your sister's boyfriend."

Jess laughed. "Dottie, you're sweet, but Logan's not my boyfriend." She put her hand on Rob's shoulder. "*This* is my fiancé, Rob. He works in Chicago. That's where I've been these past few days. I'm getting a transfer back there."

That was news to me, but it would sure make their engagement a whole lot easier.

"Oh, well..." Dottie seemed at a loss for words. "That's lovely."

"You keep us on our toes, don't you, Calloways?" Stella said with a chuckle. "It's nice to meet you, Logan. Aren't you a cutie? I've heard all about you keeping Griff in line all over town." She leaned forward and in a stage whisper said, "*Especially* when he sees that holiday graffiti."

Logan grinned. "Griff likes to maintain control of the details, but that's why the festival runs so smoothly."

His praise warmed my heart. Where everyone else saw a stick-in-the-mud, Logan truly appreciated my qualities.

After a bit of idle gossip, the ladies spotted Jem Knight, who probably regretted being the face of the festival by now, especially after I'd chewed him out yesterday for being late to an event. I gave him a sheepish grin and wave as Dottie and Stella made a beeline for him.

I turned back to Jess. "So you're going to move to Chicago?"

She nodded. "Rob and I have to head back tomorrow to tie up a few more loose ends with this data-security issue. Then

we're getting a Christmas vacation, and he's going to help me go pack up my stuff in Granville so I can start the new job in the new year."

"That's great. I'm glad you've got some help with moving."

Rob grinned. "I've been curious about that quirky little town."

Logan chuckled. "It's definitely got character. I'll miss Glazed Holes."

"Glazed-what-now?" I asked, and Logan and Jess cracked up, while Rob shrugged.

"It's a doughnut spot with flirty gay owners," Jess said.

"I'll miss Miles' come-ons," Logan said with a sigh.

I tightened my arm around his waist. "I don't know if I like the sound of that."

Logan turned warm eyes on me. "Oh, don't worry. Miles has nothing on the hot, buttoned-up brother I thought I couldn't have."

"Good answer."

Jess snorted. "Jesus, you two have it bad. Get out of here and go get a room."

I shot her a grin. "You know what? That's the best idea you've ever had."

She stuck out her tongue, playing the part of annoying little sister, while I turned to Logan. "I think my work here is done. What do you say we go enjoy your last night of freedom before you become a working man again?"

He gave me a searing look. "Only if that means going to bed." As Jess gagged, he said innocently, "I do have to be up early for my first day on the job, after all."

I nodded, fighting to suppress the goofy grin trying to take over my face. "It's the responsible thing to do."

I reached out, and he took my hand, and together we walked out of the festival, ignoring the second looks coming our way and the whispers we left in our wake. Dottie and Stella were sure to spread the news, but until then, people could speculate all they wanted.

I had better things to do with my time.



When we reached the house, Logan seemed just as desperate to connect as I was, eagerly returning my kiss. I tightened my grip on his hair and he groaned, the deep rumbling sound sending shivers down my spine.

We stumbled into the wall and kissed for long minutes before surfacing for air.

“How do you want me?” he asked in a raspy voice.

“Naked and inside me.”

He blinked, looking surprised. I wasn’t sure how he’d take the change of position since I’d topped him before, but a sexy grin soon followed. “I can get behind that.” He swatted my ass. “Literally.”

I yanked him into another deep kiss, then grabbed the zipper on his coat and tugged it down. Logan shrugged out of it while I unfastened my own, and item by item, we left a trail of clothes on the floor as we made our way to the bedroom.

I didn’t know about him, but I couldn’t go more than two seconds without having my hands on him. We’d slept together more than a few times already, but there was something different about today. Knowing that he was taking a job and staying a while made the hope that I’d locked in a chest labeled *vacation fling only* come spilling out.

The sex only grew more intense as I straddled his hips and urged him to spread my cheeks so I could prep myself for him. Logan had seemed to enjoy me fingering him, but I preferred to do this part myself. Probably another sign of my need for

control, but it also allowed us to get to the main event more quickly.

I was too impatient to take the longer route today. I perfunctorily pushed some lube inside myself, then waited for Logan to roll on a condom before positioning my ass over his cock.

I felt the spongy tip of his cock at my hole and pressed down.

“Fuck, Griff,” he gasped as his shaft slowly pushed into the still-tight confines of my ass. It burned, but I couldn’t wait. I rocked my hips, absorbing the pain and anticipating the pleasure that would come.

I didn’t have long to wait. I rocked again, taking him deeper, until Logan’s cockhead brushed against my prostate, making me jolt with a groan.

“You’re so tight,” he murmured, hands on my hips.

“Feels good, huh?” I teased, swiveling my hips and watching his eyelids fall shut and his mouth part as sensations overwhelmed him. I liked watching him unravel for me, but with his thick shaft inside me, stretching me so wide, pressing so deliciously exactly where I needed him, I couldn’t maintain my composure for long either. “*Fuck*, I need more.”

I gripped Logan’s shoulders and began working myself up and down, riding him with more urgency. Logan bucked his hips, making each thrust more intense, until I couldn’t stand the building pressure any longer.

I grabbed my cock, stroking.

“Yeah, baby,” Logan said. “I want to see you lose it.”

Part of me wanted to resist that loss of control, but another, larger part of me needed it. It was just all too much: being filled with Logan, my cock throbbing in my hand, the look on his face as he watched me jerk off, as if it was the most amazing thing he’d ever seen.

My orgasm hit hard, and I arched my back as pleasure tore through me, my cock spurting over Logan’s chest and abs. His

hand tightened on my waist a moment before I felt him coming too.

When we'd both stopped quivering with aftershocks, I rolled to the side while Logan discarded the condom and got out of bed to grab a washcloth. He returned to clean me up.

“Wow, the deluxe treatment,” I said. “I could get used to this.”

“Good,” he teased, “because I’m not anywhere close to done with you.”

“I’m glad to hear it.” I rolled into his arms, using his shoulder as a pillow. “I feel the same.”

I intended to keep this man beside me for as long as possible. I hoped that was a good, long time, but if it *was* for only the two weeks left until Christmas, I intended to savor every moment.

CHAPTER 19



LOGAN

GRIFF DROVE ME TO THE TREE FARM AS THE SKY WAS JUST lightening with dawn. We'd had to leave too early to grab my usual sugary treat at Jolly Java, but Griff had given up on teaching me to appreciate a dark roast and had added milk and sugar so that I could down some before leaving that morning.

Bruce and a petite, peppy blond guy met us as we walked into the clearing outside the store.

“Logan, welcome aboard,” Bruce said, holding out a big hand and giving me a firm shake. “This is one of my employees, Felix.”

There was an unmistakable note in his voice, something that clued me in that Felix wasn't just *any* employee. He was special to Bruce.

Felix smiled brightly. “Hey, Logan, hope you're ready to get dirty.”

Bruce gave Felix a look, as if to say, *really?* Felix snorted. “I mean, you know, with dirt. That came out wrong.”

I laughed. “No worries. I know all about getting dirty.” I winked at Griff. “Don't I, babe?”

Griff looked startled by my teasing, but the small twitch of his lips told me he was pleased.

Bruce chuckled. “I can see I've got my work cut out for me with these two.”

“I actually do have experience doing dirty jobs too. I’m up for whatever you need,” I said more seriously. “I’ve worked a lot of jobs, and I’m good at learning quickly.”

Bruce nodded. “I’m not worried at all. Felix, why don’t you show him the ropes?”

“Sure,” Felix said. “I can show Logan all the ways I’ve spruced this place up.”

His eyes were dancing, as if this were a regular tease between them.

“Call me when you’re ready for a ride home,” Griff said. “I’ll put out some calls today to find you a lead on a car. If you’re sure you don’t want to borrow Mom’s while Lena is still in town? It’s just collecting dust in the garage.”

I shook my head. “I appreciate the offer, but I’d rather stand on my own two feet.”

Griff pulled me to the side, speaking quietly. “Logan, I know you’re used to being on your own a lot, but you’re not anymore. We’re in this together, right?”

I saw a flash of uncertainty in his eyes, and I hated that I put it there. Griff was always so confident and in control. It was a quality I found attractive. I always knew where I stood with a man like Griff. But neither of us were yet sure how to navigate this experiment going forward.

I had agreed to take a job here, but neither of us knew where that would lead. I’d never had someone who made me want to stay before. I made friends easily, but that was a skill I’d picked up as a foster kid who got bounced around and was always the new guy everywhere he went.

Letting someone in? Getting attached? That I didn’t do.

But looking at Griff, I knew he was already different. Maybe it was all the time we’d spent in each other’s pockets. Maybe it was getting to know each other during those days I’d thought we’d never be able to be more than Jess’s fake boyfriend and brother.

But somehow, when I wasn’t looking, Griff snuck in.

“Of course we’re in this together,” I said gently. “But if I’m going to stay awhile, I should start behaving like a person who lives here, right? That means having my own car.”

“All right, I understand. As long as you’re not going to run out and rent a place too. I like waking up with you in my bed.”

“I probably should,” I said. At his alarmed look, I laughed. “But, I’ll be honest. I like waking up in bed with you, too.”

“Thank goodness,” he muttered.

“And, well, I’m staying a while to explore this thing between us, so we might as well go all the way, right?”

“Right,” he said, sounding relieved.

I gave him a quick kiss and a nudge away. “Okay, now go, so I can get to work before I get fired on my first day for hanging out with my boyfriend.”

Griff laughed and said goodbye, and when I turned, Bruce and Felix were standing close together, holding a quiet conversation of their own. As I approached, Felix lit up.

“Ready?”

“Yep,” I said. “Let’s go get dirty.” At Bruce’s frown, I added, “In the literal, working in the dirt sense, of course.”

“Of course,” he grumbled, shaking his head. “Two against one. What have I gotten myself into?”

Despite Bruce’s grumbling, Felix proved himself to be a smart, hard worker, and he was all business as he showed me the ropes. It was clear almost immediately just how important the tree farm was to him, or perhaps it was Bruce who was important to him.

Either way, he impressed me. The young guy at my last job had been immature at first and needed some hard lessons before he got his shit together.

It didn’t take long for us to fall into a rhythm of work as we took care of the trees, helped customers navigate the big farm to search out and cut down their own trees, and restocked

the selection of cut trees displayed near the store for those who preferred to just pick out a nice tree ready to go.

I liked the work. It was physically demanding enough that I didn't get restless the way I did the few times I'd tried an office job, but not so exhausting that I didn't have the energy to thoroughly enjoy my nights with Griff.

He was still incredibly busy. The festival was in full swing until the last few days before Christmas. But he managed to find a neighbor looking to sell their car for an amount I could afford, so I could drive to and from work, pick up groceries when needed, and finally feel like I was giving something back after all those days as a houseguest.

By the time he came home Wednesday, I had steaks grilling on the stove, baked potatoes in the oven, and a small garden salad I was assembling on the counter.

"Hey, what's all this?" He kissed the back of my neck as I bent over the cutting board to chop the last of the carrots.

"I decided to make dinner at home." I turned my head to receive a proper kiss, and Griff happily obliged. "You don't mind, do you? I'm a little tired of eating out."

Lena and her family had left, so Griff's mom had stopped hosting so many family dinners. While I enjoyed going out with Griff, it was burning a hole through my savings.

I liked to maintain a certain amount of emergency reserves in my bank account. I never knew when my car might break down, I'd unexpectedly be out of work, or I'd simply feel the need to move on.

"I don't mind. It looks great," Griff said. "Thank you. I'd like to offer to take a turn, but during festival season..."

"You're way too busy," I said. "I understand."

"If you, uh, decide to stay after all the craziness dies down, I make some enchiladas that will blow your mind."

"Blow my mind, huh?" I tossed the last of the ingredients into the salad bowl and turned off the burner under the grill pan. "You already do that every night."

I knew I was ignoring Griff's subtle question about whether I would stay or go once Christmas was over. I wished I could give him a clear-cut answer, but I didn't know myself. I liked Christmas Falls, but I'd liked my last town, Granville, a lot too.

Griff accepted the deflection with grace. "I'll set the table."

I set the steaks on a cutting board to rest and retrieved the potatoes from the oven. As we sat down to eat, I noticed a small stack of boxes that Griff had shoved to one side to make space for our dinner plates.

"What are these?" I asked, pointing my fork toward the parcels.

"Just a few gifts I picked up for Jonas and Rissa."

"You better get those in the mail soon if you want them to arrive on time."

He winced. "I know. I couldn't decide what to buy this year. They're teens now, so I almost just sent gift cards, but that seemed too impersonal."

"Way too impersonal," I agreed. "So, what are they into?"

"Uh..."

I waited for him to answer before I realized he didn't have one. That surprised me. The way Griff talked about his kids, I knew they were on his mind often.

"You don't know?"

"I haven't seen them in a while." He sounded pained. "We did pretty good the first couple of years while they were in Chicago, but then their mom remarried and moved them to California. I thought they'd still enjoy spending the holidays with me, but they didn't want to be here." He gave a short, brittle laugh. "I create holiday magic for every family but mine, it seems."

"Oh, Griff..."

“I went out there a few times too,” he continued, “but over time, there was just more and more distance between us. They got close to their stepdad, and I felt like the interloper who was disrupting their lives. I still keep tabs on them through social media. I send cards and gifts. But once they started making excuses for us not to see each other, I just...couldn’t bring myself to force it. It was too painful for everyone.”

“But they’re kids. They might not want you in their lives, but that doesn’t mean they won’t appreciate it later.”

“Maybe. I want to see them more often, but I also want them to be happy. If they’re miserable every time they see me, what kind of relationship is that? Will they lose the few good memories we have as a family and just resent me?”

“It sounds like a tough position to be in,” I said.

“Yeah. Anyway, I’ve got presents for them. I hope they’ll like them. I did a bit of social media stalking.” He smiled sadly. “It’s my best way of staying in their lives on a day-to-day basis. I comment on their posts, and occasionally they reply. It’s not much, but it’s something.”

“It’s hard for me to imagine anyone not wanting their father in their life. Or *you*, specifically.” I rubbed his arm. “I would give anything to still have a dad who cares about me as much as you obviously care about your kids.”

“Thanks.” He sighed. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to bring down the mood. You made a really nice dinner. We should enjoy it.”

“We are,” I reassured him. “I love getting to know more about you and your family, even if it’s not all as happy as I’d wish for you.”

He leaned over and kissed my cheek. “Thanks for not judging me.”

“For what? Being unsure how to navigate a difficult family dynamic over thousands of miles?”

“Well, yeah.”

“You’re trying, right?”

“Maybe not hard enough,” he admitted.

“So change that,” I said. “Life is short, Griff. I never got enough time with my parents. Don’t let that happen to your kids. If you want a closer relationship, it’s not too late. But someday it might be.”

He grasped my hand and squeezed it. “Thank you. You’re right. I never want to take my family for granted. Not for a single day.” He hesitated. “I never want to take *you* for granted. Thank you again for making this great meal. It’s amazing.”

As Griff ate, he continued to compliment my fairly utilitarian meal and praise me for the effort, showing me his gratitude for the small gesture. I’d never felt so appreciated before, and in that moment, my future flashed before my eyes.

A whole string of quiet dinners at home together after a day at work. Us sharing our everyday annoyances, but also our biggest worries and fears.

Griff thanking me for my efforts, and me doing the same.

I’d never contemplated what life in a long-term relationship would be like. I’d never allowed myself to get close enough to anyone to try.

But it seemed I was already there with Griff.

I just hoped it didn’t all end in disaster. After all, who was I to be here with this beautiful man, giving advice about family when I knew nothing about it?

I didn’t *belong*. I never had.

CHAPTER 20



GRIFF

THE SNOWMAN BUILDING CONTEST WAS IN FULL SWING AT Sugar Plum Park that Sunday, and luckily we'd had a few inches of snowfall over the past week to make the event viable. Significantly more was on the way, with a massive snowstorm moving in from the Northeast. It had hit Chicago, and Christmas Falls was likely to catch the edge of it overnight.

I was looking forward to it because snow was good when you were in the business of Christmas.

Watching all these kids having a blast with their families only made me think of Jonas and Rissa, though, and my conversation with Logan a few days ago. Should I be trying harder with them?

I'd gotten their gifts in the mail a couple of days ago. Well, Logan had because Bruce had given him two days off in the middle of the week so he could be there on Saturdays and Sundays. He'd run a handful of errands for me without even being asked, and when I checked in with Mom, she told me he'd taken some boxes to the post office for her, too. Probably *her* gifts for the kids. She did everything she could to maintain a relationship with them from afar.

But I was feeling more and more that my hands-off approach of birthday cards, gifts, and the occasional message on social media wasn't enough. What I should do, I wasn't sure yet, but Logan's presence in my life had opened my eyes to a lot of things. I'd been going through the motions for years,

filled with regret, cynical about the very thing I tried to sell to everyone else.

I didn't want to go on that way. Logan had warmed the cockles of my cold little heart, and I no longer wanted to be like one of those snowmen taking shape today.

A group of young adults came up to the volunteer table, interrupting my thoughts. I was filling in because our scheduled volunteer was ill, but luckily, this was a low-effort gig. I just had to let people sign up, hand them a numbered stake to put next to their finished snowman for the judging portion of the contest, and then later, Jem Knight would stop by to announce the winner and give them a small prize.

The guys were shoving each other, posturing for the women. I couldn't be sure of their ages, but they were somewhere between eighteen and twenty.

"Hi," one of the young women said. "We'd like to compete as a team. Can we do that? Or is it for kids only?"

"There's no age limit on Christmas fun," I told her, pushing a sign-up sheet across the table.

"Okay, thanks." She took off her puffy glove to write her name. Her fingers were stained with colors.

Must be an artist, I thought idly.

She finished up and tugged her glove back on. It was only after I sent her and her friends on their way that another thought occurred to me. *Paint on her fingers. Paint, as in graffiti?*

I glanced over at the group again. Despite being rowdy, they were building their snowman like everyone else here. There was nothing to suggest they were running around town tagging businesses with holiday artwork. No doubt the mayor and city manager would laugh me out of the office if I tried to bring such a suspicion to them. They'd brushed aside my concerns from the very first graffiti sighting.

No one else seemed to realize that a few cheery images now could easily turn into something more negative later.

Without proper vetting and pre-approval, there was no way to control our town's image.

Logan had persuaded me to see that the graffiti that was already up was doing no harm. It was helping, even, by spurring posts and tags on social media. I'd heard that a few of our newer tourists had discovered Christmas Falls thanks to the buzz.

But that didn't mean we should encourage these rogue graffiti artists without any oversight.

My phone rang just as I was working up a good head of steam about it again and wondering if I should try to talk to the city manager for the tenth time. I knew people saw me as a grinch when it came to Christmas, and thanks to Logan, I *was* loosening up, but as a festival planner, I would always want control.

Arlo Harper's name flashed on the screen. I picked up the call. "This is Griff. What's up?"

"Hey, Griff. I was wondering if you'd heard about the snowstorm headed this way?"

"Sure have. Should give us a pretty blanket of new snow. Folks love a white Christmas."

"Well, flights in Chicago are already grounded, meaning guests who intended to fly out today can't. Meanwhile, some new guests are still arriving. I'm overbooked, and all our inns are going to be in the same situation."

"That sounds like a mess in the making."

"Yeah. You're so good at solving logistical problems for the festival. I hoped you might be able to coordinate something to give everyone a bed. I can't ask these folks to stay at the airport, and at least one of my guests is too old to bed down somewhere uncomfortable."

"Hmm. All right. Let me make a few calls and see." My phone buzzed in my hand and I checked the Caller ID. "Oh, look at that, Laurie Banks is calling. She's probably in the same boat. I better take this."

“Okay, thanks. Let me know if you come up with any great ideas.”

I took Laurie’s call, getting much the same rundown from her. For worst-case scenarios, we had a storm shelter in town, but it wasn’t as if that would be a comfortable way to end a vacation. We wanted to leave our tourists with a happy memory of Christmas fun, not sleeping on uncomfortable cots next to strangers.

I spent the next hour putting out calls to a few folks around town to see if anyone had spare guest rooms available. A lot of people had family in town since we were headed into the week before Christmas, but there were a few prospects, including my own spare room.

I compiled the list of available rooms, then to be equitable, assigned one spare room to each innkeeper, so that everyone could provide at least one alternative for the guests they felt would need the most comfortable lodging.

Unfortunately, it was the best I could do on short notice. But before I offered my guest room, I had to make sure its previous occupant was willing to give it up. It was mostly symbolic at this point. Logan slept with me every night. Still, moving into my room officially might feel like a step forward in our relationship he wasn’t ready to take.

We didn’t have much choice, though. So I crossed my fingers and called him.

“Hey, babe, what’s up?”

“I was wondering if you’d mind giving up your guest room for a couple of days. There’s a storm that is going to strand a few visitors in town, and we’re trying to accommodate the overbooking at our hotels.”

“It’s your guest room, Griff, not mine.”

“I know, but I gave you that room for as long as you wanted it.”

“And I barely use it. I’m a little busy in *your* bed. Of course you can offer it to someone in need!”

“Okay. I just wanted to be sure. You haven’t moved your things into my room, and I know you still aren’t sure you’ll stay past Christmas. I didn’t want to put any pressure on you.”

“I appreciate that,” he said softly. “I’m not sure what happens after the tree farm no longer has work for me. I’ll have decisions to make. But while I’m here, I’m *with you*, okay?”

“Okay,” I said, smile breaking free. I’d gotten very used to Logan in my bed, and I was happy he felt the same. Logan wasn’t shying from what was continuing to develop between us.

Over this past week, we’d gotten closer, more comfortable. I knew that should the worst happen, and Logan chose not to stay, I would be heartbroken. But the ice he’d melted was gone, and I couldn’t go back now. I’d have to take my chances.

Shouts of glee from children playing in the snow drifted across the air, and for once, that didn’t fill me with a sense of regret, but with possibility.

I’d call Arlo and offer our guest room, then follow up with the other innkeepers.

And then? Since I was a master planner, I’d make a better one for my life. That meant figuring out how to hold on to the people most important.

Logan, yes. My children too.

I didn’t know what waited ahead: success or rejection. But the grinch was gone.

It was time to start living and loving properly again.

CHAPTER 21



LOGAN

I WRESTLED A PRICKLY DOUGLAS FIR THROUGH THE FRONT door of Griff's house and propped it against a wall before returning to my car to grab the supplies I'd picked up at Tidings & Joy: a tree stand, lights, ornaments, and a few other decorations.

After we'd agreed to a surprise houseguest, I'd asked Griff if I could decorate a little to make the place cozy for her.

He'd told me to knock myself out.

Whether a full Christmas tree, wreath for the door, garland for the fireplace mantel, and collection of cute holiday knickknacks—including another gnome for the collection Griff had hidden away somewhere—qualified as a *little* was debatable.

I hoped he didn't stroke out when he saw it all.

Griff had already swung by the house earlier, and a quick check confirmed he'd removed my belongings—still in the duffel because I'd never fully unpacked—and remade the guest bed in fresh linens.

So, I got to work on setting up decorations and stringing the tree with lights.

Griff returned about twenty minutes later, bringing in a bag of groceries. Clearly, I wasn't the only one doing some nesting for our guest.

"You're going to ruin my reputation," he said once he'd joined me in the living room. "No one will call me Grinch

after they see that massive wreath on the door.”

“Is that so bad?”

I held my breath as he stared down the tree as if it offended him.

“Nah, I guess not,” he said finally, lips twitching with amusement. “This is a *little* decorating, huh?”

I chuckled. “Well, you should see what I normally do at Christmas.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Dare I ask?”

“Let’s just say that I put Rudolph’s decor to shame.”

He snorted. “Oh, man. That’s saying a *lot*. That place...” He shook his head before giving me an intense look. “If you stay until next year, you can decorate my house any damn way you want, Logan.”

My heart skipped. I wasn’t sure what to say, but the offer touched me.

The doorbell rang, saving me from answering.

Griff went to open it while I put the final touches on my arrangement of a light-up village on the mantel that resembled Christmas Falls. The gnome was there too, in a place of honor right beside the photograph of Griff with his children.

“Oh, this is lovely, but I hope you aren’t decorating for my sake. I’m just happy to have a bed.”

I turned to see our houseguest, an older woman with silvering hair who had to be in her late seventies. Griff and another man who must be Arlo, the B&B owner, followed. He was rocking the lumberjack aesthetic, with a thick plaid jacket.

“Your arrival is just good timing,” I said with a smile.

“What he means to say is that your arrival let him nudge this old grinch into dressing up the place.”

Arlo chuckled. “It’s good to see you loosening up and enjoying the holiday, Griff.” He lifted the suitcases in his hands. “Where do you want Mrs. Chambers’ things?”

“Let me show you to the guest room,” Griff said.

Arlo and Mrs. Chambers followed him down the hall toward the room that was once mine. When they returned, Arlo said his goodbyes and Mrs. Chambers took a seat on the sofa, across from the fireplace.

“Thank you again for taking me in,” she said as she watched me hang ornaments on the tree. “My old bones aren’t quite up to sleeping on an air mattress.”

“It’s no trouble at all.”

Mrs. Chambers shivered, and I turned to the darkened fireplace. “Oh, shoot, I should make a fire.”

“Good idea,” Griff said. “I’ve got some firewood just outside the back door. How about I make some coffee?” He hesitated. “Or would you prefer tea?”

“Hot chocolate would be lovely, if you have any,” she said.

Griff and I hopped into action. While I hauled in some firewood and started a fire, he moved about the kitchen to prepare hot drinks. It felt as if we were a team working to host Mrs. Chambers together. It was a little strange, something I’d never experienced before, but good. Warmth filled my chest, traveling along my extremities, despite the chill I’d just braved to grab the wood from outside.

My phone buzzed with a text while I poked at the fire, getting the logs into the perfect position to burn well. I replaced the poker in the stand on the hearth, then pulled my phone from my pocket.

It was a text from Beckett, one of my former bosses in Granville.

BECKETT

How’s it going in Christmasland? Or have you left yet? I have a lead on a job for you if you want it.

Lead on a job would normally be my favorite words to hear. I was always looking for new opportunities to explore. But in my time with Griff, it felt as if things had changed. But

had they really? Or was I just in a honeymoon phase that would end? Maybe I should find out what the job was. I could keep it in my back pocket, just in case...

LOGAN

Still here for now. Got some seasonal work at a tree farm. What's the job?

BECKETT

Cool. Well, I have some family in the Ozarks. There's going to be some work preparing rental cabins for the coming tourist season. Let me know if you want a shot at it, but it'll need to be soon.

LOGAN

Will do.

“What’s up?”

I jumped at Griff’s voice and tucked my phone into my pocket. I wasn’t ready to think about Beckett’s offer, and as I took in the warm Christmas lights, the crackling of the fire, and the quiet strains of holiday music that Mrs. Chambers must have persuaded Griff to turn on, I had no desire to ruin our cozy night.

“Nothing. Just a text from a friend.” I straightened up. “I think the fire’s set. Let’s finish that tree.”

Griff held out a mug of hot chocolate, complete with miniature marshmallows, one of the few staples I’d added to the pantry since taking over some of the shopping. I took a sip, sighing as rich sweetness coated my tongue.

“This is perfect.” I peeked into his mug, spotting the dark roast he preferred. “No cocoa for the Grinch, huh?”

Griff pinched my side, making me yelp and nearly spill my drink. “Don’t make me toss you and the tree back out into the snow.”

I gasped playfully. “You wouldn’t!”

Mrs. Chambers' tinkling laugh reminded me we had an audience.

"You two make such an adorable couple. How long have you been together?"

"Not long," I said.

"Well, I have a *very* strong feeling this is just the beginning for you," she said, eyes twinkling. "I was married for fifty-two years, so I'm a bit of an expert."

"I guess you are," I agreed. "That's pretty impressive."

"I was blessed," she agreed. "Charles was the best partner I could have asked for. I never felt alone or lost because he was always there, ready to support me." She took a dainty sip of her hot chocolate. "Even now, I feel his presence at my side."

"It's lovely that you can hold on to him like that," I said. "My parents died when I was a kid. Sometimes I feel closer to them at Christmas. They loved the season."

"Oh, my Charlie loved it too. That's partly why I'm here. We came to Christmas Falls together every year."

Griff and I finished decorating the tree while listening to Mrs. Chambers' stories about her husband. Afterward, we had a quick dinner of chicken and wild rice.

By the time Mrs. Chambers retired and Griff and I finished cleaning the kitchen, the text from Beckett was far from my mind.

I wanted nothing more than to curl up on the sofa with Griff and enjoy that crackling fire and the ambience of the Christmas lights flickering through the living room.

"This isn't so bad, is it?" I asked him as he rested his head on my shoulder.

"Not at all," he said quietly. "I forgot how nice it could be."

"Having a tree or cuddling in front of the fire?"

Griff tipped his head to gaze up at me. “Having someone to share it with.”

My heart swelled with affection, and I dipped down to kiss him.

“The sharing part is really great for me too,” I confessed in a whisper.

He stood and held out a hand. “Come on. Let’s go to bed.”

I followed him there, not even a little surprised to discover he’d not only moved my bag to his bedroom, but put away my belongings. My empty duffel now sat on the closet floor beside his battered suitcase, which was stuffed with books, indicating just how long it’d been since Griff had given up hope on visiting his kids.

Griff had hung up my shirts and carefully folded and placed my other clothes in one of his dresser drawers.

As if I lived here. As if I were a real partner to count on, just as Charles had been to Mrs. Chambers.

We drifted off to sleep, me curled around him like a big spoon. When I woke the next morning, the view out of the window caught my eye.

Snow blanketed the street outside, making everything look fresh and new.

There was something incredibly hopeful about snow. Something that made me dare to hope too.

Maybe Christmas Falls wouldn’t be one of a dozen fresh starts, but a chance to turn the page to a new chapter, too.

One that could end with a happily ever after.

It felt dangerous to imagine it. Dangerous to wish for a life that had eluded me since I lost my parents. And yet, as I glanced back toward Griff, hair mussed and face creased with sleep, I thought it was a sight just as beautiful as the snow.

And one I wouldn’t mind holding on to for as long as I could.

CHAPTER 22



GRIFF

THE SCENT OF SUGAR HUNG IN THE AIR AS LOGAN AND I stepped into Dancing Sugarplums, an old-fashioned candy store, to do some shopping.

The interior was warm and toasty after the cold winter temperatures. The storm a few days ago had been short-lived, but some of the snow lingered, giving Christmas Falls a lovely winter wonderland atmosphere as we wrapped up festival events.

Air travel had resumed Tuesday, and Mrs. Chambers had thanked us for opening our home to her before she left.

Our home.

I'd liked the sound of that.

But now that the festival was over, Christmas Day was rushing at me, and I wasn't ready. Not ready with the Christmas gifts I'd promised to drop by my parents' place before Christmas Eve. And certainly not ready to think about the fact that Logan's work with the tree farm would soon dry up and he might decide to move on.

I had to show him the truth that Mrs. Chambers had so easily seen. It wasn't my house, and this wasn't just my town. Not anymore.

It was *our home*.

I wasn't yet sure how to do that, so I'd decided to focus on my other pressing task.

“So, what are we looking for?” Logan asked as he gazed around the store, taking in the bins of old-fashioned candies, the work area where the owners made their own fudge, and the aisles of novelty treats. “Some goodies to take to your parents’ house on Christmas? Is this a potluck sort of deal?”

“Nah. Mom loves feeding people way too much for that,” I said. “It’s her love language. But Dad has a major sweet tooth. I try to get him something sweet as a Christmas gift each year.”

“Oh, so you’re Christmas shopping.”

“*We* are Christmas shopping,” I corrected.

Logan shook his head. “Oh, no, that’s not needed. I mean, your family hardly knows me. It’s bad enough that I’ll be intruding without gifts in the mix.”

“You’re not intruding,” I argued. “You’re invited.”

“Still, I don’t want the pressure of gift-giving for any of us. I’m new here, and no one needs to worry about me.”

“We’re all going to worry about you, love. That’s how the Calloway family works.”

His face tightened, then he smiled, though it was strained. “Okay.”

“I don’t want you to stress about it. We can just add your name to the gifts I buy.”

He nodded. “Whatever you think. You know your family best.”

It wasn’t a glowing endorsement of the plan, but it probably *was* a little awkward to do Christmas with your boyfriend’s family so quickly. Our circumstances meant our relationship didn’t follow the usual timeline. If it had, Logan probably wouldn’t even be meeting my parents yet, much less joining us for a holiday.

Thankfully, our Christmas gathering was much smaller than the Thanksgiving one. Lena, Rick, and Sarah had gone home as soon as the weather cleared out, and most of our other relatives preferred to visit during the early days of the festival.

Logan would join me, my parents, and Jess and Rob—all people he already knew—so hopefully it wouldn't be too overwhelming.

I picked out some candy cigarettes for Dad—a little tease since he'd given up smoking only a couple of years ago—a block of mouth-watering mint-chocolate fudge, and a bag of jalapeno peanut brittle.

“Are you sure you're okay?” I asked as we headed for the checkout.

Logan had seemed quieter than usual, and I realized I'd gotten used to his happy-go-lucky attitude. No matter where we were, Logan was a bright charge of energy.

“Of course I am.” He picked up a box of chocolate-covered crickets. “And it looks like I found your gift.”

I gave him my best glower. “Don't you dare.”

“Ooh. I wasn't going to, but that look is making me wonder if I should piss you off more often. It's sexy.”

I knew he was deflecting, but he seemed more himself when he teased me, so I let it go. Maybe Christmas was bringing up some feelings about losing his parents. Logan had told me he loved the season because it made him feel closer to them, but that didn't mean he didn't miss them.

I couldn't imagine living with a loss like that.

We left Dancing Sugarplums and headed for Yuletide Yarns, where Logan seemed to relax a little as we looked through the skeins of yarn for a gift for Mom. From there, we moved on to Mistletoe Movies, where I planned to pick up a holiday movie for Jess because it would annoy her.

Logan looked around as we stepped inside. Aisles of shelves displayed holiday movies, everything from classics like *It's a Wonderful Life* and *Miracle on 34th Street* to popular favorites like *A Christmas Story* and *Home Alone*. There were a multitude of Hallmark movies, as well as one shelf dedicated to a local production company, HoliGay Presents, which specialized in queer holiday romances shot in Christmas Falls.

Along with movies, the store sold posters and memorabilia, including the infamous leg lamp from *A Christmas Story*, miniature figurines from *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer*, a lunch box depicting the goofy Olaf from *Frozen*, and much more.

“Wow, there are a *lot* more Christmas movies than I thought,” Logan said. “Wait, who are we shopping for here?”

I chuckled and rubbed my hands together. “Jess.”

He gave me a confused look, which only made my grin widen.

“Doesn’t she hate holiday movies?”

“That’s what makes it perfect.” At his dubious expression, I laughed. “Jess and I prank each other every year. I wouldn’t be surprised if she sticks a bow on your head the second we walk through the door and announces to everyone that you’re my gift.”

I expected him to laugh. It wasn’t as if she hadn’t said as much at our last family brunch together.

But he grimaced. “Good thing there’s a return policy, huh?”

My stomach dropped. “Logan, it was a joke. You’re not an object to be purchased or returned.”

“Right. Of course not.”

He didn’t sound convinced.

“I’m sorry if we made you uncomfortable. Jess and I always give each other a hard time. It’s a sibling thing. We really didn’t mean—”

“It’s okay.” He hesitated. “It’s just...families have called me a gift before and then returned me.”

I stared at him, uncomprehending, for a minute.

“I was a foster kid,” he said, “and more than once...”

He trailed off, allowing me to fill in the blank. And I did, much to my dismay.

“Oh, fuck. *Logan*, I’m so sorry. I wasn’t thinking. I-I—”

“Griff, it’s fine. Really. I know you were joking.” He flashed me a big, wide, entirely fake smile. “I’m going to look around a bit.”

He walked away, leaving me choking on the foot I’d put in my mouth.

I gave him a bit of time and space, browsing the collections of movies to find the most irritating gifts for Jess. And yes, it had to be done: I bought the leg lamp for Rob. That would surely send her over the edge, which would make for great entertainment.

Of course, I’d pick out something a little nicer to go with the gag gifts. I wasn’t a total asshole, even if I had fucked up a day with Logan that was supposed to be relaxing and fun.

Logan rejoined me as I made my selections, holding up one of the HoliGay Presents films. “This is so cool. A couple of my friends back in Granville will love it.”

I smiled, relieved he seemed to have forgiven my faux pas. “That’s a great choice. HoliGay Presents does a great job.” I leaned in, murmuring, “They’re better than most traditional Hallmark movies.”

He chuckled, eyes twinkling. “Oh yeah? I didn’t take you for the sappy romance type, Griff, much less a *holiday* romance. What will people say if they find out the Grinch loves Christmas?”

“They’ll just have to give credit where it’s due.”

“Where’s that?”

“With you.”

His eyes widened, and he shook his head. I brushed a quick kiss across his lips before he could protest. I was beginning to understand Logan, I thought. He was incredibly giving and generous and loving toward others. But he wasn’t so good at accepting the same for himself.

That’s why I was still kicking myself for my insensitive joking around.

I knew Logan was a foster kid, but it was so far outside my life experience that I'd related more to the grief of losing his parents than what came after. I had no idea what it must have felt like to live with strangers. To potentially get settled in one place only to be moved to another.

Was this why Logan didn't stay anywhere long-term? I'd assumed he enjoyed the adventure of exploring new places and people. But what if it ran deeper than that? What if he left because he didn't know any other way to live?

My heart ached for him, and I wanted to wrap him in a love so strong he'd never doubt his place in my heart.

CHAPTER 23



LOGAN

JESS OPENED THE DOOR WITH A BIG GRIN WHEN I ARRIVED AT her parents' house to meet up now that she'd returned for Christmas vacation. "Hey, it's the Griff tamer!"

"Hey, it's the annoying fake ex!" I replied.

She laughed and motioned me inside. "Shouldn't that be the annoying sister now?"

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves."

I followed her inside, where the scent of sugar and peppermint was strong enough to make my mouth water. Clearly, Eleanor had been doing some baking in the lead-up to Christmas Day.

My stomach flip-flopped. This would be my first Christmas with a family since my foster kid days. Back then, the holidays were usually a disappointment. And when they were good, it was almost worse, because they gave me hope... right before it was inevitably snatched away.

I'd reclaimed Christmas for myself in my adult years, but it'd always been on my terms. Celebrating with Griff's family felt...dangerous.

As if I were tempting fate to take it away.

"I just need a minute before we go," Jess said. "Come to my bedroom?"

"Uh, why?"

She laughed at me. “Well, it’s not to molest you. I’ll leave that to Griff.” She wagged her fingers. “I’ve got my own *real-ass fiancé* for those shenanigans.” Because Jess couldn’t leave it alone, she added, “You should try it sometime.”

“Right. Remind me again how long you dated Rob before this engagement?”

“Three years,” she mumbled sheepishly. “Shut up.”

I followed Jess into her bedroom where there was wrapping paper spread across the bed and a stack of gifts on the dresser. I grimaced. “I hope this isn’t some sort of bait-and-switch situation. I was promised alcohol, not wrapping until my fingers cramp.”

“I want alcohol too. Trust me. Mom has been on a holiday high. She had me helping her make homemade marshmallows, Logan. Marshmallows! That you can already buy in a bag. I mean, they’re delicious, don’t get me wrong, but after cranberry-orange bread, two pies, and braiding dough for candy cane cookies, I’m over it.”

“I can tell.”

She pulled a face. “I just need to finish wrapping this gift for Rob really quick before he comes back. He went out with Dad to do some shopping, because you know men, they leave their gift-buying to the last minute. I bet Griff hasn’t even started.”

“Wrong. He took care of that yesterday.”

No thanks to me. I knew I’d confused him with my mood swings. Confused myself a little too. I loved Christmas. I did. But when it combined with family stuff, it tangled with my personal baggage and I got all twisted up.

Jess climbed onto the bed to finish her wrapping job on what looked like a new Apple watch and air pods set. It wasn’t surprising. Rob struck me as a tech guy.

“So, what did you get Griff?” Jess asked as she folded the Santa-patterned paper over the gift and taped it shut.

“I...”

She looked at me with wide eyes. “Tell me you got him something.”

“Well, not yet,” I hedged. “I’ve got an idea. I’m still working out the details.”

It wasn’t that I didn’t plan to get him a gift. It’s that I wanted to give him something truly meaningful.

“See? Men are always waiting until the last minute!” She attached a tag, filled it out, then thrust the gift toward me. “Go put this under the tree for me? I need to change.”

I carried the gift to the living room and kneeled down to add it to the growing pile under the tree. Griff had yet to wrap his gifts or I could have brought them over today, too.

Might as well tackle the Christmas with family thing head-on.

The tag on a square package in red-striped gift wrap caught my eye.

To: Logan

There was no name next to the From line, but there didn’t need to be. This had to be from Griff’s parents. Probably Eleanor, specifically.

I pushed the gift back into place, only to spot another one. This one from *Santa*, apparently.

And another from Jess.

I stared at those gifts, nestled among the ones addressed to Griff and Jess and Mom and Dad—Rob too, of course, because he was joining the family—and my heart began to hammer.

I didn’t belong there, among these permanent members of the Calloway family.

In all the families I’d tried to join, I’d never belonged. No matter how many gifts under the tree bore my name, I wasn’t really one of them. Eventually, no matter how hard I tried—or even how hard my foster parents seemed to try—I never fit.

I'd sworn I'd never put myself in that position again. Yet, here I was acting as if Griff's family could be mine.

"Oh, Logan, I didn't hear you come in!"

Eleanor's bright voice jolted me from my spiraling thoughts. I swiveled on my knees, my smile far too shaky to be convincing.

"Oh, honey, are you okay?" she asked, concern creasing her brow.

"Yeah." I stood quickly, feeling a need to escape I hadn't experienced since arriving in Christmas Falls. That restless energy with no outlet. The itch under my skin to just go, to leave, to run before I got too attached.

I knew it was a defense mechanism. I was freaking the fuck out that I was going to be rejected and hurt again. If not today or tomorrow, then in three weeks or three months.

Six families took me in. Six families let me go.

I knew, logically, it wasn't all in their hands. That there were state laws and bureaucracies at work in some of my exits from their lives. But they didn't *fight* for me.

No one did. Not once my parents were gone.

And as much as I loved it here, as much as I loved the explosion of Christmas, of celebrating the last bit of joy I had in my childhood, of getting to know this small, quaint town full of genuinely awesome people, I knew.

None of that was *enough* to fill the hole inside me.

Eleanor was speaking. "I hope you like it. We can make you a better one later. I just wanted you to see you're part of the family and that we're so happy to have you here, Logan."

I'd missed part of what she said, but she gestured toward the fireplace, and my gaze landed on the stockings. Each bore a name.

And there I was, right beside Griff—a fluffy stocking with glittery letters spelling out my name.

Griff and Logan. Side by side.

And I knew I'd left one thing off my mental list when thinking about the antsy feeling building inside me and the fear of what came next.

I didn't just love Christmas Falls. The festive events. The friendly people.

I *loved* Griff.

I just didn't know if that was enough.

Before the month was out, my work at the tree farm would end, and Beckett's job lead wouldn't last forever. My coworker at the farm, Felix Joy, had mentioned a business venture, but that was risky—and very permanent.

I had decisions to make.

Big ones.

Jess emerged from the hallway in a dressy sweater with lace sleeves and freshly applied makeup. "Hey, you ready to go?"

I tried to imagine sitting at the bar and catching up with Jess. Of pretending my head wasn't swimming with questions my heart didn't know how to answer.

I couldn't do it. Jess would see through me in a hot second, and I couldn't handle the grilling that would inspire.

"Sorry, Jess. I just remembered there's somewhere I have to be."

"Oh." She stopped short. "Well, if it's an errand, I could just go with you and—"

"Sorry, it's work. Raincheck?"

I was already moving toward the door.

"Uh, sure, but is everything okay?"

I opened the door, needing some space to think and breathe, knowing I was overreacting to what were kind, inclusive gestures. Knowing the Calloways weren't a foster family, and I wasn't a powerless child.

But that didn't stop the emotions from swamping me. Didn't give me the clarity or the words to explain what I needed.

"I'm fine," I said as I went out the door. "Everything's fine."

But it wasn't.

Not yet.

And I had to figure out if it ever could be.

CHAPTER 24



GRIFF

I STARED AT THE LATEST INCIDENCE OF GRAFFITI WHILE I placed a call to the city manager, Keith Masters. It was made up of three letters: J-O-Y. Surrounding them were depictions of children ice-skating, families holding hands before a Christmas tree, and carolers singing.

A strange feeling settled in me as I waited for the call to connect. Not the usual irritation, not even the concern that usually assailed me that this random art could turn negative without the proper oversight.

There was a feeling of...possibility. This art was conveying a message. It wasn't just tagging on a building. Wasn't just cheery Christmas art. It resonated in my core as something more significant.

My call went to voicemail, and no wonder. It was two days until Christmas.

“Masters, it's Griff Calloway. This graffiti thing...it's not really some rebellious artist, is it? You could have given me a heads-up if—”

My phone beeped, interrupting the flow of my indignation.

“Shoot, I've got a call incoming. Don't worry about calling back. Enjoy your Christmas,” I grumbled. “But I'll want answers in the new year, damn it.”

I hit the Disconnect button so I could take the call from Jess.

“Hey, what's up?”

“I was just wondering if you’ve talked to Logan?”

“Uh...no. Isn’t he out with you?”

“Well, that was the plan.” She sounded uncharacteristically worried. “He came over, and he seemed fine while I was wrapping a gift for Rob real quick. I asked him to put it under the tree while I got changed, and when I came out, he was with Mom and he looked...”

“He looked like what?” I prompted.

“I don’t know. Not like himself. You know how easygoing Logan always is. This was a side of him I’ve never seen. He canceled our plans and practically ran out the door. That was a while ago, but he’s not answering calls or texts, and I’m worried.”

“Do you think something happened with Mom?”

“I don’t know. She says she was just talking about the stocking she put up with his name on it and how he was part of the family.”

My stomach twisted, a sense of foreboding hitting me. I remembered how unsettled Logan had been when we’d gone gift-shopping. About what he’d told me of the way he’d been forced to move from family to family. Of my suspicion that he never stayed anywhere too long now, not because he wanted adventure, but because it had become some sort of coping mechanism to avoid the pain.

What if he’s upset? What if he wants to leave?

“I gotta go,” I said abruptly. “I’ll talk to him.”

“Okay, thanks, I—”

I hung up. It was rude, but hopefully Jess would forgive me. With trembling fingers, I called Logan’s phone. I headed for my car while the line rang, and when he didn’t pick up and it clicked over to voicemail, I was already on the road home.

“Logan, it’s me. Please call me back.”

The five-minute drive home felt like an eternity, my mind spinning with worst-case scenarios and potential assurances I

could give Logan.

But my mental rehearsal was pointless because his car wasn't in the driveway. I went inside anyway, stomach tight with nerves, to await his return.

Assuming there would be a return.

The Christmas tree stood in the corner, a reminder of just how at home Logan had become here. Maybe I was overreacting. With a head shake, I headed to the bathroom to splash my face and calm the fuck down.

As I passed the bedroom, I glanced through the doorway and stopped short, heart faltering.

A new suitcase sat on the bed.

Fuck.

I walked into the bedroom and stared down at the forest green suitcase I'd seen while Logan and I were shopping at Tidings & Joy earlier in the week.

Logan *really* was going to leave, wasn't he? It wasn't an *if* but a *when*. Why else would he buy fucking luggage?

I heard an engine outside, but I couldn't stop looking at the suitcase. I watched the thing like it was a python about to strike me dead.

The front door opened and closed.

"Griff?" Logan called. "Where are..."

I turned to see him in the doorway. He looked good. He looked as gorgeous as the first day I'd seen him, with his messy sandy hair, clear blue eyes, and strong jaw. But there was so much more I saw now. I saw the nervous tension in his smile. Saw the soft vulnerability that his laid-back demeanor could so easily hide.

Saw the uncertainty in his eyes, the doubt that he was worthy of real love.

And he was so worthy. So much more worthy than a bitter fool like me.

Logan was a man with more reason than most to resent the world, and yet he had brought meaning to my life, enriched it in unexpected and incredible ways.

“Sorry.” He gestured toward the suitcase. “I didn’t mean for you to see that.”

“Don’t leave yet,” I rasped.

He looked surprised. “What?”

“I love you, Logan. I know you might not feel ready to stay.”

He shook his head. “Griff, that’s not—”

“Let me say this,” I said. “Please.”

He hesitated. “Okay.”

“It’s fast for anyone to commit, much less someone who’s had commitments to them broken so many times. I know your history with families hasn’t been good. But if you commit to me—*me*, not my family—then know that I’ll never abandon you. I’ll be your family, your home. No matter where you go. Because I know you didn’t choose Christmas Falls to be your forever home, and that’s okay, because Logan, you’d be *my* home too. Wherever you go, I’ll go. Just don’t leave *me*.”

Logan crossed the room in two big strides and raised his hands to my face. “Stop, babe. Just stop.”

“But I love you. I love you more than I ever thought possible.”

“*I love you too*,” he said, “you surprising, wonderful, *romantic* man.”

Then he kissed me.

I grabbed his waist, holding him to me, clinging, as emotion poured into the kiss: all the worry I’d suppressed for days, wondering when Logan might decide to walk out of my life, all the panic that suitcase had instilled, the stark realization of how empty my life had been until Logan woke me the hell up.

“I could never leave you,” Logan said softly when we broke the kiss.

“Jess called and said you were upset. Something about Mom and the stockings and including you in the family. I know family is complicated for you.”

“It is.” Logan sighed and started to back away, but I held on to him, unwilling to let him put even a foot of space between us. He relented and let me keep him close. “I got a little overwhelmed by my personal baggage, but I realized I can’t let it control me, Griff. I can’t let it rob me of the happiness I’ve found here. I got a great job lead from a friend, and I couldn’t bring myself to take it. But I needed to figure out if I could really commit to staying in one place for good. Because you don’t deserve for me to make promises I can’t keep. The job at the tree farm is ending at the end of the month, and—”

“I can go with you,” I said again. “If you go, I go. I meant that.”

Logan’s expression softened. “It means the world to me that you’re offering that, Griff. That you’re *fighting* for me. No one’s ever done that for me before. But your job is here.”

“It’s just a job. I can get another one.”

“Your family—”

“Has survived here without me just fine in the past. I *have* left Christmas Falls before, you know. For more than ten years.”

A slow smile spread across Logan’s face. “All right, you’ve convinced me. And that really reassures me, Griff. But I need you to know that I *want* to stay.”

“You...do?”

Logan chuckled. “I obviously scared the crap out of you to get such a dramatic love confession, but yeah. I actually was just out at the tree farm talking to Felix. He’s got this idea for a business venture, and he’d floated the idea for me to work with him in the future.”

I held my breath, heart racing for an entirely different reason than the fear that had driven me to make a fool of myself. This time, it was the hope that *maybe* I was about to get everything I wanted.

“I needed to know that I could keep any promises I made to you, Griff. I needed to take a leap and try to build a real future here. Felix and I are going to launch a business, a greenhouse combined with landscaping. It’s a huge commitment, and it’ll keep me in Christmas Falls pretty much year-round. If you’re not too disappointed I won’t be dragging you away, that is?”

I shook my head, fighting a smile. “Okay, I can see I overreacted. It’s a little embarrassing.”

“Oh, don’t be embarrassed.” Logan brushed a kiss over my mouth. “I love that you were willing to give me whatever I needed, even if I don’t deserve it.”

“Stop right there,” I said sternly. “You deserve every happiness I can give you. I know you’ve been through some terrible experiences. I can’t believe how much happiness you bring to everyone around you, considering all that. But please hear me when I say this. You are *worthy* of love. You *deserve* it. And I love you, and at the risk of freaking you out, my whole family already loves you. I know it’s scary to trust in it, but please give us a chance to show you that the Calloways will always be there for you.”

“I will.” A gleam came into his eye. “But if I’m going to confront my fears, maybe you should confront yours, too.”

“What do you mean?”

“You need to try to bridge the gap with your children. I see how it bothers you to be a footnote in their lives. So fight for a place in them, Griff. You can overcome your feelings of rejection and fight for them the way you just fought for me.”

My chest tightened as emotion surged up. He was right. I knew that. I’d known it for a while. It *was* scary, but it was nothing compared to what I was asking of Logan, so I nodded. “I’ll try.”

He smiled brightly. “Good. Then your Christmas gift won’t go to waste.”

“My gift?”

Logan patted the new suitcase on the bed. “I didn’t know what to get for you. I didn’t want it to be a tie or sweater or something. I wanted it to be special. And...after I ran out on Jess with my head a mess, I thought, regardless of what happened with us, that you should make time to visit your kids in the new year. So I picked this up for you as a little encouragement. You weren’t supposed to come home early and find it, though. That was sneaky.”

I turned to stare at the suitcase that had nearly given me a heart attack.

It had never occurred to me it would be a gift. I reached out and flipped open the lid.

It was empty.

Of course it was.

Logan was never going to leave me. I’d panicked over nothing.

Yet, I couldn’t bring myself to feel bad about it. I had the man of my dreams in my arms, and he was risking his damaged heart to commit to a future with me.

“Good idea.” I swept the suitcase off the bed, then rounded on him. “But let’s talk about traveling later. Right now, I’d much rather stay in.”

Logan’s gaze flicked to the bed. “Oh? Don’t you have some work to finish or...”

I shoved him—he was more built than me, but I’d caught him off-guard, and the backs of his knees hit the bed—so he went down easily. He hit the mattress laughing, eyes bright.

My heart swelled at the sight of him.

“Work can wait,” I said, watching his eyes darken as I placed a knee between his thighs, braced my hand over his

head, and leaned in. “We’ve got more important plans tonight.” I paused. “And every night.”

Logan smiled, looking almost shy. “I like the sound of that.”

I did too. I liked it a hell of a lot.

So I dipped down to put words to action, kissing him softly, reverently, with all the love in my heart.

CHAPTER 25



LOGAN

GRIFF'S DARK EYES WERE ALWAYS INTENSE WHEN WE WERE IN bed. I loved having all that focus and control directed at me. But today, there was a deeper emotion underlying it all. An unguarded tenderness that Griff had never shown me before.

I was loved.

Griff's lips whispered the message across my skin. His hands imprinted it into my skin.

He undressed me slowly, reverently, as if I were the most treasured of gifts.

When I was naked, he spent long minutes gazing down at me, his expression so adoring that I felt my skin heat in a blush, which had to be a first. Sex between us was hot, and sometimes it was fun, but it had never felt so vulnerable before.

"Are you going to stare all night?" I joked weakly.

His lips twitched. "Tempting, but there's not enough hours in one night for me to fully appreciate you. I'll have to stare every night."

"You're a closet romantic," I teased, even as my skin burned hotter.

"I guess I am."

Finally, he stripped off his clothes and rejoined me in the bed. As soon as we touched, I felt more comfortable. This, I knew how to do.

I kissed him greedily, parting my lips for his tongue, sucking and moaning when he gave it to me. I grabbed his hips to pull him down on top of me, but Griff broke away. He encircled each of my wrists with his long fingers and pressed them to the pillow on either side of my head.

“Let me worship you, love. Let me show you just how much you deserve.”

I shuddered, my chest growing tight and my eyes burning. “Griff...”

“Shh.” He brushed a kiss to the corner of my eye, where I felt a tear forming. What was this man doing to me?

“I love you,” he whispered into my ear. “You can take it, can’t you? You can accept my love?”

“Y-yes,” I said, a little uncertain.

I’d never consciously viewed myself as unlovable. But Griff was unleashing powerful emotions in me. There was a dam breaking inside, and I was a little terrified of drowning in the flood of feeling.

He kissed me again, but softly, before tracing his lips along my jawline and down the column of my neck. Kiss by kiss, touch by touch, he cherished my body.

I was hard and aching long before he made it anywhere near my cock.

I didn’t know if he’d want to fuck me or ride me, or none of the above, but I was game for anything that would relieve the tension coiled tight inside me. My balls felt heavy, my skin too tight. My pulse pounded in my cock, a steady thud of desire.

And still Griff took his time.

My restraint broke, and I reached for him again. “Please, Griff. I can’t...”

He smiled at me gently. “I’ve got you. You’re safe with me.”

I felt the truth of it. It resonated, reverberating throughout my body.

Griff loved me. He would keep loving me.

I was safe.

He brushed his soft, soft beard along my shaft, and I jolted at the sensation. I was so desperate that any kind of touch was likely to set me off.

“Yes, please,” I begged. “Need you.”

“You have me. Always.”

He inched back up my body to kiss me, pressing his full weight into me, grounding me. My pulse calmed a little to have him in my arms, his skin rubbing all over mine.

His cock bumped and slid along mine, and I hissed and bucked my hips, chasing the sensation.

“Hold that thought,” he murmured.

Griff retrieved the lube from the nightstand and slicked both our cocks. We kissed again, deeper now, wetter. Messy kisses without finesse but with enough passion that the heat seared me.

Griff rocked his hips, and I tilted mine up, our slick cocks sliding between us deliciously. The hair on his chest stimulated my nipples, and my skin felt incredibly sensitive as all of Griff touched all of me.

We broke the kiss, panting for breath, as we both chased the pleasure. His gaze locked on mine, full of all the intensity I’d grown to crave.

“Come with me, love,” he said. “Give me everything you’ve got.”

He lowered his hand and squeezed my cock in a tight stroke, and I was gone, breaking apart with a hoarse cry. He groaned quietly as he followed.

I got lost in the pleasure washing through my body, but I was dimly aware of myself chanting “Yes, yes, I love you so much.”

He smiled down at me, his breath still ragged. “I love you, too. So much.”



GRIFF

Logan was quiet in the aftermath of our emotional lovemaking. I had pushed him, I knew, with my open adoration, but if anyone needed to see how much they were loved, it was this man. Logan’s response had told me I was right. His childhood had deeply affected his faith in the love others had for him.

It was easier to make myself vulnerable, knowing how much Logan needed to *see* my love to believe it. One night of sex wouldn’t fix anything, of course, but perhaps a lifetime would.

He rolled onto his side and put his head on my shoulder. “Thank you for being patient while I figured out what I wanted. It must have been difficult.”

“Not knowing if you’d want to leave when Christmas was over? Or ever? *Yeah.*” I chuckled. “But speaking of that, *are* you okay with spending Christmas with my family? Because if not, we don’t have to—”

Logan pressed his fingers over my lips, and I fell silent.

“I’m not going to say I’ll never feel emotional or out of place, but I’m also not about to let my fucked-up childhood keep me from the one thing I’ve always wanted.”

I raised an eyebrow. “My mother’s cranberry-orange bread? I mean, it’s pretty good, but...”

I broke off with a laugh as Logan slugged my shoulder. “Asshole.”

I kissed his temple. “I’m just teasing. Tell me what you’ve always wanted.”

He gazed up at me, eyes dark with emotion. “A family, Griff.”

My heart broke for him, and I knew in that instant I'd do anything for this man. Not that it wasn't pretty much a foregone conclusion by now. I was head over heels for him.

"I know it seems silly I got so weird about it," he said, "since your mother was basically offering me everything I want. But it's scary to want something so badly. If I let myself try, and it doesn't work out..."

"It will," I said firmly. "I know my family, so I can make that promise and keep it. But I also meant what I said, Logan. No matter what happens, you have me. Always."

He tugged me down for a kiss.

"And what about your other family?" he asked. "The one you want to be closer to? You said if I tried that you'd try."

"I did say that. I was thinking I'd start with a phone call to the kids. Just try to reconnect."

"Good idea." Logan rolled away and dug through our clothes on the floor. When he returned, he held out my phone. "There's no time like the present."

I eyed it warily. "Now?"

He nodded. "We're facing our fears together. I'll be right here."

I took a deep breath and pulled up the contact I had for the landline at my ex-wife's home.

A young male voice answered the phone. "Hello?"

"Jonas?"

"Yeah? Who's this?"

"It's your dad. Griff, I mean."

"Yeah, I knew who you meant," he said. "We got your box of gifts. Thanks. Grandma's too."

"Oh, good, but I wasn't calling only about that."

"Oh."

"I wanted to talk to you. I saw on Facebook the other day that you're going out for baseball this spring."

“Yeah...”

“That’s pretty cool. Do you think maybe I could come see a game sometime?”

“I guess. I don’t even know if I’ll make the team yet.”

“Well, keep me updated. I’m sure if you work hard—”

“Want to talk to Rissa?” he cut in.

I sighed, a little disappointed he didn’t want to talk more, but not surprised.

“I’d like to talk to her, yeah,” I said. “I want to talk to you both more. I’d like us to be closer.”

“Okay.” He sounded dubious. “I’ll get Rissa for you.”

Before I could try to convince him of my sincerity, the phone clattered, and he was gone.

My conversation with Rissa went similarly when she picked up the receiver. My children weren’t unfriendly, exactly, but there was a distance between us that was tangible. One that was partially my fault for allowing myself to be shuffled out of their lives. With sporadic contact, I wasn’t a constant any longer.

They didn’t feel close to me, and that hurt.

But when the pain threatened to overwhelm me, perhaps even encourage me to give up and accept that I’d never be the father to them I once was, Logan’s warmth along my side reminded me I had to try.

I had to fight for my relationship with them.

This phone call was just a first step, but it was a big one.

Even if I didn’t ever completely regain the relationship I wanted, my children would know they were loved. They’d know I was there if they needed me.

They would know that no matter what, I was still their dad and I wanted to be part of their lives.

And I owed this first step to the man beside me, who’d opened my eyes to so many things and made me see I wanted

more for my life.

I wanted love and happiness. I wanted to appreciate the family I had, even if it didn't fit the perfect vision I'd had when I first got married.

Somewhere along the line I'd given up, and Logan had breathed new life into me.

Maybe I really was a grinch, because thanks to him, my heart had surely grown three sizes.

CHAPTER 26



LOGAN

“I’M SO GLAD TO HAVE YOU WITH US!” GRIFF’S MOTHER SAID fervently as she hugged me tight on Christmas morning when we arrived at her house.

“Thanks,” I managed, a lump of emotion forming in my throat. I couldn’t even remember the last time I’d had such a *mom* hug.

“Okay, let him breathe,” Griff said, hand on my back, a point of connection that made me feel safe and anchored. “We’re all happy he’s here. Me, especially.”

“Oops, sorry.” She stepped back with a sniff. “I just hate to think we upset you.”

I knew there’d be a bit of awkwardness after I raced out of here. Griff had done his best to explain the situation to his family, but in my turmoil, it had never occurred to me just how much I must have worried *them*.

“It wasn’t anything you did, Eleanor,” I said. “I’m fine now. Actually, I’m really excited to see what’s in that stocking you put up for me.”

“In other words,” Griff’s dad called from his armchair, “back off and let the boy enjoy Christmas.”

She laughed and finally let us through the front door.

Jess greeted me with a quick hug, too. “You good?”

“Yeah,” I said sincerely with a smile. “I’m great.”

I hadn't magically resolved all my feelings about family in a day, but knowing I had Griff's unwavering support helped a lot. Now that I'd made the choice to stay with him, to make a real home for myself, I felt more at peace with experiencing my first family Christmas in more than a decade.

Eleanor had outdone herself, and there was a huge luncheon spread that included a baked ham, mashed potatoes, buttery green beans, corn casserole, and spinach-and-ricotta pinwheels adorably stacked to look like a Christmas tree. That was on top of all the desserts she'd conscripted Jess into helping her whip up: pies, cookies, the infamous cranberry-orange bread, which was as delicious as advertised.

While we ate, Eleanor chatted happily about our plans for the rest of the day.

"After we finish eating, we'll exchange gifts, and then we can try to do a video call with Jonas and Rissa." She hesitated. "I'm hoping they'll pick up. I sent a message but haven't heard back yet."

Griff cleared his throat. "I called them the day before yesterday."

"Oh?" She perked up, looking eager. "How are they doing? I called over Thanksgiving, but they were with their other grandma, so we didn't get a chance to catch up much."

"It wasn't a long call, but they seemed good," he said. "I suggested going out there again this spring."

"Oh, honey, that's great!" Her eyes lit up. "Maybe the kids can come here again, too."

Griff shifted as if he were a little nervous. I lowered my hand to his thigh and squeezed gently. I could feel him relax under my touch, and my chest warmed to know that I could comfort and reassure him the way he did me.

"Maybe. That'll be up to them." Griff cleared his throat. "But even if they don't want to visit us, Logan helped me realize I have to keep trying to be in their lives. Whatever it takes."

“Maybe we could go with you sometime,” Jess offered. “It’s been too long since I saw those munchkins.”

Eleanor looked even more excited. “Maybe a whole family trip!”

Arthur chuckled. “Okay, easy. Let’s not invite ourselves along before Griff’s ready.”

“I should probably go on my own first and see how they handle having just me around before I spring the lot of us on them.” He reached for my hand on the table and entwined our fingers. “Well, me and Logan. I’ll need some moral support.”

I smiled at him. “If there’s one thing I’m good at, it’s traveling.”

“Just don’t be too good at it unless I’m with you.”

“I won’t,” I said. “You’re stuck with me now.” I surveyed the faces around the table, my heart skipping a beat in a mix of excitement and fear. “You’re all stuck with me now. I hope I don’t wear out my welcome.”

“Please,” Jess scoffed. “You’re one of us now.”

“And really,” Griff added, “if they can put up with her, you’ll be just fine.”

“Hey!” Jess threw a balled-up napkin at him, then turned to Rob. “Aren’t you going to defend my honor?”

Rob smirked. “I love you, Jess, but the man’s not lying.”

He softened the tease with a kiss, and she huffed and pushed her chair back. “After treatment like this, I need presents!”

The stockings Eleanor had shown me the other day were now filled with a variety of treats and small gifts. I got a chocolate santa, some lip balm, a miniature puzzle, and a Christmas card. When I opened it, it was covered in neat script done in blue ink.

Logan, at the risk of overstepping, I want you to know how special you’ve become to us. Griff loves you. If he hasn’t told you, I will, because I haven’t seen my son so happy in such a

long time. He's a man with a complicated history with love, and you light him up like a Christmas tree. From now on, I want you to consider us your family too. But only when you're ready. Until then, we'll be waiting. We're not going anywhere.

Eleanor

Beside me, Griff leaned in. "What is it?"

"Just the best Christmas gift ever," I said.

I handed it to him to read, then got up and crossed the room to hug Eleanor. "Thank you. I really appreciate how welcoming you've been, and I look forward to having a family again, even if I occasionally get a little squirrely about it."

"Be as squirrely as you like, honey. I'll just be sure to give you nuts when you need them," she teased.

"That's Griff's job," Jess called, making her mother blush, her father grumble at her "crude joke," and her fiancé laugh.

I glanced back at Griff to see him shaking his head, a wide smile overtaking his face. If the rest of the town saw him like this, the nickname Grinch would die off in a blink. He looked happy and affectionate.

He looked like a man in love.

Jess handed him a gift as I returned to his side, then handed one to me, too. "Don't say I never gave you anything."

Griff had already given me his gift that morning, a house-shaped ornament with a personalized message embossed on it: *Logan's 1st Christmas at home.*

I knew Griff had lukewarm feelings about the trappings of Christmas, but that only made it more special. With this one gift, he was telling me this was my home *and* embracing my love of Christmas all at the same time.

I'd kissed him stupid, and we'd hung it on the tree while I made threats that this would become our new holiday tradition for every year. He'd only smiled and said, "As long as you're here with me, I think I can live with that."

Now, a little stack of presents was growing in my lap as Jess played Santa and handed out neatly wrapped boxes and brightly colored gift bags. Being included like this was still a little unnerving because hope was like a fragile shoot of new growth, vulnerable to the winds of change.

But when it started to feel like too much, I leaned into Griff's warmth and reminded myself that whatever happened, he'd be there for me. Deep down, I knew the Calloways would too, but like Griff with his kids, I had to take small steps toward rebuilding my trust.

Also like him, I would *fight* for my happiness, even if that fight involved delicious family dinners and gift wrap. Because I was done running away.

I wanted to run toward the life ahead of me. Run toward Griff, and having a home, and yes, a *family* too.

"Unwrap my gift first!" Jess said with a little smirk that told me she was up to no good.

I was relieved, because with all the heavy emotions plaguing me, I could use a little of Jess's orneriness.

And she didn't disappoint.

Griff unwrapped his gift to find a framed photo of me.

"Told you I'd give you something great for Christmas," Jess said with a grin.

Griff looked dismayed. "Jess, this isn't okay. Logan's not some object. Did you consider how he might feel about this joke of yours?"

"Oh, shit, I'm sorry," Jess said. "I was just—"

"No, it's okay," I said, though Griff's quick defense warmed my heart. He clearly remembered my melancholy over all the times I'd been a *gift* that a family had ultimately given up. "I know it's not meant like that." I nudged Griff. "Besides, look what she gave me."

He looked down at my gift, a framed photo of Griff. If Jess was calling me a gift, she was calling her brother one too, which somehow made it okay.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” he grumbled.

“What is it?” Eleanor asked, leaning forward eagerly.

We held up our gifts side by side as Jess proudly proclaimed, “I give the best presents ever.”

Griff huffed an annoyed breath, and I grinned at him. “Well, she’s got you there, babe. Love is a pretty good gift.”

His eyes softened as he looked at me. “I suppose it is.”

“Aw, they’re so cute,” Eleanor said.

Griff shot her a look. “What did I say about calling us cute?”

“But it’s Christmas!” she protested.

“Yeah, someone find the mistletoe. Maybe we can get them to kiss,” Jess teased.

Griff scowled, but what the hell, it *was* Christmas.

I didn’t need mistletoe to kiss my grinch. Griff was my person, my roots, my forever home.

I could kiss him anytime I wanted.

So, I did.

Jess cheered, Eleanor cooed, Arthur rolled his eyes, and Rob watched it all like he wished he had a tub of popcorn. They were ridiculous and silly and loving.

They were family.

And I was finally ready to accept their place in my life, thanks to Griff and all the love he had shown me.

That was his real gift to me, and one I would treasure for the rest of my life.

EPILOGUE



TWO YEARS LATER

GRIFF

I STEPPED THROUGH THE FRONT DOOR OF MY HOUSE, THE COLD snap of an early winter frost following me.

“Is everyone ready? I’ve got to get to the parade route—”

I stopped short, taking in the sight before me, heart swelling to see Logan and my two children—more like adults now at seventeen and eighteen—hanging ornaments on the Christmas tree they’d set up in the corner of the living room.

Next to them on the fireplace mantel, a selection of gnomes were arranged around new photos we’d taken the last time we visited them in California, along with Jess and Rob’s wedding photo, which included the whole family: the bride and groom, Mom and Dad, me and Logan, and Rissa and Jonas.

It had been the first time the kids had been to Christmas Falls in six years, and I’d smiled so hard that day my cheeks had ached, not used to so much happiness. It’d taken a lot of phone calls, video chats, and three trips to see the kids, along with a few contentious discussions with their mother, before we rebuilt our relationship.

Logan slid a little grinch ornament he’d bought for me last Christmas onto a tree branch, then turned with a grin. “We’re ready now. Right, kids?”

Jonas grabbed his coat from the closet next to the front door. “I was ready to be done an hour ago.”

“Spoken like the Grinch’s son,” Rissa teased.

“Well, you’re his daughter, so what does that make you, a bi—”

I clapped my hand over his mouth before he could get himself in real trouble.

“How about we don’t use my silly nickname to insult each other?”

Rissa grabbed her puffy purple coat and matching earmuffs. “Sorry. I thought he could take a joke.”

She swept out the door. My son followed, grumbling under his breath about who could or couldn’t take a joke. Sometimes I wondered if they channeled their pre-teen selves just so I wouldn’t feel like I’d missed out. For adults, they behaved pretty childishly sometimes—not that I minded. I was just glad to have them back in my life.

Logan paused to peck a kiss to my cheek above my beard. “Well, I think your nickname is cute.”

“I’m sure you do.” I swatted his ass playfully. “It probably reminds you of when we met.”

The nickname didn’t entirely fit anymore. When it came to organizing the festival, I was still a strict taskmaster. But now, I made time to enjoy more of the events with family. Often, it was just me and Logan, but we met up with my parents, Jess and Rob, and various aunts, uncles, and cousins visiting town from time to time, too.

This year, Rissa and Jonas would make it even more special.

But I wouldn’t have them here without the encouragement of the man beside me.

I leaned in for a kiss, only to be rudely interrupted.

“Can you stop already?” Jonas complained.

“It’s freezing,” Rissa added, a puff of vapor accompanying her words as her hot breath hit the cold air. “Maybe you could

save the groping for later tonight? Preferably when we're not watching."

Logan laughed good-naturedly. "I suppose it is Christmas," he teased. "I'll resist kissing your father, but don't say I never gave you anything."

I'd left the engine running, and we all sighed with relief as we piled into the car, relishing the warmth.

Everyone had dressed warmly in layers for the parade, but Logan had also brought along a thick quilt he'd gotten at last year's Arts and Crafts Fair.

My gaze kept going to the clock. Typically, I was at the parade far earlier, but it wasn't every day my children were in town. Even when they weren't, my job was no longer my top priority. I had someone waiting for me at home, and that changed everything.

I still cared about organizing the festival and did it well, but it was no longer a mechanism for helping me hide from the world.

We found a parking spot a couple of streets over and walked the four blocks to the parade route, lawn chairs under our arms. I'd have to leave Logan and the kids to check in on the floats and coordinate the start of the parade, but first, we'd find the rest of my family and get everyone settled together to watch the show.

Even though we'd arrived early, crowds were already beginning to form along the sidewalks. Calls of "Merry Christmas" rang out as we passed by. A few people greeted me. Even more greeted Logan. In his time in Christmas Falls, he'd proven to be the friendlier of the two of us.

"Are you going to wow us tonight?" Bruce called, always ready to give me shit. "Gotta impress those kids of yours!"

"We have *really* big parades in California," Rissa said, almost apologetically.

Ouch.

My face must have given away my feelings because she hurried to add, “But I’m sure your parade is really awesome, Dad.”

I was being placated by an eighteen-year-old, but hearing her call me Dad—when I’d been *Griff* for a few years—was enough to take away the sting.

“That’s all right,” I said. “I’m a big fish in a small pond. I get it.”

“But a sexy fish,” Logan added.

“And once again, they’re gross,” Jonas said with a disgusted sigh.

We spotted our family in the crowd, and Mom hugged the stuffing out of everyone. She was ridiculously excited to have Jonas and Rissa back for a visit, but she hugged Logan just as hard.

“Easy, Mom, you’re gonna spend all evening with them,” I teased.

“You’re all coming caroling with us this year too?” she asked.

“Oh, yes,” my cousin Lena said, eyes bright. “I’ve got to see the new reformed Grinch in action!”

I inwardly groaned. Of all the holiday traditions, caroling was my least favorite.

“Actually—” I started.

“Don’t you dare say you have to work!” Mom chastised.

I held up my hands. “It’s not me this time. Logan has a Christmas light installation to do. I’ll be there, if only because my children want to torture me.”

Jonas and Rissa snickered. When they’d discovered I was still a bit bah-humbug about some of the Christmas fanfare, they’d found it hilarious that I was the organizer of a major holiday festival and they loved making me do corny Christmas crap.

I secretly loved it, but I tried not to let anyone know it.

Mom full-on pouted that Logan wouldn't be with us, which looked ridiculous on a woman her age.

"Sorry, Mama," Logan said. "Business is slow in the winter, and I've got to take the work I can get."

Every time he called her Mama, my heart grew another size. It had taken Logan some time, but it was incredible to see the way he'd melded into our family.

She sighed. "I understand, honey."

Logan and Felix often supplemented their income with snow shoveling or plowing, installing Christmas lights, and setting up holiday displays around town. They lent a hand at Bruce's tree farm as needed, too.

"I'll definitely make it over for the cookie-decorating though," Logan said, "*and* I'll braid all the candy-cane cookies without complaining. I swear."

Mom raised a hand to pat his cheek. "Well, then, all is forgiven, but we'll miss you."

Jess leaned in. "Sometimes I think Mom loves him more than me."

I laughed. "Yeah, but he deserves it."

She smiled as she watched Mom tug Logan into a chair beside her, talking his ear off. "Yeah, he does."

I checked the time on my phone and cursed under my breath. "All right, I really have to run. I'll meet you all after though?"

"We'll be here," Logan said. "Go show everyone why you're the big fish in this little pond."

"I think I prefer being called Grinch."

"Go steal the Christmas show then," Jess said, shooing me away.

I took one last look before reluctantly heading off to do my job.

The kids had unfolded their chairs and sat with the quilt Logan had brought draped over their laps. Dad had taken Rob to fetch cups of hot chocolate, which they were now handing out. Jess had sat down on Logan's other side, Lena next to her, all three of them giggling and gossiping like the best of friends.

I might be a Grinch, but I had to hand it to Christmas.

Without Logan's joy in the season, he might have never come to our little town. I might not have seen the holidays from his perspective or come to appreciate just how important it was to hold on to your family—even if sometimes it felt like maybe they wanted you to let go.

Without Logan, I wouldn't be here now, looking at this picture-perfect holiday-greeting-card-worthy scene of my family gathered together, all ready to ooh and ahh over the parade I'd spent so much time organizing.

My nerves jangled as I headed down the walk toward the staging area, where floats were already lit up and ready to roll out.

I'd wanted to share this with my children for a long, long time. Originally, it had been for the wrong reasons. I'd hoped the spectacle of Christmas would make them *want* to spend time with me.

Now, I just wanted to put on a show that would help them—and every family—make memories that would shine a little brighter.

As the first float rolled out and a collective gasp sounded, I smiled to myself.

Let the Christmas magic begin.

I would enjoy the oohs and ahhs while they lasted, but afterward, I'd appreciate the real magic of the season: quality time with my family and the man who'd helped bring us all together again.

That gift was priceless and one I could only repay in kind—with unconditional love.



Curious about quirky little Granville and the stepbros Logan worked for? Check out the [Games We Play](#) and [Rules We Break](#) series!

Wondering about that job lead Beckett had for Logan in the Ozarks? Check out my new series, [Swallow Cove](#)!

ALSO IN CHRISTMAS FALLS

Snowbody Loves Me, Jacki James

Get Frosted, Amy Aislin

Silent Knight, Beth Bolden

Under the Mistle-Tome, Sammi Cee

Clausing a Scene, Casey Cox

No Elfing Way, Hayden Hall

Ready, Set, Glow!, Rye Cox

Scrooge You!, Brigham Vaughn

ALSO BY DJ JAMISON

Rules We Break

Don't Date A DILF: As a teacher, I live by this rule. But when matchmaking drives me to fake date Hunter Rhodes, resisting this man may be the one test I can't pass.

Don't Mess With The Ex: I've lived by one simple rule for the last twenty years. But when Laurence Kensington III shows up to tell me we're still married, we'll both be put to the test.

Don't Bang Your Stepbro: I'm not one for rules, but not hooking up with your stepbrother is kind of a no-brainer. Until I wake up with him in a Vegas hotel wearing nothing but a wedding ring.

Games We Play

Two Truths and a Lyle: When our friends use a party game to drop a truth bomb that my BFF and I are in love, the drunken kiss that follows opens my eyes to feelings I never thought possible.

Never Have I Evan: When a party game reveals I still have my V-card, it's embarrassing. But when the sexy new guy in town wants to coach me in the art of flirtation, it's game on.

Truth or Darren: When I push my ex-girlfriend's brother too far with a dare, I'm the one to pay the price. A very sexy but utterly confusing tongue kiss with a guy.

7 Minutes in Kevin: When my dream man steps into the closet during a make-out game, I jump at the opportunity to get my hands on him. It might be a terrible idea, but how often will I get a chance to kiss my friend's sexy dad?

Mistle-Joe Kisses: A bit of mistletoe sparks an amazing night between coworkers. But will the prickly office manager Augustus bend his rules for love? A Games We Play/Rules We Break cross-over novella.

Thrust Into Love

Swiped By My Dad's Best Friend: Cooper is a frat boy, general screwup, and... Daddy's boy?

Matched By My Rival: Simon is an ex-football star, a bitter rival, and... falling for the enemy?

Tapped By My Roommate: Ethan is a shy geek, newly bi-curious, and... propositioning his gay roommate?

Sexted By Santa: Christian Kringle is a college professor, reluctant Santa, and... fake dating his neighbor?

Marital Bliss

Surprise Groom: Caleb is shocked to learn his family could lose Bliss Island Resort—unless he can pull off a marriage of convenience with an investor's gay, go-go dancing son.

Wrangling a Groom: Wyatt and Diego made a childhood pact to get married one day. But they grew up, life got messy, and young love wasn't enough. When Diego visits the ranch, they have one more chance... Can they get it right in time to fulfill that marriage pact after all?

Nobody's Groom: A sexy ranch hand and a naïve country boy ignite each other's tempers—and passions—in this bisexual awakening, cowboy romance.

Faking a Groom: Avery Kinkaid has been repressing his deepest urges for as long as he can remember. But when his father pushes him too far, he's ready to call his bluff. All he needs is a groom, and his first love is the perfect man for the role of fake fiancé.

Hearts and Health

Heart Trouble: Nurse Ben Griggs is leery of trusting his heart to anyone, let alone a thrill-seeking patient, but he agrees to a series of dates, if only to prevent more injuries!

Bedside Manner: Zane Kavanaugh is still recovering from a traumatic coming out, but he finds himself drawn to the calm, collected, much *older* ER doctor who treated him.

Urgent Care: Surgeon Trent Cavendish returns to his hometown—and his first love. Xavier isn't the kid he remembers, but a sexy man in lace *and* a competent nursing student. And neither version of the man is going to make it easy for Trent to find his second chance at love.

Room for Recovery: When Beau is bullied, teen heartthrob Wade comes heroically to his rescue. But their growing attraction won't come without painful truths.

Surprise Delivery: A thrill-seeking doctor teaches a workaholic administrator how to live in the moment before the responsibility of a baby arrives, and in return he finds love after loss.

Orderly Affair: A bi-curious orderly explores with a geeky lab tech, but between Ian's reluctance to come out and Callum's annoying ex, they'll have to work for their HEA in this hookups-to-lovers romance.

Operation Makeover: A cute but insecure X-ray tech and a gorgeous hairdresser join forces for a makeover that brings them both a love they never saw coming.

Rapid Response: A firefighter discovers a new side to his sexuality with a bossy male paramedic. Their chemistry is red-hot, but Sean will have to come to terms—not just with his attraction to a man, but with his desperate need to please.

Standalone Romances

Yours for the Holiday: Remy loves to hate his brother's best friend. Or maybe he hates to love him. Either way, sparks fly when the two share a room during a holiday vacation.

All I Want is You: One kiss under the mistletoe destroyed a friendship. Will another Christmas kiss remake it into something better?

Five Fake Dates: How many fake dates will it take to decide if your best friend should be your boyfriend, and whether one kiss was a fluke or only the beginning of a bisexual discovery? Five, obviously!

Love by Number: Aidan doesn't have the best record with relationships, but he's had a lifelong love affair with baseball. When he needs a ride to the World Series, though, he must rely on a sexy artist who is as spontaneous as Aidan is rigid. Will their differences add up to love?

Want more?

This is just a sampling of my books. See my [full catalogue](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

DJ Jamison writes romances about everyday life and extraordinary love featuring a variety of queer characters, from gay to bisexual to asexual. DJ grew up in the Midwest in a working-class family, and those influences can be found in her writing through characters coping with real-life problems. DJ spent more than a decade in the newspaper industry before chasing her first dream to write fiction. She's spent a lifetime reading and continues to avidly devour her fellow authors' books each night. She lives in Kansas with her husband, two sons, one snake, and a sadistic cat named Birdie.

DJ is active in her Facebook group, [DJ and Company](#), as well as [Queer Romance Fan Club](#).

You can also connect with her on other social media platforms.

