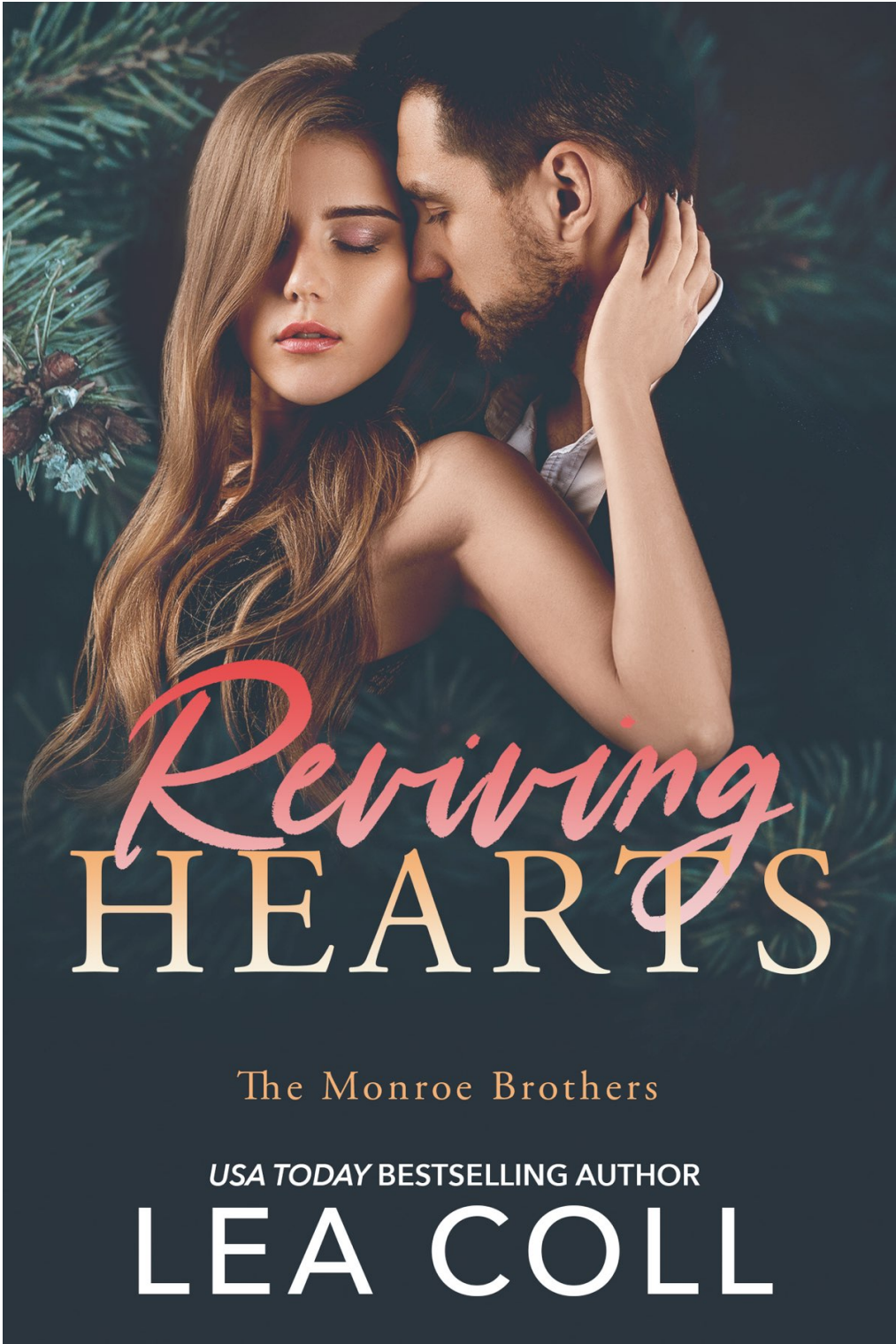


Reviving
HEARTS

The Monroe Brothers

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

LEA COLL



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One



MARLEY

“I’m not doing what’s good for you, Heath Monroe.” I was vaguely aware that we weren’t alone. But my gut churned with his betrayal.

I thought I was done thinking about him in any capacity. But now he was standing in front of me, looking way too good for words.

Heath raised his hands in a defensive stance. “We didn’t go onto your property on purpose. It’s just that no one from your family has been in these woods for years.”

My face flushed. Was he referring to how we’d meet up in these woods when we were teens? “Not that it’s any of your business, but I’m planning on renovating the inn and reopening it before the holidays.” I couldn’t believe I’d said that. I didn’t have any plans other than to renovate it and possibly sell it. What was it about Heath that had me saying things I didn’t mean?

“I, for one, would love to see the inn renovated and open again. I think it will be great for the surrounding area,” Heath’s mom, Lori, said from her seat on the golf cart.

“Grandma would have wanted me to reopen the inn.” When she was alive, I knew she wanted me to come home and manage it. But I didn’t want to return to this town. Not where

I'd grown up in a trailer with parents who didn't view me or my brother, Aiden, as a priority.

I'd felt awful about it, but I'd built a beautiful life for myself in California, and I hadn't wanted to come back to the one place I'd always felt less than.

"I'm so sorry for your loss, dear," Lori said as she rose from the golf cart and moved closer to where Heath and I stood across from each other in a tense standoff.

I'd always envied the Monroe brothers, with their tight-knit family. Whenever I saw them interact, there was so much love.

"Thank you." I took a step back from the group, feeling out of place. They'd obviously come here as some sort of family gathering, and I was the one intruding. I didn't belong here.

"I'm going to head back. I'm tired," Lori said to everyone, and then to me, "It's good to have you back, Marley. Let us know if you need anything at all. My boys would be happy to help."

Lori returned to the golf cart, and Talon drove away.

"We should go," Sebastian said, with his arm around a little girl with dark hair. There was a second girl next to her. I wondered if she was Heath's.

I vaguely recalled the updates Gram would give me when I called to check on her. Their father had died a few years ago, which must have been devastating for them. And Sebastian had a little girl now. I'd blocked out whatever she said about Heath because I didn't want to hear if he was happily married with kids. It was probably childish, but I'd never been mature when it came to him.

Now that everyone was leaving, my heart beat erratically in my chest. I wanted to escape to the haven of the inn.

I wrapped my arms around myself, mainly to shield myself from the cool wind but also to protect myself from Heath. He had the power to hurt me before.

“You’re cold.” Heath moved closer, his voice gruff.

“I should go back to the house,” I said, but I stood rooted to the spot as Heath came within a foot of me and then stopped.

He was bigger and broader than I remembered. He was one year older than me and was best friends with Aiden.

When Aiden enlisted, Heath had stayed close to home, helping on the farm and attending a local college. That’s when we’d run into each other in the woods. I’d find a place to journal or read for the afternoon, and he’d insist he was looking for the perfect spot to build his cabin.

He wasn’t like the other boys in school, who were only interested in trucks or sports. He was responsible. He had chores to do on the farm, and he cared about his family. That combination was intoxicating for a girl who didn’t get positive attention from anyone.

“How have you been?” Heath asked, and all I could see was that letter he’d left, breaking off our relationship. I could still see the words in his messy script on the loose-leaf paper: *I’m sorry, but I can’t betray your brother.*

All I could think about was that he’d chosen his friendship with my brother over me. It was one more person who’d decided I wasn’t important enough.

I shivered. “You lost the right to ask that question a long time ago.”

He sighed and nodded toward the nutcrackers. “I’ll move the lights.”

“You don’t want to see a survey?” My realtor had insisted on one when I mentioned wanting to sell the property from California. But now he was trying to convince me to renovate the inn to increase the value.

“I trust you.”

At one time, I trusted him not to hurt me.

He shoved his hands into his pockets, his expression filled with regret. “Look, I’m sorry for how I handled things back then. I was young and stupid.”

I wanted to ask if he was upset that he’d broken up with me, but I couldn’t make the words come out of my mouth. We hadn’t officially dated because Heath never wanted anything to get back to Aiden. Instead, we spent time in the woods, talking, playing games, and getting to know each other.

We eventually progressed to heavy make-out sessions, but we never went all the way. I should have been thankful for that, but I wasn’t. Heath had always been someone special to me, but I’d wondered over the years if it was because I was so young. I’d idealized our relationship. It was so easy for him to walk away; maybe he hadn’t felt the same way.

His expression pained, he continued, “I didn’t want to do something with you that I’d regret when your brother returned.”

“I remember what you wrote.” I burned the letter in the fire pit behind my trailer and vowed never to let another man hurt me.

Heath sighed and looked away. “Of course, you do.”

He never reached out to me, even though I held out hope that he'd change his mind. Aiden would always be between us.

"I never told you, but Aiden asked me to look after you when he left. You know how your parents treated you—"

I didn't need him to finish that sentence. We both knew that I couldn't rely on my parents for something as simple as a kind word or a meal. "I had Gram."

Heath's compassionate gaze met mine. "But you deserved so much more."

His concern only hurt more. "I lost your friendship when you broke things off."

His lips pressed into a firm line. "That's how it had to be."

I held up my hands. "I don't want to talk about it anymore. I don't want to rehash our past. I just want to do what I came home to do and go back to my life."

"You're not staying." It wasn't a question.

I laughed without any humor. "There's nothing for me here."

He winced. "Lila told me how you were doing over the years."

Gram never mentioned it to me. "When did you see her?"

"We took turns going over there to check in on her and maintain the property. Mom would bring her meals and drive her to the doctor. They'd sit and chat over a cup of tea."

I felt a pang about not being the one who was there for her the last few years. I'd been wrapped up in myself. But Lori and Gram had been friends despite their age difference.

Heath scrutinized me, and I wondered what he saw. The successful businesswoman I was now or the teenager who would have followed him anywhere.

“You look good.”

I wanted to say that he did, too. In fact, he looked better than he had when we were teenagers. He’d filled out, his shoulders broad underneath the red-and-blue-checked flannel that hung open over a green Monroe Christmas Tree Farm shirt, and his thighs stretching his worn jeans.

I bet he’d learned a few things since we used to mess around. He’d always been attentive and skilled with his tongue and fingers. Now that he was a man, I wanted to experience it again.

Shaking that image from my head, I took a few steps back, needing to distance myself from him. Being around him stirred up feelings and emotions I thought I’d buried long ago.

“Where are you staying?”

“At the inn.” Gram had moved into a room on the first floor after the inn was closed so that she didn’t have to manage the stairs. She’d closed off the rest of the house and let it go.

I was a little concerned if there was anything living in the house that I should be concerned about. Gram’s bedroom, the kitchen, and the living room were still in good shape, even if it was outdated.

“I don’t know if it’s a good idea for you to stay there. Is it safe?”

I let out a huff. “It was good enough for Gram.”

“Why don’t you let me look at it tomorrow? I can do a quick walk-through and let you know.”

“My realtor has been through it, and he didn’t fall through a floor.”

Heath’s expression remained stoic. “That doesn’t mean anything.”

“As much as I appreciate your concern”—I really didn’t because I didn’t need him in my space—“I don’t need your help. I’m a big girl now.”

His gaze slowly perused me. “I can see that.”

My face flushed from his appraising gaze.

“If you need anything, you have my number. I built a cabin through those trees.” He pointed in the direction of some lights.

“I’m the closest to your property.”

It was close to our spot. I wondered if he’d chosen it on purpose.

“Knox’s cabin is on the other side of the mountain and closer to the road. Talon’s cabin is behind his. I’m building a cabin for Sebastian next. His will be closer to the main farmhouse. He wants to be close to Mom. We were hoping that she could watch his daughter, Ember, but with her recent health scare, he might need a nanny.”

My heart skipped a beat. “What recent health scare?”

He shook his head. “We thought it was a heart attack, like my dad had, but it was just an anxiety attack. The doctor wants her to slow down and reduce her stress. Gram didn’t talk to you about my family?”

“She talked about Lori and your brothers.”

He smiled. “She didn’t talk about me?”

I looked away. “If she did, I didn’t want to hear it. It’s not that I’m still hurt by what you did. I just couldn’t...” I couldn’t say the words.

“I enjoyed listening to her talk about you. Lila was so proud of you. How you put yourself through school and wouldn’t accept her money.”

I scoffed. “Of course not.”

“And how you built an online business and were living in a house in Malibu.”

My throat tight, I said, “I’m proud of everything I’ve accomplished. I wanted to get out of this town, and I did.”

“I’m glad you’re happy,” he said.

I wouldn’t have said I was happy. I would have said I felt safe and secure now that I had money. I was able to buy an amazing house and whatever else I wanted. But money wouldn’t bring Aiden home or protect him while he was deployed. Money had elevated my station in life and provided amazing opportunities, but it hadn’t given me lasting friendships or even a good man to spend time with. “Are you?”

“I hate that my dad died and won’t get to see Emmett and Knox happy with their significant others. He won’t get to see Ember grow up. But I love working on the farm and being close to my family.”

I wanted to know if he’d realized his dream of owning a contracting business. When we used to talk, he mentioned his

internal conflict about working at the farm and pursuing his own dreams. I'd bet that had intensified since his father died.

"I'm sorry about your dad, but I'm glad that things seemed to have worked out for you. And I'm sorry about confronting you about the lights. I thought there were teenagers out here drinking beer and causing trouble." That didn't explain why I continued to yell at him when I realized who it was. That was my frustration with seeing him again and my traitorous heart that picked up at the sight of him.

"It's okay."

I threw my thumb over my shoulder. "I should head back. I have a lot to do."

Something passed over his face, a hint of longing. It was so quick I almost thought I'd imagined it.

"I'll stop by to check your place tomorrow."

There was no point in arguing. Heath was stubborn.

"I'd appreciate that."

When we were teens, our relationship felt exhilarating because it was forbidden. I'd wondered over the years if that's why my connection to Heath felt different. But now that I'd run into him again, I still felt that undeniable pull. He was like a magnet I couldn't help but be drawn to. But I knew if I got too close, there was the possibility I'd get burned.

I needed to stay away from him so I wouldn't be sucked into his vortex. Nothing good could come from getting close to a man who'd hurt me in the past.

Only a fool would do something like that.

Two



HEATH

I used the flashlight on my phone to navigate through the woods, back to Addy's birthday party. By the time I arrived at the bonfire, the crowd had dwindled, and it was mostly family. Sebastian had already taken Ember home, too.

I'd feel better when his cabin was done, and they had a short walk home, instead of driving into town. I wondered if Knox would ask Sarah to move into his cabin soon like Emmett had with Ireland.

I didn't feel the same desire to settle down and get married as they did. But running into Marley when I hadn't expected to see her was unsettling. I'd wanted to see her at Lila's funeral, but she held a private service.

Marley was even more gorgeous than she'd been in high school. Her hair was longer, her curves voluptuous.

We were hot and heavy when we were teens, but I shut it down when I worried about what her brother would think. It was fun for a while, and I thought I might even love her, but we didn't have a future. Not when her brother was my best friend.

When he deployed, I promised to look after Marley. She didn't have an easy time of it in school. The kids knew she lived in a trailer on her grandmother's property, and they never

let her forget it. My brothers and I were picked on for living on a farm and not being from town, where all the popular kids lived. But we didn't care, and we were big enough that they eventually stopped the ribbing.

Marley talked endlessly about leaving town. Knowing that I'd never leave my family, and the farm was in my blood, it was just one more reason that we wouldn't have worked out.

I'd never met anyone who made me reconsider settling down. I had my ever-expanding family to think about, as well as what we needed to do to increase revenue at the farm so that Mom would always be supported.

I didn't have time to wonder about the what-ifs. Aiden would have been pissed if he'd found out how I'd made a move on his sister back then. He'd never forgive me.

I'd check on the inn tomorrow and make sure it was safe. Then I'd steer clear of Marley. She was moving back to California, and I wouldn't see her for another ten years.

"Everything okay with you and Marley?" Talon asked as we headed inside the barn to clean up.

"I think she's upset about her grandmother dying and having to come home."

"She hasn't visited much over the years," Talon said as he moved around the room, gathering cups and plates and throwing out any trash.

When Mom talked about how she was doing, I listened. I needed to know that Marley was happy. It settled something deep inside me.

I knew I hurt her when I broke up with her, but it had to be done. We didn't have a future together.

“Did you know her in high school?” Talon asked, and I felt his gaze on the side of my face.

The space between my shoulder blades tightened. “She was a year younger than me but I knew her as Aiden’s younger sister.”

“You two seemed to have some history.”

I shook my head. By the time we hit high school, girls were all over me and my brothers. But we were focused on the farm. We didn’t want or need the attention. “Why would I have talked to a girl younger than me?”

“I don’t know. You tell me. We lived on adjoining properties. Did you run into her in the woods?”

My heart thumped in my chest. Did he know our secret? I thought we’d been so careful. When we were seeing each other, Knox was away at school, and Emmett was focused on building his furniture business. “Why would you think that?”

“There was just something between you, a familiarity. She seemed pissed at you.”

She’d said she wouldn’t do anything for me, as if there was something between us. But I wasn’t ready to tell my brothers. Not when I didn’t want Aiden to find out. “You’re wrong about that. I think she’s just overwhelmed with grief.”

“Then why didn’t she visit over the years? She had to know Lila missed her and wanted her to come home.”

“Lila never would have asked her to.” Each time Lila brought up Marley, I thought for sure she knew about us. She always seemed to be fishing for something. Maybe it was her intuition, and she hadn’t seen anything.

“Isn’t it selfish that she stayed away all those years?” Talon asked.

Anger surged through me, making me hot all over. “You don’t know anything about her situation.”

Talon raised a brow. “And you do?”

I ground my teeth together. “You want to talk about Holly?”

“Fuck no. Why is everyone asking about her?”

“It’s awkward as hell when you two are in the same room.”

Talon shook his head. “You’re changing the subject. We were talking about you.”

“I don’t want to talk about me.” I didn’t have much of a personal life. I hung out with my brothers or a few high school friends who still lived in the area. “I’m focused on my job and building Seb’s cabin.”

Talon nodded. “I want to see him settled on the farm.”

“Me, too.” Ever since Dad died, we’d become closer than ever. We’d come together, setting aside our differences, to take care of Mom.

We resumed cleaning off the tables. Ireland and Sarah were taking down decorations while Knox and Addy played with the puppies.

“You going to see Marley again?” Talon asked.

“I’m going over to her place tomorrow to make sure it’s safe.”

He raised a brow.

“It’s what anyone would do,” I said as I busied myself clearing off the next table.

“Yeah, but you’re the one doing it.”

I sighed. “I don’t know what you’re insinuating.”

“I think you do.”

“I already told you there’s no history there.” Noticing the garbage was full, I cinched it and took it outside. I needed some fresh air.

After I disposed of the garbage in the dumpster behind the main house, I went home. I wasn’t ready to deal with Talon’s questions or anyone else’s.

Was it that obvious that there was something between me and Marley? If so, I needed to be extremely careful. The last thing I needed was for word to get to Aiden while he was deployed. He had better things to worry about than me messing with his sister.

Once I was inside my cabin, I breathed a sigh of relief. It was a respite from the farm, my family, and the crowds that gathered during the holidays.

Before Dad died, I had plans to open my contracting business. I’d gotten off track, but maybe it was time to get back to what I wanted.

In my bedroom, I could see a light from Matthews Inn. It was nice to see the light on again and comforting to know that Marley wasn’t far away. She was just a quick walk through the woods.

When we were teens, the draw was too hard to fight. It was easier when she went to college. I hated not having her nearby, but at the same time, it made keeping my promise to Aiden easier. I wasn’t tempted to get on a plane to pursue something with her.

We were too different. She was a West Coast girl now, and I was still a man who lived on his family's farm. I had nothing to offer her.

Marley was living a good life, and I wouldn't dredge up old memories. It wouldn't do us any good.

It would have been nice to see if our connection was the same. But it wasn't worth the repercussions.

Aiden was supposed to come home by next Christmas. He hadn't decided whether he was going to re-up his contract or not, and I didn't want to have to lie to him when he came home.

As I got into bed, I wondered if I'd be able to resist her being so close. The urge to knock on her door and see if the passion was still there was strong.

I needed to get myself together before I saw her again.

* * *

The next morning, I got ready for work, intending to stop by Marley's house before I went to the job site. Before I left, Nolan called to ask me to handle an estimate for him because his stepdaughter, Charlie, was sick.

A few years ago, he'd fallen hard for a single mother and her twin girls. He often needed help to care for the kids.

When he texted the address, my heart pounded in my head. It was the Matthewses' place. Marley must have contacted Morrison Construction to get an estimate for the renovations. What were the odds that I'd be the one called to her property?

At least I'd be able to knock out two things on my to-do list this morning. I got into my truck and drove past the main

house onto the road before turning onto the lane that led to the inn. The gate hung off the hinges.

Lila hadn't been able to keep up with the property in the end, and she was too proud to let us help with much beyond cutting the grass around the house.

I parked next to a small Mercedes convertible. I knocked, then tested the planks in various places on the porch while I waited. When no one opened the door, I used the knocker, hoping it would be louder.

Finally, the door opened. Marley stood at the door in shorts so tiny I barely saw the hem peeking out of her threadbare shirt, which read *Sweet Dreams*.

I swallowed hard.

Her nipples were hard and clearly visible through the near-transparent material. When I finally made my way to her face, I noticed the redness of her cheeks, the crease in her forehead, and her hair standing on end. "Did I wake you?"

"It's seven."

"My boss called and asked me to come over here and do your estimate. His daughter's sick."

Her expression softened. "Nolan's your boss?"

"That's right. I work for Morrison Construction."

"I thought you wanted your own business."

"Dreams don't always work out." I wasn't in the mood to discuss unfulfilled desires with her this morning. I moved into the foyer, forcing her to take a few steps back. I closed the door behind me.

"Your furnace is working."

“Gram had it replaced before she died.”

“That’s good.” One less thing to be concerned about.

Marley followed behind me, her bare feet not making any noise on the wood floors. “Do you normally do estimates this early?”

“I said I’d stop by to check on things here.”

Her lips turned down. “I didn’t think you meant this early.”

“I go in early, and I wanted to get it out of the way before I needed to be on-site. Where’s your coffee maker?” I moved into the kitchen, needing to do something with my hands. I wanted to touch the back of her thigh, to test the softness of the skin. I wanted to lift her onto the counter and step between her spread legs.

“Gram didn’t have one. She only drank tea.”

The kitchen itself was cluttered with Lila’s things, old newspapers were strewn over the large kitchen table, and knickknacks lined the counters. “It must be hard to be here.”

Marley didn’t respond, so I turned to face her.

She leaned a hip against the counter, her arms crossed over her chest. Her expression was pained. “It is.”

“Do you want me to walk through the house and make a list of repairs, or would you rather eat breakfast first?”

“Do what you need to do. I’m going to get dressed. I’ll be right back.” She moved through a door off the kitchen to what I remembered being Lila’s bedroom. It was originally a sitting room, but she’d turned it into her bedroom.

I tried not to think too much about what Marley was doing in there. She was most likely stripping off her clothes. She was

naked, with nothing but a thin wall separating us. I pulled at my collar, feeling incredibly hot.

To take my mind off Marley, I wandered the first floor. I took notes of things we could do to improve the place. The kitchen needed to be updated, the fireplace inspected, the wallpaper removed, and the walls painted. The wood floors would need to be refurbished.

I paused on pictures Lila had hung on the wall. Aiden had his arm around Marley. She was probably fourteen at the time, all elbows and knees, her legs scuffed up and dirty from running through the woods.

It was a good reminder that Aiden would always be between us.

“What are you looking at?” Marley asked as she came into the room.

I turned to find that she’d put on form-fitting sweatpants and a hoodie. Her hair was brushed and pulled back into a neat ponytail, the end of which curled over her shoulder. No matter what she was wearing, she was undeniably gorgeous. I gestured at the picture. “You and Aiden.”

She sighed. “Do you know that he came to me when he was thinking about enlisting and asked if I wanted him to stay? He felt bad about leaving me here.”

“What did you say?” I asked, curious to hear her response.

“I told him to go. That I’d be fine.” Her throat was thick with emotion.

“You told him what he needed to hear.”

“I didn’t want him worrying about me when he was deployed in dangerous areas. I hated not being able to reach

him.”

Aiden had always looked out for her. He was the one who made sure she had food in the pantry, ate dinner each night, and did her homework. “He wouldn’t do anything reckless.”

Her eyes shone with unshed tears. “He’s all I’ve got now, you know?”

She said it with so much vulnerability in her voice that I couldn’t stop myself from reaching for her like I had a million times in the past. I drew her to me, and she buried her head in my chest. I breathed in the scent of her shampoo, enjoying the feel of her warm body pressed against mine. It was supposed to be a comforting gesture, but the rest of my body hadn’t gotten the memo. Everything inside me tightened with desire.

“Why didn’t you have a funeral for Lila? We would have come.”

Marley pulled away from me. “I didn’t want to deal with everyone in town coming to say nice things. I could barely hold myself together, and Aiden couldn’t get leave since it wasn’t his parents who’d died, just a grandparent. We can have a service when he comes home. Maybe I’ll be able to deal with it by then.”

She didn’t want to hold the funeral by herself. My heart went out to her. “You know we’re here for you, right? The Monroes have your back.”

She sighed. “Funerals are so final. I wasn’t ready to say goodbye.”

“But you’re ready to sell this place?” I asked, wanting to understand her.

“When I’m sitting on my deck, overlooking the ocean, yeah, I want to sell this place and never look back. But now

that I'm here, everything is coming back to me. All the emotions, memories, and feelings. Everything is wrapped up in this place. As much as I don't want it to affect me, this place made me who I am today."

I wanted to buy the property to prevent it from being developed, but also to add value to our farm. But I wasn't sure I could buy it if it caused her pain. If I bought it, and she changed her mind, wanting it back, I'd give it to her in a heartbeat. There was nothing I wouldn't do for her. Time and distance hadn't changed anything. She was still the woman I'd never gotten over.

Three



MARLEY

“You want to overhaul this place?” Heath asked, his voice gruff as he moved toward the staircase.

“The realtor thinks that it will increase the value if I take the time to renovate it.”

“He’s right about that. Taking on a property like this with a house of this size in disrepair would not be attractive to most buyers. You could draw developers. Do you want it to be an inn, or should we renovate it so that it’s more attractive to single-family homeowners?”

I hadn’t even thought about the possibility of the land being developed. I just assumed anyone who bought the place would want the inn. I wasn’t sure how I felt about it being torn down and houses built in its place. “The realtor thought we should keep it as is. It could be used as an inn or a large house.”

“There are a lot of bedrooms, though, right?” Heath gestured for me to precede him up the stairs.

“A few are smaller, and an owner might want to use those as an office, a closet, or even a sitting room.” I didn’t feel great talking about another person living in this house. It was still hard to believe that Gram was gone. That I wouldn’t walk

into the kitchen and see her sitting at the table, drinking her tea.

When we reached the landing, Heath asked, “Do you mind if I take measurements and a few notes?”

“That’s what you’re here for, right?” I asked him.

We walked down the hallway. “You could move laundry up here if you wanted.”

“That would be nice. The basement is scary. I never went down there as a kid.”

We stopped in front of the door to the first room. “You’re going to need to do laundry if you stay for a while.”

I shuddered. “I’m hoping I won’t need to be here for that long.”

I opened the door to the first room. The curtains were drawn, and the space was musty from being closed up.

Heath moved around the room, taking measurements. I held one end of the tape while he made notes of the numbers.

“I’m surprised you don’t use a tablet or a laptop,” I said as we moved down the hall to the next room.

“I’m old-school. When I design a room, I’ll use a program that brings it to life for the clients. That’s what people expect, but when I’m starting a new job, I like pencil and paper.”

I grinned. “Not even pen. I like that.”

Heath winked at me as he waited for me to open the next room. There was something about that mannerism that brought me back to when we’d run into each other in public as teenagers. He wouldn’t acknowledge me, other than a wink when no one else was paying attention. It never failed to make

me feel special, even when we had to keep our relationship a secret.

This room was larger than the first. “I’m going to need to air out the rooms.”

Heath flashed me a grin. “I’m used to working in dusty places.”

“It doesn’t mean you should have to. Will I need to haul this furniture out of here? Maybe I could store it in a barn.”

“Are you keeping it or getting new furniture?” Heath asked, moving to the windows, where he attempted to lift one.

“I think it would be best to save whatever’s salvageable for now. I can stage the rooms with the furniture I have.” Money wasn’t an issue for me, but I wasn’t used to spending frivolously. The beachfront home was the one thing I’d splurged on.

Heath ran a hand over the headboard. “It’s sturdy. They don’t make them like this anymore. Not unless you find someone who makes them by hand.”

“I like that each piece of furniture has history, and maybe even a story to tell.”

His lips quirked. “I do, too.”

“As kids, we had so much fun hiding in these rooms when there weren’t any guests.” We saw the hotel as our playground, with so many rooms and exciting new guests arriving every few days. The grounds were fun to explore, too.

We didn’t realize we should be ashamed of living here until the kids realized we lived in a trailer on the property and not at the big house. Then I felt like a charity case. My

grandmother had essentially taken our parents in, providing us with a place to live.

“I bet this place holds a lot of memories for you and Aiden.”

“I still expect Gram to be sitting in the kitchen, drinking her tea and asking me what adventures I was going on today.” I blinked away the tears.

“She was a special woman.”

What did it say about me that I’d stayed away over the years? I’d eschewed the one woman who’d cared about me, who made sure I had food to eat and got to school on time.

“Where are your parents now?” Heath asked as we headed to the next room. This one was the largest, on the corner of the house with a bay window. The window faced the woods and Heath’s cabin.

I shrugged. “I don’t really know. They’re not together anymore. They went their separate ways after we left. I think Gram was the reason they stayed as long as they did.”

“Why do you think that?”

“When I graduated from high school, I came home to find them packing up their things. Dad said I didn’t need them anymore. I was an adult. As if graduating from high school signified that you could take care of yourself. But oddly enough, I felt older than my years. I’d already figured out that I was responsible for myself. Not my parents or Gram, but me, and I wanted to do something meaningful.”

“What do you mean?” Heath asked as he jotted down the measurements in his notepad.

“I wanted to empower other women who came from nothing. Who didn’t have parents that positioned them in the world with wealth and opportunities.”

Heath set his pad aside and moved closer to me. “Did you accomplish that?”

“Every day, I reach new women and empower them to reach higher, to set unrealistic goals, and I get messages daily from them saying they did the impossible. It’s so satisfying.”

“What exactly do you do? Lila said you had a successful online business, but she said it was like life coaching or something. I didn’t understand it.”

“It started out as coaching, but that was exhausting. I imagine it’s like being a therapist and listening to people’s problems all day long. If you’re not careful, it will suck up all your energy. Eventually, I wanted an easier way to earn money but still get my message out there in a way. I finally landed on a digital course, teaching about money and confidence. People have all these negative beliefs about themselves, their success, and money. I help them clear those limiting beliefs and see life differently. I like to think I give them the confidence to reach their dreams. It’s miraculous what they’ve done with their newfound confidence.”

Heath cleared his throat, his expression full of awe. “That’s impressive. I love my work, but I don’t reach people in the same way you do.”

I frowned. “Don’t you? You see something in their homes that maybe they don’t, and you bring it to life. I bet you inspire those who live there to do more with their lives, too. They might just not tell you. I’m lucky that the women I’ve helped will email me and let me know how my course and my words inspired them.”

“I think it’s impressive. Although I never would have thought of that as being a career.”

“I didn’t either. There were tons of coaches online when I started out, and I doubted myself. But sharing what I knew was magical. I was helping people reach their dreams and making them see their potential. It was so satisfying.”

“I can tell you love what you do.” His voice was low and gravelly, and everything fell away, the memories and history of the room, the inn, until it was just us.

“I do.” I licked my lower lip, and he stepped close, running a hand through my hair. Tingles erupted over my skin at the contact, and I swayed in his direction. He smelled as I remembered, like pine and spice. I kept a candle with an evergreen scent in my apartment and pulled it out when I was feeling homesick.

I associated the inn and Gram with home. But Heath was part of the reason why I felt grounded and connected to this place.

“I can’t believe you’re here after all these years.” His gaze caught and held mine, his eyes darkening with what I could only describe as pure heat.

My skin flushed, and my nipples pebbled, but he didn’t move closer. I sucked in a deep breath and forced myself to take a step back. I was only home long enough to get the renovation started, then I was heading back to California.

His hand dropped to his side, and he moved to grab his pencil and pad.

I let out a breath. My lungs ached as if I’d been holding it in this whole time. Would he have kissed me if I hadn’t

moved? I'd never know, but I'd think of that moment later when I was alone.

He tucked the pencil behind his ear and asked, "I assume you want to keep the general feel of the place but freshen it with new paint and refinished floors.

I walked into the hallway, needing some fresh air. "The setup is nice. I don't think we need to knock down any walls or do anything drastic."

"I agree. Unless you want to move the laundry room upstairs, or something like that."

"It would be nice, but I don't want to take up one of the guest rooms for laundry. Whoever buys the property will want every room available to rent."

We continued moving from room to room, commenting on things that needed to be fixed or repaired, and he made notes in his notepad. I was impressed with his thoroughness and felt confident that he'd do right by this place.

When we were finished, he said, "I'm not sure who will handle the property. I'm filling in for Nolan this morning. He might want to take it on."

"No," I said, surprising even myself.

"What do you mean, *no*?" Heath asked, his brow furrowed.

"I'll hire Morrison Construction if you're the lead contractor. I want you to take care of this place. I'm going to be in California, and I need someone I can trust taking care of things here."

"You're not staying?" Heath asked, and I couldn't gauge whether he was upset about that.

“I need to be home. This place holds too many memories for me.”

Heath’s jaw tightened. “So, you’re going to renovate it and sell it from California?”

“That’s the plan.”

Heath shook his head. “I would have thought you’d want to keep an eye on this place and take care of your grandmother’s things.”

“I’ll go through her stuff.” Pain shot through my chest at the idea.

“Then you’ll sell?”

I swallowed over the lump in my throat. “It will be easier.”

“I never took you to be a coward.”

“I know that being here isn’t good for me.” I needed to maintain the façade I’d carefully curated over the last ten years. I couldn’t come back here. I’d fall back into my old way of thinking. That I’d never fit in, and I wasn’t good enough.

In California, no one knew my past. All they cared about was that I was successful now. I didn’t have particularly deep friendships, but I was content. I loved my business and my home. I even had Erika, my reliable assistant, to help me. I considered her to be a friend.

I felt Heath’s disapproval in the air between us. “I have everything I need. I’ll be in touch.”

He moved to go, and I stopped him with a hand on his forearm, his muscles flexing underneath my palm. “I want you to do the job. I don’t know if I can do this without you.”

My voice shook with emotion. I had to go through my grandmother's things before I could go home, which meant I needed to start today. I wasn't sure I'd survive the process, but we couldn't renovate and sell it with her personal effects here.

"I'll take care of you. If Nolan doesn't agree, I'll do it myself."

"Can you do that?"

"I've been wanting to go out on my own for a few years. My father's passing set me back a bit, but I've been thinking about it more and more lately. I can build Seb's cabin and renovate the inn at the same time."

"I don't want you to get in trouble with your boss."

"Nolan knows I've wanted to do this for a while. He's been pushing me to follow through, but I wasn't ready. I think now's the time."

I wanted to be the one who gave him the courage to do it, but I knew it wasn't me. I'd only just come back into his life. He'd already been placing the groundwork for this move; he'd just been afraid to make a move. "I'm happy for you, Heath. You've built a nice life for yourself here."

"I thought so too."

There was something in his tone, as if he wasn't quite sure he had everything he wanted. And I wondered what he was missing. Was it a relationship with a woman? Kids, even? I wanted to know everything about him—what had changed in the last ten years and what was the same. But I wouldn't be here for long, and it wasn't my place to insert myself into his life when I had no intentions of staying.

"I don't see anything that's dangerous or concerning. Lila took care of this place over the years. The electrical has been

updated. It's just a matter of new paint and refinishing the wood floors."

"Thank you, Heath. Your being here makes it easier." And harder in some ways. My chest hurt in a way it hadn't in years. Seeing him again, being here, it created a flood of old emotions.

He nodded, but he didn't move closer or touch me. He just grabbed his things and walked out the door. It shouldn't hurt, but it did. We weren't anything to each other anymore.

He was the man who might renovate the inn. He wasn't the boy I was in love with for half my life. He was different now, larger and more set in his ways. He'd walked away from us before for a reason, and nothing had changed. Aiden would always be between us.

I wasn't the same woman anymore, either. I didn't need him in the same way I did back then. I was strong and confident. But why did I want to kiss him to see how it felt now that we were all grown up? Why did I want to revisit the past?

I needed to clean up the place, secure the contractor, and go back to my real home. The modern house on the beach. Despite its cold interior, the ocean called to me in a way that nothing else did. I needed the salt air and the sound of the waves. The trees and grass didn't hold the same appeal.

I ignored the nagging thought that said if it came with Heath, he was all I'd ever need.

Four



HEATH

As I drove down the lane to leave, I wondered if Marley liked the man I'd become, not just the boy I was. It didn't even matter because she was only here for as long as it would take to clean out her grandmother's things, and then she would be gone.

I hated the idea of her doing it by herself. But Aiden was gone, and there was no one else. I wondered if I should help her or even employ my family. I could show her that she wasn't alone. That she had me and my family.

I wasn't sure she'd accept or even want our help, but it was worth a chance. I heard the pain in her voice and saw the tears in her eyes when she talked about Lila and the inn. She still deeply loved this place and her grandmother. It wouldn't be easy for her.

But it hurt when she said she was leaving. I was upset that she could sell this place without returning. But then again, maybe she knew she couldn't do it from here. That it would be too painful.

Did I want the place? Could I afford it once she renovated it? Would her realtor want to get the most he could for it?

The questions and uncertainty were swirling in my head. I needed to get to work and put Marley Matthews out of my

head. But it was easier said than done because I had to meet with Nolan to talk about the estimate. I stopped by his house, and as soon as the door opened, it was pure chaos.

“You didn’t need to come by,” Nolan said as he opened the door and moved inside.

I closed the door behind me. “I thought we should talk about it in person.”

There was a girl, maybe nine or ten, in her pajamas on the couch, who looked miserable.

Nolan waved a hand at the girl. “Charlie’s sick.”

She didn’t even look up at me when we passed by.

In the kitchen, Juliana held a baby in her arms and handed him off to Nolan as soon as he got close. “I’m going to grab Charlie a popsicle.” She hustled to the freezer and pulled one out. “Heath, what are you doing here?”

“I handled an estimate for Nolan this morning. Just wanted to discuss it.” It wasn’t mandatory that I immediately talk to him about something like this, but this was personal. When I walked inside the inn, I had this feeling that I was supposed to renovate it. Not anyone else.

“I told him he didn’t need to come,” Nolan said gruffly as he smiled at the baby, then blew raspberries on his cheeks.

It was surprising to see Nolan acting so sweet with his baby when he was so stoic at work.

“This job is different.”

He raised his brow while adjusting the baby onto his shoulder. “How so?”

Juliana left the room presumably to hand Charlie the popsicle, and I heard her soft murmurings in the other room.

“You know it’s the Matthews’ property.”

“Doesn’t that adjoin Monroe Farm? That’s why I called you. Figured it would be more convenient for you to handle it. Was the owner upset that I couldn’t be there?”

I cleared my throat. “Not at all. We know each other.”

“Oh, good. So, what’s the issue?” The baby fussed, so Nolan rocked him.

“She wants me to handle it.”

“Okay.”

“You don’t mind?”

“It doesn’t make any difference to me. Unless you have a personal relationship that would make working together an issue.”

“She’s going back home to California as soon as she can. She doesn’t want to be involved in the renovation.”

“Those are the best jobs, unless they try to micromanage things from afar.”

“I don’t think she will. I have a feeling she wants to renovate and sell it. Sight unseen.”

“What kind of renovations are we talking about?” Nolan asked as the baby began to fuss again. His whole face screwed up as he turned red and opened his mouth to scream.

Juliana took the baby from Nolan. “Hey, sweet baby. Is Daddy talking business and boring you?”

“He might be hungry.”

Juliana's gaze flew to the clock over the stove, and she said, "We're completely off schedule with Charlie home."

"Go feed him. I've got Charlie."

"I love you," Juliana said as she kissed him softly on the lips and carried the baby past me with a smile and up the stairs.

"Life changes when you have kids," Nolan said, but his expression was soft.

"I don't want to keep you. I know you've got your hands full here."

Nolan rested a hip against the counter. "I love spending time with my kids."

I cleared my throat, a little uncomfortable with his easy expression of affection for his family. I worried about my family, but it wasn't like having children of my own.

Nolan shook his head. "Now, what were we talking about?"

"The renovations for Matthews Inn."

"That's right." He gestured for me to keep going.

"It's mostly cosmetic, new trim, paint, refinish the wood floors, but I'd want to replace the windows. The windows were impossible to open. The original owner kept up with maintenance—the electrical was fine, the furnace new."

"What about the roof?" Nolan asked, all business now.

"I'll have someone come out and inspect the roof and the fireplaces."

Nolan leaned forward slightly. "Did you say fireplaces? Multiple?"

“The place has ten bedrooms.”

Nolan whistled. “You’ll enjoy working on that one. You give any more thought about going out on your own?”

“You trying to get rid of me?” I asked, tension building in my neck.

“You’re too good to be working under someone. You should be working on the projects you want. You’ll need to get some guys who can work for you.”

“I wouldn’t want to take yours.”

“You have a team. If they want to go with you, you’re welcome to them.”

“Are you serious?” I couldn’t believe Nolan was so supportive about this. Most business owners wouldn’t be.

“Cade allowed you to work with me while you dealt with your family stuff. You’re our best foreman but we both know it’s time for you to do your thing. You were never meant to work for someone else.”

“I really appreciate your belief in me.”

“You’re talented. I knew it when you applied to work with me, and I’m lucky to have had you for this long. But we both know you’re destined for more.”

That made me wonder if I was destined for more in my personal life, too. One big change at a time. I was dealing with an old love from the past, and I couldn’t do anything that would jeopardize my relationship with her brother, my friend. “I appreciate your support.”

“The inn is yours. If it doesn’t work out, then you always have a job with me. If you have any questions, I’m happy to help.”

“I appreciate that, too.”

Nolan checked on Charlie, who was watching cartoons, and returned to ask, “You dating anyone?”

“No,” I said, even though it felt like a lie. Seeing Marley again made me want to rekindle what we had before, despite all the reasons it was a bad idea.

“One day, you’ll meet someone, and your entire perspective will change. In a good way, of course. You’ll realize all the things in life you were missing out on when you were focused on work.”

“I suppose that’s what happened to you?” I asked, a little uncomfortable having a personal conversation with my boss.

“I never thought I’d fall for a woman with kids, but it’s the best thing that’s ever happened to me.”

“Love and family look good on you, but I don’t think I’m cut out for it.” Not when the only woman I’d ever loved was my best friend’s younger sister.

“You’ll know when it happens.”

My heart throbbed in my chest. Was Marley the one meant for me? How could that be possible? The universe wouldn’t pair me with someone I had no business thinking about, much less spending time with.

My phone buzzed. It was Cal, one of the guys on the project I was currently working on. “I’ve got to take this.”

“Think about what I said.”

“Will do.” I walked out and pressed the phone to my ear. I wasn’t sure if he was talking about work or me finding someone to love. I had no intentions of entertaining anything more with Marley.

But my body was telling me I could have some fun before she left town, and my heart was remembering all the reasons why I loved her to begin with. She was fun and feisty, sweet and sexy. I compared everyone I dated to her.

“The stove won’t fit.”

“I’m on my way.” I needed to get Marley out of my system. I wasn’t sure if that meant avoiding her or seeing her as much as possible. Could we have a physical relationship and walk away when she left? Or was that playing with fire?

When Marley smiled, it reminded me so much of when we were younger, before I screwed everything up. Marley was always happy to see me. She liked me for who I was, not the jock that the other girls saw. She saw the boy underneath, the one who loved his family and supported his friends.

She’d always seen the real me, and that’s why she was attractive. Then there were her full lips, the way her hair curled over her shoulders and fell into her eyes, her long legs, and her sexy curves. I loved everything about her. The next few days and weeks would be challenging. I wasn’t sure I’d be able to resist my baser urges, even if I needed to.

When I left that note for Marley, I intended to honor my promises to Aiden and stop messing around with his sister. He wouldn’t have understood if I said I was in love with her. He wouldn’t have cared. I did something behind his back when he trusted me to protect her. I’d fulfill that promise now and not touch her again. No matter how much I wanted to.

I went to work at a job site on the other side of town. It was a newer home, and the repairs weren’t nearly as challenging as the ones I wanted to do at Marley’s inn. I had ideas for closets, built-ins, and maybe even outdoor landscaping.

But I couldn't drown out the images of her in those barely there sleep shorts and the see-through shirt she wore this morning. I wondered if I'd touched her as soon as she opened the door, if she'd be warm from sleep. Did she sleep with her covers on, or did she kick them off?

Realizing I'd lost the battle with my thoughts again, I clenched my fists. Despite my best efforts, I couldn't get her out of my head. If I didn't do it soon, I'd get hurt, or someone on my crew would. I couldn't afford to be distracted.

That's what Marley was—a distraction. I wanted to say she was an unwelcome one, but she wasn't. I'd always wondered how she was doing, what she looked like, and what kind of person she turned out to be. It sounded like she was doing amazing for herself. She had a whole life in California. Probably friends and maybe even a boyfriend. She didn't need to reminisce about her past.

It shouldn't hurt. I was the one who broke things off, and I stood by that decision. But I always wondered what if. We were young. The odds were stacked against us. She'd created a good life in California. She didn't want to stay, and I didn't want to leave.

We didn't make sense on paper, but when we were together, all I could think about was how good we were together.

For the rest of the day, I managed to push her out of my head and focus on work. On the way home, I stopped at the main house to see Mom and talk to her about Marley.

I stepped inside without knocking. The holiday decorations were still up. Mom was reluctant to take them down each year, and she was supposed to be resting. It took all of us reminding her to slow down for her to do it.

I found her in the kitchen, adding muffins to a platter on the counter. She kept food readily available for us.

I grabbed a muffin before she could put the cover over the platter. “How are you feeling?”

Mom gave me a look. “I’m tired of my boys checking up on me.”

“We’re just worried about you.” Ever since our father died, we’d been extra careful with her. We missed the signs with Dad’s heart attack, but we wouldn’t with her. She was all we had.

Mom shook her head. “I know you are. But I can handle myself.”

I barely restrained myself from grunting in disapproval. She wasn’t someone who took breaks or rested. She was go, go, go all the time, whether it was working on the farm, in the shop, or making sure we were fed.

“Maybe we should hire some more help around here. Someone who could bake for us.”

Mom’s lips twisted. “I can bake. I’m not an invalid.”

I’d talk to my brothers about getting someone who could help in the shop and maybe even bake the cookies my mom was providing now. We’d need to approach it in a way that she didn’t feel like she was being handled. It might help if we asked someone she knew, like Sebastian’s friend, Hanna.

“What’s going on with you?”

“Nolan asked me to do an estimate at the Matthews place this morning. His little girl was sick.”

“Poor thing.” Mom knew everyone around town and loved hearing about their kids.

“I saw their new baby this morning. He was cute.”

Mom grinned. “I bet he was. I can’t wait until you boys have more kids.”

I decided not to touch that comment and ate the last of the muffin in one large bite.

“What is Marley planning on doing with the inn?” Mom asked as she poured orange juice into a glass for me.

“Her realtor wants her to freshen it up for sale. Just some paint, refinished floors, and new windows. That kind of thing.”

Mom raised a brow. “And you’re the one who’ll be doing the work?”

“That’s what Nolan said.” I didn’t want to tell her that Marley insisted on it, or that it was what I wanted, too. Mom didn’t know about my relationship with Marley when we were teens, and I wanted to keep it that way. She tended to meddle in everyone’s business, and she wanted to see her boys settled. She’d already gotten her wish with Emmett and Knox; I didn’t want to be the next one on her matchmaking list.

“How’s she doing?” Mom asked, her tone softer.

Mom was concerned about Marley growing up. We were aware that her parents were less than ideal. “I’m worried about her. She has to go through Lila’s things in the next few days.”

“We should help her.”

“That’s what I wanted to talk to you about. I wasn’t sure if we should offer to help or if it’s better to let her handle it alone.”

“I think we should go over there and tell her we’re going to help. That’s what neighbors do.”

“You want me to round up the troops? I think she wanted to get started today.” I hated that I’d had to leave her this morning, but I had to work.

Mom nodded. “We’ll go over there tonight.”

“You got it.” I pulled out my phone and messaged our group text chain. When someone needed our help, everyone showed up.

After receiving responses from Knox and Emmett, I tucked my phone away. Talon rarely checked his phone and almost never responded to the group chat. I was suspicious he’d deleted it or turned off the notifications. No one expected Sebastian to come from town with his little girl, Ember. I hoped that would change when he moved to the farm.

“Is there anything going on between you and Marley?”

I frowned. “Why would you think that? She’s only been in town for a short time. I saw her the first time you did.”

“There was a lot of tension between you two the other night.”

“You’re wrong.” I hated lying to her, but at the same time, no one could know about us. I couldn’t chance it getting back to Aiden.

“Nothing happened between you two when you were kids?” Mom asked.

“We played together a few times in the woods. We all hung out.” I shrugged. “It was nothing. I’d never mess with Aiden’s little sister.”

Mom raised a brow.

“You know what I mean. He asked me to look after her. I wouldn’t have made a move.” Liar, liar, pants on fire. I was

young and reckless and thinking with my dick. But at some point, my heart got involved, too.

“If you like someone, it doesn’t matter who they’re related to. You can’t help how you feel.”

“It’s a good thing that she’s just an old friend, then.” I grabbed a second muffin and stuffed it into my mouth so I wouldn’t have to talk.

My phone buzzed. “Emmett can help. Knox is hoping to meet us there. He’s helping Addy with her homework.” Ever since Christmas, Sarah and her daughter, Addy, had practically moved in with him. I think it was their new puppy, Comet, that was the draw, but Knox insisted it was him.

The door opened, and Emmett and Ireland walked in. Ireland kissed my mom on the cheek and squeezed my arm.

She was the perfect addition to the family, and we loved her because she drew Emmett out of his perpetually grumpy state. It was a fact that we’d made more business decisions since they started dating. He resisted change, but Ireland helped him go with the flow and consider new ideas.

“We’re helping Marley pack up Lila’s things?” Emmett asked.

“She doesn’t know we’re helping.” I drained the OJ and placed the glass in the dishwasher.

“Is she going to be pissed?” Emmett rubbed his neck.

“I don’t want her doing it alone. I met with her this morning to talk about renovations to the inn, and she was upset about Lila being gone. I don’t think she’s had time to grieve.”

“She didn’t have a service. We couldn’t see her and comfort her,” Mom said, her voice trembling.

“I think that’s what she was avoiding,” I said.

Mom shook her head. “Poor girl thinks she’s alone, and she’s not.”

“I’m sure it felt that way when she was a kid.” It was what drew me to her in the first place. She was strong and stubborn, but underneath, she was all heart. Her parents hurt her to her core, and other than her brother and her grandmother, she didn’t have anyone on her side. I admired her for being so strong.

Emmett raised a brow. “You know her well?”

“Just when we used to run the woods.”

Emmett nodded. The local kids would all converge in the woods, and we’d play for hours. We’d play capture the flag, hide-and-seek, and, in general, chase each other around with sticks and wrestle. It was a good time.

“Aiden told me to look out for her. He can’t get leave right now. It’s just her.”

“Let’s do this, then.” Emmett grabbed a small container of muffins Mom packed for Marley.

“I feel bad for her. It must be so hard to come back and have to go through her grandmother’s things,” Ireland said as we walked outside to get in our vehicles.

“Marley was close to Lila. She was more like a mother to her than her actual mom was,” Mom said.

Ireland sighed. “That makes it even worse.”

“With all of us there, she won’t be able to turn us away.” Or get mad at me for butting in. Mom was known for doing these kinds of things for neighbors. Marley wouldn’t think anything of it. It was the best way to offer her help and avoid her irritation.

We parked in front of the house. Marley’s red convertible hadn’t moved from its spot this morning. I wondered if she had any food in the house.

I stepped out of the truck and pulled out my phone.

“What are you doing?” Emmett asked.

“Ordering pizza. I’m hungry.”

“Good idea,” Emmett said.

It was one more thing I could do for her that I’d blame on my brothers. Everyone knew we ate a lot and would be hungry. Yet I could take care of her, too. Marley wasn’t someone who’d accept help unless we maneuvered her a bit. The trick was making sure she didn’t realize what we were doing. If she figured it out, I’d be the one she’d be mad at.

I liked it when Marley confronted us the other night about the nutcrackers. Her cheeks flushed from the cold and her anger. There was fire in her eyes. It made me want to kiss her, to see how passionate she’d be in bed.

It was so tempting to explore a relationship now that we were adults despite all the reasons why it wasn’t a good idea.

Five



MARLEY

I heard the rumble of the trucks as I opened the first drawer in Gram's dresser. It had taken most of the day for me to open the door and walk inside. The room was a little stuffy but nothing like the ones upstairs.

I opened a window to let the air in and spotted a couple of Monroe Christmas Tree Farm trucks in the driveway.

Irritation burned through my gut as I headed to the front door and opened it before anyone could knock.

I deflated when I saw Lori standing on the porch next to Ireland, Emmett, and Heath, who were talking about pizza toppings. "What are you doing here?"

"We came by to help," Lori said in a reasonable tone of voice as she stepped past me and into the house.

"We heard you were packing up some things today and thought you could use a hand," Ireland said as she touched my shoulder with a smile.

I clenched my jaw. "I don't need any help."

Emmett placed his arm around my shoulder and maneuvered me into the house. "Don't fight us. It will be easier if you just let us do our thing."

“And what is that, exactly?” I asked him with my brows raised.

Heath still had his face buried in his phone.

He threw a thumb over his shoulder. “Heath’s ordering pizza because we’re starving, and we’re going to help you pack up.”

I shook my head. “You don’t have to do that.”

“That’s what neighbors do. Now, where should we start?” Lori asked from Gram’s doorway.

“I was in the bedroom, but you don’t need to—”

Lori walked through the open door to Gram’s room. “Emmett, grab those boxes from the truck.”

“Be right back,” he said with a wink.

When Ireland followed Lori, and Emmett headed outside, I asked Heath, “Is this your doing?”

“Mom asked what you were up to, and I told her. You know her; she wants to help. She was friends with Lila.”

I grimaced. “This will be hard on her, too.”

Heath surprised me by drawing me into his arms. “That’s why we’re here. To make it easier.”

I blinked away the tears as I rubbed my cheek against his chest. I could get used to his hugs. They were comforting. “I don’t need your help.”

He rested his chin on my head. “For once, just let someone in. You don’t have to do everything on your own.”

My stomach rumbled, and his arms fell away. “Let me order the pizza. You’re obviously starving.”

“I could have made something.”

He raised a brow without looking away from the screen on his phone. “With everyone here?”

I shook my head and left him alone in the foyer to order the pizzas. It didn’t seem like I’d be able to dissuade them from their mission to help me pack a few boxes. I’d let them help tonight, and then I’d send them on their way.

If I had to, I’d stay up all night to finish. I didn’t want to drag it out or involve more people than necessary.

Emmett brought packing boxes inside and dropped them on the floor.

Lori pointed at each one. “This one’s for things you want to keep, and this one’s for donations. Emmett, grab some garbage bags for trash.”

“Already have some,” Emmett said, pulling them out of a box.

Lori nodded. “Perfect. We’ll be done in no time.”

Lori held up each item and asked whether I wanted to keep it or donate it. The clothes went into the donation pile, her jewelry and keepsakes in the keep pile.

Some of the decisions were harder than others, but for the most part, it was quicker than if I’d attempted to do it myself. There was no time to fall apart or reminisce about what each item meant. I could always go through the items later.

I hated the idea of erasing Gram from my life, but this wasn’t my place anymore. I had to think of it as someone else’s. There was no way I could run an inn from California, even if I had good memories of helping around here. Plus,

there was the fact that Heath lived here and seemingly had no issues being close to me.

There was something about him being in Gram's bedroom among her doilies and knickknacks that tugged at my heart. He was a big guy, but at the same time, he was careful with her things. It was like he knew what they meant to me.

When the pizza arrived, we took a break in the dining room to eat. It was thoughtful and sweet that Heath thought to order food and bring his family tonight to help. I wouldn't have asked for it, but it was nice to have it. Not that I'd ever admit that to Heath.

He was still butting in where he didn't belong, but I suspected it was more Lori's doing than his. Or maybe it was some misplaced loyalty to my brother.

"Knox said he couldn't make it. Addy wanted him to stay to put her to sleep."

"That's okay. We had a lot of help," I said.

Ireland and Lori cleaned up, and I sidled up next to them. "Thanks for your help, but I've got it from here."

"You doing any more packing tonight?" Lori asked, concern etched on her face.

I shook my head. "I'm going to bed. I'm exhausted."

Lori scrutinized me before saying, "We'll leave you to it, then."

"Thank you for coming. I really appreciate it," I said as I followed them to the door.

The thought of going back into her room and finishing the job we started had my heart jumping into my throat.

“I left some muffins for breakfast on the counter. If you need anything, let us know. We’re right next door.” Lori hugged me tight, and my eyes filled with tears at her generosity.

“Thank you for everything.”

Ireland hugged me next, and Emmett touched my shoulder in a show of support. When it was just Heath, I said, “Thank you. It was easier with everyone here.”

“I’m not leaving.”

“You’re not?” I asked, confused.

“I know you. You’re going to stay up all night and finish so we can’t help you again.”

My mouth dropped open at the accuracy of his statement. “I wasn’t going to—”

He raised a brow.

“So, what, you’re going to stick around and help me?”

Heath nodded. “I’m here for the duration.”

“Fine. Let’s get this over with,” I huffed as I closed the door and went back into the bedroom.

We sat on the floor and went through the rest of her things, the bedding, the closet, and the dresser drawers.

It was hard to throw things away. But he handled it. He put them in the bags and hauled it out to his truck as soon as they were full.

“How are you holding up?” Heath asked me a little while later.

“Better than I would be doing this alone.” I knew I wouldn’t have gotten half as much done by myself. “I

appreciate you being here.”

“That’s what friends are for.”

I stole a glance at his expression, but it was stoic. “Is that what we are? Friends?”

Heath sighed. “At one time, we were more than that, but now, it’s all we can be. I promised Aiden.”

“So, you’re here for Aiden?” I asked, anger surging through me. Was that all I was to him, his friend’s little sister?

He shook his head. “I’m here for you.”

That softened the hard edges inside me. “Thank you.”

I wouldn’t have asked for it, but I sure as hell appreciated it. “I would have given up if it weren’t for you and your family.”

“I know you don’t have a lot of experience with things like this, but that’s what family does. We’re there for each other.”

“But we’re not family.” The only family I had was absent for much of my adult life. I spoke to Aiden via email and the occasional video call, but it was never enough. When I talked to him, I pretended everything was okay. I didn’t want him to worry about me.

“We’re neighbors, and after everything we’ve been through, you mean something to me. Even without my promise to Aiden, I’d be here.”

I let out a sigh and blinked back the tears that threatened. I just had to make it through tonight. Then everything would be easier.

We resumed packing up the room. When the room was bare, and the to-keep boxes all there was left, we closed the

door.

I let out a breath, and my eyes filled with tears. I couldn't bring myself to look at Heath. I knew I was close to losing it.

Heath drew me into his arms, and this time, I let out the sobs that I'd held in all night, knowing I wouldn't be able to do what I needed to if I gave in to what I was feeling.

Heath rubbed my back and held me while I cried. When my legs buckled, his arms came under my knees, and he lifted me, sitting on the couch with me still in his lap. I rested my cheek against his shoulder as the tears slowed, reveling in the feel of being in his arms.

I picked at the material of his shirt. "I'm sure you have better ways to spend your evening."

His arms tightened around me, and his breath tickled my hair. "I can't think of any."

His protective nature never failed to draw me in. He was so good with his family and friends. I was just glad I was still considered one of them.

I felt exhausted, my muscles sore from the tension of the day and the hard work we'd done.

"You want to go to bed?"

I moved off his lap so I wasn't touching him anymore. Being close to him felt too good. If he stuck around, I'd start to get ideas about rekindling our relationship when he'd made it clear he didn't see a future for us. "I don't think I can sleep."

He stood. "You need anything to eat before bed?"

"I'm still full of pizza."

He held his hand out to me. "Come on, then."

“Where are we going?”

“To bed. I’ll hold you until you fall asleep.”

“You’d do that?”

“I’d do anything for you, Marley.”

His words landed on my heart, sprouting roots and spreading to the furthest chambers. “You’re going to make me cry again.”

His lips quirked. “We can’t have that, now, can we?”

I placed my hand in his, and his fingers interlaced with mine. It was familiar and comforting. My heart rate picked up as we moved toward the bedroom. “We packed up everything.” I didn’t have anywhere to sleep.

He hung his head. “I wasn’t even thinking about that. Should we make up a room upstairs?”

“It’s too much work for tonight.”

Heath drew to his full height. “Grab your bag. You can stay at my house.”

I bit my lip. “Are you sure?”

“You can’t stay here. We’ll get a room ready for you tomorrow.” I was relieved not to sleep in Gram’s room. Everything smelled like her, and I couldn’t escape the memories.

I opened the door, trying not to feel the pang of loss at the sight of the now-bare room. I grabbed my bag from the bathroom, put my toiletries inside, and zipped it before meeting Heath at the doorway. He slid the strap off my arm and slung it over his.

I followed him to his truck, and he drove down the lane in silence. The entrance to the Monroe Farm had a sign and a decorated tree next to it. “Ember and Addy chose this tree to decorate.”

“You still do that?” I asked, remembering the family tradition of choosing a tree to decorate on the property. Some years, it had been close to my trailer, and I’d reveled in the sight of it.

Heath glanced over at me. “Never missed a year. It has even more meaning now that the next generation is here.”

“Ember is Sebastian’s daughter?”

“Yeah, his ex isn’t around much. We help him as much as possible.”

Heath drove past the main house, where the lights were out for the night. “This is Emmett’s place. Ireland lives there now, too.”

Then we kept driving until we reached a cabin with a wraparound porch.

“This is so close to my place.” I swallowed over the lump in my throat. Had he chosen this spot because it was close to my property? I wasn’t even living there, so it didn’t seem likely. But it still made me wonder.

We got out and met on the porch. He held my bag, unlocking the door, and letting me precede him inside. It was an open concept with wood beams and stonework around the fireplace. “This place is beautiful.”

Heath’s lips tipped up. “I designed it.”

The kitchen had gray cabinets and white countertops, with swirls of black and gray. I ran a hand over the cool marble

counter and continued into the great room. It couldn't be called anything else with the floor-to-ceiling windows, the large comfortable-looking sectional, and the stone fireplace with a wood mantle.

Heath moved to the fireplace, throwing in a few logs and lighting the fire.

"This place is huge but cozy at the same time. I'd never want to leave this spot," I said as I sat on the couch.

"You want to watch TV before bed?" he asked me as he worked on the fire.

"I'd like that." There was no way I could fall asleep, no matter how tired I was.

"You can change in the first room on the right at the top of the stairs. It has a bathroom to wash up." I grabbed my bag, relieved not to be alone with my emotions. Heath knew exactly what I needed.

I scrubbed my face and brushed my teeth before pulling on red flannel pajamas and fuzzy slippers. Downstairs, I found Heath lounging on the couch with his feet on the ottoman. He had changed into gray sweats and a black shirt. He patted the spot next to him. The couch was large, and I could have sat on the other side, but I needed to be near him.

I curled my legs under me and smiled at Heath. "What are we watching?"

"Holiday, action, or comedy?" His deep voice rumbled in my chest.

"Comedy." I needed a distraction, or I'd either start crying again or straddle him and get lost in his kisses. I wanted to make myself forget everything but what it felt like to be in his arms.

He turned on a movie and dropped the remote onto the ottoman. “Why are you so tense?”

I’m trying not to jump you didn’t seem like an appropriate response. “It’s hard being so close to you.” *And not being able to touch you.*

“It brings everything back, doesn’t it? We never had closure, so everything feels more intense.”

Was he saying that was all this was for him? The need for closure? That the sparks I was feeling had nothing to do with current feelings, but old ones? Was I too caught up in the past that I couldn’t see the present?

Those thoughts deadened my desire for him and made me question everything. I was so caught up in being home again, dealing with my grandmother’s things and the inn, that I wasn’t thinking clearly.

He threw an arm over the back of the couch, and I held myself apart from him. I didn’t relax against him or touch him. Being near him was dangerous for me. Maybe he could resist the pull or compartmentalize it, but I couldn’t.

I was too emotional, too raw from the day I’d experienced to see things the way they were. I needed to renovate the inn, sell it, and go home so I could forget about what was happening here. Once the inn was sold to a new owner, I wouldn’t have any more ties to the area—or to Heath.

Aiden wouldn’t have a home when he visited. Gram had left the property to me, not Aiden. It was a little surprising, but I’d always had a special connection with her, and Aiden couldn’t run an inn while he was gone. He wouldn’t be able to make any decisions or sign any paperwork. It was the logical solution.

As soon as Mom and Dad left, Gram had the trailer towed from the property. She'd said I always had a room at the inn with her, and she didn't want the reminder of my parents around.

It was one less thing I had to deal with.

Heath nudged my shoulder. "Are you paying attention?"

"My mind is racing with everything I need to do to get the property ready for sale," I said, skirting around the truth.

"You don't have to make any decisions tonight."

"I have to sell it. I can't be tied to this place anymore." Especially if Heath didn't feel the same pull I did. He'd rejected me once. I wouldn't let it happen again.

In California, no one asked about my past. No one knew that I'd grown up in a trailer on my grandmother's property. That I'd worked as a maid at the inn all through high school for money to pay for activities, lessons, and college application fees because I refused to accept Lila's money. I'd wanted to work for it.

All that mattered was who I was now. I liked being anonymous, starting over without any ties to the past. And getting rid of the inn would ensure that no one ever asked about my past.

Because my home would be California, not Maryland. With no one in my family living here, there'd be no reason to come back.

"I can't imagine the inn not being the Matthewses' property anymore."

"You wanted to buy it, so I'm sure you thought about it being sold."

“That was different. We didn’t want it developed. We like the quiet and the protection of other properties around us. If a developer comes in, the surrounding farms might sell, too. Our property would lose its value as a farm then.”

“I can see that.” He’d only thought about the inn in terms of how it would affect him and the family business. He didn’t want or need me to stay.

I was holding on to something that wasn’t there. Maybe it never had been. When we dated, I was young and vulnerable. I was looking for love from anyone who would give it to me. I wouldn’t make that same mistake again. I was stronger this time.

Six



HEATH

Nine Months Later

I hadn't seen Marley since the night I'd helped her pack Lila's things and she'd stayed overnight. I thought we'd connected that night, but it only seemed to push her further away.

She was vulnerable that night, and I was glad I could be there for her. But she'd left the next morning before I woke up. I assumed she was running from the emotions that her grandmother's death stirred up.

I figured I'd give her space. But when I called her to discuss the timeline for renovations on the inn, she was already back in California.

It was like Maryland was just a quick stop before resuming her life. She must not have felt anything for me, or she was avoiding her grief by running as far away as she could.

I researched her business online, and it looked amazing. She had hundreds of testimonials from women raving about how much she'd helped them. Her online videos were engaging and full of helpful tips.

I could see why she had a following. She was captivating and magnetic and had the same qualities that drew me to her when we were teens. There was just something about her I

couldn't forget. But her life was in California, and mine was here.

I had to finish my current project and work on Sebastian's cabin. I messaged Marley that it would be a few months and was surprised when she didn't argue or insist that it be completed right away so she could sell it. There were a few delays on my last project with Nolan, and then another emergency came up that I helped with.

Marley was fine with the delay. Maybe she wasn't as eager to sell as she'd originally let on. I let her know when we were finally able to fit the inn into the schedule, and I offered the job to my team. A few went with me, and a few stayed with Nolan. They probably thought working for Nolan was a sure thing, and I was a gamble.

I called my cousin, Cole, and asked if he wanted to work with me. It would be easier to run a business with someone I knew and trusted. He quickly agreed to help with Sebastian's cabin and the inn. I needed to decide if he'd be an employee or a partner. Then there was Aiden. He'd mentioned wanting to help me if I started a business, but I wasn't sure if he was going to stay in the military or not.

I wanted the freedom to make my own decisions and work on the projects that interested me.

Marley left the keys to the property with Mom when she left, so I was able to get in and take a second look, confirming what needed to be done. Her realtor, Alan, asked for closets to be installed, new trim, wainscoting, and crown molding in the rooms.

It meant more work, but I didn't mind. I wanted the inn to be exactly what Marley wanted. I tried not to think about what

it would be like if the inn was sold to someone else and this connection to her was gone.

I preferred to build the closets myself. I enjoyed doing this kind of hands-on work. The house itself was quiet, and I could imagine Marley as a little girl, running from room to room, playing with Aiden.

I hated that the place would be sold soon and not in her family anymore. But maybe she'd always seen it as her grandmother's place, and not her legacy. I knew she didn't feel like she fit in, and maybe this was an extension of that.

I had just cut the boards for the first closet when I heard the click of a heel on the floor. Marley's realtor was a man, so I was confused as to who would be in the house. I wondered if it was a buyer interested in the property or another realtor eager to get an early look.

I set my tools down and walked into the hallway.

Marley stood at the top of the stairs in white jeans, a flowing silky red top, with silver heels. Large hoops hung from her ears, and her face was more made-up than I'd ever seen it.

"What are you doing here?" I asked, more than a little confused by her sudden presence.

"This is still my place."

I shrugged. "I wasn't expecting you. That's all."

"I needed to meet with Gram's attorney and close out the estate."

"I hope your meeting goes well," I said, not sure how to respond.

Her face pinched as she said bitterly, “I want to get it signed before my mom and dad show up, expecting a share. Gram specifically didn’t leave them anything. She always said they were worthless as parents and human beings.”

I took a step toward her. “I’m sorry.”

Marley shook her head as if to ward off my approach. “I haven’t heard from them. They didn’t ask about a funeral service or anything, so I don’t think they’ll show up.”

“It still has to hurt that they aren’t here for you,” I said carefully, not sure she even saw it that way.

Marley blinked, her eyelashes impossibly long. “I gave up on expecting anything out of them years ago.”

I wasn’t sure how to navigate this Marley, the one that was strung tight and ready to detonate at one wrong word.

She nodded toward the room I was working on. “I see you’re working on the place now.”

“Yeah, I left several messages and emails.” I’d sent our proposed timeline, the start date, and the work to be completed, but she hadn’t responded.

“What are you working on now?” she asked, moving into the room.

“The closets. When we’re closer to completion of Sebastian’s cabin, we’ll start in earnest here, tearing out the bathrooms and the kitchen.”

“Alan’s been itching to get it on the market.”

“It was his idea to renovate first.”

“Right? He can’t complain.”

“You could have found a contractor who could do it sooner.”

Her lips pursed. “I wanted you. I don’t want to deal with someone I can’t trust while I’m in California.”

“I’m glad you feel that way. We’ll do right by this place and you.”

“You loved this place as much as Gram did.”

“As much as you do,” I reminded her. She adored the inn and the guests that would come. I think it gave her hope that she’d leave one day and have a life of her own.

“I created a different life for myself. I don’t want to come back here.”

That stung even if I was the one to break things off. “I researched your business after you left. It’s impressive. You’re impressive.”

Her face softened. “Thank you. I’ve worked hard to build it.”

“But you don’t need to be in California to run it.”

Her face pinched. “Not technically. It’s an online business, but I love it there.”

“I get that.” Who wouldn’t love a house on the beach? Why would she want to come back when there was nothing for her here but bad memories and heartache? A part of me wanted to remind her about the good times we had, but there was no point when she wasn’t interested in hearing about them.

I had a feeling she felt too vulnerable the night that she packed her grandmother’s things, and she was running from feeling anything. That she wouldn’t come back unless she had

to, and as much as I wanted to see her again, I would only get these brief glimpses. When the inn sold, I'd never see her again.

It was what I wanted. I didn't want the temptation of my best friend's younger sister nearby, but at the same time, I felt a sense of loss when she left.

"You want to see what I've done so far?"

She hesitated for a second before she finally nodded and moved down the hall toward me. A hint of a smile came over her face. "You smell good, like a Christmas tree covered in sawdust."

"Is that a good combination?" I asked, my breath stuck in my throat.

She smiled wider as she stepped past me into the room I'd come from. "I think so."

Does that mean she was attracted to me? I couldn't be sure after her last visit. She was wrapped up in her grief, and I felt like an ass for thinking about how good she felt as she sobbed in my arms.

It was why I held myself back when she was sitting on my couch. I didn't want her to know what an asshole I was for desiring her while she was in a bad place.

"I was worried that adding closets would take away from the feel of the rooms and make them smaller. But it's not bad, and I can see how it would add value to the property."

"You need a closet, a window, and a door to call a room a bedroom for resale. Your guests will like having the option to hang up their clothes."

“I wonder if all of this is a waste because someone might buy the property and tear it down.”

“Do you want the inn to reopen?” I asked.

She smiled sadly. “I like to think Gram’s vision will carry on, but I don’t have any control over it.”

I bit back my thoughts about her running the place, or at least hiring a manager to run it for her. “It would be nice if there was an inn here. People can come here to see the farm. We’re adding a light display this year to draw even more visitors.”

“I remember the lights you had up,” she said, referencing the nutcracker display.

“That’s just a small part of it. Talon’s been working on it all year and promised that it would be epic this year.”

“I wish I could see it.” She fell silent, and I wondered if she’d be here at Christmas.

“You’re always welcome on Monroe Farm.” No matter how many times I said it, I wasn’t sure if she believed me.

“That’s sweet of you.”

“Let me show you the closet that’s done. I sent you pictures, but you didn’t respond, so I wasn’t sure if you saw them or not.”

“I’m sorry. It’s just too painful to be wrapped up in the details of the inn.”

“I thought you wanted to get rid of it.”

“It’s hard when it’s your past, you know? It was never really mine, but it’s still hard to let go of it.”

“Lila gave it to you. It’s yours.”

Marley turned on her heels in a slow circle, her hair fanning out behind her. “It doesn’t feel like it. I don’t know why that is.”

Maybe because she didn’t feel like she deserved it. That she wasn’t good enough for it, or something crazy like that. But when you’re raised with parents who put you down like hers did, I imagine it’s hard to accept good things when they come into your life.

We stepped into the biggest room. “This one is done.”

“This is nice. It looks like it was always here.” She opened the closet doors and peered inside.

“That’s the idea.” I didn’t like to do any renovations or additions that stood out as different or new. I wanted it to fit right in as if it had always been there.

She turned to face me. “No one else is here. Are you building the closets yourself?”

“My crew is working on Sebastian’s cabin. I want to get it done before winter so they can move in.”

“I bet you’ll be happy when all your brothers live on the farm.”

“It will be nice, as much as they irritate the shit out of me. It’s really for Mom. She won’t rest until all her boys are here. She wants to see Ember more.”

Marley smiled softly. “That will be perfect for your family. Everyone home for the holidays this year.”

I wondered if she was thinking about how she’d be alone in California. “You should come here for Christmas, stay in my cabin—or my mom’s—see the light display, and do some

of the local holiday traditions. We're not far from DC. There are so many neat events at the National Harbor."

Her brow furrowed. "I never went when I lived here, so why would I go now?"

I moved closer to brush a strand of hair off her face. "Because you are not your past. You can do anything you want."

Her eyes widened slightly when I didn't step back. "I can do whatever I want in California. But I never felt that way when I lived here."

"I bet you could if you gave it a chance." I don't know why I cared so much. Maybe if she liked this place, she'd reconsider selling. Right now, she saw it as an unfortunate reminder of her childhood and not the magical place it was. She let her parents sour it for her. I hated that.

I wanted her to fall in love with this property like I had over the years. I'd never considered living anywhere else. But when my father died, it only solidified my decision to stick close to my family.

She dipped her head. "Thank you for taking care of things while I was gone."

"Sorry we couldn't get to it sooner."

Marley shook her head as she stepped around me to leave the room. "It will sell when it's ready. I don't care what my realtor says."

"I had some ideas to add built-ins. I messaged you, but—"

"I didn't respond."

"That's right. Would you want to see the areas now?"

“Sure,” she said as I led her down the hall to the stairs. I showed her the areas in the dining room and living room where I thought it would add to the space.

“I trust you,” she said when I was done showing her the size and the design on my notepad where I’d sketched the rudimentary idea. “Do whatever you feel needs to be done.”

“I don’t feel comfortable making decisions without your okay.”

“You love this place. I’m sure anything you come up with will be fine.”

I wanted it to be more than fine. I wanted to make her fall in love with this place again, to remember any reason why she enjoyed living here. But it wasn’t my place to do that. And I shouldn’t have been thinking about that anyway. It was better for both of us if she stayed in California—even though my chest ached the entire time she was gone.

I was worried about her and how she was doing. Wondering if she was running from more than just her grandmother’s death.

Standing in the dining room in that expensive-looking outfit, I knew her life in California was nothing like mine. She probably bought expensive things and dined at five-star restaurants. Any of the men there would be able to offer her more than I ever could.

I was just a man who lived on a farm and took care of his family. I must seem boring to her.

“I can still see this place decorated for the holidays. It was always my favorite time of the year. With the trees on every floor and in every room, I couldn’t get away from the smell of evergreen. There was fresh garland on the windowsills and

mantles, a wreath on the door, and the lights on the columns on the porch. It made me hope that things could be different. But when the trees and decorations came down, nothing had changed. I was still the girl who lived in the trailer with parents who forgot to feed her.”

I opened my mouth to protest, but she held up her hand to stop me. “I’m not asking for anyone to pity me. That’s just what I thought. I’m obviously different now. I can travel wherever I want and buy whatever I desire, but—” She smoothed a hand over her white jeans, the gold plate of the double Gs on her belt visible.

I wondered if it was designer. “Things and places don’t equal love. You get that from the people in your life.”

“I don’t know about that,” I said, suspecting she was alone despite her mention of friends in California. “Where are you staying tonight?” As much as I wanted her to remember the good things, I didn’t want her to be sad.

“I can make up one of the rooms here.

“I’ve aired out the rooms and cleaned, but they’re far from ready to have anyone sleep here. Why don’t you stay at my house?”

She smiled at me, her lips painted a hot pink, and I wondered what I was thinking asking my biggest temptation to stay with me.

Seven



MARLEY

Staying overnight at Heath's cabin was a bad idea. A very bad idea. The last time we were together, I ran as fast as I could back home to my beach house, where I hoped the sound of the waves would drown out the longing of my heart.

My last visit proved that nothing had changed. I still wanted Heath Monroe. He might have moved on, but I was still that hopeful seventeen-year-old who would have given him everything if he asked for it.

Instead, he'd broken things off. He was altruistic, needing to honor his promises to my brother. None of it mattered when Aiden wasn't here.

The rational part of my brain knew that I was being unreasonable. That Heath made the right decision.

It was easy for him to ask me to stay with him because he'd gotten over me a long time ago. I could be a mature adult and spend a platonic night with my high school sweetheart. This time, I wouldn't be upset about my grandmother, and I wouldn't be open to anything happening between us.

I could pretend he didn't affect me. That I'd moved on. That I hadn't left a piece of myself behind the last time I was here.

“If you’re sure?” I asked him, giving him an out in case it was an impulsive invitation that he was already regretting.

“It’ll give me a chance to show you what Talon’s working on. They won’t be set up until November, so this is the only way to view it for now.”

“I’d like that.” I’d always been entranced with the Monroe Christmas Tree Farm, where it was Christmas all year long. If I wanted to see a Christmas tree, I snuck over to their fields and breathed in the evergreen scent.

Heath carried that same scent. It was familiar and comforting all at the same time.

I needed a distraction because finalizing the estate had this finality to it that I couldn’t escape. Once I’d reviewed the papers and walked out of my grandmother’s attorney’s office, it was signaling to the universe that she was gone. She wasn’t coming back.

I’d never see Gram in this house again. I sucked in a shaky breath as I waited for Heath to pack up his tools and close the doors to prevent dust from traveling through the house.

I appreciated his thoughtfulness. I wasn’t sure if all contractors took the same care. But I had a feeling it was him.

“The Morrisons didn’t mind that I requested you?” I asked him as we headed down the stairs.

“Nolan told me to use this as an opportunity to test my team. To find out if this was feasible.”

“I can’t believe he didn’t mind.”

“He wants me to go out on my own. He believes that’s what I should have been doing all along.”

“That’s kind of amazing. Most bosses wouldn’t appreciate the competition.”

“Nolan has always believed in me, even when I didn’t.”

“Why wouldn’t you believe in yourself? You’ve always been a confident guy.” When we were younger, that confidence bordered on cockiness.

“When my father died, it threw me off my game. I wanted to be there for my family, and I wasn’t in the right headspace to start a business.”

“That makes sense.”

“I worked for a few other construction companies, acting as a subcontractor, so I could take whatever jobs fit into my schedule. The farm always came first, especially around the holiday season. I just recently started working for the Morrisons in a more official capacity.”

“That says something if he’s telling you this is what you should be doing.”

“Mmm.”

“You don’t believe him?”

“I want to, but running a business is hard. What if my team decides that working for the Morrisons is a sure bet, and I’m not?”

“You won’t know unless you try. When I started my company, it was just me. I didn’t have anyone working for me or relying on me for a package. I didn’t need a team. Not like I do now. However, I grew slowly and took my time before hiring an assistant. You don’t have that luxury. You need a team now.”

I grabbed my bag from the trunk of my rental, and Heath took it from me, throwing it into the back of his truck before helping me inside the cab. The interior smelled like him, evergreen mixed with a hint of spice.

Heath climbed in and started the engine. “I asked my cousin, Cole, to help. He’s been a floater, drifting from one construction job to another. I asked if he wanted to build something with me, and he was quick to say yes. I think this is what he’s been waiting for.”

“Is that the same cousin Cole who helped on the farm over the years?” I asked him, genuinely curious to learn more about him over the years I was gone.

He flashed me an approving look. “You have a good memory.”

I remembered everything that had anything to do with Heath Monroe. My crush existed long before he finally noticed me in the woods. All the Monroe brothers were attractive, but there was something about Heath that drew me in. Maybe it was the combination of his confidence, his concern and care for others, and his energy. I wanted to be around him.

He backed up and headed down my lane.

“Thank you for looking after the property while I was gone.”

Heath raised a brow. “You know we’d do that anyway. We’re neighbors and friends.”

I felt bad about asking my neighbors in California to keep an eye on the place. I’d given them a key, but I didn’t think they’d go inside. I had a security system and could monitor the cameras from here.

“I’m sorry I left without saying goodbye in December. I was overwhelmed with everything.”

“That’s understandable. You had a rough night. I’m just glad we could be there for you.”

I had to get as far away from temptation as I could. Because at the end of the day, Heath wasn’t interested in me.

He drove past the main house and took a second lane up the other side of the mountain. “Knox lives on this side with Talon.”

I couldn’t see Knox’s house from the lane, but Heath pointed it out as we drove. “Just through those trees there. He has an amazing view. I made sure that each cabin had a good location and views off the back deck, but Knox’s might be the best.”

Again, I wondered if Heath just wanted to be close to me and my property, but that couldn’t be. It was just something that nagged at me. I wouldn’t be satisfied until I asked, even though I had a feeling I’d be disappointed with the answer.

He pulled up to a smaller cabin with several sheds on the property and shut off the engine. “Talon’s always in his work shed. He tends to forget to eat and sleep. We check on him to make sure he’s taking care of himself.”

“That’s nice that you guys have each other’s backs.”

“It’s nice, but also a pain at the same time.” We met at the hood, and he led the way around the cabin to the largest shed in the back. He slid the barn door open and peered inside. The workshop was dim, with tables and metal objects leaning against every surface.

Heath stepped further inside. “He’s not here. He must be sleeping. I won’t disturb him.”

“He won’t mind that we’re here?” I asked.

“He gets more annoyed when we show up when he’s working. He doesn’t like to be disturbed. Mom said he’s high on focus, whatever that’s supposed to mean.”

“Ah. He doesn’t like to be interrupted when working because it takes him a long time to get back on track.”

“How do you know that?” Heath asked.

I shrugged, feeling a little self-conscious. “I’m a coach. I don’t do as much of it as I used to, but one of the things we talk about is individual strengths—how they help us and how they get in our way.”

“What are your strengths?” Heath asked, leaning on one of the tables that was clear of tools and objects.

“My highest is achiever, then activator, and focus. I think maybe learner is up there, too. I enjoy learning new things but not so much that it hinders me from making moves in my business. I tend to decide and act fast, so I have to slow myself down sometimes.”

“Like when you left here last time in a rush,” Heath said.

I hadn’t thought of it like that. I just needed to escape. I didn’t trust myself to be around him and not tell him exactly how I felt. “What did you want to show me?”

“Nice diversion. We’ll circle back around to you running another time.”

I refrained from groaning, but just barely. I didn’t want Heath digging too deeply into my feelings. It wouldn’t take much to figure it out. I’d never gotten over him, and it was embarrassing. Who was still hung up on the guy they kind of dated in high school? We never went out on a single date in

front of other people, yet it had felt like a relationship, with the full huge range of emotions.

I hadn't needed the ice cream or movie dates or dances to feel like I was everything to him. It was too bad he was able to shut things down so easily. Over the years, I realized it was because he didn't feel the same way. I'd been younger and naïve. A way to pass the time for him. I certainly wasn't worth standing up to my brother.

He moved to another table that was covered in papers. "These are his designs."

I stepped closer to him, trying not to breathe in his scent.

He rifled through the pages until he had the one he wanted. "Look at this. This is what he wants to do this holiday season. They'll be lined along the new lane we just built. It's an additional exit we added for when we have events on the property, like weddings. That way, the traffic won't interfere with the tree people."

I nudged my shoulder with his. "You call your customers *the tree people*?"

He braced his hands on the table, emphasizing his bulging biceps and the strong muscles on his back. "That's what they are, aren't they? They're here to cut down trees."

"I guess so," I said, amusement tinging my voice. It was funny to hear Heath talk about the farm and his business. It was almost like he didn't enjoy having customers on the farm. He liked the income but not what came with it. "When I coached people one-on-one, I found it draining. So, I came up with a way that I could reach more people without exhausting myself." Heath was looking at me with curiosity in his expression, so I continued. "I started conducting webinars to

large groups of people, then I put the videos together in a course. Once I learned that people would pay money for my content, it just grew from there, and I got away from individual coaching.”

“That’s kind of amazing. You saw an opportunity and monetized it.”

My face flushed. I didn’t have anyone in my life encouraging me or telling me that I’d done something amazing. I wasn’t even sure Aiden understood what I did. He just asked if I was okay and if I needed any money. He couldn’t understand that I made money teaching online. “It’s nice.”

“It’s more than that. I read the testimonials on your site. There are too many of them to just brush it off. You’re really helping people.”

“I enjoy what I do, and I love that I’ve changed people’s lives.”

“I can’t say we do that here. We create an experience and give them something to do each year, a tradition. You come to Monroe Farm to cut down your Christmas tree, and you get your hot chocolate, cookies, and maybe even an ornament to put on your tree. Then you don’t return until the next year. We wanted to add to that experience with the lights. Talon made one for Sarah and Addy to decorate their porch, and it kind of took off.”

“I think it’s going to be amazing. Can people walk through, or will it be for cars?”

“Both. I think. We’ll have certain nights where you can drive through the display and a few where we make it more of an experience. We’ll set up booths to sell ornaments, wreaths,

and hot chocolate. We'll play holiday music and set up some bonfires."

"I got tingles listening to you talk. I think it's going to be amazing."

"You can get an idea of what it will look like here," Heath said, pointing at the diagram.

There was a Santa on his sleigh with reindeer. A deer jumping over a gate, that he'd drawn lines as if it was in motion.

"This one is neat. Talon showed it to us last year. You can see the deer jumping."

"I wish I could see it."

Heath smiled. "Stick around for the holidays and you will. The inn should be done by then. You can stay here and spend the holidays with us."

"Oh, I couldn't impose on your family."

"What do you do on the holidays?"

My heart rate picked up. "I usually talk to Aiden. That's the highlight. We get pie and eat it together on the video call. He doesn't get long to talk."

I couldn't look at Heath's face. I didn't want to see any pity there.

"This year, Aiden will be home."

"That's right. He has to decide whether he's going to re-up his contract or not." Heath turned slightly to lean against the table and crossed his arms over his chest. "Do you know what you want him to do?"

“I’ve resigned myself to the fact that he’s a lifer. I’d never tell him what I really want.”

“And what’s that?”

My throat tightened. “I worry about him when he’s gone. I’d like him to come home. But I know he’d never be happy here. And we won’t even have a home. The trailer’s gone. He hasn’t lived here since he was eighteen.”

“You don’t think he’d want to run the inn?”

“He didn’t even care that I was the one who inherited it. When I told him, he just nodded as if it made all the sense in the world. But it didn’t. Not to me. Gram should have sold it to someone who could handle the responsibility.”

“I’m sure Aiden would help you if you asked.”

“What can he do? I wouldn’t bother him with stuff going on here.”

He tipped his head to the side. “Do you ever think he wants to be bothered?”

“He has enough going on. He doesn’t need to worry about me.”

“Then who does?”

“I take care of myself.” It was something I’d said to myself since I moved away. *I take care of myself. Always.*

I didn’t depend on anyone else. I worked until I had enough money to buy my own place. It was important to me that I own the place where I lived. But now that I owned the inn, it didn’t feel right. It wasn’t meant to be mine. Or at least that’s what I kept telling myself.

“I can’t help but think that I look out for my brothers and my mom, and they look out for me, too. But you don’t have anyone.”

I stiffened. “Aiden looks out for me.”

“How can he when you’re not honest with him about your fears and struggles?”

“Like you’re always honest with your brothers?” I shook my head. “It’s different. He works a dangerous job. He can’t afford to be distracted.”

“I can understand why you’re afraid to confide in him, but I think he’d want you to.”

“I don’t need anyone—”

Heath shook his head. “You’re a strong, independent woman. It doesn’t mean you don’t need someone to lean on from time to time.”

“I’ll forever be grateful for you and your family’s help when I visited last time.”

Heath dipped his chin slightly. “I just wish you had someone in California that you could rely on.”

“I have friends.” I had acquaintances, people who wanted to be around me because of my success. I wouldn’t say any of them were true friends. But then again, I wasn’t sure I’d ever had any of those.

“Did any of your friends know that your grandmother died and what she meant to you?”

“I’m sure I mentioned it.” I was positive it was in passing, and no one asked any follow-up questions.

His eyes narrowed on me.

I threw my hands in the air. “I didn’t grow up in a tight-knit family like you did. I’m not built the same way.”

“You’ve got us now. Whether you want us or not,” he teased, lightening the mood.

“Show me what Talon made. I’m excited to see his creations.”

He led me through the shop, pointing out the pieces and then showing me where on the diagram they would be placed. He had a section for traditional Christmas decorations and nursery rhyme stories.

“These are so amazing. I’d love to see them lit.”

“That’s why you have to visit over the holidays. I’ll take you on a private tour. If you’re around that weekend, you can come with us when we decorate the tree. Last year, the girls chose the one by the entrance.”

“I couldn’t intrude on your family time.”

“You wouldn’t be. You’re an honorary member.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “If you say so.”

“My mom loved your grandmother, and she loves you.”

“And your brothers?”

“They love anyone my mom adores. So, you’re in.”

I wanted to ask if he loved me, if he ever had, but I wasn’t brave enough to ask. “Who would have thought a Matthews would ever be part of the Monroe family?”

Then my breath got stuck in my throat because I had thought about that. What would it have been like if I had dated Heath for real? It felt like something with potential to last. Would he eventually have asked me to marry him?

For a long time, I was envious of their family. I wondered why mine wasn't the same. But eventually, I realized I had good things in my life, Aiden and Gram. Even the inn felt like a part of me. My family looked different, but that didn't mean it wasn't as special.

But now that I'd gotten a glimpse into how the Monroe brothers all lived on the same farm, supported each other, and worked to make the Christmas tree farm enticing to their customers, I realized they did have something special.

Eight



HEATH

I wasn't sure what my plan was when I asked Marley to stay with me, other than I liked having her in my house.

It wasn't a good idea. I was bringing the one person I wanted more than anything into my home. The only thing that felt safe was that her brother was standing between us. I'd promised him I'd take care of her, and that was what I was doing.

Making a move on Marley would mean betraying Aiden, and I wouldn't do that. I hoped Aiden would want to work with me this winter if he decided not to re-enlist.

He'd always been interested in repairs and woodworking when he was younger. He excelled in shop class at school. With his military training, he was disciplined and hardworking. If I had Cole and Aiden working with me, I felt confident that I had a shot.

After visiting Talon's workshop, we returned to my cabin.

"What did you want to do for dinner?" Marley asked when she came down the stairs.

"I thought we'd go to Mom's. She wanted to have a big dinner tonight for everyone." I told Mom Marley was here and

that it wasn't a good idea for her to be alone. She took care of the rest.

“You have family dinners often?”

“When we can. We stop by whenever we're working, since the main house is right there. She knows to keep it stocked with sandwiches, snacks, and drinks.”

“Still Momma's boys,” Marley teased.

“Yeah, we are.” I wasn't ashamed to admit it. We loved our father, too, but it was Mom who soothed us when we were hurt or helped us with our homework. Dad taught us how to cut down a Christmas tree and when to plant the fields for optimal growth. He was the practical one, and she was all heart. “Is dinner with the family good with you?”

“I'd love to see everyone again.”

I put my arm around her. “They'll be happy to see you, too.”

“Will it be weird when I want to sell the inn?”

“We'd like to buy it, and we're still interested. If it doesn't work out, though, no hard feelings. You have to do what's best for you.”

Her shoulders drew up. “You aren't doing all of this so I'll sell to you, are you?”

I shook my head. “Of course not. You don't really think that, do you?”

“Sometimes it's hard for me to trust people's intentions. My parents—”

“They didn't give you many reasons to be trusting, but you can rest assured my family wants nothing but the best for you.

If you decide to stay and run it yourself, everyone will be happy for you. An operating inn helps us, and we prefer when properties stay in families. That's what we want to see. No outsiders coming in and changing things.

Her stomach rumbled.

I laughed. "Let's get you to the main house before you pass out. Mom will have a ton of food."

Marley relaxed in my cab, fiddling with the radio as I drove the short distance to the main house. "It's so nice being here. It feels like a vacation."

"Just think about what it will be like when the inn is done. It will be gorgeous, and you can stay there."

Something flashed across her face. Hurt or regret? I wasn't sure.

"I'm not sure what's going to happen with the inn. But do you think—could you—"

I parked next to my brothers' trucks and turned off the engine. "I'd do anything for you."

She let out a breath. "Would you plant some evergreens by the inn? I'd love to bring the Christmas trees there. From our property, we can't see your evergreens."

"I can do that. It will take a few years for them to grow unless you want mature trees."

"Is it possible to move mature trees?"

"We can try. Doesn't mean they'll take to the new spot."

She waved a hand at me. "You don't have to go through all that trouble, and I wouldn't want the tree to die. But I think if it's going to be an inn again, it would be amazing to have a

garden. A private spot for guests to go and sit, look at the flowers, or whatever.”

“What do you think about a fountain? Knox has been working on more hardscape with patios and retaining walls. He could design something for the inn that could work.”

“A fountain would be amazing.”

“We could fix the lane so that it’s in a circle and put the fountain in the middle, or we could put one in the gardens.” I was excited to discuss the possibilities with her. Knox and I loved to talk about these things when we were together.

“Am I crazy for putting money into the place? Shouldn’t I do the bare minimum and give it to someone else?” But then she winced as if the idea was distasteful even to her.

“You should do what your heart is telling you to.”

“I can see the inn with a fresh coat of white paint on the outside, the porch adorned with wreaths and lights for the holidays, and a garden off to the side, with areas for privacy. Maybe even a fountain in the middle.”

“We could do that. In fact, we’d love to. I’ll talk to Emmett about it tonight,” I said as excitement filled me. These were the kind of projects I loved. I wanted to see the inn restored to its full glory, and in this case, far exceeding anything it was in the past.

Marley’s lips pursed. “I’m not sure I want to do that big of a project. Can you give me an estimate, and I can think about it?”

“Absolutely. This is your baby. We’ll do whatever you want.” Although I secretly hoped she wanted to add the gardens. I could imagine how it would look.

“I used to dread coming home, but now that the trailer is gone, and I’m certain my parents aren’t going to show up and demand money, I can relax. Maybe I can enjoy the property for what it is.”

That’s what I wanted for her. To see the property as Lila did and decide about selling after she considered how special it was. I had a feeling her parents and her upbringing tarnished her memories. And maybe it was partly my fault, too. I’d hate for her to have stayed away for so long because of me. But I suspected it was more than that.

When she made no move to get out of the truck, I asked, “Are you ready to go in? I know my family can be a lot.”

The lights were on in the house, and from the number of vehicles parked in front, everyone was already here.

She let out a breath. “Let’s do this.”

“That’s my girl,” I said, repeating a phrase I’d said a million times when we were seeing each other. We spent all of our time on our properties, and I dared her to do things outside of her comfort zone, like snowmobiling, swimming, and swinging on the rope into the pond.

She pulled the handle and got out of the truck without turning around or acknowledging the slip. I hoped the familiar phrase sparked something inside of her. But at the same time, it was a mistake I shouldn’t replicate. Rekindling our past wouldn’t lead to anything good.

On the porch, I covered the knob with my hand and asked, “Are you ready for this?”

Her face pinched. “They don’t think we’re dating or know that we did in the past.”

“I never told anyone. You’re a family friend I’m helping. No one will think anything of it.”

She let out a breath. “Okay. Good.”

Encouraged, I turned the knob and pushed the door open. We were immediately met with laughter and loud talking.

“Uncle Heath,” Ember cried as soon as she spotted me and ran over to me so I’d lift her in the air. “What are you doing, squirt?”

“I’m not a squirt. I’m a big girl,” she said, wiggling down and running away from me.

“You’ll always be a squirt to me,” I called after her, and she just shook her head.

“You’re sweet with her,” Marley murmured from my side.

“You call that sweet? I call that my annoying older brother act. I just tweaked it for my niece.”

Marley smiled and shook her head. “She obviously loves you.”

I placed a palm on my chest. “What’s not to love?”

Marley curled a hand around my elbow and leaned in close. “Not one thing. You haven’t changed at all.” Her voice was full of love and affection, and I let it wash over me.

I liked being here with her like this. When we were seeing each other, we never hung out in front of my family. I pretended she was just another kid I played with from time to time, when in reality, we made out, and my hands roamed anytime we were alone. There was always a spark we couldn’t deny, and it had nothing to do with teenage hormones. I’d felt it anytime she was close to me.

“What do we have here?” Mom asked as she came out of the kitchen.

“Marley’s home to take care of some legal stuff with the estate, and the inn isn’t ready, so she’s staying with me. I thought she could use a home-cooked meal.”

Marley pulled away from me and hugged Mom. “Thank you for having me over.”

“You’re welcome, dear. I’m thrilled you’re home. Heath has loved working on that inn.”

“He has?” Marley asked, giving me a dubious look as Knox appeared at Mom’s side.

“Marley asked if we could add a garden or even a fountain to the grounds of the inn.”

“I think that could be amazing,” Knox said, respect in his gaze.

“I thought so, too,” I said to him. “She just wants an estimate, and maybe a diagram of what’s possible.”

“I’d love to do something like that. We could use it for advertising and other projects,” Knox said, thinking out loud.

“I don’t know if I want to do it. I’ll need to talk to my realtor. He might think it’s too much. He wants us to do some sprucing up and then throw it on the market. The next owner might tear everything down.”

Lori winced. “I hope not. That inn has been there since before I married their father. I’d hate to see it gone. But I understand that you need to sell it and move on.”

Marley shifted on her feet. “I haven’t made any decisions yet.”

“No more talk of renovations and selling properties. Tonight, you can relax and have a good meal.”

“Thank you so much,” Marley said as Mom put an arm around her and drew her into the kitchen, where everyone else was socializing.

“Is she really going to sell?” Knox asked me in a low voice.

“That’s the plan.”

His eyes narrowed. “Then why is she adding a garden?”

“It was just something she mentioned as a possibility.” I got glimpses of her desire to possibly stay and make a go of running the inn. But I wasn’t positive that’s where it was coming from.

“I guess some rich family could move in and use it as their residence.”

I raised a brow. “It has ten bedrooms.”

“It could happen.”

“It’s more likely it will be torn down and developed into cookie-cutter modern houses with shoebox lots.”

Knox grimaced. “I’d hate to see that so close.”

“Me, too. But what control do we have over the situation? I’m sure her realtor wants top dollar. I’m not sure we can afford the place if she keeps adding things.”

“It’s a tough situation. I’d love to keep that property undeveloped, and an inn would be an amazing addition to the farm.”

“I agree.”

“You can’t convince her to stay and run it?”

“Why? Because it would be better for you and our family?”

Knox nodded.

“You know that wouldn’t be right. She has to do what’s best for her.”

“Aren’t you close with her now? You’ve been talking a lot since you started renovating the inn. Surely, you have some pull with her?”

I shook my head. “When she went back to California, she didn’t even answer my calls and emails. I don’t think she wants anything to do with this place. She only came back to finalize the estate.”

Knox groaned. “That’s not good for us.”

“I don’t think she’s concerned about that. For once in her life, she should think about what she wants and needs.”

“You’re talking like you know her intimately.”

I flushed, realizing my mistake. “I don’t. I just remember how awful her parents were. How they’d tear out of the house, yelling for her and Aiden over stupid stuff, and once they’d gotten inside, it continued. It was like they just wanted to take their frustrations out on their kids.”

“I didn’t know that,” Knox said.

“Maybe I ran the property more than you did back then.” Or I paid closer attention.

“I knew they weren’t the best. That Lila was frustrated with them for not being better parents, but I had no idea they yelled at them like that.”

“Aiden wouldn’t have talked about it, and back then, Marley liked to pretend everything was fine.” Even when we started hanging out more, she was reluctant to talk about it. But I knew she was struggling with living in that trailer, and it only got worse when Aiden enlisted.

“They’re gone now, though, right? They’re not going to come back and claim the inn as their own?”

“I have no idea, but from what Marley said, they were specifically excluded from the will. But does she want to keep it? It doesn’t look like she wants to live here, much less be tied to an inn.”

“She could hire someone to manage it. Ireland expressed interest in helping us if we got the property.”

“I don’t think Marley’s going to change her mind. This place holds too many bad memories for her.”

Knox sighed. “That sucks.”

“I know.”

We headed into the kitchen, where Addy was telling Marley about Comet’s latest antics. He tended to eat crayons, markers, pencils, books, and every shoe in the house.

“That dog is a nuisance,” Knox said to me.

“You know you love him.” Everyone enjoyed the two puppies Knox and Emmett had gotten at Christmas, Dash and Comet. They were brothers from the same litter.

“I think you mean the girls love him.”

“You bought him,” I reminded him.

“It was an impulsive decision. Emmett was getting one, and he asked me to help hide the puppy until Christmas

morning. When I learned there was one more puppy in the litter, I couldn't resist. I just didn't realize how destructive puppies were."

I shook my head. "Comet encouraged Sarah and Addy to move in sooner than you thought they would."

Knox nodded. "It worked out in that sense. I knew they couldn't resist him."

"It all worked out in the end." I watched Marley smile and nod at whatever Addy was telling her. She was patient with her and interested in everything she had to say. Marley fit in with my family even though she wasn't used to big families. She didn't seem nervous or uncomfortable.

"I hope this thing with Matthews Inn does, too. I don't want construction next door and a billion houses."

There were so many problems with that scenario. Run-off from the development was detrimental to the farm and the growth of our trees. It also meant noise and traffic. None of which we wanted. But it wasn't my place to influence Marley's decision.

She felt out of control enough when she was a kid. I wouldn't add to that. She needed to feel like this was her decision.

I tried not to think about the what-ifs and worst-case scenarios because Marley Matthews was standing in the kitchen, in the middle of my family, and she looked happy. I wanted to see that look on her face more often.

I would have thought she felt that way in California, but I didn't know anything about her life there. I wondered if she'd answer me this time when she went back. If she'd be involved more in the planning of the renovation. I hoped so. I wanted to

know more about her life there, what her hopes and dreams were, and if she was seeing anyone.

It was none of my business, and I shouldn't be getting in deeper with her, but I couldn't help myself. No one had intrigued me like Marley. I'd dated other women, but there had never been that spark or connection I felt with her.

"Everyone ready for dinner?" Mom asked, and we rushed to help her set the table and get the food transferred from the kitchen to the dining room. There were so many of us that we had to eat at the huge farm table Emmett gifted her a few years ago when he was just starting his furniture business.

It had quickly become his best-selling design. We all sat down in our usual spots, except for Marley, who sat next to me. "How are you holding up?"

"I'm having a great time," she said with a smile while the talk went on around us.

"Did you expect not to?"

"I didn't know what to anticipate. I've never been here like this."

That made me feel bad that I'd kept her a secret back then. There was good reason for it, but she would have loved, and maybe even needed, my family back then. I was selfish to keep her away. She needed the love of a family, and mine would have given it to her. It was too bad I was friends with her brother. Things could have turned out differently.

I probably wouldn't have hesitated to take things further physically, and I certainly wouldn't have broken off our relationship. I liked her and always wondered what would have happened if she wasn't my best friend's younger sister.

My chest tightened. Now that we were adults, did the promise I made to Aiden still stand? Or would he be okay with me seeing his sister? I didn't even want to broach him with the question. It felt wrong to even be thinking about it.

Nine



MARLEY

The Monroe family was so loud and boisterous. I'd never been around anything like them. In the past, I managed to avoid invitations from friends for Thanksgiving, saying I'd be going home to see my family when I was in college. Then later, no one asked follow-up questions.

We passed around the plates of food, and when everyone had gotten some, we dug in. There was teasing and laughing and stories about the holiday season on the farm. It was light-hearted and fun.

When my stomach was full, I leaned over to say to Heath, "Thank you for inviting me. I've never been to a gathering like this. Is this how the holidays are?"

"I would say it's similar except there's a lot more food and tons of decorations. Mom loves Christmas, even if the rest of us are a little tired of it by the end of the season. That's Christmas Eve for us. We close early and breathe a sigh of relief that it's done."

"That's when everyone else is gearing up for the big day," I said, surprised.

"It's different when you live the season."

I sat back in the chair. “I wondered if that’s how the inn would be if I chose to run it.”

“I don’t think so because it’s open year-round. You’d have other holidays, like Valentine’s Day and the Fourth of July, where people are looking for an experience. You wouldn’t be limited like we are. Although we’ve been looking for ways to expand.”

“You want to be open year-round?”

“I don’t think Emmett would ever allow it. We like the quiet, but Mom and Ireland want to keep the shop open and sell more seasonal items. Valentine’s décor in February, Easter in March and April, and so on.”

“You could have limited events, like an Easter egg hunt.” I didn’t say it particularly loud, but everyone got quiet the exact moment I spoke.

Ireland leaned over the table. “An Easter egg hunt? That would be awesome. The eggs could be in the Christmas tree fields.”

“I don’t know about that—” Emmett began just as Knox said, “Did you mean just for Ember and Addy, or were you thinking of inviting the community, maybe making it a paid event?”

“We’d get more visitors to the store if we scheduled events around the holidays,” Ireland said, her words rushed with excitement.

“I don’t think it’s a good idea,” Emmett tried again, and Ireland placed a hand on his arm as if to stop him from speaking. “I can’t believe I never thought of something like this before.”

Emmett scowled at Knox, but he just shrugged, as if it was no big deal. “It would be one day. Maybe two. Max. You have to admit, it’s a great idea.”

“If you don’t want to be involved, go on vacation that weekend,” Heath said.

Emmett’s jaw tightened. “I thought we’d discuss any changes as a family.”

“It wasn’t planned. I was just talking to Marley about our ideas for the farm, and she offered it up,” Heath said.

My cheeks hot, I said, “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to cause any trouble.”

Lori waved a hand in my direction. “You didn’t. Emmett just doesn’t like when people are on the grounds. He’d prefer to confine the business to November and December.

“Why do we have to sell trees at all?” Emmett asked, clearly irritated with everyone ganging up on him.

“You know Mom loves Christmas, and this is what we’ve always done,” Heath said to Emmett as he smiled at me.

It made me feel warm all over. I wondered if anyone else noticed that he’d interacted solely with me.

Ireland waved a hand. “We’re already past Easter. We can’t do it until next year.”

“Thank God for that,” Emmett grumbled, and Ireland leaned closer to whisper something into his ear. He shook his head, but his lips twitched.

I couldn’t have known that everyone would hear my comment and get excited about my idea. Emmett was reluctant to make any changes or invite more people to the farm, but Ireland seemed to have some pull with him. I wondered if the

brothers ran into trouble making any decisions on the farm with so many people and personalities involved.

“But we could carry that idea forward with flags on Memorial Day and music and fireworks on the Fourth of July. The Monroe Christmas Tree Farm will become the place families look to celebrate all their holidays,” Lori said with a grin on her face.

Emmett dropped his head into his hands. “You can’t be serious.”

Ireland laughed. “You have to see how amazing this could be. We could sell food and other items in the shop. Maybe even draw in more Christmas clients, people who’ve never heard of us or who wouldn’t have otherwise made the drive from Annapolis.

“What about serving pizza? There’s a brewery by us that does something similar. It’s super low-key: drinks, pizza, games, and picnic tables. Other than trash receptacles and bathrooms, there’s almost no cleanup,” I said, remembering how much fun I had when I went there with a few friends.

Heath shifted in his seat. “That’s a big project, and none of us has a brewery.”

“What about a movie night? We could project a movie onto the side of the barn and sell popcorn and other snacks.”

“Yes!” Ireland cried as she pulled out her phone and jotted notes on it. “I love these ideas. I have to thank you for coming tonight, Marley. We’ve been brainstorming for months, and none of us has come up with anything like this.”

I smiled shyly. “I love talking business. I’m good at monetizing things.”

Ireland’s eyes widened. “Are you serious?”

“You’re talking her language,” Sebastian teased as he nodded in Ireland’s direction.

“There are so many things you could do on the farm that would make it a year-round place to visit, but keep it limited. You’re not open every day; you have events on your calendar that keep people coming back. If you have items that your customers love, you could even have an online store. They buy tickets to events and come back and buy their favorite items from the shop,” I said.

Ireland waved a hand at me. “Yes, keep talking, Marley. I’m writing it all down.”

“I like the movie nights the best. We could invite musicians to play here, too, but then we’d have to pay them for their time,” Knox said.

“Movie nights would be something we could do maybe once a month, and if it catches on, every Saturday,” Ireland said.

“What about a farmers’ market? They pay you for the space, and you allow them to sell their wares for a few hours every Sunday. Again, it brings people into the shop,” Lori said.

“That’s not a bad idea,” Knox said.

“I’ll look into the insurance and make sure we have coverage for something like this,” Sebastian said.

Emmett held his hands up. “I’m willing to try one movie night. We need a projector and the food, and we’ll tell people to bring their own chairs and blankets.”

“Will you help me plan it, Marley? I’d love your help,” Ireland asked sweetly.

My heart soared at the idea of helping her, but then I remembered I was only here temporarily. “I’m going back to California soon, so I’m not sure I can.”

Ireland smiled, undeterred. “I need to bounce ideas off you, so we can talk by phone or via email, whichever is more convenient for you.”

“I’ll send you her contact information,” Heath offered.

I enjoyed the Monroe family. Yeah, Emmett was grumpy, and they disagreed on a lot, but I felt the love at the table. I’d never sat down to eat a meal as a family like this, and I certainly never shared ideas like this.

My parents had trouble holding down jobs and felt like they didn’t need to because Gram would always help them if they needed it. I think it was because of me and Aiden that it was the case. Otherwise, Gram would have kicked them out and forced them to stand on their own. I suspected that’s what she’d done when I graduated even though my parents made it seem like it was their choice, and they wanted to get away from me. Gram only tolerated them on our behalf when we were growing up. She figured we needed our parents, but I wasn’t so sure.

“You ready to head home?” Heath asked me when everything had been cleaned up, and we’d eaten dessert in the living room while watching TV.

“I’m tired,” I said, the exhaustion from the day creeping up on me.

“That’s right. You flew in today.” Heath stood and kissed his mother’s cheek. “We’re going to head out.”

I hugged Lori, and she said, “You keep my boy in line. You see how crazy they get when they’re all together.”

“I don’t think they’re crazy. They’re a lot of fun,” I said to her softly, hoping Heath couldn’t hear what we were talking about.

“I think so, too.”

When I turned to Heath, Knox said to him, “You two be good.”

“We’re hardly going to be snowed in, and Marley’s not running from her wedding,” Heath said.

I barely suppressed a shudder. I couldn’t imagine being close enough to anyone to get married. The only one I’d ever let in was Heath. That’s why I needed to be extra careful around him.

“Thank you for inviting me. I had a really good time,” I said when Heath let me into his house.

“You were impressive tonight. The way you talked about those events? You have amazing ideas. Ireland loved them. Mom did, too,” Heath said as he shut and locked the door.

“I’m not so sure that Emmett did.”

“Emmett hates all new ideas, change, people, pretty much everything you can think of.”

I laughed. “Except Ireland?”

“He loves her. I’m not sure how she convinced him, except they were snowed in together for a few days. It forced him to decide. Otherwise, he’d probably still be pushing her away.”

“He’s stubborn.”

“I think all of us are. We are set in our ways and believe in one way of doing things. It took Ireland, and now Sarah, to help Emmett and Knox see things differently. Knox wasn’t

ready to settle down, much less be a father figure to Addy. And now I can't imagine him in any other role. He's really matured and stepped up. It even forced Addy's dad to be more responsible. He changed jobs, moved back to Maryland, and now sees Addy on a regular schedule."

"I had no idea."

"I'm just in awe of the changes in my brothers over the last few months. We were all happy being single, but then they met someone, and everything changed. They're more relaxed and open-minded. It's been good for them."

I sat on the edge of the ottoman while he threw a log in the fireplace.

"I know it's only fall, but whenever I am home, I like to have a fire going. It's my favorite part of the house. The fire makes the house warm and cozy, and I want you to feel like you could stay for a while."

He winked at me again, and I couldn't help but wonder why he was saying these things. "Are you dating anyone?"

Heath laughed and shook his head. "Why would you think that?"

"You were talking about Knox and Emmett falling in love. I just thought that was what you wanted. That maybe you'd even found it."

"Honestly?" Heath glanced over at her. "I haven't been looking."

Maybe what I felt for him was something akin to love, but he hadn't been aware of his feelings. Or maybe he hadn't felt anything for me at all.

"How about you?"

I laughed softly as Heath stoked the slowly building embers. “I’m not dating anyone. I’m fairly closed off. But I’m sure you know that about me.”

“You weren’t that way around me. At least not by the end. You shared your fears with me. You were worried that you weren’t good enough and never would be. You were vulnerable with me.” His gaze met mine, and I shifted on the cushion.

I shook my head, refusing to let him take me on a trip down memory lane. “What we had was different. We were just kids.”

Heath frowned as he sat on the couch. “What do you mean?”

“We were young and free. We didn’t know to guard our feelings or be careful about how much we shared.”

He nodded. “Ah. So you’re saying it was bad how open we were with each other?”

My face pinched. “Not bad. Just different. You wouldn’t be that way with someone as an adult.”

“I mean, you could be if you felt comfortable enough with them to share everything.”

“I don’t know that I could be that vulnerable with anyone else.”

Heath reached over and took my hand. “I’m honored that you felt like you could be like that with me. But I think you were your true self with me, and there’s nothing wrong with that. I get that you felt like you had to put on a persona when you first moved to California. But if you let people in, you’ll have more meaningful relationships.”

Everything inside me tightened. “No one wants to know about my childhood. It’s not worth telling, yet I feel like it’s shaped who I am.”

“If you mean strong and determined and fiercely loyal.”

I looked away from him, regret filling me. “I’m not loyal. I haven’t been close enough to anyone to be that way in a long time.”

“You have a hard time letting people in, but when you do, you’re all in,” Heath said firmly.

“Yeah, I guess.” I chanced a glance at him, and his expression was knowing, like he saw through me, even though we hadn’t been together for a long time.

“You haven’t changed since we were together. You just don’t share it with people.”

“I think you’re right.”

“It’s only a bad thing if you’re unhappy, and you’d rather have closer relationships with friends and maybe even a man.”

The idea of getting close to anyone was scary. “I don’t think I’m ready for that.”

“Are you lonely? I wonder what it would be like to move somewhere where no one knew me.”

“I’m content. But you’re right. I’m not close with many people.”

Heath squeezed my hand that he still held. “You’re guarded, and that’s normal. But you’re sharing with me now.”

My heart pitter-pattered in my chest. Why was I confiding in him? What was it about him that had me questioning everything? I was happy. Wasn’t I?

“What do you say we watch TV?” Heath asked, his tone light.

I’d revealed a lot tonight, more than I wanted to. I pulled my hand out of his, missing the warmth almost immediately. I curled my feet underneath me and leaned on the arm of the couch, away from Heath. “That sounds good.”

Heath flipped through the channels until he found an office sitcom we both enjoyed and hit play. We watched several episodes, talking about our favorite scenes and whether it was realistic or not. Neither of us had ever worked in an office.

Eventually, I switched positions, but it put me closer to Heath. His weight meant that the couch dipped in his direction, and my leg pressed against his. I enjoyed the contact, even though I knew I should move away.

I rested my head on the back of the couch when I felt sleepy and wished we were close enough that I could rest it on his shoulder. Everything about Heath was calling to me, his heat, his scent, and his strength. I wanted to sink into him and forget anything else existed.

Ten



HEATH

I felt her head against my shoulder. Her eyes were closed. She must have nodded off.

I finished the episode and then watched another. I was reluctant to wake her up. She was slumped against me, and I could feel the heat of her body through my clothes.

I wished that things were different. That she wasn't my best friend's younger sister, whom I'd promised to protect.

When it was late, I nudged her carefully. Her eyelids fluttered, but they didn't open. I eased myself out from under her so that she was lying on the couch, and I stood before scooping her into my arms.

She felt good in my arms, her head naturally rolling toward my shoulder and her legs dangling over my arm. How could something that felt so right be wrong? I carried her upstairs to the guest room and laid her carefully on top of the covers. She'd already taken off her shoes, so I pulled a throw from the bottom of the bed over her, then slowly backed out of the room. My heart throbbed as the light from the hallway illuminated her peaceful expression.

I hoped she felt safe in my house and on my family's farm. I wanted her to feel like she belonged. I had a feeling she'd

been missing and searching for that feeling all her life but never found it. I worried that her wound was too big to heal.

I wanted that for her. I wanted her to feel loved and accepted. Maybe that was the one thing I could do for her while she was here. Maybe it would ease the guilt over how I ended things so many years ago.

Maybe it would absolve my guilt, but it wouldn't detract from my burning desire for more with her. I couldn't escape the feeling that whatever we had wasn't over. That we hadn't explored our relationship long enough to know if we'd withstand the test of time.

I could make a move, forgetting my promise to Aiden. Or I could hold fast to my vow. I wasn't sure what I wanted or what the right answer was.

I left the door slightly ajar, in case she needed me.

In my room, I tried to go to sleep, but I couldn't get Marley's expression when she asked if I was dating anyone out of my mind. Was she asking because she cared about me as a friend, or was it because she was still interested in me? I couldn't imagine I'd ever get another chance with her, not after how I ended things.

Not that it was even a possibility. I hated feeling twisted up over things. But Marley had a way of doing that to me.

What would I do if Aiden wasn't in the picture? If Marley was just another woman I met? That we hadn't met as kids, kissed, and talked about our hopes and dreams? That I'd never met her before this weekend?

I couldn't erase our past, but I found it easy to imagine Aiden absent from this scenario, mainly because he had been. He visited infrequently, preferring to travel. I only spoke to

him by email where he checked in on the inn and the renovation, and occasionally inquired about how Marley was holding up.

I had a feeling she wouldn't appreciate that I'd talked to her brother over the years about her. I'd been careful never to mention how our relationship had deepened and then become fractured. I mainly received updates from her grandmother.

If he wasn't her brother, I wouldn't have a reason to hold back. I could get to know the person she was now and enjoy being in her presence without any guilt or shame.

I liked holding her hand today on the couch. If I were dating her, I probably would have kissed her.

I didn't want her to disappear to California again. I wanted to keep her engaged and present on the farm. I had a feeling if she wasn't allowed to run away, she might make a different decision about the inn. That she might choose to stay.

Ireland would stay in touch with her about the events at the farm, and I'd be able to engage her with the renovations at the inn. I wouldn't let her run away this time.

* * *

The bed dipped, and I wondered why. But I was too tired to move. Had one of my brothers stopped by with their puppies? Or maybe it was Addy, or even Ember. Occasionally, they surprised me because one of the girls wanted to spend time with their uncle. We each strove to be their favorite, and as a result, they got the best of us.

A cool hand touched my face.

“Addy?” I asked, my voice rough with sleep.

A snort and then a giggle slipped out. Then the covers moved as whoever it was fell onto the bed and rolled around.

Then I heard a shushing noise. “He’s sleeping.”

“But I want to play with him,” Addy said.

“Come on. Let’s make him breakfast, and as soon as he wakes up, he’ll be able to play with you.”

“Can we make pancakes?” Addy asked with excitement as she scrambled off the bed.

I opened my eyes with enough time to catch Marley with a smile on her face and her hand outstretched to Addy as she took it and followed her down the hall, presumably to the kitchen to make breakfast.

I wondered if Sarah and Knox were here, too, or if Addy had managed to sneak away. It was unlikely she was here by herself because my cabin was the furthest from Knox’s.

I listened to the voices downstairs, Marley’s softer one and Addy’s squeals of excitement. Marley must have offered her chocolate chips for the pancakes.

It was more common for me to wake up alone to a quiet house. Sometimes the sound was so deafening I put on music or the TV in the background.

But this, having my two favorite people in my house? It was priceless, and I wasn’t going to miss a minute of it. I jumped into the shower, ignoring my aching cock and the feel of Marley in my arms last night in favor of dressing quickly and heading downstairs.

Marley’s head lifted, and she smiled. “You’re up.”

“We were trying to be quiet,” Addy said seriously from her spot on the chair that was pulled up to the counter.

“I hate to break it to you, but I heard you when you were on my bed. Remember when I asked if it was you, and you giggled?”

“I didn’t think you heard me,” Addy said, and I merely gave her a look. There was no way someone wouldn’t have heard that.

“Where are Knox and Sarah?” I asked.

Marley smiled. “They went for a walk. I told them we could handle breakfast.”

“You didn’t have to do that. Especially since I wasn’t out of bed yet.”

“I don’t mind. Having Addy here is a ton of fun. Right?”

Addy nodded seriously. “I’m so much fun.”

I ruffled her hair. “You sure are. I love waking up to you.” Then I looked around. “Did you bring Comet with you?”

Usually, he would have woken me first with a tongue to my face.

“Mommy took him with her for a walk.”

I chuckled. “That’s good. He needs to get some energy out before we let him loose in my house.”

Addy giggled. “He’s good.”

“So, he doesn’t eat shoes, belts, or books?”

“That’s to be expected from a puppy. He’ll learn,” Marley said reasonably.

“It’s a good thing he’s so cute.” I loved the additions to our family: Ireland, Sarah, Addy, and the puppies. And I couldn’t help but think that Marley fit in at the dinner table last night and again this morning, with Addy.

“Do you get a lot of visitors in the morning?” Marley asked, her voice filled with affection.

“Not often enough,” I teased Addy.

Her lower lip protruded. “Mommy said you need to sleep because you’re a bachelor.”

Marley bit her lip, but it didn’t stop the twitch.

I winked at the girls. “I do need my beauty rest, but I never mind early morning or *late-night* visitors.”

“I’m used to waking up alone. So, this is nice.” Marley turned to face the stove, where a few pancakes were already grilling. I wondered if she hid her face for a reason. If she regretted saying something so revealing. It wouldn’t have been for most people, but I had a feeling that Marley was lonely in California. Even though she was usually in a rush to return.

She certainly didn’t have family there or people who’d known her entire life.

I was determined to help her see the beauty of this place and feel the love of our family. I was all mixed up with my intentions, but I knew those two things for sure.

The door opened, and Sarah and Knox came inside, with Comet pulling ahead and struggling against the leash. “Morning. I hope you don’t mind that we dropped her off. Marley said it was fine.”

“You know I love having her.”

Knox unclipped the leash, and Comet bounded over to me, scrambling on the wood floor to find purchase. “Addy wanted to go for a walk and stop in at everyone’s house. By the time we got to your place, we gave in.”

“I never mind waking up to snorts and giggles,” I said, as I loved on Comet. He wasn’t the tiny puppy he was at Christmas, but he still wasn’t full-grown. His feet were larger than his body, hinting at how big he would get.

“I didn’t snort,” Addy said.

“You sure did,” I teased her.

I loved this back-and-forth, my kitchen filled with love and laughter. I helped Addy set the table and get out the maple syrup and orange juice. Then we sat down at the table overlooking the trees.

I wanted more mornings like this. I loved it when Addy stopped by, but it was even better because Marley was here to experience it.

“It must get lonely in California. You don’t have anyone popping in to take over your morning,” Knox said to Marley.

“That’s true. It is quiet. But I open the windows to hear the ocean.”

“You live near the ocean?” Addy asked, her eyes wide.

“I sure do.” Marley pulled out her phone and hit play on a video of the waves over a deck railing.

“You live there?” Addy asked after she watched it through a few times.

Marley tucked her phone away. “That’s my house.”

“I want to live there.”

“It’s pretty amazing. Have you ever been to the beach?” Marley asked her as she ate a bite of pancake.

“We took her this summer. But just to the Eastern Shore.”

“I want to go there,” Addy said, pointing at Marley.

“I live in California. It’s way on the other side of the country.”

“It’s super far away?”

Marley nodded. “That’s right. You have plenty of beaches on the East Coast you can visit just by driving.”

Addy seemed placated by that, and Marley mouthed, “Sorry,” to Sarah and Knox.

Sarah just shook her head and smiled. “You didn’t say anything wrong.”

“Marley used to live here,” Knox said to Addy. “Her family owns the property next to us. The one with the little inn we’ve talked about?”

Addy’s face screwed up. “Why do you live in California, then?”

I stilled, needing to hear her answer. I figured it was an escape, but I always wondered why she’d chosen to be so far away.

“After college, I wanted to travel, and that’s where I ended up. I stayed because I love the ocean.”

“More syrup, Mommy,” Addy said, and when Knox gave her a look, she quickly added, “Please.”

“I can’t believe you live in Malibu. It must be amazing,” Sarah said, drizzling maple syrup over Addy’s pancake.

“It is nice,” Marley agreed, but I sensed that it wasn’t as amazing as most people would believe. “The restaurants and shops are lovely, and you already know I adore the ocean. I keep the windows open so I can hear the sound while I’m sleeping.”

“I want to hear the ocean while I’m sleeping, too,” Addy said.

“We’ll get you a sound machine,” Knox said reasonably.

Marley smiled at Addy. “You’ll love that. It sounds the same.”

“Knox said you’re in town to handle some legal stuff?” Sarah asked.

Marley’s face pinched. “That’s right. I want to get things settled before one of my parents shows up, thinking they deserve a piece of the inn.”

“Lila wouldn’t want them to benefit from the sale. She knew they wouldn’t appreciate it or want to run it,” I said.

Marley shrugged. “I don’t want to run it either.”

“Didn’t you when we were kids? I remember you enjoying checking guests in and taking them towels and things they forgot.” I remembered how fondly she spoke of the inn.

“I wouldn’t want to be tied to it. You can’t travel or go on vacation.”

“You could hire someone to manage it for you.” I wouldn’t have suggested it except for the fact she’d hinted she was well-off financially. She presumably owned that house in Malibu. That wasn’t cheap.

“I could,” she said as her shoulders drew up. “But I live so far away. It would be difficult.”

I couldn’t argue with that. But I was hoping she’d see what she was missing here.

“You should spend some time here during the holidays. There’s something magical about this place. I think you’ll

enjoy it,” Sarah said.

“I thought you said it was busy during the season,” Marley said.

“We’re busy with tree customers, but it’s neat to see. The items at the shop, the hot chocolate, cookies, and now the light display Talon is making. It’s an experience.” I wanted her to see for herself. I’d seen the way Sarah and Ireland had taken to the farm, how they enjoyed being here with my family, enjoyed our traditions, and wanted the business to do well.

I wished Marley felt the same about her property and the inn. It’s what Lila would have wanted, and I think deep down, Marley did, too. It was her dream at one point. She’d changed over the years, but I couldn’t believe that girl had been erased, at least not entirely.

Eleven



MARLEY

I'd had a good time making pancakes with Addy. I never thought I'd want kids, not after the way I was raised. My parents treated me as someone they didn't want. I wasn't sure I'd make the best mother, but spending time with Addy had been easy and enjoyable.

At home, I'd be working nonstop. There was always something I could be doing in my business, whether it was marketing, providing free content through my podcast or social media accounts, or answering questions from existing and potential clients.

Here, I was forced to take a break and rely on my assistants. I preferred to be in control and do most things myself, but it was nice to have someone to rely on, too.

When Knox, Sarah, and Addy left, we finished cleaning the kitchen.

Heath washed the countertops. "Ireland wants to meet with you today to talk about the movie nights."

"She's going to follow through with those?" I'd offered advice to entrepreneurs before, and even when it was met with excitement and approval, they didn't always implement my ideas. I tended to act on my ideas quickly. It was weird for me to see others mired in indecision or coming up with all the

reasons why it would never work. It was debilitating when you couldn't make decisions or pivot when things changed in the market.

“Ireland loved your ideas. I think she wants to implement more of them, but it's baby steps with Emmett. She knows how to get him to do something, and she must be confident she can convince him that movie nights are the way to go.”

“I'd love to talk to her. In my experience, people think something's a good idea, but they never follow through. It can be frustrating as a coach, so I have low expectations. I can tell people about opportunities, but I can't make them act on it.”

“That must be frustrating. People complain, you give them a solution, and they still do nothing?”

“That happens more often than you think, especially with how much they pay me for my advice. I feel guilty, but at the end of the day, they make their own choices. All I can do is offer suggestions.”

“I can't imagine dealing with that.”

“It is frustrating and draining. That's why I handle very few one-on-one clients anymore, and I've raised my prices considerably to attract more established entrepreneurs. There are a lot of coaches helping people who want to start a business and have no idea what to sell. My sweet spot is helping them build the business after it's established.”

“Your online materials had a lot of information regarding beliefs about money.”

“I have a few topics I've taught over the years, but money seems to be the one I'm best at.”

Heath smiled wryly. “Some of your ideas run contrary to what I've heard from Sebastian. You know he's an

accountant.”

I smiled. “I give different advice than a financial advisor or accountant would. I don’t like narrow-minded thinking when it comes to how much money we can have and spend. There’s a lot of shame in society surrounding debt, but I see it as investing in yourself and your business. I think that’s why I’ve been so successful. I offer an alternate way of thinking that people are desperate for.”

“Why did you want to teach about money? You didn’t go to school for math or accounting, did you?”

“I was a psychology major. I got my master’s and ended up dropping out of a doctoral program. By then, my business was growing, and I wanted to focus solely on coaching.”

“Mom never said why you majored in psychology but didn’t continue with your education.”

“I was fascinated by relationships and family dynamics. But when I practiced counseling, I didn’t enjoy it as much as I thought I would. I didn’t feel like I was making progress with my patients. I wanted to have a bigger impact. I figured I could do that online without the constraints of being a therapist. I can say things I wouldn’t if I was treating someone.”

“I’ve heard of life coaches, but nothing like what you do. It’s impressive.”

It felt good that he was impressed with my work. “I love it.”

He tossed the washcloth into the laundry room off the kitchen. “You should love what you do. Speaking of, why don’t we go for a walk? We can see the property and then meet Ireland by the barn.”

“Let me change.”

Heath nodded as he pulled out his phone, presumably to text Ireland about meeting with her. Upstairs, I pulled on leggings, a sweatshirt, and boots for the walk, excited to have something to do this morning besides come up with content for my online accounts.

Writing emails and videotaping podcasts was a lot of work. There was pressure to come up with fresh, new content. But maybe I could repurpose old videos and webinars and reuse them for times when I was busy. I sent a quick email to my assistant, asking her to go through old clips and see if we could use them in future videos.

Then I went downstairs, where Heath was waiting by the door. His face brightened when he saw me. I wondered if he was excited for me to see the farm. It was different when we were kids and just hiding out in the woods, hoping his brothers wouldn't find us. Now he was showing me something he'd built and was proud of.

He opened the door, and I went outside on the porch. “I love this time of year. When the leaves change and anticipation is building for the season.”

“I'd forgotten how nice it is to experience four seasons. We only have two in California, warm and cool. I don't think it's very wintry, although the native Californians wear their sweaters and boots.”

We walked side by side on the path down the mountain. There were poles with lights strung between them. I'd seen them lit at night, and it gave the property a year-round holiday feel. Combined with the cabins and the evergreens, it was like living in your own world. It made me want to stay awhile and forget about the troubles with the inn.

“In the fall, my brothers start ramping up the stress surrounding the season. They worry we won’t have enough people working or that maybe we won’t sell everything we want to.”

“When you’re only open a few months a year, that would be a lot of pressure.”

“That’s a good way to describe it. Pressure. But if we can do something else that’s year-round, it would remove that.”

“I agree, and I think the movie nights will be a nice way to connect with the community. You build familiarity and goodwill, then they will want to buy their tree here in November and December.”

We walked down a path that led down the mountain. There were poles with lights strung. The only sound was the crunch of the gravel and leaves under our feet.

“Thank you for taking the time to talk to Ireland.”

“I enjoy talking business, especially with someone who’s excited about my ideas.” It was even nicer to talk to someone in person, instead of always being on a computer.

“There are so many things you could be doing; I appreciate you taking the time. When do you have to meet with the attorney?”

“Not until this afternoon.” I was appreciative he’d agreed to meet with me on the weekend. I was hoping to go home on Sunday, but now I wasn’t positive I wanted to leave.

“I’m sure the meeting will go smoothly. Then we can celebrate tonight.”

“That would be nice,” I said, positive that whatever we did tonight would be more interesting than what I’d do if I was

home alone. I'd probably work, researching the next thing I should be doing and writing new content for the upcoming week.

Heath smiled over at me, and I resisted the urge to reach over and hold his hand or touch him in some way. Whenever we were together as teens, we couldn't keep our hands off each other. It was the memory of who we were that had me itching to touch him. It was a sense of nostalgia. At least that's what I told myself.

We fell silent, enjoying the quiet and the sounds of nature. We passed Emmett's house and a barn on the right.

Heath gestured toward the barn. "We use this one for family gatherings, like birthday parties or celebrations."

The barn had a fire pit and a pavilion off to the side. "This place feels like a campground, except with more amenities."

"I don't know about that."

I was positive people would pay to stay in a place like this, whether it was to rent a cabin or pitch a tent. There could be activities in the barns or the pavilions and gatherings around the fire pit. But his family didn't want to open the farm in that way. It was too much. But I could see the appeal of staying here and ignoring your real-life problems for a while.

When we reached the main house and the red barn, he unlocked the door and led me inside. "This is the shop. It's Mom's favorite place, and Ireland's now, too."

It was a large open space with a counter at the front and areas to hang and display items for sale. There was a bakery case and even a bathroom toward the back. "We'll bring in several trees to showcase the ornaments in November. We all help decorate and stock it. We have several artists who make

ornaments and lawn decorations for us. Talon supplies a few items, as well. Although he's been focused on the light display this year."

"It's cute. I can't wait to see it decorated for the season." It smelled like evergreen even though there weren't any trees or garland inside. I could imagine working in a place like this, buzzing with shoppers and kids excited for Santa to come. "Do you offer sleigh or carriage rides?"

"We've done it as a onetime thing before. Our neighbors own a carriage we can borrow."

"It would be a neat thing to offer."

"We struggle with staffing. We have a few high school and college students, but otherwise, it's just family, and now Ireland and sometimes Sarah. Our cousins have helped occasionally, too—mostly when they were younger, though."

"It would be hard to find people who only need to work a couple months of the year."

"If you have any solutions, I'd love to hear them."

"I'll think on it."

The door opened, and Ireland came inside. "There you are."

"I thought I'd show her the place before we met with you."

"What do you think? It's not decorated, but when it is, it's so charming. I think I have some photos from last year." Ireland searched her phone and then handed it to me.

I flipped through the pictures. It was filled with holiday décor but inviting at the same time. "It is gorgeous."

Ireland beamed. “Want to go outside so we can talk about the options for movie night?”

“Absolutely,” I said, sensing her excitement.

“Thank you so much for agreeing to meet with me,” Ireland gushed.

“I love talking business.”

“I can tell that you enjoy what you do. It’s nice to meet with someone who’s so open-minded about these things. Most people prefer steady jobs with a paycheck. I have one of those, too, but I work for a small business, a wedding planning company. We work with a lot of small business owners: a bakery, a rental company, a florist. I’m surrounded by entrepreneurs, and I get caught up in their plans.”

“I didn’t realize you were a wedding planner.”

“Yep, I’m a wedding planner, and I help out on the farm and in the shop when I can. I enjoy being here. There’s something magical about the holidays on the farm. It feels that way year-round with the lighting and the trees.”

“I can see that.”

Ireland’s eyes sparkled with excitement. “It’s what drew me to the place. I wanted to get married here and even planned my wedding.”

“Her fiancé cheated on her,” Heath said, his tone filled with irritation.

Ireland smiled softly. “It was the best thing that ever happened to me because I ran to the waterfall by Emmett’s house, and he found me in my wedding dress. We got snowed in at his cabin, and the rest is history.”

“That’s an interesting meet-cute.”

She waved a hand at me. “Oh, we’d met before. But I was already engaged. It wasn’t the right time until it was.”

That made me wonder if the same was true for Heath and me. We were so young when we were messing around. Was it not the right time, or was he not the right guy for me?

“But enough about me. Let’s talk movie night.” Ireland raised her hands and framed the area with her hands in the direction of the side of the barn. “I was thinking we could project the movie here. People could sit on chairs or blankets there.” She pointed at the grassy area surrounding the barn. “Then we could have concessions inside the barn. But I don’t know. I’m not sure about the last part.”

“You’ll want the concession outside. You want to make it easy to access. Otherwise, you won’t get as many sales.”

“I never would have thought of it like that.”

“I promise this will be a simple event. The hardest part will be the food. What will you offer?”

Heath stood nearby, listening but not offering any suggestions.

“I checked with local restaurants, and we could sell sandwiches with a small increase in price so we could earn a profit. We could offer our own cookies, popcorn, and drinks.”

“It’s a great start. After your first event, I’m sure you’ll think of other things to add, or decide you don’t want to sell something. You can adjust.”

Ireland sobered. “How will we get the word out?”

“The same way you do with your regular tree-cutting season. You can use your social media accounts, your email list if you have one, and post flyers around town.”

Ireland bit her lip. “We don’t have an email list. Could you help me get started with one?”

“I’d love to. I’m a huge fan of newsletter lists. It’s a quick way to get the word out to your customers. Let them know what’s going on at the farm, share upcoming events, and even provide information about how to care for their trees, or the different types of trees available on your farm.”

“Emmett’s against the idea of emailing people. He said we’d just be annoying them, and it would invite more people to the farm,” Heath said.

“Isn’t that the point?” I asked.

Ireland waved a hand. “Emmett isn’t fond of people. Or at least not most. Let me handle him.”

“I think it’s a quick and easy event you can do this fall, leading up to your tree-cutting season. If it goes well, you could schedule a few more of them. Maybe end with a holiday movie,” I said, walking in a circle around the area. The vision of people sitting with their families on blankets surrounding the side of the barn and kids running and playing came to my mind.

Ireland clasped her hands together. “I love that idea.”

I almost wished I could be here to see it.

“You’ll help me organize it?” Ireland asked with a pleading expression.

“I can. But it should be easy. Especially if you’ve already contacted restaurants about providing sandwiches.”

“I have. I think we’ll offer two types of sandwiches to keep it simple: hot chocolate, water, and soda, then the snacks we already talked about.”

“I’ll help with the marketing materials. Have you collected any emails?” I asked, wondering how we’d get the word out if we didn’t have anyone’s information. Flyers were okay, but a newsletter would be better.

Ireland tapped her chin. “Yes. Lori has a clipboard she keeps at the counter. I’m not sure if she does anything with the information. Let me ask her.”

“We could also post a sign-up on the farm’s social media accounts, teasing that we have something big coming, and they’ll want to be the first to know.”

“I’ve been wanting to have a charity tree, too. We could reach out to the local community and get a list of toys that families might need and collect them. They’d drop them off here, maybe even buy their tree at the same time or shop in the store.”

I smiled. “I’m not sure you need my help. You seem to have a handle on the various things you could and want to do.”

“I’d like to have someone to bounce ideas off. Whenever I talk to Emmett, I’m met with stony silence, or him pointing out all the ways things could go wrong.” Ireland sighed.

“That’s tough. But I’m happy to be a sounding board for you.”

“I’m always here for you, too,” Heath said.

“No offense, but all the Monroe brothers are against letting more people onto the farm. I need someone on my side.”

“You have Sarah,” Heath began.

Ireland sighed. “But she’s not as good with this kind of thing.”

“I don’t mind. I love talking about ways to monetize businesses. It’s rare to find someone open to the suggestions and willing to implement them.” My body was already buzzing with ideas and possibilities. I loved working with her, especially with this project. I wanted to help the Monroes. “Whatever you need me to do, just ask.”

“I will.” Ireland hugged me and then said to Heath, “Thank you for bringing Marley to us. I adore her.”

I flushed with pleasure, not used to praise. Sure, I had tons of testimonials on my website to prove that I was good at my job, but that wasn’t personal. Not like this. I’d offered to help Ireland because the Monroes were friends. She wasn’t a client who’d paid me for my advice. She’d sought it out, and I’d provided it to be nice.

It was an entirely different transaction than what I was used to. I had a sense that people, or anyone who was friendly, wanted something from me. Maybe it went back to my childhood. My parents viewed Aiden and me as worthless because we couldn’t provide them with things or money. Maybe that was why I was so worried they’d show up now when I had something they might want.

When my online business first took off, Mom reached out to me, but I ignored her. It was hard because I felt guilty. I had this idea in my head of what my parents should be like, and they’d fallen short. I made myself mourn the loss of the parents that I should have had. In reality, my parents caused me a lot of pain, and I wanted nothing to do with them.

Twelve



HEATH

I spent the afternoon working on the inn while Marley set up in the guest room for a bit, then went to her attorney's appointment. I loved having her in my space. I'd spent so much time wondering about who she was now that I was enjoying getting to know her again.

She was the same person at her core, and she'd become successful despite her parents. It was admirable. I worried that she held herself back from people and life in general because she was afraid of letting anyone in. She didn't want to get hurt, and I was afraid I contributed to that fear.

I wanted to show her the magic of Monroe Farm and maybe even convince her that running the inn, even from afar, was a possibility.

Any time I fantasized about touching her, pulling her into my arms for something more than a hug, I stopped myself short. I couldn't let myself go there. She was here to heal from her past and make some progress on her future. The one I couldn't be a part of.

Then my mind would inevitably wander to the what-ifs. What if she moved back and ran the inn herself or hired a manager so she could continue running her business? What if Aiden was okay with me seeing his younger sister?

I forced myself to focus on measurements and cutting the wood at the right angle so that I wouldn't have to redo the work I'd spent all afternoon on.

When my phone buzzed, I grabbed it. Normally, I'd let it go to voice mail, but I'd told Marley to call me when she was done. I was more than a little worried about the appointment.

"Hey," she said.

"How'd it go?" I asked, unsure from her tone how things had gone.

"Eh."

"You sign the papers?" I asked, as my stomach knotted with concern.

"He had a letter from my mom asking to see the will. The attorney wants to grant her that request before we finalize everything."

"I thought Lila specifically excluded her from the will?" I asked, my jaw tightening.

"She did."

I stretched my neck to ease the tension. "Then why is he accommodating her?"

"I think he wants her to see it for herself and explain it to her. Maybe then she'll get it? I don't know."

"You think she's going to contest the will?" I hated asking, but I had to know.

Marley sighed, and I wished I was with her so I could comfort her in some way. "It's a possibility. He advised Lila to give her a nominal amount in the will and add a no-contest

clause. She'd lose everything if she contested the will and lost."

I let my head fall back. "She didn't want to do that?"

"Nope. Gram was strong-willed like that. If she didn't want Mom to have any of her money, then that was that."

I screwed my eyes shut. "Even if her attorney thought this was a better option?"

"I guess so. Mom can contest it, but what can she say? Gram wasn't in her right mind when she drafted the will? Apparently, it was done when I was eighteen." Her words were thick with emotion.

"Where are you?" I asked, having this overwhelming urge to comfort her.

Marley sighed. "I'm sitting outside of your house."

"Go inside. I'll be there in a few minutes." I hung up, hurried to pack up my tools, and locked up the inn. The last thing we needed was vandals causing problems here.

I drove my truck to my house, irritated I hadn't insisted on going with her to the appointment. The thing was, Marley was strong and independent. She didn't want anyone there, but what if she needed someone to be? She probably hadn't even considered it to be a possibility. She'd been on her own for so long.

Lila never would have wanted to take that independence away from her, knowing how important it was to her.

I jumped out of my truck, slamming the door as I took the porch steps two at a time, and threw my key into the lock. The door swung open, and I scanned the room for Marley.

When I saw her on the sectional, I closed and locked the door, throwing my phone onto the counter as I made my way to her.

Her eyes were red and puffy, as if she'd been crying. I sat on the ottoman across from her, caging her in with my legs.

I took her hands in mine. "Are you okay?"

She tried to smile but wasn't successful. "I will be."

"Are you upset because your mother wants something that's yours? Or that she's back in your life?" I asked carefully.

She chewed her lip and looked away from me. "I think it's that she's back. And not to apologize or have a relationship with me, but because she wants something. So, both, I guess."

"It's okay to be conflicted."

Marley blinked away tears. "Your mother is supposed to love you unconditionally and show you that with everything they do. The love in your mom's dining room last night? I've never felt anything like it. It was palpable, and I felt like I was a part of that."

I squeezed her hand. "I should have invited you over back then."

Marley shook her head. "It wouldn't have been right. You didn't want my brother to know." Her gaze lifted. "But I'm glad I saw it. It showed me the way moms should be, and the contrast with how mine was." Then she sighed, and her shoulders drooped. "The question is, will I always be disappointed and hurt, or will I eventually heal and move on?"

"I'd like to think that you can heal and move on. But it's hard. I've never been through anything similar. When my father died, I carried a lot of guilt and shame because I worried

we'd missed a sign or that we weren't paying close enough attention to him."

Marley shook her head. "You couldn't have known. Maybe there were no signs, or he didn't want you to worry."

"I know that now. But when it's fresh, your mind goes to crazy places. I think Knox took it worse because he'd moved away from home for college. After Dad died, he moved back. He said it was what he'd always wanted but recently admitted it was to help Mom and to be there for us."

"I can see why you thought that. But we don't have the control over people that we think we do." Her voice was soft.

Is that how she felt as a kid? Out of control? A victim of her circumstances? Was that why she held so tightly to what she could control, her life in California and her business? She drifted away from her past. "I'm sorry you have to deal with your mother."

Marley smiled sadly. "No one should have to say something like that. I shouldn't have to *deal* with my mother. She should have always been there for me with love and support."

"She might not have been, but Lila was."

Marley shifted on the couch so that she was leaning toward me. "And I'm forever grateful for her. I would have been lost. Aiden probably wouldn't have enlisted. He would have felt the need to take care of me. That wouldn't have been right."

"He loves you, and there's nothing wrong with that."

Her lips pursed. "But he should have been a kid, not my protector."

I couldn't argue with that because she was partially right. Sure, her parents should have taken on that role, but there was nothing wrong with a brother looking out for his sibling. "When we were younger, we had to look out for each other. Mainly because we hid whatever crazy thing we were doing from my parents."

Marley's lips twitched. "You ran those woods like you had no one looking after you."

"We were wild and carefree." Now, we were worried about profit and expenses, customer satisfaction and retention rates, and income streams.

Marley smiled softly, and I loved that I'd made her forget, even if it was only for a few seconds. "I love that for you."

I sighed, not realizing that I'd made her feel bad about her past again because mine was good and hers wasn't. "Forgive your parents for not being the ones you needed and deserved. Let it go."

Her face pinched. "That's easy to say—"

"I realize that. I think as you continue to forgive them, you move on. It's a process."

"What if I don't want to forgive them? Isn't that letting them off the hook? I'm not sure I'm ready to do that."

"You're not forgiving them for what they did. You're saying that you're ready to move on and let your past stay where it belongs. You're looking forward to the future and living in the present where they can't touch you. You aren't that little girl anymore."

"Is that it? I hold the power?"

I nodded, pleased she understood. “And I’m not talking about the estate. You hold the power in your life. You decide how to react to something, whether it affects you or not. You decide who you let in.

Her gaze lifted to meet mine. “What if I want to let you in?”

Her question had my breath catching in my throat and my heart thudding painfully under my rib cage. “What are you talking about?”

She licked her lips, and I couldn’t look away from the motion. They glistened and called out for my attention.

She tipped her head to the side. “What if I want to forget everything for a little while?”

“There’s nothing wrong with that,” I said carefully because I had a feeling she wasn’t talking about her mother anymore.

Her eyes filled with heat. “I want to see if this attraction I feel to you is a leftover from when we were younger, or if it’s still there.”

The attraction was a living, breathing thing between us, but maybe that was just my perception. I couldn’t ignore the person who had always been between us. I forced myself to say his name. “But Aiden—”

Her forehead wrinkled. “I love him, but he’s not here. He shouldn’t have any control or say over my life.”

I sighed, knowing my control was slipping. “But he’s my friend. I made him a promise that I’d protect and look after you.”

“I don’t need anyone to look after me.” Marley’s tone was forceful, and she gripped my hands tighter.

She needed it more than anyone. Especially with her upbringing, and I had a feeling the wounds from her childhood were still there, just under the surface. It wouldn't take much to access them and make them bleed.

Before I could respond, she slipped to her knees between my spread legs, her hands on my thighs. The muscles in my body pulled taut, and all the blood rushed to my dick. Despite my best intentions, my brain wasn't engaged anymore. It was all feelings and sensations.

The heat of her palms seared through my jeans. Instead of tugging on my zipper like I thought she would, she straightened and pulled my face down to hers. "Kiss me."

It was a command, yet she held herself back slightly as if she was giving me the choice. I could stand up and put some space between us, reminding her of my promise to her brother, or I could give in to my desires.

It felt selfish and wrong, but lowering my lips the last few centimeters to meet hers was too tempting. Her hand came around my neck, tugging me still closer as our lips met and parted. My tongue slipped inside her mouth, dipping and exploring.

Heat exploded through my body, setting every nerve ending on fire. I dipped my hand into her hair, holding her to the spot where I could feast on her mouth.

How had I ever held myself back from her? How had I walked away? The idea wasn't feasible, as I continued to kiss her like she'd pull away at any second. One of us would return to our senses. It was only a matter of time.

One of us would come back to reality, knowing that we didn't have a future. That Aiden would never approve. But he

wasn't here now, and that was the only fact my brain cared about.

I couldn't get over that Marley was kneeling between my legs, her body pressed as tightly as she could get against mine.

My hand skated over her side, to the underside of her breast, through the sweater she wore. I wanted more. I wanted to feel her bare skin.

When she nipped my bottom lip, I found the hem of her sweater, then slipped underneath, seeking her warmth. Her skin was soft, her stomach muscles fluttering under my touch.

When I moved higher over her rib cage, skimming the edge of her lace bra, she moaned into my mouth. I pulled away from her to see her face. "Can I touch you?"

Her lips curled into a smile. "You already are."

"More." I kissed her softly, needing to hear her say her desires out loud. "Can I have more of you?"

"Yes." That one word was a sigh on her lips as she tipped her head to the side, giving me access to her neck. I licked her neck and palmed her breasts through the lace.

She sighed into my ear, and I ran my thumb over the hard nub of her nipple. "Yes, more. Please, Heath." She widened her knees in silent invitation. "I've waited for so long."

"You've waited for me?" I said, my voice sounding like I was speaking around rocks.

Her palm was on my cheek, her eyes searching mine. "Yes. You."

How had I ever walked away from this woman? How could I have been so short-sighted? So selfish? I reached around and unclasped the hook of her bra, moving a hand

underneath the cup. Her breasts filled my palm, warm and soft, her nipple hard and straining for my touch.

She arched into me as she nibbled on my earlobe. The contact sent lightning through my body, making my cock ache inside the confines of my briefs.

I wanted more. I wanted her spread naked on my bed, but I was afraid to do anything that would break this moment.

There was this tenuous thread between us, and any sharp move would break it. I wanted to weave the web around us stronger and tighter so that nothing could break us and penetrate inside. It was just me and Marley, our past, and our present, coming together in this one moment.

The feelings and emotions, the love and the affection. I thought that my feelings had changed over time, but they were just lying there dormant, waiting for me to let them out.

“I want you,” Marley whispered, her mouth a hairsbreadth from mine, her hand skimming my jawline.

I tipped her chin up so that she was looking at me. “I want you, too.”

“Is this crazy?”

“It feels right.” That statement felt closer to the truth than anything I’d ever said.

She kissed my chin. “It doesn’t feel crazy to you? Out of control?”

“All the above.” My blood pounded in my ears, and my heart raced, but I wanted this. I wanted Marley Matthews. And for once, I wasn’t going to let anything or anyone come between us. I had some concerns that she was doing this to

forget about the issues with her family and the inn, but not enough to put a stop to it.

We were making up for lost time and opportunities. We didn't have sex when we were younger. I wouldn't cross that line. Not when she was under eighteen and her brother had entrusted her to my care.

But we'd messed around like any teenagers did and skirted that line so many times. I'd felt her naked body pressed against mine more times than I could count. But this was different. We were grown adults who knew what we wanted.

I never wanted anyone more than I wanted her, and nothing was stopping us. I could have her and forget about the consequences. It was just her and me in this room.

She pulled back, a challenge in her eyes, as she clutched the edge of her sweater and held my eyes for a second before pulling it over her head. She shrugged off her bra and let it fall to the floor.

She still knelt, her hair curled over her shoulder, partially covering her gorgeous breasts. She'd filled out since I saw her last, her curves more pronounced, her bones less prominent. Her skin was tan and called out for me to lick and suck and take. I lifted her so that she straddled my lap, my cock nestled between her legs; the only barrier was our jeans.

She arched into me as I sucked on one nipple. I kept her anchored to me with a hand on her hip.

She held the back of my head. "That feels so good."

I lifted my head and said, "That's because it's my mouth on you."

"Yes," she said as I took her second nipple into my mouth, her head falling back, her back arching. She moved over my

cock, and I would have given anything to remove the last few pieces of material between us. But as much as I wanted her, I didn't want to rush anything.

This might be the only chance I got with her, and I didn't want to do anything to mess it up.

“Please, Heath. I need more.”

I lifted her and set her on her feet, working her belt and then the zipper of her jeans until we were both shoving the material over her hips and down and off. She hooked her hands into the side of her black panties, and I stopped her.

“Let me.” I moved her hands away and replaced them with mine, pulling the material oh so slowly over her long legs. “You are gorgeous.”

She bit her lip as she stepped out of the lace.

As I let my gaze drift down her body, over the curve of her hip, and between her legs where she was bare, my breath caught in my throat. Marley stood in front of me naked, and I wasn't touching her. I wasn't even breathing.

Marley reached for me, a rare expression of vulnerability on her face as I took her hand and placed it on my cheek. “I want you, Marley Matthews.”

Thirteen



MARLEY

I want you, *Marley Matthews*.

I hoped it was for a lot more than this one afternoon. I wasn't sure what we were doing or where this would go. I just knew that it felt amazing, and I didn't want any of it to stop. "And I want you. So much."

There was something about our declarations that made this moment so much more than anything else I'd ever experienced. I'd slept with a few other guys, hoping to find love, but all of them had fallen short. There wasn't that deep connection I'd had with Heath.

There was something about this man who seemed to get me on so many levels that touched me deeper than anyone else. It was like he was reaching inside my soul when he touched my skin.

The moment sizzled and simmered between us, both of us hesitant to make the next move. I swayed toward him, and he stood, crowding me against the couch before lifting me to straddle his waist.

"I need you in my bed."

"Yes, please," I purred as he easily carried me through the living room and to the stairs. "Take me to your cave." Then I

bit his earlobe and pulled.

He practically growled as he gripped me tighter. He was big and growly and straining at the seams with barely withheld strength. I wanted to feel those muscles moving over me, his tongue leaving a trail over my body and the scruff on his chin scraping my sensitive skin.

I wanted everything with him.

When we got to his bedroom, he set me carefully on the bed, then stood so he could unbuckle his jeans and push them down, revealing black briefs that hugged his cock. I couldn't look away or resist my urge to move to my knees and crawl toward him.

He groaned. "What are you doing to me?"

I touched the waistband of his briefs and pushed them down over his thick thighs.

He shoved my hands away and helped me finish. His cock bobbed in front of me. I gripped the base and squeezed.

Heath's head fell back. "I love how you touch me."

I remembered that he liked to be held with a firm grip, almost rough. "Can I taste you?"

"Baby girl, you can do whatever you want."

My core clenched as I leaned over to lick the pre-cum off the tip.

"You're killing me." His tone was guttural, as if he was barely holding himself back from taking what he wanted.

"Only in the best way," I teased as I licked the head like a lollipop. I wanted to tease him. To make him want me even more. I wanted him to anticipate my every touch and swipe of

my tongue. I wanted to reduce him to physical sensations. I didn't want him to think about his family or my brother.

I didn't want him thinking at all. I sucked him deep, and I felt the tension in Heath's body as he touched my hair ever so slightly. I looked up at him, meeting his steel gaze. I wanted more. I wanted him to possess me.

He must have read what I was thinking because he ever so slightly tipped his hips forward, sliding his dick deeper into my mouth. I gripped his thighs, loving the strength I felt in his muscles.

He did it again, this time, more forcefully, and I swallowed when it hit the back of my throat.

“Fuck. That's hot.”

We'd messed around when we were younger. A lot. Other than sex, there was nothing we didn't experiment with, and I spent a lot of time sucking his dick. He was so amazing with his mouth that I worried I'd never find someone with similar skills. But now I think it was because we had so much time to get to know each other, to experiment with what we liked and didn't like.

I never dated anyone else long enough to know their wants and desires. To explore sex in this way. The reality was, I only felt this comfortable with Heath.

The way he gripped my hair, his gaze never leaving mine, as he made sure this was what I wanted, made me feel sexy and desired. I'd never felt this free with anyone else.

“You're so sexy.”

I hummed around him, pleasure coursing through my body at his praise.

“Your lips are so hot stretched around my cock.”

I could only imagine what I looked like to him. On my knees, his cock stretching my mouth to the limits. I let him move in and out of my mouth, sucking him as best I could and swallowing when he went deep.

But I was restless and desperate for relief.

“Are you getting hot sucking my cock?”

I let his cock slip from my mouth. “I need you.”

He was over me in a minute, pushing me to my back. “You want my mouth or my cock?”

“Cock, please.”

“So sweet,” he said as he sucked on my nipple, his cock slipping between my folds.

“I’m on birth control, and I’ve been tested. It’s been a while for me.”

“For me, too. I’m clean.” His cock teased my entrance, then slipped inside slightly.

My mouth dropped open as the feel of him inside me only amped my desire.

“You like me bare.”

“I’ll take you any way I can have you.”

He bit my nipple lightly as he eased inside, giving me time to adjust to his size before continuing. I gripped his arms, loving the bunch of his muscles beneath my palms. He was so strong, so virile, and he smelled like spice and evergreen. He was everything I’d always loved, and he was finally inside me, filling me up in the best way possible.

When he was balls-deep, he braced his hands on either side of me and paused. “Are you okay?”

“More than.” I lifted my hips to encourage him to move. “But I need you to—”

He pulled out and thrust inside me in one swift motion, stealing the words from my lungs. I squeezed my eyes against the sensation of him gliding inside me with sure movements. He was hitting this spot that sent me reeling with each pass.

I squeezed his arms tighter, feeling myself drifting out of control. “Heath.”

He leaned down to kiss me. “I’ve got you.”

“Don’t let go.” I wasn’t sure what I meant by that because he was holding me. Maybe I meant it in an emotional way, but then he moved over that spot again, and I couldn’t think at all.

He kissed me, taking me higher with each thrust. Just when I thought I was going to lose my mind if I didn’t get a release, I shattered into a million pieces. My last thought was I hoped he’d pick them up and put me back together, but knowing I’d never be the same again.

He ran a hand under my back and lifted me like a rag doll to straddle his lap. He gripped my hips and lowered me over his cock.

The position felt deeper somehow, more intimate.

Heath’s gaze was fierce. “You like this?”

I felt pliable, like he could do anything he wanted, and I’d love every minute of it. I couldn’t do anything more than nod because I felt overwhelmed with how intimate this was.

I was with Heath Monroe. I was in his bed, in his cabin, on his family’s farm. We weren’t hiding. He’d forgotten or at

least pushed my brother out of his mind.

With each glide, he pierced my soul, binding me to him tighter. The thought heightened everything.

I didn't think it was possible to orgasm a second time, but the sensation was building again. "Heath," I cried as I gripped him tighter. I was a little afraid of the power that he had over me. I wasn't sure I'd survive a second orgasm.

"I've got you, baby girl."

I wasn't sure why he called me that. He never had before, but I liked it a lot.

"You can let go with me."

The truth of those words washed over me. Could I trust him not to hurt me? Not to set me aside without so much as a backward glance?

There was something in his eyes, a fierce determination and so much affection and tenderness. And it was all for me. If I didn't look away, I could almost believe his words.

He leaned close to my ear and whispered, "Let me love you."

I couldn't be sure of the exact words because that was the moment when he reached down and touched my clit. I moaned as the orgasm washed over me, more intense than the last.

This one felt like it reached inside me and wrung out my insides. I was vaguely aware that he followed me over and sank his teeth into the place where my neck met my shoulder. He soothed it with a lick and a mumbled apology.

"It's okay," I said as he laid me back on the covers and moved to the bathroom. Is this where he pulled back, reminding us both of my brother and Heath's vow to protect

me? Maybe I should get dressed so I was covered when he returned with nothing but regret on his face.

I heard the water run, and then Heath was in front of me, cleaning me.

“What are you doing?”

He looked at me with nothing but contentment. “I’m cleaning you.”

“Oh,” I said stupidly, unsure if anyone had ever taken care of me. It certainly hadn’t happened after sex. But then maybe it was me who’d moved away, get dressed, and make an excuse so I could go home to my bed. Where I’d inevitably think back to the time when I had felt something for someone.

But this time I was with Heath, and he was all I’d ever thought about. I couldn’t believe we were here, and this was real.

He wadded up the washcloth, aimed for the hamper in the corner, and threw it. Then with a grin, he flopped onto the bed next to me. Propping himself on one elbow, he asked, “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, that was—” There were no words that could adequately describe how intense it was.

He leaned down and kissed me softly, touching the strands of my hair and stroking my arm down to my hip, where he held on. When he finally lifted his head, he said, “Thank you.”

“For what?” I asked.

He pulled back slightly so he could see my expression. “Being with you is a gift.”

“But I’m not a—” The word virgin got stuck in my throat because I was when I was with Heath; he never made that

move. I knew why he held back, but I always wished my first time was with him.

A soft smile played on his lips. “It was our first time, and I always knew it would be a gift when it happened.”

I wanted to remind him that he was the one who’d walked away last time, but I couldn’t. I didn’t want to mar this special moment with regrets from our past.

Then he kissed me again, erasing any negative thoughts I was having. I wanted to stay here forever, cocooned in his arms in his bed. No one was expecting me in California.

My business was online. My assistants lived all over the world. No one needed me to be in California physically. I could go and do whatever I wanted.

“Can you stay?”

Nerves fluttered in my stomach. “I have a flight scheduled for tomorrow.”

He brushed my hair off my forehead. The movement was so tender my heart squeezed in response. No one had ever looked at me like he did. It was as addicting as it was dangerous. I couldn’t get used to being with him like this. I didn’t know when he’d leave again, but I knew he would.

“Can you stay for a few more days? I can go over the renovations with you, and we can spend more time together.” His expression was pleading.

What did I have to lose? I also wondered what if, and this was my chance. “I can change my flight.”

He smiled, warming me from the inside out.

I just hoped I wasn’t making a big mistake. That I wasn’t placing my heart in his hands only for him to squeeze it or

drop it and walk away. When we were together the first time, I would describe it as young love. But what just happened between us was in a different stratosphere. He had the power to obliterate me. And unlike him, I didn't have a family or friends to fall back on.

It was just me picking up the pieces.

He rolled to his back and reached for me to cuddle into his side. "You won't regret this."

I didn't say anything, but my stomach was already twisted in knots. I wasn't sure what the right decision in this situation was. But I knew if I walked away, I'd always have those questions. This was my chance to see if our relationship was a flicker or steady and true.

I settled into his arms, breathing in his scent and marveling that we weren't lying on a blanket in the woods but in his cabin. I couldn't believe I was here, but at the same time, it felt right.

In Heath's arms was the only place I'd ever felt like I truly belonged. I felt whole for once, as if the pieces of me that had scattered with every hurt from my mother, my father, my brother, and Heath, had come back together.

I listened to the steady beat of his heart underneath my cheek and waited for his muscles to soften and relax. I fought my flight response to go back to my room, or even to the inn. But I'd made him a promise to stay for a few days. To see where this would take us, and I wouldn't go back on that.

I was just as curious as he was. I finally closed my eyes, reliving the dinner with his family and today. I drifted off for a few hours, and when I woke, Heath was moving me to my

back. “I’m sorry. I’m hungry. I’m going to get something to eat, but you can sleep.”

My stomach rumbled in response. The clock by his bedside read eleven. “We never ate dinner.”

He smiled softly. “We were preoccupied with other things.”

The afternoon came back to me, the anxiety about my mom’s letter to the attorney, the fear that she’d come back only to cause more trouble, and then the rest of the evening with Heath.

“Don’t think about your parents or the inn. It’s just you and me.”

I nodded.

“You can wait here or come with me,” he said as he got out of bed and pulled on sweats.

I flipped off the blanket, realizing I was still naked.

Heath tossed me a T-shirt and sweatpants. “These will be big.”

“Thanks,” I said as I dressed quickly before heading into the bathroom to pull my hair into a ponytail and wash my face with cold water. I couldn’t believe I’d let go so completely with Heath when I couldn’t with any other man.

It only solidified my belief that what I had with him was different, and not just the love of youth, but something that withstood the years since.

I made my way down the stairs, reveling in what he’d built. There were hardwood floors throughout that were cool on my bare feet and a beautiful wood railing with incredible

detailing. I wondered if he'd made it or if it was Emmett's work.

Heath stood in the fridge. "Do you want eggs? I can make an omelet."

"That sounds good to me."

He flashed me a smile. "Have a seat, then. It'll just be a few minutes."

I sat on the stool at the oversized island. The room itself was clean, as if he didn't cook often or he was a neat freak. I never spent any time with him inside, so I didn't know the basic things about him and his habits.

He cracked the eggs, whipping them before pouring them into the pan. My stomach rumbled again.

"What are you thinking about?" Heath asked as the eggs simmered and cooked in the pan on the stove.

"That it's crazy we're here."

He leaned a hip against the counter and crossed his arms over his bare chest. His sweatpants hung low on his hips. Every muscle was well-defined, and I wanted to trace the dips and valleys with my tongue. "Crazy, but at the same time, inevitable."

"How do you figure that?" I asked, curious as to his thoughts about us.

"We were too young that first time, but now we can explore a real relationship."

"What about Aiden?" I asked, reluctant to bring him up but knowing I needed to.

Heath sighed. "I told him I would protect you. I can still do that while we're together."

"He won't like it."

"Aiden's been gone a long time. I don't know if he'll get out this time or reenlist. We have to live our lives. We can't live according to his dictates. If this thing between us feels right, then what does it matter what Aiden thinks?"

"Because he's my brother and your best friend. You never wanted to risk the relationship."

His jaw tightened. "I'm not saying it's a great idea. But I like being with you. It feels too good to walk away from."

How long would he feel like that? Would the guilt eventually take over, and he'd remember why we could never truly be together? Would I survive it this time?

"Are you worried about what your brother thinks?" Heath asked as he turned to the stove to check the eggs.

"Not really. He's been gone for such a long time. And I've kept him out of my personal business." At first, I didn't want him to worry, especially when he was so far away. But then it became a habit. "What's here for him now?"

Heath turned and his gaze settled on me. "You."

I shook my head. I was never enough for someone to stay. I lived on Gram's property, so she couldn't leave, but everyone else did. Heath might not have physically left the area, but the breakup had the same effect.

I was alone. But I always knew that was where I'd end up. If I was enough for anyone, they would have stayed. I would have attracted one long-term boyfriend or friendship over the years.

“You don’t think he’s going to move back if he doesn’t re-up?”

“I doubt it.”

“What if he wants to run the inn?”

I laughed. “He’s a soldier. There’s no chance he’ll be interested in running an inn in the middle of nowhere.”

“With his sister and best friend?” Heath asked.

“Like I said, he doesn’t visit home often. I think he’ll move near one of his buddies. But it’s more likely that he’ll reenlist. He’s a lifer.”

“I always thought so, too. But now that Gram’s gone, and you’re on your own—”

“I take care of myself. Aiden hasn’t in a long time.” This was another reason why I didn’t get close to people. They tried to make me see things a different way, but I knew my truth. And I wasn’t one of those people destined for a happy ending.

Fourteen



HEATH

I admired Marley for her independence and strength. But I couldn't help but wonder who took care of her. She didn't mention friends in California who'd be upset if she stayed here for a few more days. She'd hidden her life from Aiden.

If I wanted her, this wasn't going to be easy. She'd been hurt. She wouldn't be amenable to opening up, especially after I walked away the first time.

I needed to be sure she was what I wanted before I pursued anything further. The next few days were a test of sorts to see if we were compatible. We were obviously combustible in the bedroom, but would it translate to real life?

And I couldn't get past the geographical distance. Her life was in California. She loved the ocean and her home. Could she be happy living on a Christmas tree farm?

I sprinkled shredded cheese over the almost-cooked omelet and folded one half over the other, then pressed it closed with the spatula.

"Are you a good cook?" Marley asked.

"I can cook the basics. We make it a habit to stop by Mom's for lunch and sometimes dinner, so I'm not on my own

much for meals. But I've gotten good at making eggs and pancakes for breakfast. Sometimes Addy or Ember stop by."

She smiled softly. "You're great with them."

"I'm happy that another generation of Monroes is living on the farm."

"You see them running the farm?"

"One of the kids has to love the farm and be willing to stay to continue what we've built. I think at least one of them would want to carry on the legacy. It's in their blood, after all," I said as I plated the omelet and pushed it across the counter toward her.

Then I grabbed a glass and filled it with iced water. "You can eat."

I didn't crack more eggs until she'd cut one piece and eaten it, her eyes falling closed in pleasure. "This is so good. I can't remember the last time someone cooked me a meal." She fell silent, and I wondered what she was thinking.

Finally, she said, "It was probably Gram. She was always making me egg sandwiches, as if they could heal any wound."

I smiled at the memory of her moving around the kitchen and telling me to sit at the table. "I remember her doing that. Every time I stopped by to visit, she'd offer me one."

Our gaze met. "That was her go-to when I was sick, too."

I cracked three eggs, added a drop of milk, and whipped it with a fork before pouring the mixture into the pan. "I don't know if eggs heal wounds, but I think cooking is a form of caring for someone. I've watched my mom do that for years."

Marley stilled. "Your mom shows you love through food. She cooks big meals and always makes sure she has food for

when you stop by.”

“She loves us in other ways, too. She checks in with us to make sure we’re doing okay. When Knox messed things up with Sarah, we all talked to him. He admitted he felt guilty over not being there when Dad died and then missing the call when Mom was in the hospital.”

“It must have been hard when your dad passed. He was the heart of this place.”

“I think my mom was the heart, and my dad was the one who kept it beating. When he died, it was up to all of us to step into his role. To keep this place running smoothly and ensure Mom took care of herself. I think we’ve done a good job of it.”

“I think so, too. The farm and your family are thriving.”

“I never thought my brothers would settle down. We always joked we’d live here alone in our cabins forever,” I said as I checked the omelet.

“You’re so lucky.”

“I didn’t tell you that to make you feel bad,” I said over my shoulder.

“You don’t have to walk on tiptoes around me. I’m not fragile.”

“You’re the strongest person I know.” That was what had drawn me to her in the first place. She was defiant when I’d run into her in the woods, always telling me she had a right to walk in the woods wherever she wanted, despite the property lines. We didn’t care if she hung out on the farm, but it was amusing how she’d defend herself so fiercely.

When my omelet was done, I ate standing up. Then I placed our dishes in the dishwasher and the pan in the sink. I

held my hand out to her. “You want to watch TV in bed?”

She smiled. “That sounds great.”

I interlaced my fingers with hers, wondering when I’d last held a woman. I couldn’t remember if I ever had. It was something Marley and I did when we were seeing each other before. I couldn’t take her out for ice cream or to the movies, so I had to find other ways to show her I liked her.

In my room, I propped the pillows against the headboard so we could watch TV. “I figured it might be hard for us to go back to sleep.”

I grabbed the remote and flipped through the streaming services, looking for something to watch. We finally settled on a movie, and she cuddled into my side. This time, she came easily. I hoped with time she’d relax around me.

I couldn’t blame her for being slow to trust my intentions. It also meant I needed to figure out what I wanted before I took our relationship past these few days.

Within a few minutes, Marley was asleep. Her expression was peaceful as her eyelashes fanned over her cheeks. She was gorgeous, even in my oversized shirt and sweats.

I couldn’t get the image of her going down on me out of my head. Being with her again exceeded all my expectations. She was a little uncomfortable with intimacy. But again, it all came down to trust. I’d need to earn it back, and it was something I was more than willing to do. I just had to be sure she was what I wanted before we got too deep.

I had a feeling she was it for me, which meant I’d need to deal with her brother at some point. I wasn’t looking forward to that conversation.

* * *

I woke to the light streaming through the windows. When I opened my eyes, Marley was facing me, her hands under her cheek.

“Were you watching me sleep?” I asked, my voice gravelly from sleep.

She smiled softly. “Yes.”

I couldn't resist leaning closer and kissing her softly on the lips.

When I pulled back, she slapped a hand over her mouth. “I need to brush my teeth.”

“Sorry. I couldn't help it.” I grinned, not sorry at all.

Marley moved to get out of bed, and I stopped her with a hand on her wrist. “Don't go. Not yet.”

She nodded. “Any regrets?”

“No. You?”

“Last night was a dream come true for me. I always wanted more with you.”

“I didn't walk away because my feelings for you lessened. It was the opposite, and it scared me because I knew I couldn't have a future with you. You weren't just some girl I'd spend time with and easily walk away. It always felt bigger than us.”

Her shoulders seemed to relax. “For me, too. That's why I never understood how you could break things off so easily.”

I reached over to touch her shoulder. “Trust me. It wasn't easy. My brothers complained for months that I was a bear. Impossible to live with.”

“I put my head down and focused on graduating.” She moved closer so that she was resting her head under my chin.

“You always wanted to get out of here.” I wouldn’t have held her back. It was one more reason why breaking up made sense at the time.

“I wanted to go somewhere where no one knew my history. College was a reawakening of sorts. I could be anyone I wanted. I was far away from home, my parents never visited, and my brother was deployed. I was invited to other people’s holidays, and I always declined, saying I was going home to visit my parents. I did travel on occasion, but it was to see Gram.”

I moved back slightly so I could see her face. “You haven’t told anyone the truth about your past?”

“I haven’t been close enough to anyone to want to share that side of me. They don’t need to know my past to have a relationship with me.”

“I think they would.”

“Why is that?” she asked, looking up at me.

“How will they know that something might hurt you? That you might be sad around large families and displays of affection?”

She opened her mouth and closed it. “No one ever noticed if I was sad like that before. But then, I stayed away from those events.”

“You’ve never let anyone in. Not since me.” My heart pounded in my chest.

“That’s right.”

“I shouldn’t like that as much as I do.” It made me a little sad for her that she didn’t have what I did. But it made our relationship even more special. I wanted to be that person for her. The one who gave her a soft place to land. I wanted to give her everything she’d never had.

My heart ached for her and everything she’d missed out on. If Aiden wasn’t her brother, would we have stayed together? It was impossible to know, but the way I felt about her told me we had something deep.

“Do you have work to do today?”

She sighed. “I need to cancel my airline tickets and do some work. Probably send a newsletter.”

“What do you share in your newsletters? Is it a sales thing?”

“Kind of. I like to talk about what’s going on in my life, whether it’s the new house or even visiting a Christmas tree farm. If it’s okay, I’d like to take some pictures to share with my subscribers.”

“I don’t mind.”

“I won’t say which farm. My subscribers don’t know where I’m from. I talk about whatever course I’m promoting and how the information helped me in my life. I rotate my courses throughout the year. Then I create new content in the form of videos and webinars that I can repurpose into course bundles. I offer free content on social media and my podcast, so people know if I’m a good fit for them.”

“It sounds like you have everything figured out and a good system in place.”

“I’m always on the lookout for the next thing to scale my business, but yeah, the base is there. I can relax and take a few

days off if I need to. I have assistants who handle things, too.”

“We can work for a few hours and then meet back here to figure out what we want to do tonight. Would you want to go out?” I liked that our relationship was so easy.

She pursed her lips. “I’m not sure I’m ready for that.”

“You don’t think anyone would be mean to you, do you?”

“I don’t know. Probably not. But I don’t want to talk to anyone about Gram.”

“I can understand that.”

My phone buzzed with a text from Ireland. “Ireland wants to do a test run of movie night tonight. We have the projector, and it looks like she picked a holiday movie.”

Marley gave me a dubious look. “It’s October.”

“I think she’s on a mission for us to love Christmas. We get a little holidayed out after working the entire season. By December twenty-fourth, we’re ready for a break.”

Marley smiled, and my heart squeezed. “I think that’s sweet that she wants to convert you.”

I stretched out on my back. “I don’t know if I like it. An action movie would be better. But if you want to watch her pick, then I’m okay with it.” I wondered if this is what happened to Emmett and Knox. Did they meet Ireland and Sarah and change because of them, or was it a slow progression?

“I think I’d like to watch a holiday movie, especially on the farm. Ireland keeps saying how magical this place is, and I’m starting to see that she’s right.”

I wanted her to view the farm as magical. I wanted her to see herself living here. It was too early to know if we were right for each other, but I couldn't help but think she belonged here. That the Matthews Inn and property were her birthright. She just had to step into it. But it was too soon to lay that on her.

It would be baby steps with Marley. She had to think it was her idea to stay, to become immersed in this place and my family.

She moved so that she was resting her head on my bicep, and I wrapped an arm around her back, bringing her flush against me. "We're going to have fun."

She drew her leg over mine, and I felt the heat of her pussy on my thigh. "What did you have in mind?"

I rolled her so that my cock was nestled between her legs. There were too many layers of cotton between us. But I lifted her shirt and kissed her stomach.

She drew in a sharp breath.

"I've been thinking of this all night." I pulled her sweatpants and lace panties down and threw them to the side. She lifted her upper body and pulled the shirt over her head.

The sight of Marley naked in my bed was everything. Her strawberry-blonde hair curled around her shoulders, her nipples were hard nubs, and her cheeks were flushed. I hadn't even touched her, and her breathing was ragged.

I settled between her legs, my shoulders pushing her legs wide. "You want my mouth."

She lifted her hips, inviting me to take a lick. "Yes, please."

“So polite. So pretty, waiting for my touch.”

She curled her fingers into my hair and tugged. “Heath.”

I guessed she wasn't as patient as I thought. I separated her folds with my fingers and licked her from entrance to clit, where I circled the nub until it was swollen. Her fingers in my hair tightened, and the muscles in her thighs trembled.

When I used a finger to enter her, she moaned.

I loved watching her come undone. The thing that made it sweeter was that she wasn't like this with other people. I had an extra responsibility to take care of her, to protect her heart.

When she arched into my mouth, her body spasming around me, I quickly moved up her body and entered her in one swift motion. Her eyes were glazed over, her skin pink.

I dropped a kiss on her shoulder. “Does this feel good?”

She moved underneath me. “So good.”

I loved being with her like this, whether we were talking, cuddling, or driving each other wild. There was nothing better.

I wouldn't be able to walk away from her this time. Not when she'd gotten under my skin so easily. It was like she'd planted seeds in my heart when we were teens, and they'd been lying dormant for years. Now that we'd reconnected, everything inside me was growing and expanding.

I kept my gaze locked on hers, unwilling to look away or think about anything other than the connection we had.

As the tension built, I leaned down to fuse my lips to hers. I wanted all her moans and whimpers. I increased my pace, sensing that she was close. When she stiffened, then trembled underneath me, I let go.

The orgasm tore through me so quickly it took my breath away. I buried my face in her shoulder, almost disbelieving the intensity of our coming together. I rolled to the side to save her from the weight of my body.

Marley looked slightly embarrassed. “I forgot that I wanted to brush my teeth before we kissed.”

I kissed her softly. “I forget about everything when I’m with you.”

“Just what a girl wants to hear,” Marley said softly, with nothing but genuine appreciation in her voice.

“I want to give you everything you’ve ever wanted and needed.” The only problem was she was a girl who could buy whatever she wanted. Except for love and family.

She snuggled into my arms. “You already have.”

Were her expectations that low, that one night with me was all she wanted? I wanted to give her so much more. More days and nights like the past few ones. My family. This farm. Joy and anticipation. Love. The confidence to know that she was loved unconditionally. That someone had her back. That she belonged.

Did she even know what she was missing? That she could have it all if she just reached out and asked for it?

My heart twisted and squeezed inside my chest. It was too soon to broach the subject with her. But I knew that I wouldn’t be able to walk away from her a second time.

I rolled onto my back and threw an arm over my eyes. I wasn’t sure what I’d say to Aiden. If he got out of the military and moved here, would he be upset? Would it ruin our friendship? I had no way of knowing how he’d react.

The fear of the unknown had kept me away from Marley over the years. But it wouldn't anymore.

Fifteen



MARLEY

I had a hard time keeping my mind on marketing that afternoon. I was supposed to be filming short videos for social media, but my head wasn't in it. I couldn't stop thinking about everything that had happened between me and Heath.

Had I made a mistake in letting things go as far as they did? How would I walk away when it was time?

The crazy thing was, I'd canceled my Sunday flight home and hadn't booked another one. I couldn't seem to decide which day to leave. The thought of leaving at all left a pit in my stomach.

We could continue to date long-distance, but was that what he wanted? Or maybe this thing between us was a short-term fling. The problem was, I wasn't ready for it to end. I was feeling things I never had before. I just had no way of knowing if Heath felt the same way.

I set up my lighting and camera on a tripod by the fireplace so that the gorgeous stonework was behind me. I didn't want to waste the opportunity to film in Heath's cabin and on the farm, so I forced myself to focus on work.

Today, I was talking about trying new things, or going back to something that you tried before and didn't work, to see if it would have a different result this time. It was all about

taking the inspired action when you got it, trying new things and not letting any feelings of failure enter your consciousness.

Business was about pivoting when it was necessary, not getting stuck in old marketing trends, and being able to see what was coming next and act on it.

I couldn't help but think of the parallels to my relationship with Heath. I was trying something that hadn't worked in the past. Was it a big mistake, or would it be the best thing that ever happened to me?

I didn't have an answer, and thinking about the possibilities made me edgy. So, I finished filming the videos and then took a walk outside to see if I could find an outdoor place to film.

Instead of teaching, I decided to post a video of me hiking through the Christmas tree farm. The rows of evergreens were mesmerizing to me, and I hoped it would be for my viewers, too. I filmed it a few times until it was right, added some trendy music, and posted it with the caption: *Sometimes you need to take care of yourself, and what better place than at a Christmas tree farm?*

It was simple but hopefully inspiring. While I walked, I jotted down a few ideas for future videos and content I could share.

Being on the farm was inspiring. I was a little worried I wouldn't be able to work here. That I'd be distracted by Heath's family and the farm. But so far, I felt rejuvenated, like I was on a vacation.

As long as the ideas were flowing for more content, there was no need for me to rush home to California. I always

thought the ocean was my muse, but maybe it was nature in general, and I needed a new perspective.

When I finally returned to Heath's cabin, the air was cooler, the wind biting my face.

Heath stood on the porch, his hands braced on the railing. When he spotted me, he moved toward me. "I was worried about you. You weren't answering your phone."

I lifted it to see several missed calls. It must have been on silent. "I was filming and then decided to go for a walk. I lost track of time."

"That's okay. Just let me know if you're going to be gone. I wasn't sure where to look for you."

I wasn't used to having anyone waiting for me when I returned home, much less worried about my safety.

"Can you do that for me?" Heath asked, his expression serious.

"Of course," I said, even as my chest tightened. Would I get too used to this, and then it would be taken away from me?

Nothing ever lasted. Especially not for me. I grew up in a trailer on my grandmother's property. Once my parents realized I wasn't valuable to them, they ignored me. It would be the same with Heath.

"What's wrong?" Heath asked as he turned and fell into step next to me.

I smiled to cover my worries. "Nothing. I was just enjoying the farm. I got some great videos." We sat on the porch swing, and I showed him my screen. As he watched, I realized this might not be exciting for him. I lowered the

phone. “You probably aren’t interested in seeing a film of the farm. You see this every day.”

He grabbed my wrist and held it. “I like seeing it through your eyes.” Then he nodded toward the screen where the video was playing. “You like the Christmas tree fields.”

“The rows of trees are beautiful. I feel like I could walk forever and never reach the end.” It was comforting, in a way. The steadiness of those trees. They grew for years before a family decided it would be the perfect one for their living room.

“Just wait until it snows. I’ll take you out on the snowmobile. There’s something about how quiet it gets. The world is blanketed in the white stuff. It makes you feel like you’re alone, a vastness to the property that is endless.”

I paused the video. “I’d love to see the snow. I’ve missed it.”

“I can’t imagine not experiencing the different seasons.”

He stood, opening the door for me.

“Ireland wants us to watch that movie tonight. To make sure the projector will work, that it’s big enough, and that the sound will carry. I have a feeling we’ll need to invest in larger speakers to reach everyone in the crowd.”

“That will be fun.”

“Thank you for helping us with this. I know you have your own work to do.”

I shrugged. “The reality is I can work anywhere. My viewers have gotten used to the ocean in the background of my videos. But they are intrigued by the shots I’m giving them now, too.”

“I’m glad you’re still able to get things done while you’re here.”

If not, I would have had to head home, and I wasn’t ready for that yet. I wanted to explore whatever this was. For the moment, I’d enjoy it and not worry about Aiden or the future.

“We’re going over to the main house to eat. Then there will be a bonfire and the movie.”

“Do you have impromptu family get-togethers a lot?” I asked him.

“Occasionally, but more now that the girls are part of the family. Everyone wants them to be happy, and we like spending time with them.”

“They must have a blast on the farm.”

“It’s a playground for Addy and Ember and the new puppies.”

I used to hike the woods and run the property to get away from my home life. I helped out a lot at the hotel, but it was in the woods where I felt like I could let go and be myself.

Heath pulled on a jacket. “Listen, I need to stop at Sebastian’s cabin on the way. I want to make sure the crew turned everything off when they left, and the tools are put away.”

“I’d love to see his place,” I said, grabbing my phone.

Heath smiled as he held the door for me. “It’s almost finished. I hope they’ll move in before the holidays.”

Heath drove down the mountain and down a new lane I hadn’t noticed before. “We had this put in when we broke ground on Sebastian’s place. He wanted to be near the main house and me and Emmett but still have some privacy.”

We drove until there was a clearing and the two-story cabin came into view. It was similar in style to Emmett's and Heath's cabins, with a large wraparound porch.

"Ember insisted we build her playhouse first." Heath pointed to the back of the property, where a small cabin, a replica of the larger one, stood.

"That's amazing." I couldn't imagine my parents or an uncle building me a playhouse because I insisted on one. It was an alternate reality growing up with people who loved you. Gram made me feel loved, but she didn't step in other than when it came to food. My parents would criticize her if she tried to buy me shoes or clothes. But she could provide me with food without raising any questions.

Why they cared if someone else took care of me, I never understood. I didn't think it was possible that it made them feel inadequate.

Heath opened the door, and it smelled like freshly cut wood. The walls were painted, the wood floors gleaming.

"We just have the finishing touches left, then a few areas that need trim. We can't seem to get the fridge flush with the counters. We need to fiddle with the hoses in the back. Then there are a few fixtures in the bathroom that are on back order, and we're waiting on final inspections."

"You think Sebastian and Ember can move in before Thanksgiving?"

"Absolutely. Mom will be thrilled to have them close. When it snows, we can all go sledding together."

"You still go sledding?" That seemed like a childish thing to do, yet it brought back memories for me. All the local kids

would converge on the Monroes' hill, and his mom would bring out hot chocolate and candy canes.

Heath grinned. "We love snowmobiling and sledding. We still have to clear the lane, but once that's done, it's playtime."

"You're being serious?" I asked him.

"I don't joke about playing in the snow. It's the best few days of the year. Last year, we had a large snowstorm on Thanksgiving weekend. That's when Ireland was snowed in with Emmett. It lasted so long that it felt like a cleansing of the earth. Everything is wiped clean, and anything is possible."

"I used to feel that way about the ocean. Each crash of the wave was cleaning out the old, preparing for the new."

"Same concept," Heath said as he moved from one room to the other. When he was satisfied, he showed me the deck.

"This is my favorite place in each of the cabins. Everyone has an amazing view."

This one was so high it felt like a treehouse.

"All of them have this feel. I wanted the houses to be up high, almost like you're in the branches."

"Mission accomplished."

I had no doubt that Heath accomplished whatever he set out to do.

"Once this is done, we can focus solely on the inn and get it done. I'm hoping sometime in January, or maybe even sooner."

"Won't it be difficult with the tree-cutting season landing during that time?" I wasn't as in a rush as I initially was to sell the property. I didn't want any ties to this place, but now I

wasn't so sure. The inn was my excuse for visiting. What would it be when it was gone? I'd have no reason to return. There was Heath, but I still wasn't sure if it was a fling or something deeper. I thought I knew where Heath stood when we were younger, and I'd been wrong. I was afraid to trust my instincts now.

“We hired a few of our cousins to help. I'm hoping that means I'll have more time to work on your place.”

“If you're needed here—”

“I appreciate that, but we all have side work that we can't neglect just because it's time to sell a few Christmas trees. We need to hire additional help at some point. What better time than now?”

“As long as I'm not interfering with your work. I know how important it is to your family, especially your mom.”

He drew me to his side. “I love that you're so accommodating when it comes to my family, but I want you to feel that what you need and want matters, too. You can come first.”

I laughed and pushed away from him, the band around my chest pressing even tighter. “Do we need to go to your mom's? I don't want to be late. I know how important tonight is to Ireland. She wants everything to go smoothly so this can be a possibility for the farm.”

Heath gave me a look. He knew I was deflecting, rambling so long that maybe he'd be distracted.

Finally, he nodded, and I let out a breath. He wasn't going to press me about my feelings.

Because when it came to coming first in anyone's life, it never happened. It might have with my grandmother, but I

pushed her away. I didn't want to have the responsibility of being number one. The fall to the bottom was farther when you were that important.

It was safer to stay inside my California house and pretend no one outside my business existed. And with Gram gone, it should have been that much easier. But now I was getting close to Heath, and the further we fell, the more he'd push.

I just hoped I'd put it off for another day. I couldn't think about what would happen when he pressed me to open up to him. I found that if I didn't show up in anyone's life, then I couldn't be important to theirs. The problem was, I was falling for the Monroes.

Even though I knew I was going down a dangerous path, I wasn't willing to stop. Not yet.

Heath didn't bring it up again as he locked up and drove us down the hill to the main house. He parked his truck next to a similar truck with the same logo. "Thanks for helping out tonight."

"Of course." Even if it was a bad idea for my heart. I was getting to know these people. I liked them. What would happen when Heath remembered my brother and his vow to protect me? I'd lose them, and I knew it would be harder than never having them at all.

"I want you to be happy here."

"I am." It was an honest statement. I was as happy as I'd ever felt. I tended to stay in a constant state of non-expectation—unless it came to my business. I imagined amazing things happening for it. But I never let myself believe in the same growth for my personal life.

Heath smiled. “Good. I’m glad.” Then he leaned over and kissed me, making me wonder if this is what life would be like on the farm. Would I live with Heath in his cabin, going to family dinners at his mom’s or at one of his brothers? Would his family help me when I needed it?

It sounded too good to be true.

When he lifted his head, he said, “I’m glad you’re here.”

His expression was so sincere I couldn’t look away or respond. The lump in my throat was getting bigger by the second.

He pulled the door handle to get out, and I did the same. His words danced around my heart. He had no idea how his words made me feel, like I was worthy of love and happiness. He couldn’t possibly know how much I longed for them to be true. For this to be my life.

I couldn’t get too complacent here.

His mom answered the door, but her words were drowned out by the cacophony of voices in the house behind her. Ember and Addy were chasing each other through the house, and Knox was yelling at them to stop.

Ireland grabbed my hand. “I want to talk to you about the food.” Then to Heath, she asked, “Do you mind if I steal your girl?”

“Of course not,” Heath said, with a wink in my direction.

My face flushed because he’d done that move in front of his mother.

“Nice to see you,” I said to Lori as Ireland pulled me past her and into the office where she’d spread out sheets of papers filled with notes.

She sat in the chair and pointed to the one across from her. “I talked to a bunch of vendors today. These are the options and prices.”

I took the paper she offered and scanned through the sandwich options and the prices. “I think we should stick with one. Maybe choose two options. Chicken sandwiches and maybe burgers that we could cook.”

“Okay.”

“I hate to waste money or profit on bringing in a fast-food brand name for the chicken sandwiches, but it might bring more people in. Then we can cook burgers and hot dogs for the others who don’t like chicken.”

“I never thought of it like that.”

“Brand awareness matters, and people will like that you have these options for food. A reluctant family member might be persuaded by the food choices.”

Ireland reached across the desk and touched my hand. “I’m so glad you’re here to talk to.”

I shrugged, a little caught off guard by Ireland’s show of affection. “I’m just happy I could help.”

“You’re a genius with this stuff. I could learn so much from you. Gia’s good with wedding stuff, but this is a different beast.”

“I agree.”

We went over the flyers she drafted, and I said I’d send it to my marketing person to work her magic with the graphics.

“What will it cost, though?” Ireland asked.

“Nothing. She’ll do it for me.” I paid her hourly, and I didn’t mind using her for this.

Ireland’s brow furrowed. “But you’re paying her.”

“It’s fine. I want to do this. Besides, you need a logo. Your website is bland without it. She’ll come up with one, and then you’ll use it in all your marketing materials.”

“Are you sure you don’t mind? I hate to take advantage of you.”

“You can’t take advantage when you didn’t ask for me to do this. I offered.”

Ireland smiled. “I’m so excited. I think this is going to be amazing for the farm.”

“I think so, too. Especially with the fall season and people going to pumpkin farms. It will keep Monroe Farm in the forefront of their minds when they think about trees on Thanksgiving.”

“Yes, and it’s not so intrusive that it will send the boys running.”

“Are you talking about the Monroe brothers?” I couldn’t imagine anyone calling them boys.

Ireland lowered her voice. “You know how they don’t like change, people on the property, or extending the season, even if it means making more money?”

I laughed at the sound of exasperation in her voice. “They are stubborn.”

“Right? I need more women around so we can influence them. It helps that Lori’s on board, but Sarah’s not as involved with these things. I could use your help.”

“I’m not leaving yet.”

Ireland’s expression brightened. “Oh, I hope that means you’re having a good time here.”

I thought about spending the evenings and mornings with Heath and working during the day. Being here hadn’t detracted from my job. If anything, it made me more creative. “I am.”

“Is there anything going on between you and Heath, or are you just friends?”

We hadn’t discussed talking about us, so I wasn’t sure what to say. “Friends, I think.”

Her face fell. “I was hoping for more, but I’m not going to give up yet. I want all the Monroe brothers to be in love. They’re much easier to manage that way.”

I laughed as she stood and came around the desk. I wouldn’t normally be this honest with anyone, but Ireland felt like a true friend. “I’m more than a little curious to see the farm at Christmas.”

She beamed. “We can make that happen.”

Sixteen



HEATH

“What are you doing holed up in your cabin with Marley?” Emmett asked as we stood on the deck with beers in our hands.

“It’s not a snowed-in kind of situation,” I teased right back.

“What’s the difference? She’s sleeping under your roof. It doesn’t mean you’re not taking advantage of the situation.”

“She’s free to leave at any time, and I wouldn’t do that to her. She’s Aiden’s little sister.” That felt like the lie it was. I wanted to tell my brothers the truth, but I wasn’t ready to share everything yet.

Knox tipped his bottle to his lips. “There’s an energy between you.”

“We’re old friends,” I insisted, taking a swig of my beer.

“Old friends who hooked up?” Emmett teased, probably not realizing how close to the truth he was.

“I never went that far,” I protested, realizing too late what I’d revealed.

Knox turned his assessing gaze on me. “But there was something going on between you two?”

I wanted to talk to someone about this. “We weren’t public with it. I was friends with her brother, Aiden, and I didn’t feel right about it, so I broke things off before I could do something I’d regret.”

Knox gave me a pointed look. “Have you done something you regret now?”

I cleared my throat as the all-too familiar guilt trickled down my spine. “We’re adults.”

“That’s a yes,” Emmett mumbled into his beer.

I shook my head. “You hooked up with a runaway bride. She’d just broken up with someone.”

Emmett’s lips twisted. “We all know what an asshole her ex was. She deserved better.”

“Doesn’t she deserve better than you?” I teased.

Emmett punched me in the arm before I could process what he was doing. I rubbed my shoulder. He moved quickly for a guy who was so large.

Emmett stepped back, still cradling his beer in his hand. “Of course, she’s too good for me. Just like Marley is too good for you. It doesn’t mean we don’t deserve them.”

I opened my mouth and then closed it, a little surprised by Emmett’s wisdom. He wasn’t one to talk about his feelings, much less say something like that.

“He has a point. I never expected to find Sarah and Addy. I wasn’t looking for a relationship, much less a single mom. But as soon as I saw them, I knew they were special. I felt the same feelings of inadequacy, but at the end of the day, we’re all worthy of love. It’s how we go about the relationship that defines us.”

I had to know what they thought of my broken promise. “I promised Aiden I’d protect her while he was gone.”

Knox slowly lowered his bottle from his mouth. “Are you saying that you can’t date Marley because of a promise you made to her brother—how long ago was that?”

“It was right before he enlisted. He almost didn’t go because he was so worried about her. You know how her parents were. He needed to leave. It was the best thing for him at the time. There was nothing for him here, and he didn’t feel like college was the right fit for him.”

“That was over ten years ago.” Knox shook his head as if he couldn’t believe it.

“And you never told him how you felt about Marley?” Emmett asked.

I shook my head. “I didn’t want to admit that I’d gone against his wishes.”

“Don’t you think that you *are* protecting her? Not the way Aiden meant, but what better way to protect someone than to love them? Marley had a shitty upbringing. If you can provide her with the family and the love she never had, then what could be wrong with that?” Knox asked.

He had a good point. I wasn’t sure I was in love with her. But I was on my way. “I’ve never felt this way about anyone else. When we were teens, we were too young to know what love was or if that was the person we were supposed to be with. But we’re adults now.” And everything felt amplified. “I don’t know if I’m doing the right thing.”

“I don’t think we ever do when it comes to love, but Mom told me to follow my heart. And it was the best advice she

could have given me. When you cut through the bullshit, how do you feel when you're with her?" Knox said.

"Like she's the one for me." I said it without thinking about my answer.

The sliding glass door opened, and Ireland and Marley came out.

"Marley was so nice to help me. She's going to have her marketing person help us with the flyers and our logo."

Emmett frowned. "Do we need a logo?"

Ireland patted his arm. "Just let me handle it."

Emmett shook his head. "I don't like the sounds of hiring a marketing person. I don't want to change the farm or the way we do things."

Ireland gestured in Marley's direction, who stood next to me. "It won't cost anything. Marley's letting us use her marketing person as a favor."

"Are you sure about that?" I asked Marley in a lower voice in case she changed her mind.

"I want to help you."

"This person doesn't work for free," I said, still trying to gauge how serious she was about this.

Marley stepped into my space, resting a hand on my chest. Her proximity caused my heart rate to pick up. "I've got it. Don't worry about it."

I dipped my head so I could see into her eyes. "Are you sure? I don't want to take advantage of you."

"You're not. I want to help." Her soft insistence broke through my doubt.

Mom popped her head outside. “I’m hungry, and I want to watch this movie before my bedtime. Let’s eat.”

Everyone started talking at once about which movie to watch. Ireland’s pick had already been disregarded, and the discussion was pointless because Ember and Addy would make the final decision. They always did. And none of us minded. Those two little girls ruled our family, and we wouldn’t have it any other way.

We were a sad bunch of guys before they came along. Ember opened our eyes to what it was like to love a child. And we all wanted the farm to be passed on to the next generation. It was our responsibility to give them a sustainable business.

We ate sliders at the dining room table. The girls were done first, so Ireland, Sarah, and Marley took them into the living room to choose a movie.

When the guys were done, I helped Mom clean up while Emmett and Knox went outside to help with the projector. Mom handed me a plate to dry. “How’s Marley doing?”

“Her mother reached out to the estate attorney. He’s going to let her look at the will,” I said, carefully drying the plate and placing it in the cupboard.

Mom frowned. “Is that normal?”

I shrugged. “She’s a potential heir, so I guess so. She was specifically excluded from the will, and she could contest it. Say that Lila wasn’t in her right mind when she drafted it.”

“Oh? When did Lila write the will?” Mom asked, rinsing a dish in the sink.

“When Marley turned eighteen.”

Mom shot me an incredulous look. “You’re kidding me? How could Tracey possibly prove that Lila wasn’t in her right mind?”

The tension between my shoulders increased. “People can say whatever they want. Proving it is another thing.”

“Besides, Tracey left and hasn’t been back. She never wanted anything to do with that inn. Not that Lila would ever have entrusted it to her. There’s a reason she gave it to Marley. She thought she’d come back and run it someday. I think this was her way of ensuring Marley gave it serious consideration.”

“I don’t know that it’s what Marley wants.”

Mom patted my shoulder. “Isn’t that why she’s here? To see if it’s what she wants?”

“I don’t know if she sees it that way.” It’s what I was hoping she’d consider. I didn’t want her to regret her decision, and I couldn’t imagine the inn being taken down and replaced with homes.

“You just keep treating her right and showing her around the farm. No one can resist its magic.”

“It’s the inn I want her to fall in love with. I don’t want her to regret selling it later.” I worried that if the inn was sold, there’d be no reason for Marley to return.

“I think it starts with us and the farm. No one can resist its charms. You finish that renovation and the gardens she wants. Let her see how it could be.”

“She’s not sure she wants the gardens.” Knox had come up with some amazing options. It was probably too much just to sell it.

Mom gave me a pointed look. “You give that girl the gardens she wants.”

“You’re saying we build it even if she says no?”

Mom gave me a look. The one that said I was being dense.

“But why?”

Mom lowered her voice. “Because you love her.”

“I don’t know if I do,” I said quietly so no one would overhear.

“I think if you’re honest with yourself, you already know the answer.”

Maybe I’d always loved her. It was teenage love that morphed into something more mature. I just knew I didn’t want her to leave. I wanted her to stay so we could figure this out. And if Mom thought the farm and renovating the inn was the answer, then I’d do whatever it took. “You think if she sees these gardens and the renovated inn, she’ll fall in love with it?”

“It’s not just the property. It’s you. Keep being yourself. She won’t be able to resist.”

I let out a breath. “I don’t know about that.”

“Lila told me you two had a special bond.”

That had me pausing. “I didn’t know—”

“Lila was smart. She always kept an eye on Marley. I had five boys to look after. I didn’t always know what you were up to, but Lila did.”

My heart rate slowed as I considered her words. “I can’t believe you didn’t say anything.”

Mom tipped her head to the side. “Nothing came of it, right?”

“Aiden wanted me to protect her, not date her.” I clenched my teeth.

“Is that still the case?”

I shook my head. “He’s never reneged on it.”

Mom let out an exasperated sigh. “How do you know if you’ve never asked him?”

That was a good question. I owed it to Aiden to talk to him. To let him know what was going on. It was only fair. “I don’t think he’s going to be happy about it.”

“Maybe. Or maybe not,” Mom said cryptically as she handed me the last dish.

My jaw tightened. “That’s not reassuring.”

“You should always lead with the truth.” Mom wiped off the counters and then pointed out the window. “We’d better get out there. It looks like they’re ready to start the movie.”

They’d set up camp chairs and blankets around the side of the barn. The light from the projector was showing on the siding.

“Go with your heart,” Mom said right before I left the kitchen.

“That’s what Emmett said.”

“I gave him the same advice and look where he is, married to Ireland.”

I let out a chuckle. “He’s a lucky man.”

“He was stubborn and worried that he didn’t deserve Ireland. He pushed her away.”

“I remember.”

My mother pointed at me. “Don’t make the same mistakes.”

I couldn’t see myself pushing her away, but if I thought about Aiden, I had to admit it was possible. I’d done it before.

How could Marley ever trust me again? I was just one more person in a long line of people who’d hurt her.

We made our way across the lawn to the barn where everyone was gathered. Ember and Addy were holding hands and dancing in a circle.

“What did they pick?” I asked Marley.

She smiled and pointed at the barn where the title of a familiar movie from childhood appeared. “An oldie but a goodie.”

“I love this one.”

“This will be fun,” Marley said as we settled on some bean bag chairs.

This was what I lived for: My family was together, and Marley was here, too. What would it be like if we were serious about a relationship? If we got engaged or even married? Would our kids be with us at some point? Would all my brothers have their own kids, and we would just keep expanding?

I’d avoided connecting with anyone for so long, and I suspected it was because Marley held my heart.

The bonfire was ready if we wanted to roast marshmallows or make s’mores. Knox called the girls over to roast them before we started the movie.

“I don’t want to move. This is so nice,” Marley said to me quietly.

“So, you think people in the community will like it, too?” It was such a simple idea that didn’t require much work on our part.

She smiled. “I think they’ll love it. Families are looking for events like this, and it’s a nice option for date night too.”

“It was a good idea.”

“When it comes to these kinds of things. I have a knack for business but also the community you create while building one.”

I grinned at her. “You’re brilliant.”

She smiled softly and shook her head. “No one’s ever called me that before.”

“You went to school for psychology to understand your train wreck parents, and you run a successful business. Your ideas for the farm have Ireland champing at the bit to execute them. I’d say you’re brilliant.”

She dipped her head slightly. “Well, thank you. It’s nice to hear that someone thinks that of me.”

“I always knew you’d do great things.”

She rolled her eyes. “When we were together, I had no idea what I wanted to do beyond study psychology.”

“You were smart even back then, resourceful and brave.” You had to be to survive unloving parents.

“Can you two leave your love nest long enough for s’mores?” Emmett grumbled as he walked past.

“I guess that’s our cue to join the others.” I stood and held out my hand to Marley.

She smiled and placed her hand in mine. “If we’re being teased by your brothers, then I must fit in.”

I pulled her to my side. “Of course, you do. My family loved Lila, and you and Aiden by extension.”

Her smile faltered, and I realized where I’d stumbled. I wanted her to feel like she belonged here *with me*.

“Come on, you two. We have your marshmallows ready to go,” Ireland said, handing us the prongs.

“Will we have a bonfire and marshmallows on movie nights for the community?” Lori asked everyone.

“Do we want to deal with the liability?” Sebastian asked, ever the one who thought about the legal ramifications.

“I don’t know. Do we?” Knox asked him.

“I’d say we go without the first time. Focus on the food and the movie itself. It might be a distraction,” Marley said, and my heart swelled with emotion.

She had amazing ideas and fit in with my family. It was hard to imagine that she couldn’t see that herself.

“It’s a distraction tonight. We were supposed to watch the movie,” Emmett said, and Ireland moved closer to him. His expression softened as she approached. He wrapped an arm around her waist, drawing him against his body. He dropped his head and whispered something into her ear.

Is that how I looked at Marley? Like she was my whole world? My breath caught in my throat. I wanted that. Someone who loved the farm like I did, who adored my family and

wanted to live here. Emmett's ex walked away because she hated the farm and spending so much time with the Monroes.

It had burned all of us on dating, but now that Emmett and Knox had found love, it made me think that it was more than possible for me to find the same. And to think I'd found it when I was eighteen.

I wanted to be patient with Marley, but at the same time, I didn't want her to get away. I knew she was skittish. Quick to think she didn't belong somewhere. But hopefully, if she spent more time here with my family, she'd understand that she was special, and she belonged.

We held our marshmallows over the fire while Addy and Ember took turns giving us tips.

"Move it over here. Just above the flame. You want to burn it evenly all the way around. Not burn it."

"I love when mine is burnt." Ember's current marshmallow caught fire, and Sebastian jumped to her side to blow it out.

"It's perfect," Ember said as she moved over to Ireland to cover it in graham crackers and chocolate.

He tended to be a bit overprotective of her. I wondered if it was because he was a single father or if it was the uptightness that went along with his profession. My brothers and I had teased him over the years, but I wondered if it was a detriment when it came to his daughter. Maybe it would be good for him to find someone to loosen him up.

"The house will be done soon. What are your plans for moving in?" I asked him, wondering if it would affect my timeline. I'd do whatever it took to get him and Ember there quicker.

“I’d love to be in before Thanksgiving. Can you make it happen?”

“I don’t think it will be a problem. Ever since Cole started working for me, my crew has increased its turnaround time. He’s a good influence on everyone. He keeps everyone motivated and working hard.”

“You think you’ll go out on your own, then?” Mom asked.

“Most likely. Cade and Nolan want me to, and I have a team ready and willing. But I want to see how the renovation of the inn goes.” I was being overly cautious about it. It was scary when your dream was within reach. I had moments of panic and indecision, but then Nolan’s words about me being able to succeed motivated me to keep going.

“I’m proud of you. You built all the cabins, and they’re fabulous.”

“Thanks, Mom.” That’s what any good mom would say, but I tried not to take her for granted. We were lucky to still have her, especially after my father’s heart attack.

Seventeen



MARLEY

I roasted my marshmallow, absorbing the conversations going on around me. Heath's family was so nice and welcoming. They didn't seem to mind that I was here, and they'd accepted Ireland, Sarah, and Addy as if they'd always been a part of their family.

The entire situation made me hope for more for myself. But I couldn't help but think about what it would feel like when Heath realized he valued Aiden's friendship more than what we were building.

We assembled our s'mores and settled back in our spot—what Emmett had labeled our “love nest.”

We waited for everyone else to find a spot. The girls were up front on their bean bags, and most of the adults were on camp chairs in the back.

The movie started, and I settled against Heath's side.

Heath leaned down to ask, “Will you go out with me?”

I laughed to cover my discomfort. “Isn't that what we're doing?”

“I want to take you out. Maybe to a restaurant in Annapolis. Or ice skating. Whatever you want.”

I wasn't sure what to say. It felt bigger than just a guy asking a girl out on a date. Being in public was symbolic for us in a way it wouldn't be for other people meeting for the first time. "What if it gets back to Aiden?"

Heath frowned. "Does Aiden still talk to anyone from here?"

"I don't think so." He didn't have many friends. Teachers assumed he was a troublemaker when he wasn't. He kept his head down, got decent grades, and searched for a way out.

"I don't remember him hanging out with anyone else but us."

"You were the only ones who didn't treat us like trailer trash."

He put his arm around me, bringing me closer to his heat. "Don't call yourself that."

I shook my head. "You realize that's what everyone else called us, right?"

"I told anyone who said that to keep their mouths shut."

That was surprising. I hadn't heard that, but then we weren't in the same grade. "Is that all you did?"

"You don't want to hear this."

"I kind of do," I said as the movie played on the side of the barn.

Heath's gaze was on the moving screen. "Let's just say I got physical when they didn't get the message."

"You did that for my brother? I would have thought he could take care of himself."

“He knew back then he wanted to be in the military. He didn’t want a suspension for fighting on his record.”

“That sounds like Aiden. So, you defended his honor?” I asked, curious about this side of Heath.

“Something like that. I didn’t like people talking about your family. It wasn’t your fault your parents were pieces of ___”

“You can say it.”

Heath sighed. “They’re still your parents.”

“They were placeholders. They didn’t make sure I had food or made it to school. And they only talked to me when they needed something.” Which wasn’t often. They were too caught up in themselves.

“You turned out amazing despite them.”

I smiled. “I like to think so.”

“It shows your strength of character.”

“I think Aiden and Gram had a part in that.”

“You were lucky to have them.”

I deserved so much better than the parents I was given. I’d say it shaped me into the person I am, and a few weeks ago, I would have been happy about that. But after being with the Monroes, I could see that I’d missed out on an amazing family. Things could have been so much better. Sometimes I wondered why my parents had me at all.

“Hey.” Ireland appeared in front of us. “Would you mind testing the speakers with me? I want to get the best configuration.”

“Sure,” I said as I disentangled myself from the blankets and Heath’s arm. I didn’t want to leave. I was content there, but the conversation had veered into personal territory again.

It was the reason I loved that no one knew my past in California. The subject of my upbringing and my parents never came up. That was just how I liked it. My parents didn’t define me. My childhood home didn’t mean anything. I prevailed despite all of that, but no one needed to know my origin story.

We stood at different spots around the space to see if we could hear the movie. We made a few adjustments, assuming the crowd would be larger when we invited the community to attend. When Ireland was satisfied, I sat with Heath again.

“Everything good?”

“Yeah, she got it to work. You shouldn’t need additional speakers.”

“Thanks for helping.”

“Anytime,” I said as we settled under the blankets with my head on his shoulder. It was so warm and cozy that my eyes drifted shut. I didn’t become aware again until the sound had stopped, and Knox and Sebastian were nudging Addy and Ember awake. They were staying at Knox’s house tonight.

Heath helped me to stand, and I stifled a yawn. “I fell asleep.”

“I know.”

“Sorry about that.”

“I like that you felt comfortable enough to fall asleep.”

I didn’t respond to that comment because it felt too personal. It felt like something someone would say to a

girlfriend, and that wasn't what this was. We folded the blankets and piled those and the bean bags in a wagon that Emmett would tow to his house and unload.

I helped everyone clean up the food we'd laid out, which were mainly snacks and drinks. After cleaning up the trash, we said our goodbyes and got into Heath's truck for the short ride home. I couldn't believe I'd thought of Heath's cabin as home.

California was my safe place, where no one knew me. But it wasn't exactly a home. It wasn't the same as the Monroe farm. It was a scary feeling because I could easily get too comfortable here.

Heath reached over and interlaced his fingers with mine. "You think the movie night is a possibility?"

"Definitely. It's going to be amazing."

"Will you be here for the first one so you can help Ireland? She could do it herself, but I think she'd feel more confident if you were here."

"I can be." We hadn't discussed when I was leaving, and I didn't want to think about it. I was enjoying my time here.

At the cabin, Heath opened the door and went around the house, turning off the lights and making sure the door was locked. I headed upstairs to my room to get ready. A few minutes later, Heath popped his head inside.

"Are you sleeping in my room?"

"Do you want me to?" I asked, not wanting to assume.

Heath gave me a look. "I want you in my bed every night."

"Heath—" I started.

“I know we haven’t defined what we are, but I enjoy spending time with you, and while you’re here, I’d like you to be in my bed.”

It wasn’t a declaration of love, but it felt like something. My insides felt a little soft and mushy as I gathered my things and joined him in his room at the end of the hall.

We didn’t talk as we took turns in the bathroom, and I breathed a sigh of relief when I settled into his arms. It felt nice to be in his arms. I almost felt like I could depend on him.

That was something I avoided for most of my life. It was easier to assume that no one would be there for me. That groups of friends had already been formed, people had large families to fall back on, and there was no space for me. It was easier that way.

But when Heath’s breathing evened out, I stole a glance at his face. He was so peaceful in sleep. I wanted to let him in, and that was the scariest thought of all.

* * *

The next few weeks, Heath was busy getting Sebastian’s cabin finished so he could move in. The whole family was involved in figuring out what furniture they needed. Lori was in charge of stocking the fridge for their arrival.

I found myself caught up in the energy. There was an urgency to get them moved in before the main Christmas tree-cutting season began the week of Thanksgiving.

At times, I worried I should have gone home. There was no reason for me to stay. But everyone was so grateful I was there. I worked with Ireland and my marketing person on the

farm's logo and the flyers for the movie night. In the afternoons, I spent time making more content for my business, talking with my assistants, and answering clients' questions.

I kept waiting for Heath or another member of his family to ask when I was leaving. But they never did.

I told my assistants I was dealing with some family stuff, and they didn't ask any follow-up questions. It wasn't a great feeling, even if it was what I was used to. I'd kept people at arm's length, so it was to be expected.

Heath took me out on a real date in Annapolis. We went to the ice skating rink, ate burgers and shakes at a local diner, and wandered the streets of Annapolis to see the holiday lights. It was the perfect night, and it satisfied something deep in my soul.

I could easily see how my life would be here. I just wasn't sure if Heath felt the same way.

On the night of the first community movie night, Ireland was a bundle of nerves. She'd kept me busy going over details all day. I barely had time to see Heath.

His brothers helped us assemble the tables and the projector. We picked up the food and kept it warm.

"Who should be at the gate?" I asked Ireland.

"One of the boys does that. They tell people where to park." There was a flat entrance fee for each car, and then people could pay for food.

When it was close to the time to open the gate, Heath arrived at the main house with his truck. He brought a bouquet of flowers over to me.

“What’s this?” The only flowers I ever received were ones I ordered myself.

He handed the orange, red, and yellow blooms to me. “They’re for you. For all your hard work.”

I took them and smelled the petals. “Thank you.”

“Are you ready to greet people?”

“Is that what we should do?” I asked him and looked over at Ireland, who shrugged.

“This is your baby. I think you two are the most passionate about it. Let’s be honest, you don’t want the guests talking to one of us. We’ll scare them off.”

“Isn’t that what happens during tree season?” I asked, genuinely curious about the way things operated during the busy season.

“It’s probably why we’re not as profitable,” I teased as Emmett said, “Hey now. Don’t blame that shit on me.”

“One of us should stay here, and one can go by the gate,” Ireland said.

“I’ll do the gate.” This was Ireland’s thing, and she’d be more comfortable by the main event.

I walked with Heath to the front gate. There was already a line of cars. “I wasn’t expecting this kind of turnout.”

“It looks the same as opening day for tree cutting.” Even Heath seemed excited.

“You’re joking?” I asked him.

“Nope,” he said with a grin as he opened the gate and waved the first car through. “Just welcome them to the farm

and direct them to the parking area by the barn where Emmett is standing. He'll direct them to a spot."

I wiped my sweaty hands on my pants. I spoke in front of a camera, but I never saw the people who were listening. I could pretend no one was there even as I answered questions left in the comments. It never felt as real as this did.

When the first car stopped in front of us, a man opened his window and leaned his elbow out. "Where do you want us?"

"Welcome to Monroe Farm. You'll want to park by the barn, where the man in orange is standing. He'll direct you to a spot."

"Thanks," he said as he continued forward.

The next thirty minutes passed in a blur. I fielded questions about food, how long the movie would be, and whether there was a bathroom. A few people mentioned how great it was that we were doing this. It was the Monroes' decision, not mine, but it still felt good since I'd helped.

When the last car passed by, Heath said, "We can take a break for a while. I'll send one of the other guys down here to watch for stragglers. Ireland will probably want you by the food."

We walked up the hill together.

"That was a little overwhelming. I can't believe you do this every day for weeks during the season."

"It's a lot. Especially when most of us aren't a fan of peopling."

I chuckled. "I'm not used to it either."

"Even with your online presence?"

“It’s not the same as in person. But it was nice to hear how excited everyone is about the event.”

“This was all you,” Heath said as we made our way up the hill to where the crowd was gathered.

“This is Ireland’s baby. I just had the idea, and she executed it.”

“That’s not what I heard. Ireland has said repeatedly that she couldn’t have done it without you. That you were a genius when it came to planning, details, and the marketing materials.”

“She could have done it. At the very least, she can do it going forward.”

“Everyone appreciates your help,” Heath said when we reached the others.

Before I could respond, Ireland spotted me and grabbed my hand, pulling me away from Heath. “There you are. I need you.”

“Where do you want me?”

“Why don’t you man the food table with Lori? I’m going to walk around and see if everyone’s settled for the movie to start.”

“I can do that.” I stood next to Lori, who explained her process to me, and I quickly helped the next person in line. Lori took their order and cash, and I got their food. It was quick and easy. When the movie was ready to start, Ireland stood in front of the crowd, thanking everyone for coming. “And I couldn’t have done it without Marley Matthews’s help. So, thank her when you see her. This was her idea.”

The crowd clapped, and my face heated. Now everyone would know that I was home. I wasn't sure how I felt about that.

The movie started, and the line for concessions slowed. There was still the occasional kid that ran over, asking for candy or popcorn. But most of the sandwich sales were done. I made a note of what we sold and what we'd need next time.

I wanted Ireland to net a profit and not waste any food. It was a delicate balancing act.

"Why don't you go enjoy the movie with Heath?" Lori asked.

I followed her finger to see him standing near the back of the crowd, talking to Emmett. "Are you sure you're okay here?"

"I'm more than okay, and I'll ask for help if I need it." Lori squeezed my arm before I walked away.

Every time I hung out with the Monroes, I fell more in love with them, especially Heath. I adored him and his family, and I was dangerously close to wanting to stay forever. But now that the movie night was a success, they didn't need me anymore.

Heath's gaze tracked my movement as I made my way to him. "Hey, you. How's it going?"

"The concession stand was busy. How do you think people like the atmosphere?" I asked him quietly as I moved to his side.

There were clusters of people, groups of friends, and families sitting together. We asked that they not bring in food or drink, and so far, I hadn't heard any grumbling about that.

“Everyone seems to be having a good time.”

Knox had set up a small maze with hay bales for the little ones who might get bored to run around. A few older kids were throwing a football around in a nearby field.

“What do you think? Is it worth doing again?” I asked Heath, nervous about his answer. I’d never helped a business like this, where I had my hand in everything.

Heath drew me to his side, and I rested a hand on his chest. “I think so. Just don’t ask Emmett.”

I chuckled into his chest, enjoying the moment of being here with him and his family and putting on an amazing event for a community I never quite felt part of. Maybe being here with the Monroes legitimized me, or maybe it was that people had grown up and forgotten what they said about me and my family.

Eighteen



HEATH

The first movie night was a success. It seemed like people had fun, and it got them talking about our farm. Hopefully, they'd go home to tell their friends, and we'd have even more people next time. At least that's what Marley said when we stayed up that night, high on adrenaline, talking about the future.

Today, we were holding a family meeting to discuss the opening of the farm for the season and presumably the success of our first movie night.

When I entered the craft room in the barn, all my brothers were present, including Talon, my mom, Ireland, and Cole. He'd helped in the past, and since he was working with me, it was assumed he'd be involved in the planning, too.

"Where's Marley?" Ireland asked as soon as she lifted her gaze to me.

"She's working. I think she said something about creating a few videos for social media." I knew in general what she did. It seemed to consist of strategizing about marketing and creating video content.

"I think she should be here," Ireland said, her gaze traveling around the room.

“Why? She’s not a member of the family,” Emmett said.

I sucked in a breath. “I get that she’s not an official member of the family, but she helped out with movie night.”

Ireland leaned closer to Emmett. “She’s the reason why it was a success.”

“I have to agree. I don’t think we would have had the same number of people present without Marley’s help. She even got her marketing person involved,” Mom said.

Emmett’s jaw clenched. “We don’t need her.”

Ireland rested her hand on Emmett’s, which was curled into a fist. “I think you forget I have another job. I’m still planning weddings, including the ones we’re hosting here on the farm. I can’t do everything that needs to be done to get the place open.”

Emmett shook his head. “We didn’t do that much before, and we were fine.”

Ireland drew in a breath, and I knew she was doing it to calm herself. “Here’s the thing. You’ve built something good based on word of mouth. But with the movie night, you’ve created momentum. You’re moving to the next level, and if you want to keep going in that direction, there are things we need to do.”

“In the past, we posted once on social media to start the season, called the papers, hoping they’d run a story, and that was about it,” Mom said.

“That’s not going to cut it this year. If you want to increase sales, we need to do more,” Ireland insisted.

“Who said that we need or want to move to the next level?” Emmett asked.

Talon sat back in his chair, content to stay out of the fray. He only wanted to create and help on the farm when it was absolutely necessary. He let the rest of us handle the day-to-day.

Sebastian stood with a stack of papers in his hands. “I printed out our cash-flow projections for the next six months. If we don’t do something, we won’t be able to pay our bills.” Sebastian moved around the room, handing each of us the papers he’d prepared.

I quickly scanned over the spreadsheet, my gaze resting on the number on the bottom, the one that indicated profit and expenses. We were projected to be short based on last year’s numbers and the increased costs this year. “What do you suggest we do?”

Sebastian sat in his seat. “We need to listen to what Ireland, or what anyone with marketing experience, has to say. We’re lucky that we have Marley to offer her suggestions for free. I saw what she charges online, and she’s not cheap.”

I hadn’t paid much attention to her prices, but it didn’t surprise me. When it came to business, she knew her worth.

Emmett grunted. “Just because she’s expensive doesn’t mean she’s right about this.”

“I’ve read her testimonials; I’ve seen what she did with the movie night. She created a fairly low-cost event for us, which generated thousands of dollars.”

Ireland nodded. “It’s not just what we generated that night. The idea is that they will tell their friends. When they go to buy a tree, they’ll remember what they liked about this place. You’re building a brand.”

I placed my elbows on the table. “We’re building a rapport with people. They asked for a second movie night, and we’re giving it to them. Our puppies worked the crowd last night, too. All that helps.”

Ireland smiled. “There have been comments asking to see the puppies online.”

“These are all good things, and if we use them to our advantage, it will only increase revenue,” Mom said.

Ireland nodded. “It increases traffic, which means more people.

“I want Marley involved in this. I think she could add to this discussion,” Ireland said.

“I’ll ask her if she has time to come. I’m all for her offering suggestions, but I don’t want to take away from her business.” I was worried that being here would hurt her business, but she said she could do it from anywhere since it was online. I kept expecting her to say it was time for her to go home, but she hadn’t.

If helping us open the farm would keep her here longer, I was all for it. I’d made some progress at the inn, but I was reluctant to tell her about it. I didn’t want her to move out of my cabin.

I typed out a message to her and was surprised when she immediately answered yes. “She’s coming, but I just want to make one thing clear. Marley is here to help us. We’re not paying her, and we need to be respectful of her ideas and her time. I don’t want to hear the attitude you threw out, Emmett, when we first sat down. What she has to offer is valuable, and we will be grateful for it.”

“That girl has had enough strife in her life. It won’t come from us. I don’t want to hear it either,” Mom said sternly.

“Are you on board?” I asked Emmett.

Ireland squeezed his hand, and he glanced at her, his expression softening slightly. Then he nodded in my direction. “I’ll be respectful.”

Ireland smiled at me, her tone full of affection. “He’s probably still going to grumble about the changes, but he wouldn’t be Emmett if he didn’t.”

Talon leaned forward and set his elbows on the table. “I’m all for making more money, but I can’t take time away from building the displays and getting them set up if we want to offer the light show as an option this year.”

“I don’t think we’ll need you to,” Sebastian said, proceeding to list the people he’d hired to work for the duration of the season. We sometimes had college kids come back each year to help, but they didn’t come until the last few weeks.

There was a soft knock on the door.

Knox stood to let her in.

“Heath said you needed me?” Marley stood in the doorway.

I pulled a seat from the wall to the table next to me. “Have a seat. Ireland wanted to run some things by you.”

Once Marley was seated, I gave her a reassuring smile, and she turned her attention to Ireland. “The movie night was a success, and we wanted to thank you.”

“I’m happy I could help. It’s such a great event, and I have a few ideas for the next one.”

Ireland held up her hand. “I’d love to hear those, but first, we’d like to talk about the opening of the farm for the season. You’ve built some momentum with the movie night and the branding on our website and social media accounts. I’m wondering if you could help us build anticipation for the opening.”

Marley leaned forward, an eager smile spreading over her face. “I’ve been following a few other tree farms in the area to get ideas. I think you have a few things to draw people in. It’s a family farm, and you have the puppies. We could write a little history of the property and your family on the website. We could also take some pictures of the farm with information on what will be available for cutting this year. Maybe even take a few shots with the brothers standing next to the trees to show their size. For the opening, I was hoping to take pictures of the puppies in the shop.

“I love those ideas,” Ireland said, and Mom nodded in agreement. “But none of us are photographers.”

“I’ve gotten pretty good. I took some classes because I wanted to be able to take some for my business. I’ve already gotten a bunch of the farm itself.”

“I don’t want to be in any pictures,” Emmett said carefully.

“I know you don’t like doing this stuff. But pictures are better than talking to people, right? It’ll just be me, and I promise it will be painless. I’d love to get photographs of the brothers, and maybe even one with the cousins. Lori, if you have any of the family when the boys were younger, that would be great.”

“I can pull a few for you to consider. I have pictures of the house and barn, too.”

Marley smiled widely. “Perfect. I assume no one has a problem with me photographing the puppies in the shop?”

“Only that they might eat the décor,” Mom joked.

“It won’t be easy getting photographs of two puppies being still,” Knox said.

“I’ll do my best. Maybe an action shot would be better anyway. How soon do we need to get these done? You open ___”

“The week before Thanksgiving,” I said.

“That doesn’t give us much time. Maybe two weeks to get everything ready and posted.”

“Is it possible?” Ireland asked.

Marley pulled out her phone and took some notes. “I’ll get it done.”

“I don’t want it to interfere with your work,” I said to Marley.

“It won’t. My business is automated. I have the emails ready to go; I just need to make some tweaks and send them out. I might need to do a few live streams to drum up interest, but those don’t take longer than an hour or two, and I have a team that edits the videos.”

“Are you sure?” I was appreciative of her help, but not if it came at the detriment of her business.

“I’m positive.” Her expression was determined.

I nodded, then looked across the table at Emmett. “Do you have any concerns?”

“I don’t like the idea of pictures posted on the site.”

“It sounds like it will just be us,” I said to Marley, and she nodded. “Of course. This is just the brothers, your mom, and maybe one with your dad for the history section of the website.”

“Dad would have loved this,” Mom said, and everyone got quiet. “Thank you for helping us. I would have liked to do something like this years ago, but I’m not handy with a camera and wouldn’t know the first thing about social media. Sebastian is the one who posts for us now, and as you can see, it’s very little.”

“I’ll handle your social media accounts, and I’ll run it by you before I post,” Marley said.

Ireland nodded. “I can double-check everything.”

“Is there anything else?” Marley asked.

I wondered if Marley would stay here for the duration. Selfishly, I hoped she would. I couldn’t wait to see how everything looked and if it made a difference.

“Did you notice anything about the other farms in the area that could be an issue for us?” Ireland asked.

“This one has a pie shop. They take orders at Thanksgiving and Christmas and apparently, make the pies on the property in a little house. The pictures are great.” She scrolled through something on her phone and tilted it toward Ireland.

“There are trays of pies everywhere. They must get a ton of orders,” Ireland said, passing the phone around the table.

“No one here can bake like that. I make cookies, but pies are not my specialty,” Mom said.

“Daphne makes the pies,” Cole said when the phone was handed to him. “That’s who that is.”

“You know her?” Emmett asked him.

“We went to school together. She’s the only daughter. I think she has a few older brothers who work there, too.”

“It’s something they can offer that we can’t,” Marley said.

“Is that a problem?” Emmett asked.

Marley frowned. “It gives them an advantage. They have people coming to the farm in November to order the pies and then to pick them up. It’s convenient for them to pick up a tree with the pie.”

The room fell silent, everyone lost in thought about what we could offer that was similar.

“Maybe each person who buys a tree gets a special edition ornament for that year as a gift.”

“Did you just come up with that idea?” Ireland asked, her voice filled with awe.

“My best ideas come from the spur of the moment,” Marley said, and I was even more impressed by her. She was intelligent and business savvy, and she hadn’t let Emmett or my family intimidate her. She was confident in her abilities.

“What would we have to wear for this photoshoot?” Emmett asked gruffly, and Ireland beamed in his direction.

“I think we should go with whatever you normally wear, but not your farm shirts. Maybe flannel, Henleys, jeans, and boots. We’re not looking for glossy, unrealistic photos but real ones. We want people to feel like they know you when they come. They’ll see the puppies and want to know which one is Comet and which one is Dash.”

“Or which brother they’re talking to? Maybe we could add a little anecdote about each one. A little blurb about Talon’s

artwork, Emmett's furniture making, and Heath's contracting work. Should we do a blog?" Ireland asked Marley.

"We can consider it. Do you know anyone who's particularly good at writing?"

Sebastian shifted in his seat. "My friend, Hanna. She has a blog for teachers."

"We don't need to do it yet, but it's something to think about for the future. I think we have enough to get us started this year," Marley said.

"I'm still not convinced we need to take these extra steps," Emmett began, and Sebastian said, "Do we need to take a look at the numbers again?"

Emmett held up his hand. "I get that. But I want to make sure that none of this is invasive, that we're not getting too personal."

"I can understand your concern. You're in control here. We can share a little, just enough to get them curious about who you are, without giving too much away. I'd love to feature Talon a bit more since he's building the light display."

Emmett's shoulders lowered, and I think it had to do with the focus not being on him. Marley must have sensed that and knew exactly what to say to ease his mind.

"I don't mind. I've been featured in magazines and newspapers," Talon said.

"Way to be humble," Knox said, giving him shit.

"It's the truth, and it doesn't bother me. I don't care what people think about me."

"We control the narrative here. We're not waiting for a reporter to do a write-up anymore. We create our own

publicity,” Marley said, and everyone at the table was hanging on her words.

I could see how she had such a large following of people clamoring for her to speak and answer their questions online.

“I think this is a great place to start. Does anyone have any questions?” Ireland asked, and when no one said anything, she continued. “Marley will take the photographs we need for the newsletter and social media. Sebastian, why don’t you reach out to Hanna and see if she can help us with a blog. Marley creates her own emails, but she has her own business to run.”

Sebastian nodded. “I can talk to her. I’m sure she’ll be happy to help.”

Everyone was familiar with Sebastian’s best friend, Hanna. She’d been hanging around forever. We hadn’t seen her as much since Sebastian moved to town, but now that he was back, I was positive Hanna would be at the farm more. I had a feeling she liked him, but he was so focused on Ember that he didn’t even notice her interest.

Everyone got up to go, and Marley said to me, “We’re going to be busy the next few months.”

“Does that mean you’re sticking around?” I couldn’t stop myself from asking.

Marley smiled. “Looks like I’ll have to.”

Nineteen



MARLEY

I was so energized by the meeting with Heath's family that I immediately went to his house and grabbed my camera. I scrolled through the pictures I'd already taken to see if any of them would work. I had a few candids of Heath when he didn't know I was looking, and I made a mental note to print and frame them as a present.

Then I made notes on my phone about what we'd need for social media for a few weeks and newsletters throughout the season. I'd need pictures of the fields, the different kinds of trees, and the family.

"In the next couple of weeks, we need to tag and measure the trees," Heath said when I looked up from my camera.

"What is that?" I asked him, genuinely curious about the workings of the farm.

"We measure the trees and categorize them so we can price them. When someone chooses a tree, they'll rip off a piece of the tag, and we'll know exactly what to charge them. We separate them by type, height, and aesthetics. Some trees are missing branches and are uneven, and others are the perfect shape." He used his hands to make a silhouette.

"Can I help? I'd love to see what you do. It would be a good opportunity to get some candid shots of you and your

brothers.”

“That might be better for Emmett. No matter what he said at the meeting, he’s going to fight you. He probably already forgot that he promised to play nice.”

“Ireland doesn’t keep him in line?” I asked.

“She does her best, but he strays from time to time and acts like the grumpy ass he usually is.”

“No offense, but all of you are grumpy. No one wants people on the farm, yet you run a tree-cutting business. No one is excited about decorating their own trees—”

“I get the picture.”

“If you want to advertise the farm, you need to be passionate about what you do. It’s why I’m so successful. I truly believe that I’m helping people and what I have to say is important, and they need to hear it. So many people say they feel yucky about selling, but when you know you’re offering a service that people need, you’ll let go of that feeling.”

“How does that translate to our business?” Heath asked me.

“Do you remember what you love about the farm?” I asked him, lowering my camera so I could see his expression.

His face softened. “That we had the run of the place, and my family was always nearby. If not my brothers, then my cousins.”

I snapped my fingers. “Monroe Farm is the close family atmosphere combined with holiday cheer.”

Heath’s face screwed up. “I’m not as passionate about the holiday stuff.”

“That’s okay. Lori and Ireland make up for it. Talon’s doing the holiday display. Holly creates the ornaments. There’s enough holiday cheer to go around.” I made a mental note to talk to Holly about creating a special ornament to give away. I wasn’t sure it would be ready in time for this year, but it was something to think about for the future.

“We’re going out to tag now if you’d like to join us. I know you usually work on your business during the afternoon.”

“I want to come with you. I’m excited to see what you do.”

Heath chuckled. “It’s not as exciting as you think.”

“I’ll be the judge of that.”

Heath pulled me flush against him. “I love having you here.”

“I’m excited to see the farm during the season, and I’m happy to drum up interest for the opening.” I wasn’t used to people liking me for me. It was what I could do for them, and in this situation, I was giving the Monroes a lot of value.

“I hope you don’t think you’re just here to work for the Monroes.”

“Of course not.” But there was a part of me that knew I’d need to contribute if I wanted to stay.

“Your stay isn’t contingent on working for us.”

His words were so close to the truth that I was momentarily stunned into silence. He touched my chin and lifted it so my eyes met his. “Do you understand that?”

“Yes.” But I wasn’t sure if he believed me.

“I like having you here in my house.”

I let his words wind their way around my heart. I wanted to believe him. I wanted this to be real. But I couldn't get the vision of his note out of my head. It would always haunt me.

“If we want to make a go of this, we need to put the past behind us.”

“Is that what we're doing?” I kind of thought it was a nice way to pass the time with a definite end date when I moved home to California.

Heath's forehead wrinkled. “I know it's hard for you to trust people, but I'm a patient guy. I'll show you what you mean to me.”

“Are you saying that you want a real relationship?” I asked him.

“Is that not what we're doing?”

My heart pounded in my chest. I had to be sure we were talking about the same thing. “I thought we were having a good time, because at the end of the day, Aiden is my brother and your friend. You walked away before.”

“I regret that with everything in me. If I could go back and change how I handled that, I would. We're adults now, and we know what we're getting into.”

“And Aiden?” I had to be sure he wouldn't suddenly freak out about what Aiden would think.

“I want to talk to him in person. He's planning on coming home for the holidays, right?”

“That's what he said the last time I talked to him. He wants to see the inn before I sell it.”

“*If* you sell it.”

I swallowed hard because I wasn't sure what I wanted anymore. My heart and my brain were all mixed up.

"Give me a chance to make the inn beautiful again." He said it so earnestly I couldn't deny him.

"I have every confidence that you will. That's not the issue."

"Remember what you loved about this place when you were a child. Before you convinced yourself that leaving was best. A girl who loved the inn and the grounds."

If I thought hard enough, I could remember the feeling I got helping Gram at the front counter or just playing in the gardens. "I'd like to see it brought back to life."

"And you'll wait to make any decisions about selling until then?"

This was obviously important to him, so I said, "Yes."

He grinned. "Are you ready to tag some trees?"

"Yes," I said as we tugged on our boots and grabbed our jackets, hats, and gloves. On the way to the truck, he handed me a map. "These are the fields ready for cutting this year."

When we were settled in the cab, he leaned over to point out the four different fields. "This one is Douglas firs, these three are Fraser. The ones we picked last year have all been replanted and are this high." He showed me with his fingers.

"Do you cut a tree for your house?" I asked him, trying to picture him in his cabin on Christmas. Was it decorated?

"Not usually. But would you like one?"

I'd never had a tree. I don't decorate. But then there wasn't the same pressure in a place where palm trees are

commonplace. “I would.”

Heath reached over to squeeze my thigh. “Then keep an eye out today and let me know if you see one you want. I’ll cut it and bring it home.”

Bring it home. A tree for us. I loved everything about that. The vision of us spending holidays here, me helping him at the farm, and still having time to grow my business. I didn’t think I could remember a time I’d been happier.

For a few days, maybe even weeks, I’d let myself give in to the vision of living here, maybe even hiring a manager to run the inn. I’d indulge the fantasy that I could build a life here with Heath. That we could even have a family. My kids would belong, just like Addy.

I knew it was foolish, but the air was crisp, and the rows of trees were calling to me to take their picture.

He parked the car on the lane near the first field behind Emmett and Knox’s trucks. According to the map, we had to hike past two other fields to get to the ones with mature trees.

“Why do you plant them like this?” Each field was a square of one size of tree.

“You want to stagger them. Dad taught us that. It helps with growth.”

“Your dad taught you everything you needed to know about working the farm and taking care of the trees?” I asked, as we got out and joined Emmett and Knox.

“Emmett and Knox plant the trees and monitor their growth, but we all know what goes into it and the reason behind what we do.”

“I’d love to learn everything. That way, when I’m talking about the farm online or in marketing materials, I’m giving accurate information.”

Knox nodded. “We can do that.”

“Now, what are you guys doing, exactly?” I asked them.

Emmett held up red, green, and white tags. “Each tree gets a number so we can track it. Then we categorize them by type, height, and quality.”

Knox pointed to a tree that was fat, but the top only came to my shoulders.

“It looks like the top was chopped off.”

“Something stunted its growth, but someone might want it. We categorize it as a green. It will be cheaper. But then again, it might be the only tree standing at the end.”

I thought that was a little sad, even though it was a tree and not a person. Even trees had to be perfect, the branches filled out with no holes.

“We’ll measure them, tag them, and trim a few of the branches to ensure they have the shape people want,” Heath added.

“You trim the branches?”

“People want the perfect tree, and they want to believe they grew that way and not like this,” he said, pointing out the smaller tree again.

“Wow. I had no idea.”

Heath showed me how they used a special tape measure to get the height quickly, then they logged the information, gave it a number, printed the tag from a little handheld machine

they had, and secured it near the top. “Buyers will rip off this portion and bring it to the red barn or the gate to pay for it.”

“And price is based on shape, size, and type.”

“That’s right,” Heath said with a smile and a nod.

“Could you stand next to the tree so I could get a picture?” I’d seen another farm have a worker stand by the tree for a height comparison. Heath complied, and I snapped a few pictures of him standing in front of it. “How tall is this tree?”

“It’s a seven-footer.”

I made a note of it so I could use it when I posted it another day.

“Let’s get to it. It looks like you have a lot of trees to tag.” I followed next to them, watching them with interest. They were quick and efficient, obviously used to the process. I took pictures as we went, trying to be discreet.

It must have worked, because no one grumbled about me taking them. The ground sloped toward a small pond by the main house. The area was gorgeous. I could see why the brothers wanted to keep it for themselves and not commercialize it.

“Have you thought about allowing photographers here to hold sessions?”

“Absolutely not,” Emmett said, and I wasn’t surprised. “We tried one time, and it was incredibly annoying. They get in the way of the tree selling.”

“I can see that. You should focus on one thing during the season, but maybe open it up for photographers a few Saturdays in October.”

“That’s not a bad idea,” Heath said.

“You’re full of ideas,” Emmett said.

“Not all good?” I teased.

He gave me a look. “Give me some time.”

I shrugged. “This is your farm. I’m just trying to help.”

“And we appreciate that,” Knox said.

I had to remember I wasn’t part of the family, not in the way that Ireland and Sarah were. Ireland was married, and Sarah was engaged. I was just a girl living here. Despite what Heath said today, there were no guarantees in life. He could change his mind or decide I wasn’t what he wanted.

We finished that field and made plans to do another one the next day. By the time we were in the truck and headed back to Heath’s cabin, my feet hurt, and my shoulders ached from the camera strap around my neck.

“I think I know what we could do tonight.”

I rested my head on the seat. “Oh, yeah? What’s that?”

“Grab a bathing suit if you have one, and a towel. I have the perfect thing for those sore muscles.”

“I’m intrigued.”

“It’s a super-secret spot. I’m not sure Heath or Knox took Ireland or Sarah there yet. But then, it’s by my place.”

We grabbed our things and met on the porch. I hadn’t brought a bathing suit, so I pulled on sweats and hiking boots over my bra and panties. Hopefully, it was as secluded as Heath suggested. He took my hand as he led me around the house. “We built structures on the property and take pictures to show them to our customers. This is one of those, but we’ve

never shown this one to anyone. It's not the best location. Leaves are a problem, but we got a cover for it."

"What is it?" I asked.

Heath grinned at me. "You'll see."

We walked through the woods for a bit until we came to a small clearing. The lights that lined the path surrounded what looked like a small pool. "You have a pool here?"

The trees were close enough that it would be covered in leaves.

"It's not a pool," Heath said with a sly grin. He pulled off the cover, then flipped something on, and the jets came to life.

"A hot tub?" I put my things on a nearby chair.

Heath pulled his sweatshirt over his head and pushed down his sweats. He wore nothing underneath.

Since he wasn't concerned about being seen, I removed all my clothing too.

"No bathing suit?" Heath asked, already submersed in the water to his chest.

"I wasn't expecting to go swimming. The inn doesn't have a pool."

"Maybe we should build one." Heath held his hand out to me and helped me step into the warm water.

It felt like heaven after the day we'd spent traipsing through the farm. I eased down until I was sitting on the bench next to Heath. The cool air felt good on my shoulders.

He played with the settings until the tub glowed red and green.

“Are you sure this is private?” I asked as he hooked an arm around my waist and pulled me into his lap. My knees settled on either side of his powerful thighs.

“No one comes here. It’s between my house and yours. It’s unlikely anyone would wander over here.”

I looped my arms around his neck, my nipples pebbled from the cold. “How have I never noticed it?”

“We wanted privacy, but then when it was built, we realized the trees were going to be a problem. So, we covered it and rarely use it.”

“I love that you built it here,” I said as I glided over his hardening cock. “It’s the perfect location.”

“Yeah?” Heath asked as he kissed me, his cock sliding between my folds and the tip easing inside, inch by inch.

My entire body was flush from the warm water, but his cock filling me took it to another level. He dropped his head so he could take my nipple into his mouth. I loved being with him like this, open and free.

The water warmed me as the cool air sent goose bumps over my skin. Heath lifted me with his grip on my hips and lowered me until I was whimpering into his mouth.

“Touch yourself,” Heath commanded, and my hand moved lower until I was circling my clit, his cock bumping my fingers on every pass.

My movements were uneven and jerky. I was so close. I bit my lip hard when everything inside me tightened and then exploded.

My muscles spasmed around me as he took over from below, thrusting deep. My head fell back because the feeling

was pure ecstasy. The warm water, the cool air, his hot wet mouth on my nipple. He bit lightly as he thrust deep one more time.

He eased me off him and settled me across his lap, his hand lazily touching my breast, my shoulder, and my hips.

“Thank you for bringing me here,” I said as I looped an arm around his neck and settled my cheek against his chest. I was talking about more than just tonight. He’d invited me into his home and his heart.

Twenty



HEATH

The night was surreal, and her body moving over mine felt a lot like making love. It was the moment I fell completely in love with Marley. It was deeper than what I felt for her as a teenager.

The next two weeks were busy, getting the farm ready for opening. All the trees needed to be measured and tagged, the machinery tested and set up by the barn and the gate. Sebastian worked on the schedule, and Marley took photographs and videos of the place and created a media campaign to build excitement.

Today, she wanted to do the puppy shoot while the shop was stocked. She moved around the room, taking close-up pictures of the ornaments, candles, pillows, and signs with holiday sayings, like *It's the Most Wonderful Time of the Year*.

“I’ll showcase a few items every day on social media, inviting people to come on in and shop. You don’t have to buy a tree when you come, but they’ll want to once they see the offerings. They’ll remember why an artificial tree is a poor substitute.”

I walked up to Marley and pulled her into my arms. I wanted to tell her that her passion for the farm was one of the

reasons why I loved her, but I wasn't sure if she felt the same way.

She smiled up at me. "Are you ready to photograph the puppies?"

They were in a pen in the middle of the room, wrestling with each other. They were a lot bigger than they were at Christmas, but not yet fully grown.

"Do you think you can get them to be still?" Marley asked me.

I gave her a look. "I'll do my best."

Knox removed the playpen, which was more of a fence around the puppies, but they didn't notice it was gone.

Marley stepped out of my embrace, adjusted her camera, and snapped a few photos. "These are cute, but I was hoping they'd sit for me."

"I brought treats," Emmett said, pulling one out of his pocket.

I wasn't sure how the puppies knew—they must have smelled it—but their eyes went immediately to his hand and dropped to their butts, their tails wagging.

"Is this good?" Emmett asked, stepping out of her camera angle.

"Can you hold it by my shoulder so it's like they're looking at the camera?"

Emmett moved closer to Marley while she shot a few photos, then dropped to her knees to be on their level. Emmett did the same, and the puppies' gazes followed his every move, their little tails wagging faster.

I held my breath, hoping she was getting what she wanted. The shop was fully decorated and ready to go, and the puppies were a golden yellow against the wood floor.

After a few minutes, Marley pulled something out of her bag. It was a stuffed gingerbread house toy. She threw it at the puppies, and they immediately went for it, their claws scratching for purchase on the wood floor.

Marley giggled, but her camera remained steady as they worked the toy until they pulled out more toys. Comet held a gingerbread man in his mouth, and Dash held a Santa.

They dropped to their haunches and chewed on the toys while Marley spread out on her stomach and took pictures.

The pups were adorable, and I loved seeing Marley in her element. She enjoyed capturing beautiful moments, whether it was for work or the farm.

I worried that she'd get bored with tagging trees every day, but she usually joined us for a couple of hours. She still worked on her business in the afternoons, then we'd eat dinner together or go to the main house.

She seemed to thrive in the company of my family. Everyone had become used to her hiking the farm with her camera and taking shots of the rows of trees, the barn, and the pond.

I worked on the inn every chance I had. Emmett and Knox helped me with the outdoor gardens. Marley had decided to do something simple because she wasn't sure if she'd keep the inn or not. But I wanted to do something for her that was more elaborate. And I wanted to give her the fountain she wanted.

The day before the farm opened for the season, we officially moved Sebastian and Ember into their new cabin.

Everyone was present to move boxes from the trucks into the house. Ireland, Sarah, and Marley unpacked the kitchen while we set up the furniture in the bedroom. We wanted them to be able to sleep in their beds tonight.

Some rooms were empty because Sebastian didn't have much in the way of furniture. He tended to get focused on one thing, which was Ember and his business.

Hanna was here, too, playing with Ember and Addy outside. When the bedrooms and kitchen were unpacked, we convened in the kitchen to eat pizza. We tore through the pies quickly, leaving empty boxes on the counters.

Emmett lifted his red plastic cup. "To the Monroes, all living in one place again."

"To the Monroes," Knox parroted, and the rest of us followed suit.

My heart was full now that everyone I loved lived on the farm. I wasn't sure how long Marley would stick around, but I hoped it would be until after the holidays. She was as invested in the opening as we were.

She frequently discussed plans with Ireland to post new pictures and send emails announcing the opening.

Since it was obvious she was good at her job, we left them to handle the marketing aspect of it. As long as Emmett didn't have to be in too many pictures, he didn't complain too much.

"I still need to get all the brothers in a picture for the website. Can we do that today since Sebastian is here?" Marley asked, reaching for her camera that never seemed to be far from her these days.

"Do we have to?" Emmett asked.

“You know you sound like a five-year-old, right?” Ireland said dryly.

“Pictures. Pictures,” Addy and Ember yelled, always happy to pose.

“These are going to be of your uncles and daddy,” Ireland said.

“We can do it in front of trees, or we could do it in front of this new cabin.”

“The trees,” Sebastian said, and we all stepped outside while Marley found a good spot. She lined us up so that we stood next to each other and looked at us through her lens. Ireland and Sarah stood next to her.

Hanna played with the girls just outside of the shot.

Marley looked up from her camera. “You guys look like you’re going to a ballet.”

“How does that look exactly?” Talon asked.

Marley rolled her eyes. “Like you’re being forced to take this really uncomfortable picture with people you don’t like.”

“That sounds about right,” Emmett said easily, and we elbowed him and smacked him on the back of his head.

“Hey,” he finally said. “Marley’s the one who said it.”

“Act like you like each other and that you’re happy your last brother finally moved onto the farm.”

We moved closer to each other, and she lowered her gaze to look through the lens.

“Everything is right in the world because everyone you love is in one place.”

I felt my brothers relax and ease closer to each other. Knox even looped an arm loosely around my neck.

A smile curved over Marley's face. "That's better." She snapped pictures. "You guys are doing great. Just a few more."

I felt Knox tense, and when Marley looked up at him with a bright smile on her face, he made his move. He pulled me into his chest and gave me a noogie. "Stop it, asshole," I said as I struggled against him.

I sensed Emmett and Talon wrestling on the ground, while Sebastian watched us with an amused expression on his face. "Watch your mouth. The kids."

We all relaxed, remembering that Addy and Ember were watching us.

"These are great," Marley said, looking at the images on her camera.

"You didn't—" Emmett began at the same time we all moved in her direction. Her eyes widened as we converged on the screen.

She had it on the one of us wrestling, generally looking like idiots.

"Delete it," Emmett insisted.

Marley pulled her phone away as if to protect it. "These are amazing." She glanced down at the screen and scrolled through several images of us in various stages of grappling with each other. "These are real. You're brothers who run this place, but you love each other, too."

Emmett pointed at the picture. "You think that's love?"

"You weren't punching each other," Sebastian said.

The corners of her lips tipped up. “This is love. How you work together”—she scrolled through pictures of us measuring and tagging the trees—“and help each other.” She flipped through more images of us carrying Seb’s furniture into his new cabin and then the final one, the picture of standing in front of trees. A few of us were smiling, me wider than the others, and Emmett looked stoic. This was us. “You captured us, baby. I love it.”

“And another one bites the dust,” Talon grumbles to Sebastian.

But I couldn’t take my eyes off Marley. I drew her into my arms, the camera between our bodies. “Thank you for getting us.”

Her eyes filled with emotion. “You’re welcome.”

I kissed her softly, knowing my brothers were probably elbowing each other and rolling their eyes. Nothing mattered but the look on her face when she was scrolling through those pictures, the joy that she’d effectively captured.

When I finally lifted my head, they had scattered, probably to give us space. I brushed her hair out of her face. “I know we’d said we’d wait to see where this took us, but I can’t hold back anymore. I love you.”

My heart was full, but Marley wasn’t responding. I ignored the racing of my heart. “You don’t have to say anything. I just had to tell you how I felt.”

She went up on tiptoe and kissed me. “Heath, I—”

“Don’t say anything. I didn’t mean to rush you.”

“You aren’t.”

“Are you coming? Ireland brought a cake,” Sebastian said from the porch.

“We should go inside,” I said, interlacing my fingers with Marley’s and leading her inside. I tried not to think too hard about what it meant that I’d shared what was in my heart and she hadn’t said anything. But how else was I to take her lack of response?

Ireland sliced the cake and handed plates to everyone, and I tried to keep my panic at bay. Would Marley run? Would she move back to California? I was supposed to be patient.

She didn’t meet my gaze while she talked to the girls. I couldn’t get a read on what she was thinking.

The guys drifted outside on the deck like we usually did when all of us were gathered. I’d placed heaters here earlier, and Talon plugged them in.

“Everything okay with you and Marley?” Knox asked.

“They were sucking face after she took those pictures,” Talon said.

“Sucking face? What are you, twelve?” Emmett asked.

I wasn’t sure how to answer his question. But when Knox’s gaze turned to me, I said, “Seems to be.”

“She sticking around?” Sebastian asked as he grabbed beers from a cooler and handed them around.

“I think she will. It sounds like she has plans to help with social media throughout the season. I know she wants to get more pictures.” She can’t do that from California.

Knox took a bottle. “Someone could take those pictures for her if she needed to get back.”

I swallowed over the lump in my throat. “I’d like her to stay, but I don’t know what her plans are.”

“Don’t you think you need to have the conversation?” Knox asked.

“We said we’d see where things go. We never labeled anything.” Talking to her would put pressure on the situation. Pressure I wasn’t sure she could handle. She hadn’t been in a long-term relationship where she allowed herself to have feelings for the other person. Not since I hurt her. So, I couldn’t predict how she’d react to my declaration.

“You love her,” Emmett said.

“I do.” But it didn’t feel good to admit it. Not when I’d just told Marley, and she hadn’t responded. To be fair, we were interrupted, and it wasn’t the best timing.

“You don’t know how she feels?” Knox asked.

“We haven’t talked about it.”

“You should see where you stand before you get in too deep,” Emmett said.

“You think she’s going to hurt me?” I asked, a little surprised. She was the one worried I’d hurt her. But then they didn’t know our history.

“She’s the one who lives in California, and wants to sever her family ties here,” Seb said reasonably.

“I don’t know if that’s true anymore.”

“That’s the thing. You don’t know. I think it’s time you found out,” Knox said.

“I will.” When the timing was right. I didn’t want to push her, even if it was driving me crazy that I’d bared my heart to

her. “Navigating whatever this is isn’t easy.”

“Tell me about it. It’s a minefield. You think you’re stepping in a safe spot, and then everything blows up around you,” Emmett said, and we all remembered how he’d invited Ireland to live with him and then kicked her out when he freaked out about the situation.

“I think that’s just you,” Knox said. “The rest of us are better with relationships.”

“I don’t know about that,” Talon said.

“You talk to Holly yet?” I asked him, knowing she was his ex, and it was uncomfortable when they were near each other in the shop.

“I haven’t seen her much lately. I’ve been holed up in my shop, trying to get the designs for the light display completed.”

“You think you’ll be done on time?” Seb asked him, and I relaxed, knowing that the inquisition into my relationship with Marley was over for now.

When I refocused on the conversation, Seb was talking about Hanna working on the farm’s blog. “She wants to do a story on each of us. Our individual talents and the reasons we love the farm.”

Emmett dropped his head into his hands. “Why do we need a blog?”

“Don’t worry. She said she’d do you last.”

“She’s your friend. I say she starts with you,” I said to Seb.

Everyone nodded in agreement.

“I’m the most boring of all of us,” he said, and we all laughed. We loved to rib him for being uptight, even if it

wasn't always true. "What could I add?"

"You can talk about how you just finished building your house because you wanted to be closer to family. That you help with the books," Knox said reasonably.

Sebastian's lips twisted. "I think she wants something more."

"What it's like to grow up on the farm and how you want your daughter to experience that, too," I said, having thought a lot about this recently. I think it was being around Marley. She made me want to have a family. I was resigned to living alone in that house, but now she'd opened my eyes to another possibility.

"I don't see why we need all these changes. We were doing fine before," Emmett grumbled.

"You know why. We've been over this," Seb said.

We were used to Emmett's crankiness. Even though the evidence presented to him showed that something was necessary, he dug his heels in.

Hanna would have a hard time getting all of us to cooperate with her story. Her only chance was Seb. They'd been friends since we were kids. He'd do anything for her, and she loved him and Ember.

I shouldn't have said anything to Marley about how I felt. I was positive she was going to withdraw from me, from us, and it wouldn't be long before she was on a flight back to California.

It was my fault that she was so slow to trust. I just wasn't sure how to fix it. "How do you convince someone that they're deserving of love?" I asked Knox as the conversation flowed around us.

“You don’t. They have to figure it out themselves.”

Twenty-One



MARLEY

I *love you.*

Those three words hit me like a battering ram to my chest, knocking the wind and, apparently, the sense out of me. I couldn't respond. My brain was too busy trying to process them.

Gram said she loved me. I knew Aiden loved me by the way he took care of me and protected me over the years. But no one else had ever said those words to me. Part of it was my fault. I kept my distance from any friends and guys I dated.

There was a constant roaring in my ears for the rest of the night. Everyone was elated to have Seb and Ember living in a cabin on the property. There was a sense that everything was right in the world.

But for me, I felt like everything had been upended. My brain was spinning uselessly, and I couldn't slow down long enough to figure out how I felt.

I'd slipped out onto the front porch to get some air and clarity.

A few minutes later, the door opened, and Ireland stepped out. "Are you okay?"

"Of course. I'm happy for Sebastian and Ember."

Ireland sat in the chair next to me. “Are you sad that you’re not at home?”

I thought about that for a few seconds. Did I miss the ocean? “I don’t think so.”

“So, you’re not missing home. Is it that you can’t stay in your own place? I would think it would be ready by now.”

If the inn was ready for me to live there, why hadn’t Heath mentioned that? The thought of moving anywhere made me uneasy. “I’m happy where I am. Something happened tonight, and it made me question everything.” What was I doing here? What was I doing with Heath in particular? Did I want something long-term with him? There were moments where I could see it so clearly, but it was scary, too. It could all be taken away from me if he changed his mind or if his family decided I wasn’t a good fit.

My breath felt ragged; my heart pounded in my ears.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Ireland asked softly.

I wanted to talk to someone about it, but it wouldn’t be right when I hadn’t even discussed it with Heath yet. “I shouldn’t.”

“I’m here to listen if you need someone.”

“How did you know when you were in love with Emmett?” I asked her, and her entire expression softened, her lips tipping up into a soft smile.

“When I couldn’t imagine living without him. It was a little confusing because we were stuck living together during the snowstorm. But when the snow melted, the roads were cleared, and we were back to reality? That’s when everything became obvious to me. I was so scared that things would change, but it only solidified that what we had was real. It took

Emmett a little longer to figure things out, but Monroe men are stubborn and set in their ways. They don't think that love is in the cards for them."

"You think that they all feel that way?" Heath told me how he felt. I was the problem.

"I shouldn't make generalizations, but yes, I think family and this farm come first, and when they meet someone, it takes some convincing that they could spend the rest of their lives with them. Not every woman wants to live on this farm. So, they have to be cautious. To make sure they've found the right person." She was quiet for a few seconds, then shifted in the chair to face me. "Do you think Heath is the guy for you?"

I winced. "It's too soon. We've only recently reconnected."

"Reconnected. Did you have a relationship before?" Ireland asked, and I sucked in a sharp breath at my misstep. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that."

Ireland's expression filled with concern. "I won't tell anyone if that's what you're worried about."

"We dated when we were teenagers. He was eighteen, and I was seventeen. My brother, Aiden, had recently enlisted, and I was lost. I wanted Aiden to leave and spread his wings, but I was alone."

"Heath was there for you."

I shook my head. "I had a silly schoolgirl crush on him for as long as I can remember. But the more time we spent together, the clearer it became that something was there."

"What happened?"

"Heath came to his senses and remembered that Aiden was his best friend, and he didn't want to do anything to mess that

up. He left me a note, breaking things off.” My tone was bitter.

“That makes sense, but I’m sure that had to be a painful situation.”

“When it happened, I realized there was nobody there for me, and Gram couldn’t make things better. I had to do that for myself. I graduated, went away to college, and never came back.”

“Until now,” Ireland added softly.

“Until now.”

“Now you’re living with Heath, and you like each other.”

I laughed softly, even though nothing about this was funny. “He told me he loved me.”

Ireland nodded. “Ah. That’s what has you all torn up inside. Do you love him?”

I swallowed over the lump in my throat. “That’s the thing. How do you know? I love Aiden and Gram, but they’re family.”

“Only you can know the answer to that. How do you feel when you’re with him?”

I thought back to the times when we were alone in his cabin, cooking breakfast, or watching a movie. “I feel good. Happy.”

“How do you feel when you’re not?”

I shrugged. “I’m excited to see him again. I haven’t wanted to fly home.”

“That’s a start. Just keep paying attention to how it feels inside your body. Maybe you’ve been numb to your feelings for so long that you don’t recognize them in the moment.”

I hadn't thought of it like that.

Just then, the door opened, and a few people walked outside.

Ireland stood and leaned against the railing as everyone trickled out. When Sebastian came outside, she said, "You need to decorate your house for the holidays. Get a tree—"

"No excuses. You live on a Christmas tree farm now," Lori said.

"We can do that. Although, who will see the decorations? We live so far from the road," Sebastian said.

"We will," Ember said. "We can walk around and check out everyone's cabins."

Talon groaned. "That means we *all* have to decorate."

Ember shrugged. "You live on a Christmas tree farm. You should have a tree shining in your window, and your porch wrapped in lights. Maybe even a Santa and his reindeer on your roof."

Sebastian pointed at Ireland. "You created this. You better help."

"I'm happy to. Tell me what you need, and I'll pick up the decorations. Maybe we can have a family day of cutting down the Christmas trees."

I clasped my hands together. "That would be the perfect photo op. Your customers would adore seeing that."

Heath came over and wrapped his arm around my shoulders and said in a chiding tone, "Not everything is a photo op. Some things are private."

His expression was soft, so I lifted my index finger. “Maybe just one photo?”

“One,” he conceded, kissing me on the temple. I hoped that meant he wasn’t upset about how I’d stood frozen when he’d shared his heart with me.

“The season opens this Saturday. Do we want to cut our trees down first or wait, and let the customers get the best ones?”

“I have a small private field where I started to grow a few trees for us. There should be some ready to cut this year,” Emmett said.

“I had no idea you did that,” Lori said.

“It was right after Ember was born. I thought we might want to start cutting our own trees.”

Sebastian cleared his throat as if the admission was overwhelming for him.

Ireland moved to Emmett’s side, her hand on his cheek. He dropped his head so she could say something to him in his ear. It was a sweet, intimate moment, and my heart squeezed. Could I have that with Heath?

Heath opened the door today to something, and I hadn’t stepped through. Instead, I hesitated. I hoped I hadn’t closed the door on all future possibilities.

“Do you want to put up a tree at my house?” Heath asked me, and I smiled. “That would be great. I haven’t put up a tree since I moved.” Gram was the one who put up several at the inn. She even decorated one on the porch.

Heath grinned. “That changes now. What do you say we check out this private field tonight?”

“What if the trees don’t last until Christmas?” I asked him, knowing Gram always worried about that.

“We run a Christmas tree farm. You can always get another one,” Knox said reasonably.

Ember and Addy cheered, then ran around the yard, singing as they wished everyone a merry Christmas.

I’d never thought of the holidays as the happiest time of the year. Instead, I felt sad because I was supposed to spend this time of the year with people I loved. But Aiden was usually halfway around the world, and now Gram was gone.

“We’re going to create new memories. Starting tonight.” Heath squeezed my shoulder.

My eyes stung, but I nodded. “That would be nice.”

“We’ll meet at field number fifty-five,” Emmett said to everyone as they moved toward their trucks.

Inside the cab of his truck, Heath turned on the radio to classic holiday hits and said, “We create the life we want. My brothers and I wanted to be close as a family, so we each built a cabin on the same property.” He fell silent for a few seconds. “What I’m trying to say is that if you want something different, you can create that.”

“You make it sound so easy,” I said as I put my seat belt on.

He glanced over at me as we traveled over the bumpy lane. “Just close your eyes and imagine what you want.”

When my eyes closed, I got an image of waking up with Heath on Christmas morning and seeing his smiling face. Downstairs was a roaring fire and a tree with wrapped presents underneath. I felt everything, happiness and anticipation of

spending the day with him, and then his family at dinner. Tingles erupted over my skin, and when I opened my eyes, I said, “Are you saying that whatever I imagine is possible for me?”

Heath flashed me a smile. “That’s the idea.”

“What if it doesn’t seem possible, or it’s too crazy or far-fetched?” It wasn’t. Not really, but I was scared.

Heath reached over and interlaced his fingers with mine. “If it’s something you desire, then you’re meant to have it.”

His words were so new to me, so earth-shattering, I didn’t say anything until he parked on the side of the lane and shut off the engine. His brothers’ trucks parked in front and behind us, the doors opening and laughter spilling out. But he didn’t move.

“That sounds—”

Heath unclipped his seat belt and touched the side of my face, turning me so I faced him. “Incredible?”

“I was going to say too good to be true,” I said hesitantly.

“Too good to be true is what you’re meant to have,” he said firmly.

“How can you possibly know that?”

“I wanted my family all in one place, and now we are. I wanted to be happy, and it seems like we are. Everything I wanted is coming true. You’re here. If you’d told me last year I’d be rooming with you, I wouldn’t have believed it, and now I love you. Anything’s possible.”

“I want to believe that.”

“It’s easy enough to do. You just believe.”

“Why does that seem like the hardest thing of all?”

He leaned down and kissed me softly. “Just let go of all the reasons why you think this can’t happen. Your brother. You live in California, and I live here. That you don’t belong. That you believe you’re unlovable. None of that is an obstacle. Not really.”

I closed my eyes and sank into the feel of his palm against my cheek. “I want that vision in my mind.”

“Then it’s yours.” He kissed me one more time and said, “We should get out there before they come looking for us.”

I opened my eyes, seeing his expression so genuine and full of love.

“Stick with me. All your dreams will come true,” Heath said as he pulled away and grabbed a saw out of the back.

“You keep saws around at all times?” I asked as I joined him at the bed of the truck.

Heath grinned. “I live and work on a tree farm. Of course, I do.”

I shook my head, my lips already curling into a smile. When I was with Heath, it did seem like anything was possible, and that’s what scared me. What if I was the one holding us back?

I was positive that was the case. Heath was the one who’d expressed his feelings just a few hours ago. He wasn’t worried about what Aiden thought or where I lived.

Heath took my hand and smiled at me, and my heart thudded inside my chest. “What kind of tree do you want?”

I looked over the field. “I have no idea.”

“I’m partial to the Fraser Firs. They have a bit of a bluish tint.”

“You’re the expert,” I said as we joined the others.

Knox smacked Heath’s arm. “Were you making out in the truck?”

Heath’s eyes sparkled with mischief. “Wouldn’t you like to know?”

Knox tipped his head back. “It’s a good day when another brother isn’t afraid to fall in love with a woman.”

Heath grinned wider, and he didn’t correct him. My cheeks flushed. Did everyone know how Heath felt? I waited for the familiar pressure to press on my chest, but it didn’t come. Maybe Heath was right. I just needed to let go of my worries and believe love was possible for me.

Maybe after all this time, I could trust Heath not to change his mind, walk away, or put Aiden’s feelings first. We were older and more mature.

“We’re looking for trees over six feet. The smaller ones are for next year,” Emmett said as we dispersed, walking among the rows.

It was dark out now, so everyone had flashlights.

“Maybe we should have done this during the day,” Sarah said.

“If we don’t do it when we’re together, we’ll never find a time when we can be in one place again. Talon’s almost never at family events.”

Heath was taking advantage of everyone being in one place. It was sweet, and searching for a tree in the dark was different. I was used to the look of a good tree after following

them around while they tagged trees for the last few weeks. I quickly settled on a large one with full branches. “What about this one?”

Heath walked around it, testing the weight of the branches. “Looks great.”

He dropped to the ground and put the saw to the bottom. “Can you hold it so it doesn’t fall to the ground? Put your hand around the trunk; just be careful of the branches.”

“I can do that.” I was a little surprised that he’d gone with my choice, but then Heath was sweet like that.

I held on to the trunk tightly as he sawed away at the bottom. Eventually, the weight fell onto my hand, and he moved out from under the branches and took it from me. “Take the saw. I’m going to put this on one of the wagons.”

Knox brought a metal wagon to us and rested it on the ground. “Need help, old man?”

“I’m younger than you—”

“Ah. Ah. Ah. You can’t swear anymore. There are too many women and kids around.”

Heath maneuvered the tree onto the wagon. “Who would have thought just a few years ago that this would be our lives?”

It was two brothers sharing a moment, and it caused my heart to swell. Heath thought he was the lucky one to be with me, to have what his brothers had. My breath caught in my throat.

“It’s better than anything I could have imagined. I thought we’d be bachelors forever.” Knox clasped his shoulder, then moved to Ireland and Emmett, who’d claimed a tree nearby.

When Knox moved back to the field to help the others, I asked, “Do you really think that everything is perfect this year?”

Heath’s expression softened as he moved toward me. “I want you to love me back, but I won’t rush you. I know it will happen with time.”

“What did I do to deserve you?”

He leaned close and said, “You didn’t have to do anything. You’re worthy because you are.”

I was? I didn’t need to prove myself to my clients or friends or Heath and his family. It was a different concept. One I wasn’t used to.

His finger touched my chin, lifting it so my gaze met his. “You just have to believe it.”

“That’s the hard part.”

He lifted his hands. “Is it? Look around you at the evidence. You have a successful business.”

“Yeah, that one is easy.” I could see the money coming in; that was validation for me.

“You fit in with my family, and they love you.”

They never made me feel as if I didn’t fit in. That was my worries and anxieties that came up.

“You’re friends with Ireland.”

I felt like I was friends with Sarah and could be friends with Hanna, too. But wasn’t that because I was here with Heath?

“You earned that on your own. If my family didn’t like you, they wouldn’t treat you like you belonged. They wouldn’t

be mean to you, but they'd let me know that you weren't right for me. And trust me, that hasn't happened. Everyone loves you."

Everyone loves me. It was such a foreign concept when I grew up feeling like no one did, or it was just Gram and Aiden on my side.

I wanted everything I'd thought of in the cab earlier. I wanted a future with Heath. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. Now, let's get this tree on the truck so we can take it home and decorate it."

I followed behind him as he pushed the cart toward the lane.

Talon must have stopped at the barn to pick up the machine that did something to the bottom of the trees. "I figured you didn't need to wrap it."

Talon helped Heath attach it to the machine. "You think it's ready to go up tonight?"

"I think you can. Eager to get your tree up?"

"We both are. This Christmas feels different." When the machine turned off, Heath heaved the tree over his shoulder and dumped it into the bed of the truck.

I knew what he meant. I was filled with hope and anticipation in a way I never had been before. My parents didn't buy me things for Christmas. I didn't wake up in the morning with presents under the tree. When I was little, Aiden and Gran snuck things under the tree until my parents found out. They didn't want us to be spoiled. As if I could have been with them as parents.

“You want to decorate it tonight?” Heath asked me, his expression filled with excitement.

“I’d love to.” It would be so easy to love him. I just had to stop worrying about the what-ifs.

Twenty-Two



HEATH

It didn't bother me that she hadn't said she loved me. After our talk in the cab, I think I knew what was going on. She was scared, but I was confident she wouldn't run. At least not yet. I'd show her a good time this holiday season. I'd show her love and joy, and there was no way she could walk away from us.

She fit on the Monroe farm with me and my family. She had to see that. And it all started with decorating the tree in the cabin.

At home, I set the tree up in the family room, near the large window.

“Have you ever put up a tree before?”

“I have but not here. We usually put one at the main house, and that's it. Knox and Emmett got one for the first time last year. But Mom had hopes for us, because she bought each of us a set of decorations for a tree, the mantle, and our porches. I just never used much of it before. If I have time, I'll decorate the porch, but this year, I'll do it for Addy and Ember. It would be fun to set up a carriage ride for them to see everyone's porches. We should make it a contest.”

“Are you sure that's a good idea? I have a feeling you boys get crazy competitive, and it ends in—”

“Fighting?”

“Yeah,” she said with a laugh.

I’d started the fire when we came home, and it illuminated Marley from behind, making her hair appear even redder than it was. She looked like an angel. One who didn’t know her worth but was just starting to believe in it.

I chuckled. “We can’t have be wrestling on the ground. We’ll keep it family-friendly.”

We went downstairs to find the carefully packed decorations. Each box was labeled, so it made it easy to get what we needed and stack them in the living room.

“We need music,” Marley said as she scrolled through her playlist until she found what she wanted. She hit play, and familiar holiday music filled the room.

We worked together, adding hooks to the ornaments and arranging them on the tree. I got the ones higher up, and she concentrated on the lower half. When we were finished, I pulled out the colorful star and put it on the top. I plugged in the lights, and we stood back to admire it.

I wrapped an arm around her shoulder and pulled her into my side. “Isn’t it beautiful?”

“It’s the best tree I’ve ever decorated.”

I glanced down at her. “Did you help Lila with the ones at the inn?”

Marley nodded. “She always had a different theme for each one. Blue or beach-themed. Red or just green. They were so elegant. I dreamed of having a place where I could do the same. But a Christmas tree against the backdrop of the ocean isn’t the same.”

“I can’t blame you, but while you’re here, it makes sense.” It made the room more festive. “It feels like Christmas now.”

Usually, I dreaded the start of the season because it meant more work for me. I had to juggle my construction business with the farm, and it left no time for me. This year, I was working on the inn, and I wasn’t in a rush to finish it. When it was completed, Marley would have to make a decision. Neither of us was ready for that.

“Want some hot chocolate?” I wasn’t ready for the evening to end. I wanted to gaze at the tree and let the magic of the season wrap around us.

“That would be nice.”

“Why don’t you sit on the couch and enjoy the lights. It’ll just take me a few minutes to warm the milk.” Mom bought us fancy hot chocolate last year, and I hadn’t had a chance to use it yet.

I waited until Marley moved out of my arms and sat on the couch. She curled her legs under her, and I pulled a throw blanket off the back of the couch to cover her.

When she smiled up at me, I braced a hand on the couch and leaned down to kiss her softly. I had more plans for tonight, but they could wait. I wanted to spread her out on the couch while the lights illuminated her naked skin.

I adjusted myself once I was in the kitchen. We were compatible in the bedroom. I wanted to show her how we could be in real life. That I’d always take care of her no matter how busy or crazy the farm got. She came first.

Excited that I had a plan, I pulled out the mugs while I waited for the milk to boil. Then I carefully scooped a few tablespoons of cocoa into the steaming milk.

I placed a candy cane in each one, along with a few mini marshmallows I kept on hand for Addy and Ember. Then I carried them into the room. “I didn’t have candy cane shavings.”

“This is fine,” Marley said as she took the mug and blew over the top.

I sat next to her, admiring our new tree and the lights. “This is perfect.”

The night. The tree. Marley. I didn’t want it to end.

Marley shifted so that she was facing me. “What about earlier?”

“I said you didn’t have to respond. I’m not upset that you’re not ready.”

Marley’s eyes fluttered closed. “I think I could get there. When I closed my eyes and imagined the future, it was living here with you and your family.”

Hope soared in my chest. “I can be patient.”

Her eyes opened. “I don’t know what to do about the inn.”

“Wait until we’re finished with the renovations. Then you can see it and decide.” I was hoping that it would spark some desire inside her to continue her grandmother’s legacy. The inn and the property were a tie to the area and me, but I wasn’t sure it was necessary. If she loved me, or could love me, wouldn’t that be enough?

Marley sighed. “Aiden will be home soon. What will we tell him?”

“That I love you and want a future with you.” It sounded simple when I said my intentions out loud, but I wasn’t sure how Aiden would take it.

Her forehead wrinkled. “You don’t think he’ll be upset?”

“I’m sure he will be. I hope our friendship can survive it.” He’d emailed me a few times over the last few months, and each time, I gave him updates on the renovations to the inn and the farm, but I hadn’t mentioned that his sister was staying in my house.

I don’t know what Marley told him. But I was positive she hadn’t come clean with him either.

* * *

The next few weeks were a whirlwind. I was juggling the renovation at the inn and ensuring the farm was running smoothly. We’d hired more help than ever before, but I liked to be on-site as much as possible. The only problem was I needed to be at the inn and the farm, and I couldn’t do both.

Marley kept busy taking photographs and posting online. The photos with the puppies in the shop were a big hit. Everyone who came those first few days mentioned it and asked to see them. We set them up in a little pen near the barn where we could keep an eye on them, and the customers could interact with them, too.

We’d need to train them so they could be off-leash on the farm and avoid the cars and trucks on the lane.

The floors, paint, and closets were complete in the inn. We were tearing out the bathrooms and kitchen next. Emmett and Knox were helping me work on the gardens, the fountain, and other things we’d decided on.

Marley hadn’t approved this design, so I hoped she’d be okay with it. If anything, it was closer to what she originally

wanted—her dream garden if she was going to stay here. We weren't charging her for the upgrade since she hadn't approved it. But anyone who purchased the property would appreciate it.

It raised the inn to the next level. I just hoped it was enough to get her to stay. I told her I loved her every night and first thing in the morning, but she hadn't said it back. I tried not to let it bother me. I knew love was hard for her and that she believed she hadn't experienced it to know what it was. But I hoped she'd feel what I did soon.

If she didn't love me, didn't like the renovations to the inn, and Aiden was against our relationship, then I wouldn't have much going in my favor.

I couldn't imagine Marley not staying at the cabin or walking the property with her ever-present camera hung around her neck. She seemed to enjoy the farm and was excited to post her pictures on social media. She was working with Hanna to start a blog and write the newsletters that went out.

I was near the barn, ensuring that the line to trim the trees and wrap them was running smoothly. Ember ran up to Sebastian, who was helping since it was a Saturday.

She tugged on his hand. "I'm bored. Can we go?"

"You know I need to work for a few more hours."

"Why don't you have her hang out with Addy and Sarah?" I asked him.

Seb frowned. "It's not fair to ask them to watch Ember, too."

"What are you going to do, then? Mom and Ireland are working in the shop. We're all here or at our other jobs. The

only option is Sarah.”

“I’ll think of something. Maybe I’ll get a nanny.”

Ember’s expression fell. “I don’t want a nanny. I want you.”

Sebastian dropped down to her level. “I want to spend all of my time with you, too, but I have to work. We all pull our weight around the farm.”

“I want to pull my weight, too,” Ember insisted stubbornly.

“You’re too little. Why don’t you hang out with Ireland and Grandma in the shop?”

Her nose scrunched up. “It’s too busy in there.”

Sebastian stood and rolled his shoulders back. “She gets overwhelmed in the shop. There are so many people, and it’s so busy. It’s stressful.”

“I don’t blame her.” I had to be outside. It was busy, but the open space and fresh air helped. Emmett had to take breaks from the crowds. He’d work in the fields or stop by his house for lunch to get some quiet time.

“Is Hanna around? I think Marley said they were working on the blog in the craft room today.” It was the unofficial meeting room and office.

“You want to see Hanna?”

Ember’s eyes lit up.

“She loves Hanna. Do you mind if I take her to the office?”

“Not at all. Maybe you should think about asking Hanna if she could help you out and nanny. As a teacher, she’s off on the same holidays as Ember. Summers, too.”

“I want Hanna to babysit me.”

Sebastian sighed as he looked down at Ember. “We’ll see.” Then to me, he said, “I’ll be right back.”

I took over for him until he returned. “Everything okay?”

“Yeah, she adores Hanna, and Marley, too.”

“What do you think about asking Hanna to watch Ember?” I asked him, gauging his reaction.

“Is that fair to her? She has a job.”

“It would only be evenings, weekends, and holidays when you’re working at the farm. Maybe the summer. Then you wouldn’t have to send her to so many summer camps.” I remembered him complaining they were expensive and Ember complaining it was like school without the homework.

“It’s not a bad idea.”

I wondered if Sebastian was worried about spending more time with Hanna. Or maybe he didn’t see that Hanna was into him. It was obvious to the rest of us, but it wasn’t clear how he felt about her. He went into hibernation when it came to relationships after Ember was born, and he was left to raise her.

“Think about it.”

“I will. I can’t have her running around the farm with people carrying saws. It’s not safe.”

“Hang in there. Things will get easier.”

Sebastian shot me a dubious look. “I’m a single dad of a girl. When is it going to get easier? When she’s a teenager?”

I chuckled. “That’s not what I’ve heard. Isn’t it more like girls get harder and boys get easier?”

He stretched his neck. “It’s tough being the one responsible for everything. I have guilt about working so much. But I want to do my part, and she loves the farm.”

I clasped his shoulder. “You’ll find the perfect balance, and we’re all here to help.

“I appreciate it. I’m sure it will be easier living here. I just need to figure everything out.”

* * *

The best part about working on the farm was that for the last few weeks, I’d been able to come home to Marley.

When we got into bed that night, Marley said, “I can’t believe I’ve been here for months.”

“If you need to go home, everyone would understand. We appreciate you helping.”

“I don’t need to. I like being here with you.” She turned so she was facing me. The light of the moon illuminated her face. “It feels like we’ve been together for a long time.”

“Maybe because we met and dated when we were younger.” The connection was already there; we just had to cultivate it.

“Are you sure you don’t mind that I’m staying here? I could move into the inn if it’s ready.”

“I’d like you to stay.” The thought of her leaving physically hurt. I had a feeling she’d throw up her walls again. “We have Thanksgiving this week.”

“How does that work? Is the farm open?”

“From nine to three. Then we’ll eat at the house. Sarah and Ireland are helping to cook this year. Mom won’t have to do everything.”

“I can help in the shop if you need me.”

I raised a brow. “You’d do that?”

Her brow furrowed. “Doesn’t everyone pitch in?”

“They do. Although my brothers would rather not handle the shop. They prefer the gatehouse.”

“I want to help. Wherever you need me.”

“The shop is perfect,” I said.

“If this gets to be too much, you promise you’ll tell me to leave?”

I frowned. “I can’t see that happening. I love you. I want you here.”

“I’m falling for you more every day. I don’t know what it means to be in love.”

“I feel this expansion and warm feeling in my chest when I think of you and when I spend time with you. I want you to be happy.”

Her eyes searched my face. “I think I feel the same.”

“You fit here with me and my family,” I added because I knew that was important to her.

I kissed her, rolling her onto her back. We slowly removed our clothes, not breaking our kiss until we were naked. I made love to her with my mouth and then my cock. I wanted to show her how I felt. That this wasn’t just a fling. It was the real deal. I wanted a future with her.

I wasn't sure exactly what our future would look like, with her house in California and the inn incomplete. But I was hoping we'd figure it out together.

I interlaced my fingers with hers on either side of her head, and when she orgasmed, I lowered my head to kiss her while I followed her over. I shuddered, emptying myself into her. I wanted to fill her up with love and happiness. I felt complete when I was with her, and I could only hope she felt the same.

Twenty-Three



MARLEY

On Thanksgiving morning, Heath woke me with his mouth between my legs, and then he fucked me slowly. It felt a lot like making love. He'd done that often over the week. His sweet words and actions were tearing down any remaining defenses I had against him.

I couldn't bring myself to be worried about Aiden or what he thought. I was an adult, and I was sure I was in love with Heath.

Later, we showered and dressed quickly so that Heath could show me the register. Ireland and Lori were cooking in the main house, so I was by myself in the barn.

I was hoping most people would be at home, but unfortunately, there were a lot of people wanting a tree before Thanksgiving dinner.

"Why are you working here?" a woman asked when I was checking her out.

I carefully wrapped the breakable ornament. "I'm sorry. Do I know you?"

Her lips turned into a sneer. "You're Marley Matthews. You lived in a trailer at the inn."

“I lived there, yes.” I wasn’t sure what this woman’s angle was.

“We went to school together.”

“I don’t remember you.” I had a feeling she was one of the mean girls who tormented me about my living situation. Thankfully, I must have cleared her name from my memory.

She laughed. “Is that what you’re doing now? Living on the Monroes’ dime?”

“Not that it’s any of your business, but I own a multi-million-dollar company. I don’t need to live on anyone’s dime.”

Her eyes widened, and her mouth opened slightly before it closed.

I put the ornament in the bag and handed it to her. “Have a happy Thanksgiving.”

She turned and walked away, a little stunned by my declaration. I didn’t usually mention my success, and especially not in those terms. But I didn’t like people accusing me of mooching off the Monroes. Sure, they’d been nice to me, but I helped out on the farm. I did the marketing and social media. I hoped the Monroes didn’t feel like I was mooching off them.

I was a little on edge the rest of the day. I was worried others would recognize me. But if they did, no one said anything. We locked up at three and walked over to the main house.

Heath draped an arm over my shoulders. “Are you ready to eat some good food?”

“I can’t remember the last time I was at someone’s house for Thanksgiving.” My stomach rolled with nerves.

“It’s no different from the other times we ate at the house. There’s just more food.” At Heath’s easy smile, I relaxed.

Before we walked inside, I stopped him with a hand on his arm. “You don’t think I’m mooching off you, do you? That I’m staying here to get something from you?”

His brow furrowed. “Why would you think that?”

“Someone said something today, and it got me thinking.” No matter how I tried to put it out of my mind, it snuck back in.

“I love having you here. No one thinks you’re using us. You could live at the inn, or even at your house. It’s just more convenient for you to be at my cabin.”

“Are you sure?”

“Baby, I love you.” He kissed me and drew me into his arms.

I wanted to sink into his touch and never leave the safety of his arms. People were going to think whatever. I think it bothered me because a part of me felt like it was true. It was why I wanted to buy a house instead of renting one as soon as it was feasible. It was important for me to be established, to have my own place, and to be successful.

“Let’s go eat. I’m starving.”

Inside, the house was the same as it always was, full of conversation and laughter. Everyone was here, including Cole. There was a ton more food than usual, including various pies and cookies. Every surface was covered with food of some kind. We finally sat down to eat at six.

We went around the room to say what we were grateful for. Each brother said family and their health. It sounded trite, but they'd said it with emotion. Those two things were the most important to these men after losing their father. That's why it was imperative for me to be here for Heath.

He wanted me close, just like he enjoyed having his family nearby. I was the last one, and I was hoping they didn't expect me to join in, but then Lori said my name, and my face heated. "I'm thankful to be surrounded by so much love."

I must have said the right thing because everyone smiled and raised their glasses to say, "Happy Thanksgiving," and Heath hugged me to him and kissed my temple. "I love you."

"I love you, too," I whispered to him, knowing it was the first time I'd said those three words out loud. I'd said I was falling for him but not this.

Heath beamed and kissed me again.

"Come on, you two. Get a room." Talon threw his bun at Heath.

"Boys. That's enough. Heath is allowed to kiss his girlfriend," Lori said.

"At the table?" Talon asked, sounding like he was a teenager.

"Get used to it. Three of us are in serious relationships now," Heath said, never taking his eyes off me.

To be grouped with his brothers' relationships felt good. For so long, I'd felt like an outsider, like I didn't belong. But here at this table, and on this farm, I felt good. Like I was in the right place, doing exactly what I was supposed to be doing.

I snapped a selfie of me and Heath, then posted it to my social media with the caption, *So thankful*. My posts were almost entirely about work until recently. I'd posted pictures of the inn and the farm. My followers loved getting a glimpse into my personal life. If anything, my sales increased. I wondered if being authentic was the key to selling.

It was something I could discuss in my next live video.

"I'm so glad you're here. That you decided to stay," Heath said as we dug into the turkey and fixings.

"Me, too." My chest was filled with that warm, expansive feeling Heath had talked about. And it wasn't just being here with him; it was his family, the food, and the laughter. I felt like I belonged here.

When we finished, we sat around talking, and then everyone helped to clear the dishes. Emmett declared it was time for pie, and we decided to eat outside by the bonfire.

A table was set up with the various pies, plates, silverware, vanilla ice cream, and whipped cream. As we were getting slices, Cole asked, "Where are these pies from?"

"I made the pumpkin. But we got the rest from that place Marley was talking about. Pine Valley Farms," Lori said.

"Aren't they our competition?" Cole asked, his jaw tight.

"We don't make pies, so I don't think so," Lori said.

Cole rubbed his chin. "They are competing with us when it comes to the farm and what we offer, though."

Heath leaned over to touch his shoulder. "No business talk at Thanksgiving. We're here to enjoy good food and great company."

“I think the peach pie is amazing,” Talon said as he ate a large bite.

Cole shrugged Heath off, but thankfully he dropped the issue with the pies.

We sat around the fire, eating pie and drinking hot apple cider. The girls danced around us and dashed off to play tag. Eventually, they started roughhousing with Knox and Sebastian. Their high-pitched giggles filled the air.

“I’m looking for Marley,” a man said as he approached the fire.

His voice was familiar.

“Did we forget to close the gate?” Emmett asked.

He stepped closer so that the fire illuminated his face. “No one was at the inn.”

“Aiden, what are you doing here?” I shrugged Heath’s arm off my shoulder and stood to throw out my leftover pie.

“I came home to surprise you. I didn’t want you to be alone on Thanksgiving.”

I crossed my arms over my chest. “I had dinner with the Monroes.”

A muscle ticked in his jaw. “Are you staying there? None of the rooms looked ready for guests at the inn.”

“I’ve been staying here during the renovations.” My heart was pounding under my arms.

“Where is here?” Aiden asked, his jaw clenched.

He should have been happy to see me, which meant that he suspected something was going on.

“I stayed with Heath while he was renovating. He has a cabin near the inn.”

Aiden tipped his head to the side. “Why didn’t you move in when it was habitable?”

“I was comfortable here.” Besides, I didn’t think of the inn as home.

Aiden turned his attention to Heath, his fingers curled into fists. “Why is my sister comfortable in your home?”

Heath held his hands up. “I don’t think this is the best place to discuss this.”

Aiden stepped closer to him and lowered his voice. “Have you both been lying to me? You told me you were at the inn,” he said to me, and then to Heath with a finger pointed at his chest, “And you insinuated she was staying there, too.”

Heath gripped his neck. “We didn’t want to upset you while you were gone.”

“Upset me how? Are you seeing each other?” Then Aiden’s voice raised, “Are you sleeping with my sister?”

Someone said, “Jesus.”

“This isn’t the right time or place,” Heath repeated, and I said, “I can go. Let me talk to Aiden. You enjoy your time with your family.”

“You don’t want me to come with you?” Heath stood.

“I think I need to handle this alone.” I wasn’t used to asking for help, but something told me this conversation would go better if Heath wasn’t with me.

Heath pulled me in for a hug. “Call me if you need me?”

I swallowed over the lump in my throat. “Of course.” Then I turned to Aiden. “Can we stop at Heath’s to grab my bag?”

Aiden nodded tightly.

Aiden was quiet as we drove to Heath’s. I ran inside to pack up my things, not sure if I was coming back. Outside, Aiden grabbed my bag and slung it into the bed of the truck. “What’s going on?”

“We were seeing each other,” I began, not sure how much to say.

“You’re not anymore?” Aiden asked, confusion lacing his words as he continued down the lane, leaving the Monroes’ property.

I felt bereft. I hadn’t left the farm except for that one date. “Heath’s been worried about what you would think.”

Aiden slapped his hand on the steering wheel. “Not enough to keep his hands off my sister.”

My nose scrunched at his tone. “I’m an adult. I make the decisions about who I sleep with.”

“I told him to protect you. This isn’t how you do it,” Aiden growled.

“He has been protecting me.” I’d never felt so loved in my life as when I was with Heath. “You weren’t here. I’ve been alone for a long time.”

He lowered his voice to a dangerous level. “You’ve never said you were lonely or that you needed me.”

“I couldn’t. Not when you were off doing what you do. I’m okay, but with Heath, I’m thriving. I’m happy.”

“Are you saying you love him?” Aiden asked as he turned down our lane.

“I do.”

He shook his head. “I need time to think about this.”

“Are you home on leave?”

“I have a week, and then I have to go back for three weeks.”

“Do you know what you’re going to do?”

He chuckled without any humor as he parked in front of the inn. “I wanted to suggest we run this place together.”

The outside had new paint, and lights wound around the columns. “I didn’t realize he’d decorated.”

“Have you been checking on the progress?”

“I trust Heath.” And I wasn’t sure if it was a good idea for me to come here, to see what it looked like. I was afraid that I’d remember all the things I loved about the inn. That it would hold too many memories of Gram.

“You should still have been here.”

“I’ve been avoiding it.”

We walked inside. The kitchen wasn’t finished, but a few appliances were hooked up. We’d be able to cook on the stove.

“I’m going to sleep. I’m exhausted. We can talk about this in the morning,” Aiden said, heading up the stairs with our bags.

I sank to the floor and dropped my head into my hands.

I wasn’t sure how long I’d sat there. At some point, Heath texted.

Are you okay?

Tears filled my eyes. I wasn't sure I'd be okay ever again. Aiden didn't like me dating Heath. The inn was almost finished, and I was overcome with emotion. What did I want? Did I want to alienate my only family member? Did I want to live in California or Maryland? What was the right decision?

My entire body ached from standing on my feet all day and the confrontation with Aiden. I was exhausted. I went upstairs to find my bag in the hallway and grabbed linens from a closet. The water turned on down the hall, and I figured Aiden was showering.

I made the bed in the largest room facing Heath's cabin and fell onto it, beyond tired. I couldn't respond to Heath, not when I didn't know what any of this meant.

I tossed and turned all night, sleeping for short bursts of time. When the sun finally rose, I got up and showered, knowing Aiden would already be up and probably out for a run.

Downstairs, I made tea and eggs for him.

When he came through the door, he was sweaty from his run. He grabbed a water from the fridge. "I ordered groceries to be delivered this morning."

"I was wondering where the food came from." I was on edge about when he was going to bring up Heath and my living situation.

I pushed the plate of eggs across the counter.

Aiden grimaced. "I don't know if I can handle you with him."

My stomach twisted. Aiden was the only family I had left. “I don’t want you to be upset.”

He was the one I’d grown up with in that trailer. He knew what I’d been through. He tried to protect me, but no one could shield me from my parents’ sharp words and neglect.

Aiden shook his head. “I came home hoping I’d figure out what I was supposed to do. I thought seeing the inn again would spark a decision. I’d know what I was supposed to do.”

“I’ve been avoiding the inn for that same reason. When I first came home, I was positive we should sell. I didn’t want any memories of our parents.”

Aiden raised a brow. “And now?”

I shrugged. “I’ve been avoiding thinking about it.”

He picked up the fork and cut a bite of the egg. “We can figure it out together.”

“That would be nice.” It was good having Aiden by my side and not halfway across the world.

He chewed for a few seconds, swallowed, and then said, “What’s going on with the estate? You said there was a delay.”

I got out the orange juice from the fridge and poured two glasses. “Mom wanted to see the will for herself. That was the last I heard about it.”

“Is she going to challenge the will?” Aiden asked, his muscles bunching.

“I don’t know. There’s no penalty for her to do it, but she’d have to hire an attorney.” In the past, my parents didn’t have money, but they had lived off Gram. I wasn’t sure how they were surviving now. Maybe Mom had come into money and had the resources to sue.

“Let’s see if we can get an appointment to see the attorney.”

When I nodded, he said, “I’m going to walk the grounds.”

I hoped everything would look different in the morning. That the answers would be clear to me. But they weren’t. Sensing Aiden needed space, I didn’t offer to go with him. I ate my eggs, which tasted like dust, and cleaned the kitchen.

The inn was almost finished. We’d need to decide soon. I went upstairs and drew a bath. This was the only time I’d ever stayed in one of the inn’s bedrooms. It was nice. I could see people wanting to stay here, visiting the Monroe farm, and touring Annapolis, and maybe even DC.

My stomach twisted when I thought about what would happen if a developer bought the property. What would that mean for the Monroes? For me? Would I be able to live with myself?

I tried to picture myself living in California in that big house all by myself, and I couldn’t. It felt empty and lonely.

On the farm, I was never far from Heath or one of his family members.

Heath hadn’t tried to reach out to me again, to ask how I was doing or anything else. I wasn’t sure what that meant. Did he want to end things because Aiden was back? I had a feeling he would because of what happened last time.

Aiden was important to him, and I didn’t want to come between them, especially if Aiden wanted to stay and run the inn.

Was I okay with keeping the inn and letting Aiden run it? It would allow me to have this place to come home to, and it would help the Monroes.

If Aiden was running the inn, there was less of a chance he'd be okay with me dating Heath. I wasn't sure what to do or where I stood with Heath.

I needed some space to think about it.

Twenty-Four



MARLEY

We were able to get a late afternoon appointment with the attorney. He went through the specifics of the will in front of Aiden, as he had with me after the funeral.

Aiden inherited money and a few mementos of his grandfather's, but the property and the rest of the contents of the inn went to me. For simplicity, it made sense. Gram knew I didn't need cash, and Aiden wasn't present to make decisions about the inn or the property. Now Aiden would have savings to figure out what he wanted to do.

"Do you know what you want to do yet?" the attorney asked Aiden.

"I might stay and manage the inn. If Marley's on board, that is."

"What about our mother?" I asked, my heart picking up in anticipation of what he would say.

"Tracey came in a few days ago, and I read her the will. She was understandably upset. She feels like the inn should have been hers since she's the usual heir, as Lila's daughter."

"Gram kicked her off the property when I turned eighteen. She didn't want her there. She knew that she wouldn't care for the inn." That had me pausing because Gram wouldn't have

given me the inn if she thought I'd sell it. She hated having to close when she couldn't manage it anymore. I knew she always hoped I'd come home and run it. That I'd remember everything I loved about it as a kid. She couldn't have known that I avoided it because of Heath. Because it hurt too much to think of him with someone else.

"I understand all of that," Alan said.

"Is she going to challenge it?" Aiden asked, leaning forward in his chair.

"If I had to guess, I'd say no. I don't think she has the means to hire an attorney for a protracted legal process. I made sure to advise her about the reasons for contesting the will. The most effective is when the writer doesn't know their mind, but your grandmother was younger when she executed it. She gave me sound reasons for doing what she did. There was no evidence that she was unduly influenced or unaware of what she was doing."

"If she makes any trouble, I have the money and the means to fight her." She didn't deserve any piece of the estate.

"I hope she goes away, and we don't hear from her again."

"I can close out the estate at this point, now that all known heirs have heard the will."

"Let's do it," I said, confident I could handle anything my mother could throw at me. I wasn't the same person I was when I lived in her trailer. I was confident and successful, and I didn't let anyone mess with my family or the inn. This was Gram's legacy, and I'd protect it with everything I had.

We signed the remaining paperwork, said our goodbyes, and walked down to the harbor. Soon, there would be a

Christmas tree, but for now, the only decorations were the light poles adorned with wreaths.

We sat on a bench overlooking the water. There were a few pedestrians, mostly locals, out for a cup of coffee or walking their dogs.

“Do you know what you want to do?” Aiden asked as he leaned his elbows on his thighs.

I knew what I had to do. I couldn't sell it. Sure, it held memories, but Gram would have wanted us to reopen the inn. “Are you sure you want to manage it?”

Aiden straightened. “I don't want to work for anyone else. Heath had talked about me working with him, and I might still want to do that. But I want the inn to be open. It's what Gram would have wanted, and I can see myself living there. I can hire someone to manage the front desk. I'll handle any repairs, and maybe work for Heath, too.”

“That sounds like a good plan. So, you're not reenlisting?”

He glanced over at me. “It's time to come home. I've been gone long enough. I've missed you. I need some time to decompress.”

“I've missed you, too. But I don't want you to feel like you have to come back because of me.”

“Let's be honest. You don't need me. You never did. I want to build a life for myself. It's time.”

“If you're sure that's what you want to do? I won't sell. I want you to be happy, and I know the Monroes would prefer that the inn stayed in the family.”

Aiden straightened and draped his arm over the back of the bench. “You're happy with Heath?”

“In the back of my mind, I knew it was a bad idea. You’re friends with him, and he’s never been able to get over that.”

His forehead wrinkled. “What are you talking about?”

“We dated after you left.”

Aiden stood; his fingers curled into fists. “Heath went after you when you were seventeen?”

I sighed. “I wouldn’t say it that way. We ran into each other in the woods, we played and talked, got to know each other. He was only a year older than me.”

“He was eighteen,” Aiden bit out.

I didn’t point out that seventeen is over the age of consent in Maryland, especially when we didn’t do anything. “Heath didn’t—we didn’t—ugh. I can’t talk to you about this. Just know that he was a good guy. He didn’t do anything I didn’t want or wasn’t ready for.” I held up my hands. “But he never crossed that line. He wanted to wait, and eventually, he decided he couldn’t go behind your back, and he broke things off.”

His shoulders relaxed slightly. “Is that why you moved away and didn’t come back?”

I nodded miserably. “I couldn’t see him again. It hurt too much.”

“Then you came home and fell back into his arms?” Aiden asked, and I couldn’t tell what he was thinking. His face was a blank mask.

“It wasn’t quite like that. We got to know each other again and realized our feelings were still there. We never got over each other or found anyone else who made us feel the same way,” I said carefully.

Aiden dipped his chin. “Tell me one thing. Why does it have to be my best friend?”

I shrugged. “We don’t plan who we fall for. Heath resisted because of you, and I didn’t fully trust our relationship because I was worried about what would happen when you came back.”

Aiden glanced in the direction of our parked car. “I need to talk to him.”

I stood and touched his arm. “I understand that, but try not to be too hard on him. We both went into the relationship with our eyes open. We knew you might not like us together. That you might feel like Heath betrayed your trust.”

“I asked him to protect you.”

Irritation burned through my gut. “I’m a strong person. I took care of myself. I didn’t need anyone looking after me.”

“I know you are.”

My phone buzzed with an incoming call from my neighbor, Izzy. “It’s my neighbor. I have to take this.” I moved out of the room for privacy and hit answer, “Is everything okay?”

“You asked me to check on your house every few weeks. Everything was fine last time—”

“Izzy, what’s wrong?” My heart pounded harder at her words.

“I’m so sorry. A pipe must have burst. There was water everywhere. I had Rick go in and turn off the water to the whole house. But it’s a mess. I moved everything I could off the floor, and we put towels down, but there’s still standing water.”

“I’m so sorry. You shouldn’t have to deal with this.” I racked my brain, trying to think of what I could do from here. “Surely there are companies that deal with this kind of thing. I’ll call around and see what I can find.”

“Insurance should handle it. But you know how long they can take to take care of anything.” Izzy’s tone was sympathetic.

I didn’t know because I’d never needed to make a claim. As soon as I was able, I bought newer vehicles and a house, renovating whenever necessary. “I’ll be there as soon as I can. Thank you for handling this for me. I really appreciate it.”

“That’s what friends are for, right?”

That made me hesitate because I didn’t think of Izzy as a friend. She was my neighbor, and for the most part, we kept to ourselves. We grabbed each other’s packages when we were out of town, but that was it. “Of course.”

I lowered my phone, thinking of the things I needed to do. Booking a flight was the priority, then I needed to pack.

“Is everything okay?” Aiden asked.

“That was my neighbor, Izzy. I asked her to check on the house for me. Apparently, a pipe burst, and it’s a mess. I have to take care of it.”

“Do you want me to go with you?”

“It would be better if you stayed at the inn and make sure the final renovations are completed. Call me if Alan needs anything or Mom shows up.”

“I can do that. But I’m happy to go to California with you.”

I shook my head. “You have one week off. Enjoy it.”

Aiden pulled me into his arms, and I let him comfort me. This was the hug I missed last night when he showed up at the bonfire. “You know I’ve got your back.”

“That doesn’t include protecting me from Heath,” I said as I eased back.

“I’m still going to talk to him.”

“You need to clear the air, but remember, we don’t choose who we fall in love with.”

Aiden considered me. “You’re in love with him?”

I nodded. “I am.”

“How are you going to handle this West Coast-East Coast thing?”

I laughed. “I have no idea. I’m not even sure he’ll want to continue our relationship now that you’re back. Last time, he broke things off, and I’m worried the same thing will happen again.” It’s one thing to keep something under wraps when my brother was deployed. But if he was coming to live at the inn? That changed everything.

“It’ll work out how it’s supposed to.”

“I hope so. I’m sorry we couldn’t spend more time together.”

“Soon, I’ll be home for good.” That should have hit better, but instead, all I could think about while I drove back to the inn and packed was that there was no chance Heath would want to continue our relationship with Aiden making the inn his home.

I drove to the airport, focused on getting back to my house to ensure everything was taken care of. I didn’t like relying on

my neighbors. I was sure they had things they wanted to do that didn't include cleaning up my water-logged house.

At the airport, I researched clean-up companies and called around until I found one that would come out today. Then I sent Izzy the information.

I'd been neglecting my business since the farm opened, so I logged into my accounts and answered clients' questions.

I'd need to get caught up on content when I was home. When I finally arrived home, I was exhausted. The company had already been here and set up. Izzy had let them in and kept me apprised of their progress.

When I went inside, I was met with the noise of fans. They were everywhere, blowing on the hardwood floors. The ceiling had been patched but would need a permanent repair once everything dried out.

The pipe had burst in the upstairs bathroom, causing more damage than if it had happened in the basement. I wasn't worried about the cost. I just wasn't sure what was happening in my life.

Did Heath want to pursue things? Did he want space? How could I handle things with him when I was here?

I was dying to know how the conversation between Heath and Aiden went. I sent a message to Aiden, telling him I arrived okay and that everything was drying out. There was nothing for me to clean up. Izzy and Rick had picked everything up that was in danger of getting wet. The few things that had gotten wet were laid out on the dining room table.

The house was large and had an expansive feeling. I liked it when I first moved in, but now it felt empty. When I talked

or filmed videos, my voice echoed. I hadn't filled it with things, telling myself it was because I didn't need or want knickknacks, but now it felt barren. There were no holiday decorations or a Christmas tree. It was funny how quickly I got used to those things at Heath's.

The fireplace reminded me of Heath and how it was always on when he was home. But it was too warm to use it here.

I opened the slider to the deck and walked out, hoping the familiar sound of the ocean would soothe me. The breeze was warm, and the ocean sounded the same as always, the crash of the waves constant and steady.

It was nice. I loved the ocean. But it wasn't evergreens and twinkly lights. It wasn't the scent of pine and spice I smelled. Salt filled the air. Everything felt wrong.

The house had always soothed me and made me feel like I'd made it. I owned my home and the property. No one could take it away from me. That maybe I didn't need to belong so much as I needed to be in control of my life.

Now I knew the truth. I belonged with Heath, his family, and his farm. Being with him healed me. He helped me open up and let other people in. I still wasn't great at asking others for help, but I could improve.

I wished Heath were here. I had no way of knowing where his head was at. Especially since he hadn't contacted me since the night of the bonfire. The thing was, I hadn't reached out to him either. I was waiting for him to talk to Aiden and figure things out in his head.

What if Heath didn't want me anymore? What if he didn't think it was worth ruining his relationship with Aiden? My

only hope was that Aiden could see how happy I was. That he'd give Heath whatever he needed to move forward with me.

I didn't need protection, especially not from Heath. He'd done nothing but love me these last few months. When I was in California in the beginning of the year, avoiding him, he was taking good care of the inn and tried to reach out to me. I just didn't trust myself when it came to him.

I didn't want to be hurt. But you can't fully live life unless you open up to people. I didn't feel great about how we left things. I hoped Heath didn't fall back to his old ways. That he didn't let his guilt and shame prevent him from living the life he wanted.

I could plead my case with him as soon as I got home. I didn't want Heath to think that I'd changed my mind about him, so I texted him.

I miss you.

This wasn't home. California wasn't my safe place. It was Heath's cabin. This house was just a building, a place I could exist but not live my life.

When I looked out my window, I wanted to see rolling hills of evergreens in various stages of growth. I wanted to cut down a Christmas tree every year with his family. I wanted to be part of their meals and holidays. I wanted to tease his brothers and befriend their wives and girlfriends. I wanted to be part of their lives.

Here, I was merely existing, whereas I thrived on Monroe Farm. When I scrolled through my social media posts, I could see the difference. There were more images of me broadcasting in front of a tree or a string of lights than a perfectly decorated office with me in meticulously done hair

and makeup. In Maryland, I didn't have someone on call to do those things for me.

I just filmed when the mood struck me and talked about whatever I was motivated to talk about at that moment, and there were more comments and likes than ever before. I was relatable. My followers loved it.

Maybe I seemed more real to them. My struggle more relatable. I wondered if I should film what I was going through now. It wasn't about money, but then didn't I always preach that money couldn't make you happy? It made life easier in a lot of ways. But if you were unhappy before you had money, earning it wouldn't change anything.

I set up lighting because it was dark out and decided to film without brushing my hair or putting on makeup. When the red light flashed, indicating I was live, I waited for my followers to see the notification and hop on. The number ticked upward and finally, I said, "Hi, everyone. This is an impromptu live."

I said hi to a few familiar names as they wrote their greetings in the comments. "I just got off a flight from Maryland to California to take care of an emergency at my house here." I took a deep breath, tears filling my eyes. "I have to say that I feel like I left my heart on the Monroe Christmas Tree Farm. I went home because my grandmother died. I loved her so much, but I couldn't stay there and help her run her inn because when I was a teenager, this boy broke up with me. He was my first boyfriend, and I think, looking back, I may have even loved him. When he broke things off, I was scared and felt like I didn't belong there anymore.

"I went to college and eventually moved here to California, but I never really assimilated with the community. I

didn't make friends. I kept to myself, built this business, and thought it was enough. I was successful. My business was thriving. You all loved what I had to say. And I read the testimonials. What I was sharing helped people. It was fulfilling. But in a lot of ways, I still held myself back. You can be smart in one area of your life, like business, and a disaster in another area, like your personal life.”

I paused to read through the comments. There were a few *we love yous* and *we support you!* I loved the outpouring of support, but I hadn't been entirely honest with them yet. “I appreciate your support. But I have to tell you a little story. When I returned to Maryland to take care of my grandmother's estate, I ran into my old love again.”

The comments exploded with heart emojis.

“He renovated the inn so I could sell it. I thought I could maintain my distance. I thought what we had when we were teenagers was one-sided because he walked away from me. But I was wrong. The attraction, the mutual respect, it was all there. It was amplified because we're older now and smarter. But I have to tell you guys, I'm in love. I'm so in love with him.” I blew out a breath, trying to calm my nerves so the tears threatening didn't spill over.

“It took me a while to admit it because I wasn't sure what love felt like. I didn't grow up with loving or supportive parents. Frankly, I was embarrassed of how I grew up. I wanted everyone to see this new me. This man knew everything about me, and he loved me anyway. He knew I was scared and unsure, and he was patient and determined. The reason I'm telling you all of this is that I'm worried that I messed things up, and that the fact that he's best friends with

my brother will still be a barrier. But we can't have anything in life that we don't believe in.

“When things feel uncertain, or when the anxiety creeps in, we have to have faith that everything is working out in our favor. And this isn't just about money and business, it's everything in our lives, our relationships with our friends, family, coworkers, and significant others. This house and these waves were healing for me, but it's time for a new chapter. If he'll have me, I'm planning to move to Maryland to run my grandmother's inn with my brother and hopefully live on a Christmas tree farm with the love of my life. Wish me luck.”

I watched the comments flow in. They ranged from supportive to stories about heartache in their own lives.

“I'll do a live next week on how you can use what we've talked about in money and business in our personal lives. We deserve to have success and happiness in all aspects of our lives. I wish you love and happiness. I'll let you know when the next live is going to be so you can all hop on. Love you, guys.”

I clicked off the live and let out a breath. I thought I'd feel gross for sharing my feelings, but instead, I felt cleansed, like my heart had been resuscitated. I felt good being real and honest with these people who'd been with me since the beginning. They'd been by my side through everything, and it was right that I shared this with them, too.

I uploaded the video to all my social media accounts, titling it *My Love Story*, and hoped that Heath would see it.

Twenty-Five



HEATH

Ever since Marley left the bonfire with her brother, I didn't feel right. I was worried she'd run back to California.

Before I could fix things with her, I needed to talk to her brother. I went for a run to clear my head, showered, ate breakfast, and walked through the woods until I was standing in the inn's driveway.

I knocked on the door, worried because the Mercedes convertible wasn't parked out front. Marley never drove into town because she never had a reason to. I was worried it meant she was gone.

Aiden opened the door. "You looking for Marley?"

"I wanted to talk to you."

He stepped back, letting me in, and I closed the door behind me.

"That's good because she's gone."

My heart thudded painfully under my rib cage. "What do you mean, she's gone?"

"A pipe burst in her house, flooding everything. She didn't want me to go with her." I followed him into the kitchen where he poured tea and pushed the cup across the counter in my direction. "I'm learning that Marley likes to do things herself."

“She’s independent.” But I didn’t like the idea of her handling it herself. “I could have gone with her.”

“I think she wants us to talk first.”

I let out a breath. “I’m sorry about everything. You told me to protect her, and I have, just not the way you wanted me to.”

He braced his hands on the counter. “I’m pretty sure I didn’t tell you to fuck my sister.”

I reared back as if he’d slapped me, anger fueling me. “Don’t talk about your sister like that. I love Marley. I want a future with her. I get that you’re not happy about that. But I’m not going to stand back and pretend I’m not crazy in love with her or that I don’t want her.”

Aiden pushed off the counter and ran his hand through his hair. “Marley said something similar.”

My jaw tight, I said, “You’ve been gone a long time.”

He gave me a pointed look. “It didn’t sound like you waited that long to hook up with her.”

“She told you about us getting together when we were younger?” I asked, strangely pleased that she had.

He nodded. “You want to explain that to me? I trusted you.”

“We ran into each other in the woods. I think she was upset about you leaving, but she wouldn’t say. We talked and hung out and realized we had a lot in common.” I held up my palms. “But I never crossed that line with her. Not then. The guilt got to be too much. I felt like I was going behind your back.”

Aiden made a sound in the back of his throat.

“I was a coward. I left her a note in the spot we usually met up at in the woods, breaking things off and using you as the excuse.” He was the reason, but looking back, I wondered if I wasn’t scared about how intense our relationship was. I couldn’t believe I’d met *the one* when I was eighteen. It didn’t seem possible. I assumed I didn’t know my own feelings.

“I appreciate you backing off. But it shouldn’t have happened in the first place.”

“She needed a friend. The kids at school weren’t nice to her. She felt like she didn’t fit in, that she didn’t have anyone to talk to. She didn’t want to tell Gram or you. She felt like you had enough going on, and she didn’t want you to worry, and we didn’t want to hold you back.”

Aiden gave me an anguished look. “It was my job to look after her.”

“No, it wasn’t. It was your parents’. Maybe Gram’s. But not yours. You needed to enlist and do your thing. You wanted safety and financial security, and you got that. It’s what Marley wanted, too.”

“And now?”

“I don’t want to do anything against your wishes, but I have to be honest. I’m in love with Marley. She’s it for me. I’d like you to be okay with it, but I’m fine if you’re not. Because she’s my number one priority now.”

Aiden let out a breath. “I don’t like it.”

“I didn’t think you would,” I said, the fear and guilt sliding away.

“I get that you love each other, so I’m not going to stand in the way.” He looked at me. “But if you hurt her...”

“If I hurt her, you can take me out. But I don’t plan on doing that.” I finally sipped the tea, wondering if I could get a flight to California this afternoon. “What are your plans?”

“Marley’s agreed to not sell the inn so we can make a go of it.”

“Who’s going to run it?”

“I said I would help. I can fix stuff and make sure things are running smoothly. We should probably hire someone for the front counter, though. I might not be the most congenial.”

“Ya think?” I teased, pleased to have my best friend back and not have Marley between us. It gave me hope for the future. “We’re happy that Matthews Inn will be up and running again soon. The renovations should be completed around Christmas. You can probably open anytime in the new year.”

He tipped his head to the side. “What are you doing in the gardens? Does Marley know about it?”

“She originally wanted to do something more elaborate and then backed off that idea.”

“You’re not screwing over my baby sister, are you?” Aiden asked without any real bite.

“Of course not. It’s a surprise for her, and I’d appreciate it if you don’t mention it. We’re eating the cost of it because we’re hoping to use it as an advertisement for my business. I can partner with Knox to do hardscapes and landscaping. We don’t get opportunities for projects like this often.”

“I won’t say anything. But if she doesn’t like it, all bets are off.”

I grinned. “It’s exactly what she asked for.”

“I have to be honest. This is going to be weird. I don’t know how I’ll handle you and my sister together, but I’ll do my best.”

“That’s all I can ask for.”

An easy expression came over Aiden’s face. “If the offer still stands, I’d like to help you with your business, too.”

“The offer always stands. I’d love to have you.” I clasped his shoulder and gave him a hug. “It’s good to have you back.” Then I headed for the door.

“Where are you in a rush to?” Aiden asked as he followed me.

I shot him a grin. “I have a flight to catch.”

Aiden chuckled. “Good luck.” Then he shook his head. “I never thought I’d be telling my best friend good luck with my sister.”

“A lot of things changed since you left. Are you sure you’re ready to live here full time?”

“Yeah. It’s time. I want to create a home and maybe even have a family.”

I paused by the door. “No shit? You got someone in mind?”

He snorted. “No. I’m not ready for it. Not yet. But someday. I’m not getting any younger.”

“It’s the best feeling in the world.” We said our goodbyes, and I pulled out my phone to search for flights. Then I rushed home to pack and get to the airport. I texted my family after I went through security that I was going to get Marley.

I got a flurry of good luck messages from the women, and a *you got this* sentiment from the guys. I wasn't going to convince her to come back. I wanted to tell her how I felt and leave the ball in her court. I'd do whatever she wanted, even if it meant moving to California. I wanted her to be happy. The rest would fall into place.

Ireland texted me a link with the caption:

You have to see this.

I clicked on it, and it sent me to an Instagram video of Marley. It was her business page, and the caption of the video was *My Love Story*. Tingles ran down my spine. I pulled out my earbuds and pressed play, not sure what to expect.

I listened to her talk about her past, our history, and finally, our coming together a second time, and I was overcome with emotion. I almost wished I hadn't listened to it because I couldn't be with her. I had a six-hour flight ahead of me.

I watched it a second time before they called my flight on the overhead speaker. I tucked my phone away, needing to get to her and tell her how I felt. I couldn't believe she'd shared her feelings online like that. She was so private about her past, so scared that people would judge her. I was so proud of how far she'd come. She was telling her followers to do the same, to be authentic,, and I loved everything about it.

It gave me hope that we were finally on the same page.

* * *

I fidgeted in my seat the entire flight, wishing she wasn't so far away from me. I got why she had to come home, and I

didn't think she was running away from me this time. At least I hoped she wasn't.

When we landed, I waited impatiently to disembark the airplane. I'd only packed a carry-on, so I didn't have to wait for luggage. I'd gotten her address from my mom, who had it to send Christmas cards.

I scheduled a ride to her house, hoping she was there and okay with me showing up unannounced. The closer we got to her house, the more nervous I was. We might have said we loved each other, but this felt different.

It was the first time after I spoke with Aiden and got his okay. Not that it would have stopped me, but it was nice to have his support. But would Marley feel the same way, or would she push me away now that Aiden had decided he was coming home for good?

I was a wreck by the time my driver pulled up in front of her Malibu home.

"Nice house," he said as I got out.

"Yeah," I said absentmindedly as I made my way up the stairs to the front door. I rang the doorbell, hoping she was there and that I hadn't missed her. What if she'd already gotten a flight to Maryland?

I ran a hand through my hair when she opened the door wearing jeans shorts and a tank top, her hair in a messy bun. "Heath? What are you doing here?"

"I had to see you."

She opened the door and stepped back.

After I placed my bag inside the house and closed the door, I said, "I saw the video."

Her eyes widened. “What did you think?”

“I loved it. I love you.” I lifted her in my arms, and her legs wrapped around my hips as I carried her through the house. In between kisses, she said, “Upstairs.”

I carried her up the stairs and into the room she pointed to before I laid her down carefully on the bed. There were windows on one side with a view of the ocean. The slider was open, the sound of the waves permeating the space.

I braced myself over her. “I didn’t mean to act like a caveman. I wanted to talk to you.”

Her lips twitched. “What about?”

“Aiden. That video.”

“You know I had to come here because of the flooding, right? I wasn’t running from you.”

I lowered myself so I could touch her. “I would have come if you’d asked.”

Her nose scrunched. “I wasn’t sure you would. Aiden was home. Things were awkward.”

“I talked to him,” I said as I rolled to my side.

She shifted onto one elbow. “What did he say?”

“I told him how I felt. How I’m in love with you and that I’d like his blessing, but I didn’t need it to move forward with you.”

Her eyes widened. “I can’t believe you led with that.”

“He wasn’t happy, but eventually he came around. I still have some work to do, but I think it helps that I’m in love with you, and I’m always going to take care of you.”

“Is that so?” she asked, amusement tinging her voice.

I brushed a strand of hair out of her face. “If you’ll have me, that is. I want to be in the same state. California. Maryland. Wherever you are.”

“You’d move to California?” Surprise was evident in her tone.

I moved closer, placing a hand on her hip. “If that’s what you want. Nothing matters more than being with you.”

Her gaze lifted to meet mine. “I thought you and your brothers wanted to live on the farm and be near your mom.”

“I do want that, but if your dream is to live here, then that’s what I want, too,” I said, gripping her hip tighter.

Her brow furrowed, and I wanted to smooth out the wrinkles. “But your job, your future business... Everything is in Maryland.”

“None of it means anything without you,” I said firmly.

She closed her eyes. “I don’t know what to say.”

I squeezed her hip. “Say you love me. That you want forever with me, too.”

She opened her eyes. “I do want that. But I want you to be happy, too.”

I smiled softly. “I am happy. Haven’t you been listening?”

A smile slowly spread over her face. “Oh, I’ve been listening.”

“I love you, Marley Matthews, and I’ll follow you anywhere.”

She laughed softly as she moved to snuggle into my chest. “I love you, too.”

“Now that we’ve established that...” I lifted her chin and kissed her softly. “I want to show you how much you mean to me.”

“You already have,” she said as her breath hitched.

“I’m just getting started.” I lifted the hem of her tank top, feeling the soft skin of her stomach. Then I moved to place a kiss above her belly button. One day, her belly would be round with our child. I couldn’t wait for everything that was meant for us to come our way.

She rolled onto her back, and I moved between her legs.

I pushed the shirt above her lace-clad breasts, palming them and running my finger over her taut nipple.

The waves crashing in the background were a fitting metaphor for our relationship. Smooth, then rocky. I knew our future would be more of the same, but I wasn’t going anywhere. I’d be her rock, steady and dependable.

I murmured *I love yous* as she unhooked her bra and lifted her shirt over her head. Then she shimmied out of her shorts.

I hooked my fingers in the lace band and pulled them over her hips and off her bare legs. “Gorgeous,” I said as I stood to quickly remove my clothes, then settled between her legs, breathing her in.

“I’ll never get enough of you.” I kissed one thigh, then the other.

She licked her lips as she sat up to watch me. “Me either.”

I parted her folds and licked her, watching her eyes flutter closed and her head drop back.

“Look at me,” I said, and she lifted her head to meet my gaze. “You’re so beautiful.”

Something sparked in her eyes. I wanted to show her every day just how special and wanted she was. She deserved my care and attention, everything I had to give.

“I’m so grateful for you.”

She bit her lip as one hand tangled in my hair. “Me, too.”

Then her mouth went slack as I used two fingers to enter her, licking and kissing, nipping and biting, driving her wild. When she went over the peak, she trembled around me and dropped onto the bed. I moved up her body, desperate to be inside her.

I held my cock at her entrance. “I love you.”

“I love you, too,” she said as I slid inside. It felt like coming home. “My place is anywhere you are. California. Maryland.” I punctuated each state with a thrust.

She moaned and lifted her hips, seeking more contact. I adjusted my position, sitting back on my heels so I could hit that spot inside that drove her wild.

When every muscle in her body tightened, I moved so that we were chest to chest, our fingers interlaced on either side of her head. “I love you so much.”

She turned to capture my mouth with hers. We kissed as we crested the wave together and crashed onto the other side. She was it for me.

I collapsed on top of her, not sure I was capable of moving anytime soon. After a few seconds, I managed to shift to the side. “You’re it for me.”

“Me, too. But I have to tell you something.”

My heart stutter-stepped in my chest. “What is that?” Did she realize she held my heart in her hand, and one wrong move

would squeeze the life out of it?

“I don’t want to live here anymore. I’d love to visit, but the waves aren’t my solace anymore. It’s you, the trees, your farm, and your family. I don’t have any of that here.”

“Are you serious?” I asked her. I’d planned to move anywhere she was, but my heart was just as much at the farm.

She smiled. “Yes.”

“I’d love to live on the farm with you.” I kissed her, not quite believing I was with her in California, and we were going to be living together officially in my cabin. “Are you planning on running the inn?”

“I can help Aiden with it, but I think I want to hire a separate manager. He wants to work with you, and I have my business.”

“You know you’ve got me and the rest of the Monroes at your back, too, right?”

She smiled wider as she played with my hair. “I do.”

Being with Marley was everything I’d ever wished for. For a long time, I didn’t think it would ever be possible. But now that all my dreams were coming true, I allowed my brain to wander, to think of our kids growing up on the farm with Addy and Ember. My other brothers meeting someone who made them this happy.

“There’s just something about being on your farm. It truly is magical.”

“I think you’re the real magic, but I can’t wait to go home and celebrate the holidays with you and my family.”

Epilogue



MARLEY

Tonight was the night of the first Christmas party at the inn. The renovations were completed, and we wanted to invite the town to celebrate and show it off. It was great for exposure, but I was hoping this would be the beginning of a new tradition, grand, elaborate parties that guests could partake in.

We debated removing the ballroom on the third floor in lieu of adding more bedrooms but decided to keep it and use it for events like this. It was a unique feature that most bed-and-breakfasts and inns didn't have.

The Monroe brothers grumbled about having to attend the formal affair, but Heath reminded them of all the work I'd done at their farm. Even though they wouldn't like it, I thought the guys would look handsome in tuxes, and it was only for one night.

The lane was lined with trees, the trunks wrapped in twinkling white lights, thanks to Heath, and ended in a circle around a fountain just like I'd envisioned so many months ago.

The Monroes supplied the numerous trees on the porch and inside. Each one was decorated in a different theme to honor my grandmother. We had a blast planning the décor. The

mantels and windowsills were lined with garland, and the entire place smelled like evergreen.

We hadn't opened the inn for guests yet, so we'd gotten dressed and done our hair and makeup in the large bedroom. Sarah, Ireland, Lori, and the girls, Ember and Addy, had gone downstairs to greet guests and to give Heath and me a moment alone.

Heath stood behind me at the large bay window so we could watch guests arrive. We'd hired a butler and staff for the evening to provide catering, answer the door, and serve the food.

Heath lowered his head so that his chin rested on my shoulder. "Did you ever think the inn would look this grand?"

I turned in his arms. "You were the one who knew I'd want to stay once the inn was renovated. You ensured that the renovations were just right."

Heath smiled. "I believed in you and this place."

"I'm forever grateful." I went up on tiptoes so I could kiss him. My heart was full between the potential of the inn and living with Heath. When I pulled back, I asked, "Should we go downstairs and greet the guests?"

"You're the guest of honor. They can't start without us," Heath said as he interlaced his fingers with mine and led me out of the room.

I squeezed his hand. "I think you're the man of the hour since you made this place beautiful again. Gram would have loved it."

He slowed my walk and leaned over to kiss me softly. "She'd be happy you're home and happy."

“I think so, too.” Downstairs, the butler took the guests’ coats as they arrived, and they mingled in the living room, then took the stairs or the elevator to the third-floor ballroom.

We greeted arriving guests for a while and then moved into the living room, where cocktails were being served.

There were two trees in this room, one green and one red. Both were large, reaching almost to the ceiling, with elegant decorations. It helped that we knew the owners of a Christmas tree farm and they provided the perfect trees.

We mingled for a while, talking about the renovations, the plans for the inn, and the lights at Monroe Farm, which had been a hit this season. Then we congregated by the green tree with Lori, Knox, Sarah, Ireland, Emmett, Talon, Sebastian, Holly, and Hanna. Ember was playing with Addy’s hair in front of the fire.

The Christmas tree farm was closed tonight, and we’d invited all the employees and vendors.

Hanna had been staying with Sebastian for a few days because her roommate moved out, and the lease was up.

“Have you decided where you’re going to live?” Lori asked Hanna.

“I’ve been looking at places, but they’re expensive when you don’t have a roommate. Most of the teachers I know are already living with their significant others.”

“You’re welcome to stay with me as long as you need,” Sebastian said.

“My parents won’t be happy, but I don’t have a choice unless I want to move back in with them.” Hanna shuddered at the idea.

“I’d love your help in the shop. We’ll need to pack up the holiday items and store them for next year.”

“You know I’m always happy to help,” Hanna said, touching Lori’s hand.

“Hanna will watch Ember after school during tax season when I’m working late. It helps that she’ll be staying with us.”

Talon raised a brow. “A live-in nanny?”

“She’s my friend and a roommate,” Sebastian said with an edge to his tone.

“Whatever you say,” Talon mumbled into his glass.

Heath told me one night how they’d teased Sebastian over the years about Hanna, but he insisted they were just friends. Seeing Hanna’s cheeks redden at Talon’s ribbing probably only strengthened his suspicions that she liked him. It was too bad he was too dense to see what was right in front of him.

“I made this for you,” Holly handed me a painted ornament. She turned the ivory bulb so I could see how she’d drawn the inn and inscribed *Matthews Inn* underneath.

I took it from her, admiring it. “This is beautiful. Thank you.”

Holly provided a lot of the ornaments for our trees. Guests could purchase them here, so it was a good advertisement for her and her business. “Could you make more of these? We could sell them, and maybe you could make one new one each year with the year on the actual ornament.”

“You’ll have guests who visit every year who’ll want to purchase a new ornament,” Heath said.

“I could make one for the light display, too. Maybe the one with Santa and his reindeer,” Holly said to Talon.

It was the first time they'd spoken to each other, and we held our breath for Talon's response.

"That would be nice." Talon's tone was soft and gentle, devoid of the irritation we heard when he spoke about her or their relationship.

Was it possible he was irritated with how things ended, and not something Holly had done? I was invested in the Monroe family now, and I wanted Talon and Holly to mend whatever their issues were and find happiness just like Heath and I had.

"Can we dance now?" Ember tugged on Sebastian's hand.

Sebastian exchanged a look with Hanna. "We can do that."

We made our way up the grand stairs to the second floor, where every room had a wreath hung on the door. I never thought I'd own and run an inn someday, but it felt right, like I was honoring Gram and keeping her memory alive, not just in our hearts, but in this building.

I knew she was looking down on us tonight, and she was happy.

As we approached the stairs to the third floor, the sounds of a stringed instrument drifted around us. Ireland had hired Alex St. James, a local cellist to play.

When we entered the room, a few couples were dancing, and a larger crowd surrounded the makeshift stage where Alex was playing his electric cello, completely absorbed in the music. His eyes were closed, and his head moved in time with the beat.

"He's amazing," I said.

"He was invited to play the national anthem at Madison Square Garden," Ireland said.

“Do you want to dance?” Emmett asked Ireland, and then Knox asked Sarah.

“You should dance with Daddy so he’s not alone,” Ember said to Hanna.

Hanna grinned and asked, “Is that so?”

Sebastian held his hand out to her. “You don’t want me to be lonely, do you?”

Hanna smiled, taking his hand. “We can’t have that.”

“I’m going to check on the food,” Lori said.

I wrapped my hand around Heath’s elbow, content to be here with him tonight, celebrating my family’s legacy. Something I never thought I’d do. For the first time, I felt like I belonged and that my family’s history was significant instead of something to be ashamed of.

When my mother showed up at the inn a few days ago, I handed her a piece of paper, signing away her rights to contest the will in exchange for a lump sum of money. It was Alan’s suggestion. Heath was against the idea, but it felt powerful for me to make that move.

Now I could move on without any guilt or shame.

“Would you like to dance?” When Holly hesitated, Talon said, “Surely, you can dance with me for one song.”

Holly sighed and placed her hand in his. “I can do that.”

When they walked away, Heath said, “Maybe there’s hope for them after all.”

“I hope so. If it eases the tension between them, then it’s worth it.”

“I’d ask you to dance, but I have a surprise for you, and this is the perfect opportunity to sneak out,” he said as he took my hand and led me down the stairs.

“Does the fridge fit?” The original fridge wouldn’t fit snugly against the wall and in line with the cupboards. Heath had been on a mission to find the one that would.

He glanced over at me. “Not yet. But I’ll figure something out. Even if I have to tear everything out and start over again.”

“Please don’t do that. I’m fine if the fridge isn’t flush with the other cabinets. I just want a functioning kitchen.” The fridge worked; it just stuck out a little bit. It didn’t bother me as much as it did Heath.

Heath’s jaw tightened. “This is the first job I did on my own. It has to be perfect.”

“Sebastian’s house was your first project, and it *is* perfect.”

Heath grunted in response and led me outside onto the porch.

The layout of the circular driveway with the fountain made the house more regal. The columns of the house were wrapped in lights, and every window was adorned with a wreath and a bow.

It was quiet, but we could hear the laughter and music filtering down from the upstairs windows that had been cracked open for fresh air.

“What’s the surprise?” Had he been working on something behind my back?

“I hope you like it,” Heath said, and for the first time, I sensed he was nervous.

“I love everything you do.” He’d already gone off-script with the built-ins inside, the lights on the lane, and the fountain. “Does Aiden know about this surprise?” I asked as we stepped off the porch and in the direction of the mature Christmas trees Heath had planted at my request.

“He helped me plan it.”

That surprised me. I thought Aiden would have a harder time accepting our relationship, but he was working with Heath and planning surprises for me.

“This is more than just trees. We created gardens for you.”

I sucked in a breath. “You’re kidding.”

“Obviously, there aren’t any flowers. Knox will add those in the spring. But we did everything we could. Want to see it?”

“Absolutely.”

He led me through a space between the trees that led to a path lined with more evergreens. “Is this—”

Heath grinned. “It’s a maze. You asked for Christmas trees, and I thought people visiting the inn would love to explore this.”

Eager to see more, I took his hand, and we walked the path. There were benches placed every so often, and the trees were draped in Christmas lights. “This is beautiful.”

As we got deeper into the maze, I heard water flowing. “What is that?”

He grinned. “Let’s see.”

My heart pounded with anticipation. I couldn’t imagine anything more beautiful than what he’d shown me already. He slowed when we got to a small wooden bridge. The sides of

which were covered in garland, and the center contained one large wreath.

When we reached the other side, the center of the maze took my breath away. It was a tree built with red poinsettias, surrounded by a circular fountain with waterspouts. The water shot out in measured sequence so that it was like the water was chasing each other around the circle.

“I cannot believe you did this.” I’d seen something similar to this in botanical gardens but not at a private residence.

Heath stood in front of me, holding both of my hands in his. “When you came home, I wanted to see if you were still the woman I knew or if you’d changed. As we got to know each other, I wanted to show you the magic of the holidays at my farm and the inn. I wanted you to fall in love with this place again.”

“Mission accomplished,” I said, my heart overflowing with everything he’d created here.

He dropped to one knee. “My plan was for you to feel the magic of the holidays, to fall in love with this place, remember the good things we shared, and create new memories. Ones you wouldn’t be able to walk away from. Marley, know that I’ll follow you wherever you want to go, but I’m hoping you’ll want to stay here with me.”

Looking down at him, I couldn’t think of anywhere else I’d rather be. Heath was my home. My love. The one I wanted a future with.

“Will you marry me? Will you create more magic with me?”

I was nodding before I could form any words, and he stood in front of me, his hands on my cheeks. Tears were falling as

he kissed me softly. “You make me so happy. I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

“Is that a yes, you’ll marry me?” Heath asked softly, waiting for my response, as if he needed to hear the words.

“Yes, I’ll marry you.” I never thought getting married was a possibility for me. Especially since I never let anyone in, but maybe that was because Heath was the one. We just needed to be in the same place at the right time. I couldn’t help but think this reunion was orchestrated by Gram. She wanted me to come home and see Heath again. She knew we were meant for each other.

I couldn’t be upset with her because I’d never been happier.

Heath lifted me in his arms, and when I was leaning down, my hair falling like a curtain around us, I kissed him.

I hope you loved Marley and Heath’s story! Read more about their happily ever after in their bonus [epilogue](#).

Hanna and Sebastian’s story is next in [Trusting Forever](#), a friends to lovers single dad holiday romance.

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About the Author

Lea Coll is a USA Today Bestselling Author of sweet and sexy happily ever afters. She worked as a trial attorney for over ten years. Now she stays home with her three children, plotting stories while fetching snacks and running them back and forth to activities. She enjoys the freedom of writing romance after years of legal writing.

She currently resides in Maryland with her family.

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