

"This charming and swoony story is the perfect holiday read!"
-Becky Monson, USA Today Bestselling Author ★★★★★



my

EX-MAS

EMERGENCY

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

JENNIFER PEEL

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JENNIFER PEEL

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Dedication

To SJ, the newest little man in my life. You're my favorite present this year.

A special thanks to Dr. Kim Tustison for all her medical expertise and help!

ONE

CALISTA

I HATE FUNERALS. I HATE snow. I hate Tristan Granger. My eyes drifted up to the cold gray sky that seemed to delight in torturing my red cheeks with icy flecks. It was easy to imagine each big, fluffy flake zeroing in on me, gleefully laughing as it hit its target. Trying to remind me why, once upon a time, I found snow to be one of the most magical things on earth. Today, I refused to be persuaded.

Watching the evil, taunting flakes was a better alternative to looking at the stately mahogany casket, topped with an enormous white rose spray, hovering above the frozen, unforgiving ground. I couldn't believe my brother-in-law was gone. Jonathon was only thirty-eight—just four years older than me. I couldn't believe a lot of things lately. Mostly that I was back in Aspen Lake.

So much for my solemn vow to never move back to my hometown, even if it were the only safe haven in the zombie apocalypse. I'd much rather take my chances with brain-eating humanoids. Perhaps, though, I had already lost my mind by coming back here to join the emergency room staff at Aspen Lake General.

As I sat on the stiff white gravesite chairs, I placed an arm around the reason I'd broken that very promise. Quinn was my kryptonite, and I would do anything for my fifteen-year-old niece. She turned to me, trembling, but not from the cold. Though we were nearly the same height now, I wrapped her up tight, doing my best not to look at the man on the other side of her—Tristan, her uncle. Once upon a time, I'd thought he was magical too. But that was a long time ago. Thirteen years ago, to be exact. Thirteen years of pretending he didn't exist. Living in the same town now was going to make that difficult, but I planned on doing my best to keep up the charade. If there was one thing to be said about me, it would be that I am determined. And I had never been more set on anything in my life than forgetting my niece's uncle. Even if his amber scent wafted my way, begging me to remember him.

A word of advice: never date—or fall in love with—the older brother of the man your sister plans to marry, even if you doubt she'll actually marry him. It could make for some of the most awkward moments of one's life. Exactly like the one I found myself in now.

The pastor, who hardly knew Jonathon, droned on and on. I'm pretty sure Jonathon only went to church on Easter and Christmas to keep up appearances. The Grangers were all about appearances. If Aspen Lake had royalty, the Grangers would consider themselves dukes and duchesses.

“Jonathon was a blessing to all who knew him,” Father Ashton pontificated elegantly, yet not sincerely. I refrained from saying “Liar” under my breath. My niece's tears on my shoulder weren't only because she was going to miss her father. There were things I had recently learned about my dearly departed brother-in-law that had me wearing pink to this shindig instead of black. I'd probably stomp on his grave later for good measure. The only mourning I demonstrated was for my Quinny, as I called her. I could never stand to see her hurt. If I could take her pain upon myself, I would.

It was probably a good thing I didn't know about all of Jonathon's misdeeds until recently, while he lay dying in his hospital bed from liver cancer. If I'd known any earlier the louse was cheating on my sister, Stella, and heavily self-medicating with alcohol and drugs over the years, I may have had to revert to my crusader days.

Calista the Crusader, my mom used to call me. She said it was my superhero name. I wasn't sure how heroic I was, but I loved to right any injustice I could. Even if that meant putting beef bouillon cubes in every showerhead in the boys' locker room when I was in high school. That was the least the football players deserved after brutally taunting my friend Javier, the student team manager. They'd relentlessly tortured him for being too small and not “manly” enough to play. Okay, so I may have also cut all the elastic out of their underwear during the same practice. That was more torturous for me, though. Teenage boys' underwear should come with a toxic warning sign.

Sadly, I had to be more careful with how I went about seeking justice these days. Becoming Dr. Calista Monroe came with certain drawbacks, or perhaps *standards* was a better word. The Hippocratic oath was kind of a stickler when it came to not harming people. It sure took the fun out of seeking revenge. Perhaps becoming a doctor was my ultimate revenge. The wild child troublemaker—or whatever it was that people from the *right* side of the lake loved to call me—was never supposed to amount to anything ... except for maybe becoming a model prisoner. Well, I showed them. I have yet to see the inside of a jail cell. I suppose I have my niece's uncle to thank for that, but that's another story I couldn't think about without admitting that Tristan exists.

"He was a beloved husband to Stella and a doting father to Quinn," Pastor Ashton lied again.

I peeked over at my sister, sitting between her in-laws, the grand duke and duchess, otherwise known as Frasier and Cordelia Granger. They were as pretentious as their names. All three of them sat straight as pins. They were each clad in black cashmere coats with high collars, so cold and pale they resembled vampires. Not one tear fell among them.

Despite Jonathon's, let's say, shortcomings, Stella still claimed to love him. So, she was either too afraid to ruin her makeup in public, or, as I feared, she was emotionally shutting down. She'd never been able to handle any sort of crisis. Her go-to strategy was to pretend it had never happened. At eighteen, she became obsessed with Jonathon to help her forget the pain of losing our father. I was only sixteen. When our mom died a few years later, she became obsessed with her body to cope—or to not cope. Quinn was just a baby at the time, which meant Stella mostly left Quinn in my care. I would watch her for hours on end every day while my sister attended every fitness class she could and went shopping with Cordelia. Retail therapy was the only therapy Stella believed in. So much so that for Quinn's first two years of life, I was more of a mother to her than Stella. Quinny even looked more like me, with dark hair and hazel eyes that hinted toward forest green. I loved Quinny more than life itself.

This is why when Quinn asked me to come home, after they'd given her dad only weeks to live, I couldn't refuse. For as perfect as Stella looked on the outside with her gorgeous wavy red hair, stunning green eyes, and enviable figure, she was a mess inside. Years of denial and running will do that to a person. I knew eventually it was going to catch up to her, and when it did, I needed to be there for both Quinn and Stella.

Cordelia caught me staring and scowled. And not just her normal disdainful scowl that she always saved for me.

This would be a good time to mention that I wasn't just wearing pink, but a pink elf costume. A cute hat and pointy-toe shoes included. So maybe today I was being a crusader after all. Probably more like a rebel without a cause. My defiant younger self took over this morning when I saw the costume hanging in the closet. Normally, it was something I wore during the Christmas season at the hospital I worked for in Phoenix. It was always a big hit in the pediatric unit. Not so much at this funeral. I guess it was my way of saying I would let no one control me. That even though I was now a doctor and temporarily living with my sister and Quinn in their very upscale home near the lake, I was still me. And ... it was a definite slap in the face to my brother-in-law. He would have hated it more than his mother, who was dipping her chin down at me and wishing me dead with her cold gray eyes.

I was used to that look from her. While Cordelia wasn't thrilled when either of her sons fell for girls from the wrong side of the lake, she eventually grew to love Stella. It thrilled my sister to be molded in the image of her mother-in-law. All Stella ever wanted was to be from the "right" side, the side our mom grew up on. That was until Mom fell for a simple handyman from the wrong side. Her parents disowned her after she married my dad. Because of that, we never knew my rich, snobby grandparents. I was sure I would run into them now that I lived back in town, but they would probably ignore me, just like always. More fun times to look forward to. Hopefully I would be wearing the elf outfit or something akin to it.

I smiled at Cordelia to let her know her threatening look no longer held any sway with me. It was the best kind of revenge. She was one person who was sure I would end up as a model prisoner and ruin her son's life. Cordelia was afraid Tristan wouldn't do exactly what she and Frasier wished him to do. Their plan for him included running Granger Outfitters, the premier wilderness store of not only Aspen Lake but the entire West Coast. They got their wish, which meant I didn't get mine. Who dreams of being married to a ski instructor, anyway? I suppose I still did. I loved the thought of being with someone who lived his passion, no matter how little money it paid. That's what my dad did, and I wouldn't have traded all the money in the world for our simple upbringing, filled with

homemade gifts and hiking, fishing, and board games for entertainment. Not to mention all the love a kid could ask for.

It's not like I had a lot of time for romance, anyway. Even though I was past the grueling residency years, being in emergency medicine still meant almost sixty hours every week. When I wasn't working, I was sleeping—alone. Very alone. It was better than thinking you were someone's world, only to have him tell you he needed to quit you like a bad habit. No need to mention who said that.

It was all ancient history. The Grangers had the new duke of the kingdom all lined up, and I got to prove to them they were wrong about me. Not that they would ever admit it. In the end, I didn't really need them to. I loved my job. As exhausting as it was, it was my passion.

Cordelia sneered at me before turning back to the pastor. Snowflakes littered his salt-and-pepper hair, yet he continued his litany of lies. I couldn't exactly blame him. No doubt the Grangers paid him to say such things. After all, it would probably be in poor taste to mention that Jonathon wasn't eligible for a liver transplant because of all the drinking he'd done over the last several years. Or that he had constantly missed my niece's track meets because he was a selfish jerk.

"Jonathon never missed an opportunity to help his family and friends, especially his best friend and brother, Tristan."

Tristan coughed.

I swore I heard a derogatory word in that cough, something I'm pretty sure started with *bull*. Before I could stop myself, my head whipped in his direction, wondering what it was all about. The one truthful thing Pastor Ashton had said was that Tristan and Jonathon were best friends. Or at least I thought that was true.

Unfortunately, Tristan turned his head toward me at the exact wrong moment, and we locked eyes. It had been thirteen long years since I had looked into those pale baby blues full of wonder and ... No, no, no. They were just pretty eyes with the lushest dark eyelashes in the history of eyelashes. Nothing more and nothing less. No meaning existed in them, no matter how deeply they were currently trying to penetrate my own gaze. I also didn't care one iota that he had only gotten better looking with age. My mom once said he looked like a young Clint Eastwood, with his chiseled jawline covered in a fine layer of stubble and dark bronze-brown hair with a classic taper cut. She wasn't wrong. At thirty-nine, he had a few strands of gray running throughout his locks, but it totally worked for him. I only meant it probably wasn't turning anyone off. Of course, he completely repulsed *me*. In fact, I felt like vomiting.

Yet, I didn't turn away. I seriously hated myself for it. He shouldn't exist to me. He was a mere phantom of my past. My niece's uncle.

Tristan offered me a faint smile.

That, I couldn't have. It was his stupid smile that had started it all.

I whipped my head back toward the pastor, no breath left in my lungs. More snowflakes began to fall and barrage me, begging me to remember days on the ski slope and building snow shelters for *educational* purposes with Tristan. It's good to know how to survive if you get stuck in the wilderness during a snowstorm, and how to share body heat. Oh, the body heat.

I squeezed Quinn tighter, remembering why I came back to Aspen Lake. It had absolutely nothing to do with her uncle.

Finally, the pastor said, "Amen."

I jumped up so fast my elf hat almost fell off. "Amen. Hallelujah."

Everyone stared at me, mouths agape, aghast at my behavior and attire.

It was just like old times.

This was going to be fun.

TWO

TRISTAN

“CAN YOU BELIEVE SHE WORE an elf costume?” Tristan’s mother complained under her breath as they stood beneath the awning, receiving mourners along with his sister-in-law and niece.

Tristan covertly gazed at Calista across the way, as far away from his family as she could get. His eyes immediately landed on her long, shapely legs nicely displayed in her tiny elf skirt. It would be a lie to say he hadn’t often thought how it felt to run his hands up and down those legs. He clenched his fists, knowing he had no right to think such thoughts after what he’d said to her the day he’d made the worst mistake of his life.

Calista was speaking to her godmother, Dr. Deidra Zane, the chief medical officer for Aspen Lake General Hospital. Deidra held a large umbrella to protect them from the snow that showed no signs of letting up. Tristan was aware Calista claimed to hate the snow now, but he knew better. Just like he could absolutely believe she’d worn a pink elf costume to the funeral. He couldn’t help but smile about it.

“What are you smiling for?” his mother demanded to know.

Tristan diverted his focus back to his parents. They both stood emotionless near the casket that held his lying, cheating brother. As much as he currently had mixed feelings about his brother, he wondered how his parents could behave so callously, like this was just another social function for them. When people approached to offer condolences, his parents spoke more about business and vacations than they did their son. The favorite son, by Tristan’s estimation. It didn’t matter to them that Tristan had given up the woman he loved just to please them, or even that Jonathon was a less than ideal son. Tristan never measured up.

“Nothing,” Tristan sighed. The least he could do for Calista was to not bring up her name. He’d learned from experience that never went well.

His mother persisted. “Well, can you believe she wore that awful thing?”

“Yes,” he replied. Her uninhibited nature and her I-don’t-care-what-anyone-thinks-about-me attitude was just as attractive to him now as it used to be.

His mother clucked her tongue at his response.

Tristan didn’t care about his mother’s disdain at the moment. All he could think about was the first time he’d met Calista. She was fresh out of high school—barely legal. Jonathon had invited both her and Stella over to his parents’ house. He’d heard rumors about her and her wild ways. He wasn’t sure how *wild* she was—she was more like a Robin Hood who stole from the rich and gave to the poor. When the high school in town made it mandatory for all girls to wear formals to prom, Calista, in protest for those like herself who couldn’t afford expensive gowns, threw a party at the lake instead, bonfire included. Word got around and more kids ended up going to the party than prom. To say it irked the school administrators and prom committee was an understatement. But they couldn’t do anything—throwing a party the night of prom wasn’t against any rules, and she was a 4.0 student throughout high school, so there was no basis for a retaliatory academic punishment. Calista was an enigma to them.

She’d intrigued Tristan before he’d even met her, and she did not disappoint upon meeting. No one had ever dared to show up to his parents’ place in cutoffs and a halter top. He still remembered the first time he laid eyes on her. Her raw, sensual beauty screamed at him, and he did everything he could not to heed the call. But like a siren, she drew him in. It didn’t help when she jumped into their pool uninvited and came out of the water like she was posing for *Sports Illustrated*. The way she’d swung her long dark hair, the sun’s rays gracing her toned body as water dripped down her perfect figure, did him in. He’d almost jumped into the pool fully clothed just to be near her.

He asked her out that night, not caring that his friends would give him a hard time for dating a girl barely out of high school, or that his parents thought she was the devil incarnate. Not that it

mattered. She'd said no. Her excuse was that he was too rich and pretty for her taste. But her smile said she really wanted to say yes. For her, he'd been willing to be patient. So that summer, before he went back to UCLA to finish his MBA, he found every reason to visit the Mexican dive restaurant she waitressed at in the evenings, and the pool she lifeguarded at during the day. His patience paid off. She eventually asked him out. It was the best first date he had ever had.

Calista had taken him on a midnight picnic, lakeside on the beach. On *her* side, as she called it—the best side. She'd brought a telescope her dad had made so they could gaze at the stars. But all he wanted to do was look at her. The wild woman whom he'd quietly observed giving her meager tips to friends who needed it more than she did. Or even random customers who were down on their luck. He'd met no one like her before or since.

Tristan still felt as if all he wanted to do was look at her. His eyes drifted back to Calista and Dr. Zane. The night he'd foolishly ended it all, she'd sworn she was going to move away from Aspen Lake and never look back, never look at him again. Until today, she'd lived up to that promise. Even when she came back each year to visit Quinn on her birthday, she refused to look at him or acknowledge he even existed. She'd even chatted with his ex-wife, Rachel, whom he'd recently learned had slept with his brother. It was Jonathon's deathbed confession to him. What a prick. He knew Rachel had been unfaithful, but not with whom. Regardless, Calista's silence had killed him more than his failed marriage.

He watched Calista as she smiled before hugging her godmother. Then she left the safety of the umbrella and tiptoed in her pink elf shoes through the snow, weaving in and out of the graves. Tristan's heart lurched watching her walk away, reminding him of the last time he'd watched her go. A foolish impulse came over him, and, without a second thought, he followed her.

"Tristan, where are you going?" his father called after him.

Tristan paid him no attention. To be honest, he was weary of people mourning for his brother who had passed away too soon, for the tragedy it all was. The real tragedy was that Jonathon could have had it all with Stella and Quinn. But he felt like life cheated him somehow because he got Stella pregnant when he was twenty-two and became a father at twenty-three. Jonathon had no idea how lucky he was to have a wife and a daughter who adored him. What Tristan wouldn't give for such a gift.

All he could think about now was that after thirteen years, Calista had finally looked at him. He wanted nothing more than for her to acknowledge his existence. Maybe if she acknowledged him, he could forgive himself for hurting her.

Calista headed toward the more rustic part of the cemetery where many of the older and smaller graves were. She walked past the large and ornate headstones she had always found ostentatious and claimed were a waste of money. Tristan knew exactly where she was going. It was a place he'd visited often with her, a place where he'd held her hand, wiped the tears off her cheek, and promised to always be there for her. He'd lied. Maybe he was no better than his brother. He'd never cheated on Calista with another woman, but he'd traded her for the lifestyle he'd grown accustomed to, the one she hated. Even now, as a doctor probably making at least three hundred grand a year, she drove a crappy old Honda. He couldn't help but wonder if she only became a doctor to spite everyone in this town who thought she would never amount to anything. She'd probably believed all these years that he was one of those people. He had only himself to blame for that.

Tristan stayed far enough back that Calista didn't notice she was being followed. He watched as she rubbed her arms, trying to stay warm. He'd offer her his coat, but he knew she would refuse. She would be furious to know he was following her. But for now, he enjoyed the view. It was like watching a sexy elf frolic through the snow.

She stopped to straighten out a few fake flower arrangements at random gravesites. "That's better. Merry Christmas," she would say to the dead each time, even though Thanksgiving was next week. But Calista had always loved Christmas, loved people.

She reverently approached her parents' graves near a bare aspen tree. The same one where she'd carved her mom and dad's initials into the white bark.

Tristan hid behind a nearby pine tree. When he thought it was safe, he peeked around it to watch her kneel in her white tights on the snowy ground.

Calista used her bare hands to wipe the snow off the shared gravestone that lay flat on the ground, cursing the snow as she swept. He knew Dr. Zane had purchased the simple headstone

several years ago, realizing Calista couldn't afford it. Tristan had offered to give her the money, but she'd refused. She'd never wanted their relationship to be about money. Stella and Jonathon had been no help. Their lives, at the time, revolved around themselves as they were trying to deal with a newborn and adjust to married life at such a young age. So when Calista's mom, Vera, passed away and joined her late husband, all the arrangements and expenses for the funeral had fallen on Calista.

Calista arranged some newly cut daisies on the grave. "I wonder who placed these here?" she asked out loud.

Tristan wondered too. He doubted Stella had in her numb state.

"Hi, Mom and Dad," Calista's voice broke. "I bet you're laughing at me. Remember when I said I would never move back home? Well, here I am. Mom, I can hear you now, saying, *'Not all promises are in your best interest.'* I thought you only meant that when I was five and promised I would never wear socks for the rest of my life. By the way, I still hate socks and only wear them when I absolutely have to."

Tristan had to stifle his laugh, and even a grimace. He couldn't count the number of times, while they were dating, that she had placed her frozen feet under his legs, trying to warm her icicle toes. Anything not to wear socks. He still shivered, thinking about it.

"And ... I'm still not sure if moving to Aspen Lake is in my best interest. What am I doing here? I broke another promise today," she lamented. "I looked at Tristan," she spewed his name like she was spitting out rotten food.

Ouch. That hurt.

"Don't worry, though; I've resolved to never make that mistake again. This is definitely one of those times a promise is in my best interest. Anyway, let's not talk about him."

Tristan stretched his neck from side to side, thinking maybe he shouldn't have followed her. He knew he had no right, but now that she was back in town, the pull she'd always had on him was back in full force. All he wanted was for Calista to look at him, even if it was only to scowl at him. Anything to stare into her unusual hazel eyes that swirled with deep greens, blues, and browns. Quinn's were similar to her aunt's, but there was something mystical about Calista's. Her eyes begged for him to get lost in them and never return. He wasn't sure he had ever made it back. He was still lost in Calista.

"I'm worried about Stella and Quinn. Living at their house is worse than I ever imagined, and not because it looks like a Pottery Barn threw up all over it. Okay, so that was another promise I broke when I said I would never step foot in one of those stores. I confess, I bought a headboard from that overpriced place. But in my defense, it was at one of their outlets in Arizona, and on sale, and there was a tiny nick in it. So it really doesn't count."

Tristan smiled. He would have loved to have seen her walk into a Pottery Barn. It surprised him that hell hadn't frozen over when she had.

"This is all beside the point," Calista continued. "My point is that Stella's house is so sterile. It's like they all died. Even our sweet Quinn. I feel like I need to bust out some construction paper and make toilet paper roll turkeys with her. Anything to make her smile. I know they think there isn't much to be thankful for right now, but Dad, you always used to say that gratitude gives us perspective and even heals. If ever anyone needed healing right now, it's Stella and Quinn," Calista said, as if her heart was breaking. "What do I do? It's so frustrating knowing I can help heal cuts and bruises, infections, and even broken bones. But I have no idea how to heal their broken hearts right now. Or at the very least, breathe some life back into them."

Tristan had had some of the same thoughts over the last several months, especially about Quinn. She was like the daughter he never had. His little buddy. He was the one who had taught her how to ride a bike and a horse. He'd taught her how to ski both in snow and on the water, just like he'd taught her aunt. They were some of the best times of his life. Happier times.

Calista was right: Quinn needed help. Maybe *together* they could come up with a plan. Surely, for Quinn's sake, she would talk to him. Not that he would use their niece to get to Calista, especially given that her dad had just died. He was genuinely worried about Quinn and wanted to do whatever he could to help her.

With Quinn's best interests in mind, he stepped out from behind the tree. "Hi," he said, out of breath, like he'd just finished his first marathon instead of his tenth. He hated feeling like a

pubescent boy approaching his first crush, but there he was.

Calista stiffened but didn't turn around.

He didn't really expect her to. After all, she'd just promised to never look at him again. He'd almost be disappointed if that was all it took. Calista's feisty side was his favorite side.

Tristan ran a hand through his snow-covered hair. "I know I'm the last person you want to see, but now that you're living back in Aspen Lake, I was hoping we could talk." He desperately wanted to apologize to her. Not that an apology could fix what he'd done, but he needed Calista to know how sorry he was for hurting her.

Calista said nothing, but he could see her shake and clench her fists.

"Cal ... I mean Calista," his words came out strangled. He hadn't said her name out loud in years. It felt almost as sweet on his lips as her kiss. Almost.

"Go away," she commanded. "I would hate for you to pick up any *bad habits*."

And there it was. His own words came back to haunt him. Again and again and again. If he could take them back, he would. The utter hurt and revulsion on her beautiful face the night he'd spoken those words would live forever in his mind. It shouldn't have mattered that he'd just gotten arrested because of her. That was his choice. She hadn't made him take the heat when she rescued dozens of puppies from a puppy mill she'd discovered close to her house. It killed her to think of any animal or person being mistreated or abused. So, against his better judgment, he'd helped *rescue* them. Unfortunately, the owner of the mill thought of it more like stealing. It was especially bad because Calista had already found suitable homes for the pups and given them away after rescuing them. Calista was looking at serious jail time, given it wasn't exactly her first brush with the law. No charges had ever stuck until then, but that time she wasn't going to get off with only a warning.

She'd been more than willing to do the time. Doing the right thing was all that ever mattered to her. But ... he knew his family connections could make it all go away. And they did. It only took his parents threatening to smear the puppy mill owner's name, along with withholding the sizable donation they'd always given the police department every year. Tristan wasn't proud that his money bought him privilege. All he could think about that fateful night was how it would protect Calista.

Sure, the trouble she'd caused had pissed him off. Her crusader ways were a little too much for him sometimes, not to mention the tension it created with his parents. They were constantly reminding him of what it meant to be a Granger. That they had shareholders and employees to think about. And they were right. Bad press often equated to bad sales. The pressure of it all got to be too much for him, and he made a choice. One he'd regretted almost every day since.

Regardless, he should have never told her he needed to quit her like a bad habit. What the hell was he thinking, saying something like that? It's just that he knew if he wanted to make a clean break with her, he had to hurt her. If not, she would have seen right through him. She would have convinced him to become a ski instructor and leave the family business behind. Little had she known, he was too afraid to live without the money and the name. So, he took the coward's way out and pushed her away as hard and as cruelly as he could. It was easier than admitting he was a selfish jerk.

Hell, I still am a selfish jerk.

He'd gotten good at playing the corporate game. He even liked it. As CEO, he'd expanded their storefront operations, and their profits were through the roof. It was something he took pride in.

Tristan shoved his hands in his pockets, realizing he had no right to try to work his way back into Calista's life, even if it was just to be her friend. Their lives weren't compatible. He'd turned into everything she despised about people on *his* side of the lake. Knowing her, she would end up saving Quinn and Stella and every other unfortunate soul in Aspen Lake. She didn't need his help. She never had.

"I'm sorry I bothered you," he breathed out, his breath forming wisps in the cold air. "It won't happen again."

He turned around and walked away, knowing once again he'd left her thinking she was just a bad habit to him. Too bad she would never know how much he admired and loved her.

THREE

CALISTA

ON MONDAY MORNING I KNELT next to the guest room bed, on the plushiest carpet in existence, and kissed Quinn's head before the light of day. She was curled into herself, hugging one of my pillows. She hadn't crawled into bed with me since she was a little girl, but the last few nights I'd woken up to find her cuddling up to me. I didn't mind in the least bit.

She opened her beautiful sleepy eyes. "Are you leaving for work?"

I heard the plea for me to stay. If I could have, I would have, but it was my first day in the ER, and I knew my godmother, Deidra, had put her neck on the line recommending me. Although I came highly qualified and the hospital I'd worked for in Phoenix loved me, I'd left behind a reputation in Aspen Lake—and not the good kind.

"Yep. For a twelve-hour shift." I shuddered for effect.

She squeezed the pillow tighter. "That's a long time."

I smoothed her brow. "I know, but as soon as I get home, we are having a mega Cary Grant marathon with as many homemade Oreo shakes as we can down. I'm thinking of trying to break my record of four," I teased her.

She offered me the tiniest of smiles.

She was breaking my heart. I was so tempted to stay home with her until she went back to school the week following the Thanksgiving holiday, but I knew Deidra would wring my neck. And the ER staff was counting on me. "Honey, I know nothing I can say will make any of this better right now. I even wish I could tell you that time heals all pain, but that's just a lie." I knew that from personal experience, losing my own parents and ... well ... some nonexistent life form whom I was never looking at again. "But ... I promise that someday you won't feel like someone punched you in the gut, and you'll find yourself laughing and smiling again."

Her eyes filled with tears. "I wish you were my mom and Uncle Tristan was my dad."

I faltered a bit, feeling like I'd gotten one of those punches in the gut. Sure, I would love it if Quinn were my daughter, but her uncle need not be a part of the equation. No one should even use our names in the same sentence. "Quinny, why would you say something like that? Your mom loves you." Yes, Stella was an emotional train wreck, but I knew she loved Quinn. And even though I hated to admit it, I knew Jonathon had loved her too. The way he'd looked at her before he died said exactly that. He'd cried like a baby as he enumerated all his regrets and wishes that he had been a better father and husband. Sadly, it was too late for any of that.

Quinn sniffled. "Because you and Uncle Tristan are the only ones who love me."

"Oh, Quinny." I threw my arms around her. "That's not true. I mean, there's no denying I love you best," I joked, kind of. She was breaking my heart. Soon, Stella and I were going to talk. No child should feel like her parents didn't love her.

She tittered. "Uncle Tristan would disagree."

"Well, he's ... never mind." I was going to call him an idiot, but I swore to myself I would never bad-mouth him to Quinn. That would mean I cared about what he thought, and I didn't, because he didn't exist. Even if he had tried to talk to me after the funeral. It would be a lie if I said I hadn't thought about the weird exchange on Saturday while I visited my parents' graves. It was unnerving, as if he'd wanted to drive the knife he'd left in my heart just a little farther. Why he felt the need to remind me exactly what he thought of me, I didn't know. Other than he was a jerk. He needn't worry. I got the message loud and clear thirteen years ago—I was just a bad habit to him.

She leaned away from me, tilting her head. "What happened between you two? And don't say it's because you're allergic to him. I'm old enough to know better now. And ... my mom told me

you used to date.” She bit her lip. “She said you loved him. Is that true?”

Grrr. Stella. As soon as she was out of mourning, I was giving her the what for. For years, I had Quinn convinced I really was allergic to Tristan. It was kind of true. I felt itchy and I often couldn’t breathe around him. That fib worked until she was around nine. After that, I just told her I didn’t like him. Which was more than true.

I let out a deep breath, placed my hands on her cheeks, and smushed them, wishing I could make up some other ridiculous response. “Quinny, that was a long time ago.” I kissed her forehead. “I need to go to work. I love you. Text me if you need anything. I’ll see you tonight.” I stood before she asked me any more uncomfortable questions.

“Aunt Cal, I want to have an old-fashioned Christmas this year. The kind you always talked about having when you were growing up, with a real tree and homemade ornaments, sledding, making cookies, and roasting marshmallows in the fireplace.”

Her request surprised me. I wasn’t sure if she or Stella would want to celebrate Christmas this year. Not that they ever had real holly jolly affairs in their home, as far as I could tell. I was pretty sure that last year Jonathon just handed Quinn his credit card and told her to get anything she wanted.

Honestly, I could do with a good old-fashioned Christmas. It had been a long time. Medical school and residency had kind of put a damper on the holidays. “Okay, honey. Whatever you want. I’ll make it happen.”

“Whatever I want?” she asked innocently.

“Of course.”

An evil glint appeared in her eyes.

I recognized it because it was the same glint I had when I was hatching some kind of crusade. “What do you want?” I asked, suspicious.

“To be happy,” her voice cracked.

Oh. She pierced my heart with that one. “I promise with everything that I am, you’ll be happy.” I leaned down to kiss her head. “Tonight, we will plan the most epic Christmas. One that will make your grandma Vera proud.” My mom always loved this time of year. We never had expensive gifts. Usually, just a new book and a new outfit. But it wasn’t about the gifts. It was all about love. Maybe this is just what Quinn needed to start the healing process.

Quinn gave me the first genuine smile I’d seen from her in a long time.

“I’m off to save lives now.” I grabbed my backpack off the stately blue chair in the guest room. The place looked like a presidential suite, an upholstered bed with luxurious sheets and a claw-foot tub in the bathroom included. I really needed to get a place of my own, but it was hard to find a rental that didn’t cost as much as my student loans every month. Besides, Quinn needed me here, at least through the holidays. I could put up with stuffy luxury for another month or so.

I was heading for the door when Quinn threw a zinger at me. “I’ll invite Uncle Tristan tonight to help us plan.”

I spun so fast I stumbled in my hiking boots—the perfect complement to my blue scrubs ensemble. “Why? We don’t need his help.” We were absolutely not inviting him to our Christmas extravaganza.

She batted her beautiful eyes while doing the whole pouty-lip thing. “It wouldn’t be Christmas without him. He’s like a dad to me. And you said I could have anything I wanted.”

It was then I realized I’d just been played by my niece. I was both proud and irked. “Don’t get any ideas about me and your uncle. There’s no one I hate more in my life than your uncle Tristan.” I thought this was a good time to be brutally honest.

“That’s okay.” She grinned. “You can just ignore him like you always do.”

“Fine.” PS: It was not fine.

“I love you,” she said, sickly sweet.

“Uh-huh.”

She laughed, and my heart melted. I would do anything to make her happy, even if it meant being in the uncle's presence. I was good at pretending he didn't exist. It was one of my superpowers. No problem. I had this.

"Bye, honey." I walked out the door before she could trick me into anything else. I tiptoed out into the darkened hall and walked toward the floating staircase. Stella's home was hugely open, with tons of large windows. When the sun was up, it lent to gorgeous views of the lake. For now, it just had me feeling eerily exposed.

On my way down, I noticed a lump under several blankets on the couch in front of the grand two-storied stone fireplace. It looked like Quinn wasn't the only person who didn't want to sleep in her room. I crept toward the kitchen to grab some protein bars and my water bottle, trying to be as quiet as possible for Stella.

When I opened the refrigerator, Stella scared the crap out of me. "Hey, sis," she croaked.

I grabbed my wildly beating heart and turned in her direction. "Sorry, I didn't mean to wake you."

She pulled a blanket up to her chin. "You didn't."

I grabbed my protein bars and water before walking her way in the semidarkness.

She rested her pretty head on the designer velvet couch and sighed.

As I got closer, I could see her eyes were as red as her hair. "Rough night?"

"Yeah," she whispered. "Always."

"You know, you could have come up and snuggled with me and Quinn."

She gave me a weak smile. "Quinn needs you all to herself right now."

"She needs you too."

Stella's eyes watered. "I'm not really good for anyone right now. Maybe ever."

I placed a hand on her tangled hair. "Stella, you know that's not true. You were my favorite trouble buddy." She really was. Once upon a time, we were the best of friends and inseparable. Even though she always wanted to be an other-side-of-the-lake person. But then Jonathon entered the picture, and everything changed. She changed.

"You were always good at getting us in trouble." She wasn't wrong.

We got into all sorts of mischief. Everything from toilet papering the principal's house to teaching our fellow students how to make rum in chemistry class. Of course, we feigned innocence about the liquor thing, saying it was just an unfortunate accident. Obviously, I would never condone underage drinking. That's what I told the teacher, anyway. But now I actually believed it. It's amazing what becoming a doctor will do to you. In the ER I'd seen too many lives shattered by drunk drivers for me to ever touch the stuff again.

I grinned. "Well, I have to be respectable now."

"At least you did something with your life. No one will ever accuse you of trapping anyone," she choked out.

That got my ire up. I might have to forget the respectable thing for a hot minute and avenge my sister's honor. Why is it always the woman's fault? When it comes to pregnancy, it takes two to tango. "Who says that about you?"

She lifted her head up and let out the heaviest of breaths. "No one," she lied. "I got what I always wanted, right?" Her eyes wandered over the spacious home, decorated with the finest furnishings. Everything she ever wanted before her eyes, right down to the mega veranda with the perfect view of the lake. She had everything money could buy. Yet it was obvious it didn't bring her the happiness she thought it would.

"Did you get what you *really* wanted?" I had to ask.

She sat up steely straight, making my hand fall off her head. "Yes."

"You're a terrible liar."

Stella's mouth opened in dispute, but nothing came out.

“When you’re ready to tell me the truth, I’m here for you.”

“Please, just be there for Quinn,” she begged.

I tilted my head. “Stella, Quinn needs you. I know you’re hurting too, but she’s your daughter. Do something fun with her today. Just the two of you.”

Stella shook her head. “I can’t. I need to meet with our lawyers to move everything into my name. At least Jonathon was good enough to leave us financially stable,” she snipped. “Besides, Tristan is taking Quinn for the day. I think they’re going horseback riding or something.”

Funny how Quinn failed to mention that. That gorgeous rascal was cooking something up. I could smell the trouble from miles away. “How nice,” I gritted through my teeth.

Stella narrowed her eyes at me. “Are you ever going to tell me why you two broke up?”

“No.” That information was going to stay between me and the nonexistent entity. Telling people would only imply that I cared about what he thought. And I didn’t. At least not anymore. Thirteen years ago, I very much cared, and it almost crushed me when he told me I was just a bad habit. Like I was an ugly drug addiction. No one had ever said anything so humiliating to me. Yes, I knew I could be a bit much for some people, and maybe I even went overboard at times trying to do the right thing. Or even to tick people off, like wearing an elf costume at a funeral. But I’d thought he loved me for who I was. I’d thought we were a forever kind of thing. Never had I been so wrong. That, more than anything, had floored me and had me keeping my mouth shut. He would never have that kind of power over me again.

“Maybe someday we’ll both tell each other the truth.” She snuggled back down into the blankets without another word.

I stood there, not knowing what to say. It was a rare day when I had no snappy comeback. Perhaps, though, I had no words because deep down, Stella and I both knew how vulnerable the truth could make a person. Right now, I had no time for vulnerability. I was about to face a town that was rooting for me to fail and prove to them I was just a trashy wild child from the wrong side of the lake. Just like they always thought I was. Worse, I was going to have to be in the presence of the man who almost, for a moment, made me think the town was right about me.

I had no time for vulnerability.

They were *all* going to see just how wrong they were.

FOUR

CALISTA

I KNOCKED ON DEIDRA'S OFFICE door and waited. She wanted to talk to me before I started my shift, I assumed to wish me luck. She didn't need to do that, considering she was the CMO and kept business hours. None of these seven in the morning to seven at night shifts. But I appreciated it all the same. Especially since I was nervous. Few things rattled me, but it was daunting to start a new job in a town where everyone was probably taking bets on how long I would last. Or on whether I'd actually graduated from med school. While I appeared to be a hear-me-roar kind of girl most of the time, I was still human. Even if I didn't like to admit it.

"Come in," Deidra called.

I opened the door to find her sitting prim and proper behind the modern glass desk in her pristine corner office. The wall of windows behind her provided a beautiful view of the courtyard. Well, when it was light outside, it did. Though she was close to sixty years old, you would never know except for her long curly gray hair. Her beautiful brown skin, a gift from her Pacific Islander father, had hardly a wrinkle in it.

"Good morning," Deidra said, professionally.

I tilted my head, taken aback by her tone. As my godmother and my mom's best friend dating back to their junior high school days, she usually spoke to me in a sweet, motherly fashion. "Good morning," I responded warily. "Is everything okay?"

She pointed behind me. "Shut the door."

That didn't give me any warm, fuzzy feelings. But I did as she asked and leaned against the door. "What's going on?" I inquired with some trepidation.

She pressed her lips together, formulating her response. "You know I love you like you were my own ..."

Deidra could never have children. She'd married later in life, and she and Max had Great Danes they treated like children. The dogs even had their own room and beds.

"But?" I questioned.

"No buts; just a warning."

My stomach twisted, knowing my reputation preceded me, but I'd thought she'd already properly warned me to be on my best behavior.

"Don't look at me like that," she pleaded.

"Like what?"

"Like you're bracing yourself for me to hurt you. You know I would never."

I knew that. Deidra was my mentor and second mother. If it weren't for her, I wouldn't be a doctor. After the nonexistent entity tore out my heart, she was the person I ran to. She was the one who made me think about becoming a doctor. She'd said if I really wanted to help people for the rest of my life, I should consider medical school. It seemed like an impossible dream for a young woman with very little means and nothing to her name except for her dad's old run-down truck and the tiny cottage I grew up in which had very little equity in it.

Deidra had helped me sell them both, even though it broke my heart to do it. But Deidra told me my parents would be so proud of my choice. That money paid for my undergraduate years. From that point on, it was a lot of student loans and the occasional card from Deidra and Max containing cash. Somehow, they always knew when I needed it most.

It's funny how at first the idea of becoming a doctor mostly appealed to me because it would be a slap in the face to every person in Aspen Lake who thought I was just a troublemaker. In the end,

it felt like my calling in life. I wouldn't trade it for anything. I loved that I got to help people every day when I stepped into my scrubs.

I nibbled on my bottom lip like I always did when I was anxious. "So, what's the warning?"

Deidra gave me a placating smile. "Word has gotten around about your elf costume at the funeral."

"To whom?"

She grimaced. "Everyone."

I shrugged, not caring who knew about it. That was kind of the whole point of the outfit.

Deidra sighed. "Calista, I know you don't want to hear this, but as a doctor in this community, you have a certain obligation."

"What? To pretend my brother-in-law wasn't a jerk? Or that his family doesn't abhor me?"

"No. To behave in a way that is becoming of your title. You need to cultivate trust between you and those who will walk into the ER every day."

I pressed my hands against the door, stunned. "I have always put my patients first. You know that. Never once has a colleague or superior questioned my dedication or my judgment. Why are you?"

"I'm not. It's just there are several people on the board of trustees who are—"

"Let me guess: friends with the Grangers?"

"Honey," she breathed out. "Whether you like it or not, the Grangers wield power in this town. All I'm asking is that you don't give them any reason to use it against you. No cowboy medicine."

I smirked. "What about cowgirl?"

She looked down her nose at me with her wise brown eyes. "You know I've always loved your passion and the way you try to do what's right, despite the consequences. Just remember, your job and future are at stake here." She paused. "Not to mention my job and credibility. Few women sit in my position across this country and never before in this town."

Deidra really was a trailblazer.

I rubbed my chest, feeling more than ever like I'd made a mistake in returning. Part of me wanted to run back to Phoenix and beg for my old job back. I was well loved there and had good friends. I had even dated some great guys. Sure, I always broke it off before they could reduce our relationship to an addiction and tell me I was just a bad habit to them, but that was another story. "I would never intentionally do anything to hurt you or your career."

Her countenance softened. "I know that. I just ... I just want you to be careful. Unfortunately, and unfairly, there will be those waiting for you to step even a toe out of line."

"Great. Happy first day to me."

Deidra stood. "Honey, if anyone is up to the challenge, it's you. I've never met anyone more determined or as intelligent as you. And let's throw in stubborn too."

My lips twitched, refusing to fully smile. "I think I like *determined* better."

"There is nothing wrong with being stubborn. I wouldn't be occupying this office if I weren't stubborn. Don't let anyone steal this from you. Especially the Grangers. For far too long, they have gotten their way in this town." She knew that better than anyone. She'd come from the wrong side of the lake too. For some reason, people didn't seem to like it when we succeeded.

"Maybe I shouldn't have come back," I voiced my fear out loud.

"I think you needed to."

"Why?"

"Because you love this town, and you let the Grangers steal it from you. I think it's time you took it back. Besides, I missed you, and your sister and niece need you."

I didn't want to remember loving this place. But Deidra was right. Quinn and Stella needed me. For them and for Deidra, I would have to toe the line. Hang up the elf costume for a while, I guess. "I better head downstairs."

“I love you, Calista. I’m proud of you. Have a good first day.”

I turned to go. “Thank you, Dr. Zane.” I thought I should be more formal. You know, just in case.

She chuckled. “You got this, Dr. Monroe,” her voice cracked. “Your mom and dad would be so proud.”

“They would say I am finally using my powers for good and not evil.”

“Your parents never thought you were evil. They loved your fire. Don’t lose that—just keep it a controlled burn, okay?”

I nodded, knowing what she meant, and walked out the door. The gleaming tiled floor and fancy artwork on the walls seemed to mock me and remind me I was out of place. It was a far cry from the inner-city hospital in Phoenix, where the walls were drab and dankness permeated the halls. I doubted I would treat gunshot and stab wounds on any sort of regular basis here. Yet, I felt like I belonged more there than here. There, they applauded my *cowboy* ways.

The ride down the elevator went way too quickly. I had never questioned myself more than at that moment. Not even when, against my better judgment, I had decided to date the nonexistent pretty boy who persistently pursued me so long ago. I should have known better then, just like now. But just like then, I’d already made my choice and I would see it through. I was stubborn like that. If only I could figure out why the Grangers still had it out for me. They’d gotten what they wanted. Their son left me and hated me, just like they wished.

It’s possible they still blamed me for his arrest all those years ago, even though I’d begged him not to take the blame for rescuing those puppies. He hadn’t wanted to help me in the first place. I’d even told him not to come, but he insisted when he realized I was hell-bent on saving them. In good conscience, I couldn’t let those dogs live another moment in the filthy, cruel conditions of that supposed breeder’s property. It all ended up working out. The breeder got shut down, we placed the puppies and older dogs in good clean homes, and *he* got off without even a blemish on his perfect record. So why did the Grangers still feel the need to keep me down now? Were they worried I still wanted their son? Believe me, they had absolutely no reason to fret. I had made a solemn vow to never look at him again. And unlike the sock promise, and the one time I’d slipped up and looked at his pretty face during the funeral, this was one sacred oath I would be keeping.

When the elevator doors opened into the ER waiting room, I trudged out, gripping my backpack straps like lifelines. A couple of adults were waiting to be seen. I decided it was best not to make eye contact, lest they see the fear in my face. It wasn’t them I was afraid of. It was this town. The town with judging eyes.

I hustled to the entrance and stretched out the badge on the retractable reel attached to my shirt to pass it over the electronic lock. When the door automatically swung open, I jumped like this was my first rodeo. *Get it together*, I berated myself. I wouldn’t be intimidated by the Grangers. I mean, it’s not like I needed this job to pay off my two hundred grand in student loans or anything. I rarely cried, but I felt some tears emerging until I saw the nurses’ station. They had made an enormous banner and hung it up on the glass surrounding the station in the middle of the unit. *Welcome, Dr. Monroe!*

Nurses really did save lives.

My tears didn’t have the chance to manifest, thank goodness. I never cried on the job unless ... well ... when someone died. Even then, I did it privately in my car after my shift was over.

The bitter smell of antiseptic and soap lingered in the air, while the sounds of heart and blood pressure monitors played in the background. In a weird way, it calmed my nerves. It reminded me why I loved this job, and that I got to help make people better every day.

The charge nurse, I believed Deidra told me her name was Evie, noticed me right away. She left the safety of the station and marched over to me like she was on a do-or-die mission. I was used to it. They didn’t have time for new doctors, which I understood. Thankfully, after medical school and residency rotations, I got used to learning the ropes quickly in a new unit. It was kind of like being thrown into a pack of wolves. Everyone had to learn to fend for themselves. If I was lucky, some nurse would at least show me to the employees’ lounge and let me know where I could get a mass infusion of caffeine.

Evie was probably in her late fifties, judging by her short gray permed hair. She was all of five foot two, but her in-charge attitude made her seem taller than my five-foot-nine frame. This was good. I appreciated a no-holds-barred charge nurse. They made the unit function better, which made my job easier.

“Are you Dr. Monroe?” Evie barked. Clearly, she was not the one who made the welcome banner. And ... more than likely, she knew I came with a reputation. For all I knew, she was Cordelia Granger’s BFF. Except, I’m pretty sure Cordelia’s best friend was the spawn of Satan.

I held out my hand. “Yes, it’s a pleasure to meet you. Evie, right?”

She warily looked at my hand before she took it and crushed it with her iron grip. It was her silent way of warning me she would not tolerate pink elf costumes or cowboy medicine.

I looked squarely into her brown, emotionless eyes. “I’m ready to get to work.”

She dropped my hand.

I refused to give her the pleasure of flexing it. I would show no fear, even if I trembled inside.

She gave me a good once-over. “Follow me.”

I marched behind her.

“Did you download the app so we can page you if needed?”

“Yes.”

She spun around. “Just so you know, I don’t care who you’re related to here. I don’t have time for nepotism.”

I knew she meant Deidra.

“Evie.” I smiled my most charming smile. “I promise you, by the end of this week, we’re going to be best friends and you won’t know what you ever did without me.”

Her eyes widened, transforming her large forehead into several rolls of skin.

I loved to catch people off guard.

She tsked before turning back around, obviously not sure what to make of me.

I, on the other hand, felt a bit of satisfaction, and more like myself. I hated that I had let the Grangers rule my emotions.

On the way down the hall, Evie grabbed a cute nurse with sandy shoulder-length hair. “Lucy, show this one the ropes.”

This one? I wanted to say, *Hello, I have a name*, but figured there was no need to tick her off right out of the gate. I’m sure that would happen later.

Lucy rolled her eyes at Evie for addressing me in such a manner.

I instantly liked her.

“I would be happy to show *Dr. Monroe* around,” Lucy emphasized.

“Thank you,” I said gratefully.

Evie walked off without another word, muttering to herself.

Lucy smiled. “Don’t mind her. She doesn’t like anyone.”

“Oh good. I thought it was just me.”

Lucy bit her lip. “Well ... she might like you even less. You are kind of a legend in this town.”

“Legend?” I had never heard that one before. Public nuisance, rebel, good-for-nothing, gold digger, tramp, etc. But never *legend*.

Lucy’s heart-shaped face lit up. “You are the one who sabotaged the boys’ locker room showers and made a slip and slide down the gym hallway, right?”

I grinned. Those were good times. They almost didn’t allow me to graduate because of the slip and slide incident, but it was totally worth it. “Um, yeah, that was me.”

“My friends and I were so jealous you graduated before we made it to high school.”

“You went to Aspen Lake High?”

She threw her fist in the air like a cheerleader. “Yep. Go Bobcats!” She wagged her brows. “Maybe you can liven things up here a little.”

Oh, no. That was the last thing I was going to do. For Deidra, Quinn, and Stella, I had to play by the rules for once. I could do that, right? Maybe?

FIVE

TRISTAN

“HEY QUINNSTER, YOU’RE BEING QUIET today,” Tristan remarked as they rode horses up one of the mountain trails at his ranch. He, too, was finding himself lost in his thoughts as they wended their way up. Each thought seemed to land on Calista. Something about her wouldn’t let him be. He knew there could be nothing between them again, yet his mind replayed their story repeatedly. Everything from late-night dips in the lake to staying up for hours talking just to watch the sunrise. Every replay had him wishing he could change the ending somehow. But he knew it was impossible. He’d screwed up in a major way, and there was no coming back from it.

“What are you thinking about?” he asked Quinn, hoping she could help distract his mind from her aunt. He would even be happy to talk about his prick of a brother if that’s what his niece needed.

She took her time answering.

Meanwhile, Tristan took a moment to look at what he considered his little slice of heaven. It was a chilly, but clear, day. Snow covered the ground and trees, insulating the sound of the horses’ hooves. Perfect riding weather in his mind. Really, any day was perfect for riding, as long as it wasn’t raining or a blizzard. Riding his trusty horse, Scout, brought him solace. It was even better when Quinn joined him. When he’d bought this property a few years ago, he’d had Quinn and his future children in mind. Maybe even a certain new doctor in town, even though it was a ludicrous thought. The dream they’d once had to own such a place together was just that—a dream.

“Do you think you’ll ever get married again?” Quinn asked out of the blue.

Tristan twisted his head to look at her, surprised by her question.

She flashed him an innocent smile atop Buttercup, the chestnut mare he had given her on her tenth birthday.

“You cried when I married Rachel,” he reminded her. He should have taken that as his sign to not go through with it. But Rachel checked all the boxes. She was intelligent and gorgeous, driven and stable, or so he’d thought. Plus, his parents approved of her. That should have been a red flag too. But he hadn’t wanted to rehash the same arguments dating Calista had caused. She was still causing them. His parents were still seething about the elf costume she wore to the funeral. Yesterday, he told them just to let it go. That hadn’t gone over well. They accused him of wanting her. They weren’t wrong, but he wasn’t going to admit it to them. The usual warnings ensued after that—she was bad for business, and even worse for him. They didn’t care that the happiest he’d ever been in his life was when he’d been with her. He wasn’t even sure if his parents knew what happiness was.

Quinn scrunched her button nose, red from the cold. “She only pretended to like me when you were around. When you weren’t there, she wanted nothing to do with me.”

Tristan cringed. Rachel had fooled him. He’d thought he was marrying a kind woman who wanted to raise a family with him. Come to find out, she was more interested in his money and social status. She never intended to have children or even settle down. It killed him to know he’d been so blindsided.

He faced forward and apologized again. “I’m sorry about that.”

“You didn’t answer my question. Do you want to get married?”

Tristan let out a heavy breath. A plume of white danced in front of him. His thoughts immediately turned to Calista. It was more than foolish. No way in hell would she ever consider it. At least not now. Once upon a time, they had talked about getting married. He’d even looked at rings, knowing if he crossed that line, his parents would have most likely pushed him out of the family business and disinherited him. If only he’d been brave enough to take the risk. Who knew what his life would look like now? He’d probably have children of his own and a warm, sexy body

to hold every night. Instead, he had more money than he knew what to do with and a ranch with a stable full of prize-winning horses. It was quite the tradeoff.

“I don’t know, Quinnster,” he answered honestly. Relationships didn’t seem to be his forte. He either picked the wrong women or hurt the right one.

“Oh,” she sounded disappointed.

He pulled up on Scout’s reins and turned around to face her. “What has you asking?”

She shrugged but wouldn’t meet his eyes. “I don’t know. I was just thinking you’re getting kind of old, and it might be nice to have some cousins or something.”

Tristan chuckled. “Men my age have children all the time.”

“So, you do want to have kids.” She sounded hopeful.

“Sure, but I’d have to find the right woman, and that takes time.” No need to mention he’d already found her and pushed her away.

Quinn’s eyes lit up mischievously, reminding Tristan of her aunt. He wasn’t sure if he should be worried or not.

“Maybe you’ll find her soon,” she sang.

“Doubtful, kid.”

“Okay. Um ... well ... I wanted to talk to you about Christmas.”

Tristan was all ears. He hadn’t been sure if he should bring up the holiday, under the circumstances. “Shoot,” he said.

“What I really want this year is to have an old-fashioned Christmas. The kind Aunt Calista always talks about. You know, picking out a tree and making the decorations. Homemade cookies, hot chocolate, and cinnamon rolls. Stuff like that.”

Tristan swallowed hard at the mention of Calista. He and Quinn rarely talked about her. In fact, Quinn used to believe Calista was allergic to him. No doubt who had told her that. “Sure, kiddo, whatever you want. I’ll make it happen.” Anything to make her happy.

A big ole grin appeared on her face. “Yay! So you’ll come over tonight and help me and Aunt Calista plan everything?”

Tristan coughed. “Excuse me?”

“Yeah, Aunt Calista said she’s fine with it, even though she hates you.”

He knew that, but it felt like a punch in the gut to hear his sweet Quinn say it. “She said she hates me?”

“Yeah. A lot. Like more than anyone else. Why is that?” Quinn asked, conspiratorially.

Tristan wasn’t falling for her trap. “She didn’t tell you?”

“No, but it must be really bad. What did you do?”

“Who says I did anything?” he feigned innocence, not keen on admitting to his niece what a jerk he had been.

Quinn smirked. “Because you never say her name, and your ears are turning red.”

He covered his ears with his hands. “It’s cold.”

“Uh-huh. So, what did you do?”

“I think you should ask your aunt.”

“I think you should tell me.”

“Ah, you asked her, and she wouldn’t say,” Tristan guessed. It didn’t surprise him. He had a feeling she hadn’t told anyone what he’d said. Not even Stella. He’d crushed her, and her best revenge was to act like it never happened. Her plan had worked. The silence was wickedly painful.

That didn’t deter Quinn. “Maybe I did. But I know she was in love with you. Were you in love with her?”

Tristan blinked several times, not believing he was having this conversation with Quinn. Although it was foolish to think he could hide the truth from her forever. He knew eventually she would realize Calista wasn't truly allergic to him and that they always ignored each other whenever they saw each other. Which was a rare occurrence over the years. Calista only came back to town for Quinn's birthday. Tristan usually stayed away until she left. But every once in a while, he would torture himself and show up at his brother's place just to catch a glimpse of the woman he loved.

"Well, did you love her?" Quinn grew impatient.

"Quinnster," he breathed out. "What happened between your aunt and me was a long time ago."

"That's what she said. So, what happened?" She refused to drop it.

His shoulders rose and fell. "Magic." A magic like he had never known before or since.

Quinn's eyes widened. "You did love her."

Tristan nodded.

"Then why does she hate you?"

He cleared his throat. "I hurt her. We'll leave it at that." He turned back around and snapped Scout's reins.

"Did you tell her you're sorry?" Quinn pleaded to know.

"Kiddo, there are some things sorry doesn't fix."

"Did you cheat on her like my dad did to my mom?" she cried.

Damn Jonathon. Tristan jumped off Scout and went straight to his niece. She slid off Buttercup and right into his arms. He held her close while she sobbed into his coat. "Honey, I didn't cheat on your aunt. I'm not that guy." *I'm worse.*

"I heard my mom and dad fighting about it. They were always fighting until he went into the hospital. I told my mom she should just divorce him, but she wouldn't. She said she deserved it."

Tristan leaned away and peered into her bleary eyes, wondering why the hell Stella would say such a thing to her daughter, of all people. "No one deserves that. Don't you ever let a guy make you think that. Promise me."

She nodded. "I promise."

He pulled her back to him and stroked her hair, wishing he could take this pain from her.

"Please apologize to her," Quinn blubbered against him.

Tristan's hand stilled in her hair. "Kiddo, she doesn't want to talk to me."

"But maybe if you said sorry, then ..."

"Then what?"

"Well, maybe you could—"

Tristan had a suspicion about where this was going. "Quinnster, whatever you're thinking, it's not going to happen." As much as he wished it could.

She leaned away from him, tears running down her cheeks. "Please try."

He wiped a few tears off her cheeks, his heart breaking and wishing for anything to make her smile. "Kiddo, she won't even look at me. Besides, we've been apart for too long. We're different people now." At least that's what he liked to tell himself. She obviously had the same fire in her, wearing that elf outfit to a funeral. And he was still toeing the line with his parents.

"But you still love her, don't you?" she asked without guile. "I can tell."

"How can you tell?" he asked, instead of answering the question. Tristan didn't want to admit his feelings out loud. Feelings he had tried to bury, and successfully had for a while. Then he would see fireworks in the sky. And his mind would picture her clothes hanging on a branch as she ran through the snow in her bra and underwear to jump into the freezing lake on New Year's Eve, just for the hell of it. While bursts of colors exploded above her, she'd dared him to join her. She was always daring him to do the unexpected and live outside the box. It was one of the things he loved most about her, but it was also the thing that drove them apart. To him, the box served a purpose,

and he liked the safety of it. Despite all that, there was no denying he still loved her. She made him come alive in ways he had never known. He missed it. He missed her.

“I saw you follow her at the funeral,” Quinn admitted. “And when you look at her, it’s like you lost something.”

That about summed it up. Except he hadn’t lost her. He’d left her. “It doesn’t matter how I feel or don’t feel.”

She sank against him. “It does matter. It matters to me. Please fix it. I need both of you.”

Tristan rested his chin on her head. Quinn had no idea what she was asking of him. When Calista made her mind up about something, that was it. It was do-or-die for her. Unless it came to socks and Pottery Barn, apparently. But she *had* looked at him. Maybe there was a shred of hope they could at least be friends, for Quinn’s sake. This was insane thinking. It would take a miracle for Calista to even acknowledge his existence. But ... it was Christmas—the season of miracles. And if anyone deserved her Christmas wish, it was Quinn. For her, he had to try.

“What time did you say I should come over tonight to help you and your aunt plan Christmas?”

SIX

CALISTA

AFTER A LONG FIRST DAY IN the ER, which included a close call of being vomited on and one marriage proposal from a kindly old man with dementia, I drove up Stella's lengthy drive. I wanted nothing more than to sink into a hot bath before indulging in a Cary Grant marathon with Quinn, but she'd already texted me that the uncle was there. Ugh. Seriously, why did I ever date him? Okay, I knew why. It was the way he would look at me with those pale-blue eyes of his. They didn't undress me. No, they said, *I'll wait for you to show me what you want, when you want*. It was the sexiest thing ever for him to just let me be me. To let me come to him when I was good and ready. That was, until he didn't want me. But until then, I'd never felt so loved and admired.

Come to find out, it was just a lie.

Man, was he a good liar. He sure had me fooled. Idiot.

It was fine. I had been ignoring him for thirteen years, except for my very tiny recent slipup at the funeral, but that would never happen again. It was going to be a little harder now to pretend he didn't exist, considering we lived in the same zip code and we both loved Quinn more than anything. But I liked a challenge. What could be harder than working twenty-hour shifts in the ER? Or removing a superglued toilet seat off some poor college kid's butt? That was not the weirdest thing I had seen in the ER. Poor mortified guy. I bet he never drank again or went to another frat party.

The point was, I could do this. No problem. Tristan was nothing to me other than a lapse of judgment. I should have known better than to date him. Or worse, swear to him I was going to marry him and have at least four babies with him. I would daydream out loud with him about a little cozy cabin with a wraparound deck. He would be a ski instructor during the winter, and in the summer months we would lead wilderness excursions. We would take our babies with us, strapped on our backs like we were the Swiss Family Robinson or something. It was simple and perfect. Or at least I used to think so.

I cringed, thinking of it now. Especially knowing he was probably laughing behind my back about it the entire time we were together. I was just his bad habit, after all. How could I have been so foolish to think it would ever work out? His parents and friends all looked down on me because of where I came from. And unlike Stella, I wouldn't pretend to be someone I'm not. I was proud of my side of the lake. My parents were the best people. They always helped others and gave what they could, even though we never had a lot. My dad gave his life trying to save a family that got caught out on the lake during a terrible thunderstorm. I wanted to be just like them. You know, except the dying young part. All I knew was I didn't need Tristan to accomplish that. Never did, never will.

I parked my car in front of the four-car detached garage that looked more like a fancy guest house. I didn't think Stella wanted me to park my old Honda next to her nice, shiny luxury vehicles. She had offered to let me drive Jonathon's Mercedes G-Class SUV since it was getting snowier and snowier. I'd refused on principle, and because I'm pretty sure the *G* stood for *gaudy*. Someday, I would buy a used Jeep or something. It seemed to be the vehicle of choice for ER doctors. Not sure why, but it was true. It was probably a good idea to get four-wheel drive, seeing as I had to live in this forsaken town until Quinn graduated and decided what to do with her life. Then I would follow her to college or something.

I got out of the car slowly, not looking forward to another awkward situation. Admittedly, I felt juvenile for blatantly ignoring someone, but I'd made a solemn vow. And I knew if I broke it, something bad would happen. Like the world would stop turning. At least my world would, and that I couldn't have. Tristan had made my world stop once before, and I would never feel so vulnerable again.

With several deep breaths in and out, I trudged my way over to the steps leading up to the kitchen entrance. I passed Tristan's old black Ford truck. I had to stop and catch my breath. It shocked me he still had the thing. I remember picking it up from the dealership with him like it was yesterday. He'd bought the beast with big four-wheel drive wheels to haul his horse trailer. I couldn't help but peek at the tailgate to see if the dent I'd put in it the first time I drove it was still there. With squinty eyes, I scanned the back of the worn truck, hoping he'd fixed it. I felt awful the day it'd happened. Although he was partly to blame. I was backing out of my drive, and he put his hand on my thigh at just the wrong moment. I hit the mailbox, bending the post clear over.

He wasn't mad at all, even though the truck was all of a week old. I'd offered to get it fixed, but he wouldn't hear of it. He'd said it added character to it and was proof I wasn't entirely perfect.

When I opened my eyes fully, there the dent was on the same tailgate that had seen a lot of heated kisses. The best kisses of my life. I shook my head, trying not to think about how Tristan would start off by being agonizingly chaste about it, a taste here and there, driving me mad with his teasing. From there, the kiss would become more intimate, yet still sweet, while he would gently sweep my mouth with his tongue. Then when we were breathing the same breaths, the kiss would turn deep and ravenous while his hands ran through my hair, decimating my ponytail or braid. The best part was how he always kissed his way over to my ear, his stubble brushing my cheek as he went. He would whisper the most beautiful things in my ear. Mostly how much he loved me and couldn't imagine his life without me in it.

Like I said, he was a good liar.

This wasn't a good start to the night. I shouldn't reminisce about the time we'd shared that was better than good. Something like magic. But just like magic, it was an illusion.

Rattled, I marched up the wooden stairs, only to find Stella walking out the kitchen entrance. She was dressed to the nines in a party dress and a long black silk coat, her hair in an updo. My brow raised. "Wow. Are you hitting the club?" I asked sarcastically, a bit miffed she was leaving Quinn.

She tittered nervously. "No. I'm meeting some friends at the country club."

I refrained from rolling my eyes. It was still weird to think my sister belonged to a country club. "Quinn really wants an old-fashioned Christmas this year. Why don't you stay and help us plan it?"

She waved her perfectly manicured hand around. "You and Tristan are much better at that sort of thing. I'll leave you to it." She rushed past me.

I turned to watch her hustle down the stairs in her stilettos. "Stella, you can't run from this. From Quinn."

Even in the dark of night, I could see her eyes well up with tears. "You don't understand."

"I don't understand what?"

Stella stood there for a moment, at a loss for words. "I'm not strong like you, okay? Please, just take care of Quinn. I'll be back later." She ran like her life depended on it.

I watched her go, not sure what to make of the situation.

"There you are," Quinn cheerfully called from the door.

I put on a fake smile before turning around, making sure it was only Quinn at the door. I couldn't have any accidental looks at the uncle. Thankfully, it was just my perfect niece in a hoodie and pajama pants.

"Hi, Quinny. How was your day?" I walked up the remaining steps.

She rubbed her arms from the cold. "Good. Uncle Tristan and I went horseback riding," she sang to a devious tune.

"That sounds nice," I said without grimacing, knowing full well she was setting a trap.

"He just made the best Oreo shakes ever. Just how you like it, with homemade whipped cream on top and a drizzle of dark chocolate syrup over it."

Oh, it wasn't even fair he remembered the Oreo shakes down to the smallest of details. What was he playing at? At the funeral, he made it clear I had only ever been a bad habit to him. Was he

trying to prove he was the better person? Maybe that he loves Quinn more than I do? Well, I had news for him. No one loves her more than I do.

“Great.” I gritted my teeth, trying to be adult about the situation.

Quinn swung the door open wide for me.

I steeled myself before walking through it, reminding myself to be cautious and watch where my eyes roamed. It was immature, I know, but that’s the way it had to be.

Quinn threw her arms around me as I walked into what my sister called a modern rustic kitchen. Supposedly, the painted sage cupboards and island and the white wooden walls made it so. I had no idea about these sorts of things. What I knew was crappy and cramped kitchens that I never used in my old apartments. I barely had time to eat, much less cook. But I would find the time for Quinn now. Especially during the holidays. I was going to pull out all Mom’s old recipe cards. Everything from gooey orange rolls to her Crock-Pot hot chocolate.

I held Quinn tight, glad she didn’t seem upset her mother was hitting the country club. I took my time, knowing her uncle was staring at me. I could feel his eyes rove over me. A hint of his amber scent mixed in with the chocolatey goodness in the air. Unfortunately, it was an excellent combination. One I used to crave. But not today. “Are you ready to plan the best Christmas ever?” I stuttered, feeling off, knowing he was nearby. My guess was he stood near the island, but I refused to check.

“Yep.” She let go of me.

I kept my head down and took my backpack and coat off. “Just let me hang these up and I’ll be right back.”

Quinn grabbed them from me and tossed them on the butcher block counter. I doubted her mom would appreciate it, but since she wasn’t here, c’est la vie. “Don’t worry about them now. Your shake is going to melt.” She grabbed my hand and led me toward my demise—I mean the island.

I kept my head straight and eyes down, thankful the idiot was tall at six foot three. Looking at his chest surely didn’t count. I couldn’t act like too much of a weirdo and completely look away. I just prayed he didn’t talk to me. Quinn better have told him the rules. Well, there was only one rule: ignore each other for eternity. Pretty simple, if you asked me. Hopefully, he wouldn’t ask me, thereby breaking the rule.

Especially since staring at his flannel-clad chest had me wanting to hyperventilate. I knew very well it was covering some deliciously defined pecs and abs. It was ridiculous how clearly I could still picture his smooth, tanned skin. I was pretty sure he waxed his chest, but I never asked, letting him keep that secret. All I cared about was that my fingers used to love to dance down the length of his chest and over the ripples of his abs, making his skin rise. Even better was resting my head upon it, listening to his heartbeat, lulling me to sleep.

I grabbed an Oreo shake before I was tempted to run off and find some of my old med school textbooks. Books with horrific pictures and descriptions in them. Anything not to think of *him*. However, I was determined to not let him get to me, so I stayed.

I took a long sip through a metal straw, letting the cookies and ice cream soothe my soul. Quinn filled my line of vision, smirking like the little con artist she is.

She wagged her perfectly arched brows. “Good, huh?”

I nodded, still sucking in the delectable shake. I figured this way, I wouldn’t even have to speak.

“Okay, let’s get down to business.” Quinn sat down on a stool and grabbed the notebook and pen near her.

I tilted my head to read what she had written all over the pink notebook. *I love Kody*. Who the heck was Kody? I would have asked, but I was working my way into a sugar coma. And then ... the bozo sat down next to her, forcing himself into my line of sight.

Crap.

The suddenness of it all made me take in too much of the shake. I began spluttering, trying to avert my eyes, all while lunging for the stool on the other side of Quinn. No doubt I looked like a fool. It was a miracle I didn’t drop the mason jar holding the delicious ice cream concoction.

Tristan chuckled.

He could laugh all he wanted. I was keeping my blood oath. He would not intimidate me. I cleaned maggot-filled wounds and removed bullets lodged in skin for a living. Don't even get me going on what people stuck up their intimate parts I'd had to retrieve. It was going to take more than some laughing to scare me off.

With my coughing under control, I took a deep breath in and let it out. "Why don't we make a list of everything you want to do?" I suggested. "Then we can talk about scheduling."

Quinn must have liked the idea, as she went right to work. "First, we have to find the best Christmas tree. Well, maybe we should buy all the stuff for the decorations and then make them before we get the tree. Or maybe it doesn't matter," she rambled as she wrote.

I smiled at her enthusiasm.

"I'm sure your aunt will know where we can buy the supplies," Tristan said.

It was inevitable, but it made it harder to pretend he wasn't there. And why was he mentioning me? Didn't he say at the cemetery he would never bother me again? He was definitely bothering me. Besides, it didn't take a genius to know we needed to go to a craft store. We could even get some supplies at the grocery store, like popcorn and cranberries for the garland.

I took another long sip of the shake and nodded.

Quinn giggled.

Yes, I was an imbecile. But at least I was upholding my principles.

"Uncle Tristan, do you know where we can get the perfect tree?"

"I have one in mind on the ranch. We could chop it down together on Friday or Saturday," he suggested.

"Aunt Calista, you're off on Friday, right?"

I set my shake down, holding back the whimper that was building in my chest. The last place I wanted to go was Tristan's ranch. I'd heard Quinn speak of it before. It sounded, you know, perfect, if you liked a cozy cabin and acres of beautiful land made for camping and horseback riding. I loved all those things. Which was why I didn't want to go. I didn't need to see Tristan living out a part of *our* dreams. I mean my dreams. But I knew I couldn't back down. I would die on the stubborn ship if I had to.

"Yep. I wouldn't miss it. I have to teach you how to sing 'O Tannenbaum' in German." My mom would make us sing it every year to the tree before we chopped it down. Maybe to ease her guilt. I think she needed the tree to know it was serving a noble purpose. She said it had to be done in German to honor her heritage. The heritage she rarely spoke of. It was too painful for her to speak about the family that had disowned her. For what? Loving one of the kindest, most selfless men to walk the planet. All because he hadn't graduated from college and worked a low-paying job he loved.

"It's a date," Quinn chirped.

I assumed she meant that figuratively, because this would in no way resemble a date.

"Okay," Quinn sounded so giddy. It did my heart good. "Some other things I want to do are make lots of sugar cookies, watch Christmas movies, roast marshmallows, donate my old clothes and take food to the food bank, go sledding, and definitely skiing."

Oh no. That was one thing I was not doing. Too many memories of Tristan and me lived on the slopes. It was one reason I hated snow now. The first time he ever told me he loved me was on those slopes during my very first skiing trip. I'd just fallen grandly and couldn't get up because the powder was so deep. Tristan purposely fell down beside me. Etched in my mind forever was the adoring gaze he gave me at that moment. No one had ever looked at me that way before. It was all-encompassing, like he could see everything from my past to my future. Overcome with emotion, he choked out, "*I love you, Calista.*"

I pulled him to me and kissed him, tears streaming down my cold cheeks. If ever there was a perfect moment, that was it.

Suddenly, the Oreo shake didn't feel so good in my stomach. I pushed it away, as well as the memory. "I don't ski anymore," I informed Quinn.

She turned toward me, a question in her eyes. “But I saw the skis in the back of your closet when you said I could borrow your jean jacket the other day.”

I didn’t have to look at Tristan to know that his head whipped my way.

Dang it. I thought I hid those better. I should have gotten rid of them a long time ago. Thirteen years, to be exact. I wasn’t even sure why I kept them. You don’t know how ridiculous I have looked over the years, moving Tristan’s stupid gift to me. I’ve had them hanging out passenger-side windows or strapped to the roof of my car. But I couldn’t part with them. Maybe it was because they were proof I couldn’t be so wrong about someone. Or that our relationship wasn’t just all in my head. That once upon a time, I was more than just a bad habit.

I had to stop myself from looking at Tristan. It probably disturbed him I’d kept the skis. The one time I let him buy me anything expensive. Believe me, it disturbed no one more than me. Maybe if I saw the horror in his eyes, I could finally part with them. But now, more than ever, I needed to keep my promise to myself. I couldn’t let him see in my eyes how much he had hurt me.

“Those are just old pieces of junk,” I said to Quinn, hoping Tristan got the memo. He had no reason to fear I was still clinging to the past—to him.

“Oh,” Quinn said, disappointed. “Well, maybe you can rent some, or I bet Uncle Tristan has some you can borrow.”

“That’s okay, honey.” I smiled at her. “That’s something you and your uncle can do together.”

“But,” she started to say.

I shook my head, letting her know it was a moot point. I would swallow my pride and do anything else she wanted with Tristan for her sake, but I would never set foot on a ski slope again.

My list of solemn vows was getting longer and longer.

It was going to be a very long holiday season.

SEVEN

CALISTA

I SHUFFLED INTO THE EMPTY staff lounge early the next morning, debit card in hand, ready to swipe that baby in the vending machine's card reader as many times as necessary. I needed caffeine. Lots of caffeine, after the night I'd had. It was beyond awkward. There was nothing like cozing up on the couch with my niece, her uncle on one side, me on the other, watching the Cary Grant classic *Every Girl Should Be Married*. That was Quinn's choice. I was pretty sure she was trying to send me a not-so-subtle message. If she thought I would ever scheme as hard as the main character to marry a man, she was crazy.

That wasn't the worst of it. Tristan and I both went to put an arm around Quinn at the same time and we made skin-to-skin contact. The bolt of electricity that shot through my fingers all the way down to my toes made me shiver so violently, I almost broke my vow and looked at him. His touch still did something to me, and I hated myself for it.

To make matters worse, I stayed awake until Stella got home, which wasn't until one in the morning. She sashayed in with her hair all askew, smelling like cologne. When I questioned her about where she'd been and what she'd been doing like I was her mother, she waved me off and hid in her room. I stayed up for another hour after that, stewing about the situation. Stella was free to date, or whatever she was doing. But I didn't think it was the best example for Quinn to see her mother move from one man to the next so fast. Especially given that Stella needed time to heal from Jonathon's death—and his actions. And I worried Stella was going to fall back into her old habits of defining herself by how attractive men found her.

It all made for an exhausting night of very little sleep.

As I headed for the vending machine, I noticed a book on the table nearest it. *To Love a Rogue Pirate* by Josie Cavanaugh. I picked up the obviously well-loved book, judging by the creases in the torrid cover. Ooh la la, the rogue pirate cover model bared his chiseled chest. Hmm. I wondered if anyone would mind if I borrowed this copy.

Lucy came waltzing in, fresh faced and chipper. She must have gotten more sleep than I did. Her eyes zeroed in on the book, and she fanned herself. "Oh. My. Gosh. Have you read that book?"

"No." I smiled.

"You have to. The woman who wrote it lives in Carson City, and she and her husband have family up here. Sometimes you see them around town. And get this: he's kind of a pirate. Sexy as all get out, and he wears an eye patch."

"Are you serious?"

"Dead serious. If only he had a brother. I've asked." She laughed.

"I guess I'd better read this book. Do you know whose copy this is?"

"That's just here as a little pick-me-up. Feel free to read it whenever you want. We have several more copies at the nurses' station."

Now all the pictures of Orlando Bloom as Will Turner in *Pirates of the Caribbean* hanging up in the nurses' station made more sense. I was pretty sure some of them even had lipstick kisses on them.

I set the book back down. "Great. I'll sneak in some pages today if I can." The ER was always busier during the holidays. Lots of flu, colds, and strep throat. Not to mention burns and cuts from cooking Thanksgiving meals and ... family disagreements. Though I would probably see less of that here in Aspen Lake. Propriety was the name of the game in this town.

Lucy opened the refrigerator and placed her lunch in it. "Good luck with being able to stop after only a few pages. It's addictive."

Sounded like my kind of book. “I’ll do my best,” I teased before swiping my debit card and picking out a bottle of energy water. I didn’t waste any time opening and downing half of it. Immediately, I felt the rush of caffeine. Whoever invented energy water was my hero.

“Late night?” Lucy inquired.

“Yeah.” I took another long swig.

Her pretty eyes lit up. “Husband? Boyfriend?”

I vehemently shook my head. “No. How about you?” I asked.

“Oh, goodness no. I’m kind of on a man detox. I have this ugly habit of dating *bad boys*.”

“We all go through that phase, I think.” I knew I had dated my fair share. Mostly fellow med school students and residents. There are a lot of places in a hospital where you can hide and make out. Was I proud of those actions? Yes. Yes, I was. A good make-out session gave me more energy than caffeine any day of the week.

“Well, mine seems to be more than a phase,” Lucy admitted. “Speaking of bad boys, Dr. Shackwell wanted me to tell you he wants to talk to you before he leaves for the day.”

Dr. Shackwell, one of the doctors who moonlighted in the ER, had taken the night shift. Yesterday, I heard some nurses refer to him as Dr. Shack-Me-Please. I knew then to stay clear of the handsome doctor who had all the charisma of Chris Evans, including the sexy sideburns. Besides, dating coworkers never went well. Noncommittally making out with them was one thing. Relationships were way too tricky. And most of the time, the hospital admins frowned upon it. No need to give Deidra more heartburn over me.

“I’ll be right there. I just need a few more ounces of caffeine.”

She grinned and waved on her way out the door.

I downed the rest of the bottle and bought a new one for good measure. I had to be on my A game. Make that A-plus game. I hated feeling so watched in this town. Not that I wouldn’t do my best normally. But I knew people would love to misconstrue even my best efforts if given the chance. I would do everything not to give them any ammunition.

Dr. Shackwell walked in before I could go find him. He was probably eager to get home. The night shift was brutal. I probably would have gotten saddled with it this week if it weren’t for the fact that I was working all day on Thanksgiving. It was fine. Quinn and Stella were spending it with the Grangers, and I wasn’t invited. Shocker. Not like I would have gone, anyway. They required you to dress up and had the meal catered by a local five-star restaurant. That didn’t sound like my kind of holiday. I missed cooking in the kitchen with Mom and Dad and then yelling at the TV screen at whichever football team was fouling up. Every Thanksgiving night by a blazing fireplace, we would start making our Christmas tree ornaments. Strings of popcorn and cranberries, stars made from wooden beads, and various decorations made with cinnamon sticks. Dad could make the most elaborate paper snowflakes. It was magical. I hoped to give Quinn some of that magic this year, even if it meant the uncle had to be involved.

“Dr. Monroe,” Dr. Shackwell addressed me formally. I’d told him yesterday he could call me Calista, but if he wanted to be formal, I was on board. It was probably better that way, considering my reputation.

“Hello. How was the night shift?”

He ran a hand through his brown hair. “Long,” he was curt and to the point. “I just wanted to let you know in exam room one, there’s a fifty-one-year-old male, diabetic, dehydrated. Possible food poisoning, but I tested for norovirus just in case. He’s currently on IV fluids.”

Yikes. That norovirus test wasn’t a fun sample to get.

“Thanks for letting me know.”

“In room two, there’s a thirty-three-year-old female waiting to be seen. Possible UTI. Good luck. See you later.” He marched out without even letting me get in a word.

I guess that meant it was showtime. I hustled over to the office the on-shift doctors used so I could drop off my bag and caffeinated beverage. The ER was in a lull for the moment, but I knew that would change.

On my way over to exam room two, I waved and smiled at my *favorite* person, Evie, as she barked orders at the nurses in the nurses' station. She reciprocated with her lovely grimace. I smiled even wider. Her grimace turned into a sneer. Someday, I would get her to smile if it was the last thing I did.

I walked past the row of curtains where most patients were shuttled. It was decent of the nurses to give the woman with the possible UTI a private room, since it was available.

I knocked on the door. "It's Dr. Monroe. Can I come in?"

A sweet voice called out, "Yes."

I opened the door to find a familiar face from high school sitting on the paper-covered examination table that made a crinkly noise as she shifted her body. Smartly dressed in a black turtleneck and chinos, she dangled her feet clad in ballet slippers.

"Julia Carmichael," I said, pleasantly surprised.

She blinked several times, making me wonder if I'd been mistaken. I probably should have pulled up her info in the system before I came in, but I liked to do that in front of the patient on the room's laptop. And I always thought it was better to ask them their name. To me, it created a good rapport with the patient.

"I'm sorry. I must have mistaken you for someone else."

"No," she breathed out. "It's just that no one ever remembers me."

I found that odd, seeing as she always reminded me of Katie Holmes, with the silky dark hair cut in the cutest bob tucked behind her ears. Even back in high school, she had the whole *Dawson's Creek* thing going for her. Though she was a year younger than I was, and we never really hung out, I clearly remember thinking she was probably a popular girl. In fact, I'm pretty sure her best friend in high school was the homecoming queen or something. All I knew was what's-her-friend, whose name I couldn't remember, didn't like me. But Julia was always nice to me, even if I came from the wrong side of the lake.

I sat on the rolling stool and glided her way. "Well, Julia, I remember you."

She smiled, so relieved, like it was a miracle or something that I remembered her. "Thank you," her voice cracked with emotion. "And you can call me Jules."

"Jules it is. And you can call me Calista." It would be weird for her to call me Dr. Monroe, seeing as we went to high school together.

"Wow. You're a doctor."

I grinned. "Hard to believe, huh?"

She bit her lip. "I didn't mean for it to come out that way."

"That's okay. I have the opposite problem as you. Everyone here remembers me. And ... as you can imagine, it's not all that flattering."

"If it makes you feel any better, I thought you were the coolest girl in school."

"That does make me feel better." I laughed. "So, tell me, what can I do to help *you* feel better? I hear you are having some UTI symptoms." I grabbed the rolling cart with the laptop and pulled it my way to look up her records and to see if her lab results had come back yet.

"Yes. I haven't really been drinking enough. It's been a rough few days." She wept.

I stood and grabbed a few tissues near the sink and handed them to her. It wasn't unheard of for people to have emotional breakdowns in the ER. I'd heard many sad stories. Since we were acquaintances, I asked, "Do you want to talk about it?"

She gratefully took the tissues and dabbed her eyes as the tears kept flowing. "I'm sorry for being so emotional. It's just that my dad had a major stroke last week, and the prognosis isn't good. He's been upstairs in the ICU the entire time. And I hate coming home. I feel so forgotten here, even among my parents and sisters. It's one thing in LA, where no one knows me. But here, it just makes me feel like such a loser," she lamented. "You don't know how much it means to me, you remembering me. My last date took me to Starbucks so the barista would ask me my name to write on the cup because he forgot it," she wailed. "I gave her the wrong one on purpose, and he called me Ingrid all night."

I tried not to react, but I felt my pupils dilate and my brow raise. Technically, I shouldn't be touching patients other than for examination purposes, but if anyone needed a hug, it was this poor woman. Though I was kind of jealous she had the gift of being forgotten. I could use a little of that. I threw protocol out the window, praying Jules wasn't friends with the Grangers or wouldn't report me to the hospital, and wrapped my arms around her.

She fell against me and clung to me, shaking and sobbing.

At that point, I didn't care if I got fired. As a doctor, I promised to heal and help people. Sometimes the best medicine was a hug and a listening ear.

"This is probably more than you bargained for today," she mumbled against me. "I don't usually blab my life story to people I haven't seen in forever. Or even to people I see all the time. I'm so sorry."

I patted her back. "Don't be. I'm sorry you're having such a hard time. Sometimes coming home is the hardest thing we can do."

"You have no idea."

Oh, I think I did.

EIGHT

TRISTAN

TRISTAN LOOSENED THE KNOT OF his tie while staring aimlessly out one of the large picture windows at his parents' lake house. The choppy, icy lake water before his eyes reflected his mood on this Thanksgiving Day. The classical music playing in the background and the smells of lasagna and lobster, part of the seven-course meal to be served, only soured his mood more. What he wouldn't give for some turkey and mashed potatoes drenched in gravy, and a beer to wash it down with while he watched the game on TV. His parents would be aghast at the suggestion.

He knew someone who would love the idea. Someone who wasn't invited, and whom he couldn't stop thinking about. Thoughts of the fiery brunette with legs for days and a heart the size of the mountains in view consumed him. She may have hated him, but he'd loved listening to her talk to Quinn and Stella last night as they made Christmas tree ornaments. Calista spoke of an old classmate whose father was sick while she tried to figure out what she could do for her. She told Quinn and Stella how she'd checked on the woman during her own limited breaks. She was even planning on packing the woman some snacks for today. It was just like her to think of others before herself.

Admittedly, it made Tristan feel guilty. He often thought of himself before others, unless it was Quinn. She was the reason he was enduring the torture of being in her aunt's presence, even though Calista was hell-bent on ignoring him. It bothered him more than he thought it would. He wasn't used to not getting what he wanted. And he was realizing how badly he wanted Calista. He swore she'd pranced around last night in a nightshirt that showed off her delectable legs just to torment him. It was working.

All he could think about as he lay in bed the night before was how he longed to glide his fingers down those silky babies. He'd even be happy to warm her cold feet. Tristan loosened his tie some more, feeling like he was suffocating. He was sure there was no Christmas miracle on the horizon. Calista had made it abundantly clear she wanted nothing to do with him. Even after they'd accidentally touched a few nights ago, she'd had no reaction other than to cringe like it revolted her. Meanwhile, he'd had to force himself not to pick her up off the couch and beg her to let him kiss her until there was no breath left in either of their lungs. She probably would have decked him for it, but it would have been worth it just to hold her again.

Yet ... he couldn't help but think about how she'd kept the skis he'd given her for Christmas several years ago. The revelation had shocked him. Clearly, it embarrassed her that he knew. It wouldn't surprise him if he found them in the trash sometime soon. Even so, he wondered why she'd kept them. It was so unlike her. She'd had a hard time accepting them in the first place, knowing how expensive they were. He had to swear he got them at a wholesale price from one of his company's vendors. He would have paid anything for them, though. The amount of fun they had skiing that season was priceless—to say nothing of the fun he'd had warming her up afterward.

He ran a hand through his hair, nervous energy consuming him. He had half a mind to blaze a trail to the hospital right now and profusely apologize and beg her to forgive him. To find out if she kept the skis because a part of her still remembered he was a decent man and not just the guy who hurt her.

"Tristan," his mother's shrill voice interrupted his agony. He reluctantly turned to find her standing there, in a blue chiffon dress, holding a glass of chardonnay. More and more, she was reminding him of Cruella de Vil. And more and more, he could see why Calista thought it was ridiculous to dress up like this for holiday dinners. Did they expect England's royal family to join them?

As a family, they should have been in mourning. Or at the very least, comforting each other over the loss of Jonathon. It was as if his parents didn't wish to acknowledge their perfect son was anything but. Better just to sweep it under the rug and move on. Not even all their money could save

him. Oh, they had tried. But Jonathon's drinking and drug use prevented him from getting the new liver he needed. No amount of money could get him on that transplant list.

"Yes, Mother," he sighed.

She approached him with shrewd eyes. "Your tie is in disarray."

Tristan fixed it, knowing it was pointless to argue that he couldn't care less. Especially since it was only him and his parents there. Hopefully, Quinn and Stella would arrive soon. At least Quinn would offer him some sort of reprieve. Stella, on the other hand, was beginning to really worry him. The night before, Calista had had to beg her to stay in and help them make decorations. Not that she'd been much help. Half the time she'd been on her phone texting. It was no wonder that Quinn gravitated toward Calista and him. If Stella wasn't careful, she was going to lose the best thing in her life.

"Why so glum?" Cordelia asked.

It surprised Tristan she could read his emotions. But what a ridiculous question. Shouldn't they all be a little down, considering their brother and son had just died? Not to say his angst came from his brother's death. He was still trying to come to terms with the fact that his own brother had slept with his former wife. There was a time when Jonathon's death would have devastated him, but that was a long time ago. Before Jonathon started showing up late every day to work and missing meetings with vendors and investors, forcing Tristan to cover for him. Before he started treating his wife and daughter like afterthoughts.

Tristan shrugged off his mother's question. She would never understand the wonders of Calista Monroe and how she penetrated his very being.

"Please don't tell me it's that *girl*."

He narrowed his eyes. "Do you mean Calista? Dr. Monroe?"

"Doctor," she scoffed. "She's a shame to the profession."

Anger bubbled up in Tristan's chest. "How would you know that? Are you a patient of hers?"

"Certainly not." She quaked at the thought. "She only got the position because of that Deidra Zane."

"I highly doubt that," Tristan countered.

Cordelia almost dropped her glass. "Don't fall for her again," she warned.

He'd never gotten up from the first time he fell for her. Not that it mattered. The best he could hope for now was to be her friend. Even that was a long shot. "Why?" he asked, to perturb his mother.

A look of horror washed over her. "You can't be serious? She's nothing but trouble. Besides, I doubt she'll be here very long," she said confidently.

"What is that supposed to mean?" Tristan demanded to know.

Cordelia arrogantly smiled. "Only that this wrong will soon be righted."

Tristan took a menacing step forward, his blood boiling. "If you do anything to jeopardize her position at the hospital, you'll lose both your sons."

She flushed red, momentarily at a loss for words. "You wouldn't dare walk away from the business." Of course that was her primary concern—not their relationship.

"Watch me." He marched off toward the balcony, needing to cool off. He threw open the door with force, a blast of cold air hitting him before he slammed it shut behind him. Not caring about propriety anymore, he undid his tie and tossed it aside. Feeling like he could finally breathe a little easier, he went to the railing and leaned on it, looking toward the *other* side of the lake. The side he felt happier and freer on. He remembered his holidays spent there. He'd never laughed or loved more. Never got in more trouble either, but at least he'd been happy.

Tristan wondered if he should try to warn Calista her job was on the line. Not that she would listen to him. She was smart enough that she was probably somewhat suspicious already. No doubt she knew the risks in returning to Aspen Lake. This town had been anything but kind to her. He was the worst offender of all. No more. He would be damned if he let his parents or anyone else hurt her.

The door opened, but he ignored it.

“Son,” his father said.

Great, another lecture, he thought.

Frasier joined his son, dressed in his finest dark three-piece suit. He patted Tristan on the back in a placating manner. No genuine affection was involved. “I hear you and your mother had a disagreement.”

Tristan laughed sardonically. “No disagreement. I meant what I said. If either of you do anything to get Calista fired, you can find yourself a new CEO.”

“You don’t mean that,” Frasier disagreed.

Tristan turned toward him, his eyes boring into his father’s so he would know just how serious he was. “I’m not bluffing.”

“Son, what is this girl to you? Don’t you remember all the problems she caused? Hell, she got you arrested.”

Tristan clenched his fists. “First, she’s not a girl. She’s an intelligent and compassionate woman. A doctor. And you know damn well I willingly accepted the fall for the puppy mill thing.”

“You would have never been in that position if it weren’t for her.”

“She didn’t make me do anything. Besides, you made it all go away, so it’s a moot point.”

“Are you dating her again?”

Tristan heard the plea in his father’s voice. It ticked him off even more. “No. But even if I were, it’s none of your business.”

“It is if she hurts the company.”

“I’m sure you meant to say me, right?”

Frasier cleared his throat. “That’s a given.”

“Is it?” Tristan questioned.

“Where is all this coming from? You were fine until she came back into town.”

Tristan shook his head, amazed his parents were so blind. Either that or they just didn’t care about him. Maybe it was his own fault for keeping his feelings hidden all these years. “No, Dad, I haven’t been fine. My jerk of a brother just died, leaving behind a brokenhearted daughter and a wreck of a wife. All the while, we’re having a dinner party, eating ridiculously overpriced food, pretending like it never happened. Most families are giving thanks today, remembering why they love each other. And I’m questioning if you or Mother ever loved me at all.”

Frasier’s jaw dropped. “Of course we love you.”

“If that’s the case, Calista is off limits. Do you understand?”

His father’s tan-lined face turned fifty shades of red. “She’s no good for you.”

“You’re wrong. But it doesn’t matter. She doesn’t want anything to do with me.”

“Good,” Frasier huffed.

“I mean it, Dad. Don’t harm her. If not for me, think about Quinn. It would devastate her if Calista left.”

Frasier still wasn’t sold on the idea. “She has Stella.”

“News flash: Stella’s a mess. How could she not be, after what Jonathon did to her?”

Frasier waved his hand around, not wanting to hear it.

Heaven forbid his parents face the truth that their youngest was a douchebag.

Tristan pushed off the rail. “Believe what you want. But know I’m serious about walking away from the company and this family if necessary. I’m tired of these games, and I can live off my investments if needed. Hell, I could start my own company if I had to,” he threatened. It’s not like he had never thought about it. Like he said before, he liked the game. And maybe it was time to make his own and set the rules.

Frasier’s brow got lost in his receding hairline. “You would do that to this family?”

“What family, Dad?” He walked off, back into the warm house that felt colder than outside.

Quinn and Stella had arrived. Quinn wore a pretty pink dress, and Stella was as nonpresent as ever, texting furiously. His niece stared at her mom, downtrodden.

Tristan looked around the pristine house worthy of a magazine spread, right down to the grand piano no one could play. It was all for show. The show was too much for him today.

Without another thought, he strode over and grabbed Quinn’s hand. “You want to get out of here?” He had a colleague from work who had invited him over for dinner with the promise of noisy children and enough food to feed a small country and clog all his arteries. It sounded perfect to him.

Quinn nodded, grateful.

“Great. Let’s blow this popsicle stand.”

They walked out together, his parents calling after them. He paid them no heed. He planned on doing that a lot more, going forward.

“Do you think we can take Aunt Calista some food later?” Quinn asked on the way out the door.

Tristan smiled at her. “We will do whatever you want.”

“Can I get out of this dress?”

Tristan laughed. “Yeah, kiddo. Now let’s go do Thanksgiving right.”

She leaned into him. “I’m thankful for you, Uncle Tristan.”

He kissed her head. “Right back atcha, kid.”

Quinn smiled up at him. “I think this will make Aunt Calista happy.”

He thought so too. More and more, he was kicking himself for ever forgetting that all he ever wanted to do with his life was make Calista Monroe happy.

NINE

CALISTA

I PEERED THROUGH MY OTOSCOPE into the ear of nine-month-old Jesse, who had an impressive set of lungs on him, and he was a kicker. Not that I blamed him. I wouldn't like it if some random lady was shoving something in my ear either. On Thanksgiving Day no less. Especially when it was so red and bulging. "Little guy definitely has an ear infection," I informed his parents, Cami and Noah Cullen. Yes, like the vampires. Except the only sparkling thing about them was their charming personalities. Even if Cami, who was a few years younger than me, remembered all my high school antics.

I stood, placing the otoscope back where it belonged, and stepped away from a flailing Jesse.

Cami held him close to her and gently bounced him, trying to comfort him. "I was really sorry to hear about your brother-in-law. I took their family pictures last year." If only she knew how those *perfect* family pictures still hanging on the wall at my sister's house were all just a facade.

"Thank you," I said as graciously as I could, considering what a louse Jonathon ended up being.

I remembered Stella mentioning how excited she was to score a photo shoot with Cami. Cami was not only a famous photographer, but she also ran a business called The Ex-Files, according to Stella. It was so unusual; I had to look her up after speaking to my sister. Cami's services included cropping exes out of pictures and even manipulating some of them in hilarious ways, such as replacing the ex with a very handsome celebrity. Genius. If only she could make them vanish from memories, that would be more than helpful. Especially since Tristan, unbeknownst to him, was infiltrating my mind more and more. The dang man was an exceptional, doting uncle. I figured he would be, based on our previous relationship, and how enamored we'd both been with Quinn when she was born. Of course, Quinn had gushed about him over the years. But to see it all up close and personal was a much different ball game.

Admittedly, he was making it harder than expected to ignore him. Don't worry, I was still living up to my principles, but it was a challenge. Especially when the night before he'd told Quinn she could pick out a kitten at the shelter this weekend and keep it at his ranch. Or when they kept tossing Reese's Pieces, my favorite candy, into each other's mouths from far across the room. It was pretty adorable, and I loved hearing Quinn giggle. Unfortunately, it reminded me of when her uncle and I would play that game. Except we had different rules if one person missed. Let's just say it involved a lot of kissing and I missed on purpose a lot.

It made me wonder if he was doing it deliberately. Like he wanted me to remember the good times between us. It made no sense, given I was only a bad habit to him. Maybe I was just imagining things. Why would he care?

Cami smiled at me. "I'm sure your sister and niece love having you back home."

Quinn did. I wasn't sure about Stella. She didn't seem to appreciate the reminders that she was still a mom and should act accordingly, or at least try to be present in her daughter's life. Was that too much to ask? I got that she'd been through a lot, but so had Quinn. And Stella was only going to do more damage to her if she kept on the way she was. I didn't want my sister to have more regrets.

"I love being with my niece," I answered truthfully.

"Does she know what a legend you were in high school?"

There was that word *legend* again. "I'm probably more infamous."

Cami laughed and spoke to her husband, Noah. "This woman here left thousands of business cards hidden all over our high school stating *Calista Monroe was here*. They are still finding those cards today."

Noah chuckled. "That's clever."

I had to take a lot of extra shifts at the Mexican restaurant where I waitressed to buy those cards, but it was worth it. Quinn had even found a few at the school. Totally a proud aunt moment.

“That’s not even the best one,” Cami gushed over the sound of her crying baby. “She once got everyone in the school to bring watermelons and place them randomly in the classrooms and the halls.”

I got in some trouble for that one. A lot of detention.

Noah took Jesse out of Cami’s arms and lovingly held him against his chest, patting his back to soothe him. “Very cool.”

A sudden ache hit me, watching the sweet family. I longed for one of my own. “Well, I’m past my melon days.” I nervously laughed, half-flattered to be remembered, half-worried it would only bring unwanted attention my way. “It was really nice to meet the three of you. I’m sorry your little guy isn’t feeling well. I’ll put in for a prescription of amoxicillin. That should do the trick. If he’s not feeling better in the next few days, or if his fever gets above 102, call your regular pediatrician or bring him back here.”

“Thank you,” Cami said, gratefully. “Hopefully we can enjoy some turkey now. Happy Thanksgiving.”

“Happy Thanksgiving to you as well.” I left the cute family to see who was up next. When I walked out, Pam, one of the nurses, stopped me. “You have a visitor in the break room.”

“I do?”

“Yes, a darling girl bearing heavenly-smelling food.”

That had to be Quinn. It shocked me Stella would be so considerate and drive Quinn over here. “Thank you. I’ll just be a minute.” I knew there were a few more patients in the queue.

“We’ll cover for you.” She winked.

It was a good thing Evie wasn’t around to hear that.

“Thank you.” I hustled over to the break room. I could smell the Thanksgiving goodness before I even walked in the door—roasted turkey, thyme, and sage. It shocked me. I’d heard the Grangers were having lasagna or some other monstrosity for Thanksgiving. I loved a good lasagna but not on Turkey Day.

I opened the door to find my Quinny smiling brightly, holding up a large basket full of all the best Thanksgiving foods, including an entire pumpkin pie.

“What’s all this?”

“Uncle Tristan and I thought you might be hungry.”

I stopped dead in my tracks. “Your uncle brought you here?”

“Yeah.” She grinned evilly. “He knows how much you love Thanksgiving, and he knew you would be home late, so we brought dinner for you. He’s waiting in the car because he knows how much you hate him,” she added.

I eyed the food warily, wondering what the catch was. It wasn’t just me that hated him. He hated me too. It was mutual hate. “Is it poisoned?” I had to ask.

“No, silly,” she laughed and set the basket on a table. “He thinks you’re a baddie.” She wagged her brows.

“A baddie? He thinks I’m a bad girl?” I wasn’t surprised. Yet, it irked me. Um ... he used to applaud my “bad girl” ways.

“No,” she giggled. “A baddie is a hot girl boss who’s always slaying it.”

I narrowed my eyes at her, not buying it. “Okay, sure.”

“It’s true,” she sang.

We needed a change of subject, like stat. No way did Tristan think of me like that. The invisible knife he’d left in my heart was proof he believed quite the contrary. “Why aren’t you at your grandparents’ in your *prom* dress?” I teased.

“Because”—she smiled—“Uncle Tristan said he was tired of pretending we are all perfect, so we left and went to his friend’s house for Thanksgiving. There were so many people. It was so fun. We played games and made silly hand turkeys. I even met a cute boy there.”

I was so happy for Quinn. And even glad her uncle had made sure she had a stellar day. But ... this was not in my best interest. I couldn’t afford to see Tristan in a good light. Been there, done that. It hadn’t worked well for me. Besides, I’d made a solemn vow to never look at him again. How did the world not understand this?

“What about Kody?” Who I had learned was in her biology class. She was still working up the courage to talk to him. I’d given her some pointers.

She bit her lip and blushed. “I don’t know. Beckett is super cute, and he asked me for my number.”

“Oh, really?”

“Uh-huh. I’ll show you some pictures I took of him when you get home tonight.”

“I look forward to it.” Sadly, I needed to rush off. “Honey, I better go. I have patients waiting. Thank you for thinking of me.” I walked over and kissed her head. “You’re a good kid.”

“It was mostly Uncle Tristan. Maybe you should kiss him.”

I grabbed my heart, feeling like I was going into cardiac arrest. If she kept saying things like that, I was going to become a patient in my own ER. “Quinny, why would you say something like that? You know how I feel about him.”

She folded her arms and gave me such a stern look. It was like she had channeled my mother, right down to her crinkled nose. “I think I *do know* how you *really* feel about him. And maybe if you were brave enough to look at him, you would see how he *really* feels about you.”

I stood immobile and flabbergasted. Why would she say something like that to me? I truly hated him. He left me no choice. If not, his cruelty would have crushed me. I had no idea what lies he was telling her. But ... “I know how he feels about me. He left no doubt thirteen years ago.” My voice betrayed me and wavered with emotion.

Her facial features and stance softened. “I don’t know what he did back then, but he’s sorry. You should give him the chance to apologize.” She walked off and left me in a daze after her figurative mic drop.

I gripped the chair closest to me. I didn’t sign up for this when I told Quinn I would move back home. The awkwardness I’d counted on. But this. This was almost more than I could handle. Tristan Granger wrecked me in ways I didn’t even know were conceivable. I promised myself I would let no one make me feel so breakable again. Especially the man I’d once loved so wholly, I’d never once questioned how he felt about me. It had never even occurred to me there would be an end to us. To me, it was impossible. Just as impossible as Tristan still caring for me.

TEN

CALISTA

DEATH BY PUMPKIN PIE WAS not a bad way to go. I shoved the plastic fork in the pie for another bite of heaven.

Jules sat next to me in the ICU waiting room and did the same. Her family, including her mom, sisters, and their families, had all gone home for the night to salvage the Thanksgiving holiday. They had designated Jules to stay behind. She seemed to be resigned to this being her lot in life—the forgotten one.

I felt bad for her. It was like her family was saying, *Since you don't have a family of your own, you must enjoy spending the holidays alone.* Maybe she did. I didn't know her well enough yet to tell. But for me, I hated spending the holidays alone. A few times, I begged Stella and Quinn to come visit me, but Stella always made up some excuse for why she couldn't come. A couple of years ago, she flew Quinn out to see me for Christmas. Deidra and Max came a few times over the years. Other than that, I hosted a lot of Friendsgivings in break rooms or my small apartments. Still, nothing was like being with those you loved most. Even if I was kind of hiding from my family right now.

"How's your dad doing today?" I asked after swallowing.

Jules's shoulders rose and fell, while her lip trembled. "He can barely speak, and what he can say is hard to understand. He seems like he's lost his will to live."

Depression in stroke patients wasn't uncommon.

"And ...," she hesitated to say, "his doctor is saying things that lead me to believe he's not sure he will recover. My mom doesn't want to believe it, but I just have this feeling," she choked out.

I took her hand with my free one.

Poor thing was shaking.

"If you want, I could talk to his doctor. Not sure if they will talk to me. Some doctors get weirdly territorial about these things, but I'm willing to try."

She squeezed my hand. "That would be great. Thank you."

We each stabbed our forks into the pie sitting between us on the small table topped with old issues of *Better Homes and Gardens*. Personally, I couldn't shovel it in fast enough. It had been a long day, and Quinn's words were still ringing in my head. Hence the reason I hadn't gone home yet. That, and I felt like Jules could use the company.

After a few moments and an almost devoured pie, Jules asked, "So why are you eating your emotions?"

I laughed. "Am I that obvious?"

She set her fork down in the pan and nodded.

"You don't need to hear about my problems." My *ex-emergency*, per se, was nothing compared to what she was going through.

"Honestly, I would love to think about someone else besides myself right now."

I understood that feeling. Sometimes it was easier to focus on someone else's problems rather than on your own. "Mine seem trivial compared to yours."

She grinned. "I love trivial."

I sank into the uncomfortable purple floral chair and sighed. Before I said a word, I looked around to make sure we were alone. The waiting room was devoid of people, and except for us and

old reruns of *Friends* on the TV, it was quiet. “I’m not sure if you know or remember, but I used to date Tristan Granger,” I whispered his name like I was saying something untoward.

She thought for a moment before biting her lip. “Actually, I remember my parents talking about it. It was a big scandal in their circles.”

“Are they friends with the Grangers?” I cringed.

“Just acquaintances. My family doesn’t do well enough to be friends with them. But ... ,” she seemed embarrassed to say, “word got around.”

Oh, I remembered. I’d flaunted the fact whenever we were in public together. The PDA was probably over the top. It was my way of showing people they couldn’t shame me because my bank account and pedigree weren’t to their liking. I hadn’t done myself any favors, but Tristan never seemed to mind the overt affection. “Yeah, well, it was a mistake, and it ended badly. So badly, I swore I would never look at him again.”

“Ouch. That is bad.”

“The thing is, we share a niece. And the little extortionist roped me into having a merry little old-fashioned Christmas with him. I can’t even tell you how awkward it is to be around him and ignore him.”

Her eyes widened. “You don’t look at him at all?”

“No. I made a solemn vow.”

She sniggered. “Kudos to you. From what I remember, he’s gorgeous.”

“I know,” I groaned. “Worse, he’s the best uncle. But the very worst is that my niece has it in her head that she wants us to be together. And that her uncle is sorry and still has feelings for me. Believe me, he made it clear when he broke up with me, he wanted nothing to do with me ever again. So, I’m not sure where this is coming from,” I said, as if I were out of breath for how disconcerting it was to me.

Jules blinked, not sure what to make of me. “So ... are you upset because you want there to be something between you?”

“No,” I was quick to say. “I hate him,” my voice betrayed me and pitched.

“Yeah,” she let out an understanding breath. “It’s always the worst to hate the ones you love.”

“Yeah.” I looked down at the empty pie dish, wishing there were more for me to shove into my mouth. “Who do you hate?”

She ran a hand through her hair. “Simon,” she admitted, barely above a whisper. “It’s dumb because we never even dated. In fact, he married Penelope. Do you remember her?”

“Was she your best friend in high school? Homecoming queen or something?”

“Homecoming princess, homecoming queen, prom queen—you name it, she was it.” Jules didn’t sound bitter about it—more heartbroken than anything.

“Did she know you loved this Simon?”

She looked up at the fluorescent lights. “No. I tried to keep him to myself. Have you ever met someone and ‘So This Is Love’ from *Cinderella* plays in your head?” She blushed.

“You’re sweeter than I am. I heard ‘Let’s Get It On’ by Marvin Gaye when I saw Tristan for the first time.”

She laughed loudly before placing her face in her hands. “I’m an idiot for ever thinking I had a chance with him.”

“Why?”

“Because,” she said, muffled against her hands. “He was perfect. Well, you know, until he fell for my supposed best friend. Honestly, though, he had the most mesmerizing voice. He’s British.”

“Ooh. Yummy.”

“That’s a good word for it. His curly hair was to die for. And ... he *saw* me. No one ever sees me. But he did. Or at least I thought he had. One look at Penelope, and that was all it took for him to forget about me.”

“He sounds like a jerk.”

“That’s what I’ve told myself all these years, but the truth is, he was lovely.”

“Where is he now?” I couldn’t help but ask. How she spoke of him reminded me of the romantic tension in the pirate book the ER unit was obsessed with. I admit to sneaking in bits here and there. Who knew how delectable a rogue pirate could be?

“I don’t know. Thankfully, Penelope’s family moved away from Aspen Lake a long time ago, and I don’t do social media, so I have no idea.”

“No social media at all?” That was a rare occurrence nowadays.

She let her hands drop, only to clasp them and twist them together. “It’s better for my job that way.”

I hadn’t thought to ask about her career yet. I’d mostly just offered comfort. “What do you do?” I was eager to learn more about her. I felt this kinship between us, like we were destined to be friends.

“Would you believe it if I said that if I told you, I would have to make you sign an NDA?”

I sat, blinking. Was she for real?

She turned, an apology written on her face. “I don’t mean to be mysterious, but it’s sensitive.”

“Like government secrets?” I whispered.

“No,” she said nervously, making me think maybe she worked for the CIA or something. That would be kind of cool. It would play into the whole flying-under-the-radar thing she had going on.

“Okay,” I trilled. “But, if you ever need, like, backup, or to sneak in anywhere top secret and your partner’s not available, I’m totally your girl.”

She laughed loudly.

“Listen, I have stared down gang members and removed bullets from flesh.”

“I like you, Calista. This is probably the best Thanksgiving I’ve had in a long time.”

“That’s just sad.”

She shrugged. “I try not to think about it.”

I patted her knee. “Well, you should. You have a cool spy job or something, and you’re sweet and more than gorgeous. You deserve to be seen.”

“I’m not a spy.” She smiled.

“Whatever you say.” I didn’t believe her. She was totally a spy.

She placed her neatly manicured hand on top of mine. “Thank you for seeing me.”

I stared at her hand, wondering what kind of gun she had and if she’d ever shot anyone. “It’s my pleasure. Thanks for listening to me whine.”

“That was hardly whining. And believe me, growing up with a younger and an older sister, I know whining.”

Stella whined a lot too. She always wanted more and better.

“The question is, What are you going to do about Tristan?” she asked.

I pinched the bridge of my nose. “I have to keep ignoring him.”

“Do you?”

I swallowed hard. “I can’t let him wreck me again. I’d have to become like an astrophysicist or something.”

“He’s why you became a doctor?”

“At first. I wanted to prove I wasn’t who his family thought I was. But in the end, I figured out that Dr. Monroe was who I was meant to be.”

“Wow. Med school. That’s some dedication. You must really hate him.”

“Only because I really loved him,” I eked out.

“Do you still?” she asked uneasily.

My chest rose and fell dramatically. “You know the line from *Wuthering Heights*?”

“*Whatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same.*” She spoke perfectly, word for word, like it was a ghost who haunted her.

The same ghost haunted me, except mine is named Tristan, not Simon.

“That’s the one. To not love him would mean not loving myself.”

“Men,” she growled.

Yeah, men. I leaned forward, resting my arms on my legs, and hummed “So This Is Love” to a mournful tune.

After a few seconds, we broke out into fits of laughter.

It was better than crying. I had a feeling there would be tears in my near future. Unfortunately, if they weren’t my tears, they were going to be Quinn’s when she didn’t get her wish. I really hoped it wasn’t going to be a blue, blue Christmas for her—or me.

ELEVEN

TRISTAN

TRISTAN STOOD IN FRONT OF the bathroom mirror, sizing up his flannel shirt. He wasn't sure if it made him look too much like a lumberjack, or if it screamed masculinity. He couldn't remember the last time he cared so much about how he looked. Not like Calista would look at him, anyway. The woman was driving him mad. All he wanted was one tiny glance. From there, he would try to pull her in with his gaze and pray she wasn't completely immune to him.

She'd seemed startled when they'd locked eyes at the funeral. This gave him a dash of hope. He just wanted the chance to explain and apologize. Okay, and maybe to taste her lips one more time, or for the rest of his life, but he knew that wasn't going to happen.

The only thing he had going for him was Quinn. She'd told him what she'd said to her aunt last night after dropping off the food. If she kept it up, he was going to buy her a car or anything she wanted. Not that he was using his niece to get to Calista, but he was thankful for all the help he could get.

However, it could have just ticked Calista off. She loved Quinn more than anyone, but Tristan knew he couldn't make it seem like Quinn and he were ganging up on her. Or that they were hatching elaborate plans to snare her into some trap. Although he would love to get stuck somewhere alone with Calista, where she had no choice but to turn to him. Or at the very least, acknowledge he was alive.

He hoped chopping down the Christmas tree and decorating it today would lend itself to such an opportunity. He planned to show her he remembered every word of "O Tannenbaum" in German. Maybe that might garner a smile from her. And ... hopefully she would require everyone hold hands while they sang, as she'd always insisted. Tristan was going to do his best to make sure he stood between Quinn and Calista when that happened. He wasn't sure how he would accomplish it, but he would figure out a way.

Tristan peeked over at the freestanding stone tub in front of a large window. It boasted a gorgeous view of the pond and a meadow full of wildflowers in the summer. A vision popped into his mind of Calista taking a bath in it, her legs peeking out a bit while she listened to Joan Jett and sang along to "Cherry Bomb." He imagined her pulling him into the tub to join her, even if he'd dressed for the day. That was the kind of woman she was. A cherry bomb.

He slapped a hand on the cement counter. Why did he ever let her go? He'd known no one as playful and sexy as she'd been. When she loved, it was with all her heart. Yes, she was impulsive and a little much at times, but he missed her passion and her no-holds-barred way of living. Even if it got him arrested. At least he knew she'd bail him out. Well, not anymore. She'd probably leave him to rot in jail now.

Tristan stared in the mirror and sighed. "You're an idiot." He threw on a splash of cologne, Heritage. It was Calista's favorite.

His phone buzzed on the counter. He picked it up to see Quinn was calling.

"Hey, Quinnsster," he answered.

"Hi," she said, bummed.

"What's wrong?"

"Aunt Calista got called into work. The scheduled doctor called in sick."

That is tragically ironic, Tristan thought. "Do you want me to come pick you up and we can chop down the tree?"

"No," she was quick to say. "Aunt Calista has to be with us."

He would prefer that too, even if all she wanted was to chuck the axe at him.

“She has Sunday off. We can do it then.”

Sunday seemed like an eternity away. He was turning into a lovesick teen with thoughts like those. “Okay, kiddo. We can go to the shelter and pick out that kitten.”

“All right.” She didn’t sound thrilled.

“Or we can do something else.” He’d taken the day off so he could be with her and ... Calista.

“I want to get a kitten; it’s just I was hoping ...”

“Yeah, me too.” He stared at the tub again, enticing thoughts running through his mind. He needed to get a grip. There was no chance Calista would ever take him back. He didn’t even feel deserving of her after what he’d done.

“Maybe we can take her some food again, but this time you can come in too.”

“I don’t think she would like that.”

“Probably not. I’ll think of something, though.”

“Your aunt will see right through your plotting, kid.”

Quinn laughed. “You don’t seem to be against it.”

He certainly wasn’t, as unrealistic as it was. “I guess we could think of something.” What the hell? Right? She couldn’t hate him any more than she already did.

Quinn squealed. “I’m getting ready now. See you in thirty. Over and out.” She hung up.

Tristan smiled at his phone. At least he was making his niece happy. He only hoped she wasn’t terribly disappointed when it didn’t turn out as she wanted. It would take nothing short of a Christmas miracle for Calista to forgive Tristan, or to even look at him, for that matter. To hope for anything more would be insanity. He couldn’t help but want to jump on the crazy train.

He hurried to get ready, thinking of a way to get Calista to at the very least look at him. It irritated him the universe had put a kink in his plans for the day. Why did that doctor have to get sick? Where was the Christmas magic in that?

Tristan put on his cowboy boots because Calista used to say she loved a man in boots. With any luck, he would at least see her tonight. He was sure she would want to see the new kitten. She loved cats. He didn’t care if Stella was allergic to them. He would bring it by for a visit. That might open a tiny door, or maybe a window.

With those thoughts, he shoved his wallet in his pocket and headed out the door. He needed to feed the horses before he left. While traversing the wraparound deck, he realized cowboy boots probably weren’t the best choice. The previous night’s snow had made it slick. He slipped a few times on his way to the stairs. He gripped the railing as he walked down the wooden steps, thinking he had this, but his overconfidence was his downfall. His damn boots came out from under him, and he fell on his back and slid down a few steps. It would have been okay except ... “Hell!” he yelled. The exposed nail he’d been putting off fixing for weeks tore through his shirt and right into his back.

He immediately felt the blood stream down his skin.

“Damn it!” he yelled to himself. His voice echoed across the deserted ranch. He let out another string of four-lettered words, trying to ease the stinging pain. It didn’t help. He hadn’t had an injury like this in years. While writhing in pain, frustrated with himself for being so careless, it occurred to him that perhaps this was the Christmas magic he was looking for, as torturous as it felt. The tear in his skin felt deep. He might even need stitches, or at the very least, a tetanus shot. His doctor would most likely be closed the day after Thanksgiving. He should probably go to the ER and get this checked out.

Calista couldn’t very well ignore him then. Right?



CALISTA

“JUST KEEP YOUR FOOT ELEVATED and iced for the next few days and put as little pressure as possible on it. If the swelling doesn’t go down and the pain persists, come back in,” I instructed Mr. Yates. The X-ray didn’t show a fracture, but sometimes swelling could mask a break.

“Thanks, Dr. Monroe,” he responded.

“I swear you tripped over the dog just so you didn’t have to put the Christmas lights on the house today,” his wife complained.

I held in my snickers and left them to their bickering. “Merry Christmas.” I pulled back the curtain and rushed out of there.

Lucy was waiting for me. I think she might have been a little disappointed I was on shift and not Dr. Shackwell, who I had discovered was Lucy’s brother’s best friend. I wasn’t all that thrilled I had to come in either. But apparently, Dr. Shackwell was running a fever and coughing up a lung. So here I was on my day off. At least I didn’t have to see Tristan. It was a silver lining.

Lucy was bouncing on the balls of her feet, wringing her hands.

“Is everything okay?”

“Uh, yeah,” she squeaked.

I narrowed my eyes, not buying it. “What’s wrong?”

She grabbed my arm and pulled me farther away from what we called the fast-track beds behind the curtains.

Now I was really getting worried. “Lucy, what’s going on? Are you worried about Dr. Shackwell?” I knew she thought he was a bad boy, but I’d seen the looks between the two of them. There was definitely some sexual tension going on.

“Noooo,” she laughed nervously.

“Okay, then what?”

She cleared her throat and squinted. “I just wanted to give you a heads-up about your next patient.”

“Is it maggots?”

“No.” She squirmed.

“Spiders?” *Please don’t let it be a spider in the ear.* I hated spiders.

“It’s worse.”

Worse than spiders? I knew it wasn’t trauma, like a heart attack or a car accident. They would have paged me to the trauma room immediately. I braced myself, waiting for her to say something or other was stuck up an intimate orifice. Or maybe it was a Viagra patient. Oh man, draining blood from ... well ... never mind ... was never a treat. Or ... “Is it a worm in the eye?” Those always freaked me out.

“It’s your ex,” she blurted, squinting her eyes.

I felt all the blood drain from my face while my heart pounded erratically. “What do you mean, my ex?” I stuttered.

“You know, Tristan Granger,” she whispered. “Everyone knows you used to date him back in the day and that it didn’t turn out well.”

Of course she knew. “What’s wrong with him?” I prayed it was something we needed to call in a consultation for. Anything so I didn’t have to be the one to treat him.

“Um ... well ... he needs stitches,” she said apologetically. “Lower lat laceration about seven and a half centimeters long and one and a half deep. Just below his tattoo.”

Well, crap. “Are you sure?” I only asked out of sheer terror. Of course she would be certain, but I was grasping at straws. Also, tattoo? When did he get a tattoo? I bet his parents were livid about it. To them, only lower-class miscreants got tattoos. If they weren’t so expensive, I probably would have gotten one back in the day, just to upset them. I had to admit I was curious to see what he’d inked on his back. Yet, I could live with the suspense for the rest of my life if it meant not having to walk into that room and treat him.

She rubbed my arm. “Yeah. Sorry. But the good news is he’s in a gown, and I got a peek at what’s under there and ooh la la.” She giggled. “Sorry, that was totally unprofessional. I don’t objectify our patients,” she swore.

I smiled. “I’m not worried in the least.” Besides, she wasn’t wrong. I was sure it was like a winter wonderland under that gown. The only thing she was wrong about was it being good news. This was the worst news ever. I didn’t need to see Tristan half-naked again. How in the heck did he even cut his back?

She patted my arm. “Good luck. He’s in exam room one.”

Oh, joy. I stood frozen for a moment, feeling as if someone had cemented my feet to the floor. How could this be happening? Quinn didn’t have anything to do with this, did she? She wouldn’t cut her uncle just so I would look at him. Right? I mean, not even I would go that far to enact a plan.

Lucy said it was his back, so I could keep my solemn oath not to look him in the eye. Yes, yes. I would keep my head down and speak minimally. Surely that wouldn’t count as breaking my oath. I had no choice here. I could get the hospital and Deidra—not to mention myself—in serious trouble if I refused care.

Ugh. This was not how I saw the Christmas season beginning for me.

I steeled myself before tiptoeing over to exam room one. It felt like everyone was staring at me. Did they all know who was in there?

The Darth Vader death march sounded in my head as I made my way. When I came to the door, I stood there staring blankly at it, praying this was all just a bad dream and I would wake up soon. No luck. I had to see this nightmare through.

I swallowed down my racing heart and knocked on the door. “Can I enter?” I eked out.

“Yes,” he chuckled, like he darn well knew it was the last place I wanted to be.

Before I opened the door, I visually pictured where the exam table was and where I should keep my focus so as not to look at him. Slowly, I inched the door open, feeling like cardiac arrest was a certainty.

Like the moron I was, I kept my head down when I walked in and went straight to the sink to wash my hands without saying a word. How could I speak to him after all these years, when his last words to me still pierced my very being? Save Quinn, I’d loved no one more than Tristan, and he so easily tossed me to the side. Even after I’d told him how sorry I was for the getting arrested thing. But I thought he’d wanted to take the fall to protect me. I could still never figure that one out. Especially since he broke up with me in the most hurtful manner possible. At first, I’d thought he was lying, but I saw the disdain in his eyes. He hated me.

I turned on the water and pumped too much soap into my hands. Anything to keep me distracted. I scrubbed my hands like I was heading into surgery without gloves. Which I would never do, of course, but no germ survived after I was done.

When I reached for the paper towel, Tristan spoke.

“Calista,” he croaked.

I stilled, my hands dripping wet over the sink.

“I know I’m the last person you want to see.” He had that right. “But maybe we can call a truce.”

I ripped the paper towel out of the dispenser. “A truce would indicate we were at war or had some sort of disagreement. Neither apply.” When he broke up with me, he left no room for discussion. All I got to say was I would never look at him again. He didn’t protest. In fact, he made it easy and walked away. There was no fighting, no war. Just deep heartache.

He blew out a large amount of air but didn’t disagree with me.

I turned, doing my best not to look at him, but I noted he was sitting on the end of the examination table with his long legs dangling over the edge. “Let’s just get this over with. Shall we?”

“Yeah, sure. Of course.” He sounded nervous.

I carefully approached him, not even bothering to pull up his records. This needed to be over with as quickly as possible. Especially considering I was going to have to remove his gown and see him in nothing but jeans and boots. There was something about a man in only jeans and boots that did me in. Not just any man, but him. It was the sexiest thing I'd ever seen.

"I'm going to have to remove your gown," I spoke into my chest.

He cleared his throat. "There's something you should know."

"What?" If he was worried about me seeing a deep cut, he needn't be. Believe me, I'd seen much, much worse. I reached up to loosen the back of his gown, trying not to be taken in by his cologne. My favorite cologne. Or worse, get excited about seeing his bare chest again. I used to think about it as the eighth wonder of the world.

"My tattoo ... it ... well ... ," he was having a hard time articulating. "Never mind," he said hastily, but he braced himself.

Now I was more than curious. But I knew curiosity could do more than kill cats. It could also stop hearts. Like mine. It quit beating as soon as his gown fell off his shoulder to reveal his tattoo.

Without thinking, I reached out, and my fingers brushed over the dagger on his left shoulder. It was enough to get me fired, but I couldn't worry about it at that moment. The infuriating man had a blade inscribed with the word *CRUSADER*. *Oh. My. Hell.*

My fingers upon his skin made him tense, while goose bumps appeared everywhere. Admittedly, touching him sent a shiver through me.

I wasn't sure what to say or do. All my medical training went out the window as I stared, mesmerized by my nickname on his back. Perhaps it had nothing to do with me, but I suspected his silence and the way he tensed said it had everything to do with me. But I couldn't ask him, and nor did he try again to offer any other explanation.

I forced my hand to drop, wondering when he'd been inked. Even more, I wanted to know why he'd chosen to permanently etch something so specific to me upon his skin. It made no sense whatsoever. Did it matter, though? Nothing was going to change between us.

With that in mind, I composed myself the best I could. I grabbed the rolling tray that Lucy had kindly prepared with everything I would need, including the suture kit, Betadine, and shots of lidocaine. I put on the blue latex gloves before removing the blood-soaked gauze Lucy had placed over the wound.

He winced when I peeled it back.

"What happened?" I had to ask. It was part of my job.

"I fell down the damn deck stairs this morning. My back caught on a nail."

I cringed. "Ouch. Are you up to date on your tetanus shot?"

"I'm not sure," he responded.

"As a precaution, I recommend we give you one before you leave."

"Whatever you say, Doc." Did that sound flirty? He surely wasn't flirting with me.

I surveyed the ugly cut. "You're definitely going to need stitches." He was going to have a nice scar when all was said and done.

"I figured."

"If you could swing your legs over to the other side, it will be easier for me to stitch."

He did as I asked while I grabbed the aluminum package with the Betadine swabs to clean the wound.

"So why did you choose emergency medicine?" he asked.

I ripped open the package. The iodine antiseptic smell tickled my nose. "I enjoy knowing I can help people when they need it the most."

"Sounds like you," he said fondly.

"How did you like living in Arizona?" he rushed to say, as if he hoped to keep the conversation going.

“Summers are brutal, but I enjoyed living there,” I responded, almost appreciating the small talk. At least it meant I didn’t have to think about the meaning of his tattoo, or that I had to touch him again. I wasn’t sure how to feel about the familiarity between us. It felt so right, but so wrong. Once upon a time, he was my best friend. We could talk for hours together, or even better, enjoy the peace of not having to say anything. It was just enough to be together.

“The Betadine is going to feel cold,” I warned him before going in with the first swab to cleanse the area around the wound.

He gasped like everyone does as soon as it hit his skin.

I couldn’t help but laugh.

“Are you enjoying this?”

“No.” Did I want to torture him? Sure. But I would rather not be around him. He was confusing the heck out of me and making me break my solemn oath. At least I hadn’t looked at his face. That had to count for something.

“Oh,” he sounded disappointed. “Well, I am.”

“No one has ever said that while getting stitches.” I grabbed another swab.

He unexpectedly turned around and grabbed hold of my arm, my hand still holding the rust-colored swab. “Calista,” he said as if he were out of breath. His eyes captured my own before I had a chance to look away. For a split second, they drew me in, pleading with me not to turn my head.

I closed my eyes, furious he’d caught me off guard. That once again, I’d broken my vow.

“Please,” he begged. “Please look at me.”

“Why?” I protested.

“Cal, I’m sorry.”

“Don’t say that to me,” my voice cracked. I needed him to hate me as much as I hated him. It was easier that way. It left no room for conflicting emotions.

“I know apologizing in no way makes what I did right. But, Cal, from the depths of my soul, I’m sorry I hurt you.”

I drew away from him and turned around, hardly able to catch my breath. The swab in my hand shook as badly as my body. “I hate you” was all I could think to say.

“Probably not as much as I hate myself,” he said in a low voice.

“I wouldn’t bet on that. Please, just turn back around,” I pleaded.

“I’m good at that, aren’t I? Turning my back on you.”

No one did it better; I thought, not able to say the words out loud. All I could do was stare at his back once he’d turned around. The dagger with my name on it screamed at me. It spoke of some vital piece of information I might have missed. I didn’t know exactly what that could have been. But I knew one thing: I wasn’t ready to hear it.

TWELVE

TRISTAN

TRISTAN SMILED AT QUINN CURLED up with her two calico kittens, Coco and Poppy, at the opposite end of the couch from him in Jonathon's den. She'd begged for both of them, and he couldn't say no. And she made a good point—they could gift one to Calista. She loved cats. Too bad she hated him.

He adjusted uncomfortably. The 800 mgs of ibuprofen Calista had prescribed were wearing off. The cut didn't bother him as much as the way Calista loathed him. He wasn't sure if he should feel like an idiot for trying to apologize to her, or if he should congratulate himself for his bravery. Especially considering she had been about to sew him up.

But she'd seen the tattoo. She had to know it was for her. The pain from the nail ripping his flesh had made him forget about the ink on his back before he'd rushed over to the ER. He hadn't thought about the implications of it all.

He'd gotten the tattoo after his divorce was final five years ago. It wasn't one of his finer moments. He'd had too much to drink and was angry about how his life had turned out. The combination had him wanting to do something rebellious. Something his parents would hate. All he could think about at the tattoo parlor was how much Calista would have loved that he was living outside the box. It was the first time in years he'd allowed himself to admit he'd never stopped loving her. It was a painful realization.

At least she looked at him today and even spoke to him. Even if it was only to tell him she hated him. It was worth it. Maybe. He felt like more of a jerk for hurting her.

Tristan looked around Jonathon's den. He had a feeling Quinn liked to watch TV in this room as a way to be close to her dad, even though she had mixed feelings about him. Parental relationships were so complicated. At least in their dysfunctional family.

He gazed at the photos on the wall. Portraits of his brother, along with Stella and Quinn. He had to wonder if every smile was a lie. Or if there had been happy times. He hoped so. There were also a few photos of Tristan and Jonathon. One on the golf course, arms around each other. They'd gone to see the Masters Tournament several years ago. It was an amazing trip. Good food, lots of laughter, and several rounds of golf. He missed that Jonathon. It made Tristan wonder where it all went wrong. He knew Jonathon had loved Stella and Quinn, even if their marriage didn't start off the way he'd envisioned. Tristan thought he was a better man than Jonathon. But was he really? He'd let go of the thing he loved most, just like his brother had. And for what? His career and money? Was that any better than the sex and drugs Jonathon had traded his family life for?

Sadly, none of it seemed to make either of them any happier. Sure, Tristan loved the corporate game. He even liked the comfort of his large investment portfolio and bank account. But there was something missing in his life—or someone.

Quinn smirked at him, pulling him out of his dour thoughts. *Stranger Things* played in the background. It was their show, and their second go-around bingeing it. "So, what are you going to do to win back my aunt?"

Thinking of the hurt in Calista's eyes, he knew he shouldn't even consider trying. But heaven help him, he wanted to. "I think the best we can hope for is that maybe she'll voluntarily look at me one day," he said in defeat.

Quinn narrowed her eyes at him.

"What's that look for?"

"You're not even trying," she scolded him.

"I think falling down the stairs and getting stitches deserves some credit." He grinned.

Quinn giggled. “That’s not romantic at all.”

He could be plenty romantic, but he knew it wasn’t the tactic he should employ. Calista didn’t like being wooed. She loved thoughtful gestures and just being present. “You know, kiddo, I hate to break this to you, but this is probably pointless. She hates me.”

She held up Coco, who had more black in her fur than butterscotch like Poppy, and rubbed her soft fur against her cheek. “I know, but she must secretly love you if she kept your skis all these years.”

He’d told her he’d given Calista those skis. Quinn was positively giddy about it. Tristan held out very little hope Calista was secretly in love with him. Maybe she had been a long time ago, but that ship had sailed—and crashed and burned.

“Quinnster,” he sighed, “I really screwed up.”

“What did you do to her?” she asked, afraid to know.

Tristan didn’t have the heart or the guts to repeat what he’d said that day. “I made her believe she was nothing to me. A mistake, even.”

Quinn scrunched her face, glowering at him.

He never thought Quinn would look at him with such loathing. It felt like a slap against his cheek. “I know, kiddo. Believe me, I know.”

“Why would you do that?”

He rubbed his forehead. “Because I’m an idiot.”

“You better fix it,” she demanded. “You and Aunt Calista are all I’ve got. So don’t screw it up this time!” she shouted.

Tristan blinked, taken aback. He’d never seen Quinn so fiery. She wasn’t crying or sad, but, boy, was she determined.

He scooted closer to her, although it made his back throb. He wanted to tell her she had her mom and even her grandparents, but he couldn’t. Stella was once again not around, doing who knows what, leaving Quinn in his care. Maybe Quinn was right. Tristan and Calista were all she had in the parent department right now. At the very least, they needed to get along to be good “coparents.” “Kiddo, I’ll do my best, but you have to understand that—”

“I know Aunt Calista is stubborn, but maybe if you *really* tried, she would see you still love her. Don’t be like my dad.” Her voice hitched. “All he could do was tell me how sorry he was he wasn’t a better father and talk about all the things he wished we would have done together. You have to make Aunt Calista know she’s somebody in your life.”

Tristan sat, dazed. His fifteen-year-old niece just owned him. He looked around at all the old photos of his brother on the wall. The last thing he wanted was to end up like Jonathon. Quinn was right. If he wanted any chance of some sort of relationship with Calista, he needed to put her first this time. Calista was going to hate it, but he couldn’t stand the thought of living and dying with such a regret, despite it being a long shot. It was the Hail Mary of all Hail Marys.

“Okay, kid. What do you say to making your aunt dinner tonight?” It was about time he started thinking of others more than himself.

Quinn lit up. “Now you’re talking.”

“How about spaghetti and meatballs?” he suggested.

“That’s her favorite.”

He smiled, remembering how Calista would make spaghetti and insist they recreate the *Lady and the Tramp* scene, where they shared a noodle between them, ending in a kiss. It made spaghetti his favorite too. She had this way of turning ordinary events like eating dinner into memorable moments. All the cheesy things she liked to do that he thought he would hate—it turned out he loved them too. Much like he loved her.

“We better get to work. She’ll be home soon,” Tristan said.

Quinn nodded. “You can do this. I believe in you.”

Tristan reached over and ruffled her hair, chuckling. “Ouch.” He felt his stitches tug.

Quinn jumped off the couch, cuddling her kittens to her. “You should probably have Aunt Calista check on your cut,” she said deviously.

As much as he loved the thought of that, he knew it was out of the question. He was going to have to approach this situation with extreme caution. That would mean first mustering up the courage to tell Calista the truth—that he’d turned his back on her because he was a coward.

No longer would he be that man. He refused to end up like his brother. From now on, he was going to face the woman he loved, no matter how much she hated it.



CALISTA

I GROANED WHEN I SAW Tristan’s truck in the driveway again. Did the man ever go home? I’d seen enough of him today—too much of him. There should be some law against ex-boyfriends looking so good. Or having to treat them in the ER. His tattoo and his apology were still wiggling me out.

I parked my car and leaned my head on the steering wheel. Part of me wanted to leave, but I was exhausted, and it was snowing. My car had barely made it up the drive, slipping and sliding all over the place. I really needed to get a new car, but I hated spending the money, and it wasn’t like I had a lot of free time on my hands to shop for one.

Why couldn’t Tristan stick to the rule? There was only one freaking rule: ignore each other for eternity. The jerk had made me break my solemn vow today. Why apologize now? He’d had thirteen years to do so. Not once had he approached me during all that time. He’d gotten married and moved on. Although, I knew the marriage wasn’t going to last. His ex-wife, Rachel, had train wreck written all over her gorgeous face. At first glance she’d appeared put together, and like another perfect little protégée for Cordelia, like my sister. But underneath brewed a conniving gold digger. I only had to talk to her for five minutes to know that. Evilly, I was glad he’d married her. I knew eventually Rachel would break his heart the way he’d broken mine. And the fact that Quinn hated Rachel told me all I needed to know about the woman. Kids and pets don’t lie when it comes to people.

With that said, Quinn adored Tristan. For good reason. He was an amazing uncle. I was very grateful he’d been there for Quinn in my absence. But I was here now, and I didn’t need him around. Especially when he was causing so much inner turmoil. The last thing I needed was to feel anything but hatred for the man.

With a huge exhale, I trudged out into the snow and cold. I swore this place was out to get me. Every snowflake was begging me to remember the magic of Aspen Lake, Tristan included. I wholeheartedly refused. I didn’t care that my nickname was permanently inked on his back. For all I knew, he did it on a dare. Or maybe he was drunk. It was kind of apropos, considering I felt as if he’d stabbed my heart with a dagger. Maybe that’s what his tattoo really meant: he’d slayed the crusader. Well, he wouldn’t be getting another chance to do so.

I carefully walked up the back stairs, doing my best not to slip. It gave me an unfortunate moment to admire the lake. It, too, called to me, compelling me to remember how magical my hometown was. There was no denying how beautiful the lake was this time of year, with snow-frosted pine trees surrounding it. The falling snow on the icy water made the lake look as if Mother Nature had crafted it out of glass. I didn’t want to remember Tristan and me planning our future during walks in the snow around the lake, or impromptu polar bear plunges. Yet the sweet memories assaulted my mind, making me ache for such times. And a person to share moments like that with.

I pushed those thoughts out of my head. I only came back to Aspen Lake for Quinn. Once she graduated from high school, I was out of here.

Shivering from the cold, I walked into the warm kitchen to the smell of garlic and oregano. My stomach immediately growled, reminding me I’d only eaten two protein bars all day.

“Aunt Calista,” Quinn sang as she set the plank wood table in the kitchen nook. “We made your favorite, spaghetti.”

I knew who she meant by *we*. The fool was staring at me as he pulled the buttery garlic bread out of the double oven. I didn't even bother not looking at him. The vow was dead, and I hated him even more for it. More so for smiling that charming smile of his.

"I'm tired" was all I could think to say. I couldn't stand another evening in his presence after our scene in the ER earlier today. Even though the food smelled amazing and I was starving. Better for my stomach to suffer than my heart.

Quinn slammed the plate she was holding on the table, making an ear-piercing clang.

I whipped my head in her direction, sure she'd broken it, but it was intact.

Quinn glowered at me.

I wasn't sure I'd ever seen her glower. Certainly never at me. It hurt enough that I dropped my backpack and rubbed my chest.

Tears formed in her eyes. "I don't know exactly what happened between the two of you, because no one will tell me the whole truth. But I'm tired of you acting like children," she scolded. "For once in my life," she cried, "I want family dinners and a merry Christmas. And you two are going to make it happen. You're going to start by getting along and moving on from the past. Do you hear me?" She channeled my mother again.

Dazed by her rebuke, I nodded, worried if I didn't, she would ground me for the rest of my life.

"Good." She ran to me and threw her arms around me, resting her head on my shoulder, bawling.

I wrapped my arms around her, feeling ashamed of my behavior. There was nothing like my niece calling me out to make me realize exactly how childish I was being. It didn't matter how much Tristan had hurt me; she loved him. And as much as I hated to admit it, she needed both of us. I knew how much her parents had fought over the years, or worse, just ignored each other. She'd called me many times, crying and upset. A few times I'd had to call Stella and Jonathon and read them the riot act. Like Quinn had just done to me. She didn't deserve more adults in her life behaving badly, especially after everything she'd been through.

"I'm sorry," she muttered against me. "I just want us all to be happy together. I just want to be happy for once."

"Shh." I stroked her hair. "I'm the sorry one, honey. I'll try harder," I promised. She really was my kryptonite.

Tristan caught my eye. He was standing there holding the pan of bread, steam rising off it, looking as floored as I felt. Yet, I saw the corner of his lip ticking up like this was good news for him. I assure you it wasn't. I still hated him. You can't just switch off that emotion. Just like love. Oh, how I wished I could turn that feeling off on demand. Tristan could never know those feelings still existed. I was only going to pretend not to hate him. It was for a noble cause. I would do anything for Quinn, even if it meant putting on an Academy Award-winning performance.

"New rules," I said. "From now on, we will be *friendly*," I emphasized resolutely. Friendly did not mean friends. Especially not lovers. But I would act more like an adult from now on and make a better effort to give Quinn exactly what she needed and wanted, even if it went against my principles.

"I like friendly," Tristan crooned in the sexy way only he could.

He better not be thinking of the kind of *friendly* we had been before. If he thought that was a possibility, he was living in la-la land. "Don't even think about it," I mouthed to the gorgeous imbecile.

He chuckled, and in his laughter, I heard hope—and maybe even a challenge.

I would have thought he knew better than to challenge me, but if he was dumb enough to try, I was up for some fun.

"Shall we eat?" he asked.

Oh. I was going to eat him alive.

THIRTEEN

CALISTA

“WE HAVE A SURPRISE FOR you.” Quinn smiled at me from across the table. We’d devoured half the food already.

I stilled, not sure I could handle any more surprises. Not after being placed next to Tristan at the table. I could feel his body heat and smell his yummy cologne. If that wasn’t enough, he’d already “accidentally” brushed up against my arm twice as we reached for the parmesan cheese at the same time. When our fingers touched, my entire body tingled. It was wholly unfair. But I was being an adult about it and didn’t complain, at least not out loud. In my head, I was saying all the swear words.

“Oh, really?” I faked my excitement.

Quinn scooted her chair back. “I’m going to go get it.” She was up and gone before I could beg her not to leave me alone with her uncle.

I ripped off a sizable chunk of the delectable garlic bread and shoved it in my mouth, hoping Tristan got the memo that we didn’t need to converse if Quinn wasn’t around.

“You still hate me, don’t you?” he said under his breath. Apparently, he was reading the room correctly.

“More than ever,” I grumbled after chewing and swallowing.

He turned toward me, a smile in his eyes. “It’s been a long time since we’ve shared a meal together.”

“Not long enough.” I shoved more bread in my mouth. I would at least admit the man could still cook. The spaghetti and bread were to die for. And the way the night was going, there could be another funeral in the near future.

“Calista,” he whispered intimately. “I don’t blame you for hating me. Hell, I hate myself for what I did. But can we at least be friends and not just *friendly*? For Quinn’s sake.”

“Don’t you dare use her to get to me,” I spat.

His features turned icy. “I would never use Quinn,” he seethed. “You know I’m not that guy.”

His words stung. But ... “Do I really know you? Did I ever?”

He hung his head. “I suppose I deserve that.”

Quinn came bouncing back, all smiles, holding the most adorable calico kittens. She looked between Tristan and me. “You guys aren’t fighting, are you?”

“No, no,” we both responded with plastered smiles.

“Oh, good,” she said, relieved, holding up the kittens. “This is Poppy and Coco. Poppy is for you. Surprise!”

I wasn’t sure what to say. I loved cats, but I knew Stella wasn’t fond of them, and this was her house, even though she never seemed to be home. Which was irking me more and more. All the words were about to be said to her the next time I saw her. “Uh ... wow. Um ... thank you. I don’t know where I’ll keep her right now.”

“I thought you could keep her at my place for now, along with Coco,” Tristan rang in. “You can visit her whenever you want.”

“Isn’t that great?” Quinn asked before I could respond to the infuriating man.

“So, so great,” I gritted through my teeth. Because that’s just what I wanted. To visit my ex’s house all the time.

Quinn pranced over and handed the sweet kitten to me. She was adorable, butterscotch and black fur with hints of white.

I held up the cutest bribe ever and stared into her blue eyes, eyes that were reminiscent of Tristan's. Both pairs were saying the same thing: *You know you like me*. The kitten, yes. Tristan, no. "Hello, Poppy."

She mewed the squeakiest mew.

I smiled and set her on my lap, where she curled into a tiny ball and purred.

"I think she likes you," Tristan commented.

"Of course she does." Quinn snuggled her own kitten. "I'm going to go call Beckett. You guys don't mind cleaning up, right? And, Aunt Calista, Uncle Tristan's cut has really been hurting him. You should probably check that out. Bye-bye." She flitted off.

I stared after the cute imp as she walked off, no doubt congratulating herself. If she thought I was going to fall for her little coup, she was sorely mistaken.

Tristan grinned over at me, obviously happy with how this was all turning out. "I'm sure you had a long day, so I'll do the dishes while you rest."

I was going to protest and tell him I would do the dishes and he could just go home, but the day had exhausted me. So I nodded my thanks while stroking Poppy.

Tristan stood and grabbed his plate along with Quinn's and walked them over to the sink.

"I'll pay you for Poppy." I didn't feel right accepting gifts from him.

"No need. Besides, we got her at the shelter," Tristan informed me. "I knew you would prefer a rescued animal."

He was correct.

"I insist on at least paying for her room and board until I get a place of my own."

He started rinsing off the dishes. "Don't worry about it. I've got it covered."

"I don't—" I started to protest.

"I get it," he cut me off. "You don't want to be beholden to me in any shape or form. Look at it like you're doing me the favor. I could use the company." He sounded downtrodden—lonely, even.

That I could relate to, but he didn't need to know that. "I don't want to do you any favors either," I retaliated.

He shook his head.

"Maybe I'll just keep her here with me and let Stella deal with it. Where is my sister, anyway?"

Tristan shrugged. "Your guess is as good as mine."

"What are people saying at your country club?" I asked with some disdain. If Stella was hooking up with someone, surely there would be some talk.

He looked up from the dishes and scrunched his brow. "I know you don't have the highest opinion of me, but I don't spend my days at the country club listening to people gossip."

"Just on the weekends," I quipped.

"Only when the golf course is open," he zinged back.

"You must be in mourning right now, then."

"I'm doing my best to deal with the tragic circumstances," he teased.

I couldn't help but smile. I would berate myself for it later. "At least tell me you know something about this Beckett kid." I would have to snoop on my sister later. Maybe Jules could help me. I was sure she was a spy or something like that.

Tristan walked back over to the table to grab the serving dishes. He paused to glance at me, his eyes trying to peer into my own, but I refused to get trapped in those babies. "Beckett's a good kid. His dad is the store manager, and Beckett works there after school, stocking the inventory. And ... they are from the *other* side of the lake."

That surprised and pleased me. "You mean the best side?"

“I’ll give you that one,” Tristan agreed.

I squinted at him, not believing it for a minute.

He stepped closer to me and leaned in, making it so I couldn’t breathe. “Some of the very best times of my life happened on that side of the lake.”

My heart stopped. He wasn’t allowed to say things like that. “I assume you’re talking about after I left,” I said dryly.

“You know exactly the times I’m talking about,” he whispered before standing up straight and walking back to the sink.

They were times I didn’t want to remember, but remember them I did. Simple, sweet moments like helping my mom plant her garden or making plum jam. Sometimes I would look over at him during those times and knew that wherever he was, that’s where I belonged. It didn’t matter what side of the lake we were on. But ... he obviously didn’t agree.

I stood with Poppy, thinking this was a good time to exit. I had played mostly nice for long enough. My heart didn’t need any more reminders of the past. Of him. “I’m going to head upstairs,” I informed him, not daring to look at him. He still had this pull on me.

“Wait,” he said, panicked. “I need to tell you something.”

I took another step toward my escape route. “I think we said enough for today, don’t you?”

“No. I need to tell you why.”

“Why what?” I was confused.

“Why I broke up with you.”

I grabbed the wall nearest me and stared at him. He was gripping the counter near the sink, as if he needed the support as much as I did. “You made that clear.” My stomach twisted thinking of that night. The night my world got turned upside down.

“I lied,” he adamantly stated. “You saw my back. I never forgot about you.”

I pressed my lips together, not wanting to believe a word he said. Not after all these years and the heartache. “Please, stop. I was just a bad habit for you. You said so yourself.”

“No. Damn it. I didn’t mean it.”

That lit a fire under me. I gripped the wall tighter. “You sure as hell better have meant it. You don’t say things like that and not mean them, Tristan. Not to someone you say you love,” I cried, hating myself for it.

He hung his head. “Calista,” he said my name so affectionately, “I’ve regretted those words since the moment they came out of mouth.”

“Thanks for letting me know,” I said flatly. “I hope you feel better now.” I knew I didn’t.

He lifted his head, his pale-blue eyes immediately penetrating my own. “I don’t think I’ve felt right for thirteen years. How about you?”

I shook my head. We were so not having this conversation. I was just fine until I came back to this stupid town. Until I broke my vow. “I really hate you right now.”

“You keep saying that, but your eyes say something entirely different.”

I was pretty sure my eyes had been giving off the I-loathe-you vibe. “Oh yeah? What do they say?”

“They say ...” He hesitated for a moment, like he was unsure if he should proceed. “They say you’re home,” he blurted.

I lowered my head, denying him access to my apparently lying eyes. Once upon a time he *had* been home to me, but he’d slammed the door to the house, locked it, and then burned it down. “If you mean a haunted house, sure,” I scoffed, unwilling to let him think for a second he was right. Although my heart was screaming that it was me who might not be seeing things clearly. Except, it truly felt like since I’d come back to Aspen Lake, I was walking through a haunted house, just waiting for the next unpleasant thing to pop out at me.

“You do haunt me,” he admitted.

I snapped my head up. “What does that mean?”

“It’s like the Ghost of Christmas Past has appeared to show me all my old mistakes, with leaving you being the worst mistake of all.”

“Stop saying things like that,” I demanded.

“Why? Because you’re afraid what I’m saying is true?”

“No.” My lower lip trembled while tears threatened to appear. “I know you’re lying now, because the man I thought I knew wouldn’t have told me I was a bad habit he needed to quit unless he really meant it. He wouldn’t hurt me for no reason.”

His face paled so much he looked as if he’d stopped breathing. “I had my reasons,” he said quietly. “They weren’t good, but I had them.”

“And what were those reasons?” I wasn’t sure I wanted to know, but I’d wondered for thirteen years why things had changed so suddenly for him.

“Cal,” he whispered, working up the nerve to tell me. “The truth is, I was a coward. I didn’t want to let go of my lifestyle and sometimes ... you were a lot,” he mumbled. “I worried, and my parents worried, what it would do to our business. And I liked the money and everything that came with it. I didn’t think I could walk away from it, so I walked away from you instead,” he said, ashamed.

I snuggled Poppy against my pounding heart. It felt as if Tristan had taken the knife he’d stabbed me with thirteen years ago and twisted it for good measure. I knew I could be a lot to handle, but I thought it was one of the things he’d loved about me. You know, except for the whole getting arrested thing. And if he’d wanted to keep working for his parents, he could have told me so. I never demanded he quit. He’d made me believe he wanted a different life. A life with me.

I stared blankly at Tristan, trying to decide how I should respond—or if I should even respond at all. The only thought that came to me was, “I was right; you never really loved me.” The thought killed, yet in a way it helped me make sense of the pain. Truth has a way of doing that.

His jaw dropped.

“If you really loved me, you would have told me the truth. You would have at the very least given me the choice to not be *too much*, as you say. But you didn’t do any of that. Because you wanted to quit me.” I spun on my heels, no longer able to look at him. All I wanted was to be by myself.

“Calista,” his voice broke unnaturally. “I understand why you feel that way, but it’s not that simple.”

“Sounds pretty simple to me.” I marched off.

“Except I never stopped loving you,” he called out.

I didn’t bother to turn around. He was clearly delusional to say such a thing, especially after admitting why he’d really broken up with me. If he thought the Ghost of Christmas Past was really haunting him, I would leave him with some of Belle’s parting words to Scrooge. I knew he would understand the reference, as I’d made him watch every version of *A Christmas Carol* available when we were together. “May you be happy in the life you have chosen.” It was his choice, after all.

FOURTEEN

CALISTA

“HERE YOU GO.” I HANDED Jules some of my special peppermint hot chocolate with a shot of coffee. She’d texted before five this morning, saying her dad had taken a turn for the worse. So, I came in before my shift to check on her. I’d spoken to his doctor the day before and the prognosis wasn’t good. Her father’s brain was swelling. But it was risky to perform a decompressive hemicraniectomy, which is to remove part of the skull to reduce the pressure in the brain.

Jules gratefully took the cup and held it between her hands, savoring the warmth. The dark bags under her eyes said she hadn’t slept all night. “Thank you,” she whispered. Her gaze drifted toward her father lying in the hospital bed, tubes and machines keeping him alive. He was a tall man with a broad chest and shoulders, and a thick mane of silver hair. But he looked like a shell of a person. He’d fallen into a coma, which wasn’t a good sign.

The only lights in the darkened room came from an overhead lamp and the glow of the datascop measuring his vitals. The steady beeping was a familiar tune to me.

“You know, many coma patients report being able to hear familiar voices. It’s comforting to them.”

“What if he doesn’t wake up?” she croaked out.

I pulled up a chair next to her and sat down. “Then I will mourn with you.”

She took a sip of the caffeinated peppermint hot chocolate before saying, “You don’t know what that means to me. My mom and sisters aren’t taking it well. Worse than me. They want the doctor to remove part of his skull to see if it will help. What do you think?”

“Honestly?” I was afraid to give my opinion.

She nodded.

“The truth is many stroke patients who undergo decompressive hemicraniectomy still die from the brain swelling.”

“That’s what I was afraid of,” she cried.

I patted her back, wishing I had better news for her. Sure, I had seen plenty of miracles during my time as a doctor, but often the kindest thing to do was just to be honest about the odds. “I’m sorry, Jules.”

“Don’t be. I’m sorry for texting you so early. I just needed a friend.”

Didn’t we all?

“I’m glad you felt comfortable enough to.”

“Still, you have to be exhausted working extra shifts this week.”

“It’s one of the perks of the job.” I grinned.

She softly laughed. “And treating your ex, right?”

I’d checked on her last night before I left and told her all about giving Tristan stitches yesterday. “Too bad that wasn’t my only encounter with him yesterday.”

She faced me and tilted her head. “What happened?”

“Nothing.” The poor woman had better things to worry about than my ex making wild claims about still being in love with me. Especially since before that, he admitted he’d left me because I was too much and he didn’t want me to impede his lifestyle. Tristan had no idea how much his words killed me, even after all these years. I had a hard time sleeping because I couldn’t stop thinking about them. Basically, he’d given me up because I embarrassed him and he loved money. He really was Ebenezer Scrooge. If I was lucky, the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come would pay him

a visit and throw him in a grave. Then I wouldn't have to be *friendly* to him anymore for the sake of Quinn.

She nudged me. "Come on. Remember, I love trivial."

I smiled. "Well, this is probably a tad more than trivial."

"What happened?" She sounded concerned.

I gave her a brief overview of last night's revelations.

She blinked, surprised. "Wow."

"Yeah," I sighed.

"What are you going to do?" Jules asked.

"I'm just going to play nice in front of my niece. Other than that, I plan on avoiding him."

She bit her lip. "But on Thanksgiving, you said you still loved him too."

My brow quirked as if to say, *And?*

She smirked. "I'm just saying it might be difficult to school your feelings, knowing how he still feels about you."

I spat out a muted, albeit sardonic, laugh. "He doesn't really love me."

"Love is a complicated thing." She focused her attention back on her dad. "If you asked my parents if they loved me, they would emphatically say yes. But I don't particularly feel loved by them. I was never as brilliant or as accomplished as my sisters. My parents weren't cruel, but I could tell I disappointed them, or maybe I just became an afterthought to them. And let's not forget they left me at a rest stop on vacation once. It took them an hour before they realized I wasn't in the car with them."

"Yikes," I gasped.

"They even missed my college graduation. I waited for them at the airport for three hours before they called to say they weren't coming. They just laughed it off like it was no big deal. But they didn't miss my sisters' graduations. But look at me. Here I sit with my father's lifeless body because I feel more seen here than at home. I keep thinking," her voice pitched, "that maybe Dad will wake up and see it was me who stayed by his side. And he'll finally recognize I'm worth loving too, even if I don't have a doctorate in ancient studies or speak four languages."

I felt so awful for her. Thankfully, my parents always made me feel so loved. I took Jules's shaking hand. Not knowing exactly what to say, I went with my go-to—humor. "Does he know you're a spy?"

She giggled. "Maybe if I really were a spy, it would mean something to him. He just thinks I'm some run-of-the-mill computer programmer."

"So what you're saying is you are some high-level CIA encryption specialist."

She squeezed my hand. "Thanks, Calista, for making me feel seen."

I noted she did not deny the CIA encryption specialist accusation. "Anytime. Let's do something outside the hospital when you feel up to it."

"I'd love that."

"It's a date. Unfortunately, I need to run. My shift starts soon. Call or text me anytime."

She turned my way. "Thank you. I will." She sounded so grateful. "Good luck with Tristan."

I stood. "No luck needed there. Maybe now that I know the truth, my heart can heal."

"Or be open to new possibilities," she said mysteriously.

"And what possibilities would those be?"

"Maybe Scrooge will get the girl this time."

I spat out a laugh. "Not this girl."

"Didn't you say that to not love him would be like not loving yourself?" she asked sincerely.

That took all the bravado out of me. Love and the sharing of souls is a tricky business. No wonder Catherine and Heathcliff were so messed up in *Wuthering Heights*. “I did,” I quietly admitted.

“I would hate for you to never love yourself. That would be a tragedy.”

That thought was a smack in the face. So much so I had no response other than to whisper, “Goodbye. I’ll check on you later.”

She waved and turned back toward her dying father.

I sauntered out past the nurses’ station that was festively decorated with stockings and Christmas lights. The nurses in the ER had decorated their station almost identically. Someone had even put a Christmas tree in our break room. It added some cheer. I needed all the cheery thoughts I could get after my conversation with Jules, and even after the one with Tristan last night. I think I would have felt better if he’d just cheated on me or something. Instead, he left me for things that would never love him back—and because he couldn’t handle me. So he got arrested. It was only the one time. Sure, it wasn’t pleasant. And I felt terrible about it. But those poor puppies were suffering, and no one would do anything about it. I’d tried the legal route before I’d taken matters into my own hands.

I’d figured the puppy thing was the catalyst to him breaking up with me, but from the sound of it, he was going to anyway. I didn’t fit into his country club lifestyle. Here was a news flash for him—I still didn’t. Nor would I ever. Not that it mattered, because we weren’t rewriting *A Christmas Carol*.

I arrived in the ER to find my favorite person. “Hi, Evie,” I said as brightly as humanly possible, even though I felt anything but festive. Although every time Evie curled her lips and wrinkled her brow at me, I felt a certain amount of satisfaction. I was still determined to make her like me.

“Hi,” she mumbled as she marched out of the nurses’ station.

The other nurses did their best to hide their snickering.

“Good morning,” I greeted them.

“Good morning,” they each happily replied.

“I love the headbands.”

Each of them wore some flashing antlers on their heads. I bet Evie loved that.

“Do you want one?” Joelle asked. She was as cute as a button and barely out of school.

“Uh, yeah.”

She reached into her bag and pulled a set out for me. She handed me the antlers through an opening in the glass.

“Thank you.” I immediately put them on. The silliness of it had me feeling a little better. That was until I heard one of the ER techs say, “Right this way, Mr. and Mrs. Harding.”

I froze, thinking surely it was not *them*. My absentee grandparents who wanted nothing to do with me because my family didn’t fit their lifestyle. It was seemingly a pattern in my life. My last memory of them was when I was eighteen. Mom and I were perusing the summer flower festival when we ran into them. For a moment, we’d all stopped and stared at one another. My mom said a tearful hello, and they turned their backs on us. I have never forgotten the tears pouring down my mother’s cheeks after that encounter. It hurt her so much, she couldn’t even speak. It was the first time in my life I’d felt true hatred.

Flexing my fingers, I turned around slowly, waiting for the next ghost to pop out at me in the haunted house that was Aspen Lake. I threw up a few silent prayers for good measure. Sadly, they went unanswered. Honestly, it was almost comical at this point. At this rate, Cordelia and Frasier would arrive at any moment.

Before me were Rosemary and Arthur Harding. They had aged quite a bit in the last sixteen years. The haughty air around them had certainly diminished. Arthur sat in a wheelchair being pushed by the tech, sporting a nasty bump and cut on his forehead. He had only a few wisps of white hair left on his wrinkled, age-spotted head. Rosemary’s white coiffure was a bit mussed, and her back was slightly bent, but in her deep-brown eyes fixed squarely on me, I saw my mother. I

didn't like it. The woman was nothing like my loving mother. Yet, I couldn't deny the family resemblance.

I waited for Rosemary and Arthur to flee, or at the very least turn away from me. But they did neither.

"We'll get you settled, and then the nurse will be in to see you," the tech said.

I turned, hardly able to breathe, knowing I was going to have to treat Arthur. Maybe I could beg Dr. James to stay longer. It was wholly unfair, but I would make it up to him somehow. In my younger years, I would have totally agreed to make out with him in the supply closet or something. Dr. James was more than attractive. He reminded me of a young Denzel Washington. But I knew Deidra wouldn't appreciate it. Even though I could totally go for a noncommittal make-out session. There was nothing like kissing to blow off a little steam.

"You okay?" Joelle asked.

"Yeah," I murmured before numbly walking off to find Isaiah, a.k.a. Dr. James.

He was walking out of the office with his backpack slung over his shoulder, looking dog tired. "Hey, Calista." Isaiah smiled.

"Hi," I replied in a panicked tone. "I was wondering if you could do me a huge favor," I whispered.

"Sure, name it."

"Um ... I don't know how to explain this and it's probably better if I don't, but I need you to treat the patient in room one."

He rubbed the back of his neck, hemming and hawing. "Normally, I would say yes, but I promised my girlfriend I would take her to breakfast this morning and that I wouldn't be late."

Of course he had a girlfriend. There went any chances of making out in the supply closet. It was probably a bad idea anyway, seeing as my ex was totally messing with my head. "I get it. You should keep your promise." That's what good boyfriends do. They don't go running the first time they get arrested on your behalf.

He patted my shoulder. "Thanks for understanding. Have a good day."

I was pretty sure that wasn't going to happen.

With an enormous sigh, I shuffled into the office to deposit my backpack and hyperventilate for a moment. While I gripped the edge of the desk and stressed out of my mind, my phone chimed. I reached into my backpack, thinking it was Quinn or Jules. No such luck. The day was going downhill fast.

A picture of Poppy showed up on the screen. And guess where Poppy was? Cuddled up against Tristan's bare chest. The man was insufferable. Yummy, but completely dreadful. I admit to ogling the picture for longer than I should have. I wished I could blame it on Poppy's cuteness, but I couldn't. Tristan's dang pecs had me mesmerized and aching to brush my fingers across them and his rippled abs. I was completely disgusted with myself.

With the adorable picture came a message:

Tristan: *Quinn gave me your number. I won't even bother asking if you mind, because I know you do. But Poppy wanted to say hi this morning. She misses you.*

I thought that was it, but then some texting bubbles appeared. Apparently, he wasn't done torturing me for the day. I should have just turned off my phone and faced the music with my mom's parents, but no, I foolishly kept my eyes fixed on the screen, waiting to see what else he had to say. Several times the bubbles disappeared, only to reappear seconds later. He was obviously having a hard time deciding what to say, or maybe if he should say it at all. Eventually the words came, and they caused my pulse to race.

Tristan: *I miss you too. I'm sorry about last night. Even more sorry about the last thirteen years. I know you must think I'm a real jerk. And I am. If you're wondering if I'm happy about the life I've chosen, the answer is no. If I could, I would go back and choose you.*

I let the phone drop on the desk, not caring if the screen cracked. I should have kept Poppy with me, but Quinn didn't think her mom would like it. And Coco and Poppy seemed to like to be

together, so I sent her off with Tristan last night. That was a mistake. It gave him another avenue into my life. A life he didn't want. Why, after all this time, had he changed his mind? Was it the holidays? The loss of his brother? These events do odd things to people. And it didn't matter if we shared the same soul. He'd made his choice. You don't just get a do-over. Did he have any idea how much he'd hurt me?

"Knock, knock," Joelle interrupted my hyperventilating session. "Mr. Harding is ready to see you."

Great. Just great. "Thank you. I'll be right there." I picked up my phone and thought I would text Tristan back and tell him I hated him, but then I thought Quinn might see it. No need to upset her. In the end, I just ignored him. I couldn't afford to engage him in conversation. I feared if I did, it would open the door to my heart. If he thought my eyes said they were at home with him, for sure my heart would scream how much I loved him. That, he could never know.

FIFTEEN

CALISTA

I STRAIGHTENED MY BLINKING ANTLERS before barely rapping on the door. “May I enter?” I croaked before clearing my throat. I meant to sound more in command.

“Yes,” Rosemary called out, her voice wavering.

It startled me. I had never heard her speak. The lilt in her voice reminded me of the gentle way my mom used to talk. That alone had me wanting to run. It wasn’t fair Rosemary could remind me of Mom after all the pain she had caused her.

It was surprising they hadn’t requested a different doctor. Maybe they didn’t want to make a scene. Or perhaps they were here to trick me into doing something that would get me fired. I wouldn’t put it past them to conspire with Cordelia and Frasier to rid this town of me once and for all. If that was the case, they had another think coming. I wouldn’t let them intimidate me. I would stay in Aspen Lake until Quinn left for college, regardless of whether the Hardings and Grangers liked it.

I swung the door wide open and walked in with my head held high, for my parents’ sake. I looked between the aging couple gaping at me. “I assume we can do away with the usual pleasantries, since you know who I am.”

Rosemary nodded, and Arthur swallowed hard.

After my curt introduction, I sat on the rolling stool and pulled the laptop cart closer to access Arthur’s information. I could feel their eyes on my every move. I logged in and began perusing Arthur’s charts. He had type 2 diabetes and high blood pressure and was on a few different medications. The nurse’s note said he’d fallen this morning in his bedroom on the way to the bathroom. She was worried about a possible concussion.

“You look so much like Vera,” Rosemary choked out her name.

My head snapped up. How dare she mention my mother. I had a diatribe on the tip of my tongue and was bursting to unleash it upon them, but I thought of Deidra and Quinn and kept my mouth shut. Hopefully, the fire in my eyes conveyed all the terrible things I wished to say to them.

Judging by Rosemary’s watery eyes, she got the picture. However, her emotional state confused me. They’d disowned their daughter almost forty years ago. One would think after that length of time, there would be no lingering affection.

“I don’t blame you for hating us,” Rosemary whispered.

I said nothing. Of course I hated them. The way they had treated my mother was inexcusable.

I rolled toward Arthur. He was sitting in the same wheelchair the tech had rolled him back in. Joelle had cleaned his cut and put a butterfly bandage on it. I pulled a penlight out of my shirt pocket to exam Arthur’s eyes. “Have you had any vomiting or headaches?” I asked in my most professional voice.

“No,” he answered.

I turned toward Rosemary. “Has he had any slurred speech or seizures?”

She shook her head.

I clicked on my low beam light and shined it at the outer edge of his right eye, moving it inward to see how fast his pupil constricted. It was a little slower than I’d have liked. I checked his left eye, and it, too, was sluggish. “I’m going to order a CT scan to see if there is any bruising or swelling in the brain.”

Rosemary gasped.

“It’s just as a precaution to rule out a concussion,” I informed her before gliding back toward the laptop to submit the order. While typing, I absently recited, “Joelle will be in shortly to take you to imaging. Let me know if you need anything in the interim.” I said it without thinking. It was my normal doctor speak, but there was nothing ordinary about the situation.

I logged out of the laptop and stood to exit quickly, thinking I would at least get a reprieve until I got the test results back.

“We do need something,” Rosemary bleated like an injured lamb.

My eyes narrowed, not at all hiding my annoyance.

Rosemary wasn’t deterred by my less-than-cordial attitude. “We would really like to get to know you,” she said, trembling.

My brows shot up. Was this a joke? “Why? Because I’m a doctor now? Is that respectable enough for you?”

“No. No. No.” Arthur adamantly denied my accusation.

“Then why, after all these years?”

“Because,” Rosemary cried, “I think your mother would want us to.”

I spat out a maniacal laugh. “How would you know what my mother would want? You disowned her and pretended we didn’t exist. You didn’t even bother to come to her funeral. Your own daughter.”

Rosemary wept silently. Tears pouring from the eyes that reminded me so much of my mom’s. “I will never forgive myself.”

Arthur reached over and took her delicate, trembling hand.

She squeezed his hand like she was holding on for dear life. “We know we don’t deserve to ask, but please,” she pleaded. “Please, let us try to atone for our past mistakes. We’ll do anything.”

I stared incredulously at my undeserving grandparents, wanting so badly to rant and rave, despite this town’s eyes and ears. Their sheer audacity had my head swimming. All I could do was turn and walk out the door. More than anything, I wanted to run away from this town and take Quinn with me. I didn’t recall signing up for this when I said I would move back home. Honestly, I thought I would do most of the torturing. Nothing malignant, of course. Just my mere presence was enough to give some people in this town hives. Instead, I was the one being tormented.

It was going to be another endless day.



AFTER MY SHIFT WAS OVER, I ran to the only place I could think of—the cemetery. Quinn had a date, Stella was who knew where, and I needed my mommy. Or at least a place to cry in private while I vented about my day. So, there I stood in front of my parents’ grave in the dark, wearing a parka on this bitterly frosty night, angry tears begging to be unleashed. Rosemary and Arthur’s plea incensed me. How dare they want to know me when they had ignored me for over thirty-four years.

I knelt in the snow, not caring that it seeped through my scrubs. I brushed the fluffy white stuff off the headstone to reveal my parents’ names. It was hard to see in the dark, but I made out Vera and Alden Monroe. There were also more daisies, my mom’s favorite flower, frozen and wilted on the stone. I had a guess now as to who had been coming here and placing them on the grave. They had no right to mourn her now.

“I miss you both so much it hurts,” I whispered. “What a day I’ve had. Make that *days*. But this one takes the cake.” The tears that had been threatening finally unleashed their fury and rolled down my cold cheeks. I was just about to bare my soul when I heard the snap of a twig and footsteps. I spun around, my hand heading for the mace in my coat pocket.

“I didn’t mean to startle you,” Tristan’s gravelly, sexy voice filled the air.

I wiped my eyes. “Are you following me?” My voice broke. Stupid tears.

He stepped closer, concern filling his gorgeous eyes. “What’s wrong, Calista?”

“Just go away.”

Tristan didn't listen to me and strode right over, dropping to his knees next to me. He looked like he'd just come from work in dress pants, a button-up shirt, and an expensive dark wool coat.

“You're going to ruin your clothes,” I said, trying not to be affected by his presence, and doing my best not to remember how often we had come to this place together. The comfort he had given me in this very spot had made me feel so loved and wanted. My body and soul cried out how much they had missed him. But he was just another person who'd pushed me away because I didn't fit the right mold.

“I don't give a damn.” He unceremoniously wrapped his arms around me.

I stiffened, refusing at first to let myself feel at home, even though that's exactly how I felt. I hadn't been held so tenderly in such a long time. It made me realize how lonely I was, which made me cry harder.

Tristan stroked my hair. “Let it all out.”

His gentle command had me obeying him. I sank against him and wept, not caring that I hated him or that he had thrown me away. I needed someone, and there he was. All my pent-up emotions poured out of me as I sobbed and shuddered in Tristan's arms. My anger, sadness, and vulnerabilities about being back in Aspen Lake bubbled to the surface.

“Calista,” he whispered. “What happened?”

Instead of baring my soul to my dead parents, I found myself telling Tristan everything that had happened with Arthur and Rosemary. Including admitting Arthur to the hospital so his condition could be monitored for the next twenty-four hours. In good conscience, I couldn't let him go home, even though his CT scan looked okay. His age and other health conditions made me cautious. It had nothing to do with affection, even though they'd begged me to forgive them for their neglect.

Tristan listened to it all, not offering a single word of advice, just granting me the opportunity to get it all out. It was exactly what I needed.

“How could they think I would want anything to do with them after all this time? After all the pain they caused my mother?” I cried.

Tristan ceased stroking my hair, but he held on tighter.

“Why wasn't I good enough for them ... for you?” I couldn't help but ask. Those words out of my mouth had me pulling away, remembering Tristan was no longer my person and I couldn't count on him.

Tristan refused to let go. “Cal, it wasn't you. It's them. It's me.”

I pushed away from him. This time, he let me go. “You said yourself I was too much.”

He scrubbed a hand over his delicious five-o'clock shadow. “I shouldn't have said that.”

“You meant it.”

“Not how you think. Yes, you were more than I could handle sometimes, but that was on me. I was afraid of how it would affect my standing in the community and my bank account. All poor excuses. You don't know how often I have missed your 'too much.'”

“It's doesn't matter now. You can leave.” The vulnerability of the situation was starting to affect me.

He reached out and ran a finger down my cheek, leaving a trail of sparks. “It matters. You matter.”

I spat out a sarcastic laugh. “Just go, Tristan. We're not doing this.”

“Why not?”

“Because I only came back for Quinn. And despite being a doctor now, this town and your parents still think I'm just trash from the other side of the lake. Nothing has changed. You wrecked me, and I won't let you do that again.” I stood and brushed the snow off my pants, shivering in the chilly air.

Tristan stood, determined. “Tell me right now that being in my arms didn't feel right and I'll walk away forever.”

I opened my mouth to lie, but I couldn't. Something deep inside me held my tongue hostage, refusing to release the words I so desperately wanted to say. I tried over and over, to no avail. "This is stupid." I huffily walked off.

Tristan followed.

"I seriously hate you." I meant every word. Sure, I also still loved him, but he didn't need to know that. Like, ever.

"That's okay. I can work with that," he happily replied.

I threw my hands up. "We're not working on anything. Why are you even here?"

"I came up here to talk to Jonathon. He, more than anyone, knows what it's like to throw away the person he loves most."

"Don't refer to me that way," I growled.

He grabbed my hand, pulling me to a stop. "Cal," he breathed out, forming white puffs in the cold air. "I know you have zero reason to believe me, but I'm not lying. I've already warned my parents you're off-limits."

I rolled my eyes. "Like that's ever stopped them." They were already threatening my job. Getting involved with Tristan would only fuel that fire. "But it's fine because we are never getting back together."

He pulled my hand up with a devilish smile before his warm lips landed on my skin, sending a shock wave through me. "*Never* is such a tragic word. Don't you think?"

The real tragedy was that I would never get lost in the feel of his kiss again. I yanked my hand away for self-preservation before I did something I would regret, but thoroughly enjoy. "We're definitely not doing that again."

"Why? Because you liked it?" he taunted me.

I scrunched my nose at him, glaring. "I'm leaving. Have fun talking to your jerk of a brother."

"You don't know the half of it," he gritted out.

Dumb man had me curious. And apparently, I hadn't learned my lesson about curiosity killing the cat. "What happened between you two?"

"Besides the way he treated Quinn and Stella ..." Tristan paused for a moment. "He slept with Rachel."

My jaw dropped. That had to be an attractive sight. "While you were married?"

He nodded.

"Does my sister know?"

"I don't know. I hope not."

I shoved my hands in my pockets, trying to warm them, feeling awful for my sister. Maybe I needed to have a little more compassion for her. Not that I was letting her off the hook where Quinn was concerned, but maybe I needed to figure out how to approach her more softly. "I'm sorry." It's all I could think to say. I knew Jonathon was a pig, but it was a low blow to sleep with his brother's wife.

Tristan looked down at his designer shoes. "That's what I get for picking the wrong woman."

I wanted to say I wasn't the right woman for him either, but it was a lie. In my heart, I knew we would have been great together. "I don't know that anyone deserves that. Not even you." I grinned.

His head popped up, the corners of his lips twitching. "I am sorry, Calista. I know it doesn't make up for anything, but it's the truth."

Tristan's sincerity rang true, scaring me. "I really have to go." I turned and hustled off.

"I'll pick you and Quinn up tomorrow morning," he called out, thankfully not following me this time.

"Fine," I yelled back, knowing Quinn wouldn't let another day go by without getting a Christmas tree.

“Good night, Calista.”

“Good night, Tristan,” I said more to myself, a little ticked that part of me looked forward to seeing him the next day. And for that, I really hated him.

SIXTEEN

TRISTAN

TRISTAN PARKED HIS TRUCK IN front of Stella's house and took a moment to stare at it, the last couple of days running through his mind. He banged his head on the steering wheel. "You're a prick for telling her you left her for money and because she was too much," he lamented out loud. "While I'm at it, you're an idiot for telling her you still love her. You couldn't have saved that?"

The woman did things to him that had his mouth and heart overriding his head. He'd planned on playing it cool and coming on subtly. Instead, he was behaving more like a sledgehammer in a glass shop. Every time he was around her, all he wanted to do was skip to the part where she forgave him and realized she still had feelings for him too. It was a pipe dream.

He had to hand it to Calista: she knew how to cut him to the core. Using that line from *A Christmas Carol* was wickedly good. It figuratively punched him in the chest, just as she intended. Tristan had to smile, though, remembering how many versions of the movie they had watched when they were together. The Muppet version had been her favorite. She had every song memorized and would belt them out while they watched the show. Gazing at her was more fun than paying attention to the movie.

The Christmases they had spent together were the best of his life. More than anything, he was hoping to make this Christmas just as good. Or better. Especially for Quinn. Calista had given him hope last night at the cemetery, the way she'd eventually snuggled right into him and sobbed into his chest. He was sorry she was hurting, but to hold her again was more than he could have asked for. The fact that she'd allowed it for so long confirmed she felt the rightness of it too. She wanted to deny it, but her actions proved otherwise. And she could keep telling him she hated him all day long; it was better than indifference. He could work with hate. Hate meant there were still deep feelings.

Today he planned to capitalize on last night's events. Hopefully more subtly this time. His back was killing him, and there was no way he could swing an axe with stitches. If all went well, Calista would offer to do it, and he would be happy to teach her how to swing an axe. It would necessitate some close contact.

Tristan grinned over at the bench seat in his truck. He'd purposely bought this truck so Calista could sit next to him. He used to love nothing better than resting one hand on the wheel and the other on her bare thigh. Those short shorts she used to wear always did him in. He planned to let Quinn drive today so that he could sit next to her aunt. After all, she needed the practice now that she had her driver's permit. And the girl took corners way too recklessly, which would force him to lean into Calista a few times on the drive over to his ranch. It was going to be a good day.

He climbed out of the truck slowly so as not to tug on the stitches in his back.

Quinn and Calista were already on their way down the back stairs.

Tristan couldn't help but gape at Calista in her tight jeans that showed off her long, beautiful legs. A beanie topped her gorgeous dark mane, while the rest of her dark, silky hair fell softly below her shoulders. It made her look adorably sexy. He remembered how amazing it had felt to stroke her hair last night, and to breathe in her strawberry-vanilla scent.

Calista was doing her best not to look at him, but he saw the hint of a smile on her perfect face. She knew exactly how tempting she was.

"Good morning, ladies." He hustled over the best he could to the passenger side of the truck to open the door.

Calista narrowed her eyes at him.

"What? I'm opening this for myself," he feigned innocence. "I thought I would let Quinn drive."

Quinn squealed and ran around to the driver's side.

“I know what you’re doing,” Calista whispered. “And it won’t work.”

He shrugged. “You never know about these things. Do you want the middle? Or should I take it? You need to be ready to act quickly. Quinn can be a bit of a scary driver.”

“Hey!” Quinn shouted. “I heard that.”

“I’m only speaking the truth, kiddo.” Tristan laughed.

“Maybe she just needs a better teacher,” Calista quipped before climbing into the truck, clinging to her coat like a security blanket.

Tristan figured it wouldn’t be easy for her. Some of their best memories lived in this truck. It surprised him she’d agreed to let him pick them both up. But he knew her car wouldn’t do well getting up to his place this time of year. He probably should have brought his Land Rover, but he couldn’t resist seeing Calista in his truck again. Besides, he wasn’t letting Quinn drive his new car. He gave Calista’s hand a little squeeze to let her know he understood how hard this was for her.

She squeezed back before saying “Ugh” and shaking her hand like she had just touched something disease ridden.

Tristan kept his smile to himself. He liked the fighter in her.

With everyone settled and buckled in, Quinn fired up the truck, ready to take on the world.

“My mom used to tell me never to drive faster than my guardian angel can fly,” Calista told Quinn as she stepped on the gas too vigorously, lurching them forward before she braked too hard, giving them all a mild case of whiplash.

“Sorry,” Quinn whined.

“It’s okay,” Calista said in soothing tones. “Just press down gently and evenly.”

Quinn nodded. “I’ll try.”

“You’ve got this.” Calista did her best to make her feel confident.

Tristan kept his mouth shut and just sat back, admiring Calista. He’d always loved how great she was with Quinn. From the time Quinn was born, Calista had innately loved her and known how to best take care of her. It was like she was born to be a mom. He used to dream of the day she would be the mother of his children. How he forgot about that all in one stupid juvenile moment, he didn’t know. But he knew once he’d said those fateful words to her, there was no going back. The damage was done. And most likely, he could never undo it. But something inside of him kept telling him to try, and not just for Quinn’s sake.

With Calista’s help, Quinn got them safely on the road. Then Calista helped herself to his radio, turning it to a station that played Christmas music all season long. She sang along to Frank Sinatra’s version of “The Twelve Days of Christmas.”

Quinn joined in and giggled when Calista sang opera-style when they got to five golden rings.

Tristan smiled at the scene. He hadn’t felt this much holiday cheer in years.

“Come on, Uncle Tristan, sing along,” Quinn implored as she stopped at a red light on Main Street in downtown Aspen Lake. Pine garlands twisted around each lamppost, and strings of lights graced the quaint brick buildings. A memory of watching the Christmas parade with Calista hit him, rendering him unable to sing. He reminisced about holding her from behind to keep her warm as they’d watched the floats go by. She’d sung along as the marching band approached, and caught the Christmas candy thrown out to the crowd with just as much excitement as the little kids around them. They’d shared a cinnamon lollipop and not enough kisses. He could never get enough of her warm, supple lips.

“We should go to the parade this Friday,” Tristan said offhandedly.

“For sure,” Quinn agreed. “We have to.”

Calista bit her lip. “Um, sure.” She sounded anything but sure but was trying to be a good sport for Quinn. “My shift should be over by the time it starts.”

He didn’t blame her for responding less than enthusiastically. He’d made her believe he would never leave her, and then he’d obliterated the trust and love between them.

Quinn carefully got them the rest of the way through town. But when she turned onto the country road leading to his place, she took the corner too quickly, in her usual fashion. It forced Calista right into him.

Tristan naturally put his arm out to brace her. He was only doing it for her protection, of course.

Calista stared down at his arm across her chest clad in a tight pink sweater that showed off her—let's just say, fantastic—body. “Enjoying yourself?”

He let his arm drop. “Do you even have to ask?”

She rolled her eyes ... but she smiled.

To him, it was a start.

SEVENTEEN

CALISTA

QUINN TURNED INTO THE RANCH'S entrance on a snowy and muddy dirt road. Thankfully she turned more carefully this time, since the last few turns had sent me careening into Tristan. He obviously didn't mind, since he found any excuse he could to touch me. He was playing sexy-dirty. Unfortunately, I couldn't say I detested it.

When Tristan directed Quinn to stop and put the truck into four-wheel drive, it gave me the opportunity to gaze out the windshield. That was a mistake. Before me was the Garden of Eden. The sun's rays peeking through the billowing clouds fell perfectly on the gleaming snow blanketing Tristan's ranch. Tall pine trees dotted the property lined with cedar split rail fences, giving it the classic, rustic ranch look. Horses ran free in the field next to us, galloping in the snow. In the distance was a large black barn with natural wood doors and a stable to match it.

His house was what really got to me. It was just like the one we had dreamed about, only bigger. The A-frame cabin with a wraparound deck and large stone chimney was the home I had pictured raising babies with Tristan in. In my mind's eye I could clearly see us running through the meadow, swimming in the pond close to the house, and sleeping out under the stars on summer nights.

I shook my head, trying not to have an Elizabeth Bennet moment. The one where she saw Pemberley for the first time and thought maybe she had been wrong about Darcy. I couldn't help but recall a quote from *Pride and Prejudice*: "She had never seen a place for which nature had done more." It perfectly described Tristan's ranch.

"What do you think?" Tristan eagerly asked, shaking me out of my reverie.

"Uh ... it's okay, if you like this sort of place."

"So you love it," he said cockily, knowing I was dang well going to be in awe of it. Sure, it was more expensive than anything I had ever imagined, but the place didn't scream wealth. It spoke of ... well, me ... us.

No. No. No. I was not living in a Jane Austen book. While Mr. Darcy was a proud jerk occasionally, he'd never told Elizabeth he needed to quit her like a bad habit. Sure, he said things like she wasn't handsome enough to tempt him to dance, and that he loved her against his better judgment, but this was totally different. Right?

"Honestly, Calista, what do you think?" he pleaded to know.

I turned and met his gaze. He fixed his blue eyes on me, begging me to let him in.

The part of me that had fallen into his arms last night and sobbed into his chest wanted me to open the door and welcome him right back in. Honestly, as I was trying to fall asleep last night, I couldn't quit thinking about the way it had felt. I even ached to be close to him again. But I had principles to live up to. And I didn't plan on making Aspen Lake my permanent home again. I couldn't break every promise I had ever made. Socks were one thing. Tristan was entirely another—and much more uncomfortable than socks.

But just like last night when I wanted to lie to him, I couldn't. "It's beautiful," I whispered, mostly against my will. But it was the truth. There was no denying the magic of this place.

Tristan smiled widely. "I still have a lot of work to do on it. Getting the road paved, for one."

"Don't," I said before I could stop myself. "I like a good dirt road." My cheeks burned as I turned away from him. I might as well have said, *Take me now*. What was wrong with me? He could do whatever he wanted with his piece of heaven, even if paving the road would take away from the charm of the place.

"I remember," he responded. "Do you recall that time we went camping up above Grove Creek and turned off on that little dirt road and got stuck? And we had to spend the night in my truck?"

“What did you do?” Quinn asked, concerned, while she carefully traversed the rutted road.

Oh, I remember what we’d done, and our niece would never learn about it. Let’s just say it was my favorite camping trip. “Uh, we just sang camp songs until a ranger found us and pulled us out.”

“Liar,” Tristan said softly, for my ears only.

I nudged him with my elbow, thinking about how we had lain wrapped up in each other in the bed of his truck, gazing at the stars in the skies and in our eyes, planning our future. Who could have known how different it would all turn out? Now, I didn’t even like him. Or at least that was the story I would keep telling myself.

“Best camping trip ever,” he added.

I wished I could disagree with him, but I couldn’t. I was more than grateful when Quinn pulled up on the concrete pad in front of his detached garage and I could exit the truck. It was getting a little too close for comfort for me. My hands were itching to touch him, like they just needed a little hit of him. I knew exactly what that would lead to, and it wasn’t happening. Before we’d gone on our first date, I’d told myself it was no big deal. That I could walk away from him anytime I wanted to. And that was the biggest lie I had ever told myself. It was all or nothing with him.

As soon as Quinn slipped out of the truck, I slid out and took a deep breath of fresh air. The scent of pine filled my senses, making me remember how much I used to love Aspen Lake, even if the town didn’t love me.

I put on my coat and wrapped an arm around Quinn, trying my best to avoid looking at Tristan’s house and picturing myself there. “Are you ready to get a Christmas tree?”

She leaned her head on my shoulder. “It finally feels like a real Christmas.”

I kissed her head. “We are going to have the realest Christmas ever.”

She giggled.

Tristan joined us, looking way too good in his jeans and flannel shirt. He had the whole sexy-lumberjack vibe going for him. “I won’t be able to swing the axe. Doctor’s orders.” He winked at me. “But I’m willing to instruct. It will be a *hands-on* course.”

I saw where this was going, and I was way ahead of him. “A handsaw is much better for the job, and I’m thoroughly proficient with that tool.”

His face dropped.

“Do you not have a saw?” I teased him.

He cleared his throat. “I have one.”

“Perfect.” I smirked as we walked past him. “Lead the way.”

“Then you can meet Buttercup. She’s my horse,” Quinn gushed. “Maybe we can even go riding later.”

I loved horseback riding. There was nothing more romantic than a long ride through the backcountry. “Your uncle shouldn’t get on a horse until he gets his stitches out.” I had to nip that one in the bud. No telling how itchy my fingers might get if I saw Tristan on a horse again.

“Oh, bummer,” Quinn moaned.

Tristan sidled up to my other side. “By the way, I’m going to need help with the bandage later. I can’t seem to reach it properly.”

“I’m sure Quinny would love to help you out.”

“Ooh, gross. No.” She totally betrayed me.

Tristan couldn’t grin any wider. “I guess it’s up to you, Doc. I mean, you wouldn’t want it to get infected.”

He shouldn’t be so sure about that.

“Quinny, you’re going to have to get used to these kinds of things if you want to be a doctor like me.”

She bit her lip. “Well ... I was thinking about taking over the family business like Uncle Tristan did.”

“Oh.” I tried not to sound too disappointed. That would require her moving back to Aspen Lake after college. Which would mean I’d have to as well, because I totally planned on being her kids’ pseudograndma. But a younger, hipper, trouble buddy sort of grandma. I had all sorts of plans for those great-nieces and nephews of mine.

“Actually, I was going to ask if maybe I could start working at the store too,” Quinn mumbled.

“This wouldn’t have anything to do with Beckett, would it?” Tristan asked.

Quinn’s rosy cheeks turned a shade redder. “Well ... sort of. But I could be, like, his boss since it’s our company.”

To Tristan’s credit, he shook his head. “If you’re going to work for me, you’re going to start at the bottom and work your way up, just like everyone else.”

“Oh, okay.” She didn’t sound thrilled.

“It would be good for you,” I chimed in. Not because I wanted her to follow in Tristan’s footsteps. Those steps had led him right out of my life. But learning how to work hard was important, no matter the job.

Tristan threw me a thoughtful glance, thanking me for being his partner in this.

If he had only believed in me enough, we could have been true partners. We could have had our own kiddos with us, along with Quinn. I turned from him so he couldn’t see the longing for those things, and the anger because he’d stolen them from me.

“Do you want to start this week?” Tristan asked Quinn. “We could use the holiday help.”

She thought for a moment. “I guess so.”

I gave her a squeeze. “You can do hard things.” My dad had said that to me all the time. He was right.

“Okay,” she sounded braver.

Tristan clapped his hands. “Great. Let’s cut ourselves down a tree.”

After Tristan retrieved the saw, to his obvious disappointment, we trudged across his snowy property toward what he called the perfect tree.

All the while, I did my best not to fall in love with his ranch. It was as if he had taken our daydreams and magically brought them to life. On a grander scale, of course. I guess I couldn’t begrudge him that. Especially knowing now how much his lifestyle meant to him. Did he believe I was so unyielding in my beliefs he couldn’t even broach the subject with me? How could he not know that our love was the most important thing to me? Granted, I was opinionated, and I’d made no attempt to hide how I felt about his parents and their excess. But he should have at least given me the choice. Honestly, I don’t know how I would have reacted. I never wanted to be like someone from his side of the lake. I thought I was better than that.

Perhaps I could see why he had been afraid to talk to me, but that was no excuse for how cruelly he’d pushed me away. Oh well. Maybe I should thank him. If it hadn’t been for his rejection, I would have never become a doctor.

Tristan stopped and pointed to a tree several yards ahead of us near the pond that was just icing over. I bet in a month it would be the perfect place to ice-skate. “There,” he said, excitedly. “That’s the one.”

I swear the sun burst through the clouds at that exact moment and sent a beam of light to grace the full and evenly shaped blue spruce. It was gorgeous.

Quinn let out a high-pitched squeak before racing toward it.

I smiled, watching her go. More than anything, I loved seeing her happy.

Tristan stood proudly, his gaze landing on me. “Merry Christmas,” he said as if he were Bob Cratchit himself.

I clasped my hands together, trying my best not to be affected by him. Nor remember our first Christmas together, when I’d woken up to find him under my tree with a big red bow on his head. It was my favorite present. And did I ever enjoy unwrapping him. “It’s a beautiful tree,” I stuttered out.

“You’re beautiful,” he said, flustered, almost as if he didn’t mean to say it.

“You’re ridiculous.” I walked off, determined to keep at least one of my freaking promises. Why did he have to make it so difficult? Maybe the better question was, Why was my resolve so weak around him?

He caught up to me. “Listen, I’m sorry. I’m trying not to be charming.” He smirked.

I flashed him an incredulous glance.

His smirk turned into a humble smile. “What I meant to say was, I’m not trying to be an ass, but when I’m around you, my mouth and my head disconnect. I feel like I’m back in junior high, trying to impress the girl of everyone’s dreams. But instead of being suave, I’m more like the class clown.”

His candor and humility took me by surprise, especially considering this town had always hero-worshipped him and his family. By all accounts, he had been the most popular person throughout school. Regardless, he was right about one thing. “You are a clown.”

“The world’s biggest,” he admitted.

“I’m glad we got that straight.”

He looked down at his boots. “Yeah.”

For half a second, I felt this tug of remorse for being so cold toward him, even if he was asking for and deserved it. It’s the worst when you hate the person you love. It causes too much inner turmoil.

“Hurry! We need to sing the song,” Quinn yelled, saving me from being alone in his presence.

I broke away from Tristan and ran to Quinn through the snow, my hiking boots weighing me down. But not as much as my wildly beating heart. The turmoil raged inside me.

When I reached Quinn, I took her hand, needing her to ground me in reality. I had come back here for her, not to fall right back into Tristan’s arms. Maybe he was acting so strangely because he was high on holly or mistletoe. The holidays can do weird things to people. Perhaps if we could just get past the holidays, all this madness would stop.

“You ready to sing, honey?” I asked, out of breath. It had nothing to do with running to her. Physically, I was in great shape. I was still using all my mom’s old Leslie Sansone *Walk Away the Pounds* videos she had gotten on clearance at Walmart forever ago. Emotionally, though, I was anything but in shape.

“I think so. I’ve been practicing.”

I smiled at her. If ever there was a perfect kid, it was Quinn.

Tristan joined us and took Quinn’s other hand. The little traitor let go of both our hands and moved to my other side, smiling evilly as she went. “Aunt Calista, you need to be in the middle because you’re the best singer.”

Oh, what a devious little imp she had become.

Before I could disagree with her, Tristan shrugged like he had no other choice. He took my hand and gripped it tightly, like he had just taken the reins of a bucking bronco and knew he was in for a wild ride.

I whipped my head toward him—not pulling away from him, mind you. “What are you doing?”

He batted his luscious lashes at me like some pinup girl. “You heard Quinn: you’re the best singer, and we have to hold hands to sing the song. It’s tradition.”

“Maybe it’s time for a new tradition.”

“No,” Quinn cried. “We all need to be together.” There were no ulterior motives in her voice, just a plea to have what she was longing for.

She totally obliterated all my defenses.

Tristan gripped tighter, silently begging me not to pull away.

My fingers itched to intertwine with his. The little traitors. I warred with myself about what to do until Tristan crisply and clearly sang, *O Tannenbaum, o Tannenbaum, wie treu sind deine Blätter!*

Just like my mom had taught him. It made my resolve weaken, and I surrendered to my dang fingers that were all too happy to get tangled up with his.

Feeling more at home than I had in a long time, I set my sights on the beautiful tree glistening in the sun, the snow on its boughs sparkling. Tears filled my eyes as I sang the song my mom had looked forward to singing every year. She'd hoped one day I would teach it to my children. She'd wanted those children to be Tristan's. Sometimes I thought she'd loved him even more than I had. She would tell me it was important to look at his heart and not where he came from. Never did she want me to judge anyone by where they lived or how much money they made. Sadly, I had been guilty of doing exactly that. Maybe Tristan had a genuine reason to worry I wouldn't have accepted him if he'd told me he wanted to take over his family's business and live the lifestyle of the rich and famous.

But that was all in the past. Tristan was my past.

Then why, for a fleeting moment, did I want this memory of the three of us together, singing our hearts out to the prettiest tree, to last forever?

EIGHTEEN

TRISTAN

TRISTAN COVERTLY SNAPPED A FEW pictures of Calista and Quinn hanging the last beaded star ornaments on the tree they'd chopped down and set up at Stella's place. He wanted to capture the perfect moment. The women he loved most in the world were singing "We Wish You a Merry Christmas" along with the radio. So far, it was turning out to be just that: a very merry Christmas.

While Calista and Quinn debated where the ornaments should go, Coco and Poppy were curled up next to him on the couch, purring away as the snow gently fell outside the window. Quinn couldn't stand the thought of leaving the kittens behind, so they had come with them. A fire blazed in the stone fireplace. Mugs with the remnants of homemade cocoa littered the coffee table, along with scraps of white paper they'd used to cut out snowflakes. The place smelled of pine and cinnamon. It was just as it should be. Except he and Calista were no longer a couple.

He swore for a moment while they sang in front of the tree that she'd held on to his hand like she never wanted to let go. It gave him some hope, until she'd immediately pulled away once the song was over and sawed the tree down in no time flat. Acting like if she stayed any longer on his ranch, something bad would happen to her. Then she'd refused his invitation to go into his cabin to warm up and grab something to drink. Maybe it was for the best. Having Calista in his house would have him acting even more foolishly.

Quinn waved her arm out like a *The Price Is Right* model, showcasing the tree. "What do you think, Uncle Tristan?"

He set his phone down and admired the tree decorated with popcorn and cranberry garland, dozens of paper snowflakes, and beaded stars and cinnamon sticks. "It's perfect, except it's missing an angel." He smiled at Calista, the most beautiful angel around.

"I just so happen to have the one my mom made." She danced over to a nearby accent chair and picked up an old shoebox. Calista opened the lid and retrieved a wad of tissue paper. Carefully she removed the paper to reveal a white-and-gold papier-mâché angel. Tears filled her eyes as she gazed upon the beloved heirloom. "I haven't used this in years."

Tristan had a feeling it hadn't been used since their last Christmas together.

Calista held up the angel and walked over to the tree so Quinn could get a good look at it. "Your grandma made this for your grandpa the first year they were married. They couldn't afford to buy one, so she made do with what they had. It graced our tree every year while I was growing up. Dad said it would always be his favorite gift." She smiled at their niece. "Do you want to do the honors and put it on the top of the tree?"

Quinn grinned and almost nodded her head, but then thought the better of it. "I think you should do it. Grandma would like that."

"I wish you could remember her," Calista choked out. "She loved you more than anything. Just like me ... and your uncle," she added, only a little begrudgingly.

Tristan jumped off the couch, taking advantage of the opportunity presented to him. He knew Calista wasn't tall enough to reach the top. "Let me help you."

"I'll just get a chair," she stuttered, flustered. "Besides, you might rip your stitches."

It was worth the risk in his mind. With pleasure, he placed his hands on her waist, letting his fingers press into her sweater, longing for it to be her bare skin, before she could protest. He gently pulled her to him and breathed her in. Every part of him wanted her.

She flinched but didn't move away from him or demand he take his hands off her.

"You ready?" he whispered in her ear. He noticed the skin rise on the curve of her elegant neck.

She nodded, and he easily lifted her lean and toned body. The woman was so desirable, it was killing him.

Calista expertly placed the angel on top, but he waited a few extra seconds before he lowered her, not wanting to let go of her just yet, or ever, even if it was killing his back. Once he did, she wobbled as if she were woozy. Tristan hoped it was from his touch. He was feeling tipsy himself. Regardless, like the gentleman he was, he kept his hands on her until she was steady.

It wasn't until she said, "I'm good. Thank you," that he let go.

Flushed, she placed some space between them. "It's perfect." She fanned herself.

He felt the heat too.

Quinn smiled between them, pleased that her plan might be working.

Tristan wasn't too sure about that.

"Who wants more cocoa?" Calista asked.

Quinn pressed her lips together and scrunched her cute nose. "Actually, some of my friends are getting together to watch a movie, and I was wondering if I could go."

"Sure," Tristan replied at the same time Calista said, "But I thought we were going to watch *White Christmas* and sing "Sisters" when it came on, and do the dance together."

Tristan was looking forward to that too.

"Can we do it tomorrow night? Please?" She gave Calista puppy dog eyes.

"Is Beckett going to be there?" Calista asked.

"Yes," Quinn chirped. "Pretty please, can I go?" She kissed Calista on the cheek. "I promise I'll be home before ten."

Calista grabbed Quinn's cheeks and smushed them. "Fine, but there had better be parents there. And no going into dark rooms alone with Beckett."

Tristan silently berated himself for not remembering to ask about those things before he agreed to let Quinn go. This was why he needed Calista in his life. She was better at the parenting thing than he was. At least he was better than Stella, who had been gone all day. She didn't even show up to help decorate the tree. It was really starting to tick him off how much of Quinn's life she was missing. He wasn't sure why she thought it was okay to check out of being Quinn's mom. Why she even thought that was an option was beyond him.

Quinn raised up her right hand and, with her cheeks smushed, said, "I swear there will be parents there, and I'll only make out with Beckett in fully lit rooms." She giggled.

Calista laughed and dropped her hands. "Go get ready, you nut. Then your uncle and I will drop you off."

Tristan's brow jetted up, surprised by her declaration. He was more than okay with the plan. The fact that she purposely chose to go anywhere with him was a Christmas miracle.

"You're the best." Quinn hugged Calista before running off and up the stairs.

As soon as Quinn was out of earshot, Calista turned to him and whispered, "Don't get too excited. It's just that I need to figure out what's going on with Stella. I might have broken into her phone and turned on a track-my-friends app. And it's snowing and you have four-wheel drive, which is the only reason I'm inviting you to help me on this mission."

"Mission?" Tristan laughed, not surprised at all that Calista had broken into her sister's phone. He'd met no one more resourceful or caring than her. And had he mentioned sexy? Going on a spy mission sounded kind of hot.

"Yes. It's called the knock-some-sense-into-Stella mission."

It's about time somebody did something, he thought. "I'm game."

"Great. Get the kittens ready and I'll grab some snacks and the binoculars."

Tristan chuckled, wondering how in the world he had ever let her go. No other woman he knew would think to take kittens and a snack on a recon mission. Or go on missions at all.

"And—" She paused midstep. "Don't get any ideas about trying any funny stuff in your truck."

He slapped a hand across his chest. "What kind of a guy do you think I am?"

She gave him a thoughtful glance. "Honestly, I wish I knew."

Tristan faltered, taken aback by the sting of her statement. While her words bore no malice, they still pierced him. To hear she didn't know what kind of man he was haunted him more than anything. "Let me show you. Let's get to know each other again," he pleaded with her. There he went with the sledgehammer again.

She stood, frozen. "I don't think that's a good idea."

"Why? Because you're scared you might still like me?" He stepped a little closer to her, holding himself back from taking her into his arms and embracing her until she knew she could trust him. "Or perhaps you may still have some deeper feelings for me."

Her breath stilled as she tried to think of something to say.

Tristan had expected her to say she hated him, but she just turned and hustled toward the kitchen.

It wasn't often he got the better of her. But that wasn't important. The only thing that mattered was that she made his life better. She always had. Now more than ever, he was sorry he had forgotten that. He was going to do whatever it took to prove to her he wasn't the man who'd left her. He would leave no doubt in her mind what kind of guy he truly was.

NINETEEN

CALISTA

I STARED OUT THE WINDSHIELD at the steadily falling snow through my binoculars. Any flake that hit the glass died a speedy death as Tristan kept his truck running to keep us warm. The seedy motel my sister was at, according to the app, came into view. It was on “my” side of the lake. Definitely not a five-star location like Stella normally insisted on. The rundown motel’s lime-green paint was peeling worse than skin after a bad sunburn. The blinking red Christmas lights strung along the roof with several missing shingles only added to the creepiness of the establishment.

“You don’t think my sister is selling her body, do you?” I couldn’t help but ask.

Tristan grabbed the binoculars from me and looked for himself. “No.” He shuddered. “Why would she? Jonathon left her his entire estate. She’s worth millions.”

“I don’t know. Maybe for the thrill. Why else would she be here?” This place screamed that if you checked in, you would leave with an STI at the very least. And your throat slashed at the worst. I loved my side of the lake, but most people stayed away from this area of town. For good reason.

“I’m sure there’s a logical explanation,” he tried to make me feel better, but it wasn’t working.

“There is nothing logical about this.” I was holed up in my ex’s truck under a blinking payday loan sign, spying on my sister, Bing Crosby crooning on the radio, with two kittens in tow.

Tristan lowered the binoculars and turned toward me. “We’ll figure it out together.”

Together. I couldn’t afford to think about that word where we were concerned. Unfortunately, I couldn’t stop thinking about it—and him. He was making it impossible for me to ignore him. Worse, he was reminding me of all the reasons my feelings ran so deeply for him. Few people would agree to accompany me on such an excursion. I kind of hated him for it. How was I supposed to remain ambivalent toward him when he was being so wonderful? It was getting to where I either hated him or loved him.

I picked up the blanket holding the sleeping kittens from the middle of the bench seat and placed them on my lap, needing some comfort. “*Together* is a dangerous word.”

He took advantage of my moving the kittens and inched closer to the middle of the bench. The smell of peppermint candy canes lingered on his breath. “I’m sorry I made you feel like that.”

I shrugged, trying my best to hold on to the hate, even though part of me wanted to pull him to me and fog up the windows in a spectacular fashion.

Tristan wasn’t deterred. “While we wait for your sister to come out, let’s talk.”

“About what?”

“You.”

“Me?”

“Yes,” he smiled. “You say we don’t know each other anymore, so tell me all about yourself.”

I stroked the kittens. “There’s nothing to tell.”

“Says the woman who went to medical school and became a doctor.”

“There you have it. That’s my life in a nutshell.” I was doing my best to resist him.

“You’re chicken. Bok, bok,” he teased me.

“I’m not chicken,” I said, highly offended. “I just don’t see the point in sharing.” Well, I saw the point, but I thought it would be best if I didn’t try to reach for it. If I did, Tristan might get his wish, and it was going to get hot and sticky in here. And I wasn’t talking about the cinnamon rolls I brought.

Tristan reached over and tapped my nose. “Now that’s a lie. But I get why you’re scared.”

“You’re ridiculous. But ... since you’re helping me out, I’ll let you ask me five questions. But they can’t have anything to do with us.” I added that caveat, saving myself from any uncomfortable situations. It was already awkward enough as it was.

His face fell before he quickly recovered from his disappointment. “Okay. I’m game. First question: What is the most rewarding thing you have done as a doctor?”

That was an easy one. “Last year, I went to Africa for three weeks and worked in a clinic treating and vaccinating children through a program my hospital sponsored. I even got to deliver several babies.” I had never seen such poverty or happiness. It was such a weird dichotomy. It definitely made me more grateful for my life.

“Wow.” He looked taken aback. “I had no idea. Quinn never said a thing about it.”

“I didn’t tell anyone. I didn’t want to make it about me.”

“You’re incredible,” he said in awe.

“Not really.”

“Are you kidding me? The only philanthropic thing I do, besides donating money to various causes and participating in charity golf games, is fulfilling Christmas wish lists for kids in some of the surrounding counties. And even then, I pay people to do the shopping. My small part is dressing up as Santa when they come to the store to get their gifts.”

I could picture Tristan in a Santa suit. I bet he was the sexiest Santa around. Ho. Ho. Ho. “That’s nice.”

“Says the woman who goes to Africa and plans reconnaissance missions to save her sister.”

I grinned. Although I was more than worried about my sister now. If she had turned to the oldest profession around, I was going to have a major intervention with her. She was a mother, and Aspen Lake would eat her alive if they ever found out. Cordelia and Frasier may very well have heart attacks over it. Which wouldn’t be terrible. Okay, that was evil of me to think. “Well, you’re a good uncle, and one time you rescued some puppies and took the rap for it.” I probably shouldn’t have brought it up, especially since I didn’t want to talk about us. But I still felt guilty he had been arrested.

He rubbed the back of his neck. “About that. I shouldn’t have—”

“You don’t have to say anything,” I interrupted him. “I should have never gotten you involved. Ask your next question,” I said hastily, hoping to change the subject. The past was the past. There wasn’t anything we could do about it now. I guess I just wanted him to know I regretted his being arrested on my behalf.

Tristan scooted closer and contemplated what to say for a moment. He finally let out a sigh of resignation and let it drop.

I was grateful he didn’t want to hash out the past. Or at least I thought so.

“Why aren’t you married?” he threw at me.

“Uh, that’s a personal question.”

The corners of his lips twitched. “You didn’t specify it couldn’t be personal.”

The answer to that question was multifaceted, and I didn’t particularly care for him to know he had a lot to do with it. The scars he left when he broke up with me made it hard for me to trust anyone. And then there was the whole still-being-in-love-with-him thing. That always put a damper on a relationship. I took the simple route. “Med school and residency didn’t leave much time for relationships.”

“What about now?”

“You’re about to run out of questions,” I cautioned him.

“These are just appendages to the original question.”

“I didn’t agree to those terms.”

He leaned in closer, his minty breath and amber yumminess filling my senses. “Agree to them now.”

I pushed on his hard chest, trying to keep some distance between us, but my fingers were such traitors, begging me to undo a few of his buttons. “Is this how you get business done, Mr. CEO?”

He moved in a little more, his lips getting dangerously close to mine. “Does my title bother you?”

“Should it?”

“Does that mean now you’re willing to date men who make more than the median income?”

I had forgotten about that rule. Obviously, I had broken that one by dating him. I thought he would be my only exception. Becoming a doctor had changed things. It would be hypocritical to keep such a rule, considering I made well above the median income. Not like I was rolling in cash, with all my student loans, but I wasn’t hurting financially. I was a little disgusted. Apparently, I couldn’t keep any of my dang promises to myself. My mom was probably having a good laugh at my expense. It had all started with the socks.

“What is this, a job interview?”

“You’re not answering my questions.”

“You’re not giving me any answers either,” I challenged him, trying not to stare at his parted lips, which were way too inviting. My fingers pressed a bit deeper into his chest, enjoying the feel far too much. I was more than disappointed in myself, yet I didn’t remove one digit.

He placed a hand over mine, flattening my hand against his chest. I could feel the beat of his strong heart. “This isn’t a job interview; I’m just trying to get to know you.”

“I don’t see why these questions are pertinent,” I whispered, breathily. It was getting awfully warm in the cab of his truck. And it had nothing to do with the heater blasting.

“You’re still not answering me.” He smiled.

That was because I couldn’t think. He was overwhelming my senses, and my body was begging for him. Thankfully, I caught a glimpse of some movement across the street. “I think that’s my sister.”

Tristan turned, allowing my hand to drop and for a clearer head to prevail. Holy crap, I had almost given in to temptation. What was wrong with me?

“I think that’s Stella,” he agreed.

I grabbed the binoculars, making sure not to jostle the sleeping kittens. They were adorable. I held the binoculars to my eyes, trying to get a good visual of my sister. Unfortunately, the snow was coming down harder. “She’s with someone,” I reported. “A man.” I handed the binoculars to Tristan. “Do you recognize him?”

Tristan focused on them. “No, but he’s getting cozy with her against her car.”

“What?” I snatched the binoculars back and looked through them. What I saw made me a little squeamish. They had hands all up and down each other while the snow swirled around them. Stella hiked her leg up on him, and he put his hand under her skirt. “Oh my hell. Go back into the freaking room!” I yelled. If they were this exuberant in public, there was no telling what went on in the motel.

Tristan chuckled.

“Please don’t let my sister be a prostitute,” I prayed out loud.

“I don’t think she’s a hooker,” Tristan tried to make me feel better, but he didn’t sound all that confident.

“Zoom in with your phone and get some pictures of him. We need to find out who this guy is and why he’s groping my sister outside a sleazy motel.”

Tristan held up his phone. “How are you going to find out who he is?”

“I have my ways.” Meaning, I was going to ask Jules, a.k.a. the CIA analyst, to help me out. I had a feeling she could.

“Care to share with the class?”

“Not yet,” I replied.

He snapped a few pictures before turning my way. “Today’s been the best day I’ve had in a long time.”

I lowered the binoculars, a little sick from all the PDA. Don’t get me wrong: I liked my own PDA—within limits. But watching my sister behave like a hormone-crazed teen was disturbing. Especially if she was getting paid for it. “You know, considering the way they’re behaving, this now borders on voyeurism. We could get arrested,” I warned him.

He reached over and tugged on a strand of my hair. “I would get arrested for you ... again.”

“I don’t think your parents or board members would appreciate that.” I would for sure get fired at that rate. No way would the Grangers tolerate such a scandal.

“I don’t give a damn.”

“Yes you do. You like your lifestyle, and there is nothing wrong with that.”

“Calista, you don’t know how much I’ve regretted walking away from you. The money. My possessions. None of it has made me happy. You and Quinn make me happy.”

I shook my head. “There’s no way you can know that. You’re just emotional right now because it’s the holidays and your brother just died. You’re talking crazy.” I couldn’t get sucked in, as much as I wanted to believe him.

He pressed a finger to my lips. “This has nothing to do with Jonathon. You saw the tattoo. My ranch and cabin. You have to see how much I’ve thought of you over the years.”

I didn’t want to see any of those things, but unfortunately, they were flashing as brightly in my mind as the neon payday loan sign we were parked under. “Please, just let me hate you,” I half pleaded, half teased. But really, it would make my life a whole lot easier if he could just be a jerk.

His finger dropped. “You can hate me for as long as you need to.”

I was kind of thinking like forever. Maybe. Probably. For sure possibly.

TWENTY

CALISTA

I CHanneled my mom and sat at the kitchen table, waiting for Stella to get home. I'd tracked her phone all night, only sleeping for short stretches while she did who knew what with the handsy man. They'd practically turned into snowmen while groping each other outside the motel. Then they left in her car and went through a drugstore drive-through to pick up an order. Hopefully it contained a lot of contraception. After that, they headed for the lake. We needed to pick up Quinn, so we didn't follow them. Not that we wanted to. No telling what they were going to do in her car. All I knew was she had better sanitize it before she took Quinn to school.

The longer she stayed out, the angrier I got. While I loved parenting Quinn, I wasn't her mother. I was supposed to be the fun aunt she got in trouble with. Stella was better than this, and I was going to call her out on this behavior before heading to the hospital for my shift. I didn't care if she got angry at me for spying on her. Besides, I was the one who got tortured during the process by my charming ex doing his best to prove how wonderful he could be. He'd helped me keep a level head last night, and when I'd gotten too wound up, he'd turned up the radio and made me sing a Christmas song with him. We ended up talking—a lot. I recounted every year of med school and each rotation I did until I decided on emergency medicine. Tristan seemed fascinated by it all.

You know what fascinated me? How freaking unprincipled I was. Going back on the sock promise was like a gateway drug to me. Oh, and was I ever careening toward the gateway. If this kept up, Tristan and I would find ourselves getting really cozy for Christmas. But I had to resist, even if yesterday had been one of the best days I'd had in a long time too. Well, minus all the gross PDA and worrying whether my sister was a call girl. Other than that, it was pretty much perfect. But Tristan didn't need to know that.

I picked my phone up off the table to check the time. I had to leave in thirty minutes. Plenty of time to ream my sister, who according to the app should arrive any second now.

While I waited, I admired the tree in the great room, glowing in the dark with all our handmade ornaments. A lot of love had gone into it. I looked at the angel on top, hoping to glean some wisdom from my dearly departed mother about what I should say to Stella. Maybe even some insight on how to deal with Tristan. I think I knew what she would say concerning Tristan. *When your heart has reasons not even reason can make sense of, it's called love.*

I knew my heart had its reasons for loving him. Good ones, even. But our past didn't make reconciliation reasonable. At all. In fact, it would make me a fool.

The beep of the keypad outside the kitchen door made me jump. I sat up authoritatively, ready to confront Stella.

She tiptoed in like a teenager who'd stayed out way past her curfew.

I crossed my arms, judging her messed-up hair and wrinkled clothes. "Hello," I said smoothly, yet sinisterly.

She screeched and grabbed her heart. "What are you doing?"

"Oh, I don't know. Waiting up to make sure you got home so Quinn will have a ride to school. You do remember that she goes back to school today, right?"

She ran a hand through her wild hair. "Yeah, of course." She was a terrible liar.

I shook my head at her in disgust. "What's going on with you?"

"Nothing." She hustled off.

Oh, no. I wasn't letting her run anymore. "I followed you last night. What the hell were you doing at Red Box Motel?"

She spun around, her nostrils flaring like a raging bull. "How dare you follow me!"

“Believe me, it wasn’t a pleasure cruise, watching you go at it with that guy in the parking lot. Did he pay you for your services?”

Her jaw dropped to the floor. “You think I’m a prostitute?”

“It has crossed my mind. What other reason would you have for going to such a disgusting place?”

Tears filled her eyes as she shook uncontrollably. “You wouldn’t understand.”

“Try me.”

“Just leave me alone,” she whined.

“No. This has to stop. Whatever this is. You have a daughter to take care of.”

She placed her hands over her face and bawled. “You don’t know what it’s like.”

I stood and met her in the great room. I placed a hand on her bony shoulder. She was too thin. “What don’t I know?” I reminded myself to take a gentler touch, considering Jonathon’s betrayals.

She lowered her hands to reveal mascara-stained eyes. “Try being the joke of this town. Everyone knew Jonathon was cheating on me. People even thought he had the right to, since they believed I trapped him into marrying me. And you know what? They were right. I got pregnant on purpose because I was tired of being poor.” She covered her mouth like she hadn’t meant to confess that.

My hand dropped, stunned at this revelation. “Did Jonathon know?”

“He suspected as much when I told him about Quinn, but he said he loved me, so it didn’t matter. That was a lie. It very much mattered to him. Hardly a day went by where he didn’t remind me I owed my cushy life to him,” she cried.

“Why did you stay with him?”

“What else was I going to do? I had one year of community college and no life skills other than knowing how to throw a dinner party and decorate a house. It was all I was good for. That and sex, when he wanted me.” She fell into my arms and sobbed into my chest.

I held her tight. This was turning out much differently than I thought it would. I knew things were bad between her and Jonathon, but I had no idea they were this bad.

“Maybe I am a prostitute. I sold my body and soul for money.”

No wonder my parents didn’t love me. It does dumb things to people. Even hurtful things. I knew that from personal experience.

“Stella.” I stroked her messy hair. “You are so much more than you believe.”

“How can you say that? You thought I was a hooker.”

“Well, I mean, can you blame me? You don’t stay in places like the Red Box Motel. And ... you put on quite the show with ... Who is that guy?”

Her sobs quieted, yet she still clung to me. “His name is Skip,” she murmured against my chest. “He’s only staying there because I asked him to. I couldn’t risk anyone seeing us together.”

“Um ... You weren’t exactly being careful.”

“No one I know goes to that side of the lake,” she said as if it were a dirty word. She was still ashamed of her roots, it would seem.

“Regardless, how did you meet him? When did you meet him? You barely buried your husband.”

She leaned away from me and bit her lip coyly. “It sounds silly, but we met online. He’s been a great emotional support to me over the last several months.”

“Online? Where online?”

“Don’t worry about it. He’s great.”

Oh, I was worried. Very worried. “Tell me more.”

“I can’t. We want to keep this private for now. See where it goes.”

I scrunched my brow. “Do you want to keep it secret, or does he?” I was feeling some major red-flag vibes from this situation.

“Both.”

“Hmm. Does this Skip have a last name?”

“Of course.”

“And what is it?” I was so looking him up.

Stella gave me a placating smile. “It’s not important right now. I still can’t believe you followed me and watched me ... well ... you know.”

“For your information, I only saw what you did in the parking lot and in the car.” I decided not to mention that Tristan was with me and saw everything too. That would probably embarrass her even more. “You should be more careful. And you need to get your priorities straight.” I didn’t mince words even though my heart broke for her.

She let go of me, pouting. “I haven’t felt wanted in a long time. So don’t judge me.”

“I’m not judging your sex life. Although, I hope you’re being careful there. Jumping into a new relationship after a tumultuous one isn’t necessarily the best thing to do. Especially if it’s making you forget you’re a mother. A mother to the most terrific kid on the planet.”

Her lower lip trembled.

I placed my hands on her shoulders. “Stella, listen to me. You can’t judge your worth by what others think of you. Please don’t teach Quinn you need a man to feel validated. Or worse, that a man is more important than she is in your life.”

Stella’s eyes widened, as if that thought had never occurred to her. “I love Quinn.”

“Then show up in her life.”

A few tears trickled down Stella’s creamy cheeks.

“I need to leave for work. I love you, sis. You can do hard things, even if the hardest thing is believing in yourself. We can talk more when I get home.”

“Okay,” she squeaked out.

“Good. Now go get cleaned up. You look like ... well ... you know.”

“Yeah,” she sighed.

I kissed her head. “Have a good day. Don’t forget to take Quinn to school and to pick her up afterward. Also, you’ll need to drop her off at Granger Outfitters. She’s starting a new job today.”

Stella tilted her head. “Doing what?”

“Stocking shelves, sweeping floors, things like that.”

“Huh. Okay. I guess I’ve been out of the loop.”

“Yep.” I wasn’t going to sugarcoat it. “But it’s not too late to jump back in.”

She nodded.

“Great. See you tonight.” I prayed she would be home and not with this Skip character. Believe me, I was going to find out who he was if it was the last thing I did.



FEELING A LITTLE BETTER, OR at least relieved Stella wasn’t involved in prostitution, I walked into the ER. I prayed no other ghosts from my past showed up today. I wasn’t sure I could handle any more surprises. I waved to a few of the nurses at the station, even Evie, who looked so pleased I was working again. By pleased I meant she curled her lips at me. I was going to buy her something nice for Christmas. That would get to her.

I walked into the office to deposit my bag, only to find that Deidra was sitting behind the desk, reading something on her phone. Weird. My heart raced. “Good morning,” I said uneasily. “Did I do something wrong?” was the first thought that came out of my mouth.

“No,” she laughed, while standing and walking around the desk.

“What are you doing here so early, then?”

“I came to tell my goddaughter how proud I am of her. I’ve been hearing good things about your first week.”

Had it only been a week? It felt like months.

“And I heard you had to treat your grandfather.”

“One can hardly call him that.”

Deidra patted my cheek. “It’s their loss.”

“That’s what they said too.”

Deidra’s eyes popped. “Interesting.”

“You could say that.”

“How do you feel about it?”

“Let’s just say they won’t be getting a Christmas card from me this year.”

Deidra laughed, but then she pressed her lips together. “You know, Arthur sits on the hospital’s board of trustees.”

“Of course he does,” I snarled.

“He’s not who you have to worry about,” she whispered.

I swallowed hard. “Who should I worry about? I thought you said I was doing a good job.”

“You are, honey.” She walked over and shut the door before she continued. “It’s just that Max heard some things at the country club over the weekend.”

Her husband was more of the country club type than Deidra was. I still loved him, regardless of his *misguided* ways.

“What did he hear?” I snapped.

“Just that you and Tristan are spending a lot of time together.”

“We share a niece, and we are both trying to give her a good Christmas,” I defended myself, even though I had no reason to. What I did in my free time was none of anyone’s business.

“I know,” she said in a soft tone. “I just wanted to caution you the Grangers are none too happy about it.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose. “Let me guess: they’re afraid I’ll turn their son into a decent human being who cares more about people than money. The horror.” I fake shuddered.

Deidra smiled. “I think they are afraid they will lose control, just like last time.”

“Well, they don’t have to worry. Tristan and I aren’t getting back ... um ... together,” I had a hard time saying the words. I was ridiculous. Maybe the holidays were doing strange things to my mind. They always made me feel lonelier. It’s probably why I was having crazy thoughts about Tristan. I just needed to make it past New Year’s Day. Surely my powers of resistance would increase exponentially after that. Especially since we would spend less time together after Christmas was over and Quinn got her old-fashioned holiday.

Deidra tilted her head. “Is there something you want to talk about?”

“No,” I said, in a pitchy cadence that said otherwise.

“You can talk to me, honey.”

“I know. It’s just that there’s nothing to talk about. We’re being *friendly*, for Quinn’s sake.”

“Rigghhht. For Quinn’s sake.”

“You know what he did,” I reminded her.

“I also know how in love with him you were.”

Were? If only the love actually were in past tense, my life would be so much simpler. “It would be silly to want to get back together with him. It’s totally against my principles,” I rambled.

She carefully eyed me. “If you say so. Just know that I’m here. And watch your back. You already proved the Grangers wrong once when you became a doctor. If you and Tristan were to rekindle your romance, there’s no telling how unhinged they might become,” she warned.

I knew Deidra was pleading with me in a roundabout way to remember it wasn’t only me on the line, but her name and position were at stake as well.

“There’s no need to worry,” I promised her. I would do my best to protect her reputation.

I really hoped it didn’t turn out like the sock promise.

TWENTY-ONE

TRISTAN

TRISTAN SAT IN HIS LAND Rover and stared at the ER entrance, debating with himself. The red sign with white letters was daring him to go in. Was Calista really going to buy that he was worried his cut was getting infected? The chances of that were highly unlikely. Yet, his hand kept reaching for the door, itching to go inside. All he wanted was to see her gorgeous face and wish her a good day before he headed into the office. He was turning into a lovesick fool. More like the class clown.

Why couldn't he just play it cool? Let her come to him when she was good and ready. It worked last time. But things were different this time around. Tristan needed Calista to see he wasn't the man who left her. Just like Ebenezer Scrooge, he was a changed man. Maybe she needed to see he was willing to play the fool. That his ego and pride wouldn't impede their relationship this time.

He inhaled and exhaled deeply before rushing headlong into the wintry morning. *What more do I have to lose than I've already lost?* he thought to himself as he briskly walked toward the hospital, the frosty air going right through his dress coat.

When the ER doors automatically opened for him, it was a welcome relief to be in from the cold. Even more welcoming was the empty waiting room. It appeared it was his lucky day.

He strode straight over to the reception desk to check in.

Before he said a word, the older woman with hair as white as snow manning the desk gave him a sly smile, like she knew why he was *really* there. People in this town had long memories and his relationship with Calista had been nothing short of scandalous as far as most were concerned. He hated that was the case. Regardless, it didn't change how he felt about Calista. He hoped that people would be kinder to her. It shouldn't matter what side of the lake you grew up on.

"I'm Tristan Granger. I was here a few days ago to get stitches. Now I'm worried the cut may be infected," he said confidently, even though he'd only noticed a little bit of red around the wound. But one can't be too careful about these things.

The woman nodded and grinned like the Cheshire cat. "Uh-huh." She handed him an electronic tablet. "Just sign in here and the triage nurse will call you back soon."

He took the tablet and, using the stylus, filled out the required information before handing it back to the receptionist.

He sat down and, for a moment, enjoyed the soothing sounds of the large copper wall fountain in front of him. While he was at it, he prayed Calista wasn't going to hate him even more for showing up like this. The way they'd easily conversed and laughed the night before gave him more hope than he'd had in years. He missed her crazy antics, even if it meant having to watch his sister-in-law behave in a less than socially acceptable manner. With any luck, Calista would talk some sense into Stella and save her from herself.

"Tristan Granger," the triage nurse called out.

Tristan popped off the chair and went directly to the nurse who was patiently waiting for him by the automatic doors.

"Good morning, Mr. Granger," she greeted him.

That's what he was angling for—a good morning.

She took him back and asked him about his symptoms. As they weren't busy, he got to go straight back to be seen. As soon as he entered the ER, every nurse in the nurses' station craned their necks to gawk at him. Grins and fits of laughter broke out.

Oh hell, he thought. He was causing a scene. Calista wasn't going to love that. But it was too late to abort his foolish plan. Maybe he should have just brought her coffee or something. Why

hadn't he thought of that before? He berated himself. The woman was addling his brain. It was sweet torture.

The nurse he had seen on his previous visit, Lucy, he believed her name was, came out of the nurses' station, as bubbly as could be, doing nothing to hide her obvious amusement. "Mr. Granger, you're back again," she chirped.

No doubt he would be the subject of the daily ER gossip. Maybe he should have just headed straight for the office. But visions of Calista kept dancing in his head, and he knew until he saw her, he wouldn't be able to think clearly. He was behaving like a child on Christmas morning, beside himself with anticipation of what Santa had brought him. Except he knew exactly how much he was going to love his gift. From every curve on her body to her silky dark hair and enigmatic hazel eyes, he loved her.

Once situated in the treatment room, Lucy began by taking his vitals. She kept pressing her lips together, holding back a laugh as she took his blood pressure.

"What brings you in today, Mr. Granger?" she giggled while recording his vitals on a laptop.

He didn't want to say, but he'd passed the point of no return. "I noticed some redness around the stitches on my back. I wanted to get it checked out. Make sure it's not getting infected."

"I'm sure Dr. Monroe will be happy to check you out ... I mean, she'll be glad to check for an infection." She blushed furiously.

Hastily, she grabbed a gown from a cupboard above the sink and handed it to him. "Put this on and leave the back open. Dr. Monroe will be in shortly."

Tristan eyed the blue gown in his hand, not eager to put it on. Did he really need to? It's not like Calista hadn't seen the goods before. He tossed it to the side before unbuttoning his dress shirt and removing it.

He sat half-naked, dangling his legs off the exam table, waiting for Calista to come in, the anticipation building. He eyed the table he was on and wondered if Calista would like to give it a whirl. Obviously, he was getting way ahead of himself. He was going to be lucky if she didn't kick his butt out of there. Yet, he couldn't help but fantasize about the two of them getting tangled up for a moment or two or three. It would certainly cure him of any ailment.

He waited and waited. He thought it odd, since they didn't seem busy. At this rate, he was going to miss the weekly Monday morning status update meeting.

Finally, Calista knocked on the door. "May I enter?" she huffed out.

That wasn't a good sign.

"Yes," he called out, sitting up as straight as possible, knowing it would show off his sculpted physique.

Calista walked in and quickly shut the door and leaned against it like she was hiding from someone. When she faced him, an uneasy sigh escaped her kissable lips. That was until her eyes landed on his bare chest. For a split second, her lips twitched before they curled up into a sneer. "Why aren't you wearing a gown, and what are you even doing here?" Her tone bordered on exasperation and worry.

"Are you okay? Did something happen this morning?"

She shut her eyes and composed herself. "I'm fine. Let's just get this over with."

"Calista," he said, tenderly. "You can talk to me."

"That's not a good idea." She walked to the sink and washed her hands with a vengeance.

Her change in demeanor between last night and this morning confused him. He thought for sure he'd made a dent in her resolve to hate him. But this morning, it appeared to be back in full force.

She turned around and trudged toward him, avoiding any opportunity of eye contact.

Forgetting propriety, he reached out and took her hand. It fit perfectly in his own. A surge of warmth went through him that spoke of him coming home. He curled his fingers around hers, silently begging her not to let go, and to remember how good they were together. More so that he was good. That he wasn't his brother or even the coward who left her.

For a moment, her hand gripped his. She raised her head and peered into his eyes.

He saw not only the conflict raging in her gorgeous eyes but the longing that he felt in his own soul. Instinctively, he drew her closer, wanting to erase any doubts she had about him. But as soon as he did so, she pulled away and shook her hand as if trying to get rid of the feel of his touch.

“We can’t do this. You can’t come here anymore.”

He cocked his head, studying her. He knew she felt the same pull he did. “You don’t have to fear me,” he pleaded with her to hear the truthfulness in his voice.

“I do, actually.” She stepped back. “Please, if you ever cared about me, don’t come back in here when I’m working.”

“Calista,” he stammered. “What’s happened?”

She ignored him and peeked at his back. “Your cut doesn’t look infected. Just keep it dry and let it breathe as much as possible. See your regular physician next week to have the stitches removed,” she hurried to say before running out the door and slamming it behind her.

Tristan sat there dumbfounded and feeling like someone had sucked all the air out of the room. All his dreams for a merry Christmas and a happy New Year just went up in flames.

He balled up his shirt and threw it across the room. “Damn it.”

It killed that she feared him. He wished he could do something to change that. But he would do as Calista asked because he cared for her more than anyone. If that meant walking away from her, it was the least he could do, even if it was the last thing he ever wanted.

TWENTY-TWO

CALISTA

“THANKS AGAIN FOR COMING WITH me tonight.” I smiled over at Jules in the passenger seat of my car as we drove to the Christmas parade downtown, Friday night. I desperately needed a buffer. It was the first time I would see Tristan since the emergency room incident on Monday. Working the night shift twice this week had played in my favor, as exhausting as it was. This way, I didn’t need to upset Quinn by acting coolly toward Tristan in her presence. I had no choice but to do so. Deidra’s and my jobs were on the line. And as much as I didn’t love Aspen Lake anymore, I needed to be here for Quinn. Especially since Stella was finding any time she could to sneak off to be with Skippy, as I’d started referring to him. I thought after our little talk she would have been more present, but that was wishful thinking.

It didn’t matter that when Tristan took my hand on Monday and drew me closer to him, I ached to fall into his arms and let his lips ravish mine. Or that I had even found myself missing him this week, as ridiculous as that was. I couldn’t break my vow. Not this time. But, if he was any kind of a gentleman, he could have at least sent me a picture of my kitten on his chest. I missed Poppy. And, okay, his chiseled chest too. Seriously, I had problems. Which is why, for my sake, I finally threw my skis in the trash. I admit to shedding a tear or two as I stood there, taking them in and out of the bin a dozen times. Reason finally won out, and I said my goodbyes and let go of any crazy notions of us getting back together.

“Thanks for asking. The hospital is getting stifling,” Jules responded.

Jules’s mom had opted to go with the surgery to remove a piece of her husband’s skull. He’d survived the procedure and the swelling in his brain was going down. But he was still in and out of consciousness. He was nowhere near out of the woods.

I grinned over at her. “Well, tonight we are going to party. And by party, I mean freeze our booties off watching floats and listening to the high school marching band.”

Jules giggled. “Sounds perfect. By the way, I think I found out who Skip is.”

I knew my CIA operative could do it. Even though she was still denying she worked for the government.

“Ooh. Should I brace myself?” The entire situation gave me a bad vibe.

“Well, it all depends.”

“On what?”

She held up her phone. “Let me show you something.”

I found an empty parking spot in the quaint grocery market near the parade route. As soon as I turned off the car, I eagerly turned toward Jules.

“So ...” She squinted. “It’s about to get cringey.”

“Are you talking like sex tape cringe?”

“No,” she laughed. “But get ready for the spandex.” Jules tapped her phone and held it up before I could say anything else.

Before my eyes was a lot of Skippy, and I wasn’t talking about the peanut butter.

I could see the resemblance between the man’s face in the photo I’d given Jules and the guy on the screen, but there was a lot more to him than I would have ever imagined.

“Are you ready for another workout with Get Ripped with Skip?” he shouted in an Australian accent while jumping up and down, only wearing bright-orange spandex shorts. His glistening tan body suggested he used a bronzing lotion, camouflaging his skin to his shorts. His flippy, sandy-

blond hair gave me surfer boy vibes. He appeared to be in a room in his house that sported a wall of mirrors and a few houseplants.

My eyes widened as I watched the buff man march to warm up his bulging muscles, all while spouting off how he could get anyone ripped in just a few months' time. If he wasn't doing some type of steroids, it would surprise me.

I tilted my head, trying to understand what my sister saw in this guy. He was nothing like Jonathon, who, for all his faults, was classy and stylish. Skippy was more like a caricature. How my sister even came across him was beyond me. The clip Jules showed me was a reel from Instagram. It appeared he had about two thousand followers on the platform, but very few views of that reel.

"Uh." I wasn't sure what to even say other than I wished I could unsee the video.

Jules lowered her phone. "Yeah. I know. The weird part is—"

"There is something weirder than what you just showed me?"

She flashed me a knowing smile. "Well, the thing is, I can't find out much about him other than his supposed last name is Kelly."

"What do you mean *supposed*?"

"The guy is a mystery. I can't find where he lives or anything beyond his videos on social media."

"He must live in Australia, right?" I surmised.

Jules shook her head. "I don't think so. Most social media companies now require a declaration of which country you're based in. He's definitely in the US."

"So, he must be a native of Australia, then."

Jules shrugged. "I can't say. But I'll keep digging," she promised.

I playfully nudged her. "And how will you do that?"

"Not using government software," she said with a grin.

"If you say so." I didn't believe it for a second.

She held up her hand. "I swear."

"Okay," I laughed, still not buying it. "Can I at least pay you for your time?"

She waved her hand around. "No. This is fun for me."

"If you're sure. I feel bad asking you to help me under the circumstances. But I really need to find out what's going on with my sister and good ole Skippy."

"Please don't feel bad. I'm good at this, and I promise we will solve the mystery of Skip."

"Hopefully before my sister does anything dumb—or dumber." I let out a huge breath, knowing I was about to enter my stupidity zone. Meaning I would come face-to-face with Tristan. I had to. I'd made a promise to Quinn to give her the best Christmas ever, and for her, that included the uncle.

Jules patted my leg, knowing what all the sighing was about. I'd given her the skinny. Honestly, I'd talked way too much about it the last few days. Why couldn't I just let it go? Him go? We'd been over for thirteen years. But is it really over if you're both still in love with the other person? I didn't want to know the answer.

"We should get out there so we don't miss the good candy." I faked some enthusiasm.

"I'm sorry you're hurting," Jules offered.

"You're a good person. Here your dad is sick and you're helping me."

"It's you helping me," she unequivocally declared. "I haven't had a friend in a long time," she sniffled.

That I couldn't understand. She was the sweetest person around. "Then there are a lot of people missing out."

"That's nice of you to say."

“I absolutely mean it.” I opened the car door and braved stepping out into the cold, clear night. At least it wasn’t snowing. My car wasn’t handling the winter weather well.

We both grabbed coats, hats, and gloves and put them on, trying to stay warm. Once bundled up, we linked arms and hurried to find Quinn. She’d texted to say she and Tristan were standing near the Mercantile Store that sold vintage toys, sodas, and candy. I used to take Quinn there on her birthday when she was little and let her pick out whatever she wanted.

I tried to steel myself before I saw Tristan. He’d obviously gotten the hint we needed to spend less time around each other. Which was a good thing, but I feared my eyes would tell him a different story. The one where I could see us living happily ever after in his cozy cabin with lots of kids and my cat. But I knew his family would turn that fairy tale into the Grimm brothers’ version. I wouldn’t put it past Cordelia and Frasier to attempt feeding me a poisonous apple or hiring a huntsman to carve out my beating heart. And let us not forget Tristan had already stabbed me in the heart, so there was that.

It didn’t take long for us to find Quinn and Tristan.

When Quinn spotted me, she waved furiously, all smiles among the sizable crowd. Everyone had bundled up in winter attire. Many were rubbing gloved hands together or jumping up and down trying to stay warm. Quinn was wearing her purple puffy coat with a matching beanie, her long hair cascading down her back. She was as adorable as could be. Unfortunately, her uncle was looking mighty fine. His dress coat and clothes spoke to his coming straight from work. I never thought I would enjoy him looking so professional, but it totally worked for him. Unlike everyone else, he stood stiffly, as if bracing himself for my arrival.

With no time to change, I was still in scrubs and my hiking boots.

I embraced Quinn as soon as I made it to her. “Hi, Quinny. How was school and work?” I said loudly, to make sure she could hear me above the crowd and Christmas music blaring from the passing float decorated like a candy cane forest. All the while, I did my best to ignore Tristan, who stood faithfully by our niece, doing his best to ignore me. Fun times.

“Both were good. Beckett’s going to meet us here.”

Of course he was. The girl was obsessed with the boy. I was anxious to finally meet him.

I let Quinn go and gestured toward Jules. “I want you to meet my friend Jules. We used to go to high school together.”

“Neat.” Quinn smiled.

Tristan held out his hand to Jules, avoiding me at all costs. “I’m Tristan. Nice to meet you.”

Jules looked between Tristan and me before taking his hand. “It’s nice to meet you. I’ve heard a lot about you,” she playfully claimed.

“I’m sure,” Tristan grumbled.

He probably thought I’d told her the details of how he broke up with me. He would be mistaken. That would stay between me and the sexy man.

“Are you two fighting?” Quinn asked, worried.

“No,” we both said quickly. And it was true. We weren’t fighting. It felt a lot like mourning.

“Okay,” she said, not convinced. But then the devious thing took my hand and pulled me right next to Tristan. “Stand here. I want to get a picture of the three of us.” She turned to Jules. “Would you mind taking a picture of us?”

“Not at all,” Jules laughed, taking the phone and waiting for a suitable moment to step out into the street.

I flashed Jules a look that said, *I thought you were my friend*. Her smile said she was, and that’s why she agreed to take the picture. Did she forget how dangerous this could be to my career?

“Quinny, you should be in the middle,” I suggested, more than nervous someone in the crowd would spot us and report me to the Grangers. I hated feeling not like myself. Never did I think I would let this town win.

“Uh, no. It will look better from tallest to shortest,” Quinn gave the lamest excuse of all time.

We just needed to get this over with. “Hurry,” I agonized over the situation. I was stuck between two conflicting but vital forces: make Quinn happy or keep my job so I could protect Quinn if need be.

“Put your arm around Aunt Calista,” Quinn admonished Tristan.

He let out a huge, disgruntled breath.

Quinn snapped her head in his direction. “I thought you said you weren’t fighting.”

“We’re not,” Tristan mumbled before reluctantly putting his arm around me as lightly as possible.

It didn’t matter how light. I could feel his touch through the layers of clothes, right down to each of his fingers skimming my coat. Something in me said I was right where I belonged. My body tensed and tingled all at once. Why did I have to feel so at home with him?

Quinn leaned into me.

“Say cheese,” Jules sang.

For a fraction of a moment, Tristan’s arm relaxed around me, and he naturally pulled me to him, gripping my arm, begging me without words to open the door to him.

A war raged within me. Open the door and face the fury of this town or keep it slammed shut, bide my time, and probably lose some of my soul in the process. Regardless, his magical touch made my head lean on his shoulder. A contented sigh accidentally escaped my lips, leaving the door between us open just a crack. I knew I had to close it, but I wasn’t sure if I could. I realized I’d never really closed it all the way. Keeping those skis for so long was a testament to that.

Jules snapped several pictures. “Perfect,” she exclaimed.

The sound of the marching band playing “Sleigh Ride” brought us all back to reality. Tristan and I broke apart, not brave enough to look at each other.

Jules joined us and handed the phone back to Quinn.

I was more than grateful when Beckett pushed his way through the crowd to get to Quinn. Even if he wrapped my niece up tight in a big bear hug and said, “Hello, gorgeous.”

Were teen boys supposed to sound so smooth? Or look so grown up? The kid was sporting a five-o’clock shadow on his square jawline. I didn’t like it. Especially in light of Skippy, or whomever my sister was gallivanting around with. How did we know for sure this Beckett kid was who he said he was? Maybe I could ask Jules to snoop on him too.

Quinn snuggled right into the man-child.

Thankfully, Tristan cleared his throat loudly, a clear signal for the boy to back off.

I wanted to show some type of appreciation for Tristan stepping up to the dad plate, but I resisted.

Quinn snarled at Tristan before saying brightly, “Beckett, this is my aunt Calista. She’s the one who left the business cards all over school.”

Beckett nodded appreciatively. “That’s so CEO of you.”

My brow scrunched, not understanding what the kid had just said.

Quinn giggled. “It means you’re like the master of cool.”

“Oh. All right. I agree with that.” I grinned.

Quinn went back to cozying up to the slang-talking kid.

I planned on keeping a close eye on them. But my old friend Javier saw me from across the street and between floats made his way to us with his darling wife and two little boys. I didn’t know if he still lived in Aspen Lake, or maybe he was just visiting for the holidays. It had been years since I’d seen him.

“Dr. Chica,” Javier called out. “The prodigal daughter has returned to Aspen Lake.”

I wasn’t sure running off to medical school qualified me for such a moniker. And I for sure knew no one was going to be killing a fatted calf on my behalf. But I smiled and laughed all the same, so happy to see him.

He gave me a big hug and kissed my cheek. “It’s so good to see you. I tell my kids stories about you all the time.”

It was easy to hear in his voice how grateful he was for the time I put beef bouillon cubes in the boys’ locker room showers on his behalf. I would do it all over again to defend him. Joke’s on all those football players who tormented Javier. He grew up to be muy caliente, and last I heard he was a financial analyst for some big insurance company.

He introduced me to his wife, Gabriela, and his little boys, who were all just as cute as could be. Javier was a lucky man. I grabbed Jules and pulled her our way. “Look who I brought with me. Do you remember Jules Carmichael? She was in the year below us.”

Javier tilted his head and tried to remember, his brow crinkling with the effort.

Poor Jules bit her lip. “It’s fine if you don’t remember me.”

It wasn’t fine, and I felt terrible. Maybe Jules was right. She was invisible. How could that be? She was a knockout and incredibly nice. Definitely memorable in my book.

Javier’s sons got restless and wanted to watch for Santa’s arrival, so they said their goodbyes.

As soon as they were gone, I whispered to Jules, “I’m so sorry.”

“I’m used to it. I’m forgettable.”

I shook my head, refusing to believe it. “It’s because it’s dark,” I fretted.

She laughed. “Nice try. Honestly, I’m okay.”

I’m glad one of us was. So much turmoil bubbled inside me from fear that the Grangers knew I was there with Tristan, and from hating myself for caring what they thought, and from the situation with my sister and Skippy. To top it off, my feelings for Tristan were out in full force. The combination made it so I didn’t even have the heart to catch any of the candy being lobbed at us like torpedoes. A frenzy ensued around us. Children of all ages were jumping and scrambling to get as much candy as they could. Even Quinn and Beckett joined in on the fun.

Focusing on Quinn, I didn’t realize Tristan had gotten in on the candy action. But out of nowhere, in front of me appeared a cinnamon lollipop wrapped in red cellophane. Just like the one Tristan and I shared at the last parade we went to together.

“For you,” Tristan murmured.

I stared at the lollipop that held so much meaning. When my eyes drifted up and caught hold of Tristan’s, in his own, I could see his plea for me to open the door to him. *Come home*, he begged.

A hundred sweet memories of us filled my mind. Whether we were slow dancing to only the music our hearts sang or playing canasta with Mom to keep her from feeling so lonely, there was one overriding feeling—love. A love like I had never known before or since. I ached to have it back. To take the lollipop and share it—and my life—with Tristan.

I raised my hand to take the lollipop, not caring about the consequences and feeling like myself. But just as I was about to take it and the silent invitation accompanying it, the most grating voice punctuated the chilly air, making it even icier.

“There you are, Tristan,” Cordelia trilled, making the peasants around her part the way for the Grand Duke and Duchess of Aspen Lake.

It shattered the spell that had come over me. I dropped my hand and stepped back into the crowd, grabbing Jules for comfort, hating myself for being so cowardly. I wanted to be elf-outfit-wearing Calista. But then I looked at Quinn, smiling brightly and laughing with Beckett, dancing in a shower of candy. I needed to be there for her. She was going to need guidance through the tricky teen years. And I knew that right now my sister wasn’t up for the job. While I was at it, I needed to save Stella too.

Tristan lurched forward, but something in my expression made him freeze midstep. “Calista,” he desperately called my name amid the surrounding glee.

Cordelia stood next to Tristan, and with her claw covered in Gucci gloves, she grabbed his arm, daring me to answer his call.

I gripped Jules tighter, knowing I would have to fight another day. And believe me, I would. After Quinn graduated, there would be hell to pay. For now, all I could say was, “Merry Christmas,

Cordelia. It's good to know you're still saving Santa a trip to your house. How very kind of you."

Tristan chuckled.

Cordelia blinked, not comprehending at first, but when it finally dawned on her, she sneered the most condescending of sneers. She didn't bother retorting. I wasn't worthy enough for her to speak to. But I got what she was saying. *Stay away from Tristan or you'll be sorry.*

Oh, I was sorry, all right. Sorry I ever came back to this town.

TWENTY-THREE

TRISTAN

LIKE A LOVESICK PUPPY, TRISTAN lay on his bed staring at the photo Quinn had sent him while a decent amount of snow fell outside the window. The howling wind was his alarm clock this morning and a reminder he needed to get up and feed the horses before he went into the office. But the photo of Calista, Quinn, and him at the parade mesmerized him. It showed him what his life could have been if he wasn't such an idiot. He kept staring at Calista with her head on his shoulder, longing to be close to her.

It had been a week since he'd seen Calista's gorgeous face in person. She was working a lot of night shifts. Not that he would have seen much of her, anyway. It was clear she wanted him to stay away from her. He had an inkling it wasn't just because she was afraid of him. Something else, or should he say, someone else, was getting to her.

It didn't take a genius to know who it was. If his parents hadn't shown up at the parade, who knows what might have happened that night. Maybe he wouldn't have been reduced to looking at photos of the woman he loved. He stared at the empty side of his bed, torrid thoughts running through his mind.

He sat up and ran a hand through his unkempt hair, knowing he needed to get up and face the day—and the fact that he probably wasn't going to get his Christmas wish this year. Even if he once again warned his parents to lay off Calista. They feigned innocence, but he knew they were up to something. They never attended the Christmas parade unless the mayor invited them to light the tree in the town square. This year that honor had gone to a local educator who won Nevada's teacher of the year.

His parents were trying to send a message to Calista. He assumed it was about her job, given their conversation on Thanksgiving. Whatever it was, it had rattled Calista. And that was a hard thing to do. He'd never known her to back down from any kind of fight. If they did anything to hurt her, he would make good on his threat.

For now, though, he needed to get ready and head to work. With the weather, it was going to be a slow drive in. But first, the horses.

He grabbed a pair of jeans off the chair close to his bed. He'd just gotten his pants buttoned up when Quinn called.

"What's up, Quinnster?"

"I need a ride to school. My mom's too tired to get up, and Aunt Calista isn't answering her phone. She should have left work already. What if something happened to her on the way home?" Quinn cried.

Tristan's heart pounded rapidly. The thought that something could have happened to Calista knocked the breath out of him. Yet he remained calm for Quinn. "I'm sure things just ran long with a patient. I'll take you to school." Then he was going to have words with Stella. Her behavior was unacceptable.

"Please go check on Aunt Calista. You know how crappy her car is. What if she got stuck somewhere? Or what if she was in an accident?"

Tristan was sick, thinking of the last scenario. "I'll call the police chief to see if there have been any accidents reported." The chief was a longtime patron of the store, and a friend.

"Okay," she whined.

"Just get ready for school and I'll be there as soon as I can." It surprised him they hadn't canceled school yet. With students able to attend school online now, they usually opted for that route when it snowed more than a few inches. "And, Quinn, I'm sure Calista's fine," he said, trying to make himself feel better too.

“Call me right back,” she begged.

“I will.” He hung up and immediately dialed Craig, the police chief.

“This is Craig,” a deep baritone voice answered.

“Hey, man, this is Tristan.”

“Tristan, what’s up? You still sore that I beat you in our last round of golf?”

It still ate at him, but that wasn’t important now. “Come this spring, we’ll have a rematch.”

Craig chuckled.

“Listen, I need a favor. My niece is worried about her aunt, Dr. Monroe.”

“Ah. Your ex.”

“Yes,” Tristan tried not to sound annoyed. The town had a long memory. Especially the police department.

“What has she done now?” he teased.

Tristan stretched his neck from side to side, trying to maintain his composure. “Nothing,” he gritted out. “She’s not answering her phone and she should have been home by now. I’m just wondering if there have been any accidents reported near the hospital or in the area.”

“With the snow, I’m sure there have been, but I’ll check for you. What kind of car does she drive?”

“Silver Honda Civic. Probably ten years old.”

“All right. I’ll see what I can find out.”

“Thanks, man.” Tristan hung up and finished dressing. He wasn’t going to wait around to hear from Craig. All he could think about was finding Calista. Even though he knew there was probably a rational explanation for why she wasn’t answering her phone that didn’t include her lying hurt in a ditch. She was more than likely still at the hospital. If that was the case, he would offer to take her home. She shouldn’t be driving her car in this weather. He doubted she could even make it up Stella’s drive.

On his way into town, Craig called to inform him no one had reported any accidents involving a Honda Civic. It made Tristan feel partially better. But what if she really was hurt and lying in a ditch somewhere? The thought made his throat constrict. So many regrets ran through his mind. If she was all right, he decided he was going to take her in his arms and show her exactly what she meant to him. He couldn’t stand the idea that he may never get to hold her or kiss her again.

The roads were a mess, snow packed and icy. Even with his truck in four-wheel drive, he had to go slow. Each minute that ticked by was agonizing. He tried calling Calista several times, to no avail. Each call when straight to voice mail.

Where the hell is she? The snow fell furiously, giving his windshield wipers—as well as his heart—a workout. It seemed to take hours to get to the hospital. Thankfully, Quinn’s school had decided to take everything online because of the weather. At this point, he didn’t care if he made it into the office today. All that mattered was finding Calista.

He swallowed hard when he carefully turned into the hospital parking lot. The snow was coming down so hard now; it covered most of the cars in the employee section of the lot. Just as he was getting ready to stop and run into the hospital, he saw Calista walking out, her head down with her hair blowing in the wind, an annoyed expression on her beautiful face.

Tristan had never been so happy to see someone in his life. He pulled over to the curb, put his truck in park, and jumped out. He did his best to run to her against the snow and wind. “Calista,” he shouted.

She looked up and squinted through the snow. “Tristan?”

He lunged for her and pulled her to him, the snow bathing them in white. He kissed her head and breathed several sighs of relief.

“What are you doing here? Is Quinn okay?” she asked, panicked.

“She’s fine.” He held her tighter. “We were worried about you. You were late and didn’t answer your phone.”

“It was a crazy night and I forgot to plug my phone in and the battery died,” she responded, muffled against his chest before pushing him away and wildly looking around. “You shouldn’t be here.”

He looked around too, not seeing anyone in the blinding snow. “Why?”

She took off without answering him and ran the best she could to her car.

“Calista,” he shouted, done staying away from her. As soon as he reached Calista, he gently grabbed her arm and spun her around. “Tell me what to do.”

With her free hand, she wiped the snow off her face. “What do you mean?”

Tristan pulled her closer until they were face-to-face. He stared at her parted lips, ready for her to tell him off. His aching lips hovered above hers, risking the diatribe she was ready to release. But the angry words never came.

Calista’s features softened. “Please, just leave me alone.”

“I can’t. I love you,” he admitted before he could stop himself. But it was the truth. He loved her.

She closed her eyes, hiding from him and the truth. “No, you don’t. And even if you did, why should I believe you?”

“Because,” he whispered, leaning in a little more. “I’m not me without you. And I have to believe part of you has been missing too. I’m tired of living half a life. Aren’t you?”

Her eyes flew open. Terror swirled in them, knowing he spoke the truth. “This will not be like the socks,” she vowed.

Tristan’s brow arched. “What?”

“Nothing.” She tried half-heartedly to pull away.

Tristan refused to let go this time. Instead, he drew her closer, until their lips came dangerously close to colliding. “I love you,” he said before his thumb glided over her lower lip; he longed to kiss her but was afraid of her reaction if he tried.

Calista reached up and with her trembling fingers, grazed his lips as if she longed to remember how it felt to touch him so intimately. “Tristan,” she said his name with the same sweet emotion she used to.

It gave him the courage to press his lips to hers. When she didn’t pull away, he pressed harder, his world immediately righting. It felt like the first time he ever kissed her—he knew his world would never be the same because she *was* his world. How he had forgotten that, he didn’t know. But he swore he never would again.

Calista grabbed his coat and gripped it tightly, pulling him closer to deepen the kiss. Her tongue begged him to explore every inch of her mouth, and he did so with pleasure. His hands grabbed her face, and his fingers intertwined in her hair, damp from the snow. Anything to get closer to her. He couldn’t get enough of her or the way she tasted like chocolate and cinnamon. Their tongues tangled, neither seeking dominance. They only wanted to dance the way they always had, in perfect rhythm, like old partners.

He was home.

She moaned with contentment, making him kiss her deeper and more urgently.

Unexpectedly, she pulled away from him, a wild, dazed look in her eye. “We should never do that again.” Yet, in the next second, she grabbed his coat and pulled him right back to her for one more kiss, as if she couldn’t help herself. She devoured his lips and mouth, drinking him in like she would never taste him again. That he couldn’t have, but when she pushed him away from her, he didn’t resist.

“Now we’re done.” She turned and swayed like she was tipsy.

He put an arm around her to steady her, smiling, pleased that he still had that effect on her.

“You need to leave,” she demanded.

“That’s not happening.”

She stopped, tears forming in her eyes as she shivered in the cold. “Tristan, we can’t do this.”

“Your kiss says something different.”

Calista looked up at the relentless sky, raining down white, fluffy flakes. “This town,” she cried. “Your parents. They will make sure we never happen.”

Tristan ran a cold finger down her wet cheek. “Not this time.”

Her eyes met his. “Easy for you to say. If I step one toe out of line here, my job and even Deidra’s are in jeopardy. Do you understand what that means? I need to be here for Quinn and Stella. I can’t fight back like I want to.”

“Then let me fight for you like I should have thirteen years ago,” he pleaded like he never had before, knowing his life depended on it. Knowing this time, she was his life.

Calista pinched the bridge of her nose. “I’m too tired to think about this.”

Tristan leaned in and kissed her brow, breathing her in, promising himself to never take it for granted again. “That’s okay. I promise to be here when you wake up.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of.”

“This time, I promise to stay.”

TWENTY-FOUR

CALISTA

IF SOMEONE HAD ASKED ME what the last thing I thought I might do today was, I would have said: *Sit next to my ex in his truck while he drove us through a blizzard to his ranch.* Yet, that's exactly what I was doing. One might ask how it came to be. I'll tell you. A major lack of sleep and still being buzzed from those dang kisses Tristan administered all too well and all too publicly. The man was still the king of kissing. No one but him could make me feel so heated while covered in snow.

Thankfully, Quinn was with us, or there was no telling what might occur once we got to his place, no matter how much I kept protesting that we were never kissing again. As exhausted as I was—and worried I was going to lose my job over our very public display of affection—I still wanted another taste of him. We are talking a long, slow, let-me-memorize-everything-about-you kind of kiss. I kept telling myself I was only going to his ranch because his horses needed to be fed and Quinn begged us to go get the kittens. It was a lie. A big fat lie.

The truth was, I wanted to go home—and Tristan was apparently my home. Don't get me wrong—I wasn't ready to roll out the welcome mat just yet. But I wanted to look through the door's peephole and see him there. See if he was the man he promised to be. Then maybe, just maybe, I would open the door and let him in.

He had no idea what it meant to me when I came out of the hospital to find him there, worried something had happened to me. It had been a long time since anyone had cared about me enough to brave a blizzard, or any weather for that matter. And when he said he loved me, it was like suddenly all the empty spaces inside me were full again.

Quinn scooted my way. She was sitting closest to the door, insisting I sit next to Tristan. I'd warned him not to touch me in front of Quinn. Not that he could, anyway. He was having to white knuckle the drive on the treacherous roads. It was probably a good thing. It wouldn't be fair to get her hopes up that all her scheming had worked. Although, I had to say, I was proud of her calculating ways. Maybe someday I would tell her so and thank her. Maybe.

Her lower lip trembled. "I was so worried about you. I can't lose you like I did my dad ... and it seems, my mom."

Sometimes I forgot she'd just lost her dad. She was handling it all with such grace. But I needed to remember that even though Jonathon was a pig, Quinn loved him and was mourning him, despite all the complications. As for Stella, I was going to wring her neck. I hoped Jules would finally figure out who this Skippy character really was. Had Stella watched any of the man's workout videos? Wasn't she embarrassed? The guy was so full of himself, and so many of his health claims were bogus.

I put an arm around Quinn and kissed her head. "I'm sorry, honey. Don't worry, I'm not going anywhere. And I'm going to figure out what's going on with your mom." Then I was going to knock some sense into her. Again.

She sniffled. "Okay. Can we have a *Stranger Things* marathon and then maybe go sledding when it stops snowing?"

"Sure," I yawned. Even though I wasn't a fan of the horror genre. It was weird, since I dealt with blood and gruesome injuries all the time, but watching gore and suspense had always freaked me out.

"I think we should let your aunt get some sleep first," Tristan suggested.

Sleep sounded divine. I was so glad I had tomorrow off and then went back to day shifts for a while.

After what seemed like an eternity, we finally made it to Tristan's. It had snowed so much that his big truck had a hard time making it up the drive. As soon as we pulled up to his garage, the deejay on the radio announced several road closures.

"Looks like you girls will be stuck here until tomorrow." Tristan couldn't have sounded any happier.

"Yay," Quinn squealed.

I bit my lip, not sure what to think. I should have known it was a possibility, but I pleaded exhaustion—and getting drunk off Tristan's kisses. It totally muddled my brain.

Tristan noticed my reluctance. "Don't worry—I have a generator if the power goes out and plenty of food and supplies."

Those were the least of my concerns. I was worried about how much heat we would generate together if we ever found ourselves alone. I had a feeling he was already devising a plan that Quinn would be all too happy to help execute.

"Ooh, do you have stuff to make chocolate chip pancakes?" Quinn asked.

"Of course." Tristan smiled over at her.

"Awesome." She hopped out of the truck and slammed the door, leaving me alone with her uncle.

For a moment I watched her as she braved the elements, pushing through the snow to the cabin before punching in the code and letting herself in. I probably should have followed her, but I knew she thought this was her sneaky way of giving me time alone with her uncle. If only she knew what had happened in the hospital parking lot. She would have lost her mind.

As soon as she was safe, Tristan's hand immediately found my thigh and squeezed it. "How are you feeling?"

"Conflicted." Very conflicted.

Tristan reached up and ran a hand over my hair. "I can understand that. But let me take care of you today. I'll draw you a bath and get a bed ready for you."

That sounded lovely. "Not your bed." I coyly smiled.

"What kind of a guy do you think I am?" he faked being offended.

"Oh, I'm pretty sure I have a good idea."

He tenderly cupped my cheek with his strong hand. "Then you know we will never do anything you're uncomfortable with."

I did know that about him. When we were together, he always made me feel safe and in control. But ... "I can't let you wreck me again." My vulnerabilities came out. I was too tired to think straight.

He leaned in and kissed my brow, and then my nose. "I won't. I can't."

"Of course you can."

His impassioned eyes caught hold of mine. "No, I can't. I couldn't live with myself if I hurt you again."

"I want to believe you, but your parents are already threatening to get me and Deidra fired. You know that, right?"

His face blazed red. "If they dare, I'll resign. And then"—he grinned—"I'll become a ski instructor, and we'll lead wilderness excursions in the summer."

"Ha ha. Funny."

"I'm serious."

"Tristan, as lovely as that once sounded, I love being a doctor." I actually enjoyed working at Aspen Lake General, even if Evie was still scowling at me any chance she got. The rest of the nurses were amazing and had welcomed me, even though I was infamous in this town.

"Then we'll open a clinic for you on your side of the lake. Whatever you want."

Hmm. That was an intriguing thought. Being able to help people who couldn't afford quality health care *and* stick it to the Grangers. Oh, they would be livid if the next duke didn't ascend to the title. But this was insane thinking. "I don't want our relationship to be about money."

"Calista," he sighed. "It wouldn't be. Everything I have is yours." He was certainly doing his best to make his case.

I let out a tired breath and groaned. "Can we talk about this later? Our niece is probably getting the wrong idea about us being out here for so long." Besides, the long night and this morning's events had fried my brain. I had no business making life-altering decisions in my state.

"I think she's getting exactly the right idea," he crooned, while his lips begged mine for a taste.

I pushed on his chest, more than wanting to give into his wish, but we needed to be cautious. "Hold on, lover boy. I feel like we should pace ourselves." And I had declared we should never kiss again, but I was a consummate vow breaker.

He inched closer. "It's been at least two hours since I've kissed you. I think that's a reasonable pace, until we ramp back up to past levels."

"And who says we will reach those levels again?" I playfully challenged him.

He stole a kiss. "Your eyes tell me everything I need to know."

Those darn eyes. They were worse traitors than my fingers. Well, since I was already outed, I grabbed his shirt and pressed my lips against his for a second. Just enough, before I wanted to do nothing more than stay in his truck and fog up the windows. I let out a long, satisfied breath. My lips still tingled from his touch. "That should tide you over." And hopefully it would satisfy me as well. Although, I already wanted another taste of him.

"Not even close. I'll never get enough of you."

"Are you sure? You went thirteen years without me," I said snarkily.

"Worst thirteen years of my life."

"You seemed pretty happy. You even got married. Stella showed me all the joyous photos." I'd let her, only to prove they didn't bother me. Inside, it killed a piece of my soul.

He swallowed hard and rubbed a hand over his stubbled cheeks. "I didn't like the man you saw in those photos. It wasn't me."

"Because you're not you without me. Isn't that right?" I tried not to sound bitter, but he'd stolen from me, in a sense.

"Calista," he whispered. "I know an apology will never fix what I did. But I am sorry. I'm a changed man."

We shall see.

We traipsed into the house and shook off the snow while discarding coats and then hanging them up. I peeked around the corner from the mudroom, and gazing at Tristan's home made me empathize with Elizabeth Bennet more than I ever had. Pemberley had left her no choice but to fall in love with Darcy. Just like Tristan's home had me wishing to wake up here every day for the rest of my life. His cozy great room had an inviting window nook with the perfect view of the falling snow. It made me want to curl up in front of it and read a book. Or maybe snuggle up on his linen sectional in front of the river rock fireplace. Everything from the wood-beam ceiling to the ladder leading up to the loft was a dream come to life for me. The place even smelled inviting—amber mixed with pine, cinnamon, and just a hint of hardwood bacon.

In a word, I was smitten.

Tristan grinned next to me, knowing I was in awe. But he was good enough not to say anything.

I shook the snow out of my hair and took my boots off before I carefully tiptoed the rest of the way in. It was best to enter dreams cautiously.

Quinn ran up to me in the open kitchen, holding Poppy and Coco. She wore a gloating expression, confident her plan was working. "Look who I found." She handed me my kitten.

I gladly took her. I'd missed the little thing. "You've grown so much," I commented.

“She loves tuna,” Tristan informed me before practically begging, “Make yourself at home. I’ll go start your bath and find something for you to change into.”

I nodded, trying not to feel so at home. But his place called to me. It said, *This was all for you.*

Tristan darted off toward the back of his house, through a door I assumed led to his bedroom. I had a feeling my dreams were about to become more inviting—and probably scarier.

As soon as he was out of sight, Quinn sidled up to me. “You like him.”

“You think so?”

“I saw the way you kept looking at him in the truck.”

“You mean when we slid and I gripped the seat and squeaked?”

“No,” she giggled. “I mean when you kept smiling over at him and tucking your hair behind your ear.”

“I did not do that,” I babbled, while silently berating myself for being so obvious.

“Oh yes, you did. And that’s okay,” she got serious. “He’s a good guy, Aunt Calista. Like the best. He was always there for me when I needed him. Did you know he even took me to get tampons for the first time?”

I shook my head, wishing it could have been me, but so happy Tristan had stepped up to the plate.

“Yeah, and he didn’t make it embarrassing or anything. And he came to every one of my track meets, even if they were out of town. One time he drove all night just to be there.”

I rubbed my chest. My heart was beating erratically as Tristan was becoming more and more attractive to me. I was moving into the danger zone. I was putting my heart and job on the line. This town and the Grangers were going to make me fight for this. Sure, I was up for it. I loved a good fight. But it wasn’t only *my* heart and job on the line.

“Aunt Calista,” Quinn choked out. “He was so worried about you this morning when you didn’t come home on time. I can tell he loves you. Please forgive him.”

Firmly holding Poppy with one hand, I rested my free hand on Quinn’s rosy cheek. “I’m working on it, Quinny.”

“Really?” Her eyes lit up.

“Yeah.”

I had a feeling I was going to be jumping in the ring soon and going a few rounds with the Grangers. The question was, Would I get knocked out again?

TWENTY-FIVE

CALISTA

I WALKED OUT OF TRISTAN'S bedroom, wearing one of his plaid button-ups that fit me more like a dress and some of his wool socks. As much as I hated socks, I felt it best to wear them to keep me from begging Tristan to warm up my always-cold feet. The irony of wearing socks wasn't lost on me. They were my Achilles' heel. Who knew such a simple thing could take me down?

I'll tell you what else was going to aid my downfall. Tristan's bathtub. I'd just had the pleasure of soaking in that incredible freestanding baby while I watched the snow fall and listened to Christmas music. It was heavenly—and a little torturous, as I tried hard not to think about how the tub was big enough for two. There was no doubt who I wished could join me. I realized all I had to do was say the word and I could take a bath here every day for the rest of my life. It was a scary and beautiful thought.

Every second that ticked by, I fell more and more in love with the place. Maybe even more in love with Tristan.

Before I announced myself, I took a moment to stare from the kitchen doorway at Tristan and Quinn roasting marshmallows in the fireplace as it crackled and popped. Quinn laughed as she pulled the ooey gooey confection off the roasting stick and placed it between graham crackers and chocolate. It was the perfect scene.

As tired as I was, I wanted in on the s'mores action, so I pranced into the great room. "Hello."

Tristan whipped his head my way, his eyes roving over me, landing on my bare legs. His jaw dropped. "Dang," he said under his breath, making me smile.

It had been a long time since I'd worn one of his shirts. He used to say it was his favorite thing to see me in. Apparently, he still felt that way.

"I hope you saved some s'mores for me," I said, doing my best not to run to Tristan and kiss him. You know, to thank him for all his hospitality.

As soon as I reached them, Quinn placed a large decorative pillow from the sectional between her and Tristan to show that's where I should sit. I rolled my eyes at her but did as she wanted.

I kneeled carefully so as not to show too much leg. Tristan's eyes might have popped a blood vessel if I did, given how hard he was gaping at me.

"You had a good bath, I hope?" Tristan uttered, his gaze intent on me.

"Yes. Thank you. And thanks for the clothes."

"My *pleasure*."

I was sure it was.

"Here," Quinn said, handing me a metal roasting stick.

I took it and reached for a marshmallow in the bag next to me.

"Feels like old times," Tristan commented.

I skewered the marshmallow. "It does."

"Did you two make s'mores a lot when you were dating?" Quinn offhandedly asked, like she was trying to be sneaky or something.

"Quite a bit." I smiled, thinking of camping trips and winter nights by the fire.

"What other kinds of things did you do?" Quinn was desperate to keep up this line of questioning.

Tristan thoughtfully turned his roasting stick, browning his marshmallow to perfection with a contented expression. “Lots of things—fishing, paddle boarding, picnics, skiing.” He flashed me a knowing look.

I nibbled on my bottom lip, thinking about the skis that were now long gone. Why did I throw them away? After carrying them around for years, why had I chosen now to be brave enough to trash them? It felt as if someone had dropped a boulder in my stomach.

“Are you okay?” Tristan asked.

“Um, yeah. Just tired,” I lied, trying to think if there was any way for me to get those skis back.

“Now that you don’t hate Uncle Tristan, we should all go skiing.” Quinn beamed.

“Uh, maybe. You know, if I have time. I’m working a lot. Like so much.”

Tristan pulled out his perfectly toasted marshmallow and held it in front of my face as if he were taunting me with it. “I’m sure you can find some time. I’d be happy to help you fix your old skis.” He wagged his brows.

I shoved my marshmallow into the flames, feeling the heat of my total misstep. “I’m not really sure they’re salvageable. I’ll probably just rent some if we end up going.”

“But Uncle Tristan said he bought those skis for you,” Quinn whined. “I’m sure he can fix them.”

I let out an exasperated sigh. Of course Tristan had blabbed about that.

“I’d love to try.” He nudged me, with a wicked smile on his handsome face.

“We’ll see” was all I could offer. I was going to call waste management as soon as I could, to see if somehow I could get the skis back.

“This is so happening,” Quinn chirped.

I squirmed, watching my marshmallow turn golden brown.

Tristan put his s’more together and held it up, offering me the first bite like he always used to do.

I smiled before parting my lips, even though my insides were twisting over the skis. But I found that sugar always helped.

“You guys are so cute,” Quinn twittered. Oh, she was way past getting her hopes up that Tristan and I would get back together. It was a foregone conclusion to her. No pressure.

Tristan shoved the s’more in my mouth.

I bit into the treat, and a burst of chocolate, graham cracker, and marshmallow gave me a brief rush of happiness.

While I chewed, Tristan’s finger swiped the corner of my lip. “You got a little chocolate there.” Then he licked the chocolate off his finger, slow and sensual, knowing exactly what he was playing at. Oh, baby, was I here for it. If Quinn weren’t a witness, taking it slow would have gone out the window.

“Um, okay. That was a little much,” Quinn complained. “I hope you guys don’t get all gross.”

Tristan and I laughed.

“Maybe we should put on *Stranger Things*,” Tristan suggested.

“Ooh, yes.” Quinn jumped up and ran toward the sectional. She snuggled into one corner of it with a quilt.

“Why don’t you take the chaise section, so you can rest,” Tristan offered. “Or you can nap on my bed.” He slyly smiled.

As tempting as that was, I thought it best to stay near Quinn. If not, Tristan and I would be sharing more than s’mores—that I knew. Besides, if I crawled into Tristan’s bed, my thoughts would keep me awake. Thoughts of ... well ... never mind.

“I’ll hang out with you guys.” I hastily pulled my marshmallow out of the flames and made a s’more for myself. My hands shook from all the nervous energy coursing through me.

“Hey.” Tristan tugged on my hair. “You’re safe and in control.”

I let out a deep breath. “I know. This is all just ...”

“Amazing,” he finished for me.

He wasn’t wrong. It was baffling, but there was something magical about it all. I never thought we would get the chance to be together again. Much less see some of our dreams come to life, namely his cabin. It sounded strange, but I could feel the love he put into it. Even stranger was that it was our love that built his home.

“It is,” I admitted. “But it’s weird.”

“It won’t always feel like that,” he promised. “Now”—he held out his hand—“let’s get you comfortable.”

In truth, I had never been more comfortable with anyone than him. I think that’s what scared me the most. I was so comfortable with who we were, I hadn’t seen the end coming. But I knew better now. It made me more cautious. Yet, I braved giving him my hand. My soul craved to be whole. As soon as our fingers intertwined, all the hell I knew we were going to pay for this faded to the background for just a moment.

Tristan pulled me up and didn’t let go of my hand. He led me over to the sectional.

Quinn watched our every move, all her hopes and dreams swirling in her eyes.

Tristan helped get me settled on the chaise end, even putting a quilt over me and placing Poppy on my lap.

So there I was, with my kitten and my s’more, dangerously close to Tristan, who sat next to me with his feet propped up on his plaid ottoman.

He gazed over at me. “It feels a lot like Christmas, doesn’t it?”

I snuggled down under the quilt and nodded, thinking of something my mom used to say: *“Christmas is just another word for love.”*

I certainly felt loved.

TWENTY-SIX

TRISTAN

AS THE DAY FADED INTO evening, Tristan watched Calista sleep more than he watched the show. Even when he had to take a couple of work calls, he couldn't keep his eyes off her. She looked beautiful with her dark hair splayed across the pillow. He loved the little sighs that escaped her inviting lips from time to time as she slumbered. He'd forgotten she did that.

"Should we make her dinner?" Quinn whispered.

Tristan nodded and stood, not wishing to let her out of his sight. He was afraid if he did, she would vanish. Today had been like a dream to him. One he knew he didn't deserve, and he wanted to do everything he could to hold on to it. He still couldn't believe she was here. More so that she'd let him kiss her. If he had his way, there would be more of that later. He might have to bribe Quinn to go to bed early.

Quinn joined Tristan in his open kitchen, which had an industrial flair, with vaulted ceilings, a modern stainless steel island, and concept lighting. He'd wanted a more masculine vibe when he'd worked with an architect to design the home.

Quinn sat on a stool at the island and propped her hands under her chin. "So, what's your plan?"

"For dinner?" Tristan questioned.

"No, silly. To keep my aunt."

Tristan opened the refrigerator and pulled out the steaks he'd been marinating. "She's not a pet to keep."

"You know what I mean. You can't screw up this time."

Tristan placed the tray of meat on the island. "I know."

"So, what are you going to do?" Quinn was relentless.

"What do you think I should do?" Tristan couldn't believe he was seeking advice from his fifteen-year-old niece. He ran a multimillion-dollar company, and executives from around the world sought his opinion. But he knew he had one shot to get this right with Calista, and he would do whatever it took, even if that meant getting advice from his teenage niece.

Quinn's eyes lit up like she had been waiting for him to ask for her help. "Since you've now zombied her, you can't make her feel like you're just cuffing her."

Tristan rubbed his forehead. "I have no idea what you just said."

Quinn giggled. "When you zombie someone, it means you ghosted them but then popped up in their life again. Cuffing means you just want a girlfriend so you're not alone on the holidays."

Tristan stared blankly at her, thinking maybe she wasn't the best person to get advice from. At least he knew what *ghosting* meant. He hadn't ghosted Calista. She was well aware he had purposefully pushed her out of his life. "Obviously, that isn't the case."

"Exactly, so you need to prove to her that you want her forever. You have now entered IRL mode. That means in real life," she clarified, like he was uneducated. "Maybe you should DTR sooner rather than later."

"Let me guess: define the relationship?"

"Now you're getting it." She grinned.

"I think she knows where I want this to go."

"You can't be too sure."

“Have you and Beckett defined your relationship?” Tristan was eager to know. While he liked Beckett, he wasn’t sure how he felt about the kid dating his niece, especially with how handsy he was at the parade.

“Uh, no. We hardly know each other.”

Tristan was glad to hear that. “That’s good. Keep that going.”

She rolled her eyes. “Anyway, just don’t screw up this time.”

“Thanks, Quinn. That was really helpful,” he said sarcastically while reaching over to rustle her hair.

She laughed and reached into the marshmallow bag he’d brought back to the kitchen. She grabbed a marshmallow and threw it at him.

“Two can play that game.” He grabbed a marshmallow of his own and chucked it at her, hitting her in the face.

“Hey!” She grabbed a few more marshmallows, and a food fight commenced.

Quinn took cover behind the island while Tristan grabbed the bag of marshmallows and ran around to pelt her with as many as possible. Quinn squealed loudly, grabbing as many marshmallows as she could off the wood floor to retaliate.

In the chaos of it all, Calista walked in wearing a sleepy smile, running a hand through her long wavy hair.

Tristan froze to gape at her. She was a vision.

She coyly smiled at him, knowing exactly how much she turned him on. “Sounds like I’m missing out on all the fun.”

Tristan held out the remaining marshmallows in his hand. “Do you want to join in?” he stuttered like a starstruck teen.

“Give me a second.” She pranced off toward his bedroom, and dang if he didn’t want to follow her and define the relationship without using a single word. He tilted his head, following her every move, thinking things he shouldn’t. At least not in front of his niece.

Quinn came out from hiding and patted his back. “You’ve got it bad for her.”

Truer words had never been spoken.

Quinn stockpiled marshmallows while Tristan got out some garlic and butter to cook the steaks in.

Calista returned in no time, holding her phone, a pensive look on her face. Although she was doing her best to smile, Tristan knew her well enough to know something wasn’t right. He worried it might be something concerning Stella. Or perhaps his parents were already causing trouble. He probably shouldn’t have kissed her in front of the hospital, but he couldn’t help himself. The rush of emotion he felt when he knew she was okay had overcome him. Regardless, he would make sure Calista’s job was safe. He wasn’t going to let anything or anyone impede their relationship this time.

“Quinn, didn’t you say you wanted to call Beckett?” Tristan was anxious to find out what was bothering Calista.

“You’re just afraid I’ll beat you in ...,” she started to say, but then looked between her aunt and uncle, a smile forming on her face. “Actually, I do need to call him.” She winked at Tristan. “Have fun.” She waved and jaunted off toward the spare bedroom.

With Quinn gone, Tristan sat at the island and pulled out the stool next to him, inviting Calista to join him. “What’s wrong?”

She let out a heavy breath and joined him.

“Is it my parents?” he spewed.

“Not yet.” Calista looked around to make sure Quinn wasn’t within earshot. She pulled up her phone and leaned in closer to Tristan. “I just got a voice mail and some texts from Jules.”

“The woman you brought to the parade?”

“Yeah. She’s been helping me find out who that guy is that was groping my sister.”

Tristan's face contorted, thinking about the scene he'd witnessed at the motel. He wished he could scrub it from his memory. "Did she find something out?"

"Unfortunately, yes," Calista seethed.

"What?" Tristan was concerned.

"Before I tell you, I should probably show you something. Get ready to be disturbed." She clicked a few things on her phone.

Tristan was expecting to see crime footage, or the likes of it. But nothing could have prepared him for the glowing orange man gyrating on the screen and trying to pass it off as a serious workout. "Is that the guy from outside the motel?" he was afraid to ask.

"Yep. His name is Skip. And that's the only thing ole Skippy has told the truth about. Well, as far as I know. My sister would only tell me his first name. But I have to believe he's been lying to her."

"What do you mean?"

"His Australian accent. Fake. His last name. Fake. And I have something else to show you."

"I'm not sure I want to see anything else if it involves him."

The corners of her lips ticked up. "I promise, no more bicycle shorts or shiny orange bare chests."

He leaned in closer to her, breathing in the scent of her hair. The smell of his mint shampoo on her was driving him wild. "You smell good," he couldn't help but say.

"I smell like you."

He flashed her a seductive grin. "I smell good on you. Always have."

"Focus," she flirtatiously admonished him. "This is serious."

"Very." He ran a finger down the exposed area of her chest.

She gently elbowed him. "Seriously. Focus. My sister could be in real trouble here."

He cleared his throat. "You're right. I'm sorry. Just, seeing you in my shirt—it ..."

"I know, and maybe later we can ..."

Tristan waited with bated breath for her to finish her thought, hoping she was thinking what he was thinking.

"... talk." She smirked and then laughed when he groaned in disappointment. "Okay, maybe one good night kiss," she offered.

He nuzzled her ear and spoke lowly into it, "I hope you're open to negotiations."

She shivered from his touch. "Maybe," she stammered.

Tristan kissed her cheek before backing off, pleased with her response. "Okay, show me."

She held up her phone. "This is from a news article twenty years ago in North Dakota."

Tristan squinted to make out the man in black and white, standing next to an attractive middle-aged woman. He definitely saw hints of Skip in him. But it was the headline that mostly caught his eye. "Local Man Suspected of Swindling Thousands from Widow." Tristan's head snapped up. "Do you think he's still at it?"

"Most definitely. According to Jules, Skip *Larson* has been evading police for years. All while taking advantage of women. There are more articles from more towns across the country. They basically all say the same thing. He's just changed his last name."

"We need to report him to the police." Tristan got up to grab his phone.

Calista grabbed his hand. "Wait."

Tristan cocked his head. "Why?"

"Tristan, this town will eat Stella alive if they find out about this. Think about what your parents alone will do to her."

He let out a disgruntled breath and sat back down. No doubt in his mind his parents would make Stella's life a living hell. "You're right. So, what do we do? We can't let him take advantage of your sister." Tristan prayed he hadn't already.

An evil glint appeared in her eyes. "I say we run the jerk out of town and *then* we tip off the authorities."

Tristan always worried a bit when Calista got that look, but he knew whatever she had planned, he was going to be all in. Even if it meant another trip to the police station in handcuffs. "What do you have in mind?"

Calista looked taken aback. "Are you sure you want to get involved? It could ruin your reputation if this ever gets out."

Tristan rested his hand on her cheek, reveling in the feel of her smooth skin. "The only opinion that matters to me is yours. If you want to take this bastard down, I'm there with you every step of the way."

"Well then," she purred. "I think you just earned yourself a long, slow kiss good night."

That was the best news he'd heard in years.

TWENTY-SEVEN

CALISTA

MY LIFE WAS BECOMING MORE and more unexpected. Yesterday, I was driving to my ex's house, where I spent the night. Today, Tristan and I were on our way to take down a criminal. This time, though, we were in Jonathon's Mercedes. Tristan's truck was too recognizable. And for some reason I couldn't fathom, one in five people in this town seemed to own the G-Class, so it offered us some anonymity.

The most unexpected thing was my inability to keep my eyes off Tristan in the driver's seat. Memories of last night made me smile. We'd taken Quinn sledding at midnight, just because we could. The almost-full moon in the bright, starry sky was begging us to come out and play. Tristan's property had the perfect hill for it. And his old-fashioned wooden sleds with red metal runners made it even better. They reminded me of the sled I had as a kid. It was my dad's from his childhood. The glistening snow and the rush of flying down the hill reminded me how much I used to love winter, and this town. Oddly, feelings of homesickness had crept in. Weird, given my recent move back to Aspen Lake. But my heart hadn't yet accepted the relocation.

Tristan kept grinning, while skillfully traversing the snow-packed roads. I wondered if he was replaying the good night kiss that had occurred after Quinn went to bed. Or maybe he was thinking about how good it felt to wake up next to each other—on the sectional. I definitely wasn't ready to share all of myself with him physically. We had too many emotional things to figure out.

But lying in Tristan's arms last night and listening to the beat of his heart while the fire crackled in the fireplace felt amazing. Especially when he gazed adoringly at me like that's all he ever wanted to do. I'd forgotten how one look from him could say so much. He didn't have to say a word last night in the low light. I knew exactly what he was thinking. He loved me. I believed him, but it was hard to reconcile the past with that fact.

Not sure how many men, though, would join me in my current venture, which could get a little dicey. I wasn't even sure how it was going to turn out. But I had to act now. The snowstorm had played in our favor. It had kept Stella at home and ol' Skiparoo away. I'd made Stella promise me she would stay home with Quinn while Tristan and I were "grocery shopping." I mean, we would definitely hit up the grocery store after our takedown of Skip, so we weren't lying. Although, I'm pretty sure my sister thought we were using grocery shopping as a euphemism for sex. But whatever. As long as she stayed at home, she could believe what she wanted. I just hoped she would believe me about Skip and see how foolish she was behaving. More than that, she needed help. I was going to do my best to convince her to seek therapy. That was, after I told her that her *Australian* boyfriend was a scam artist from North Dakota. Yikes.

"Thanks for doing this with me," I said as we crossed over to my side of the lake. I was pretty sure I had come up with a plan that was the least likely to get us arrested. At least I hoped so. Not that I wouldn't finally get a police record and prove the town right about me to save my sister, but I thought it best for everyone involved if I tried to keep it on the down-low. Although I had been pretty excited about my plan to show up and pretend like we were FBI agents and then "arrest" Skip and dump him off at some remote location. However, impersonating a federal officer is a federal crime and carries with it a hefty prison sentence and fine. I wasn't sure Tristan's last name could save him from that. And Deidra would probably get fired if I ended up in a federal prison. So, we were going with a more direct route.

Tristan glanced my way and smiled. "Someone has to keep you out of trouble."

"Just don't take the rap for me this time if it goes south. I've always wanted to see how I would look in a mug shot."

Tristan chuckled. "Obviously gorgeous," he said before his tone turned serious. "Calista, I'm sorry I told you last time I would protect you and then I didn't."

My brow furrowed, confused. "You're the one who got hauled off in handcuffs."

He let out a heavy breath. “Then I used it against you. That’s not protection; that’s destruction.”

That was a good word for it. Thankfully, something beautiful had risen like a phoenix from the destruction. I’d found a way to help people every day of my life. Not that it didn’t come at a cost, but that part was very worth it. As far as my heart went, that was another story. But maybe Jules was right: *A Christmas Carol* might get a new ending. Maybe Charles Dickens made a mistake not letting Ebenezer get a second chance with Belle.

“I think it was only a matter of time before you broke up with me. The arrest was just a catalyst. We wanted different things. And I just assumed you wanted to be my ride or die. I shouldn’t have.”

Tristan gripped the steering wheel tightly. “I wanted to be that for you, but I was a coward. And I knew I couldn’t have my cake and eat it too.”

“What about now?” I needed to know. “Did you get enough cake?”

“You were the cake. I settled for the crumbs.”

I liked that answer, but ... “You should have told me the truth.”

“You’re right. There is no excuse for what I did. I can only tell you that time has made me a smarter man. But I have to be honest and let you know: I like the corporate game. And I’m good at it. Can you be with a man like that?”

“That’s a good question. I guess we’ll see. But know that if this works out, I won’t be like my sister. I don’t know how to fold fancy napkins or which wine pairs with the cheese. Honestly, I don’t know anything about wine, except I don’t particularly care for it. And if you ever want me to attend a corporate event, I might wear a pink elf outfit.”

Tristan reached out for my hand. “I love that outfit.”

I let my hand fall into his for a brief moment. The roads necessitated both hands on the wheel. But something in our touch gave me hope. “Maybe let’s not put any pressure on ourselves. Let’s just see where things go. We’ve both grown. Hopefully,” I added with a smile. “But we need to be open to the idea that we aren’t compatible anymore, or that maybe we never were.”

He gave my hand a squeeze before he let go. “I don’t believe that for a second.”

I didn’t either, but I wanted to be realistic. Not to mention protect my heart. I knew now that Tristan had the capability to destroy it. At eighteen, I’d had no idea. “Well, we should at least see how this afternoon goes before we commit to anything. If this gets out, it’s going to make the news. No telling how ballistic this town and your parents will get if that happens.”

“Cal,” he said tenderly. “I understand your trepidation regarding me. You would be a fool not to have reservations. But this entire thing could blow up in our faces and I am still going to want you. We are riding or dying together, figuratively speaking.”

I clasped my hands together and wrung them, hoping he spoke the truth.

“Maybe they’ll let us stay in the same cell.” He winked, trying to lighten the mood.

“I call dibs on the top bunk.”

“I was thinking more along the lines of sharing.”

“Of course you were.” I smiled. “Anyway, let’s go over the plan again.” We were getting closer to the motel. “I’ll knock on his door while you stay out of sight. He’ll probably get suspicious if he sees both of us. I guarantee the guy checks before he opens the door.” He’d been on the lam for too long to not be somewhat smart. Not that you could tell from his workout videos that he had any brains. I mean, what kind of idiot criminal posts videos of himself? Did he really think the fake Australian accent would fool people forever? I hoped he would end up on one of those episodes of *Dumb Criminals*. Maybe I could submit his story.

“I’m not sure I like that part, but you’re right.”

“I won’t go into his room without you.” I wasn’t an idiot, and this wasn’t my first rodeo. My junior year in college, I had to shake down my roommate’s ex-boyfriend, who was trying to extort her with pictures he had taken of her without her permission. Oh, I got him to delete those photos. And then I called the campus police. “Just be ready to rush in with me once he opens the door.”

“Let’s just hope he doesn’t get violent,” Tristan murmured.

That was a worry, but it was a risk I was willing to take for my sister. I didn't care how many CrossFit boot camps she'd attended. She couldn't take down a partridge in a pear tree. "As a precaution, I let Jules know where we will be. I still think she's with the CIA, so hopefully she'll call for backup if we need it." She still denied any connection with the agency. But how else was she able to dig up so much dirt on Skippy?

"Just be ready to dial 911 if you need to," Tristan begged. He wasn't convinced Jules was with the CIA. Something about them not being able to operate on US soil. I'd watched several crime dramas, and those agents always broke that rule. Although, I probably shouldn't base my knowledge on Jack Ryan shows.

I nodded. "Be sure to record the whole thing." I needed that as my backup plan to convince Stella she was being duped. If all went well, Skippy would do most of the dirty work for me.

"I will," Tristan promised.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" I asked again. I couldn't have a repeat of last time. If he was going to get a police record, I needed to know he wouldn't resent me for it.

Tristan glanced at me, his eyes grabbing ahold of mine. "I'm all in."

"Okay," I whispered. "But on a more serious note, you have to tell me if Steve lives." I had gotten sucked into *Stranger Things*, even though it wasn't my preferred genre. Maybe it was all the eighties references and songs that reminded me so much of my parents. Or perhaps I could relate to a bunch of outcast kids trying to save their town, and the world, against all odds.

"My lips are sealed." Tristan laughed. "You'll have to keep watching with Quinn and me to find out."

"I can't stand the suspense. Plus, I need to know if I should start a Save Steve campaign or a you-better-find-a-way-to-bring-him-back one." Seriously, if they killed him off, I was going to be livid and never watch the show again. While they were at it, they had better find him a good girlfriend. If he got back with Nancy, I was going to be ticked.

"You'll find out," Tristan taunted me.

I scrunched my face. "I'm going to google it."

"Don't you dare. You'll ruin the fun."

"Or ..." I leaned toward him, giving him my best come-hither look. "I could make it fun and get you to tell me."

"How fun?" he seductively negotiated.

"I think you know exactly how fun I can be."

A shiver ran through him, making the car swerve. "Dang, woman."

I laughed. "I guess that means you'll be telling me later."

He flashed me a provocative grin. "I look forward to it."

I did too, but kept it to myself. I needed to focus on taking Skippy down and saving my sister.

The Red Box Motel came into sight looking as seedy as ever, even though the snow and wind had partially buried it in drifts several feet high.

"I'm going to park in front of the motel," Tristan said. "I want to be able to get out of here as soon as possible if things go south."

"That's not a bad idea," I agreed. It's not like many people were out and about, which made it less likely for anyone to spot us. Even if they did, I guess Tristan and I could say we were meeting up there. It would definitely raise some eyebrows, but at least I could keep Stella out of it, which in turn protected Quinn.

Tristan pulled into the lot, doing his best to navigate. Motel management obviously didn't put a lot of effort into shoveling and plowing.

I took a minute to notice that while Tristan was on edge, he wasn't frantic like he had been during the puppy rescue. Maybe because this time we wouldn't be jumping over barbed wire fences and ignoring the *No Trespassing* and *Protected by Shotgun* signs. Or maybe it was because he was all in this go-around. Whatever the change, I was glad he was with me. He was like the Dustin to

my Steve. You had to watch *Stranger Things* to understand that hilarious bromance. Their characters were opposite in almost every way, just like Tristan and me, but they worked.

As soon as Tristan got the car parked several spaces away from Skip's door, he turned to me and motioned with his finger that I should come closer.

I recognized the adoring, bordering on craving, look in his eye. I leaned toward him. "The fun is supposed to come later," I teased.

He cupped my face in his capable hands. "This is serious business," he whispered, his breath brushing my cheeks. His lips followed suit and brushed my cheeks next. "Cal, don't feel like you have to do anything risky in there." He kissed my nose. "I can handle going to jail, but I can't handle you getting hurt." Before I could respond, his lips found mine, like a key to a lock, softly twisting and luring me in before his tongue's silent invitation came, begging me to open the door. When I did, Tristan's hands pulled me toward him. His fingers moved up through my hair. The bristle of his cheeks against my skin was a welcome reminder that he was very real. As our tongues tangled, the kiss turned hot and breathy. Electric waves pulsed through my body, making me tingle. Chasing more heat and sparks, I deepened the kiss until he groaned and gripped my hair. The rush I craved came just as I knew it would.

Breathing hard, I reluctantly pulled away from him before it got all sorts of serious.

We stared wide eyed at each other, unspoken thoughts between us piercing my soul. Tristan's eyes screamed that we belonged together. He wasn't wrong. I knew that when I was eighteen years old. The question was, This time, could we make it work?

Time would tell. But for now ... "It's time to make Skippy skip town."

TWENTY-EIGHT

CALISTA

I STOOD IN FRONT OF the metal door to Skippy's room. Time and neglect had made most of the white paint peel off. In the middle of the door, the number 5 dangled askew from one rusted screw. I looked over at Tristan, standing far enough away not to be seen by Skippy when he opened the door, but close enough that he could tackle the orange man in a few seconds if need be. He looked great in his tight jeans and North Face coat. His sensual kiss still played on my lips, but I couldn't think of that now. I had to get into character—Calista the Crusader.

"Be careful," Tristan mouthed.

I nodded, my nerves buzzing from trepidation—and admittedly, excitement. It had been a while since I'd been on a good crusade.

With a deep breath in and out, I knocked on the door with my gloved hand. I immediately heard some rustling. Soon an American accent called out, "Who is it?"

I rolled my eyes. The guy was such a fraud. I flexed my fingers, reminding myself not to make him suspicious. "Just a fan of Get Ripped with Skip," I said like a proper Valley girl. I was totally tubular, if I said so myself.

I caught a glimpse of Tristan's grin before I heard Skip undo the locks on the door. From the sound of it, there were several of them. It only proved how sketchy this place was.

As soon as Skip opened the door, he eyed me salaciously, like I was candy and he wanted a taste. I almost decked him right then. How could Stella get involved with such a loser? If she ever brought home a guy like this, Quinn was going to live with me.

"Hey there." He wagged his bushy brows. His Australian accent had magically returned. He looked ridiculous wearing a teal jogging suit reminiscent of the nineties.

"Oh. My. Gosh. It's totally you. I can't believe it. Because of your workouts, I've lost two pounds."

He blinked for a moment, my ridiculous statement throwing him off, but he couldn't resist the faux compliment. "Really? That's great. What's your name, sugar?"

I threw up a little in my mouth but swallowed it back down, knowing I had to get this loser as far away from my family as possible. My only hope was that Stella had used lots of contraception. This man did not need to procreate. I didn't want to think about how many STIs he had. "If you let me come in, I'll tell you." I took a step toward him.

He reeked of BO and stale beer. He obviously lied about being health conscious in his videos.

I had to breathe through my mouth.

Skip couldn't resist and opened the door wide.

As soon as he did, Tristan zoomed past me and pushed Skippy inside before he even knew what had hit him. It was almost like he was enacting my FBI-agent plan. Did it turn me on? Absolutely. All I could think was, *Look at my man go*. But I needed to keep my head in the game. I followed and shut the door behind me, doing my best not to touch a thing in the dingy and cluttered room.

"What the hell is this?" Skippy yelled in his American accent while he pushed Tristan back.

Tristan's face burned bright red; he was ready to throw a punch.

I didn't really want it to come to that, even though I was digging Tristan's tough-guy act. I held up my phone with a picture of the newspaper article I'd shown Tristan the night before. "The jig is up, Skippy. Or should I say, Skip Larson?"

The orange man turned white. He backed away from Tristan, running a hand through his hair. "Who are you two?"

“I’ll tell you who we are. We’re Stella’s family.”

At first, his eyes widened, but then he shrugged and laughed.

Oh, that did it. “Listen, Skippy, this is no joke. You better stay away from my sister.”

A sinister smile grew upon his glowing face. “But she doesn’t want me to. You see, we’re in love.”

I spat out a sardonic laugh. “Oh, please. You only love yourself.”

“We’re the real deal, baby,” he said with a mocking air.

Tristan grabbed him by his teal jacket. “Don’t ever call her baby again.”

Well, hello, Tristan. Ooh la la. His tough-guy side was making me want to fan myself.

“What are you going to do about it?” Skippy challenged him.

Tristan pushed him up against the wall with a thud. “I’ll tell you what I’m going to do. I’m going to call our family attorney and have him freeze access to all of Stella’s accounts. After that, I’m calling the authorities.”

Skippy swallowed hard and stammered, “Listen, man, I’m only here because Stella asked me to come.”

“Right,” I scoffed. “And I’m sure you had no idea her husband just died and she’s worth millions. Just like all the other widows you’ve swindled over the years. I’m sure you just magically appeared in their lives at the right moment. What fake accent did you use for them? By the way, you do a horrible impression of an Aussie, mate. Does my sister know you’re really from North Dakota?”

His orange face turned red.

“That’s what I thought. So, this is what you’re going to do. You’re going to text my sister and tell her you don’t want to see her anymore. Then we’re going to give you a thirty-minute head start to get your lying orange butt out of this town before we alert the authorities.”

“And what if I don’t?” Skippy sneered.

Tristan pressed him harder against the wall. “I can haul you over to the police station right now if you’d like. Maybe call my friends over at the Associated Press.”

Of course Tristan had friends at the AP. He really was too pretty and rich for my style, but how could I fault him for that? Especially since here he was helping me save my sister. He’d done the craziest things for me, even when he didn’t particularly want to. Maybe if I hadn’t been so stringent about my “principles,” he could have told me the truth thirteen years ago. Perhaps I had some lessons to learn too.

Skippy threw his hands up. “Okay, okay.”

“Get your phone, Skippy,” I demanded. “I’m going to tell you what to say to my sister. And then, I’m going to watch you block her and delete her number. If you ever try to contact her again, or any other vulnerable woman, for that matter, I will personally see to it you rot in prison for the rest of your orangey life. Because I know people too.” No need to mention who those people were. Mainly Jules, who may or may not work for the CIA.

Tristan flashed me an appreciative grin before letting go of the scumbag. “Do as the woman says.” He kept up his tough-guy act. Oh, we were going to have a lot of fun later.

Skippy grabbed his phone off the unmade bed littered with beer cans and Corn Nuts.

Though I hated to, I stood next to him to make sure he did exactly as I instructed.

Tristan sidled up to me and took my hand, giving it a good squeeze.

He had no idea how much it meant to have him there with me. I curled my fingers around his, not wanting to let go. Ever.



TRISTAN

TRISTAN KEPT STEALING GLANCES AT Calista whenever he could on the drive back to Stella's house. She couldn't stop smiling. The way she beamed spoke of her goodness. She loved nothing more than *saving* people. All he could think about was the fact that she was the coolest girl he'd ever known. Watching her masterfully own Skip totally did him in. He regretted now more than ever that he'd been such a cruel coward thirteen years ago.

Calista unexpectedly reached over and placed a hand on his thigh while he drove. "Thank you."

He placed a hand over hers, hoping she would keep it right where it was. "We make a good team."

"We do," she whispered, almost as if she were afraid to admit it.

He could understand her trepidation. "I know you're worried about what this town and my parents will do to us. Hell, even what I might do to you. But I swear to you, I won't let anything come between us this time. You saw what I did to Skip." He grinned.

Calista squeezed his thigh and smiled. "You were very brave against the orange man."

"I'm serious, Calista. I'm willing to do anything to make this work."

She gripped his thigh tighter. "I believe you, but your parents ... they always seem to get their way, don't they?"

"Not always." He thought about Jonathon and how all the money in the world couldn't save his life or make him into the perfect son they pretended he was. "And not this time." Tristan brought her hand to his mouth and kissed it.

"Maybe we should keep things between us on the down-low for a while," Calista suggested.

"If that's what you want." He paused. "But ... that's not your style, or mine."

"I know," she sighed. "But it's not just me on the line this time," she lamented. "I can't let anything happen to Deidra. Do you know how hard she had to fight for me to even get an interview at the hospital? My credentials didn't matter—only my reputation in this town."

"Cal, I've never known you to back down from a fight. And this time, you're not doing it alone. Are you really going to let my parents bully you or Deidra?"

She blew out a huge breath. "When you put it that way, no."

Tristan felt a rush of relief. "Good. I want to ask you on a proper date, then."

"A date?" she sounded surprised.

"Did you forget what those are?" he teased.

"Why don't you refresh my memory," she said flirtatiously.

Tristan stopped at a red light just outside of downtown, allowing him to more than just glance at the beautiful woman riding shotgun. "Well, first I would pick you up and, after seeing you, I would have thoughts of staying in and having you all to myself. After I get over my selfish behavior, I would take you ice-skating outside at town square. Lots of peppermint hot chocolate and kissing would be involved, of course. Then we would catch a showing of the original *Miracle on 34th Street* at the old theater on Main Street. I'll watch you the entire time and smile when you tear up when Fred convinces the court that Kris Kringle is real, and Susan finally believes in Santa Claus."

Calista gazed at Tristan, completely under his spell. "Santa *is* real," she said, as serious as could be.

"I believe you. Can you believe in me?" he pleaded to know.

Calista blinked and thought, making Tristan's heart skip several beats. "I want to," she admitted.

"That's a start."

TWENTY-NINE

CALISTA

“STELLA, OPEN THE DOOR,” I shouted above her wailing. Tristan had taken Quinn Christmas shopping in town so I could deal with the aftermath of the Skippy breakup. Stella didn’t know Tristan and I played a part in it. Believe me, she was going to, and I was going to talk some sense into her. I just hoped the authorities had nabbed the thief. Like a good citizen, I’d left an anonymous tip saying I’d spotted him, giving them his license plate number and a description of his car. Tristan and I had covertly followed him out of town to make sure the bozo actually left and to find out which direction he was headed.

Tristan was turning into a regular James Bond. And oh, baby, did I want to shake and stir him. I tentatively agreed to the proper date night. I wanted to talk to Deidra first. Tristan was right. I never backed down from a fight, but Deidra deserved to have the choice of jumping in the ring or not. And, I needed to prepare myself for going several rounds with the Grangers and this town. Oh, Quinn was going to flip if it ended up working out. But first, I needed to deal with Stella.

“Go away,” Stella yelled back.

“I’ll pick this lock if I have to.” She knew I had the skills.

“Please, Calista, just leave me alone,” she begged, her voice trembling.

No can do. “Stella, I know Skip broke up with you, and I know he’s a lying scumbag.” I made sure he’d told her he was a swindler in his text. He didn’t want to, but we threatened to call the police right then if he didn’t. I’d never seen anyone text, or pack their bags, as fast as Skippy had.

Stella whipped open the door. Her cheeks and eyes were wet and red. “How do you know?”

I pushed my hand against the door so she couldn’t close it on me. I was stronger than she was. “Because I made him.”

Her jaw dropped before she spluttered; then came the angry contorted face. “Why would you do that to me?” she screamed.

“Because I love you and you’re a hot mess right now. And someone has to save you from yourself.”

She tried to shut the door on me, but I pushed myself the rest of the way into her light and airy room, which was an apartment unto itself with a sitting area and fireplace. Not to mention her enormous bathroom.

Stella ran from me, crawled into her bed, and hid under the covers like a child.

Fine with me. I was tired, so I crawled right in with her.

“Leave me alone. You’ve done enough to humiliate me today.”

In the dim light under the pillowy comforter, I reached over and smoothed her tear-stained cheek. Being under the covers reminded me of times when I was a little girl. Stella and I always shared a room, and anytime I had a bad dream or was afraid of the dark, I would crawl into bed with her. She always comforted me, or would make me giggle so loud our parents would come in and tell us to go back to sleep. I wanted to do that for Stella now—comfort her. Maybe even bring some humor back into her life.

“Stella, I didn’t do any of this to humiliate you. I’m worried about you and Quinn. Do you realize what this guy could have done to you, to your daughter?” Thankfully, Stella had only given him a small “business” loan of \$5,000. At least that’s all he’d confessed to. Who knew how much he would have stolen from her? Apparently, he’d convinced her that together they would start their own fitness channel on YouTube and become huge sensations.

She squeezed her eyes shut and sobbed.

I drew her to me and held her like a child while she wailed and shook. All I could do was stroke her hair and let her get it out of her system. Once her cries became shudders, I asked, “How did you even get involved with Skip?”

“You’re going to think I’m stupid,” she whined.

“I already do.” No need to lessen the blow.

“I get it. I’m not smart like you.” She tried to pull away, but I wouldn’t let her.

“This has nothing to do with any of my degrees. You can’t put this on anyone but yourself right now. I’m not saying that you’re not hurting, and that Jonathon didn’t mess with your head, but you need to own this and then *together* we’re going to fix it.”

She stopped fighting me and nestled back into my chest. “I know I’ve made a mess of everything. *I’m* a mess.”

“We can clean up the mess,” I promised. “Just tell me what’s going on and how you got involved with that loser.”

She thought for a moment and sniffled a few more times. “I saw some of his workout videos on social media several months ago. And I’m a sucker for an Australian accent, so I private messaged him and he responded.”

“He’s not really from Australia,” I informed her. “He’s from North Dakota.”

“Ugh,” she groaned. “I’m such an idiot.”

I didn’t disagree.

“Anyway, we just started chatting. Eventually, I told him about Jonathon. How he’d been cheating on me for years and how he was dying. Skip made me feel good about myself. As dumb as it sounds, he gave me permission to be mad at Jonathon.”

“Why wouldn’t you be mad at him?”

“Because,” she cried, “I knew I’d tricked him into marrying me and I believed what everyone in town thought—I deserved to be cheated on.”

“Stella,” I breathed out. “It takes two to make a baby, and he didn’t have to propose to you. Regardless, no one deserves to be cheated on. Jonathon should have been man enough to keep it in his pants or divorce you and move on with someone else. That’s on him. Not you.”

“But he loved me, or so he said,” she choked out.

“That’s not love.”

“I guess I’m just not meant for love.”

I leaned away and looked into her red, puffy eyes. “You are absolutely meant for love, but first you need to love yourself. Stop looking for a man to show you what you’re worth.” I pointed to her heart. “Please look in here. Or at least ask me first.” I tried to lighten the moment a little.

She gave me a hint of a smile.

“Stella, I love you. Quinn loves you.”

“I know,” she sounded grateful for that fact. “How did I get here?” she bemoaned. “With Skip,” she could hardly say his name. “This town is going to have a field day with this one.”

“No, they won’t. I made sure of it. But, Stella, even if they found out, you can’t let it ruin you. You have to quit worrying about what anyone else thinks about you. That’s how you’ve gotten to this place. That’s how the Skips of the world find victims.”

She curled into herself. “I’m so embarrassed.”

“That’s not a bad thing. Sometimes we have to feel the sting so we don’t do it again. You just can’t go down into a shame spiral and make it worse. You’ve got to get out of this unhealthy cycle you’re in.” Shame bred ills like worthlessness, codependency, anxiety, and depression. All things I’d seen in Stella. “Let me help you. Please,” I begged.

She squirmed for a moment, wrestling with her thoughts.

As weird as it sounded, sometimes the hardest thing to do is give up the things that hurt us. So, I understood her struggle.

“Okay,” she finally squeaked. “What do I do?”

“First thing is you need to seek professional help.”

“What?” she sounded horrified.

“A therapist can help you process and resolve your feelings. They can show you a way out of the shame cycle. Most importantly, they’ll teach you how to deal with your problems instead of running away from them and using things like money and men to hide from them. If you want, I’ll even go with you and hold your hand.”

She held so still, I wasn’t even sure she was breathing.

“I know it can be scary, but think of Quinn. What message do you want to send to her? She feels like she’s lost both of her parents.”

Several tears leaked out of Stella’s bright-green eyes. “I don’t want to lose her.”

“Then don’t.”

Stella met my eyes. “Will you really go to counseling with me?”

“Of course.” I hugged her, praying this time she would take the steps she needed. That I wouldn’t have to take down any more criminals. At least not on her behalf. If Jules ever needed me as backup, I was still her girl.

She wrapped her arms around me and held on for dear life. “Thank you for coming home.”

“Yeah, you owe me for that one,” I said with a smile.

“You seem happy, though.”

Oddly enough, I was. “I am.”

“Does Tristan have anything to do with that?” she casually asked.

“Maybe.” I didn’t want to talk about my love life when hers was a dumpster fire.

She tilted her head up. “I don’t think he ever stopped loving you. Um ... he got a tattoo that uh ___”

“I know. But if you knew, why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because.” She smiled. “No one was supposed to talk about it. The first time we saw it at one of our pool parties, he said not to even ask. But I didn’t have to ask. I knew. It was like a part of him died when you left. And I could see the way he would look at you when he braved coming over whenever you were in town for Quinn’s birthday.”

“And how was that?”

“Like he was missing the best part of himself. No one has ever looked at me like that.”

“Oh, Stella.” I kissed her head. “I hope one day you’ll look in the mirror and you will see a person who loves you so much she’ll do everything she can to make you feel safe and comfortable in your own skin.”

“I want that so much,” she whimpered.

“That’s a start.”

She nodded.

“When Quinny comes home, let’s snuggle in right here and have a slumber party. Just us girls.”

“I’d like that. But what about Tristan?”

“He’ll be there when I’m ready.”

I can’t tell you how happy that made me.

THIRTY

CALISTA

I WAVED GOODBYE TO STELLA and Quinn early on Monday morning. They were dropping me off at work since the roads were still dicey and my car was still stuck under the snow in the hospital parking lot. I supposed I couldn't put off car shopping any longer.

Quinn smiled and waved back. The light was coming back into her eyes. We'd spent all last night after my shift having a girls' night. We played several rounds of UNO and ate raw cookie dough, because we liked to live dangerously. It was the first time in a long time that I'd hung out with Stella. The real Stella who snorted when she laughed too loud and ate simple sugars. She was even up super early this morning to pack Quinn a lunch. They were headed out to breakfast before Stella dropped Quinn off at school. I prayed this was going to be a permanent change. Stella promised she would call the therapist that some of my coworkers had recommended.

I walked out of the bitter cold and into the hospital, headed straight for Deidra's office. I wanted to talk to her in person about Tristan. Tristan, who had already texted me this morning saying how much he missed me. And maybe it came with a picture of my kitten on his bare chest. Poppy never looked so cute.

I missed him too, but I thought it was good to spend a day apart. Especially since it embarrassed Stella that Tristan knew about Skippy. I could understand that. Besides, it was probably good to have a cooldown period to make sure we were making the right decision. Make that *I* needed to make sure. Tristan was fully on board. I definitely wanted to jump on the train. I just wanted to be sure it wasn't going to end in a wreck. And maybe I enjoyed torturing him a little. Granted, I needed to make good on my promise for "fun." At least to find out if Steve lived. Quinn wouldn't tell me either.

Deidra was waiting for me in her office, a pensive smile on her face like she knew what I wanted to talk about. As soon as I shut the door, she said, "You're still in love with Tristan, aren't you?"

I leaned against the door and nodded. "Yeah."

She pressed her lips together until they were a thin line, thinking about what to say. "This complicates things."

"I know, but if it makes you feel better, I never stopped loving him. I just hated him."

She tapped her fingers on the desk to what sounded like the beat of "Jingle Bells." "I should have figured this was going to happen. How many times did I see that man sitting with your mom, doing a puzzle with her, or making her tea?"

He really was so sweet to my mom. He would always arrive early for our dates, even if I wasn't yet home, just to keep Mom company. Tristan said he doesn't do much for others, but it's not true. I'd forgotten how thoughtful he was.

"Deidra, I know how much is on the line here, so if—"

She held up her hand. "You shouldn't have to choose between your career and love. I'm sorry if I've made you feel you might have to."

"But what if I'm making the wrong choice? Am I a fool to contemplate giving Tristan a second chance?" I had to ask. If ever I needed a mom, it was now.

"Honey, I can't answer that for you. I've always thought he was a decent man. Honestly, I'm glad he broke up with you. You needed to spread your wings and see life outside this town. And I didn't want to see you end up like Stella, swallowed whole by the Grangers. If you were ever going to be a part of that family, you needed to know who you are and what you're capable of. Not that you haven't always had a mind of your own." She grinned. "But having a mind of your own and

knowing who you are, those are very different. You, my love, could never let their name define you.”

What if Tristan hadn’t broken up with me, and because I wanted to keep him, I changed myself to fit into his lifestyle instead of us growing together? Would my twenty-one-year-old self have done such a thing? The thought sent a chill through me. “I couldn’t live with myself if that happened,” I said, terrified.

“It would have killed your soul. But now, I think you know exactly who you are. And I think you are smart enough to know if you want Tristan to be a part of your life. But it will come at a cost.”

“Tristan says he’ll handle his parents. He’s already told them he’ll resign if they do anything to hurt me—or you.”

She gave me an uneasy smile. “Hmm. That’s very noble of him, but Cordelia and Frasier don’t like to lose. They know how to *persuade* people in this town without it ever coming back to them.”

It wasn’t surprising. Disgusting, but not surprising. “So, I don’t fight?” That felt so wrong to my soul.

She hemmed and hawed before sitting up proudly with her shoulders squared. “I would never tell you that. We’re fighters. And I’ve dealt with tougher opponents than the Grangers my entire life.”

“But what if you lose your job because of me? Will you hate me?”

“Honey, I would hate myself more if I told you to cower in the corner. If you feel like Tristan is worth a second chance, then you follow your heart. We will deal with whatever comes.”

I bit my lip, knowing I was about to make a pivotal decision with far-reaching consequences. One that might even open the doors of hell and let Cordelia and Frasier’s minions out. Was Tristan worth the wrath? He was willing to get arrested for me. And he was a sexy tough guy when he needed to be. More importantly, he had a soft touch. I thought of how wonderful he’d been with Quinn and my mom—and with me. He drew baths and took care of kittens. It would mean breaking another vow, but Mom did say not all promises are good to keep. And she loved Tristan.

So did I.

“Get your boxing gloves out,” I warned Deidra.

“Oh, honey, I never put them away.”

That was a good life lesson right there.

“Still no cowboy medicine,” she warned me with a smile.

“I still prefer cowgirl.” I smirked.

“Get out of here, knucklehead.” She laughed.

I couldn’t leave without saying, “I love you, Deidra. Thank you.”

“Right back at you, kid. Now go help some people.”

That’s all I ever wanted to do.

I arrived in the ER ten minutes before my shift began. Enough time to follow my favorite person, Evie, to the break room, where she scowled at me from the counter where a few coffeepots were brewing. It smelled like a cheap Starbucks.

“Good morning, Evie. Before you pour a cup of coffee, I have the perfect mug for you.”

She gripped the mug she was planning on using like she was daring me to steal it from her.

I placed my backpack on the table nearest me and pulled out the mug I’d ordered for her. It said, *Chaos Coordinator (Someone who solves problems you never knew existed in ways that will blow your mind)*. See also *ninja*; *rock star*; *legend*.

“Here you go.” I proudly held up the mug. “I think it’s an apt description of you.” It really was. For as grumpy as she was, she ran a well-organized unit.

She eyed the black mug with white lettering like it might bite her. That was until she read it. Her lips twitched, begging to smile. But she refused to give in. “That’s thoughtful of you,” she said

curtly.

I handed it to her with a bright smile. “Is it too early to call you my best friend?” I teased her.

She swiped the mug from me with a surly “Thank you.” Then she turned and silently dismissed me.

I guess that was a no go on the best friend thing. We would work on it.

I headed for the office to deposit my things when I got a text from Jules.

Jules: *Look at this article and picture.*

I scrolled down and read:

Nevada state troopers nab Skip Larson, on the run for over twenty years after being accused of swindling tens of thousands of dollars from multiple widows across the country.

There he was, in all his orangey-ness, handcuffed and being placed in a patrol car. Oh, sweet justice. I was so happy, I wanted to squeal. I couldn’t wait to tell Tristan. It was a good thing Skippy liked orange. He was going to be wearing a lot of it in the foreseeable future.

Me: *This is amazing! Thank you for all your help. How’s your dad doing today?*

Jules: *He’s hanging in there.*

Me: *I’ll stop by the ICU after my shift is over. Again, I can’t thank you enough. PS: You’re the coolest spy around.*

She sent back a laughing emoji.

But she didn’t deny it this time.

I walked out of the office to find a grinning Lucy. “What’s up?”

“He’s back,” she sang. “Room one.”

I didn’t know whether this news excited or exasperated me. Tristan was going to have the whole town talking before we even went on a date. “What’s he in for now?”

“I think that’s obvious.” Lucy flitted off.

With every nurse watching me, I headed over to room one to see what he was faking this time. I swung the door open to find him once again sitting on the exam table, shirtless, his long legs in dress pants dangling off the edge. A smoldering smile played on his ridiculously gorgeous face. The stubble on his chiseled cheeks and jawline had me feeling weak in the knees. I quickly shut the door.

“What are you doing here?” I half complained, half ogled his sculpted chest and abs. Oh, mama.

“I forgot to get my stitches taken out.”

I wasn’t buying that line. “What? I hope your skin hasn’t started growing over them. It’s going to be painful to remove them. The scarring might be worse now.”

“Totally worth it,” he crooned.

“Why didn’t you tell me over the weekend? I could have taken them out at your place.”

He reached out his hand to me. “Because I need every excuse I can come up with to see you.”

I eyed his hand, torn about taking it. “I’m at work.”

He motioned with his finger for me to step closer, tempting me. “The door is closed.”

“You’re going to get me fired.”

“I know that’s not what you’re afraid of.”

He was right. I had made out plenty in hospitals. But never with a patient. Never with him. There was a difference, though, because he was different. He was my first and truest love. He’d also broken my heart, yet he still owned it. Giving him my hand meant I was throwing the door wide open for him to wreck me again. Not to mention opening it to the wrath his parents were just waiting to unleash.

Sensing my hesitancy, Tristan jumped off the exam table and came to me. Tenderly, he wrapped his arms around me and rested his chin on my head. “Calista,” he spoke my name like he treasured

it above all else.

I settled against his bare chest and wrapped my arms around him. My fingers pressed against his muscular back. The skin-to-skin contact ignited a flurry of emotions, but the overriding feeling was that I was right where I belonged.

Tristan's fingers danced down my back. "I've missed this."

"Me too," I murmured against his chest, wishing to drown in his intoxicating scent.

"Does this mean you'll go on a date with me?" He sounded like a nervous teenage boy.

I liked his trepidation. "Yes." I kissed his chest. My lips reveled in being able to do so.

Tristan leaned away and tilted my chin with his finger, allowing him to peer into my eyes. "Thank you. I know I don't deserve another chance."

"That's true," I softly laughed. "However, I think you should kiss me."

He didn't waste a second. "Yes, ma'am." His lips captured mine. The zing of all zings shot through me when he wasted no time deepening the kiss. Yet, he took his time sweeping and savoring every taste. His hands wove through my hair as my fingers gripped his bare back. All I wanted was to be as close to him as possible.

When he groaned with pleasure, I remembered there was an exam table in the room, and tawdry thoughts of how we could utilize it filled my mind. That's when I extracted myself from him. No need to fuel any more rumors.

"I think we should take out those stitches," I said breathily.

He flashed me a knowing smile and kissed my nose. "Okay. But you did promise me some *fun*."

"Later," I agreed. I needed to find out about Steve. "Get back on the exam table. I need to wash my hands." And compose myself. I wanted to get all sorts of cozy with him.

He did as I commanded while I scrubbed my hands and retrieved the stitch scissors, hoping they would do the job. I couldn't believe he'd waited so long.

When I returned to him, he was grinning widely. "Go easy on me, Doc."

I rolled my eyes. "Swing your legs over to the side. And don't ever wait this long again to get stitches removed," I scolded him.

"Totally worth it."

Fine. I would give him that.

While I assessed the wound to make sure it healed properly, he asked, "How's Stella doing?"

"Better. Oh, I forgot to tell you: Skippy got arrested. Jules just let me know."

"This is excellent news," he replied.

"The best. Thank you again for helping me."

"I'm your ride or die, baby," he laughed.

"You better be." I couldn't help but brush my fingers over his tattoo.

"Calista, your name isn't just on my skin. It's written in my heart."

I liked that thought very much.

"I'm here for it all. Maybe I need a cool superhero name like you. Or more like a sidekick name."

I laughed. "I'll think of something and then maybe I'll get a tattoo of it."

"I'd love that," he said, sincerely.

I supposed that was saying we were going to be a forever kind of thing. "Of course, it would have to be something amazing." I was thinking like Tristan the Titan, and I would get inked with a Greek god or the like.

He turned his head toward me. "I promise to amaze you. Always."

A flutter went through me. "I'm going to hold you to that."

“As you should.” He kissed my cheek. “That reminds me—this Saturday at the store, I play Santa and hand out gifts. I was hoping you would come be my elf, seeing as you already have the costume.”

“Hmm.” I playfully tossed my head from side to side. “I’m not sure how Mrs. Claus would feel about it. I’m pretty sure that costume turns Santa on.”

His eyes roved over me. “It most definitely does. But honestly,” he got serious, “it’s the one time of year I do something good, and I want you to be there for it.”

I set the scissors down on the exam table and took his handsome face in my hands. “Tristan, I’ve been reminded lately about all the good you have done and keep on doing. All you have to do is look at Quinn. You’ve been a great *dad* to her. And she’s turned out to be a terrific kid because of it. So, don’t sell yourself short.”

He gave me a grateful smile before centering my body between his legs and pulling me closer. My hands had no choice but to fall on his chest. Oh, darn.

“I will never be as good as you.”

I smiled. “Well, I mean, that’s true.”

He adoringly brushed back my hair. “It is true.”

I couldn’t help but lean in, letting my lips hover above his. “You’re going to get me in trouble.”

“I promise it will be worth it,” he whispered against my lips before capturing them, making me throw caution to the wind.

Oh, yes. I was going to get in lots and lots of trouble.

THIRTY-ONE

TRISTAN

TRISTAN RUBBED HIS EYES AND took a break from analyzing last week's projected profits against the same period last year. His gaze landed on the Santa suit hanging on the door in his office. He couldn't wait to wear it tomorrow with his sexy elf by his side. He was looking forward to their date tonight even more. Calista had been spending as much time with Stella as she could this week, which meant their date got put on the back burner. Not to say he hadn't seen her. Since he'd run out of "emergencies," he'd started bringing her coffee or lunch every day. It wasn't as fun to make out in the break room as it was in the exam rooms, since they always got interrupted. But he would take whatever he could get. The woman had him completely captivated.

An added benefit of his hospital visits was the ability to witness firsthand how much Calista's coworkers liked her. Even the scary nurse, Evie, seemed to respect her. He was glad some people in this town recognized how amazing she was. Even if his parents didn't. They were none too happy he and Calista were dating again. Tristan didn't care as long as they kept their word and left her alone. If not, there would be hell to pay.

He looked around his posh office on the second floor of their flagship store. It had every amenity, from a private veranda to a stone fireplace and a ninety-inch TV screen. As much as he loved it, he would give it up in a second if his parents did anything to Calista. He wasn't sure what they could do to her. She was an excellent doctor and obviously well liked by the staff. Not to mention, her godmother was the CMO. So his parents would never welcome her to family dinners and holidays—so what? Hell, he would be happy to have an excuse not to attend. All in all, it was a win-win situation.

A knock on his door preceded a cute head peeking in. "Hi, Uncle Tristan."

"Hey, Quinnster. Are you on a break?" Tristan was proud his niece had come to work for him. Especially since it meant swallowing her pride and doing menial tasks like stocking shelves and making sure the racks of clothing were neat and orderly.

"Yeah. I came up to see if you needed any advice for your date tonight." She impishly grinned as she strode into his office.

He was afraid to ask for fear she would speak a language he didn't understand, which only made him feel old. "I think I'm set."

"Did you get flowers? Candy?"

"Your aunt isn't really into that kind of thing." He loved her for it. Not that he wouldn't buy her anything she wanted. It's just, he appreciated that thoughtful gestures meant more to her. Although, he had bought some Reese's Pieces for the occasion, hoping they could play their old game of tossing them into each other's mouths. Whenever either of them missed, they had to kiss the other person. He planned to miss every single one.

She placed her hands on her hips. "Just don't screw it up. Don't say what you said last time, whatever that was. No one will tell me." She rolled her eyes.

Tristan's stomach tightened at the mere mention of his idiocy. "Believe me, I have no intention of screwing up this time."

"Good."

He closed the reports on his screens and signed off. "How's it going with you, kiddo? How's your mom?"

Quinn let out a happy sigh. "Better. Lots better. My mom's going to go to counseling. Aunt Calista thinks I should talk to someone too," she said apprehensively.

Tristan gave her a warm smile. “I think that’s a good idea.” After everything her parents had put her through, it was a wonder she was so well adjusted. But Tristan was sure there were things she probably kept to herself, and it would be good to get them out and work through them. He was grateful Calista was being proactive.

Quinn wrung her hands. “It’s kind of weird.”

“It might be at first, but it will help both you and your mom.”

She nodded. “I’m just glad it feels like I have my mom back. Do you think it will last?” The trepidation, and the fact she asked that question, was exactly why she should see a therapist. Poor kid.

Tristan hustled around his desk and spread his arms out.

Quinn ran to him and hugged him fiercely.

He kissed the top of her head and held her tight, knowing he couldn’t love her more if she were his daughter. “Quinnster.”

“I just don’t want to lose her again. I love it when she takes me to school and picks me up. We laugh and sing in the car. Last night she just held me in my bed and told me how sorry she was. I want *that* mom.”

Tristan wanted that for her too. He had a feeling when she said all she wanted for Christmas was for him and Calista to be together, what she really wanted was her mom back. “If your aunt Calista has any say, that’s exactly what you’ll get.”

“She really is the best,” Quinn replied.

“That she is.”

Quinn gave him one last squeeze before pulling away. “You better not be late picking her up. And don’t forget: you need to get her the perfect Christmas present.”

Tristan grinned. He knew exactly what he was getting Calista for Christmas. He saluted Quinn. “Aye, aye, captain.”

She giggled. “By the way, I still want some cousins.”

“I’m working on it.” He chuckled. “Now get back to work.”

She scooted off, and he hustled to grab his coat, eager to get to the woman he loved. He hoped it would be a memorable night and a fresh start—a better start, even. Because this time he knew what he had, and he wasn’t dumb enough to let it go.



TRISTAN WAITED IN THE HOSPITAL lobby for Calista, as anxious and as excited as the first time she’d agreed to go out with him. He smoothed out his dress coat while he listened to the instrumental jazz Christmas music playing in the background. Every person who came through the revolving doors seemed to laser in on him like they knew who he was there for. He knew coming out into the open tonight was going to cause a stir. He prayed this town would be kinder to Calista and their relationship wouldn’t be considered such a scandal this time. For her sake, at least. Tristan didn’t give a damn what anyone in this town thought about it, especially his parents.

It wasn’t long before Calista walked through a set of electronic doors. She’d changed out of her scrubs and wore snug jeans and a deep-brown funnel-neck sweater that matched her hair and made her hazel eyes shine warmly. She carried her parka, which would come in handy while they ice-skated.

Like the lovesick fool that he was, he jogged over to her, not able to wait one more second to have her in his arms.

Calista’s smile said she knew exactly how she affected him.

Tristan would gladly admit to being besotted. As soon as he was to her, he wrapped her in his arms and kissed her cheek. “Hello, gorgeous. How was your day?”

She snuggled against him. “Long, but good.”

“You sound tired. Do you want to just do dinner and a movie?”

She smiled up at him. Her cinnamon breath begging him to kiss her. “I think you’re just afraid I’ll outskate you.”

“I have no doubt you will.”

She laughed before skimming his lips with her own.

Tristan so badly wanted to kiss her breathless, but refrained for the sake of propriety. “I’m just glad you’re coming around to winter again.”

She bit her lip. “It’s okay.”

He knew she was downplaying it. She loved winter weather and even this town. He regretted making her think any differently. But he planned to make up for it. “Shall we go?”

She nodded.

Tristan helped her put her coat on before they walked out into the crisp, clear night. The stars seemed to twinkle extra brightly. Perhaps the universe was just as happy to see them back together as he was.

He took her hand and let their clasped hands swing between them, happier than he had been in years. The hope of Christmas and the future lingered in the air. He couldn’t help but think of a quote from *A Christmas Carol*. “Every traveler has a home of his own, and he learns to appreciate it the more from his wandering.” His home was Calista, and there was no one more appreciative than him at that moment. There would be no more wandering.

They were almost to his car when the loud screech of tires squealing and the most horrendous sound of metal colliding and glass shattering split the air. A car had run a red light and collided with a car turning into the hospital. The impact was so great, the turning vehicle spun and ended up hitting a light pole on the other side of the street.

Before Tristan could process what had just happened, Calista let go of him and bolted across the hospital parking lot. She shed her coat and tossed it on the ground as she went so that she could run faster, but she kept her backpack.

Tristan followed her and watched in horror as Calista crossed the busy street, dodging cars to get to the mangled car with smoke pouring out of the hood. By the time Tristan made it to the street, several cars had stopped, making it easier for him to cross. The smell of burning rubber filled the air, making him cough.

When Tristan reached Calista, she was wrenching open the passenger-side door to the severely damaged large SUV with no thought for her personal safety. “Is everyone all right?” she called out.

A woman screamed in the back, and the man in the driver’s seat yelled, “My wife is in labor!”

Oh, hell, Tristan thought.

“I’m a doctor,” Calista announced as she maneuvered over the passenger seat and into the back, among broken glass.

The sound of ambulance sirens wailed in the distance. Thankfully, they didn’t have far to go.

Tristan peeked his head in the car. “What can I do?”

“Keep Dad calm,” Calista instructed.

Tristan assumed she meant the man in the driver’s seat. He actually recognized the man with the patch on one eye. They’d played in a charity golf tournament earlier that year. The man, Reece, was a lawyer, and his wife was a well-known author, if he remembered correctly.

“Hey, man.” Tristan used his arm to sweep the broken glass off the passenger seat before he climbed in. He tried not to react to the blood dripping down Reece’s head. They looked as if they’d just come from a party of some sort. Reece was wearing a suit and his wife was in an evening gown. “Your wife is in excellent hands. Calista is one of the best doctors at the hospital.”

Reece swallowed hard. He seemed afraid to move. Tristan feared the impact had hurt his neck or back.

Tristan reached over and took his hand, not knowing what else to do. Reece gripped it tightly.

“Hi there, Mom,” Calista said in soothing tones. “Tell me your name.” She was already reaching into her backpack and putting on blue gloves.

“Josie,” the woman panted. “I feel like I need to push,” she screeched.

“How far along are you?” Calista asked.

“Thirty-eight weeks,” Josie could barely say through the pain.

“Very good. Is it okay if I check you?”

Josie nodded and bent her knees, allowing Calista to peek under the evening gown.

Tristan averted his eyes, though he wanted to watch Calista. He was in awe of her.

“Did you know your baby is breech?” Calista asked.

“No,” Josie cried. “I need to push!”

“Okay. Listen,” Calista remained calm. “I delivered a few breech babies while I was in Africa. Your little one is on the way out and isn’t going to wait until we get you to the hospital.”

“It’s a boy,” Reece interjected, squeezing Tristan’s hand.

“The good news is, your little guy is buttocks first,” Calista informed them. “Josie, I need you to bear down hard with the next contraction. It’s best if I don’t touch the baby until I can see his shoulders. As soon as that happens, I’m going to take his hips and pull until his arms are delivered. We’ll go to that point,” she said as calmly as could be.

From there, it was a blur to Tristan amid the arrival of EMTs and police. But through it all, Calista was amazing. He was in love with a rock star. The way she expertly and safely brought new life into this world among the chaos was incredible. When the baby’s cry filled the car, he admitted to tearing up right along with Reece.

Calista flashed him a quick grin before laying the baby on Josie’s chest and placing a coat over him. The way she beamed lit up the dark car.

Once the baby had safely arrived, she let the EMTs take over. But not before she called out, “By the way, I love your book.”

Josie laughed, clasping her infant, trying to keep him warm. “I’ll send you as many signed copies as you want.”

“Thank you, thank you,” Reece and Josie both cried as Tristan and Calista exited the car.

“If there is anything we can ever do for you, just name it,” Reece added.

Even though things he didn’t want to think about covered Calista’s clothing, he wrapped her up tight as they watched the emergency crews do their thing. “I love you” was all he could think to say to express the awe he felt around her.

“I don’t think we’re going to make it to the skating rink or the movies,” she laughed.

Tristan didn’t care if they made it to either. As crazy as it sounded, it was the best date he’d ever been on. All he could think about was his desire to see what else Calista had in store for them. He knew one thing for sure: life with Calista would never be boring.

THIRTY-TWO

CALISTA

I WALKED OUT OF TRISTAN'S office bathroom after changing into my pink elf costume. It felt so good to be reunited with my *rebellious* costume. But seeing Tristan dressed as Santa topped that feeling.

"Ho, ho, ho," I sang as I perused Tristan in his jolly red suit.

He dropped the fake white beard he was just about to put on when he saw me. His eyes roved over my entire body. "I want to be on the naughty list this year."

I pranced over to him and rested my hands against his chest. "I could arrange that," I purred.

"Could you now?" His lips brushed mine before he sat down on his nearby desk and wrapped me in his arms.

I stood between his legs and nestled my hands in the white fur of his costume.

He took a moment to gaze at me, awe written in his lively blue eyes.

"You need to stop looking at me like that," I teasingly rebuked him. He'd been staring at me like that since last night. Don't get me wrong—I loved it. But I had only been doing my job. Sure, the scenery was a little different, maybe even a little frightening. And yes, I may have delivered the baby of my new favorite author, but when it was all said and done, I just did what I had been trained to do—help and heal.

"I still can't get over you delivering that baby last night."

"It's all in a day's work." I smiled.

"No, Calista. You didn't have to run into traffic and jump into a car that later caught fire."

I shuddered. Thankfully, that happened after the emergency crews had extricated the sweet family, who I'd called and checked on this morning. All were doing well. Even Reece, considering he was pretty banged up and had to have several stitches. "They'll have quite the story to tell their little guy someday."

Tristan tugged on a loose strand of hair that framed my face. The rest was up in a messy bun. "I have quite the story to tell of Calista the Crusader," he said fondly.

"Thank you for being my faithful sidekick." He had no idea how much it meant to me that he'd followed me last night without a second thought. "I still need to think of a name for you."

"Just call me yours."

I studied him, not knowing what to say. I'd been careful about giving us a title yet, or even saying I loved him. It's not that I didn't, but I wasn't expecting this—him. Mostly, I wasn't expecting to break all my vows.

"I'm scaring you, aren't I?" Tristan guessed.

I burrowed against him and rested my head on his shoulder, thinking about all the time we'd spent together this past month. He'd helped me take down a criminal and deliver a baby, bought me a kitten, and made my niece smile again. And let's not forget all the setting-fire-to-my-soul kisses. "I don't know if *scared* is the right word. It's just that I promised to hate you forever. What kind of person does that make me?" I giggled.

His hand glided up and down my back. "I see your dilemma."

"It's a tough one. I mean, you have a ninety-inch TV in your office. How can I be with a person like that?"

He chuckled and held me tighter. "I'm a monster."

I leaned away from him until our eyes met. “That’s the problem. You’re not. You’re every bit as good as I remembered you to be and more. It just seems too good to be true.” I kept waiting for his parents to rear their ugly heads.

“What can I do to help you understand I’m not going anywhere?”

I inched closer until our lips almost touched. “While I think about that question, we should probably try to get on the naughty list together, Santa.”

“Mmm,” he groaned. “I can accommodate that.”

“Wait.” I placed a finger on his eager lips. “You never told me if Steve lives. And we had lots of *fun* last night.” After delivering the baby, I needed to go home and clean up. We ended up on the veranda in front of the outdoor fireplace, where Tristan kept me plenty toasty. In between, we gazed at the stars and talked about everything and nothing at all. It was the perfect night.

Tristan let out a heavy, amused breath before whispering in my ear whether or not Steve lived. Before I could react one way or another, his lips captured mine and made me forget all about Steve.

I wound my arms around his neck and let my fingers get lost in his hair.

His hands took their liberties, touching every curve before landing on my thighs. He dug his fingers into my flesh, heat searing right through my tights.

Every time we kissed, I felt so at one with him. I could feel the beat of his heart as we embraced, and the sound of his ragged breaths soothed my soul. A feeling of safety and contentment wove through me, making me forget why I’d had any fears at all. His touch filled me with the courage to take on the town—and his parents—if we had to.

With every prod of his tongue, sparks of energy and resolve shot down my spine. The longer we kissed, the more my body came alive. Zings ran from my lips to my toes. His hands moved to my face, where he caressed my cheeks, making me feel even more adored and wanted.

A knock on the door broke us apart.

Breathing heavily, we smiled slyly at each other.

“Did that help?” he crooned.

“Oh yeah,” I barely managed to say as my heart raced.

“Good.” He wiped the lip gloss off his lips before calling out, “Come in.”

I stood by his side and straightened out my tiny skirt, waiting to see who was going to appear through the doorway.

Tristan took my hand.

Quinn bounced in, all smiles, wearing her Granger Outfitters long-sleeved polo shirt. “Guess what?” She paused and eyed us more carefully, an impish grin forming on her perfect face. “By the way, your hair is a mess. That goes for both of you. Looks like I’m going to get some cousins soon.”

“Quinny,” I spluttered.

“What?” She shrugged. “You don’t have to be embarrassed.”

I wasn’t embarrassed, but I also wasn’t going to discuss this with my fifteen-year-old niece. Besides, I wasn’t ready to take that step yet.

“What do you want, kiddo?” Tristan jumped in and changed the direction of the conversation.

She put her hands to her mouth, excited. “Oh. My. Gosh. My mom has been trying to call you, Aunt Calista, but you weren’t answering. I guess we know why now.” She laughed. “Anyway, you’re all over the news.”

I pointed at my chest. “Me?”

“Yes, you.”

“What news?” I was both intrigued and terrified. The last time I made the news around here was for throwing a bonfire at the lake to protest the prom rules. The school was none too happy about it. Oh, and the things with the watermelons and the slip and slide in the hall had both made the news too. Oops. Had those all come back to light? I bet it was Tristan’s parents.

I was about to get irate when Quinn said, “All the news stations are reporting how you saved that famous author’s baby last night.”

“When you say all the stations, do you mean like national coverage?”

“Yes!” she shouted. “Isn’t that awesome? They’re calling you a hero.”

I rubbed the back of my neck. “I was just doing my job.” This kind of attention made me uncomfortable. On the flip side, maybe this town would finally know me for more than all my high school antics and for getting the duke and duchess’s son arrested. Perhaps this would give me and Deidra the job security we both needed right now.

Tristan squeezed my hand. “You are a hero. Your aunt was amazing last night,” he said to Quinn.

“This is such goals. I can’t wait to tell all my friends at school.” She ran back out, her phone out and her fingers flying over the keyboard.

I looked at Tristan to get his take. “This is unexpected.” Honestly, I wasn’t sure what to make of it at all.

“The world just knows now what I’ve always known. Even if I forgot for a while,” he said abashedly.

I held our clasped hands up and pressed them against my chest. “If you ever need a reminder, just let me know.” That was my way of saying, *Please don’t let me go again and make a fool out of me.*

“I don’t need a reminder. All I need is you. Did that sound too cheesy?” He grinned.

I held up my forefinger and thumb. “Maybe just a little. But I’ll take it.”

He pulled me flush against him. “Then let’s go make some kids happy.”

Now he was speaking my love language. Who knows, maybe someday we would have our own children to make happy.



THERE IS NOTHING SEXIER THAN watching your man make a child smile and granting them their Christmas wish. With each child who sat on his lap, Tristan took the time to ask them questions about themselves. In turn, he listened intently to what they had to say. Some wanted to talk about school, others their pets. Some even asked about Santa’s reindeer and Mrs. Claus. I tried not to be jealous.

I loved watching all the children running around laughing and admiring all the decorations and festive lights in the “Santa’s Village” that was built near all the skiing equipment. It looked like a magical winter wonderland, complete with fake snow-covered trees and the scent of hot cocoa and freshly baked cookies for the kids. But being so near the skis reminded me I would never again see the ones Tristan had bought me. The sanitation department had basically laughed in my face when I’d called them to see if there was any way to find them. It broke my heart a little, and I dreaded having to tell Tristan. I knew he would understand, but it was a piece of our past we both loved.

I couldn’t think about it now. I had gifts to hand out to beaming children. And ... I had some admirers. Several people shopping in the store had come by to say they’d seen the news report about me. The way they smiled and wanted to shake my hand and thank me for my bravery was disconcerting. You would have thought I was one of the celebrities living in Aspen Lake. These were the kind of people who ran in the same circles as the duke and duchess. The people who had thought I would become a model prisoner. And I know some of them were at the funeral and had looked down their noses at my elf costume. Now, suddenly, they were complimenting me on it. How could this be?

Whatever it was, I didn’t like it. Because I knew these were the same people who would eat my sister alive if they found out about Skippy. They were probably some of the ones who thought Jonathon had every right to cheat on Stella.

No doubt all the attention would die down soon. I realized how much I liked being thought of as a rebel. It was going to irk me if my pink elf costume became a trend in this town. All I was hoping

for was some job security and the chance to be with Tristan. I was in no way going to start frequenting the country club. Tristan could golf there all he wanted, but I had to hold on to some principles.

With the last present gifted and the children gone, Tristan pulled me onto his lap and whispered in my ear, “What can Santa bring you this year?”

Oh, I had some thoughts. But I felt like I shouldn’t say them out loud. I knew we had an audience. Apparently, I had a new fan club. Or so I thought.

“Tristan,” Cordelia’s grating voice sent a shiver down my spine, and a feeling of dread swept over me. I wasn’t exactly sure why. But I doubted she regularly made an appearance at this event. Tristan made sure the press was never involved. He didn’t seek the glory of it. On the other hand, his parents were all about the nobility. At least if it made them look good. So, why was she here?

I sat up and straightened my elf hat.

Cordelia tsked loudly while taking in my costume. It didn’t faze me in the least bit. I knew she hated me. When she smiled at me, the fear crept in.

“Hello, Mother,” Tristan tried to keep it cordial since several people lingered about, carrying expensive outdoor clothing items that would soon be wrapped and placed under Christmas trees.

Cordelia kept toothily smiling at me like she was auditioning for a toothpaste commercial. “I heard the town’s new hero was here, and I had to come say hello.”

The pit in my stomach grew. I knew she was lying. The question was, why? But I would play her game for a moment. At least until I knew what she was up to. “I’m not a hero. I was just doing my job.”

Cordelia stepped onto the raised platform, among the cotton batting meant to look like snow, in what looked like leather riding boots. In fact, it looked like she was entering an equestrian event. “I hear it wasn’t your job at all, as you weren’t the doctor scheduled to work that shift.” Her toothy smile turned more sinister.

I refused to be intimidated by her. “As a doctor, I’m always on shift when someone needs help.”

“How noble of you. Especially since you performed such a *risky* procedure. A breech birth. That was very bold of you.”

“The baby was already coming, so I did what needed to be done,” I defended myself. Yes, a C-section is typically the best and safest way to deliver a breech baby, but I felt confident in my abilities, and the situation called for immediate action.

“Yes, you did.” She seemed way too happy about it.

This didn’t bode well for me.

“What do you want, Mother?” Tristan asked. The bite and warning in his tone were apparent.

She placed her thin hand with clawlike nails across her chest. “Like I said, I wanted to come say hello.”

Oh no—I was sure she was coming to say goodbye.

THIRTY-THREE

CALISTA

AFTER CORDELIA'S APPEARANCE, IT DIDN'T take long for Deidra to call. I knew right away from her trembling voice that the news wasn't good—and why the pit in my stomach had remained.

I sat on Tristan's office chair, gripping my phone tightly while Tristan paced in front of me, swearing.

"Honey," Deidra croaked. "The board of trustees has turned this matter over to the general counsel."

"What? Why do lawyers need to get involved? Are the Cavanaugh's suing me or the hospital?" They'd seemed so happy and grateful last night. And their baby was healthy.

"It's not the Cavanaugh's. Some on the board feel you're a liability for not only treating a patient while not on shift or on the hospital's property, but for performing a risky procedure." Exactly the words Cordelia used. "They say you've left the door wide open for lawsuits. Especially since this event has gone so public."

"Who's *they*?" I asked, like I didn't already know.

"I'm sure you can guess who's behind this all. Of course, no one on the board will ever admit to it."

"Of course not," I seethed. "So, what does this mean?"

Deidra paused for a long time, making my throat dry up and constrict. "I have to suspend you, honey."

Unwanted tears pricked my eyes as years of hard work went up in flames. Thoughts of wishing I had stayed in Phoenix crossed my mind. That was until Tristan dropped by my side and took my free hand. Our connection did something to me. It reminded me I was a fighter. I knew the risk of rekindling my relationship with him, and I had accepted it. So, if the Grangers wanted to do battle with me, they had better get ready to go a few rounds.

"What about your job?" I had to know.

"As you can imagine, my judgment has come into question. Depending on what the general counsel decides . . ." she trailed off. We both knew what would happen if the Grangers had their way. And they always seemed to get their way. But not this time. I wouldn't let Deidra go down for me. Especially when I did nothing wrong. Any other hospital would have praised my efforts. They would tout the news story and market the heck out of it.

I squeezed Tristan's hand. "We're going to fight this."

"What is your plan?" Deidra begged to know.

I contemplated for a moment. An unpleasant thought came to mind. Oddly, it was in the voice of my mother. I could hear her begging me to do something for her. *Forgive*. "You mentioned Arthur Harding is on the board."

"Your grandfather *is* on the board," she said uneasily.

Tristan gazed at me wide eyed, knowing this was going to be unpleasant and go against another vow. I'm telling you: socks—they're a problem.

"Well—" I let out a long breath. "They want a relationship with me. Boy, are they ever going to get one."

"Honey, are you sure?" Deidra asked.

"No. But I'll be damned if I stand by and let the Grangers steal something else I love." I wasn't even sure how much sway Arthur held on the board, or in this town. But I had to try. People in this

town could think what they wanted to about my past. I enjoyed being thought of as a wild child. However, they would not besmirch my reputation as a doctor—or Deidra’s.

“I’ll see what I can do on my end.” Deidra already sounded exhausted.

“Okay. I’m sorry, Deidra.”

“Don’t be. Sometimes in our profession, you have to make split-second decisions. I’m proud of the choice you made. You helped a baby enter the world safely.”

That’s what mattered most to me. “I’ll call you soon,” I promised. “Goodbye.” I hung up and set the phone on the desk.

Tristan’s face was pulsing red. “I’m so sorry, Calista. I’m resigning as of today.”

I looked around his expensive office and even thought about the crowded store below, full of holiday shoppers. Tristan’s success was undeniable. “Do you really want to give all this up?”

“I’m not giving anything up. Except stuffy holiday dinners with overpriced food.”

I rested a hand on his warm cheek. “Tristan, that’s not true.” I pointed all around me. “You like this, and that’s okay.” I wished I would have recognized a long time ago his need to have such things.

“But I love you. Careers are much easier to rebuild than relationships. I’ll never risk ours again. Besides, I warned my parents what would happen if they hurt you.”

“You know they’re going to deny it. Which makes me wonder why she came here.”

“Because that was her way of gloating. There’s not a lot of fun in ruining someone’s life unless they know you did it.”

“She’s not ruining anything,” I vowed. And this time, I really meant it.

“That’s my girl.” He pecked my lips. “What do you need from me?”

“I think I should talk to Arthur and Rosemary alone.”

“Are you sure? I’m happy to go with you.”

“I think my mom wants me to. Is that crazy?”

He shook his head. “It makes perfect sense. Your mom was one of the kindest, most forgiving people I have ever met. She was a lot like her daughter.”

I could only hope to be half as wonderful as my mother. “Who says I’ve forgiven you?” I teased.

He tenderly ran a finger down my cheek. “You wouldn’t be here if you hadn’t.”

That was true. “So, I guess that means you should go do your thing and I’ll do mine and then we should probably get together tonight.” I played coy.

“We should definitely get together tonight.” He nuzzled my neck, his stubble tickling me. “I promise to make this right.” He trailed kisses up my neck.

I threw my head back, enjoying the moment, knowing the unpleasant things I had to face. “Maybe there is a bright side to all of this. Neither of us will have to go to work for the next few days.”

“Whatever will we do?” he groaned against my skin.

Oh, I had some ideas.



I PULLED UP TO ARTHUR and Rosemary’s gated mansion in Tristan’s truck. I still hadn’t had time to buy a car, and Tristan wanted me to have something safe to drive in the interim. He’d offered me his Land Rover, but I had principles to uphold. Very few, mind you, but I had to hold on to some of them.

Jules had come in clutch again and found the Hardings’ address for me. If she wasn’t in the CIA, I had to wonder where she got all her info. Maybe someday she would tell me. Regardless, I really liked her. After telling her of yet another dilemma in my life, she’d offered to start an online

petition on my behalf or stage a rally in front of the hospital. She was sure no one would come since she was invisible, but she was willing to try. And for that, we would always be friends. I only hoped one day she would be seen the way she desired and deserved.

I rolled down the truck window and stared at the ornate iron gate and the security intercom. It reminded me of Bruce Wayne's manor in the Batman films. Flecks of snow landed on my cheek, where they fizzled and died in a lackluster fashion. All the while, I debated about whether to push the button and enter Arthur and Rosemary's lair. If I had any chance of saving my job and Deidra's, I knew I had to.

Take the first step. There is no weakness in that. Only strength of character; I could hear my mom say. I wasn't sure I wanted to show moral character after all the Hardings had done to my parents. But then I would dishonor my mom and dad.

"Fine," I said to no one but myself before I pushed the button.

"Who's calling?" a voice I didn't recognize asked.

"Um ... uh ... Calista Monroe," I stuttered.

"Just one moment," the cool, smooth voice responded.

It didn't take long for the gate to open automatically and for the voice to say, "Please proceed to the front door entrance."

I slowly inched the truck in, feeling like I was entering a trap. It was a fancy trap, based on the magnificent grounds and dignified house. Towering pine trees and manicured hedges, all enveloped in snow, covered the landscape. The house boasted ornate stonework and elegant columns. I felt a sense of awe and slight trepidation as I drove in. My mom grew up here. I could hardly imagine it, but it was true. She'd probably run through the trees and played hide-and-seek with her friends here. And daydreamed in the grand house. I wondered how much different her life had turned out than she thought it would. One thing I knew for sure: she never regretted it. She would always say Dad was worth the price she had to pay. He never took that for granted.

I parked the truck in the semicircle drive in front of the house and slowly got out.

The dark double doors opened before I took a step toward the entrance. Arthur and Rosemary stood, holding on to each other, staring at me, not sure what to make of the situation. Yet, their countenances said they were hopeful.

Since it was cold and snowing, I did the kind thing and hustled toward the door. No matter what they had done, it felt wrong to make the aging couple feel winter's wrath.

They opened the door wider, and I slid in before I lost my nerve.

Once Arthur closed the door, we all stood gawking at each other, waiting for someone to say something.

Rosemary went first. "Welcome to our home. We're so glad to see you."

I shoved my hands in my jeans pockets, not sure how to respond. It then came to my attention that they had gone overboard decorating their enormous two-story marbled foyer for Christmas. I hadn't pictured them as the type to celebrate the holidays. To me, they were the Marleys and Scrooges of the world. But maybe they loved Christmas as much as my mother. Perhaps it's why she loved it so much. With that thought, I noticed on top of their twenty-foot tree, sparkling in gold and white, a large angel dressed in a delicate velvet dress. It was obvious my mom had patterned the papier-mâché one she'd made for my dad after it. Tears filled my eyes.

"Your mother loved that angel," Rosemary choked out.

I wiped my eyes. I was certainly getting more than I bargained for here. "She made my father one for their first Christmas," I said before I could stop myself. It was like my mother was opening my mouth. Darn her. I wished to remain aloof. All I needed was Arthur's help to save Deidra's and my jobs.

"I always wished I would have given her that angel," Rosemary lamented.

Arthur wrapped an arm around her. His head wound had turned shades of purple and yellow, and the cut had scabbed over. "We were both headstrong and foolish," he tried to comfort his wife. "Why don't we take a seat in the parlor," he invited me.

I didn't realize people still had parlors. I nodded, not knowing what else to do. Besides, a gentle breeze could have blown either of them over. It was best they sat down. I took one more peek at the angel before I followed them to a room on the right. A cozy warmth filled the parlor, which smelled like cinnamon sticks. My mom was obsessed with them during the holidays. Now I knew why. A large fireplace crackled in the corner; its flames provided a calming ambiance. The furniture was ornate, with plush velvet chairs. Patterned curtains draped the windows, providing privacy.

"Please sit," Arthur pointed to a chair near the fireplace. Before I sat down, I noticed framed portraits of my mom gracing the mantel. They ranged from her toddler years to her teen years. In each photo, she was smiling or laughing. Her brown eyes seemed to gaze at me, begging me to forgive the past so I could fix the future. It was a tall order. One I wasn't sure I was capable of.

I sat with a question. "Why keep all these memories of my mom?"

Rosemary sat across from me on the love seat with Arthur, clutching an embroidered hankie, sniffing. "You must think we're monsters."

That about summed it up, but for the sake of my objective, I kept my mouth shut.

Rosemary's brown eyes, like Mom's, lasered right into me, making sure I heard her out. "When your mother met your father, we were so angry. She was such a smart girl. Every Ivy League school had accepted her. We felt like she was throwing her life away, marrying your father."

I had no idea my mother had applied to the likes of Harvard and Yale. "You probably still feel like that," I hissed.

Arthur and Rosemary shook their heads.

"For many years, we did," Arthur admitted. "But then she died," his voice cracked, "and we realized how pathetic our pride was and what it had cost us. Our little girl was gone."

My heart pricked hearing him refer to my mother that way.

They both turned into each other and cried.

I rubbed my chest, not expecting such a show of emotion. More so, I hadn't intended to feel sorry for them, but I did. They missed out on the most wonderful person to grace the planet.

When they got ahold of their emotions, Rosemary turned toward me. "We know we are asking too much of you, but we just want the chance to right what we can."

I realized they probably thought I was here to reconcile. Maybe I should have stated my purpose before now. "Well, honestly, I'm here—"

"We know why you're here," Arthur interjected. "I'm aware of the situation you find yourself in at the hospital." He sat up a little taller. "Some members erroneously acted without my vote. If you are looking for an ally, you have one in me. You may not be aware, but before I retired, I owned one of the most successful law firms in the state. I have informed my colleagues that they hardly have a leg to stand on. And if they don't wish to have their names dragged through the mud, they should reconsider their positions."

My mouth fell open, half hoping, half not wanting to be beholden to the people who had hurt my mother. At least the knot in my stomach loosened. "What about the Grangers?" I couldn't help but ask.

Arthur scoffed. "The Grangers. I will remind them of a little favor I did them several years ago."

Ooh. I really wanted to know what that was, but I could tell he wasn't going to part with that info. "Oh." I was at a loss for words.

Rosemary offered me a weak smile. "You are under no obligation to grant our request. Your grandfather will help you regardless of your decision."

I rubbed my lips together, feeling an uncomfortable sensation. Like my mother was prodding me. "I appreciate your help. And ...," I hesitated to say, "I think you're right. My mom would want me to get to know you. But ... that's going to take some time for me."

Rosemary and Arthur clasped hands, holding back the hope that shone in their eyes.

"Of course," Arthur spoke. "Please know we extend the invitation to your sister and our great-granddaughter as well," he said with emotion. "And your beau too." He grinned, showing off what were surely veneers, for how perfect and white they were.

I guess the word was getting around about Tristan and me. It wasn't surprising.

I stood, not knowing what else to do. "Thank you again for your help." I hoped my mom understood I wasn't going to hold hands with them and sing "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas" just yet. Or maybe ever. But I would visit them again for her sake. And perhaps even for my own.

Rosemary stood faster than I would have thought she could. "I would like to give you something."

"Oh. That's unnecessary."

"Please," she begged. "I want you to have the angel."

I rubbed my chest. Wow. I wasn't expecting that. "Uh ..."

"Please," Arthur added his plea. "Your mother loved it so much. She would want you to have it."

I felt my mother's ache for it, and I couldn't refuse. "All right," I agreed to take it. A wash of emotion overcame me. My mother was happy. I knew it with everything that I was. Tears sprang to my eyes, and I had an overwhelming urge to hug Arthur and Rosemary, but I refrained. That was surely my mom coming through me. She was going to have to wait.

"Thank you, Calista," Rosemary cried. "You have given me the greatest gift this year. Merry Christmas, dear." She suddenly sounded twenty years younger.

"I will be in touch," Arthur said. "I would be ready to report to the hospital for your next shift." He winked.

I felt like Tiny Tim and wanted to shout, *God bless us, every one!* Instead, I said, "My mom loved to say this during Christmas to anyone who visited us during the season. I feel like she would want me to share it with you. It's her favorite quote from Mother Teresa."

Before I could say another word, Rosemary quoted, "It's not how much we give but how much love we put into giving."

I stood stunned, once again reminded that Rosemary was my mother's mother. Surely, some of Mom's goodness came from her.

Rosemary softly smiled. "It's my favorite quote too. Somehow along the way, I forgot what it meant. Thank you for reminding me."

My visit reminded me of something too. That people like my grandparents and Ebenezer Scrooge truly can change. That is the miracle of Christmas. It was my miracle.

THIRTY-FOUR

TRISTAN

TRISTAN, STILL DRESSED AS SANTA, punched in the security code to enter his parents' home. He dispensed with knocking and barged right in. Never had he been so livid in all his life. Tristan stomped across the pristine home, his boots thudding against the wood floors. He could feel the wrath radiating off him like a heat wave. The quiet house was devoid of any feeling or holiday spirit, even though professionals had decorated it to the nines. No amount of pine boughs hanging from staircases and mantels could make him feel merry at the moment.

Tristan found his parents in the kitchen sipping wine, probably congratulating themselves. Little did they know that on his way over, he had gotten in touch with the Cavanaugh's. While he hated contacting them while they recovered, he knew they could help Calista. When he explained the situation to them, they were more than happy to help the woman they believed had saved the life of their child. They were planning to threaten the hospital over this grave injustice. If Calista's suspension wasn't rescinded, they would go to the press. No doubt Aspen General didn't want that kind of coverage.

It didn't matter whether Calista lost her job or not; he was going to be looking for a new one.

"Son." Frasier noticed Tristan first. "We didn't hear you come in." He set his wineglass on the marble countertop nearest him. "To what do we owe the pleasure?" He sounded unnaturally chipper.

Tristan narrowed his eyes at his parents, dressed well even though they were probably staying in for the evening. Something about their smugness ticked him off even more. He clenched his fists until the veins in his hands appeared. "You are both such pieces of work."

"Why would you say such a thing?" Cordelia sounded aghast.

Tristan folded his arms, shaking his head. "You know exactly why. How dare you get Calista suspended."

Cordelia tsked. "We have no such power ... but ... as a concerned citizen of this community, I must agree with the hospital's decision."

"And how do you know that the board already made that decision?" Tristan challenged them, knowing he was calling them out on their lies.

Cordelia cleared her throat and stood straight as a pin. "We know people."

"I'm sure you do," Tristan gritted out. "And I know damn well that you convinced those people to suspend Calista." He held up his hand. "Don't even try to deny it. If you do, I will not only be resigning as CEO, but as your son as well."

Cordelia and Frasier's faces fell as they realized the severity of the situation. Frasier's mouth hung open as he tried to process the words Tristan had spoken. Cordelia's eyes widened and her face turned pale, as if someone had physically struck her. She opened her mouth to speak, but no words came out. She was clearly shocked by Tristan's ultimatum.

"Son," Frasier spluttered. "You're talking nonsense. Granger Outfitters is in your blood. We are your blood."

"If I am your blood, why would you purposely hurt the woman I love?"

"Calista," Cordelia spat her name. "She always has been trouble and she always will be. Can't you see that?"

"No, Mother. You know what I see? A woman who will do anything to help others, no matter the cost. She jumped into a car last night to deliver a baby, a car that later burst into flames. Few people would do what she did. She's incredible, but your pride refuses to let you see it."

Cordelia scoffed. "You're just blinded because she's beautiful."

“You think so little of me.”

“Of course not,” Cordelia defended herself.

Frasier came around the island in the middle of the kitchen to get closer to Tristan. “Listen, son, we are only trying to protect you. We don’t want to see you get arrested again. Think of what that would do to your reputation and the company’s,” he couldn’t help but add.

Tristan sardonically laughed. “Heaven forbid this town realizes the Grangers aren’t perfect. Here’s a news flash for you. Half of this town knew Jonathon was doing drugs and cheating on his wife.”

Cordelia’s face pinched unnaturally. “Don’t speak about it.”

Tristan pointed at his mother. “That’s the problem right there. You don’t want to deal with it. Just like you don’t want to admit that you were wrong about Calista. Well, guess what? I plan to spend the rest of my life with her. If you want me in your life, you better damn well treat her with the respect she deserves.”

Cordelia and Frasier stood still, swallowing hard.

“Does this mean you’re not resigning?” Frasier had the gall to ask.

“I’m still resigning. I told you not to hurt Calista, yet you did. Besides, I want to do more worthwhile things with my time and money. I want to be more like Calista,” he said, knowing that would irritate his parents more than anything. But it was the truth. He was tired of living a life for himself.

He got the reaction he wanted. His parents both stared incredulously at him.

Feeling better now that he had gotten that off his chest, Tristan turned to go and waved behind him. “Merry Christmas. If you want to know where to find me, I’ll be wrapped up under the tree with a gorgeous brunette.”

Tristan strode out of the kitchen with a smile on his face.

His mother yelled after him, “You’re going to regret this. Mark my words.”

The only thing he regretted was leaving Calista thirteen years ago. That was one mistake he would never make again.



TRISTAN WALKED INTO STELLA’S HOUSE to find Calista, Quinn, and Stella working out to old Leslie Sansone videos. “Now walk, walk, walk,” Calista imitated Leslie through her giggles. Tristan leaned against the wall in the great room and smiled at the trio. He felt a sense of peace as he watched them enjoy themselves. Only Calista could have brought about such a miracle.

When Calista noticed him, she ran to him. He particularly enjoyed the tiny athletic shorts and sports bra she was wearing. She jumped into his arms and wrapped her long legs around him, her face bursting with good news.

Tristan pressed his fingers into her bare flesh, igniting an unquenchable desire in him. Since they had company, he settled for chastely kissing her lips. “Things must have gone well with your grandparents.”

Calista beamed at him. “Deidra called a few minutes ago to let me know the board has reversed their decision. Something about they received misinformation, blah, blah.” She rolled her eyes. “Deidra was pretty sure the Cavanaugh’s played a part too. They were going to go to the press and fight for me. Can you believe it?” she gushed.

Tristan didn’t admit to calling them. All he cared about was Calista’s happiness and her job being safe. “I absolutely believe it. You’re incredible.” That earned him another kiss.

“How did it go with your parents?” she hesitated to ask.

“As well as could be expected. I resigned.”

She placed her hands on his cheeks. “Are you sure this is what you want to do?”

“Calista,” he said with meaning, “I’ve never been more sure about anything in my life. You don’t mind being with a ski instructor, do you?” he teased.

She smiled and brushed her thumb across his stubbled cheek. “I just want you to be happy.”

“I’ve never been happier in all my life than I am right now.”

That mischievous glint in her eye appeared. “Good. Because you need to come do *Walk Away the Pounds* with us.” She slid down his body and grabbed his hand.

“Come on, Uncle Tristan,” Quinn shouted from the arms of her mom, the glow of the Christmas tree bathing them in a soft light.

Stella held her daughter tight. Tristan prayed she kept it that way. Something caught his eye in the middle of the tree. “You added another angel.”

Calista squeezed his hand, her eyes watering. “It was my mom’s. Rosemary wanted me to have it.”

How fitting, Tristan thought. An angel for an angel. He pulled her to him and kissed her forehead. The warmth of her body against his, and the thump of her heart against his chest, was a reminder she was real, and they were together.

Calista let out a contented sigh.

That was exactly how he felt—content.

Calista tilted her chin, her eyes boring right into his own. “I love you.”

Tristan had thought he would never hear those words coming from her mouth again. He couldn’t ask for a better Christmas gift. And this time he knew he would never take those words, or her, for granted.

THIRTY-FIVE

CALISTA

I WALKED INTO THE HOSPITAL the next day with a spring in my step. I loved my job, but never had I been so happy to be up at the crack of dawn and headed into work. The smell of disinfectant and medicine filled my nostrils, making me smile.

When I sashayed into the unit, before me was a line of nurses and doctors, all clapping for me. Even Jules was there. Behind them were large cutouts of the rogue pirate and stacks of *To Love a Rogue Pirate* books.

I stopped, not sure what to make of all of it.

Lucy ran toward me and fiercely embraced me. “We heard what you did, delivering Josie Cavanaugh’s baby.”

Who hadn’t?

“She had her publisher deliver all this stuff!” Lucy squealed. “And,” she whispered, “we know you almost got suspended. We were all going to protest if we had to.”

She had no idea how much that meant to me. I squeezed her back. “Thank you,” my voice cracked with emotion.

“Okay, okay,” Evie grumbled. “Back to work, everyone.”

Lucy gave me another good hug before letting me go. “You are a legend.”

I wasn’t sure about that, but it was better than a lot of things I had been called over the years, and even lately.

Jules waited for Lucy to flit off before approaching me. Something was different about her.

“Are you okay?”

She nodded. “I heard they were celebrating you, so I thought I would come down. And I wanted to tell you my dad is being moved to a regular room,” she said, so relieved. “He’s not out of the woods yet, and he probably won’t ever fully recover, but he’s alive and talking. I just wanted to say thank you for helping me through this. I think I would have gone crazy in this town without you. Thank you for seeing me.”

I was so happy for her. I took her hand. “Jules, you’re amazing. You helped me more than you will know. I have my sister back because of you. And the CIA,” I teased.

She laughed. “Someday I will tell you what I really do.”

Oh, she’d better. I was more than willing to sign an NDA to find out. “I look forward to it.”

“I better go. Merry Christmas, friend.”

“Merry Christmas, Jules. I hope Santa is extra good to you this year.”

She shrugged like she didn’t count on it before walking off.

I watched her go, hoping the person who deserved her most would see her soon.

Once Jules disappeared through the automatic doors, Evie marched up to me, hands on her hips, a stern look in her eye. “You got balls, Monroe; I’ll give you that.”

“Does this mean you like me?” I sing-songed to annoy her.

Her lips twitched, so badly wanting to smile. “I wouldn’t go that far.”

“Oh, but you know you want to.”

Her lip twitch turned more into a lift. I counted that as a smile.

She cleared her throat, wiping any show of happiness off her face. "Get to work. We have patients waiting to be seen. Start with the patient in room one."

"Yes, ma'am." I saluted her.

She rolled her eyes. "By the way, I better not hear any noise coming from there."

I tilted my head. "What do you mean?"

Evie didn't answer me; instead she marched off, barking orders.

I was so curious; before I even dropped my bag and coat off in the office, I hustled over to room one and knocked on the door. "May I enter?"

"Yes," the voice I loved more than anything in this world replied.

I walked in and closed the door, shaking my head, to find Tristan once again with his shirt off, sitting on the exam table with his long legs dangling. Dang, he looked good. I paused to take in the sight of him, my gaze sweeping over his broad shoulders and toned chest. His blue eyes sparkled with amusement as he watched me.

"What are you doing here?"

"I had an emergency."

"And what would that be?"

"I didn't get to kiss your gorgeous face when I woke up this morning."

I dropped my bag and slipped out of my coat, leaving them both on the floor before I tiptoed over to the incorrigible love of my life. "I suppose we should remedy that. I could write you a prescription."

He reached for me and pulled me flush against his hot flesh.

I melted right into his embrace and breathed in his amber scent.

"What medicine would you prescribe?" He buried his head in my neck and nuzzled it gently.

My breath quickened with the touch of his lips against my raised skin. "I would say at least ten doses of passionate kissing a day."

"I'm not sure that's enough," he groaned against my neck.

"Well, you could add more doses as needed."

His head lifted. "I do need you."

"I need you too," I admitted. "I guess that means I should probably administer your first dose of the day."

"Yes, please," he crooned.

I ran my hands up his bare chest and into his hair, enjoying every second. "As your doctor, I should probably warn you before we begin that this could cause heavy breathing, a pounding heart, and raised oxytocin levels. But above all, know you are in excellent hands."

THIRTY-SIX

CALISTA

I WOKE UP EXTRA EARLY on Christmas morning. Quinn was curled up next to me in Stella's bed, sleeping soundly. Growing up, Stella and I used to share a bed on Christmas Eve. We would talk and giggle all night long, waiting for Santa to arrive. We thought it would be fun to recreate some of our childhood memories with Quinn.

I kissed Quinn's smooth cheek, thinking about how much had changed since I'd arrived in Aspen Lake. I would have never imagined how things had turned out. Stella was in counseling. Skippy was in jail. Tristan quit his job and was talking about running wilderness excursions for less fortunate children. And most importantly, Quinn had found her happy again. I'd found mine too. Who would have ever guessed I'd left it in Aspen Lake? I wasn't sure everyone in town would ever think of me as anything besides a future model prisoner, but that was okay. I kind of liked it. Besides, I knew who I was, and that's what mattered most.

Carefully, I crawled out of bed so as not to disturb my sister or niece. There was something about seeing the Christmas tree first thing in the morning before the sun appeared. The way it glowed in the dark with brightly wrapped gifts beneath it was magical. It had been a long time since I'd had that kind of magic in my life.

I tiptoed out of the bedroom in my oversize T-shirt, into the great room, where, to my surprise, Santa was sleeping on the couch. Not just any Santa, but my sexy Santa in his red suit. The sound of Tristan's steady breathing played in my ears. It was one of my favorite sounds in the world. I glided his way and took a moment to admire him, bathed in the glow of the twinkling Christmas tree lights. I loved him.

Without wasting another second, I snuggled in next to him on the couch, resting my head on his chest.

He wrapped his arms around me, his sleepy eyes adjusting to the low light. "Merry Christmas," he whispered.

"What are you doing here so early?"

"I had to put your present under the tree."

I turned in his arms and faced the tree, searching for my gift. My eyes landed on something shiny lying across the back of the tree. "Are those what I think they are?" I asked with childlike excitement.

"I dug your skis out of the trash, hoping that maybe you might change your mind about me someday. I filled in the scratches and gouges and shined them. There are some new ski boots under there too."

I turned back toward him and pressed my lips to his. "Thank you. I've felt so guilty, thinking I would never see them again, but I didn't have the heart to tell you."

"I figured." He rubbed his nose against mine. "I don't blame you for throwing them away. In fact, I'm surprised you kept them. Why did you?"

I thought for a moment about how to explain it to him. "I guess I just wanted a piece of you. At least the you I remembered. Not the guy who wanted to quit me."

Tristan cringed. "Cal, I hate that those words ever came out of my mouth."

I placed a finger to his lips. "I know."

He kissed my fingers. His hand ran the length of my body until it landed on my bare leg. His fingers tracing my skin made me shiver. "I don't deserve you."

"That's not true. In fact, I want to give you your present now."

“Oh, really.” He pressed his body harder against mine.

“Not that present.” I grinned.

He let out a heavy, resigned sigh.

“Don’t be disappointed,” I playfully admonished him while I sat up so I could show him my gift. I swept my hair to one side and slowly pulled down my shirt sleeve to reveal my shoulder. “I finally came up with the perfect superhero name for you.”

Tristan sat up and ran his fingers along my new tattoo, which was still a little red and ached, but was totally worth it. “It just says Tristan,” he commented, surprised.

“I know.” I couldn’t think of a more fitting superhero name than his own.

A sheen of moisture filled his eyes. “I don’t know what to say.” He kissed my shoulder and let his lips linger upon the name I had permanently inked on my back. It spoke of spending every Christmas with him for the rest of my life.

The emotions that ran between us in that moment were so palpable, I wished I could bottle them up and relive them over and over again.

Tristan took me in his arms, his hand cupping my neck. “I love you.”

Smiling, I responded, “I know. I love you too. Merry Christmas.”

“Merry Christmas indeed.” His head lowered until his lips landed on mine. His kiss was soft and sweet and felt just like home.

Quinn threw open the bedroom door and burst onto the scene. “Yes! I got my Christmas wish.”

I supposed she did. Someday, I would thank her for all her scheming. I was quite proud of it.

Tristan and I broke apart as she ran and jumped between us on the couch. “I’m not interrupting anything, am I?” she impishly asked.

I pulled her to me and hugged the life out of her. “No, nothing at all.”

Tristan flashed me a knowing grin before kissing Quinn’s head.

Wrapped all together on the couch, we basked in the tree’s glow.

My eyes drifted up toward the angel. I couldn’t help but think my mom had something to do with all this. I swore I could even hear her laugh about my foolish promises. But I knew there would be one promise I would always keep.

I gazed over at Tristan and silently promised to love him for the rest of my life.

EPILOGUE

CALISTA

FROM THE SLOW-MOVING SKI lift, I looked down at the snow-covered mountains stretching out below us, glistening in the morning sun. The crisp, cold air filled my lungs with each breath, and I felt the anticipation of it all. The smell of pine trees wafted through the air, mixing with the sound of skiers carving up the slopes. I reached out and grabbed Tristan's gloved hand. He looked mighty fine in his black ski suit with matching goggles. They were about as sexy as the ones I was wearing.

I heard Quinn laugh with Stella in the lift ahead of us. I loved how close they were becoming.

It was the perfect way to start the New Year, even if I had worked throughout New Year's Eve. And what a night it had been with kidney stones, food poisoning, several Viagra patients, and of course my favorite patient, who was too impatient for me to come home. All he needed was a good long kiss when the clock struck midnight.

"Do you remember how to get off the lift?" Tristan asked.

"I think so."

"Just remember to keep your ski tips up and stand like you're getting up from the dinner table."

"Got it." I hoped. It would be a lie if I said I wasn't nervous. It had been a long while since I'd skied. But as I looked down at my old skis, I remembered that some of my very favorite memories had happened here and I wanted to make new ones with Tristan and Quinn and Stella. I could almost feel the rush of adrenaline I was about to experience as I swished down the slopes.

I readied myself as we approached the top of the mountain.

"You got this," Tristan assured me.

With poles in one hand, I sat up and got off the lift. As soon as I got control of my balance, I pushed my shins into the boots and glided away.

Quinn and Stella left us in the dust and zoomed down the hill.

Tristan faithfully stayed by my side.

I gazed down the long mountainside, and with a deep breath I pushed off using my poles. I got my skis in the snowplow position like a beginner.

We slowly made our way down on the packed snow. Tristan was good enough not to make fun of me for being so cautious. All I needed was to end up in my own ER with a broken bone.

When we were halfway down the slope, I got more confident in my abilities, so I pushed harder on my poles, making me go faster. I even twisted and turned on my skis. Feeling like a pro, I sped up, enjoying the feel of gliding weightlessly down the slope. Even more so, I loved that I was here again with Tristan. I saw many more skiing trips in our future.

But ... just like my first time skiing, I hit some deep powder and spectacularly crashed to the ground, my arms and legs flailing in all different directions. I even lost a ski and a pole.

Tristan quickly skied over to me, looking like a pro, swishing and expertly stopping in front of me. He used his pole to push down on each ski's binding before stepping out of them. Laughing, he landed by my side, making the snow fly around us.

"Are you injured?" he managed to get out between his fits of laughter.

"Just my pride," I growled.

He took off his goggles and his face hovered over mine. "I was hoping this would happen."

"You wanted me to fall?"

“I was just thinking about a moment like this that happened several years ago.” He gently removed my goggles. “It was the first time I told you I loved you.”

“It’s one of my favorite memories.”

“I was hoping we could add another favorite memory today.”

“What did you have in mind?”

“Let me show you.” He took off his gloves, unzipped his jacket pocket, and reached inside. My heart raced as I waited to see what he had in his pocket. He pulled out a tasteful halo diamond ring. His eyes sparkled as brightly as the diamond as he looked into my own. He reached out and cupped my face in his hands.

My breath caught in my throat, and my heart felt like it was about to burst.

Tristan cleared his throat and said, “I know this might seem sudden, but I love you more today than I did the day I first told you. I don’t want to waste another second. Will you marry me?”

I was so overwhelmed with emotion, I couldn’t speak. While it was fast, it also seemed like an eternity. After all, whatever our souls were made of, it was the same. More than anything, I wanted to be with him. It made my answer simple. “Yes.”

Tristan took off my glove and slipped the ring onto my finger. “It’s lab created. I know how you feel about mined diamonds.”

I laughed, but loved that he remembered that tidbit. I grabbed him and pulled him to me until his body draped mine. The heat between us made me forget I was in a bed of snow.

“I love you, Calista.” His lips pressed against mine, begging for me to give him a taste. I did so with the utmost pleasure.

Oh, happy New Year to me.

THE END

Want to read more about Calista and Tristan? Subscribe to my newsletter for giveaways and book news and you will receive a [BONUS SCENE](#) of *My eX-MAS Emergency*.

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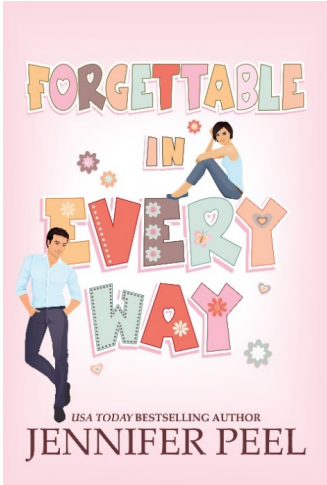
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For a complete list of all her books, click [here](#).



Jennifer Peel is a *USA Today* best-selling author who didn't grow up wanting to be a writer—she was aiming for something more realistic, like being the first female president. When that didn't work out, she started writing just before her fortieth birthday. Now, after publishing several award-winning and best-selling novels, she's addicted to typing and chocolate. When she's not glued to her laptop and a bag of Dove dark chocolates, she loves spending time with her family, making daily Target runs, reading, and pretending she can do Zumba.

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