

SNOWED IN WITH THE

*Rancher*

LESLIE NORTH

MARY SUE JACKSON

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## BLURB

### *Snowed in at Christmas with the one that got away...*

Olivia Wickham never forgot her passionate romance with a sexy cowboy, Tate McConnell. After a family emergency forced them apart, Olivia searched, but couldn't find him...not even to tell him she was pregnant with his twin daughters. Now, years later, she and the twins are stranded in the wilderness, with a blizzard bearing down. When a handsome rancher shows up to rescue them, Olivia is shocked to see it's Tate — the girls' father.

Time hasn't dampened Tate's attraction to the gorgeous Olivia. But he's convinced himself he's not cut out for family life, and it's hard for a stubborn cowboy to change his ways. Still, the more time he spends trapped in a remote cabin with Olivia and his daughters, the more Tate begins to realize they may be just what his life has been missing...

With Christmas around the corner, Olivia and Tate can't help but feel like fate is offering them a second chance at love. But can they open their hearts enough to accept it?

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## PROLOGUE

Tate McConnell was a ranching man—he was used to the sun beating down on him from a clear sky stretching endlessly overhead, arching over cool green pastures rolling out for miles with not another living creature in sight, except for some cows.

Today...well, the sun was out. There was that. But the sunshine was just about the only damn thing that felt familiar as he inched his way along the cruise ship's long, zigzagging gangway, blessing the partial shade that the overhead canopy provided as he reached the top section. He felt a sharp elbow in his side from the woman pushing forward on his left, struggling to grab a kid who held a dripping ice cream cone in one hand. She yanked the kid back, the ice cream flew off and landed on Tate's sneaker, causing the child to begin shrieking in response.

“Sorry,” the woman muttered as she dragged the child back to her family's place in the boarding line, shoving people aside with those sharp elbows as she went.

Tate tried to shake the ice cream off his foot, but as he was packed in among a multitude of people, all struggling to make their way up that narrow incline, and he didn't have much room to maneuver.

What had possessed him to accept this gift of a cruise from his dad and stepmom? “You need a vacation,” his dad had said. “Get out there and meet people,” both had told Tate. Why they thought he'd *want* to meet people, he didn't know. He'd never really been the social type. It was why ranching

suited him so well. Hours out on his own while he rode the fences and checked on the herd, letting his thoughts drift slow and easy—that was when he was happiest, when he felt the most settled and content. The idea that he needed a vacation from ranching was, frankly, ridiculous. And for that “vacation” to mean cramming on a boat with enough strangers to fill a small city? His stepmom might call it “a fun break,” but he was more likely to call it “hell on earth.”

“It’s stupid crowded, isn’t it?” a silky feminine voice to his left said.

The thought of making small talk with a stranger was nearly enough to make him cringe—but his manners wouldn’t let him just ignore her. Tate bit back a grimace before he turned to face her. But as his gaze focused, he actually found himself smiling.

“It is,” he said, clearing his throat, which was suddenly hoarse and tight. He stared at her long enough that he figured he probably looked like a creeper, but damn, she was gorgeous. Her ruby lips curled in a warm, inviting smile and flawless golden skin covered a slim, curvy frame, but it was her eyes that really caught his attention. Wide, thickly lashed, and so expressive that he felt like he could stare into them forever and never get bored.

“You on board alone?” she asked.

“Yeah,” he said, shifting to face her.

She squeezed in next to him, putting them mere inches away from one another. She smelled like lemons and sunshine, and Tate’s heart gave a little flutter.

“The cruise was a, uh, gift,” he told her as explanation for his solo status.

“Nice!” she exclaimed. “I’m here alone, too. Once a year, I scope out all the biggest deals on vacations and pick one, then go for it.”

Tate’s grin kept getting wider. He probably looked ridiculous, but he couldn’t help it. Her enthusiasm just made him want to smile. “That’s adventurous. I’m impressed.”

She laughed, her entire face lighting up. “It’s once-a-year adventurousness. The rest of the time, I’m boring.”

He chuckled, not believing it for a minute. “What do you do the rest of the year?”

“I work for a nonprofit. I finished my degree last year, so it's my first real job. How about you?”

“I'm a rancher. The opposite of adventurous.” He put his hand on her shoulder to keep her from being bumped by someone passing by with an overlarge shoulder bag. That one touch was all it took to short-circuit what was left of his inhibitions. Her skin was silky smooth like her voice, and warm like her smile. A frisson of electricity shot through him as he reluctantly let his arm drop.

“I'm Tate, by the way,” he said. “From Montana.”

“It's very nice to meet you, Tate from Montana,” she replied. “I'm Olivia from Washington.”



They had to separate when their turn came to be screened to come on board—a process that gave Tate a whole new appreciation for how his cows must feel when he herded them together to vaccinate them—but that night, they met up again for dinner, grabbing take-out from the diner on the fifth deck and then heading over to the pool deck, curling up on pool loungers and watching the sun set as they scarfed down burgers and fries. And in that moment, with Olivia by his side, Tate thought that his dad had been right after all—a cruise might be the best thing he'd done in months.

“Now, that was a meal,” Olivia said, leaning back on her chaise with a smile and a happy, sated sigh. In spite of his best attempts to be a gentleman, Tate couldn't help wondering what else he could do to get her to make that sound again. He decided he wanted to find out the answer as soon as possible.

“Glad you enjoyed it,” he said somewhat suggestively as he shifted so he could reach for her hand. She didn't resist, and he held on while gazing into her eyes with longing.

“I've enjoyed everything about spending time with you,” she told him softly.



“So have I,” he agreed. “I don’t think I’ve ever connected to someone as fast as I have with you.” He flushed. “I’m sorry—that probably sounds like a line. But I swear, I mean it.”

“It sounds like a *good* line,” she said. “Because I believe you. And I feel the same way.”

As he stared into her lovely eyes, his heart clenched, and something else hardened in anticipation.

“So, Olivia from Washington...would you like to have a drink in my cabin?” he asked, hoping like hell he hadn't misread the situation. “Just a drink, if that's all you want,” he added, in case he *had* misread it. It wasn't like he had much practice at this sort of thing. He'd never really dated much—usually preferred being on his own. But everything felt so easy with Olivia, so *right*. He had to take the chance.

“Which deck are you on?” she asked, tilting her head.

“Four.”

“I'm on three—your cabin is closer.”

Then she stood and tugged him up. Joy lit him up, and he pulled her into his arms, unable to wait a second longer to hold her. His forearm banded across the dip in her spine, and he buried his other hand in her hair.

“Where’s the hurry, cowboy?” she said with a giggle. “I already said I’d come to your cabin with you.”

“Had to do this first,” he said, lowering his head down to hers and capturing her lips in a sweet kiss. Pure pleasure rushed through him and he tugged her closer, kissing her with everything he had, relishing the way her pretty mouth gave way beneath his. His mind became a tangle of slick heat and warm skin. He thought he'd never been so damn happy.

When they finally broke for air, she took him by the hand, and not wanting to wait for the elevator, they ran all the way to his cabin.

They couldn't quite seem to let go of each other, which made it a little tricky to unlock the door, but they finally managed to fumble their way inside his

cabin. It was tiny—but the advantage of that was that they didn't have to go far to reach the bed. He scooped her up and lay her out on it, relishing the feel of head-to-toe contact as he covered her with his body. It was a wrench to pull away from her sweet lips, but it was well worth it to kiss his way down her neck and enjoy her gasp of pleasure when he found a sensitive spot below her collarbone.

“More, please...” she whispered, and he was happy to comply, unzipping her dress and peeling it down slowly, unwrapping her like the gift that she was. God, she was so beautiful. Her front-clasp bra was easily unsnapped and he took some time to worship her breasts.

“Tate,” she moaned, tugging at his shirt. “Come on, get your clothes off. I want to feel you, too.”

He pulled back to comply, stripping down as fast as he could. He paused only long enough to fish his wallet out of his jeans and extract the condom he'd had in there for...well, honestly, he couldn't remember how long. He was just glad it was there. Tossing his wallet on the bedside table and his clothes on the floor, he lay down beside Olivia again, returning to his exploration of her warm, silky skin.

She was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen, and he intended to spend the night worshipping every inch of her. And then the next night and the next, for as long as the cruise lasted. She murmured his name and wrapped her arms around him. Leaning over to kiss her again felt like the most natural thing in the world.

He'd never felt like this about anyone before. He didn't know what the future held, didn't know if this was just a holiday fling for her or if it could be the start of something special. But he couldn't wait to find out.

# ONE

*Five years later*

“**Y**ou'll just love all the little glass reindeer I put in that box.”

Tate scrubbed a hand across his eyes and tried to smile at the screen in front of him. Smiling back at him, only with a lot more authenticity, was his stepmother, Lucy. The good part about talking to Lucy was that she didn't expect him to contribute much to the conversation. The bad part was that she never. Stopped. Talking. It would have been almost impressive if it hadn't started to sound like nails on a chalkboard to him after five minutes or so. Long, chatty conversations were not his strong suit. They weren't even his medium suit. In truth, they were a suit he'd never voluntarily worn in all his life.

“There's also a nativity scene,” she continued, her voice warm and enthusiastic. “I found it the last time we were in Billings. There's a darling little creche, and the baby is made out of...”

Another area where he had no expertise—decorating for Christmas. He had some vague memories of lights and greenery when he was little, but all of that had stopped when he was six years old and his mother died. He and his dad hadn't bothered with decorating after that. Not until Lucy came into his dad's life six years ago. Lucy liked to doll up the ranch house with so many blinking lights and candles and tinsel and bows that he nearly needed sunglasses to shade his eyes every time he came over. As with so many things Lucy did, it all felt too loud, too bright, and too *much* for his taste. If it

made her and his father happy, then more power to them...but he wanted no part of it.

Not that Lucy seemed to be giving him a choice this year.

Next to him on the floor was the box of Christmas decorations Lucy had delivered earlier in the day. He was working so he hadn't been there to receive it, which was her excuse for the call—to “make sure” he'd gotten it and to give him the full rundown on every piece she'd put inside the box.

“With the storm coming, I thought it would be good for you to have something to do in case you're snowed in up there for the next few days,” Lucy continued. “And maybe you could practice baking some of your famous cookies? Everyone will want some for Christmas.”

Tate sighed. “Everyone” meant Lucy's family. They would be arriving in droves to take part in the big Christmas celebration Lucy held every year at their house. They were all good people, but there were just so *many* of them. Cousins and in-laws and siblings and nieces and nephews and he didn't know what-all. Sometimes he wondered how Lucy kept them all straight. He didn't want to be rude, didn't want to hurt Lucy's feelings, but he also *really* didn't want to spend hours making awkward small talk with a bunch of people he barely knew.

He'd never been good at connecting with people. The only person he'd ever really clicked with right off the bat had been Olivia, on that cruise five years earlier...but that had ended so strangely and abruptly. Little wonder that he'd become even more withdrawn afterward. He was used to being on his own—he had years of practice at it. But being left behind had been another thing entirely. It wasn't an experience he was eager to repeat.

“I'll see,” he prevaricated. “But I really don't know when I'll find the time. I have a lot of work to do with this empty parcel on the north side. The feds will take that land back if we don't get it productive in the next six months, and that's not going to be easy.” Federal land leases were like that. If you weren't using 100 percent of the land, the government officials assumed you didn't really need it all, which resulted in them taking the unused part of it back. “I should never have let it go this long, but I was so busy with that fencing project, I lost track.”

His dad stepped into view, leaning over Lucy's shoulder. "You know, you could ask Lucy's nephews—William and those brothers of his—to help out while they're here. That operation they run in Wyoming is nearly as big as ours. I bet they'd have some good ideas for that tract."

Lucy nodded vigorously. "I don't know if I told you, but William started a new breeding program last year. His momma says he's been written up in the *Wyoming Cattleman's Journal* for it. They'll be here before Christmas and aren't planning to leave until almost New Year's. That's plenty of time for them to take a look at that tract and help you brainstorm some ideas. That could be so nice for all three of you, don't you think? You really have so much in common—I think you could be great friends, and—"

She continued in that vein for a stretch longer, and Tate tried to tune it out. She was always trying to fix him up with friends—and even dates, like that time she'd signed him up on a dating site without asking him first. The intentions were kind, he knew, but after he'd come back from the cruise, he'd decided that he was better off on his own. Things were simpler that way.

Tate felt something wet on his knuckles and looked down to find his dog Lobster, who'd just woken from a nap.

He grinned for real and gave the old lab a good scratch behind the ears. Lobster's tail thumped and he let out a happy bark.

"That Lobster?" his dad asked.

"Yeah, he just woke up," Tate answered, turning the computer so the camera would show the black beast to the others. Lobster's tongue lolled out of his smiling mouth, and Lucy and Thomas began cooing at him.

Tate's gaze roamed around his living room. He'd spent the last six years redoing the old cabin, ever since his dad and Lucy got married and he'd moved out of the main ranch house to give them some space to themselves. It had come together nicely, an eclectic mix of traditional Montana décor—an antler chandelier over the dining room table, overstuffed leather sofas—and modern practicalities like triple-glazed windows, gas fireplace, heated floors. Actually, he might have gone a little overboard. It was certainly more than he needed to live alone, with a couple of bedrooms and a study, one great room with living, kitchen, and dining area, and two and a half bathrooms. But he

loved it. The cabin was his refuge, the place where he could relax and let down his guard. The place where everything was laid out exactly the way that he wanted it. And those decorations Lucy had dropped off? He just didn't see anywhere for them here in his space. They were perfectly nice decorations, but they just weren't right for him at all.

“So what do you say?” Thomas asked. “You going to set up some time aside to have William and the boys help you with that land?”

Damn, a direct question—he couldn't just nod and smile and hope the conversation moved on without his input. “I'm not sure, Dad. They'll be on vacation and all. It might not be the best time to bother them with the ranch's concerns.” He didn't want his dad worrying about things, either. Since his heart attack three years ago, he'd stepped back from the day-to-day running of the ranch, leaving it in Tate's hands. Resolving the situation with the unused land was Tate's problem, and he would handle it himself, as usual.

“It's the perfect time!” Lucy burst out, her ebullient grin lighting up her face. “They'll be happy to help, I'm sure of it. And it's no imposition—I know you'd do the same for them if the tables were turned.”

Of course, if there was anything he could do to help another rancher out, he'd be glad to lend a hand. But asking for help himself? That was a different matter.

Just then, an obnoxious siren blasted from his phone where it sat on the kitchen table on the other side of the room.

“Oh!” Lucy jumped in surprise.

“Sounds like search and rescue calling,” Thomas said, placing a steadying hand on Lucy's shoulder. His dad knew about his long history volunteering with the local search and rescue team. With his commitments to the ranch, especially after his dad stepped back, Tate couldn't be on the schedule as much as he would like, but he still tried to put in as many hours as he could. And when they called, he came right away.

“Yep. Gotta run,” Tate said, relieved for the easy excuse to end the conversation before anyone forced a promise out of him that he didn't want to make.

“You stay safe out there, son,” Thomas instructed.

“Thanks, Dad. I'll talk to you later.”

He tapped the red X on the screen and began moving across the room immediately. He reached the phone before the siren could blast a second time. Picking it up, he saw the emergency text.

*Three individuals missing near Tolson Cliffs. Adult female late twenties. Two female children under ten. Last seen at the following coordinates...*

“Damn,” Tate muttered. The impending storm was rolling in fast, and a mom was out there alone with young kids. There wasn't a second to waste. He grabbed the keys to his ATV before picking up the emergency responder kit he kept by the back door. His jacket, gloves, and hat followed, and he was out the door and climbing onto the four-wheeler in less than a minute.

Lobster was at his hip the entire time, jumping into the passenger seat of the ATV without being prompted. He'd been going on rescues with Tate since his puppy days, and he knew the routine as well as any human.

Tate picked up the radio that backed up their cell phones during rescues. “This is McConnell, responding to the call,” he said.

“Roger that, Tate,” replied Marjory Andrews, the wife of the search and rescue team chief. Marjory served as the dispatcher when calls came in. “You might be the only one able to get there before the storm fouls everything up,” she said. “Make sure to stay in close touch.”

“Roger that,” Tate replied before putting the handheld back into its slot on the dash of the ATV. “You ready, old man?” he said to Lobster. The lab gave another enthusiastic bark before bathing Tate's ear with his tongue. The ATV engine cranked over and Tate hit the accelerator, snow churning behind him as he headed toward the old trucking road to the east—and a mother with two kids who needed saving before the biggest storm of the season rolled in and put a halt to everything for a hundred miles.

## TWO

“It hurts, Mommy,” Jacqueline said from the log where she was sitting, amid a pile of snow at the bottom of the ravine she'd tumbled into.

Olivia Wickham sighed as she rubbed the four-year-old's ankle gently. “I know, hon. I need you to keep it elevated—up on this rock. Someone's going to be back for us soon, and they'll put you on a sled or something to take you back to the lodge.” She tried to smile convincingly. “It's all going to be fine.”

“I told her not to look over the edge,” Jackie's twin sister Melissa said. “She doesn't listen, and she's a 'rupter,” the other four-year-old in the party added with righteous indignation.

“Well, she was curious,” Olivia said, looking at Melissa over her shoulder. She stood, her arms crossed, on top of a small boulder that stuck up out of the snow. Above her, a huge pine tree threatened to dump a branch full of snow over the little girl. Beyond that, the sky was darkening quickly, big gray clouds churning angrily. They made Olivia more than a little uneasy, but being a mom meant never panicking—at least, not where her girls could see it. Aloud, all she said was, “You get curious sometimes, too.”

“Huh!” Melissa's jaw stiffened, and she glared at her sister.

Olivia shook her head, wondering for the millionth time where Melissa's strong personality came from. She was always so sure of herself in a way that Olivia had never been. Maybe it came from her father?

Unfortunately, Olivia had barely known the girls' father, so some aspects of



Melissa's personality remained a mystery.

“Mommy, I liked the snowshoeing part,” Jackie said, a tired look in her pretty caramel eyes—visible proof that she was her father's daughter too, even if she'd inherited more of Olivia's personality. “But I'm cold now. I want to go home.” The last words threatened to turn into a whine.

Olivia reached over to where her backpack rested against the tree trunk and unzipped it. No mother of twin four-year-olds was ever without a prodigious number of supplies. She dug around before finding several instant glove warmer packets as well as a collection of energy bars and the small canteen of water she'd brought for the girls to share.

“Here,” she said, maintaining a cheerful tone. “Give me your gloves, and we'll put warmers in them.”

Both girls handed over their ski gloves, and she massaged the warming packets to life before sliding them into the gloves and then helping the girls get them back on their hands.

“Now, if Lissa will scoot over a touch, I can sit on that rock with her, and then we can each have a bar while we wait.”

Food served to be every bit as much of a distraction as she'd hoped, and before long, they were comparing mouths full of half-chewed energy bars. Olivia subtly pulled her cell phone from her jacket pocket. Still no signal. She glanced at the sky. The rapid onset of dark and cold was making her heart beat a little faster. She held on to the idea that help was on the way. If it wasn't...she didn't know what she'd do.

The last few weeks had already been difficult for her and the girls. Moving was never easy, especially with kids, and the girls missed their former preschool and with their friends. Olivia missed the group of single moms she'd had as a support system since shortly after the twins were born. But turning down the opportunity that had brought her here simply hadn't been an option.

Olivia's new job with Dreams for Disabilities—DFD—was something she'd been working toward since before the girls were born. When she'd seen the posting for the position of executive director of DFD, she'd known that she

was finally going to get her chance. The pay raise was substantial, and the small-town location meant a healthy, safe environment to raise the girls in.

The fact that the job had been in Montana, the state the girls' father was from, had seemed like some sort of kismet. While she had no idea whether he still lived in the state or not, she remembered that he'd talked about having close ties to a family ranch. The odds that he was still here somewhere were better than not. Without knowing his last name, she'd never been able to look for him, but she figured being in the same state increased her odds at least somewhat. She'd felt hopeful when she'd accepted the job offer and started planning the move.

But after weeks of every little thing going wrong, optimism had gotten harder and harder to hold on to. This snowshoeing “adventure” had been her latest attempt to cheer the girls up and lift her own spirits as well—and look how that had turned out. Jackie had fallen down an embankment, hurting her ankle and slipping completely out of sight of the rest of the group. Rushing to her baby's side, Olivia hadn't spared a single thought to getting the group leader's attention, and when she'd finally looked up after checking over the injury, she'd realized the group had left them behind, apparently not even realizing the three of them were no longer there. With no signal to call for help, no way to get two four-year-olds back up on the trail by herself, and no other options, Olivia was clinging to her last threads of hope that help was on its way. It just had to be. She didn't know what she'd do if it wasn't.

She looked at the sky again as light snowflakes began to drift down. Surely they were going to send someone back soon, right?

“Mommy,” Jackie said again, tears filling her eyes this time. “I'm really scared. I don't want to live in Montana anymore.”

Melissa nodded her agreement, her brow furrowed in a scowl.

“Hey.” Olivia got up from the rock and went over to the log Jackie was perched on. She eased herself down on the log and pulled the tired child onto her lap. Then she put out her other arm and gestured to Melissa to join them. Melissa jumped down from the rock and trudged over with a resigned expression.

“I know it's cold and a little bit scary right now, but someone is going to

come along very soon and take us back to the lodge, and then we can go home to our new beds.”

“I want my old bed,” Melissa grumbled, bending her head to pick at her nails.

“Me, too,” Jackie whined.

“I'll tell you what,” Olivia said brightly—much more brightly than she felt. “Let's talk again about all the fun things we're going to get to do here in Montana.”

“Like snowshoeing and watching Jackie fall down a hill?” Melissa asked with a raised brow.

“And then seeing Mommy and you slide down on your butts to help me?” Jackie asked with a giggle.

“What about the puppy we're going to get?” Olivia said. Okay, yes, she was desperate. She'd been holding out the promise of a puppy for weeks while they were packing up the apartment back in Spokane. And she knew taking on the care and training of a puppy when she was busy with her daughters and her new job wasn't the best plan, but there had been days when that as-yet-to-materialize puppy was the only thing that got them all through.

“I want a Goldendoodle!” Jackie said, bouncing up and down on Olivia's lap.

“No,” Melissa said sternly, “a Saint Bernard, so it can rescue us when we fall down hills in the snow.”

Olivia had to smile at that one. Melissa was always so practical. If she did take after her father, he was obviously a very capable guy.

Jackie was talking about names for the puppy when Olivia suddenly cocked her head, ears trained on the distant buzzing sound she heard.

“Mommy! What's that?” ever-vigilant Melissa whispered.

Olivia held up one finger to indicate the girls needed to be quiet. They both promptly went silent, although Olivia could feel Jackie pressing closer to her, probably ready to burst into tears again.

The buzzing came closer. They heard it slow for a few moments, then pick

back up. Slow. Quicken.

“I think it's someone coming to help us!” Olivia exclaimed. Both girls cheered, and Melissa jumped up and down, clapping her hands, uncharacteristically excited.

Olivia stood and set Jackie on the rock before walking over to the bottom of the hill they'd all slid down. As the buzzing engine—probably an ATV of some sort—came closer and closer, she knew she had to find a way to alert whoever was driving it that they were here.

She looked around at the rocks and pine trees, hoping for some sort of inspiration. Despite her intense concentration, nothing presented itself. All they had to work with was noise. That meant they needed to make some, and fast.

“Start screaming, girls,” she instructed. “Use your very biggest, loudest outside voices, and don't stop until I say!”

“Okay, Mommy,” Melissa said with iron determination, and Jackie nodded to show her support.

“Help! Help! Down here!” Olivia began to shout. Both girls followed suit, sometimes shouting words, other times simply screaming as only four-year-olds can—high-pitched, ear-splitting, blood-curdling screams.

Suddenly, the engine stopped, and then she heard a dog barking.

“Mommy!” Jackie shouted, eyes bright with hope. “It's a puppy!”

The barking got closer and closer, and then she heard a man's voice. “Go get 'em, Lobster!”

The dog barked again, and Olivia yelled, “Down here! We're down here!”

Then a big black head with bright eyes and a silvery muzzle appeared over the edge of the embankment.

Both girls shrieked in excitement, and the dog stopped barking and whined at them, his silly tongue lolling out of his mouth as he whipped his head back and forth between them and whoever was up top.

Footsteps came closer, and she heard a deep, husky voice say, “Good job, Lobster. There's a good boy.”

Olivia's face broke out into a smile. A dog named Lobster. She was going to buy him a Porterhouse steak when they got out of this damn mess.

Then a big boot appeared at the edge of the embankment next to Lobster. Olivia's gaze traveled up and up, passing over long legs encased in worn denim, a broad chest, and wide shoulders, and finally reaching a face that she could never forget.

The face that had haunted her every day and every night for five long years.

## THREE

Tate recognized her face instantly. Even with her long hair partially covered by a stocking cap and her amazing body wrapped in a boatload of puffy layers, he instantly knew it was Olivia by her eyes. Those big, beautiful hazel gems. Eyes that had stared into his in a moonlit ship's cabin on a sultry summer night all those years ago. Eyes that had drifted closed as he'd kissed her and run his hands over her silky skin.

“Are you going to rescue us?” a little voice asked. Tate blinked once, trying to regain his bearings.

“It's Tate, right?” Olivia called quietly up the slope.

He gave her a stiff nod, too rattled by memories of his time with her—and by the abrupt, unexplained way that it had ended—to know how to respond. “Olivia. It's...well...Let's not worry about what you're doing here—we need to get you all out. How does that sound?”

She nodded. “Thank you. I was starting to get worried.”

He looked at the little girls—her daughters, he guessed—then back at her. It made his heart do a small skip when he thought about all the things that might have happened between them. To cover his feelings, he reached down and patted Lobster on the head again.

“I'm going to set up so I can help you all climb out of there.”

“One of my daughters has a sprained ankle,” Olivia told him with a grimace.

“That's okay,” he reassured her. “I can carry her piggyback. I bet she can hold on just like a little monkey.” He winked at the girls and was rewarded when they both giggled. Thankfully, they seemed calm and cheerful. He'd been involved in more than a few rescues where everyone—from the children all the way up to the adults—had been panicked and crying. He couldn't blame them, of course. Getting trapped was scary, by definition. But Olivia had managed to hold things together for her girls. She must be a great mom.

Fifteen minutes later, he had the rope secured to a nearby tree, and he and Olivia were coaching the uninjured girl—Lissa, Olivia called her—to walk up the embankment. The rope tied around her waist would keep her from getting injured. He could have simply pulled her up with it, but that wouldn't be very comfortable for her, and she was a healthy little kid, so he hoped she could get herself most of the way up the slope.

Her little face was screwed up in determination, her brows furrowed, mouth set as she continued up the embankment. Something about the expression was so familiar, he couldn't help a smile.

“You're doing great,” he told her from his perch above. “And if you get too tired, you just let me know.”

She nodded and kept methodically stepping, pulling herself along, hand over hand, as he'd shown her. After a few minutes, she reached a point immediately below him.

“Want a lift up the last two feet?” he asked with a smile.

She shook her head, repositioned her hands, pushed with her feet, and hoisted herself the last bit until she was teetering on the edge on her tummy.

Olivia and the other girl, Jackie, cheered from below while Tate reached under Lissa's arms and pulled her to stand safely on firm ground near—but not too near—the edge.

She gazed at him with triumph shining all over her sweet little face. “I made it.”

“You sure as heck did,” he said with a grin. “You're a superstar.”

She nodded, her expression still completely serious. “Are you going to get

Jackie out now?”

“Your mama first, then your sister. I promise. Now, let's get you out of this rope.”

As he loosened the slip knot and had Lissa step out of the loop, he turned and looked back down at Olivia.

“You ready?” he asked.

“Are you sure we can't send her up first? I really don't want to leave her down here alone.”

He gave her an encouraging smile. “We need one able-bodied adult at each end for this rescue to work. I can't come down there to take her up if you're down there, too. I need you up here to help out. Trust me, it's all going to be fine.” He lowered the rope. “Slip this on, and let's get moving so we can get all of you inside somewhere warm.”

Olivia nodded and caught the end of the rope.

Her ascent was faster than her daughter's, but she needed more help from Tate. He could see she wasn't as confident as Lissa was pulling herself up hand over hand, so he hoisted her at the same time, giving her more vertical pull with each step up the embankment.

“Let me know if you feel like the rope's going to cut you in half,” he joked. “I know it's not the most comfortable thing in the world.” She gave him a quick smile and kept on climbing.

Once she was at the top, Tate tied the rope around his own waist and grabbed a harness device that he slung over his shoulder.

“Okay, let me show you a few things before I go down,” he told Olivia. “This is the radio—you press this button to talk. If something happens to me and you need more help, you tell them you're about a mile north of Blind Man's Pass on logging road six.”

“But nothing's going to happen to you, right?” Olivia asked warily.

“No, nothing is,” he promised. “But part of search and rescue is preparing for all contingencies, no matter what.”



She nodded.

“You know how to drive one of these things?” he pointed to the ATV.

“Yes, a friend's brother took the girls and me camping once and had one.”

He noticed she had yet to mention a husband or the girls' father. He couldn't help wondering if she was still single. Not that it mattered, he told himself. He had plenty on his plate with the ranch and his search and rescue work. He'd long since decided that romance wasn't for him. Even before the cruise where they'd met, he hadn't been very enthusiastic about trying to get a relationship going. And after the time he'd had with Olivia...well, dating someone else just hadn't held much appeal. He hadn't been with anyone since her. Partially because he'd been hurt by the strange, unexplained end to their relationship but also because he couldn't imagine feeling that connection with anyone else. And if he couldn't have that, what was the point in dating at all?

“Good. It's best to stay put and wait for help, but if you have to...” He gave her a look that hopefully said it all—*leave me here and go*.

“Be careful,” she said softly, and he felt something tighten in his chest. Lobster, cuddled with Melissa in the trailer hooked to the ATV, gave one sharp bark, and Tate smiled.

“Be right back,” he said before he rappelled off the edge of the embankment.



Olivia held her breath as Tate hoisted himself the last bit to land on his knees next to the ATV with Jackie securely on his back.

Melissa mumbled something that sounded like, “Yay,” then closed her eyes again, burrowing into Lobster's big body. Olivia rushed over to help get Jackie out of the harness. Tate knelt patiently while Olivia fussed with the straps and extricated the four-year-old, pulling her into her arms and squeezing her tight.

“Mommy, you're suf'cating me,” Jackie complained.

“Everyone's okay, now, Mom,” she heard Tate say in reassurance. “Let's get her set up in the back, and then we'll head to where it's warm...” he said, adding, “and there's hot chocolate,” for the little girls' benefit.

The snow was falling faster now, and both girls were obviously cold and exhausted. Olivia set Jackie up as comfortably as possible in the little trailer while Tate put away his gear.

She heard him on his radio, telling the search and rescue coordinators that everyone was safe.

He put the radio back in the holder on the ATV dash, then got the girls two of the crinkly silver blankets rescuers always used, while Lobster faithfully lay between them to share his warmth.

“He's such a good dog,” Olivia said as she slid into the seat of the ATV and wedged herself against Tate.

He started up the engine and slowly maneuvered the vehicle back the way he must have come, his previous tracks still evident in the snow, though they were rapidly filling up as the snow came down thicker and the wind began to blow it around. But he didn't seem worried, saying casually, “He's been a search and rescue dog since he was a pup. Ten years. He's a pro, and a big help. We have two other dogs who work rescues too, but Lobster was the original one, and he's had special training in Billings.”

Silence settled between them as Tate drove the ATV carefully over the newly fallen snow. Now that the girls were safe, Olivia's mind began to process the fact that their father, who hadn't known they existed and didn't know they were his, was sitting next to her in a snowstorm in the wilds of Montana. She'd dreamed about this moment, secretly hoped for it since getting the job offer, but she still hadn't really thought it would happen. All she could think was that she should be better prepared. She should have thought up something to say. Because here, now, in the moment...she was drawing a blank.

“So,” she said warily. “What are the odds?”

He glanced at her, a wry smile on his face. “About a million to one, I'd guess,” he answered.

After another pregnant pause, he asked, “So what brought you to Montana?”

She took a deep breath and tried to calm her racing heart. “A job,” she answered as nonchalantly as possible. “I’ve just been hired as the new executive director of Dreams for Disabilities. Their office is in town, and we’re staying at the lodge for a few days until our moving truck gets here.”

Wedge against him as she was, she felt him stiffen slightly at the information, but then he rolled his shoulders and relaxed. Glancing at his expression told her nothing.

“Well, congratulations,” he said politely, his gaze steady on the path ahead. As far as she could judge, it wasn’t the reaction of a man who was thrilled to hear an old flame had come to town.

Olivia’s heart sank. He didn’t seem happy about them living in the same town—but after the way she’d vanished on him years before, maybe that was to be expected.

Before she could say anything else, they came to a clearing where a traditional two-story log cabin sat. The front of the property was a traffic circle that connected to a long drive wandering away into the trees. A deep covered porch ran the width of the building and wrapped around the sides. A porch swing hung to one side of the front door, and a table and chairs sat on the other side. Chopped firewood was neatly stacked by the rafters of the porch, and a big blue pickup truck was parked in the circular driveway.

“So...” Tate said as he pulled the ATV parallel to the front porch and switched off the ignition. “This is my place. It was closer than the lodge and didn’t require crossing the Molly Bridge.”

He climbed out and walked around to her side. “That bridge is fine for snowshoers and pedestrians, but it really isn’t safe for ATVs.” He glanced back at the trailer where the two girls were fast asleep next to the devoted Lobster. “With her ankle hurt, I would have had to carry her the last mile to the lodge—she’s light, but it still would have slowed us down, and I didn’t want to spend the extra time with this storm coming in.”

As Olivia stepped off the ATV, he caught her hand to help her. Even though they were both wearing gloves, a jolt of electricity ran through her as if she’d

brushed against a live wire. Her breath caught in her throat. She saw his gaze fixed on her, and her own vision focused on his perfect face for what felt like several heated moments. His amber eyes flashed with something indecipherable, and she couldn't stop herself from looking over his sharp cheekbones, strong jaw covered with scruff, and lips she knew from experience were so much softer than they looked.

“Um, go on in, door's open,” he said gruffly. “I'll get the girls.”

She nodded wordlessly and gathered her backpack, but paused to look at the sky. It was dark gray now, the air filled with blowing snow, and she wondered just how long she and the girls would be stuck here with this man who hadn't yet realized that her daughters were also *his*.



Half an hour later, both girls were tucked into the queen bed in Tate's spare room, and Olivia was seated at his kitchen counter with a warm cup of hot chocolate in her hands.

“I see you're about to start decorating.” She pointed to the box of Christmas ornaments his stepmother had dropped off earlier. “Do you do the decorations, or does your...” Her voice trailed off in a question.

“No one does the decorations,” he muttered as he poured himself a cup of coffee. He motioned to the living room sofa and shoved the box of decorations into a corner with his foot. “I'm single,” he explained, “but my stepmother thinks this place needs a woman's touch, so she dropped the decorations off for me. I'm not actually planning to use them.” He shrugged.

“It's a lovely place,” Olivia said, sitting on the opposite end of the sofa from him. She bent one leg beneath her and angled her body so she could watch him.

“How about you?” he asked. “You haven't mentioned any mister somewhere who's wondering where you and the kids are.”

She tried to smile, but it felt more like a grimace. Was now the moment to tell him? He deserved to know, but they weren't exactly the easiest words to say.

She was exhausted, her head muddled and her emotions all out of whack. From the terror she'd felt when Jackie had gotten hurt, to the anxiety over waiting for help to come, to the relief mixed with shock when she'd laid eyes on Tate again... The day had been an emotional rollercoaster. The whole "Surprise, you're a daddy!" conversation would have to wait until she had a chance to get some rest and hopefully clear her head. And that meant for now, she'd answer Tate's questions—and nothing more. "There's no one worrying about us. I'm a single mother."

She could see the curiosity on his face, but to his credit, he didn't push. "Well, you're doing a great job. They're sweet kids."

Her heart lifted a touch at the praise. Pride in and love for her girls were a constant. No amount of exhaustion or emotional confusion could stop that.

"Thank you."

"I'm not the type, I guess..." he added, "but give me a dog, and I'm a pro." As if summoned by the words, Lobster ambled over and put his head on Tate's knee. Tate petted the lab. "We do pretty well, don't we old man?"

Unease trickled through her veins. This didn't bode well for how he'd handle her revelation in the morning. Olivia had had just about had all she could take. She felt her eyes begin to burn with impending tears and leaped to her feet. "I'm sorry, it's been such a long day, I think I'm going to go to bed."

Tate's brow furrowed in concern. "Of course. Can I get you anything else? I left a spare toothbrush out in the bathroom, and there are plenty of towels."

She nodded quickly, struggling to maintain her composure. "That's fine. Thank you." Then she turned and ran for the stairs.

## FOUR

Tate punched the pillow for what had to be the tenth time before rolling to his back to stare up at the ceiling. He hadn't seen Olivia in five years, and seeing her now was like a punch to the gut as he wondered yet again where things had gone wrong. Closing his eyes, he tried to will himself to sleep, but all he could think about was that perfect day they'd shared on the cruise ship.

Snorkeling. Tate was floating in the ocean, mask on his face, flippers on his feet, fish all around him. Never once in his life had he experienced the urge to snorkel. However, when his sexy new companion, Olivia, had suggested they take the offered snorkeling lessons together on the third day of the cruise, what was a red-blooded American male supposed to do? He wanted to spend every minute with her that he could. He'd never felt this kind of connection with anyone before, and he couldn't get enough of it. Not to mention, Olivia would be wearing a bikini. It was a no-brainer.

They'd been given a snorkeling lesson, then left to their own devices within a cove of crystal-clear blue water. An abundance of brightly colored fish took refuge in the calm waters of the cove, along with sea turtles and the other fifteen passengers who'd signed up for the event. Tate had to admit it was a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

He felt Olivia tap him on the arm to draw his attention as a couple of sea turtles swam beneath them. She smiled around her mouthpiece and pointed. Since she'd asked him before they'd set out to take charge of her underwater camera, he took the hint and snapped a couple of pictures.

He laid his hand on Olivia's leg then pointed ahead where an outcropping of rocks defined the edge of the cove on one side. They swam in that direction, and when they got there, Tate surfaced, pushing the mask and mouthpiece on top of his head and seeing Olivia do the same. He reached for her quickly, pulling her around a big, jagged rock and into a tiny crevice where they couldn't be observed by the other swimmers in the cove.

“Come here,” he whispered, pulling her closer, her breasts fitting perfectly against his chest. She'd worn a red bikini, and as beautiful as everything around them was, none of it could hold a candle to her.

She grinned at him. “You didn't think this was going to be fun, did you?”

He let his gaze roam her pretty face, pink from the sun and shiny with droplets of water.

“I admit, I was skeptical, but you proved me wrong.”

“I like proving you wrong,” she teased.

Then he kissed her, something he'd been doing at every opportunity since their dinner that first night on board. Two days later, and already, kissing her had become essential. Her tongue flicked out to taste his lips, and he slanted his head to deepen the kiss. He kept them afloat by anchoring one hand on the rocks, but with his other hand, he skimmed the curves of her waist and breasts. Adding to the caresses, he slid his leg between hers, and she chuckled against his lips.

“I didn't know this was part of the snorkeling lessons,” she chided, kissing him softly, first on the corner of the mouth, then along his jawline.

“Only the best student gets a private lesson,” he murmured as his lips found her neck and his teeth explored her earlobe.

“Glad to hear it. I'd hate to think how exhausting it would be for you to spend this much attention on all the students.”

He smiled against her neck. He couldn't imagine doing this with anyone but her. Couldn't imagine even wanting to. “Not to mention, I don't think the guy with the tattoos and mohawk would take too kindly to me kissing him.”

She laughed but stopped short as they heard a child's voice not too far away in the water.

“No! I'm not gonna put my head under. No, no, no!”

Tate raised an eyebrow as Olivia's eyes widened.

“Joshua! Stop fighting me. You're going to drown us both.”

Olivia mouthed something to Tate, but he was already pushing off the rocks, leading her by the hand back toward the main part of the cove.

As they rounded the point of rocks they'd been hiding behind, they were met with the sight of a little boy, maybe six or seven, struggling with his mother in the water. The boy was trying to head toward shore, and his mother didn't want to let go of him. Tate frowned at the sight. Normally, he wasn't one to interfere in anyone else's business. He was far more inclined to keep to himself and allow others to do the same. But if someone was in danger, all bets were off. It was why he'd gotten so involved in search and rescue work. No matter how awkward he felt making conversation with people he barely knew, he couldn't just walk by when someone clearly needed a helping hand.

Tate glanced at Olivia, who seemed to know what he had in mind. “Go,” she said, and he released her hand and swam toward the pair. The water in the cove was relatively shallow, but the mother was in over her head, and the little boy was putting up a real fight, making the situation dangerous for them both.

“Hey, there,” Tate said as he got closer, directing his gaze to the mother. “You need any help?”

She gave him a tight smile as she continued to struggle with the squirming child.

“He, uh, doesn't want to try the snorkel, but he also seems to think he can swim all the way back to shore by himself.”

Tate turned his focus to the child. One thing search and rescue had taught him was that the best way to calm a kid down was to get them focused on something else. Maybe it would work in this case, too? “So are you a good swimmer, cowboy?” Tate asked casually.



The boy stopped wiggling and looked at him suspiciously. “Yes. I can swim from one end of the pool to the other.”

“That's pretty good,” Tate encouraged. “So do you swim with your face out of the water in the pool?”

The boy looked at Tate like he'd lost his mind. “Of course. No one wants water up their nose.”

Tate nodded. “You know, I don't have a pool at home, so I swim in a pond.”

“Really? Are there fishes in the pond with you?”

The boy's mother released her grip, and the kid swam closer to Tate. He was actually a good swimmer for such a small kid.

“There are big old ugly catfish in there because my dad likes to fish for them.”

The boy's nose wrinkled.

Tate went on. “But in my pond, the water's not nice and clear like this.”

The boy began to tread water in front of Tate, and he saw Olivia make her way to the mother and start chatting.

“I'm Tate, by the way. What's your name?”

“Josh.” Then the boy dropped his voice to whisper. “But when my mom's mad, she calls me Joshua.”

Tate nodded in commiseration, then put on a bright expression as if he'd just had the best idea in the world. “You know,” he said casually. “I was snorkeling a little while ago, and I saw some sea turtles down there, and some of the brightest-colored fish you ever saw.”

Josh's eyes rounded. “Really? Like on TV?”

“Just like,” Tate assured him. “I don't usually put my head under water before because when I swim in that pond, it's muddy, and I don't want to end up eye-to-eye with a catfish.”

Josh giggled.

“But here, the water is so clear, it's like being at the aquarium.”

Josh's gaze narrowed in suspicion, but Tate kept the momentum going. “Want to try it with me?”

Josh considered a few more seconds. “Were the fishes big or little?”

“Little. The turtles were bigger, and they had flippers.”

Finally, Josh nodded his agreement. After checking in with Josh's mom, Tate helped him flip his mask down and position the mouthpiece. Then, holding hands, both ducked their faces under the water and floated. Under the water, Tate could see Josh's enthusiasm as colorful fish zoomed around below them, and when a small turtle went slowly by, Josh gestured and pointed excitedly.

When they surfaced, both Olivia and Josh's mom applauded, and Tate ruffled the boy's wet hair.

“Now,” he told Josh. “You can help your mom do it, and then when she says it's time to go back to shore, you make sure and do as she asks, right?”

Josh nodded, a grin on his small face.

“High five,” Tate said, holding out his hand.

“High five!” Josh yelled as he slapped Tate's much larger hand.



“Do you have nieces or nephews?” Olivia asked. Wrapping his arm around her waist to settle comfortably along her hip, Tate relished the feel of her sun-kissed skin beneath his palm. The ship had docked for the night, and they were walking along the beach adjacent to the beachside town.

“Nope,” he answered. “I'm an only child.”

“You were so good with that little boy, I wondered if you'd had practice.”

He laughed, his head tipped back before he turned to smile at her. “No. I do volunteer some with a search and rescue team—I guess it's given me some practice in dealing with kids when they're scared or upset and have gotten all

worked up.”

“That's amazing,” she said, looking at him admiringly. “*You're* amazing.”

He looked down at her and stopped walking, turning toward her and cradling her cheeks in his big palms.

“That's a sweet thing to say,” he told her. “Thank you.”

Then he kissed her, and when she kissed him back, he felt his heart melt. When they finally broke apart, he put his arm around her shoulders and turned them back the way they'd come. “We'd better get back, or we'll miss that dinner reservation.”

“Well, the good thing about you helping little Josh today is that if you do ever have kids, you know you can handle them.”

He cleared his throat awkwardly, and he hoped she'd think the redness he felt spreading across his cheeks would be mistaken for too much sun.

“I, uh, never thought about it, really.” He looked out at the sky that was fading from burnt orange to lavender as the sun set. “But you know, with a property as big as my family's, a few extra ranch hands wouldn't be such a bad idea.”

They both laughed before she glanced down at her wristwatch. “Oh!” she squeaked. “Our reservation is in five minutes.”

“That calls for drastic measures,” he said before bending down and hoisting her over his shoulder in a fireman's carry.

She screamed with laughter as he carried her at a jog down the beach, her head hanging over his back. The train had left the station, and he hoped Olivia would hold on for the ride.

## FIVE

It was past midnight when Tate heard movement in the kitchen. He'd been lying in bed for hours, trying—and failing—to fall asleep. His mind kept replaying their history. The moments on the ship, the feel of her in his arms, the way she'd seemed to shine light and joy on everything they'd done. He tossed, he turned, he ached. He remembered how, after everything they'd discovered together, Olivia had left the ship two days after the snorkeling lesson without a word of explanation. She hadn't told him she was going, hadn't even bothered to leave him a note.

They'd never gotten around to trading last names, they'd never talked about making plans for the future, but he'd thought they'd have time for that before the trip came to an end. Apparently, he'd been wrong. To all appearances, she'd walked off that ship, cutting her cruise short, and never looked back. He'd thought about trying to track her down—if for no other reason than to ask her *why*—but with nothing but a first name to go on and no contact information, he hadn't even known where to start. He'd finally had to put the memories aside and move on with his life, never admitting even to himself how much her abandonment had hurt him. After a lifetime of never quite feeling like he fit in with other people, he thought he'd finally found his person in her...but he'd been utterly wrong. In the five years since, he hadn't felt even the slightest urge to try again. He'd gotten used to the idea that he was simply meant to be on his own.

But he wasn't on his own now. His house was more occupied than it had been in years, and the proof of that came in the sound of the refrigerator door opening and closing. He headed out of his bedroom and into the kitchen.

“Hey,” he said as he stood in the dark, watching her rummage in the pantry.

“Oh!” She jumped and spun, her hand over her heart.

“Sorry,” he said, holding out his hands to indicate he was no threat.

She huffed out a laugh. “Oh, no, I'm sorry. I think it's everything that went on today. I'm just a little jumpy.”

He nodded, moving into the kitchen, making sure to maintain some distance between them. Her presence still did things to him, things he didn't want to acknowledge.

“Are the girls all right? Can I get you something?” he asked.

She gave him a tight smile. “They're sleeping like the dead.” She blinked. “I nodded off pretty fast myself—but then I kept waking up at every unfamiliar sound. I just can't seem to settle. Would it be okay if I made some tea?”

He nodded and pushed the button on the electric kettle his stepmother had gotten him for his birthday. “Take your pick,” he said as he opened the cupboard that held a decent selection of teas. He was partial to tea himself.

A few minutes later, he sat on one of the stools at the breakfast bar and watched as Olivia dipped her tea bag into the steaming hot water in her mug. Outside, the snow continued to fall, and a strong wind shook the trees.

“There's something we need to talk about,” she said suddenly, breaking him out of the strange, maudlin emotions that were cycling through him.

“Sure,” he said easily, although his stomach knotted with warning. Was she finally going to tell him why she'd left? He'd wanted an answer to that question for five years, but now he felt strangely nervous about hearing it.

She didn't suggest that they go into the living room, nor did she move to take the seat next to him at the breakfast bar, seeming to prefer to keep the big expanse of tiled countertop between them.

“The girls are going to be five in March,” she said, looking at him intently.

“So they'll start kindergarten in the fall?” he asked, unsure where this was going.

“Yeah.” Her voice was flat. “They were conceived in June.”

June...five years ago... It was as if the world stopped spinning for a moment, screeching to a halt as he stared at her pale face in the low light provided by the kitchen range hood.

He tried to take a breath, feeling as if he'd been kicked in the chest by a mule. His mouth opened, then shut again, and he tried to inhale.

“Breathe,” she said softly, and his breath came rushing back.

He coughed sharply before his lungs kicked back into action, then he stood, his heart racing. “I...don't know what to say,” he said. *Understatement of the year.* He shook his head at himself. What the hell? This wasn't some soap opera. Women you'd known for a few days didn't suddenly show up years later with fully formed children that were *yours* without you even knowing.

“Why am I just finding out about this now?” he demanded.

She raised an eyebrow at him. “How was I supposed to track you down, *Tate from Montana*? I still don't know your last name.”

He stared at her, incredulous. Then he realized he didn't know hers, either.

“Jesus,” he said, the agitation rising in him as he stumbled to his feet and began pacing around the kitchen.

She nodded. Taking a deep breath, her hands tightening on her mug of tea, she started talking, her voice soft and strained. “It all happened so fast. One minute, I was there with you, having the time of my life, making plans for what we'd do next. But then I went back to my cabin to change, and there were these porters waiting at my door. They told me that an urgent call had come into the captain's office and that he needed to see me right away. He was the one who broke the news that there had been a fatal accident. The driver of a semi-truck had passed out at the wheel and plowed right into my parents' car. They both died instantly.”

Tate inhaled sharply. “God, Olivia, I'm so sorry...” he murmured.

She managed a weak before returning her attention to her mug of tea as if it held all the secrets to the universe. “Honestly, everything was kind of a blur

after that. I was back on shore before I even realized it. I know I should have talked to you, should have let you know, but I was just so overwhelmed.”

“Of course you were,” he replied, wanting to reach out to her but not quite knowing how—or if his touch would be welcomed. “Anyone would be. I’m sure that a guy you’d only known for a handful of days was the last thing on your mind.”

“Not the last,” she argued. “Not at all. I thought about you a lot, actually. We shared something special.” She flushed. “At least, it was special to me.”

“To me, too,” he admitted. She smiled at that, still looking down into her mug.

“It was a few weeks before I realized just *how* special it had been. With everything that was going on, I didn’t figure out what the symptoms meant at first, but once I did…” At this, she finally looked up. “I tried to find you—honestly, I did. But the cruise ship company wouldn’t share any passenger information, and trying to find a specific rancher in all of Montana was like trying to find a specific kid in all of Disneyland. There were just too many results for me to be able to narrow it down.”

Meanwhile, Tate just sat there as his mind spun with the implications of it all. For years, he’d looked back on his time on the cruise with a feeling of bitterness that hardened more with each reiteration. She’d left him without a word. She clearly hadn’t cared for him even a fraction as much as he’d cared for her. Even the sweetness of the memories had gone sour, with him thinking that the connection he’d thought he’d felt had been just an illusion all along. But now, his perspective on everything had shifted. Rather than the woman who used him and dumped him, he saw someone even more incredible than he’d known. She’d held three lives together entirely by herself, with no family, no husband, no help.

“Can I tell you something?” she asked.

He nodded, his blood thrumming with panic. What else could she possibly have to tell him?

She finally stepped around the counter and walked toward where he’d been pacing between the kitchen and the dining table.

“I think this is fate.”

He raised an eyebrow in question.

“Me getting this job here. Jackie falling into that ravine. You getting the call to find us. I mean, how could it be anything other than the universe making sure you finally knew about the girls?”

How could this be fate? He had no idea how to be a father. It was an idea he'd barely even considered before. Romance had never worked out for him, so he'd resigned himself to the fact that he was simply meant to be on his own. And he'd been *fine* with that. Comfortable with it. This...was not comfortable. This was *terrifying*.

“They haven't asked about their dad much—”

Tate's throat felt tight at the use of the word *dad*.

“But whenever they did, I told them he owned a ranch and was a real live cowboy, but he didn't know they'd been born, and I didn't have a way to find him. They don't know how babies are made, so there's no judgment from them on that.” She laughed softly. “But I think they'll be really happy when they see I told them the truth. You fit the profile I painted so perfectly, they're going to feel like they've known you a lot longer.”

Would they? Or would he turn out to be a disappointment to them? Would they get frustrated and upset by the same things about him that had eroded so many attempts at relationships in the past? The way he never knew what to say. The way he was totally hopeless at picking up on cues. The way he could never manage to be easy and natural with affection, even when he badly wanted to reach out. Grown women hadn't been able to get past his cluelessness—how much worse would it be for little girls who needed and deserved unconditional love and support? How could he be their dad when he was so sure that he'd just let them down?

It was all too much.

He cleared his throat. “I'm sorry,” he said, taking a step back. His heels hit the stairs and he took a backwards step up. “I can't...” He ran his hand roughly through his hair, resisting the urge to yank on it to make sure he wasn't dreaming. He knew she deserved better than this, but he couldn't help



it. Panic was welling up inside him, and when it reached maximum capacity, it wasn't going to be pretty.

“I just need...” He swallowed hard, then gestured up toward his bedroom. Lobster rose from his bed in the corner of the living room and made his way to Tate's hip, showing that sixth sense dogs have when their humans are freaking the heck out.

She was still staring at him sadly when he fled up the stairs, shutting his door and locking it behind him as if the demons of hell might try to get in.

## SIX

The smoke alarm in the kitchen was shrill and relentless, as it should be.

Tate groaned as he rolled over and tried to get his bearings. Lobster began to howl from his oversized pillow on the floor at the foot of the bed.

Then Tate realized what the noise was and went into action, leaping out of bed clad only in his pajama pants. He threw open the door and was greeted with the sight of smoke curling its way lazily up the stairway.

He charged down the stairs where he was met with two four-year-olds chattering and bouncing around as Olivia fanned the air with a dish towel and stared up at the offending smoke alarm.

“There's the rescuer!” Jackie said, pointing.

Olivia's gaze flashed to his, and he saw the apology in her eyes.

“I'm so sorry we woke you,” she said. “I'm generally competent in the kitchen, but your toaster really hates me.”

Tate pulled a bar stool with him into the kitchen and stood on the lower rung to reach up and press the reset button on the smoke alarm. The high-pitched beeping stopped, and everyone in the room let out a relieved sigh. Lobster stopped howling in the bedroom and came ambling down the stairs. The girls saw the dog and ran to hug him, crawling on the floor while he lolled on his back, eating up the tummy rubs.

“That toaster hates everyone,” Tate mumbled as he pulled the cord from the

outlet and picked up the offending item. “I should have gotten rid of it ages ago...” He walked to a closet and shoved the toaster inside.

Olivia stared at him as he walked back into the kitchen. He saw her gaze slide to his bare chest for a brief moment, and heat washed over him. But when she looked at him again, she had a polite mask back in place. Before he could decide how that made him feel, an enormous crash sounded. Both adults jerked in unison, their heads swinging toward the noise. Jackie stood, red-faced, eyes wide, staring at what remained of Tate's large glass award from the Northern Montana Ranchers' Association.

Melissa shook her head. “I told her not to touch it,” she said sternly.

Jackie burst into tears, and Olivia strode over, scooping her up and rocking her slowly as she whispered in her ear. Tate snapped his jaw closed as he stared down at what was left of his award glittering in the overhead light. In that moment, he felt as though his life was in as many pieces but without the sparkle. Forcibly unclenching his jaw, he started for the laundry room to get the broom and dustpan.

“No!” Olivia's voice was sharp. He turned in time to see Melissa scowling as Olivia navigated around the shards of glass to pick her up as well. “Your feet are bare, baby—you'll cut yourself all up.”

Shit. Tate watched as Olivia balanced a kid on either hip. They were too big for her to carry like that, but it hadn't occurred to him to help. He hadn't even thought of the fact that they were in the midst of all that glass with bare feet.

He snorted softly. Some damn father he'd be.

“I'm going to get them dressed, then we'll clean up the mess,” Olivia said as she made her way to the stairs.

“Don't worry about it. I'll get it.”

“We made the mess, we can clean it up. We'll all work on it, won't we, girls?” The two little brunette heads nodded in unison as they trained their big brown eyes on him.

“It's fine,” he reassured them, simply wanting to sweep the offending pieces up and be done with it. “It'll be a lot faster and easier if I just take care of it

myself. That's how most things work in life. Too many cooks in the kitchen, and all that.”

“That's not what Mommy says,” Jackie admonished.

“Yeah,” Melissa added with a solemn look. “We're always better together. And Mommy, Jackie, and me are a team.”

“The Thwee Musketeers!” Jackie shouted.

Olivia shook her head sadly and carried them upstairs.

Tate was left with a big mess all around his feet—and the sinking feeling that he'd made an even bigger one with the three people staying under his roof.



Twenty minutes later, Olivia made her way back downstairs, planning on making some breakfast for the girls. When she arrived, however, Tate had already taken charge of breakfast as well as cleanup. The smell of bacon wafted through the open floorplan cabin, and she could see pancakes on the stovetop. The broken glass was nowhere to be seen.

Guilt twisted her stomach. It seemed like charging in and making a mess was all they'd done to Tate since they'd arrived. The smoke alarm, the shattered award...and the way she'd shaken up his life telling him the twins were his. She remembered how blown away she'd been by those two lines on the pregnancy test. At least she'd had the luxury of time to process the news—to be stunned and anxious and excited before she actually had real live babies in her arms needing her attention and care.

Olivia sighed and knelt to pet Lobster, lurking with a look in his eyes that said, *Pay attention to me, why don't you?*

“Can I have a turn putting the batter in the pan?” Melissa's voice came from the kitchen.

Olivia whirled, expecting to see chaos breaking out again. Instead, she was met with the sight of both girls seated on the high kitchen stools, one on each side of Tate. He was in front of the stovetop, a spatula in hand as he flipped

pancakes.

“Yes, you get the next turn, and if you want, I'll show you how to make the Mickey Mouse pancakes.”

“Yesss!” Jackie bounced up and down on her stool.

“But only if you remember not to bounce.” He nudged Jackie, who immediately stilled. “Why can't you bounce?” he asked casually as he handed the ladle to Melissa, who very deliberately dipped up batter and poured it on the griddle where he indicated. “Then another small circle right there,” he told her before turning his attention back to Jackie.

“Because the stove's hot and it's dange'rus,” Jackie told him.

He smiled at her. “That's right...and then one more circle on the other side.” Melissa did as instructed, then a grin broke out across her face. “Do you see it?” he asked both girls.

“There's the ears and there's his face!” Jackie exclaimed.

“And when it's cooked, we can use some chocolate chips and whipped cream to make the eyes and mouth.”

Olivia couldn't control the grin that spread over her face. She walked to the kitchen. “So that's some pretty fancy breakfast you're cooking,” she said as she entered the room.

The three cooks looked up at her in unison. As each blinked at her, heads cocked, she saw it—the resemblance. Feature for feature, the girls looked more like her, but the mannerisms? They were all Tate.

It took her breath away for a moment.

“Mommy,” Jackie crowed, “we're making Mickey Mouse 'cakes, and if you're a good girl, you can have one.”

Tate chuckled as Melissa shook her head and rolled her eyes.

“Yeah, Mom,” Tate added. “If you're good, we'll let you have one.”

“Mommy doesn't have to be good,” Melissa chastised. “You guys are silly.”

“We are,” Tate agreed softly. “The whole world is really silly today.”

Olivia could only agree silently. So much silliness. Who knew where it would end? But this, here, with all of them together making breakfast and teasing each other like a real family—it felt good. She only hoped it would last.

## SEVEN

Tate settled in at the desk in his bedroom. He'd left Olivia and the girls to kitchen cleanup after Olivia had insisted. Alone with the door closed, he opened the laptop and took a deep breath before pulling up his parents' Skype ID.

"Here goes nothing," he muttered to himself before clicking the call button.

"Hey, son," his dad said as the screen opened. Thomas, wearing his favorite Denver Broncos sweatshirt, lifted a cup of coffee in a toast.

"Hey, Dad. That your first cup?" Tate asked. His father wasn't supposed to overdo the caffeine, but Tate knew the old man cheated.

"Second," Thomas answered. "Last one, I promise."

Tate gave him a wry smile. "Sure."

"Huh," Thomas grunted, taking a sip of the coffee.

"You were always a good dad," Tate told him, suddenly overcome with emotion. "I didn't tell you that enough."

Thomas grunted again, but as the coffee cup lowered, Tate could see the question in his eyes. "I have something to tell you," he said.

"Okay. Whatever it is, we'll get through it, son. You know that."

Tate nodded. "You might want to get Lucy for this one."

Thomas called for his better half, and a few seconds later, her cheerful face and head of silver-streaked curly hair appeared.

“Tate has something he wants to tell us,” Thomas announced.

Lucy's gaze flew between Tate and Thomas. “Of course.” Her smile faded into worry.

“You remember that cruise you sent me on a few years ago?” he began. When they nodded, he said, “What I never told you was that I...I met someone.”

“A girl?” Lucy asked. “Did it end badly? Is that why you seemed so gloomy when you came back—and why you haven't dated since? Honey, I know it's tough when a relationship doesn't go the way you hope it will, but that's no reason to give up on romance altogether—”

Thomas laid a gentle hand on her arm. “Sweetheart, let him finish.”

She flushed. “Right, you're right.” She turned back to Tate. “Sorry, honey. I'm listening.” She set her shoulders, clearly giving her all to sitting quietly and hearing him out. Tate felt a familiar rush of affection toward her. She could be a lot at times, but her commitment to the people she cared about was extraordinary. And now he was about to add some more names to that list.

“I did meet a girl, yes. Olivia. I...I *thought* things had ended badly because she left abruptly before the cruise was over. She didn't even tell me she was going. But I saw her again yesterday—she was the one I was called out to rescue.”

Lucy clapped a hand over her mouth in an expression he thought was partly surprise and partly to keep herself from blurting out a dozen questions. Thomas chuckled a little and wrapped an arm around her waist in a sideways hug.

“And were the two of you able to patch things up?” Thomas asked. “Is that what you wanted to tell us?”

Tate fought the urge to squirm as he tried to think of how exactly to say this. “Not...exactly. It turned out she had some pretty big news for me. You see, when she left the cruise, it was because of a family emergency. She was too



rattled to come say goodbye...or ask for my contact information. So she had no way of reaching me a few weeks later, when she found out..."

Tate watched as his father and stepmother's eyes went wide, and he knew they were already putting the pieces together. "When she found out she was pregnant," he concluded.

Thomas cleared his throat, his eyes looking a little watery. "Son, are you saying I have a grandchild?"

Tate managed a weak chuckle. "I'm saying you have two. Jackie and Melissa—twin girls."

"Twin girls," Thomas repeated, in the same tone one might use to say, "the biggest diamond in the world." He sounded thrilled, awed, amazed.

"When can we meet them?" Lucy demanded. "Oh, Thomas, we need to go to the little toy store in town and get them something." She turned back to Tate. "Do you think they like ponies? All girls like ponies, right? And Olivia. What's she like? What does she do? Where does she live? Is she just in the area visiting? How long will she be staying? Can we meet them today? Oh, I'd love to meet them today!"

Tate looked at his dad, silently begging for assistance.

Thomas wrapped an arm around his wife. "We can't do anything until this storm moves through. We all need to stay safe and warm. We can worry about all that a few days from now."

"But..." Lucy said, crestfallen, before giving a resigned sigh. "No, you're right." She managed a little smile. "I'll use the time to make a list. After all, I've got granddaughters to spoil now. This is going to take some planning."

"And you have at least two days to do that, sweetheart. In the meantime, I think Tate and Olivia and the girls need some time to catch their breath."

Tate nodded, relieved his father at least understood. "We haven't told the girls yet. I mean Olivia hasn't...or..." He dug a hand into his hair. "I don't really know how that's supposed to work."

Thomas chuckled softly. "You'll get used to that feeling," he counseled. "You

won't know how anything's supposed to work from here on out, so just take it one day at a time, and trust their mama. She's been at it longer than you.”

That was true enough. And it was obvious to him that Olivia had done an amazing job as a single mom. The girls were beautiful and smart, spunky and confident. “She's a great mom,” he agreed. “And the girls are amazing. I'm, uh...I'm excited for you to meet them.”

“You take some time and get to know your girls,” Thomas told Tate. “We'll be here, making our own adjustments. When you're ready for us to come and meet them, just let us know.”

Tate cleared his throat. “Thanks, Dad.”

“And son?”

Tate nodded.

“You're a damn fine man. You'll make a damn fine father, too.”

Tate disconnected the call and sat back, watching the snow fall outside. The wind had died down, and it was peaceful now, big flakes drifting softly to the ground.

*A father*, he thought, his heart racing at the words. He wondered if at some point in the future, that word would actually feel like it described him. At the moment, no matter what the DNA said, he wasn't truly a father. Fathers knew what size shoes their kids wore, when their dance recitals were, how much allowance they should be getting. Fathers could handle any problem that arose and answer any question a kid might have.

No, Tate wasn't like any father he'd ever known. He wasn't sure he was even capable of being the father the girls deserved, but he figured he had to at least try. A whole lot of people were relying on him to do something he didn't feel remotely equipped for. He'd give it his best shot—for Olivia's sake, for the twins' sake, and for his parents' sake, too. He just wished he could believe he'd actually succeed.



How had he considered even for a moment that “spunky” was a good thing in a child? Tate wanted a take-back on that one. Jackie's ankle appeared to be healing at a remarkable rate. Fast enough that she was now preparing to rappel off the banister from the second floor.

“Jacqueline Marie!” Olivia snapped.

“But, Mommy,” Jackie intoned, one leg slung over the banister in preparation. “We're playing lost in the ravine. We're going to climb up and down just like Tate did on the rescue!”

Melissa slid the box of Christmas decorations across the living room floor and placed them under the rope that dangled from the banister on the open landing, as if intending to cushion her sister's descent with the box full of breakables. Tate briefly wondered where the hell they'd found the rope but decided it didn't matter. What did matter was finding them something productive—and *non-destructive*—to do before they tore his house apart.

“You know what's in that box?” he asked casually as he walked over to Melissa. He'd noticed that she was quieter, more thoughtful than Jackie. While Jackie reminded him of Olivia, he suspected Melissa had inherited some of the McConnell quietness.

“What?” Melissa asked as she lifted her somber eyes to look at him.

“Christmas decorations. My stepmother sent them over.”

He noticed Jackie go still above them and stifled a smile at her obvious interest.

He squatted down and opened the flaps on the box top.

“Ooh,” Jackie crooned from her perch above. “Look at all that tinsel!”

“Tinsel,” Olivia corrected.

Melissa didn't say anything, but she knelt on the floor and began looking at the decorations one by one. The box contained a creche, tinsel, glass balls of all sizes and colors to hang on the tree, several wall hangings, and even a stocking for Lobster.

“Mommy,” Melissa said, her eyes shining. “Look at all the pretty Christmas

things.”

“They're very pretty, hon.” Olivia's smile had a wry twist that made Tate want to burst out laughing. “Which is why we can't use that box to jump on.”

Melissa looked up at her sister and shook her head. Jackie took her leg off the banister and made her way downstairs—the normal way.

“You know,” Tate said as he stood and carried the box over to an empty corner of the living room. “I haven't done a very good job decorating so far, have I?”

The twins shook their heads in unison.

“We haven't decorated for Christmas either,” Jackie complained.

Olivia soothed, “I told you we will, just as soon as we get into the new house.”

“Maybe you guys could help me decorate while you're waiting for your new house?”

Jackie shrieked and jumped up and down. Melissa rocketed to her feet, ran to Olivia, and grabbed her hand with a pleading look.

Olivia smiled, and Tate's heart flipped right over in his chest, like a pancake getting flipped on a griddle.

“As long as you're very careful with Tate's things and he's sure it's okay.”

He met her gaze. “It's more than okay. Maybe we can send a few pictures to Lucy—my stepmother—after it's done.” Including the girls in the photo might even hold Lucy off for another day or two, Tate thought.

“Yay!” Jackie crowed. “We're gonna do Christmas. We're gonna do Christmas!”

“Well,” Tate said, walking toward the back door, “First thing we're gonna do is get a tree.”



“So you can come shop down a tree anytime you want?” Jackie asked as she rode piggyback on Tate while Melissa held tight to one of his belt loops to keep her balance in the deep snow. Lobster ran along, snuffling in the frozen fluff, then bounding through the drifts. The weather had cleared enough for it to be safe for them to go out, but Olivia could help shooting suspicious looks at the sky, waiting to see if more storm clouds were about to roll in.

“Chop. And yep. I don't do it very often, but all these trees are in my yard so I get to chop them down if I want.”

Olivia brought up the rear of the little parade, and all she could do was marvel at how natural he was with the girls.

“What do you think about this one?” he asked.

Melissa thought it was too short. Jackie thought the next one was too skinny. Five trees later, Olivia made an executive decision, and Tate took his ax and began chopping.

Becoming bored as the chopping went on, the girls began making snow angels, alternating with throwing snowballs at one another. Olivia tried to avoid looking too closely at Tate's arm muscles as he swung the ax and chipped away at the spruce. Even as cold as the air was, he'd stripped to a t-shirt while he worked, and Olivia could attest that it was a very good idea indeed. She remembered the feel of those biceps beneath her fingertips as they lay in his bed on the gently rocking ship. She remembered the way he smelled—like citrus and ocean breezes. And she remembered the way he kissed—like he had all the time in the world and was willing to spend it on her.

She sighed as he took one last swing and the tree toppled over into the deep, fluffy snow. She didn't want the man to freeze to death, but it was a real shame to see him put his flannel shirt and parka back on.

On the way back, the girls chattered nonstop about their plans for the tree. They'd agreed to divide it in half, and each would get her own side to decorate the way she wanted. Tate's naturally taciturn nature worked well with the twins. They talked, he listened and offered the occasional murmur, and soon they were all back in the warm cabin.

As the girls settled down to their work, Olivia got out the ingredients to make hot chocolate.

“You know,” Tate said as he walked into the kitchen and rested his nicely formed ass against the counter opposite her, “with all the, uh, news last night, I barely got a chance to tell you how sorry I am about your parents.”

She turned the stove down to simmer and faced him. “Thank you. I appreciate that.”

“I can't imagine what you went through.” His expression was so warm and gentle, it took her back to sitting on a beach, watching a sunset with him. “I wish I'd been able to come with you. To help.”

“I know. In retrospect, I should have gone and gotten you. And I don't mean because of...” She waved her hand toward the living room where Lobster, his big tongue lolling out of his mouth, was watching the girls decorate. “Later on, after I'd gotten over the shock, I realized that even though we'd never exchanged last names, you would have helped me.” She looked down, swallowing hard. “We had that kind of connection, didn't we?”

He followed her gaze, staring at their hands as if he'd forgotten he was holding hers. When he spoke, his voice was gruff. “We did. After you left, I just couldn't understand how you'd been able to up and leave without a word. It felt like we knew one another so much better than that.”

Her heart raced at his soft smile. He was like a big bear—strong, warm, and a little gruff. It wasn't hard to see why she'd felt the way she did about him on that ship. He was kind of irresistible.

“Mr. Tate!” Jackie yelled from the living room. “We need your help!”

Olivia smiled as he dropped her hand. “I'll bring the hot chocolate,” she told him before he turned away to obediently make his way to the Christmas tree.

A few minutes later, Tate reached up and set the big gold star on top of the tree. Both girls jumped up and down with excitement.

“He's so tall,” Jackie said.

Olivia tried not smile. Yes, he was very tall. There was certainly something

about a tall man.

“Now we need the tinsel all over the ceiling,” Melissa ordered.

“The ceiling?” Tate looked at her skeptically.

“Like when it's droopy,” Melissa insisted.

Tate picked up some ropes of tinsel, then looked at the ceiling, obviously unsure.

“I think they mean draped.” Olivia reached over and demonstrated. “But not from the ceiling, you two. How about along the fireplace mantle and over the windows and doors?”

Once that was agreed to, Tate got to work swagging ropes of tinsel all over the place. He was so patient and gentle with the girls, but also really good at reeling them in when necessary. Or distracting them—every parent's favorite trick, and one he seemed to know how to do innately.

The girls had found the perfect spot for Lobster's stocking, and the dog seemed to realize it belonged to him as he sniffed it and lay down directly underneath.

Finally, they reached the bottom of the box. Both girls were whispering and giggling when Olivia went to the kitchen to refill everyone's hot chocolate mugs. As she returned, Tate had put the last tack into a cluster of fake mistletoe that he'd hung over the bottom of the staircase.

“Done?” Olivia asked, handing out mugs to both girls and Tate.

“There's nothing left,” Melissa said sadly as she looked into the empty box.

“Well,” Tate said, surveying the room. “It looks pretty darn Christmassy in here.”

Lobster hopped up and barked to emphasize the point, and both girls bounced and clapped.

Then they began whispering again.

Tate looked at Olivia. “Should I be worried?”

“Definitely,” she answered.

It was Jackie who made the play, with Melissa standing behind her, coaching.

“Mommy?” Jackie said with such innocence, Olivia knew that whatever she wanted was going to be something completely inappropriate.

“Ye-es?” She eyed Tate, who didn't seem to have a clue that something was up.

Jackie giggled and pointed at the newly hung mistletoe. “You and Mr. Tate should kiss like they do in the movies.”

“What?” Tate jerked and turned to see what Jackie was pointing to.

Olivia felt the heat rush to her cheeks. “Honey, you can't make people—”

“But it's the rules.” Melissa finally stepped out from behind her sister. “They always do on TV.”

Olivia looked at Tate, unsure what to do. He scratched his head awkwardly.

“Kiss! Kiss! Kiss!” Both girls began chanting in unison, hopping up and down in excitement. Lobster chimed in with a few howls.

Olivia sighed.

Tate cleared his throat and then raised his voice to be heard over the ruckus. “I think we might have to.”

“I'm guess I'm game if you are,” she answered before stepping closer to him.

He cupped both of her elbows in his big hands and looked down at her. Her heartbeat kicked up. His eyes were so beautiful. Like two pieces of amber. Thick dark lashes; strong, straight nose. She couldn't help the tiny breath that escaped her lips.

“It won't be too bad,” he told her with a wry smile. “After all, it's how we got them in the first place.”

Then he bent and pressed his lips to hers.

It was the briefest moment in time, a few seconds at most. But in that tiny



touch, Olivia felt everything. The joy she'd found when they met, the sorrow she felt when she lost him, the days and nights of yearning since. His lips were warm and soft, his scent like pine and snow and chocolate. She felt his hands tighten around her arms as he pulled away, and then they simply gazed at one another, millions of unsaid words sitting in the breath of space between them. *I'm sorry. I missed you. I'm glad we found each other again.*

And then he was gone, stepping back, calling to Lobster that it was time to take a trip outside. Olivia blinked, and it was over, but she knew it wouldn't be leaving her heart—ever.

## EIGHT

*F*ive years earlier

Olivia woke with Tate's lips in lovely places. She squirmed and giggled as he made his way to her mouth.

“Good morning,” she whispered.

“Good morning, yourself.” He gazed at her for a moment. “You got a little sun on your nose yesterday.”

She rubbed at it. “We shouldn't have sat by the pool for so long, but it was so nice out there, I couldn't resist.”

He moved on top of her, settling himself between her thighs. “Plus there was the whole bar service at our poolside loungers thing,” he added.

She smiled, relishing the weight and heat of him. His arms held part of his weight as he caged her in on the bed, biceps firm and round.

“You know,” she said as he put his magical lips to work again, this time on her neck, “I can't even remember what my cabin looks like, I haven't been there in so long.”

“Maybe you should just move in here,” he answered, giving her a quick peck on the lips.

“Too bad I didn't know I'd meet you; I could have saved on cabin fare and been in here with you from the start.” She ran her hands up and down his bare

back. It was firm with muscle and covered in silky smooth skin. She arched into him, loving the way he was so much bigger than she was, so solid, so masculine.

“Well,” he whispered. “Maybe we can plan another vacation together after this one is over. Then we can double up all we want.”

She stared up at him for a moment, wondering if he was serious. “Really?” she asked, probably sounding far too hopeful.

He grinned. “It's a cost-saving measure. We can take twice as many trips because they'd cost half as much.” Then he winked at her, and she knew she was in trouble. So she kissed him as if it was the last thing she'd ever do. She couldn't think of a better way to go.



Thirty minutes later, Olivia stood dripping from the shower, looking at the wrinkled sundress she'd worn the night before.

“I am going to have to go back to my cabin,” she told Tate as he pulled on a pair of board shorts. “This reeks of sunscreen and sweat, and I can't go to breakfast in my bikini.”

“That's a damn shame,” he told her. “You'd be doing the males on board a real service if you did.”

She rolled her eyes and grimaced as she pulled the sundress on. “I'm going to go change, then I'll meet you in the restaurant, how's that?”

“Afterwards, let's go get the rest of your things and bring them here. There's no point in you going back and forth constantly for the remainder of the cruise.” He paused. “I mean, if you're okay with that?”

She threw her arms around his neck and kissed him. “Very okay with it.”

As she walked back to her cabin, she thought again about what he'd said. Taking vacations together. She smiled and did a little skip as she walked through the corridor. He might want to see her again. And she definitely wanted to see him again. This was turning out to be the best vacation she'd

ever had.

As she approached her cabin, Olivia saw two ship's porters knocking on her door.

“Excuse me?” she said as she approached. “That's my cabin, but you don't need to clean it, I haven't been there for a couple of days.”

They both turned to look at her.

“Ms. Olivia Wickham?” the older one asked.

“Yes. That's me.”

“Ma'am, we have an urgent message for you to come to the captain's office.”

She wrinkled her brow in confusion. “What do you mean?”

“There's been a ship-to-shore call for you. It's a family emergency. If you'll come to the captain's office, you'll be able to return the call.”

Olivia's heart raced. A family emergency? But what could possibly be wrong? Her parents were in perfect health, and her grandparents had all passed away years ago.

“Who was the call from?” she asked as the porters closed her cabin door again and led her down the hall.

“A gentleman named Jeffrey Coldwell, ma'am.”

Her father's best friend. Olivia's heart froze in her chest.

“Did he say what was wrong?”

“Just that there had been an accident, ma'am. And that you need to call him right away.”



Forty minutes later, Olivia was an orphan. No, that wasn't right—she'd been an orphan for nearly a day. She'd just found out about it forty minutes ago. And who knew how long it would be before the truth really set in? At the

moment, she felt shocked and numb as the small motorboat took her toward the shore, five long miles away. From port, she would take a taxi to the airport and then fly home to Spokane, where preparations were already underway for her parents' funerals.

She looked at the receding ship behind them, still in shock and unable to do much except follow directions. The captain and Uncle Jeff had made all the arrangements. Olivia had simply stuffed her belongings in a bag and gotten on the transport boat.

But suddenly, it hit her. The realization that in the midst of the nightmare, she'd forgotten one very important thing—Tate. What she wouldn't give to have him by her side, his strong arms wrapped around her. But she'd left him behind, hadn't even said goodbye. For a second, she wanted to tell the sailors to turn the boat around, but she doubted they'd listen to her, even if she tried. She had a plane to catch, places to be, and she'd missed her chance.

She'd just have to get in touch with him later, when her head finally cleared and the world made sense again. She'd get to that point eventually...or so she hoped.

## NINE

Tate smiled at Olivia as she came downstairs.

“So they actually sleep in the daytime?” he asked.

She laughed, and it was as if a ray of sunshine had darted into the room.

“They don't nap every day anymore, but it's been a long couple of days. I think they're exhausted.”

“Can I get you anything?” he asked.

“Adult conversation?”

He smiled and waved her over to the sofa. She took one end and he took the other.

“So.” He studied her, marveling at how beautiful she was. It was as though his memory had become a faded photograph. The real thing was so much more vibrant. “Why don't you tell me more about the pregnancy and...I don't know...everything.”

She opened her mouth a couple of times as if she was going to begin talking, then closed it again.

“Maybe just start at the beginning?” he suggested softly.

“Okay. So, the first few weeks after my parents' funerals, I was mostly in a fog. Paperwork and lawyers, insurance claims and bankers—it seemed like it would never stop. I was so lucky my job let me have an entire month to deal

with it.”

He felt a knot form in his center, unaccountably guilty at the idea that he hadn't been there to help her through it.

“I didn't understand it at the time, but I was really lucky my parents had life insurance and had left me a house that was paid for.” She gave him a wry smile. “I realized how much I was going to need those things a few weeks later when I discovered I was pregnant.”

“And what happened when you found out it was twins?”

She gave a brief burst of laughter. “I won't lie. I cried harder than at my parents' funeral. It was...” She paused. “Terrifying. I couldn't even imagine how I was supposed to do it.”

Then she got a furrow between her brows, and Tate had to control the urge to reach over and smooth it away with his fingers. He hated that she'd had to go through all that. But mostly, he was blown away by how well she seemed to have handled it.

She wiped at her eyes and sniffled. “I've never told anyone this before, but you're their father, so it seems like you should know the whole truth.”

He nodded and finally did reach out and touch her, taking her hand in his. He felt suddenly like he was part of a team, part of something bigger than himself. It was the first time he'd felt that way since they'd been on that ship together, enjoying new adventures by day, discovering each other by night.

“The first few weeks after I found out...I considered giving them up for adoption.”

His heart thumped twice, once for each child. He rubbed painfully at his chest, but he understood. How could he not?

“I talked to some agencies, and I looked at all the options.”

“But...” he interjected, because there must have been a big *but*.

“But as time went by and I adjusted to being pregnant, I also talked to people, like my parents' friends and my boss. They all had advice and ideas for how I could manage it. I was entitled to twelve weeks' maternity leave, and the life

insurance covered my expenses and then some. My father's best friend who'd called me on the ship made sure everything in the house was in good shape so I wouldn't have any unexpected issues. One of my mom's friends paid for a night nurse to help with the babies for the first four weeks.”

Tate tried to take measured breaths, remembering that this was all in the past. Everything had worked out. Olivia was fine. The girls were fine. They hadn't needed him, really. They'd shown they were fine without him. If he'd been there, fumbling around and getting in the way, he might have even made things worse.

“So over those months of pregnancy, I went from being scared, and lonely, and doubting myself most of the time, to being at least somewhat confident I could manage it. It wasn't the way I'd always imagined becoming a mother, but it wasn't something that felt impossible, either.”

“You imagined it?” he asked, baffled. He'd never pictured himself as a father. It just hadn't seemed like something that was in the cards for him.

She smiled softly. “Sure, plenty of times over the years. But there was lots of stuff that was supposed to happen first.”

“Like what?”

“Meeting the perfect guy, falling in love, making a commitment, building a home together.” Her smile turned wry. “*Then* becoming a mother, once everything else was in place. Instead, I met the perfect guy and just...skipped all the rest.”

“Me?” His throat clicked dryly. “I'm not perfect. Far from it.”

She just sighed, looking a little sad. “I wasn't expecting literal perfection. I just had some hopes that you might turn out to be perfect for me...But we didn't really get the chance to find out, did we?”

She'd seemed perfect to him, he had to admit. But that was vacation life, not reality. Even if her parents' accident hadn't happened and they'd had more time together, he wasn't brimming with confidence that they could have made things work. That wasn't how romance tended to go for him.

“Still,” she added. “At least we have now. It's hard to believe it all worked



out like this. It's almost enough to make me believe in fate. I mean, the odds of me ending up with a job here in the same town you've lived in your whole life, along with getting stuck a few miles from your house when you're with the local search and rescue...It's obvious fate had some other ideas for us.”

Tate swallowed, his throat feeling thick, his lungs constricted. Fate had also taken her from that ship—and from him—that morning. Fate had taken his mother when he still needed her, and had almost taken his father a few years back. Fate seemed to realize that he wasn't the right kind of guy to be a family man. Otherwise, the powers that be wouldn't keep taking away the few people he cared for most.

“I'm not sure I believe in fate,” he told her. “Granted, the odds were slim, but sometimes weird stuff just happens.”

Her brow furrowed again, and he decided the tactic he'd found that worked best with the girls might work with Olivia as well.

“Tell me more about the job and where you'll be living,” he said.

She shifted on the sofa, and he wasn't sure whether he'd actually distracted her or if she was just humoring him, but either way, she let him get away with the subject change.

“As I mentioned, I'll be the new executive director of Dreams for Disabilities. I spent the last few years working for its sister organization in Spokane. I've been working toward a promotion to director for the last two years, so when I saw this position open up, I thought it was time to test the waters. How about you? Tell me more about your work,” she prompted.

“Well, my dad had a heart attack a year after the cruise, so I took over the operation.”

Her face transformed into a look of concern. “Is he doing okay?”

He remembered the sight of his dad lying in the hospital bed, pale as a ghost, tubes and sensors attached to what seemed like every inch of his body. He nodded and tried to smile in reassurance. “He is. He has to take things a little slower and avoid stress, but he's doing really well, and my stepmother takes good care of him. I told them, by the way—about the girls.”

Her eyes widened. “How did they take it?”

“About like I'd expected. They're shocked and thrilled all at once. If you ever wished the girls had grandparents, your wishes have come true. If it weren't for the weather, I think my stepmother would already be pounding down the door with armloads of gifts to spoil the girls. As it is, they've agreed to give us a few days to adjust—and for the storm front to clear—before they start asking to visit.”

She laughed softly. “It's going to be a lot for the girls to take in, but they're so young, I really think it'll work out fine, and God knows they won't be averse to having new people to fuss over them.”

Olivia looked him in the eyes then, her voice soft but intense. “So what happens next? I mean, how are we going to handle all of this? There are so many things to consider. How we tell them, what kind of time you want to spend with them going forward—”

Before she could finish, which also meant before Tate could give in to a total panic attack, a little voice floated down from the top of the stairs.

“The snow stopped, Mommy! And there's someone coming to the house!”

## TEN

The sound of an ATV's engine had interrupted the girls' nap. Tate stood and walked to the front door, Lobster close on his heels. He swung it open in time to see Vince and Marjory Andrews drive up on matching ATVs.

They came to a stop in front of the porch as Tate shut the door behind himself and Lobster ran to greet them.

“Hey, buddy!” Vince said as the dog wiggled all over to greet him. He scratched Lobster behind the ears before climbing off his ATV.

“I hope it's not something bad bringing you by,” Tate said, walking down the porch steps. He was friendly with the rescue team chief and his wife, but not really “swing by in the middle of a storm system just to say hi” friendly. “Do we have another rescue?”

Marjory grabbed Tate's shoulders and gave him a kiss on one cheek. Her grandmotherly air made him feel like he ought to brush his hair and say “yes, ma'am” a lot.

The Andrews were retired from the local school district. He'd taught shop, and she'd been the high school secretary. Tate couldn't actually remember a time when he hadn't known them. But it wasn't until he'd joined the search and rescue team in his twenties that he'd gotten to know them as an adult. They were good people and had honed the team into one of the best volunteer rescue groups this side of the Rockies.

“How you doin'?” Vince asked as he came over and shook Tate's hand.

“Good. Everyone here's just fine.” Why *had* they come?

Vince's voice lowered as he leaned in toward Tate. “She's concerned about your houseguests. Was worried they might not feel comfortable staying with a strange man, and all.”

Tate's brow furrowed. “Is that why you came all the way out here? You could have called and asked to talk to Olivia.”

Vince grinned. “Naw. We have a deer caught in a snow slide over near the lodge. I was hoping you could come with me to yank her out.”

“Yeah, sure,” Tate said. “Olivia and the girls will be fine here for a bit.”

“Good. Let's go on in and let everyone know.”

Tate followed the older man up the stairs to the porch. He felt relieved to have an excuse to get away from the house—and then guilty for being relieved. It wasn't that he didn't like being around Olivia and the kids, but he spent every second worried that he was going to mess something up. Even if everyone went out to the woods together, at least they'd have an activity to keep them occupied, and other people around to keep an eye on the twins so the responsibility wouldn't feel so heavy on him.

Frankly, compared to fatherhood, wrestling a frightened deer out of a couple of feet of snow sounded easy.



Olivia smiled as she rode on the back of Tate's ATV. Each of the Andrews had taken a twin behind them on their ATVs, and Lobster had been left at the cabin because no one wanted him to frighten the already distressed deer.

When the guys had said where they were going, Olivia's heart had leaped at the possibility of getting out of the cabin. While she'd enjoyed the chance to talk to Tate, and telling him about the girls had been a relief of sorts, she needed a break from the intensity of being locked up in the cabin with the man she thought she'd never see again. She needed a chance to get out and take a breath. Luckily, Marjory had seemed to intuit Olivia's needs and informed the men that everyone was going to come along to rescue the deer.

Marjory was a cheerful, caring woman who reminded Olivia a bit of her late mother. She'd come bustling into the cabin upon arrival, asking after the girls, checking out Jackie's ankle, and taking Olivia aside to make sure she was comfortable with Tate as a host. She'd started to give a full testimonial about how long she'd known Tate and how trustworthy he was, but once Olivia explained that they'd actually known each other from years ago, Marjory had seemed to relax.

Now, Vince slowed his ATV down and pulled over under a grove of trees. Up ahead, Olivia could see where a big slab of snow had slid off the edge of the trail they were following.

“That'll be where she is,” Vince said as the rest pulled to a stop. Olivia couldn't help noticing the way Tate's arm muscles flexed beneath her hands as she climbed off the ATV.

“All us girls will just stay here unless you need more help,” Marjory said. Vince and Tate agreed and walked off to the site of the snow slide to assess the deer's situation.

“Mommy, can we make a snowman?” Jackie asked.

“Of course, hon, just stay where I can see you,” Olivia answered.

Marjory smiled as the girls headed a few feet away, and then she opened a thermos she'd pulled from the case on the back of her ATV. Next, she pulled out two tin mugs and poured steaming, dark liquid into each one.

“Here you go,” she said, handing one to Olivia.

Olivia smiled as she lifted her cup to let the steam rise to her nose. “Oh!” She jerked in surprise.

Marjory laughed. “Yes, it's coffee with a kick. That whiskey will warm your toes, and you're not driving.” She winked as she took a sip of her own Irish coffee. “So you say you and Tate met on a cruise a few years back?” she asked.

“Yes,” Olivia answered, wondering just how much of their past to reveal. She didn't want to step on Tate's toes by oversharing with people he worked with, but she also knew that eventually, in such a small town, everyone would find

out that the twins were his. She decided to stick to the simplest version of the truth. “We met the first day and then hung out, did some shore activities together, had dinner most nights. But we didn't stay in touch afterward because I had to leave the cruise very suddenly due to a family emergency.”

Marjory watched the girls playing as she murmured, “Mm-hmm.” Jackie tossed a handful of snow at Melissa, who stood, serious expression on her face as she appraised the rudimentary snowman they'd made so far.

“How many years ago did you say this was?” Marjory asked.

“Five.” Olivia buried the answer in another mouthful of coffee, but she saw a keen look in Marjory's eye.

The older woman watched the girls for another moment, then turned and gave Olivia a kind smile. “You know I retired from the local school district a few years ago.”

Olivia waited, wary.

“I started in the health office of the elementary school, then moved to being secretary at the high school. I've known Tate since he was a tiny little mite. Five or six years old.”

Olivia's breath caught at the calculating gleam that entered Marjory's gaze now.

She gestured at Melissa. “He used to get that very same expression on his face when he was working on something on the playground. That little scowl, and the same set to his chin.”

Olivia's heart raced as she cleared her throat.

“Does he know?” Marjory asked.

Olivia words were momentarily stuck, so she nodded.

“Has he always known?”

“No! Oh, no, I wouldn't want you to think... He had no idea, honestly. We didn't know how to find each other. I tried, but...” Her voice faded as her cheeks heated. “It was a vacation, you know?” She shrugged. “I knew the

state he was from, but not the town. Knew his first name, but not his last. Knew a handful of details about his family, but nothing that gave me any leads.”

Marjory patted her on the shoulder kindly. “That's what I thought. Tate's a good man—and he takes his responsibilities seriously. Not to mention, I couldn't imagine Tate would have kept that from his daddy and Lucy all these years. I'm glad that wasn't the case.”

Olivia glanced over at Tate and Vince, who were rigging up a slew of ropes and harnesses to a winch attached to Vince's ATV. “I'm not sure how he meant to tell people...We haven't had time to—”

“Don't you worry about a thing, sweetie, no one will hear it from me.”

Olivia's heart rate settled a touch at that.

“No, Jackie!” Melissa scolded. “We have to put the arms higher.”

She couldn't help a chuckle at the idea of little boy Tate—a male version of Melissa. “So he was always this serious?” she asked, swallowing the last of the coffee and feeling the glow of warmth that took the edge off everything she'd been feeling the last twenty-four hours.

Marjory chuckled. “Oh yes, he was. Quiet, serious, and very methodical about everything. His mama was an artist. Kindest woman ever, but an artist's temperament. Introverted, you know?”

Olivia's mind raced at that information. How had Tate never mentioned that in any of their conversations? Maybe because he never talked about his mother at all. “That makes so much sense,” she told Marjory. “Both of the girls love art—I mean, I know most kids do, but they're very good. Everyone always compliments me on how sophisticated their work is for their age.”

Marjory smiled. “I wasn't real close to Anne, but we played in a Bunco group together. She painted and sketched. Beautiful landscapes, but a real strong style of her own. Had her own way of seeing the world, you know.”

Olivia's heart swelled. As hard as she'd tried to keep the memories of her own parents alive for the girls to feel connected to, there had always been a gap in their past, a hole that she hadn't been able to fill. Now for the first time in

four years, she'd be able to give them parts of the other half, a history of why they were who they were.

“Thank you so much for that,” she said gratefully. “It means a lot to hear about her. Tate's hardly mentioned her.”

Marjory finished her own coffee and took Olivia's mug back, putting both cups and the thermos back on the ATV. “It was pretty rough on him and Thomas when they lost her. A lot of us at the school felt like Tate's natural temperament made it extra difficult for him. He doesn't have a lot of words to begin with, and even for a chatterbox like me, that would be a hard thing to find words for.”

Olivia couldn't help the little smile that pulled at her cheeks. *He doesn't have a lot of words.* That was one way of putting it. She wrapped her arms around herself, more out of the need for comfort than the cold. “I lost my parents—that's why I had to leave the cruise he and I were on. I think I can imagine a little of what he felt.”

Marjory's expression became even more sympathetic, and she patted Olivia on the hand. “You poor dear. I'm so sorry for your loss.”

Just then, Olivia saw Tate begin to rappel down the hillside where the deer was trapped. She stiffened to see him seemingly leap off the edge into nothing. “Have any of the rescuers ever been hurt?” she asked, trying to remember to take a breath.

Marjory followed her gaze. “Oh, hardly ever. Some bumps and scrapes, maybe, but since Vince has been in charge, we've never had anything more serious than a mild concussion. And Tate's one of our best. You don't need to worry.”

Thank goodness, Olivia thought. The last thing she needed was to lose the girls' father just after she'd found him.

“Mommy!” the twins yelled in unison before Olivia could answer Marjory. “Come see our snowman!”

“You gonna let me see, too?” Marjory yelled back. “I might have some hot chocolate in the supplies here, but only if I get to see the snowman.”



Both girls shrieked in delight, and Marjory winked at Olivia. “Did I mention I have grandchildren about their age? Just leave this to me.”

Olivia smiled as they carried the same mugs—full of hot chocolate this time—and made their way to the girls. They were all going to like it here, she could tell. Montana felt like a place that could be home. She had sworn to the girls, that was where she'd take them—home.



“She doin' okay?” Vince asked as he touched down at the bottom of the hill and sank knee-deep into snow.

“Yeah, she's scared, but she doesn't look like she'll fight us,” Tate answered from where he knelt a few feet away on snow he'd packed down, his hand on the young doe's neck as he stroked her carefully. She'd thrashed a couple of times, but she was so tangled up in tree branches and the six feet of snow that had toppled the tree, she couldn't do much.

Vince carefully waded through the snow until he got to the small landing. “Pretty little thing, isn't she?” he asked.

“Yeah, can't be more than a year old,” Tate answered. “Let's see how she feels about the harness.”

Both men began to dig in the snow in order to work the harness straps under the deer's body.

“Easy there, girl,” Vince said soothingly as the deer gave a couple of jerks. “So tell me about your houseguests.” He handed Tate the other end of a strap.

Tate kept working silently. He hadn't had even a moment to decide how he'd talk about all this to people other than his parents. But he should have known better than to think he could keep it to himself. Greenwood was such a small town that everyone would know all the dirty details one way or another within a week. The only thing keeping the news private right now was the snow piled up on the roads. He figured if Lucy hadn't already called every friend she had, then by tomorrow, she'd be visiting them in person, telling them she'd discovered not one but two brand-new granddaughters.

“Well...” He cleared his throat as he buckled one strap firmly around the doe's ribcage. She groaned in distress. “As it turns out, Olivia and I already knew each other.”

Vince's left eyebrow went up in a gesture that indicated that this was a story he wanted to hear.

“We, uh...were on a cruise together a few years back.”

“A cruise, huh? I think I remember when you took that. Your dad bought the ticket for you, didn't he?”

Tate buckled a second set of straps and stroked the frightened doe's shoulder.

“Yeah. So I met Olivia there, and we got to know each other a bit. They have all sorts of events and activities on those things.”

Vince chuckled. “So I've heard.”

Tate's jaw set as he realized he was going to have to explain further. “She got called back to shore suddenly one day, and I never saw her again.”

“Until yesterday,” Vince added.

“Right.”

They both began to dig in the snow around the doe, working to free her from the heavy, wet barrier.

“Where's her husband?” Vince asked.

“She's single.” Tate tried to sound disinterested. The glance Vince shot him said he wasn't managing to be all that convincing. “She just got hired for a job in town,” he continued. “With that nonprofit, Dreams for Disabilities.”

“The place on Main?”

Tate carefully untangled a branch from around the doe's left rear leg.

“Yep. She must be some kind of hot shot. She'll be the new executive director.”

Vince shook his head. “Well, I'll be. Pretty, smart, *and* single. Even an old

codger like me knows that's the trifecta.” He grinned at Tate.

Tate's brow drew down into a scowl. Vince didn't even know the girls were Tate's, and he was already trying to be a matchmaker. Everyone over the age of fifty in Greenwood would do the same thing. Being a single man in Greenwood was a little like being a fox in the English countryside. And he'd *tried*—tried to find a real connection with someone. But the only time it had ever happened was with Olivia.

“Trifecta or not, she's my houseguest for a couple of days, that's all. Roads ought to be cleared by tomorrow afternoon, and then she can get on with her plans.”

Vince shook his head slowly. “You oughta ask her out. New in town, she'd probably appreciate having someone show her around.”

Tate sighed as he buckled the last strap around the deer and began wrapping her two front legs together. If her legs were free during the ride up the side of the hill, she might catch them on something and break one of those slender bones.

“I'm not date material, Vince. I figured that out years ago. I'm happier on my own.” Or more comfortable on his own, at least. And wasn't that nearly the same thing?

Vince had begun working on the deer's back legs. “Pssh,” he scoffed. “I'm sure you tell yourself that, but that doesn't make it true.” He finished wrapping his pair of deer legs and stood. “I know you've had your share of sorrow, son. More than your share, really. And I know you haven't had the easiest time finding your people out there—people who make you happy just being near them. But those people *do* exist. Up until yesterday, I'd have said that if you stayed holed up in your cabin, you were never going to find them. But now you've got a lovely girl who smiles at you like you're just what she wants to see, and she's right there in your cabin with you. Seems like the hand of fate to me. Would it really be so terrible to see what could happen? Maybe take a chance at *actually* being happy, for a change? I think you might end up liking it more than you expect.”

## ELEVEN

Both twins gasped in awe as the winch gave one last shudder and Tate and Vince helped the deer over the edge of the hill and onto the trail next to the ATV.

“Mommy,” Melissa said quietly. “Is it hurt?”

“I don't think so, hon. It's probably scared and ready to run back to its home, but it doesn't look like it's hurting.”

Tate and Vince began taking the harness off the deer as it lay panting in the snow. She noticed the calm way Tate talked to the animal, the sure rhythm of his hands as he smoothed them over her fur, feeling the bones in her legs and then her ribs.

His dark hair was uncovered—he'd lost his stocking cap at some point in the rescue, and his parka was unzipped, the exertion having probably warmed him up. She remembered what that chest had looked like bare, all smooth skin and sinewy muscle. And as a shock of hair fell over one eye as he worked, she remembered that same hair doing that same thing as he'd loomed over her in bed, his body sliding against hers, the two of them sharing one rhythm.

Suddenly, the deer struggled to its feet, and Vince and Tate jumped back, putting themselves between the rest of them and the deer. The pretty doe trotted a few feet away, then turned and looked at them all for a moment. She bowed her head once, then leaped into the air and bounded away, disappearing into the trees ahead at a curve in the trail.

The girls shrieked in delight and jumped up and down, clapping.

Tate turned, and for a moment, his gaze met Olivia's. He was grinning broadly, and his eyes sparkled. She couldn't help but smile back, and for a breath, it was as if the two of them were alone, the way it had been on that ship, experiencing a connection that was raw and powerful.

Then Vince clapped Tate on the shoulder, and he shifted to face the older man, breaking the tension. Olivia was left feeling as though she'd had the wind knocked right out of her.

“Well, looks like we can pack up and go to the party,” Marjory said to the girls.

Olivia shook her head out of the clouds. “Party?”

“The lodge staff were the ones who called in the deer. They said after we were done here, we ought to bring the rescue team on up there. They're having a barbecue to celebrate the end of the storm.”

“What's a barbecue?” Jackie asked, wrinkling her nose.

“Do you like chicken?” Marjory asked as she bent down to match Jackie's height.

“Yes!” Jackie shouted.

“Well, a barbecue is a way to cook food so that you get the best chicken you'll ever have, and—” her voice dropped to a conspiratorial half-whisper, “—I've heard there are brownies for dessert.”

Both girls turned to look at Olivia, their eyes wide and begging. “Please, Mommy?” Jackie asked. “I know we just had hot chocolate, but please—brownies, too?”

Olivia laughed and rolled her eyes. “I suppose. And since all our things are at the lodge, we can finally take a shower and change our clothes.”

As they all helped pack up the rescue equipment and prepared to ride on to the lodge, Olivia realized her time confined with Tate was coming to an end. Once the roads were cleared, they'd have to navigate more than just Marjory and Vince. They'd be faced with the realities of their situation. For starters,

they'd need to tell the girls that Tate was their father before someone else said something in front of them. They'd need to decide what role Tate was going to play in their lives.

And she'd need to figure out exactly what feelings she still had for this man who'd changed her life forever in one brief moment aboard a cruise ship five long years ago. Was she still attracted to him? Yes, most definitely. And from the chemistry that continued to spark between them, she was pretty sure it was mutual. But the stakes were higher now. There was more on the line than just her own heart. Could she take a chance on Tate? And was he willing to take a chance on her?



Tate didn't know how it had happened, but somehow he'd been dragged to the Greenwood Lodge for a barbecue. He'd rolled his eyes when he heard that they'd cleared a spot in the snow and fired up the old smoker. He'd been prepared to say no when the girls had come running up, all bubbly and adorable, chattering on about the chicken and the brownies and a bunch of other things he didn't quite understand. They'd simply assumed he was part of the package. He understood why Olivia would want to go back to the lodge, after all—her belongings were there, and he felt pretty certain she was ready for a change of clothes. But none of that required his participation.

Yet, here he was, standing in the middle of the lodge's lobby, which looked like something out of a Christmas movie, watching as all the guests and staff and Vince and Marjory drank spiced cider and chatted before they opened the big ballroom up for a buffet and barbecue.

“Tate!” Marjory called from her spot by the drink table. “Get over here and meet these nice people. I want you to tell them about that little deer.”

Tate groaned inwardly as he obeyed, striding over to meet Bonita and Clyde from Denver who were thrilled to hear he'd rescued a cute deer. They'd just begun talking about their son who attended Montana State University when Tate heard his name from the staircase. He looked over to see the girls, both dressed in clean jeans and Christmas sweaters, their hair in high pigtails as they hung over the banister waving to him. His heart caught, actually seemed

to skip a whole beat as he suddenly had the feeling of looking in a mirror. Something about the way they were smiling, the curve of their cheeks in that exact moment, was so familiar, so much like him, that it felt as if a giant tether had suddenly extended and clipped him to them.

“I'm sorry,” he murmured to Marjory and the others, “I need to do something...” He walked away almost as if he were in a trance, and by the time he reached the bottom of the staircase, both girls were there to meet him, big grins, rosy cheeks, and identical expressions that looked so much like him, it stole his breath away.

“Hi,” he said, still a captive of the strange hold that had grabbed him.

“When's the barbecue?” Melissa asked, reaching for his hand. He held hers in response, and something inside him simply...locked into place.

“I think it'll start soon,” he said. “Where's your mom?” He glanced to the empty stairwell behind them.

“She told us to come get you, and she'd be here in a few minutes,” Jackie answered.

“Okay. Would you like some cider?” he asked, grabbing Jackie's hand on his other side.

“Yes, please,” they chimed together.

He walked them to the drinks table and scooped up two cups of warm cider, then searched for a place to sit down. When he'd finally found a big armchair and ottoman nestled in front of the largest Christmas village display he'd ever seen, he escorted them to it, sat them together in the armchair with their ciders, and took the ottoman for himself.

They chattered about the deer, and the snowman, and the new sweaters that they'd been happy to get back to at the lodge, and Tate listened, nodding at the right moments as he watched them both, enjoying the cadence of their voices and the ways they gestured as they spoke.

Jackie was so much like Olivia, he couldn't help smiling. She was sunny and silly, and wide open with her thoughts and expressions. Everything was right there to see and hear and understand. But Melissa...He guessed people would

say she was like him, and that did something to his chest, made it ache in a strange way he'd never experienced.

Melissa was quiet, and she wore a look of concentration on her face much of the time. She could be bubbly with her sister for a moment or two, but then that seriousness would descend again. Was that what he looked like to other people, he wondered? Was he so serious all the time? Did he have that same little line between his brows? Without even thinking, he moved his finger to touch the space at the top of his nose. Sure enough, he felt the indent there. The result of a lifetime of quiet thought and endless observation.

And suddenly he wanted to grab Melissa by the shoulders and tell her it was all going to be okay. Explain that she didn't have to be so worried, or so quiet, or so serious, because now that they'd found him, he would never let anything worry her again. No matter what, she'd have him. Always. And he wasn't going to let her lose her childhood to fears and worries and grief. No—Tate vowed in that moment that he would do whatever it took to ensure his girls had the sunniest, safest, best childhoods any kids could ever have.



Olivia paused briefly before she made her way across the crowded lobby. She watched Tate as he sat with the girls, nodding his head and occasionally reaching out to steady a cup of warm cider. And as she watched, her heart did this strange fluttering thing in her chest. She'd thought of Tate many times over the years—how could she not? But this was a sight she never thought she'd see: him spending time with them, looking at them like they were his entire world. Her eyes burned with unshed tears for a moment before she pulled herself together and joined them.

“Did Tate let you have cider before dinner?” she said as she approached the three of them.

Both girls looked guilty and nodded. Tate looked confused. “Uh, did I do something wrong?”

Olivia smiled at him. “Normally, it would be a lot of sugar before dinner, but we can make an exception since it's a special occasion.”



“Special occasion?” Jackie asked. “Is it Christmas?”

Melissa's eyes grew wide with hope.

“Not yet,” Olivia corrected. “But we survived the big whiteout, and you built a snowman, so that makes it a special occasion.” *And you're sitting here looking at your father*, she thought silently.

“Oh, there these two little dears are.” Marjory came scurrying over. “Are you ready to try the barbecue?” she asked. Both girls agreed. “You ask Mommy if you can come eat with me and Vince. We hardly ever get to eat with such lovely young ladies who are having barbecue for the very first time.”

“Are you sure?” Olivia asked. “It's going to be messy.”

Marjory laughed. “I'm positive, and that's what napkins are for.” She held out her hands, and each twin grabbed one, giggling at the things she was whispering to them while she led them away.

“Well,” Olivia said. “I haven't had this much help with the girls since I left Spokane a week ago.”

Tate stood and looked around the room. “Where'd everyone go?” Olivia suppressed a giggle. Somehow, he hadn't noticed that it had emptied in the last few minutes as everyone went into the ballroom to eat.

“Did you want to go and eat?” he asked.

“You know, I'd rather take a few minutes to catch my breath. Want to sit over there by the Christmas tree?” She pointed to one corner of the big room where a magnificent fir tree sporting rustic decorations stretched toward the high ceiling.

Tate gestured for her to go first, then followed her. They sat on a small loveseat flanking the big, sparkly tree.

“Thanks for watching them while I grabbed a shower,” she said as she turned partially to face him.

“They were telling me a story about a boy at preschool...Billy? Bobby?”

“Bucky Nelson.”

“Yes! That was the one. He ate a cockroach, apparently.”

Olivia struggled not to laugh. “Yes. Bucky has been known to ingest insects on more than one occasion.”

Tate scratched his head. “Is that normal? I mean, Jackie and Melissa haven't...They wouldn't do that, right?”

Then Olivia did burst into laughter. The look of confusion mixed with raw fear on Tate's face was enough to send anyone rolling on the floor with laughter. She tried to answer him between giggles. “No. No, your daughters know not to eat bugs.”

Then the strangest thing happened. His entire expression softened, his eyes lit, and he held her gaze. The laughter died on her lips.

“Say that again,” he requested.

She tilted her head, not sure what he meant.

“The part about my daughters. *My. Daughters.*”

She smiled as something warm radiated through her chest.

“Your daughters,” she told him again. “It's real.”

“I never thought I'd hear it, but I have to admit, I kind of like the way it sounds. I...like them,” he finished.

The warm feeling spread, and before she knew what she was doing, she'd reached out to brush a lock of hair out of his eyes. He gazed at her, and the moment shifted into something that was more than warm. It was hot and it was familiar, even after all the years when she hadn't known where he was.

He caught her hand as she went to pull away. His big fingers closed over her smaller ones, and his voice was low and gruff.

“You did something amazing. You had those girls, and you fed them and sheltered them and taught them without anyone there to help. Without a partner. Without family.”

She blinked at him, an ache building in her chest. This. This was the man she'd come to know on the cruise. This was the Tate she'd been halfway in

love with after just a handful of days all those years ago.

“I never really had a lot of time to think about it,” she told him truthfully. “And I didn't have anything else to compare it to, so I just did what needed to be done.”

He leaned closer, his hand still closed firmly over hers.

“You're amazing,” he whispered.

They stared into one another's eyes, caught in some sort of in-between place, where before and after didn't exist. There was only that moment.

Then he leaned in further, and his lips brushed hers—whisper-soft, tender. Her breath caught as she returned the kiss—once, twice. His free hand moved to cup the back of her neck, and she heard him release a breath as if he'd been holding it for days. His head tilted, and he deepened the kiss, his fingers digging into her hair as she shifted, moving her whole body closer to him. He tasted like tart apples and smelled like pine and snow and something else that was simply...him.

Muscle memory kicked in as her hands found the hard planes of his chest. How she could remember the feel of him after such a long time, she didn't know, but she did, and it was like coming home.

He whispered her name as his thumb stroked over her breast, and she gasped. Her mind had lost all sense of time or place and only focused on one desire—more.

Luckily, he seemed to have retained more awareness, because when a door opened at the far end of the room, letting in the sound and activity from the ballroom barbecue, he had the sense to jerk away, leaving her confused and breathless.

“I think I see them right there,” Marjory's voice came from the far end of the room. “You run and tell them it's time for dinner.”

The pitter-patter of four-year-old feet came running across the wood plank floor as Tate cleared his throat and Olivia quickly moved to put some distance between them.

“Mommy!” Jackie cried.

“It's time for dinner,” Melissa scolded.

“And Mr. Tate, too,” Jackie put in.

Olivia looked at Tate and shrugged lightly. “Welcome to parenthood,” she murmured before standing to meet up with the twins.

## TWELVE

By the time dinner was over and the guests at the lodge had begun filtering away to their own rooms, the temperatures had plunged, leaving the night dark and frigid, and Tate knew he wouldn't be making it back to his cabin until morning. The lodge told Vince they'd comp two rooms for the local rescue team, so he and Marjory handed one of the keys to Tate before heading off to their own room.

After going outside to his ATV and grabbing the few toiletries he kept packed there for emergencies, he shot off a text to his dad, asking if he'd check on Lobster, before coming back inside to find Olivia in the lobby. He watched as she climbed around on one of the big, overstuffed leather sofas, looking under throw pillows and between cushions.

“You lose something?” he asked, walking up behind her.

She gave a little shriek and nearly leaped off the sofa. Tate shot out an arm, grabbing her wrist so she wouldn't fall on her lovely behind on the floor.

“Oh my God,” she said, laughing. Her other hand had flown to her heart, and she kept it there for a moment, taking a deep breath. “You scared me half to death.”

He reluctantly let go of her wrist. “Sorry. I'm used to walking up on horses, and it's better not to be too loud when you do that. You're not the first person I've startled.”

She smiled, warming the whole room. The big antler chandeliers overhead

had been dimmed, and the only other person in the lobby, an overnight clerk at the front desk, was engrossed in a movie on his iPad. But they could have been in the middle of a Times Square New Year's Eve party, and he still wouldn't have wanted to look at anyone but her. He could never get tired of looking at her.

"It's fine. I was just so focused. Jackie lost her bracelet, and I was hoping to find it before I put them to bed."

"Little silver one with pink beads?" he asked.

"Yes. Have you seen it?"

"Only on her, I'm afraid," he answered. "But I'm happy to help look."

"It's fine," she told him with a small smile. "I've gone over everything pretty thoroughly. She must have dropped it somewhere else. With any luck, it happened here at the lodge and it'll turn up in lost and found in a day or two. For now, I should go back upstairs and get them into bed, or tomorrow's going to be a bear."

He studied her for a long moment, and she seemed to simply...let him, her brown eyes patient and trusting. Giving himself a mental shake, he spoke again. "After you put them down, can we talk?"

She nodded. "I was hoping you'd suggest that." Her cheeks turned pink, and his heart skipped a beat. "I feel like we have a lot of things that we need to plan..." She paused, her smile turning shy. "And maybe a few things to work through, too."

He agreed. He wasn't sure how he felt about everything, but he knew it was all happening at the speed of light, and if they didn't take a breath and slow it all down, they were liable to make a mistake.

He told Olivia his room number, then they parted for a bit. When he arrived at the room, Tate hung up his parka, set his toiletry kit in the bathroom, and flipped on the television to a basketball game. He sat down in the armchair in front of the television and sprawled, the long day finally settling in and bringing with it a bone-weary exhaustion.

It had been a long day, in every way imaginable. He honestly couldn't

remember the last time he'd had a longer one. And yes, parts of it had been amazing. But most of all, it had been overwhelming and confusing—and those were emotions he was not at all equipped to handle. Three days ago, he'd been the same old Tate—single, devoted to his ranch, his life orderly and predictable. Now, here he sat, waiting for the mother of his children, whom he'd shared an absolutely incredible kiss with not even four hours ago.

He sighed as his head fell back and he closed his eyes. That kiss. It had been electric and tender all at once, like a piece of chocolate with a bite of chili pepper. It had brought back the cruise in a way that simply seeing her and speaking to her hadn't. He'd remembered the connection they'd had, the way she'd made him want things he'd never wanted at any other time.

He found it exhilarating and terrifying all at once.

Tate had put aside the idea of a family years ago. He'd seen everyone he'd gone to high school with pair off, settle down, start families...and all along, he'd been on his own. He'd filled his life by spending time with animals, learning everything he could about being a rancher, and watching his father like a hawk because his dad was just about the only person in the world he believed loved him. He'd kept his life quiet and contained and told himself that it was better that way. But now he was faced with the intrusion of two little girls and their beautiful mother. So while family hadn't been on Tate's list, he had one now, whether he knew what to do with it or not.

And now Olivia was coming to talk to him about making a plan for the future, and she was going to ask him what he wanted. He needed to have an answer for her...but the truth was, he had no idea. What he wanted was not a question he ever stopped to ask himself. What mattered was what the ranch needed, or what he could do for the search and rescue team, or how he could make his dad and Lucy happy. The last thing he could remember actually wanting for himself was...well, it was Olivia. Beautiful, vibrant Olivia who'd made him forget about everything else. Sweet, passionate Olivia who had felt so unbelievably right in his arms. Fierce, extraordinary Olivia who could handle anything that life threw at her—even a pregnancy with twins at a time when she was entirely on her own.

Of course he had wanted Olivia. Of course he still did. Who wouldn't? Every single thing about her just made her more interesting and attractive to him.

But what did she want from him? He knew the chemistry was still there—their kiss had more than proven that. And from what she'd said, he knew that she wanted him to have a role in the twins' lives. But being with her—truly being with her, as a lover and a partner, a father to the girls... Was that what she wanted from him? And more, was it something he was capable of being?

His thoughts were interrupted by a knock at the door, and he reached for the remote and turned off the television before he stood. He still didn't have any answers, but maybe he and Olivia could find them together.



Olivia walked into Tate's room and waved her baby monitor at him. “If anyone wakes up, I'll have to run back down the hall.”

“Of course,” he said. “Do you want something to drink?” He gestured at the minibar on one wall of the large room.

“Maybe a water?” She went to the small sofa that faced the television along with an armchair and a coffee table. After he handed her the bottle of water, she twisted the cap and took a drink before putting the bottle on the coffee table.

Tate took the seat next to her on the sofa and cleared his throat. “There are so many things we need to figure out, I'm not sure where to start,” he said.

She took a deep breath, remembering that searing kiss in the lobby. “Maybe we should start with the girls. I don't want to push you into something you're not comfortable with, but at the same time, I don't like keeping the truth from them.”

“Okay, I was actually hoping you'd say that. I'm ready to tell them. Or at least, I think they should know sooner rather than later. Partly because I want to be honest with them, and partly because when the roads open up tomorrow and you start moving into your house in town, there won't be a way to keep it secret for more than a few hours. My stepmother is so excited about you and the girls that she won't be able to keep it to herself for long. It'll make the rounds through the grandmas in town and then trickle down from there.”



Olivia couldn't help smiling at the idea of a town that was so small and so close-knit, everyone living there would care about her girls being Tate's daughters.

“I have a little news for you. Marjory already knows.”

Tate's eyes widened briefly. “You told her?”

“No,” Olivia was quick to correct. “No, I would never have done that without consulting you, but she...guessed.”

“Guessed?”

“She started asking questions about when the cruise was and how old the girls were, and then said that Melissa is so much like you. If she's any indication, everyone in town will figure it out in a hot second whether we tell them or not.”

Tate simply shook his head and chuckled. “Of course they will,” he murmured before running a hand through his hair. “I guess that decides it for us. We have to tell Jackie and Melissa tomorrow before we all leave the lodge.”

“I agree,” Olivia said.

“I'd like to be there when you tell them.” His gaze told her he was dead serious, and she couldn't help but feel her heart swell at how earnestly he was taking his new role.

“I think that's fine. As long as they have a chance to talk with me privately afterward if they need to.”

He nodded his agreement.

Now Olivia treaded closer to the area she wasn't as sure about. She'd never had to share the girls with anyone, and she had no idea what Tate's ideas were about his ongoing role in their lives. At the same time, she wanted her girls to have every good thing in the world—and that included a father who was an active part of their lives. “I'm wondering how you see this going after we've settled in?”

He cocked his head and looked curious.

She plowed on. “I mean, I'm hoping you'll want to see them regularly, let them get to know you better...” Her voice faded as she ran out of words. She didn't even know exactly what she was asking, much less how to ask it.

“You mean like visitation, custody, things like that?”

She pursed her lips, not liking those terms. They sounded so clinical—like an obligation rather than something he *wanted* to do.

He continued as if he could read her mind. “I want to see them, I want to get to know them. You're their mother so I'm going to have to rely on you to tell me the best ways to do that. I don't want to do anything that makes them feel unsure about their home or who loves them.”

The twisty feeling inside her relaxed and she touched his arm, feather lightly. “Thank you. I want that, too. Maybe we can start with some dinners together, that sort of thing.”

He nodded. “Wow, that was easier than I'd have thought.”

She agreed, but she also knew the next part wouldn't be as smooth. “I think the more complicated thing we need to deal with is that kiss in the lobby earlier,” she admitted.

His gaze shot to hers, and a wry smile curved his lips. “Yeah, about that kiss...” He let the word hang there between them.

“Guess we haven't lost whatever it was on the cruise.” She couldn't help the grin on her face.

“No, we haven't.”

Tension filled the air between them, and Olivia's breath became short, her chest achy, her skin tingly.

“I don't have an answer for you about what that kiss means, but I'm willing to try it again and see where it leads us,” he told her in a low rough voice as he leaned closer.

“I think I could be convinced to experiment some more.” She even sounded breathless to her own ears. She worried that they might be rushing things, but that worry wasn't enough to make her pull away. Not when she wanted this so

badly. Tate was the last man she'd made love to. She'd tried some dates, mostly set up by well-meaning friends, but none of them had ever gone anywhere. The most she'd gotten from any of them had been a kiss. And none of those kisses had come anywhere close to what she'd shared with Tate earlier. She wanted more—craved it.

Tate cupped her cheek in his palm and gently pulled her toward him. Her eyes drifted shut as his lips made contact with hers. He teased her mouth, brushing his lips over hers before sliding his tongue along the seam of her lips. She gasped as her mouth opened beneath his and the kiss deepened.

In the hallway outside, a door slammed, and on the baby monitor one of the girls sighed in her sleep, but in the shelter of Tate's hotel room, heat built and Olivia's entire body sparked to life. He reached for her and pulled her onto his lap. She straddled him and felt the evidence of his arousal pressed against her core.

He made a growling sound in the back of his throat as one of his hands found her hip, squeezing it possessively. His other hand skimmed up the curve of her waist before cupping her breast and brushing over her nipple with his thumb.

But then Tate froze, his hand tightening on her hip.

“What is it?” She looked at him with concern, saying a little prayer he wouldn't stop now.

Was he blushing? “Uh, I don't actually have any condoms on me, and given what happened last time...” His voice trailed off, and he looked up at her, seeming to hope she'd say the right thing.

She ground against his erection, making him groan again before she answered. “I'm on birth control, and I haven't been with anyone since you.” She bit her lip, hoping she hadn't said too much.

“Well, that's good to hear. About the birth control, that is. The other part, too. Well, at least from my perspective. Ouch!”

Olivia interrupted him with a pinch to the arm. “Shut up and keep kissing me, cowboy.”

“Well, yes, ma'am.” He gave her another of his devastatingly handsome smiles before his lips blazed a path down the column of her neck. She arched her back, nerves firing back up like tiny sparklers. Oh, how she'd missed this. Missed him.

Beneath her hands, the planes of his chest were hard, built from real labor, not a gym. She rocked on him, need building in her like a volcano waiting to erupt.

“God, you're beautiful,” he whispered, digging a hand into her long, wavy hair and rubbing his cheek over the cleft between her breasts.

“Tate.” The name left her lips like a prayer, and he seemed to understand exactly what she was praying for when he slipped a hand between them, murmuring heated words in her ear as he applied the perfect amount of pressure to the perfect place.

She buried her head in the crook between his neck and shoulder as her need grew. Then he was lifting her. She kept her legs wrapped around his waist while he carried her to the bed, laid her down gently and stared at her.

“Is this what you want?” he asked, his eyes full of heat.

“Yes,” she answered with a smile before sitting up and pulling her t-shirt over her head.

His gaze fell to her chest and she grinned at him. Yes, motherhood had given her more to work with there. She was glad he seemed to like the change. “Your turn,” she teased.

He did that thing that guys do when they pull their shirts off by grabbing the back of the neck and pulling it over their heads. She wondered, not for the first time, how men managed to make something so mundane look so sexy.

He leaned down and kissed her again before standing up straight and saying, “Now you.”

She stood on the bed and hitched her thumbs under the waistband of her yoga pants before shoving them down her hips. The soft bed proved to be a problem when she tried to balance and kick them off her feet. She struggled to keep from falling off, but then Tate wrapped his arms around her hips and

held her steady, pressing his lips to the bare skin of her stomach.

“Don't look too close,” she whispered as she ran her fingers through his hair. “Stretch marks everywhere.”

He pulled back and looked at the faint silver marks along her abdomen. He surprised her by tracing them with his fingers before kissing each one in turn. “These are beautiful. Every one of them. They're proof of how amazing you are.” Her heart melted.

Before long, he'd managed to remove the rest of her clothes, and his. She lay back on the bed as he gazed at her, his expression soft.

“Do you remember the night we ate at the Italian place on the ship?” he asked, his voice almost as soft as his breath on her skin.

“It was the first time you ever had pesto,” she answered, thinking back.

He chuckled as he reached down and pulled one of her legs up around his waist. “Actually, I was referring to after dinner.”

Yes, she remembered that. It would be hard to forget. In fact, if she were pressed, she'd guess that was the night she got pregnant.

Her cheeks heated as her mind traveled back to that particular night. “Um, yes, I remember it.”

“That night was when I decided that you were the most perfect woman I'd ever seen.”

She sighed as his fingers brushed down her center and his lips caressed her neck.

Slowly, so slowly it nearly made her scream, he entered her, one delicious inch at a time, until he filled her so completely, she thought she might cry from the rightness of it.

His breath came heavy and quick. “You're still the most perfect thing I've ever seen...” He paused as he withdrew, then pushed in again, harder. “Or felt.”

“More,” she gasped, arching into him.

And then there were no more words, just breaths and touches, the slide of slick skin, the whisper of smooth sheets. Everything became parts of a whole, the curve of a breast, the angle of a wrist, sweat and skin and a blooming ache that suddenly took Olivia by surprise as she cried out Tate's name in the night. He growled in response before biting down on the juncture between her neck and shoulder while he shuddered above her.

When they'd both recovered and he lay by her side in the warm bed, stroking her hair as her head rested on his chest, she tried to remember the last time she'd felt so good. She'd had plenty of wonderful days over the past five years—special events and milestones with the girls that had overwhelmed her with joy, quieter days of simple pleasures that had filled her with peace. But her life had never felt quite complete, because at the end of the day, she'd settled into bed alone. No one to curl up beside and share her happiness with. No one to hold her close and make sure she knew she wasn't alone. It was only now, as she tucked her cheek against his shoulder, that she admitted to herself how lonely she had been. Was there a chance that loneliness could be over now?

“This might be the quietest I've ever seen you,” Tate murmured. “Are you okay?”

She smiled even though he couldn't see her face. “I'm better than okay.” She pressed up so she could look him in the eyes. “I'm so happy the girls and I found you. When I knew there was a job in Montana, my first thought was, *wouldn't it be something if I saw him walking down the street someday?* Then I reminded myself those odds were about a million to one. But I still wanted to move here.” He ran a finger gently over her cheek and she felt her heart skip a beat. “Aside from the fact it's a great place to raise kids, I hoped that getting to know Montana would be a way I could inject a little of their father into the girls. It was the only way I could think of to keep you present in their lives, even if only in a small way.”

He cleared his throat, his gaze fixed on hers. “I'm glad you found me, too. And not just because of the girls.” His hand moved lower to cup her butt. “Just sayin'.” He began to grin.

She chuckled. “You're a bad influence that I'm enjoying way more than I should. But even though I haven't heard a peep out of those two, I really need to get back to my own room.”

“So can we have breakfast in the morning and have that discussion with the girls?” he asked.

“Yes. Why don't we get room service? You can come to our room at eight?”

“I'll be there.” He paused and kissed her softly on the lips. “Are you sure you can't stay?”

“Very sure,” she said reluctantly, relieved when he pulled back and didn't try to argue with her.

“But we're okay, right?” he asked, sounding a little uncertain. “This isn't going to mess anything up or make things awkward? I...I didn't just ruin things, did I?” He studied her, that little dent she'd noticed between his brows growing deeper, so like Melissa's expression when the little girl was concerned about something.

“No, no, of course you didn't ruin anything,” she rushed to reassure him. “We're okay, I promise.” She hoped they were more than okay—that they were actually on their way to building something between the two of them, something that went beyond co-parenting. But she didn't want to jump the gun or scare him off. “We can worry about that later. Right now let's talk to the girls. One step at a time.”

He nodded, the worry-line fading. “Okay. One step at a time.”

## THIRTEEN

It only took five minutes and a silent pep talk for Tate to gear himself up to knock on the door of Olivia's suite. He'd figured it would take him more like ten, so he was a little early when she opened up.

“Hey there,” she said, a soft smile on her lips that made it incredibly hard not to kiss her. But he didn't know if that was allowed.

“Hey,” he answered. “Everyone having a good morning?”

“Well, I let the girls watch an episode of *Peppa Pig* on my tablet, so for them, it's an excellent morning.”

“I...have no idea what that is. I guess I need to bone up on kids TV,” he said, stepping into the room at her gesture.

She laughed. “You'll get used to it.” She turned to face the girls who were seated at the kitchenette's counter, coloring with ferocious concentration. He couldn't tell exactly what the pictures were supposed to be, but he couldn't help being amused at Melissa's careful, methodical coloring contrasted with Jackie's wild abandon.

“Girls, look who's here!” she announced, and they both looked up. Those smiles hit him like a punch to the chest. *His girls*. Grinning just at the sight of him.

“Mr. Tate!” Jackie called out. “Come see my picture of a panda!”

“It's beautiful,” he assured her. “I've never seen a purple and green panda



before.”

“Purple's my first favorite,” she informed him. “Green is my second favorite. Blue is my third favorite. Pink used to be my fourth favorite, but I think I might like yellow better. Do you like yellow better, Mr. Tate?”

“I do like yellow a lot,” he agreed.

“Girls, I'm going to need you to stop coloring for a minute,” Olivia interjected before the conversation could go any further off the rails. “Mr. Tate and I have something we need to tell you.”

Melissa frowned. “You're all scrunched up. Are you gonna say we have to move again?”

Olivia's eyebrows flew up. “No, sweetheart, of course not. I told you, we're to stay. But...remember how when we talked about moving, I told you that your daddy was from here?”

The girls nodded.

“And do you remember how you asked if we'd see him here, and I told you that I didn't know, but that maybe it would happen? That maybe we'd look up one day, and there he would be?”

The girls nodded again.

“Well, the other day when Jackie twisted her ankle and we were waiting for rescue...I looked up,” Olivia said, slanting a look over at him. “And there he was.”

“But it was Mr. Tate who was there,” Melissa said with a frown. Tate's stomach twisted into a knot. Did that mean she was unhappy with the news?

“That's right,” Olivia agreed. “Mr. Tate is your daddy.”

Still frowning, Melissa climbed off her stool and walked over to Tate. He knelt down to put himself at eye level with her. “You're my daddy?” she asked.

Tate cleared his throat. “Y-yeah. I am.”

She tilted her head a little considering the idea—a gesture so familiar, it

nearly made him gasp. But then she hurled herself into his chest, wrapping her arms around his neck, and it was all he could do not to sob. “Hi, Daddy,” she whispered in his ear, squeezing him tight.

“Hi, darling,” he said, hugging her back.

A second set of arms wrapped around him a beat later and he shifted to hug Jackie close, as well. He heard a click and looked up to see Olivia, crying unabashedly, with her phone in her hand, snapping a picture. He'd never been one to put up a lot of photographs around his house, but he wanted this one. This was a moment he never wanted to forget.



Tate would have happily stayed in that moment forever, but it turned out there were other things that Olivia and the girls needed to do with their day. Specifically, they were going to pack up their stuff and drive to town to take a look at their new house.

“Where's your rental?” he asked when he learned about their plans.

“It's a two bedroom not too far off Main Street on Wyatt Avenue.”

“Is it one of Mrs. Anderson's bungalows?” he asked.

“Yes! It is.” She seemed surprised.

“There aren't a lot of rentals downtown. Would you mind if I went with you to check it out?” he asked. Norene Anderson was a notoriously terrible landlord. He cringed at the idea that Olivia's new bungalow might be a lot less appealing than she'd thought when she rented it online.

“Sure,” she said with a smile. “You're welcome to join us.”

*Good*, he thought. No telling what Norene might try to pass off as acceptable housing.

An hour later, after getting all of Olivia and the girls' stuff packed into the Honda, Tate drove everyone to his cabin to pick up his truck and an overly anxious Lobster, and then they followed him down the mountain to

downtown. Tate watched Olivia and the girls in his rearview mirror all the way down and let out a sigh of relief when they finally reached the bottom and the clearer roads near town.

As he pulled up in front of the address Olivia had given him, he slowed to a stop, staring out through the windshield with foreboding. Mrs. Anderson, who had arranged to meet them there with the keys to the property, was standing outside on the unshoveled driveway talking to Jake Pickelner. The same Jake Pickelner who owned Pickelner Home Restoration Services. As the side of his truck parked next to them advertised—Fire, Flood, Hail, and Crime, We Fix It All on Insurance's Dime.

Tate climbed out of the truck, deciding not to wait for Olivia to park behind him and get the kids out of the car. He made his way straight to Norene and Jake, Lobster tagging along beside him.

“Howdy, Tate,” Jake said extending his hand. “What brings you by?”

Tate shook his hand and nodded at Norene, who narrowed her eyes at him, obviously wondering why he was there. “I came to help Norene's new tenant get moved in.”

“I didn't realize you knew Ms. Wickham,” Norene said primly.

“I do in fact,” he said, not bothering to explain. Gossip would spread the word fast enough, and he didn't owe Norene a damn thing—not even an explanation. “Something wrong with the house?” He gestured toward the little house with the front porch that was approximately the size of a postage stamp.

Jake looked to Norene, who put on her best *don't mess with the mean old woman* face. “Some pipes burst during the storm, so there's some water damage.”

Tate wanted to curse. He'd known something like this was going to happen the minute he'd heard Olivia had rented one of Norene's dumpy properties.

“How much damage we talking about?” He addressed the question to Jake, who looked uncomfortable but went ahead and answered.

“The wood floors will have to be replaced or refinished, depending. They've

cupped in some areas and are stained everywhere, even the bedrooms.” He kicked at a chunk of snow next to the truck tire. “Drywall in the kitchen and living room needs to be torn out and replaced. We'll have to replumb the kitchen and bath where the pipes burst, and I was telling Norene that it would be a good time to have new wiring put in, even though that part would be out of pocket—insurance only covers fixing the water damage. It's mostly the original knob-and-tube from the 1930s.”

Norene's expression grew more obstinate by the second. “We're going to wait until you've dried the place out first. If the wiring works, no reason to replace it.”

Unless it meant putting his kids at risk from a house fire, Tate thought, scowling back at the old slumlord.

“Hi,” Olivia said as she finally reached the group. “Are you Mrs. Anderson? I'm Olivia Wickham.” She held out her hand politely, and Norene shook it reluctantly, dropping it as soon as possible.

After introductions were made, Olivia looked at Tate. “I'm sensing something's wrong here.”

Jake explained the situation, and Olivia listened carefully.

“Well, I guess we should go in and look?” she asked. “Or at least go in to talk. No offense, but it's freezing out here.”

Tate had forgotten that Olivia was from a milder climate, at least by Montana standards.

“Great idea,” Jake said. Norene mumbled something that sounded like *won't last long*, and *prissy city girls*. Tate glared at her, and she snapped her mouth shut but returned the glare.

Olivia called to the girls, and everybody marched inside.

Once the door closed behind them, Tate stood in shock in the front room of the little house. It was far worse than he'd imagined. The water had run from under the kitchen sink into the living room as well as the hallway that led to the bedrooms. The yellow oak floors were blackened with water stains and curling up at the edges wherever low points had allowed the water to collect.

He began to walk around to take a closer look, lifting his feet gingerly as he stepped into a lingering puddle in one corner of the room.

“Mommy?” Jackie said, a whine in her voice. “I don't think I like this house. Let's go back to our old one.”

Olivia shot Tate a look that begged for help.

“You know what we have here?” he said, grabbing each girl by a hand. “A backyard full of fresh new snow. You want to build a snowman?”

They both agreed, as he'd expected, and after he'd shoved them out the door into the fenced-in backyard, he turned to Norene.

“It's uninhabitable,” he said bluntly.

“Once they get it all dried out, it might be okay,” Olivia interjected.

Tate raised an eyebrow at her, and she started to say more but then shut her mouth.

“No,” Jake said. “Tate's right. This place won't be livable for a while. Forget unpleasant, I'd say it's unsafe—especially for kids.”

To his relief, Olivia finally looked concerned.

“Well, you've already paid first and last, and I'm not giving that back,” Norene announced. “We'll just have the lease start when you move in, but you're still bound for the twelve months. No getting out of the contract you signed.”

Tate was about to tear a strip off Norene when Olivia turned to him. “We can stay with you while they fix it, right?”

He blinked at her, not sure what to say for a moment. Stay at his place? Not for a day or two, but possibly...weeks? He wanted to spend time with them—had been counting on it—but he'd thought it would be more gradual, paced out. Give them a chance to get used to each other. This...this was not gradual. This was warp speed, and he wasn't at all ready for it.

But with all eyes fixed on him, what could a man do? He plastered on a smile and said, “Yes. Of course.”



Olivia stood in the middle of Tate's living room, Lobster at her side, and watched as the girls went upstairs, dragging their small, colorful backpacks behind them. Tate was outside chopping wood. She wasn't sure why, having seen the substantial stack of it on the porch as well as one inside, next to the fireplace, but he'd seemed certain that more was needed, and she could hear the repeated thwack of the ax outside the back door.

Listening to the sound of the girls playing upstairs, Olivia let out a long sigh before turning in a full circle taking in the space around her. Although she'd last been here only twenty-four hours ago, it seemed like months.

Lobster shoved his head under her hand, and she scratched him absentmindedly. Tate had been quiet after he'd discovered she couldn't live in the house she'd rented. She couldn't help wondering if he didn't want them to stay with him. And after the night they'd shared, and then the sweetness of their morning together, with the girls literally embracing him as their father, she thought they'd taken a major step forward. They hadn't nailed down exactly what was going on between them, but she'd believed they were on the same page in wanting to see where this would go. Had she been completely off base?

A horn honking outside broke her out of her thoughts, and she moved to the front window to see a big pickup truck similar to Tate's stopping in front of the cabin. She watched as an older man wearing a cowboy hat, jeans, and a down parka stepped out of the driver's side while a woman with auburn hair pulled back into a bun and wearing a parka that matched the man's got out of the passenger side.

As Tate appeared from around the back of the house, the woman ran forward and grabbed him, giving him a big hug and kissing both his cheeks before releasing him. The man, more reserved in his manner, shook Tate's hand and cuffed him on the shoulder.

These would be Tate's parents. Olivia took a deep breath and readied herself. She'd had a hell of an introduction to Montana, and it seemed like it was only going to get crazier.



“This is my dad, Thomas,” Tate said as he took off his own parka and hung it in the closet by the front door before taking both visitors' coats over his arm. “And my stepmother, Lucy.”

Olivia gave them her best smile and stuck out her hand to shake, but Lucy instead pulled her into a big hug. “None of that formal stuff around us now,” the latter said, beaming. “We're family.”

“It's nice to meet you both,” Olivia said as Tate hung up his parents' coats.

“Well, I have to say that you were a surprise, but we couldn't be happier to meet you as well,” Thomas said kindly.

“Do you want coffee, Dad?” Tate asked. “Decaf, I mean.” He looked at Lucy quickly for approval.

“I'd love some,” Thomas said. “But put some cream in it. Decaf's just not any good black.”

Tate took Lucy and Olivia's coffee orders and moved off to the kitchen.

As she sat with Thomas and Lucy in the living room, Olivia listened with one ear to the activity upstairs. She could tell that the twins were engrossed in whatever they were doing, but that had already lasted ten minutes or more and wouldn't be likely to last much longer.

Turning to the visitors, she said, “It was so kind of you to stop by, and I know you're probably anxious to meet the girls.”

Lucy's eyes welled up, and she nodded as Thomas patted her hand.

“If you think they're ready,” Thomas answered.

“They've had a lot of change the last few days, but they seem to be holding up well.” She paused and watched Lucy settle in, leaning into Thomas. The two were obviously very much in love. They reminded her of her own parents, and she felt a momentary burst of grief at the thought that the girls were about to meet their paternal grandparents but they would never be able to meet their maternal grandparents. The pain of that loss still hit her at odd

moments—not as often as it did at first, but often enough to sting. She knew how to deal with it, though. She breathed through the pain and reminded herself to focus on gratitude instead. A week ago, all the girls had was her and each other. Today, they had a daddy—and they were about to have grandparents, too. That was a good thing. A very good thing.

“We told them this morning that Tate was their father, and they seemed pretty happy about it all. We haven't really had a chance to talk about having grandparents, but I think they're going to like the idea.”

Tate arrived with the coffee and handed mugs to everyone.

“So I guess we need to do this?” he asked, looking a touch green around the gills.

Olivia reached over and gave his hand a squeeze. “I think it's going to be fine.”

She went upstairs and found the girls sitting quietly with way-too-innocent expressions on their faces. That couldn't mean anything good...but no one was bleeding and nothing seemed to be visibly broken, so she decided to let it go for now. “Let's go downstairs,” she said. “There are some people who want to meet you.”

“What people?” Melissa asked.

“Daddy's parents,” Olivia answered.

“Daddy has parents?” Jackie asked, sounding awed.

“Of course he does,” she said while helping Jackie down the stairs. Her ankle didn't really seem to be bothering her anymore, but better safe than sorry.

Olivia heard Lucy let out a little gasp when she first caught sight of the girls. As soon as they stepped off the last stair, Jackie and Melissa both made a beeline for Thomas, who Olivia noticed looked a little misty-eyed. Lucy, meanwhile, was openly dabbing tears away. They both wore blinding smiles.

“You're my daddy's daddy?” Jackie asked Thomas.

Thomas chuckled. “I sure am. Do you know what that makes me?” When the girls shook their heads, Thomas grinned. “It makes me your grandpa.” He



reached out and took Lucy's hand. "And this is your grandma."

Melissa regarded Lucy with concentrated interest. "Daddy talked about you. You gave Daddy all the pretty Christmas things, didn't you?"

"That's right, I did," Lucy confirmed. "And I have to say, they look just wonderful. I especially love the tree. Did you girls help with that?"

After that, the floodgates were open. The girls talked over each other, describing every detail of how they had decorated, from picking out the tree to choosing exactly which knickknack went where. Lucy and Thomas listened intently, as if they had never heard such a fascinating story before. It wasn't long before Jackie was ensconced on Lucy's lap, and Melissa sat next to Thomas, her serious expression in place as the conversation shifted to questions about Tate's growing-up years.

"So when my daddy was little, did he have a dog like Lobster?"

Hearing his name, the lab thumped his tail, lifted his head from where he lay by Tate's feet, and gave one sharp bark.

Thomas laughed and snapped his fingers. Lobster ambled over, and Thomas began to stroke the silky-smooth head as he put an arm around Melissa and spoke to her softly.

"When your daddy was little, we had a golden retriever. Have you ever seen one of those?"

Melissa looked to Olivia for help with that one.

"Jessie's parents have a golden retriever," Olivia reminded her.

Melissa nodded to Thomas then, and he went on with stories about Tate's childhood dog.

Tate had been as quiet as usual, watching everything that went on but not participating much. When he stood to go refill his coffee, Olivia followed him into the kitchen.

"This seems to be going well," she said, watching him pour coffee into his mug.

“Seems to,” he answered.

“Look.” She lowered her voice so she wouldn't be heard by the others in the living room. “It's been a lot—for all of us. And it's been...” She paused, taking a breath. “Fast.”

Tate seemed to relax a touch, relief apparent in his face. “Really fast,” he agreed.

“So now that all the revelations have happened, let's just try to work on establishing some sort of normal and be patient with one another. I know you have a life, and it's been on pause during this storm, but you can get back to it now, and the girls and I will be fine. I planned the move for the holidays so I'd have time to get us all settled before they go to school and I start work. We might not be settled in quite the way we expected since the house is damaged, but I still have lots to do.” She put her cup down on the counter and ticked items off on her fingers. “Bank accounts to set up, doctors and dentists to arrange—oh, and I'll have to get all our furniture put into a storage unit when the truck arrives.”

Tate filled Olivia's cup as well and handed it to her, watching as she poured some cream into it and stirred it before continuing.

“All I'm saying is, we've both got a lot to deal with, and we don't have to make any more decisions right now. I'll stay in the guest room with the girls. We can take some time to do all the kinds of things that we need to do for normal life. None of us is going anywhere. We have plenty of time to figure out how we want to move forward.”

Tate's look of relief grew, and he gave her a small smile. “You're right,” he said. “Thank you for that. It's been an intense couple of days, and it'll be good to do some normal things for a while.”

She took a sip of her coffee. It would. It would be great to have some normal after the most chaotic few days she'd had in a very long time.

## FOURTEEN

“So you moved that herd over to the north acreage?” Tate asked his foreman, John, as they stood outside his father's house.

“Yep, managed to get 'em moved just before the storm hit. I sent a couple of the guys up there this morning to check on 'em, make sure they did okay with the weather.”

Tate swiped the screen of his iPad and nodded absentmindedly. “Sounds good. And where are we with the repairs to the auxiliary barn?”

While listening to John's report, Tate looked out over the snow-covered acreage that sat outside his father's front door. It was good to be back at work. Olivia had been right, he needed some normal. He'd been up and out of the house before Olivia or the girls had woken. And that was for the best, Tate thought. They all needed some time and space to get into a workable routine.

After getting the day's work lined up with John, Tate turned to head to his truck.

“Son?” his father called from the front door of the house. Tate reversed course and met Thomas on the front porch.

“You're up and at things early,” Thomas said as he stood alongside Tate, his eyes scanning the horizon, a cup of his usual coffee in his hand. He wore a sheepskin jacket and his old work Stetson on his head, looking every inch the weathered old rancher.

“Been trapped at the cabin for nearly three days,” Tate answered, adjusting

his own Stetson on his head and shoving a hand deep in the pocket of his parka. “Unfortunately, the work didn't take a break.”

Thomas glanced at him for a moment. “I just figured you'd want to spend a little more time getting to know your family. You could have called me to handle things here. I'm happy to check in with John, make sure everything's gettin' done.”

Tate knew his father had run the ranch successfully for several decades, but since taking over, he'd changed a lot of things, instituted new systems, revised priorities. It made him twitchy to think about his father in the middle of all that, struggling and stressing himself out as he tried to keep things under control.

“Thanks, but Olivia and I decided last night that the best thing for all of us right now is a little normal. After all that new information in three days, everyone just needs to get back to regular life, you know?”

Thomas's brow furrowed, and he rocked back on his heels before settling again. “I understand it's been a lot in a very short time. But you do realize that you've got a whole new normal now?”

Tate's midsection tightened, and he took a deep breath. “Sure, we've talked about how I'll spend time with the girls, become a regular part of their lives. Olivia suggested some dinners with them, to start. But that doesn't have anything to do with my job. I have a ranch to run, kids or no kids, and that doesn't change.”

Thomas didn't answer that, and Tate relaxed a touch. Good. His dad obviously understood what he was saying. He loved that the girls were in his life, and he had hopes that maybe he and Olivia could work something out, too, but there was no rush. Everything didn't have to change. Some things could stay the way he was so accustomed to. Satisfied that he'd cleared that up, he said goodbye to his father and set off to tackle his day. It was going to be a long one, no point in wasting any more time chatting.



A week later, Olivia stood looking at what had been the living room of the

house she was supposed to be living in by now. The floors were missing, and the walls were torn down to the studs. Meanwhile, her belongings from Washington were wedged into a very expensive storage unit ten miles up the road in the next town.

“So we'll need to lay new boards, then finish them, replace the drywall, float and tape it, texture coat and paint.” Jake continued his explanation before leaning toward her. “And you didn't hear this from me, but you should insist that Mrs. Anderson get the rewiring done before we start putting up the drywall. This knob-and-tube is about thirty years past when it should have been replaced.” Folding up the piece of paper with the list of tasks, he tucked it in his pocket and gave her an earnest look. “I'm not trying to get more money, I'm really not, but it's not even allowed by code to leave that wiring in—for good reason. I won't turn her in because she owns half the rentals in town and I need the business, but if the town inspector catches wind of it, she'll fine old lady Anderson a lot more than the cost of the replacement.”

Olivia's head throbbed. As always, she'd been trying to put a positive spin on this. And truly, most days she could find the bright side of things, if she looked hard enough. However, this week had been a doozy, even by her standards.

“Is there any chance of another rental in town?” she asked. “I think I'd have better luck getting her to let me out of the lease than getting her to spring for new wiring.”

Jake gave a sharp bark of laughter, then sobered when he saw she was serious. He scratched the back of his neck, clearly uncomfortable. “Last time someone tried to break one of Mrs. Anderson's leases, she took 'em to court. They won, but not before she dragged things out so long that they ended up paying ten grand in lawyer fees. Would have been cheaper to just pay her the rent.” He smiled sympathetically. “Besides that, she's the only landlord in town unless you want to go out to the mountains.”

Olivia sighed. “Okay, I'll talk to her about the wiring, but will you do what you can to keep things moving along? It's hard on my girls not to have a real house, and with everything in storage, things are stressful for all of us.”

Jake looked perplexed. “I've been up to Tate's place, it's real nice.”

“It is, but it's not *our* house. You understand, I'm sure.”

He nodded, although she didn't think he really got it.

As she drove back to Thomas and Lucy's, where she'd left the girls while she ran errands for the afternoon, Olivia thought back over the last few days. Since the first night when she'd told Tate they should work at getting back to their normal habits, he'd seemingly done exactly that. But his going back to his normal routine meant that he went to work while it was still dark, came home long after it had gotten dark again, and spent most of his time in the house reading ranching journals and taking Lobster out to snowshoe.

He'd eaten dinner with her and the girls exactly once, had breakfast with them once, and spoken probably fifty words to them in all that time. She was beginning to get the impression that he had no idea what to do with them being in his house...or in his life.

And while it might have broken her heart if she'd let it, Olivia simply didn't have the time to worry about it. Christmas was only three days away, and she had nothing for the girls. The tree they'd decorated at Tate's was fine, but all their ornaments, the ones she'd inherited from her parents, the ones the girls were attached to, were packed away in the storage unit, and nothing *felt* like Christmas. There'd been no trip to see Santa, no baking Christmas cookies, no attending parties at friends' homes. The girls were cranky, Olivia was overwrought, and any ideas she'd had about getting a partner in all of this had rumbled out the door with Tate the first morning she'd woken up to find him long since gone.

She pulled up in front of Thomas and Lucy's and released a long sigh. The one bright light in the whole situation had been Tate's parents. She couldn't have asked for kinder, better people to be grandparents to her children, and that alone reminded her that this move had given the girls something irreplaceable.

As she walked up the stairs of the porch, the door swung open. Melissa came bouncing out and threw her arms around Olivia's legs.

Olivia was surprised by that kind of exuberance from her quiet one. “Hey Lissa, everything okay?”

Melissa's eyes shone as she gazed up at her mother. "Mommy, we had so much fun!" she exclaimed in a loud whisper as if speaking out loud might ruin it.

Olivia smiled, stroking her daughter's hair. "I'm really glad. Why don't we go inside where it's warm, and you can tell me all about it."

She let Melissa lead her inside, where she took off her coat and boots. She could hear Lucy and Jackie in the kitchen, but instead of leading Olivia there, Melissa pulled her along to the study. The walls in the big room were lined with bookshelves. The furniture was comfortable Western style, overstuffed leather sofas and chairs, a large oak desk, cowhide rugs.

Thomas was sitting in an armchair, reading glasses perched on his nose, a photo album in his hands.

"There she is," he said with a warm smile. "We've been watching out the windows for you." He winked.

"I hear you've had a lot of fun this afternoon," Olivia said, sitting on the sofa adjacent to his chair. She blinked in surprise when Melissa went over to Thomas and climbed onto his lap as if she did it every day.

Thomas moved the photo album aside to make room for his granddaughter and wrapped an arm around her casually. "Well, you want to tell your mama what we've been up to?" he asked.

Melissa turned to Olivia and began a recitation of their activities that included visiting the barn and learning the names of all the tack for the horses—and the names of all the horses, of course—then a trip to the attic to play dress-up in their late grandmother's wedding dress, a lesson in how to cut the end off a cigar—"but grandpa's not allowed to smoke them, just chew them"—and finally story time with the photo album that was all about Daddy.

By the time the recitation was over, Olivia's eyes were burning with unshed tears, and she had to pause before she could comment on any of it. "That's—" she cleared her throat. "That's the best day I've heard about in a long time." She looked Thomas in the eye. "I can't thank you enough."

He smiled gently at her. "It's only the first of lots of days, we hope. I haven't had this much fun in years."

“And did your sister do all those things with you?” Olivia asked.

“Just the barn and the dress-up. Then she wanted to go plant the herbs in the kitchen and bake cookies.” Melissa gazed up at Thomas adoringly. “But I wanted to stay with Grandpa. Grandma Lucy says next time we can trade—and also, I still get to eat the cookies even though I didn't bake them.”

Thomas laughed. “And I bet if you ran into the kitchen, Grandma Lucy has some all ready for eating, along with a big glass of milk.”

Melissa looked at her mom. “You'd better run,” Olivia said, unable to hold back a laugh. “I'll be right behind you.”

Melissa ran out of the room, and Olivia moved to stand as well, but Thomas interrupted her exit.

“The girls say they haven't seen much of Tate since those first couple days,” he said somberly.

Olivia hesitated, not sure how to handle the situation. She didn't want Tate to think she'd complained about him to his parents. And while Thomas and Lucy had been perfectly respectful of boundaries up until now, she wanted to make sure that continued. She knew it wouldn't be appropriate to let them interfere in whatever was happening in Tate's house.

“You don't have to worry about telling me the truth,” Thomas seemed to be reading her thoughts. “I'm not trying to interfere, but I do know my son.” He sighed and set the photo album on the coffee table as he leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees.

“Melissa reminds me so much of him as a kid. The way she observes everything so carefully. She wants to learn, and she doesn't want to try anything until she's sure she can do it perfectly.”

Olivia was floored by how well he already knew her child.

“Tate was like that from the start. But...well, it got worse after we lost his mama.” She saw him swallow hard. “Anne was an angel. Brought this quiet and peace to everything she did.” He cleared his throat. He obviously still had strong feelings for his late wife. “When Anne died, I wasn't prepared for what it meant to Tate. I did the things I understood needed to be done—I kept him



busy, made sure I was always here for him when he got home from school, learned how to cook some of the things his mama used to make. But I thought as long as he wasn't acting out or telling me he was upset, that meant he was doing fine.”

Olivia reached over and gave Thomas's knee a squeeze. “I'm sure you did everything you could. It must have been such a hard time for both of you.”

“What I didn't realize was that for a kid like Tate—a kid like Melissa—if you don't find a way to help them say what they're feeling...” He shrugged. “They won't.”

Olivia didn't know how to respond, didn't know what he wanted her to say, so she just waited.

“But I've been Tate's father for over three decades, and for many of those I was his only parent. Over time, I've come to realize what he hasn't been able to say—my son struggles to connect with people. Deep down, I think he's afraid to care for anyone because he knows how much it hurts to lose someone you love.”

Olivia made a strange sound in her throat as tears threatened to spill.

“He's kept a distance between himself and everyone else in his life for years now. And when the girls told me he hadn't been around this last week—hell, when I saw him here before seven a.m. every day—I knew he was doing it again.”

*Well dammit*, Olivia thought. Just in case she'd thought her day couldn't get any worse.

She shook her head. “I'm not sure what to do with that information.” Feeling sad, she looked at Thomas. “What are you asking from me?”

The older man smiled sweetly and patted her on the hand. “That's up to you, dear. Like I said, I don't want to interfere. I just thought that you should know, so maybe you can be a little patient with him. He has it in him to love deeply, but he's been hiding for a very long time. It's not going to happen quick.”

Lucy called from the kitchen, echoed by the twins, and he added, “Sounds

like we'd better head that way." He got up from his chair, and she followed suit.

"Wow, everything smells so good. My compliments to the bakers," she told Lucy and Jackie as she followed Thomas into the kitchen. She looked around the airy kitchen, surprised at the number of racks hosting cooling cookies.

"They're for Christmas," Jackie announced, looking every bit the baker in her flour-covered apron. "But we made extra so we could have some now, didn't we, Grandma?"

"Indeed we did," was Lucy's reply as she walked to the cabinet to take down empty glasses for milk.

Olivia watched Melissa inspect the cookies while her sister whispered in her ear, pointing out the different types. As if on cue, Melissa reached for a sugar cookie decorated in what looked like crushed peppermints and white chocolate.

"Those are one of my favorites," Lucy told her, grabbing a cookie for herself and biting into it.

Melissa lifted her chosen cookie to her lips and took a careful bite. Her eyes seemed to light up when the peppermint and sweetness from the white chocolate hit, and she nodded her head in agreement. Pointing to what looked like snickerdoodles, Jackie proudly proclaimed that she'd made those, and Olivia picked one up. Before taking a bite, she inhaled deeply of the rich scent of sugar and cinnamon.

"Well now, I'd best catch up," Thomas chimed in, breaking Olivia out of her thoughts. They all talked and laughed together while overindulging in warm cookies and cold milk. It was the first time in nearly five years she'd felt anything like what she'd had with her parents, and it helped ease her mind somewhat. These were two people who already loved her children. Good people. Trustworthy. People who would support her. By the time she'd packed up the girls and was heading to the car, Olivia had at least one thing in her new life settled—no matter what happened with Tate, both she and the girls had people they could rely on. Thomas and Lucy were going to make wonderful grandparents.

Now if only she knew whether their son could fulfill his role.

## FIFTEEN

Normal did not include one twin screaming while the other stood naked, dripping water all over the living room floor.

Tate stood, arms crossed, facing Melissa as she shivered and dripped. An equally wet Jackie sobbed in Olivia's arms.

"It's okay," Olivia soothed. "But I can't listen to what you want to tell me if you don't stop crying."

Melissa's obstinate expression told Tate that whatever had happened, she was likely the one responsible for it. He reached over to the back of the sofa and grabbed a chenille throw, bent down, and wrapped it around forty pounds of wet, slippery child.

Jackie buried her head in Olivia's shoulder, and the sobs finally quieted. Tate hated to see the girls upset, but he'd also had a very long day at the ranch. His plan had been to come home, take Lobster out for a quick hike, eat something in front of the television, and read *Rancher's Quarterly* until he fell asleep—the sooner the better.

Instead, he'd come home to a kitchen that looked like a tornado had passed through, both girls out of sorts, and Olivia trying to fill out some sort of paperwork for her rental house while simultaneously dealing with the girls, a load of laundry, and Lobster's dinner.

He'd quickly realized that he wasn't going to be able to cook what he wanted, watch what he wanted, or do what he wanted. This was the new normal his

father had been warning him about, and it was deeply unsettling. He wasn't meant to feel this lost and out of place in his own home.

“So, why don't we start from the beginning,” he said to Melissa as he knelt in front of her. “What happened?”

Above him, he heard Olivia sigh as she rocked with Jackie in her arms. Melissa continued to scowl.

“Lissa,” Olivia said. “You need to tell us what happened.”

The small girl shook her head and crossed her arms.

“Well,” said Tate, at a loss for what to do. Only one idea seemed like a decent possibility. “I guess everyone can just go to bed, then.” Jackie started wailing again, and Melissa glared at him before her bottom lip began to quiver. She turned around and stomped upstairs.

Tate looked up at Olivia in time to see her narrow her gaze, her lips uncharacteristically tight. Then she too marched upstairs, carrying Jackie, indignation following in their wake.

Tate stood and looked at Lobster, who had wisely stayed on his bed in the corner during the fracas.

“At least I got my quiet back,” he mumbled—though that was poor compensation for having all three of the ladies of the house angry with him. Lobster sighed, his big, soft eyes accusing.

Half an hour later, after cleaning the kitchen for the second time since he'd been home, Tate finally sat down on the sofa and opened his *Rancher's Quarterly*. It was after nine, and he needed to be at work before six in the morning, so he didn't anticipate much reading at this point.

“We need to talk,” he heard Olivia say and looked up to see her standing at the bottom of the stairs. Her tone told him this wasn't going to be good.

He set the magazine aside. “Okay.”

She began to pace in front of the fireplace, arms crossed, before finally speaking. “I understand that you had a long day at work, and I realize that this is all new, and having us crammed in the same house in the middle of

winter isn't the best setup.”

He silently said an amen to that.

“But you can't solve it by telling them to go to bed. When they're upset, they need *attention*, not to be pushed away like they're a bother. They're still learning how to deal with what they're feeling, and I don't want them to get the idea that bottling everything up or hiding it away is the right choice.”

“What is there to bottle up?” Tate asked, genuinely confused. “I mean, from the looks of it, they got into some kind of spat during bath time. Not really a lot to unpack there.”

“The issue is *why* they got into a spat. They're unsettled, and this is how they're showing it.” “They're four,” Olivia said, her voice sounding strained, “and they've been through a lot the last few weeks. They've left the only home they ever had, moved to different state, they have no one to play with here, they've suddenly gained a father and grandparents they didn't know existed...” At that, her voice cracked and she inhaled sharply before sniffing.

*Oh hell.* How could he have forgotten that it wasn't just him *or* the girls who were going through a lot? She was too—and he hadn't been much help. Tate was on his feet in a flash, moving around the coffee table and taking her in his arms. “I'm sorry,” he murmured as he held her stiff body as close as she'd allow. “I didn't mean to...” He searched for the right words.

“Be a jerk?” Olivia provided helpfully.

“Yes. That.”

She sniffed again, and he felt her head nod against his chest, then she began to relax, melting into his arms bit by bit. “They really need a lot of patience right now.”

He stroked her hair and simply kept holding her, thinking that she clearly needed some patience, too.

“And I've been trying to get everything in order, but it's like an obstacle course. The rental practically needs to be rebuilt, the only pediatrician that's taking new patients is twenty miles away in Melton, the outgoing director at the center sends me half a dozen emails a day with things he thinks I need to

know, all of our Christmas stuff is packed in that storage unit, and tomorrow is Christmas Eve,” she took a ragged breath, “and I don't have a single gift for the girls.”

Tate finally let go of her and pulled back so he could look her in the eyes. She looked...watery. And beautiful, and sad. In that moment, he was ready to hand over his internal organs if it would just make her smile again.

“I'm sorry,” he said simply. “I'm sorry that nothing seems to be going right. I guess our ideas about getting back some normal were a little premature.”

She gave him a wry smile.

“And I can't fix the house or beam in a doctor,” he nodded firmly to emphasize the next words, “but I can help with the Christmas presents.”

Her eyes widened. “Would you?”

He smiled. “Yes, I absolutely would. How about if I take off at noon tomorrow, and we can leave the girls with my parents, or ask Vince and Marjory if they'd watch them, drive into town, and get all the shopping done?”

She released a shaky breath, and he saw the tension leave her body with it. “You have no idea how much help that would be.”

He kissed her softly on the forehead, that mixture of emotions that he felt whenever he touched her swirling in his gut. “Good, then that's what we'll do.”

She gazed up at him, and he couldn't stop himself from stealing another kiss, this one on her soft pink lips. But before he could try for another, one of the girls yelled from upstairs. He and Olivia both sighed.

“I'll go up,” he said. “I need to apologize to them for earlier, and you need to have a cup of tea and just sit for a few minutes.”

“Thank you,” she said simply, but those words were enough to make him feel ten feet tall.



“And Lucy said if we can come to their house around eleven, that'll give them time to do gifts with the girls before everyone starts arriving for dinner at four.”

Tate shifted the weight of the package he was carrying and tried to keep from grinding his teeth. Going Christmas shopping had seemed like a good idea, but he'd forgotten how much he hated being surrounded by a nearly overwhelming crowd of last-minute shoppers. The only thing that made it bearable was hearing about the types of things each girl liked to do and play with. That, plus he'd been practically captivated at watching Olivia do her thing. She was a really great mother. The way she balanced getting them things that they'd love with things that were educational and engaging had him impressed. And he'd even chosen right when picking out a couple of games himself.

But since they'd left the final store, he'd had to endure nonstop planning for the apparently enormous family get-together Olivia and Lucy were cooking up for Christmas day. He didn't know how to put a stop to the insanity. He'd adjusted to the idea of a Christmas at his house with the girls and Olivia, he was even excited to see the girls open presents, but the rest of the madness was causing him to break out in hives.

To hear Olivia tell it, the girls needed to unwrap a second set of gifts at his parents' house along with a few of Lucy's great nieces and nephews. That would be followed by a family dinner at four p.m. attended by no fewer than twenty-five people, including Lucy's sister, brother-in-law, their kids and grandkids, and the ranch foreman and his family as well as Thomas's second cousin and her family from Butte.

“So we need to get at least one gift for your dad and Lucy, then maybe some small things for the kids who will be there. I'm thinking those chocolate oranges that you have to bang to break into sections? Did you ever have those when you were a kid? The girls love them.”

Tate had no idea what she was talking about, and he didn't have any real interest in finding out. His plan had been to stop by Thomas and Lucy's for a few minutes midday on Christmas to exchange gifts, then go home, just like he did every year. The giant family dinner at Thomas and Lucy's was a tradition he went out of his way to avoid, especially since it seemed to get



bigger every year. And even though they asked him to come every year, he always came up with a good excuse not to. After all, with all those people crammed into the ranch house, no one would actually miss him. They didn't need him there.

“Tate?” Olivia's voice broke him out of his thoughts. “The chocolate oranges?”

He cleared his throat and tried to calm his rising discomfort. “I've never had them, but they sound fine.”

Then Tate's gaze lit on Reed's Tack and Saddle Shop, and all his discomfort vanished like snowflakes on warm pavement.

“Hold up a minute?” he said to Olivia. She turned back expectantly. “I'd like to go in here.” He pointed to the shop. She looked confused but shrugged and followed him inside.

Tate took a long, deep breath, smelling the amazing odors of leather, oil, and wool. One entire wall of the shop contained saddles of every type and size. The back third of the space was filled with riding helmets, cowboy hats, horse blankets, and grooming equipment. And on the final wall, opposite the saddles, hung every other kind of tack imaginable. Nylon, leather, large, small, Reed's had everything a seasoned horseman could want, as well as the best beginner's setups in the state.

A smile began to curve up Tate's lips. This was the perfect thing. He'd get each girl her own set of equipment, and they could share the old pony at the ranch. While one was learning how to tack up and curry, the other could be practicing in the small ring outside the barn. This, he thought, was what a Christmas ought to be.

“Howdy, Tate,” Jess Reed said as they walked in, jingling the bell over the door.

“Jess.” He shook the older man's hand. He introduced Olivia, then turned toward the back corner of the shop where the smallest saddles were displayed.

“What can I do for you tonight?” the shopkeeper asked.

“Well, I'm wondering what you have that'd fit that little pony Dad's had around the ranch since I was a teen?”

Jess smiled. “You know someone small enough to ride old Rupert?”

Tate could feel Olivia's eyes on him. “Yep. My twin four-year-olds.”

Jess's grin grew wider. “I'd heard something about that.” He turned to Olivia again. “You must be Mama.”

“I am.”

“Well, isn't that a great thing. Just follow me, I got the best for that old pony and those little girls.”

As Jess chattered on about how excited Thomas and Lucy must be to have new granddaughters, Tate looked over the selection of pony-sized saddles. He could go with two of the same model, or he could get each girl her own unique saddle and hope he guessed right as to what each would like.

“Now that one is a pretty little thing,” Jess said as he saw Tate fingering an ornate pale leather saddle with silver conches for decoration. “Custom-made in Mexico. They do beautiful leatherwork down there.”

Olivia touched the old-fashioned cardboard price tag. “I'm not sure the girls need something quite that elaborate,” she offered, her brows puckered.

But Tate was already looking at his next choice, made of dark brown polished leather with brass stirrups and subtle decorative stitching.

He lifted it off the rack and inspected it before doing the same with the Mexican-made saddle. He examined others as well, but he kept going back to that pair.

“I think these two,” he said.

“Tate,” Olivia's voice was soft, but he heard the censure in it.

As if sensing a disagreement coming, Jess piled both saddles together in his arms. “I'll just take these up to the counter while you look around some more. If you find something you like better, we'll swap them out.” He turned away and hustled away to the front counter.

Tate met Olivia's gaze.

“That's nearly a thousand dollars' worth of saddles,” she said immediately. “Neither one of them has ever been on a horse.” She raised a skeptical eyebrow and added, “They might hate it.”

They wouldn't. He knew that as deeply as he knew Lobster loved to have his belly scratched after dinner. He knew it as well as he knew that Lucy would never stop trying to make him into a social butterfly. He knew that no child who had his DNA could turn down a horse.

“They won't,” he told her firmly. “They're my kids, so they'll adore riding. Besides, these saddles will be useful on the ranch anytime there's a kid visiting. It'll give them something to do with my dad when they visit. Don't worry about the cost—money's not an issue. I've been a single working man since I was eighteen years old, and I have plenty of money to get my girls some saddles.” He paused and looked toward the front of the shop. “In fact, I think you need one, too.”

“Oh, I don't really...” Olivia's voice faded away as Tate moved past her to the women's saddles.

“Jess?” he asked, calling the owner over from the front counter. “What about something for Olivia here?”

“I think we could find something for her.” Jess gave Olivia an up and down look. “You're not too big, so my guess is Tate'll put you on one of the mares.”

Tate nodded in agreement, looking between Olivia and a dark brown saddle with white accent stitching.

“We have a really pretty little quarter horse named Matilda,” he said. “She doesn't go out to work much right now because she's too small for the guys on staff. Back when Robbie Junior was working for us, she was the perfect size for him.”

Jess chuckled. “You mean back before Robbie Junior had his growth spurt.”

Tate laughed and agreed.

“I really don't need my own saddle,” Olivia protested. Following the line of

her eyes, Tate saw she was looking at the price tag with a frown.

“Sure you do,” he said in a voice that indicated he wasn't open to discussion. “That way, you can go with the girls on the trail that goes around the home pastures. Trust me, when summer comes, you'll love it.”

Olivia simply looked at him.

He turned back to Jess. “I'll take all three saddles, two curry kits, and three helmets.”

Jess nodded and took the saddle with him up to the front counter to join the smaller saddles for the twins.



Tate looked far too satisfied as he climbed in the truck after Jess had loaded the purchases in the truck bed.

“I'm thinking the girls could take the saddles with them to my dad's after they unwrap them, and I could get them up on the pony right away.” He started up the truck and pulled away from the curb.

Olivia's jaw tightened as she debated what to say to the world's most clueless man.

“I think Jackie's really going to love all that fancy silver on hers, don't you?”

She took a deep breath and released it slowly. “I think we should have discussed all that a little more before you went and spent nearly two thousand dollars on saddles and accessories for four-year-olds who've never ridden.”

He glanced at her before returning his eyes to the road, his brow furrowed in apparent confusion. “Are you really that worried they won't want to ride?” he asked.

Olivia shifted in her seat, wondering when this roller coaster her life seemed to be on was going to end. She was starting to wonder if moving to Montana had been a mistake.

“I don't know, Tate, and neither do you! You haven't brought up the topic

with the girls at all, or with me.” What she added in her head was that he seemed to have no problem dropping money, but getting five minutes of his time was like prying a pearl from an oyster.

Tate stiffened in the face of her criticism. “So, I have to clear all my gifts to the girls through you?”

Her stomach turned sour in an instant. “I didn't say that—”

“You pretty much did,” he countered. “If you want to see my financials, I'm happy to show you that two grand isn't anywhere near a hardship.”

Whoa. This had gone south fast. “I'm not questioning your financial position —”

“But you are questioning my capacity to choose gifts for my daughters. Riding is special to me, and it's something I want to share with them. Is that really such a terrible thing?” His voice was sad now, and Olivia suddenly felt like a jerk.

“It's not that...” She paused as they slowed down for the last traffic signal before the highway. “It just felt like you want to throw money at them, when you haven't spent any real time to get to know them.”

Tate's expression shuttered, and he shifted away from her on the bench seat of the truck.

“Yes, well, I suppose you know them better than anyone.” His voice had gone flat, and he paused as if he was picking the right words to say next. “You've also been the one in charge for four years. You never had to share that with anyone. Never had to deal with someone doing something with them that you didn't choose. Never had to trust that someone else might have something to offer them that you didn't.”

*Ouch*, Olivia thought, *that hurt*. Especially because he wasn't wrong. “Okay...I admit I haven't had to compromise with anyone about the girls, but I don't think that changes the fact that you'd rather spend money on them than spend *time* with them. I can tell you right now which one matters more.”

Tate nodded, and though he kept staring straight ahead at the road, she could see his expression was stony. “Well, I guess that makes it pretty clear. I

wouldn't want to be that dad—the one who tries to buy his kids' love. I'll return the stuff first thing in the morning,” he said quietly.

*Dammit.* She rubbed her temple as she stared out the window at the cold, dark night. “You don't have to do that,” she answered, her own voice barely above a whisper.

He didn't reply, and they made the rest of the fifteen-minute drive in silence. When they reached the cabin, Tate parked, got out, and set about covering the truck bed under a tarp. Olivia went inside and put on a cheerful smile for Vince and Marjory, who'd been nice enough to come out to stay with the girls and put them to bed. After they left, she waited for over an hour for Tate to come inside, but he didn't. Finally, exhausted, angry, and sad, she went to bed. By the time she woke up the next morning, he was gone as usual.

## SIXTEEN

Tate shoved his emptied plate away and stared into a mug of beer at the town tavern. He listened to Vince and the other rescue squad members joking as they passed around the duty signup sheet for the next month. Yesterday had been a long day, and this morning's ranch chores had kept him hustling until Thomas had come to find him in the barn to remind him of the search and rescue meeting in town. If it hadn't been for the fact he didn't want to face Olivia again, Tate might have simply told Vince to sign him up for whatever shifts were open. As it was, meeting up with the team at the tavern for a festive lunch and planning meeting provided a great excuse to avoid his problems at home.

When the sheet reached Tate, he looked it over and then began to write his name down in the spaces for weekend after weekend.

“No one expects you be available as much as you've been in the past,” Vince said quietly, placing a hand on Tate's shoulder as he leaned over and watched the younger man writing.

Tate raised an eyebrow and kept jotting his name in every open space on the sheet. “Why's that?” he asked.

Vince withdrew his hand, shook his head, and rolled his eyes to the ceiling before fixing Tate with a firm stare. “You're a hard one to get a handle on, Tate McConnell.”

Tate snorted and handed the signup sheet to Becky on his other side. He took a long drink of his beer and waited for Vince to elaborate.

“Did I ever tell you about my sister, Jean?” Vince asked, seemingly out of the blue.

“Nope,” Tate answered, his eyes on the big-screen television showing rodeo over the bar. “Didn't know you had a sister.”

Vince smiled, his gaze softening. “She was two years older than me, but you would have thought she was my mother, the way she bossed me around.”

Something in Vince's tone had Tate turning his attention to the older man.

“I was sixteen when she died.”

Tate's stomach turned over.

“Thrown from her horse. Broke her neck, died pretty near instantly. It was during a big rainstorm, and she got caught up north of the place my parents owned near the Red Creek trail. Jean was a barrel racer, as natural on a horse as anyone I've ever seen.” He shook his head, smiling at the bittersweet memory. “But we figured there must've been a lightning strike and the horse bolted. Threw her, and she landed just wrong.”

He shrugged before taking a sip of his own beer. Tate waited, his heart tender and achy.

“I finished out high school, and then I joined the Marines,” Vince said. “I wouldn't admit it to myself at the time, but I had a death wish. Jean was bossy as hell, but she was also my whole world growing up. When I lost her, I didn't think there was a lot worth doing in life anymore.”

“I'm sorry,” Tate murmured. “How'd you pull out of it?”

Vince shifted on his seat and looked Tate straight in the eyes. “I realized what a selfish bastard I was being. Jean didn't get the chance to do all the things she wanted in life. She never got to fall in love. She never got to win the state barrel racing championships. She never got to have her own kids to boss around.” He smiled warmly. “I was standing on a field in the Congo, listening to a Frenchie soldier tell me about his girl back home when I realized that I wanted a girl, too. I wanted to see my parents again. I wanted to own a house and be a father and have a *life*. Because what I had then sure didn't count.”



“Just like that?” Tate asked, disbelieving. “You realized it all in a flash like that?”

“I realized that all those things I'd always figured I'd do when I grew up didn't change when Jean died.” He took a sip of his beer while his eyes bored into Tate's. “I'd changed. I'd decided that somehow, if Jean didn't get to do them, then I shouldn't either. But what a damned waste. Jean would have been so angry with me for that.”

Vince set his beer bottle down on the tabletop with enough force to get the attention of a couple of nearby team members. He waved in dismissal and waited for them to get back to talking before he resumed. “Every day you get on this earth is a damned blessing, son. But life is a gift that's so much better when it's shared. You've been closing yourself off from everyone for years, and we've all let you. But there are innocent kids involved now. It's time for you to pull your head out of your ass and realize what an extraordinary opportunity you've been given.”

Tate's eyes widened in shock. Mild-mannered Vince had never snapped at anyone. Steady and fatherly, he ran the search and rescue squad efficiently, but he never spoke harshly to anyone, even when they messed up.

Vince's voice lowered so only Tate could hear him. “Your mother died, son, and it was tragic. But that doesn't give you the right to spit in the eye of her memory and the good fortune you've been handed.”

He grabbed the signup schedule from the middle of the table where it had wound up after making the rounds. Using the pen that dangled from a string on the clipboard, he drew a line through every date Tate had signed up for.

“You're not allowed to work again until you stop using this team to avoid your life.”

Tate swallowed, a lump crawling up his throat.

Tapping the page with the pen, he stared at Tate, making him want to squirm like a schoolboy. “Show me you don't need to be rescued, and I'll let you come back to rescuing others.”

Then Vince nodded a goodbye to the rest of the team, taking the signup sheet with him as he walked out of the bar.

Tate sat without moving and stared after him, wondering what the hell he was supposed to do when everything that he'd defined himself by for years got turned upside down.



Olivia pressed a piece of Scotch tape to secure the wrapping on the final gift and looked around the bedroom at her handiwork. The stack of gifts included games, books, dolls, and art supplies. Admittedly, it was more than she usually bought for the girls, but it had been a rough month, and they'd earned some coddling.

She picked up the small box with Tate's name on it. It contained a framed picture of him and the girls hugging right after she'd told him he was their daddy. She'd framed the photo in a leather frame with the word Daddy embossed subtly at the bottom. The frame was stitched like a saddle, the leather burnished like a well-worn piece of furniture. It was the perfect gift.

She wasn't sure he'd even want it.

She stacked the gifts in the closet before cleaning up the wrapping supplies. As she moved to open the door, her phone dinged. She picked it up to look at the message.

*Can you come by the rental house?* the message read.

Olivia sighed. It was the third time this week Jake had asked her to come by. Mrs. Anderson was still refusing to put in new electrical wiring, and Jake was too scared of the landlady to press the issue. He'd been stalling on putting up the drywall, hoping Olivia would get the old bat to concede. Olivia had asked three times, but Norene Anderson wasn't about to spend a dime more on that old bungalow than she had to.

After texting her agreement, Olivia went to pull the girls away from their movie and packed them in the car.

Once in town, she drove straight to the bungalow. Her heart skipped a beat when she saw Tate's truck parked out front along with Norene's car and Jake's work truck.

As they approached the house, she could hear Tate's raised voice.

“Daddy sounds mad,” Melissa said somberly.

“Daddy's never home,” Jackie interjected with a pout. The statement seemed to be a tangent, but the words hit home.

“You know what?” Olivia said, reaching into her purse and removing the iPad she kept with her. “Why don't you two finish watching your movie. I can already tell this is going to be boring grownup stuff.”

Melissa sighed in relief and Jackie nodded in agreement before the two small girls trudged back to the car and settled in.

As she reached for the bungalow door handle, Olivia heard Tate. “You need to get something straight here, Norene. My daughters and their momma will not be living here without updated electrical. I'm not risking an electrical fire or an ungrounded outlet with those girls. You can threaten all the lawyers you want, but you know the McConnells are a match for you. This isn't just me you're dealing with; my dad and Lucy are prepared to do whatever we need to, including going to court if that's how you want to play it. Fix the house or return Olivia's money. It's a simple choice.”

Eyebrows raised, Olivia opened the door. Norene Anderson stood scowling at Tate, who was towering over her. Jake Pickelner had chosen to observe from the safety of the far side of the room, a look of amusement on his face.

“Hi. What's going on?” she asked. As if she hadn't heard...

As Tate turned to look at her, she saw a flash of something so vulnerable, it shook her to the core. All her anger at him the previous day melted away.

“You must think I'm made of money, Tate McConnell,” Norene squawked.

“I think you have more than enough to make sure my family's safe on your property,” Tate replied, his gaze firm as he crossed his well-muscled arms over his chest.

“Tate?” Olivia said quietly.

He glared at Norene another moment, then turned to Olivia. “I'm sorry you drove all the way down here, but I think Norene's clear on the situation. It's

up to her now.”

He looked back to Norene. “You let us know what you decide.”

He walked to Olivia. “Are the girls in the car?” he asked.

She nodded as she glanced at Mrs. Anderson, who was looking unsure for the first time ever in Olivia's experience.

“Let's go home,” Tate said softly.

His gaze was gentle, entreating, and suddenly all Olivia cared about was taking Tate and the girls back to the cabin and having a warm Christmas Eve together. It didn't matter where he'd been for the last week. All that mattered was that they were family now.

“Okay,” she said.

He smiled and took her by the hand, leading her out of the bungalow that she wasn't sure she'd ever live in. And right then it didn't matter. Right then, in that moment, all that mattered was Tate and the girls and Christmas.

## SEVENTEEN

After a dinner of steak and baked potatoes followed by the classic *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer* movie, Tate said goodnight to the girls and waited for Olivia to tuck them in and come back downstairs.

She slid onto the far end of the sofa, and Tate couldn't help wishing she was closer.

“They were both out before I even turned off the lights,” she told him, reaching to the coffee table and picking up the mug of hot chocolate he'd made for her. She closed her eyes as she took a sip, and he saw just how exhausted she was. He realized he could have taken some of that from her, but he'd been so wrapped up in his own discomfort that he'd ignored her needs.

“It's been a long day for everyone,” he answered, shifting subtly to be closer to her.

She nodded, and they sat in silence for a moment.

“About last night,” he began at the same time she said, “I'm sorry for last night...”

They both stopped and chuckled softly.

“No,” he said firmly. “I'm sorry. I've been stubborn and inconsiderate. Reuniting with you, meeting the girls...it got me so out of whack that I ran away. Work has always been kind of my security blanket, and I've been clinging to it awfully hard. But that was wrong of me. I never should have

left you to deal with everything alone.”

“But you had a point, too. I've been in charge of the girls and myself for so long, I'm not sure I know how to let someone else participate in that.” She gazed down at her drink. “It's all I've wanted for so long, but now that you're really here, I'm not sure I know what that should look like.”

Tate's heart nearly split in two. How had he missed all of this? How had he never realized how much she was having to change, too? And dammit, if she could do it, he could as well.

He slid over next to her, reaching out and cupping her beautiful face with his palm. “You know what? I'm scared, too. I'm scared that if I let you in, you'll realize I'm not worth keeping around. Ever since my mother died, all I've been able to think is that if only I'd been better or different somehow...” His voice faded on the last few words, and he blinked away the emotions rolling through him.

“We're a mess,” she said before surprising him by laughing softly.

“Well, at least you're a beautiful mess,” he told her. “I know we need to start over, establish some ground rules. Figure out how to take this step by step,” he took a deep breath and ran a hand over his head, “but it's all moving so fast, I feel like every time we start to get a handle on it, everything shifts again.”

She nodded emphatically. “Every day I wake up and all I can think is, 'what next? What will blow up in my face today?’”

Lobster wandered into the room, having waited until the girls were asleep to come back downstairs. His devotion to the twins was commendable—and profitable for him as they both snuck him food on a regular basis.

“So maybe we deal with the big stuff first?” Tate suggested.

“Okay.”

He scratched his head and tried to organize his thoughts. “I've never felt about anyone else the way I feel about you,” he finally admitted. And surprisingly, it felt good. It was refreshing to acknowledge the fact to both himself and Olivia.

She smiled softly. “That's good to know, because I feel the same. Even if I hadn't wound up pregnant, I would always have regretted not knowing how to find you after that cruise.”

“But I'm not sure I can be the person that you and the girls need.” He tried to ignore the ache in his chest. “My life doesn't...I never thought...” His voice faded, but he hoped she could see the truth of what he was thinking in his eyes. He'd never planned for a wife and kids. He'd never thought that was in his future.

“If we'd been able to take the time when we first met, maybe I'd have adjusted? But now, there's no way to do it slowly. If you and I get involved together—again, that is—then the girls will think they're getting a traditional family.”

“And what if we don't work?” she added sadly. “That's what you're worried about, right?”

He nodded. “When I think about you three, I want you safe, I want you happy. I want you and my parents to know each other. I want to be able to spend time with the girls.”

She gave him a wry smile. “But?”

He shook his head as sorrow rolled through him. “But I have trouble seeing this—” He waved his arm around the cabin. “I don't see you and me living in the same place. I don't picture family dinners and holidays.” Sudden anger spiked through him. Not at her. Not at the girls. But at himself, because no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't picture it.

Olivia's eyes shone with unshed tears.

“I'm so sorry,” he told her. And he meant it. From the bottom of his wretched soul, he meant it. “You're my family,” he continued, taking a deep breath. “I love you—” He reached out and ran a thumb along her cheekbone, gazing deeply into her eyes, his voice growing rough despite his best efforts to control it. “I do love you. I was in love with you on that ship. I know that much. I just don't know that I can give you what you deserve.”

She leaned over and nestled her head against his shoulder, a long sigh escaping her.

Doggedly, he went on. “And I don't know where to go from here.”



Olivia took a long shuddering breath and tried to calm the racing of her heart. She's wanted his time, his attention, his words. And now she had them. *No takebacks*, she reminded herself silently.

*If only*, she thought. If only she hadn't left that ship without his contact information. If only she'd been able to tell him about the girls before they were born. If only they'd both had those months when they could have gotten used to what was coming—together. But they hadn't.

“I want you to be happy,” he continued. “I need you to tell me how I can make that happen.”

“You can't,” she answered softly. She knew this drill. When you were an orphan and a single mother at twenty-four, you learned that no matter what dreams you might have, in reality, the only person who could make you happy was you. The only person you could rely on was...you. “No one can make me happy. I have to build a life here that fulfills me, and the happiness will follow.”

She shifted so she could look up at him. “I have the right ingredients. I have a great job. I have the girls. And I have your parents.” Despite her sorrow, she smiled. “They've been such a blessing. I couldn't have asked for better grandparents for the girls.”

Tate smiled in return. “They're crazy about them.”

“And the feeling is mutual.” Olivia laughed. “You should have seen the four of them the other day. I walked in to pick them up, and they were performing a skit. They had your dad dressed up as the prince in *The Little Mermaid*.”

Tate chuckled and shook his head. “They've probably added ten years onto his life. He's already talking about which rodeo events they'll be best at in high school, and I'm pretty sure he's rewritten his will. I just hope he leaves me enough land to earn a living. Otherwise, I'll have to ask Jackie and Melissa to hire me as their foreman when they inherit the place.”



Olivia's heart grew warm, the way it always did when she and Tate were just being themselves without all the other pressures. If only they didn't have to make decisions about where to live and what to call each other. If only they weren't required to define what this was between them.

But the world didn't work that way. And children didn't work that way. And Olivia knew that eventually, she wouldn't want to work that way anymore, either.

So she put on her big-girl pants, and she did what she always did. She took the situation in hand and addressed it head-on. "I want you to know that I love you, too," she said. She heard his breath catch as he pulled her closer, stroking her hair while she laid her head against his shoulder once more. "And I'm not angry with you. I don't have any right to ask you for something you can't give. I don't spend a lot of time regretting things in my life, but I do regret not finding you before I left that ship. Maybe if we could have done all this together..."

He kissed the top of her head. "None of that. We have to believe we're all where we're supposed to be."

She swallowed. "I think I need to move out," she told him quietly. "It's too hard on all of us this way. You feel smothered, I feel abandoned. The girls are just confused."

He cleared his throat once before speaking; his fingers continued to sift through her hair as he said, "You can't live in that house before the repairs are done. I know it's not my place to tell you what to do, but it's a matter of safety. I can't allow the girls to sleep in a building with substandard electrical."

She nodded. She was too tired to fight about something simply on principle. "I agree."

He paused as if turning the problem over in his mind. At last, he said, "Then if you really feel you need to go, I think you should move out to the ranch. My folks have plenty of space, you'll have built-in babysitting, and I'm there all day every day for anything you need."

Olivia knew that until she could find a home of her own, his idea was the best

solution. And she was grateful. But she was also sad, because she knew that the chances that she and Tate would ever be anything but friends and possibly co-parents were quickly evaporating.

This wasn't the outcome she'd hoped for when she'd seen him standing on the ridge in that snowstorm.

“You don't think they'll mind?” she asked.

“I think they wouldn't have it any other way.” He checked his watch. “It's too late now, but as soon as the celebration is over tomorrow, I'll talk to them.”

“*We'll* talk to them,” she corrected.

He smiled. “Yes, ma'am.”

Then they just gazed at one another, breathing the same air, feeling the same electricity that was always there when they were together.

Tate's voice was low and so rough that it sent vibrations through Olivia's chest. “There has never been and there will never be anyone like you. Not for me. “

She had no idea what to say to that as his lips lowered to hers. He kissed her as if she were breakable, and deep in her chest, she wondered if she actually might be. She wondered if Tate McConnell might do what losing her parents, being left alone with twins, struggling to make ends meet, and feeling utterly alone for years hadn't.

She wondered if this moment might be the one that finally broke her.

When he slowly pulled back from the kiss, she kept her eyes closed and whispered, “Take me to bed. Just for tonight, Tate. Let's pretend it's like it could have been.”

He didn't speak again as he stood and pulled her with him. In silence, they made their way up the stairs and to his bed, where he laid her down and undressed her as if she were the most precious thing in his world. Then, as he slid inside her, his lips on hers, his skin everywhere, Olivia shuddered as tears quietly flowed down her cheeks and her heart inside her chest split into a thousand fragments so tiny they might never be glued together again.

## EIGHTEEN

By the time morning arrived, Tate was alone in his bed, Lobster snoring away on the oversized pillow on the floor.

It took him a moment to realize what had woken him up: the sounds of two small children whispering as they shook and felt every gift under the Christmas tree. He smiled as he stared at the ceiling and listened to them.

“Shh,” he heard Melissa instruct. Ever the careful one.

“It sounds like a new bike,” Jackie announced in what Tate knew she thought was a whisper, yet somehow carried throughout the house.

“It can't be a new bike,” Melissa said scornfully. “It's too small.”

Tate smiled at the rational, analytical one of the pair.

“Uh-uh. I've seen bikes that folded up,” Jackie insisted. “They fold so small, you can put them in your backpack.”

Tate laughed silently and sat up in bed. He supposed he'd better get out to the tree before they got carried away and unwrapped something accidentally.

As he sat on the edge of his bed, he noticed Olivia's shoes on the floor near the door. His heart clenched as he remembered the night before. Her beautiful body beneath his. Her plush lips and soft skin. The glint of tears in her eyes as they made love. The way he didn't mention them, simply kissed them away as his own heart split in two.

He knew damn well that he'd never have a night like that with her again. He knew he didn't deserve it, and more than that, he knew that she'd be better off without him. He didn't know how to be a husband. He didn't know how to be the kind of guy who came home for dinner every night. He only knew how to take care of his ranch, work at search and rescue, and be alone.

"It's just you and me, boy," he told Lobster as he reached down and scratched behind the lab's ears. Lobster yawned in response. Yeah. It did sound sort of boring.

Tate shook off the regrets and pulled on jeans and a t-shirt to go supervise his wily daughters.



The girls and the presents and the pancakes managed to take up so much of Tate's attention that it wasn't until late morning that he found himself alone with Olivia again.

"Are you...okay?" he asked cautiously. She'd been somewhat quiet throughout the morning, but on the other hand, she didn't seem angry.

"I will be," she told him with a smile that lacked her usual sparkle. He hated that he was the one who'd put that look in her eyes. Even if it was for the best in the long run.

"Will we talk to your parents today?" she asked, loading the last of the breakfast plates into the dishwasher. "If so, I think I should go ahead and pack up our things." She gestured upstairs.

His heart took a hit at that. She was in a rush to leave. *Move out and move on.* But that was what he wanted for her. What he knew was best for all of them, so he couldn't really complain.

"Yeah. We can talk to them when we get there before everyone else arrives."

She nodded.

"We shouldn't have..." His voice faded away. "Last night. It's made you sad," he said quietly, watching her face.

She shook her head. “It was what I wanted. I'm fine. Really.” She pasted on a too-bright smile, and Tate felt a hundred times worse.

“Okay,” he said, nodding. “How can I help?”

“Maybe pack up the girls' gifts?”

“Sure. I can do that.”

“Great. I'll go get everything else ready.”

He watched her walk up the stairs, and inside his head, a voice that sounded an awful lot like Vince told him he was being an idiot. Told him he'd been given this chance and he was throwing it away. But another voice—the one that had followed him for years—told him that he'd never been meant for a family. That he didn't belong with anyone, that love wasn't for him. That the best he could hope for was to find contentment in being alone.

The old voice won.



Olivia smiled at Tate and his father as they set off to the front yard to let the girls try the new sleds Lucy and Thomas had bought them.

“Why don't you come on in and talk to me while I get those potatoes mashed?” Lucy said before shutting the front door.

“Of course. Is there anything I can do to help with the food?”

“Well, if you don't mind getting the green beans ready, that would be perfect.”

They moved into the big farm kitchen, and Lucy set Olivia up at the table with a bowl full of green beans and a knife. She clipped off the ends, then snapped the beans before placing them into the big pot they'd be boiled in. The work was repetitious and simple, something she appreciated when her mind was the tangled mess it had been since she'd left Tate and returned to her own bed at midnight.

“So was it Tate's idea for you to move in here, or yours?” Lucy asked bluntly

while she peeled potatoes at the kitchen sink.

They'd spoken to Thomas and Lucy briefly when they'd arrived, and the older couple hadn't asked any questions, simply opened their home to Olivia and the girls just as easily as they had their hearts.

"It was mutual," Olivia answered. As disappointed as she was in Tate, she didn't want to cause problems between him and his family. She could see that this whole situation was a struggle for him. Olivia didn't doubt that Tate cared. She just doubted whether he could express that care in a way that would make them both happy.

Lucy, her back to Olivia, made a small sound that didn't convey much.

"He's trying," Olivia added in his defense. "And I know he'll be there for the girls. That's all that matters."

Lucy set down her paring knife and turned to face Olivia, a potato in one hand, sympathy in her eyes. "I bet you've been saying that since before they were born."

Olivia's brow furrowed.

"As long as they're taken care of, it's okay. As long as they're happy, it's fine. But you need to know that you matter, too."

Olivia scowled down at the green beans in her hands.

"It's not enough that he's there for the girls," Lucy insisted. "He cares about you. Anyone with eyes can see that. And you feel the same. I'd wager you two fell in love back on that cruise ship. You had to have felt something important for one another, or those little darlings wouldn't exist."

Nodding, Olivia snapped the green beans in half and dumped them in the pot with the rest. "We do...we did." She shrugged lightly. "But he can't do more than he's doing, and I can't change that. I can't force him to be a family man. I can only hope he loves the girls and tries to do right by them."

Lucy shook her head. "I've been trying to get that man to come out of his shell for years. I really thought you and those girls could finally do it."

Olivia sighed. Yes. Truth be told, she'd thought they could, too. For about five

minutes one day.

“It's fine,” she lied. “I didn't come here with the intention of finding him. I came for a good job and a nice town to raise the girls in. I got all of that, plus you and Thomas.” She smiled genuinely at the older woman. “And the girls will get a chance to know Tate for who he is. They won't grow up with mysteries and questions. They'll know exactly the man their dad is, and that's worth something, I think.”

Lucy wiped her hands on her apron and turned back to the sink. “You're too good, Olivia,” she said, her voice wavering. “He's making a big mistake. I love him like I would my own child, and I can't bear to see him throw away this chance to have a real family.”

Olivia snapped some more green beans and wisely didn't answer.

“Someday,” Lucy said softly, “Thomas and I will be gone. Who will Tate have then?”

Olivia wasn't sure, but she felt pretty certain she wouldn't be the one.

## NINETEEN

“They took to that in a hurry,” Thomas said, smiling as the twins slid away down the little hill behind the ranch house. They'd each gotten a new sled—one a purple dish, the other a lime green bullet. They'd promised to take turns and share so each got a chance with both sleds.

“They're both going to be athletic,” Tate answered with pride. “Melissa's got better balance, but Jackie's more aggressive. I'm thinking they could play on that little Kicking Cubs soccer team they run at the rec center on Saturdays.”

Thomas nodded thoughtfully. “Need to get 'em up on a horse soon, too. They're old enough.”

Tate flinched, remembering how irate Olivia had been about the saddles and other tack. Truth be told, he had been heavy-handed about it. But he'd returned the items and gotten one plain saddle and one plain bit-and-bridle combination for the girls to use on that old pony. He simply hadn't told them yet.

“I bought a saddle and other tack for Harvey the other day,” he told Thomas. “Maybe you'd like to show it all to them, next time you have a chance?”

A smile crossed his dad's weathered face. “I'd love to,” the older man answered. “I'll have them up on Harvey in no time.”

The two men watched the girls sled for a few minutes in silence. Then Thomas started the questions Tate had known were coming. “So why do you want them all to stay here with us?”



Tate tried not to sigh. He knew he had to answer his dad's questions, but it was going to be difficult when he didn't entirely understand the reasons himself.

"I think it's for the best, until we get their new place worked out. As a bonus, I'm here all day every day myself, so they'll probably see more of me this way than they have the last couple of weeks."

Thomas nodded in that patient way of his. Tate felt his own blood pressure rising. It was not a logical reaction, he knew, but it was something that had been happening between them since he'd hit fifteen and developed the never-ending urge to escape out from under his father's scrutiny.

"You don't see a future with Olivia, then?"

Running a hand through his hair, Tate watched as Jackie landed face down in a pile of snow and then popped up giggling like a maniac. Melissa brushed her sister off and stood her back on her feet before falling into the same pile herself on purpose.

"I didn't plan this, Dad." Tate looked at his father, trying to push down his resentment. "Olivia was special to me—she *is* special to me. But I wasn't looking for a wife and kids. I'll do everything I can for the girls, and I want Olivia to be happy, but I've been single all these years for a reason. I'm not the kind of guy who can give her what she needs."

Thomas cleared his throat as if to answer, but instead he cupped his hands around his mouth and yelled to Jackie to trade sleds with her sister.

He nodded at the girls' response before turning to his son. "Is that what Olivia thinks? That you're not the kind of guy who can give her what she needs?"

Tate opened his mouth, then shut it again. He felt a throbbing headache developing at the base of his skull. "She accepts what I'm telling her."

Thomas snorted and shook his head. "I'll tell ya, you may have got your sensitive nature from your mama, but that stubbornness is one hundred percent my father. Not sure how the McConnell bullheadedness skipped a generation, but genes are a strange thing."

"I could argue you're just as stubborn, insisting I should be someone I'm not."

A small smile curled up Thomas's cheeks. "All parents are stubborn when it comes to their children's happiness. You'll find that out soon enough."

"I'm happy, Dad. My kind of happy is just different from yours."

"Mm-hmm."

They watched Melissa spin in a circle in the middle of the hill as Jackie slid by laughing.

"You going to be happy when Olivia finds a new man—and he becomes the girls' stepdaddy?" Thomas asked casually.

Tate's heart clenched, the reaction unexpected and sudden. He brought his fist to his chest, rubbing the spot unconsciously. In his head, a rotating collection of faces shuffled through as every bachelor between twenty-five and forty in the county suddenly came to life inside his mind. Men with properties, men with homes. Men who were outgoing and funny. Men who were kind and easygoing. Politicians, ranchers, restauranteurs, artists. Montana was full of men and lacking in women. Olivia was going to be very popular once word got around that she was single.

His brow furrowed as he thought about seeing Olivia around town with someone else. Seeing the girls with someone else. He'd barely gotten to know them himself. What if Olivia moved in with another man, and they spent all that time with him?

"I thought so," Thomas muttered under his breath.

Tate rebounded, the aforementioned stubbornness rearing its disruptive head. "I want her to be happy. If she meets someone who can give that to her, then I'll support it."

Thomas turned to Tate, a sad smile on his face. He slapped his only son on the shoulder a little too firmly before he said, "Son. You're a total idiot."

Then he walked back into the house.



“So you're the famous Olivia,” Tate's second cousin, Roxanne, said as she stood next to Olivia at the buffet set up in the dining room.

Olivia smiled at the bleached blonde while she scooped mashed potatoes onto a plate for Melissa. “I didn't know I was famous.”

The other woman smiled broadly. “Oh, you are. All Lucy and Thomas have talked about for days are you and the girls.” She patted Melissa on the head kindly. “And they were right—y'all are just as cute as can be.”

Melissa nodded seriously. “Grandpa says I look just like Daddy when he was little, and he was cute, too.”

Olivia handed the full plate to Melissa and pointed her toward the table where Jackie was already seated with some other kids.

“I tell you what,” Roxanne said. “I never would have thought I'd hear anyone calling Tate *Daddy*.”

Olivia nearly snorted out loud. Yeah, she got that.

“He's settling into it,” she told Roxanne. “He's really good with the girls, and he's getting better at it every day.”

“That's great,” Roxanne said as she waited for Olivia to finish loading her own plate. Then the two women went to sit at one of the smaller tables set up in the living room. Lucy and Thomas had invited so many people, there was no way to seat everyone at one table together.

Once they were settled, Roxanne continued. “I have to tell you the truth.” She lowered her voice and leaned in toward Olivia. “If you hadn't come along, I don't think Tate would have ever had a family. He's a good man, but...” Her voice faded as she shrugged apologetically.

Olivia sighed. Yes. She knew. He *was* a good man. And underneath all his self-protective armor, he was also a loving and generous man. But the effort it took to find that guy required more energy than she knew she had. As much as it hurt her heart, she couldn't continue to fight him on his insistence that he wasn't cut out to be a family man.

Olivia was tapped out, and she was woman enough to admit it. “He's...” she

paused, wondering how to say it diplomatically. "Going to be a good father." There. She'd leave it at that.

"I guess there's no chance the two of you will get back together?" Roxanne asked softly.

She shook her head, stirring the green beans on her plate with the tip of her fork before spearing a piece of bacon. "We discussed it, but it doesn't really fit with his plans. He wasn't expecting all this. I get it. It's a lot to get used to."

Roxanne took a big gulp of wine. "It would be good for him to have to get used to something for once. His mother was the sweetest woman alive, and also all about family. She would have hated how he's chosen to live his life. All alone, pushing everyone away." She shook her head, mirroring Olivia's earlier gesture. "And I don't believe for a minute that's actually what makes him happy."

Olivia didn't know what to believe anymore. She just knew she wasn't going to spend more time trying to convince him to love her enough to make her fantasies come true. It was tearing her apart inside, and she couldn't afford that. She needed to be able to focus on her girls and her new job. She didn't have the bandwidth for a man who didn't want to be with her.

"Well," she told Roxanne. "I want him to be happy, so I hope he is." She gave the other woman a tight smile, then changed the subject.

No, Olivia didn't have what Tate needed, and she wasn't sure any woman ever would. But that didn't mean she wouldn't ache for the loss of him for a good long while. Maybe even forever.

## TWENTY

It was nearly ten p.m. when Tate finally returned home after the Christmas gathering at his parents' house. He'd said goodbye to the girls and taken the leftovers Lucy had insisted on giving him. Now as he entered the darkened house and stopped to give Lobster a scratch on the head, he realized that he was alone in his own home for the first time in weeks.

He put the food away in the refrigerator and took a seat on the sofa. Lobster rested his head on Tate's knee, and he petted the old lab as he looked at the lights on the Christmas tree. He smiled, remembering all the ruckus the girls had created decorating the tree. At the moment, the house seemed almost eerily quiet without their little chipmunk voices carrying down from the upstairs bedroom.

Then Tate spied a single gift still sitting beneath the tree, about the size of a paperback book. There was no way they'd missed unwrapping a present during the frenzy that morning. The girls were devoted to presents, both giving and receiving. They'd never have missed a gift.

"Did Santa Claus slip in here while I was gone?" he asked Lobster as he leaned forward and snagged the box.

Lobster yawned before curling up on his pillow near the fireplace.

Tate looked at the gift, shook it a bit, then turned it over. On the other side was a small gift tag with his name written on it. Recognizing Olivia's handwriting, he carefully lifted the taped ends of the package, then unfolded the decorative paper. Inside was a leather picture frame, stitched like one of

the ornate saddles he'd looked at for the girls. The photo inside showed him hugging Jackie and Melissa.

He traced the outline of their sweet heads with his index finger. Olivia must have left the gift for him before they'd headed out to his parents' house earlier in the day. And now, here he was, with all the solitude he'd craved, holding this reminder that he wasn't alone anymore. These beautiful girls were his. They were part of him, and no matter how far away they might go, he'd never be able to operate as a lone wolf again.

“Well, damn,” he murmured to Lobster. Holding the frame carefully, he stared down at the picture and tried to imagine Olivia choosing the frame for him, carefully trimming the photo to fit, polishing the glass to make it crystal clear. She'd spent time choosing this gift, had put effort into it.

And he'd gotten her a gift card to the local coffee shop. “For your first day at work,” he'd said. “When you get a coffee break.”

God. What a heel he was. This. This was why he wasn't the right man for her. He didn't deserve a woman who was this thoughtful and considerate when he was such a clumsy, insensitive jerk.

Then his father's voice rang through his head. “Son, you're a total idiot.” Yeah. He was. But not for the reasons his father thought. No, he was an idiot because he had no idea how to treat a woman like Olivia, and all he did was disappoint her at every turn.

“But at least I can say thank you,” he told Lobster before reaching into his back jeans pocket and extracting his cell phone. He pulled up her number and quickly tapped out a message.

*Got the photo. Can't thank you enough. It's beautiful.*

He hit send and waited, laying his head back against the back of the sofa, his uncooperative ears straining for the sounds of laughter and games in the old cabin. But all he heard were Lobster's soft snores.

*You're welcome,* Olivia's reply came.

He stared at the message, yearning for something more from her. Wishing he could hear her voice, if only for a moment.

When nothing else came through, he typed two more words. *Good night.*

He waited there alone in the dark, except for the soft lights of the Christmas tree, for another hour, but a reply never came. Finally, he stood and made his way upstairs to his bedroom, where he crawled under the covers and breathed in the scent of her one last time.



A week later, Olivia stood in the doorway of her new office and sighed with satisfaction. She wasn't officially beginning until the next day, but she'd already come in two mornings in a row and organized the space to suit herself. The office was closed during the week between Christmas and New Year's, so she'd had the place to herself and could finally focus on cleaning out emails and files as well as reading background on the organization's recent projects and looking over the budget for the upcoming fiscal year.

Since moving in with Thomas and Lucy, things had become exponentially easier for Olivia and the girls. She felt guilty at how much help the older couple gave them, but both of them insisted it was the best thing that had happened to them in years. Olivia made sure to buy groceries and stock the refrigerator, and she and the girls got up early and cooked breakfast for the whole house most mornings. But Lucy and Thomas had kept the girls entertained, had taught them to do chores, taken them riding on the pony and shopping in town. Their help had freed Olivia up to come get her new office ready and make the extensive list of phone calls and arrangements necessary to prepare for the start of the second half of the school year and the repairs to her rental house.

Norene still hadn't agreed to upgrade all of the electrical wiring, but she'd replaced the ones that were the most potentially dangerous, and Olivia had gotten her to pay for a new stove and washer-dryer set, so it felt like a win. The little house was looking better each day, and Olivia hoped that within a couple of weeks, she and the girls could move in.

“Mommy!” Jackie yelled from the front room of the small office.

Olivia walked to the reception space, and both Jackie and Melissa ran to

throw their arms around her legs. Lucy smiled as she stomped snow off her boots before she closed the door behind them.

“Did you have fun?” Olivia asked, looking down at two rosy faces.

“We got hot chocolates, and we learned how to scrape the snow off the window of the truck,” Jackie answered.

“They were so helpful,” Lucy said with a smile. “We went to the post office, and they put all the stamps on the letters, then we stopped at the coffee shop for hot chocolate, and when we came out and there was new snow on the truck, they used the long broom from the coffee shop to sweep it all off the window.”

“So Grandma could see to drive,” Melissa said earnestly.

At the girl's use of the name Grandma, Olivia saw Lucy's eyes light up. “You are both so helpful to Grandma,” the older woman gushed as she knelt and hugged both girls at once.

“Thank you for taking them this morning. I feel like I'm finally ready for the new job now. And I got all the paperwork to get them registered for their preschool done, too. They'll be starting when the other kids come back from winter break.”

Lucy said her goodbyes and left for an afternoon of knitting with some of her friends. Olivia began to gather her things so she could take the girls to the grocery store and then back to the ranch.

“Mommy?” Jackie asked. “Will Daddy be there when we get home?”

They probably knew the answer to that better than she did. Tate had spent time with the girls every morning when he came to work, and he'd stayed at the end of some days for pony rides and sledding, but Olivia hadn't talked to him other than in passing. The girls told her about spending time with him while he had his coffee in the mornings, and she watched as they all played in the snow in the afternoons, but she didn't get involved. Neither did she ask him to do anything for them. She was tired, and her heart hurt. For now, she would simply let things progress as they would.

“I don't know, hon. Why do you ask?”



Jackie shot a look at Melissa, who was drawing on a piece of paper she'd taken off the receptionist's desk.

Olivia took Jackie's hand and walked with her into her own office, sensing that Jackie didn't want her sister to hear the discussion.

Jackie climbed up on a chair and watched Olivia sit down at her desk. “Mommy, how come now that he knows about us, Daddy doesn't want to live with us?”

Olivia blinked, searching for an appropriate answer. “Well, not all moms and dads live together. You know that.”

“But we were living with Daddy.”

Olivia sighed. No, it seemed to her that they'd simply been existing in Tate's space. They'd never lived together.

“We were staying with him while our house was getting fixed, and now we're staying with Grandma and Grandpa. Once it's ready, we'll live in our own house, just the three of us, like we always have.”

“But I like Daddy,” Jackie said quietly.

Olivia couldn't tamp down the immediate response in her head—*I do, too*. Yes, she still liked him, even after he'd told her he couldn't be with her, even after she'd accepted that they weren't going to be a family the way she'd wanted.

The fact was, Olivia still lay awake in bed at night and remembered the feeling of his skin on hers, the taste of his lips, the words he'd whispered to her in the dark. She still remembered the man she'd fallen in love with on that ship, and the shadows of him she'd seen since coming to Montana.

“And Daddy likes you,” she told Jackie. “But he didn't know about us for a long time. And he had his life here. He's still figuring out how to fit us in, but it might not be in the same house with him.”

Before Jackie could answer, Olivia's phone chimed. She picked it up to see a text from Jake.

*Can you come over to the house? We could use your input.*

Olivia put aside her thoughts of Tate. This was her life. She had two kids to raise, a rental house to manage, and a new job to conquer. Maybe when the girls graduated from high school, she'd look for a man. Until then, her to-do list was full up.

## TWENTY-ONE

Tate stood on the porch of his dad's house and stared through the windows into the warmly lit living room. There sat Thomas, one girl on each knee, Lucy in the chair next to him, her reading glasses on, as Olivia held up different shoes, asking everyone's opinion on each pair before tossing them into one pile or another. They all laughed as she presented one particularly bizarre-looking pair of high heels with sequins on them and gold chains for ankle straps.

Tate had been at the ranch late, working in the barn and helping one of the horses foal. He'd decided to stop by the house to say goodnight before taking the cold, dark fifteen-minute drive home. But somehow, as he stood there on the porch watching them all, the pain in his heart was so sharp, he couldn't bring himself to open the front door.

*This was what you wanted, a voice in his head reminded. You said you didn't belong there, that you didn't want to be in that picture.*

But now as he looked at it, standing outside, watching the warmth and love that existed beyond the cold glass, he wanted to be there very badly. In that moment, watching all the people he loved in the world being happy without him, he finally understood what it meant to need something so badly that it overwhelmed all your fears, all your reservations and insecurities.

Because in that moment, Tate wanted a family more than he'd ever wanted anything in his life.

But he'd made a choice, right? He'd told them all—over and over—that he

didn't belong there. With a sigh, he turned and walked back off the porch, making his way to his truck, parked near the main barn. Then he started it up and drove away, wondering the entire time if he might have made the biggest mistake of his life.



A week later, Tate stood and watched as Olivia—*his* Olivia—chatted to Deke Harper at the grand opening of the winter carnival.

Every year, the McConnell ranch sponsored the opening reception. Barbecue, local craft brews, and this year, a country trio from Butte. Most of the town came—and then nursed their resulting hangovers the next day.

This was one of Tate's favorite events of the year. While he generally preferred his quiet, solitary lifestyle, Tate did like the winter carnival. The kick-off reception was always a night to relax, catch up on the gossip from nearby towns, and evade the speculation on who was next to get married. Okay, maybe the last wasn't particularly relaxing, but he could put up with it with a reasonable amount of aplomb, usually.

But not tonight.

No, tonight, Tate was facing down the specter of Olivia in public, mingling among the people of his hometown, making friends and charming the men everywhere she went. In a state that had more men than women, a new single, attractive young woman was cause not only for celebration but quick action. He'd watched no fewer than three bachelors introduce themselves to Olivia. And now she was laughing at something Deke Harper had to say.

Deke Harper wasn't funny. Ever.

“Could have used you out on Highway 6 yesterday,” Vince's rough voice interrupted Tate's sour thoughts.

Tate tore his gaze away from Olivia and blinked at Vince.

“Had a car slide into the ditch there by the Ramirez place. Young couple passing through to Idaho. Took forty minutes to find them. They'd ended up hood down in a six-foot drift.”

Tate's gaze had strayed to Olivia and Deke once more, but he wrenched it back to Vince. "You're the one who benched me," he muttered, and followed the sentiment with a long drink of his beer. "Not sure even how I'm supposed to get back in your good graces. You weren't so clear on that part."

Vince snorted. "Try not being so damned stubborn. Spend some time with friends, do right by your family." He leaned forward and whispered, "Stop that pretty girl of yours from starting something up with Deke right under your nose."

Tate was intimately familiar with impatience, forbearance, and tenacity. But he rarely felt anger. Pure, unadulterated, boiling-your-blood mad. Somehow, Vince had managed to pull the trigger, and Tate felt a red-hot surge of anger roll through him.

A growl erupted from somewhere inside that he didn't even know he was capable of. "They're not starting something up," he snarled at Vince.

The older man just grinned, unrepentant. "Mm, I beg to differ. They're over there trading phone numbers." He shook his head. "Maybe you'd better get moving before they schedule their first date."

Tate's feet were moving before his brain had a chance to catch up, and while he realized he'd been manipulated by the wily leader of the search and rescue team, he almost immediately decided he didn't care. If it meant getting Olivia out of the clutches of Deke Harper, no cost was too high to pay.

"Olivia," he said more sharply than he'd intended as he reached her side. "Can I talk to you for a minute?"

She looked at him, a small furrow on her brow.

"Tate." Deke held out his hand affably. "Good to see you."

Tate glanced at the other man's hand and then back to Olivia. "We need to talk."

Deke raised a brow and pulled his hand back, muttering something that sounded a lot like, "Okay, then."

"Uh. Sure," Olivia murmured before turning a bright smile on Deke. "Thank

you so much for all the information. I'll make sure to get in touch when we have the program up and running. It's so generous to offer up your ranch for some of our activities.”

Deke nodded, threw Tate a wary look, then walked away.

Tate turned to face a scowling Olivia, who crossed her arms over her chest. “Well?”

He realized belatedly that he had absolutely nothing to tell her. He'd gotten angry, and where had it led him? To Olivia's side, without a plan.

But at least Deke was gone.

“What did you need?” Olivia pressed.

“How do you know Deke?” he asked, following the concept of *the best defense is a good offense*.

“What?”

He pushed on. In for a penny and all that. “How do you know Deke?”

“I met him about fifteen minutes ago,” she answered warily. “I'm not sure that counts as knowing him.”

“Well, he's...” Tate searched for something negative to say. The fact was, Deke was an all right guy, just not all right for Olivia. “Not very responsible with his cattle. Had a whole dozen wander off his property last summer. Wasn't keeping his fences mended.”

As Olivia stared at him in wonder, he blundered on. “It's a good measure of a man. You can tell what kind of a person someone is by how they treat their animals.” His argument gained steam. “And everyone knows that people who don't take good care of animals won't take good care of kids. I don't want the girls spending time with someone like Deke Harper. He's liable to let them wander right out of the house and into the middle of a street somewhere.”

There. That was a worthy explanation, Tate thought, crossing his arms and giving Olivia the stare he usually reserved for his most recalcitrant employees.

“You have got to be kidding me,” Olivia ground out slowly between clenched teeth, her warm brown eyes snapping with anger. “You saw me talking to another man and came over here to scare him away? What are you, the twins’ age? Someone looked at the toy you’d tossed aside, and you couldn’t stand the thought of sharing it?”

Tate gaped at her. No, that wasn’t it at all. Didn’t she care who she was spending time with? Who she might have the girls spend time with? He grabbed her wrist and towed her to the high, wide double doors of the lobby. Looking around for privacy, he tugged at her wrist and headed over to the nearest exit.

“What are you doing? It’s freezing out here.” she hissed in protest.

He didn’t stop until they’d reached the greenhouse run by the local 4-H group. Yanking on the handle, he said a silent word of thanks as the door opened and he pulled her into the warm interior. “I’m trying to warn you away from men who might not be healthy for the girls to be around.” Yeah. Exactly. That was exactly what he was trying to do.

“I had a fifteen-minute conversation with the man. It had nothing to do with the girls.”

He stepped closer to her, but she held her ground, putting them nearly nose to nose.

“You exchanged phone numbers. I saw you. He was asking you out, right? You were giving him your number so you could go on a date?”

Her eyes widened. “Oh. My. God.”

He narrowed his gaze. Oh my God, what?

“You’re jealous!”

A dismissive puff of air passed through his lips, and he opened his mouth to protest, but she cut him off before he could. “How dare you. You can’t manage to spend more than a couple hours under the same roof with me, and you’re going to get jealous when you see me talking to another man?”

Something flared inside him. Passion. Hot, sharp, and out of control.

He wrapped a hand around her upper arm, tugging her against his chest. He heard the gasp of air leave her lungs in shock.

“I didn't like the way he was looking at you.” His voice was so rough, it sounded more like a growl.

Instead of pulling out of his loose grasp, she seemed to melt into him. “How was he looking at me?”

Their gazes met and locked, electricity crackling in the air around them.

Tate inhaled deeply, the scent of her curling through his chest, down deep inside, feeding the flame that had been lit, oxygen to the fire.

“Like he wanted to do this,” he murmured before he lowered his head.



Olivia gasped as Tate's mouth sealed over hers. Her heart raced, and one of her hands stole upward to wrap around the back of his neck while the other pressed against his firm chest.

She moaned as his tongue slipped between her lips. This wasn't a Tate she knew. No, this man wasn't the earnest lover from the ship, nor the distant man from the last few weeks. This Tate was hotter, more alive, gritty, and greedy. His hands roamed over her curves until he cupped her rear and yanked her into him. Acting on instinct, she wrapped one leg around his, her calf behind his knee.

The ache in her nipples intensified as one of his hands stole beneath the stretchy top she wore. He stroked her nipple with his thumb, then cradled her breast in his palm, a desperate noise escaping his throat.

She didn't know who this man was, but she wanted him with every fiber of her being. Wanted to feel his touch on her bare skin, wanted to hear his rough voice in her ears, wanted to be filled by him until she felt as though she would burst like an overripe peach.

Before she knew it, Tate had picked her up without breaking the kiss and turned, striding over to the large potting bench off to the side. Setting her



down, he shifted so his back was to the exterior, his big, hot frame protecting her from any potential viewers.

He lifted up her top and freed her breasts from her bra. Then as she arched her neck and moaned his name, he lowered his head, first laving a nipple with his rough tongue, then sucking the tender skin, pulling the plump flesh into his mouth.

“Oh God,” she hissed into the night air as desire overtook her. She ached everywhere, her breath racing, need coiling tight.

“You're so beautiful,” Tate whispered, his lips coasting over her collarbone. And then there were no more words. She felt the release of the button on her jeans followed by the telltale sound of the zipper, and then his fingers slipped beneath fabric and skin touched skin before the heat of his hand nearly sent her springing off the bench when he cupped her mound.

As the party continued inside the lit-up main building, and Olivia's mind went to static, Tate brought the raging need inside her to a tumultuous crescendo, covering her mouth with his before she could cry out in the shadowy greenhouse.

Her breath came in gasps as he slid his fingers inside her and his hips flexed against hers where she was pinned to the bench.

“I need to be in you,” he told her while he thrust two fingers in and out, making her crazy with lust.

With concerted effort, she pushed him back. For a moment, Olivia thought she saw a flash of hurt on his face. Then she lifted her hips to shove down her jeans and panties. Seeing that, he quickly did the same. Even though it was warmer in the greenhouse than it was outside, she'd have to take her boots off in order to get out of her jeans, and that was something she didn't want to do—she hoped this would be enough. Tate seemed to have the same idea; he only pushed his jeans down to his knees before they were once again touching.

He lifted his head and gazed into her eyes, drunk with lust, hot with unslaked need, possessive in a way she'd never felt from any man.

Turning her around, he had her bend over the potting bench, resting on her

elbows. His hands were everywhere, touching, fondling as her arousal rose rapidly. His erection was hard pressed at her back, and she went up on tiptoes as she leaned on the bench. They moaned in the same breath when he entered her from behind in one full stroke. Setting a powerful pace, he flexed his hips, driving into her over and over.

Olivia held onto the bench, her moans becoming louder with each dynamic thrust. When they both finally came, she thought she saw stars sparkling behind her tightly closed eyelids.



Turning around, she looked up at him, his eyes still closed. “What are we doing?” she whispered, softly stroking his stubbled cheek.

Bowing his forehead against hers, he sighed. “Losing our minds?” he asked, chuckling softly before pulling away slightly to kiss the top of her head.

“You can't have it both ways,” she told him softly, gently, because she was nearly as confused as he appeared to be.

“I know,” he admitted. “Maybe I made a mistake.”

“Which time?” she questioned. “When you agreed I should move out of your house, or tonight?”

He didn't answer for a moment, and her stomach churned. She shoved at his chest, but he didn't budge.

“Shh.” He kissed her on the cheek. “Give me a minute. The words don't come all that easy.”

She waited then, not even sure what she hoped to hear, but certain she needed to hear something.

“When I saw you with him, I just...” He paused, taking a long shuddering breath. “I don't know how to do this, and I'm so terrified I'll ruin it.”

Her eyes began to sting as her hand moved to the back of his head and she stroked the soft short hair there.

“I don't know how, either.” Her voice broke as she tried to capture the thoughts that danced through her head like wisps of smoke. “This is all new to me, too.”

“Every time I see you at my dad's house, all I want is to touch you, talk to you, make sure you're okay and the girls are happy.”

The tears overflowed then, and she sniffed. He pulled back to look at her. “I did this to you. I'm so sorry.”

She blinked at him.

“I actually am losing my mind.” He gave her a wry smile, and she laughed softly in spite of the tears.

“Maybe we could try?” she asked. Because she had to. She couldn't just walk away when she knew he wanted more, even if neither of them was sure how to get it.

“Maybe we should,” he answered, reaching up and tucking a lock of hair behind her ear. “But maybe we should start at the very beginning. Have some dates, just the two of us. Get to know one another as we are now—here.”

She nodded. Okay. She could do that. After all, she wasn't a single twenty-four-year-old anymore. And this wasn't a vacation. It was the rest of their lives, and the girls' as well.

“Then I think we should keep you and the girls separate from you and me—for now,” she told him.

He seemed to consider it. “No family time?”

She took a deep breath, searching for the right words. “It's hard—on me and on them. And it confuses things. I know you want to be their father. That's not in question.”

He kissed her again then, one burst of lingering passion that stole her breath, before saying roughly, “It's not in question that I want you, either. I just want to make sure I'm good for you. That I'm what you need.”

“Okay.” She tried to catch her breath, even as she could still feel how aroused he was where his hips pressed against hers.

“Olivia? May I take you out to dinner Saturday night?” he asked with a gleam in his eye.

She grinned at that. “I'd like that.”

“Me, too,” he whispered.

The sound of laughter floated out as a group of people from the party wandered out of the main building toward the parking lot.

Even as she realized her top was still askew, he stepped back to let her adjust it, careful to keep his body where he shielded her from view should anyone venture into the darkened greenhouse for any reason.

“It's late,” she said. “Lucy's niece is only fifteen. I should probably get back so she can go home and get to bed herself.”

He nodded, and she stepped past him. He reached out and touched her hand briefly. “I'll see you Saturday,” he said.

Her heart fluttered in her chest. “Yes,” she told him with a secret smile. “See you then.”

## TWENTY-TWO

Tate spent the next few days working from sunup until sundown. Some of the fences had been knocked down by tree falls, and he and his workers repaired and replaced what they could to keep from having to move the herd. He also plowed the road to his father's house, installed a new sink in his laundry room, chopped the better part of a cord of wood, and took Lobster on three hikes.

And still all he could think about was Olivia. The taste of her lips, the feel of her skin, the sound of her voice. Getting a glimpse into what being apart from her would really mean had sparked something inside him he didn't think existed. He still didn't know if he could do right by her, but he damn well wanted to try.

The cowboy in him took hold as he thought about how to be the kind of man she deserved. He planned a formal date. He wanted to pick her up, take her out, spoil her like a man should with the woman he cared for. So when Saturday night arrived, he showed up to his father's house with a sparkling clean truck, wearing his best hat and boots, and a reservation at the most expensive steak house in town was waiting for them.

"Well," said Lucy as she ushered him into the foyer. "Look at you." She leaned up and kissed him soundly on one cheek. "You look ready for prom."

He tried not to roll his eyes. He supposed this was what mothers did. Made you feel like blushing and gritting your teeth all at the same time.

"Well, we're going to Finley's," he told her. "I hear you need to clean up for

it.”

Lucy's eyes sparkled as she grinned. “Finley's, huh? That's where your daddy took me for our very first date.”

Tate tried not to cringe. He also reminded himself that it was a small town, and there weren't that many choices.

“Who's that handsome young buck in my foyer?” Thomas joked as he walked in.

“Guess I don't dress up often enough,” Tate muttered.

Thomas laughed and slapped him on the back. “Did I hear you say you're going to Finley's?”

Tate sighed. Where was Olivia? He really needed to be rescued from this hell. “Yeah, Dad. I thought a steak sounded good.”

“Finley's is good luck for first dates,” Thomas said with a wink as he put an arm around Lucy.

Tate tried really hard not to think about what that could mean. He didn't want to know anything about his parents' dating lives. Not a single thing. Really.

“Hi, there. I'm ready.” Olivia's voice drifted down the stairs as she descended.

Tate's gaze moved from his parents to the staircase, and all the words in his mind dissipated in a haze. All that was left was Olivia.

Her long dark hair was pinned up in some sort of loose knot on top of her head. Curling tendrils fell around her face and down her neck—trails a man could follow with his fingers, his lips, and his tongue. Her long, lean curves were covered by a red dress that clung to her softly. The fitted top had tiny sleeves that barely covered her shoulders, the neck cut wide to show her collarbone and barest hint of cleavage. The skirt flowed and swished as she walked, falling to just above her knees.

His gaze traveled down her sleek legs to the four-inch red, strappy stilettos on her feet. He swallowed once, then cleared his throat. “Uh, hi,” he managed to rasp.

If he'd had better blood flow to his brain, he might have noticed the raised eyebrows and mile-wide grins on Thomas's and Lucy's faces, but all he could see was Olivia.

She reached him and smiled, and his heart nearly burst out of his chest.

“Are you ready?” she asked.

Then he heard a little squeak, followed by childish giggles. Olivia raised an eyebrow. “We'd better go before they disobey and come down here,” she whispered.

He ducked to look up the stairs, and there at the top, hiding behind the railings, were two little faces. He grinned and winked at them. They burst into hysterical giggles.

“I told them they had to stay upstairs, but they watched me get ready, and they've been going on about dates and kissing for the last half hour.” Olivia rolled her eyes and grinned.

Tate tried to keep his approval from showing. His daughters were obviously on his side. He thought kissing sounded like an excellent activity for a date. “Well, we'd better get moving, then. Our reservation is at seven.”

Then, under the full scrutiny of his entire family, Tate helped Olivia on with her coat and escorted his date out of the house.



Looking across the table at Tate, Olivia wondered if this was a new beginning or only a momentary detour. She'd known two Tates now—the Tate she'd first met on vacation, and the Tate she'd found in the wilds of Montana. One was sweet and affectionate, but not tethered to the real world. While the attraction had been undeniable, she hadn't really known Tate all those years ago after only a few days on a cruise ship. She didn't think it would have been possible to truly get to know someone in a situation like that. It was only when they were in their home that their true self emerged. The Tate she'd met here in Montana had disappointed her in a number of ways—but he'd blown her away countless times. He'd been so protective, so

good with the girls, so gentle with the animals under his care. He wasn't the same person she'd met on the boat, no—but she loved this version of him, too. She wanted a future with him. And now, at last, it seemed like he wanted that too.

Tate looked at her over the top of his menu. “What has you smiling?” he asked.

She laid her menu down on the table. “Just thinking about all we had to go through to get here. As much as I talked to the girls about how you lived here in Montana, about how we might see you again, I didn't really have a realistic picture of what that might mean. How could I? I barely knew you. I only knew...vacation you.”

He reached across the table and stroked her hand. “We've made some mistakes. It's an unusual situation. But I sincerely want to start again. I want to get to know you here in the real world. I want to be what the girls need.” His voice cracked before he cleared his throat to continue. “I care, Olivia. I really do.”

Her heart thudded hard in her chest for just a moment. “Me, too,” she said.

“Let's start with what you're ordering for dinner. I need to learn all your favorites.” He winked the same way he'd winked at the girls earlier that evening. Tate was a man who winked. A sexy wink. A fun wink. She'd just learned this about him. It was a start.

They made it through the meal with small talk. She explained what she'd be doing in her new job, he told her about the business—how many cattle they had, how their land leases worked, what a typical day looked like for him.

“So you'll lose that lease if you don't find a use for the land?” she asked as the server cleared their plates.

“Yep. The feds aren't interested in letting me keep it for no reason, I can't imagine why,” he joked.

“But you don't need it for grazing?”

He shook his head and picked up his napkin off his lap, folded it loosely, and laid it on the table. “We really don't. I've considered some sort of breeding



program, but that's a whole new business, to start, and I'm not sure I have the time or the inclination right now.”

She sat for a moment, ideas percolating. “There are barns there? And corrals?”

“Yeah. Those were built by the feds back in the day. They used them for some research programs, I think.”

Olivia smiled as a plan began to formulate in her mind.

“Want to partner with the new executive director of Dreams for Disabilities?” she asked playfully.

He leaned forward, his gaze dropping momentarily to her cleavage before he raised it again to meet her eyes. “More than you can imagine,” he said in a husky voice.

“Then let me tell you about my idea.”



An hour later, Olivia was sitting on his living room sofa as Tate handed her a cup of freshly brewed coffee. Lobster rested his head on her knee, and her eyes shut for a brief moment as she drew in a long breath to savor the coffee steam.

“You make great coffee,” she said. “I don't think I ever took the time to tell you that.”

He smiled as he took the seat next to her. “And you have some amazing ideas for that organization of yours.”

“Well, it only makes sense to narrow our focus to dreams that involve livestock, hiking, camping—the kinds of things Montana is known for and that we can do better than anyone else. Let the bigger organizations handle dreams about Disneyworld and dinners with celebrities. We can be the one-stop shop for these Montana-themed dreams, and that will keep funds rolling in—and disabled children served with great experiences.”

Tate nodded, amazed at how sharp she was. She was an amazing businesswoman, and added to that, she was running a nonprofit.

“So, you think we can turn that piece of land into the perfect location for all these events for the kids?”

“I do,” she told him, giving him a knowing smile. That confidence was sexy as hell. “If I can raise the funds to make those improvements to the trails and the barn, make them accessible, I’m sure they’ll be well-used.”

“And I’ll keep the land, and be able to write off a portion of the lease as a tax deduction.” He thought for a moment. “I would like to try a breeding program there at some point, but I think we have plenty of space for both your organization’s programs and that.”

She gave him a coy smile. “Maybe the kids who come to visit could spend some time with the calves and foals?”

He grinned. “I understand why they hired you.”

She took another sip of her coffee, and he glanced at the clock on the wall. As much as he wanted her to stay, he knew that wouldn’t be the best choice for their fresh start. This was a first date, and he wanted to show her he could do it right.

“It’s probably time to take you home, Cinderella,” he said softly, reaching over and stroking a finger down her silky cheek.

She shifted, setting her cup on the table. Her big, warm eyes blinked slowly, and she leaned toward him.

“I’ve had a really nice time tonight,” she said.

He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed her fingers gently. “I have, too.”

“Why didn’t we talk like this when I was here every day?”

“Because there were dirty dishes and four-year-olds and a blizzard outside.” He scratched his head, his brow furrowing at the memory that seemed years ago, not weeks. “Also, I was being an idiot, so that probably didn’t help. I’m honestly not sure what I was doing or thinking. It was like one long panic.”

Luckily, Olivia wasn't the type to hold grudges, and she chuckled. “I *thought* you were the one who was panicked, but I have to admit, now that I've had some space—I was pretty overwrought myself. I think I may have been in a semi-panic for the last five years. That moment I first saw you, something inside me kind of collapsed in relief. I was so happy to not be alone in this anymore that I think I expected too much of you. That wasn't fair of me.”

“It's not that I don't want to be there—”

She interrupted. “I know. But you need time to adjust, and that's not unreasonable, Tate. You're only human.”

He looked down at their hands that had somehow wound together. “My parents didn't seem to need time to adjust. They've been a hell of a lot more helpful than I have.”

“Your parents are the most wonderful grandparents I could have ever dreamed of for the girls. But they only have to be grandparents. It's not their responsibility to make sure those girls grow up right. They don't have to worry about how to feed them and clothe them, how to pay for college, and whether to put them in soccer or gymnastics.”

“Soccer,” he said firmly. “There's a Kicking Cubs program at the rec center. I checked, and it starts in February.”

“See?” She ran her fingers through the lock of hair that fell over his forehead. “You're being a dad already.”

He leaned forward then, those last few inches, and brought his lips to hers. One gentle, sweet brush of a kiss. Then he was pulling back, because this was the first date, and he was going to do it right.

“Time to go home,” he whispered.

“Time to go home,” she agreed.

## TWENTY-THREE

Tate wanted a second date—soon. It had been one of the best nights he'd had in as long as he could remember. And if the way Olivia kissed him at the front door to his parents' house was any indication, she felt the same way. But when calendars were consulted and texts were traded, neither he nor Olivia had a free moment for another week.

On Monday the girls started at their new preschool, and Tate was there with Olivia to walk them into the building, telling them he'd attended in the very same classroom when he was four. He was surprised at how memories of his mother came back to him while he showed them around. And at how good it felt to talk about her.

“So Grandma Anne brought you here when you were four?” Jackie asked.

“She did,” he told her, smiling as she climbed up on his knee while he sat in a very small chair at a very small table in contrast to all the new students and parents milling around the room. “And I remember she made me a lunch just like your mom made you a lunch.”

“What'd she make you?” Melissa asked, wrapping her small hands around his biceps.

“Peanut butter and jelly,” he told them. He'd eaten peanut butter and jelly every day for years. And not once since his mother had passed away.

“Mommy made us turkey and 'merican cheese,” Jackie informed him. “But tomorrow, I'm asking for peanut butter and jelly so I can be like you.”

“Me, too,” Melissa agreed solemnly.

Tate laughed and kissed each girl in turn before leaving them to start their day. At lunchtime, he drove in from the acreage he'd been inspecting with his foreman and knocked on the door to his dad's house.

“Tate!” Lucy said with a smile as she opened the door. “Your dad's gone into town for some dog food. You need something I can help you with?”

He scratched his head, feeling a little foolish now that his idea was becoming reality. “Uh, I'm stopping for lunch...” He gave her a shy smile. “I was wondering...do you have any peanut butter and jelly?”

Lucy smiled brightly. “I do! Want me to make you a sandwich?”

He breathed a sigh of relief. “If it wouldn't be too much of an imposition?”

“Don't be ridiculous! I make lunch for your dad and me every day. I've been telling him for years that you should join us. Come on in.”

And every day after that, if Tate wasn't in town at lunch time, he ate at his dad's house. Sometimes Lucy had leftovers, sometimes she made him a meat sandwich, but his favorite days were when she slapped some peanut butter and jelly on white bread and handed it to him as he was rushing between one task and the next.

The following Tuesday, Olivia had her first meeting with the board of Dreams for Disabilities. She explained that yes, she was going to be one of *those* directors—the ones who come in and want to make changes immediately. Then she outlined her plan to focus their work on fulfilling dreams that took advantage of the Montana environment—fishing, hiking, skiing, snowshoeing, horseback riding, ice skating, rodeoing, camping.

“We can become the experts on adaptive outdoor sports. We'll partner with bioengineering firms who develop prosthetics for things like skiing, we'll work with organizations who build adaptive trails, we'll create the model for giving differently abled people access to the natural environment including working with ranch animals.”

By the time she was done, the board was applauding, and she knew she'd started something significant. And Tate's federal lease lands were going to be

the centerpiece of the whole effort.

On Wednesday, Tate and Lucy took the girls to their first doctor's appointment in Montana. They got shots—Jackie wailed, Melissa was stoic while two little tears slipped down her cheeks—found out they were in the fiftieth percentile for height and the seventy-fifth for weight, and then each got a sticker. Afterward, Tate took his stepmother and the girls out for ice cream. He was surprised when he realized he'd been gone from work for three hours by the time they were done, and he hadn't worried about it once.

Thursday was the day Olivia had set aside to set up her grant-writing program for the year. She worked with two of her staff members and the consultant in Butte all day long, putting together their lists of applications, data, and needs. And for the first time since the girls had been born, Olivia didn't have to leave an all-day meeting to go get them, didn't have to find a way to keep them busy while she continued to work, didn't have to wonder what she'd feed them when they all stumbled home after dark. She knew the girls were being well-taken care of by their grandparents and their father. When five o'clock rolled around and she had that moment of panic that she needed to leave. After she took a breath and realized she could keep working along with everyone else, she nearly cried tears of relief.

On Friday, Tate, his father, Vince, and two of the ranch hands loaded up five pickup trucks at Olivia's storage unit and drove all her belongings back to town where her newly refurbished rental house was waiting. She left work at two o'clock and met all the guys at the house. There was nothing like spending an afternoon bossing a bunch of cowboys around as they lifted heavy objects. It sure beat having to haul around everything herself, the way she had when she'd boxed her life up to move it to Montana. And it made for quite the added bonus to watch as they filled her house with all the items she'd been missing since she and the girls had moved. Vince and Thomas spent more time bullshitting and less time carrying, but even the older cowboys were a fine sight as they lifted heavy furniture and hefted boxes full of the stuff that makes a house a home.

Lucy picked the girls up from school, and once the three of them arrived, they all helped unpack. Olivia left the girls to unpack their toys in their new room, knowing it would be like Christmas all over again. The short span of a four-year-old's memory ensured that most of those toys had been forgotten

over the last several weeks. Now it would be like rediscovering a treasure trove.

“The boys are putting my bedframe together,” Olivia said as she walked into the kitchen.

Lucy unwrapped another dish and put it in the cabinet. “It's good for Thomas to have some more to do. When he had the heart attack, we thought he wouldn't be able to do much ever again. But the fact is, he's healthy as can be now and really doesn't have enough to occupy him. You and the girls have been such a godsend.” She smiled. “We're both blessed to have you three.”

Olivia gave the older woman a hug. “We feel the same way,” she told her honestly. “And things finally feel like they're coming together. Getting moved in, starting my new job. I feel so much more hopeful than I did a few weeks ago.”

Lucy handed her a dish to put away and bent back down to unwrap another. “And how about things between you and Tate?” she asked casually. “Do things seem better there, too?”

Olivia couldn't help the smile that crossed her lips as she thought about that kiss the previous weekend after their date.

“I think things are...better.”

Lucy grinned. “So the date went well, then?”

Olivia laughed softly. “The date went well, and if we can find a few free hours, we're hoping to have another.”

“Maybe Thomas and I could stay and have dinner here and put the girls to bed?”

“Would you?” Olivia said hopefully. “You wouldn't mind?”

“Not a bit, sweetheart.” Lucy patted Olivia on the cheek. “I think everything's going just like it should. This was all meant to be, you, the girls, Thomas and me.” She paused before setting a platter on the counter. “And Tate.” She nodded to herself. “I think you and Tate are going to be just fine. All you needed was some time.”

*Some time*, Olivia thought as she kept unpacking. Maybe time did heal all wounds. And if it gave her and Tate a second chance, she'd have all the time in the world.



A few hours later, Tate gazed at Olivia over a table of deep-dish pizza and grinned. “Well, it's nothing like our first date, but I'm so hungry, I'd eat just about anything at this point.”

She pulled her third piece of pizza from the tray, melted cheese draping off the slice. “As much as I love a fancy meal once in a while, you won't hear any complaints from me about pizza. Especially this pizza.”

He watched her devour the slice and thought about how much she looked like the girls when she had that sparkle in her eyes. As their dinner went on, she told him funny stories about her new staff and mimicked the stuffy congressman they'd had a conference call with.

He remembered this Olivia. This was the Olivia who'd convinced him to snorkel and eat sushi on board the ship. And he realized that life with Olivia would be like a little mini-vacation each day. Her smile was like sunshine on a beach. Her laugh felt to him like splashing in a turquoise pool on a ship's deck.

Yes, this was the Olivia he'd fallen for all those years ago. Only, now she was so much more. Because that fun-loving Olivia was also a brilliant businesswoman and a responsible mother. She could tease him about being too serious, then turn right around and bandage up a child's skinned knee.

“Tate?” her voice brought him back to the restaurant. “Did you want that last piece?” She pointed to the lone remaining slice of pizza.

He smiled as warmth spread over him. “No, you go ahead.”

She grabbed it before he could change his mind, and it was gone in moments.

“The girls are probably already fast asleep,” she told him as they put on their coats before leaving the restaurant. “They had a really long day.”



Tate opened the door for her, then reached for her hand as they stepped out onto the sidewalk. “So you have a new house—with a sofa and a TV, I might add—and two silent, sleeping children, all tucked away in their beds.” He gave her a sideways glance, waiting patiently to see if she'd say what he hoped.

She smirked but didn't look at him. “Huh. Now that you mention it, that sounds like the perfect time for me to watch a movie. It's Friday night. I don't have to work tomorrow.” She continued their stroll, and he gritted his teeth, knowing she was playing with him but suffering anyway.

“What should I watch, do you think? Something romantic?”

He blanched. God no. Anything but rom-coms.

“Ooh, or maybe a British drama!”

Okay, anything but a rom-com or a British drama.

“What about an action flick?” he suggested.

She seemed to think about it for a moment. “Hmm. Nah, I'm not really a fan. And since it's just me watching and all...” She let her voice trail off.

He finally lost his patience and stopped in the middle of the sidewalk. Turning to face her, he grabbed her by the shoulders. “For God's sake, woman, invite me over to watch a movie with you,” he cried in mock desperation.

She laughed. “Oh! Did you want to join me?”

He rolled his eyes and wrapped an arm around her neck, pulling her in for a kiss before leading her down the sidewalk again. “Better,” he muttered. “But we're not watching a rom-com.”

She snuggled against him, laying a hand on his abs and sending a wave of lust through him.

“Really?” she asked sweetly.

“Okay,” he conceded. “Maybe a rom-com.”

Her throaty chuckle echoed in his ears all the way to the truck.



The next two weeks flew by in a blur of work and unpacking and school. And then there were dinners and brunches, movies and walks in the town square. And with each date, each discussion, and each day that passed, Olivia felt that she had peeled away another layer of the man she'd fallen for all those years ago.

“Well, what brings you by?” Marjory asked one afternoon as Olivia walked into the search and rescue office in the small storefront next door to the police station and volunteer fire department.

“I was just passing and thought I'd stop in and say hi.”

“Well, you want a cup of coffee then?” Marjory said, pushing herself back from the front counter and motioning Olivia around to her side.

Once they both had mugs of coffee in hand, Marjory gave Olivia a stool to sit on and took the other for herself.

“You all settled in now?” she asked. “Vince said he saw you and Tate at the grocery store the other evening.”

Olivia shifted on her seat and took a sip of her coffee.

“We were grabbing some things for dinner.” She felt her cheeks flush. “The girls were at their grandparents' so we were cooking at my house.”

“Mmhmm.” Marjory raised an eyebrow as she drank her own coffee. “Lucy may have said a thing or two about you and Tate having some dinners together.”

Olivia chuckled then because really, she should have known. This might be the friendliest town in Montana, but it was definitely also the most gossipy.

“Things have been...good,” she said. “Really good.”

“Well, that's what Lucy and I were hoping. You sure make a lovely couple.” Marjory winked.

“It feels like this is how things were meant to be. When I first arrived, I guess

I thought everything would just fall into place naturally. But things were too rushed. We were there in his house, in his life 24/7, and he didn't know how to cope. To be fair, I didn't really know either, and we ended up making a lot of mistakes.”

“But things are better now?” Marjory asked, watching as the sheriff parked his patrol car across the street.

“Yes. We're taking things slow, letting his relationship with me be separate from his with the girls. He's learning how to be their father without my interference, and then we're learning what the possibilities are between us.”

“And what are you finding?” Marjory winked again, a smirk on her cheerful face.

Olivia felt that flush again. “Um, so far, I think the possibilities are good... really good.” Both women burst into giggles.

“I couldn't be happier for the both of you,” Marjory said.

“Maybe Vince could let him back on the search and rescue squad?” Olivia asked from behind her coffee cup.

Marjory chuckled. “I could probably make that happen.”

When she left a few minutes later, Olivia thought it might have been the most productive cup of coffee she'd ever had.



Tate stood on the porch of his parents' house and watched as Vince climbed out of his big pickup with Waylon County Search and Rescue painted on the side.

“Well, fancy seein' you up here,” Vince said as he climbed the porch steps.

Tate stuck out a hand and shook with the older man. “You actually caught me just before I left for the day. You coming to see Dad?”

Vince hooked his thumbs through two of the belt loops on his jeans. “Nope. Thought I'd try to catch you,” he said, his blue eyes sparkling beneath the big

cowboy hat he wore.

“Okay, you want to come inside for a cup of coffee? I think Lucy has some already brewed.”

“That's okay.” Vince shook his head. “I don't need but a minute.” He scratched his head. “It seems the powers that be have decided I was a bit hard on you when I booted you off the team.”

Tate tried not to smile as he nodded. “I see,” he murmured.

“Yep. Marjory and Lucy and Olivia have been chatting, and they've apparently come to the conclusion that you need to be back on the search and rescue schedule next month. Personally, I think it's just because they want a big strapping kid like you to come rescue them if they need it, but I'll put my own prejudices aside and concede defeat.”

Tate laughed outright then. “Marjory threatened to stop making you dinner, did she?”

Vince nodded as he squinted at the bright snow in the yard. “Worse. Told me I'd been an ass and said if I didn't let you back on the team, and pronto, she'd go visit her sister in Butte for the next month.” He looked at Tate with desperation in his gaze.

“Well,” Tate said, clapping Vince on the shoulder. “I'll save you then and come back. I can stop by the office and fill in my shifts tomorrow.”

“I'd appreciate it.” The older man cleared his throat. “And I was happy to hear about you and Olivia giving things a try. I know I came down kind of hard on you—”

Tate held up a hand, palm out. “Nope. Don't apologize. I deserved every word. I was badly in need of a kick in the ass right about then. Yeah, it was a shock to find out about the girls the way that I did, but that doesn't excuse my behavior. If my dad taught me anything, it's that you take care of the people who need you. He never failed me once. He never let my mom down. I know better, and you were right. I needed to get over myself and take care of my family.”

Vince gave him a cheeky grin then. “Well, I'm happy to hear it's all working

out. She's a mighty fine young woman, your Olivia. Marjory thinks the world of her.”

“I do, too,” Tate said. “I do, too.”

## TWENTY-FOUR

Olivia woke, disoriented. Her clock said two a.m. The alarm was persistent, penetrating her mind and the darkness that surrounded her. She tried to assess what was happening when the odor registered.

Smoke.

“Oh my God!” she cried out as she climbed from her bed. Smoke was streaming under her bedroom door as the shrill alarm continued its keening wail. Her heart raced. The girls! She had to get to them. Her hand reached out to touch the doorknob. Warm but not hot. She braced herself as she twisted the knob and pulled it open.

Smoke rushed into the vacuum created by the opening, but it spread out and seemed to dissipate in the larger space. She turned toward the girls' room, eyes stinging. Finding it hard to breathe, she pulled her t-shirt over her mouth. Coughing, she stumbled down the hall. She couldn't tell exactly where the fire was coming from. It almost looked to be all around her. Smoke seemed to be oozing from the walls, and as she looked behind her toward the living room, she saw flames licking up from the baseboards in the hallway, crawling up the walls, seeming to come from inside the very bones of the structure.

The door to the girls' room was open, and smoke had filled the space from floor to ceiling. Olivia kept her t-shirt pulled up over her mouth, but she could barely see, and her eyes were watering so heavily that she could see little more than a blur of darkness surrounding a small glow where she knew

the girls' nightlight was plugged in.

“Mommy!” she heard Jackie's frightened voice in the murk ahead of her. Her shin slammed into something heavy, and she leaned down, her hands searching desperately to find what she'd run into. A pair of tiny hands met her grip.

“Mommy!” Jackie screamed again before climbing up Olivia, wrapping her arms and legs around her mom's torso.

She held Jackie's head tightly against her shoulder as she tried to navigate to the next bed where Melissa ought to be.

Her lungs burned now, and she coughed heavily. Jackie was still and silent, clinging to Olivia and keeping her face covered.

Olivia's thoughts were like the smoke, thick and clouded. She knew two things: she needed to get Melissa, and she needed to get them all outside. She tried to navigate in the direction she thought Melissa's bed was.

But she couldn't see a thing—she had to close her eyes completely to keep out the stinging smoke. She stumbled forward, calling hoarsely to Melissa in between fits of coughing. Tears streamed down her face as she grew more and more disoriented. She couldn't hear Melissa. She couldn't find her, couldn't see her. *We're all going to die here*, she thought.

And then other people were suddenly in the room with them. Firefighters.

“Bedroom!” one yelled as his big mask came into view next to her. Then, “We have occupants! I repeat, we have occupants!”

After that, everything became a blur, Jackie was taken from her arms, and Olivia, half-supported, was being pulled out of the room despite her resistance. She tried to tell them about Melissa, but all she could do was cough, and choke, until everything went black.



“Where are they?” Tate shouted frantically as he entered the waiting room of the hospital. Lucy and Thomas's house was ten minutes closer to town than

his cabin, which meant they were already standing at the front desk talking to a nurse.

“Son,” Thomas said with a grim expression. “This is Loren, the nurse who's been working on Olivia.”

“Is she okay? Where are my daughters?” Tate demanded.

Loren gave Thomas and Lucy a look that suggested they needed to get their son to calm down.

“Tate?” Lucy said softly before laying her hand along his cheek. “Tate, honey, look at me.”

His wild-eyed gaze fell on his stepmother's face. His heart was racing, and his skin felt like it had a hundred tiny bugs crawling beneath it.

“They got all three of them out,” Lucy continued, her touch helping to ground him somewhat. “They're all being treated for smoke inhalation, and we'll know more soon, but you need to take a breath and calm down so you can help them. They're going to need you.”

He blinked at her, trying to hear what she was saying through the hum of bone-chilling panic vibrating through his brain, his heart, his soul. It was telling him to shout, punch, tear anything and anyone apart that stood between him and his family. But he gazed into Lucy's steady stare, and then he felt Thomas's big, warm hand on his back, and he took first one breath, then another. Slowly his heartbeat steadied. The hum retreated.

And he was finally able to focus. “They're alive?” he croaked out.

“Yes, hon, they're all going to be fine,” Lucy said softly.

He nodded, suddenly so overcome, he thought he'd break down in tears right there in the middle of the hospital waiting room.

“Mr. McConnell?” Nurse Loren said, giving him a small smile. “We're getting them all oxygen and IV fluids. I think your wife will be ready to see you very soon, and then we can get you into the pediatric unit to visit the girls.”

He nodded, feeling unable to speak without completely falling apart. His



mind caught for a second on the nurse calling Olivia his wife, but he didn't have the strength to correct her. Besides, if the hospital thought they were married, it should be easier for him to see Olivia as soon as possible.

Lucy and Thomas thanked the nurse before leading Tate to the chairs in the waiting room.

“They're going to be okay?” he repeated, looking at his father in desperation.

“Yes, son. The nurse said the firefighters got them out in time. The fire started in the kitchen, so it wasn't near the bedrooms. There was a lot of smoke, but the fire department was able to come in the front door and get down the hallway to the bedrooms safely.”

Tate's mind suddenly cleared as a horrible realization crept in. “The kitchen?”

Thomas nodded.

“Did they leave a burner on or something?”

Tate didn't miss the look Thomas and Lucy sent one another. “It was electrical, wasn't it?” Deep down, he knew the answer. He didn't need his dad to confirm it.

“They won't know for sure until the investigation. Vince called, and he and the search and rescue team are heading there now to help the firefighters. You know he's done this kind of work before. They'll find the cause soon enough.”

Tate nodded, his expression grim. “I'll have Norene put in jail for this,” he vowed. “I don't care how old she is. She was *told* that dated wiring was a hazard, and she refused to fix it. I should have fought harder, should have *insisted*. I know she swapped out some of it, but not enough. Not nearly enough.” He blinked to clear his vision and resumed, “I didn't ask Olivia if it had been done right, and she was in a hurry to get into her own house.” He hung his head then, staring at the cold tile floor below. “This is all my fault.”

“Stop,” Lucy demanded. “If there *was* negligence then it's Norene who bears the responsibility, but we don't know that for sure. All we know is that somehow a fire started in that house—but thank the good lord, Olivia and

those beautiful girls are going to be fine. And Tate?” She gave him a look that only a mother could give. “That's what matters.”

“Mr. McConnell?” Nurse Loren was back. “You can come see your wife now.”

“It's going to be fine, son. We'll be right here. Just let us know when we can come on back,” Thomas told him encouragingly.

Tate nodded somberly and stood to follow the nurse down the cold hallway, his boots thudding on the hard tile flooring. “Now, her throat is still aggravated from the smoke,” Loren said. “So she's not going to feel up to much talking. And we have her on oxygen, so there are tubes in her nose, and an IV drip in her arm.”

“My daughters?” Tate asked, his throat thick with emotion.

“I'll go get a progress report on them as soon as I show you to your wife's room, and then I'll come update you both. Here we go,” Loren said, gesturing through the doorway into a room. “I'll be back in a flash with the news on your girls.”

Tate nodded his thanks, then cautiously entered the room. He walked quietly to the bed where Olivia's slight form lay motionless. As he reached her, he saw that her eyes were closed, her skin pale in the dim lighting.

He released a shaky breath and reached out to touch her hand, still smudged with ash and soot.

At his touch, her eyes drifted open, and when her dark gaze met his, his whole chest nearly exploded. The pressure behind his breastbone was physically painful. His head ached, his heart ached, his very soul ached.

He lifted her hand in his and watched as tears rolled down her cheeks.

“I tried—” Her voice was little more than a rasp, and he shushed her right away.

“Shh.” He sat one hip on the mattress of her bed, leaning over her as he brought her hand to his lips and kissed it softly. “Don't talk. Your throat is hurt.”

She nodded, the tears continuing to slide down her smooth cheeks.

He held her small hand between both of his larger ones and bowed his head over them, closing his eyes and simply breathing. He could smell the smoke that still permeated her hair, and it made him want to rail at the heavens. The emotions roiling inside him seemingly had no limits.

“I am so sorry I wasn't there,” he whispered. “I'm so sorry you were hurt and the girls—” His voice cracked then. “And the girls were in danger.” Then he looked into her eyes, and his voice was tense and shaking with pent-in emotion. “But I am so proud of you. They told me they found you in the girls' room, with one of them already in your arms. You were saving our daughters, and I can't—” He choked back the tears yet again. “I can't ever thank you enough for what you did.”

She nodded, then croaked, “Melissa.”

Before he could answer her, the nurse came back into the room. “I have updates for both of you,” she sang with a smile.

Both Tate and Olivia turned toward her in anticipation.

“The girls have woken up, they've both had fluids and oxygen. We'll need to keep them on some bronchial dilators and anti-inflammatories and antibiotics for a week or so, but all signs say they're going to be fine.”

Olivia sobbed once—and it must have hurt like blazes because she pulled it back in, her eyes squeezing shut as her breath hitched. Tate leaned down and drew her into his arms gently, making sure not to disturb her various tubes. “It's okay, baby. They're going to be okay. You did so well. You're the best mother there is. The very best.”

The nurse smiled at them both. “Well, I have some even better news. We're going to bring them both in here so all four of you can be together. That way, Dad here can make sure if anyone needs anything, he tells us.”

Tate released Olivia, wiping his eyes. “They can stay here?”

“Absolutely—and that chair in the corner folds into a bed if you'd like to stay as well.”

“Yes,” he said quickly. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“Look at that,” Loren said, grinning as she patted Olivia on the arm. “You married a good one.”

Then she left to help transport the girls from the pediatric ward.

“Married?” Olivia whispered, the first inkling of a twinkle returning to her eyes.

Tate grinned. “Yeah, about that.” He took a deep breath. “She jumped to conclusions, and I didn’t correct her. I’d feel terrible if she caught me in a lie, so I think we need to take care of that.”

Olivia blinked at him.

“And before you say it’s the fire talking, just remember you’re the one who had smoke inhalation, not me.”

“Are you saying you want to get married?” she croaked.

“I’m asking,” Tate answered softly. “I’m asking if you will please be my wife, my family, my love. I know I had a hard time adjusting to all this, but the last few weeks have been as close to perfect as any time in my life has ever been. The only thing that could make it better is if I could be with you and the girls every single day, from the moment I wake up until the moment I fall asleep. When I got the call tonight, I realized that I never want to be separated from the three of you again. I never want to wake up in the darkness and not know where you are or if you’re all right. I’ve been so afraid of letting you in, but believe me when I say I’m far more afraid of losing you. And if you let me, I want to hold on to you for the rest of my life.”

He dropped to one knee next to her hospital bed, and Olivia gazed down at him.

“Will you please marry me, Olivia Wickham?”

Her voice was barely a hoarse whisper, but he distinctly heard her say, “Yes.”

Then he stood and bent over to kiss her on the lips, and as he pulled away, all he could think was that he’d do it all again, every painful, solitary minute, as long as he knew this woman was waiting at the end. She and the girls were

worth it all, and he was going to make sure they never had to go it alone again.

## EPILOGUE

Tate watched as Jackie slid down the long zip line that ran through the trees on the federal acreage he leased. The zip line was part of the adaptive ropes course that Dreams for Disabilities had installed during the year and a half since Olivia had taken over.

*She's totally fearless, he thought as she yelled and kicked her legs wildly while zipping by. Just like her mother.*

“Daddyyyy! Look at meee!”

He laughed. “I see you, sweetheart! You're doing great!”

Jackie was followed by the boy who was having his Montana outdoor dream fulfilled. Seven-year-old Jacob had been born with spina bifida, but Olivia's organization was ensuring that he learned anything was possible if you were brave enough to dream.

Tate waved to Jacob as the boy flew by overhead, smiling to see Jacob's parents jumping up and down as one of Olivia's staff members filmed the whole thing for them.

Then it was Melissa's turn. She looked down shyly at Tate, and he hooked up her safety harness to the line, tested it with a sharp tug, and gave her a quiet thumbs-up. He understood her, and they'd forged an unbreakable bond since he'd really stepped up and committed to being her father. Taking a deep breath, his quiet girl grabbed onto the handle and pushed off the platform. Her path along the line was slower than her sister's, but he saw the secret

smile on her face under the safety helmet as she gained speed, and he knew she was having every bit as much fun as Jackie had.

He flashed to the night of the fire and felt a familiar shiver of fear as he thought about what could have happened if Olivia hadn't woken up in time to try to save the girls. That damn Norene and her miserly ways could have killed his family because she was too cheap to update the wiring. What was worse, she actually took Olivia to court to make her fulfill the remainder of the rental contract. The look on Norene's face when the judge not only told her no but ordered her to pay all the court fees *and* arrange for home inspections on all her properties was priceless, and he'd heard from others that she'd been hit with a list of housing code violations that would keep Jake Pickelner busy for the next year. At least none of her other tenants will find themselves in a similar predicament. He just wished their safety hadn't needed to be at the expense of his family. Thankfully, no one was seriously injured. Or worse.

Tate shook his head to clear the negative thoughts from his head as he watched Melissa finish her journey. When she reached the opposite platform, Olivia was there waiting with open arms.

Tate smiled and waved to his three girls before beginning the walk to the bottom of the long wraparound ramp that wove its way down through the trees and allowed zip line workers to make it back to the forest floor to help bring up the next disabled child.

After collecting his family, Tate took them all to his pickup. Jacob and his family would go on to a campsite further up the mountain, where they'd spend two nights with a certified outdoor guide who would teach Jacob how to fish and camp and even how to use a new wheelchair specially outfitted for unpaved trails since he wouldn't be able to walk those trails using his crutches. Tate called it the off-road vehicle, and Jacob had adopted the name himself.

“So you know,” he told the girls as they drove down the road to his parents' house. “I heard grandma baked up a storm this afternoon.”

Both girls' eyes grew round with excitement. “Grandma's the best baker there is,” Melissa said definitively. Jackie nodded in agreement. Tate had to admit

that Lucy's baking was pretty exceptional. Olivia contended that if she'd lived at Lucy's more than a few weeks, she'd have ended up several sizes larger.

Thomas was leading the girls to the barn to ride their pony as Tate and Olivia drove away.

“Date night,” Tate said with a grin, shifting his truck into gear to pull onto the public road from the driveway.

Olivia smiled. “Did you have any ideas for what to do? I've had such an insane week, I haven't had a minute to think about it.”

“We could always go back home and grill some steaks and watch a movie.”

Olivia sighed in satisfaction. “Could we? I love to go out, but I'm just so tired this week. I don't think I've been this tired since...” Her voice faded and her brow furrowed.

“Since when, babe?” Tate asked as he navigated onto the winding road that led to their cabin. In the last year, they'd remodeled several times. The place now sported a family room that stretched the width of the house across the back as well as a new bathroom. Tate had built a loft off the landing to the second floor, taking out an unused hall closet and creating more space for the twins to play, and most recently, they'd expanded the master bathroom with a large, jetted tub. It was Tate's favorite part of the whole house—especially those times when he discovered his wife in said tub.

“Babe?” he asked again as they turned into the parking circle in front of the house.

“Uh, nothing,” Olivia answered distractedly. “I'm so tired I can't even carry on a conversation, apparently.” He laughed and climbed out of the truck.

As they walked into the house, Tate put an arm around her and kissed her on the temple. “It's okay, I'll take good care of you,” he promised. He'd been taking care of her the best he could ever since the night her rental house had caught fire, and it was the finest, most satisfying job he'd ever had. He couldn't imagine ever giving it up.





The next morning, Olivia stood in the bathroom of her office staring at a plastic stick. She held her hand over her mouth and blinked at the two pink lines.

Her heart gave a little kick, and she tried to remember to breathe. She'd known that this was possible the minute she'd realized that she hadn't been this tired since she was first pregnant with the girls.

Okay, if she were being honest, she'd known that it was more than just possible—it was probable. Once she'd admitted to herself that she'd lost track of the calendar, and that birth control wasn't foolproof, it had been a fast trip to the probability that she was pregnant again.

“Well, then,” she murmured to herself as she tossed the stick in the trash. She had to remind herself that this wasn't six years ago. She wasn't single. She wasn't alone. She had a husband. A family. She had a good job, and a town full of people who might be mostly busybodies, but well-meaning and supportive busybodies all the same.

She straightened her skirt and took a deep breath before leaving the bathroom and heading to her receptionist's desk.

“Kathy?”

“Yes, ma'am, boss-lady?”

Olivia couldn't help but smile at her efficient, no-nonsense assistant.

“I need to go out to the ranch for a bit. Can you tell David and Janette that I'll be back in time for our two o'clock call with the Mayo Clinic?”

“Sure thing,” Kathy said, inspecting her over a pair of readers. “You okay?”

Olivia nodded. “Yeah, just fine. I'll see you in a couple of hours.”

Kathy didn't look convinced, but she nodded and motioned Olivia out of the office. They both knew that if she didn't go while she had the chance, something would come up, and then she'd never get out the door.

Something was always coming up, which was why Tate's job at the ranch was such a godsend. He took the girls to work with him every morning, and they'd eat breakfast at Grandma's kitchen table while they waited for the bus

to pick them up for school.

At the end of the day, the bus brought them back, and Tate, Lucy, and Thomas were there to help with homework and hand out snacks. Meanwhile, Olivia was free to get ready for work without two children underfoot. But working in town a few blocks from the school, she could stop in for lunches and to volunteer whenever she wanted.

As she drove up the road to the family property, her head spun with the newest wrinkle in their family schedule. How would she manage with a baby? She couldn't expect Lucy and Thomas to do daycare for two kindergarteners and a baby. Tate was out on the acreage most of every day, and there was no way she could manage a staff and what was fast becoming a nationally significant nonprofit with a baby in the office.

*Deep breaths*, she reminded herself as her Toyota Landcruiser climbed up the wooded mountainside. Tate had insisted she have a giant SUV to drive her and the girls around Montana's mountain roads and often snow-covered highways. She'd decided not to argue and had to admit that it was a lot more comfortable than the little CRV she'd been driving when they got married.

Tate was standing in front of the barn talking to his foreman when she drove up. She climbed out of the SUV and walked over.

“Hey, there,” he said with a big smile as he grabbed her by the hand. “What brings you out in the middle of the day?”

“I need to borrow you for just a few,” she told him, giving the foreman a quick smile.

Tate's brow furrowed, but he nodded. To John, he said, “Okay. I'll come get you when I'm ready to head out to that fence line.” Then he turned and led Olivia toward the house.

“Why don't you come sit on the porch for a few with me?” he asked.

She nodded, some of the tension in her chest loosening merely by being in his calm presence.

They sat on the porch swing, and he put his arm around her, pulling her into his shoulder. “You want to tell me what's going on?” he asked softly. “You

were awful quiet last night, and now you show up out of the blue. Did something go wrong at the office?”

She pulled back so she could gaze into his eyes. Her heart thumped hard a few times, but she reminded herself again that this was not six years ago, and this wasn't the same Tate she'd found on the mountain. This was her husband, and he loved her and their children.

“I told you I've been so tired lately?”

He nodded, his brow furrowing.

“Well, last night I realized that the only other time I've been this tired was when I was pregnant with the girls.” Then she sat and waited for him to catch up.

His eyes grew wide. “Are you...?”

She shrugged lightly. “That's what the stick said. I guess our ninety-nine percent effective birth control wasn't a hundred percent effective.”

He gazed at her for a moment more, then put his head back and laughed. “I guess not,” he said with a grin.

“You're not mad?”

“Mad?” He pulled her closer and kissed her lips before putting his hand over her still-flat stomach. “Babe. I'm nothing even close to mad. All I care about is that you're healthy and safe.”

“But how are we going to manage? I can't bring a baby to work, and you're out on a horse or an ATV all day long. We're going to have to hire someone to take care of the baby all day—it's going to cost a fortune.” She shook her head, visions of her life devolving into complete chaos circulating in her mind.

“Hey,” he said, settling further into the swing and stroking her hair. “We have a family and plenty of money and each other. We can do anything. Don't you know that by now?”

She sighed. She knew he was right, but it was hard to let go and believe it was all going to be just fine.

“We can work out the details over the next few months, but I can arrange things to spend one day a week here at the ranch office. My dad and Lucy can take a day a week. You can spend a day a week working from home, and maybe we hire a sitter to do the other two days here at the house where my parents and I can oversee them. I promise we can manage this.” He looked at her with his serious dark eyes. “You're not alone, Olivia. You have a family, and we'll love this baby every bit as much as we love you and the girls.”

Then she cried, because she was hormonal and exhausted and also she loved her husband a great deal.

He chuckled softly and simply held her, which was perfect.

“You think it might be a boy this time?” he asked a while later as they gently swung and watched the horses in the corral across the drive.

“Would you like that?”

“I'm not too picky. As long as you're both healthy, that's the main thing. Speaking of, I don't want you staying past five at work anymore until you're feeling better. You need to get more rest.”

“Where were you the last time I was pregnant?” she joked.

“I was here,” he said. “Waiting for the love of my life to find me.”

And she had. She'd found the love of her own life, and now they had their happily ever after.

# END OF SNOWED IN WITH THE RANCHER

Do you love sexy cowboys? Please keep reading for an exciting excerpt from ***Snowed In with the SEAL*** and ***Cowboy's Christmas Rodeo***.

THANK YOU!

I'd like to thank you for reading my book.  
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## MAKE AN AUTHOR'S DAY

There's nothing better than reading great reviews from readers like yourself, but there's more to it than simply putting a smile on my face. As an independent author, I don't have the financial might of a big NYC publishing house or the clout to get in Oprah's book club. What I do have, as my not-so-secret weapon is you, my awesome readers!

If you enjoyed this book, I'd be incredibly grateful if you could leave a quick review. Simply [TAP HERE](#) or just leave a review when prompted by Amazon at the end of this book. Alternatively, head over to the product page for this book on Amazon and leave a review there—look for the WRITE A CUSTOMER REVIEW link.

No matter the length (short is fine!), your review will help this series get the exposure it needs to grow and make it into the hands of other awesome readers. Plus, reading your kind reviews is often the highlight of my day, so please be sure to let me know what you loved most about this book.

## ABOUT MARY SUE JACKSON

Mary Sue Jackson is the romance pen name created for all those cowboy dreamers! This Montana-based cowgirl is a rancher, and knows what hard work means. But despite being up at dawn and working past dusk, she still finds time for what she really loves... romance! With so many hours spent alone, riding across the seemingly never-ending expanse of grasslands, she has plenty of time to dream of love and the romantic tales of ranch life.

When Mary Sue's not out on the grasslands dreaming up her next story, she's most often spending time with her own personal hunky rancher, her husband. One of Mary Sue's favorite activities is to ride the ranch with her husband in the evening and hold his hand as they watch the sun go down over the prairie.

To learn more about Mary Sue you can check out all her books on social media and her website: [www.leslienorthbooks.com/mary-sue-jackson](http://www.leslienorthbooks.com/mary-sue-jackson).

You can find her hanging out on:





## ABOUT LESLIE

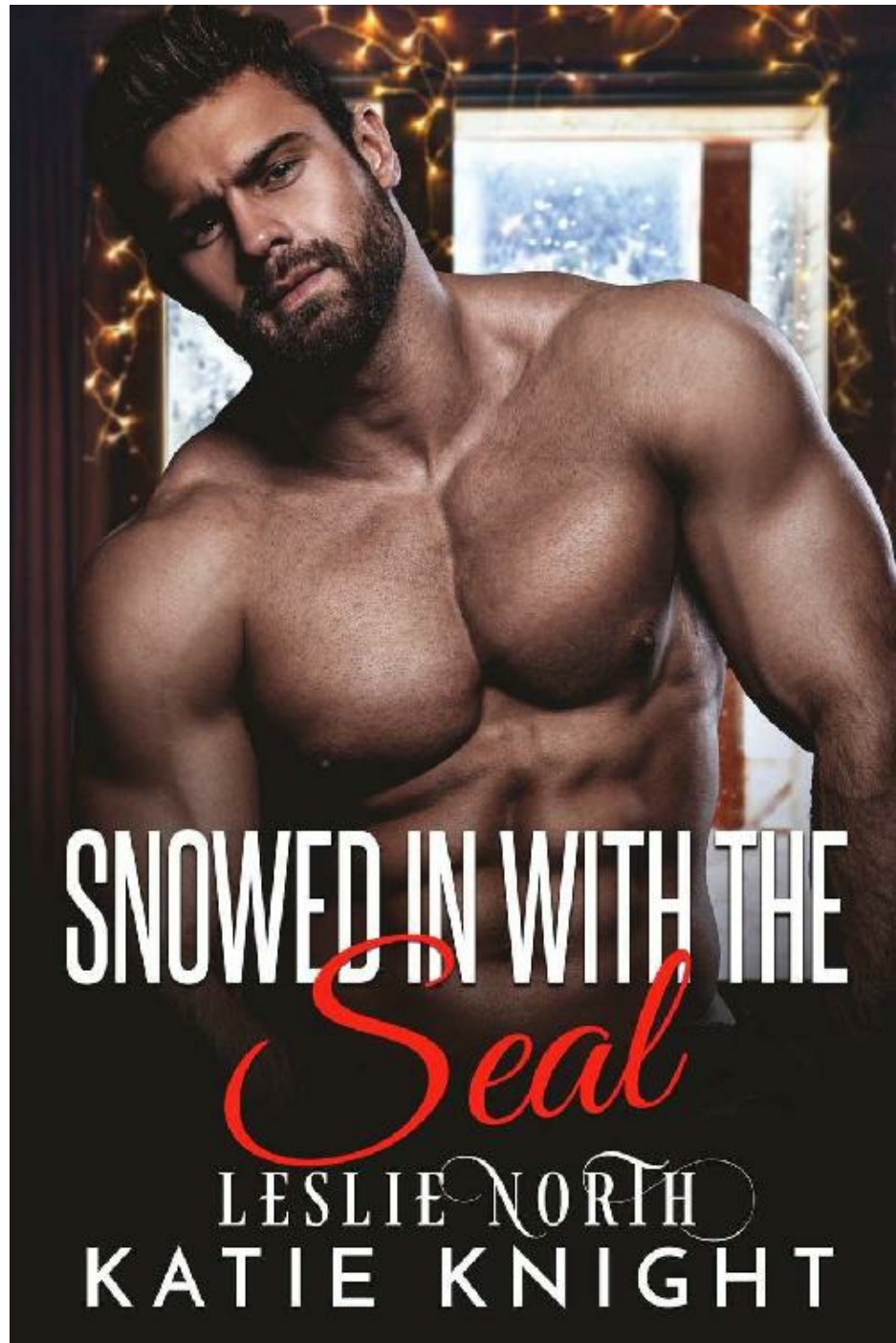
Leslie North is the USA Today Bestselling pen name for a critically-acclaimed author of women's contemporary romance and fiction. The anonymity gives her the perfect opportunity to paint with her full artistic palette, especially in the romance and erotic fantasy genres.

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PS: Want sneak peeks, giveaways, ARC offers, fun extras and plenty of pictures of bad boys? Join my Facebook group, [Leslie's Lovelies!](#)



### **BLURB**

**Two lonely hearts. One Christmas miracle...**

Navy SEAL Preston Lawson is dead. At least on paper. When the Navy

mistakenly reports him as KIA, it gives Preston the opportunity to join an elite BlackOps team. It's perfect for a man like him... No family, no commitments. No romance...

On leave for the holidays, Preston heads to the last place he was truly happy... The resort where he met Lila, a stunningly beautiful woman who stole his heart, years ago. He's supposed to stay off the grid—and alone. But then he sees *her*. Lila. Along with a son he never knew existed...

Lila wrote off Preston years ago. Of all the sneaky, underhanded things a man could do. Pretending to be dead, just to avoid her? Furious is putting it mildly. But when she bumps into Preston at the very same resort where they met, she calms down long enough for him to explain. And she can't deny the sizzling chemistry they both still share.

When things take a dangerous turn, Lila's grateful to have a sexy Navy SEAL in her corner. And maybe in her bed as well...

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**Available November 2, 2023**

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## **EXCERPT**

### **Chapter One**

*Three years ago...*

There were worse ways to spend a June evening than watching a beautiful woman dance in the rain.

Preston Lawson leaned one shoulder against the side of the cabin he'd rented for the week and stared across the yard at Lila Holden as she twirled and laughed while rain soaked her pretty auburn hair and her white T-shirt,

plastering both to her body.

What a fine body it was too. Curvy and soft, and seemingly made for him. She fit him perfectly, and not just physically, but emotionally too.

And that was exactly why Preston had to say goodbye to her.

She'd expect—and deserve—a more serious commitment if he stayed, and that was something he couldn't give her. His heart twisted a bit inside his chest, but damn it, leaving was for the best.

Besides, it wasn't like he had a choice. He was being deployed again with his SEAL team in a couple of days and would be gone at least six months. Sure, he and Lila had been hot and heavy from their start two months ago, but it was best to end it now, on a high note and with a clean break.

“You better come in soon, honey, before you catch your death,” he called to her. Her response was to spin faster, throwing her arms out wide. For a gal who'd lost her entire family, she had more zest for life than anyone he'd ever met.

Lila glanced over at him and laughed. “I have a better idea. How about you come out here and join me?”

He snorted and shook his head, perfectly happy beneath the overhang of the porch, dry and warm. And yet, he couldn't take his eyes off of her, or ignore the potent draw he felt to hold her tight for just a little bit longer. He wasn't a trusting man by nature—life had repeatedly taught him the unfortunate lesson that nothing lasted forever and most people were out for themselves. Which made the fact that somehow, some way, Lila had burrowed her way into his heart from day one that much more unbelievable. Yet, there she was, right there in his soul, as close to him as his SEAL teammates or the memory of his long-lost parents, gone nearly twenty-four years now.

“So, what do you say, sugar?” Lila came up to him, peering up at him. She held a hand up and crooked her finger at him, her expression enticing. “Want to have a little fun?”

Tamping down the pinch of melancholy inside him, Preston reached down and grabbed her hand, hauling her up on the porch beside him, pulling her close as she squealed in delight. “How about we go inside and have fun

instead?”

In response, she wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him long and deep. His body responded immediately, and he held her, pressing his hips to hers to allow her to feel the full extent of her effect on him. Man, he couldn't get enough of Lila. Odd, since he'd never been a guy driven by his emotions or desires. In fact, he normally did his best to suppress that side of himself and prided himself on self-control and strategic thinking, not sloppy feelings. Feelings could get a man killed in combat, reacting out of anger or frustration. No. Usually, Preston kept a tight lid on his emotions, but with Lila they all seemed to want to come pouring out.

Another good reason to get out of town.

One more night. He'd spend one more night holding her, touching her, hearing those soft little moans she made as she came apart in his arms, then he'd set her free. Leave for his mission and never look back. That was how it had to be.

Preston bent slightly and swept Lila up into his arms, carrying her inside their cabin at the remote wilderness lodge, then kicked the door shut behind them. The sound of raindrops plinking on the tin roof above created a nice sense of intimacy as he tugged her wet T-shirt over her head then ran his fingers down her damp skin, loving the way she shivered against him.

“Cold?” he asked, nuzzling the side of her neck as he undid the clasp on her bra.

“Not even a little,” she said, stepping away from him, sliding the straps down her arms then tossing the bra away, leaving her naked from the waist up. Preston's pulse kicked up another notch and his hard cock strained against the fly of his jeans. Hard to imagine this would be his last night with her.

During his eight-week leave, they'd been pretty much inseparable. He'd met her his first night here. She'd been waitressing in the restaurant attached to the lodge and he'd been a lonely sailor home between missions. He'd had his share of girlfriends in the past, but nothing long-term, and nothing like Lila.

She made him feel happy and content and made him dream about a different future than the one he'd planned for himself. Made him think that a career in

the Navy might not be all he wanted for himself. Those were dangerous dreams, since a military career was basically all he knew. He'd enlisted right after high school graduation, fresh out of his umpteenth foster home, and he'd never looked back. Until now.

The final reason he needed to let Lila go.

But not yet. Not tonight.

She shimmied out of her shorts and panties, and he couldn't seem to take his clothes off fast enough. Forget finesse. Forget everything except being beside her, being inside her, being as close to her as humanly possible for as much time as they had left.

Once they were both naked, he picked her up again, kissing her gently as he carried her over to the queen-size bed and placed her in the middle of it, stretching out beside her. Her skin felt like silk beneath his fingertips, so warm, so soft. He kissed his way down her neck to her collarbone, then to her breasts. He took one taut nipple between his lips while he toyed with the other between his thumb and forefinger, paying homage to her gorgeous body in the best way he knew how.

Lila traced her fingertips up his back to his shoulders, stroking the short hair at the nape of his neck, and he shuddered. Her throaty laugh damn near made him embarrass himself on the spot. She arched beneath him as he continued kissing a path down her abdomen.

"You are so beautiful, sugar," she said, her words husky with need.

He smiled against her lower stomach. "Men aren't beautiful. We're rugged, tough, sexy."

"And beautiful." She gazed down her body at him and smiled and his whole world brightened.

Bad. That was so, so bad. Yet it was also amazingly good.

Ignoring the rush of confusing emotions inside him—need, want, desperation, sadness, hope—he gently spread her thighs then traced his tongue over her slick folds. Lila gasped and slid her fingers through his hair as he pleased her with his mouth and fingers. He selfishly wanted to make

sure she'd never forget him after he left. He wanted her to remember this night together same as he would, on all the long, lonely days ahead.

It wasn't long before she dug her nails into his scalp and called out his name softly, digging her heels into the mattress as she climaxed hard around his fingers. He continued to nuzzle her sensitive flesh as she drifted back down to earth, then he kissed his way back up her body to her lips. They shared another passionate kiss as he put on a condom then positioned himself between her legs.

Preston buried himself inside her in one long stroke, then held still as her body adjusted to his size. So warm, so wet, so tight. Heaven on earth. Heaven in her arms. Heaven that would be gone all too soon, so he'd best savor it while he could.

"You feel amazing," he said, resting his weight on his elbows on either side of her, using his hands to smooth back the dripping wet hair from her flushed face.

"So do you," she said, locking her legs around his waist and pushing her heels into his buttocks, urging him to move inside her. "I love you, Preston Lawson."

His breath caught and he blinked down at her, stunned and speechless. He cared about her, more than he'd cared about anyone in a long, long time. But love? He didn't do love. Didn't do commitment. Didn't do long-term because in his life, his situation, he never knew where he'd be from one day to the next—or if he'd survive.

Instead of demanding he say the words back, however, she pulled him down and kissed him, moving her hips in time with his thrusts, bringing them both to the brink far sooner than Preston anticipated.

A familiar pressure built at the base of his spine and his balls tightened. He reached between them to stroke her slick folds, circling her most sensitive flesh until she cried out and her body convulsed around him, milking him as she tumbled over the edge into orgasm again. Preston wasn't far behind—thrusting once, twice more, before his muscles stiffened, his back arched, and he came hard inside her.

Time slowed as wave after wave of ecstasy crashed over them before finally leaving them breathless and sated on the bed, her fingers in his hair and his head resting on her chest, over her heart. The steady rhythm threatened to pull him under into sleep, but he fought to stay awake. He was painfully aware he'd not responded to her declaration of love and that he needed to say something.

Not because he didn't care, but because he did.

"Lila, about what you said. I—"

"Shhh," she said, smiling down at him and placing a finger over his lips. "I know. You don't have to say it back. I don't expect you to. I just wanted you to know how I feel, since you're leaving again in a couple of days. Something nice to take with you overseas. Just do me a favor, okay?"

He scooted up to lay beside her then drew her into his arms, kissing the top of her head and inhaling the sweet floral scent of her shampoo. "If I can, I will."

"Stay in touch with me?" she asked, her voice tentative.

Preston closed his eyes, wincing internally. She'd told him about her past, about how she'd lost her parents in a car accident right after high school. About how her brother had enlisted in the army and gotten killed in Iraq, leaving poor Lila all alone. She still had some distant relatives in the area, but she didn't keep in touch with them. He knew how much her request meant to her and it damn near killed him to deny her. "I'm sorry, honey, but I can't. I wish I could. I really do. But I never know where I'm going to be or if I'll be allowed any contact at all with the outside world."

"I don't need a lot. Just a phone call every now and then, something to let me know you're okay."

The words hung in the quiet room like a shroud until finally, he bit the bullet and manned up. "Honey, we went into this knowing we didn't have much time. Maybe it was sweeter because of that. More intense."

"No. The sweetness is because of what I feel for you—what I've never felt for anyone before. I said I love you, Preston, and I meant it." She sniffled and buried her face in the base of his neck. "I know I shouldn't, and I know it's stupid, but I can't help it. We don't know each other that well and you said



upfront you don't do relationships. I'm not asking you to give me any more than you're willing or able to, but I wanted you to know how I felt. Needed you to know. No matter what happens after you leave, no matter what the future holds, you'll always have a place in my heart."

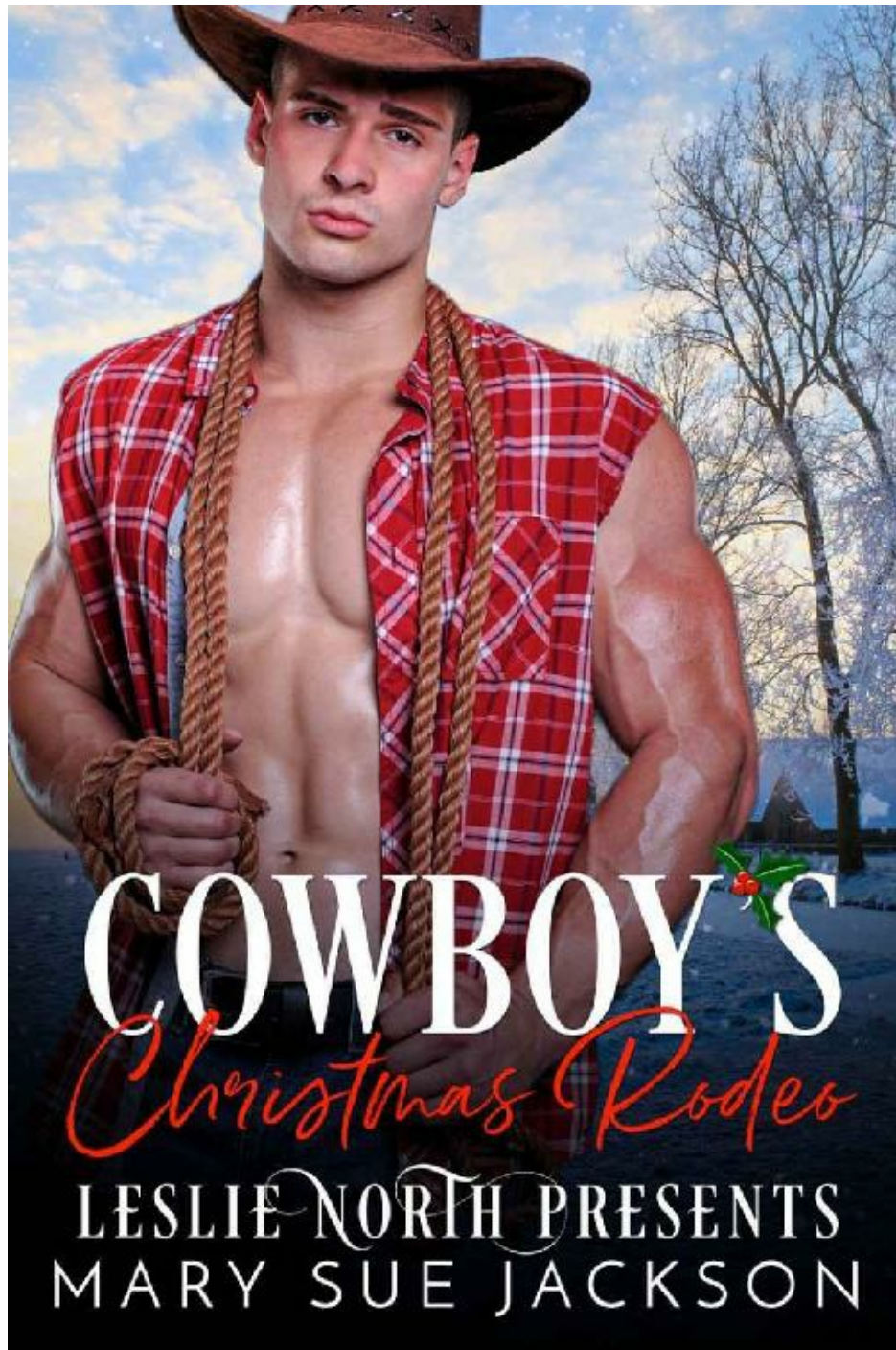
"That doesn't sound stupid at all," he said, tucking her words deep inside him. His chest squeezed and his heart ached, but he had to stay strong. Had to stay alone. Alone was easier, cleaner, less complicated. Then her soft sob gutted him and he couldn't stop himself. He tipped her chin up and kissed her gently, smoothing away her tears with his thumb. "If I can, I'll come back to you one day. I promise I'll try."

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## BLURB

*True love is wilder than a bucking bronco...*

Axel King has lived a tough life on the rodeo circuit, and now he's ready to

settle down. But first he wants to win the Pride River Christmas Rodeo. Which means he's got to stay out of trouble, and that's where Belle Manning comes in. Belle always kept him out of hot water when he was a kid, and Axel's never forgotten her... or their first kiss. He's also never forgotten how her daddy warned him to stay away from her...

Belle's had a crush on Axel King when they were little cowpokes and she can't deny she's a little intrigued by his return. So when he approaches her with a proposition, she agrees. Axel wants her by his side and, in exchange, he'll give her a plot of land so she can build her occupational therapy clinic. It's a stunning offer, and one that will keep her matchmaking mother off her back, too. Once Axel wins the rodeo, they can go their merry ways.

But it doesn't take long before their fake relationship turns all too real, throwing Belle off kilter. Maybe a second chance at love is the Christmas miracle they needed all along?

Guess what? This heartwarming cowboy romance is even better than before, it was updated & republished in August 2023!

**Grab your copy of *Cowboy's Christmas Rodeo* here.**  
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## **EXCERPT**

### **Chapter One**

“So this is it, huh?” Jared asked, a hint of amusement and perhaps even disbelief in his voice. “This is the place responsible for the legendary Axel King.”

“Well, I don't know about that,” Axel replied with an easy chuckle. “I give my parents some of the credit, too. The bar didn't exactly raise me, if you know what I mean.”

Jared looked at Axel and frowned for a second, and Axel could see him

trying to work out what he meant. Jared was a decent guy and a hell of a rodeo rider, but he wasn't the sharpest tool in the shed. He almost always got there, though, and this time was no exception. After another moment or two, the frown lifted, and Jared rolled his eyes, punching Axel in the biceps.

“Hey, man!” Axel exclaimed, rubbing his arm and making a big show of being injured. “What do you want to do a thing like that for?”

“Because you're being a smart aleck, that's why,” Jared answered promptly, then jerked his head toward the door of the bar and reached for the handle. “And you're keeping me out in the freaking snow while you're doing it.”

“Would it help if I said the first round's on me?” Axel asked with a smirk. They'd been friends long enough for him to know that offering to buy the booze was almost always the way to Jared's heart. Jared's self-satisfied grin told him that this time was no exception.

“I guess you're all right,” he said, holding the door open and allowing Axel to step inside first. The door swung closed again, pushed by the wind as much as the spring. “Even if you *did* grow up in a tiny, freezing town.”

Axel had nothing to say to that one, mainly because it was true. Pride River, Colorado, was the kind of small town a young man couldn't wait to leave, and he found it strange to be back now. He had always intended to return, though, and he'd gotten a bee in his bonnet about buying back the family ranch, which his parents had been forced to sell several years ago. The kind of money to be had from the Christmas Pride rodeo would allow him to do just that. He hadn't been back in a long time, but if he won the funds to put a down payment on the ranch, Pride River would once again be his home, and he could hang up his rodeoing days before he sustained the kind of injury a man couldn't walk away from. Now seemed like as good a time as any to get used to being in town again, and the Pride bar was as good a place as any to do it.

“Come on, man, stop dragging your feet,” Jared demanded when Axel took a little too much time surveying the still familiar layout of the bar. “I don't think there's a man alive who's more ready for a drink than I am.”

“I don't doubt it,” Axel said with a wry smile, although, in truth, he did.

Jared was a good enough friend, but he wasn't exactly the type of person a

man could talk to. Axel didn't even consider telling him that he was more than ready for a beer at the moment, too, let alone the reason why.

Axel had too much pride to admit it, the irony of which wasn't lost on him, considering the town's name, but he was nervous about being in his hometown again. He had left at eighteen without any intention of coming back. There had been a girl he needed to get away from for her own good, and he'd been too wild and ornery to stay in one place for long anyway. Now the town that watched him grow up was going to see what he could do. Not only that, but the results of this rodeo mattered more to him than any of his previous rides. He would never get a better shot at enough money to buy back the ranch and take care of his parents the way they deserved. He had too much riding on this to make mistakes, and knowing that made him feel like an animal trapped in a cage.

All these thoughts and more were racing through Axel's mind as he and Jared approached the bar, and he was more than a little grateful for the first sip of cold beer passing his lips. The relief was short lived, however, because in the next instant, he heard a voice he knew too well.

"They said you were coming for this one," said Ford Carlisle, speaking so that Axel could hear the sneer on his face before he turned to see it for himself. "Everyone on the circuit has been whispering about it. They're all waiting to see if you can keep your cool this time, or if you're going to get yourself banned from rodeo for good."

"Nice to see you, too, Ford," Axel said stiffly, shrugging off the warning hand Jared was already placing on his shoulder. "I know why I'm here early, but why are you here so far in advance?"

"I want to keep an eye on my competition. Maybe seeing you in your native environment will give me even more of an advantage." Ford gave a shrug that seemed meant to look casual, but came off like he'd practiced it in the mirror a million times. "Not that I need it."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Axel asked, bristling at the condescension practically leaking out of Ford's ears.

The thing was, he knew exactly what it meant. For as long as Axel could remember, he'd had a quick temper, and he had always struggled to keep it in

check. He'd gotten in more fights than he could remember before he even hit his teens, and by the time he left Pride River, he'd left quite the reputation behind. In ten years of working the rodeo circuit, he'd mellowed a bit. He'd had to keep an even keel around the rodeo animals, no matter how the humans set him off. In high school, Belle had looked after him, helped him keep himself in check, but out on the road, he hadn't found anyone with the same magical effect. He'd had to learn to tamp down that temper. Only one person could still set him off—Ford. He made a point of learning every single one of Axel's buttons and pushing them repeatedly. This season had been particularly bad as their competition had heated up.

They were ranked one and two among the bronc riders, and whichever of them scored higher here in Pride River would be the season champion. The prize money would be life changing. And as the season went on, Ford had targeted Axel more and more often, picking fights and pushing buttons, resulting in four censures for Axel from the Rodeo Association for unsportsmanlike conduct. One more, and he'd be disqualified from the Pride River rodeo. Somehow, Ford always managed to sidestep the actual tussles, pushing Axel's temper right to the edge, so that whoever threw the next barb would receive Axel's fist. In the week or so leading up to the rodeo, Axel knew Ford would be pushing harder than ever.

“Come on, sugar, don't get your panties in a bunch,” Ford said now, heckling Axel as he stepped closer, invading Axel's personal space. His skin crawled at the other man's proximity. “I'm only messing with you. Besides, it's not me that needs to worry about you being here, is it?”

“Come on, Ford,” Jared said disgustedly, although he didn't get so much as a glance from Ford for his troubles.

“It's all the pretty ladies that need to do the worrying, right? Them and their daddies,” Ford said in a sing-song voice that set Axel's teeth on edge. “That is if there's any of 'em that you haven't already run through, which seems like a big 'if' to me.”

This was enough to get the drunks at the bar beside them muttering and laughing, which only pissed Axel off more. Ford was using his other reputation—as a player—against him too, and although it was easy enough to do, especially in Axel's hometown, it was also a cheap shot. The man was

clearly enjoying himself. He was enjoying the way he was making Axel's blood boil, and he was far from finished doing it. He stepped even closer, standing so near to Axel now that no culture on earth would have deemed the proximity socially acceptable. Before Axel could point that fact out, one of Ford's hands darted out low, so that nobody would be able to see it. He jabbed Axel hard, right in the side where his latest injury had been. Axel gave a grunt of pain mingled with surprise, and then he saw red.

“Ah,” Ford said quietly, all the feigned cheerfulness absent now. “I knew you weren't as strong as you used to be. Looks like you're about used up, from where I'm standing. I'll leave you alone to think about how it'll feel when I pull the season championship right out from under you.”

Axel wasn't going to be able to stop himself from throwing a punch. He knew that he needed to, knew that he had to keep himself in check if he wanted to compete at least one more time. But understanding what you needed to do and being able to see it through were very different animals, and Axel's deep breaths and counting down from ten and all the other techniques he'd developed over the years weren't helping. He was going to throw a punch, and that was all it would take. His ship would be sunk, and there would be no going back.

He felt a hand on his shoulder, pressing down in a way that was somehow both gentle and firm. It wasn't Jared. He was as sure of that as he was of his own name. Even after ten years, he recognized the whiff of perfume that wafted over him, like as he recognized the light pressure the fingertips on his shoulder made. He knew exactly who it was stepping in to save the day.



*This is real, Belle Manning told herself, fighting the urge to pinch herself, just to make sure. Axel King is back in Pride River, after all these years, and he's still looking for a fight.*

She had come to the Pride to blow off steam with some friends who were back in town for the Christmas holiday and the rodeo festivities. It was a welcome distraction and sorely needed; she had been spending a lot of time with her mom lately because of the holidays, and as much as she loved her,

the woman was driving her insane. Ever since Belle's father died of a heart attack a few years back, her mom had been overly invested in Belle's love life. It felt like she piled on the pressure a little more with each passing day, finding truly ludicrous and bizarre ways to bring up men she considered suitable. It didn't matter how many times Belle told her she wasn't looking to be in a relationship, let alone a serious one. Her mother was on a mission, and God help the person who stood in her way.

Belle most definitely had not been expecting to see Axel standing at the bar. It was her turn to buy a round, and she had been on her way over from their table when she swore she heard his voice. She shook her head, reminding herself that Axel hadn't come home in almost ten years, and there was no way he would turn up now. It was the time of year that made her think of him, that was all. The last time she had seen him was on Christmas Eve, a magical, snowy night when he had kissed her on the porch and brushed snowflakes off her lashes, telling her he would see her in the morning. The next day, Christmas Day, he was gone. He hadn't called, and he hadn't returned to Pride River. After all this time, there was no reason to believe he would be back now.

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