



THE Christmas Letters

JENNY
PROCTOR

CAN AN OLD LETTER
spark A NEW FLAME?

THE
Christmas
Letters

a sweet Christmas novella

JENNY PROCTOR

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CHAPTER ONE

Tess

A DEAL IS A deal.

I promised my parents, so I'm here.

But no matter how many times I remind myself of this fact, it doesn't make the looming doors of the Southern Society any less appealing.

I shouldn't be intimidated. I know these doors. I've walked through them a thousand times. I've gone to the luncheons and brunches, the book clubs and the soirees. I attended cotillion here and even held my debutante ball in the gathering space upstairs. In so many ways, this place made me who I am.

Who I *was*, anyway. Who I definitely *don't* want to be anymore.

But convincing my parents that reinventing myself is a good thing hasn't been so easy. New degree, new living situation, new job, new philosophy on life. *Yeah*. It's a lot for them to swallow. So I've had to make some concessions.

Yes, I can use my trust fund to live on my own and pay for a second bachelor's degree—this time in something I actually want—but *only* if I meet them at the yacht club for dinner once a week. *And* volunteer at the Southern Society.

Honestly, I'm not sure it's worth it. But this is the closest I've ever gotten to living life on my own terms. If it means occasional dinner with my pretentious parents and a few hours a week volunteering with Mom's pretentious friends, so be it.

I pull out my phone and call my cousin, Chloe, who also happens to be my best friend. We've been through a lot, Chloe and me, so it's probably good we're cousins. The blood relation makes our tolerance for each other higher than it might be if we were just friends.

"Hey," Chloe says. "I'm on break, so I've only got a second. What's up?"

"Remember when I said I was going to the Southern Society to volunteer?" I say. "Just kidding. I can't actually do it."

Chloe chuckles. "How far did you make it?"

"I'm on the sidewalk out front. But I really don't want to go inside."

"You can do it!" Chloe says in her best cheerleader voice.

"Can I though? Remind me again why I'm here, Chlo. Because I'd much rather walk the two blocks to Vera's and get myself a caramel macchiato."

"You're there because you have to volunteer or your parents are cutting you off," Chloe says. "But also, volunteering will

be good for you.”

I frown, pacing back and forth on the wide Charleston sidewalk. “Can’t I just volunteer at the hospital?”

“Sure. I’ll save you all the bedpans.”

“Rude,” I mutter.

“Just go inside!” Chloe says. “The society women visit here all the time. They decorate. They bring treats. You’ll love it.”

“I haven’t seen Mrs. Greenly since the wedding,” I say, bringing up yet another excuse.

But Chloe doesn’t yield. “You can handle Mrs. Greenly,” she says. “She might bite, but she won’t break the skin.”

The reality is, facing down Mrs. Greenly is much less about not wanting to volunteer and much more about not wanting the inevitable scrutiny of reentering Charleston society. Just over a year ago, I was all anyone could talk about. I stayed away as long as I could, but now I’m back. And I’m not ready to face the consequences.

“Listen to me,” Chloe says. “This is my all-caps voice. You can do this. And it’s going to be different because you are different. And don’t let snooty Mrs. Greenly or anyone else tell you otherwise.”

“Am I different though?” I say. “Some days I wonder.”

“Stop it. I know you better than you know yourself and you’re a changed woman.” Sounds of the hospital drift through the phone, and Chloe says something to someone in

the background. “Okay, gotta get back to work,” she says to me. “Love you lots!”

The call disconnects but before I can put my phone away, a text message from Chloe pops up on my screen. It’s a Ryan Gosling Hey Girl GIF with the words “I believe in you” stamped across the bottom. She’s been sending me cheesy Ryan Gosling GIFs as long as they’ve been a thing, and I will never get tired of them.

I should trust Chloe. She *does* know me better than anyone. And she also knows the world I grew up in. Well, mostly.

The biggest difference between Chloe and me is that her mom, my mother’s sister, married a tax accountant from Summerville. They raised Chloe and her three brothers in the Charleston suburbs, on the fringes of the society our mothers grew up in. Chloe didn’t even have a debutante ball. My debut was treated like the event of the century. Bigger than Christmas. The most important step I would take to position myself in Charleston society.

Because *my* father is a Ravenel. A partner at one of Charleston’s oldest law firms. A bastion of old Charleston society and old Charleston money. With a last name like Ravenel, you can’t go anywhere in this city without someone knowing who you are. At least who your parents are.

Chloe’s mom got a job working as the office manager for a chiropractor.

My mom got a job as the wife of her very rich husband. Chair the committees. Manage the household staff. Host the

parties.

It's fine for her. She's good at it. But I want something different. Which means I cannot stand on this sidewalk forever.

"It's for business school," I mutter as I push through the doors. "For my *own* freaking future."

The heavy wood creaks with age, and the familiar smell of the historical mansion immediately fills my nose. Dusty books. Plaster. Ancient wood floors. If history has a smell, the old Henderson mansion is it.

Mrs. Greenly appears in the foyer of the old house. "Tess!" she says, a wide smile on her face. "Your mother said you'd be dropping by."

Mrs. Greenly is prim and proper in all the ways she should be as a cultured Southern woman. Think Emily Gilmore with a side of Paula Dean's accent.

I force a smile I don't really feel. "Hello, Mrs. Greenly. It's so nice to see you."

"You too, darling." She pulls me in to place air kisses on either side of my cheek. "I haven't seen you since right before your wed—" She winces. "Sorry about that. I don't mean to bring up a sore subject."

I manage a tight smile. "Mom said you'd have a list of volunteer opportunities for me to look over?" I say, completely ignoring her dig about my failed wedding.

I want to believe she didn't *mean* to bring it up, but I know better. Southern women are very good at needling in the sweetest way possible. But that doesn't mean I have to play the game and needle back.

"Right, right, of course," Mrs. Greenly says with a polished ease. "Come on back and we'll chat."

She leads me through a door just off the foyer and into her office, where she settles into the enormous velvet green chair behind the desk. "Now, let's take a look," she says as I drop into the smaller but still very green and very velvet chair across from her.

She turns a sheet of paper so I can read along as she slides her pen down the side. "Oh. Well, we can just scratch these off." She draws a thick line across several rows of text. "And this one here, too."

"Wait, why are you crossing them out?" I ask, tilting my head to see better.

Mrs. Greenly offers me a pained smile. "These are the committees Lydia Vanderhorst chairs. I just assumed you wouldn't want—"

Ahh. Lydia Vanderhorst. My almost mother-in-law. I probably *should* avoid volunteering on any of her committees. "Right. Understood."

Mrs. Greenly pins me with a smile that almost seems genuine. "It won't always be this way, honey."

I nod. It won't be. But only because I'm changing things for myself.

I try to turn my attention back to the list, but Mrs. Greenly slides it closer to her side of the desk, her hands hovering over the words in a way that keeps me from reading it. I look up, my eyebrows raised.

"You know," she says, leaning forward, "I heard he's dating again. My daughter Trish told me she saw him out on Folly Beach with a blond woman she didn't recognize."

I force a breath in through my nose and out through my mouth. *Just stay calm.* "I hope Preston *is* dating, Mrs. Greenly. I want him to be happy."

"Just not happy with you," she says, a little too sweetly.

I barely suppress a sigh. The thing is, Preston Vanderhorst *wouldn't* have been happy with me. At least not for long. I didn't run away on my wedding day because I saw happily wedded bliss in my future. I was doing both of us a favor by finally being honest. Not that anyone in this circle will ever understand my decision. Definitely not his mother or Mrs. Greenly.

Why would anyone *not* want to be *Mrs. Preston Vanderhorst*?

"Mrs. Greenly, I don't have much time. Can we get back to the list?"

"Oh, right, right. Okay. Let's see. There's certainly a lot to do. Especially this time of year. The Christmas programs, you

know, they take a small army to run.”

“Christmas? Already? That seems a bit ear—”

“Oh, of course,” Mrs. Greenly says, cutting me off. “We already have four dozen letters for Santa, and we’ll have twice that by the end of November. And then there’s the Christmas Eve Gala. Lydia is over the decorations, but there are probably other parts that—”

“What about the hospital?” I blurt. “Is there a group that visits the children’s hospital?”

Mrs. Greenly’s face lights up. “There sure is. Julie Waterson heads that group. I’ll send you the schedule and let Julie know. She’ll be thrilled to have a young face joining her team.” She gives me an expectant look. “What else?”

“Oh. I was thinking if I started with just the hospital—”

“How are you at fundraising?” she asks, cutting off my protests.

“No fundraising for me,” I say a little too quickly. “That’s my mother’s territory.”

Mrs. Greenly frowns. “The silent auction, then? We’re gathering art this year. Do you know anything about art? My Trish is heading that up. I’m sure she’d love to spend some time with you and catch up.”

I shake my head, hoping Mrs. Greenly doesn’t remember the art history degree I earned from the College of Charleston. I may be more qualified than most, but I’d rather eat my diploma than intentionally spend time with Trish Greenly. She

was my mortal enemy through all of cotillion, and she poured a glass of punch on my dress at my debutante ball. She swears it was an accident, but I saw the gleam in her eye. Not even the three weeks I spent connecting with my inner peace on the shores of Bali could give me enough Zen to deal with Trish any longer than absolutely necessary.

“I don’t think art is my thing either,” I say, which is the truth. I didn’t pick the degree. My mother did. Because it’s a “perfectly respectable degree that will serve you well when you’re a hostess to your husband’s important guests.”

Mrs. Greenly taps her pen against the desk. “Well, I suppose you could handle the letters to Santa. It’s tedious work, but you could do it from home.”

I immediately perk up, liking the idea of doing something from home. “What would that involve?”

“It’s easy, really; we have drop boxes at several post offices around town and at the fire station over on Elm Street. You’ll need to gather the letters once a week or so, open them, read them, and respond. We like the responses to be handwritten so they feel more authentic—you know, so the children think they’re getting something directly from the North Pole—but you write the same thing in every letter, just filling in the child’s name and address. No creativity required.”

“So I just write out the letter and mail one to each kid?”

“That’s it.” She stands and walks across the room, pulling an oversized file box from the shelf behind me. The box is covered in faded Christmas paper that’s wrinkled and lifted at

the corners. It looks absolutely ancient. “These are the letters we’ve gathered so far. Plus a key that will open the collection boxes at each location.”

I lift the lid and look inside. The top letter is addressed in crayon to *Santa Claus, The North Pole*.

Mrs. Greenly has no idea how happy she’s made me. I’m volunteering for TWO different jobs, both of which I can do without having to come back here at all. This is better than I ever imagined.

I stand up, letter box in hand. “This looks great, Mrs. Greenly. Thanks so much for your help.”

“Well thank you for being so willing.” She reaches out and places a hand on my shoulder. “We were all so happy when your mother told us you were back in town. I’m sure it was embarrassing after everything that happened, but there’s nothing to worry about. You’re with us now. We’ll get you right as rain before you know it.”

“Honestly, Mrs. Greenly,” I say, forcing the tension out of my jaw, “I’ve never felt more *right* than I do right now.”

“Of course, darling,” she says with a dismissive wave of her hand. “Will you be at the yacht club this weekend? I heard the Stagers’ son is back in town for a visit.” She raises her eyebrows, suggestion heavy in her eyes.

I swallow a groan. Spending time with Johnny Stager almost sounds worse than curating art with Trish Greenly. “I don’t

think I can make it this weekend. But thanks for thinking of me. Will you tell Johnny I said hi?"

I finally escape Mrs. Greenly and the stuffy Southern Society offices and step into the muggy Charleston air. Even in November, we have as many warm days as we do cool ones and we started today on the warmer side. But a surprisingly cool breeze is blowing now, lifting the hem of my skirt, and I breathe deeply, savoring the unexpected chill.

I look at the sky. The palm trees lining the street are swaying against a backdrop of heavy storm clouds. That explains the breeze. I hurry toward my car, knowing from experience how quickly a Charleston storm can hit. I open the passenger side door and drop my purse and the box of letters inside, pulling out my keys and my wallet. I'm too close to Vera's Coffee not to get that macchiato I've been craving, but the brushed leather of my purse will *not* do well in the rain.

If I'm lucky, I'll make it back to the car before the storm starts. Either way, at least my purse is safe.

Vera's is more crowded than it should be on an ordinary Tuesday afternoon, the line reaching almost to the door. When I finally turn away from the counter, macchiato in hand, rain is sliding down the front windows of the coffee shop in thick sheets.

This isn't just the kind of rain that might ruin my purse. This is the kind of rain that could completely wash me away.

I walk to the window and look toward my car. It isn't *that* far. A block and a half, maybe. But I'm not wearing the shoes

to run for it, especially not while holding my very full macchiato.

So...I guess I'm waiting out the storm at Vera's.

I drop into a chair at an empty table, but without my purse, I don't even have my phone.

I've never felt so naked.

Or so bored.

I look around the crowded coffee shop, feeling weirdly awkward and out of place. This is *my* city. I should feel at home here. But lately, I've felt more and more like I'm wearing someone else's skin.

I want to believe I'll find my place here again. That I can be in the city I've always called home without feeling like it's turning me into someone I don't want to be. Chloe has always managed it just fine, and she has the same lineage I do. But I've never been as good as Chloe. She's always known what she wants from life, and she doesn't let anyone stand in her way. Except, not in a "get out of her path" kind of way. It's more like she just has this quiet confidence. She's never been the kind of person who's blown over by the slightest thing. And she doesn't care what people think.

Okay, so maybe it's actually kind of amazing we share the same lineage. I've never been any of those things. But I want to be. I'm *starting* to be.

I finish my drink and toss it into the trash bin, looking toward the windows one more time. The rain hasn't eased up,

but my drink is gone, and I can't stay here all day. I make my way to the back of the coffee shop to the narrow hallway that leads to the bathroom. If the rain hasn't stopped in the time it takes me to pee, I'll just have to resign myself to getting wet.

The floor slopes downward as I walk—crazy historical Charleston buildings—and the ceiling drops, and it feels a little like I'm entering a cave. The bathroom itself is nearly as narrow as the hallway, just wide enough for two stalls—their doors flush with the floor and reaching nearly to the ceiling—and a small pedestal sink.

I slip into the first stall, the heavy door slamming shut behind me with a thud that startles me. I've never been in a bathroom stall quite so private.

I *do* love my city, but maybe I don't love tiny bathrooms in tiny hallways in old buildings that *definitely* weren't constructed with indoor plumbing in mind.

Once I'm finished, I reach for the handle of the stall door. The knob twists in my hand, but the door doesn't budge.

Okay, that's weird.

Nudging my shoulder against the door, I try again, giving the locking mechanism a good shake. Still no luck.

Panic grips my throat, and I close my eyes, taking several slow, deep breaths.

This isn't a reason to freak out. The door is just stuck. It can't stay stuck forever. I grab the knob one more time and

give it a hard tug, spinning it in the opposite direction to see if that will dislodge whatever is holding me captive.

Annnd, the knob breaks off in my hand.

I swear under my breath before throwing my whole weight at the unwieldy door. This cannot be happening. My caramel macchiato was good, but it wasn't *get-locked-in-a-bathroom-stall* good. Especially not when I have no phone.

“Hello?” I call, banging my hand against the stall door. “Is anyone out there?”

What kind of bathroom has floor-to-ceiling doors anyway?

Cold sweat prickles against my lower back despite the cooler temperature in the bathroom, and I force a few steady breaths as I lift my dark hair off my neck, letting the cool air touch my skin. Closing my eyes one more time, I imagine Bali. Warm sand under my toes, cool waves lapping over my ankles, fresh breezes lifting my hair.

This is temporary.

Someone will eventually come into the bathroom. Vera's is packed with people right now. It's not like I'm the only woman in Charleston who ever needs to pee.

But no matter how hard I try to stay calm, every time I open my eyes, it feels like the four walls of the tiny stall in the tiny bathroom at the end of a very tiny hallway at the back of Vera's Coffee House are quickly closing in around me.

CHAPTER TWO

Drew

I EASE THE AMBULANCE to a stop in front of Vera's Coffee House and shift into park.

"Is she stuck in the bathroom? Or just stuck in a bathroom stall?" my partner, Ben, asks.

I almost can't hear him over the roar of the rain pounding on the rig. "I guess we're about to find out." The lights of a Station Two firetruck flash behind us. "Let's go," I say to Ben, then I duck into the rain and lead the way into the coffee shop.

An older Black woman wearing a bright red dress and a black apron stands at the back of the restaurant, a worried look on her face. The nametag on her dress says "Vera."

"I'm so glad you're here," she says as soon as I reach her.

"How long has she been stuck?" I ask as I follow Vera into the narrow hallway behind the coffee house.

"Not more than an hour, all total—y'all made good time—but she seems like she's starting to break down a little. I can't say I blame her. Those stalls are small."

“She’s trapped inside the stall? She can’t just crawl under the door?”

“Not these doors,” Vera says. She glances over my shoulder, a frown creasing her brow.

I turn and follow her gaze to AJ, the firefighter a few paces behind us, who is holding an ax. I look back to Vera, eyebrows raised.

“The stall doors are two hundred years old. Repurposed from the original building. I’d hate to see them destroyed.”

“Ah. Understood. We’ll do our best.”

Vera nods one more time, then steps out of the way, making room for me and one of the firefighters to step into the small bathroom. Everyone else stays in the hallway, but the door is propped open so they can at least see in.

I stop outside the stall door and knock. “Hello? I’m Drew, a paramedic with Charleston Station Two. How are you holding up?”

A woman snuffles. “Oh, thank goodness. Please get me out of here.”

“We’re working on figuring that part out. Just hang with me, okay?” I step to the side while AJ inspects the hinges on the door and fiddles with the locking mechanism.

“We tried everything,” Vera says from the hallway. “The hinges are iron and as old as the hills. And it looks like the lock broke off on the inside. I can’t make sense of it.”

“I’m willing to back all the way up if you want to just break the door down,” the woman says from inside the stall, trepidation filling her voice.

Vera shakes her head. “Surely it won’t come to that.”

AJ crouches down in front of the lock. “We can’t just pick the lock?”

“We tried,” Vera says. “There’s nothing left to pick.”

“I’ve got the doorknob in here with me,” the woman says from inside the stall. “And it looks like the lock is still attached. I can see where the pieces broke.”

AJ stands back up and shifts his attention to the bolts. “I think I know what to do,” he finally says. “If we can get a saw with a diamond blade, we can cut through the iron without harming the door. We’ll lose the original bolts, but that’s probably our only option. Otherwise, she might be in there forever.”

“Oh, geez,” the woman says. “Please don’t say that.”

I shoot AJ an annoyed look. The woman’s voice sounds shaky, and Vera already said she wasn’t doing that well. The last thing I need is AJ freaking her out by using words like *forever*.

“It’s going to be a minute before we can do anything,” Ben says from the hallway. He sticks his head in the door, making eye contact with me. “King Street is flooding. We aren’t going anywhere unless we’re swimming.”

I stifle a groan while the woman inside the stall whimpers.

“I hate small spaces,” she says softly, repeating the words over and over again. “I hate small spaces. I hate small spaces. I hate small spaces.”

I look up toward the ceiling, momentarily wondering if I could climb up and fit through the space above the stall door. There might be enough room, but I don’t have the first clue what condition this woman is in. Maneuvering her over the top of the door would likely be too dangerous, and if she hates small spaces, adding myself to an already tiny bathroom stall will only make the space feel smaller.

I motion toward the door, asking AJ and everyone else to back up and give me some space. “Find us a saw to cut through the bolts,” I say quietly. “In the meantime, I’ll try to keep her calm.”

Flooding in downtown Charleston isn’t rare, though it’s unusual for November. Usually, it’s the fast-moving summer storms that dump enough rain to overwhelm the storm drains and fill the streets with water. Either way, the flooding never lasts long. It’ll recede within the hour, so it shouldn’t hinder our rescue for too long.

Hopefully.

Where does AJ think he’s going to find a diamond saw anyway?

AJ nods, disappearing out the door. He looks like he has a plan, so all I can do is trust him and focus on the job I assigned myself.

I lean a shoulder against the stall door. “You okay in there?”

A deep breath. A snuffle. “Seriously? Would you be okay in here? It’s taking every ounce of my focus not to completely freak out.”

“What’s your name?” I ask. Maybe if I can help her focus on something else, she might relax a little.

“Tess,” she answers.

“That’s a nice name. Are you from Charleston?”

She scoffs. “I know what you’re trying to do, Drew. And it isn’t going to work. You can’t small talk me out of a panic attack.”

She takes several shallow breaths, and alarm bells sound in my brain. The last thing I need is a woman I can’t help panicking herself into passing out. “Got it. No small talk. Can you take a couple of deep breaths for me?”

“Right. Breathing. I can breathe,” Tess says.

I listen as she takes a slow deep breath, then another, and another. “How are you feeling?” I finally ask.

“Better, I think?”

“Good. Keep going. Focus on your breathing. That always helps me.”

“When you’re trapped in bathroom stalls?”

I grin. “I had panic attacks when I was a kid,” I say. “My grandma used to remind me that oxygen was my friend, and I shouldn’t shut it out when it’s only going to help me.”

Tess breathes out a shaky laugh. “Seems like it would be hard to forget something so simple and yet...normal breathing really is the first thing to go, isn’t it?”

“How’s your pulse?” I ask. “Does it feel like it’s racing?”

“No. I mean, it isn’t normal, but it’s getting better.” The longer she talks, the calmer she sounds.

“It shouldn’t be too much longer,” I say.

“Why did you have panic attacks as a kid?”

The question surprises me. It’s personal. Too personal, really. And yet, if talking is what it takes to keep Tess safe, I’ll talk. This is my job. And right now, I’m all she has.

I glance at the door. Only Ben is close enough to hear our conversation, and he already knows everything there is to know about me.

“I lost my parents when I was a kid,” I finally answer. “A sailing accident. For three years after, I...struggled.”

Struggled is an understatement. I was afraid to swim in the ocean, I refused to walk on the beach, and I couldn’t even *think* about getting on a boat. As an only child, I was pretty close to both of my parents. I was the center of their world, and they were the center of mine.

“That’s...” Tess pauses for a long moment. “I’m really sorry. That makes freaking out because I’m locked in a bathroom stall feel really stupid.”

“It’s not stupid. You’ve been in there a while.”

“It feels like it’s been days instead of hours, but I know that’s just me being dramatic. How did you stop them?” she asks. “The panic attacks?”

I turn so my back is against the door, folding my arms across my chest and turning my face away from the hallway. It’s a small space, so if anyone tries, they’ll still hear me. But this at least makes it feel like I’m only having a conversation with Tess. “Lots of controlled breathing and some good therapy. And then, eventually, I just grew out of them. But you’ll never find me on a sailboat. Even today.”

“What about surfing? Do you surf?”

“A little. But I’m not very good.”

Ben snorts from the door, and I shoot him a look. Ben does surf, and he never misses an opportunity to remind me how much better he is than I am.

“I’m more of a land sports kind of guy.”

“I learned to surf in Bali,” Tess says. “Isn’t that funny? I grew up at the beach and never touched a surfboard. I had to travel halfway across the world to realize it was something I love to do.”

“Bali, huh? That sounds nice. Vacation? Or were you living there?”

“Vacation. Well, sort of. It’s a long story. But then on my way home, I stopped in Paris to see my aunt and stayed with her for a while. I’ve only been back in Charleston a few months.”

“How was Paris?”

“Um, not as glamorous as it sounds? At least not for me. I was kinda going through something, so I mostly just stayed in and ate a lot of bread.”

“I guess there are worse places to live when you feel like binging on carbs.”

“That’s definitely true. Tell me something else about you,” Tess says. “I like the sound of your voice.” She pauses. “Well, not just your voice. Any voice will do. The distraction is helping.”

Her words spark something deep in my gut; it’s been a long time since I’ve felt a flare of attraction, and it doesn’t make sense that I’m feeling one now. Tess could be eighty for all I know. Or worse, seventeen. Though, she doesn’t *sound* eighty. And surfing in Bali, traveling to Paris...that makes me think she probably isn’t seventeen, either.

“What do you want to know?” I ask.

“Are you from Charleston too?”

“Born and raised.”

“How long have you been a paramedic?” she asks next.

I do some quick math in my head. “Almost five years.”

“Any siblings? Spouses? Kids?”

I chuckle. “You want to know about pets and girlfriends too?”

I catch movement in my periphery and look over to see Ben staring at me, a ridiculous expression on his face. He lifts his arms and wraps them around himself, sliding them up and down and swaying back and forth while he makes fake kissing sounds.

I roll my eyes and wave him away. I'm not about to admit to Ben I'm feeling even a tiny bit of attraction. He'll turn any situation into an opportunity to meet women, but I'm determined to keep this interaction professional. My job is to keep Tess calm. That's all I'm doing. Just how much I'm enjoying myself is entirely irrelevant.

"You can tell me about the flowers growing in your grandma's flower beds if you want to," Tess says. "Anything is better than what I have to entertain myself in here."

"You don't have your phone?"

"Weirdly, I don't. I left it in my car when I ran into Vera's to grab coffee. Come on. Where were we? Siblings?"

"No siblings for me. I'm an only child. No wife. No kids. No girlfriend."

"Wow," she says. "And you lost your parents? That...I mean, do you have anyone?"

My gut twists with a familiar pang of loneliness. "I do all right," I eventually say.

"Sorry. Was that a totally rude question? As soon as it came out, I wished I hadn't asked."

“It’s fine. I don’t mind you asking. I have good friends. My grandmother. Lots of extended family.”

“Extended family is good,” she says. “Actually, my best friend is my cousin. She’s having a baby in a couple of months, which is amazing. A tiny bit weird, but mostly amazing.”

“Why is it a tiny bit weird? Just that she’s having a kid?”

“Well, yeah. We’re the same age. I don’t feel like we’re adult enough to be thinking about motherhood, but she’s totally going to be a mom. That’s just part of it though. The other part is kind of a long story.”

“You got somewhere you need to be?” I ask playfully.

She takes an audible breath. “Okay. Here’s the thing. I’m going to tell you a story, but you can’t judge me for it. And you have to *promise* me you aren’t judging since I can’t see your face to know for sure.”

“Okay. You have my word. No judging.”

“So...my trip to Bali. It was supposed to be my honeymoon.”

“Whoa.”

“I said no judging.”

“That was a totally benign, strictly observational whoa,” I argue.

She laughs. “Mmm, I don’t know. It sounded judgy.”

“Tess, I swear. Come on. Let’s hear it. So you go to Bali by yourself?”

“Yes. And it was totally amazing, blah, blah, blah. Anyway, the point is, the guy I didn’t marry is the brother of the guy my cousin *did* marry.”

“Ohhh, and now you’re finally back in town. Hanging out with your cousin...”

“Exactly. My cousin *and* her husband. Who is so nice and sweet, even though I know he’s basically pretending I didn’t torch his little brother’s entire life.”

I shift my weight from one leg to the other, suddenly wishing I had a place to sit down. “Was it the right call?”

“Was what the right call?” she asks.

“Leaving him.”

“Oh. Absolutely. We wouldn’t have been happy.”

I nod along as I say, “Then I’m guessing his brother realizes that, too.”

She’s quiet for a beat. “Thanks,” she finally says. “I hope he does.”

I hear some shifting, then her voice comes through the door a little closer than it was before. “Okay. Your turn. I just told you about my last relationship. It’s only fair.”

“You want to know about my last relationship?”

“Absolutely I do.”

Ben chuckles silently from the doorway, pumping his fist over his head in a “go get ’em” gesture.

I wipe a hand across my face to hide my smile. I shouldn’t be enjoying myself so much, but Tess is really easy to talk to. Fun. Refreshing. *Exciting*.

“Her name was Daisy Mae.”

“Wait...Daisy Mae?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“No reason. Just...that is a very Southern name.”

She sounds like she’s hiding something, but honestly, what do I know? She could be hiding everything, and I wouldn’t have a clue.

Either way, the beat of uneasiness has me revising how much I admit about my relationship. “So we broke up six months or so ago. Turns out we were looking for different things.”

“I can relate to that,” she says softly. “What were you looking for that she wasn’t?”

“Something real, I guess?”

She doesn’t immediately respond, which makes heat creep up my cheeks.

“That probably sounds stupid,” I say.

“I don’t think it sounds stupid at all. My relationship with Preston never felt real. Or maybe it just didn’t feel like I was the right version of myself when we were together.”

“Preston, huh?”

She clears her throat. “Preston Charles Vanderhorst, the third.”

“Oh man. That’s a name. He sounds like he probably runs in the same circles as Daisy Mae.”

“Oh trust me. He totally does.”

That gives me pause. Does Tess *know* Daisy? Uneasiness swirls in my gut.

I liked Daisy. A lot. And sometimes, when she relaxed and just hung out with me, I could see us having a future together. But whenever we were with her friends, or her family, especially, she was completely different. Society mattered to Daisy. And I was never enough for her. Not rich enough. Not ambitious enough. Not good enough.

I didn’t need Daisy’s approval to feel okay about my life. I’m a paramedic because I want to be, not because I have to be. But I did get tired of feeling like she was constantly measuring me against some invisible yardstick of accomplishments.

A week after we broke up, she started dating some guy from up north whose family owns fifty bazillion hotels. Or something like that. Let’s just say he fits in her world a lot better than I did.

Sounds like that’s Tess’s world too.

“Do you know Daisy?” I ask, suddenly scared to hear her answer. Weird as it sounds, I like talking to Tess. I don’t really

want Daisy's world to be her world. Because that means it can never be mine.

“Calhoun, right? Daisy Mae Calhoun? We were in cotillion together, and we debuted the same year, but we went to different high schools, so we weren't really friends.”

Cotillion. Debutante balls. It *is* Tess's world.

“Huh. Small world,” I say easily, hoping I've managed to hide my disappointment.

The conversation drifts to other things as I let Tess ask me question after question. Hobbies, favorites, childhood memories. It's easy to answer, easy to talk to Tess, and if it helps her stay calm, I'm happy to do it. But the stirring of excitement I initially felt when we started talking is gone.

The last thing I need is another woman with expectations like Daisy's. Not that I'm getting any vibes that explicitly remind me of Daisy. But Tess is behind a heavy bathroom door.

How can I really know what she's like?

“Hey, AJ's back,” Ben says, sticking his head into the bathroom.

“What? Who's AJ?” Tess asks.

“He's the guy who's finally going to get you out of here,” I say.

AJ steps into the narrow space, saw in hand.

“We’re going to cut through the hinges, all right?” I say to Tess. “Can you back away from the door? As far away as you can.”

The closer we come to freeing her, the more nervous I begin to feel. Not for the process—AJ seems like he knows how to handle the saw—but for seeing her. Making eye contact. I may not be interested—not truly—but that doesn’t mean I haven’t enjoyed our conversation.

Actually, that’s an understatement. I’ve *really* enjoyed our conversation. And I *was* interested. Right up until I realized she was a society girl just like Daisy.

Society with a capital S.

Ben hefts my bag of supplies and hands it to me. “You’ll need to check her vitals once she’s free,” he says. “Just to make sure. I moved a chair into the hallway so she can sit.”

I nod, gripping the bag a little too tightly.

When Tess emerges from the stall, my throat goes dry.

Oh man, she is not making this easy.

Tess is gorgeous.

Like, tongue-stuck-in-my-throat-I-can’t-form-words gorgeous.

Suddenly, I’m rethinking everything I decided just moments before. Maybe Tess is different. Maybe she isn’t *really* a society girl.

Somewhere in the back of my mind, a voice reminds me that looks would be a very shallow reason to ignore other warning signs, and I think of Daisy's parting words.

Honestly, Drew, did you really think Daddy would be okay with me marrying a paramedic? We were never going to work out long-term.

Even months later, the words still sting.

Tess looks past AJ, whom she must know isn't me based on the saw in his hands and his firefighter uniform, and makes eye contact with me. "I'm assuming you're Drew?"

I nod, my voice lodged somewhere in the back of my throat.

She walks toward me, pausing briefly before wrapping her arms around my waist and burrowing her face against my chest.

I wrap one arm loosely around her shoulders and return the hug, knowing AJ, Ben, and a number of other colleagues are watching.

"Thank you," Tess whispers. "That would have been so much worse without you talking to me."

"Don't worry about it," I say gently, hating that she smells so good. That she fits so perfectly against me. "I was just doing my job."

Tess drops her arms and leans back, studying my face. "Was that really all it was?"

Before I can answer, Ben clears his throat, motioning toward the chair just outside the bathroom door.

I nod and take a quick step backward. “I need to check your vitals before I can let you go. Would you sit down for me?”

Tess raises her eyebrows and looks down her front as if assessing herself for imaginary damages.

“I’m not really worried,” I say through a half-grin. “But it’s protocol.”

She nods, following me to the chair Ben positioned a few feet away.

She sits, and I crouch down in front of her, my stethoscope in my ears. I lift the end, stretching it toward her. “May I?”

She nods, and I press it to her skin, just above the deep v-neck of her sweater.

She shifts at my touch, and her heart rate spikes while I’m listening.

“Am I gonna make it?” she jokingly asks.

I press my lips together, fighting a smile. “It’s a little fast, but I think you’ll be okay.”

I lift a blood pressure cuff out of my bag and position it on her arm, touching her as little as possible. Mostly because I want to do the exact opposite, and I refuse to be anything but a professional.

This is my job. Not a date. And she isn’t the kind of woman I want to date in the first place.

“Are your hands shaking?” Tess asks, laughter in her voice.

I clear my throat as I tug the blood pressure cuff from her arm and drop it into the bag. I tuck my hands behind my back. “Blood pressure looks good,” I say a little too quickly. “I think you’re all set.” I glance down the long hallway to what looks like an employee exit to a narrow alleyway beside the building. “It even looks like the rain has let up.”

“Hopefully it didn’t wash my car away before it did,” Tess says, following my gaze. She cocks her head as if considering her next words. “Drew, do you have your phone on you?”

I swallow, already knowing where this is going but still feeling powerless to stop it. “Yeah.”

She holds out her hand, a look of expectation clear in her eyes. “Can I see?”

I pull out my phone and hand it over, watching as she programs her number into my contacts. She hands it back before taking a few backward steps, a wide smile on her face.

“You should call me.”

I can’t help but return her smile, but I can’t give her more than that, and not just because I’m on the job. “It was great to meet you, Tess.”

Her expression shifts, losing the confidence it held moments earlier, but then she lifts her shoulders and smiles one more time before she turns and pushes through the door.

CHAPTER THREE

Tess

I DID *not* just do that.

I did not give my number to a paramedic who was ONLY DOING HIS JOB.

I mean, I've flirted with guys before. Given out my number. Been the one to make the first move. But being so blatant was bold, even for me.

It didn't *feel* bold though. It felt like the only option—like leaving without giving him my number would have broken something in the universe and thrown my entire life off track.

Which...*okay*, maybe that's a little dramatic. But I swear there was something happening between me and Drew. Something intense and exciting and different. *That's* what made me bold.

And he responded with *it's great to meet you*.

I drop my head onto the steering wheel and groan.

It wasn't exactly a rejection. But it wasn't a commitment either.

I half wonder if I'd have felt the same way if I'd emerged from the bathroom stall to find someone...let's say *less* attractive than Drew. Someone without deep blue eyes and wavy brown hair and a dimple on his left cheek that popped up when he smiled at me.

I want to say that I would. That our connection was strong enough to make an ordinary-looking guy suddenly look amazing. But I'll never know for sure because Drew is the polar opposite of ordinary. If someone told me I stumbled out of a bathroom stall and into a photo shoot for a calendar highlighting the world's hottest paramedics, I would have believed it, full stop.

I finally lift my head and turn on my car just as Drew and the other paramedic step onto the sidewalk. I quickly pull away from the curb, not wanting them to see me sitting here staring into space. After practically begging him to date me, Drew might think I'm waiting for him.

A police officer is positioned at the end of King Street, directing traffic around the worst parts of the flood. In another hour, the water will drain back into the harbor, and everything will be drivable again. But for now, I'll have to take the long way home to my apartment complex.

I turn right instead of left, following the flow of traffic as my mind replays my conversation with Drew. Talking through a closed door was different. In a way, it was freeing not having

to worry about how I was standing or whether there was spinach in my teeth.

The physical barrier between us also made it easier to be vulnerable. If I were looking at Drew face to face, it might have been harder to open up without worrying about how he might react.

Though, it's debatable whether that worked to my advantage.

I told Drew *so many things*. Things that could have easily convinced him *not* to call.

But the way he eased my sense of panic, distracting me with his buttery voice, telling me about himself and his life. It just made everything feel so intense. Like my emotions were amplified a thousand times.

Then I saw him in person, and he was just so pretty, and...I don't know what happened.

Maybe I was just overwhelmed? It's been a very long time since I've felt any sense of *wanting*. It was intoxicating.

Clearly. Since it made me behave like I've had more than a few drinks.

I finally make it home and turn into the parking garage for my apartment complex on East Bay Street. It might actually be better if Drew doesn't call me. Then I can go back to my very simple, very single life and never think about bathroom stalls or handsome paramedics again.

Something deep in my gut protests at the thought. I don't *truly* want to be alone. But the idea of getting back into the

dating game is terrifying. When I date again, I want to do it right. I want someone to get to know me as *me*. Not as the me I pretended to be for too many years.

What a solo honeymoon in Bali taught me, followed by nine intense months of leeching free therapy from my aunt in Paris, is that I have to untangle what I want from what my parents want. And believe in myself enough to own what I want and go after it, no matter who I might disappoint.

It makes sense *now*, but my parents are very convincing, and their programming was very thorough. They might as well have given me a script titled “Tess’s Lovely Life,” with a little post-it note stuck on the top warning me that I better not screw it up.

It’s been just over a year since I left Preston mere hours before I was supposed to walk down the aisle and say *I do*. A year of carefully reassembling my life, this time into something I actually want it to be. But in all that time of careful reconstruction, I haven’t felt a flicker of attraction to anyone. Not until today.

And maybe that’s the silver lining. If nothing else, whether Drew does or doesn’t reach out to me, my encounter with the hottest paramedic on this side of the Mississippi has at least shown me that I’m finally ready to date again.

And that feels big.



After an early dinner alone, I dive right into the box of Santa letters with a Hallmark movie playing in the background and a mug of hot chocolate on the coffee table beside me.

I wiggle my toes inside my fuzzy slippers as I nestle a little deeper under my lap blanket.

Yes, it is still sixty degrees outside. And yes, my year of self-reflection really did turn me into a ninety-year-old woman.

The letters are adorable—in a sweet way. For the first few, I follow the template to the letter, copying the words Mrs. Greenly gave me. The reply feels a little impersonal, but maybe the kids will be excited enough to hear back that they won't notice it sounds like their letter was written by an advertising executive at a bank.

Thanks so much for writing! Mrs. Claus and I were so excited to get your letter. We hope you've been good this year, and we're looking forward to bringing you...

I drop my pen. It feels wrong to send a form letter to Sophie, the little girl who wrote and asked Santa to bring her a puppy. Why not write a letter about puppies? Give the girl a few tips, suggest she check out one of the shelters in town? Besides, what if I write and tell Sophie Santa is excited to bring her a puppy, but in reality, Sophie's brother is allergic to dogs and she's actually getting a goldfish? How do parents resolve this Santa dilemma every single year?

When my phone lights up with an incoming call, I jump at the chance for a new activity. I'm maybe beginning to

understand Mrs. Greenly's glee when I agreed to take on the Christmas letters.

I groan when I see my mother's face fill my screen, but I have to answer. She won't stop calling until I do.

"Hi, Mom."

"Tess, I'm so glad I caught you. What are you doing tonight? Are you busy?"

Oh no. I know that tone of voice. "So busy, Mom. I was just about to walk out the door."

"Doing what?"

Crap. "Um, a volunteering thing?"

"At this hour? Surely it can wait. I want you to come down to the club. Your father and I are having dinner with the Stagers. Johnny's back in town."

"So I heard."

"So you'll come?" she asks, hope filling her voice.

"Mom. I'm not going to date Johnny Stager."

She huffs. "Now don't sound so judgmental. He's grown up a lot since you were children. Sure, he's no Preston Vanderhorst, but you could do worse. And listen. Your father had a conversation with Thomlinson, over at his investment firm? They didn't talk numbers, but he says that Stager boy has a *very* impressive portfolio."

I close my eyes, one hand pressed to my forehead. "I don't care about his portfolio, Mom."

She scoffs. “You keep saying that, but I don’t think you mean it. *Of course* you care. I *know you*, Tess.”

The way Mom says she knows me feels like an insult. But I don’t have to play this game. I don’t have to let her get to me.

“I appreciate the invitation, Mom, but I’m not interested. Please tell the Stagers I said hi, okay?”

“Tess, you aren’t getting any younger.” She lowers her voice to a conspiratorial whisper. “Men in our circle are getting married to debutantes five years younger than you. If you aren’t careful, you’re going to age out—”

“Oh my gosh, Mom, this is not the eighteenth century. I’m not aging out of anything.” We’ve had this argument at least ten times since I came back to Charleston. It never ends well. But maybe if Mom has an actual reason to ease off a little ...

“Besides, I’ve met someone,” I say in a way I hope feels casual.

Mom’s voice immediately changes. “What? Where? Who?”

I don’t know why I do it. Possibly to spite her, which doesn’t exactly make me proud. But no matter how many times I’ve tried to make Mom understand that I’ve changed, that I don’t want what she wants, she refuses to see it.

I launch into the story of meeting Drew with enough enthusiasm that hopefully, Mom won’t try to interrupt. And she doesn’t. I spare her no details. The magic of our connection. The intense blue of his eyes. The dimple that popped whenever he smiled.

The only adjustment I make for Mom is the timeline. In the version I tell her, our rescue was a few weeks ago, and we've been dating ever since.

Hopefully, he *will* reach out, and we *will* go out this weekend.

It's a lie *now*, but it won't be for long.

"Well," Mom finally says. "That's quite a story."

"It felt pretty magical, Mom. I really like him."

She scoffs. "It's only been a few weeks. You hardly know him."

She's holding back. I can tell she's holding back.

"And really, Tess—"

Here it comes.

"A paramedic? They make less money than I pay our gardener."

"Then it's a good thing I don't care about money."

"Don't be ridiculous. Everyone cares about money. You certainly cared when you were using it to gallivant around the world for the past year."

My jaw clenches. The honeymoon was already paid for—that money was gone whether anyone was there to enjoy the island or not. And I was staying with my mother's second cousin in Paris, in a tiny flat that was far from luxurious. But none of that will help Mom prove her point, so she won't hear

me even if I *do* point it out. Arguing with her has always been futile.

“Okay. Good chat. I gotta go,” I say instead.

Mom huffs, her annoyance coming through loud and clear. “What am I supposed to tell your father? He’s expecting you to join us. *Johnny* is expecting you to join us.”

Another call beeps through, Chloe this time, and my shoulders sag with relief.

“Tell them I’m dating someone else. I’ve gotta go, Mom. Chloe’s on the other line. I’ll call you next week, okay?”

I answer Chloe’s call and put it on speaker before dropping back onto my couch. “Please tell me why I came back to this place,” I say with a groan.

“Whoa. Was Mrs. Greenly really that bad?”

I grab a pillow and press it against my face to muffle a scream of frustration.

“Okay. Bigger than Mrs. Greenly, then. Let me guess,” Chloe says. “You just talked to your mom?”

I sit up. “Seriously? How did you know that?”

Chloe clears her throat. “Chloe, dear,” she says in a voice that is eerily close to my mother’s. “Can you talk some sense into Tess? If you get her to the club tonight, you’ll make me so happy.”

“She called you?”

“Texted,” Chloe says. “Just now. I’m guessing you don’t want to have dinner with Johnny Stager?”

“Mom couldn’t stop talking about his portfolio.”

“Please tell me she was only talking about his investments.”

I laugh. “Fortunately, yes. But I’m sure we aren’t far from her digging into his medical records.”

“He’s a very robust young man, Tess,” Chloe says, mimicking Mom’s voice again. “His sperm count is far above average.”

“Oh, gross. No talking about Johnny’s sperm.”

“I’m proud of you for standing up to her,” Chloe says, sincerity back in her tone. “You did good.”

“I didn’t, though. I lied to get her off my case. That’s hardly good.”

“Wait, what? What did you lie about?”

I pause. “Um, remember the story I told you earlier about the paramedic at Vera’s?”

“He already called you?”

“Not yet. But it’s possible I told my mom we met a few weeks ago and have been dating ever since.”

“Meh. What’s a few weeks?” Chloe says. “Because he’s absolutely going to call you. Did you tell her he’s a paramedic?”

“Oh, I totally did,” I say, “though I’m guessing she’ll leave that part out when she tells Daddy. Wouldn’t want him to have

a heart attack in the middle of the yacht club.”

“But you told your mom, and that feels huge.”

“Unless he doesn’t call. Then I’ll have to find some other paramedic to take home for family dinner.”

“Now *that* would give your father a heart attack,” Chloe says.

I pull a pillow onto my lap and grin. “Okay. Enough about me. How are you? How are you feeling?”

“Wait. *One* more thing about you. I actually called to give you some good news.”

I perk up. “Did you hear back from your yoga friend?”

“I did,” Chloe says, her voice bright. I can practically hear her smiling through the phone. “She checked with her boss and, as luck would have it, their office manager is moving after the first of the year and they’ll be looking to hire her replacement. No promises, of course, but she’s willing to meet with you.”

I gasp and sit up straighter, gripping a pillow to my lap. “Do they know it would have to be part time? I’ve got my classes —”

“It’s only a part-time position. Twenty hours a week.”

“Oh my word, that’s perfect.”

“Right? I thought so too.”

I breathe out a grateful sigh. The business experience will be great, but every penny I earn on my own is a penny I don’t

have to take from my parents. And the sooner I cut the purse strings, the better. “Thanks, Chlo. I appreciate you asking for me.”

“Of course! You know I’m in your corner.” She yawns audibly into the phone. “Okay, can we talk about me now?”

“Definitely. How are you?”

“Starving,” Chloe says. “And enormous. And irritated all the time. Are you busy right now? Want to come over? Want to bring me a cheeseburger?”

I barely stifle a laugh. Chloe’s tone tells me she’s serious about all these feelings and does not need me to laugh at her. “That good, huh? How was your appointment today?”

She sighs. “Fine. The baby is measuring a little big. They think I might go early.”

“Hey, well done. Fewer weeks to be pregnant can’t be a bad thing.”

“Just as long as she’s fully cooked before she decides to come. What are you up to? I was serious about you coming over.”

“Why, because I can get you a burger on my way?”

“I was joking about the cheeseburger, but if you’re offering to stop for food, I would rather have some of Francie’s chicken salad.”

“You want me to drive all the way out to Sullivan’s?”

“Oh, come on. It’s not that far. And how often is your best friend pregnant?”

“What’s Deacon up to tonight? He can’t get you chicken salad?”

I’m not necessarily opposed to hanging out with my ex-fiancé’s older brother. The whole failed wedding should have created tension between me and my cousin, but somehow, we’ve made it through without things getting too weird. Which is entirely Chloe’s doing. She’s just like that—always sensing people’s moods and saying exactly the right thing to make everyone feel better.

Plus, Deacon is far more chill and down-to-earth than Preston. He married Chloe, after all, even though she wasn’t a *true* debutante and didn’t meet any of his mother’s requirements. We’ve been together enough times now that it doesn’t even feel weird anymore. Just so long as no one mentions anyone else in his family.

Lack of awkwardness aside, I still have to plan my Chloe and Deacon time wisely. They’re just so *happy*. It isn’t super fun to be the third wheel.

“He’s in court and then after, he has to prep for *tomorrow’s* day in court, so he won’t be home until late. Please?” she begs. “I swear, when you’re pregnant, I’ll bring you whatever you want to eat every single day.”

Another image of Drew flits through my mind, and heat floods my cheeks. An hour of random conversation through a

stuck stall door and I'm thinking about having his babies? I'm worse off than I thought.

"Fine. I'll bring you chicken salad. But you have to help me answer Santa letters for the Southern Society."

"I'll help," she says easily. "I mean, assuming there's chicken salad. Did you sign up to visit the hospital?"

Chloe is a pediatric nurse at MUSC Children's, so she's got a vested interest.

"Yeah. Someone named Julie is supposed to email me the schedule. I think we're coming in to decorate for Thanksgiving next week."

"That sounds so much better than bedpans."

"Doesn't it?" I roll off the couch and turn off the television, then kick off my fuzzy slippers. "Okay. I'll go get your chicken salad. But I'm absolutely bringing these letters."

"You're my favorite," Chloe says. "Have I told you how glad I am that you're home?"

"A few times," I say, though I'll never get tired of the reminder.

The one bright spot in my struggle to reinvent myself is that through it all, Chloe has always believed I can do it. That somewhere inside of me, there is a person who values something more than investment portfolios. A person who is *real*.

I end the call, then drop Sophie's half-finished letter about the puppy she's probably not getting back into the box with the others. I grab the lid and move to put it on the box, but then I notice the corner of something sticking out from behind the wrapping paper that lines the old box. It looks like another envelope.

Gently, I pick at the wrapping, loosening it enough to slip whatever was hidden into view. It *is* an envelope, a slightly tattered one, yellowed with age.

Curious, I drop back onto the couch, letter in hand. The postmark on the corner of the envelope is from sixteen years ago.

Sixteen years? It's been hidden that long?

I look back at the box, worn and well-used. There are several layers of wrapping paper where I picked at the seam to free the hidden letter. It's probably been wrapped and rewrapped every few years to keep it looking fresh. It's hard to imagine no one would notice the letter until now. But it's clearly never been opened.

A sudden pang of sadness washes over me. Whoever wrote this letter is probably well into adulthood now, but my heart still hurts at the thought of them not getting a response all those years ago.

Slowly, I open the envelope and pull out a single sheet of white paper.

Dear Santa,

First, I want to start by saying I'm pretty sure you aren't real. I'm ten, and ten-year-olds are too old to believe in Santa. But I thought I'd write a letter anyway. Just in case you are. If you reply, maybe that will be my sign.

I smile. Whoever this kid was, they had spunk.

I don't want any of the regular things kids want for Christmas. I already have a Nintendo, and my skateboard works great. I even have a dog. But I don't have my parents anymore. So instead of presents, I'm hoping you can bring them back. If you're real, then you're a miracle. That's obvious. There's no other way you could get all over the world in one night anyway. If you can do that? Then bringing my parents back shouldn't be a big deal.

I live with my grandma now. She's nice. But she doesn't know how to make the pancakes my dad used to make every Saturday. And she doesn't read stories as good as my mom. If you can help, please tell them I'm on Sullivan's Island with Grandma, but I'll come home the minute they call for me.

Sincerely, Max

Oh man. I wipe a tear from the corner of my eye. Poor kid. This is even worse than Sophie's puppy.

Made doubly worse by the lack of response. I clearly broke the seal when I opened the envelope, so I'm sure no one has read this letter but me, much less replied.

Max probably waited for a response all season long. To think of him hoping for an answer, then watching for his parents on Christmas morning. It's the worst kind of emotional gut punch. *Poor, poor Max.*

My thoughts turn to Drew. He lost his parents too, and it strikes me as odd that I would read this letter today, right after hearing Drew tell me a similar story. I mean, I know it happens. Accidents happen. People die. But two stories in one day? It makes me wonder what the statistics actually are. How many kids are orphaned every year? And how do they ever make it through?

I may grumble about my parents, but I'm not unaware of my privilege. I still have them both in my life, and I've never wanted for anything. It's a sobering reminder to be grateful, even for a family that isn't perfect.

I do some quick math, looking again at the postage date stamped on the outside of the letter. If Max was ten when he wrote to Santa, that means he's close to my age now.

I refold the letter and slip it back into the envelope, but instead of putting it in the box with the others, I tuck it inside my purse. This one feels special enough to give it a little extra care.

I put the lid on the box, then cross to my bedroom to grab a hoodie and pull on my Uggs. The entire time, I can't shake the thought of the little boy with no parents.

Does Max still live on Sullivan's Island? Does his grandmother? What did he think when he didn't get a response from Santa? But then, even if he had gotten a response, it wouldn't have been the one he wanted.

He wouldn't have gotten his parents back.

I hate that I'll never know how things turned out for him.

Wherever he is, whatever his life has become, I hope he's okay. I hope he's *happy*.

CHAPTER FOUR

Tess

IT'S JUST BEFORE SEVEN when I arrive at Francie's, and the cafe is mostly empty with only a few people sitting at a table next to the window. I glance over the display case of pastries, tarts, quiches, and pre-made sandwiches, nearly picked clean.

I smile at the woman behind the counter and cross my fingers. "Please tell me you still have some chicken salad left."

The woman grins back. "Enough for a couple of sandwiches, I'd guess."

"Oh, good. My very pregnant friend will be so happy to hear it. Go ahead and give me everything you've got left."

She chuckles easily. "It's not the first time an expectant mama has craved my chicken salad. Can I get you anything else to go with it?"

"You're Francie?" I ask, suddenly feeling a little starstruck. This woman's food is famous all over the Lowcountry.

"Have been all my life," she says easily.

I add a couple of cinnamon rolls to the order and a loaf of sourdough bread—Chloe has always loved sourdough—then a thought suddenly pops into my head. Francie’s has been around as long as I can remember, and Sullivan’s isn’t a big island.

Would she know anything about the mystery letter I found?

“Hey, do you mind if I ask you a question?” I ask as Francie hands over my food.

“I can’t guarantee I’ll know the answer, but I reckon asking won’t hurt anything.”

I smile, loving the soft lilt to Francie’s Southern accent. Lowcountry island Southern has a sound all its own. It’s softer, gentler, rounder than a typical Southern drawl.

I pull out the letter. “Old Magnolia Road is on Sullivan’s, right?”

Francie nods. “Sure. It runs along the water a block over.”

I already knew as much but asking about geography felt like a smart lead-in question. “Do you happen to know if someone named Max lives on Old Magnolia?”

Francie narrows her eyes. “That’s kinda general. There might be plenty of people named Max on the island. Why are you asking?”

“I don’t mean any harm,” I say quickly, sensing Francie growing a little wary. This woman is likely loyal to her fellow islanders, and for all she knows, I’m just a stranger snooping

around. I'll probably get closer to an answer if I stick to the truth.

I hold up the letter. "I found this. I do volunteer work with an organization that answers letters to Santa. But this one got stuck in the box, and no one ever answered it. It's from a little boy named Max. He would be an adult now, close to my age."

Francie's expression softens, and she holds out her hand. "May I?"

I hand her the letter, still uncertain what I'm actually hoping to accomplish.

Maybe I just want to know that the kid turned out okay. That he grew up and married someone lovely and lives on the island with his beautiful wife and a dog named Chester.

Also maybe I've been watching too many Hallmark movies.

"Well I'll be," Francie says. "Poor thing." She folds up the letter and hands it over. "I remember when it happened. Nearly killed the whole island losing Eve and Andy like that."

"Eve and Andy? Those are the little boy's parents?"

Francie nods. "Eve grew up on the island. Moved to Charleston after she got married, but her mama stayed on the island, and Eve was out here all the time with Max. After the accident, he moved in with his granny full time."

"On Old Magnolia Street."

Francie nods. "She's still there, though Max moved away."

My heart twinges with...something. Not sadness, exactly. I think I just hoped for a more definitive happy ending.

“Off the island, anyway,” Francie continues. “Though I see him often enough, you’d think he still lives at his granny’s place.”

This perks me right up. “He lives nearby?”

Francie nods, apparently having decided I’m harmless enough to trust. “Over in Charleston now. But he takes good care of his grandma. Visits all the time.”

I nod, liking the idea of the boy in the letter growing into the kind of man who takes care of his grandma.

Francie leans on the counter, a sudden gleam in her eye. “Say. What are you planning to do with the letter?”

I look up, not sure how to interpret her interest. “Oh. Nothing, I guess. You can keep it if you like. And give it back to him the next time you see him.”

“I could,” Francie says with a slow nod. “Or *you* could keep it. You could respond.”

I frown and furrow my brow. “What, like, write a letter back?”

“Sure,” Francie says. “Send it to his granny’s place. He’ll get it if you mail it there.”

I slip the letter back into my purse. Why does Francie even care?

“Take it from me, honey,” she says, leaning on the counter. “He’s a man worth getting to know. If I’m not mistaken, he’s single right now. I think he could benefit from getting to know someone as pretty as you.”

Ha. *Now* it all makes sense. Francie serves up her famous chicken salad with a splash of matchmaking on the side.

“I’ll keep that in mind.” I sign the receipt for Chloe’s food, adding a generous tip. It’s doubtful I’ll actually write a letter to a strange man I’ve never laid eyes on just because Francie suggested it. But I have to give her props for trying.

Fifteen minutes later, I pull into Chloe’s neighborhood and follow Deacon’s silver SUV to their driveway at the end of the second cul-de-sac.

Okay, so he’s not working late tonight.

Or maybe he’s working from home? Maybe he’ll go inside, say hi to Chloe, then disappear into his office and leave us to our girl time? I hope so because I did not bring enough chicken salad for three.

Deacon gets out of his car, and we make eye contact over my dashboard. He looks a little panicked, *definitely* uncomfortable.

And then I see why.

Preston is with him.

Preston who I haven’t seen since our failed wedding day.

My hands grip the steering wheel as he moves from the passenger side of the SUV and stops next to Deacon, his eyes finally finding mine.

Seriously? Was getting locked in a bathroom stall not enough of an ordeal for one day?

Either way, I can't stay here.

Would it be terrible if I simply backed out of the driveway and didn't return? I could toss Chloe's chicken salad onto the yellowing lawn and be gone in a matter of seconds. She would understand. Chloe *always* understands.

My eye catches on Max's Santa letter sticking out of the top of my purse.

There are people who have been through a lot worse than a failed society wedding.

I can do this.

Honestly, I *should* do this. And it's not like Preston and I haven't talked at all. I called him while I was in Bali. And we texted multiple times as we systematically unraveled the life we'd planned on sharing together. We've already made peace over how things ended.

The only thing left is to see each other in person. It will have to happen eventually, so why not now? Steeling my resolve, I slowly climb out of the car and walk toward the Vanderhorst brothers, my eyes darting from Deacon's concerned expression over to Preston's wary one.

"Hi, Preston," I say.

He pushes his hands into his pockets. “Tess.”

His tone is perfectly neutral, but my heart starts pounding anyway, uncomfortable, nervous energy racing through my veins. I thrust the to-go bag I’m carrying toward Deacon. “I stopped at Francie’s on my way over. Chloe was in the mood for chicken salad.”

Deacon nods and takes the bag. “That was nice of you.” He looks toward the door, and I get the sense he’s wishing for Chloe right now. Her stabilizing presence would go a long way to making this interaction more bearable. “Are you coming in?” he asks.

“Oh. Um—” I look at Preston, who seems stoic, but not particularly uncomfortable. “Probably not. Chloe and I were going to—” I tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. “She thought you were working late tonight, so we were going to hang out, but you’re here now, so I’ll just go.”

“We will be working,” Preston says. “We’ll be holed up in Deacon’s office all night.” He looks over at his brother, who is nodding in agreement. “Please don’t leave on my account,” Preston adds.

Since Preston and Deacon are both lawyers within their father’s firm, it isn’t *what* Preston says that surprises me. Of course the brothers are working together. They probably work together all the time. But there is finally emotion in Preston’s voice, and it’s *this* that surprises me. Because he sounds... *kind*. Like he really doesn’t want me to leave.

Deacon looks at me, concern in his eyes. He motions toward the house, and I nod. “I’m going to take this inside,” he says, holding up the chicken salad. “You’re welcome to stay, Tess. You know Chloe will be disappointed if you don’t.”

Preston and I are silent until Deacon is fully inside, then we shift so we’re leaning against Deacon’s SUV, standing side-by-side, some sort of silent understanding passing between us.

We’re long overdue for an in-person conversation, and clearly, we both know it.

“Honestly, I’m surprised it’s taken us so long to run into each other,” Preston says. After a beat of silence, he adds, “You look good, Tess.”

Again, I’m struck by how sincere Preston sounds. Which is...different.

Don’t get me wrong. Preston was not a terrible boyfriend. He was kind and courteous and every inch the gentleman he was raised to be. But our relationship was full of pretense. We were playing the parts we’d been given, saying the things we were supposed to say, so I’m not as experienced with Preston sounding so...*real*. It’s a nice change.

“Thanks,” I say. “I feel good.”

He nods. “Deacon says you’re starting business classes?”

“Yeah. Not until January when the new semester starts, but...” I shrug, suddenly feeling sheepish about my new plans. Most of the time, I’m fully convinced the path I’m on is the right one, despite my parents’ continual reminders that I’m

wasting my life striving for things that are beneath me. But doubt still flares pretty regularly, especially when I'm confronted with my *old* life.

"I think it's a good idea," Preston says.

I lift my eyes to his. "Really?"

He runs a hand through his hair, and his eyes flash with something that looks like hurt, but then his jaw tightens, like he's hardening his resolve. "I'm not going to say I don't wish I could have given you what you wanted. But I also recognize I should have been more aware of how unhappy you were. I've only ever wanted you to be happy, Tess. I mean that."

It takes me a moment to respond. It's not like I needed Preston's approval. But it is nice to know he doesn't wish me ill after how I ended things.

He nudges me with his elbow. "It took a lot of courage to do what you did," he says.

I huff out a laugh. "Leaving you at the altar?"

"Hell yeah," he says. "I'm Preston Vanderhorst. Do you know how many women would kill to marry me?"

I roll my eyes at his teasing. Well, his *almost* teasing. I know Preston well enough to know a part of him is absolutely serious. He's also right. There *are* a lot of women who would kill to marry him.

"What I'm saying is I hope this works for you, Tess. I hope you find the life you're looking for, and I appreciate you sparing me an expensive divorce in the future."

An image of Drew pops into my mind. Maybe because he's the last man with whom I had a conversation, and the first man I've felt any attraction for since Preston. Maybe because the image of his bright blue eyes hasn't left my mind all day. Maybe because despite my initial embarrassment, meeting him filled me with a hope I've been missing the past few months. Not that I'll have a relationship with him—though I'm definitely on board with that—but just that I'll have a relationship with *anyone*.

A spark of excitement lights in my belly, and I can't keep from smiling.

Preston's lips lift in a small smile. "What's that look for?"

I quickly shift my expression into something more neutral. "Nothing. I'm just...I'm glad I ran into you. I want you to be happy too, Preston."

"Good. I'm glad we agree." He holds out his hand. "Friends?"

I slip my hand into his. "Is it going to be weird?"

"Yes," he says. "But you're Chloe's best friend, and Deacon's mine. I'm willing to make the most of it if you are."

"I'm definitely willing," I say. I breathe out a sigh, a sense of peace I didn't know I was missing filling me up, pressing out to my fingertips and down to my toes.

We head inside together, finding Chloe and Deacon pressed up against the front window, where they've clearly been

watching us. We all laugh about it before the brothers do as promised and disappear into Deacon's office to work.

Chloe levels me with a long look, her hands propped on my shoulders. "So this feels pretty significant," she says. "How do you feel?"

I smile, the peace from moments before steadying me, filling me with confidence, making me bold. "Ready to move on," I say.

Now I just have to hope Drew calls.

CHAPTER FIVE

Drew

I PAUSE OUTSIDE THE emergency room doors of the hospital and stretch. After back-to-back shifts, I am beyond exhausted. My muscles are tight with tension, but after several difficult calls on our shift today, I'm also tapped out emotionally.

Ben walks up behind me and claps me on the back before heading toward the ambulance. "Long day."

I barely muster a nod. "I'm beat."

"You have a few days off now, yeah?"

I push a hand through my hair. "Yeah. I'm off till Friday—"

My words cut off when Ben nudges me, pointing toward the sidewalk leading into the ER. "Hey, isn't that the woman we saved last week? From the bathroom stall?"

On impulse, I duck behind the rig, pulling Ben down with me. I practically knock him over in the process, and he yanks his arm away just in time to stop himself from face-planting

onto the pavement. “Seriously?” he says when he’s steady on his feet, crouched next to the rig’s front tire beside me.

“Sorry. Gut reaction.”

“Your gut reaction was to hide? Why? I thought she was totally into you.”

I glance around the back of the rig at the group of women Tess is walking with, unsurprised to see the familiar scarves the Southern Society women always wear.

Ben follows my gaze. “What do you think she’s doing here?”

“Volunteering,” I answer. “Those women are from the Southern Society.”

“How do you even know that?”

“It’s the scarves. They all wear them when they volunteer. My mom used to have one.”

I ignore the hollow feeling that fills my chest whenever I think of my parents. Mom didn’t volunteer long with the Southern Society, but I have distinct memories of that scarf—of how proud she was to own one.

I backtrack up the side of the rig and shimmy around to the front, crouching in front of the grill as the women pass by not twenty feet behind us.

Ben rolls his eyes and stands up, moving toward the driver’s side of the rig.

“Can you maybe be a little less obvious?” I whisper yell.

“Right. Because two grown men hiding behind an ambulance doesn’t make us conspicuous at all.”

Once the women are all inside, I finally stand up and climb into the rig.

“I still don’t understand,” Ben says as he cranks the engine. “Did something happen between the two of you?”

More like what *didn’t* happen. “Nah. That’s the problem. I never called her.”

Ben shoots me a disbelieving look. “Why not?” He eases the rig onto Ashley Avenue. “You did *see* her, right?”

I did see her. That first day I met her and ever since, every stupid time I close my eyes. But a Southern Society scarf is just more proof. If Tess and Daisy are running in the same elite circles, then Tess is not the woman for me. Just like Daisy wasn’t.

You should call me.

Tess’s words come back to me, itching at my conscience. Would she have said them if she didn’t mean them?

But the wounds from Daisy’s rejection are still fresh enough to keep me thinking logically. I learned the hard way that sparks and attraction are not enough to overcome a whole world of differences between Tess’s life and mine.

“You just have to trust me,” I say to Ben. “She’s not the woman for me.”

“A beautiful woman who volunteers at hospitals and willingly tosses her number at you is not the woman for you,” Ben says dryly.

“It’s more complicated than that.”

Ben raises his eyebrows. “Explain complicated. It’s been six months since Daisy, man. You’ve got to start dating again at some point.”

I sigh and give him a sideways glance. I don’t really want to have this conversation, but Ben won’t ease up if I don’t give him some sort of explanation. “Dating, yes. But not someone so much like Daisy.”

Ben scoffs. “She’s nothing like Daisy.”

“You saw the car she was driving when she pulled away from Vera’s. And now she’s here, volunteering with the Southern Society. That’s Daisy’s world. Cotillion. Debutante balls. High society. All of it.”

“Not all of it. Tess knows you’re a paramedic, Drew. And she still gave you her number.”

“But it wouldn’t work out. Not long term. I’m just trying to spare us the ordeal of trying to force it when I can already read the writing on the wall.”

“Huh,” Ben says. “And you know all of this because you *didn’t* call her. You already know what she’s looking for? What kind of man she’s interested in?”

I stop myself from rolling my eyes because technically, Ben is right. “I can guess,” I finally say.

“A guess? You’re rejecting a woman who looks like *that...* based on a guess?” He shakes his head. “Daisy ruined you, man.”

I press my lips together. I hear Ben’s words, but he doesn’t have the same perspective I do. I endured too many dinners with Daisy’s family, too many conversations where I was slighted, dismissed, or made to feel small because of my career choices. Because I didn’t brag about the size of my investment portfolio or have a membership at the yacht club.

I hung on because I thought Daisy saw me for who I am.

But she’d never seen me as more than a temporary distraction. *A toy*. She didn’t care what her family said about me because she already knew we had an expiration date. I was a placeholder. A temporary distraction until a more serious prospect came along.

When he did, Daisy didn’t waste a second before ending things with me.

“Even if I’m wrong, it’s not worth the risk,” I say in a way I hope ends the conversation once and for all.

Ben nods as he pulls the rig back into the open garage bay at the station. He cuts the engine. “Okay. I hear you. But are *you* worth the risk? Because if we’re only judging based on numbers in bank accounts, you’re one of them.”

My eyes cut to his, a flare of anger erupting in my chest. I never should have told Ben about the money I inherited from my parents. “It’s not the same thing.”

He shrugs, leveling me with his best-friend stare like I just made his point for him. “Maybe Tess isn’t the same either.”

“It isn’t just about the money,” I say. “Women like Tess marry attorneys and doctors and investment bankers and live in fancy houses on the peninsula. It’s about the lifestyle.” I motion around the rig. “But this is the lifestyle I want. A normal job. A simple life.”

The kind of life I had growing up. At least the life I had *at first*. My family lived a regular, middle-class life on James Island. Then my dad sold his software company to a larger competitor and did *really* well with the sale, and our lives changed almost overnight.

Suddenly, my parents were attending charity events and joining private clubs, buying expensive art from the galleries downtown they’d only ever browsed for fun. Mom became an active volunteer with the Southern Society, wearing the same stupid scarf Tess was wearing on her way into the hospital. “It’s for charity,” Mom always said when she and Dad would leave for some other event. Always for charity.

Then they decided they wanted to learn how to sail. They’d only been out on their boat twice when they got caught in the storm that killed them. I don’t think Mom even liked sailing. But it’s what their new friends were doing, so they wanted to do it too.

I didn’t need any of the fancy things they bought. I just wanted us to be together. I wanted the simple life we had when our idea of excitement was camping out in the backyard and

roasting marshmallows over the makeshift fire pit Dad built with a load of leftover bricks he pawned off the neighbor for fifty bucks.

I'm self-aware enough to know that I'm probably making some unhealthy associations between losing my parents and *using* the money they left me when they died. But the point about Tess still stands.

I'm fine with my modest apartment and blue-collar job. And when I'm in a relationship, I want to be with someone who appreciates that about me and doesn't need anything else.

That doesn't mean I don't keep seeing the intense blue of Tess's eyes.

Or remembering the way my pulse raced when she wrapped her arms around me after her rescue. I was so thrown off that I actually trembled while taking her blood pressure. I've never been that nervous around a woman. Not ever.

But I had chemistry with Daisy too. And the sting of that rejection is still too fresh for me to make the same mistake twice.



After showering and changing clothes, I drive out to Sullivan's to see Grandma Pearl. She always helps me stay grounded when nothing else will, and after my conversation with Ben, I feel like I need grounding more than ever. Grandma Pearl

knows better than anyone else how I feel about the money my parents left me, and she never judges me for it.

“Gran?” I call as I step into her entryway. “You home?”

“In here, dear,” she calls.

Roxie, Gran’s chocolate lab, appears around the corner to greet me, and I reach down to scratch her ears. “Hey, Roxie. You being good today? You want to go for a walk later?”

I follow Roxie back to the living room where Grandma Pearl is sitting on the couch, a book in her lap. I lean over and kiss her on the forehead and Roxie drops onto the dog bed at her feet.

“It’s awful quiet in here,” I say, sitting down beside Grandma Pearl. “What are you up to?”

“Just reading,” she answers, holding up her book. “I like the quiet when I read.” She looks at me quizzically, as if sensing there’s something wrong. “What’s brought you here on a weekday? Did you just get off work?”

I nod. “Are you hungry? Can I pick us up some dinner, maybe?”

She shakes her head. “I walked over to Francie’s earlier. There are leftovers in the fridge though. You’re welcome to them.”

If Francie’s wasn’t barely a block away, I might scold Grandma for walking on her own. She’s still pretty spry at eighty-two, but there’s a certain frailty about her that makes me nervous. I’ve seen one too many shattered hip bones when

someone elderly has accidentally tumbled down a few stairs. And the way some tourists drive through the island—it wouldn't take much to turn Grandma Pearl's afternoon stroll to Francie's into something deadly.

But I swallow my words, knowing Grandma won't hear any of my fussing. I move to the fridge, pulling out a wrapped Italian sub made just the way I like it. "Leftovers, huh?" I hold up the sub as I step into the doorway separating the living room from the kitchen.

Grandma Pearl's lips quirk up on the side like she's trying to hide a smile. "It's possible I planned to lure you over here later anyway. Thought the food might help my case."

I disappear into the kitchen long enough to grab a water bottle, then carry my food to the living room, converting the coffee table into a makeshift dining table.

"Don't be spilling on my rug now," Grandma Pearl warns.

I nod, then pull the table a little closer so I can lean over the sandwich wrapper as I take my first bite. "Why'd you want me to come over?" I ask through a mouthful of sandwich.

"Manners, Drew. I taught you better than that."

I grunt, swallowing and wiping my mouth on my napkin before speaking again. "Sorry," I say with a grin. "Didn't realize how hungry I was. You know you never need a reason to invite me over. I love coming out here."

"And I love feeding you. This just makes it a win for both of us." She picks up her book. "Finish your food. Then we'll

talk.”

I make quick work of my sandwich, despite Roxie’s best efforts to make it *her* sandwich, then haul my trash back to the kitchen. I wash my hands as I look through the enormous open windows above the kitchen sink. Just feeling the ocean breeze coming through eases the tension in my shoulders. This late in the year, the temperatures are mild enough that most days, you can leave your windows open all day. It only gets cool at night, but even then, it doesn’t really qualify as *cold* until January or February.

Back in the living room, I drop onto the sofa next to Grandma Pearl. “All fed,” I say. “What did you want to talk about?”

She closes her book, marking her page with a gleam in her eye that almost makes me nervous. “I had an interesting conversation with Francie today.”

I raise my eyebrows. “Yeah? What about?”

“She told me a beautiful woman came into the café the other day. And she asked about *you*.”

“About me?” I think of the last beautiful woman I saw, which is just irritating. I don’t need more reasons to think about Tess. Not when she’s already popping into my head on a regular basis.

A surge of longing pushes through me. Longing that things could be different. That Tess’s circumstances were different.

Why couldn't I have felt a connection with an elementary school teacher from Goose Creek instead of a Society Southern belle?

Grandma Pearl nods. "You, specifically. Well, in a roundabout sort of way. She wanted to know if someone named Max still lives on the island."

I scratch my chin. "Gran, nobody has called me Max since I was ten years old." Short for my middle name, Maxwell, Max was the only name I went by for the first decade of my life. I was named after my father, and I guess my parents decided calling me Max was easier than having two Andrews in the house. But a year after he died, I decided I wanted to go by Dad's name instead. He'd given it to me, after all. It felt like a nice way to honor him.

Gran scoots closer. "But that's just it. She was looking for a ten-year-old Max. She had a letter. A letter you wrote to Santa right after your parents died. Do you remember?"

I nod, the twinge of sadness filling my chest only eclipsed by my confusion.

A beautiful woman showed up at Francie's with a letter I wrote to Santa sixteen years ago? How does that even happen?

Grandma Pearl pats my hand. "You were so disappointed when you didn't get a response. I think that's what killed Santa for you, wasn't it? It was heartbreak layered onto heartbreak that year. Apparently though, the letter was lost and never opened. But this woman found it. And she was trying to find you."

I'm momentarily lost in memories of that painful first Christmas after Mom and Dad died. I can conjure up exactly how I felt writing that letter, knowing that Santa's magic was the only hope I had left of things going back to the way they were.

"Do you remember the part where I said the woman was beautiful?" Grandma Pearl asks, pulling me back to the present.

I roll my eyes, finally understanding Grandma Pearl's enthusiasm. "Beautiful in Francie's eyes could mean a lot of different things. She calls her sourdough beautiful."

Grandma Pearl swats my arm. "This is different, and you know it."

"But I don't know it. That's just it. You want me to be excited about some random woman who has a letter I wrote when I was ten years old? What did Francie tell her?"

"She told her to respond, of course. She might have even mentioned that you were a man worth getting to know, and it would definitely be in her best interest to reach out."

I lean back into the sofa cushions. "So a mystery woman I've never seen is going to respond to a letter I wrote sixteen years ago, and I'm supposed to be excited about that?"

"A *beautiful* woman," Grandma Pearl repeats. "You keep forgetting that part."

"You know as well as I do that appearance isn't the most important thing." If it was, I'd have already called Tess by

now.

“Maybe not, but you’ve been so withdrawn lately. It’s been six months since Daisy broke up with you. This could be good for you.”

“Do we know her name?” I ask, mostly just to humor my grandmother.

She frowns. “Unfortunately, no. But she’ll likely include it when she writes.”

“*If* she writes.”

“Don’t be so pessimistic. Of course she’ll write. Francie made it clear how much of a catch you are. Mark my words, Andrew McKay. This will turn into something.”

I stand up. “I’m going to go take a walk on the beach.”

Grandma Pearl reaches up and grabs my hand as I pass by. “That’s all you have to say about all this?”

I lean down and kiss her cheek, giving her hand an affectionate squeeze. “I love you, Gran, but I’m not holding my breath.”

She huffs. “You’re just being stubborn.”

“Stubborn for doubting that a woman who found my sixteen-year-old letter to Santa might be my soulmate?” I say. “This isn’t a Hallmark movie.”

Love just doesn’t happen like it does in the movies. No matter how much I wish it did.

CHAPTER SIX

Tess

“THAT’S JUST IT THOUGH,” I say, pacing back and forth across my living room, Chloe on speaker phone. “He told me he didn’t have a girlfriend. The only reason he could have for not calling me is not liking me. It’s been almost two weeks. There’s no other explanation.”

Two weeks.

Two weeks of answering Santa letters but *not* answering the one letter I WANT to answer.

Two weeks of wearing the Southern Society scarf to the hospital every time I volunteer.

Two weeks of thinking about Drew and wondering why he never called.

The length of time it takes Chloe to respond can only mean one thing.

She agrees with me.

I drop onto my couch with a huff. “I just don’t understand.”

Chloe chuckles. “Welcome to life for the rest of us.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means most of us haven’t lived a charmed existence where literally every guy we’ve ever been interested in has automatically fallen at our feet. So one guy didn’t call. It’s not the end of the world. I’m not saying it doesn’t suck. But most women have endured that kind of rejection a lot more times than once.”

I pull a pillow onto my lap, gripping it tightly. “I’m sure I sound like such a brat right now. But I swear there was something different about this guy. The connection felt so real.” A fresh surge of embarrassment sweeps over me as I think about what I said to him as I walked away.

Chloe is silent for another long moment. “I’m sorry he didn’t call. It’s lame. And he’s missing out. Because you are definitely worthy of being called.”

“What if he lost his phone?”

“Don’t play this game, Tess,” Chloe says. “I really think you need to let this go.”

I will let it go. And pray I never need to call an ambulance. Running into him after such a blatant rejection? I’ll pass, please and thank you very much.

“If I ever have an accident, and you need to call the paramedics? Don’t, okay? Just let me die where I am. I’ll be fine.”

Chloe chuckles. “This too shall pass.”

“Don’t get all philosophical on me. I’m mortified. It’s going to take a while for this to wear off.”

“I’m just glad you don’t know his last name,” Chloe says. “I can’t imagine the cyberstalking you’d be doing right now.”

“Oh, believe me. I’ve tried. I found an account on Instagram for a paramedic named Drew that could be his, but the profile picture is a picture of a chocolate lab on the beach, and there aren’t any photos that show his face.”

“I can appreciate a man who keeps a low profile,” Chloe says.

“No! We don’t appreciate this man. We hate him for not calling me.”

“You’re right. We do hate him. And his chocolate lab, too.”

I groan and slump into my couch cushions. “I’m totally pathetic.”

“Pathetic is *not* a word I would ever use to describe you,” Chloe says. “And I know you felt something real with this guy. It’s okay to be upset about it.”

“But?” I say because there’s totally a *but* coming.

“*But,*” she continues, “it’s definitely time to move on. Deacon says there’s a new hire at the law firm that seems really great. We could do a double date, maybe.”

“Absolutely not,” I say. “I love you both, and I’m so glad you’re happy and having a baby and living in perfect wedded bliss. But I cannot, under any circumstances, allow Deacon

Vanderhorst to set me up on double dates. Can you imagine the dinner conversation?"

"He would never do that to you, and you know it," Chloe says.

"So how do you three know each other?" I ask in a deep voice. "Oh, we go way back. Friends since elementary school, and then there was that wedding that almost happened."

"It wouldn't be that bad," Chloe says.

I sigh into the phone. "I know. But anyone who knows Deacon from the firm *also* knows Preston. The potential for weirdness is too high."

Plus, I'm absolutely *not* cut out to be an attorney's wife, even if I won't admit this part out loud to Chloe.

"I get it," Chloe concedes. "Okay, so what about the Santa letter guy? Did you ever respond to him?"

"The *Santa letter guy* is a ten-year-old boy who wrote a letter a billion years ago. It's a dead end, Chlo. I'm not writing to a stranger."

"He's not a ten-year-old boy anymore. He's a grown man the same age as you who Francie says is worth getting to know," Chloe argues.

"You talk like Francie is a personal friend and not a complete stranger," I say.

"She's not a stranger. She's been feeding me for years. And what would it truly hurt to write the guy a letter? If anything,

it'll get your mind off the paramedic-who-shall-not-be-named."

"It just feels stupid," I argue. "Writing actual letters by hand?"

"I think it's romantic," Chloe says emphatically. "And what do you have to lose? The worst thing that could happen is that he doesn't write you back."

"Oh, definitely. I would love to have another rejection to add to my collection. This most recent one has been so fun."

Chloe chuckles. She's not laughing at me—I know this—but it does feel like she's making light of something that, in my head, feels a lot bigger. But then, maybe that's part of the problem. I'm disappointed Drew didn't reach out because somewhere deep inside, I expected that he would. For better or worse, rejection isn't something I'm all that familiar with.

The thought makes me itchy. I can't do anything about genetics. I'm aware that as far as modern standards of beauty go, I got pretty lucky. But it was just that. Luck. I didn't do anything to earn my looks, and I don't want to be the kind of person who relies on them. Who *expects* things because of them. Who *expects* people to always call. Which, come to think of it, might have something to do with why my connection with Drew felt so special. I felt a spark—a connection—before we saw each other face to face.

In that sense, maybe getting to know someone through letters is exactly what I need.

I reach over and grab the lost Santa letter out of my purse and stare at the address on the corner.

I have definitely done crazier things in my life.

“You’re going to do it, aren’t you?” Chloe says, breaking the silence that has suddenly filled our phone call. “Your silence is very telling.”

“It *would* be a nice distraction. You’re right about that part.”

“Do it!” Chloe practically shouts. “Do it, do it, and then tell me all about it.”

Before I can tell her I’ll at least *think* about it, Chloe is ending the call.

“K, gotta go,” she says. “Deacon’s mom will be here any minute to take me to brunch at the club.”

Brunch at the club. How many of those meals did I sit through with Lydia Vanderhorst?

I might have agreed to be friends with Preston, but I’m not sure I’ll ever make peace with his mother. I have no idea how Chloe endures their relationship with so much good-natured grace.

A muffled noise sounds through the phone before Chloe gasps. “What are you doing here?”

Deacon’s voice sounds through the phone. “Preston’s covering for me so I could have the morning off. Thought you might appreciate having me along for brunch with your monster-in-law.”

Chloe giggles. “Your mother is anything but a monster. Be nice.”

I listen to Chloe and Deacon chatting—pretty sure they’ve forgotten I’m here—while I nurse the envy growing in my heart. Happiness that people I love are happy will always trump my own petty jealousy. I would never take away what Chloe has just to feel better about what I lack. But that doesn’t mean their happiness doesn’t serve as a continual reminder of my own loneliness.

I let that loneliness carry me back to my bedroom, the letter in one hand and my phone in the other. I toss the letter onto my bed before pulling a box of stationery Mom gave me for Christmas a few years back from my nightstand. I’ve never had a reason to use it before now.

“Oh my gosh, Tess, I totally forgot you were still on the phone,” Chloe finally says.

“Hey, Tess,” Deacon says, his voice so similar to Preston’s.

That realization used to make me queasy, but after running into Preston a couple of weeks back, it doesn’t have quite the same hold over me. I’ve always known I would eventually move on. It feels good to realize it’s finally happening.

Well. *Sort of* happening. At least in spirit if not in actual reality.

“Keep me posted on the letter writing, okay?” Chloe says. “And don’t worry about the paramedic. He doesn’t deserve you.”

“What paramedic? And who are you writing letters to?” Deacon asks. The hint of big-brother protectiveness in his voice warms my heart.

“It’s a long story,” Chloe says. “I’ll explain later.”

“I love you guys,” I say to them both. “Tell your mom I said hello,” I add, trying not to wince at the thought of how Lydia Vanderhorst will respond to *any* mention of me, even a benign greeting like *Hi*.

I end the call and scoot back on my bed until my back is against the headboard. I open Max’s letter and pull a single sheet of stationery out of the box.

I can’t believe I’m actually doing this, but here goes nothing.

Dear Max,

I’m so sorry that when you originally wrote this letter, you never got a response. More than that, I’m so sorry that you lost your parents. I wonder if you had gotten a letter all those years ago if it might have helped in some way.

Honestly, I’m not really sure why I feel like I need to write to you now. You’re an adult, if I’ve done my math correctly, no longer that little boy, hoping for a miracle. I imagine that by now, you’ve found some measure of peace in your life. At least, I hope that you have.

Still, when I found your letter hidden in the bottom of the letter box, it felt wrong not to respond, to tell you that someone finally read your words.

I pause, wondering what I might say that would encourage a response. If all I do is write a bunch of platitudes, whoever Max is will probably toss the letter without another thought. And then what? I'll be no better off than I am now. I need engagement. I need him to write me back.

I wonder if you have any advice for people weathering similar challenges. I haven't lost my parents, but I have lost the life I always thought was going to be mine. I'm learning to embrace a new version of myself now, and sometimes, it's really hard. I'm just a stranger, I know. But a part of me wonders if you'll know how to help. Maybe there's a reason that I'm the one who found your letter after all this time. I hope you'll respond.

Sincerely, Your Christmas Pen Pal

I fold the letter without even reading it a second time, sure that if I give myself the chance to second guess, I'll likely end up throwing it away without sending it at all. I hesitate over the signature, wondering if I ought to sign my name. But the idea of being anonymous feels safer somehow. No matter how

much Francie thinks this guy is worth getting to know, he's still a stranger.

Nerves dance in my gut as I walk the letter to the mailbox. None of this makes sense. I have no idea who the man even is. I don't know a single thing about him except that he lost his parents when he was ten years old.

And yet, I already know I'm going to be nervous every time I check my mail for at least the next month.

"I'm being ridiculous," I say out loud as I walk back to my condo.

My neighbor's dog barks in confirmation.

Utterly and completely ridiculous.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Drew

I SHOULD NOT BE this excited.

I'm driving to my grandmother's house to pick up a letter from a mystery woman I've never even seen before. She could be anyone. She could look like anyone. She could live in a tiny cabin at the edge of the swamp with sixteen cats and a pet possum.

I pull into my grandmother's driveway and will my nerves to settle. This isn't a big deal. It's just a letter. It doesn't mean anything.

Honestly, maybe I'm just excited about the distraction. I've had a hard time keeping Tess out of my thoughts the past couple of weeks. I've seen her two more times since I first saw her going into the hospital with the Southern Society, which feels incredibly unlikely, considering I *never* saw her before I rescued her from a bathroom stall.

When I made this argument to Ben, he insisted I might have seen her plenty before her rescue. I just didn't notice her

because I'd never met her. He might be right, but it's hard to imagine any circumstance in which I wouldn't notice *Tess Ravenel*.

Ravenel. It's not a wonder that's her last name, something I only know because she programmed it into my phone. It's an important name in Charleston. There's a bridge named after a Ravenel. Bridges and libraries and probably a dozen other things around the city. Yet more evidence that she's *not* the woman for me.

Her presence at the hospital could also be seasonal. The volunteers are always at the hospital more during the holidays, trying to make the place as cheerful as possible for patients and visitors.

Either way, I'm to the point now where I'm nervous *every single time* I'm at the hospital, which is beginning to feel like a job hazard since we're there all the time, and I can't really afford the distraction.

The last time I saw her, she actually saw *me* too. She was hanging snowflakes in the windows of the ER waiting room, and I was hurrying through it on the way to my rig. She held my gaze for a moment before her cheeks flushed and she looked away.

I should have spoken to her, but technically, I was on the clock. And now, more than two weeks after she gave me her number, what could I have even said?

Hey, it's you! The woman I didn't call after we had an amazing conversation and you put yourself out there by

making the first move. Great to see you again!

“Gran?” I call as I open the front door.

She appears in the kitchen doorway, a broad smile deepening the creases on her face. She holds up the letter. “I’ve nearly opened it myself at least half a dozen times.”

I sigh, dropping to one knee to give Roxie an obligatory head scratch. I ought to take the dog out on the beach. She’s getting older and doesn’t seem to mind lounging around the house all day with Grandma Pearl, but the exercise would probably be good for her.

“Grandma, I told you I wasn’t getting my hopes up,” I say, my eyes still on the dog. “And you shouldn’t either.”

I’m willing to own that I was feeling actual anticipation on the way over, but I won’t give my grandmother false hope. Even a spark of excitement would be enough to send her into matchmaking overdrive. She might even write the woman back herself.

“Oh, just read it,” Grandma Pearl says, swatting me in the arm with the letter as I stand up. “What would it hurt to get a little excited every once in a while?”

I follow her into the kitchen.

“Are you hungry? I’ve got half a sweet potato pie with your name on it.” She lifts the half-eaten pie from the back of the stove and sets it in front of me.

“You ate your half before I got here, huh?”

“You hush,” she says. “I had help. Shelby from down the street brought her girls over this afternoon.”

Shelby was one of Mom’s new friends from the Southern Society—the only one who stayed in touch after the accident. “Yeah? What’s Shelby up to these days?”

“She came by to make sure I got my invitation to the Southern Society’s Christmas Eve Gala.” Grandma Pearl slides an envelope across the counter. “She left a ticket for you, too.”

Shelby visits Grandma Pearl once a year, dropping off a couple of comp tickets to the gala and a giant basket of fruit. The connection used to irritate me—an unwanted tieback to the life that, in my mind, stole my parents away from me—but I’m old enough to recognize that isn’t really fair to Shelby *or* my parents. Plus, Grandma Pearl appreciates the attention, and she’ll never turn down the chance to put on a fancy dress and go to a holiday party.

“Will you go with me, Drew?”

My jaw tenses. I’ll do anything for Grandma Pearl, but this is a big ask.

“You’re hesitating,” Gran says.

I look up and meet her eyes. “Daisy will probably be there.”

“Ah.”

Daisy *and* her new boyfriend.

“You know, I bet I can ask Shelby for a third ticket. That way you can bring a date, too.”

I pull a fork out of the silverware drawer while Grandma Pearl lifts a piece of pie onto a plate and slides it across the counter. “Except I’m not dating anyone right now.”

“Shoot. You could ask anyone. Any woman would jump at the chance to spend an evening with you.”

“Not any woman,” I say, thinking of Daisy. I shovel an enormous bite of pie into my mouth. Eating feels much easier than having this conversation with my grandmother.

“Andrew,” she says, leveling me with a stare I can’t ignore. Especially not when she pulls out my full name. That means she’s really serious.

“Grandma,” I say back around a mouthful of pie.

She props her hands on her hips. “It’s time for you to let this go. That woman was awful. *Let her go*. Her, and the anger you’re hauling around in your heart.”

I take another bite, knowing Grandma Pearl is right. The trouble is, I’m not exactly sure *how* to move on. Not with Tess, I know that much. My eyes drift to the letter sitting on the counter just to the left of my plate.

Gran nudges it forward. “You never know,” she says softly. “Just be open-minded, all right?”

With a weary sigh, I break the seal on the envelope and scan the contents, nervous if only for my grandmother’s looming presence across the counter.

“What does it say?” she finally asks.

“Nothing, really. She apologizes that no one answered the letter and then asks me how I managed to move on.” It’s the truth—the letter doesn’t say much. But a knot of emotion forms in my gut anyway. There’s something about it that makes me wish whoever wrote it had written more.

Which doesn’t make sense. She’s a stranger. I shouldn’t want more from a stranger. But the vulnerability, the honesty of her question, it makes me think I would like her. I’m not sure I’d call it a connection. Not yet. But the woman has definitely made me curious.

“Let me read it.” Grandma Pearl holds out her hand, and I hand her the letter.

Her eyes scan over the page. “Your Christmas Pen Pal?” she asks, looking up. “There isn’t a name anywhere else?”

“Not unless you see one that I don’t.”

“Is there a street address? I bet we could use the google to find her name.”

I press my lips together over my grandmother’s use of *the google*. “When did you become such an internet detective?”

“Get with the times, Drew. You can learn anything on the google.”

I watch, highly entertained, as my grandmother grabs her phone and navigates her way to a search engine with unexpected ease. Still, it’s doubtful Gran will find anything worthwhile. If the address were to a house that someone owns,

we could look up property records to see who's on the deed. But the address on the envelope is to an apartment complex over on East Bay Street. If the woman is only renting, those records aren't public.

Sure enough, the address pulls up a few outdated listings on real estate sites, but nothing else significant. I swallow an unexpected twinge of disappointment. I didn't truly expect to find anything, but I won't lie and say I wouldn't have liked finding a name. Which feels a little sneaky when she didn't give it to me willingly. But I'm part of a generation that has grown up with cell phones in our pockets. It's hard not to *want* information when it's usually so easy to find it.

Grandma Pearl sighs and closes out the search. "Are you going to write her back?"

I shrug, feigning disinterest if only to keep my grandmother from getting her hopes up. "I guess so. She asked me a question. It feels wrong not to answer it."

She nods, seemingly satisfied with my answer.

Which means I don't have to tell her the real reason I'm writing back is because weirdly enough, I really want to.

Dear Christmas Pen Pal,

Thank you for responding to my letter. Even after all these years, it's nice to know that someone read my words and cared enough to respond. I wish I had an answer to your question, but honestly, time is probably what helped me the

most. I was young when my parents died. I was surrounded by people who loved me, and that made a big difference. The island also helped. My grandma lives on Sullivan's Island, and I moved in with her after everything that happened. If any place is capable of healing someone, it's Sullivan's. I think the beach might be magic. I still spend most Sundays there—it's time I look forward to all week.

Maybe there's some place like that for you—a place that fills you up and makes you feel whole even when the rest of your world feels like it's falling apart. What is it about your life that you've lost? I like to think that what we make of our lives is up to us. Maybe it isn't too late to get it back? Thanks again for writing back.

-Max

CHAPTER EIGHT

Tess

I GLANCE UP FROM my book, watching as the gulls sweep toward the water, then back up again. It's been a long time since I spent time on the beach alone, but Max's first letter arrived a couple of days ago, and I've been itching to be here ever since.

I screamed out loud when I checked my mail and found an actual letter, scaring my neighbor and making three different dogs in the complex start to bark. But then I read the letter, and Max's words immediately settled my nerves. It wasn't that he said anything truly profound. But I still felt *seen*—like he knew exactly how to answer my question. And of course, he mentioned the beach and how much it helps him feel peace.

Which, hello. The ocean has always done the same thing for me. The beach in Bali was the only thing that saved me after I broke things off with Preston, and I spent almost every weekend on the sand growing up. But somehow, since getting home, I haven't made it out here. I've been so focused on settling into my apartment and making peace with my parents,

it's like I forgot that all I have to do is cross the Ravenel bridge and I can be on a beach in minutes. It *is* November, so that hasn't helped. But I don't need to swim to feel the breeze or smell the salty air.

I turn my face to the warm winter sun and breathe out a long sigh as I dig my toes into the sand. Most of the time, I drive over to Isle of Palms. My family has a beach house there, so it's easier to park, and of course, access to showers and bathrooms and a fully stocked kitchen is a nice perk. But today, I'm on Sullivan's.

I told myself when I turned right instead of left that it was only because Sullivan's is quieter, with fewer tourists. Plus, Francie's Cafe is on Sullivan's, and that's as good a reason as any to be here.

But I'd be lying if I said it didn't at least have a little to do with Max. He mentioned he spends most Sundays on the beach, and he mentioned Sullivan's Island specifically. It's not like I have actual hope of running into him. It's a big beach. Besides, even if I did, how would I even know it's him? But I've still imagined running into him at least a dozen times, and I've looked at every person passing by with an extra level of scrutiny, especially men who look close to my age.

There have been three. And none of them looked like Max.

Which, *yes*, I realize how ridiculous that sounds. Of course I can't know what Max actually looks like. But a girl can dream, and *this girl* would love for Max to have deliciously broad shoulders and smoldering blue eyes.

A very specific set of blue eyes pop into my mind's eye, and I force the image away with a grumble. But thinking of Drew right now, in the middle of my Max-themed fantasy, is an apt reminder. Just because I feel a connection to Max's letters doesn't mean we'd feel a connection in person anyway—at least not one that's reciprocated. That's exactly what happened with Drew.

If I had any doubts about his lack of interest before, those doubts are long gone now. The last time I was at the hospital to volunteer, we made direct eye contact over the snowflakes I was hanging up in the waiting room of the ER, and he walked away without saying a word.

Not a *hello*. Not a *nice to see you again*. He just looked at me with those wide blue eyes, then he turned and walked in the opposite direction.

Down the beach, a man tosses a stick toward the water, and a large chocolate lab retrieves it then lumbers back to drop it at the man's feet, tail wagging happily.

Maybe I need to get a dog. A dog will love me no matter what. A dog will never pretend like it doesn't see me in a crowded ER waiting room.

"I definitely need a dog," I say out loud.

As if lured by my words, the chocolate lab I've been watching trots over to me, tongue lolling to the side.

The dog looks happy and friendly, and I immediately smile. The tag around her neck reads "Roxie."

Roxie extends her nose, sniffing my hand before leaning forward and licking the side of my face.

I laugh, scratching her behind the ears. “Well, you’re friendly, aren’t—”

My words freeze in my throat when I see the dog’s owner approaching.

No. No, no, no. How is this even possible?

I look around for somewhere to go, somewhere to hide, but I’m on the *beach*. Hiding is impossible. Not unless I want to crawl under my blanket and pray the man doesn’t realize who I am.

Because it’s *Drew*. The one person on the planet I most hoped to never see again. What are the freaking odds?

I try to shoo Roxie away, but my efforts only make the animal try harder. She wants my attention, and she isn’t giving up until she gets it.

In a last-ditch effort to hide, I pull the hood of my sweatshirt tightly around my face and lift my book up, holding it directly in front of me. Roxie is still breathing on my cheek, but at least, for the moment, she seems willing to chill.

“Sorry if she’s bothering you,” Drew says. He stops a few feet in front of my blanket.

“No, no, she’s fine,” I say, dropping my voice a little in a way I hope sounds convincing. We talked a long time through the bathroom stall door. He might actually recognize my voice before he recognizes my face.

I pull the book closer, so close the words blur on the page, but it's not like I'm reading them. I can't do anything but sit here and hope my heart doesn't climb up my throat and flop onto the blanket beside me. With the way it's pounding, it feels like an actual possibility.

Roxie's tail wags as she makes one more attempt, nuzzling her nose in between my hand and the book, then adding a salty wet paw to my lap. In a move that should only belong in a movie and not my real, actual life, she shifts her weight forward, pushing me backward on the blanket. I gasp and I drop my book, landing on my back with an audible oof.

Roxie hovers over me, a paw on either side of my head as she licks my face. I immediately start to giggle, suddenly not caring that as soon as Roxie moves, Drew will absolutely see who I am.

"Roxie, heel," Drew says. "I'm so sorry. She must really like you."

The dog finally runs back to Drew's side, leaving me prone on the blanket, the victim of a very slobbery tornado.

My face is still turned away from him, and for a second, I consider staying right here. Maybe he'll just leave. Walk away without realizing what woman his dog just affectionately mauled. But he's a paramedic. I'm guessing he won't walk away until he's sure I'm okay.

But honestly, it's not like I have anything to lose here. Drew has already made up his mind about me, so who cares what

happens now? The thought is freeing, and I push myself up so I'm sitting again, making eye contact with Drew.

“You think she really likes me?” I motion to Roxie, calling her toward me, rubbing her face as she gives me another slobbery kiss. “I guess you didn't learn it from Drew,” I say in my best doggie voice. “Did you, Roxie? No you didn't!”

“Tess?” Drew says.

I look up, eyebrows lifted in what I hope is a playful expression. My gaze quickly skims over this dressed-down version of Drew. He was delicious in uniform, but he makes jeans and a hoodie look just as good. Maybe even better. I squelch the rebellious and perfectly useless observation and force myself to maintain a casual nonchalance.

“We have to stop meeting like this, Drew,” I say jokingly.

Roxie flops onto the blanket beside me and drops her head onto my lap. It is weirdly satisfying that she's staying close to *me* right now, instead of him, and I make a mental note to look into getting a dog *for real*.

“What are you doing here?” Drew asks, his voice strained, almost like he's uncomfortable.

It's petty, but a part of me hopes he *is* uncomfortable.

“You mean, *here*, on a public beach?” I say, looking around me.

“Right. Dumb question,” he says. “Do you...live around here?”

I shake my head. “On the other side of the bridge. I just came out to relax a little bit. Do some reading.” I give Roxie another affectionate pat. “Until Roxie here decided I needed a bath.”

“Yeah. Sorry again,” Drew says. “I don’t know that I’ve ever seen her do that with a stranger before.”

“Like I said. Your dog has *excellent* taste.” I shoot him a knowing look, and he grimaces as he lowers himself onto the sand beside me. His body moves with an athletic grace that’s impossible to miss, and I wonder if he plays any sports. Not that I need to give *that* curiosity any fuel. This is Drew, after all. I have exactly zero reasons to wonder about him at all.

Unfortunately, my brain seems to have missed the memo, because I’m drinking in the sight of him like he’s an oasis and I’m lost in the desert.

“I don’t doubt Roxie’s good taste,” Drew says. He’s quiet for a long moment before he says, “I’m sorry I didn’t say hello when I saw you at the hospital last week.”

I lift my eyebrows. I wasn’t expecting an apology, so this one takes me by surprise.

He catches my gaze, a question in his eyes. “I’d like to explain if it’s okay with you,” he says. There’s something sheepish about his demeanor that softens me the slightest bit.

“Explain why you didn’t say hello?” I ask. “Or why you didn’t call me?”

“Both?” he says, running a hand across his face.

If I could detect even a speck of arrogance in Drew, I might not *want* an explanation, but there's something so genuine about the way he's looking at me, completely without pretense, that I find myself curious anyway—even if it might sting to hear it.

I pick up my sneakers and shake the sand out of them if only for something to do, then I set them back down and nod. “Okay,” I say. “Let's hear it.”

He looks relieved, but it takes him a moment to speak. He stares out at the ocean for ten, maybe twenty seconds, which might not seem long when you're counting down the last seconds of a basketball game, but in conversation, twenty seconds of silence is a *very long time*.

Finally, he hooks his arms around his knees and turns his gaze to me. “This feels like a terrible way to start, but Tess, I promise it isn't personal.”

It doesn't seem like he's delivering me a line, even though *it isn't personal* is only a few steps better than *it's not you, it's me*, so I wait and let him continue.

“My last relationship—”

“With Daisy,” I clarify, and he nods.

“With Daisy,” he repeats, “it only ended six months ago, and I'm...” He breathes out a sigh. “I guess I'm still reeling a little?” He shifts in the sand, and I watch the muscles in his face flex, then relax again.

I barely resist the urge to lift a hand and rub it across the line of his jaw. It's yet another thing I like about dressed-down Drew. He was clean-shaven when we first met, but he looks like he hasn't shaved in a few days, and I'm really digging the scruffier look.

"I cared about Daisy," he says, "but in the end, I was more a way for her to pass the time. She made it clear I didn't belong in her world, and she never had long-term plans for us."

Understanding dawns. Daisy's world is *my* world. I admitted as much when I mentioned I knew her from cotillion. "So you didn't call me because you assumed I'm like Daisy?"

Drew shrugs. "I saw the car you were driving when you left Vera's. It's worth more than I make in a year."

His words make me bristle, and not just because he's comparing me to Daisy Calhoun, of all people.

"So it matters to you that my parents have money?" I'm intentional in the way I say *my parents* and not me, though technically, I wouldn't be able to live on my own and go back to school if not for my trust fund that very much *did* come from my parents. But I don't want to live on their money forever, and I'm doing everything I possibly can to make sure I don't have to.

"It matters to me that we clearly run in different circles," Drew says. "I've been down this road before, and it ended too badly for me to want to do it again."

I understand where he's coming from, but I still can't fight the indignation his words stir up. "Don't you think it's a little unfair to paint everyone who comes from money with the same critical brush? I'm *nothing* like Daisy Calhoun, Drew. It's why I didn't marry Preston in the first place. Because I want something different for myself. I want a different kind of life."

The words are true enough, but even as I say them, I sense the underlying hypocrisy. *I* wouldn't have a problem dating someone who is a paramedic, but that doesn't mean my parents wouldn't be bothered by it. They currently believe I *am* dating a paramedic—thanks to the lie I told them when I was trying to avoid a setup with Johnny Stager—and they're still giving me grief about it.

"But answer me honestly, Tess," Drew says as if reading my thoughts. "What would your parents think if I was part of that different life?"

I bite my lip, unable to respond. I've come a long way in separating myself from my parents and their unhealthy expectations. But there is still plenty of progress yet to make. And I'm not sure I'll ever trust them to interact with Drew, or anyone else without a perfect pedigree, without saying something hurtful. My silence must be telling, because Drew nods his head like he understands what I'm *not* saying loud and clear.

"I've endured one too many dinners where my value was directly tied to the number of zeros behind my annual salary,"

he says. “Maybe it’s left me a little gun-shy, but I don’t want to put myself in that position again.”

Silence settles between us while I consider his words, one hand slowly rubbing over Roxie’s soft fur. “So this is all Daisy Calhoun’s fault,” I eventually say. “I might have to kick her in the kneecaps the next time I see her.”

Drew’s expression shifts, his lips lifting in a smile like he’s surprised by my levity. “Work in an extra kick from me?”

“Consider it done,” I say. “Bare minimum, I’ll at least figure out how to spill my wine on her dress the next time we’re at the club.”

Roxie jumps up when a couple of seagulls land nearby, and I use the opportunity to shift onto my knees and gather my belongings, putting them all inside my bag. The sun is starting to fall in the late afternoon sky, and I can already feel the temperatures cooling.

“Time to go?” Drew asks, and I nod.

“It feels like it gets dark fast this time of year,” I say. I stand, and Drew jumps up beside me, standing back while I pick up the blanket I’ve been sitting on and shake out the sand. As soon as I finish, he reaches down and picks up the bottom corners so he can help me fold it. We fold the blanket in half, then in fourths, then he walks toward me, bringing his end to mine.

We’re standing close when he hands me his end of the blanket. Close enough for me to feel the warmth emanating off

his body and catch his familiar scent. My body reacts like Drew just injected his pheromones directly into my veins. A hot flush creeps up my chest, and I take a stuttering breath.

Why does this man impact me so strongly?

And how am I ever supposed to think clearly when he does?

“I’m glad I ran into you, Tess,” he says, his voice low. “And I appreciate you letting me explain where I’m coming from.”

I shrug, holding his gaze. “I still think you’re wrong about me,” I say. I have the sudden urge to press my palms against his chest, to feel the warmth of him under my hands. His hoodie looks soft, and I only just keep myself from testing my theory. Instead, I breathe out a resigned sigh. “Unfortunately, I think you’re right about my parents. And the last thing I want is to expose you to their ridicule when your wounds from Daisy are still so fresh.”

I pull the blanket free from his grip and drop it into my bag, then bend down to retrieve my water bottle from where it’s sitting near Drew’s feet. When I stand back up, the sand shifts beneath my feet, and I stumble.

Drew quickly catches me, his hands cupping my elbows until I’m steady on my feet. His thumbs trace slow circles over my arms, and I suddenly hate that I’m wearing a sweater, that there’s something to keep me from feeling the brush of his fingers directly on my skin.

“Thanks,” I say softly, and he nods, his blue eyes flashing.

“Are you all right?” he asks.

I nod, even though I feel anything but all right. *What* is happening to me right now? I've never experienced this kind of chemistry before. I'm not just talking sparks of attraction. I'm dealing with a whole raging forest fire. Unless Drew is willing to kiss me, or at least take me out to dinner, being around him is only going to get more painful.

"Good enough," I finally say.

He drops his hands away and takes a step backward, and I immediately feel the absence of him like a heavy weight in my midsection.

"I don't suppose you have any interest in just being friends?" Drew asks, his expression sheepish.

Friends might actually kill me, but I smile anyway. "Maybe we just start with you saying hello the next time you see me at the hospital?"

He grins. "I can definitely handle hello."

We say goodbye, and I make my way back to my car, thoughts spinning the entire time.

On the one hand, it *does* help to know Drew's history with Daisy and better understand where he's coming from when he says he isn't interested in pursuing anything with *me*.

On the other, it still stings to feel misjudged when I'm working so hard to live a more authentic life. Drew's hurt is making him shortsighted, and that isn't really fair.

He might just need more time though, which means being friends might not be such a bad idea. Friends for *now* doesn't

necessarily mean friends *forever*.

Back at my car, I drop my beach bag into the back, then climb into the driver's seat. My letter from Max is sitting in the center console, and I pick it up, pulling it out of the envelope to read it one more time.

"I don't know, Max," I say as I run my hand over the words written in neat, boxy letters. "You said the beach brings you peace, but today, I think it only made my life more complicated."

CHAPTER NINE

Drew

AS I WALK BACK to Grandma Pearl's house, several key things stand out in my mind. One, Tess is just as beautiful as I remember her. Maybe *more* beautiful. And two, she really *isn't* anything like Daisy.

The way she giggled when Roxie knocked her over, loving on the dog instead of freaking out over all the slobber. The easy way she listened without getting defensive or dismissive when I told her what Daisy put me through. Her sincerity when she talked about Preston and her efforts to create a different path for herself.

Maybe I *did* misjudge her.

Still, she didn't deny that her family would hate the idea of us having a relationship. It's probably a little presumptuous to worry about things like that when we haven't even been on a date. But after Daisy, I'm not interested in pursuing something that might lead to more heartbreak. It's easy for Tess to say that she doesn't care about her family now, but in a year, in five years, will she care then? Is it worth the possible tension?

A thought niggles at the back of my brain. With how quickly I felt a connection to Tess, she maybe *is* worth it.

And I just spent thirty minutes telling her all the reasons she *shouldn't* go out with me.

Roxie nuzzles my hand with her nose, and I scratch her ears before opening Grandma Pearl's back gate and letting the dog pass through.

"This is your fault, you know," I say to the dog. "Had you just minded your business, I wouldn't have known Tess was there at all." Roxie doesn't look sorry at all.

Grandma Pearl was napping when I got to her house earlier, but she's up now, sitting in the living room with a blanket over her legs and a bowl of popcorn on the side table next to her. She smiles at me as I cross through the back door. "I hoped it was you who stole my dog," she says easily.

I bend down and kiss her cheek. "Hope you don't mind. I thought Roxie could use the exercise."

"She always sleeps better after you take her out," Grandma Pearl says. She motions toward the kitchen. "Another letter came for you yesterday." She doesn't even try to hide the childlike glee she obviously feels in telling me.

I duck into the kitchen and slip the letter into my back pocket like it's no big deal. Like I don't care at all that I've gotten a response. Like it isn't exactly the distraction I need to keep my mind off of Tess.

“You want to watch with me?” Grandma Pearl asks when I’m back in the living room. She holds up the popcorn. “I’ll share.”

“For a little bit, I guess.” I’m headed over to Ben’s—he’s invited some of the guys from the station over to hang out—but I’ve got some time before I need to go. I scoop up a handful of popcorn and drop onto the couch beside her. “What are we watching?”

“*You’ve Got Mail*,” she answers. “And I’m already halfway through, so we should be able to finish it before you leave.” She hands me the popcorn bowl and stands up. “In the meantime, I’ll pretend I need to use the bathroom so you can read your letter in private.” She pats me on the head as she passes behind me.

I can only laugh at Grandma Pearl’s not-so-subtle nudging. I wouldn’t have read the letter with her sitting beside me, but I’m not above taking advantage of a brief moment to myself.

Dear Max,

I’m glad you mentioned the beach. It does the same thing for me. Fills me up in all the ways you mentioned. It’s always been where I go when I need to think, when I need to puzzle over problems in my life. But I haven’t been there much lately, and you’ve inspired me to make it a priority.

You asked me about the life I lost. It's a hard question. I can't be too sad about it because the loss was a result of a decision I made, and I know it was the right thing to do for everyone involved. But it still changed everything about what my future looks like. And that's what has left me feeling lost. Like I'm having to find myself all over again, define myself in this new reality.

The truth is, I spent a lot of years fighting against who everyone else wanted me to be. Now I don't have to fight anymore. I'm free to do and be whoever I want. But I'm not sure I really know who that is. I'm working on figuring it out. I should probably be a little more patient with myself.

Congratulations! I just told you more about my fears and insecurities than I've ever told anyone else. Feel free to send me a bill for the therapy.

Now it's your turn. Tell me something about you. Three somethings, actually. Three random things I might not guess just by looking at you.

(Funny, even if I could look at you, I wouldn't know you. I admit, I have wondered if we've ever passed each other on the street, if we've eaten at

the same restaurant at the same time, or if we have any acquaintances in common. This is such a strange way for friendships to form, and yet, I do feel like this is a friendship. I hope that doesn't seem too forward.)

Since I already tossed the question to you, it's only fair I play along, so here are three random things about me.

Number one. I am really good at cornhole. Stupidly good. Like if I didn't think the shirts they had to wear were so ugly, I could go onto ESPN and win the National Cornhole Championship without breaking a sweat.

Two. I graduated from college with a degree that I hate and don't think I'll ever use. I'm working on fixing this. Hopefully.

And three. A year ago, I started listening to audiobooks and now I'm totally hooked. Fiction, nonfiction, all of them. I love that I can listen and learn while I'm doing other things. Plus, if I'm listening to books, I can't hear all the doubts swirling around in my head.

Too much information? Probably so. Please tell me something about you that will make me feel better.

Warmly, Your Christmas Pen Pal

I read the entire thing through, then immediately jump back to the beginning and read it again.

Whoever wrote it sounds fun. *Real*. Would it be weird if I stopped by Francie's deli to get my own take on what, exactly, Francie meant by beautiful? Maybe she could describe the woman. Give me hair color, eye color, a guess at how old she might be.

I reread the part about cornhole, smiling the whole time.

I'm already thinking about the three things to include in my return letter when Grandma Pearl crosses back into the room. She settles under her blanket and reaches for the popcorn.

"Have you ever seen this one?" she asks, nodding toward the television.

I tuck the letter back into my pocket. "Not that I can remember. What's it about?"

"Meg Ryan and Tom Hanks are secret pen pals via email," she says without missing a beat. "And then they fall in love."

I shoot her a look. "Did you pick this movie on purpose? Because you knew I was coming over?"

She smirks, the creases on either side of her face deepening. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

“You’re terrible. You know that, right?” I reach for another handful of popcorn. “Just play the movie already.”

It isn’t hard to pick up the threads of the storyline, even halfway through. There are definitely similarities to my pen pal situation, though it isn’t exactly the same. The characters in the movie know each other in person without knowing the emails they’re exchanging are with each other. Still, it only takes a minute for me to be hooked, and I love the whole thing, right down to the cheesy line where Meg Ryan’s character, when she learns that her pen pal is also the guy she’s been sparring with through the whole movie, tells Tom Hanks that she wanted it to be him.

For a brief moment, I indulge in the possibility of my pen pal being *Tess*, but that doesn’t make enough sense to give it more than a passing thought. It would solve my problem of thinking about both women at the same time, but there’s just no way a coincidence that strong could ever be real.

Grandma Pearl turns off the television when the ending credits start to roll. “I do love a good romance,” she says, leaning her head back onto the sofa. She looks toward me, her eyes sparkling. “What do you think? Feeling inspired?”

I roll my eyes and grin. “You can relax, Gran. I’ve already decided to write her another letter.”

She clasps her hands in front of her chest. “I have a good feeling about this, Drew.”

I’m not ready to admit it to anyone else, and I still haven’t fully shaken my disquieting thoughts about Tess, but I’ve got a

good feeling about it, too.



On my way home from Ben's, I stop by the store and pick up some actual stationery—I used printer paper for the last letter I wrote—and grab some stamps from the check-out line. It all feels very old-fashioned and weird, but I'm strangely excited to write again. And not just because of Grandma Pearl's movie choices.

Once inside my apartment, I drop onto the couch and pull the dictionary my high school English teacher gave me as a graduation gift off the bookshelf beside me, using it as a makeshift desk.

I pull a single sheet of stationery out of the box I purchased and stare down at the blank page.

It's just a letter.

I run a hand through my hair.

Just words on paper.

Dear Christmas Pen Pal,

That's a pretty confident claim—professional cornhole playing. I'm not saying I doubt you. It's just that those people on TV are really serious about their sport. Maybe we could get together and play sometime...

I reread the first few lines I've written and sigh. It's probably too soon to suggest we get together in person. I ball up the paper and start again.

*Dear Christmas Pen Pal,
That's a pretty confident claim—professional cornhole playing. I'm not saying I doubt you. It's just that those people on TV are really serious about their sport. You really think you could take them?*

Three things about me. Let's see. I'm really good at my job. It's a job that requires you to stay calm, even in stressful situations, and I'm really good at that. In fact, I don't get ruffled easily in general. I don't have much of a temper, though sometimes I do get a little mouthy. That's the word my mother used when I was a kid.

What else? I hate olives. I don't understand how anyone can NOT hate olives. I'll eat just about anything. But not olives.

And finally, something that might make you feel better about yourself. I like to watch romantic comedies with my grandma.

I'm guessing you're laughing. It's fine. I can handle it. My grandma is pretty amazing. She always adds funny commentary to the movies, and she makes really good caramel popcorn. We've been watching movies together since I was a kid, but it's only recently that they've all become romance-themed. I think she's trying to tell me something...transmit her hopes and dreams for me through Hallmark-style indoctrination. I don't know what she's so worried about. It's not like I'm opposed to the idea. I guess I'm just waiting for the right person.

Who knows? Maybe I've already met her, and I just haven't realized it yet.

Am I being too obvious? That's the point of all this, right? If I'm being totally honest, I'm only writing because I hope the woman might be someone I could eventually get to know in person. I press on and finish the letter, resisting the urge to let my doubts win.

Tell me about the college education you aren't using, and how you're planning to fix things. You've made me curious.

Until next time,

I hesitate before signing the letter. It feels weird to call myself Max after so many years of going by Andrew or Drew.

But signing my real name to the letter—would it ruin the magic? The woman writing has only signed as *Your Christmas Pen Pal*, so in the end, I decide to follow her lead and sign the letter, *Max*.

She probably has reasons for wanting to keep her anonymity. We are strangers, after all. I can't blame her for wanting to be cautious.

After a few more letters, maybe I'll suggest we start using our real names. Or just get right to the point and invite her to dinner.

I add one final line, a postscript that reads, *I like calling us friends. It feels right.*

CHAPTER TEN

Tess

“BUT SERIOUSLY, READ THIS letter,” I say, thrusting it across the table at Chloe. We’re on the outdoor patio at The Obstinate Daughter, a pizza place on Sullivan’s Island that’s famous for funky toppings and top-notch crust. “Trust me. You’ve never read anything so perfect.”

Deacon leans over Chloe’s shoulder, his eyes scanning over the letter. After just a few moments, he looks up. “You told him you were good enough to play professional cornhole?”

I raise an eyebrow. “I beat you every game, don’t I?”

“Oh my word, he watches movies with his grandma?” Chloe presses a hand to her chest. “That’s the sweetest thing I’ve ever heard.”

“Right?” I lean back in my chair. “He feels too good to be true.”

“Of course he’s not too good to be true,” Deacon says with a grin. “He probably looks like Gollum.”

Chloe smacks him on the chest. “He does not,” she says. “I think he sounds adorable.”

Deacon chuckles. “I don’t know. It sounds risky to me. How can you possibly learn enough about a person through letters to know you’re attracted to him? I know it’s not the most important thing, but physical attraction does matter.”

“But maybe once you really get to know someone, you’ll find them physically attractive because of how great they are overall, even if you would have ignored them at first glance.” I take the letter from Chloe’s outstretched hand and refold it before tucking it back in my purse. “People can be shallow, yes. But that doesn’t mean we *have* to be.”

“So would you date this guy if he looked like Gollum?” Deacon asks.

“He doesn’t look like Gollum,” Chloe says, shooting Deacon a pointed look. “The lady at the deli already said he was a catch.”

“Which is very subjective. What if he looks like that guy over there?” Deacon motions to an older, balding man across the patio. “Or the guy next to him. How do you feel about face tattoos, Tess?”

“Geez, you really know how to kill a moment, Deac,” Chloe says.

“Sorry. I’m not trying to be a buzz kill. He really does sound like a great guy. I’m just saying. We don’t live in a Hallmark

movie. The odds of him being someone who would generally turn the head of someone like Tess are slim.”

“And maybe that’s the point,” I say, looking to Chloe for support. “This way, I’m getting to know him for all the reasons that actually matter, and not just the superficial stuff. Obviously, dating the pretty boys hasn’t worked out too well for me in the past.” My eyes dart back to Deacon. “Sorry. No offense to your brother.”

“None taken,” Deacon says easily. “Just be careful, all right? If you decide to give this guy your name or meet him somewhere, let me know. I’ll come be back up in case he’s a creep. Or Gollum.”

Chloe gives her husband an adoring look, and gratitude tugs at my heart. I know Chloe is the main reason Deacon is being so kind to me, so concerned for my well-being, but as an only child, I’m happy to soak up whatever brotherly concern he’s willing to give.

“Thanks, Deac.”

The conversation moves on to other topics as dinner progresses, but I can’t keep myself from tossing glances toward the guy with a face tattoo on the other side of the patio.

The truth is, that guy *could* be Max. I have no way of actually knowing what he looks like. Maybe Francie is into the biker look. Spikes and chains and lots of black leather. How could I possibly know?

Except, Max watches romantic comedies with his grandma! Would a guy with face tattoos and spikes around his neck do that?

I press my fingers into my temples. I'm being so judgmental right now. *Of course* a man with face tattoos could watch movies with his grandma. I have to stop this. Stop the spiraling —

“How's the toy drive idea coming?” Chloe asks.

Yes! Perfect. Let's talk about the toy drive!

“The toy drive is totally happening,” I say, so happy for the distraction. “Mrs. Greenly loved the idea, and the fire station is happy to host.”

It only took a few nights of rote Santa letter responses for me to decide I wanted to do something more than deliver false promises and empty platitudes. A few phone calls expressing my concern, and suddenly I found myself heading up a toy drive that will, instead of just answering letters from Santa, actually provide the requested gifts for the letter writers. It will take some coordinating with the kids' parents, and I'm going to have to suck it up and do some fundraising to make it all work, but it feels so much better than just crossing my fingers and hoping parents can deliver what their kids are asking for when they're writing to Santa.

“Can I sign you guys up to help? Three weeks from this weekend,” I say. “I wanted it to be as close to Christmas as possible. We'll be meeting Friday night to wrap and sort the

presents, and then Saturday the kids will come to meet Santa and pick up their presents.”

Chloe’s eyes drop to her midsection where her hands are resting on her very pregnant belly.

“Oh. Oh gosh,” I say quickly. “You totally don’t have to help. I wasn’t thinking—”

“No! I totally want to,” Chloe says quickly. “I just got distracted doing the math. I’ll be seven months along by then.”

“You might not feel up to it,” Deacon says gently, and a pang of wistfulness fills my heart. He is so good at taking care of her.

“If I’m still working, I can still volunteer,” Chloe says. “Count on us,” she says more firmly. “We’ll be there to help.”

After dinner, I follow Chloe and Deacon out to the parking lot, trying hard not to envy the way Deacon helps Chloe down the stairs, one hand hovering protectively at the small of her back, the other gripping her hand. They love each other *so much*, something that only makes what my previous relationship lacked more apparent. Preston and I were never so solicitous of each other. We were together, and I believe we cared about each other, but that’s different than caring *for* each other. Even aside from my frustrations with the world he represents, we didn’t quite fit—not like this. Not like Chloe and Deacon do. It’s just one more confirmation that I really did make the right choice in ending things.

Next time, it has to be different. *I* have to be different.

With Max, maybe? If life were a Hallmark movie, sure.

Or, you know. If I'm the kind of woman who's down with a face tattoo.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Tess

Dear Max,

I love that you watch romantic comedies with your grandma. I love even more that you admitted it.

I agree that olives are the world's worst food. I have a friend who eats them like they are grapes, by the handful. It grosses me out just thinking about it. Her husband feels the same way and so they are always ordering olives on their pizza, which is ridiculous and disgusting.

I would love to learn more about your job. Mostly because you sound like you really love it. And that intrigues me. It feels like people are too frequently motivated by having a job that's going to pay them a salary they love rather than having a job that makes them happy. I mean, if you can have both, I guess that's the best of both worlds, but happiness

is more important, I think. Lots of money in a life that feels empty hardly seems worth it. But that's just me.

Can you tell me more about what you do?

You asked about the college degree I'm not using. I graduated with a degree in art history. Art is fine. I like art. But I don't really have a passion for it. And the degree didn't really prepare me to do anything practical. I picked it because my mother thought it would be a good idea. In her mind, being a "supportive wife" was all I needed to aspire to. And an art history degree was a perfectly respectable way to accomplish that.

I'm going back to school in January. To study business and entrepreneurial leadership. I have an idea, a business I'd like to open someday, so I'm hoping this degree will help me figure out how to make it happen. I haven't told anyone about it yet. It still feels too new. Too scary. But maybe someday.

Sincerely, Your Christmas Pen Pal



Dear Pen Pal,

I'd love to hear about your business idea. I promise I'll be supportive. And not tell you your only role in life is to be a "supportive wife." I mean, I hope to be a supportive husband someday. And I hope I have a supportive wife. But that isn't all I want her to be. It's about teamwork. And supporting each other's goals and dreams and aspirations.

Does it make me too much of an idealist to believe a relationship like that is possible? I hope not.

Either way, your idea is safe with me.

A few more questions for you:

Favorite childhood game?

Favorite food?

Favorite beverage?

Last book you read that you couldn't put down? Or in your case, last book you listened to?

I love to read, but I'm still partial to the feel of a book in my actual hands. I might, with a little convincing, be willing to give an audiobook a try. Though if I end up liking an audiobook, I might have to buy the book just to have it on my shelf. My grandma says this is weird. That I'll check a book

out from the library and then, if I like it, buy it for my own library. I just know that eventually I'll read it again and then I'll be happy to have it on my shelf. I don't do it with ALL books, just the ones I love. What about you?

-Max

PS. Olives on pizza are the WORST.



Dear Max,

I don't think you sound like an idealist. I think the kind of relationship you described sounds amazing. And I know it's possible because my best friend has this kind of relationship with her husband. They are so supportive, and they really see one other, you know? They set the bar pretty high as far as relationships go, but I haven't given up hope yet. Your letter actually gives me MORE hope. That there are men out there who get it. Who are looking for what I'm looking for.

My business. Okay. I'll tell you. But I just want you to know how terrified it makes me to think about saying these things out loud.

Here goes: I want to run my own yoga studio. I'm not an instructor, but I'm interested in the business side of it. I want to create something that's more than a studio. More like a retreat center. A place where people can go to relax and feel peace and find their center. But I don't want it to be some posh, expensive place that charges five bucks for a glass of cucumber water. I want it to be accessible. The people who probably need to de-stress the most are the people who are living on a budget. I want them to be able to come and do yoga and relax and get a massage without it breaking the bank. I'm still working out how I can make it happen. But I have ideas. Ideas of holding retreats that are high-dollar, targeting them toward women who have the income to indulge, but then using those profits to provide services that are more budget-friendly, or even free.

Does that sound crazy? I hope it doesn't sound crazy. I don't know anything about the actual business of running a business, so that's what my classes will focus on in January. I've also got a job lined up, doing administrative work at a yoga studio to help me learn the industry. It pays basically nothing, and it doesn't start until after the first of the year, which means I have a lot of time

on my hands right now. But it will work well with my school schedule, and the owner of the studio is fantastic, so I'm excited to work with her.

In the meantime, I'm dreaming and planning, which is fun. Also terrifying. Almost as terrifying as olives on pizza. I'm glad we agree on that.

Favorite childhood game: Tetris. If you think I'm good at cornhole, you should see me play Tetris.

Favorite food: Sweet potato pie. NOT pumpkin pie. It's not the same thing and don't you dare suggest it is.

Favorite beverage: Cheerwine, of course. Or sweet tea with raspberry puree and a twist of lime. I made that last one up, and it's to die for.

Last book I read that I couldn't put down: This one is tough. Because I love books for different reasons. But the last novel I listened to that was just so gripping I couldn't turn it off? The Other Side of Thinking, by Jenna Rafferty. So thought provoking. Have you read it? If you haven't, you should. Then we can talk about it.

What about you? Same questions. Game. Food. Beverage. And the best book you've read in a while.

Sincerely, Your Christmas Pen Pal



Dear Pen Pal,

At your recommendation, I just finished The Other Side of Thinking. I listened to it actually, since that's the way you enjoyed it. I walked six miles on the beach last night just so I could get through the last few chapters. Wow. What a book. I can't stop thinking about the way the main characters judged each other without even realizing they were doing it. It's so interesting how our life experiences filter into what we see in the world around us.

I loved it. Thanks for the recommendation.

I love your business idea. I think it's amazing. Do it. People will love it.

Favorite game. Would you believe it's also Tetris? I swear it would have been my answer even if you hadn't said it first. It's my favorite because I never

*lost. I see a tournament in the not-so-distant future.
Tetris and Cornhole.*

*Favorite food. What can I say? I love to eat just
about anything. But I love a really good burger.
And sweet potato fries. I can't believe you said
sweet potato pie because this is also a favorite of
mine. My grandma makes an amazing one.*

*Favorite beverage. I'm not much of a social
drinker. I like food too much to consume too many
liquid calories, so my boring answer is water.*

*As for reading, I'm going to cheat and say the last
book I read that I loved was the one you
recommended to me. Thanks again, by the way.
Before that, I read Macy Finley's latest thriller and
enjoyed it. Have you ever read any of her stuff? I'd
love to hear what you think if you have.*

*Is it weird that multiple times a day, I find myself
wondering what you'll think about something?
When I see something interesting or hear
something funny, you're the person I want to tell. I
hope you know how much I appreciate these
letters.*

You're important to me. I hope that doesn't scare you off.

Yours, Max



Dear Max,

It doesn't scare me at all. You're important to me too. Getting your letters has become my favorite thing lately. I worry my mail carrier thinks I have a crush on him because I'm always waiting at the mailbox when he arrives. I hope that doesn't make me sound silly.

Macy Finley's stuff is SO SCARY. I listened to one of her books, and then I couldn't sleep for a week.

It just occurred to me that you still haven't told me anything about the kind of work you do. If this is on purpose, and you haven't mentioned it because you CAN'T mention it, forget I asked. I'll assume you're a CIA operative and you're staying silent because telling me would mean having to kill me. But if it's just an oversight, I'd love to know how you spend your days.

Also (deep breath) do you think it's time for us to meet? Or maybe advance our correspondence to something slightly more modern? Texting might be fun.

I'm not going to lie. These letters have been amazing. But I can't pretend like I'm not spending inordinate amounts of time imagining what it might be like to meet you in person.

If the thought scares you as much as olives on pizza scares me, pretend I didn't say anything. But I'm ready whenever you are.

Your Christmas Pen Pal



I STARE AT THE finished letter, wondering if I ought to include my phone number at the bottom. Deacon would tell me it's too risky. That I ought to just set up a time to meet Max in person so I can see for myself that the guy isn't a creeper before I give him something as personal as my phone number.

It isn't a bad suggestion. I still don't even know the guy's full name.

But his letters don't give me creeper vibes *at all*. He's funny and engaging and we like the same books and the same food. *AND* he thinks my business idea is amazing. That has to mean

something. So what if he's the only person aside from Chloe whom I've actually told about my idea. I had to start somewhere, and clearly, he was a brilliant choice.

My phone buzzes with an incoming message, and I slide the letter onto the coffee table and grab my phone before stretching out full length on the couch, my feet propped on the armrest.

Chloe: Just finished the last bit of online shopping you sent my way. It's all being shipped to you, but it's only two-day shipping so you should have it in plenty of time before Friday.

Tess: Perfect. Thank you!

I was so relieved when Chloe agreed to handle some of the shopping for the toy drive. I've been all over Charleston looking for the toys the Santa letter kids have requested, but there are a few things I haven't been able to find in person. Chloe has ninja-level online shopping skills. I swear, the woman finds things that no one else can ever find.

Chloe: I even found the Barbie with curly hair.

Tess: You are amazing. Send me your receipts, and I'll get Mrs. Greenly to cut you a check.

I haven't loved the soliciting for donations part of running the toy drive, but I've managed well enough. It helped that my dad made a substantial donation from his law firm. And Deacon did the same.

Tess: Can you still come on Friday night?

Chloe: We will be there. Should we eat first?

Tess: I'm ordering pizza for everyone. Come hungry but bring your own olives. You know I'll never ruin a pizza for you, no matter how much I love you.

Chloe: Even for your very pregnant friend?

There are half a dozen smiley faces at the end of Chloe's text.

Tess: Man, you sure do like to use that baby as a bargaining chip.

Chloe: A girl's gotta do what a girl's gotta do.

Tess: ONE pizza with olives. But I'm not fighting firefighters off to protect it for you, so you better come early.

Chloe: Right. Got it. Are we coming to the actual fire station?

Tess: Yes—to the big pavilion at the back of the parking lot. The fire chief promised he would send out lots of volunteers.

Chloe: Firemen wrapping Christmas gifts. You may have your work cut out for you. But at least the scenery will be nice.

Tess: Haha. That's one bonus. Mrs. Greenly has purchased gift bags in abundance. I think they'll be able to handle it.

I close out my phone and pick up the letter I abandoned when Chloe texted. I fold it and shove it inside the envelope I already addressed, determined not to overthink it. It normally only takes

three or four days after sending a letter to get one back, so I shouldn't have to wait long.

But this is big.

I asked Max to meet me in person.

And I have no idea how I'm going to feel if he says no.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Drew

BEN DROPS ONTO THE bench in front of the station, a wide grin on his face, and nudges me with his shoulder. “Hey, so you remember when you told me you have the whole weekend off?”

I stare at Ben blandly. “I’m not going on another blind date, man. I’ve been a good sport the past two weekends, but enough is enough.”

“They weren’t that bad,” Ben says. “The last one wasn’t, at least.”

A mostly true statement. The date hadn’t been horrible. But I can’t tell Ben the reason I don’t want to go on a second date is because I’m too busy thinking about some mystery woman I’ve been exchanging letters with—a woman I’ve never even seen in person.

Ben would laugh me out of the station. I’d probably do the same thing if our roles were reversed.

But I can't help it. I feel a connection to the woman— whoever she is—and she takes up a lot of my headspace. Enough that I'm not really in the mood to think about other women. It's bad enough that after our run-in on the beach, I still have Tess on my mind. That's complicated enough.

I'm hoping that once I respond to my most recent letter, I'll be able to put Tess out of my mind once and for all. Because my pen pal asked if I want to meet her in person.

The answer is yes. Absolutely yes.

"I *did* sign you up for something," Ben says, "but it isn't a date. And the chief thinks it's a good idea, and I already told him you would do it with me."

I raise my eyebrows. "Something work-related?"

"Sort of? It's just this toy drive thing. The fire chief called over and asked if we could send a couple of volunteers over to help out. The fire station is hosting, and some volunteer organization charity thing is running it. They just need manpower. And it looks good in the community when that manpower comes from civil servants such as ourselves."

"When?"

"Tonight for a few hours, doing prep work, and then tomorrow all day. We have to take the rig with us tomorrow. And dress in uniform. So we can meet and greet with kids, let them look around, answer questions. We're the sideshow while they're waiting to meet with Santa. They're expecting a pretty

big turnout, I guess. The firefighters will be doing the same thing.”

“We have to compete with the fire trucks? That’s not fair.”

“True, but with our good looks, it’ll all balance out,” Ben says through a grin.

I roll my eyes. “Whatever, man. I’m game.”

A few hours later, Ben rides with me, and we drive over to the fire station. It’s only a few blocks west, so we probably could have walked it, but I figure we’ll be glad to have my truck when the night’s over.

A couple dozen people are milling around the parking lot, slowly making their way toward the picnic pavilion behind the fire station.

I park and lock my truck and start heading that way, but then Ben grabs my arm. “Dude. Is that Tess?” He shoots me a worried look. “I swear I didn’t realize she’d be here, or I never would have roped you into this.”

I follow Ben’s gaze, immediately picking Tess out of the crowd. Something catches in my chest, a familiar buzz racing through my veins.

I wish I could explain my physical reaction to seeing her. It’s like there’s some sort of cellular recognition that makes my blood run hot and a sheen of sweat break out across my skin. But...*look at her*. I can’t even wrap my head around how beautiful she looks.

I wave away Ben's concern, hoping my voice sounds normal. *Chill*. "Actually, I ran into her on the beach a while back. We talked. We're cool."

Ben's eyebrows go up. "Cool as in...*friends*?"

I shrug. "I mean, I haven't seen her since then. But yeah, I guess. You could call us friends."

"Why didn't you tell me about this?" Ben says as we follow a couple of firefighters to the pavilion. "You saw her, and you didn't think it was worth mentioning?"

"We had one conversation," I say. "It wasn't a big deal."

Though, the way my nerves are rioting, it feels like a *very big* deal that I'm seeing Tess right now. It's an uncomfortable feeling because it almost feels like a betrayal.

I'm not interested in Tess.

I *am* interested in my Christmas pen pal.

I don't want to have doubts about that, but the reality is, I haven't met my pen pal in person so comparing her to Tess, who is real and beautiful in front of me...it's hard *not* to doubt.

Tess turns and looks in my direction, and we make eye contact. A huge smile breaks out on her face, and my heart flops onto the ground at her feet. "Drew!" she says as she walks toward us. "What are you doing here?"

"We're here to volunteer," I say. "Our chief sent us over."

"Perfect," she says. "We need all the help we can get."

"You remember Ben?" I say, motioning next to me.

“I do. Good to see you again,” Tess says as she shakes Ben’s hand.

Together, we step into the pavilion where the picnic tables have been split in half. On one side, piles and piles of unwrapped toys, books and other presents cover every available surface. The other half of the tables are mostly empty, dotted with stacks of labels, pens, and tape.

“So we’re wrapping presents?” I ask.

“That’s the plan,” Tess says. “I know it looks like a lot, but hopefully we’ll have enough people here to get everything wrapped by tomorrow.”

“Tess!” a voice calls from behind us, and Tess turns, then runs over to greet a couple walking toward the pavilion hand in hand. She beams when she greets them, then hugs them both. When Tess grips the woman’s hand, she glances briefly over her shoulder in my direction, and I get the distinct impression she’s talking about me.

Ben leans closer. “I can’t believe you could have dated *her*, and you chose not to. You’re crazy, man.”

Watching the way she smiles as she interacts with her friends makes me think I probably am. But it’s too late for those kinds of thoughts now. Especially when I’m committed to seeing where things go with...*man*, I really need to find out my pen pal’s name.

While I’m watching, Tess pulls out her phone. She stares at the screen, worry lines forming between her brows. She

glances at her watch, then looks at her phone one more time.

Something's wrong.

Acting on impulse, I step toward her. "Hey, is everything okay?"

She offers me a tight smile. "Not really. But it's nothing for you to worry about. We'll get started soon—"

Her words cut off when her phone rings, and her face sags in visible relief. "Thank you," she mutters under her breath. She answers the call, stepping to the side and leaving me with the friends she just greeted, who are staring me down like I'm the mystery meat in an elementary school cafeteria.

"Hey, man. Deacon Vanderhorst," the man finally says, extending his hand. "This is my wife, Chloe."

I meet Deacon's gaze head on and shake his hand, even as something catches in my brain. Why does his name sound familiar? Overall, he seems friendly enough. Maybe just a little more curious than normal, but I don't think I've ever met him before. "Drew McKay," I finally say as I shake his wife's hand. "Are you friends of Tess's?"

"She's my *best* friend," Chloe says. "And my cousin."

The conversation I had with Tess that first day pops back into my brain. She mentioned her cousin was having a baby—the same cousin who was married to the brother of her ex. Which explains why Deacon's last name sounded familiar.

Tess steps back into the small group we've inadvertently formed. "That was Mrs. Greenly," she says through a frown.

“She was supposed to have all the wrapping supplies delivered by this afternoon, but she got held up in Columbia. She’s still an hour away.”

“Can we wait an hour?” Chloe asks. “Maybe we eat first?”

My stomach rumbles. I’d be on board with eating first.

Tess runs a hand over her face. “I really wanted to get started earlier rather than later. I have no idea how long this is actually going to take, and I don’t want to keep volunteers out all night, and...” She sighs.

“Hey. We can make this work,” Chloe says. “Tell me what you need. We’re here for you.”

Tess nods, but her expression is still guarded. “Let me just think for a minute.” She looks across the pavilion where her army of volunteers are milling around, waiting for direction. “Mrs. Greenly says all the wrapping stuff is in her garage. What if I just drive over to her place and get it? In the meantime, there’s enough here that you guys could start wrapping the smaller stuff.”

“Totally,” Chloe says. “We can handle it. Want me to head things up while you’re gone?”

“Yes. That would be amazing, actually,” Tess says, but then her shoulders drop. “Except I can’t take my car because it’s still full of presents you’ll need to be wrapping.” We follow her gaze to her sleek SUV, the back hatch open, mounds of presents visible inside. “They’re organized and everything. Moving them isn’t worth it.”

“Drew has his truck here,” Ben says, casting me a pointed look. “He could drive you.”

Tess frowns, her brow furrowed.

Ben points across the parking lot. “It’s got a covered bed and everything. There’s plenty of room for whatever it is you need to pick up.”

“I’m happy to drive you,” I say to Tess, willing my voice to sound calm, neutral. It wouldn’t have to mean anything. We *did* say we would be friends. And friends help each other out. “Or if you don’t want to leave since you’re in charge, I could just go and pick up the supplies.”

Tess nods, her eyes hopeful. “Yes—no.” She bites her lip. “I can’t ask Mrs. Greenly to give her garage code to someone she’s never met. She’s weird about stuff like this. She’ll give it to me, but I don’t think she’ll give it to anyone else.” She presses a hand to her forehead.

“What about Trish?” Chloe asks. “Isn’t she supposed to be helping tonight? Could she go get them?”

“She’s supposed to be. But she’s with her mom. I’ll just go. We’re wasting time talking about it.” She looks at me, a question in her eyes. “You’re sure you don’t mind?”

I ignore Ben’s smirk and pull out my keys. “Totally. I’m happy to help.”

“And can we pick up the pizza on our way back?”

I nod. “Absolutely.” *Because we’re friends. Just. Friends.*

Tess gives Chloe a few instructions about gifts and wrapping paper and which ones to start on first and then turns to face me. “Okay. Ready to go?”

I nod and lead the way across the parking lot, a little dumbstruck that fifteen minutes ago, I didn’t even know Tess would be here, and now we’ll be alone together in my truck.

At least I cleaned it out earlier this week.

I unlock the doors as we approach, and the taillights blink in response.

“Thanks for this,” Tess says as she climbs into the passenger side. “I tried to think of everything, but Mrs. Greenly was supposed to drop off the wrapping paper and gift bags earlier today, and her daughter Trish was supposed to bring the pizza. I had no reason to assume they wouldn’t be here. I didn’t think of a contingency plan.”

“It’s no problem,” I say. “I’m happy to help.”

Inside the truck, Tess tugs on her seatbelt. “Um, is this supposed to happen?” The belt is somehow locked, only pulling a few inches away from the side of the truck.

“It gets caught sometimes. You just have to pull it toward the window a little.” I lean over, reaching across her to adjust the seat belt. My hand brushes against hers, and she lets out a little gasp that makes my heart rate immediately spike. Her scent wraps around me, and I just...stay there, breathing her in, my eyes locked on hers.

“Thanks,” she finally says, her voice breathy and light.

What am I doing?

I jolt and lean away from her, settling into my seat as I clear my throat. “Sure—it—right—sorry.”

Tess chuckles. “Was that supposed to be a sentence?”

Heat creeps up my cheeks, and I rub a hand down my face as if that could possibly conceal the impact she’s having on me.

“So where are we headed?” I say, a little too loudly.

Tess smirks like she recognizes my avoidance for exactly what it is, but she doesn’t tease me anymore. “The Greenlys live just over the bridge in Mount Pleasant. It shouldn’t take us long to get there.”

I nod and make a right turn toward the downtown bridge. Somehow, I have to find my equilibrium. Get to a point where I’m *not* tripping over my own words. I clear my throat one more time. “So how have you been?”

“Great. Busy with the toy drive, which is why you haven’t seen me at the hospital.”

“Yeah, I’ve noticed the other volunteers a few times, but I haven’t seen you. How did you get involved in the toy drive?”

“Actually, it was my idea,” she says with a sheepish shrug. “This is the first year the Southern Society has ever had one.”

“Yeah? That feels like a big deal,” I say, impressed that she isn’t just volunteering, she’s running the whole show. Yet more evidence that I wasn’t fair in my initial judgments of Tess.

“So the Southern Society does this thing where we answer letters that kids write to Santa every year,” she says. “I guess it’s the job that no one really wants because it’s just copying the same letter over and over again so they all feel authentic and handwritten, which is just as boring as it sounds. But I’m new to the society, so the Santa letters project was given to me.”

My hands tighten on the steering wheel as Tess continues to talk.

Is she saying what I think she’s saying?

She can’t be...because that would mean...but *no*.

“So I started responding to all these letters—letters asking for puppies and Barbie dream houses and Xboxes and all kinds of things. It felt wrong to respond with rote answers and empty platitudes when I actually have no idea what these kids’ parents’ are going to be able to provide. For some families, an Xbox isn’t ever going to be in the budget, you know? So that question turned into a toy drive where we’re providing the actual gifts kids ask for in their letters, big or small.”

The details of Tess’s toy drive barely register in my brain because I can’t stop thinking about *Tess* answering Santa letters.

Is there more than one organization in Charleston that answers Santa letters? Is it the same organization now that it was sixteen years ago? I don’t have any memory of *where* I sent the letter I wrote, but Gran’s connection to Shelby at the

Southern Society makes me think it's likely my letter wound up there.

Does that mean Tess found it?

Does that mean *Tess* is my Christmas pen pal?

The thought sends a burst of excitement racing through me, making my hands tremble. I've only known it's a possibility for a matter of seconds, but apparently, that's all my brain needs to lock in on the idea and wish for it with all I've got.

I really want it to be Tess.

Despite my hesitations, my rash judgments, my stupid certainty that we would never work out, if Tess is the woman writing me letters, I'm in. Unequivocally.

"The toy drive sounds amazing," I say, recognizing that I have to respond to the conversation I'm having in person and not just the one happening inside my head. But I can't keep myself from asking, "So how long has the Southern Society been doing the Santa letters thing?"

"I don't know," Tess says. "The box of letters looks like it's been around for decades, so probably a long time."

"And it's only one person who answers them? Only you?"

Tess furrows her brow, a completely understandable reaction since my questions are pointed and weird. "As far as I know," she slowly answers. "I'm the only one doing it now, but I get the impression the box has been passed around a lot. Apparently, I was the third person they gave the job to this year and the only one gullible enough to keep it."

“I wouldn’t say gullible,” I say. “I would say generous. You’ve done an amazing job. And clearly turned the whole thing into something even better.”

Tess smiles at my praise, a hint of color filling her cheeks. “Thanks. That means a lot.” She points up ahead. “Right here. Take the next right.”

I focus on the road, using the slight break in our conversation to catalog what I know.

If I’m understanding Tess correctly, two other women *might* have had the letters before they wound up with Tess. One of them could have pulled out my letter before passing the rest along. But what are the odds of that happening? Tess is in charge of the letters. It makes the most sense that she would be the one who responded to mine.

But is that just wishful thinking?

I could just ask her. Come right and say, *Hey, did you happen to find a really old letter in the box this year?* But asking would immediately reveal my identity, and that thought makes me hesitate.

There are definitely some details that fit though. Everything my pen pal told me about wanting a new life, starting over after losing the life she *thought* she had...that fits with Tess making her own way after bailing on her fancy society wedding. She also talked about finding peace at the beach, and I ran into Tess out on Sullivan’s Island. It really could be her.

Would Tess be disappointed to learn I'm on the other end of her letters? After I judged her so unfairly, would she even want to pursue something? Would I? I meant it when I said I didn't want to walk the same path I did with Daisy. I *do* think I was wrong about Tess, but—

“It's the second driveway on the right,” Tess says, pulling me out of my thoughts.

I nod and turn the truck onto the winding drive, listening as Tess calls Mrs. Greenly to get the garage code we need to retrieve all the gift-wrapping supplies.

I stop the truck in front of an enormous three-car garage. The Greenlys' house sits off to the left, looking like it belongs in a magazine highlighting Southern, plantation-style estates.

“Wow,” I say, followed by a low whistle. “This is some house.”

“She says everything is in that third garage bay,” Tess says, ignoring my comment. She's probably a lot more used to houses like this than I am. “Want to back up to it?”

“Sure thing.” I swing the truck around and shift into park, then follow Tess as she climbs out and approaches the garage. She types a code into a keypad just outside the door and it slides up, revealing an enormous pile of wrapping paper and boxes of gift bags.

“Guess this is what we're here for. Should we load it up?”

Tess nods. “Let's do it.”

I step forward, hesitating when a loud crash sounds just beyond the gift wrap. A cat darts out of the garage like it's escaping a cell at a high-security prison and disappears into the darkness. "Um, you think that cat was supposed to get out?"

Tess follows my gaze. "I don't know. Let me ask really quick..."

She pulls out her phone, her face shifting into a grimace as she reads the screen. "Uh-oh," she says, her voice low. "I missed a text from Mrs. Greenly."

She walks toward me and turns the screen around so I can read it.

"Whatever you do, don't let the cat get out of the garage," I read aloud.

I lift my gaze to meet Tess's. "Oops."

"What are we going to do now?" she asks.

I chuckle. "I guess we're going to search for a cat."

"This is totally ridiculous. We don't have time for this. I don't even *like* cats."

I place a steadying hand on her arm. "I'll look for the cat. You can load up the wrapping paper while I search."

I don't particularly like cats either, but I could use another minute away from Tess to clear my head.

I have to figure out who she is. If she's...*her. My pen pal.*

Then I have to figure out what to do about it if she is.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Tess

“OF ALL THE STUPID, idiotic things to have happen,” I mutter under my breath. I hoist another roll of wrapping paper into the back of Drew’s truck.

Of all the people to be spending time with. *Drew!*

I don’t even know what to think. It was a surprise to see him, but it was also a surprise to *not* feel awkward when I did. Maybe it was the conversation we had on the beach. Or maybe it’s just that I’m halfway to falling for Max, and he’s made it a lot easier *not* to think about Drew.

But that moment in the truck, when Drew leaned close to help with my seat belt...the way he was messing up his words, like I was clearly having an impact on him. *Was I impacting him?* It would only be fair because he was liquifying my limbs just by looking at me.

But is that what I want?

I carry another load of wrapping paper to the back of the truck and settle it into the bed, irritated by how quickly my life

went from relatively simple to completely ridiculous.

Yesterday, I was waiting for a letter from Max and adding the final details to my perfectly crafted toy drive plan.

Now, I'm scrambling to pick up the pieces of a *failed* plan, hanging out with Drew *freaking* McKay, and worrying about a lost cat that doesn't even belong to me.

How, exactly, did Mrs. Greenly expect me to get the wrapping paper out of the garage *without* letting the cat out? It's not like cats have a solid track record of sitting and staying. At least not any cats I know.

It takes a few more trips, but soon, I have everything loaded and ready to go, so I turn toward the side yard where Drew went in search of the cat. Hopefully, he's already found her and is on his way back to the garage by now.

Everything about the Greenlys' property is enormous. The house. The garage. The football field of live oak trees stretching out in front of me. I step onto the grass and peer forward, but it's hard to see much of anything in the dark.

I move toward the closest tree and pull out my phone to use as a flashlight, aiming it upward into the branches.

No cat, so I move to the next tree.

"Drew?" I whisper into the stillness. "Where are you?"

I don't hear Drew, but I do hear a *meow*. I walk toward the sound, my steps slow and steady. "Here, kitty, kitty, kitty," I call softly. I approach another oak tree, this one twice as big as

the last with a trunk as wide as my car, and tiptoe around it, my eyes on the branches overhead.

“Oof!” I bump into something solid, nearly falling backward onto my butt, but then arms snake around my waist, keeping me upright. My hands fly forward, dropping my phone before colliding with the very warm, very solid expanse of Drew’s chest.

I swallow and take a steadying breath. He smells good. *So good.* Manly and clean. Like fresh linen and Christmas trees. I love anything that smells like Christmas trees. I lean forward, immediately loving the feel of his arms around me and hating that I don’t have enough self-control to step away anyway.

Even if I understand his reasons for only wanting to be friends, I do have *some* pride.

Drew’s arms tighten around my waist. “Are you okay?” he asks, his voice low.

“Yeah. I’m—” My hands slide down his chest, and his muscles twitch under my touch. I lift my gaze to his face. Moonlight glints off his features, catching in his eyes and highlighting the freckles across his cheekbones and the stubble lining his jaw.

I take a steadying breath.

There’s definitely been something magical about building a relationship with Max, responding to his letters, getting to know him in such an organic, simple way. And the air of mystery around him has kept things interesting and exciting.

But this is exciting in a different way. There's nothing mysterious about the strength of Drew's arms or the way it feels to have him look at me so intently. And there's no mistaking how much I like it.

My eyes rove over his face. If I were to lean up the tiniest bit, I could press my lips to the smooth stretch of skin just below his ear.

Drew leans forward, and for a half-second, I think he wants me too.

Would I truly kiss him?

The last time we were together, we talked about being friends. *Just friends*. But it's hard to remember what all the reasons were when he's looking at me like this.

"You smell like Christmas," I hear myself say. "I love Christmas."

Heat flashes in Drew's eyes, and he tilts his head so his nose brushes against mine. He pauses, his lips hovering centimeters from my mouth, and I know he's asking permission. If I want this, it will be me that closes the distance between us.

I almost do it.

But...*no*. I can't do this. My body might want to, but I just asked Max if he wants to meet in person. I can't show up just to let him know I started dating someone else and wanted to meet so I could let him down easy.

I have to see this through. I have to give Max a chance.

My hands fall from Drew's body, and I take a step backward, out of the circle of his arms.

Drew doesn't resist, immediately giving me the space I ask for.

"Drew, I'm seeing someone," I say.

His eyebrows lift, but otherwise, he doesn't respond.

"Or, not *really* seeing someone. We're just talking, and it's still new," I continue. "Really new. But I still want to see where it goes. And knowing that, it feels weird to let anything happen between us."

He pushes his hands into his pockets. "So you're saying I really screwed up when I didn't call you, and now I've lost my chance?"

My heart stretches at his words, even as I smile, loving that he's still willing to be a good sport about it. "I'm saying your timing isn't great. And I hope we can be friends anyway."

He's silent for a beat before he nods. "Friends would be good."

We stand there, our gazes locked for what feels like an eternity before Drew asks, "Hey Tess, how do you feel about olives on your pizza?"

It takes me a minute to process his question. "What?"

"Olives," he repeats. "Do you like them?"

I shake my head. "Olives are the worst. Why?"

He smiles, the dimple in his left cheek popping in a way that sends a rush of traitorous butterflies through my belly. “No reason. I think I’m just hungry.”

A meow sounds at our feet, and I look down to see the Greenlys’ cat weaving her way between our legs. “Well, hello,” I say, bending down and scooping her up. “Nice of you to make an appearance.”

I walk back toward the garage, the cat purring happily in my arms. “Why don’t you close me in,” I say to Drew, “and then I’ll let myself out the side door.”

“Do you remember the code?”

“No, but it’s on my phone.” I look down at the cat. “Which is in my back pocket?”

“Are you asking me to pull your phone out of your pocket?” Drew asks, his eyes glinting in the moonlight.

“Yes? Is that weird? I’m afraid if I move, we’ll lose the cat again.”

“I’m willing, I just wanted to make sure. If I’m touching your butt, it’s going to be consensual.”

I laugh and roll my eyes. “*Friends*, Drew.”

“You don’t touch your friends’ butts?” He smirks as he slips his arm around me, leaning close enough for his nose to brush against my neck, his soft breath sending a wave of goosebumps over my skin. “Got it,” he whispers huskily.

Oh, he is not making this easy on me.

Drew holds my phone up to my face so facial recognition can unlock it, then finds the code Mrs. Greenly sent in her text. I carry the cat back into the garage, then wait while Drew uses the code to close me in.

As I make my way back to the truck, my brain cycles through the last five minutes. Drew's arms around me. Our *almost* kiss. The way his nose brushed against my neck when he reached for my phone.

Drew doesn't strike me as a player. He didn't call me because he didn't see a relationship between us going anywhere. That's not typical behavior from a guy just looking for a good time.

So does that mean Drew just changed his mind? It's a good thing if he did because he was definitely wrong from the start, but talk about crappy timing.

I liked him, and he wasn't interested, now he *is* interested, and I like someone else.

The trouble is, I can't pretend like I don't also like Drew. And that's a very disquieting thought. Especially when I think about Max.

When we make it back to the pavilion, Chloe has Christmas music playing, and one picnic table is already covered with wrapped gifts.

"Excellent timing," Chloe says as she meets us in the parking lot. "We're out of wrapping paper, and we're also starving."

“This disgusting one is for you,” I say to Chloe, sliding the top box off the stack Drew has pulled out of the truck.

“Olives?” Drew asks.

“She eats them like they’re grapes,” I say. “It’s totally disgusting.”

Drew holds my gaze for a beat, his smile wide. “That *is* disgusting.”

“I heard that,” Chloe says through her first bite of pizza.

As the night progresses, I try to keep my distance from Drew, mostly to preserve my own sanity, but also to keep myself from giving him the wrong impression. But keeping my distance is much easier said than done.

Every time I look up, he’s there, making eye contact. When he passes behind me to get more wrapping paper, he brushes his hand over my shoulder. When we’re wrapping presents side by side, he talks to me more than he talks to anyone else.

Somehow, he’s always in my orbit though that could be because I’m looking at him just as much as he’s looking at me. Whenever he moves, my eyes track to his new location, and I get the sense he’s doing the same thing. It’s like my body is tuned to him, like I’m some sort of shortwave radio, picking up his signal whether I want it or not.

Which I don’t.

Or at least I *shouldn’t*.

So why is my body reacting like he's the sun and I'm a freaking sunflower?

The only thought that brings me comfort is that after tomorrow, I'll be able to focus on Max because I definitely don't have plans to see Drew again.

Across the table, Drew laughs at something Deacon says, his smile stretching wide across his very handsome face.

Those two have been buddy-buddy all night which is exactly what I need. For Drew to become Deacon's new best friend. Sure! Why shouldn't my best friend's husband who happens to be the brother of my ex *also* be good friends with my temporary and probably unrequited crush?

I breathe out a sigh and force my attention back to the Barbie doll I'm wrapping in bright green paper.

I think about Max and the connection we've formed. I hope it's more than just smoke and mirrors, that I'm not giving up something real and tangible and right in front of me for something that only exists on paper.

I don't *think* that's what's happening. But every time Drew looks my way, my certainty wanes a tiny bit more.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Tess

“HE’S SO GREAT,” DEACON says to me and Chloe as we’re loading the last of the wrapped presents into the back of my car. “He’s coming with me to the hockey game tomorrow night. And I invited him to the barbecue next weekend, which probably I should have asked you about that, Chlo. But he’s just so easy to talk to. I don’t think you’ll mind having him around.”

“Look at you and your cute little bromance,” Chloe says, patting Deacon on the arm. She shifts her attention to me. “So what was happening with you and Drew tonight? I was sensing some crazy energy between you two.”

I shrug, feigning an indifference I definitely don’t feel. “It was nothing. We’re just friends.”

“Yeah, he was *not* watching you like he only wants to be your friend. What did you do to change his mind?”

“Nothing,” I say a little too quickly, and Chloe’s eyebrows shoot up. “As far as I know, he hasn’t changed his mind,” I say

in a more neutral tone, even as I force the thought of my *almost* kiss with Drew out of my mind. “Besides, it doesn’t matter even if he has because I’m not interested. Not now.” I drop the last armful of presents into my car, then prop my hands on my hips. “Not when I just asked Max to meet me in person.”

Chloe’s jaw drops. “You did what? When? Has he responded?”

“Not yet, but it’s only been a couple of days since I sent it. I’m sure he will soon.”

My reassurance doesn’t do anything to improve Chloe’s doubtful expression, and I drop my hands on her shoulders, turning her to face me. “Please trust me, Chlo. I know it sounds crazy, but I really do have a good feeling about him. If it will make you feel better, I’ll make sure our meeting place is somewhere public. You can even come too if you want.”

“I do want,” she says. “Me and Deacon both should be there.”

“Count me in,” Deacon says. “I’m happy to play the role of scary older brother whenever you need me.”

I’ve never had an older brother, and Deacon’s willingness to watch out for me makes my heart squeeze. When I was in Paris, I worried I’d come home and have to see Chloe on the sly, sneaking around her husband and the rest of his family. But this is so much better. Especially now that Preston and I have made our peace, eliminating any lingering awkwardness between us.

Chloe leans up and kisses him on the cheek. “Good man.”

“In the meantime,” Deacon says, “how do we feel about going out for a drink? I think we deserve one after how hard we’ve worked tonight.”

“How hard *you* worked?” Chloe says. “You wrapped half as many presents as the rest of us. Also, I’d rather have a milkshake than watch you guys drink.”

“I second milkshakes,” I say.

Deacon holds up his finger. “I got a paper cut. Those things hurt.”

“Want me to call Drew over?” Chloe jokes.

“He already gave me a band-aid. But we *should* ask him to come with us. Hey Drew!” he calls across the mostly empty pavilion.

Drew is on the opposite end, bagging up the last of the trash, and he holds up a hand in response, motioning toward the dumpster where I assume he’ll drop the trash before coming over.

My stomach pitches at the thought of him coming with us. With just the four of us, it’s going to feel like a double date. Which is the exact opposite of what I need if I have any hope of quelling my growing crush.

Chloe uses the back of her hand to smack Deacon in the chest. “Don’t you think we should ask *Tess* if she’s good with Drew coming?”

“Oh. Right,” Deacon says. “Sorry, Tess. Are you okay if I invite him?”

I shrug like it’s no big deal, mostly because if I say that Deacon can’t invite him, then I’m acknowledging that it *is* a big deal, and that will make it even *more* of a big deal because then Chloe will know. “Totally fine with me. We’re friends. Friends can get milkshakes together. But we should invite Ben, too,” I add, thinking that will kill any double date energy. “I think they rode here together.”

Turns out, Ben *can’t* come, so Drew agrees to drive him back to the EMS station, then meet us at *Scoop*, an ice cream place Chloe and I have loved since we were kids.

I ride over with Deacon and Chloe, who thankfully doesn’t ask a single follow-up question about my “we’re just friends” declaration. Which is good because I can’t explain how I’m feeling about Drew to *her* if I haven’t even figured it out myself.



“Okay,” Deacon says, clapping his hands. “This or That. Lightning Round. Let’s do it.”

I push my empty milkshake glass to the center of the worn Formica tabletop at *Scoop*.

“No way,” I say, glancing at Drew, who is sitting next to me. “Drew and I hardly know each other.”

Unsurprisingly, it's been perfectly comfortable having Drew hang out with us like this—he fits right in. He is also charming and attentive and a great conversationalist. He's interesting too, full of random information that keeps the conversation moving. But he's somehow still humble about it. He never seems like he's trying to look smart or talking just to hear himself talk. It's more like he just really likes talking to people.

I genuinely like having him around—something that's getting harder and harder to ignore. If I want to play this thing out with Max—and I do—I cannot keep hanging out with Drew. He's making it way too hard.

Chloe rolls her eyes. “That only matters if you plan on changing your answers to match his. Which is cheating.”

I scoff but can't truly object. “It isn't cheating. It's just... intentionally changing my mind at opportune times.”

Drew holds up his hands. “I'm totally lost.”

“Here's how the game works,” Chloe explains. “There are two teams. For this game, it will be me and Deacon against you and Tess. We'll take turns asking each other this or that questions. You want your answers to be the same. If they are, you get a point. But you have to answer truthfully. So if you're the one asking the question, you want to try and pick something that you know your opponents are more likely to disagree on. Because then their answers won't agree, and they won't get a point. Make sense?”

“So really, that puts us at an advantage,” Drew says, looking at me. “Because you know Chloe and Deacon well enough to ask questions you know they’ll disagree on. But they don’t know me well enough to do the same.”

“I like the way you think,” I say.

“Tess only thought it was a disadvantage because she’s been known to change her answers just to win,” Deacon says.

I smirk. “Maybe my favorite foods just change every day. You can’t really know if I’m cheating or not.”

Deacon and Chloe exchange a look, then face Drew. “She totally cheats,” they both say, perfectly in sync.

“Whatever. I’m not the only one who does it. Your brother cheats all the time, Deac. And it still takes skill to guess what your partner is going to answer. It just makes the game fun for a different reason.”

“Come on.” Chloe calls us all to order. “Let’s just play. This time, as honestly as possible.” She scrunches her brow, looking from me to Drew, then back to me again. “Cornhole or horseshoes?”

“Cornhole,” we both say, responding at the same time. We share a look, and Drew’s grin makes my heart squeeze.

“One point for us,” I add. I look from Chloe to Deacon. Stumping them is too easy. “Sushi or Italian.”

Chloe rolls her eyes. “No more food questions from you. You know us too well.”

“Who likes what?” Drew asks me, leaning close enough that his breath tickles my neck.

“Chloe loves sushi,” I say. “Deacon hates it.”

He nods like he’s filing this information away. “How do *you* feel about sushi?”

I lean into him. Because I can’t help it. Because it literally feels like there’s a magnet pulling me toward him. “I love it. You?”

“Definitely. Seafood?”

“All kinds. Scallops are my favorite.”

He smiles. “Mine, too.” The intensity of Drew’s gaze shifts my already heightened sense of awareness into hyperdrive. His every move, his every breath, I see it all. Feel it all.

“Hey. No collaborating over there,” Chloe says from across the table, and Drew lifts his lips into a lopsided smile before *winking* at me. Normally, I might find winking cheesy or even annoying, but Drew totally pulls it off.

“Mountains or beach?” Deacon asks, forcing us to turn and face him.

“Beach,” we answer, in complete unison for the second time in a row.

“We’re toast, Chlo,” Deacon says, though his grin says he doesn’t mind too much.

The questions bounce back and forth across the table for several more rounds.

Yahtzee or Connect Four?

Poker or Monopoly?

Sleep in or wake early?

Dogs or cats?

Sailing or surfing?

At this question, Drew's eyes dart to mine, emotion flashing behind them. He can only be thinking of his parents. I reach under the table and squeeze his knee, and together we both say, "Surfing."

The game finally ends when Deacon and Chloe can't stop arguing about Chloe's insistence that she would rather take a walk than take a nap. "You're crazy," I say, siding with Deacon. "I can't even count the number of places we found you asleep when we were kids," I say. "In the car. In Sunday school. And you never made it through a movie without falling asleep."

Chloe pouts. "Fine. But I *aspire* to like talking walks, so I feel like that should count."

Behind us, the bell above the door chimes, and a couple walks in. My eyes catch on the woman and a knot of tension forms in my gut. I haven't seen Daisy Mae Calhoun in person in over a year, but there's no mistaking her. What are the odds that Drew's ex would show up here? But then, that's the way the universe seems to be working lately. I'm randomly running into Drew everywhere, so why wouldn't his ex show up here?

The ice cream shop is mostly empty, so Daisy's eyes immediately find us. I know the exact moment she realizes Drew is here. Her gaze narrows, then she stands a little taller, pushing her boobs out as she bites her bottom lip.

Oh no she will not. Who does she think she is? She's even with a date, or at least it looks like a date, and she's still going to act like that?

I do my best to tamp down the jealousy I should *not* be feeling as Daisy approaches our table.

“Drew!” she says as she reaches the side of our table. Daisy looks at the rest of us. She doesn't know Chloe as well as she knows me, but she definitely knows Deacon. He's a Vanderhorst. When Chloe took him off the market, women across Charleston cried real, actual tears. “How fun running into you. Talk about worlds colliding. How do you know Deacon and Tess?”

She slips a hand across Drew's shoulder, her fingers lingering with a familiarity that makes me want to punch her perfectly polished face.

Drew immediately leans away, glancing at me before saying, “That's kind of a long story. But we all did some volunteer work together tonight, so...”

Daisy's eyes narrow, zeroing in on me. “Wait a minute,” she says. “Last time I was at the club, I heard rumors that you were dating again, Tess. Your mother said he was a paramedic, but it didn't even occur to me that it might be Drew.” She gives Drew a knowing look. “Guess you have a *type*, huh?”

Oh man. I could not have seen this coming, but then, I *was* the one who told my mother I was dating a paramedic. I'm about to protest, but then Drew wraps an arm around me, tucking me against his side.

"I wouldn't say I have a type," he says, lifting an eyebrow toward Daisy. "You don't seem *anything* like Tess to me."

Daisy frowns, and the guy behind her reaches for her hand like he's trying to tug her away from the table, but she swats him away like he's a horse fly instead of her date. If he even *is* her date.

I slide my hand up to the back of Drew's neck and tangle my fingers in his hair. I'm being so obnoxious. *Completely obnoxious.* But Daisy was rude and dismissive and condescending, and she hurt Drew when he really didn't deserve it. If I can make him look good right now, I'm going to do it.

"It's still new," I say, looking at Drew like he's the cherry on top of an ice cream sundae. "But you know how it is in the beginning. It's just so hard to keep our hands off each other."

Across the table, Chloe snorts and Deacon turns a laugh into a cough.

"That's so sweet," Daisy says, and her expression turns cunning. "It must be so nice after everything fell apart with Preston. How's he doing, Deacon? It can't be easy to literally be left at the altar."

Man, I hate mean girls.

“Easier than marrying the wrong person,” Deacon smoothly says. He looks at me and winks, making it clear that’s a judgment on my relationship with Preston, not on me. But the truth doesn’t offend me. Even if it took me a while to realize it, Preston and I were wrong for each other from the start.

Daisy rolls her eyes like she was hoping for a bigger reaction, but the guy behind her looks like he’s running out of patience. “Daisy, come on,” he finally says. “Leave them alone.”

Yes, please, Daisy. Leave us alone.

Under the table, Drew slips a hand to my knee, giving it a reassuring squeeze, then he leans down, his mouth close to my ear. “So we’re dating now, huh?”

He leans back, and we make eye contact, his gaze sparkling with mischief.

Warmth spreads from my chest up to my neck, and I breathe deep, filling my lungs with Drew-scented air. It’s the second time I’ve been this close to him tonight, and it’s getting harder and harder to remember why I shouldn’t be with Drew.

“I’ll explain in a minute,” I whisper, tilting my head toward Daisy. The man with her has already moved up to the counter, but she’s still watching us.

“Right well, it was nice seeing y’all,” she finally says, clearly annoyed that we’re no longer looking at her. But I couldn’t tear my eyes off of Drew right now if I wanted to.

Harry Styles could walk in to get an ice cream cone, and I wouldn't even care.

We keep the conversation surface level until Daisy and her date have gotten their orders. Luckily, they don't stay, and soon we're the only people inside *Scoop's* small interior.

"Ummm, what was that?" Chloe asks when the door closes behind Daisy.

"Yeah, Tess," Drew says playfully. "What was that?"

I bite my lip and sigh. There is no explanation that will work here except the truth. "So...it's possible that right after we met, I told my mother we hit it off after you rescued me and... then we started to date. But it was only to keep from having to go out with Johnny Stager, and if you knew Johnny, you would totally understand my desperation on that front."

"I'll second that," Chloe says. "Johnny really is terrible."

"Thank you for covering for me," I say to Drew. "You didn't have to, and I really appreciate it."

He grins. "Are you kidding? And miss out on an opportunity to show my ex I'm perfectly fine without her? Trust me. I didn't mind." He shoots me a smoldering look, his blue eyes intense and focused. "It was nice to realize how much I don't care anymore."

Oh. Oh my. This man could do some serious damage looking at women like that. Looking at *me*.

"Work," I blurt, and Drew frowns.

“Work?” he repeats.

“We should talk about work,” I say, scooting my chair back as far as possible without actually leaving the table. “How’s work for you, Chlo?”

She eyes me like I’ve completely lost my mind, which, maybe I have. But I had to do something to stop whatever was happening with Drew, and work was the first topic that popped into my mind. “It’s good,” she finally answers. “We delivered a set of identical triplets the other day. That was cool.”

“No way,” Drew says. “I gave a woman who was pregnant with triplets a ride to the hospital this week. I bet it was the same person.”

This is good. Triplets! Work! *Anything* is better than talking about—

“Tess, I don’t think you ever told me what you do for work,” Drew says.

My shoulders slump. I take it back. Anything is not better. *This* definitely isn’t.

“Um, I’m actually in between jobs right now,” I say slowly. Which is true. But how spoiled can I be? Who has the privilege to just float around doing nothing for months at a time? It sounds like something Daisy would do, and that is not a comparison I want Drew to make.

“She’s starting school in January,” Chloe says. “Business school. And one day she’s going to open a yoga retreat center and it’s going to be *amazing*.”

I smile, touched by Chloe's confidence in me, but it's the warmth in Drew's voice that really sets me on fire. "That *does* sound amazing," he says. And it sounds like he really believes it.

"Thanks," I say, a blush flooding my cheeks. "It feels like it's still so far away. But I've got a job at a yoga studio that should help me learn the industry along with my classes. I'm excited about it."

"You should be excited," Drew says, holding my gaze like we're the only two people in the room. "It takes guts to be an entrepreneur. But I have a feeling you'll be really great at it."

Drew's phone buzzes from the table, and he ignores it, but then it buzzes again, and again, and again. He frowns, shaking his head the slightest bit, but then he catches sight of the screen. He immediately picks up the phone, leaning away from me and breaking whatever tension was crackling between us. "It's my grandmother," he says. He makes eye contact with me. "Tess, I'm so sorry. But I have to go."

I nod. "Of course. Go. I hope everything is okay."

"I think it is," Drew says, "But she says she isn't feeling well, and she lives by herself. I'll feel better if I check on her myself."

Drew quickly says goodbye to Chloe and Deacon, then looks at me one last time. "I had a really nice time tonight, Tess."

I nod, biting my lip. "Me too."

Chloe clears her throat as soon as Drew is gone. “Deacon, should we feel offended that Drew didn’t apologize to *us* for leaving?”

Deacon grins across the table. “That man has it bad, Tess. Whatever reason he had for not calling you, I think he got over it.”

“Definitely,” Chloe says. “He’s obviously into you.”

I lift my hands to my still-flushed cheeks, my eyes shifting from Chloe to Deacon, then back again. “He tried to kiss me tonight,” I say.

Chloe’s mouth drops open. “What? When?”

“When we went to get the wrapping paper. We didn’t though. I stopped him.”

“Why?” Deacon asks.

“Because of *Max*,” Chloe says to Deacon like the answer should have been obvious.

But how obvious could it be when I haven’t thought about Max once tonight?

But I *have* to think about Max. I can’t just throw away the connection we have, even for someone as intoxicating as Drew.

“Tess, it really is okay for you to choose Drew,” Chloe says.

I nod, knowing she’s right, but the thought leaves me feeling itchy and incomplete. If I don’t see this thing through with Max, the *not knowing* will kill me.

I owe it to both of us to meet him in person.

I just have to hope my heart will know what to do.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Drew

IT'S JUST PAST ELEVEN when I use my keys to let myself into Grandma Pearl's. I find her in the living room, sitting in her favorite chair, Roxie curled up at her feet. One of those Hallmark Christmas movies is playing on the television, but she doesn't look like she's paying it much attention. She's leaning back, her eyes closed, one hand resting on her chest.

I crouch down in front of her and softly nudge her shoulder, placing the small medical bag I keep in my truck at my feet. "Gran?"

She rouses quickly, blinking up at me through watery eyes. Her pupils look normal, and her focus is sharp, both encouraging signs. "Drew? What are you doing here?" she says. "What time is it?"

"After eleven," I say. "How are you feeling?"

She frowns. "Oh, bother. Fine enough that you didn't need to come all the way out here to check on me."

"You texted me four times," I say.

“And I told you I’ll go to my doctor tomorrow,” she says. “I was just a little dizzy, but I’m better now.” She looks around the room, then gives her head a tiny nod. “Much better. The room isn’t spinning at all.”

“When was the last time you ate, Gran?” I reach for my bag and pull out a blood pressure cuff. She frowns as I take her blood pressure, then spend a minute listening to her breath sounds. Her lungs sound good, but her blood pressure is a little higher than normal. Not too high, but high for her.

I pull out my glucometer to test her blood sugar and reach for her hand. We’ve been down this road before, so she doesn’t protest as I prick her finger and get a reading.

“I haven’t eaten since lunch,” Gran says, the knowing tone of her voice telling me she’s finally guessing, like I am, why she was dizzy earlier. Sure enough, her blood glucose level is dangerously low.

“Stay right here, all right? I’m going to get you a snack.”

Half an hour later, the color has returned to Grandma Pearl’s face, her insulin levels have stabilized, and she seems to be feeling much better. But I’m still uneasy. This isn’t the first time she’s forgotten to eat. It also isn’t the first time I’ve thought about moving home so I can keep a better eye on her. At eighty-seven, she’s pretty spry. But I don’t like that she spends so much time alone.

Gran wouldn’t like it though. It would irritate her to think she’s pulling me away from my own life. But that’s not how I’d

feel about it at all. She's as big a part of my life as anyone or anything else.

"I hope I didn't ruin your evening," Gran says. She takes a long sip of the lavender tea I brewed for her as soon as she finished her snack. She always has lavender tea before bed.

"Not at all," I say, thinking back on those final moments with Tess.

If I had any doubts about my pen pal's identity before, those doubts are long gone now. Tess's job and her plans to start business school in January were more than enough confirmation.

When Tess first told me she was the one answering the Santa letters, my brain searched for every possible explanation. Someone else found *my* letter before Tess was given the rest of the letters. My letter was never even with the other letters. It was just buried in a drawer somewhere or in the corner of someone's attic. My letter went to some other organization that answers letters to Santa and never had anything to do with Tess.

But too many pieces fit together. And the longer we were together tonight, the more confident I felt. But the school thing, that was the final piece I needed to know for sure.

It's her. It was all I could not to lean forward and kiss her the second the words were out of her mouth.

"Goodness, Drew. You better tell me what's making you smile like that," Grandma Pearl says.

I run a hand across my jaw, wiping off the smile I didn't even realize had taken over my face. But why shouldn't I tell Gran

what's happening? If there's anyone who will appreciate the story, it's her. "Are you too tired for a story?"

"Is there kissing?" she asks. "I like kissing stories the most."

I chuckle. "No kissing yet. But I hope there will be soon."

I tell her everything. How I met Tess. Then ran into her on the beach, then again at the toy drive tonight. Then I list out the reasons why I believe Tess and my Christmas pen pal are the same person. I even mention running into Daisy Mae at the ice cream shop and how much it *didn't* impact me to see her. It was unnerving at first, but then I realized how little power she holds over me now.

The only thing I don't reveal to Grandma Pearl is my reason for *not* calling Tess when we first met. But she knows me too well, and she pieces the details together anyway. "You say Tess is a Ravenel?" she asks. "Is her father James Ravenel?"

"I don't know. I know he's an attorney though."

She nods. "Probably James, then."

"You know him?"

"Not really. But I know *of* him. His wife is very involved in the Southern Society, and Shelby has mentioned them both a time or two." Gran levels me with a discerning stare. "Is that why you didn't call her at first? You thought she would be just like Daisy?"

"At first, yeah. But Tess is different."

She nods and smiles, her eyes sparkling with an enthusiasm that makes her seem much younger. "It really is like *You've Got*

Mail.” She reaches over and pats my arm. “You make a marvelous Tom Hanks.”

I grin. “You called it, Gran. I shouldn’t have been so dismissive.”

“You’re right about that. You shouldn’t have been,” she says, but then her expression turns thoughtful. “Does Tess know that it’s you? That you and Max are the same person?”

I shake my head no. “I don’t think so. At least not that she’s let on.”

Grandma Pearl nods. “But you think she’ll be happy when she finds out?”

The question gives me pause. Based on our interactions tonight, I’d like to think Tess would be happy, but I can’t truly know for sure.

“Listen to me, Drew,” Gran says. “I believe you when you say that Tess is different. And it sounds like fate worked double time to make sure the two of you found each other, bringing you together both through your work *and* the letters. But you need to be aware, honey. There will be some bumps in the road. She’s a Ravenel. Her family will have expectations, and they might not believe you’re capable of providing what they believe their daughter deserves. Not unless you decide to toss around a little of that money you’re sitting on.”

I think back to Tess’s letters and the way she talked about wanting to provide for herself instead of relying on a spouse. I respect her desire to make her own way in the world, but I also understand what Grandma Pearl is saying. I experienced enough

judgment from Daisy's family that it isn't hard to imagine. But the hardest part about Daisy's family was that she never seemed to care when they were hard on me. It always felt like *me* against them instead of *us* against them.

Will it be the same way with Tess?

The question isn't reason enough not to see Tess again. But that doesn't mean I shouldn't be cautious. Trust fund aside, we *do* come from different worlds. And her family's expectations will be different than mine.

It's funny though. When Daisy was critical of my job or my lifestyle or my modest apartment, it only made me dig my heels in more. I could have "impressed" her. Mentioned my investment portfolio, spent money on her, taken her to fancy restaurants. But I didn't want to. I wanted her to accept me for who I was choosing to be regardless of my bank account balance. I wanted to be enough as I was.

But even though my relationship—can I even call it a relationship yet?—with Tess is new, it already feels different. There's an authenticity to her that was missing with Daisy, and it makes me feel confident that she already *does* accept me as I am. That makes me *want* to spend money on her. Do whatever it takes to impress her family. To win them over.

"I get it," I say to Grandma Pearl. "And I'll keep that in mind."

She holds my gaze for a long moment. "And you'll consider using the money to better your life and the lives of people you love?"

I'm not ready to call it love just yet, but the certainty settling into my soul tells me the potential is there. "I'll consider it," I say, making Gran smile.

"Well that's good," she says. "Because you've been incredibly prideful about your humility. There's nothing wrong with having money, Drew. It's how you use it that matters." She lifts her hand and taps it against her chest. "It's what's in here."

I lean forward and prop my elbows on my knees, my head resting in my hands. "Logically, I know that," I say. "But sometimes it still feels like...I don't know. Like blood money." I've talked to Grandma Pearl about my feelings dozens of times. But I've never spoken so plainly.

She frowns. "Blood money? What does that even mean?"

I shrug. "It's the money that killed them, isn't it?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about, Drew. You better explain this instant so I can scold you and tell you how wrong you are."

I drop back onto the sofa, suddenly feeling incredibly tired. This whole conversation has caught me off guard, but something in my gut urges me on—some need to finally own my darkest thoughts out loud.

"They died *sailing*, Gran. *Sailing*. Why did they need a sailboat? Why did they suddenly need to learn if not to impress all their new friends at the sailing club? Our life was fine before they made all that money. We were happy doing normal stuff on the weekends. Going to the beach. Paddle boarding. Catching crabs. Fishing off the pier. But then everything changed when

Dad sold his business. The little stuff didn't matter anymore. They were too busy hobnobbing with important people and shopping for boats.”

Grandma Pearl is silent for a long moment before she finally speaks. “I don't know if I ever thought about what it must have looked like to you. The way your life changed so quickly. I think I just assumed you'd be excited to have so much *more*.”

“We got more stuff, sure. But way less time with our parents.”

Her expression saddens. “I do remember noticing that. And it's probably true that your parents got a little too caught up in the whirlwind of suddenly having so much wealth. But you're wrong if you want to blame their deaths on the money. Your mother always wanted to learn to sail. Since she was a tiny thing. We never had the means for her to learn when she was growing up, so buying that boat with your father was a dream come true for her.”

My thoughts slide to a screeching halt, like a train thrown off the rails. “But she wouldn't have—”

“She *would have*,” Grandma Pearl says, cutting me off. “Drew, they'd been saving for years. I remember the phone conversation when she called and told me they finally had enough for a down payment and had started shopping for boats. And that was months before the sale on your dad's company went through. It was an accident, Drew. And a terrible one. But it didn't have anything to do with them assuming a new lifestyle or pretending to be something they weren't. They earned their money through hard work and discipline. Your father was very

good at what he did. And he wouldn't want you to limit yourself just to spite his wealth because you think it's what killed him."

I shake my head, trying to make sense of what Grandma Pearl is telling me. She's rewriting my history in real time, and I don't know how to handle it.

"Blame the ocean. Blame that blasted sailboat. Blame the weather." Her voice drops, her tone turning steely. "But don't blame your parents, and don't blame their money. Especially don't blame rich people. If you make judgments against people who have money, you're no better than the ones who judge people who don't have any. Be better than that."

I nod, sensing that I needed this kind of straight talk, even if I didn't realize it. Because Gran's probably right about Tess's family and I'll do better if I go into this relationship with my eyes open, without any ill-conceived biases.

"I'm trying, Gran. I really am."

"I can see that. And I'm proud of you for it." She smiles, reaching over and patting my arm with her worn, wrinkled hand. "Now. Let's talk about your plan."

"My plan?"

"Drew, you can't just *tell* Tess who you are. Remember, you did start your relationship with a rejection. If you don't want to risk her handing one right back to you, you have to do this the right way. You have to make sure that, in Tess's mind, knowing Drew and Max are the same person is a good thing."

"How am I supposed to do that?" I ask.

“How did Tom Hanks do it?”

I think back through what I remember of the movie. “He worked hard to win over Meg Ryan’s character. But Gran, I already apologized to Tess. I really think things are fine between us.”

Gran lifts an eyebrow. “Not fine enough for her to choose you over a mystery man she’s never met before.”

Oof. Points to Grandma Pearl for hitting me where it hurts.

“Okay. Fair point. So I need to make sure Tess knows *Drew* is a catch.”

She nods. “And then?”

“And then? That won’t be enough?”

She sighs like I’m twelve years old and arguing for a later bedtime. “Have you learned nothing from all the movies we’ve watched together?”

I frown, my brow furrowing, then understanding dawns. “I need a grand gesture.”

Her eyes twinkle as she folds her hands in her lap. “Exactly. And I have a marvelous idea.”



I wind up staying at Grandma Pearl’s house overnight. I tell her it’s because I’m too tired to drive home, which is partly true. But mostly I just don’t feel comfortable leaving her alone.

The next morning, I'm supposed to meet Ben at the fire station for the second day of Tess's toy drive, but Gran's blood pressure is still a little low, so I call him and let him know I'll be getting there late if I even get there at all so I can take her to see a doctor. It's Saturday, so we'll have to go to an urgent care, but I'd rather do that than assume she's fine when, at eighty-seven years old, *not fine* can turn into something deadly really fast.

While we're waiting for the doctor, I pull out my phone and send a message to Tess. It's the first time I've used it since she programmed it into my phone and my hands tremble the slightest bit as I do.

Drew: Hey, it's Drew. I'm still with my grandmother (she's okay...but we're at the doctor just to make sure) so I won't be at the toy drive this morning. Ben found someone to fill in for me, so you'll still have all the volunteers you need. I was blown away by what you pulled off yesterday, and I'm sure today is going to be just as great. You've got this.

I end the message with a couple of strong arm emojis then show the whole thing to Gran before I send.

“What do you think?” I ask.

She reads over the message, then nods. “Add a heart,” she says.

“A heart? You don't think that's too forward?”

“The stakes are high, Drew,” she argues. “Throw caution to the wind!”

I’m all for throwing caution to the wind, but I’m not about to send a red heart to someone who straight-up told me she was talking to someone else, even if I think that *someone else* might be me.

Tess doesn’t know Max is me, and I don’t want to look like a jerk. But I do want to include something that hints at possible feelings. I finally channel Taylor Swift and her *Fearless* era and include a heart-hands emoji.

Tess’s response comes through almost immediately.

Tess: So glad your grandmother is okay. And thanks for the encouragement!

Well. It’s not nothing. But it didn’t really create an opportunity for me to text back. This whole *win Tess over* plan might be harder than I thought.

Moments later, a nurse appears in the waiting room of urgent care and calls Gran’s name, so I slip my phone into my pocket and focus my full attention on her.

It’s almost two o’clock by the time we make it back to the house and I have Gran fully settled. She’s got a clean bill of health, though the doctor did recommend she follow up with her cardiologist next week about the low blood pressure. In the

meantime, she's supposed to stay hydrated and fed and get plenty of rest.

I leave her with a counter full of snacks, a filled water bottle next to her living room chair, and a full pot of tea on the back of the stove. And strict instructions to call me the moment she feels even the slightest bit faint.

I'll check on her tonight anyway, but there's still an hour of the toy drive left, and I'd love to drop by and see Tess.

When I pull into the fire station parking lot and climb out of my truck, my eyes are immediately drawn to her. I stand there for a few minutes, at the edge of all the activity, and just watch. She's obviously in her element. Coordinating, talking to kids, making everyone feel comfortable. She'll be amazing when she opens her own business. Everyone she talks to walks away smiling.

On the other side of the parking lot, Ben and Chelsea, another paramedic from our station, are leading a group of kids around the ambulance. I make eye contact with Ben, and he lifts his head in acknowledgment.

"Drew!" a voice calls from behind me, and I turn to see Chloe hurrying toward me, Deacon right behind her. "Hi. So glad you're here," she says. Her voice drops as she levels me with a look. "We need to talk."

I lift my eyebrows. "We do?"

"Yep. Right now." She hooks a hand around my arm and tugs me toward a fire truck parked at the edge of the parking lot. I glance at Deacon over my shoulder, who is following behind us,

but he only shrugs, his expression saying he's not about to stop his wife.

She finally lets me go once we've rounded the fire truck and we're completely hidden from the rest of the toy drive. Completely hidden from *Tess*.

"What is this?" I say, looking from Chloe to Deacon.

"We have something to tell you," Chloe says. "Well, something to ask you, really." Her eyes dart to Deacon, who nods, his expression encouraging. "Drew, do you know who your Christmas pen pal is?"

I frown. They know I have a pen pal? "How do you..." I run a hand across my face. "You know that I'm..."

"Andrew Maxwell McKay," Deacon says. "Max."

I narrow my eyes. How could they possibly have figured it out?

Deacon holds out his phone, and I take it, my eyes quickly scanning what he's showing me. It's my parents' will, naming me as his sole beneficiary. "Probate records are public, man," he says. "It only took a little bit of digging."

My heart ticks up as I hand his phone back. If *they* know, does that mean...

"Does Tess know?" I ask.

"So you *do* know you've been writing Tess," Chloe says, her voice relieved.

"I didn't at first," I say. "I figured it out last night. I didn't think she'd figured it out though."

“She hasn’t,” Chloe says. “Only we did. And we haven’t told her yet because we wanted to talk to you first.”

Deacon moves forward, leveling me with what I can only describe as a big-brother stare. “It feels like a stupid question based on how obviously into her you seemed last night, but you are glad it’s Tess, right?”

I breathe out a chuckle. “Yes. Definitely glad.”

“And all those reasons you gave for why you didn’t want to date her...” Chloe says.

“I’m over it,” I quickly say. “I was wrong. Tess is different. *So different*. I never should have assumed she’d be anything like Daisy.”

Chloe smiles, lifting her hands to her chest. “So you just need to tell her,” she says. “And quickly, Drew, because she really likes you, and it’s totally messing with her head to *also* really like Max. She needs to know you’re the same man.”

I nod, debating on the wisdom of pulling Chloe and Deacon into my plan. But there’s no way around it. If I want to surprise Tess with a movie-worthy grand gesture, I have to tell them. “Do you think she can wait until Christmas Eve?” I ask.

And then I tell them everything.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Tess

THERE IS NO LETTER from Max on Monday morning. Based on how quickly he's responded to me in the past, there should be, so the disappointment coursing through me as I walk back to my apartment is acute.

All this letter writing has been amazing, but pretending like it's 1803 and the only way to communicate is through actual freaking snail mail has me feeling particularly impatient.

I mean, *fine*. Letters are definitely romantic. But the waiting might actually kill me.

When I get back to my apartment, I call the post office to see if they've traded trucks for horses. Are we going back to the days of the Pony Express? Is that why I still haven't gotten a letter from Max?

Their answer is less than satisfactory. Christmas is in five days. There are more letters, more packages than usual. Everyone is busy, blah, blah, blah.

'Tis the freaking season, but I want my letter!

I drop onto my couch with a huff and reach for my phone, which I left on the coffee table while I went to check the mail.

I have two text messages from Drew, and my mood immediately lifts.

Drew: I responded to a call at a hot yoga studio this morning and it made me think of you. Is the yoga you do hot?

Drew: Just making sure you know I'm genuinely asking about temperatures and not giving you a very lame pickup line. 😊

I smile and drop my phone onto my lap. This isn't the first time we've texted over the past few days. He sent me a message after the toy drive to congratulate me and apologize again for not making it there himself and then texted again with a random question about the classes I'm starting in January.

We've been messaging back and forth ever since. Nothing too crazy or overwhelming. Just a handful of times every day. We've talked about Roxie, the chocolate lab I met on the beach, and commiserated over being only children with no siblings. He's asked me about the time I spent in Bali and Paris, and we've talked about other places we'd both like to travel.

He's easy to talk to over text, which doesn't surprise me because that's one of the things I liked about him right from the

start. But I can also tell he's trying really hard to keep our messages *friendly*.

Which is exactly what I want. Or...what I *think* I want?

I told him I was talking to someone else, and he's clearly respecting that boundary. The problem is, the fact that he *is* respecting that boundary only makes me like him more. Because it means he's a good man on top of being incredibly sexy and kind and handsome and good at his job.

I pick up my phone and respond to his message.

Tess: I've actually never tried hot yoga. But I want to.
I've heard it's killer.

Tess: Though, I hope not ACTUALLY killer? Was the person you responded to okay?

Drew: Totally fine. He was a little dehydrated, and he ended up passing out during class. But he'll make a full recovery.

Tess: That's good.

Tess: Is it hard when it doesn't work out that way?
When you respond to calls and people aren't okay?

Drew: Yeah. It is. Not as hard as it was at first.

Tess: I bet you've seen some crazy stuff.

Drew: You wouldn't believe the stories.

Drew: What are you up to today?

Tess: Absolutely nothing, and it's driving me nuts.

Drew: You just have to make it through the holidays. Then you'll be so busy, you won't be able to lay around and text me.

Tess: That sounds horrible, actually. I shouldn't complain.

Drew: Being busy? Or not texting me?

Tess: Are you flirting with me, Drew McKay?

Drew: Nope. Not unless you want me to be, and then my answer is YES, YES I AM.

I'm fully reclined on the couch now, my head propped on the armrest, and I drop my phone face down onto my chest, not even trying to contain my smile.

I *do* want Drew to be flirting. Is that terrible? I'm checking the mailbox every single day for my next letter from Max. Shouldn't I want *him* to be flirting instead?

Tess: What if I said I *possibly* want you to be flirting?

Drew: Tell me more.

Tess: There are just a few things that are...up in the
air?

Drew: The other guy you're talking to?

Tess: It's complicated. But hopefully I'll know more
in a week or so.

Drew: I understand complicated. Take your time. But if it matters, I'm here. And I'm still interested. I'll keep my flirting on standby until further notice.

Drew's last message carries me through Tuesday (no mail) and Wednesday (still no mail!) until I'm standing at my mailbox Thursday morning, waiting while my mailman ambles his way up the sidewalk whistling *Jingle Bells*.

He reaches the bank of mailboxes, shifting around to the back so he can unlock the entire thing and file in the mail.

It takes approximately twenty-seven years for him to finish, and I am ready to crawl out of my skin by the time he steps away. I lunge forward and unlock my box.

Finally.

The letter is thicker than normal, which sends a weird fluttering through me. Does that mean it's longer? Or maybe he included a photo?

That thought makes me pause. What if it *is* a photo? What if I'm about to learn that Max has a bad comb-over and likes to take selfies with his cat?

I scold myself for the judgmental thought because there are probably a lot of handsome men who are both balding *and* cat owners. Plus, that's the whole point of this letter exchange. I *like* Max. I feel a connection, even attraction, that doesn't have anything to do with his physical appearance.

I cling to that as I hurry back to my apartment, just barely keeping myself from tearing into the letter like some sort of crazed animal. By the time I'm sitting in my living room, letter on my lap, my hands are shaking like leaves in the wind.

I gently tear the seal and pull out a single sheet of stationery. When I unfold it, a second sheet of heavy cardstock falls onto my lap. It's not a photo of Max at all. It's a ticket to the Southern Society's Christmas Eve Gala. I quickly turn my attention to the letter.

Dear Christmas Pen Pal,

I'm sorry if this letter took a little longer than normal to reach you. I had a couple of personal matters that prevented me from writing as quickly as I normally do. All is well now, and I hope you can say the same. Is it weird to say I miss you? Even though I know I won't get a letter from you

until I mail this one and you've had time to respond, I still find myself hopeful every time I check the mail. That's how much your letters mean to me.

I wait for them, watch for them, look forward to them.

But that doesn't mean I haven't thought about what it might mean to text you and have you text me right back.

I'm so glad you suggested that we meet in person. I've been hoping for the same thing.

I've included a ticket to the Southern Society's Christmas Eve Gala. Are you aware of the organization? My grandmother loves to attend every year, and this year, she requested an extra ticket. I've included it for you in hopes that you'll meet me there.

I'll be on the balcony facing the ocean at seven o'clock. Please say yes?

I can't wait to see you.

Love,
Max

I have so many questions.

Max attends the Christmas Eve gala every year? Does that mean he's someone I know? Someone who is a member of the yacht club? If he is, then I probably *do* know him. Or I at least know of him. Still, there are definitely people who attend the gala who aren't members of the club *or* the Southern Society. It's a huge event, with ticket sales open to the public. It could just be a part of his grandmother's Christmas tradition.

I reread the letter, combing it for any additional clues. But there isn't anything else that hints at his identity.

I wasn't planning on attending the gala at all this year. My parents will be there, and I've generally been avoiding any social gatherings with them in attendance beyond our requisite dinners at the club.

But there's no way I'm missing the gala now.



Drew: What are you up to tonight? Plans with your family?

Tess: Sort of? I'm going to a very fancy party, and my parents will be there. But they aren't the reason I'm going.

Drew: You have other reasons?

Tess: I do. And I'm nervous, Drew.

Drew: Why?

Tess: I'm meeting someone in person for the first time. The someone I told you about. The one I've been talking to.

Drew: You've never met him in person?

Tess: No. Is it weird that I'm telling you this? Sorry if it's weird.

Drew: I don't mind you telling me. You can tell me anything.

Tess: I just...what if he doesn't like me in person? What if we don't connect? What if he thinks I look like a troll?

Drew: Tess. There is no man on the planet who could ever think you look like a troll, so stop worrying about that. I'm sure everything will be fine.

Drew: Though...have you thought about what you'll do if HE looks like a troll?

Tess: Trust me. The thought has crossed my mind.

Drew: Are you meeting him somewhere safe? Just in case?

Tess: Yes. And Deacon and Chloe will be there, though I'm not really worried. His letters have me convinced he's a good guy.

Drew: Letters? That sounds romantic.

Tess: It has been. But...

Drew: But?

Tess: I'm...conflicted.

Drew: Tell me why.

Tess: Because when YOU texted me tonight, I felt... whole. Happy. I feel that way whenever you text. That has to mean something, right?

Drew: I feel that way too. But see this thing through, Tess. I have a feeling everything is going to work out. No matter what, I'm here.

It took a little bit of Christmas magic to find a dress on such short notice, but with Chloe's help, I'm standing on the yacht

club's back patio ten minutes before seven in a perfect red dress, killer heels, and the jewelry I wore on my wedding day. Or my not-so-wedding day? The earrings and matching bracelet were a gift from my grandmother, and I'm so happy to have a new reason to wear them. Hopefully, the night will turn into a new reason to love them.

The yacht club is decked out in all its Christmas finery, and it couldn't look more beautiful. White twinkle lights line the terrace and stretch overhead, and delicate snowflakes hang from the strands, casting tiny, glittery shadows across the terrace floor. Decorated Christmas trees flank the doors leading inside, and I breathe in the pine scent that fills the air.

I smooth my hands down the front of my dress and take a steadying breath. "I can do this, right?" I ask Chloe, who is standing beside me holding my purse and my phone, both things she's promised to keep safe while I'm meeting Max.

"You absolutely can," she says.

Over Chloe's shoulder, I catch a glimpse of my mother striding across the dining room. We make eye contact, and she pauses, lifting her hand in a small wave. I could be making things up, but there's a tenderness to her expression that warms me, despite the cool December air.

Mom was beyond thrilled when I told her I was coming to the gala. She didn't even care when I told her I would *not* be dancing with Johnny Stager. It's a small victory, but I'll take every win I can get when it comes to my parents.

“Okay, I’m going inside,” Chloe says. “It’s three minutes to seven, so he should be here any minute.”

I take another steadying breath. “Okay.”

“You’re good?”

“Yes? Maybe? I’m doing the right thing here, yeah?”

She looks at me. “What do you mean? Meeting Max?”

I nod.

She reaches over and gives my hand a reassuring squeeze. “You absolutely are. It’s going to be great, Tess. I promise.”

I don’t know how Chloe thinks she can know, but I appreciate the reassurance anyway. She heads inside, and I turn and walk to the edge of the terrace. The moon is bright overhead, glinting off the white-capped waves as they tumble onto the beach. The breeze coming off the ocean is uncomfortably chilly, but I’m too nervous to truly care.

Weirdly, what keeps floating to the surface of my mind isn’t the last letter I received from Max, or *any* of the letters, really. It’s my last text message from Drew.

See this thing through, Tess. I have a feeling everything is going to work out.

I squeeze my eyes closed and remember those words, repeating them over and over in my head.

“Tess,” a voice says from behind me.

I open my eyes, staring at the ocean for one beat, then another, and another.

“You’re okay,” I whisper to myself, one hand pressed against my abdomen.

Then I turn, and he’s standing right in front of me.

Not Max. *Drew*.

As if my thoughts of him conjured him out of thin air.

“Drew?”

He takes a cautious step forward, a hesitant smile on his face. I liked Drew in a uniform. And then I liked Drew in jeans and a hoodie. But Drew in a suit that looks like it was made for him, accentuating his broad shoulders and his narrow waist—this is my favorite look yet. He’s gorgeous.

More importantly, he’s *here*.

My eyes drop to his hands, where he’s holding a stack of letters.

I gasp. *My letters*.

I slowly lift my gaze to his. “You’re...?”

“Andrew Maxwell McKay,” he says slowly.

“Max,” I whisper. I reach behind me and take hold of the terrace railing because if I don’t, I’m not sure I’ll stay on my feet.

Drew nods. “My father was also named Andrew. I went by Max at first, but a year or so after he died, I decided I wanted to use the name we shared.”

It takes me a moment to fully process what Drew is telling me. *He’s Max*. All this time, I’ve been getting to know two men

who were actually the *same man*.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you, Tess. I didn’t know at first, not until the toy drive...”

“When I told you it was me who was responding to the Santa letters.”

He nods. “That’s when I first suspected. Hearing you talk about your plans for school was when I knew for sure.”

I don’t know how to respond. What to say. How to even begin to process how happy this makes me. How utterly *relieved* I am. I want to laugh. But also to cry. Any second, I’m pretty sure I’ll start doing both.

“Are you mad?” Drew asks, his voice soft. Hopeful.

Tears spring to my eyes—*there they are*—as I look up and smile. “Not mad.” I take a stuttering breath, shaking my head as I let out a disbelieving laugh. “I wanted it to be you, Drew. I really wanted it to be you.”

Drew slowly lifts a hand to my face, wrapping it around the curve of my cheek. “I’m going to kiss you now, Tess Ravenel.”

He wraps his free hand around my waist, tugging me against him as he presses his lips to mine. My hands slide up his chest, palms flat against the smooth planes of his chest. His heart beats under my touch, steady and strong, if a little fast.

There was no denying the spark I felt when I talked to Drew for the first time, then again when I saw him. But this kiss—this is the end for me. There are no other kisses. No other men.

Drew's hands slide to my shoulders, and he turns us so my back is to the terrace railing and *his* back is to the enormous glass wall separating us from the rest of the Christmas gala. It isn't much privacy, but it's more than we had before, and I lean into him, my hands slipping under his suit coat and around his waist. He groans the tiniest bit, his hands finding my hips as he deepens the kiss. His touch makes me greedy, hungry for more of him. More of this.

I'm kissing Drew. *And* I'm kissing Max.

It's more than I could have ever wished for.

When we finally break apart, my heart is pounding in my ears and we're both breathing heavily. Drew rests his forehead against mine. "I could kiss you all night, Tess, but I'm trying to remember my grandmother is probably watching."

This makes me smile. "Your grandmother is here?"

He nods. "She comes every year."

"That's right! You told me that," I say. "It's going to take me a minute to fully merge what I know of *you* with what I know of Max."

"She's excited to meet you," Drew says.

"I'm excited to meet her too." Except, something isn't quite lining up. *Drew's* grandmother attends the Christmas gala every year? For all his frustrations with Daisy and her attitudes about social status, I wouldn't have guessed this was his family's scene. "Is your grandmother a part of the Southern Society?" I hesitantly ask.

Understanding lights Drew's eyes. He knows why I'm asking. He knows he gave me every reason to think he would never intentionally hang out with the Southern Society crowd. "She isn't," he says, his gaze holding mine. "But my mother was."

I lace my fingers through Drew's, wanting him to know that whatever he tells me, it isn't going to change this. It isn't going to change *us*. "Tell me about her?" I say.

Before he can respond, a breeze picks up, blasting us with a chilly burst of ocean-scented air. Drew quickly shrugs out of his suit coat and wraps it around my shoulders. "We should go inside," he says, but I quickly shake my head no.

"My parents are inside, and a million other people, including Deacon and Chloe who, by the way, are going to flip when I tell them who you really are. But I don't want to talk to anyone else yet. I want it to be just us for a few minutes longer."

Drew grins. "Technically, Deacon and Chloe already know. But I'm happy to stand out here as long as you want."

"What? How long have they known? You're saying Chloe *knew* and she didn't tell me?"

Drew grimaces. "I made her promise not to tell you. I wanted it to be a surprise. And Grandma Pearl said I needed a grand gesture."

"Of course she did," I say through a laugh. "With all the romcoms you guys watch...it's only fitting." I push up on my toes and kiss him one more time. Mostly because I can. But also because I can't actually believe he's here. That this is real.

After the kiss, Drew tucks me against his chest, wrapping his arms around me from behind. “I’m sorry about how things started between us, Tess. I know I already apologized, but if I could go back and do things over, I would call you the second I finished my shift.”

“But then we would have missed weeks of writing letters,” I say.

He brushes my hair away from my neck and presses a lingering kiss just below my ear. “But we would have had weeks of this.”

I chuckle and lean closer, snuggling deeper into his embrace. “Fair argument, but I’m still not sad about how things turned out.”

He’s quiet for a beat before he says, “You know, it wasn’t just Daisy. She wasn’t the only reason I was hesitant to call.” He goes on to tell me about his parents. About the sale of his father’s company, and their sudden shift into wealth. He tells me about his mom’s volunteering and how much time they spent away from home in the last few months before they died.

“It wasn’t fair, Tess,” he says, his voice rumbling against my back. “I made some unhealthy assumptions, and it’s made me shortsighted. But I’m working on it. I *need* to work on it because I inherited quite a bit of wealth when my parents died and so far, I haven’t touched it. Gran keeps telling me it’s a waste, and she’s right.”

I spin around in his arms and lift a hand to his cheek. “Drew, you went through something really hard. It’s okay if it takes

time to figure things out.”

He shakes his head. “It’s been long enough. It’s just my pride getting in the way now. It’s you that helped me figure that out.”

“What did I do?”

“You taught me not to assume, not to make judgments based on what I see on the outside.”

My heart squeezes at his words. Still, he wasn’t entirely wrong in the judgments he made. Daisy certainly deserved them, and there are plenty of people in this world just like Daisy, my parents included. “Drew, some people deserve judgment. People who value money and status over kindness and compassion. Sadly, a lot of them are in the dining room behind us. I wish I could say that Daisy was the worst of it, but...you haven’t met my father yet. And he’ll probably be particularly hard on you.”

Drew nods like this doesn’t surprise him. “I figured as much. But would it help if I casually mention the size of my investment portfolio?”

I wrinkle my nose. “I really don’t want to say yes, but... definitely yes.”

He grins, then lifts a hand and runs it over my hair until he’s cupping my cheek. “I’ll play the game for you, Tess. I have no doubt you’re worth it.”

“Are you sure about that?”

He smiles playfully. “I don’t know. You should probably kiss me one more time just so I can make sure.”

I push up onto my toes and kiss him like my life depends on it. Like *his* life depends on it. Like this is the start of the rest of our lives.

“Merry Christmas, Drew,” I whisper against his lips.

His arms tighten around me. “Merry Christmas,” he whispers back.

I’ll never get over the enormous coincidence it was that I met Drew in person on the same day I found his letter.

But maybe it wasn’t a coincidence at all. Maybe it was fate.

Or just a little bit of Christmas magic.

EPILOGUE

One Year Later: Tess

TWO DAYS AFTER CHRISTMAS, I sit snuggled on the couch in between Drew and Grandma Pearl, a huge bowl of popcorn sitting untouched on the coffee table in front of us. I can't speak for Drew, but I had two slices of Grandma Pearl's sweet potato pie after dinner. I don't have room for popcorn no matter how much I wish I did.

"If y'all aren't going to eat the popcorn, I'll keep it over here with me," Grandma Pearl says as she reaches for the bowl. Her eyes don't drift from the television screen where Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan are only minutes away from seeing each other for the first time in *Sleepless in Seattle*.

Drew wasn't wrong about Grandma Pearl's love of romantic movies. I suspect she has a little bit of a crush on Tom Hanks based on her movie selections for our post-Christmas movie marathon. Though, the way she winked at me when she started *You've Got Mail* makes me think she picked that one just for me.

It's been three hundred and sixty-seven days since I met Drew on the back patio of the yacht club and our relationship officially began. Three hundred and sixty-seven days of laughing and talking and snuggling Chloe's baby and watching movies with Grandma Pearl. Of studying for my exams and playing on the beach with Roxie and sketching out future business plans.

I wish I could say every day has been perfect. My father has been begrudging in his acceptance of Drew, but Mom is a huge fan, and with her support, Dad doesn't feel quite so intimidating. Besides, together, Drew and I can face anything. Stalwart. United. And determined to make our own way.

I stand up and stretch my arms over my head. "I need something to drink. Anyone else need anything?"

Drew shakes his head, reaching out to squeeze my fingers as I move away. Warmth surges up my arm at his touch. I hope that feeling doesn't go away for a long time—the way he makes me feel so *whole*.

My phone is sitting on the counter in the kitchen, and I pick it up, checking my messages with one hand while I fill up a glass of water from the fridge with the other.

I have at least a dozen texts from Chloe. I've been movie-marathoning with Drew and his grandmother for hours, so the first message came in hours ago. It's a picture of ten-month-old Charlotte who is spoiled and rotten and absolutely perfect. But after that, the texts grow more and more urgent. My eyes widen as I read each message until I'm finally laughing, one hand pressed over my mouth.

Chloe: Hey. You busy? You need to call me.

Chloe: I'm serious, Tess. You should call me RIGHT THIS SECOND.

Chloe: Seriously? What are you doing right now that is so much more important than me? I need you!

Chloe: I mean, I'm fine. This isn't an ACTUAL emergency. But definitely still call me when you can.

Chloe: Fine. I'm tired of waiting. I'm just going to TELL YOU.

Chloe: I'm pregnant. Again. Still in shock. Deacon is going to lose his mind. But YAY!!!

Chloe: Also, do you remember when I sent Deacon to the store the other day for strawberry ice cream and Cheez-Its because I wanted to eat them together?

Chloe: THIS EXPLAINS SO MUCH.

Drew appears in the doorway of the kitchen. "What's up?" he asks. "You okay?"

I put down my phone and turn to face him. “It’s Chloe,” I say. “She’s pregnant again.”

He smiles wide. “That’s great! How does she feel about it?”

“She seems pretty excited. Here. Look.”

He moves up behind me and wraps his arms around my waist, resting his chin on my shoulder as I show him Chloe’s texts.

“Cheez-Its and ice cream, huh? I can maybe understand the appeal.”

“It was way worse when she was pregnant with Charlotte,” I say. “Her cravings were terrible.”

“I bet,” Drew says.

I put down my phone and spin in his arms, tucking myself against his chest. “Will you be this patient with me when I’m grouchy and pregnant?”

“Planning ahead, are we?”

I shrug. “It’s what I want. I’m not going to pretend otherwise.”

“You want to be grouchy and pregnant?”

“Don’t pretend like you’re surprised. And I’ve seen you with baby Charlotte. You want kids just as much as I do.”

“Not just any kids,” he says playfully. “Your kids. Which... speaking of...there’s been something I’ve been meaning to ask you.” He presses his hand over mine and slides it up to the front pocket of his shirt.

There’s something bumpy inside the pocket, and my breath catches as I feel the ridges of what *I think* is a ring.

I eye Drew suspiciously, and he smiles. “We can make it official if you want.”

“Andrew Maxwell McKay. Are you proposing to me right now in your grandmother’s kitchen?”

“I was planning on asking you on New Year’s, but Grandma Pearl just gave me the ring, and then you brought up having kids, and I just thought—” His eyes dart away like he’s nervous. “I can ask you better. Make it a real proposal.”

I shake my head. I don’t need anything fancy. I just need him. “Is it Grandma Pearl’s ring?” I ask.

Drew stills for a moment, then his grip tightens around my waist. “It was my mother’s ring,” he says, his voice low.

I fiddle with the button that holds the pocket closed. “Can I see it?”

He chuckles. “Is that going to make a difference?”

“No!” I say quickly. “Of course not. But it belonged to your mom. I want to see it because it was hers.”

“Okay,” Drew says gently, his voice so warm and full of love, I’m suddenly grateful his arms are around me to keep me upright.

Slowly, I unbutton the pocket and reach my hand in, pulling out a simple diamond solitaire that takes my breath away. I hold it with both hands, the glow from the overhead lights in Grandma Pearl’s kitchen glinting off the stone.

“Ask me,” I whisper.

“Marry me,” Drew says without a beat of hesitation.

I meet his eyes and smile. “Okay.”

Drew shakes his head, one hand leaving my waist long enough for him to run it through his hair. “Did that really just happen?”

I bite my lip and nod. “Can I put it on?”

He laughs and takes the ring, lifting my left hand and sliding the ring into place.

As fate would have it, it’s a perfect fit.



Thanks so much for reading Drew and Tess's story!

I hope you'll check out the rest of my books, all of which are available to read for FREE with a Kindle Unlimited Subscription!

You can start with my How to Kiss a Hawthorne Brother series by clicking on the image below. Or turn the page and read Chapter One of How to Kiss Your Best Friend.

All books are standalone stories in a connected series and can be read in any order. My brand of romantic comedy is swoony stories with great kisses and lots of romantic tension but nothing explicit on the page. I hope you enjoy!



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Hi, friends! Thanks for being here, and thanks for reading *The Christmas Letters*! If this story felt familiar to you, this is actually a second edition of sorts. I originally wrote and published *The Christmas Letters* back in 2019. It was a sweet story as I originally wrote it, but it didn't quite mesh with my current style and so I pulled it and updated it. Guys? Rewriting old stuff is really hard. I ended up making so many changes—changes that essentially made this a very different book. Character names changed, tenses changed, point of view changed. Even motivations and characterizations changed! Would it have been easier to simply write a whole new story? YES. Yes it would have. But I'm really happy with how this one turned out anyway, and I hope you enjoyed the read! If it's still the holiday season when you're reading, I hope you have a very happy holidays and I thank you for spending a little bit of time with me.

As always, I owe my thanks to my brilliant critique partner, Kirsten. I know I used to write words without you, but

honestly, I'm not sure how I managed it. That our working relationship has turned into such a valuable friendship is one of my greatest joys. To my cover designer, Stephanie, thank you for your endless tweaks and thoughts and for making this cover so stinking adorable. You're a rock star. To my daughter Lucy, thank you for reading and telling me all the places my characters were talking like they were forty instead of twenty-six. Love you lots! To my readers, as always, THANK YOU for being here. I wish I could hug you all.

HOW TO KISS YOUR BEST FRIEND: CHAPTER ONE

I stare at my phone like it's about to sprout legs out of the speaker port and dance across the coffee table.

Kate Fletcher sent me a text.

Today.

Five minutes ago.

And I have no idea how to respond.

Look, I realize better than anyone that pining after my childhood best friend is a dangerous game. I have three brothers, and they have reminded me more times than I can count (and that's saying something because I am very good with numbers) that I am only setting myself up for heartbreak. They say if anything were going to happen with Kate, it would have by now.

Logically, I get that. I understand we aren't ever going to be together.

But I can't let her go completely.

Kate is my favorite bad habit. The impossible wish. The dream I can't shake.

It's been one thousand, four hundred and thirty-three days since we last had a conversation. That streak ended today. At least it will once I respond.

I stand up and start pacing, my fingers tapping against my leg. There are so many things I want to ask her. But I can't launch into an inquisition when all she said was hello. She's the one who reached out to me. I'm a mature adult, and a mature adult would say hello back and let her make the next move.

I am seventeen laps into my pacing when my oldest brother, Perry, knocks twice before pushing into my house, a backpack slung over his shoulder. "You ... do not look ready to go."

I pause next to the fireplace, halfway through lap eighteen. "I'm ... *close*."

"Right. Yeah. It looks like it." Perry surveys the room and sighs, but he's overreacting. My living room may look like an outdoor outfitter threw up all over my furniture, but I know where everything is, and I know exactly where it's going to go when I stash it all in my pack. I'm only waiting to finish packing because I just cleaned my tent, and it's still in the backyard drying off.

And also because Kate Fletcher just sent me a text message.

"What's up with you?" Perry asks as he discards his pack and drops into the chair by the window. "You look all weird

and stressed and stuff.” He pulls out his phone and reclines into the chair like he expects to be waiting a while.

“I, um, I just got a weird text, and it threw me off.”

“Aww, did Taylor Swift finally respond to all the messages you’ve sent her fan club?”

I grab the bundled merino wool socks sitting on the arm of the couch and chuck them at his head.

He deflects the socks without even cracking a smile.

“Honestly, hearing directly from Taylor Swift herself would be less surprising.”

Perry looks up, his expression morphing into actual concern.

“I got a message from Kate,” I say.

His eyes go wide. “High school Kate? Your Kate?”

I nod and lean forward, resting my head in my hands.

“What did she say?”

“Nothing. She said hi. Said it’s been a while.”

The thing is, I do not hold Kate accountable for our friendship falling apart. We did a decent job of staying in touch after graduation even though I headed to college, and she headed to Europe to live with her dad full time. We saw each other once or twice a year, whenever she was back in the states, and we texted regularly.

Until we didn’t anymore.

It didn’t make me mad. It just made me worried about her.

My brothers, on the other hand, were thrilled when Kate dropped out of my life. *Now you can move on, they said. Now you can stop waiting for something that's never going to happen.*

I know that at some point, I'm going to have to take dating other women more seriously. I'm twenty-eight years old. I don't *really* want to spend the rest of my life reading Kate's articles—she's a travel writer—and stalking her Instagram feed. I know precisely how pathetic that makes me look.

Don't get me wrong. I date.

Just not *seriously*. A three-month relationship here. A six-month relationship there. I even made it a year with a woman named Jill my senior year of college. But nothing ever sticks. Because somewhere in the back of my mind, I can't let go of the hope that at some point, Kate will come back into my life and this time, things will be different.

"It's been a while?" Perry repeats. "How kind of her to acknowledge."

"Don't do that," I say. "You can't play it both ways. You were pissed at her when we were still in touch, now you're pissed at her because we fell out of touch?"

"I'm not pissed at *her*," he says. "I just don't like what she does to your head. She's been messing with you for a lot of years, Brody."

I push a hand through my hair. "But that's on me. She didn't do anything on purpose. I can't blame her for what she doesn't

feel.”

Perry lifts a shoulder in the sardonic way that makes my oldest brother so annoying. “I won’t argue with you about it. But I think you’re being generous by saying she’s never strung you along on purpose.”

“Strung me—? Geez, Perry, do you even know what a real friendship looks like?”

He looks at me over the top of his phone. “I don’t need friends,” he says dryly. “It’s bad enough I have so many siblings. Friends and all their *neediness* would make my life even more unbearable than it already is.”

It’s arguable that the last four years of Perry’s life have been hard enough to justify his attitude. An ugly divorce, settled in court, that nearly cleaned him out. Then all the stuff we’ve dealt with at home. Dad had a stroke and was forced to retire early, leaving Perry to step up and take over daily operations of Stonebrook Farm, the working farm and event center that’s been the family business for almost thirty years. As soon as our only sister, Olivia, finished her MBA, she moved home to help out, but Perry is still juggling a lot.

All that aside, Perry has never been particularly . . . jovial? Happy isn’t the right word. I’ve seen him happy. He just doesn’t smile much. He’s Roy Kent minus the swear words. Stanley Hudson minus the indifference. Dr. House minus the cutting insults. He perpetually looks like he’s carrying the weight of the world—or at least our family—on his shoulders.

“Your life isn’t unbearable,” I say.

“And you aren’t in love with Kate,” he responds without missing a beat. His eyes are back on his phone now. “See? Saying something out loud doesn’t necessarily make it true.”

“I’m not in love with Kate.”

I say it mostly out of habit. Like it’s an affirmation I’m trying to will into existence. I don’t love her because I *can’t* love her. Because it’s fruitless to love her.

“Right. Sure. Should I get Lennox on the phone so he can jog your memory? I bet Flint remembers that night out at the ledge. Should I call him up, too?”

Perry is playing dirty.

I shouldn’t be held accountable for things I said nearly nine years ago, the one time in my entire existence I allowed myself to get completely wasted.

I was with my brothers, up behind the orchards on our family’s property, on a cliffside we brothers dubbed *the ledge*. It isn’t truly a cliff. Had one of us ever fallen, we wouldn’t have done more than tumble a few yards into a grove of rhododendrons.

But it still provided great views of the valley, was a short hike from the house, and an even shorter one if we took one of the Gators, the 4x4s we used to get around the farm, to the orchard edge. From the time we were old enough to brave the shadowy, Western North Carolina woods alone, the ledge was our escape whenever we were mad, sad, angry, or in trouble. It was also where we took dates when we wanted to impress

them with the view and make out without the risk of our parents catching us.

That night nine years ago, all four Hawthorne brothers were on the ledge together, beverages provided by the two oldest. Perry and Lennox wore their older age like a badge of manhood and me and Flint, the brother younger than me, were still aspiring to.

I was exhausted after finishing freshman year finals and bemoaning the fact that my high school best friend had gone off and started traveling the world with some guy.

Preston was her long-distance boyfriend all through our junior and senior year, so I shouldn't have been surprised. But traveling together, visiting far-off countries, staying in Preston's family villas and seaside condominiums. It felt so . . . permanent. So *adult*.

I don't remember much of what I said out on the ledge that night. But my brothers seem to remember every last word of my miserable tale of unrequited love. They must, because even nine years later, they remind me of it every chance they get.

They also remind me that, with tears streaming down my face, I poetically claimed I'd been in love with *two* women in my nineteen years of existence. Kate Fletcher and Taylor Swift.

"Are you going to respond?" Perry asks.

"Sure. Eventually. I just have to figure out how."

Perry breathes out a heavy sigh. “Brody. How many minutes have you been staring at your phone?”

The number pops into my head as quickly as they always do. “Seventeen and a half.”

“You gotta snap out of it, man. Finish packing. Tyler will be here soon. You can respond in the car.”

I nod, knowing Perry is right. I’ve wasted too much time as it is.

It was a last-minute decision to join Perry on his annual two-week trek on the Appalachian Trail. We’re all big hikers, my entire family, but Perry is the only one into the long-distance stuff. He says he’ll thru-hike it one day—tackle the entire 2,190 miles in one uninterrupted trip—but I’ll believe it when I see it. He likes working too much to take six months off to go hiking. I hesitated to take even two weeks off, but after the volatility that dominated the last month of the school year, I need the break. Even if it means hanging out with Perry.

I stand and start gathering my gear from various places around the living room.

“Did you read Kate’s last piece in *The Atlantic*?” Perry is behind me now, rummaging around in my kitchen. “On the impacts of tourism on the Maasai tribe in Zimbabwe? It’s brilliant.”

I stop and stare at my oldest brother. It does not surprise me that, after all the traveling she’s done, Kate has turned herself

into an accomplished travel writer. It does surprise me Perry reads her stuff. “You read Kate’s articles?”

Perry walks back into the living room with a to-go container of leftover chicken fried rice in his hand. “Not as a rule. But I read *The Atlantic*. If she’s in it, then I read it.”

I, on the other hand, read everything Kate writes. And buy hard copies, whenever there is one, for safe keeping. “Yeah, I read that one too,” I say noncommittally.

Perry takes a bite of the rice and winces. “How old is this? The rice is crunchy.”

“Old. Why are you eating that for breakfast?”

“Why didn’t you throw it out?” He frowns but doesn’t stop eating. “Does it ever seem weird that you know so much more about Kate’s life and what she’s up to than she does about you?” He nudges the socks I threw earlier with the toe of his shoe. “Don’t forget these.”

I grab the socks and add them to my pile of gear, then move toward the back door to retrieve my tent. “I don’t know. She lives a pretty public life. I only know the stuff everyone else knows too.”

At least that’s how it’s been the past four years. I used to know everything.

I disappear into my backyard long enough to collapse my tent and fold it up. Back inside, I put it, and the rest of my remaining gear, into my bag. “Kate might know some stuff. I

don't post anything, but Olivia does. I'm pretty sure they still follow each other."

"Olivia's feed wouldn't tell Kate anything but how much Olivia loves the farm. And Tyler."

"True." I glance at my watch. "Speaking of Tyler, shouldn't he be here by now?"

"He's coming," Perry says. "He had to help Mom with something in the goat barn, but he said he'd be here by nine-thirty."

"I swear she likes him better than the rest of us." Olivia's husband, Tyler, who will drop us off at Springer Mountain, the Southern terminus of the Appalachian Trail, made fast work of convincing Mom he was her favorite.

"Only because he loves her goats," Perry says grouchyly.

"And helped make her a grandbaby." It's not lost on any of us that the youngest of the five Hawthorne children, and the only girl, managed to find a husband and get pregnant before any of her older brothers have even come close. With the way things are looking, Olivia's baby, due at the end of the summer, may be the only grandchild Mom and Dad get.

Perry swore off women after his divorce and despite our best efforts to resuscitate whatever part of his brain controls desire, he's still uninterested. A vegetarian in the meat aisle of the grocery store.

Lennox, the next brother down, has the opposite problem. He desires *too much*. His problem isn't finding a woman, it's

wanting to settle down with only one.

The brother right under me, Flint, has an acting career that isn't exactly conducive to normal relationships. Last time I saw his face, it was plastered to the front of one of my AP Chemistry student's notebooks—a cut out of the photo that made the cover of People magazine's latest "Sexiest Man Alive" edition.

If it isn't yet obvious, I'm the only Hawthorne brother who's even remotely normal, at least when it comes to relationship stuff. I'd love to get married. Settle down. Have kids. Be the son who takes the kids over to have dinner with their grandparents every Sunday afternoon. It's what I want. I just need to meet the right woman.

My eyes dart to where my phone is still sitting in the center of the coffee table.

Step one? Convince myself Kate is not the right woman.

I'll get right on that. Make it my top priority.

Just as soon as I respond to her text.

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