



KISSES AT

BLIZZARD BLUFF SERIES BOOK THREE

*candy cane*

LANE



USA TODAY & WALL STREET JOURNAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

LARAMIE  
BRISCOE

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# **KISSES AT CANDY CANE LANE**

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**BLIZZARD BLUFF**

**BOOK 3**

**LARAMIE BRISCOE**



*To Lauren*

*Who helped me find joy this year in the writing of the words  
that for so long gave me anxiety.*

*Who was my own personal cheerleader when I needed it, and  
who helped me believe in myself again.*

*Thank you!*

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## **NEW RELEASE ALERTS**

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## **BLURB**

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### **Noelle, a hotel, and two hearts that fell ...**

Noelle Green

Holidays are turning out to be something of a special time for me. On Halloween I got pregnant, and now that we're heading for Christmas - who knows?

When I tell the father of my baby that he's a daddy, he surprises me by not running away. Even though all we had was one night, he's willing to see where this goes, and so am I.

Little do Cal and I know that what we started on Halloween night just might see us through the rest of our lives.



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# CHAPTER ONE

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## Noelle

“Welcome to The Gingerbread House.” This is the phrase I spend most of my days saying, and I love it. “Do you have a reservation?”

The couple in front of me have eyes for only each other. The way they’re smiling softly and attached at the hip is what I love to see when couples come into my boutique hotel.

“We do,” the man answers, pulling his wife closer to him. She in turn presses her head back to his shoulder, tilting it so that their eyes meet. “We’re the Taylor’s.”

“Here for a babymoon.” The woman grins as she runs her hand over her burgeoning belly. “I’m due in late January.”

“Congratulations.” I smile back at her. “I’m so happy you’ve chosen to stay here for the ...” I check their reservation, “week before Christmas.”

“It’s our last one as a family of two. We wanted to make it special.”

“We’re going to do our best to give you the best Christmas experience you’ve ever had,” I assure them. “I just need your ID and a form of payment, and we’ll get you settled.”

I finish the rest of the transaction on autopilot. When we’re done, I direct them to one of my other team members so they can be taken to their room. Their best celebration ever is about to start. When they’re gone, I take a seat at the bench by the large bay window, and inhale deeply, hoping that it will settle my queasy stomach. It’s my favorite spot to sit, and one of the reasons I like working the front desk.

“You alright, Boss Lady?” Jessica, one of my front desk workers asks, as she gets a look at me.

Nodding, I put a hand on my middle section, focusing on breathing through my nose and out through my mouth. “Perfect, but I’m gonna go take a break if you’ve got the front?”

“I’ve got it; take your time. Sorry I was a little late.”

“It’s okay. I know the roads are trash. They said we’ll get more snow over the next week too. I’ve saved rooms for staff, so don’t worry.”

Jess gives me a look. “I never worry about you having our safety and happiness at the forefront of your mind. This is the best place I’ve ever worked, and you’re the best boss I’ve ever had.”

My cheeks heat at the praise. “Thank you, I’ll see you in a little while.”

Once off the hook, I hurry to my office and shut myself inside. Leaning back against the door, I sigh heavily. I don’t know how much longer I can keep this secret especially with this being the busiest time of the year, and the biggest year we’ve ever had.

After walking over to my desk, I pull out the chair and take a seat. I haven’t moved my calendar from the night my life changed. Halloween will always have a special place in my heart, and I have to decide if I want to tell the man I spent that night with about our predicament.

The only problem?

He is my employee, and has been my crush since I was thirteen years old. On Halloween, things got infinitely more complicated between us, but also my dream came true. It’s one I’m not prepared to let go of yet.

Reaching into my desk drawer, I feel around for the package of peanut butter crackers I carry with me now. Gone is my daily Starbucks, replaced by what I’ve told others is a new hydration routine. Really, my insulated cup carries Sprite at all times.

With shaking hands, I struggle to open the package of crackers. Once I do, I pull out one and munch on it gratefully. It's starting to have a placebo effect. As soon as the flavor hits my tongue and the crunch sounds in my ears, my stomach starts to settle. Already feeling better, I sink back in my chair, closing my eyes for a few minutes. I've been exhausted lately and grabbing catnaps wherever I can.

Today? My attempt at sleeping is not helping.

There's so much I need to do, and all I want to do is go home, curl up, and not show my face until tomorrow.

But this is my dream, and I'm determined to make it work. I've put every single bit of extra money I have into this hotel. Not only does it need to provide for me, but now for the little family member I'm going to have. Pressure mounts, but I know I can handle it. I've wanted this since I knew what it meant to be a mother.

There's nagging at the base of my skull, though. I have to tell *him*. It's not a secret I can continue to keep to myself. Not in good conscience. I just haven't found the right time.

*But when is the right time?* The voice in the back of my head questions me.

If you wait for the right time for everything you'll be waiting your entire life. As I'm trying to make a plan that has the potential to work, my office door slams open and I'm greeted with the man I've been thinking of.

He looks at me like a soldier ready to do battle, which he was not so long ago. His dark eyes are full of fire, his face is set as if he's determined to get answers, and his mouth a grim line. The tattoos he came back to Blizzard Bluff with are on show along his delineated forearm as he holds the door against the wall. While everyone else is buttoned up and excited about the perfect Christmas weather we're having, he's wearing short sleeves and a grimace.

"Cal ..." I give him a wan smile.

"Why didn't you tell me? When were you going to tell me?" he demands. "How long have you known?"

It's not easy to be on the receiving end of his annoyance and anger, but I knew as soon as I started keeping this secret that that's exactly where I would be.

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## CHAPTER TWO

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## Cal

“*I*’m waiting, Noelle. When were you going to tell me?”

My patience with her is running thin. I’ve had my suspicions, but they were confirmed this morning when I watched her closer than I ever have. Since I’m the baby of a family of five and the rest of my siblings are girls, I know a thing or two about pregnant women.

“Soon,” she hedges, clasping her fingers in front of her stomach. “It’s getting to the point where I can’t keep it to myself,” she admits, tilting her head to the side. “How did you know?”

“Say it,” I press. “You haven’t told me yet. I need to hear it from you.” I’ve known her for years, so I also know her tells. The way she’s rubbing her fingers against one another says she’s nervous and perhaps lying, but I’ll give her a pass.

“I’ve known for three weeks that I’m carrying your baby,” she shrugs helplessly. “Thought I had a stomach virus.”

“My sisters all thought the same thing the first time. As for how I knew? You’re the energizer bunny, Noelle. I hardly ever saw you yawn before a few weeks ago. “

There’s a lull in the conversation between us, full of tension that’s been there since Halloween night after the meeting of our bodies that neither one of us were prepared for, and the way we came together in a blur of arms, legs, and lips.

“Yeah ...” She pulls her bottom lip between her teeth. “I’m not going to stand in your way if you want to be a part of this baby’s life.”

“Oh, I know you want to.” I smirk. “That’s what we’re not going to do here. We might not have been prepared for this, might not be in a relationship, but what we will do is manage this situation together.”

She shoots an annoyed look my way. “What I’d prefer you not to do is tell me what to actually do. I’m willing to give you some lenience because I should’ve told you about the baby as soon as I found out. I was trying to figure out how to tell you because we don’t have a relationship.”

“That’s a damn lie, and you know it. We’ve had a friendship for as long as we’ve been alive. Our parents know each other, we’ve spent holidays together, and had backyard cookouts and family dinners. You act like we’ve adjacently known each other when the fact of the matter is we’ve been pretty close before. I call bullshit on it, Noelle.” I run an agitated hand through my hair.

“I accept that, and I take responsibility for keeping you in the dark.” She breathes heavily. “I’ve been under so much pressure with this season meaning so much.”

“You’ve mentioned that before.” I swallow roughly. “And I know I’m just your employee, but if you need to put that pressure on someone, I’m here. I got big fuckin’ shoulders.”

She looks uncomfortable, pulling her bottom lip in between her teeth and shutting her eyes. Her mouth opens and closes. Her fingers flip a pen end over end. I jump slightly when she slams the pen down on the desk. “I took out a capital loan against the bed and breakfast,” she says slowly.

“For what?” I’m shocked. Beyond shocked, honestly. This place does amazing for itself, especially this time of year. It’s always full, and there’s even a waitlist. The idea that she has money problems, throws me off. I’ve never seen any indication.

“To do some renovations. While this place does great in the winter and at Christmas, we’re struggling in the summer and fall. I have a vision for a new addition. What I didn’t expect was to be pregnant right now.” She scoffs. “If



everything goes to plan, it looks like the first summer of our update, I'll be pregnant and delivering.”

I don't know what to say. “You know I'm not going anywhere.” I put my hands in my jeans pockets and rock back on my heels. “Whatever you need me to do, I'm willing to help.”

“Cal, I can't afford to give you a raise right now. I had planned on taking all of this, the debt, and the baby as my own. Now, I'm not sure. I can't ask someone who just works for me and doesn't have an invested stake to take such a risk.” She shrugs.

The look on her face is so sad. Like she had such amazing plans, and now she's unsure of where she should go, or what she should do. “First of all, I think we can agree, I don't just work for you, and did I ask for a raise?” I bark. I don't mean to, but the way she's making excuses and assuming the worst is pissing me off.

She jumps back. “No, you didn't, but you should expect one. You work harder than anyone else I know. You do anything I ask of you.”

“Don't tell me what I should expect and what I shouldn't. I'm not asking you for anything in this other than to let me help you and let me be in this child's life.” I lay it all out there for her, hoping she'll understand it's not about money, and it's not about what she can give me—it's what I can do to make life easier for her. There are a lot of pressures on her shoulders, and I can help take some of that off her, if only she'd let me.

“If this is what you want, then yes, I want you to be in our lives.”

Instead of waiting for her to understand, I'm going to come right out and say it. “I want to make your life easier. I want to help you and make it so you don't have to worry about shit by yourself anymore. I know I'm probably not who you thought you'd be having a baby with, but here we are. It can't be changed now, unless you've made some sort of decision you haven't shared with me?”

“No, I’m definitely having this baby. That you don’t have to worry about. My fear was that you’d try to say I shouldn’t because I’m so busy and I have a lot going on. Trust me, I’ve thought about all the logistics, I’ve gone through each and every one of them, from every aspect, and no matter how hard this is going to be, I want to do it. I’ve always wanted a child.” She takes a drink of the water, wetting her throat. “I just never got around to having a relationship in order to even get to the conversation about having a child. I’ve been so focused The Gingerbread House ...”

“Well, now I’m here to make sure you focus on more than this place. You need to focus on yourself.”

She doesn’t look comfortable. “And this place. If I don’t make enough money to cover the payments on the loan, I’m fucked.”

“Lucky for you, you have me to help you.”

She gives me a grin. “Maybe that’s what I’m afraid of, Cal.”

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## CHAPTER THREE

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## Noelle

G lancing at the clock as I walk through my front door, I sigh heavily. I don't know how much longer I can keep doing these long nights and early mornings. It's been rough throughout the first ten weeks of my pregnancy so far, but I have a feeling it's going to get worse the further along I get.

Coming home to an empty house used to be so sad. Lately, I've found that I enjoy it and I'm savoring it more than I ever have before. I'm acutely aware that in a few months there will be someone with me at all times. My days and nights will no longer be just mine. They'll be shared with another human being who will rely on me for every single bit of their care and love. It's daunting, but at the same time, it's a dream—one that's about to come true.

As I walk through my small home, turning on all the lights and plugging in my Christmas tree, my thoughts turn to Cal.

I inferred today that he's just someone who works for me, and he called me on it. He should've. An acquaintance is far, far away from who and what he is to me. That's the reason I broke down and spent the night with him on Halloween. The two of us had been dancing around one another for at least the past few months. We've flirted for years. If I'm being completely honest with myself, which I'm not always, I've liked him more than I should have since we were in high school.

Over fifteen years. Previously I haven't wanted to mess up our friendship, and then I saw the way he was with the women he dated. He'd make them feel amazing and then leave them in

his wake when he was done. They'd look shell-shocked for years afterward, jumping to give him their attention like a puppy looking for a pat on the head. Now? Now I've had a night with him, and I know exactly how they feel.

I rub my face as I head into the bedroom. All I want are my comfy clothes and a good meal. Luckily, I made a huge batch of taco meat yesterday and I'll have leftovers, as soon as I heat it up. A taco salad is my go-to.

In record time I change, get my food, and have a seat on my couch. Just as I get comfortable, a FaceTime request from my best friend, Misty, comes through. I accept it and wait for the call to connect. Up here in the mountains, cell reception can sometimes be slow.

After waiting through a period of time comparable to dial-up internet back in the '90s, her face appears in front of me. "Hey!" She waves. "I texted you earlier, but it doesn't even show you've looked at it. Is everything alright?"

She's the only person who knows about the baby—aside from the father, now. I sigh heavily before taking a bite of my food and totally talking with my mouth full. We're friends, and we can do that. "Today was a shit show. Cal found out."

Her gasp is broken up, but I hear it just the same. "How? What did he say?"

I shrug before taking a drink of my lemonade. "He guessed. To be fair, it's probably easier to tell now I'm this far along. I've stopped being so obsessive about not letting anyone know, and I'm fucking tired."

"You know I can come help you if you need me," Misty offers. "I have the name to be in Blizzard Bluff, right?"

I giggle. Both of us have names that scream Christmas. Hers is actually Mistletoe, but we call her Misty. "I know, but I hate to have you come here. I know you have your own life."

"What life?" She scoffs. "Since the lockdown I've been working from home, and I'm becoming more and more isolated."

“It doesn’t help you moved there two months before it all started,” I remind her. Those were scary times. There wasn’t a handbook on how we were supposed to handle a worldwide pandemic. I’d been happy to be right where I was on this mountain, but at the same time I was scared. I’d had to shut down until I’d been granted a state contract for travel nurses who helped in the sick wards. I somehow made it then, and I’ll make it now, through this baby and the renovations too.

“Yeah,” she sighs heavily before running a hand through her hair. “If I come home, I’ll feel like I’m giving up.”

“Giving up?” I wipe my hand on my napkin. “What does that even mean? You’ve been there for three years and lived through loneliness that would’ve driven others crazy. You’re so far from ‘giving up.’”

She smiles. “Thank you, but I’m looking for change, and if you’re going to need help, I’m here to offer that. Maybe it’s time to come home.” She sighs. “I’ve given it a go here and I just don’t know if it’s for me.”

“If it’s not for you and you want to come home, I would love it,” I admit. All I’ve ever wanted is to have a family, and having my best friend be a part of it would make this even sweeter. “But this has to be your decision, Misty.”

“I know.” She blows out a breath that makes her lips clap together. “Who knows if my work would even let me do it.”

“If they won’t, you know I’ll give you a job. Can I pay what they can? Probably not, but you could stay in the B&B for as long as you needed.”

The slight brightness of her eyes tells me more than anything how much this means to her, and how much she misses home. “I’ll think about it. Really think about it.”

“Good, because me and this baby?” I put my hand on my stomach. “We’ll need all the support we can get.”

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## CHAPTER FOUR

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## Cal

I've tossed and turned all night thinking of Noelle carrying my baby. The night we shared together was one of the hottest I've ever had. It fucking blew my mind. The next morning, I'd woken up, ready to offer her the world if she wanted it, but she hadn't been there.

She'd left me some note talking about how she shouldn't have allowed it to happen. That she was my boss and I was her employee.

It's all fucking noise in my head. I can't take it anymore.

Glancing over at the clock, I see it's ten thirty pm. I'd gone to bed early hoping to get a good night's sleep, but since it's obvious I'm not going to be getting one tonight, I decide to get up and get dressed. After bundling up in a big puffer jacket, and putting a toboggan on my head, I slip my feet into snow boots and step out into the cold nighttime air. The best thing about living in a small town is the fact you can walk everywhere when needed. It's a quick five-minute jaunt down to the neighborhood bar.

My breath is white in the hazy streetlights. Almost frozen as it mists in the air. Any sane person wouldn't be doing this, but I can't be alone with my thoughts anymore. They're going to drive me insane. I need the chill of the icy air to try and make sense of the shit clouding up my head.

When I enter there are only a few people inside, less than I expected. Christmas lights are strung across the ceiling, giving the normally dreary interior, a festive appearance. A tree is



decorated in the corner, fake Christmas presents sitting around it. Fresh garland sends pine scents throughout the room, and the glitter of the wrap on the presents flash off the wall.

“Hey Cal.”

I tip my chin to the bartender, Alex. I’ve known him since we were kids. He grew up here in Blizzard Bluff. Like me, he never left. “Hey.” I slide up to the bar. “Give me whatever you have on tap, tonight. I think you said you were getting something new?”

“We did. You’re gonna like this one. Long day?” he asks as he pulls a mug out and fills it by tilting the tap toward him.

I don’t even know how to answer this question. “More like an unexpected day. Lot to think about.”

He pushes a bowl of peanuts toward me. “Maybe being busy with your hands will help you think through whatever it is you need to.”

I’m willing to try anything at this point. “Thanks.” I grab a peanut encased in the shell and begin to strip it off.

For the next fifteen minutes, I fall into an easy routine. First I take a drink from the glass, then pop the peanut in my mouth, sucking off the salt, before taking it out and peeling the skin off. Once I’m done, I get the two seeds out and pop them into my mouth. Slowly, I work them around, trying to think of what my life will be like when I have a baby to take care of.

A hand waves in front of my face. “You okay?”

Noticing the hand, I shake my head. “Sorry. What did you say?”

“You seem pretty deep in it tonight. Is there anything I can help you with?”

I debate on whether to talk to him or not, but he’s a bartender. He’s heard enough shit in his life to probably fill a fucking book. I’ll be able to talk around this so he won’t know I’m discussing myself. “When do you know something you thought was a one-time thing is worth it being an all-the-time thing?”

“Are we talking about something that’s life-changing or something like deciding to cut sugar from your diet?”

I tilt my head to the side. “I think we can both agree that cutting sugar from your diet is life-changing.”

“That’s fair.” He shrugs.

“But no, it’s not going to be something that’s going to resolve itself in a few days or months—not even years. This is more like decades to the rest of your life.”

Alex grabs a clean cup, polishing it. “So the question I have for you is—do you want this to be an all-the-time thing? Are you ready to change your life?”

I take a drink and remove another peanut from its hull. “I think it’s going to happen whether I’m ready for it or not.”

“Then I don’t think you really need anyone to tell you if you’re ready for it. I think you need someone to believe in you—to think that you’ll be able to do it. You’re looking for validation.” He puts one glass down before picking another up and starting to polish it again. “We both know you’re a confident man, Cal. You don’t need validation. You just need to do what you feel is morally right.”

He’s really good. I guess that’s what you get when you’ve been a bartender for as long as he has. He’s hit the nail on the head. “Morally, I know what I’m going to do. It’s the emotional side of things that’s bothering me.” I wouldn’t admit this to any other person, but somehow in this dark bar, I’m willing to give him a bit more than I’m willing to give anyone else.

His eyebrows pop up into his hairline. “Then that’s the question you have to ask yourself. Do you want to emotionally make yourself available and vulnerable?”

I drain the rest of my beer before putting it down heavily on the scratched wood of the bar top. “That’s the decision I have to make.”

“And that’s what you’re conflicted about.”

“Exactly.” I pull a ten out of my wallet and push it toward him. “Keep the change. I appreciate the talk.”

“You know I’m here if you ever need to get stuff off your chest.”

I do know that. He was good friends with my dad when Dad was alive, and talking to him makes me think about the man I miss the most in the world. More than anything, I wish Dad were here for me to confess all this stuff to, but cancer is a thief and he’s not. “I appreciate it. I know my dad would too.”

“He was a good man taken way too soon.”

He’s not telling me anything that I don’t already know. Instead of feeling melancholy about it like I normally do, right now I’m thankful for the lessons Dad taught me. I’m going to be able to share those with the baby that I’m going to have soon.

I get up from the bar stool before shrugging my jacket on. With sure fingers, I pull my beanie down over my ears.

“Thanks again, Alex.” I give him a wave before stepping out into the dark night.

Snow is falling down around me, almost as if I’m in one of those globes. The night is silent as I make the trek back to my house. Noelle and I didn’t really get a chance to talk much today, and that bothers me. Everything is up in the air with nothing decided on. Perhaps that’s the problem I have.

Nothing is set in stone, and right now I have this overwhelming need to talk to her. To make sure what I thought I felt that night wasn’t a lie.

In this moment, I have to know.

Turning from the way to my house, I hook a left and head toward hers. Before I can talk myself out of it, I’m standing on her front porch, knocking on the door. Whether she’ll answer or not determines what I’ll do. I’m not going to bang and scare her to death, but if she’s awake she’ll hear, and that’ll mean we can have this conversation.

And I want to have it now.

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## CHAPTER FIVE

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## Noelle

Who in the hell is knocking on my door at this time in the morning?

Typically I would be asleep, but I had to get up to pee. I always thought that happened later in pregnancy, but it's been happening to me since two weeks after I found out I was pregnant. I'm slightly scared to check the door, but if someone's here at this time of night, or morning, as the case may be, it must be important.

Peeking out through my peephole, I see Cal standing there, huddled against the door. Fear crashes through my body. I jerk open the door, pulling my long-sleeve shirt as close to my body as I can. "Oh my God, is something wrong?"

"No." He puts his hands in his pockets and rocks back on his heels.

"Then why are you here at three a.m.?" I demand, standing back so that he can come in. When he hesitates, I wave him through. "C'mon, before people see you standing out there at this time. We'll have everyone in this town talking about us before we want them to."

He rushes in and stands in the middle of the foyer. The last time he was here was Halloween night. I remember watching him as he stepped in. My eyes go right to his lips. The memory of the way he took my mouth heats my body.

"What?" he questions, his voice raspy, like he knows exactly what I'm thinking.

"Nothing." I shake my head to rid myself of the memories.

“No.” He steps closer, getting all up in my business. “You’re remembering it too. The way we were together. The way everything fell away for the few hours we had in your bed. I wasn’t ready for it to be over,” he whispers. “I wanted there to be an option in some universe where we went out on a date, and I told you how amazing you were. How I’ve watched you through all the obstacles thrown in your way during the pandemic. You’ve done everything you’ve had to in order to keep the business afloat. Even with everything you’ve been dealt.”

I don’t feel comfortable with all this praise. “I’m doing the exact same thing every other business person had to do in order to keep themselves going. It’s not like I did anything special.”

“But you did,” he argues. “When none of us really knew what the hell was happening, you were there every day. Even if it was just you, me, and a couple of the housekeeping staff. You were there ... I needed that.” He swallows roughly. “I was losing my mom then, ya know?”

I do know. At the beginning of the pandemic, his Mom was one of the people who passed away. None of her children had been able to be with her. “I didn’t want you to feel alone,” I admit, hesitantly. “We were all so cut off from each other.” I push my hair back behind my ear. “Can I tell you something?”

He reaches down, grabbing my hand with his. “You can tell me anything, anytime.”

The way he’s stroking the back of my hand with this thumb makes it hard for me to concentrate on the words I need to get out, but I manage to work through it. “I admired you. The way you were handling everything for yourself, your dad, and your younger brother. You were making things better for them any way you could. When I’d see you? You’d make my day better because I knew I wasn’t alone.”

He rocks back on his heels. Reaching forward, he cups my cheek with his hand. “I fell for you during all of that, Noelle. I’ve tried to fight it. I was doing really good until Halloween. If it hadn’t been for you wearing that sexy as hell costume, I

might have been able to fight it a little while longer, but ...” He stops, pulling his bottom lip between his teeth. “The short skirt, the tight shirt, the way your hair was curled around your shoulders? It was my undoing, and I didn’t want to leave here without taking a chance. The chance I’d wanted to take since the first moment I realized you’d grown up.”

“Yeah.” I tilt my head to the side. All my edges are fraying as I listen to him talk, and whatever had been so important when he walked through the front door isn’t nearly as important as hearing what he has to say to me right now. “When did you realize I’d grown up?”

“Junior year of high school.” His eyes shine bright, although the light is dim.

“Oh Lord,” I groan. “That was when I was the worst.” I’d gotten braces the summer before the school year started, and my mom had decided I needed a perm and it made my hair frizzy. I hadn’t yet started the medication that would take care of my acne. It was all bad, and for the life of me I don’t know how he could’ve seen I’d grown up.

“It wasn’t.” He shakes his head. “When I saw you walking down the hallway, you had such an air of confidence about you. It was the hottest thing I’d ever seen in my young life.”

“If it was anything, it was me faking it until I made it. I was so uncomfortable in how I looked, so weird about my reactions, and didn’t even know how I’d be perceived with my awful hair and mouth full of metal. I just wanted others to think I had it all together.” I shrug. “I guess I did better than I thought.”

“I never would’ve imagined you weren’t comfortable with yourself.” He leans in toward me. “Even now, you seem like the most confident person in the room, and like the boss babe moving through your daily life. That may not be how you think you are, but little girls see you at work, and they look up at you like you’re a princess. Only you’re not out of some fairytale. You’re wearing your name tag and graciously helping every person who comes into the hotel.” He turns us so that my back is against the wall. “You don’t see yourself



how others see you, but that's okay. I'm going to make you see yourself that way."

The sincerity of his words hits a place in my chest that I didn't know needed to be understood. Warmth engulfs me, and tears pop in my eyes.

"What's wrong?" he asks softly.

"Nothing," I sniff, shaking my head. "Nobody's ever said anything like that to me before. I feel so invisible most of the time, like no one sees all the work I do at the hotel. They don't worry about it the way I do. All they care about is getting paid. It's their job, but it's my life."

"I see it." He crowds my personal space. "I see everything about you. I always have—I just never admitted it before."

"Why?" I ask. The answer is important. This is one of those life-changing moments that's going to change how you get to your destination. It's even going to change how I feel about being pregnant with his child.

"Because I was scared. The last few years haven't been kind to any of us." He ducks his head. "Just when you think things are going to get better, you get kicked in the balls and then you're expected to get up like nothing ever happened. Can you blame me?"

I can't. Not when we've spent so much time trying to figure out how we could continue to live with so many restrictions. I promised myself when those restrictions were lifted, I'd actually do the living. That was one of the reasons why it was so easy to let myself fall into bed with him that night. I'd kept my life so regimented in the past. I hadn't allowed myself to live for the moment. Instead I'd focused on getting from one day to the next so I could accomplish my next goal. But in that period where we weren't allowed to do anything? I'd learned that goals were just that if there was nothing and no one to share it with. "No." I shake my head, allowing my arms to go around his waist and hold on tight. "I can't blame you, and now I can admit something."

"What's that, Elle?"

It takes me a minute to work up the courage to say what I want, but he's patient. He waits and allows me to come to him when I can. "I want what we had that night again. Ever since I found out I'm pregnant, I've thought about it. What the two of us could be if we gave it a shot. If we weren't a one-night stand who ended up with an unplanned pregnancy. Am I crazy? Am I making up things that aren't there to fit the narrative of what I want this to be?"

He steps even closer. His chest touches mine, and I tighten my fingers around the material of his jacket. He leans in so that our foreheads meet. He rocks it back and forth, as if he's trying to see inside my mind, or maybe trying to tell me what he wants me to know without having to speak the words. It takes a thousand lifetimes before he speaks. "No, you aren't crazy. I want that too. More than I've ever wanted anything. Can we do it again?"

I gasp as he kisses my forehead. "Yeah." I swallow roughly. "Yeah, we can."

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# CHAPTER SIX

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## Cal

It's as if I've been given another chance to do the one thing that made my life worth living. After I left her house that night, I wasn't sure I'd ever get a shot like this again. I step back from her, getting out of my jacket and letting it drop to the ground where I stand. Once that's off, I reach down and around, grabbing Noelle by the cheeks of her ass, and lifting her up so that her legs can go around my waist.

She makes a small noise of surprise but is right there with me as she loops her arms around my neck. Her lips open slightly—an invitation for me to take what I want. It's the kiss I'd hoped to take last time but didn't. We'd been so shocked at what was happening, I'm not sure we even realized how it was going to end when it started.

Tilting my head to the side, I fuse our lips together, savoring the connection. I'm fully aware that just because this is happening again doesn't mean it'll continue to happen. I need to cherish these moments as I have them.

She melts into me, letting me hold her weight. As her middle comes to rest against mine, I can feel the slight swell of her stomach. There's not yet a bump; it's more as if she's eaten too much dinner and is bloated. Hooking my arm around her, I hold on tight as I remove one arm and put the palm of my hand against her stomach. I pull away, struggling to catch my breath. "That's ours?"

She nods, lips wet and inviting, a slight smile curving against her cheeks. "It's ours. I'm sorry I didn't tell you immediately when I found out."

I shake my head, swallowing everything I was going to say. Instead, I let it all go for the moment. “We can talk about that later, and honestly, I can’t even begin to imagine what it was like to be in your shoes. As shocked as I am, I don’t know how I would’ve felt getting a positive pregnancy test by myself.”

Her eyes soften. “I appreciate that.”

I inhale deeply, my nostrils flaring with the levity of it all. After taking my hand off her belly, I slip it along the curve of her chin and back to her neck. Using a bit of pressure, I pull her toward me and take her lips again. This time, I’m walking toward the bedroom. I drop her onto the bed as the light from the street filters in between the curtains that move when the heat kicks on. She’s laid out in front of me much like she was on Halloween night.

The difference?

That night she’d been dressed like a siren. Legitimately. She’d been a mermaid with fake red hair. Her face had been highlighted with light blue and green on her cheekbones, leaving her looking like some sort of gilled nymph.

Tonight?

She looks ethereal, especially in the soft light of the moon. There’s a glow about her that hadn’t been there previously. Her hair around her is like a halo. My fingers itch to dig into it, but they have other ideas. Instead of digging in and hanging on, I run my hands down her sides, hooking my thumbs in the elastic waistband of her pajama pants. Then I go to work on my own clothes, pulling them off before having a seat against the headboard where I pull her thighs on either side of my hips. Together we fight for the edge of her T-shirt, yanking it over her head.

I dig my fingers into her hair, pulling her mouth to mine. I own it the way I did that night, kissing every inch of it, making sure not to leave any bit of it untouched. When she pulls away and catches her breath, I tilt her back against my palm, bringing her tits up to my hungry lips.

She groans, rotating her hips against my cock and digging her own fingers in my hair, yanking me closer. “They’re so sensitive,” she moans.

Her pussy is wet against my length. Holding the base, I slip it in, waiting a moment for her to adjust. Once she does, I begin to rock her back and forth on top of me. Sneaking my finger in between us, I rub against her clit. “Feel good?”

“Right there.” She tilts her head back. “I’ve been so sensitive to everything the past few weeks. It’s not going to take long.”

That’s nice to hear because it isn’t going to take me long either. Being inside of her is all I’ve thought about since Halloween. She rides me with complete abandonment, taking what she needs and everything she wants. It’s fucking sexy as she puts her hands on my chest to brace herself, tilts her head back, and goes for it.

Within minutes, she’s coming. I can feel her ripple against my cock and that’s all it takes for me too. As we both breathe heavily, we look at each other, bewildered smiles on our faces.

“Will it always be like this?” she asks, trying to catch her breath.

“Lord, I hope so.”

She laughs, laying her head against my chest. I wrap my arms around her and send up a little prayer that I never have to find out if it won’t.

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# CHAPTER SEVEN

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## Noelle

There's a heavy weight pressing against me. It's breathing against my ear, and I know before I open my eyes who it is.

He stayed last night.

The time before, he didn't.

I'm not sure how I feel about that.

Cal makes a noise in the back of his throat. It's deep and guttural, but at the same time, comforting. Relaxing back into his body, I exhale. For the first time in as long as I can remember, I'm not on the go. I'm not worried about where I need to be or what requires my attention. I'm in the moment.

I hope there's many more of these mornings coming, but I also know there has to be a conversation. And that conversation needs to happen before he leaves today.

"I can almost hear your brain going from over here." His voice is rough with sleep and sexy as hell.

Every single part of my body responds, but that's what gets us into trouble. I forget who I normally am when he's around and then we end up in bed. That can't happen this time. "I am thinking about a lot right now."

He pulls me closer and tighter. "Anything I can help you with?"

"Yeah." I swallow to wet my dry throat. "You and I need to have a conversation, and I'm nervous, but we have to."



He lets go and sits up so that his bed is against the headboard. “If we’re going to have the conversation I think we’re about to have, you’re gonna need to put some clothes on, Elle. If not, I won’t be able to think about anything other than how you felt last night when you were gripping me so tightly.”

Immediately, my body heats up, and I know he’s right. “Be right back.”

It’s cold when I get out from under the covers, but I have to use the bathroom, and I desperately need something to wet my throat. It’s drier than the fucking Sahara. Quickly, I head to the bathroom and do my business while rubbing my hands together to try and get them warm. Once I’m done, I wash them and then put on my robe and fold my arms across my chest. There are two doors to my bathroom. One goes straight to my bedroom—the other goes to the hallway where I can walk to the kitchen. I’ve got to have something to drink, and a snack, otherwise I’m going to puke. Glancing over at the door to the bedroom, I tilt my head slightly in apology before I slide out and hurry down the hallway.

When I get to the kitchen, I pull up with a start, screaming. Cal is standing there, his arms crossed against his bare chest. His eyebrow is raised, an annoyed look on his face as he observes me.

“I wasn’t running away, I promise,” I say. “I’m thirsty and hungry. If I don’t eat and drink first thing in the morning, I spend at least an hour in the bathroom throwing up. I didn’t want to do that this morning.”

His look softens. “What do you normally eat and drink?”

The question throws me off. “What?”

“What do you normally eat and drink? I’ll get it for you.”

This isn’t something I’m used to. The last few weeks since I found out about the baby, I’ve been doing everything on my own. It’s nice to know there’s going to be someone else around. Hopefully I’ll be able to count on him throughout my pregnancy and for the rest of the life of this child. “I normally

have toast with strawberry jam. Has to be strawberry jam.” I’m adamant. My mouth is already watering as I think about it. “And Sprite. I can’t do coffee any more in the morning, but a Sprite hits.”

He chuckles, a sexy smirk working its way across his face. “I’ve never been in your kitchen before, so give me a minute, but I’ll make sure you have what you need.”

I have a seat on one of the bar stools and watch as he works his way through my personal space. When it takes him a minute to find my plates, I point up to the cabinet. “Right there. I tend to like the one with the Christmas tree on it,” I admit.

He shakes his head. “Somehow, that doesn’t surprise me about you. What brand of strawberry jam?” he asks as he opens the fridge and bends down so that he’s looking inside it. “There’re like fifteen of them in here.”

“It took me a while to figure out which one I liked,” I defend myself. “It’s the one that says ‘my favorite’ on it.”

He turns back, an incredulous smirk on his face before he reaches in and grabs it along with a cold can of Sprite. The way his large hand engulfs the much smaller jar of jam gives me a glimpse of what he might look like holding a small baby.

“Why is this one so small?” He holds up the jar, decorated with a bow tied around the top, and a festive covering wrapped around it.

“Because I had to get someone to actually make me one I could tolerate. Lucky for me, Merry at the bakery loves me. I’ve kept her in business, getting the strawberry jam she sells, and now she’s started making me small batches of it. I don’t know if she figured out I was having cravings or what, but once a week, she drops by a jar at The Gingerbread House. I’m extremely grateful for her.”

He braces his hands against the counter, his eyes pulled together in a pained expression. “Did anyone else know except for me?”

I pull my bottom lip in between my teeth, trying to figure out how to explain to him. “No one knows for sure, besides my doctor. I didn’t tell a soul because I wanted to be the one to tell you.” I intentionally bring the arms of my robe down to cover my fingers. It’s my way of making myself smaller than I normally am, so that I can fade into the background and not be the center of attention. “But I didn’t know how. I wasn’t sure if you even wanted a repeat of what happened that night, much less to be tied to me for eighteen years, or the rest of this kid’s life.” This time I reach down and cup the small bump I’m getting.

“Truth?” he questions, his eyes impossibly dark.

The toast in the background pops up, but neither one of us makes a move for it. “Always. I’ve never been the type of person who wants to be lied to. I’d rather the truth hurt than it not be real.”

He turns from me and grabs the toast, and all I want to say is forget the fuckin’ food, but my stomach growls, and I know it should be a priority. He slips it onto my Christmas plate, and then comes back to the island. With care, he butters the brown bread, causing it to crunch under the movements of his knife, then he dips the same knife into the jar of jam. A noise of shock escapes my mouth.

“This bother you?” he teases.

“You know it does. I don’t like to mix my foods in jars, and I guarantee there’s a sliver of butter amongst that strawberry goodness now.”

“Maybe just a little.” He slaps the redness onto the bread before bringing his thumb up to lick a dab of it that’s been misplaced onto his skin. “Damn, that’s good.” He whistles.

“I know.” But really I’m just jealous his tongue got to taste his skin.

He slides the plate across the island to me, motioning for me to sit down. He pops the tab on my Sprite and brings it over next to the plate. Now he’s towering over me, and I don’t know if my mouth is watering for the food or him. He reaches

down, tilting my chin up with the knuckle of his pointer finger. “Truth is, I’ve been trying to figure out a way to be with you since we were in high school, Elle. If a night of passion was the way to do it, I wish we would’ve given it a shot years ago.”

My throat is even more dry than it was before. “Are you serious?”

“Yeah. I always thought you were cute back then, and while I’ve been working at the Gingerbread House, I’ve gotten to know the new you. The one who I saw growing into herself. You’re such an amazing boss. You love your job and the people you work with.” He lifts a shoulder as if what he’s just said isn’t enough to blow my mind.

“Why didn’t you say something?” I can’t help it; I have to reach forward and grab the toast. I take a bite, groaning as the warm butter melts on my tongue. If there’s one thing I’ve learned during pregnancy, it’s that everything tastes better.

He ducks his head, putting his hands back on the counter top. His shoulders bunch together as he rests his weight on his palms. “I wasn’t secure enough to even attempt it. You were intimidating.”

“Me?” He points to his chest. “It was you.”

I finish chewing before swallowing and then washing it down with a drink from my can. “Okay, let’s admit neither one of us is the most confident. What are we going to do about it now?”

The silence is deafening as I wait for his answer, but one thing I do know? I’m not going to be in this alone.

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# CHAPTER EIGHT

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## Cal

I've always been the type of guy to sit back and bide my time. To wait until the perfect moment to strike. Like a snake who has to be patient to catch his prey. That's why Halloween night happened. I sensed an acceptance in Noelle that had never been there before, a vulnerability she was willing to show. One I picked up on because I felt it too.

It's happening again. She's asking me to be the man she needs, and that in itself is a vulnerability I've never witnessed from her previously.

I pull out the empty seat beside her and get comfortable. "We're going to have a baby together, along with all that entails."

She exhales deeply. "Why does that sound so scary?"

Placing my elbows on the counter, I hook my fingers together, propping my chin on the back of my hand. "Because I don't think either of us planned to be in this position. It's not bad—just different."

"You're right." She takes another drink. "I didn't plan to be here, but I'm excited for it."

The way her eyes light up warms a place inside my chest. "I'm excited for it too. However, us being excited about it doesn't mean it won't be hard. We still have to figure out how we're going to deal with this." I don't know how to throw it out there, but I figure I can't go wrong with trying to be completely honest. "Are we going to make a go of it, or are we

going to try and co-parent? There's a lot to figure out, Noelle. I mean, where should we even start?"

"I don't know." She shakes her head.

"Ask me a question," I push her. "One question you want answered. That you have to have answered. Ask me, and that'll start the conversation."

She seems to roll the idea around in her head for a moment. It's the same way I see her approach things at work—she tries to work out the correct answer to the question being asked. I don't want her to overthink things, but I also don't want her to feel pressured. This is about patience, and I have to be the one who's willing to put my feelings aside and wait on her. I know what I want, but it might not be as easy for her.

"If I wanted to make a go of it, could we?" she whispers, her eyes not moving up to meet mine.

I want to make sure I understand her correctly. I don't want to assume anything or put us in a situation where we aren't completely clear. "You want to see if the two of us have chemistry outside of the bedroom?"

"Yes." She finally looks up at me. "That's exactly what I want."

Perfect, because that's what I want too, and I feel as if I've just been given an amazing gift. "I'm for that."

A smirk spreads slowly across her face. "Are you? I've tried to get your attention for years, and you never paid any to me."

Crossing my arms across my chest, I give it back to her. "I could say the same for you. Maybe the two of us were so close to our own feelings we couldn't see past them. If we're both so busy trying to hide our feelings, we're going to miss each other's cues."

She snorts. "I'd be willing to say we've never seen the cues to miss them. Maybe we're both so dedicated to our own lives we can't see what's around us. I know if I'm at work, my

vision is firmly placed on what's going on in that place, not on my personal life. It's truly a detriment."

Running my hands through my hair, I nod toward her. "It's true, but I'm the same way. There's typically a whole list of things to do once I clock in, and we've been shorthanded since the shutdown. I'm working as much as possible."

"I'm sorry," she apologizes. "I'm trying to get more people hired."

"I know. That wasn't a criticism of you—just me telling you I understand. I'm in the same position as you."

"Exactly." She pushes a piece of hair behind her ear. "We're starting to pick up to pre-shutdown levels, but I'm unsure if we'll be able to handle it. I just don't have enough staff, and I don't know how to get them here. I've been doing things I've never done before to help keep it running, and now we're going to have a baby."

I reach for her hands and hold them tightly at my waist. "I'm here to help you. We're going to be a team for a long time, and it can start now. I've wanted to be more than your maintenance supervisor for years. I've tried to make things easier on you in small ways, but I'm here to tell you now: I want to help you."

"I can't ask you for that." Her eyes are cloudy with conflict.

"You're not asking me—I want to do it." I reach out, cupping her cheek in the palm of my hand. "We're going to have to make life easier on each other because we're going to be planning a life with our child. I don't want you to feel as if you have to give something up because you're the owner of a business."

She swallows roughly before opening her mouth to speak. Quickly, I place my finger over her lips. "No, let me finish before you start arguing."

A soft gush of air releases from her lips. She closes her eyes and nods.



“I respect the fuck outta you, and I am so proud of the businesswoman you are. You’ve overcome so many obstacles, and all I want is to help you with that. I don’t wanna be your knight in shining armor or your savior. You don’t need that, Noelle. You save yourself more than anyone else I know. You don’t need me, but I need you,” I hoarsely admit, laying myself bare for this woman. “I need your perspective and the way you believe in the good in everyone. The way you go for what you want and don’t settle for less. You’re going to teach our child that, and they’re going to be better for it.”

“You think too much of me.” She licks her lips.

“You don’t think enough of yourself.”

“And neither do you,” she throws back at me. “Together, we’re going to get each other out of that. We’re going to raise this kid the way we obviously needed to be raised.”

She hits a nerve although she doesn’t realize it. My stomach rolls slightly, but I manage to push that anxiety down deep, and answer her. “You’re right, we will. Now, how are we going to start this? Do I need to ask you out on a date, or ...?”

A smile crosses her face. “I mean, it’d be the nice thing to do.”

Widening my stance so that I’m eye level with her, I grab hold of her hand and bring it to my chest. “Noelle? Will you do me the honor of going out on a date with me?”

Her eyes go up to the ceiling, and there’s a smirk on her face. “Oh, I guess so.”

And that’s, as they say, apparently how our story is going to begin.

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## CHAPTER NINE

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## Noelle

I glance nervously at the clock at the bottom of the computer screen. Fifteen more minutes and I'll be having my first official date with Cal. He hasn't told me where we're going, just to dress warmly. Which honestly, for Blizzard Bluff, could mean anywhere.

Eyeing the front door, I notice my relief coming in. Becca is a high school girl who I hired over the summer, and she's become one of the most dependable employees I have.

"Hey." She waves. "Let me go change and then I'll be up there. I know you have plans." She gives me a sly grin.

Somehow, everyone knows I have a date. "Take your time."

All day I've had to deal with the winks as my employees have walked by me. There have been a few whistles in my direction, and I've taken it all with as much dignity as I can. However, I have to draw the line at my teenage, high school, desk clerk acting like she's my mother as she prepares to take over my spot and see me off.

"Okay, I'm ready." She comes in behind me, tucking her hair into a braid. "I got this. Go have fun with charming Cal."

This is the first time I've heard someone refer to him that way. "Charming Cal?"

"Yeah, that's what Martha calls him."

Martha heads up the board games and gingerbread house competition for the inn. She's eighty-two, and I've never heard

her call him this—ever. “Oh she does, does she?”

“Yeah.” Becca pops a bubble of gum. “She says he reminds her of her husband. They were married for sixty years, ya know?”

Everybody knows. We celebrated it as a town when they passed that anniversary. Sadly, he passed away six months later. “I know—we all know. I’m just wondering what Cal is doing to charm her.”

“You’ll have to ask her, but she talks very highly of him. Apparently she’s seen him without his shirt on before. According to her, it’s a sight to see.”

“That it is,” I whisper.

Her eyes widen, and her mouth opens in surprise. “What?”

I ignore her question and start gathering my stuff. “I’ll have my phone on me in case anyone needs anything.”

“Trust me, none of us want to interrupt your date. We’ll take care of whatever we have to so as not to bother you. Go.” She pushes me toward the exit. “See you tomorrow.”

I get the distinct feeling she’s going to want to know how the date goes, and if it crashes and burns I’m going to disappoint a whole business of employees.

“See ya.” I wave at her before heading back to my office.

I knew I wouldn’t have time to go home and change, so I brought everything I would need this morning and stuck it in my office. Hurrying that way, I do my best not to make eye contact with anyone I pass. It’s inevitable they’ll need to discuss something, and right now I want to be Noelle, the chick getting ready for her date with a hottie, instead of a businesswoman and the owner of this establishment.

When I get inside, I close the door, then lean against it, letting a slow breath out. My stomach is jumpy and so are my nerves. I haven’t felt like this since I was getting ready for my first date way back in high school. Seeing the clock, I realize I have less time than I’d believed. After hurrying over to the closet, I open it up and look at the outfit I picked out. A pair of

dark-wash jeans, a light sweater, and a pair of snow boots, because we got a few more inches of snow last night.

Grabbing the clothes, I head to the bathroom inside my office and quickly change. These jeans are a pair that have always been slightly big on me, but today they zip up with no problem. I actually have an outline of an ass.

I freshen up my makeup and hair the fastest I ever have, and right as I'm finishing up, there's a knock at my door. With shaking hands, I spritz perfume on my wrist and head toward the door. When I open it, what comes out of my mouth is unexpected. "Damn, you look good."

He chuckles, putting his hands in his pockets and rocking back on his feet. "You do too. Are you ready? You got a jacket, right?"

"I do. Don't go anywhere without one once it hits late September. Wanna tell me where we're going?"

He shakes his head. "Not yet. Grab your jacket, and we'll get outta here."

It's one of the best things he's ever said to me, and I can't wait to experience whatever this is through his eyes. Most of the time I don't even pay attention because I see it every day. I become blind to it, and I hope looking at it the way he does will give me a different perspective. Sometimes that's needed, and after the hard years we've had, it'll be welcome.

Walking over to my chair, I get the jacket and go to shrug it on. When he makes a noise in the back of his throat, I glance up. "What?"

"Bring it over here. I'll help you put it on."

I hold it out to him, sighing when he helps me get my jacket situated. I turn to face him and he bends to zip it up. "Thank you," I say.

"My pleasure. Now we can go. You wanna?"

I nod, holding out my hand to him. Little does he know, I'd follow him to the ends of the earth and back.

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# CHAPTER TEN

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## Cal

She changed, fixed her hair, and did something different to her face.

All for our date.

It puts an anxious tickle in my stomach. You know the type—the kind you get when you’re excited about what’s going to happen. That little flutter at knowing someone did something and it feels as if it’s specifically for you.

“You look amazing,” I say.

Her cheeks pinken. “You’re just saying that because I’m your baby mama.”

At first I don’t know if she’s being serious or not, but then she winks and the tension leaves my body. “Are you ready?”

“I am.” She gives me a once-over. “You’re looking pretty good yourself. Are we gonna plan on not getting naked tonight? It’ll be one of the first times since Halloween.”

While I wish I could spend the entire time I have her for in bed with her, I know we have to start having conversations and getting to know each other on a totally different level than what we’ve done so far. “I think tonight we should keep the touching over clothes, and our conversation about our future tonight.”

“You’re right.” She sighs. “But can you at least tell me where we’re going?”

“You’ll see.”

There's another sigh, but this one is good-natured. Putting an arm around her waist, I direct her out of her office and toward the lobby. Once we pass the registration desk, Becca gives us a sly wink and wave. "Have fun, you two."

"What was that all about?" I mumble as we head out to the parking lot.

"Becca is a teenager and believes in all the butterflies of young love. She saw me waiting for her to come in and knew we were going out on a date, *Charming Cal*."

I snort loudly. "Oh my God, she told you about that?"

"I didn't know it was such a big secret. I mean, am I allowed to call you that?"

We arrive at my truck, and she turns around to look at me. In the dim glow of the light, she looks younger than her years. The blue of her eyes is darker than normal, and her lips are a deeper pink. Leaning down, I steal a quick kiss. "You can call me whatever you want, but I'm unsure what my fan club will think about it."

Her warm breath brushes against my face. "You have a fan club now? Who do I need to talk to so I can be a member?"

I tilt my head to the side, giving her a smile. "You'll probably need to talk to the president."

"Which is who? I feel like it should be me."

I wish it were. "Martha. She's a card-carrying member and the founder. She might be willing to give you a VP spot."

"Should I tell her I'm carrying the next *Charming Cal*?" she questions as she leans against the side of the truck.

"Wait? Do you already know what you're having?" My mouth is as dry as the fucking desert.

"No." She shakes her head, giggling. "You're just easy to mess with. I'm only doing this because you won't tell me where it is we're going. I have to get my kicks where I can."

Widening my stance, I bend so that we're a breath apart from one another. "You can always ask me to help you get



your kicks. I'll never say no."

I can't help it—I have to take the kiss I've wanted since I saw her a few minutes ago. Slowly, I press my lips to hers, coaxing them apart. She sighs, allowing her body to fall against mine. I take her weight easily and deepen the connection, knowing that if I let it, this could get out of control easily. When she wraps her arms around my neck, I pull back, clearing my throat. "Come on. Let me help you up into the passenger seat."

The pout on her face is adorable. I open the door and hold her arm, helping her up. When she settles into the seat, I reach in, pulling the seat belt across her.

"Do you do this for every woman you take out on a date?" she asks.

"Only ones who are carrying my kid." I grin.

She reaches out, grabbing hold of my forearm. "Promise me you aren't doing this just because of that. That's the last thing I want—for you to feel like you have to be here. You'll eventually resent me and the baby. I want you to be here because you want to be."

The fear is palpable for her.

Reaching in, I cup her jawline with the palm of my hand. "I promise. I'm here because I want to be. Because I've wanted a chance with you for a very long time. This isn't the type of thing I feel like I need to do. I hate to break it to ya, Noelle, but I'm not that nice of a guy. You're never going to make me feel bad enough to do something because you think I should. I'm not that type of guy—never have been. If I'm here, it's because I wanna be."

Her eyes are impossibly dark. Her nod is barely perceptible. I move my thumb down to her bottom lip and groan when she opens her mouth, sticking her tongue out to give it a tentative lick. "Thank you for that," she says.

"I won't lie to you, Elle. I may not ever be the type of man who deserves you, but I'll never lie. I don't take the simple way out of anything, and that's just who I am."

Dropping down off the running board, I shut the door and make my way around the back of the truck. Everything I said was true, but I hope I haven't killed my shot with her. I've been honest before and managed to fuck myself over. It's not what I want to do with her. Heading toward the driver's side, I take a deep breath and manage to talk myself down from the ledge.

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"You've brought me here?" She giggles as we pull up outside a hot cocoa stand. "Jackson is my competition." She laughs.

It's not true. Jackson makes much better hot cocoa than The Gingerbread Inn could ever hope to make. I don't know what the man puts in it, but it should be illegal in all fifty states. "Just because he's competition doesn't mean you can't enjoy what he creates," I argue. "Besides I know you sometimes roll over here on your lunch break and get a pick-me-up. Don't think I don't know."

Noelle gasps. "How do you know? I keep that to myself and put it in another cup before I go back into the lobby."

"I'm very observant."

We get out of the truck and stroll up to the line outside the small building. It could possibly be described as a shack; there's no room inside for more than two people working together. We know everyone in line, and we make small talk with all of them. Everyone seems to be watching us with interest, and a few of my friends give me a raised eyebrow, but they can think what they want.

"Ooh it's our turn," she squeals.

"Noelle, do you want your regular?" Jackson asks the question in a low tone.

"Please," she whispers back just as low.

I'm amused as I watch the two of them and their exchange. So often I see her in the type of situation where she's got to be professional, and she has to constantly be on. It's unusual for

me to see her let her hair down. That was why she'd been so beautiful on Halloween. She wasn't the boss, and she wasn't in control—she'd been able to be the young woman she is. I'd gotten to see her in a way I hadn't in a long time. "You're cute," I blurt out. "When you think people aren't watching and you're not in charge of a situation. You're adorable."

She blushes. "You're not so bad yourself."

"I'm assuming you want your regular too, Cal?" Jackson looks between us, his eyebrows bowed in interest.

"Yes please. I've been looking forward to it all day."

Once we have our drinks, we head back to the truck, taking sips of the steaming liquid.

"Where are we going now?" she asks as I start the engine and crank the heat up.

"My house. I made dinner for you."

The surprise is evident in the gasp she releases and the way she jerks her head around. "You made dinner for me?"

"Yeah." I shrug, suddenly embarrassed. "I like to cook and I don't get to do it very often. It sucks, cooking for one. I'm excited to be able to do it for you tonight."

She reaches over, putting her hand on mine. "Nobody has ever done anything like this before for me. Thank you, Cal."

"Someone should've been doing it, but I'm glad they haven't. It's let me shoot my shot. Hopefully I'll be doing it for you for many years to come."

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# CHAPTER ELEVEN

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## Noelle

I'm quiet as we drive to Cal's house because I'm absolutely flabbergasted at what he's said he's done for me. I'm so used to going home at the end of the day by myself and picking up dinner on the way or putting something in the microwave. I don't even remember the last time someone made me dinner. It might've been a couple of years ago. I tend to work the holidays at the inn so that my employees can have time off with their families, and I celebrate at a later date.

Unfortunately that sometimes turns into meeting family at restaurants, and that means I still don't get that home-cooked meal. To know he went to this trouble? It's got me all kinds of emotional.

He pulls into the house he grew up in. I know at some point he bought it, but I haven't been here since we were teenagers. However, looking at the outside, I can see the changes he's made already. Back when I used to walk by this place to get to my bus stop, the siding had been a tan color; now it's a dark blue. It completely suits his personality. It's almost him in house form. The masculine color reminds me so much of the aura he gives off.

He opens the garage and pulls the truck in. When the door shuts behind us, I'm acutely aware of the silence and how close we're sitting to one another. "C'mon in," he invites me, getting out of the car. "But wait for me to come around and open your door."

No other man I've dated or been interested in has been this nice and chivalrous. If this doesn't work out, I'm screwed for whichever man I move on to next—if I even do. I don't want to think about that. When I'd thought of getting pregnant in the past, I'd always assumed I'd be married and that I'd do things the traditional way. I'd never expected to prepare to be a single mother or the boss of my baby's father. I'm in one of the most unusual situations I've ever been in.

He escorts me into his home and I'm not surprised at all at what I find. It's masculine and slightly bare, but it looks like him. Dark colors dominate, and I just know that as soon as I walk into his living room I'm going to see a leather couch. It's homey and smells amazing as we enter the kitchen. It's cleaner than my house, and I wonder if he has a housekeeper.

"No." He laughs, shaking his head. "I don't. I had to learn to take care of everything when I moved from this house. Now that I'm back, I'm doing things the right way."

"Oh my God, I can't believe I said that out loud. There are a lot of things I do now that I'm pregnant that I never did before. One of them is blurting out things without thought."

"It's no problem. The first year I lived in my first apartment was bad. I couldn't find anything, and I had mold growing on a bowl in my sink. After that happened, I was like, I have to figure this out. I have to learn to be a damn adult and make sure that I take care of things as they need to be taken care of. So that's what I've tried to do ever since."

I'm impressed with his maturity and the way he appears to approach situations. Not everybody has coping skills and reasonable deduction. I've dealt with people who don't have them as a boss and wondered where in the world we went wrong as a society. But Cal? He's giving me hope for the future. "I wish I had that dedication. Especially lately. I barely get home and eat dinner before I fall into bed."

"Is it because of the pregnancy?" he asks as he takes my coat.

"I'm sure it's that, and I'm trying to keep everything going. As I kind of told you before, it's been a struggle to get

people to come to work, and I've done more the past few months than I've ever done. The week before I got pregnant? I worked seventy-five hours," I admit.

"Jesus Christ, Noelle. You've got to get some help." He walks closer, puts his hands on my hips, and pulls me closer. "You can't keep doing this to yourself. Especially after you have the baby. Have you asked other employees to help?"

I hate talking about this. Hate admitting I'm not doing as well with my business as everyone assumes I am. It's almost as if I'm giving in to my fear of not being good enough and not being able to be the type of businesswoman I want to be. "Yeah, but they all have families of their own. I had to lay them off during the shutdown, and they struggled. Now, even though I've re-hired them, I don't feel right about asking them to do more work. Ya know? It's as if we've gone from famine to feast."

"That's not your fault or anyone else's, Elle. That's the way of the world. I think many of the employees would be willing to help you. If you can afford to pay them the overtime, I think you should offer it. I'm not telling you how to run your business because this is yours. You've built it from the ground up. What I am saying is I think they would chip in, but you have to ask."

We step farther into the kitchen and my stomach growls loudly. I don't know what I'm smelling, but I'm absolutely going to devour it. "That seems to be something I need to work on. I don't want to inconvenience anyone to the detriment of myself."

He smirks. "Now that you've admitted the problem, we can go about working on it."

I roll my eyes, giving him his smirk back. "Tell me what the hell is it you've cooked because I'm starving and it smells amazing."

"It's a cheesy chicken and rice casserole with green beans on the side. It's nothing extravagant, but it's super good."

“My mouth is watering, and I definitely appreciate that you made it for me.”

“Then let’s eat.”

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“You know we don’t have to have all the answers right now.” I take the last bite of the food on my plate. “We just need to figure out what’s most important for the next few months.”

He nods, taking a pull from his bottle of beer. “Agreed, but I would like to know where you’re sitting on certain issues. Like, am I allowed to come to the doctor’s appointments? Will you call me if you have issues? Can I be there when you give birth? Those are the big questions I have, that I need to know the answers to. Just for my own piece of mind.” He swallows roughly. “I don’t think you’d ever try to keep me from my child or anything of that nature, but I’m acutely aware we didn’t plan this.”

I can respect and see how he needs those answers, and I definitely want to put his mind at ease. “You’re right, we didn’t plan this, and that makes things difficult. Especially because we weren’t in a prior relationship.” I stop to gather my thoughts and make sure I don’t say something that could be misconstrued. “But I want you to know with everything I am, Cal, I promise I’m not going to keep you from our child. You’re allowed to come to the doctor’s appointments, you’re allowed to be there when I give birth, and you’ll most definitely be one of the first call I make if I need help in any way.”

He reaches across the table, clasping my hand in his. “Thank you.”

“No need to thank me. I trust you, and if I want you to trust me, I have to be willing to give you the same as I expect.”

He leans in, placing a kiss full on my mouth. “We got this.”



I inhale deeply. “That we definitely do.”

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## CHAPTER TWELVE

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## Cal

“It’s fucking freezing out there.” I stomp my feet in my snow boots as I enter the lobby. “Does anyone know what the temperature is?”

Noelle is standing at the reception desk, a bemused smile on her face. “About five below zero.”

“Sorry, I probably shouldn’t have let the F-word slip before I saw if anyone was in here or not.” My face warms, and I have the decency to be slightly embarrassed.

“It’s okay. I tend to like the fact that you’re a bad boy.”

After walking over to the desk, I lean against it, giving her my best smile. “Oh yeah? Is that what got you?”

She rests her elbows and puts her face in her palms. “Maybe. I mean, probably. How’s it been going out there today?”

“Anything that could freeze up has done so. Do you happen to know what the temperature is supposed to be overnight? We may need to make some adjustments, depending.”

Levering herself up, she turns back to the computer. “Looks like it could get down to twenty below, and they’re calling for six inches of new snow.”

I tilt my head back, groaning. “I might as well stay here. There’s no telling what might happen, and with there being a possibility of six new inches, it might be difficult to get in

tomorrow morning. The road department is decidedly not interested in doing these streets when they don't want to."

"That's a good idea," she mumbles. "Maybe I should stay here too. Becca is supposed to report for early duty tomorrow, and I don't know what I would do if something happened to her when she was trying to get here."

"Umm yeah, remember what we talked about the other night? You don't have to constantly be here. Nobody expects you to even if this is your business. I didn't say that so you'd stay too." I give her a look of disbelief.

"No, I know, but what if I want to stay with you?" she questions, her eyes looking into mine.

Now this is a turn of events I wasn't expecting at all. She hasn't mentioned staying with me since the night at her house. "I'd like that a lot, but I don't want you to do it because you feel like you have to. Me mentioning staying is more for safety and the fact I don't want pipes to burst tonight than to see you. I hope you know I wasn't trying to get you to do something you might not be interested in doing."

She rolls her eyes, pulling her bottom lip in between her teeth. "The honeymoon suite is open tonight, and the tub in that thing is amazing. I'm looking forward to it."

Should I assume we'll be staying in the same suite? I don't know how to approach this. "Will I be staying in the honeymoon suite or will you be putting me somewhere else?" I'd like to give myself a high-five for the way I just asked this question.

With a look around, possibly to see who could be watching or listening, she motions for me to get closer. When I do, her words are barely above a whisper. "I'm asking you to stay with me, but only if you want to. I don't want you to do anything you're not comfortable with."

"Then plan on there being two in that suite." I pop up on my feet and steal a kiss. "Gotta get back out there, but I'll see you later."

“I’ll text you the info to get in. I assume you have the app downloaded on your phone.”

“I do. See ya later, Elle. Don’t work too hard, and take a break when you need to.”

She glances around at the empty lobby. The lack of people is not unusual at all on a Tuesday, which tends to be the slowest day for the inn. “Me and all my friends are just gonna have a party.”

“Don’t party too hard. You’re with child,” I remind her, winking.

She giggles, and the sound is one of the best I’ve heard all day.

As soon as I get outside, I’m cornered by one of the other techs. “We need to go wrap the pipes in long-term cabin six. The alarm is going off.”

Two years ago, with a federal grant, we were able to get alarms to help us assess when temps were in danger of making pipes burst. It’s saved us a lot of money, but it’s also been eye-opening. One thing we found out is some of the long-term cabins that were added to the property before Noelle bought it weren’t properly insulated. We’re dealing with that now every time we have a deep freeze.

“Is that the only one?” I ask.

“So far, but I have a feeling eight and nine will go off too. They don’t have anyone staying in them, so there’s not the potential for supplemental heat. Want me to grab the supplies and meet you over there?”

“Yeah,” I sigh. “Let’s settle in for what’s probably gonna be a long afternoon and evening.”

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When I get a text a few hours later telling me that Noelle has made her way up to the honeymoon suite, I am beyond ready.

C: Be right there. I have one more pipe left to wrap on the long-term cabins. Is there anything you need when I'm on my way up?

N: No, I got the kitchen to make us some food, and I grabbed some extra clothes from the gift shop. We should be good for the night. Just waiting on you. Don't be too long.

If it were up to me, I'd be making my way over there right now, but I'm committed to my job. Since the relationship between me and Noelle has gotten more personal, I'm willing to do more than I ever have previously. My goal is to make things as easy on her as possible.

"Let's get this done," I tell Jake, my assistant for the afternoon. "I'm tired, hungry, and cold. I'm sure you are too."

"Yeah, Dad's waiting in the parking lot to take me home."

He's another one of our new hires from the high school. The best idea we've ever had is to recruit from there. They don't mind working, even if they have shorter shifts more frequently. It's meant we're able to fill in the gaps so we can all continue to get things done, and it's been a godsend when things like this have happened. "Then let's get this done so he doesn't have to wait for you much longer."

Within fifteen minutes, we're done, and I'm heading up to the honeymoon suite. As I wait on the elevator, I wonder if this is what it would be like if she and I lived together. Would I be excited to see her at the end of every day like this? Would the butterflies in my stomach ever stop? Would I get them when I notice her from across the room and our eyes catch as she's standing at the registration desk? This is all the shit I think about. Call me *in my feelings*, but I guess that's where I am right now.

I put my phone up to the RFDI reader and wait for it to allow me access. "Hey," I call out as I enter. I don't want to scare her if she's engrossed in something. "You here?"

"Yup, getting ready to take a bath." She pokes her head out from the bathroom door. "Would you like to join me?"

"More than you know. Do I get to eat afterward?"

“Yeah.” She grins. “You’ll probably need to recover some of your energy.”

“So it’s like that, huh?” I start taking my clothes off as I walk toward her.

“Yeah, I’ve thought about this all day,” she admits. “Ever since I saw you walk into the lobby, looking all hot.”

Now I’m interested in how I looked to her. “Looked all hot? What did you see?”

She’s got a towel covering her body and when she glances over at me, she drops it. “I saw everything I’ve always wanted. A man who’s strong enough to take control of his life and fix anything that’s broken. You take charge of any room you walk into. There’s something about the way you own it. It made me hot, and I wanted nothing more than to spend the afternoon cuddled up with you, but work came first.”

“Nah, babe. That’s gonna be you tonight.” I pull my T-shirt over my head, tossing it over to the side.

“I sure do hope so,” she sasses back at me.

I follow her into the bathroom, and it’s as if I’ve walked into some steamy fairy world. The way the steam rises up from the bathtub causes it to encompass us in what feels like a dream.

“Hope it’s not too hot for you. I’m not supposed to take hot baths, so I’m going to wait a bit before I get in, but I like the way the steam rolls up.”

I’m taking my pants off, getting frustrated as they get caught on my boots. “Fuckin’ hell.”

She giggles as I fall back onto my ass with my pants around my ankles.

“Sure, go ahead and laugh it up, Elle.”

“If you could’ve seen the look on your face, you would’ve laughed too. It wasn’t just the actual fall. It was the way you windmilled while you were trying to catch your balance.”

“What would you have done if I’d hit my head and then you’d had to take me to the ER or something?”

“I would’ve told them you were so eager to get naked with me in the bathtub that you managed to hurt yourself.” She hides her smile behind her hand.

I give her a wink. “I’m sure everyone would understand if they saw the way you’re glowing right now. You look almost as if you’re under some sort of spotlight and you’re on a red carpet. I can’t believe I never noticed it before. If I would’ve just been paying attention, I probably would’ve known you were pregnant.”

She shakes her head. “I didn’t want anyone to know, and I can guarantee you I would’ve protected it with my life.”

Now that we’re both naked, I allow myself a few moments to look at her, to really take her in. Her breasts are bigger and heavier than they were back in October. Her stomach is fuller, and since she’s already so small a little bump is visible. I’d like to roar loudly, telling anyone who’ll listen that I helped do that. Probably wouldn’t be looked upon favorably, but I am who I am. “What do you want? What do you need?”

With her head tilted to the side, it appears that she’s thinking about the question selfishly, which she never is. “Truthfully?” she asks.

“Be selfish—tell me exactly what you want, and I’ll make it happen for you. I want nothing more than to help you achieve the night of your life.”

Her eyes shine brightly as she brings her bottom lip between her teeth. “Nobody ever tells me that. I find I’m constantly having to temper my expectations with what I’m actually going to receive. I don’t even know what to say to it.”

“The truth.” I reach forward, cupping her jaw in my palm and putting my thumb on her lip. I move the pad of my finger along the smoothness of her mouth. “I want the fucking truth. Not what you think you I wanna hear, not what you think should be said. I want what you want.”



“Your hands on my tits as you sit behind me in the tub.” She swallows roughly.

“I can make that happen for you.” I hold her hand above us as I help her into the water. She’s standing in front of me, motioning for me to have a seat. When I do, I open my legs wide enough for her to sit between them. “Be careful,” I warn her.

As we get situated, her back rests against my chest and I feel like the baddest motherfucker around, knowing that she trusts me enough to ask not only for what she needs, but also what she wants. Every day she comes into work and takes control of countless situations, holding herself up to a high standard and never showing weakness. The fact that she allows me to see it and trusts me enough to hand her needs over to me is humbling in the best of ways.

Bringing my palms up, I rest them on her breasts for a moment, relishing in the feeling of her relaxing against me. There’s a little bit of tension left, but I tilt my lips into her neck. “Let it go, Elle.”

With a sigh, she melts into me, laying her head against my chest. I look down at her closed eyes and take control of her pleasure, because that’s what she’s asked me to do. She pushes her body out, pressing her hard nipples into my palms. They tighten further as I start kneading, pulling the flesh with my fingers. “Feel good?” I mumble as her head lazily lulls against me.

“So good. Please don’t stop,” she begs.

“I won’t stop until you ask me to.”

With my free hand, I move it down her stomach, disappearing between her legs. Aware of how water is notorious for robbing women of their lubrication, I rub softly. Her body starts moving against mine, splashing the water as she chases the orgasm she wants. Her ass grinds against my hard cock and I’m almost ready to explode when she grunts wildly and flies apart in my arms.

“Holy ...” she breathes heavily. “Didn’t expect that to happen so quickly.”

“Must’ve needed it.” I bury my lips in her neck, kissing against the rapid beating of her pulse.

“I did.” She stretches against me. “Now it’s your turn.”

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# CHAPTER THIRTEEN

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## Noelle

I've never been the type of woman who knows her sexuality well. I've tried with boyfriends, but I've never felt as if I turn them on. With Cal, I don't have that problem. He's hard, standing at attention against his stomach, and his dark eyes are heated, as if he's begging for me to put him out of his misery.

Reaching down, I fist his cock and jack it up and down.

"That's it. Don't stop." He inhales deeply, breathing out on a choked groan. "Seeing you come is one of the hottest things, and never fails to make me hard."

Getting on all fours, I lean down, taking him down my throat. I want to make him come, and I want to do it now. Not because I want our time together to be over, but because I want to prove to myself how hot he gets for me. Opening my mouth a little wider, I slide him up and down.

"Can I put my hand on your head?" he asks.

I nod, making a noise in my throat of acceptance.

"Fuck yes," he groans, pressing my head up and down against his length. "Don't stop; it's not going to take long. I'm sorry."

I let go of him with a loud *'pop'*. "Don't apologize. I want your pleasure as much as you want mine."

At this point, he seems to let go. He pumps against my mouth without measure and I take him down as far as I can, slightly gagging. That seems to spur him on, and when I feel

the warmth spurt against my tongue, I swallow, proud as fuck that I've left him a panting mess—the same way he's done for me more than once.

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I don't want to get up from this bed. Not when I'm wrapped tightly in Cal's arms, knowing we'll have to start this day and actually work through it. I wish more than anything that I could stay here with him all day.

“You're thinking so hard over there.” His sleep-roughened voice interrupts my thoughts. “You always are when you first wake up. It's like that mind of yours never stops when you're awake. You're gonna have to learn to turn it off, Elle. It's not good for you to be in a constant state of planning. You've got to learn how to relax, especially with this baby coming. If you don't, you're gonna burn out quickly. More so than you have in the past.”

I take his words into consideration. “I know, and it's something I've been trying to work on. It's hard though. A lot of people depend on me.”

“The most important person, besides the one in your stomach, is you, Elle. If you aren't good and happy, nobody else is going to be good and happy around you. It's okay to be selfish. You don't constantly have to think about everyone else.”

I'm listening to what he's saying for the first time, really listening to it and letting it sink in. There have been days when I've wanted to give up. When I've known it would be easier to throw in the towel rather than keep going. “You're right. I've always been able to bounce back when I've taken care of myself.”

He puts his hand on my stomach. “And now you have the best reason ever to take damn good care of yourself.”

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# CHAPTER FOURTEEN

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## Noelle

I'm in a great mood as I stand at the reception desk later on, thinking about the night, and morning Cal and I have had. If I'm honest with myself, I wish every morning and night could be like the last twelve or thirteen hours have been. There's a feeling I get with Cal that I don't get with anyone else, an ease to the nervous rumbling of my body I've been carrying around since the stressful days of lockdown, when I wasn't sure if we'd survive. While I've been cognizant of trying not to dwell on what happened back then, it sometimes works, and sometimes doesn't. When left to my own devices too long, I get too deep inside my own head and start to question if I'm really cut out for this job. When I'm with Cal? He doesn't allow me to do that, and I find myself breathing easier and sleeping better.

My stomach growls and I nibble at the toast I brought out from the kitchen. Since I found out about the pregnancy, all food has been slightly iffy, but this morning I'm starving, and I could probably eat a whole loaf if given the chance.

"Hey." Becca waves as she comes in through the lobby door.

"What are you doing here? Don't you have school today?" I raise a brow at her, trying on my mother tone for the first time.

"Christmas break started two days ago. I'm going to have a spa day." She points toward the day spa we have in-house. It's not directly related to us—a friend of mine runs it. She pays her rent on time each month, and it provides another reason for

customers to walk through the inn as they get to it. It's a win-win for us.

"Oh yeah? What are you going to do?" I lean onto the counter, putting my chin in my palm.

"Mom gave me enough money for a pedicure and manicure. My boyfriend gave me a gift card to get my hair done and eyebrows waxed. It's going to be so nice." She smiles brightly.

I can remember being excited for grown-up things when I was her age too. The pedicure and manicure were a rite of passage. Especially the first time you got to sit down and have it with the other women in your life. However, I can distinctly remember the first time I got to do it by myself. I felt like one of the most responsible people in my friend group. "Have fun!"

"I will. Dad's coming to pick me up because they're calling for more snow tonight. Are you staying late?" She twirls her hair around her finger.

"I am. I'll be careful," I reply, already knowing what she's going to say.

Becca grins and then heads to the spa while I turn to do some bookkeeping work. Afternoons at the reception desk are long, typically. Especially when most of our guests check in after four, even on Fridays. I'm trying to get ahead in everything I can before this baby makes me slow down.

Pulling up the guest register, I see we have around five visitors to check in, and it's going to make it almost a full house. Pride in knowing how full it is rises in my stomach. Three years ago, there were hardly any guests and we were asked to not spend the holidays with our families. We've come a long way since then.

"Hey." Martha, my head of housekeeping who apparently loves Cal, waves at me. "We got done with the rooms early today. Anyone who comes to check in can."

"Thank you so much. If you all want to go ahead and go home early, please do. I know I've asked a lot of your little



staff.”

She smiles, showing dimples in her wrinkled face. “I’d love that. This is the first Christmas for my great-grandchild. Wish he was here to see it.”

We both know she means her deceased husband.

“Then go enjoy it.” I almost shove her out the door. “You have a couple days to get prepared.”

“I know. It’s coming up quicker than I ever imagined it would.” She shrugs on her jacket and wraps her scarf around her neck. “Be careful. I don’t know if you saw the news, but they’re expecting a quick blizzard Christmas Eve and possibly Christmas Day. I know you typically work those two days so everyone else can have time with their families.”

This is news to me. “No, I haven’t seen that. Thanks for letting me know.”

“They started talking about it on the news yesterday morning as an ‘it might happen’ thing. Well, this morning they all but said it’s going to, and I got an alert on my phone.” She holds up her third-generation iPhone that’s somehow still chugging along.

“I’ll be careful. I promise.”

As she leaves, I make a mental note to make sure one of the rooms or the long-term cabins is empty so I have a place to sleep again if I need it.

The next few hours go by at a snail’s pace, so I start to gather information to provide to my accountant for year-end taxes and the last quarterly payment of the year. Since it’ll be quiet, this will probably be the best time to do it. Once I have all my information gathered, I start to input everything into my Excel spreadsheets and get ready to send it over.

When a woman and a girl walk through the lobby, I’m not even sure what time it is. “Welcome to The Gingerbread Inn,” I greet them, putting a big smile on my face.

“I know we’re early,” the woman says, her arm around the girl.

It's three-thirty and normal check-in is four. Time went a lot quicker than I'd thought it would. "You're fine. What's your name?"

The woman swallows roughly. "The reservation is under my husband's name. Honey, go stand by the fire." She directs the younger girl over. "My husband passed away a month ago, so I hope you don't need his ID or anything." She blows out a breath. "His name was James Sturdivant."

I have a visceral reaction to what she's just told me. Tears come to my eyes, and I have to push back the wetness. "I'm sorry. I'm pregnant," I blurt out. "I'm very emotional." Quickly, I look through the reservations and see a Sturdivant that has a woman's name next to it. "Are you Lynn?"

"Yes." She smiles. "Congratulations by the way."

"Thank you so much." I swipe under my eyes. "Please bring your daughter down tomorrow. There will be s'mores by the fireplace and Santa. I'm glad you're here."

"This is where my husband and I decided to come—we always go someplace for Christmas every year. I just never imagined I'd be here without him."

I reach forward, grasping her hand in mine. "If there's anything we can do to make your stay better, please let me know and I will personally take care of it. I own the inn."

She nods, handing over her credit card. "Thank you. I appreciate all your help and for not making me feel silly for still wanting to do this."

"You should do what you need to do in order to move on. No one can tell you how to grieve."

I'd learned that myself after the whole lockdown situation. I'd grieved the woman I was and the woman I was going to be, as well as my business and what it had been going to be before my forward trajectory was stumped.

I watch as the two guests leave.

"That was really nice of you."

Cal's voice scares me, and I jump slightly. "Don't sneak up on me like that."

"Sorry." He hooks his arm around the front of my body, pulling my back to his chest. "Didn't mean to."

"It's okay." I hook my fingers between his. "I hope if I I'm ever in her situation someone would treat me the same."

He makes a noise in the back of his throat, and for the first time, I admit to myself something I've been afraid to. I want the foreseeable future of my life to be with him.

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# CHAPTER FIFTEEN

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## Cal

Saturdays in downtown Blizzard Bluff during the winter are usually pretty busy. Add onto that the fact that Christmas is a week away, and it's damn near impossible to move, the small shops are so packed. But I'm on the lookout for something important. Some small token to show Elle how much she means to me. We haven't discussed our feelings for each other—hell, we've barely discussed what we're going to do when this baby comes—but they're there. Even on just the periphery.

“Morning, Cal.” The shop owner, Faith, greets me as I walk around, looking for something that's going to jump out at me.

“Morning,” I answer.

“You look confused. Is there anything I can help you with? Shopping for family?”

“Not really,” I admit, scratching the back of my neck. “More like someone a little more special than that.”

I don't have to tell her anything else. She gets it. She probably even knows who it is.

“She was in here the other day and was looking real hard at a piece I have.”

I knew she would know who I was talking about. “Show me.”

Together, we walk over to the corner where Faith keeps the antiques. This is a section I never go into since I consider it

too rich for my blood, but if something Noelle likes is here, I'll pull out my credit card and welcome the payments I'll probably have to make.

"Yeah, here it is." She grins, holding up something that sparkles and shines brightly in the light.

It's all the colors of Christmas, giving me all the feels for the holiday season. "What is it?"

"It's a vintage hair comb. This one is from the 1920s, so a little over a hundred years old. I normally don't carry things this old because there just isn't an audience for it here most of the time. When I saw it, though, there was something special about it, and obviously Noelle saw that too."

The way it sparkles in the light reminds me of the way Noelle does when she's seen something that excites her or when she's made a guest's day by providing them with a service they hadn't expected. She takes that kind of stuff to heart and loves to sprinkle a bit of magic for guests who come to stay at the inn, like she did for the mother and daughter duo yesterday. "I'll take it," I announce impulsively. That isn't like me in any way at all, except for Halloween, when I made another impulsive decision.

"I'll wrap it for you. I know what she likes. I can't believe you're buying this without weighing every single variable," she teases.

"What can I say?" I shrug. "With her, I make all the impulsive decisions. Consequences be damned."

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# CHAPTER SIXTEEN

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## Noelle

### *C*hristmas Eve

The expected blizzard hasn't hit yet, just like all the ones they've predicted previously. It's one of the things that irritates most of the locals. The weather people always make a big deal over what could happen, and then there's no bread, milk, or eggs in the grocery. The kids and parents get excited, then nothing happens. It's always been that way.

I'm still working on the taxes and waiting for Santa to make his appearance tonight. Cal walks in, and I can't help but notice the snow all over his body. He's stamping his feet against the floor.

"Is it snowing out there?" I ask.

"Yeah." He laughs. "Started about an hour ago, and it's coming down. I can't believe you didn't notice it."

"I've been working on taxes and last time I looked up, nothing had happened. I'd assumed it was something we were warned about that didn't happen. Guess I was wrong." I laugh.

"Did you get us a place tonight?" he asks. "There's no way I'm letting you drive home or letting you stay here without me."

I glance back at him over my shoulder, licking my lips. "I got us a long-term cabin. There's one available, and I took it off the site for the next two days just in case."

"Good, then we can celebrate the holiday if we need to." He moves his hand up to my chin, tilting it back and grabbing



my lips with his.

“That would be nice,” I admit. “Typically I’m here and don’t even celebrate until after the New Year with my family.”

“Well, now you can spend Christmas with me.” His deep voice promises. “When can we go? It’s going to be dark soon.”

“Right now.” I see my relief come in—another inn owner who doesn’t celebrate Christmas, I trade off with him for his vacation every year. “Thanks for coming, Danny.”

“No problem,” he says. “Enjoy your night. Do you need me tomorrow night too? I have coverage at mine.”

“If you don’t mind.”

He waves a hand. “You cover me for an entire week every year. It’s the least I can do.”

Cal holds his hand out to me. He walks me over to the coat closet and helps me into my winter jacket, as well as my scarf. I already have my snow boots on.

“You ready?” he asks. “It’s blowing out there. I’ll protect you as much as I can.”

“I’m ready when you are.”

As I entwine our fingers together, I know those words mean more than anything else I’ve ever said.

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A while later, we’ve showered and changed, and we’re sitting in front of a roaring fire. I swiped some marshmallows from the s’mores party and we’re roasting them, laughing at how sticky they are.

“I have something for you,” he announces as I take the last bite.

“For me? You didn’t have to get me anything. I didn’t get anything for you.” I pout.

“You’re giving me everything I’ve ever wanted.” He nods toward my stomach. “But I saw this and it reminded me of you.”

He puts a small package in my hand. I recognize the gift paper from one of our local stores. “I love almost everything in this store, so you’ve made a good decision.”

Using my nails, I dig into the wrapping paper and pull. It gives way easily, and I quickly take it off. When I see the sparkling hair comb, my mouth hangs open. “How did you know?”

“A little birdie told me.” He dips his head to mine, pressing our foreheads together. “This is what I have to say to you, though. We’ve danced around the idea of what we’re going to do about this baby, and I’m here to tell you I don’t want to dance around it anymore. I want us to give this a shot in whatever way that means. Who knows? Maybe we won’t work, or maybe next year we’ll be right here in this cabin celebrating with our baby.” He shrugs. “But I know I want it with you.”

Tears come to my eyes, and I try not to be emotional, but I can’t help it. “I want that with you too.”

“Then let’s try it. If we fail, we fail, but if it works?”

I smile against the emotions. “It could be the love of our lifetimes.”

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# EPILOGUE

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## Cal

*O*ne year later

“They’re calling for another blizzard tonight,” I tell Noelle as I walk into the lobby of The Gingerbread House.

She giggles, waggling her eyebrows toward me. “Maybe there’ll be one and we can stay in the same cabin we did last year.”

I walk closer to her. “Maybe we should make it a yearly tradition.”

She’s holding our daughter on her hip, an impish grin on her face. “Maybe I could make that happen.”

Just as she says those words, Danny comes in to relieve her. I reach out, shaking hands with him. “Thanks for helping us.”

“Not a problem.” He shakes my hand. “How’s the little family doing?” He wiggles his fingers at our daughter. She coos at him then giggles when he walks up to her and tickles her stomach.

“We’re good,” Noelle answers him. “If you need anything, we’ll be in long-term cabin three.”

“I won’t need anything,” Danny replies.

Together, the three of us walk toward the cabin. My stomach is full of nerves as I think about what’s waiting for us. Because I don’t want her to be suspicious, I start a conversation about our daughter, like I always do.

“How was Belle today?” I ask. We went back and forth for a while over whether we should name her something that was Christmas- or Halloween-related because of when she was conceived and when we finally admitted our feelings to one another.

“She was really good. Played in her pen all day, only cried when she was hungry,” Noelle says.

I reach out and grab Belle as we get to a part where the snow is deeper. Holding my daughter in my arms always makes me feel blessed. There’s no telling what my life would be like without these two. Most definitely a lot more lonely. Belle kicks her feet and giggles.

“She loves the snow. She’s such a snow baby,” Noelle says.

“She’s like both of us,” I comment.

The closer we get to the cabin the more nervous I am, and as we get to the steps, I can’t say anything.

“What’s wrong with you?” Noelle asks, her eyebrow raising.

I don’t say anything, I just open the door and let her take a look at what I’ve done.

The cabin has been decorated for Christmas, along with a special dinner. There’s a banner hanging from the mantle that reads “*Will you marry me?*”

She stops in her tracks and puts her hand to mouth to try and hold in the gasp. “Are you serious? Cal?”

“More serious than I’ve ever been about anything. Belle started this at Halloween, but Christmas Eve in this cabin solidified it. I love you more than I’d ever thought possible. Will you do me the honor of becoming my wife?”

She cries, sobbing wildly. “Yes, yes, with everything I am. I love you too. I would marry you tomorrow if we could.”

I laugh, wrapping my arms around her, winter jacket, daughter, and all. “You don’t need to. We have the rest of our lives, and I plan to make every day special.”

“You already do that.” She sniffs. “Just by loving us the way you do.”

We hold each other in silence, and from somewhere above, I swear I can hear the ringing of a bell. A blessing we hadn't ever counted on, but one we will always appreciate.

The End

Keep reading for the first chapter of my new small town, blue collar romance series set in Broken Falls, WV.

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**BOONE - JANUARY 13TH**

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## Alexis

“Do you even know what pressure-treated plywood is? I bet you don’t. You probably got your job here because of the size of your chest,” the son of a bitch at my register questions as he runs his credit card for the purchase.

*I need this job. I have student loans to pay. I need this job. I have a car payment. I need this job. I have to eat.*

Pasting a smile on my face, I tilt my head to the side, twirling a piece of the long hair around my finger. I wish I had a piece of gum in my mouth to pop. So I could complete the vision of what he assumes is the blonde bimbo. “Something to do with it being treated so it won’t rot, right?”

“Something like that sweetheart. They’ll load it for me?”

“Sure will,” I answer. “Have a great day,” I pour on the cheer before he leaves my register.

When I see who is behind him, my mouth goes dry, and my stomach gets jumpy. Ever see a man who just *does it* for you? That’s who this guy is. He started coming in a month ago, and while he’s almost old enough to be my dad, he hits every single one of my buttons. The green eyes, the black hair with a teeny bit of gray at the temples, the strong forearms and rough hands. It’s all proof of a hard worker who will no doubt do whatever it takes to provide for his family. A trait that’s really fucking attractive to me.

“What a dick,” he mumbles as he sets his purchases on the counter. His eyebrow raises. “Can’t believe you didn’t tell him to go fuck himself.”



Just hearing the man say fuck does crazy things to my girly bits. I wonder how he says it with a woman underneath him, or on top of him. If I were the type of woman who felt comfortable enough to proposition a man, this man would be it. I giggle, rolling my eyes. “Unfortunately I need this job. If I were in any position to tell him that, I would’ve. Trust me.”

I ring up his items, trying not to pay attention to the way the black t-shirt under his red flannel unbuttoned long-sleeve kisses his hips with his movements. Unconscious of my reaction, I lick my lips.

“Hey Lex, eyes up here,” his deep voice cuts through my thoughts.

“Sorry, what?” I’m dazed.

“Are you bartending tonight?” He asks, his green eyes sparkle against the short, dark beard on his face.

“I am. Seven till close. Your total is twenty-five even,” I manage to put everything in a bag without embarrassing myself.

He hands me the money, letting his touch linger against my skin. “See you there tonight then, Lollipop,” he grins, deep grooves in his cheeks exposing what would be dimples if his beard didn’t cover them up.

I blow out a breath, feeling it push my bangs up off my forehead. The other day he came in to pick up an order, and I had a sucker in my mouth. It was my lunch because I’d woken up too late to grab anything else. Since then he’s mentioned it more than once, even when he sees me at the bar. “Are you ever going to let me forget that?”

He looks around. Once he sees we’re alone, he leans onto the counter, and motions for me to come closer. I do as he asks, knowing my tank top pulls tight, and with a flick of his eyes, he’ll be able to see right down the gap. “Not a chance. Still think about it. The way you swirled your tongue around the tip, and then closed your eyes, savoring the taste? Gets me there every time.”

*Holy. Fuck. Is he masturbating to the thought of me?*

A throat clears behind him and we break apart when we realize someone else is waiting to be checked out. “See you tonight,” I wave.

“You can count on it.”

As he leaves, I watch his ass in those well-worn jeans he likes to wear, before turning back to the customer. But the rest of the day? My mind is on the thought of what that man does when he’s thinking of me, and more importantly. Which hand does he use to get off?

---

When I get dressed for my second job, I typically don’t overthink it. I opt for comfort and nine times out of ten, I don’t take a shower when I get home from my first job. Tonight though? I’ve taken a shower, I’ve shaved, and tidied up everything. Because I know Boone Wilson will be swinging by, I’ve decided to make an effort.

Since graduating from college three months ago, I’ve struggled to find a job in my chosen field, and finances are rougher than they were when I was a student. Back then I was able to supplement my income by being an RA, and using my cafeteria pass to eat. None of that is available now that I’m supposed to be fending for myself. It’s crazy that no one ever prepares us for these in-between times. Where we don’t know when we’ll be able to put our degree to use, and we’re struggling to find our footing in the world. I’m lucky to live in this apartment over the bar I tend at, but it’s only because my family owns it. If it weren’t for that, I’d be up shit creek, no doubt about it.

“You coming down here anytime soon?” My brother, Justin, yells up the stairs from the landing where the bar and my apartment meet.

“When I feel like it,” I sass back at him. I’m doing my best to put a few curls in my hair, although I know given the humidity of the place when it’s packed to the gills, it’ll fall before I probably see Boone.

“I have a date, and I’m not gonna be able to help you tonight. I need you to come take over.” His annoyed tone travels up the stairway.

I roll my eyes. He sounds like he’s about to stomp his damn foot. “I’m sure one of the other bartenders can hold the fort down for five minutes, Justin. Give me a break.”

“They’re having to cook. The new guy called in.”

I drop the curling wand, making a face in the mirror. “He’s been here for a week, and he already called in?”

“His kid is sick. Are you coming down here or not?”

Not getting in a hurry, I patiently curl a few more pieces. “Two minutes, leave me alone so I can finish getting ready.”

He sighs heavily and I ignore the fuck outta him. “Gonna make me late.”

“Don’t care.”

I’m wearing a pair of cutoff jean shorts that show the pockets, circa Britney twenty-ten, along with a black tank top. My best green push up bra, to match his eyes, is showing just over the edges. Tonight, my makeup is slightly darker than normal, and with the curled pieces of hair, I look as if I just rolled out of bed from having a good time. The last thing I add is a layer of lip gloss.

The only thing I’m practical about tonight are my shoes. A pair of converse encase my feet. They’re my favorite, and they’re worn in enough so that my arches aren’t killing me by the end of this shift, and it allows me to continue to stand at my day job.

Once I’m done tying the laces, I head down, spotting Justin behind the bar. He gives me a pointed look, and I flip him off. I’m short enough that I can bend under the bar instead of having to lift the service station area. Once I’m there, I grab an apron and carefully tie it around my waist. Justin blows out a breath. “Can I go?”

“Yes,” I let the word drag out. “Be back in time to help me close.”

“Good luck with that,” he mumbles as he throws his apron down and heads out like his heels are on fire.

He’s gonna make me do it by myself, but as I see Boone walk in, I have a thought that maybe it won’t be so bad to be alone tonight after closing. Maybe, I’ll get lucky and have a little help. His green eyes meet mine, and judging by the shock of electricity that jolts through my body, chances are good. He licks his lips when those eyes of his lower to my chest.

Scratch that. Chances are fucking great.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Laramie Briscoe is the USA Today and Wall Street Journal Bestselling Author of over 30 books.

Since self-publishing her first book in May of 2013, Laramie has appeared on the Top 100 Bestselling E-books Lists on Amazon Kindle, Apple Books, Barnes & Noble, and Kobo. Her books have been known to make readers laugh and cry. They are guaranteed to be emotional, steamy reads.

When she's not writing alpha males who seriously love their women, she loves spending time with friends, reading, and marathoning shows on Netflix. Married to her high school sweetheart, Laramie lives in Bowling Green, KY with her husband (the Travel Coordinator) and an energetic Pudelpointer, Gus.



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